

The Ambivalent Depictions of Arabs in Naomi Shihab Nye's *Habibi* and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*

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Abstract—The study aims to identify how Arab-American authors Naomi Shihab Nye and Diana Abu-Jaber depict Arabs in their novels, *Habibi* and *Crescent*. Additionally, the study attempts to compare and contrast between the two writers' depictions of Arabs in their novels. To achieve the objectives of the study, the theory of Post-colonialism is used; more specifically, Edward Said's views from his book *Orientalism* are applied to both novels. The study concludes by showing how both Nye and Abu-Jaber depict Arab characters in an ambivalent way within their works, *Habibi* and *Crescent*, respectively, in that they sometimes present Arabs in a positive light and other times in a negative light. The study also concludes with a set of concepts that include lack of identity, hybridity, and multiculturalism that have affected Arab-Americans and influenced their cultural values. These representations are also considered ambivalent.

Index Terms—Diana Abu-Jaber, Naomi Shihab Nye, ambivalent, representation, Arabs

I. INTRODUCTION

Arab writers living in diaspora often depict Arabs in different ways. For example, Arab writers, such as Leila Aboulela and Mohja Kahf, portray Arabs in a positive way by trying to negate the stereotypical images about Arabs. Conversely, other Arab writers living in diaspora like Fadia Faqir and Ahdaf Soueif characterize Arabs in a negative way which may lead to the promotion of well-known stereotypes of Arabs. Perhaps some Arab writers portray Arabs in a negative light to attract the attention of Western readers and gain popularity among them. At the same time, however, other Arab writers may be using these negative portrayals of their Arab brothers and sisters simply as a way to reflect Arab issues in their writings.

Whatever the case may be, the misrepresentation of Arabs has been an ongoing issue throughout history, and it has only increased in the aftermath of 9/11. It was then that, not only in the West, but throughout the world, people started becoming convinced that the stereotypes that they heard about the Arabs were true. Harb (2012) declares that the attacks on 9/11 are considered to be "a turning point" in the way that Americans and the West view Arabs (p. 14). In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Said discusses the well-known stereotypes about Arabs and how they were first created by the West. He argues that the East (a term also created by the West) only exists in the West's ideology. Said (1978) defines "Orientalism" as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident" (p. 10). According to Said, the West views the East as inferior, irrational, exotic, and backward. On the other hand, they perceive themselves as rational, civilized, and strong. After the events of 9/11, the East (and especially Arabs) began to become synonymous with terrorism and violence (Gana, 2008).

Moreover, Said (1978) questioned and challenged oriental studies; he criticized political and cultural imperialism, claiming that Western Orientalists - authors and scholars who research the "Orient" or "the East" - have misrepresented (and continue to misrepresent) the Orient in such a way that only propagates the West's domination over the East. However, Said's claims of Orientalism have served to motivate many researchers to think more critically about how they picture other cultures and how they unwittingly disseminate complex geopolitical messages in their works (Mather, 2020). Bayani (2020) states that, on one hand, Orientalism refers to the analysis of the East by the West, and on the other hand, she declares that it remains the most powerful method for the West to achieve its own consciousness. Ahmad (2011) adds that, according to Said, Western Orientalists built the universe out of two conflicting elements: "Ours" (the West) and "Theirs" (the East).

Harb (2012) declares that these stereotypical images were a crucial reason that motivated diasporic Arab writers to make their voices heard by presenting their perspectives and defending themselves against Arab stereotypes. As a result, these Arab writers living in diaspora started presenting Arabs in a more favorable light. Nonetheless, these Arab stereotypes are still propagated by other diasporic Arab writers who depict Arabs in an unfavorable way in their works.

Then there are also other diasporic Arab writers whose characterization of Arabs could only be described as ambivalent. Such is the case with the two diasporic Arab-American writers Nye and Abu-Jaber. Thus, this study aims to prove that both of these writers depict Arabs in an ambivalent way in their works (*Habibi*, 1997; *Crescent*, 2003). According to Gamez (2010), Nye and Abu-Jaber are considered to be two iconic Arab-American writers.

Rothman et al. (2017) claim that the nature of ambivalence has been the subject of discussions among scholars and critics since the times of Plato and Aristotle. They define ambivalence as “the simultaneous experience of positive and negative emotional or cognitive orientations toward a person, situation, object, task, goal, or idea, and the feelings of tension and conflict that result... (and) may even be more the norm than the exception in organizations” (p. 33). Eidsvik (2016) declares that ambivalence is a concept that describes a persistent oscillation between wanting one thing and wanting something totally different. It may also refer to a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from an object, individual, or actions.

