

Proselytising Cultural Agency through Culinary Rituals in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003): En Route for Creating a Heteroclite Universe

الدعوة للتمثيل الثقافي من خلال ممارسات الطهي في رواية الهلال (2003) لديانا أبو جابر: نحو خلق عالم مغاير

Dr. MOUISSA Fattoum

Amar Telidji University of Laghouat (Algeria), fa.mouissa@lagh-univ.dz

Received: 17/04/2023

Accepted: 01/06/2023

Published: 13/07/2023

Abstract

Within the pandemonium that has entwined the Arab-American community on account of their impartiality toward ethnic groups and the mainstream centre, Arab-American authors have been confounded by the cargo of negotiating the borders of 'Arabness' and 'Americanness'. Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) debriefs the fateful question of cultural agency and the vortex of marginality. This paper catechizes Abu-Jaber's drive to create a heteroclite space wherein cultures are balanced, devoid of the plague of cultural barriers. Though the novel exposes the nostalgia that defines those who are someone else's hostage, Abu-Jaber empowers her characters to discourse their differences. In defiance of cultural absolutism, the central characters channel America with the 'terre natale' by bringing the Arab culture, a stratagem of coalitions athwart ethnic confines. Accordingly, the act of twinning the Arab culture emulates the author's fervour to absorb borders, defying the passé cultural polarisations.

Keywords: Arab-Americans, Cultural Schisms, Ethnic Confines, Cultural Twinning, Culinary Practices.

المخلص: في خضم الصراع الذي رافق المجتمع العربي الأمريكي بسبب عدم انتمائهم للجماعات العرقية او المجتمع الأمريكي، اضطر الكتاب العرب الأمريكيون على التفاوض ومناقشة الحدود بين "العروبة" و "الأمريكية". تستعرض ديانا أبو جابر من خلال رواية الهلال (2003) السؤال المصيري والقدر حول تمثيل ثقافة الوطن الأم ودوامه التهميش. يهدف هذا العمل إلى التحقيق في سعي أبو جابر لخلق عالم مغاير أين يمكن موازنة ثقافات مختلفة دون أي عوائق عرقية. على الرغم من أن الرواية تكشف عن الحنين إلى الماضي الذي يميز أولئك الذين هم رهائن ثقافات جديدة، إلا أن أبو جابر مكنت شخصياتها على التحدث عن اختلافاتهم. في تحدٍ للمزاعم القائمة على الاستبداد الثقافي، تسعى الشخصيات الرئيسية إلى ربط أمريكا بـ "أرضهم الأم" من خلال إدخال الثقافة العربية، وهي حيلة لبناء تحالفات ضد الحدود العرقية. وعليه، فإن توأمة الثقافة العربية تحاكي رغبة الكاتبة في امتصاص والغاء الحدود، متحدية الإستقطابات الثقافية المتحجرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العرب الأمريكيون، الانقسامات الثقافية، الحدود العرقية، التوأمة الثقافية، ممارسات الطهي.

Corresponding author: Dr. MOUISSA Fattoum, e-mail: fa.mouissa@lagh-univ.dz

1. INTRODUCTION

Acute queries into Anglo-Arab studies have often interrogated the presence of individuals of different cultures who occupy other people's territory. The quandary regarding the categorization of this racial group refers to the strain of positioning this group that demarcates from non-white to a group that exists outside the limits of racial classification (Saliba, 1999, p. 311). This ethnic group, however, is pigeonholed by its radical unapproachability to the white community. Like any other ethnic group, Arab Americans as a group have no legal locus in the continuum of minorities within which they can articulate their identities. Anglo-Arab writers, therefore, probe whether cultures travel across borders to absorb all existing differences.

Diana Abu-Jaber's second novel, *Crescent*, narrates stories of obscurity, banishment, and alienation that traumatize the lives of most immigrants in America, and Arabs specifically. The narrative stages melancholy, nostalgia, and trauma that carry active lesions resulting from the wars between Iraq and America. The novel debunks the protagonist's rumpus with her double lineage as an Iraqi-American, as it recounts the conundrum of her parents' absenteeism, who died in Africa on a charitable mission. Though her uncle's stories deputise her parental absence; nonetheless, the problem of identifying herself keeps tormenting Sirine, who finally starts to sense her presence and understand her being through her relationship with Hanif, an Iraqi immigrant. Abu-Jaber introduces the uproars and turbulence in Sirine's life through the sporadic narrative voice of her uncle, who introduces each chapter and his stories are customarily interjected with the story of Arabs in Nadia's café, a place that embodies the immigrants' elasticity irrespective of their variant origins.

