

Crossing Borders, Shaping Identities: Exploring the Diasporic Experiences of Arab Women in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*

Ashraf Waleed Mansour¹, Ala Shdouh², Ms. Mead Mohamad Banat³

Abstract

*This paper discusses the different and multiple types of oppression that affect Arab diasporic women's life in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993). The paper traces Arab women's resistance to patriarchy in their native culture, and the challenges of adaptation to new countries. The paper also comes across the significance of ethnic and gendered homeland–memory in molding and expressing Arab diasporic women's identities, and the impact of these homeland–memories on the sustainability of violence in the host country. Moreover, the term “Reversal Tension” which is a new term, is used to refer to the effects of the Arab community's counter-attempts in the diaspora to prevent Arab women from assimilating into the host countries' culture.*

Keywords: *Arab women, Arab Diaspora, Identity, Patriarchy, Integration*

INTRODUCTION

Women's diasporic experience is a double-sided experience; on the one hand, it enables many Arab women to move from their patriarchal homelands to another society to enjoy more freedoms and rights. On the other hand, it places many other women under other forms of oppression and challenges due to alienation, discrimination, and cultural stereotypes. Therefore, some of the Arab diasporic women are stuck in between the two worlds; the home and host, and left up with fluid identities, neither able to survive in their original countries nor in the diaspora.

In the diaspora, Arab women get through many painful experiences that affect their mission to construct independent identities. Some of these relate to their memory and cultural background associated with their country of origin. Such memories and cultural background play an essential role in the extent to which women are integrated into host societies. For example, traumatic memories motivate some to integrate and celebrate a new life away from past traumatic experiences. Others, on the contrary, remain unable to integrate into the host country, unable to get rid of the previous burden.

Moreover, familial restriction imposed on Arab women in the diaspora is among the main reasons for women's inability to integrate into the host countries. In some cases, home-country's imported traditions and customs violate women's rights and hinder them from expressing their genuine identities. The “traditional kinship systems is identified as a key cultural factor inhibiting the formation of feminist identities” (Marshall & Read 879). Celebrating Arab traditions in the host countries enforces patriarchal dominance over diasporic women as. In this sense, Fatema Mernissi warns that “the return to the tradition which males are now claiming, is a way to put things back in 'order.' An order which no longer suits everyone, especially the women who have never accepted it” (qtd in Cherif 215).

Despite diasporic women's readiness for integration, most of the time western host societies reject people due to cultural, religious, and ethnic differences. Unfortunately, the Western media contributed to creating negative stereotypical images of Arab and Muslim women, especially after the September 11 attacks. Edward Said illustrates that the West's misrepresentation plays a great role in giving wrong and false information, and that “what is commonly circulated by it is not ‘truth’ but representations” (36). Consequently, the circulation of false

¹ English Language and Literature Department, Jerash University, Jordan., E-mail: amansour111@gmail.com, a.mansour@ipu.edu.jo

² General Education and Foundation Program, Rabdan Academy, Abu Dhabi, UAE

³ Department of English, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA.

stereotypes of Arab women in diaspora negatively affects the host society's reception of women and the ability of women to integrate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994) criticizes the West for its misrepresentation and stereotyping of the East. Bhabha believes that there is no such a static culture; every culture is changeable and “demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present” (7). In this sense, Bhabha rejects the static stereotypes of the marginalized ‘Others,’ such as the black, indigenous, and women. Thus, Arab diasporic women’s integration into the host society gives them an opportunity to replace their old culture with a more consistent one.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” criticizes Western Feminists and colonial discourse that tend to categorize Third World women into one homogeneous group. She explains that Western Feminists disregard the singularity, differences, and the specialty of the Third World women, as “Western feminisms appropriate and ‘colonize’ the fundamental complexities and conflicts that characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races, and castes in these countries” (335). She demonstrates that such homogeneous categorization disregards women’s individual and unique identities, interests, needs, and desires.

Diana Abu-Jaber, an Arab-American novelist, author, and professor at Portland State University, believes that Arab women in the diaspora can only achieve authentic identities by self-determination and find balancing between the home and the host cultures (Abu-Jaber 1). Abu-Jaber’s writings center on issues of identity and culture. She was famous for her novel *Arabian Jazz* (1993), but she has also written several influential works, such as *Crescent* (2003), *Origin* (2007), *Birds Of Paradise* (2011), *The Language of Baklava* (2005), and most recently, *Life Without a Recipe* (2016).

