

THE CONSTRUCT OF IDEOLOGIES IN DIANA ABU JABER'S *ARABIAN JAZZ*

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Abstrak

Studi tentang sastra sangat erat kaitannya dengan cara pandang suatu komunitas terhadap dunia dan budaya. Cara pandang ini merupakan perwujudan ideologi yang tidak akan mungkin dilepaskan dari karya sastra. Begitu pula karya sastra Asia-Amerika yang dibahas dalam makalah ini. Karya sastra yang berjudul *Arabian Jazz* karya Diana Abu Jaber memberikan ruang untuk mengeksplorasi keadaan orang Arab yang berada di Amerika. Keberadaan mereka menjadi menarik karena terjadi pergulatan budaya. Oleh karena itu, teori yang disampaikan oleh Benedict Anderson terkait *imagined community* dilekatkan dengan teori budaya yang bersinggungan dengan postkolonialisme oleh Homi K Bhabha dan Stuart Hall menjadi penting untuk digunakan. Konstruksi ideologi dalam novel ini direfleksikan memulai konsep adaptasi budaya dalam musik Jazz, perlawanan terhadap intoleransi, dan ambivalensi.

Kata kunci: ideologi, sastra arab-amerika

A. Introduction

Asian-American literature as a multi-ethnic literature constitutes a significant and growing aspect of American literature. In Asian-American literature, identity always has been an important issue. When the term "Asian-American" is coined and questions of identity are passionately discussed, the topic goes relevant with contemporary problem in cultural studies. Cultural nationalism like in demographic, political, and historical shifts has greatly influenced and constructed the identity discourses and turned them into interesting topics of debate and contemplation on the ideology of representation.

This study explores Arabs in the United States experiencing a racial problem that identifies them both as individual or group as either "black" or "white". The studies on Arab-American ethnicity and racial formation show that historically Arab-Americans were first considered "not white," then "not quite white," then later "became white." This study explores the Arab-Americans' struggle with their "in-betweenness" reflected in works of fiction by an Arab-American female writer, Diana Abu Jaber.

Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* draws the reader's attention insistently to anti-Arab racism and hostility. However, in the ambivalent relationships with people of color, the characters in the novel reflect the precarious position Arabs in ethnic and racial discourses in the US. Although Abu-Jaber's protagonists are singled out as non-whites, they still feel comfortable in befriending white people and living in an exclusively white neighborhood. This leads to the understanding that the struggles of Arab-Americans form certain ideology constructed from a hyphenated identity.

B. Theoretical Approach

As this study aims to explore the ideologies formation from identity survival of Arab-Americans, theory of identity reflecting position of Arabs in American society plays big role. Benedict Anderson is a prominent writer whose concepts touch the problem of identity in a nation.

The struggle of Arab-American in maintaining their "Arabness" as well as gaining acknowledgement from the whites shows how Arab-American deal with identity for their ethnicity and their sense of Americanness. This is in line with concept of "imagined community" by Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* which first appeared in 1983. The use of Anderson's work will show how language and print help create this sense of nationality. Anderson's book has become one of the standard texts on the topic of nations and nationalism. Anderson states that the combination of economic, social, and scientific changes with increasingly rapid communications resulted in new, potentially perplexing cultural paradigms associated with the origin of the universe and humans, their relationships, and history (43).

Stuart Hall and Homi K Bhabha play important roles in sharpening this study by theorizing the identity and cultural identity in terms of theory of discourse and identity. Hall focuses on cultural identity and Bhabha deals with cultural diversity and cultural difference. Analyzing the two contemporary Arab-American fictions, the theory of transformation of culture is worth employed.

Identity is one of the essential elements in any literary discourse. The concept of identity refers to such features of people such as their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, or sexuality. It achieves prominence in the work of Erik Erikson that proposes that advanced identity formation should facilitate the ascendance of the ego strength of fidelity. The use of the term identity reflects the belief that each person's identity--in the older sense of who he or she truly is - is deeply inflected by social features (27).

