

Arabian Jazz: The Challenges of Being an Arab American

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Abstract.

This paper investigates how Arab-American literature depicted the challenges of being an Arab-American prior to the events of 9/11. It argues that before the terrorist attacks, the complications of being an Arab-American were not necessarily related to religion. This idea is studied through looking closely at Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Arabian Jazz* (1993) where the novel's main character Jemorah, the daughter of a Jordanian immigrant, finds herself in constant struggle to find a unique sense of identity. That is mainly caused by the fact that her identity is being torn apart between two conflicted worlds; while the first is limited to the constraints of her family and inside the home, the other is found everywhere where she needs to assimilate into the society where she lives in. To highlight the outcome of these conflicting worlds, the paper looks at W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of double-consciousness where one's sense of identity is always looked at through the eyes of others. The paper concludes that for the second generation of Arab-Americans, the sense of identity is lost between the insistence of the first generation to preserve their Arab heritage, and a white America where the customs, traditions, and values of this culture is regarded as outsider.

Keywords: Arab-American, identity, Arab-American literature, double-consciousness, Multiculturalism

1. Introduction

When addressing the Arab American identity issue, one must consider that the term "Arab American" has long been evolving since the early Arab immigrants arrived in America. According to Jamal and Naber (2008), "ever since the late 1880s, when the first significant group of Arab immigrants came to the United States, the terms of Arab identity have been contested and shifting" (p. 6). By considering the discussed context, it is vital to keep in mind that the early Arab immigrants were referred to as Syrians. Nevertheless, most of these immigrants were not necessarily from a nation known today as Syria. In fact, the early Arab immigrants were from various nations, including Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon.

The Arab identity today was not attained until the full collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s and the formation of the different Arab States. The attainment of the Arab identity acknowledged today resulted from the end of the Turkish influence and control over the Arab part of the Middle East. As a result of this strong nationalist movement, the Arab American identity started to form a rubric that classified the immigrants of Arab descent.

A notable fact is that the Arab American identity is heavily influenced by the events in the Arab world. The Arab-Israeli war in 1967, the Gulf War in 1991, and even the current Arab uprisings are among the illustratable incidents that heavily affected Arab American sense of identity. For example, Awad (1981) argued about the huge effects of the Arab-Israeli war on Arab Americans by writing,

"The shock for Arab Americans was not so much the defeat of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in 1967, but the way it was received in the West and especially in the United States, where strong, derogatory racial overtones in the media toward the Arab contributed significantly, for the first time, to a growing political and ethnic awareness in the American Arab community." (cited in Jamal and Naber, p. 33)

Thus, the effects of these incidents on the Arab American identity were not only caused by their massive impact but, more importantly, due to the Americans' constant involvement in them.

As a result of Americans' involvement in the region, the unfortunate 9/11 attacks occurred in the United States. These attacks brought tremendous changes with them, which redefined the whole identity of the Arab Americans. The changes are due to the idea that the 9/11 events complicated the sense of identity for Arab Americans as religion unexpectedly became a major player in defining the identity of an Arab American. Thus, scholars divide Arab American literature into two major phases when studying the field.

First, the scholars focus on the era prior to the 9/11 attacks, where the Arab American writers were primarily concerned with the themes of struggles to assimilate into American society and the difficulties in connecting with one's Arabian heritage. Second, the scholars concentrate on the post-9/11 literature where defining the Arab American identity is circled by the ideas of racism and religion. Nevertheless, as the latter period seems to be gaining much attention in recent years, it is equally important to comprehensively study what defined the Arab American identity prior to the 9/11 events. Therefore, this paper aimed to study the Arab American identity prior to

the 9/11 events by focusing on *Arabian Jazz* by Diana Abu-Jaber. The study seeks to analyze the difficulties and challenges that the second generation of Arab immigrants experience. In order to achieve this goal, the insights from Jemorah's long journey of searching for a unique Arab American identity will be explored and discussed. Jemorah, an Arab American character, is the protagonist in *Arabian Jazz*.

