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The question of identity in Abu-Jaber's *Birds of Paradise*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the problematics of identity in the light of the traditional American family's restrictions, father's patriarchal authority, and mother's internalization of such an authority as presented in Abu-Jaber's Birds of Paradise. By examining the connection between family and children's attempts of constructing subjectivity, the article reveals how the psychological anxiety of conformist parents about children's potential autonomy becomes a disciplinary power that is identifiable with that of prison as children are kept under surveillance, and regulated to embrace certain roles. The result of this process of control, the article communicates, is that it proves ineffective as it promotes estrangement and resistance, and prevents understanding and enactment of dialogue among family members. Not surprisingly, then, Abu- jabber makes of the protagonist Felice the very rebel against those familial restrictions and practices that violate her freedom and privacy. The lack of ideals in her family inevitably drives Felice to find them outside. However, given the tropes of fracture and division of Brians, the novel seems to suggest rejection of parent's control on shaping children's identity, and provides a critical perspective into identity construction on conformist norms. My approach delves into identity theories and (feminist) psychology to shed light upon how identity is performed and conceived in this contemporary literary text. Approaching the novel through the lens of these theories helps provide innovative critical readings that expand to navigate the complexity of identity construction, and interrogate the social and cultural limits that negatively influence an individual pursuit of selfhood.

Keywords: Identity, Patriarchy, Gender, Selfhood, Object Petit a, Imaginary Order, Symbolic Order, Anxiety, Motherhood.
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(Arab) American writers have long been concerned with questions of identity and the problematics of its construction as a means of positing a wide array of insights, critiques, and suggestions that are often associated with the understanding of human needs, rights, and aspirations. In a society of dizzying social and cultural changes (modernity, postmodernity, immigration, changes in gender roles and sexual orientation, and multiculturalism), it should come as no surprise that the very traditional values and ways of American identity construction are being constantly challenged and

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interrogated in literature for reconsideration. Rather, they become to some writers like Diana Abu-Jaber a source of tension and obstacles that influences the individual's pursuit of selfhood. Her Birds of Paradise (2011) dramatizes the American traditional family's anxiety over children's evolutionary attitude towards self-recognition. While the novel touches on parent's suffering as they see their children leave them, it portrays the traditional family as defective and its conventions as suffocating for children. The dominance of patriarchy, parent's rigidity, authoritarian control, and conformity to tradition prevent such a family from being an empowering space for self-assertion, and a suitable environment where children could grow as independent individuals.

This article examines the problematics of identity in the light of the traditional American family's restrictions, parental over-protectiveness, father's patriarchal authority, and mother's internalization of such an authority as presented in Abu-Jaber's Birds of Paradise. By examining the connection between family and children's attempts of constructing subjectivity, the article reveals how the psychological anxiety of conformist parents about children's potential autonomy becomes a disciplinary power that is identifiable with that of prison as children are kept under surveillance, and regulated to embrace certain roles. The result of this process of control, the article communicates, is that it proves ineffective as it promotes secrecy, estrangement and resistance, and prevents understanding and enactment of dialogue among family members. Not surprisingly, then, Abu- jabber makes of the protagonist Felice the very rebel against those familial restrictions and practices that violate her freedom, privacy, and independence. The lack of freedom and privacy in her family inevitably drives Felice to find them outside. However, given the tropes of fracture and division of Brians, the novel seems to suggest rejection of parent's control on shaping children's identity, and provides a critical perspective into identity construction on conformist assumptions and norms. My approach delves into identity theories and (feminist) psychology to shed light upon how identity is performed and conceived in this contemporary literary text. Approaching the novel through the lens of these theories helps provide insightful and innovative new critical readings that expand to navigate the complex dynamics of identity construction, and interrogate the social and cultural limits that negatively influence an individual pursuit of selfhood.

The value of the study lies in its original contribution to the substantial critical corpus dedicated to Arab American novels in general, and in addressing a significant gap in the already established scholarship on Diana Abu-Jaber's novels, in particular. While extensive research has been conducted on Arabian Jazz: A Novel, Origin, Crescent, and The Language of Baklava, very little has been written about Birds of Paradise. Until recently, I have only found short critical reviews or comments done about the novel. A review in Washington Post by Ron Charles, for instance, praises the book for its "rich, complex and memorable" engaging style of telling the story of Felice (Charles, 2011). Further, the psychological aspect of the book has been the subject of attraction from Susanna Sonnenberg. She reviews the book as a story about a sadistic girl, who "punish herself for some horrible thing she had done," leaving her parents to struggle "with the consequences of her actions" (Sonnenberg, 2011). Some of the academic commentaries have been provocative, considering the book as platform for interrogating issues about family. Good Housekeeping reviews the book as a "gripping, beautifully written portrait of a family falling apart and trying to amend itself" (Housekeeping, 2011). On the other hand, For Bliss Broyard, the book is an elaborate proof of Abu Jaber's artistic talent and skills. She comments on the book: "Abu-Jaber . . . employs her descriptive talents in bringing Miami to steamy, pulsing life" (Broyard, 2011)

As for the studies that dealt with Birds of Paradise, this article is, to the best of my knowledge, the first one done on the novel. Therefore, it might hopefully become an important start that provides a catalyst to more studies about identity in the novel, and provides a critical view of tradition for its association with violation of individuality, privacy, and freedom. In other words, the article allows us to consider the intersections of conformity, tradition, and the right to individuality, selfhood, and independence, questions that are usually at the heart of literary communication. The structure of this article is designed to introduces readers to the dynamic institutional and traditional forces of identity formation and their impact on the individual's quest for selfhood. To that end, the article's analyses concern the relationship between mother and daughter, the physical and psychological damage enacted by their separation for patriarchal ideals, the psychic dramatic dilemma of daughter's quest for object petit a due to lack of love from patriarchal parents, and then the empowering dynamics of disidentification with parents as an essential step towards selfhood.

