

MUSINGS

OF WEDDING GIFTS

SOMDATTAG MANDAL

After a month's respite, with the inauspicious *Pous* being over, the Bengali wedding season has come back with a big vengeance, so to say. Apart from decking up in gorgeous finery, what really scares me is the idea of selecting the right gift to carry each time I am invited to a marriage reception. Nowadays the brides hardly wear saris, and so the staple fashion accessory is passé. Wracking my brains to give a gift that looks expensive and also goes with the particular person's taste is more difficult than solving complicated mathematical problems. When we were young, I remember an aunt gifting my mother a hard-bound copy of Tagore's *Sanchayita*, not because my mother recited the poet's poems quite well but because she had received seven copies of the same as wedding gifts. Even the cheap Bengali novels of the Mills and Boon variety that were found in abundance in shops selling wedding presents earlier are no longer in fashion. In recent times I haven't seen anyone walk into a wedding with

a copy of *Chicken Soup For Your Soul*, *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, or *The Bhagavad Gita*. Till last year, I used to gift bed sheet sets as wedding presents until I found my newly-married nephew do up his rented apartment

any gifts? Is the blessing asked for in the card a mere sham? It would really help the average middle-class householder, who often has to juggle his financial priorities, to attend on an average five weddings a month. It

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with bed sheets cut out into window curtains. They had received thirty-two bed sheets, he shyly confided and they did not have the cash to buy drapery.

I often think why can't some of the invitees just ask us not to come with

would also save the receivers the trouble of recycling some of the useless stuff that flooded their houses. Whenever my grey cells fail to think out a suitable present and I think of giving cash in an envelope, I am told that it

happens when you do not have anything left within your budget? Well you can gift one wine glass in a set of four, and wait till the three others would be sponsored by somebody. Though I forgot to ask what would happen if the set was left lame, it made sense. Although Napoleon had called England a nation of shopkeepers, the American newly-wed couple would not have to do with a dozen wall clocks, two dozen bed sheets, five tea-sets, ten thermos flasks, and so on. Since mall culture has already crept into our city, I am just waiting for the wedding card to announce that the Kolkata couple (or maybe their parents) along with the blessings of *Prajapati*, has opened a gift registry account at Shoppers Stop or Westside or Pantaloons. Even if we do not always agree with their political decisions, we can follow the Americans in this case, can't we?

When I was musing aloud, my son, who now lives in Uncle Sam's land of plenty, gave me a quick suggestion. "What is the problem? Why don't you look up the marriage registry account at the gift shops?" Now, what was that? Well, I was explained that the to-be-married couples opened a special account at one or two departmental stores and gave them a list of all the things they needed to set up a household. You just checked the account and paid for whatever item that suited your pocket. So, the earlier you went, the greater chance you had of booking the cheaper items. But what

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star REVIEWS

Crescent: A Review

NATASHA AFRIN

Diana Abu-Jaber. ISBN: 0-393-32554-7, Norton, 2003.

Diana Abu-Jaber, a Jordanian-American writer based in U.S., attracted an international readership when her debut novel *Arabian Jazz* (1993) won the Oregon Book Award for Literary Fiction. A professor of English Department of Portland State University as well as a writer-in-residence, Abu-Jaber has also authored some essays and many short stories. *Crescent* (2003), which won her the Pen Center Award for Literary Fiction in 2004, is her second fictional venture and is a wonderful read. The book can be regarded as a noteworthy contribution to the Arab-American literature not only for bringing forth objective representation of Arab community, culture and politics, but also for offering penetrating observations about the contemporary crises of civilisation.

Crescent revolves around a wide range of issues: the representation of Iraq since the first Persian Gulf War and America's role in it, the Arab-American characters' responses towards the contemporary American Foreign policy, the silenced stories of those people whose lives have been wrought by the havoc of an unending, unfair brutal war. Offering a detailed description of the diasporic community of Arab Americans, mostly expatriate/exiled intellectuals and immigrant students, Abu-Jaber deftly explores the issue of these individuals' quest for identity and belonging. By bringing into fore the tales of their isolated lives or the customs through which they conceive the everyday world, the author examines their experience of exile, the predicaments of diasporic existence and the bitter taste of displacement and homelessness.