F. Cultural Adaptation by Jazz

Within this complex situation of racial, cultural, social, and economic politics involving Arab-Americans, Jazz as black music offers a powerful and positive symbolic site for Arab Americans to invoke connections between this group and African-Americans. This can be seen in the way the 'jazz' of the title begins as a reference to "black music," but then becomes "Arab." Often, invocations of African American music by Arab-American writers are positive and celebratory, underlining a shared understanding through culture rather than establishing a bond between the two groups which is only based on shared oppression.

Abu Jaber shows that jazz is a creative enterprise displaying black contributions to American, and world, culture. This is an issue that non-African American authors nourish their works with the rich flavors of African American music, culture, and literature is an issue. This happens due the similar taste of struggle in identity between Blacks and Arabs.

The character, Jemorah, is on a quest to come to terms with both her background and present life as a young Arab American woman, the daughter of a Jordanian/Palestinian father and a deceased American mother. Because Jemorah is not identified as "white" or "black," Jemorah's racial identity is explicitly questioned by other characters in the novel. For example, Jemorah's white American cousins connect her Arab heritage and brown skin to something dirty. In an important scene in which Jemorah's new boss, Portia, declares her racist logic about Matussem, Jemorah's Jordanian/Palestinian father:

"I'm telling you, Jemorah Ramoud, your father and all his kind aren't any better than Negroes, that's why he hasn't got any ambition and why he'll be stuck in that same job in the basement for the rest of his life. Oh, sure, you're tainted, your skin that color. A damn shame. But I've noticed that in certain lights it's worse than in others" (294).

This can be seen from the title and is further underlined by the musical notes. Therefore, two words, Arabian and Jazz, symbolize connection between Arab culture and blacks' music. One of which, "Arabian", refers clearly to Arabs, the community explored in the novel, and the other, "jazz" refers to African-America. Hence, the title alerts the reader that this work is defining a new sort of jazz, one which is Arabian. It also implies that Arabs can be understood through jazz.

G. Struggles against Intolerance

Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* appeared in 1993. It also refers directly to jazz, both in its title and as a metaphor which permeates the novel. Abu-Jaber's use of jazz in this novel must be read in relation to Arab American identity negotiations in the United States in the early 1990s. *Arabian Jazz* is firmly rooted in local US issues and politics. The novel alerts the reader that the work is set in a "poor white community in upstate New York," and the story is an often light-hearted tale of the difficulties faced by the Ramoud family. Matussem Ramoud is an Arab immigrant who moves to the United States and raises his daughters there after the death of his American wife. Abu-Jaber's novel confronts issues which occupy the works of many Arab American writers of the 1980s and 1990s, such as identity politics and the fault lines between being Arab and American (Sulaiman 18). Because the Ramouds do not quite fit into this poor white community that has few "ethnics," their friends, family, and neighbors understand them in relation to African Americans. Therefore, the work's engagements with African America—and the unstable racial categories of Arab Americans—are central to the structure and messages of the novel. This can be seen in the way the "jazz" of the title begins as a reference to "black music," but then becomes "Arab." This theme is reinforced through passages discussing the racial indeterminacy of the protagonist, Jemorah Ramoud, as she struggles to understand her own identity.

In *Arabian Jazz*, Diana Abu-Jaber relates the experiences of two first-generation young Arab American women, Jem and Melvina. The American parts of their selves are not only bestowed upon

them by their residence, with their father Matussem, but also through their American mother, of Northern European origin, who died of typhus when the girls were young during a fatal visit to the father's family in Amman, Jordan. Caught between two different cultures, Jem and Melvina uncomfortably look for their identity under the unrelenting supervision of their father's childless sister Fatima. Since their early childhood, they have been simultaneously claimed by both cultures. This is reflected through Abu Jaber quotation at the beginning of the novel:

in the book of life, every page has two sides (6).

