

# A Gaze on Postmodernism in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* and Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*

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**ABSTRACT---** *This study sheds light upon postmodernism in Arab-American Diana Abu Jaber's Crescent (2003) and Arab-British Ahdaf Soueif's The Map of Love (2000). These two novels in particular are chosen for examination due to the fact that both of them span over a period extending over more than one generation of cultural interaction between the Orient and the Occident and because they weave a story of mutual love and understanding across different cultures and ethnic conflicts.*

*The objective of this study is to focus upon several main features of postmodernism such as hybridity, identity, diversity, multiculturalism, narrative techniques, fragmentation, intertextuality, parody, settings, magic realism, metafiction, mixing of genres, and ending in each novel in order to demonstrate how these novelists deviate from the traditions of the genre of the novel not only in terms of structure but also content. Consequently, this study will shed light on prominent characters in both novels since the writing of these two stories entails a travel through space and time as they depict a quest for an identity and an initiation of a harmonious coexistence among several ethnicities and cultures.*

**Keywords---** Postmodernism, hybridity, identity, and culture.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism has changed the conventions of the literary genres with its sense of experimentation, innovation, and diversity since its emergence in the 1940's. It suggests a number of diverse approaches to the representation of a new reality as literary traditions and conventions are no longer observed in aesthetic writings. Postmodernism is a term that suggests new insights, richer connections, a coherence of a different degree that would pave the way for more discourse, new interpretations, as well as counter proposals (McHale, 1987). It shares a strong relationship with Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction as language could be attained at various levels of perception. As deconstruction flourished, fragmentation, which rejects an imposed set of convictions, became popular.

Postmodernism liberates authors from the confined rules of literary writing by allowing them to express themselves in any experimental way they prefer without worrying about their creations being labeled as disorderly (Klages, 2007). Authors, therefore, adopt a postmodern approach by taking literary genres to a new realm of experimentalism, which paves the way to a carnival of meanings.

## 2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999) deviate from the traditions of the genre of the novel not only in regard to structure but also content. These authors no longer abide by the traditional norms of story writing as they offer various trends of innovative style.

## 3. PROBLEM

There is no concrete definition of what postmodernism is so far as it is still in progress. However, many scholars and critics like Klages, Thornborrow, and Wareing agree that postmodernism heavily deals with hybridity, playfulness, incoherence, and fragmentation. It is consequently inferred that postmodernism is based on multiplicity and innovation.

#### 4. BASIC POSTMODERN FEATURES IN BOTH NOVELS

The basic postmodern features that color both novels are focused upon as the same themes of nostalgia, the sense of belonging, and the issues of identity are dealt within each of the stories. These novels written by two contemporary female authors of the Levant, who are currently living in Diaspora, are chosen for examination as they shed light on the marginalized people, who do not belong to the main-stream majority. Both multiculturalism and ethnic hybridity are at the heart of postmodernism because it overlooks the masses and rather puts minorities under the spotlight to reveal the significance and distinguished experience of each unique individual.

Tawfiq Yousef examines postmodernism in a number of novels and poems by Arab-American and Arab-British authors, but the aim of this paper is not to merely hold a comparison between the two concerned novels; it is rather to show how culture plays a major role in the lives of the concerned characters through the authors' usage of certain postmodern features. Culture is, on one hand, a source of identity and on the other, a sort of a theatre where diverse ideological and political causes engage one another (Said, 1994). The reality of the characters in the selected novels is defined by their hybrid culture, which is reflected in their way of living. This reality is presented under postmodernism due to its exclusivity and uniqueness.

Each story is based upon multiple narratives of hybrid characters with an emphasis upon consequent generations of people, who do not only conduct physical journeys by traveling from one place to the other, but also emotional ones in search of themselves. These characters who belong to a variety of political, social, economic, educational, cultural, ethnic, and religious affiliations are on a quest in search of their identity in a constructed world of their own consisting of a blend of the Orient and the Occident.

One of the main features of postmodernism is to shed light on the neglected or even the repressed segment of people, who are usually of mixed blood or diverse cultures. These people are considered to have been lost somewhere in the middle. These same people or characters, who do not belong to the ethnic, geographical, cultural, or social norm, are celebrated in postmodernism due to their difference as they struggle to find a room of their own.