2. Discussion

Abu-Jaber is a prominent Arab American novelist born of a mixed-race. Her father was an Arab immigrant of Jordanian descent, while her mother was a white American from Irish roots. The mixture of her parentage races helped Abu-Jaber to publish various publications that are considered to be major works in the Arab American Literature field. Her works include *Crescent* in 2003, *The Language of Baklava* in 2005, *Origin* in 2007, and *Birds of Paradise* in 2011. Nevertheless, her major contribution to the field was publishing *Arabia Jazz* in 1993. Although this novel was published more than two decades ago, it continues to inspire many critics to analyse its characters, themes, and complications. More importantly, *Arabian Jazz* usually finds its way into the curriculum of literature classes in many American universities, which is crucial for the field as a whole.

In this novel, Abu-Jaber focuses on the experiences of two young Arab American sisters, Jemorah and Melvina. The two sisters are not only connected to America by the fact that they were born and raised there but also because they are the daughters of a white American mother, Nora. Nonetheless, Jemorah and Melvina were left to grow up with only the presence of the Arab side of their racial roots since their mother died when the sisters were young due to a fatal disease during a visit to Jordan.

Fortunately, the younger sister, Melvina, could find her place in American society easily as she is the more outspoken and outgoing individual of the two sisters. In contrast, Jemorah struggles heavily to establish her unique identity due to personality differences. Her struggles are mainly caused by her identity being torn apart between two worlds. The first is represented in the family and inside the home. The other is represented in the society where Jemorah is interacting. Cherif (2003) writes about Melvina's and Jemorah's struggles as "caught between two different cultures, Jem and Melvina uncomfortably look for their identity under the unrelenting supervision of their father's childless sister Fatima" (p. 210). As such, one could argue that the struggles to assimilate into American society and the issue of the Arab American identity are the two main issues being addressed by Abu-Jaber in *Arabian Jazz*.

The presence of a character known as Fatima is very crucial for understanding the psychological pressure that Jemorah and Melvina experience. What makes Fatima's role even stronger is that she takes Nora's position as the mother figure for the two young sisters. Hence, her constant pressure helps the reader view *Arabian Jazz* as a conflict between two contradictory cultures. Fatimah represents the Middle Eastern culture where the concept of marriage differs. Unfortunately, her pressure deepens the siblings' struggles to assimilate to the ideals and the norms of the Western culture represented in the United States. In "Beyond Stereotypes: Representational Dilemmas" in "Arabian Jazz," Kaldas (2006) writes, "After Nora's death, Fatima becomes the maternal figure in Jemorah and Melvina's life. As her character develops, we begin to see that she is not simply an overbearing aunt but a character haunted by her memories of imprisonment and infanticide" (p. 175). Thus, Fatima's previous life forces her to be deeply attached to her roots, consequently causing her nieces to face difficulties assimilating.

Concurrently, it is important to bear in mind that it is easy for the first generation of immigrants, such as Fatima, to be in touch with her roots. Contrarily, the situation is complicated for the second generation. The story suggests that it is almost impossible for Jemorah and Melvina to adapt to an unfamiliar culture. The suggestion can be seen in Jemorah's speech to Melvina, "I'm tired of fighting it out here. I don't have much idea of what it is to be Arab, but that's what the family is always saying we are. I want to know what part of me is Arab" (Abu-Jaber, p. 167). In short, the constant pressure to connect the girls to the Arab culture appears to create conflicting identities where the two sisters, especially Jemorah, are lost between East and West.

Therefore, in order to understand the predicament of the sisters' complicated identities, relating to the double-consciousness concept by W. E. B. Du Bois is necessary. Relating to the concept is essential because although Du Bois discussed African Americans, his concept could help understand Jemorah's struggles. Du Bois (1961) states, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts ..." (p. 11). This argument can be extended to include other minorities such as Asian Americans, Indian Americans, and Arab Americans.

In *Arabian Jazz*, the two souls and two thoughts can be felt through analysing Fatima's pressure on the sisters to follow the Arab cultural norms. For example, when it comes to marriage, the aunt believes that Jemorah is getting older and should be married as soon as possible to an Arab man. The reason for insisting that the husband should be Arabian is tied to a traditional belief that the Arab man would be more concerned with safeguarding the family's name and honour than any other man. Nevertheless, Jemorah, the daughter of a white American mother and a product of the American culture and ideals, finds the idea of an arranged marriage too difficult to accept.

