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Exploring Symbolism and Imagery in the Novels of Diana Abu-Jaber: A Critical Analysis

Mohammed Saleh Ali Al Marebi

Research Scholar in the Department of English,
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

Abstract:

This paper critically analyzes the novels of Diana Abu-Jaber, a prominent Arab-American author, focusing on the use of symbolism and imagery in her writing. Exploring works such as *Arabian Jazz* (1993), *Crescent* (2003), *Origin* (2007), *Birds of Paradise* (2011), *Silverworld* (2020), and *Fencing with the King* (2022), The study focuses on how Abu-Jaber uses symbols such as music, birds, food, and mirrors to convey deeper emotions, cultural identity, and universal themes. The study emphasizes the importance of these literary methods in overcoming cultural boundaries and engaging readers in her rich storytelling. Her works are an important contribution to Arab-American literature and beyond because of Abu-Jaber's superb use of symbolism and imagery.

Keywords: Diana Abu-Jaber, Arab-American author, symbolism and imagery

Introduction:

Symbolism is the use of objects, characters, activities, or surroundings to represent abstract concepts or emotions that go beyond their literal meaning. Imagery is using colorful words to produce sensory experiences and mental imagery. They are related because visual frequently brings symbolic concepts to life, making them more emotive and tangible for the viewer. The Oxford English Dictionary defines Symbolism as: “the use of symbols to represent ideas, especially in art and literature” (Oxford, 2013), while imagery is: “language that produces pictures in the minds of people reading or listening” (Oxford, 2013).

C.M. Bowra, commenting on the worthiness of images and symbols, writes: “The symbols may vary in their contexts, but their meaning is always clear. They save much explanation and give a concrete form to ideas that would otherwise be dim” (213). The use of imagery and symbols as a literary tool dates back to ages. Robert Frost says: “Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors grace metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have. Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another” (104).

He adds: “Unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere” (106). In his book *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye elaborately discusses his ideas about the meaning and role of imagery and symbols in literature. To Frye: “symbol means any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention” (71). He adds: “A word, a phrase or an image used with some kind of special reference . . . are all symbols when they are distinguishable elements in critical analysis” (71).

In other words, the reader immediately recognizes certain images and symbols since they are already registered in the conscious or unconscious mind. Such natural items discovered with a human meaning are some symbols, the representations of which are shared by all humans. Food and drink, the quest or voyage, light and darkness, and sexual gratification (in the form of marriage) are all symbols shared by all human. As a result, a center emerges, and at that center is a collection of universal symbols. When literature is read and understood in the light of such symbols, to quote the words of Frye: “In the greatest moments of Dante and Shakespeare, in, say, *The Tempest* or the climax of the *Purgatorio*, we have a feeling of converging significance, the feeling that we are close to seeing what our whole literary experience has been about, the feeling that we have moved into the still center of words” (Frye 117).

To delve further into the meaning of an image and a symbol. The simplest definition of the term 'image' is 'a picture created from words. It is typically expressed as a phrase, epithet, metaphor, or simile. C. Day Lewis has observed: “An epithet, a metaphor, a simile may create an image: or an image may be presented to us in a phrase or passage on the face of it purely descriptive (qt. in Pandey 28). An image is a mental picture generated through words, while imagery is a grouping of images used to create an intended ambiance or picture. When an image becomes suggestive in nature, it becomes a symbol. The repeated usage of specific images transforms them into symbols. Imagery and symbols make the writing more interesting by appealing to the senses, providing depth, and enriching the narrative. Reading is made more enjoyable and meaningful by the use of images and symbols. Symbols enlighten, clarify, and foreshadow. Repetition establishes symbols. A symbol could be an object, a person, an action, or a scenario. Symbols can be universal, cultural, or context-specific. The essence of literature is imagery, which immerses the reader in the story, novel, poem, or play. It includes all "details of sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch" (DiYanni, 779) that elicit emotional responses from the reader and allow the reader to experience the settings, characters, and events in the piece. Without imagery, literature would be lifeless and lifeless, and it would be difficult to captivate the reader's imagination.

It would be safe to assume that the connection of the image in literary work implies symbolic function in the main and the metaphor could be interested as a first stage symbol. S.K.Langer and W.Y.Trindall maintain rightly the interemerging quality of the symbol and image. A writer can express much more through symbols than with ordinary words. Symbols enrich and convey the language. Concepts that are intrinsically inexpressible can be

conveyed. Kenneth Burke, for example, viewed literature from a certain perspective as “symbolic action”. Symbolism is an oblique mode of saying things; hence, it is that symbolic art that is difficult, complex and even obscure. Symbols may be of two kinds, conventional or public and private or personal. (Rani 18, 19). Images and symbols used by modern writers are the specific devices to reduce the tension generated in the ideas that thoughts with their rush and multiplicity in the writer's mind, while composing his literary work (Rani 12). Susanne Langer's explanation of the imagery connects the mental strata of the writers' thoughts, which emerge from concrete forms and struggle to assume a new dimension in the abstract (Langer 108).