In *Arabian Jazz*, Abu-Jaber recounts the story of Jemorah and Melvina, two Arab-American girls of a Jordanian Arab father of Palestinian origin, Matussem, and of an American mother of Irish descent, Nora. The story takes place after Nora's death when the family moves from Syracuse to Euclid, where the father starts playing jazz to console himself after the loss of his wife. The novel discusses the journey of the two girls in searching for an authentic identity that represents them. Jemorah feels that she is stuck in a place that does not suit her, and she almost submits to the demands of her family in Jordan to marry an Arab relative to protect the family's honor according to their thinking. However, Melvina believes that her identity stems from her internal values. The novel presents two extreme models of women. On the first hand, Aunt Fatima, who represents the extremist Arab culture, views women as being inferior to men and can only be completed by marriage. On the other hand, Portia, who represents the extremist American culture, views Jemorah and Melvina as an impure race who can only be accepted in the American culture by slipping them away from their Arab side, Americanizing them to the extreme.

CONTROVERSIAL CHARACTERS

The character of Aunt Fatima may be considered controversial, as she turns in the diaspora into an anti-feminist and patriarchal figure, despite what she suffered in Jordan as a result of the patriarchal system. However, her inability to overcome her memories and build a new identity in the host community is the reason behind this unexpected transformation.

Fatima insists on enforcing the patriarchal traditions in her new life, unable to see her identity in isolation from these oppressive traditions that were originally the reason for her suffering. Therefore, her diasporic experience marks the loss of her identity in between the two worlds.

Indeed, the consistent influence of Fatima's memories in the host country had a significant role in her inability to develop an authentic, independent identity that would provide her with an intrinsic value. When Fatima narrates the story of her four born sisters buried alive and expresses her feeling of pain that still accompanies her, the reason behind her troubled personality and her patriarchal behavior is understood. Her feeling of guilt prevents her from getting rid of the past and the painful memories and experiences:

When we were homeless and dying without food, what of the four starving babies I had to bury still alive, living—I, I, I?" she said, pushing her palms in their faces, as if the mark of it was there to be read. "Can I buy a bar of American soap and wash these away, as you have washed up your self? 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. (334)

In addition to this painful experience, Fatima's detention at the age of sixteen in an Israeli prison and the suffering she went through gives her the feeling that she is always vulnerable. That is to say, the loss of security for women is the main reason for their failure to develop a genuine identity. Fatima recounts her experience as if it happens today; she tells her nieces that she is held in prison for several days without food or drink as she had to eat eggshells in order to survive. This experience has deepened her feeling of fear and her conviction that women are in an insistent need of men's protection:

But at some point in 1956—perhaps she was crossing the street to the marketplace, perhaps merely standing at the edge of the road—the border twitched again and she was seized without warning for crossing that line [...] The men wore army jackets [...] didn't speak Arabic [and] put her in to a truck so crowded that she couldn't turn [...] Fatima saw a room the color of which she could never forget, though there was nor word for it in Arabic or English. Later, if she saw this color—she would have to sit and put her head between her knees [...] They believe they let me out of there, she thought; they never let me out. She would close her eyes and mentally close a door, the door on a tiny brown room of earth. I've been waiting to go out, she thought, room in room of earth. I am waiting. (120-121)

In explaining the importance of disclosing memories for women, Abdullah Shehabat in "Contemporary Arab-American and Middle Eastern Women's Voices: New Visions of "Home," states that "these memoirists break their silence and liberate themselves from authoritarian patriarchal culture and institutionalized religion, [...] they construct new feminist identities expressed through the creation of [the] imagined spiritual homes" (6).

The continuing influence of these experiences led to her persistent feeling of pain and weakness. In other words, the consistent impact of these memories drives her to the belief that women are always in need of men's protection to survive. Consequently, Fatima lost herself-appreciation and self-independence. Therefore, she believes that men are privileged in her original culture for being much more valued than women; they are "born so fortunate! Born [...] man" (334).

Based on this belief, Fatima thinks that the Arab world is not a proper place for women. She tells Jemorah and Melvina that, "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'" (116). She believes that the only way for women to get some freedom is to get married: "there are ways of getting around it [as women] must have husband to survive on the planet of earth" (116-17). Therefore, she is possessed with pursuing suitable Arab matches for her nieces.

The influence of Fatima's memories keeps her attached to the traditional values of Arab society that obliges unmarried women to keep their virginity in order to protect their families' and clan's honor. In "Arab American Literature: Gendered Memory in Abinader and Abu-Jaber," Salwa Essayah Chérif argues that the consistent attempts to find suitable matches for her nieces, reflects Fatima's "struggles to reproduce the oppressive models of the past" (215). That is to say, Fatima voices the Arab patriarchy in the diaspora by trying to impose the old traditions on her nieces.

