

"Under the Spell" of Non-Sense¹: Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* as a Counter-Narrative and the Poetics of Making Sense of a Senseless World."

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The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical [if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted], and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine (Conrad 8).

Abstract: Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) provides a picture of the postmodern struggle with identity conflicts, especially among Arabs and Arab Americans in the twenty-first century. It could even amount to the status of a reference text as to the dilemmatic query involving the crisis of sense. *Crescent* approaches the crisis of sense from a conceptual and ideological position which demystifies the myth around the missionary discourse that America sets out to accomplish. The novel additionally reflects upon a cultural psychological understanding of the considered dilemma by intriguing the characters' perception of what defines an Arab American identity in the turn of the twenty-first century. In examining some aspects of sense and nonsense in *Crescent*, I argue that this text embodies a senseless world which it also tries to balance through the revelation of the contradictions enveloped in the U. S. support of state violence in the name of democracy as well as the invalidity of negative dogmas against Arabs. As a counter-narrative, *Crescent* transmogrifies a world under the spell of nonsense into a sensual experience as a way to cast away the obsession with exile.

Keywords: *Crescent*, sense, non-sense, civilizing mission, exile.

1. Introduction:

In English letters, the crisis of sense does evoke a multitude of dimensions and unfold onto myriad vantage points. Speaking of a crisis, we refer to "a turning point," "a radical change of status in a person's life," "a decisive moment in a literary plot," "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive

¹ My subtitle is in part borrowed from Diana Abu-Jaber, *Crescent* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003): (295). The image also lends itself to the loss even of academic figures in the novel, such as Han and Aziz, to nonsense to the extent of giving in to superstition.

change is impending,” “one with a highly undesirable outcome,” also “a situation that has reached a critical phase”. Aligned with the term sense, the notion crisis restricts the range of descriptions above to critical or controversial moments of undecidability or instability at the levels of “sensation, feeling, mechanism of perception [and] meaning” (*Webster’s*). As such, the crisis of sense could have a psychological load and entail states of irrationality and angst as much as it may suggest a certain ontological absence, loss or lack of purpose in life. Altogether, the concept could also encompass a condition of non-meaning, evoking whatsoever is generative of emptiness, devoid of reference and, consequently, invalid. As the crisis of sense takes in similar conditions of vacancy, nonsense or meaninglessness, it is even attributable to traces of failure, conflict or disintegration in establishing centers of reference, comprehending one’s circumstances and making sense of one’s identity and existence. Currently, all these implications are re-announced as a marker of the twenty-first-century literature, hence, the urgency to revisit the complexity of this notion, its literary representation and repercussions.

At least from modern to postmodern English literature, the crisis of sense or meaning, evoked interchangeably in this essay, becomes inseparable from the quest for meaning in life. As one modern literary instance, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* suggests the crucial principle of deciphering meaning in the quest for life which offers itself up as the ultimate preoccupation of the high and the low, from the seaman to the literary man. At the onset of the essay, the prefatory passage, taken from the same novel, goes beyond reinforcing a universal hunger for meaningfulness, to a challenging distinction between simple and complex levels of producing meaning in the folds of a story. In tandem with the appeal to this question, the current example of Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* (2003) provides a picture of the postmodern struggle with identity conflicts, especially among Arabs and Arab Americans in the twenty-first century, and could even amount to the status of a reference text as to this dilemmatic query.

Throughout *Crescent*, the crisis of sense is not solely that which is conceptual and ideological, disruptive of the balance in the missionary discourse that America sets out to accomplish, but also a cultural psychological one, since it intrigues the characters’ perception of what defines an Arab American identity in the turn of the twenty-first century. Peopled by characters, the majority of whom are either intellectual or have something to do with the intellect, *Crescent* provides the right framework for a discussion of the crisis of sense. There are, at least, four intellectual figures in this novel that could be said to function as the triggering forces in giving the considered crisis further prominence. These include Sirine’s Uncle, Hanif and Aziz, all of them Arab university professors in Los Angeles and Nathan, an American student of Sociology.

