

Exile, Hybridity and Cultural Negotiation in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* and *Arabian Jazz*

Abu-Jaber'in *Crescent* ve *Arabian Jazz*'ında Sürgün,
Melezlik ve Kültürel Müzakere

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Abstract

This study explores the evolving Arab-American identity in Diana Abu-Jaber's influential novels, *Crescent* (2003) and *Arabian Jazz* (1993), through the interconnected lenses of exile, hybridity, and cultural negotiation. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly the insights of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, the study examines how Abu-Jaber's protagonists inhabit liminal zones shaped by gender, race, diaspora, and memory. Through food, music, language, and storytelling, the characters resist cultural essentialism and reconfigure identity as a dynamic, improvisational process rooted in everyday life. *Crescent* presents exile as an ontological fracture, with culinary ritual and sensory memory functioning as acts of self-reclamation and cultural continuity. In contrast, *Arabian Jazz* offers a polyphonic exploration of diasporic improvisation, intergenerational tension, and cultural dissonance. The female characters reject both patriarchal and racialized standards and assert autonomy through affective, narrative, and embodied modes of resistance. Ultimately, the article argues that Abu-Jaber's fiction reframes identity as a performative space of becoming by subverting dominant Orientalist narratives and articulating the layered, contradictory, and resilient nature of Arab-American belonging.

Keywords: Identity, hybridity, exile, postcolonialism, orientalism

Öz

Bu çalışma, Diana Abu-Jaber'in etkili romanları *Crescent* (2003) ve *Arabian Jazz* (1993) aracılığıyla Arap-Amerikan kimliğinin dönüşümünü sürgün, melezlik ve kültürel müzakere ekseninde inceler. Özellikle Edward Said ve Homi Bhabha'nın kuramsal katkılarından yararlanan çalışma, Abu-Jaber'in başkahramanlarının cinsiyet, ırk, diaspora ve hafıza tarafından şekillenen eşik mekânlarda nasıl konumlandığını araştırır. Yiyecek, müzik, dil ve anlatı yoluyla karakterler kültürel özcülüğe karşı çıkarak kimliği gündelik yaşama kök salmış, dinamik ve doğaçlamaya açık bir süreç olarak yeniden kurgular. *Crescent*, sürgünü ontolojik bir kırılma olarak sunarken; mutfak ritüeli ve duygusal bellek, benliğin geri kazanımı ve kültürel sürekliliğin araçları hâline gelir. Buna karşılık, *Arabian Jazz* diyasporik doğaçlama, kuşaklar arası gerilim ve kültürel uyumsuzluk üzerine çok sesli bir keşif sunar. Kadın karakterler hem ataerkil hem de ırksallaştırılmış normları reddederek duygusal, anlatısal ve bedensel direnç biçimleriyle özerklik kazanırlar. Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, Abu-Jaber'in anlatısını kimliğin oluş halindeki performatif bir alanı olarak yeniden çerçeveleyerek, Oryantalist anlatıları altüst ettiğini ve Arap-Amerikan aidiyetinin katmanlı, çelişkili ve dirençli doğasını görünür kıldığını savunur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kimlik, melezlik, sürgün, postkolonyalizm, oryantalizm

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Introduction

The Arab-American experience is shaped by the intersections of migration, cultural negotiation, and identity formation, existing within a complex framework of belonging and exclusion. While the United States is often portrayed as a multicultural society, Arab Americans, like many other diasporic communities, grapple with the tensions between assimilation and the preservation of cultural heritage. The legacy of colonial histories, racialized narratives, and geopolitical conflicts have rendered Arab-American identity a site of continual negotiation, where individuals must reconcile personal and collective histories with the realities of living in a predominantly Western, often Orientalist, societal structure.

Diana Abu-Jaber's novels *Crescent* (2003) and *Arabian Jazz* (1993) illuminate these struggles, illustrating how Arab-American protagonists navigate racialized perceptions, gender expectations, and familial pressures while forging a sense of self within the diaspora. Drawing on postcolonial theory: particularly Edward Said's critique of *Orientalism* (1978) and Homi Bhabha's concept of *hybridity* (1994), this study examines how Abu-Jaber's fiction resists cultural essentialism and redefines the meaning of home and identity. Said's concept of exile as an "unhealable rift" (2000) informs the analysis of displacement in *Crescent*, while Bhabha's notion of the *Third Space* provides a lens through which the hybrid identities in *Arabian Jazz* can be understood. Abu-Jaber's protagonists neither fully assimilate into dominant Anglo-American norms nor wholly adhere to traditional Arab cultural expectations; instead, they engage in a fluid, evolving negotiation of identity.

Food, language, and storytelling emerge as crucial symbolic tools in this process, serving as mediums through which Abu-Jaber's characters reclaim agency and establish connections between past and present. Sirine, the Iraqi-American chef in *Crescent*, bridges cultural gaps through culinary expression. At the same time, Jemorah, in *Arabian Jazz*, grapples with her Arab heritage amid the pressures of marriage and familial duty. Gender also plays a pivotal role in these narratives, as the women in both novels confront patriarchal expectations while asserting their autonomy. Through these thematic explorations, Abu-Jaber challenges dominant narratives that frame Arab Americans as perpetual outsiders and offers an alternative representation of cultural hybridity. This addresses the following research questions:

1. How do *Crescent* and *Arabian Jazz* redefine the meaning of home and belonging for Arab-American characters?
2. In what ways do Abu-Jaber's protagonists navigate linguistic and cultural identity within a Western-dominated literary landscape?
3. How do these novels reflect the broader struggles of marginalized communities in constructing selfhood beyond imposed racial, gendered, and cultural labels?

