Chapter IV

Construction of Arab Identity in Arab American Counter-narratives

*Nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivation felt at not being with others in the communal habitation*

---Edward Said

The term “Arab Americans” refers to Arab Muslims and non-Muslims and their descendants who have migrated from the Middle East, largely voluntarily, to the United States from the 1880s till the present time. Arab American writers have had a significant presence in the U.S. literary field since the nineteenth century. Though these writers have migrated to the United States from different societies of the Middle East particularly Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, carrying with them different religious and spiritual heritages, yet they “staked out an individual space from which they explore their own relations to identity, culture, religion, and the building or inhabiting of a life in the United States” and tried “to bridge Eastern and Western philosophy, thought, and religion.”¹ The first wave of Arab American writings that continues till the early decades of the twentieth century has been more assimilationist. Nevertheless, attempts of assimilation have been subject to many factors that alter the mainstream of Arab American literature. Among these factors are the creation of Israel in 1948 and the ultimate American support for establishing a Jewish state on the Arab lands. The creation of Israel causes Arab Americans to rethink of their position in the United States and bring themselves towards unity with other Arabs especially the Palestinian refugees.²
With the start of the twenty-first century, the subject matter in Arab American literature takes a change to meet anti-Arab racism in the U.S. that gets worsened by the 9/11 attacks on the U.S and fueled by U.S. military involvement in the Middle East. Due to these developments, Arab immigrants’ different religious and cultural backgrounds are replaced by a common thread of immigration that unifies them. Moreover, the growing racial perception of these immigrants as terrorists enhances the solidification of their unity. Therefore, themes of displacement, discrimination and racism against Arabs and Muslims dominate the majority of texts written during the period from 2001 to 2009. In the introduction to their anthology of Arab-American fiction, *Dinarzad’s Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction*, Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa comment on the inextricable link between the American politics triggered by the events of 9/11 and the need to assert Arab-American literature on the US literary map:

> Post-September 11, the invasion of Afghanistan, the extralegal treatment of Arab Americans, [and] the war on Iraq must be considered turning points not only for the community but also for the larger American public’s awareness of this community’s existence. Arab Americans could not try to engage the world and remain anonymous.\(^3\)

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the white American rhetoric fuelled by misconstrued patriotism rushed to vilify and marginalize persons of an allegedly suspicious racial makeup. The events lead to a production of white American fiction on Arabs characterized by what Rothberg calls “a failure of the imagination.” Therefore, Rothberg argues for a “model of critical multiculturalism”
that will produce “a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship.” This writing strategy is an inherent characteristic in Arab American fiction of the post 9/11 that Georgiana Banita calls “moral racialization” after her examination of Laila Halaby’s novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). This tendency of replacing the dominant racial discrimination by a moral discourse can be perceived in the following lines taken from an anthology “*E-mails from Scheherazad*” by an Arab American poet and novelist, Mohja Kahf, in which she allows her impatience with the typical Arab stereotypes to come to the fore without fear of direct confronting the post–September 11 American political landscape:

No, I’m not bald under the scarf
No, I’m not from that country
where women can’t drive cars
No, I would not like to defect
I’m already American
But thank you for offering
What else do you need to know
relevant to my buying insurance,
opening a bank account,
reserving a seat on a flight?
Yes, I speak English
Yes, I carry explosives
They’re called words
And if you don’t get up
Off your assumptions,
They’re going to blow you away.
Therefore, if reading in previous chapters is mainly based on Orientalist and neo-Orientalist approaches to novels written by white American novelists whose writings, indeed, are influenced by racial prejudices and biased attitudes toward Arab Muslims, a different path is chosen by these writers. It is the imagination of Arab American writers or brown Americans, that has influenced the literary production in this period and which tries to subvert the negative stereotypes by introducing their own “counter-narrative” defined by Edward Said as a “great deconstructive power.”

This chapter will concentrate on the works of Arab American writers to show that, unlike white American writers, Arab American writers tend to employ literary strategies to subvert stereotypes and misconceptions commonly associated with Arabs in white American literature and popular culture. These writers also tend to look closely at the Arab community from within in order to explore some of the problems that Arab Americans encounter. Therefore, the image of the Arab Muslim community is central to this work. In other words, this type of ‘counter-narrative,’ in contrast to the American narrative, tends to focus on the marginalized Arab ethnic minority inside the US.

Through their treatment of the experience of Arab Muslim characters, Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby emphasize the impossibility of achieving an equal life with the white Americans. The two novels, *Crescent* (2003) and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) are thematically similar. This similarity can be attributed to the similar imagination of writers who descend from the same ethnicity, settle in the same diasporic society and receive the same treatment. They are part of an ethnic community that currently faces a dilemma in terms of its racial classification and suspicious outlook. The obscurity that Arabs witness in the ethnic map inside the United States has made this ethnic group the most invisible among all minorities.
Though, according to the US official Census records, Arabs are considered white, however, this group has no legal position within the spectrum of minority cultures from which it can legally articulate its effective concerns about discrimination. Therefore, the socio-economic, political, religious and ideological dynamics of Arab American communities needs to be adequately addressed and contextualized while discussing a literary work produced by an Arab American writer in this period. These ambiguous racial positions drive Helen Samhan, Executive Director of the Arab American Institute, to state that the current federal white categorization of Arab Americans from the Middle East and North Africa within the “white ‘majority’ context” does not resolve confusions regarding their racial status.8

Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) is the story of an Arab couple, Jassim and Salwa, who leaves the deserts of their native Jordan for those of Arizona in the turbulent days following 9/11 to fulfill their quintessential dreams. Yet their life becomes the focus of the FBI investigation and they begin to experience a longing for their homeland. Although the two live far from Ground Zero, they cannot escape the racial discrimination of the citizens and the FBI agents. *Once in a Promised Land* offers an instructive insight into the struggles facing Arab Americans in post 9/11 America. The title the “promised land” may be the place of new beginnings and possibilities, the United States, for Arab immigrants. After 9/11, the Americans become increasingly intolerant and distrustful of Arabs and Islamic cultures. The novel portrays the American character’s intolerance with and the xenophobic attitude towards Arab immigrants and reveals that post 9/11 America is rife with anti-Arab racism.

Jassim, a hydrologist, believes passionately in his mission to make water accessible to all people in the arid Arizona. His obsession in providing clean water
for the people leads the FBI to suspect him of being a terrorist. His contract with the company he is working for is terminated. Salwa, a Palestinian twice displaced, is a banker and real estate broker. She is treated badly by American customers at the bank and finds good company in Jake, an American co-worker, who later falls in love with her. The racial profiling and the harsh realities of being viewed as outsiders, Jassim and Salwa turn away from each other and begin to lead parallel lives. Jassim accidentally hits a teenage boy with his car and kills him. He keeps this secret from Salwa and finds a way to deal with his own grief. Salwa too keeps several secrets from Jassim. She becomes pregnant against her husband's wishes and is consumed by an eventual miscarriage. By detailing their failing marriage in a hostile society, the novel describes Jassim and Salwa's isolation not only from American society but also from each other.

In *Once in a Promised Land*, Halaby highlights the contradictions in the propagated American Dream for people living on the U.S soil regardless their colour, race and religious affiliation. It further challenges stereotypes about Arab Americans whose figure in US popular representations harkens to the exoticism of distant cultures and places and suggests an irrationality that can be contrasted with the rationality of Western liberal societies. In this counter-narrative, Halaby adopts a literary resistance strategy of storytelling that enables Arab immigrants to come closer to their native culture in times of adversity when the host society shows racial discrimination and injustices. Similarly, in *Crescent*, Diana Abu-Jaber uses intertextuality as a creative strategy of resistance. Her *Crescent* makes references to issues, misconceptions and stereotypes embedded in both European and American texts. In this sense, Abu-Jaber explores a serious issue that members of the Arab American community encounter which partly causes their marginalization in the US.
social, political and cultural arenas. By examining these two novels, analysis in this chapter aims at showing how these novels vacillate between a moral understanding of post 9/11 racial discrimination on the one hand and resistance to this discrimination by denouncing terrorism and adherence to Arabic tradition on the other.

*Once in a Promised Land* denounces the racial prejudices against Arab Muslims in the neo-Orientalist discourse of white Americans that is “extensively racialized” against people identifiable not just by their religion but also by their racial appearance. Jassim and Salwa Haddad, the main characters, are an Arab American couple who struggle to find a place for themselves and live comfortably with well-paying jobs, fancy cars and more space and privacy than they ever had in Jordan, but for much of the novel they remain confused and thwarted by their mixed identity. The more they struggle for achieving the American Dream the more they become pessimistic and confused. Their lives are further sophisticated by the American “patriotic breathing of those around them” and by what Salwa in particular has perceived as “those red, white, and blue fingers flapping at her, flicking her away.” At the end, this couple is informed by everything around them of the impossibility of achieving the American Dream and consequently gets branded as outcasts and thus doomed to suffer a long and spectacular ruin.

Counter-narrative, as a narrative, usually has two main functions that differentiate it from narrative work: (a) it counters an official/dominant narrative, and (b) it functions to open space for alternative narratives to be heard by creating public debate about an official narrative. It performs multiple functions such as offering an alternative representation of the identity of the marginalized people and giving them a voice in stories that critique the Master Narrative. These counter-
narratives “counter not merely (or even necessarily) the grand narratives, but also (or instead) the “official” and “hegemonic” narratives of everyday life.”

Hegemonic narrative, that is also called a Master narrative or official narrative, is first introduced by the French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard in 1984 as a *Grand Narrative* that he defines as “the unifying and legitimating power” whose aim is one “of speculation and emancipation.” In the present thesis, the first three chapters have dealt with many kinds of post 9/11 American hegemonic narratives.

This chapter on the other hand examines the way in which post 9/11 Arab American counter-narratives emerge as a direct response to white Master narrative. Post 9/11 Arab American narrative is largely counter-narrative primarily because this narrative defends Arab marginalized ethnicity against a strong white narrative written in a period in which “Evil, of course, means *Arabs*. Or, at the very least, it insinuates that evil is exclusive to the Islamic world while the United States has a divine monopoly on goodness,” and Arabs are perceived with “a very special hostility and fear.” In 1967, Kenneth Burke noted that literature is fundamentally equipment for living referring to a style of narrative writing that is perceived through a process of deconstructive reading defined by Jacques Derrida as an “oppositional reading” technique. In doing so, Burke and Derrida draw our attention to our usage of literature as a strategy that shapes our understanding of the world we write and read.

