

# Re-Shaping Arab American Cultural Identity in Diaspora in Ward's "How We Are Bound" and Darraj's "The New World"

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*ABSTRACT* This paper explores two short stories written by two Arab American women writers who expose the varied experiences and reactions of Arab Americans in diaspora. Patricia Ward's "How We Are Bound" (1996) and Susan Darraj's "The New World" (2004) are two stories that show how challenges such as assimilation, generational differences, cultural diversity, and identity questioning are depicted and met by the Arab American communities. These challenges are approached by relying on Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, as a theoretical framework. This paper argues that the experiences and issues of Arab immigrants varied from one ethnic community to another-Lebanese American and Palestinian American-yet they shared the struggles of adapting and embracing a new shape identity due to their need to survive and live in peace.

*KEYWORDS* Arab-American immigrants, diaspora, assimilation, alienation, cultural diversity, identity crisis

## INTRODUCTION

The Arab diaspora in the United States of America includes many Arab immigrants who left their homelands for different reasons. The reasons for their immigration varied from searching for a better life and financial opportunities to being forced to abandon their homeland due to wars and critical political circumstances. The first wave of immigrants included Christian Lebanese immigrants, who were able to adapt easily in America.

Arabs immigrated to the United States in many waves. The Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians are the largest group among Arab immigrants. The history of Arab's immigration to the United States, according to Tanyss Ludescher, dates back to the Nineteenth century. The first wave of Arab immigrants to the United States ranges from 1880 until 1924. It included Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians who were identified as Turks because of the domination of the Ottoman Empire. Unskilled and often illiterate, those immigrants who identified themselves as Syrian traveled all around the state and worked as itinerant peddlers. Because of this lifestyle which provided a good chance to assimilate and learn English language, these immigrants "enthusiastically embraced American values" (93).

Ludescher mentions that the second wave of immigration began after World War II. Unlike the first wave which included illiterate Christians, the second wave included a group of educated, and skilled professional Muslims who identified themselves as Arab. This group included Palestinian refugees who became stateless after the Arab-Israeli War in 1948. The third wave of immigration began in 1967 and continues to this day. Some major events in this period like the Lebanese Civil War in the 1970s and 1980s and new immigration laws that established the end of a quota system participated in the production of a further flood of refugees. This wave included Palestinians and Lebanese Muslims from Southern Lebanon fled after the 1967 war with Israel and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian. Those people were highly politicized. According to Ludescher, “for the first time, Arab American organizations were formed to defend the Arab point of view and to combat negative stereotypes of Arabs in the popular press” (94).

As a result, some Arab immigrants started writing to reflect their new experience in diaspora. Among them were an important literary group called Al- Mahjar which refers to the works produced by immigrants in North and South America. While The Southern America branch was centered in Brazil and presented traditional and conservative features, the Northern American which included writers like Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani and Mikhail Naimy, focused on, according to Ludescher, “the desperate need to escape the mundane materialism of the peddler lifestyle; . . . a desire for reform in the Arab world; acute concern about international politics and the political survival of the homeland; an obsessive interest in East/West relations; and a desire to play the role of cultural intermediary” (97).

Diaspora writers were interested in discussing social and political experiences of immigrants. In America, Arab American literature started to flourish in the 1800s. From the beginning of this process of writing, the writers faced many problems. Being a diverse and heterogeneous community, Arab American’s identity was the first problem that faced Arab American writers. Hall argues that “the question of identity is very problematic” (*Questions of Cultural Identity*, 20) which is something that Arab Americans like any other minority struggled with. This community included different people from different Arab countries and religions, in addition to the various dialects of Arabic. Other problems were related to the publishing houses and the content of their writing since the writers were considered minorities.

Regardless of the difficulties, the growth of Arab American literature was motivated by two factors. According to Ludescher, “[t]he first was the search for voices outside the traditional canon of Anglo-American male literature [ and] The second factor, like

so many things in the Arab American community, was political" (106). The political issue plays an important role in the works of Arab American writers who have produced valuable works that reveal the real daily experiences of Arab immigrants in the states. The writers try to depict the multi-dimensional difficulties and reactions of Arab immigrants toward the social and political circumstances before and after 9/11. According to Abinader, "Arab Americans were among the first immigrant writers to organize and to be recognized as a literary force by the broad U.S. literary community" (11).