By engaging with these questions, this study highlights the significance of Arab-American literature in shaping and challenging discourses on identity, diaspora, and hybridity. Abu-Jaber's fiction presents the home not as a fixed geographical space but as an internal, evolving construct shaped by migration, memory, and cultural transformation. In doing so, *Crescent* and *Arabian Jazz* contribute to a broader reimagining of Arab-American identity in an increasingly interconnected world.

Home, Belonging, Identity in *Arabian Jazz*

Arabian Jazz (1993) unfolds as a vibrant, polyphonic meditation on the fluidities of Arab-American identity, weaving together generational discord, diasporic longing, and cultural dissonance with a lyrical yet satirical edge. Set in the liminal space of a white, working-class enclave in upstate New York, the novel refracts hybridity through the prism of the Ramoud family, whose members exist in a state of cultural improvisation. Matussem Ramoud, a melancholic jazz artist and Jordanian émigré, embodies the diasporic condition as a dissonant harmony: his identity improvised like his music, wavering between nostalgia and reinvention. His daughters, Jemorah and Melvina, navigate a labyrinth of expectations under the vigilant eyes of tradition-bound relatives. Rather than fix identity within East-West binaries, Abu-Jaber conjures a shifting Third Space, where exile becomes not rupture, but the very essence of becoming.

The novel becomes a site of cultural translation, where humor, memory, grief, and resistance converge in shaping the contours of selfhood. Jemorah, the elder daughter and the novel's primary protagonist, faces particular scrutiny as a single woman in her thirties. Among the most influential figures in enforcing traditional values is Aunt Fatima, who remains deeply committed to the customs of "the Old Country." Fatima embraces her role that extend beyond religious obligations to include

"marriage makers and shakers, preservers of Arabic culture and party throwers, immigrant sponsors, and children-police" (Abu-Jaber, 1993, p. 52). Lacking children of her own, she considers it her duty to secure a suitable groom for Jemorah, ensuring the continuation of the family's honour and lineage. Through these familial and communal dynamics, Abu-Jaber highlights the intricate negotiations between tradition and individual agency within the Arab American immigrant experience.

Uncertain about how to navigate his family's expectations for his daughters, Matussem Ramoud finds solace and renewal in his passion for jazz, mainly through playing the drums. Music serves as an outlet for him to process the dilemmas of belonging and the experience of in-betweenness, reflecting his struggle with cultural duality. The memory of Nora's death marks a pivotal moment for the Ramoud family, signifying not only the loss of a wife and mother but also the beginning of a deeper exploration of self-identity. For Matussem, Jemorah, and Melvina, the absence of their American mother intensifies their questioning of their place in American society. The challenges of being Arab in America become more pronounced as they grapple with their cultural heritage and personal identities in the aftermath of this traumatic loss.

The experiences of immigrants are shaped by upbringing at a predominantly white community, influencing their identity formation. Euclid is depicted as an isolated and marginalized space, described as "an isolated piece of land cut off from the world" (Ghouaiel, 2015, p. 90). Within this impoverished setting, Jemorah experiences bullying during childhood. Abu-Jaber (1993) portrays this marginalization through a vivid countryside scene: "The Broom kids looked savage. Their faces were sharp and blank, branded with grime. Jem felt heat rising from their hands, their mouths, the way they ran, banding down to sit in the bus" (p. 92). The depiction of physical characteristics in the early sections of the novel serves as a marker of foreignness and otherness within Western society. Abu-Jaber describes their Arab heritage with distinct physical features: they "looked so alike, their skin the same pale shimmer of olive, the same glints of blue in their hair" (p. 31). This portrayal aligns with broader discourses on Arab American identity, which have often been shaped by the perception of Arab Americans as perpetually foreign. According to Fadda-Conrey, "Arab Americans' cultural citizenship has been severely and consistently undermined due to a widespread perception that they lack a true and single allegiance to the U.S. by virtue of their religion, heritage, politics, all of which brand Arab Americans as 'forever foreign' in the dominant U.S. imaginary" (2014, p. 5).

The rejection Jemorah experiences from her maternal relatives, coupled with the racism embedded in her immediate white community, reinforces her awareness of her difference from an early age. As a response, she develops a strategy of self-defence through invisibility, distancing herself from others on the school bus. This behaviour reflects the broader marginalization of Arab Americans, which Joanna Kadi describes by stating that Arabs are "the most invisible of the invisible" (1994, p. xix). Jemorah's invisibility thus symbolizes the erasure of Arab American presence and identity within dominant societal narratives. Jemorah's sense of time remains stagnant as she experiences a prolonged state of detachment following the death of her mother. Although she is now thirty years old, she continues to struggle with making decisions or taking meaningful action, as if her soul is suspended in a perpetual state of aimlessness. Her existence is marked by a profound sense of loss, rendering her disconnected from reality. Abu-Jaber conveys Jemorah's emotional trauma through the following passage: "She swam in loss, and it seemed other children were different, at great distances from her" (1993, p. 80). This depiction illustrates how Jemorah perceives herself as adrift, both emotionally and psychologically. Her grief creates a temporal and existential dislocation, which reinforces her sense of alienation from those around her. The imagery of floating and being carried by external forces underscores her inability to anchor herself in the world, reflecting the long-lasting impact of trauma on identity formation.

