

# Cross-Cultural Marriage and Family Life in Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories From South Philly*

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**Abstract**—This paper aims at examining the personal factors that affect and are affected by the cross-cultural marriage in *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly*. The intercultural marriage of Hanan; an Arab, and John; an American, affects the entire unit of children, members of family and social networks. Cultural differences between the couple make their parents reject the interracial marriage and this leads to struggle and instability in the couple's marital life. The study highlights the sociological, economic and cultural contexts that affect this interracial marriage.

**Index Terms**—cross-cultural marriage, Darraj, American, Arab, family members

## I. INTRODUCTION

Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile* (2007) portrays the lives of four female friends, Nadia, Aliya, Hanan and Reema. All of them are daughters of Palestinian immigrants who have settled in Philadelphia. Darraj narrates these stories in four major chapters that have the names of these young women. Their stories are separated in chapters but are interconnected. The first chapter portrays the life of Nadia and her mother who took the responsibility of raising her child alone after the death of her husband in a car accident. The second chapter portrays the life of Aliyah who is a journalist. She writes mainly about immigrants and about her family. The third and most developed chapter portrays the life of Hanan who sees herself only as an American. She rejects her hyphenated identity as an Arab American. She struggles to remove anything that is related to her "Arabness". She is not satisfied with her own Arab family. She gets pregnant by the American, John, and gets married to him consequently against her mother's will. The last chapter tells the story of Reema who is described as "a collector of stories" (Darraj, 2007, p. 180). Reema is working on her thesis on the children of immigrants and their experiences with assimilation (Darraj, 2007, p. 180). The only woman who is involved in a cross-cultural marriage is Hanan, and therefore, this study concentrates only on Hanan's story.

In "Family Members and Marital (In)Stability of Cross-Cultural Marriage in Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinn*s" (2019), Alkayid and Abu Amrieh, analyze how children, parents, siblings and family members negatively affect cross-cultural marriages and play a "role in augmenting marital dissatisfaction" (Alkayid & Abu Amrieh, 2019, p. 1). Moreover, in *Modern Arab American Fiction*, Salaita (2011) argues that Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile* is "a frank representation of the difficulties and sometimes joys of intercultural marriage" (Salaita, 2011, p.73). Therefore, the novel portrays the struggle that the characters live in because of cross-cultural marriage. In fact, the novel portrays the cross-cultural marriage of Hanan and John, an American of Irish origin. Darraj highlights the difficulty of a cross-cultural marriage of Arabs and Westerners. Using an Arabic proverb, Layla, Hanan's mother, states that "oil and water don't mix" (Darraj, 2007, p.79) to affirm the impossibility and inappropriateness of mixing Arab and American blood through marriage. Hanan resists being an Arab and she does whatever she can to be an American. Hanan is too obsessed with being an American, denying her Arabness. Hanan from her early childhood announced that she hated her Arabic name. After her marriage, she tells John how happy she is in their new house and how "she felt like we lived on our own island, in our small house in University City, far from . . . Mama and Baba" (Darraj, 2007, p. 119). Therefore, her marriage to John is her strategy to feel and be fully American. Hanan wants to get rid of her Arabness and assimilate into American culture. In "Intermarriage and Assimilation: Levels, Patterns, and Disparities in Levels of Exogamy among Arab Americans," Kulczycki and Lobo (2014) argue that intermarriage is "an index of assimilation into the larger host society" (Kulczycki & Lobo, 2014, par 1 of 22). They argue that Arab Americans are integrating and assimilating in the American social fabric, and therefore, intermarriages increase (Kulczycki & Lobo, 2014).

In their sociological study, Heaton and Jacobson (2004) argue that educational institutions are good places that introduce people from different origins and consequently facilitate their intermarriages (Heaton & Jacobson, 2004). In the novel, Hanan meets John on the University of Pennsylvania campus. Reema, Hanan's friend and colleague, introduces her colleague John to Hanan. Although Hanan observes John's "bright blue eyes" and "curly brown hair" (Darraj, 2007, p. 127) and falls in love with him from the first sight, she claims that "I wasn't impressed" (Darraj, 2007, p. 127). Four years later, she tells him that she is pregnant, and consequently they marry.

