

**JEMORAH'S STATE OF DOUBLE CONCIOUSNESS IN  
DIANA ABU JABER'S *ARABIAN JAZZ***

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Despite Edward W. Said and Anwar Abdel Malek being recognized as two of the most distinguished scholars in the United States today, Arab American literature remains largely neglected in the study of American ethnic literatures and cultures. The American readers are familiar with Arab writers like Naguib Mahfouz and Ghassan Kanafani than with works produced by Arab Americans. The problem is partly occasioned by the fact that English is not first- generation Arab American immigrants' native language and partly by the fact that Arab Americans do not belong to any of the four established ethnic minority groups. Nevertheless, as is demonstrated by Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*, the second- and third-generation Arab American writers are ready to take on the challenge of diversifying the ethnic voice in America.

Jaber's voice in Arab American literature is like a breath of fresh air, her first novel *Arabian Jazz* throws light on an Arab American family's struggle in Euclid, New York, a small poor-white community. The thematic power of *Arabian Jazz* is generated by the collision between the past and the present, dream and reality, and the ways of "the Old Country" and the lifestyle in the New. Structurally, the novel's humour relies heavily on the anachronistic appearance of characters whose faith in "the Old Country" brings into question their cantankerous relationship with the present. Yet Abu-Jaber's thematic treatment of the conflict between traditional Arab culture and modern American culture goes beyond the conventional exploration of irony. It is built on what African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) calls the experience of "double consciousness," or "a peculiar sensation,... the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." Double consciousness describes the individual sensation of feeling as though one's identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have one unified identity. Du Bois spoke of this in context to race relations in the America. Too much pressure to identify oneself with *an* ethnic group can produce an equally detrimental effect on the individual's sense of identity. This happens mostly with people who are born into a family with two cultures, which is the case of the protagonist, Jemorah Ramoud, in Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*.

From the beginning of the novel, Jem seems still and indifferent as she does not make any effort to move forward in life, confining her in a meaningless job at the hospital that she neither likes nor identifies with.

Her mother's death haunts her, preventing her from getting out of the bubble where she has locked herself up. She is not even at ease with her inner self because she still has issues pending to come to terms with, like facing the real world, or finding a way to reconcile the two components of her mixed

identity. Jemorah's father, Matussem, is a first-generation Arab immigrant in the United States; her mother Nora, who died of typhus on a trip to Jordan when Jemorah was three years old, was white. Because of her mother's untimely death and her father's close ties to his relatives who live in Syracuse's Arab community, Jemorah feels constantly under pressure to conform to traditional Arab customs she does not quite understand. Jaber reveals Jem's passiveness in the sense that she depends on others to define who she is.

On the one hand, she is Arab because she is defined by her family as such, and on the other, she complains about her mother's early death which has prevented her from enjoying her American part. Therefore, Jem intends to put an end to her struggle to find a balance and understand her hyphen. She complains to her sister, Melvina:

"I'm tired of fighting it out here. I don't have much idea of what it is to be Arab, but that's what the family is always saying we are. I want to know what part of me is Arab. I haven't figured out what part is our mother, either. It's like she abandoned us, left us alone to work it all out." (Jaber 1993)

The life altering blow of the mother's loss is deeply connected to the girls' consciousness about themselves not only as individuals, but as Arab Americans as well, the girls lose their guide through a maze of cultural self validation in a country where they represent the 'Other.' Abu Jaber lets Jem and Melvie have their own struggle during this journey and allow them in this way to create their own stories and identities.

Rejection and hatred seem to have helped shape the girls' consciousness about their difference since their childhood. Their physical aspect accentuates this difference, as they "looked so alike, their skin the same pale shimmer of olive, the same glints of blue in their hair" (Jaber 1993: 31). Raeding of Jemorah's childhood, we learn that her Arab features have provoked the hostility of children in the school bus. They taunted Jem because of her strange name, her darker skin...They asked her obscene questions, searched for her sickness, the chink that would let them into her strangeness. She never let them. 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) Hence, Jemorah experiences another episode of rejection, this time at the hands of her schoolmates.

Also alarming is Jem's relationship with her boss; Portia who considers herself a saviour, warning Jem that she will always be an inferior misfit unless she accepts her offer to help her get rid of her parental Arab heritage that she considers savage, primitive and impure. Hailing from the dominant culture, Portia believes that Jem's skin colour and name are definitely markers of inferiority; Portia offers to rescue her and asks her to lighten her hair colour, and change her name and make it sound Italian or Greek, so as to make believe she belongs to a 'more acceptable' ethnic group.