#### 5. IMPORTANCE

The literary importance of this article is to shed light on several main postmodern features in *Crescent* and *The Map of Love* with particular emphasis on hybridity, identity, diversity, multiculturalism, narrative techniques, fragmentation, intertextuality, pastiche, magic realism and metafiction, mixing of genres, and ending in order to show the broader implications behind their employment.

*Crescent* is a story that is mainly about the protagonist, Sirine, who is of a hybrid or an ethnically diverse origin as her father is an Iraqi and her mother is an American. This novel attempts to make the voice of such marginalized people finally heard in a national context (Fadda-Corney, 2006). As the individual in postmodernism does not restrict himself to a fixed ethnic, geographical, or social paradigm, but rather explores new horizons of human experience and existence, Sirine is on a quest of self-discovery.

After the passing away of her parents, Sirine moves in to live with her uncle in Los Angeles – California. She loses connection with her Arab heritage and entity upon her father's death. Her uncle is not very useful in filling in the gaps for her as he fails to feed her hunger for knowledge about her oriental part. As a result, she feels at loss in determining who she really is and, therefore, the matter of identity becomes a troublesome issue that preoccupies her.

But Sirine is not the only one who suffers from an identity crisis. Han, Rana, and Nathan are also good examples of others suffering from the same matter. Han lived most of his life in exile. He was obliged to leave his homeland, Iraq, at a very young age due to his political beliefs and preferences so he does not really have a strong connection with his Arab and specifically Iraqi background. That is why, even though he is at the peak of happiness with Sirine and somewhat satisfied about working and living in Los Angeles, he suddenly determines to go back to the insecure and unstable Iraq without even prior warning in search of who he really is.

Rana is also viewed to have a problem with her identity. She is originally from Saudi Arabia, married and wearing a veil. Based upon this, it is expected of her to at least be ethically committed to such an identity. But the situation is not as such since she leads a liberal life. As a result, she is not truly conservative in any sense and she definitely loses connection with her past especially that it is later revealed that she abandons her husband by literally running away and coming to Los Angeles.

Even though Nathan is an American living in Los Angeles, he has no sense of belonging to a homeland as well. He actually lacks any sense of belonging, and that is why he is so restless. He keeps on sojourning in an attempt to relate to somewhere whether in America or Iraq. He develops a love story with Leila, Han's sister, in order to initiate a kind of root linking him to somewhere so as to establish an identity. But he does not seem to succeed since there is a sense of remoteness about him that lasts until the end of the story.

Sirine happens to work as a cook at Nadia's café. It is interesting that this venue in specific serves as a meeting place for immigrant students and Professors from the Middle East as well as other minorities such as Latinos. The venue itself is very postmodern as it introduces characters of various nationalities like Um Nadia being Lebanese, Han being Iraqi, Aziz being Syrian, Rana being Saudi Arabian, and Nathan being American along with other students from, for example, Egypt, Kuwait, and Iran. The café is a "melting pot" kind of location because it offers such characters the freedom of integration and discussion of sensitive matters that concern everyone as war, race, immigration, and isolation.

Since these characters are of minority groups, they happen to be the marginalized people, who are not distinctively recognized in society at large. It is due to this fact of being the overlooked minority that they show solidarity and cohesion toward each other despite their cultural diversity. Iraqis, Kuwaitis, Iranians, Turks as well as other ethnic groups gather together in the café overlooking potential points of disputes for what links them together in such an environment is much stronger than any cause of disunity.

The function of the café is to demonstrate that although these characters are ethnically different from each other, they exist in a harmonious environment due to their common sense of nostalgia. The finding of such common meanings and directions is an amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery (Williams, 1958). Boundaries between these characters demolish as they share the same sufferings and agonies:

At Nadia's Café, there is a TV tilted in the corner above the cash register, permanently turned to the all-Arabic station, with news from Qatar, variety shows and a shopping channel from Kuwait, endless Egyptian movies, Bedouin soap operas in Arabic, and American soap operas with Arabic subtitles. There is a group of regulars who each have their favorite shows and dishes and who sit at the same tables as consistently as if they were assigned. There are Jenooob, Gharb, and Schmaal – engineering students from Egypt; Shark, a math student from Kuwait; Lon Hayden, the chair of Near Eastern Studies; Morris who owns the newsstand; Raphael-from-New Jersey; Jay, Ron, and Tony from the Kappa Something Something [sic] fraternity house; Odeh, the Turkish butcher, and his many sons. (10)

