

THE IMPACT OF EXILE ON THE FORMATION OF HYPHENATED IDENTITIES IN ABU-JABER'S *CRESCENT*

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ABSTRACT: *In Crescent (2003), Abu Jaber questions the meaning of identity in relation to exile. Sirine suspects if Hanif is drawn to the American or the Iraqi side of her, which immediately fractures identity into two conflicting aspects. She herself questions her identity as an Arab American. She wants to know which part of her identity defines her the most as she finds herself on the borderline between who she is and the way she appeals to Han. Her romance with Han opens her eyes to questions such as: Does she belong better in the Middle East where flavours, scents, pictures, and stories seem to be pulling her? Is she too American for Han? Do exiled people in this situation live in imaginary homes, or does guilt, as in Han's case, become a defining factor that determines their hyphenated identities? This article addresses these questions. It examines how the notion of hyphenated identities inform the characters' decisions and anxieties in the novel. What does the hyphen signify? In what ways can the novel be understood as a negation or an assertion of self-divided identity? In what ways does it celebrate and represent this hyphen that determines the diasporic condition.*

KEYWORDS: crescent, diaspora, exile, identities, hyphenated, anglophone.

INTRODUCTION

Diana Abu-Jaber is one of the few Arab American women writers whose works accentuate ethnic presence. Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* (2003), set in Los Angeles and peopled by immigrants and Iraqi-Americans, speaks of the romance that captured the thirty-nine-year-old, Iraqi-American Sirine, who is a chef in a Lebanese restaurant. She lives with her uncle, who knows Hanif (referred to as Han), an Iraqi-born professor who dines at Sirine's restaurant, which is portrayed as a hub for Arab students who nostalgically enjoy Middle Eastern food. The novel addresses some of the concerns of the Arab-Muslim American community. This paper examines how alienating feelings of exile inform hyphenated identities in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*. Abu Jaber questions and problematizes the meaning of identity with exile. Sirine suspects if Hanif is drawn to the American or the Iraqi side in her. She comes to the point where she questions her identity as an Arab American. She wants to know which part of her identity defines her the most. She emotionally struggles with their relationship as she finds herself on the borderline between who she is and how Han imagines her to be. Her romance with Han opens her eyes to questions such as: In what ways does she belong to the Middle East where flavours, scents, pictures, and stories seem to be pulling her? Is she really too American, as Han tells her? Do exiled people in this situation live in imaginary homelands, or does the sense of guilt, as in Han's case, become a defining factor that determines

their hyphenated identities? This study attempts to answer these questions by discussing the concept of hyphenated identity in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*.

Hyphenated Identity, Exile and Arab Anglophone Writers

A hyphenated identity is a diasporic condition of being situated between two cultures: "The hyphenated identity is a term that implies a dual identity. It evokes questions regarding which side of the hyphen the person belongs to, giving the impression that the person is oscillating between two cultures" (Khilay, para 4). The notion of identity is central to a better understanding of Anglophone Arab literature. Among other Arab Anglophone writers such as Leila Aboulela and Ahdaf Soueif, Abu Jaber explores the issues of hyphenated identities as the product of living between two cultures, "in the sense of always being both Arab and American and yet being completely neither Arab nor American ... [with] characters who simultaneously embrace and resist both American and Arab culture as they are forever negotiating the two cultures ... working to explore and create fluid dynamic hybrid identities for themselves" (Abdelrazek xiii). However, what distinguishes Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* from other novels negotiating Arab identity is the link she makes to exile and how it intensifies the hyphen for Arab Americans as it questions the concept of home or homeland: "the novel manages _ albeit provisionally _ to figure forth a complex mosaic of Arab singularities on American soil. In particular, the novel dramatizes, with compelling poignancy, both the piercing sense of dislocation and alienation that permeates Arab exilic identity" (Gana 242). The act of estrangement defines the diasporic condition of Arabs and ultimately shapes their identity.

