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Arab American Identity in Exile: Case Study of Diana Abu Jaber's
Crescent

**A Thesis Submitted to the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Master Degree in Language, Literature and Civilization**

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Dedication

First and Foremost, I thank God for his blessing and his power to lighten my thinking.

Every challenging work needs self efforts as well as guidance of elders, especially those who are very close to our heart.

I would like to express my deepest thankfulness and gratefulness to my respective parents who have been my constant source of inspiration. They have given me the drive and discipline to tackle any task with enthusiasm and determination.

Thank you *my father Mohamed*, my first teacher, and *my dearest mother Saida* I dedicate this thesis to them for having contributed a lot in my studies.

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Abstract

This study discusses the struggle of Arabs and Arab Americans, especially those of Iraqi origins, with identity conflicts in *Crescent* (2003) by Jordanian American Diana Abu Jaber. *Crescent* offers characters that face different forms of exile and have to work through broken, destabilized identities to create for themselves new identities that embrace their hyphenated positions. For that, the choice to use the psychoanalytic theory was the right call. Further, as the novel was written by a female writer and discusses the life of a female protagonist, the necessity recall using the feminist theory as a way to understand the feminists ideologies which the writer indirectly used within the events of the story. Moreover, the thesis presents three chapters. The first one gives us a detailed description of the immigration process and the reformation of so called Arab American community. While, the second chapter represents a rich depiction of the triangle love, food, and identity intertwined with memory. The final chapter describes the immigrants' attempts to cope with the new environment that is crowded with various ethnicities. Besides, the novel presents a spectacular protagonist "Sirine" who succeeded to work as an ethnic bonding agent, as through her cooking, she managed to draw most of the different ethnicities of Arabs and non-Arabs together in the space of Um-Nadia café. In the end, the thesis shows no alternative for the characters except the coexistence with the minority groups accepting the reality of in-betweenness as a temporary solution and looking optimistically for a better future.

Key Words: Arab American, Identity, *Crescent*, triangle, in-betweenness.

Résumé

Cette étude traite de la lutte des Arabes et des Américains arabes, Surtout d'origine irakienne, Avec des conflits d'identité dans *Crescent* (2003) de Jordanienne American Diana Abu Jaber. *Crescent* offre des personnages qui font face à différentes formes d'exil et doivent travailler à travers des identités brisées et déstabilisées pour créer de nouvelles identités qui tiennent compte de leurs positions en trait d'union. Pour cela, le choix d'utiliser la théorie psychanalytique était le bon appel. En outre, comme le roman a été écrit par une écrivaine et parle de la vie d'un protagoniste féminin, il faut se rappeler d'utiliser la théorie féministe comme moyen de comprendre certains des opinions des féministes que l'écrivain peut être utilisé indirectement aux événements de l'histoire. En outre, la thèse présente trois chapitres, le premier, nous donne une description détaillée du processus d'immigration et de la réforme de la communauté dite arabe américaine. Alors que, le deuxième chapitre Représente une représentation riche du triangle de l'amour, de la nourriture et de l'identité entrelacés avec la mémoire. Le chapitre final décrit les tentatives des immigrants pour faire face au nouvel environnement qui regorge de différente ethnicité. En outre, ce roman présente à spectaculaire protagoniste Sirine qui a réussi à travailler comme agent de liaison ethnique, comme à travers sa cuisine, elle a réussi à attirer l'une des différentes ethnies des Arabes et des non-Arabes dans l'espace de Um -Nadia café. En fin de compte, la thèse ne montre aucune alternative pour les personnages, à part la coexistence avec les groupes minoritaires et accepte la réalité de l'intermédialité comme une solution temporaire et cherche de façon optimiste pour un avenir meilleur.

Mots clés: Arabe américain, Identité, Croissant, Triangle, Intermédialité.

ملخص

تناقش هذه الدراسة كفاح العرب والأميركيين العرب؛ وخاصة أصحاب الأصول العراقية؛ مع نزاعات الهوية في رواية الهلال (2003) من قبل الأردنية الأمريكية ديانا أبو جابر. الهلال يقدم شخصيات تواجه أشكال مختلفة من المنفى، و التي يجب أن تعمل من خلال هوياتها المزعجة على خلق الاستقرار لنفسها و بناء هويات جديدة تمثل وتعتنق مفاهيم جديدة. لذلك كان اختيار استخدام نظرية التحليل النفسي هو الدعوة الصحيحة. و علاوة على ذلك وبما أن الرواية كتبت من قبل امرأة وتناقش حياة امرأة الضرورة استدعت استخدام نظرية النسوة كوسيلة لفهم بعض الأفكار للكاتبة التي يمكن أن تكون استخدمت بشكل غير مباشر في أحداث القصة و بالإضافة لذلك فإن الأطروحة تقدم لنا ثلاثة فصول، الأولى، تعطينا وصفا مفصلا لعملية الهجرة وإصلاح ما يسمى المجتمع العربي الأمريكي. بينما الفصل الثاني يمثل تصويرا غنيا لمثلث الحب والطعام والهوية متشابكة مع الذاكرة. ويصف الفصل الأخير محاولات المهاجرة للتعامل مع البيئة الجديدة المزدهمة بمختلف الأعراق. إلى جانب ذلك فإن أهمية هذه الرواية تنسب إلى بطلتها سيرين الذي نجحت في العمل كعامل ارتباط عرقي، من خلال طهيها، تمكنت من رسم معظم الأعراق المختلفة من العرب وغير العرب معا في مقهى أم نادية. في نهاية المطاف تظهر أطروحة أنه لا يوجد بديل للشخصيات ما عدا التعايش مع الأقليات وتقبل واقع الوسطية كحل مؤقت وتبحث بتفاؤل لمستقبل أفضل

الكلمات الرئيسية: العربية الأمريكية، الهوية، الهلال، المثلث، الوسطية

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Introduction

Diana Abu-Jaber was born in New York State to an American mother and a Jordanian father. The family lived in New York until Diana was seven years old; at that time they moved to Amman, the capital of Jordan. In the ensuing years, they moved frequently back and forth between the two countries as her father could not decide which country should they settle in. According to him living in America was a good way to ensure his daughter's future but also living in Jordan will ensure the preserving of his ancestral heritage. Their life at that time was really difficult, acting Arab at home, but American in the street was really a tough task to do (Shalal-Esa 4-6). The struggle to make sense of this sort of hybrid life or in-betweenness, permeated Abu-Jaber's fiction, and helped her in 2005 to publish her own story in the memoir *The Language of Baklava*. The book was "a feast of words and images," according to *Entertainment Weekly* reviewer Alyssa Lee.¹ The center of the memoir was Abu-Jaber's father, Bud, who left Jordan of his own wish, but found himself lost in the American culture. He shifted restlessly between Jordan and the United States, unable to settle in either country. Bud was passionate about food, a quality he passed on to his daughter. *The Language of Baklava* was replete with descriptions of meals and food and even includes numerous recipes. Gillian Engberg, reviewing *The Language of Baklava* for *Booklist*, found it not only readable, but thought-provoking, raising questions about identity and the meaning of "home". Engberg concluded: "Abu-Jaber's sly, poetic precision will leave readers breathless."²

Diana continued her glamour, but this time with her first novel *Arabian Jazz* (1993) in which she also depicted heavily on her own background. The main characters of the novel

¹ Lee, Allyssa. Rev. of *The Language of Baklava*, by Diana Abu Jaber. *Entertainment Weekly Reviews* 25 March. 2005:p76.

² Engberg, Gillian. Rev. of *The Language of Baklava*, by Diana Abu Jaber. *Booklist Reviews* 15 Feb.2005:p1051.

were Jemorah and Melvina Ramoud, two sisters who had emigrated with their father from Jordan to Syracuse, following the death of their American mother. There, they attached with various colorful family members, including Aunt Fatima, the matchmaker, and from there the sequence of the events started. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer found that the portrayal of Jemorah and Melvina's family a "borders on caricature," but he/she nevertheless praised the author's "narrative powers."³

In her next novel *Crescent* (2003), the genius work that gathered between the sense of love, the passion for food, and the search for identity, helped her to prove again that her presence in the Arab American literature was not just a presence of an ordinary writer, but she ensured that she could leave her unique print in a world that proclaimed that creativity and uniqueness which was only limited to male writers. The work was written after Diana's attendance in a teaching class in Middle Eastern culture at UCLA University (the University of California in Los Angeles) as a guest lecturer, in 1995. The class was filled with Arab and Iranian American students and they were all very interested in works about identity, as well as, in finding out about their cultures or their parents. Almost none of them could speak Arabic or Farsi, but they were just really eager to learn. It was very inspiring and energized, and that was what pushed her to start writing the novel (Shalal-Esa 4-6).

Crescent was about a woman called Sirine who was an Iraqi-American. She occupied a job of chef in an Arabic restaurant in Los Angeles called Um-Nadia's café and she was in love with an Iraqi immigrant professor "Hanif", who was somehow mysterious. Hanif taught linguistics at UCLA. The novel explored along with love and food; the question of identity and exile which was one of Diana Abu Jaber's literary obsessions. How when you left your home country, you did not really know what would happen to you. What an incredible

³ Rev. of *Arabian Jazz*, by Diana Abu Jaber. *Publishers Weekly Reviews* 12 April. 1993: p 45.

experience and journey it was and how for a lot of people it could have been a beginning of an identity loss and loneliness, it is said that: “When we walk away from home, we fall in love with our sadness”. And that’s what the reader will surely notice it in the novel events and the personalities of the characters (Shalal-Esa 4-6).

Moreover, Abu Jaber welcomed the reader inside spice-scented, fragrant rooms where families gathered for comfort, sharing family traditions and hopes for the future. The characters struggled to understand cultural and ideological differences in a world made smaller by means of communication, yet obscured by the barriers of language and tradition. An antidote to reader confusion; *Crescent* is a rich; enthusiastic experience; one that felt the reader to satiety; like a Middle-Eastern banquet topped off with vanilla ice cream for dessert; the perfect combination of the unexpected and the familiar. Blending cultural diversity and the daily banality of life in an urban American city, this talented author invited us to a bountiful buffet of humanity, a magnificent multi-cultural feast.

Identity concept was always unease spot, especially for immigrants and exiled people; it often carried within it the feelings of loneliness, confusion, instability, and most importantly the sense of lost and non-belonging to anything or anyone. Diana Abu Jaber was one of the stunning writers, who challenged the silence surrounding that spot to create masterpieces like *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent...* Her second novel *Crescent*, which is the focus of this thesis smartly managed to show how a person could find his identity through three different sides that were effortlessly found in our lives. The first side would be the people who we had in our lives and the relationships that we developed with them and the way their lives could influence ours, which in this case represented by Sirine’s life and its relationships with the other like: Hanif, her uncle, or Um-Nadia.... Another effecting side was the place or the environment; the environment that the individual belonged to or had grown up in brought a sense of who they were in the world and what identity they were belonging to. Um-Nadia

café and the uncle's home were examples of such places. Lastly, the history of an individual could influence their identity in a negative or positive way, but no matter what, it still had a great role in shaping the individual's identity, for example, in the novel Sirine's memories of Iraq and her dead parents, and Hanif's past had shaped their lives deeply.

This work is conducted through analytical style and endeavors to depict cues in Diana Abu Jabber's novel *Crescent* that showed how the characters' identity in the exile was misplaced from their lives and how the events gradually helped them to overcome many obstacles that prevented them from discovering their true selves. Therefore, the research uses two main theories; the psychoanalytic theory and the feminist theory. First, the psychoanalytic theory analyses the psychological state of the characters in relation to their past traumas, bad experiences and sad memories. Second, the feminist theory describes female and male characters' problems concerning their social, politic, and economic relations, and connects them to the analytical views of the identity problems that the female characters suffer from.

The research is prearranged into three chapters. The first chapter that is entitled "Identity in Arab American Literature" presents an overview of the question of identity in various Arab American literary works. Also, it starts a prolific discussion about the relationship between Arab American women and identity issues. The second chapter is entitled "Sirine exploring her Arab Identity". It analyzes the identity of Sirine, the protagonist of the novel, which was affected by her love to Hanif, in addition to her passion for food and how it helped her discover her true self. At last, there is a discussion on how the characters' past causes their identity confusion. The last chapter that is entitled "Reformation of Home in the Exile" shows the characters' integration into the American society and the end of their struggling path to maintain their Arabness.

Diana Abu Jaber' works were very rich in content and message, but they had in common a desire to articulate Arab American identity with all of its complexities. Through Diana's works and particularly her second novel *Crescent*, the research depicts the contest of Arab American invisibility, silence, and the negotiation and responses to the perceptions of Arab Americans in the mainstream of American society. Moreover, this work focuses on some cases related to the literary contribution of Arab American authors (males and females); and their works which challenged and redefined both the boundaries of American identity and the limits of the Arab American literary canon.

Chapter one: Identity in Arab American Literature

Arab American community, shaped by a century long history of immigration, was remarkably diverse (Majaj, “Arab-American Literature” 1). It included different Arabs from different countries and through different stages of generation development. But this diversity complicated the assessment of what constituted “Arab American” identity. Arab Americans who spoke no English were primarily identified with the “Arab” side of their heritage, and those who spoke no Arab were primarily identified by the American side (Majaj, “Arab-American Literature” 1). This caused a matter of confusion and lost among the Arab American in the host society.

Through time this issue was raised constantly and was almost the base of every Arab American literary work. At first, the Arab American writers used this issue to identify their Arab American true identity, and to clear the misunderstanding that was built upon them in the American society. But later and after 9/11 things changed dramatically, the writers found themselves raising the issue for the purpose of defending rather than defining.