Counter-narrative voice in *Once in a Promised Land* directly deals with the backlash of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and its effect on the lives of Arab immigrants. By following the experience of the Arab Muslim immigrants inside the American society, readers witness how the prejudices and the sad reality of being considered outsiders cause Jassim’s and Salwa’s alienation not only from American
society, but also from one another. Ironically, isolation outside, in places of work, leads to lack of communication between them at home causing an accumulation of secrets to a point where it seems impossible to tell the other what is going on and they begin leading parallel lives. On the one hand, Salwa is shocked to find herself pregnant against her husband’s wish and goes on in a sexual affair with Jake, her bank co-worker after she finds her husband has no interest in children. On the other hand, Jassim, tries to soften his isolation in the company of an American waitress named Penny after having killed a boy in a car accident. This lack of communication aggravates the situation and leads to a tragic denouement. When Salwa tells Jassim about her plans to go back to Jordan for some time without him, he realizes that the lack of communication might mean the end of their relationship:

In leaving out what was most on his mind, Jassim realized that they had spent their lives together not saying what mattered most, dancing around the peripheries instead of participating. He had seen in her a passion and excitement for life that had become dulled almost immediately upon their arrival in the United States. What he wanted in her could not exist in America. Could not exist with him,

Halaby initiates her novel with a preface informing the reader that her main characters are Arab Muslims: “Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. Nothing and everything,” a statement that reveals the fact against which Arab Muslims are judged inside the American society. Though, Halaby tries to distance her protagonists from their religious background in order to achieve assimilation, racism overcomes all their attempts. This indicates that the lofty ideals about fairness and equal opportunity characterizing the social structure of the country are
hypocritical. In the preface to the novel, both Salwa and Jassim are referred to as being Muslims; the first page of the novel identifies Jassim as a non-believer: “Jassim did not believe in God, but he did believe in Balance.” Later in the novel Jassim reflects on how his belief in God weakened and his awareness of his bodily instincts became stronger through swimming: “I have not prayed in a mosque since I was a young man…Because I don’t believe in God…?” He remembers his father saying “without God there would be no hope” when he asks him “Baba, why do you believe in God?” However, Jassim does not agree with his father, but he does not say out loud what he thinks: “I don’t believe in God, and I hope.”

Jassim embodies Arab immigrants’ wish to achieve assimilation. As a hydrologist working in the U.S. to promote accessibility to clean water, he is an important contributing part of the American system, yet he is cast out. Each of the characters has a separate and growing experience of what America has made him or her. Arabs who want to assimilate remain outsiders and part of 9/11 events that constitute ethnicity primarily made up of political and cultural influence of the 9/11. Therefore, assimilative demands for Arabs and Arab Americans are very high and at the same time they are rejected. The American Dream becomes accessible to Arabs only if they renounce their multiple national belongings, religion and culture and submit to the demands of a melting-pot America which are unbearable standards to the Arab community who is not ready to reject its own heritage, yet doomed to outsiderness:

You [Arab immigrants] will not fit in here unless you behave appropriately, and this will be possible only if the differences that set you apart from us – your language, your culture, your religion, your attitude – are somehow naturalized, normalized, muted, consigned to
another time, or linked to a place and a way of life you have left behind.²¹

Though the American Dream ensures certain values like equality, freedom and justice to be available to any person in the United States without having a person to melt in that culture, however, some scholars reveal the hypocrisy of the American Dream and question the legitimacy of its demands. After the second world war, Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish social economist and his colleague Sissela Bok call attention to “An American Dilemma” when they recognize the failure of U.S. society to live up to its stated values of equality and justice for everyone regardless of race.²² This dilemma is recognized at the end by Jassim and Salwa who voluntarily leave their homes to America to discover that what is presented as “freedom” and “opportunity” for all is a thinly veiled system of discrimination that often excludes them.

Total melting in the American culture becomes a standard to judge Arab loyalty to America. So “either be with us or you are out of line,” a standard rejected by Arabs and Arab Americans in the American society. In Once in a Promised Land, Salwa has a tendency to follow this standard but without erasing her identity and Arab heritage. She accepts the American flag on her car, offered to her by her American friend, in order to avoid racist attacks: “Joan gave us both American flag decals for our cars, so that we can announce to every stranger we drive by that we do not intend to blow anything up.” “Do you think people who might intend to blow things up are putting those same decals on their cars for disguise?”²³ In Arizona, Jassim and Salwa come under personal scrutiny by citizens inspired by Bush’s call to act as the eyes and ears of the government or what Judith Butler would call “petty sovereigns”, a task initially reserved for members of bureaucratic institutions but
now extended to the entire nation. Salwa who works in a bank as a teller is verbally assaulted by a bank client, “a native Tucsonan, American born and raised,” who prefers to discuss her bank account with someone who can “understand better.” With astounding presence of spirit, Salwa offers her the option of a Mexican man, an American lesbian, or their Chinese director. The point Halaby makes here is that after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Arab Muslim community has fallen many steps behind other immigrant communities and got categorized not only as second class community but also as a social danger to the national security as: “Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us” and whose goals must be foiled at any price.26

Crescent (2003), Diana Abu-Jaber’s second novel, is a story of exile, search for identity and racial discrimination. Abu-Jaber notes that this American perception of the Arabs as potential terrorists has long been in existence before the events of 9/11. Abu-Jaber’s Crescent opens in 1990 during the Second Gulf War fought between the Western allies, led by America, and Iraq. The novel’s whole action takes place in Nadia’s Café. With the break of the Gulf War, this Café, readers are told, was known as Falafel Faroah and was owned by an Egyptian man. But due to the Gulf War and its negative consequences on the lives of Arabs in the United States, CIA men began frequenting the restaurant in quest of “terrorist schemes developing in the Arab-American community.” Frightened, the Egyptian owner called his Lebanese friend, Um-Nadia, to Beirut telling her “if she’d like to buy a restaurant, cheap,” an offer that she accepted, “she said, sure, why not?” From this time, the legacy of Nadia’s Café was born and called “Real True Arab Food”. Therefore, discrimination against Arabs inside the United States began long before the terrorist attacks of the 9/11 but got reinforced after the attacks in a manner that
did not pass without leaving its imprint on the imagination and psyche of these Arab-American feminists as is reflected in their writings.

The main character in the novel is Sirine, a thirty-nine year old Iraqi-American who lives with her uncle and works as the main chef at Nadia’s Café. Though she does not speak Arabic, the language of her father, Sirine creates an atmosphere of homeland for Arabs who are fated for loneliness in the American society. The Café provides a comfortable haven for Arabs where they congregate and talk about home. *Crescent* does also interweave a story of love and mutual understanding across different cultures and diverse ethnicities. The novel, for example, creates a physical and psychological ethnic borderland in which Arabs and other minorities such as Latinos, Iranians and Turks coexist and communicate. This interaction among *Crescent*’s ethnic characters emphasizes the ability of minorities in negotiating differences and creating a home in the midst of a foreign and alienating culture.

Abu-Jaber introduces, as the background to the world of racial discrimination, the historical reality of the 2001 terrorist attacks and their effects on the lives of the Arabs who are seen by the larger public as homogeneously complicit in these savage acts. This attitude begins to loom larger in the white American literary production and media after 9/11. Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* provides contrasting images of the lives, aspirations and concerns of these ethnic minorities inside the United States and defend those living in the Middle East as well. While white Americans depict their Arab Muslim characters in a negative manner, Abu-Jaber presents a positive picture of these characters and those drawn from other ethnic minorities like Latinos, Iranians and Turks. While she utilizes the questions of identity, hybridity and multiculturalism to promote a greater degree of racial
integration and coexistence, white American writers use these motifs to further deepen the conflict between ethnic minorities and the mainstream American culture. Therefore, Abu-Jaber's approach is basically cultural and open-minded towards all humans while that of the white Americans is predominantly political and prejudiced against the Arabs, the Muslims and Islam.

In *Crescent*, Arabs are not terrorists; rather they are victims of American racial prejudices. Sirine, an Arab American chef and the most familiar character to Arab immigrants in Los Angeles, wonders why America suspects her fellow Arabs: “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*.” In the novel as a whole, terrorism weighs heavy on the minds of Arabs living inside the United States. Arab Americans are a rejected ethnicity in America: “They’re like animals…all half-animals and half-something else.” These racial prejudices affected many young Arabs who prefer not identifying themselves as Arabs: “Ask anyone, Persians, Turks, even Lebanese and Egyptians-none of them want to be the Arab.” Aziz, the Syrian poet states: “Islam has a hard enough time in this country.” Being a part of this religion, Aziz wonders: “Who knows? I am Aziz, I am large, I contain multitudes. I defy classification.” These Arab views asserted by Nathan, a white American friend to Arabs, who acknowledges American racist injustices done to Arabs inside America:

Things that Americans believe they don’t have to learn about. You may want to live a life of benign indifference to the rest of the world, but understand that as long as you live here, murderous things are being done in your name. We have a moral obligation—a pact—to live as fellow citizens of the world. We have broken that pact through our
indifference to others. And someday, something terrible is going to happen to us.\textsuperscript{34}

The Arab experience in America is clearly framed by harsh racial discrimination that their lives seem to ebb and flow with international and domestic political changes. Hanif, an Arab professor feels that his experience in the United States as a writer is not encouraging his talent and he feels: “The media is saturated with the imagery of the West. Is it even possible-or desirable-to have an identity apart from this?” and “the C.I.A. is following you around.”\textsuperscript{35} Aziz narrates that his experience in writing poetry is affected by the environment he lives in: “I got fed up with all the harassments. Do you think I got nice letters? I did not. I got letters saying, no, don’t tell such unhappy stories about the Arabs…And from who did I get these letters? From the Arabs who are always complaining that there’s not enough truth about Arabs in the magazines and TV.”\textsuperscript{36} These two views are asserted by another Arab American boy, Jenoob, who replies: “Of course…All we see on the TV or movies about Arabs is they’re shooting someone, bombing someone, or kidnapping someone.”\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Crescent} contrasts these prejudices against many issues in which Abu-Jaber rejects the American negative representation of the Middle East and its people. For instance, \textit{Crescent} describes the brutal American sanctions imposed on Iraq and its devastating effects on the lives of the people to show how brutal the American empire is. This issue is central to the lives of Arabs living inside America because the United States policy plays the major role in destroying Iraq in order to exploit its oil and other resources. Han explains to Sirine the suffering of Iraqis when he receives a letter from his family:

\begin{quote}
…the air over the city is electrical, stirring with chemical dust and ashes…The vegetable seller opens his stalls but there isn’t enough,
\end{quote}
milk for the children, and the children are everywhere, all over the streets, their eyes too big and their knees and ankles and wrists knobs. If you give one a banana, he will run just out of range in case you change your mind, and then eat it peel and all… Our fine, beautiful country is gone. We can’t get away from the smell of burning…There are many diseases, cholera, malaria, typhus, and rickets…Our ancient night flashes with bombs. The Americans still bomb Iraq on nearly a daily basis.\(^\text{38}\)

These facts and the imperial purposes behind them are confirmed by Han’s American friend, Nathan, who tells Han and other Arabs in a lecture at the university:

“Let me tell you all something”, the man says, his voice charged with emotion. “Let me just tell you this. America simply cannot continue to pillage the natural resources and economies of other countries, to heap its desires and values, its contempt and greed on the backs of others, and not expect there to be consequences. I don’t know when and how. But if things continue as they are, there will certainly be consequences. We do not live in a vacuum. We are not the only nation in the world. We have been doing terrible things to countries like Iraq for a very long time.”\(^\text{39}\)

Abu-Jaber shows a state of resentment among Arabs towards America and its imperial policy in Iraq. While hundreds of thousands of civilians including children die by American aircrafts, America looks the other side. Aziz describes the brutality of the American policy in Iraq: “Now, according to UNICEF, fifty thousand Iraqi adult die because of U.S. sanctions every year, and five thousand children die in Iraq
every month because of the American embargo of food and medicine. The sanctions deny people access to basic health care, clean water, and electricity—they're a systematic violation of the Geneva Convention, which prohibits the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare.” Aziz compares these huge losses with the American hypocrisy that “If twenty-five people die in a plane crash in the U.S. it makes headlines”. In this situation, Crescent provides a call on all American Muslims to do something to prevent these massacres: “American Muslims must do everything they can to show support for their Iraqi brothers and sisters.”

