

Identity Dilemma and the Lack of Reciprocity in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*

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Abstract: Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* astutely interweaves the search for identity into a romantic love story. This article approaches it using a new identity concept found in Amin Maalouf's work *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (*Les identités meurtrières*). It investigates the identity dilemma that the female protagonist, Sirine, faces while living in-between her conflicting Arab and American allegiances. It argues that her struggle is amplified by the lack of what Maalouf calls "reciprocity." Sirine finds it too difficult to assimilate into the mainstream Arab culture. Arabs around her do not accept her, and she reacts by upholding her Arab identity. This article maintains that even small acts of reciprocity can reduce her identity dilemma.

Keywords: Diana Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, Amin Maalouf, Identity, Reciprocity

CLC: I712

Document Code: A

Article ID: 2096-4374(2020)02-0114-08

Introduction

Diana Abu-Jaber (1959-) was born in Syracuse, New York, of a Jordanian father and an American mother, who often moved the family between the U.S. and Jordan. She is the author of four novels: *Arabian Jazz*, *Crescent*, *Origin*, and *Birds of Paradise*, of which only the last was translated into Chinese 《天堂鸟》 by Yaping Chen (陈亚萍) in 2013. She also wrote a memoir, *The Language of Baklava* (2005). Her works revolve around similar themes such as food, hybridity, and identity, which are most fully represented in *Crescent*. This novel has been discussed in terms of culinary art (Mercer and Storm 33-46; Limpár 249-268; Mehta 203-235; Careillo 313-338; Laouyene 586-601; Tabačková 67-76), storytelling and postmodernist techniques (Yousef, "Diana" 228-244; Salaita, Awad; Zbidi 661-671), ethnic, cultural, and political inclination (Fadda-Conrey 187-205; Yousef, "The Goals" 205-222; Gana 197-216; Asiri 21-29; Masood 997-1015), and of course identity (Michael 313-331). To provide a fresh perspective into the protagonists' identity predicament, this essay observes how Sirine responds to her entourage's attempts to reduce her "composite identity" into one "ingredient" employing the identity conceptualization deduced from Maalouf's *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*.

Maalouf (1949-) was a Christian Lebanese-French journalist, scholar, novelist, and author of

opera librettos. Because of his status as a minority within a minority, the ideas he expresses in his book, *In the Name of Identity*,¹ have resonated with many critics and authors. He holds that everybody has one “complex identity” (4) consisting of “many components” (2), in his other words, “ingredients,” “allegiances,” and “affiliations.” He proclaims that people with “composite identit[ies]” (3, 20) often live under tension from the various groups they can identify with, as each demands that they choose only one group to belong to. To him, pressure combined with anger might reduce one’s identity into one allegiance, which would result in violence. He claims this to be “a recipe for massacres” (5).

Maalouf defines “reciprocity” as “a moral contract” (41) of mutual exchange, respect, and understanding between the immigrant and the host culture. He also claims that “reciprocity” may serve as a solution to both the immigrant vs. host culture dilemma (41-42) and the anxious concerns about globalization (120). That is, heterogeneity should not be rejected: immigrants may accept the new culture while maintaining their original one. In his conclusion, reciprocity can work for both individuals and societies, and everybody should be free to add to their identities whatever new ingredients they want.

In this article, Maalouf’s identity concept is applied to interpret how a lack of “reciprocity” in *Crescent*’s small Arab American community intensifies Sirine’s identity dilemma, while acts of reciprocity are capable of diminishing the severity of her struggle. She finds it overwhelming to choose between her two national allegiances and tries to reconcile with herself and other members of the society: “reciprocity” appears to be a feasible solution to her dilemma.

I. Sirine’s American Exterior and Arab Interior

A main reason behind Sirine’s identity crisis is her discernible American looks. Early in the novel, she is stripped of all visible signs of her Arab origins. A second generation Arab immigrant, she looks mostly American, “with her skin so pale it has the bluish cast of skim milk, her wild blond head of hair, and her sea-green eyes” (Abu-Jaber 7). She is physically presented as a stereotypical American blond woman. She looks so American on the outside that she herself cannot see any physical indication of her Arabness. As “she stares at the portrait of herself in the metal-framed mirror. All she can see is white. She is so white . . . when people ask her nationality they react with astonishment when she says she’s half-Arab” (195). This seemingly American appearance hints at her identity dilemma.

