Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures Vol.18, No. 1, 2026, pp387-412

JJMLL

Troubling Cultural Narratives: Discourse of Interculturality in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* and Susan Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly*

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Received on: 7-8-2024 **Accepted on: 3-5-2025**

Abstract

In an era marked by growing cultural fluidity and global mobility, narrow nationalist narratives face heightened scrutiny, particularly for their role in perpetuating epistemic violence. Against this backdrop, this article investigates how Diana Abu-Jaber's (2003) *Arabian Jazz* and Susan Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly* (2007) (henceforth, *The Inheritance of Exile*) interrogate and disrupt dominant cultural paradigms, positioning interculturality as a transformative framework for understanding the nuances of cultural exchange in Arab American literature. By exploring the multiplicity of narrative voices in these works, the article critiques the exclusionary and insular discourses inherent in nationalist ideologies, advancing interculturality as a dynamic counter-narrative that reimagines cultural interaction. The analysis demonstrates how these literary texts reconceptualise notions of citizenship and belonging, portraying them as fluid, diverse, and ever-evolving. This critique challenges stringent binaries that seek to define contemporary American identity, offering instead a vision of identity that embraces complexity and interconnectedness. By situating its discussion within the realm of fiction, the article highlights the adaptive and generative potential of interculturality, advocating its value as a critical lens for fostering deeper understanding and meaningful engagement in a globalised world.

Keywords: interculturality, cultural narratives, Arab Anglophone literature, belonging, citizenship.

1- Introduction

Although American society has evolved into an ethnically diverse landscape, the nation's ideals of diversity and inclusivity are increasingly threatened by rigid, exclusionary cultural narratives that foster intolerance along ethno-racial lines (Bhabha 2021). Drawing on postcolonial and cultural studies, we understand "Arab" as operating as a heterogeneous and contested category shaped by historical, cultural, and geopolitical contexts. Despite the inherent complexity and diversity within Arab ethnic groups, these identities have been homogenised and systematically marginalised within the framework of American citizenship and belonging (Naber 2000, 38). This perception, often associated with Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1993), frames migrant groups, particularly Muslims, as threats to American

* Doi: https://doi.org/ 10.47012/jjmll. 18.1.18
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civilisation, asserting that they "reject assimilation" and cling to the values of their homelands (304). This perspective has gained traction among some Arab American writers, who, as cultural insiders, depict Arabs as a monolithic, culturally and religiously conservative group. Salaita (2016) critiques Norma Khouri's *Honor Lost*, arguing that she fabricates narratives of honour killings to appeal to Western audiences (31), while Hassan (2014) describes her as an "unscrupulous opportunist" who exploits her heritage and Orientalist stereotypes to position herself as an authoritative cultural translator (88). Similarly, Nonie Darwish (2008), claiming insider knowledge, asserts that the West must "get tougher" and abandon "multiculturalism and cultural relativism" (201, 246). While these authors may lack literary acclaim, they contribute to dominant narratives that portray Arab communities as inherently incompatible with American society. Their works, often oversimplified, reinforce stereotypes and obstruct a more nuanced understanding of intercultural dynamics.

In contrast, the majority of Arab American writers present a progressive, anti-hegemonic vision that celebrates multicultural diversity and challenges reductive myths about Arab-Western encounters (see Kahf 2005; Majaj 2008; Salaita 2011, 2016; Hassan 2014; Fadda-Conrey 2011 & 2014). These writers contribute a nuanced perspective on American citizenship by fostering an in-group consciousness that promotes critical intercultural integration (Fadda-Conrey 2014). They emphasise the need to expand conceptualisations of American belonging, "forg[ing] new critical U.S. citizenships" that highlight transnational perspectives within Arab American identities (5). Similarly, Salaita (2016) notes that these writers advocate for "corrective and interventionist poetics" to challenge exclusionary notions of American citizenship (26). For example, Kahf (2005) creatively reinterprets American citizenship by exploring complex issues of racism, gender relations, exclusion, cultural essentialism, and religious radicalism. She places under the microscope thorny issues such as racism, gender relations, dynamics of exclusion, cultural essentialism and religious radicalism. Majaj (2008) emphasises that Arab American literature emerges from a "post/multinational" space, redefining Arab identity within a distinct Arab American cultural framework that preserves Arab heritage.

Exploring Arab American identity reveals the profound influence of gender on experiences of assimilation, exclusion, and intercultural negotiation. Women, in particular, face dual layers of marginalisation: one arising from the intersection of their ethnic identity with the dominant society, and the other from patriarchal norms within their own communities. While men's experiences of assimilation and exclusion are often framed in terms of socio-economic mobility or political representation, women's challenges frequently centre on cultural expectations, familial obligations, and their roles as carriers of tradition (Naber 2012, 34-35). This dual positioning forces Arab American women into a unique form of intercultural negotiation, balancing the demands of cultural preservation with societal acceptance, often navigating conflicting expectations from their families and the broader society. The two novels offer a compelling portrayal of the gendered dimensions of identity, illustrating their complex impact on individual and collective experiences. While *Arabian Jazz* examines the tension between cultural heritage and personal autonomy, *The Inheritance of Exile* explores intergenerational struggles as young women navigate their parents' nostalgia and their own sense of belonging in America. These narratives critique

structural inequalities and explore the intersection of gender with race, ethnicity, and nationality, offering a more nuanced understanding of interculturality. By centring on women's experiences, the novels challenge monolithic perceptions of Arab American identity and provide critical insights into the broader socio-political dynamics of migration, assimilation, and exclusion (Salaita 2011, 45).

These gendered dynamics provide a critical lens for exploring broader questions of citizenship and interculturality while simultaneously challenging essentialist and reductive cultural narratives. By applying a gendered perspective, this article examines how *Arabian Jazz* and *The Inheritance of Exile* reimagine the complexities of Arab American identity in a multi-ethnic US context. Through the portrayal of protagonists navigating intercultural romance relationships, multilingual environments, and multicultural workplaces, these novels offer a nuanced critique of conventional understandings of cultural belonging. In doing so, they engage with a non-essentialist portrayal of interculturality challenging two dominant paradigms in intercultural encounters: first, the framing of cultural narratives as representations of distinct, incompatible societies, and second, the notion of compatibility as a precursor to assimilation and the erasure of cultural differences.

2- Intersecting worlds: Cultural narratives unveiled

The evolution of cultural narratives reflects a deep connection to fundamental human conditions, serving as frameworks for individuals to identify within a particular group and interpret the 'Other' (Ross 2002, 302, 306). These narratives shape the perceived values within cultural groups, functioning as "frameworks for action" that enable individuals to interpret and articulate their social and political realities, along with the conflicts they navigate (306). Both literal and metaphorical uses of cultural narratives capture how people interpret complex, emotionally charged events resulting in seemingly contradictory accounts of the same occurrence (310). In recent years, cultural narratives have also served as mobilising agents of nationalist ideologies, emerging strongly in reaction to the rise of multiculturalism (Gordon 76). The late 2010s and early 2020s have seen new forms of the incompatibility narrative adopted by neo-nationalist movements, such as Trumpism in the United States, which reflects an emergent social order that merges psychological and political domains (Gordon 2017, 79). This populist turn embodies a narrative where dominant groups feel threatened by ethnic minorities (Bhabha 2021, min. 37). Bhabha's concerns about the global proliferation of such narratives call for counter-narratives that disrupt hegemonic discourses and advocate for a more egalitarian cultural understanding.

Notably, two distinct cultural narratives shape Arab-Anglo encounters, each presenting a unique view on identity and integration. The "compatibility narrative" promotes coexistence by downplaying cultural distinctions, while the "incompatibility narrative" highlights historical conflicts, positing cultural groups within fixed oppositional societal boundaries (Funk and Said 2004, 5). These narratives suggest contrasting views of identity formation: whereas the compatibility approach allows for some fluidity and openness, the incompatibility narrative frames identities as rigid and exclusive, inherently resistant to integration (Bauman 2013, 56). Within both narratives, Arab Americans face paradoxes, including being misrepresented as a monolithic group, experiencing dual racialisation as both white and non-white, and

being defined more by religious affiliation, particularly Islam, than by physical traits (Naber 2000, 38). Naber argues that over the past four decades, the US state and media have homogenised geographically, culturally, and religiously diverse individuals coming from North Africa and the Middle East under the singular label 'Arab", imbuing it with mythological and derogatory connotations (41).

