

DOUBLENESS IDENTITY OF DIASPORA IN RANDA JARRAR'S *HIM, ME, MUHAMMAD ALI*

Sari Fitria¹

UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, Indonesia
sari.fitria@uinjkt.ac.id / dosen01462@unpam.ac.id

Lutfi Nur Hidayah²

UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, Indonesia
lutfv.153019@mhs.uinjkt.ac.id

Muhammad Jumhur Arrizqina³

UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, Indonesia
muhjumhur.arrizqina19@mhs.uinjkt.ac.id

Nur Dini Rahmadania⁴

UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, Indonesia
nurdini.rahmadania19@mhs.uinjkt.ac.id

Abstract

This study was purposed to reveal doubleness of cultural identity experienced by diaspora individuals in a short story written by Randa Jarrar, entitled *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali*. This story captured a life of diaspora who was not easy for a completely different culture between the homeland and the hostland. Jarrar depicted how being a Muslim living in a western country could be totally a mess for her cultural identity. To conduct this study, the method used was qualitative descriptive by collecting the data through reading the novels. Then, the certain quotations that relates to diaspora were analyzed by cultural identity and diaspora concept from Stuart Hall. This diaspora term refers to the character who owns two or more different culture in his life. The result of the analysis framed that being a diaspora living in a country with a completely different culture is complicated, especially to define the diaspora individual's cultural of identity. The diaspora character was in the state of doubleness, which they could not completely belong to one culture. The character has culture in between his homeland (Muslim culture) and hostland (American culture). However, Jarrar depicts that there was a tendency for a culture to be more dominant than the other one.

Keywords: cultural identity; diaspora; homeland; hostland

1. INTRODUCTION

Diaspora relates to a notion of mixing two cultures originating from one or a group of people with a certain cultural background who generally move with their own will to a new country that has different cultural values, customs, to a very contrasting environment and tends to be more

advanced from their country of origin. People who find it difficult or unable to adapt to a new environment after moving will usually experience some traumatic symptoms such as alienation, longing for their homeland, doubleness of cultural identity, and others. Those who experience these traumatic

symptoms usually channel their feelings into various written works such as novels, short stories, fiction, poetry and prose (Raina, 2017).

One of the symptoms often experienced by diaspora individuals is cultural identity. This cultural identity can be interpreted as a form of cultural mixing from one diaspora individual or someone who has two contrasting cultural backgrounds, it describes how a someone's cultural experience is distorted by a new culture in a new place which then influences shifts and changes in one's behavior, either in a positive or negative direction (Hall, 1990). Diaspora people generally have to form their own identity by managing the two cultures that originate from their homeland and their new place in order to deal with various factors that can make them feel alienated. This also aims to avoid an identity crisis that arises from someone who has two different cultures. Those who have multiple identities are required to adapt to the differences between the two cultures that they receive as a form of experience they have gone through (Laxmiprasad, 2020).

Fitria (2022) stated that a diaspora individual has to struggle to define his cultural identity. This identity is complex. At the same time, the diaspora is shadowed by the culture of homeland and is required to fit the new culture in order to accept by the society in the hostland. This condition leads the diaspora character to experience doubleness of cultural identity. This is also depicted in a short story, *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali*, written by Randa Jarrar, which the diaspora is trapped between Muslim and American culture.

In one of Randa Jarrar's short stories entitled *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali*, it is told about a girl named Kinshasa with an American father and an Egyptian mother. The main character's mother died long ago and was buried in her

native land, Egypt, while her father died in Australia due to a brain aneurysm. Before her father died, he had said that if he died he wanted his body to be cremated and the ashes from his body scattered along the Nile. To fulfill her father's last wish, Kinshasa had to return to Egypt to spread the ashes from her father's body. While in Egypt, although there was not where she came from, the main character experiences some doubleness of her cultural identity. Even though the main character is what is called as "the second generation," she can feel the doubleness because she is still connected with her "homeland" (Huang et al., 2013) despite all she was doing is only a temporary visit. However, because of that, she able to connect with her homeland more (Zhu & Airey, 2021).

