



Exile, Memory, and The Scent of Belonging: The Politics of Home in *Crescent*

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<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n4.52>

Abstract:

The impact of power conflicts, such as Saddam Hussein's authority in Iraq, is evident in the harsh lived experiences of communities in diaspora. *Crescent* by Diana Abu-Jaber contextualises Arab American immigrant experiences through depictions of exile, fragmented selves, and persistent trauma that shape individual and collective memory. This investigation maps how Abu-Jaber's characters embody the cultural and psychological outcomes of political upheaval while negotiating affiliation and estrangement in America. This will be achieved by employing intersecting theories of trauma, diaspora, and postcolonialism, including Bhabha's notions of displacement and hybrid identity, Said's conceptualisation of exile, and Caruth's theories of trauma and memory. The novel serves as a site of memory and resistance to the hegemonic erasure of Arab distress. This qualitative and exploratory paper limits itself to highlighting the role of authoritarian violence in shaping narrative memory in *Crescent*. The paper concludes on an affirmative note that Arab American literature extends its scope beyond geographical exile to grapple with the individual experiences of being diasporic subjects.

Keywords: diaspora, exile, identity, memory, political violence, trauma.

Introduction

Crescent by Diana Abu-Jaber articulates a layered understanding of exile as an existential condition as well as a socio-political condition. It reflects the predicaments faced by characters while framed by the dual pressures of geopolitical conflict and diasporic estrangement. Political conflicts interfere with the personal life of the protagonist Sirine and her lover Hanif. Hanif's identity as an Iraqi subject in exile exemplifies how authoritarian governance, sociopolitical violence and institutionalised subjugation uproot subjects from their birthplace. As a result, they feel a simultaneous sense of belonging and alienation. The text highlights the impact of dictatorship and political upheavals on personal lives, especially the regime of Saddam Hussein and his imposition of military conscription in Iraq. It also provides a voice to the suppressed topography of exile and longing. Hanif reflects:

Everything that you were – every sight, sound, taste, memory, all of that has been wiped away. You forget everything you thought you knew ... you have to ... you have to let yourself forget, or you'll just go crazy... They know what it feels like- they live in between worlds, so they're not really anywhere. Exiled from themselves. (Abu-Jaber 182-183)

Hanif continues to examine his condition in exile. He feels he can connect to the homeless people on the street, those who walk around in torn clothes, speculating on their existence. Their tattered clothes and homelessness symbolise Hanif's torn sense of self and identity. Thus, his emotional proximity concurs with the desperate and the homeless. Abu-Jaber presents the concept of exile as an embodied experience that works beyond displacement across geographies. It is an enduring existential condition that tampers with identity, social interconnectedness and psychological grounding.

Review of Literature and Research Gap

The existing critical literature on *Crescent* reveals that a considerable amount of research has been undertaken pertaining to culinary aspects, storytelling, hybrid identity, political regimentation and so on. Somaya Sami Sabry, in her critical text, *Arab American Women's Writing and Performance*, discusses the relevance of culinary art in the context of Arab diasporic experiences. Food can be a way through which diasporic characters can resist assimilation and claim agency. She enunciates, "Throughout the novel, in Sirine's description of food and cooking, we feel very much involved in an empowering and artistic enterprise rather than a domestic one. Cooking is foregrounded as one of the major sites of cultural production and redefinition" (61). In her critical discourse, *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture*, Nouri Gana historically traces the scattering of the Arab population and their predicament. She further elucidates their political struggle across centuries and multiple border crossings (197-216). Yet, in another critical study, *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings*, Amal Talaat Abdelrazek analyses *Crescent* from multiple theoretical stances such as hybridity, exile, hyphenated identity, belonging and so on. She posits, "in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, all the characters suffer from either physical or mental exile, pointing to the multiple notions of exile and exilic identities" (9). The current research, however, is an analytical attempt to explore how Abu-Jaber juxtaposes the personal tragedies of diaspora and the political violence under a dictatorial regime that forces people into exile.

Objectives, Framework and Methodology

A crucial objective of this research is to examine the impact of dictatorial regimes on the lives and minds of exilic people. Secondly, to explore the role of memory and trauma in

shaping the consciousness of diasporic subjects in the novel. Finally, to analyse the role of culturally grounded culinary art in claiming agency and representation in a diasporic context.

