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CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO DIVERGENT WORLDS: THE TRANSNATIONAL TERRAIN OF DISPLACEMENT IN JASMINE WARGA'S OTHER WORDS FOR HOME

Djawida Rebaa*

Abstract. As a rich and multi-layered literary tradition, American literature has always and long been a genuine reflection of the nation's multicultural diversity taking as its chief concern to probe in a multitude of ways the experiences and voices of individuals of various backgrounds and cultures. Driven by war, conflict or voluntary migration to seek better opportunities, the immigrant experience particularly still plays an outsized role in contemporary literary discourse. The displacement of those individuals creates a serious tension quite often leading to a sense of loss, confusion and mainly disorientation in their attempt to navigate the new order. The intersection whereby various cultures and languages meet exemplifies a quintessential theme in the literary creations of writers who have either lived between two worlds or have a bicultural upbringing, straddling multiple contexts and identities. This pattern of thought is pervasive within the literary works of Jasmine Warga who offers romanticized depictions of dislocation, loss and belonging in her narratives. Through a transnational lens, this study seeks to cast light on the transnational experiences and triumphs of Jude, the novel's female protagonist who is forced to navigate the complexities of cultural displacement. By analysing the character's struggles with language, culture, belonging and adaptation, the present study aims to elucidate the multi-layered spectrum of transnationalism as well as the experiences of individuals caught between two worlds.

Keywords: Belonging, Displacement, Forced Migration, Home Longing, Transnational Contexts

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**МЕЖДУ ДВУМЯ РАСХОДЯЩИМИСЯ МИРАМИ: ТРАНСНАЦИОНАЛЬНОЕ
ПРОСТРАНСТВО ВЫНУЖДЕННОГО ПЕРЕМЕЩЕНИЯ В РОМАНЕ
ДЖАСМИН ВАРГИ «OTHER WORDS FOR HOME»**

Джавида Ребаа*

Абстракт. Американская литература как богатая и многослойная литературная традиция на протяжении долгого времени служит подлинным отражением мультикультурного многообразия нации, сосредотачиваясь на осмыслении опыта и голосов людей различного культурного и этнического происхождения. Опыт иммиграции, обусловленный войнами, конфликтами или добровольной миграцией в поисках лучших возможностей, по-прежнему занимает значительное место в современном литературном дискурсе. Вынужденное перемещение таких индивидов нередко порождает глубокое напряжение, приводящее к чувству утраты, растерянности и дезориентации в процессе адаптации к новому социальному порядку. Пересечение различных культур и языков представляет собой ключевую тему в литературных произведениях авторов, которые либо жили между двумя мирами, либо выросли в условиях бикультурной среды, балансируя между несколькими контекстами и идентичностями. Данный способ осмысления отчетливо прослеживается в творчестве Джасмин Варги, которая в своих произведениях предлагает романтизированные образы отчуждения, утраты и поиска принадлежности. Используя транснациональную перспективу, настоящее исследование направлено на выявление транснационального опыта и личных достижений Джуд - главной героини романа, вынужденной преодолевать сложности культурного перемещения. Анализируя борьбу героини с языком, культурой, чувством принадлежности и процессом адаптации, данное исследование стремится раскрыть многослойный спектр транснационализма, а также опыт людей, оказавшихся между двумя мирами.

Ключевые слова: принадлежность; вынужденное перемещение; принудительная миграция; тоска по дому; транснациональные контексты

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İKİ FƏRQLİ DÜNYA ARASINDA: JASMIN WARGA-NIN OTHER WORDS FOR HOME ƏSƏRİNDƏ MƏCBURİ KÖÇKÜNLÜYÜN TRANSMİLLƏTÇİ MÜSTƏVİSİ