As a part of resistance strategy to the western hegemonic discourse, Abu-Jaber uses the intertextual approach to subvert common misconceptions associated with the Arabs. In Crescent, a reader comes across episodes that are brought into dialogue with some Western texts like Shakespeare’s Othello that engage with them in order to challenge certain stereotypes and misconceptions about Arabs on one hand and contrast them on the other. Therefore, Crescent uses Ludescher’s viewpoint on Arab American literature that aims to show the “human face” of Arab and Arab Americans by “combating the proliferation of anti-Arab stereotypes.”

With Shakespeare’s Othello, the most academically critiqued play in literary history, Abu-Jaber contrasts one of the seventeenth century European conceptions on Arabs in which Shakespeare called them ‘Moors’ and viewed them as superstitious, jealous and irrational. In characterizing Han, a reader admires Han for his genuine love and high level of education who, unlike Shakespeare’s Othello, is a contemporary educated Arab man whose love for Sirine is not marred by Othello’s jealousy, superstition and irrationality.

Han’s love for Sirine forms the main plot that revolves around his ability to submerge himself and his beloved in a romantic world and the concomitants that
emerge. Before they both fall in love, Han invites Sirine to dinner for a series of dates. When she knocks on door at the first invitation “Han immediately opens the door as if he’d been waiting right behind it” and “looks as if he can’t quite believe she’s standing there.” He takes her to the kitchen where he starts preparing the meal and listening to a famous Arab songstress, Fairuz: “Han just seems excited - his skin slightly damp and pink from the kitchen heat.” The atmosphere Han creates at his flat is a romantic one. His treatment of Sirine is lovely and calls for admiration as he “places the food in her mouth”…“Min eedi” which he translates “From my hand.” As soon as they finish their meal they step to the balcony as “[t]he moon comes out and turns red. They’re back sitting side by side on the tiny balcony, eating frozen chocolate layer cake.” In this romantic atmosphere, Han introduces his past, personality and situation as Sirine “stays too late, drunk on Han’s stories.” This episode forms one of the main intertextual contexts on which Abu-Jaber builds Crescent as an intertextual novel especially by making it engage with Othello, described by Sirine’s uncle as a text “written by a mad Englishman” and compares Han’s love for Sirine to that of Othello for Desdemona.

Like Han, Othello tells Desdemona stories of his past as a warrior and wanderer since his "boyish days" that he spent in achieving “disastrous chances.” Of course, Desdemona falls in love with Othello not only because of his passionate nature, deep love and tenderness but because of the adventures he has undertaken as Othello narrates:

Upon this hint I spake:

She loved me for the dangers I had pass’d;

And I loved her that she did pity them.

This only is the witchcraft I have used:-
Here comes the lady; let her witness it.\textsuperscript{49}

By comparing and contrasting characters with Shakespeare’s characters, \textit{Crescent} provides a challenge to some Orientalist perceptions of Arabs who are viewed as jealous, superstitious and irrational. This kind of characterization confirms Homi Bhabha’s statement on challenging a stereotype that “the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive.”\textsuperscript{50} Through this strategy of Intertextuality, \textit{Crescent} subverts certain stereotypes in Othello and adheres to Jonathan Cullar’s notion of “Presupposition and Intertextuality” as a strategy of engaging with other texts:

It leads one to think of a text as a dialogue with other texts, an act of absorption, parody, and criticism, rather than as autonomous artifact which harmoniously reconciles the possible attitudes towards a given problem; it alerts one to the artifice of literature, the special conventions and interpretive operations on which it is based; and it makes one particularly sensitive to the special referentiality of literary works…The consequences of the notion of Intertextuality are undoubtedly rich, but it proves itself, nevertheless, an extremely difficult concept to work with.\textsuperscript{51}

In Han and Othello, the reader gets two different personalities in terms of irrationality and jealousy. Engaging with Othello’s handkerchief, for instance, that has been associated with magic and superstition, aims at subverting one of the Orientalist conceptions that view Arabs or as Shakespeare calls them “Moors” are irrational and superstitious. In \textit{Othello}, the handkerchief, Othello’s first gift to Desdemona, becomes a cause of rage when Desdemona loses it as it appears when
Othello asks her for the handkerchief and stresses the value the handkerchief has for him:

Othello: That is a fault. That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give;
She was a charmer, and could almost read
The thoughts of people: she told her, while she kept it,
'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt
After new fancies: she, dying, gave it me;
And bid me, when my fate would have me wive,
To give it her. I did so: and take heed on't;
Make it a darling like your precious eye;
To lose't or give't away were such perdition
As nothing else could match.\(^{52}\)

*Crescent* adopts the idea of Othello’s handkerchief and employs it to cast out the perception of superstition and irrationality of the Arabs. In *Crescent*, Han’s first gift to Sirine is the Scarf which is known for its beauty and superiority that its “material is so soft between her fingers it feels like dipping her hand into water. The material floats and gleams in her lap.”\(^{53}\) Han informs Sirine that his mother’s village is reflected in this scarf and its embroidery: “This is the traditional pattern of my mother’s village in the south…If you study them, you can figure out where a certain embroidery stitch has come from.”\(^{54}\) The scarf his family sent him as a reminder of his own homeland, means something big for Han. In addition to this trait, the scarf
reminds him of his mother as he tells the reader: “My mother was wearing this when my father fell in love with her.”\textsuperscript{55} It is here where \textit{Crescent} tries to subvert misconceptions about Arabs who are viewed as superstitious. Unlike, Othello’s handkerchief that “magic in the web of it”, Han’s scarf is merely “a small thing…a beautiful thing.”\textsuperscript{56}

The loss of these two tokens creates different attitudes in Othello and Han. In \textit{Crescent}, when Sirine loses the scarf at the Thanksgiving dinner, she becomes very scared in case Han knows: “Sirine makes everyone swear they won’t breathe a word of this to Han.”\textsuperscript{57} Like Othello’s handkerchief, this episode contributes to the tragic atmosphere of the novel. Initially, the loss of the scarf creates psychological pain in Sirine and causes a temporary anger in Han:

“Where is it?” he says…“The \textit{scarf}. What did you do with the scarf I gave you? Why don’t you ever wear it?” Her mouth opens but she stammers, her voice rattling in her throat. “I guess-I just-I haven’t had-…” “I trusted you with that one thing, just that one small thing, Sirine.” He looks away from her. “How could I have been such a fool?” His eyes return to her and now they are flat, sharp stone. “How could I have trusted something so precious with someone like you?”\textsuperscript{58}

Though Han’s initial reaction is one of anger that does not differ from that of Othello, \textit{Crescent} challenges Shakespeare’s perception of the Arabs. Unlike Othello, Han feels ashamed of his outrageous behavior toward his beloved when she loses that piece of cloth. Soon he goes to Sirine and apologizes for his behaviour. His love and rationality surpass Othello’s irrational and superstitious mind. He tells her: “The scarf was just a thing. If you have lost it or not, things are things and that’s it. A scarf is a scarf, right? You, on the other hand, are the whole world.”\textsuperscript{59} A reader can find
that Han’s love for Sirine is a genuine one and not marred by magic like Othello’s. Therefore, Crescent basically aims at contrasting a stereotype on Arabs in the Orientalist discourse represented by Shakespeare’s Othello.

Similarly, Han’s and Othello’s mothers are used to provide a critique of the Western perception of the Arab woman who is viewed as oppressed by her religion. In an interview with Andrea Shalal-Esa, Abu-Jaber notes: “I feel like if there’s a choice … between speaking and suppressing yourself that inevitably you have to speak. Audre Lorde once said, ‘Your silence will not protect you.’ That’s a really hard lesson to learn, and sometimes you have to learn that the hard way. It’s an instinct to try to hide if you’re feeling like you’re under attack, to be quiet.”

Subverting stereotypes through strategy of the intertextuality is common and primarily associated with post-structuralist thought. Roland Barthes provides a deconstructive view of intertextuality of the author in his famous essay Death of the Author (1967) in which he affirms that literary texts are no longer the product of an author’s original thoughts. He argues that a text is “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” and the writer’s “only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.”

Accordingly, in Crescent, unlike in Shakespeare’s Othello, the Arab woman plays a central role in her own life. Contrasted to the absent mother of Othello, Abdelrahman’s mother, who is also Han’s aunt, travels around the world to find her missing son, Abdelrahman who “makes money by selling himself off, then pretending to drown while escaping.” The Arab woman in Crescent is present to challenge their stereotypes. If Shakespeare associates Othello’s mother with magic and superstition, Abu-Jaber subverts this conception. Aunt Camille is more resourceful and determined, and crosses oceans and continents searching for her son.
She is “a perspicacious woman” who “was no dumb-dumb.” Camille tries hard to prevent her son from his bad habit: “I told him a thousand times, no more fake drowning! But did he listen? No! He’d turn right around and do exactly the opposite.” As the reader follows her search in Asia and deep in Africa, he admires her strong personality compared to that of Western men too. For instance, when she goes with the British traveler Sir Richard Burton, she does not like his personality because he follows his wife and shows no interest in finding her son: “Sir Richard was not too sure he wanted to be released” and claims “imprisoned people always get confused about whether they actually want to get out of their chains…his wife was more clearheaded about the whole situation.”