In its underlying structure, the methodologies of this paper are analytical, explorative and interpretive, followed by an in-depth textual analysis. Conceptually, this study engages extensively with the critical frameworks advanced by Said, Bhabha, Caruth, and other scholars. Theoretically, it is grounded in postcolonial studies, with its analysis principally informed by central concepts and debates in diaspora studies. However, the analysis limits itself to a qualitative approach and does not venture into any quantitative methods.

Exile as a Condition of Being: Dictatorship, Displacement, and the Arab Diaspora

Hanif reflects on his early days in Iraq, highlighting the convergence of personal displacement and political oppression, “Saddam started forcing young men to join the army, and my parents wanted me to stay at home, out of sight. Instead, I went out late at night with Arif and Leila, visiting our friends, discussing theories about economics and foreign policy and the workings of the world” (Abu-Jaber 329). Hanif’s adolescence is shaped by Saddam Hussein’s dictatorial regime. His parents’ attempt to shield him from these external forces highlights the precarious condition of survival that pervades daily life. Hanif’s political awakening occurs through critical discussions with his peers. This demonstrates the influence of an oppressive political regime on human consciousness. It aligns with Said’s perspective on exile in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. He represents exile as a “condition of loss, dislocation, and exposure to a new consciousness,” which helps individuals gain awareness about personal susceptibility and structural marginalisation (173).

Abu-Jaber validates this journey into exile, accompanied by physical and psychological danger. Hanif reflects on his decision to take refuge in England: “My friend Sami found a cab driver who took me forty miles in the middle of the night out into the desert. I had to escape

through the desert into Jordan where my family had friends, first in an open Jeep crowded with other refugees, and then on horseback with a group of Bedu, and then finally on foot for two days” (Abu-Jaber 160). His reflection underscores the procedural risks of escaping a totalitarian state. This in turn maps the physical ordeals of exile. Hanif’s journey symbolises the collective experiences of displacement in the Middle East. Exile serves as an administrative compulsion, a physically taxing experience in addition to being perilous in nature.

Hamid Naficy, a renowned scholar, in the text *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, opines that exile invokes a “traumatic rupture from homeland, compounded by the perilous journey and the uncertainty of arrival,” which captures the entangled process among trauma, persistence, and selfhood depicted through Hanif’s lived experiences (27). The concept of exile in Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* is entwined with the silencing of individual and communal memory, further revealing the profound psychological implications. Hanif’s pathos about the uncertainty of returning home is evident in his thoughts: “Exile is like... it’s a dim, gray room, full of sounds and shadows, but there’s nothing real or actual inside of it. You are constantly thinking that you see old friends on the street or old enemies that make you shout in dream. You go up to people certain that they’re members of your family, and when you get close their faces melt away into total strangers” (Abu-Jaber 182). The visual imagery of the ‘faces melting’ in Hanif’s traumatic memory complements Freud’s theorisation of “the uncanny”. The text *The Uncanny* also suggests that the familiar is simultaneously acknowledged yet estranged, causing insecurity and social disconnection (122).

The dual perception of physical uprooting and subjective fragmentation is exemplified through Hanif’s articulation. Bhabha’s notion of the “third space” in *The Location of Culture* is significant and relevant in this context. He opines that individuals in exile occupy “an interstitial space” where identity is constantly negotiated between memories from the Homeland and the hierarchies of relational power of the host country (4). The interstitial space

is evident through Hanif's exilic grief. His presence in the host land is only physical, as he continues to share an emotional attachment with Iraq. This highlights the disruptive ability of exile to tamper with a diasporic individual's identity and sense of belonging. Hanif expresses that, "The fact of exile is bigger than everything else in my life. Leaving my country was like – I don't know- like part of my body was torn away. I have phantom pains from the loss of that part- I'm haunted by myself... It's as if I'm trying to describe something that I'm not, that's no longer here" (Abu-Jaber 182).

