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Cultural Navigations in the Borderland: Arab-American Experience in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent*

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Abstract: *The novel Crescent by Diana Abu Jaber (2003) portrays the experiences of Arab-Americans navigating cultural tensions and conflicts in the borderland of the United States, using food as a metaphor for cultural identity, and emphasizing the importance of intersectionality in understanding the complexities of the Arab-American experience. This research paper aims to analyze the cultural navigations of the Arab-American characters in Crescent, with a particular emphasis on Sirine and Han's unique experiences in the United States. It also examines how their experiences reflect broader issues of identity and cultural diversity in contemporary American society. By exploring the novel's themes and characters, this paper contributes to the ongoing conversation about multiculturalism, identity, and cultural politics in literature and society.*

Keywords: Arab-Americans, Borderland, Cultural Hybridity, Diana Abu Jaber, Diverse Identities

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of cultural identity has become increasingly important to understand the experiences of individuals and communities in multicultural societies. This is particularly relevant in the context of Arab-American communities, which often navigate complex and challenging cultural spaces in the United States. Diana Abu Jaber's novel *Crescent* (2003) explores the experience of Arab-Americans living in the borderland between their traditional cultural roots and the dominant American culture. Through the characters' experiences, Abu Jaber portrays the challenges, tensions, and opportunities that arise from cultural hybridity and the negotiation of multiple identities in the US borderland.

The concept of 'borderland' refers to the liminal spaces that lie between or across different cultural, political, and geographical spheres. Borderlands are often sites of cultural hybridity, where diverse identities and practices interact and create new forms of expression and belonging. They are often spaces of conflict, violence, and marginalization, but also of creativity, diversity, and transformation. Gloria Anzaldúa argues in her work '*Borderlands: The New Mestiza'* that borderlands are not only physical spaces, but also psychological, spiritual, and linguistic spaces where different cultures and identities meet and clash. She contends that:

> the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy (i).

Thus, borderlands challenge the dominant narratives and structures of power that seek to impose rigid and homogeneous identities and territories, and instead offer alternative ways of imagining and living in a complex and interconnected world. In his book *The Location of Culture* (2004), Homi Bhabha argues that borderlands can be seen as third spaces and calls them:

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> the realm of the *beyond* … where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond' (1).

Here, borderlands, according to Homi Bhabha, can be seen as the sites that transcend the binary oppositions of self and other, us and them, inside and outside. They are territories of negotiation and resistance, where the dominant norms and values of the center are challenged and contested by the marginalized and subaltern groups. As such, borderlands offer a critical perspective on the complex dynamics of globalization and localization, homogenization and differentiation, inclusion and exclusion.

Being an Arab-American author in the US borderland, Diana Abu Jaber utilizes the questions of cultural identity, hybridity, and resistance to challenge the negative portrayal of Arabs by the mainstream American media and narratives, where "*Evil*, of course, means *Arabs*. Or, at the very least, it insinuates that evil is exclusive to the Islamic world while the United States has a divine monopoly on goodness" (Salaita, 40). Thus, Abu Jaber's novel *Crescent* (2003) has been recognized for its insightful portrayal of the complexities of cultural identity and the experiences of Arab-Americans through a moving story of love, romance, and search of belonging in the United States. Sirine, the protagonist in the novel, is an Arab-American chef who navigates the borderland between her Arab heritage and her American upbringing. Through Sirine's experiences, Abu Jaber portrays the tensions that arise from cultural hybridity and the negotiation of multiple identities.

Cultural Navigations of Arab-Americans in *Crescent*: A Critique

Crescent (2003) is set in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in Los Angeles, wherein Abu Jaber explores the ways in which Arab-Americans are forced to navigate cultural tensions and prejudice in the wake of the attacks. The novel follows the story of Sirine, who is thirty-nine years old and lives with her uncle. She works at Nadia's Café, an Arab restaurant owned by Um-Nadia, who is from Lebanon. She falls in love with Hanif El-Eyad (Han), a professor of Linguistics at UCLA University who left Iraq as an exile. *Crescent* explores how they deal with their Arab and American cultures and identities, along with the complexities and negotiations of other characters from different ethnic backgrounds that are part of their lives. The novel is a moving exploration of identity and cultural conflict, as well as a celebration of the rich culinary traditions of the Middle East.

