

## De-orientalization of the self through intertextuality in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* and William Shakespeare's *Othello*

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### Abstract:

"De-orientalization" involves rejecting negative Orientalist perspectives on the East, including Arab culture. Influential Arab American writers, like Edward Said, emphasize the impact of misrepresented Orient narratives in the West. Arab American writers, such as Diana Abu Jaber, aim to present authentic and nuanced identities, challenging stereotypes and fostering understanding within their communities. Abu Jaber, in her novel *Crescent*, uses intertextuality and focuses on Arab cultural heritage to de-orientalize the self and counter prevailing narratives. This contributes to a more accurate and diverse representation of Arab American identity.

**Key words:** de-orientalization; identity; stereotypes; intertextuality.

### Introduction

"De-orientalization" implies a rejection of the Orientalist lens through which the East, including Arab culture, has been negatively portrayed. Prominent Arab American writers and scholars, such as Edward Said, have discussed the impact of misconceptions and misrepresentation of the Orient in the West. Arab American writers, by de-orientalizing the self, contribute to a more accurate and diverse representation of Arab identity, challenging stereotypes and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities within their communities. They have striven to present a more authentic and nuanced understanding of their identities, experiences, and cultures, free from the distorted perspectives that have been perpetuated by Western Orientalist narratives. In other words, Arab American writers have endeavored to counter the prevailing mainstream narrative about Arabs in general and Arab Americans in particular. By doing so, they

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established a counter-narrative in an attempt to debunk cliché and stereotypical images about the Orient. De-orientalization and counter-narrative are often used in cultural studies, post-colonial theories, and debates revolving around representation and identity. The commonality between de-orientalization and counter-narrative lies in their shared objective of challenging and subverting established narratives and representations. Among the outstanding Arab American writers and novelists who have struggled to write back against the Western mainstream narrative is Diana Abu Jaber, whose novel *Crescent* attempts to de-orientalize the self. To fulfill her objectives, the novelist has adopted a couple of literary strategies, among which are her use of intertextuality and her emphasis on the importance of Arab cultural heritage.

### **1-Intertextuality as a literary device to de-orientalize the self**

In the spirit of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, Abu Jaber engages with intertextuality to disrupt and dismantle stereotypical depictions of Arabs. By incorporating a wide range of cultural references, the novel acts as a counter-narrative that challenges preconceived notions and offers readers a more authentic and nuanced view of Arab American life. In her endeavor to dismantle prevailing misconceptions about the Orient and Arab Americans, Abu Jaber strategically embraces intertextuality within her literary texts. This deliberate choice is a powerful means to challenge the monolithic and orientalist discourse surrounding the East. By skillfully incorporating intertextuality, Abu Jaber aims to navigate and reframe narratives, providing a nuanced understanding that transcends stereotypical representations and encourages a more multifaceted perspective on the Orient. In her definition of intertextuality, Linda Hutcheon points out:

[Intertextuality] replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself. A literary work can no longer be considered original; if it were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance. (Quoted by Zbidi,2015, p.667)

In this respect, Linda aligns with Jonathan Culler who challenges the idea of text originality. According to their shared viewpoint, texts are not isolated entities but rather interconnected within a broader context. Linda underscores the importance of readers immersing themselves in a "discursive space," a realm where they actively engage with related texts. She maintains "that to read is to place a work in discursive place, relating it to other texts and to the codes of that space, and writing itself is a similar activity: a taking up of a position in a discursive space" (Culler, 2010, p.1382). This brings us to Ronald Barthes's perspective on the essence of literary writing. Barthes contends that literary writing is not solely a creation of the writer's imagination. He emphasizes that "the writer's only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" (Barthes, 1977, pp.146-147). This implies that the creation of a literary work is not solely reliant on the author's internal creative abilities but also, to some extent, involves borrowing or appropriating from other writers' texts. Consequently, the reader's understanding of the text should not be limited to an internal reading but it should be connected to other texts.

In this regard, understanding a particular text becomes a dynamic process that involves discerning the intricate connections and relationships between the text under study and other relevant textual elements. By navigating this discursive space, readers can unveil the nuanced interplay and combinations that exist between the focal text and its broader textual context, thereby enriching their comprehension and interpretation.

## 2-Shakespearean Intertextuality

*Crescent* sets a dialogue with certain Western canonical texts, including Shakespeare's *Othello* (1565), to address issues related to stereotypes, misconceptions, and depictions of Arab/Arab Americans. By engaging with Shakespearean texts, Abu Jaber enters into a dialogue with one of the world's renowned literary writers. Through an exploration of Shakespearean texts, the novelist challenges the literary tendencies of Western canonical literature, particularly its potentially derogatory portrayal of Arabs. Abu Jaber assigns significant importance to her work by offering a literary misreading and reinterpretation of Shakespeare who is recognized as a canonical figure in British and world literature.

