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# 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 duyusal 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

While *Crescent* (2003) and *Arabian Jazz* (1993) both foreground questions of cultural displacement, their narrative strategies highlight how hybridity is enacted in mundane encounters rather than in spectacular clashes of culture. Abu-Jaber's protagonists experience belonging less as a geographical certainty than as an affective and ethical practice that oscillates between nostalgia, alienation, and creative adaptation (Hassan, 2011; Gana, 2008). The novels' emphasis on the ordinary—the kitchen, the café, the family living room, the neighborhood street—recasts diaspora not as a single rupture but as a series of micropolitical negotiations through which the self is rehearsed and revised.

In *Crescent*, hybridity surfaces in Sirine's relationships rather than solely in her cooking. Her romance with Han, the exiled Iraqi professor, dramatizes the tension between private intimacy and political exile; the heart's ordinary risks are folded into the extraordinary risks of border regimes and state surveillance. Their inability to sustain a straightforward relationship underscores the fractured nature of diasporic subjectivity, where love itself becomes entangled with histories of violence, memory, and dispossession (Hassan, 2011). Equally telling is Sirine's ambivalent attachment to Los Angeles, a city that alternates between refuge and exposure. Los Angeles promises anonymity and cosmopolitan textures, yet it also rehearses suspicion and racial profiling; in that sense, the city performs what Bhabha (1994) calls the "Third Space," a zone where identities are improvised, negotiated, and constantly unsettled.

*Arabian Jazz*, on the other hand, dramatizes hybridity through its comic—even chaotic—rendering of family life. Rather than presenting Arab-American identity as tragic or victimized, Abu-Jaber injects humor into the disorientations of diaspora, revealing comedy as a diagnostic mode rather than an evasion. For instance, Jemorah's interactions with her overbearing relatives reveal how cultural traditions are not merely inherited but constantly reinterpreted, resisted, and reshaped (Majaj, 2008). The musical motif of "jazz" in the novel further becomes an allegory for improvisation—suggesting that Arab-American identity, like jazz, thrives not in purity or stability but in constant improvisation across dissonant notes, with syncopation rather than harmony as the dominant figure (Salaita, 2005). In this key, Matussem's drumming is not just character color; it is the novel's theory of belonging set to time.

Abu-Jaber also highlights language as a site of negotiation. In both novels, moments of miscommunication—between lovers in *Crescent* or among family members in *Arabian Jazz*—serve as reminders of the liminal position Arab Americans occupy, suspended between linguistic traditions and social expectations. Thus, hybridity in essence is not a static situation and instead it constantly evolves. Here identity is reformed in transit in a slipped and repaired condition (Alsuntany, 2012). The folktales by the uncle in *Crescent* braid a pre-national narrative memory into late-twentieth-century Los Angeles, just as Jem's adult narrations in *Arabian Jazz* are indication of the child's memory with the grown woman's understanding. In both situations, storytelling functions as a cultural work which keeps open a transgenerational conversation that no single language can contain (Fadda-Conrey, 2014; Hall, 1990).

Both works refuse to essentialize Arab-American subjectivity. Rather than fixed binaries of assimilation and tradition, the characters perform selfhoods that are unstable, very contradictory and at times creative. Sirine's mantra "work is home" foregrounds belonging as an act of practicality built on repeated actions of feeding, cleaning, hosting and listening. It is not a passport stamp. Jeromah's act of withdrawal is not pathological, rather is a condition of gendered and racialized histories of perpetual visibility, though curiously unheard (Alsultany, 2012; Majaj, 2008). Instead of a model that measures identity as a fixed axis of Arab versus American, Abu-Jaber foregrounds a polyphonic field that identity is reshaped by memory, place, work and desires (Bhabha, 1994; Fadda-Conrey, 2014). Both books translate diasporic life into the grammar of the ordinary: Kitchens, basements, courtyards, classrooms, buses, and strip-mall cafés. Rather than propose a single thesis about Arab American identity, they stage a repertoire of practices through which belonging is made and remade—work, storytelling, food preparation, music-making, joking, and the micropolitics of care. Such practices align with Hassan's (2011) emphasis on "cultural translation", where the immigrant subject must continually convert experience between codes, and with Gana's (2008) account of Abu-Jaber's "reconfigured Arabness," which is less essence than method.

Both novels take loss not as a single event, but as an atmosphere that shapes perception and time. Jeromah's grief upon his mother's death holds the decision-making process while Matussem's drumming is a transformation of repetition ritual. Sirine's orphanhood becomes the ethics of feeding the needy and transforms into an act of hospitality. Carruth's (1996)

definition of trauma as a belated wound helps to understand how those characters revive their histories to the present. Bhabha's (1994) theory of in-betweenness elucidates how such wounds never heal. When those two theoretical frameworks converge, it shows how Abu-Jaber's figures experience time. They have not resolved through assimilation, neither nostalgic. Instead, they move forward in time and place forming a unique identity peculiar to itself.

