The Formation of In-Betweennees: Iraqi Immigrants' Identity in Heather Raffo's *Noura*

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Abstract: Heather Raffo, an Iraqi American playwright, focuses on Iraqi immigrants' issues and offers a glimpse into their lives by narrating their stories in her plays. Raffo's drama falls under the category of immigrant literature in which immigrants or their descendants are usually presented. In *Noura* (2019), Raffo depicts the story of a Christian Iraqi family who fled to the United States to avoid ISIS, a dangerous radical Islamic group. Raffo's *Noura* describes the notion of in-betweenness through its characters' dimensions. Depending on postcolonial theories, this paper analyzes and elucidates the situation of the Iraqi immigrants who fluctuate between the two different cultures of their homeland and their adoptive country. Moreover, this paper highlights how Iraqi immigrants occupy the place of in-betweeness and their in inability to forget their cultural belonging. Depending on Homi Bhabha's mention of the term 'in-between' space to refer to the 'third Space,' the Iraqi immigrant characters in *Noura* designate a transcultural contact zone, hybrid or 'in-between' space in which they initiate new signs of identity formation. The paper portrays how the cultural encounter causes a sense of confusion among the immigrants and how it affects the construction of their in-between or multicultural identity. Hereby, *Noura's* characters develop a new mixed form in which the boundaries between their Iraqi identity and their American identity are blurred and fluid.

Keywords: diaspora, hybridity, in-betweenness, ISIS, migration.

1. Introduction

Migration is the movement of one person or group of people from one place to another, and it has two types: national and international. People change their residence for varied reasons and purposes that could be political, economic, or educational. However, the main reason for migration is the search for a better life. Iraq is no stranger to migration. Throughout modern history, Iraq has witnessed successive periods of political unrest that increased with the advent of Saddam Hussein to the presidency in 1979. The ousted president and his administration were enmeshed in multiple wars, such as the Gulf War (1990-1991) and Iraq War (2003). Saddam Hussein's repressive regimes and previous wars urged people to migrate. The following period was not any good because Iraq was governed by incompetent governments, which lay behind ISIS' occupation of Mosul in 2014. ISIS, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which is also known by its Arabic acronym Daesh, is a radical Islamic group that emerged under the wings of Al-Qaida and succeeded

in capturing Mosul after committing genocides against its people. ISIS adopted the Salafi theology and promoted religious violence that ended the lives of thousands Yazidis, Christians, and Muslims; including children, women, and the elderly. Witnessing ISIS' atrocities, the inhabitants were forced to immigrate to other countries to save their lives. Consequently, many Iraqis are dispersed throughout the globe, experiencing diaspora. In *Noura* (2019), Heather Raffo portrays the experience of an Iraqi family who had to escape to the United States after sensing the danger of ISIS militias. Homi K. Bhabha and Frantz Fanon's conceptualization will be employed in analyzing the effects of migration and the cultural clash that accompanies it on the reconstruction of Iraqi immigrants' identity.

2. Methodology

To analyze *Noura*, the first postcolonial concept that should be clarified is diaspora, which "is the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions" (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin 1998:68). The term was initially used to describe the expulsion of the Jews and their dispersal after the Babylonian Exile. However, the concept of diaspora could be applied to millions of people living outside their countries borders. Because of their dispersion, the Iraqi immigrants turned into a minority oppressed by the Western culture that considered them the 'Other'. The post-colonial theorist Edward Said analyzes the concept of the 'Other' depending on the idea that the Western culture internalized its superiority over the Eastern culture through colonial discourse. This discourse stereotyped the indigenous Eastern people as sensuous and uncivilized individuals to distort their image, assert their inferiority, and dominate them. Hereby, the Orient people were treated as the 'Other' even nowadays.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, the postcolonial theorist, Fanon (1991:159) declares that a feeling of inferiority will arise within the colonial subjects (the colonized people) or the immigrants the moment they mingle with European individuals. Therefore, the immigrants may embrace European values, norms, and language. They may assimilate or even resist the Western culture to stamp out their feeling of inferiority. Consequently, the most common construction of the immigrants' identity is the hybrid formation, or the so-called state of 'in-betweeness.' From a literary perspective, one can imagine that the colonized and the colonizer are just like "two continents of experience and feeling unable to communicate" (Golding 1954:46) because of their two different cultures and languages, but they have to create a third place, or the in-between place, to understand each other. The term of the third place determines a transcultural contact zone and hybridity.