Jemorah perceives her homesickness as an inherited familial trait passed down from her father, linking her longing for belonging to her immigrant lineage. Abu-Jaber illustrates this sentiment through Jemorah's reflection: "She thought she had contracted homesickness from her father, that it was passed on like a gene to the child of an immigrant" (1993, p. 299). Unlike her sister Melvie, who fully embraces the individualism and liberties associated with the American Dream, she ultimately surrenders to her Arabic heritage. This realization occurs when she recognizes her father's deep sense of belonging in his homeland and, surprisingly, agrees to marry her cousin Nassir in Jordan. Although the novel does not depict the actual marriage, Jemorah's approval of the arrangement signifies an act of obedience and submission to patriarchal traditions rooted in her ancestral culture.

However, Nassir challenges Jemorah's romanticized perception of home as an escape from the realities, self-discovery, and belonging. Through his perspective, he disrupts her idealized vision of the region, forcing her to confront its complexities. Through Jemorah's journey, *Arabian Jazz* presents a nuanced exploration of identity, displacement, and the tensions between cultural heritage and personal autonomy. Ultimately, the novel challenges the notion of a singular, idealized homeland, portraying the Arab American experience as one of constant negotiation between multiple identities.

The names of the sisters in *Arabian Jazz* symbolize their distinct familial and cultural origins. Jemorah is a transliteration of the Arabic word meaning "live coal" (Baalbaki, 2020, p. 430), whereas Melvina is an Irish name. This linguistic and cultural contrast reflects their differing perceptions of life. As Ghouaiel notes, "While Jemorah emerges as a silent dreamer lacking self-confidence and auto-esteem, Melvina is a realist and highly determined" (2015, p. 136). In the opening chapter, Melvina, who has fully embraced her American identity and found stability within the American Dream, acknowledges the duality of her heritage. She encourages Jemorah to accept both sides of their cultural identity by recalling a Bedouin proverb: "In the book of life, every page has two sides" (p. 6). Their existence is shaped by a dual framework: two cultures, two families, two identities, and two languages. Throughout the novel, Melvina successfully negotiates and integrates her Arab and American heritage, which demonstrates an appreciation for both aspects of her identity. She expresses admiration for the Arabic language, describing it as follows: "Tongues could climb Arabic syllable over syllable like fingers ascending piano keys, enabling great crescendos of screaming. Arabic represented to Melvie the purest state of emotional energy" (p. 304). Melvina's perception of Arabic as a language of raw emotional intensity highlights her ability to navigate and reconcile her bicultural identity. Her embrace of both traditions contrasts with the struggle Jemorah experiences in finding a sense of belonging.

The novel also touches upon gender roles within traditional Arabic culture. Melvina, who envisions herself as a modern incarnation of both Atlas and Joan of Arc, criticizes patriarchal traditions upheld by the Ladies' Pontifical Committee at St. Yusef. She expresses her frustration with these gender norms, stating: "What they are doing is feeding their virgins to their raging gods of macho domination and chronic dissipation" (p. 51). Her grandmother's cautionary words further reinforce Melvina's rejection of patriarchal structures: "Never trust a man. Don't let them touch you!" (p. 284). Internalizing this warning, Melvina develops a deep-seated scepticism toward men. She articulates a feminist critique of male dominance, arguing that "men were beyond hurt: perpetrators, trespassers, their presence as troublesome as poltergeists, their desires far less certain" (p. 284). Her perspective aligns with a postcolonial feminist discourse that challenges traditional gender expectations, positioning her firmly within a modern, independent American woman.

In contrast to her younger sister, Jemorah experiences a profound sense of loss that prevents her from establishing a clear sense of self, as she remains haunted by her childhood memories. Jemorah's journey toward self-discovery is partially facilitated through her relationship with Ricky Ellis, a half-Indian lover. Although Jemorah is aware of Ricky's flawed nature, she is captivated by his appearance and what he represents. As a character existing between cultural boundaries, she is drawn to his hybrid identity, which resonates with her liminal existence. She expresses admiration for hybridity through her relationship with Ricky, stating, "A faun is far more special than either a satyr or a nymph" (p. 36). Jemorah's interactions with Ricky reflect her broader search for belonging and demonstrate the transcendence of ethnic boundaries. Their relationship symbolizes a marginalized interethnic harmony, highlighting the complexities of identity formation among individuals who navigate multiple cultural affiliations. By engaging with Ricky, Jemorah embraces hybridity as a defining aspect of her own identity rather than adhering to rigid cultural categorizations.

Arabian Jazz also explores a contrasting theme: the depiction of whiteness as inherently antagonistic toward Arabs. The underlying theme of anti-Arab sentiment is subtly woven throughout the novel, particularly in the characterization of Nora, Jemorah and Melvina's late mother. Nora's rejection of medical advice before travelling to Jordan illustrates this tension. She dismisses the suggestion to take necessary vaccinations as "typical Arab patronizing," remarking, "According to your sisters, young women do not know how to take care of their bodies" (p. 78). Her implicit disdain for Arab cultural attitudes reflects a broader perception of Arab paternalism and an unwillingness to integrate fully into her husband's heritage. The tensions between Arab and Arab American characters intensify after Nora's passing in Jordan. Years later, during Mat's concert, Aunt Fatima exacerbates the existing cultural divide by blaming Nora's death on her supposed hatred of Arabs. She accuses the daughters, stating, "Your mother died on purpose because she hates Arabs" (p. 66). This accusation triggers a violent response from Melvina, who slaps Aunt Fatima.