Identity and family are closely bound. A person's moral or social views, conventions, rituals, and attitudes are at an early age much influenced by family. As Maalouf notes, identity is gradually structured by and develops through family: "[t]he apprenticeship starts very soon, in early childhood. Deliberately or otherwise, those around him mould him, shape him, instill into him family beliefs, rituals, attitudes and conventions" (Maalouf, 1998, p. 21). Family is an early social space of adjustment to life: [i]t teaches children who they are, how they (should) relate to their surroundings, and what attitudes they should develop towards life and themselves.

Felice attests to the dynamic family forces of identity formation. As a child, Felice cannot define herself away from her mother's gendering nurture. Chodorow notes that "[w]omen's mothering . . . produce[s] psychological self-definition and capacities appropriate to mothering in women" (Chodorow, 1978, 208). "Daughters grow up," asserts Chodorow, "identifying with . . . mothers . . . [who] have ensured that women will mother infants and will take continuing responsibility for children" (Chodorow, p.208). As she sees Felice grows, Avis becomes interested in preparing her daughter for the expected gender role. She believes that "daughters [belong] to mothers, and sons to their fathers" (23). Hence, Felice is supposed to mirror her. As an image source for her daughter, she usually imagines herself "baking with [Felice] a daughter. Showing her how to crack an egg one-handed . . . [T]the way to distill essences from berries, the proper way to tie an apron" (23). Such a paradigm of femininities on which Avis grounds her attitude towards life functions as an essential gendered self-image that Felice is expected to develop about herself in life.

Indeed, Avis's modelling of different femininities to reinforce the acceptable gender identity for Felice allies her with the feminist notion of motherhood as a form of patriarchy. As Beauvoir puts it, "[o]ne of the woman's curses . . . is that in her childhood she is left in the hands of women . . . the mother wants to integrate the girl into the feminine world . . . [F]or the mother, the daughter is . . . her double and another . . . she imposes her destiny on her child: it is away to proudly claim her femininity" (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 295). More than anything else, Avis embraces the feminine qualities that are imposed on the female by patriarchy. She is the typical image of what the female is expected to be: fragile, kind, domestic, submissive, and nonintellectual. Avis accepts domesticity with serene satisfaction: "[i]nstead of reading . . . Avis stood in the kitchen studying the pictures in cookbooks . . . Philosophy, she already intuited, created only thought—no beds made, no children fed" (13). Domesticity, to Avis, is more important than knowledge/education, as suggested by the word "philosophy."

There is no real sign of Avis's life that suggests she has grown up as an independent individual. She tends to be more traditional and submissive in her approach to life. Her short-term attendance at Risley Hall College was merely to "placate her mother" (164). When she meets Brian there, she prefers preparing food and sweets for him to studying literature as marriage and procreation are the ultimate desired ends of her relationship with him: "she [Avis] wanted him. She wanted children with him" (165). Avis places the traditional roles of mother and wife on a pedestal. She primarily defines herself in relation to these two gender roles.

Avis cannot even imagine her life without looking after the needs and well-being of Brian: "[w]here would she sleep if she didn't have Brian to make the bed for? Would she sleep at all? . . . She could never give up her house or kitchen (16). The idea that the female's fundamental duties are the home and well-being of husband restricts Avis's social freedom and keeps her under close supervision. Her social life, albeit primarily enacted by her acceptance of the patriarchal dictates, is experienced as painful and oppressive. Her interaction with neighbors is banned by fear and tension caused by Brian's authority. When she thinks of socializing, she "can imagine how horrified Brian would be . . . and how he loves to remind her: 'You might not want to deal with the public'" (91). It is not surprising, then, that Avis throughout the novel lives in solitude without friends other than Solange.

In fact, Avis's life remains an obvious model of a mother wary of substantiating an appealing attitude towards patriarchy. She then attempts to make of Felice an extension of her 'ideal' gendered self-image, taking concrete steps to prepare her daughter for such an end. Avis imposes the traditional dress code on Felice, and never allows her to break with it (26), and when Felice goes to a friend's party, she forces her to come back before "curfew" time (27). Avis's schemes of gendering Felice are also correlated with physical violence and heavy-handed control. Avis regretfully acknowledges:

"[t]hat's the problem—we tried to control her, so she [Felice] rebelled" (29). One of the methods perpetrated against Felice by her father, and supported by mother with the aim to control her is the use of violence as the narrator observes: "Brian grabbed Felice by one of her wing-like arms and swatted her, hard, twice with the flat of his palm . . . Avis didn't blame Brian . . . for the spanking" (30). Brian's violent nature together with Avis's tolerance of it is so deeply tragic to Felice.

Wounded by such realization, Felice becomes so confused and angry at Avis that a fissure of the relationship between them starts growing. As Rosinsky puts it, "mother and daughter are estranged by patriarchal norms for female behavior and self-identity" (Rosinksy, 1980, p. 280). Felice's sense of identity loss grows, and with it a deep anger festers: "she [Felice] broke into tears when Avis made her change an outfit. 'It's like you think you own me. You don't even really love me'" (26, italics original). With these terms, Felice unfolds her anger at her mother's attempts to control her selfhood to please patriarchy. She understands the issue of identity as a willful construction that is to be developed separately from the coercive gender limits that operate to objectify her. She cannot see herself as Avis's double or an object owned by her.

In Rich's view, a key factor of splitting mother-daughter relationship is the mother's submission to patriarchy. "Many daughters live in rage at their mothers," writes Rich, "for having accepted, too readily and passively, 'whatever comes.' A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her; it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman" (Rich, 1986, p.243). Avis's association with patriarchal norms is calamitous for Felice, and leaves an emotional scar in her psyche—a matter that highlights the daughter's need to separate from her mother. Avis, according to Felice, is already a patriarchal functionary of what the daughter will become under her upbringing. When Hannah asks her whether she would grow up to be a "smart" woman (44), Felice assures her that she would reject Avis's mode of life: "my mother is pathetic but good. That happens to mothers a lot. Which is why you should never be one" (44).