Both Nye and Abu-Jaber belong to hybrid cultures. Allani (2017) states that the concept of hybridity refers to an individual trapped between two different objects or two different cultures. This entrapment leads him/her to acquire a double vision or double consciousness according to the culture or environment which he/she lives in which, in the end, leads to a merged or even a lost identity. Likewise, an individual from a specific country and culture has unique customs, languages, religions, and other characteristics that distinguish them as members of that culture and ultimately distinguish them from other cultures. As a consequence, when an individual leaves his or her home country and moves to another, he/she experiences a variety of emotions (Zohdi, 2017). This leads them to a place that Bhabha (1994) calls a “third space” which is a place where one has “a sense of home” and is “a space to which they belong” (p. 23). Any mixing between Eastern and Western culture is referred to as hybridity. It generally applies to colonial subjects from Asia or Africa who have sought a balance between Eastern and Western cultural attributes in colonial and postcolonial literature (Singh, 2009). Bhabha’s (1994) theory of developed hybridity describes “the construction of culture and identity within conditions of colonial antagonism and inequity” (p. 30).

Based on Bhabha’s third space, Yousef (2019) states that Nye creates a place, where she can combine both her American bringing and her Arab origins in her created “third place” to be able to comprehend the Arab world (p. 31). AlKhadra (2013) explains that, as hybridity, biculturalism is a source of blessing, and it is not confusing. Further, there is widespread agreement that hybridity originated from ideologies as a result of culturally internalized relations between colonizers and the colonized (Brady, 1994).

Nye (1997) was born in 1952 in St. Louis, Missouri. Her father was a Palestinian refugee and her mother was an American of German and Swiss descent. As a result, Nye spent her adolescence between Jerusalem and San Antonio, Texas (Marchi, 2019). Most of Nye’s work has been inspired by her encounters with cultural disparity and various cultures (Karim, 2002).

Abu-Jaber was born in Syracuse, New York, in 1960 to a Jordanian father and an American mother. At the age of 7, she moved with her family to Jordan where they lived for two years. She has since split her time between Jordan and America. Set in upstate New York where she grew up, Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* is a lighthearted look at a first-generation Arab-American family navigating the pressures and desires of the typical extended family network (Elia et al., 2007).

The stereotyping of Arabs is one of the issues that sway public opinion in Western societies nowadays. Unfortunately, the distorted images of Arabs produced by these stereotypes have also lent themselves to the foreign media which seems to only further transmit the negative ideas about Arabs and Arab culture that are, more often than not, far from reality. Nonetheless, the fact remains that articles presenting Arabs in a negative light do exist, the result of Western ignorance of the Arab reality. The best way to improve this image is for Arabs to challenge the stereotypes about Arabs that the West has propagated and start to present Arabs in their true light.

The current study shows that, as Arab-American writers living in diaspora, both Nye and Abu-Jaber depict Arabs in an ambivalent way. That is, they both present a favorable image of Arabs in their respective works *Habibi* and *Crescent*, but at the same time they also present an unfavorable image of Arabs in these same novels. Many studies into the two authors and their aforementioned novels have been conducted in the past. Moreover, most of these studies have concentrated on universal motifs such as love, family, war, and peace, adjusting to change, ethnicity and identity in relation to Arab culture. As a result, the contribution and significance of the current study lies in the fact that that not many studies have been conducted on how the two Arab-American writers Nye and Abu-Jaber depict Arabs in their respective novels, *Habibi* and *Crescent* in such an ambivalent way. Additionally, up to the researcher’s knowledge, most of the studies that have been conducted tackle each writer individually, while the current study tackles both writers together.

Shaheen (2003) focuses on how the negative portrayal of Arabs in the media reflects their life experiences. Other critics have pointed out the complexity of the writing that Arab-American writers created in their works. Additionally, the media should open the door to completely new modes of activism to get the real picture of Arab and Muslim communities (Gershoni, 1997). Moreover, “Arabness” is frequently associated with backwardness, fanaticism, incompetence, and external antagonism against the Western world and its lauded humanistic and enlightened values of democracy, freedom, and economic and social openness in current political debate (Levanon, 2021).

