

Rhetoric of Significance and Transformation in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent*

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Abstract

Many important literary works have been written on the multiple issues such as ethnicity, multiculturalism, modernism, postmodernism, etc. Many of them have direct bearing to everyday life advocating the interest of certain group of people. The issues in literary works are presented in various perspectives. This paper explores the way Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* presents its issues. Rhetoric of significance and transformation reveal the way the novel presents its core stances. In her rhetoric of significance, Abu Jaber presents her questions on identities, longing for home, self-discovery, and cultural transmission. This rhetorical structure is interwoven with flashbacks where memory on food is strongly connected. Besides, the Middle Eastern food appears as an essential indicator of the Arab-American ethnicity. The rhetoric of transformation in *Crescent* deals with the persuasive effort to convey integrated culture reflected in the connections among the characters. Transformed belief is manifested by the portrayal of the café as the site of cultural integration.

Keywords: rhetoric, literary work, Asian-American

A. Introduction

Many contemporary literary works have been written on the issue of ethnicity, multiculturalism, melting pot and assimilation in the United States. Many of them highlight very fundamental aspects and help in the construction of the multicultural understanding. Nevertheless, very few of the works emphasize on the Arab-American ethnicity. Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* can be pointed as an example. In *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber questions issues of identities, longing for home, self-discovery, and cultural transmission. The narrative structure is interwoven with flashbacks where memory and food are strongly connected. Besides, the Middle Eastern food appears as an essential indicator of the Arab American ethnicity. *Crescent* is a novel about a thirty-nine-year-old woman, Sirine, who is Iraqi-American and works as a chef at Nadia's Café, a Lebanese restaurant, in Los Angeles. Sirine is single and falls in love with an Iraqi exile named Hanif Al Eyad, a literature professor. Despite being a hyphenated person, Sirine does not speak Arabic, the language of her father, and she also does not actively engage in her family's religion. The legacy of her parents – especially from her father – is the old recipes of Arab dishes. When Sirine started working at the café, she began cooking “the favourite – but almost forgotten – dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents' tiny kitchen and her earliest memories” (Abu-Jaber, 2003:19). It is through the medium of food that Sirine negotiates her Arab self. Hanif or Han, as he is called throughout the novel, carries the pain of being an exile. In a certain way, he tries to place himself inside the new environment of the U.S. and, little by little, he reveals details of his life. The novel is interwoven with Hanif's flashbacks of his life in Iraq and his escape from the country during Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. Moreover, *Crescent* goes beyond a love story and mixes fantasy and reality through the narrative of Sirine's uncle who tells the tale of the slave Abdelrahman Salahadin and his mother Camille.

Embarking issue on identity in literary works must deal with the discussion of cultural relation between the writers, the works and the readers. Scholars have advanced belief that identity of certain members of people can be seen through the literary works. This implies that the writers of the literary works put some strategies to convey their voices. The value of

equity and equality in ethnicity relation is one vital point in the discussion on identity. It is no doubt that people argue the same in the matter of equality and equity. People stand in front to defend that human beings stand on the same ground and deserve same treatment. What is interesting is how the writers articulate their goals through literary works. This articulation is one important part of argumentation.

Argumentation has close link to literary works in term of defining values in the literary works as the writers' arguments. It goes without saying that any literary work conveys a meaning. Or, at least, a work will be judged to contain value. In other words, a value is always embedded in the literary works. By understanding this principle, argumentation studies apply in literary studies. Literary literacy, then, needs a good blend between literariness and understanding of argumentation.

Argumentation takes processes like a writer who needs time to finish his/her work. The way a writer finish his/her work has to do with his/her standpoint to certain problems. This makes people think that writing is ideological. Then, literary works are political since ideologies of the writers are intertwined with creative writing skills. In this context, to engage in the practice of argumentation means to enter new space of interpretation (van Eemeren, 2002:13). To explore argumentation in literary works is to understand their meanings. This paper presents the rhetorical strategies used by Diana Abu Jaber in her *Crescent*. Her standpoints are viewed from the rhetoric of significance and transformation.

B. Toward Rhetoric of Significance and Transformation

Writers argue through their persuasive creative writings. The argumentation is not limited to the protocols of structured arguments. Engaged arguments in literary works are mostly stylistically written. Then, a work is always conveying issues. In this sense, adopting *a rhetoric of significance* involves determining issues in literary works. A writer prepares a standpoint on an issue, whether he/she defend or oppose the issue. In multiple styles, writers formulate their reasons and gather evidences. Rhetoric of significance is then an identification of issue and how it is supported by reasoning and manipulation of facts or evidences. This rhetoric allows writers to argue for changes when they identify instances in status quo practices (Beach and Steven, 2009). *Crescent* advances a major problem that "Arabness" is needed to maintain. This is closely linked to the issue of imagined Arab community in United States.

