Postmodernist Generic Transgressions, Fragmentation and Heteroglossia in Diana Abu Jaber’s *Crescent*

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Abstract

*Diana Abu Jaber’s Crescent* (2003) is a postmodernist Arab American novel that sheds light on the multicultural encounters in modern America. It highlights the different dichotomies surrounding various ethnic communities in a way to transcend them and to build cultural bridges. It seeks to forge a hybrid cultural integration and to promote understanding among separate ethnic groups living in the America. Generic transgressions of conventional storytelling are manifested in various ways in the novel such as the merging of fact and fiction and the mingling of literary genres. All these references are incorporated into the texture of the fairytale story and the main fictional story that go simultaneously in the novel. Like most postmodernist writers, Abu Jaber challenges the ideas of binary oppositions, disconnected boundaries and stable identities. She experiments with intertextuality, fragmentation, manifold narratives and narrators and various literary allusions. Through resorting to different discourses in this multilayered text, she creates what Bakhtin calls a ‘polyphonic’ text.

Keywords: Generic transgressions, Postmodernism, Fragmentation, ‘Heteroglossia’, dialogism, polyphony
Introduction

Arab-American writers have been widely absented from mainstream American literature and the realm of academic criticism in the US. Joanna Kadi highlights that “As Arabs, like other people of color in this racist society, our race is simultaneously emphasized and ignored. For long periods of time no one can remember that Arabs even exist” (xvi). However, the latest flourishing literary activities of some Arab-American writers such as Diana Abu-Jaber, Laila Halaby, Mohja Kahf, Suheir Hammad, and Naomi Shihab Nye among many others have paved the way to an emerging rising critical concentration in a variety of literary productions.

_Crescent_ is Diana Abu-Jaber’s second novel. According to Amelia Maria de la Luz Montes “It is a story of exile, a search for identity both individual and collective” (211). Sirine, the protagonist of the story, thirty-nine year old Iraqi-American lives with her uncle who brought up her after her parents passed away when she was still a child. As a chef at Nadia’s Café, her life is devoted to cooking and nurturing her mind from the story of Arab intellectuals whom she serves at the restaurant. “Occasionally, a student would lingers at the counter talking to Sirine. He would tell her how painful it is to be an immigrant- even if it was what he’d wanted all his life...For many of them the café was a little flavour of home” (Abu Jaber 22). Indeed, “the clientele at the Iraqi-Lebanese café is primarily Middle Eastern and here is where stories are told, news and issues about the Middle East are discussed, argued” (Montes 211). Apart from that, this setting is where Sirine nurtures a romantic love story with Hanif Al Eyad, an Iraqi immigrant exiled in the US.

1. Postmodernist Generic Transgressions in the novel

Like all diasporic writers, Abu-Jaber has been deploying postmodernist techniques and investigating on some of its salient features like: multiculturalism, exile, identity, hybridity, alienation, nostalgia. Thus, she tries to bring together the self and the other in order to get incorporated within the larger ethnic and multicultural American culture. The current socio-political events taking place in the Arab countries have chiefly shaped the political awareness, sense of belonging and commonality of the Arab American community in the US. Out of her conviction and commitment to face the propagation of anti-Arab prejudices and stereotypes, Diana Abu Jaber, like other women writers from Arab descents, joins the endeavour to humanize and valorise the Arab American immigrant experiences and concerns. Ironically, the drastic events of 9/11 have further intensified mainstream hatred and led to a further dismissing of this community from the American spectrum. In one interesting instance in the novel Abu Jaber reveals what it means to be an Arab in America. She underscores the harshness of the biased milieu that Arabs are facing. She describes this when saying:

Um-Nadia says the loneliness of the Arab is a terrible thing; it is all consuming. It is already present like a little shadow under the heart when he lays his head on his mother’s lap; it threatens to swallow him whole when he leaves his own country, even though he marries and travels and talks to friends twenty-four hours a day. That is the
way Sirine suspects that Arabs feel everything - larger than life, feelings walking in the sky. (21)

According to Tawfik Youssef, “this awareness has been deeply bolstered by the traumatic events of September 11, 2001 and the war on Iraq. Such motifs occur not only in Crescent but also in the novels and works of many Arab fellow writers writing in English” (228). Crescent addresses the generational cultural encounters between the East and the West and more specifically between, homeland and hostland. It also reveals the multicultural confrontations in contemporary America. Indeed, Abu Jaber skillfully intertwines a tale of love at the ethnic borderland while underscoring the diversity and richness of ethnic communities. In other words, the novel evokes the novelist ardent desire to bridge different cultures through promoting cultural understanding that would ultimately ensure a peaceful coexistence and cultural amalgamation of the ethnic landscape in America.