II. METHODOLOGY

The researcher uses the theory of postcolonialism in reading Nye's *Habibi* and Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*. Further, the researcher specifically relied on Said's views on Orientalism and his discussions on the stereotypes of the Orient/East.

III. ANALYSIS

A. *The Ambivalent Representation of Arabs in Nye's Habibi*

In her novel *Habibi*, Nye depicts the Arabs in an ambivalent way in that her depictions are sometimes positive while, at other times, they are negative. Starting with the positive representations, Nye represents Dr. Kamal as an open-minded educated Arab. This is evidenced in his way of dealing with his kids and his wife. He is very interested in their lives, always asking them questions and listening to their opinions. For example, "Poppy" (as his kids call him) asks his kids and wife about their return to Jerusalem and how they felt about it (Nye, 1997, p. 9). It is also here that Nye tries to show how Arabs remain attached to their home countries even while living abroad. This is a great example of how Nye positively depicts the good nature of Arabs and how their hearts still long for their home countries. At the same time, Nye also tries to focus on the idea of the homesickness of Arabs and their attachment to their Arab identity. She reflects an image of homesickness that lies within her and embodies it in the father's character. The father's smile carries a lot of longing for home; however, a certain sense of nationalism lies in the heart of every human being. Along these lines, Thurber (1999) mentions that homesickness is accompanied by acute longing and intrusive thoughts about home and attachment objects.

In the same paragraph, Nye (1997) also depicts the good side of another Arab father. She describes Liyana's father as a handsome man who, according to Liyana's friends and colleagues, looks like a movie star. He is a very open-minded man and a parent who can speak calmly to his children about any matter. For instance, when Liyana wonders aloud why kissing is not allowed, her father explains that each culture has its own unique traditions (p. 9).

From the previous examples, one can see that the characterization of Poppy is in direct contradiction to the stereotypes that Westerners have about Arab fathers. Salaita (2011) notices this as well and discusses how Nye tries to reflect how both the Arab husband and the relationships among members of Arab families have changed. Ajami et al. (2015) comment on this by saying that the relationships between Arab American fathers' and their children are thought of as strong. In other words, Arab American fathers are strongly attached to their children. Nye shows this contradiction among the Westerners themselves throughout the novel. In one scene Liyana is told by her girlfriends that Jerusalem is full of "pretty guys" who they see on TV (Nye, 1997, p. 21). This image of Arabs, which resembles how Poppy is described as handsome, contradicts the way Arabs are described by Liyana's teacher, Mr. Hathaway. He asks her why people in Jerusalem have such great difficulty being civilized (Nye, 1997). According to Gana (2008), Arabs are known in the West as backward and uncivilized.

The second example shows how the relationship between the Arab father and his daughter is based on discussions and debates rather than the stereotypical Arab father-daughter relationships of control and domination propagated among the people of the West. Moghissi (2010) states that Arab fathers no longer have complete control to manipulate their children. This same point is made where Nye (1997) is presenting an open-minded Arab father. It is easily noted that Liyana's father is depicted as open-minded and mature in all situations and attitudes. He advises his daughter that she must be patient since cultural differences are not simply and quickly understood. He adores his family and especially his children whom he refers to as "precious." He also expresses his delight at being with them all the time. This also negates the stereotypes of Arabs husbands who are said to be neglectful of their houses, wives and children (Moghissi, 2010).

While she may paint these Arabs in a positive light, Nye often contradicts that by painting them in a negative light as well. Kutrieh (2007) discusses these contradictions of Nye's in her portrayal of Arab men. For example, Nye shows different characterizations of Abboud, Liyana's Arab father. Abboud is a doctor and is written as intelligent Arab, yet Nye also presents him as a patriarchal, dominant and backwards Arab when dealing with his wife and mother. He attempts to "silence his mother to no avail" (p. 5). Likewise, Awajan et al. (2019) discuss how Nye represents Dr. Abboud in *Habibi* as a loving father to his two children. He is shown in the novel to be an open-minded Arab who sits with his children and gives them a chance to ask questions and present their opinions.

Nye's ambivalent representation of Arabs in *Habibi* is also mentioned by Yousef (2005). Yousef discusses how Dr. Abboud, is represented as a Palestinian who flees his home country after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. On the contrary, Nye's also portrays Dr. Abboud as an intelligent and successful Arab doctor in the United States who decides to go back to his home country and practice medicine there. This exemplified by the following:

"Only recently he [Liyana's father] grew hopeful about Jerusalem and his country again. While Abboud asserts he is a Palestinian coming back to his country, the Israeli soldiers consider him as an alien who should be checked and searched before letting him in. Indeed, the whole Abboud family is subjected to a humiliating treatment at the airport as are all their relatives who have come to see them" (pp. 34-36).