Against her wishes and expectations, Hanan's marriage gets worse after a series of episodes and situations that embarrassed her upward looking husband. Steven Salaita explains that Hanan and John, do not break up because of unbridgeable cultural differences. They break up because of more general—and common—factors: conflicts between Hanan and her in-laws; different visions of the future; a lack of fundamental trust in one another's level of devotion. Cultural differences nevertheless play a role in the existence of those factors (Salaita, 2011, p. 76).

Salaita does not neglect cultural difference as a main factor in the failure of this marriage, but he adds other factors including the effect of the in-laws, the couples' expectations for the future and lack of trust. An example on the factor of cultural differences is the episode of a dinner at John's colleague's house. At the soirée, many professors and scholars meet and one professor who discusses her book on Arab women and politics asks Hanan to read it "for authenticity" (Darraj, 2007, p. 139). She explains that she needs an Arab woman to read it to see how genuine, real and accurate her writing is. However, Hanan says that she is not an Arab. She explains that her father was born in America and her mother is a Palestinian immigrant. The professor responds that Hanan's name is an Arabic name. Hanan repeatedly confirms that she is not an Arab and that she has never been to the Middle East in her entire life.

One may also explicate Hanan's response within the precarious position Arabs occupy in discourses on ethnicity and race in the US. Officially, classified as Caucasian, and hence white, Arab Americans are subjected to different forms of institutional prejudice and discrimination. In *Transformative Acts: Arab American Writing/Writing Arab America*, Majaj (2012) argues that Arab American writers are always interested in issues engaged with Arab American community as a whole. She maintains that these issues include "how to define (and defend) oneself and one's community; how to ground one's identity amid contesting pressures of identification and affiliation; how to assert agency in local, national and international spheres; how to engage with difference without relinquishing wholeness" (Majaj, 2012, p. 17). In other words, Arab Americans are concerned with their hyphenated identities and dealing with the pressures that result from cultural differences.

Another situation at the dinner meeting that raises the tension between the couples is when another professor asks Hanan, "[f]rom which region do you hail?" (Darraj, 2007, p. 140) and she replies jokingly that she comes from 10<sup>th</sup> and Tasker, meaning an area in Philadelphia. He looks confused and John seems to collapse with embarrassment. The professor again asks her about her origins in the Middle East, and she says that she comes from Palestine. On their way home, John rebukes her for trying to hide her identity as an Arab. He blames her for not cleverly answering his professors and says "[t]hat whole evening was *mortifying*. Do you understand me? Mortifying" (Darraj, 2007, p. 142). He tells her that if she was an educated person, she would have shown interest to the professors without refusing to read the book. To conclude, John thinks that their interracial marriage can be successful only if his wife is educated. Because his wife refuses to pursue her studies, he leaves her a message informing her that their life together cannot continue like this, and they should, therefore, separate.

## II. CHILDREN

Hanan and John decide to marry after Hanan gets pregnant. As sociologists Steele et al. (2005) argue, pregnancy encourages couples to marry. Hanan expects that when she leaves her parent's house and settles with her husband John, she will develop her independent identity. She imagines that her new house will be a safe and happy place for her husband and her child together. In "Displacement, Belonging and Identity in Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile*," Awad (2015) argues that Hanan joyfully thinks of her new house as a lost paradise that she has finally found. Awad clarifies that Hanan describes her marriage poetically by describing her new house with the word "nested" which, Awad maintains, "invokes the image of a bird settling snugly and comfortably in a sheltered position, probably to lay an egg and start a new family" (Awad, 2015, p. 7). Therefore, Hanan expects her life to be a paradise in which she lives happily with her husband and child. However, these wishes fade away after John's decision to leave her.

According to Belsky et al. (2014), the couple's first pregnancy and the arrival of the first born child are a major change in the couple's life. They explain that "the transition to parenthood involves, commitment to bear and raise a child, high levels of physical and psychological investment associated with pregnancy and delivery, and the real and symbolic changes that accompany the addition of a small, relatively helpless, and extremely demanding new member to the family unit" (Belsky et al., 2014, p. 119). In Darraj's novel, Hanan and John's marriage declines after pregnancy.

