

**THE IMAGE OF THE WHITNESS IN ARAB-AMERICAN NOVELS
DIANA ABU JABER'S *CRESCENT* AS A CASE STUDY**

Mohammed Faia Asiri
Lecturer in Arabic literature,
King Abdul Aziz University,
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
&
PhD student
The Institute of Arabic
and Islamic Studies

Abstract

This paper attempts to interpret the presence of white and whiteness in one Arab-American novel, *The Crescent* by Diana Abu Jaber. It argues that whiteness and white appear in several spots of the novel and uncover some political social aspects that Arab-American confront in a daily basis. It also shows the shift of the perspective of looking at the white skin from the next generation of Arab-American literature.

Keywords: Arab-American literature, whiteness, Diana Abu Jaber

Introduction

The presence of white and whiteness is remarkable in both Arab-American and Arabic literature. They bring white and whiteness in various levels to introduce matters that are related to them. Diana Abu Jaber, in her novel *Crescent*(2003), treats appearances of American characters and American people physically by describing their body features especially the colour of skin. However, these descriptions are not separated from the issues of white privilege and stereotypical image of white people.

About the novel

Taking place in California at the time of the Second Gulf War, the novel *Crescent*(2003) narrates a story about a thirty-nine-year old Arab-American woman, Sirine the central character, who lives and works as a chef assistance in a café in California. She struggles with her identity and the way she looks because her father is from Arab region, Iraq, and her mother is from the United States. Sirine falls in love with an immigrant Iraqi university teacher, Han, because his originality reminds her the Arab world, where her father came from. The self-conflict of this dual identities appear through the novel and convey messages about whiteness, Arab culture, especially food, and the Middle East crisis. The novel is mostly narrated from the third person's

point of view¹, where the narrator dominantly tells the story and reveals some characters psychological and physical aspects.

Personal dimension (physical) (white skin and nationalism)

As far as national identity is concern, many ethnic communities in the United States are represented in the novel to show the diversities. In *Crescent* 2003, the owner of the café is from Lebanon; Sirine's beloved is from Iraq; the cleaner in the restaurant is from Mexico; and the photographer is white American. The novelist, Abu Jaber, insists showing that America is not only a land for white people but also for non-white races. In a scene that describes customers who frequent to the café, Abu Jaber shows how homeland, America, would be secured by police officers from different races as the narrator says:

“There are two American policemen -one white and one black- who come to the café everyday.” (Crescent, 2003: p.10)

In this scene, however, the white privilege is still beyond this sentence when the the word ‘white’ proceeded the word ‘black’. That shows the long and deep impact of white traditional culture in the United States as white people always come first even if the novel want to show the diversity of races in the States. What proves this in the same novel is when the narrator recounts the colures of postcards, the narrator starts with ‘black’ postcards not white ones (p.??). Thus, ordering words (colours in this case) is not always random but it indicates several issues that matters the author.

As it seen above, the Nationalization Act brought to the surface a major social and political problem which is racism. Racism cannot be seen towards the central character, Sirine, because she looks ‘white American’, but there are some signs of marking non-white as a different and exotic, which, in turns, shows the predominant of white identity in America because “[f]or her mainstream American culture, darkness denotes an Arab identity and whiteness designates a staple of mainstream American identity”. (Tawfiq, 2010: p.234). In the novel, Sirine, the protagonist, and her Iraqi immigrant beloved, Han, are wandering alongside on the Santa Monica Beach;

“[t]hen a little boy with wide brown eyes and silky eyelashes says ‘look at them, Mommy.’ His mother hushes him, grabbing his hands.” (Crescent, 2003: p.105).

If the novel would be considered as a post-colonial fiction, it should have described the little boy's eyes as almond eyes, for instance, to indicates other races in such a multicultural city as California, the setting of the novel. Additionally, the surprise of the little boy not only because the skin of Han, but also because the situation itself which is a white woman is walking with a brown man.

It might be said that the point of view here is from a ‘boy’ which seems to be unreliable character, I would say, however, the opposite. It is undebatable that children are honest and free to express their thought and feelings. They are a sincere reflection of their communities and upbringing. Therefore, if the boy has experienced and lived in multiracial environment, he would not be surprised to see a brown man walking with a white woman on the Santa Monica Beach,

¹ Point of view, so-called ‘focalization’, is an approach of studying novel which focuses on who tells the story, or who says any statement in the story: narrator, character (see chapter ... on page...)

California, United States.

Personal dimension (physical) (white skin and colonialism)

White as a coloniser and invader is noteworthy shown in *Crescent* (2003). In the beginning of the novel,

“the sky is white... it is white because white is the colour of an exploding rocket.” (Crescent, 2003: p.3)

The repetition of the word ‘white’ here and association it with an explosion and militant actions is clearly noticeable throughout the novel. Generally, white American government are accused of being involved in invasion and colonising territories in the Middle East as it was explained in a theoretical part.