The patchy narrative that Abu-Jaber selects is analogous to the muddled upbringing of the protagonist, whose journey of truth-finding was distrustful seeing that she fails to recognize to which world she belongs. Paradoxically, Sirine manages to create home for immigrants in the café by providing them with the smells of home, yet she repeatedly fails to sense her Iraqi origins. Hypothetically speaking, she is the owner of the land and does not belong to the immigrant community; however, she feels that she is the invitee each time Hanif is present. Unpredictably, Hanif helps Sirine in her journey of self-finding on

every occasion he talks about Iraq. Jacques Derrida's idea if at all possible describes Sirine and Han's status quo, he envisions:

It is as *if*, then, the stranger could save the master and liberate the power of his host; it's as *if* the master, qua master, were prisoner of this place and his power, of his ipseity, of his subjectivity (his subjectivity is hostage)... the guest becomes the host's host. The guest (*hôte*) becomes the host (*hôte*) of the host (*hôte*) [...]the master of the house is at home, but nonetheless he comes to enter his home through the guest- who comes from outside. The master thus enters from the inside as *if* he came from the outside. (2000, pp. 123-125)

Sirine's failure to sense her tenure to the land is instigated by her acknowledgement that she is not purely American. The absence of valid accounts vis-à-vis her Iraqi origins is an 'extra cargo' placed on her. Though she constantly asks her uncle about their Iraqi origins; yet, surprisingly enough, Iraq seems less pronounced and banished in the stories he recounts. In a conversation with her uncle, she divulges, "You never talk about it. You never talk about Iraq at all" (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 124). This to a certain extent explains Sirine's vehemence in listening to Hanif's stories about Iraq, a contrivance that subsequently familiarizes her with the land she putatively owns, America.

2. The Café as a Sangam of Cultural Liquidisation

Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) comments on how cultures thrive to coexist regardless of the existing splits. Abu-Jaber's main preoccupation centres on how people of multiple grounds mingled in the café, moving beyond the dichotomous split of the world. The café is a dwelling space that belongs to everyone, as claimed "days of coffee-drinking and talking- that the Arab student craved. For many of them the café was a little flavour of home" (Abu-Jaber, p. 22)

It is within this homely café that Arabs and other ethnic groups explore their collective and ethnic identities. Eccentrically, some believe that the café is more than a home, but rather a place where cultural and political adherences are

being communicated. This, nonetheless, prompts Sirine to understand the averseness of Iranians to visit the café even though it is located in the middle of an Iranian neighbourhood, as described:

After the long, bitter war between Iraq and Iran, some of Um-Nadia's Iranian neighbours refused to enter the café because of Sirine, the Iraqi-American chef. Still, Khorosh, the Persian owner of the Victory Market up the street, appeared on Sirine's first day of work announcing that he was ready to forgive the Iraqis on behalf of the Iranians (p. 06)

It is in this sense that Khorosh decides to eschew the existing cracks and splits to focus on the issue of belonging without distressing about how one culture fits in/against another. More accurately, Khorosh makes a strong model of those who move from the tapered nit-picking views of ethnicity in the sense that he refuses to submit to the project of making the café a locus wherein social and political issues are being negotiated.

What Abu-Jaber tries to negotiate is the cultural adaptability that most ethnic groups possess. This idea is elucidated in Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia*, as follows: "in which cultures, histories, and structures of feeling, previously separated by enormous distances, could be found in the same place, the same time: school, bus, café, cell, waiting room, or traffic jam" (2005, p. 70). Gilroy's assertion regarding cultural adaptableness clutches a true image of Abu-Jaber's vision that celebrates the Arab and ethnic minorities' geniality. The conviviality that these groups hold explains their coexistence in the café without having social or cultural bonds.