Jem and Melvina recall the pull and tug of the contradictory messages about where 'home' is from Fatima, on one hand, who would murmur in their ears. This can be seen from the following expressions:

You come back to home soon, come back to Old Country, marry the handsome Arab boys and make for us grandsons (77),

Your home is here. Oh, you will travel, I want you to. But you always know where your home is (78).

Considering the family's Palestinian origin on the father's side and their loss of any geographic homeland, the above statements are ironic. Abu Jaber explores the theme of homelessness when she investigates the role of memory for her characters. The immigrant generation of her novel recalls with bitterness the experience of dispossession followed by the illusion of making a home in the United States, echoing their parents' illusion of making a home in Jordan. This is reflected in the following expression:

[L]ost to the world was Matussem's private land, like the country his parents tried to leave as they made lives in Jordan, as they let go of their children's memories and let them grow up as Jordanians. Matussem was only two when he left Nazareth. Still, he knew there had been a Palestine for his parents; its sky formed a ceiling in his sleep. He dreamed of the country that had been, that he was always returning to in his mind. (260)

In *Arabian Jazz*, the girls' childhood memories contain unhappy incidents of hostility expressed in jeers and taunts, physical aggression, or racist labels. Jem recalls with pain her daily bus rides to and from school when she "learned how to close her mind, how to disappear in her seat" (92) in order to shut off the other children's comments on her name and her skin. But there was no way she could prevent her hair from being pulled and her face from being scratched; no way to prevent being pushed off the bus to face her "shameful" family name painted, in what seemed to her too big and too bright letters, on her home mailbox.

To her, home, where the voices would track her and haunt her sleepless nights, is the source of comfort. Jem makes her way to college with the memory of the early pain and the distressing knowledge that "[s]he didn't fit in even with them, those children that nobody wanted" (94).

Abu Jaber describes the feeling of fear which is produced by this overt expression of hostility and which seizes Jem following the conversation with Portia:

It struck her [...] that the thin breath in her lungs and the tightening sensation in her stomach were fear. Not merely the fear of being caught, but of everything around her [...] of the world of these people, who didn't know her or want to know her. (298)

Abu Jaber devises different coping strategies for her characters. While Matussem resorts to jazz, seeking a hold on strangeness of the world around him in pounding on the drums, his daughters find comfort in professional commitment and short-term affairs with local boys. Fatima, Matussem's sister, however, is the character who seems to find relief in being attached to her roots and in trying to preserve traditional Arab values. Fatima is an apparently amusing and simple-minded matchmaker whose primary concern is her obsessive attempts to find suitable Arab husbands for her nieces. Abu Jaber, however, has actually constructed a complex character through whose memory of female experience of the past, as contrasted with that of Matussem, she explores the theme of ambivalence.

Matussem's memories of Jordan consist in having been spared his sisters' hardships. As the only son in an Arab family of daughters, Matussem "knew, watching and overhearing his sisters at night, that it was a bitter thing to be a woman" (187). He remembers being fondled in his mother's arms, when he has outgrown her lap, while her voice poured insults at his sisters around them. His memory of home consists of "so many lonely sisters" and of "social restrictions that kept them home" (233) until they were married off, as Matussem also remembers, "to men they had never seen before in their lives" (237).

Unlike those of Matussem, Fatima's images of home are of a more afflicting nature. Having witnessed the burial of four newborn sisters alive, at a time when the dispossessed family could not afford the waste of more girls to feed, Fatima grows haunted by tormenting memories she believes she can escape and distressing knowledge she believes she can wipe out of her consciousness in order to get rest. She tells Jem and Melvina:

When we were homeless and dying without food, what of the four starving babies I had to bury still alive [...]. Babies I buried with my mother watching so this rest could live, so my baby brother can eat, so he can move away and never know about it. [...] [H]e was born so fortunate ! Born a man, not to know the truth. (334)

