

Exploring The Crisis of Identity in Diana Abu- Jaber's Crescent

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ABSTRACT

This Research explores Contemporary Arab–American Literature, focusing on the role of third space in shaping Arab American literary texts and their Arabian identity and American belonging. It aims to capture the main traits of Arab–American characters and the impact of hybridity and third place on their way of living. The research uses a postcolonial approach to analyze specific aspects depicted in selected novel, aiming to change the stereotypical notion that Arab American women have the same experience. The study also explores political, sociological, and psychological elements affecting Arab expatriates' negotiation of their identities in the context of immigration, focusing on the perspective of Diana Abu–Jaber. The aim is to provide a more nuanced understanding of the diasporic experiences of Arab American women immigrants.

Keywords: Contemporary, Arab American writers, diaspora, third space, negotiation

استكشاف أزمة الهوية في رواية الهلال لدينا ابو جابر

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الملخص

يستكشف هذا البحث الأدب العربي الأمريكي المعاصر، مع التركيز على دور الفضاء الثالث في تشكيل النصوص الأدبية العربية الأمريكية وهويتها العربية وانتمائها الأمريكي. ويهدف إلى النقاط السمات الرئيسية للشخصيات العربية الأمريكية وتأثير التهجين والمركز الثالث على طريقة معيشتهم. يستخدم البحث منهج ما بعد الاستعمار لتحليل جوانب محددة مصورة في روايات مختارة، بهدف تغيير الفكرة النمطية القائلة بأن المرأة العربية الأمريكية لديها نفس التجربة. وتستكشف الدراسة أيضًا العناصر السياسية والاجتماعية والنفسية التي تؤثر على تفاوض المغتربين العرب حول هوياتهم في سياق الهجرة، مع التركيز على وجهة نظر ديانا أبو جابر. الهدف هو توفير فهم أكثر دقة لتجارب الشتات للمهاجرات الأمريكيات العربيات. الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدباء العرب، الأمريكيان المعاصرون، الشتات، الفضاء الثالث، التفاوض.

1.1. Introduction

Literature is a crucial field that reflects the emotions and feelings of immigrants in host countries, highlighting the connections between their past cultures and the current cultures of the host countries. Many immigrant writers express their memories of their original countries through their literary works. During the continuous migration waves, writers from the second generation have emerged, either born in their original countries but studying and achieving careers in the host countries, or born in the host country and sharing their feelings and nostalgia for their ancestors' countries through writing. Their works showcase a mixture of host culture and earlier inherited traditions. Arab countries, which have experienced unstable political and economic conditions since the mid-twentieth century, have encouraged immigrants to seek stability.

The United States is a popular destination for immigrants, who often seek work and settle in the country. This has led to a new generation of Arab immigrant writers who express their interest in the Arab heritage through their writings. They focus on the conditions of their living society, such as places, food, and social events. American-Arab writer Diana Abu-Jaber, for example, explores the Arab Diaspora

phenomenon in her literary works. Diasporic literature often presents concepts of home and food, representing the diasporic identity as a hybrid identity. These writers navigate the tension between their homeland and adopted home, balancing their identity of origin and the American milieu. Abu-Jaber's literary works serve as an ideal example of these terms.

1.2. The Concept of Diaspora

The term 'diaspora', or Al-Shatat in Arabic, refers to being exiled, scattered, or dispersed from one original country to other countries. The term was coined by Cohen Robin in his book *Global Diasporas* (1997) and is derived from the Greek verb *speiro* (to sow) and the preposition "dia" (to spread). It signifies collective trauma or banishment, where one dreams of home but lives in exile. Dispersed seeds belong to a single plant, and diaspora refers to individuals who originate from Diaspora, a term originating in Western contexts, refers to the dispersion of a group of people from one center to multiple peripheral places, often due to issues such as slavery, genocide, war, expulsion, indentured labor, political exile, or refugee flight. William Safran, in his 1991 book *"Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,"* explains that the term originated with Jewish communities and extends to groups like the Chinese, Greek, Indian, Palestinian, and Sikh (p.36). Canadian feminist historian Vijay Agnew identifies diasporas as communities forcibly scattered due to issues such as slavery, genocide, war, expulsion, indentured labor, political exile, or refugee flight.

