The Confines and Freedoms of Female Identity in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*

Ashley Diedrich
Department of English
Northern Illinois University
1425 West Lincoln Highway, DeKalb, Illinois 60115, USA
Email: adiedrich2018@gmail.com

Abstract:

Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) takes place in Euclid, New York, a town which remains "virtually the same as it had been one hundred years ago" (Abu-Jaber 1993, 88), filled with "dirt farmers, onion farmers, and junk dealers" (90). The Ramouds, an Arabian American family, move to town, attempting a fresh start after the death of Nora, the wife and mother. Their ethnic background and middle-class status make them stand out within the "white-trash town," which "produced poorly clothed and poorly fed children" (90). Within this environment, some characters, regardless of gender, culture, or economic status, struggle with the confines of their understood identities. The Ramoud sisters, Jemorah and Melvina, and the Ott sisters, Peachy and Dolores, act as foils to one another, emphasizing the unbalanced reality for these women in society. While many critics detail the hardships faced by Jemorah and Melvina because of their dual Arabic and American backgrounds, this duality and their middle-class status allow them to form their own identities and make their own rules in life. Unfortunately, many of the white women in the text feel trapped by their poverty and by a white trash label, which limits and stifles their life choices and opportunities.

Keywords: Abu-Jaber, Class, Oppression, White Identity, Women's Fiction

Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) takes place in Euclid, New York, a town which remains "virtually the same as it had been one hundred years ago" (Abu-Jaber 1993, 88), filled with "dirt farmers, onion farmers, and junk dealers" (90) and surrounded by "ancient trailers . . . disintegrating into rust and red tears" (311), "scrap heaps," "car graveyards, and sewers" (176). The Ramouds, an Arabian American family, move to town, attempting a fresh start after the death of Nora, the wife and mother. Their ethnic background and middle-class status make them stand out within the "white-trash town," which "produced poorly clothed and poorly fed children," who attempt to leave town but usually only get "far enough for them to come back for good" (90). Within this environment, a number of the characters, regardless of gender, culture, or economic status, struggle with the confines of their understood identities. The Ramoud sisters, Jemorah and Melvina, and the Ott sisters, Peachy and Dolores, act as foils to one another, emphasizing the unbalanced reality for these women in society. Even though many critics detail the hardships faced by Jemorah

and Melvina because of their dual Arabic and American backgrounds, this duality, along with their middle-class status, allows them to form their own identities and make their own rules in life. Unfortunately, many of the white women in the text, such as Peachy and Dolores, feel trapped by their poverty and by a white trash label, which limits and stifles their life choices and opportunities. Being aware of "human suffering and the deep inequalities that generate dreadfully undemocratic and unethical contradictions for many people" (Giroux 2015, 276) allows society to "challenge, rather than support or ignore, the assumptions and inequities perpetuated by the dominant culture in favor of a narrow and privilege portion of society," ideally bringing forth social transformation (Brady 2008, 2).

Since two of the main characters in the text straddle two worlds, Arabic and American, it is not surprising that the literary criticism about *Arabian Jazz* often focuses on identity. Mazen Naous stresses the connection between the improvisation and interweaving nature of jazz music with the presence of "two cultures, two families, two identities, and especially two languages" (2009, 61) which require the creating and intertwining of individual and collective identities. According to Hind El-Hajj and Sirene Harb, gendered and ethnic memory aids "in shaping Arab American women's identity," allowing these women "to fight silencing and oppression" and to establish stronger connections to their background and community (2011, 138). In addition, Pauline Kaldas argues that Abu-Jaber's use of humor allows her to slowly chip away at stereotypes and showcase real individuals "in the midst of personal and cultural struggles" (2006, 184) as they try to understand themselves and their place in the world. Lastly, Michelle Hartman claims that Abu-Jaber employs specific symbols to "represent black America" and invokes African American music, which offer other possibilities for the construction of Arab American identities (2006, 146).