Despite the good feeling Felice holds for her mother, it is difficult, for her, to embrace the mother figure of Avis as a role model to pursue selfhood. She cannot live as a traditional female in a patriarchal family, where the mother fails to exist in any real way for her, but as a model to teach/support her acting the required gender roles. Avis has never been a real mother for Felice as the narrator observes: "Avis had wished desperately . . . that she'd grown up with a proper mother—a real one—who would've shown her what to do—not the shadow figure" (30). Although Avis blames her mother for failing to nurture Felice, this remark is in itself a commentary on Avis's inability to understand her daughter and support her to fulfill her aspiration for self-recognition. Felice then denies identification with Avis, and rejects the feminine world she takes.

Inevitably, this mother-daughter disidentification does not only strain the relationship between Avis and Felice but also causes psychological conflicts and pains for both women. Birds of Paradise is informed by the psychological feminist sensibility that conceptualizes the mother's separation from daughter for patriarchal ideals as a critical phase of serious psychological consequences. Mairs vividly describes her traumatic psychic experience, being a daughter prepared by parents, especially mother, and society for the male world: "[i]ndeed my life became troubled, not when individual men entered it, but when I emerged from the long dream . . . of my female supported childhood into the Real/Male world . . . I longed to smash the entire hideous alien structure, but I had no tools" (Mairs, 1986, p.141). "Empty- handed" to stand against the patriarchal structure and its agents, Mairs asserts: "I grew depressed . . . my depression was— and still is—my response to the struggle not to go under, not to go down for the last time, sinking into acceptance of that space which crabbed and cramped me" (Mairs, p.141). Depression, enacted by the contradiction between the harsh reality of patriarchy and Mairs's parental male-oriented upbringing – especially that of mother as a primary care taker of children—are not feelings that contribute to the daughter's affiliation with mother, but, on the contrary, to the traumatic alienation/separation from her. Mairs's terminology "space" when referring to her reluctance of being part of the male's world, which mother supports, is significant in demonstrating the daughter's resentful sense of attachment to her.

Rich also points out that with the daughter's separation from mother, intensity, anxiety and a sense of pain are left over. She claims:

[p]robably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other,

one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement. (Rich, 1986, p. 225-26)

Accordingly, the mother-daughter bond/identification is one of the strongest, most natural and biological ones. Due to the special nature of such a relationship, Rich asserts that the daughter's attachment to/disidentification with the mother, the mother to/ with daughter is continuously conflictive. It continues to be "resonant with charges," and a subject to either deep mutuality or traumatic alienation. The determiner of either end, for Rich, depends on the extent the mother-daughter relationship is influenced by patriarchy. The separation becomes a catalyst for anxiety and trauma when such a relationship grows within the limits of patriarchy. At this point, the daughter cannot see that her mother really exists for her, but sees her as a patriarchal agent to obscure her real self and strip her of individuality.

A complex and insightful account of the traumatic aspects of the mother-daughter separation is given in Abu-Jaber's Birds of Paradise. Pathological symptoms, nerve/mood disorder, anxiety, and physical repercussions are skillfully dramatized here to bring the reader as close as possible to the painful experience of the mother's loss of her daughter, or the daughter's loss of her mother. Abu-Jaber tackles the subject of separation and its physical and psychological ramifications with a view to pinpointing women's suffering from patriarchal structure.

Patriarchy is an institution of large generative physical and psychological ills against the female. "Every woman in a patriarchal society," write Gilbert and Gubar, "must meet and overcome: oppression . . . starvation . . . madness . . . and coldness" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2009, p. 339). Patriarchy takes therein large psychic and physical tolls on Avis. She experiences the pains of insomnia, and becomes more vulnerable to (un)consciously develop self-destructive behaviors by the loss of Felice. She rarely sleeps, preferring to wait her missing daughter on a hard rocker in the den: "[i]t was an uncomfortable chair so it helped her stay up late and wake early and it was a punishment place—for failing to keep her daughter at home . . .. She'd slept for an hour at most—the wall clock said 3 a.m." (85). Felice's escape leaves Avis to bear the burden of guilt and shame, which she attempts to atone for by getting her body into the pain of sitting on a hard chair. Avis substitutes physical pain for the emotional and psychological ones that continuously haunt her for not being a good mother for her daughter as she admits "to herself—much to her shame—that . . . she felt as if she hadn't known her daughter as she should have" (87).

The dramatization of the sense of guilt is taken to the extreme in Birds of Paradise; where Abu-Jaber links it with depression and grief that endure throughout Avis's life. The fluid boundaries between guilt and grief concur with Rodriguez's conceptualization of guilt as "a cognitive and emotional response often associated with the grief experience in which a person feels a sense of remorse, responsibility, and/or shame regarding the loss" (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 341). Avis then struggles to cope with the dynamics of the various guilt-oriented feelings and their negative consequences in her life. Cyclothymia "takes all of her [Avis's] effort . . . to stay calm (21), and "crying" becomes a daily ritual to haunt the house with gloom (66). She acknowledges that Felice's absence "breaks my [her] heart, every day" (227). Another symptom associated with Avis's grief is her preoccupation with the sense of emptiness. Avis encounters difficulty with overcoming her sense of the so called 'empty nest" when Felice runs away: "[t]he house felt hollow to Avis, despite the presence of husband and son" (85). As well, Avis's overwhelming grief greatly disturbs her life and management of pastry business. She continuously makes "mistakes over the past year: miscalculating ingredient amounts for breads she's made hundreds of times; forgetting orders, singeing entire sheets of the most delicate . . . pastries" (161).

In fact, the effect of grief on Avis is complex. On the one hand, it mostly diminishes her intimate feeling towards Brian: "they've lost the ability to speak to each other" (162), and they barely meet for copulation: "[s]he [Avis] estimates that it's been nearly six months since they last made love" (160). Avis's energy is so consumed that she is "too drained" even to get into quarrel with Brian (234). She becomes absorbed by impotency and sadness that threaten to engulf her life— a matter that makes her look like a victim in the primal scene of her marriage. Her sexual and personal agency wilts by grief over Felice whom she has lost because of the patriarchal pressures and dictates that underlie their

relationship. In this way, Abu-Jaber debunks patriarchy as a realm of subjectivity and comfort even for its female patrons.

