

**Between Two Worlds: Ethnicity, Identity, and Arab-American Self-Empowerment in Diana Abu-Jaber's "Crescent"**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to analyze issues of identity and cultural hybridity in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* through the exploration of the importance of storytelling, language and culinary art as cultural tropes for identity formation in Arab-American reality. The issues that this study tackles are examined through the critical approaches of post-colonialism, feminism, and food studies. *Crescent* adapts elements from *The Arabian Nights* in diverse ways, mainly; the framing of the chapters and the ongoing story-filled content involving fantastic segments recounted orally. Cooking functions as a complex language for communicating love, evoking memory and dealing with displacement. Food emerges as an avenue for questioning cultural, racial and linguistic boundaries. In a world of mutilating political struggle and loss, Abu-Jaber's hybrid narrative utilizes native cultural elements to construct spaces wherein people perceive the possibilities of interaction and community.

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## الحياة بين عالمين: العرقيه والهويه وتمكين الذات لدى الامريكان ذوى الاصول العربيه فى روايه " هلال " لديانا ابو جابر

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#### ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تحليل بعض القضايا المتعلقة بمفهوم الخلط الثقافى وتأثيره على سياسيات الهوية فى روايه الهلال للكاتبه العربيه الامريكىة "ديانا ابو جابر". يقوم البحث بفحص واستكشاف العناصر المكونة للهويه المنقسمة على نفسها جراء حالة التمزق والصراع بين بيئتين متباينتين وما يعقب ذلك من انجذاب ورفض للاخر فى ان واحد. وتبدو الثقافتان المتناقضتان كالمكون الاساسى للواقع المعاش والسياق السردى فى النص. وترنو هذه الدراسة الى توضيح مدى انعكاس الصراع الثقافى على شخصيات النص الروائى وتحديد مسار الاحداث. بعض المواضيع التى تتعرض لها هذه الدراسة هى اهمية السرد واللغة وفنون الطهي كاستعارات ثقافية تشكل الوعى بالجنور و الاصول و كعوامل هامه لتمكين الذات حيث توظف هذه المسائل للتعامل مع واقع تشوبه ازمات سياسيه جمه.

In *The Thousand and one Nights*, Scheherazade saves herself by telling stories to distract her murderous king and husband, Shahrayar. To assure her survival, the legendary narrator asks that her sister, Dinarzad, accompany her. It is Dinarzad who asks for a story on the first and subsequent nights. She initiates the storytelling process with an invitation to Scheherazade to begin her tales; "Sister, if you are not sleepy, tell us one of your lovely little tales to while away the night, before I bid you good-by, at daybreak, for I don't know what will happen to you tomorrow" (Kaldas and Mattawa ix). Aside from the enthrallment of the king by the enticing eloquence of Scheherazade, the one thousand and one tales transform Shahrayar, nourishing his imagination with various means of dealing with life's complex issues. Shahrayar renounces the criminal procedure of marrying a virgin each night and killing her the following morning, yet the tales end without a clear sense of why and how Dinarzad disappears into silence. In some ways, the lives of many Arab American women have been similar to that of Dinarzad.

The aim of this paper is to study and analyze issues of identity and cultural hybridity in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* through the exploration of the importance of storytelling, constructing a hybrid text, and the significant role of food as cultural tropes for empowerment and identity formation of the Arab-American self and as means of converting displacement and exile. These issues will be examined and approached through the critical lens of post-colonial, feminist, and food studies.

Several studies have examined the silence surrounding Arab American lives for long. Arabic-speaking immigrants who came in the early decades of the twentieth century were adamant about blending in. Alixa Naff notes that for practical reasons many sought to be "assimilated ... out of existence" (330). Parents did not encourage their children to speak Arabic so as not to hinder their English. Arab Christians, when their churches were not available, joined their neighbors in worship. Many claimed they were Greek or Italian to better pass as European Americans even though many upheld certain traditions within their own households. It is noteworthy that the pressures exerted by American mainstream culture on the non-whites living within it inculcated such an attitude

(Kaldas and Mattawa x). In fact, changes in the political scene with the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the consequent Arab bashing, in addition to demands of minority rights by civil rights movement prompted some people of Arab descent to claim their ancestral links. At that point in time, the term 'Arab American' was coined and was embraced by Arabic-speaking communities. They formed political organizations, issued publications and translation of Arab literature and set up exhibits of Arab art.

The flourishing interest in ethnic identity politics brought about a change in the American cultural scene. African American, Asian American and Latino writers gained wide publication and readership. Arab Americans, on the other hand, a small but significant minority, were absent. With the works of Sam Hamod, D.H. Melhem, and Jack Marshall who have been publishing since the 1960s, there came into being the label 'Arab American literature'. Nonetheless, there was uncertainty about the importance such identification would add to the work. The Arab-American's literary condition was "in a sense like their ancestor Dinarzad, helpful to the dialogue about a new American culture but generally unheard" (Kaldas and Mattawa xi).

The long absence of Arab American narratives was dispelled with an emerging sense of urgency and confidence as well as a deep ethnic and feminist consciousness. Lisa Suhair Majaj offers an insightful perspective: "The growing emergence of a body of feminist Arab American writing corresponds with ... the turn away from nostalgic celebration toward more rigorous and self-critical explorations" (qtd. in Kaldas and Mattawa xi). Many of the stories are written by women who are more ethnically and politically conscious. By writing about their own experience, the Arab American women sustain the integrity of their communities through their stories, letting the outside world into their world and providing a sense of community for their kin. For Barbara Nimiri Aziz, the struggle for empowerment and recognition is epitomized in slogans such as "Write or be written" (xii). Born and raised in the United States with a hybrid cultural consciousness, Darraj aspires for a work that speaks, as she reflects:

my experiences as both an outsider my entire life; while Americans thought I was a “foreigner”, Arabs regarded me as “Americanized”. I wished I could invite friends to my parents’ house without getting slightly alarmed looks from them when the stuffed grape leaves, *magloubah* (spinach and rice), or *foul* (crushed fava beans) appeared on the dinner table. How could I tell anyone that I owned cassette tapes of both Fairouze and Madonna and sang to the lyrics of both with equal zest? I...needed to find that book, the sooner the better” (Darraj 1).

However, the voice of the Arab woman has been warped since it first made its way westward. Thus, Darraj believes the existence of that book is a remote possibility. What is really needed is the voice of an Arab woman to speak the truth, without the filter of translation. An Arab American female story uncorrupted by the intervention of others is, as Darraj says, “possibly mine as well ... might describe my own confusion about feminism, marriage, education, ambition, identity and obstacles”(2).

With the publication of Ahdaf Soueif’s novel *In the Eye of the Sun*, Darraj felt that she found the book that spoke her experience. In fact, many women have related to that book, perhaps “because of the honesty with which Soueif describes sexual politics in the Arab family and society: the pressure to marry, the emphasis on having children, issues of control within marriage, the development of a feminist consciousness. Soueif’s was an insider’s view-the view of someone who understood, who ‘got it’”(2). Darraj believes that other Arab women writers such as Ghada Samman, Hanan Al-Shaykh, and Naomi Shihab Nye constituted a support as she struggled to articulate her voice. She adds:

When I felt disconnected from either half of my identity, their words helped me find my way. When I questioned my feminism and my own strength, they reminded me that Arab women are always strong, always resilient. When I despaired at ever fitting in, ever finding my true voice, they reminded me that my identity is to be found somewhere in between the two worlds I call home. (Darraj 2-3)

Actually, these writers have inspired many Arab women who feel trapped and caught between worlds, where the Middle East is not-

too-distant home, but America or Europe is still not a completely comfortable one. Darraj remarks that these writers are inspired by their Eastern connections; “their writing and their themes touch a global audience while reclaiming the image of Scheherazade as a woman who wove a marvelous tapestry of tales” (3).

Arab American female writings seek to dismantle the stereotypical image of Arab women as “silent, acquiescent, unthinking”(Darraj 4). They tackle issues of memory, relationships between the writers, their parents and grandparents, and their affiliation with Arab culture and language and how it reinforces their identity (Darraj 6). For many, the crisis in Palestine is central to their identity and consciousness, and affects their views on social justice and racism. Although their concerns and experiences may overlap, they move in different directions.

