An overview of Contemporary Anglophone Arab Literature: Case Study of Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Cresent*

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Anglophone Arab novel:

The term «Anglophone Arab novel» refers to novels written in English by writers of an arab background. Anglophone Arab writers carry a sense of difference from both their past and their present cultures. Steven Salaita argues that these writers exist in «an inbetween state in which arab Americans are not quite arab according to their ethnic brethren in the Arab World and not quite Americain according to their co-national peers in North America.

ANGLOPHONE ARAB Lit:

- Anglophone Arab literature sheds light on an increasingly body of creative writing in English by Arab authors ,or by authors of Arab decent.

- It deals with a previously neglected corpus of literary work that is now receiving increasing attention not only from university department with middle Eastern concern but also from intellectuals everywhere who are interested in postcolonial studies, the new literature and indeed the larger domain of world literature in English.

- The fact of the mater is that Arabs have been using English as a medium of literary expression since the beginning of past century.

The term Anglophone coined after the model Francophone has been found to be convenient enough to lodge them within the larger multicultural family. The description implied by this adjective anglophone does not simply provide a linguistic Shelter for the Arab writer in English. It is also achieves is a much wider umbrella under which certain themes and concerns can be shared. born from the homeland, anglo-arab literature is hounted by the same hybrid, exilic and diasporic questions that have dogged fellow postcolonialists.
• Though, universities in USA, Europe, and middle East have begun to include courses in their curriculum that incorporate anglophone Arab writing.

• A great emphasis has been put on American-Arab writers such as (Gibran, Rihami, Abu Jaber) and considerable attention is devoted to the British-Arab experience (Ahdef Souif, Leila Abulela, Fadia Faquir).

What is Anglophone Arabic Literature:

Anglophone Arabic literature, that is, a literature conceived and executed in English by writers of Arabic background, is qualitatively different from Arabic literature and Arabic literature translated into English (Nash 11). This trend of Arabic literature is to be considered as an influence on contemporary international literatures, in particular on the postcolonial, with its theorization of intercultural relations by reference to the impact of colonialism and imperialism on non-Western literatures. As suggested by Geoffrey Nash (2007) in his analytical book devoted to Anglophone Arab literature, The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English, contemporary Anglophone Arab writers use English rather than Arabic as the language for their fiction for personal preference, to avoid cultural restrictions and censorship, and to optimize exposure. Some Anglo-Arab writers were embedded within an English-speaking environment either in their country of origin or in Britain/the United States of America, and this made English virtually a native language, so it is natural that they would choose to write in English.

The last few decades have been marked by a significant increase of interest in literary works produced in foreign languages by Arab male and female writers who are described either as Anglophone or hybrid. Anglophone Arab female writers outnumber male writers. They are
either academics and/or intellectuals who migrated to Britain or USA and decided to write in English, or British/American writers who are daughters of the early twentieth century Arab immigrants who settled mainly in the US, and whose mother tongue is English. Interestingly, literary works written by Arab Anglophone women writers—mainly novels and short stories—have brought more recognition and visibility to the Arab Woman whose identity is perceived by the Western readership as being different, peculiar, complex, and mosaic because of her portrayal in the media and in the books of early orientalists.

*Crescent (2003)* engages with a problem that faces Arab-American communities, namely, stereotyping. *Crescent explores* the life of the intellectual in Diaspora. Among other themes, it attempts to give an insight into the daily issues that an exile encounters. Abu Jaber throws light on the problems of displacement, exile and Diaspora in the present global scene. Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom, for instance, argue that ‘food functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory and exile in *Crescent*. The two protagonists of the novel, the Iraqi American Sirine and the Iraqi exiled lecturer Hanif represent two different experiences of displacement:

**Cultural exile VS Political exile:**

**Diana Abu-Jaber** is one of the preeminent Arab American writers today. Her first novel, *Arabian Jazz (1993)*, was the first work of modern Arab American fiction to reach a wide critical and commercial audience. She has subsequently built on her early success with *Crescent and Origin* as well as with a memoir, *The Language of Baklava, all best-sellers.*
Accompanying Abu Jaber’s success is much lively discussion among Arab American literary critics about the merits of and problems in her work. This discussion takes place because Abu-Jaber employs a distinct ethnic presence in her writing, which is evident in the way her work is packaged and promoted. In many ways, she is at the nexus of the category “Arab American literature” because her work impels critics to examine not only the uses of ethnic imagery in the category, but the very parameters of the category itself.

Female authors who are Arab British include Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Layla Elalami, Betoul Elkhedir, Leila Aboulela and others. Arab American female writers include Mohja Kahf, Diana Abu-Jaber, Layla Elmaleh, Naomi Shehab Nye amongst others. These women have gained literary recognition for their works which created certain cultural and literary bridges between divergent spaces, cultures and peoples.