Some of those writers who depict the real experience of Arab Americans are the Lebanese American Patricia Ward, and the Palestinian American Susan Darraj. These female Arab American writers deal with different issues related to Arab Americans. They show the connection between the conditions in the Arab world, and the role of the political crises and wars in the migration of many people to the United States. They also depict how Arab immigrants varied in their ability of assimilation with the new life in America and how this ability is governed by the motivation of migration as well as the desire of understanding the real situation.

Ward, for example, portrays the role of the civil war in Lebanon, especially that which extended from 1975 to 1990, in the life of Lebanese immigrants. Lebanon is known as a country that has the highest number of immigrants who moved to the United States. According to Salaita this war "involved Sunni Muslims and Maronite Christians. Many of the Sunni Muslims combatants were Palestinians, who compose a large underclass in Lebanon" (*Modern Arab American Fiction*, 11). Similarly, Darraj depicts the Israeli-Palestinian war as a prominent factor in the Palestinians' immigration. Unlike the Lebanese, Palestinian immigrants have a stronger desire of assimilation because of the existing colonialism and the need for peaceful survival.

#### PATRICIA WARD'S "HOW WE ARE BOUND" AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Ward in "How We Are Bound" portrays the experience of assimilation of two Lebanese families. According to Abdelhady, assimilation "refers to the ways members of an immigrant community became absorbed by the dominant society through various mechanisms such as language absorption, socioeconomic mobility, and intermarriage" (18). According to the reactions of the immigrants, in the selected stories, after settling in the United States, they may be classified into four types of acculturation. These types, as Berry et al. argue, are "assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization" (309).

The four types of acculturation are very clear in the characters of “How We Are Bound”. Madelaine, Amin, and their daughter Shereen live in the same house with Adel and his wife, Zeina. This group reacts differently towards the new life in America. According to Berry et al., the ability of acculturation is measured by the interaction between “five domains of life: cultural traditions, language, marriage, social activities, and friends” (309). The behavior of Amin and Zeina during the fourteen years they spent in America shows their strong desire to adapt to the American life and culture. Zeina is absorbed by cultural values of the new life of America. Her assimilation is revealed through her actions in America and thoughts of her homeland. For her, living in America is better than staying in Lebanon where the war destroys everything. When Shereen is lost, Zeina adapts herself to a position that shows how she is highly Americanized. Zeina refuses Madelaine’s attitudes toward Shereen’s disappearance. Zeina asserts that Madelaine is overreacting and she “crushes that girl” (Ward, 70) since “she [Shereen] is twenty years old” (Ward, 70). Zeina assumes that Shereen “has a boyfriend [since] That is what happens in America” (Ward, 76) and that explains why she disappeared. Zeina, as well, adapts to the material life along with the social values and concepts. Like his wife, Adel believes that America is the place where he and Zeina have to be.

Adel is integrated into the new life. He works in a Bakery where he meets different people. Like his wife, Adel is so materialistic “(in America, this is how it is)” (Ward, 67). The couple pretends to know everything while knowing nothing. They never think of going back to Lebanon since Adel declares that he “has no country” (Ward, 77) to go back to, while Zeina announces her refusal by saying, “What? Go back to that shithole?” (Ward, 76). Both Adel and Zeina represent Arab Americans who, according to Orfalea, want to be “100 percent American and changed their names and their religions even. They wanted to arrive socially, politically, [and] professionally” (139).

On the other hand, Amin has a different point of view toward everything around him. He does not accept the way American people behave with him as an Arab, like the behavior of the American lady who bought things from the bakery. Amin is not satisfied in his new American life. He addresses Zeina saying “I had my life there [in Lebanon] ... You think I appreciate becoming someone who sells bread? I was an *accountant*” (Ward, 77). At the same time, he tries to get involved in the new lifestyle. When Madelaine was so frightened because of her daughter’s absence, Amin says “Don’t worry. This is America. You worry too much” (Ward, 69).