Cavida Rəbaa*

Abstrakt. Zəngin və çoxqatlı ədəbi ənənə kimi Amerika ədəbiyyatı uzun müddətdir ki, millətin multikultural müxtəlifliyinin həqiqi əksi olmuş, müxtəlif mənşə və mədəniyyətlərə malik fərdlərin təcrübə və səslərini müxtəlif aspektlərdən araşdırmağı əsas məqsəd kimi qəbul etmişdir. Müharibə, münaqişə və ya daha yaxşı imkanlar axtarışı ilə baş verən könüllü miqrasiya nəticəsində formalaşan immiqrant təcrübəsi müasir ədəbi diskursda hələ də mühüm yer tutur. Bu fərdlərin məcburi köçkünlüyü çox zaman gərginlik yaradaraq itki, çəşqinlik və yeni sosial düzənə uyğunlaşma prosesində dezorientasiya hissələrinə səbəb olur. Müxtəlif mədəniyyət və dillərin kəsişdiyi məkan iki dünya arasında yaşayan və ya bikultural mühitdə formalaşmış, çoxsaylı kontekst və identikliklər arasında mövqe tutan yazıçıların əsərlərində əsas mövzulardan biri kimi çıxış edir. Bu düşüncə modeli Jasmin Warganın ədəbi yaradıcılığında açıq şəkildə müşahidə olunur; müəllif öz hekayələrində köçkünlük, itki və mənsubiyyət axtarışını romantikləşdirilmiş şəkildə təqdim edir. Transmillətçi yanaşma əsasında aparılan bu tədqiqat romanın qadın baş qəhrəmanı Jude-un mədəni köçkünlüyün mürəkkəblikləri ilə üzləşərək qazandığı təcrübə və nailiyyətləri işıqlandırdığı hədəfləyir. Qəhrəmanın dil, mədəniyyət, mənsubiyyət və adaptasiya ilə bağlı yaşadığı çətinlikləri təhlil etməklə, araşdırma transmillətçiliyin çoxqatlı spektrini və iki dünya arasında qalan fərdlərin təcrübələrini aydınlaşdırmağı qarşıya məqsəd qoyur.

Açar sözlər: mənsubiyyət; köçkünlük; məcburi miqrasiya; vətən həsrəti; transmillətçi kontekstlər

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1.Introduction

Much like the diverse threads that compose the fabric of America, its body of literature comprises a collection of rich, varied and distinct narratives that seek to reflect the interconnected experiences of various literary expressions. Over the course of many decades, the American literary landscape has always been home to a multitude of voices, particularly within distinct ethnic literary canons. A powerful testament to the persistent diversification of the American literary landscape is the birth and flourishing of Arab-American literature. Through generations of shared experiences, the unique journey of Arab Americans has given rise to a powerful and singular ethnic identity that has endured and evolved for years. Born from the complex history and diverse realities of migration and its lasting shadow, Arab American literature has produced captivating literary compositions that explore the spirit of resistance, identity crisis, cultural adaptation and the ongoing search for belonging. From this typical literary tradition have emerged salient figures like Khalil Gibran, Mohja Kahf, Ameen Rihani, Leila Halaby and Diana Abu Jaber whose lasting contributions continue to manifest.

In comparison to the long-established presence of African American literature, Arab American literature is a newer arrival, its emergence is largely attributable to the narratives shaped by waves of immigration to the United States. Emerging mainly from the late twentieth century, this literary arena explores a plethora of themes like identity, belonging, home longing, dislocation, cultural hybridity and a wealth of other concerns related to a specific category of individuals (Arabs) with one foot in homeland and another in the host country. As a matter of fact, contemporary Arab American literature offers a fresh perspective deeply rooted in the immigrant experience. Far from being static, this specific literary canon continues to give birth to new generations of writers, including figures like Jasmine Warga, that are adding their narratives by addressing themes and dialogues in ways that resonate with the present day.

A common thread emerges when carefully examining the narratives from various generations of immigrant Arab American writers, specifically a collective challenge in grappling with the complexities presented by living in two different worlds each defined by its distinct cultural and linguistic features. Through their narratives marked by richness and variety, Arab American authors have not only enriched American literary tradition but have also created pivotal channels through which diasporic writers can articulate their unique experiences. This recurring pattern of thought and spirit constitutes a central element within the literary compositions of Jasmine Warga. In her narratives, the author features the experiences of dislocation, sense of loss and search for belonging. From a transnational perspective and relying on a

qualitative research approach, this study seeks to cast light on the transnational experiences associated with crossing borders of Jude, the novel's female protagonist who is forced to traverse the complexities of cultural displacement. By focusing on the specific challenges the protagonist faces with regard to home longing, identity rupture, belonging and adaptation, this study elucidates the multifaceted nature of transnationalism in addition to the experiences of people living with ties to two separate spheres.

1.1.Statement of the Problem

The central problem motivating this study is to examine and argue that Jude's identity, profoundly lived between two worlds, is powerfully shaped in *Other Words for Home* through her experience of forced displacement and transnational existence.