Struggling for changes through creative writing is a manifestation of *rhetoric of transformation*. Adopting this rhetoric writers need to address people's belief about an issue or problem and then to convince them to the urgency of the changes. The belief *Crescent* addresses for the readers is on the intercultural integration where Arab culture is portrait to be harmonized with US background. This struggle is variegated with the need of home memory. Recalling experiences of the origin is one of the beliefs this novel strongly convey.

C. Imagined community: Maintaining "Arabness" through food

The struggle of Arab-American in maintaining their "Arabness" as well as gaining acknowledgement from the whites shows how Arab-American deal with identity for their ethnicity and their sense of Americanness. This is in line with concept of "imagined community" by Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson (1983:43) shows how language and print help create this sense of nationality. He states that the combination of economic, social, and scientific changes with increasingly rapid communications resulted in new, potentially perplexing cultural paradigms associated with the origin of the universe and humans, their relationships, and history.

The distinctive stories that Arabs occupy in the ethnic map in the US makes Arab-American communities invisible. According to the US official records, Arabs are considered white. However, this does not mean that they are part of majority culture. The socio-economic, 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 is another issue that needs careful examination and cautious theorization since it is one of the main battlegrounds on which the East-West cultural encounter is being staged. In 'Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People', for example, Jack Shaheen (2003) argues that for more than a century Hollywood has 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 argues that filmmakers have collectively indicted all Arabs as brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural 'others'. Shaheen argues that viewers, laughing at bumbling reel Arabs, leave movie theatres with a sense of solidarity, united by their shared distance from these peoples of ridicule. These movies, Shaheen warns, 'effectively show all Arabs, Muslims, and Arab-Americans as being at war with the United States'. Shaheen warns that there is a dangerous and cumulative effect when these repulsive screen images remain unchallenged.

While Shaheen focuses on how negative media representations of Arabs reflect on their lived experiences, other critics have emphasized the complexity of the context in which Arab American writers produce their works. Judith Gabriel (2009) argues that Arab American literary productions have to negotiate the 'complex interlacing of the forces of identity and the forces of art'. Gabriel postulates that 'it is difficult for Arab American writers to engage in serious self-criticism on such issues as gender inequities, racism, homophobia, classism' because to cross these lines is to risk alienation from community. Gabriel argues that the fear of disclosure 'is often most paralyzing when it involves women's issues, particularly those that involve intergenerational conflicts' and identity-related debates. Gabriel maintains 'that the Arab woman is *a construct of outsiders*, and [Arab American writers] are attempting to reclaim [. . .] a *multi-faced image*' of the Arab woman. Without a carefully contextualized explanation and critique of Arab American literature, however, the attempts of Arab American writers to reclaim their voices and draw a realistic picture of their communities seem ineffectual. In other words, the works of Arab American writers need to be complemented with a literary criticism that explicates these works.

In this context, Steven Salaita (2001) calls on critics and scholars to develop a 'critical matrix' that is articulated from within the Arab American community and employs Arab artistic traditions as well as American ones. Salaita argues that artistic growth 'can play a crucial role in the external interpretation, acceptance, and humanization' of Arab Americans and the Arab people as a whole. For Salaita, Arab American literature and community are interconnected: 'By exploring the community, Arab-American critics will find the relevance of the text, and the community will in turn sustain the criticism'. In other words, Salaita is urging critics to make clear the connections between Arab American literary productions and the context in which these works are produced. In this context, literary representations become one way of engaging with the issues that encounter Arab-American communities.