Accordingly, the café becomes a gathering place wherein the acknowledged and verboten are interposed, a place where differences are obliterated and absorbed to survive the exilic position in America. Even more, the level of syncretism among immigrants is highly praised by Abu-Jaber, who never fails to point to the characters' willingness to set a podium for the recognition and absorption of cultural differences. Celebrating Thanksgiving with Americans in the Café is an alleged reason that energizes their syncretic efforts, just as it denotes the truism of mobility as ethnic limpidness proved to be barren. Thus, taking part in a prototypically American festivity denotes their craving for recreating a space in the new home.

Six thirty-eight A.M. on Thanksgiving morning. Sirine is in the kitchen mining garlic and King Babar lies at her feet. The kitchen is overheated and fragrant with the scent of roasting turkey. She stuffed the turkey with rice, onions, cinnamon, and ground lamb [...] By noon there is: Han, Mireille, Victor Hernandez and his cousin Eliazer, Aziz the poet, Nathan, Um-Nadia, Cristobal the custodian, Shark, Jenob, Abdullah, Schmaal, and Gharb- five of the lonely students from the café- Sirine, and her uncle. King Babar greets each of them, standing on his hind legs and putting his dusty paw prints on their pants (Abu-Jaber, pp. 186-187)

Accordingly, the café becomes an aperture space for cultural exchange. Adding Arabic flavours and seasonings to the principle meal, which is turkey, is a reinvention to conventional culinary practices thru ethnic assertion. Sirine's verdict to join the American culinary traditions tête-à-tête with the Arabs' food is a façade to her cultural appropriation, as it designates the Arab's dynamism in America. Sirine's custody, borrowing Fred Halliday's words, is to "turn a critical face both ways, towards the country of origin and its traditions and the country of reception. The challenge, the alienation, the 'offence' are two sided" (1996, p. 109). Hence, Sirine's plasticity and multiple adherences are not unforeseen, but rather an integrated part of those who live on the rim of in-between worlds.

To put it in a nutshell, Sirine manages to regale her Arab visitors by orientalising the café, a heteroclite act that violates the putative logic that sets America and the Arab immigrants diametrically contrasted. Through her culinary artistry, she offers her guests a prevue into both their Arab and American worlds. The juxtaposition and parallel she creates, by claiming the turkey as the central meal next to the Arab flavours for the Thanksgiving feast, is defiance to those who believe in the authenticity and fixity of borders between worlds and cultures, particularity her Iraqi lover, Hanif.

3. The Potency of the Arab Cuisine in the *Crescent*: Food as a Cultural Relic

Within the perception of immigration, cultural artefacts like food demarcate from their minimal representations to be fabrics through which human beings can

interact, construe their experiences, and find meaning to their ontological existence. In this prerogative, it is envisioned:

The meaning of food is an exploration of culture through food. What we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, who is at the table, and who eats first is a form of communication that is, it has a rich cultural base. Beyond merely nourishing the body, what we eat and with whom we eat can inspire and strengthen the bonds between individuals, communities, and even countries. (Sibal, 2018, p. 02)

Aware of such a connection, Abu-Jaber's main character tries to reconnoitre all that is related to Arabic cuisine. She admits, "it comes back to her [...] for years, the only truth she seemed to possess-that food was better than love: surer, truer, more satisfying and enriching. As long as she could lose herself in the rhythms of peeling and onion, she was complete and whole. And as long as she could cook, she would be loved" (Abu-Jaber, p. 189)

What is more, readers can notice that culinary practices transcend their derogatory connotation to be a means of knowledge and a reminder of home for ethnic groups in Abu-Jaber's novel. It is through cooking that Sirine, the chef, ratifies her role as a mediator across the different ethnic groups. Interestingly and regardless of the existing tensions between people, who might be archrivals in the regions they originated from, they find themselves mitigating the agonizing feelings of hostility in the café, which acts like a cultural insignia. Hence, food and eating habits are not merely essential to human existence, but rather they institute an opening to solidify the group's membership, not to mention that they aver its diversity and union. The sense of organisation, re-creating home, and the desire to bring familial traditions are erected through bringing the Arab cuisine into America. The Arab's solitude is pictured as follows:

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. (p. 21)

The exaltation of ancestral recipes galvanizes the forgotten memories and brings them to the surface. Sirine, in this regard, ponders, "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” (pp. 21-22)