### **Crescent: a new moon /a fresh start**

Born in Upstate New York, Diana Abu-Jaber (b. 1960) spent different periods in her life going back and forth between Jordan, her father’s homeland, and the United States, her mother’s homeland. Abu-Jaber’s career as a writing professor at Portland University as well as her hyphenated condition allowed her to extensively elaborate on her “in-betweenness”. Belonging to two different cultural traditions, Arab Jordanian and American, allows Abu-Jaber to reflect extensively on identity issues, longing for home, self-discovery and cultural transmission. Living between the US and Jordan, she envisions herself as “the mermaid who was neither fully human nor fish ... a creature of in-between”(Darraj 122).The 1990s saw the publication of Diana Abu-Jaber’s novel *Arabian Jazz*; Elmaz Abinader’s memoir *Children of the Roojme*; and a ground-breaking anthologies, *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*,(1994). edited by Joanna Kadi. *Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999), edited by Munir Akash and Khaled Mattawa. *Dinarzad’s Children : An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (2004), edited by Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa; and *Scheherazade’s Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (2004), edited by Susan Muaddi Darraj. (Ludescher 105).

When trying to provide a “balanced” portrait, Diana Abu-Jaber attests to adverse reactions. She notes that while she was trying to publish her first novel, *Arabian Jazz*, some editors wanted to take the word ‘Arabian’ out of the title. Others wanted to change the characters’ names so they would not seem alien. When Arab characters appeared to be ‘normal’ or ‘universal,’ it was felt that the American book market could not handle it. The only options available for a long while have been “to collaborate ... in one’s extinction” or “go silent”(Kaldas and Mattawa xii).

However, the silence could not be kept for long. It was impossible for Arab American writers to engage the world and remain anonymous. Even before the September 11 events brought the American public’s attention to the existence of an Arab American community, Arab American writers had presented their stories to the public, stories that are testaments to the humanity of a heterogeneous and complex group of people. A generation of Arab American writers emerged shedding a critical light on issues of heritage, gender, nationalism and assimilation within the Arab American community. The histories and tales that are told by Arabs are missing the point.

Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* (2003) captures the worlds of the interstices in all its minute details. She admits in one of her interviews:

It’s my hope for *Crescent* that while it has a strong cultural profile that it transcends its own cultural agendas. I intended for the novel to give the readers both a social tableau as well as a basic human story about love and fear and jealousy that resonates no matter what readers’ own background or beliefs might be. The students in the café represent exiles in the midst of their new lives. Their yearning for home is constant. (Gaines 4)

The choice of the title is significant for the message she seeks to convey to her readers. A crescent moon is a lunar phase: a new moon that represents a fresh start in life, perhaps a budding romance as that flourishing between the two main characters in the novel, Hanif Al Eyad, or Han and Sirine. *Crescent* dramatizes, with compelling poignancy both the piercing sense of dislocation and alienation that permeates Arab exilic identity. It chronicles the psychic disarray of

Han, an exiled Iraqi professor at UCLA, as he attempts to assimilate and be assimilated into the socio-cultural milieu of a small Arab American community in a part of Los Angeles called Irangles. Nouri Gana notes that “the setting of an ethnic community within yet another ethnic community is evocative of the concentric circles of belonging and the multiple dynamics of proximity and distance that both nurture and withhold the process of homecoming-of becoming rather than being Arab”(238).

In a parallel move, *Crescent* chronicles the awakening of a second-generation, middle-aged Arab American Sirine, to the forgotten portions of her Arab identity. In the atmosphere of post 9/11 and the heightened politicization of Arab identity, Abu-Jaber notes that the likes of Sirine should first “become aware of the portions of ... identity that might need to be accounted for, even prior to understanding how much portions have a concrete bearing on her otherwise tranquil American identity”(Gana 238).

In fact, characters in *Crescent* from first generation children embody instances of cross-culturalism and exist in the in-between places described by Homi Bhabha. According to Bhabha, “What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences”(1). These “in-between” spaces provide “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal-that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself”(Bhabha 1-2).

Like Abu-Jaber, Sirine is light-skinned, middle-aged and unsure of her Arab identity. While Sirine’s questions about self-identity and origins haunt her, they also provide the territory for elaborating strategies of selfhood. When she looks in the mirror, “all she can see is white.” She describes her eyes, “almond-shaped, and sea-green,” and her other features “tidy and compact. Entirely her mother. ” People who ask her nationality are surprised when she says she is half Arab. She ponders the idea that she “inherited her mother on the outside and her father on the inside”(Crescent 195), and believes that if she could examine “the blood and bones and the



shape of her mind and emotions-she thinks she would find her truer and deeper nature. ” She “imagines her parents, young, expecting their first child, expecting, perhaps, true amalgam of their two bodies. Were they disappointed, she wonders, to have an entirely fair-skinned child?”(*Crescent*196). Sirine’s questions about her blood and bones’ origins exemplify her in-between state as Arab American. On meeting Han, she undertakes a refreshing journey of self-discovery and cultural reinvention. He tries to teach her about Iraq and the Arab world, Sirine starts a refreshing journey of self-discovery and cultural reinvention.

The title of Abu-Jaber’s narrative has political and religious implications. As the narrative moves from the mysteries of romance to the clearer light of revelation and discovery, the symbolic significance of the crescent constitutes a recurring thread. It is associated with discovering one’s Arab identity. Sirine’s uncle says:

The crescent moon is an important symbol in the Islamic faith. Many mosques are crowned with a crescent moon...The first sighting of the new moon marks the beginning of each Islamic month and it marks the end of Ramadan-the great and pious month of fasting...the significance of crescent [is] the reward to the patient, the watchful, those who are willing to wait.(*Crescent* 329)

Han carries the pain of having to deal with the loss of his home as well as his identity, culture and religion, in addition to being an exile. In his case, exile is traumatic because it is not a matter of choice. Han tries to place himself inside the new environment of the U.S. Gradually, he reveals details of his life in Iraq and his escape from the country during Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship. Significantly, Han bears a crescent-shaped scar by his eye, a remnant of political persecution under the reign of Saddam Hussein.

Han has to deal with the death of his sister and the impossibility of returning to his homeland. In an interview with Andrea Shalal-Esa, when asked about Han, Abu-Jaber explained that Han’s character is part of her “literary obsession”(2), which questions the painful experience of being in an immigrant condition. The painful experience she mentions is related to the very moment that a person leaves his or her country and is unsure about the future; Abu-Jaber concludes that it appears as an “incredible experience and

journey...and for a lot of people it can be a real process of loss” (Shalal-Esa 2).Furthermore, Han defines exile as “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 am haunted myself”(Crescent 152).

Han’s comments echo Edward Said’s reflections on exile as a condition of loss. Said explains that exile is a kind of “unbearable rift force between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,” (173). Said believes that “the pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidarity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of question”(179). Like the photographs, the scarf mitigates Han’s homesickness to an extent he decides to return to Iraq taking all the risks the country now represents for those who escaped during the first years of dictatorship, contrary to Said’s comments about impossibility of homecoming. In fact, the professor needs to reunite with his family so as to feel comfortable.

Han is rather mysterious about his past and behaves as if trying to push his traumatic experiences out of his mind. He also tries to overcome his sense of guilt for being responsible for his brother’s arrest after his escape. Han’s experience as a refugee shaped his new way of living since he went to a private school in Cairo, where he learned the history of the West-American and British. He describes this process of assimilation he underwent as something he could not avoid; “The school had British and American faculty, classes were conducted in English, and the history classes were the history of West, literature was the literature of America and Britain. I didn’t question any of it”(Crescent 220) . Gradually, the past becomes clear as it is seen from a distant point in the present. Han’s flashbacks as well as his contact with Sirine take him twenty years back and this distance in time and space allows him to grasp his past, although it is represented in little fragments.The professor’s life is undercut by two kinds of memory, the memories of his childhood and the memories of exile. Personal memory is linked to his childhood in Iraq, living with his family and helping his father in the fields and the historical memory made up of the unstable political situation in his homeland.

As second generation of Arab Americans, Sirine and Han

adopt a similar exilic discourse, and seem to be both “inhabited by elsewhere communities, faces and places-as if those were the necessary combustible ingredients of longing that would fuel the pursuit of belonging”(Gana 243). Sirine confesses, “I guess I’m looking for my home, a little bit. I mean, even though I live here, I have this feeling that my real home is somewhere else somehow” (*Crescent* 108). Han goes even further, he compares himself to the homeless people on the street, “walking around talking to the air...they live in between worlds so they’re not really anywhere. Exiled from themselves”(152).