In above quotation Yousef shows how Nye depicts Abboud as both an Arab returning to his beloved homeland and viewed as an alien in his own land by the Israeli.

Liyana is not completely surprised when her parents first announce the move back to her father's homeland. She expected that this would happen sometime in her lifetime, and now it is time to leave. Liyana's father tries to persuade

his children into believing in the importance of knowing their history - Arab history. As a result, what Nye is presenting here is the importance of a person knowing his/her own history and the history of his/her homeland as well (Nye, 1994).

One of the most important ideas that Nye positively depicts in her novel is the suffering of Arab immigrants in the West. According to the author herself, her beliefs regarding immigration are a form of communication with the world in which she wants to explain how immigrants struggle. Furthermore, she is interested in the reader on the opposite side of her work. She sees her novel as a means of connecting with the bigger picture and that it is her responsibility as a diasporic Arab-American writer to bring readers closer to true picture of Arabs, presenting them as they really are and not according to the stereotypes that Westerners have created in their minds (Nye, 1997). While doing so, Nye here focuses on the word "immigrant". She highlights human identity, and here, the Arab identity specifically. Alexandersen (2019) proves that Nye has the ability to promote intercultural competence by allowing students to identify with and imitate the novel's main protagonist.

In the same context, Pourjafari and Vahidpour (2014) state that this is related to Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" which emphasizes the fact that, in today's world, the migrant is valued not for his/her adherence to pre-determined ethnic morals and cultural traditions, but for his/her ability to adapt to new situations. In other words, "The ability of tradition to be described through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend the lives of individuals who are in the minority" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).

From the previous examples, it is clear how Nye represents Arabs and Arabness in a positive way; however, Nye also seems to want it both ways by also depicting Arabs and Arabness in a negative way. One example of this can be seen in her depiction of how Arab people have to dress. Poppy frightens his daughter when they are moving back to Arab world by telling her that, once they arrive in Palestine, she can no longer dress anyway she wants. This scares her because she now feels that she is not able to be the person she is nor can she do the things she is used to doing (Nye, 1997). It is clear that Poppy is telling his daughter that, although Americans have no problem wearing shorts, Arabs do not find it acceptable.

However, maybe Nye wrote these lines for another reason, too, for in mentioning the fact that Arabs find it unacceptable to wear shorts, she is referring back to her own Palestinian roots. After all, her novel does employ visuals of an Arab environment to convey a greater argument about variety and shared humanity. "No one wears shorts over there" is simply Poppy's (and, in turn, Nye's) way of presenting a respectful attitude towards Arab life and customs. Besides, Nye is always attempting to cross boundaries and connect individuals from these two disparate countries in order to bring them closer together as a result. Yousef (2019) declares that despite the fact that Nye tries to represent an image of Arabs away from the well-known stereotypes that still remain about them, she does not really detach her Arab origins as a Palestinian from her American upbringing. That is, Nye represents both her Palestinian origins and her American upbringing in equal measure in her works. Yousef (2019) continues by stating that Nye considers representing Arabs her responsibility, and that includes those Arabs that blow up buildings. In doing so, she must not only present the good, everyday, average Arabs, but also those Arabs that blow up buildings because, after all, they are Arabs, too. Indeed, this is where the ambivalence in her work becomes most noticeable.

Based on what Yousef (2019) states, Nye concentrates on the idea of Liyana having a new life full of conflicts between her two cultures, marking her own identity. Liyana is depicted as being afraid of facing this new life full of difficulties, especially when it comes to culture, society and people. It is totally different from her past. It is here that Nye tries to convey a realistic view of the mixed feelings of giving up one's home and culture for another, the little things to which one says goodbye to, where even the seemingly insignificant things will be missed. By depicting Poppy's view of Palestine as something Liyana should be fearful of is part of the negativity of Nye's ambivalence in writing about Arabs and the Arab world (Nye, 1997).