Crescent abides to a postmodernist reading as it features patterns associated with identify, hybridity and multiculturalism. Diana Abu Jaber employs postmodernist narrative techniques including the use of multifaceted narrative structures, polyphony, fragmentation, and the reconciliation between different cultures. According to J. Bainbridge et al multicultural literature is “literature that depicts and explores the lives of individuals who belong to a wide range of diverse group” (183). Arab American literary works in English can be labelled into the categorization of Multicultural/postcolonial literature. As a matter of fact, Multicultural literature “tries to increase awareness and sensitivity to pluralism and celebrates diverse cultures and common bonds” (Youssef 228). According to Steven Salaita “Crescent might best be described as a study in character. That is to say, the novel is driven more by an intimate exploration of character than it is by a fast-moving plot” (104). This ardent quest for identity and cultural legacy had flourished in the 1960s when different ethnic groups having residence in the United States “became engaged in a search for identity and cultural background and for a harmonious coexistence with the mainstream culture” (Youssef 228).

Prominent postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Bill Ashcroft, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha, have paved the way for the advent and the expansion of Multicultural literature in general. According to Peter Barry, postcolonial criticism seeks to “undermine the universalist claims once made on behalf of literature by liberal humanist critics [...] this universalism is rejected by postcolonial criticism; whenever a universal signification is claimed for a work, then, white, Eurocentric norms and practices are being promoted, by a sleight of hand to this elevated status, and all other correspondingly relegated to subsidiary, marginalized roles” (191-2). Certainly, this explains why Arab-American literature has been often absented or uncared for in ethnic literatures. This is obvious through the disregard of the Arab American writers from the paradigms of academic anthologies and from scholarly studies probing into and investigating ethnic literature. The Arab community living in the US endures troubles of remoteness, estrangement and cultural subjugation, a subject matter that is often mirrored in the works of many Arab writers located in diaspora.

Through its ethnic plurality, fragmented narrative technique, characterization, language, cultural diversity, motifs and setting, Crescent mirrors many facets of postmodernism. Jim Mc Guigan perceives Postmodernism to be as a remarkable alteration in
both knowledge and culture. Significantly, the postmodern assertion encapsulates ideas related mainly with subjectivity. He admits that “how we think and signify: it is not primarily a claim concerning ‘material reality’. The declaration is supported by the assumption that there is no ‘objectively’ discernible material reality, in any case, certainly not one situated beyond thought and signification”(2). Indeed, the assorted surroundings of the characters in the novel underline the diversity of their experiences which collapse all edges and boarders and assemble people from diverse ethnic origins. The novel features a myriad mix of ethnicities for instance: Sirine and her uncle are Iraqis, Aziz is Syrian; Victor Hernandez is Mexican; Cristobal is originally El Salvadorian, Um-Nadia and her daughter are initially Lebanese; and Nathan and Lon Haden are American. Such a concentration in foreign languages and cultures in the novel echoes a postmodernist apprehension to multiculturalism, identity and hybridity. Diana Abu-Jaber, significantly draws attention to identity, hybridity and ethnicity, by putting to the fore the significance of the peripheral, the liminal, and the multicultural. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define hybridity as “one of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in postcolonial theory, [it] commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. As used in horticulture, the term refers to the cross-breeding of two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, ‘hybrid’ species” (108). Features of hybridity abound at different levels in the novel. The use of a hybrid language for instance is very obvious. Arabic words with no English translation prevail in the structure of the novel such as hejab, mishkila, baklava, Ramadan, humos, tabuleh, matbakh, iftar, rouhi, etc. These words and expressions provoke familiarity and belonging to a multicultural condition. Indeed, “Crescent shows how Arab-American and American characters live between two different cultures, making code-switching a major feature of this novel where speakers move back and forth between Arabic and English” (Youssef 230). Arabic in the novel is often used in family contexts and religious matters, while more standard everyday life words are uttered in English. This oscillation between both languages is referred to as code-mixing or code-switching in linguistics. It is the “process by which a person changes from one language...to another...the use of an entire language side by side with English (Talib 142). Talib adds that [c]ode-mixing involves the use of a scattering of words in a different language” (142) whereas code-switching turns to be pertinent whenever employed in whole sentences from a different foreign language. The particular dialect or language that a person chooses to speak on any occasion is referred to as a code which is “a system used for communication between two or more parties” (Wardhaugh 101). Abu-Jaber employs some Arabic words to render her story more realistic and to insert a hint of intimacy and familiarity for the reader. In fact, the state of hybridity, which is a chief characteristic of postmodernism, is obviously articulated in this novel mainly through characterization.