However, pregnancy also has a positive effect on Hanan. For example, when Hanan feels that it is time to deliver her baby, Hanan forgets about John, who left her, and feels that she is powerful and in charge of her life:

For a second, I forgot all about John, caught up in the elation that soon I would be a mother. "I can't wait to see you," I whispered fiercely, wrapping my arms around my belly. Even though I could feel my joints loosening, my uterus thumping wildly, and the fact that I was sitting in a puddle of my own amniotic fluid - I never felt so in control in my life. I was powerful, collected, in charge of not only my own life but that of my baby (Darraj, 2007, p. 143)

Therefore, Hanan has become more responsible and confident after she got pregnant. In a way, pregnancy is a turning point in Hanan's life and this makes her turn a blind eye to John's decision to abandon her.

Moreover, when Hanan gives birth to her son, she names him Michael which is the Americanized version of her father's name Michel. She tells her friend Reema that she chooses this name after her father and by doing this she

follows the traditions because “[m]ost men name their first sons after their fathers” (Darraj, 2007, p. 144). Hanan also explains that since her father has no sons, she follows this tradition. In a way, Hanan understands that she and her son have hybrid identities. He is a person whose very existence is a result of a cross-cultural marriage, so she adjusted her son’s name to affirm his hyphenated identity as both Arab and American. Another effect of having children is feeling of love and peace. For example, when Hanan holds Michael in her hands, she feels of love that fills her whole body. She feels that she is not lonely after her husband has left her. She says that “that loneliness washed away now as I gazed in wonder at my son” (Darraj, 2007, p. 144). Michael came five months after John had left her. He left her while she was pregnant during the most important time when she needed him the most. When John comes to visit her at the hospital, she feels that she had been cheated by this man and that he only deserves her scorn. As a single mother without the support of her husband, mother and father, Hanan relies on books and Internet sites to educate herself about taking care of her son. She promises herself that she will dedicate her life to her child and never think of her husband:

I’d promised myself that whenever John crept into my thoughts, I would not waste the time in a daze over him - which would have been simple to do. At least I would be productive - wash dishes, empty the diaper pail, fold clean laundry (Darraj, 2007, p. 149)

Therefore, Hanan’s strategy to forget the pain and disappointment of losing her husband is through keeping herself busy in taking care of her baby and her house. Hanan knows that she needs John financially to be able to raise their son. He offers to help with the mortgage and to give her extra money for the child. He thinks that by giving them money or what he calls “allowance” (Darraj, 2007, p. 150), he gives them everything they need. He tells Hanan that this child is his son, too, and Hanan replies that she will not keep him away from his son. She wants to refuse his financial offer, but she cannot because she does not have enough money to afford a decent living for her and her child.

### III. RELATIVES: PARENTS AND IN-LAWS

Honeycutt et al. (2005) argue that one’s family has a major influence on the interracial couples. The novel focuses on the interracial marriage of Hanan and John and the influence of their parents on their marriage. Since both Hanan and John do not have siblings, this study focuses mainly on how the couple’s mothers have played a key role in shaping this cross-cultural nuptial. Honeycutt et al. (2005) argue that the families that have a history of interracial marriages are more open to interracial marriages. In the novel, neither Hanan nor John’s families have interracial histories. Therefore, this can be a factor of their opposition to the couple’s marriage.

Hanan’s mother does not approve of her daughter’s marriage to John and tells her, “I will not give you my blessing - never” (Darraj, 2007, p. 115). She angrily asks her daughter, “What do you want with an *amercani*?” (Darraj, 2007, p. 115). Before the wedding, Hanan’s mother keeps yelling at her trying to prevent her from marrying John. However, Hanan does not listen to her mother. Unlike traditional weddings where there are a lot of people that attend, few people attend Hanan’s wedding ball and it is described briefly as an ordinary event. Ironically, Hanan excitedly remarks that her marriage party is “so fantastic - it’s perfect” (Darraj, 2007, p. 116). Her husband tells her that the wedding is perfect even without her mother being there. Sociologist Anderson (2014) argues that some members of the family may show their displeasure towards the interracial marriage of their children. In the novel, this hypothesis is made clear in a conversation between Reema and Alex, an American. Alex asks Reema if her family would accept him in her family even though he is not an Arab and she says that “[m]ost parents want their children to marry within their culture - it’s natural” (Darraj, 2007, p. 176).

