

HOME IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB AMERICAN LITERATURE: RANDA JARRAR'S *A MAP OF HOME*

Esra Öztarhan

Abstract

Theoretical works written on diaspora vary from positive to negative conceptions of homelessness. Some theories defend that lack of home causes constant uneasiness and instability. It is true especially for the migrants with hyphenated identities as they don't know which home they belong to. But according to some other theories although rootedness and homelessness create a sense of lifelong discomfort, this feeling can be positive in some ways for the individuals. This time moving in and out of homes or cultures brings development for the migratory selves. It also creates an aura of freedom and transformation. Arab American writer Randa Jarrar discusses the concept of home in her 2008 novel *A Map of Home*. The protagonist of the novel offers a new dimension to the abovementioned discussions and theories on diaspora by offering her own concept of home. As a diasporic person living between homes and identities, she finds her way home in the novel through a process of awareness consisting of three phases. The first phase is the quest of home as a result of the uneasiness of non-belonging. The second one is the realization and the acceptance of her in betweenness, thus reconciliation with having no home. The third step brings out her celebration of non-belonging to any particular home. Home for Randa Jarrar remains in fluidity and built as a process rather than a place.

Key Words: *Arab American Literature, Randa Jarrar, A Map of Home, Diaspora, İdentity, Home.*

GÜNCEL ARAP AMERİKAN EDEBİYATINDA EV TEMASI: RANDA JARRAR'IN *A MAP OF HOME* ROMANI

Özet

Diaspora üzerine yazılmış kuramsal çalışmalar, evsizlik üzerine olumlu ve olumsuz olmak üzere iki temel bakış açısına sahiptir. Bazı kuramlar evsiz olmanın sürekli bir huzursuzluk ve dengesizlik yarattığını savunurlar. Bu özellikle evi neresi bilmeyen, iki kültüre birden ait olan, kimlikler için geçerlidir. Ama bazı kuramlara göre de köksüzlük ve evsizlik devamlı bir rahatsızlık hissi verse de bireyler için olumlu sonuçlar da doğurabilir. Göçmenler için evler ve kültürler arası gidip gelmek onları geliştirir. Arap Amerikalı yazar Randa Jarrar 2008 tarihinde yazdığı romanı *A Map of Home* 'da ev konusunu tartışır. Romanın kahramanı yukarıda sözü edilen kuramsal ayrılığa kendi tanımını getirerek katkıda bulunur. Sürekli değişen evler ve kimlikler arasında yaşamak zorunda olan kahraman üç aşamalı bir bilinçlenme süreci sonunda evini bulur. Birinci aşama aidiyetsizlik sonucunda ortaya çıkan rahatsızlıkla evini arama sürecidir. İkinci evre kendi arada kalmışlığını yani evsizliğini kabullenme evresidir. Üçüncü evrede ise yazar herhangi bir eve ait olmama durumunu över. Randa Jarrar'a göre ev bir yer değil değişken olabilen bir süreçtir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Arap Amerikan Edebiyatı, Randa Jarrar, A Map of Home, Diaspora, Kimlik, Ev.*

Mohja Kahf, a Syrian American writer and poet in her poem "The Passing There," refers to the poem of Robert Frost "The Road Not Taken". Kahf mentions about the pain of a divided identity, the pain of not belonging anywhere but being in between as an Arab American.

*My brother knows this song:
How we have been running
to leap the gulch between two worlds,*

Each with its claim.

*Impossible for us
to choose one over the other,
and the passing there
makes all the difference. (2006:n.p.)*

The effort to leap the gulch seems like the everlasting dilemma of hyphenated identities. The poet searches for a place to belong, a home to feel safe and comfortable. In the poem it is impossible for an Arab American to choose one culture over the other to belong to.