The diaspora, a term used by Jews to represent connectedness and community, originated in the eighth century B.C. when Jews were forced into exile in various countries, including Babylon and Spain. The term was used to represent the connection among Jews and their sense of belonging. Social critic Baumann argued that the notion of exile was predominantly tied to the Jewish experience in the first millennium BCE

(20). After four decades, Jews were freed, and they formed communities in East Mediterranean countries. The term "Diaspora" expanded to include both exiled and voluntary immigrants. The concept expanded to include voluntary immigrants seeking work, such as laborers in southern Europe and the US (Dufoix, 37). The Caribbean is a new group of islands that represents the beginning of diaspora, diversity, hybridity, and difference. Afro-Caribbean people are already part of a diaspora, but this term is used metaphorically rather than literally (James, 254). Diaspora is not about scattered tribes whose identities are recognized by their relationship with a sacred homeland. It represents the old, imperializing form of ethnicity. The concept of diaspora is studied in relation to nativism theories, suggesting that the end of colonialism can influence the recovery or reconstruction of pre-colonial societies. Recently, significant diaspora movements have been those of colonized peoples returning to urban centers (Safran, 83). The nature of diasporic communities is a key area of interest in diaspora studies, as the concept of home in diaspora studies is a question of identity and belonging.

Diaspora refers to the geographical areas where Arabs live outside their origins, often due to conflicts and security crises. This research explores the novels and memoirs of Diana Abu-Jaber, who explores the challenges and dismantling of physical, social, and mental boundaries in the Arab world. Diana Abu-Jaber's novel, *Crescent* (2003), explore her experiences of displacement and trauma, highlighting her quest for identity through the perspectives of her characters and her nostalgia for her originality and nativity.

1.3. Exploring the crisis of identity in *Crescent*

The Concept of Identity is always an unease spot, especially for immigrants and exiled people; it carried within it the feelings of loneliness, confusion, and the sense of loss and non-belonging to anything or anyone. Diana Abu-Jaber is one of the prominent writers,

who challenged the silence surrounding that spot to create masterpieces like *Crescent*. Diana Abu-Jaber claimed that her grown-up years, her father who was a Jordanian, insisted that Diana's identity was Arab, when she was a kid, her family moved back to Jordan several times, and she was confused about the cultures that she had to assert her Arabian heritage while still emphasizing her American identity.(Noman, 182)

The Arab immigrants try to face the challenges in society and attempt to adjust to changes in self and society to get better opportunities for coexistence in the American community. In a country that assimilates different ethnicities, in the US. The Arab immigrants strive to preserve their heritage and traditions in order not to fade away regardless of the reasons that led them either voluntarily or forced. They choose exile where they can get a suitable environment of being safe and living peacefully away from violence and political, social, and economic crises in their countries. They sought to safe place to live far from disputes and instability in their homelands, when they settled in the new home, again they were exposed to a new kind of oppression and issues like discrimination, superiority, and racism (Noman, 63).

After the September 11 attacks in 2001, the Arab immigrants had to fight what can be called a new wave of racism resulting from the misunderstanding of Islam in general, and Arabs in particular(Majaj,86). Accordingly, they have to endure a greater burden in addition to their longing for their homelands, the loss of identity led them to what is called by Homi Bhabha's "*third space*" which refers to a liminal space and creates something different and unrecognizable. Consequently, the immigrants' psychological state is highly influenced by the previous circumstances, their psychological situation can be associated with the concept of "Uncanny" by the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. He claims that human behaviours are affected by

unconscious memory and thoughts and he also includes that there are three factors: the id which is the internal unconscious, the ego refers to the conscious mind and lastly superego deals with both the conscious and unconscious (Freud, 10).

According to Freud, the Uncanny is the feeling of discomfort that appears when all common issues become uncommon and strange. (Masschelein1). The uncanny refers to a feeling of uncertainty and it indicates the double-conscious and uneasiness because of being isolated and marginalized. The characters' identity in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* can be discussed according to Freud's concept. For example, the protagonist, Sirine, has an internal conflict between her dual identities. Additionally, her exterior shape as a woman makes her face additional challenges. On the other hand, Han experiences discomfort due to his strong desire to return to Iraq, his native country. Unfortunately, he is unable to do so because of his opposition to the Iraqi regime. Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) captures the worlds of the interstices in all its minute detail. She admits in one of her interviews:

It's my hope for Crescent that while it has a strong cultural profile that it transcends its own cultural agendas. I intended for the novel to give the readers both a social tableau as well as a basic human story about love and fear and jealousy that resonates no matter what readers' own background or beliefs might be. The students in the café represent exiles in the midst of their new lives. Their yearning for home is constant. (Gaines,

4)