Certainly, many characters in Crescent have hybrid varied roots and origins and are portrayed as either alienated or exiled. Ultimately, the depicted setting/hostland appears to be as a borderland or a meeting point of diverse hyphenated identities, cultures, languages, and characters. This on-going process of border crossing between different languages and cultures and more specifically between hostland and homeland echoes the in-progress phenomenon of acculturation. The concept of border/ borderland is a key feature of post-colonial studies and is interconnected with matters related with the already established borders between peoples.
and nations. Besides, this idea has been implied in the European discourses of the colonial era. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin:

Contemporary transcultural studies have suggested that such borderland spaces can be spaces of energy, when they question fixities and release the potential for change and revision (Anzaldua 1987, Glissant 1989, Harris 1983). This is because these liminal spaces act to problematise and so dismantle the binary systems which bring them into being. It is this idea of the deconstructive potential of the space where two cultures encounter one another which also underlies the idea of the transformative energy of the contact zone (Pratt 1992). (25)

Through the food trope, Abu-Jaber raises the multifaceted issues of belonging, identity and ethnicity. Food functions as a multifarious language for triggering memory and nostalgia and for beautifully communicating love and exile for immigrant characters in the US. Apart from food which is the realm of the protagonist Sirine, Diana Abu Jaber skilfully employs the storytelling technique through the character of Sirine’s uncle. In this respect, Mercer and Strom observe that “the two trajectories [food and storytelling] intersect in the kitchen, where she [Sirine] feeds him the Arabic food he loves and he [her uncle] feeds her the Scherazade-like tale of his great Aunty Camille and her son Abdelrahman Salahadin’s adventures in a fantastical Arabian landscape” (7). Indeed, both food and storytelling turn out to be essential basics in the quest for identity as they mutually trigger feelings of nostalgia toward unreachable moments of Arab homeland often connected with food and The Arabian Nights. According to Rodney P. Carlisle, Arab Americans, “While they have become assimilated into American society over time, [they] tend to retain certain cultural traditions [such as food ways of homeland and storytelling] that reflect their unique heritages” (144).

The uncle’s story telling is exceptionally important in the novel structure. The reader is involuntarily captured into the world of magic of Abdelrahman Salahadin who “carries himself like a handful of water” (26). This story is entwined within the main plot of the novel so that it turns into a nuance/subtext of this latter. In one instance, Sirine’s uncle, the narrator of this story, highlights that this kind of fairytale stories which are transferred from the Bedouin collective memories of family are a reflection of reality. Sirine’s uncle considers “the moralless story of Abdelrahman Salaadin, [his] favourite cousin, who had an incurable addiction of selling himself and faking his drowning” (17). This means that this sub-story of Abdelrahman Salahadin mirrors Sirine and Hanif's loss of home. This mingling of the fairytale story with the main fictional story is indeed part of the generic transgressions of conventional storytelling task the novelist is undertaking throughout her story.

The novel displays a mixture of interconnected cultures and draws attention to diverse ethnic groups intermingling and interacting with one another. The reader delves into the peculiarities of different ethnic groups including Latinos, Turks, Iranians Arabs, Arab-Americans, and white Americans with all their intricacies and loyalties. Yet, Diana Abu Jaber distinguishes these groups from one another. These distinctions are extended to comprise significant variations among Arab groups as well (Palestinian, Kuwaiti, Iraqi Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese, etc.) and between Latinos (Salvadorian and Mexican). The majority of characters in the novel possess fluid hybrid/hyphenated identities including the protagonist
(Sirine) herself. She is preoccupied by concerns of self-identity ethnic and cultural inheritances. She has the typical physical features of a blond white American woman, but she is also half-breed, half-Arab in particular. When she faces herself in the mirror, “all she can see is white…. entirely her mother” (8), but when she encounters people’s question about her ethnic group, they are astonished as she confesses that she is originally half-Arab. She perceives her parents as the connective bridge that bonds her to two obviously dissimilar cultures.