Regardless the catastrophic consequences of war in Iraq, the narrator shows that the Arabs/Iraqis, as represented by Han’s father, are interested in the power of white people who will give them better lives and rescue them from the dictatorship regimes in Arab regions (Crescent, 2003: p. 320).

In the novel, there are two ‘white American’ character Nathan, the American photographer, and Genet, the American general’s wife, are representing American government, the invader in Iraq. For Nathan, the scene in which Arif, Han’s brother, and his father were looking for the tough pale American guy, the writer says Hans’s

“father has come to believe that Americans wealth and political influence is the Iraqi’s only hope for combating dictator in power. He and Arif are interested in this intense young man with the pale [grey] eyes and porcelain skin.” (Crescent, 2003: p.320).

The writer presents the stereotypical image of white as a strong body and appealing skin in the context of discussing colonising Iraq which confirm the relationship between whiteness and power.

In addition of presenting the colonial white, the writer brings the history of white and how they intervene not only in the territories but in our small daily habits. Starting with description of the time and place,

“The moon comes out and turns red. [Sirine and Han] are sitting side by side on a tiny balcony, eating frozen chocolate layer cake straight from the box and spoonful of vanilla ice cream from the carton and drinking from one cup of Lipton’s tea, which Han says is the great colonial tea bag: ‘A brown tea bag upon which white empires are built.’”(Crescent, 2003: p.62).

In this scene, it can be seen that how they connect white with imperialism. Tea in this scene represents a daily Arab beverage and more importantly it brings the idea of white coloniser to indicate that talking about white is the most what Arabs have in Arab region, either white as power or white as a standard of beauty.² Another aspect which shows the power of white is that tea bags were described as brown and this colour is link to black people and their slavery history in the early American history, when black people were more or less handicapped as a brown tied tea bag. Although it is great picking up a small daily habit (drinking tea) to introduce a large

² There will be a discussion of the white and beauty in the next part.

aspect of human issues (colonialism), bringing the idea of white coloniser in this scene is literary unsuitable because people usually don't drink tea with all that sweets.

Similar to the theme of colonialism is the history of slavery in the United States. The author resembles between some nature features to white and black people in order to draw big picture of American history. In the novel, Sirine goes to the beach which

“makes her sentimental, thinking of night excursions with her parents to the beach, the foam white as curd against the black waves.” (Crescent, 2003: p.249).

Here, the white foam is hitting black waves that demonstrates the clash between white people and black people in the early American history.

Personal dimension (physical) (white skin and attractiveness)

The representation of whiteness as a criterion of beauty in the novel has contradictory dimensions. In the first place, in terms of remembering Sirine's American mother, whiteness is a pleasant and beautiful skin. In three occasions, the protagonist appreciates her skin because it reminds her mother. Her 'white American' mother was killed in a humanitarian mission in Africa. When Sirine

“stares at the portrait of herself in the metal-framed mirror. All she can see is **white**. She is so **white**. Her eyes wide, almond-shaped, and sea-green, her nose and lips tidy and compact. Entirely her mother.” (Crescent, 2003: p.195).

As it seen here, and after saying that the skin is white, all the beauty points are made as if they are exclusively to that skin. Although, the writer doesn't mention the blonde hair as a distinctive features of white people, she ascribes all guise of beauty to her 'white American' mother in the last sentence.

What interesting though, the narrator before describing Sirine beauty, she describes the colour of the space as a “**white**-tiled bathroom.” (Crescent, 2003: p.195) Utilizing 'white' here to describe the space is to give a clear, nice, pure, cleaned picture of the site. And then the image of bathroom is followed by a beautiful detailed description of Sirine, who is half Arab and half American but all beauty matters are account for her American descended mother.

In another occasion, the narrator delineates the beauty of Sirine's mother in details by saying how much her colour hair is light and how tall she is. In the novel, Sirine's mother

“arms are long and white like Sirine's; her hair is a shiny auburn flag.” (Crescent, 2003: p.298).

Whiteness in the novel also is a part of Sirine's dream family. When she is working in the café, a “family comes in: An Arab man and fair-haired woman and two pale, dark-eyed children. She lets herself imagine that this is herself and Han and their family.” (Crescent, 2003: p.)

On the other hand, when it comes to portray American female character, whiteness comes to add an erotic flavour to the scene especially in swimming pool site. For instance, when Han and Genet are in the swimming pool at night

“it was hard to know if they were playing or serious, even when she united the strings to her swimsuit so her white belly and small breasts flashed in his hands”. (p.215).

After a couple of pages Genet

“raised his [Han] arms as if it were a precious artifact, a dark wash of skin inside her curved white fingers. (Crescent, 2003: p.219).