Diana Abu-Jaber is a writer of Arab American literature who established her identity in Arab American literature by her novels' attempt to use imagery and symbolism. While considering the status of Arab American literature post 9/11, symbolism and imagery could echo the relation between the two worlds. These research articles aim to identify and analyze symbolism and imagery: to identify and examine the different symbols and images used in Diana Abu Jaber's novels and analyze their significance in the story's context. It aims to explore how the author uses symbols and images to convey deeper meaning and themes.

Symbolism and Imagery in the Novels of Diana Abu-Jaber

Diana Abu-Jaber is a renowned Arab-American author who has penned a number of novels that explore identity, culture, memory, and narrative. Her novels often use symbolism and imagery to convey her characters' complex experiences and emotions, especially those caught between the Arab and American worlds. In her first novel, *Arabian Jazz* (1993), Diana employs symbolism and imagery to depict the struggles and joys of Matussem Ramoud's Arab-American family. The novel uses musical metaphors and allusions to convey the composite and dynamic identities of its characters, who are frequently referred to as "half-and-half" or "American Adam" (Limpár 249). The novel contrasts the rural setting of upstate New York with the urban setting of Los Angeles, where Matussem's daughters Jemorah and Melvina pursue their ambitions and careers. The jazz music performed by Matussem and his band represents the hybrid and dynamic identity of the Arab-American characters, who improvise and adapt to various situations and cultures. Jazz music also conveys the characters' emotions and desires, such as Matussem's yearning for his native land, Jemorah's desire for love, and Melvina's rebellion against tradition (Kaldas 173). Matussem says, "Jazz is like life. It is about being in the moment" (*Arabian Jazz* 15). The wedding of Jemorah and Ricky in *Arabian Jazz* represents the cultural clash, generational divide, and social pressure faced by the Arab American characters. The ceremony also reflects the diversity and complexity of the Arab-American community and the potential for harmony and acceptance. Abu-Jaber writes, "The wedding was a circus. It was a mix of Arabs and Americans, Muslims and Christians, old and young, rich and poor. It was a celebration of love and life" (*Arabian Jazz* 234). The cemetery where Matussem's wife is buried symbolizes his and his daughters' sorrow, loss, and loneliness.

Additionally, the cemetery contrasts with their home and community's life, happiness, and music. Matussem says: "The cemetery is my sanctuary. It is where I feel closest to her" (*Arabian Jazz* 67). For the Arab American characters in *Arabian Jazz*, particularly Melvina, who is a veterinarian and rescues injured birds, birds represent liberation, escape, and transformation. The birds also contrast the cages and traps that the characters encounter in their daily lives, such as racism, misogyny, and violence. Melvina says: "Birds are my spirit animals. They make me feel like I can fly. They make me feel like I can leave this place and go anywhere I want" (*Arabian Jazz* 123).

In her novel *Crescent* (2003), she employs food as a potent symbol and image to convey affection, memory, and exile. Food is also a metaphor for the cultural diversity and hybridity of the Arab American community and a means of challenging the stereotypes and boundaries imposed by the dominant culture (Fadda-Conrey 199). For instance, the protagonist Sirine, a caterer who is half-Iraqi, prepares dishes that combine cuisines and ingredients, such as lamb with rose petals or baklava with chocolate. In addition, she falls in love with Hanif, an Iraqi exile who shares his stories and recollections through food. In *Crescent*, the moon represents the cycles of existence, the phases of love, and Sirine and Hanif's relationship. Additionally, the moon embodies the Islamic culture and calendar, as well as the feminine strength and inventiveness of Sirine. Sirine says: "I love the moon. It is always changing but it is always there" (*Crescent* 13). In *Crescent*, Hanif and his uncle's storytelling symbolizes the Iraqi people's oral tradition, folkloric heritage, and political resistance. In addition to establishing a bond between Hanif and Sirine, storytelling helps to heal the wounds of war and exile (Elgohary 223). Hanif asserts that "stories are our homeland" (*Crescent* 56). The rose petals used by Sirine in her cooking represent the love, attractiveness, and sensuality she shares with Hanif. Additionally, the rose petals contrast with the violence, ugliness, and suffering that Hanif encounters in Iraq. For example, Sirine states, "My secret ingredient is rose petals." They impart a heavenly flavor to everything" (*Crescent* 23).