Nye's characterization of Liyana's father in the previous example is in direct contradiction with the way she first portrays him. When she first introduces Poppy, he is open-minded, patient, and understanding towards his daughter; however, in the second example, he is shown as the more stereotypical Arab father – tough, stern, and controlling. As a result, Liyana becomes full of fear and hatred for her new country. Liyana also begins to notice the national and racial barriers that surround her. She becomes afraid of losing her identity (identity diffusion); as a result, she begins to feel empty and lost in addition to being stuck in between two opposing countries, their cultures, their ideas and their way of thinking.

Moreover, the reader may surmise that Liyana has a bad idea about the Arab world which may reflect Nye's own opinion. This resembles the Western consciousness about Arabs. The West considers Arabs to be illiterate, uncivilized and savage. This can be seen when Liyana mentions "wild characters". Likewise, when Liyana mentions "the half-breeds", this exemplifies how Nye concentrates hybridity the most common concept of Postcolonialism (Nye, 1997, p. 21). This is because Liyana and her brother think of themselves as Arab-Americans and have difficulties establishing their true identity in much the same way her father finds it difficult to explain to his Arab relatives that he is half Arab and half American. This feeling of being lost in a hybrid identity is yet another major way Nye typifies Arabs in a negative way. Commenting on this point, Erikson (1994) states that immigration is not only about changing countries or regions, but it is also about having two identities, something which becomes hard to accept, particularly among adolescents. Immigrants endure competing social settings as they try to integrate "here" and "there" into a meaningful sense of self throughout the construction of their identity. As a result, identity construction among immigrants,

particularly among those in their teens - the time in which all people's identities are formed - is a continual process in which both the host country and the country of origin play a considerable role.

Then Nye moves to show how Liyana is disappointed about moving to Palestine from the very minute they arrive. The reader sees and observes everything from the eyes of Liyana, feeling her anxiety and curiosity. The reader also sees how disappointed she is; she thought Palestine was different from its reality. By having both Liyana and her mother show and express their disappointment in what they find, Nye delivers a negative message to the reader about the Arab country they have arrived in (Nye, 1997, p. 41).

Nye presents critically depicts how the West used to see the Arab world, which is very different from reality. She also has her own notions about Palestine based on her father's talks about his country, and these ideas become apparent during her first visit to Palestine. To the reader, it is obvious when reading the dialogue between Liyana and her mother. In a similar vein, Nye utilizes the character Liyana to illustrate the problem of multiculturalism that the main character faces after returning to her hometown. This struggle is also evident in the character of her father Poppy, who believes that if he returns to his homeland, he would no longer feel lonesome. Liyana found she and her father are not all that different in their multicultural sentiments.

Conversely, in other scenarios throughout *Habibi*, Nye attempts to show how the well-known Arab stereotypes, and especially those of the Palestinians, are not the true pictures of Palestinians as who they really are – a people trying to defend their country and their people. Nye tries to highlight both how Palestinians live in their own country, and how some of them living in diaspora are not even allowed to enter it. She mentions how Palestinians suffer with borders that are shaped by cultural, economic, and political ideologies. This resembles what Mercer and Strom (2007), Knopf-Newman (2006) and Al-Masri (2001) state.

Nevertheless, there is another example where Nye tries to represent Arabs in a positive way and opposes the West's well-known stereotypes about them. It is when the Jews, thinking that Liyana is an American, advise her not to buy from Arabs, but instead tell her to travel to the city's Jewish border. This kind of an act exemplifies the Arab-Israeli conflict and the tremendous suffering endured by Palestinians in both their bordered and bounded homeland and around the world. These boundaries divide people, resulting in increased hostility, intense political tension, and a significant cultural division between opposing factions of the population. Furthermore, there are several allusions to Israeli raids on Palestinian homes, including the searching, seizing and bombing of Palestinian homes. There are also hints to the Israeli demolition of entire villages and erasure of existing borders within Palestine to make way for Jewish settlers. In such settings, Nye tries to highlight the suffering of the Palestinians in their homeland and that what is negatively known about them as resistant people and terrorists is only a result of them defending themselves, and their lands and families from the Israelis. In this way, Nye presents Arabs positively, while in other scenes she depicts them in a negative way.

For example, Nye portrays Poppy as an Arab who is against religion and mocks those that are religious and in doing so, she conveys a bad idea about how Arabs think and what they believe in. According to Poppy's character, for example, she states that it is not acceptable to abuse other religions. Religious tolerance is an idea that suggests that human beings respect all religions and ideology, whether it suits us or not. Nevertheless, it means acceptance by all people of all religions and cultures.

