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**Trauma in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and Joseph  
O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008): A Psychoanalytical Perspective**

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*To The Pride and Joy of our Families and  
Friends*

## Abstract

The present study investigates the issue of trauma within two selected literary works: Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent*, (2003) and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). The aim of this research paper has been to explore how trauma shapes an individual's identity in context of displacement. Relying on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, this dissertation analyzed how the novels portray their protagonists' struggles with their identity formation in two different contexts: post- Gulf War and post-9/11 America. Our research is structured into two main chapters, the Imaginary, the Real, and the Symbolic order in the two selected narratives. The analysis of these two literary works together resulted in two key findings. First, it confirmed how trauma significantly alters self –perception, pushing individuals to navigate their identity through a fragmented self in diasporic dislocation. Second, the research revealed that identity formation is a complex process of reconciliation between internal desires and external expectations through language, trauma, and social structures.

**Key words:** trauma, identity formation, Lacanian psychoanalysis, displacement, alienation.

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgment</b> .....	<b>I</b>
<b>Dedication</b> .....	<b>II</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>III</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>IV</b>
<b>I/ General introduction</b> .....	<b>01</b>
<b>Review of Literature:</b> .....	<b>03</b>
<b>Issue and Working Hypothesis:</b> .....	<b>05</b>
<b>Methodological Outline:</b> .....	<b>06</b>
<b><i>II/ Method and Materials:</i></b> .....	<b>08</b>
<b>1-Method:</b> .....	<b>08</b>
<b>2-Materials:</b> .....	<b>11</b>
a) Biography of Diana Abu Jaber: .....	<b>11</b>
b) Biography of Joseph O’Neill: .....	<b>12</b>
c) Synopsis of Diana Abu Jaber’s <i>Crescent</i> (2003): .....	<b>13</b>
d) Synopsis of Joseph O’Neill’s <i>Netherland</i> (2008): .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Results:</b> .....	
15	
<b>III. Discussion:</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter One: The Imaginary and The Real Order in Diana Abu Jaber’s <i>Crescent</i></b>	

<b>(2003) and Joseph O’Neill’s <i>Netherland</i> (2008).</b>	18
<b>1. Historical Background:</b>	18
1.1/ Iraq and the Post-Gulf War:	19
1.2/ Post 9/11 New York:	20
<b>2-The Imaginary:</b>	22
2.1/ Identity Formation:	22
2.2/ Misrecognition and Alienation:	28
2.3. /Mirroring Characters:	30
<b>3. The Real Order: The Unpresentable and the Unspeakable:</b>	33
3.1/ Death:	33
3.2/Trauma:	35
3.3/ The Uncanny and The Surreal Elements:	38
<b>Chapter Two: The Symbolic Order in Diana Abu Jaber’s <i>Crescent</i> (2003) and Joseph O’Neill’s <i>Netherland</i> (2008):</b>	45
1. The Symbolic Order:	45
2. Language and the Collapse of Norms:	48
3. Alienation and the Divided Subject:	52
4. The Role of the Other and Symbolic Recognition:	57
<b>V. General Conclusion:</b>	65
<b>Bibliography:</b>	67



# *General introduction*

## **I/ General introduction:**

The following dissertation will study trauma, which has a deep impact on individuals causing a disruption in the way they perceive themselves. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), trauma is defined as “a psychological response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more”. It can have a profound impact: “immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea”.<sup>1</sup>

Trauma effects consist of symptoms such as anxiety, depression, flashbacks, nightmares and avoidance behavior. Over time, untreated trauma can lead to serious mental health issues like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and emotional struggles. Understanding trauma is crucial for recognizing how painful experiences can profoundly impact individuals’ emotional, mental, and physical well-being<sup>2</sup>. Trauma in literature is often represented through non-linear narratives and fragmentation, reflecting the disorderly nature of traumatic experiences.

