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HYBRID IDENTITY AND ARAB/AMERICAN FEMINISM
IN DIANA ABU-JABER'S *ARABIAN JAZZ*

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition:
English Literature
English Composition

By
Nicole Michelle Khoury

June 2005

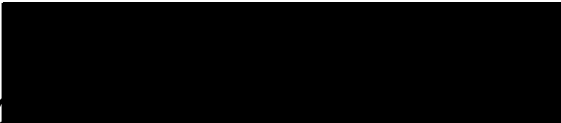
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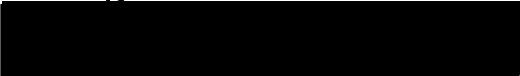
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ABSTRACT

In her novel *Arabian Jazz*, Diana Abu-Jaber attempts to explore the Arab American identity as something new, as an identity that exists related to but ultimately separate from the Arab and American identities from which it is originally created. *Arabian Jazz* indicates that the Arab American literary community is attempting to move past the discussion of preserving cultural identity, which has been the main focus of much of the works in the canon, to issues that plague some sectors of this multicultural group, such as marginalization, exploitation, and poverty, while attempting to explore an eclectic female identity. In this thesis I discuss the emergence of the depiction of the Arab American female identity in the novel, examine how the characters explore issues of race, class, imperialism, and sex within both the Arab and the American cultures as those issues shape female identity, and rhetorically analyze the speeches that allow the characters a voice with respect to how identity is shaped and reshaped throughout the novel.

To my Arab and American family

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CHAPTER ONE

ARAB AMERICAN IDENTITY IN LITERATURE

Arab American History of Identity

Although Arab American literature has been discussing issues related to identity since the early twentieth century, it has only begun in recent years to focus on the creation of the Arab American hybrid identity. Diana Abu-Jaber explores this identity as something new, in a collection of literature that has primarily focused on assimilation of identity. Her first novel, *Arabian Jazz*, indicates that the literary community is attempting to move past the discussion of preserving cultural identity to issues that plague some sectors of this multicultural group, while attempting to explore an eclectic female identity. There is a growing interest in Abu-Jaber's work as it emerges within this commonplace discussion of identity of people of color within the United States, and *Arabian Jazz* is a perfect text for analyzing emerging issues related to identity more thoroughly.

In this section I use Michael Suleiman's "Early Arab-Americans: The Search for Identity," and Lisa Suhair Majaj's "Arab Americans and the Meanings of Race" to

briefly outline a historical background of the Arab American identity in the United States and how it has come to affect the literature of Arab Americans. Also, I will draw from Elmaz Abi Nader's "Children of Al-Mahjar" and Evelyn Shakir's "Arab-American Literature" to provide an overview of Arab American literature.

According to Michael Suleiman's "Early Arab-Americans: The Search for Identity," Arabic-speaking immigrants came to the United States in the late nineteenth century in sizeable numbers. They came from oppression under the Ottoman rule because the government there harassed and exploited them (Suleiman 47). America represented a "promised land" of opportunity, wealth, and freedom from oppression. Many Arab individuals who came to the United States came with the idea that they were to accumulate wealth and return to their homeland, and so issues of identity did not arise at first. Suleiman reports, "There were mere transients who sought and found social and psychological security within their family and church" (41). As it became clear that many Arabs would remain in America, new adjustments had to be made in order to properly assimilate into their new environment and the definition of identity was negotiated.

The discussion of race and identity arose when Arabic-speaking immigrants began to settle in America as their new home. The U.S. census records referred to the immigrants as "Turks" or "Other Asians," up to 1920 (Suleiman 42). Many of them objected being referred to as such because they had left their homeland to escape the tyranny of Ottoman rule. Also, most early immigrants were Christian, and "the term 'Turk' was synonymous with Islam and Muslims—which were generally viewed negatively in the United States" (Suleiman 42). Therefore, they called themselves "Syrians", which at the time defined people who came from geographic or greater Syria, but was not reflective of religions beliefs.

However, during this time the U.S. courts spent a great deal of time trying to decide whether or not a particular group "belonged to a specific race and whether that group was eligible for entry into the United States" and eligible for acquisition of U.S. citizenship:

The problem of racial identification and citizenship traumatized the Arabic-speaking community for several years early in the century. Indeed, to resolve it the erstwhile "Syrian" community went searching for its roots and

emerged to declare itself Arab and hence
Caucasian, and therefore, eligible for U.S.
citizenship! (Suleiman 44)

The issue of identity became an interesting factor in Arab American literature as a result of the historical struggle for categorization. "Arab American literature both reflects and is situated within this history of contested racial categories," claims Lisa Suhair Majaj in "Arab-Americans and the Meanings of Race" (328). As the Arab Americans struggled to be included in the "white" category of race, their literature reflected this struggle. Majaj claims, "Literary texts from the first half of the century make clear the anxieties of Arab Americans as they struggled for inclusion as 'white' Americans" (Majaj, "Arab-Americans" 328). The subject of identity in Arab American literature stems from the early immigrant's struggle with race. This issue has been one of the main subjects of Arab American literature throughout the years and continues to be a subject much written about.

Arab American Literature

In "Children of Al-Mahjar," Elmaz Abi Nader claims, "Arab Americans were among the first immigrant writers to

organize and be recognized as a literary force by the broad US literary community" (par. 5). One of the first literary accomplishments was The New York Pen League, otherwise known as Al Rabital al Qalamiyah. It was created in 1920's and included Arab American authors Ameen Rihani, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Mikhail Naimy, and Elia Abu Madi. This league included writers from Lebanon and Syria who wrote in Arabic and later had their works translated. One of its members, Ameen Rihani, is known as "the father of Arab American literature," and also as an ambassador, "traveling between his Lebanese homeland and the United States, working for independence from the Ottomans while developing a literary life in the United States" (Abi Nader par. 7). This league is the basis of much of the Arab American literary works that follow in the Arab American literary community. Its members greatly influenced following writers and brought to the surface many Arab American issues in their literature. Their readers included not only the Arab American community, but also other communities. However, by the 1940s, the Pen League had diminished.

Arab American journals played an important part in the publication of influential writers and exposure of

important Arab American topics. *The Syrian World* journal was an important publication that published various works from writers of the 20th century, including works from Gibran Khalil Gibran, perhaps the most famous Arab American author. Although the articles in *The Syrian World* discuss issues of "American-ness in a positive light," as Abi Nader explains, the writers of the Pen League wrote about issues that "weighed on the side of universality" (par. 11). *Al Jadid* and *Mizna* are also important Arab American journals that are in circulation today and constantly explore arising issues that face Arab American literature and Arab culture.

Arab American literature has been most directly influenced by the political situation in which it was written. Evelyn Shakir states, in "Arab American Literature":

It is now possible to see that over the last eighty or ninety years, Arab-American literature has developed in three distinct stages—early, middle, and recent—each of them responsive to the political currents of its day. (3)

The first stage she titles "the emergence of an Arab identity." An important work that contributed to this

stage is *Wrapping the Grape Leaves* (1982), a collection of poetry edited by George Orfalea, that later became a full anthology titled *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry*. This anthology included many of the works from members of the Pen League. It still remains an important staple of Arab American literature.

It is at this stage that Arab Americans begin to explore the meaning of their identity through their literature.

The definitions of Arab and American were constantly being explored and scrutinized by the Arab American literary community:

Arab-Americans found that "American" continued to mean Christian, European, western, and white, and that they were still located outside of this definitions. Meanwhile, the orientalist stereotypes of Arabs held such sway that ordinary Arab-Americans were often viewed as not "exotic" enough to be "authentic." (Majaj, "Arab-Americans" 329)

An example of the orientalist stereotypes of Arabs is Lebanese American William Blatty's *Which Way to Mecca, Jack*, an autobiography published in 1960. It is a humorous

look at Blatty's attempt to challenge American stereotypes as well as Arab stereotypes. Blatty was an Arab, but in order to get the part as an Arab in a movie, he had to accentuate the exotic Arab character and dress up as a cartoon Arab in order to meet orientalist expectations of an "Arab."

More recently, Arab American writers explore issues beyond identity. They discuss political and social issues that affect their lives. The subject of their text goes beyond stories of the homeland and heritage. D.H. Melhem is among those authors who have helped the Arab American literary community "by organizing the first Arab American poetry reading at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in 1984" (Abi Nader par. 14). Also, Etel Adnan, an Arab American author, created her own publishing company named The Post-Apollo press. Her reputation is more international than American. However, "her poetry, her fiction and her reportage focus on the Middle East and political and military turmoil, specifically in Beirut" (Abi Nader par. 15). Samuel John Hazo, D.H. Melhem, and Etel Adnan "distinguished themselves initially as writers independent of ethnic categorization who later donned the cloak of the Arab-American identity" (Abi Nader par. 13).

These authors were among the first to approach the discussion of Arab American identity and created a voice for the Arab American. Shakir's second stage of Arab American literature is titled "responding to Arab-Israeli conflict," which she attributes much of this stage to Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab-Nye. Shihab-Nye is a well-known poet, having published six books of poetry, including *Fuel* (1998), *Red Suitcase* (1994), and *Hugging the Jukebox* (1982). She has also written *Habibi*, a novel for teens, *Never in a Hurry*, a book of short stories, and *What Have You Lost?*, an anthology of poetry.

The third stage Shakir identifies is titled "beyond romanticism," defined by a particular interest in exploring issues of patriarchy in the Arab world. This third stage has come, but it has not yet gone. Exploring patriarchy in the Arab world has begun to produce works that are currently changing the face of Arab American literature. Included in this stage are Elmaz Abi Nader's *Children of the Roojme*, Joseph Geha's *Through and Through*, and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*. Abi Nader states:

There has been a noticeable increase in women's voices in Arab American literature, ever since the 1970's and the advent of Melhem and Adnan.

In the main, this has been part of the national trend in the United States, ever since the rise of the women's movement in the late 1960's. In the wake of Melhem and Adnan have come many others. (par. 18)

Works of literature that also fall in this categorical stage of Arab American literature include *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, edited by Joanna Kadi (1994), Evelyn Shakir's *Bint Arab*, Mona Simpson's *Anywhere But Here*. Also, *Arab American Biography*, edited by Lisa Suhair Majaj, Loretta Hall, and Bridget K. Hall, as well as *Post Gibran Anthology of New Arab American Writing*, edited by Khaled Mattawa and Munir Akash (1999) are collections of works that are nominal in Arab American literature.

Contemporary Arab American writers write about identity differently from the first generation of Arab American authors, such as Rihbany or Blatty, who tried more to assimilate than to challenge definitions of race. "Arab-American writers increasingly seek to challenge established cultural and racial boundaries in their articulation of Arab-American identity, and to assert their identity on their own terms" (Majaj "Arab-Americans" 330).

As Arab American literary critic Majaj points out in "New Directions: Arab American Writing at Century's End," the Arab American identity is an "ethnogenesis." In other words, it is "the creation of a new culture that draws on both Arab and American contexts and identities" (Majaj 74). Shakir introduces a novel titled *Arabian Jazz*, by author Diana Abu-Jaber, which "casts a skeptical eye on both Arab and American societies," thus innovative in its attempts to create a space for the complexity of the Arab American female identity (12). Abu-Jaber explores the Arab American identity as something new, as an identity that exists related to but ultimately separate from the Arab and American identities from which it is originally created. *Arabian Jazz* indicates that the Arab American literary community is attempting to move past the discussion of preserving cultural identity, which has been the main focus of much of the works in the canon, to issues that plague some sectors of this multicultural group, such as marginalization, exploitation, and incidents of poverty, while attempting to explore an eclectic female identity.

Majaj claims, "Jordanian American Diana Abu-Jaber . . . [provides an example] of contemporary writers' efforts to grapple more directly with the racialization and

politicization of Arab-American experience and to assert their Arab-American identity without apology" ("Arab-Americans" 330). The Arab American experience includes exploring both facets of one's identity. Abu-Jaber's voice is met with opposition by Arab critics because her place is unique: it is the place of the Arab, as she exposes the Arab culture, and the place of the American, as she exposes the American culture. Her dual task places Abu-Jaber in a compromising position, exposing the harshness of reality of both cultures, as she negotiates identity between them. As a result, her novel has not been given the attention it deserves because of its open discussion of cultural practices and its exposure of both Western and Arab stereotypes.

Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* is set in 1990, in Euclid, New York, as a Jordanian-American family attempts to fit in with its poor white surroundings. Born to an American mother and a Jordanian father, the two daughters, Jemorah and Melvina, are struggling with their dual identity. Abu-Jaber uses stereotypical characteristics of both cultures to inject humor into the myriad of characters, which creates an immediate tension between the two cultures. In doing so, Abu-Jaber widens the gap between the Arab and the

American, allowing her characters mobility between the two worlds the reader can instantly identify. Thus, the issue of identity as it relates to culture forms a central theme, as does the ability to navigate between differing identities and cultures.

The Arab American woman is in a position that enables her to view and critique both cultures. She is not suspicious or defiant of the dominant culture, due to the fact that she has not been a direct victim of colonialism, and having been immersed in her culture she has experienced patriarchal oppression. Therefore, her position makes her a prime candidate for advocating change within the Arab culture. Majaj states:

While early Arab-Americans sought to claim a space within white American culture through strategies of assimilation and strategic deployment of exoticism, contemporary Arab-Americans increasingly seek to affirm their identities without minimizing complexity, and to claim a classification adequate to their experiences. ("Arab-Americans" 332)

Abu-Jaber explores the complexity of her characters' identities through interactions with their surroundings,

creating an innovative look at the Arab American identity. Abu-Jaber's exploration and exposure of the two cultures gives the Arab American female a voice she never had before, to explore her issues with each culture and understand how her identity is formed and reformed as the cultures merge and diverge. Suleiman claims, "the identity of a people is not an innate characteristic but is, rather, shaped by many outside factors and elements of self-selection—such is the case with Arabic speaking Americans" (46). Abu-Jaber's characters explore their own definition of identity as they encounter other characters and experience their Arab and American roles.

Arab American Literary Criticism

This section outlines some of the important issues critics of Arab American literature should address drawing from Lisa Suhair Majaj's "New Directions: Arab American Writing at Century's End," and Steven Salaita's "Split Vision: Arab American Literary Criticism." Also, this section draws from two critical essays on Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*: Steven Salaita's "Sand Niggers, Small Shops, and Uncle Sam: Cultural Negotiation in the Fiction of Joseph Geha and Diana Abu-Jaber," and "Arab American

Literature: Gendered Memory in Abinader and Abu-Jaber," by Salwa Essayah Chérif.

"What is an Arab American?," asks Salaita in "Split Vision: Arab American Literary Criticism" (par.5). How do Arab Americans identify themselves? This question has been the inspiration for much of the works in Arab American literature over the years and has been constantly evoking attempts at answering this question. Majaj explains, "As hyphenated Americans we seek to integrate the different facets of our selves, our experiences, and our heritages into a unified whole" (64). No longer are Arab Americans willing to assimilate as strictly Americans or Arabs. Instead, Arab American writers seek to explore their identity as something that stems from a multicultural setting and as something that constantly changes and grows with each new experience.

Poetry has long been the form of expression for many Arab American writers. Recently, however, Arab American writers have begun to explore other forms of writing. Majaj claims that moving past poetry as a form of expression to fiction indicates a shift in perspective:

The predominance of the lyric mode in Arab-American literature at a time when we, as Arab-

Americans, have been engaged in articulating and consolidating a sense of our own group identity, is indicative: it suggests that we have, in large part, been asserting our identity and giving voice to our emotions rather than analyzing and probing. (Majaj, "New Directions" 70)

On the other hand, the emergence of fiction in Arab American literature shows that Arab American writers are willing to probe, inspect, analyze, and explore their identity. Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* provides one example of such analyses. Her two main characters question their lives and what it means to be Arab and American.

Throughout the novel, Jemorah, the older sister, constantly attempts to define and redefine herself. Her struggle with her dual identity indicates that Abu-Jaber is exploring Arab American identity and analyzing it, without ever coming to a particular conclusion. Abu-Jaber finally turns to the metaphor of jazz to express the complexity of Jemorah's identity.

Until recently, cultural preservation has been the focus of much Arab American literature. Salaita claims Arab-American writers often attempt to write back towards their heritage in an effort to present a pure Arab

heritage. However, Salaita admits that this is the first mistake Arab-American writers make because this pure Arab heritage exists only in their imagination. "Their task is to build a heritage identifiably linked to the Arab world but that is nonetheless their own" (Salaita, "Split Vision" par. 8). However, some may hesitate to expose their new identity or explore their multicultural setting. Majaj urges Arab American writers to explore other ways of answering the identity question: "As we continue to strengthen our networks and develop our group identity, we need to expand our vision and to move beyond cultural preservation toward transformation" ("New Directions" 71). The term "Arab American" implies not that this identity consists only of one culture, but rather of two or more. And, accordingly, "we need to probe the American as well as the Arab dimensions of our Arab American identity, and to engage not only in self-assertion, but also in self-criticism" (Majaj, "New Directions" 71). Majaj believes that Arab Americans need to start criticizing the Arab part of identity, as well as the American part of our identity, without feeling guilty for questioning cultural practices or being accused of rejecting their own cultural identity.

The Arab American culture is similar to many cultures, such as Latino/a, Indian, African American, etc., that have all struggled with their marginal positions in society. The Arab American's struggle can be likened to theirs in many ways. In *Arabian Jazz*, Abu-Jaber introduces us to characters that are in some ways similar to her main Arab American characters and who share a similar struggle with their own identity. For example, Jemorah's relationship with Ricky, of Indian heritage, brings together two characters searching for their roots. In "Sand Niggers, Small Shops, and Uncle Sam: Cultural Negotiation in the Fiction of Joseph Geha and Diana Abu-Jaber," Salaita states:

In *Arabian Jazz*, contextualizing the Arab within a broader rubric of minority discourse produces a textual paradox worth our attention: 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 setting of the novel also indicates that the poor white town in which the Arab family lives is marginalized by

society at large, just as they marginalize the Arab family. As Salaita explains, "It is in the community where critics can see living contrasts of preservation and assimilation, Arabism and Americana, xenophobia and camaraderie - all split visions that demand expressions" ("Split Vision" par 9). Abu-Jaber uses the American setting, a small poor town named Euclid, as a backdrop for the main characters to explore their identities, but it is through their interactions with their surroundings that they are able to delve into the complexity of their identity. Euclid plays a role in their self-discovery as much as any other character in *Arabian Jazz*.

Arab Feminism

Mona Mikhail, in her book titled *Seen and Heard: A Century of Arab Women in Literature and Culture*, explores Arab female characters and how they have been portrayed in novels throughout the years. Mikhail notes:

For the most part, Arab male writers have treated women as symbolic of their link with the past, [as] the custodian of tradition. . . . For them she is primarily mother and wife, symbol of the fecundity of the earth. Yet they have ventured

to investigate a more subtle analogy when they equate their traditional oppression to their political realities. (138-9)

Furthermore, she writes, the women writers courageously explore the "dualities in the lives of their protagonists." Mikhail claims the women "succeed in giving us adult heroines grappling with their sexual realities coupled with their social and political ones" (139). It is important for Arab female authors to voice their positions, including political, for they are the experts on their own lives. Oftentimes, however, Arab women's voices are excluded from the discussions concerning their own lives, and they are to be "informed" about feminism, notes Susan Muaddi Darraj in "Understanding the Other Sister." Similarly, in her article, "Is feminism relevant to Arab women?" Nawar Al-Hassan Golley explains:

In the Arab world, feminist consciousness has developed hand in hand with national consciousness since the early 19th century. Some have gone even further to argue that, because feminist and national consciousness emerged at the same time and as a reaction to Western imperialism, feminism is an illegal immigrant and

an alien import to the Arab world and, as such,
is not relevant to the people and their culture.

(521)

Abu-Jaber's discussion of feminism in *Arabian Jazz* serves as an important step for Arab American women. She gives her characters a voice to question Arab cultural practices, while at the same time questioning American cultural practices. Her characters are not only concerned with grappling with their Arab selves, but also with their American selves. Abu-Jaber gives the Arab American female a voice she never had before, to probe her hybrid identity.

Arab feminism is first noted in Qasim Amin's *The Liberation of Women*. The book "caused not ripples, but tsunamis of dissent and discussion across the region. . . . He argued that men oppressed and silenced women, which caused society in general to suffer" (Darraj 18). However, Darraj notes that "Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, the editors of *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, argue that men's feminism (like Amin's), which developed due to contact with Europe, differs from women's feminism, which arose out of women's reflections on their own lives and problems" (19). One such example of Arab feminism that stemmed from personal reflection came from

Nawal Al-Saadawi, who founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA). In *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, she details her struggle with earning respect in the medical field as a woman and "achieving her goals under familial and social pressures to conform to the feminine ideal: to marry at an early age, bear children, and be an obedient wife" (Darraj 20). She immigrated to the United States after being placed on a death list of Islamic fundamentalists in 1993 for being vocal about female rights and issues, such as genital mutilation.

Similarly, when discussing fictional characters, Evelyn Accad notes:

In the face of legalized oppression and social degradation, it is not too surprising that the first concern of these women novelists has been their female characters' private struggles for a personal identity, seen alternatively as a search for personhood or an escape from thinghood.

("Rebellion" 224)

On the same note, the main character (Jemorah) struggles with her identity, and this also includes her struggle with the concepts of female. In "Arab American Literature: Gendered Memory in Abinader and Abu-Jaber," Salwa Essayah

Chérif indicates that in contemporary Arab American literature:

Identity is no longer viewed as exclusively dependent on ethnic history but as dependent on the way that history relates to the American present and gives meaning to a blend of Arab, American, and female components of a continuously negotiable conception of oneself. (208)

The role of the woman in American society differs from her role in Arab society. It also differs from the role of women in poverty-stricken Euclid, in *Arabian Jazz*, where girls drop out of high school to have children and take care of their families. It also differs from the role of Fatima, their aunt, whose one goal is to marry off her nieces. In other words, female roles differ from society to society; exploring this difference is essential to understanding one's own position:

[I]n addition to asserting their ethnicity in a hostile, image-ruled environment, Arab American women must also voice their femaleness. Their experience of self is strongly gendered on account of the serious limitations for women that the journey to the past leads them to

(dis)/(un)cover. (Chérif 207, emphasis in original)

Arab feminism has faced difficulty from Western feminists. Some critics accuse Western feminists of succumbing to stereotypes regarding issues concerning Third World feminism. Western feminists often assume that the Arab culture oppresses its women through cultural and religious practices, such as the veil, clitoridectomy, polygamy, and arranged marriages. In her novel, Abu-Jaber explores the stereotype that Arab women are oppressed by their patriarchal families. Her characters express the debilitating situation many Western feminists believe Arab women experience, and she highlights the stereotypical attitudes of her characters:

Through the female network of relationships developed in the novel, Abu-Jaber highlights 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 an exclusively female space, women have become progressively entrusted with the task of representing culture and preserving tradition, which means basically transmitting from one

female generation to another the very values
which oppress them. (Chérif 216)

Accordingly, Western feminists have sought to "liberate" Arab women, and other Third World women, by teaching them Western values and ideals. Underlying this liberation is the assumption that Arab women suffer from a "false-consciousness" because they seem to have accepted and enforced their own oppression. However, this assumption creates an oppressive relationship between Western feminism and Third World feminism: Western feminists seem to believe that in order for Third World women to free themselves of oppression, they must become more "Western" and reject the patriarchal cultures in which they exist. Abu-Jaber's characters encounter such examples of Western feminist thinking; they experience oppression from other women and explore the options open to them in order to find their own voice, instead of adopting someone else's.