Fatima cannot see herself as an American woman, or even like the rest of Arab American women who are able to maintain an internal reconciliation and get rid of their painful memories (Cherif 210). Obviously, the only way for her to enforce her identity is to abide her-self by the Arab customs and traditions and endeavors to restrict her nieces to them. Therefore, Fatima believes that marriage for her nieces is a priority over education and employment: "So what do you need brains for? You're twenty-one, still pretty, so what's wrong with you?" (136-37).

Moreover, Fatima believes that the importance of women is derived from, first, their reproductive role, and second, their physical beauty. The female beauty in the Arab world is restrictedly thought to be a pleasure for

men. Therefore, the value of women is limited in their bodies rather than their essence. In other words, the negligence of women's intellect indicates that women are chosen for marriage not for their personalities or merits but rather for their physical beauty, which means that they are chosen only to satisfy their husbands' desires:

It helps to have a good bust, but don't worry. At least you didn't get that Irish Catholic skin of your mother's [...] Everyone knows the Irish are pretty-pretty when they're young, but let them hit thirty and that skin? Gone! Horrible! Okay, so let's say it, you're built like starving rats and not so pretty now, but you girls wait, when you're forty, forty-five, everyone will say how handsome you are, I guarantee it. But what good will handsome do if you don't already snagged some man to see it? There are things you don't know yet that I know perfect, and first and last is that you must have husband to survive on the planet of earth. (116-17)

Unaware of the geographical obstacle, Fatima instructs her nieces to follow the beauty standards of their original culture, asking them to gain extra weight to become attractive for Arab men. This marks the first attempt in the novel, where Jemora and Melvina are asked to make physical changes that have a direct effect on their identity:

She turned to Jem. "Show me your fingernails. No, no! This are terrible! This will never do. What man will come near such fingernails? All right, let's get these over with"—she began shucking the coats off them—"I knew it! I knew it! Still looking like rats! Starving rats. Your father doesn't feed you a thing. Don't you eat the *mejlube* and *mjeddra* I brung?" (53)

In fact, this dialogue indicates an ideological disparity between Fatima and her nieces based on different marriage principles. On the one hand, Fatima views women as a commodity that must be marketed through their physical attributes, emphasizing the marginal role of women in the marriage (Al-Joulan 73). On the other hand, Jemora and Melvina have a different point of view with regards to women's role in marriage; they seek to marry men who love them for their essence, not for their beauty or their stuffed bodies.

The ideological controversy between Fatima and her nieces stems from the different principles for their self-worth. Fatima cannot see herself without a man since her value is limited to the presence of a man in her life. On the contrary, her nieces derive their value from their self-awareness and self-love; they do not need to rely on men to secure their material needs, and they do not have to presume unequal marriages to help them reshape their identities.

In this sense, the novel presents a vast gap between the first and the second generation of immigrants as one of the most critical problems that face women in the diaspora. The first—the older—generation is a little bit influenced by the old way of life in their home country, they have direct relation and experience with it, and they tend to do things in the old way to overcome their nostalgia. The second—the younger—generation has less contact with their home country, most of the things they know are told not lived; thus, they adopt the host country's culture as a native culture.

In this aspect, in "Intergenerational Cultural Dissonance, Parent–Child Conflict and Bonding, and Youth Problem Behaviors," Yoonsun Choi, a professor at the University of Chicago, argues that cultural values have always been a problematic issue between the first and the second generation of immigrants. She adds that: "Intergenerational cultural dissonance (ICD)—a clash between parents and children over cultural values—is a frequent issue for Asian American youth" (85).

GENERATIONAL CONFLICTS

Diasporic experience usually creates conflicts between the first and the second generation in the Arab-American ethnic communities. Such generational conflicts arise because of the first generation's desire to preserve the country of origin's traditions. However, most of the time, the second generation refuses their elders' endeavor, which creates a gap between these two different generations. In this sense, in *The Arabian Jazz*, Fatima belongs to a different generation of her nieces and has a different reality and background. Therefore, according to Fatima, asking Jemora and Melvina to get married to Arab men is a way to protect her culture and heritage.

However, since they have an American life-style, raised in the Western way, and have an American mentality, they find it oppressive to suggest, restrict, chase, or urge them to get married to Arab men.

Paradoxically, as an Arab woman, Fatima, who has been subjected to many forms of oppression in her original culture, strives to follow her old traditions, enforce them and protect her family alleged honor by arranging suitable marriage-matches to her nieces. Although she is aware of the oppressive standards of this culture, she insists on keeping her nieces within its limits. She knows that Arab men do not respect the mind and body of their women, but she still has the belief that her nieces must get married to be tamed in order to become ideal Arab women, she tells them: "No, ma'am. You're intellectually mature, but emotionally you ain't. I can see that close up and I can see that across that damn seminar room. You got a skittishness in you like a horse around cows. What you need is an experienced cowboy" (24). Despite the domestic violence, marriage in the Arab culture is still considered a shield for women from the external world. However, in the American culture, marriage is the final result of mutual understanding and respect between men and women on an equal basis.

