

IDENTITY SURVIVAL OF ARAB AMERICAN IN DIANA ABU-JABER'S *ARABIAN JAZZ* (2003)

Rachmat Nurcahyo

English Language and Literature Study Program, English Education Department,
Faculty of Languages and Arts, Yogyakarta State University

ranurindonesia@yahoo.co.id

Abstract

This study explores the identity of Arab Americans in a novel by an Arab American female writer, Diana Abu-Jaber. Due to the blend of Arab and American flavor experienced by the characters in the novel, Arab Americans in this novel experience a racial problem. What is considerable in identifying the characters in the novel is that they are identified in problematic and hierarchical groups of ethnicities. The historical background of the Arab American shows racial formations. Arab Americans were included into the white, then became the not quite white, then finally become particular white. The way the characters set their responds to the surrounding reflect the survival of identity of the Arab Americans.

Keywords: identity, survival, Arab Americans

1. Introduction

Asian American literature as a multifaceted literature constitutes a significant and growing aspect of American literature. In Asian American literature, identity always has been an important issue. Even though much time has passed, when the term "Asian American" was coined and questions of identity were passionately discussed, the topic is still relevant. Cultural nationalism and stereotyping as well as demographic, political, and historical shifts have greatly influenced and shaped the identity discourses and turned them into interesting sites of debate and contemplation on the politics of representation.

Many American literary works and criticisms have been written dealing with the issue of ethnicity, multiculturalism, and assimilation in the United States. These works and criticisms have highlighted very central facets and have helped in the formulation of the multicultural norm (Al-Issa, 2003). Nevertheless, very few of those works focused on the Arab-American civilization, especially on the cultural spot of current Arab-Americans. Most of the already existing theories and studies emphasize the issues of racism, segregation, stereotyping, power, practiced by the dominant white Anglo majority that holds power and considers itself the centerpiece among all others.

This study explores Arabs in the United States experiencing a racial problem that identifies them both as individual or group as either "black" or "white" (Hartman, 2006). The studies on Arab-American ethnicity and racial formation show that historically Arab-Americans were first reflected

"not white," then "not quite white," then later "became white." This study explores the Arab-American "white-ness" or "in-betweenness" reflected in works of fiction by an Arab-American female writer, Diana Abu Jaber.

In this current atmosphere in the United States of enjoying and celebrating literature of culture and immigration, many feel they have discovered the Arab American voice (Harold, 1999). The emergence of magazines and newspapers that highlight Arab American culture, the abundance of organizations which address issues of Arab American identity and image, the access to web sites and specialized search capabilities in the writings of Arab Americans, the anthologies and presses that collect Arab American voices, and the conferences that have as central themes Arab American writers, all create the impression that Arab American literature is something that has just now emerged, that it has discovered America and America has discovered Arab American writers.

This is not the case. The Arab American literary tradition goes back to the early years of the 20th century, and continues to thrive today. Many believe that this strong presence of Arab American literature is part of or followed the upsurge of "ethnic literature" in the United States of the 1970s.

Here, reversing the terms of how race is read in relation to Arab Americans can lead to a better understanding of how Arab American authors claim and identify with "blackness" in their texts to expose and negotiate US racial hierarchies. This is important, not only because they reformulate the positioning of Arab Americans within US racial hierarchies, but also as a contribution to rethinking these hierarchies, and the privileges and inequalities linked to them (Shaheen, 1997).

2. Identity Negotiation

Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* appeared in 1993. It also refers directly to jazz, both in its title and as a metaphor which saturates the novel. Abu-Jaber's use of jazz in this work must be dealt to Arab American identity negotiations in the United States in the early 1990s. *Arabian Jazz* is firmly deep-rooted in local US issues and politics.

