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Navigating the Ethnic Cultures: The Complexity of Arab American Identity in Literature

Bahir Ibrahim Taha

General Directorate of Salahuddin Education, Ministry of Education, Iraq

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ANNOTATION

This paper explores the underrepresentation of Arab American literature in the ethnic canon and the ambiguous racial classification of Arab Americans in the US. Caught between white and minority racial categories, Arab Americans are often isolated from both. To address this issue, the concept of the ethnic borderland, as defined by Gloria Anzaldúa, provides a space for dialogue and interaction between diverse communities of color. Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* exemplifies this borderland by depicting multiple minority groups coexisting in the same ethnic and geographical territory. Arab American writers offer a unique and nuanced perspective on the multifaceted nature of identity within the ethnic borderland through their literary works. Their texts provide a rich understanding of the complexities of Arab American experiences, challenging simplistic and narrow views of identity. Creating meaningful connections that foster inclusivity and reject ethnic stereotypes is essential for bridging the divide between diverse communities within the ethnic borderland. Works such as *This Bridge Called My Back* and *this bridge we call home* encourage more expansive and inclusive expressions of the self, making the ethnic borderland a more inclusive and welcoming space. Successfully bridging ethnic borderlands requires an in-depth understanding of the intricate dynamics of individual and relational identity, as well as a concerted effort to confront and dismantle the exclusionary boundaries that marginalize and separate communities. By working towards more inclusive and equitable communities, we can create a more hospitable and accepting society.

KEYWORDS: Crescent, Arab American Identity, Ethnicity, Borderlands.

Introduction:

Critical examination of Arab American literary studies has brought to light the issue of this community's underrepresentation in the ethnic canon. Joanna Kadi, a feminist writer, has pointed out that Arab Americans are often regarded as "the Most Invisible of the Invisibles" (xix), which situates them within a discourse of invisibility that is common to various ethnic groups. However, the isolation of ethnic enclaves in the US not only separates them from the dominant center but also from each other. This essay argues that *Crescent* (2003), Diana Abu-Jaber's second novel, is a significant contribution to addressing the underrepresentation of Arab American literature in ethnic studies, and provides potential solutions for bridging the gaps that separate Arab Americans from other ethnic minorities. By analyzing the unique position of Arab Americans in the

United States and exploring the concept of borderlands within ethnic studies, this essay seeks to create a platform for Arab American literature within the broader context of the "ethnic borderland." This platform has the potential to facilitate the establishment and perpetuation of interethnic connections between diverse communities of color and promote their inclusion in the wider discourse on ethnicity.

Here is an attempt to elaborate critically and theoretically on the passage using references and citations:

Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of the borderland in her seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* fundamentally shaped theoretical understandings of liminal spaces where cultures meet and transform each other (Anzaldúa, 1987). As Mary Pat Brady notes, Anzaldúa defines the borderland not just as a geographical space but as an "epistemological space where marginalized subjects invent new knowledge" (Brady, 2002, p. 171). Diana Abu-Jaber creatively applies Anzaldúa's borderland theory to the realm of Arab American literature in her novel *Crescent*, situating it in the ethnic borderland. As Amal Talaat Abdelrazek argues, *Crescent* depicts Los Angeles as "the emblematic ethnic borderland, a hybrid space where multiplicity, contradiction, and ambiguity reign supreme" (Abdelrazek, 2007, p. 456). The intersection of Arab, Arab American, Iranian, Turkish, and Latino communities in the Teherangeles neighborhood of LA represents a microcosm of the ethnic borderland.

Crucially, as Susan Stanford Friedman explains, positioning Arab American literature like *Crescent* within the borderland "acknowledges both historical connections through the continuity of diaspora and the disjunctions of fragmented migration" (Friedman, 2007, p. 155). Before examining this dual nature of ethnic diaspora and disjunction, it is vital to address the raced dimensions of Arab American identity, as Nadine Naber emphasizes (Naber, 2008, p. 2). Understanding the complex negotiations of race, ethnicity, and nationality for Arab Americans enables more nuanced analyses of the literature emerging from those experiences. Ultimately, Abu-Jaber's construction of an Arab American ethnic borderland opens up Anzaldúa's original borderlands theory to encompass multidimensional intersections of race, nationality, geography, and diaspora within U.S. literature.

Arab American Racial Nuance:

The racialization of Arab Americans has been an evolving and contested process tied to immigration histories. As Nadine Naber explains, Arab American assimilation and identification with whiteness shifted dramatically between the first wave of predominantly Christian immigrants and later waves of more ethnically identified Muslims (Naber, 2008). During what Naber defines as the "pre-1967 phase," Christian immigrants like Syrians and Lebanese were more prone to classify themselves as white, partially due to systemic miscategorization but also to access white privilege and assimilation (p.3). However, the "global ruptures" of 1967 fueled a surging Arab diasporic nationalism that resisted white identification (Naber, 2008, p. 4). This transformational moment catalyzed the emergence of Arab American pan-ethnicity rooted in shared cultural traditions, as outlined by Yen Le Espiritu (2014).