For that, this chapter discusses the formation of the Arab American identity. In addition, it presents background information about Arab immigrants in the American society; and the events following their arrival. Moreover, it includes a discussion about the women’s contribution to the Arab American literature.

I.1 The Nature of Arab American Identity

The Arab American literary tradition goes back to the early years of the 20th century where Al Rabita Al Qalamiyah or the New York Pen League was created. This organization, familiarly known as Al-Mahjar, or “immigrant poets,” was composed of writers from Lebanon and Syria who often wrote in Arabic and collaborated with translators of their works. Ameen Rihani, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Mikhail Naimy and Elia Abu Madi served as

the major figures in this period, and often were and still credited with developing an interest in immigrant writing in general (Majaj, “Arab-American Literature” 2).

Many scholars found Gibran’s works deeply philosophical and elementary, in his day he kept company with the greats of U.S. literature among them poet Robinson Jeffers, playwright Eugene O’Neill and novelist Sherwood Anderson. Gibran’s work, *The Prophet* (1923), had been a top seller for more than a half-century, and in much tabulation, the second most purchased book in the United States after the Bible. It is a book of prose poetry that commonly found in gift shops and frequently quoted at weddings or any occasion where uplifting 'spiritual' thoughts were required, the work had never been a favorite of intellectuals, yet its author Gibran was a genuine artist and scholar whose wisdom was hard-earned.

The Prophet started with a man named Almustafa living on an island called Orphalese. The locals considered him something of a sage, but he was from elsewhere, and had waited twelve years for the right ship to take him home. From a hill above the town, he saw his ship coming into the harbor, and realized his sadness at leaving the people he had come to know. The elders of the city asked him not to leave. He was asked to tell of his philosophy of life before his leaving, to speak his truth to the crowds gathered. What he had to say formed the basis of the book.

The Prophet provided timeless spiritual wisdom on a range of subjects, including giving, eating and drinking, clothes, buying and selling, crime and punishment, laws, teaching, time, pleasure, religion, death, beauty and friendship. Corresponding to each chapter was evocative drawings by Gibran himself. For example, when he spoke about freedom, he explained that the longing for freedom was in itself a kind of slavery. When people spoke of the need to be free, often it was a searching for an exit to get away from (*The Prophet* 30).

Taken as a whole, Gibran's book was a metaphor for the mystery of life. We came into the world and go back to where we came from. As the prophet prepared himself to board his ship, it was clear that his words refer not to his journey across the seas, but to the world he came from before he was born. His life now seems to him like a short dream. The book suggested that we should be glad of the experience of coming into the world, even if it seemed full of pain, because after death, we will see that life had a pattern and a purpose, and that what seemed to us now as 'good' and 'bad' will be appreciated without judgment as good for our souls. This novel might be a very good lesson to the exiled people, living in a city isolated from their native land as the protagonist "Almustafa", on how to accept their destiny and to never let themselves bent down to the hardship of their new life.

The identity crisis in this novel was believed to be a great representation of Gibran's identity confusion, they even called it the "wounded autobiography" (Israel 17). Gibran's observations, written to his Egyptian-Lebanese friend May Ziadeh, declared that:

As for The Prophet — this is a book which I thought of writing a thousand years ago, but I did not get any of its chapters down on paper until the end of last year. What can I tell you about this prophet? He is my rebirth and my first baptism, the only thought in me that will make me worthy to stand in the light of the sun. For this prophet had already "written" me before I attempted to "write" him, and created me before I created him, and had silently set me on a course to follow him for seven thousand leagues before he appeared in front of me to dictate his wishes and inclinations. ("Blue Flame" 23)

The "thought of writing a thousand years ago" and the assertion that the "prophet", as his "rebirth" and "first baptism", made him "worth to stand in the light of the sun" showed how the book became the autobiography of an individual "wounded" (Israel 17) by displacement and dislocation. Therefore, the "prophet", he felt, "created me before I created him" ("Blue

Flame” 23). There was no point in analyzing these words from the theoretical premises of one’s intentional fallacy for Gibran had made his position very clear. It was because of this “politics of position” that he wrote that Almustafa had “silently set me on a course to follow him for seven thousand leagues before he appeared in front of me to dictate his wishes and inclinations”(“Blue Flame” 23).

Same thing with Ameen Rihani; he considered by all as “father of Arab American Literature”. His contributions which mostly celebrated in his novel, *The Book of Khalid* (1911), written in verse, which dealt directly with the immigrant experience had a huge credit and appreciation of the reader. *The book of Khalid* which was the first English novel in the Arab American literature told a story of two boys, Khalid and Shakib who immigrated to the United States from Lebanon at the time where Lebanon was a province of the Ottoman Empire. These two boys were very intellectual and of a solid opinion, which eventually engaged them in numerous problems even in their homeland. Generally, the novel was about reconciling the culture and the values of East and West. It constantly reflected the struggle of the Arabs in both, their homeland and their settling place, with a modest admiring toward the American way of living and hoped for the Arab countries to follow its stream.

These two writers were considered as the main reason for the improvement of Arab Americans Literature along with many writers from Al-Mahjar; in a time where Arab immigrants in the United States lived for a long time in the shadow; and their presence had no value. They worked on bridging the gaps between East and West in their writings. In all Arab American literature stages, Arab Americans writers had kept reflecting their connection to their countries of origin; and had indicated their problems as living in both Arab and American worlds. For the most part, their literature was a depiction of their problems and challenges related to their identity (Al-Momani 8).

The term “Arab American” generally referred to the “US citizens or residents who traced their ancestry to countries in the Middle East and share the heritage of a common language and culture” (Chelala 417). So, according to Chelala; Arab American was a term coined to refer to the immigrants who came from different Arab countries and cultures, and they spoke both Arab and English languages. In general, Arab American was a name created as a result of political and social unrest in the homeland of the immigrants who later helped in the existing of new and subsequent generations who were full of confusion about their identity.

The Arabs immigration process toward the United States of America had known three main waves. The first wave was between 1885 and 1945. It consisted of Christian minority mainly males who came from Syria and Lebanon (Kabir 13). The second wave was between 1945 and 1967. This wave is characterized by an increase in the number of women and Muslims, as well as the significant political and demographic changes, especially after the negative traces of the World War One and Two, and the decolonization movements that the East witnessed and led to many people to choose immigration as a way of salvation. The third wave started in 1967 until today. This last wave was the greatest in number and diversity due to political and economic situations, people were leaving their homeland due to the political tension in the East area which caused hard living circumstances like the war in Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, and South Lebanon... (Naber, “Ambiguous Insiders” 37-61).

Reasons of the immigration of Arabs to the United States of America varied depending on the time of immigration. The reasons behind the very first wave of immigration were mainly poverty and famine that were caused by the blockade of the Syrian coast after World War II. The immigrants saw the United States of America as a great economic opportunity. One more reason was the political oppression and war in the Arab world (Naff 82). Similar reasons were associated with the second and third waves of immigration. As in

the second wave, most of the immigrants were Muslims seeking better economic condition and attempting to escape from the political crises that formed as a consequence of the creation of an Israeli state and the subsequent Arab Israeli war in 1948(Al-Momani 35). In the third wave, immigrants were in need for economic relief and an exit to escape political conflicts in their countries of origins, such as the Palestinian Israeli conflict, the 1967and1973 Arab Israeli wars, and the Israeli Invasion and occupation of the Southern Lebanon in 1982... (Al-Momani 38).

Mainly, the reasons that forced the Arabs to reside in the States were that they were looking for a better life with the maximum human rights (Naber, "Ambiguous Insiders" 37-61). Recent immigrants fled to the United States because of the war and the intense situation in their countries.

The immigration had huge impacts on the lives of the immigrants. The process of leaving everything behind and starting a new life from scratch was not an easy path to go through. Arabs faced many difficulties when they wanted to mingle in the American society. The early wave felt that they needed to change their language into English and their names into American names. For example, Yusuf would become Joseph or even Joe (Naber, "Ambiguous Insiders" 37-61). The Arab immigrants a while after settling in the United States of America, started forming family business. After the First World War, the social and economical status of the immigrants changed. They went from lower-class and poor-income neighborhoods to middle-class neighborhoods. They also started to acquire the American qualities such as the language, the culture, and the social attitudes. The immigrants started to melt in the United States of America and their Arabic culture started to dilute; therefore they started to form communities in order to maintain the Arab identity for those who were born in the United States of America (McCarus 25-32).

The Arab American society in itself was a very diverse community. There were some who spoke only English, some who spoke only Arabic, and some who spoke both Arabic and English fluently. This complexity made the Arab American identity a very complex identity which could not be put in a single mold and could not have one specific definition (Majaj, "The Hyphenated Author" 69). Majaj as well argued that Arab Americans were highly concerned with the Arab world and they were involved in everything that was related to it including its politics, language and heritage. Some of the Arab American community thought of those who did not engage in all the aspects of being an Arab (politics, language, and heritage) were betraying their origins. On the other hand, some Arab Americans argued that there should be an understanding according to the "American frameworks of assimilation and multiculturalism" (Majaj, "The Hyphenated Author" 70). All this leads to a creation of something new and different which consisted of both Arab and American cultures which led to the formation of an Arab American identity.

Arab Americans were highly confused once they were asked about their homeland. They did not know where was home exactly. They were never sure to which land they belonged to. Some had been highly attached to their homeland, yet they preferred to live in the United States of America, others were trying their best to fit into the community of the United States of America, yet it would be a very difficult process to consider it as their home. The short story *Wherever I Am* (1994) by Mary Salome discussed the confusion that Arab Americans went through. In the story, the unnamed protagonist felt confused about her identity and about the place which she would be belonging to. Therefore, she decided to go on a four month travel in order to discover her true self. She went to Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus. She found out that she could not fit in any of the previously mentioned countries, and concluded that she was never going to fit anywhere no matter how much she tried to fit in. The protagonist said:

for communities where I might feel at home. Identity is a complicated subject and it is always hard for me to say who I am in a few words. I identify myself as a living being, a human being, a woman, a lesbian, a Syrian/Irish-American, and a feminist. My feeling that there is rarely room for me to claim all of who I am increased on this trip. The most noticeable parts of my identity were those which made me different from the people around me and the people usually viewed these differences as negative. (Salome 87)

In the previous quotation, the protagonist portrayed the struggles and difficulties of each and every Arab American citizen; because she obviously tried to fit in each community she went to, yet she did not get accepted because her differences were always highlighted. Later on, she argued on how hard it was to fit in when everything and everyone around her indicated that she could never be in the right place. All of this applied to both Middle East and United States of America. When she went to the Middle East, everyone highlighted her broken language and her non-Arab identity. She kept being told that, “You don’t belong, you do not fit, you are not welcome, and you do not exist” (Salome 88).

There is a phase in which every immigrant usually goes through, which is “in-betweenness”. Homi Bhabha, an anthropologist and a comparative symbologist, defined “in-betweenness” as, “a cultural heredity in which it constituted the point of exchange between life and drama. It was the channel connecting self and world, subject and object, old and new” (Bhabha 96). We concluded that the term “in-betweenness” was a series of actions that helped people to break boundaries and to transfer from one phase to another (from merely an Arab to Arab American).

In other words, Homi Bhabha argued that cultural identities could not be assigned, “to pre-given, irreducible, scripted, a historical, cultural trait that defines the conventions of ethnicity” (Bhabha 98). Moreover, Bhabha suggested that there had to be a kind of

negotiation between different cultural identities, in order to produce mutual representation between the different cultures. Indeed, Arab Americans lived in the in-between space where they fluctuated between their Arab culture and their American culture. As discussed earlier, Arab Americans tried so hard to embrace their Arab heritage, and yet they probably would not fully belong to the American culture; because it excluded and eliminated them due to racial and ethnic reasons. This was also applicable to the Arab culture; Arab Americans were excluded because of their language and other reasons. No doubt, cultural “in-betweenness” was a problem in which every Arab American struggled with, and which was definitely reflected in the Arab American literature.

We follow the protagonist in a second short story which was also considered to be a semi-biography *Homecoming* (1994) in which May Munn showed us the confusion and the culture shock the protagonist went through when she decided to come back home from Texas to Palestine after five years of absence. She came back to Ramallah comparing what she remembered and the things she saw in that current time. Things had changed massively not only because of the destruction war had caused, but also because she herself changed a lot. She was no longer just a Palestinian; she was now a Palestinian American. May Munn was quite clever in the way she had shown us as readers how Palestinian Americans felt when they came back home. She had shown us the way their views about home and identity changed, “Once, in this place of memory, shops opened mornings and afternoons, stone walls and buildings were free of politics, and instead of gunfire, the honking of cars disrupted equilibrium in the streets” (Munn 94). According to this quote, we get to see the way the protagonist remembered Ramallah five years ago. She showed us how peaceful and appealing it used to be, yet when she came back, she realized the harsh reality of people were living in. She recognized how everything had changed, including the innocent kids in her family, who had become mature because of what war had done to them.

To conclude the concept of “in-betweenness”, Munn and Salome had done a remarkable job in which they were able to deliver to us as readers the feeling of confusion every Arab American struggle with, and how they felt that their hybridity was an obstacle to their belonging (especially in the 9/11). Therefore, they never belonged to a certain culture and they lived their lives fluctuating in between the two cultures.