Scholarship on *Arabian Jazz* also addresses issues pertaining to gender. Nayef Ali Al-Joulan explains that *Arabian Jazz* "offers a hybridized feminist vision," which critiques patriarchal social beliefs of both Arabs and Americans (2010, 70). According to Salwa Essayah Cherif, Abu-Jaber "investigate[s] the interconnectedness of the past and the present in the making of the Arab American female self," allowing a space for self-invention for Arab American women (2003, 208). In addition, Ibis Gómez-Vega claims Abu-Jaber "works with the cultural imperative that girls must get married but wickedly employs Greek myths, fairy tales, and American popular culture to deconstruct the traditional marriage story," providing opportunities for her female characters to properly establish themselves as Arab American women (2016, 134).

While criticism predominately focuses on the two female Arab-American protagonists, few scholars discuss the plight of white women in the novel. Al-Joulan is the exception, arguing that Abu-Jaber's "portrayal of different perceptions of issues of sexuality, body, morality, marriage, and children comes through the varied types of Arab and American women in the novel, creating dialogue within and across cultures" (2010, 73). When addressing American women, Al-Joulan focuses on Dolores and Peachy Otts, "who suffer as much as Arabs" (78).

She claims they "adopt the patriarchal culture's anti-feminist stereotypes" (73) and "suffer from poverty, lack of education, . . . and gender oppression" (78). Dolores, especially, "enable[s] [her] own oppression through [her] fear, weakness, and ignorance" (74). No less than the critical readings focused on the struggles of Arab-American female characters, Al-Joulan's discussion of white women's oppression emphasizes the limitations of all women in patriarchal culture.

In *Arabian Jazz*, Jemorah and Melvina face oppression due to their Arabic background. On the bus to school, the other children taunt "Jem because of her strange name, her darker skin" (Abu-Jaber 1993, 92). They continuously search "for her weakness, the chink that would let them into her strangeness," while they "tore out a handful of her hair . . . pushed her down as she stood to leave . . . raked scratches across her face and neck as she stood" (92-93). As time passes, Jem recognizes that "'people see color first'" (194). Portia, Jem's boss at the hospital, wants to "'scrub all the scum [Arabic] right out of'" her to make her "'pure and whole'" (295) because she is "'tainted'" (294). Adding further insult, Portia claims that Jem's father is not "'any better than Negros,'" which will cause him to "'be stuck in that same job in the basement for the rest of his life'" (294). Not long after, the whole family must deal with a pair of hikers invited to picnic with them, who question if the Ramouds are "'I-talians? Wet-backs?'" and stare at them with "amusement and disgust" when they find out that the Ramouds are Arab (361). Jem struggles the most with these incidents, which prompt her to believe "'it's not enough to be born here [America], or to live here, or speak the language. You've got to *seem* right'" (328). She eventually points out that she has "'started to see better'" and understands that she does not "'fit in'" because Americans "'don't like Arabs'" (327-328).

In addition to racial issues, both sisters struggle with oppressive gender expectations because of traditional Arabic customs. After the death of his wife, Matussem raises the girls alone with occasional assistance from his sister, Fatima, who emphasizes the need for both women to be conventional Arabic good girls because "a good girl does not leave her home. Does not go out in public, speak to a man, show her ankles, talk back to her parents, go to school, live alone" (289-290). However, the sisters must "'marry the handsome Arab boys and makes for us grandsons'" (77) soon because if they reach the age of thirty "'without a contracted male, [they will] be diagnosed as terminal spinster[s]'" (9). So, even though it drives both Jemorah and Melvina crazy, Fatima continues to push both women to "'wear a little bit Maybelline'" (52) and reminds them "'a little tanning booth is all it needs'" to help make them more desirable to potential husbands (53).