The novel also explores the challenges of maintaining cultural identity in a society that often views Arab-Americans with suspicion and prejudice. Um-Nadia Café functions as a gathering home for Arab students, exiles, and immigrants meet to enjoy "Real True Arab Food" (9) and find comfort and closeness in the café which reminds them of their homelands. Sirine used to serve the Café's visitors and listens to their worries and stories. She wonders how the government and CIA suspect all Arabs: "Sometimes she used to scan the room and imagine the word *terrorist*. But her gaze ran over the faces and all that came back to her were words like *lonely* and *young*" (8). This sense of being 'othered' is further emphasized in the minds of many Arab-Americans to the extent that they prefer to identify themselves with another ethnicity:

> No one ever wants to be the Arab—it's too old and too tragic and too mysterious and too exasperating and too lonely for anyone but an actual Arab to put up with for very long. Essentially, it's an image problem. Ask anyone, Persians, Turks, even Lebanese and Egyptians—none of them want to be the Arab (38).

Thus, *Crescent* offers a nuanced and empathetic portrayal of the Arab-American experience in the borderland between multiple cultures. Through her experiences, Abu Jaber highlights the complexities and challenges of cultural hybridity and the negotiation of multiple identities in a multicultural society. Magali Cornier Michael argues that "Diana Abu-Jaber's 2003 novel, *Crescent*, examines the complex position of Arabs and Arab Americans living in the United States with respect to notions of identity by creating a complex hybrid text" (Michael,2011,p.313). Through its exploration of cultural navigations,

Crescent contributes to the ongoing conversation about the importance of cultural diversity and understanding in contemporary American society.

Throughout the novel, Abu Jaber uses food as a metaphor for the cultural identity of the characters. For Abu-Jaber, food is a wonderful way of bringing people together, as it involves closeness and sharing. Sirine, who is passionate about food and cooking, uses her culinary skills to connect with her cultural heritage and express her identity. When writing her novel, Abu Jaber aimed to feature Arabic cuisine and use it as a representation of her characters' experiences, "Let the food represent their lives. And I want people to connect with it through the beauty and the passion of the senses, the sensory pleasure of the novel and the richness of Arabic food" (Shalal-Esa, 5). The novel also delves into the cultural history of the Arab world, exploring the rich traditions and history of the region through the lens of its culinary traditions.

In *Crescent*, the characters navigate their cultural identities in a borderland, where they must balance their Arab heritage with their American identity in order to find a sense of belonging in the United States. One of the strategies that the characters use to cope with their cultural identity is cooking and eating. Sirine embraces her Arab heritage and takes pride in her cultural identity. She works at a Lebanese café that serves as a gathering place for Arab immigrants and students. She uses her culinary skills to express her love and care for Hanif and others, as well as to connect with her parent's memories and Iraqi heritage "she went through her parents' old recipes and began cooking the favorite-but almost forgotten-dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents' tiny kitchen and her earliest memories" (9). Hanif, on the other hand, finds comfort and joy in Sirine's food, which reminds him of his lost home and family "For a moment—for a moment, I forgot where I was. I forgot that this was America. I was on the banks of the Tigris. I could see the sun through my eyelids. My sister was about to call me in to eat" (167). Food also becomes a medium of cultural exchange and dialogue, as Sirine and Hanif share their stories and perspectives over meals. Through their relationship, they learn to embrace their hybridity and find a sense of belonging in each other and in their borderland.