There is a close link between one's identity, sense of belonging and the concept of home, especially for the hyphenated identities. Belonging and rootedness are significant ways of relating to one's surroundings. But for people who have no place or more than one place to call their home, it is difficult to find a solution like the poet proposes. This paper will focus on a contemporary Arab American writer, Randa Jarrar, and will try to discuss the concept of home in her 2008 novel *A Map of Home*. The protagonist of the novel offers a new dimension to the ongoing discussions and theories on diaspora by offering her own concept of home. As a diasporic person living between homes and identities, she finds her way home in the novel through a process of awareness consisting of three phases. The first phase is the quest of home as a result of the uneasiness of non-belonging. The second one is the realization and the acceptance of her in betweenness, thus reconciliation with having no home. The third step brings out her celebration of non-belonging to any particular home. Home for Randa Jarrar remains in fluidity and built as a process rather than a place.

This process is the change in the perception of diaspora from a negative experience or existence to a positive one. There are two main approaches on the theories about diasporic people's situation in terms of belonging and rootlessness. The first group of thought suggests that being a migrant without a home creates a constant loss and pain for the individual. According to this group of theories, being away from home always has negative connotations. William Safran defines the basic norms of the term diaspora, in his article "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" (1991). He mentions six characteristics for categorizing the common features of diasporic communities. These are: Dispersal from center to periphery, a creation of a collective memory, non-belonging to or indeed non acceptance by the host country, a strong wish to return to the ideal homeland, a belief that the homeland will be peaceful, secure and prosperous and lastly a continuous relationship with the home country and its people (Safran, 1991: 84).

The concept of homelessness for migrant, exilic, deterritorialized, ethnic, transnational or diasporic people is considered as one of the major troubles of existence. Therefore, such people live in a place of uneasiness, instability, as they do not know which home they belong to. Ian Chambers asserts that, "*migrancy is a movement in which neither the points of departure nor arrival is certain*". It is a site of "*constant mutation...always in transit with no promise of homecoming*" (1994: 5). Therefore he talks about an identity construction which is: "*An incomplete journey, no fixed identity or final destination*" (Chambers, 1994: 25). This instability creates a constant uneasiness for the migratory subjects. Moreover it also creates a never ending nostalgia about home and an ambition to reach home, wherever it is.

According to Sara Ahmed, this impossibility of returning to the homeland, results in a lifelong feeling of "*out of space*" (1999:343). As these subjects suffer from a sense of longing to return to their roots, even the act of remembering the past and imagining home is a discomfort. As it is impossible to return, there is no solution to this discomfort, but this feeling also ruins the feeling in the present space they

are in. According to Ahmed, migration is "a process of becoming estranged from that which was inhabited at home" (1999:343). Home is sometimes an obscure land, a utopia, a non-fixed geography where nobody can prosper. Many theoreticians call homes of diasporic people as non-real and nonexistent spaces. Salman Rushdie mentions about a loss which exiles and immigrants have as a result of their experiences. This loss creates fiction with imaginary homelands.

Azade Seyhan also mentions about this loss in *Writing outside the Nation* that for the diasporic people, no matter how they got separated from their homeland, by force or willingly, there is a common cultural heritage they have left behind which make them form imaginary communities. In her literary analysis of Turkish German literature, she claims that there is no place which the Turks who have immigrated to Germany can show on the map as their homes. They cannot feel at home in the countries they left behind and also in the country in which they live now. The place where they call home is the place of memory, language and therefore of translation (2001:15). They do not have anywhere to call home so they cling to common memories and histories as their homelands (2001:18). She also claims that:

Multiple migrations end in the loss of our homes, possessions, and memorabilia. When the smoke clears, we are faced with charred pieces of identification, shards of language, burned tongues, and cultural fragments. However from the site of this fire, the phoenix of a transnational, bi-and multilingual literature has arisen. (Seyhan, 2001: 7)

However still the naming of exilic, ethnic, migrant or diasporic individuals or communities lack a number of nuances as they exist between histories, geographies and cultural practices according to Azade Seyhan (2001:9). The working definitions for the terms exilic, diasporic or ethnic are quite unclear sometimes. Seyhan prefers to call them as "paranational communities and alliances" (2001:10). According to her theory: "These are communities that exist within national borders or alongside the citizens of the host country but

remain culturally or linguistically distanced from them, and, in some instances, are estranged from both the home and the host culture" (2001:10).

