

Making Homes in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*

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Abstract: This paper examines the portrayal of how immigrant Americans create their own space or homes in a Lebanese restaurant, which is a symbol of their minority kingdom, in order to negotiate questions of belonging and exclusion from U.S. society in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003). By engaging with postcolonial studies, this paper investigates how Immigrant-Americans, such as Arab, Mexicans, Hispanic, and Malaysia work together to establish their own home by using a Mediterranean café as a symbol of their minor palace, to show their existence in a modern global space and to challenge Anglo-American dominion in the U.S. and in the world. This community uses the Mediterranean café as a place to share their feelings and their stories as exiles, refuges, and immigrants to substitute a sense of loss and home, which is taken from them. Indeed, this paper investigates how Abu-Jaber expands the notion of homes through symbols of food and the Mediterranean café in order to negotiate American belonging. Thus, this text illustrates how Arab/Muslim-Americans, who can also represent other marginal groups, have struggled to search for homes, especially after the invasion of Iraq.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, especially after Edward Said's monumental book, *Orientalism* (1978), many scholars, both from the Orientalist world and the Muslim world have been interested in discussing and expanding the binary and the dichotomies of Occidental and Oriental, the center and periphery, the empire and the colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed, and the self and the other. Homi Bhabha magnifies Jacques Derrida's theory of how "binary oppositions structure Western thought, arguing that such dichotomies are too reductive because they imply that any national culture is unitary, homogenous, and defined by fixity or an essential core" (Steven Leitch, 351). Based on Derrida's analysis, Bhabha creates his theory of "Hybridity" in his seminal book *The Location of Culture* (1994). He defines hybridity—"is new, neither the one nor the other," which rises from a "Third Space" (Bhabha 19). Bhabha contends that the binary oppositions might not be relevant in the modernity and global culture since it cannot represent the whole identities, but is limited to certain identity or nationality. Bhabha suggests innovative discourses to substitute the traditional dichotomies, in order to reinforce a new sense of nationality and identity, which are: "dialog, translation, negotiation, in-between, cross reference,

and ambivalence" (9). A wonderful novel, *Crescent* (2003), written by a Jordanian-German-American woman writer, Diana Abu-Jaber, offers various examples of what Bhabha's *Location of Culture* argues about a culture in a new space, which is able to mix all different kinds of identities and nationalities. This paper argues that Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* challenges Orientalist dichotomies by exploring Mediterranean restaurant where various identities and ethnicities mingle in one place.

2 MAKING HOME IN THE MEDITERRANEAN RESTAURANT

Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* tells the history of an Iraqi-American woman, Sirine, who has been an orphan since she was nine years old. Her parents passed away when they worked at Cross Red Nation in Africa. By losing her parents in an unknown country at an early age, Sirine understands how her identity is broken from her origins: Iraq, where her parents were born and Africa where her parents died. Both Iraq and Africa are places that Sirine never visits. By having this broken bond with her parents, Sirine understands that she does not belong to any countries, including

the U.S., where she was born, as she says: “I guess I’m always looking for my home” (132). The sense of “un-belonging” can also be seen through the fact that Sirine does not see her uncle’s home, where she has lived since she was orphaned, as her home. For Sirine, home is just a mysterious and uncertain place, where she feels alien and unwelcome. Therefore, she needs a place where she can be taken in as like in the Mediterranean restaurant, where she works and spends almost her days.

In Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*, Sirine has been raised by her uncle for almost thirty years and has worked at various restaurants in Los Angeles, yet she still feels lonely and unhomey while living in the U.S. Only when she works at the Mediterranean café does Sirine feel at home. She can join together in the loneliness of the various immigrants, especially Arab immigrants. Sirine’s uncle is a story teller and a professor at UCLA in the North Eastern Department. Sirine is now 39 years old and working as a chef at the Mediterranean café. She imagines her work space, the café, as a missing home as the narrator describes:

Arabs feel everything—larger than life, feelings walking in the sky. And sometimes when she is awake in the centre of the night, the night cool and succulent as heart of palm or a little chicken kabob. Sirine senses these feelings rushing in her own blood. But she was also born with an abiding sense of patience, an ability to live deeply and purely inside her own body, to stop thinking, to work, and to simply exist inside the simplest actions, like chopping an onion or stirring a pot (21-22).