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the white American tradition today is its propensity to mainstream thought to forget adjectives and qualifiers. As a result, a handful of terrorists has come to represent 300 million Arabs. Halaby’s narrative in *Once in a Promised Land* is used to this end. Halaby uses Salwa, who is born in America and has the American citizenship, in order to show that Arab heritage becomes intolerable after 9/11. In the 2008 Human Rights First’s hate crime survey, Arabs are the most exposed ethnicity to American assaults: “The more serious of these offenses included assaults—sometimes deadly—against Muslim religious leaders, ordinary Muslims, and those perceived to be Muslim.” Once Salwa goes back to America, she tries to show more Americanness in her personality by showing a face “Made in USA. Miss America”, yet this does not help her live as free as other ethnicities such as Africans, Indians, Hispanic and other communities. This anti-Arab backlash resulted by September 11 urge Arab Americans into total assimilation, a desire reinforced by the discourse that Salaita terms “imperative patriotism” drawn from “a longstanding sensibility that nonconformity to whatever
at the time is considered to be ‘the national interest’ is unpatriotic,” and “generates its strength most consistently at the level of morality.”

In *Once in a Promised Land*, it is easy to see how imperative patriotism and the negotiation of morality are played. Salwa becomes involved in an affair with Jake, a younger co-worker and her husband comes perilously close to having an affair with an American waitress; both are guilty of betraying familial bonds which leads to their isolation. The isolation and condemnation of this couple as outsiders and immoral in fact form the basis of the narrative, which describes a whole string of catastrophes culminating in Jassim’s dismissal from his job despite his excellent efforts in the company. Of course, termination of Jassim’s contract is purportedly based on something other than his racial profile; after all, as Salaita has stated, “imperative patriotism relies on a perceived pragmatism in order to command moral legitimacy.” In this case, the pragmatism consists in the boss’s concern that the suspicion evoked by Jassim in his clients, coupled with Jassim’s neglect of his duties as a result of personal troubles, would greatly endanger the position and profitability of his business. These personal troubles consist in Salwa’s secret pregnancy and secret miscarriage, as well as an accident in which Jassim runs over and kills a young boy on a skateboard. As a result of these misfortunes, both of which Jassim could have done nothing to prevent, Jassim begins to neglect his professional duties, thus endangering his position and making it easier for his employer and American intelligence to single him out as a potential danger to the American national security.

Similarly, Salwa goes astray from what is considered moral and professional conduct. As a real estate agent, she seems complicit in the image of the United States as an agent of territorial violation and occupation. Salaita argues on anti-Arab racism as a function of the geopolitical interaction between the Arab and the American
As soon as Salwa exceeds the limits allowed by her position, she sleeps with her young American lover in the bedroom of one of the properties she has been assigned to sell. Tragically for Salwa, her lover feels slapped when she refuses to abandon her marriage to Jassim (choosing to return to Jordan instead), he attacks her physically and portrays her native place as a “pigsty.” Ironically, the moment these words are spoken, Jake’s own apartment looks much more like a pigsty than any location Salwa may have come from; but in Jake’s mind at this point in the narrative, race, femininity, and moral power are knotted together:

Why did you come here? You came because you want sex. That’s why. That’s what all of this has been about…No, Jake. I am saying goodbye…”When do you leave?” “Monday.”…“So you’re running back to the pigsty?” Salwa’s brain skipped. “Pardon?” “I said you’re running back to the pigsty you came from.”…She saw that he was holding something rectangular that caught the sun. A part of her brain processed that he was giving her a gift, a picture, and that for some reason he was lifting it into the air. In one powerful blink, it came down on her cheek, just below her eye, and she felt as if her face had been sliced with something that was part sledgehammer, part knife. She screamed and bent her head forward, covered her face, caught her blood…Another blow, aimed at the back of her head…”Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch.”

Episodes of sexual affairs between Arab woman and American man that later turn into an aggressive attack reinforces the idea that Arab ethnicity and heritage are
no longer acceptable inside the United States. This attitude can be seen in many American characters. For example, Professor Jassim is reported to the FBI by the receptionists of the company he is working with simply for personal hatred for Arabs: “...after September 11, Bella and Lisa were both really angry. They wanted to get revenge and they wanted to be involved in that revenge.” Similarly, Trini’s dialogue with Penny, a waitress and Jassim’s best friend shows the same sentiment towards Jassim:

I don’t get you, Penny. How can you like that guy and then you want to blow up his whole country...Jassim is a good guy—he’s not like them, shouldn’t be judged like them. But those people over there, they oppress women and kill each other. They’re the ones who should be bombed...Men over there can marry four women at once, make them wear those sheets over their whole bodies.

Racial discrimination against Arab immigrants inside the American society and nostalgic feelings are also the focus of Abu-Jaber’s Crescent. This concern of Halaby and Abu-Jaber is commonly shared by Arab American writers and critics. In Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People, for instance, Jack Shaheen notes that Hollywood has been producing distorted movies which have affected the image of Arabs in general inside America. In his study, Shaheen surveys more than nine hundred films whose basic tenet is “all Arabs are Muslims and all Muslims are Arabs” and their common understanding of this group of people is simple that an Arab is “heartless, brutal, uncivilized, religious fanatics.” While Shaheen focuses on the negative image of Arabs in American culture, some other critics shed light on the complicated context in which Arab Americans produce their counter-narratives. Judith Gabriel refers the complex situation that Arab American writers live due to
the tense relationship between Arab and American worlds where these writers “are trying to maintain both their Arab and their American identities, without sacrificing one or the other.” Therefore, Gabriel advises that negotiating “complex interlacing of the forces of identity and the forces of art” should be taken into consideration along with the fear of disclosure that “is often most paralyzing when it involves women’s issues, particularly those that involve intergenerational conflicts.”

On this ground, Salaita emphasizes the importance of developing a ‘critical matrix’ that is expressed from inside the Arab American community and will enhance the Arab American artistic endeavor. Salaita observes that “this [Arab American] artistic growth can play a crucial role in the external interpretation, acceptance, and humanization of Arab Americans and the Arab people as a whole” since Arab American community and their literature is 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 brief, Salaita calls on Arab American writers to common grounds and connections between their community and their literary production on one hand, and between their literary work and the context in which these works are produced on the other. In this context, literary representations become one way of engaging with the issues that Arab American communities encounter.

*Crescent* introduces the experiences of exilic identities and alienation of Arabs as “sadder than others” in a country where they are born and live. It explores the life of Arab American intellectuals, the hollowness of their existence inside America and their resistance to assimilate into a hostile society. Nadia’s café is the centre where all Arabs gather. All Arab visitors to the café are males, as the readers are told: “The Arab families usually keep their daughters safe at home. The few
women who do manage to come to America are good students—they study at the library and cook for themselves, and only the men spend their time arguing and being lonely, drinking tea and trying to talk to Um-Nadia, and Sirine.”⁷⁸ Though all these immigrants are highly educated, they are unable to find jobs due to the rampant racism in this society. As a result, they are “always so lonely, the sadness like blue hollows in their throats, blue motes for their wives and children back home…days of coffee, drinking and talking…For many of them the café was a little flavor of home.”⁷⁹ An Arab immigrant would often loaf at the counter and relate to Sirine “how painful it is to be an immigrant – even if it was what he’d wanted all his life – sometimes especially if it is what he’d wanted all his life.”⁸⁰

The novel is set in a part of Los Angeles referred to as “Teherangeles” due to the large number of Iranians living there. In the novel, Sirine, the protagonist, is a half-Iraqi and half-American chef at Nadia’s Café where Arab Professors and students spend their time eating and talking about home. Her uncle, who remains unnamed till the end of the novel, is the only Arab professor who works in an unnamed nearby university. Throughout the novel, Arabs are out of place inside the American society. It is only the café that brings them together to interact through their shared experience of exile and alienation: “Um Nadia says the loneliness of an Arab is a terrible thing; it is all-consuming. 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 loves his own country, even though he marries and travels and talks to friends twenty-four hours a day.”⁸¹ It appears that Arab Americans seem to be fated for loneliness, which explains their constant need for company inside the American society, as is evident in the popularity of Nadia’s Café.
Clash of cultures is quite clear in *Crescent*. The racial attitude of the host society toward this ethnic group and the difference in lifestyles of both represent the difference in social relations between the US and the Arab world. Their life is mingled with a passion for Arab tradition, largely Arab cooking: “For many of them the café was a little flavour of home” since “Americans, he would tell her, don’t have the time or the space in their lives for the sort of friendship.”

Commenting exile, Said states: “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.”

Exiled thinkers and writers, Said adds, “lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity - to deny an identity to people. For them, it is apparent that, to concentrate on exile as a contemporary political punishment.” In *Crescent*, Han is the embodiment of Arab intellectuals’ suffering inside the American society after the 9/11. He listens to a song called “Andaloussiya” that reminds him of the time when “Muslims and Jews lived together and devised miraculous works of philosophy and architecture.”

Han feels astray in the town where he lives and where he even finds it difficult to locate Sirine’s flat though it is close to him: “I really don’t get the geography of this town,” he says. “It seems like things keep swimming around me.”

Similarly, Arabs who show readiness to assimilate in and indulge in the mainstream American life are eventually pushed back to face the political situation of America and Arab world. This is reflected on the life of Arab intellectuals in America who are viewed as “terrorist spies.” To Han, America is no longer a place of literary achievement largely because of the media: “The question in the contemporary era is, what does it mean to call oneself an ‘Egyptian writer’ or even a ‘Middle East writer’ anymore?...The media is saturated with the imagery of the
When Sirine asks Han “Do you think you could live here?” his answer shows willingness in assimilating: “I think so.” He looks at her for a moment. “That’s what I’m trying to find out.” Though Han tries to adjust to a new life, he fails. It is only Arab TV channels, food and the love relationship with an Arab American girl that makes Han temporarily feel “the opposite of exile”. But the more time he spends the more he feels alienated as he comments on life in America:

Exile is like… It’s a dim gray room, full of sounds and shadows, but there’s nothing real or actual inside of it. You’re constantly thinking that you see old friends on the street—or old enemies that make you shout out in your dreams...Everything that you were—every sight, sound, taste, memory, all of that—has been wiped away. You forget everything you thought you knew. You have to let yourself forget or you’ll just go crazy. Sometimes when I see some of those homeless people on the streets—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 anyone as those people. They know what it feels like—they live in between worlds so they’re not really anywhere. Exiled from themselves.  

