

**Exile and the Disabled Body in Randa Jarrar’s “The Life, Loves, and Adventures of Zelwa the Halfie”**

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to analyse the notion of exile as one of paradox, of being both within and without, as a disconnect between the mind and body. Edward Said has noted that exile is “strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience”. Said’s suggestion of a mind/body split gives us room to consider the sense of self as already in-between, as the exiled ‘I’ attempts to find a home within a new land and a new body. Exile from one’s own homeland is also exile from one’s body in Arab-American author’s Randa Jarrar’s latest novel *Him, Me, and Muhamad Ali* (2016). The collection of stories moves away from reclamatory approaches to ethnic identity and examines the characters’ trajectories of selfhood through a gendered, racialized, and embodied image. Disability features as a site of tension, a site of interrogation of Zelwa’s (the protagonist) sense of self. It is a peculiar coming-of-age narrative in the sense that it is an anti-Bildungsroman, a probe into bodies that fail to be integrated, assimilated, or acclimated to American culture, while also failing to maintain their association with an Arab collective identity. Jarrar’s text underscores and redefines the “I” of the Arab immigrant exploring transgenerational trauma and reclaiming her identity through celebrating the body.

*Keywords:* Arab women’s literature, body, disability, identity

As Edward Said notes, “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (2001, p. 173). This is a paradox in itself, as the head and heart need to find a place to merge. Exile can be understood in theoretical terms, but language often fails to capture the experience of exile, of existing outside of one’s home, of being away from one’s roots in a state of liminality. In the case of refugees, it’s a case of needing to move without necessarily wanting to, while with immigrants it’s a complex issue that spans generations and includes a state of limbo, a constant search for a homeland, for a sense of belonging. The resulting hybridity is a state of being that generations of immigrants carry within their bodies and is often “compelling to think about”, and in Randa Jarrar’s case, to write about in her narratives.

Exile has accrued sundry meanings in the fields of sociology and literary studies. In contemporary literary and sociological studies, exile is a multidimensional and bi-lateral phenomenon...in the post-structural philosophical point of view, ontologically, exile is examined as a fundamental state of being, the outcome of the essential human condition. Exile can also be examined as a self-imposed departure from one’s homeland, race, and milieu, and termed self-exile. It is often described as a form of protest against the social and political circumstances which the person does not feel are suitable for their life. Self-exile is a feeling of estrangement from a society where one feels unable to adjust to new circumstances, triggering the establishment of a buffer between self and society. Gradually, such accepted alienation becomes a fact of exile, and ultimately self-imposed exile develops into a particular lifestyle (Singh, 2016, p. 3).

For the purpose of this paper, exile and self-exile will be examined as a continuity, that is to say, one leads into the other. Jarrar is an Arab-American author of the critically-acclaimed *A Map of Home* (2008), *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali: Stories* (2016), and most recently of her memoir *Love is an Ex-Country* (2021). As an Arab American her work often engages with issues of identity, ethnicity, and sexuality. Arab-American literature typically considers issues of cultural hybridity and that particular state of constant in-betweenness. Nathalie Handal describes Arab-American writers as experiencing “an ongoing negotiation of the self as they explore their many experiences, visions, and heritages, and bring wholeness to their multiplicity” (2001, p. 60). Because of this very specific state of being-in-flux, the circumstance of multiplicity and an understanding of exile is written into the body in Jarrar’s work.

Bodies are vessels in which we experience the world. There are multifaceted ways in which bodies articulate themselves and find a language to voice experiences of both otherness and disability. How might attention to disability expand our understanding of hybridity and exile? Disability hardly features in narratives of exile, and if it does, it is as a tragedy, the amputation of a limb, the mutilation of the body and by extension of the self. In such cases, experiences of disability are not a focal point. In Jarrar’s work, however, disability is featured through the body of Zelwa, a young Arab woman who is born a “halfie”, half human and half transJordanian ibex. As the protagonist goes through her experience of exile and disability, she arrives at a politics of self-exile from an ableist community that leaves no room for her. This self-exile allows her room to find her authentic voice and embrace her body and identity, a process that ultimately puts an end to oppressive societal expectations and the exiling of her body. In many ways, the narrative echoes memoirs such as Eli Clare’s *Exile and Pride* (2009). Clare’s memoir deals with disability and exile through a personal chronicle that examines institutional violence against disabled and queer bodies. Similarly, Jarrar’s fictional text offers an instance where exile and disability coalesce within one body.