1.2.Research Questions

- How does Jude navigate life between her homeland (Syria) and the new environment (USA)?
- In what ways does displacement influence Jude's evolving identity?
- To what extent does engagement with American cultural elements function as a dual means for Jude's cultural adaptation and a formation of the transnational self?

2.Displacement and Transnationalism: A Complex Relationship

The profound interplay between displacement and transnationalism has always been placed at the heart of postcolonial literature discourse, mirroring the profound divisions with regard to societal ruptures and blended selves born from colonialism enduring legacies. With an eye to Arab-American literary canon, the narratives of displacement and transnationalism hold the lion share as they create a vital core in their attempt to picture the complex journeys of immigrants as they navigate unfamiliar cultural environments while still preserving ties to their heritage.

In her article entitled "*Transnationalism and Mental Spaces: A Perspective on the Global Mind*", Hasmaṭuchi (2024) offers a particularly insightful definition for understanding transnationalism asserting; "Transnationalism refers to the interconnectedness of people, ideas and cultures across national borders" [Hasmaṭuchi, 2024, p.196]. She also addressed a related concern, framing transnationalism as a complex phenomenon characterized by individuals concurrently upholding ties to diverse places and cultural spheres. She further elaborates that this approach related to the movement of people extends beyond the literal crossing of physical borders to include the navigation of mental and psychological boundaries.

In light of this foundational understanding, and in a parallel vein, it can similarly be argued that transnationalism, as a burgeoning field in literary studies, has blossomed as a vital framework that centres on narratives that

render the flow of individuals and ideas beyond national confines. Such a lens brings to light the profound and frequently unanticipated mutual reliance between different communities and cultural groups. It provides a critical analysis of the various ways identities are formed and consistently redefined within an era characterized by widespread global ties.

An essential reality of transnationalism, a significant outcome of displacement in the postcolonial and globalized era, is that it profoundly shapes the identities and human experiences depicted in postcolonial literature. The legacies of colonialism often destabilized traditional social orders, leading to compelled relocations, the widespread formation of diasporas, and the birth of blended cultural environments. These displacements whether driven by political turmoil, economic necessity or the persistent consequences of colonial demarcations ultimately lead individuals and communities to forge bonds and affiliations that extend across national borders.

Accordingly, postcolonial literature takes as one of its chief concerns to probe some immediate truths about the complexity of navigating these transnational realities. This typical concern has long been articulated and endorsed by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in their quintessential book, *The Empire Writes Back*, widely perceived as a landmark publication in the field of postcolonial studies. Ashcroft et al., 2002, emphasized place and displacement as core subjects. According to them, colonialism involved more than simply seizing territory, it also forcefully redefined indigenous landscapes, fundamentally impacting people's connection to their environment. It was these shifts in how places were perceived, they maintained, that directly prompted the widespread relocation of peoples.

These migrations, in turn, became central to comprehending fractured selves and identities, the formation of communities spread across various lands mainly diasporas, and the complex efforts to find a sense of belonging as depicted in postcolonial literary compositions. It is evident how these profound disturbances directly lead to a deep crisis of identity, as they highlight, "It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being" [Ashcroft et al., 2002, p.09]. This insight elucidates that the detachment from familiar places and cultural spheres, a direct result of displacement, fundamentally challenges one's sense of 'who they are' and 'where they truly belong', forcing individuals to traverse fragmented identities and engage in complex negotiations of belonging in new, often alien, settings.

As evidenced by Saha (2015) in his study on displacement and its consequences in the postcolonial discourse, an individual's psychological development is intrinsically tied to their lived environment. According to Saha (2015), individuals typically develop a peaceful rapport with their

environment, a peace that is profoundly disrupted by displacement, thereby generating psychological disturbance [Saha, 2015, pp.319-320]. In a similar spirit, Owen (2024) considers that displacement is a multifaceted phenomenon that forces individuals to leave places that hold important social meanings for them. He also argues that displacement place people in a complex situation that breaks the continuous ties they have with their familiar environments resulting in feelings of loss, disorientation and confusion.