*Crescent* also portrays the feelings of estrangement and loss that several immigrant characters endure because of the harshness of the exilic condition they face. Both Hanif and Sirine’s uncle, for instance, are exiled for different causes. According to Bill Ascroft *et al* “the condition of exile involves the idea of a separation and distancing from either a literal homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin” (85). In the case of Hanif, the reason for his exile is chiefly political. All of characters in the novel are aware of this situation and they all carry their homeland memories and family stories to Um-Nadia’s café which becomes “the symbol of a recreated home in the midst of a foreign and alienating culture” (Fadda-Corney 5). According to Fadda-Conrey, “recognizing the differences among and within minority groups becomes an essential part of Abu-Jaber’s delineation of the ties that unite them within *Crescent*’s ethnic borderland” (5). By challenging the notions of binary oppositions and prejudicing, *Crescent* conjectures the peaceful coexistence of ethnic minorities with one another. In spite of the multifariousness of their cultural environments, the characters of the novel peacefully manage to overcome the burden of cultural differences they are facing in America. They join in the process of intercultural dialogue that proliferates in the borderland of Nadia’s café. Indeed, as Fadda-Conrey indicates, “instead of pitting different ethnic characters against each other by marking what keeps them apart as individuals and communities, *Crescent* resists the ‘us versus them binary’ that might characterize some minority cultures' conception of each other” (9).

It is significant to observe that in current theoretical debates on identity construction, fragmented identity has turned to be characteristic of post-colonial emerging subjectivities. Ashcroft *et al* define ‘subjectivity’ as “the question of the subject” (219) and perceive that it “directly affects colonized peoples’ perceptions of their identities and their capacities to resist the conditions of their domination, their ‘subjection’” (219). According to them, this conception of subjectivity epitomizes the straightforward correlation between the individual and language, thus, substituting human nature with the notion of the “production of the human subject through ideology, discourse or language” (221). In other words, *Crescent* challenges the traditional perception of the concept of identity as fixed and predetermined, of as well as the notion of grand narratives.

2. Levels of intertextuality & Fragmentation in the novel

*Crescent*, a postmodernist novel, proliferates in intertextuality and literary insinuations and allusions. According to Linda Hutcheon, Postmodernism is closely associated with intertextuality. When underscoring intertextuality she mentions that it:
replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself. A literary work can actually no longer be considered original; if it were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance. (126)

In her definition of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon highlights the notion of parody as a quintessential element in her theory which, using her words, allows “opening the text up, rather than closing it down” (127). For her, part of the different matters that postmodern intertextuality defies and seeks to undermine “are both closure and single, centralized meaning” (127). It tightly relies upon “its acceptance of the inevitable textual infiltration of prior discursive practices” (Hutcheon 127). In other words, postmodern intertextuality of art both scrutinizes and destabilizes given contexts. When applying this notion into Crescent we notice that, in several instances, Dina Abu Jaber makes use of different intertexts in her novel. For instance, she alludes to significant Arab writers (such as Naguib Mahfouz, Mahmoud Darwish, Edward Said, Ahdaf Soueif and Emile Habibi), and American poets (such as Whitman) in addition to references to American and Arabic works of literature. Apart from the literary allusions, Crescent features typical elements of the fairytale story. Undeniably, words such ‘mermaids’, ‘jinnies’, ‘ghosts’, ‘afreets’ etc reminds us of the famous Shahrazad figure in The Arabian Nights. The novelist skilfully employs storytelling technique of the Arabian Nights and the narrative techniques of the fairytale story. In chapter thirty-one, Sirine’s uncle who embodies ‘Shahrazed’ figure in the novel, reveals the chief wisdom of storytelling when saying:

Here is something you have to understand about stories: they can point you in the right direction but they can’t take you all the way there. Stories are crescent moons; they glimmer in the night sky, but they are most exquisite in their incomplete state. Because people crave the beauty of not knowing, the excitement of suggestion, and the sweet tragedy of mystery, (340)