According to the second group of theories, which are the positive interpretations of diasporic situations, lacking a homeland literally or metaphorically opens a new dimension for people who are in diaspora. Although rootedness and homelessness create a sense of constant uneasiness, this feeling can be positive in some ways for the individuals. For them belonging to a home means constant stability for the individual with no movement at all, hence no wish to change. They claim that on the contrary, moving in and out of homes or cultures brings development for the migratory selves. Chambers notes that this discontinuous state of being, meaning to move or travel and changing your home creates an aura of freedom, "to translate is always to transform" (1994:3). Unlike Seyhan he finds this space of translation as a dynamic situation of change, not as a site of estrangement and entrapment. He also comments on the essentialized character of home and belonging for diasporic people: "Exile knows that homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons" (Chambers, 1994: 2).

These theories about the positive aspects of diaspora also mention the plurality and importance of homes in diasporic peoples' lives. Sara Ahmed in her article entitled *Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement* claims that home is not a particular space but can be more than one space. She claims that exilic people falsely perceive the concept of home as something precious and desirable as a fetish object. According to her, such misperceptions and feelings about home being sacred and sine qua non for all human beings are all essentialized points of view (1999:330). The moment migrants could escape from these ties which essentializes them, they can be freer as individuals. Sara Ahmed further quotes from two other scholars who define these subjects as not literal but metaphoric migrants. Anita Haya Goldman uses migrancy in a metaphorical sense of defining people who are estranged in one way or another in

a society. Similarly, Rosi Bradiotti claims that homelessness can be a choice of individuals who are standing against labels, boundaries and conventions (Ahmed, 1999: 333-4). Thus an everlasting dream of reaching a single and a particular home is a misperception

Arab American writer Diane Abu Jabar also mentions this in her novel *The Language of Baklava*:

We grow into the curve of what we know; for me that was my family's rootlessness and my father's control and scrutiny- movement and confinement. I am as surely a Bedouin as anyone who has travelled in a desert caravan. A reluctant Bedouin-I miss and long for every place in every country, I have ever lived-and frequently even the places my friends and my family have lived and talked about as well- and I never want to leave any of these places. I want to cry out, to protest: Why must there be only one home! (2005: 329-330)

Having more than one home to belong as a result of forced or voluntary migration can be positive for people as it challenges the notion of a fixed or unitary home or origin to belong to.

In spite of negative connotations of homelessness being defined as instability, with constant longing for home with uneasiness, Ahmed asserts that sometimes belonging to a home is the actual source of discomfort as it ties the individual to a fixed territory, a fixed identity with no motivation for change or movement. This time having a home to belong to creates uneasiness, boundaries, no movement, no change and a fixed identity (1999:339). Migration means "movement, dislocation, crossing of borders" therefore not obscurity but liberty" (1999:331).

A Map of Home by Randa Jarrar is the coming of age story of a girl who has an Egyptian-Greek mother and a Palestinian father. It is written like a memoir where she narrates the story of her childhood in Kuwait and her teenage years in Egypt, where she and her family fled during the Iraqi invasion. Later her family moved to Texas. The novel comes to an end when she

decides that for her future she has to move to Boston for university away from everyone and every place that has been her home.

The novel narrates the story of a cross border, transnational, multi ethnic situation of a girl marked by moving among countries and cultures. Thus she cannot find a place to call home on any map because there is no home to return to, nor is there a home where she belongs. This ambiguous situation as a result of constant migrations causes feelings of non-belonging. But Jarrar's protagonist creates a home within herself away from the cultures that encompass her, the countries and even her own family by constructing a fluid and liberating homeland at the end of her adolescence as a result of a process.