Indeed, the emotional and mental impact of forced relocation frequently proves as devastating as its more tangible physical manifestations, frequently giving rise to a unique form of exile. This pattern of thought strongly aligns with Edward Said's thorough examination of forced displacement and exile, which he argues transcends mere geographical removal from one's country of origin. Similarly, Said (2000) posits that exile is a psychological disposition and an existential modality thereby emphasizing the complex and persistent mental and emotional detachment that accompanies the physical rupture. Consequently, the deep scars that emerge are not simply external wounds, but also deeply embedded psychological conditions that continually influence an individual's identity and self-perception when a stable home is absent. This insight on displacement finds powerful resonance with Karkaba (2010) who considers the experience of being uprooted as not solely a physical transfer, but it also involves a profound dislocation of identity, language, and cultural legacy.

In their study entitled *Displacement and Inequality: An Analysis of the Negative Consequences of Displacement at Society's Margins*, Perälä et al. (2023) argue that displacement ruptures an individual's sense of self, requiring those affected to reconstruct their identity in the face of experiences of loss, recalled memories and the new challenges posed by the new order. This arduous process of reconstruction is heavily marked by constant negotiation between cultural retention and adaptation, rendering identity formation as not fixed but rather a fluid dialogic practice. Such a condition leads to a sense of alienation and an arduous struggle for individuals to redefine themselves within a novel context where the very notion of home remains fluid, rendering their state of being without a truly fixed sense of belonging.

W.E.B Du Bois's theoretical concept of double consciousness offers a powerful framework for understanding the complex identity struggles that arise from displacement and fractured selfhood in transnational contexts. His notion of two souls, two selves describes the duality and internal conflict experienced by individuals, caught between different worlds, who see themselves through their own cultural identity and through the lens of a dominant, often oppressive, society. This dual awareness creates a tension between pride in ancestral heritage and the struggle to confront racial prejudice

and social exclusion. According to Du Bois (1997), the two-ness is not merely a social condition but a psychological duality born from exclusion and uncertain belonging, something that resonates with the displaced subject’s negotiation of selfhood within new environments. Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness highlights the challenge of balancing these two selves without fully losing either, revealing the complex psychological experience of living between worlds.

3.Negotiating the Liminal in *Other Words for Home*: Jude’s Journey through Displacement

As formerly highlighted, Arab-American literature constitutes a significant avenue for investigating the multi-layered aspects and experiences of both displacement and transnationalism. It is chiefly concerned with elucidating the complex struggles and adjustments central to the immigrant experience. This body of work, alongside other similar literary outputs, as articulated by Sellman (2018) is “born of mass migration and the encounter with borders and borderland”. Originating from periods of extensive human movement, frequently driven by conflict, political instability, appalling economic needs or the enduring echoes of colonial rule, literature of migration vividly depicts the multifaceted realities of living at the intersection of various spaces, languages and cultures.

This ambiguous state of being that pictures an uneasy mode of existence is powerfully illuminated by Gloria Anzaldua in her insightful theory of Borderlands that vividly captures this lived experience and complex reality. In her hybrid seminal work, Anzaldua (1987) offers a thorough understanding of the divergent frontiers people experience be they cultural, geographical or psychological. She also argues that a border, in its complexity, symbolizes more than a basic line of division. According to this theorist, it is at this specific unique point that ones’ sense of self is shaped and continually redefined, thereby undergoing profound transformation.

Moreover, *Other Words for Home* is a novel penned by Jasmine Warga, an emerging prominent figure within the contemporary Arab American (Anglophone) literary tradition. Born in Ohio to an American mother and an immigrant Arab father, Jasmine Warga herself experienced a bicultural upbringing. This dual cultural background has powerfully influenced her creative and literary vision, offering a genuine insight into the complex journey of individuals that embrace diverse cultural identities. In her literary creations, she addresses a host of concerns including home yearning, the complexities of belonging, the formation of dual identities, displacement and other profound human experiences, all of which are placed at the heart of the immigrant lived experience. As a matter of fact, *Other Words for Home* tells a story of a young Syrian girl whose life took an unforeseen turn when she and her pregnant

mother were forced to leave their hometown Syria, seeking refuge in the United States for a new beginning with relatives in Ohio, owing to political instability and adversity.