*Crescent* draws on the sense of fragmentation that an Arab immigrant experiences inside the American society after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The reader feels this state of displacement and homelessness through Han’s experience: “For a moment—for a moment, I forget where I was. I forgot that this was America. I was on the banks of the Tigris.” It is only later that Han realizes that “exile is bigger than everything else in my life” when the pull of home becomes stronger. He begins to withdraw into memories of home that seem to tug at him, drawing him further and
further away from the reality of the US: “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.” Finally, he reaches to the conclusion that leaving America for Iraq becomes a must, as he writes in a letter to Sirine: “I’m driven by the prospect of my return: my country won’t let go of me – it’s filled me up.” In short, coexistence between Arabs and Americans seems to be irreconcilable due to the unprecedented flow of discriminations against Arabs after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Halaby compares these social and personal alienations experienced by Arab immigrants to the ability of the white Americans in breaking the ice between them and Arabs. Contrasted to Jassim, Jack Franks, a client of Salwa and a retired marine officer, has less difficulty with breaking cultural boundaries. As soon as he meets Jassim at the pool for the first time and learns that Jassim is from Jordan, he immediately introduces his own understanding of Jassim as “an outsider” and associates Jassim with another Jordanian man with whom his daughter ran away. Consequently, he constructs a bad perception of Jassim, considers him to be a potential terrorist and begins his contact with the FBI:

These are some scary times we live in, he resonated to himself. My number-one duty is to help protect my country. The president said that specifically, that it is our job to be on the alert for suspicious behavior, to help the police, to be the eyes and ears of the community. Besides, if it turns out to be nothing, then no harm done to anyone. Dammit, if you’re going to live in this country, you’re going to have to abide by the rules here.95

Contrary to Jack’s thought; Jassim loves America and does not have any intention to harm the country where he is planning to live the rest of his life. Though
he believes that “it [Jordan] would always be home”, “he had no desire to return” because he thinks “What would he do there? He couldn’t imagine living in that bureaucracy again, had become comfortable in this easy, predictable life.”96 Jassim, further, has even assimilated some typical American social practices such as having talks with people he does not know: “That was something Jassim admired about Americans, something he had done his best to absorb for himself: they didn’t allow social constraints to get in the way of the day’s plan.”97 Though this quote indicates that Jassim has adopted the American lifestyle by breaking certain boundaries, however, after the car accident he admits that he feels alienated and his longing for his home, Jordan, starts: “And for the first time he felt unsettled in his beloved America, vaguely longed for home, where he could nestle in the safe, predictable bosom of other Arabs.”98

Setting her novel in the early days of post-September 11th America, Halaby draws the structure of Once in a Promised Land from Arabian folklore to illuminate the futile search for identity in an inhospitable society and reinforce the characters’ attachment to their home. She begins the novel by alluding to the traditional fairy tale more familiar to Arab readers, “Kan ya ma kan fee qadeem az-zamaan,” which she perfectly translates as “they say there was or there wasn’t in olden times.”99 So any Arab reader of the novel feels that the novel brings him/her back to stories told by grandparents. Inserting Arab folktales in the novel has a nationalist indication especially in episodes where the writer seems to be very obsessed with the loss of Palestine. At the heart of the novel is a rendition of an Arab folktale, about a ghoulī (a female demonic figure of Arabic folklore) who lures her innocent victims into her grip so that she can eat them up once they are within her clutches. In this episode, only a very clever poor boy, Nus Nsays, manages to defeat her by his patience and
tricks. The image of this clever poor boy has reference to Palestinians’ suffering at the hand of the Israeli brutal colonizers: “Every Palestinian has a habit of Nus Nsays within him. Or her.”\(^{100}\) Arab nationalist issues have a good presence in this narration as reflected in Arab-Israeli conflict on water and land. Arab characters’ determination to save their land and water from Israel parallels their hope of achieving the American Dream. Jassim, before his marriage to Salwa, goes to Jordan and gives a lecture in Amman University addressing Jordanian students:

> When the Europeans settlers came, they diverted rivers and tried to harness them, with little regard for the people they might be affecting, which is similar to what the Israelis did when they hijacked the River Jordan in 1964; the 1967 war started because Israel was caught trying to divert the Jordan away from the West Bank and Jordan. The result of that war was that Israel controlled-controls still-most of the headwaters of the Jordan, much of the Jordan itself, and is in partial or total control of all the aquifers.\(^{101}\)

Adherence to home and heritage is seen as a natural result of the racism and discrimination against Arabs and Arab Americans in the United States after the 9/11. Abu Jalal, Jassim’s uncle, comments: “Imagine, in the face of Palestine being destroyed, of more people being made refugees, of their culture being stolen, of Jordan being placed on the brink of civil unrest as a result.”\(^{102}\) This feeling is shared by Arab immigrants inside the United States who appreciate their failure of assimilation even though they are Americans by citizenship. Jassim reminds his wife: “We are both of us too wedded to our countries”, a place that “pumps through the blood, but America stays in the mouth.”\(^{103}\) Therefore, America becomes a symbol of failure and familial disintegration for Arabs who search for better life
while Arabia offers shelter and remedy for the tragic experience of American life. After their marriage falls apart and their dreams vanish, Salwa curses herself for being born in America: “I hate myself, feel so disgusted…I want to peel off my skin.” Later, the obsession with the American Dream is altered:

What Jassim didn’t know and what Salwa hadn’t fully realized yet was that in breathing her first breath on American soil, she had been cursed. Because while place of birth does not alter genetic material, it does stitch itself under the skin and stay attached by virtue of invisible threads, so that if a person leaves that place for somewhere else (whether because she’s been kicked out and forcibly sent away or because she is simply returning to the home of her parents), there is always an uncomfortable tugging as the silken (in her case) threads are pulled taut.

Arab immigrant category in *Once in a Promised Land* represents a wave of immigrants who left home due to political instability and war. It is the category that processes a strong commitment to home and Arab nationalism. This wave of immigrants, according to Naber, is marked by “a rising ethno-political consciousness among members of the Arab American community.” This is explained by the fact that the American utter support for Israel against Arabs causes this wave of immigrants to grow up with a feeling of a need to emphasize their distinct identity and claim their rights as a minority group. Therefore, this nationalistic sense that characterizes this wave of immigrants is more politically powerful than the nationalism of previous immigrants because this wave that “brought new and specific forms of Arab nationalism to the US and began to self-identify according to the classification “Arab” more than the previous immigrant wave.”
These boundaries that identify this group of immigrants is seen in many characters in the novel. In Jassim, we see a man “filled with dreams of saving Jordan from drought and dependency.” According to him, the Palestinian and Jodanian shortage of water is caused largely by the Israeli piracy in the area: “Israelis who divert water” because “water is life” for Palestinians. This attitude is seen in his father, Abu Jassim, who believes: “what happened to Palestine was a question both of pride and of humanity” and whose “sympathy for the Palestinians was both intellectual and emotional; his ire was immense and came from the injustice not just on a human level but also on an organizational level: something so wrong should not have been allowed to happen among civilized people.”

Halaby highlights the benefits of one’s native culture in the difficult times. In her failure, Salwa is advised by her friend to return home and let home culture erase the memory of the American experiences: “Salwa, listen to me. You need to go home for a little while. You need to be with your mother and sisters.” And your culture, where things like this can’t happen…“It will help you to see things as they are, and it’s been years since you visited. Right now is a good time…and being home will be good for you.” The point Halaby makes here is clear that Arabs and Arab Americans cannot live in America anymore and any hope for a better life for them should not be thought of after the tragic attacks of 9/11:

If wishes came true, she would wish that things were now as they once had been, but Salwa knew in the marrow of her bones that wishes don’t come true for Arabs in America, recognized that shift had come just months before, on the very day when she had tried with all her soul to drown her deception. It was not just her Lie that had
brought distance between her and her husband and surrounded them with tension, it was the patriotic breathing of those around them.\textsuperscript{112}

In \textit{Crescent}, Abu-Jaber’s use of characters affiliated to different ethnic groups aims at breaking the barriers separating Arabs from other minorities inside the United States. Therefore, \textit{Crescent} contributes to any discussion of borderlands in ethnic studies in which interethnic relationships between different ethnicities in a society are negotiated. To put it in Bhabha’s own words, these writers occupy “a cultural space - a third space - where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences.”\textsuperscript{113} Bhabha refers to these created borderlines in writing as tools that “open the way to conceptualizing an \textit{international} culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the \textit{diversity} of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s \textit{hybridity}.”\textsuperscript{114} Borderlines are present in \textit{Crescent} where people of different cultures occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. In fact, \textit{Crescent} represents an ethnic borderland, Arab-American community which is apparent in its interaction with cultures of different ethnicities as the reader notices the visible negotiation of differences through the interaction of these communities in and outside Nadia’s cafe.

Abu-Jaber breaks the barriers of color and ethnicity in order to achieve mutual relationships in the hostile American society. The novel weaves a story of love and mutual understanding across different cultures and diverse ethnicities that include Arab Americans, Iranians, Turks and Latinos. The common understanding between these groups is seen in Um-Nadia, the owner of the café, who gives her viewpoint of the world as “Life is argument! Um-Nadia says. When Sirine laughs and asks, what are they fighting about? Um-Nadia says, What else?”\textsuperscript{115} Throughout
the novel, these ethnic communities are brought to interact through their experience of discrimination and alienation in the white American society. As Aziz gives his view “I contain multitudes. I defy classification.” This view is seen in Nathan, the only white American who has a relationship with these ethnic minorities and who does not have an assertive notion of what his identity is. Nathan always identifies himself with his love for Han’s sister, Laila: “I wanted to marry her. But I was just a guest in her world— her parents, her brothers. I couldn't take her away.”

His love for Han and Iraq surpasses his American sense of belonging:

There’s a glow about them, the light caught in such a way that an onlooker might say the photographer was discreet and respectful, even reverential. She never realized before how important was Han to Nathan, or how consumed Nathan was by their relationship. And now that Han is gone, there is something gratifying, even moving, about this attention...She rubs her eyes and temples and experiences an upwelling of pity for both herself and Nathan, a sense of his loneliness and isolation, lost her among his images. Both of them locked into separate griefs.

Classified in the same category, Arab Americans and Latinos try to diminish all the cultural barriers between their two different ethnicities inside the United States and consider themselves as one community. Further, they resist the idea of stereotyping or categorization and insist on negotiating their own differences for achieving common coexistence with each other. The following dialogue between Aziz and his Latino friend, Victor, embodies this sense of unity in the racial society: “They think we’re all terrorists anyway,” Aziz says cheerfully, scooping up a forkful of smashed potatoes” to which Victor replies “Who’s ‘they’? I don’t think that.”
Aziz erases any difference between him as an Arab and Victor who is Latino as he tells him: “If 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.”