Furthermore, Anderson gives an example of a woman who opposes her daughter’s interracial marriage and thus, did not attend her wedding. She did not talk to her daughter for more than one year (Anderson, 2014). This case is identical to what happens in the novel between Hanan and her mother as the two start talking to each other only after one year has passed. Another study by Boyd (2012) gives another example where a father did not attend his daughter’s wedding due to her interracial marriage. Unlike Hanan’s mother who does not attend the wedding, her father does. In the church, her father escorts her down the aisle and kisses her cheeks when they reach the altar. He shakes John’s hands firmly saying, “[y]ou are my son now” (Darraj, 2007, p. 116). Although Hanan’s father attends the wedding, he never interferes or does anything to curb his daughter’s marriage. Therefore, Hanan’s exogamous marriage is received by two extreme ends: the severe rejection of her mother, on the one hand, and the passive reaction of her father on the other hand. In *Post-9/11 Representations of Arab Men by Arab American Women Writers: Affirmation and Resistance*, Vilarrubias (2016) argues that Hanan is more related to her father than her mother because her father is more an American than Arab, since he was born in America while her mother is a Palestinian refugee. Vilarrubias affirms that “Hanan’s love for her father is so strong that she gives her son his grandfather’s name, as she wants to instill his positive sense of masculinity to her newborn son” (Vilarrubias, 2016, p. 272). This means that, for Hanan, her father represents the American side of her identity, while her mother represents the Arab side.

After a few months into their marriage, John writes a letter to Hanan explaining that he is not happy with her. He says, “I now question how wise it was for us to get married in the first place [...] and I can’t continue like this” (Darraj, 2007, p. 142). He admits that their marriage is a mistake, and that they disappointed each other. However, he promises her that he will not disappoint their child. Hanan realizes that she will take the responsibility of raising her child without her husband’s support. Hanan avoids seeing her mother for more than a year. At last, Hanan decides to call her father

and inform him that she is going to visit them. She was afraid that her mother would answer the phone because her mother rejected Hanan's marriage and they have never talked to each other after that.

Hanan visits her parents after one year of not seeing or talking to them. When she is parking her car in front of her parents' house, there are two boys who save a spot for her car (as her father asks them to do.) One of the boys exclaims that her car is so big, and asks her "[d]id your guy give it to you when he *dumped* you?" (Darraj, 2007, p. 155). This episode portrays a negative societal attitude to cross-cultural marriages. The child uses the word "dumped" to express his disapproval of the intermarriage of Hanan and John. According to sociologists Skowroński *et al.* (2014), social disapproval affects marital satisfaction. They argue that "societal attitudes affect marital satisfaction, in which couples tend to be sensitive towards adverse reactions people in public have towards their interracial relationships" (Skowroński *et al.*, 2014, p. 351). Although the boy's negative comment does not affect Hanan's position or leave a mark on her, his disapproval is another reminder for Hanan of her failed marriage.

In her visit to her parents, Hanan feels that her mother understands her visit as a signal of defeat because her mother was right about the inappropriateness of marrying John. She feels that her mother expects her to say that she was right when she warned her of that man who left her and that she should have listened to her mother. However, Hanan does not do that and she shifts her attention to her father. Unlike the mother, Hanan's father does not say or do anything that has to do with Hanan's marriage. Her mother seems to be very worried about her daughter and her financial situation. Hanan's mother gets very angry when Hanan tells her that she is making a living by selling handmade baskets. According to Honeycutt *et al.*, parents of interracial couples are very concerned with the socioeconomic status of their children. For these sociologists, "[m]ost parents only had concerns in reference to their daughters being provided for and not having a mate that was dependent on them" (Honeycutt *et al.*, 2005, par. 23 of 52). Therefore, parents may approve of their children's marriage to another mate from a different racial group as long as they are financially secure. Therefore, the bad financial situation of Hanan due to John's irresponsibility of supporting Hanan and her son financially makes her mother very angry and she tells her that John has tricked her. However, Hanan says that nobody tricked her and that she did what she did because she wanted that. At last, Hanan leaves saying that she is not doing well, and she does not need to hear it from her mother.