First of all, the term 'hybridity' seems to always be associated with Bakhtin's biological connotations: the biological mixing of two different genetic streams. Yet, the term could be extended in postcolonial theories to denote a cultural mingling and fusing between two different cultural values or practices from the Occident and the Orient. Hybridity could be defined as a cross-cultural exchange or the individual's capacity to form a new space in which he would be able to announce a

certain kind of balance between his local/national and global/adoptive aspects and attributes (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998:109-110).

Bhabha (1994:4), the Indian post-colonial theorist, states that hybridity takes place when an individual is caught between two different cultures, resulting in "double vision" or "double consciousness" and ultimately a merged identity. The Eastern people, especially Arabs, have their own norms, costumes, religion, language, and other features that differentiate their culture from any other culture. So, when a person immigrates to another country, he will encounter a new culture with all of its people's perspectives, traditions, norms, ethics, values, etc. The encounter indulges the immigrants in a double life, changing their identity into a new merged form (Zohdi 2018:146-147). In *Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994:1-2) articulates that living outside the borders or "'in-between' spaces provides the train for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself." Thus, he views identity, which is the traits, characteristcs, and beliefs that define individuals and differentiate them form others like gender, race, and nationality, as something fluid that changes with the exposure to different cultures. Yousef (2019:71) asserts that one's cultural milieu significantly influences the formation of self-identity. This influence extends to the selection of cultural affiliations, particularly for immigrants who may adapt their cultural practices to achieve a greater sense of congruence with the dominant culture of their new environment. Thus, living outside the borders of one's homeland affects the process of identity formation.

In "The World and the Home," Bhabha (1992:141) presents "home" as an essential thing to maintain a stable dentity. He states that "to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can "unhomely" be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres." These words indicate that people who immigrate to another country might not easily assimilate the culture of the new country because life outside the borders creates a sense of alienation and dislocation. So, their sense of being alienated and exiled drives immigrants to adhere to their indigenous culture and to glue themselves to its norms and practices. Being occupied by the homeland culture and the adoptive culture, immigrants might be prone to an identity crisis. The playwright, Heather Raffo, takes on the responsibility of illustrating the psychological conflict that immigrants go through because of her hybrid situation. Being born to an Iraqi father and an American mother, Raffo knows the real struggle that comes out of belonging to two different cultures. She is also conscious of the stigma that plagues Easterners in general and Iraqis in particular, as she relatively states:

> I am an American, but I became aware of myself as an Iraqi – had sense of myself as the "other" – for the first time during the Gulf War…. I'd walk down the street and over hear people saying, "let's go fuck the Iraqi." I realized from that point on that my cousins in Iraq…. would be viewed by many Americans as dark and dirty. I also realized that the only difference between my cousins and myself was the accident of where we were born (qtd in Renner 2005:20).

Therefore, she decides to address the psychological conflicts that Iraqi immigrants encounter throughout her plays.

3. Analysis

Iraqi modern history, as it has been noted earlier, has witnessed various wars and many political, religious, and social upheavals that have increased the number of Iraqi immigrants who were forced to evacuate their own home country and escape to get rid of the violence that surrounded them. Based on this fact, Heather Raffo sets *Noura* in New York precisely eight years after ISIS' occupation of Mosul, a futuristic time during which Mosul has been liberated and currently witnesses a reconstruction campaign. The play revolves around a Christian Iraqi family that consists of the father (Tareq), the mother (Noura), the son (Yazen), their Muslim friend (Rafa'a), and a Christian refugee called Maryam. Raffo presents Noura, the protagonist of the play, as a middle-aged woman who encouraged her husband to leave Mosul after sensing and experiencing the danger of ISIS militias. Tareq recalls:

> She [Noura] got us here, told militias at the door I was gone, packed our bags / in thirty minutes … I held Yazen / she shut the door … Threw her gun in the glove compartment. / I drove! (Raffo 2019:60).

In the previous quotation, Raffo employs the concept of diaspora "in the serves of the external homeland, such as the protection of an ethnic minorities [a Christian family] living in another state" (Baubock and Faist 2010:11) since the Christian protagonist of the play, Noura, was forced to evacuate her home and immigrate to the USA because of ISIS militias who might kill her entire family or captivate them if they stayed in Mosul.

Upon their arrival in the USA, Noura is shocked by the fact that Arabs, especially Muslims, receive harsh treatment due to the racist mentality that prioritizes and prefers the Christian/white race over the other races. According to Noura, migration officials have sympathized with her only because she is a Christian white woman; otherwise, she might be neglected, dehumanized, and marginalized like so many other people. She might even receive a different treatment or face a different destiny. Raffo (2019:48) detects the racism of the Americans towards Muslims through the following lines:

> NOURA: ….You think they are so easy on Muslims? The people at immigration? I hated their questions. If I were dark, they would have asked me.
>
> TAREQ: Asked you what?
>
> NOURA: If I hurt somebody! If I did anything wrong. They only asked if I had been "raped." They looked so sorry for me – a Christian, Iraqi, a white woman.