While Aunt Fatima embodies the traditions of her homeland, she is also profoundly haunted by traumatic memories of her childhood. She carries the weight of past injustices, particularly the patriarchal oppression of Arab women. One of the most harrowing experiences of her life was witnessing the burial of an infant girl when she was just four years old. After the birth of her brother Matussem, another baby was born weak and sickly. Fatima recalls how her mother took her to the river, where women washed clothes and dug a hole to bury the baby girl with her own hands. This traumatic event remains deeply ingrained in her consciousness and shapes her lifelong sorrow. As the youngest of seven daughters, Fatima understands the gendered preferences of her parents. She recounts how, after the birth of her brother, her parents finally felt a sense of relief: "Matussem was finally born, Rima had told her much later, there was at last ease in her parents" (p. 118). Thus, Aunt Fatima resists assimilation while simultaneously pressuring others to adhere to the traditional values of the old country. Her rigid perspective highlights the struggles of immigrants who attempt to preserve their cultural heritage while living in a new land. While she enforces these expectations with a sense of duty, she also carries a profound personal pain shaped by the trauma of her past and the rigid patriarchal structures she has endured.

Portia Porschman serves as a symbolic representation of the white colonizer in *Arabian Jazz*, embodying the forces of segregation and racial superiority that seek to marginalize Arabs. As Nora's former school friend and Jemorah's employer, Portia is a strict and overbearing figure whose attitudes push Jemorah to leave her job. Viewing herself as a civilizing missionary, Portia expresses disdain for Nora's decision to marry an Arab man, lamenting: "I know for a fact your grandmother had to ask for a picture of the man for her parish priest to show around to prove he wasn't a Negro" (p. 293). Portia's words expose her racial prejudice, particularly in her attempt to equate Arab identity with racial impurity. She continues by elevating herself as a model of success and virtue, condescendingly telling Jemorah: "Oh, sure, you are tainted, your skin that colour. A damn shame" (p. 294). Her bigotry extends to an outright condemnation of the Arab world, which she describes in dehumanizing terms: "It's a wonder any of you survived that place, so evil, primitive, filled with disease!" (p. 294). Finally, Portia offers to take Jemorah under her wing, suggesting that she be "educated" and physically altered to appear more American: "We will try putting some pink lipstick on you, maybe lightening your hair, make you American" (p. 295).

Portia's racist and condescending actions catalyze Jemorah's personal growth. After resigning from her job at the hospital, Jemorah experiences another moment of racial awakening during a family picnic. When two hikers unknowingly eat food prepared by Matussem, their reaction shifts from indifference to disgust upon realizing the food was prepared by Arabs: "Arabs, Jesus fucking Christ. And we ate their food" (p. 361). This moment underscores how anti-Arab racism operates within American society, reflecting broader U.S. political and media narratives that misrepresent Arabs. The scene illustrates what Said (1978) critiques in *Orientalism* as the tendency to erase Arab individuality, reducing Arabs to a homogenous, dehumanized mass. The media perpetuates stereotypes that depict Arabs as violent and inherently dangerous, reinforcing systemic prejudice. As Özsert and Güven (2023) argues, *Orientalism* focuses on the distinction between "the self" and "the other" attributing to the literary studies applied by Western scholars to the Eastern countries for the purpose of establishing dominance (p. 433).

Although Jemorah had previously been hesitant to return to school, the racism she encounters at the picnic becomes a turning point. The experience instils in her a determination to confront and deconstruct these narratives through education. She realizes that understanding the roots of this hatred requires direct engagement: "She had recognized, as the hikers turned to face her, the mystery of this hate, something she could crack only by going into it: back to school" (p. 362). Education becomes her means of empowerment, a way to unearth hidden truths, including those within her own family. Thus, the novel highlights the transformative power of knowledge as a response to racial injustice, positioning Jemorah's return to education as both a personal and political act of resistance.

Jemorah stands at a pivotal crossroads, grappling with a profound internal conflict that transcends mere personal indecision and gestures toward the deeper crises of diasporic selfhood. She is torn between two diametrically opposed life trajectories: the pursuit of higher education or acquiescence to the culturally sanctioned destiny of marriage to one of the suitors tirelessly endorsed by Aunt Fatima. When Jemorah momentarily consents to marry Nassir and relocate to Jordan, her justification: "I'm tired to fight it out here. I don't have much idea of what it is to be Arab, but that's what the family is always saying we are" (p. 308), betrays a weariness that is both personal and emblematic of a broader diasporic fatigue. Her words resonate with the melancholic recognition that identity, particularly in exile, is often something told to us before it is something we know.

Matussem's experiences reflect a multi-generational pattern of diaspora, where successive geographic shifts shape his displacement. His sense of loss originates in Palestine, from which his parents were forced to flee due to Israeli oppression. This initial displacement was followed by his migration from Jordan to the United States in pursuit of new opportunities. Hence, Matussem embodies two overlapping layers of diaspora: the first is a political diaspora rooted in forced migration and the loss of Palestine. At the same time, the second is an entrepreneurial diaspora driven by economic aspirations and the pursuit of a better life in America. These categorizations align with the four primary motivations of diaspora identified by Bruneau (1995, pp. 39–41).

The upstate New York town of Euclid becomes the final stop in Matussem's journey, where his sense of loss is most profoundly felt and examined. His aspiration to establish a home in America parallels his parents' earlier efforts to build a new life in Jordan. This distinction highlights the nuanced nature of Matussem's displacement. Whereas Palestine is permanently lost as a homeland, Euclid remains physically intact, yet it is stripped of its significance following Nora's passing. Thus, for Matussem, diaspora is not only a geographical condition but also an emotional and existential struggle tied to memory, loss, and the desire for belonging: "When he first saw Euclid, he remembered it, every silver leaf and broken-backed creek. Nora was his history; now only the land was left" (p. 260).