ARAB AMERICAN OBSTACLES

Arab-American young women often face many obstacles that violate their rights in the private and public spheres. Some of these obstacles are related to their country of origin, others to the host country. The two sisters, Jemorah and Melvina, face a great pressure from two different sides; the extremist Arab culture represented by Aunt Fatima and the extremist American culture represented by Portia. It is worth noting that the greater pressure the two girls experience from both sides, the more they become aware of the necessity to depend on their-selves, protect themselves, and construct genuine identities that represent them. Therefore, they refuse their Aunt's endeavor to arrange marriages for them as it contradicts their marriage concept and the way of their life. The more Aunt Fatima insists on their marriage, the more they deny this kind of marriage.

There are many things that affect the girls' identity, such as their mixed ethnicity. On the one hand, their father, Matussem, is a Jordanian-Palestinian who belongs to a family where some are Christians, and the others are Muslim. On the other hand, their mother, Nora, is an American-born, of Irish origin woman. In addition, Nora's death of typhus during her short visit to Jordan gives the girls a negative attitude towards their country of origin, Jordan.

Although Jemorah and Melvina have never lived in Jordan, they hold a negative impression of it. This is due to the attitudes of their relatives that conflict with their beliefs. As an instance, Uncle Fouad's disloyal manners to his wife and ironically his speech of women's loyalty to their husbands represent the double standards of Arab society that consider women as sexual machines which serve to satisfy men's desires and restrict their sexuality while granting men a total freedom to betray their women. Therefore, the two girls found themselves completely detached from the culture of their origin.

Abu-Jaber reflects the different personalities of the two sisters by giving them different names that belong to different cultures and parallel the sisters' different perceptions of life, traditions, and identity (Mazen Naous 63). These names identify the sisters' relation to the host society and reflect on their shallow relation with their original country. Jemorah is given an Arabic name that means "live coal," (Naous 63), while Melvina is given an Irish one that identifies her with her mother's origins.

This analysis will mainly be centered on Jemorah more than Melvina, for that they have different attitudes toward their experience in the host country. On the first hand, Melvina proves that she is able to reach a sense of stability, standing between the two cultures. Such stability enables her to build up an independent identity that opposes all the conventional beliefs about Arab women. Her aunt Fatima described her as "never looked like a girl" (12).

On the other hand, Jemorah has a more challenging character to study, for being more ambivalent than her sister, Melvina. She is unable to make a balance between the two cultures. She has an uncertain complex of beliefs that shakes her identity from within. Being fluctuated between the two cultures and negatively influenced by her boss, Portia, she decides to marry her cousin and return to Jordan.

This fluctuation has resulted from several factors that particularly influence Jemorah. The dark skin-color that links her to her father's origins affects her identity and obstructs her attempts to have a stable character with fixed beliefs. In addition, the consistent pressure that the American society practices on her regarding her skin color and her reluctant character drive her further back to be a much more passive and disturbed character.

Furthermore, Nora's death has drastically influenced Jemorah's identity and stands as a barrier between her and the possibility to integrate into the American community. If Nora were alive, on the first hand, the girls' ties with the American society would not have been cut; Nora used to be the bridge for the girls to pass into the American society and the shield that would immune them against racism. On the other hand, Aunt Fatima would not have bothered the girls with her patriarchal thoughts and culture. Nevertheless, Nora's death makes Fatima take a more significant role in the girls' life:

When Jem turned nineteen, the earth made a quarter turn. The aunts got back on the phone and declared that Jem was ready for the altar. College had been innocent play for a semester or two, they said, but enough was enough, she'd have to shape up now, get serious about marriage and babies while there was time. And her father would have to help out, since the "poor orphan" lacked a mother's care. (10)

Accordingly, these factors have affected the relationship between Jemorah, Melvina, and their Jordanian relatives. The two girls' attitude towards marriage has nothing to do with ethnic antipathy. In other words, their rejection to get married to Arab men is neither because they hate Arab men nor because they admire American men. They avert the methods Arabs use to arrange marriages that commodify women and disrespect their needs, minds, and souls. Moreover, the Arab patriarchal mentality that restrains women to the service of their husbands does not match with the girls' expectations of marriage. Despite the persistent attempts of their aunt, what they lost by the early departure of their mother can never be restored and healed by an arranged marriage with a vast cultural gap.