Moreover, and after the bombing of the twin towers in 9/11, Arab Americans found themselves gripped to another complicated situation that was known nowadays by the name of Islamophobia⁴. This latter reinforced both the negative and the positive ways that Arab Americans were perceived by Americans (Howell and Andrew 443). The Arab Americans cultivated “an identity that is both “here” and “there”, they lived in the United States of America, yet their minds and hearts most probably were “there” with the Arabs and Muslims. Arab Americans started to isolate themselves from political Arabic communities; they had to apologize for things that they had not done and things that did not even represented them but were associated with them for political reasons. Arab Americans needed to prove their loyalty to the United States of America while they were being attacked by other Americans (Howell and Andrew 445).

The same way 9/11 reinforced the negative attitudes towards Arab Americans, it reinforced the positive ones as well. It had been noticed that the mainstream media started representing the Arab Americans in a sympathetic way. For example, some Arabs would be presented in a series as discriminated against but at the same time there was an American that defended the Arabs and showed other “Americans” how a person should judge upon the character of the other not the race, color, or religion (Al-Sultany 204-205). Such events and such reactions from the American street led to nothing but a confused Arab American

⁴ The term “Islamophobia” was first introduced as a concept in a 1991 Runnymede Trust Report and defined as “unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims.”

identity. Arab Americans were puzzled about who they were and what they were considered as. Were they considered as Arabs, as Americans, as Muslims, or as Arab Americans? They started to question their origins and whether they should hold on to them or to the American part of their life. Some of them prefer to defend Arabs and to hold on to their “Arabness”, others decided to neglect their “Arabness” and to hold on to their “Americanness”, and some chose to consider themselves as Arab Americans, while others remained puzzled not knowing what to do.

Arab Americans formed a new race and new ethnicity, which did not exist before; therefore they had a sense of confusion and not belonging. Hybrid identities will always fluctuate between cultures until they found their own space which they will feel comfortable in. This space will be found only when they both accept their mixed cultural identity and get accepted for it as well.

I.2 Arab American Female Writers

Arab American female writers struggled remarkably to have an advanced place in the body of the Arab American writings. They used their writings as a means to defy marginalization, racism, oppression, and exile. They positively connected themselves to fellow Arab American writers, old and new comers. They tried to negotiate their hyphenated identities and resisted stereotypes and misconceptions about female writers in the Arab communities that had been depicted by American popular culture and society. Moreover, Arab American female writers challenged the sense of loss, displacement, and nostalgia. They spoke loudly to express their ideas, desires, emotions, and strategies for survival through hundreds of books and different kinds of social media. Their writings essentially aimed at defining themselves, refusing all kinds of discriminations, criticizing the war, supporting the oppressed people in the homeland, rejecting domination of the western culture and presenting proudly their Arab heritage (Noman 502).

It was worth mentioning that female writers from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine had effectively contributed to enrich the Arab American literature and received critical treatment. This acknowledgment was not only for the creativity and productivity of Arab women writers, but also to the commitment by publishers to produce and to distribute their works, mentioning few of these writers, Diana Abu-Jaber, Mohja Kahf, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye, Mona Simpson, Laila Halaby, and many others (Noman 498).

From the above mentioned writers, the feminist, scholar Mohja Kahf, a Syrian-American poet and novelist proposed that Arab women immigrants had been unable to criticize their community in the United States and the Arab homelands without being accused of cultural betrayal. She argued that Arab American women had different relationships with the Arab homelands of their families and their homes in the United States; they still until now counting obstacles created by specific stereotypes projected from within and outside their communities (Cooke 145). Also, Amal Amireh and Lisa Suheir Majaj had discussed the cultural tension Arab women faced when they spoke of their own experiences. Those observations were based on their personal experiences as Arab feminist scholars in the United States. According to their research, Arab women's criticism of orientalist stereotypes of Arab women had also been viewed as defensiveness and raised questions about their self-defined position as feminists (Amireh and Majaj 1).

Moreover, the publication in 1994 of Joanna Kadi's⁵ edited collection, *Food for Our Grandmothers*, writing by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists, was often cited as a "landmark" moment in Arab American literary history (Majaj, boundaries 8). Kadi saw the

⁵ Joanna Kadi (1958-) is a poet, essayist, and activist born to a working-class Lebanese-American family. She is best known for her essay collection *Thinking Class: Notes from a Cultural Worker* (1996). She is one of the founding authors of the concept of the intersection of oppression, important to many feminists whose identities cross more than one boundary: for example, she has interrogated classism in the queer and gay-positive communities and anti-Arab prejudice among feminists.

book as creating space for Arab-American feminist voices and as empowering Arab-American women to create alternative maps to those of mainstream American discourse. The selections, which addressed issues of identity, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, political activism, race, and class, charted the quest for belonging and the search for a home capable of encompassing the voices of Arab-American women from a variety of backgrounds (Noman 501).

One of the most important things about *Food for Our Grandmothers* (1994) was that it made it clear that the concerns of Arab American women were not just about “gender oppression.” In fact, stereotypes of gender oppression within so-called inherently misogynistic Arab societies and communities had been among the most unbearable forces Arab-American women have had to confront. As Evelyn Shakir ⁶ discussed this matter by declaring that:

According to popular belief, all Arab women can be divided into two categories. Either they are shadowy nonentities, swathed in black from head to foot, or they are belly dancers—seductive, provocative, and privy to exotic secrets of lovemaking. The two images, of course, are finally identical, adding up to a statement that all Arab women are, in one sense or another, men’s instruments or slaves. (39)

The impact of such stereotypes was political as well as cultural. The portrayal of Arab men as inherently patriarchal and oppressive of Arab women became just one more way of positioning Arab culture as inferior to Western culture. This created a double tie for Arab-American feminists. On the one hand, they must struggle against the notion that they needed “liberating” from their own culture (as if western society offered a solution), and found difficulty in simply claiming their identities with pride. On the other hand, they often found

⁶ Evelyn Shakir (1939-2010) a daughter of Lebanese immigrants to the United States, and a pioneer in the study of Arab American Literature and the author of *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* 1997.

that they had to hold back their feminism in order to claim a sense of home in their Arab communities and avoid the charge of community betrayal, especially at times when these communities are under siege (Noman 501).

For Jordanian American novelist Diana Abu Jaber, she explored the dilemma of identity confusion more fully in her novels, *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent*, which featured her protagonists with Arab fathers and an American mother. Stymied by the complexities of their mixed identities and the inability of those around them to understand that complexity, the protagonists struggled to find homes for themselves between Arab and American cultures. For both novels, issue of identity was expressed through the issue of race, as they experienced classifications such as “white” or “not white” as a form of violence. Jemorah, the half Jordanian, half American protagonist of *Arabian Jazz*, found the racial tensions around Arab-American identity brought to an increase in an interchange with her employer, Portia, who considered the “good white blood” running in Jemorah’s veins to have been contaminated by her Arab father who “[isn’t] any better than Negroes” (*Arabian Jazz* 294). For Portia, this Arab “taint” (*Arabian Jazz* 294) was nonetheless recoverable into a framework of white ethnicity; lipstick and hair lightener will help make her more of an “American.” Recoiling from such bigotry, Jemorah turned instead to her Arab identity. But the novel suggested that reverting to the other side of the hyphen was not a solution either: rather, what needed was the ability to move with fluidity between worlds. Similarly, in the novel *Crescent*, the Iraqi American protagonist Sirine was distanced from her Arab identity and in search of a sense of self. Viewed as simply white because of her skin color, “... with her skin so pale it has the bluish cast of skim milk, her wild blond head of hair, and her sea-green eyes” (*Crescent* 03), she experienced a constant sense of dislocation and homelessness. The novel charted her search for a sense of homecoming to the complexity of her self-hood, a search drawn through her relationship with an Iraqi in exile.

In addition to the above writers, there was one last writer who is worth mentioning, Laila Halaby. She was born in Beirut to a Jordanian father and an American mother. She grew up mostly in Arizona, but had lived for a short of time on the East and West Coasts, the Midwest, and in Jordan and Italy. Her education includes an undergraduate degree in Italian and Arabic, and two Masters Degrees, in Arabic Literature and in Counseling. She currently works as an Outreach Counselor for the University of Arizona's College of Public Health. *My Name on His Tongue*, was her most recent publication, was a memoir in poems. Her novels *West of the Jordan* (2003) (winner of a PEN/Beyond Margins Award) and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) (a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Authors selection; also named by the Washington Post as one of the 100 best works of fiction for 2007) were both published by Beacon Press. Besides fiction and poetry, she was a very obsessed by writing stories for children.

Her first novel *West of the Jordan*, Halaby started to focus on one large Palestinian family, tracing its various adventures through the eyes of four female cousins: Mawal, Hala, Khadija, and Soraya. Mawal, the only cousin who had never left her village, lived a simple life, and thought of her American relations as either foolish or crazy. The other three had lived in both the West Bank and America, and were very confused by their teenage experiences, mostly because they had to navigate the mores of one place while still respecting those of the other (Al-Momani 2-3).

On top of that, the three girls who now living in America were having radically different experiences. Hala was ready to start college, and excited about it, but was feeling guilty because her father wanted her to come home and get married. Khadija was a nerd among her peers, who had no idea she was being abused at home. Pigeonholed as a "bad girl" by her family, Soraya gladly played the part, pushing the envelope on sex, drinking, dancing, and other behaviors inappropriate to Muslims.

The overriding theme of the novel was that it was not easy to be an Arab American woman, and that if you wanted to live life on your own terms, you would be better prepared for a lot of struggles. Through the novel, Halaby was trying to give voice to cultural experiences that many Western readers will be unfamiliar with, and to represent more understanding of the challenges immigrants face when they arrive to the United State of America.

Moreover, her second novel *Once in a Promised Land* was also one of her best novels that depicted the challenges of the immigrants in America through the experiences of a couple, Jassim and Salwa, who left the deserts of their native Jordan for those of Arizona, each chasing their own dreams of opportunity and freedom. Although the two lived far from ground zero, they could not escape the nationwide fallout from 9/11. Jassim, a hydrologist, believed passionately in his mission to keep the water tables from dropping and made water accessible to all people, but his work was threatened by an FBI or Federal Bureau of Investigation witch hunt for domestic terrorists. Salwa, a Palestinian woman who was struggling to put down roots in an inhospitable climate, became pregnant against her husband's wishes but later on lost the baby. When Jassim killed a teenage boy in a terrible accident and Salwa became hopelessly entangled with a shady young American, their tenuous lives in exile and their fragile marriage began to unravel. This intimate account of two parallel lives was an achingly honest look at what it was destined to straddle cultures, to be viewed with suspicion, and to struggle to find safe haven other (Lloyd 2- 18).

Halaby's works took many elements from the Arabian folklore and the western fairy tale which indicated the search for home and identity, and the universal hunger of the soul for love. The title of Halaby's second novel was reminiscent of the beginning of a traditional, Western fairy tale. Also in this novel, she blended her use of Western fairy tale traditions with Arabic folktale conventions. First of all, she prefaced her novel with "kan / ya ma kan /

fee qadeem az-zamaan”, a common opening to Arabic folktales similar to “Once upon a time” and meaning “They say there was or there wasn’t in olden times”. Moreover, early in her novel, Halaby, through Salwa’s grandmother, told a traditional Palestinian children’s tale entitled “Nus Nsays,” which could be translated into English as “half of a halving” or “half-halvsies”. The story spoke about the ghula; a character similar to a witch or a hag in Western fairy tales, and when Salwa asked her grandmother whom the ghula in the story was representing, her grandmother did not offer an answer, although, as Halaby’s novel progresses, the correlation between the inner and outer story became clear: Nus Nsays might represent Salwa on behalf of the Arab American population as a whole, and the ghula embodied America itself and all its temptations of affluence (Lloyd 24-25). Finally, Halaby was and still considered to be one of the top female writers in the Arab American literature who made her feminist voice heard.

Arab American women writers had continued to expand their exploration of the combination of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and politics in their writing. Relatively, discussions of Arab American feminism was built to shatter down stereotypes of gender oppression and identity, exile and belonging, and shows feminism to be a comprehensive concept as it opened its border to multiple subjects that were not seen before within the feminism side. Thus, Arab American feminist writers want to build a sense of solidarity with American male writers on the basis of mutual understanding and respect for Arab American literature and efforts to liberate themselves from the offense of betrayal that the American and the Arab society and literature accused them with it.

Chapter Two: Sirine Exploring her Arab Identity

The change in the definition of identity –or the understanding of identity – was predictable for those who spent decades in a new environment; moreover, some environments encouraged this kind of transformation in identity towards more assimilation outlook. This idea, surprisingly, was found to describe the exact situation of the female characters of Diana Abu Jaber’s second novel *Crescent* (2003).

The female characters presented in *Crescent* defied the stereotypes normally associated with Muslim or Arab women. They were in full control of their lives, personally, professionally, and sexually. These women were able to challenge the dominant stereotypes in their Arab society. For that, their mission to find their true selves was a very hard task to accomplish. For the male characters, things were a bit different because they were aware of what was happening in their lives and that they were living far away from home, which this later on made them living in misery; as their exile and their identity confusion was a result of their past in their homeland.

According to the mentioned above, this chapter focuses on analyzing the female protagonist “Sirine” and how she was affected by her love to Hanif; who represented another important and interesting character who deserve attention. Moreover, there is a detailed description of the role of “food” that helped Sirine to realize her true self. At the end, there is also a comprehensive depiction of how Sirine’s past can be the cause of her identity confusion.