Indeed, Sirine understands how being an Arab is being part of a bigger group that can walk throughout the world, including the U.S. By understanding that she is surrounded by the Arab people in the café, Sirine feels like she is at home, where she finds warmth, represented by “onions” and “a stirring pot” (22). When Sirine feels the cool of the night representing her loneliness, she just remembers a little chicken kabob, which is warm and delicious, that she cooks at the restaurant. By contrasting the feeling of cold with the warmth of the chicken meat, Sirine can create a sense of comfort, like feeling at home, where she belongs. This can be understood as the reason for her preference for working as a chef at the Mediterranean café to create a sense of warm feeling. She also enjoys her work as a chef because her work is “to simply exist inside the simplest actions, like chopping an onion or stirring a pot” (22). Onions can create a sense of warmth and can make food more delicious, so she stirs them together with other ingredients in a “pot.” Indeed, the pot represents Sirine’s empty heart, which is longing for her parents,

homeland, and heritage. Indeed, onions need to be cooked to make Sirine warm and comfortable. All these symbols can be understood as the reason why Sirine works as a chef to find a “homely” place to live and to share her loneliness with other immigrants who also search for a sense of belonging, loving, and warmth in the café.

Significantly, there are some scholars, such as Amelia Montes (2006), Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom (2007) who examine *Crescent* from various perspectives, such as womanhood, immigration, and food culture, but not many of them focusing on the idea of making homes, which this paper seeks to explore. Montes argues that “The spice-filled aromas within Nadia’s Café bring expatriates, immigrants into a place that allows for a respite from longing as well as a matriarchal community of sorts” (21). Although Montes discusses the café in her review, she mainly focuses on how women in the novel, such as Um-Nadia, Merieli, and Sirine, are depicted in such a way as to defy common stereotypes in the media: submissive and hidden. Indeed, Arab and Muslim women are depicted as financially and socially independent: Um-Nadia is the owner of the Mediterranean café (UM-Nadia), Meriliene is a strong-willed woman, and Sirine, the protagonist, is a single woman at 39.

Sirine also uses her work space, especially the kitchen, as her own room, to connect with her boyfriend, Hanif. Hanif, who is often referred to Han, is a new and young professor in Near Eastern Studies at UCLA, where Sirine’s uncle also teaches. The narrator writes, when Han asks Sirine: “What makes a place feel like home for you, then?” (132), she replies: “Work,” and “Work is home” (32). By referring to her work as a home, it can be understood that Sirine is longing for her own space to understand where she belongs to. In the kitchen, she can explore many recipes and create various kinds of meals and desserts, exploring her own sense of self. The need for Sirine to establish her unique identity while living in the U.S. can be understood through the way she feels that her “real” home is uncertain. Thus she needs to find someone who can understand her situations and feelings to establish her own identity. In doing so, Abu-Jaber represents Sirine as sharing her longing for home: “I guess I’m always looking for my home, a little bit. I mean, even though I live here, I have this feeling that my real home is somewhere else somehow” (132). Indeed, Sirine does not feel that the U.S. is her home, despite the fact that she was born there. She not only searches for a homely place, but importantly a person who is in a similar “root” to her, with whom she can build a new home and family.

Moreover, the kitchen is represented as a place, where Sirine can explore her parent's legacy through their traditional food and recipes. This can be related to Virginia Wolf's *A Room of One's Own* (2001). Wolf argues that "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (1). Wolf uses the term of money and a room as powerful tools for women in creating pieces of art; novels being written mainly by men at the beginning of the twentieth century. By relating to Wolf's assertion, we can understand how Abu-Jaber not only produces her own room for Arab-American writing, but also creates another piece of art in cooking, through her protagonist, Sirine. Indeed, Sirine struggles both to find her own home and to establish her own identity while living in the U.S. In order to fulfil her basic needs of home and actualisation, Sirine uses the kitchen as her own space to earn a living and share loves.

