

## **Being Arab-American: Stereotyping and Representation in *Arabian Jazz***

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*Arabian Jazz* (1993) by Jordanian-American writer Diana Abu-Jaber constituted a breakthrough in Arab-American literature and is even “thought to be the first novel published about the Arab American experience” (Evans, 43). While the accuracy of such statement can undoubtedly be put to question, it does underline the transformation the novel initiated in the Arab-American literary tradition as it departed from the conventional approaches adopted for decades by writers from the community and which basically aimed at catering to the needs of members of this community as well as projecting a specific image to American readership. While Arabs were similar to other minority groups in the United States as far as discriminatory practices or xenophobic attitudes are concerned, the projection of this lack of acceptance on their literature was quite different. While tackling a wide variety of themes that included cosmic philosophical issues, nostalgia, rags-to-riches stories, and the American Dream among others, there was an obvious evasion of attempting a close analysis of the Arab-American condition with all its complexities, contradictions, and conflicts. According to Evelyn Shakir, this started with the first generation of Arab-American writers like Gibran Khalil Gibran, Abraham Rihbany, and Ameen Rihani, all of whom “dressed carefully for their encounter with the American public, putting on the guise of prophet, preacher, or man of letters” (1996, 6). While subsequent generations tackled different topics, they still steered away from issues that would involve exposing the flaws of the Arab culture or the struggles within the Arab community for fear of confirming already-existing

negative stereotypes and to give precedence to solidarity over the realistic depiction of the community's problems as well as in an attempt to avoid the harsh reaction of community members. Women writers were especially stricter in applying this form of self-imposed censorship: "For many years, the real or perceived need for unity among a beleaguered minority has hampered an honest discourse by Arab-American women about topics as controversial as honor killings, arranged marriage, and patriarchal structures" (Shalal-Esa, 24). This is exactly how Diana Abu-Jaber marked the beginning of a new stage. *Arabian Jazz*, notes Tanyss Ludescher, managed to break "an unwritten rule in the Arab American community that members should not criticize Arabs and Arab Americans in public" and was, therefore, attacked for what was seen as its "grotesque stereotypes of Arabs" (104).

When asked whether she feels responsible for the Arab-American community, Abu Jaber replied that her topmost priority is the creation of authentic characters rather than representing the Arab culture in the United States: "it's not a cultural responsibility—it's more about art" (Field, 211). It can, however, be argued that Abu-Jaber did assume a form of cultural responsibility, even one that is entirely different from what was expected of her. It is rather the responsibility to hold a mirror to a culture that is misunderstood in the sense its intricate layers and multiple contradictions are hardly intelligible not only for outsiders, but for Arabs themselves who usually prefer to adopt a unilateral approach that involves "us" and "them." That is why it becomes obvious throughout the novel that she is not restricted by the community's reaction to her representation of Arab characters even as several of them underline negative aspects of the culture that are generally overlooked, at times denied, not only by Arabs in the US, but Arabs in general.

Understanding *Arabian Jazz* requires an impartial perspective of an insider into the Arab culture who can at the same time assume the role of an outsider, which is what this paper attempts to achieve through offering an insight into the complicated nature of the Arab culture and the equally complicated nature of this culture's encounter with a world that is as desirable as it is detestable. This requires more emphasis on the novel subject of this research as an Arab-American text rather than an ethnic American one, hence always focusing on the specificity of the Arab culture and steering away from generalizations pertaining to race, ethnicity, and multi-culturalism. For this to become possible, it is necessary to totally deconstruct all stereotypical perceptions of Abu-Jaber's characters and embark on a process of analyzing how each of them

represents a different angle through which the culture can be seen, practiced, and preserved so that alleged stereotypes are questioned, refuted, and at times reversed and where cultural obligation is no longer at the heart of ethnic representation.

