Arab Literary Representations of London: Cross-Cultural Romances as Social Spaces in Dabbagh's *Out of It* and Jarrar's *Dreams of Water*

Nihad Rahmouni[1] & Yousef Abu Amrieh[1]

[1] Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Jordan, Jordan

Correspondence: Nihad Rahmouni, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Jordan, Jordan.

Abstract

This paper investigates the literary representation of London as a site of cross-cultural romance by analyzing the effects of romantic relations between Arab women and white men on their identities in the works of Selma Dabbagh's *Out of It* (2011) and Nada Awar Jarrar's *Dreams of Water* (2006). It aims at examining the city of London as a convenient testing ground for whether Arab women characters could mingle and cohabit with white men as a coping strategy in the Metropolis. As this paper shows, the Metropolis helps Arab women to navigate a sense of identity in these cross-cultural romances. It is within the multi-ethnic and multicultural spaces of Metropolitan London that new intimate possibilities between Arab women and white men begin to emerge, revising and interrogating long-established racial and cultural barriers and boundaries. In other words, this is an attempt to examine how these cross-cultural romances serve to tighten the rift between the two cultures and decode the city's different spaces. Therefore, the article argues that London's multiple spaces appear to be a prominent factor in the construction of a social space in which cultural identity can be reconstructed and redefined.

Keywords: cross-cultural romances, *Dreams of Water*, ethnicity, gender, London, multiculturalism, *Out of It,* social space

1. Introduction

Britain's multiculturalism is best showcased in London which, since the early 1950s, has become a space for diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural groups. Interestingly, for centuries, London has maintained its role as a vital site for the settlement of Arab immigrants. It has long been both a hub and a gateway for the country's new arrivals from the Arab world. Not surprisingly, London has become a site for cross-cultural romantic encounters between Arabs and non-Arabs. Accordingly, this research investigates this encounter which is facilitated by London's various spaces through the optics of Arabs. It aims at offering an understanding of Arab women's quotidian experiences in diaspora. In his book, *The Making of London in Contemporary Literature,* Groes (2011) stresses the importance of fiction in understanding the city. Therefore, he declares that if one fails to get a good grasp of the city around him/her directly, he/she should go to the literary representations that present a dialogue that exists between the fabric of the city and those who imaginatively transform it in their works (2011: 4). Therefore, the city of London has often received serious attention in Western literary academia. However, opening up discussions for the representation of London in diasporic Arab fiction through cross-cultural relationships is long overdue. Hence, this study aims at bridging this gap by examining the representations of London in Arab British novelist Selma Dabbagh's *Out of It* (2011) and Arab Australian novelist Nada Awar Jarrar's *Dreams of Water* (2006).

In order to trace the shift from London as an 'Imperial Metropolis city' to a globalized and multicultural world city, John McLeod (2004: 7) introduces the concept of "postcolonial London." Although McLeod admires the diverse and transcultural nature of London, he highlights the problems and challenges facing newcomers with a history of colonialism. In his view, the Metropolis is not immune to the impact of imperialism overseas, and that both the colony and the Metropolis are influenced by the process of decolonization, where knowledge-power relations continue to be authoritative on subaltern societies within the Metropolis (13-14). McLeod focuses on the mapping of the city in "the rewritings of London" by immigrant writers from Africa, Asia, Caribbean, and South Pacific, and demonstrates how their accounts attempt to resist the injustices and prejudices practiced on them. In other words, his study attempts to deconstruct the assumption that "London is a utopian place" (16). Moreover, in *(Re-)Mapping London: Visions of the Metropolis in the Contemporary Novel in English*, Vanessa Guignery (2008) investigates how English postcolonial texts provide different responses to London that fluctuate between fondness and revolt. Particularly, Guignery examines how writers with British-born Londoner origins and those who immigrated from Britain's ex-colonies such as Indians, Pakistanis, West Indians, or who are second-generation immigrants perceive London as a city. In this context, John Clement Ball (2004: 4) argues that "London is an English place, as the hub of a network of global relations, it has always been transnational space. Any postcolonial 'me' who ventures to write about contemporary London has all that expansive history and geography […] temptingly close at hand."

Significantly, London, "was a model of multiculturalism that the world might envy" (White 2008: xiii). Multiculturalism transformed London into an unprecedented arena of cultural and ethnic diversity. Yet, this postcolonial transformation does not only affect the capital itself, but it has a great influence on the newcomers from the Arab world. Arabs were allowed entry to London but have remained hidden

under the mist. They are within the Londoner society but are not part of it. Even Arabs with British nationalities cannot be considered true citizens. In this case, the concept of citizenship has lost its value. In their article, "Integration and the Negotiation of 'here' and 'there': the Case of British Arab Activists," Nagel and Staehili (2008) argue that "[i]ntegration" refers not just to the attitudes of marginalized groups that could be observed or measured but also to the ways in which the superior and inferior groups contest the concept of citizenship and affiliation in nationally recognized political systems (416). Hence, they stress the need to scrutinize not only where these marginalized groups of immigrants live, but also how they perceive their sense of citizenship in places of residency, work, and familial circles (2008: 416). In other words, they question the extent that Britain accepts difference and diversity within its societies. Following this line of thought, this study on sociocultural, geo-critical and literary theories such as those proposed in Henry Lefebvre's monographs *The Production of Space* (1992) and *The Right to the City* (1996), and Robert Tally's books *Spatiality* (2013), and *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2011). It investigates the role of the Metropolis from being a mere backdrop to a space for social relationships that help Arab women, and immigrants, to create a healing space from the scars of wars in Selma Dabbagh's *Out of It* and Nada Awar Jarrar's *Dreams of Water*.