According to Maalouf, “identity is in the first place a matter of symbols, even of appearances” (120). He explains that people need recognizable signs of identity to help them connect with each other. Since Sirine lacks visible symbols of her Arab identity, she would face difficulty linking herself with the Arabs and Arab Americans around her. Despite her constant attempts to mingle with the Arab community in L.A., all the Arabs around her constantly deny her Arabness. Because of her American exterior, they could only see her as American and reduce her identity to her American allegiances only. *Crescent* contains several examples that illustrate the lack of reciprocity and the pressure imposed on Sirine.

Firstly, there are the Arab men who always admire Sirine as an American lady. As Abu-Jaber puts it, “most Arab men have always been eminently polite to her, filled with an Old World propriety, so formal, they seem almost not to see her but to see an outline captioned: Woman” (37). Even if they make mild advances, they always keep formal boundaries with her. They admire her as they would do any exotic luxury they are not familiar with. Because of their “Old World propriety,” which probably originates

from their Islamic values, they are forbidden from approaching her, so they appreciate her from afar.

A second example suppresses Fadda-Conrey's positive tone when she states that "*Crescent* resists the 'us versus them binary' that might characterize some minority cultures' conception of each other" (203). It is the scene where Sirine shows an interest in a photo of hanged people in Iraq on the front page of an Arab newspaper. The Arab side of her identity is immediately intrigued by the photo, so she tries to learn more. When she asks the student who holds the paper questions about it, he rebuffs and tells her, "you're American" (Abu-Jaber 165). This incident suggests that Sirine is marginalized in the Arab community. As an American, she is not expected to care or interfere in Arab matters. Though most of her everyday companions are Arabs, and she works as a chef in an Arab restaurant and serves Arab students, they do not consider her one of them and exclude her from their Arab interests.

Thirdly, Aziz, an Arab visiting poet who later seduces Sirine, tells her, "you're just an American and you've got no natural defenses" (249). He views her as a naïve American woman who ignores the Arab ways. Most importantly, Han (Hanif Al Eyad), Sirine's Arab boyfriend, used to reduce her identity to her American allegiances. Once she tells him that "things show their origins," he immediately thinks, "that must be why you seem so American to me" (59). On other occasions, he describes her manners as "very American" (18), and commends, "how American of [her]" (108). Maalouf explains that the pressure imposed on people with complex identities may come from all kinds of people, not just xenophobes (5). In Sirine's case, even the closest people take part, consciously or unconsciously, in worsening her identity dilemma. This lack of reciprocity makes it more difficult for her to integrate into a community she certainly belongs to.

Whenever she is asked about her nationality, Sirine introduces herself as "half." In this way, she is like Maalouf, who, when asked if he was more French or Lebanese, always answered that he was "Both." According to him, a person cannot exist genuinely if a part of his / her identity is cut off (1). Despite her obvious Americanness, Sirine knows that she is an Arab as well. Thus, the fact of people denying her Arabness causes her to feel "like her skin is being peeled away" (Abu-Jaber 195). This eerie description reveals how damaging it is to deprive Sirine of a part of her identity. Despite all the rejection, she remains sure there is a part of her that is Arab, even if it does not show on the outside.

As she reflects on her identity, Sirine figures that "she may have somehow inherited her mother on the outside and her father on the inside. If she could compare her own and her father's internal organs [...] she thinks she would find her truer and deeper nature" (195-196). According to Maalouf, an identity is an unlimited number of ingredients, and not all of them are innate (10-11). Sirine surely inherited her mother's American looks, but her father's Arabness is passed down to her as more an abstract, psychological inheritance than a genealogical one.