The controversy stirred by *Arabian Jazz* upon its release was largely attributed to what was perceived as the “cartoonish characterization” (DeHaven, 9) and “implausible representations” (Hagopian, 1) through which the family of Matussem Ramoud, who emigrates from Jordan and lives in a small town in upstate New York, is introduced to the reader. This particularly applies to Matussem and his sister Fatima, who are initially depicted in a comic manner that makes them seem more caricature-like than human. Matussem’s silver rings and oiled hair, which make him look like “a cross between Elvis and Dracula,” can arguably be a manifestation of his desperate attempt at assimilating to American popular culture as he perceives it (Abu-Jaber, 56). The same applies to the way he decorates the house garden with Disney characters, deer, flamingos, and exotic birds much to the chagrin of his younger daughter Melvina who protests, “There's only so much you can do to become an American!” (106). His keen response to all sorts of commercials from “self-sharpening knives” to “foster-child programs” (106) imply a childish desire to engage in what he assumes are the daily activities of the American middle class. Fatima’s appearance is similarly introduced in quite a burlesque manner with her nail polish consisting of “layers of Dragon Lady Red, tough as concrete and hard enough to tear out eyeballs” and eyebrows “tweezed to exclamation points” (41). Fatima is depicted as a loud, imposing woman whose life revolves around nonstop attempts at marrying off her nieces to Arab men “to preserve the family’s name and honor” (10) and fixing the girls’ Americanized appearance, which makes them look like “starving rats” (116) as she puts it, so that they can be attractive for their potential suitors. Unlike Matussem, she rejects the American culture and constantly engages in exaggerated actions of preserving her family’s traditions, which she feels are under a grave threat in the United States. Matussem and Fatima can, therefore, be seen as one-dimensional characters that conform to prevalent stereotypes as they fit to the extreme ends of the assimilation spectrum and the humorous way with which they are initially depicted gives the impression that it is through them that first generation Arab immigrants are ridiculed, judged, and reduced to simplistic formulas. However, it is only through those alleged stereotypes that those very stereotypes are questioned, deconstructed, and viewed in a new light.

The first line in the novel underlines the trauma with which Matussem is haunted and which he conceals by his attempts at assimilating to the American culture: “When Matussem Ramoud opened his eyes each morning, his wife would still not be there” (1). The death of Matussem’s American wife Nora places him in a state of limbo where he becomes lost in both time and space. This sense of loss, Pauline Kaldas argues, is reversed since it is not the loss of the homeland as is the case in immigrant literature, but rather the loss of the host country that had the potential of becoming a new home: “Much of Arab American literature mourns the loss of Arab culture and expresses nostalgia for that culture. *Arabian Jazz* turns this view around and looks at the loss of America, symbolized by the death of Nora” (173). Nora was Matussem’s only link to the United States and her death severed this tie and left him totally disoriented and unable to deal with a world whose clues only she had: “She taught him how to speak a new language, how to handle his new country. His American lover. Through the year of their courtship she took his hands and fed him words like bread from her lips” (Abu-Jaber, 188).

On the other hand, the fact that Nora dies of typhus during the family’s visit to Jordan complicates Matussem’s relationship with his homeland, which in a way took her life in what symbolizes some form of mutual cultural repulsion. When he goes back to the US, he moves from Syracuse to the isolated, rundown town of Euclid, where he starts improvising his way through the new America and recoiling into his own world that is, in fact, neither Jordanian nor American. It is noteworthy that Matussem is originally Palestinian, which means that Jordan is not his original homeland and emphasizes the significance of Nora’s presence in his life as she provided the home he never had, the home that is not located in a land but rather in a person: “Nora had been his history once; now only the land was left” (Abu-Jaber, 260). Euclid, in fact, inspires in Matussem a sense of homelessness that reminds him of Palestine and it is this lack of rootedness that makes it the best place for him to live, “a place of perfect forgetting” (86).

In the midst of his detachment from all his surroundings, including his daughters whom he cannot help with their cultural dilemmas, the only connection he manages to maintain is that with his music. This also is related to Nora since he believes it is the only way he can communicate with her and keep her memory alive: “He believed that any music was prayer, sending a message out to the sky. Nora was always his audience; she was over *there* listening. He knew that drumming—its sound and intensity—had the power to penetrate the heavens and earth” (16). Music was

Matussem's way of shielding himself from the reality he is no longer capable of handling following his wife's death and it is through music that he locks himself into the familiar past to seek shelter from the undecipherable present. Through jazz, Matussem makes sure he never heals, as if healing constitutes an abandonment of the only solid reference he can fall back on and that is why keeping the wound open is necessary for his survival in the United States. This is particularly clear in the description of John Coltrane's composition "Naima," which Matussem always identifies with Nora, as "a song so slow and sweetly agonizing that it didn't sound like there were drums in it at all, but they were, on the edges, moving it along so the song didn't just stop and close on itself like a wound" (16).

His choice of jazz in particular is quite telling in many ways. Jazz is always linked to the improvisation, which is associated with Matussem's unconventional attempts at formulating an identity in the United States following the death of his wife. According to Mazen Naous, improvisation is also linked to the nomadic background of Matussem's Bedouin culture, both of which allowing for a state of mobility between different places/cultures. Naous argues that improvisation is in itself a nomadic practice and that is why it is resisted by the dominant culture as jazz and other unclassical forms of music were not recognized when they first emerged: "The dominant culture becomes suspicious of the nomadic practice of improvisation, since it challenges and negotiates both western and eastern musical and linguistic forms. Consequently, some dominant voices in the western classical music establishment seek to define improvisation as a primitive, other, and aural (as opposed to written) manifestation" (66). The title of the novel is in itself an indication of the negotiation process in which Matussem is involved as he bestows an Arab dimension on an American music genre that was originally improvised and initially emerged in relation to another marginalized group. The process of improvisation also becomes clear in Matussem's faulty English, which apparently stays as such despite the years he spends in the United States and which could indicate lack of interest in mastering the language of the country with which he loses the only connection he ever had following his wife's death.