In *Crescent*, Arab immigrants identify with the atmosphere of Nadia's Cafe. The cafe has an important role to play in the plot since it functions as a unifying metaphor, ironically, of Arabs' many – and therefore heterogeneous – homelands. As described in the novel:

the café is like other places – crowded at meals and quiet in between – but somehow there is also usually a lingering conversation, currents of Arabic that ebb around Sirine, fill her head with mellifluous voices. Always there are the same group

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.* (p.17)

Gardaphe and Xu (2007:7) write, "in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, the language of food offers a portal to ethnic history, culture, and roots. This language forms a gastronomic contact zone situated in cafés, kitchens, and homes where displaced individuals meet and reestablish identities and communities". In *Crescent*, it is the café the place where the collective forms and also fosters bonds among the regular customers through the very act of eating and participating in that ritual. The smells and flavors of Sirine's food seem to soften the feeling of loss of their homelands. As Carol Fadda-Conrey (2006:199) claims, 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)

Fadda-Conrey, then, ponders that "Sirine's cooking and the act of participating in its consumption, while drawing various characters together, simultaneously, underscore their varied ethnic, national and cultural identities". It is as if the Arab dishes prepared by the chef enter the regulars' nostrils and mouths and invade their minds with the memories of the Arab World, family and friends they left behind. Indeed, Sirine's cooking, explicitly described as anodyne, as well as her presence in the café even encourage the students to confess their solitude and lament of being "invisible" in the American culture as once one of them 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 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.* (19-20)

The food served at the café is able to call their attention to their inner selves and momentarily the painful experience of missing one's homeland is forgotten. In this perspective, Sirine's presence in the kitchen and her food work as continuous memory rescuer. As a museum, where objects from the past are once again in contact with someone and re-enact the memory of early experiences, so function the food and the café in Abu-Jaber's novel. When asked about the character Sirine, Abu-Jaber claimed that she wanted to "draw that kind of internal conflict: what part of me is Iraqi? What part of me is American?" She goes on to question if "it is something that I've inherited, something in the blood or something that people tell me I am?"

Being in the café's kitchen, for the chef, makes her feel as if she were in her mother's kitchen again. In fact, as Mercer and Strom express, it is "in the absence of her parents, Sirine attempts to use food and cooking to establish her own narrative of origin" (42). Her parents were emergency care personnel for the American Red Cross and they were killed in a tribal clash in Africa. As the narrator comments, "on the day she learned of their deaths, Sirine went into the kitchen and made an entire tray of stuffed grape leaves all by herself" (Abu Jaber 50).

Cooking the Arab food is the compass she uses to re-create her affective memories of her parents as well as to negotiate her Iraqi identity and meditate upon her life. Sirine witnesses the regulars' satisfaction as they close their eyes while eating. If, on the one hand, eating her *baklava* makes the Arab students taste home, on the other, cooking this special dish also serves to orient her during the day. As the quotations, "Sirine feels unsettled when she begins breakfast without preparing *baklava* first; she can't find her place in things" (59).

Moreover, *Crescent* also presents complex webs of food where the characters Sirine and Han seem to be looking for directions all the time. Food, in this way, acquires a different nuance since it offers the ground for those characters to discuss issues of diasporic location and direction for life.

On the one hand, Sirine is interested in learning about her father's culture and religion. As she was not raised immersed in her father's culture she does not understand her connection with the professor and Iraq. Hanif, on the other hand, needs directions to situate himself in the U.S. He declares to Sirine: "I really don't get the geography of this town." He continues by saying that, "It seems like things keep swimming around me. [When] I think I know where something is, then it's gone" (75). He feels displaced and finds in Sirine and in her way of cooking his real north – the needle for his compass.

The existence of food in the novel questions the ideas of belonging and home. For instance, in one of the first contacts between the chef and Hanif, she is in the kitchen when she sees Hanif entering the café. She feels something different and "thinks she does look different from the rest of the customers" (38). At that exact moment, she is making *knaffea* when Um-Nadia wisely says: "Ah, you've made *knaffea* today," she continues by asking Sirine, "who are [you] in love with, I wonder?" (38). This passage shows an interesting connection between cooking and being in love as Sirine's first symbolic contact with Han occurs when she serves him "a plate of *knaffea* herself" (38).

According to Um-Nadia, the *knaffea* "is said to be so delicious that it brings even the wild animals home" (39). Mirelle, Um-Nadia's daughter, asks about it as if not quite understanding the implicit meaning which her mother employs to the expression. Han, in his turn, says: "[a]ll those stories about the animals – the *jemel* and *asfoori* and the *ghazal*," then he asks the name of the last one in English. Nathan answers him by saying that the name is Oryx. Han continues by saying that "[w]ell, the *ghazal* is always wandering, looking for his lost love, and they say he has to go away before he can find his way home again" (39). Even the wild animals look for love. As the passage demonstrates, Han is similar to the *ghazal*. He is also looking for his real love and directions, but when he really finds them in Sirine and her food, he returns to Iraq. He fled Iraq due to political issues and when away from home his contact with the chef gives him the directions he needs to return to this homeland and bury the traumatic memories he carries. It is worth discussing that Um-Nadia's statement seems to be predicting or giving the reader the clues to understand the end of the novel, the moment when Hanif goes back home despite running the risk of being killed by Saddam Hussein's men.