Language and storytelling bring those two books to a different dimension. Thus, it insists translation between languages, generations, and kinds as not something neutral. Uncle's folk tales in *Crescent* brings pre-national narrative to the present and teaches Sirine to read her identity as something fluid. In *Arabian Jazz*, Jem's childhood traumas become an adult understanding. Translation mistakes are not narrative glitches but constructive moment of renegotiations. Hall (1990) claims that cultural identity is always in a process and "a matter of becoming as well as being. AbuJaber literally fleshes out that insight in the mise-en-scène of bilingual cafes and polyglot households. Misreading or mistakes in translation do not only block understanding, it also opens up new spaces for some risky and reparative affiliation (Fadda-Conrey, 2014; Hassan, 2011).

Urban geographies in both novels present a significant aspect as well. While *Crescent* take place in Los Angeles's university corridors, alleys, malls, and apartment buildings, Euclid in Arabian Jazz is set in a poor – while setting whose isolation bring surface the racism prevalent. When read together, the urban spaces show how space plays a significant role in shaping diaspora. The metropolis presents anonymity and cultural structure. The small town on the other hand, make social boundaries explicit and impenetrable. Sirine's displacement and ambivalence towards the city, is in parallel with Jeromah's toward both Jordan and United States. Thus, belonging in both narratives flesh out in a series of practices of feeding, listening, rehearsing, studying instead of a passport category (Bhabha, 1994; Fadda-Conrey, 2014; Gana, 2008).

Scholars have mostly interpreted Abu-Jaber's culinary richness as a celebration of heritage. However, the message in *Crescent* complicates such an interpretation. The food does not only signify culture, it disciplines attention, organizes the value of labor and reinvigorates the community. "Work is home" could sound very harsh, however in the café, this statement shows the circuit of reciprocity. Thus, Sirine's labor transforms into customers' comfort, and their presence gives her a sense of belonging. Therefore, the novel refuses to reiterate the gendered costs of such labor in terms of exhaustion, worry, and the politics of respectability that accompany the pleasures of feeding and being fed (Majaj, 2008; Naber, 2012).

The reading of the novels together clarifies how AbuJaber reimagines the Arab American visibility. In the extremities which demands American vilification and exaggerated glorification (Alsultany, 2012), both works bring forth the ordinary plurality. Scholars, mechanics, aunties, students, police, and lovers all share spaces, recipes, and songs. The outcome is not a sterilized plularity of multiculturalism, neither an expose of relived tensions (Gana, 2008; Hassan, 2011; Salaita, 2005). In Abu-Jaber's hands, the "forever foreigner" narrative dissolves into a set of practices through which people learn to inhabit the in-between: sometimes joyfully, sometimes wearily, always creatively (Gana, 2008; Hassan, 2011; Salaita, 2005).

Thus, *Crescent* and *Arabian Jazz* do not only describe immigration, but they also allow the praxis of living in harmony and practicality. By describing the ordinary taste of lentils, the thump of a drum, the ache of a late bus, the slip of a mistranslated word, Abu-Jaber invites readers to reconsider what foregrounds as political evidence of diasporic fiction. The kitchen and the bandstand become archives. The joke becomes a method, the miscommunication becomes the hinge on which new affiliations emerge. In this sense, hybridity is not a label but a condition in which subjects reshape belonging that is enough for vulnerability and desire (Alsultany, 2012; ; Awad, 2021; Bhabha, 1994; Cainkar, 2009; ; Caruth, 1996; Fadda-Conrey, 2014;Gana, 2008; ; Hall, 1990; Hassan, 2011; Majaj, 2008; Naber, 2012; Said, 1978/2003; Salaita, 2005 ). In this way, Abu-Jaber's fiction challenges dominant narratives of Arab Americans as "forever foreigners" and reimagines diaspora as a space of possibility, humor, and relationality.

**Home, Belonging, Identity in *Arabian Jazz***

Arabian Jazz (1993) dramatizes the complex entanglements of Arab-American identity, belonging, and displacement through the microcosm of the Ramoud family, whose lives unfold in the small, racially marked town of Euclid, New York. Abu-Jaber's first novel resists static definitions of Arab-American identity by portraying it as unstable, improvisational, and mediated by humor, grief, and cultural negotiation. Scholars emphasize that Arab-American writing consistently unsettles essentialist

narratives of ethnicity by foregrounding hybridity, liminality, and satire (Cainkar, 2009; Fadda-Conrey, 2014; Hassan, 2011; Naber, 2012). Abu-Jaber's novel, polyphonic in tone and structure, layers comedy with melancholy, musical improvisation with domestic rituals, and the weight of memory with the irreverence of satire. By exploring family, race, gender, and music, the novel underscores that Arab-American belonging is always partial, contested, and generative.