In the so-called land of freedom and opportunity, Arab immigrants are treated as second-class citizens. They are denied access to any opportunity that may improve their socio-economic conditions. It is worth mentioning that American laws have imposed menial jobs on the new non-European arrivals as part of a plan prepared to undermine their status. Raffo illustrates this point through her main characters.

Noura, for instance, used to be an architect. However, she is prevented from practicing her profession. Tareq, who used to be a surgeon in Iraq, is currently a hospitalist in an E.R., a job that he has attained after getting American citizenship. Rafa'a, Noura's childhood friend, has also experienced different rasict behaviors. One of the incidents that Rafa'a recalls as an obstetrician is a baby being born in a cab because the father could not tolerate the idea that a Muslim doctor would deliver his baby.

Despite all these downsides, the USA still seems to have a place within which the Arabs could find their last sky of hope and express themselves. New York is the third place or the "in-between" place where Arabs can fly together freely. It is the only place where Christians and Muslims can gather around the same table, regardless of their religious and ideological differences. Rafa'a tells Noura, "Look who's here tomorrow: myself and Maryam, one Muslim and one pregnant Christian refugee. Maybe New York is the one place we can still celebrate together!" (Raffo 2019:41).

According to Rafa'a, the USA has become a shelter for refugees who seek a safe place to live. Thus, it could be viewed as a contact zone, the place "in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 2008:6). Based on this definition, the relationship between immigrants and natives is not devoid of oppression and marginalization. Raffo manifested the economic marginalization of Iraqi immigrant through Tareq, who despite of his prestigious profession as surgeon, was obliged to work in a restaurant at a subway station before getting his American citizenship.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1991) suggests that the Western White colonizers are not only treating the colonized as merely an object without a soul or a means of hard labor, but also making him believe from a cultural perspective that the colonizer's culture is more valuable than any other culture. Hereby, he suggests that this is the reason that makes the colonized lose his own history, culture, and consequently trying to wear the colonizer's mask over his own. Fanon states:

> I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me man to acknowledge that I am human of all worth , all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world , that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into the white world ... Then I will quite simply try to make myself white: that is, I will compel the white (qtd in Dini 2017:5-6).

In other words, Fanon illustrates that when two cultures clash, one culture is considered inferior to the other. Being inferior to the American white individuals, the immigrants imitate or adopt the language, norms, and customs of the American society in an attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture and get rid of their inferiority. Arabs wear the American's mask to hide their indigenous identity. Noura suffers from an inferiority complex that becomes evident when she presents hereself to the Americans as "a Christian immigrant from Iraq" (Raffo 2019:39). By declaring her religious affilation, she tries to prevent the Americans from viewing her as an Arab muslim, a view that may worsen her life conditions.

According to Elnaggar (2023:119), the phrase that Noura states in one of her conversations with Rafa's "my dying identity" indicates that she is aware of the shifting in her identity. On the other hand, Noura's family tries to assimilate into American society, especially Tareq, who states that he is "tired [of] feeling ashamed for being an Arab" (Raffo 2019:70). Therefore, they adopt the English language and use it in their daily speech for two reasons. Firstly, to be part of the American society, and secondly, to encourage their son to acquire the language and thus protect him from the stigma of being an Arab refugee.

> MARYAM: I'm curious, you speak mostly English, in the house?
> NOURA: Tareq insisted when we first moved.
> TAREQ: For Alex.
> YAZEN: So I wouldn't grow up sounding like a foreigner, now they only speak Arabic when they're telling secrets (Raffo 2019:54).

They even changed their names after gaining American citizenship to Nora, Tim, and Alex to sound more American. Unlike her family members, Noura could not fully assimilate into the culture of her host country and refused to be called by her American name or to refer to her family members by their new names. Bhabha proposes that throughout the colonial encounter, the native/colonized imitates the colonizer, but with specific nuances and differences. This means that the colonized becomes 'almost the same' as the colonizer, but not 'quite' because of the different hegemonic political and cultural systems that govern both of them. In other words, the colonized develops a hybrid identity which is a mixture of assimilation and resistance (Nayar 2010:28). Thus, through the process of mimicry, the Christian Arab Noura would be torn between her assimilation, deeper resistance, and mockery (sly civility). This state of the Noura's mimicry and mockery is what Bhabha calls 'hybridity.' The following quotation proves this point:

> NOURA: You're hoping I answer to that name, so you put a darling with it.
> TAREQ: Habibti, your passport now says Nora.
> NOURA: You changed my name against my will – call me by my real name (Raffo 2019:8).