As a matter of fact, the 1991 and 2001 censuses marked a total absence of Arabs as an autonomous category. Relying on statistics from the 1991 census, Madawi Al-Rasheed (1996: 206) argues that "nearly 300.000 persons recorded their ethnicity as other-others." In other words, Arabs were degraded to the third rank after the Irish white other. In this respect, this category failed to capture the whole of the Arab population. Al-Rasheed points out the shortcomings of the census classification whereby Arabs find themselves uncertain as to which category they belong as "racial categories such as white and black are confusing especially for people whose skin color is neither" (206). Al-Rasheed identifies two types of Arab migration to Britain. The first type is labor migration, which consists predominantly of Moroccans who work in the West end of London in restaurants as chefs, cleaners, waiters, receptionists, and porters. The second type is "Involuntary Migration," and it includes Palestinians and Iraqis who were forced to flee their homelands as refugees and asylum seekers.

However, a separate box of "Arab" as an ethnic identity was added for the first time in the 2011 Census. Data retrieved from the 2011 Census indicate that the highest number of people of Arab origins, ranging between 106.020 and 175.458 individuals, was based in London. Nearly 7.2% reside in Westminster Borough and 4.1% in Kensington and Chelsea (The Council for Arab-British Understanding [Caabu] 2020: 28). It is worth mentioning that the data included statistics on interracial relationships of all people who were a couple, who were married, cohabiting, or in a civil partnership: "Nearly three-quarters of Arabs (72%) […] cohabiting were in interethnic relationships, compared with almost a third (31%) of Arabs […]. The proportion of people in inter-ethnic relationships was lower in 2001, compared to 2011" (Office for National Statistics). Since there is another minority that does not have legal refugee status, it is difficult to estimate the number of Arabs who are in cross-cultural relationships. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Yemeni immigrants had built up their own neighborhood in London's East End, keeping up social ties with relatives who resided in other British ports such as Cardiff, Liverpool, and South Shields. During the early years of their arrival, they were seemingly inclined to marry native British women (El-Solh 1993: 73). These British wives easily adopted the Islamic culture of the Yemeni women.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing this paper, the results of the most recent census, which was carried out in 2021, are not published yet. It would be interesting to analyze these results, including the changes in the size of Arab populations in Britain since 2011. Certainty, recent sociopolitical events in the Middle East, such as the Arab Spring and the ensuing armed conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen, have substantially increased the number of Arab refugees in Europe, including Britain. Against this background, this article investigates the literary representations of London as a socio-cultural space of romantic relations between Arab women and white men with a special attention to how these cross-ethnic and cross-cultural trysts affect Arab women's identities in Dabbagh's *Out of It* and Jarrar's *Dreams of Water*.

2. Social Spaces of London

The city of London has a strong resonance among other global cities in sociological, cultural, and human sciences studies. London "is the largest city, within the largest country, in the United Kingdom. Alongside housing Parliament and government departments, the capital also contains the majority of national media, national galleries and museums, the Bank of England, and the national football stadium" (Brown 2019: 24). Interestingly, as a multi-ethnic space, London offers a rich arena to investigate Arab communities of immigrants and refugees in Britain, and address issues of identity, religion, political activism within a global context. Accordingly, it is apt to draw on "Space Theory" to scrutinize issues of space, power, gender, and "the other". In Henri Lefebvre's view, space is produced by human beings. In this context, Lefebvre concentrates on the idea of "social space" in which spaces are no longer a mere setting or related only to issues of economy or finance but rather are grounds for social relations and power. Lefebvre was the one who coined the term "the production of space" with his emphasis being not on the process of creation itself but on the creation of social connections of production (Smith 2008: 123). According to Lefebvre, nature serves as the "raw material" from which they are produced. They are products of a process that touches on the economic and technical spheres but goes far beyond them since they are also political products and strategic locations. Accordingly, Lefebvre argues that "[s]ocial space thus remains the space of society, of social life. Man does not live by words alone; all 'subjects' are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify" (1992: 35). Furthermore, people are not faced with one social space but with a variety of social spaces (Lefebvre 1992: 86).

It is certainly true that so far there is a type of space that can be identified and reproduced through social interaction, one that is, by borrowing Lefebvre's terminology, called "social space". Therefore, this social space cannot be examined without Lefebvre's book, *The*

Right to the City (Le Droit à la Vie) (1996). Lefebvre (1996:158) had coined the term "the right to the city" as a "cry" or a "demand" for the right to a new urban life "which cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional crises. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life". However, Lefebvre confines his scope to everyday life in Western Europe and often specifically to France. Hence, the current study appropriates Lefebvre's theory of space to discuss how Arab writers in diaspora reproduce their own social spaces through cross-cultural romances and claim their rights to the city as a survival strategy.

In addition to Lefebvre's theories and studies, this research also draws on the work of Robert Tally who, in an attempt to trace the spatial turn within the postmodern era in philosophy, literature, and critical theory, has introduced the term "Literary Cartography". In his book, *Spatiality* (2015: 6), Tally blends literature with cartography. He asserts that "narrative functions as a means of mapping […] and that literary cartography produced in the narrative then becomes a way for readers to understand and think their own social spaces." Tally appropriated Fredrick Jameson's concept of "Cognitive Mapping" to be a quintessential model for the project of literary cartography (67). He argues that Jameson's concept "refers to a person's attempt to locate his / her position within a complex social organization or spatial milieu as in the case with a single person who is walking around in an unfamiliar city, attempting to gain a concrete sense of place in relation to various other places on mental map" (68). Tally contends: "However, the aim is to represent an unpresentable international social class or, as Jameson's model makes clear, to situate one's position relative to others in a vast, seemingly unpresentable social space, a cartographic project is required" (74). In other words, literary cartography helps to reduce the generalized depictions of the places so that the invisible person can locate himself within the mainstream.