Almost thirty, Jem becomes the main topic of discussion in her Arab relatives' gossip. Aunt Fatima, for example, simply cannot stand the fact that Jemorah is still single. Fatima has strong faith in the traditions of "the Old Country" and is obsessed with the idea of wanting to join the social committee of the local Syrian Orthodox Church, whose roles include, among others, "marriage makers and shakers, preservers of Arabic culture and party throwers, immigrant sponsors, and children- police." Because she does not have children, Fatima believes that it is her responsibility to help find a fitting bridegroom for Jemorah within the family, so that the family's name and honour can be preserved.

Family pressure is one reason that Jemorah is struggling with her identity and her relationships with other people. Even though she has met several men, Jemorah fails to decide as to which relationship is worth pursuing. However, Jemorah finally realizes that while getting two looks at the world can be a confusing experience, it can also be a blessing. “Arabian jazz,” as booming as the term may sound; it is a new form of music created by bridging two evidently incompatible worlds. By deciding to take into her own hands the control of her destiny, Jemorah feels she begins to find her way “along a path of music.”

Early in Arabian Jazz, Melvina asks her sister Jemorah to remember a Bedouin saying: “In the book of life, every page has two sides” (6). The “two sides” are in fact multiple sets of two sides whether it is two cultures, two families, two identities or two languages; that culminate in the term Arab American. Melvina calls upon the Bedouin saying in response to her aunt Fatima’s pressuring Jemorah to marry an Arab man and lead a traditional life. The Bedouin saying allows Jemorah to better understand the demands of the Arab side of the family and to access her American side to counter those demands. The nomadic nature of the Bedouin allows for a travelling understanding or cross-translation of Arab and American in the Arab American condition. For example, when Fatima brings over a potential mother-in-law to inspect Jemorah (including her teeth), Melvina intervenes:

“Back off, lady!” Melvie raised a fist. ‘I’m warning you.’ ‘Allah the merciful and munificent! A demon-ifrit’ [answered the woman]” (64).

The potential mother-in-law’s two-sided word “demon-ifrit” presents the transliteration of the Arabic word alongside its possible English translation (“demon”), doubly mediated by a hyphen and italics. Ifrit is the transliteration of the Arabic word that appears in the Oxford English Dictionary as “afreet,” defined as “an evil demon or monster of Muslim mythology.” While “demon” and “ifrit” share in denotation, linked as they are by the hyphen, they are also separated in connotation by the same hyphen that connects them. In western cultural understanding, “demon” begins with the Greeks and later earns a Christian significance whereas “Ifrit,” is a giant demon in Muslim mythology and makes a marked literary appearance in *A Thousand and One Nights*.

Jemorah shows once more her persistent dependence on others to work it out for her. She wants to go to Jordan because it is where her mother has died. Realizing that, her cousin Nassir tries to open her eyes:

“Because, dear, if that’s what you feel, I have to tell you, I don’t think you’ll find her there” (340)

It is at this moment that Jem finally realizes that Nassir is right and that her mother is not in Jordan anymore, nor anywhere else. She is really and truly dead. It is definitely the first time that Jemorah sees the truth clearly and understands that she has to accept it. Therefore, Jem shifts from one extreme decision to another when she makes up her mind once more to give up the idea of moving to Jordan and stay in America. She wants not only to get out of her inner world, but also out of the hospital’s walls, to leave Euclid and get access to the real world. Jem decides, then, to move to California so as to pursue a degree course at Stanford University. She chooses America as her home in order to try to come to an end with her identity negotiation and her double sense of belonging. This quick and unexpected shift from one extreme position to another reveals, actually, that she has not really resolved her ambivalence. However, the definitive burial of Jem’s mother in her mind has provided her with a fresh start as she decides to give America

an opportunity to be the stage for her identity negotiation with the objective of reaching the point of being able to enjoy her transcultural identity.

However, the process of identity negotiation undergone Jemorah is totally different. Her struggle with her double identity is more complex as she emerges as a twenty-nine-year old woman who feels suspended between both sides of the hyphen. As Alice Evans comments, Jem is “someone who is trying to fight through what she’s been told she is” (45).<sup>32</sup> She seems to be “not quite at home in either her Arab or her American contexts” (Majaj 2000: 332), which illustrates her displacement in both cultural spaces. Consequently, Jem finds herself involved in a struggle in order to find a space of her own and compensate herself after twenty-nine years, as according to her own words, “everything in her past seemed doused in gloomy work and dark winters” (Abu-Jaber 1993: 29). Jemorah appears as a fragile and silent dreamer lacking self confidence and living through a traumatic memory.

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