During the period when Shakespeare was composing his plays, stereotypes about Africans and Arabs were prevalent within English discourse as argued by Emily C Bartels: "English discourse was [ . . . ] already filled with stereotypes of Africans as embodiments of evil, blackened by sin, driven by lust, and hungry for murder and revenge" (Bartels,1997,p.53). Shakespeare refers to Arabs as "Moors" and portrays them as jealous, irrational, and superstitious, thereby playing a role in distorting the image of Arabs in mainstream Western culture. In contrast, Abu Jaber portrays Han, a character representing Arabs, as authentic and devoted in his love for Sirine. Unlike Othello, whose love for Desdemona is marred by jealousy and superstition, Han emerges as a charismatic and admirable lover, capable of expressing genuine love for Sirine with reason and rationality. Abu Jaber's depiction of Han as a kind and charming individual with a respectful character serves as a signal to readers, prompting them to recognize the prevalent stereotypes surrounding Arabs and Arab Americans. Consequently, there is an invitation to reconsider how Arabs are portrayed in Western literary texts. In contrast to Othello, who exhibits irrational behavior, Han is an accomplished Iraqi university professor known for his friendly demeanor toward his students. With his charismatic and wise personality, Han attracts the interest of Sirine when he visits Um-Nadia's Café for the first time. "[ Sirine's] main impressions of Hanif are of his hair, straight and shiny as black glass, and of a faint tropical sleepiness to his eyes. And there is his beautiful, light-accented, fluid voice, dark as chocolate. His

accent has nuances of England and Eastern Europe, like a complicated sauce.”(04)

The primary narrative of the novel revolves around Han's love for Sirine. Unlike the protagonist Othello, who is somehow callous, Han demonstrates remarkable kindness by inviting Sirine to join him for dinner at his home over a few days. They share moments of music during their meals, followed by time spent together on the balcony: “The moon comes out and turns red. They’re back sitting side by side on the tiny balcony, eating frozen chocolate layer cake straight from the box and spoonfuls 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.” (35)

This segment of the novel reflects Abu Jaber's engagement with Shakespeare's *Othello*, as the romantic interludes between Han and Sirine echo Othello's expressions of love for Desdemona. The harmonious atmosphere shared between Han and Sirine makes them look like well-matched partners. Amidst this delightful setting, Han begins sharing anecdotes with Sirine about his personal life and current career. Similar to Han, Othello recounts tales of his past to Desdemona. As a knight enamored with extraordinary adventures, Othello captivates Desdemona's heart through the narratives of his exploits. Desdemona's affection for Othello extends beyond his tenderness, encompassing the fascination inspired by the adventures he shares with her as he states:

“Upon this hint I spake:  
She loved me for the dangers I had pass’d;  
And I loved her that she did pity them.  
This only is the witchcraft I have used:-  
Here comes the lady; let her witness it”(23)

Through the deliberate inclusion of characters who share both similarities and differences with those in Shakespeare's *Othello*, Abu Jaber boldly confronts a canonical text in the Western literary realm. In doing so, she crafts an alternative and respectful portrayal of Arabs that diverges from the negative portrayal of Arabs presented by Shakespeare and other Western literary authors. By employing the literary technique of intertextuality, *Crescent* skillfully deconstructs certain orientalist stereotypes linked to Arabs. This strategic use of

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intertextuality serves to undermine misconceptions and makes him align with Jonathan Culler's perspective on the potential of this literary strategy:

In its designation of a discursive space and its assertion of the primacy of this space for any systematic study of discourse. Intertextuality is a theoretical construct of the first importance, and it is not without direct practical consequences. It leads one to think of a text as a dialogue with other texts, an act of absorption, parody, and criticism, rather than as an autonomous artifact that harmoniously reconciles the possible attitudes towards a given problem; it alerts one to the artifice of literature, the special conventions and interpretive operations on which it is based; and it makes one particularly sensitive to the special referentiality of literary works. (Culler,2010, p.1383)

Intertextuality unveils both commonalities and distinctions. An instance of this is the shared use of a handkerchief by playwright Shakespeare in *Othello* and novelist Abu Jaber in *Crescent*. While both works incorporate this item, Shakespeare deploys it to reinforce stereotypes about Arabs or "Moors," whereas Abu Jaber transforms it into a symbol of love and loyalty. In *Othello*, the handkerchief becomes a source of anxiety and irrationality. As Desdemona inadvertently loses the handkerchief, Othello, consumed by fury, interrogates her while vehemently emphasizing the pivotal importance of the lost item. This intense moment not only underscores the narrative tension but also contributes to the perpetuation of a skewed portrayal, depicting Arabs/Moors as inherently irrational. In a departure from *Othello*'s narrative, Abu Jaber ingeniously employs Han's handkerchief as a narrative device to humanize and counter the prevailing negative portrayal linked to Arabs in Western literary texts. Within the pages of the novel, this symbolic cloth becomes more than a mere accessory; it transforms into a source of beauty and happiness, challenging and reshaping entrenched stereotypes. "[its] material is so soft between her fingers it feels like dipping her hand into water."(59)

In contrast to Othello's response to the similar incident of losing the scarf, Han expresses regret for his initial reaction upon losing it. Abu Jaber strategically challenges and disrupts the entrenched stereotype of irrationality found in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Han's scarf, a cherished memento sent by his aunt during his studies in England, becomes more than a mere accessory. It serves as a poignant portrait, encapsulating a distinct image of his mother's village and adding a layer of cultural significance to the narrative. "This is the traditional pattern of my mother's village in the south. All the villages have their design. If you study them, you can figure out where a certain embroidery stitch has come from" (81) In this respect, the scarf serves as a poignant reminder of Han's identity and sense of belonging, elevating it to the status of a priceless garment. Intriguingly, it also encapsulates the memory of his father's initial meeting with his mother as he states: "My mother was wearing this when my father fell in love with her." (82) Han's authentic love for his beloved Sirine stands in stark juxtaposition to Othello's irrationality.