Furthermore, in his collection of essays, *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2011:13), Tally shows how literature finds "its way back to the center of our discussion of space and place." He examines the critical role that the notion of place plays in light of the delocalizing effects of modernization and globalization (14-15). Notably, he focuses on "the modes of social practice" whereby he argues that geocriticism "suggests a mode of literary analysis that would organize the study of literary texts in a way that converges neither on singular places nor on categories of place but on behavioral aptitudes and strategies […] where spatial orientation is linked to the theme of personal identity" (23-24). In other words, in literary texts, themes and places are intricately related, and therefore, analyzing the role that a place plays in developing a theme in a literary text can be a fruitful and productive process both thematically and aesthetically.

The literature of diaspora revolutionizes the contemporary globalized discourse in which ethnic minorities are brought into the center. Minorities and ethnic groups are caught in a dynamic socio-political spatial mobility that has affected their identity transformation. According to Humphery: "Postmodernity celebrates these experiences as 'de-territorialization,' 'hybridity' and 'exile.' This is a world in which everything and everybody is being prised from their roots" (32). Interestingly, in an attempt to theorize the concept of diaspora, Judith Shuval (2000: 44) argues that it is worthwhile to scrutinize "diaspora theory" as an autonomous category, yet it is critical to recognize its deep-seated connections to other hypothetical contexts. Among these theories is "ethnic theory" since this approach deals with issues of identity and its effective role in seeking an understanding of the different stages that one may go through in the making of his/her own identity that is derived from history, religion, language, and previous experiences, in an era of urbanization, tumbling of geographical and individual connections (44). Therefore, "the diaspora and transnational literature come perilously close to fetishizing 'the migrant' as the exemplary global subject, equating social complexity with movement across nation-state boundaries" (Nagel 375).

The theme of cross-cultural romances is one of the themes that can be scrutinized against the backdrop of the space in which it takes place. In addition, this theme has been always there in literary academia. There are numerous literary works that have elaborately explored this theme. William Shakespeare touched on the gist of this throughout his famous play *Othello* (1604) to mirror and historicize the racial atmosphere that permeates Britain in the Renaissance Era. Therefore, this theme is transformed from Shakespeare's times into the postcolonial arena as reinvented by Tayeb Salih in his novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). Tayeb Salih contributed to the development of this discussion through the character of Mustafa Saeed who engages in a series of romantic relationships with different British white women in cosmopolitan London. Yet, Salih's novel is not an imitation of Shakespeare's canonical text, but a re-invention of it, whereby he uses the figure of Othello to write back to the British imperial discourse. Not surprisingly, cross-cultural romances and marriages have become central motifs in many diasporic Arab literary texts written by authors as diverse as Fadia Faqir, Selma Dabbagh, Nada Awar Jarrar, Betool Khedeiri, Jamal Mahjoub, and Randa Jarrar as a result of the dissemination of political and ideological discourses on race and ethnicity.

The theme of cross-cultural marriages in the works of Arab writers in diaspora has been previously examined by AlKayid and Awad in their article "Family Members and Marital (In)Stability of Cross-Cultural Marriage in Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns*." Focusing on Mahjoub's novel, AlKayid and Awad (2019: 5) argue that "the cross-cultural marriage of Yasin and Ellen in the novel affects and is affected by two major personal dimensions, children and relatives". AlKayid and Awad conclude that Mahjoub represents Yasin and Ellen's cross-cultural marriage "as a site where socio-economic, cultural, political, and even historical differences converge" (11). Yet, the researchers do not examine how the setting itself, i. e. Europe, influences this cross-cultural marriage. The current study, in contrast, focuses on the representation of London as a backdrop to the romantic relationships that involve Arab women and white men.

3. Cross-Cultural Romance as a Site for Identity Formation in Dabbagh's *Out of It*

Selma Dabbagh is a British Palestinian novelist. Her debut novel *Out of It*, published in 2011, was designated as a Guardian Book of the Year in 2011 and 2012 by Ahdaf Soueif and Dame Marina. The novel unfolds the story of the Palestinian family of Mujahed who lives in

Gaza under a suffocating Israeli siege. The setting shifts between Gaza, the Arab Gulf, and London. In an interview with Lindsey Moore, Dabbagh states that by mapping these three different spaces, she expresses her wish for unifying the Palestinians in diaspora by focusing on political consciousness (2014: 331). Significantly, *Out of I,* as Bashiti and Al- Mousa argue, "reveals the impact of the element of space on the formation of the hero's psyche. That is, space is associated with specific personal experiences and memories which play a major role in the shaping of the individual's selfhood" (2021: 50). Moreover, Boehmer and Davies argue that London as portrayed in Dabbagh's novel "is imaginatively inflected with Gaza's more overtly violent topographies and its mainstream population is critiqued for its failed 'political consciousness,' in direct contrast to the Palestinian protagonists who come into contact with it" (2015: 404). Significantly, this study deviates from the above discussion in an attempt to investigate how the gender of the protagonist shapes her experiences in the Metropolis. It examines the city of London as a space that brings Arab women with white men together in cross-cultural romances, and valorizes how these rendezvous contribute to the process of transformation that Arab women go through.