On the other hand, the extent to which Avis's body is drastically damaged by depression and anxiety over the separation evokes the notion of patriarchy not only as a threat to women's selfhood but also to their life. Oakley writes about the complex relationship between the psychological state and physical illness: "health and illness are not split off from the rest of experience, in which bodies are seen as connected to the environment, and minds and emotions are understood to shape the way in which bodies function" (Oakley, 1993, p. 17). The body is a representational mode of emotions and thoughts; it exists in a correlative relationship with them. The negative feelings a person experiences, then, turn into signs/symptoms on his/her body. Rodriguez, for example, discusses how depression and anxiety experience leaves its repercussions on the victim's body as man's organ systems are influenced by one another in response to how s/he feels or thinks. She asserts: "Human beings are self-reflective creatures with the capacity for experiencing, reflecting upon, and giving meaning to sensations, both physical and emotional" (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 341). A person's body is the way s/he feels and thinks.

In Birds of Paradise, Abu-Jaber gives a particular concern to the interplay between the painful feelings and body illness to intensify woman's suffering from patriarchy and suggests bypassing its norms for a healthier parent-children relationship. Avis's body is turned into a reflective site of dangerous pathological symptoms. Depression and anxiety play out destructively on her body. They manifest themselves in the pathological recurrent panic attacks, especially at moments of emotional intensity. When Avis's loss of her daughter is triggered by that of her only friend, Solange, "she takes deep breaths—a technique she'd learned years ago from a grief counselor, to stave off panic attacks" (271). Behind Avis's complicity with gendering Felice and its consequential painful feelings lurk the ills of chronic panic attacks, a physical manifestation of her severe mental and emotional depression and anxiety.

The body remains a significant a venue through which Avis can express her suffering. Hair loss is another biological reaction to the severe stress, which plagues her for more body damage. From a psychoanalytic perspective, "[t]he most common type of psychological condition that can cause hair loss," asserts Armani, "is stress" (Armani, 1999, p. 31). There is a link between stress Avis endures and her hair fall. After years of stressful life caused by her separation from Felice, the narrator describes the tragic moment of Avis's decision to cut her hair because of baldness: "Avis scoops her remaining hair in one hand, tilts the scissors in the other, and snaps away furiously. 'Here you go!' She says to the mirror . . . 'Happy birthday, Felice! Happy Birthday to you!'" (1971). Within patriarchal structures, the pains of Avis are as much physical, as they are cultural and psychological.

The portrayal of these forms of suffering does not only point at Abu-Jaber's focus on the physical ills, the emotional and psychological burdens that the female endures by performing her roles of feminine wife and insufficient mother, but also at her attitude towards motherhood within the patriarchal structure as a constant threat to her well-being for reconsideration. "[U]nder patriarchy," asserts Rich, "female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood" (Rich, 1986, p. 13). Avis has been awakened to the harsh realities of motherhood in her patriarchal marriage: "[s]he [Avis] doesn't want to talk. All words have left her. How many times is a person supposed to lose her children? Is this why she went through motherhood? The morning sickness that lasted all day, the swollen ankles, the all night feedings . . . The anxiety and the waiting up, and on and on" (198). Physical fatigue, illness, sickness of domestic confinement, frustration, and anxiety over loss of Felice are extreme versions of the futility of female's potentials by patriarchal motherhood. Although this realization comes so late in the novel that we don't see Avis put it into practice, it remains a significant motif to represent what such a form of patriarchy and submission to its dictates mean for the female mother.

Abu-Jaber draws a striking parallel between the tolls of mother and daughter under patriarchy. The novel is divided into clipped chapters. Each is entitled by a family member of Brians, and told from his/her point of view, with frequent comments and observations by the author. Such a structure makes it possible for each character to give voice to his/her inside and outside perceptions of reality, feelings, experiences, and aspirations. Felice's voice/experience is a prominent part of Abu-Jaber's work, and a significant figuration of the hardships the daughter undergoes in the quest for selfhood under the control of patriarchal parents. As Still puts it, patriarchy is "an arbitrary assumption of power, founded

in a set of widely shared belief systems, historical conditions and material, social practices, which combine to . . . compel individual . . . assent" (Still, 2007, p. 253). Patriarchy operates to deny woman's autonomy, kill off her self-realization, and prevents her from making decision independently. Within its limits, woman's selfhood is reduced to do things against her passions and interests, and is obscured by external expectations and dictates.

As a member of patriarchal family, Felice is "essentially" expected to suppress her individuality and interests; she has only to exist as a proper female. Since her childhood, "the purity of Felice's desire" to prefer "beauty" to domestic skills is not supported by her mother (12). Much to the young Felice's frustration, her leisure time is subtly constrained by Brian and Avis to prevent her from socializing and exchanging personal interests of physical appearance, fashion, and entertainment with her friends: Lola, Betty, Coco, Marisa, Yeni, and Bella. To Felice's parents, these girls' lifestyles, fashions, interests, and social relations threaten their endeavor to prepare Felice for the proper female figure role. During vacations, "Brian and Avis did their best to keep up— taking the kids to water parks and museums, summertime hegiras to Europe, and the costly winter pilgrimages to Disney World" (23). Such subtle measures have been so overwhelmingly negative on Felice that they cut her to the bone. It was not easy for Felice to be separated from "friends [she] had known . . . since kindergarten" (156). Due to the pain of the separation from her beloved friends, Felice resorts to withdrawal. Avis realizes how her daughter starts "standing apart from the others, especially as she grew older" (23-4). By adopting this negative behavior and having no opportunity to overcome its cause, grief overwhelms Felice. "Felice . . . was sad and would always feel that way," illustrates Avis (26).