It is evident that the café serves as a venue that celebrates the uniqueness of these characters. Moreover, the food presented in the café in particular and the story in general is important as it is a reflection of these characters' backgrounds, origins, and cultures. Abu Jaber explains in an interview that Sirine's cooking is a strong indication that links her to her Arab heritage (Gaines 5). Interestingly enough, Sirine mixes the names and contents of Arabic dishes with Western ones when referring to, for instance, *tabuleh* as "*tabuleh salad*" in an attempt to find a common ground for her own "in-betweenness" or multiculturalism.

Food, in that sense, mirrors the postmodernity of these characters as it is a combination of a number of cuisines and cultures. But food is not the only aspect reflecting the diversity of these characters as their adoption of code-switching illustrates their cultural blend. Code-switching is constantly utilized as in the usage of *hejab*, *Ramadan*, *habibti*, and *baklava* in their English dialect. The usage of diction in such a way highlights once more these characters' hybridity.

The story of *Crescent* unfolds by several narrations. It is narrated by an omniscient narrator along with Sirine, her uncle, Han, Nathan as well as others in the form of dialogue. All of these narrations are important since each plays an equally essential role in the presentation of the subject matter. This is typical of postmodernism as it deviates from grand narratives in an attempt to extend the unique individual vision of human experience through fragmentation. In postmodernism, fragmentation replaces grand narratives. According to structuralist Roland Barthes, fragmentation gives a more comprehensive insight by offering more than one point of view in terms of a certain issue (Webster, 1996). Fragmentation leads to the permissibility of various perspectives by initiating more than a single account of the story. Barthes states that the author of such a literary work is no longer the voice of authority or the one in control. He

announces ‘the death of the author’ and ‘the birth of the reader’ as various interpretations of the same work could be reached by different readers.

In postmodernism a pluralistic view is appreciated as no one imposed truth exists but rather a multiplicity of ‘truths’ suggesting a diversity of meaning which is formed due to the numerous narrative voices in a story as well as the diverse interpretations of different recipients of the same work of art. This multiplicity of voices or heteroglossia highlights the wide variety of their links and interrelationships (Bakhtin, 1981). As many pieces of mosaic are arranged together to form a general framework of art, fragmentation in postmodernism offers a multiplicity of views paving the way for a clearer perspective of events in the plot.

*Crescent* includes intertextuality through which one literary work overlaps and influences the other. For instance, intertextual references are made to Arab poets such as Mahmoud Darweish and Ibn al-Rumi, to Arab theorists like Edward Said, to the Arab heritage by heavily referring to *The Arabian Nights* in the parallel story of Abdelrahman Salahiddin and the frequent reference to Shahrazad, to Arab actor Omar Sharif, and to British explorer Richard Burton.

Intertextuality leads to pastiche, which is a fragmented literary account of another. It is adopted as postmodernism rejects the idea of both centrality and certainty. For instance, pastiche is depicted in the story of Abdelrahman in terms of its similarities to and connections with *Arabian Nights*. Like Shahrazad in *Arabian Nights*, Abdelrahman’s fate in *Crescent* is unclear. A good reason behind that would be due to the constant employment of magic realism and metafiction.

The parallel story of Abdelrahman constantly refers to, for example, the *jinn*, the *houris*, the mother of all fish, and Alieph. Metafiction is depicted in Abdelrahman’s fairytale story for he tends to be at one time somewhere in the depths of the sea then immediately afterwards at another in a farfetched place such as Hollywood. Magic realism and metafiction, which mix fantasy with reality, are strongly utilized throughout the novel as the story of Sirine along with the other characters and the fairytale story of Abdelrahman are portrayed hand in hand.

Anachronism, which means the existence of something not in its chronological time, is also witnessed in the numerous flashbacks in the story. Anachronism is utilized in postmodern writing in an attempt to condemn the fabricated reality of characters by drawing an anti-portrait of how a character is meant to exist. To illustrate, the story of *Crescent* unfolds in Los Angeles, but it also takes place in Baghdad, Beirut, and Aqaba. Moreover, the novel initially begins with the story of Sirine then moves on to Han’s previous life in Baghdad shifting to Nathan’s former experiences in the Middle East as well as Rana’s past background.