Matussem Ramoud's navigates the complexities of identity, loss, and cultural hybridity. Throughout the novel, he faces racial discrimination and exclusion, being referred to as "negro," "darky foreigner" (p. 89), "the dirty sand nigger" (p. 99), and "damn fool, foreign A-rab that lives next door" (p. 213). Matussem struggles to rationalize his continued presence in the United States while simultaneously questioning whether he should return to his homeland. His daughter, Jemora, reflects on his displacement: "His removal was part of that soft grieving light behind his eyes and part of the recklessness in his laugh" (p. 98). Matussem's sense of self was deeply intertwined with his late wife, Nora. Her presence allowed him to find stability in America, and after her death, he experienced a loss of voice and identity. His polyphonic utterance, which their intercultural marriage had shaped, dissipates, leaving him searching for new ways to articulate his place in the world. At one point, he confesses to his daughters, "Believe me, sometimes I don't know why I move to these balls-freezer place. Only your mother can get me to stay in this refrigerator" (p. 39). His grief compels him to reconstruct himself, prompting a performance of identity through music. In one of his concerts, he proclaims: "My greatest work, a father! Now for fathers out there in the fatherland, a little song we're making up as we go, I call 'Big Daddy!'" (p. 149). Matussem embodies Arab American diasporic identity, existing between different geographies, histories, and identities. As a cross-border migrant, his life is defined by a delicate balance between memories of the old land and engagement with the new one. Both nostalgic recollections and ongoing cultural and social interactions in America shape his identity.

Jazz, as a historically significant musical genre, evokes racial politics and the African American experience. It exists at the intersection of colonizer and colonized, black and white, which mirrors the cultural tensions that shape Matussem and Jemora's identities. In an effort to overcome racism and foster cross-cultural dialogue, Matussem forms a jazz band with gas station workers in his American town. Through this act, jazz becomes his bridge to reconnect with the world after Nora's death, enabling him to re-establish his presence within American society while still carrying the memories of his homeland. Matussem experiences cultural and national displacement through musical transference. Jazz evokes memories of his childhood in Jordan, where he recalls the village drummer: "The memory of singing mingled with his memories of the Muslim muezzin, caught like a princess in the tower of the mosque" (p. 240). This highlights the transcultural nature of jazz, as Matussem integrates an Arab instrument of the drum into an American musical form (Ghouaiel, 2015, p. 132). His connection to jazz symbolizes a cultural fusion, where the rhythms of his past merge with the sounds of his present.

During his final visit to Jordan, Matussem, as a ruptured rhizome character, realizes that his nostalgic idealization of Jordan does not align with reality. What he remembers from his homeland is poverty, loneliness, and social restrictions. His disillusionment reaches its peak when he acknowledges, "I'm in the wrong place, that I never would be at home here" (p. 263). Ultimately, Matussem chooses America as his home for his wife and jazz, which provides him with "something to help the pulse of grief in his throat, in his hands" (p. 239), that offers him a form of emotional and spiritual resurrection. While his feelings of nostalgia keep his connection to his homeland alive, he remains in a liminal state: neither fully diasporic nor thoroughly American. *Arabian Jazz* symbolizes the negotiation between two contrasting cultures. Initially, Matussem plays only jazz, a genre with strong American and African roots, but by the novel's conclusion, his music transforms into a hybrid form. The novel concludes with this symbolic integration: "She could hear the sound of the drums through the movement of

Ricky's chest, jazz and trills of Arabic music, bright as comet tails, and through this, the pulse of the world" (p. 374).

Home, Belonging, Identity in *Crescent* (2003)

In *Crescent*, Diana Abu-Jaber renders exile not merely as spatial dislocation but as an ontological condition: a quiet, enduring fracture that haunts both body and mind. The novel's protagonist, Sirine, an Iraqi-American orphan raised by her poetically inclined uncle after the tragic death of her Red Cross-volunteer parents in Africa, navigates a life suspended between absence and yearning. Her culinary sanctuary of a Lebanese-owned Arabic restaurant nestled in Los Angeles's ethnoscape of "Teherangeles"—becomes more than a workplace; it is a diasporic agora where Arabs, Iranians, Turks, Latinos, and the displaced converge. Described as "Aladdin's Hidden Treasure" (p. 65), this sensual, aromatic space emerges as a palimpsest of hybrid culture, a stage where identity is continually cooked, served, and reimagined. Each dish evokes ancestral echoes, mapping identities across oceans and generations. In this way, *Crescent* is not merely a narrative of exile and the search for belonging: it is a celebration of cultural continuity, wherein tradition, particularly through the medium of food, becomes both refuge and revelation for Arab Americans forging meaning in an often unwelcoming landscape.

At the start of *Crescent*, 39-year-old Sirine brews coffee for her uncle as he recounts the "moralless" tale of his cousin, Abdelrahman Salahaddin, and brings up Hanif El Hayed, a newly appointed professor in the university's Near Eastern Studies Department. Sirine exhibits impatience when listening to her uncle's story and displays no initial interest in the new professor. At this stage, Sirine firmly identifies America as her home and has no desire to leave. However, as the novel progresses, Hanif gradually exposes her to the Arabic world, igniting a profound personal and cultural transformation. Thus, Sirine's journey is not merely geographical but also spiritual and emotional. Hanif experiences displacement, having physically left his homeland, while Sirine suffers from displacement: a sense of cultural disconnection despite her Iraqi heritage. She possesses little knowledge of her identity, which results in an internal sense of unrest.

