



**Alienation Representation in Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*****أ. إبتسام عادل (\*)****Abstract**

The present study tries to show how the theme of alienation is depicted in Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008); the novel received an Arab-American Book Award and the Hopwood Award of literature and was named one of the best novels of 2008 by the Barnes & Noble Review. In his article "On the Meaning of Alienation" (1959), Melvin Seeman classified six meanings or aspects of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation and self-estrangement. The purpose of this paper is to apply Seeman's theory of alienation to the novel under discussion. Jarrar's novel shows that five (out of the six) variants of alienation manifest in the two central characters; the Arab-American daughter, Nidali and her Palestinian father, Waheed. The former suffers from powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, cultural-estrangement and self-estrangement and the latter experiences powerlessness and meaninglessness.

**Keywords:** Melvin Seeman, Alienation, Randa Jarrar, *A Map of Home*.

**Introduction**

Alienation is the main form of rootlessness which appears as a main subject of many psychological, sociological, literary and philosophical studies. It is a sense of non-belonging or non-sharing. The idea of alienation and loss has been rooted in man's existence through ages and discussed in all literatures of all times. However, it surfaces and becomes a

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huge literary interest more than any other time because of the sudden changes that have stormed the modern world. In the twentieth century, the man "becomes alienated, estranged from self and world" (Taylor, 28). The experience of alienation has become a fact of life in the days of modernization. Due to its historical and socio-cultural reasons, the Arab-American literature could not remain unaffected by it.

By adopting Melvin Seeman's theory of alienation, the present study discusses and analyzes the manifestation of the different dimensions of alienation experienced by the main characters in Jarrar's novel A Map of Home. Waheed, the protagonist's father, has experienced harsh feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness that he passes into his daughter Nidali. Waheed's alienation is apparent at the very beginning of the novel, when he was forbidden from entering Palestine after the 1967 war, so his inability to control events and to expect future outcome emerges. Also, Nidali is affected by her father's alienation and entered the same spiral.

At the beginning, the research sheds light on the theme of alienation, its manifestations, reasons and its serious consequences. Also, it examines Randa Jarrar's life and literary career showing the major influences on her work and views. In addition, it tries to show how the protagonist and her father are both presented as alienated individuals.

### **Alienation: An Overview**

According to *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, alienation is defined as: "the state of being alienated or estranged from something or somebody; it is a condition of the mind". Encyclopaedia Britannica terms alienation as "the state of feeling estranged or separated from ones milieu, work, products of work or self". Linguistically, the word "Alienation" is derived from the Latin noun "alienatio" which means to take away, to avoid

or to remove. Psychologically, the word in general means to make estrange, or turn away the feelings or emotions of anyone, to turn into an alien or stranger, to create a state of aversive or hostile or unwelcoming. It also means the banishment of the emotions of hope and trust. Thus, all natural, desirable, or good relationships and connections have been lost.

One of the most significant articles of alienation is Melvin Seeman's "On the Meaning of Alienation" in which he presents six major dimensions of it: powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, self-estrangement, social isolation, and cultural estrangement. Powerlessness refers to "the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behaviour cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks" (1976: 403). Seeman remarks that this "phenomenon" has been first discussed by Karl Marx "in terms of lack of control" (1976: 405). But, Seeman takes this notion further than Marx claims. He confirmed that powerlessness is a socio-psychological phenomenon and not only a social condition in society. So, a man suffers from alienation in the form of powerlessness when he is conscious of the gap between what he would like to do and what he feels capable of doing.

Meaninglessness refers to "the individual's sense of not understanding events in which he is engaged" (Seeman, 1959: 786). It is the individual's failure to understand the events upon which life and happiness are known to stand. Eyal Chowder, a professor in political science, sees humans as "beings that require a meaningful existence" because without some form of meaning, it becomes impossible for people to keep on living (60). Max Weber, a German sociologist, historian and political economist, also defines the personality as "a concept which entails a constant and intrinsic

relation to certain ultimate 'values' or 'meanings' of life" (qtd. in Chowder, 69). Seeman states that meaninglessness occurs when "the individual's minimal standards for clarity in decision-making are not met" (1976: 405). In simple words, powerlessness refers to the sensed inability to control outcomes, while meaninglessness refers essentially to the sensed inability to predict outcomes. Thus, the individual's ability to predict social situations and the outcomes of his own and others' behaviours is weakened.