Amin is stuck between two worlds. As he is living in America, he keeps comparing things with those in his homeland, Lebanon. While he is searching for his daughter, he notices the streets and the behavior of the drivers. When a man shouted 'Asshole' (Ward 71). Amin asserts that "In Beirut you would have been shot," (Ward, 71). Amin also notices the way people dress. He notices how Jenny "was wearing cut-off jeans and that there was a large mole on her thigh. Shereen [his daughter] would not wear shorts, at least not that short" (Ward, 72).

The representation of Arab American experience is very realistic in Ward's story. She depicts Madelaine's isolation and marginalization in the diaspora. Madelaine is very depressed and tortured. The memories of her homeland keep haunting her. She is very passive in her actions and reactions toward everything in America. She never accepts anything new, not even the apartment where she lives. She asserts that "[t]he smell of this apartment was offensive . . . no matter how much she washed the floors with lemon-scent soap, the American odor remained" (Ward, 68). This shows her rejection of America; as a result, she remains lonely without any social relationships.

Ward's use of food as a literary device is very important in immigrant fiction. Madelaine tries to get over the sense of displacement by remembering the Lebanese food. The tabbouleh reminds her of Shereen and of the time they passed together in Lebanon. Adel and Amin also sell "Arabic bread, molasses, tahini, black olives, and falafel mix" (Ward, 68). Mentioning Arabic food serves as a bridge between the new country and the country of origin. It also connects the immigrants to their heritage and their ethnic essence.

Ward also sheds light on the generational differences. Madelaine who represents the first generation immigrants has no desire of assimilation. Her inability to speak English keeps her alienated from the new social circles. She has no desire to learn the language or to communicate with people in America because she still has the hope of going back to Lebanon. Madelaine's inability of assimilation can be culturally clarified; Edward Said refers to the cross-cultural voyage as a reason for the confusion that immigrants pass through. He asserts that:

"[T]he question of 'traveling theories,' suggesting the idea that travel generates a complex system of cultural representation that depends not on power but on motion and willingness to go into different worlds, use different languages, and understand multiplicity of disguise, masks, and rhetoric." (qtd. in El-Aswad, 235)."

Shereen, as a second generation, is the opposite of her mother. According to Salaita, the second generation “replaces Arabic with English, traditions with individualism, and working –class origins with upward mobility” (*Arab American Literary Fictions*, 62). Shereen assimilates to the new life and culture. She attends college, makes new friends and finds a job to keep in touch and blend in with the society around her. Her separation from her family shows her desire to achieve her goals in the new life.

The ability of the characters to assimilate varies even between the members of the same family. Sometimes this variation is controlled by the motivation of migration which has two categories; voluntary and obligatory, by force. Both categories threaten the identity of immigrants. Obligatory migration is based on the political circumstances in homelands like the Lebanese civil war in “How We Are Bound”.

Madelaine’s inability to cope with the new life is a result of the forced migration. The Lebanese civil war created a sense of insecurity among the citizens; as a result, many of them were forced to leave the country. According to Timotijevic and Breakwell, the forced migration “is often related to a previous traumatic experience (induced by a catastrophic change in the migrants immediate physical or social environment), no prior decision to move, and hence, through the lack of choice, no real control over life events” (358).