The first phase of finding home begins with her struggle with the negative consequences of homelessness like constant uneasiness and ambiguity. It can be read as the heroines' lifelong struggle to find her place and home in between Arab and American cultures which is a very common motif for ethnic writers' literature regardless of their origin. In Arab American literature in particular, themes like homelessness, third spaces, never ending identity formation stories are also predominant. For example, Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian- American poet suggests that being Arab American is "discovered in process, by making sense of disparate experiences and cultural contexts and by nurturing the sparks generated by their juxtaposition"(Majaj, 2008: 6). This transformative identity concept perceives the becoming of migratory subjects as an ongoing and never ending process. Therefore as identity and belonging is closely linked with the concept of home, the notion of homeland is also a process.

This feeling of non-belonging is a predominant theme in the novel where Nadali feels split more and more because of her mixed ethnic roots, her hybridity.

My little passport, the one looked nothing like Mama's medium green one or Baba's big brown one, said I was American. I didn't have to stand in a different line at airports yet, but soon I would. And Mama would stand

in a different line and Baba would stand in a different line. It would make me believe that the world wanted to split up my family, so I'd pull to them even more. (Jarrar, 2008:9)

They lived in Kuwait for so many years where none of the family members felt they belonged. Then they moved to Texas where again the feeling of not belonging was primary for all of the characters in the family. But it was especially hard for the young girl trying to find a home where she felt she belonged. When they moved to Egypt in her teenage years near her grandmother's home it was the same old feeling of non-belonging again: *"this was our home now; our old home was gone...I cried a mini Mediterranean of tears"* (Jarrar, 2008:162). At school kids were making fun of her and asking questions about her nationality. She always felt *"sad, sad half and half self"* (2008:167). *"I didn't tell them that my heart was broken. I didn't tell them how I always felt like I'd left something behind at home until I realized that what I'd left behind was home"* (2008:166).

And after Egypt she is forced to move for the third time, this time to America. She is tired and unhappy of adapting to new environments all her life. She resists by saying that: *"I can't move to America....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 of home again, to lose that home again, then have to start all over again"* (2008:207). Thus searching for home is the natural result for her situation as a solution to all the ambiguities and discomfort of having nowhere to belong to. However this vicious cycle of split identities, multiple homes and imaginary homelands add to her unhappiness.

The second phase of finding home is the acceptance of her in betweenness and homelessness. *A Map of Home* is the story of being in between different value systems and cultures. Nadali feels this throughout her life and instead of fighting with it she decides to live the unchangeable condition. Nadali's grandmother is Greek, her mother is Egyptian, and her father is Palestinian. She resembles herself to Russian matrushka dolls, the smallest one at the very center:

...the empty bellied one that goes in her mama, the mama that gets cradled in her mama and so on...I knew that the biggest doll, the biggest mama on the outside was Greek but that I was not a Greek. I noticed that all the dolls were split in half except me, even though I was split in half: I was Egyptian and Palestinian. I was Greek and American. (2008:8)

Nadali gets more mature as she recognizes that searching for home is a useless effort for her, but she still cannot get rid of the discomfort. In Chapter 14 entitled *"You are a fourteen year old Arab chick who just moved to Texas"* (2008:232), Jarrar switches from first person narration to second person. In an interview about the novel she comments that *"That was certainly a conscious effort on my part to make the reader see how it feels to be an immigrant"* (Yaman, 2009: n.p.). She says that her identity gets fragmented as she moves to America so she wanted the reader to feel that uncomfortable feeling as the narration changes into what the reader is not accustomed to throughout the book.

The notion of homeland as something impossible to return to is very similar to Sara Ahmed's theory on home. She remarks that *"narratives of leaving home produce too many homes and hence no home"* (1999:330). Similarly, Nadali by travelling through places and cultures is left without anywhere to belong to. She began to come to terms with her in betweenness. Just like the theories on diaspora and homeland suggest, Jarrar's protagonist is struggling to decide where the home is. It is a reality that she has had too many homes to belong to; throughout her short life of adolescence she has crossed borders too many times.

