

Diana Abu- Jaber's *Crescent* as a Postmodernist Novel

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to study Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* (2003) from a postmodernist perspective. The novel will be examined from such perspectives as characterization, language, identity, hybridity, exile, multiculturalism, ethnic plurality, intertextuality, narrative method, fragmentation, parody, setting, ambiguity as well as its connection with science fiction, magic realism and metafiction. Parallels will also be drawn between *Crescent* and other relevant literary works by some fellow Arab-American and Arab – British writers with a view to placing it in its appropriate context.

Keywords: Diana Abu Jaber, *Crescent*, Postmodernist Perspective.

Arab-American and Arab-British writers have been largely ignored in mainstream American and British literature and in the realm of academic criticism in both the US and the UK. However, the recent emergence of some Arab-American and Arab-British writers on the literary scene such as the American-born Diana Abu-Jaber (born to a Jordanian father and an American mother), the American-born Naomi Shihab Nye (born to a Palestinian father and an American mother) in America, the Egyptian-born Ahdaf Soueif and the Jordanian-born Fadia Faqir in Britain, among many others, has drawn some critical attention in various literary circles and activities. Nevertheless, all these attempts have been either modest or produced mainly by fellow Arab writers and academics. This paper attempts to fill up a gap in this area of literary scholarship by concentrating on the discussion and the analysis of a somewhat typical work by this group of Arab women writers namely, Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* (2003). The main focus of the discussion will be the chief aspects of postmodernism in this novel especially identity, multiculturalism, hybridity, ethnicity, exile as well as other relevant aspects such as intertextuality, language and narrative technique. Though Diana Abu-Jaber lives and writes in an American environment, she has not gone a long way in experimenting with many of the daring techniques that

have been employed by several postmodernist writers in Western literature. Nevertheless, her novels, including *Crescent*, show clear signs of utilizing various aspects of postmodernist writings. The objective of this paper is to expound such postmodernist aspects and to show how they have been employed in this novel.

There is no doubt that contemporary Arab-American and Arab-British writers have been writing against the backdrop of postmodernism. Like her fellow Arab writers living in the diaspora, Abu-Jaber has been experiencing with the modes of postmodernism and concentrating on some of its aspects such as identity, hybridity, multiculturalism, exile, alienation, nostalgia and the like in an attempt to reconcile the self and the other so as to be assimilated within a larger ethnic and multicultural American community. 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 such as Fadia Faqir's *The Pillars of Salt* (1996), Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (2000) and the poetry collections of Naomi Shihab Nye. Reference will be made to these writers in due course in the discussion.

Like Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*, *Crescent* spans over a period extending over more than one generation of cultural encounters between the East and the West. As *The Map of Love* deals with the clash of cultures in the Middle East, *Crescent* addresses the multicultural encounters in modern America. Both novels weave a tale

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of love and mutual understanding across different cultures and ethnic conflict. Like Sirine, who embarks on an arduous quest for her identity and self-discovery, Isabel tries hard to understand her conflicting emotions and to discover the truth behind her heritage. Writing these two novels entails a travel through space, time and a quest for identity and harmonious coexistence among different cultures and ethnicities. Like Soueif, Abu-Jaber presents events from an Arab viewpoint to a Western audience. *The Map of Love* highlights the conflict and the clash of Western and Arab culture and the problems resulting from their encounter. *Crescent* underscores the inherent differences between ethnic communities and the ways to transcend them. Both novels try to build bridges of cultural understanding that would eventually lead to a harmonious coexistence and cultural integration. However, *The Map of Love*, like Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*, can best be read against the backdrop of postcolonialism as it concentrates on nationalism and cultural clashes while *Crescent* can best be presented from a postmodernist angle as it deals with issues related to multiculturalism, identity and hybridity. Nevertheless, such works and the works of many other contemporary Arab-American and Arab-British writers utilize postmodernist narrative techniques and motifs including the use of polyphony, complex narrative structures, fragmentation, and the reconciliation between different cultures.

Most of the works of Arab writers writing in English can be categorized under the umbrella of multicultural/postcolonial literature. In the words of J. Bainbridge et al, multicultural literature is "literature that depicts and explores the lives of individuals who belong to a wide range of diverse groups" (183). The characters usually come from diverse backgrounds and live in one community. The themes often center on the issues of hybridity, in-betweenness, diasporas and the crossover of ideas and identities generated by such factors as emigration, exile, colonialism or displacement. Multicultural literature also tries to increase awareness and sensitivity to pluralism and celebrates diverse cultures and common bonds.

The search for identity and cultural heritage is an old subject in literature, but there is no doubt that it had gained ground in the 1960s when different ethnic groups living in the United States and elsewhere became engaged in a search for identity and cultural background and for a harmonious coexistence with the mainstream

culture. Such theorists as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon and Bill Ashcroft have played a key role in the appearance and the development of Multicultural literature. Unfortunately, Arab-American literature is often neglected or ignored in ethnic literatures. This can be clearly seen in the exclusion of Arab writers writing in English from standard academic anthologies and from academic studies dealing with ethnic literature. To a certain extent, Arab groups living in the US and in the UK face the same problems of isolation, alienation and cultural oppression, a theme that is reflected in the works of many Arab writers living in the West. As multicultural writing embodies the culture, race and history of the group or groups it represents, it is no wonder that Arab writers who write in English have focused their works on the issues of identity, hybridity, exilic existence, cultural conflict, assimilation, accommodation, acculturation and coexistence.

Crescent portrays the life of the American-born protagonist, Sirine and her infatuation with the Iraqi professor of literature Hanif (or Han) who works in the new Middle Eastern Department at UCLA in California, USA. It is also the story of Abdelrahman Salahadin, who has an incurable addiction to selling himself and faking his drowning and who is lost and kidnapped but is finally reunited with his mother before settling down with her in Cairo. In its characterization, language, cultural diversity, ethnic plurality, narrative method, motifs and setting as well as in its use of parody, science fiction techniques and metafiction *Crescent* reflects many aspects of postmodernism. Previous studies of *Crescent* such as Georgette Jabour's. "Review of *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent*". Carol Fadda-Conrey's "Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*" (2006) and Lorraine Mercer's "Counter Narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*" (2007) concentrate on a few thematic issues particularly identity, hybridity, multiculturalism and the like. As the novel has not been studied from a comprehensive postmodernist perspective, a postmodernist approach would shed light on some of its multifarious dimensions.

Characters in *Crescent* are largely presented from a postmodernist perspective. Sirine has a hybrid or a mixed origin as she is an Arab-American born to an Iraqi father and an American mother. She now lives with her Arab-American uncle and works as a chef at a Middle Eastern

café located in Los Angeles, California and owned by a Lebanese woman, Um-Nadia. Arab students, Arab exiles and immigrants from different parts of the world flock to the café which becomes the meeting place of Arab-Americans, Iranians, Turks, Latinos, and white Americans, among others. The diversified background of the characters underscores the multiplicity of their life that breaks down boundaries and borders and brings together people from different ethnic origins. While Sirine and her uncle are Iraqis, Um-Nadia and her daughter are originally Lebanese; Aziz is Syrian; Victor Hernandez is Mexican; Cristobal is originally El Salvadorian and Nathan and Lon Haden are American.