The contradicting beliefs of Fatima and Jemorah create a difficult situation where severe psychological pressure is being exerted on Jemorah to follow her traditional norms. If she decides to marry as per Fatima's suggestion, she will give up an important part of her identity because she will always be half-American. Concurrently, although marrying according to the Arab traditions will emphasise her Arab identity, it will be at the cost of her freedom in choosing the individual she will spend the rest of her life. Hence, choosing either path will always affect her sense of identity.

In short, due to the constant pressure from Fatima, Jemorah's identity is not only being torn apart between two cultures, but more

importantly, her personality, emotions, and feelings are all being destroyed. In their full study on *Arabian Jazz* concerning the sense of identity, El-Hajj and Harb (2011) argued, “Jemorah’s complex identity and her reliance on memories to define her location in the present result in a state of ambivalence and fragmentation” (p. 151). These feelings of ambivalence and fragmentation can be felt in the way Abu-Jaber hints at the suggestion that Jemorah is not also comfortable in following the American dating traditions. For instance, she is haunted by memories of her aunt’s warnings against breaking the rules of her ancestors while dating according to the Western culture.

As a result of this constant psychological struggle, Jemorah is also alienated from American society. The strong presence of Arab traditions in her home pulls her back from embracing the American ways of life. Hence, instead of being blessed with the gift of having the chance to cross cultures, Jemorah is cursed with having two contradictory ways of viewing life. Her feelings perfectly fit Du Bois’ concept of double-consciousness.

The concept of marriage, with all its complications in each culture, is the most obvious example of where Jemorah’s conflicting identities appear in the service. In fact, it is a constant theme throughout the novel where Abu-Jaber’s readers could easily observe Jemorah’s struggles. Nevertheless, although it is a difficult topic for Jemorah to deal with, it does not provide enough provocations that would force her to face her reality. She needs a more direct shock that would make her see her two opposing identities clearly. Therefore, the awful incident with Portia is crucial in realising what identifies an Arab American. El-Hajj and Harb (2011) argued that “her [Jemorah’s] confrontation with Portia represents a turning point in understanding her identity and location within mainstream American society” (p. 151). The difficulty of this horrible confrontation is embodied in the suggestion that for Portia, Americanness is defined only by whiteness.

The complication of the incident with Portia is that she believes she is helping Jemorah. She does not want the young lady to lose her job. Simultaneously, Portia wants the young Arab American to change her physical appearance to look more American. Hence, by asking Jemorah to change her name, the colour of her hair, and even using some makeup to whiten her skin, Portia wants Jemorah to hide her Arab identity. Portia believes that the ideal image of America is represented by whiteness. As Salaita (2001) argues, “she [Portia] is convinced that true Americans—and by implication, overarching American culture—must be white...” (p. 438).

When Jemorah seems reluctant to accept Portia’s suggestions, the confrontation turns racial. It becomes a matter of comparison where the white race is positioned as superior to all races, especially the Arab. Unfortunately, the examples of this comparison are Jemorah’s own father and mother. Something that contributes to praising Nora’s whiteness is the same excuse used to attack the racial background of Jemorah’s father. In other words, to Portia, Jemorah is a product of two identities that could never be equal. Thus, it is important to quote this offensive speech to understand why it is challenging to be an Arab American in a world filled with racial prejudice where one’s skin colour defines an individual.

Your mother used to be such a good, good girl. She was so beautifully white, pale as a flower. And then, I don’t know. What happened? The silly girl wanted attention. She met your father in her second year and she just wanted attention. We just weren’t enough for her. I’ll tell you, we couldn’t believe it. This *man*, he couldn’t speak a word of our language, didn’t have a real job. And Nora was so—like a flower, a real flower, I’m telling you. It seemed like three days after she met that man they were getting married. A split second later she was pregnant. I know for a fact her poor mother—your grandmother—had to ask for a picture of the man for her parish priest to show around to prove he wasn’t a Negro. (Abu-Jaber, p. 49)

In this context, although the focus of her speech is Jemorah’s mother, Portia’s harsh words highlight three important suggestions about races. First is the idea that whiteness is the equivalent of beauty, goodness, and innocence. The representation could be interpreted from the repeated use of “flower” as the best way to describe Nora. Nonetheless, if the flower symbolises beauty and innocence, it usually sits and waits for someone to pluck it, destroying its beauty and innocence. In this context, Portia implies that Jemorah’s Arab father destroyed her mother’s beauty and innocence. Second, Portia’s long speech also suggests the impossibility for a white girl to be in love with an Arab man. Something unusual has to play a role for this horrifying scenario to happen. According to Portia, Nora’s need for attention led to the situation. In other words, Nora must have been trying to do something very shocking to catch the attention of the people around her. Third, her horrible racist speech suggests that there is nothing worse than being married to a black man. She supports her accusation by highlighting that Jemorah’s grandmother had to present visual proof that her son-in-law was not an African American.