Her father's solution was creating an imaginary homeland. *"Our people carry the homeland in their souls"* says her father, *"you can go wherever you want, but you'll always have it in your heart"* (Jarrar, 2008:9). For Nadali, it is hard to understand at first his father's concept of home. She has a more materialized concept in her mind. For example she thinks how hard it must be for her father to carry whatever he remembers from Palestine in his soul and

body with him: *"That's such a heavy thing to carry. I'd visited this homeland once, noticed that there was a lot of grass, several rocks and mountains, and thousands of olive trees and donkeys"*(2008:9). However as it is impossible to return to a home and her solution would be to dream of an idealized home like his father.

In *Cartographies of Diaspora* (Brah argues that there are mainly two types of diaspora. One regards home as a mystic place of desire. This concept of homeland is the place of no return, even when the subjects return there literally. The second type of diaspora is the longing of the lived experience, which is more solid. The sounds, smells, feelings, experiences, pains and pleasures being remembered by the homesick subject (1996:188-9). These two types exist in Jarrar's novel.

The feeling of ambiguity saddens Nidali more than the present situation of being away from anything familiar. She says: *"I...wondered about the future. I wanted more than anything to know what was going to happen to us, to me"* (2008:180). The feeling of being away from home for her is to miss her old stereo, bed, piano, zatar burgers, gulf, friends, school... But she knows that she will never be able to return to the same life even after Kuwait has been liberated (2008:178-9). This nostalgic feeling of home materialized by places, sounds, smells and tastes of home is imaginary and utopic.

In another instance when her parents tell her that they will buy a house of their own, she does not feel happy at all. *"But even as my feet jumped and my eyes smiled, my heart caved in on itself...as I wondered how long that home would hold us, how long that home would last"* (2008:279). *"I was missing a hundred different things from home, and the sad part was, I was starting to forget what they were and where home really was"* (2008:220-1). Thus the concept of a real home with all material things to miss and the concept of a home as a non-existing place blended together in her. The acceptance of home as an impossible place to return brings relief to her as a part of her coming of age as an immigrant.

The third phase is thus accepting a fluid concept of home neither as a real nor an imagined place. In "Arab American Literature:

Origins and Developments" Lisa Suhair Majaj analyzes basic themes and concepts in Arab American literature. In her analysis of Diane Abu Jabar's novels *Crescent* and *Arabian Jazz* she concludes that both novels contain elements of dislocation and homelessness. Majaj claims that in the case of hyphenated identities like Arab Americans accepting either side of the hyphen as the sole place of belonging is not the solution. She says *"rather, what is needed is the ability to move with fluidity between worlds"* (Majaj, 2008: 10).

For Nidali, the uneasiness and instability of having no home to belong to brings out change and transformation. If the concept of home is a process this is the resolution point as the last step. It is a challenge to stable lives, fixed identities as a hybrid subject. The reconciliation of accepting that she is carrying the home within herself opens a new position for her. In the novel, she challenges the restrictions of essentialist definitions of one's homeland. Home as a changing concept thus adjustable position brings out her liberty and happiness.

One afternoon, I sat at the dining table and drew a map of Palestine from memory...I pointed at the western border and asked (my baba), is that right? Who knows he said...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 one that comes after, even more different. What do you mean? I mean...there's no telling where home starts and where it ends...I noticed that Baba's eyes were filled with tears. I took the map I draw to my room, flipped my pencil and brought the eraser's tip to the page. I erased the eastern border, the northern border. I erased the southern and eastern border. I surveyed what remained: a blank page...I stared at the whiteness of the paper's edges for a long, long time. The whiteness of the page blended with the whiteness of my sheets. 'You are here,' I thought as I looked at the page and all around me. And oddly, I felt free." (Jarar,2008:192-193)

Metaphorically the heroine's name is the feminized version of the word "nidal" which means "struggle" in Arabic as she struggles to find her own map of home. At the end as she gives up deciding on where to belong; she feels free and empowered. She has had to fight against essentialist notions of ethnicity and belonging all through her life. For example the stereotypes about Arabs determine what she is or is not what she can or cannot do. People would have assumed that they are Arabs so they should be poor (2008:8).