Demolishing differences between members of these minorities is the core of *Crescent*. Sirine, a daughter of an Iraqi father and an Irish-American mother is a personification of this tradition. She inherits this tradition from her parents who have been working for humanitarian organizations and got killed working for a disaster relief NGO: “They were emergency care personnel for the American Red Cross, killed in a clash between tribes while on assignment in Africa.” Though she appears to be anxious about her origin and culture, she denies any judgment based on racial or ethnic basis. Sirine concludes that skin colour remains an erroneous and a slippery racial and ethnic marker. Accepting one another is a prominent theme in *Crescent*. Like Sirine, her uncle introduces Han, an Iraqi exile with whom she later develops a love relationship that agitates her nostalgia for her Arab heritage, as an ideal man: “I’m telling you, he looks like a hero. Like Ulysses…If I were a girl, I’d be crazy for Ulysses.” And in order to bring his niece closer to Han, he always makes connections between the two: “her uncle keeps introducing him to Sirine, saying their names over and over, “Sirine, Hanif, Hanif, Sirine.”

Establishing ties between Arab Americans and other communities in *Crescent* involves a readiness for understanding their own similarities and differences. Demonstrating these ties is achieved by different characters who provide spaces for communication and mutual relationships. Sirine, the main character, lives with her uncle and works as chef at Nadia’s Café where Arab students and other ethnic minorities meet, eat and chat. This café, of course, plays a central role in
establishing an ethnic borderline. Sirine’s love relationship to Han represents negotiation of American and Arab identities and cultures. Though, Han and Sirine differ in their status, the former is exiled by Saddam Hussein while the latter is an Arab American, they manage to bridge these differences. Abu-Jaber’s art of characterization aims at negotiating these differences between Arabs belonging to different ethnic geographies. For instance, representing Arab students as Schmaal, Jenoob, Shark, and Gharb which in Arabic mean North, South, East, and West respectively, aims at negotiating the geographical differences between Arab countries through this personification. Though these characters belong to different backgrounds, yet they manage to bridge their differences through the café which provides them “the flavors that remind them of their homes” and its TV that provides them “news from Qatar, variety shows and a shopping channel from Kuwait, endless Egypt movies, Bedouin soap operas in Arabic.”

Sirine’s hybrid heritage is used in the novel as a tool for demolishing racial boundaries of identification. For instance, when she is asked about her faith, she responds: “I suppose I don’t actually have one,” “I mean, my parents didn’t, so…” “Well, I believe in lots of things.” This hybridity helps her get connected to all races and build bridges of communication and understanding among Arab and non-Arab ethnic and cultural groups. Her boyfriend shows a similar view that religion does not matter for him “I’m no longer a believer but I still consider myself a Muslim… ‘I don’t believe in a specific notion of God. But I do believe in social constructions, notions of allegiance…” Similarly, Nathan, a white American, has a great sense of communal life with different ethnic minorities in his society. His interest in Arabic literature and his translation of Ernest Hemingway into Arabic are indicative of his endeavor to cross boundaries and establish bridges of understanding.
between different cultures. Though white American, Nathan’s life resembles that of immigrants who suffer loneliness. He is looking for communal life and belonging that the other minorities are also seeking. He tells Sirine:

I was sure I would feel that way, absolutely and completely, for the rest of my life…I grew up half-wild. My parents divorced when I was a kid and all I knew about families was what I learned from watching other people. I went into the Middle East without any idea of who I was – there was no needle on my compass, you know? But the people in Iraq – this sounds dumb and romantic – but the thing is, they really seemed to know who they were. They dressed the way their grandparents dressed, they ate the way they’ve eaten for hundreds of years.¹²⁷

In addition to bridging the barriers between Arabs and Arab Americans, *Crescent* expands this strategy to bridge barriers between Arabs and Latinos. At the café, Sirine is helped by two Latinos: Victor Hernandez from Mexico and Cristobal from El Salvador. Though Hernandez and Cristobal belong to different backgrounds, nevertheless they share the feeling of displacement experienced by Arabs. For Victor: “there wasn’t anything for him here in America”. He asks Sirine if she ever “felt like it was all a big lousy dream”, and gets the answer “America is most definitely not a dream.”¹²⁸ Similarly, Cristobal, a refugee who had escaped from El Salvador after the “guardia” of their “crazy dictator” had “firebombed his whole family” feels as an “Outsider.”¹²⁹ For these figures, dictatorships at home unify their suffering. For example, Victor knows what will happen to Han if she returns to Iraq and therefore he advises Sirine: “…listen, I’m telling you, you can’t let Han go back there. They will kill him for sure. Places like that, people like Han are the first ones
to go…That’s how it always goes.”

This feeling is seen in Cristobal, when Hanif suddenly returns to Iraq that he may become a victim of Saddam Hussein. Cristobal asks Sirine: “What will happen to Han now? What will they do to him?” Being from El Salvador, a similar dictatorship to Iraq, Cristobal “must somehow know the answer to that.”

Though Cristobal is not familiar with the Iraqi situation and Han’s history, he manages to make connections between the two political dictatorships of Iraq and El Salvador. Accordingly, Crescent manages to bridge boundaries between different ethnic groups in the diaspora.

Therefore, 9/11 is an important turning point in the psyche of Middle Eastern Muslim Americans to the extent that it causes them to reevaluate their place in America and its promises of freedom and equality. In a study on the labor market presented in National Poverty Centre in 2009, Faisal Rabby and William M. Rodgers III state: “We find that 9-11 and the anti-terrorism measures were associated with a relative decrease in employment, hours worked, and the earnings of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries. The largest decreases were among the youngest immigrant men (ages 16 to 25) from the Middle East (excluding Israel).” Halaby shows how these events have negatively affected the life of Arabs, especially at workplaces inside the United States through Jassim and Salwa who have been treated with suspicion and disrespect simply for being Arabs. In a telephone conversation with Jayne Benjulian, Halaby states: “Actually, I wanted to see what would happen to a very successful immigrant who had something happen to him—an accident—and how it would affect him. In my mind, I started with the accident and worked backwards.”

Jassim’s personal life is brought to light by the FBI which exerts lots of pressure to fire him from his job where he has been working in a company as a hydrologist for almost twelve years. Similarly, the accident that results
in the death of an American boy who jumps to the road is understood by the FBI as a terrorist act though the police report clears Jassim from any intention of killing the boy. This issue illustrates a racist attitude towards Arab immigrants as his wife comments:

…do you see, Jassim? If we had been home and you had hit that boy, his family would have gotten involved from the beginning. Here, no one cared until they found out who you were, and –they’re not looking at who you are as a person, at all the great work you have done. They are looking at the fact that you’re an Arab. Do you think that any American would be scrutinized in this way?  

Similarly, at public places, Arab immigrants are not safe from racial prejudice and hate. At the local gym where Jassim used to have his daily swim as “a morning ritual as close to prayer as he could allow”, he is confronted by the receptionist who informs him that “someone pooped in the pool” suspecting him. Although this has not attracted the attention of the federal authorities, contamination of the pool seems to be related to Jassim’s suspicious presence at the gym. Though Jassim does not carry any negative attitude toward anything in America, symbolically he becomes attached to the defilement of the pool. These perceptions become part of American understanding of the Arabs. Such prejudices are expressed by Penny’s roommate who warns Penny against Jassim and his traditions: “Men over there can marry four women at once, make them wear those sheets over their whole bodies.” These boundaries, both from the inside and the outside, affect the perception and ideas about gender roles in America and in the Arab world. This connection between Arabs and suspicion is highlighted on September 17, 2001 by U.S. Representative John Cooksey who made a statement to Louisiana radio stations
that anyone who is “wearing a diaper on his head” must not be surprised to get interrogated at any time after the 9/11.\textsuperscript{138}

Rapid increase in complaints and reported hate crimes against Arabs indicates a radical change in the mentality of the white Americans against the Arabs. Council on Arab-Islamic Relations’ report of 2009 shows that the number of complaints in 2008 increased to three thousand compared to six hundred complaints in 2001. Arab efforts and participation in the development of American life is not evaluated by what they achieve, rather judgment takes place on racial and ethnic backgrounds. Arab American community comes to be defined in terms of Islam that is viewed as worse than Nazis and a very evil and wicked religion. Halaby tries to express the view that racist attitudes towards the Arabs overcome all Arab positive attitudes towards America. For example, Jassim’s great efforts to preserve a huge quantity of rainwater for American barren areas come to be perceived as a threat to American security after 9/11:

He had come to America a simple, focused man who wanted to expand his knowledge so that he could improve life for others… In more than a decade of good citizenship, he had never for a moment imagined that his success would be crossed out by a government censor’s permanent marker, that his mission would be absorbed by his nationality, or that Homeland Security would have anything to do with him. Things like that aren’t supposed to happen in America.\textsuperscript{139}

His interrogation by the two FBI agents in a restaurant is a fruit of his good efforts and intention: “The FBI is trying to get information on every Arab in the country right now. Our government is at a loss, so they’re grasping at straws. Jassim is a straw.”\textsuperscript{140} The information the FBI agents disclose about Jassim and his family
reveal that they know more about Jassim’s family than even Jassim does. As the title *Once in a Promised Land* indicates, Arabs become a rejected component in a land they hoped to live as free and safe as other ethnicities. Another incident occurs for Jassim when he is in a shopping mall when he encounters a security agent:

Salwa’s eyes were on her husband at first but glided over to land behind him on the security guard, puffed up and close to bursting out her uniform…”Is there a problem?” Salwa asked in English over her husband’s shoulder. “No ma’am.” “Then why are you following my husband?” “I am doing my job, ma’am.” “Which is what exactly?” asked Salwa with open scissors in her voice. “To protect the security of this establishment.” “And how are you doing that by following my husband?”