II. Language and Religion as New Ingredients in Sirine's Identity

Undoubtedly, there is more to Sirine's identity than shows through the color of her skin. She is evidently American, but her Arabness is equally hard to ignore. She constantly repudiates people's attempts to reduce her identity into one allegiance. Arabs often describe her as an all-American woman, but she knows all too well that she is not: "'I'm not really all-American,' she says" (Abu-Jaber 58). Likewise, she confirms that she is only "half" when someone calls her Iraqi (156). At one time, she confesses that "she feels ashamed that she's taken so little interest in her father's home country"

(52). She admits that there are certain defining elements from the culture of her origin “she should know” (59); namely language and religion. Maalouf suggests that “everyone should be able to include in what he regards as his [her] own identity a new ingredient” (163). To compensate for the lack of physical symbols of her Arabness, Sirine shows the initiative to acquire new identity components from the Arab culture. She then “embarks on an arduous quest for her identity and self-discovery” (Yousef, “Diana” 229) and starts to find ways to connect with Arabs around her.

It is explained in the novel that Sirine “grew up around Arabic conversations and she feels the presence of Arabic somewhere behind her mind, like a ghost language” (Abu-Jaber 106). Arabs around her often speak to each other in Arabic and mention words from different registers like “tabbouleh,” “habbebtî,” “ma’mul,” “falafel,” “hummus,” “jemel,” “asfoori,” “ghazal,” “knaffea,” and so on. Though she has been exposed to the Arabic language since she was a child and it is present in her subconscious mind, she cannot speak it and “feels guilty that she can’t” (107). She holds herself accountable because she did not work sooner on acquiring the language. She expresses her interest in learning it. “[I]’d love to be able to speak Arabic” (106), she tells Han. For the principle of reciprocity to work, Sirine’s interest in the Arabic language and her feeling that she needs to add it to her identity should be totally accepted and reciprocated with, especially by the Arabs in her community.

As she recognizes the importance of the language, Sirine also develops an interest in the Arab culture and the Islamic religion. She then “becomes submerged, by way of Hanîf, in a world that she had thought was lost: the world of her father’s abandoned and some-what romanticized Iraq, and a religion unfamiliar to her” (Fadda-Conrey 198). When she shows so much interest in Arab and Islamic culture, Han reciprocates and teaches her about Andaloussiya; “a place where the Muslims and Jews lived together and devised miraculous works of philosophy and architecture” (Abu-Jaber 60-61). He also introduces to her mosques and prayers (athan). At his place, she listens to “Fairuz,” a famous classical singer, and enjoys her Arabic music. She once eavesdrops on his lecture about contemporary Arab writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, Ahdaf Soueif, and Emile Habiby. By and by, Han starts to see her as “a good Arab girl” (93).

A couple of Arab people thought that Sirine should add an Islamic element to her identity in order to assimilate with them. Han, who gifts her a scarf, finally sees “an Arab woman” in her when she puts it on her hair (133). Rana, who hears from Han about Sirine’s interest in Islam and “hejrab” (Islamic veil, or headscarf), also thinks that she looks “almost Arab” in it (156). She later invites her to attend the “Women in Islam” meeting about “the negative portrayal of Arabs in Hollywood films” (157-159). When she is asked about her religion at the end of the meeting, Sirine declares that she does not actually have a faith. But the fact that she voluntarily joined the meeting proves that she is earnestly interested in the Islamic religion. The headscarf externalizes a connection between her and other Arabs. As Cariello puts it, “Sirine becomes suddenly confused, feeling pulled by the threads of the fabric towards her Arab identity” (333). Rana, a second-generation veiled young woman from Saudi Arabia, is juxtaposed to Sirine, who has been brought up in America. After a serious misunderstanding, they finally reciprocate over crucial similarities in their identities. They are both Arab on their paternal side, American on the maternal one, and feel stuck in the in-between.

Moreover, Sirine attends Arabic poetry events held first for and then by Aziz. She even joins him for a concert to watch Arab whirling dervishes. However, his accounts about religion are not as clear as Han’s or Rana’s. He obscurely answers her questions about his Islamic religion and tells her that

“Islam has a hard enough time in this country [America]” (Abu-Jaber 83). Later, even more acts of reciprocity come about as Sirine journeys to claim her composite identity. At the end of the novel, she “doesn’t read the American papers, but she still turns reflexively toward the Arabic papers” (336). She reciprocally gets help from Arab students to read an Arabic article about Han’s cryptic disappearance.