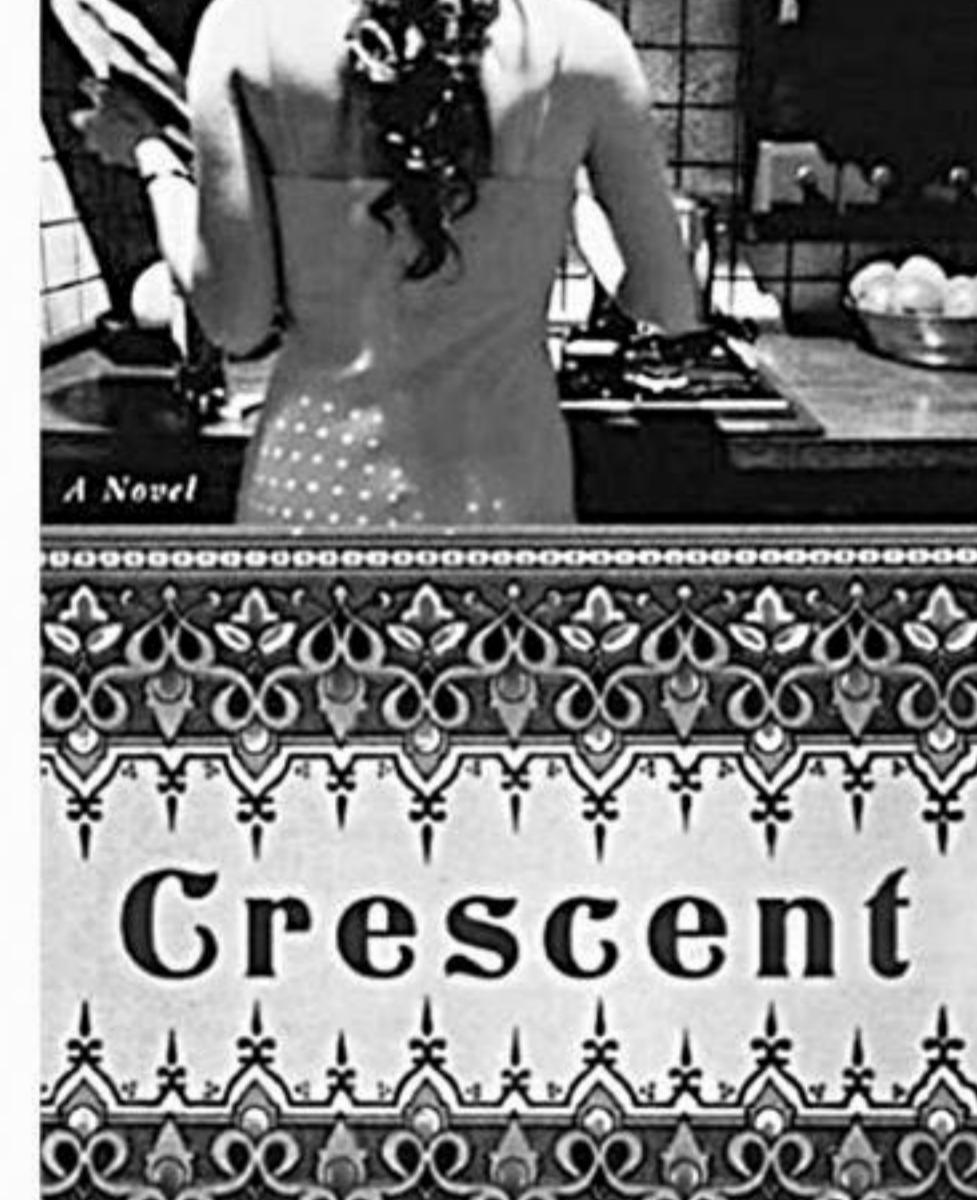
As *Crescent* begins, the reader encounters the city of Baghdad under siege. There the night sky is white not because it is foggy or full of lights, but because "white is the colour of an exploding rocket" (15). The backdrop is the Iran-Iraq war of the eighties. And as the narrative starts, we meet a young boy, Hanif Al Eyad, wracked by insomnia and terrified by the exploding missiles, hitting Baghdad from Tehran. Amidst such restless and sleepless nights, the boy dreams of a "white-skinned woman . . . hip-deep and motionless" (16), standing by the edge of a pool. No doubt, this "bright-haired" woman of Hanif's dream becomes an embodiment of escape for him from an endless torment.

Hanif's spur to immigration is not an adventure; rather, it is associated with the question of survival. He flees his homeland Iraq in order to avoid political persecution under Saddam Hussein's regime, when he was just twenty years old. As he publishes diatribes against the president in underground newspapers under a pseudonym Mall, he becomes an imminent threat to Hussein's autocratic and repressive regime. Eventually, Saddam's security police officers tracked down Hanif's whereabouts and arrested his twelve-year-old brother Arif, mistaking him for Hanif, the author of "treasonous and defamatory" articles that attacked the Iraqi president and thereby, the nation of Iraq. Fortunately enough, Hanif was ultimately able to make a difficult escape—firstly to England and then to America.

The novel then places him at UCLA, as a professor in exile, of Linguistics in the Near Eastern Studies Department. There Hanif meets Sirine, an Iraqi American chef, and passionately falls in love with her. Sirine, the protagonist of this novel, is thirty-nine years

old, independent and is completely attuned to her profession of a chef. She works at Nadia's Café – a Middle Eastern Lebanese restaurant situated in a peripheral Iranian neighbourhood of Los Angeles. Being half Arab, Sirine is bright-haired and bright-skinned and surely resembles the woman of Hanif's dream of youth. As their romantic relationship begins to blossom, for Hanif, Sirine becomes the embodiment of home, of belonging, a "cocoon of peace" in an "unaccustomed earth" and the place he wants to be, "the opposite of exile" (140). Hanif's stories of Iraq, on the other hand, offer Sirine linkage to her father's homeland and its rich cultural heritage. Thus, by bringing together these two individuals from disparate worlds, with similar cultural roots, Abu-Jaber on the one level explores the "traumatic undertones" of exile, the pangs of dislocation and displacement, and on the other, shows how the feeling of loss, non-belonging and insecurity – which is part of an exile experience – can be overcome by the virtue of commitment to loving.