Matussem's obsession with Jazz does, in fact, underline the similarities between Arab-Americans and African-Americans, both groups being the subject of marginalization at the hands of the dominant culture and attempting to negotiate their identity through an act of improvisation that does not follow the conventional—that is, acknowledged by the mainstream—path towards assimilation or rather does not see

assimilation as the ultimate goal in the first place. Matussem's choice of jazz demonstrates the unfamiliar territory he treads as an immigrant, since he does not hold on to some form of traditional music from his homeland, hence rejecting assimilation, nor does he favor a genre typically popular among white Americans, hence fully assimilating. Matussem's position in the mainstream American culture is similar to that of Jazz in American music, both carving their own niche away from traditional choices.

It is also noteworthy that the ethnicity of Arab-Americans has always been problematic since it has always been hard to place them under a specific category for after all the term "Arab" is only cultural, but is in no way indicative of physical features or skin color: "Arab Americans come in a range of colors. Some are nearly as dark as sub-Saharan Africans, a few are blond and blue-eyed, most—eyes brown, hair dark, skin tending to be olive—occupy the middle ground shared by other Mediterranean people" (Shakir 1997, 112). The complexity of the Arab ethnic makeup, or what Lisa Suhair Majaj calls "their ambiguous location with American racial and ethnic categories" (320), combined with the pejorative connotations of the designation "Arab" makes it easier in many cases for white Americans to associate Arabs with another group historically perceived as inferior: African-Americans. One of Matussem's bosses actually refers to him once as the "sand nigger" (Abu-Jaber, 99), which demonstrates the way he as an Arab is classified as a black man who comes from the desert.

Jemorah Ramoud's boss Portia tells her that her father is not different from Negroes and that her mother, "who was so beautifully white, pale as a flower," made a mistake marrying him. "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..." (Abu-Jaber, 294-95). Jemorah's response highlights the dilemma of the racial categorization of Arabs and also marks the beginning of her own improvisation process: "My father's mother was black... Yeah, a former slave. She married her master who had twenty-six other wives. They were black, brown, and yellow, and some didn't even have skin" (295). Through this statement, Jemorah is coming to terms with the black part of her identity whether it is real or imagined. The information she gives about her grandmother might not be correct in the first place, but it serves as a symbolic acknowledgment of the link between Arabs and blacks in the United States. Her response is similar to her father's choice of jazz, which is a "metonym for black America," as Michelle Hartman

puts it, thus implying that “Arabs can somehow be understood through jazz, or more broadly, in relation to African American culture” (154).

Fatima seems more culturally grounded than her brother as she is adamant on preserving Arab traditions and resisting all forms of American influence that might pose a threat to “the ways of her mother and mothers before her” (Abu-Jaber, 41). The United States is for her only the land of opportunity, but life is back in Jordan: “Americans had the money, but Arabs, ah! They had the food, the culture, the etiquette, the ways of being and seeing and understanding how life was meant to be lived” (360). However, Fatima’s relationship with the Arab culture is also marked by an experience of loss more tragic than that which defines Matussem’s relationship with the American culture. Fatima is haunted by the memory of burying her four baby sisters because her dispossessed family in Palestine could not afford to feed them. This trauma drove Fatima to both adhere to her culture and feel repulsed by it because she realized that for her family the life of one boy was more important than that of four girls: “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... he was born so fortunate! Born a *man*, not to know the truth—” (334). Fatima is left with no choice except subscribing to the patriarchal order to which she belongs because only then can she feel safe. Her firm belief in this order drives her to perpetuate the oppressive practices she might deep down detest. Her ambivalent attitude towards the Arab culture is shown in the statement she makes to her nieces about marriage and in which she offers paradoxical opinions about men and being a woman: “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 girl. But I am telling you there are ways of getting around 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).

Fatima’s indignation turns into complicity as she decides to perceive the same culture that sanctioned the burial of her sisters as the safe haven that will protect her from any foreign influence. She, therefore, chooses this elusive cultural security over her identity as a women through repressing her “gendered memory,” as Salwa Essayah Chérif argues:

Fatima resorts to a nostalgic invocation of an idealized past of traditional 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 assumption of the homeland's patriarchal structure. (215)

