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Postcoloniality Revisited: Remapping the Politics of Home and Identity in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*

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Abstract

The controversy over diasporic identity has become one of the hotly debated issues in the contemporary postcolonial diasporic literature. In other words, identity formation and the uncertainty of homeland are, mostly, two crucial subject matters in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, a narrative that makes a daring shift from the traditional perception of home to a more global understanding wherein the sense of home in the in-between space takes place. Abu-Jaber deals with diaspora as an inevitable catalyst that outlives cultural diversity among different cultures. The overwhelming dominance of the in-between space in the reconstruction of diasporic identities is of paramount importance to Abu-Jaber's fictional world. Thus, the present paper seeks to redefine the boundaries of home and identity in a way that shows Abu-Jaber's commitment to depict the dilemma of belonging and the meaning of living between diverse identities. Given the fact that home can no longer be thought of as a generalized or unified place, the paper argues that home emerges as an outcome of relationship between the past and the present where memory plays a pivotal role in reshaping fluidity of home in the postcolonial space.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Postcolonial, Home, Identity, Belonging, Diana Abu-Jaber.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the postcolonial theory has been taken up in almost every field in humanities and social sciences, to anthropology and other medieval and theological studies. Before embarking on a new journey to reveal the inseparable relationship of postcolonial discourse to ongoing debates over war, exile, and the reconstruction of multiple identities in the diasporic space, it is of paramount importance to unfold the blurring lines between Postcolonialism postcoloniality.

Although the term postcolonial always involves the idea of resistance, the term would be better located as a catalyst for what we might simply refer to as the repercussion of the colonial era. The postcolonial theory has emerged as an outcome of the political insights and endeavors that were developed as part of colonial resistance to the western cultural hegemony, particularly during the anti-colonial resistances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[1] To be more specific, whereas post coloniality entails the condition of the postcolonial, post colonialism describes its politics with a special focus on the cultural, political, and economic legacy of colonialism, trying to wipe away the colonial legacy by subverting the western hegemony on the 'other' as primal and demonic. More to the point, post colonialism offers a voice for the voiceless—those who have no place to belong, and those whose knowledge and visibility are not allowed to count. This kind of preoccupation with the marginalized with those minorities who belong 'nowhere', with the concerns of those who live in the in-between space that

Volume 63 | Issue 06 | June 2024
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determines the holistic understanding of the postcolonial politics and remains the core that feeds its ongoing power.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At the heart of postcoloniality, there is a kind of celebration of different cultural and national formations, the ways in which one would look or how one's place and of birth delineate the kind of life, privileged and congenial, or oppressed and exploited, that you will go through your life (Altwaiji, 8, 2015). Although there are postcolonial writers who desire to pronounce the end of "Postcolonial Theory"[2], there are other iconic writers like Robert Young who argues that postcolonial discourse is not just a "[…] disciplinary field, nor is it a theory which has or has not come to an end. Rather, its objectives have always involved wide-ranging political project—to reconstruct Western knowledge formations, reorient ethical norms, turn the power structures of the world upside down, refashion the world from below" (Postcolonial Remains20). Accordingly, the postcolonial theory has always been engaged with questioning the interwoven records of war, violence, exile, hegemony, inequality, and injustice; addressing the fact that there are millions of diasporas who live under the severity of otherness as victims of the western hegemonic regimes and without slight privileges that most of those in the west take for granted.

Waïl Hassan argues that "[o]ne of the ironies of postcolonial studies is that colonial discourse analysis began with several theorists who studied colonialism in the Arab world: Albert Memmi (in Tunisia), Frantz Fanon (in Algeria), Edward Said (in the Levant)" (45). Significantly, the seminal contributions of those critics particularly in the 1980 and 1990 played a pivotal role to expand a sophisticated theoretical framework that hardly ever consider Arabic literary tradition. Put differently, the Arabic literary tradition and cultural production remained mostly close to Middle Eastern Studies departments, controversial as they appeared in Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the book, which marks the heyday of postcolonial studies. Said meticulously surpasses in reflecting how critical intellectuals in both questioning imperialism and developing a libertarian cultural reaction that address the question, raised by critics of orientalism, of how to enhance a truly oppositional critique to the postcolonial hegemonic discourse.[3]

For diasporic writers, the formation of home entails an active interaction between the past and the present where memory plays the role of a cultural bridge compromising the two (Altwaiji, 118, 2016). Home is thus created out of various implications that include individual and collective experiences, the context within which migration from the traditional home place and the relocation in the newly adopted home which in return complicates ideological allegiances and multiple belonging of hyphenated immigrants.