Additionally, when Nye mentions what Poppy answers Liyana about the relationship between Palestinians and Israelis, Liyana asks, "Do you think the Arabs and Jews secretly love one another?" "I think," Poppy said, "they are bonded for life. Whether they like it or not. Like that kind of glue that won't let go" (Nye, 1997, p. 55). Here, Nye wants to send a subliminal message to readers that Arabs have to accept the Jews; in fact, she is blaming them for not accepting the Jews. To go even further, she is trying to blame the conflicts between the Palestinians and the Jews on Arabs.

On the other hand, the same scene could, however, be positively understood in two ways. The first shows the hopelessness or disappointment in Poppy's character when he says they are bonded for life, whether they like it or not. Poppy shows that he is losing hope of ever getting rid of the occupation, which may have also led him to accept the fact that Jews are living in occupied Palestinian territories. This also may be understood in a way that Nye (1997) is reflecting her hope of peace, something that is also seen in the relationship she creates between Liyana and Omer, a Jew. This is noted by Nye in the novel where she writes, "Everybody then was praying for peace in Jerusalem" (p. 30). AlKhadra states that Nye even chooses a Jew to be Liyana's beloved because of her hope for peace not because of peace itself, but because of the consequences of peace and its effect on the Palestinians specifically (p. 180).

Mercer and Strom (2007) show the food-related imagery and themes that are used by Nye to represent the Arab family, political conflicts and issues, and culture. Through all this, they try to introduce Middle Eastern ingredients to the Western reader. Knopf-Newman (2006) also shows how Nye reveals some of her own life in *Habibi*. She depicts the Arab culture, and specifically the Palestinian culture. Finally, Al-Masri (2001) also states that Nye reflects the Arab culture and politics and the issues related to them in her literary works.

B. Abu-Jaber's Depictions of Arabs in *Crescent*

Like Naomi Shihab Nye's *Habibi* (1997), Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) is full of ambivalent depictions of Arabs, where Abu-Jaber sometimes paints them at times in a positive light and at other times in a negative light. Thus, Abu-Jaber highlights several ideas concerning Arab-American identity while presenting Arabs in her aforementioned novel.

First, Abu-Jaber emphasizes a significant positive depiction of Arabs to the reader about how Arab immigrants suffer in the West. Sirine, the novel's protagonist, is an Arab female who lives in the West with her uncle after her parents die. Abu-Jaber sums up Sirine's feelings in the following:

"And sometimes when she is awake in the center of the night, the night cool and succulent as heart of palm or a little chicken kabob, Sirine senses these feelings rushing in her own blood. But she was also born with an abiding sense of patience, an ability to live deeply and purely inside her own body, to stop thinking, to work, and to simply exist inside the simplest actions, like chopping an onion or stirring a pot" (Abu-Jaber, p. 21).

From the quote above, the reader can sense that, when Sirine feels the cool of the night, it represents her loneliness. Furthermore, if we look at it from a different perspective, we will discover that she likes her job as a chef because it allows her to just dwell on the simplest acts such as slicing an onion or stirring a pot. This might be seen as the explanation for her desire to work as a cook at Nadia's Café in order to create a friendly atmosphere. Being a chef in an Arab café and cooking Arab food enables her to feel at home. This is a positive representation of Arabs by Abu-Jaber that shows how Arabs are attached to their original identity although living in the West.

However, Farid (2018) confirmed Abu-Jaber's reply when asked if she feels responsible for the Arab-American community, Abu-Jaber said that creating authentic characters, rather than portraying Arab culture in the United States, is her first priority: "It is more about art than it is about cultural responsibility" (p. 211). Thus, it may be claimed that Abu-Jaber did take on some type of cultural burden, even if it was not what was expected of her. It is rather the burden of holding up a mirror to a culture that is misunderstood in the sense that its many layers and multiple paradoxes are difficult to comprehend, not just for foreigners, but also for Arabs who prefer to take a unilateral approach that incorporates "we" and "them." Nevertheless, that is why it is clear throughout *Crescent* that Abu-Jaber is unconcerned about the reaction of the community to her portrayal of Arab characters, even as several of them highlight negative pictures of the culture that are often overlooked, if not denied, not only by Arabs in the United States, but by Arabs as a whole.