Dabbagh's *Out of It* does not only collaborate with the national discourse of the Palestinian quest*,* but it also examines the marginalization and inherent inferiority that Arab women confront within the social hierarchy. In doing so, Dabbagh questions the social exclusion, and mostly, the elimination of Arab women from political debates in her own society. It scrutinizes how Arab women's experiences in London become central in their journeys of struggle to reform and maintain their identities. Importantly, social space, as the term itself suggests, cannot be stripped of the social context in which space becomes a variable that influences and is influenced by human beings through social practices. As Lefebvre puts it, "social space is a social product" (1992: 26). Therefore, the spaces of London appear to be a prominent factor in the reconstruction of a social space in which identity can be both reconsidered and retained. As a social product, a cross-cultural romance becomes a testing space that interrogates the social conventions that restrict Arab women's participation in the local socio-political situation. In addition to revealing Arab women's inner crisis, a cross-cultural romance offers an appropriate space that allows them to re-define their identities. This theme is introduced through Iman's romantic relationship with Charles in London. The following analysis focuses on Iman's quotidian experiences in London in relation to her previous days both in Gaza and the Arab Gulf. The discussion follows Lefebvre's approach to the production of space to demonstrate that, as a multiethnic space, London offers Iman a convenient space for a cross-cultural romance, where she goes beyond the social, political, racial, and spatial barriers.

While the novel is mainly about Gaza and the complicated and deeply rooted conflict between the Palestinians and the Israeli forces, the character's experiences in the Metropolis play a critical role in the narrative. Palestinian writers, like Randa Jarrar and Susan Abulhawa, have "portray[ed] the hard conditions and circumstances that Palestinians endure due to recurrent Israeli military attacks on the Gaza Strip" (Abu Amrieh 2022a: 194). However, this study attempts to investigate the literary representations of London through the lenses of Arab women characters and how it helps them navigate and re-construct a sense of selfhood. The center-periphery social interaction as a context for cross-cultural romances makes it particularly resonant in the experiences of Arab women immigrants. Therefore, the following analysis is going to investigate the city of London through the experiences of Arab women in particular. This is clearly explored through the East-West relationship that is dramatically vibrant in Dabbagh's novel, whereby London is a convenient testing ground for this encounter which is embodied through Iman's cross-cultural romantic relationship with Charles who is of white British descent.

The process of displacement that a dispersed person experiences in diaspora is inextricably interconnected with the notion of space. Bill Ashcroft (2001: 125) states that people's sense of place was ruptured by colonialism. In the case of dispersed individuals, 'place' is no longer a mere spatial site since the defining link between identity and a particular place might have been irreparably destroyed (125). As the title implies, Dabbagh's novel *Out of It* is an intentional spatial text that examines the interrelated relationships between the disparate metropolitan landscapes of London and Palestine. This description and superimposition of several urban settings are fundamental to the cross-national relationships between Palestinians that Dabbagh outlined (Boehmer and Davies 2015: 404). In fact, the title itself involves spatial socio-political mobility out of the dystopian reality of Palestinian society. Accordingly, as a case in point, Iman's perception of the city of London is seen through the optics of an overwhelming war that she has left in her homeland and through a journey that she undertakes toward self-exploration.

As a starting point, one may argue that Iman's conception of London is reflected in her attitude towards her flat mate Eva. This hostile attitude is stimulated by a long history of British colonialism with London as the capital city of the empire as she reveals her thoughts to Rasheed: "[C]olonialism. Two hundred-odd years in India, another hundred or so in Egypt, thousands of years in Asia and Africa. If you stack them all up on top of each other it feels like the whole history of civilized man, and for what? To create this place? [...]. And people like Eva" (2012: 192). In addition to this, London is the city from which the Balfour Declaration was announced, starting a process of dividing Palestine and creating the State of Israel. Arnold (2016) has condemned Britain for its heinous policy that has blighted Middle East politics by declaring two irreconcilable decisions: by granting the Arab self-control and at the same time constructing a Jewish colony in Palestine (285). In conspiracy with the French, Britain adapted its imperial policy to seize more territories for domination (285-286). This actually augments Iman's frustration and sense of injustice. The above quotation epitomizes Iman's antagonism towards the city and its people, and yet her perception of London oscillates between hostility and affection. This also could be illustrated through Dabbagh's endeavor to create a contrapuntal vision between two spatial geographies of London and Palestine:

> London was quiet to Iman. The traffic, planes, and people worked along allocated channels. They moved along the grooves cut out for them. It was not a world shaken down and cut through night after night. The noise was conformist and the talk and expressions appeared to operate on one level only. People behaved in ways that seemed unconnected to others. Their actions had repercussions only for themselves. There was an enviable ability to relinquish involvement in the bigger picture, to believe that it

was all under control, that somebody with your interests in mind was looking out for you. (185)

Therefore, while in London, Iman chooses to stay indoors. She builds up her own private world bordered by the walls of her own flat. She "had established a reliable three-pointed routine, with her bedroom, the television, and the kitchen delineating her movement […]. Her triangle of life was about as comfortable as it got. It was all she needed" (189-190). Nevertheless, there is an implicit desire to be part of that crowd: "To get more of their lives, Iman followed strangers, fascinated by the directions that the mind's interests took when no longer consumed by fear. But then her world caught up with them and she could not do it any more" (185-186). In other words, Iman's perception of London was equivocal and ambivalent.

Back in Gaza, Iman was underestimated in her own society. She finished her studies in Switzerland and returned to Gaza. Though she is a member of a women's committee in Gaza, she is always looked to as "the outsider, the returnee and as a result, she did not deserve to so much as comment on what was going on there" (6). Consequently, Iman is a victim not only of a devastating war but also of a society that is locked down with social restrictions. She is pushed to the margin: "[W]hatever she did, they always watched her and she always heard them in her head, commenting on her clothes, her foreignness, her virginity, her marriageability, or her lack thereof" (22). In an attempt to find a role for herself, she joins one of the Islamist movements. Thus, her father arranges for her to join him in an unnamed Arab Gulf country before she becomes fully politically engaged with the Islamist movement. Iman is sent by her father again to London so that she is safe from any political engagement of any type. It is worth mentioning that Iman's low self-esteem becomes inflamed in the unnamed Arab Gulf state. Her stepmother, Susie shakes her entity for being a woman. Though she feels a necessity to act, these thoughts keep occupying her mind: "The judgment had resonated and caused so much self-doubt Iman felt as though her inexperience had been branded on her forehead with a cattle iron. She wondered about the visibility of her sexual immaturity continuously" (205).