When Fatima was detained as a teenager in an Israeli prison in Jerusalem, she believed she would die there, hence atone for her sin against her sisters and that is why her release was a curse: “I am left even by my enemies. I am returned to die again, again, again” (Abu-Jaber, 335). Fatima’s determination to imprison herself within the confines of her patriarchal culture could be the punishment she decides to inflict upon herself in the sense that like her dead baby sisters, she decides to be a victim of this oppression as well. This is demonstrated in the way she inflicts this oppression upon herself when she urges her husband to take a mistress: “But don’t you ever think about it? Aren’t you even curious about other women? [...] What wrong with you? Are you man or blob?” (55). Through Fatima, Abu-Jaber reverses the stereotype of the oppressive Arab male since Fatima’s oppression is self-inflicted and she also becomes the source of oppression in the family as she tries to force her view of gender relations on her nieces and in doing so takes the role that should be traditionally played by Matussem according to prevalent stereotypes. When she compares her nieces to wild cows that need “an experienced cowboy” (24), she is assuming a double role in which she belongs to the sex that needs to be tamed while she herself is taking part in the taming process, as Nayef Ali al-Joulani argues: “Although Fatima mentions a masculine figure as necessary to tame the wildness, she herself adopts the taming principle, exemplifying a self-inflicted and self-preserved form of female oppression” (74). By being both submissive and oppressive, Fatima’s relationship to her original culture seems one of love-hate, hence both conforming to and subverting the stereotype of Arab women, becoming both predator and prey. Fatima’s stance on the Arab culture places her in an ambivalent position in which she can be seen loving and loathing both cultures. It is noteworthy that several of the novel’s American female characters are subjected to male abuse, hence discarding the assumption that violation of women rights is exclusive to Arab men or that submissiveness is exclusive to Arab women.

Despite her overbearing presence in their lives, Fatima’s plans do not constitute part of the cultural dilemma Jemora and Melvina go through since while they struggle to come to terms with their hyphenated identity, they are certain that they do not accept that part of the Arab culture their aunt represents. The core of their dilemma is, like Matussem’s, mainly related to Nora and the way her death is linked to losing contact



with the American culture through losing the mediator that made the passage between the two worlds safe and smooth. Nora's sudden death imprisoned Jemorah and Melvina in time and drove each of them to improvise her own identity in a way that relates in one way or another to the moment of death. Jemorah's last moments with her mother signal the beginning of this state of being frozen in time:

Jem held her mother's hand, as fever turned body and words to ashes, then cold. Jem sat through the night, stiffening, as if in step with the process of death. She was afraid that if she made a sound and broke the spell that held her mother's silence, her father's sleep, and her baby sister's stare through the bars of the crib, that she would shatter something holding them together. (157)

Jemorah's inability to move beyond this moment could be an attempt to hold on to the one link she had to the culture she is unable to deal with on her own: "Her mother had left before she could show Jem where her place might be" (299). The bullying incidents to which she is subjected at school because of her ethnic background and her passive reaction to them underline the impact of losing her mother who was supposed to guide her through the intricacies of the new culture: "She learned how to close her mind, how to disappear in her seat, how to blur the sound of searing voices chanting her name" (92-93). This passivity continues as she grows incapable of making any decisions and fearful of any change, including of course any that would help her negotiate her identity as an Arab-American, which renders her what Kaldas calls "a floating entity" (174).

The confrontation with her boss Portia alerts Jemorah to the necessity of coming to terms with her identity. Like Fatima, Portia sees identity as one-dimensional and urges Jemorah to discard her Arab heritage and embark on an Americanization process that redresses her mother's mistake when she married Matussem: "I want to save whatever of your mother's clean blood is left [...] I'll scrub all the scum right off you, make you as pure and whole as I can" (295). While infuriated by Portia's insults, Jemorah does subscribe to her perception of identity, and Fatima's for that matter, when she decides to marry her cousin and live in Jordan, hence admitting that she can either be fully Arab or fully American. With the latter seeming impossible, Jemorah decides to search for herself in the former: "It's not enough to be born here, or to live here, or speak the language. You've got to *seem* right [...] well, I don't know how to accomplish that, and I'm starting to think I won't ever learn if I haven't by now" (328). While initially seeing her job as a form of confinement that she wants to escape in order to explore other possibilities, this claustrophobic feeling extends to the entire country which she believes cannot accommodate her any more. In other words, she decides

to deal with one side of her identity and she selects the Arab one since the death of her mother made the American entirely hostile and unmanageable, a fact that is proven years later through Portia's slurs. When saying, "We'll try putting some lipstick on you, maybe lightening your hair, make you *American*" (295), Portia confirms that being "American" is only equivalent to being white or Caucasian and Jemorah realizes that in this case she can only be Arab. The America that Portia presents to Jemorah is so repulsive that she decides to discard it altogether. That is why it is at this moment that Fatima's words keep resonating in her ears: "This is not our place, not our people" (298).