Literary representations of trauma often employ key techniques ‘such as fragmentation and non-linear narration’ to explore its complexities and reveal how traumatic experiences shape the way stories are told and perceived by individuals and communities. These aspects are used to convey the disorienting effects and confusions of trauma on memory and perception. As the exploration of trauma in literature has deepened, it has given rise to a distinct sub-genre known as trauma fiction. Trauma, as a sub-genre, focuses on the psychological and emotional effects of traumatic events on characters, dealing with themes of suffering, resilience, identity and survival. This style employs techniques that include nonlinear storytelling where events are not

presented in a chronological order to allow readers experience the confusion and fragmentation that it can causes. This technique reflects the disorientation and emotional damage associated with traumatic events, it works to provide a powerful lens through which to examine the human experience that convey the deep impact of trauma on the characters. <sup>3</sup>

The sub-category of trauma literature has been particularly prominent in post 9/11 fiction that addresses the terrorist attacks in September 11,2001. It depicts the impacts of the attacks, exploring themes of loss, grief, security, identity and collective memory. Post 9/11 narratives highlight the personal and collective trauma reflecting the impact of the tragedy on both individuals and society. It also deals with cultural identity and alienation where others portray the experience of minorities and immigrants who face identity crises as they navigate through their cultural or religious background. <sup>4</sup>

Post-Gulf War literature explores the effects of war on people and societies. It examines themes like trauma, identity crisis, and the human cost of conflict. Authors write about the experiences of soldiers and civilians, highlighting the struggles and challenges they face. This literature provides insight into the impact of war on individuals and communities.

Building on the themes present in post 9/11 fiction and post-Gulf War, our major interest in this study is to examine two novels that exemplify the representation of trauma in literature, mainly Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). This study explores how two novels, *Crescent* by Diana Abu-Jaber and *Netherland* by Joseph O'Neill, portray trauma and its impact on characters' identities and sense of belonging after 9/11.

## **Review of Literature:**

Both *Crescent* by Diana Abu Jaber and *Netherland* by Joseph O’Neill have received significant varied critical responses upon their release. To start with, Nouaouria Hassiba has studied Abu Jaber’s *Crescent* in her case study in titled ‘Arab American Identity in Exile’ from both a psychological and cultural perspectives. She deals with trauma as a testimony to the deep psychological and cultural impacts of exile on Arab and Arab American identity. Trauma is multifaceted in this case and involves loss of home, displacement at a cultural level, and the fragmented identity experienced by figures such as Sirine and Hanif.

This sense of “in – betweenness” portrays the struggle of most immigrants to negotiate their dual identities caught between origins and their new environment. Hassiba’s use of psychoanalytical theory shows how trauma appears in inner conflict, identity crisis, relationships, self – perception, and affects memory.

Furthermore, Nouaouria Hassiba shows in her study how *Crescent* (2003) portrays food as a powerful symbol and a way for healing, according to her food preparation and sharing meals offer a way of maintaining cultural memory and strengthen communal bounds in displacement. Despite the depth of trauma, the narrative offers a hopeful vision of mixed cultures and coexistence, embodied in the café setting that becomes a place of intercultural contact. Hassiba states in her article that: —Sirine who succeeded to work as an ethnic bonding

agent, as through her cooking, she managed to draw most of the different ethnicities of Arabs and non – Arabs together in the space of Um – Nadia café (p.5).<sup>5</sup>

In addition, Ouhiba Nawel Meriem in her critical analysis “Food as a Marker of Self Identification” in Diana Abu Jaber’s *Crescent* examines the fictional representation of food as a marker of identity in the text functioning as an attempt for the protagonist Sirine to reconnect with her past roots and the new setting in the United States to find her identity. Food in Abu Jaber’s *Crescent* is a symbolic bridge between displaced Arab immigrants and their home. According to Ouhiba, the use of food as a “guide” portrays its function of preserving cultural heritage and belonging in times of dislocation.

Despite the disruptive power of trauma, displaced individuals are able to show resilience in the form of identity reconstruction, usually creating hybrid identities by combining elements of their homeland culture with those of their new environment, reflecting the psychological impact of exile. Overall, Ouhiba’s study reveals that trauma and identity are deeply bound, with food as a cultural marker and a tool for healing and self -reconstruction in the aftermath of loss and disruption. In this sense, she claims that: “This article presents a critical analysis of Abu Jaber’s novel *Crescent*; it examines the fictional representation of food as a marker of identity and an articulator of nostalgia for the lost homeland”.<sup>6</sup>

Considering O’Neill’s *Netherland*, Cinzia Shiavini’s analyzes how the novel reflects the political, social, and cultural aftermath of the September 11 attacks, as she claims:

“Among the transnational novels that questioned the many facets of the construction and legitimacy of the state of exception related to 9/11 events, Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008) is probably the one that stimulated the majority of critical responses due to its complexity and self – reflexivity” (p.83).