Self-estrangement is an "experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself" (Fromm, 120). For Seeman, a man is self-estranged when he is involved in an activity that is not rewarding in itself but is a tool in satisfying external needs, such as the need for money and security. It is a psychological state of denying man's own interests and seeking out external satisfying activities rather than internal satisfying activities. In simple words, self-estrangement is "the loss of intrinsic meaning or pride in work" (Seeman, 1976: 410). Thus, several sociologists put self-estrangement at a central position in the phenomenon of alienation as all the other forms of it seem to end in self-estrangement. Approving this belief, Blauner states, "When work activity does not permit control (powerlessness), evoke a sense of purpose (meaninglessness), or encourage larger identification (isolation), employment becomes simply a means to the end of making a living" (3).

So, when a man finds that his environment either the work place or the whole society unable to provide opportunities for the satisfaction of self-actualization needs, he becomes self-estranged.

Social isolation, for Seeman, is “the individual’s low expectancy for social inclusion and social acceptance, expressed typically in feelings of loneliness or feelings of rejection or repudiation”; this form of isolation is most prevalent among “minority members” and “strangers” and it is “usually accompanied by loneliness” (1972: 492). Social isolation refers to the feeling of being separated from one's community. Community is “one of the foundational social imaginaries of human society. It is the figure, the image, the form from which we construct our yearning for a meaningful, humane, and just social existence” (Farrar, 7). Therefore, it is from “community” that meaning is formed. Thus, social isolation stems from normlessness and results in self-estrangement and meaninglessness. When a man finds that he can no longer share the normative system for achieving his goals because of its ineffectiveness, he may develop his own norms to guide his behaviour. Having his own normative system, the individual feels himself different from others and becomes separated from the society.

Cultural estrangement is a central element of alienation construct. It has been viewed as a disconnection from popular cultural standards or a rejection of popular culture. According to Seeman, this form of alienation is characterized by “the individual’s rejection of or sense of removal from, dominant social values” (1991: 351). Hence, the culturally estranged individual feels that his ideas and opinions about the important as well as everyday affairs are different from those of people in his primary and secondary groups. So, a man becomes estranged from the society and the culture it carries. He feels himself confused and unstable and as a result unable to participate in and adapt to the community life. Thus, when an individual finds his ideas inconsistent with those of the masses, he becomes

estranged from the society and the culture it carries. People who do not share the common frame of the culture represent the true aliens in society.

### **Randa Jarrar (1978- ): Life and Literary Career**

Randa Jarrar is an award-winning Arab- American novelist, short story writer, essayist and translator. She was born in Chicago (1978- ) to a Palestinian father and an Egyptian- Greek mother. At a very early age, Jarrar moved with her family to Kuwait and she received her early education there in both English and Arabic. The invasion of Kuwait in 1990 by Iraqi troops obliged the family to flee to Egypt to escape the war. After two years, she returned to the United States with her family at the age of 13. Jarrar is a prolific writer for newspapers and magazines such as the New York Times, Oxford American and Rumpus. She won several prizes: the 2004 Million Writers Award for best short story online, the 2008 Chamberlain Prize, the 2010 Beirut 39 as one of the 39 most gifted writers of the Arab world under the age of 40, and the 2017 American Book Award.

Being born to a Palestinian father and an Egyptian-Greek mother and she herself is an Arab-American, Jarrar's identity and ethnicity have always played a significant role in her works. As she goes through the circumstance of multiplicity, the themes of alienation, dislocation and exile represent a significant part of her works. In her first novel, *A Map of Home* (2008), a coming-of-age story set in Kuwait, Egypt, and Texas during the 1990 invasion of Kuwait in the Gulf War with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a larger background, Jarrar portrays the struggles that her own

family faced. In fact, the novel examines the themes of alienation, identity and home while depicting Nidali's transition from youth to adulthood.

Later on, Jarrar wrote a collection of short stories called *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali* (2016) that explores the lives of Muslim communities. Jarrar depicts a memorable group of characters who have lost their way seeking their crooked routes to go back home. In "Building Girls," Aisha struggles with her Egyptian roots, and Perihan, who moved to the US, can't get rid of her roots fast enough; the childhood friends together find a common language for their past and sexuality. In "Lost in Freakin' Yonkers," Aida is disowned by her family after deciding to have a baby out of wedlock. She is alone and struggles to help herself feel less alone. "A Frame for the Sky," narrates a story of a Palestinian man who is forced to settle in New York after not being allowed to go back to Jordan. In the title story, Kinshasa is a biracial woman—half black and half Egyptian. After her father dies, she searches for her history in a missing photograph of Muhammad Ali posing with her father.