Significantly, Abu-Jaber quotes the poem, "Mourning in Andalusia," which tells a story of loss and was written by Abu il-Hasan al-Husri, an Arab poet, in the eleventh century. The narrator states, "*If white is the colour / of mourning in Andalusia, / of white hair / in mourning for my youth*" (200). This poem tells the defeat of Andalusia in the sixteenth century. This lamentation is discussed by a literary scholar, Nouri Gana (2015) in her essay "In Search of Andalusia". Gana argues that "In the history of Arab consciousness, Al-Andalus reverberates like a melancholic wound, fissuring chaotically between narcissistic cultivation and elegiac vulnerability" (203). Gana suggests that Al-Andalus reminds the Arab world both of their agony and their glory in the seventh century. In that era, the Arabs dominated a Medieval Muslim territory in Andalusia or Islamic Iberia. However, this territory has lost its status as "key" in the global land since the loss of the Ottoman power. Arguably, the idea of experiencing loss, especially the loss of "home" becomes the central characteristic of Muslim immigrants in the U.S. In order to highlight this sense of loss, Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* explores how these immigrants make home in the Mediterranean café to unsettle Anglo-American's dominance both in the U.S. and in the world.

Indeed, Abu-Jaber uses the symbol of the key as a home for immigrants and exiles. The omniscient narrator describes when Han gives his key's apartment to Sirine, she lifts her hand to accept the key and says, "You want to give me your key" (115). Here, key can represent Han's home and life, which is endangered and in need of someone else, Sirine, to keep it safe. The key is also a symbol to open the door

of the home, which makes the exile comfortable as Han says, "Somehow I was thinking it would make me feel better ... knowing that you had this [key]" (115). In this sense Abu-Jaber emphasises how sharing the key, which represents home, is significant for her characters in order to make them "feel better" and feel homely. Additionally, Sirine, is also holding a new silver key: "She squeezes the key in her hand" (115). By squeezing this key, Sirine reveals her deepest emotion, which dreams for a real key or home, but it is a real sense of being loved by an Arab Muslim Professor who is rooted to her Arab heritage.

Relevantly, Gana discusses the significance of the key and the home in Arab-American writings. She argues that Al-Andalus "persist as an unjustly but irrecoverably lost key to a rightful home, a not-so-distant legacy of cultural and political devastation, an allegorical recall of a lost Jerusalem, a compartmentalised Arab world of petty stateless and pettier leaders—a lasting reminder of the remainder that can neither be mourned nor disregarded because it has not been completely lost" (203). Andalusia can be seen as a symbol of the lost key to the gate of Jerusalem since the area was separated from the Arab world. This separation can be an agonizing reminder for the Arabs that this key has not actually been lost but no longer belongs to the Arab world. However, although Andalusia is lost, its power to remind Muslims of their glory and their agony remains, and can be understood in how the Arab world has longed for their sense of homeliness to return.

Moreover, *Crescent* not only explores the function of food as "a complex language for communicating love, memory, and exile" (Mercer and Storm, 33), but also questions boundaries of cultures, classes, and identities. I investigate further how the Mediterranean café works as a place to blend these various immigrants in a natural and "homely" space. Similarly, Carol Fadda-Conrey (2006) argues that *Crescent* "raises an important question about the overriding ethnic ambiguities that often engulf people of colour in the U.S. This novel, moreover, creates a physical and psychological ethnic borderland with different ethnic communities coexist and communicate" (204). People of colour are often depicted as ethnically uncertain, in this case American Muslims who are often excluded both in mainstream American society (Anglo-Americans) and in ethnic Americans as they are often considered as religious groups, instead of various cultural identities. Indeed, many Muslims communities are derived from around the world, such as Africa, Asia with their diverse cultures. In order to establish their multiple and hybrid identities, Arab or Muslim

Americans in this novel work together with various ethnic groups, such as Mexicans and Latinos. Thus, Conrey's analysis allows me to explore how the creation of ethnic borderland through different groups can establish their commonality as a multiple identity.