Failing to push memory out of her mind, she eventually finds respite when she acknowledges the ghosts of her childhood by breaking the silence and telling her unbelieving American nieces the story of her infant sisters' burial. However, Fatima has no conception of life outside the patriarchal social order that oppresses women. She conveys ambivalence in ironically antithetical statements such as "the speech" she often delivers her nieces:

It's terrible to be a woman in this world. This is first thing to know when the doctor looks at baby's thing and says 'it's a girl.' But I am telling you there are ways of getting around it. [...] [F]irst and last is that you must have husband to survive on the planet of earth. (116-17)

In all respects, she remains "true to the ways of her mother and mothers before her" (41) and attempts to continue through her resisting nieces the old tradition of female perpetuation of female oppression.

H. The Ambivalence

Diana Abu-Jaber's works reflects a tendency by Arab American novelists to foreground the experiences of Arab characters as members of Arab-Americans community. Arab American novelists tend to highlight several aspects of Arab-Americans daily experiences, especially anti-Arab racism and bigotry. It shows that the ambiguous position occupied by Arabs in the ethnic and racial discourses in the US has shaped the literature produced by Arab American writers. Arab-American literature is ambivalent to locating the experiences of members of the Arab-American community in a non-white ethnic context..

Through highlighting the different immigration and settlement experiences of members of the Ramoud family, *Arabian Jazz* reflects the heterogeneity of the Arab-American identity and the ways in which different members of the community perceive their identities. While the 20-year old Melvina considers herself American, her aunt, Fatima, insists that she is an Arab who lives among Americans, and wants to keep herself, her family, and a few friends apart from the rest' (p. 360).

Literary and cultural productions by Arab-Americans are sites for manifesting/contesting an Arab American identity and delineating its features. While Jemorah is identified as a black person, she refuses to marry half Native American Ricky Ellis. Jemorah's ambivalent reactions to non-whiteness shows that for an Arab-American, ethnic identity is mediated by racial categorizations. This position is reflected in the daily experiences of members of the community who engage with whiteness in heterogeneous ways. It applies also to Matussem. His band mates are the whites. By joining the white community aiming at perceiving acknowledgement from the community, then the strategy is based on racial classification.

The illustration above draws our attention to the fact that Arab-American communities have been subjected to a long history of stereotyping and distortion. The ambiguous position that Arabs occupy in US ethnic and racial discourses influences the way Arabs in America define their identities and divides members of the community on their relationship with whiteness. A closer look at this experience enhances our understanding of the dynamics that influence an Arab-American identity especially in its engagement with (non)whiteness. Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* may show that we need to further investigate this statement and look at how Arab-American writings may undermine this statement. In other words, the ambiguity of the position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in the US is reflected in the ambiguity of *Arabian Jazz*'s position toward the people of color it portrays. The novel has been lauded by most critics for its attempt to define an Arab-American identity within US discourses on ethnicity and multicultural policies.

Arab American literature has remained ambivalent to the issue of whiteness and has focused instead on discussing the dynamics of Arab-American communities whose members do not fully perceive themselves as non-white. *Arabian Jazz* constructs the Ramouds as racialized others. It is done by depicting how Matussem and his daughters are perceived as non-white by white characters.

The Ramoud family's experience of gathering along with white community becomes a metaphor for the racial ambiguity of the Arab position in the US. While some other characters see the Ramouds as non-whites, the Ramouds themselves do not seem to identify themselves as non-whites. The neighborhood in which the Ramouds live is entirely white (p. 90). It is possible to argue that Abu-Jaber places the Ramouds in a white neighborhood to foreground their strangeness and to highlight anti-Arab racism. Placing the Ramouds in a white neighborhood may indicate that the Ramouds perceive themselves as whites, and hence, they find their settlement in this neighborhood convenient. In fact, the Ramouds feel comfortable in this neighborhood. They have plenty of friends and they easily socialize with their neighbors.