### Zelwa's Exile, Disability, and Journey

Anglophone Arab women's narratives are usually concerned with verbalizing the state of the immigrant, where the individual is caught between home and a state of diaspora. At times, this state of marginalization may also be exacerbated by a state of liminality. Liminality in its basic definition evokes a state of being limited in relation to boundaries and spaces. This marginalized zone is where minorities, disabled and queer bodies exist. Most literature by Anglophone Arab women writers like Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Fadia Faqir, Dian Abu-Jaber and others has concerned itself with re-writing the image of the Arab woman and narrating gendered relationships. These studies are generally viewed from a postcolonial critical lens of exile, home and patriarchal relationships in both private and public domains. There is an urgency to rethink the links between exile, gendered relations, home, and the disabled/queer body. Bodies that are othered are racialized, gendered, queered, and crippled. A reading of Jarrar's work is enriched by an understanding of the body as exiled and marginalized by both the private and public domains, at home and outside the home.

According to scholar Dalal Sarnou (2014), most Arab Anglophone literature deals with immigrant narratives and exile. Works produced by Arab women living in the Diaspora are referred to as immigrant writings, but building on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature (1986), one may relocate these narratives. To refer to minor literature theory is to stress the handling of a given language by a writer who is not native to a particular language. Deleuze and Guattari's theory simply places immigrants as standing between the culture of origin and that of the adoptive country, and equipped with first-hand knowledge of both, they assume the role of mediators, interpreters, cultural translators and double-sight observers of the two cultural entities.

This "doubling" of sight is necessary when reading Zelwa's state of in-betweenness. If we consider that immigrants are standing in-between cultures, then disability itself may be a place of in-betweenness, at least in the case of the protagonist in Jarrar's lone story that deals with disability. In every story presented in her work, Jarrar places her female protagonists at the centre and brings their bodies into conversation with their social roles, their identities, and their particular articulation of self. The text of "The Life, Loves, and Adventures of Zelwa the Halfie" explores the state of being an immigrant as perpetual exile from one's body. The story is narrated through Zelwa's contemplative voice, beginning with "All I have ever wanted is to feel whole" (2016, p. 189). Sensing the limitations of her halfness, Zelwa struggles with finding acceptance with herself. She strives to feel complete despite her obvious dividedness, in both her physical and mental states. Her body is half "Transjordanian Ibex and half human", which initially labels her as a marginalized member of society. Whatever she does, she continues to feel as though she does not belong. There are others who live in the same type of body that she occupies: "There are about five thousand of us halfies in the country, mostly residing in Wyoming, Montana, Texas, the Bay Area, and New York" (2016, p.190).

The use of the word halfies and not "disabled" is significant. Many Disability Studies scholars have considered a character's disability as a way to add complexity to the narrative. It is a "narrative prosthesis" as Mitchell and Snyder argue, "a crutch upon which...narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (2000, p. 49). If we apply such analyses to Jarrar's story, we find that Zelwa's half-formed body functions as a "narrative crutch" that allows one to consider the complexity of embodiment in the case of immigrants. The material and lived body (in the text) becomes a site of exile that is attended

by a constant feeling of estrangement. This is reflected in Zelwa's "general feeling of difference" (2016, p. 192).

While Jarrar's employment of disability as a metaphor might be problematic for many Disability Studies scholars, another way to consider Zelwa's half-body is to question what sort of potential spaces does the disabled body open up? For instance, Michael Bérubé considers how "narrative deployments of disability do not confine themselves to representation" (2016, p. 2) but can "also be narrative strategies, devices for exploring vast domains of human thought, experience, and action" (2016, p. 2). As such, Zelwa's half-body places her in a position of exile but also, and very importantly, allows her room to explore her identity and sexuality. She goes on many dates and drives her "disability-equipped van, which allows me to accelerate with my hands and provide my lower body lots of room" (2016, p. 191).

Zelwa's disability van is an analogy that relates to her ability to move between spaces as an immigrant. The circumstances of hybridity and disability relate to a third space, one in which the establishment can use the hybrid, disabled individual in order to establish its boundaries of normalcy: "the disabled body multiplies the possible terms of disavowal for both the colonizer and the colonized; because disability can be a more evident signifier even than the colour of one's skin, it becomes a visual means by which to define normalcy and, by extension, nation (Lacom, 2002, p. 140).

Zelwa's body is clearly a halfie, half-formed, half-abled, and half-allowed to fit in. She is in a constant state of non-belonging, of homelessness, unable to fit adequately in her home or her body. The body itself becomes a site of anxiety and an inability to feel whole. As the narrative progresses, Zelwa's understanding of the body shifts to accommodate new definitions of a body that can house her. She has to make a home out of her body.