3- Arab American literature: Fictionalising interculturality

Another construct commonly inscribed in the discourses of citizenship and integration is the notion of interculturality, defined as the "interaction between individuals from different backgrounds" (Jandt 2004, 507). The concept counters multiculturalism, criticised for deepening societal divisions through self-segregation and cultural divides (Nagle 2016, 35). Instead, interculturality promotes a more integrative paradigm, fostering profound exchanges of ideas, values, and cultural norms while nurturing relationships grounded in mutual respect and understanding (38). In intercultural interactions, individuals undergo transformative experiences through mutual learning and shared experiences (Jandt 2004, 508). Interculturality further entails recognising common human needs across cultures while encouraging critical dialogue within them (Kolapo 2009, 134), thereby rejecting the exclusivity of identity politics and challenging cultural understanding as confined to insiders.

However, the concept presents a significant dilemma due to its inherent elusiveness; any attempt to frame it within disciplinary paradigms risks reverting to monocultural assumptions (Handelsman 2021, 75). In contrast, Fornet-Betancourt (2011) underscores the critical role of cultural and conceptual resources that enable individuals to achieve an "intercultural approximation of the reality of interculturality" (76). Salazar and Fernandez (2016) further argue that interculturality is deeply intertwined with decolonisation, particularly when interactions occur between individuals who share a colonial history. In this context, the foundations and dynamics of interculturality are closely tied to Arab American experiences shaped by transformations in their homeland, along with the emotions and modes of existence that arise from these changes. Scholars have established a strong connection between interculturality and the fictional realm, where these theoretical insights gain deeper resonance through the portrayal of lived experiences. Czainska (2015) argues that, despite its fictional nature, literature holds unique cognitive value, providing valuable insights into the understanding and practice of interculturality (28). Similarly, Handelsman (2021) asserts that ethnic literature, in particular, serves as a crucial medium for fostering interculturality, as it negotiates meaning through diverse voices that contribute to the collective identity of citizenship (76). These perspectives highlight the intrinsic relationship between Arab American literature, including the novels under discussion, and the broader concepts of cultural narratives and interculturality.

Moreover, the concept of space, imbued with intricate spatial metaphors and rich cultural connotations, occupies a central position in the discourses on interculturality. While space is inherently fluid and perpetually incomplete, normative discourses often seek to impose an idealised fixity upon it, framing it as a stable construct (Collins 2018). Neoliberal discourses, as MacDonald and O'Regan (2013) argue, exacerbate this tendency by essentialising space, treating it as a totality of collective consciousness,

and disregarding its dynamic nature, shaped by individuals constantly traversing cultural boundaries. Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "Third Space" offers exceptional insight into this dynamic, disrupting these reductive frameworks and emphasising hybridity as a site of negotiation where self and 'Other' meet to generate new, non-fixed meanings. In this space, cultural identities are not resolved into a universal wholeness but remain in a state of productive tension and transformation. However, neoliberal discourses, in their appeal to universal consciousness, fall into two aporias: "first, that it contains an unstated movement towards a universal consciousness; second, that its claims to truth are grounded in an implicit appeal to a transcendental moral signified" (MacDonald and O'Regan 2013, 3). Such discourses, rooted in Enlightenment ideals, erase difference by privileging homogenising rationality, reducing intercultural engagement to a pursuit of conceptual purity. By contrast, Bhabha's "Third Space" acknowledges the irreducible relation to the other, highlighting the ambivalence within intercultural discourses that simultaneously valorise and efface difference. This underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of space as an ever-evolving construct that resists closure or fixity.

While foundational hybridity theories by Paul Gilroy and Steven Vertovec remain influential, recent scholarship has recalibrated these frameworks to address contemporary dynamics of cultural negotiation and identity formation. Papastergiadis (2012) reconceptualises hybridity as a fluid, transnational process shaped by intercultural exchange, while Bhabha (1994) underscores the performativity of hybrid identities in postcolonial and diasporic contexts. Král (2014) interrogates the visibility and erasure of hybridity within dominant narratives. Werbner (2018) extends these debates by probing the ethical and political stakes of cultural fluidity in an era of intensified globalisation. These perspectives converge with Fadda-Conrey's *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Home and Belonging* (2014), which examines how Arab American writers resist rigid nationalisms through narratives of interconnected, evolving identities. Likewise, Jarrar and Kaldas (2021) explore how Arab American fiction disrupts essentialist identity paradigms through intercultural negotiation. Integrating these perspectives enriches the analysis of hybridity in Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* and Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile*, positioning their works within contemporary scholarly debates on migration, diaspora, and transnationalism. Ultimately, this framework underscores interculturality as a transformative literary paradigm—one that reimagines belonging beyond exclusionary nationalist discourses.

These theoretical insights set the stage for Arab American writers, who challenge reductive views of intercultural encounters by portraying the complexities of cultural interactions in their work. Although having relatively limited visibility in the Western literary system, they actively challenge monolithic perspectives on intercultural encounters endorsing a performative approach to the discourse on interculturality. They, as Nash (2007) observes, adopt multi-prism perspectives to portray how cultures and lifestyles interact by exploring from within the contradictions of cultural narratives (47). As Hassan (2014) notes, they complicate the oversimplified and celebratory notions of assimilation by providing nuanced representations of transnational Arab American writers who simultaneously associate with their place of living and Arabic heritage (85). To achieve this, they destabilise "essentialist discourses that

implicate or suspect immigrants who originally hail from Arab countries" (Salam 2022, 38). Since Arab American characters often experience uprooting from their original culture striving to adapt to a new cultural reality, their narratives reflect the experience of acculturation and the associated dynamics of this process (Czainska 2015, 5). They valorise intercultural interactions with two interlocking perspectives: one that subverts and one that transforms cultural contradictions (Fadda-Conrey 2011, 533). For example, Abu Jaber uncovers the intricate layers and multiple inconsistencies, which are hardly intelligible not only for outsiders but also for the members of the Arab community itself who usually adopt a unilateral discourse that involves dichotomising tendencies (Farid 2018, 137).

Arab American writers, positioned at the intersection of cultures, are inherently compelled to fictionalise interculturality. Their poetics can be understood as a collective endeavour that delves into the complexities of "intercultural encounters" (Sarnou 2014, 65). Straddling Arab and Western cultures, they negotiate, albeit with difficulty, a common ground that seeks to bridge cultural divides advocating for cultures that continuously reflect upon and inform one another (Abu-Shomar 2020, 57). Through their nuanced portrayal of intercultural exchanges, they emphasise the transformative potential of these encounters, subtly navigating multicultural spaces while fostering strategies for cross-ethnic identification (Abu-Shomar and Salam 2024, 18). Thus, their borderland narratives unfold at the intersection of cultural interaction, offering a nuanced representation of the lived realities in both their homeland and host country. In this manner, they carve out a unique, liminal space that is intrinsic to their identities. By doing so, they enrich the discourse on intercultural experience, introducing a novel critical lexicon that challenges and disrupts entrenched cultural narratives.

Arab American women writers notably surpass their male counterparts in both number and thematic influence, addressing pivotal issues such as identity, gender, and interculturality through a distinctly feminine lens. Authors like Mohja Kahf, in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), delve into the identity struggles of a young Syrian American woman navigating life in the Midwest. Kahf explores themes of faith, heritage, and self-discovery, offering a layered depiction of the challenges involved in reconciling cultural and personal identities. Kahf's works illuminate the unique perspectives Arab American women bring to literature, showcasing their critical engagement with interculturality (Majaj 2008, 305; Salaita 2011, 16). The novels, at hand, share similar themes within the broad context of intercultural interactions. While *Arabian Jazz* addresses the tensions resulting from its protagonists' quest for inclusion within American society, *The Inheritance of Exile* explores intercultural interactions within the immigrant community itself. Despite their thematic differences, both texts employ comparable literary techniques and share a focus on the complexities of intercultural engagement. Given that a comprehensive study of all Arab American writers connected to intercultural themes exceeds the scope of this article, these two works were selected for their distinctive artistic and methodological contributions to the field of intercultural studies. Although both novels have received critical acclaim, analysing them as fictionalised frameworks that critically engage with and dismantle dominant cultural narratives within the context of intercultural discourse offers a fresh and rigorous perspective that has yet to be fully explored.