The following is a passage taken from Majaj's discussion about feminism as it relates to Arab American literature; Included in *Post Gibran: An Anthology of New Arab American Writing*, it raises concerns about Arab American female issues:

When Arab and Arab-American women give voice to feminist concerns, they are often assumed, by both their own communities and by outside observers, to be rejecting their own cultural traditions in favor of a more "liberated" western culture. Depending on the stance of the observer, this is viewed either as an escape or as a betrayal. . . . Yet to succumb to silence in order to prevent our words from being misunderstood is in its own way a form of self-betrayal. What we need is not less but more representation - for only when there is a wide array of depictions of Arab-American experience and culture will writing that is self-critical be understood for what it is: not a betrayal, but an attempt at self-transformation. (Majaj, "New Directions" 73-74)

Majaj's call for more representation in order to better understand Arab American writing and identity includes being self-critical. Abu-Jaber's novel is a perfect example of an author attempting to understand the Arab American self-transformation.

In the second chapter of my thesis, I will discuss the emergence of the depiction of the Arab American female identity in the novel and examine how the characters explore issues of race, class, imperialism, and sex within both the Arab and the American cultures as those issues shape female identity. I will explain the debate between Western feminism and Third World feminism in more detail and explore how Abu-Jaber presents this debate in her novel through the exposure of Arab and American stereotypes. I will also explore how Abu-Jaber's characters reconcile feminism and multiculturalism in their own lives.

Furthermore, I analyze Abu-Jaber's portrayal of how each character integrates her two cultures differently through their use of language. The language in the speeches of the characters and the rhetorical devices they use to express themselves is the main focus of chapter three of my thesis. In chapter three of this thesis, I will do a rhetorical analysis of the speeches that allow the characters a voice with respect to how identity is shaped and reshaped throughout the novel. Abu-Jaber presents three characters which represent the perspectives of three approaches to Arab American feminism, and it is through the speeches of the supporting characters through

which Jem (Jemorah) and Melvie (Melvina) are able to understand their own affinities. In this section, I am going to analyze the rhetoric of the three separate speeches made by Portia Porschman, Fatima, and Nassir in an effort to explore how Abu-Jaber uses these three characters to represent the identity of the Arab American feminist.

Salaita asks, "What, then, is Arab American literature?" ("Split Vision" par.10) I believe Arab American literature is the body of work which adds to the voice of the Arab American people. He answers this question by claiming the definition must remain open-ended, able to be challenged and expanded. As the coming years renegotiate the definition of Arab American literary work, I believe the works that challenge the Arab American and Arab communities to expand their views and incorporate several issues into their works are the pieces of literature that will help the Arab American literary community become well received within both the Arab and American literary communities. As Arab Americans negotiate their own identities, so must their literature renegotiate the foundations on which it stands.

CHAPTER TWO

ARAB AND AMERICAN FEMINISM

Many of the assumptions made by Western feminists about Arab feminism are based on stereotypes and stem from misconceptions about the lives of Arab women. This section will explore how Abu-Jaber exposes these stereotypes in *Arabian Jazz* and how she depicts the effects the relationship between Western feminism and Arab feminism has on her main character's everyday lives. In this chapter, I explore the sexual identity of both main female characters in *Arabian Jazz* and how it is interwoven with discussions of poverty and marginalization, as well as personal explorations of identity.

The Western Feminist and Arab Feminist Relationship

In Abu-Jaber's novel, the theoretical implications of Western feminism and Third World feminism are played out through the myriad of characters that interact with one another. Abu-Jaber creates a world where the stereotypes that are held by each group of feminists are brought to life. The stereotypes held by the West as they perceive

the East are brought out in the Arab characters, and the stereotypes held by the East as they perceive the West are brought out in the American characters in the novel. Abu-Jaber's presentation of this world comments on the relationship between these two groups of feminists as she attempts to introduce a third party: the Arab American feminist perspective. The Arab American female's stance lies between these two groups of females. Abu-Jaber makes it clear by the radically different characters she portrays that the relationship between Western feminism and Arab feminism and the attitudes held against each other make it extremely difficult for this new group of females, the Arab Americans, to find their place.

Recently, there has been a focus on Arab American identity, and the female identity has begun to emerge with the emergence of this body of people. After recent events, including September 11 and the War on Iraq, Arab culture and American culture have further separated and the gap has grown. Furthermore, the identity of the people who are both Arab and American has been called into question. In this day and age can the Arab American identity exist as something that is related to, but separate from, the two radically different cultures it originated from? Abu-Jaber

claims it can and should be considered when discussing female issues regarding Western and Arab feminist perspectives. Abu-Jaber calls for these two opposing groups of feminists to evaluate how the perceptions they hold of one another in turn greatly affects the lives of a new group of women who have begun to emerge. By creating a fictional world in which the Western feminist's stereotypes and the Arab feminist's stereotypes interact with one another, Abu-Jaber shows us how this binary perception creates a conflict in the lives of Arab American women as they attempt to step out into their own. In the following section I explain the relationship between Western feminism and Arab feminism and how the main conflict in Abu-Jaber's novel stems from this oppressive relationship. ✓

In her article "Is feminism relevant to Arab women?" Nawar Al-Hassan Golley describes the situation between Arab feminism and Western feminism as stemming from Orientalist stereotypes, as a misunderstanding:

When [Arab feminist] movement is recognized, it is described as mere imitation of similar movements in Europe and the USA. It is even argued that Western feminists have described Arab women's lives as being so different from theirs

that they cannot possibly develop any kind of feminism. (522)

Western feminist Susan Okin believes that the liberal Western culture, although not perfect, 'had departed far further from [its patriarchal past] than others,' and therefore provides a superior feminist alternative to these minority cultures. (qtd. in Herr 82)

Okin argues that the survival of some cultures works against the well being of their female members. This assumption is true in the context of the liberal West, which Okin argues offers a better feminist alternative (Herr 82). In "Questions of Gender in a Multicultural Society," Randi Gressgard and Christine Jacobsen explain the term ethnocentrism, which "implies the act of universalizing cultural norms of a dominant group, thus establishing these norms as the general—and hence legitimate—standard of evaluation" (71). Therefore, with regard to gender, "ethnocentrism implies that non-Western women can be liberated and made equal only via 'our' liberating values and ideals" (Gressgard and Jacobsen 71). In other words, in order for minority women and Third World women to achieve freedom of choice and autonomy, they must

do so by rejecting their cultural values and background and adopting those of the liberal Western feminist. That being said, the Third World feminist is represented by the Western feminist's perspective and speech. The Western feminist attempts to speak for the Third World feminist. Attempting to speak for the other, as Gayatri Spivak claims in, leads to an oppressive relationship ("Can the subaltern Speak?"). When one attempts to speak for the other, the other is not given a voice, but is instead represented, creating a discrepancy between what the other would like to say and how the representative presents it.

Abu-Jaber exposes this oppressive relationship in *Arabian Jazz* through the relationship between Jemorah, the eldest sister, and Portia Porschman, her boss. She uses these two characters to portray the relationship between Third World Feminists and Western Feminists and the direct effect it has on Jem's immediate life and the cause for much of her internal conflict. Abu-Jaber attempts to expose the stereotypes used to represent the Arab culture in *Arabian Jazz*. She exposes the Arab and American stereotypes as the reason for much of the disagreement in the oppressive relationship between Western feminism and Arab feminism. More specifically, an influential American

female character that affects Jem's life is Portia Porschman, her boss. It is through this relationship that the misunderstandings of Western feminism and Arab feminism are played out in the text.

Portia claims to have been friends with Jem's mother, Nora, and when Jem decides to leave her job after seven years, Portia takes it upon herself to have a discussion with Jem about her future. She tells Jem that her mother made a mistake by marrying her father:

She never did finish college after that, never got to be the woman she could've been. A husband and a baby at twenty. Look at what *I've* done with my life. You know, it's not too late for you (Abu-Jaber 294, emphasis in original).

In fact, it seems as though having a husband and a family is frowned upon by Portia's. An education and a career are highly valued in American society, if we are to view Portia as representative of Western Feminist values and ideals. Abu-Jaber portrays the stereotypes of the Arab and American females at the very end of the spectrum, and makes it nearly impossible for one to overlap with the other. She plays out the stereotypes so that the American woman is career-oriented and the Arab woman is family-oriented;

there is no middle ground. The American, Portia, views Arab women as subservient and unable to speak for themselves, and in order to help Jem, Portia attempts to change her thinking and asks her to adopt another view of her female self.

In an intense speech Portia delivers to Jemorah, in an attempt to keep her as an employee, the relationship between Western feminism and Arab feminism can be seen:

[Matussem] only got where he is now on my say-so, because I feel for you kids. And now you can go that way, too, or you can come under my wing and let me educate you, really get you somewhere. We'll try putting some pink lipstick on you, maybe lightening your hair, make you *American*.

(Abu-Jaber 294-5, emphasis in original)

This passage is reflective of how the American views the Arab female role and how the Arab views the American female role. However, these views are based on false beliefs and stereotypes that have influenced their perceptions of each other, which is why Jem cannot bridge the two cultures and is constantly conflicted. While she rejects Portia's thinking, she does not adopt the Arab female perspective, either.

In "Under Western Eyes," Chandra Talpade Mohanty claims that "women," as a category of analysis, leads to an objectification of women. Third world women, she explains, are grouped together as victims and as dependent, which gives them no subject status. She defines the term "colonialist move" as a contrast of the representation of women in the Third World with Western women's self-presentation in the same context. "We see," she claims, "how Western feminists alone become the true 'subjects' of this counterhistory. Third world women never rise above the debilitating generality of their 'object' status" (71).

Abu-Jaber exposes this oppressive relationship through Jem and Melvie's interaction with Portia. Later in the novel, Portia says to Melvina, "Hey, I'm on your side . . . We're all women here, aren't we?" (Abu-Jaber 314). Portia explains that she helps women by giving them a job. "You know a lot of people would be saying these women should be home having babies. Not Portia Porschman" (Abu-Jaber 314). However, Melvina exposes Portia by claiming that she exploits her workers because they are the last non-unionized wing of the hospital and their working conditions should be reconsidered. It is then that Portia's exploitive nature is brought to the surface:

Don't you go using that *union* word around here.

These girls are mine. They answer to me and they work for me. I trained each of them like a mother, and without me they're nothing. . . . I made them, every one. (Abu-Jaber 314, emphasis in original)

It is in this scene that Abu-Jaber clearly portrays Western feminist oppression against Arab feminism. Jem leaves her job at the hospital minutes after this, but the exposure of such oppression stays with Jem. Later on in the chapter, Melvie says, "You know she's not such a bad sort once you get to talk to her" (Abu-Jaber 316). Melvie realizes that although Portia has been oppressing her workers, her intent was never to do so.

In a way, Melvie forgives Portia and blames her misjudgment on a lack of understanding, but she believes Portia has good intentions. Through this simple act of forgiveness, it is clear that although Western feminism has engaged in an oppressive relationship with Arab feminism, it has done so out of an attempt to alleviate such oppression. How does one reconcile Western and Arab feminism? Cheryl Johnson-Odim, in "Common Themes, Different Contexts: Third World Women and Feminism,"

explains that in order for Western feminists and Third World feminists to work together to alleviate oppression against women, they must agree on three beliefs that form a broad base: "women participate in the oppression of other women," one must respect different cultures, and one must understand and agree that "women in various places are capable of having their own voice" (325). Portia Porschman believes she is helping her female workers. She does not understand that her employees are capable of owning their own lives by forming a union. Once she understands she is oppressing them, she can begin to really help her female workers by giving them the autonomy to free themselves.

Abu-Jaber's explores how the relationship between Western feminism and Arab feminism makes it nearly impossible for the Arab American feminist perspective to exist. Therefore, she calls on these two theoretical perspectives to reevaluate the way they view each other's identity and for a better understanding of Feminism as it is implicated in cultural values and traditions. Abu-Jaber introduces the Arab American female perspective as an entirely new identity that does not adhere to either Western or Arab female perspectives, but rather as an emerging identity that constantly changes with each new

experience. In this next section, I analyze how Abu-Jaber exposes the stereotypes held by Western feminists as they perceive Arab culture. Abu-Jaber brings these stereotypes to life to create awareness of the root of the problem facing Arab American females: the binary thinking and rigid categories of stereotypes that Western feminists adopt when discussing the lives of Arab women.