It is only when she meets her cousin and presumably future-husband Nassir that Jemorah reconsiders her decision. Abu-Jaber once again reverses stereotypes when she does not portray Nassir as the male chauvinist who puts Jemorah off the Arab culture and brings her back to America. Instead, Nassir, who will ironically live in the US for his post-doc at Harvard, is the one who draws her attention to the impossibility of embracing one side of her identity at the expense of the other and the naivety of idealizing Jordan just because she is faced with prejudice in the United States: "There is nothing unique or magical about the Middle East; it shares xenophobias and violences with all the rest of the world!" (329). Nassir alerts Jemorah that she needs to accept her hyphenated identity, which by definition implies not belonging to one culture and having to constantly straddle two worlds, a process that might be tenuous but not without advantage: "you're torn in two. You get two looks at a world. You may never have a perfect fit, but you see far more than most ever do. Why not accept it?" (330).

Nassir occupies a peculiar cultural position, one that allows him a critical perception of different worldviews, which explains his cynical remarks on both the West and the Arab world: "Nassir arrives not as a representative of the Old World, but rather with a sense of detachment from all nations [...] despite or perhaps because of the combination of his Arab identity and his Western education, Nassir stands on the outskirts of national affiliation" (Kaldas, 181). Nassir's role in guiding Jemorah towards embracing her hyphenated identity is not only the result of the way he defies the stereotypical depiction of Arab males. Nassir acquires a kind of wisdom that enables him to see both the East and the West quite objectively, a privilege that only Nora could have had. While lacking Nassir's exposure and education, Nora refuses to abide by the rules of cultural superiority imposed by the dominant culture in the United States,

as represented by Portia or the bullies at Jemorah's school. Because, as she describes herself, Nora was "someone who thinks what they choose to think" (50), she is never hindered by color, language, or ethnicity, hence loving and marrying Matussem as well as becoming an atheist. Nassir's character is set in stark contrast to that of Farah, Jemorah's suitor at the beginning of the novel and a typical representative of a considerable segment of the Arab-American population, one that believes in arranged marriages as the ideal way to preserve the culture from foreign influence. His question to Jemorah about whether she knows how "to cook, clean shirts, refinish floors" (61) underscores this contrast.

Like her sister, Melvina remains trapped in the moment of her mother's death. Even though she was only two years old when this happened, the feeling of helplessness she experienced as she watched her die from her crib haunts her for years:

The veil fell lightly toward her mother, and behind the bars of her crib Melvie was helpless to move her out of the way as she would push someone out of the path of a truck [...] And it was as if some part of that veil had fallen over Melvina, too, covering her with the memory, a network of sensations that she could never tear away. (178)

Her obsession with death and illness lead to her determination to become a nurse, which becomes part of her identity or rather distracts her from thinking about her identity the way Jemorah does: "As a result, being a nurse becomes not simply her vocation but a fixed identity [...] Every attempt to save others from death is an attempt to make up for not being able to save her mother" (Kaldas, 174). Melvina's ability to find a purpose to her life makes her seem more reconciled with her hybridity than Jemorah, yet locking herself up in the hospital is only a means of avoiding interaction with the outside world in which she would have to negotiate her hyphenated identity. That is why she is at times perceived as a "robot," as a woman who brings in a patient into the hospital tells her (Abu-Jaber, 160).

Like Jemorah, Melvina is clueless about the American culture following her mother's death. Her constant attempts at remembering her mother and knowing more about her epitomize her struggle to maintain that final link between her and the country she presumably belongs to. Lack of memory of her mother is, therefore, similar to lack of any connection with her American half. She actually accuses Jemorah of trying to keep the memory of their mother to herself: "You never tell me about her, you never talk about her... Like you want to keep her all to yourself. Well, what about me, Jemorah, I'd like to know what about me!" (191). It is only when Fatima agrees to speak about

Nora that Melvina is able to climb out of her crib and feel capable of facing the world outside the house and the hospital, which have over the years constituted her comfort zone.

The vacuum Nora leaves in the lives of Jemorah and Melvina is accentuated by the abandonment of their grandparents who hold Matussem responsible for their daughter's death and could not see the girls because they are his daughters. "His in-laws never forgave him. Although they called the girls on birthdays and holidays, they wouldn't see them in person. 'It hurts so much,' his mother-in-law had said to Jem, 'to see so much of our daughter mixed up with the body of her murderer'" (85). Through the automatic identification of Arabs with violence, the grandparents stereotype Matussem, consequently his daughters who, by association, become half-murderous themselves, hence in a way responsible too for their mother's death. For the grandparents, the urge to stigmatize Matussem surpasses that of embracing their daughter's offspring. The grandparents' stance gives Jemorah and Melvina an insight into how they are generally viewed in the United States. Ibis Gómez-Vega comments on this point: "They know that one half of them is Arab, the half that they inherit from their father's side, and their grandparents identify that half as the murdering half. This irrational identification of their Arab side as the murdering side colors their own sense of themselves as Arabs in America" (22). Therefore, while Nora was expected to help them reconcile with their hyphenated identity, her parents do the exact opposite following her death as they become the mouthpiece of the dominant culture. This sets Nora apart from them as well as from the entire mainstream. Because the reaction of their mother's family is representative of American society as a whole, Jemorah and Melvina prefer to withdraw from the outside world, which they feel would always reject them, and always attempt to stay within the relatively safe boundaries of their home, no matter how fraught it is with cultural struggles and how unable the remaining family members are to help them.