In an attempt to explore and embrace her Arab self, Sirine immerses herself in various cultural and intellectual experiences. She views art exhibition featuring photos of Iraq. However, cooking remains the most potent and authentic means through which she connects with her dual identity. Having been trained as a chef, she later rediscovers the forgotten culinary traditions of her childhood: "But when she moved to Um-Nadia's café, she went through her parents' old recipes and began cooking the favorite dishes of her childhood" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 22). Through this sensory and cultural journey, Sirine ultimately begins to reconcile her Arab and American identities, which illustrates the novel's broader theme of cultural hybridity, memory, and self-discovery. In Um-Nadia's café, food serves as a powerful link to Sirine's past, evoking memories of cooking with her parents in their small family kitchen. Although her mother was American, her father often remarked that his wife "thought about food like an Arab" (p. 56). One of their shared culinary traditions was the preparation of baklava, a symbolic fusion of Middle Eastern heritage and American upbringing. This deep connection to family cooking is further emphasized when, upon learning of her parents' passing, Sirine instinctively enters the kitchen and begins making stuffed grape leaves, a dish tied to her earliest memories: "Sirine's earliest memory was of sitting on a phone book on a kitchen chair, the sour-tar smell of pickled grape leaves in the air" (p. 56). As Sirine prepares traditional Arabic cuisine, she simultaneously questions her Arab identity. Despite excelling in Middle Eastern cooking, she remains visually marked by her American heritage, which dominates her self-perception. The customers in the café marvel at her appearance, when she looks at herself in the mirror "All she can see is white. She is so white. Entirely her mother" (p. 231). Her physical appearance serves as a visible marker of her American identity, reinforcing her disconnection from her Arab heritage. Her Arabic roots remain internalized, like a ghost, invisible to others and herself.

The romantic relationship between Han and Sirine share a profound sense of in-betweenness, seeking a sense of home and self-definition. Within this exploration, food becomes a central cultural and emotional metaphor that dissolves boundaries of difference and allowing them to connect on a deeper level. Food functions as a private language of love between them, merging sensory pleasure and cultural memory. This is particularly evident in their first intercourse, during which Sirine's feels alive through imagery of food: "She opens her mouth and tastes his skin and tongue. He is amber and caramel and earth-coloured" (p. 126). Further reinforcing this sensory connection, she inhales his smell, which "smells like bread" (p. 167). This suggests that love and intimacy are intertwined with cultural identity, as Sirine's understanding of Han is deeply connected to the sensory language of food.

Sirine is raised in California by her Middle Eastern uncle after losing her parents at the age of nine. She constantly navigates space between "over there" and "over here", embodying a tension of diasporic existence. The café, where she works, represents an ethnic borderland where Sirine serves as a cultural mediator between the Arabic world, which she has lost and abandoned, and the American culture that she has adopted. Her in-betweenness places her in a continual state of negotiation between these two identities. One of the most striking moments in the novel is the Arabic Thanksgiving, which highlights Sirine's role as a cultural intermediary. This dinner serves as a delicate representation of cultural hybridity, bringing together group of individuals from different ethnic backgrounds, including café patrons, university students, and professors: "By noon, there is Han, Mireille, Victor Hernandez, and his cousin Eliazar, Aziz the Poet, Nathan, Um-Nadia, Cristobal the custodian, Shark, Jenob, Abdullah, Schmaal and Gharb—five of the lonely students from the café—Sirine, and her uncle" (p. 215). This multi-ethnic celebration underscores the novel's central themes of identity, diaspora, and cultural coexistence. Sirine sees this event as an opportunity to explore her mother's American heritage while incorporating her father's Arabic culinary traditions. The hybrid nature of the meal reflects this dual cultural belonging. Additional ethnic dishes contributed by guests—including "big round fatayer," "a lamb pie" from Aziz, "six sliced cylinders of cranberry sauce, whole roasted walnuts in chilli sauce", and "three homemade pumpkin pies and a half-gallon of whipping cream" from Victor (pp. 216–217), further emphasize the mosaic of identities represented in this gathering. The traditional Thanksgiving turkey is transformed through the ancestral cinnamon flavour that Sirine incorporates, symbolizing the merging of her Arab and American heritages. This event celebrates both the diversity of America and the new identities that emerge within diasporic communities. Sirine's uncle captures this spirit of cultural fusion in his toast: "Here's to sweet, unusual families, pleasant dogs who behave, food of this nature, the seven types of smiles, the crescent moon, and a nice cup of tea with mint every day" (p. 217). His mention of the crescent moon links this secular American holiday to the Muslim tradition of Ramadan, reinforcing the parallelism between Thanksgiving and Ramadan as communal celebrations. Later in the novel, Han educates Sirine about Ramadan, explaining: "a time of charity, compassion, abstinence, and forgiveness" (p. 273). By blending Thanksgiving and Ramadan, the novel portrays unity across cultures, fostering a culinary consciousness that transcends national and ethnic boundaries. In exploring identity, Diana Abu-Jaber employs heteroglot discourse, a concept introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin, which refers to the coexistence of multiple languages, voices, and perspectives within a single text. Sirine's linguistic hybridity is evident in her earliest memories of addressing her parents. Although her parents are long deceased, their intercultural union remains linguistically preserved in Sirine's speech. As a child, Sirine watched television reports of Red Cross emergency workers, knowing that her parents were among them, even if she never physically saw them on the screen. In one instance, she hears the name Bangladesh and sees a dark-skinned child, which reminds her of her father's complexion. Though her parents' presence was absent from the television, she sensed their existence "inside the box". She instinctively referred to them as: "Mama and Baba", in which Mama means mother in English and Baba means father in Arabic. This moment symbolizes Sirine's hybrid linguistic consciousness; rather than choosing a single language to address them; she instinctively selects the words that best fit each parent. This bilingual construction reflects her inherent dual identity, shaped by both Western and Arab cultural influences.