Storytelling is another way that the characters employ to navigate their cultural identities in the United States. Hanif is a university professor who is an expert on the Arabian Nights, a collection of tales that reflects the richness and diversity of Arab culture. He uses storytelling to teach his students about the history and politics of the Middle East, as well as to challenge the stereotypes and misconceptions that they have. He also tells stories to Sirine, who listens with curiosity and empathy. Throughout the novel, Sirine used to listen to her uncle's stories about Arab homeland while she is preparing her delicious dishes "accomplished uncles and storytellers are usually rewarded with plates of knaffea pastry for the record. Then we can get on with our story" (24). Storytelling is a central theme and technique in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* that allows the characters to preserve and transmit their cultural memory and identity, as well as to create new meanings and possibilities for their lives.

These characters' strategies for navigating their cultural identities reflect the theme of cultural hybridity and the challenges of balancing multiple cultural identities in a borderland. By embracing their Arab heritage and sharing it with others, these characters find a sense of belonging and create a community in the new country. Additionally, their strategies reflect the importance of preserving and sharing cultural heritage as a means of navigating cultural identity in a borderland.

Intersectionality, which refers to the ways in which different social identities intersect and interact to create unique experiences and challenges, plays a crucial role in shaping the characters' cultural navigation in *Crescent*. The experiences of the characters are shaped not only by their Arab identity but also by their gender, class, race, and other social identities, which intersect to make unique challenges and opportunities. These intersecting factors create complex representations of Arab-Americans in the United States. Gender plays a significant role in the novel as the female characters face various challenges due to

their gender. For example, Sirine's identity as an Arab-American woman in the culinary industry intersects with her gender to create challenges in her career. Being a chef, she faces discrimination and sexism from her society due to her gender because "The Arab families usually keep their daughters safe at home. The few women who do manage to come to America are good students—they study at the library and cook for themselves" (5). These intersecting identities shape Sirine's experiences and her strategies for navigating her cultural identity in the US borderland.

Class also intersects with gender and race in the novel. Sirine and her family are portrayed as middle-class Arab-Americans, which allows them to have access to certain opportunities and experiences. However, they also face economic challenges, particularly in their struggling restaurant business. The class differences are also highlighted through the character of Han, who is portrayed as coming from a more affluent background due to his family's successful business. Further, Abu-Jaber has admitted that she intentionally created a favorable image of an Arab man, from a cultured social class, to deconstruct the stereotypes of Arab Muslims:

> Han is meant to be representative of a specific kind of very literate, sophisticated Arab man. He is someone who has studied and traveled. He is a man that I have known among my family, among friends, but that I never see represented in our media. I very deliberately set myself to task, to see this profile come forth–we needed to see this other man. Definitely he is a bit idealized, but not that idealized. (Field, 219)

Race, however, is the most prominent factor in the novel, as the characters regularly navigate their Arab identity in a society that is often hostile towards Arab-Americans. The characters face discrimination, xenophobia, and racism, especially in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks. Therefore, Arab-Americans in *Crescent* try to mingle with other ethnicities to bridge their gaps and become like one community. This relationship can be seen when Aziz, a Syrian poet, tells his Latino friend: "If you and I were out shopping at the mall do you think any of the white guys there could tell the difference between us? They'd think you were one of my terrorist buddies" (178). Similarly, Um-Nadia hires two Latinos to assist Sirine in the Café: Cristobal from El Salvador and Victor from Mexico. Thus, Abu Jaber portrays the characters' experiences of racism and prejudice in a nuanced way, highlighting the complex intersections of race, gender, and class in their lives.

In short, the intersection of gender, class, and race in *Crescent* creates complex and multi-faceted representations of Arab-Americans in the United States. Abu Jaber's portrayal of these intersections highlights the challenges and nuances of navigating cultural identity in a borderland, where individuals must balance multiple identities and negotiate their place in society.

Conclusion

To conclude, *Crescent* is a beautifully written novel that offers a unique perspective on the experience of Arab-Americans in navigating their cultural identities in the United States. It is considered a significant contribution to contemporary literature as it challenges the dominant stereotypical narratives and narrow representations about Arab-Americans and, in turn, offers alternative perspective on cultural integration and coexistence. Through the lens of food and culinary traditions, Abu Jaber explores the complex and often conflicting experiences of Arab-Americans living in the American borderland. The novel is a powerful reminder of the importance of cultural identity and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of prejudice and discrimination.

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