

Unravelling Diaspora in Heather Raffo's *Noura*: A Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

This paper argues that Heather Raffo's *Noura* (2019) is an instantiation of the Iraqi-American theatre representing postcolonial diaspora. An attempt to bridge the gap between American and Middle Eastern cultures, the play is well regarded as a response to Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Drawing on the theoretical framework of diaspora, the paper reveals miscellaneous themes such as panic, hysteria, violence, nostalgia, alienation, and hybridity. In doing so, it attempts to answer the following question: How far is Raffo's *Noura* delineated as an instantiation of the postcolonial diasporic Iraqi-American theatre? The paper has reached the following findings. First, cultural diaspora is argued to have led to utilizing a great deal of Arabic words/expressions that may be entextualized with the passage of time. Second, Raffo was demonstrated to have reconfigured Ibsen's view of marriage and motherhood by posing her own novel one for discussion through the open-end technique. Third, it was revealed that the playwright has managed to upend the dramatic conventions of gender roles by expanding the role of the wife and marginalizing that of the husband.

Keywords: Arab-American, belonging, gender roles, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Heather Raffo's *Noura*, nostalgia, postcolonial diaspora

استكشاف الشتات بمسرحية نورا للكاتبة "هيذر رافو": منظور ما بعد الاستعمار

مستخلص

يناقش البحث الحالي مسرحية *نورا* (2019) للكاتبة "هيذر رافو" كمماتلة للمسرح الأمريكي العراقي الذي يجسد شتات ما بعد الاستعمار. وحيث إنها كُتبت كمحاولة لسد الفجوة بين الثقافتين الأمريكية والشرق أوسطية، جاءت *نورا* كرد على مسرحية *بيت الذميمة* للكاتب النرويجي "هنريك إبسن". واعتمادًا على الإطار النظري لمفهوم الشتات، كشف البحث عن موضوعات متنوعة مثل الهلع والهستيريا والعنف والحنين إلى الماضي والاعتراب والتهجين. وإزاء ذلك يحاول البحث الإجابة عن التساؤل التالي: كيف تم تصوير مسرحية *نورا* للكاتبة "هيذر رافو" كمماتلة للمسرح الأمريكي العراقي الذي تناول شتات ما بعد الاستعمار؟ وقد توصل البحث إلى النتائج التالية. أولاً: أدى الشتات الثقافي بدوره إلى استخدام كم هائل من الكلمات والتعابير العربية التي يمكن أن تدخل في اللغة الإنجليزية بمرور الوقت. ثانيًا، أعادت "رافو" النظر في رؤية "إبسن" للزواج والأمومة بطرحها رؤيتها الخاصة غير المألوفة للمناقشة من خلال النهاية المفتوحة للمسرحية. ثالثًا، تمكنت الكاتبة من قلب الأعراف الدرامية الخاصة بأدوار الجنسين رأسًا على عقب بتوسيع دور الزوجة وتهميش دور الزوج.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أمريكي عربي، الانتماء، أدوار الجنسين، بيت الذميمة لـ "إبسن"، نورا لـ "هيذر رافو"، الحنين إلى الماضي.

Introduction

Studies tackling diaspora in contemporary American theatre in general and those approaching postcolonial diaspora in Arab-American theatre in particular are still underrepresented and not anthologized. Safi M. Mahfouz's "Exploring Diasporic Identities in Selected Plays by Contemporary American Minority Playwrights" (2012) concluded that ethnic drama in the USA is still lacking because "many American minority playwrights" are neither widely read on the page nor even well performed on the stage (163). Hadeer Abdel Dayem's "Identity Issue in Contemporary Diaspora Arab Theatre" (2019) has studied the Lebanese-American playwright Leila Buck's texts and concluded that identity is one of the political issues/problems the world faces since the most repeated question is "What does it mean to be an Arab American?" (239). The most recent study on the Arab American diaspora is Ishak Berrebbah's "The Mosaics of National Identity in the Arab American Diaspora" (2021). It has tackled the Jordanian-American Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* as an example of contemporary Arab American fiction examining the "long-distance nationalism" that "has received little attention in literary studies" (187). It has concluded that the "components of long-distance nationalism" forming "the Arab American community," such as language, religion and memory, have complicated "the Arab Americans' affiliation to" the U.S.A. (206-7). Diaspora has been traced and unravelled in both Lebanese-American drama and Jordanian-American fiction.

Given this background, there is not a single study approaching an Iraqi-American play as a representation of postcolonial diaspora. Furthermore, there is not a single study devoted to Raffo's *Noura*. Two studies only have touched upon *Noura* along with other plays. The first study, Maya Roth's "Critical Essay: 'Listening to the Soul of Rapture—and Difference in Heather Raffo's Iraq-American Trilogy'" (2021), is sent me by the author. Revolving around the influence the Iraqi war had upon its citizens and the audience listening to them, the study has concluded that this trilogy dramaturgically leveraged "rhythms of trauma and exile" (162). The

second study is Suzanne Elnaggar's "Trauma and Identity in Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* and *Noura*" (2022), an MA thesis tackling *Noura* with *9 Parts* and other plays. Concentrating on trauma in the two plays, Elnaggar shows that Raffo's plays can be read not only as a comment on Middle Eastern and Iraqi identity but also as a representation of the trauma experienced by the Iraqis due to the Anglo-American war. It has concluded that the playwright "gave voice to experiences that are often silenced" and that the journey to the stage is as important as the words that were unspoken" (154). Stating that Raffo's plays "emotively represent the trauma of Iraq and Iraqi women" (*Ibid*), Elnaggar assures that her study "is no an exhaustive look at" either the theory of trauma or the work of Raffo because she did not have the space to do so and the work of Raffo is still to be done (155). Other studies done on Raffo's *Noura* are no more than sparse articles. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to answer the following question: How far is Raffo's *Noura* delineated as an example of the postcolonial diasporic Iraqi-American theatre?

