

Suffering and Nostalgia in Exile in Abu-Jaber 's *Crescent*

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Abstract

The experience of exile is the most prevalent phenomena in the modern world. It includes voluntary and involuntary displacement. The importance of exile had increased on unprecedented scale and created many diasporic communities. The Arab community is one of them. This paper focuses on the case of Arab Americans in America because they are considered to be the most hated group in the US. This paper focuses complexities of exile, nostalgia, identity crisis, and cultural and psychological distress experienced by Arab Americans in selected works of the Jordanian American writers Abu Jaber's *Crescent* and Laila Halaby's *once in a promised Land*.

Introduction

The experience of exile is an undoubtedly prevalent and ever-recurring condition in the human history. Exile is a severe punishment for crimes committed by the outlaws. These crimes ranged from murder, political anarchy , religious and political oppression. The offenders preferred to move away from their homelands escaping oppression or searching for a better life.

Exile includes both involuntary and voluntary exile. The growing importance of exile was recognized since people have sought a safe sanctuary in other countries to escape from racial, political, and religious oppression. Its great importance reached an unprecedented prevalence in the twentieth century, which witnessed an unparalleled intensification of transitional migration all over the world.

The increasing migration of people to the western countries, specifically to America, has created many diasporic communities around the world, with their own distinctive characteristics, like Arabs and others. Consequently the host countries became the home to a broad spectrum of exile communities. The motivation of Arab immigrants varied from economic to political and social, but the economic motivation was the strongest. While reasons of leaving varied over time, the experience of exile is often accompanied by feeling of not belonging to the host land.

The exile has a feeling of estrangement and up rootedness. His search for his roots and heritage are his main quests. The exile who find themselves torn between their homeland and the host land have a sense of separation and uprooting. The experience of exile involves up rootedness and

transplantation, so the in-between state that the exile suffers makes him swing between the past and the future.

The obstacles faced with the immigrants in the adopted home are language difference, unfriendliness, marginalization, and xenophobia, particularly if they came from different cultures and ethnicities. The exiles often share emotional ties with their motherlands; some prefer to maintain their religious, ethnic, and cultural identities in the adopted home and others try to adapt to the new home.

The experience of Arabs in exile is not much different from the other ethnicities in the causes of their migration and their feeling of alienation. As an ethnic minority, Arabs suffered racism and exclusion but more than any other minority especially after 9/11 attacks . They are considered to be the most detestable group in the United States. However, no minority was as deeply affected as the Arab community in the United States. Since the attacks on the World Center, Arabs residing in America have experienced violations of economic and political liberties as well as social discrimination.

This paper focuses on the case of Arab Americans in America, as reflected in the works of Jordanian writers Diana Abu jaber's *Crescent* because Arabs became the subject of different literary works especially after the Gulf war and the tragic events of September.

Exile creates many disturbances and its pain is very sore. The idea of creating an alternative home instead of the homeland proves difficulty. The pain and suffering of leaving the homeland cannot be relieved by the idea that exile could be a relief or rescue from a pressing danger. In *crescent*, the characters' past relates to the political turmoil in Iraq during

the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. As a consequence, many people fled Iraq and settled in America. Hanif, the main protagonist of *Crescent*, is one of those people who decided to leave Iraq after Saddam Hussein took the rule. Hanif is a typical model of forced displacement.

The novel is set in a district of Los Angeles, referred to as Teherangeles because many Middle Easterns , especially Iranians live there. *Crescent*, Diana Abu-Jaber's second novel, centers on the piercing sense of displacement and alienation through the sensuous love story between the protagonists Hanif and Sirine; Hanif, a handsome Iraqi exiled Arabic literature professor who fled the rule of Saddam Hussein and Sirine, a thirty-nine-year-old Iraqi American woman, has never been married, and lives with her Iraqi-immigrant uncle who raised her after her parents' murder when she was quite young.