It is certainly true that the concept of space has shifted over and over in the postcolonial era. Interestingly, Ashcroft states that a sense of place is reduced to a particular family, group, and the symbolic elements that make up a common culture, race, and set of beliefs, including a longing for a distant home country. It is when space transcends its physicality, perhaps it starts to be more identifying (2011: 125). Similarly, Lefebvre argues that each space has content. Despite the fact that space is a set of relations between things, i.e., objects and products, every place involves, consists of, and dissimulates social relationships. The social nature of space, including the social ties it suggests, contains, and dissimulates, has started to overpower in a noticeable way (1992: 83).

According to Lefebvre, the character of social space "is an encounter, assembly, simultaneity […] everything that there is in space, everything that is produced either by nature or by society, either through their co-operation or through their conflicts. Everything: living beings, things, objects, works, signs and symbols" (1992:108). Lefebvre argues that "social relations do not disappear in the worldwide framework, on the contrary, they are reproduced" (404). It is worth mentioning that Iman's sense of Gaza was epitomized in the attitude of Ziyyad Ayyoubi, a fighter from the Patriotic Guard, toward her. In other words, Ayyoubi was the only person who "had spoken to her, not as a girl, but as someone of significance" (181). Therefore, in London images from home that brought them together keep taking over her mind: "Iman had come to accept that he was everything and now he was there in her room, in her father's flat, in this oasis of boredom. In her hand, she held a piece of evidence that that world of meaning and horror still existed" (179).

This relationship between center and periphery enables Iman to escape both the social and political powers. According to Lefebvre, it could be beneficial to take into account the body in order to comprehend the three social space moments: the conceived, the perceived, and the lived (40). This means reconsidering that a "subject" who belongs to a group or society is involved in having a relationship with his or her own body and vice versa (1992: 40). In this sense, for Iman, London is a haven from the war overseas. Iman's visit to Charles's flat reminds her of her brother Sabri's room. For Iman, being with a government official in his flat makes her comfortable and safe from the flames of war in Gaza and liberates her from a world that "rested only on a sheet" (14):

> She felt more comfortable now in this safe little hole underneath the centre of London's government, this flowery little bunker, unchanged for over a century or two, filled with the regalia of the past. There was comfort in victory, in the silence that it brought. The knowledge that the bed that you slept in would be yours in the morning. (214)

The quotation highlights the substantial differences between London and Gaza since people in the former live quietly while "wars and conflicts affect people's daily experiences in Gaza" (Abu Amrieh 2022b, 43). Lefebvre states that social space "is also a means of control and hence of domination, of power, yet as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it" (1992: 26). This center-periphery relationship enables Iman to escape both the social and political powers. It grants her both worthiness and safety. Iman succeeds in meeting the feminine norms only when she engages in a romantic relationship with a white man. In other words, Iman finds solace and peace in this cross-cultural romance where she is psychologically protected from the trauma of war. Hence, she is doubly liberated both as a Palestinian citizen who is exhausted by war and as a woman who is competent enough to fulfill her status as a female. Moreover, social space which, in Lefebvre's view, "[i]tself the outcome of past actions, […] is what permits fresh actions to occur while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others" (1992: 73). Accordingly, Iman's relationship with Charles resembles to some extent her relationship with Ayyoubi who is also, as mentioned above, a soldier from the Patriotic Party. To put it differently, London allows Iman to produce social relationships with a white man where she becomes able to produce a space of her own through this cross-cultural romantic relationship which, in turn, reproduces and recreates London as a social space. In doing so, Iman's romantic relationship with Charles offers her a social space in which London allows Iman to engage with racial boundaries, bringing both the self and the other to the center through a romantic encounter.

Finally, Iman manages to reconfigure and reform her true identity as an Arab woman and finds herself in a "wasteland" only when she succeeds in re-constructing her own social space in the Metropolis. The engagement with the racial boundaries that the socio-cultural spaces of the City of London give her victory over the social and political powers that draw her into a state of uncertainty and doubt. This is illustrated in the transformation in her attitude towards Eva. Iman no longer treats Eva with antagonism. Iman is "goading herself into a guise of friendship with this girl that she found awkward to put on after all the time spent criticizing her at close quarters. But it seemed like this was a different girl in many ways" (283). Iman reaches the point of self-reconciliation: "it was no longer her responsibility to act" (197). It is the multi-ethnic social space of London that instigates Iman's transformation. In this sense, her romance with Charles is both the trigger and the apex of self-transmutation.

4. London as a Safe Haven from the Trauma of War: Cross-Cultural Romance in Jarrar's *Dreams of Water*:

Nada Awar Jarrar is a Lebanese Australian writer who published four novels, namely *Somewhere, Home* (2003), *Dreams of Water* (2007), *A Good Land* (2009), and *An Unsafe Haven* (2016). Her novels have been investigated by many scholars. She is the daughter of an Australian mother and a Lebanese father. She is regarded as a best-selling author. She won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for her novel *Somewhere, Home*. Jarrar's fiction usually "depict[s] the gruesome reality of war affecting the lives of several Arab diasporic characters" (Zaarour, Mukattash, and Abu Amrieh 2023: forthcoming). For instance, in her most recent novel, *An Unsafe Haven*, Jarrar portrays "the effect of the Syrian crisis and the subsequent influx of refugees onto Lebanon," and in this sense, she draws readers' attention to a "dilemma that [chronically] plagues the Arab world as a result of continuous socio-political upheavals" (ibid.).