II.1 Sirine’s Identity Affected by Her Love Story

Sirine was thirty-nine years old and single, she worked as a chef in Um-Nadia café; a popular Middle Eastern restaurant located near the University of California in Los Angeles. Throughout the novel, Sirine physical description was given shortly as the following, “... with her skin so pale it has the bluish cast of skim milk, her wild blond head of hair, and her

sea-green eyes” (*Crescent* 16). Generally, this description was so vague to make the reader build an image of her. Furthermore, Sirine was born to an Iraqi father and an American mother, her parents worked for the International Red Cross and were absent for much of her childhood. They died while on a mission in Africa when Sirine was nine. After the death of her parents, Sirine was raised by her Uncle (his name was not mentioned in the novel), a university professor and irrepressible storyteller whose tales were interrupted the novel’s story.

So basically, Sirine’s relationship with home “Iraq” did not exist at all, even when her Uncle was telling her the stories of Arabic people and their experiences; we could say that there were no signs that she grasped the point behind his stories as could the reader grasp it clearly after reading the novel. Besides, Sirine did not know how to speak Arabic, and there was no clear statement about whether she was a Muslim or no. Also, her personality was quite isolated as she had no concept of any place outside Los Angeles or any idea of what is happening in the world, her routine life was limited between two places her home and the restaurant, so, her personality was shaped in a defensive way and this according to Freud Sigmund believed to be the quality of an “Armor Character” (27-84), a character that prefer to take the protective and the safe position in a known environment rather than the insecurity and the stimulus of the outside world. What is important here was that Sirine the character was really ragged from her roots, but this state might be remarked as the state before Hanif al-Ayad appearance on the scene.

Hanif Al-Ayad, known to his friends as Han, was a new professor in the University of California. He was described throughout the novel as an attractive and intellectual person, who was surrounded and followed by people, especially by two minor characters who were: Nathan an American photographer who was traveling in the middle-eastern area a lot and a big admirer of Han; also there is Rana, an attractive Muslim woman in one of Han’s classes

and also she was very attracted to him as a man. Precisely; he was described as the perfect person who held the perfect Arabic genes, “the white of his teeth, the silky dram of skin, cocoa-bean brown. He’s well built, tall, and strong” (Crescent 19). His personality according to Sigmund psychoanalytical character analysis can be classified as “the Resistant Character”; a character that:

expresses itself, not in the content of the material, but in the formal aspects of the general behavior, the manner of talking, of the gait, and facial expression and typical attitudes such as smiling, deriding, haughtiness, over-correctness, the manner of the politeness. (27-84)

All of these qualities above described exactly the character of Han as the novel did:

Look at him—look at that face. What a face. Like Ulysses, right?

Look at that expression. He’s an Iraqi classic just like your old uncle.

Hanif shakes his head and smiles a big, squared-off smile, teeth bright against his toast-brown skin. (*Crescent* 23)

The love story between Han and Sirine developed slowly but the obvious thing that was shown throughout the novel was that they fell in love from the first sight but none of them admitted it at first. Before Han, Sirine was dating a lot of men, but none of them was of a serious matter to her; as if she was just playing around:

She’s always had more men in her life than she’s known what to do with. Um-Nadia says that attraction Sirine’s, special talent—a sort of magnetism deeper in her cells than basic beauty or charm. She’s never broken up with anyone, she just loses track of them, adding new men as she goes. Never, not for a single day since her second year in high school, has she been without a boyfriend or admirer of some sort, and she has never really, entirely given herself to any of them. (*Crescent* 28)

She was a very sociable girl with a lot of close friends. These include her employer, the café owner Um-Nadia, and Um-Nadia's daughter, Mireille and many other mainly costumers who really loved her and her cooking. Sirine's contented existence was disrupted when she introduced to Han by her Uncle. Sirine encountered Han as a customer in her restaurant as mentioned in the novel, "Hanif has come into the restaurant four times since arriving in town several weeks ago and her uncle keeps introducing him to Sirine, saying their names over and over, "Sirine, Hanif, Hanif, Sirine" (*Crescent* 15). After a while, they began seeing each other, and their relationship deepened gradually.

Things took an interesting turn when Sirine began to question Han's reasons for leaving Iraq, and his story about his origins. Sirine and Han had a small fight when she lost a scarf he gave her, which once belonged to his mother. When they were back together, he told her his story. As a young man, he befriended and had an affair with an American expatriate in Baghdad who arranged for him to have an overseas education. He explained how he decided not to return to Iraq after Hussein came to power. However, Sirine found evidence that this story may not be true. She found an enigmatic note in Han's apartment, apparently from a loved one. The note informed Han that his mother was ill and wished to see him, and also made a vague reference to a murder. Later, while attending an exhibition of the photographs Nathan took while in Iraq, Han had a strong reaction to a photo of a young Arab woman. Sirine's relationship with Han became strained, and she had a brief affair with Aziz a Syrian poet and friend to both Han and Sirine. Wracked by guilt, Sirine attempted to reconnect with Han. However, when she saw Rana wearing the scarf that she lost, Sirine caused a public scene and left in a hurry.

When Rana followed her to discuss the matter, Sirine learned that Han had not been entirely honest about why he left Iraq. When he returned to his family after completing school in Cairo, Han became involved in the resistance movement, protesting the Hussein

regime by writing for an underground newspaper. When the secret police arrested his family, Han escaped and fled the country, leaving his parents and siblings behind. Han suggested to Sirine that he was bearing in mind; returning to Iraq to see his mother, regardless of the consequences. When Han finished this confession, the couple spent the night in his apartment. Sirine awoke to a note from Han, telling her that he had left. She learned via her uncle that Han resigned his position at the University, and had left the country toward Iraq.

Sirine was quite understandably upset, but slowly began to adjust to life without her lover. Months go by with only one communication from Han, a letter written in a London airport, explaining his reasons for leaving and indicating that he might never return. Sirine continued to work at the Café and returned to her old routine. However, the novel concluded over a year after Han's departure. Sirine, at the Café, received a phone call from him. Actually, the love story's ending was very predictable as both of them were confused about their identity; according to Erikson, "intimacy between two people as a couple was only possible when each had developed a strong sense of identity separately" (12; ch. 9).

Through her relationship with Han, Sirine began to explore her Arab-American identity more than she ever known before. Han was represented as a person who stimulated the resting curiosity that Sirine was hiding about her original country, Iraq, which she forgot or intentionally ignored after her parents' death. As Sirine was getting closer to Han, she came to realize how starved he was for the sustenance of his homeland, he used to repeat: "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" (*Crescent* 106).

Slowly, she was gathering pieces of his tragic history, his escape from Iraq and his family's ghastly fate under Saddam Hussein. Even knowing she could not fill that void, she made an attempt, grasping after pieces of her father's Iraqi past, investigating Islam, "Han

answers Sirine's questions about Islam—she's curious, not having been raised with formal religion. He describes what the interior of a mosque looks like, its clean, open prayer hall...” (*Crescent* 49), and struggling to immerse herself in the political news she was always ignored. This image of how Sirine was trying to sympathy and to encourage Han was a kind of an attempt from Diana Abu Jaber to change the Americans' prejudice toward the Arab as terrorists who only knew the violent ways, “All we see on the TV or movies about Arabs is they're shooting someone, bombing someone, or kidnapping someone” (*Crescent* 129). In this novel, Sirine was put as a kind of Americanized character that held this prejudice thought as she never lived in Iraq and was raised her whole life in America. Also, Diana Abu Jaber tried to defend herself as a daughter of immigrant and the other who were just children of an immigrant from the offense of ignorance, carelessness, and unknowing to a lot of things that was related to the Arab world exactly as what was happening to Sirine in the novel:

“What is that?” she asks [Sirine] tentatively, pointing to the photograph. “What's happening there?” The student half-shrugs, so skinny she can see the knob of his shoulder through his thin shirt. “Just Saddam Hussein. Making an example... “It's possible. Or it might have been something else. He has all kinds of reasons, they come to him or he can make them up at will.” He glances at the photograph again and shrugs. “This is nothing special.” “Nothing special?” He pushes up his glasses once again, but this time looks at her very carefully and closely. “What do you care?” he says finally. She's taken aback; without thinking, she moves one hand to her chest. “Of course I care. Why do you say that?” He reopens the newspaper, folding over the front page so she can't see it. “You're American,” he says. (*Crescent* 114)

Also, and through her love experience with Han, Sirine developed a complicated friendship with a lot of people. Rana, Han's student and a friend of his was one of them. Though, there was a jealousy of Rana's friendship with Han, Sirine developed a friendship of

a kind with Rana in order to explore her own identity. At a meeting of Muslim women at the University of California, Los Angeles, Sirine came to know about Rana's tragic experience as she was a victim of a compulsory marriage when she was too young:

She shrugs [Rana]. "That doesn't matter. For one thing, I'm married." Sirine drops her hands. "You're married?" "When I was thirteen. My parents arranged it. And my mother's an American. Married me to my rich second cousin Fareed..., Fareed was a total control freak. He had closed-circuit cameras installed in all the rooms, including the bathroom, so he could keep an eye on me even when he was away." "You're kidding." "Oh." She flops one hand at Sirine. "That's just the start. He had locked iron gates around the house and iron bars on the windows—so no one could climb in, he said. But of course, then I couldn't get out. There was even a lock on the telephone. Servants had to bring me my food by sliding the plates under the bars. He didn't trust anyone with a key besides himself." "How absolutely horrible." (*Crescent* 117-118)

This somehow made Sirine felt sad for her and at the same time pushed her to explore ways to integrate her father's Iraqi heritage with her American identity, and Rana intellectual, political, self-possessed, and devoted Muslim revealed her one way of doing so. Also; and through the meeting, Sirine got the chance to know more political and radical thoughts that some of the audience apprehended about America and the Arab world relationship from the similarities, differences, and problems.

Moreover, through Sirine's relationship with Han and Rana and her previous love affairs, one could notice that Abu Jaber gave the reader a good insight to the situation of Arab women in the Arab society and the Arab American Society. For the Arab American society, we saw that Sirine, Mireille, and even Rana were described as free, independent women who had multiple relationships with men without any constrained rules or patriarchal control.

While for the Arab society, we saw that the novel pointed to the Arab women by the concept

of “good Arab girls”, “He nods, kisses her twice, and strokes his thumb over her cheekbone. “So this is what it is to date a good Arab girl”. “Good Arab girls don’t date,” she says [Sirine]”(*Crescent* 69), according to Naber the concept interpreted as a marker of community boundaries and the notion of a morally superior “Arab culture” in comparison to concepts of “American girls” and “American culture.” It is an Idealized femininity concept that built upon the figure of women as the upholder of values, and an ideal of family and heterosexual marriage (“Arab American” 8). Also, the novel mentions one of the stereotype of Muslim or Arab women, which portrayed them as subservient to men, “... usual stereotypes—you know, the sheikh with the twenty virgins, all that stuff” (*Crescent* 177), this stereotype was only mentioned in a quotation to show the American thinking about Arab women but *Crescent*’s characters were a way different from it; as they were more liberated and a little bit influenced by the American society.

Additionally, Sirine friendship with Nathan, the photographer and the big admirer of Han helped her to realize how bad things were happening in Iraq as she came to know from Nathan about his experience when he lived there, and how he felt so lonely and so strange in that country, it was basically the same as what any immigrant could feel:

“I used to read about Baghdad in the Arabian Nights,” he says [Nathan]. “It was all magic and adventurers. I thought that’s what it was like there. And when I got older Baghdad turned into the stuff about war and bombs—the place on the TV set. I never thought about there being any kind of normal life there”... So she keeps her eyes closed as Nathan talks about Eastern domes beside Western multistory buildings, and ancient ruins and contemporary ruins from the war with Iran and then bombs from America, missile attacks that left huge smoking holes in the earth... (*Crescent* 207)

Parallel to his story; his friends’ Sirine and Han had to live the same things. Han’s time abroad changed and challenged his identity as an Iraqi Arab, and Sirine, growing up as the

child of an immigrant in a community of immigrants, sometimes, had trouble integrating her Arab and American identities.

To conclude, Sirine and Han' love story was drawn perfectly and naturally to meet the reality of the immigrants and what they experienced in the host country. Sirine represented the honest image of the mixed race and immigrant women living in America, she was represented as fully independent, most of the time ignorant to what was happening in the Arab world, and not fully aware which religion she was supposed to believe in, and most importantly; she was sexually free; but of course, exceptions existed like the character of Rana, who was really aware of her Islamic origin as she was partly practicing her religious duties and also her intellectual and political awareness that made her more likely to be one of those feminists who were demanding their rights especially after their bad experiences. Generally, Diana Abu Jaber succeeded to create a spectacular connection between love and identity; that the reader might not been seen before in any novel he might read.

II.2 Sirine's Passion for Food in Relation to her Identity

The food was always considered as a language and existed as a vehicle for expressing culture. It had the power of being both a biological necessity and a deeply symbolic cultural artifact, one that connected us to one another on several levels. Thus, we found it agreeable to say that the food was and still a mechanism for expressing the identity that also had a social purpose (Fox 2). Preparing food for consumption, and eating socially, were activities that conducted for purposes other than mere nutrition (Claxton 01). In other words, your choices of what food you consumed, which ingredient you cooked with or your preferred one sometimes could determine your identity and your cultural belonging; for example; olive oil meant for the Arabic culture, while, spicy and chili food meant for Mexican culture, and Sushi meant for the Japanese culture... and so on. In general, "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are" (Anthelme 182).