The triangle love / food / identity plays an important role in the novel as it allows the characters to question their lives. For Sirine, the symbolic act of cooking becomes a way of expressing and questioning her fears regarding Hanif and her connection to Iraq. Her food brings the professor closer to her. It is so uncomfortable for the chef to deal with the sensations he causes in her, but, at the same time, she feels something enigmatic in relation to him. She thinks that "Han seems to have some sort of *internal light* that makes him intriguing and, at the same time, a little bit hard for her to look directly, he's so charming and educated and worldly" (47). Han wants to teach Sirine about Iraq and the portion of the Arab culture she does not know, whereas Sirine teaches him about the U.S. and the intricacies of being American.

Moreover, the Arab food – mostly *baklava* and *knaffea* – is strongly connected to love. The very act of cooking and eating these dishes powerfully ties Sirine and Hanif together, strengthening their love. Food, thus, becomes a strong metaphor of love. It is believed that by offering food in a romantic dinner, one is also offering his or her body to be metaphorically devoured. The food then becomes something seductive and the body also becomes an object to satisfy the lovers' hunger.

Something similar occurs in *Crescent* when Hanif kindly prepares a dinner for Sirine. Ironically, despite being a chef, the dinner is something especially new to Sirine as “no one ever wants to cook for her” (68). The dinner itself stands out as a good example of food translation from the novel, a form of translating cultural experiences.

In that occasion, Hanif meant to be “all American” for Sirine, as if forgetting she was half Arab and also playing with his own identity. The professor is completely excited about cooking for her, and, curiously, one of the recipe books he uses to accomplish the dishes is the well known and popular cookbook entitled *The Joy of Cooking*. By the act of replacing the ingredients, Hanif is also playing with the possibilities of momentarily becoming “American.” Being in a new environment allows him new possibilities to forge an identity – differently from the stigmatized Iraqi one. The language of food permits Hanif to feel closer to Sirine. As the professor nurtures a desire of being safe, he finds in the act of cooking the means of being on the safe side of the American cultural hyphen.

The portrayal of imagined Arab world becomes the vocal idea of *Crescent*. This perpetuates the idea of Arabness. Rhetoric of significance of this novel falls mostly in the issue of longing for Arab community. Enhancing stories of food is effective in leading on to the problem of Arab community.

D. Transformed Belief: an intercultural Integration

Rhetoric of transformation aims at exploring the belief the work addresses. The change opposing the status quo becomes the central idea of this rhetoric (Doerr-Steven and Beach, 2009). *Crescent* struggles for ideological shift especially in intercultural integration. In *Crescent*, issues of Arab identity and cultural transmission are presented. The story offers a narrative structure where memory and cafe are strongly connected. Besides, the existence of cafe offering Middle Eastern food appears as an essential indicator of the Arab-American ethnicity.

A glance over the epigraph invites the reader to take part in the atmosphere which permeates Nadia’s Cafe. Described as “Aladdin’s Hidden Treasure”, it is a special place, mainly for the Arab immigrants who go to the U.S. searching for opportunities – professional and personal. As described,

At Nádía’s Café, there is a TV tilted in the corner above the cash register, permanently tuned to the all-Arabic station, with news from Qatar, variety shows and a shopping channel from Kuwait, endless Egyptian movies, Bedouin soap operas in Arabic, and American soap operas with Arabic subtitles. There is a group of regulars who each have their favorite shows and dishes and who sit at the same tables as consistently as if they were assigned. . . .69

There are students who come religiously, appearing at the counter with their newspapers almost every day for years, until the day they graduate and disappear, never to be seen again. And then there are students who never graduate. (20) In *Crescent*, for the Arab students, Nadia’s Cafe works as the materialization of home, and, consequently, of memory. The food cooked by Sirine seems to have the effect of reminding the café’s regular customers of their homelands. Fadda-Conrey (2006:5) also points to the importance of the café as a gathering place. She comments that Arab students, teachers, exiles, and immigrants flock to the cafe, which becomes for them the symbol of a recreated home in the midst of a foreign and alienating culture. In fact, the cafe also becomes 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.