Nevertheless, the crisis of sense is not just endemic to the orbit of academia. That is why, even Sirine, the female protagonist and a chef in a Middle-Eastern restaurant in L.A., takes part in consolidating decisive controversies in the plot and restoring meaning to certain concepts. On the whole, the crises are intrinsically related to discerning one’s identity as an American with an Iraqi

heritage, a query sharpened with the venture to discuss politics by attempting to dig deep in the notion of the United States as an exporter of justice to the world and question its dominant perception of the Arab as a terrorist. For the Arab American, what brings this ideological crisis to the fore is the fact of inhabiting an in-between world, not often a blessing, because it also suggests not being “wholly one thing or another” i.e., in a way, “situated somewhere between Arab and American cultures---never quite rooted in either, always constrained by both” (Majaj, “Boundaries” 79).

Through a study of some aspects of sense and nonsense in *Crescent*, this article argues that this text embodies a senseless world which it also tries to balance with diverse strategies. Part of recording such a dark vision are the contradictions enveloped in the U. S. support of state violence in the name of democracy as well as the invalidity of negative dogmas against Arabs. In tandem with the conceptual/ideological crisis, the exile stands out as an existential trait of the identity crisis, given its identification with loss and a shadowy existence. However, the task to which Abu-Jaber puts herself is more intractable than transmitting the prevalent undecidability in meaning, because it also “helps make sense of the senselessness of our days” (Orfalea 117). As a counter-narrative, her book transmogrifies a world under the spell of nonsense into a sensual experience by seeking spiritual and physical feeding to cast away a nonsensical spell.

To the extent that the crisis of sense in *Crescent* stretches out to engulf conceptual, ideological and identity axes, “Under the Spell of Non-Sense” will interpret the crisis of sense in Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* while calling upon some specific particulars of theoretical works by Arab Americans. In the first place, “Master versus Counter-narratives” will study the features that make the characters’ world lack an essential valuable or also stable meaning, by scrutinizing discursive distortions in American politics and culture. In the second place, “Paradise Lost” tries to render the intricate crisis of sense for the exile. The section entitled “Paradise Regained: On Feeding Sense” turns our attention to the counter-strategies that Abu-Jaber implements to better understand the Arab American experience by considering the profuse role of the culinary in fostering a sense of direction. I will also dissect memory and its capacity to escape a death-in-life orbit and allow a full grasp of a whole self.

2. Master Versus Counter-Narratives:

By itself, the significant publication of *Crescent* almost two years after September 11th heralds the beginning of a global crisis for Arabs and Arab Americans. The turn of the twenty-first century is ideologically related to the controversies about American democracy as opposed to Arab terrorism. Describing the amalgam of these crises, Peter McLaren refers to the entry of “a reality zone already captured by its opposite: unreality. It is the world where nobody really wanted to venture. It is the world where order has given way to disorder, where reason has given way to unreason, where reality is compromised by truth, where guilt is presumed over innocence” and where “[p]ublic school teachers across the country eagerly prepare new courses on the glory of Western civilization, elevating the United States to its shining pinnacle” (149). His statement undermines the common sense agenda of

Americanism, in turn, challenged throughout *Crescent* with a meticulous focus on the inconsistencies emanating from an imperial democracy.

A love-story in essence, *Crescent* enfold a secondary plot whose foundation is questioning the exemplary image of the U. S. role in international pacifism.² It digresses into the American propagandist claim of re-establishing stability in the Middle East, reconceived as a rhetoric as devoid of its original or intended meaning as slogans like “manifest destiny”, “the white man’s burden” and the “civilizing mission” (Hamouda 288). This is achieved by showing that the embargoes, following the First Gulf War and aimed to punish the Iraqi regime for attempting to annex Kuwait, are no less disastrous than “the trope of war-as-a-lesson” which consists in teaching the native “how to behave” and acting “as schoolmaster” to an “unruly pupil” (MacDonald 27). With regard to the anti-humanitarian realities behind the U.S. hegemonic policy towards Iraq, including diseases and refugees resulting from the embargoes, any claim of reinstating order in the region loses its apparent implications and turns out to be no more than a superficial empty variation on a real imperial project (Abu-Jaber 169, 288).