Sara Ahmed claims that "*nomads resist socially coded modes of thought and behavior*" (1999: 334- 337). This homelessness is a choice and freedom against conventions and boundaries. So migrants are against any fixed notion of home and identity. "*By refusing to belong to a particular place, the world becomes nomad's home*" (1999: 334- 337). The concept of diaspora according to Brah offers a "*critique of discourses of fixed origins while taking into account of a homing desire, not a desire for homeland*" (1996:15-6).

Natalia Handal is a Palestinian poet and play writer who also wrote about her dual identity in United States. Her conclusion to this separation between two cultural worlds is finding home as she says home is where one is. Her home concept is again by not choosing one culture or home over the other. In her poem "Debke in New York" she writes:

I arrive...I wear my jeans, tennis shoes,
walk Broadway,
pass Columbia, read Said and Twain...
recite a verse by Ibn Arabi
And between subway rides to the place I
now call home, listen to Abdel
Halim and Nina Simone....
It is later than it was a while ago
..and I haven't moved a bit
My voice still breaking into tiny pieces

When I introduce myself to someone new
And imagine I have found my way home
(qtd. in Majaj, 2006: 15)

According to her, if home is finally only possible in the imagination, it is nonetheless a space with infinite possibilities (Majaj, 2006: 30).

Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* is about the diasporic situation of homelessness. Nidali passes through three phases of looking for home in the novel. In the first phase, the protagonist of the novel problematizes this uneasiness of having to live in between cultures, between homes, thus having no home to belong to. Her situation of being out of space dominates the theme of the novel as she writes about looking for a home to belong. However as she suffers from uneasiness she is not able to find a solution to her situation.

In the second phase, she recognizes that in spite of negative connotations of homelessness having no home is not a destiny. She could create her imaginary home to long for by accepting her in betweenness. It resembles to the theories on diaspora which claims that belonging to a home is the actual source of discomfort as it ties the individual to a fixed territory, a fixed identity with no motivation for change or movement.

The third phase comes as a result of her celebration of non-belonging to any home, culture or identity. The home that she finally finds is the result of this process of perceiving diaspora no more as a negative but a positive value. This liberating viewpoint of homelessness and rootlessness is a reaction for the hyphenated identities that cannot have one place or culture to belong to. Nidali finally realizes that having no home to belong to brings about change and transformation.

REFERENCES

- Abu-Jaber, D. (2005). **The Language of Baklava**. Random House, New York.
- Ahmed, S. (1999). "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement", **International Journal of Cultural Studies**, 2/3, 329-347.
- Brah, A (1996). **Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities**. Routledge, London.
- Chambers, I. (1994). **Migrancy, Culture, Identity**. Routledge, New York.
- Jarrar, R. (2008). **A Map of Home**. Other Press, New York.
- Seyhan, A. (2001). **Writing Outside The Nation**. Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
- Majaj, L.S. (2008). "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments", **American Studies Journal** 52, n.p. Retrieved Mar. 20, 2010, <http://www.asjournal.org/archive/52/150.html>.
- . (2006). "Supplies of Grace: The Poetry of Mohja Kahf", **Arteeast**. Retrieved Apr. 15, 2010, <http://www.arteeast.org/artenews/artenews-articles2006/september06/artenews-mohja-kahf.html>.
- Safran, W. (1991). "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return", **Diaspora** 1/ 84-99.
- Yaman, S. (2009). "Randa Jarrar Discusses Her Novel, *A Map of Home*", **Kabobfest**. Retrieved Apr. 19, 2010, <http://www.kabobfest.com/2009/09/interview-with-randa-jarrar-author-of-a-map-of-home.html>.