Throughout the novel, class oppression also affects people in Euclid. Janet Zandy defines class as "an experience of shared economic circumstances and shared social and cultural practices in relation to positions of power" (1996, 8). She further claims that "each of us is born into a family with a particular class identity and class history" (9), a "kind of inheritance we carry with us as individuals" (8). Don Slater adds that "it is partially through the use of goods and services that we formulate social identities and display these identities" (1997, 31). In addition, Annette Kuhn states that "class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being" (1995, 98). Typically, people "fall into poverty not out of laziness or

stupidity but because of the structure of the economy or the indifference of the majority" (Marsh 2011, 615-616). Regardless, class relations "determine life-chances" (Reay 2005, 924) and are "deeply embedded in everyday interactions, in institutional processes, in struggles over identity, validity, self-worth and integrity even when it is not acknowledged" (Payne 909).

In the novel, Jemorah and Melvina come from a middle-class upbringing. Prior to moving to Euclid, their father works, while their mother remains at home with the girls, indicating that the family could survive on one salary. After Nora's death, Matuseem moves the family to a "sprawling" (Abu-Jaber 1993, 86) home, where "every May since their move to the country, their father went through fits of exuberance, driving to the local hardware store and bringing home lawn decorations" (107). In Euclid, Matussem manages the local hospital's maintenance department, but he also finds the time to play the drums in The Big Band Sound of Mat Ramoud and the Ramoudettes, a jazz band that he started that plays local gigs. Beyond their father, both Ramoud sisters received college educations and both have employment. Melvina is a nurse, and Jemorah works at the hospital in inpatient billing.

While Jemorah and Melvina have a conventional lifestyle, Dolores and Peachy come from a poverty-stricken background where both gender and class oppression trap them both in their current circumstances and plays a key role in shaping their lives. The "relentless" sisters "run wild" (92) and come from "one of the 'bad' families" in Euclid (33). Their mother, Hilma, spends her time at the Key West Bar, while wearing her usual "down jacket and nightgown" with her hair "pulled . . . tightly into curlers" (103). With their "sharp and blank" faces, "branded with grime" (92), the poor children of Euclid, a community filled with "silence" and the "afterglow of abandonment" (100), either drop out of school, get "pregnant, went to juvenile homes, foster homes, penitentiaries, turned up poverty-stricken, welfare-broken, sick, crazy, or drunk" (93). Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz claim being "incestuous and sexually promiscuous, violent, alcoholic, lazy, and stupid" (1997, 2) are stereotypes of poor whites, who, according to Nancy Isenberg, are "stigmatized for their inability to be productive, to own property, or to produce healthy and upwardly mobile children" (2017, xxvii). Unfortunately, this defines Dolores and Peachy, who does not even know how to read.

Even though her Arabic and American backgrounds prove challenging at times, Melvina's stance in both worlds and her middle-class status offer her more opportunities to pave her own way in life, leading her to identify herself, not by a man, a child, or a race, but through a career as a nurse. Even though her family believes she should marry and settle down, focused and "fierce" (Abu-Jaber 1993, 21) Melvina is quick to point out she does not "'need a husband'" (45) because she has "little use for men as a general rule" (283) and she has "'too many other concerns to attend to'" (223). When offered a marriage proposal by Larry Fasco, she claims she would "'rather swing from a vine'" (351). Instead, starting from a young age, Melvina focuses on "making herself into that woman [a nurse]" (12). She begins "playing nurse when she was three, bandaging her older sister in dish towels" (133) and starts attending community college nursing courses at her elementary school by sitting "in the back of the room and pass[ing] herself off as somebody's daughter" (36). Melvina even

takes "an accelerated course in nursing just after high school . . . to become an R.N. as fast as humanly possible" (133). Melvina's dedication to her career results in being "made a team leader after only a year on the job, and head nurse the year after that" because her supervisors saw that "she was 'all nurse'" (13). The hospital staff and hospital community "knew and respected her and honored her commands" (179). Even her relationship with Larry stems from her need to "dutifully" (286) help "keep him alive as long as she could" (287) by suppling and administering methadone due to a habit "introduced by way of muscle relaxants after an injury in 'Nam" (285). According to Gómez-Vega, "Melvina is so identified with her profession that, on her day off from school, she wears 'spotless white slacks and white blouse, more or less identical to those she wore to work'" (2007, 30). She is "both Arab and American, but she identifies with neither side of her ethnic divide. Instead, she defines herself by the one identity that she herself chooses, her work as a nurse" (30).