It is worthy to mention that Nora becomes a mini-copy of her new dwelling with all of its ethics, traditions, and cultural life. She becomes a liberated strong woman who used to smoke in front of her family members and friends. Also, even in her own house that holds an Arabic taste, Noura used to speak only in English with her son so that he would not sound like a foreigner (Raffo 2019:54).

Although Noura tries to assimilate with the American language to cope with her new environment, to continue her life, to have a job, and to escape from the state of being inferior, at the same time she resists to be a complete American individual. She never forgets herorigins or her Arab culture. She lives the state of "in-between." Noura is torn between her past life and the new adoptive one, as she is controlled by both of them which means that Noura has a hybrid identity. Her hybridity is crystalized through a communal building that she designs to live with her husband's extended family. The building is a mixture of Iraqi and American features. It reflects Noura's states of "in-betweenes." Though Noura has settled in

New York, she insists on decorating her house according to the traditional Iraqi style, centered on a minimalist approach. She dresses her son, Alex, in a Chaldean costume for the children's Christmas pageant mass. Living outside the borders of her homeland has created a sense of alienation inside the heroine of Raffo's play. Noura tries to eradicate her sense of alienation by clinging to her past and cultural heritage. Noura's cultural attachment is shown through her Christmas Eve celebration, as she forces her son to fast and cooks Iraqi cuisine to revive the traditions she has been raised up to. Noura's cultural attachment is rejected by all the characters in the play, especially her son, Yazen, who tells her, "Nobody fasts on Christmas eve! Can't you be American for once?!" (Raffo 2019:37).

Noura is an excellent example of hybridity. Despite mastering English, she incorporates Arabic words and sentences into her conversations with the other characters (Tareq and Rafa'a) to express her Arabic roots and not forget them. She uses 'code-switching' that can be defined as "the act of inserting words, phrases, or even longer stretches of one language into the other" (Brown 2000:67). The definition has been extended in the postcolonial studies to highlight the idea that 'code-switching' (CS henceforth) occurs with those who are "bi-linguals/ multilinguals or bidialectals who juxtapose elements from two or more languages varieties in a single utterance or piece of discourse" (Albirini 2016:216). Nora's family members use their first/native language (Arabic) within a stream of utterances in their second language (English). CS occurs as an accumulation of their migratory experience for a long period of time, and therefore their consciousness truly becomes bi-lingual.

Noura is full of CS Arabic/Iraqi words and phrases as they are crystallized in the text in italics through Raffo's blending between the Arabic and the English language of her characters' daily speeches to intensify their biligual identity. Words and phrases like: Bismulla il rahman al Rahim /bism allah il rahma:n al rahjm/: in the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful (Raffo, 2019:13), Shukran ya Noura /ʃo:kran ja: nwra:/: thank you, Noura (p.18), Habibti /habjbtj/: my sweetheart (p. 20), Da'esh /da:ʕiʃ/: ISIS (p. 23), jidu /dʒido:/: grandfather (p. 36), Yella /jlah/: let's go (p. 36), Joeh'reen'na, Aou'ja'tna, Adh'falna /dʒo:re:na ʕo: dʒa:tna ʔatfa:lna/: our neighbors, our streets, our babies (p. 47), Anni Khalsani /ʔani xalsani/: I am done or I am exhausted (p. 47), Thoula /θwla/: fool (p. 47), Hi Khethbeh /hi: kiðba/: it is a lie (p. 47), Khal'lini Aw'wah'kelki /xali:ni: ʔawkilki/: let me feed you (p. 77), Bel-afia /bilʕa:fia/: Bon appetite (p. 53), Mah'Aq'der /ma: ʔaqdar/: I can't (p. 53), Sud'deq /sudiq/: really (p. 53), Hamel /hamil/: pregnant (p. 54), and qahbeh /kahba/: prostitute (p. 65). In addition, there is a repetitive reference to Arab meals, especially the Iraqi cuisine like: claeche /klidʒa/: an Iraqi cookie stuffed with date paste or walnuts and sugar (p. 30), Kubba mosul /Ku:ba mwsul/: a middle Eastern meat pie (p. 52), Macloubi /maklwba/: an upside-down dish of rice served in the Levant (p. 52), Samoon/sumuwn/: Iraqi flatbread (p. 52), Pacha /patʃa/: a cooked head of lamb (p. 53), and dolma /dwlma/: a dish of different vegetables stuffed with meat and rice (p. 53).