In wagering on the lives of the Iraqi civilians and children and playing on “political and economic doctrines” such as free economy, globalization and democratization, regularly “sustained by militarism”, the economic sanctions on Iraq, which are endorsed by the U.S., unravel an explicit American desire to domesticate Iraq as a subject country (Hamouda 383). *Crescent* suggests that they fall under what Glenn E. Perry terms “Imperial Democratization”, meaning the fact of “hiding a struggle for domination –even ‘deceiving oneself’ – ‘behind the mask of political ideology’ (i.e., ‘pretexts and false fronts’) that make one’s goals ‘psychologically and morally acceptable’ and thus provide ‘weapons in the struggle for power’” (56).³ Hence, if there is something that logically explains U.S. interventionism in the Middle East it is the fact of dovetailing mythmaking and propagandistic mottoes with warfare for the sake of domination and supremacy.⁴

Apart from dismissing the U.S. announced intentions as mere illogical pretexts disguising pure self-interested motivations, we can decipher another side of embodying the ideological-conceptual crisis in *Crescent* by looking at the more recent “war on terror” (Hamouda 288). As it is pointed out by the Arab American feminist Joanna Kadi, there is a strong affinity between politics and the validity of such descriptions as Arab terrorism:

² For a detailed analysis of the romantic features in this novel, see my recent paper entitled “Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*: A Political Satire within a Love Story in Disguise”.

³ Perry quotes Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: The Struggle for power and peace*, 7th ed., revised by Kenneth W. Thompson and W. David Clinton (Boston: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2006): 97-100.

⁴ See an interesting discussion by Majid Khadduri and Edmund Ghareeb who explain that the “intervention of the United States in the Gulf crisis, apart from its obligations as a member of the Security Council, rested on three grounds,” among them, the protection of “its own national interests in the Gulf region”, the U.S. “commitments to a number of countries” and, last, the endeavor to defend “Western (Christian) values” (252).

As Arabs, like other people of color in this racist society, our race is simultaneously emphasized and ignored. For long periods of time, no one can remember that Arabs even exist. This is the case no matter how many times non-Arabs are reminded of our presence. Of course, this forgetfulness changes once there is another 'crisis' in the Middle East. Crisis: A by-product of past and current colonialism. During crises, Arabs can be reassured we exist as a distinct racial group. We will remember it, in the dark of night and the light of day. We will feel the effects of the social construction of 'the Arabs' that has cast us as enemy, other, fanatical terrorist, crazy Muslim. (Sic xvi)

The passage is quoted at length, for its propensity to trigger an important controversial weakness in the American rationale, understanding, usage and equation of Arabness and terrorism, in the sense that the latter does not always have strong grounds as long as it is the most contingent on both the world state of affairs and the East / West dialogues or their absence.

There are hints in *Crescent* that the current war on terror in the U.S. often amounts to a racist rhetoric that legitimates a harassing surveillance of Arabs and Arab Americans at the expense of the Civil Rights' achievements (Hamouda 272). The novel is keen on showing that the intruding gaze of the C.I.A. agents, who become a complementary segment of its general scene, turns state surveillance into a mere nuisance to ordinary immigrants (Abu-Jaber18). For instance, it goes deeper than establishing that everything about the overwhelming feeling of being scrutinized seems to unfold back to as "the Arab disease"; it's where "you keep thinking the C.I.A. is following you around" (Abu-Jaber116). Instead, *Crescent* prompts us to grapple the extent to which even the love intimations between the protagonists become subjected to a haunting, surveying gaze of a malicious intruder (Abu-Jaber114-7, 155-6). It is also in the name of the war on terror that surveillance becomes, for the Arab immigrant, associated with destabilizing effects which range from putting in practice the official stigmatization of the Arab as a terrorist to foregrounding "the loneliness of the Arab" (Abu-Jaber19). We can infer that such aspects put the civil rights of the Arab American at stake, thus, reflecting another crisis of sense inside the backbone of the American constitution.