The dust jacket alerts the reader that the work is set in a "poor white community in upstate New York", and the story is an often light-hearted tale of the difficulties faced by the Ramoud family. Matussem Ramoud is an Arab immigrant who moves to the United States and raises his daughters there after the death of his American wife. Abu-Jaber's novel confronts issues which occupy the works of many Arab American writers of the 1980s and 1990s, such as identity politics and the fault lines between being Arab and American (Sulaiman, 1999). Because the Ramouds do not quite fit into this poor white community that has few "ethnics," their friends, family, and neighbors understand them in relation to African Americans. Therefore, the work's arrangements with African America and the racial sets of Arab Americans are central to the values of the novel. This can be grasped from the way the "jazz" of the title arises as an orientation to "black music," but then converts to "Arab." This subject is strengthened through passages discussing the racial indeterminacy of the protagonist, Jemorah Ramoud, as she struggles to comprehend her own identity.

In *Arabian Jazz*, Diana Abu-Jaber narrates the experiences of young Arab American females, Jem and Melvina. Their American parts are not only granted upon them by their residence, with their father Matussem, among the hopelessly degenerate residents of the peripheral town of Euclid, New York, but also primarily through their American mother, of Northern European origin, who died because of typhus when the girls were young during a deadly visit to the father's family in Amman, Jordan. Trapped between two different cultures, Jem and Melvina uncomfortably look for their identity under the inexorable control of their father's childless sister Fatima. Since their early childhood, they have been simultaneously claimed by both cultures, proving through their dual belonging the truthfulness of the Bedouin saying that, the beginning of the novel: "in the book of life, every page has two sides" (Hartman, 2006).

Jem and Melvina suggest the pull and tug of the contradictory messages about where 'home' is from Fatima, on one hand, who would murmur in their ears: "You come back to home soon, come back to Old Country, marry the handsome Arab boys and make for us grandsons" (77), and their mother, on the other hand, who would privately counter, "Your home is here. Oh, you will travel, I want you to. But you always know where your home is" (78).

These accounts are ironic, considering the family's Palestinian origin on the father's side and their loss of any geographic homeland. Abu-Jaber explores the theme of homelessness when she investigates the role of memory for her characters. The immigrant generation of her novel recalls with bitterness the experience of dispossession, of the hardships in the border encampments, followed by the illusion of making a home in the United States, echoing their parents' illusion of making a home in Jordan:

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

In the novel, the girls' childhood memories contain unhappy incidents of hostility expressed in jeers and taunts, physical aggression, or racist labels. Jem recalls with pain her daily bus rides to and from school when she "learned how to close her mind, how to disappear in her seat" (92) in order to shut off the other children's comments on her name and her skin. But there was no way she could prevent her hair from being pulled and her face from being scratched; no way to prevent being pushed off the bus to face her "shameful" family name painted, in what seemed to her too big and too bright letters, on her home mailbox. To her also, home, where the voices would track her and haunt her sleepless nights, is the source of little comfort. Jem makes her way to college with the memory of the early pain and the distressing knowledge that "[s]he didn't fit in even with them, those children that nobody wanted" (94).

3. Racism and Gender Biased

Racism can be in a variety of forms, and Jem goes through another remarkable experience at her place of work with Portia, a woman who went to college with her mother and who offers to help her up from the lower ranks of the ethnic hierarchy, to "scrub all the scum" off her. In addition to rosy lipstick and lighter hair color, she also recommends a name change to a more Italian or Greek sounding one (Van den Berghe, 1967). In her blind acceptance of the racist stereotypes, Portia resists any acknowledgement of the Arab part of Jem's self

and claims "whatever of the mother's clean blood is left" (295), while she refers to the father as "the dirty sand nigger" (99) and believes him, with "all his kind [not to be] any better than Negroes" (294).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As a vehicle of gender segregation, Fatima's views strongly reflect one aspect of the powerful nature of the predominance of Islam in shaping Arab culture. Although not all Arabs are Muslims, Islam is indisputably the predominant religion in the Arab world and continues to provide the foundational model of social organization in a general way and gender roles in a more specific fashion. And in spite of the scholarly evidence against the generalizations about a single Arab social pattern, there is still room to argue in favour of the existence of basic unifying features. They stem from the way Islamic law (Shari'a), a strongly patriarchal legal interpretation of the Scriptures, with clearly stated principles of gender discrimination which had justifiable social and economic foundations several centuries ago, still regulates the lives of Muslim people. Arab women may have reached varying degrees of achievements in terms of their equality with men in the different Arab nation states, owing to the modernist thinking

of influential male intellectuals and/or to the strength of Arab feminist struggle; their achievement may have contributed to loosen the tight control of Islamic law and to force a counter civil law, but the Arab social structure remains invariably patriarchal. It rests upon an Islamic code which grants social and financial privileges to the male in such areas as inheritance, marriage, and parenthood, and provides for male dominance and female subordination.