The novel is structured into six main sections, each primarily focusing on the female protagonist Jude, her family, and their collective experiences. In the first section, titled *Changing*, Jude is introduced as a seventh-grader student residing in a Syrian coastal city positioned on the Mediterranean Sea. Known for attracting numerous tourists, this coastal city is described by Jude as a place where “*the rest of Syria comes when they want to/breathe*” [Warga, 2019 p.06]. Early manifestations of transnational identity within the narrative arise from compelling political circumstances that were at the core of the protagonist’s relocation from her place of origin and integration within a transnational diasporic community. Indeed, within the same section [1], indications of violence and protests -much like the devastation seen in Aleppo- are presented as significant threats to the family’s wellbeing. Consequently, following a notable protest in a nearby city, Jude’s parents decide that she and her pregnant mother must leave Syria and flee to Ohio (United States) so that to join her uncle Mazin. It is at this pivotal moment that Jude faces a painful reality of having to leave the ones she loved behind, particularly her brother Issa, whom she calls her “*favourite person in the whole world*” [Warga, 2019, p.14], her father whom she affectionately calls Baba and her hometown Syria.

By positioning Jude within two profoundly divergent worlds and cultures, Warga skilfully elucidates the many ways transnationalism operates within the narrative. This deliberate artistic narrative choice serves to elucidate Jude’s journey through displacement and its consequences as Jude should traverse the surrounding tensions and blend the dissimilar elements of her original upbringing with the new expectations and evolving demands of her adopted environment. The protagonist’s (Jude) experience is not a mere fictional demonstration but also serves as a powerful tool for understanding how individuals reconcile their ties to various cultural backgrounds that transcend singular national boundaries. Throughout its six distinct sections, the novel illuminates the formation and evolution of Jude’s identity across diverse national contexts, highlighting the ongoing processes of cultural negotiation and cross-border connections that mark and shape the transnational existence. Rather than remaining an unchanging figure, Jude’s character is not static and resists any fixed condition, demonstrating continuous change and profound growth.

The thoughtful placement of Jude in two contrasting and geographical landscapes was of paramount importance to shed light on the complex manifestations of transnationalism. This reality as evidenced by Jude is apparent in her growing sense of home, her evolving identity and personal

relationships. From the outset, Jude maintains a strong attachment to Syria. Her identity is deeply grounded in her homeland, leading her to reflect upon past memories of her life in Syria, her family members, and the community from which she originated. Despite her fascination with the first glimpses of America and its opulence, Jude interpreted this experience as a profound betrayal of her origins and sense of home. There is a fictional instance that highlights this reality in which uncle Mazin displayed immense care for her pregnant mother and provided particular consideration to Jude with the aim to interest her in technology. Nonetheless, Jude strived to mask her wonder, an internal conflict she described in her words “*a betrayal of Baba. / a betrayal of home*” [Warga, 2019, p.76].

A further illustrative fictional scene elucidating Jude’s strong bond with Syria is presented in section two of the novel entitled *Arriving*, specifically on the night before school commences. As a strong thunderstorm hit the neighbourhood, Jude commented on its fierceness and her mother (Mama) reminded her that they encountered strong storms in their homeland too. Later on, Jude seeks clarification from her mother regarding any expectation to dislike America. Mama explicitly expresses her desire for Jude to retain her memory of home. Jude expressed her sorrow in a deeply sincere statement: “*If you did not want me to forget, we shouldn’t have left*” [Warga, 2019, p.96]. This revealing conversation illuminates Jude’s internal conflict of loyalty as she perceives the acceptance of the new order and surroundings in America as an act of abandonment towards her heritage. Indeed, her former declaration illustrates that she became disconnected from her place of origin as leaving, in her eyes, entails losing ties with home.

In a similar spirit, Jude’s mother expressed a similar worry regarding her brother Mazin, observing his immense fascination with the American lifestyle and its inherent prosperity which according to Mama indicated a distancing from his cultural background. A particular narrative instance within section two vividly elucidates this reality. Mama directly questioned Mazin about the lack of items from their original home in his US house: “*I don’t see anything from home here*” said Mama, Mazin replied to her: “*This is home*” [Warga, 2019, p.88-104]. Consequently, Mama implicated Aunt Michelle, claiming that her too American nature “*made Mazin forget his home*” [Warga, 2019, p.89-90].