In *Crescent* (2003), food appeared as a way of affirming or creating both personal and cultural identities:

Sirine learned about food from her parents. Always said his wife thought about food like an Arab. Sirine's mother strained the salted yogurt through cheesecloth to make creamy labneh, stirred the onion and lentils together in a heavy iron pan to make mjeddrah, and studded joints of lamb with fat cloves of garlic to make roasted kharuf. Sirine's earliest memory was of sitting on a phone book on a kitchen chair, the sour-tart smell of pickled grape leaves in the air. Her mother spread the leaves flat on the table like little floating hands, placed the spoonful of rice and meat at the center of each one, and Sirine with her tiny fingers rolled the leaves up tighter and neater than anyone else could—tender, garlicky, meaty packages that burst in the mouth. (*Crescent* 36-37)

Sirine did not speak Arabic. However, through cooking in Um-Nadia's Café, she found a way of reconnecting with her heritage. The above statement asserted how Sirine's passion for food was mainly related to her memories about her previous life that she lived it with her parents, and to the image that she kept in her mind; on the happiness that she had in the kitchen; with the beautiful scenes of Arabic food and the laughter that filled that space when her family gathered around. For Sirine, cooking became an agency, when all else failed in her life when she was confronted with uncertainty, confusion, and identity conflict, she went to the kitchen and cooked herself and her history into existence (Mercer and Strom 40), also, Emma Parker wrote in her article "You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood" that food was the way women articulate their lives in the novels and it became the medium through which they could subvert the patriarchal system. Indeed, food became the language they used to express their anxieties and struggles to set free from such oppressive system in which they were inserted (356-357). Basically, Sirine's cooking was a way to

“Self-Realization” and Goldstein’s “Self-Actualization” (Freud 27-84) which means a person's use of his talents, skills and powers to his satisfaction within the realm of his own freedom, and established realistic set of values. Furthermore, it means the unconstrained ability to reach out for and to find fulfillment of their needs for satisfaction and security.

Furthermore, Um-Nadia’s café and its Arabic American atmosphere from the Arabic customers who speak Arabic mixed with English to discuss their lonely exiled life to the TV broadcasting Arabic and American channel pushed Sirine to think and to ask about her real identity and belonging:

Nadia’s Café is like other places—crowded at meals and quiet in between—but somehow there is so usually a lingering conversation, currents of Arabic that ebb around Sirine, fill her head with mellifluous voices. Always there are the same groups of students from the big university up the street, always so lonely, the sadness like blue hollows in their throats, blue notes for their wives and children back home, or for the American women they haven’t met. (*Crescent* 16)

For that, Sirine found that the best language and solution to investigate and to find her answers in this confused and surprisingly encouraging place was the food. So, she began the act of cooking using her parents’ recipes and cooking mostly Arabic food. This act was unintentionally the cause to let the immigrants show their true selves when they entered Um-Nadia café and tasted the delicious plates that Sirine’s prepared like tabbouleh and knaffea... It was as if those dishes stroked directly their nervous system and invaded their minds to revive their memories of the Arab world, family, and friends who they left.

Indeed, Sirine’s cooking as well as her charming presence in the kitchen, pressed the students’ to open their hearts to her as was stated: “... and only the men spent their time arguing and being lonely, drinking tea and trying to talk to Um-Nadia, Mireille, and Sirine. Especially Sirine” (*Crescent* 17). And to confess their frustration and the pain they suffered

from the moment they left their home until they entered this strange world, they revealed to 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 the 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 flavor of home. (*Crescent* 18)

So, on total, Sirine's food was like a pill that calmed down the immigrant's homesickness and sent to their souls some relief and power to continue the struggling with the daily life.

Also, the food became a means of fashioning a new identity, an identity that hosted any strange elements and coped with it naturally without any side effects. Sirine's Thanksgiving feast was a combination of an American Thanksgiving traditions and an Arab flavor, which she mixed together as mentioned in the following:

She looked up Iraqi dishes, trying to find the childhood foods that she'd heard Han speak of, the sfeeahas—savory pies stuffed with meat and spinach—and round mensaf trays piled with lamb and rice and yogurt sauce with onions, and for dessert, tender ma'mul cookies that dissolve in the mouth. She stuffed the turkey with rice, onions, cinnamon, and ground lamb. Now there are pans of sautéed greens with bittersweet vinegar, and lentils with tomato, onion, and garlic on the stove, as well as maple-glazed sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, and pumpkin soufflé. (*Crescent* 124)

In the most American holidays, Sirine's menu reflected both her American identity and her Arabic heritage. Her guests were a diverse crowd of friends and relatives, and their contributions to the table highlighted the multicultural atmosphere:

There are three open bottles of wine, all different colors, and there seem to be far more plates and silverware than are actually needed. Among the guests' contributions, there's a big round fatayer—a lamb pie—that Aziz bought from the green-eyed girl at the Iranian bakery; six sliced cylinders of cranberry sauce from Um-Nadia; whole roasted walnuts in chili sauce from Cristobal; plus Victor brought three homemade pumpkin pies and a half-gallon of whipping cream. (*Crescent* 125)

The meal reflected Arab (Um-Nadia sauce), Iranian (lamb pie of the green-eyed girl), and Latin American (chili sauce of Cristobal and Victor homemade pumpkin pies) combination of flavors. It also represented the ways in which American identity was forged and continually reinvented itself by incorporating and blending new cultural influences from international immigrants. In all, food and the multiple occasions played an impressive role to tremble the hearts and the minds of the characters that in these exact situations of love and joy and as any normal persons, they would certainly remember their family gathering, the nights of celebrating with their loved ones and the smells and tastes of the traditional food they were preparing, especially by their dearest person; their “mothers”.

Further, the food's existence in the novel was one of the best ways that allowed the characters to question their lives and to explore their true identities. For Sirine, the usage of her mother's recipes helped her to remind herself of her heritage and belonging. Further, her first meeting with Han was related to food. She was preparing Knaffea in the kitchen when Han entered the café, in that time she felt something different and “think she does look different from the rest of the customers” (*Crescent* 29), as if she was sensing that things in the future will change dramatically, but regardless of what will happen in the future, the love was for sure filling the air at that moment as Um-Nadia noticed it directly when she saw Sirine making the Knaffea and hinted her by saying, “Ah you've made Knaffea today, ..., who are in love with, I wonder? Then her dark secret laugh” (*Crescent* 29).

From the above quotation, one could notice that the novel created a marvelous connection between food, love, and identity; as it strongly ties foods like baklava, and Knaffea to love. Further, these types of dishes were and still considered as one of the main things that should be prepared in occasions like marriages and celebrations in the Arab world. Thus, food became a strong metaphor of love. It was believed that by offering food in a romantic dinner, one is also offering his or her body to be metaphorically devoured. The food then became something seductive to satisfy the lover's hunger (Nurcahyo 5).

Something similar occurred in *Crescent* when Hanif kindly prepared a dinner for Sirine, ironically, despite being a chef, the dinner was something especially new to Sirine, "No one ever wants to cook for her; the rare home-dinners at friends' houses are served with anxiety and apologies"(*Crescent* 47). The professor was completely excited about cooking for her, and curiously, one of the recipe books he used to complete the dish was the well-known and popular book entitled "The Joy of Cooking" a similar joy that Sirine was feeling when cooking at Nadia's café. This act permitted Hanif to feel closer to Sirine, also the new environment allowed him to enjoy the possibility of momentary being an American and to forge an identity different from the stigmatized Iraqi one.

Crescent successively traced the connection that existed between the writer and her protagonist. As both Diana Abu Jaber and Sirine were extremely in love with food, especially the Arabic food, Diana Abu Jaber in one of her interviews with a blogger named "Luan Gaines " in 2007 declared that:

My father is a very serious chef and I grew up in a food-obsessed family, so naturally I inherited the obsession myself. I supported myself in college as a short-order cook and seriously contemplated going into cooking professionally, but I eventually decided that it was more fun to write about food than to prepare it for a living. Writing

about Sirine the Chef was a very organic union of my own passions as an artist and a cook.

The above quotation highlighted the fact that Diana Abu Jaber's passion for food was inherited from her father who was of a Jordanian root, so eventually; her character Sirine was not a fully fictional character. In addition, her obsession to write about food showed how tightly and strongly her wishes to keep her Arabic family heritage.

Finally, we found that ethnic identities were expressed and maintained through dietary choices (Bell and Valentine 733-736). The food that we eat could strengthen ties to our ethnicity on a day-to-day basis and it could also reflexively reinforce a sense of identity when we lived in another culture (immigrants). So, literally Diana Abu Jaber's novel *Crescent* was the real proof and evidence of what was studied and analyzed from the early years until it was published; on the fact that food could be the missing element, and the bridge that connects between the different ethnic groups and their identities, and that was definitely one of the reasons that made it spread widely and won many prizes.

II.3 Identity and Memories of the Past

Crescent was full of immigrants and expatriates, most of whom had built a fairly successful and fulfilling life in the new country. However, most of these men and women also experienced feelings of sadness and loss, even while enjoying their new lives. There were several references to their past, but a little explanation was mentioned. Yet, the setting of the novel could give us a lot of explanation of what did happen to them before they left their countries with no intention to go back again.

The novel's characters' past, mainly, was related to one place which was 'Iraq', in that time Iraq political and social life was really in chaos. From one side, Iraq was entering a new era with Saddam Hussain dictatorship and the opposition refusing his rule. And from the other side, the tension between Iran and Iraq raised and they both entered a war in what was

called the “First Gulf War” from 1980-1988, further, and after the war ended with Iran, Saddam started another war with Kuwait in 1991; which ended in the same year with the support of America to Kuwait and it was called later the” Second Gulf War”.

As a consequence, a lot of people fled from the country and decided to settle in the United State of America, Hanif was one of those people who decided to leave the country after Saddam Hussain took the rule. He moved to England, where he continued his studies and became a famous professor, then he get a position at the University of California, Los Angeles in America where he lived there as a refuge. But even with this achievable success, Hanif was always carrying with him the pain of being in exile and for having to deal with the loss of his home as well as of identity, culture, and religion and most importantly to cope with the idea that he might not go back to his home again as he mentioned it before in the novel when he said, “of course I love Iraq, Iraq is my home—and there is, of course, no going home” (*Crescent* 19).

Diana Abu Jaber in one of her interviews that entitled “The Only Thing to Silencing is to Keep Speaking” with Andrea Shalal-Esa in 2002 before the publishing of *Crescent* in 2003 described Hanif as:

He’s kind of mysterious. He teaches linguistics at UCLA (university of California, Los Angeles). It explores a little bit about the question of exile. That’s one of my literary obsessions—what a painful thing it is, to be an immigrant. How when you leave your home country, you don’t really know what it is that’s about to happen to you. What an incredible experience and journey it is. And how for a lot of people it can be a real process of loss.

His mysterious behavior was mainly related to his past, it was as if he was trying to push his traumatic past away. His memories of his family who he left behind was haunting his thoughts every day, it was some sort of guilt and blaming as he could not help them and leave

them alone under the tyranny of Saddam Hussain rule. Sirine was one of the few people that made Han talking about his past as she was curious about his life before her, in one of their conversation he told her that, “since I’ve met you—it’s starting to return. I’m beginning to feel it and see it” (*Crescent* 122). Sirine questions about his past made him, recalling all of his memories that he was trying to forget, but in vain as he mentioned it by saying, “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” (*Crescent* 122).

Moreover; Han’s past and memories did not concern him only, but it reached even Sirine who started a love story with him, but this later was not like any love story, there were more things that unified this couple besides their love for each other. Han was one of the people who influenced Sirine’s life. His presence made Sirine’s memories revived constantly; her childhood, and her parent’s memories and recipes were every day recalled and reinvented in the kitchen of Um-Nadia café.

Besides, this two main character there was also a character who was suffering from its past, “Nathan”. Nathan and his story filled several roles in the novel; most obviously providing a connection between Han’s family and life in Iraq, and the narrative unfolding in Los Angeles. However, Nathan was also included for other reasons. The novel focused on the experience of Nathan’s time in Iraq, that of an American living abroad. Nathan’s time in the Middle East forced him to face and adapt to an alien culture, just as the immigrants that frequent Nadia’s Café had to adjust to life in America. As with other immigrants and expatriates, he found himself changing in this new environment. As he recounted in a conversation with Sirine, “going to Iraq shook me loose from who I was. The deep wild strangeness of the place. The way the air smelled like dust and herbs, the strange slant of the sun. I couldn’t help myself” (*Crescent* 59).

Han's time abroad changed and challenged his identity as an Iraqi Arab. Sirine, growing up as the child of an immigrant in a community of immigrants, sometimes had trouble integrating her Arab and American identities. Nathan's experience in Iraq had the same effect on him. Sirine's uncle, Han, and many of the other characters had experienced personal losses as a result of moving to another country. While most of the characters in the novel formed strong friendships or family ties to combat the feeling of loss, Nathan stood out as the most reclusive and alienated person. One of the reasons for this was that Nathan, too, left someone behind overseas. While in Iraq, he fell in love with Leila, Han's younger sister. This experience also left a mark on him:

It was something that just stripped me clean. Like a new man. I love everything about her and I didn't care about anything else. I loved her wrists and her laugh and her shoes and her teeth. I was so happy I even stopped taking photographs. I was sure I would feel that way, absolutely and completely, for the rest of my life. (*Crescent* 59)

Love and loss were omnipresent themes in the novel. Nathan's story, of losing his love when he was forced to flee the country, echoes those themes. This gave Nathan a common, though often strained, bond with Sirine and Han. All had lost loved ones due to the tragic events that took place in Iraq during and after the Hussein takeover.