Dreams of Water (2007) relates the story of Aneesa, a Druse Lebanese, who flees the flames of the civil war to London. Just like many other diasporic Lebanese novelists, Jarrar "dramatizes the psychological damage that Lebanon's civil war has caused and continues to cause for the Lebanese people" (Awad 2016a, 93). Additionally, Luma Balaa (2013) investigates the ambivalent representation of men's identity in the novel (205). She argues that men in *Dreams of Water* have inconsistent power experiences as a result of their inability to live up to Arab society's hegemonic notions of masculine identities (ibid). When males fail to meet masculine norms, they blame themselves and are portrayed as insecure, worried, weak, fearful of being emasculated, hesitant to display their feelings, alienated, self-hating, and having an identity crisis (ibid). Yousef Awad (2016b) examines how Aneesa's job as a translator helps her navigate a sense of identity and contends that "the (female) translator, by virtue of her work, is involved in a self-discovery process that takes the form of investigating her relationship with her cultural past, present, and future" (295).

The above-mentioned articles have not paid enough attention to how the city of London is depicted in the novel nor do the researchers highlight the city's role in shaping and re-shaping the Arab characters' identities. The current study, in contrast, will examine how Aneesa, the protagonist, perceives the Metropolis and how she enters into a cross-cultural romantic relationship with a white man in an attempt to map her own space and find a niche for herself in the city. Indeed, Nada Jarrar's *Dreams of Water* depicts the journey of Aneesa, a Lebanese Druze in her early thirties, who left Beirut to London seeking a new stable life away from the ravages of war, taking only with her the memories of a lost brother. Aneesa lost her brother Bassem, who was kidnapped during Lebanon's Civil War. She lives with her mother Waddad who has never lost hope for Bassem's return.

It is worth noting that, the Lebanese civil war was a multifaced intense struggle. It was a result of both internal and external threats, Lebanon's geographical location, and its sectarian system. The war started in 1975 and ended in 1990. The conflict drove Lebanon into a sectarian labyrinth, causing heavy losses where 90,000 people were killed, nearly 100,000 people suffered severe injuries, and 20,000 people were kidnapped or must be regarded as dead because they have not been found. Two-thirds of the population or around one million individuals were displaced (Sune 2011: 1). The war forced some 274,000 people to leave the country between 1975 and 1990, i. e. almost three times the number of Lebanese who fled the country in the first major exodus wave between 1898 and 1914 (Humphrey 2004: 35). Lebanon's stable state was entirely disrupted by war. It "became synonymous with lawlessness, international terrorism, and Islamic radicalism. And with the taking of Western hostages by radical elements, the country became a global pariah" (Najem 2012: 2). In Beirut, Aneesa becomes numb and inactive as a result of "the traumatic events of war and the oppressive patriarchal norms" that she has to grapple with in Lebanon (Letaief and Abu Amrieh 2022: 11). The chaotic and traumatizing events of the war paralyze Aneesa and turn her into a lifeless creature. Hence, she leaves for London where she meets an elderly Lebanese man, who, like her, is burdened with memories from home. Aneesa works as a translator of the Arabic language.

According to Ashcroft (2001), place is neither an empty space nor fixed; it is a cultural legacy that colonialism obliterates (156). Place is similar to culture, whereby place is in a constant and perpetual state of production, a movement closely tied to culture and identity (ibid). Throughout the novel, Aneesa's perception of London is ambiguous and ambivalent. This is reflected in Aneesa's views on London's gloomy weather: "there is the crushing absence of sunlight. It is almost as if this new world, grey and faltering, invites ambiguity, calls her to a place where she has no identity and where nothing can be defined" (90). As Al-Khayyat and Awad (2021: 37) put it, "weather conditions in literary works […] deliver metaphorical significations and […] depict humans' emotional and mental stability or instability." In this sense, Aneesa's instantaneous perception of London is outlined by her unflattering description of the city's weather. This sense of precariousness, uncertainty, and equivocation foreshadows Aneesa's growing sense of alienation and disaffection towards London. This awakens in Aneesa a strong desire to be healed from the exhausting memories of war and at the same time to have herself defined in her new place. Moreover, Aneesa questions her life in London: "how long it will be before she feels completely a part of this place before it becomes where she comes from and everything, she knows rather than somewhere she has merely been" (90). Hence, Aneesa is willing to be a Londoner and to immerse herself in the city's social and cultural tapestry.

Significantly, in London, Aneesa experiences a sense of alienation and estrangement. Later, at her work, Aneesa meets Isabel, a French and German translator, whom she befriends. Isabel introduces her to her friend Robert. Aneesa and Robert engage in a romantic relationship. Although this cross-cultural romance ends somewhat abruptly, and she decisively returns back to her homeland, this relationship unlocks for her a new space where she feels that London is a safe haven away from the flames of war. According to Tally (2013), "the power of the imagination to project a meaningful ensemble which can then be used to aid in the navigation of social spaces is itself a type of mapping" (67). In other words, Anessa's romantic relationship with Robert helps her to recognize her true identity in which her Arab selfhood resists the ambivalence of London. Although Aneesa is unable to fully find a place of her own in London or assimilate into the British mainstream entirely, she creates a social space that enables her to reconsider and maintain her true identity. Aneesa's relationship with Isabel and Robert "is what makes her happy" as she feels that they are "her ideal companions" (94). In this way, London plays a major role by offering her a convenient space for a cross-cultural relationship that overcomes barriers and boundaries and paves the way for self-actualization.