As the complexity of each of the character's immigrant experience is gradually unraveled, the novel becomes "particularly slippery," as Steven Salaita puts it (438), since it becomes obvious that all the stereotypes are discarded and that none of the cultural dilemmas any of the characters go through can be resolved in favor of being exclusively Arab or American or through any of the simplistic formulas that each of the two cultures assumes are viable. It is noteworthy that each of the characters is helped negotiate his/her identity in many cases by other characters who are themselves

suffering from a similar dilemma. This is particularly applied to the case of Matussem whose trip back to Jordan, the first since Nora's death, offers the closure that allows him to come to terms with both the loss of his wife and his identity as an Arab-American. While unable to deal with her cultural dilemmas herself, Melvina forces her father to go to Jordan, which coincides with the role she plays throughout the novel as the protector of the family, especially that she is the less shaken by the immigrant experience at least on the outside. It is also possible that Melvina believes that Nora's death created a rift between Matussem and Jordan and that it is impossible to connect with the American culture without first resolving his ordeal with the Arab part. Matussem's trip to Jordan constitutes the first step towards reconciliation with the past in preparation for accepting the present. One of the most important factors that contribute to that is learning for the first time that Nora has a grave in Jordan, one that was built by his family so that her soul can rest where she died.

"But her grave is in America," he said, astonished.

"I know. We had thought she might need a second bed," Rima said and smiled.

"We thought her spirit might have become confused on such a long airplane ride back. So we has a second burial the week after you left. We wanted to give her soul ease." (Abu-Jaber, 354)

The construction of the grave offers the kind of reconciliation between Nora and Jordan that Nora's parents insisted would never be possible. It absolves Matussem, and Jordan or the Arab culture for that matter, from the guilt of causing Nora's death and symbolizes Nora's acceptance of her fate and an implicit message for Matussem to move forward.

Matussem's reconnection with his Jordanian family gives him insight into the meaning of "home" which for him is not associated with a geographical location or blood ties, but rather the people he wants to be around. For Matussem, his homeland is not the United States, but the country where his daughters and his friends live and where he, therefore, can be himself: "You girls and this guys my family" (350). By "guys" he means the members of his jazz band, workers at the gas station who are classified as "white trash" by the mainstream, thus are marginalized in a different way. As it crosses racial lines and finds common ground through a genre of music that is in itself based on improvisation and originated by a marginalized group, the band becomes part of Matussem's family and part of the reason why he decides to come back to the United States. According to Mazen Naous, the choice of jazz plays a major role in connecting an Arab middle class immigrant with white American workers: "It

comes as no surprise that Matussem chooses jazz, which allows for myriad styles of music, to extend communicative lines to working-class Anglo-Americans” (76). Through constructing a new type of homeland, Matussem offers a new perception to the immigrant experience where belonging is no longer founded upon a set of rigid cultural values that need to be preserved at any cost.

Matussem’s relationship to music changes after his trip to Jordan as he realizes that Jazz can be the way to release his grief rather than to trap himself in the past as he did since Nora’s death:

He also returned with a theory about drumming, that it tapped into the heart and broke the spirit free, all the colors and the flavors of the life a person had lived. There were things hidden in the core of a person, feelings and memories so deep, that with the right music the spirits of people could be liberated, new life conceived, and the dead given rest. (Abu-Jaber, 352-53)

Jazz is no longer the means through which Matussem laments Nora’s loss and isolates himself from the outside world. Instead, it becomes his way of navigating his hyphenated identity, a process which was made impossible by Nora’s death. The music he plays at the end of the novel stands in stark contrast to that of the beginning as it no longer holds him captive to grief, but rather sets him free. It is as if his music needed a signal from Nora that her soul is at peace so he, too, can move forward. This is shown in the last scene when he sees Nora dancing as he plays, but this time beckoning to him to let go: “she came to him again, dancing like the original mystery of her language, its jinni’s tongue. Her image turned, bent to him, the world in her gesture, the mystery of her love, releasing him” (374).