As mentioned earlier, Han’s and Sirine’s relationship is based on her parents. Her father is a romantic immigrant who “lost a critical piece of himself in coming to the States”. Her mother was “a curious, American girl, ready to be swept off her feet”(Gaines 2)). In envisioning Sirine, Abu-Jaber draws on the daughters of immigrants with their sense of being caught in between identities and cultural legacies. Sirine’s memories of her childhood exert a strong influence over her life since they arise mostly when she is in the café, especially in the back kitchen, preparing recipes of Arab dishes, and also through her contact with Han. An unremitting sense of loss becomes the incentive that drives Han and Sirine into a romantic relationship. In this context of personal instability, *Crescent* goes beyond a romanticized story to show how different experiences of Arabs in the West are affected by similar nostalgia for the lost homeland and difficulty in belonging to the new environment. The condition of the American photographer Nathan illustrates a variation on the theme of exile. In his study on the semiotics of photography, Barthes maintains that there is a close connection between photography and loss. In this sense, the photograph becomes a sign of loss, death, exile or that which can never be again. In Photography, Barthes observes, “I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and the past ... What I see has been here ... It has been here and immediately separated” (*Camera Lucida* 76-77). Nathan’s memories are anchored back in Iraq where he meets Han’s sister and falls in love with her. Despite being American, Nathan has more connections with the East than with the West. Because of this, he is

aware of the political situation of that region; he knows the geographies of the places he has been to, besides knowing the names of the Arab poets and their poetry by heart: he recites the poetry of “Ali Ahmed Said, more famously known as Adonis” (*Crescent* 95).

A scarf that belonged to Han’s sister leads characters to unveil their past. It was sent to him by his aunt as a memento when he was still living in England. After telling Sirine about the object and some prayer beads, Han insists that she accepts the scarf saying it belonged to his mother. The scarf not only carries Han’s memories of his family, but it is also an object that instigates him to think about his life in Iraq and his feelings towards being away for such a long time without having contact with them. Mysteriously, Sirine loses the scarf during the Thanksgiving dinner. Han regrets trusting her with such a meaningful object. Besides that, he calls himself a fool for giving her the only memento he has of his sister.

Nathan’s memories of his beloved Leila come up when he sees Sirine wearing a scarf that belonged to her. Both the photograph and the scarf become objects charged with symbolic meanings: The photograph confesses all the truth about Leila’s death in Iraq, while the scarf works as a catalyst to bring Nathan’s past memories to the foreground. According to Barthes; “The photograph does not call up the past ... The effect it produces ... is not to restore what has been abolished... but to attest that what I see has indeed existed ... Reality is a past state; at once the past and the real” (*Camera Lucida* 82).

Although each of the characters deals differently with memories of homeland, in *Crescent*, memory appears as a cultural phenomenon; the immigrant characters can only recall what constitutes part of their experience in a collective context shared by a group. The immigrant community, as illustrated in the narrative, emerges as the ideal collective environment for the development of memory. Moreover, collectivity expresses the predicament of being invisible inside the host culture.

### **The Power of Storytelling:**

The frame of *The Nights*, which *Abu-Jaber’s Crescent* assumes, presents Scheherazade as a powerful storyteller and positions storytelling itself as a hopeful and life-affirming endeavor

since the unfinished fantastic suspenseful stories saved Scheherazade and all the other virgins from death. Like the traditional format of *The Nights*, Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* interweaves two narratives, one real and the other fantastical. The latter is told in a fragmented fashion by Sirine's uncle who describes it as the "moralless story" (*Crescent* 5) of his cousin Abdelrahman Salahadin. It is a story of a sailor who repeatedly sells himself into slavery, steals the money back and undertakes a fake drowning only to resurface elsewhere. The undertones indicate a critique of Western imperialism and exploitation. Moreover, the figure of Abdelrahman conjures up the power metaphor of Al-Andalus and the competing forces of exile, nostalgia and homecoming—all of which Abdelrahman experienced firsthand but transformed them into a productive mix. (Gana 243).

Abu-Jaber highlights the importance of beginning each chapter with the continuing tale of the adventures of Abdelrahman Salahadin by saying:

I grew up [among] big time story-tellers—my father and my uncles loved to regale us with jokes and fairy tales and reminisces and all sorts of wonderful yarns. Like food, story-telling was a tremendous part of my cultural education and I wanted to try and convey a little of the flavor of that experience by having Sirine's uncle tell an ongoing tale. It was very important to me that this story contain elements of the oral tradition. (Gaines 4)

The story of Abdelrahman Salahadin develops into a sort of mirror to the larger "real-life" story of Sirine and Han reflecting upon the themes and motifs of their experiences. Abu-Jaber maintains, "I believe [it provides] ... the critical key to the characters' own struggles and uncertainties" (Gaines 4). In fact, the two narratives echo each other throughout the novel and by the end combine into a hybrid text. The fairy-tale gives Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* the archetypal mood that characterizes a fable. The imaginative power of stories conveying the richness of minute details mingled with fictional elements entertain and provide a sense of values involved in living in a certain society. In an Interview with Field, Abu-Jaber explains; "I wanted the uncle to be telling Sirine, his niece, a story throughout the course of the book. I wanted the story to have the flavor of the

oral narrative, and the surprises and the nuances of the spoken voice” (221). In presenting life experience, stories have the power of transmitting truths in an imaginative and enigmatic way.

The act of telling and passing on messages through storytelling is performed in *Crescent* by the figure of Sirine’s uncle who is the only character in the novel that does not have a name. Abu-Jaber says that she thinks of him as the “Uncle” and adds:

...when I tried to give him a name it felt so false to me, too specific and too personal. I wanted to give him this very archetypal, avuncular presence ... It’s almost like she can’t know his name. If she knows his name, it breaks the spell. There’s a kind of God-like power in not having the individual name... (Field 220-221)

Thus, it is intentional to leave out the name of the storyteller.

The parallel fable-like story told by this ‘avuncular presence’ carries key elements for the understanding of the main frame story of Sirine and Han. Mythical tales and the novel’s main plot go hand-in-hand to uncover different layers of meanings. Several passages interweave the two levels of the narrative: often Sirine and her uncle are familiar with Abdelrahman , the slave in the embedded narrative, and characters in Abu-Jaber’s work seem to be also aware of the slave’s existence. Each chapter presents one of the pieces of the mythical tale of Abdelrahman and his mother Camille, mixing fantastic elements of mermaids with icons of Western culture such as the Victorian explorer Richard Burton. With the mention of the career film idol Omar Sharif, Hollywood appears as a stage for the fantastic tale. The frame story presented in *Crescent* offers an interesting insight into the importance of storytelling as a way of passing on tradition and expressing political issues namely.

Moreover, the fable story told by the uncle brings into cognizance the difficulties and risks of the very fact of being Arab for someone whose name combines “quintessential elements of Arabness and Islamicateness as Abdelrahman Salahadin” (Gana240). Sirine’s uncle states that Abdelrahman; “knows he might be free, but he is still an Arab. No one ever wants to be the Arab—it’s too old and too tragic and too mysterious and too exasperating and too lonely for anyone but an actual Arab to put up with for very

long”(Crescent 38). Thus, the uncle contends that being Arab is possible when “one is emptied of the consciousness of being Arab”(Crescent 183).

In fact, the uncle’s story reveals the way in which being Arab has become the site of exclusion and confinement to a choice between two alternatives of non-existences: one is associated with the romanticized Bedouin life and the second does not promise much of an existence either. It is “an uncanny feeling to live within the prison-house of one’s Arabness without having the power to own it or appropriate it away from the discourses that cluster thick around, under, and above it” (Gana 241). Arabness cannot, therefore be easily recognized as long as the discursive power structures that grant recognition are the very ones that usurp, withhold, or suspend it.

The ‘avuncular presence’ of the storytelling figure with his avid desire to relate tales fabricated with vivid details that puzzle the listeners is a constant in the lives of those people around him. The place he tells the story to Sirine adds to the aura of magic; it is a “room of imagined books” where everything carries “an odor of forgotten memories.” This is “the library of imagined books”, her uncle says, “because he never reads any of them” (Crescent 5). The uncle’s joy in telling the story echoes Gail De Vos’ opinion when she claims that “when the storyteller thoroughly enjoys the story he can see the characters, setting, and action clearly in his or her own mind” and “during the telling much of the art of storytelling comes naturally”(80).