Seen from this perspective, Abu-Jaber clearly portrays this idea and deals with the cafe as a strong metaphor of connection to the lost past; the space of the café recalls their

homelands and comforts the characters. Again, according to Wathington, it is important to question the way immigrants deal 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 work as a “sort of comfort in an otherwise strange and foreign language” (Wathington, 2007: 68-70).

It is in the cafe where the Arab immigrants “spend their time arguing and being lonely, drinking tea and trying to talk to Um-Nadia, Mireille, and Sirine” (17). Um-Nadia, the cafe owner and the “all-around boss,” points 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. (19)

As a consequence, for the Arabs, the cafe becomes the re-creation of the Middle East in the West; besides that, the “Real True Arab Food,” cooked by Sirine, is the bridge able to take them back to their old memories. This analysis relies on the premise that the different spaces in the cafe – the tables, the counter, the first kitchen, the back kitchen, and the garden in the back – construct a single unity, giving the place the status of a meaningful site of memory.

Curiously, in *Crescent*, not only the Arab and Latino immigrants, but also others such as the Italian waiter Eustavio from the Italian cafe, La Dolce Vita, share the same feeling of loneliness for being away from home. As the waiter declares, when “[w]e [immigrants], leave our home, we fall in love with our sadness” (127). In fact, as the novel demonstrates, there is no escape from the past, since one’s memories inhabit the very self and are thus from the self inseparable, and can be activated at anytime. Despite not having been opened to make the regulars remember their lives back in their old homes, the cafe fits Nora’s definition inasmuch as it is invested by a symbolic aura and becomes an object of a ritual, able to transmit values and traditions through generations.

The cafe is a locus for a kind of ritual for Abu-Jaber’s characters as it permits them to recall past experiences. It materializes memories through the manipulation of objects – such as newspapers, the TV set broadcasting the news from the East – besides the presence of Sirine’s food. As pointed out previously, it also takes on the status of a re-created home for the Arabs in the U.S. As a result, the cafe appears as the prosthetic device which “nourishes” the characters’ recollections.

Sirine’s presence in the kitchen softens the loneliness the regulars feel due to her kindness and her gentle voice. Besides that, “her food is so good that [they] cannot help themselves” as “they sit at tables, leaning toward her” (17). It is worth mentioning the reference to other ethnic workers: the Mexican busboy, Victor Hernandez; the Central American custodian, Cristóbal, and Um-Nadia’s daughter Mireille. Interestingly, as Fadda-Conrey states, all the characters, including the minor ones, are carefully delineated and “their individual national differences negate simplistic representations of the Arab identity” (195). The representation of the cafe as a re-created homeland can be seen through the interesting analysis of the names of the characters from Egypt and Kuwait, like in the following quotation.

[t]he names of the Arab students from Egypt and Kuwait--Schmaal, Jenooob, Shark, and Gharb, which in Arabic mean North, South, East, and West, respectively--signify distinct geographical entities that can be interpreted as individualized characteristics challenging the reductive attributes the term Arab often generates. (195)

Because of the interethnic interaction the cafe provides, Nouri Gana (2008:228) reflects the space as a representation of Andalusia, a place where Muslims and Jews lived in harmony, developing miraculous works of philosophy and architecture together. As Ganaremarks, Nadia's Café is *amini Andalusia of Arabicate (rather than Islamicate) culture in operation*.

The enacted rhetoric of transformation is in the understanding that the change is expected through the elaborated story of food. Café is used as the strongest evidence to defend the change. The change expected would be a deep understanding that minority group like Arabs in US needs to recall their memory site. Besides, living together with full-pledged respect from one another is elaborated to the idea of intercultural integration. *Crescent's* rhetoric of transformation is seen in the idea of expanding the understanding of Arab into an understanding that Arab also belongs to US reflected through the integration of cultures.

E. Conclusion

Conveying values could be through multiple ways. *Crescent*, an Arab-American literary work, performs its values through two rhetorical standpoints. Rhetoric of significance implies its strategies in exploring the core problems of the novel. Imagining Arab community through the existence of food becomes the strongest way this novel uses to maintain its issue. This problem is linked to the exploration of Arabness as the need of Arab-Americans. Problem of transformed belief becomes the central idea of the rhetoric of transformation. Transforming the belief of cultural integration, this novel uses café as the strongest metaphor for the integration. The good blend of ethnicities visiting the café becomes an effective elaboration to support the value proposed that equality and equity for everyone must be consistently maintained. This refers to the position of Arab people in US, meaning that the rhetoric of transformation is used to struggle the position of Arab-Americans.

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