The mejnoona tree that grows behind Nadia's Café in *Crescent* symbolizes the Arab American community's attractiveness, vitality, and resiliency. The mejnoona tree also contrasts with the harshness, violence, and oppression faced by the Iraqi characters in their native country. Abu-Jaber writes, "The mejnoona tree is a miracle. It blooms in the desert, in the middle of Los Angeles. It is a sign of hope and life" (*Crescent* 67). Hanif and his uncle's storytelling symbolizes the Iraqi people's oral tradition, folkloric heritage, and political resistance. In addition to creating a bond between Hanif and Sirine, storytelling also functions to heal the wounds of war and exile. For example, Hanif says, "Stories are our homeland. They keep us alive and connected. They are our weapons against tyranny and despair" (*Crescent* 56). The crescent moon is a recurring image and symbol that represents the cycles of life, the aspects of love, and Sirine and Hanif's relationship. The crescent moon also symbolizes Islamic culture and the Islamic calendar, as well as the feminine strength and creativity of Sirine. , Sirine says: "I love the moon. It is always changing, but it is always there. It guides me and inspires me" (*Crescent* 13).

In *Crescent*, the desert is a symbol and image of the Iraqi characters' homeland, exile, and memory, particularly Hanif, who suffers from trauma and loss. The desert contrasts with the urban landscape of Los Angeles, where Sirine and Hanif attempt to establish a home and a community. Hanif, for instance, claims, "The desert is my heart." (*Crescent* 87). For the Arab American characters in *Arabian Jazz*, particularly Melvina, who is a veterinarian and rescues injured birds, birds represent liberation, escape, and transformation. The birds also serve as a contrast to the cages and traps that the characters encounter in their daily lives, such as racism, misogyny, and violence. Melvina says: "Birds are my spirit animals. They make me feel like I can fly" (*Arabian Jazz* 123).

In *Origin* (2007), the snowflakes Lena Dawson collects and analyzes represent her individuality, quest for the truth, and identity. The snowflakes contrast with the darkness, mystery, and peril surrounding her work as a fingerprint analyst and her involvement in a string of infant deaths "Snowflakes are my passion. They are like fingerprints, no two alike. They are beautiful and fragile and mysterious" (*Origin* 12). The jungle in Lena's visions and imagination represents her origin, memory, and strength. The jungle is also symbolic of the bond between Lena and her foster mother, Cat, who tells her a story about being raised by apes after surviving a plane accident and being orphaned. Lena feels alienated and alone in the urban landscape of Syracuse, which contrasts with the wilderness. Lena states: "The jungle is my home. It is where I belong. It is where I learned to see and smell and hear everything. It is where I feel alive" (*Origin* 56). In *Origin*, the fingerprint is a recurring symbol and image that signifies the character's identity, history, and fate. Lena's fingerprint reflects the science, art, and intuition she employs in her work and daily life "Fingerprints are my language. They tell me stories of people's lives. They reveal secrets and mysteries. They are my clues and my guides" (*Origin* 23).

In *Birds of Paradise* (2011) the mangoes that Avis Muir bakes represent her affection, generosity, and hope for her family. After her daughter Felice walks away from home, she experiences bitterness, emptiness, and guilt, which are contrasted by mangoes. Abu-Jaber writes: "Mangoes are her gift. They are sweet and fragrant and full of life. They are the only thing she can offer to her broken family" (*Birds of Paradise* 34). For the characters, especially Felice, who works as a model and assumes various bird names, the birds represent freedom, escape, and transformation. Additionally, the birds contrast with the cages and pitfalls that the characters encounter in their lives, such as addiction, violence, and betrayal "Birds are my spirit animals. They make me feel like I can fly. They make me feel like I can be anyone I want" (*Birds of Paradise* 123). Avis's paradise pastry represents her passion, creativity, and pursuit of purity. The paradise pastry also symbolizes Avis's connection to her native culture, France, as well as her conflict with her spouse Brian, who resents her success "Paradise pastry is my art. It is where I express myself. It is where I honor my heritage. It is where I find my joy" (*Birds of Paradise* 56).

In *Silverworld* (2020), the silver that Samar Rayburn discovers in her grandmother's home represents her creativity, imagination, and strength. The silver symbolizes Samar's relationship with her grandmother Luma, the keeper of Silverworld, a magical region where light and dark creatures coexist. The silver also contrasts with Samar's existence in Miami, where she feels out of place and lonely "Silver is my magic. It shines and sparkles and makes everything possible. It is the link between me and my grandma. It is the key to Silverworld"

(*Silverworld* 56). The mirror through which Samar falls represents her journey, her escape, and her transformation. The mirror also functions as a portal between the actual world and Silverworld, where Samar must overcome numerous obstacles to save her grandmother from the evil Shadow Queen Nixie. Samar's identity crisis is mirrored in the mirror as she struggles to fit into both realms and discover her true self "The mirror is my door. It takes me to another world. It changes me and tests me. It shows me who I really am" (*Silverworld* 123). Flickers and Shadows are symbols and representations of the light and dark forces in Silverworld and every individual. The Flickers are light-based creatures able to shapeshift and create illusions, whereas the Shadows are dark-based creatures with the ability to manipulate and annihilate. The Flickers and Shadows are also metaphors for the novel's recurring themes of harmony and conflict, optimism and fear, and love and hatred "Flickers and Shadows are my friends and enemies. They are part of Silverworld and part of me. They teach me about balance and choice. They show me the good and the bad" (*Silverworld* 234).