Abu-Jaber and Darraj emerge as crucial interlocutors in the discourse of Arab American identity, articulating the liminality and cultural negotiations that underpin their literary and personal narratives. Their works, whether fictional, autobiographical, or critical, coalesce around a shared preoccupation with displacement, hybridity, and the dialectics of self-representation. Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* (2005) functions as more than a memoir; it operates as a cultural palimpsest where culinary metaphor intertwines with the broader epistemology of identity formation. Through her reflections, Abu-Jaber constructs a rhetorical space where language, memory, and cultural inheritance collide, mirroring the tensions explored in *Arabian Jazz*. Similarly, Darraj's critical interventions, particularly in *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (2004), foreground the politics of storytelling as a mode of resistance and self-inscription. Her essays underscore the narrative strategies Arab American women employ to navigate and subvert hegemonic frameworks of identity.

The literary intersection of Abu-Jaber and Darraj is underscored by their critical engagement with cultural memory and the liminal space of Arab American subjectivity. Darraj, in *Conversations in the Feminist Press* (2014), foregrounds the imperative for Arab American women writers to reconcile inherited narratives with contemporary lived realities—a concern mirrored in Abu-Jaber's interrogation of cultural authenticity in *Crescent* (2003). As Fadda-Conrey (2014) asserts, Arab American literature operates as a site of "transnational belonging," simultaneously invoking and dismantling the homeland. Abu-Jaber and Darraj exemplify this dialectic, depicting identity as fluid, shaped by personal memory, familial expectation, and sociopolitical contingencies. Pickens (2014) further situates their fiction within an intersectional matrix where racialised and gendered identities navigate structures of power and resistance. Their interviews reveal the fraught entanglement of gender, ethnicity, and belonging, positioning their novels not as passive reflections of identity politics but as active sites of discursive contestation. By embedding their narratives within a broader framework of literary and autobiographical self-fashioning, their works engage in a dialogic interplay that both reaffirms and complicates Arab American identity. This intertextual resonance, enriched by their own metacritical reflections, serves as a vital framework for interrogating the mechanisms through which cultural memory and national belonging are inscribed, negotiated, and, at times, destabilised in their fiction.

4- *Arabian Jazz*: Melodies of the in-between

In *Arabian Jazz*, Jordanian American writer Diana Abu-Jaber (2003) examines contemporary American culture, focusing on themes of interculturality and self-discovery as they unfold within the fabric of cultural narratives. The novel offers a profound exploration of identity, belonging, and the tension between heritage and assimilation, presenting a compelling narrative that reflects the broader complexities of intercultural engagement. Her characters come out as fully-fledged humans at once defying and confirming stereotypes, representing and misrepresenting, hybridising, and essentialising both the immigrant and host cultures. The novel transforms the concept of representation from a duty towards the writer's community to a critical analysis of the complexities involved in the interactions between immigrant communities and mainstream culture (Salaita 2016, 83). Hartman (2019) also notes

that the novel "confronts issues which occupy the works of many Arab American writers such as the fault line between being Arab and American discussing the racial indeterminacy of the protagonist, Jemorah Ramoud, as she struggles to understand her own identity" (153-4).

The novel narrates the story of Matussem Ramoud who emigrates from Jordan and lives in a small town in upstate New York. Matussem encounters interculturality through a cross-cultural romance and marriage culminating in the birth of two daughters, Jemorah and Melvina. This marriage, however, is hampered by the early passing of his American wife, Nora, while the family is visiting Jordan. While Matussem struggles to find his way in the host culture following the death of his wife, his sister Fatima adheres to Arab traditions becoming a guardian of the family. Unlike Matussem, she always feels threatened by the American host culture and strives to shield her family traditions perceiving her ultimate duty "to preserve the family's name and honor" (Abu-Jaber 10). Sparing no effort to restore what she feels the family has lost in Arab culture, she criticises Jemorah and Melvina for having an Americanised appearance that, in her opinion, makes them look like "starving rats" (116). She believes that their Western lifestyle would tarnish their reputation and, as a result, undermine their prospects of finding suitable Arab suitors. Clinging to the narrative of antagonism, Fatima's attachment to her cultural background instils in her a state of repulsion to all American lifestyles including food, names, and personal relationships, among many others. She sees the United States as a mere land of opportunity while true life is back in her homeland: "Americans had the money, but Arabs, ah! They had the food, the culture, the etiquette, the ways of being and seeing and understanding how life was meant to be lived" (360).

However, Fatima's unwavering commitment to Arab culture presents a paradox: despite her awareness of the patriarchal structure within Arab societies, she perceives this very system as providing the protection women need. In her attempt to convince her nieces to get married to an Arab, she states:

> It's terrible to be a woman in this world. This is first thing to know when the doctor looks at baby's thing and says girl. But I am telling you there are ways of getting around it … There are things you don't know yet that I know perfect, and first and last is that you must have husband to survive on the plant of earth (116-17).

Her seemingly firm belief in such order leaves her no choice but to endorse the patriarchal doctrines that seem to protect her and her nieces from the risks of foreign influences. This situation creates "a double bind for Arab-American feminists" since while they "must struggle against the notion that they need 'liberating' from their own culture", they attempt "to suppress their feminism in order to claim a sense of home in their Arab communities and avoid the charge of community betrayal" (Majaj 2008, 322). Such a contradictory position, we argue, underscores an additional layer of conservative cultural narratives, where the preservation of cultural security takes precedence over the expression of individual identity. In this context, Fatima invokes a romanticised vision of a traditional past, idealised as the bedrock of selfhood, driven by a profound sense of nostalgia.

The American iteration of the exclusionary narrative, however, reinforces a discourse of homogeneity grounded in white supremacy and the systematic exclusion of ethnic minorities. Portia,

Jemorah's manager, embodies a critical perspective on cross-cultural marriage from an American standpoint. Viewing Nora's union with Matussem as a fundamental error, she reinforces the cultural tensions that undermines such relationships. Portia perceives Nora as someone "who was so beautifully white, pale as a flower" (294) and considers her marriage to Matussem a source of familial disgrace. She recounts, "I know for a fact her [Nora's] poor mother – young grandmother – had to ask for a picture of the man for her parish priest to show around to prove he wasn't a Negro" (295), reflecting deeply ingrained racial and cultural prejudices. Much like Fatima, Portia evaluates Jemorah through the lens of her own cultural values, reducing citizenship and belonging to a singular, rigid framework. She pressures Jemorah to reject her Arab heritage in favour of embracing an exclusively American identity, stating, "I want to save whatever of your mother's clean blood is left … I'll scrub all the scum right off you, make you as pure and whole as I can" (295). This reveals Portia's underlying intent to erase cultural hybridity in favour of an idealised, monocultural purity.