For the reasons mentioned above, Jemorah finds her-self lost between two cultures and unable to determine her identity. In "Arab Muslim Women in Canada: The Untold Narratives," Amani Hamdan indicates that "Arab [...] women are negotiating their cultural, religious, and personal identities and that these negotiations operate in complex ways" (133). That is to say, Jemorah's uncertainty or fluid identity is due to two main reasons. The first reason is the host society's rejection due to her different background, color, religion, and race. The second is Jemorah's inability to integrate or assimilate with the host society. Thus, Jemorah faces great difficulty while trying to stabilize her identity because she feels that she belongs to neither of the cultures:

You don't understand. 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 always saying we are. I want to know what part of me is Arab. I haven't figured out what is our mother, either. It's like she abandon us, left us alone to work it all out. (307-308)

Indeed, Jemorah aspires to lean toward the American community more than the Arab one. However, she always faces the barrier of racism and hatred that keeps her away from achieving her American identity. Thus, the barrier of racism drives Jemorah away from the American identity and later brings her closer to the Arab one.

It is worth noting that Jemorah and Melvina are bound to both communities by different ties. Their connection to the Arab community is based on an ethnic basis and their close relationship with their Jordanian family, while their connection to the American community is based on their American style of life, as being brought up in America. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to determine whether Jemorah and Melvina are Arab or American, for that one part of them is Arab and the other is American. This means that their identity is established based on a hybrid culture; Arab-American. In this sense, Chérif illustrates that "[i]dentity is no longer exclusively dependent on ethnic history but as dependent way that history relates to the American present and gives to a blend of Arab, American, and female components continuously negotiable conception of oneself" (208).

In spite of Nora's attempted to influence her daughters' identity and link them to America, her mission had not been accomplished yet because the girls were too young to recognize their identity. "Your home is here. Oh, you will travel, I want you to But you always know where your home is" (78). Nora knew that her daughters are the product of a mixed marriage and expected that they would be isolated in the American community; still, unfortunately, she passed away before she succeeded in her endeavor.

In addition to this, being abandoned by their American grandparents, Jemorah and Melvina lose another tie with the American community, which magnifies their failure to fully integrate into the American society due to the lack of roots that connect them to the American identity. Consequently, this drags them a bit closer to their Arab side. In this respect, in "Home(less) Narratives: Female Arab-American Identity in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*," Imen Bouteraa clarifies that Jemorah is: "unable to reach any sense of belonging to her American half, neither in the narrative of the world from which she is excluded, nor in the one she creates in her stories, Jemorah is again an 'exile'" (308).

Ironically, Abu-Jaber criticizes the Arab community for restricting women's marriage options and chasing them with unsuitable matches, while the American community is similarly presented as oppressive as the Arab community. Nora's family had to prove to the priest that their daughter had not got married to a Negro (an Arab man), which indicates that white American women also suffer from the same oppressive practices:

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. Though he might as well have been, really, who could tell the difference, the one lives about the same as the other. (293-294)

Through this double-sided criticism, Abu-Jaber manifests that women are always subject to oppression, regardless of the society or culture they belong to or live in. The only thing that protects women in general from being oppressed is their-selves. If women have authentic identities based on the values and principles of self-respect and self-determination, they will be able to bring justice to themselves. In other words, Abu-Jaber addresses the oppressed Arab women, who aspire to integrate into American society for better conditions, emphasizing that achieving an authentic and genuine identity is not linked to changing the country of residence, but rather on the readiness of women to struggle and defend their rights.

Therefore, *The Arabian Jazz* presents a big difference between the two sisters, despite their similar circumstances. Moving to a new country does not necessarily mean getting rid of violence, and patriarchal oppression, but rather is an opportunity to achieve an authentic identity away from the original social and cultural restrictions (Hanadi Al-Samman 22). Bearing in mind that Western societies believe in the principle of individuality, which barely exist in Arab societies, due to the absolute power of family. Indeed, there are great challenges facing the identity of diasporic Arab women in the host countries because of the ideological differences.

Some of these challenges happen due to Arab women's failure to bridge the gap between the two cultures. As a result, this failure extends to form a hybrid identity in which they need to keep their original beliefs and acquire a kind of adaptation with the current culture to save their genuine self and works for their survival. In some other cases, Arab diasporic women, who experienced a great oppression in their original country, resort to have a new identity that is completely assimilated with the host culture, abandoning all the connections they have with their origins: their old land, people and self (Hanadi Al-Samman 33-34).

RACISM VS. INTEGRATION

However, rejecting Arab diasporic women by the host communities' racism has a negative influence on their assimilation process, which consequently shakes their inner self and makes them further lost; because they are neither able to return to their countries of origin nor able to integrate in the host countries. This tremendous sense of loss gets further deeper because it distorts the Arab women's original self. In this context, in "Narratives of Misplacement in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*, Crescent, and Origin," Ildiko Limpár illustrates that: "One of the most focused problems [...] is the contrast between two cultures, two worlds [...] this problem often arises as a need to choose between two identities" (249).