These direct and indirect racist insults push the poor Jemorah over the edge. The insults force her to look at her identity from the perspective of the other. Surprisingly, the racial insults do not make Jemorah weaker but help her to be stronger. As stated before, this awful confrontation incident marks the moment of realisation for the confused young lady. For instance, the young Arab American proudly states that blackness also runs in her blood when Portia suggests that Jemorah is lucky enough not to be at least black. Hartman (2006) corroborates this statement by stating, “rather than negotiate an in-between status, Jemorah here claims a black identity. Jemorah does not try to explain the complexities of who she is as an Arab American to her racist and ignorant boss, but rather proudly declares her heritage as black” (p. 155).

Similarly, the statement can be interpreted from Jemorah’s pride in the heritage of her paternal grandmother, “my father’s mother was black ... 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” (Abu-Jaber, p. 295). In this context, Jemorah is potentially suggesting that her identity is a mixture of all these minorities in America. She does not care if she is black, brown, or even yellow. Rather, it is important now that she is not white. Thereby,

she will always be the “Other.” Hence, although she is half-white, she views herself as a minority, an Arab. A feeling that is frequently associated with being an Arab American, as Hartman (2006) argues, “Being marked as different, alien, and generally understood as non-white or outside the mainstream in the United States has prompted many Arab Americans to seek out and build links to other groups of colour, including African Americans” (p. 146).

Nevertheless, the confrontation between the two negatively impacts Jemorah’s Arab American identity. Although it helps Jemorah confirm and understand the Arabic side of herself, the confrontation destroys the American side of her identity. Consequently, Jemorah seeks salvation for her predicament by concentrating solely on the Arab part of her racial heritage. Nevertheless, it appears to be a defensive reaction to the awful clash with Portia. Portia’s harsh words reflected the situation that Jemorah has been trying to fight all her life, which is the sense of alienation from American society. This difficult feeling is embodied in the way Jemorah was raised by her aunt Fatima who is convinced that “this is not our place, not our people” (Abu-Jaber, 1993, p. 298).

One could sense Jemorah’s rejection of the American identity through her emphasis on seeing her home country, Jordan, as the haven for her belonging. Jordan is the promised land to the confused young Arab American girl where she could finally be with people like her. Besides, “on another level, Portia’s words trigger Jemorah’s memories of childhood exclusion and ostracism, causing her to turn to Jordan as a potential site of belonging” (El-Hajj and Harb, 2011, p. 152). In Jordan, she will be able to find people who will look physically similar to her. She will share their skin colour, eyes, black hair, and other physical traits. Nevertheless, the important question is, will these appearances be sufficient to make Jordan a better place for Jemorah? Due to the severe psychological shock from the incident involving Portia, Jemorah fails to comprehend that being an Arab is very different from being an Arab American. Although she will share the physical appearance of the Jordanians, she will not share their language, ideals, religion, and other identities. Thus, one could say that Jemorah’s real sense of identity is lost.

One possible explanation for Jemorah’s continuous failure to embrace her American side is the absence of her white mother. Nora’s death plays a huge role in distancing Jemorah from the white American concept. In short, the mother is the missing link capable of bridging the two cultures for her daughters. This idea can be interpreted by Gómez-Vega (2007), who argues, “when Nora dies, Jemorah and Melvina not only lose their mother but they also lose their guide through a maze of cultural self-validation in a country where they represent the ‘Other.’ Without Nora, Jemorah and Melvina lose an integral part of their identities” (p. 20). Nora’s death destroys Jemorah’s emotional and psychological relationship with the United States. It also makes America a foreign country to Jemorah. Abu-Jaber clarifies this notion to her readers by writing, “her mother had left before she could show Jem where her place might be” (Abu-Jaber, p. 299).