With *the Nights* as the predominant model in technique and motifs, *Crescent* skillfully borrows the narrative format of a story within a story, where the main frame in a first glance has more importance in content, but its layers of meaning are unfolded gradually as the frame tale is decided. Abu-Jaber states, in an interview with Field, that she “wanted [the same story] to function as a kind of looking glass for the characters, that would in some way reflect upon motifs of their reality in an indirect way”(221). The uncle acknowledges that “old stories that gather in the collective unconscious of a family- are like mirages. Illusory and fantastic, and yet they are frequently based on some reflection of reality” (Crescent 179).

The uncle takes into consideration the specific context of the lives of his Arab American listeners. He has successfully negotiated his own life and identity as an Arab American, an identity that remains dynamic and in-process through the stories he tells. “He situates himself in his storytelling position-- elbow on knee and hand to brow,” at which point he launches into his story. The uncle reinforces his role as teacher as he comments to his listeners about his story; he explains to Sirine that his tale is “the story of how to love”(Crescent 5). At the beginning of the novel, the uncle promises to tell Sirine the whole tale only if she behaves. Moreover, he interrupts his story with often-humorous asides, making clear that his telling of the tale is a performance that he continually shapes and adapts to the circumstances of the telling and needs of his listeners. Amidst a story, he often pauses to point out certain observations like, “[n]o one ever wants to be the Arab” because of the “image problem”(Crescent 38).

The uncle, much as Scheherazade does in *Nights*, takes upon himself the responsibility of teaching those around him, and offering them life lessons. Also in keeping with *The Nights*, the line between fantastic tale and reality often blurs the uncle’s narrative as a way to entertain and ignite the imagination of his audience. Andre Miquel explains that, in the oral tradition of *The Nights*, the storyteller was “a preacher and sermonizer as much as a storyteller in the strict sense” (8). He also adds that “behind the fantastic exists a series of concrete and real references” (10). He thus claims that his story is rooted in material reality. He also breaks from his story by making references to Sirine’s lover, the Iraqi professor Han, the uncle links the tale’s hero to Han.

Abu-Jaber is also playing with the binary opposition reality\imagination. Sirine and her uncle are at Nathan’s exhibition called “Photography Against Art: Real Scenes by Nathan Green”. As described, they are observing the photographs and “her uncle stops by one of the drowning man portrait for a moment and smiles as if recognizing a friend. He nods and turns away. ‘Well, he is an unusual fellow’, he says” (Crescent 22-23). The figure of the “drowning man” who appears in the uncle’s tale, is perfectly related to Abdelrahman himself, and, in this way, it puts into question how



the boundary between reality and fantasy is fluid. The moralless tale is brought to life through the use of photographs; it becomes "Real Scenes"- as real food.

The tale of the slave deciphers the enigma of Han's life. Abu-Jaber explains that "the story of Abdelrahman Salahadin is meant to be a kind of code" (Field 221). In this case, the connection is obvious. Both Abdelrahman and Han are young men who choose to leave their homes after having been betrayed; Abdelrahman by his wife and Han by his country. Essentially exiled from their homes, they become escape artists who wander the earth in search of themselves. Moreover, Han is compared to Ulysses: "I'm telling you, he looks like a hero. Like Ulysses" (*Crescent* 6), and thus the uncle establishes the link between various cultures' mythic tales and the inherent hybrid quality of most folkloric tales.

In *Crescent*, Abdelrahman's existence defies the boundary between reality and fiction. Observing an Arab crescent and listening to the uncle's story, Han seems familiar with the slave. "'Abdelrahman Salahdin'. Han murmures. 'What?' ... 'Your uncle's story. It is so familiar'" (*Crescent* 36). Han is also referring back to the tradition of storytelling from the Middle East, especially in Iraq. He comments, "In Iraq everyone tells jokes and fables. It's too difficult to say anything directly" (*Crescent* 36). In fact, as the main story and the frame tale show, the best way of saying things is by covering them with symbolic metaphors in order to reach the audience. Thus, in *Crescent*, the tale helps to indirectly discuss issues of love, politics, and identity. Towards the end, the "drowning man" or Abdelrahman himself and Han become one single character. Gana provides an insightful view of this fact in the embedded story:

The uncle's story feels at first like no more than an intolerable digression, an endurance test for the reader's patience, but, toward the end of the novel- when Han reemerges in Iraq bearing the name of the same mythical figure of the uncle's story, i.e. Abdelrahman Salahdin- it becomes a particular relevance to an understanding of the competing mythical, historical, and cultural forces that factor in the makeup of an Arab and an Arab American identity. (239)

More than fusing the two characters, it also suggests the "found Arab." Han, found himself, only, when he immigrated and walked

outside his own culture. Eventually, he drowns himself inside the U.S culture and through his contact with Sirine, the professor has the courage to face the traumatic memories of his life back in Iraq. Abu-Jaber clearly reveals that the journey of self-discovery is sometimes painful and requires a certain degree of autonomy to make decisions.

The uncle's tale, with its subtle undermining of any clear distinction between fiction and reality extends to the rest of the novel. Throughout the span of *Crescent*, "the two narrative strands of the uncle's story and the present's seemingly more traditionally realistic, novelistic narrative weave back and forth across each other, with various elements of each echoing suggestively in the other" (Michael 322). Abu-Jaber opens one of the chapters with a segment of the uncle's tale in which the hero's mother, Camille, meets the infamous now retired "mermaid, Alief from the land of Na'" (*Crescent* 222), and falls under "the spell of the siren's call: the sound that contains the scent of berries, chocolate, and mint" (*Crescent* 223). This segment is immediately followed by the present-day narrative in which the poet Aziz calls Sirine a "siren" and Aziz himself is portrayed as a siren of sorts as he works his charms to entice Sirine, who succumbs to his "scent [that] fills her head, sweet orange blossom and almond" and kisses him (*Crescent* 230).

At times, the two narrative components become almost indistinguishable. This is often the case when characters try to remember events from their pasts-particularly traumatic ones- and thus engage themselves in storytelling as they work to recreate a past that is difficult to access and to represent in narrative form. Han's memory of his discovery of a swimming pool in Bagdad populated by Western women blends the real and fantastic. One way to think about both aspects of *Crescent's* narratives is that they present themselves as two modes of telling the same story. They are complementary in that each mode tackles things differently. This is a useful technique since narratives cannot fully capture or represent events and characters. The multiple forms of stories can paint a fuller picture. In the case of the novel's Arab American characters, telling their stories is particularly difficult "given not only their hyphenated identities but also their traumatic pasts grounded in national and

global politics”(Michael 323). Both Han and Sirine have to a certain extent repressed the memories of their pasts, at least in part because of the difficulty of facing and narrating their traumatic experiences. Thus, the uncle’s tale “functions as a potential means of representing such experiences because of its slanted, seemingly more indirect approach”(Michael 323).

Indeed, the tale includes a representation of the traumatic experience of its hero Abdelrahman who, once he finds his way to Hollywood as an actor, experiences a split sense of identity and a deep rift within himself:

...In his left ear was the soft inhalation and exhalation of the desert and the susurration of the ocean winds. In his right ear was the sharp metallic din of America... In his right eye there were parties and girls, directors and scripts, money and fast cars. But in his left eye there was a sort of absence, a nothingness that he couldn’t quite identify. (*Crescent* 314)

Han’s experience clearly echoes that of Abdelrahman, as Han himself asserts that people like himself “live in between worlds so they’re not really anywhere”(Crescent 152). In deed, as Amal Abdelrazek argues “the uncle’s tale itself embodies Hanif’s exile experience”(213).

Thus, the novel designates that exiles cannot merge the two narratives of their split identity. Instead, the solution “involves negotiating between the two narratives to create a new hybrid narrative that is not simply a merging of two distinct narratives but rather a new construction altogether, created through an ongoing process of altering and adapting aspects of those narratives”(Michael 324). Since the uncle’s story bridges Arab and western cultures through a creative processes of alteration and adaptation, it offers a model for Han, as an Arab exile in America, to think about and narrate history and eventually create a future-oriented identity. More specifically, Han adds that he has “gotten used to saying several things at once. Just in case any secret police came around” (*Crescent* 36), thus suggesting that the use of coated and veiled narratives in late twentieth-century Iraq is politically motivated and not just a neutral folkloric form. The uncle’s story is thus “layered and folded up precisely because of the difficulty of engaging the issue of exile

and how the exile can create a future-oriented identity...particularly in an America that views its citizens of Arab descent with suspicion and even open hostility”(Michael 324).