In the novel, through Fatima's unconditional attachment to the values of the homeland, Abu-Jaber critiques one aspect of ethnic memory which idealizes the past. Fatima's concern for ethnic selfhood in the alien culture overrides the pain of her gendered memory so that the uncritical celebration of the past acquires an apparently redemptive function. Through Fatima, Abu-Jaber has created a comical character to make room for satirical passages, such as the one on polygamy in which Fatima steers her own husband towards a hopeful second wife, and to express her criticism. Ignoring the fact that it is the repressed gendered memory of her infant sisters' burial which prevents both her reconciliation with the past and her adjustment in the present, Fatima resorts to a nostalgic invocation of an idealized past of traditional ethnic values presumed to constitute selfhood. Ethnic memory in her case, as a means of assertion of self and overcoming ambivalence, Abu-Jaber demonstrates, is highly problematic. Not only does it invoke a static conception of culture and an essentialist perception of one's identity, but it also leaves unquestioned the gendered assumption of the homeland's patriarchal structure.

In bringing up her nieces in America, Fatima struggles to reproduce the oppressive models of the past which have crushed her and have left the symbolic female infants' ghosts to inhabit her persecuting dreams. Not only does she believe Jem ought to fulfill the "sacred obligation" of marriage, but it also has to be to "someone's son [in order to] preserve the family's name and honor" (10).

Over the female linkage of relationships developed in the novel, Abu-Jaber highpoints the private sphere of the women's realm of control. Having been traditionally excluded from the public world of politics and power and left to act in a female space, women have become progressively trusted with the mission of representing culture and preserving tradition, which means basically transmitting from one female generation to another the very values which oppress them.

In the mind of Jem and Melvina, Fatima's memory obtains a peculiar meaning and impacts their experience of duality negatively. The novel ends with a prevailing attitude of unresolved ambivalence displayed by the two young female protagonists' ambiguous motivations at the close of the novel. Melvina is shown at the backroom of a local bar injecting her drug addicted friend Larry and bringing relief and destruction to his silent pleas. The peculiar act, regularly performed, by the dedicated life-saving nurse, as Melvina is known to be at the hospital where she works, is suggestive of her ambivalence towards her own life experiences, encountered again and again with Larry's sway between life and death as "his veils would lift ... like the layers of death she had seen in her life" (286). Although Melvina does not take any drugs herself, with regards to Larry, she endorses the opposite roles of healer and killer. After the injection, Larry voices her ambivalence towards the duality of her life experience when he welcomes her to the "Room of the Absolute Present Tense" (268), unrealistically removed from time and space.

Then, unsolved inconsistency is similarly showed at the end of the novel through Jem's contradictory final decisions regarding the whole orientation of her future. She first unexpectedly states her decision to marry her cousin and "come back with him to live in Jordan" (307), exactly satisfying her aunt's plans for her. To account for her decision, which generates a great amount of surprise among her family including the cousin she is willing to marry, Jem invokes her alienation in the United States and the racist hostility she can no longer bear to face:

"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." (328)

Then, as unexpectedly, and urged by the same motives, she states her decision to stay in her adopted homeland and go back to school in order to "crack" the mystery of racist hate.

4. Conclusion

To a certain extent, this portrayal can be seen as appropriations of African American musical traditions in the package of Arab American identity building, but the links to black music should not be understood as superficial or simplistic symbolism. The texts do not deny that Arab American and African American racialization in the United States are significantly different processes and that the