The concept of home for people in exile is evidently associated with a sense of displacement or relocation: "Home for the exile means a transitional place, since the original home can not be reclaimed, nor can its presence/absence be entirely banished in the remade home" (Abdelrazek 176). In Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, however, exile means much more than just a physical or geographical presence. It is a mental condition:

But Exile, however, exiles deal with, always extracts a price, whether the exile is geographical or psychological/mental. Indeed, exile is not only a physical condition but also a mental one; they exile, especially the Arab exile, often feels alienated and unwelcome by the majority. Each one of the characters in *Crescent* suffers from overt, or, more frequently, covert homesickness _ telling tales of loss, fear, anger, or self-pity (Abdelrazek 178). Likewise, in an interview by Judith Gabriel, Edward Said shares a similar sense of displacement within the context of Arab Muslims in the United States: "I don't know a single Arab or Muslim American who does not now feel he or she belongs to the enemy camp and that being in the United States at this moment provides us with an especially unpleasant experience of alienation and widespread, quite specifically targeted hostility" (Gabriel 2002, 23). Similarly, Layla Al Maleh (Al Maleh 2009) draws attention to the importance of asserting agency among Arabs in diaspora:

The title of the very recent anthology of Arab-American poets by Hayan Charara, *Inclined to Speak* (2008) [...] suggests a desire to break the silence, establish connections, and speak out on behalf of three million people living in the USA who are at once Arab and American. [...] In a way, this

simply reflects the sense of double consciousness and in-betweenness that characterize the present age. (2009, 437)

Additionally, Wisam Kh. Abdul-Jabbar (2017) explores how the notion of double-consciousness, a colonial by-product, informs the diasporic conditions of Arab identity: “The notion of double-consciousness peculiar to the African dispersion is not distant from the condition of most Arabs in diaspora. Arguably, it is similarly creolized as a syncretic product of continuous historical, cultural, and linguistic processes, and is correspondingly an immediate consequence of the advent of the colonized world” (741). Likewise, Abu-Jaber introduces the condition in which expatriates cannot even entertain the idea of a possible return to their homeland simply because these homelands seized to exist the way it used to be, a case which is peculiar to Iraqis in exile. In an Interview with Andrea Shalal-Esa, Diana Abu-Jaber points out how the notion of exile serves well to explain the diasporic conditions of both Iraqis and Palestinians:

I feel that especially in the political gestalt we're in right now, exile has become a particularly pointed question, more so than immigration. Immigration, at least from the Arab American point of view, was just more innocent, but it has a kind of hopefulness and optimism that wasn't as charged by issues of race and politics as it is now. Particularly for Palestinians and Iraqis, a lot of them are not choosing to emigrate, but rather they're fleeing political persecution or they've lost their homes. It's an act not entirely of their own volition. I'm very interested in what the loss of homeland means for someone. (Abdelrazek 177).

Crescent, in this sense, is more than a simple romance. It takes the reader on a journey into some of the exilic and identity anxieties of the Arab community. The pain of exile is always associated with a sense of loss. Sirine's Iraqi uncle explains to Sirine how the predicament of being trapped in exile is a life-changing experience that determines your identity:

It means talking about the difference between then and now, and that's often a sad thing. And immigrants are always a bit sad right from the start anyways. Nobody warns you when you leave town what's about to happen to your brains. And then some immigrants are sadder than the others. And there are all kinds of reasons why, but the big one is that you can't go back. For example, the Iraq your father and I came from does not exist anymore. It's a new, scary place. When your old house doesn't exist anymore, that makes things sadder in general. (142)

Then he asks an Italian waiter in Um-Nadia's cafe about the sadness of displacement: “Wouldn't you say that immigrants are sadder than other people?” To which the waiter responds, “Certo! When we leave our home, we fall in love with our sadness” (143). Um-Nadia herself asserts the sense of solitude that takes over the Arabs when they leave their homelands:

Um-Nadia says the loneliness of the Arab is a terrible thing; it is all consuming. It is already present like a little shadow under the heart when he lays his head on his mother's lap; it threatens to swallow him whole when he leaves his own country, even though he marries and travels and talks to friends twenty-four hours a day. That is the way Sirine suspects that Arabs feel everything _ larger than life, feeling walking in the sky (21)

So many times, the uncle explains to Sirine that talking about Iraq, the home he shared with Sirine's father, is very closely related to the pain of loss, the loss of homeland. The sentiment of loss and homesickness is so prevalent in the novel that it does not necessarily come from one of the major characters:

Occasionally, a student would linger at the counter talking to Sirine. He would tell her how painful it is to be an immigrant _ even if it was what he'd wanted all his life _ sometimes especially if it was what he'd wanted all his life. Americans, he would tell her, don't have the time or space in their lives for the sort of friendship _ days of coffee-drinking and talking _ that the Arab students craved. For many of them, the café was a little flavour of home. (22)

Nadia's café, in this sense, becomes a substitute for the homes that they have left behind. Exile to Diana Abu-Jaber, in other words, is about creating new imaginary homes. Um Nadia's café is a surrogate home where immigrants need to resituate themselves.

Hanif and Sirine: The Story of Hyphenated Identities

Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* is a novel that studies the characters' politicized identities, which become pivotal to better understand the movement of events. Psychologically, the novel studies how identity determines action. In other words, it is more about what happens in the characters' minds than what happens in real life: "*Crescent* might best be described as a study character. That is to say, the novel is driven more by an intimate exploration of character than it is by fast-moving plot" (Sataila 102). To better understand the novel as a study of characters, a closer look at the novel's two leading protagonists, Hanif and Sirine, is required in terms of how problematizing identity drives and influences their journey in life and romance and then determines their decisions.

A. Hanif and Sitting Uncomfortably on the Hyphen

Through the character of Han, the readers explore the exilic idiosyncrasies and allegiances of a man whose memories seem to be like ghastly faces looking over his shoulders. He exemplifies a life spent in exile with the feeling of being stranded. Han's life in America is overshadowed by unresolved feelings of some "unfinished business" (Abdul-Jabbar 748) in Iraq where his family lives and suffers under Saddam's regime. Han's face is portrayed to be a personification of Arabia: "Sirine watches Han, and for a moment it seems that she can actually see the ancient traces in Han's face, the quality of his gaze that seems to originate from a thousand-thousand years of watching the horizon ... a forlorn, beautiful gazing, rich, and more seductive than anything she has ever seen" (115). His guilty feelings towards his family define his attachment to Iraq. The loss of home is associated with a sense of helplessness as he cannot go back to Iraq to help his family find his brother or sister since Iraq is under Saddam's regime: "I can't go back ... To Iraq? No. ... Not the way things are now, of course. It's very dangerous _ it was terribly difficult for me to get out of the country in the first place ... But even so, it's like there's some part of me that can't quite grasp the thought of never returning. I have to keep reminding myself. It's so hard to imagine. So I just tell myself: not yet" (70). Consequently, it is this feeling of entrapment that renders his love affair incomplete and unfulfilling. This specific unresolved issue of his past that hinders progress and causes a sense of stagnation.

Sirine's uncle tries to explain how complicated Hanif's situation is, and she should probably think twice before taking any step towards him in terms of endearment. Despite that, she tells her uncle that "there's also something complicated about him." In response to that statement, her uncle says, "Well, but he's an exile _ they're all messed up inside. But I thought girls are supposed to love that" (53). When she inquires as to what he means, her uncle further explains the anxieties that haunt exiled people: "Because he can't go back. Because anything you can't have you want twice as much. Because he needs someone to show him how to live in this country and how to let go of the other" (53). Han, in the light of describing his identity, is trapped in the hyphen. His identity is not hybrid or hyphenated but framed and enigmatic because it is not solely defined by its diasporic dimension like Sirine's situation. Han's identity is entrapped in an exilic condition, which negates the possibility of a hyphen that bridges two cultures and enables immigrants and diasporans to straddle the big cultural divide. Nathan, one of Han's students, explains to Sirine:

No. Han's a great professor. I've never studied with anyone like him before. The kind of teacher you always hope you'll find but doesn't actually exist. Only he does, there he is. You get the feeling when you listen to his lectures that he's taking you apart, piece by piece. All the things you thought you knew have to be relearned. You find out you have to learn a new way of knowing things. You listen with your whole body, not just your head, and you see that you teach the same way, with his whole being. He teaches Islamic history and Arabic literature but he also teaches about life and art and faith and love ... I mean, if you know how to listen for it. (60)