Portia's racial rhetoric significantly undermines Jemorah's attempts to construct a unified American identity. In reaction to this hostility, Jemorah adopts a racially fluid identity, a decision that gains particular relevance following a critical confrontation with her employer. This moment not only challenges her sense of self but also prompts her to identify explicitly with Black Americans, illustrating the complex interplay between racial categorisation, identity formation, and the pursuit of solidarity in navigating intersecting cultural frameworks. As Majaj (2008) puts it, "For Portia, the 'good white blood' running in Jemorah's veins from her American mother has been contaminated by her Arab father who '[isn't] any better than Negros'" (332). Portia situates Jemorah within an irredeemable framework of white ethnicity, marking her by the "taint" of her Arab heritage (Abu-Jaber 294), thereby reinforcing the racial boundaries that define and limit her social acceptance. For her, being an American only means being white or Caucasian. She tells Jemorah: "Now, if you were to change your name, make it Italian maybe, or even Greek, that might help some … We'll try putting some lipstick on you, maybe lightening your hair, make you American" (295). In this manner, Portia becomes the mouthpiece of the dominant mainstream cultural narrative which perceives whiteness as a defining category of American identity while appropriating "Arabs, Middle Easterners and Muslims as a monolithic category and as one of the pre-eminent enemies of the West" (Naber 41). This interpretation aligns with Salaita's critique of the label "the new niggers" ascribed to Arabs, arguing that such a characterisation of Arab Americans constitutes a "devastating slur" (2016, 71). Arab Americans' claims to legal and cultural forms of citizenship have been persistently subjected to scrutiny, thereby isolating Arab Americans from the white category and positioning them within an unstable racial space in the United States (Fadda-Conrey 2011, 541). The stigmatising racialisation of Arab American bodies by mainstream US society deepens the ambiguity surrounding Arab American belonging. These racial segmentations play a critical role in reinforcing the perception of Arab Americans as outsiders, excluding them from dominant racial categories and perpetuating their marginalisation within US society (543).

Fatima and Portia advocate a draconian version of culturally informed narratives, safeguarding the self-culture against an exotic other. Abu-Jaber, however, underscores that such worldviews hinder the

resolution of identity and interculturality by introducing characters whose pivotal roles contribute to alleviating Jemorah's sense of disorientation. Nasir, Jemorah's cousin, for example, perceives Jemorah's hyphenated identity as a merit rather than a dearth: "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). Through these characters, Abu-Jaber critiques essentialised cultural narratives of incompatibility, unpacking their complexities while providing tools to challenge, deconstruct, and reframe them. This is accomplished by involving Matussem and his daughters in a transformative experience that cultivates self-awareness and reconciliation, ultimately enabling their assimilation into the American community. Their journey reaches its zenith in a third space characterised by diverse, multi-voiced perspectives. In the novel's final passage, Abu-Jaber employs jazz as a metaphor, presenting the spaces born of cultural crossover and improvisation as an ethically and critically informed site for articulating and performing interculturality.

From the outset, Abu-Jaber situates her central character, Matussem, in a profound state of limbo, grappling with a fragmented and episodic sense of belonging following the death of his American wife, Nora. As his sole connection to the host community, Nora had taught him to navigate his new environment, showing him "how to speak a new language, how to handle his new country" (188). Her loss upends his understanding of both his homeland and his adopted country, as "Nora had been his history once; now only the land was left" (260). Although Matussem was born and raised in Jordan before migrating to the United States, his Palestinian origins further compound his estrangement and his search for a sense of rootedness. Nora had provided him with a home he had never truly known, serving as the bridge through which he connected to America: "Through the year of their courtship she took his hands and fed him words like bread from her lips" (188). Her death, caused by typhus during a visit to Jordan, exacerbates Matussem's confusion, particularly as Nora's parents hold him responsible for her passing. This tragedy also complicates his relationship with Jordan, a place he once regarded as his homeland, further deepening his identity crisis.

In such a state of disorientation, Matussem improvises his way of self-discovery and reconciliation, which comes through music believing that "any music was prayer, sending a message out to the sky" (16). For him, music becomes the universal language through which he can eliminate his foreignness and otherness. His choice of jazz, in particular, is quite telling in several ways since jazz requires improvisation, which is linked to his nomadic background that allows a state of travelling between different places. He favours jazz over other forms of music since it "challenges and negotiates both western and eastern musical and linguistic forms" (Naous 2009, 66). For him, jazz serves as a universal language that facilitates the navigation of interculturality, allowing diverse cultural influences to coexist and interact simultaneously, creating a dynamic and fluid space for expression and understanding across cultural boundaries. Interestingly, the fact that Mutassim hails from an Arab country where jazz is not common invites him to get involved in a negotiation between two diverse musical traditions. By infusing an Arab dimension into American music—a genre shaped by the marginalised African American community—Matussem subverts prevailing Western perceptions that dismiss jazz as a primitive musical

form. Ultimately, jazz emerges as a unifying space, providing Matussem with a shared language through which he can engage with his host community. Notably, despite his extended years in the United States, Matussem never achieves fluency in English. Instead, he relies on music as a protective medium, navigating his linguistic limitations while resisting the hegemony of English. In this regard, music emerges as a powerful means of articulating his identity, providing a sense of clarity and stability amidst the complexities and contradictions inherent in his intercultural experience.

Rooted in African American communities, Abu-Jaber's use of jazz music underscores a deliberate effort to highlight solidarity between socially marginalised ethnic groups in the United States. Hartman (2019) identifies "generative links" between Arab and African communities in the US, grounded in "cultural borrowings, appropriation, and reciprocity" (18). Through literary and artistic expressions, such principles, as Hartman argues, seek to foster interethnic solidarity. He notes that the novel "draws on African American music as symbolism in the title and elsewhere", with jazz serving as a significant emblem for the Ramoud family, particularly Jemorah's father, who is disparagingly described as "no better than a Nigro" (Abu-Jaber, 20). Matussem's adoption and reinterpretation of jazz thus illuminate the shared experiences of marginalisation endured by both ethnic groups under the dominant white culture. Simultaneously, jazz functions as a medium through which they renegotiate their citizenship, embracing improvisation as a mode of resistance to the mainstream narrative's demand for complete assimilation. As Farid notes, jazz "demonstrates the unfamiliar territory he [Matussem] treads as an immigrant, since he does not hold on to some form of traditional music from his homeland, hence rejecting assimilation, nor does he favor a genre typically popular to white American, hence fully assimilating" (140).

Furthermore, Jazz functions as a metaphorical and thematic device in the novel, offering a transcendental lens through which intercultural interactions are reimagined. It mediates between extremes, fostering the hybridisation of conflicting notions and presenting a framework for the development of 'third spaces' that transcend rigid nationalism. Jazz, characterised by its polyrhythms—the simultaneous interplay of rhythms not inherently derived from one another—symbolises this cultural hybridity. As a globally evolving genre, jazz draws from diverse regional and local musical traditions, giving rise to various styles that resist singular categorisation. Matussem's jazz is neither purely American nor exclusively Arab. As an immigrant, his musical expression reflects his refusal to confine himself to his Arab ethnic heritage or fully assimilate into American culture. Farid (2018) observes that "Matussem's position in mainstream American culture is similar to that of jazz in American music, both carving their own niche away from traditional choices" (140). Through the literal and symbolic invocation of jazz, Abu-Jaber articulates an intercultural discourse that traverses diverse cultural and artistic values, eschewing essentialism while embracing complexity and fluidity.

Jemorah and Melvina, Matussem's daughters, provide a compelling case study of the dysfunctionality of the compatibility narrative, as depicted through the deeply ingrained process of assimilation within the American community. In their quest for self-awareness, sense of belonging, and acceptance of their hybrid identities, both, like their father, search for a resolution to their dilemmas. Following the death of their mother, they experience a rift between their Arab half and the racial

discourse endorsed by some Americans around them. They become entangled in their mixed-race while fighting for acceptance as Americans, albeit to varying degrees. Under the influence of Portia's racial narrative, Jemorah seems to endorse the idea that she is contaminated by Arab blood. Since she believes that assimilation into American society is not possible, she turns to her Arab half: "It's not enough to be born here, or to live here, or to speak the languages. You've got to seem right … well, I don't know how to accomplish that, and I'm starting to think I won't learn if I haven't by now" (Abu-Jaber 328). Melvina, on the other hand, demonstrates more determination to find a connection with her American side. She becomes a nurse, which later on forms a significant part of her identity since the hospital gives her a relatively safe space away from the outside world. Unmoored from cultural narratives, they ultimately overcome their sense of estrangement through the support they receive from other empathetic and insightful voices within their environment. This external solidarity helps them navigate their isolation and forge a path toward belonging.