These unjustified interrogations result in radical change in Jassim’s personality and his perception of the American society. He begins to regard his surroundings with logic and candor of his own when his hope for a better life appears to him “like a ghost who might vanish at any time without being noticed…a visitor to this country, to this woman, to this life.” The world surrounding him is perceived from a very detached perspective. Compared to Jassim, Salwa has a more realistic personality. The racist situations she comes across inside the US are more and even sharper. When a customer in the bank interrogates her, Salwa shows prided at being Palestinian: “Where are you from?” asked the woman. “I am Palestinian from Jordan.” The woman continued to look at her. Chewed it over. Spat it back out. “What does that mean?”… “What do you mean that you are Palestinian from Jordan?” Does it mean you will steal my money and blow up my world?...You’re out of line, lady.” This incident solidifies Salwa’s belief: “I don’t think it would be
easy to be an Arab these days. I mean, with what’s going on and investigations and all that”\textsuperscript{144} and reinforces her hope in her homeland and native identity: “Palestinian by blood, Jordanian by residence, and American by citizenship” and “Palestinian, Muslim, recent mother of buckets of blood.”\textsuperscript{145}

Salwa differs from Jassim in her assertive mood too. She is a strong woman who knows her duties and needs. She has always been fighting to protect Jassim from American racist discrimination. When Jassim is suspected and confronted by the mall-assistant, it is Salwa who defends him, confronts the shop-assistant and involves the shop manager in the discussion. She is the one who takes the protective role instead of being the one who receives protection. Jassim acknowledges her strong personality when he is interrogated by the FBI and immediately wishes Salwa to be with him: “Salwa, whom he longed for right now. If Salwa were here, she would be able to make this right, would turn the investigators’ questions around so they could see how ridiculous they were.”\textsuperscript{146} This assertive and strong personality does not exist in Jassim. At the end of the novel, when Salwa is attacked by Jake and enters the hospital, Jassim appears as a helpless man who fails to defend his wife: “Salwa, I am so sorry it has come to this. For what happened. I feel that I am responsible.”\textsuperscript{147}

This assertiveness in Salwa’s personality is recognized by Arabs at home. When Jassim reaches Salwa’s house in Jordan to ask her hand in formal marriage, her father informs Jassim of Salwa’s strong personality: “…she is really first world. A colonizer.”\textsuperscript{148} Further, Salwa’s non-traditional attitude is appreciated soon after her marriage. Unlike traditional Arab women, Salwa soon takes on Jassim’s last name which is not in Arabic tradition. When Hassan, her ex-boy friend calls her to America, he is informed by a voicemail about this change “Salwa Haddad” which he
could not believe: “…he never thought Salwa would be one of them. She had erased Palestine from her very name. He couldn’t believe it.” Salwa’s crossing of this boundary is very important in the Arab mind as when Hassan feels that Salwa is erasing her identity and therefore she is not an insider.

Salwa’s high spirit does not exist in Jassim who feels exposed and depressed with no possibility of redemption. His spirit as a pre-9/11 Arab immigrant professor who lives as “an Arab in a Mercedes, oblivious of the sizzling around him” is destroyed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks when “his diorama sufficiently shaken, he began to see, slowed down, and looked at those looking back. And for the first time he felt unsettled in his beloved America.” The terrorist attacks of the 9/11 not only peeled “the safety film from people’s eyeballs, allowing in what is really there rather than the filtered view through the comfort of routine.”, but pushed Jassim to go back to the fearful, loathing gaze of anti-Arab racism by looking at himself through a hate-tinted lens and internalizing the racist profiling to which he is outwardly subjected. His achievement in the firm he works for slackens, his moral standards decline at a steep clip, his hitherto balanced and friendly vision of the American society suddenly change into a damning view that diagnoses a social apartheid in an “unwelcoming” society where “more liberal streets where fear and hatred were disguised.”

Salwa, in her attempts of assimilation, tries to maintain certain limits and boundaries. She does not cut herself from her culture and religion as Jassim does. If Jassim identifies himself as a non-believer, he does not go to the mosque or celebrate Eid, the novel shows that Salwa fasts in Ramadan and celebrates Eid. Even though religion is not dominantly present in the story, Salwa’s use of language with her Arab friend Randa demonstrates the influence of religion on her talk. Similarly, the
telephone call between her and Hassan, her Jordanian ex-boyfriend, is full of references to God. The expressions “Thank God”, “God willing” and “Praise God” seem to be integrated in every sentence. The same can be noticed in the conversations between Salwa and Randa, although here the occurrence of such expressions is less dominant. The reason for integrating religious expressions in their language might be the existence of an implicit boundary that distinguishes their language from American language. In other words, it can be interpreted as a means to maintain a connection with the home where Arabic language is full of such religious expressions.

These changes in Jassim’s personality including his new perception of America can be justified. The racial discrimination he faces is felt by his employer, Marcus, who goes through a detailed and excessive investigation by the FBI regarding Jassim’s possible connection to the terrorist network of Al-Qaeda: “They say he sent money home to Jordan the day after the Twin Towers fell.” Marcus further informs Jassim: “They [FBI] asked me what your reaction was to September 11. They asked what sorts of Internet sites you look at…They asked me about your reaction to the war in Afghanistan.” They investigate his religiosity: “How often do you pray in a mosque?…What was your wife’s reaction to September 11?” “Why did she send fourteen thousand dollars to Jordan on September twelfth?” Later, Marcus’ ability to view the situation so reasonably does not prevent him, however, from firing this Arab scientist when he receives a newspaper article titled “Engineering Mistakes in the Building of the Twin Towers” and written for this particular purpose: “Jassim, please know that I am your friend. This is not an easy time for Middle Eastern people in this country. If you need anything, please come to me, to us. My family and I want you to know that.”
In the novel, it is easy to notice how Jassim’s character changes. For instance, the excellent English language he masters in America is challenged by his isolation. Immediately after the accident, Jassim’s fluent English escapes him and it becomes difficult for him to use it: “For all the years his tongue had been using English to communicate, he now found it difficult to work through, standing at the end of each sentence and translating it back to make sure he said what he had wanted to say.” During the investigation he feels as if his language is not understood by the police officers and the paramedics: “The words he spoke had not conveyed what he had intended by them. He could never decide if it was his English, his actual use of language, or if it was because people didn’t really listen and instead put into words they heard the words they expected to hear.”

Language in Once in a Promised Land is not only a means of communication; rather, it is a link of the immigrants to their homeland. For example, Jassim’s problem in his communication might have been caused by the boundaries he creates through his use of both Arabic and English. In many situations he uses both languages. For example, when he feels sexually attracted to Penny and invites her to go with him, he scolds himself in English: “What in God’s name, on God’s earth, am I doing? he asked himself out loud in English.” However, when he decides to cancel the date, he speaks Arabic: “I can’t do this, he said aloud in Arabic.” Like Jassim, female characters always create this boundary in their daily life. Randa, Salwa’s best friend, constantly mixes the two languages: “I’m cleaning the kitchen, folding laundry, and watching a Lebanese game show”. And then in English she added, “I am Randa, Mistress of Multitasking. I’ll make tea.” The use of the language here does not indicate two different languages only but also certain habits of two different cultures. For instance, her use of “Multitasking” refers
to a typical American life style of life at home and at the same time she is connected to her homeland through a Lebanese TV program. Similarly, at the beginning of the novel we are introduced to Salwa’s definition of language as a medium of thought and intimacy. In many situations Salwa creates boundaries between the two languages. When she contemplates the kiss she receives from Jake she comments: “What have I done?” Salwa demanded herself in English, this being an American problem, an American situation. She promised herself to think about it only in English, even as her brain shouted at her in Arabic, cursed her with her mother’s words.”

Arabic food does also refer to a boundary created by Arab immigrants and play a significant role in the formation of Arab identity in *Once in a Promised Land* and *Crescent*. In *Once in a Promised Land*, though Jassim and Slaw have been living in America for nine years, their food is still Arabic. Usually, Salwa prepares *baklava* and *musakhan*, typical Arabic foods. Food remains an important anchor in the memories of the past. Constantly, Jassim joyfully remembers the food he had in Jordan with his uncle: “Lamb that had been roasted with garlic in the outdoor stove. For years to come Jassim could taste it, the garlic having left a pleasant taste in the recesses of his mouth and, later, in his years of being away, a taste of home.”

Salwa and Randa, too, are very much connected to traditional food that seems to lessen their isolation. Salwa comments on Arabic coffee prepared by Randa: “The coffee boiled away thousands of miles of homesickness.” Attachment to Arabic coffee takes them back home and distances them from the American life not because of its taste but because of the Arabic tradition of introducing coffee for guests and visitors: “I’ll make you Arabic coffee. You can’t come over here unannounced and not have tea or coffee. That would be too American.”
Further, this attachment to Arab food does not distance them from American and other cuisines. After the accident, when Jassim does not want to cook he decides to order some Thai food: “Thankful for the luxury of living in a country where any kind of food was minutes away, he got the pile of menus from a drawer beneath the counter and began picking through.”166 Similarly, at the Fitness Bar where Jassim used to swim, he drinks American coffee. Though it is the first time since he lives in America that he enters such a place soon he becomes familiar with the typical breakfasts served there. While he normally never takes breakfast, he is seduced by Penny, the waitress, to try it out. As a result, he ends up eating sausages and eggs which, to his own surprise, taste good: “He bit into a biscuit and was startled by how tasty it was. Not heavy or filling, though, and he found himself eating quickly, propelled by each bite to have another one.”167 When he visits the bar a second time he immediately orders some breakfast, namely pancakes and sausages. Jassim again adjusts a boundary to that of the host country.

Food, as a potential bridge for cultural dialogue and as an identity marker, is also used in Crescent to bring Arab immigrants together at Nadia’s café. Food plays functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory and exile between immigrants. In Crescent food does also bring people of different ethnicities to interact and share their common experience. It becomes a metaphor for the interconnections within the ethnic borderland between different ethnic characters. In her interview with Andrea Shalal-Esa, Abu-Jaber states: “Food is such a great human connector, it’s so intimate…let the food be a metaphor for their experience…that’s why food has been such an important metaphor. To me, that’s one of the most immediate and powerful ways of creating the metaphor of the hearth and a gathering place, a place where the collective forms.”168 In spite of the feelings of displacement,
homelessness, nostalgia that overcome the narrative, native food creates a feeling of home among Arab Americans and communal life between them and other ethnic groups as readers notice in their communication over the Thanksgiving feast, a dinner party at Sirine’s uncle’s house to which people from different cultural backgrounds are invited:

The conversation at the table meanders through the rest of the meal.

While Nathan becomes moody and withdrawn, the rest of them talk about the foreign but not unpleasant experience of eating turkey, and the pleasure of the rice stuffing…. They gossip about the café customers and the professors at the university and then they start to talk about Middle Eastern politics, which upsets everyone.169

Creation of friendly communal life is the result of food shared between different people as the above quote indicates. What is noted here is that religion does not play any role in bringing people of different religious affiliations together. All these characters do not care about religion, culture or ideology they follow. The only message given in the narrative is that all attempts of bridging the gaps between immigrants are done through food which happens to be cooked at an Arabian café. Realization of the effect of food on these immigrants can be seen in Han who shows more inclination to Arab food than to the Arab woman he loves largely because food creates a home away from home for him. His constant meeting with Sirine, who cooks for him, reminds him of food he has at home “My sister was about to call me in to eat. It’s like the light broke into me and brought it all back and then I had to return to this place.”170 This feeling grows within Sirine too who spends too much time looking up “Iraqi dishes, trying to find the childhood foods that she'd heard Han speak of, the sfeehas-savory pies stuffed with meat and spinach-and round mensaf
trays piled with lamb and rice and yogurt sauce with onions, and for dessert, tender ma’amul cookies that dissolve in the mouth.”