Heather Raffo (1970-), born in the United States to an Iraqi father and an American mother, is an Iraqi-American playwright and actress holding a BA in English from the University of Michigan and an MFA (in acting and performance) from the University of San Diego. She has taught and performed at many American universities and international centres about Iraqi politics and arts. Her plays include *9 Parts of Desire* (2004), which won many awards; *Fallujah* (2016), a libretto for the opera about the Iraq War; and *Noura* (2019), her most recent and personal play. Raffo is well known for bridging the gap between her Iraqi and American identities/roots with her award-winning *9 Parts of Desire*, "an example of how art can remake the world" (Lahr 137). Inspired by the playwright's trip to the modern art museum in Baghdad in August 1993, *9 Parts of Desire* details the lives of nine Iraqi women in her father's homeland. *Noura*, inspired by the stories and lives of Arab-American women about identity and belonging, is created as a response to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. It has to do with postcolonial diaspora, the quest for identity, nostalgia, and hybridity.

Theoretical Framework

Difficult to define or put under one single definition, postcolonial theory may be regarded as a critical approach tackling the literature produced by authors living in colonized/colonizing countries to tackle such common issues as immigration, struggle for independence, quest for national identity, loyalty, nostalgia, and diaspora. The proponents of the theory tend to study the ways wherein writers from the colonized countries try to accentuate/celebrate their cultural identities reclaiming them from the colonizer. They also trace the ways in which the colonial powers' literature used to justify their colonial process by depicting the colonized as backward inferiors. While the United States of America was not classified as a postcolonial country the same way the United Kingdom was, the former has recently become a place for producing more diasporas than the latter due to its outstanding colonial processes in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq after the 9/11 attacks. Since colonialism is the historical condition leading to the displacement of people across the world under different circumstances, diaspora cannot be separated from it. It is thus argued that the "notion of 'diaspora' did not seem at first to be the area of post-colonial studies until we examine the deep impact of colonialism upon this phenomenon" (Aschcroft *et al* 217).

As a theory, diaspora has been tackled by such theorists as William Safran, Stuart Hall, Robin Cohen, Nicholas Van Hear, M. L. Raina, and George Steiner. Originating from the Greek word *speiro* meaning "to sow" or "to disperse," "diaspora has become a concept widely used to refer to both the Greeks in the Hellenic era and the Jews after the fall of Jerusalem in the early 6th century BC (Cohen xiv, 24). Apart from the Judaic diaspora implying the dispersal of many peoples around the world, the concept has become obviously used to refer to "the displacement of an individual, community or group of people from the original homeland to an alien territory. It also connotes a cultural transition from pure roots to mixed customs in the adopted land" (Raina 6469). This transition results in the inability of the diaspora individuals/groups to adhere to

their cultural identity, which coerces them to endure alienation and its consequences like longing and nostalgia. Getting involved in an intermediate hybrid situation, they end up in one of two inevitable situations: either to embrace “cross-culturalism or to encounter continuous experience of trauma” (*Ibid*). Diaspora people are seen in two categories: those who move from metropolitan centres and relocate to the colonial borders and the colonized who are forced back into centres through processes like slavery (Aschcroft *et al* 217). At the same time, diaspora is not restricted to geographical dispersal; it refers also to “questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces” (*Ibid* 217-18). However, whether migrants or settlers, the people of diasporic movements generated by colonialism have developed their distinctive cultures that both maintain and often expand, and develop their original cultures. Such diasporic people have their own life, stories, and actively contribute to the culture of diaspora.

People experiencing diaspora due to (voluntary/compulsory) migration are bound to encounter different customs and cultures, and often fail in acclimatizing themselves to such alien cultures and values. This failure leads them to feel a sense of alienation and nostalgia (during their period of accommodation to their newly adopted land) that develops into the traumatic experiences reflected in their diasporic writings. Michel Bruneau discusses entrepreneurship, politics, religion and ethnicity/race to distinguish among four types of diaspora: (1) Entrepreneurial diaspora, in which people migrate to develop their commercial and enterprise activities, as is the case with the Indians, the Lebanese, and the Chinese. (2) Religious diaspora, in which people migrate for religious targets, as in the case of the Jewish, Greek, and Armenian diasporas. (3) Political diaspora is found when “a territory of origin is dominated by a foreign power and the main aspiration of the diaspora population is the creation of a nation-state” (40), as in the case of the Palestinian diaspora. (4) Racial and cultural diaspora has to do with the shared identity, as in the African Americans’ diaspora or collective memories which “refer to the traumatic experiences under which this diaspora formed” (*Ibid* 40-41). In his *Global Diasporas*,

Robin Cohen dilates on the four types of diaspora defined by Bruneau giving them relatively different appellations—labour, imperial, trade, and cultural diasporas. To Cohen, labour diaspora refers to people who migrate as servants/slaves to work in the countries' plantation like the Africans and the Indians. Imperial diaspora refers to people who migrate to other countries for colonizing them like “the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, German, French and British colonists [who] fanned out to most parts of the world” (69). The trade diaspora resembles Bruneau’s entrepreneurial diaspora, where people migrate to develop their enterprise activities. The cultural diaspora stresses the cultural transformation resulting from the cultural shock immigrants generally face in their new land where they, as newcomers, cannot assimilate to the new culture. Due to this cultural shock, immigrants find themselves bound to move back to their native countries.