In *Crescent* Um-Nadia and Sirine are depicted in a way to defies traditional stereotypes associated with Muslims that women are submissive and silent. They are financially and socially independent. Um-Nada is the owner and manager of a café that becomes a place for many immigrants from all over the world, whereas Sirine is the chef in

the café. Rana is an interesting character because she wears the veil, and at the end, she managed to escape from an abusive husband and moves from Saudi Arabia to the United States of America. Thus, that portrayal also must come from trying to debunk the stereotypes about the veiled, the repressed woman, and show that the veiled woman can be a strong feminist. (Field, 220). Sirine's main reason for struggling with her identity is that she looks mostly American, *“with her skin so pale it has the bluish cast of skim milk, her wild blond head of hair, and her sea-green eyes”* (2003,19). She is physically presented as a stereotypical American blond woman. She looks so American on the outside that she cannot see any physical indication of her Arabness. When she looks at herself in the mirror, the only thing she sees is white, people are surprised when she says that she is half-Arab. Her lack of physical Arabic appearance made her suffer to connect with the Arab immigrants around her. Sirine's American exterior and the Arabs' look at her as an American make Sirine unable to mingle with the Arab community in Los Angeles. In *introduction to Food for Our Grandmothers: (1994) Writings by Joanna Kadi, an Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, she defines the term “Arab-American” as suggestive of nationalist ideology. She claims that, regardless of the tension between the two hyphenated terms, the implementation of “Arab” with “American” strategically contributes to the overturning of racist and negative views toward Arabs. Kadi says that the term “Arab-American” enables us to reclaim the word Arab, to force people to hear or say a word that means, it binds us to our Arab brothers and sisters and reinforces our identity (xviii). Besides, the process of challenging the stereotypes of Arabs is further demonstrated through Rana, a liberal Saudi-American woman, who escapes the oppression of her controlling husband in Saudi Arabia and comes to the USA. Rana breaks the confinements of her past life and then starts to sleep with Aziz to

unleash her sexual desire liberally . She becomes a woman that Sirine admires because of her fierce mind, strong political stance, and intelligence, When Rana is around, Sirine feels that her mind is a tiny, dark place. (2003,192). Rana's personality can be considered as the other part that Sirine's character lacks in her pursuit to locate herself socially and culturally. A heroine, in the case of Sirine, can sometimes never be complete, but other characters, like Rana's case, can provide an alternative version of how a heroine should be. The portrayal of Rana in that way, is an attempt by Abu-Jaber to subvert and correct the stereotypes that circumscribe the veiled Arab Muslim women as the exotic, the passive, and the repressed. This suggests that the veiled woman can also be regarded as a strong feminist, despite certain cultural difficulties and religious complexities.

Another character in *Crescent* is Hanif Al-Ayad (Han) who also is suffering from the loss of identity in exile. Han, an Iraqi immigrant is a new professor at the University of California. Throughout the novel, he is described as an attractive and intellectual person. Han is surrounded and followed by people, especially by two minor characters who were: Nathan was an American photographer who travels in the Eastern area a lot and a big admirer of Han; and also there was Rana, an attractive Muslim woman in one of Han's classes and also she was very attracted to him as a man. At first glance, Han seems to be a person who longs for his country, though his suffering of being in exile. *"Of course I love Iraq, Iraq is my home and there is, of course, no going home" and then back into Arabic* (2003,8).

According to Sigmund's psychoanalytical character analysis, his personality can be classified as "the Resistant Character"; a character that: expresses itself, not in the content of the material, but in the formal aspects of the general behavior, the manner of talking, of the gait, and facial expression and typical attitudes such as smiling, mocking, over-

correctness, the manner of the politeness (Freud,27–84). The qualities above describe the character of Han.

The title of Abu–Jaber's narrative has political and religious implications. It is associated with discovering one's Arab identity. Sirine's uncle says that the crescent moon is an important symbol in the Islamic faith. Many mosques are crowned with a crescent moon, the first sighting of the new moon marks the beginning of each Islamic month and it marks the end of Ramadhan, the month of fasting. The significance of the crescent is the reward to the patient, the watchful, those who are willing to wait (2003, 294). Han carries the pain of having to deal with the loss of his home as well as his identity, culture, and religion, in addition to being an exile. In his case, exile is traumatic because it is not a matter of choice.

Gradually, he reveals detail of his life in Iraq and his escape from the country. Han has to deal with the death of his sister and the impossibility of returning to his homeland. In an interview with Andrea Shalal–Esa, Abu–Jaber explains that Han's character is part of her literary obsession (2), which questions the painful experience of being in an immigrant state.