There are some previous researches found related to the study. The first previous research is an article journal with the title *Akhil Sharma's Family Life: Regretting Doubleness of Diaspora Individuals* by Sari Fitria from University of Pamulang (2022). This article talks about the same topic, which is doubleness in diaspora with the same approach by Stuart Hall. The corpus used in this article is different from the study. This research aims to analyze the issues in the novel that Sharma engages as a diaspora author. The results of this research is that there is regretting doubleness of cultural identity in the novel.

The next research is an article journal titled *Home in Contemporary Arab American Literature: Randa Jarrar's A Map of Home* by Esra Öztarhan from Pamukkale University (2018). This research has the same topic, which is about diaspora, but it focuses on the concept of home in the novel *A Map of Home* by Randa Jarrar. The corpus is different with the study, but the author of the novel used in this

article is the same. This research attempts to identify the process of awareness between homes and identities that consists of three phases: (1) quest of home; (2) realization and acceptance; and (3) celebration of non-belonging. The result shows that home in the novel remains fluid and built not as a place, but a process.

The last previous research is an article journal titled *The Concept of 'Home' in Palestinian Diaspora Fiction: A Critical Study of Randa Jarrar's Fiction* by Jameel Ahmed Alghaberi (2018). The topic brought in this article is the same with the study, which is diaspora, but it focuses on the concept of home, cultural identity and transnationalism. The corpus is different from the study, but same as before, the corpus used here is a novel by the same author, Randa Jarrar. The research aims to analyze and highlight the issues in the novel that Jarrar tackles as a Palestinian's origin author. It also explores and examines the relationship between Palestinian diasporas and their homeland-Palestine. The result shows that Jarrar is experimenting in a creative space and there is also a counter-narrative ideology to resist the Middle Eastern female body stereotypes as propagated in Orientalist discourse.

Based on the background that has been described above, there is already research done with the focus of diaspora in literature. This study is conducted in hope to participate in a field of diaspora studies, especially in cultural identity focusing on doubleness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study deals with an analysis of a short story by Randa Jarrar, *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali*. To analyze this short story, a concept of cultural identity and diaspora by Stuart Hall is applied. Hall (1996) stated that cultural identity for diaspora individuals is a matter. It is

caused cultural identity is not merely inherited but it is also depended on society around. It makes cultural identity becomes a dynamic thing. It is not stable but complex. This cultural identity is constantly produced and reproduced, especially for certain individuals, called diaspora.

Diaspora refers to those who runs two or more cultures in their life. They can be immigrants, exile, or people for formed colonized countries. Hall (1996) explained that there are some characteristics of diaspora. First, diaspora relates to those who engaged with slavery, colonization, and migration. Second, it refers to the second and the third generations from those who previously immigrated. It makes the diaspora needs to have some struggles to negotiate culture in in their old country and in the new one. Diaspora is a concept that focuses on the connection between immigrants with their country of origin or "homeland," and even though they no longer live there, they still have "strong sentimental and material connection" with their homeland (Huang et al., 2013). This shows how diaspora character cannot delete the old culture. Thus, they need to negotiate their cultural identity, between the old one and the new one. s

For diaspora characters, since they have two (or more) different cultural identities, they experience a shock over "the doubleness of similarity and difference" of their identity There are two ways of seeing a cultural identity. The first one is "one true self" where this identity is hidden among the other identities, but it is one that has "historical experiences" and shares the "cultural codes" of a diaspora person. Meanwhile the second one is about "becoming" or "being" to form the true identity of a diaspora person, about "what we really are." In this second sense, there are the similarities and

differences that were mentioned before. This is then connected to the doubleness of someone's cultural identity (Hall, 1990).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is qualified as a qualitative study, which is using a qualitative method. The qualitative method itself refers to research that produces descriptive data such as people's spoken and/or written words, also behaviors that are being observed. Rist pointed out that the qualitative method can be considered a way to know the world from an observational or experimental point of view, so it makes the qualitative method more than a data-gathering technique (Taylor et al., 2015). As has been mentioned above, qualitative research produces descriptive data, which means it is "richly descriptive." This research method typically uses a lot of words (or pictures) to support the findings. Citations from collected documents and other data sources are also included in the research, making qualitative research descriptive (Merriam, Tisdell, 2015).