Aneesa's longing for someone to share with the bitterness of exile and to locate herself in her new world resonates through her different relationships with people, whether British or exilic people like her. The efforts to articulate a spatial site where cultural forces can mold the space in accordance to its cultural orthodoxy involves the reconstruction of new space (Al-Doori and Awad 2018: 13). In this context, Lefebvre (1996: 173) argues that "the right to the city manifests itself as a superior form of rights: the right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. Furthermore, through the practice of habitation, as Ashcroft (2001: 182) declares, new possibilities would be opened in which the process of habitation "transforms boundaries by seeing the possibilities – the horizon – beyond them". Thus, he defines the concept of horizon as an extended possibility, realization, and the rethinking of postcolonial space (183).

In Humphrey's view, diaspora describes a set of social ties brought about by being uprooted from one's homeland. It involves a highly traditional socio-cultural viewpoint, namely, the perseverance of identity while being removed from its context. It fits into the dated opposition to tradition-modernity, where tradition's impending demise is fought. The concept is now used to refer to both competent approval by the foster land as well as the maintenance of identity as a result of the common struggle for a cultural loss but also qualified acceptance by the foster land (2004: 32) In the novel, Aneesa admires Robert's "unquestioning acceptance" (96). In other words, her encounter with the other in an intimate relationship creates a social space that takes Aneesa into a state of tranquility and stability. Being in a romantic relationship with Robert, Aneesa feels a sense of "quietness" that permeates her life, and yet, her sense of nostalgia for Beirut and her brother Bassam keeps her occupied mentally: "Sometimes, she likes to imagine them together, Robert and Bassam sitting down on the sofa in her living room" (97). This quotation reveals that Aneesa's relationship with Robert is a site that unveils Aneesa's inner struggle where memories of her father and brother work as a bridge that links her with her Arab roots. At this point, Jarrar, just like so many Arab writers in exile, attempts to reduce the cultural barriers between the two races in their writings through cross-cultural romances so that they appear more flexible and pave the way for the dispersed to find their own social space or to preserve their national identity.

Aneesa's romantic relationship with Robert liberates her from her anxieties of adolescence change where Aneesa feels embarrassed among people around her "because she herself, the essential parts of her that were exclusively her own […] had become more intense, more persistent" (94). In this way, being with a white man elevates Aneesa's self-esteem as a mature Arab woman, putting her in an equal position with the white woman. Consequently, Anessa's low self-esteem is cured and her sense of alienation is transformed into a sense of comfort: "this time there is gratification associated with her separateness, a sense that she has finally gained control over her destiny and that it is her will alone that can direct it" (94). As Tally (2013: 67) puts it, "if the human subject does not exactly feel "at home," then at least one can develop strategies for navigating these uncanny spaces of everyday life." As long as Aneesa engages with Londoner society, she succeeds in reconstructing a sense of meaning for her own for she escapes the abstractness that Lefebvre discusses in relation to the significance of social spaces. Lefebvre states that spaces lose their meaning when they are reduced to their abstractness (1992: 40). Therefore, Anessa's cross-cultural romance unlocks for her new spaces for new possibilities to accept and appreciate her true identity. As the above quote demonstrates, in the two novels, cross-cultural romances are not only mere relationships that Arab women engage in, rather they are sites for cultural interaction and identity realization.

5. Conclusion

With its changing and challenging profile, London is a convenient arena for writers from different parts of the globe to pen their thoughts in order to re-map, interpret and reproduce them from different angles. Interestingly, in *Imagined Londons*, Gilbert (2002: 1) contends that "there are no Londons other than those of the imagination. From multiple perspectives, in diverse historical circumstances, people have turned their faces toward the city and created it as the site and embodiment of communities of their dreams and necessities". In this context, Ball argues that London is firmly embedded in the postcolonial arena. Notably, any hyperactive reader who attempts to investigate all English language novels from the postcolonial commonwealth would realize that London is the most widely used geographical descriptor and backdrop (2004: 5). Significantly, London does not only feature prominently in literary texts by British writers, but it has also captured the attention of Arab intellectuals, including novelists, poets, and dramatists. The city plays a pivotal role in their narratives. It was not only the appropriate setting for their fiction, but it also inspired them to portray how the city of London as a multi-ethnic space allows them to reveal, reconsider and reconstruct their identities. Consequently, this study has investigated the significant role that London plays in the experiences of Arab women by helping them create their own social spaces through cross-cultural

romances, and how engaging in these romances engenders a significant socio-cultural and psychological transformation.

This article has employed Lefebvre's concept of "social space" to examine the central role that the city of London plays in the literary texts written by Arab writers in diaspora. Therefore, through analyzing how cross-cultural romances contribute to spatial social productions of London in Dabbagh's *Out of it* and Jarrar's *Dreams of Water*, issues of gender, political and cultural anxieties, and identity transformation become significant factors to unlock new spaces for Arab women. As the two novels open, both Dabbagh's and Jarrar's protagonists are depicted as weak and marginalized individuals who are haunted by the trauma of war and social exclusion. However, both Iman and Aneesa successfully reconstruct their social space by reasserting social relationships with white men. To put it differently, this study demonstrates how London is presented as a convenient place by offering Arab women new spaces to engage and interrogate the racial boundaries, which in turn, allows them to test their feminine norms. Overall, London helps Arab women characters to claim "their rights to the city" and to re-think and re-form their identities.