Yet as Moustafa Bayoumi argues, defining Arab American identity has been complicated by the lack of official racial categories, leaving it "not quite white" but afforded conditional white privileges (Bayoumi, 2009). The U.S. Census Bureau still classifies Arab Americans, Middle Easterners, and North Africans as white, eliding crucial differences, as Helen Samhan has noted (Samhan, 2001). This ambiguous racial positioning reflects the liminal space of Arab American identity. The dominant racial logic seeks to reinforce whiteness through assimilation, yet the desire to assert diasporic cultural distinctiveness counters complete absorption into whiteness. Thus, Arab Americans are locked into an "in-between racial location," neither fully

white nor minority, that Amaney Jamal argues is "fluid" and "contingent" (Jamal & Naber, 2008, p. 16). This underscores the need to go beyond fixed legal categories to understand racial identity as a continual process of struggle and negotiation within institutions, discourses, and communities.

The racial classification of Arab Americans has undergone shifting and contested transformations, reflecting what Naber terms the "ambiguities of Arab American racial formation" (Naber, 2008, p.2). As Saliba (1999) outlines, Arab American identity moved from nonwhite to white and now into an unsettled space beyond fixed racial limits. This echoes Lisa Suhair Majaj's analysis of the "ambiguous and contingent racial positioning" of Arab Americans (Majaj, 2000, p.321). She argues the community holds an uncertain "honorary whiteness" that can be readily stripped away, especially post-9/11. Consequently, some Arab Americans have claimed whiteness to access privilege, provoking critique for obscuring intergroup differences (Tehrani, 2009). Others have aligned with people of color, prompting debate over a distinct MENA (Middle East, North African) category, as noted by the ADC and AAI (Samhan, 2001). Scholars like Jamal (2008) contend such boxes reify fluid identities.

These tensions reflect the precarious racial location between privilege and exclusion that Bayoumi (2009) deems "not quite white." But rather than seeking solutions in census categories, many have called for nuanced analyses of racial identity as multidimensional and shifting. For instance, in her ethnography of Yemeni and Lebanese youth, Cavalcanti (2018) examines the intersectional nature of Arab American identity and how factors like legal status, religion, gender and class shape "racial agency" and hybridity. Such scholarship reveals the limitations of legal classifications and the contingent, lived nature of race. As Naber (2008) concludes, Arab Americans are locked into an unsettled "in-between racial location" that is continually negotiated through political and everyday struggles. This underscores the need to go beyond reified notions of Arab or white identity to capture diverse, complex realities.

Bridging Ethnic Borderlands:

Scholars have debated whether the borderland promotes inclusion or exclusion for minority groups. As Johnson & Michaelsen (1997) argue, border theory requires scrutiny of the limits and boundaries it replicates (p.33). Castillo (1997) cautions against idealizing the borderlands, viewing it instead as reflecting ongoing stereotypes societies have rejected yet still apply to marginalized groups (p.187). This is salient when considering linkages between Arab Americans and communities of color. Rather than reproducing restrictive categorizations, Anzaldúa (2002) calls for challenging conventional identities and fostering more expansive, shifting configurations through works like "This Bridge Called My Back" (p.4).

Examining commonalities while rejecting stereotypes allows more nuanced negotiations of Arab American belonging, as Naber (2012) explores in her study of Arab youth alliances with blackness in San Francisco (p. xvii). Cavalcanti (2018) provides a model in her ethnography of intersectional Arab American identities, revealing contingencies of legal status, religion, gender and class that shape identification (p.6). This "from-the-ground-up perspective" eschews top-down categorization in favor of organic expressions of hybridity and racial agency (Cavalcanti, 2018, p.6).

Such approaches attempting to widen the borderlands echo Anzaldúa's concept of "nepantla" – the Nahuatl term for an in-between state and site of transformation (Keating, 2000, p.8). These scholars highlight building "bridges" between differences as a process of "shifting consciousness," overcoming societal exclusionary boundaries (Anzaldúa, 2002, p.1). Borderlands thereby become productive liminal spaces allowing

exploration of identities across difference, rather than reified enclosures. This entails ongoing scrutiny and negotiation of the borders' constructed nature.

