

(Re-) Constructing The Identity in The Works of Diana Abu Jaber

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Diana Abu Jaber is among the leading contemporary Arab-American women writers who are articulating their voice quite strongly for the issues that confront an Arab-American immigrant: identity, racism, and feminism. She is a native of upstate New York. Currently, she is a writer-in-residence at Portland State University. Daughter of a Jordanian immigrant father and American mother, she began writing in order to as she says "Constitute myself as the child of Arab immigrants as a 'whole' person". She has written novels, memoir, stories and numerous articles and reviews. Her credentials rest mainly on her novels: *Arabian Jazz* (1993), *Crescent* (2003), food memoir *The Language of Baklava* (2005), thriller *Origin* (2007), and *Birds of Paradise* (2012). Her works reflect not only her thoughts, and experiences of being an Arab-American woman, but also her growth as an artist. The major factor that links all these works of fiction is the question of identity. The paper aims at exploring the various ways through which Diana Abu Jaber problematizes the concept of identity, and how her being an Arab-American provides her a split-vision to look at it.

Identity is a multi-layered concept as it is rooted in history, philosophy, biology, geography, and political science. Factors from all these fields impact a person's perception of self, in order to help him answer the question 'who am I?' Identity can be perceived as a mosaic, since an individual emerges as a conglomeration of various factors which come together to make a larger, at times paradoxical but comprehensible picture. In this context economist Amartya Sen in his book *Identity and Violence* explains that identity is pluralistic and at times prone to change depending on choices made by an individual. In Abu Jaber's narratives an individual is a constellation of assorted roles assigned by birth, by personal choice, by socio-political norms. Her characters endeavor to understand their life and self and define the contour and substance of their identity. She deals with the concept of identity in each work on the basis of gender, home, culture, and religion, as identity can no longer be viewed in exclusion to any of these.

The argument of identity crisis in diasporic experience arises from dislocation, leading to search for roots and the process of constituting an identity that is mosaic. Abu Jaber draws heavily on sentiments of immigrants in relation to race, culture and discriminations experienced to understand the elements that go into the construction of diasporic identity. The feeling of loss, of rootlessness, the search for the question "where do I belong?" leads to uncertainties about the self. This conflict results in ambivalence in relation to identity that is layered owing to the dual concerns of an immigrant's identity. In one of her interviews with Luan Gaines, Abu Jaber talks

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about her characters' "...sense of being caught in-between identities and cultural legacies". This in-betweenness and feeling of loss is also due to the 'othering' of Arabs. Abu-Jaber dealt with this in her own life especially post 9/11. As in her interview with Koval, Abu Jaber clearly asks like numerous other immigrants "am I included in the flag?" Throwing light at the growing tense relation between Arab countries and America she says that "this is a strange and painful time to be Middle Eastern and American".

Diana Abu Jaber's works post 9/11 reveal her efforts to move beyond the confines of diasporic experience as she explores new areas and concerns in her writings. The narrative of *Birds of Paradise* unfolds the story of the Muir family, settled in Miami, consisting of parents Brian and Avis, and children Stanley and Felice. It revolves around the decision of the daughter Felice to leave home at the age of thirteen: Why does she run away? How does this incident impact the family? What are the effects of the episode on the other sibling and the relationship between parents? The basic plot is further enriched by Abu Jaber's central concerns: issue of identity, mother-daughter relation, food and woman, and sense of guilt.

Teenager Felice is sketched as a beautiful girl from a well-established and close-knit family. At school she befriends Hannah Joseph, an Arab-American girl whose father, in order to escape the anti-Arab sentiments had changed his last name from Yusef to Joseph. Their close friendship is brought to an abrupt end by Felice, when one day she sees Hannah in a compromising position with the music teacher Mr. Rendell. Felice signs the letter written by her peers, insulting and rejecting Hannah. Consequently, Hannah commits suicide. Felice holds the letter and herself responsible for Hannah's death. Though an Arab-American character plays a key role in the novel, yet Abu Jaber does not give a detailed description of the diasporic experience.

Felice hated herself for rejecting Hannah and wanted to move away from the value system that defined her, in order to be different from whom she was at the time of signing the letter. Guilt and the feeling of repentance make Felice decides to run away from home and live with other adolescents like her. Family being the propagator of the moral values and social ethics could be the reason behind the decision taken by Felice to distance herself from the family. Through the disintegration of Muir family that follows, Abu Jaber interrogates the problems related to adolescence, the changing value system and shifting family relation in American society.

Absence of Felice is not the sole reason for the disintegration of the Muir family. The fragmentation of the family is due to the lack of connection between the individuals. The seemingly happy façade is put to test in the moments of crisis. The breakdown of families is an important issue haunting the contemporary society. Parental failure to understand the emotional needs and the behavioral changes of adolescent children jeopardizes the lives not only of the children but undermines the very foundation of the familial relationships, as individual's drift apart leading to the fragmentation. The inability of Brian and Avis to decipher and relate to the changing attitude and emotional trauma experienced by Felice is mirrored in their relation with,

the son, Stanley too. In their concern over the runaway daughter, the parents are unable to relate to the emotional needs of teenager Stanley becomes reticent as he feels neglected.