Here, whiteness comes to give a description of the Genet skin in order to make the scene much suggestive. Likewise, in the other site, white girls are linked with filling time with pleasure and fun (Crescent, 2003: p.329). In this part, the typical image of white female, as a stirring body, is far long deep in Arabic narrative discourse.³ White female attract Arabs men eyes in the novel.

“They [Arab men] sit and watch Sirine surreptitiously or their eyes follow the American girls through the café window.” (Crescent, 2003: p.63).

This quote illustrates that white American girls are eye catching and the secret of this attractiveness is the outward appearances which the colour of skin is the most obvious one. Even Sirine herself, the Arab-American woman, grabs the Middle Eastern men’s attention and makes them “open-mouthed” because of her “white-blond” features not because she is from Arab region.

Lastly, the skin white is represented in the novel as unpleasant, undesirable skin, and the protagonist, Sirine, wants to get rid of it because it affects her life socially and emotionally. On Santa Monica Beach, Los Angeles, Sirine and Han were walking,

“Sirine glanced at Han’s hand, the perfect, coffee-coloured skin⁴ against her own whiteness.”(Crescent, 2003: p.105).

The narrator admires the Arab man’s skin by characterizing it as a ‘perfect’ implying that Sirine’s ‘white’ skin is ‘non-perfect’. The outer skin of Han symbolises the homeland of Han where she is longing to whereas her white skin represents undesirable identity she wants to obtain.⁵

The narrator goes further talking on behalf of the main character⁶ saying:

“When people say this [Sirine does not look like Arab] she feels like her skin is being peeled away.” (Crescent, 2003: p.195).

There are many dimensions can be seen here. First, the character feels anguished with her skin because it excludes her not only from being entirely Arab person but also from being carrying Arabic culture. Another aspect, when she feels that her skin is “peeled way” that means she has skin that is not natural. This is claimed in many Arabic and non Arabic fictions such as *Amrikānī* (2003) by Ibrāhīm, Ṣun‘Allāh, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe, and *Darkness* (1986) by Bharati Mukherjee. Skin here is a representation of culture and history, so being “peeled way” indicates there is someone took her culture, and give her the stereotypical image of whiteness privilege which does not appeal to her.

Although, the protagonist’s parents were passed away, she was concerns what was their reaction on the day of her birth.

³ See Tarabishi, *Sharq and Gharb (the East and the West: The Crisis of Sexuality in Arabic Fiction)* and Fanon, F. *Black skin white masks*.

⁴ The narrator describes Han’s skin multiple times as bronze (p.103), brown, cacao, coffee, and chocolate a wash dark of skin

⁵ The conflict identity because physical and nonphysical aspects is a phenomenon in Arab diasporic literature. See, Salhi, Z. S., &Netton, I. R. (2006). *The Arab diaspora: Voices of an anguished scream*. London: Routledge.

⁶ This narrative approach called “the omniscient third person point of view” when the narrator

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“She imagines her parent, young, expecting their first child, expecting perhaps, a true amalgam of their two bodies. Were they disappointed, she wonders, to have an entirely fair-skinned child?” (Crescent, 2003: p.196).

Sirine here is doubting whether her skin was expecting or disappointing regardless being white. The main purpose of interracial marriage, as it appears in her thought, is to mingle the races, to falsify the notion of ‘white privilege’, and, in other words, to produce non-white generation.

The consequences of being white chases Sirine in the café’s kitchen, where whiteness causes a lot of pain to her. We can see this when Sirine gets ready to work; she

“ties up her hair, puts on her heavy white jacket and apron.” (Crescent, 2003: p.309).

The jacket is described as ‘white’, and not only white but a heavy one as if she hates it and cannot bear it. This ‘heavy white jacket’ mentioned in a juxtaposition with the scene when she hurts herself by knife. The narrator says “she slices an onion in half, **peels away** the amber skin, the crisp white body wet between her fingers... She cuts off the very tip of her index finger. Not much. A sliver of skin.”(p.309). Cutting her skin denotes that white skin, for her, is unbearable and she wants to get rid of it. This scene reminds the previous scene when she felt that her skin looks like as if it is peeled away.

To sum up whether whiteness is a matter of the beauty in the novel *Crescent*, I would argue that there are three attitudes towards white skin in the novel. When it regards to a family or a very close relative, the white skin is appealing not because itself but because the family member who is marked with. When it comes to describe white American women, the skin colour is desirable and seductive. In a context when white skin excludes a person from a certain culture or stigmatizes them because of their skin, whiteness here is unpleasant and unnatural.