Another significant instance of heteroglot discourse occurs when Han teaches Sirine Arabic, guiding her in uncovering her Arab heritage. Despite being half-Arab, Sirine initially lacks a deep connection to her Middle Eastern roots. Han encourages her self-discovery by introducing her to the lyrical and poetic nature of Arabic, reinforcing its emotional and intimate expressions: "It is like a poem," she says, strumming his chest with her hand" (p. 157). Through this exchange, Sirine experiences language as a bridge to her Arab identity, immersing herself in the emotional depth and poetic richness of Arabic. The metaphoric and affectionate nature of these expressions symbolizes both linguistic and cultural belonging, reinforcing the interplay between language, identity, and self-discovery. In *Crescent*, language is not merely a means of communication; it is a lived experience, a cultural artefact, and a reflection of hybridity.

The theme of nostalgia is central to *Crescent*, particularly through Hanif El Eyad's longing for Baghdad. Han, an exiled Iraqi professor at UCLA, embodies political diaspora, one of the four primary motivations of the diasporic movement as outlined by Bruneau (1995, pp. 39–41). The novel opens with a temporal shift, depicting Baghdad a decade earlier, when the night sky, expected to be dark, is illuminated by the light of rockets and bombings. This scene establishes Han's profound dislocation, as war and political oppression prevent him from ever genuinely returning home. The novel underscores this struggle when Han meets Sirine at Um-Nadia's café, where he engages students in conversations that alternate between English and Arabic, reflecting his dual identity and intellectual exile. The first words Sirine hears him say in English encapsulate this paradox: "Of course, I love Iraq; Iraq is my home" (p. 24). Despite this declaration, Han attempts to reconstruct Baghdad

in exile, narrating the “good old times” to Sirine. He recalls his return to Iraq in 1979, only to witness Saddam Hussein’s rise to power and the Iran-Iraq War. Having spent five years studying in Cairo, he experiences reverse culture shock upon his return to Baghdad, where every young man is conscripted into the army. At the same time, his political writings under the pseudonym Ma’al place his family in danger.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said asserts: “The past life of émigrés is, as we know, annulled” (1993, p. 333). For political exiles like Han, this statement rings especially true. Once uprooted, is returning home ever genuinely possible? In Han’s case, home is no longer a sanctuary but a graveyard of trauma, a place haunted by social pressure, loss, and violence. Friedman (2007) argues: “Home may, in fact, be constituted upon an act of violence against the body, even as that body travels, migrates, or goes into exile” (p. 200). Han’s experience exemplifies this violent rupture, as his return to Baghdad only intensifies his alienation: “I came back from Cairo obsessed with just about everything cultural—literature, painting, drama” (p. 328). The novel ultimately asks: Can home be reclaimed, or does exile irrevocably transform the concept of belonging? Han’s eventual departure suggests the latter. Leaving behind Sirine, his books, and a farewell note, he writes: “Things are broken. The world is broken. Hayati, it’s time” (p. 334). As Carol Fadda-Conrey argues: “They also superimpose the war traumas embedded in Arab localities onto a U.S. cultural and social landscape that is oblivious or at best, indifferent to such traumas.” (2014, p. 105). Han’s diasporic consciousness means that, no matter how far he flees, his identity remains shaped by war, loss, and exile. This dissolution of spatial and temporal boundaries underscores the geographical imagination of mobility, wherein the concept of home is continuously redefined. Han embodies the redrawing of hegemonic configurations of geography and citizenship, destabilizing fixed notions of home, belonging, and identity. Han has lived a nomadic existence since leaving his parents’ home in his youth, making it difficult for him to develop a sense of belonging anywhere. This transience manifests in his living spaces, which remain unfurnished and impermanent. Abu-Jaber writes, “commitment—to a place” (p. 78) is a concept Han has never fully embraced, as he constantly exists in a state of impermanence. This is reinforced when Sirine’s uncle visits Han’s house and remarks: “you’re living like a Bedouin in a goat-hair tent” (p. 302). Han internalizes his rootlessness, articulating his disorientation to Sirine: “I really don’t get the geography of this town. It seems like things keep swimming around me. I think I know where something is, and then it’s gone” (p. 85).

Cooking serves as a symbolic act of negotiation between Han’s Arab identity and his desire to integrate into American culture. In an effort to assimilate, he embraces American cuisine and even consults one of the most renowned American cookbooks when preparing a meal for Sirine. This culinary performance reflects his attempt to momentarily embody an American identity and connect with Sirine on her American side. However, the act of replacing ingredients suggests a transitional process rather than complete assimilation: “a shift of ingredients like a move from native tongue into a foreign language: butter instead of olive oil; potatoes instead of rice; beef instead of lamb” (p. 77). This culinary adaptation parallels Han’s fluctuating identity, as he remains at an equal distance from both East and West, embodying a self in flux. His connection to Sirine deepens through this shared negotiation of cultural identity. He expresses his love for her as an antidote to exile: “It’s like you know some sort of secret, Hayati, a key to being alive—to living” (p. 158). Through Sirine’s gaze, Han’s historical and cultural burden becomes visible, as she sees in him “the ancient traces” of a people who have spent centuries watching the horizon, symbolizing both longing and displacement: “Sirine watched Han for a moment it seems that she can actually see the ancient traces in Han’s face, the quality of his gaze that seems to originate from a thousand-thousand years of watching the horizon” (p. 211). According to Deleuze and Guattari’s, movement does not lead to complete assimilation, but rather to a process of re-rooting in new contexts (1987, p. 9). Han initially experiences deterritorialization in Cairo, where he is educated in a Westernized school and immersed in English-language curricula: “The school had British and American faculty, classes were conducted in English, and history classes were the history of the West, literature was the literature of America and Britain” (p. 259). This forced Westernization results in a fractured identity, making his eventual return to Baghdad equally alienating. Feeling estranged from his homeland, he reconfigures his sense of self through movement, using exile as a space for critical reflection and reinvention.