Since Fatima took Nora’s place as the mother and the responsibility for raising the two sisters, Jemorah was unfortunately introduced to only one side of her identity. In fact, Fatima does not only raise the sisters as anything more than Arab, but she also wants the girls to see themselves as only Arab and not Arab American. Thereby, it is not a surprise to see Fatima telling Jemorah, “you come back to home soon, come back to Old Country, marry the handsome Arab boys and makes for us grandsons” (Abu-Jaber, p.77). Fatima’s idea is completely different from Nora’s philosophy. When the girls were young, their American mother encouraged them to see the United States as their home, “your home is here. Oh, you will travel, I want you to. But you always know where your home is” (Abu-Jaber, p.78). These conflicting views about what America means define Jemorah’s difficulties in viewing the United States as her home, especially after the loss of her mother and the strong presence of Aunt Fatima.

Jemorah already felt alienated from the white culture when she encountered the horrible incident with Portia. Thereby, Portia’s words were the straw that broke the camel’s back. The incident provoked Jemorah’s hidden feelings after years of being taught that America is not her place and that being an American could never be her identity. The decision to move back to Jordan could be read as an emotional reaction that needed to be challenged and questioned by people similar to Jemorah. The presence of Nassir as a different voice inside the Arab American society is crucial for helping Jemorah to understand the huge difference between being an Arab and being an Arab American. Since Jemorah became convinced that the United States represents the land of the whites, she turns her attention to Jordan as her home. She starts to believe that each race is tied to a land, “I think I know...how important a place is, and the need for a particular land, a location, for anyone to live, to have that land to call home. I know that’s what I want” (Abu-Jaber, p. 339). These few lines suggest that the idea of the physical location of where the individual exists is the determination of the individual’s identity to the confused Jemorah.

Nevertheless, Nassir’s ideas and beliefs concerning the identity of the Arab American are different from Jemorah’s. While Jemorah romanticises Jordan as the perfect place where she would easily fit in, Nassir is more realistic in viewing the Old Country. To him, Jordan could never be their home because they did not only lose the emotional connection to the land, but more importantly, by being born and raised in America, they could never reconnect to the land and its people. Unlike Jemorah, Nassir knew that Jordan was not even their home. It is only another refuge for their Palestinian ancestors. These ideas could be interpreted from Nassir’s speech to Jemorah, where he is trying to convince her about the irrelevance of her decision to move back to Jordan,

We spring from exiles and refugees, Jemorah, you and I. We go on to be sure, but the place of our origins is swept away. Forgive me, if I take liberties in saying this. Perhaps I say it because I sometimes feel the same as you. But, I think, maybe, you believe that because she died overseas that there’s still some part of your mother, perhaps her soul, remaining in Jordan, waiting for you to come back again. Perhaps the home you’re thinking of is in your mother’s arms. (Abu-Jaber, p. 340)

These few lines seem to communicate a crucial suggestion of what Jordan means to Jemorah. The Arab American girl’s decision to escape

to Jordan should not be interpreted as a pursuit of Arab identity. Nevertheless, it is better viewed as a search for the memories of her mother. In other words, Jordan is the place that represents security, belonging, and, more importantly, happiness. Therefore, one could argue that Jemorah's pursuit of Jordan could be interpreted as a pursuit of her mother.

Furthermore, Nassir's words also suggest that they have lost the connection to their origins as they were second-generation immigrants. Unlike her father or Aunt Fatima, Jemorah, Melvina, and Nassir could never be connected to Palestine, Jordan, or any other Arab State. To this young generation, the Arab world is a strange place where only their dreams could make it perfect. Hence, it is easier for Jemorah to rebuild her relationship with America than to start a new life in the Arab world. Jemorah will always be an Arab American, not just an Arab or an American.

3. Conclusion

The identity of the Arab American is usually a complicated issue because of the severe differences between the Arab and American cultures. Consequently, the younger generation of Arab Americans finds it difficult to assimilate into American society. Hence, *Arabian Jazz* presents great insights into understanding these difficulties. Specifically, when one looks closely at the experience of Jemorah, one can notice how the cultural traditions of the East and the racism in the West could create conflicting identities. Unfortunately, this conflict creates a soul that is torn apart between two worlds. Nevertheless, when this younger generation of Arab Americans realised that the means to reconnect to the Arab world were lost, they could finally find it easier to look for their place in American society.

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