Han is portrayed to be one of those Romantic figures who are larger than life. As Sirine enjoys the pleasures of romance, love ignites in the exile-tortured Han a feeling of anxiety as he associates this romance with guilty feelings about abandoning the Baghdad he loved as a boy. Han experiences painful memories as he holds himself responsible for his imprisoned brother and the disappearance of his sister since the time she was taken away by Saddam's men. When he speaks of Iraq, Han expresses feelings very similar to homeless people wandering the streets: "sometimes when I see some of those homeless people on the street _ you know, the ones walking around talking to the air, shuffling around, old torn-up clothes _ sometimes I think I've never felt so close to anyone as those people. They know what it feels like _ they live in between worlds so they're not really anywhere. Exiled from themselves" (183). Sirine struggles with Han because he consistently defines himself in terms of attachment to a personal history and concerning his own past. He feels that their affair cannot progress unless she knows about his politicized history. Han's identity is not hyphenated because one aspect of his identity remains unrevealed and unresolved. Han's identity does not fit into the idea of a hyphenated Iraqi-American frame the way Sirine does.

B. Sirine:

Sirine expresses doubt about her Arab-American identity, which parallels her uncertainty when she experiences love with Han. Food, in this sense, does not only signify ethnicity but shows evidence of her partly lost identity: "Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* establishes the important link between cuisine and identity in which the preparation of food provides the protagonist Sirine with the basic ingredients for the healthy negotiation of her mixed-race Arab-American identity" (Mehta 204). She struggles to connect with her Arabian heritage, and finds in cooking a form of expression:

That night, after she's done with work and alone in her bedroom, she sits on the bed ... and stares at her old Syrian cookbook. The recipes are pared down to the essentials: simple equations, the ideal calibrations of salt to vegetables to oil to meat to fire. They're little more than lists, no cooking instructions or temperatures, but scattered among the pages are brief reflections on the nature of animals, forest, flowers, people and God. Sirine browses through the book, lingering equally over the reflections and lists of ingredients, which seems to her to have the rhythms and balance of poetry ... Following the ingredients, the anonymous author has written and her uncle has translated: "Praise be to Allah for giving us the light of day. For these creatures with air and flight in their minds if not in their bodies." It is a prayer or a recipe? She reads it several more times and can't tell. (315)

In this context, Sirine's exquisite cooking unfolds her Arab American identity as it connects her to the Arabic heritage. Additionally, food also serves as a reminder of her ethnic identity in the sense that it brings memories of her parents: "But when she moved to Nadia's Café, she went through her parents' old recipes and began cooking the favourite _ but almost forgotten _ dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents' tiny kitchen and her earliest memories" (22). Food becomes more than a commodity; it is an idea or an ideal that transforms Sirine into the forgotten world of childhood. For Sirine, it bridges the gap between the uncertainties of the present and the dissipating, unfamiliar past.

In Um Nadia's Cafe, she materializes this binding role of reinvigorating the Arab culture with her exquisite and delicately made food:

Even though many of the Arab café regulars remain in the novel's background and do not play an active role in the plot, the careful delineation of their individual national differences negates simplistic representations of Arab identity. The names of the Arab students from Egypt and Kuwait - Schmaal, Jenooob, Shark, and Gharb, which in Arabic mean North, South, East, and West, respectively – signify distinct geographical entities that can be interpreted as individualized characteristics challenging the reductive attributes the term Arab often generates. (Fadda-Conrey 195)

Um Nadia's Café, for instance, serves as a magnet for all the loneliness-stricken and homesick university students coming from Arab countries. The Café is both a location and a hyphen that binds them to their culture. Moreover, Sirene has surrounded herself with people in exile or diasporans including her uncle, Um-Nadia the cafe owner, Mireille, Nadia's daughter, Nathan, a reclusive photographer who has spent a good deal of time in Iraq, Aziz Abdo, a Syrian poet, and the homesick cafe regulars. Having to mingle with them on a daily basis, the feeling of exile becomes contagious and domineering:

Especially Sirine. They [Arabs in exile] love her food _ the flavours that remind them of their homes _ but they also love to watch Sirine with her skin so pale it has the bluish cast of skim milk, her wild blond head of hair, her sea-green eyes ... She is so kind and gentle-voiced and her food is so good that the students cannot help themselves _ they sit at the tables, leaning toward her" (20).