At the center stands Matussem Ramoud, a widowed Jordanian immigrant whose identity is as fragmented as his jazz drumming. His diasporic subjectivity is defined by displacement across Palestine, Jordan, and the United States, producing what Bruneau (1995) has described as overlapping layers of diaspora: political exile, economic migration, and cultural estrangement. The death of his wife Nora deepens his alienation, robbing him of the fragile anchor that tethered him to America. His humor—often bitter and ironic—reveals his inability to reconcile cultural belonging with social rejection: **"**He believed that any music was prayer, sending a message out to the sky"; "My sister Fatima going to put me in the crazy house with her fifty thousand worries about husbands" (Abu-Jaber, 1993, pp. 16-17). His jokes mask the racial hostility he endures, being derided as a "dirty sand nigger" (p. 99) and a "darky foreigner" (p. 89), while also bearing the contradictory patriarchal authority expected of Arab fathers. As Naber (2012) argues, Arab men in the U.S. are frequently racialized as threatening yet simultaneously emasculated, trapped in a contradictory social imagination. Matussem embodies this paradox: his masculinity is diminished in the public sphere but magnified within the domestic one, producing a fractured self that seeks reconciliation through music.

The daughters, Jemorah and Melvina, embody divergent responses to hybridity. Jemorah, unmarried in her thirties, is haunted by grief and immobilized by cultural pressures. Her emotional detachment manifests as withdrawal, recalling Joanna Kadi's assertion that Arabs in the U.S. are "the most invisible of the invisible" (1994, p. xix). Jemorah turns invisibility into a survival strategy, keeping her distance from classmates who taunt her for appearing different. Abu-Jaber depicts this moment with stark detail: The Broom children, grim-faced and dirt-marked, radiate an almost tangible hostility as they crowd onto the bus (1993, p. 92). Here, racism is inscribed on the body; Jem's olive skin and dark hair mark her as foreign in a white enclave. As Fadda-Conrey (2014) notes, Arab-Americans are persistently racialized as "forever foreign," regardless of assimilation or generation. Jemorah embodies this condition, her identity stifled by the constant reminder of difference.

Melvina, on the other hand, approaches bicultural identity with confidence and resistance. She openly challenges patriarchal authority, styling herself as a modern Joan of Arc while ridiculing the Ladies' Pontifical Committee at St. Yusef, whom she accuses of sacrificing young women to the false idols of male dominance and wasteful indulgence (Abu-Jaber, 1993, p. 52). Her language is satirical, biting, and feminist. Melvina also finds in Arabic a wellspring of beauty and intensity, describing its sounds as if syllables could build upon each other like piano notes, rising into powerful crescendos of emotion (Abu-Jaber, 1993, p. 305). For Melvina, hybridity is empowering rather than paralyzing. Scholars have shown that Arab-American women often reimagine hybridity as creative adaptation rather than loss (Alsultany, 2012; Majaj, 2008). Melvina's voice exemplifies this, positioning bilingualism and biculturalism as resources for agency.

Aunt Fatima represents another dimension of Arab-American belonging: the persistence of tradition, memory, and trauma. Fatima is simultaneously the enforcer of cultural norms and the bearer of deep wounds. Her role as guardian of heritage is captured in her self-description: "Marriage is sacred obligation, to get that baby-girl married" (Abu-Jaber, 1993, p. 11); "They treat me like I am a corpse! Like a shit, damn, curses corpse!" (Abu-Jaber, 1993, p. 42). Yet her insistence on tradition is haunted by trauma. She recalls witnessing the burial of a newborn girl when she was four, a moment that etched patriarchal violence into her consciousness: "Marriage is sacred obligation, to get that baby-girl married" (Abu-Jaber, 1993, p. 11). Fatima's rigid traditionalism is therefore not merely nostalgia but also a response to generational pain, echoing what Hassan (2011) calls the transmission of trauma in immigrant narratives. Her character exposes how diaspora carries not only cultural memory but also the burdens of unresolved violence.

The absence of Nora, the daughters' American mother, amplifies the family's instability. Her death deprives them of a symbolic bridge to Americanness. Jemorah reflects: "With love, there no reason… Sometimes you are suffered enough" (Abu-Jaber, 1993, pp. 38-39). Her grief suspends her in a timeless state, exemplifying what Caruth (1996) describes as trauma's disruption of linear temporality. Nora's ambivalent relationship to Arab culture also reveals the complexities of cross-cultural intimacy. She resists vaccinations before traveling to Jordan, dismissing Arab medical advice as "typical Arab patronizing" (p. 78). After her death, Fatima cruelly accuses her daughters by saying that their mother dies only for hating Arabs (p. 66). These

moments reveal how racism and cultural tension infiltrate even intimate family bonds. Scholars such as Cainkar (2009) and Naber (2012) have shown how Arab-American families navigate both external hostility and internalized conflict, complicating narratives of assimilation.