To counterbalance assertive and moderate voices within this narrative context, Abu-Jaber introduces minor characters who, despite their peripheral status, play pivotal roles in subverting dominant discourses. Among these is Nassir, Jemorah's cousin and presumed future husband, through whom Abu-Jaber enacts a self-critical lens within the ethnic community itself. A Jordanian American pursuing postdoctoral studies at Harvard, Nassir challenges stereotypical portrayals of the macho Arab male. He offers a nuanced and impartial critique of issues concerning intercultural interactions, adopting a sceptical view of nationalist ideologies in both the West and the Arab world. Rather than aligning himself with either cultural pole, Nassir remains distanced from both, critically engaging with nationalist discourses. When Jemorah rejects her American identity and resolves to relocate to Jordan in search of solace, he cautions her against romanticising the Middle East, asserting, "There is nothing unique or magical about the Middle East; it shares xenophobia and violence with all the rest of the world" (329). He further emphasises the value of her hybrid identity, framing it as an asset enabling her to perceive multiple perspectives simultaneously. Despite his ostensibly minor role, Nassir provides Jemorah with the equilibrium she needs to navigate her relationship with her ethnic heritage and the multiethnic society of the United States. Similarly, Nora, Matussem's wife, disrupts the axioms of white superiority imposed by her parents. Her unwavering love for Matussem transcends the boundaries of ethnicity, race, and language, establishing her as a subversive force against dominant narratives and a catalyst for fostering intercultural understanding.

Therefore, Nassir and Nora contrast sharply with Fatima and Portia, presenting an alternative narrative that encourages a more nuanced and balanced engagement with cultural differences. From her marginal position, Nora embodies resistance to her parents' prejudices by embracing love as a means of opposing their rejection of Matussem. Similarly, Nassir's education and insight empower him to challenge Fatima's monolithic worldview, positioning him as a counterbalance to reductive discourses. Nassir's role in the narrative extends beyond assisting Jemorah in resolving her identity struggles. He acts as a counterpoint to Farah, Jemorah's suitor, who represents the patriarchal expectations of a segment of Arab society, insisting that his future wife possess domestic skills such as cooking, cleaning, and

refinishing floors (61). In contrast, Nassir represents a synthesis of his Arab heritage and Western education, rejecting the stereotypical image of Arab men while refusing to idealise the cultural framework. His character exemplifies a critical and balanced approach to cultural hybridity, embodying the potential for transformative intercultural engagement.

In concluding this section, Abu-Jaber resists simplistic dichotomies, juxtaposing hybrid and essentialised identities to highlight the complex dynamics of intercultural interaction, including racial essentialism, assimilation, and cultural pluralism. Rather than endorsing wholesale rejection or assimilation, she envisions an alternative mode of intercultural engagement rooted in the fluid interchange of subject positions and diverse worldviews. In the novel's final chapter, the United States shifts from an inherently hostile environment for Arabs to a more accommodating space that embraces cultural diversity. Abu-Jaber underscores the inseparability of essentialist and assimilationist narratives as components of broader cultural discourses, while simultaneously challenging constructs such as racial superiority, nationalism, and the fear of the unknown other. Her portrayal fosters a stance of critical interculturality, wherein characters recognise how difference can be harnessed for ethically and morally informed purposes. As Fadda-Conrey (2011) observes, assimilation and racialisation are "equally harmful", presenting Arab Americans with only two reductive choices in negotiating their public and communal identities (537). While Abu-Jaber focuses on the intercultural dynamics between Arab immigrants and their American host society, Darraj extends this exploration, delving into the gendered lineage of Arab migrant communities to unpack the challenges inherent in these interactions. Together, their works deepen the discourse on interculturality, emphasising its intricacies and transformative potential.

5- *The Inheritance of Exile*: The mothers' extending touch

Foregrounding two contrasting perspectives on intercultural relationships, Darraj's (2007) *The Inheritance of Exile* interrogates cultural narratives within the immigrant community, crafting localised accounts that unravel the generational tensions between immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. While the daughters pursue full assimilation and integration into American society, their mothers steadfastly cling to the traditions and values of their native homeland. Darraj structures her narrative as a collection of interconnected stories, each chronicling the lives of four young female protagonists—Nadia, Aliyah, Hanan, and Reema—who navigate the complexities of adapting to life in South Philadelphia. The narrative alternates between the perspectives of the daughters and their mothers, shifting between first and third-person viewpoints to highlight the interwoven relationships of individual and collective experiences. The opening story centres on Nadia and her mother, who must rely on each other following the death of Nadia's father. The second story introduces Aliyah, a journalist and creative writer whose decision to expose her family's private stories strains her relationship with her father. In the third story, Hanan's narrative explores the challenges of assimilation as she identifies exclusively as American and experiences conflict with her family after becoming pregnant out of wedlock by John, an American man. Although Hanan marries John, her mother dismisses the union with the fatalistic remark,

"oil and water don't mix" (79). The final story focuses on Reema, a "collector of stories" and PhD student researching the integration of immigrant children into American society (180). Through this multifaceted narrative structure, Darraj illuminates the generational and cultural tensions that define the immigrant experience, setting the stage for a deeper examination of the complex interplay between identity, belonging, and cultural inheritance.

As their stories unfold, the daughters must endure the tribulations that result from the deeply ingrained values of Arab female ancestry that they inherit but oppose. Interestingly, while the majority of similar narratives focus on the patriarchal traditions of Arab societies, Darraj highlights the role of women in acting this role. The role of the grandmother, symbolising continuity and tradition, transcends both time and space, acting as a bridge between past and present. This is evident in the mothers' positions, as they maintain and pass on cultural values, offering a stabilising force in the face of generational and cultural shifts. The grandmother's influence reinforces the traditional frameworks within which the mothers operate, highlighting the persistence of cultural identity across time, despite the changing dynamics of the broader society. Nadia's mother always involves her grandmother, and significantly, not her father or grandfather when she refers to Arab values. This vision seems to extend to Nadia who perceives her grandmother as an icon for everything right: "My grandmother arrived in my dream the same night she died – she flew in quietly and settled into the brightest corner of my mind" (3). Here, the grandmother serves as a connection thread through the three female generations and as the vector that introduces the constant tension it brings throughout the novel. For these young women, Philadelphia is therefore to be constantly pulled to an elsewhere, an imagined home existing far away in space and time, but that is also the syncretic cultural ethos, the fusion of Arab with American values.

The Palestinian American identity in Darraj's narrative emerges from a distinct historical and cultural context, deeply rooted in the displacement and diasporic experiences of Palestinians. This literary portrayal captures the intergenerational struggles of identity negotiation, where the weight of historical dispossession intersects with the challenges of assimilation and cultural preservation in the United States. The daughters and their mothers navigate a dual sense of belonging—anchored in the collective memory of Palestine as a homeland and reshaped by the cultural landscape of American society. The narrative intricately explores themes of exile, resilience, and the quest for selfhood, reflecting how Palestinian American identity is shaped by inherited displacement and the lived realities of negotiating a bicultural existence. These representations underscore the tension between maintaining cultural heritage and adapting to evolving socio-political contexts, offering a profound framework to examine the complexities of interculturality. Struggling with her sense of belonging, Hanan reflects on her mother's persistent reminders of their origins: "She wanted me to remember where I came from, but how could I do that when I never felt like I belonged there in the first place? America was all I knew, but to her, it was always a place of exile, never home" (84). This internal monologue underscores Hanan's struggle to reconcile her American upbringing with her mother's nostalgic longing for Palestine, highlighting the generational and cultural tensions inherent in their relationship.