The familiarity and force of the folkloric form which the uncle’s story incorporates are employed as a means of fascinating its audience and addressing serious issues. Both Han and Sirine long for a home that exists only in their memories which have become hazy and are always under reconstruction. As Michael Seidel notes, “[t]he memory of home becomes paramount” most specifically when “home itself is but a memory”(11). Eventually, they find out that they must give up their imagined and idealized notions of home and instead rethink “the notion of home as always in process of formation”(Michael 325). In order to move forward, they must work to accept that “home comes to be found in a routine set of practices, a repetition of habitual interactions, in styles of dress and address, in memories and myths, in stories carried around in one’s head” ( Rapport and Dawson 7), and, crucially, in the articulation of those stories, particularly to loved ones. Although, Han exhibits an idea of such a notion of home when he tells Sirine, “You are the place I want to be—you’re the opposite of exile”(Crescent130), he eventually has to travel back to Iraq to prove for himself that it is no longer home for him and then choose to leave Iraq for good.

An example of hybridity is the small box that arrives with Sirine’s name and address written in both English and Arabic. Two years after Han has left, Sirine sees in an Arabic newspaper “a photo of a man who resembles Han” and asks a student who can read Arabic to read the article, which he translates as “a crazy story. It says this guy’s a political prisoner who broke out and then escaped from Iraq by following the migration of these animals across the border into Jordan. He says he’s on his way home-I don’t know where” (Crescent 336-7)-and gives his name as “Abdelrahman Salahadin”(337). Han thus veils his identity in his replies to the reporter’s questions to protect himself from the brutal Iraqi political regime he has just escaped. At the same time, Han uses a story and name that Sirine will recognize in an attempt to communicate with her. He thus “uses the very kind of layered, veiled narrative he earlier told Sirine about and that he suggested marked the uncle’s

story as familiar to Arabs”(Michael 327).

In *Crescent*, a cast of complex characters, with hybrid and contested identities, work through their traumatic pasts and negotiate multiple cultures in order to construct future-oriented identities for themselves. The narrative itself is constructed in the form of a hybrid text that “adapts and transforms two popular and familiar forms of narrative that are themselves already hybrid and always in-process, even though one is traditionally associated with the East and the other with the West” (Michael 328).

Several contemporary writers are preoccupied with constructing hybrid narratives as a means of exploring the phenomenon of hyphenated identities that prevail in a world that has witnessed voluntary and involuntary exiles and migrations. “[M]illions of people” have been torn “from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography”(Said 177). However, as Madan Sarup notes, “All frontiers,” including those between cultures and their traditions have the potential of becoming “places of communication and exchange” and thus “creative” spaces (98). In the United States where ethnic groups are becoming more fluid and less fixed as a function of the increased mobility of people and the frequency of cross-cultural and bi-racial parentage, processes of cultural hybridity are ongoing. Narratives, such as *Crescent*, deal with the challenges of this phenomenon of cultural hybridity.

In fact, the uncle’s tale instantiates what Said calls a “plurality of vision” that can imagine “both the new and old environments [as] vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” (186). Thus the uncle’s story becomes one that can imagine liberating processes of hybridity. Michael confirms that “[n]ot only do written versions of *Nights* consist of multiple genres of tales held together by a framing tale, but the tales were arguably derived in oral form from multiple time periods and multiple cultures”(Michael 315). *Crescent* is a hybrid text on multiple levels.

### **Food<sup>(1)</sup>: A triangle of love/food/identity**

Food informs culture and shapes lives. What food signifies in the social environment is central concern of several studies. It serves as a sign for situations; summing up and expressing a way of life. It constitutes a source of information about a community. Using a structuralist analysis in discussing the transformation of cooking into a cultural process, Claude Lévi-Strauss produces one of the groundbreaking studies in culinary anthropology. He maintains that food can be utilized to explore how primitive societies make sense of their worlds (*The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques*, 1983). As a structural analyst, he implements the concept of binary pairs of nature/culture relations on the culinary level. In the act of cooking, food crosses the boundaries between raw and cooked/nature and culture. The commentaries of Ouzi Elyada on Lévi-Strauss' study is a case in point; he observes that the natural, in the process of becoming cooked, undergoes a process of socialization. The cook, in this sense, becomes a cultural agent connecting the raw product with the human consumer. The change food undergoes from raw form to cooked form is cultural. Lévi-Strauss maintains that culinary rites and eating traditions encompass social conventions that specify "what type of food we shall eat and on what occasion" (Elyada 2). Cuisines, across place and time, are typified by a vast range of what is or is not edible and this is founded more on a cultural rather than a physical basis. Ways of cooking raw food is cultural and the variations of cooking alternate between fully raw (closer to nature) and fully cooked (closer to culture). The various ways of cooking are associated with specific social values, and processes pertaining to the creation of cultural order and social hierarchy. Notions of turning raw into cooked, whether boiled, roasted, smoked, fried, dried, pickled, steamed, baked or maintaining its raw condition, is associated with various categories of social status and hierarchical

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<sup>1</sup>Although NassimaKaid deals in her dissertation, *Hyphenated Selves: Arab American Women Identity Negotiation in the Works of Contemporary Arab American Women Writers*, with the topic of food in *Crescent*, my perspectives on culinary issues tackles problematics that pertain to the power relations and the private-public dichotomy and how they impact the critical condition on the hybrid identity.

positions namely; the highly prestigious, refined values, intimate milieu linked to family cuisine, and the public celebrations taking place in the public sphere and are often associated with the masculine world (Elyada 2-3).

From an anthropological vantage point, Roland Barthes focuses on the function of food and the role it plays in a cultural environment. Barthes applies the system of signification to a wide variety of contemporary cultural signs most prominent amongst them is food. To Barthes, food is a system of signification serving as a sign among the members of a given society. It is identified as a unit of a system of communication “a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (*Toward A Psychology* 29). In other words, food sums up a situation and constitutes information. Different types of food signify different situations. A specific item of food bought and consumed constitutes a “functional unit of a system of communication.” In fact, Barthes theory indicates that food not only “sums up and transmits a situation” but also it “transforms itself into situation” (*Toward A Psychology* 30-34). He claims that “A coherent set of food traits and habits” convey dominant features that characterize “system of tastes and habits”. He goes to the extent of proclaiming that an “entire social environment” is embodied in food; a community is “present in and signified by food” (*Toward A Psychology* 31- 32). The way every country has its own kind of food and special preparations impacts the cultural milieu. As a sign, eating functions as “behavior that develops beyond its own ends ... summing up and signaling other behaviors” (*Toward A Psychology* 33). In this respect, Barthes believes that it would be systematic to describe food for what it signifies rather than what the food itself is. He concludes by stating that culture and food are inextricably bound to each other: one changes with the change that the other undergoes. Food in its traditional function of satisfying hunger is likely to disappear giving way to other various significations. In day to day occasions and not only the festive ones, food acts as a signifier and serves as an identification of such situations. In short, Barthes describes food as nutrition as well as a protocol: it should be dealt with as with official procedures and systems of rules governing our affairs. It impacts and is influenced by the accepted or established

code of procedure or behavior in any group, organization, or situation.

Significantly, *Crescent* centers the significance of storytelling in connection to food. Several interspersed passages are permeated with the presence of Arab food. In a first glance, this may seem unimportant but it gains relevance as the narrative develops and approaches its resolution. The novel is structured around Sirine's focus on food and her uncle's focus on storytelling. Lorraine Mercer and Linda Storm state that, "These trajectories intersect in the kitchen, where she feeds him the Arabic food he loves, and he feeds her the Scherazade-like tale of his great Aunty Camille and her son Abdelrahman Salahadin's adventures in a fantastical Arabian landscape" (40). Her uncle explains that a "lesser-known fact about jinns [genies], is that although their homes may lack living rooms or dining rooms or studies or bathrooms or even very comfortable beds, they do like a nice kitchen, to satisfy their sweet tooth, maybe bake a little knaffea, brew a little coffee, have a few people over—that sort of thing" (*Crescent* 162).