Abu-Jaber further attempts to highlight the diasporic experience examined through the standpoint of Arab American communities in diaspora. Sirine's workplace, Cafe Nadia, serves as a prominent diasporic space in the novel. The cafe is transformed into a liminal space that preserves culture and helps negotiate identity. The vulnerability of the Arabs in diaspora is illustrated through incidents situated within regimes of vigilance and mistrust. A decade earlier in the novel's timeline, when Saddam attacked Kuwait, mistrust began to develop around not just the Iraqis but around all the Arabs in America. Prior to Um Nadia, the café was owned by an Egyptian couple who were frequented by the CIA on suspicious grounds. Due to the continued suspicion around the Arabs, the business began to fail. Additionally, the CIA agents questioned the café's cook about whether he was aware of the hidden terrorist schemes within the community, terrifying him as they implicated him in the Twin Towers catastrophe. (Abu-Jaber 21).

Individuals in diaspora are always trapped between the cultural past and the sociopolitical tensions shaping host-migrant relations. According to Stuart Hall's theoretical scaffolding of "cultural identity as a narrative of difference" in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, the Arab immigrants are portrayed as prominently visible, yet mischaracterised. As a result, they are subject to suspicion and marginalisation (223). The feeling of alienation and fear encountered by diasporic individuals illuminates the structural inequality endured by them. The

political histories associated with their homeland intersect with a racialised contemporary gaze. The notion of exile is accompanied by the uncertainty of return, and Hanif's constant, repetitive memories of his family residing in Iraq exemplify the lasting impacts of displacement:

He's my younger brother... His name is Arif. I haven't seen him- or my parents, for that matter- in over twenty years (Abu-Jaber 133) ... And it's so hard to let yourself know that you'll never actually see or touch them again. To let yourself take in that thing, that you'll only be able to know them through your memory now...and for me it's even worse, somehow...this is a terrible thing to say, but I feel it would be easier if I knew they were dead. (Abu-Jaber 210)

Edward Said, in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, discusses the concept of "exilic consciousness," which exemplifies the forced separation from family and loved ones. The longing for one's homeland and family serves as an anchor of emotional distress and ethical accountability (176). Arif's imprisonment and subversive activism, along with Hanif's inability to cope with fractured familial bonds due to exile, destabilise the conventional understandings of obligation, allegiance and remembrance.

Abu-Jaber does not restrict herself to highlighting the impact of displacement on men. Sirine's identity is also affected by her hybrid socialisation and diasporic orientation. Her attempt to negotiate her Middle Eastern socio-cultural background in the American context validates James Clifford's notion in his text *Diasporas*, where the concept of diaspora is portrayed as a "deterritorialised cultural space." Clifford opines that identity is constantly articulated through intergenerational memory, narrative transmission, and cultural continuity (306). The collective experiences of Arabs at Cafe Nadia, their longing to get back to their homeland and their attempts to negotiate hegemonic American social codes, suggest the

layered impacts of exile. It is a shared historical condition shaped by a sense of nostalgia, intergenerational cultural continuity, and social exclusion.

The conscious attempt put in by Sirine and Hanif to re-imagine exile aligns with Said's insights into the emotional and psychic landscapes of exile in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. This charts the entanglement of self, displacement, and trauma:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: the essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. (Said 173)

The diasporic psychology is also affected by the authoritarian governance in Iraq. Hanif's narrative introspections disclose the fear of bureaucratic domination and regulatory scrutiny: "It's a tricky place for Iraqi men- there's the army, jail, torture, hangings. I'm wanted by the government for dodging army duty. For one. There are plenty of other aggravating factors... The ruler is famous for his ruthlessness" (Abu-Jaber 134). Abu-Jaber attempts to expose the interference of totalitarian regimes in shaping memory, apart from the governance of territory. The narrative in *Crescent* aligns with theories of politically mediated suffering, especially with Veena Das' notion of "social suffering" in her text titled *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. She suggests that the impact of state violence possesses the ability to percolate into the domestic sphere. This produces a prolonged psychological and communal dislocation (7).