While Melvina quickly recognizes and progresses forward with her educational and career goals at a young age, young Peachy embodies the stereotypes and limitations of being poor white trash. Educational inequalities and deficient family backgrounds "lock poor children into lives of poverty" (Marsh 2011, 621), where they feel like "their descent into poverty as something that is beyond their control" (Hill 2007, 86). They fail to recognize that "they are caught up in circumstances originating much earlier that set the course toward increasing poverty," and "they are at a loss as to what to do" (86-87). "Barefoot" with "hair sticking out like a busy doormat" (Abu-Jaber 1993, 90) and "a smell . . . like dill pickles" (210), Peachy first appears when the Ramouds move to town. She quickly shares that her family is "white trash," and that "no one ever escapes" the "white-trash town" of Euclid, emphasizing her understanding of her place within society (90). Even though she continuously gets "throttled" by her mother "when she [is] up to no good" (89), young Peachy "leer[s]" at the other kids on the bus and "spit[s] in their faces," acting like a "permanent child-god of destruction" (92). Supporting the white trash stereotype, Peachy does not see any escape from "the things that . . . [her] brother Joe" does to her when she gets "home first from school" (176). She admits to Jemorah that her brother "pushed her down in the bedroom, stopped her mouth with a hand that smelled like axle grease, and sweated and groaned his face into the pit of her neck" (92). Because she is uneducated and unprotected by a drunken mother, Peachy is subjected to abuse by one of her family members. She is, effectively, defenseless against that kind of familial oppression, and this leads to her becoming "a repeating ninth-grader," who is quickly picked up by the police, for an undisclosed reason, while riding the bus to school one day (94). Her "face was squeezed past recognition in rage and fear as they carried her out" (94). Shortly after, Peachy "never return[s] to school" (94), and the school bus no longer stops at "the shacks and trailers," implying that "the school had forgotten those children," like Peachy, "were even there" (93).

Unlike Melvina's success as she gets older, the limitations of Peachy's life, the result of poverty and her poor white trash label, follow her into adulthood. According to Gregory Mantsios, class oppression significantly impacts the physical and mental well-being of individuals (2001, 313). As she gets older, she remains within the confines of her pre-determined label, "sleeping anywhere and

going off with anyone" (Abu-Jaber 1993, 346), knowing that there is little she can do to change things. On occasion, she works at Onondaga Orchards, "a big produce stand up the road," which requires no high school degree and offers no future career options (95). However, she seems to be "at home among the vegetables" with her dirty skin and her "vacant" eyes, "sweet and dull as molasses" (95). When Melvina tries to help Peachy continue her education, to try to make a new identity, Peachy claims that she is "'stupid and teachers hate me'" and argues that she only learned "'stuff like how to make fat noises on [her] arm'" (209). Her reason to avoid further education becomes clear when the Ramoud sisters discover that Peachy cannot read, which prompts her to "grab the [college application], crumple it up," and throw "it down on the table" (210). Lower and working classes are "the most vulnerable" and "made to bear the greatest psychological burdens of an unequal society" (Reay 2005, 924), where individuals feel "undeserving, unentitled, . . . [and] incapable of 'getting it right'" (Kuhn 1995, 98). By the conclusion, unlike Melvina, who acts like an adult from the age of two, Peachy's life seems stalled, trapping her in a continued state of childhood, where she will remain "'a goofy devil-child,'" waiting for her life to start through "'more smarts'" or "'hav[ing] a kid like herself'" (Abu-Jaber 1993, 95).