Through the Arab cuisine, or what Sirine calls her ‘world’, she creates a ground wherein her diverse worlds can interact. Instead of eschewing her opaque Arab culture, she decides to approach her paternal world. The kitchen actively participates in the process of self-understanding and communicating diverse cultures. More interestingly, the kitchen has become her domestic cosmos that involves “conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt, 1992, p. 06). For that reason, cooking, for the protagonist, is a canal through which she communicates and understands her being. She gets astounded why:

Whenever she tries to deliberately seek out something like God, she gets distracted and she finds that instead she is thinking about something like stuffed grape leaves rolled tightly around rice, ground lamb, garlic, onion, currants, fragrant with green olive oil [...] to exist inside the simplest actions, like chopping an onion or stirring a pot. (Abu-Jaber, p. 227)

For Sirine, cooking is like a language that lives within her as a personified form of knowledge through which she gets to know and apprehend the world around. This aligns in perfect accord with the idea of Pierre Bourdieu, which he called ‘habitus’. The latter, for Bourdieu, appertains to “a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group and class” (1977, p. 86)

These internalized structures and views erect the human being's apperception and sense of the world in which he/she exists. As outlined previously, subjects within the habitus structure certain values upon which things are being controlled and tracked. On this view, the kitchen for Sirine becomes the habitus that endows her with authority. Most importantly, she starts to sense her being, sense herself, and relate to the world around through culinary practices. Suffice it to say that Sirine strongly believes in the nexus between culinary messaging and social interaction. Generally, Abu-Jaber construes food as a means of communication and a venue for creating closeness and intimacy for Arabs in America.

Accordingly, the café for Sirine and the Arabs likewise transforms into a portrait of home that reassures them of who they are and allows them to pronounce their difference from the main community, as it is a means of identity insertion. This tendency is reflected in Sirine, who recalls the recipes of her mother whenever her identity seems to be threatened. Sirine's mother, an American, attempts to bring the Arab cuisine into her family to create a sort of domestic fortress. Sirine comments:

The smell of the food cooking always brought her father into the kitchen. It was a magic spell that could conjure him from the next room, the basement, the garage. No matter where he was, he would appear, smiling and hungry. And if it was one of his important favourite-stuffed grape leaves, mjeddarah, or roast leg lamb- he would appear in the kitchen even before the meal was done cooking. When she as a little girl, Sirine thought that this was why her mother cooked – to keep her husband close to her, attached to a delicate golden thread of scent. (Abu-Jaber, pp. 51-52)

Such scenes are repeatedly referred to in Abu-Jaber's *The Crescent*, where the author never misses the chance to remind her reader of the intimacy that culinary practices afford to her characters. Abu-Jaber represents food and food-making as a contextual ground that charts the lives of immigrants in America. Through the recipes, Sirine's mother makes it possible for her husband to access home tangibly. Likewise, Sirine endeavours to nourish Hanif, who, on the other hand, sustains her with stories about her father's homeland, Iraq. Conspicuously, food criss-crosses communities and it has become an emblematic contrivance that enables individuals to tell the story of their people, sense their presence, and chart communal vicissitudes and values. Hence, migrants like Hanif and Um-Nadia providently search for possible ways to recreate home and survive their exilic status quo, specifically via recalling their traditional food and culinary practices. In a conversation between Sirine and her uncle, she wonders:

“Well, but he's an exile-they're all messed up inside”

“What do you mean, ‘exile’ because he left Iraq”

“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” (p. 48)

Conspicuously, the agony of exile and loneliness is surmounted through the smells and sounds of home. Hence, the cravings for home, for family, and for the old smells are conjured up through food that mediates the characters' commitment to the '*terre natale*'. This explains Sirine's desire to cook traditional meals to reconnect with Iraq, a land that she has never set foot on. Abu-Jaber's literary strategy to inject culinary practices is a polygonal prognosticator that echoes the social, cultural, and ethnic gauges of identity. In this regard, the critic Hafez Sabry rationalizes the culinary rituals as follows:

Examining the ways in which narrative writers use culinary codes as signifying tools in their work, through a study of their socio-cultural implications, their interaction with the spatial presentation of the narrative [...] the association between the culinary and the erotic [...] the interaction between food and religious practice and between culinary customs and changing social values. (2000, p. 257)

Sirine's cooking rituals are commemorative of her Arab culture inasmuch as she decides to be the cultural agent, who alters the kitchen as an exilic space that nourishes Arabs and diaspora subjects in America. Accordingly, cooking has become the nexus that interconnects her ancestral land and her mother country, America. This rationalizes Sirine's delight in receiving her uncle's gift, an old Syrian cookbook. The book, however, is considered a reference attendant to her origin, as elucidated in the novel:

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 essential: simple equations, the ideal calibrations of salt to vegetable to oil to meet the fire. They're little more than lists, no cooking instructions or temperatures, but scattered among the pages are brief reflections on the nature of animal, flowers, people, and God. Sirine browses through the book, lingering equally over the reflection and lists of ingredients, which seem to her to have the rhythms and balance of poetry. There is one for the roast chicken that she decides she may try preparing for a daily special: chicken, saffron, garlic, lemons, oil, vinegar, rosemary. 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 (Abu-Jaber, pp. 303-304)

Accordingly, readers may not fail to notice Sirine’s resilient conviction in the corporeality of food, which transcends mere materiality to be a spiritual vestige. The call for prayer that causes Sirine’s muddle evidently replicates her awareness that the call *per se* vies with her task as a chef as it awards her the role of the spiritual and cultural agent of her Arab culture. Claudia Roden’s vision is an example that lines up with Sirine’s ambivalence to decrypt the power of food. Roden contends, “There is a lot more to food than eating and cooking. Behind every dish lies a world, a culture, a history. Dishes have social meaning; they have emotional and symbolic significance. Food is about power. It is an expression of identity and ideology.” (2000, p. 7)

By being the cultural agent of the Arab culture, Sirine insists on acquiring the accurate and precise rules that govern this cuisine. The precision in mixing the ingredients and selecting spices does not reflect her exactitude solely, as it designates her recognition of the importance of accuracy in food-making to one’s body first and to uphold the communal and spiritual equipoise afterward. This view is illustrated through Abu-Jaber’s description of her character’s conscience, “she tastes everything edible, studies the new flavours, tests the shock of them; and she learns, every time she tastes, about balance and composition, addition and subtraction. Han watches, eying the strange foods. When she offers him a taste, he closes his eyes and shakes his head” (Abu-Jaber, p. 181). Sirine’s obstinacy on precision is further carried out in the novel when the writer talks about her character’s desire to be armed with the exact and basic ingredients after starting the work at Nadia’s Café. This hint is referred to in this fashion:

Sirine learned how to cook professionally working as a line and then a sous chef in the kitchens of French, Italian, and ‘Californian’ restaurants. 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. (Abu-Jaber, pp. 21-22)

This memorial experience that is outlived in Nadia’s café qualified her to be the chef, whose cooking expertise keeps alluring Arab immigrants and non-Arabs.

It goes without saying that the injection of traditional meals into Sirine's life is an endorsement of her Arab heritage, considering that there appears to be propinquity between one's identity and food. In this context, Holtzman asserts, "food is well-known to transport people (especially ethnic and diasporic groups) to different times and places through triggering experiences or meaning in reference to the past" (2006, p. 363). In effect, Sirine transforms the kitchen into a ground of knowledge wherein she starts to discover the history of her family. Moreover, the kitchen has become a sanctuary for family reminiscences, as indicated in the novel:

The back kitchen is Sirine's retreat, her favourite place to sit at a table chopping carrots and thinking her thoughts. She can look out the window at the back courtyard and feel like she is a child again, working at her mother's table. Mondays are for baklava, which he learned to make by watching her parents. Her mother said that a baklava-maker should have sensitive, supple hands, so she was in charge of opening and unpeeling the paper-thin layers of dough and placing them in a stack in the tray (Abu-Jaber, 2003, p. 59)

Interestingly, Sirine learns that the boundaries existing between her maternal and paternal cultures are being opened up in the kitchen, which turns into a space where different cultures can converse. In other words, Sirine's mother discovers that through food she can communicate with her husband without frictions, gradually handing her daughter the truthful prescription that could assist her in coming to terms with her mixed heritage. Subsequently, Baklava-making for the protagonist has always been emblematic of the shared exertions, as her parents made a share in the process. Sirine explains, "Her father was in charge of pastry-brushing each layer of dough with a coat of drawn butter. It was systematic yet graceful: her mother carefully unpeeling each layer and placing them in the tray here Sirine's father painted them. It was one of the ways that Sirine learned how her parent loved- their concerted movements like a dance." (Abu-Jaber, p. 59). Additionally, Sirine explains how this process was arduous and the extent to which her parents were vigilant to their steps, an attentiveness that is concomitant and binding to the team's work. This harmonization between a husband, an Arab,

and a wife, an American, and watchfulness are decisive to keeping the conversation between the Arab and American worlds going.