Madelaine finds herself in a different place that has a different culture. She tries to go over her feeling of nostalgia by remembering the old days in her homeland. Knowing that she will not go back home and having the desire of doing so make her live alienated with inner conflicts. She tries to escape the sense of displacement and alienation by remembering the happy times in her homeland. She:

“[L]et in the nostalgia with rush of anxiety like a door gliding open: the summer *sabhiyyehs* [mornings] in Zghorta [in Lebanon] with the sounds of water running from the taps and the laughter of women cooking, the cool stone walls of Byblos; the blinding white pavements of the beach complexes in Jounieh.” (Ward, 70-1)”

The sense of loss and displacement haunts Amin as well. He feels sickness for missing his home because of the uncomfortable circumstances that forced him to leave after fourteen years of war, but at the same time he feels nostalgic towards homeland. According to Friedman “homesickness . . . is a cryptogram; the word opens up into opposites: sick for home and sick of home” (191). Amin “had mixed all his keys from Lebanon with those that were American, to prove that one place is like any other, one key just like the next” (Ward, 73). Both Amin and Madelaine live in what Homi Bhabha

calls "the third space". According to Bhabha the third space, "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originally past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People" (*The Location of Culture*, 54).

The decision of the couple is always changing. Once Amin decides to go back to Lebanon, Madelaine, who feels depression from living in America, tells Amin "[w]hat's wrong with you? . . . How can we go now?" (Ward, 78). This reaction of Madelaine is the result of her realization of the truth about their real circumstances and of their real need to live in America where they are bound. They are bound there by their circumstances back home in Lebanon. As a result, this confusion creates an inner conflict in Madelaine who states that "I am rotting with remembrances like garbage" (Ward, 70). The identity of Madelaine and her husband may be considered as Hall states, "Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses" ("Ethnicity: Identity and Differences," 10).

The experience of migration varied from one ethnic group to another. The Lebanese immigrants suffer from alienation and unsuccessful assimilation. Madelaine's life in diaspora is controlled by her hope of going back. She never tries to adapt to the new life in America. On the other hand, Adel and Zeina want to be Americans and want to fit themselves in the melting pot. They see the United States as the land of dreams that has so much yet to offer.

Unlike her mother, Shereen wants to be herself. She left her family to start a new life that helps her in accomplishing her goals. She learns English, attends college, and makes friendships with American people. She survives by assimilating with the American culture and lifestyle.

#### SUSAN DARRAJ: MEETING "THE NEW WORLD" IN DIASPORA

The desire for assimilation is also clear in Siham's character in Darraj's "The New World". The story is about an Arab American, Nader, who returns back to Palestine obviously in search of a bride, who turns out to be Siham. After they get married they fly to the United States and begin a new journey abroad. Siham struggles to learn English so she begins English classes until she "practiced her English like a religion" (Darraj, 4). She adapts to the new cultural aspects or as her husband, Nader, calls 'cul-

tural things'. She gets familiar with the shapes of the streets, parks, apartments and even more with the personal relations. Siham and Nader, as Palestinian immigrants, realize the truth of their inescapable situation in America. The difficult social and political circumstances in Palestine make the couple realize their need to assimilate. The experience of Siham and Nader as Palestinians is different from the experience of the Lebanese immigrants in Ward's story. Hall mentions some factors that contribute to distinguish between the varied experiences of immigrants. According to Hall, "there is very considerable variation, both of commitment and of practice, between and within different communities – between different nationalities and linguistic groups, within religious faiths, between men and women, and across the generations" ("Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural," 220).

The motivation to immigrate for Siham and her husband, Nader, is obligatory because of the Israeli occupation in Palestine. Unlike Madelaine and Amin, both Siham and Nader are eager to assimilate with the new culture. From the beginning, Siham considers that getting married to Nader is the opportunity of her life. Even though "it was a risk, to marry a man who had spent so much time in America, but a lot of girls in Palestine did it ... to try their lives and their luck across the ocean" (Darraj, 13). As many Palestinians, Siham considers moving to America as the dream of her life. As a result, she starts adapting to the new culture excitedly.

From the beginning of her journey into the new world, Siham deals with certain things differently. Unlike Madelaine's understanding of Arabic food, Siham considers such cultural things in a deep way. Darraj uses things like food and the blue eye (a charm believed to ward off evil) to go beyond expressing the sense of loss. For example, when she first moved to the apartment she'd "immediately set about sprinkling charisma on each wall" (Darraj, 7). For Siham, they are not used only as traditional things from homeland, but to explore the idea of desiring safety and stability in the new life.