William Safran argues that there are six characteristic features most diaspora communities share. First, they are “dispersed from a specific original ‘centre’ to two or more ‘peripheral,’ or foreign, regions” (83). Second, they keep recalling their collective memories/visions/myths about their original homeland, “its physical location, history, and achievement” (*Ibid*). Third, they believe they are not or cannot be fully accepted by their host countries and therefore they feel alienated from them. Fourth, they long to return to their ancestral home when conditions are apposite because they regard it as the true ideal home for them and their offspring. Fifth, they feel committed to restore “their original homeland and its safety” (*Ibid* 83-4). Sixth, they continue to keep their relationships with their homeland. Robin Cohen, drawing on Safran, mentions nine characteristic features a diaspora group must have. First, they often experience trauma in their dispersal from the original homeland to other foreign regions. Second, they often leave a homeland in search of work or trade. Third, they recall a collective memory or myth about their homeland including its history, location, suffering and achievements. Fourth, they have an ideal image of their ancestral home regarding it as a source of safety. Fifth, they develop a frequent return movement to the homeland to keep their

remote relationships via “intermittent visits to the homeland.” Sixth, they may have “a strong ethnic group consciousness over a long time” that leads to “a common cultural and religious heritage and a belief in common fate.” Seventh, they experience “a troubled relationship with host societies,” indicating “a lack of acceptance” or an imminent calamity befalling them. Eighth, they have “a sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement.” Ninth, there is “a possibility of a distinctive creative enriching life in the host countries with a tolerance” (17). Thus, Cohen’s features have sprung directly or indirectly from Safran’s.

Diaspora literature reflects such themes as panic, nausea, hysteria, violence, nostalgia, alienation, identity, and hybridity. The most central parts of diaspora found in diasporic writings are cultural identity, alienation, and hybridity. Whenever we approach diasporic writings, we discern that they are tracing the real identities of their authors. Identity is the cultural construct one carries from one’s coming into existence, through surrounding cultures and values, to one’s death. Stuart Hall defines identity as a “construction, a process never completed—always ‘in process.’ It is not determined in the sense that it can always be ‘won’ or ‘lost,’ sustained or abandoned” (2). Alienation is defined by Erich Fromm as “a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of the world, as the creator of his own acts” (Qtd in Miyamoto 6). The alienated person is often seen as out of touch not only with other people but also with himself. Hybridity refers to the mixture of eastern and western cultures. It is defined by Stuart Hall as a strategy that

opens up a space of negotiation [where] hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole. (58)

Hybridity takes such different types as linguistic hybridity, literary hybridity, and cultural hybridity (Raina 6474). All these types of hybridity can be simply traced in diasporic literature.

Analysis

Noura is inspired by a series of workshops Raffo had in New York with Arab-American women about bridging the gap between the two cultures—the American and the Middle Eastern. After inviting the women to write their own stories in a narrative monologue, upsetting stories of leaving home, the playwright has given them *A Doll's House* to combine with their narratives “reimagining the many Nora Helmers in their lives” (“Playwright’s Note” 4). Created as a response to Ibsen’s *A Doll's House*, the play *Noura* is compassionate play pursuing the complicated pathways of motherhood and marriage, and fragile architecture called home. However, set in New York, the play tells the story of an Iraqi immigrant family’s Christmas dinner bothered by the arrival of Maryam (an Iraqi orphan sponsored by Noura) who stirs up long-buried memories left behind. Having fled their native Iraq years ago, Noura, her husband Tareq, and their son Yazen live in the city of New York as newly US citizens with passports carrying their Americanized names (Nora, Tim, & Alex), a change with which Noura is dissatisfied. Nora receives Maryam and is dismayed to find her “pregnant and unapologetic” (21). Shocked by the latter’s planned pregnancy, the former is worried about Tim’s reaction. On Christmas while facing past secrets, Nora is caught between two countries—the one she fled and the one she lives in—questioning: Which sacrifice is inevitable to make life possible? In brief, dilating on the intricate issues of motherhood and marriage, *Noura* is the story of a woman’s uneasy mind pushing against the confines of her home life and her past. That is why Raffo argues that “*Noura* was provoked by many things—from the fracturing of Iraq, to a shifting American identity; from the rise of polarizing ideologies to modern marriage and motherhood” (Roth 156).