Western Feminists' Misconstrued View of Arab Feminism

Abu-Jaber exposes the stereotypes held by the Western feminists as they perceive the Arab culture throughout *Arabian Jazz*. Her exposure of these stereotypes creates a gap between the two cultures the reader can identify instantly. The gap that is created exists between the Arab and the American cultures. Therefore, the Arab American female, the subject of Abu-Jaber's novel, finds herself caught between two rigid categories of perception as she attempts to enter the discussion concerning her own life. In "A Third World Feminist Defense of Multiculturalism," Ranjoo Seodu Herr explains the common misconceptions Western feminist Susan Okin subscribes to when regarding Third World feminism. Because of these misconceptions,

Western feminists and Third World feminists have been unable to find a common ground for working together to alleviate Third World feminist oppression. Throughout *Arabian Jazz*, the misconceptions pointed out in Herr's article are exposed through different characters' actions. In this section I show how Abu-Jaber exposes the stereotypes in *Arabian Jazz* and their influence in the shaping and reshaping of Jemorah and Melvina's female identities.

Herr claims that one of the misconceptions about minority cultures that Okin subscribes to is that they are "static and backward-looking, as opposed to vibrantly changing and forward-looking Western culture" (87-8). In *Arabian Jazz*, Abu-Jaber portrays the Arab woman's role as mother and caretaker of her children. Abu-Jaber presents this role well in a funny scene when the Archbishop is being honored at one of the functions presented by the Ladies' Pontifical Committee, and his hundred year old mother sits next to him wiping food out of his beard with her spit while calling him her "baby" (Abu-Jaber 60). The image of the Archbishop being babied by his mother comes from the many that Abu-Jaber paints as a stereotypical Arab female role. In fact, the High Secretary of the Ladies'

Pontifical Committee sat next to them, "watching the Archbishop's mouth as he ate, as if she too would have liked to blot food from his beard" (Abu-Jaber 60).

Since the role of an Arab female typically means to be a mother, a common Arab belief is that if Jem does not marry by the time she is thirty years old at most she will become a spinster and will never marry. Even Uncle Fouad, when he comes to America, makes a deal with his nieces because he knows about Jem's dilemma. "Back in home we know the scores, like Jem is in marriage emergency. Thirty years of age in months and then what" (Abu-Jaber 153-4).

It seems that if Jem is not married by the time she is thirty then she is forever doomed and there is nothing left for her. Her life will remain empty without a husband and children. Arab women are not meant to be single women, even if they are married or engaged to be married. When Nassir comes to America and speaks to Jem of the Old Country, he tells her, "If you were determined to move there in the near future, you would probably have to go alone, and our country does not understand or appreciate solitary women" (Abu-Jaber 331-2).

Because such beliefs exist in the Arab culture, it becomes Aunt Fatima's role in Jem and Melvie's lives to

find them a husband and marry them off before they get too old and are forever branded as spinsters.. In a speech she often gives to her nieces, she says, "It's terrible to be a woman in this world. . . . It helps to have a good bust . . . and first and last is that you must have husband to survive on the planet of earth" (Abu-Jaber 116). Jem remembers, "the only thing her aunts wanted her to graduate with was a husband," (Abu-Jaber 136). One of her aunts asked her long-distance from Jordan, "So what do you need brains for? You're twenty-one, still pretty, so what's wrong with you?" (Abu-Jaber 137). To her aunts, brains were something you work on if you don't have looks. The role of female in Arab society includes being obedient and good.

Jem's relatives constantly reminded her of the image of a good girl in Arab society. "A good girl does not leave her home. Does not go out in public, speak to a man, show her ankles, talk back to her parents, go to school, live alone" (Abu-Jaber 289). Part of Jem's dilemma comes from constantly being told what to do. "Inside the Arab-Syracuse world she was surrounded by relatives and other interested parties, the dead and the living, each with his or her own opinion and influence" (Abu-Jaber 284). Part of

this external influence also has to do with Jem's late mother, Nora, who wanted Jem to be free and do what she wanted to do. Jem's conflict stems from the clashing of Arab and American cultural female roles. Even though Jem is constantly being told to be good by her aunts, her mother wanted her to be free. This discrepancy creates the internal conflict that plagues Jem for most of the novel, because in order to be obedient and good, she cannot be free.

Secondly, Herr also exposes Okin's assumption that "racial ethnic women are thoroughly subjugated by their culture," and that they are unable to speak for themselves (Herr 86). "In this way, they are suffering from 'false-consciousness' and 'committed outsiders can often be better analysts and critics of social injustice than those who live within the relevant culture'" (Herr 86). Fatima, the Arab aunt, portrays an example of this stereotype. Fatima, near the end of the novel, voices her beliefs on the female roles in Arab society; it indicates the accusations Western feminists make of Third World females suffering from "false-consciousness":

Women are meant for death, she thought. These bodies bound for no good in this world, where any

man might kill you. They were all guilty, the living. Wasn't the night sky with its pink-and-blue belted clouds the sky of loss? Weren't women like black orchids, in the sorrow of their bodies, meant to be used up, to wither like roses, left in rockers, over sewing and tv, left without men and children, knowing their lives had never really been their own? (Abu-Jaber 336-7)

Fatima's disturbing thoughts come from the anguish she had endured as a child. Because she was the youngest, she had to help her mother bury four baby daughters alive, since her family was poverty stricken and could not financially provide for any more children. She says about her brother Matussem, "praise Allah he was born so fortunate! Born a man, not to know the truth - " (Abu-Jaber 334). To Fatima, being a woman meant living a life of sorrow, never owning herself. A man, on the other hand, was lucky because he was always given priority and had control over his own destiny.

Since Fatima was the youngest daughter she was required to help her mother, and the memory of the babies being buried alive caused her so much suffering over the years. Fatima's character exposes the stereotype that

babies are killed in Arab society in very poor families. Her discussion of this murderous act, as she brings it to the surface and allows herself to ponder it, brings to the surface a taboo in many societies. However, this act, due to extreme incidents of poverty, is similar to abortion, a stereotype held by the East as they perceive the West. The act of abortion is discussed as an effect of the situation of poverty, much like killing the baby girls are. It is as if the stereotypes that are held by each culture are equally unjustified: the American and the Arab characters are exposed as poverty corrupts their lives, so that the discussion becomes the economic hardship and its effects on both cultures. Both cultures are guilty of stereotyping the effect economic hardship has on the other, and both are equally unjustified in doing so.

Thirdly, Herr claims that Okin "resorts to the perceived horrors of the often sensationalized customs such as clitoridectomy, 'marriage by capture,' polygamy, and forced child-marriage" (Herr 84). These "perceived horrors" are exposed in the novel when Jem and Melvie's cousins, Said and Keir, come to visit America. While on a date with their cousins, orchestrated by Uncle Fouad, the wealthiest—and therefore king—of the family, Jem and Melvie

discover they are already married to Jordanian women and are looking for wives in America. Said and Keir claim they are looking for wives in America because, "the ones in Jordan are all wore out, man. It's sad, they're dragging," they say to their cousins (228). The cousins are portrayed as stereotypical Arab men, who are exposed to the American culture through the media, namely their television sets. Abu-Jaber exposes the stereotype that Arab men are polygamous and treat women as their servants through these two humorous characters.

Another example of "perceived horrors" in Arab society includes the forced marriages conducted in the Old Country. Matussem remembers his sisters' experiences with men and marriage. His sisters were married to men they had never seen before. These marriages were arranged by his parents. "He had never questioned it before: marriage as regular and perfect as clockwork" (Abu-Jaber 237). Family has come to mean different things in the Arab culture and in the American culture. "In the Old World, Jem thought, family must be as abundant and invisible as air—just as precious—just as easy to exploit. In America, maintaining a family at all times seemed like a miracle" (Abu-Jaber 302). Jem views family in the Arab society as forced and taken for

granted, whereas family in the American society is often broken.

Finally, Herr states:

Okin subscribes to a sweeping generalization concerning Third World non-liberal cultures that the aim of many of their customs is to 'control women and render them, especially sexually and reproductively, servile to men's desires and interests.' (Herr 84)

An example of this misconception exposed in the novel comes from the Ladies' Pontifical Committee, which regularly threw Arab functions and claimed to be "marriage makers and shakers, preservers of Arabic culture and party throwers, immigrant sponsors, and children-police" (Abu-Jaber 52). Melvina commonly referred to their functions as "human sacrifices," and says, "What they're doing is feeding their virgins to their raging gods of macho dissipation" (Abu-Jaber 51).

To be a member of the Ladies' Pontifical Committee meant a great deal to the Arab women. Membership is one of Fatima's two goals; the other is to marry her nieces to Arab men. Fatima, a typical Arab woman, has these two goals in her life. She differs from Melvina and Jemorah.

Their goals include higher education and a stable career. Nowhere in their agenda do they make marriage a priority. Perhaps this is because they have been pressured to find a husband throughout their lives by their Arab aunts. This reflects their rejection of the typical Arab female role. They refuse to become like their Aunt Fatima and instead turn away from it by focusing on the intellectual and economic aspects of their lives, which is a lacking focus in Arab female's lives. They define their identity as having goals that don't necessarily fit into the stereotypical Arab woman's role in society.

The Arab and American categories of identification intertwine in this novel. Identity is not necessarily based on ethnicity, but rather on behavior and acceptance. An American may fit into the Arab society more willingly than an Arab may fit into an Arab society. For example, Auntie Sally, who now refers to herself as Auntie Salandria, had barely finished tenth grade when she met and married Raife Ramoud, Jem's cousin, and moved to Jordan. She re-created herself and considers herself Arab after changing her name and adopting the Arab culture, living the life of an Arab woman in Jordan. In a conversation with Jem, she says, "Dear me, I'm even losing my *Engleesee*. I'm

afraid I've turned quite *Arabee*, you know" (Abu-Jaber 214, emphases in original). She, unlike Jem and Melvie, accepts the role of the Arab woman by taking care of her husband, focusing on marriage as the important aspect of one's life, and she does not value higher education or a career. On the same note, Jem meets two American girls that Said and Keir bring with them on their date and she notices that they are dressed, manicured, and coiffed: "Jem noted their matching lipstick and nail polish and spidery coats of mascara: they could have passed as Fatima's nieces, the ones she was meant to have" (Abu-Jaber 225). These American girls seemed to be more Arab than American because they accept their female role willingly. What bothered her about these girls was how "they seemed secure in some animal knowledge of how the world turned, how they were supposed to look and behave" (Abu-Jaber 225). This security is a lot like the security the Arab woman has in herself, sure of her role in society, what she is supposed to look like, sound like, etc. Jem is disturbed by this because she is not sure that this is the way the world is supposed to turn, and she does not accept her Arab female role so willingly.

Characters described in this stereotypical manner call into question the reality of perception. Jem and Melvie struggle to be Arab American when their Arab and American cultures are portrayed in such a stereotypical way, because these stereotypes are not real. This dilemma is the struggle they face: how do I find myself in this mess of perception? Abu-Jaber exposes the stereotypes held by Western feminists as they perceive Arab feminism in an effort to show that when one looks at the world in such a binary manner, Arab/American, East/West, Strong/Weak, etc., no solution can be found. Abu-Jaber comments on the effect the relationship between Western feminists and Arab feminists has on Arab American feminists. Western feminism and Arab feminism regard each other with such binary oppositions that carry over into the lives of Arab American females.

Abu-Jaber shows how these binary oppositions in Jemorah and Melvina's lives make it difficult to find a common ground because there is none. In order for the girls to be able to combine the two, or find some sort of mixture of the two in their lives, a change in perception first needs to occur. Abu-Jaber claims these two bodies of feminism must change their views of each other if this

third new body of feminism, the Arab American female, is to be able to step into the discussion and emerge independently. Abu-Jaber paints an accurate portrait of lives torn between two perceptions of the world. In the next section I will explain how these female characters attempt to reconcile their dual identities.