As Sirine attends to the meals she fondly prepares, she unearths memories of her childhood longing for her parents or discovers more about the Arab side of her identity. In effect, she finds in food the ingredients of memory and the body of history that she has lost with the death of her parents: It is as if, living in this lack of memory, broken by the loss of her parents and never recovered in an environment of 'exiles' like the one she lives in, Sirine has lost her own body, cannot exchange it with other human beings. Food, then, becomes the code in which Sirine transcribes people; she translates them into scents and flavours, heavy molecules suspended in the air. And her falling in love with Han becomes a perfume, his voice chocolate, 'the dark chocolate of hand's voice' (Cariello 334)

Paradoxically, however, Han believes that Sirine's fondness of food seems to be characteristically American, but again it asserts how food can be a hyphen that binds two cultural perspectives. When Sirine says, "I think food should taste like where it came from," Han remarks, "That must be why you seem so American to me." (78). Food, therefore, symbolizes a sense of ambivalence about the myth of authenticity and origins. Han cannot attach to food the significance that Sirine often sees, which reflects how they look differently at their identity. Han does not see the implications that Sirine sees in food because he still possesses the Iraqi ingredients under his skin. He has not let go of home yet, and therefore, neither does he need nor seeks, perhaps like all other Arabs in exile, a substitute in food to what he has not completely lost yet. Whereas Sirine sees in food a hyphen to celebrate hybridity, Han sees a negation of what he conceives to be his true and authentic self. Even though Sirine does not speak or understand Arabic, is not a Muslim, and has never been to any Arab country, she uncannily feels connected to Iraq and intensely interested to know more about her cultural and ethnic origins. When she looks in the mirror, she feels that there is more than the white skin that the eye can see:

She stares at the portrait of herself in the metal-framed mirror. All she can see is white. She is so white... Entirely her mother. That's all anyone can see: when people ask her nationality, they react with astonishment when she says she is half Arab. I would never have thought that they say, laughing. You sure don't look it. When people say this, she feels like her skin is being peeled away. She thinks that she may have somehow inherited her mother on her outside and her father on the inside. If she could compare her and her father's internal origins-the blood and bones and the shape of her mind and emotions- she thinks she would find her truer nature. (206)

Evidently, she struggles to find in herself a trait that she can identify with her father so she can feel complete. She has painful memories about her parents, who always appear to be saying goodbye to her as they fail to return. Sirine feels the same pain when with Hanif, she:

Wishes she knew how to say something wise or consoling to him, something that wouldn't sound frightened or awkward. But she remembers the time after her parents' death when people would approach her and try to explain her loss to her; they said things that were supposed to cure her of her sadness, but that had no effects at all. And she knew then, even when she was nine years old, that there was no wise or consoling thing to say. There were certain helpful kinds of silence, and some were better than others. (90)

In effect, speaking about Iraq and the east, especially to Han, seems always to trigger a sense of loss and sadness. Her inability to unravel the essence of identity comes from her wish to more fully identify with Han. For her, Han is the hyphen that will bring together what seems to be two conflicting aspects of her identity.

CONCLUSION

Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* is a novel about those people who are caught in the middle, who negotiate their hyphenated identities amid the American way of life. Not only does it address Iraqis' dilemma of exile but the tensions and anxieties of all people living in diaspora. The paper explored the diasporic implications of love determined by exilic uncertainties through a discussion of the divided identity. Sirine discovers how tantalizing the life of an Iraqi exile is through Han's unknown past that he unravels to her. The unknown present to Han represents a continuation of his unknown past to Sirine. As she gets to know Han better, Sirine realizes the hyphen for her is a journey of discovery heading into the future, whereas for Han, it represents the unknowns in terms of people that have disappeared and a country that is no longer the Iraq he used to know. As Sirine finds satisfaction in love, Han's diasporic self craves for something more. Han's yearnings and longings for his home are a microcosm of the Iraqi community of exiled academics, poets, and immigrants who are torn and not reconciled by the hyphen.

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