Cultural Identity and Home in Randa Jarrar's a Map of Home

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Abstract
As an estranged Egyptian, Palestinian, and Kuwaiti, Randa Jarrar had a tough upbringing. In her novel, the protagonist 'Nidali' somewhat reflects her life. Nidali was smart for her age, rebellious, studious, and curious and like any other kid, she longed for a place she can call home forever. Yet, that was complicated due to the recurrent move and the not-so normal life. Like Randa Jarrar, Nidali struggled to keep her cultural identity intact. This paper applies a qualitative data analysis based on textual analysis where it explores Nidali's sense of difference and rigidity between her cultures and sense of self and constantly being torn apart between her Americaness and Arabness. Is she Arab or American? Is she neither or both? This difference will be examined through Homi Bhabha's concept of "unhomeliness" in which he believes that the first feeling a newcomer gets when encountering a new culture is the sense of "unhomeliness". The latter is generated through the change of places and the fact that home or part of it is missing, and this is how Nidali felt when she started having nightmares in the middle of the night. Moreover, Nidali's experience will be further explored through Edward Relph's "Place and Placelessness" in which he questions the 'taken-for-granted nature' of place and its significance as an unavoidable dimension of human life and experience. Additionally, the complexity of Nidali's migration experience will be manifested from her identity construction through Erik Erikson's "identity crisis".

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Home, Post Colonialism, Migration, Arab American Identity

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Introduction

> Baba said that moving was part of being Palestinian. "Our people carry the homeland in their souls," he would tell me at night as he tucked me in. This was my bedtime story when I was three, four. "You can go wherever you want, but you'll always have it in your heart." I'd think to myself: "That's such a heavy thing to carry."
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> Randa Jarrar, *A Map of Home*

As an estranged Egyptian, Palestinian, and Kuwaiti, Randa Jarrar had a tough upbringing. In her novel, the protagonist 'Nidali' somewhat reflects her life. Nidali was smart for her age, rebellious, studious, and curious and like any other kid, she longed for a place she can call home forever. Yet, that was complicated due to the recurrent move and the not-so normal life. Like Randa Jarrar, Nidali struggled to keep her cultural identity intact because of the long history of colonization and present postcolonial experiences and migration. The latter has tremendously affected the construction of identity and triggered urban and social marginality, which in turn put identity into question and made it more peculiar in terms of its contemporaneity, and being invaded by the outsider, "the other". This otherness within is widely represented through the concept and theory of "hybridity". Hybridity, mestizaje, creolization, and syncretism are terms that have been proposed to refer to processes of cultural and social mixing in postcolonial situations. Furthermore, coming from hybrid cultures and having a hybrid identity, one can doubt their sense of self and feel like they do not belong *neither here nor there*. This paper applies a qualitative data analysis based on textual analysis where it explores Nidali's sense of difference and rigidity between her cultures and sense of self and constantly being torn apart between her Americaness and Arabness. Is she Arab or American? Is she neither or both? This difference will be examined through Homi Bhabha's concept of "unhomeliness" in which he believes that the first feeling a newcomer gets when encountering a new culture is the sense of "unhomeliness". The latter is generated through the change of places and the fact that home or part of it is missing, and this is how Nidali felt when she started having nightmares in the middle of the night. Moreover, Nidali's experience will be further explored through Edward Relph's "Place and Placelessness" in which he questions the 'taken-for-granted nature' of place and its significance as an unavoidable dimension of human life and experience. Additionally, the complexity of Nidali's migration experience will be manifested from her identity construction through Erik Erikson's "identity crisis".