The Multicultural Solution

How can feminism exist in a multicultural setting (when one culture co-exists with another) without the threat of rejecting cultural traditions? In other words, how can feminism exist in the lives of Arab and Arab American women, without the rejection of cultural traditions? Ranjoo Seodu Herr, in her article "A Third World Feminist Defense of Multiculturalism," discusses this problem with racial ethnic immigrant women, who she believes are "placed in a strategic position to make a relatively reliable comparative assessment of the two cultures in terms of gender equality" (91). Based on such a view, it can be maintained that the Arab American woman is in a position that enables her to view and critique both cultures and makes her a prime candidate for advocating change within the Arab culture. Namely, she is not

suspicious or defiant of the dominant culture due to the fact that she has not been a direct victim of colonialism, and having been immersed in her culture she has experienced patriarchal oppression.

Jem's conflict with her identity is exposed towards the end of the novel. Finally, Auntie Rein attempts to convince Jem to marry Nassir, her son. As Jem's internal conflict finally comes to a head, Jem agrees. She says, "I'm tired of fighting it out here. I don't have much idea of what it is to be Arab . . . I want to know what part of me is Arab" (Abu-Jaber 308). Jem is struggling between doing what others want and expect her to do and what will make her happy:

I've spent so much of my life not daring to look up, look around at what there might be for me. I've spent so much time trying to please her, to guess what she wanted. And listening to Aunt Fatima telling me how to be good, to please my mother, to be a good girl, which means, as far as I can tell, to shrink down into not-thinking, not-doing. Well, I don't want to waste away doing jobs that make me numb. You say our mother wanted us to live freely. I don't want to keep

hanging on to a place or a dream that comes from someone who is not around anymore. 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. (Abu-Jaber 309)

It is at this point in the novel that Jem decides to solve her dilemma, using very rigid and binary thinking. She sees that she has two choices: she can go to Jordan, marry her cousin and live there, or she can remain in America and forget about the Old Country. This dualistic thinking is the main conflict of the novel.

Furthermore, dualistic thinking is also the reason for much of the conflict that arises in Arab American literature.

In general, the universalist stance, whether liberal or socialist, of mainstream feminist theorists is morally suspicious because it in fact replicates the Colonial Gaze that regards Third World cultures as stagnant, backward, and oppressive and Third World people as childlike, gullible, and lacking in agency. (Herr 88)

Jem is struggling to find her own solution to her problem. Her boss, Portia Porschman, as stated earlier, believes the

solution is to abandon her Arab culture and adopt her way of thinking. Jem's mother, although deceased, also has an influence on Jem. Nora, Jem's late mother, was an atheist and claimed that an atheist was "someone who thinks what they choose to think" (Abu-Jaber 50). Nora had wanted Jem to "be bold, be bold. You should learn about yourself by learning the world. See how things come apart and go back together again" (Abu-Jaber 256). Nora had difficulty, as we discover throughout the novel, with Matussem's family and his sisters. She had a hard time accepting the Arab female role and often broke down in Matussem's arms, because she could not bear many of the Arab cultural traditions. Her Arab aunt Fatima is constantly trying to turn Jem into another version of herself and to adopt her Arab culture, to become completely immersed in it.

However, they are all guilty of believing that Jem is lacking in agency. It is at this point that Jem thinks about embracing her American self and rejects her Arab self. As Jem sees it, if she were to accept her Arab female role and marry her cousin she would "shrink down into not-thinking, not-doing" (Abu-Jaber 309). She views the Arab female as subservient. However, she wishes to be in control of her own thoughts and actions. She dreams of

"rebirth, the longing to move more fully into her own life" (Abu-Jaber 11). Therefore, because Jem perceives the Arab female using binary thinking (action/inaction), she cannot reconcile her mother's wishes (her freedom) and Fatima's wishes (obedience) in her life. Jem claims she wants to find a better job, pursue her education, get her life in order, but she does not know how to do that if it means rejecting her Arab self.

However, Jem cannot disregard her culture, as Portia believes she should, because as Herr explains "culture has an intrinsic value for [racial ethnic women] because it plays a crucial role in their identity formation . . . their culture is essential to their identity" (Herr 92). If Jem were to adopt another way of thinking, she would have a harder time identifying herself than she currently does, because her culture is a part of who she is. In fact, when Jem agrees to marry Nassir and move to Jordan, she does so because she believes her culture will finally allow her to identify herself. She believes this will end her search for her identity, and she will finally find somewhere she can call home. It is at this point in the novel that Jem decides to embrace her Arab self and leave her American self behind, much like Auntie Salandria.

Again, due to binary thinking, Jem remains conflicted because she cannot see how her Arab self and her American self can possibly coexist. Earlier in the novel, Gil Sesame, an old flame, returns to Jem and tells her, "Moving out does not make life better . . . Like the poet says, every town is the same town. Just say to yourself, 'There's no place like home'" (Abu-Jaber 128). His words, although humorously written, echo the truth Jem finally hears from Nassir towards the end of the novel. Although she had heard them from Gil earlier, she does not understand their profoundness until Nassir explains it to her.

When Nassir finally comes to America, on a post-doc scholarship, and visits his cousins, he asks Jem, "What was it that turned Jem the unattainable, the American cousin, back to the Old Country?" (Abu-Jaber 327). Jem replies:

I've started to see better, like the way 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. (Abu-Jaber 328)

Jem cannot abandon her Arab culture because it also protects her from her surroundings. Herr explains:

Culture has a strategic value for racial ethnic women because its values and institutions function as a protective bulwark against various kinds of oppressions that they face in the dominant society. . . . Like other racial ethnic women, immigrant women experience 'multiple jeopardy' that includes not only sexism within, but also racism, cultural imperialism, and economic exploitation from without. (Herr 93, emphasis in original)

Jem resorts to engulfing herself as completely Arab because she believes the American society has shunned her and she has been unable to identify as part of this community.

Nassir asks Jem if she thinks things are any different in the Old Country and proceeds to tell her that they are not. The Middle East is not a magical place, "it shares xenophobias and violences with all the rest of the world!" (Abu-Jaber 329). Nassir seems to dispel myths about the Middle East that Jem has built up in her mind. She thinks that she will find her home in Jordan, and Nassir knows that this is not the case:

"And I'm telling you," Nassir said, "this 'home' that you seek is not there, not in the sense that you mean, not even close. People like you and Melvina, you won't have what your grandparents might have had. To be first generation in this country, with another culture always looming over you, you are the ones who are born homeless, bedouins, not you immigrant parents. As you and your sister just said, everything and nothing. 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?" (Abu-Jaber 330)

Herr argues that one should not abandon multiculturalism and adopt a single cultural worldview. Rather, the solution is for the members of these cultures "to democratize their decision procedures and to arrive as a substantively representative and collective consensus on multicultural issues that incorporates feedback from all members, including female members" (Herr 95). I believe it is at this point in the novel that a difference in perception is made. Throughout the novel, Abu-Jaber has built her characters on stereotypical attitudes and roles,

which created the internal conflict in Jem. At the end, after considering the possibility of abandoning both of her selves, Jem finally sees, from someone who has had first-hand experience, that these stereotypes and myths are just that. Nassir's speech breaks apart the binary world Jem has lived in and her perception begins to change. Only she can then be the one to change her position and her perception in life.

Jem finally begins to understand that her identity is neither Arab nor American, but a hybrid of the two cultures, an ethnogenesis. Nassir understands what it is like to live in Jordan with the family, and knows that Jem's discomfort cannot be soothed in Jordan with the Arab family. She must discover for herself what she wants to do, because, as he explains, it does not matter where she chooses to live she will always be an outsider. Therefore, the Arab American female must take it upon herself to create her own identity. She must understand that the American identity and the Arab identity from which she originates cannot be the basis for her new identity. Rather, she must learn about herself as an entirely new person. Abu-Jaber calls upon this emerging body of women to situate themselves outside their previously thought

identities, and explore it as separate and new, for that is what it is. Herr explains, "In this process, racial ethnic women must be the primary agents in bringing about this change through contestations and negotiations with male co-members on what their culture means to them" (Herr 100). Jem must be her own agent in bringing about change in her life. She cannot rely on or adopt any other worldviews other than her own. She must be the one to analyze her life and decide what changes need to be made to both cultures, in order for there to be a revolutionized way of looking at her hybrid identity. "It becomes clear that not only individuals, but also the society in which they live, must be reborn" (Accad, "Rebellion" 225). It is essential that Jem, since she has a look at both cultures and how they play out in her life, be the one to initiate change in the society in which she lives, which includes both the Arab society and the American society. She must explore her identity as something that is related to, but ultimately exists separate from, her Arab and American identities. By exploring this new identity, she will also begin to learn what needs to be reborn in her multicultural surroundings. She must explore different aspects of her

identity if she is to understand it and to begin reforming the society in which she lives.

Abu-Jaber presents the identity of the Arab American female in a way that has never been presented before. She urges Arab American women to enter their own discussion and explore their own identities instead of relying on the Arab and American views of themselves, which only creates conflicted images of their identities. In the next section, I explore the element of sexual identity in both the main female characters in an attempt to discuss the importance of this part of a female's identity, which has long been silenced in Arab society.

The Sexual Element

The Arab American woman has recently begun to explore her identity as independent from the Arab and American identities. However, this task is not an easy one when these two cultures are radically different from each other and are in constant opposition. As the identity of the Arab American female is being formed, it is constantly being challenged by both its Arab and American counterparts. Are the values and beliefs of an Arab American female similar or different from the American or

Arab values? Can an Arab American female exist in both cultural settings? These are some of the questions that Arab American females are beginning to ask of themselves. In this next section, I analyze the sexual identity of the Arab American female characters in Abu-Jaber's novel, in an attempt to explain how the exploration of different facets of one's identity is essential to the understanding of this emerging group of women. I also explore how Abu-Jaber innovatively presents this sexual identity as something that is related to other facets of Arab American female identity.

Sex has always been a major taboo in Arab culture. Jem remembers when her Aunt visiting from Jordan used to take her face in their hands and examine her lips to see if she has yet been kissed by a boy. "'Not yet,' they'd whisper, crossing themselves. 'Al humd'illah, thanks be to God. She's a good girl!'" (Abu-Jaber 10). Jem has liked boys in the past, but they have all been driven away by her father. However, she has always harbored an attraction to Ricky Ellis. Abu-Jaber explores the sexual relationship between Jem and Ricky Ellis, a poor boy from a "bad" family, as one that unites two marginalized characters.

An Arab American girl is "tainted," the aunts claim in a conversation with Jemorah (Abu-Jaber 10). An Arab girl living in America is bound to be exposed to such things as sex, the aunts believe, which is why she may be considered tainted: Whereas, the aunts used to tell them, "America is no place for young girls like you . . . A man was different; he could let himself fly into the world like an arrow and, the aunts told them, no matter where he flew, he would still be an arrow" (Abu-Jaber 99). Through the imagery of the arrow, a direct reference to the phallus, it is clear the aunts are discussing sexual intercourse and sexual prowess. The dual standard here is clear; the woman should not engage in any such activity, or even thoughts, whereas the man should feel free to "shoot his arrow" anywhere it wishes to fly.