This indicates that *Crescent* is conveyed through a mixture of genres as the fictional in the story of the diverse characters, the romantic as in the love story that takes place between Sirine and Han, the historical as in reference to the regime of Saddam Hussein and the disruptions in the Middle East, and the metafictional as depicted in the subplot of Abdelrahman.

Postmodernism offers a kind of democracy by canceling the sense of dominance of a one and only reading of a literary work. It offers a variety of interpretations as postmodern narratives are usually open-ended. As the postmodern approach is concerned with a process in the story rather than with its beginning and end, the major characters in the novel are primarily on a search mission for their identities, which underscores their exceptionality. In that sense, the ending in *Crescent* is not well fastened but rather open as Han abruptly decides to go back to Iraq in search of himself leaving Sirine with an anonymous telephone call resulting in ambiguity.

Similarly, these basic postmodern features are existent in *The Map of Love*, which also strongly deals with the issue of hybridity. The main characters in the story are of hybrid roots, which accentuate the sense of their uncommonness. Anna is an English lady, who later on marries Sharif Basha al-Baroudi, who is Egyptian. Their daughter, Nur al-Haya, is of a hybrid origin being half Egyptian and half English. Their granddaughter, Nur’s daughter; Jasmine, is also of a hybrid origin since her father is French. Their great granddaughter, Jasmine’s daughter; Isabel, is of a hybrid origin too because her father is American. Other prominent characters are of diverse ethnicities. For instance, Sharif Basha, Layla, and Husni Bey are Egyptian, Amal is Egyptian-British, Omar is Egyptian-American, Sir Charles, James, and Lord Cromer are English, Madame Rushdi is a French lady married to an originally Turkish Basha living in Cairo, Boutros Ghali is an Egyptian Copt, Sheikh Rashid Rida is Syrian while Anton Bey is Lebanese.

Anna is not deeply rooted in her English environment and it is only when she marries Sharif Basha that she starts to become a rounded character. In postmodernism, the value of a character lies in his departure from the masses,

the regularity, and commonness. Anna experiences this unique individual existence after marrying someone ethnically and socially different, and only then she begins to function as a mediator between the East and the West.

Anna is viewed in the novel to be in a state of in-betweenness after becoming ‘Anna Hanim, Haram Sharif Basha al-Baroudi’. Even though she is purely an English lady, yet she is determined to assimilate in her new Egyptian environment and society being aware that her image reflects on her husband. She prepares, for that matter, a new wardrobe and carefully observes both Layla and Zeinab Hanim in their conducts as they function as some kind of guides for her. Anna expresses this by stating:

Visit from the dressmaker as I had expressed a wish to have some costumes made in the Egyptian fashion. I chose some deep blues and aquamarines, set off with scarlet and old pink. Colours which would have looked most overblown in European dress but suit the style of cloths here wonderfully well...it is the time for visiting of being visited by other ladies. I am accompanied on these occasions by Layla who guides my steps with great delicacy. For now I am not simply myself, but Haram Sharif Basha al-Baroudi, and everything I do reflects on him. (349-450)

Adjustments, in the story, are not only observed in the selection of cloths but also in the choice of words. Diction is important in postmodernism as it allows creativity and innovation in expression. In the novel, code-switching from Arabic, English, and French is spontaneous at times to meet the needs of the multicultural characters as in the usage of *al-Mar'ah al-Jadidah* (the new woman) and *Ça vous va très bien* (you are very becoming). Words of Turkish origin especially those in relation to social hierarchies, such as *Hanim*, *Abeih*, and *Basha*, are also used in the story due to colonial influences reinforcing the diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds the story introduces.

Language, in postmodernism, is no longer a unified and homogeneous system. Jean-Francois Lyotard argues that antithetical readings of the same literary text may emerge as postmodernism defies grand narratives. *The Map of Love* is multi-narrated by an omniscient narrator, the chronicles and letters of Anna, Layla, Sir Charles, Sharif Basha, and James as well as through dialogue conducted between these characters and others as Amal, Isabel, and Omar. Literary language, which displays a high index of dialogue, as the case in the novel, offers “many-voicedness” that reveals the full play of meaning potentially available in language (Bakhtin, 1981). This “many-voicedness” or polyphony introduces a diversity of discourse involving potential shifts of language.