All of the symbols included in the previous quotation and throughout the novel may be interpreted as the reason why Sirine works as a chef, which is to find a "homey" place to live and to share her loneliness with other Arab immigrants, who also seek a sense of belonging, love, and warmth at the café. What Sirine also does, is show how she is an independent woman who paves her own way while living and surviving in the West. Another Arab female character who shows the same independence is Nadia, the owner of the café that Sirine works in. In the following quote, Nadia is seen as an Arab woman with a strong and independent personality. She opens her café for all Arabs to feel and let the Arabs feel at home, "Nadia's Café is like other places—crowded at meals and quiet in between—but somehow there is also usually a lingering conversation, currents of Arabic that ebb around Sirine, fill her head with mellifluous voices. Always there are the same groups of students from the big university up the street, always so lonely, the sadness like blue hollows in their throats, blue motes for their wives and children back home, or for the American women they haven't met" (Abu-Jaber, 2004, p. 19). In this quote, Abu-Jaber figuratively conveys how Nadia's café is a specific area for Arab immigrants and serves as a metaphor for unity, harmony, and even one identity as a soul mate.

Abu-Jaber's representation of these two characters in the previous quotes is positive here because it highlights the idea of homeland. Additionally, she also tries to show the difference between the Arabs and the Westerners. She shows how the Arabs have strong bonds and relationships, unlike the Americans who are considered Westerners (Abu-Jaber, 2004).

According to that, home is like an adoring mother who hugs her children and gives them a feeling of safety. So, when those Arab immigrants search for their mother, they come to the café and eat Sirine's food, which is expressly defined as palliative. It is as if the Arab delicacies made by Sirine bring back memories of the Arab world, family, and friends they have left behind. However, it is not only her food that people come for, but also just her presence at the café exemplified by how she inspires the students to confess their loneliness and lament about being "others" in American culture.

In one way or another, the meals prepared at the café have the ability to draw the attention of the Arab immigrants towards their inner selves, and the terrible feeling of missing one's hometown is temporarily forgotten. Indeed, both Sirine's cooking and presence serve as a constant savior of memory in this context. Abu-Jaber depicts Arabs as being united and supportive in challenging situations such as those that come with living in the West as foreigners. This can be witnessed in Nadia's Café a place where the Arabs feel united (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 22).

In this context, Nadia's Café serves as a symbol of the materialization of home. Nevertheless, *Crescent* portrays Arab cultural history and conceptual frameworks that may be recognized and comprehended. However, Arab immigrants come from a variety of places, but live in the same community. All of them share the same characteristics of hybridity, inbetweenness, diaspora, and the differentials of ideas and identities as a result of situations such as emigration, exile, colonization, or displacement. Abu-Jaber's novel also attempts to raise awareness and sensitivity to diversity while celebrating various cultures and shared ties.

On the other hand, as strong and independent as Sirine is depicted, she is equally written as weak and fragile, when she "wishes she were smarter about things. Wishes she knew how to say something wise or consoling to him, something that wouldn't sound frightened or awkward" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 88). This may be the reason behind why Sirine cooks

as it is the only way she can run away from her fears and her life as an Arab in the West. So, here in this instance, Sirine blames herself for being weak and wishes to become strong and to be able to say the things that exist inside her.

Another Arab character depicted by Abu-Jaber is Han, an Iraqi. Although Abu-Jaber (2003) presents Han as a university professor, he is sometimes presented as passive despite having a certain sense of awareness and a critical way of thinking (Abu-Jaber, 2003). Seen from the previous perspective, Abu-Jaber clearly portrays the idea of identity and how identity plays an important role in social status. However, through Han's speech, there is a comparison between Hemingway, who discusses the national identities from all over the world, and Mahfouz, who mirrors only the social spectrum of his country. This means that literary works may reveal the identities of certain individuals of society. This implies that the literary works of Hemingway and Mahfouz put forth some strategies to convey their voices. Thus, what is fascinating is how Hemingway and Mahfouz express their aims via literary works. On the same point, they reveal the importance of fairness and equality in ethnic relations as a critical element in the identity issue. Erikson (1963) conceptualizes identity as a process in which people's identities are built up of biological, psychological, and social components that are negotiated to form a coherent sense of identity. Thus, Erikson identifies a feeling of cohesiveness as the aim of an individual's identity formation and considered it fundamental to a well-functioning personality.