This specific fictional interaction offers insights into divergent ways individuals confront displacement and the varying perspectives of defining home in the immigrant experience. In fact, Mama’s concern about Mazin embrace of American culture and lifestyle and detachment from his roots could be considered as a testament to her own fears and anxieties about cultural loss. Her direct inquiry about the absence of Syrian items from their home

demonstrates her strong belief that home is linked to cultural markers of their homeland that help preserve their own heritage. Conversely, Mazin's assertion '*this is home*' elucidates a significant redefinition of belonging. According to him, the notion of 'home' has moved beyond its geographical and cultural boundaries, now being strongly rooted in the environment where he has established his life with his wife Michelle and daughter Sarah. To this end, this captivating juxtaposition between Mama's deep yearning for cultural continuity and Mazin's novel sense of self clarifies the conflicting journeys undertaken by individuals in their transnational experiences.

What is more is that Mama and Mazin are not alone in this struggle. Jude, as a displaced character, encounters a multitude of challenges and difficulties, notably deep home longing and considerable adaptation difficulties, particularly in her initial stages in the United States. Her struggle and journey are further complicated by her mother's constant reminders of home coupled with the fear that Jude might, similar to her uncle Mazin, become detached from her origins. This tension is best articulated by Mama when she laments "*I know you will have a better life here./but that breaks my heart*" [Warga, 2019, p.96]. This illustration elucidates the existential dilemma central to the transnational journey principally for immigrant parents. While Jude's mother acknowledges that their present environment offers more favourable circumstances for their well-being, her fear that Jude might fully immerse in the American community and forget about her home renders the deep paradox characteristic of being displaced.

America

*like every other place in the world
is a place where some people sleep
and some
other people
dream* [Warga, 2019, p.82].

As her relocation journey progressed, Jude's sense of amazement started to decrease as she realized that America exemplifies a range of dichotomies and paradoxes, a perception that extended her initial understanding and assumption regarding the American community. As highlighted above, her assertion that America like *every other place in the world* contains individuals who *sleep* and *dream* hints at a critical shift in her understanding, moving beyond a simplified perception of the U.S as a land of opportunities and affluence. Moreover, Jude has come to terms with the diverse cultural nature of the American society and that her status as a displaced person was a shared reality for many.

*Sometimes it feels like
the whole world*

lives at [her] new school [Warga, 2019, p.113].

In her experience of otherness as a result of displacement, Jude was exposed to peers from various backgrounds and cultures: Grace from Korea, Omar from Somalia and Ben from China. In light of this, it should be stressed that Warga’s skilful narrative choice is apparent in her decision to not only highlight the multi-layered fabric of American society, but also to effectively demonstrate that the inclusion of students from divergent nationalities was of significance to Jude’s integration into her new social environment.

*I am scared that the only place
in middle America that I belong
is a middle eastern restaurant...
and at once, I feel at Home ...
the smell of cumin and thyme,*

The strong scent of Arabic coffee brewing on a stove [Warga, 2019, p.76].

Furthermore, a significant device deployed by Warga involves the imaginative portrayal of a Middle Eastern Restaurant. This corner serves as a welcoming and gathering space for individuals like Jude and her family to enjoy dishes that directly connect them to their home, offering a source of consolation as they navigate their displaced lives. It is within the confines of this restaurant that Jude finds not only comfort but a sense of home in the companionship of her first authentic American friend Layla whose Lebanese parents own and manage the restaurant.

Beyond its culinary function, the restaurant offers a vital forum for immigrants to assemble and find echoes of their home. In a similar spirit, this pattern of thought is further elucidated by Nurhusna (2022) who emphasized the middle eastern restaurant significance as “a space to pour out their worries when the new culture they face is not as good as their previous life” [Nurhusna, 2022, p.18]. The creation of a fictitious restaurant is a common artistic strategy deployed by writers from diasporic communities or with bicultural identities. This practice is similarly observed and evident in the literary compositions of Diana Abu Jaber whose identity, similar to Warga, is shaped by a bicultural upbringing. In like fashion, Tabačková (2018) examines Abu Jaber’s deployment of food, culinary elements and fabricated restaurants which serves a dual function: Firstly, it serves to evoke cherished memories loved ones and secondly it serves as a “device for self-identification” [Tabačková, 2018, p.65].

*Mama does not find her recipe online.
She finds it in her memory,
her heart* [Warga, 2019, p.150].

A considerable amount of critical ink has filled the pages of Arab American literary compositions to elucidate the profound connection between culinary traditions and cultural legacy. Writers in this specific literary canon strategically deploy this interplay as a powerful instrument to bridge the gap

between homeland and hostland. Food as Omeye (2025) puts it “extends far beyond its nutrition value” [Omeye, 2025, p.108] to constitute a powerful reservoir of shared memories and defining cultural traits. Following the same pattern of thought, Berrebbah (2020) asserts: “Culinary practice as cultural heritage also elucidates a sense of space and belonging and reiterates affiliations to home” [Berrebbah, 2020, p.116].