The daughters of Palestinian immigrants in South Philadelphia encounter the profound challenge of balancing their Arab heritage with their American experiences. Darraj enriches these narratives by incorporating the perspectives of their mothers, illuminating the often-strained relationships between first-generation immigrants and their American-born children. The daughters inhabit a bifurcated world, shaped by the competing values of their mothers' traditional customs and cultural practices and the exclusionary norms of an American society rooted in racial and cultural superiority. This clash creates a complex space of negotiation, where identity formation is both a struggle and an opportunity for redefinition. Reflecting on her mother's advice, Sahira recalls: "My mother always told me that a woman's reputation is like glass—once it's shattered, it can never be repaired. She said this so many times that I began to feel that every step I took outside our home was a risk, every interaction a potential crack in that fragile surface" (94). Sahira's mother's insistence on the fragility of reputation underscores her deep adherence to cultural traditions and her profound fear of societal judgment, highlighting the generational and cultural tensions that shape the daughters' experiences.

This analysis integrates gender as a critical lens, arguing that the imagined portrayals of gender relations among both subordinated and dominant groups serve to justify and perpetuate lived racist and patriarchal practices. Darraj reconfigures the intersection of gender and cultural narratives, engaging with a recurring and increasingly prominent motif in Arab American women's literature: the assignment of women as custodians of cultural preservation. While traditional narratives often attribute this conservative role to men, Darraj challenges this convention by placing Arab women at the centre of cultural continuity, thereby exposing the flawed stereotype of an inherently patriarchal Arab system. However, Darraj complicates this depiction by positioning both the mothers and, to a lesser extent, their daughters in similarly strained and unresolved circumstances regarding intercultural interactions. While the mothers adhere to traditional cultural frameworks, the daughters, caught between these expectations and their American surroundings, face a comparable sense of conflict and alienation. The mothers, in particular, adopt a static view of culture that reinforces essentialist conceptions of identity and subtly perpetuates a patriarchal vision of the homeland. Strikingly, this stance, which male characters might traditionally voice, is instead articulated by women, positioning them as both victims and enforcers of cultural values within their ethnic community and the American host society. This duality allows Darraj to critique patriarchal discourse from within Arab culture while simultaneously challenging the community's fear-driven attitudes toward cultural preservation. For instance, Hanan's mother exemplifies this deeply ingrained fear, cautioning her daughter: "We have to always be scared, Hanan" (112). This enduring sense of fear is portrayed as a hallmark of Arab female genealogy. Such an analysis resonates with Salaita's observation that in *The Inheritance of Exile*, "one sensibility that binds all the women is a focus on safety" (74). Darraj thus unearths the complexities of cultural preservation and gendered agency, illustrating how women navigate, uphold, and, at times, subvert cultural narratives within the fraught space of intercultural exchange.

The generational conflict between immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters is starkly intensified through the experiences of Reema and Nadya, both of whom struggle with competing

expectations. Reema resonantly recalls her mother's disturbing response when she expressed her desire to study art: "When I told her I wanted to study art, she stared at me like I'd just confessed a crime. 'Art doesn't put food on the table,' she said, 'and it won't get you a husband'" (177). This reaction highlights the tension between Reema's aspirations for creative self-expression and her mother's pragmatic concerns rooted in survival and marriage. Similarly, Nadya reflects on her mother's traditional expectations: "My mother used to say, 'A good daughter knows her place.' I think she meant in the kitchen, behind the stove. I wanted to be anywhere but there" (67). Nadya's desire to break free from these conventional gender roles underscores the broader resistance among the daughters to the restrictive cultural norms imposed by their mothers. These reflections illuminate the deep intergenerational clash over values and identity, with the daughters striving to forge more autonomous, modern paths, while their mothers cling to traditional, survival-oriented perspectives.

In this manner, the novel portrays a fluid stance of interculturality marking the elusive conditions of Arab migrant women on material, symbolic, and narrative levels. The narrative further unfolds by contrasting two perspectives: how fully Arab immigrants will integrate into their new homes, and the impact this will have on the host community. This state of entanglement fuses a sense of belonging that is conflated into the construction of a polysemic space, the Western modernised metropolis, and the stratified layers of history signified in the cultural narratives of the mothers. While the young women's stories are set in the present and centre on their current experiences in the United States, their mothers' narratives are rooted in the past, focusing on their memories and reflections of life before and during their immigration. Hanan's disorientation, for example, emerges from her mother's stories about historical Arab-Western conflicts. Those stories, according to Hanan, draw a "dividing line between Arabs and Americans, who faced off against each other like boxing opponents" (87). Hanan's mother's stories are a significant part of why she hates being an Arab. For her, they are like a "ghost haunting a house" (87). She often withdraws to her bedroom to avoid her mother's stories where she can reflect on her identity, and "when she finally felt safe in her fortified room, she decided she was not an Arab" (81). Eventually, she leaves her parents' house because her bedroom no longer provides her enough self-sufficiency: "Should she think about moving out, getting her own place? Maybe that was the jumpstart she needed, to become independent; maybe a small apartment in University City" (88).

Hanan's struggle with belonging persists even after she moves out of her parents' home, as she continues to carry the weight of her Arab heritage and the collective memory of her ancestors. This connection is evident in her admission: "If she did leave, she would miss these oddly distant, but richly familiar moments with him [her father], with this house, even with mama" (79). Despite this lingering attachment, Hanan outwardly projects a sense of self-discovery and fulfilment after establishing her own household and embarking on the seemingly idyllic life she envisioned with her husband. She expresses her determination "to stamp every room in the new house with my impression, to mark it for myself" (118) and envisions her new home as "[her] own island, in our small house in University City far from... Mama and Baba" (119). Leaving her parents' home thus symbolises Hanan's effort to assert a self-fashioned identity as exclusively American, characterised by a deliberate attempt to sever ties with her

past. This separation is particularly aimed at her mother, whom Hanan perceives as the embodiment of the 'repugnant Arabness' she seeks to reject. Her departure signifies a complex negotiation of identity, marked by an aspiration for independence and cultural redefinition, yet shadowed by the inescapable influence of her familial and cultural roots.

However, Darraj highlights the inescapability of Hanan's Arab heritage, demonstrating the limitations of her attempts to fully adopt an American identity while severing ties with her ethnic roots. Despite her attempts to celebrate her Americanness and sever ties with her Arab lineage, Hanan continues to grapple with prejudice and the inevitability of being identified as ethnic. During a dinner hosted by an American professor, Hanan responds to a question about her origins by stating she is from Tasker, Philadelphia (140). Unconvinced by her answer, the professor reframes the question to inquire about her Middle Eastern heritage, prompting her to reluctantly admit her Palestinian origins. This uncomfortable encounter culminates in a stringent reprimand from her husband, John, underscoring the tension between cultural expectations and personal desires. Hanan's ethnicity also becomes a point of tension with John's parents, who insist on referring to her as "ethnic" (125). Similarly, when introduced to her husband's friends, the first question posed to her is, "Where from the Middle East do you come from?" (141). These recurring microaggressions and cultural misunderstandings contribute to the eventual dissolution of Hanan's marriage. As a single mother raising her child, Hanan's experience exemplifies the challenges faced by individuals who view intermarriage as "an index of assimilation into the larger host society" (Kulczycki and Lobo 2005, 459). Hanan's failed marriage, therefore, underscores the complex interplay between cultural identity and relational dynamics. While cultural differences are not the sole cause of her marital breakdown, they exacerbate broader issues, including conflicts with in-laws, divergent visions of the future, and a lack of mutual trust. Salaita (2011) argues that these challenges are not due to "unbridgeable cultural differences" but arise from how those differences influence other fundamental issues (76). Ultimately, rather than advocating for the rejection or assimilation of cultural differences, Darraj—and by extension, Salaita—focuses on the dynamics of negotiating and managing these differences within intercultural relationships.