Portia Porschman, Nora's friend and Jemorah's employer, represents white hegemony and Orientalist disdain. She infantilizes and racializes Jem, proclaiming that it is shame and she even proposes to "make" Jemorah American by altering her appearance. These statements reflect the assimilationist violence Arabs face, where acceptance is conditional upon erasure. Said's (1978, 2003) critique of Orientalism resonates here: Arabs are positioned as other, deficient, and in need of transformation. Recent scholarship confirms how such micro-racism's structure everyday life for Arab Americans (Alsultany, 2012; Awad, 2021). Portia thus embodies the intersection of racism and gendered policing, making visible the pressures Arab American women face in predominantly white institutions.

Food and domestic rituals also play crucial roles in the novel, functioning as contested sites of belonging. Shared meals provide moments of comfort and connection, yet they are also occasions for exclusion. At a family picnic, two white hikers initially enjoy Arab food but recoil upon learning its source: "'Arabs, Jesus fucking Christ. And we ate their food'" (Abu-Jaber, 1993, p. 361). This reaction exposes how racism penetrates the most intimate spaces of hospitality. As Gana (2008) observes, Abu-Jaber often uses food as a metaphor for cultural negotiation: meals bridge gaps but also reveal prejudice. Here, Arab food becomes a marker of alterity, rejected not for its taste but for its ethnic origin, demonstrating how racism structures sensory as well as social experiences.

Romantic relationships further complicate belonging. Jemorah's relationship with Ricky Ellis, a half-Indian man, underscores her attraction to hybridity. She muses: "A faun is far more special than either a satyr or a nymph" (Abu-Jaber, 1993, p. 36). Ricky's mixed heritage resonates with her liminality, symbolizing the potential of interethnic intimacy to reconfigure identity. Yet the relationship is fragile, shaped as much by projection as by genuine connection. Scholars such as Salaita (2005) argue that Arab-American literature often stages interethnic romance as a metaphor for cultural negotiation, suggesting both possibility and precarity. Jemorah's desire for Ricky reflects her yearning for a space beyond rigid categories, where hybridity itself becomes desirable.

The town of Euclid functions as a symbol of exclusion, representing the ways Arab-Americans are pushed to the margins of U.S. society. At the same time, it is the setting where the Ramoud family struggles to establish a sense of community. This duality underscores the paradox of diaspora: the search for belonging often takes place within spaces that actively deny acceptance. Matussem reflects on this paradox during a return to Jordan, where he realizes that nostalgia cannot restore home. His disillusionment underscores what Majaj (2008) describes as the ambivalence of the homeland in Arab American writing: both desired and estranged, both remembered and resisted. Matussem ultimately anchors himself in America, not because the country offers him genuine belonging, but because it holds the memory of his late wife and the sustaining rhythm of jazz. What keeps him there is not acceptance, but the emotional weight of loss and the music through which he processes it. Home, in this sense, is not a location but an affective construct, produced through memory, music, and loss.

By the end of *Arabian Jazz*, belonging is redefined not as assimilation or return but as improvisation. Jemorah, Melvina, Matussem, and Fatima embody different modes of negotiation—withdrawal, empowerment, creativity, and preservation—none of which resolve the tensions of diaspora. Instead, Abu-Jaber offers a vision of identity as polyphonic, humorous, and improvisational. Satire punctuates the narrative, reminding readers that laughter, like jazz, can resist fixity. As Cainkar (2009) argues, Arab-American literature often refuses closure, insisting on the open-endedness of diasporic identity. Abu-Jaber's novel exemplifies this refusal, portraying Arab American life as a constant balancing act between grief and joy, rejection and resilience, memory and reinvention.

In a sense, Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993; Norton reissue, 2003) stages Arab American identity as a live negotiation rather than a settled category. In a shabby upstate New York town that is neither quite home nor pure exile, the Ramoud family tries to compose a life on the off beats: grief keeps time, humor breaks the measure, and improvisation becomes the everyday ethic of survival. If much U.S. discourse has cast Arab Americans as forever outside, Abu-Jaber answers with characters who insist on living *in-between* without apology, and who learn to sound out that in-between as a language of their own (Bhabha, 1994; Fadda-Conrey, 2014).

From the opening pages, grief and displacement bind the family's present to a lost past. Matussem Ramoud, widower and drummer, wakes into absence that feels physical: "His wife's face was imprinted on his consciousness. He thought of her as he drove to work in the mornings through ice and rain. His sense of loss was sometimes so potent that he became disoriented" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 1). That imprinted face is also a map—of routes from Jordan and Palestine, of the ordinary American streets that are no longer navigable without Nora's living guidance. The novel's house style is to move from the intimate to the historical and back again, as if to say: diaspora is not an abstract theory but a hand finding the door in winter dark (Said, 2000).