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Doubleness of cultural identity in *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali* short story by Randa Jarrar is found in the main character. Although she is a second-generation diaspora from a Black-American father and an Egyptian mother, she still feels things that are related to her doubleness of cultural identity. This doubleness relates to her homeland as the one who inherits Muslim Identity and to her hostland as the one who runs her life in The United States of America. Therefore, in this section, the researchers focus on the doubleness of cultural identity of the main character, and later indicating which culture (Muslim or American) that the main character is more inclined to. In this part, there are two kinds

experiences of the diaspora character that illustrate her doubleness of cultural identity. The first is how she is shadowed by the homeland. In this part, the analysis is about her experience to be regarded as an Egyptian even though she was born in Western country and she never grows in Egypt. The second, she is also shadowed by her hostland. In this part, it reveals how she is regarded as a Western individual by people in Egypt.

4.1 Being Shadowed by The Homeland

In this part, Jarrar reveals how diaspora character is always shadowed by her homeland. The diaspora will never be altered from her homeland even though she has been the second generation of her family to live in America. The homeland keeps growing in the diaspora character, as seen in the following quotation.

"While my father was alive, he said he wanted to be buried with the old African kings, and when I'd pressed him, he'd said his ashes belonged near the great pyramid of Khufu. I tried to dissuade him by saying that the Pyramids were cheesy, that the ancient Egyptians would have never cremated anyone. (Jarrar, 2016, pp. 139-140)."

In this part, the main character looks like she was trying to convince her father not do the cremation. Here the main character emphasized her words by using "pressed" and "dissuade" to make it clear that she rejected her father's decision to be cremated after his death. It is because the main character feels that cremation is not part of Egyptian's culture. When her father said that "his ashes belonged near the great pyramid of Khufu," means he wanted his ashes to be scattered there, the main character replied that "the ancient Egyptians would never cremate anyone." Moreover, it could be related to the

religion too since they are Muslims. Cremation in Islam is not allowed because a dead body should be buried as soon as possible to avoid decay (Albar, 2012). However, the main character's father wanted to be cremated since Western people are known to be freer than Eastern people, and he once was not Muslim but then converted as one to marry the main character's mother. It was once reported that there had been an increase in requests for cremation in the USA for reasons such as the people themselves who asked and chose to be cremated, the increasing levels of education, the reduced understanding of religion, and cremation memorial ceremonies which were considered more flexible (Huddleston, 2008). From here, it can be concluded that there is an indication of doubleness in the main character. This part shows that, even though she is part American and her father asked her to cremate him, she still leans to her Egyptian side; towards her mother's culture and religion.

Then, the shadow of Muslim culture is shown when the diaspora character cannot totally fit with the hostland culture even though she grew up in this host country. In the quotation below, it can be seen how the diaspora character compared the hostland and homeland culture.

“The whole time she was my mother, I assumed she never got laid or even dated, but I was mistaken. She dated behind my back, and often scheduled sleepovers for me on nights she planned to go out and find someone to have sex with (Jarrar, 2016, p. 149).”

The quotation above how Kinshasa thought that her mother would never date or be close to a man or even boyfriend before marriage according to Islamic teachings in the east and as she was taught. A Muslim is taught that when interacting with family, friends, or

the opposite sex, he must uphold the religious norms that he has learned from an early age, this is the reason why a Muslim should not have sex before marriage. In Islam, it is also taught that the closer a person is to the opposite sex, the more likely they are to commit adultery (Adamczyk, Hayes, 2012). But in fact, her mother did the opposite, she dated and had free sex as she did western teenagers. This shows a contradiction between eastern and western cultures and how the rules of the two cultures are very different. If eastern culture (more importantly the Middle Eastern area) prohibits having sex with the opposite sex outside of marriage, even a man and a woman cannot be close together as religious teachings must be obeyed to distance themselves from sinful acts. Therefore, Western society is more tolerant of relationships between men and women because it is not constrained by rigid social or religious norms, which allows young people of other genders to pursue their interests without being bound to any particular path.

