

Arabian Jazz, 1993, (376 pages)

&

Crescent, 2003, (pages 349)

by **Diana Abu Jaber**

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The new generation of Arab-American writers is fully concentrated on their American experience as Arabs' offsprings. These writers' particular background knowledge of the Arab World is utilized to inform an American audience of the dynamics that hold an Arab-American family together, and that differentiate an Arab immigrant community from other immigrant communities, on the one hand, and from mainstream cultures, on the other hand.

In her two novels, Diana Abu Jaber, a new generation Arab-American writer, offers a concrete description of the process of adaptation of Arab-American families to American culture, while still keeping strong ties with their native cultures. Abu Jaber is concerned with the conflict that occurs when two cultures function at proximity. Like earlier Arab-American literary figures, namely Rihani, Gibran, and Naimy, who established the grounds for a committed Arab-American literature that fulfils a mission, Abu Jaber has also presented committing works.

Arabian Jazz (1993) consists of 39 chapters and depicts the life of a Jordanian-American family, while *Crescent* (2003), consisting of 32 chapters, relates to an Iraqi situation.

Arabian Jazz represents the dynamics of a short period of time in the life of a family made up of three members: Melvina and Jemorah, aged 21 and 30, and their widowed father, Matussem Ramoud. The setting is the impoverished neighborhood of a place called Euclid in upstate New York. The extended members of this family are an aunt and her husband living in the same area, and the relatives in Jordan who come for in-residence visits. Abu Jaber uses flashbacks to elucidate earlier events that led to the death of the American mother, Matussem's wife, in Jordan, after being

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diagnosed wrongly for an infectious disease, and the impact of the death on the family, mainly after the parents of the deceased accused Matussem of killing their daughter. Matussem took the charge of bringing up his daughters, and he did so in an unrepressed atmosphere. After his hospital job, he would spend time playing jazz at home and out of home, upon request. His daughters are intelligent and open to their neighborhood. They have dreams. Melvina is a dedicated nurse, and Jemorah is a university graduate who is temporarily working in the same hospital as her sister and father. At times, the aunt, Fatima, interferes in Melvina and Jemorah's business since she believes that, being motherless they are in need for someone older to rely on. She is also worried that Jemorah, the eldest, has not married yet. Thus, she would sometimes give herself the freedom to drag them to church, mainly when church events are being organized, where she thought prospective husbands would meet them. Herself being an immigrant, and childless, Fatima is also seeking involvement in, and recognition from her community.

This setting has given an opportunity to the writer to highlight the attitude of the two daughters regarding their paternal and native cultures. Their immediate neighborhood and their relatives from Jordan formed their framework for socialization. The exposure to both cultures helped them make informed decisions about their own lives. Jemorah seems to have opted to go to college for graduate work, while Melvina has decided to keep going with her vocation as a nurse to make a change in the life of the members of her community. The father has also decided to go through some change by getting involved with a lady friend. The bicultural atmosphere this family had embraced helped its members have a better understanding of, and sensitivity to their heritage culture. Jemorah's indecisiveness, and hesitancy in spelling out her likes and dislikes is somewhat related to the impact of her mother's death, which has taken a toll on her a lot more in comparison to Melvina. In general, the story draws on the daily life of an Arab-American family in which the American-born daughters play an essential role in making an American audience feel more involved.

The setting in *Crescent* is that of a family nucleus of an uncle and a niece. The uncle holds a teaching position at a state university in the Los Angeles area, and the niece, 39 year-old Sirine, is a cook, whose reputation bestowed on her the title of "chef". This uncommon family configuration of uncle and orphan niece living together is used to help the writer focus on Sirine as the main character, and on the development that has shaped her understanding of life and love. Sirine's parents, an Iraqi father and an American mother, passed away while on a humanitarian

mission in Africa. Sirine was seven then. Through her job as a cook in a Middle Eastern restaurant in the vicinity of the same university where her uncle teaches, Sirine became acquainted with university students and teachers. Such acquaintances formed the backdrop of her liberated and relaxed social life. Her relationship with Haneef, nicknamed "Han", professor of Arabic Literature at the university, originally from Iraq. Haneef, who had fled his country because of the Iraqi regime's brutality, takes a more complex and involving turn. The story line of this novel is built on the development of these two characters.

The highlights of the novel are the progression of Sirine's emotional life and her involvement with Han, and the difficulties of Arab immigrants, like Han, who continue to have strong family ties back home and are emotionally split between two cultures. Through Sirine's commitment, dedication and natural life style, the reader gets a closer yet global understanding of Iraqi politics, of Middle Eastern cuisine including names and ingredients, and of an energetic Arab-American socialization system. All the way through the novel, the reader's imagination is left to soar with the short recall of an Arabian Nights' story at the beginning of most of the thirty-two chapters of the book. The word 'Crescent', standing for the title of the novel, refers to incompleteness. The incomplete story that is alluded to is Han's, since he 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.

In both novels, Abu Jaber has chosen to picture daughters whose mothers are American and yet unavailable, and in both novels, the role of the father, or uncle, is limited to that of a supporter, a non-interfering figure. This context is probably a means to provide these young women with a sense of freedom of choice, and space to find their identity since the two novels have favored daughters who have reached a critical age regarding marriage. In addition, these two novels have used a variety of names, a variety of food items and a variety of situations that connect the Middle East to America. The choice of hybrid names for the characters, such as "Ramoud", "Jemorah", and "Sirine", gives a strong sense of ethnicity that reflects on a combination of origins. The names of well-known food to Americans, such as "humos", and "tabuleh", add familiarity to a multicultural situation. Young Arab-American women encountering young Arab immigrant men and making all the efforts possible to have a better understanding of their backgrounds and behaviors which not infrequently seem to be obscure and somewhat incoherent, provides specific story orientations. In *Arabian Jazz*, for

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example, Melvina warns her sister against succumbing to the pressure of getting into an arranged marriage. In *Crescent*, Sirine is sometimes suspicious of Han's feelings toward her because of his lack of expressiveness.

Abu Jaber has also balanced between education, or lack of it, the use of Arabic, and the unexceptional social status of the two families. In *Arabian Jazz*, the father and aunt are uneducated. They speak broken /dialectal/foreign English, characterized by a drop of the "s" of the verb in its third singular form, substitution of the "ing" sound with the "n" sound, and frequent use of Arabic words and interjections. By contrast, the two daughters are educated and do not know any Arabic. In *Crescent*, the reverse is true. The uncle is educated, but uses Arabic sparingly. The niece is not educated and does not speak Arabic, but the people she socializes with are educated.

Despite the fact that the three young women characters have struggled in search of their identity, *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, in terms of individuality, independence and realization of dreams. The entertaining and easygoing style of the writer places these novels within the reach of multiple audiences: Arab, American, and multicultural. These two novels are welcome contributions to Arab-American literature because they fulfill a need to inform and to affiliate.