Through her relationship with Han, Sirine began to explore her Arab–American identity more than she had ever known before. Han represents a person who stimulated the resting curiosity that Sirine was hiding her original country, Iraq, which she forgot or intentionally ignored after her parents' death. As Sirine was getting closer to Han, she came to realize how starved he was for the sustenance of his homeland, he is always repeating that the fact of exile is bigger than everything else. (2003, 106). This image of how Sirine was trying to sympathize and encourage Han was a kind of attempt from Abu–Jaber to change the Americans' prejudice toward the Arabs as terrorists who only knew the violent ways. Sirine and Han had to live the same things. Han's time abroad changed and challenged his identity as an Iraqi Arab, and Sirine,

growing up as the child of an immigrant in a community of immigrants, sometimes, had trouble integrating her Arab and American identities.

Sirine uses the kitchen as her own room to be in touch with her boyfriend Hanif (Han), where Sirine's uncle also teaches. In the kitchen, Sirine can make many recipes and various types of meals and desserts as well. Sirine is searching for her home and she shows her longing for a safe place instead of the US. where she was born but does not have a sense of belonging *"I guess I'm always looking for my home, a little bit, I mean, even though I live here, I have this feeling that my home is somewhere also somehow"*(2003,132). Furthermore, Abu-Jaber used in *Crescent* the symbol of the key which represents home to Arab immigrants. Hanif gives the key of his apartment, Sirine accepts to take the key, *"You want to give me your key"*(2003,92). Sirine's opening of the door indicates that she will be in a safe place.

Definitely, there is more to Sirine's identity than shows through the color of her skin. She is evidently American, but her Arabness is equally hard to ignore. She constantly repudiates people's attempts to reduce her identity into one allegiance. Arabs often describe her as an all-American woman, but she knows all too well that she is not: *"I'm not really all-American,"*

(2003, 60). Sirine assures that she is only "half" when someone calls her Iraqi. She confesses that she feels ashamed that she has taken a little interest in her father's heritage. She claims that there are certain elements from the culture of her origin.

Sirine takes the initiative to acquire new components of her identity from Arab culture to make up for the lack of physical symbols of her Arab identity, Sirine grew up around Arabic conversation, and she is feeling Arabness somewhere behind her mind, (2003,108). Arabs around her usually speak to each other in Arabic and mention words like "tabbouleh," "habbebt," "falafel," "hummus," "asfoori," "ghazal," "knaffea,"

and so on. Though she has been exposed to the Arabic language since she was a child and it is present in her subconscious mind. Sirine feels that she needs to add the Arab language to her identity. Sirine also starts to show an interest in Islamic and Arab cultures. When she shows so much interest in Arab and Islamic culture, she listens to “Fairuz,” a famous classical singer, and enjoys her Arabic music(2003,62). She once listens to Han's lecture about contemporary Arab writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, Ahdaf Soueif, and Emile Habiby. Han starts to see her as “a good Arab girl”(2003,86). A couple of Arab people thought that Sirine should add an Islamic feature to her identity to assimilate with them. Han, who gifts her a scarf, finally sees “an Arab woman” in her when she puts it on her hair.

Generally, Diana Abu-Jaber succeeded in creating a spectacular connection between love and identity; that the reader might not have seen before in any novel he might read. The novel concluded over a year after Han's departure. Sirine, at the Café, received a phone call from Han. The love story's ending was very predictable as both of them were confused about their identity ; according to Erikson, a German-born American psychoanalyst, intimacy between two people as a couple was only possible when each had developed a strong sense of identity separately.(Pradeeban,128)

Conclusion

In this Research, I have examined the diverse experiences of the Arab American characters' experience in the United States of America and their journey towards third space through the selection of Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent*. Diana Abu-Jaber has shown in her novel, the possibility of treating the ethnic past innovatively. She has chosen to depict the ethnic complexity of her characters in their ambivalent situations.

Crescent explores the Arab community through searching for identity, focusing on the desire for Arabness and cultural integration among Arab Americans. The novel contrasts with general ideas about Arabian immigrants in the U.S., highlighting the painful memories of their homelands that haunt them. Immigrants and exiled people often dream about returning home due to social, political, and economic problems.

Diana Abu-Jaber's work explores complex perceptions of ethnicity, migration, exile, and cultural exclusion in Arab culture. She elucidates issues like identity, in-betweenness, and love, which other disciplines have not explored. Abu-Jaber's texts highlight the uniqueness of the diasporic experience, which is universal but unique to each immigrant. Despite advances in technology, many people still feel a sense of loss and longing for equal recognition, emphasizing the strength of this longing.

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