Like jinns, Sirine, the blond-haired, blue-eyed chef of Iraqi descent, appreciates a nice kitchen. She first appears in the kitchen as she brews Arabic coffee for her uncle. In fact, the uncle's role as a storyteller is always triggered by the presence of the Arab food served by Sirine. As De Vos claims, "[f]ood, generally, is a great source of stories" (24), and Sirine seems to be aware of this fact by offering her uncle food to start telling the tale. In the next chapter, Sirine also offers him food when the uncle wisely says: "I would just like to point out at this moment, for the record, that accomplished uncles and storytellers are usually rewarded with plates of knaffea pastry. For the record. Then we can get on with our story" (*Crescent* 24). Food, in this perspective, works as a catalyst for another chapter of the frame story. It is the fuel the uncle needs to fabricate and maintain his tale.

For Sirine, "food is a contact language—a medium to translate experience and create a meaningful world. It is synonymous with love, prayer, creativity, and healing." Nine-year-old Sirine learns this contact language, and at thirty-nine "still uses it for translation, to connect and communicate with everyone around



her”(Mercer and Strom 40). She learned that “food was better than love: surer, truer, more satisfying and enriching. As long as she could lose herself in the rhythms of peeling an onion, she was complete and whole. And as long as she could cook, she would be loved”(Crescent 184). In fact, simple acts such as peeling an onion or making a broom reveal large truths, and, for Sirine, this was “the only truth she seemed to possess”(Crescent 184). For her, cooking becomes agency: “when all else fails in her life, when she is confronted with uncertainty, confusion, and identity conflict, she goes to the kitchen and cooks herself and her history into existence” (Mercer and Strom 40).

In the in-between space of cultural difference, Sirine searches for her identity through food and against the background of her uncle’s stories. Her loss and exile, through the tragic death of her parents, drives her to seek solace in cooking for reasons of both nostalgia and security. Her moods, her philosophy of life, as well as her place in the world are defined by food. Through food Sirine explores her identity and legacy. She has learned about food from her parents and “even though her mother was American, her [Iraqi] father always said his wife thought about food like an Arab” (Crescent 39-40). In the absence of her parents, Sirine attempts to use food and cooking to uphold memories and to establish her own narrative of origin. She says, “I think food should taste like where it came from. I mean good food especially.” She explains, “You can sort of trace it back. You know, so the best butter tastes a little like a little pastures and flowers, that sort of stuff. Things show their origins” (Crescent 59). She also adds that the crescent moon has also culinary connections. It shares its shape with gh’rayba, shortbread cookies infused with orange-flower water. Apparently, Abu-Jaber is also a food writer; thus, the spicing and textures of food are sensuously and extravagantly rendered. Food serves as a metaphor for Arab identity and culture. It also serves as a trigger of memory.

Obviously, *Crescent* highlights an interaction between food and memory. In fact, Sirine and her food work as an ethnic bonding agent drawing different ethnicities of Arabs and non-Arabs together in Um Nadia’s Café, which becomes “the locus where heterogeneous diasporic community comes into existence”(Júnior Ferreira de Sena

11). Moreover, food in the novel provides the ground for discussing issues of politics and displacement, as well as being of great importance for the individual's sense of self and identity. In fact, food in *Crescent* has different layers of meanings.

Linda Civitello believes that, "identity- religious, national, ethnic-is intensely bound up with food. Every group thinks of itself as special and exceptional and uses food to show it"(xvi). Food in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, establishes as well a bridge between the place of origin and the new setting as the Arab immigrants present in her novels deal with different kinds of displacement, mainly the geographical one. Abu-Jaber herself defined the "metaphor" of food as "such a great human connector," and something "intimate"(Shalal-Esa 2). She keeps on arguing that it is "the most powerful way of creating the metaphor of the heart and gathering place, a place where the collective forms" (Shalal-Esa 2-3). Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom observe that food in Abu-Jaber's novel, structures the narratives and "functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory, and exile"(33). They insist that food has a sacred meaning insofar as it works as a "natural repository for memory and tradition and reveals the possibility for imagining blended identities and traditions." Moreover, the authors observe that Abu-Jaber "uses food to construct spaces wherein they imagine the possibilities of peace, love and community"( Mercer and Strom 34).

In General, food in *Crescent* works as an ethnic bonding agent since it brings different ethnic characters together. In fact, the protagonist, Sirine and the food she cooks function as a kind of bridge that is able to draw different ethnicities together and also to connect present and past. Moreover, food acquires different nuances throughout the novel, as it seems to instigate immigrant characters to question and make revelations of their fears and dreams towards their lives in the U.S. Thus it can be affirmed that "food is strongly connected to the issue of direction and orientation as Sirine, the chef, and Hanif [Han], the professor, are bound to each other through the manipulation and savoring of the Arab food cooked by her"(Júnior Ferreira de Sena 15). Commenting on the cultural intersections in *Crescent*, Carol Fadda-Conrey says that narratives as such construct "ethnic borderland" that "becomes a space of communication" that

would improve ethnic relations”(194). Moreover, Fadda-Conrey affirms that food acts as a connective medium that “transcends the limitations that the difference [of complex identities of the café regulars] might engender” (202). She also adds that it is through food that Sirine can enact her role as a bridge across the different ethnic communities.

Since food goes beyond a mere physiological necessity to become a ritual invested of symbolic meanings, Carol Bardenstein expands on the social importance of food as “structuring of collective memory and cultural identity.” It deals with “roles of food in the social, religious, and cultural lives of people and the ways ... individuals conceive of themselves ... identify with ... homeland” (356). In addition, food constitutes a fundamental element to explore cultural, economic, political, and ethnic issues. Claude Fischler, the French sociologist, adds a new dimension to food, which is the individual significance of the act of eating. As he claims, food is a key element to the construction of selfhood and “is central to our sense of identity”(275).

Not only does food constitute an essential element in social life, but it also has the power of making many memories surface in us as long as we experience the tastes, smells and texture of the dish. In fact, the smell of particular foods can remind us of pleasant or unpleasant feelings in moments of eating. The ingredients used to prepare a certain recipe may take us back in time. In the particular case of immigrants, the memories invoked in this process can soften the pain of a lost homeland as well as diminish the sense of displacement. Moreover, eating is one of the most powerful ways of reinforcing and negotiating identities. It is believed that people who emigrate from one continent to the other enjoy exotic cuisines, try out new flavors, and strange combinations. Each country and its people carry their own culinary particularities. Food also has a straight connection with the re-creation of home when away from it. Immigrants, caught in the different cultural webs of a foreign country, feel the necessity of leaning upon small fragments of the old home as a way of keeping alive the tradition of their ancestors and, consequently, claiming for themselves a form of belonging. Tasting and cooking the food from their homelands in a host country

becomes a tool for recalling and reviving the memories of the homeland they left behind.

Fred L. Gardaphe and Wenyng Xu discuss the endeavors undertaken to reform the immigrants' eating habits in order to transform them into potential capitalist consumers. They state:

Immigrant foodways ... traditionally perceived by mainstream culture as markers of ethnic inferiority...to reform the immigrant's foodways was not simply an effort to assimilate him or her into mainstream American culture; it was also an effort to turn him or her into a capitalist consumer, because culinary diversities in the 1940s resisted homogenizing, industrial food production.(9)

The powerful connection between food and memory has initially been conveyed in Marcel Proust's postulations. To him, smells can transport us back to powerful and emotional memories from the past much more effectively than sounds. Proust says:

When from the distant past nothing remains ... the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time ... amid the ruins of everything else ... [they] bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the immense architecture of memory. (47)

Food and eating habits function as a locus of identity in its historical, social, national and ethnic dimensions.

Smells and tastes of the dishes of the childhood are mentally fixed and become a connection between the memories of mother's house and the meanings they carry. Thus, for immigrants, food becomes a bridge connecting the tastes of the present with the tastes in their old family dwellings. In this respect, Arioaldo Franco maintains that "the exaltation of some dishes of the mother's cuisine, from the country of origin, even when they are mediocre, can last a life time and its savoring triggers, sometimes, surprising mental associations"(qtd. in Júnior Ferreira de Sena22-23 ).For exiles, food becomes a form of articulation of nostalgia and longing for the lost homeland. Bardenstein shows that for the exile, food and senses related to the lost homeland "became invested with all glories"(353). Tasting the food served outside the homeland becomes a way of "articulating their longing for the world from which they have been

absented due to circumstances beyond their control, of gathering together in a poignant attempt to commune with that world by partaking of a disconnected fragment of it”(353).