Another way in offering discourse is through the intertextuality presented in the story. The story refers to historical and national figures as Khedive Ismail, ‘Urabi, and Sheikh Muhammad ‘Abdu as well as to historical events such as the Suez Canal project and Sa’d Zaghoul’s revolution. But the story does not only offer a historical discourse of the period as magic realism is used in the weaving of the plot. This blend is conducted in the story through Isabel’s experience in the shrine, where she finds an old Sheikh using a loom and an old woman sitting aside and smelling of orange blossoms. Another example of magic realism is depicted in the images of Isis, Osiris, and Horus that are placed on the tapestry that Amal and Isabel are trying to figure out from the past life of Anna. These images arise to preoccupy the thoughts of Amal and Isabel. This suggests a kind of playfulness as such fantastic or magical characters become alive just like the others. In postmodernism, there is no distinction between fact and fantasy as each account is as crucial as the other in the construction of the overall story.

This indicates that *The Map of Love* is depicted through a mixture of genres as the fictional regarding the different stories of the characters of the novel, the romantic as in the love story of Anna and Sharif as well as that of Isabel and Omar, travel literature as in Anna’s recording of diverse landscapes like the Sinai Desert, and the historical in relation to the ongoing political events of the time of the novel such as the Entente Cordiale. In fact, the novel heavily deals with the issues of politics, nationalism, the abolishment of foreign influence, and the end of occupation, which are very much relevant to the matter of identity. To illustrate, upon receiving her mother’s trunk, Isabel does not spare any effort in embarking on a demanding quest in order to define her true identity. She is seeking self-discovery, which is achieved by unfolding stories of her diverse ancestry during conflicting political situations and trying economical times over more than a century.

Furthermore, a large part of the story sheds light on the profound sense of patriotism of the early twentieth century Egyptians, who are reductively referred to as ‘the natives’ by their contemporary Englishmen. As a result, this diversity of nationalities and multicultural perspectives strongly interact in the novel drawing an analogous relationship between cultural clashes in the past and the present as stated below:

It must be hard to come to a country so different, a people so different, to take control and insist that everything be done your way. To believe that everything can *only* be done your way. I read Anna's descriptions, and I read memoirs and the accounts of these long-gone Englishmen, and I think of the officials of the American embassy and agencies today, driving through Cairo in their locked limousines with the smoked-glass windows, opening their doors only when they are safe inside their Marine-guarded compounds. (70)

It is evident that the novel utilizes anachronism as it shifts backwards and forwards in time due to the letters and chronicles of Anna, Amal's recollection of her past, and Isabel's e-mails; moving the location of the story from London, to Cairo, to the Sa'id, and back again. This constant shift leads to an abrupt end. This ending presents loose threads since the fate of Anna and Nur is unknown after their departure to England and the fate of Omar is mysterious as he is no longer heard of after his departure to conduct a concert. Connections with each of these characters have been lost, so the story ends with uncertainty and ambiguity.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Based on the above examination, both *Crescent* and *The Map of Love* exhibit basic postmodern features as they pose a number of dichotomies in their plots in terms of not only reality versus fantasy and linear time versus imagined time, but also in regard to the visible versus the invisible. In addition, Abu Jaber and Soueif, like their major characters, are a product of a mixed culture resulting in hybridity in which there is no one organic unity of culture. Consequently, on the technical level, the postmodern approach is an adequate approach to engulf all of these diversities that these authors are trying to present to their readership.

On the thematic level, the reason behind the emergence of multicultural literature is for the displaced to be assimilated in the larger ethnic community. This occurs as a motif in both novels so as to bridge the gap between the different cultures of the Orient and the Occident. A harmonious coexistence and reconciliation is sought in the stories for those of different ethnicities, who suffer from the same agonies of discrimination, segregation, and at times oppression. Through multiculturalism, both novels are trying to transcend the characters' numerous diversities that are likely to hinder the progress of not only their aspirations, but also their dreams.

In conclusion, Abu Jaber in *Crescent* and Soueif in *The Map of Love* succeed in communicating the meaning of postmodernism to their readership by employing not only the superficial but also the profound meaning of the lines to convey the celebration of the vivaciousness and ultimately different postmodern.

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