This multiplicity is further enhanced by the fact that these characters, particularly Arabs, use different languages on various occasions. Such an interest in foreign languages and other cultures reflects a postmodernist concern with identity, multiculturalism and hybridity. Like black American women writers, contemporary Arab-American women writers, including Diana Abu-Jaber, have brought to the fore the question of identity, hybridity and ethnicity, thereby stressing the importance of the marginal and the multicultural. As Georgette Jabbouri observes, "*Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent* have created lively pictures of average, happy Arab-American families who are enjoying their lives while making strands in understanding and empathizing with their cultures of origin and adapting to a mainstream American culture" (224). In the characters' everyday life, such Arabic words as *humos*, *tabuleh*, *matbakh*, *hejab*, *mishkila*, *baklava*, *Ramadan*, *iftar*, *rouhi*, etc. add familiarity to an otherwise multicultural situation. *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. Words that have to do with home or family or religion are often spoken in Arabic, whereas more institutionalized words are expressed in English. In fact, "in-betweenness", which is a major feature of postmodernism, is clearly shown in this novel where characters have mixed origins or live in exile and where America is presented as a crossover or a meeting place of different languages, identities, cultures and characters. Indeed, in this novel there is always a crossing of boundaries between different languages and cultures in the same way that there are crossing boundaries between America and the Arab world and between America and

the rest of the world in an ever going process of acculturation.

Living in the midst of this multicultural community, Sirine seems to be enjoying this cultural diversity: "She enjoys the refined cadences of Farsi, enjoys her eavesdropping without understanding. It is comfortably delightful and deeply familiar— the immigrants' love and nostalgia" (101). Sirine's main attachment to her original country is her father whom she remembers each time she hears an Arabic word or when someone talks about Iraq. "She has never heard anyone speak so eloquently and lovingly of Arabic before. Suddenly she misses her father" (16). Sirine speaks only a few words of Arabic, but the sound of Arabic poetry "soothes her" (17). Abu-Jaber uses some Arabic words that stand out in the text to make the story more realistic and to add a touch of familiarity for the reader. As in Naomi Nye's *Habibi* (1997), the use of endearing terms such as "habibi" highlights the importance of love, family, and heritage and brings the main themes of the novel together.

Through the language of food, Abu-Jaber tackles the complex issues of ethnicity and identity and deals with the problems of Sirine, who, at the age of 39, wonders how to make peace with her hybrid heritage and her individual identity. After the death of her father, Sirine's access to her family roots is her uncle. If Sirine's focus is on food, her uncle's focus is on storytelling. As Mercer and Strom observe, "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 Aunt Camille and her son Abdelrahman Salahadin's adventures in a fantastical Arabian landscape" (7). In fact both food and storytelling become basic elements in the search for identity and both stir a feeling of nostalgia to the Arab homeland associated with food and *The Arabian Nights*. As Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom have pointed out,

In Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* and in the poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye, food functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory, and exile. In their texts, food also becomes an avenue for questioning boundaries of culture, class, and ethnicity. Food is a natural repository for memory and tradition and reveals the possibility for imagining blended identities and traditions".(2)

They add that in *Crescent* "metaphors of food register

both the presence and absence of cultural and familial bonds.... Much of the action takes place in various kitchens, which mark the pain of exile and loss as well as the hope of family and community" (ibid. 2). The relationship between food and the quest for identity in this novel is actually a very complicated one. Food and spices used in preparing it make people remember their countries and their language and consequently generate feelings of nostalgia and homesickness to their countries of origin and eventually constitute a basic ingredient of the search for identity and ethnic origin. According to Crolyn Korsmeyer, "Eating together is a signal among most peoples for friendship, truce, or celebration.... The intimacy of eating is part of what knits together those who eat" (187; qtd in Mercer and Strom, 6). All Arab characters like to eat the traditional foods prepared throughout the Middle East as a way of asserting their identity. In the words of Mercer and Strom again, "Food can register the parts of cultural experience, tradition, and identity that cannot be readily translated" (7). The language of food connects the characters, especially the heroine, to their ethnic history, culture and roots. Sirine has learned about food and cooking from her parents, especially her Iraqi father. As food transports the novel's characters to their native homelands and customs, it transports Sirine to the lost world of her parents besides stirring in her a deep longing for her Arab heritage. Sirine still has vivid memories about her father's interest in food and in cooking and his desire of passing this culinary knowledge to his American wife (19). Through food, Sirine explores her identity and her roots. When she is asked to introduce herself during a meeting of Women in Islam, she stumbles before she says, "Sirine. I cook" (189). As Mercer and Strom beautifully put it, "The kitchen is where she [Sirine] attempts to clarify and forge her identity" (9). Whenever Sirine experiences an identity conflict, "she goes to the kitchen and cooks herself and her history into existence" (ibid. 8).

The appearance of Han on the scene of events reminds Sirine of her Iraqi roots and makes her "feel ashamed that she has taken so little interest in her father's home country" (52). Sirine is also anxious to learn from Han about the Arab world: its music, singing, food, religions, languages, culture, etc. She even yearns to learn Arabic: "She feels the presence of Arabic somewhere behind her mind, like a ghost language – crisp, clear and ocean-blank. And she feels guilty that she can't speak it" (107). When Nathan, the American photographer and

graduate student in Middle Eastern Studies, provides Sirine with pictures about Iraq, she begins to remember Baghdad.

Food becomes a kind of contact language which enables the two protagonists as well as the characters from different origins, different native languages and cultural backgrounds to come together and communicate with each other while keeping them separate. Often Sirine and Han communicate through food, and as a translator of Arabic and English, Han understands the function of the language of food for Sirine. When Han feeds Sirine a morsel from his finger, we are told that it was as if "food [was] their private language" (299). Foregrounded as a contact language, food for Han stirs memories of exile from both country and family. Han tells Sirine: "I never much wanted to be up in my father's orchard. I liked this. I liked the kitchen....Where the women were always telling stories" (67). In fact, Sirine serves as a connecting link joining together different communities and individuals. Some of the characters open up to her, revealing how "painful it is to be an immigrant" (19) and she becomes a bridge between America and the Arab world as well as between the displaced groups sharing similar experiences of exilic life and alienation.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that in many interviews Abu-Jaber maintains the importance of the immediate effect of food in determining the characters' cultural experience: "I do believe that food is one of the most immediate and most convincing ways of explaining cultural experience to another person," she asserts in one of her interviews. ⁽²⁾ And in a recent talk, Abu Jaber said that "eating is one of the things that crystallizes your experiences and the metaphor of food is a way to translate these cultural experiences.... The treatment of food becomes a 'safe' way for white American readers to listen to dangerous topics like war, Iraq, the Middle East" (PSU talk, 21 October 2006; qtd. in Mercer and Strom, 7). Thus, food provides a means for building bridges between peoples and cultures and for solving the dilemma of having a mixed heritage not only for Sirine but also for the novelist herself.