At first, Maalouf maintains that identity components are “not equally strong [...] but none is entirely insignificant” (11). He also explains that these components are set in an alterable hierarchical order (13). But then later, he overemphasizes the importance of language at the expense of religion. He argues,

While it would not be difficult to prove that a man can live without religion, clearly he cannot live without a language [...] and that we [should] watch over tirelessly the right of every man to retain and to use freely the language which identifies him and with which he identifies. I regard that freedom as even more important than liberty of belief. (131-133)

If language seems more important than religion to a certain individual at a certain time, this very language can inversely rank behind religion when the hierarchy of their identity components changes. Certainly, Sirine recognizes the importance of speaking the same language as the Arabs she wants to identify with. Her inability to speak it becomes an impediment to accessing a part of her identity. She also understands that religion is an equally essential ingredient of the Arab identity.

The more components from the Arab culture Sirine adds to her identity, the closer she gets to other members of the Arab community. Correspondingly, the more they reciprocate with her efforts, the easier the assimilation becomes. Although only a few people around her reciprocate with her willingness to acquire more identity symbols; nonetheless, these small acts of reciprocity help link her to the community. More importantly, the national and cultural belongings are not the only ingredients of her identity. There is more to it like her food and profession as a chef.

III. A Culinary Expression of an Invisible Identity Component

Sirine does not speak Arabic but speaks fluently the language of Arab food, which provides a visible indication of her repressed Arab identity. Many critics agree that her choice of the Arab cuisine as a passion and a profession is highly symbolic of her identity dilemma. According to Cariello, “in food, Sirine performs her otherwise silenced identity” (334). Mehta also argues that food is her means of rebellion and an alternative expression of her Arabness (204). Sirine cunningly employs her cooking skills to express her repressed, composite identity. Her culinary talent allows her to relish the complexity in her identity and overcome the boundaries set between two conflicting cultures; Arab and American.

Crescent’s female protagonist has little knowledge on how and what it means to be an Arab. Losing her Arab parent at nine, she inevitably lost important access to the Arab side in her identity. The few things which remind her of her Arab allegiances are the Arab food recipes that her parents left behind and her uncle’s stories. Through these stories and recipes, she finds a way to reflect her Arab origins. The novel describes her as “the Iraqi-American chef” (Abu-Jaber 10) who works at Um-Nadia’s café where Arab food is served to lonely Arab students on a daily basis. There “she went

through her parents' old recipes and began cooking the favorite—but almost forgotten—dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to . . . her earliest memories" (9). Arab cuisine helps her link herself to the small Arab American community that constantly tries to marginalize her.

Ironically, Sirine had learned how to cook Arab food from both her parents. Her American mother, Sandra, "thought about food like an Arab" (40) so that she is more Arab than American. But, more ironically, Sirine does not know much about her maternal history: she professes, "My mom's from Santa Barbara—you know, California—and I don't know her side of the family" (108). She has no contact with the American side of her family whatsoever. Throughout the novel, she struggles for acceptance into a small Arab community, while her American family is almost never brought up. Paradoxically, her pursuit of the Arab origins is so accentuated that her American affiliations are reduced to mere biologically inherited (by default) components.

Sirine has worked at Um-Nadia's for nine years, cooking for Arab students who come because they feel sad and nostalgic. As she picks up ingredients for her next dish at Khoorosh's Iranian shop, she dreams of dishes "somewhere between Iraq, Iran, and America" (100). She cooks for her uncle and her lover as well. While dating Han, the two exchange different elements of identity and take food as a channel of exchange. She says to him, "you made me meat loaf, so I wanted to reciprocate [with] an Arabic Thanksgiving" (182). Sirine's thanksgiving food smells like "old times Arab's cooking" (181). It is between Arab and American, as it reveals "America to [...] non-Americans, and vice versa" (187). This Arab-American banquet is a typical portrayal of the duality of her allegiances, a revelation of status as a mediator between two cultures. Alas, this role comes with a large amount of pressure. Maalouf insists on the vital important role of people with complex identities as bridges between cultures. He says that,

They have a special role to play in forging links, eliminating misunderstandings, making some parties more reasonable and others less belligerent, smoothing out difficulties, seeking compromise. Their role is to act as bridges, go-betweens, mediators between the various communities and cultures. And that is precisely why their dilemma is so significant: if they themselves cannot sustain their multiple allegiances, if they are continually being pressed to take sides or ordered to stay within their own tribe. (5)

Fadda-Conrey agrees with Maalouf that Sirine acts as a bridge linking the Middle East and America. She identifies Sirine as a "Nepantlera," or the in-between of two things. She argues that "the most important bridges are Sirine herself and the Middle Eastern food she cooks. . . . Sirine serves as an integral connecting link, joining together the different communities and individuals of *Crescent's* ethnic borderland" (196). Sirine's role as a bridge adds to the complexity of her identity.