Summary:

Crescent takes place in the Middle Eastern community in Los Angeles, California. Sirene is 39 and unmarried, and works as a chef in Nadia’s Café, a popular Middle Eastern eatery located near UCLA. Sirene was born to an Iraqi father and American mother. Her parents worked for the International Red Cross and were absent for much of her childhood. They died while on a relief mission in Africa when she was nine. Following the death of her parents, Sirene was raised by her uncle, a university professor and irrepressible storyteller whose tales are interspersed throughout the novel. As an adult, Sirene continues to live in her uncle’s house while working at the café, where she is much loved by both coworkers and customers. Though unmarried, Sirene continues to date around, and her social life is filled with close friends. These include her employer, café owner Um-Nadia, and Um-Nadia’s daughter Mireille, an eccentric photographer who has traveled widely in the Middle
East, and Aziz Abdo, a syrian poet serving as Artist-in-Residence at UCLA.

Sirene’s contented existence is disrupted when she meets Hanif al–Eyad, known as Han, an Iraqi, who was forced to leave the country at young age when Saddam Hussein came to power. Han attended school abroad and finally landed a position as an instructor at UCLA.

Sirene encounters Han as a customer in her restaurant, and immediately feels a strong physical and intellectual attraction. They begin seeing each other, and their relationship deepens.

Sirene is unable to speak Arabic, and has no religious affiliation. Despite this, and through her relationship with Han, she begins to explore her Arab-American identity.

Sirene also develops a complicated friendship with Rana, an attractive young Muslim woman in one of Han’s classes. Though jealous of Rana’s friendship with Han, Sirene develops a friendship of kind with Rana in order to explore her own identity.

Things take an interesting turn, when Sirene begins to question Han’s reasons for leaving Iraq, and his story about his origins. Sirene and Han have a small spat when she loses a scarf he gave her, which once belonged to his mother. When they make up, he tells his story. As a young man, he befriended and had an affair with an American expatriate in Baghdad who arranged for him to have an overseas education. He explains how he decided not to return to Iraq after Hussein came to power. However, Sirene finds evidence that this story may not be true: She finds an enigmatic letter in Han’s apprenently from a loved one.

The letter informs Han that his mother is ill and wishes to see him; and also makes a vague reference to a murder later while attended an exhibition of the photographs Nathan took while in Iraq. Han has a strong reaction to a photo of a young Arab woman. Sirene’s relationship with Han becomes strained, and she has a brief affair with Aziz. Wracked by guilt, Sirene attempts to reconnect with Han. However, when she thinks she sees Rana wearing the scarf she lost; Sirene causes a public scene and runs away. When Rana follows her to discuss the matter; Sirene learns that Han has not been entirely honest about
why he left Iraq. When he returned to his family after completing school in Cairo Han became involved in the resistance movement; protesting the Hussein regime by writing for an underground newspaper. When the secret police arrested his family; Han escaped and fled the country leaving his parents and siblings behind. Han suggests to Serine that he is considering returning to Iraq to see his mother; regardless of the consequences. When Han finishes this confession; the couple spends the night in his apartment. Serine awakes to a note from Han; telling her that he has left. She learns via her uncle that Han resigned his position at UCLA; and has left the country for Iraq.

• Serine is quite understandably; but slowly begins to adjust to life without her lover. Months go by with only one communication from Han—a letter written in London airport; explaining his reasons for leaving and indicating that he understands that return may be impossible. Serine continues to work at the café and returns to her old routine. However the novel concludes over a year after Han’s departure. Serine at the café receives a phone call from him.

PLOT SUMMARY:

• Takes place in an Arab–American community near Westwood.

• Serine meets Han who is an Iraqi exile and professor at a local university who is struggling to adapt to life in LA. Serine contemplates her cultural identity; the idea of love; the role of religion; and the purpose of storytelling.

• One day Han decided he must return to Iraq despite the threat of death and leaves a note for Serine and Serine is devastated.
• The novel concludes with Serine discovering that Han has survived and on his way back to LA.

Characters

Characters are often described in terms of food:

• **Sirine:** is a 39 unmarried chef working at um Nadia’s café a popular middle eastern eatery in L A. Sirene was born to an Iraqi father and American mother. Her parents worked for the International Red Cross and were absent for much of her childhood. They died while on a relief mission in Africa when Sirene was nine. She was the raised by her uncle,

  • “Especially Sirine. [The students] 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, and her sea-green eyes. She has the worst kind of hair for a chef, curly and viney and falling all over her shoulders, resisting ponytails and scarves and braids. She is so kind and gentle-voiced and her food is so good that the students cannot help themselves – they sit at the tables, leaning toward her” (20)

• **Hanif al-Eyad,** known to his friends as Han. An Iraqi, Han was forced to leave the country at a young age when Saddam Hussein came to power. Han attended school abroad and finally landed a position as an instructor at LA. Sirene encounters Han as a customer in her restaurant, and immediately fell in love together,

  • "Hanif shakes his head and smiles a big, squared-off smile, teeth bright against his toast-brown skin" (33).
• **Aziz: Aziz Abdo**, a Syrian poet serving as Artist-in-Residence at UCLA

• "His voice ticks like a whisk in a copper bowl" (30).