Music becomes Matussem's way to speak to what cannot answer back. Early on, Abu-Jaber casts his drumming as a ritualized bridge between worlds: "He believed that any music was prayer, sending a message out to the sky. Nora remains as the audience who stays there and listens constantly. He was always aware that drumming "had the power to penetrate the heavens and earth" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 16). This belief functions more than merely grieving. It reimagines a relationship above departure. If exile is, in Said's statement, an "unhealable rift," *Arabian Jazz* shows how rhythms can span it, not by juxtaposing it closed but by learning to play *with* the gap: solo answering solo, call meeting response (Said, 2000).

The poor-white neighborhood of Euclid which Ramoud family has settled, is not a final destination. It is described as a strange and suspended space: "a place of perfect forgetting" where a person can stop by before arrival (Abu-Jaber, 2003, s. 86). This statement rejects both nostalgia and assimilation. Euclid is neither a home nor a blank slate, it is indeed a place of rehearsal where the family can renegotiate their newly acquired identities. However, this process very painful. When they were kids, Jem and Melina feel alienated and it renames the newly acquired identities. They "didn't fit even with them, those children nobody wanted" (p. 94). As such, invisibility becomes a method for safety for Jem, while competence becomes a secure tactic of respectability. The differing responses complicates their competence which in turn becomes a method of survival. Those two minority girls in the US become quiet and secluded in their newly acquired identities and spaces.

Abu-Jaber is fully aware of the racial profiling in such spaces. The novel carefully narrates Ramoud family's being less than white and putting them in a lower place than American counterparts. It records slurs and glances that put the Ramouds in a precarious situation. The slangs and language is very real historically which does not shock the family. Thus, the reader hears the casual contempt of locals to better understand the weight on Jem's shoulders. On the other hand, the narrative refuses binaries if "bad racist townspeople" against "innocent minority victims". Though the portrayal is harsh and essentially honest, the poor whites share the same binary classification of precarity with the Ramoud family which still weaponize race; and Arab immigrants may bring their own rigidities to the new world (Alsultany, 2012; Cainkar, 2009).

Portia Porschman, Nora's schoolmate and Jem's supervisor is an embodiment of racism who carries race, color, class, and femininity. Her harangue and tantrums in the office is carefully detailed in the novel. Initially it begins a innocent nagging which later turns into curdles. She says, "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*. Though he might as well have been, really, *who could tell the difference*, the one lives about the same as the other" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, pp. 293–294). Jem's response shows Portia's racism embedded inside which quietly inserts racism into the inner crevices of her mind: "*My father's mother was black… Yeah, a former slave*" (p. 295). This exchange between a local and a second-generation immigrant shows the number of politics involved in the choice of words. Jem rejects the white gaze which has come to define and surround him. Here hybridity is not a polite melting-pot metaphor but, in Bhabha's reasoning, a "third space" that unsettles hierarchies instead of tidying them (Bhabha, 1994).

While Portia's racist slurs and comments protect the whiteness, kinship can police the boundaries of respectability. However, Abu-Jaber does not bring down the concept of kinship into a caricature. In the novel those who are most tradition bounded are the most wounded characters. Their fragility could be interpreted as a safe and a cope mechanism for the pains and suffering they encountered in their previous encounters. As such divergent voices and expectations exist in a liminal space Nora literally "feeds" Matussem American English during their courtship; oral instruction rendered as intimacy: "She taught him how to speak a new language, how to handle his new country… she took his hands and *fed him words like bread from her lips*" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 188). This quotation shows the politics of immigrant speech which is fluent and tells the love story in the grain of a single sentence. Though it is gentle in nature, it provides an understanding why death of Nora shatters more than marriage. In her absence, what "home" refers has to be reimagined. Abu-Jaber portrays Palestine a painful

memory in Matussem's imagination. We find out that "there had been a Palestine for his parents; *its sky formed a ceiling in his sleep*" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 260). Though it is a modest image, the description retunes the whole room: A ceiling that reminds the sky. The purpose of such a description is to register how place persists in the body even after borders and papers have changed, and how transgenerational loss can become a private architecture of mind (Fadda-Conrey, 2014; Jamal & Naber, 2008).

The novel presents how "going back" can be disappointing. On a return nostalgia, Matussem, realizes the sad truth behind going back concept: "*in the wrong place, [he] never would be at home here*" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 263). This realization does not resolve the identity, on the contrary, it complicates it. The lost land remains real ethically and emotionally. However, the life has to be livable where it is. Abu-Jaber tries to avoid the sentimental lesson ("home is where the heart is") for something harder. Thus, the home is where one's responsibilities, loves, and daily labors accumulate, *even if* the old sky keeps pressing down.