Another line that shows the main character leaned to her East side is as what quoted below.

“... he said he'd never met a tourist who didn't like pyramids. 'It's just a pile of rocks,' I said For him, they meant nothing ... (Jarrar, 2016, p. 146).”

In this part, the main character shows her behavior that is much more like a local than a tourist. When other tourists like to see pyramids, for the main character “it's just a pile of rocks.” It is strengthened by the cab driver's statement who said that “he'd never met a tourist who didn't like pyramids,” which refers to the main character. Then the cab driver, as a local, added that the pyramids “meant nothing” to him. It is indicated that the cab driver himself

agrees that the main character is, although look like a tourist, she does not look like one as well.

There is still another fact that could strengthen the main character's behavior as explained above. It is in the line as quoted below.

“Outside, thousands of non-Egyptians tourists were gawking at tombs-built centuries ago, and there I was, on my knees, in my mother's tomb from 1987 (Jarrar, 2016, p. 153).”

In this quotation, main character shows her behavior that looks like a local and not like a tourist in this part as well. When people that are from outside Egypt came to “gawking at tombs-built centuries ago,” the main character paid her mother's tomb a visit, instead of being a tourist like the others. From here, it can be seen that there is a doubleness where the main character leans more towards her East side of identity.

Therefore, it can be confirmed that the main character, as a diaspora with doubleness of cultural identity, seems to be leaning more towards her East side of identity instead of her West side. However, just like a diaspora who would feel in-between two or more different cultures, the main character is still seen having her West side of identity with her on several occasions. Some of the lines found have been collected and quoted as presented below.

“... and every once in a while during the fourteen-hour flight, an Ethiopian would mistake me for an Egyptian, and an Egyptian would mistake me for an Ethiopian (Jarrar, 2016, p. 142).”

This sentence shows that the main character was mistaken several times as an Ethiopian by an Egyptian and vice versa in her flight to Cairo, Egypt. From the way she put it in words, she did not

sound pissed at the mistake people made of her. She kind of accepted the fact that she indeed looks like both Ethiopian and Egyptian. Her being mistaken as an Ethiopian perhaps from her father's side that mentioned in the story as a Black-American, which at the same time, she accepted being mistaken as an American as well as an Egyptian. Then, it can be concluded that even though she is more inclined to her East side of identity in previous explanations, she can still accept the existence of the West side within her, whether consciously or not.

“... and scarecrows in galabiyyas, which surprised me. I expected Australian or American scarecrows—sticks bearing overalls and plaid shirts, but why? (Jarrar, 2016, p. 148).”

Another example is as presented in this line. Here the main character said she was surprised when she saw scarecrows wearing *galabiyya*, or *jalabiya* in Libyan, means “a loosely woven overdress with an uneven hood,” or also called as *jellabiya* in Egypt means the robe that wore by the Bedouins (Kanitz, 2021). The main character saw those scarecrows on her way to her cousins and grandfather's place by train right after she arrived in Egypt. She said she “expected Australian or American scarecrows” that usually “sticks bearing overalls and plaid shirts,” but instead she saw scarecrows in *galabiyya*. From this can be seen that there is doubleness because the main character still brought her West side within her.

“For the first few years of my life, I thought my mother spoke only Arabic. She ignored me when I tried to ask her for something in English, or she pretended she didn't understand (Jarrar, 2016, p. 157).”