Through a noticeable scrutiny of the attribute terrorist in *Crescent*, it is necessary to mention that Abu-Jaber goes profound than this in questioning the underlying assumptions enveloped in the American discourse of terrorism. At least four characters in the novel, including Sirine, Nathan, Aziz and Rana, attempt to make sense of the expression Arab terrorist and, more importantly, find out its link to reality. With respect to Sirine, the narrator stresses her failed efforts to verify the meaningfulness of the involved catchphrase, for, 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*" (sic, Abu-Jaber 19). The implication of her reflection does not simply question terrorism as a token of Arabness but, additionally, stresses its unreal exaggeration i.e., the fact that it is not always grounded in reality. In consequence, the inexistence of pertinent or concrete traces for this signifier transfigures the whole ideology into one governed by the biased essence of stereotypes.

In the same context, Aziz, the Iraqi poet and a visiting lecturer in L.A., allows us to get a better hold of the illusory aspect of the questionable signifier. In

the middle of a crucial discussion during Thanksgiving, Aziz notes, “[t]hey think we’re all terrorists anyway.” Victor, an assistant of the chef in Um-Nadia’s café retorts, “[w]ho’s ‘they’”, commenting, “I don’t think that.” In full humor, Aziz answers, “[i]f you and I were out shopping at the mall do you think any of the white guys there could tell the difference between us? They’d think you were one of my terrorist buddies” (Abu-Jaber197). The short exchange, especially through its last statement, serves as reinforcement of the word terrorist as part and parcel of a whole system of stereotyping quite prevalent throughout the history of minorities in the U.S. Despite Victor’s opposition, its scrutiny adjoins the expression terrorist to a semantic field of racial discrimination, as it is further suggested by Aziz’s distribution of pronouns that extends the scope of the word terrorist to describe non-whites, deflected to the bottom line of racial classification and turned into an interchangeable category with ‘terrorist’. Ironically, the word terrorist acquires the definitional capacity of a bias and, thus, reinforces the reformulation of this notion as another pretext for legitimating discrimination.

In view of all these attempts to contemplate the rationale for Arab terrorism and grapple with its meaning, nothing perfectly illustrates the deficit in the word terrorist as a signifier of being Arab than the outcome of Nathan’s search for its signification in the heart of the Middle East. As an American amateur of photography, Nathan not only consolidates the nonsensical essence of this tag but, also unravels the role of media in giving this word a sense of reality that it does by no means possess. The American amateur of photography provides a chronicle of his own struggle with comprehending this concept which I will quote at length:

‘[W]hen I was twenty-one, I didn’t know about the world at all. But I had this idea about cowboys and Indians and submarine commanders and Russian spies. I used to be unhappy because I thought that all the bad guys were already caught and there wasn’t much excitement left in the world. And then one day I went to see *Black Sunday*. You know—the one with Bruce Dern where the terrorists take over the Goodyear Blimp? But I came home thinking, oh, good, there’s still terrorists!

‘So I thought of that as my mission. I mean, don’t we all want to have missions? I started dreaming of going to someplace like Lebanon or Iraq and hunting down terrorists [...] You know, like James Bond? [...] I had this thought about going over to the Middle East and uncovering terrorist spies. I would take their photos and send them to the C.I.A. or some place.’ (Sic, Abu-Jaber 252-53)

Told as part of a speech that Nathan delivers on the occasion of his photograph exhibition in Dynamo Church (Abu-Jaber250), the passage explains how much the word terrorist is media-based. It demonstrates the construction of this notion through mass media such as James Bond’s movies. The term terrorist also retains an aspect of vagueness as long as Nathan associates it with what is termed as the American mission in the world which gets us back to its double or ambivalent quintessence.