The novel's politics is never too personal. It narrates how the racial common sense in America singles out non-Americans and labels them as potential suspects. However, Jem's journey tells the story of knowledge instead of vengeance. She carefully reads the notes that have been assigned to her and annotates them with her own lines. Education, then becomes a mode of counterarguments, friendship and desires. Desire in *Arabian Jazz* is neither allegory nor mere plot device. It is essentially a method of thinking across difference. Jem's attraction to Ricky Ellis, an immigrant himself, puts bodies and histories in close contact that the town's racial laws would rather have apart. When the novel brings them into the same sonic frame towards its end, it doesn't hand out a banner for "multiculturalism". Instead of offering a neat resolution, the novel portrays a fragile moment of connection, where Jem senses an alignment between her surroundings and her inner state. The imagery of autumn colors blending with desert hues conveys how landscapes and memories can intersect, producing a quiet harmony that preserves difference rather than erasing it.

Abu-Jaber also narrates how a public performance can transform into a personal healing process. In the club where Matussem teases his audience saying" Now for father out there in the fatherland… I call Big Daddy" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, pp. 148–149), shows the fatherhood concept as a simple improvisation. The joke has a tone of sarcasm and pain. The showmanship only masks this pain and vulnerability. But it also carries a certain amount of pedagogy for the daughter: watch a man who admits he is making it up as he goes and still chooses the joy. In a sense this shows the concept of belonging. Since *Arabian Jazz* is a diasporic narrative, death is inevitable. When Matussem finds out that his sisters in Jordan have arranged a headstone for Nora there, he says: "*We had thought she might need a second bed… We wanted to give her soul ease*" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 354). This scene is painful, surreal and very sensible. It is surreal because, the dead would never need two graves. It is sensible, because mourners actually need a gravestone to mourn for. The second bed is a confirmation of the fact that migration multiplies the spaces of memory and grief which is an indication of hybridity. The line makes obvious the labor of elder women in migrant family and the tending capacity of sacred logistics of loss.

The novel is blunt in its portrayal of American racism towards migrant population. However, it refuses the locate this language as the determining last words. Rather, Jem learns to live with his traumas and lack of opportunities. The narrative's language consists of small, stubborn redefinition that lean on the sensuous articulation that the characters encounter. Those are food, fabric, the weather, or the feeling a simple drumstick in the hand. The culture here materializes not as props but a mixture of how identity is made and remade in spaces like kitchens, parking lots, basements and out of service cars.

A significant motif in *Arabian Jazz*, is the way the narrative' s construction of the concept of care towards the Other. Thus, Nora is "feeding" Matussem language (p. 188); we also see how the town instructs Jem in terms of visibility and silence, and how she shows resistance to those rules. The story returns several times to moments when someone tries to lecture someone else into a prescribed shape (for instance, the relatives urge arranged marriages or Portia prescribe lipstick and hair-lightening) and to the counter-lessons the protagonists come up with for themselves. In a bravado, Jem meets Portia's racial sermon with an ancestral fact: "My father's mother was black" (p. 295). This is not to win points but to force the conversation into the harsh reality of race.

Abu-Jaber's handling of place is equally layered. Euclid is "a place of perfect forgetting" (p. 86), but it is also where the Ramouds teach themselves to remember differently. The broader Middle East makes glancing entries not as newsreel but as

lived histories folded into people's mannerisms and preferences (a proverb here, a drum cadence there). Palestine appears in Matussem's dreams as ceiling, not as headline (p. 260); Jordan appears as both family haven and social net that could entangle his daughters; America appears as improvisatory and punitive at once. Place, that is, is not a container but a set of moving relations. To see how memory and music braid in that movement, consider the book's compact evocation of apprenticeship and grief. On the night of a party, "[Matussem] had started out… trying to arrange the kind of drum solos an archbishop might like; but he ended up thinking of his wife" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 16). The juxtaposition is funny and aching—church and club, decorum and desire—precisely the tonal doubleness that makes the novel's comedy so humane. It's also a map of cultural traffic: Arab drummer in a U.S. basement saluting the Catholic ear while composing for a dead beloved—nothing in this sentence is "pure," and everything is intensely particular.

Across these arcs, Abu-Jaber develops a grammar of hybridity that is neither the melting-pot myth nor the gated community of "pure" identity. The Ramouds' home is not a fixed coordinate; it is what forms between people who keep trying. Jem's most radical act is not a dramatic renunciation but an insistence on complexity—on claiming, at once, her father's Arabness, her mother's Americanness, the Black ancestor Portia tried to erase, the Onondaga lover the town would dismiss, and the stubborn fact that grief does not end but can become livable. That insistence refuses the colonial archive that would sort her into acceptable boxes (Alsultany, 2012; Fadda-Conrey, 2014). In that sense, *Arabian Jazz* gives us a felt theory of belonging that appreciates the uses of silence and the necessity of song. Even its local images travel. Take the image of Jem as a child among "children nobody wanted" (p. 94): What she learns there becomes the counter-pedagogy of her adult life—making room for herself *and* others, finding ways to insist on being seen that do not require self-erasure. Or take the family house as "a place of perfect forgetting" (p. 86): It turns out to be also a place of strategic remembering, where the family chooses which stories to carry forward, which to leave fades of grief behind. Or take Nora teaching Matussem English by "feeding" him words (p. 188): The scene reframes "assimilation" as intimacy and care, not surrender—a crucial difference in a political moment that too often confuses belonging with obedience.