Analysis

Coming from a hybrid culture that was produced by colonization, Nidali's contemporary identity was invaded by the outsider, by the "other". Additionally, she experienced a sense of difference and rigidity between her cultures, but at the same time, gained a new form of hybrid identity. In this regard, Homi K. Bhabha postulates that all culture is characterized by a certain "mixedness" where it merges two worlds into a created political, economic, social and cultural world, which, in turn, co-produces hybrid political orders and allows the international and local worlds to co-exist. Moving from place to place, being banned from entering Palestine, running away from war in Kuwait, and having to start from scratch every time she moves undeniably rendered her confused, distant and caught in between:

> I sat in the balcony, completely bewildered, after she told me the news."I can't move to America", I said. Mama looked at me, waiting for a reason. "I have nothing to wear. And my hair is stupid!" I didn't want to tell her the truth: that I didn't want to

> move again, to work at feeling at home again, to lose that home again, then have to start all over again. (207)

Growing up, Nidali learnt about her name change or alteration, and she was not very pleased. Her father Waheed had hoped for a boy since he had six sisters and lost three brothers. Therefore, at first, the given name was "Nidal" (struggle) then modified to "Nidali" (My stuggle) which made sense since she had almost died at birth "I had almost died, survived, almost died again, and now I was going to live" (3). This sentence in itself is a manifestation of the contested identities of Palestinians who may or may not survive. And if they do survive, their history will be inextricably intertwined with their present and future life. Nonetheless, Bhabha contends that this 'in-between' space carries the burden and meaning of culture, and that is the essence of hybridity. The latter also emphasizes the reciprocity of cultures in the colonial and post-colonial process in expressions of 'syncreticity, cultural synergy, and transculturation':

> It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturation or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. (The Location of Culture, 1994)

In *The Location of Culture*, having recourse to Bhabha's ideas, culture is not a static entity and certainly not an essence that can be fixed in time and space. But rather, culture is fluid and perpetually in motion. It is a melting pot of several diverse elements, which are frequently added and regularly transforming cultural identities. For him, for instance, there is no pure Indianness, Africanness, or Britishness, in this case, no pure Arabness and Americaness that can be grasped, studied, or even returned to. Therefore, this idea of pure uncontaminated culture is somewhat non-existent or a myth. Following this idea, Bhabha believes that the first feeling a newcomer gets when encountering a new culture is the sense of "unhomeliness". This sense of "unhomeliness" is generated through the change of places and the fact that home or part of it is missing, and this is how Nidali felt when she started having dreams in the middle of the night. She didn't know whether she's in Alexandria (Egypt), Kuwait or in Texas. She would wake up to birds chirping and wonder if that was the calm before the storm. But then she would keep reminding herself that she's in America, and that it's the one that attacks people and never gets attacked, she felt safe but guilty for being in a place that does that (218). Additionally, she was very confused and had many questions that it made her miss "a hundred different things from home, and she thought that she was starting to forget what they were and where home really was" (221).

Place and Placelessness (1976) by Canadian geographer Edward Relph, a notorious book that still has an impact today both inside and outside geography in which Relph questions the 'taken-for-granted nature' of place and its significance as an unavoidable dimension of human life and experience. He attests that space is not bare or an isometric plane or a kind of container that holds places. But rather, he argues that in order to study the relationship of space to a more experience-based understanding of place, space has to be examined in terms of how people experience it. Even though he believes that there are endless types and potencies of spatial experience, he outlines a 'heuristic' technique rooted in "a continuum that has direct experience at extreme and abstract thought at the other…" (9). The idea of tackling space through people´s intimate experiences is crucial for the analysis in addition to identifying the modes of spatial experience that he terms 'instinctive, bodily, and immediate,

such as pragmatic space, perceptual space, and existential space'. And other modes that are 'more cerebral, ideal, and intangible, such as planning space, cognitive space, and abstract space'. For instance, existential space— the taken-for-granted environmental and spatial constitution of Nidali's everyday life is constructed through culture and social structure— can be experienced in a highly self-conscious way, for example, when she would feel overwhelmed by the beauty of something and in unself-conscious way where she would just sit there and do the same thing every day without paying attention to her surroundings, such as staying in the library for hours.