Racism is one of the oppressive practices that affect women in the diaspora. It forms a barrier between Arab women and their integration into the host society (Abdulhadi et al. xxxviii). Abu-Jaber stresses the negative impact of racism through the character of Jemorah, exploring several stages of her life. It is worth noting that Abu-Jaber does not show whether Fatima is subjected to racism or not because Fatima does not show any intention to integrate into the American society due to her attachment to the original culture.

In this sense, Abu-Jaber represents Jemorah's first experience of racism during her journey in the school bus, as children used to make fun of her due to her strange name and different skin color. Since that time, Jemorah realizes that she is an alien and this by turn increases her ambivalence about her identity:

Peachy was Jem's only friend on the bus. The other children taunted Jem because of her strange name, her darker skin [...] She remembered the sensation of their hands on her body as they teased her, a rippling hatred running over her arms, legs, through her hair [...] One day someone tore out a handful of her hair; on another someone pushed her down as she stood to leave; on another someone raked scratches across her face and neck as she stood, her eyes full, the sound of her name ringing in rounds of incantation. Waiting to leave, she could see her name on the mailbox from a half mile away, four inches high in bright red against the black box: RAMOUD. Matussem had been so eager to proclaim their arrival. There was no hiding or disguising it. She would run off the bus, straight to her room, but the voices would follow and circle her bed at night. (92-93)

Jemorah's feeling that she is an outcast in her community justifies her ambivalence in achieving a genuine identity and steadily determining her life path. Hence, Jemorah's childhood memories impact her life path and personality. In this context, in "The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health," Maria Trent indicates that "[r]acism is a social determinant of health that has a profound impact on the health status of children, adolescents, emerging adults, and their families" (1).

Jemorah would have had a better chance of integrating into American society if she had not been exposed to racism as a child. However, her childhood experience had a significant impact on shaping her identity and building a friendship with American society members. Melvina, who did not experience racism as a child, on the contrary, has a friendly relationship with many members of American society and does not feel that she is an outcast like Jemorah.

As Jem moved toward graduation and college, her tormentors scattered. The kids on the bus dropped out or got pregnant [...] A kind of relief and loss: no one to bear witness, and Jem did not let herself remember. There was no room left in her to think about any of it; she knew those children had been rights. She didn't fit in even with them, those children that nobody wanted. (93-94)

These incidents are still preserved in Jemorah's memory. Even if she tries to hide them, they just appear on the surface at the first new experience of racism. Moreover, Portia's hostility has influenced Jemorah's ability to adapt to her work environment, and consequently influenced her identity. Portia's frank hostility has the major role in shaking Jemorah's identity and self-confidence.

From my perspective, experiencing racism in the school-bus as a child is different from experiencing racism as a grown-up person in the workplace. As a child, Jemorah could find herself an excuse for not defending herself, being immature and not ready to confront such experiences, but as a grown-up person, Jemorah should have been able to defend herself and respond to any racist occasion. Therefore, Portia's conversation shakes her identity and belonging to the American community and shakes her self-confidence and reminds her of her weakness and fragility.

Portia, Jemorah's supervisor at work, who was a previous colleague of the girls' mother at the university, intensifies that the reason for her hatred for girls is due to her realization that Matussem, like other Arab men, has stolen American girls from their society and contaminating their offspring. Therefore, Portia believes that Nora would have had a better future and better children if she had not married Matussem. That is to say, Portia's hostility emerges from her belief that Jemorah and Melvina are products of a wrong marriage that should not have taken place from the beginning, as the Arab race profaned Nora's offspring:

She never did finish college after that, never got to be the woman she could've been. A husband and baby at twenty [...] it's not too late for you. Oh, sure, you're tainted, your skin that color. A damn shame [...] Your mother could have made such beautiful children—they could have been so lovely, like she was, like a white rose. Still, it could definitely have been worse for you, what with *his* skin. Now, if you were to change your name, make it Italian maybe, or even Greek, that might help some. I'm telling you this for love of your mother. I'll feel forever I might have saved her when that Arab man took her and you kids back to that horrible country of his over there. It's a wonder any of you survived that place, so evil, primitive, filled with disease! I should've spoken up twenty years ago, but I didn't [...] Well, not anymore, now 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. (294)

Portia's speech reveals the mentality of the majority of the American community that does not tolerate the presence of different races in their society. Portia is a complex character, which represents Abu-Jaber's personal experience with racism. Furthermore, when a diasporic Arab person is exposed to racism, one resorts to their Arab community within the host community, separates oneself from the host society, and generates a feeling of discrimination against the host community (Mohammad Al-Mahmoud 4). Racism causes Jemorah, who does not have ties with any member of her Arab community in America, or rather does not seek to consolidate her relationship with the Arab community for the reasons previously mentioned; racism causes her to feel alienated and isolated. Consequently, it becomes more difficult for her to achieve a genuine identity in such circumstances. It is even possible for her to achieve a false identity by resorting to her Arab community and adopting its identity as a response to American society's racism.