Jarrar's most recently literary work is her memoir *Love Is an Ex-Country* (2021). Largely inspired by the true story of Tahia Carioca, a famous Egyptian dancer and actress who made a similar trip in 1946, Jarrar travelled across the United States. She began in California and ended at her parents' home in Connecticut. Jarrar's journey becomes the framework for a memoir that reflects her identity and past. *Love Is an Ex-Country* is not a road trip memoir so much as a deep meditation on race, borders, abuse, trauma, survival and above all, homeland. Through a road trip, Jarrar highlights that "home" is more than just a physical space. The road trip is

not a starting point to a specific destination; but, it is an evolving struggle to claim, inhabit and feel a home.

### **Analysis of *A Map of Home* (2008)**

The concept of powerlessness and lacking control over events occurring in the large society is realized from the early beginning of the novel. The powerlessness of the protagonist's father, the first aspect of his alienation, is basically caused by an extremely influential political event, namely Nakba (the Palestinian Catastrophe) and post-1967 war. Among such uncontrollable events and its severe consequences that have been affecting everyone in the country, Waheed Ammar, a Palestinian who was forbidden from entering Palestine after the 1967 war, finds that he is neither effective nor powerful to have any influence upon these events. This clarifies that his powerlessness is a mixture of an indisputable fact and a subjective experience. Thus, his lack of control causes his powerlessness and therefore meaninglessness, social isolation and self-estrangement. Waheed unconsciously passes his alienation to his daughter, Nidali.

The names of the characters have been carefully chosen, as Jarrar situates naming at the heart of alienation. Waheed's powerlessness appears when he mistakenly thought that his new-born child was a boy. As a result, he hurried to fill the birth certificate and named her "Nidal," a masculine name meaning "struggle" in Arabic. After realizing that his child was, in fact, a girl, he changed it into "Nidali," the feminine version of the same name which means "my struggle". In fact, the name "Nidali" refers to both Waheed and his daughter's powerlessness. For Nidali, it indicates that her future belongs to her father and that he has some sort of control over her.

On the other hand, Waheed, like many Palestinians of post-Nakba and post-1967 war, is traumatized being unable to defy or even repel the attack on his homeland which leads him to the feeling of powerlessness. This trauma is the reason that he wants Nidali to be a boy or rather a man to fight for the cause of Palestine. Waheed himself failed to return to Palestine, so his ultimate hope is to raise a child who would achieve what he could not.

Waheed's powerlessness appears also in his adherence to forcing his daughter to pick one identity; an Arab identity. Although Nidali's first language is Arabic, it becomes an aspect of conflict and the possibility of being controlled or made to adopt an identity she is not entirely comfortable with. This clearly comes across the way her father expects her to use Arabic. For example, Nidali's father is outraged to find out that her English school has taught her nothing about Arab history but instead teaches her about the Vikings. He screamed "Goddamn your school! Goddamn the English, those pink pigs with their ugly history of atrocity and anguish! They've taught you nothing! Saturday you'll start a new school\_ an Arab school" (Jarrar, 66). Speaking, learning, and gaining an education in English represent a source of cultural estrangement for Waheed. English language may cause a disturbance in the Arab identity and, consequently, in everything related to the homeland. After they move to America, he still insists on her to write her compositions in both Arabic and English because he wants her to write about "something purely Arab, or relating to [her] Arabness" (Jarrar, 260). His attitude shows that her speaking and writing in Arabic will force her to stay connected to her Arab identity and therefore to Palestine. Thus, Arabic represents another aspect of Nidali's powerlessness as it becomes a way for Waheed to control her, to dictate what her identity is and to tell her what her future should be.

In addition, the characters have never experienced a strong community feeling where they can perceive their family, friends and neighbours as part of collective self that forms their identity and contributes to a feeling of belonging to a certain community. For instance, Nidali's father refuses to settle in Kuwait's Palestinian ghetto, as he "didn't want to live with his own because he never felt like he belonged with them" (Jarrar, 59). According to Edward Said, this estrangement is a common aspect of living in exile where one develops a sentimental hostility to outsiders, to even those who may be in the same predicament (178). Thus, the dislocation that Waheed and Nidali experience through their lives deprive them of a collective community with shared memories; an aspect that often shapes one's sense of belonging, so a sense of social isolation arises.