In order to illustrate this passionate relationship of Sirine and Hanif, Abu-Jaber uses food as her narrative tool: indeed, when



Sirine feeds Hanif with his favourite Middle Eastern dishes, or Hanif cooks food for her, or the couple make *baklava* together, they uncover as well as discover more about their individual selves, their sense of loss and homelessness.

Moreover, Abu-Jaber represents food as a metaphor for home and the connection between people and also as a medium of self-discovery. Sirine's cooking not only offers the Arab American characters a journey down the memory lane, triggering nostalgia for their distinctive native customs and homelands, but also helps her negotiate the intricacies of her own hyphenated identity as an Arab American. For immigrant Arabs, food is thus linked with identity and history, offering a slice of native life, a sense of belonging in an otherwise alien world. And Nadia's Café becomes a space for belonging, for integration and inclusion, a melting-pot where cross-cultural relationships may blossom, and the gulf between diverse ethnic

communities and racial groups may be bridged.

Though principally set against the backdrop of a lush neighbourhood of a small near Eastern Community in Los Angeles, the narrative of the novel traverses diverse countries, cultures and climates, and takes Iraq as an important alternative setting. The reference to Iraq keeps cropping up through the memories and individual stories of the characters, and assumes a dark and depressing hue when Abu-Jaber describes the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War: streets full of "starving children," "broken buildings," "pre-famine conditions," and "bombed regularly by America" (221). The cruel irony about these bombings was that during the Persian Gulf crisis "these displays were compared to fireworks on American television" (177).

These vivid descriptions of the sheer desolatory condition of Iraq, the unmistakable plight of its people, the sufferings of starving children – who, if offered a banana, would "eat it peel and all" (176) – bring to light the discriminatory and unjust practices carried on by American foreign policy towards Iraq since the first Persian Gulf War, and exemplify the author's engangement with instances of injustice and discrimination.

Abu-Jaber's fiction also challenges the stereotypical representations of the Arab as "terrorist" or the mysterious and inferior "other." Therefore, in her narrative, the reader encounters vibrant intellectual and artistic gatherings, where well-educated Arab American professors/intellectuals as well as students congregate to share their views on issues ranging from Middle Eastern culture, poetry and politics to American dealings with Iraq, which undoubtedly testify to these characters' contemporary consciousness.

Replete with unmistakable lyricism and extraordinary precision, Abu-Jaber's prose seems to radiate warmth as well as serious attention concerning the issues she deals with, such as, people encountering each other and forming relationships in the context of diaspora, the contemporary global experiences of individuals and their intervention into the contemporary history and global politics. The novel, therefore, courageously charts the cruel unjust performances of inequitable systems and organisations and discourages the concept of a singular/monolithic narrative through its imagining alternative stories about cultures and communities, about nations and individuals. Through the exploration of the variegated nuances of the Arab American diasporic community and the immigrant experience, *Crescent* celebrates the notion of cultural hybridity and believes in the positive transformative potentials of diasporic existence. At the same time, it also articulates a substantial counter-narrative to unjust structures that tend to overlook the essential heterogeneity and diversity of human existence. In this highly technologised-era of ours, where we are flooded by heaps of information and prefabricated images of the Arab people, Abu-Jaber's narrative, no doubt, functions as a useful interrogation into Arab American life and culture, contemporary history and politics, the issue of representation and the discourse of identity.

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POETRY



The Endless I

AINON N

Within the givens of life
I seize thoughts, weave stories
Live parallel lives
In words, and in reality
United yet separate
Intensifying harmony
Of laughter and tears

Some days I am the question chaser
I run with Alphard across the sky
Asking
Is there happiness
Only to realize it is caged
In soundless allegro of my heart

Some days when magnum opus of life blurs
I strip a piece of dark night
And wear it on my forehead
To burn the crowded hues of endings
I become the eloquent
Yet, once again

Some days I become the crucifix
Raged
By the sea of blind eyes
By the penury of sacred shelters
Where forgiveness could be all
The allowance of religion

And then,
Some days I see a stranger's face
Longing for
Warm fire-glow of mind's dream
On such days I shed my name
Give it to the rainbow
Mix it's hue in a goblet of wine
I sculpt the heart's caged bird
Name her Ashna (friend)

I walk through the maze of her heart
Where days and nights are not caged
Where mellowed whims are free
To laugh and cry

In silence she defines me, and I her

In the imagery of poetry
Everything fits
And yet
Everything falls away
In search of the new
I am the ever drunk
Wanderer, lover, preacher, thinker

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