Physically, Felice's lack of defining herself on her terms under the patriarchal parents' authority takes its toll on her body. "[T]he light in her face seemed different: she'd gone from clarity to a gray gem . . . grief made her seem older—her loveliness elevated into something unearthly" (25-6). Living the contradiction between the external expectations/dictates, and internal reality/aspirations makes Felice vulnerable to emotional and physical sickness. Gilbert and Gubar assert— particularly with reference to social scientists and historians like Bernard, Chesler, Weisstein, and Bart— that "patriarchal socialization literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2009, p. 53). Given the patriarchal structure of Brian's family, which is fraught with conflicts and tensions, it is not accidental that Felice develops deconstructive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Felice's relationship with Brian was "never easy" (106). Not only does Brian exist in the house as an "angry . . . ghost" (179), but he also asserts himself as a conformist and a figure of oppressive authority, who the children fear. The relationship between Brian and his children is, of course, hierarchical in nature: they are his children but they are also his subordinates, who should unquestionably accept his doctrines. A mirror reflecting to his children a replica of his father, the authoritarian figure of Brian's father is, in Freud's terms, "introjected into" his "ego and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego" he imposes on children (Freud, 1962, p. 176). In his treatment with children, Brian displays the same traditional authoritarian attitude his father had towards him. At the root of his consciousness is the notion that "our parents know us even better than we know ourselves" (162). Like his father, he then enforces discipline, opinions, and conformity on his children. There is no chance to get what they want, or freely discuss their aspirations with him. Having been a mediocre student at college, Stanely's suggestion of quitting education to start his organic food business is sharply suppressed by Brian: "[y]ou're going to college, Stan. You're too young to make this decision, so I'm making it for you. Case closed" (121). Being a son of authoritarian father, Stanely has to accept Brian's view with docility and submissiveness.

The situation of Felice is not much different. She suffers from Brian's discrimination, whether on the basis of gender or age. A stern, aloof, and patriarchal conformist father, Brian refuses to buy a cell phone for the ten-year-old Felice: "Felice had started asking for her own phone when she'd turned ten, but Brian had ruled she was too young" (27). Brian's rejection of granting his daughter the cell phone she craved is caused less by real fatherly caution/care for her than by conformity with the external patriarchal dictates of society. Chodorow writes: "[a] primary way in which the closely intertwined cultures of gender . . . enter the family and the child's unconscious is through the father" (Chodorow, 1994, p. 87). Brian substantiates the father's role in imposing gender role traits and role-related behaviors on Felice. According to his patriarchal dictates, Felice is forbidden to have a cell phone at this

age so that he can take full control of her socially, and appropriate her to behave in ways which are considered to be feminine by society.

Brian is associated with the external patriarchal world and its imposing dictates. He is often in opposition to the gentle caring father figure. Lack of concern, love, and sympathy for Felice remains a shocking feature of his relation with her. Unlike Javier, who "talks to his children every day . . .. He [Brian] never asks about Felice" (109). Such an imperfection of Felice's relationship with Brian should have hindered her individuation process and quest for selfhood. The emotional intimate father-daughter relationship plays a significant role in woman's development and agency. Tessman writes:

the quality of emotional engagement between father and daughter . . . remains . . . a powerful undercurrent giving direction to that particular vision of happiness which becomes a guiding force in a woman's life and affects her perception of the value or futility of her own efforts in striving toward it. (Tessman, 1982, p. 220)

That the daughter's emotional relationship with father is an essential of developing her positive attitude towards life and enhancing the sense of independence in her environment clearly contrasts with distance and emotional detachment in Felice's relationship with Brian or Avis.

Felice's lack of parental attachment surfaces repeatedly in Birds of Paradise. Abu-Jaber, for example, consciously discloses a scene—Derek's affectionate hug of Felice—that would unfold Felice's real need to experience emotional and psychological ties with father or mother. When Derek affectionately hugs Felice, the narrator comments with indignation: "[n]o one has touched her like this since she was eight or so years old: she feels a fine, prickling heat on her skin" (153). While an explicit yearning for deeper contact, recognition, and emotional involvement from parents remains an aspect of Felice's personality, there is yet another implicit unconscious aspect that this narrator's commentary statement tells about her adult character. The lack of parental love and emotional closeness sets in motion Felice's desire to quest for substitute parental figures and intimate psychological ties with other characters in the hope of offering her alternative sources of such love feelings.

For Lacan, man's loss of love object leaves within the unconscious a deep affective wound which persists into adulthood, and turns to repressed desire which remains dynamic for fulfillment through investment into new objects. In his illustration of the relation between human subjects and the object they desire/lack, Lacan claims: "[t]he human object always constitutes itself through the intermediary of . . . a loss of an object . . . this feature didn't escape you . . . the subject has to reconstitute the object . . . to find its totality again starting from I know not what unity lost at the origin" (Lacan, 1991, p. 136). As such, Lacan's view of the lost object of desire is, in an important sense, bound to fantasy. The subject attempts to re-construct an imaginary object for the one lost to experience the illusion of fulfillment or unity with it.

There is no absolute resolution of such a psychic dramatic dilemma as the imagined object is not exactly identical to the one lost. The experience of this process constantly haunts us, but it is conceived by Lacan as incomplete and impossible to be fully attained. Aware of that deep lack and yearning for its completion in the human psyche, Lacan, in seminar XI of 1973, argues that the lost object or what he calls object petit a "can never be attained . . . [it] is really the CAUSE of desire rather than that towards which desire tends . . . Object petit a is any object which sets desire in motion, especially the partial objects which define the drives" (as cited in Dylan, 1996, p. 128). In Lacan, Object petit a is the original motive of desire within the psyche. What we lack is at the heart of our being in action; it constitutes the very condition of our behaviors and relationships with objects in this world.

Within this context, Felice's behaviors are partly formed by the dynamics of lack in her psyche. Felice's attraction to Berry and Renaldo—or that comfort she felt with Derek as previously highlighted in my discussion— is not an act of absolute will, but an inevitable effect of her attempts to fulfill a desire of lost object. The desire of lacking father/mother is an unconscious motive force that entails her actions and social relations; it becomes that gap in her psychic identity, which she seeks to fill through love, friendship, and sexual union. At the root of Felice's psychic identity is the object of father's desire. Her relationship with Brian breaks not because she rejects him, but because she believes that he has already abandoned and rejected her. The jouissance of their relationship is disrupted by Brian's constant abandonment of his daughter, and allegiance to the law of patriarchy, whereby the relationship between them is transformed from the natural to the cultural. By Brian's internalization of the law of patriarchy, Felice turns from a daughter to an object to be appropriated for such law's

dictates. So closely does she at the imaginary phallus phase identify with Brian that the essential later separation enacted by patriarchy feels like a fall from Eden.