As Mercer and Strom have indicated, in her emphasis on the role of food in identity building and in facilitating communication among individuals and societies, Abu-Jaber is similar to several Arab-American women writers particularly Naomi Shihab Nye. In many of her poems, Nye's search for identity is brought to the fore through concentrating on the kitchen and some kinds of food,

fruits and vegetables such as figs, peaches, onions, mint and Arabic coffee and other simple ingredients which take on a special significance, reflecting thereby her Palestinian-American roots. In a world of political conflicts, exile, alienation and dispossession, Nye's poems such as "Lunch in Nablus City Park" (*Yellow Glove*, 32), "Arabic Coffee" (32) and "The Traveling Onion" (41) are used to construct spaces wherein she imagines the possibility of peace, love and communication. Like Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, Nye's poems are often set in kitchens, grocery stores or other domestic spaces traditionally associated with family or groups gatherings and human communication, cooperation and connection. This practice is part of her belief that human communication should be extended beyond the boundaries of geographical space and the self. Whether in the restaurant in Nablus or in the quest for the perfect peach in Texas or in drinking Arabic coffee in America, Nye's main objective is to look for domestic objects that can bind generations and peoples together through love and memory and provide a sense of relief and consolation in exilic life.

Like many other Arab-American women writers such as Suheir Hammad, Laila Halabi, Etel Adnan and Naomi Shihab Nye, Abu-Jaber tackles the idea of having a hyphenated Arab-American identity. Among the most important issues with which these writers wrestle is the question of identity and its concomitant themes such as hybridity, multiculturalism and exile. These writers identify themselves as Arab-American and every one of them uniquely explores the themes of identity, multiculturalism, displacement, exile and memories, trying to build bridges that connect different cultures with one another. These writers were either born in the US or emigrated to it when they were young children. They all share a collective memory that binds the past, the present and the future. Most of them view their writings as a way of connection with a larger world and as a means of coming closer together as human beings, regardless of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They all need to come to terms with their past heritage and their current life and many of them have actually visited their original homeland to show their interest in their ancestral homeland and to revive their memories of the place, the culture and the people of the Middle East.

As one of these writers of Arabic origin who "assert their Arab-American identity without apology" (Majaj: 330), Abu-Jaber lives and writes in another culture or

subculture that is trying to interact with the mainstream culture. In her novels particularly *Arabian Jazz* (1993) and *Crescent* (2003), Abu-Jaber presents Arab immigrants living in another culture, the American culture. In *Arabian Jazz*, Abu-Jaber addresses the question of identity from a different perspective than that she uses a decade later in *Crescent*. In the earlier novel, one can easily feel the lurking conflict in the relationship between Arab Americans and their American society. The Ramouds do not fit into their poor-white community in upstate New York and consequently the neighbors understand them in relation to African Americans. Like Sirine of *Crescent*, the protagonist of *Arabian Jazz*, Jemorah, is on a quest to come to terms with her past heritage and present life. The daughter of a Jordanian/Palestinian father and a deceased American mother, Jemorah is ambivalent about her identity: Is she Arab? Is she American? When she is cornered by her racist boss who defines herself aggressively as white, Jemorah is not prepared to negotiate an in-between status (i.e. an Arab-American) and proudly declares her identity as "black" (295). In this way, she is associating herself with black Americans. As Hartman explains, "The 'jazz' of the title begins as a reference to 'black music,' but then becomes 'Arab' (7). In this novel the author strikes a balance between two radically distinct cultures: Arab and American, black and white. In other words, Arabs have their distinct identity (black) which can be understood more broadly in relation to African American culture, and this is the way Jemorah fits into the US as an American and as an Arab-American.

In *Crescent* the situation is different. In this novel the reader is drawn into the life of various community groups including Arabs, Arab-Americans, Latinos, Turks, Iranians and white Americans, among others, with all their complexities and allegiances. Most of the characters have hybrid identities that are fluid and flexible, and they all bring their memories and family stories to Um-Nadia's café which becomes, in the words of Fadda-Corney, "the symbol of a recreated home in the midst of a foreign and alienating culture"(5). The novel features various intersecting cultures and maps different minority groups, placing them in dialogue so that they ultimately interact with one another. These differences and groupings are not restricted to Arabs and non-Arabs but are extended to include important distinctions among Arabs (Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian, Kuwaiti, Iraqi, etc.) and between Latinos (Mexican and El Salvadorian.). It is in

this context of difference that this communication between these divergent ethnic groups takes place. Throughout the narrative, these characters are brought together and interact through their shared experience of exile and alienation. In the words of 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).

Having delineated some distinguishing factors among these different ethnic and cultural groupings, Abu-Jaber, proceeds to show how many of our categories and demarcations of identity are often illusory. Asked if he is a Muslim, the poet Aziz replies: "I defy classification" (105); Sirine is half-Arab, half-American; the Covered Man is actually a Covered Woman, and the veiled Rana is a feminist. Nathan, on the other hand, is an American who lives in his own country but he has close ties with the members of these minority groups.. He has traveled extensively in the Middle East and has written books and studies on it and is planning a translation of Hemingway into Arabic (107). However, he always feels unsure of his own identity, and that is why he keeps traveling from one place to another and sometimes identifies himself by his love for Han's sister, Laila. Nathan's great interest in Arabic literature and his translation of Hemingway into Arabic mark his endeavor to cross boundaries between different cultures. Similarly, although Rana is a veiled Arab-Muslim woman, she does not really know where she belongs and her liberal behavior shows a kind of multicultural background. Han knows that he is an Iraqi Muslim and is not sure that Iraq is the country to which he belongs since he is living the experience of exile and alienation and seems not to belong to any specific place. Aziz diminishes the differences between Arab Americans and Latinos and dismisses the idea of stereotypes that categorize people into separate entities"(197). As Fadda-Conrey points out, "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).

Defying the ideas of binary oppositions and stereotyping, *Crescent* posits the concept of ethnic communities communicating and coexisting with one another. Despite the diversity of their cultural backgrounds, the characters manage to negotiate the barriers that these differences might produce by taking

part in the intercultural communication that takes place in the borderland of the café and the kitchen. Indeed, it is through her work as a chef that Sirine is able to carry out her role as a bridge across the various ethnic and cultural groups. However, Sirine's role is simultaneously a medium of unification and separation, bringing the characters together while keeping them apart. As Fadda-Conrey puts it, "Sirine's cooking and the act of participating in its consumption, while drawing the various characters together, simultaneously underscore their varied ethnic, national, and cultural identities" (7). For example, the rituals of food consumption and festive occasions in the novel such as the celebration of "Arabic Thanksgiving" (190-192) highlight the distinctions inherent between different cultural and ethnic communities even at the level of Arab groups. While food brings different ethnicities and nationalities together, its preparation and consumption serve as an important distinguishing factor between one national and ethnic affiliation and another ((Fadda-Conrey, 8).