Waheed and Nidali's powerlessness is reinforced when the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait shows no sign of abating; therefore, Waheed's family is forced to flee their home in Al-Jabriya. From this incident, the sense of meaninglessness began to overwhelm Nidali and her father. They cannot understand the events in which they are engaged in as well as Nidali cannot predict the decisions that his father has to take. The country of their relocation is uncertain. She says: "I...wondered about the future. I wanted more than anything to know what was going to happen to us, to me" (Jarrar, 180). Waheed himself was confused and lost; he rejected the decision to leave Kuwait until the matter started to be complicated and food was running out.

After settling in their temporary home in Egypt for a few months while waiting for the family's return to Kuwait, Baba breaks Nidali's hopes of a homecoming when he got a call that assured that they can't return to Kuwait again. While weeping, Waheed told his family that "We were not

returning to Kuwait. We were not wanted there; no Palestinian person or family with a Palestinian member was" (Jarrar, 192). Being expelled from Kuwait enhances the sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness and self-estrangement inside Nidali and her father too. The pain of separation from loved ones, close friends and established lives always creates a sense of alienation. Consequently, this exile leaves the family with only one inevitable choice: Waheed would look for a job in America. Nidali discovers that America makes her enact losses on many levels; loss of home, loss of language and loss of her personality in language. In America, she struggles with a sense of cultural estrangement that is almost overwhelming, as she faces the struggle between legal and cultural citizenship. Being born in Boston makes her an American citizen, but on the other hand, she has not lived in the country of her birth after leaving as a young child, so she worries about the cultural transition. She says: "I was unsure of myself, of my appearance, of my accent, of my intelligence. I was unsure if I could really, fluidly transition again, and I was scared" (Jarrar 219). This quotation focuses on the anxiety that is related to the participation in the US social and cultural landscapes. The participatory anxieties about cultural citizenship are connected with the issues of language and generally belonging to the American society.

Despite living as a bilingual in Egypt and Kuwait, Nidali experiences this trait as an obstacle in a stronger sense when she moved to America because of her accented English that confirms her feelings of being an outsider. In this sense, Svetlana Boym, a Russian-American cultural theorist, playwright and novelist, says that "bilinguals have recurrent problems with self-translation" (258). At school, Nidali has been bullied by her American friends when they corrected her English every few minutes.

Being unable to express her personality precisely through the English language frustrates Nidali as it disables her from projecting her true self to her new surroundings. Consequently, Nidali feels confused and lost because of these linguistic and cultural barriers, saying to herself: "I wished, then and for many months later, that I would translate the way I was, my old way of being, speaking, and gesturing, to English: to translate myself" (Jarrar, 225).

Also, Nidali's cultural estrangement clearly appears in her first day at school when her all classmates stand up to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Supposing it is a prayer, she does not join in. And when the teacher sternly asks her if she had filled "a conscientious objector form," she apologizes and explains that she "didn't want to pray" (Jarrar, 220). But, she is severely reprimanded by her teacher saying that she has to participate, "It's not a prayer. It's a patriotic thing" (Jarrar, 220). According to her teacher, Nidali's small act of objection is not a sign of a democratic practice; it is rather a shameful ignorance of the socially accepted norms in the American milieu.

Such reality is firmly emphasized within racial communities; there are processes by which the individuals are differently incorporated or excluded from the class, gender or norms and thus they are placed on different sides of the dividing line between valued and devalued (Hong and Ferguson, 3).

## **Conclusion**

As this study has shown, the different dimensions of alienation, with the exception of normlessness, are reflected in Randa Jarrar's novel *A Map of Home* (2008). The most severe forms of alienation are experienced by

Waheed, the central character's father, as he feels disconnected from socio-political events, decision making, the surrounding society, his family and most painful of all, his self. Nidali, the central character, who desperately craves for the feeling of belonging, stability and home, suffers from severe loneliness, rejection and alienation. Her existence in different places throughout her life among strange people and many societies that she can't integrate into and her unfamiliarity of the prevalent social values intensify and complicate her alienation.

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