Brian's recollection of Felice's habitual bedtime wait for his return to home after work catches the reader's attention for its sharp illustration of the tense mutual attachment between them at this phase: "Felice waited . . . for him . . . three, four, and five years old. Her face seemed to go pale with joy when he opened the door . . .. He had loved her profoundly . . . read her bedtime stories, her . . . warm head resting against . . . his chest . . . He couldn't think of that without his throat tighten" (101-02). At this age, Felice's love for her father is charged with infatuation, an object of love one might hold for his/her first love. She cannot imagine her father but as a loving intimate subject to satisfy her needs, desires, and narcissistically herself as an object of his love. Lacan's explanation of how children feel at the imaginary phallus phase clarifies Felice's attitude towards her father here. The father in Lacanian theory turns through this phase into an imaginary figure. He is "an imago . . . that the subject builds up in fantasy around the figure of the father. This imaginary construction often bears little relationship to the father as he is in reality . . .. The imaginary father can be construed as an ideal father" (as cited in Dylan, 1996, p. 63). Brian fulfills the ideal role of imaginary father in Felice's psyche. And she continues throughout adolescent life to be trapped within this imaginary realm of perceiving him, a matter that makes her later realization of the opposite a problematic issue in her identity.

However, the ideal imaginary image Felice creates about her father becomes desperately superficial as the real Brian stands in counterpoint to it. We shall remember that Felice's later disidentification with parents is due to emotional distance: "[t]hey [i.e. Brians] were living in a state of hibernation—that's what it'd felt like at the time . . . Now Brian suspects that what he did was worse than neglect—it was abandonment" (116). For Felice, it is hard to see Brian, who was once ideal, recede into negligence and abandonment. The retreat into these two negative features is the reason of the early breakdown of the relationship between them. Felice's runaway from the house is partly due to her aversion to the aloof and negligent father. Avis claims that "Brian's absence from their life" is a fundamental reason of Felice's escape from the house (106). Brian's separation from Felice dangerously broadens as Felice grows adult and becomes vulnerable to the functionality of the father figure in the Symbolic order. Through the progressive accession to the Symbolic order, Felice not only becomes more alienated from her father, but also more curbed to fulfill her desires.

For Lacan, the Symbolic Order is a perversion and curtailment of the subject's desires and wishes. He/she is forced to express or fulfill them within the limits and exigencies of a circulated discourse. Lacan asserts:

> [i]t is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links.
>
> It is the discourse of my father, for instance, in so far as my father made mistakes which I am condemned to reproduce . . . I am condemned to reproduce them because I am obliged to pick up again the discourse he bequeathed to me, not simply because I am his son, but because one can't stop the chain of discourse, and it is precisely my duty to transmit it in its aberrant form to someone else. (Lacan, 1991, p. 89)

Entering the realm of the Symbolic involves submission to the dictates of the function/position the subject is assigned to meet. Neither the subject nor those in charge of developing his/her identity is free to behave on their own terms. They are compelled to behave as though they were functionaries of what Lacan calls a circuit of discourse. According to the prerequisites of this discourse, the father in Lacanian theory becomes "[t]he symbolic father [, who] is not a real being but a position, a function, and hence is synonymous with the term 'paternal function. This function is none other than that of imposing the Law" (as cited in Dylan, 1996, p. 62). The pressure that weighs more on Felice and provokes her anger for perpetual struggle and advancement of selfhood against Brian is his attempts of imposing the patriarchal law and its dictates on her.

Indeed, Brian's acceptance of playing the role of the patriarchal functionary in the Symbolic order remains devastating in Felice's life. His narcissistic desire for asserting his patriarchal authority against Felice turns his natural love for her to hideous resentment. Felice, who was once "a Miami angel . . . [and an] unbearably lovely . . . child" (116), becomes "worthless" (116), and is also significantly coded as "terrorist" for her refusal to submit herself to Brian's patriarchal oppressive confines.

Brian's attitude towards Felice is one of anger and hatred. In fact, he represses his natural emotions for her, buries them in denial—a matter that creates a sense of loss in her ego. Felice's growing realization of such a bitter feeling leads her to eventually run away from the house, seeking relations and connections with people to fill her need for a substitute love. At a certain moment of her life, Felice's essential human need for family love, especially father's, informs her attachment to the companionship of Berry and Renaldo, as illustrated by the narrator: "Felice feels unusually wise—as if the meaning of the night has revealed itself to her. Love is exchangeable, malleable: she traded one family for this other kind of family" (241). Felice's love and sense of belonging to her new friendship becomes a manifestation of her emotional investment and a substitute for the unfulfilled love she lacks in her real family. Abandoned by Brian, Felice transfers her love to Berry and Renaldo, expecting them to undo the lack of love from her father.

Although Felice's separation from parents, father in particular, is accompanied by the (un)conscious attempts to fulfill a desire for object petit a, this disidentification is an essential step towards her psychic development and selfhood. Disidentification with parents is generally viewed by identity theorists as the foundation of the will to selfhood. Butler, for example, notes the importance of separation in a subject's life:

[i]n my view, the self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered a separation … a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some 'Other.' That 'Other' installed in the self thus establishes the permanent incapacity of the 'self' to achieve self-identity; it is as if it were always already disrupted by the Other; the disruption of the Other at the heart of the self is the very condition of the self's possibility. (Butler, 1991, p. 27)

Here, Butler equates separation with autonomy, viewing both essentially positive. One then needs to embrace separation as a developmental goal. Significantly, Felice's experience of the separation from Brian—the other— gives way to reformulate her self-development and then achieve independence. The traumatic separation from father marks a turning point for her. It enhances Felice's faith in her own self, turning her to be more perceptive of the necessity of independence. She then leaves the suffocating family in search of self-assertion. At the scene of her departure, she displays courage to quit the old pains of separation and embrace future with merry expectations: "[s]he had a feeling like struck sparks flitting through her body: anticipation and scraped away dread and grief, and clear drops of joy" (126). Felice enters the world empowered by a strong belief in her self and strength of will for self-assertion. She no longer needs to see herself depend on Brian or any other family member; she stands on her own, and enjoys approaching this new life, as suggested by "drops of joy."