Abu-Jaber explores female sexuality in this novel as it relates to outside influences, such as economic hardship, exploration of identity, racial identification, and class identification. Accad expresses her concerns about sexuality in Arab society:

I also hope that sexuality - the right to sexual pleasure, the emotional relationship between two persons, as well as the problems connected with

it: virginity, genital mutilation, etc., in the East, rape, pornography, etc., in the West - will grow to be recognized as an important element, as serious and as essential as food, shelter, jobs, and development in the struggles for revolutionary change. ("Sexuality" 247)

Abu-Jaber's exploration of Jem and Melvie's sexual identity stems from her exploration into their social realities. Sexual identity is considered as important to their identity as other factors. Their sexual exploration is essential to their identification and to their hybrid identity. Abu-Jaber expresses the concern for sexual identity to be as exposed as other issues, such as stereotypes. In order for change to ensue it is critical that Jem and Melvie's exploration into their sexual identity be discussed in the novel. Also, Abu-Jaber dissects other characters' sexual identities. For example, it is interesting to note that Abu-Jaber introduces, even for a split second, a gay cousin, which Fatima attempts to bring to the girls as a suitor. The gay community has not been recognized in Arab society, and so the character, entering with a toss of his head and a muscle shirt, does so with humor and without directly indicating his sexual

preference. Although he does say, "You know I swing whichever way the wind blows, darling. But marriage? I'm not climbing into *that* closet!" Fatima either pretends she does not understand or really does not understand his sexual orientation (Abu-Jaber 63, emphasis in original). The exposure of a gay member of Arab society breaks the mold of past literature. Abu-Jaber discusses sexual identity as an important component of her characters' identities and as an essential factor in their social realities. This is an innovative exploration of sexual identity, which presents readers with the understanding that the sexual component of their identity should not be ignored and is as much a part of their social realities as any other factor explored in the novel.

Jem's relationship with Ricky Ellis is an enigma, even to her. She questions whether or not she is in love with Ricky. In doing so, she compares herself to him. She sizes him up by looking at his educational level, which is one year of junior high, and his family background, which includes only himself. His mother was a fifteen year old runaway off the Onondagan reservation and his father was supposedly dead, or so he claims. Later, we realize that his father, Jupiter Ellis, is actually a drunk who, due to

lack of funds for alcohol, drank anything he could get his hands on including rubbing alcohol and Lysol. The differences between them are their education and their family lives, but their similarity is that they both feel like outsiders. Ricky, a half Indian, and Jem, a half Arab, find in each other something that may feel like belonging. In the scene where Jem and Ricky succumb to their sexual desires, the description of their sexual act is more like a sacred act: "The movement of their bodies was a chant, a sacrifice of the distance between them. The feeling was honed and Jem pressed against him, to feel it all the more" (Abu-Jaber 204).

Feminism urges the exploration of sexual identity as it stems from, or is connected to, other factors, such as race, class, and imperialism. Cheryl Johnson-Odim, in "Common Themes, Different Contexts: Third World Women and Feminism," states:

Such a definition of feminism will allow us to isolate the gender-specific element in women's oppression while simultaneously relating it to broader issues, to the totality of what oppresses us as women. If the feminist movement does not address itself also to issues of race, class, and

imperialism, it cannot be relevant to alleviating oppression of most of the women of the world.

(321)

As Abu-Jaber's novel shows, the feminist movement must address issues of sexual identity if it is to advocate change within an oppressive society. The Arab American female must not be afraid to explore this facet of her identity if she is to truly understand her hybrid identity. Since sexual identity is radically different in the Arab and American cultures, it is essential to explore sexuality as it plays out in her life in order to understand her identity in its totality.

As Jem is trying to find herself throughout the novel, so is Ricky. His attraction to Jem is clear when he says,

I guess that's how I love you, not knowing, just the way you were up there riding that school bus, looking at this stuff but never falling into it like the rest of us. I mean, you were the first person who saw me. (Abu-Jaber 203)

His attraction to Jem is based on her ability to understand him, his marginalized character, understanding that those kids on the bus rejected him and they rejected her as well. The kids used to make fun of Jem on the bus, as they made

fun of Ricky, too. Just as Ricky did not fit in to the crowd, neither did Jem: "She didn't even fit in with them, those children that nobody wanted" (Abu-Jaber 94). In a poor white trash town like Euclid, Jem is an outsider attracted to Ricky because of his position as an outsider, as well.

As the novel progresses, and as Jem's struggle to identify herself becomes more complicated, their attraction towards one another grows. Jem begins contemplating the meaning of their relationship, and even begins thinking about why she feels so connected to this man:

What do I mean to you, she wondered. What if he answered her? What if . . . he were to take her hand and say: Marry me now, once and for all. Who was he to her? Bad teeth, dirty hair, penniless. Still, somehow, as he stared at her hands she knew she wanted him. (Abu-Jaber 222, emphasis in original)

Towards the end of the novel, Jem contemplates marrying Ricky because the attraction she feels towards him is very strong. "Maybe Jem would someday marry a person like Ricky Ellis and spend her life learning about another lifetime. Perhaps not" (Abu-Jaber 362). The sexual relationship

between Jem and Ricky represents a strong human connection between two characters who are able to understand each other because of their marginalized positions in the society they are living in. Abu-Jaber explores sex as a relationship which includes race and class, not as something separate from it.

Melvie's relationship with sex is also interwoven with her need for order and to help the lives of others. In other words, her relationship with Larry Fasco, as she explains, begins even before she meets him: "[Larry Fasco] was ill, and for Melvie the decision to help him had been made long before she'd ever met him" (Abu-Jaber 285). Larry Fasco, as we find out later on in the novel, is a recovering heroin addict, and Melvie, the head nurse, secretly administers methadone to ease his withdrawal symptoms and keep him alive. Through this interaction, Melvie becomes emotionally attached to him. Although it is never clear the extent of their sexual relationship, it is clear Melvie has feelings for Larry.

When discussing men, Melvie remembers a conversation her mother's mother had with her on the phone. Nora's mother, an American woman, warns Melvie of men. Nora's parents were never supportive of Nora's decision to marry

an Arab man and even blame Matussem of her death because he took Nora and the kids to Jordan on a family trip. So, it is clear that she should warn her granddaughter of making the same mistake she believes her daughter made. Her grandmother tells her, "Never trust a man. Don't let them touch you, I mean really touch you. They'll only hurt you" (Abu-Jaber 284). While on the surface it appears that Melvie's grandmother warns her away from men and sex, she is actually warning Melvie of love. Melvie remembers this advice when she is administering Larry his dosage, and she finds herself contemplating her grandmother's words. "No, Melvie knew, men were something beyond hurt: perpetrators, trespassers, their presence as troublesome as poltergeists, their desires far less certain" (Abu-Jaber 284). She had forever tried to block men into her world, never giving them the time of day. But Larry Fasco needed her and this is what made Melvie's life understandable for her.

Similarly, the patients at the hospital need her. She is described as "all nurse," and so it seems only natural that the man she harbors feelings for understands and is dependent on that part of her personality, the part of her she is very willing to give. Melvie tells Jemorah, "Well, I've tried out sex in its purely recreational format and I

find I don't have much use for it" (Abu-Jaber 223). She doesn't view the relationship between a man and a woman as based on sexual exploration, but rather as the exploration of their personalities. Although it is unclear whether Melvie's relationship with Larry is sexual, her feelings for Larry stem from her willingness and need to be needed, something that is ingrained in her character since she was a baby.

Abu-Jaber, as well as exploring sexual identity in Arab society, explores it in American society. She discusses sexuality as it stems from economic hardship. This is an important factor for feminist discourse. Golley explains:

Feminist discourse is weakened in a society where sexual freedom is not a priority, and where the number of professional women has yet to match the number of professional men in all fields.

Besides, for an Arab, feminism is often associated with Western societies, which in turn are frequently presented as socially sick and suffering from 'rape, pornography and family disintegration.' Instead of looking at feminism

as a political response to such social phenomena,
it is often seen as the cause. (528)

Abu-Jaber discusses sexual relationships as it is connected to the economic situation of characters, such as Dolores Otts. Poverty plays a big role in the lives of the American women in *Euclid*, especially the life of Dolores. She is thirty years old and still feels like her life has not started. She has slept with so many men, she can not remember whether it was forty, fifty, or a hundred. She has many kids and lives in a trailer. We are introduced to Dolores as she is attempting to abort her child using a coat hanger, and later when she is admitted into the hospital under Melvina's care, we discover she was not pregnant to begin with.

The repercussions of sexual intercourse and depressing economic situations are played out in Dolores' life. She believes she is pregnant and learns how to abort her unborn child from a bumper sticker on the back of a woman's car in the parking lot of a grocery store. She sees a bumper sticker that had a picture of a hanger with a red slash through it that said "Never Again." When the owner of the car returns with her groceries, Dolores asks her what it meant, and she told her "That's to say that abortions

should be kept free and legal in this country" (Abu-Jaber 102). Dolores looks at the woman and thinks, "She had a nice running car and could buy all the abortions she wanted" (Abu-Jaber 102-3). Abu-Jaber comments on the silencing of sex in situations of poverty. Dolores' sexual situation stems from and is interconnected with her poor living conditions.

Therefore, Abu-Jaber explores sex as something that is related to and stems from racial, economic, and class identification, as well as personal identification. Her discussion of sexual relationships in *Arabian Jazz* is interwoven with discussions of poverty and marginalization, as well as personal explorations of identity. Abu-Jaber presents an innovative look at the Arab American female identity by exploring facets of this identity previously untouched. The Arab American female finally has a voice to discuss issues that are pertinent to her identity, essential to her understanding of her worldview, while negotiating her identity between two radically different cultures.

Abu-Jaber exposes stereotypes throughout her novel, which are rigid categories of definition, and place her characters in the midst of these stereotypes to identify

themselves, which creates the conflict they struggle to overcome. Finally, they understand that their identity is something that stems from but is not dependent on their two cultures. This hybrid identity is something new that is constantly changing with each new experience. Finally, Abu-Jaber creates a space for the Arab American female that exists separate from the Western Feminist and Arab Feminist perspectives. The Arab American female is an entity that is currently entering into theoretical discussions concerning her own life, and Abu-Jaber gives her a voice with which to do so.

CHAPTER THREE

AN EMERGING HYBRID IDENTITY

Arabian Jazz incorporates the stereotypical behavior of Arab and American characters in interplay to show how the Arab American's negotiation of identity is a constant struggle. Abu-Jaber uses the stereotypes held against the Arabs to show how one might perceive an Arab character, and to show how this character is radically different from the American characters. She creates a world in which she can portray how the Arab American identity is torn between two radically different cultures and the perceptions they have of each other. Accordingly, the question of Arab identity is negotiated by the main characters. However, before I discuss how the main characters negotiate their identity or how they incorporate their Arab culture into their everyday lives, I must ask, what is an Arab? This chapter discusses how Abu-Jaber portrays the negotiation and incorporation of a hybrid identity of the main characters by imitating behavior patterns of their Arab relatives and making it their own. The main characters accept their Arab culture once they have accepted the Arab behavior presented in the novel. The following section explains the definition of

Arab behavior presented in *Arabian Jazz*, as it stems from stereotypes.

The West perceives an Arab to act a certain way derived from certain beliefs. Abu-Jaber makes use of stereotypes for the purpose of illuminating the reader to the discrepancies found between perception and reality. She creates Fatima, for example, from the stereotypes that exist about Arab women. However, if she does so, then how do the characters incorporate Fatima's behaviors without incorporating stereotypical beliefs as well. The question then arises about the nature of the stereotypes and the truth behind them: are the stereotypes real? Yes and no; stereotypes do stem from some truth, since they are defined as an over-generalized truth. I say this because I read the novel from an Arab American point of view and that means I read it from outside of the Arab culture. If, as I have been trying to argue throughout this thesis, we regard the Arab American identity as something that is separate from its Arab and American counterparts, then a reading of *Arabian Jazz* by an Arab American will be much different from a reading by an Arab or by an American for that matter.

An Arab reading of *Arabian Jazz* will regard the stereotypes that have come alive as a negative perspective of the culture and as regressive in nature. An Arab reading will view the novel as a set back to the Arab culture, because Abu-Jaber uses the stereotypes that Arabs have so long been attempting to dispel. However, the Arab American identity is something different and separate from the Arab identity. Therefore, the Arab American will see the stereotypes that Abu-Jaber casts in the novel as holding some truth, even if exaggerated. They will read the novel as portraying the most excessive parts of the Arab culture, as well as the most excessive parts of the American culture in interaction with each other. This is how *Arabian Jazz*, I argue, is meant to be read.