Each of the mentioned characters dealt differently with their past memories and experiences, and each one of them was motivated and pushed to recall their past through a common place. This place was Um-Nadia café which played an important role in their lives. The café worked as the materialization of home, and consequently their past. It was also a special place mainly for the Arab immigrants. Fadda Corney described it as a gathering place as she commented that:

Arab student, teachers, exiles, and immigrants flock to the café, which becomes for them the symbol of a recreated home in the midst of a foreign and alienating culture.

In fact, the café also becomes the core of *Crescent's* ethnic borderland, serving as the central focus of interethnic and intercultural interactions between Arabs, Arab Americans, Latinos and white Americans, among others. (5)

Also, the café's location was very interesting, as the café was found in the Iranian neighborhood. As we know, Iraqis and Iranians were holding an amount of hate to each other after the First Gulf War in 1980 and the damages that it left on both sides, which made the idea of gathering them in Um-Nadia café a challenging and smart step from Diana Abu Jaber as she showed that the possibility of gathering different ethnic groups on one border even if they were enemies could be an advantage to simply accept and cope with the idea of double identity due to the fact that in the host country there was no such thing called as merely Iraqi or Iranian but there was the reality of transforming to Iraqis-American/Iranians-American.

Moreover, food also played a great role in the process of recalling the past. The different Arabic dishes like: tabbolah, Knaffea, and baklava..., and the various spices such as cinnamon, rice, and olive oil that Sirine used had as stated before the power to make the immigrants travel through the senses and through time to visualize those people who they lost or with whom they had shared a special moment with. Thus, food became a form of bringing memories into the surface (Bardenstein 353).

Additionally, there were two things that the reader might not consider them valuable; but in fact, their role was highly important in rousing the characters to remember, these two things represented in: the photographs of Nathan and the scarf of Han's mother. First the photographs or simply the photos, they had the power of acting as stored memories; they granted the return to the past that was no longer available. They went beyond mere objects to supplement and send personal feelings and emotions that led in a moment of a life that had been. Thus, they conceded the construction of the past, being broadly associated with the

collective and individual memory since they also worked as a tool in shaping the person's identity; they allowed the mental reconstruction of the past.

In *Crescent* each character had a different reaction to Nathan's photographs as their memories were varied. In Nathan's first exhibition entitled "Photography against art: real sconces by Nathan Green" which showed people in different emotional states and the photos described as, "disturbing yet graceful, filled with languid shadows, as if the photographer was shooting through surfaces" (*Crescent* 25) Sirine were at first captivated by the picture but the more she was focusing the more seemed to be disturbed as the following passage showed:

The photos bother Sirine: they remind her of times she's known she was dreaming and couldn't wake herself up. She gazes at one particularly dark. Image: something that looks like a wall of light, a person in its center, head tilted back, staring straight up at the camera. The image ships inside her, cold, like swallowing tears. (*Crescent* 26)

While, in Nathan's second exhibition, which located in an old church, Han was very interested; especially in the portrait of the people, which he defined as "odd" as he was shocked by them. Actually, the photographed people here seemed to be afraid of the camera; as the narrative description:

The images aren't at all charming: the animals look matted and filthy; one cat seems to be missing an ear. There are many photographs of adults as well: a woman with bruised-looking eyes, leans intently toward the camera; an elderly woman lifts one hand. There are no horns, mysterious fish tails, or fleeting smiles – but there is something disturbing in the mood of the shots, an ingrained murkiness, rolls of smoke on the horizon, descending from the sky. (*Crescent* 159)

The view of those people was very disturbing and shocking to the visitors. But on the other hand Han reaction was different from the other; he was able to read the faces of the

people in the photos as he was living among them in the past, those Iraqi people were his people. As a result, the photos become powerful sites of memory as they have symbolic and sentimental meanings for Sirine, Nathan, and ever more so to Han, who still longs for his home and the pictures seem to stress his homesickness.

Second the scarf; it was very helpful to lead the characters to unveil their past. Han received the scarf from his aunt as a souvenir from his mom to remind him of his home and family. It reminded him of his whole past life in Iraq, whether the sweet one or the painful one, everything was flashed back in the mind of Han due to this small object, it also led Han to reveal his memories of home to Sirine; hoping that his family was safe as he felt guilty towards them, and he confessed of missing them every day of his life since he left them:

He studies her, his expression quiet and contemplative. "I do and I don't. It's hard to get information from Iraq, so few letters get through, and the ones that do are usually so heavily censored that they don't make much sense. I suppose my brother is still in prison and I hope that he and my mother are still alive. But I have no way of telling for sure. And there's no way for me to know if I'll ever see them again." He pauses. "I always think about them." (*Crescent* 96)

For Sirine, seeing Han in that situation made her feel bad for him; not only because he was her lover, but that situation reminded her so much of herself as she also felt his pain as he reminded her of her dead parents and her lonely, and painful childhood without them before and after their death due to the fact that her parents were always traveling as both of them were working for the red cross. Both of them were hiding their pain and drawing a smile on their faces to hide the ugly and lonely life they would have if they permitted to those feelings to come out. Also, Nathan was very sad when he saw the scarf on Sirine in the Thanksgiving dinner, which made him leave directly without saying anything. Later on, he confessed to Sirine that the scarf actually was belonging to Han's dead sister Leila, who was in fact his

love; so when he saw the scarf all the painful memories of his life in Iraq and the death of his love Leila revived in his mind instantly which made him speechless and decided to leave the dinner. The scarf was actually more than a symbol of the past; it was more evident as a symbol of painful memories and darkness that led the characters to lose their true identity and place called 'Home'.

Finally, immigrants' experiences, especially in *Crescent* taught the readers, many lessons, but the only lesson that one could never forget was that the memories of a person never die; even if you wanted to forget, to change, to get amnesia, be sure that your past memories will not leave you at all because there will be always something that pull you toward your past like a magnet; maybe food, scarf, or photos... like the things that were found in the novel. In "Arab American Literature and the Politics of Memory", Lisa Suhair Majaj explained that:

Memory plays a familiar role in the assertion of identity by members of ethnic and minority groups; family stories frequently ground ethnic identification, and the popularized search for 'roots' is often articulated as 'remembering who you are' [...] Memory functions on both a cultural and a personal level to establish narratives of origin and belonging; myths of peoplehood, like memories of childhood, situate the subject and make agency possible. It is thus no surprise that Arab American literature turns repeatedly to memory to explore, assert, critique, and negotiates ethnic identity. (266)

In conclusion, the sympathetic portrayal of Arab characters and the details of life in Iraq, both positive and negative, along with the sensitive insights into the meaning of exile from one's country were the ones that led *Crescent* to be classified as one of the best novels of Arab American literature. Diana Abu Jaber's great job in assimilating the feelings of loneliness, exile; memories and love with the texture of food were very impressive. She

established a warm and revived atmosphere for her characters, so they could discover their identity easily and clearly. Further, she helped the American reader to know more about the Middle East and to change some of his stereotypes that he held for a long time without knowing a thing about the Arab people. In all, she was the perfect writer for the perfect novel.

Chapter Three: Reformation of Home in the Exile

Immigrants were always living in dramatic challenges, in which recognition and adjustment to changes in self and society was an expected thing from them; in order to coexist with the different ethnicities in the new environment. In this chapter, the focus will be directed to the battle between the unfamiliar and the coexistence to reform a new home. The unfamiliar mainly will be traced by the concept of Sigmund Freud the “Uncanny” which is, “In the most basic definition, proposed in 1919, the uncanny is the feeling of unease that arises when something familiar suddenly becomes strange and unfamiliar” (Masschelein 1). Relatively, there will be a detailed discussion of the role of storytelling and food in recalling the identity of the characters and overriding the unfamiliar. To conclude, there will be an interpretation of the role of cultural ethnicity, and whether, its representation in *Crescent* helped the characters to open the border for a possible intercultural integration.

III.1 Preserving Arab Identity

From the beginning of the process of immigration, Arab immigrants struggled to maintain their Arabness against various problems and obstacles; they were at first confronted by the wars and the political instability in their regions (the Arab-Israeli war, the Iranian-Iraqi war and so on), which led them to choose the exile as new home rather than staying in their homeland and living the hardship day by day. Moreover, and as they settled in the new home and found their safe zone far away from war and violence; they were again with an appointment to new problems like discrimination, racism, and the most importantly the notion or the offense of “terrorism” which roused after the 9/11. In addition, to all what mentioned previously, they had also to fight one of the most dangerous enemies in their lives which were their own “selves”, they had to fight their self-confusion, their homesickness, their identity lose, and so on, all of these were mainly related to their psychological state. In

general, they had to fight as Freud pointed the “uncanny” which defined as the feeling of change and the sense of the familiar turning to be unfamiliar, strange, and scary.

The notion of the “uncanny” could be traced to Freud’s 1919 essay “Das Unheimliche,” and its influence still felt strongly in the twenty-first century: “At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Freudian uncanny leaped from the domain of criticism back into the domain of art, where it influenced the visual arts as well as fiction” (Masschelein 3). Freud explored the uncanny in terms of language, semantics, and literature, and in relation to psychoanalytical practice: “In the most basic definition, proposed by Sigmund Freud in 1919, and as mentioned before the uncanny is the feeling of unease that arose when something familiar suddenly became strange and unfamiliar” (Masschelein1). The essay was a response to Ernst Jentsch’s study “On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)” (1995). Jentsch suggested that the uncanny was bound to a feeling of uncertainty in relation to something that was either animate or inanimate, such as wax figures and life-size automata. For both Freud and Jentsch, the uncanny was a specific form of anxiety related to objects and occurrences in real life as well as in literature, particularly in the literature of the fantastic. The figure of the double, strange repetitions, the omnipotence of thought (the idea that one’s wishes could come true), and uncertainty between animate and inanimate objects, insanity, superstition, and the death drive was motifs that Freud connected with the uncanny. Freud, however, qualified the uncanny as an aesthetic experience. He used the term aesthetic in the broad sense of “the qualities of our feelings,” as opposed to the narrow sense of “the theory of beauty” (Freud 123). The fact that the uncanny was related to aesthetics also accounts for the subjectivity of the experience. Departing from Jentsch’s insistence that the feeling of the uncanny was particularly strong in primitive peoples, children, women, and the uneducated, Freud situated the uncanny in an everyday situation in which a feeling from childhood resurfaced that we thought we had forgotten. Recalling Schelling’s definition of

the concept as something that should have remained hidden, but had come to light, the Freudian idiom was a feeling branded by the return of the repressed (Abdul-Jabber 742-743).

So, according to Sigmund we could explain that what *Crescent's* characters lived was mainly a result of this concept. For Han, his sensibility to exile as an ambivalent predicament provided us with a telling example of the cultural crisis of disconnection from one's roots. In fact, only, at first, did exile, for him, emerge as the alternative to free expression, security and survival. While still in President Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Han dreamt of "a new place, away from the new president, as far away as the other side of the world, a place where he will no longer have to look at his brother and sister not-sleeping, where he will not have to count his heart beats, his breaths, the pulse in his eyelids" (*Crescent* 14). Apart from representing an opportunity to escape persecution, exile also was Han's single occasion to escape his guilt-ridden conscience for endangering the life of his two siblings and the togetherness of his family. Unexpectedly, however, the fact of being forced to leave Iraq and live in England and, lately, in Los Angeles allowed him to grasp firmly the ironies that could be enfolded in the alternative of exile as a synonym of dislocation and alienation (Arfaoui 7).

While for Sirine, the feeling of the unfamiliar objects and places, and the process of repressing her memories started from her childhood; where at the age of nine her parents, emergency care personnel for the American Red Cross, were murdered in a raid in Africa, Sirine, at thirty-nine years, experienced a condition of symbolical exile (*Crescent* 50). "What Han says reminds her of a sense that she's had---about both knowing and not knowing something. She often has the feeling of missing something and not quite understanding what it is that she's missing" (*Crescent* 62). Critic Robin E. Field made an important suggestion, upon mentioning the effect of the absence of Sirine's parents both on "her subsequent relationships with men" and "her sense of who she is as an Iraqi-American" (*Crescent* 216). Indeed, Sirine could not be definite about what faith she had, particularly, when she ventured

to reply “I suppose I don’t actually have one [religion],” adjoining, “I mean, my parents didn’t, so...” (*Crescent* 171). Letting her sentence trail off, echoing Han’s in a way, she only commented “Well, I believe in lots of things” (*Crescent* 171). When such a statement occurred in a workshop on Women in Islam it rendered best Sirine’s dilemma (Arfaoui 9).

In Nathan’s context, the sense of identity went deeper than interrogating the ambiguity and even the unintelligibility of certain notions in order to overwhelm his sense of who he was as an American. When he spoke of himself, he referred to an “overgrown student in search of a life may be” (*Crescent* 54) and, shortly, commented “I’m made out of powder” (*Crescent* 55). Sirine compared him to “a monk—sunken cheeks, hungry lunar shadow eyes, a body inhabited by an old spirit” (*Crescent* 329). The simile suggested a state of death-in-life, equally perceptible in Nathan’s shots which was symbolic of a world close to a wasteland and reach the onlooker as “gray dreams, full of accusation and a lingering sense of emptiness” (*Crescent* 253). These shots made sense only in the perspective of a person separated from his beloved due to a death execution and an essential civilization cultural clash. Beyond this, the pictures conveyed but disfiguration, emptiness and absence (Arfaoui 9-10).