Trauma, Memory, and the Haunting of the Past

Crescent perceives the concept of memory and trauma as crucial components of exilic experience. This is primarily represented through the character of Hanif. His life is conditioned by two key factors, personal and political. It is guided by the prolonged absence of his homeland alongside the autocratic coercion and systemic violence under Saddam Hussein. Trauma is the intertwined outcome of historical events and subjective, cognitive engagements that affect identity and the ability to narrativise one's personal and collective history. Through Hanif's reflections, Abu-Jaber employs a technique to expose how traumatic memories persist and manifest through involuntary recall. She also discusses the haunting effect of trauma that depicts remembered experiences as a site of psychological load and self-knowledge. This positions memory as a double-edged sword. It facilitates a connection with the lost homeland along with the lasting psychological distress of displacement. It resonates with Cathy Caruth's perception of trauma in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. It is "not locatable in the simple event itself, but rather in the way it returns to haunt the survivor" (4). The notion of memory is also closely knit with the experiential perception of diasporic life. Hanif emphasises the unceasing emergence of Iraq in his mental and emotional life:

Only now I'm afraid...That I haven't forgotten any of it, nothing at all. I'm starting to think that it's all been there inside me all along. And since I have met you- it's starting to return. I'm beginning to feel it and see it. Every time I turn a corner lately, I seem to turn into Sadoun Street or the Jumhurriya Bridge. Every person I talk to turns into the vegetable seller or my grade school teacher.

(Abu-Jaber 211)

The convergence of the past and the present epitomises Marianne Hirsch's definition of 'postmemory' in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. The personal

experiences of one's homeland are either witnessed firsthand or transmitted onward constantly, framing understanding and emotional experiences (22). Hanif perceives memory as intimately connected to the sense of displacement. He is forced to negotiate his daily life in the United States along with the lingering memory of Baghdad. This notion of spectrality is theorised by Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, where she opines that the diasporic individuals experience "socially organised haunting" (4). The past therefore influences the present through the medium of rituals, objects and persistent mental echoes.

Trauma as a concept in *Crescent* is revealed in the psychological and bodily experiences of forced displacement. Hanif's loss is both physical and psychological. It is evident through his articulation, "The fact of exile is bigger than everything else in my life. Leaving my country was like-I don't know-like part of my body was torn away. I have phantom pains from the loss of that part-I'm haunted by myself. It's as if I'm trying to describe something that I'm not, that's no longer here" (Abu-Jaber 182). Hanif's reflection underscores exile as a fragmentation of experience that resonates with Veena Das's perception of social suffering as discussed in *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. She discusses the process by which trauma stems from structural oppression and is further internalised, both physically and psychologically. In turn, it also shapes identity formation and social engagements (Das 7). The psychic effects of displacement are also evident in Hanif's reflections on sensory disorientation. He is imbued with traumatic memories as follows: "Lately, I've started waking up and feeling like it was just yesterday that I left. Or just an hour ago...Twenty- two years ago when I left for England, I sort of felt like I was anaesthetized for surgery...like falling asleep" (Abu-Jaber 210).

Exile is perceived from the point of view of a liminal space that facilitates the convergence of memory and trauma. Further, it creates an uncertainty about external reality

and internal perception. Hanif's marginal consciousness portrays the continued effects of trauma on recollection, personal identity and social interconnection. Hanif's trauma stemming from separation is intensified owing to the uncertainty associated with the lives of his loved ones. Paul Ricoeur's text titled *Memory, History, Forgetting* defines memory as "a mediation between absence and presence" (110). Incidents from the past don't just serve as memories, but they play an active role in shaping the present. It produces a recurrent cycle of mental and emotional estrangement from the past, associated with emotions of nostalgia.

Culinary Memory, Nostalgia, and Cultural Survival

Food serves as a crucial framework through which desires, sense of belonging and identity are constructed and interrogated within the framework of the Arab American diaspora. Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* situates culinary excellence as a cultural medium through which Sirine's culinary practices at Café Nadia promote food to the level of a symbolic bridge between memory and identity that connects individuals in diaspora to their nostalgic and unreachable homeland. It parallelly mediates the complex negotiations of identity within the framework of American assimilationist discourse.