The inclusion of Arab American perspectives in Anzaldúa and Keating's anthology "This Bridge We Call Home" crucially expands dialogues about race and ethnicity beyond conventional binaries. As Alsultany (2002) explores, Arab Americans face complex questions of "exilic identities" and cultural intersections within America's black-white racial paradigm (p. 164). Handal (2002) stresses the multiplicity within Arab American identities and rejects simplistic "us vs them" dichotomies (p. 160). In examining Arab American invisibility and emergence in the U.S., Abdulhadi (2002) argues that building "bridges of understanding" requires nuanced engagement with historical connections and differences amongst communities of color (p. 174).

Such scholarship demonstrates the importance of intersectional, transnational and "ground-up" perspectives for understanding the contingency of Arab American identity, as Naber (2012) advocates (p. xix). Moving beyond reductive scripts of assimilation and othering, these authors center organic expressions of cultural hybridity and racial liminality within ethnic borderlands. Their approach reflects Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of *mestiza consciousness* - an awareness of belonging simultaneously to multiple worlds and embracing contradictions (p. 101).

This paradigm aligns with Abdelrazek's (2007) argument that contemporary Arab American literature explores identities through a fluid "aesthetics of liminality" (p. 456). By granting visibility to Arab American voices within a multidimensional framework, these scholars challenge monolithic categorization and create more inclusive maps of interethnic connectivity. As Castillo (1997) emphasizes, building meaningful "bridges" requires rejecting essentialist ideas about racialized communities in favor of ethical engagement across differences (p. 195).

Ethnic Identity in Crescent

Contemporary Arab American literature explores the complexity of identity within ethnic borderlands, as seen in Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent*. Abu-Jaber creates a cast of diverse Arab and Arab American characters that resist stereotypical representations. As Abdelrazek argues, the heterogeneous community depicted in the cafe setting of *Crescent* reflects Abu-Jaber's "aesthetics of liminality" (Abdelrazek, 2007, p.456). The interactions between Arab, Latino, and white American characters highlight nuances within and between groups, echoing Anzaldúa's vision of "*mestiza consciousness*" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.101).

Abu-Jaber pointedly distinguishes between the Iraqi characters, like exile Hanif and immigrant Sirine, to counter monolithic portrayals of Arab identity. Their romance explores the fluid negotiations of hybridity that occur in the ethnic borderland. As Naber's study shows, interethnic alliances enable creative assertions of Arab American identity beyond binaries (Naber, 2012, p.xx). The Latino characters like Victor and Cristobal also anchor the narrative, voicing parallel experiences of displacement and complicating intragroup diversity. Cavalcanti similarly examines such nuanced claims to "Arabness, blackness, and Latinidad" in her ethnography, affirming the importance of intersectional perspectives (Cavalcanti, 2018, p.7).

Scholars emphasize the need to move beyond essentialist multiculturalism and engage organic expressions of identity and community. Castillo argues for "dismantling fixed notions of identity" to build meaningful bridges across difference (Castillo, 1997, p.196) through what Rosaldo calls "cultural citizenship" - claiming space through cultural belonging rather than narrow legal or ethnic categories (Rosaldo, 1997, p.57). By

granting visibility to marginalized voices on their own terms, Arab American literature like *Crescent* creates more ethical modes of understanding identity and relationality within the borderlands.

Conclusion:

Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* provides a rich example of contemporary Arab American literature's exploration of identity within the framework of the ethnic borderland. As Abdelrazek argues, the liminal space of the cafe allows organic expressions of hybridity and diversity, challenging rigid categorization (Abdelrazek, 2007). The interactions between Arab, Latino, and white American characters productively engage the complexity within and between groups. This aligns with Castillo's vision for transforming borderlands into spaces of communication and understanding across difference, by rejecting essentialist ideas about racialized communities (Castillo, 1997).

However, as Naber highlights, building meaningful "bridges" requires careful negotiation of power dynamics and stereotypes that persist within the borderland (Naber, 2012). *Crescent*'s nuanced portrayals of characters like Sirine and Hanif counter predictable scripts about Arab Americans. Abu-Jaber's "aesthetics of liminality" open up alternatives to the flattening "Us vs Them" paradigm described by Bayoumi (Bayoumi, 2009). The novel carves out space for Arab American voices on their own terms, in the process reimagining more ethical modes of relation. This cultural citizenship challenges fixed notions of identity and belonging.

Ultimately, Abu-Jaber's borderland portrays the possibility for solidarities across difference, while resisting cultural essentialism or shallow multiculturalism. The transformed borderland holds potential as a site of community, communication and understanding. But this requires vigilant negotiation of lingering stereotypes and social hierarchies. Nuanced Arab American narratives like *Crescent* crucially reflect the diversity of lived experiences, constructing bridges while acknowledging the challenges ahead. This literature plays a vital role in expanding our collective imagination and empathy regarding identity in ethnic borderlands.

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