Many geographers explored space and place separately or stated their conceptual and existential relation. However, for Relph, 'the unique quality of place is its power to order and to focus human intentions, experiences, and actions spatially'. To further understand the notion of place, one needs to grasp these two modes: Insideness and Outsideness. For Relph, on one hand, being inside a place and being profoundly attached to it makes a person feel safe, unthreatened and his or her identity somewhat gets stronger with that place. On the other hand, being outside a place or alienated from place makes a person feel some sort of separation between themselves and the world. In this regard, Nidali felt both out of place and inside a place depending on the different homes or places she moved to:

> I knew from the beginning that home meant fighting, arguing, and embellishing, and that's why I loved school. School was where my parents were not. Teachers were there; they taught us facts based on reality. They weren't supposed to love us, and they didn't. They were English and cold and didn't resemble us at all. I liked this, that they did not hold a mirror up to me. Like some kids felt about play, school was my true escape. (10)

School was Nidali's home, where she felt safe, less pressured, less attached to her environment and somewhat free. Moreover, she loved poetry more than anything else, but her father wanted her to make his dreams come true, like getting a PhD, being a "renowned" scholar. He saw himself in her, but all she wanted to do was write poetry: "I hated how he created this folklore around himself so that I could never hate him, because the folklore constantly reminded me of how history fucked him (messed him up) and how he just couldn't do a PhD. He couldn't afford to" (240).

Nidali's parents played a huge part in her life. Her mother Ruza was Egyptian, and her father Waheed was Palestinian who was torn apart between who he was and where he belonged. He was forbidden from re-entering Palestine after the 1967 war, and automatically Nidali was prevented from entering Palestine too. Her father never felt like he belonged with his family which made Nidali's life a projection of his own or so he thought. Nidali was similar to her father in some ways, but slightly different in others. She was more eccentric, always seeking knowledge, and doing things her way even if it meant defying her father's rules. And being in America helped her with that. She even learnt about the law and how things were done in order to get away from her strict father and "teach him a lesson" because that's what the cops do. She says: "Cops in America don't like Arabs and they definitely don't like Arabs who hit their daughters and chase them around the house with knives" (249). With that in mind, Nidali's national identity is being constructed and one of the factors is migration since it has become "a force that is both formative and transformative" (Reyes, 110). Yet, the recurrent moves were not voluntary, but rather forced. Therefore, the forced migrants have little to no control over the course of their lives and are uncertain whether they would be accepted anywhere. As historian W. R. Smyser states in his book *Refugees: Extended Exile*: "unsure

whether any country would accept them…powerless to control their future, afraid to return home" (XIV).

Albeit Nidali's future was uncertain, she tried to make a life for herself out of the disparities that conditioned her way of living. However, the emotional conflicts and the countless tough events that were part of the migration experience certainly left their mark:

> How many times had they done this? An old feeling visited my heart, the feeling that I was a dupe. It made me wonder what else I was being deceived about. Did Mama and Baba really love me? Was I safe in the world? Who protected me? And from there, things got worse: Was the world real? Was God real? Was I real? (43)

Being left alone with her brother at home along with the family history frightened her and triggered these questions. In this regard, the interrelation between identity and migration has been expanding since the 1950s when the notorious American-German psychologist Erik Erikson came up with the term "identity crisis". As a migrant himself who left from Europe to the United States, Erikson manifested the complexity of the migration experience from identity construction. In his essay "Autobiographic Notes on the Identity Crisis", Erikson highlights the often disregarded unconscious complexities of identity crisis:

> The crisis is sometimes hardly noticeable and sometimes very much so: in some young people, in some classes, at some periods in history, the identity crisis will be noiseless; in other people, classes, and periods, the crisis will be clearly marked off as a critical period, a kind of "second birth," institutionalized by ceremonial procedure, or intensified by collective strife or individual conflict. (732)

In Nidali's case, the crisis is quite apparent insomuchas it will result in a kind of "second birth". The long family history of war and turmoil together with the stereotypical depiction of Arabs and her American identity that she has yet to discover precede her, exceed her expectations and examine her sense of self. It's worth mentioning that Nidali's birthday coincided the war, and her period came while they were running away in a village in the West called "al-Rahhaliya" which meant "the travelers", but the contrast here is that travelers choose to travel and are not forced to run away. (148)