Jemorah, the Arab-American woman who feels that she is neither Arab nor American, is being claimed by both communities. On the one hand, Fatima wants to strengthen the Arab roots of her nieces by matching them with Arab husbands. On the other hand, Portia believes that Jemorah can be a real American after making some changes; including her name and skin color (Imen Bouteraa 65-70).

LOST BETWEEN THE TWO WORLDS

Being discriminated against and cast away, Jemorah will only be accepted by the Jordanian community if she abandons her American side of her identity. Likewise, Portia's offer to Jemorah to change her name is an offer to abandon her identity and her-self, for that the Arab side, as well as the American one, is an integral part of Jemorah's identity. Therefore, proposing to abandon any of these sides or changing the skin or hair color does not maintain a true identity. Therefore, Jemorah is lost between the extremes of the two cultures:

There was no way to bridge the space. It could not be covered by travel or in the course of a love affair, not even in marriage. The space was inside her now, she could feel it, a thing to be valued, the edges of her loss. Jem looked into the sky, its canopy of rain, and thought of a pair of bright wings that might enter the gap and lift her thoughts up high, a love letter on every point of water, filling the distance. (321)

In fact, Abu-Jaber's addressing these incidences of racism does not seem to particularly criticize the American racism, rather than manifesting the Arab women's reaction to such situations and their impact on the diasporic women's self, identity, and life. In this aspect, in "Diana Abu-Jaber's Arabian Jazz: Hybridizing Arab-American Feminism and Literature," Nayef Al-Joulani explains that female literature, identities, and roles occupy:

a position of utmost centrality. Rather than standing as consumers or victims of such literature, female Arab-American writers have established inviolable voices and offered challenging views. They have channeled their works towards wider issues of Arab-American life at large and female experience in particular. As such, an approach of their literary productions in terms of feminist frameworks has to be executed within the parameters of their reception of and reaction to Western feminism. (71)

Therefore, racism is presented as one of the factors affecting women and their development in diaspora in order to study women's different reactions to these issues. For example, Jemorah, who is not sure about her identity, has been highly influenced by this situation and felt that she is alienated from the American community.

Therefore, she decides to surrender to Aunt Fatima's attempts to attract her to the Arab community, believing that she would better fit in her original homeland or even lately have a sense of belonging to a particular culture. Therefore, she decides in a desperate moment to marry her cousin Nasser and live with him in Jordan.

In a dialogue with Melvina and Nasser, Jemorah, for the first time explicitly, reveals the truth about her feelings toward her identity, declaring that she does not see herself as an American because she believes that Americans do not like her. This declaration confirms the notable influence of racism on diasporic women in the host society. On the contrary, Melvina asserts that they are both Americans, which shows the significant difference between the two sisters' dealing with their diasporic experience. They both belong to the same race, but with different views that explain Melvina's ability to see herself as an American, unlike Jemorah:

I don't fit in I haven't put together a life. I'm still living at home, I've been working at a job I hate. I'm so tired of being a child, being good, wanting people to like me. They don't like me. They don't like Arabs [...] Americans don't like anybody! Americans don't like Americans!" Melvie said. "And what are we talking about, you are an American. Where do you think Americans came from, when they're not captured on reservations? They come from other places. That's what an American is! (328)

Like a ship floating in a sea of waves looking for her anchor, Jemorah accepts to marry Nasser as a quick reaction to get rid of her feeling of loss and despair. Jemorah thinks she will find her lost homeland in Jordan because of her ethnic connection. "I'll marry and move to Jordan. And I'll be free because I'll be with people who have my name and who look like me" (309). However, her cousin Nasser, an educated Jordanian young man who voices wisdom in the novel, is able to clarify that the concept of the homeland for her is associated with her mother, Nora. Nasser has also explained to Jemorah that due to the different way of life she has, it is impossible for her to find her lost homeland in Jordan:

But it's incredible, do you honestly think anything is any different in the Old Country?" Nassir asked Jem, leaning forward [...] that world would be only your own, the isolation of a child's fantasy. If you were to step outside your enchanted circle, you'd find the same sorts of suspicious and intolerances as here. There is nothing unique or magical about the Middle East; it shares xenophobias and violences with all the rest of the world. (328-329)

Nasser seeks to show Jemorah and Melvina that the imagined homeland is not like the real homeland, as both girls have not experienced life in Jordan as women, and that everything they know about their original homeland is conveyed either by Aunt Fatima or other relatives. That is to say, homeland is not linked to a geographical place; instead, it is related to women's ability to integrate into the host community smoothly. Therefore, true alienation forces women to abandon their identity to be accepted in other communities.