In *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber is addressing the question of mixed origin (hybridity) and the possibility of reconciliation with a torn self, a dilemma that haunts most Arab-Americans who are trying to adjust in a multi-cultural American society. As the author's persona, Sirine is haunted by issues of self-identity and cultural and ethnic origins. She is blond and a white American, but she is also half-Arab. When she looks in the mirror, "all she can see is white.... Entirely her mother" (8), but when people ask her nationality, they are surprised when she tells them she is half Arab. On one occasion she ponders the idea that "she inherited her mother on the outside and her father on the inside" (231) Uncertain about this conclusion, she wishes she could examine "the blood and bones and the shape of her mind and emotions [to] find her truer and deeper nature" (231). As Mercer and Strom conclude, "Sirine's questions about her blood and bones' origins exemplify her in-between state as an Arab American"(8). Sirine has been brought up by parents who died on a humanitarian mission in Africa after traveling to different parts of the world. She views her parents as the bridge that connects her to two different cultures. Originally, she was born to an American mother from an Irish origin and an American immigrant from an Arabic descent. She is an Iraqi-American, to be more specific. Sirine's view of herself as a combination of Arab and American origins reminds us of Naomi Shihab Nye's view of herself as the daughter of an American mother

and a Palestinian father as shown in her typical poem "Half and Half" (*19 Varieties of Gazelle Poems of The Middle East*). Like Nye's, Sirine's father is a symbol of her Arabic roots and origin. He reminds her of her original homeland and leads her to find a place in her father's culture.

A very important question that Sirine asks and which is considered a main issue in postmodernism is whether we, as human beings, can have only one identity. Finding herself as the daughter of an Arab-American father and an American mother, Sirine is keen on challenging the boundaries of identification. She tells Hanif: "I'm not really all American" (58). Sirine always feels there is something lost in her life that she needs to find: "I guess I am always looking for my home, a little bit, I mean, even though I live here" (61). When Sirine calls the agency to buy a ticket to go to Iraq, she is not sure whether she wants to be identified as an Iraqi or as an American: "What if I was an Iraqi?" she asks (291). When asked what faith she belongs to, Sirine replies: "I suppose I don't actually have one.... Well, I believe in lots of things" (161).

All this shows that Sirine is suffering as a result of this tortuous quest for individual and national identity. As a hybrid, Sirine sees her self as the different, the unusual individual. Her hyphenated position makes her feel as if she were in a constant motion between two distinct cultures and two different identities. Sirine suffers from her feeling of being half and half, a feeling that makes her unsure about the culture to which she really belongs. Fadda-Conrey rightly points out that although Sirine's interactive role helps build bridges of communication and understanding between different Arab and non-Arab ethnic and cultural groups, she suffers from the stringent dictates of her mainstream American society that insists on a clear and transparent demarcation of identity and citizenship (6). For her mainstream American culture, darkness denotes an Arab identity and whiteness designates a staple of mainstream American identity. A sense of conflict begins when she can't see herself as pure American or pure Arab and torn between two cultures she cannot easily assimilate. Unable to determine whether she is white or black, Sirine concludes that skin color, though significant, remains an erroneous and a slippery racial and ethnic marker. As Fadda-Conrey again observes, "Abu-Jaber renders fluid the otherwise rigidly constructed demarcation lines that generate ethnic enclaves, which separate one minority from another and

pit members of the same minority group against each other" (7). At the age of 39, Sirine does not know to which culture she really belongs and so she starts to question her original identity in everything around her: in her uncle's folk tale of Abdelrahman Salahadin and his adventures, in her uncle's Arabic words and stories about her father and Iraq, in Han's Arabic words like "habeebti", "mineedi", "athan" "ya Allah", "knaffea", etc., in his stories about Iraq, in his Arabic songs, in Um-Nadia's stories about Lebanon and in her use of some Arabic words and in the Arabic food she herself prepares. Sirine's uncle is an Iraqi Arab who lives in America and who tries to revive his own culture of story-telling through narrating the story of Abdelrahman Salahadin. Considering story-telling as the common code of the people of the same culture, he narrates this fable to Sirine in order to keep her in touch with her own culture. In spite of the intergenerational and cultural distances between Sirine and her uncle, the uncle is capable through storytelling of reaching out to his niece and helping her find her identity. In this way, Sirine realizes that there is a deeply-rooted bond between the present and the past, the American and the Arab components of her identity and the role of transculturation as a means of achieving a hybrid identity. It is through her uncle that Sirine can recollect some memories about her homeland and Arab heritage

Despite her suffering as a result of her feelings about her mixed origin, Sirine's hybridity and in-betweenness help her provide a connecting bridge within the ethnic borderlands of the novel. Though she is concerned about her identity and her roots, Sirine lives a kind of free, liberal and secular life that clearly shows a sense of cultural diversity and an ethnic plurality that characterize postmodern life. Her inability to speak Arabic shows her detachment from her culture. The love story between Sirine and Han involves not only an exchange of emotions and love but also a search for identity and origin. Sirine's view of the relationship has a touch of multiculturalism and diversity. Sirine is both an Arab woman who wants her relationship with her lover to end with marriage (286) and an Arab-American Muslim woman behaving as an American woman frequently going to parties and seeking joy and comfort from her relationship with her boyfriends or lovers (25-26). Even though Sirine loves Han and finds it difficult to live without him, she rarely mentions the idea of getting married.

This conception of identity as outlined above is compatible with that recurrent in most postmodernist fiction. As Patricia Waugh observes:

Over the last thirty years, the deconstruction of liberal individualism and the dissolution of liberal aesthetic conceptualizations of character have been central to postmodern art and theory.... The human individual is defined without history, traditional values, God, nation. Both have assaulted aesthetic or philosophical notions of identity as pure autonomous essence.

(*Postmodernism*: 165)

Accordingly, having one specific identity is not possible any more, for individual identity is not governed by any specific factor. From a postmodernist perspective, we live in a world in which nothing is certain and final and in which we are exposed to different cultures at the same time. Hence, our identities are not fixed and constitute a mixture of different cultures that influence and are influenced by one another. The writer herself can be considered as an Arab-American of a Jordanian origin. In this way, *Crescent*, like most postmodernist fiction, challenges the traditional concept of identity as well as the concept of grand narratives, the unity and autonomy of the subject and the ability of discourses to stabilize and become complete wholes.

Crescent also depicts the feelings of loss and alienation that many of the immigrant characters suffer from as a result of their exilic living. Such characters as Han and Sirine's uncle live in exile, though for different reasons. Sirine's uncle had immigrated with his brother earlier on in search of better living conditions. Han's exile is basically political, coming after his hunting down by the Iraqi police. It is noticeable that these characters living in exile pass their nostalgia and the bitterness of exilic life to their descendants and relatives.

As Linda Hutcheon has shown, Postmodernism is closely associated with intertextuality (120-140). A postmodern novel in its own right, *Crescent* abounds in intertextuality and literary allusions. There are frequent allusions to Arab and American poets as well as to American and Arabic literature in general. In addition to the references to Mahmoud Darwish (21), Edward Said (188), there are references to Ahdaf Soueif, Emile Habibi, Naguib Mahfouz (86) as well as to Hemingway, Whitman, , Adonis (95), Abdul Wahab Al-Bayati (96), Melville(239), Shakespeare and Chekhov(122,99), among many others. There are also quotations from Arab poets

such as the ancient Arab poet Tarfa Ibn al-Abd (95) and the Abbasid poet Ibn al-Rumi (226). In its language, the fairy-tale story often uses the kind of terminology we find in *The Arabian Nights* like the use of such words as jinn, afreet, enchantress, and mermaid, etc. The writer also utilizes some narrative techniques derived from the fairy tale and the storytelling of the *Arabian Nights*. Indeed, the novel often alludes to the *Arabian Nights* and to Shahrazad by name (e.g.181). On many occasions the narrative method echoes that of the *Arabian Nights* with its keen interest in maintaining a sense of suspense and curiosity by stopping at a crucial point in the narrative; and so the reader is kept anxious to know about the fate of the principal character of the fairy tale, Abdelrahman Salahadin, who has been missing for months after his fake drowning in the same way that the reader of the *Arabian Nights* is concerned about finding out the fate of Shahrazad.