The daring endeavors to come to terms with the representations of home both literally and metaphorically speak volumes about the commitments of many of diasporic writers who have been affected by the rapidly transnational trends of migration in today's world and Diana Abu-Jaber is a case in point. Hence, the diasporic writers have different perspectives when it comes to the act of writing about home in the postcolonial landscape. This kind of cultural diversity in representing home from the diasporic space enhance the process of multiple belongings and give rise to different questions concerning the act of reconstruction of home and identity from the land of exile. This paper attempts to explore various forms of belonging wherein Abu-Jaber's characters reflect a transnational tendency to belong beyond the

Volume 63 | Issue 06 | June 2024
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11667009

traditional rigidity of single identity. The dynamics of multiple belongings of characters in *Crescent* reflects Abu-Jaber's commitment to maintain cultural diversity among her characters.

Home and Identity

Crescent takes place in Los Angeles, in the neighborhood of "Teherangeles" inhabited by numerous numbers of Middle Easterners and other diasporic minorities. Sirine, who was born to an Iraqi father and American mother, is the protagonist of the novel. She lives with uncle after her parents' death and skillfully works as a chef at Nadia's Café, a multi-cuisine Arab restaurant wherein different ethnic minorities meet and enjoy a sense of togetherness in such melting pot of different culture. Sirine falls in love with Hanif (Han), an Iraqi exile who was lucky to get a prestigious position at the UCLA University as a professor of linguistics. The novel focuses on the love of Sirine and Han and how their differently ethnic cultural backgrounds facilitate the process of cultural negations along with their interaction with various ethnic minorities at Nadia's Café. In this regard, *Crescent* is a hybrid novel whose characters embrace different modes of belonging within the larger multicultural American community. However, the post-9/11 atmosphere negatively affects Abu-Jaber's characters and worsens their crisis of belonging.

The novel elucidates Han's crisis of belonging between the Arab world and the newly adopted home in the United States and how the bitterness of exile is bigger than everything in his fragmented life "there's some part of me that can't quite grasp the thought of never returning. I have to keep reminding myself. It's so hard to imagine. So I just tell myself: not yet" (52). For Han, belonging is not merely related to a single home but has much to do with a place of no return. In other words, Han is fully aware of the impossibility of coming back to Iraq due to his writings against the Saddam regime. However, he is haunted by attachment to America especially after his romance with Sirine and his obsession to see his family in Iraq. Han's haunted imagination of belonging comes in line with what Avtar Brah thinks of home "a mythic place of desire in diasporic imagination"(*Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*192). This kind of overwhelming mobility to different cultural localities and their intersectionality with diaspora and exile reflects Abu-Jaber commitment to create transnational characters through which she addresses a plethora of issues related to crisis of memory, crisis of belonging and identity politics.

As a diasporic writer who experienced the perception of double belonging between Jordan and the United States, Abu-Jaber's dynamic characters deal with the notion of belonging of home beyond merely a geographical place as it is significantly related to different cultural implications and intimacies that contribute to the reconstruction of home in the borderland. Han defines himself by absence: "I pretty much think I define myself by an absence" (182). Simply put, home remains more fluid than unified and this kind of fluidity of home enables diasporic identities to survive amid different modes of belonging. As a result, Nadia's Café represent a fertile soil of home to many expatriates and thanks to this transnational space through which hyphenated identities embraces cultural multiplicity and go beyond any naïve representations of cultural differences. More to the point, Nadia's Café echoes what the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha's describes as the notion of "gathering" spaces through which immigrants and exiles come to know other ethnic groups and develop shared understanding of their diasporic identities in the mainstream culture. Bhabha writes:

Volume 63 | Issue 06 | June 2024
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11667009

Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees, gathering on the edge of "foreign" cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos of cafés of city centers; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language…gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present.(*The Location of Culture* 199)

Accordingly, Nadia's Café serves as a diasporic shelter for immigrants, students, and exiles to gather in a home-like space and this kind of shared memory alleviates their crisis of belonging. The dilemma of these regular visitors of the Café is that while they feel lonely to their home countries, they are also unable to comfortably settle down in the host country where they feel themselves unwelcomed especially in the post-9/11 times.