Darraj skilfully employs art as a reflective discourse to examine intercultural encounters, using Aliyah's creative writing endeavour as a case study. Aliyah's initial foray into storytelling elicits contrasting responses from her father and an American editor, exposing tensions between cultural expectations and artistic expression. While the editor commends the authenticity and originality of her narrative, her father reacts with disapproval, asserting: "You are supposed to be a writer, no? And a writer uses her imagination to create characters and … situations. Right or wrong?" (57). When Aliyah affirms this, he critiques her work further, stating: "So where is your imagination in this story? You create nothing. You only take an embarrassing family story and tell it to the world, like those Home Funniest Videos" (57). This reaction reflects the father's adherence to Arab familial traditions, particularly the importance of safeguarding the extended family's reputation by keeping personal matters private. Aliyah's defence—that her uncle, portrayed in the story as an alcoholic, cannot read English and therefore would remain unaware of her portrayal—highlights her intended American audience, underscoring the

generational and cultural gap in their perceptions of artistic representation. The incident illuminates the divergent ways in which the two generations engage with cultural values, particularly concerning the portrayal of potentially incriminating aspects of Arab traditions. It also sheds light on a broader pattern among some Arab American writers, who, as noted earlier, navigate the complex terrain of crafting narratives that resonate with American audiences. This often comes at the potential cost of perpetuating stereotypes or exposing sensitive cultural practices, reflecting a tension between artistic recognition and cultural preservation.

The other young female characters, to varying degrees, undergo similar tensions primarily brought on by their mothers' differing perspectives on their senses of cultural values. For example, Reema's mother is outraged when her daughter tells her to rip her jeans at the thigh: "Is it wrong for us to want our girls to look respectable, and not like they live on the streets?" (58). Additionally, Aliyah's mother warns her daughter: "If she ever put a second earring hole in her ears, I would cut them off and leave her deaf" (58). Therefore, the language of cultural values for the daughters necessarily spans both the present and the past since they live in two spaces: that of their mothers' stories, and that of their yearning to become part of the US community. Such iterations are inscribed in the larger discourses of the Arab American community and its external and endogenous negotiations of cultural values (Cariello 2016, 78). For the Arab migrant community in the US, the discourse of interculturality seems to be constructed inside these two versions of cultural narratives: on the one hand, the narrative of the past, which turns out to become a legacy (or a burden), is set against the argument that it unfolds. Conversely, it would be impossible to erase the differences passed down to and ingrained in the younger generations.

Darraj's nuanced approach to cultural narratives embodies a self-reflective critique that challenges essentialist ethnic narratives while resisting total assimilation into the host community. Through this lens, women of both generations navigate the complexities of belonging, testing the boundaries and possibilities of hybrid identities. Ultimately, the daughters come to acknowledge the impossibility of complete assimilation into American society, as exemplified by their poignant realisation: "We're different, and that's it. They tell us we're not Americans and, sure, we listen to the music and drink the coffee […] we're just different, and that's OK" (74). This recognition underscores Darraj's message: to achieve inclusion, the younger generation must embrace their differences rather than erase them.

By offering a nuanced critique of American citizenship and belonging, Darraj subverts racialised American narratives while simultaneously challenging the patriarchal authority's claims over Arab ethnic identity. She critiques preservationist narratives that rigidly define the Arab self in opposition to the American Other, positioning interculturality as a means to critique both intra- and interethnic discourses of preservationism, exclusion, and assimilation. Notably, Darraj's critique of preservationist narratives shifts focus away from stereotypical portrayals of male-dominated patriarchal authority. Instead, she foregrounds the role of maternal figures—mothers and grandmothers—as cultural custodians, aligning them with Fadda-Conrey's (2014) conception of women as "bearers of culture" and "carriers of tradition" (39). However, while these maternal figures act as bulwarks against cultural transgression, their strict control intensifies the generational divide, leaving their daughters grappling with conflicting identities.

Unlike their mothers, who are firmly anchored in a singular cultural framework, the daughters traverse the emotional terrain of interculturality, resulting in profound feelings of disorientation and rootlessness. Darraj thus illuminates the double-edged nature of cultural preservation and adaptation, offering a poignant commentary on the intricate dynamics of identity in intercultural spaces.

6- Conclusions: The transformative power of interculturality

Drawing on the above analysis, it is essential to conceptualise interculturality as a dynamic, transformative process that reshapes individual identities and interrogates broader cultural narratives. According to Welsch (1999), interculturality transcends the mere coexistence of cultures, instead fostering a transgressive space where diverse cultural elements interact, overlap, and give rise to hybrid transcultural identities (194-196). This transformative process is critical for understanding the protagonists in both novels, who experience identity not as a fixed essence but as a negotiated product of cultural multiplicities and interaction. Through these encounters, the characters navigate and reconstruct notions of belonging and self, revealing that interculturality operates as an ongoing dialogic negotiation rather than a fixed reconciliation of cultural differences. In both novels, this process disrupts static national and ethnic identities, guiding the protagonists toward a redefined sense of self that transcends rigid categorisations of being either Arab or American.

In *Arabian Jazz,* Abu-Jaber illustrates how interculturality disrupts binary frameworks of cultural identity. Through Jemorah and Melvina's experiences, the novel depicts characters caught between the demands of an Arab Jordanian tradition and American individualism, yet neither sister fully adheres to one side. In a pivotal scene, Jemorah confronts her aunt, who represents traditional Arab cultural expectations, questioning their relevance in her life as an Arab American woman. This moment represents an intercultural encounter that resists aligning with binary paradigms of "compatibility" and "incompatibility" cultural narratives. Jemorah's ambivalence and resistance highlight an intercultural tension that disrupts these binaries, embodying a more fluid and nuanced negotiation of identity. The scene illustrates interculturality as a force that transforms identity from a binary choice into a spectrum of possibilities (Wolfgang 1999, 53), as Jemorah reclaims elements of her Arab heritage in a way that harmonises with her American context. Furthermore, after her personal crisis of trying to assimilate to American values fully, Jemorah begins to reconnect with her Arab roots through her father's cultural practices. She visits her father's native home, Jordan, symbolising her connection to her Arab identity, yet her experience is anything but simple nostalgia. Jemorah grapples with the differences between her aunt's adherence to Arab tradition and her own transformative identity. She appreciates aspects of her heritage but also recognises the tension between her aunt's rigid cultural expectations and her American upbringing. These occurrences illustrate how Matussem's daughters, representing the younger generation of Arab immigrants to the US, navigate between two cultural worlds to form a more complex, hybrid identity that transcends binary cultural narratives.

Abu-Jaber's approach avoids the urge to prematurely close out the competing voices of her characters by either oversimplifying their situations or controlling their worldviews. Instead, she

scrutinises their multiple subject positions by adopting an honest voice that reflects the world as it is. Therefore, rather than erasing the diverse subject positions held by her characters, she attributes to each character the freedom to express their own voice and make individual choices. At the same time, however, she examines the intersections between their voices, creating a space for alternative narratives to emerge—narratives that occupy what Bhabha (1994, 3) defines as the 'third space', where cultural identities are negotiated and reimagined. She invokes the notion of jazz both literally and metaphorically to unpack the divergent dimensions of such an evolving narrative. As a result, jazz becomes an evolutionary space that transcends the dialectic perceptions and articulations of difference. In addition to Matussem, whose reconciliation comes through intermixing jazz music, the duality of Melvina's and Jemorah's background allows them to make their own rules in life away from such clashing narratives. According to Giro (1995), jazz music itself serves as a metaphor for the complex cultural hybridisation that mirrors the diverse American immigrant experience (34).

Similarly, in *The Inheritance of Exile*, Darraj's characters confront interculturality in ways that subvert nationalist narratives and underscore the nuanced, non-binary nature of their cultural negotiations. In portraying mothers and daughters with conflicting understandings of their Palestinian heritage, Darraj illustrates how interculturality manifests across generations, resisting simplistic interpretations of compatibility or incompatibility with American culture. In a key scene, a Palestinian mother (Noura) attempts to teach her daughter (Ranya) about traditional values and expectations, only to encounter the daughter's resistance and reinterpretation of these values through an American lens. The daughter's response is marked by a hybrid approach, integrating her mother's heritage into a self-concept that aligns with her American life. Here, interculturality enables the daughter to navigate between her Palestinian heritage and American identity, crafting a unique cultural synthesis that defies binary categorisations. Ranya's encounters with her American peers at school further exemplify the "complexity of interculturality" (Fred 2014). Pressured to conform to American ideals of individualism and self-reliance, which contrast with her mother's collectivist values, she carves out a personal space merging these influences. She learns to appreciate family while asserting her independence, illustrating how interculturality allows her to develop a multi-layered identity blending Palestinian and American selves. As Noura reflects on her relationship with Palestinian culture, she realises her identity has evolved through her migration to America. Admitting to her daughter that, while clinging to certain traditions, she feels alienated from the homeland she left behind creates a crucial moment. Unexpectedly, the mother acknowledges her hybridised, continually reshaped identity by her American experience. Her evolution underscores how interculturality is both a generational and personal process, illustrating how the mother's hybrid identity mirrors the daughter's challenges in negotiating her place between two cultures.