While Melvina disregards issues pertaining to her ethnic background and forges ahead in the nursing field, Jemorah struggles initially to understand who she is, but she eventually understands that her duality, which causes her so much frustration, actually offers more options to create who she wants to be. She begins the novel employed at the hospital and single as she nears her thirtieth birthday. After leaving college without a plan, Jem takes the position "out of necessity" (4) but finds herself "jealous of people who liked their jobs" (133). She eventually realizes "she would have to do something herself to change her life," so she plans "to quit her job" (133) and get "a new start" (330). This decision helps solidify a plan to attend graduate school, which would not allow her to "hide in Euclid and disappear" because "she wanted *more*" and "would *not* let herself vanish" (299). It is her own struggle with her identity that prompts her to study psychology, which will help her understand herself and others. Also, Jemorah becomes empowered by breaking from traditional gender norms, especially Arabic expectations. Year after year, Jem waited, "but the desire to marry, to love a man passionately . . . didn't come" (11). Eventually, she reencounters a past crush, Ricky Ellis, and "she knew she wanted him" (222). But when he extends a marriage proposal to her, Jemorah says "'no,'" opting for the possibilities of graduate school instead (371). According to Gómez-Vega, Jemorah "finally learns to see marriage as a way to hide from the life that she should be living" (2016, 144). In the end, Jemorah understands that she is "'torn in two'" by her Arabic and American backgrounds, but she gets "'two looks at a world,'" allowing her to "'see far more than most ever do,'" impacting her ability to understand, and even create, her own identity (Abu-Jaber 1993, 330).

Unlike Jemorah, Dolores, whose "'name is Latin for 'sorrow'" (172), finds herself confined by restricted life choices due to poverty and a white trash status. Iris Young stresses that "there are five dimensions of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism

and violence" (1990, 9). Class oppression prompts feelings of "guilt, shame, resentment and defensiveness" (Sayers 2005, 201-202), as well as "envy, deference, contempt, arrogance, pride, rage, satisfaction, embarrassment and pity" (Reay 2005, 913). At the age of twelve, "swollen with pregnancy," Dolores stays home and stands "at the windows of the Otts's house, waving to the bus she should have been riding" (Abu-Jaber 1993, 182-183). While Jem decides to focus on her education instead of a man, Dolores, who is intelligent in her own right and could "read something or hear it on TV and get every word in her head," over the years, "turn[s] herself over so many times to that damn man, *that damn man* being many men, forty, maybe fifty, or even a hundred" (101), and "nearly every one put a baby in her" (102). Before she even turns thirty, Dolores finds herself "look[ing] haggard as old warriors, harrowed by poverty and pregnancy" (95). Unlike Jemorah's comfortable family home, Dolores lives in a trailer home, "a barnyard" (103), where "the kids slept on old sofa cushions and bus seats," "they cooked on a Sterno camp stove" (104), and "all she could hear or see or smell was babies, on and on, forever" (170). Surrounded by "tin walls," Dolores struggles with "animals with bottomless eyes and slots of mouths, just eating and shitting," and each new baby "suck[s] the life right out of Dolores's body" (104). Diane Reay adds that the "petty mundane humiliations and slights of social class" (917) lead to "resentment and antagonism . . . time and time again" (2005, 915). She often reprimands herself for thinking too much, knowing it only gets her "closer to things than she really needed to be, the kind of things that made her crazy" (Abu-Jaber 1993, 101). During these moments, she questions "when her life would begin" because "she hadn't seen any signs of it yet" (101).