The Arab American, because both integrated with and separate from both cultures, can see the imperfections that both see in each other, whereas an Arab reading of *Arabian Jazz* will claim that the novel uses these imperfections in the culture against the culture itself. In fact, Abu-Jaber does not side with one culture or the other, but instead attempts to show the reader how the imperfections of both cultures create a conflict for negotiating an identity between them. Therefore, the stereotypes Abu-Jaber uses of

the Arab culture are perceived not only by the American culture, but also by the Arab Americans who are able to step outside both cultures, understand their differences, and negotiate their identity within these differences. Abu-Jaber uses the stereotypes not against the Arab culture, but in support of the Arab American struggling identity.

The frustrations, fears, hopes, dreams about the future, and their own identity struggle of the once oppressed characters is the struggle of *Arabian Jazz*. Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha coins the term "unhomeliness" for the feeling of being caught between two cultures, which is the feeling a colonized persons commonly experience. The feeling of abandonment by both cultures tend to push the colonized person to become a psychological refugee. Each person will blend their two cultures differently and no two subjects will interpret their cultures alike. The colonized writer must "create a new discourse by rejecting all the established transcendental signifieds created by the colonizers" (Bressler 203). *Arabian Jazz* attempts to present the struggle of the Arab American female as she is caught between two cultures, a post colonized people and their oppressors, which makes the

task of identification all the more difficult. Jemorah and Melvina attempt to redefine their position in society and reassert themselves through their hybrid identity. However, they both interpret their Arab cultures differently, emphasized by the way each attempts to reconcile with their Arabic heritage and language. Abu-Jaber shows how each character integrates her two cultures differently through their use of language. In doing so, Abu-Jaber presents her subject, the Arab American woman, with the task of integrating her two cultures as she sees fit, so that her interpretation of the Arab and American cultures to which she belongs is different than others that may belong to the same cultural groups.

An Arab American Identity

Jem's interpretation of her Arab culture stems from her interest in the mind, which she decides she will pursue by the end of the novel. Therefore, her interest in bilingualism focuses on the thought processes of bilingual speakers:

Jem wondered what language he thought in; his displacement was a feature of his personality. He wouldn't have been the same father, she knew,

if he had stayed in Jordan and raised them there. His removal was part of that soft grieving light behind his eyes and part of the recklessness in his laugh. (Abu-Jaber 98)

Matussem's displacement, she notes, has now become a feature of his personality. Jem decides to study the mind because she wants to explore that part of the human mind that creates the hateful relationship between two opposing peoples: "she had recognized, as the hiker turned to face her, the mystery of this hate, something she could crack only by going into it: going back to school" (Abu-Jaber 362). Jem decides to study what has created this conflict for her. "This was worth studying, she thought, things that were hidden inside the crust of the earth and sky, the things that lay hidden in people: he father's heart in the drums, her sister's ministering fingers" (Abu-Jaber 362). It is in this second to last chapter in the novel that Jem seems to accept parts of the Arab culture that have affected her behavior and is willing to finally embrace them.

Storytelling exists in many cultures as a traditional method of explaining or coping with situations. These stories retain cultural traditions and teach younger

generations of the morals such cultures value. For the characters in *Arabian Jazz*, storytelling provides a method of coping with different issues. For Matussem, these childhood stories provide comfort. His famous story, the one Jem and Melvie remember hearing over and over again, titled "Za'enti da'ar," is Matussem's favorite story. When the girls would give him a hard time leaving the house he would remind them of this story, the girl who would not leave the burning house because she claimed she was the beauty of the house. By recounting this story and others like it, Matussem is able to retain cultural morals and actions. He saw in the people around him the characters in the stories:

He populated America with figures from his childhood's stories; Jem thought it sharpened his focus on the world . . . These were childhood friends; if Matussem recognized them everywhere, this country couldn't be such a foreign place after all. (Abu-Jaber 98)

The stories helped Matussem understand his surroundings. He likened the people he met to the characters in the stories, and found the ability to recognize their motives and actions through this technique. When he did recognize

people, it helped Matussem liken America to his homeland because these stories were his link to his homeland.

The mode of storytelling, of passing down cultural traditions and values from generation to generation, is well-pronounced in Matussem's relationship with his daughters. Abu-Jaber compares Matussem to Shahrazad: "Matussem flickered thin in the family mind, every step always the first, poised over his drums, raveling beats through the air, telling story after story through them, like Shehrazad, giving life" (Abu-Jaber 99). Through the mode of storytelling he was able to convey his thoughts. Storytelling is Matussem's method of explaining the Old Country to his daughters. It is through storytelling that Jem and Melvie learn about their Arab culture: "When he wasn't telling fables, the girls heard their father's stories about his childhood, about the way the enchantment of America had eventually drawn him across an ocean" (Abu-Jaber 99). What they learn about Jordan and the Arab culture, they learn through their father's stories as they were growing up. They eventually learn how to deal with their father, through the stories he used to deal with them. It is through storytelling that Matussem communicates to his daughters, and accordingly, it is

through storytelling that Melvie and Jem are able to reach their father.

Jem is finally able to adopt parts of her Arab culture when she allows herself to use the childhood stories she grew up with to recognize the world around her, which is symbolic of her father's assimilation into the American culture. Specific to Jem's identity alone, she begins to adopt the storytelling strategy her father uses to adapt to life in America, by recognizing characters from his childhood stories in the American people he meets. At the end of the chapter, Jem is driving the family home and recognizes the road:

This was a road the ghost hitchhiker was supposed to travel: the lovely, lost daughter on the way to the prom who took the sweater of whoever gave her a ride, then left it waiting, neatly folded, on her grave in the morning. (Abu-Jaber 363)

Jem adopts her father's coping strategy, and if she recognizes people and places from the stories she was told as a child, then maybe the world would not seem so foreign to her. Perhaps, if she recognizes her strategy as one that she adopted from her father, then maybe she would not feel so much like a homeless refugee stuck between two

worlds constantly in battle. Jem adopts this feature into her own personality, and in doing so she assimilates a part of the Arab tradition into her new hybrid identity.

On the other hand, Melvie integrates her Arab and American identities differently than Jemorah. Instead of adopting the storytelling strategy she has seen her father use, she adopts her aunts' use of guilt as a method of persuasion. Melvie's understanding of the dual languages stems from her perspective on the world. Towards the beginning of the novel, her involvement in her Arab culture is minimal stemming from her attitude towards her Arab culture: "Melvie thought of Arabic as the tongue of the hearth, of irrational, un-American passions, of pinching and kisses covering both cheeks" (Abu-Jaber 304). Melvie is a straightforward character, and as a nurse she seems to see the world in black and white. Such cultural traditions, kissing and pinching the cheeks, is useless to Melvie and she regards them as frivolous actions.

Abu-Jaber uses the word "un-American" to describe the Arabic language. In doing so, she further emphasizes the opposition between both cultures. Melvie sees Arabic as the furthest thing from American language. She describes Arabic as everything to do with passion and nothing to do

with reason. This terminology reflects the stereotypes that the West has held about the Orient, as noted by Edward Said: Orientalism is the "creation of non-European stereotypes that suggested so-called Orientals were indolent, thoughtless, sexually immoral, unreliable, and demented" (Bressler 203). The Oriental was described using words such as, "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'; thus the European [is described as] rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'" (Said 40). No theory, claims Said, can be totally objective. The use of such rhetoric, the division between English and Arabic, the West and the East, the Occident and the Orient, further magnified in Melvie's black and white world, reflects her binary thinking. The dual languages in her life symbolize her internal conflict. When Melvie begins to adopt Arab cultural practices of language for her own specific purposes, she begins to fuse these two languages and form her own hybrid identity from them.

The opening pages of *Arabian Jazz* present an opening dialogue between Matussem and Fatima. In this dialogue, Arabic words are incorporated into the English text. Abu-Jaber introduces us to the language of her Arab American characters. The first dialogue between Matussem and his

sister include not only an example of Arab American language, but also an example of the nature in which Fatima decides to convince Matussem to play at an upcoming church party: through guilt. Abu-Jaber uses guilt throughout the novel as a tool of manipulation, or attempted manipulation, for the Arab women. An example is Fatima's attempt to convince her brother: "'*Matussem, Ya Matussem*, remember when you are five and I am six and I give you all my *grabia* cookie to eat? Do you?' Matussem had no such memory" (Abu-Jaber 3, emphasis in original). Abu-Jaber presents this method of persuasion throughout the novel by the Arab women as a means to convince other characters in the novel to act as they wish. For example, when Auntie Rein wants Jem to marry Nassir she attempts to convince her using guilt as her manipulative strategy:

This is very important to the family and I know I don't even need to ask, because this is the only thing now that would make me happy, and if she won't do it, God forbid, I would have to go and die like a dog in the street, God willing. (Abu-Jaber 306)

When Jem agrees to marry Nassir, Melvie exclaims, "Do you understand that Auntie Rein is ninety-nine? Do you really

plan to worry about her committing suicide?" (Abu-Jaber 307). The method Auntie Rein uses to try to convince Jem to agree to marry her son is one that is commonly used by the Arab women in *Arabian Jazz*. In the previous quote, Melvie understands that her aunts' words are not to be taken literally. Throughout the novel, Melvie relies on stating her case and persuading her sister through logical reasoning.

When Melvie begins to use her aunts' method of persuasion, this act emphasizes Melvie's acceptance of her Arab identity and her attempt to reconcile both her American and Arab identities. Melvie does not agree with her Arab aunts that marriage is the next step for Jem, and instead believes graduate school is the path she should take. However, she uses her aunts' method of persuasion to convince Jemorah to go to graduate school. Towards the end of the novel, Jem tells her family she has decided not to continue her education. The scene that follows indicates the extent to which the Arab culture has influenced Melvie, the rational, straight-forward nurse. Melvie argues with Jem in the same manner that Fatima argues with Melvie: she uses guilt to convince her sister. "What am I hearing? Is this a mutiny? Tell me now, is this why we drove to the

lake? So you could have me walk the plank? . . . Why? Why is my every effort trampled, cut down, denigrated?" (Abu-Jaber 359). Melvie uses the same linguistic devices Fatima has used throughout the novel. By attempting to emphasize her "American" beliefs using an "Arab" female's method of persuasion, Melvie has begun to integrate both cultures into her own interpretation of her hybrid identity, which is different than her sister's.

Abu-Jaber uses the character's language and language use to symbolize the integration of their two cultures. She allows each of her characters to independently create her own use for language practices, and through this it signifies her emerging hybrid identity. Abu-Jaber comments on the ability for the Arab American female to form her own identity. Since each person interprets their two cultures differently, their integration of them will be different from other females existing in the same sphere. Therefore, by presenting the reader with two radically different sisters who interpret their cultures differently, Abu-Jaber shows us that it is necessary for the Arab American female to negotiate her identity on her own terms and form a hybrid identity from her experiences alone.

"War of the Rhetoric"

In this section, I am going to analyze the rhetoric of the three separate speeches made by Portia Porschman, Fatima, and Nassir in an effort to explore how Abu-Jaber uses these three characters to represent the identity of the Arab American feminist. Abu-Jaber presents three characters who represent the perspectives of three approaches to Arab American feminism. The first perspective is the Western feminist's perspective, represented by Portia Porschman, Jem's boss and a figure of authority. The second perspective is the Arab feminist's perspective, represented by Fatima, Jem's aunt. Throughout the novel I have argued that Fatima represents the stereotypes of the traditional Arab women as viewed by the Western female. Also, as I have been trying to argue, contrary to stereotypical belief the Arab feminist does not hold Western feminist values and may hold cultural values instead. Although Fatima does hold cultural values, the rhetorical perspective she adopts in the last speech she makes in the novel represents the perspective of the Arab feminist. That is, she portrays the rigidity of the perception the Arab female adopts whilst trying to speak for the Arab American female. Just as the Arab feminist

finds opposition from her fellow Arab females when she attempts to break convention, so does the Arab American female find opposition from the Arab female community when she questions her Arab identity. In this section I analyze the rhetoric Fatima uses to show the perspective in which accusations of betrayal are made against Arab American females questioning their identity.