Although Han is presented as an educated Arab, he is also misrepresented as violent and as a murderer in some scenes throughout the novel. This can be seen when Aziz and Um Nadia ask Sirine not to tell Han what happened between her and Aziz because Han may kill somebody over the situation (Abu-Jaber, 2003). Um Nadia continues by saying that Arab people as the same as they have been for millions of years about these matters (Abu-Jaber, 2004). Han is described here as a murderer and killer who would kill for anything. This mirrors the known stereotypes of Arabs as violent terrorists, so that after reading such depictions of an Arab, the Western reader will start to believe these stereotypes. In other places, Han and Aziz are both presented in a positive way: Aziz is a wise and smart Arab poet (Abu-Jaber, 2003) and Han has many Arabic translations of Hemingway, Poe, Dickenson, and Whitman (Abu-Jaber, 2003).

At times throughout the novel, Abu-Jaber shows how Arab immigrants are unable to assimilate to the American way of life. Moreover, Arab-American hybrids feel incomplete and cannot exist as hybrids for long, and this is how she represents Arabs as negative. Likewise, Abu-Jaber's depiction of characters is largely based on ethnic and racial stereotypes of Arabs. In addition to that, she represents the belief that Arab-American hybrids feel incomplete and will not be able to remain as hybrids for long. That is how Sirine thinks Arabs perceive things larger than life, as if they are walking in the sky. Moreover, the writer here highlights the sense of isolation that takes over the Arabs when they leave their homelands.

Abu-Jaber also introduces another character whose husband is depicted as dominating and oppressive. Rana is married to an Arab who brings her to America and locks her inside his house. He refuses to let her go out or see anyone. Rana tells Sirine and Han her story and how she managed to escape from him (Abu-Jaber, 2003). From the previous examples, the ambivalence in the representation of Arabs is clear. Gardaphé and Xu (2007) urge that the language of food provides a window into ethnic history, culture, and roots in *Crescent*. Abu-Jaber's language creates a gourmet contact zone in cafés, kitchens, and homes where displaced people congregate to reconstruct their identities and communities. Furthermore, in *Crescent*, the café is where the Arabs gather, eat and live the Arab social lives they are used to living in their home countries. The flavors of Sirine's meals appear to soothe their sense of loss for their homelands (Gardaphé & Xu, 2007).

Likewise, De Sena (2011) discusses how Abu-Jaber's novel depicts food as synonymous with remembrance and serves as a backdrop for discussions of race and political problems. De Sena (2011) also addresses the importance of images and other items, especially a scarf, in that they, too, function as a kind of return to the past, bringing early memories into the present and thereby serving as a location for remembrance. Arab food is represented as a way to enhance Arab culture and present it to the West and at the same time provides a place for the Arab characters to feel at home. Michael (2011) states that the name Arab is used generically in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, as it is in the United States, to refer to people of Islamic Middle Eastern heritage. In actuality, "Arabs" are "those individuals who come from places where the Arabic language is spoken" (though distinctions exist within the language itself), and "not all Arabs are Muslims, and not all Muslims are Arabs" (p. 4). However, the importance of oral storytelling in the Middle East as a means of knowing reality is emphasized throughout *Crescent*.

In another study conducted by Semaan (2014), a systematic analysis of scholarly and academic studies on Arab-Americans had been written. It investigates the conditions and backgrounds that led to the visibility of this diaspora community in the United States. This paper sought to provide academics and researchers interested in Arab Americans with an analysis of previous studies and to emphasize the need for further study on this understudied minority group by laying the foundations for potential research on this ethnic group. Berrebbah (2020) states that "Arabness is represented as "a burden and an obstacle to assimilation and being accepted in a foreign culture" by Abu-Jaber in *Crescent* (p. 132).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing Nye's *Habibi* and Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* through the lens of Postcolonialism, many insights into the novels' diverse characteristics are noticed. Both writers sometimes depict Arabs in a positive way, while at other times, the two also depict Arabs in a negative way proving that their writing is often ambivalent regarding the depictions of

Arabs. They may not have intended to represent Arabs in an ambivalent way, but this is shown while trying to concentrate on the idea of homesickness and the immigrant experience as seen through the eyes of several characters. While presenting all the previous topics, the researcher comes to the conclusion that Arabs are portrayed with ambivalence in the Nye's *Habibi* and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*. In both of these novels, Arabs are sometimes painted in a positive light and sometimes shown in a negative light. Nonetheless, this ambivalence will neither enhance nor refute the well-known Arab stereotypes in the neither the West nor the rest of the world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Middle East University in Amman, Jordan, for their financial support granted to cover the publication fee of this research article.

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