From illusion, Nathan passes on to disillusionment. In fact, what brings him down-to-earth is the reality-proof to which he subjects his interiorized biases. His ultimate visit of the Middle East is evidence of how the American movies are misleading, pointing out the untrue mythical, also propagandistic side about the claim of the American mission in the world. By providing a counter-narrative to the master narrative, it also reinforces that the absence of reference is equal to the

absence of meaning. Nathan relates “And When I finally got there, you know, to the Middle East, I traveled through all these different countries, and this amazing thing happened—the people there were really nice to me,” adding, “I felt like I’d finally found something real. Like I’d regained my senses,” shortly followed by “I never found my terrorist, though, unless [...] it was me” (Abu-Jaber253). Right here, nobody can overlook Nathan’s realization of the wide gap between what is common sense and what is real. It is this very gap between truth and reality that begets an equivalent chasm in his initial comprehension of terrorism. We should also be able to capture the irony of the closing statement about never grasping his “terrorist, though, unless [...] it was me” (Abu-Jaber253). This acknowledgment of the impossibility of a referential meaning draws our attention to the idea that Nathan, instead of contributing to consolidating a distorted representation of Arabs according to a familiar western tradition, ends up disfiguring his proper image as a villain par excellence.

3. Paradise Lost:

Apart from providing a commentary on the negotiation of pivotal referential crises of sense, that lend themselves to certain recurrent catchphrases, *Crescent* prompts us to look at identity issues which are incorporated within a similar critical trajectory. In effect, the crises that the Arab and Arab American characters endeavor to comprehend, Abu-Jaber’s narrative demonstrates, do not only or always pertain to specific notions or ideologies, that is solely encompassed in political and historical interpretations, but principally internal, if not existential. To investigate the overlapping process of such experiences, I intend to examine in close Hanif’s struggle to decipher the interior clash inhabiting the exiled self, without losing sight of other minor exiled characters. I will focus on the inner workings of a character to which Sirine’s uncle refers as someone who “needs someone to show him how to live in this country and how to let go of the other” (Abu-Jaber47). What is noticeable about this personality is its striking awareness of veering towards a dilemma state of mind abounding with meaninglessness and intricate quandaries. Further, I will comment, with some briefness, on other instances of the encroachment of nonsense on the perception of one’s alienated existence.

Hanif’s sensibility to exile as an ambivalent predicament provides us with a telling example of the cultural crisis of disconnection from one’s roots. In fact, only, at first, does exile, for him, emerge as the alternative to free expression, security and survival. While still in President Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Han dreams 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 heartbeats, his breaths, the pulse in his eyelids” (Abu-Jaber14). Apart from representing an opportunity to escape persecution, exile also sounds 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 allows him to grasp firmly the ironies that could be enfolded in the alternative of exile as a synonym of dislocation and alienation.

To Han, what marks the emergent crisis of sense is the re-conception of his exile from Iraq as being indivisible from losing his sense of direction. The note he leaves to Sirine before his sudden resignation points out “‘Things are broken. The world is broken’” (Abu-Jaber296). Somewhere in the novel, Han reconfigures exile as

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 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. (Abu-Jaber162)

These contemplations best reflect the dark world of non-meaning and ghostly presences that bounds Han’s fractured sense of self throughout the novel and best manifests itself through an ever-wandering “soulful ache” (Tepper 24).

The losses that accompany Han’s first-hand experience of imposed immigration range from the physical contact with the homeland to the religious scope. In truth, his enforced journey to the west becomes almost conditioned with a certain loss of faith embodied through the fact of cutting with praying (Abu-Jaber71). Out of practice, Han turns the prayer beads into mere relics of his Iraqi identity as a Moslem. Thus, his first reply to Sirine’s question “do you believe that your religion---that Islam---defines who you are?” is only the blank vague statement: “‘For me, it’s more complicated than that. 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’” (Abu-Jaber161). Even his later clarification, “I don’t believe in a specific notion of God. But I do believe in social constructions, notions of allegiance, cultural identity....,” does not reveal the portrait of a person who still sees meaning in his religious identity as a Moslem (Abu-Jaber162). For this reason, he soon lapses from spirituality to the only meaningful void that overwhelms his sense of being, by drawing exile as the broadest truth in his life:

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. (Abu-Jaber162)

In this sense, the only thing that Han ends up with from an experience of exile is uprootedness fused with an absurdist consciousness of non-existence, worse an existence in shadows, to which he becomes starkly enlightened.