On the other hand, John's parents seem to be very worried about the marriage of their son. In order to introduce Hanan to his parents before their marriage, John says to Hanan that his parents may ask Hanan a lot of questions because she is "ethnic" (Darraj, 2007, p. 125). She replies that she hates this word and she asks him to leave her because she needs some time to "brace" herself (Darraj, 2007, p. 125). Hanan says that John's parents are kind to her, but she feels that she does not fit in with their family. She says, "it was painfully clear that I didn't fit in with the Martin family" (Darraj, 2007, p. 129). She explains that John's family have different traditions and behaviors. For example, table manners are different. She recalls what happened at a Thanksgiving, saying:

I had picked a chicken leg - with my fingers, not noticing the tongs -from the tray and put it onto my plate, because that was how we did it at home. The dinner table got real quiet, as all eyes watched me. Everyone that night took chicken from the opposite side of the tray, leaving a small pile of chicken wings and legs near what I'd touched, like a contaminated leper colony (Darraj, 2007, p. 129)

Donovan (2004) argues that exogamous marriages face many challenges because of the different cultural traditions. Moreover, it has been argued that communication in exogamous marriages would be more complicated than endogamous marriages because different cultures have different expectations about behavior and interaction based on social norms, rules, and styles (Donovan, 2004). Therefore, different cultural norms contribute to marital conflict (Duan & Claborne, 2011). In the novel, these differences in social rules, traditions, styles and norms start to show up after the couple's marriage.

Honeycutt *et al.* (2005) argue that parents would rather see their children with someone successful of a different race than someone unsuccessful from their own race. In John's family, education is the key criteria for success. John has completed his PhD and later on he is offered an assistant professor's position at Drexel University. He seems to have been influenced by his parents to persuade Hanan to complete her study in order to be a competent spouse for their son. John says, "[m]y parents were just thinking that, you know, since we're having a baby soon . . . wouldn't it be better to quit the clothes shop so you can start sooner on your degree?" (Darraj, 2007, p. 130). She replies that she is thinking of studying, but she has not made her decision to do that then. He insists that his mom made the point that Hanan had been accepted at the university. Hanan is shocked that he had this conversation with his mother. She decides that she will not quit her job at the clothing store and will not study at that time.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, both Hanan's and John's families have opposed their cross-cultural marriage. Although Hanan and John do not seem to sustain their marriage, the relationship between Hanan and her mother becomes better after their conversations with each other about raising children. At the end of this chapter, Hanan and her parents unite after the heart attack of her father. While having a conversation with her mother at the hospital, Hanan realizes that her mother is compassionate, caring and knowledgeable about taking care of children. When Hanan complains about how the baby wakes up many times every night, her mother assures her that the child will sleep longer when he is six months old. These compassionate conversations reduce the tension between Hanan and her mother. Some sociologists argue that

one factor that reduces family conflict is the birth of the couple's first child (Wilt, 2011). In other words, Hanan starts to understand her mother's point of view and understands that she does not have to raise her child alone while her parents can support her.

In the novel, family members play a vital role in the interracial marriage. Children affect and are affected by this marriage. Expecting a baby is the reason that triggered the marriage of this couple. Moreover, Darraj's Michael is the center of gravity for his mother, Hanan. Hanan is a parent with Arab ancestry and she gains power and self-control when she is with her child. On the other hand, Hanan's family opposes her marriage, except for Hanan's father who remains onlooker as his daughter's marriage collapses before his eyes. These members highlight cultural, social and economic issues that intersect in cross-cultural marriages.

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