However, it should be noticed that the literary world spun by Abu-Jaber was never utterly hopeless. Instead, her representation of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as much deprived of consistency, transparency and short of intelligibility was, equally, suggestive of hope in regaining some sense in life. It even traced itineraries of how to go beyond these ontological crises, instead of letting them lead to self-defeat and absurdity. These strategies ranged from nurturing oneself with food and art (storytelling) to reconciling with one’s homeland and cultural roots (Arfaoui 10).

In the article “Counter narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Nye’s Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*,” Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom observed

that food, in both Nye's poetry and Abu-Jaber's novels, structured the narratives and "functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory, and exile" (33-34). They insisted that food had a sacred meaning in so far as it worked as a "natural repository for memory and tradition and reveals the possibility for imagining blended identities and traditions;" moreover, as the authors observed, Nye and Abu-Jaber "use food to construct spaces wherein they imagine the possibilities of peace, love and community" (33-34). So, according to Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom food was the shelter for Sirine to find some peace and to draw herself from the dilemma of who she was. Sirine's act of cooking was enough for her to know that she exists and that what was in the past unfamiliar became today familiar, and that the food was her epitome of patience, even more, of existence, since "she was also born with an abiding sense of patience, an ability to live deeply and purely in her own body, to stop thinking, to work, and to simply exist inside the simplest actions, like chopping an onion or stirring a pot" (*Crescent* 19). As a result, we can sum up that food was not merely a connector between Sirine and her identity, but it was also a proof of self existence, self realization (Sigmund's notion), and self actualizations (Goldstein's notion); in Sirine's eyes, "cooking becomes agency: when all else fails in her life when she was confronted with uncertainty, confusion, and identity conflict, she goes to the kitchen and cooks herself and her history into existence" (Mercer and Strom 40).

Moreover, food in *Crescent* also appeared as a kind of fuel that Sirine used to instigate her nameless uncle to tell the mythical tale of the adventures of Abdurrahman Salahadin, "Her uncle looks at her thoughtfully and puts down half a falafel. "So we are on chapter... what, now? Three? Seven?"She sighs. "And are there any more cookies left?" (*Crescent* 65), also the food was the fuel for the other characters to recall the richest details of their tales as they were gathered in Um-Nadia's café; eating the Arabic food that Sirine prepared and recalling their past memories to her, "only the men spend their time arguing and

being lonely, drinking tea and trying to talk to Um-Nadia, Mireille, and Sirine. Especially Sirine. They love her food—the flavors that remind them of their homes— but they also love to watch Sirine” (*Crescent* 16).

In addition to the food, the healer of the immigrants’ souls, there was also the act of storytelling, which composed of marvelous pieces of art not only found in *Crescent* but in all the literary works throughout the history. Storytelling for decades was:

Teaching and transmitting to children, family morals and other aspects of social life.

Within immigrant families, for instance, storytelling was a way of recalling the past. It might be a way of forgetting the adversities of the past and worshipping the present situation when most immigrants found themselves better off financially. Ruth Stotter entitled the introduction of De Vos’s book as “We are Made of Stories.” This assertion could not be more appropriate for this discussion as stories were part of the formation of human selfhood and character. Indeed, family stories always carried symbolic meanings and didactic aspects, acting effectively in a person’s life, especially in enhancing one’s self-esteem and identity (Ferreira de Sena 47).

only family stories could help the individual to find his self, there were also historical stories, fictional stories and many other types.

The story of *Crescent* was originally built upon the famous story of “*Othello*”; as Diana Abu Jaber first intention was to modernize the story to suit the present time, but unfortunately the task was too hard to accomplish, this was literary what Diana Abu Jaber answered when the interviewer Andrea Shalal- Esa asked her on the reason that pushed her to write *Crescent*:

When I wrote it the first time, I really was trying to rewrite *Othello*. But it was a very hard story to transplant to a modern version because it was so dramatic and it relied so much on the idea of villainy and heroism. When you try to do that in a modern

context, well, it was almost like Freud [a villain in the modern western horror tales] wrecked it for everybody. After Freud there are no more villains. We understand each other too much—unless of course, you're Arab. We have too much understanding about the unconscious and about family history, so everything had to be subtler and more complex. And so, the closer I got into the characters, the more I saw, well, the villain really isn't a villain, actually he's suffering too. And the hero isn't that great. It all just sort of dissolved as I was working on it.

Despite that Diana was unable to rewrite Othello but she was smart enough to use some of the heroic patterns in *Crescent* to give it more artistic side as she said:

The vestiges that I kept of Othello were that the Iraqi professor was very dark, that he looked dark, and that the Iraqi-American chef was very white and American. She also had an Arab father and an American mom, so she was doing that kind of straddling. And I wanted to talk about... and I did this in the novel... about her conflicting feelings; if I didn't look like it, did that mean that I'm not it? It was the curse of the first generation—the children of immigrants. You were straddling generations and you straddle cultures. And like so many people who were cultural mixes, we kind of submitted to the lie that was the whole notion of race—because race is based on appearance. And appearance was tenuous at best. I happened to come out looking like this. My sisters look much more traditionally Arab... but actually I'm the only one among my sisters who can speak Arabic. Race has nothing to do with who we are and it's not a reality. It's a complete social construction, but we cling to it. We cling to it as some kind of signifier, and it basically signifies nothing.

Basically, Abu Jaber tended to create a modern hero and heroine, but she simply ended up with creating simple characters with complex common issues. But still that did not

prevent her from at least providing some heroic qualities to her male character “Han” as she described him as:

“Her uncle lounges back in his big blue chair. “No, really, you can’t believe it, I’m telling you, and he looks like a hero. Like Ulysses. “That’s supposed to sound good?” He leans over and picks up the unsliced half of lemon, sniffs it, then bites into one edge. “I don’t know how you do that,” Sirine says.

“If I was a girl, I’d be crazy for Ulysses.”

“What does Ulysses even look like? Some statue-head with no eyes?”

“No,” he says, indignant. “He has eyes.”(Crescent 16)

Besides, the novel presented at the beginning of each chapter another story that Sirine’s uncle narrated which was about a slave boy called Abdurrahman Salahadin who was as they called the “drowned Arab” that “makes money by selling himself off, then pretending to drown while escaping” (*Crescent* 39). Actually the story was very familiar to Han, as mentioned that, “He raises his head slightly and his eyes are black and shining and still. “Your uncle’s story it’s so familiar” (*Crescent* 46). The story was not only familiar to Han but also to all the other Arab character in the novel like Aziz the Syrian poet who attend the pool party where Sirine’s Uncle was narrating the story, this familiarity goes back to the reason that the name of the slave was composed of two of the famous names in the Arab Islamic history, as, the name Abdurrahman referred to the famous emir [prince] of the Umayyad in the Andalusian history who escaped the Abbasid massacre of his ruling family in 750 C.E, and fled from Baghdad through North Africa to Al-Andalus, which he reached in 755 C.E. A year later, he became the founder and governor of Córdoba; he declared himself emir of the Iberian Peninsula and began to build the early glory of Al-Andalus, including the Great Mosque of Córdoba in 785, which was later enlarged by his successors (one of whom—Abdurrahman III, who named himself the Umayyad caliph in 929—built Medinat

(city) al-Zahra, one of the biggest royal palaces in the medieval world). Known as Saqr Quraish [Falcon of Qarish], a name given to him by the Abbasid caliph, Abdurrahman not only deterred the French King Charlemagne from taking Saragossa in 778, but also invested in the cultivation of the arts and sciences. While the name Salahadin was taken from the name of the famous warrior who was the Kurdish Muslim leader Salahadin Al-Ayyubi, who besieged Jerusalem for more than a dozen days before he captured it on October 2, 1187, after 88 years of crusader rule. A great warrior, Salahadin respected and earned the respect of Richard the Lion Heart, King of England and leader of the third crusade. He was known as much for his mercilessness as mercifulness, which came to prominence when he entered Jerusalem peacefully and, even though he longed for revenge, did not massacre the Christians like the first crusaders had the Muslims (“In Search of Andalusia” 239).

Naturally, The uncle’s story believed at first to be like no more than an intolerable digression, an endurance test for the reader’s patience, but toward the end of the novel—when Han reemerged in Iraq bearing the name of the same mythical figure of the uncle’s story, i.e., Abdurrahman Salahadin—it became of particular relevance to an understanding that fiction and reality were emerged hand by hand, and that the mythical figure “Abdurrahman Salahadin” was non than less a typical image of “Han”.

The mythical tale was not only talking of the “drowned Arab” “immoral”, but also brought into cognizance the difficulties, implications and risks of the very fact of being Arab, especially when you have the name of two famous figures in the Islamic culture “Abdurrahman Salahadin”, “Sirine’s uncle stated that:

Abdurrahman 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. Essentially, it’s an

image problem. Ask anyone, Persians, Turks, even Lebanese and Egyptians—none of them want to be the Arab. They say things like, well, really we're Indo-Russian-Asian-European- Chaldeans. So in the end, the only one who gets to be the Arab is the same little old Bedouin with his goats and his sheep and his poetry about his goats and his sheep, because he doesn't know he's the Arab, and what he doesn't know won't hurt him. (*Crescent* 54–55)

According to the passage above, one could notice the negative image of being an Arab and the total denial of the reality that Arab and happiness will ever exist in the same context unless you were a Bedouin with goats because in that situation you will not know even what we mean by Arabs. In the real plot of *Crescent*; specifically in the Women Muslim meeting that held by Rana and her colleagues, one of the women called Suha was clear that she lived the state of not desiring and wanting to be an Arab and insisted on calling herself an American just as she was one of the second generation's members:

“Rana, I'm sorry, but do you always have to be at the top of your lungs all the time? People like you make the Amerkees think Muslims are always angry.” She adds something in Arabic so a number of the other women shout, “English, English!” Rana looks dazed. “How can you talk like that, Suha?” she demands. “Do you know the effect of an American rocket on an Iraqi tank?” She lifts her hand. “The Americans were firing after the Iraqis had already surrendered, they were retreating.” Suha sniffs. “I don't even know why you expect us to know about all these political things,” she says. “We just want to be Americans like everyone else.” (*Crescent* 111)

In conclusion, food and storytelling were undoubtedly a key element for healings some of the pains of the characters that identity confusion caused. They were artifact that bridged together different memories painful and happy one but in the same time was needed

to each one of the characters to remember his roots; they also functions as a spin board for both Sirine and Han to begin their journey to discover their selves through sharing intimate and honest feelings. And, as a result, the representation of food and storytelling ended up being the ground for discussing political issues concerning the situation of Arab immigrants and their descendants in the United States and the right way to understand what Diana was trying to clarify from writing this novel.

III.2 Intercultural Integration

Culture is what shapes us; it shapes our identity, our beliefs, and our behaviors. Many sociologists defined culture as “way of being” which referred to the shared language, values, attitudes, practices, and norms which were conveyed from one generation to the other (Kittler, Sucher, Nahikian-Nelms 6). The existence of different cultures in one community shaped also the concept of “multiculturalism” which was defined as, “a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context” (What Makes a School Multicultural? 2). The United States of America were considered to be one of the most multicultural nations in terms of culture across the world. According to the United States Census Bureau, the population in the United States of America in 2009 consisted of 80% White, 16% were from Hispanic or Latino origin, 13% African American, 5% Asian, and 1% American Indian/ Alaskan Native. For the Arab American community, things were a little bit complicated as they found themselves facing a quandary in terms of its racial classification. As the US Census Bureau situated it within the “white” (the 80 %) category, this group had no legal position within the spectrum of minority cultures from which it could legally articulate its communal concerns about discrimination. These ambiguous racial positions drove the likes of Helen Samhan, Executive Director of the Arab American

Institute, to state that the current federal white categorization of Arab Americans from the Middle East and North Africa within the “white majority” did not resolve confusions regarding their racial status (Conrey189). Thus, Arab Americans could not articulate themselves as quite “white” enough, nor as quite “American” enough, and not quite whole, as a result, and by recognizing the fragmentation and complexity of their identities, Arab American might began to join forces with other marginalized groups due to their identity or their structure of violence and power as a temporary solution (Majaj, “Arab American Ethnicity” 332).

As mentioned above Arab American had to start a polycentric multiculturalism in order to situate their identity within the other groups and to avoid losing due to isolation, moreover, learning about different cultures can be quite beneficial for people who live in a diverse cultural society. It makes people more able to understand the different perspectives which can help to eliminate negative stereotypes. Thus, especially with the situation of Arab American classification, one should not limit himself with a definitive border, especially if he were belonging to minority cultural group, as Lisa Majaj suggested:

... we need not stronger and more definitive boundaries of identity,
but rather an expansion and a transformation of these boundaries.

In broadening and deepening our understanding of ethnicity, we are not abandoning our Arabness, but making room for the complexity of our experiences. (Majaj, “Arab American Ethnicity” 322)

So, Arab Americans needed to ask for their rights to be acknowledged as important contributors to the American nation’s racial, ethnic, and literary cartography; as any other ethnic group, their internal differences needed to be recognized in order to create solid bridges that would facilitate border-crossings among themselves as well as between them and other communities of color, thus, enabling them to coexist in the ethnic borderland. The

socioeconomic, political, religious and ideological dynamics of Arab American communities need to be adequately addressed and contextualized when discussing a literary work produced by an Arab American writer. Gender was another issue that needed careful examination and cautious theorization since it was one of the main battlegrounds on which the East-West cultural encounter was being staged. In *“Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People”*, for example, Jack Shaheen (2003) argued that for more than a century Hollywood had used repetition as a teaching tool, tutoring movie audiences by repeating over and over “insidious images” of Arabs, eventually affecting honest discourse and US public policy. Based on a study of more than 900 movies, Shaheen argued that filmmakers had collectively indicted all Arabs as brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money mad cultural “others”. Shaheen argued those viewers, laughing at bumbling reel Arabs, leaving movie theatres with a sense of solidarity, united by their shared distance from these peoples of ridicule. These movies, Shaheen warned, “effectively show all Arabs, Muslims, and Arab-Americans as being at war with the United States”. Shaheen warned that there was a dangerous and cumulative effect when these repulsive screen images remained unchallenged, in this context, Steven Salaita also (2001) urged critics to make clear the connections between Arab American literary productions and the context in which these works were produced. In this circumstance, literary representations became one way of engaging with the issues that encounter Arab-American communities (Nurcahyo 3).