Abu-Jaber is committed to the notion of maintaining cultural bridges among people of deferent cultures. This appears through Sirine who works as a cultural bridge between the old home and the mainstream culture. The novel shows Sirine as a connecting point to compromise the immigrants' double sense of belonging through her food, "They love her food – the flavors that remind them of their homes – but they also love to watch Sirine with her skin so pale it has the bluish cast of skim milk, her wild blond head of hair, her sea-green eyes…her food is so good that the students cannot help themselves – they sit at the tables, leaning toward her" (7). The multi-ethnic food cooked by Sirine lessens the loneliness and introduce them to the American cuisine and vise versa.

Apart from being a melting pot for immigrants to enjoy different cuisines, the Café becomes a multicultural locale of constant border crossings between different minority communities and this kind of space gives room for diverse religious and ethnic values and practices to flourish. The Café becomes a space for cultural understanding of Arab and other diasporic immigrants to negotiate their crisis of living and more importantly how to situate themselves the multiethnic milieu of the American culture. Thus, for Abu-Jaber's characters to negotiate these intercultural encounters with people of different backgrounds and beliefs, they need to situate their positioning in the borderland and "intermingle in a way that creates "some form of connection across difference"[4].

The sense of belonging entails a kind of cultural plurality, which validates meaningful relations with different social, cultural ethnic groups in the borderland. As migration facilitates fluid changes and transformations for hyphenated identities, the act of belonging constantly reshapes migrants' lives depending on a set of global aspects of migration strategies. In this aspect, the notion of multiple belonging, according to Marek Pawlak and Elżbieta Goździak, reflects "the complexity and conditionality of migrants' ways of attachment and their experiences of 'being in the right place'" (Multiple Belonging…2).

Driven by her multi-ethnic experience at the borderland, Abu-Jaber traces the shared pain of exile and the crisis of belonging for Arab and Latino immigrants. In doing so, she highlights Han's fluctuation between Iraq and America and similarly Cristobal's haunted experience El Salvador and the United States. The novel describes the characters' dilemma of crossing the borderland in the following manner:

Han was telling me what it was like where he comes from, about the *guardia* they have there, and their crazy dictator, and it was reminding me of something. And then I remembered it was Cristobal. You know Cristobal is from El Salvador? … They firebombed his whole family. The *Guardia*. All dead. They were just little farmers from nowhere. Out in the country. You should see how messed up his legs are. (Abu-Jaber 277)

Volume 63 | Issue 06 | June 2024
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11667009

The above excerpt reflects Abu-Jaber's transnational penchant for building cultural bridges among people of color who suffered almost the same fate of identifications to multiple nodes of belonging. This kind of solidarity between Arab and Latinos enhances the potentiality of cross-cultural encounters, which plays a crucial role in overthrowing stereotypical portrayals targeting different minority groups in the borderland.

In *Crescent*, diasporic characters like Latinos and Mexicans help Sirine in cooking different meals in the Café and go through almost the same complexity of living to multiple modes of belonging. For instance, Víctor, a Mexican American young man, expresses his crisis of belonging in America and finds himself unable to balance his belonging between two cultures ""I was born here and all, but sometimes I wish I could just go off to some place like Mexico" (276). Thus, Víctor shares Han's and other characters in the novel the feeling of displacement at the host country. Aziz the poet tells Victor that "If you and I were out shopping at the mall do you think any of the white guys there could tell the difference between us? They'd think you were one of my terrorist buddies" (187). These incidents reveal how both Arab immigrants and Latinos are sharing almost the same fate of racism due to the American mindset that fail to differentiate between people of color, and deals with them as the suspicious other particularly in the post-9/11 period.