In addition to the various references to the *Arabian Nights*, we are reminded of some literary works such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, Forster's *A Passage to India* and Lawrence's *Women in love*. When we are told that Sirine's uncle "situates himself in his story-telling position — elbow on knee and hand to brow" (5), we are immediately reminded of Marlow "lifting one arm from the elbow and the palm of the hand outwards" (*Heart of Darkness*: 9-10), as he begins to narrate his story. The repeated references to the scarf that Han had given to Sirine are reminiscent of Othello's intriguing handkerchief and the loss of the scarf and the protagonist's betrayal are very subtle references to *Othello*. Abu-Jaber also evokes Forster in his complicated literary treatment of the encounters between Western and Eastern cultures and people in India under British colonial rule. This evocation is further bolstered by the recurrence in *Crescent* of the same name of one of the principal characters in Forster's novel, i.e., Aziz, who appears in both novels as a poet with clandestine love relationships and who does not care much about conventional morality. By the same token, the unexpected coming of Sirine to Han's lectures reminds us of Birkin's surprise visit to Ursula's classroom in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. Unfortunately, however, Abu-Jaber leaves these loaded connections and many similar others largely unexplored

By using several languages and different discourses in this somewhat multilingual and multilayered text, the author creates what Bakhtin would call a polyphonic

novel with various voices or what M. A. K. Halliday would call registers. According to Bakhtin, heteroglossia or the plurality of discourse is produced through the interweaving of different registers in the text of the novel (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 336). Postmodernist fiction uses heteroglossia in order to break up the unified projected world into a polyphony of worlds of discourse (McHale: 167). In *Crescent* there is a tendency to emphasize the plurality of voices of discourse (polyphony) through providing the text with a distinct diversity of voices, narratives, languages and identities, thus making the text multilingual rather than monolingual. Bakhtin maintains that “radical heteroglossia emerges in cultures in which the various national languages are mutually aware of one another” (qtd. in McHale: 171). In *Crescent* we can find different languages (Arabic, English, and French) and different cultures as well as diversified characters from different regions of the world, all of whom are aware of and accept each other's existence. Indeed, The novel merges what is usually kept separate in a modernist novel, and the unified text of the traditional realist novel is not only decentered but is actually split when the narrative breaks into two parallel stories and the fictive and the factual are intermingled.

In *Crescent* there are two parallel stories running concurrently. As a consequence to this, readers may wonder how to read the text: two stories at the same time? One story at a time? The first choice requires the reader to read the text in the order in which it is actually printed on the page while the second requires him/her to read it as two separate stories altogether. Neither of these choices is simple, for it contains some difficulty, if not confusion, for the average reader. Actually, the writer's use of two parallel stories is part of the postmodernist writers' technique of using simultaneous texts that run counter to each other. As McHale observes of postmodernist fiction in general: “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).

Whenever a text like that of *Crescent* is split into two separate texts, questions arise about the relationship between the two parallel texts. In this novel, the reader has to keep in mind the development of the first story which s/he encounters at the beginning of each and every chapter. Undoubtedly, reading the novel may sometimes become disconcerting. The fragmented and multiple

structure of *Crescent* challenges the traditional realist narrative conventions of coherent and continuous texts, suggesting perhaps that fragmentation is an essential component of postmodernist narrative texts. As Hutcheon observes, “The local, the limited, the temporary and the provisional are what define postmodernism ((43). These elements take on a new significance in the light of the notions of the decentered subject and of the multiplicity of truth (rather than one truth) – a poststructuralist view led by Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, among many others. In *Crescent*, this decentering can be found through the valuing of the local, the provisional and the peripheral. Actually, this fragmentation of narration may mirror the sense of chaos, uncertainty and dispersal characteristic of postmodernism as a whole.

Like many postmodernist novels, *Crescent* makes use of multiple narrators. In addition to the omniscient author, there is Sirine's uncle, who narrates not only the fairy-tale story but also takes part in narrating some sections of the main story when he tells Sirine about the family life story and other related incidents. The mermaid Alieph also narrates her story to Aunt Camille. And in retrospect, Han narrates to Sirine his childhood story in Baghdad when he was 13-14 years of age (Chapter 20) . Nathan also becomes a narrator when he describes his own life experiences and his love relationship with Laila, Han's sister; and so does Rana when she tells Sirine about her failed arranged marriage and the bizarre incidents that followed from it. It also worth mentioning that the story in *Crescent* does not start from the beginning but towards the end when Sirine is about 39 and Han is even older than that age. Sirine's life as a child and the story of her parents are narrated in the form of a flashback and so is the life of Han as child and as a young man in Iraq and later as a student and an adult in Egypt and Britain. Other characters such as Nathan and Sirine's uncle also present their recollected memories of the past.

Though narrative technique is one of the most important postmodernist features that characterize this novel, it still does not approach the level of experimentation that some postmodernist writers have tried in their novels. For instance, there is neither a complete withdrawal of the narrator nor the replacement of narration by dialogue or the author leaving the reader without the help of the omniscient author. Nor do we find the use of graphology or orthography that we may find in many postmodernist novels. In *Crescent*, the author's

presence in the story is easily felt though in most postmodern fiction the author almost disappears. Actually, in this novel traditional narrative techniques exist side by side with postmodernist narrative techniques, producing the effect of multiplicity, variety and a sense of fragmentation and reflecting the relativity of truth. Han's life story is told partly through first-person narrator and partly through the omniscient author and the whole novel contains two parallel stories: the fairy-tale story and Han-Sirine love story; and in both stories first- and third-person narration are used. In its narrative method of using more than one narrator, in its concentration on past memories and in telling a story rooted in the ancient tradition of Arab story telling, *Crescent* is reminiscent of Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* and Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* which employ multiple narratives to develop the main story. In such works, the use of multiple narrators, parallel narratives and multiple points of view creates a multilayered narrative that sounds confusing at first but eventually proves to be cleverly done.

The frequent and sudden shifts in setting also reflect the diversity and the multiplicity that characterize most postmodernist fiction. *Crescent* is a novel in which the local and the global interact to produce a diverse and multifarious world. There are references to various locales or places such as Baghdad, Beirut, Los Angeles, Cairo, Jerusalem, Aqaba, Damascus, Egypt, Jordan, Africa, India, Britain, America and many other places. In addition, part of the events of the fairy-tale story occur in the Red Sea, in the White Nile, in the Arabian desert, in Sinai and even in some legendary places such as "the Land of the Setting Sun" and "the land of Na". The novel opens with a description of war-time Baghdad setting but soon shifts its locale to Los Angeles where most of the events take place in Nadia's cafe. In the last part of the novel, the fairy-tale story shifts from the Middle East and Africa to America where the events take place in Los Angeles and Hollywood before it finally shifts back to the Middle East, while the main story continues in America.