Finally, the third perspective is an independent perspective, which I believe to be Abu-Jaber's perspective, represented by Nassir, the educated cousin, as he encourages Jem to make her own voice heard within the discussion of feminism occurring in her own life. Abu-Jaber presents these three differing perspectives, all interacting with Jem, representative of the Arab American female identity. Abu-Jaber's commentary states that the Arab American female should be viewed as an entity that is separate from the Western feminist's perspective and the Arab feminist's perspective. Throughout the interaction of the characters with one another, Abu-Jaber claims that the Arab American female should be encouraged to explore her own identity separate from her Arab and American counterparts.

The first speech that occurs towards the end of the novel is Portia Porschman's, and it represents the Western feminist's perspective. Although she claims she would like to help Jem, Portia Porschman's delivers her speech in a didactic tone representing her attempt to influence Jem's perception. Before she begins, she beckons for Jem to come into her office and sit next to her by saying, "Here . . . come sit. Let's get to know each other" (Abu-Jaber 291). However, throughout the dialogue Portia does not attempt to get to know Jem, but has already formed presuppositions about Jem and her way of life. Portia sits on a Persian rug on the floor and she wraps herself in an Oriental shrug, symbolizing her fascination with the stereotypical exoticism of the East. Abu-Jaber presents us with a character who pretends to be interested and helpful, but instead does not want to hear what Jem has to say. She begins her speech by saying, "Did I ever tell you I knew your mother in college?" (Abu-Jaber 292). She attempts to present herself as someone who was really good friends with Nora, Jem's mother. She does this because she knows it will grab Jem's attention and Jem will want to hear anything about her mother. Portia begins her speech in this manner in order to present herself as a "mother-

figure" herself, stepping into Nora's role. Soon after the first two lines of her speech Jem realizes Portia's intentions in attempting to change Jem's perspective. As I presented earlier in the second chapter, Portia's attempt to help Jem, without wanting to get to know her or allow Jem the autonomy of her own voice, is representative of Western Feminists' view of Arab females.

Throughout the speech Portia passes judgment on Jem's mother and father, calling her father names. She believes she can help Jem, but Portia never gives Jem a chance to ask for help. Instead, she assumes Jem is in need of it. Also, Portia assumes Nora needed help, as well, "I thought I should butt out, let Nora make her own mistakes. Well, not anymore, now I'm telling you, Jemorah Ramoud, your father and all his kind aren't any better than Negroes" (Abu-Jaber 294). Portia believes that it is her duty to step into Jem's life and make her decisions for her. She believes she allowed Nora to make her mistakes. This false sense of control stifles Jem's autonomy, and in order for Jem to be heard she cries out when she cannot take anymore, "My father's mother was black" (Abu-Jaber 295, emphasis in original). Portia's speech does not help Jem, because

after this experience Jem decides to reject her American identity and accept her Arab identity.

Throughout Portia's speech she separates herself from Nora's mistakes and makes it clear that she does not approve of Nora's choice of life. Her references to Nora's parents as "Good Christian people" makes it clear that she regards Nora's actions in life as a statement of rebellion, instead of a choice (Abu-Jaber 293). She does not understand how Nora could make such choices in life, unless she was suffering from a lack of attention. Portia's discussion of the incidents she refers to as mistakes signify her detachment from the Arab culture itself, while wrapping herself in an Oriental shrug in an attempt to present otherwise. Abu-Jaber creates this character as a representative of the didactic "mother-like" nature with which Western Feminists approach Arab and Arab American Feminists in order to show how little they can actually achieve in the Arab American female's life without listening to her first.

On the other hand, Fatima, speaking from the Arab feminist's perspective, bases her speech on her own life experiences that have shaped her opinion of the world and her identity. Fatima's experience with the war in the Old

Country is portrayed in her recounting of the horrors she endured as a child. Fatima's perspective is a personal one as she speaks of her past personal experiences with the war. In her speech, Fatima identifies herself with the horrors of the past that have long affected her life: "When we were homeless and dying without food, what of the four starving babies I had to bury still alive, living - I, I, I?" (Abu-Jaber 334). Throughout Fatima's speech she does not distance herself from her actions in the past, rather she allows them to become a part of her identity, "Their spirits stay with me; there is nowhere else to go" (Abu-Jaber 335). Fatima has experienced patriarchal oppression and the war, but continues to identify herself with the very culture she struggled with.

Fatima finds her meaning, her identity, and her past in her homeland, which exists within her. Therefore, Fatima's personal experiences represent the Arab feminist's perspective on her identity, as tied to her culture. For Fatima, rejecting the Arab culture means rejecting your own identity and turning away from the people who surround and love you. She cannot understand why Jem would not embrace her Arab culture fully and submerge herself in it, as Fatima has done throughout her life. When Jem questions

her Arab identity, to Fatima this means becoming like the enemy, and unless she embraces and adopts her Arab identity, she is not a part of it. Through Jem's interactions with Fatima's speech, Abu-Jaber paints a picture of how and why the Arab female regards the Arab American female as rejecting her identity when she rejects her Arab identity. Abu-Jaber comments on the rigidity of the perception the Arab female adopts whilst trying to speak for the Arab American female.

Finally, Nassir's speech, which I believe is representative of the Arab American perspective, comes from a character that has experienced and understands the conflict of a dual identity. Nassir, Jem's cousin, has traveled to America to continue his education for a post-doctorate at Harvard university. Nassir has lived in Jordan and in America, completing his "baccalaureate and graduate degrees in science and Anthropology at Cambridge and Oxford respectively" (Abu-Jaber 327). In the following passage, Nassir explains that life in the Old Country is not the same as Jem remembers it, and if she decides to move there she will have a hard time adjusting to her life there:

What you hate in this place you will find in other places. Imagine, if you will, living immersed in endless feuds over kinship, allegiance, and possession—which is what you will find yourself doing in the Old Country . . . the war of the rhetoric is nearly as painful as that of the flesh -- (Abu-Jaber 333)

When he asks Jem to imagine, he places her in the Old Country and allowing her to see for herself how her life would be like. Nassir refers to the situation in the Old Country as the "war of the rhetoric," and Fatima is appalled. Nassir knows very well that this war has extended far beyond perceptions and rhetoric. He lost his brother and his father to this war and claims, "I have Israeli friends who lost even more! It never stops; it's a game without end. Why shouldn't we be the ones to say stop?" (Abu-Jaber 334). Nassir has experienced, like Jem, the struggle to find a middle ground. Jem can identify with Nassir because he, too, understands what it is like to be caught between two worlds.

Nassir asks Jem to imagine a situation; He engages Jem to think about her position in the world. Throughout his speech, Nassir attempts to identify with Jem in order to

help her come to her own decision. This is "our" country, "our" border, he claims. The emphasis in his speech is on "you," Jemorah. His first question to Jem is, "But it's incredible, do you honestly think anything is any different in the Old Country?" (Abu-Jaber 328). He begins his speech by asking Jem what she thinks. He engages Jem in a conversation about her life and asks her what she wants, "Say the word, open sesame, and it is my command" (Abu-Jaber 331).

Nassir's approach is to engage Jem in a discussion about the Old Country, ask her opinion, and encourage her to think for herself. He focuses on Jem's ability to make her own choices and asks her to allow her voice to be heard. Jem's conflict arises from a need to find a home: "I think I know . . . how important a place is, and the need for a particular land, a location, for anyone to live, to have that land to call home. I know that's what I want" (Abu-Jaber 339). Jem is struggling not only with her dual identity, but also with her status as a refugee. She regards herself as an exile. Nassir says to her:

We spring from exiles and refugees, Jemorah, you and I. We go on, to be sure, but the place of our origins is swept away. Forgive me, if I take

liberties in saying this. Perhaps I say it because I sometimes feel the same as you. (Abu-Jaber 340)

Nassir claims he feels the same as Jem feels, and this creates equality between the Arab American female and the Arab American male. It is ironic that Nassir, an Arab male, helps Jem come to terms with her hybrid female identity. It is a man that is the one who liberates Jem. Also, it is a man's voice Abu-Jaber chooses to use as the voice of reason, who teaches Jem. They don't necessarily learn together, but he teaches her something he already knows. One might read this as reinscribing the patriarchal structure, and in this passage privileging the male valorizes the male.

However, I believe Abu-Jaber uses Nassir to further develop her point that it is not a man who keeps the woman from liberation, freedom, and autonomy, as previously thought. The male figure is not the oppressor in this situation. It is the female who has taken that position and the male is in a position to help. Abu-Jaber uses the male figure to help Jem come to terms with herself in order to allow the truth to surface: women oppress other women.

In this speech Abu-Jaber comments on the ability and necessity of the Arab American female to create her own discourse, as well as the necessity of the Arab male to contribute and assist in the Arab women's liberation. Society must change in order for the Arab American female to change. At this point, the Arab American female is given a voice with which to speak and is freed from oppression. She is finally asked to voice her position between her Arab and American female counterparts.

The perspectives of Portia, as she attempts to teach Jem, and Fatima, as she attempts to enlighten Jem, represent the two differing perspectives of the Western feminist and the Arab feminist, respectively. Jem, the Arab American feminist, is caught between being taught by the Western perspective and being enlightened by the experiences of the Arab perspective. Abu-Jaber is claiming that neither the willingness of the Western feminist to help, nor the past and personal experiences of the Arab feminist can be a voice for the Arab American female.

Through the speeches of the characters and their approach to the Arab American female character, Abu-Jaber presents the reader with the reality of the social situation: just as the Western feminists has been

oppressed, and the Arab feminist is being oppressed by the Western feminist's perspective, so is the Arab American feminist currently being oppressed by both the Western feminist and the Arab feminist. The Arab American female does not hold the same beliefs and values as the Western feminist, nor has she experienced a past as the Arab feminist has. Not only does the Western feminist's perspective not allow the Arab American female to voice her opinion on her own life, but if she does not do as the Arab feminist expects, then she is accused of rejecting and shaming her Arab culture. This, Abu-Jaber claims, is the oppression of the Arab American female, and in order to free herself from such oppression, she needs to engage in dialogue of her own life and become an agent of change in herself and in the society and perspectives around her. As Nassir presents Jem with a situation and asks her for her interpretation and opinion, so should the Western feminists and the Arab feminists engage in discussion with the Arab American female.

Abu-Jaber comments on the importance of the Arab American female to represent herself, apart from both the Western and Arab feminist perspectives. Here, Abu-Jaber asks the two bodies of women to understand that in

attempting to represent this newer third party, they are in fact stifling her voice to step out into her own views. The Arab American female must not be represented by either her Arab or American counterparts, for she exists as a separate female identity.

Conclusion

The female characters in Abu-Jaber's novel come from an oppressed status and express the concept of being oppressed, while at the same time questioning the concept of "woman." They question the concept that "woman" means one thing, that it has actually a multi-faceted definition. Her main female characters speak out because they have experienced oppression and have a desire to change their world. Abu-Jaber can be considered a subaltern writer; her voice originates from a point of view that was once silenced. However, what is interesting about this novel is that the female voice that attempts to speak from it has been silenced not by a male but by other female perspectives, and it is a male that helps the female regain her voice and understand its importance.

Abu-Jaber presents a solution to the Arab American female's dilemma in *Arabian Jazz*. The Arab American female must create for herself her own discourse, as she breaks free from the one that has tied her down. She must explore her own identity, her role in society, and her place in the world. Abu-Jaber's literature embodies this exploration. Deconstructing the binary between man/woman and the Occident/Orient is an essential step towards the rediscovery and reassertion of the Arab American female's identity and role. Arab American females all want to be heard as they are, to voice their opinions from where they stand and to expose the false consciousness that has been oppressing their way of life for so long, and Abu-Jaber has given the Arab American female a starting point, a voice, with which to do so. Abu-Jaber is writing for a reason: to liberate the Arab American female and to raise awareness. *Arabian Jazz* indicates that Arab American literature is prepared to adopt a view of the Arab American identity that is entirely new and constantly changing with each new experience.

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