Because of her established identity, the only real control Dolores wields in her life is the choice to live or die. When fearing yet another pregnancy, she takes "a hanger out of the closet and start[s] to unbend it" (102). Then, she "gently, even tenderly" guided the wire "between her legs" (104). Dolores recognizes that maybe the home abortion "would kill her," but "it seemed like she was looking at that in either direction. One way she'd be in charge, the other way would be in the hands of a red, bawling baby" (103). For her, death appears as an escape from her life, filled with "late welfare checks, . . . broken TVs, . . . babies," where "nothing changed" (171). Her brief reprieve at the hospital, which is "so different from her life in Euclid, where everything detracted from the pure pleasure of watching one show after another, straight through the days" (171), fails to detract Dolores from believing that "things didn't get better until you died" (102). Even though Melvina thinks that Dolores has "her whole life ahead of her" (83), Dolores does not fear death and hopes to "climb to the top of that field, no matter how [her children] cried and clung to her skirts" to "stand where she could look at the trailer and at Euclid and lay it all down. So she could step out of that body of hers at last, the heavy flesh, the teeth, the hair, lay it aside and go free" (271). Her only regret "would be leaving her sister Peachy behind, the only one of them all she could spare a thought for" (270). While Jem plans to attend school, which will likely lead to an eventual career, Dolores meets her end by lighting her trailer, filled with "stacks of magazines" and "collected towers of garbage" (275), on fire, embodying the idea "*live by garbage, die by garbage*"

(175). As a working-class female, Dolores feels worthless, which "leads to the emotional paralysis that defines her life" and her eventual death (Gómez-Vega 2003, 112).

Allusions to the biblical figure Lazarus further emphasize Jemorah and Dolores as literary foils, depicting freedoms for Jemorah and limits for Dolores. In the New Testament, Jesus goes to Bethany "'to awaken'" (New Revised Standard Version, John. 11.7) Lazarus, who died from sickness and "had already been in the tomb for four days" (John. 11.17). Upon arriving at the tomb, Jesus asks for the stone to be removed from the entrance, and then, he calls for Lazarus to "'come out'" (John. 11.38). Moments later, Lazarus is resurrected, and he leaves the tomb with "his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth" (John. 11.38). After "yelling at her boss, fleeing the office, and calling in sick for almost two weeks," Jem feels like she is emerging from a figurative tomb, "like she was Lazarus, still wearing the death rags" (Abu-Jaber 1993, 310). While Lazarus comes back to life, Jem plans to return to work to officially quit, allowing her a second chance at life by going back to school and by choosing her own path. On the other hand, Dolores comes back after a botched abortion, but she understands that "she was Lazarus, brought back to life . . . just long enough to see her death coming" (270). Unlike the figurative death of Jemorah's old life, Dolores recognizes that she must go back to the "newspapers, rags, the boxes of takeout food, the spools of thread" (311) and "the field around their place . . . piled up with diapers, plastic disposables, each with a nest of baby shit" (101). She consciously gets "involved in dying" (172) because she knows "nothing really mattered anymore" (173). She comprehends that her life, filled with poverty and white trash stereotypes, will never change. In the end, Dolores "could see her death out there, in the fields, waiting" (175).

The Ramoud sisters and the Ott sisters take, or are forced to take, very diverse paths throughout their lives because of their differing backgrounds. This is emphasized through Abu-Jaber's use of the two sets of sisters, Melvina/Peachy and Jemorah/Dolores, as foils. Jemorah's and Melvina's lives show countless possibilities and opportunities, allowing them to choose education and careers over traditional gender expectations involving men and children. Poverty and class oppression, however, trap Peachy and Dolores in a world with few, if any, future prospects in education or the work force, and Dolores ends her misery through suicide. Abu-Jaber's Arabic background allows her to speak convincingly for Jemorah and Melvina and the identity issues they face, providing a voice for women with dueling ethnic backgrounds who struggle to understand their place in Arab American society. Interestingly, Abu-Jaber chooses to depict white women who are burdened by poverty and ignorance, and she positions them as foils to the two Arab American sisters whose lives appear to be the main focus of the novel. Peachy and Dolores, minor characters in the novel, face oppression created by their class status. In this sense, Abu-Jaber draws attention to women from another marginalized group, the poor, and offers them a voice to break and change stereotypes.

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