It is clear that Noura and Tareq's immigration from their native Iraq to New York has to do with political diaspora since their original country was dominated by a foreign power (the United States of America) after the Anglo-American war on Iraq. That is to say, they are "dispersed from a specific original 'centre'" (Safran 83), Iraq, to a foreign region, New York. One of the most prominent themes reflected from this (political) diaspora is hybridity. This hybridity is obvious from the opening scenes of the play where Noura and Tareq are reflected as relatively two opposed newly Americanized citizens. Their wavering between Arabic and English is remarkably indicated throughout not only their speech but also their Arabic/Americanized names. While Noura calls her husband by his Arabic name, Tareq, he calls her by her Americanized one, Nora—a name she does not like and feels dissatisfied with. When she informs him that she "cannot answer to that name" without putting "a darling with it" (4), he ingeniously replies: "*Habibti* (*Hah'bibti*), your passport now says Nora" (4). It seems that the American "Nora" needs the darling word "*habibti*" to make it more compassionate like the Arabic "Noura." Unlike Noura, Tareq likes calling her Nora unless he expresses his love for her or needs something from her. Moreover, dyeing their speech with such Arabic words as "*habibti*" not only assures their nostalgia for their original Arabic but also denotes their sense of belonging. Nostalgia and belonging are demonstrated more in Noura, who abides by her Iraqi roots and wants "to sponsor every Iraqi orphan" (6), than in her husband, who tries to escape the past with its associations to live in the present. Noura's desire to host Maryam, who comes from the former's "grandfather's church" (6) in Mosul, is refused by Tareq whose central preoccupation is celebrating the first Christmas they witness after getting the American citizenship. Their talk stresses their true identity. Unlike Tareq, who refuses to host Maryam, Noura welcomes her reminding him that they themselves "were refugees" (6). In addition, Noura and Rafa'a exchange words on some Iraqi characters they had been bred up with in Iraq such as Kate, Dara, Reem, and Nadia (10-11), names that recall "their collective memories/visions about their original homeland," as Safran has argued above.

Hybridity is outstandingly highlighted throughout the play. It is not confined to Tareq's calling his son by Alex and Noura's calling him by Yazen. It includes a Christian family having a Muslim, Rafa'a, who was brought up in Noura's home, and comes now to share her their memories in Iraq. Cultural hybridity is pursued in Tareq, who had left his work as a surgeon and serves now in a restaurant. He wants "to invent something" in restaurants (9) reminding us of Mushi, the Bangladeshi hero of Richard Bean's *England People Very Nice*, who invented the chicken tikka masala that had become part and parcel of the British dish. Moreover, Noura paves the way for her husband to receive Maryam who, brought up in a convent by nuns (11), witnesses the first winter for her in New York. Maryam, who has escaped from Mosul to New York (where she is awarded an internship for studying physics), aims at having a job after graduation (15). She assures Tareq, later on, that she has found a job with "the Department of Defense" where she builds weapons contracts (41). Thus, she here represents the entrepreneurial diaspora as negotiated by Bruneau. She has left Mosul's danger for New York where she studies for having a work to live on. She migrates to develop her commercial status by finding a work to live on since she is alone. Maryam's dispersal is not confined to entrepreneurial diaspora; it includes all other types of diaspora—religious, political, and cultural. This is pointed out by her explanation of the *status quo* in Iraq after the Anglo-American war: "In Baghdad they're tearing down homes. You don't even buy the house anymore" (17). This situation has forced Tareq's sisters, before Maryam, to leave Iraq for other countries like "Germany, New Zealand, [and] Sweden" (16). Tareq's sisters echo Raffo's family. Raffo had 100 family members living in Iraq in 2003 (at the start of the war), but now she has only two cousins living in the country. She assures that her "family is now scattered across the world having fled as global refugees" (Roth 157). In addition, while sharing memories about Iraq in this way, Noura informs Maryam that they have "cooked everything Mouslawi" for Christmas tomorrow (17). Thus, they live in New York on Iraqi memories.

Maryam's pregnancy and its relation to *Daesh/Da'ish* has much to do with the different types of diaspora hinted at above. She ascribes her pregnancy to *Daesh/Da'ish* (an Arabic acronym having, like many other Arabic words, two acceptable forms because it was not originated in English, but it has been entextualized as an English word). She says: "I don't have to explain to you *Daesh* (*Da'ish*) when you see them face to face" (18). That is to say, she, like others before and after her, has fled Mosul to fend off more of *Daesh's* transgressions. This issue is vindicated later by Tareq who exclaims: "This is the Iraqi orphan we saved from ISIS?" (41). This argument suggests that leaving Iraq for New York involves political as well as religious diaspora. In other words, Noura's family, Maryam, and other migrants have fled Iraq to create themselves another "nation-state" (Bruneau 40) and eschew further transgressions committed under the umbrella of religion. Maryam relates to Tareq a story of a woman in her own tent who left Iraq in fear of *Daesh* forgetting her own son behind: "'I left Yousif!' She says. 'God. God. I left Yousif in his crib. Sleeping. I forgot him. Forgot! Now they have him. *Daesh! Daesh!* (*ISIS! ISIS!*)'" (48). *Noura* is, in many ways, "Raffo's most personal and harrowing play since it deals with the rise of the so-called 'Islamic State' in Mosul, the ancestral homeland of Raffo's Iraqi Christian family" (Najjar 8). This is how *Daesh* has led to political and religious diaspora forcing the native Iraqis, like Noura and its creator—Raffo—to leave Iraq in panic forgetting their sons.