References

Abu Amrieh, Y. (2022a). From 'My Dovecote' to 'My Building': Intertextuality in Jarrar's 'The Story of My Building.' *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)*, *22*(2), 193-209. https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.22.2.11

Abu Amrieh, Y. (2022b). Susan Abulhawa's Appropriation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet. Critical Survey*, *34*(3), 39-55. https://doi.org/10.3167/cs.2022.340303

Al-Doori, R., & Awad, Y. (2018). Space, Transformation and Identity in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love. Transnational Journal, 10*(2), 1-17. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322681502

AlKayid, M., &, Awad, Y. (2019). Family Members and Marital (In)Stability of Cross-Cultural Marriage in Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns*. *The International Journal of Critical Cultural Studies*, *17*(2), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-0055/CGP/v17i02/1-13

Al-Khayyat, A., & Awad, Y. (2021). The weather as a storyteller in Lalami's *The Other Americans*. *Ars Aeterna*, *13*(1), 36-56. https://doi.org/10.2478/aa-2021-0003

Al-Rasheed, M. (1996). 'The Other- Others': Hidden Arabs, in Ethnicity in the 1991 Census. *4,* 206-20.

Arnold, G. (2016) *History and Politics in the 20th Century: Conflict: Wars in the Third World since 1945. London:* Bloomsbury.

Ashcroft, B. (2001). *Postcolonial Transformation*. London: Routledge.

Awad, Y. (2016a). Bringing Lebanon's Civil War Home to Anglophone Literature: Alameddine's Appropriation of Shakespeare's Tragedies. *Critical Survey, 28*(3), 86-101. https://doi.org/10.3167/cs.2016.280306

Awad, Y. (2016b). The Translator as a Fictional Character in the Works of Arab Women Writers in Diaspora. *Dirasat Human and Social Sciences*, *43*(1), 295-306. https://doi.org/10.12816/0028444

Balaa, L. (2013). Men's Contradictory Experiences of Power in Nada Awar Jarrar's *Dreams of Water. Antipodes*, *27*(2), 205-211. https://doi.org/10.13110/antipodes.27.2.0205

Ball, J. C. (2004). *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis*. London: University of Toronto Press. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442676015

Bashiti, L., & Al- Mousa, N. A. (2021). Disability and Identity Transformation in Selma Dabbagh's *Out of It. International Journal of Arabic- English Studies*, *21*(2), 49- 64. https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.21.2.3

Boehmer, E., & Davies, D. (2015). Literature, Planning and Infrastructure: Investigating the Southern City through Postcolonial Texts. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 51*(4), 395-409. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2015.1033813

Brown, J. (2019*). London, UK: Strengthening Ties Between Capital and Country. Centre for London*. London: Centre for London.

Dabbagh, S. (2012). *Out of It.* New York, NY*:* Bloomsbury.

El-Solh, C. F. (1993). Arabs in London. *The Peopling of London: Fifteen Thousand Years of Settlement from Overseas*, edited by Nick Merriman, fore. by Colin Holmes. Museum of London, 72-79.

Gilbert, P. K. (2002). *Imagined Londons*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Groes, S. (2011). *The Making of London: London in Contemporary Literature*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230306011

Guignery, V. (2008). *(Re-)Mapping London: Visions of the Metropolis in the Contemporary Novel in English*. Paris: Editions Publiook,

Humphrey, M. (2004). Lebanese Identities: Between Cities, Nations and Trans. Nations. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, *26*(1), 31- 50.

Jarrar, N. A. (2007). *Dreams of Water*. London: HarperCollins UK,

Lefebvre, H. (1992). *The Production of Spaces*. Oxford: Willey- Blackwell

Lefebvre, H. (1996). *Writing on Cities*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell

Letaief, S. K., & Abu Amrieh, Y. (2022). The Passive Antihero in Alameddine's *I, the Divine* and an *Unnecessary Woman*. *Anglo Saxonica*,

20(1), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.5334/as.75

McLeod, J. (2004). *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203335543

Moore, L. (2014). A Conversation with Selma Dabbagh. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *51*(3), 324-339. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2014.954755

Nagel, C. R. (2016). At Home with the Lebanese Diaspora (review essay). *Arab World Geographer*, *3*(4), 368-376.

Nagel, C. R., & Staeli, L. A. S. (2008). Integration and Negotiation of 'here' and 'there': the case of British Arab Activists. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *9*(4), 415-430. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360802069019

Najem, T. (2012). *Lebanon: The Politics of a Penetrated Society*. London: Routledge, 2012. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505083

Shuval, J. T. (2000). Diaspora Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and a theoretical Paradigm. *International Migration, 38,* 41-57. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2435.00127

Smith, N. (2008). *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. Oxford: University of Georgia.

Sune, H. (2011). The Historiography and Memory of the Lebanese Civil War. *Violence de Masse et Resistance*. pp. 1-17. Retrieved November 14, 2022, from https://www.sciencespo.fr/massviolence-war-massacre

Tally, R. (2011). *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies.* New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230337930

Tally, R. (2013). *Spatiality*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203082881

The Council for Arab- British Understanding. *Baseline Research to Assess Existing Research on British- Arab Communities*. 2020.

White, J. (2008). *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and Its People*. New York, NY: Vintage.

Zaarour, M., Mukattash, E., & Abu Amrieh, Y. (2023). Coming of Age in the Arab Diasporic *Künstlerroman*: Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013) and Nada Awar Jarrar's *An Unsafe Haven* (2016). *World Journal of English Language*, 13(2), 16-22. doi:10.5430/wjel.v13n2p16.

2011 Census analysis: What does the 2011 Census tell us about Inter-ethnic Relationships? *Office for National Statistics (2014, July 3)*. Retrieved July 15, 2022, from https://www.ons.gov.uk