Indeed, these different communities use the Mediterranean café as their home to ascertain their connecting identities as ethnic Americans. Thus, this paper explores how the restaurant functions as a place where many immigrants can come and share their loss and their harmony. For example, the narrator describes, "always there are the same groups of students from the big university up the street, always so lonely, the sadness like blue hollows in their throats, blue notes for their wives and children back home, or for the American women they haven't met" (19). Indeed, the students are depicted as both longing for a sense of home and sharing their commonality. Blue hollows in their throats represent ones' emptiness: the colour of blue represents the feeling of depression, sadness and grief. Simultaneously, the American women are represented as hope for the future life of the immigrant students in order to establish their hybrid identities.

These immigrants also debate their traditional cultures to share their feelings and desire to build a new home in the host land. The narrator says, "Nadia's café is like other places—crowded at meals and quiet in between—but somehow there is also usually a lingering conversation, current of Arabic that ebb around Sirine, fell her head with mellifluous voices" (19). Here, although these immigrants are superficially satisfying their hunger, they are continuously searching for the Mediterranean food and meals to fulfil their homes. Thus, this 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. By depicting these different background ethnicities have a dream to establish their homes in the café representing the host land, *Crescent* highlights how the U.S. has transformed to become multiple identities.

These transformations can be seen through the way the immigrants establish their unique home in the café through music. The narrator states, "They sit at the tables outside and play drums with their fingers, the one-stringed rebab, the violin, the flute, Arabic music sailing through the walls of the café" (42). In this sense, these communities use music to entertain their "blue lives" as they often face issues of American racism as many mainstream society or white communities perceive them as foreigners,

despite the fact that some of them were born in the U.S. Additionally, these immigrants use the café as a space in which to exchange ideas. Before Sirine starts her day in the café, every morning she observes the situation: "in her open kitchen behind the counter and discreetly watched the students sipping coffee, studying the newspapers, and having arguments" (22). Indeed, the café is represented as a comfortable space where everyone can relax and enjoy their drinks and food. These students also exchange their opinions by having various debates and discussions. In this sense, they can speak freely and voluntarily in conversations without being intimidated or interrogated by any powerful groups or institutions, such as the CIA or Saddam's regimes. When Han lived beyond this café, for example in Iraq, he was frequently hunted by Saddam's soldiers as he contributed to spreading propaganda. Thus, the café is a safe place to discuss any topics including politics and religion, which can be dangerous topics if discussed in other public places, such as in the square or the city park, where Han used to speak to criticise Saddam's regime.

However, although these communal people feel safe and comfortable in the café, they remain living under the surveillance of American officers. When Um-Nadia and the customers are watching TV, the narrator describes "two policemen sitting by the TV, eating friend lentils and onions, and watching reports in Arabic about terrorists from Saudi Arabia" (43). Indeed, the two American policemen are depicted as characters who watch Arabic news, despite the fact that they do not speak or understand Arabic. In this sense, Abu-Jaber toys with the American policemen who are watching Arabic TV program without understanding the language. These two policemen are depicted as only seeing the pictures superficially, without understanding the content. This depiction can be understood as the way in which this text questions the role of American officers in excluding Muslims in public, especially at U.S. airports, where many Muslims face discrimination and unfairness. This discrimination can be seen through the fact that the U.S. President, Donald Trump, launched "Executive Order 13769," (2017), which bans Muslims to enter the U.S., especially from these following countries: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen.

In order to question U.S. policy Abu-Jaber uses one of the U.S. highest institutions, including the CIA, invade the café. The narrator describes how the CIA frequently came to the café when it belonged to Falafel Faraoh, an Egyptian-American and Um-Nadia's friend: "after a month of sitting at the counter, the two men took the cook aside and asked if

he [Falafel] knew of any terrorist schemes developing in the Arab-American community" (21). Here, the CIA not only assumes that Falafel has links terrorists, but also uses the Arab café as a place to investigate and interrogate Arabs and Arab-Americans, who may be associated with terrorism. The narrator also explains that the reason Falafel sells his Arab café to Um-Nadia is because of the CIA interrogations. In this sense, the café is not only represented as a safe place to spend leisure time reading newspapers and watching TV, but simultaneously as a place of fear as it is used as the site of the CIA's investigations. Thus, this comfortable space, which is a home for these marginal citizens, is also invaded by American institutions, including the policemen and the CIA.