Maryam's pregnancy reveals her view of modern marriage and motherhood as diabolically opposed to that (traditional one) of Ibsen. She expresses her desire having a baby without having a husband: "I chose to have a baby, not a husband, a baby. I don't want to get married. I have school, my whole life" (18). Noura is surprised to find Maryam (who was raised in a convent) not feeling shy to have a baby without having a husband. When she informs Maryam that she "can't go back home now, unmarried, with a child [she] won't be accepted," the latter shockingly replies: "Are you kidding? Would you go back? To Mosul? It's gone. The people are unrecognizable. You wouldn't survive a day in Mosul now" (18).

Unlike Maryam, Noura lives by her Iraqi memories and Eastern traditions, and hopes to go back to Iraq one day to rebuild it: “I wanted to rebuild Iraq! I wanted to be part of something! Three thousand years of culture destroyed and what did I do?” (63). Noura’s words indicate her ideal image of her ancestral home and her avidity to return to it when conditions are opposite because she regards it as the true ideal home for her and her offspring. Hence, she feels committed to restore Iraq and its safety.

Unlike Noura, Maryam is not nostalgic for Iraq and never thinks of going back again. She explains her view in full to Tareq:

Maryam: Okay. I’m pregnant, six months. I don’t know the sex. I wanted it to be a surprise.

Tareq: I’m surprised.

Maryam: I’m not married. I’m still in school. I wanted the baby. I was not coerced or raped. I am really excited about being a mom and having this child. I don’t need you to find me a husband. Hope that addresses all your questions. I already have a job offer so I will be able to support the child during and after my schooling— (40-41)

Thus, Maryam leaves her homeland in search of job/work after finishing her study. Her behaviour adapts her to the American community she lives in now. After expressing her view to Tareq, Maryam leaves him in amazement exclaiming if this is the Maryam they saved before from ISIS! Moreover, unlike both Noura and Tareq, Maryam goes out with Yazen asking him: “You want me to call you Yazen or Alex?” (41). It makes no difference for her to call him by any name, for she feels utterly free. Her name too is expected to be changed into Mary once Americanized. She represents the free woman who has chosen herself her own path without abiding by any fetters or principles.

Having five sisters and, hence, believing in “big families,” Tareq continually expresses his wish to have a daughter because he does not “want to regret having one child” (24). At such a moment, Noura abstrusely asks him: “After all these years insisting we have

one child?" (24). She simultaneously reassures him: "Tomorrow you won't be lonely. You'll see. It might be the most beautiful Christmas we've ever had" (24). Noura's question and reassurance are both ambiguous. What does she mean by her question and reassurance? Does she refer to Maryam in both cases since they have sponsored her and saved her from *Daesh*, and in such a case Tareq will not be alone having her in Christmas as an adopted daughter? Is Noura paving the way for her husband to some truth she cannot speak of? No one is able to utter the truth for "truth is a pathless land" (34), as Rafa'a has once said. This argument leads to the two opposing views of marriage reflected by the play through Tareq and both Noura and Maryam.

While Noura is preoccupied with Maryam's concern, Tareq is terribly busy preparing to cook for the first Christmas they will witness after getting Americanized. He tells his wife that they "only cook like this once a year" (37) praying her not to destroy dinner. She argues that they do actually "destroy the people [they] know. *Joeh'reen'na, Aou'jat'na, Adh'falna (Our neighbors, our streets, our babies!)*" (37). She alludes to Maryam all the time:

Noura: *Hi Khethbeh. (It's a lie.)* We've spent a month preparing to cook the Mosulawi way, so it won't be lost...? How many have we lost because we cannot accept who they are? I'm sick, *Anni Khalsani (I'm sick.)*

Tareq: *Noura, Ya Thoula! (Noura you fool!)* The waste. Keep yourself together. (38)

Tareq accuses his wife of throwing all their hard work for three weeks away arguing that "Muslims all over Baghdad are lining bridges with Christmas lights in solidarity" (38). While he asks her to celebrate the citizenship they "waited for, for eight years," she sarcastically replies: "Congratulations TIM, on becoming an American—Congratulations ALEX, good job! We're American now! What, we're 'safe' because we're Christian? Is that why they let us in? So easily? Changing our names, is a lie" (38). This is the cultural shock due to which Noura finds herself bound to move back to her native country or, at least, live on its memories.

Getting the American citizenship with different names does not alert her away from her real and true identity. She cannot leave her past for living in the (false) present. Obsessed with Maryam as a critical case, Noura is “trying desperately to remember who the hell” she is” (38). She does not believe in the American dream most Arabs are fascinated with since she cannot escape a case like Maryam that always reminds her of her true identity. Noura echoes Raffo’s own experience: “I admit, finally, to feeling lost myself. Uprooted even in New York, where I have lived for over twenty years, longer than I have lived anywhere else. I find myself searching for what friends and family struggle to articulate—the weight of being erased, of not belonging anymore, anywhere” (Roth 157). Unlike his realistic wife who cannot forget her reality and hence is torn between her Iraqi identity and American one, Tareq has accepted entire changes. He accepts the American citizenship with all its consequences, like the new American name and abandoning his career as a surgeon: “You can still have your career, Noura, I can’t. I can never return to surgery, my hands shaking. Fuck it. What’s wrong with feeling safe? I’m grateful there’s a place we can reinvent ourselves, a place we can forget” (38). These lines summarize the difference between a husband ready to change his identity and a wife torn between her true identity and false one.