Crescent revolves two parallel stories that are streaming simultaneously: the one told by the novelist herself and the other is narrated by Sirine’s uncle. Actually, Abu Jaber’s use of this technique is part of the postmodernist frame as a whole in order to counter big narratives. According to McHale, “The postmodernist text involves the use of two or more texts arranged in parallel, to be read simultaneously to the degree that is possible” (191). So, when the reader comes across such a split text this would create a questioning of the thematic thread that links both stories. In Crescent, one is aware of the development of each of the separate stories. At the start of each chapter, the fairytale story is announced, then, at a certain time of its progress, it leaves the floor to the main story. Subsequently, this fragmentation of the body of the story becomes interesting and suggestive of multiple meanings. It also echoes the state of confusion and ambiguity which typifies postmodernism in particular. In this respect, Hutcheon maintains that “the local, the limited, the temporary and the provisional are what define postmodernism (43). Thus, the manifold structure of Crescent defies the conventional realist narrative norms of plain and organized texts.
3. *Crescent* as a ‘polyphonic’ ‘dialogical’ text

By portraying multiple stories and discourses in her multifaceted text, Diana Abu Jaber fashions what Bakhtin perceives a “polyphonic” novel with multiple voices. According to Aschcroft *et al* “the idea of a polyphony of voices in society is implied also in Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque, which emerged in the Middle Ages when ‘a boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture’ (Holquist 1984: 4)” (108). Andrew Robinson perceives that “Polyphony literally means multiple voices”. For him, this idea stems from Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoevsky’s work as enclosing “many different voices, unmerged into a single perspective, and not subordinated to the voice of the author. Each of these voices has its own perspective, its own validity, and its own narrative weight within the novel” (Ceasefire magazine). The multiplicity of perspectives and voices is referred to as dialogism in Bakhtin’s terminology. Hence, any given text is viewed as ‘double-voiced’ or ‘multi-voiced’. Discourse neither plausibly opens out nor is it plainly straightforward released, however, it intermingles and interacts. “This makes dialogical works a lot more ‘objective’ and ‘realistic’ than their monological counterparts, since they don’t subordinate reality to the ideology of the author” (Robinson). A dialogical work continually connects with and is overwhelmed by previous works and voices, and looks for to revise or enlighten it. It is definitely inspired by the records of former events and the connotations connected with each word it makes use of and it typifies a given genre. “Everything is said in response to other statements and in anticipation of future statements” (Robinson). In other words, according to Bakhtin, this approach to language-use is in fact represented in daily ordinary language-use. So, the way it is employed in novels such as *Crescent* precisely reveals the authenticity of language-use. Therefore, the dialogical word is “always in an intense relationship with another’s word, being addressed to a listener and anticipating a response. Because it is designed to produce a response, it has a combative quality (e.g. parody or polemic)” (Robinson).

*Crescent* is a polyphonic text which underscores the plurality of voices and discourses through the fragmented narratives, the multiple ethnicities and identities around which it revolves. Thus, one considers this novel as a multilingual text par excellence as it features different languages (Arabic, English, and French) and diverse ethnic cultures. “Heteroglossia” or the plurality of discourses is produced through the mingling of different genres and registers of languages in the text of the novel. When commenting on heteroglossia, Bakhtin maintains that “one of the most basic and fundamental forms for incorporating and organizing heteroglossia in the novel [is]”incorporated genres.” (320) According to him, the novel allows the amalgamation of a variety of genres, “between artistic (inserted short stories, lyrical songs, poems, dramatic scenes, etc.) and extra-artistic (everyday, rhetorical, scholarly, religious genres and others)” (320). Theoretically, any genre could be established in the making of any novel. More specifically, “it is difficult to find any genres that have not at some point been incorporated into a novel by someone. Such incorporated genres usually preserve within the novel their own structural integrity and independence, as well as their own linguistic and stylistic peculiarities” (Bakhtin 320).
Conclusion

This paper has tried to uncover the main elements of postmodernism tackled in Diana Abu Jaber’s *Crescent* mainly hybridity, ethnicity, identity, multiculturalism, exile in addition to other pertinent features such as narrative technique, intertextuality and language. The fragmented and multilayered structure of *Crescent* challenges the traditional realist narrative standards of coherent and even texts. The diversified backgrounds of the characters emphasize the diversity of their lives that shrivel boundaries and assemble people from miscellaneous ethnicities. ‘Heteroglossia’ or the plurality of discourses is produced through combining different registers in the novel. Either on the levels of hybrid identities and multiculturalism or on the levels of intertextuality, the persistent fragmentation of the narrative and the experimentation with postmodernist techniques demonstrate that *Crescent* overturns generic borders and celebrates in-betweenness, interculturalism and transnational border crossing.
References