Another example of how this text criticises U.S. government is by depicting the TV as using the Arabic language, which blinds and confused the U.S. officers. The narrator describes that: "there is a TV tilted in the corner above the cash register, permanently tuned to the all-Arabic station, which news from Qatar, variety shows and a shopping channel from Kuwait, endless Egyptian movies, Bedouin soap operas in Arabic, and American soap with Arabic subtitles" (42). Indeed, the TV shows almost all Arabic channels from various countries with their specific distinctions and with a shared Arabic language. In this sense, this text undermines American imperialism in the Middle East. Additionally, in this story, the American TV channel is represented as showing an American soap. This can be interpreted as how this text deconstructs American identity as a commercial identity, which mainly focuses on commodity and superficiality. In fact, in the nineteenth century, American identity was well-known as an industrial identity: for example, the General Motor, which has likely been replaced by Chinese and Japanese companies.

Significantly, the café is constructed as a neutral space, where every different identity and ethnicity is welcomed and accepted. In the novel, not only is Sirine depicted as an immigrant, but so is Mireille, a Jordanian-American, whose father abandoned her and married another woman. Other immigrant workers in the café are Victor, whose parents died in a fire, and Cristobal, whose parents died during the El-Salvador revolution in 1929. Thus, the immigrants in the novel represent multiple ethnicities and religions. The narrator describes, "Um-Nadia, the owner of the café and all-around boss," and "her daughter Mireille, and Victor Hernandez, the young Mexican busboy hopeless in love with Mireille, and the Central American custodian Cristobal, and Sirine the chef are in motion around her" (20). Indeed,

Victor and Cristobal are depicted as Christian South-Americans, while Um-Nadia, Mireille, and Sirine are depicted as Arab/Muslim Americans. Thus, the café as a home where different immigrants blend together in the warm place.

Moreover, in the restaurant, the immigrants celebrate various festivals, such as Christmas, thanksgiving, and Eid al-Fitr, Islamic celebration, after fasting Ramadhan for a full month. The narrator describes when Sirine celebrates Thanksgiving with the café community: "By noon there is: Han, Mireille, Victor Hernandez, and his cousin Eliazar, Aziz the poet, Nathan, Um-Nadia, Cristobal the custodian, Shark, Jenoo, Abdullah, Schammal, and Gharb—five of the lonely students from the café—Sirine, and her uncle. King Babar greets each of them, standing on his hind legs and putting his dusty paw prints on their pants" (215). Here, there are not only various kinds of ethnicities, but also different religions mixed on one table to celebrate an American feast, Thanksgiving. Victor and Eliazar are Mexicans, Cristobal and Sharks are from El Salvador and Spain. The rest are from various countries of the Arab world: Iraq, Iran, Jordan, and Lebanon. By presenting her characters' varying backgrounds, Abu-Jaber emphasises how this mixed communities create their own home in the café by celebrating American culture, Thanksgiving, together. Thus American Thanksgiving symbolizes their diversities, but their ability to be united together on one table and in one café which can also be read as a challenge to the idea of American melting pot, which mainly focuses on dissolving immigrants into a singular European, instead of transnational and trans-religious identity as Sirine represented as Iraqi-American and Muslim-Christian backgrounds.

These groups not only unite together to celebrate U.S. culture, but also reconstruct American culture to build their hybrid culture, such as Arabic Thanksgiving. When Sirine prepares the turkey in her kitchen, she speaks to Han: "An Arabic Thanksgiving. It was my idea—what you think? [...] Vibrant vegetable greens, garlic, and lemon. And this. Herbal, meaty, vaguely fruity" (216). Indeed, Sirine not only combines the turkey with various kinds of vegetables, but also Arabian taste, flavours, and numerous fruits. Fruits are symbols of freshness and health. In doing so, Sirine is creating her home by combining American and Arabian food; thus she realizes how her own identity and home are the amalgamation between these two different cultures, which create a sense of creativity and innovation. Additionally, these various kinds of foods represent different ethnicities that celebrate American

Thanksgiving together. By reconstructing American culture, Sirine and her community negotiate American traditions (American belonging) as part of their identity. This can also be related through the reality of U.S. Muslims who have negotiated American traditions by offering their cultures inserted in the U.S., such as food and music or dance as discussed previously.