In postmodernist texts transgressions of traditional storytelling are manifested in various ways such as the mixing of fact and fiction, of history and fiction, of high and low culture, the mingling of literary genres and the inclusion of the fantastic, the metafictional (the narrator talking about his own story) and of the magic-realist. In fact, one of the exciting developments in the late 20th-century fiction is the writers' exploration of the

connection between history and fiction. In postmodernism, "history becomes a text, a discursive construct upon which fiction draws as easily as it does upon other texts of literature" (Hutcheon: 142). As in most postmodernist fiction, in *Crescent* the fictive and the actual are intermingled. For instance, Han discusses the current political issues of Iraq with Sirine and he narrates to her his life story, his romantic adventures with a western lady and how he managed to run a campaign against Saddam Hussein and his fleeing Iraq afterwards. He also tells her about Saddam's execution of his two sons-in-law after making them apologize for leaving Iraq without prior permission (109). In fact, Han's life is embedded within the historical/political context of Iraq and is always foreshadowed by Saddam's punitive actions. However, we must always remember that reference to Saddam Hussein does not include him as a character in the novel as we may find in most postmodernist and historical novels which often treat real-life figures as fictional characters.

In addition to the various references to Saddam Hussein and his regime during the 1990s and earlier, there are references to the Shah of Iran, to Ayotallahs, to Jews, to Palestinians, to Moslems, to Hollywood, to American air strikes against Iraq, to the C.I.A., to the F. B. I., to Aljazeera Satellite Station, to Abbasid empire as well as to the Iraq-Iran war. There are also references to the history of slavery, to the life of some historical personages such as Sir Richard Burton and to several other historical events, real places and literary/historical figures such as Mahmoud Darwish, Peter O'Toole and Lawrence of Arabia. All these references are integrated into the texture of the fairy-tale story and the main fictional story and become an integral part of the novel's essential fictional components. Fiction, biography, history, politics, classroom lectures, letters, news broadcasts, childhood memories and present-day dreams are all intermingled—a further indication of the fall of boundaries between the genres. For instance, Han's narrative of his own life story (Chapter 26) is partly biographical (narrating his own life), partly historical (referring to Saddam's reign) and partly fictional (a character in the story), and the references to the political situation in Iraq during the embargo of the 1990s and to American foreign policy exist side by side with the fictional events.

Crescent combines romance, folk tales and current events to depict the Arab-American experience. By this

mixing of the real and the fictional, the writer seems to be doing what most postmodernist writers have done: to fictionalize history. "The postmodernists fictionalize history, but by doing so they imply that history itself may be a form of fiction" (McHale: 96). Conversely, fiction may compete with history as a vehicle of historical truth. "In postmodernist-revisionist historical fiction, history and fiction exchange places, history becoming fiction and fiction becoming 'true' history – and the real world seems to get lost in the shuffle" (McHale:96). In *Crescent*, there seems to be no neat dividing line between the texts of history and those of literature or fiction, and the novel borrows from both. It is this intermingling of the factual and the fictive that helps underscore the novel's postmodernist nature.

Another aspect of this unconventional intermingling is the mixing of high and low culture. Actually, popular culture has received special attention by postmodernism. Before the 1960s, popular culture was largely neglected. In postmodernism, elements of popular culture exist side by side with the products of high culture. In *Crescent*, low culture is intermixed with high culture and is given prominence through treating the main fictional story and the fairy-tale story on equal footing, with the latter being presented as a full-fledged narrative preserving its own unity within the frame story from start to finish.

But even more extraordinary is the mixing of real-world historical fact with the illusory reality of the fantastic and the magical world of the fairy-tale story, a phenomenon often called "magic realism". According to an anonymous *Wikipedia* article, magic realism is "an artistic genre in which magical elements or illogical scenarios appear in an otherwise realistic or even 'normal' setting".⁽³⁾ In fiction, magic realism refers to a combination of the realistic and the fantastic. Characters in the magic-realist story are idiosyncratic and possess unusual, historic and symbolic names. The plot is generally nonlinear, circular, intertwined, anachronic or even chaotic. There is a peculiar fragmentation of time and place; time shifts between past and present and place keeps changing, creating what looks like a "mythical" place. In magic realism, we find a miscellaneous use of myths, legends, fairy-tales, the oral tradition of storytelling, folkloric customs, magic and mythology, etc. There is also an abundance of surprise, the absurd, the comical, the grotesque and the uncanny. Such themes are actually part of the postmodernist fictional tradition. Indeed, magic realism is sometimes considered as a

subcategory of postmodern fiction due to its use of techniques similar to those of postmodernist texts (ibid.).

Like many other postmodernists, Abu-Jaber seems to be borrowing from the genre of magic realism when she makes a combination of the realistic and the fantastical, of fictional characters and real-life personages. For instance, Sir Richard Burton, the famous British explorer, is presented as a partly historical, partly fictional character as exemplified in his marriage to Aunt Camille with whom he becomes involved in the search for Aunt Camille's son Abdelrahman Salahadin. Aunt Camille herself looks half -human, half-witch, a sorceress who has bewitched Burton, among many others. She plays such contradictory roles as "the third wife of the Sultan of Imr (89), a "freed Nubian slave" (38) and the wife of the British explorer Sir Richard Burton (89). She falls under the spell of the enchantress mermaid Alieph, who also has both human and supernatural qualities as shown in her appearance in her sea cave at the beginning and as moving in her rolling chair in Cairo at the end (315). In this story, Peter O'Toole, the famous movie star, appears as starring in the film of *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and Abdelrahman is transformed into Omar Sharif and is seen acting in the *Lawrence of Arabia* movie (314) . Abdelrahman and Crazyman al-Rashid also act in many Hollywood films (289-290,329) and Abdelrahman is also seen acting in a movie set in Wadi Rum in Jordan where he had originally grown up (289) and he later on takes a part in a theatrical production of *Othello* in Cairo while Crzyman al-Rashid becomes a stage producer there (330).

Jinn, houris, mermaids, sirens, ifreets, nymphs, sylphs, legendary fish (Alieph and the Mother of all Fish) and legendary animals (Napoleon-Was-Here) appear and speak in this kind of fantastical, mythical and legendary atmosphere and even behave as humans. There is also a miscellaneous mixture of myths, legends, oral traditions of story-telling, folkloric customs, magic, the marvelous, the fantastic, and the absurd, elements in which postmodernist fiction usually abounds, making the fairy-tale story a mixture of the magic-realist. Very fantastic events occur throughout the fairy-tale story and the real, the fictional and the magical mingle with each other without logic or reason, strictly speaking.. In this atmosphere of magic realism and fairy-tale, miraculous events and supernatural beings are expected to appear as natural and unforced and are all expected to be accepted as matter-of-fact and normal everyday occurrences.

Although the two stories remain parallel throughout the novel, they are interconnected in one way or another. For example, Sirine's uncle claims that Abdelrahman's mother, Camille, is his "great-great-auntie" (87) and that Abdelrahman is his cousin (5) and Sirine's great-cousin (264). Both Sirine and her uncle appear in both stories, thus integrating the two seemingly disparate narratives. Despite this, the writer tries to keep the two stories as separate as possible, an action that shows a different way of using the fantastic from say Poe's "the Fall of the House of Usher", Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's children* (1983) and Gracia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Unlike the other stories, in *Crescent*, the fantastic or the magical does not intrude extensively on the main realist story. The writer keeps the two narratives (i.e. the fictional-realist text and the magic-realist text) both integrated and apart, with the main story working well with or without the magic-realist story.