Hanif and Sirine are the most two prominent characters in *Crescent*. "*Crescent* might best be described as a study of character. That is to say, the novel is driven more by an intimate exploration of character than it is by a fast-moving plot" (Salita, *Modern* 102). Most of the conversations of this novel take place in the kitchen between the two protagonists Hanif and Sirine. Hanif Al-Eyad or Han, as he is called in the novel. His exile is basically political. He leaves his country unwillingly because of his politically opposed stance.

Hanif is always carrying with him the pain of being in exile. He has to deal with the loss of his homeland and to cope with the idea that he may not go back to Iraq again. As an exile, he is seemingly removed and cut off from his land and family. Said says that exile is: " a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivation felt at not being with others in the communal habitation" (*Reflections* 177). Han is described as very

secretive. In fact, Han tries to push the most traumatic past experience of his mind, and to avoid the sadness connected to those excruciatingly painful memories. Albeit, the painful past still exists inside him. Said sees that "crippling, sorrow, anguish, suffering, and muteness" are some of the terms associated with the exilic condition"(*Reflections* 173).

Hanif is involved with Sirine, the Iraqi American protagonist. Gradually, the professor Hanif reveals to her his past which arouses and awakes many questions inside her about the forgotten aspects of her Arab identity as a second-generation Arab-American woman. For Han, the past seems to be very explicit now that can be explored from a deep point of view in the present. His flashbacks as well as his day-to-day contact with Sirine get him twenty years back, revealing some aspects of his past to her. This lapse in time makes him understand his past. Nevertheless, he remains to be haunted by some mere "chips of details" and "bits of recollections"(*Crescent* 208). He recounts, saying: "my mother and brother are still in Baghdad. [His younger brother Arif] was arrested and imprisoned before his thirteenth birthday. That was twenty-one years. And I can't return to help him" (132-33).

In a certain way, Hanif's agonized memories are strongly connected to the political status and events in Iraq. When Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi president, came to power in 1979 and became involved in a horrible war on Iran, Han began "publishing diatribes against Saddam Hussein in underground newspaper" (*Crescent* 329) under the pseudo Ma'al. Since then Han feels really guilty for being responsible for his family's suffering. Bitterly, he tells Sirine, "I let Laila [his sister] and Arif distribute these newspapers among their friends. I encouraged them to go from door to door handing out mimeographed copies of my articles. Then

even read my work at public gathering while I remained 'in hiding'-it was a game. Laila was sixteen and Arif was twelve; both of them thought I was brilliant"(330).

The visit of Saddam's men to arrest Han led his younger brother to claim his full responsibility for publishing diatribes against the Iraqi government, and was finally captured instead of Han. He left his country Iraq and lived torn between if his return to Iraq is better or not.

It is obvious that Han's situation and his serious conversations is marked by pangs of guilt. He is deeply distressed by what happened and feels himself responsible for his family's distress. Then Han has to deal with his situation in exile and high risk of returning Iraq as a consequence of Saddam's strict discipline of permitting outsiders to apologize for their strong opposition against government and escaping before having them executed.

The experience of exile is pervasive; *Crescent* depicts the difficulties and harsh realities that exiles face on their way to escape. Han chooses to leave his homeland escaping persecution and horrifying conditions of Saddam's regime. As a fugitive, he is pushed from his home, and he has not come directly to the United States. He tells Sirine how "it was dangerous for [him] to leave and how "it was dangerous to stay" (*Crescent* 159). It is terribly difficult for him to get out of the country in the first place like many who try to escape. He suffers great turmoil on his route into exile. He says to her: "I had to escape through the desert into Jordan where my family had friends. First in an open Jeep crowded with other refugees, and on horseback with a group of Bedu, and then finally on foot for two days"(160).