Another illustration can be seen in Portia's experience. Portia, Jemorah's boss at the hospital, tells Jemorah that her problems stem from having an Arab father. Portia declares herself as a "grade-A all American" animal on the run 'off the Onondagan reservation in Nedrow' (p. 273). She is a careless person who is 'capable of sitting and playing endless games of solitaire in the kitchen' (p. 274). In *Arabian Jazz*, other people of color, especially African Americans, are pushed to the margins. African Americans appear as cleaners in the hospital and as owners of the bakery. Arabs, Portia insists, "aren't any better than Negroes" (p. 294). This confrontation has been viewed as a climactic moment that exposes anti-Arab racism and links Arab-Americans to other ethnic groups. In this way, the confrontation contextualizes Arab experiences in the US within racism that Arabs share with people of color.

Jemorah's response to Portia needs to be carefully examined because, it is ambivalent and contradictory.

'My father's mother *was* black.' The statement came from the back of Jem's throat, so sudden she hadn't known she was going to say it, the words like iron.

Jem leaned back on her elbows, locking them against her shaking. 'Yeah, a former slave. She married her master who had twenty-six other wives. They were black, brown, and yellow, and some didn't even *have* skin' (p. 295).

Jemorah's response is meant to show an identity in relation to that of her boss who defines herself aggressively as white. However, Jemorah does not mean to identify herself as a black person. She does not seem convinced of what she is saying. In this way, Jemorah's response is self-defeating because it is based on stereotyping of polygamy and slavery that are commonly associated with Arabs culture. Fatima acts as the preserver of the Arab heritage in the novel is attached to a southern European and Christian heritage. Although for the past year, the bakery has been run by an African American family, Fatima keeps referring to it by its original Greek name, *Thanatoulos Bakery*. The bakery is the place where Fatima articulates her thoughts about her identity and her relationship to other ethnic groups. Fatima wonders if the bakery has become a more dangerous place 'with a *black* family in charge' (p. 366). By seeing the link of Fatima to a southern European cultural heritage, the novel invites us to locate Arabs' experiences in a southern and eastern European immigration and settlement experiences in the US rather than to Asian or African-Americans ones.

As a result, while the novel is not strictly appropriating an African American cultural artifact to promote itself, it does not succeed in establishing a solid relationship between Arab-Americans and

African Americans, or indeed any other minority group. Instead, the characters in *Arabian Jazz* seem to be ambivalent about constructing their identities as non-whites. Their conceptualization of their identities problematizes their position and eventually curtails them from entirely identifying themselves as non-whites. Although Matussem is infatuated by jazz, he lives in a white neighborhood and his band mates are all white. In the same way, in spite of the fact that the local bakery has been owned for some years by an African American family, Fatima insists on referring to it as the Greek bakery. Similarly, even though Jemorah tells Portia that her father's mother is black, Jemorah turns down a marriage proposal from half Native American Ricky Ellis.

I. Conclusion

From the analysis, it could be concluded that (1) Arab-American characters adapt to discrimination and prejudice in a white-dominated society by articulating identity through resorting to Jazz music. Besides, one of the ways in preserving their Arab value is to obsessively concern on finding Arab husband for her niece. (2) The struggle of Arab-American characters in the novel ends up in forming their identity survival. *Arabian Jazz* offers a cultural integration by following the way American people play Jazz in effort to be accepted by the white community. The characters in the novel, in effort to adapt to majority, fall into an imitation of American culture backlashing their struggle to be accepted. Jazz refers to 'Black Music' meaning that the Arab-Americans seem to immitate the struggle of the Black-American. However, all band mates are the white. All characters want to be treated the same. In addition, to preserve their original culture, they do not want to get a wife or husband from other ethnic. This includes how Fatimah prefers European brand for her bakery to a more Arabic name. This leads to the conclusion that all struggles of Arab-American characters in the novel is ambivalent. They still put high products of America as the reference.

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