The importance of Felice's moving beyond dependency is powerfully expressed by Stanley when he identifies her as "a free radical, unsettling the environment" (330). Felice's achievement of such a status of freedom and independence should have been particularly difficult. Felice's autonomy first requires awakening of consciousness of her self-sufficiency, and, second, repression of desire for identification with the primordial Imaginary love object— father or mother— as keeping such a desire unconstrained within Felice's psyche makes her envision herself as a part, essentially needing the other to make a single independent whole.

Repression, for Freud, is an essential defense mechanism for the individual's well being. It starts with "the self-respect of the ego" (Freud, 1953-1966, p. 93). Man practices repression when s/he develops an ideal image or a high self-esteem attitude towards him/herself. In this way, s/he begins to lock out the undesirable information, situations, and events of him/herself. Indeed, Felice is presented as a person of a very strong repression of desire for identification with the Imaginary love objects, namely parents: "For all she [Felice] knows, everyone from her old life could be dead—like Hannah used to say. Everyone that she's ever loved vanished" (238). This process of repression, being fully developed into a sense of selfhood, enables the formation of Felice's independent identity. That Felice's need for anyone to depend on is absent certainly supports the notion of her psychic development for selfhood.

After her departure from the family, Felice is awakened into becoming her independent self. She shatters the illusion of dependence on the other, be that other a (surrogate) mother or father. This change emerges through interaction with her best friend, Emerson. Despite the need for his financial and physical help to alleviate the dangers and financial burden of her life, Felice, however, does not allow him to play the role of her guardian. She is so provoked by his suggestion of taking care of her—

"I could take care of you, if you wanted" (56)— that she "feels like the blood in her veins speeds up" (56), and burst into passion: "'what're you talking about?' . . .. What's that supposed to mean?'" (56). Felice reacts as if Emerson's offer were a threat to her autonomy.

The physical domineering presence and overprotective attitude Felice sees in Emerson reminds her of the patriarchal brother, Stanley: "something about him [i.e. Emerson] reminds her, oddly, of her brother" (56). Her suffering from the control of Stanley's guardianship makes it impossible for her to accept that of Emerson. Felice cannot help feeling reluctant and apprehensive about any sign of authority pertinent to the means in which she was oppressed by her patriarchal family members in childhood. The painful childhood experience of family members' control creates an enduring anxiety and rejection that could frequently surface later in Felice's life, as in Emerson's case, of any figure similar to them.

Felice continuously emphasizes autonomy in her relationship with Emerson. As a sexual being, she breaks with the patriarchal tradition of the "normal femininity," which imposes essential modesty and passivity on the female's sexuality to reduce her to a receptive and responsive sexual entity. "Female sexuality," asserts Irigaray, "has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (Irigaray, 1977, p. 23). She continues to argue that the binary nature of the masculine tradition of sexuality becomes a tool for eliminating the possibility of viewing the female as a subject of erotic pleasure since its focus is on the passivity of vagina and its reduction to an organ of sexual response and excitement. Irigaray asserts: "the opposition between 'masculine' clitoral activity and 'feminine vaginal passivity . . . makes of penis . . . the only sexual organ of recognized value" (Irigaray, 23). Within this context, to be a female in the masculine discourse on sexuality is to essentially remain a passive object of the male's initiation in intercourse.

In explaining the female's passive functionality of sexuality and sociality, Freud claims "[i]t is perhaps the case that in a woman, on the basis of her share in the sexual function, a preference for passive behavior and passive aims is earned over in her life . . . in proportion to the limits . . . within which her sexual life thus serves as a model" (Freud, 1933, p.115-16). Freud then does not simply ascribe passivity to the female; rather he attempts to normalize the way this passivity is to be understood. In Freud, the female's tendency to passivity in life is "a normal" result of the "innate" passivity of her sexuality. This sexist belief dictates what a female should be like socially and sexually. It determines her to conform to certain behaviors and ways of living so that she does not oppose the "absolute" definition that such a false logic assigns. Sexually, responsiveness and passivity define the normal female; dare, activity, and initiation, in contrast, define the abnormal one in the sexual act.

In Birds of Paradise, Felice appears to be defiant of the absolute masculine definition of female sexuality by refusing to conform to what is sexually expected of her. She sexually interacts with Emerson away from the masculine dual parameters. In the first sexual scene with him, Felice reverses the masculine duality of the active male/passive female. The functionality of the sexual act in this scene is clearly contingent upon the performance of Felice as a daring active sexual agent: "Felice hoist herself up . . . slips a leg over Emerson's, her hand swims over his chest. She kisses his shoulder, then his neck, and watches the blood rise beneath the surface of the skin. She kisses the outer rim of his jaw . . . his mouth . . . and her hand travels over the towel" (150). Felice's open revelation of sexual desire is melodramatic in its suggestion of challenging her patriarchal culture's tradition, and mandates for female sexual behavior.

Further, Felice insists on performing as an active sexual equal to Emerson, despite the latter's disapproval over her attitude. He resents her sexual initiation: "[h]ow many men have you been with?" (151). Being sexually initiative, open, and active, Felice becomes tainted for Emerson and associated with debauchery. The act of sexuality for Felice is, however, no longer restricted by what is respectable by male, or society's tradition. Her sharp answer back to Emerson represents a mockery of his masculine view, and a rejection of tradition (i.e. religion) as an enabling factor of setting strictures about female behavior. She ironically puzzles over his attitude: "'since when do you get to ask me that? . . . 'Been with'? What are you now, Mr. Talking Bible?'" (151). Felice asserts herself as a true incarnation of break with tradition and the patriarchal view of female sexuality.