The most illustrative figure of exile reconceived as overwhelming self-alienation, rather than safety, is engulfed in the image of inhabiting the world of the down-and-out which is quite common on American pavements. Han says to Sirine:

Sometimes when I see some of those homeless people on the street—you know, the ones walking around talking to the air, shuffling around, an old torn-up clothes—sometimes I think I’ve never felt so close to anyone as those people. They know what it feels like—they live in between worlds so they’re not really anywhere. Exiled from them. (Abu-Jaber162)

Due to this state of non-belonging and instability, Han starts even to be skeptical of his work ethics, including his passion for translation. Describing the tasks he exercises in class with students, he affirms, “[h]alf the time I don’t know what I’m saying. I throw out some thoughts and then hope one or two of them sticks. It’s all

words to me” (Abu-Jaber93). The citation is the best indicative that arbitrariness and meaninglessness turn out solid tokens of cultural displacement and get impregnated with a strong sense of paradise lost to the extent of verging on devouring Han’s academic principles.

Nevertheless, Han is not the only character in the novel that inhabits this world of non-meaning but, instead shares it together with two other characters, Sirine and Nathan. An orphan since age nine when her parents, emergency care personnel for the American Red Cross, were murdered in a raid in Africa, Sirine, at thirty-nine years, experiences a condition of symbolical exile (Abu-Jaber50). “What Han says reminds her of a sense that she’s had--about both knowing and notknowing something. She often has the feeling of missing something and not quite understanding what it is that she’s missing” (Abu-Jaber62). Critic Robin E. Field makes 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” (Abu-Jaber216). Indeed, similarly to Han, Sirine could not be definite about what faith she has, particularly, when she ventures to reply “I suppose I don’t actually have one [religion],” adjoining, “I mean, my parents didn’t, so...” (Abu-Jaber171). Letting her sentence trail off, echoing Han’s in a way, she only comments “Well, I believe in lots of things” (Abu-Jaber171). When such a statement occurs in a workshop on Women in Islam it renders best Sirine’s dilemma.

As a striking feature of Sirine’s internal clash, the passage about her sensitivity to the failure of language to make any sense and console Nathan for his circumstances is quite evocative of a complex crisis. After listening to Nathan’s traumatic adventures in Iraq, ranging from the execution of his beloved (Han’s sister) to his consequent displacement, Sirine has reached an inference similar to the one it crossed her mind upon learning of her parents’ death. She wishes

she knew how to say something wise or consoling to him, something that wouldn’t sound frightened or awkward. But then she remembers the time after her parents’ death when people would approach her and try to explain her loss to her; they said things that were supposed to cure her of her sadness, but that had no effect at all. And she knew then, even when she was nine years old, that there was no wise or consoling thing to say. There were only certain helpful kinds of silences, and some were better than others. (Abu-Jaber88-9)

On both occasions, the only truth which is perceptible to Sirine is the fact of being failed or defeated by verbal language, which represents, in itself, the peak of the crisis of sense in the novel.

In Nathan’s context, we should remind ourselves that his crisis of sense goes deeper than interrogating the ambiguity and even the unintelligibility of certain notions in order to engulf his sense of who he is as an American. When he speaks of himself he refers to an “overgrown student in search of a life, may be” (54) and, shortly, comments “I’m made out of powder” (Abu-Jaber55). Sirine compares him to “a monk—sunken cheeks, hungry lunar shadow eyes, a body inhabited by an old spirit” (Abu-Jaber329). The simile suggests a state of death-in-life, equally perceptible in Nathan’s shots which are symbolic of a world close to a wasteland and reach the onlooker as “gray dreams, full of accusation and a lingering sense of

emptiness” (Abu-Jaber253). These shots make sense only in the perspective of a person separated from his beloved due to a death execution and an essential civilizational cultural clash. Beyond this, the pictures convey but disfiguration,emptiness and absence.⁵

4.Paradise Regained: On Feeding Sense:

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

Crescent identifies a tactile view of the world as a significant means of making peace with oneself, the world around us and its system of signification. As a matter of fact, if there is something that saves Sirine from a desperate awareness of the contradictions around her as strikingly as Hanif it is the staying power that she is able to derive from cooking to others or eating together with them. Her concentration on taking care of this skill and forging it brings us back to Carolyn Korsmeyer’s view that “the intimacy of eating is part of what knits together those who eat--the mutual trust presumed, the social equality of those who sit down together, and the shared tastes and pleasures of the table” (187). Critics Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom emphasize the pertinence of food in bridging “the gap that may look like chaos and add[ing] structure to the narrative” (39).⁶ In such a way, feeding and eating are given a strong potential of establishing meaningfulness.