As a prominent feature of diaspora, nostalgia for one’s country “dominates much of the rhetoric of American minority playwrights” (Mahfouz 171). Noura’s being torn between her Iraqi and American identities culminates in a hybrid identity echoed by using a hybrid language. A great deal of Arabic words has been used by Noura and her family while conversing throughout the play. All in all, Raffo’s utilization of Arabic words has dexterously appeared in four different ways. First, the Arabic word is written in a brief form followed by its full one, as in “*Habibti (Hah’bibti)*” (4), “*Mashallah (Ma-sha’Allah)*” (7), “*Daesh (Da’ish)*” (18), and “*yellah (Yah’lla)*” (27). As a result of this, the Arabic word, once entextualized, appears with two acceptable forms with the same meaning. Second, the Arabic word is followed by another Arabic one to interpret it or make its meaning easier, as in

“*keffeya*”/“*Shem'magh*” (27). Third, the Arabic word/expression is written in Arabic followed by its English counterpart, as in “*Shukran ya Noura* (Thank you, Noura)” (13), “*Hi Khethbeh. (It's a lie.)*,” “*Anni Khalsani (I'm sick.)*,” “*Noura, Ya Thoula!*” (Noura you fool!)” (38), “*Et'fadh'ahlee. (Do me the honor.)*” (42), “*Mah'Aq'der, Sud'deq Ma'aq'der, Ani Hamel*” (*I can't. I really can't. I'm pregnant*) (43), “*qah'beh (whore)*” (54), and “*Ah'hebki. (I love you.)* En'ti Mait'ta Men-El-Jou'e (*You're dying of hunger.*) Khal'lini Aw'wah'kel'ki. (*Let me feed you.*)” (64). Fourth, the Arabic word/expression is written purely in an English transliterated form without being followed by its counterpart, as in “*Bismullah. Il Rahman al Rahim*” (9), “*Elhamdullah ya binti*” (13) “*jidu*” (28), “*habibti*” (which was first used followed by its longer form and then confined to its shorter one), and “*Ya,*” the apostrophe that is fused throughout the dialogues of the play. This last way stresses the significance of the first three ones; it stresses that there is no other way for understanding the word/expression in question but accepting it as it is and getting its meaning from a specialized dictionary. Furthermore, they are nostalgic for the Christmas songs sung in Arabic; for instance, Tareq “*hums along to Arabic Christmas music with the radio*” (36). Catalina F. Florescu sees in this usage of Arabic “an invitation to let these people talk their language, eat their food, say their prayers as they please, and not only their intimacy” (para 9). All types of hybridity put forward by Raina—linguistic, literary, and cultural—are well featured here. This fact accentuates the state of nostalgia and belonging overwhelming the migrants.

The difference between Noura (who cannot feel at ease with the American culture) and her husband Tareq (who is ready to adapt to the American life) is thoroughly noticeable. While Tareq introduces his son to Maryam by saying: “Our son, Alex,” Noura directly corrects: “Yazen!” (40). Moreover, when Tareq passively comments on Maryam’s act by asking Noura: “This is the Iraqi orphan we saved from ISIS?” (41), Noura defends her: “You know nothing about what she’s been through, I want you to know her” (41). Unlike Tareq who always tries to fend off the past shying away from its belongings, Noura has a sense of belonging to it aspiring to

it and its memories. As Raffo informs Johanna Buch, “belonging is something every human being considers. It’s always vibrating within us, and I think we will forever long for belonging and question what I looks like” (11). When Tareq asks Maryam about the father of her baby, she, confident and self-assured, replies with another question: “Does it matter?” (44). Tareq asks Maryam crucial questions that will reflect upon him as a father: “Is the father going to take responsibility?” (45). He himself will be left later to answer this question. However, Maryam replies that her baby’s father does not know that she is pregnant because it took months for pregnancy to take place and other months to get rid of him. She just wanted the child to flee with from the danger of ISIS. Maryam’s story shows us how fearsome the position in Iraq is. Noura points it out: “I’ve been here eight years, still every time I close my eyes I see violence” (46). This fact reflects the trauma she experiences in her dispersal from her original homeland to the foreign city of New York. She assures: “We’re the only people who survived. ... Who else could possibly understand what we’ve seen?” (46). This situation is well depicted by Roth: “When ISIS overtook Mosul in 2014, neighbor turned against neighbor and most Christians felt Iraq was no longer a place they would ever belong” (157). Thus, Noura and her family echo Raffo’s family in experiencing what Maryam calls “PTSD,” the post-traumatic stress disorder.

Noura argues that there are many truths that cannot be spoken of, such as the screams Tareq makes in his sleep, Rafa’a’s undeclared love for her, and their stifling survival. Although Tareq regards their survival as something good, she regards it as “stifling” (50) since it thus deprives them of their native Iraq and their own people. In Florescu’s words, “if surviving is ‘stifling,’ behind walls, the separation is already visible and permanent” (*para* 10). Tareq’s screams and Noura’s uneasiness reflect the trauma they experience after leaving their native Iraq. This trauma has increased by the arrival of Maryam. Just as Noura abides by Maryam, the latter abides by her own child: “This child is the only life I’ve ever had to hold onto! ... giving birth was my most intense joy. It’s your whole body preparing you for everything minute of motherhood” (51-2).