Additionally, the history of Thanksgiving can be traced back to when it was celebrated initially at the beginning of white American history. Thanksgiving is traditionally celebrated in the U.S. in order to give thanks for the blessings of the year, including the harvest. Thanksgiving, which is annually celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November, is also a symbol of the beginning of the holiday season in the U.S. Thus, thanksgiving can also be related to a religious tradition, as it is always followed by the Christmas feast in December. This is why in the novel, this society also celebrates Christmas in the café.

Indeed, these communal people celebrate Christmas in the café as a means to unite together as a family. The narrator describes when the people celebrate Christmas, Um-Nadia and Victor Hernandez decorate their café: they “string Christmas lights around the inside of the café. She stands beneath him, giving a lot of instructions (That doesn’t look like Christmas that way. Put it higher-higher—make it go in circles)” (280). Here, the “string Christmas lights” represent the variety of people who feel alive in the café because they celebrate the holy feast together, despite the fact that they are not Christians. In this sense, Abu-Jaber illuminates that although the Mediterranean café belongs to a U.S. Muslim, she accommodates and appreciates her various customers. This reveals how the restaurant can be used as a means to celebrate the feasts to unite different communities, regardless of their ideologies and religions.

Moreover, in this novel, the society not only celebrates Christmas, but also celebrates Eid Al-Fitr at the café to break the dominant feast of Anglo-Europeans. The narrator describes,

At the café, Sirine and Um-Nadia become preoccupied with the special iftar—or fast-breaking—menu for the month of Ramadan. Muslims all over town hear about it and more customers crowd in, loitering outside and waiting for tables—Iranians, Saudis, Palestinians, Lebanese, even Malaysians, Pakistanis, and Croatians. They come early in the morning, before sunrise, then later after the sun goes down and the day’s fast ends, ordering special treats like killaj pastry, qatayif pancakes, zalabiyya fritters,

and ma’mul cookies. Sirine no longer has time for anything but cooking and baking (297).

Indeed, Sirine is depicted as a chef who cooks for *iftar*, or fast breaking, for students or the Muslim community who are fasting in the month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the month when Muslims fast for thirty days not only to be empathetic and feel how the poor are suffering, but also to train their own patience and control their worldly desires. By feeling these hunger pains, Muslims grow to want to share their food and money with the poor and avoid harbouring a selfish attitude. Here Ramadan, Islamic worship, can unite these diverse, poor students and immigrants. In this sense, this text reveals how the communities use the Islamic tradition as a means to be together to tighten their brotherhood as Muslims. In doing so, they create their own home by using the café as a place for a family gathering and celebrating various festivals. By celebrating and performing Islamic worship and traditions, Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* highlights that the U.S. is no longer a white and Christian country, but a colourful state with multi-faiths.

3 CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated how Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* (2003) explores the idea of home in Arab or Muslim Americans to question the ideas of American Exceptionalism and Eurocentrism. Arguably, Arab or Muslim women’s voice, in Postcolonial studies, has tended to be excluded in the last five decades. In order to fill this gap, this paper has explored Abu-Jaber’s Mediterranean restaurant, which functions to replace senses of loss and establish Arab or Muslims’ identities, who work together with other ethnicities, such as Mexican, Caribbean, African, and Chinese. Indeed, The protagonist, Sirine, who is an Iraqi American chef, shares her “home” with Hanif, an Arab American professor, and other immigrants who are rooted to various identities in the world. By presenting and exploring multiple identities in her novel, Abu-Jaber shows how Mediterranean restaurant functions to unite these minorities in order to undermine the idea of American individualism. Significantly, specific emphasis is given to the way in which Abu-Jaber offers complex representation of American belonging to a range of multi forms of ethnicities, religions, and immigration in the Arab or Muslim American context and diaspora.

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