An additional affirmation of cuisine’s deep resonance with cultural identity, coupled with its ability to offer comfort amidst the agony of displacement finds expression in Mama’s way of remembering recipes. Drawing them not from an online source, cookbook or mere instruction but rather from her internal reservoir, as evidenced in the aforementioned excerpt, it becomes obvious that Mama preserves traditions and memories as a crucial piece of her identity. In a context heavily marked by displacement, each food ingredient and flavour of her cherished recipes is, according to her, an echo from home, truly residing in her memory and heart.

4. Jude’s Evolving Character in a Displaced Context

By the same token, the evolution of the narrative is paralleled by Jude’s growing and maturing character. The fifth section of the novel titled *Growing* by the author highlights Jude’s adoption of novel roles and responsibilities. The author’s strategy to cast Jude in the role of Plumette is insightful. This tactful choice portrays Jude’s growth by requiring her to embody a character who is reflective of her own journey. In the face of various challenges and hurdles, Jude displayed both courage and growth through her deeds. Initially, Jude is often mirrored as struggling with her new surroundings and ongoing search for home that render her sense of displacement. However, her confrontation with a stranger’s rude and insensitive remark marks a critical shift. In a notable fictional scene, Jude accompanies her mother to a medical visit whereby her mother learns she is expecting another girl. As they walked home, Jude and her mother were thrilled by the news. Unexpectedly, a stranger accosts them:

Hey! She says,

pointing a finger at Mama’s face.

You don’t have to wear that anymore [Warga, 2019, p.100].

The stranger’s forceful assertion that Mama is in America and does not have to wear the veil because she is now free led directly to Mama’s disorientation, an act that was lamented by Nurhusna (2022) as a “picture of islamophobia in America” [Nurhusna, 2022, p.18]. Amidst Mama’s state of confusion, Jude courageously asserts their happiness to the stranger: “*Excuse us. Thank you. We are Happy*” [Warga, 2019, p.101]. This crucial fictional scene exemplifies Jude’s ability to confront dangers and react against perceived threats in her

cultural context, delineating her character growth from a child adjusting to displacement to a person dedicated to her family’s protection and safety.

In spite of facing an aggressive stance against the veil, Jude remained entirely undiscouraged as she displayed a further act of bravery by intentionally choosing to wear it. This decision immediately followed her first menstrual period which had occurred overnight. When Jude had noticed the first spots of blood, she decided to take the headscarves from her suitcase. A wave of joy enveloped when Mama learnt about Jude’s coming of age and deliberate choice to wear the veil. She reassured Jude of her continued maternal affection that Jude will always *“be her baby too”* [Warga, 2019, p.222] as she aids her wrap and fold her turquoise headscarf, a colour that is always associated with peace and harmony. This specific colour could symbolically signify Jude’s journey towards finding harmony between her past identity and evolving self.

Correspondingly, it is worthy of note to state that Jude’s intentional choice to wear the veil/hijab was met with scrutiny from various individuals from her surrounding environment. Despite encountering scepticism and pressure mainly from her relative and instructor, Jude’s firm determination that her choice to wear the veil showcases a profound personal commitment. In an attempt to convey appreciation for Aunt Michelle for her care and worry, Jude reassured her that her headscarf would not exemplify any obstacle to her life or personal journey. In a similar vein, Jude expressed her strong desire to align herself with influential women who wear the veil in the following expressive lines:

*I cover my head like other
strong
respected
women have done before me
like Malala Yousafzai
like Kariman Abuljadayed
like my mama* [Warga, 2019, p.236].

For Jude, the chaotic array of challenges appears boundless. Nonetheless, she demonstrates both bravery and maturity amidst every adversity she encounters. Jude’s determined efforts to integrate into her school environment while embracing her new identity and individuality, she encountered a significant challenge: the audition for the school musical. Despite her friend Layla’s warning about the competitive nature of the audition, Jude maintained a strong determination to participate. She explained to Layla that she was devoid of fear, considering the profound adversities she had already endured: her displacement from a war-zone country, the departure from her homeland and the agony of her brother’s disappearance. This lived experience is powerfully rendered in the following excerpt:

*I left home, I flew
across an ocean,
My brother is missing,
in the middle of a war zone,
What is there left to be afraid of?* [Warga, 2019, p.205].