Jemorah’s way out of her cultural limbo is not through marrying Nassir despite his role in enlightening her about the complexity of cultural affiliations and the necessity of embracing her position as straddling two worlds. It is Nassir who alerts Jemorah that marrying him in search for cultural stability is an illusion since he himself is “a professional nomad” (342), as he labels himself. Nassir transfers to Jemorah this state of nomadism as she starts to feel that being firmly grounded in one culture is not always possible and therefore accepts her situation as a hybrid between two cultures that are more likely than not to clash. It is through Nassir that Jemorah accepts her difference, which she realizes is inevitable whether she stays in the United States or moves to Jordan and that is why he makes it clear to her that her decision is only “false escapism,” as Ildikó Limpár puts it (251).

Jemorah's attraction to Ricky Ellis, who is half Native American and works at the gas station, constitutes a major component of her reconciliation process since she identifies with his cultural and ethnic dilemmas and feels that she can negotiate her hybrid identity with him. According to Alice Evans, Jemorah's connection with Ricky is not only inspired by the fact they share a hybrid identity, but also by the similarity between her legacy as a Palestinian and his as a Native American. Jemorah realizes how "the experiences of Native Americans were so similar to what was happening to Palestinians" and how the victims were always labelled "savages or barbarians" (48). The last scene, in which Jemorah dances with Ricky to Matussem's music, links the different components of her identity together as she embraces the complexities of her immigrant experience and acknowledges her hybridity. Through this dance Jemorah not only forges a bond with Ricky that marks her first step towards reconciliation with her identity, but also makes room for her father's music to guide her through the intricacies of this identity as she becomes able, for the first time, to listen to a different type of jazz—an Arabian one:

Jem moved closer, placing her head against his chest. They moved, ever so slightly, together, and it felt to Jem like they had begun wending their way along a path of music, finding their way. She could hear the sound of the drums through the movement of Ricky's chest, jazz and trills of Arabic music, bright as comet tails, and through this, the pulse of the world. (Abu-Jaber, 374)

Fatima is only capable of reconciling with the past when she breaks her silence and tells the story of her four dead sisters to Jemorah, Melvina, and Nassir: "I have no kind of peace. Their spirits stay with me; there is nowhere else to go" (335). The peace of mind Fatima reaches when she releases a traumatic memory she kept suppressed for years is accompanied by the closure she has always been seeking. This takes place when Matussem is taken by his sister Rima to the four girls' grave by the Jordan River where she tells him that their souls are resting in peace: "We laid the babies to rest," she said. "You must tell Fatima. It's over. There's no one left to protect, nothing to do now but to mourn and reflect. We want her to come back, to visit and see her home and family again" (354). Matussem's knowledge of the incident alleviates Fatima's pain since he shares the trauma and finally becomes part of the tragedy as he realizes that those girls' lives were sacrificed in return for his, hence also sharing the shame. Such transformation, which resembles the exorcism of an evil spirit that haunted her, brings down the barrier between Fatima and Jordan, therefore allowing her to follow in Matussem's footsteps and go back in an attempt to reconcile with the past as well as

with her identity as an Arab-American. While Fatima's trip to Jordan does not materialize throughout the course of the novel, it is no longer far-fetched as she becomes more open to exploring the different aspects of her immigrant experience, thus seeing both Jordan and the United States in a different light.

Melvina's ability to reconcile with the past, hence to reconnect with the American side of her identity, is directly associated with Fatima's confession. For the first time throughout the novel, Melvina sheds off her practical personality and unravels unprecedented emotion when she embraces Fatima and reassures her that her sisters have forgiven her:

"Auntie," Melvina said. Fatima flinched for just a fraction of a second then Melvie opened her strong arms and took her in. "It's all right, it's all right," she said into Fatima's hair, standing and holding her, the two women moving back and forth, like a cradle. "They forgive you, they all forgive you—can't you hear them? They're here, in the air, all around us. I can hear them, they forgive you." (335-36)

Their embrace confirms the bond they have as women, hence symbolizing Fatima's gradual abandonment of the patriarchal order in which she had for years sought shelter. Realizing that she possesses the power to effect such a transformation, Melvina decides to similarly connect to her past through filling the gaps in her memory of her mother. Through asking Fatima to tell her everything she remembers about Nora, Melvina starts filling in the blanks and establishing a link with her American side through reclaiming the memory of the only mediator she ever had with America: "Once Fatima releases her own silenced memory of the past, Melvina can finally step out of the bars of the crib that have held her prisoner since her mother's death" (Kaldas, 181). While the gap between Melvina and Fatima seemed insurmountable, their newly-forged tie surpasses the cultural tension that had existed between them as they united over the memory of the Arab sisters and the American mother and in the process established their own common ground.

The last scene provides an image of harmony in which each of the family members expresses relief in a different way at taking initial steps towards navigating their way through reality and negotiating their identity while coming to terms with their loss. This harmony does not, however, imply finding definite answers for the Arab-American question or hybridity in general, but rather reflects a common desire by the protagonists to attempt answering such question and a realization on their part of how complicated such a process is. The resolution of the novel, therefore, does not end the conflict in favor of one culture or the other. In fact, it does not end the conflict at all, but rather



reshapes it so that it becomes a process of ongoing negotiation, or “self-invention,” as Chérif calls it (208), one that will not necessarily be smooth and can at times be rather harsh.