"His skin is the color of coffee and milk and his deep-set eyes are satiny" (35).

• **Abdelrahman:**

• "In the day his skin is cinnamon-and-honey-colored. At night he is almost invisible" (27).

• "Abd el rahman lifts his arms and jumps; he spills into the water like honey from a jar, dense and bright, instantly gone" (27).

**The symbolism of The Crescent:**

The word "**Crescent**" immediately suggests two things:

The lunar phases, and as an extension, the Islamic symbol,

The crescent moon appears as a reminder and a symbol of the Arab identity in CA, For example: during one of Han and Sirine’s first encounters: He moves to her side. "Look there." Han points to the sky. "An Arab crescent."

She looks at the paper-fine moon. "Why do you call it that?"

"It reminds me of the moon from back home."

**The crescent** also represents the idea that Arab-American hybrids feel incomplete and cannot exist as hybrids for long.

**How does the novel portray the immigrant experience?**
"It means talking about difference between then and now, and that's often a sad thing. And immigrants are always a bit sad right from the start anyways. Nobody warns you when you leave town what's about to happen to your brains. And then some immigrants are sadder than others. And there's all kinds of reasons why, but the big one is that you can't go back. For example, the Iraq your father and I came from doesn't exist anymore. It's a new, scary place. When your old house doesn't exist anymore, that makes things sadder in general."

Eustavio brings them plates of dewy, rose scented penne cotta. "Wouldn't you say that immigrants are sadder than other people?" her uncle asks the waiter.

Eustavio straightens up and closes his eyes. He answers Sirene's uncle in Italian, then he says to Sirene in his accented English, "Sadness? Certo! When we leave our homes we fall in love with our sadness." (pp. 142-143)

"The loneliness of the Arab is a terrible thing; it is all-consuming....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."

**How do relations between the US and the Middle East come across in the novel?**

"Of course," Jenoob says. "All we see on the TV or movies about Arabs is they're shooting someone, bombing someone, or kidnapping someone." He counts them off on his fingers. "Those are the choices. The only lines they get to say are: 'Shut up and sit down!'" He shouts, fingers cocked like a gun. (pp. 222-223)

**Themes:**

Diana abu jaber Crescent combines romance, folktales and current event to illustrate the arab American immigrant experience.
• The story is about an Iraqi American woman, Sirin, who falls in love with Hanif, an Iraqi exile.

• She suffuses this novel with dishes and aromas from the Middle East, she tells: "I do believe that food is one of the most immediate and convincing ways of explaining cultural experience to another person."

• Excerpt from the first chapter of Crescent

  ‘Sirine learned how to cook professionally working as a line cook and then a sous chef in the kitchen of French, Italian and Kalifornia restaurants, but when she moved to Nadia’s coffee, she went through her parents old recipes and began cooking the favorites ……she felt as if she was returning to her parents tiny kitchen and her earliest memories.’

• In Crescent food appears as a way of creating both personal and cultural identity, Sirine is not a Muslim and doesn’t speak Arabic. However, through cooking in Nadia’s coffee, she finds a way of reconnecting with her heritage. Abu Jaber puts Sirine in the perfect place to observe cultural cooking in an arabe coffee.

• Sirine’s parents died when she was just nine and due to their international role they were absent from her life before that. Cooking their recipes at the coffee becomes a mean of reaffirming her familial as well as her cultural identity.

• Food also becomes a mean of fashioning a new identity. Sirine’s Thanksgiving is a combination of American Thanksgiving traditions and Arab flavors which she blends together. Abu Jaber said ‘‘there are open battles of wine, all different colors, and there seem to be far more plates and silverware that actually needed. Among the guests ‘s contribution, there is a big around Fatayar a lamb pie that Aziz bought from the green eyed girl at the Iranian backer, six sliced cylinders of cranberry sauce from Um Nadia’’.
• The meal reflects Arab, Iranian, Latin, American and European influence. It also represents the ways in which Americans identity was forged and continually reinvents itself by incorporating and blending new cultural influences from international immigrants.

• The theme of loss and loneliness is mostly related to the story of Nathan. His time in the middle east forced him to adopt to an alien culture. He found himself changing in this new environment as he recounts in a conversation with Sirine: ‘going to Iran shocked me loose from who I am. The deep wild strangeness of the place. The way the air smelled like dust and herbs, the strange slant of the sun, I couldn’t help myself’. (p86). His time abroad changed and challenged his identity.

• Sirine’s uncle, Han and many of other characters have experienced personal losses as a result of moving to another country. Sirine felt alienated from her parents both before and after their death.

• Nathan left someone overseas. While in Iraq he fell in love with Laila Hanif’s sister. This experience left a mark on him: ‘’It was something that just stripped me clear, like new man. I loved everything about her, and I didn’t care about something else. I loved her wrists, her laugh, shoes, and her teeth. I was so happy, I even stopped taking photographs, I would feel that way, absolutely and completely for the rest of my life’’.