Chris Jenks's *Transgression* provides a solid approach to the general subject of transgression, incorporating an overview of the term itself and its multiple definitions and understandings. He proposes a straightforward definition, "Transgression is that which exceeds boundaries or exceeds limits" (2003, p. 7). Given that definition, Jarrar's characters are transgressive in their positionality and their rejection of boundaries and limits. While choosing not to define her sexuality at first, Zelwa soon identifies herself as a bisexual woman. Being a disabled, queer female places her at the very bottom of the normative hierarchy; to others, there was nothing normal about her. Soon after she reclaimed her body in its disability, she scared away suitors with what they would consider confusing confidence in spite of her Otherness. Being a family attorney and financially independent, she was successful and stable in all aspects of her work life. Even with all her accomplishments and sense of autonomy, the fact that she is a halfie will always restrain her societal acceptance and belonging. Casted off as Other, Zelwa attempts to find her place within the community as a disabled, queer Ibex.

Interestingly, her father refuses to accept her bottom half, which is quite ironic, considering Zelwa eventually finds out that he is also a "halfie". The denial of his truth creates an identity crisis which he then conveys onto his relationship with his daughter. Fearful of the possible discrimination and maltreatment by others, he keeps his halfness hidden from his daughter. This silence and shame soon manifest into a turbulent relationship between the two, and a projection of the father's insecurities onto Zelwa. The father's inability to fully accept his Otherness then, gets translated into antagonistic behaviour.

The difference between Zelwa and her father is mainly in the way that they deal with disability and identity, making it clear that it takes more than one generation for an individual to accept this state of otherness and exile. It shows in Zelwa's refusal to adhere to cultural and familial norms: "I have gone to a couple of self-acceptance conferences for other half beasts, or halfies, as we prefer to call ourselves" (2016, p. 192). Zelwa's commitment to finding a path begins to flourish half-way through the narrative. This changes the course of what seems to be a coming-of-age-story to a counter-bildungsroman. Rather than adhere to the common narrative of a Bildungsroman, Zelwa's journey resists the common trope of marriage. By applying a different narrative form to the traditional Bildungsroman, this "process of revision" is necessary for "bending and stretching the form so that it reveals the multiple patterns and figures hidden under the generic 'carpet' that has served to define a largely Eurocentric and patriarchal form" (Bolaki, 2011, p. 12).

To break away from the common marriage-trope, Jarrar stretches the traditional definition of happiness to interrogate compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness. Disability Studies scholar Robert McRuer identified a "compulsory able-bodiedness," where "being able-bodied means being capable of the normal physical exertions required in a particular system of labour" (p. 91). What Jarrar does in her narrative is subvert and challenge the two normativity expectations as Zelwa asserts that she realizes she is "label-free" (2016, p. 193). Zelwa begins to consider that her body's capacity for sexual exploration surpasses her expectations. In spite of her feelings of inadequacy, she begins to explore "a sort of rite of passage for me" (2016, p. 195). The textual choice of the words "rite of passage" reminds one of the Bildungsroman trope.

Jarrar uses Zelwa as a modern representation of disabled and queer women who are trying to reclaim their Otherness and gain back their agency through self-discovered confidence. In the beginning of the story, Zelwa expresses her desire to feel "whole". There is a constant need to rid herself of the diverse obstacles she faces because of her disability, mostly relating to her dating life. The theme of halfness extends throughout the story to include her sexuality as a bisexual woman. Upon coming out to her father, he replies, "It's not enough you're a halfie? You want to be half gay and half straight too?" (2016, p. 194). The father's comment reflects the normative requirement to box and label identities; those individuals that do not meet normative criteria cause, in normative mindsets, a confusion that develops with their attempt to grasp the unfamiliar. This lack of understanding usually causes overwhelming feelings of mental and emotional exile of the marginalised individual within a community, as well as the sense of physical exile within oneself.

Zelwa struggles to find acceptance within the family but feels rejected and exiled from home. Her father asserts that she must have an operation that can "fix" her, but she refuses to agree to the surgery that would alter her physical (and subsequently emotional) being. Her father's wrath at her for refusing to adhere to his patriarchal choices and norms leaves her dejected: "I wanted to run after him and scream...I wanted to tell him that I was beautiful, and of all the people in the world who've pointed and laughed at me, he had been the first" (2016, p. 199). Her father's rejection is not just the rejection of one individual by another, but is reminiscent of the Law of the Father in Lacanian psychoanalysis. What Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father refers to the influence of cultural and social law within the family, something which has traditionally - especially within patriarchal societies - been associated with the actual figure of the father. The father's rejection, then, is a metaphor for society's rejection of Zelwa (Hook, 2016, p. 113).

Thus, the father attempts to enforce society's normalcy and its patriarchal values. Only when Zelwa manages to leave her father's expectations and judgement behind is she able to grow into her full self, allowing her identity as a woman to emerge. Zelwa's progression into self-acceptance is an ongoing process, "I wish I could tell you that all wounds were healed after that, wish I could say that I accepted myself unconditionally from that moment on, but it remains a daily effort" (p. 200). Living without her father's approval, she is in a state of exile, constantly looking for fragments of her self that will allow her to live a life that she feels proud of.