Parental neglect of the children and the lack of bonding are not limited to Muir siblings. Hannah's suicide is also a glaring example of it. Abu Jaber has sketched Hannah as different from other girls due to her diasporic background in the story. Hannah's comments in her conversations with Felice, her aloofness, her disconcerted attitude and the suicide of her siblings, all these factors are suggestive of suicidal tendency in her too. Her relationship with the teacher is also questionable as the author suggests that Hannah felt "kind of happy" (286) that Mr. Rendell liked her. Could her need to be accepted among the Americans be the reason behind Hannah's affair? The relation which she considered as a mark of acceptance paradoxically becomes the cause of rejection among the peers. The peer pressure emerges as one of the reasons for Hannah's suicide as well as poses a, Gordian knot kind of complexity for Felice.

In the novel Abu Jaber brings in a fresh perspective to look at her chief concerns. Hitherto, the writer had looked at the question of identity from standpoint of gender, race and class, but in *Birds of Paradise* she attempts to explore the part played by the family in construction of identity. Family being the basic unit of social structure, Diana in this work uses it as a synonym of home. It is characterized by security, comfort, familiarity and affection. Though a family provides some of the defining paradigms of its members' identity, yet each family too has its separate identity in the society. In the novel the collective identity of Muir as a family is shattered after Felice runs away at the age of thirteen without any explanation. This incident complicates the equation of interpersonal relations in the family. Brian and Avis are distanced from each other due to their lack of understanding about who is to be blamed for this disruption of their quite life. Their example is a rejection and affirmation of the conventional projection of a child as the binding factor in family. Felice becomes the cause of rift between the parents, but paradoxically it also affirms the approach that sees a child as a bond between mother and father: Brian and Avis drifts away from each other in Felice's absence. Brian a corporate lawyer and Avis a baker find recourse by immersing themselves in their respective professions.

Through the character of Avis, the baker mother, Abu Jaber introduces her favorite topic, food: the difference being that here the author's focus is on the precision of baking and not on the spontaneity of cooking. The act of baking reflects the patience of Avis in dealing with her daughter's whimsical nature. She bakes elegant cakes and cookies which require a methodological approach. As opposed to it, her aversion of cooking, which necessitates an instinctive understanding of the ways in which diverse ingredients blend and react in a dish, suggests her natural inability for intuitive understanding of the signs in her daughter's unexpected and sudden change in attitude which led to her gradual disintegration. The mother-daughter relation of Avis and Felice forms the crucial part of the narrative. The writer has looked at the complex mother-daughter relationship, largely from the perspective of the mother. Her earlier works are marked by the absence of mother, either due to death or abandonment. The presence of

mother in this novel may be credited to the author's personal experience of motherhood. In an article 'Not What She Expected' Abu Jaber writes that during her research about adopted children for the thriller *Origin*, she was inspired to adopt a girl child. This work exemplifies the reciprocal relation between art and life. Abu Jaber's concerns as a mother are magnified in the novel. The fear of a child going astray is depicted through Felice, who runs away because she feels guilty for the suicide of her friend.

Diana Abu Jaber has moved beyond diasporic experience with the *Birds of Paradise*. It deals with contemporary quintessential American issues of disintegrating families, straying adolescents, drugs and self-destructive suicides. These issues transcend the American society and emerge as global concerns.

The narratives of Diana Abu Jaber, which began as a journey in the search for a tangible implication of Arab-American identity, gradually moves beyond the confines of Arab and America, aspiring to understand identity as a whole. There is a conceptualization of identity and an attempt to comprehend it in a holistic way, considering its diverse facets like gender, race, class, culture, religion, and the idea of home. These parameters of identity form the axis of Abu Jaber's narratives and also provide an outline for realization of the Arab-American self. Being an Arab or an American or situating oneself somewhere in the middle will perhaps always be impacted by the ever shifting historical, cultural and personal contexts. Her characters take on different personas in different contexts and all these personas when taken together provide an interesting ensemble with the core pointing towards the need to be human first. Diana Abu Jaber has tried to explore the liminal space between all these polarities which give rise to a thrust for creating and comprehending a coherent Arab-American identity; in the process she has framed her mosaic of identity.

Reference/Endnote

1. *These lines by Diana Abu Jaber are borrowed from the Suzanne Dawkins contribution about Arab-American writers in the article 'Children of the Al-Mahjar' by Elmaz Abinader; See works cited*
2. *In an interview by Luan Gaines, <<http://www.curledup.com/intabu.htm>>*
3. *From Abu Jaber's article 'On Recognition and Nation.'*
4. *In Greek mythology, Gordian knot refers to the intricate knot tied by king Gordian, that could be*
5. *untied only by the future king of Asia. The knot refers to a seemingly unsolvable situation or a very difficult circumstance.*
6. *Abu Jaber distinguished between the attitudes behind cooking and baking in her memoir, The Language of Baklava*

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