In the novel *Fencing with the King* (2022), the fencing that Amani Hamdan's father Gabe practices with King Hussein of Jordan represents their friendship, fidelity, and bravery. The fencing also represents the history, politics, and culture of Jordan, as well as the difficulties and opportunities Amani confronts when she travels to Jordan with her father "Fencing is my honor. It's a noble sport that teaches discipline and respect. It's a bond between me and the king. It's a way of showing my love for my country" (*Fencing with the King* 78). The poem that Amani discovers among her grandmother's possessions represents her heritage, memory, and curiosity. The poem also symbolizes the relationship between Amani and her poet grandmother, a Palestinian refugee. In addition, the poem contrasts with the silence and mysteries surrounding Amani's family history "The poem is my treasure. It's a piece of my grandma's soul. It's a clue to my roots. It's a spark for my imagination" (*Fencing with the King* 34). Similarly, the rock that Amani's uncle Hafez possesses represents his power, ambition, and avarice. The rock also serves as a plot device that exposes Hafez's hidden agenda and motivations and his participation in a plot against the monarch. The rock also contrasts with the straightforwardness and simplicity that Amani values in her life. "The rock is my prize. It's a rare and precious gem. It's a source of wealth and influence. It's a weapon against my enemies" (*Fencing with the King* 123).

Abu-Jaber's use of symbolism and imagery to narrate stories through food, music, and nature is evident in her novels. In addition, she employs these literary devices to investigate the politics and aesthetics of narrative in Arab American literature and to challenge the notions of belonging, identity, and culture in a multicultural society.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Diana Abu-Jaber's works demonstrate the power and significance of symbolism and imagery in writing. Abu-Jaber brings her characters and their complex experiences to life through her deft use of literary conventions, particularly those caught between two cultures - Arab and American. Her works' imagery and symbolism reveal deeper ideas and topics, complementing the narrative and capturing the reader's imagination.

Music, particularly jazz, emerges as a prominent symbol in *Arabian Jazz* (1993), expressing Arab-Americans' composite and adaptive identities. The wedding ceremony reflects cultural clash and concord, displaying the community's variety and possibilities for acceptance. Birds represent emancipation and freedom in the face of prejudice and persecution, starkly contrasting the protagonists' daily struggles. Food becomes a powerful symbol of affection, memory, and ethnic diversity in *Crescent* (2003), breaking assumptions and barriers. The moon represents the stages of existence and love while emphasizing the protagonist, Sirine's, strength and creativity. The mejoona tree represents the community's energy and perseverance in the face of adversity, and it serves as a symbol of hope and life. In *Origin* (2007), Snowflakes represent individuality and the search for truth while the forest represents the protagonist Lena's origin, memory, and strength. Fingerprints repeatedly appear as a sign of identity, history, and fate, representing Lena's work as a fingerprint analyst and the mysteries around her. In *Birds of Paradise* (2011) mangoes represent affection and optimism among bitterness and guilt. Birds symbolize freedom and metamorphosis, providing an escape from life's perils. The paradise pastry represents passion, inventiveness, and cultural heritage. In *Silverworld* (2020) Silver represents creativity and imagination, connecting the protagonist Samar to her grandma and the wondrous world they share. The mirror represents Samar's journey, escape, and metamorphosis, reflecting her identity conflicts. Flickers and Shadows reflect the interaction of light and dark energies, mirroring the novel's themes of harmony and strife. Fencing symbolizes friendship, fidelity, and bravery in *Fencing with the King* (2022), reflecting Jordan's history and politics. The protagonist discovers a poem that depicts her lineage and family history, emphasizing the relationship between generations. The rock represents power and ambition, revealing the story's hidden goals and agendas.

To sum up, Diana Abu-Jaber's novels are enhanced by her skillful use of symbolism and imagery, symbolizing cultural elements, expressing deep emotions, and exploring universal themes. She crosses cultural gaps via contrasts and parallelisms, appreciating the diversity of human existence. Each work features distinct themes and strong symbols that are influenced by place and cultural context, resulting in profound and engaging literary experiences.

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