Therefore, the Middle East café, Sirine and the food she cooks become the most important bridges connecting to home as Sirine comments “food was better than love: surer, truer.” Sirine’s role as a bridge through cooking food and participating in its consumption with different ethnicities facilitates achieving communal life with varied ethnic, national, and cultural identities. Such a type of portrayal is best exemplified by the dinner party at Sirine Uncle’s house described as “Vast and steaming, crowded” where “Sirine and her uncle try to invite over anyone who need a place.” In fact, this event sheds light too on erasing the cultural barriers between Arab immigrants and other ethnicities in America. The conversation between the Egyptian student Gharb and Aziz regarding the mix meeting with women shows a possibility of achieving common life with other immigrants: “All these guys and girls all together…” “Yes, imagine the possibilities,” Aziz says. “That’s what I mean,” Gharb says. “In my village, the guys and women eat apart from each other…I like it, of course. I do!” These views are met with the reaction of Um-Nadia who describes how people gather and eat in her native place “In Beirut, it’s always boy-girl, et cetera, et cetera. Much more sophisticated” which differs from Iraqi tradition as Sirine’s uncle notes: “In our village, the big parties always separated men and women.”

Arabic food prepared at the café such as lentils fried with rice and onions, roasted lamb, baba ghannuj, rice and pine nuts, fava bean dip, laban sauce and eggplant constitutes a reconstruction of Sirine’s past and the memory of her parents. It transports her to the lost world of her parents, American Red Cross volunteers who had died in Africa. When she joins Nadia’s café, “she went through her parents’ old
recipes and began cooking the favorite-but almost forgotten-dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents’ tiny kitchen and her earliest memories.\textsuperscript{176} In other words, the Arabian food she prepares reminds her of both a physical replication of the culture that her Iraqi father practices and a lost homeland: “The flavors remind them of their homes.”\textsuperscript{177} Thus, food is a medium that connects people together regardless their ethnic and cultural affiliation. For instance, at the café, Sirine is helped by other displaced Latin ethnic minorities such as Victor and Cristobal, who all together serve to exemplify such a community. This coexistence at the café reinforces the sense of mutual understanding between immigrants as Victor comments:

“Chef isn’t an American cook,” Victor Hernandez says. “Not like the way Americans do food-just dumping salt into the pot. All the flavors go in the same direction. Chef cooks like we do. In Mexico, we put cinnamon in with the chocolate and pepper in the sweetcakes, so things pull apart, you know, make it bigger?”\textsuperscript{178}

In addition for being a tool for connecting different ethnicities, food does also play a contrast role. As much as it brings immigrants together inside the United States, it widens the gap between immigrants and the American culture. This is appreciated in the way the immigrants try to escape indulgence in the American foods: “butter instead of olive oil; potatoes instead of rice; beef instead of lamb” which Han interprets “a shift of ingredients like a move from native tongue into a foreign language.”\textsuperscript{179} This is because, according to Han, commitment to native food is like adherence to mother tongue: “food is their private language…The words flow into the eating.”\textsuperscript{180} Therefore, food in \textit{Crescent} plays a two-fold role. On the one hand, it breaks all the barriers between immigrants through which all physical and
psychological ethnic borderlines are erased for the sake of communication and coexistence away from home and distances them from the hostile environment that views them as refused race on the other.

The present dynamic of the American culture is a key crosscutting theme and, as such, exacerbates trends in racism, discrimination, and Othering Arabs as the reader observes in Arab American fiction. Edward Said contends, in *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, that there is a consensus on “Islam as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world’s new political, social and economic patterns. For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism.”

According to media expert Jack Shaheen, since the Oklahoma terrorist attack of 1995, the American media have projected negative stereotypes of Arabs and keep producing images parallel to the images of the Jews in Nazi-inspired German movies. In *Once in a Promised Land*, Halaby shows that the representation of Arab Muslims in the American media relates to the lack of acceptance of differences that creates public panic around the terrorist threat:

Later, as she was driving home, Salwa stopped at a red light with her windows closed against the unbearable heat, which seemed as though it would never, ever end. She pressed the forward scan button on the radio, searching for the station with soft rock and no commercials. A man’s voice blared out: “Is anyone fed up yet? Is anyone sick of nothing being done about all those Arab terrorists? In the name of Jesus Christ! They live with us. Among us! Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us. They just want …”
The tragic attacks of 9/11 have instigated many questions about the American relationship with the Arab world. Perhaps the most appreciated form of this relationship as perceived by the majority of the Americans is “Why do they hate us?”, an exclamation that has inspired many white fiction writers to give answers to this outrageous question. Generally their answers as examined in the two previous chapters are clearly of hegemony and imperialism as the word “us” suggests. In other words, the question clearly implies that this alleged hatred is directed toward every American and not toward specific American institutions. Hence, the white American discourse on Arabs reflects the answer of the majority of the Americans to the question. Accordingly, Arab American fiction emerges as a counter-narrative produced by writers who found themselves being compromised as “members of a demonized community” and whose task “tended to address communal concerns more than individual ones.”

The period that follows the terrorist attacks of the 9/11 does not only engender a need on the part of Arab-Americans to confront the terrorism and fanaticism charges targeting them, but has made it crucial for Arab American fiction writers to highlight the historical injustices that Arabs in the Middle East had been subjected to by US foreign policy. By doing so, these writers contextualize the 9/11 attacks and move them beyond simplistic rationalizations. Therefore, the post 9/11 era does not indicate an emergence of a new Arab American literature, rather it contributes to the maturation of this community’s literature which has already attained a complexity in its themes and concerns before the 9/11 attacks as Said notes in Covering Islam:

…the tendency to reduce Islam to a handful of rules, stereotypes, and generalizations about the faith, its founder, and all of its people, then
the reinforcement of every negative fact associated with Islam-its violence, primitiveness, atavism, threatening qualities. And all this without any serious effort at defining the term “fundamentalism,” or giving precise meaning either to “radicalism” or “extremism,” or giving those phenomena some context (for example, saying that 5 percent, or 10 percent, or 50 percent of all Muslims are fundamentalists). 185

This complexity is portrayed differently by writers whose responses to American racism differ from one another. For writers like Laila Halaby, Diana Abu-Jaber and Muhja Kahf, subjugation of Arab ethnicity has its roots, in addition to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, in the growing American imperial ambitions in the Middle East. For Naomi Shihab Nye, terrorism has been the main cause for Arab suffering inside the US. Her “An Open Letter from Naomi Shihab Nye to Any Would-Be Terrorists,” that was published weeks after 9/11, embodies loathing of terrorist acts and as well as its ostracizing effects on Arab-American and Muslim-American minorities. Addressing “any would-be terrorists,” Nye focuses on terrorism as the only factor affecting the lives of Arabs as she writes to a faceless terrorist: “I beg you…as your distant Arab cousin, as your American neighbor, listen to me. Our hearts are broken, as yours may also feel broken in some ways we can’t understand, unless you tell us in words. Killing people won’t tell us…Find another way to live.” 186 Regardless of complexities in approaching issues related to Arabs inside America, these differences create the opportunity to voice Arab American concerns in the period after 9/11 and help bring Arab American literature into the larger socio-political dynamics of the twenty-first century American society.
Novels written by Arab American writers in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks emphasize the impossibility of achieving an equal life with the White Americans. These novels expose the contradictions in the propagated American Dream for people living on the U.S soil regardless their color, race and religious affiliation. In contrast to the White American writers, Arab American writers demonstrate fear of the increasing racial profiling towards Arab Muslims and try to subvert white American misrepresentation of Islam and Muslim by providing contrasted views. If an Arab is represented as violent, uncivilized brute and terrorist in White American fiction, Arab American writers challenge this stereotyping. An Arab is represented as a victim of generalization, racial profiling and physical assaults. Arab American characters, who are represented as victims, tend to build communal life with other minorities like Latinos, Turks and Iranians and try to bridge the gap of differences by diminishing all cultural boundaries of identification in order to achieve mutual understanding and relationship in this hostile environment.

Anti-Arab attitudes have their roots in pre 9/11 America. In Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*, this pre 9/11 history of anti-Arab racism is shaped by many events like the Arab oil embargo imposed on America in 1967 and the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979 and confrontations that involved Arab and Muslim terrorists such as bombing the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the Oklahoma bombing of 1995. The events of 9/11 are considered by many to be a major transformative event in the history of America and a memory fault-line that increased the racial profiling against Arab Americans and altered the situation of Arab community inside America. The post 9/11 climate becomes ripe for manifestations of political racism and moral exclusion. This study found that, a majority of Arab Muslims believe their
identity is under siege and their cultural heritage is under attack after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

One common issue that is strongly highlighted in post 9/11 Arab American novel is the increased anti-Arabism inside the American society. Arab American characters feel they are removed not only from the Middle East but also removed from the United States. This hybrid feeling characterizes the protagonists and corresponds with the feelings of minor characters. The two novels tell stories of how the protagonists try to find a way of dealing with the boundaries created by the whites. Demolishing these boundaries happens either by creating communal life with other minorities or by relating to their religion, language, music, food, gender and class which seem to shape the identity of the protagonists and other characters. Although the two stories deal with the same theme of Arab-American immigrant experience, each story tells a unique experience of its protagonist and in this way they draw attention to the diverse make-up of the Arab American population which contains Christians and Muslims, rich and poor, recent immigrants and people raised in America, etc.
Notes


4 Conrey 153.


15 Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land* 303.

16 Halaby VIII.

17 Halaby 3.

18 Halaby 231-232.

19 Halaby 46.

20 Halaby 46.


23 Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land* 57-58.

24 Halaby 56.

25 Halaby 114.

26 Halaby 56.


28 Abu-Jaber 21.

29 Abu-Jaber 22.

30 Abu-Jaber 43.

31 Abu-Jaber 54.
32 Abu-Jaber 105.
33 Abu-Jaber 105.
34 Abu-Jaber 325.
35 Abu-Jaber 110-130.
36 Abu-Jaber 222.
37 Abu-Jaber 222.
38 Abu-Jaber 176.
39 Abu-Jaber 325.
40 Abu-Jaber 324.
41 Abu-Jaber 190.
42 Abu-Jaber 106.
43 Abu-Jaber 75-76.
44 Abu-Jaber 77.
45 Abu-Jaber 80.
46 Abu-Jaber 81.
47 Abu-Jaber 83.
49 Shakespeare 23.
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96 Halaby 71.

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101 Halaby 244.

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104 Halaby 288.

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151 Halaby 217.

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156 Halaby 225-226.

157 Halaby 120.

158 Halaby 125.

159 Halaby 157.

160 Halaby 158.

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171 Abu-Jaber 214.
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173 Abu-Jaber 206.
174 Abu-Jaber 218.
175 Abu-Jaber 218.
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183 Halaby, *Once in a promised Land* 56.
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