This particularly shows in the park incident when the Ramouls go for a picnic and invite two passing backpackers to eat with them. When they know they are Arabs, one of them says, “*Arabs*, Jesus fucking Christ. And we ate their *food*” (Abu-Jaber, 361). It is noteworthy that the young man asked if they were Italians or “Wetbacks,” the latter being a derogatory term used in reference to Mexican illegal immigrants, which demonstrates a preconception based on the Ramouls’ physical difference from white Americans and the assumption that their presence in the United States is most likely to be illegal. This is contrasted to Fatima’s feeling at the Thanatoulos Bakery, originally funded by Greek immigrants then bought by several other families from different ethnicities, the last of which is African American. The different races the bakery embraces makes Fatima feel welcome, hence more relaxed than she in the midst of white Anglo-Americans: “The place allowed her to visit home without feeling the pain that it had held for her” (365). The bakery, therefore, turns into a cross-border space where multiculturalism is the norm, thus allowing for a smoother transition into the American culture, which is also the case with jazz music. The park, on the contrary, becomes a hostile space that promotes exclusivity and rejects difference. The bakery and the park represent the United States and as the Ramouls embark on that journey of discovery, they are bound to navigate through both and while doing so will gradually get acquainted with the multiple layers of their identity as Arab-Americans. As part of its subversion of simplistic dichotomies, the novel turns the United States from a land that is by definition hostile to Arabs into a space that is constantly subject to negotiation and which can be as fluid as the hybrid identity of those who inhabit it.

The bakery, similar to jazz music and the character of Ricky Ellis, places the Arab-American experience within a broader ethnic landscape, which is what makes *Arabian Jazz* a distinctive work. While Arab-Americans are the main ethnic group, the African American heritage is represented through jazz music and the tragedy of Native Americans through Ricky Ellis. Also, when Nassir tells Jemorah, “Our border is an open sore” (333), this echoes Gloria Anzaldúa’s reference to Mexican-American border as “una herida abierta” (25) or “an open wound,” which adds a link to the Mexican American, or Hispanic American, community. This is also the case when the Ramouls are referred to as “wetbacks.” Beside the fact that this offers a realistic portrayal of the

United States as a multicultural nation, it also creates a unified “other” discourse that aims at questioning the norms of the dominant culture. Steven Salaita comments on this point: “Abu-Jaber creates an essentialized Other—the Arab American—who interacts with other marginalized characters so that the essentialist tendencies of the dominant society can be mitigated and ultimately restructured” (436). The same applies to the workers in Matussem’s band, who though not technically “other” yet are still marginalized by the mainstream, as well as white American women in Euclid who suffer gender oppression, therefore, share the plight of their counterparts in patriarchal Arab societies.

That is why Diana Abu-Jaber’s depiction of her characters and the reality surrounding them is devoid of any tendency towards placating a particular segment of readers, be they Arab or American, even as she does that at the risk of having her work frowned upon by members of her community. Without any attempts at embellishment or abstraction, her Arab characters came out as fully-fledged humans who at once defy and confirm stereotypes, represent and misrepresent the Arab community in the United States and whose cultural dilemmas and personal struggles are as deeply unsettling as they are strikingly truthful. This is also true of her American characters so that she ends up criticizing both her ethnic group and the mainstream in the American society as well as reversing misconceptions about both. Meanwhile, she asserts the impossibility of isolating the experience of one immigrant group from that of its counterparts as she links Arab-American to other ethnic communities that share the same dilemmas and go through the same arduous ordeals as they attempt to negotiate their hyphenated identity.

*Arabian Jazz* marks a new era in Arab-American literature because it transforms the concept of representation from a duty towards the writer’s community to a profound analysis of the complexities of this community’s culture both back home and in the host country. Through venturing into a territory that is usually left untrodden by writers from her community, Diana Abu-Jaber creates a text that is as complex as its subject matter owing to its immersion into the subtleties of a culture that is at times as incomprehensible for outsiders as it is for natives. As she peels the multiple layers of this culture, she tackles different stereotypes that are unraveled in the process and in doing so addresses the most sensitive issues pertaining to the Arab-American community including those that at times might confirm several of those stereotypes. For this reason, *Arabian Jazz* requires an unbiased reading by Arab scholars who are

both well-versed into the intricacies of the culture and capable of distancing themselves from it and a critical analysis by Arab and/or Arab-American readers who are aware of the impossibility of dealing with their culture without a multi-faceted approach that acknowledges contradictions and rejects simplistic dichotomies.

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