Another pertinent underlying factor contributing to Jude's participation in the audition stemmed from a linguistic motivation, specifically her determination to reveal to her peers her proficiency in English. In doing so, Jude had the opportunity to display her newfound confidence in English, a remarkable progression from her first day in America when she could only respond 'yes' to the officer inquiry about visiting relatives. This reality finds expression in Jude's assertion:

*Words, all kinds of them,
bubble up in my throat
but nothing comes out* [Warga, 2019, p.64].

In essence, the audition offered Jude the opportunity to showcase her talent, courage and independence to her peers. Indeed, the audition, more than a mere performance, became a crucial avenue for Jude to assert her identity among her peers. Through this courageous endeavour, Jude succeeded in transforming a personal challenge into an act of profound self-expression and redefining her presence beyond her early struggles. A clear display of Jude's determination and courage for the audition emerges as her last name was mispronounced by Mrs. Bloom when she called her to the stage. This fictional scene proves crucial, for instead of allowing the incident to disorient her, Jude converted it into a triggering motivator for her audition. This reality is eloquently conveyed in her words:

*I am going to give her
give everyone
a reason to know how to say my name
my full name* [Warga, 2019, p.223].

The fictional scenario examined clearly exemplifies Jude's significant character development and sense of growth, highlighting her maturity and emergence of her autonomous self. It mirrors a shift in her identity from a newly displaced child marked by astute awareness of external perceptions, to a young girl who displays pride in her decisions, though they may meet with disapproval or they may not be validated by her surrounding circle as they are perceived as abnormal in her new cultural context. In doing so, Jude affirms a construction of an evolving transnational identity that portrays a symbol of resilience and a redefinition of home within herself.

The novel's concluding chapter titled *Living* is heavily symbolic as it is filled with expressions of profound courage and hope. A pertinent illustration of the

enduring power of hope and Jude’s personal growth and maturation is evidenced in the birth of her younger sister Amal. The name Amal, derived from Arabic, directly signifies hope in English, it grants the new born baby girl immediate importance and symbolic weight, embodying a profound sense of optimism not only literally as a new life but also figuratively as a fresh beginning for Jude and the entire family. Accordingly, the presence and arrival of the new born Amal plays an outsized role in motivating Jude to embrace and integrate hope into her life with a newfound level of maturity and courage.

A preeminent reaffirmation of hope when Mama and Jude receive a video call on the computer from Issa confirming his well-being and his improved circumstances. The interaction not only provided a glimpse of reassurance but also revealed a change in Issa himself with Jude’s assertion that “*He seems more at peace/ than [she has] ever seen him*” [Warga, 2019, p.323]. The newfound tranquillity in Issa coincides with Mama’s shift in perspective, who despite her initial apprehension regarding America, now eagerly wants Issa and Baba to join her in Ohio. Additionally, Jude’s character demonstrates a developed sense of maturity, a remarkable contrast to her previous views in the novel, as she recognizes Issa’s cause as genuinely worthy and they “*should be proud of him*” [Warga, 2019, p.326]. These fictional interactions demonstrate Jude’s growth of character, her pivotal development marks her shift from navigating displacement to actively shaping a positive future.

5. Conclusion

Jasmine Warga’s *Other Words for Home* eloquently renders the multi-layered experience of displacement through Jude’s eyes, a young Syrian immigrant who navigates the challenges of relocation to America amid the Syrian conflict and political instability. The novel vividly captures the far-reaching emotional as well as psychological effects of forced migration, offering a powerful portrayal of the agonies strongly rooted in the immigrant experience. As it also pictures the many ways Jude, through her lived experiences, struggles with losing her home, leaving her family behind and the destabilization of her cultural self. Her growing character, filled with symbolic moments, from a state of displacement to an embrace of new opportunities exemplifies the arduous path from home longing to forging a redefined sense of belonging. Through a fictitious character, Warga voices some immediate truths through a broader narrative about how various individuals in transnational contexts carry pieces of each with them as their lives are marked by a collection of memories, experiences, and relationships that span two countries, cultures and languages. All in all, the novel depicts how displacement- as a double-edged sword- can both enrich and challenge a young person’s sense of self and belonging in a transnational context.

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