She starts learning everything about the new world where she is going to live. She notices the way the Americans call each other in formal and informal situations. Nader tells her "Habibti [my love], in America, that's what they do. These telephone people, they don't use 'Mr. and Mrs.' anymore. You well get used to these little cultural things" (Darraj, 5). She also starts exploring her neighborhood by walking in the streets exploring how buildings are arranged. While she notices the numbers and the names of the streets and buildings, she unintentionally compares them with buildings in her homeland.

The Italian Market, where she lives, reminds her of "the Old City quarter of Jerusalem" (Darraj, 5). She remembers the men yelling to sell their products and how

they, unlike those in America, feel insulted if women do not make a bargain with them. Adding to that, she notices the trees and how their leaves are different from those in her homeland. Siham is eager to share this new experience with her family in Palestine. She mails her sister some leaves and describes Halloween to her. In order to increase her sense of ability in the American society, she starts listening to English music like the jazz music, and the songs of 'Miles Davis in an effort "to be infinitely more American" (Darraj, 10).

The cultural diversity continues in the life of Siham. Since she is seeking stability, she accepts the fact that Nader was married to an American girl before to get the American green card. Moreover, Siham uses her embroidery skills to gain money by which she can support her husband. The conditions of cultural clash and identity crisis that Siham lives in are described by T.S. Eliot as follows:

"[The immigrants] have transplanted themselves according to some social, religious, economic or political determination, or some peculiar mixture of these . . . the people have taken with them only a part of the total culture . . . the culture which develops on the new soil must therefore be bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture. It will be complicated sometimes by whatever relations are established with some native race and further by immigration from other than the original source. In this way, peculiar types of culture – sympathy and culture clash appear. (qtd. in Hall and Gay, 54)"

Nader also faces some of these cultural diversities in his homeland. When Nader sees Siham for the first time, he follows her to the café she entered. Moreover, he allows himself to sit with her on the same table and order coffee for himself, with "an imperious wave of his hand. The other men in the café stared at them curiously, stopping their conversations to see who was this Amerkani sitting with the eldest daughter of doctor Abdallah al – Medani" (Darraj, 6-7). Living in America, Nader seems to forget some cultural aspects of his homeland as he is stuck between two cultures and therefore unable to draw cultural boundaries. Bahbha asserts that:

"[cultural] 'difference' is not so much a reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the tablets of a "fixed" tradition as it is a complex ongoing negotiation – against authorities, amongst minorities: the "right" to signify concerns, not so much the teleologies of tradition as much as its powers of iteration, its forms of displacement and relocation, its ability to signify symbolic and social relations outside of the mimetic transmission of cultural contents. ("Frontlines/Borderposts," 270)"

Moreover, Nader asks Siham to go shopping with him in the Palestinian market, neglecting the fact the cultural difference as inappropriate behavior in Palestine. His

dressing style is different from Palestinian people. He wears a” pleated trousers, linen blazer and shiny, lace-up shoes” (Darraj, 6). Nader’s hybrid character, according to Bhabha, has constructed his “culture from the national text translated into modern Western forms of information technology, language, [and] dress” (“The Commitment to Theory,” 55). He has engulfed himself into a bi-cultural fold shedding the old with the new. Nader had begun a new stage of his life when he previously got married to an American woman in order to gain the green card. The action shows his desire for settling in America once he landed his feet on the American soil as he started adapting to the new language, lifestyle, and dressing.

#### A CLOSING NOTE

Despite the diversity of Arab American immigrants, there are more common grounds than differences. The need to survive and live in peace, and maybe to start over and look for a better life, are important motifs in their journeys away from their homelands. The desire for assimilation and fitting in a new lifestyle and culture is a result of the characters’ realization that there is no going back to neither Lebanon nor Palestine. Desiring peaceful lives, Arab American immigrants are willing to reconstruct their cultural identities and perspectives towards life despite homesickness, cultural barriers, and alienation in diaspora. Both stories by Ward and Darraj explored representations of the immigrant experiences and conflicts that made resilience more possible with the will to succeed and zest for life away from home.

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