In this part, the doubleness of the main character is also shown. When she was still live with her mother in Egypt for some time, the main character said that she tried to talk to her mother in English, which was always either ignored by her or “she pretended she didn’t understand.” Because of this, the main character once thought that her mother only spoke in Arabic and could not understand English. From here can be assumed that when the main character tried to talk in English to her mother, indicating that she still has her West side.

“... and a vibrator. I bought a visa from a man at a window, approached the passport check, smiled at the officer as he asked me where I was going and what I was doing—I pleaded with myself not to say, “Burying my father, then going off somewhere to masturbate”—watched him stamp my passport ... (Jarrar, 2016, p. 144).”

The quote indicated that Kinshasa has been influenced by western social culture which does this freely, and these actions are considered normal. In Islam, masturbation is prohibited. As quoted in Quran (23: 5-7): “And they who guard their private parts, except from their wives or those their right hands possess, for indeed, they will not be blamed; but whoever seeks beyond that [in sexual gratification], then those are the transgressors.” In the last sentence of this verse, it is clear that doing any sexual gratification act beyond what is permitted (marital relationship), including masturbating, is prohibited in Islam; Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq emphasized this verse as well and labeled masturbation as an indecent act (Hoseini, 2013). Even so, as shown in the quoted part, the main character is still accepting this West side of her, indicating that there is doubleness in this part as well.

“Everyone in Sydney treated me like an Egyptian kid. I looked like one of them, and nobody mentioned my Black dad. Some women played with my hair and said things like, ‘Well, she came out positively pharaonic.’ My classmates called me an ugly aborigine. I told my mother, and she tried to soothe me (Jarrar, 2016, p. 149).”

This dialogue shows that people in Sydney treat Kinshasa as a foreigner, which is an Egyptian kid, even though she doesn't want to be treated differently and she also feels that she looks like one of them. In this dialogue there is also rejection from western people, that her classmates called her an ugly aborigine. The sentence above can be categorized as a doubleness of cultural identity, because there is a feeling in her mind that she looks like one of them (which are western people), and does not want to be treated like a foreigner who came from Egypt, even though it is her mother’s homeland.

4.2 Being Shadowed by The Hostland

In this part, the diaspora character has to experience a rejection by her homeland when she goes back to her hometown, Egypt. The Egypt people straightforwardly opinionates that she is not a part of them even though her mother comes from this country. They think she is a foreigner from a western country. It can be seen from the quotation below.

I hated the idea of being mistaken for a tourist, and saw it as an assault on my identity (Jarrar, 2016, p. 145).”

The quotation indicates how Kinshasa, who is the main character in the story, feels uncomfortable with the Egyptians who regard her as a foreigner even though her mother was born in Egypt and she also understands the

culture there. She indirectly feels alienated by people, they think of her as a Western tourist who is traveling to Egypt, even though Kinshasa is a Muslim and still has Egyptian ancestry. A part of her soul gave resistance to the idea that she was a tourist in her own mother's homeland. The fragment that says "I hated the idea of being mistaken for a tourist," emphasizes how Kinshasa rejects her Western side; she feels as an Easterner because she is also a Muslim. Therefore, the sentence above can be categorized as a doubleness of cultural identity.

Then, the situation of the diaspora character in this short story who is rejected by her homeland comes from this following statement: "You look Egyptian, but you sound like such a khawaaga (Jarrar, 2016, p. 145)." This also proves how Egyptians view Kinshasa as 'other'. As diaspora, Kinshasa is rejected by her homeland through the word *a khawaaga*. This term refers to foreigner who comes from western countries. Even though the diaspora character has a Moslem name (Kinshasa), but he is still shadowed by her hostland since her speech style does not sound like an Egyptian. This condition leads the character to trap in betweenness, her homeland and hostland.

Besides, Jarrar shows how diaspora character is rejected by her homeland since her unfamiliarity with some habits of people in her homeland. It is stated in the quotation below:

"The cemetery guard spoke to me in English. I answered in Arabic, and he apologized for his mistake and told me I walked like a khawaaga, with my feet out-turned (Jarrar, 2016, p. 157)."