It is worth noting that Abu-Jaber's novel presents a neutral balanced narrative that is not biased towards a specific culture or gender. Feminist thought is not limited to women, for that Nasser and Mutasim are presented as feminist characters that hold the voice of truth and wisdom, while Fatima claims the patriarchal voice. Abu-Jaber also does not prefer the American or the Arab culture more than the other but shows that there is an extremist side of both cultures, as it shows the influence of the Arab patriarchy on Fatima. The novel also reflects the influence of the American patriarchy on several American women, such as Dolores and Helma. Abu-Jaber emphasizes the fact that American women also suffer from patriarchy, not just the Arab women. Therefore, she criticizes those American men who do not hold responsibility for the consequences of women's pregnancy:

She wanted to know when her life would begin: she hadn't seen any signs of it yet. Maybe, she thought, that was why she'd turned herself over so many times to that damn man, that damn man being many men, forty, maybe fifty, or even a hundred. Who was counting. It didn't matter, they were all the same, parading around with their dicks like trophies, and nearly every one put a baby in her. (101-102)

The novel presents women's status on the other side: that the American women who are considered more fortunate in obtaining their rights also suffer from patriarchal abuse and oppression. These situations give the novel characters a kind of balance that enables them to bring together the good from both cultures. If American

society were presented as an ideal society, the two sisters would have adopted all the American values without hesitation.

As mentioned previously, the novel represents a double-sided criticism of both societies, the Arab and the American. That is, Abu-Jaber criticizes patriarchy in the American community that affects American women's health and safety. Through the presentation of these two extremist aspects, on the first hand, she criticizes the culture of the Arab society that oppresses women, limits them, prevents them from exercising their sexual rights, and even prevents all forms of communication between men and women under the name of honor. On the other hand, she also criticizes the culture of the American society that oppresses and abuse women by giving men the opportunity to take advantage of women without holding them responsible for the consequences, and the absence of women's awareness of the consequences of having sex without taking precautions that protect women's health and psyche, which may lead to a woman's pregnancy at a young age and consequently, hinders her life and progress. Thus, Abu-Jaber represents a bridge between the two societies and a mediating island that brings together the two ideas without prejudice or extremism, aiming to present what is appropriate for women and their status.

In fact, the several models of women represented in the *Arabian Jazz* is nothing but a display of the different reactions of Arab women to the difficulties they face in diaspora, such as the influence of the Arab family, memories, and the inability to integrate as a result of racism or hatred. The goal of these presentations of the oppressed American women is to emphasize that women are oppressed everywhere and that Arab women's move to another country does not necessarily mean that they will get rid of oppression. In short, Abu-Jaber's novel highlights the importance of establishing a hybrid identity of the diasporic women that maintains their survival, sustains their struggling self, and bridges the gap between the two cultures.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, this paper examines the difficulties and obstacles Arab diasporic women face in the host societies through the study and analysis of the characters of Huda, Yvonne, Fatima, Melvina and Jemorah. It discusses the importance of Arab women's struggle to create a genuine identity that represents them-selves. In addition to this, it examines the role of the ethnic and gendered homeland-memory in molding Arab diasporic women's identities.

Moreover, it emphasizes that Arab women in the diaspora have a greater chance to get rid of the patriarchal hegemony. However, Arab diasporic women have different challenges that greaten their suffering. The challenges relate to both their country of origin and the host country where they move. The challenges that relate to the original country include the painful memories, nostalgia, the extended influence of patriarchal cultures on host countries, religious extremism and religious hypocrisy. While the challenges that relate to the host countries examine Arab diasporic women's ability to integrate into the new culture, the degree of being accepted into the host community, and the ability to balance their original culture and the host culture.

Through the examination of the above-mentioned characters, we come to know that the ability of women to challenge the social, cultural and familial obstacles of their patriarchal community helps them re-form their lives and establish authentic identities that represent them.

In *Arabian Jazz*, Abu-Jaber emphasizes the importance of excluding the old memories of the country of origin in order to overcome the gap between the two cultures and thus gain freedom from the old restrictions. Fatima, the representative of the continuity of the patriarchy in the host country, is unable to get rid of her memories. Jemorah and Melvina represent the necessity of having a balanced commitment to both cultures that maintain stability in women's psychology.

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