At the novel’s conclusion, Han returns to Iraq despite the immense risks of persecution and death. His departure signals his desire to reclaim his existence and confront the loss of his origins. The novel presents two different exilic experiences: Sirine’s cultural exile, as she struggles to embrace her Arab heritage despite being born and raised in America and Han’s political exile, as he flees oppression in Iraq while remaining haunted by his past and longing for home (Sarnou, 2014, p. 76). Although their displacement is different, both characters engage in exilic discourses to forge a sense of belonging. In this process, they become “disconnected rhizomes” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9), figures who initially appear uprooted but ultimately

cultivate new identities through movement and cultural reinvention. Han may be deterritorialized, but the café functions as a place of reterritorialization, where he temporarily reconnects with his Arab identity through language, community, and food. His story reveals that home is not a fixed place but an evolving concept shaped by memory, migration, and love.

Storytelling, one of the oldest literary traditions in the Arabic world, is seamlessly integrated into the novel's narrative framework. The tale of Abdelrahman Salahaddin, Sirine's uncle's favorite cousin, serves as a mythical parallel to the novel's central plot. The uncle's narration functions as a treasure map, guiding both Sirine and the reader through themes of exile, identity, and return. When Sirine expresses dissatisfaction with the unresolved nature of the story, she asks her uncle for more details about whether the characters reunited or how they felt. In response, he offers a profound reflection on the nature of storytelling: "Stories are crescent moons: they glimmer in the night sky, but they are most exquisite in their incomplete state. Because people crave the beauty of not-knowing, the excitement of suggestion, and the sweet tragedy of mystery" (p. 384). The crescent moon represents incompleteness, in-betweenness, and the perpetual state of searching: a condition the uncle, rather than lamenting, praises. The *Crescent* signals the beginning of Islamic months and new phases of life. By likening his storytelling to the moon, Sirine's uncle embraces ambiguity, the beauty of incompleteness, and the necessity of perpetual transformation.

By the novel's end, fantasy and reality blur, as Sirine finds herself confused about Han and Abdelrahman's identities: "Was it Abdelrahman who had to leave her, to return to his old home, or Han who was compelled to drown himself, over and over again." (p. 394) Through this myth-reality entanglement, Abu-Jaber reinforces the idea of transformation and fluidity in Arab and Arab American identities. The novel also addresses the psychological toll of immigration. Sirine's uncle avoids discussing Iraq or memories, as they are too painful for him to revisit. His dialogue with Estavio, an immigrant waiter, captures the deep sadness that often accompanies displacement: "Wouldn't you say that immigrants are sadder than older people?" Estavio responds, "Sadness? Certo! When we leave our home, we fall in love with our sadness" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 143). Immigration and its emotional consequences thus form the backbone of Abu-Jaber's narrative.

Abu-Jaber further merges oral storytelling traditions with Western novelistic form, reinforcing the hybridity of her work. Ultimately, the novel itself becomes a Third Space: an inter-ethnic bridge that negotiates shifting cultural landscapes, particularly within the American context (Ghouaiel, 2015, p. 265). The characters of Sirine and Hanif are intricately woven into the novel's storytelling structure, reinforcing its hybrid nature. Abu-Jaber skillfully portrays the feelings of loss, rootlessness, and the ambiguity of dual belonging. As they seek to reconnect with their origins each character attempts to reterritorialize their concept of home within contemporary communities. This negotiation of identity reflects the broader struggle of immigrants who navigate between their cultural heritage and the pressures of assimilation in a new land.

Conclusion

Crescent and *Arabian Jazz* unravel Arab-American identity as an ever-evolving tapestry: fragmented, fluid, and defiant of fixed categories. Her characters are not bound by origin but shaped by the psychic contours of exile, where home is less a place than an intimate geography of memory, ritual, and loss. In rejecting binaries, Abu-Jaber situates identity in a Third Space of tension and transformation. In *Arabian Jazz*, Jemurah's quiet rebellion and Matussem's devotion to jazz—a music born of hybridity—reflect the improvisational nature of diasporic life. Jazz becomes a metaphor for fractured belonging, a soundscape where discord becomes creation. *Crescent* shifts inward, portraying Sirine's culinary rituals as acts of narrative reclamation, where food becomes a language of mourning, sensuality, and survival. Hanif's haunted exile underscores how longing itself becomes a mode of knowing, an epistemology of absence. Gender remains central. Abu-Jaber's women resist both patriarchal tradition and racialized American norms, navigating identity through silence, story, and sensory acts. They do not assimilate; they recompose. Rather than offering resolution, Abu-Jaber renders identity as a site of layered improvisation: performed, remembered, and perpetually reimagined. Her work reframes exile not as rupture, but as fertile terrain for cultural reinvention. In doing so, *Crescent* and *Arabian Jazz* subvert Orientalist narratives and affirm that to belong is not to arrive, but to create meaning across shifting borders that dwells in contradiction and composing selfhood from the fragments.

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