Felice's nonconformity is celebratory and intriguing. Her life is interestingly provocative and revolves around the problematic relationship between the collective and personal identity. The choice

between the collective and personal identity to encapsulate man's struggle for freedom seems a fact of life. Appiah asserts: "[e]ach person's individual is seen as identity having two major dimensions. There is a collective dimension . . . and there is a personal dimension" (Appiah, 1994, p. 151). Because the protection of collective identity sometimes implies a sort of violation of personal identity, resistance to the oppressive parameters of collective identity, as Appiah notes, is an essential "in order to construct a life with dignity" (Appiah, 161). In Appiah, "recognition" achieved by conformity to the dictates of collective identity is "strangely at odds with the individualist . . . identity . . . and authentic self" (Appiah, 149).

Felice's attitude towards the so called "others" becomes a mirror to her privilege of the "individualist identity" over the collective one. She breaks free from the restrictions enacted against non-Americans by the hegemonic, cultural, and familial powers. Through her interaction, Felice embraces the liberal self that emerges from her belief in multiculturalism, thereby subverting her father's typical attitude towards foreigners who are stereotyped as dangerous in American society. Brian and Felice are interestingly juxtaposed in their attitude towards non-Americans. Brian is a paranoid figure of "Cubans . . . African-American . . . and Arab men" (73). Since he "suffers from Anglo paranoia" (73), he never mingles with the non-white. Felice, in contrast, emerges as an open-minded and evolutionary character, who embodies multiculturalism to unsettle the we/them, American/non-American binaries, and set the tone for human relations beyond these man-made typical boundaries. Part of Abu-Jaber's intellectuality throughout the novel is to bring into question the racial attitude in all its forms, from gender to ethnicity. Yousif's antagonism against Litchfield reminds us of the repugnant racism that prevails there against Arab Americans. He moves to live in Miami with his family because "it was too white. In Litchfield . . . he was sick of putting up with anti-Arab bullshit" (155). Felice, however, challenges such a racial attitude against others that force people to ban their social activities for political, religious, or familial agendas/stereotypes.

As an independent individual resisting typical definitions of others as dangerous, Felice maintains a deep relationship with the "dark" skinned, Hannah Joseph, who moves to Miami from Jerusalem (155). With feelings of intimacy, respect, and admiration, they become close friends. At school, although they are not in the same grade, they are careful to take electives, go to the dining hall, and spend their spare time together. And after school time, "Felice and Hannah fell into rituals of endless email and phone calls" (156). Like Felice, Hannah is a liberal character, who dreams of human relations away from racial, political, and cultural boundaries. With great bitterness, she decries the existing political extremist powers that incite people to racial, religious, political hatred and wars: "'I hate Arabs. I hate Israelis. I hate soldiers. I hate Saddam Hussein. I hate George Bush. I hate politics'" (157). The racial boundaries as a result of wars, political extremism, and religious sectarianism are subjects of significant rejection in Hannah's consciousness, together of course with that of Felice.

However, US patriarchal, racial, and collective traditions are brought into question through the representation of Felice and her progressive pursuit of asserting personal identity and recognition. As an evolutionary woman, Felice asserts herself and consolidates her position within society by casting off tradition. By doing so, she is able to see herself as an empowering agency of subjectivity to challenge the negative patriarchal image of woman as a sexual object. Her resistance to such depreciating image begins with her refusal of wearing makeup. "At first Felice wore makeup and was careful with her hair and clothing. But she quickly realized that … prettiness [is] a kind of weakness—just the opposite of the way it was in school" (54). Felice's tendency to quit beautification encodes a significant possibility for undoing the masculine typical female image as an entity obsessed with seeking a sexual attraction from the male.

Felice is determined to champion her selfhood and freedom. Her aspirations become the centre of her life, and her adherence to fulfill them independently orders her world. Her pursuit of being a movie maker (283) implies the importance of woman's struggle within an oppressive family to assert her identity. The oppression of Felice's family, as illustrated earlier, is principally exposed by the focus on Brian's dogmatism and the demonstration of absolute fatherly power "to discipline the mind[s]" of his children (66). Defying the likelihood of retribution from Brian and with a flagrant opposition to the arrangements of having "his own kids . . . attend Cornell" (105), Felice insists on becoming a movie maker. It is important to recall her rejection of her parents' attempts to financially support her after she left their house. On several occasions of need for money, Felice works in "Miami Beach modeling

agencies" (129) and stores (334). The bold independent Felice is deterred neither by parental authority, nor even by the subsequent risks of deciding her future on her own terms.

In conclusion, Abu- Jaber's protagonist, Felice, substantiates the story of a real woman's quest for self-assertion that she has to be different from that of the traditional woman in American society. She resists being objectified through patriarchal functionaries/figures—be he/she a strict male father and friend, or a feminine mother like Avis. Felice's story is a story of resistance and defiance of gender roles assigned to women in her society. The early realization that she cannot be what she wants within the limits of her patriarchal family prompts her escape from such a confining environment as her only salvation. Further, Abu-Jaber does not only dramatize the story of Felice to include the feminist voices and sensibilities of those women who are left on the margins of the patriarchal family, but she also employs the narrative to highlight the problematics of selfhood within such a family. Depression, anxiety, trauma and many other forms of pain directly engage with the key themes of the daughter's separation from mother, and mother's from daughter for patriarchy's sake. Such an engagement serves as a sign of woman's victimization under patriarchy, and a means of expressing critique against its ills. Intriguingly, patriarchy, the novel suggests, far from being simply an oppressive form of thought and practice, uses and abuses its own functionaries until the basis of the strongest, most natural and biological bonds like that of mother and daughter is disturbed. It would be then a serious error to underestimate the dangerous role patriarchy plays in damaging human ties and relations for women, family, and the wider society. The unadulterated consequence of this oppressive ideology is that it is a threat to the stability and the very advantages of communities even if they are in the most democratic and progressive countries like that of Felice's.

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