Maryam may be speaking for the playwright, expressing her view of marriage and motherhood, to have a child without having a husband. Despite Tareq's attack against Maryam, Noura defends her telling him that "she deserves a chance" (54). When he justifies his attack by arguing that "she wanted to get pregnant" and that she does not know the father of her child, Noura powerfully replies by arguing "Why can't she want a child?" (54). *Noura* reminds us of Lucas Hnath's *A Doll's House Part 2*, which is "a variation on Ibsen's 1879 tale of the feminist liberation of Nora Helmer. Noura is no less desperate to free herself from the dead hand of the past, crushed as she is by 'the weight of being erased. Of not belonging anymore. Anywhere'" (Teachout 5). She wants to free herself from the shackles and conventions of the past. Thus, the play, as Sharon Green argues, "poses questions about marriage, motherhood, and gender roles, and how these specifically intersect with refugees' experiences of exile, assimilation, sacrifice, identity, and community-belonging" (500).

Seeing his wife attached to someone (Maryam) who may hurt her, Tareq argues that they "have to protect" themselves from a stranger all they know about is "her behavior, not her parents, her lineage" (55). Both Noura and Tareq look at Maryam differently: the former regards her as a victim that should be sympathized with while the latter regards her as an enemy that must be fended off. It is thus argued that the current climate depicts the refugee narratives as either victims or enemies (Roth 157). He wants her to leave them:

Tareq: Then let her go.

Noura: I won't.

Tareq: You have to.

Noura: I think she's brave/fearless.

Tareq: For sleeping around?

Noura: For keeping her child.

Tareq: By herself? Better not to be born. Her mother should have done the same.

Noura: SHAME. I am sick of it. We are so unforgiving. It's the worst of who we are. If she is shameful I am more so. (55)

While Noura argues that Maryam is right in keeping her child, Tareq argues that it is better for it not to be born and that her mother (Maryam) should have the same fate. Thus, by defending Maryam against Tareq's attacks, Noura shows she has a voice in trying to hoist Tareq by his own petard. Raffo's plays do actually "represent the voices of those who previously had no voices on American stages or have been mistranslated by American playwrights in the past. Here, Raffo is saying all those things that cannot be said" (Najjar 10). In other words, Raffo's plays attempt to rectify the historical marginalization of women and reinstate their rightful place in society.

Noura castigates her husband for parting with Maryam while in the same time he is helping "broken people, addicts, crazies, whose bodies cut open in front of" him (56). She explains to him that he is the father of Maryam: "I've never touched another man in my life. We were promised from seventeen. ...You begged me to make love to me as a test? At seventeen years old I failed your morality test? Am I supposed to never be stronger than you—only in my sexual restraint?" (56). Raffo argues that "Maryam was conceived before they [Tareq and Noura] were married. And Tariq never knew this" (Raffo to Sirwah). Maryam represents the past chasing Tareq who is trying hard to run away from. "She reminds [him] how far Iraq has disintegrated" (58). He unravels that her "idea of family is fatherless" (58). As a result, he is tired of feeling ashamed for being an Arab. He changed his name for escaping Iraq to finally find it behind him: "The day I changed my name. Iraq was finally behind me" (58). Noura too argues: "We changed our names, to make them safe and pronounceable and relatable. We're losing too much/ we're losing each other" (58). As Roth argues, "if parents can't protect their own children, how far will survival push us? How far will divisions go?" (157). In fact, every word Noura says implies significance and further meanings not conceived by Tareq. By "we're losing each other" Noura is not confined to herself and her husband; she refers to Maryam. She argues with Tareq by asking: "You hate the girl because I love her?," a question that speaks volumes of the disagreement between her and Tareq. She adds that

she loves Maryam and is attached to her like a mother (59). When Tareq asks her: "Noura, what did you think was going to happen today?," she ingeniously replies: "It was a chance" (61). She means that it is a chance for Tareq to revise his situation regarding Maryam.

The play's finale unravels much of its complexities. Noura puts it explicitly to her husband: "We have a daughter" (61). She tells him that Maryam is their daughter and nuns took her from her arms before even naming her. She refused to "have an abortion" like most women and kept the secret for twenty-six years. She admits she is not a victim but a coward who could keep that secret from her husband. Unlike Ibsen's Nora who was "unfairly caged by the strict societal mores expected of 19th -century women," Noura is trapped in the prison of her own mind" (Kragen *para* 2). Therefore, Tareq, who has longed for having a daughter, finds himself a father to a daughter. Noura faces him with the fact that they, like Maryam, had sex before marriage. Accordingly, if he blames her for having sex and being pregnant before marriage, he should have blamed himself for the same thing. He is thus hoisted by his own petard; Noura tells him: "It was her or you?" (61). She asks him: "You have a daughter. What do you feel?" ...I've just lost the one woman who could have been mine!" (62). The stage directions tell us that "*Noura goes for her coat and purse*" (62) and "*goes to leave*" (63). She decides to follow her daughter, Maryam, who has been rejected by her real father, Tareq. Traumatized, she admits: "I'm so angry. All the time. Everyday I try to do the right thing and it's wrong? Was it wrong? I had a life! Endless love, endless cousins, neighbors, but did I ever have a private thought to wonder who I was? Twenty-six years I've lived in exile from myself" (63). This is the sense of alienation she has suffered from for years.