Finally, *Arabian Jazz* insists that the political and the lyrical can live in the same sentence. It is in the same breath that Jem can be told to lighten her hair "to make [her] American" (pp. 293–295) and that she can claim a Black grandmother as part of her self-making; in the same chapter that Matussem's basement drums recall a village percussionist, and that he re-scores grief into communal sound; in the same closing page that desert reds show up on New York maples (p. 374). If the novel's answer to the question *Where is home?* is finally provisional, it is also generous: home is wherever people teach one another how to go on, how to play together in time.

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

Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* presents Arab-American life as a chareography of retuns and departures. In this dramatic novel embedded with culinary essense, appetite, memory and language become the "home" itself. The novel, instead of seeing the home a static address, finds belonging and its real place in food, cooking, storytelling, caring, and translation. Such practices form the diasporic identity. This section reads the novel as an extended meditation of how hybrid selves are gathered in the cafeteria and the city itself, also the university and kitchen where romance and war coexist. Therefore, Abu-Jaber's Los Angeles becomes less of a background than an institutionalized space. This place becomes where taste, touch, and ordinary talking tune Arab-American identity against the grain of Orientalist reduction (Said, 1978) and towards an everyday "third space" of improvisation (Bhabha, 1994). Abu-Jaber's formal strategy of interleaving Sirine's presence with her uncle's folktales further thickens this lovely atmosphere. The interludes between Abdelrahman Salahadin do not only drive the love plot, they also construct a pre-national narrative of repertoire (caravans, courts, drownings, miraculous survivals) into contemporary Los Angeles setting. The braid produces a double effects. First, it puts the campus romance in dialogue with older Arabic storytelling forms. Secondly, it models how diaspora inheres in genres as much as in the passports. The uncle's tales do "identity work," staging resourcefulness and fidelity as transferrable virtues that must be re-translated in a kitchen setting. This is what Gana sees the novel's Andalusian long view: Arabness imagined as cultural practice, not essence (Gana, 2008).

If Sirine's leitmotif is work, Han's is witness. The novel figures Han less as allegory and more as a man making sense of exile's uses and erosions—safety and distance on one side; guilt and survivor shame on the other (Gana, 2008). As the love plot deepens, Abu-Jaber refuses to convert him into a symbol of Iraq; he remains particular: desirous, secretive, wounded, tender.

The political enters not as speechifying but as the grain of recollection and the tempo of risk: when to speak, what to conceal, when (and whether) to return. This is what Berrebbah calls the "strategy to deconstruct stereotypes" through culinary and intimate scenes: The novel returns Arabs from abstraction to appetite (Nyman, 2009, p. 181).

A central thread in *Crescent* is how the Arab-American subject is made legible in U.S. culture. Abu-Jaber stages the question with disarming clarity in Sirine's habit of scanning the room and imagining the word "terrorist"—only to be met by other words: "lonely, and young" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 22) The line performs the novel's counter-reading: look, then look again; stereotype dissolves into personhood. Um-Nadia yokes maternal authority to entrepreneurial hustle and a zest for the one-liner. Her "paradise" line redeems the ordinary without romanticizing it; her towel-wielding chase scene makes a comic spectacle of anti-Arab surveillance. "Um-Nadia says the loneliness of the Arab is a terrible thing; it is all-consuming," the narration adds—both diagnosis and counter-spell: by naming isolation, the café names a cure through structured sociability—assigned tables, regular shows, daily coffee (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 21; BookBrowse).

Language is *Crescent*'s is the kitchen itself. Abu-Jaber decorates English with Arabic lexicon and cadence: Umm/Um, mjeddrah, oath and blessing, while staging meta-discussions about translation as arguments about intimacy and risk. Han, a professor of Arabic literature, brings to the love plot and shows how language migrates. Sirine learns to hear what can't be mapped one-to-one: politics tucked into idiom, tenderness in hyperbole. The novel's polyglossia puts pressure on assimilationist demands and invites what Fadda-Conrey refers as transnational "reconfigurations of belonging": A citizenship rehearsed through affiliation rather than sameness (Fadda-Conrey, 2014).

Alsultany calls the era's media depictions "simplified complex representations," layering sympathy over surveillance (Alsultany, 2012; 2013). Abu-Jaber translates these abstractions into counter-scenes at a lunch counter: the men with notepads, the sudden quiet, the wary glances—and then back to the counter-speech of recipes and jokes. As in *Arabian Jazz*, Abu-Jaber thinks gender as deeply as ethnicity. Sirine's body is a worker's body: tired feet, onion-and-orange-blossom hair, fingers nicked by knives. Desire is flavored by service. When Han falters, she cooks first and argues later. But this is not a story about self-effacing care; it's about craft as language. The women in the novel—Sirine, Um-Nadia, Rana—debate men and risk and respectability with the frankness of friends who have run a restaurant together. If the uncle's tales offer a masculinized archive of cleverness and endurance, the kitchen offers a feminized archive of technique and timing—an ethics of attention forged in heat and repetition.