As in most postmodern fiction, there are various instances of a clear distortion of time. For example, Aunt Camille, the mother of Abdelrahman, who is himself cousin of Sirine's uncle, cannot be the wife of the nineteenth-century historical explorer and traveler Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890). As the novel is set in the last decade of the 20th century, there is an obvious anachronism in such a presentation of time. This distortion of time by the magical-realist narrative makes time appear as cyclical, chaotic or even absent. In fact, time in this narrative sometime collapses so that the present repeats or resembles the past. Another instance of such distortion of time appears when we are told that Abdelrahman has been starring in Hollywood movies for over 40 years (328), which sounds incompatible with his present and past life experiences and circumstances. Despite this, the characters are made to accept rather than question the logic of the magical or miraculous elements. When Sirine expresses her incredulity about some of these miraculous events, her uncle tells her that she needs to get more familiar with the art of story telling (266).

As mentioned earlier, the use of metafiction (literally fiction about fiction) is one of the main devices of postmodernist fiction. *Crescent* is replete with instances of metafiction. In several chapters the voice of the narrator of the fairy-tale story (i.e. Sirine's uncle) breaks in or intrudes upon the narrative to provide general comments or to explain how to view the story. More than once, he intervenes to claim that the fairy-tale story is a "moralless" story and that it is different from a "story

with a moral" (e.g.5, 68,189), to describes it as a "form of love story in disguise" (47), to urge Sirine to pay attention or to exhort her about the art of story-telling (264). Sometimes, the narrator talks directly to the narratee, trying to theorize about story-telling, asserting that old stories are illusory but may be based on reality and so the listener is urged not to fret over details (179) or to affirm the continuous, cyclical nature of his "moralless" story, claiming that it goes from one place to another without suffering from any interruption (189). When Sirine asks her uncle about the ending of the fairy-tale story, he makes interesting remarks about the art of story-telling and the necessity of withholding some information from the listener, saying: "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. In other works, Habeebti, you must never tell everything" (330).

The fairy-tale story in *Crescent* is also connected with science fiction which is, as McHale maintains, "postmodernism's unrecognized or 'low' art's double, its sister-genre" (58). Science fiction deals with invasions from outer space, visits to other planets, time-travel, lost worlds, etc. and postmodernism has borrowed some of these motifs (Ibid. 65). In this novel Abdelrahman's adventure in the sea and his trips to different parts of the world including Asia, Africa, and America are reminiscent of a journey in a science fiction story where characters go on imaginary journeys to distant places or to far away planets. From his undersea cave, Abdelrahman goes to Hollywood—a strange, unexplained and unexpected trip. Abdelrahman and Crazyman al-Rashid, a fellow of the notorious Abdelrahman, were kidnapped by the sirens while they were both prisoners of the mermaids (255). The abduction of Abdelrahman by some sea sirens and the kidnapping of Crazyman by "some sort of desert version of space aliens" (180) are comparable to the abduction of humans by space aliens in science fiction novels as we may encounter, for instance, in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse – Five* (1969). And in a manner similar to that of a space trip in a science fiction story, Aunt Camille sets on a long-distance trip to the unknown "Land of the Setting Sun" (193).

Furthermore, *Crescent* makes use of parody. Parody figures prominently in the way this novel makes use of the narrative techniques of the *Arabian Nights* or the

folktale as well as those of the traditional novel. Though parody is defined as “a literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for comic effect or ridicule” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*), parody “is not always at the expense of the parodied text.” (Hutcheon: 26). In other words, parody does not necessarily include the concept of ridicule; and it is in this sense that *Crescent* utilizes this literary device in its treatment of the *Arabian Nights*, upon which it draws for motifs and narrative technique. *Crescent* does not mock or poke fun at its prototype but uses it as a model to present its own narrative, a technique that frequently occurs in some postmodernist fiction. In *Crescent*, whole elements of the fairy tale or of the *Arabian Nights* are lifted out of their context and incorporated into a late twentieth-century context, without ridiculing them. For instance, the depiction of jinn, magicians, witches, legendary places, animals and characters as well as the narrator’s frequent pauses in the midst of the story are essentially borrowed from the *Arabian Nights* or the common fairy-tale. Such elements are further complicated by the mingling of fairy-tale or fictional characters and settings with historical figures and real geography, a feature which is basically akin to that we usually encounter in the *Arabian Nights*. And as in the *Arabian Nights*, characters in *Crescent* may tell a story within the frame story, resulting in a richly-layered narrative structure. For instance, Queen Alieph talks to Aunt Camille about her life in the ocean (238) and the story of Abdelrahman is paralleled by the story of Crazyman al-Rashid, who spends some time with Abdelrahman in captivity.

However, *Crescent* seems to be using parody in its more traditional sense of mockery in the main story when it departs from the kind of clear and conclusive ending associated with the traditional novel. The ending of *Crescent*, tinged with a touch of irony, implies a critique of a traditional love story where love relationships are often brought to a happy ending, a kind of “and the lovers lived happily ever after”. Contrary to this, Han-Srine love relationship is intercrossed with different intervals of doubt, suspicion and betrayal and the whole story ends on a note of incompleteness, uncertainty and indeterminacy.

Crescent contains many surprises and uncertainties where the reader expects something and then realizes that something else has happened or where there are ambiguous incidents. For example, Han’s sudden disappearance or going back to Iraq is strange,

unexpected and surprising; and Sirine’s infidelity with Aziz (230,333,250) is no less surprising. Another surprise can be seen in Rana’s unexpected behavior when she is prepared to sleep with Aziz though she has been presented as a conservative Muslim (272). It is also surprising to see Abdelrahman, who used to have an incredible addiction to selling himself and faking his drowning (5), becoming a movie star in Hollywood and elsewhere. No one ever expected Abdelrahman to become a professional movie star or Crazyman al-Rashid to become a stage producer or to see the mermaid Alieph rolling in an electric wheelchair in Cairo (315,335) or to witness her earlier transformation from the “Covered Man” into the “Uncovered Woman” (69). Another surprise is the ironic touch which happens when what was frequently alleged to be a “moralless story” turns out to be a story with a clear moral, as Sirine’s uncle’s words clarify: “And in the end, this is also a story about what a good thing it is to forgive – a relief to the one who did the bad thing, and a great relief to the one who gets to forgive.... In this story, the dogs and the mermaids and the mothers and the sons all lived together forever.” (336). Another surprise is shown when Nathan reveals that it was he who had picked up the scarf that Han had given to Sirine and that he had been in love with Han’s sister, Laila (319). There is also a surprising reversal when Sirine finds out that most certainly, and contrary to her previous doubts, Han is still alive (337-338).