The dialogue that is mediated in the kitchen halts the cultural confines, as expounded in Uberoi's assertion, "intercultural dialogue introduces communities to the limits of their beliefs and practices and helps to illuminate the need to reform them" (2015, p. 08). Hence, it was Sirine's mother who pushed her daughter towards the recognition of her dissimilar worlds as equal partners. Gradually, the kitchen becomes her safe environs, a home without borders, and a retreat she heads for to escape her cultural estrangement. In view of that, it is safe to say that the kitchen for the protagonist is an invigorating site, as alluded to:

Sirine wakes early and braves the cars in order to ride her bike from West L.A. to Westwood. She's used to the quick rhythms and physical demands of the kitchen and she likes to exert herself. Then she notices the flowering things around her, the plants with the fluted edges like feathered goblets, or striped pink blossoms floating before a storefront, or the two big twin palms in the Garden of the Birds behind Nadia' café. Their long elegant trunks rub together when the wind comes up. Sirine's never known any other kind of place. (Abu-Jaber, pp. 26-27)

By considering the kitchen a revitalizing locus, Sirine starts to approach her forgotten origins, something that she blames herself for throughout the entire course of the novel. Additionally, food has become the only counteracted means through which she and her Iraqi beloved can talk without being hackneyed and confrontational to one another. Sirine feels in several instances that Han considers the Arab world and America as contrasting opposites. She describes how Han treats her as an American and wonders whether this amalgam between Arab-ness and American-ness would be possible, as described:

"How lovely," Sirine says. "What a lovely voice she has."

"It's Fairuz" Han says. "I was going to play some American music for you but I guess I don't actually own any. I meant for tonight to be all American for you"

"But I am not really all-American," Sirine says.

"Well then I hope you will tell me what you are," Han says (Abu-Jaber,

p. 68)

In the face of her community's opprobrium and in penance to Hanif's insistence on her 'Americanness', Serine dexterously blends her contrasted world and identities to avoid the perils of the rigidity that both groups have and to contend with the agony of crossings. This clearly explains her bewilderment when Hanif insists on positioning her among Americans, discarding her Iraqi origins. Incongruously, this frightening reality, to be more exact, the jolt of being the 'stranger' all over forasmuch as she is neither fully American nor Arab, inspires Sirine to search for a connective bridge that transcends the limitations and crosses all borderlines standing between her American and Iraqi identities.

4. The Phantasm of the Past in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*: A Cathartic Journey

One of the prevalent doctrines related to immigrants is the past that keeps structuring their present. Most Arab Anglophone writers have subsidized the genre of past revisioning considering it a transformative journey towards self-understanding. And so, Abu-Jaber uncovers the power of the past in grounding and devising a fecund tactic to understand the present-day. This accord with Helen Davis's views that points "This reclamation of the past is actually a process of production. It is an imaginative act of discovery, which gives an imaginary coherence to a broken and fragmented sense of identity. Memory, fantasy and myth all conjoin" (2004, p. 185). As a replacement for using memory for regretful reminiscence, Abu-Jaber points to the consolation offered by past memories to most characters. Even if, all Arab immigrants in *Crescent* were plagued by their cultural precariousness, the thrust towards negotiating the cultural boundaries could easily be spotted. Abu-Jaber, instead of focusing on issues related to cultural malaise on account of inhabiting the fringes of two adversary cultures, celebrates the space of 'in-between'. Thus, the memories of the past and remembering the erstwhile culture are any longer excruciating.