Hereby, CS makes *Noura's* text one of the best examples of textual hybridity and multiculturalism. Furthermore, the pronunciation of Noura's family members

of specific English words indicates their hybrid accent. Noura states, "They hear my accent they want to know where I'm from" (Raffo 2019:39). Yet Noura refuses to forget her past and tells Rafa'a, "I am trying to hold one small piece of my past together. If I let go it dies / with me" (Raffo 2019:39). Noura clings to her past and tries to preserve her cultural traditions because she fears losing her Arabic identity. Noura's past prevents her from accepting Maryam's pregrenancy. Maryam, who turns out to be Noura's illegitimate daughter, represents the antithesis of the traditional Eastern woman, who is expected to preserve her chastity until marriage. Therefore, when Maryam announces her out-of-wedlock pregnancy without shame or regret, Noura resents her because she knows the Iraqi community will no longer accept her daughter. She tells Maryam, "But you can't go back home now, unmarried, with a child you won't be accepted" (Raffo 2019:23). Noura knows this fact because she has done the same act in her adolescence. When Noura had been engaged to Tareq, she got pregnant with Maryam. According to the Iraqi cultural and religious traditions, this is adultery. To protect herself and her family from such a scandal, Noura waives her daughter to an orphanage ran by her aunt. Surprised by Noura's reaction, Maryam responds that she does not intend to return to Mosul. ISIS destroyed Mosul and turned it into an uninhabited place. The community, which she once lived in, is now diminished. Maryam goes a step further and expresses her disappointment in Noura, who upholds Eastern customs and norms despite her progressive personality on social media.

Rafa'a and Maryam share similar views concerning Mosul. Therefore, he encourages Noura to forget her past and move on. He tells Noura, "There is no going back, Noura. You can live amongst Arabs, or Christians, or Iraqis anywhere in the world it will never be the community it was, not again" (Raffo 2019:39). The Iraqi immigrants cannot return to Mosul not only because of ISIS but also because they have changed. Their encounter with other cultures has transformed them into a new hybrid form.

Like Rafa'a and Maryam, Tareq is grateful to be in New York where he has reconstructed himself and forgotten the pain of the past. He urges his wife to overlook the past and to be part of American society. However, Noura compares their attempts to assimilate with American society to the ISIS' invasion of Mosul. ISIS invaded Mosul and other parts of Syria to form their Islamic republic or to form a homeland at the expense of other countries. She states, "We're the same! Animals fighting for a place to belong…" (Raffo 2019:47). She repeatedly asserts, "I don't want to forget! I'm trying desperately to remember who the hell I am" (Raffo 2019:48). Noura experiences an identity crisis that is caused by her state of "in-betweeness." She is caught between two cultures and struggles to find a common ground on which she can balance her desire to hold on to her culture with her family's request to erase the memories of the past. She states, "I don't know how to let go and hold on at the same time" (Raffo 2019:78). She cannot realize how to reconstruct her lost identity.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper divulges Iraqi immigrants' conditions as depicted in Heather Raffo's *Noura*. Through the lens of postcolonial theories, the paper shows that Iraqi Arab immigrants are generally treated as inferior individuals outside the borders of their homeland. The sense of inferiority leads them to occupy the space of 'in-betweeness.' The in-between status is a position that Noura's family members occupy. The paper traces how Noura's immigrant Iraqi family members have created their in-betweeness when they attach themselves to their original homeland and to their new dwellings.

The paper concludes that immigrants' state of in- betweenness takes two different formations through Raffo's characters. The first form is represented a a resistant and an assimilated self which is found in Noura's character. Noura rejects the idea of assimilation and tries to maintain her own Iraqi identity, but unconsciously she embraces the language and norms of American culture. Although migration to the USA was her own choice, she becomes caught between the two cultures of her own Iraqi homeland and of her host country. Noura involves a confused manner concerning both palces and how to identify herself with each one of them. Noura has a confused identity results in her assimilation with the host country as a result of her sense of inferiority and in her exclusive style of life in which she detaches herself from the host society and practice her own Iraqi culture within her house. While, she keeps nurturing a sense of superiority over the mainstream culture in the host country. The state of "in-between" has made her experience an identity crisis.

The second form is the hybrid one through which the other characters of the play come to maintain a good relationship with their home, but at the same time have a complete indulgence and assimilation with the host society with a sense of responsibility towards it. Therefore, the paper proves how Nour's husband, childern, and her best friend have accepted the idea of assimilation and reformed their identities into a new hybrid form. The cultural clash reconstructed their identities and created a new blended form.

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