Transpersonal dimension (mental) (white and attitudes towards other races)

Another stereotypical image about white population in the novel is that they don’t differentiate between the Middle East races, especially Arab and Persian, because they think they are the same. What confuses them is the similarities in their calligraphies as the novel states. In the novel, there is a place named

“Teherangeles” where many Iranian stores are located and Farsi with its Arabic script are shown. The character, Um Nadiastates that “non of the Americans can quite get that Arabs and Iranians are ‘completely different animals.’” (Crescent, 2003: p.15).

Analogising Arab and Iranian people with animals in this sentence indicates several aspects that support whiteness privilege discourse. First, it is noteworthy to read this sentence as it is put in between quotation marks which means the expression quoted is frequently heard in the American society. It is, secondly, an indication that Arabs and Iranians are submissive and slaved by their owner as animals are. Um Nadia quotes “different animals” as if she suggests the attitude of the White-American towards other races especially the Middle Eastern ones.

The writer vigorously symbolises the misunderstanding of the Middle East races to their way of cook. What the Americans do with food is that they

“just dumping salt into the pot. All the [flavours] go in the same direction. Chef cooks like we do in Mexico, we put cinnamon in with the chocolate and paper in the sweetcakes, so things pull apart.” (Crescent, 2003: p.187).

In this scene, the Mexican character symbolises the flavours of food to human races and White-Americans way of cooking to non-white Americans method of cooking. In the Americans' minds, all races are designated as one race just like their way of cooking when they put all flavours together in one pot. The treatment of food is not only a way to introduce the culture of the Middle East, it is also a way of resemblance food with the issues Arab-Americans experience in their daily lives.

In the part when the character Aziz, the Arabic poet, has an argument with VictorHenandez, a Mexican café's cleaner, about weather Americans can distinguish between them racially, Aziz says

“they think we are all terrorists anyway... If you and I were out shopping at the mall, do you think any of white guys there could tell the difference between us? They would think you were one of my terrorist buddies.” (Crescent, 2003: p.187).

This phenomenon is stereotypical image about the Americans as they don't know much about people from outsider their boundaries. The Americans are more concern about their personal lives, internal affairs and making profits. Therefore, they feel shameless knowing about races from the Middle East.

Non-personal dimension (White and the Nature)

In the novel, I have noticed that white is used mostly to describe space, sky or any relevant items. At the night, there are 'white tails' out from 'white stars' in a combination with 'milky' moonlight. Likewise, in the early morning, when 'white predawn' starts and the fog not only makes 'air white' but so white which stimulus mind to think of white snow covering street on the Christmas Eve. By tracing the contexts of these examples, I claim that the protagonist, Sirine, finds the purity and lucidity in the nature and and find the most peaceful moment at night and in the early morning where she is away from people and her work. Another aspect is that she appreciates the environment in the the United States and would use her bicycle to commute to her work instead of privet vehicle or public transportation indicating the issue of environment.

Whiteness Vocabulary Usage

For the linguistic words uses, the Arab-American writer, Diana Abu Jaber, renders a rich expression that used to describe whiteness such as (Pink, blushing, white, whiteness, peeled away, milky, fair-haired, porcelain, blonde). Unlike other ethnicity in America, namely South Asian American writers, Diana's usage of language is similar to what white writers referring to whiteness such as 'peaches-and cream', 'alabaster', 'milky' and 'ivory'. On the other hand, the Arab writer, MaysloonHadi, provide words that are mostly related to food, and dairy products in particular such as butter, chees, cream, pale, light, snow. What interesting here is that Diana Abu Jaber is well-known as a food critic and the food theme is present in this novel, *Crescent* and other writing works,⁷ but she never resembles 'white' with food except for describing the moon light, when she says "milky".

One possible explanation I argue is that Diana's style of writing the name of food is to state the actual Arabic name in English letters (Nyman, 2009) so that she grabs attention to the

⁷The Language of Baklava (2005) for instance.

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Arabic names. Another reason as Alison D. Goeller argues is that mentioning food and any other words related, such as cook, eat, is connected to Arab identity, memory and belonging (Alison D. Goeller cited in Nyman, 2009). Therefore, the Arab-American author, Abu Jaber, wants to keep this distinctive feature belong to Arab ethnicity not to whiteness.

Conclusion

Finally, after analysing these two novels, I conclude that whiteness and white are used metaphorically and literarily to present atrocious history of white people, particularly colonialism. Characterizing whiteness as unpleasant and undesirable skin is one way that writers utilise to deal with this issue ruthlessly (Maxey, 2007: p.535). Stereotyping whiteness is not limited to Arab and Arab-American fictions, but it is nearly a common theme within literature written by non-white people or the minorities in the United States in order to empathise and sense the experiences they faced and to keep readers remembering this untold history (Wilson, 2004). Above all, talking about whiteness, the power and the knowledge, in such way, enhances writers' abilities to create lively characters and introduce several interesting topics (Maxey, 2007: p.537).

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