Another unconscious complexity that Erikson mentions is having a "negative identity" that stems from identity formation: "The negative identity is the sum of all those identifications and identity fragments which the individual had to submerge in himself as undesirable or irreconcilable or by which atypical individuals and marked minorities are made to feel 'different'" (733). That is to say, the residue or negative leftovers of identity formation might be contained in a positive identity. For instance, when Nidali and her family took advantage of the "disaster" and depended on it to reach their destination:

> I drank my coffee in silence and wished mama could read the cup when I was done. I wished she could see a play in it, or a new home, or some sign that I'd make it to the damn exam, or that we'd make it as a family…We followed the ambulance all the way downtown, tailed it leaving only a few hand-lengths between us, the whole time clutching onto our seats for dear life, my family and I, not only following disaster, but chasing it, thankful for it, depending on it to get us where we need to get on time. And it did. (196-197)

Additionally, Erikson claims that identity conflict occurs due to the hidden "panic" permeating a historical period. As a psychologist who dealt with psychoanalysis and the stages of psychosocial development, from infancy to adulthood, he contends that "some periods in history become identity vacua caused by three basic forms of human apprehension: *fears* aroused by new facts, such as discoveries and inventions (including weapons), which radically expand and change the whole world-image; *anxieties* aroused by symbolic dangers vaguely perceived as a consequence of the decay of existing ideologies; and the *dread* of an existential abyss devoid of spiritual meaning." (733) For example, in the novel, Nidali's growing fears and anxieties of having a future that is influenced by her family history, of starting all over again in a foreign country, and of the cultural and religious clash between her Arabness and Americaness.

> I thought of my ancestors going from country to country, and a little silent film played in my head… My father gets on a ship from Jordan to Egypt and finds my mother and they marry. They get on a plane and go to America and beget me. We all get on a plane and go to Kuwait. My child someday will tell this entire story and tack on in the end that I got in a car and fled Kuwait and then boarded a plane to Egypt. I didn't know where my story would end or how many planes, carriages, cars, or ships my offspring and the offspring they beget would go on, only that I hoped in the future travel would be more comfortable, because right then I was sad and dizzy and my goddamned head hurt. (159-160)

Conclusion

To conclude, descending from a history of colonialism and European imperialism, and immersed in a present permeated by Western globalization, both Nidali and her father struggle to preserve their sense of self and home both culturally and spatially. Upon exploring the issues of space and place in "Beyond Culture: Space, Identity, and the Politics of difference", Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson claim that geographical territories that cultures and societies are thought to connect are not necessarily nations. They go on to say that "ethnographic maps" are an example that is believed to showcase the spatial distribution of "peoples, tribes, and cultures". However, "space itself becomes a kind of neutral grid on which cultural difference, historical memory, and societal organization are inscribed. It is in this way that space functions as a central organizing principle in the social sciences at the same time that it disappears from analytical purview". (7) One of the problems that affects one's identity and place is postcoloniality, which puts into question the hybrid cultures and the possibility of creating a "new culture" in both the colonized and the colonizing country. Going back to the novel, Nidali's curiosity about the "map" of Palestine made her father feel emotional and reminded of the ongoing battle between Palestine and Israel. After all, Palestine was once his home and later got lost amidst the never-ending cycle of political conflicts:

> One afternoon I sat at the dining table and drew a map of Palestine from memory. Baba walked by, coffee cup in hand, and said, "You still remember that?"… I pointed at the western border and asked, "Is that right?" "Who knows." He said, waving his hand dismissively… "What do you mean, Baba, when you say 'who knows'?" Oh, *habibti*. That map is from a certain year. The maps that came earlier looked different. And the ones that come after, even more different. "I mean… there is no telling. There is no telling where home starts and where it ends"… When I got up to go back inside, I noticed that Baba's eyes were filled with tears. (192-193)

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