Noura thinks of what America has done: "Ripping us apart without a thought" and finds it a chance to "rebuild Iraq" since they still have "internet, cell phones," and "Facebook" (63). This is how a diaspora group can develop a frequent return movement to the homeland and keep their remote relationships, as negotiated above by Cohen. Noura asks Tareq: "Do we live for each other or for our

selves? I need a country in between” (64). He tries to comfort her offering her food. He speaks with her with the language she is nostalgic for, Arabic: “Ah’hebki. (*I love you.*) En’ti Mait’ta Men-El-Jou’e (*You’re dying of hunger.*) Khal’lini Aw’wah’kel’ki. (*Let me feed you.*)” (64). Noura, who has a more thorough vision than her husband, replies to him: “What I need is not at the table” (64). Although the play is “barely Ibsen, Noura’s husband is not nearly the forbidding puppet master of the Ibsen drama” (Pressley 6). He still has a sense of belonging to his wife and tries to please her.

After “*Tareq desperately offers Noura a plate of food,*” she calls upon Yazen: “Alex! There’s something you need to know” (64). Calling her son by his American name is an indication that she is going to continue her life in the United States as an American (Elnaggar 130). She does not ignore him but wants to tell him about every bit. At this moment, Tareq tries to dissuade her from divulging the secret of Maryam to him. This episode is reminiscent of Ibsen’s Nora who slams the door leaving her children behind, a fact many critics disapproved of. Unlike Ibsen’s Nora, Raffo’s Noura “has reconfigured nineteenth-century disbelief and disdain for abandoning children by placing it within the context of political violence” (S. Green 502). However, the play ends with Tareq’s and Noura’s calling each other by the name and language they like, a fact indicative of the play’s open end: “I don’t know how to let go and hold on at the same” (64). She does not know the answer to the play’s indirect question posed by its open end. The play’s end does not give us a definitive view. In one of her messages to me Raffo argues:

The play is meant to be left open ended with the question will Noura walk out on Tariq and her son to become her full self as a brave woman able to find her agency and go after Maryam? Or will she stay in a marriage after all Tariq said. We are meant to be left wondering if their marriage can repair, if they can still love each other after all that was said, if Tariq can accept Maryam and if Noura will ever become the woman she is capable of being. (Raffo to Sirwah)

Despite the playwright's unclear view demarcated by the play's open end, Jesse Green, like me, sees that Tareq, unlike Torvald, "has a modern disposition and seems comfortable catering to his wife" (*para* 10). However, the open end is open for discussion and all views are possible.

Conclusion

Noura, Heather Raffo's most personal play, has unravelled the four types of postcolonial diaspora tackled by Michel Bruneau and Robin Cohen—entrepreneurial, religious, political, and cultural. The play has pointed out that the characteristic features of diaspora demonstrated by William Safran and Cohen are applicable to all characters, particularly the title character. In doing so, many themes related to diaspora, such as panic, nausea, hysteria, violence, nostalgia, alienation, identity and hybridity, have been discussed. The paper has reached three findings.

First, cultural diaspora has been argued to have led to utilizing a great deal of Arabic words/expressions that may be entextualized with the passage of time. This has been manifested through the sense of alienation that has demonstrated the belonging and nostalgia reflected in hybridity. In other words, characters' nostalgia to Iraq and to conversing in Arabic has resulted in making use of many Arabic words and expressions that might be part and parcel of English with the passage of time. Among these Arabic words/expressions are *habibti mashallah*, *yellah*, *shukran*, *Bismullah Il Rahman al Rahim*, *elhamdulillah ya binti*, and *jidu*. Second, Raffo was shown to have reconfigured Ibsen's view of marriage and motherhood by posing her own novel one for discussion through the open-end technique. The playwright's view of having a child without having a husband had been secretly adopted by Noura twenty-six years ago and was supported by her biological daughter, Maryam, who appeared pregnant and unapologetic. This view of marriage and motherhood (that goes against that of Ibsen negotiated in his *A Doll's House*) has been left unresolved *via* the play's open end. Third, it was revealed that the playwright has managed to upend the dramatic conventions of gender roles by expanding the role of

the wife and marginalizing that of the husband. Indeed, it can be said that the character of Noura avenges women (who have been long marginalized and denied their voice in previous literary encounters) by upending the gender roles in the current play. The play has delineated the title character as a model woman who has unfailingly proven her husband to be invariably hoisted by his own petard. Tareq could not welcome Maryam, his biological daughter, for being pregnant without having a husband nor was he ready to forgive her for that act despite the fact that he himself had committed the same act before. Thus, Noura had kept her daughter's case as a secret to face her husband with his violence and intolerance by the end of the play. More evidently, Tareq, who has unjustifiably and unmistakably exercised violence in situational treatment of Maryam, falls in the same trap to be, like her, condemned.

Thus, the different findings reached by the paper complement one another in showing us how a postcolonial diasporic Iraqi-American play leads to different contexts with different results.

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