Nonetheless, given these stark contrasts and anxieties between the two female generations, Darraj employs intercultural interactions, traversing only on the boundaries of cultures where the chain of one-dimensional cultural narratives is destabilised. For example, configuring her identity as always an Arab American, Aliyah emphatically presses the hyphen of her hybrid identity: "There was a hyphen there, connecting the things that created me" (Darraj 87). Such a double gaze offers a critical performance of

interculturality, providing immunity against the tension arising from essentialist narratives of exclusion and assimilation. This result aligns with Salam's assertion that *The Inheritance of Exile* features "complex and nuanced female characters who self-evaluate their positions as Arab Americans, crossing the boundaries and cultural barriers" (34). They "refuse to be culturally pigeonholed and prefer cross-cultural and transnational articulations" (62). Therefore, this mileage not only safeguards individuals of diverse worldviews to avoid confrontation but also renders the perceived fears of the other questionable. Hanan cannot "understand this mysterious dividing line between Arab and American, who faced off against each other in her mother's mind like boxing opponents" (Darraj 87).

The role of the hyphen in Arab American identity also connects to broader concepts of cultural hybridity and the ongoing negotiation of belonging. As Tölölyan (1991) notes in his discussion of the Armenian diaspora, the hyphen in terms like "Arab-American" serves as a critical marker of cultural negotiation, marking the intersections of diverse cultural influences (4). This hyphen emphasises the hybrid nature of identity, resisting essentialist or exclusionary discourses while opening up possibilities for fluid and diverse self-conceptions. Stuart Hall's (1990) exploration of cultural identity further underscores the importance of recognising the historical and political dimensions of identity formation, particularly within diasporic contexts (393). Hall suggests that identity is not a fixed, essential truth but a process shaped by cultural encounters and the interplay of multiple historical forces.

In examining the dynamics of cultural assimilation and exclusion, Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism is crucial in understanding the tension between the dominant Western cultural narratives and the marginalised experiences of Arab American characters (45). Said's analysis of how the West constructs the East as the "other" provides an important framework for understanding the complexities of identity in the diaspora, as characters in both novels grapple with how their identities are constructed in relation to external forces of exclusion and assimilation. Bauman's (2013) work on globalisation also adds to this understanding, showing how individuals navigate the contradictions of belonging to multiple, often conflicting, cultural worlds in the context of global movement (99). Similarly, Vertovec's (1999) exploration of migrant transnationalism highlights how cultural hybridity results from complex interactions between individuals' homelands and their host societies (452). These theorists contribute to a broader understanding of how identity is continuously negotiated and redefined in the context of migration, emphasising the dynamic nature of intercultural encounters. Furthermore, the critique of binary cultural frameworks is also central to understanding the complexities of cultural hybridity in both novels.

Gilroy's (1993) *The Black Atlantic* provides a further pivotal framework for understanding how cultural identities are constructed across national boundaries, particularly within diasporic contexts (51). His concept of "double consciousness" aligns closely with the experiences of the characters in both novels, who grapple with navigating and reconciling multiple, often conflicting, cultural identities. In *Arabian Jazz*, Jemorah and Melvina embody this tension as they oscillate between the expectations of their Arab heritage and the individualism of American culture, reflecting Gilroy's notion of an identity shaped by continuous negotiation and ambivalence. Similarly, in *The Inheritance of Exile*, Darraj's characters illustrate the complexities of dual cultural allegiances, as they strive to balance their Palestinian

heritage with the demands of their American environment. Gilroy's argument encapsulates the fluidity and hybridity of their identities, emphasising the broader diasporic struggle to navigate and redefine belonging and selfhood within intersecting cultural frameworks.

Abu-Jaber and Darraj illustrate how interculturality functions as a continuous, transformative experience that challenges fixed cultural identities and problematises nationalist narratives of singular cultural allegiance. By portraying characters inhabiting liminal spaces of cultural hybridity (Bhabha 1994), they suggest that identity is not a static allegiance to one culture but a dynamic process of intercultural negotiation. For them, interculturality becomes a transformative and destabilising force by allowing characters to construct identities that encapsulate the complexities of their intercultural experiences. They share common strategies by materialising the dynamics that challenge cultural narratives, creating characters who inhabit elliptical spaces between cultures—shaped by both yet confined by neither. In doing so, they methodologically, thematically, and conceptually complicate the narratives of assimilation and exclusion while unveiling the forces that stand between Arabs and Americans.

Ultimately, both authors suggest a stance of interculturality as a dynamic process of cultural negotiation, rejecting fixed categorisations in favour of fluid, relational interactions. Unlike diaspora, which centres on displacement and nostalgia, interculturality emphasises the ongoing renegotiation of identities within evolving cultural contexts (Zapata-Barrero 2017, 7). They discursively weave together inherited traditions and American socio-cultural norms, embodying the self-critical and relational essence of interculturality in a way that challenges and reshapes conventional understandings of identity and belonging. However, this framework can complicate analyses tied to fixed paradigms (Phipps and Gonzalez 2004, 22) and may overlook power asymmetries that marginalise Arab American voices. Despite these challenges, both authors critique notions of cultural purity and exclusivity, using characters like Fatima and Portia to challenge traditional ideas of nationalism and belonging. In doing so, they advance a transformative vision of interculturality as an evolving, pluralistic process rooted in self-critique and the negotiation of identity and citizenship.

في مواجهة السَّرديات القوميّة الحضارية: خطاب التداخل الثقافي في روايتي *(موسيقى الجاز العربي)* لدينا أبو جابر ورواية *(ميراث المنفى)* لسوزان دراج

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الملخص

تتسم القيم الحضاريّة المعاصرة بالسيولة والديناميكيّة والالتقاء، متحديةً العنف المعرفيَ القائم على السرديّة القوميّة ذات الأطر القارّة والصارمة التي تتعارض معَ الطفرة المستمرة للحراك البشري الفاعل والخلّاق، إذ تتناول هذه الدراسة أُنموذجين من السرديات الحضاريّة: سرديّة التوافق والانصهار الحضاري، وسرديّة الإقصاء الحضاري التي تستقي أطرها الفكريّة من نظرية صراع الحضارات، حيث فشلت هاتان السرديتان في تجسيد الواقع الحضاري المعاصر، إذ تختطُ الرواية العربيّة الأمريكيّة طريقاً ثالثاً لا يتوافق تماماً مع سرديّة كلٍّ من التوافق الحضاري المنفتح على الآخر دون قيود أو حدود، وسرديّة الصراع الحضاري المتصادم مع قيم الآخر ووجوده، وتبحث الدراسة في الرؤية السرديّة للكاتبتين دينا أبو جابر في روايتها *(موسيقى الجاز العربي)*، وسوزان دراج في روايتها *(ميراث المنفى)*، وتقف على تجسيد الروايتين للتفاعل الحضاري وتحديهما للسرديات الانعزاليّة للقوميّة الصارمة، وتخلص الدراسة إلى أنّ هذين النصين الروائيين يقومان على إعادة تشكيل مفاهيم المواطنة والانتماء باعتبارها مفاهيم سائلة دائمة التحول، وتؤكد الدراسة على الدعوات المستمرة لتعزيز الطبيعة الديناميكيّة للتعدديّة الثقافيّة القائمة على التفاعلات المتزايدة بين الحضارات.

الكلمات المفتاحية الأدب العربي الأمريكي، التفاعل الحضاري، السرديات الحضاريّة، المواطنة، الانتماء.

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