Just like other fragments in the form of “photographs, letters, songs,” food as Bardenstein claims, becomes a form of bringing memories into surface and turning it into a catalyst of early experiences. Bardenstein argues that some cookbook- memoirs present a reconfiguration of pre-established roles such as the ones related to class, gender, identity and collective memory. According to her; “New configurations of memory take shape and new performances and presentations of identification emerge, pointedly inflected in terms of gender, class, ethnic affiliation, that would not have emerged in these particular forms if not for the experience of displacement” (355). Moreover, displacement as presented in novels that focus on exile is drastically responsible for reconfiguring the way exiles deal with the new home and, as Bardenstein puts it, its effects are mirrored in their literature.

At the outset of *Crescent*, Sirine moves to work as a chef at a Lebanese restaurant. She is prompted to delve into her deceased parents’ old recipes and to begin cooking “the favorite-but almost forgotten-dishes of her childhood” (*Crescent* 9). It is through the medium of food that Sirine negotiates her Arab self. Sirine, the chef, also exerts selfhood by cooking the Arab dishes. Her memories of her parents, in most cases, are the ones in which they are in the kitchen cooking together. Food, then, is the ground of recollections and expressions of emotions, for Sirine. It allows her to give meaning to her life.

In addition, *Crescent*, clearly presents a shift of roles in relation to power and gender. The few women characters Sirine, Um-Nadia and her daughter Mireille are the ones who cook and control the food served in the café, mainly to male regulars. To a certain extent, it suggests that the male immigrant characters are powerless because of the adversities they find in the host country and their nostalgia is demonstrated through their complex relationships with the food cooked by Sirine. In other words, eating provides the opportunity for these characters to reveal their deepest feelings of loneliness and homesickness. In a certain way, this assumption is

supported by Bardenstein's argument that new forms of identification are created by those individuals in exile. Despite focusing on cookbook-memoirs written by exiles, Bardenstein's claim offered some hints to understand the very formation of a community of different ethnicities in *Crescent*(355). Thus, food becomes the common language Abu-Jaber employs in the novel so as to discuss political and ethnic aspects concerning this diasporic reality.

Gardaphé and Xu note that in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, "the language of food offers a portal ethnic history, culture, and roots. This language forms a gastronomic contact zone situated in cafes, kitchens, and homes where displaced individuals meet and reestablish identities and communities"(7). Indeed, in *Crescent*, the café is the place where the collective forms and also fosters bonds among the regular customers through the very act of eating. Fadda-Conrey believes that "Sirine's cooking and the act of participating in its consumption, while drawing various characters together, simultaneously, underscores their varied ethnic, national and cultural identities"(199).

In fact, the food served at the café brings to focus their inner selves and the painful experience of missing homeland is momentarily forgotten. In this sense, "Sirine's presence in the kitchen and her food work as continuous contact with someone, and re-enact the memory of early experiences; it constitutes the function of food and the café in Abu-Jaber's novel"( Júnior Ferreira de Sena 35). For the chef, being in the café's kitchen makes her feel as if she were in her mother's kitchen again. In fact, as Mercer and Strom express, it is "in the absence of her parents, Sirine attempts to use food and cooking to establish her own narrative of origin" (42). Her parents who were emergency care personnel for the American Red Cross were killed in a tribal clash in Africa. As the narrator comments, "On the day she learned of their deaths, Sirine went into the kitchen and made an entire tray of stuffed grape leaves all by herself"( *Crescent* 40). Cooking Arab food is the compass she uses to re-create her affective memories of her parents as well as to negotiate her Iraqi identity and meditate upon her life. Sirine witnesses the customers' satisfaction as they close their eyes while eating. If, on the one hand,

eating her *baklava* makes the Arab students taste home, on the other, cooking this special dish also serves to orient her during the day. As the narrator comments, “Sirine feels unsettled when she begins breakfast without preparing baklava first; she can’t find her place in things” (*Crescent* 49).

Moreover, *Crescent* also presents complex webs of food where the characters Sirine and Han seem to be looking for directions all the time. Food, in this way offers the ground for those characters to discuss issues of diasporic displacement-location and set direction for life. On the one hand, Sirine is interested in learning about her father’s culture and religion. As she was not raised immersed in her father’s culture, she does not understand her connection with the professor and Iraq. Han, on the other hand, needs directions to situate himself in the U.S. He feels displaced. Accordingly, food is central to the characters’ preoccupation with questions of belonging and home. In one of the first contacts between the Chef Sirine and Han, the comments show the connection between cooking and falling in love. Sirine’s first symbolic contact with Han occurs when she serves him “a plate of Knaffea herself”( *Crescent* 28). The description of the scene shows the impact of that contact on those sitting at the counter; “Mirelle and Victor stop talking and Um-Nadia and the customers look up to see this break in precedent, even the two [American] policemen sitting by the TV, eating fried lentils and onions, and watching reports in Arabic terrorists from Saudi Arab” (*Crescent* 28).

In the very moment the chef serves Han, the narrator describes her desire to give him the food. Sirine “has an impulse to sit and feed him by hand” (*Crescent* 29). She has a maternal instinct as if she knew his fragility and the uncertainty of his life in the U.S. The *Knaffea*, as described, is to be a dish of love. Thus, by offering Han the dish Sirine metaphorically offers her love to him. According to Um-Nadia, the *knaffea* “is said to be so delicious that it brings even the wild animals home” (*Crescent* 29). In fact, in Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*, “the triangle of love/food/identity plays an important role as it allows the characters to question their lives. For Sirine, the symbolic act of cooking is a way of expressing and questioning her fears regarding Han and his connection to Iraq. Her cooking brings

the professor closer to her, However, at the same time, she feels something mysterious in relation to him. She thinks that “Han seems to have some sort of internal light that makes him intriguing and, at the same time, a little bit hard for her to look directly, he’s so charming and educated and worldly” (*Crescent* 37).

On another plane, Sirine carries the secret of the Arab recipes and they seem to make Han comfortable when he is in contact with her. Even her intimate impressions concerning the professor are described through the metaphor of food, especially when she is in the Victory Market trying out new flavors. The scent of the spices “makes her think of Han-somehow, everything seems redolent, brimming with suggestions of Han... [t]he intimate proximity of Han’s body comes back to her now, the scent of his skin echoed in the rich powder of spices (*Crescent* 101).

Cooking takes Sirine back to her childhood helping her mother to prepare *baklava*. The chef Sirine, remembers her parents preparing the traditional dessert as an intimate ritual where complicity and love are intimately linked. The ritual of making *baklava* together, as described in the novel, strongly resembles a private relationship. Since Sirine’s parents spent little time with her because of their job, she feels “proud” to contribute in the preparation of their dish of love. As Abu-Jaber puts it, this particular element functioned as a human connector: this time not between her and Han or between her and the café regulars, but between Sirine and her parents. It is in the back kitchen of Nadia’s café that Sirine and Han prepare their first *baklava* together echoing her memories of her parents in the kitchen. During this ritual of food preparation, Han experiences a feeling of homesickness. The loneliness of being away from his family exposes his fragility. He declares to Sirine how he misses “Absolutely everything” (*Crescent* 51). The atmosphere of intimacy that surrounds the kitchen and the *baklava* make Han disclose his past and confess his fears of returning to Iraq. He cannot quite grasp the idea: “I have to keep reminding myself. It’s so hard to imagine. So I just tell myself: not yet” (*Crescent* 52).

Besides being an ethnic bonding agent, food has a strong connection to memory and orientation. It is while eating that Sirine and Han question about their lives, origin and connections to each



other. Moreover, the Arab food, mainly *baklava* and *knaffea*, is strongly connected to love. The very act of cooking and eating these dishes powerfully ties Sirine and Han together, strengthening their love. Eventually, food becomes a strong metaphor of love. This becomes obvious when Han prepares dinner for Sirine. Ironically, despite being a chef, the dinner is something new to Sirine as “no one ever wants to cook for her” (*Crescent* 58). In fact, food represents a form of translating cultural experiences. By the very act of replacing the ingredients, Han is also playing with the possibilities of momentarily becoming American. Being in a new environment allows him new possibilities to forge an identity different from the stigmatized Iraqi one. The language of food permits Han to feel closer to Sirine. As the professor nurtures a desire of being safe, he finds in the act of cooking the means of being on the safe side of the American cultural hyphen. She also believes that good food should be connected to its origin. In other words food becomes a fragment of the old home.