Thus, her success is important to her as an attorney, and she eventually begins to feel a sense of freedom previously unexperienced. With the father-figure gone from the narrative, the symbol of patriarchy and discrimination begins to depart her psyche. Having finally found her voice and her ability to refuse a surgical intervention, Zelwa begins her growth as a well-rounded character. She chooses self-exile and to remain outside the margins of normativity. Knowing full-well that the surgery her father suggests could "cure" her body from its deformity, she still refuses to adhere to the surgical fixing of her body. This choice is not arbitrary. The narrative seems to suggest that the alteration of her body will coincide with the self-betrayal of her identity.

Bodies that are different in the text are not just ibexes, but also mermaids. The text references mermaids being perceived as attractive and exotic, while ibexes are not. This selective bias digs its roots deep within society. Tying mystical creatures to seductiveness is choosing to disregard their apparent Otherness because they are interpreted as part of a sexual fantasy. Ibexes are considered disabled bodies in Jarrar's text, while mermaids are not. Zelwa questions the reasoning behind people's sexual attraction towards mermaids in her attempt to find common ground between them and halfies—who are more likely to be viewed as undesired. The difference lies in the mythological versus lived realities of bodies that are marked as other and deviant. Zelwa's intimate and fated meeting with a mermaid changes her self-understanding and allows her room to accept her otherness and difference by loving another's "different" body: "I stared at her tail's scales" (2016, p. 200). It is in this recognition of the other that Zelwa realizes she has found love and self-love, both feeding into each other. It is her first act of self-love, choosing to love the mermaid, and they end up living together, creating a home, exiled from others:

On Sundays we do yoga in our back yard. I put my arms over my hooves and she puts her arms over her scale and we chant...she reminding me: 'There is oneness in duality. Nothing is one and nothing is double. You are both'. Then, we do our salutations, our bodies like mirrors facing the whole, brilliant sun. (2016, p. 201)

A home is created after a long sense of loss and exile. This new home is where she finds her sense of belonging, and in the simple, daily routines of "mornings, she brews coffee and nags me to buy toilet paper" (2016, p. 200). Zelwa's long desire for normalcy culminates in a disabled and queer relationship, where the two women enjoy each other's "lack" and find wholeness in the other.

This relationship in its queerness is also subversive and reminds us of French Feminist Luce Irigaray's wholeness – "I love you: body shared, undivided. Neither you nor I severed...There is no need for blood shed, between us. No need for a wound to remind us that blood exists...you/I, we are always several at once...we haven't been taught, nor allowed, to express multiplicity" (1985, pp. 206, 209). Irigaray's dichotomy of you/I and self/other is broken when

the two women meet and there is no more room for boundaries that separate. The ending allows room for multiplicity of bodies and an unconventional relationship that exists outside the law of the Father. It is, therefore, a counter-bildungsroman. Effectively, the image that Jarrar offers is one of “oneness in duality. Nothing is one and nothing is double” (1985, p. 201). This narrative strategy of subverting the patriarchal and narrative expectations of a bildungsroman works by focusing on Zelwa’s discomfort with her difference. Lacom (2002, n.p.) suggests that “the disabled body [...] almost universally perceived in terms of lack, comes to symbolize the impossibility of totality” but what Jarrar’s ending attempts to do is reiterate the possibility of wholeness in lack, and a doubling of bodies as oneness (2016, p. 140). These different and “freaky” bodies employed in the narrative, whether Zelwa’s ibex-body or the mermaid’s body, both push against social constructions of normativity:

Being “freaky” is a direct mode of resistance to systems of neoliberal valuation. It works to revalue the “freaky body” itself, not as a commodity implicate in the neoliberal exploitation of bodies, but as a potential site of resistance made possible by the very anti-normativity that places it outside mainstream desirability. (Bryan, 2018, p. 377)

Zelwa’s body becomes a site of resistance and allows room for multiple expressions of identity as she embraces her new-found love for herself and her unnamed mermaid lover. The split between her mind and body becomes one that she is able to move freely within and without, harnessing the power of in-betweenness and hybridity.

### **Conclusion**

Although Zelwa initially feels limited in her dating choices, recognising the immediate limitations of her body, she grows into her own skin (her halfness), embraces multiplicity and, by extension, wholeness. Throughout her journey, readers pick up on a certain undertone of growing confidence as Zelwa’s narrative progresses. Zelwa eventually finds peace in her difference, noticing the discrepancies and duality in everything around her. Only when her father leaves and she is left to face her inner voice is she able to confront her demons and push against societal discrimination. Having rejected the medicalization of her body and the surgical manipulation of her body-parts, she reclaims her body and her sense of agency. By refusing to assimilate, Zelwa finds her own identity and formulates a new and untainted understanding of her body and other bodies. She no longer sees “full” humans as the normalized sanctioned idea of “whole”, but rather finds that wholeness comes from within.

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