

The Book Review of “A Map of Home” by Randa Jarrar

Randa Jarrar is an outstanding Muslim-American born in Chicago in 1978. Being grown under the influence of the Egyptian-Greek mother and Palestinian father, Randa absorbed all the traditional features of Kuwait and Egypt, where she stayed a lot in her childhood. When the Gulf War started in 1991, the girl and her family moved back to the USA, where she devoted herself to the creative writing. At present, Randa is the writer, editor, translator, and volunteer in the Radius of Arab American Writers Inc. She was awarded the Arab-American Book Reward for her novel “A Map of Home”.

The novel “A Map of Home” is rather biographical. The author depicts a rebellious girl, the daughter of the Palestinian father and the mother with the Greek and Egyptian roots, like the author herself. The plot of the novel places the main character, a girl called Nidali, to the USA, Egypt, and Kuwait. The girl was born in Boston, the USA, and became the citizen of the country. She called her parents “baba” and “mama”. Being grown in Kuwait, Nidali absorbs the culture and traditions of the country. Later, having spent her teenage years in Egypt, the girl gets acquainted with her mother’s Egyptian roots. Moving from one country to another, she feels her homeland in her heart and soul saying: “Our people carry the homeland in their souls” (Jarrar, 2008, p. 9).

In the novel, the girl is under the pressure of the Gulf War in Palestine, the traditions and customs of the new country – the USA, as well as the struggle with her strict father, who has his own plans for the daughter. Trying to escape from her tyrannous father with the authoritative rules, Nidali goes to Egypt to stay with her sick grandfather, who allows her more independence and freedom. In Egypt, the girl falls in love with a boy Fakhr. The relationships become the first mental and sexual experience for the couple. Thus, a rebellious Nidali breaks all restrictions and rules of her father. Further on, the girl comes to the USA

again where she is forced to shift from the strict Muslim traditions to the free democratic culture. She runs away from her home falling in love with a boy Omar Medina. At last, Nidali receives the permission from her father to attend the Boston College saying, “Baba had left me an escape route” (Jarrar, 2008, p. 106).

The novel impresses by its innocent view on the life events through the eyes of the girl. The name Nidali was chosen for the girl not incidentally. It means “struggle”, and the girl is depicted by the author of the novel as the character in the continuous struggle with her father, traditions, customs, as well as the political and global circumstances. Randa Jarrar represents the girl as a strong individuality defending her beliefs and ideas.

The author of the book tells her story in such a humoristic way that it makes the readers smile while reading the novel. All the characters are depicted in a rather eccentric manner. Nidali’s mother prefers playing the piano to the house work and meals preparation. Her father with his Palestinian roots does not accept the American culture and traditions trying to impose his own unrealized ambitions on his daughter and make her a professor. At the same time, he does not let her study far away from their house. He has the strict established rules which do not allow his daughter to have any boyfriend until marriage. There is almost no depiction of Nidali’s brother in the novel, except for the final events when he supports his sister in her desire to leave their house for the education in the university.

The novel is written in a daring and humoristic way. It is full of creative elements and impressive description of the Middle Eastern culture, traditions, and ways of life. The author of the book is skillful in the depiction of the religious, social, and cultural differences of the West and East. The tears and dramas, as well as struggle and laughter, make the readers easily visualize the events happening on the pages of the novel and live the life of the main characters.

Randa raises coming-of-age issues in her book. The migration caused by the global political situation and the states of war, the culture of the mixed families, the awakening of the teenage sexuality, the struggle for one's own beliefs despite the strong influence of parents compose the novel's strong points. The father of the family is depicted as an authoritative tyrant not accepting any possible changes. Being a Muslim, he became furious when he saw a Christmas tree in their house: "Baba screams for two hours till his throat goes hoarse and his nose gets red and he passes out from sheer exhaustion. He cannot change the fact that our household is changing" (Jarrar, 2008, p. 132).

The novel gives the fresh breath to the traditional Arab-American fiction. Nidali is the representative of the middle-class family with the eccentric views on life, who could win in the struggle of the strict traditional restrictions peculiar for the Eastern society and free democratic beliefs spread in the western culture. Randa Jarrar masterfully combines the humorous description with the loving and sharp representation of the events in the novel.

The lyrics of the book cannot but leave its readers without the strong impression and love to the main heroine. The touching and charming description of the main life stages of Nidali was made in such a perfect tonality to greatly impress the readers. The novel is full of funny moments, feminine atmosphere, and powerful ideas. To my mind, the book is worth reading for people of all ages all over the world, especially those who are grown in the mixed families and experience the impact of several cultures in their lives.