By the same token, many instances of uncertainty occur throughout the novel. For example, Sirine’s uncle comments that “Abdelrahman Salahadin may or may not have been the true name of the movie star Omar Sharif. We’ll simply never know for sure. But who really knows anything for sure in this strange and notorious world?” (254). When the Bedouins talked about Richard Burton, they were confusing between the explorer and the actor: “Yes. And when the blue Bedu talked about Ar-Rashad Vur’atonn, they weren’t talking about the English explorer and slave owner Sir Richard Burton, they were talking about the Welsh, drowned-Arab of an actor, plain old Richard Burton...” (254). Han’s letter to Sirine after he left for Iraq (202-203) does not indicate clearly whether or not he will come back after visiting Iraq. A sense of uncertainty or ambiguity also appears as to whether or not he was finally executed back in Iraq, at least for the time being (312). Moreover, it is uncertain whether Abdelrahman survived or was drowned: “Did he survive? Well, maybe he didn’t drown, maybe he did”

(264). We are also not sure about the cause of Laila's death: Was it illness or was she killed by the Iraqi police? The characters themselves are often shown uncertain. Sirine is not sure whether or not she saw Han with another woman (236,255) or whether the scarf Rana was wearing was the one Han had given her (279). She also seems to be uncertain when she thinks about Han's previous relationships and love affairs or when she peruses the letter she finds in Han's pocket and suspects a betrayal (147-148). Moreover, she cannot be sure whether Han had seen her when she went off with Aziz or why Han had left her and gone back to Iraq until Nathan tells her the whole truth and temporarily clarifies the mystery of both the scarf and Han's sudden disappearance (323-325). Another instance of uncertainty appears when Sirine cannot distinguish the photograph of the man in the newspaper: whether it is Han's or Abdelrahman's (338). Indeed, the novel's inclination to keep the events and the endings as ambiguous and as mysterious as possible is echoed in the admonition of the narrator of the fairy-tale story on the art of storytelling quoted earlier but worth quoting again: "Stories 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. In other words, habeebti, you must never tell everything. (330)

Crescent is very much concerned with endings, a feature characteristic of postmodern fiction in general. As Patricia Waugh explains:

In postmodernist texts, the sense of an ending is explicitly posited as something which has to be continuously revised through the endless deferral of repeated narrative reconstruction.... The End is the insight that there can be no ending, no beginning, no ground, because everything is being endlessly rewritten. (90)

McHale also has shown that endings have been treated differently in traditional, modernist and postmodernist novels:

Conventionally, one distinguishes between endings that are *closed*, as in Victorian novels with their compulsory tying-up of loose ends in death and marriage, and those that are *open*, as in many modernist novels. But what are we to say about texts that seem both open and closed, somehow poised between the two, because they are either *multiple* or *circular*? (220)

Accordingly, postmodernist novels often have

ambivalent endings that are partly closed, partly open or multiple and circular endings. *Crescent* can be described as an open-ended novel with multiple endings. Towards the end of the novel, Han suddenly and strangely disappears and everybody is wondering whether or not he has gone back to Iraq and why. As readers, we expect Han to have left America for Iraq as a reaction to Sirine's infidelity and that he will never come back; but the narrative continues two years later, showing that Han may possibly come back to Sirine after all. For the time being, Sirine's view of Han's return is a mixture of doubt and certainty. Nine months later, Sirine suspects that Han has been executed after she sees in the newspaper a picture showing the execution of some "Western spies and collaborators" (312). However, this suspicion is soon dispelled when a week later Sirine receives a letter from Han together with his prayer beads (31). Two years since Han has left, Sirine's conviction that Han is still alive and that he may come back to her after all are further strengthened when she sees in the newspaper a "photo of a man who resembles Han, but cannot be Han" (236) and who is reported to have broken out of prison and crossed the border into Jordan. On further perusal of the photograph, Sirine recognizes the crescent-shaped scar at the corner of Han's eye and she can now easily exclaim that "Han is *alive*" (238). This conviction is further enhanced when Sirine is told that Han is on the phone: "Victor Hernandez is on the phone, saying Han's name and looking at her. ... She presses her hand against her mouth and takes the phone" (339).

Clearly, this development of events shows a repeated shift from one situation to another, thereby indicating an ambiguous open-ending. Instead of the closed ending of the traditional novel which would have made a clear and definitive ending, *Crescent* closes with a symbolic phone call suggesting that Han is on the other end of the line with the possibility of restarting his love relationship with Sirine. However, we cannot be sure about what will happen next, and so the story would go on and on without a clear and decisive conclusion. At the end of the novel, there is no clear end in sight for the reader has been confronted with different potential endings. Does the novel end with the disappearance of Han or does it end with his possible reappearance after two years of absence? Will the ending mark the closure or the continuation of Han-Sirine relationship? The title of the novel may throw some light on this atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty. As Jabbour has explained,

“The word ‘crescent’ standing for the title of the novel, refers to incompleteness. The incomplete story that is alluded to is Hanif’s who opted to visit his mother in Iraq at a time when he may be captured or imprisoned.... It is understood that a fully-fledged moon would have referred to a complete story” (223). Actually, crescent, as the novel shows (329) is a symbol of beginnings and endings; and so it fits as a description of the development and the ending of the love relationship between Sirine and Han as it indicates a relationship that begins and ends before it is complete. This view would make us read the novel as an incomplete narrative, an open-ended story without a clear, definitive ending. In short, the ending is neither clear nor definitive and the events seem to be capable of continuing in the future, a feature that characterizes most postmodernist fiction.

Whether on the levels of mixed identities, hybridity and multiculturalism or on the levels of intertextuality, the continual shifting of narrative method and setting and the experimentation with several postmodernist techniques, *Crescent* seems to defy borders and to celebrate in-betweenness, interconnection and the cross-over of boundaries. As the previous discussion has illustrated, *Crescent* makes use of multicultural literature and multilayered and postmodern narrative techniques to communicate its belief in the possibility of new kinds of relationships across cultural divides.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that Diana-Abu Jaber's *Crescent* abounds in many postmodernist features, the most conspicuous of which are those that deal with the questions of identity, hybridity, ethnicity and multiculturalism. Other important features include intertextuality, the use of multiple narratives and

NOTES

1. <http://www.colorado.edu/English/courses/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html>

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somewhat indeterminate ending, metafiction, science fiction, magic realism and ambiguity. *Crescent* can be seen as part of multicultural literature which focuses on such themes as individual and national identity, acculturation and multiculturalism in an attempt to promote accommodation and understanding among discrete ethnic groups living in the midst of a mainstream cultural community. While acknowledging the need for separate and distinct entities, the novel suggests that different cultures should engage in cooperation, coexistence and integration rather than in ethnic or racial conflicts. Through depicting the struggle of the characters of mixed racial identities and heritage to be accommodated in their larger community in spite of ethnic barriers, the novelist challenges the idea of binary oppositions, demarcated boundaries and fixed identities. Like many other Arab women writers living in the West, Abu-Jaber utilizes this novel to express her feelings not only about identity formation but also to explore such motifs as exile, alienation and hyphenated identity and to forge connections across ethnic and national boundaries. The novel reveals that asserting an Arab identity or an Arab-American identity is not an end goal to be cherished for its own sake but a starting-point from which to begin a redefinition and a reshaping of the traditional concept of identity as a separate and closed entity incapable of mutually influencing, transforming and communicating with the other.

Despite its multifarious postmodernist aspects, *Crescent* is not a postmodernist novel *par excellence*. Using many traditional narrative methods as part of its postmodernist techniques, it stops short of incorporating some of the ideals and practices of the highly experimental postmodernist novels. Nevertheless, a postmodernist approach would shed some light on the multilayered dimensions of this multicultural novel.

2. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1323340>
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_realism

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