From Sirine’s perspective, as long as she cooks and nurses her tactile expertise she exists, figures her sense of being and, even, turns what sounds nonsensical into something meaningful. Food is 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 inside her own body, to stop thinking, to work, and to simply exist inside the simplest actions, like chopping an onion or stirring a pot” (Abu-Jaber19). Suffice it to scrutinize Sirine’s ability to grasp the life, the love and the richness that could be enveloped inside a forkful of sweet potatoes into her mouth:

The potatoes are soft as velvet, the gravy satiny. It is as if she can taste the life inside all those ingredients: the stem that the cranberries grew on, the earth inside the bread, even the warm blood that was once inside the turkey. It comes back to her, the small secret that was always hers, for years, the only truth she seemed to possess—that food was better than love: surer,

⁵ Due to the space restriction, it is not possible to analyze another dimension about the predominance of non-sense in Abu-Jaber’s work,that is, the omnipresence of superstition as a cogent motif.

⁶Likewise, Abu-Jaber affirms that, in her family, “meals were always the place where things really got hashed out. That was where we found out who each other was” (Field 217). That is why, food is depicted as a pivotal dynamic in *Crescent*, departing from the principle “that if you want to work spirituality, or if you have a sense of it of any kind, one of the best ways to go about it is to take care of yourself. Take care of your physical being, so that the spiritual being will also be brightened and nurtured” (Field224-25).

truer, more satisfying and enriching. As long as she could lose herself in the rhythms of peeling an onion, she was complete and whole. And as long as she could cook she would be loved. (Abu-Jaber194)

From the taste, she can identify the essential ingredients with precision. Her philosophy is that “food should taste like where it came from. I mean good food especially. You can sort of trace it back. You know, so the best butter tastes a little like pastures and flowers, that sort of stuff. Things show their origins” (Abu-Jaber69). Even when Aziz asks to “consider the difference between the first and third person in poetry” in relation to “the difference between looking at a person and looking through their eyes”, Sirine picks up on his analogy saying, “that’s how I feel about eating” (Abu-Jaber196). She explains that “tasting a piece of bread that someone bought is like looking at that person; but tasting a piece of bread that they baked is like looking out of their eyes” (Abu-Jaber196-7).

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). With every withering interest in feeding herself or others, Sirine fails to get hold of her life, that is, fails to recuperate an understanding of the world. As long as she does not yield herself to concocting different dishes she loses every other stamina, among them, the ability to establish meanings in her life. It is related that one year after the unexpected departure of Hanif and, in the course of resuming her creativity as a chef, “Sirine is starting to feel like she can breathe again without wanting to cry. Mostly she feels the neutrality of absence—neither happy nor sad, apart from sudden surges of feeling that lick through her, quick and electric as nerve synapses. Only when she cooks, in those moments of stirring and tasting, does she feel fully restored to herself” (Abu-Jaber340). It takes her only stirring, or another simple action, to regain wholeness. Right here, only through cooking does Sirine forge a strong ability to bear Han’s absence of Hanif and await him with a mixture of despair and hope.

Crescent fosters the yoke of the crucial importance of physical feeding to spiritual feeding by contrasting Sirine and Han’s incongruent responses to the tactile. While Sirine “tastes everything edible, studies the new flavors, tests the shock of them; and she learns, every time she tastes, about balance and composition, addition and subtraction”, Hanif simply “watches, eyeing the strange foods. When she offers him a taste, he closes his eyes and shakes his head” (Abu-Jaber185-6). The novel insists on this divergence as much as it points out the influence of Sirine’s awareness of the communicative secret in feeding on enhancing Han’s journey from nonsense to sense. Nobody loses sight of their collaborative making of baklava, a sweet cake based on almonds and other fruits (Abu-Jaber59-61). For a while, Sirine draws Han from his impending sense of exile towards unforgettable sharing and pleasure. Similar episodes allow us to always keep in mind that Sirine sees food as “a contact language---a medium to translate experience and create a meaningful world,” as a synonym “with love, prayer, creativity, and healing” and uses it “for translation, to connect and communicate with everyone around her” (Mercer and Strom 40).