Mary Douglas' critical insights on food in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* align with Abu-Jaber's narrativisation. It positions food as a signifier of identity formation, social demarcation and ethical relations (47). Sirine's culinary space is transformed into a site of cultural continuity, challenging hegemonic power, and personal engagement. It offers a microcosmic reflection of broader realities of the Arabs in diaspora alongside a space that facilitates counter-discourse to marginal erasure and psychic fragmentation. Abu-Jaber's repeated attempts to situate culinary practices are embedded in the intertwined notions of memory, longing, and affective connection. Sirine's attempt to prepare elaborate and traditional Middle Eastern cuisines serves as an instrument for transmitting

diasporic memory across generations, borders and cultural contexts. Sirine reflects, “I think food should taste like where it came from. I mean good food especially. You can sort of trace it back. You know, so the best butter tastes a little like pastures and flowers, that sort of stuff. Things show their origins” (Abu-Jaber 78).

Food possesses the dual ability to serve as a literal and metaphorical source of nourishment, a medium of emotional labour that nurtures diasporic communities in the face of alienation. Culinary traditions, cultural transmission and emotional engagement serve as facilitators of negotiating identity in exile. Sirine’s culinary excellence creates a sense of belonging and nostalgia for her as well as diasporic customers at Café Nadia. Homi K Bhabha’s theoretical understanding of “cultural hybridity” in *The Location of Culture* advocates that culinary practices bring together the old and the new world in order to produce sites for diasporic negotiation. This involves aspects of subjectivity, cultural difference and community belonging (112).

Café Nadia and the culinary space functions as a site of liminality, where diasporic individuals negotiate themes of hybrid identities, acculturation and nostalgic memory. Culinary excellence bridges the gap between American and Arab identity, further creating a space that facilitates cultural integration. Abu-Jaber also considers these liminal spaces as socially productive sites.

Reconfiguring Arab American Identity: From Loss to Resilience

Hanif reminisces about his homeland and his family and reflects on his initial experience of exile while narrating his emotional experiences to Sirine. He was forced to leave Iraq owing to the regime of Saddam Hussein, after which returning to his homeland was extremely dangerous. His family played a crucial role in enabling his attempt to flee, unlike the majority who feared the repercussions of migration (Abu-Jaber 159). The various letters

from his immigrant aunt Dalal serve as a testimonial writing about the devastation caused by political dictatorship and imposed systemic violence. It foregrounds the intersection of individual trauma and systemic oppression in constituting diasporic subjectivity. It also presents how the Arab immigrant is rendered voiceless by an authoritarian regime in his homeland and Western society:

So now I switch to this language, in hopes of evading censors and prying eyes, you understand... I frequently wonder what your life is like there in such a cold, distant place. I cannot quite manage to imagine it. And most probably you can no longer imagine ours either... Our fine, beautiful country is gone. We can't get away from the smell of burning. Terrible chemical fallout, starvation, no medicine, the usual catastrophe—so dull being a victim.... Our ancient night flashes with bombs. (Abu-Jaber 176).

The letter illuminates the corporeal and psychic registers of political exile that underscore the totalitarian surveillance, routinisation, and internalisation of violence within everyday existence during Saddam Hussein's regime. It also highlights the dual nature of exile, wherein individuals choose to migrate for safety. However, they continue to experience emotional trauma in the hostland. Edward Said, in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, opines that exile is accompanied by "a continuous sense of loss and displacement" (173). The letter precisely discusses the juxtaposition of his yearning for his homeland along with a sense of helplessness in terms of bringing change.

Conclusion

By showcasing Sirine and Hanif's life sandwiched between nostalgia and assimilation, Abu-Jaber extends the angst of exile beyond geographical displacement. The narrative ultimately presents exile as a state of change rather than a complete rupture of identity. The life

of diasporic individuals is gradually shaped by the existential weight of exile and the contingent desire for re-rooting. By contextualising *Crescent* within the lens of politics, the current study validates the attempt of Arab American literature in continuing to interrogate and destabilise the ideological structures that regulate knowledge and belonging in American multicultural discourse. The current paper paves the way for further research in areas discussing the intersection of diaspora, displacement, gender and memory in the Arab American context. An interdisciplinary approach combining feminist theory and psychology can also be considered, as mental health serves as a crucial topic of discussion in contemporary times.

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