For Han, the question of going back is neither purely romantic nor simply patriotic; it is lethal. Scholarship reads his arc as a test of who gets to cross borders freely and whose crossings risk arrest, illness, or disappearance (Berrebbah, 2020; Gana, 2008). As his history surfaces, the love plot takes on continental stakes: What can an American lover understand about war? What can a kitchen repair? *Crescent* is too honest to make the café a magic solvent; instead, it preserves the hardness of the question while showing how people continue to feed one another through it Nyman, 2009, p. 182). The café's menu doubles as a syllabus: Tabbouleh, the flirtation dish; mjeddrah, the memory dish; the TV, the diaspora dish. The staff is a coalition: Um-Nadia, immigrant entrepreneur; Sirine, mixed-heritage Californian; cops who come for lentils and soap operas; "Lon Hayden, the chair of Near Eastern Studies," representing the university's porous border with the café. When the note-takers return after the "Real True Arab Food" relaunch, Um-Nadia weaponizes welcome into refusal. The café becomes a "minor palace" (Djohar, 2020) where hospitality includes warding off the state's uninvited gaze (Abu- Jaber, 2003, p. 21). Critics note Abu-Jaber's lush prose, but its lushness does social work. The catalog refuses the singular "Arab face" (Abu- Jaber, 2003, p. 21-22).

Hybridity talk can turn feel-good if it ignores power. *Crescent* keeps power in frame by staging institutions (university hiring and surveillance, visa regimes, restaurant economies, media scripts) alongside the pleasures of taste and talk. The café may be called "paradise," but it survives because workers scrape grease, chase off harassers, and manage fear as well as flavor—an everyday politics legible alongside scholarship on post-9/11 representation (Alsultany, 2012/2013; Cainkar, 2009).

Because food writing easily slides into fetish, Abu-Jaber keeps affect tethered to labor. The reading guide frames mjeddrah as "peasant food" that displaced people "end up craving the most," and then spells out why: "through these flavors, it seems that you taste the delicious notes of the earth itself," alongside the memory of "kicking a ball… until your mother was

hollering… to come in for dinner." Nostalgia here is political memory; craving is pedagogy. What patrons consume is a small curriculum of survival, a palate lesson in endurance.

Although *Crescent* appeared in 2003, its horizon spans the first Gulf War through the early 2000s. In that stretch, Arab-American visibility was stigmatized and sentimentalized. Alsultany calls the era's screen portraits "simplified complex representations," layering sympathy over surveillance (Alsultany, 2012; 2013). Cainkar documents how policy and policing reorganized routine life (Cainkar, 2009). Abu-Jaber translates such abstractions into counter-scenes at a lunch counter, asking the novel to hold the contradiction. The uncle's interludes do more than decorate the love plot; they archive a narrative grammar that predates the nation-state and teach Sirine to read contingency as part of belonging. Their tonal shift—from fable to modern LA—models the "braided temporality" that Fadda-Conrey tracks across Arab-American writing, where past and present are co-present without collapsing (Fadda-Conrey, 2014). The tales thus normalize the café's hybrid scene: medieval motifs beside microwaves, Bedouin proverbs beside campus slang—and a cook who becomes a historian of taste.

## Conclusion

The analyses of *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent* reveal that Abu-Jaber's fiction persistently interrogates the shifting landscapes of Arab-American identity through the interconnected lenses of home, belonging, and hybridity. In *Arabian Jazz*, home is destabilized by intergenerational tensions, the residue of trauma, and the corrosive effects of racism. Characters such as Jemorah and Matussem embody the impossibility of returning to a singular origin, negotiating instead an identity rooted in improvisation and contradiction. In *Crescent*, the metaphor of food and the diasporic café space extend this inquiry, transforming everyday acts of cooking and storytelling into sites of cultural continuity and self-discovery. Sirine's negotiation of her dual heritage and Han's nostalgia for a lost Baghdad highlight how exile inscribes itself as both longing and fracture, making identity a process of constant becoming rather than recovery.

Across these narratives, hybridity emerges not as an abstract theory but as a lived reality: visible in Sirine's bilingual memories, Melvina's bicultural confidence, or the hybrid Thanksgiving table that fuses cinnamon with turkey. Abu-Jaber portrays belonging as an ongoing negotiation within the Third Space, where tradition and reinvention co-exist. Ultimately, both novels challenge Orientalist depictions of Arab Americans as static outsiders, offering instead a vision of diaspora as improvisation and resilience. By situating Arab-American subjectivity at the crossroads of memory, migration, and cultural transformation, Abu-Jaber affirms that home is not recovered but reimagined, belonging is not inherited but negotiated, and identity is not fixed but continually remade.

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