Abu-Jaber insists on the universality of the exilic experience, although she has concerned herself largely with the experience of her Arab-American community. Generally, it has become common to observe that the social and spatial displacement of people has been increasing around the world at a fast pace. These movements include vast numbers of people who are legally classifiable as refugees. Like many refugees, Han began to seek a refuge, especially in the United States. She saw in them a safe haven or as an alternative to homeland during political disturbance.

In fact, the predicament that Han experiences is a symbol of that wretchedness and sheer misery which many immigrants experience in a century characterized by wars, persecution, terrorism, genocides or ethnic cleansing, revolution, army rebellions, and totalitarian systems. Abu jabber feels really sorry for the homeless in general and Arabs in particular, who are destined to a life of misery.

In *Crescent*, Han is not classified as a refugee or an expatriate. Instead, he is a true exile because he believes in the possibility of going back when things change. In other words, Han always thinks of his return to Iraq if safety permitted. As a political exile, Han can't return without fear of government-based punishment. Like many exiles, Han usually wait for the downfall or ouster of dictator or political changes of a government to be able to go back Iraq. In fact, many Iraqi refugees returned Iraq after Saddam Hussein fell in 2003. Believing in eventual return, Hanif is keen on tracing the news of his homeland to reassure his family, but it is not an easy task. There is mounting anxiety about the conditions of his family in Iraq. It is a big difference to find Arif alive to relieve his anxiety. It is a difficult situation in which Han finds himself. Han tells Sirine:

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 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. (161-62)

Nostalgia and homesickness are more typical experiences for those who live away from their homelands. Due to the pain, Han suffers for being in exile for so long and feels homesick. Most of the time, he used to think about the different activities going on there. He always remembers his family, his mother's food, and his father orchard.

Loss is considered an element of migration. The experience of exile has a profound effect on the identity and personality. Living in exile led the displaced to undergo radical changes in identity. As a result of his geographical exile, he is not just losing a home, but losing an identity and even religion as well. He no longer feels himself to be the same person as he was in the past, nor does he fit into the present. With the loss of his home, Han loses his religious beliefs that were deeply important to him. Abu-Jaber presents a twofold picture of Han before and after his exile. He used to be a deeply religious person before escaping Iraq, but now he does not fulfill his prayer obligations. It is a completely different Hanif after exile Sirine is meeting. Religion is no longer what influences his character because exile creates a barrier between him and his prayers. Han tells his beloved Sirine:

I've heard of people defining themselves according to their work or religion or family. But I pretty much think I define myself by an absence. I'm no longer a believer but I still

consider myself a Muslim. In some ways, my religion is even more important to me because of that. (*Crescent*182)

Exile is a traumatic experience that is hard for Han to bear. Faced with his situation, Han does not realize how such an uprooting experience can result in this acute anxiety and disorientation. He was not fully aware when he left his country how much is left behind. Han says bitterly:

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. I don't know-does any of that make any sense? It's as if I'm trying to describe something that I'm not, that's no longer here. (182)

As shown repeatedly in Han's words, there seems to be a great deal of confusion, severe depression, and disorientation about the condition of exile. Sadat considers exile is "tantamount to imprisonment for those obliged to endure it" (958). Han explains what is meant by the strict meaning of exile:

It's a dim, gray room, full of sounds and shadows, but there's nothing real or actual inside of it. You're constantly thinking that you see old friends on the street-or old enemies that make you shout out in your dreams. You go up to people, certain that they 're members of your family, and when you get close their faces melt away into total strangers'. Or sometimes you just forget this is America and not Iraq. Everything that you were-every sight, sound, taste, memory,

all of that has been wiped away. You forget everything you thought you knew. (*Crescent*182)

The feeling of melancholia is rooted in all those who are away from their country. In *Crescent*, the pain and anguish which Han experiences can be well compared to the agony experienced by the other exiles. In other words, like many exiles, Han is not exempt from being a victim of the suffering and torture in exile. They all live an anomalous and miserable life. Bitterly, Han reflects:

Some times when I see some of those homeless people on the street-you know, the ones walking around talking to the air, shuffling around, old torn-up clothes-sometimes I think I've never felt so close to any one as those people. They know what it feels like-they live in between worlds so they're not really anywhere. Exiled from themselves. (182-3)

The experience of exile itself is "based on a structure of mourning"(qtd in Ahlstedt 219). As indicated in *Crescent*, Han's words resonate of mourning over what had been left behind. It is noticeable that images of suffering dominate most of the scenes that depict departure from the homeland. He is still haunted by his painful memories that accompany him. For him, exile is a completely unbearable situation. When Sirine, the protagonist, asks him to let himself forget, Han responds:

I'm trying. Sometimes it's so hard. I had no idea, none, when I left my country, what a life-changing thing it would be. It's much harder than I'd ever thought could be possible. I wasn't prepared for how much I would I would miss them-and for

how much worse simply knowing I can't return makes me feel. (183)

The Dream of Returning Homeland is an important point highlighted in the novel. To dream of returning to the same place you 've previously been represents a return to your safety, emotional mindset, psychological state, and different issues you previously were involved with. Stress and loss are considered the normal results of displacement. The deep sense of loss and grief that starts with the departure from the motherland leads to the feeling of an intense nostalgia and the constant obsession with return no matter how dangerous or difficult has been in the homeland. The exile's inability to adapt to the new home, for any reason, no matter how much time he has spent in it, makes it is impossible for the exile to consider the new country as his home.

In *Crescent*, like many exiles, the idea of return haunts Hanif and is probably the only incentive to tolerate his life in exile. Although he spent about twenty years in exile, he always thinks that his exile would be short lived. So, Han reads the press and follows the news of Iraq, waiting for the day of return. Tabori asserts that "the only hope of survival is that the storms will die down, the hurricanes come to an end, and the waves will carry the homeless back to their homes"(273).

Although Han's dream of returning haunts him, he is fully aware that he can't set foot on Iraq. It is noticeable that images of his suffering in exile dominate most of the scenes that depict his departure from Iraq. Sirine wonders if Han can live forever in the US, Han answers " that's what I'm trying to find out"(*Crescent* 60). It is an awkward situation in which Han lives. He longs nostalgically for what is lost and at the same time, he realizes well that he can't return to his homeland. Swinging

between two ways of life represents the state of Hanif. As a result Han ends up living in the "state of in betweenness" that is full of awkwardness and disorientation which occurs when the exile does not experience a complete separation from the place he has left behind. *Said* says:

The exile therefore exists in the median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with the half involvements and half detachments, nostalgic and sentimental at one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another. (49)

It's a state full of confusion, to use *Said's* words as previously mentioned. This state causes Han to feel a sense of belonging to either culture. Han is actually neither here nor there. He lives in a state of chaos and instability as he does not know what to do. Unable to make a decision whether to stay or return, the result is his constant split, leading to his sense of exile. Han's state echoes the exile poet *Esmail Kho'I* when he says:

Un-wanting to be in the host society and un-able to go back home. Un-welcome here, and unwanted there-except, of course, for imprisonment and or/ torturing and/ or shooting. An outsider here, an outcast there. Physically here, mentally there. Not a split personality, but a split person. (qtd. In *Naficy* 11)

Abu-Jaber shows how adaptation to the new society proves difficulty for Han. The idea of being permanently displaced from his homeland is such a terrifying thought to Han. He behaves in his host society neither as a permanent resident nor as a temporary visitor. Even after spending about twenty years in America, Han can't get accustomed to the idea that the

United States would be his permanent home. He is no longer living in his home country for many years but still seems to have hoped to return to his native land if safety permitted to visit his dying mother. This is clear when Sirine is surprised that Han has not furnished his flat. He cannot get accustomed to a permanent life in America. He seems to believe that buying furniture may restrict and tie him permanently to the adopted home. Han says to Sirine when she surprised to see Han's flat without furniture:

It's not very comfortable, is it? It's just- it hadn't really occurred to me-I mean, that I would need things like chairs and bookcases. I've moved around so much between schools and teaching posts and about a million different apartments. I haven't had much incentive to buy furniture. I suppose in some way I had the sense that I would be like a commitment- to a place, I mean. (*Crescent* 78)

The above lines reveal the constant nomadic state of Han as an exile. Said sees exile is "nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal"(*Reflections* 186). Han sees that it is very difficult to determine the geographical location of Sirine's flat although he lives close to her. Han feels that his adopted home is only a temporary one, a place in which he cannot be surefooted. Accordingly, he has no enthusiasm for cultivating a new garden in an alien land, to use Said's words.

Embedded with the condition of exile is the nostalgia for the past. Indeed, it is not possible to address exile without considering its relationship to the past and present. The movement between the past and present is a mark of the displacement. Han can't distance himself from the past and his homeland Iraq. As an exile, Han flatly rejects his estranged

present and prefers to look back and reflect on his past where he feels at home and try to forget his desperate current status. In other words, Han yearns for his past and old home and construct emotional ties with his home and everything related to it. As an exile, he is obsessed by the past, therefore, his time moves backwards rather than inwards. Unlike the immigrant who swings between the present and future. For the exile, the future and present are unsecured and often lost. Unlike the present and the future, the past is assured and guaranteed because it is a place that used to provide protection, security, comfort, and safety.

It is worth mentioning that the notions of both past and home are central to displacement ; Han, here, yearns nostalgically for his fading past. In spite of his long absence in exile, he describes Iraq through his imagination or a feeling. Although Han spent about many years away from Iraq, it's glorious image is still existent and cannot be distorted by the many years he spent in the adopted home. This makes his exile more painful and pronounced. He feels a deep attachment to Iraq that he had left behind. There is a nostalgic description of Iraq which appears as a lost paradise that Han yearns to. Hanif says to Sirine:

This is Tigris River Valley. In this section there's the desert and in this point it's plains. The Euphrates runs along there... [And there] is the home of the Nile crocodile with the beautiful speaking voice. [And there] is the dangerous singing forest ...There's a savanna. Chameleons like emeralds and limes and saffron and rubies. Red cinnamon trees filled with lemurs. (*Crescent* 86)

For Han, home appears as something lost; it becomes "a mythic place" and "a place of no return"(Cartographies188). So, through memory Han presents an image of his home, Iraq that was a shelter, safety and protection for him. He now experiences what Said calls "the torturing memory of a life to which [Hanif] cannot return (*Representations* 62). It is seemingly that Han does not believe that the homeland he left behind is not the same as a result of wars and the invasion of Iraq by the United States. The beautiful description of Iraq by Han is replaced by a completely different one; the same exotic place looks crazy and totally destroyed by fire in the photographs of the American photographer Nathan when he shows them to Sirine as mentioned before.

Refusing to let go off the past and waiting for the day of return make Han feel thoroughly confused. In other words, overwhelmed by feeling of homesickness and his strong desire to see his dying mother, Han suddenly decides to return Iraq. His anguish and agony can never be cured without his return to homeland. Abu-Jaber shows no desire to integrate in the adopted home from the start. The reader from the beginning feels that Han will return one day to his homeland because of his growing nostalgia which was his motivation for return.

To sum up, both Abu-Jaber depicts the difficulties the Arab immigrants encounter in thier exile; while Abu-Jaber depicts the intense feeling of the loss of homeland when an exile settles in an alien land, Halaby explores immigrants' alienation as a result of cultural differences, and racist attitudes towards Arabs through self-imposed exile exacerbated by the 9/11 tragedy. A feeling of anxiety of loss permeates the characters in both novels. Through the protagonist's suffering, Abu-Jaber emphasize that life in exile is very painful.

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