One way in which Abu-Jaber opens up the past to the present is through memory, a strategy through which she assists her main character in resisting the dominance of mainstream culture and preserving the original one. The

doggedness in recalling the cookery heritage and the continual interrogations about Iraq help Sirine revive her past, fighting the existing autocracies with aromatic paraphernalia. Though she can scarcely remember her parents, yet the memory of baklava-making crafts a ground for her, as alluded to in this way: “And Sirine feels unsettled when she tries to begin breakfast without preparing the baklava first; she can’t find her place in things” (Abu-Jaber, p. 60). Thus, the feelings of placelessness and the loss of paternal heritage are amended through the remembrance of Arab cuisine. Strangely, the culinary practices that Sirine adapts help her understand her disposition from both cultures; therefore, mystifying those who insist on her unfamiliarity with the Arab culture, as articulated in Han’s remark, “I saw that you had some prayer beads- ‘He holds out one hand as if imitating her. ‘The way you held them was very delightful-very American.” (p. 29)

Plainly, constructing connections and coalitions across/within ethnic confines for Sirine is attained through food, which is the only memento she holds. This explains her nervousness when she lost Hanif’s gift, a scarf she refused to accept, believing that it was the only leftover he had. The idea of losing the only aide memoire of Hanif’s home was outrageous, as she explains, “Han, I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I lost your scarf ... and I’m sorry about everything.” (Abu-Jaber, p. 279). In this context, it is relevant to say that the material reminders, namely the scarf, are of huge importance for immigrants as they aid them in figuring out who they are. These reminders, however, are transfers of the former culture and identity. This explains Han’s desire to save his father’s prayer beads and Leila’s scarf, given that they are souvenirs of home. The night before Hanif’s departure to Iraq, he reports to Sirine about how it feels to leave one’s country, recounting his journey to America:

I got this when I escaped” He fingers the scar lightly. “One of the men helping me to escape suddenly turned on me and tried to steal my father’s prayer beads. He saw the way I always carried them close to me and assumed they were valuable. I woke one night while he was trying to slip the beads out of my hand and he struck me across the face with a broken glass bottle. I bled so profusely that it frightened him” (pp. 283-284)

The prayer beads aid Hanif to sense his being and deal with the phantoms of

exile. On a number of occasions, he talks about the eerie returns of the past, confessing, "I really don't get the geography of the town. It seems like things keep swimming around me. I think I know where something is, then it is gone" (p. 76). In line with this perspective, Sirine shares Han's exilic mental state, averring, "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" (p. 116). Hence, the feelings of inadequacy and scantiness that parallel Sirine's and Hanif's lives originate from the remnants of memory. In line with this critique, Edward Said describes them as those who are "permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever" (2000, p. 173). Perchance, the major split between Hanif and Sirine lies basically in their paternal heritage, as Hanif is considerably linked to his original land, Iraq, something that Sirine feels preyed upon throughout the entire course of the novel. Nonetheless, readers will not fail to sense that both characters bespeak the memories of the past that remain to reshape and restructure their present.

5. CONCLUSION

In the context of Arab-American writings, almost all attention has been inundated by what Majaj envisions as 'split-vision' (2000, p. 72) owing to the strain of counterbalancing the Arab and American cultures. As a primary means of resistance to the essentialised views that positioned Arabs on the outside of the white grouping and the ethnic minorities, Arab-American writers were indulged in constructing a new demesne that is 'in-between'. The latter is a 'created' space where ethnic groups, like Arabs, are certified to negotiate their relegation and invisibility. Accordingly, Diana Abu-Jaber interrogates the likelihood of building connections and coalitions amidst cultures across the ethnic lines. In *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber circumnavigates in a land that is weighed down with cultural schisms related to reminiscence, bigotry, eccentricity, and marginality; nonetheless, she points to the inexorable cultural coalitions that escorted the experience of dispossession and border inhabiting.

Unexpectedly, Abu-Jaber exposes the protagonist's cultural precariousness inasmuch as she continually reveals her incapacity to counterbalance her

‘Arabness’ and ‘Americanness’. The inaptitude to neither collide nor conjoin refers to Sirine’s inability to identify with Arab culture due to the absence of parental origin. Additionally, this indeterminacy is further intensified as she fails to sense her Americanness even though almost everyone, specifically her Iraqi lover, retells her that she looks American. Sirine’s indeterminacy reflects the particularity of this minority that can only be understood outside of racial, cultural, and ethnic absolutism. Indeed, her cultural unevenness dissolved when she created a revitalizing realm in the café, wherein she approached her lapsed Arab origins. Bringing Arab culinary practice into America is momentous, as it is considered the only vestige and memento of her Iraqi origins. Differently put, her robust belief in the corporeality of Arab food is metonymic with her desire to twin the two cultures, just as it replicates her promptness and inclination to head towards cultural coalitions.

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