In *Crescent*, culinary memory is strongly connected to the kitchens, not only that of Um Nadia, but also the one in Sirine’s and Han’s homes. In fact, kitchens, in the novel, offered the ground on which characters make revelations. The vivid tastes of childhood dishes that permeate these spaces seemed to encourage the characters to unveil their past. Strongly considered a female space, the kitchen in the novel surpasses ordinary assumptions to acquire the status of a site memory, not only foregrounding revelations but also becoming the stage on which the character Sirine enacts her Iraqi identity while maintaining the tradition of cooking the Arab dishes inherited from her father. The warmth and comfort of the café’s kitchen transport her back to her childhood memories partaking in the moments when her parents cooked together in the kitchen. Though the food knowledge is usually transmitted from mother to daughter, in *Crescent*, it is Sirine’s father the one who instigated her to go deeper in the mysteries of the Arab cuisine and this fact allows her to delve into the hidden self.

Another significant aspect of the novel is the strong connection between food and orientation. Sirine and Han are hungry for love and directions. On the one hand, Sirine wants to understand

her cultural Iraqi roots, while looking more American in her appearance and her behavior. Her Iraqi roots are more related to the recipes she cooks. In fact, it is when she is cooking that she feels her connection with that region more deeply. Han, on the other hand, is strongly affected by his exile condition. He still misses his homeland and fears the dictator's attitude towards those who escaped from the country and dare to return. Han predicts a new future in the U.S and seems to be looking for a guide throughout his path. Viewed under this light, Sirine and her food seem to comfort him to the extent that he unveils his fear and frustrations towards being an exile. At the same time, Sirine becomes a comfort zone for him, a place where his feelings of displacement seem to soften when he is with her.

Moreover, food is another crucial medium that connects the novel's different ethnicities while highlighting the internal distinctions that exist within and between them. In fact, it is precisely through the connective medium of food that Sirine can enact her role as a bridge across the different ethnic communities. Bardenstein points out the multilayered relationship that often exists between collective identities and food, stating, "At given historical moments, resulting configurations of collective affiliation or culinary practice are likely to contain multiple layers, a range of internal inconsistencies or contradictions, and overlapping, interpenetrating elements"(361). Bardenstein adds that the type of communal participation associated with food production and consumption, when applied to *Crescent*, mirrors the "multiple layers..[and] range of internal inconsistencies or contradictions"(361), inherent to the characters' ethnic makeup, even, as Fadda-Conrey states, "when they belong to the same Arab\Arab American minority group"(199). Similarly, In an interview with E.Field, Abu-Jaber comments; "I grew up in such a food-obsessed family; food for our family was the metaphor for cultural memory. So Thanksgiving was ..., the place where we could have long-standing American traditions: my mom's traditions," (217-218).

Sirine concocts an Arab American "Thanksgiving" dinner for an assorted collection of unrelated friends and acquaintance. In *Crescent*, this is a hybrid holiday, with roasted turkey, football on T.V., and what Um-Nadia calls the 'old time Arabs' cooking. Abu-

Jaber uses food to enlarge the reader's understanding of the complex relationship between the guests. At dinner, the conversation revolves around politics and food, and questions of identity are debated. What does it mean to be American? To be in America? She explains that "tasting a piece of bread that someone bought is like looking at that person, but tasting a piece of bread that they baked is like looking out of their eyes". Aziz claims, "You've got the soul of a poet! Cooking and tasting is a metaphor for seeing. Your cooking reveals America to us non-Americans. And vice versa" (*Crescent* 186-187).

This dinner table conversation illustrates Appiah's notion of cosmopolitanism. He states that "cosmopolitanism shouldn't be seen as some exalted attainment: it begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association" (xviii, xix). The 'Thanksgiving feast' underscores this notion of coexistence and building community through conversation. Appiah adds that "Conversations across boundaries can be fraught, all the more so as the world grows smaller and the stakes grow larger. It's therefore worth remembering that they can also be a pleasure" (xx). Sirine's blending of foodways illustrates Appiah's theory of cosmopolitanism. According to Carolyn Korsmeyer, "the intimacy of eating [together] is part of what knits ... those who eat –the mutual trust ... the social equality of those who sit down together, and the shared tastes and pleasures of the table" (187). The nonverbal dimension of food registers aspects of cultural experience that cannot be readily translated. In *Crescent*, food forms a kind of contact zone. Mary Louise Pratt states it is "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations" (6). The contact zone formed in *Crescent*, according to Mercer and Strom, "is a domestic one ... it establishes the theme of the world –as-home and the theme of the personal as political" (39).

Food, in *Crescent*, also serves as an important distinguishing tool between one national affiliation and other. The "pulling apart" of ingredients in cooking enriches the result by bringing out the individual taste of each ingredient. In similar way, Fadda-Conery,

explains “while widening the ethnic borderland blurs the border limits between one ethnic group and another...and facilitates border-crossing.”(201). Thus, the particular attributes of each group come more into focus as a result of the intermingling of what can be referred to as “ethnic ingredients” (Fadda-Conery201). Moreover ,Sirine learns that food like olives, garlic, lentils and other foods serve as common dominarors. They are also the main ingredients in the food of many other cultures. These foods migrated with travelers throughout the Mediterranean and beyond. Critics like Bhabha and Appiah argue that culture is not static, but constantly in motion: “But trying to find some primordially authentic culture can be like peeling an onion...Cultures are made of continuity *and* changes and the identity of society can survive through these changes”(Appiah 107). For the ethnic group depicted in Abu-Jaber’s novel, food and space of Nadia’s Café become the facilitator of all the relationships. Despite not sharing the same homeland, the very fact of coming from the Middle East serves as a common denominator that nurtures the characters’ feelings of solidarity and community for living under the same predicament of being Arab in the U.S.

As a conclusion, the feeling of estrangement for the new environment forms a fictional ethnic community united by the very notion of sharing a common language- the language of Sirine’s food. Therefore, food becomes a connective bridge that transcends the limitations that difference might engender. “[F]ood], for Sirine and Han, “is their private language...The[ir] words flow into eating” and becomes a major tool for communication (*Crescent* 256). In fact, food is foregrounded as a contact language. Han tells Sirine: “I never much wanted to be up in my father’s orchard. I liked this. I liked the kitchen. The table, stove. Where the women were always telling stories”( *Crescent* 50). In fact, food memories can carry feelings of both loss and joy attached to history, family and culture. Arab food cooked and eaten in the space of the café has a power that transcends anthropological values to become a bridge connecting fragmented worlds, giving the characters a real sense of identity in an otherwise strange culture. By remembering their previous lives back in the told home, immigrants may envisage a future as an ethnic community. In conclusion, in *Crescent*, memory appears as a cultural phenomenon,

since the immigrant characters can only recall what constitutes part of their experience in a collective context only if it is shared by a group. It is not surprising; therefore, that an immigrant community is the ideal collective 'environment' for the development of memory, and, more often than not, the collectivity expresses the predicament of being invisible inside the host culture. In this perspective, Sirine's food has a power that transcends the anthropological values to become a bridge that connects to their lost homelands. Memory of their homelands, plays an important role in easing the feeling of displacement and uncertainty about their future in a host country.

Thus, it has been shown how *Crescent* examines the complex notions of Arab-American identity by creating a hybrid text. It is a particularly vexed issue given the heightened political tensions that demonized and stigmatized Arabs and devalued their culture. The narrative foregrounds fractured and destabilized identities that are marked by loss and negativity yet persistently seeking to create for themselves new identities that assimilate their hyphenated position. The endeavors highlight the possibilities that exist for Arab Americans to surmount the racial stereotypes and overcome the sense of deprivation.

*Crescent* explores the complexities of hybrid identity that predominate Abu-Jaber's text. The storytelling, apart from structuring the narrative and marking the pain of exile and loss, also provides the ground for the discussion of political events and identity issues. As for food, it functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory and exile; an avenue for questioning boundaries of culture, class and ethnicity. It is also a natural repository for memory and tradition. Such modes provide territories for elaborating strategies of empowerment and selfhood for the exilic. In addition, the very fact of coming from the Middle East serves as a common denominator that nurtures the characters' feelings of solidarity and community for living under the same predicament of being Arabs in the U.S.

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