The crisis of Arab American immigrants takes different trajectories due to the intersections of different cultural and political parameters following the terrorist attacks of 9/11which undoubtedly pushed Arabs in America, to quote Joanna Kadi's words, to the status of being "the Most Invisible of the Invisibles" (xix). The precarious status of Arab Americans between being identified with white people in the host culture or sharing the multi-ethnic values of people of color exacerbate their crisis of belonging (Altwaiji & Telha, 64, 2018) Carol Fadda-Conrey "articulate stories about individual and group identities, locating strategies by which the ethnic borderland becomes a space of communication for different minority groups a space that ultimately leads to the transformation of ethnic"(194). Hence, Abu-Jaber succeeds to draw the reader's attention to the importance of enhancing cultural differences among people of color, which would definitely unite their shared efforts to gain their privileges and resist the kind of otherness and racism nourished by the American government.

At the heart of *Crescent*, there is a daring blending of diverse cultures and flavors, which resists the postcolonial discourse of "us versus them binary" and dissolve the cultural differences between Arab Americans and other ethnic minorities (Altwaiji, 208, 2014). One of the most significant examples of the novel's postcolonial hybridity of different voices and flavors is the gathering at the house Sirine's uncle at the eve of Thanksgiving. The festival has hosted many of the novel's diasporic characters who formed a multiethnic family in the borderland. The feast witnesses the presence of different food all of which symbolizes the richness of the culinary traditions brought to the United States by diasporic immigrants from the Middle East and other minority groups. Sirine's uncle narrates the art of sharing food with memory as follows:

Well, look at us… sitting around here like a bunch of Americans with our crazy turkey. All right, now, I want to make a big toast. Here is 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. Sahtain. Good luck and God bless us everyone. (183)

Volume 63 | Issue 06 | June 2024
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11667009

The Thanksgiving party reflects the possibility of constant border crossing and the endeavors of Abu-Jaber's hybrid characters to negotiate cultural differences in a multicultural American society.

Abu-Jaber surpasses in fictionalizing the realm of ethnic borderland through the prism of different groups who struggles hardly to establish their shared commonality towards negotiations of a multiple mode of belonging. Tawfiq Yousef describes *Crescent* as "an avenue for questioning boundaries of culture, class, and ethnicity" (230). Likewise, Hasnul Djohar points out that the novel reveals "how these communities attempt to make home by discussing their traditional cultures in the café. This struggle can also be seen through the way Sirine and Han or Hanif frequently discuss their future home in the café" (86). Hence, Abu-Jaber meticulously shows how Nadia Café, as a multicultural site, plays a pivotal role in reshaping the characters 'understanding of adjustment in the host land. The characters in *Crescent* go through fluid transformations of belonging and that can obviously be seen the art of food and music at the Café.

CONCLUSION

This paper gives a postcolonial critique to the crisis of belonging in relation to cross-cultural encounters of exiles and immigrants in the borderland. As a post-9/11 text, *Crescent* sheds light on a number of issues related to exile, hybridity and multiculturalism and their intersections in reconstructions of multiple avenues of belonging for the hyphenated selves. The novel provides a postcolonial site for different identities to negotiate their cultural differences and enhancing their commonalities in a multi-layered manner of identification. More importantly, the paper shows how the politics of belonging and the intersection of "here and there" localities evoke a kind of postcolonial resistance of othering stereotypes and at the same validate their right to equal American citizenship.

Notes

1) See, Robert J.C. Young, "What is the Postcolonial?"(2009). p(14)
2) See, Editor?s Column, 'The End of Postcolonial Theory?' A Roundtable with Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Susie Tharu, and Jennifer Wenzel," PMLA 122, no. 3 (2007): 633–51. For a better understanding of the controversial debates over the end of Postcolonialism, See also, Hamid Dabashi, The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism, 2012. P(70).
3) See, David Butz, "Revisiting Edward Said's Orientalism". (1995) p(78)
4) See, Susan Friedman. (1998). Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter. (1998).P (135)

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Volume 63 | Issue 06 | June 2024
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11667009

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