The reactions of Othello and Han to the disappearance of the handkerchief differ markedly. In *Crescent*, Sirine feels anxious when she loses the handkerchief during the Thanksgiving dinner, whereas Han undergoes psychological anguish after misplacing his cherished scarf:

Where is it?! [Han] says..."The *scarf*. What did you do with the scarf I gave you? Why don't you ever wear it?" Her mouth opens but she stammers, her voice rattling in her throat. "I guess-I just-I haven't had-"..." I trusted you with that one thing, just that one small thing, Sirine." He looks away from her. "How could I have been such a fool?" His eyes return to her and now they are flat, sharp stone. "How could I have trusted something so precious with someone like *you*?" (147)

While Han's response to losing the scarf resembles Othello's reactions, Abu Jaber, through *Crescent*, challenges the stereotypes about Arabs perpetuated by Shakespeare. In contrast to Othello's fiery confrontation with Desdemona, Han chooses a different path, offering apologies for any resentment he may have caused. This divergence underscores a notable distinction between Othello and Han. Unlike

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Othello, Han genuinely expresses remorse for his anger and actively endeavors to downplay the significance of the lost scarf. In this aspect, his demeanor seems more rational than Othello's, as he soothes Sirine with his reassuring words: "The scarf was just a thing. If you have lost it or not, things are things and that's it. A scarf is a scarf, right? You, on the other hand, are the whole world." (151) In a stark departure from Othello, whose love for Desdemona is tainted by irrationality, jealousy, and superstition, Han exhibits a sincere and genuine affection for his beloved, Sirine. Through the reimagining of the scarf scene, Abu Jaber not only revises the Western canonical text but also challenges the societal stereotypes imposed on Arabs and Arab Americans, presenting a more nuanced perspective.

Another juxtaposition between the two texts lies in the contrasting portrayals of Othello's mother and Abdelrahmane's mother in *Crescent*. Arab women characters hold crucial roles, actively challenging the prevalent images of submission and passivity often found in Western literature and media. In contrast to Shakespeare's association of Othello's mother with superstition, Abu Jaber depicts Abdelrahmane's mother as a resilient and determined woman. She stands as a formidable challenger, traveling the world in search of her lost son. Aunt Camille is characterized as tenacious, strong-minded, and a "perspicacious woman" (54). Through this resilient Arab American female character, Abu Jaber endeavors to dismantle the negative stereotypes associated with submissiveness and self-victimization (Awad,2011)

Han's handkerchief is a visual portrayal that echoes a specific image within his mother's village, as articulated by Han: "This is the traditional pattern of my mother's village in the south...If you study them, you can figure out where a certain embroidery stitch has come from." (81) In this regard, the scarf becomes a symbol of his connection to home, his roots, and his identity, imbuing it with priceless value. More importantly, it alleviates his feeling of homesickness and exile, a sentiment he conveys to Sirine. In this context, the scarf serves as a reminder of his sense of belonging, origin, and identity, rendering it truly invaluable. In this way, it provides solace, easing his sense of homesickness, which, as he explains to Sirine, is "bigger than everything else in my life. Leaving



my country was like—I don't know—like part of my body was torn away. I have phantom pains from the loss of that part—I'm haunted by myself. I don't know—does any of that make any sense? It's as if I'm trying to describe something that I'm not, that's no longer here.” (93)

Abu Jaber skillfully portrays Han as a charismatic individual deeply connected to his Arab identity, offering a deliberate counterpoint to prevailing Western narratives about Arabs. In this sense, the novelist strives to reestablish the prominence of the Arab American community and safeguard its identity within the broader tapestry of American society. By presenting Arab Americans as productive and dignified citizens, Abu Jaber effectively disrupts stereotypical images associated with Arabs and Arab Americans that persist in U.S. literary works and popular culture.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Diana Abu Jaber's use of intertextuality in *Crescent* emerges as a sophisticated literary strategy to de-orientalize the self. The novel engages with diverse literary traditions, challenges stereotypes, and reclaims narratives that contribute to a more authentic representation of Arab American identity. Through the intricate layers of intertextuality, Abu Jaber successfully dismantles Orientalist frameworks, allowing the characters and the narrative to transcend simplistic categorizations and present a more nuanced and genuine portrayal of the Arab American self. Intertextuality serves as a powerful literary device, allowing the novelist to illuminate the diverse experiences of Arab Americans in their adopted country. Abu Jaber employs the incorporation of Shakespearean texts, such as *Othello*, as a means to challenge Western canonical narratives that often depict Arabs as malicious Moors.

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