The quotation above shows how the diaspora character is rejected by her homeland society because they are unfamiliar with a walking style of the

diaspora character. Even though the diaspora can speak Arabic and her look is a bit similar with Arab people, it is not enough to make her to be a part of Arabi community. Then, the term *khawagaa* is repeatedly addressed to the diaspora character. Jarrar strengthen that the concept of being accepted by the homeland is unreal for diaspora character.

5. CONCLUSION

The result of this study showed that Kinshasa, as the diaspora character in *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali* by Randa Jarrar, suffers for doubleness of cultural identity. Jarrar portrays that the doubleness occurs due to her culture-in between condition. In her hostland, The United States of America, this diaspora character prefers to be more comfortable to run her life by applying Arabic values. Ironically, in her homeland, Egypt, she has to experience rejection from the local people. She does not get any recognition in Arabic society, even in Egypt community as her hometown. Besides, Jarrar also celebrates an idea that for diaspora character, comparison between the homeland and the hostland cannot be avoided. Jarrar depicts that at the end, there is a tendency for a diaspora character to be more dominant in one of the two cultures, the homeland or the hostland.

REFERENCES

- Adamczyk, A., & Hayes, B. E. (2012). Religion and sexual behaviors: Understanding the influence of Islamic cultures and religious affiliation for explaining sex outside of marriage. *American Sociological Review*, 77(5), 723-746. doi: 10.1177/0003122412458672
- Albar, M. (2012). Organ transplantation: A Sunni Islamic perspective. *Saudi Journal of Kidney Diseases and*

- Transplantation*, 23(4), 817. doi: 10.4103/1319-2442.98169
- Alghaberi, J. A. (2018). The Concept of 'Home' in Palestinian Diaspora Fiction: A Critical Study of Randa Jarrar's Fiction. *Langkawi: Journal of the Association for Arabic and English*, 4(1), 13. doi: 10.31332/lkw.v4i1.765
- Fitria, S. (2022). Akhil Sharma's Family Life: Regretting Doubleness of Diaspora Individuals. *Poetika*, 10(1), 61. doi: 10.22146/poetika.v10i1.64292
- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 222-237). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hoseini, S. S. (2013). Masturbation: Scientific Evidence and Islam's View. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 56(6), 2076–2081. doi: 10.1007/s10943-013-9720-3
- Huang, W. J., Haller, W. J., & Ramshaw, G. P. (2013). Diaspora Tourism and Homeland Attachment: An Exploratory Analysis. *Tourism Analysis*, 18(3), 285–296. doi: 10.3727/108354213x13673398610691
- Huddleston, C. A. (2008). Ashes to ashes: When families choose cremation. *Journal of Christian Nursing*, 25(3), 138–141. doi: 10.1097/01.cnj.0000326269.78869.3f
- Jarrar, R. (2016). *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali*. Louiseville: Sarabande Books.
- Kanitz, J. (2021). *The Headscarf as a Business Card: A Qualitative Case Study on Styles and Expressions of Berlin Muslim Women* (1st ed. 2021). Springer VS.
- Laxmiprasad, P. V. (2020). Diasporic Literature - An Overview. *Journal of English Language and Literature*, 7(3), 98-106. doi: 10.33329/joell.7.3.20.98
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Öztarhan, E. (2018). Home in Contemporary Arab American Literature: Randa Jarar's A Map of Home. *Ettawassol El Adabi*, 11, 261–277. doi: 10.12816/0051091
- Raina, J. A. (2017). Theorizing Diaspora Literature: A Review of Key Concepts. *Scholarly Research Journal for Humanity Science & English Language*, 4(23), 6469-6474.
- Taylor, S. J., Bogdan, R., & DeVault, M. (2015). *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource* (4th ed.). Wiley.
- Zhu, J. J., & Airey, D. (2021). Diaspora Chinese tourism: Cultural connectedness and the existing academic insights. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 40, 100916. doi: 10.1016/j.tmp.2021.100916