In the conclusion of his book, Maalouf calls societies to embrace the diversity that shapes their "collective identities" and to demonstrate "by means of visible symbols that they accept their own identities, so that every individual may identify with what he sees around him" (160). Similarly, Sirine needed to exhibit visible signs of her Arabness in order to identify and link herself to the Arabs in her community. Her profession as an Arab cuisine cook, therefore, becomes a crucial ingredient of her identity. In other words, she needs her gastronomic proficiencies to fulfill her duties as a "Nepantlera." This identity component acts as an agent that brings together not only the Middle East to America, but

also helps, first, link Sirine to Arab people she knows, then, bring together the novel's many characters from different ethnic backgrounds.

With a hybrid identity, Sirine lives in-between two ethnic, national, and cultural origins. She tirelessly attempts to understand her cultural background and integrate into the Arab American community. For that, she befriends Arabs like Um-Nadia and Aziz, and Arab Americans like Rana and Mireille. She even takes an Arab lover, Han. She uses her food as a medium to communicate with these Arabs, and a means to decrease the distance between them. Sirine and Han's love affair is a representation of reciprocity. Their exchange of identity ingredients is best expressed through food. Han cooks for Sirine, and she for him, as "food is their private language" (Salaita 256). Cooking Arab food is her way of staying in touch with the Arab side of her identity. It is what helps her transcend her identity dilemma and be both American and Arab simultaneously. She cooks not only to feed others but also to express herself.

Conclusion

Crescent's fictional characters are from Arab, Arab American, and other ethnic backgrounds such as American, Iranian, and Mexican. Coming from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Egypt, and America, the novel's small Arab American community demonstrates how reciprocity between individuals is a solution to minorities' identity dilemma. They face their identity quandaries each in their own way, but all somehow find comfort from its severity in reciprocating with someone else who feels the same as they do.

Sirine is a second-generation Arab American who lacks any physical symbols of her Arab origins, and that makes it difficult for her to connect with Arabs and Arab Americans from her society. Despite that, she shows an earnest interest in learning about and embracing her Arab backgrounds. She effectively tries to acquire knowledge of the Arabic language, the Arab culture, and its Islamic values. Her identity dilemma is relieved only when people around her reciprocate with her attempts to identify with them. One key ingredient of her identity is her distinctive ability as a chef to excellently cook both Arab and American foods. She successfully uses this culinary component as a means to express her composite Arab American identity.

Abu-Jaber employs the technique of maximalism in that many details are given in the physical and psychological description of her characters, especially Sirine and Han. Both her female and male protagonists psychologically complement each other. Han goes through a disturbing childhood experience that prematurely exposes him to the modernized West. He runs a quest for a defined identity in the Middle East and the West, only to return home to Sirine (to America), where he figures his complex identity is accepted. The two face their identity dilemma and figure out that, in order to reconcile with others, one must first accept the complexity of their own identity. Han, an Arab whose identity includes many Western ingredients, finds in Arab American Sirine the acceptance he could not find elsewhere. The contact between Sirine and Han is in fact a communication and an exchange of identity ingredients. Each of them, explicitly or implicitly, helps the other come to terms with their repressed or rejected allegiances.

Crescent represents the forging and construction of an Arab American identity, and the characters it describes are figurative depictions of an existing one. In this remarkable novel, Abu-Jaber exceeds

the usual expectations. She artfully portrays the issue of distorted identities in the Arab American community, while implicitly presenting reciprocity among her characters as a solution to it.

Note

1. Maalouf's *Les identités meurtrières* (1998) was translated by Barbara Bray into its English version, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (2000). Bray (1924-2010) was an English translator and critic, who read in English, French, and Italian.

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