In tandem with this reading, Han's growth from a stark state of emptiness to a meaningful existence is, to a large scale, fashioned by his recollections of Iraq and its landmarks. Nobody misses how remembering the homeland and its grandeur enhances self-reconciliation and expresses a continuing struggle for some sense of the exile, for a feeling of being safely at home. In "Arab American Literature and the Politics of Memory", Lisa Suhair Majaj explains that,

[m]emory 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 negotiate ethnic identity. (266)

If there is something that still relates Han to a meaningful world it is his ability to breathe life into his relationship with his family. As he renders it, "for a moment, I forgot where I was. I forgot that this America. I was on the banks of the Tigris. I could see the sun through my eyelids. My sister was about to call me in to eat. It's like the light broke for me and brought it all back and then I had to return to this place" (Abu-Jaber187). With every act of remembering, Han goes through a sense of rebirth and restores his childhood in Iraq, despite the scare of an utter loss of his present life to the past. He suggests that "sometimes when I start remembering ... sometimes I'm afraid I won't be able to stop" (Abu-Jaber188). As implied, what meanings memory could re-construct for the exile turns out insufficient as a guarantee of wholeness.

As a result of this incompleteness, Han's recuperation of an authentic sense of his Iraqi identity becomes associated with an inevitable return back to Iraq. The affirmation that "it's like there's some part of me that can't quite grasp the thought of never returning. I have to keep reminding myself. It's so hard to imagine" explains that visiting the homeland is the only and one prerequisite of wholeness (Abu-Jaber62). In a letter to Sirine, Han writes: "I'm driven by the prospect of return: my country won't let go of me—it's filled me up. You know that. And a certain fear—an emotional fear—has suddenly lifted and freed me" (Abu-Jaber312). Thus, when Han cuts with inaction and ventures to re-enter Iraq he expresses the scared of losing the last thread that could re-establish his grasp over his identity as an Iraqi, that is the possibility of not seeing his mentally-disturbed mother before her death. This audacious act shows the thin affinity between sense and nonsense, given the folly of the homecoming despite the strong probability of a death execution.

5. Conclusion:

As I have tried to show in my reading into some aspects of sense and nonsense through Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, the considered narrative offers solid convenient contextual triggers for investigating the crisis of sense. In parallel, its immediate academic environment adds a complex challenge, essentially, to the overarching identity crises embodied in the novel. Among these challenges are the multifaceted controversies, extending from the lack of identification when certain notions cease to signify or lose their foundational aspects of reference and meaningfulness, to the

features of opposition between an original meaning and the abuses made out of it. In this last case, reality does not just belie certain conceptions but, additionally re-identifies their emanation from illusions. As such, the crisis of sense in *Crescent* can only make sense in the plural form, rather than the singular.

Likewise, this literary approach of sense and non-sense alerts us to Abu-Jaber's attempts to make sense of the twenty-first-century crises for the Arab American by sending out a hopeful note. Her book denounces the disastrous complicity inherent in current political discourses while countering the inconsistencies and disfigurations of the master-narrative with "a simple, human story about love and fear and jealousy that can transcend culture and have an immediacy that will speak to a lot of different people" (Field 216). Hence, even the incorporation of a complex ideological background does not undercut "a vision of life that, while haunted by past suffering and loss, holds out hope for the future" (Mercer and Strom 46). By bringing to the fore the communicative up-building of remembering and eating, I have also pointed out that when verbal language fails to determine transparent meanings other means of signification take over to re-establish our sense of direction and foster the stamina to regain meanings with the cultivation of sense and care for the self.

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