Also, in the process of establishing links and intercross between culture pursue the following steps:

the border between Arab Americans and other communities of color, the ready acceptance of ethnic stereotypes should be replaced by a constructive understanding of unity and difference among the groups involved. The search for ties between communities within the ethnic borderland should always be accompanied by the unfixing

of ethnic stereotypes; in this way, the ethnic borderland takes on a fluid quality, transgressing the limitations of tightly enclosed enclaves (Conrey 191).

In *Crescent*, Diana Abu Jaber was able to create a great atmosphere for the different minority groups into its delineation as a way to unite them within the chosen ethnic borderland. The term ethnic borderland drew upon Gloria Anzaldia's definition of "borderlands [as being] physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different cultures occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (19). The interaction among *Crescent*'s ethnic characters brought out the tension of the plot, emphasizing the particular intricacies of ethnic identity politics in the novel (Conrey188). The novel plot as mentioned before narrated a story of an Iraqi chef "Sirine", who lived almost her whole life with her uncle (anonymous) a professor and storyteller, and occupied a job in a restaurant called "Um-Nadia café". The café was a place that gathered different ethnic borderland customers; among them the charismatic, the lover and the famous professor "Hanif"; who as we mentioned before represented the basic key to Sirine's exploration of Arab identity. Besides, there were different minority characters including Arabs, Arab Americans, Turks, Latinos, and Iranians like: "Jenoob [South]; Gharb [West] ; and Schmaal [North]-engineering students from Egypt; Shark [East], a math student from Kuwait; Lon Hayden, the chair of Near Eastern Studies; Morris who owns the newsstand; Raphael-from-New-Jersey; Jay, Ron and Troy from Kappa Something fraternity house; Odah, the Turkish butcher, and his many sons" (Conrey 194-195), in addition to Victor Hernandez, the young Mexican busboy and the Central American custodian Cristobal (*Crescent* 16); and "There are two American policemen—one white and one black—who come to the café every day, order fava bean dip and lentils fried with rice and onions, and have become totally entranced by

the Bedouin soap opera plotlines involving ancient blood feuds, bad children, and tribal honor” (*Crescent* 20).

Basically, all of these groups were as mentioned before minor characters, but for Abu Jaber, dealing with their individual national differences was the main big thing for her novel, for example; 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 could be interpreted as individualized characteristics challenging the reductive attributes the term Arab often generates. Despite the fact that these Arab (and non-Arab) characters hail from diverse backgrounds, they nevertheless managed to negotiate the barriers that their differences might produce by partaking in the kitschy Arab culture provided at the cafe in the medley of “news from Qatar ... endless Egyptian movies, Bedouin soap operas in Arabic, and American soap operas with Arabic subtitles” (*Crescent* 20). Moreover, in her characterization of people sharing the same national background, such as Iraqis, Abu-Jaber highlighted some distinguishing factors. Even though both Hanif and Sirine’s uncle were Iraqis living in the US, their status differs since the former was coerced to leave Iraq, fleeing Saddam Hussein’s regime, while the latter emigrated as a young man to the US with his brother (Sirine’s father) in pursuit of adventures and new experiences (Conrey 195). Hence, every minor character was designed to show the different ethnicities in relation to the Arab identity.

In *Crescent*, there were two main connectors to the represented ethnicities. The first one represented in Um-Nadia café where all the deferent character regularly gathered to share their loneliness and sadness as Um-Nadia, the cafe owner and the “all-around boss,” pointed out that:

The loneliness of the Arab is a terrible thing. 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. [And] that is the way Sirine suspects that Arabs feel everything –larger than life, feelings walking in the sky. (*Crescent* 17)

Consequently, for the Arabs, the cafe became the re-creation of the Middle East home in the West, where they “spend their time arguing and being lonely, drinking tea and trying to talk to Um-Nadia, Mireille, and Sirine” (*Crescent* 16), and also a source of recalling their past memory. In other words, the cafe became the core of Crescent’s ethnic borderland, serving as the central locus of interethnic and intercultural interactions between Arabs, Arab Americans, Latinos and white Americans, among others (Nurcahyo 6). Abu-Jaber clearly portrayed this idea and dealt with the cafe as a strong metaphor of connection to the lost past; the space of the café recalled their homelands and comforted the characters. According to Wathington, it was important to question the way immigrants dealt with the new environment and with the memories of the old home. Thus, food and the act of remembering a lost country in the cafe worked as a “sort of comfort in an otherwise strange and foreign language” (Wathington 68-70).

Naturally the second connector will be represented in Sirine herself plus the eastern food that she prepared in the café’s kitchen. As Carol Fadda-Conrey (2006) claimed, in Abu-Jaber’s novel:

[t]he most important bridges are Sirine herself and the Middle Eastern food she cooks. From her pivotal position in the kitchen, which opens out to the rest of the café, Sirine serves as an integral connecting link, joining together the different communities and individuals of Crescent’s ethnic borderland. (196)

Sirine's personality which showed complexity and contradiction; especially after she met Han; helped her to change her perspective towards the Arab, "Sometimes she used to scan the room and imagine the word terrorist. But her gaze ran over the faces and all that came back to her were words like lonely, and young" (Crescent 17). Furthermore, Fadda-Conrey pondered that "Sirine's cooking and the act of participating in its consumption, while drawing various characters together, simultaneously, emphasized their varied ethnic, national and cultural identities" (Nurcahyo 4). Sirine before choosing to be an exclusive chef of her parents' Arabic food recipes; she learnt to cook different international dishes as the novel declared:

Sirine learned how to cook professionally working as a line cook 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 favorite—but almost forgotten—dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents' tiny kitchen and her earliest memories. (*Crescent* 17)

So, Sirine's act of cooking in itself was also a representation of ethnic integration.

Moreover, Sirine's cooking helped to soften the relationship between the different ethnic identities, namely the "Iraqi Iranian" relationship as both groups had a shared painful past; as mentioned in the following:

Even though Nadia's Café is in the middle of an Iranian neighborhood, there are few Iranian customers. After the long, bitter war between Iraq and Iran, some of Um-Nadia's Iranian neighbors refused to enter the café because of Sirine, the Iraqi-American chef. Still, Koorosh, 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. He stood open-mouthed when he saw white-blond Sirine, then finally blurted out, "Well, look at what Iraq has managed to produce!"

He asked if he knew how to make the Persian specialty khorosht fessenjan, his favorite walnut and pomegranate stew, and when she promised to learn, he returned later in the day and presented her with a potted pomegranate tree. (*Crescent* 18)

In addition, the above quotation Abu Jaber not only used Sirine's character as an interethnic bridge, but also she portrayed a complexity through this character that was essential to a more intricate understanding of ethnic identities, particularly the Arab American identities. In other words, she used her to portray the issue of racial discrimination that was natural in a society full of different ethnic groups. With an Iraqi father and an American mother, she possessed a hybridity that became a mark of contradiction for Americans on the one hand, and Arabs and Arab Americans on the other. Looking at herself in the mirror, Sirine performed a swift act of self-criticism reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double-consciousness," by which she assessed her identity through the racial perceptions handed to her by a mainstream white culture:

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's half-Arab. I never would

have thought that, they say, laughing. You sure don't look it. (*Crescent* 113)

Skin color, then, became a significant, but nevertheless erroneous and slippery, racial and ethnic marker, portrayed in the underlying assumption ("You sure don't look it") that denotes "darkness" as a designation of Arab identity and "whiteness" as a staple of mainstream American identity (Conrey 197).

Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* was one of the riches novels in the contemporary Arab American literature as it was not only affirmed the Arab American identity, but it also helped in the exploration of how to situate that identity within the contemporary multicultural borderland. *Crescent* built upon two standing point; food and ethnic diversity; both worked to

explore Arabness and to solve its isolation. Before, Arab American literature were only concerned with discussing immigrants problem within the American society stream, but when contemporary literature changed its paths and became more concerned with the Arab identity in relation to other ethnic groups and more dependent on elements like food, geographical areas (Um-Nadia café), and complicated and richest characters (like the character of Sirine) the goal swiped not only to maintain Arabness but also to challenge the outside world barriers and to gain recognition for their literary work productions.

Conclusion

The thesis analyzed novel in the Arab American literature “*Crescent*”, which was written by feminist voice and the most heard one, who is “Diana Abu Jaber”. The intention behind writing this thesis was to explore the issue of identity confusion of Arab American immigrants.

Firstly, the interest built upon the love story that occurred between the protagonist Sirine and the Iraqi exiled professor Hanif. The love story successfully bridged the gap between these two confused, lonely, and lost characters. Sirine represented the honest image of the mixed race and immigrant women, who lived their whole lives in America with her Uncle; knowing nothing about her Arab identity. While Hanif or Han represented the image of the life that any exiled person; who is far away from his family, friends, and most of all a place called “home”; may suffer from in the host country. As a result, their love affair helped them to explore and to identify their lost [for Sirine] and confused [for Han] identity.

Secondly, the female characters presented in *Crescent* defied the stereotypes normally associated with Muslim or Arab women. Um-Nadia was unmarried, and runs her own business. Sirine was also unmarried, and dated around as it suited her. Though Sirine’s mother was an American, her parents died when she was nine and she was raised by her Iraqi uncle. Neither he nor the Lebanese Um-Nadia seemed to voice any objection to Sirine’s

dating habits, even though by Sirine's admission, "Good Arab girls don't date" (*Crescent* 69). Sirine was not the only woman to experience this kind of liberation. Um-Nadia's daughter, Mireille made references to her own past boyfriends, and the devoutly Muslim Rana has confessed to have had several sexual liaisons since coming to the US (*Crescent* 178). The Western stereotype of Muslim or Arab women portrayed them as subservient to men, the "sheikh with twenty virgins" (*Crescent* 177) as Rana put it. Many of the women presented in *Crescent* were in full control of their lives, personally, professionally, and sexually. These women destroyed the typical stereotype. Many of these women were immigrants or the children of immigrants, and as such were forced to reconsider their identities. Sirine encountered with Rana's group, as she attended Women in Islam meeting, and had assimilated to varying degrees of women according to their individual beliefs. Some of them defined themselves by their marital status and children, others talked about their employment or how they became Muslims. Many were covered, some were not. Some of the women put makeup. Styles of dress vary widely. They expressed distinct points of view on assimilation into their new country, from "We just want to be Americans like everyone else" (*Crescent* 111) to Rana's political rants. These differences in point of view and approaches to Islam contradict the stereotype that Muslim women wear a uniform, homogenous group. Just as in reality, the women in the novel had been distinct individuals.

Thirdly, one of the major elements that gave the novel a unique platform was "Food"; the obsession of Diana Abu Jaber that existed as a base for every novel she wrote. The food was "a contact language, a medium to translate experience and create a meaningful world," as a synonym "with love, prayer, creativity, and healing" (Mercer and Strom 40). Sirine used food to communicate with the various ethnicities around her, she learned cooking from her mother and after her death, she continued learning from her recipes, and when she became a grown woman, she chose to work as a chef and took her place in Um-Nadia Café. In Sirine's

eyes, “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), from Sirine’s perspective, as long as she was cooking and nursing her tactile expertise she exists, figures her sense of being and, even, turns what sounds ridiculous into something meaningful. Food was an epitome of patience and, even more, of existence, since “she was also born with an abiding sense of patience, an ability to live deeply and purely in her own body, to stop thinking, to work, and to simply exist inside the simplest actions, like chopping an onion or stirring a pot” (*Crescent* 17). In the end, The Arab food that Sirine cooked and eaten at the space of the café had a power that transcended 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 old home, immigrants may envisage a future as an ethnic community (Ferreira de Sena 111).

Finally, Abu-Jaber’s exploration of exile included all the various ways that could bereft any one of his home, from the death of parents, the separation from lovers, to the hunger of a lost identity. Gradually, we came to see that every character in this story; Iraqi, American, and Arab-American; was banished by guilt, exiled to sadness by a sentence that cannot be lifted by imperial decree or regime change. Abu-Jaber captured this despair with exquisite care, as her heart belonged to romance, not a tragedy. Thus, she created the solution within the ashes of the problem; she transplanted her characters in a place (Um-Nadia café) that recreated a version of home from the traditional Arabic food, and people who spoke Arabic, to the smell of the old memories and the love that blossom within the kitchen. Moreover, she surrounded them with people from different countries; Mexico, Iran, Turkey, Italy...; as a way to make them realize their new life and to accept it and to cope with the idea of the new home. Hence, through her novel, Diana was trying to provide the idea that those

immigrants and exiled people were not merely Arab, but they were in fact Arab American, an identity that they could not deny it or live without It, as both sides separately Arab and American did not accept them, so the only remained that was to be in the state of “in-betweenness” and to accept the fact that a new home was required.

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