In the same study, Shiavini explores trauma from the perspective of O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008), situating the novel in the context of broader literature on 9/11 and philosophical discussions on sovereignty, emergency, and identity. The state of exception, as developed by Giorgio Agamben is central to the analysis of the post 9/11 American socio-political condition. Agamben, as stated in Shiavini's study, derives the concept from situations of crisis in which normal legal systems are paused so that sovereign authority may act outside of constitutional limits. Shiavini highlights how this suspension of law was a characteristic of the US response to 9/11, embodied in policies like the USA Patriot Act and the militarization of foreign policy. This state of exception created a collective trauma that was characterized by fear, disorientation, and a fragmentation of social bounds. *Netherland* stands out as an original text regarding the representation of trauma, through its protagonist Hans Van den Broek, a Dutch expatriate in New York, and his relationship with Chuck Ramkisson, an Indo-Trinidadian immigrant, the novel reorients trauma beyond the national framework. This decentering of the American view point destabilizes the binary oppositions of 'Us vs Them' and examines the cultural and political fault lines exposed by 9/11.

New York itself is turned into a metaphorical '**Netherland**', in between space representing loss, paralysis and submerged emotional states, highlighting uncertainty, alienation, and the search for meaning in a destabilized world. Shiavini points out how *Netherland* is critical of the state of exception through its illustration of the intersection of political and intimate realms of trauma. The failure of Hans marriage, for Shiavini, parallels the disintegration of national identity, suggesting that trauma is operating on both intimate and collective levels simultaneously. *Netherland* deals with themes of home, belonging, and identity that disrupt traditional narratives of recovery, providing instead the implication that the post traumatic moment is a continuous negotiation of space, memory, and cultural hybridity. Shiavini's analysis situates *Netherland* within a critical discourse that views 9/11 not only as a

national trauma but as a transnational event that challenges sovereign power and its narratives. The novel's innovative narrative strategies and thematic concerns contribute significantly to the understanding of trauma in post 9/11 era, offering a complex counter narrative that resist closure and embraces multiplicity. <sup>7</sup>

Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* is a thought-provoking novel that explores the complexities of identity, belonging, and dislocation in post-9/11 New York City. The story follows Hans van den Broek, a Dutch financier, as he navigates his life in a foreign city. Through Hans's experiences, O'Neill raises important questions about what it means to belong to a community and to find one's place in the world. The novel provides a portrayal of life in New York City after 9/11, capturing the sense of uncertainty and disorientation that many people felt during that time. Some critics such as Wood James' in his article called "*Beyond a Boundary* " published in the New Yorker on may 26th,2008, he noted that the novel focuses mainly on the experiences of privileged expats, which can limit its perspective. However, *Netherland* remains a rich and nuanced work that offers valuable insights into the human condition. The novel's themes and portrayal of life in New York City make it a compelling read, sparking important discussions about identity, community, and belonging in a post-9/11 world. Overall, *Netherland* is a novel that encourages readers to reflect on their own experiences of identity and belonging, and to consider the complexities of navigating multiple cultural identities. <sup>8</sup>

### **Issue and Working Hypothesis:**

Relying on the literature review above, it is evident that a significant research has been conducted on both *Crescent* and *Netherland*. However, to our best knowledge, no study had so far ventured to put and study the two novels together. Our main concern is to investigate how

the main characters in the two narratives deal with traumatic experiences that affects their sense of identity and belonging.

Despite the vast critical attention given to the two novels, there remains a significant research gap in the portrayal of trauma, identity, cultural hybridity in these two novels. While *Crescent* has been analyzed from psychoanalytic and feminist dimensions focusing on the gendered experiences of trauma, the symbolic nature of food, and the negotiations of Arab American identity, *Netherland* has been investigated mainly for its post - colonial perspective on immigrant identity and the navigation of culture through the metaphor of cricket in a post 9/11 world. However, to our best knowledge, there is no research available that critically analyzes the way in which trauma and identity reconstruction function both in the two novels, especially at the intersection of gender, exile, and cultural identification. A further theoretical research approach combining the interplay of psychoanalytical and socio cultural perspectives applied to both narratives could give deeper understanding of the complex processes of identity formation and the search for belonging in exile, addressing these gaps would further deepen the comprehension of trauma literature and the multiple ways in which immigrant narratives negotiate trauma and cultural hybridity.

### **Methodological Outline:**

This study follows a structure, comprising a broad introduction providing an overview of the topic, including a review of literature on both Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). The second part, related to method and materials, deals with the analysis of Jacques Lacan's theory of the three registers the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. While the materials section consists of the summaries of the two novels and the biographies of the two writers. The discussion section is divided into two chapters. The first chapter entitled the "Imaginary and the Real Order" focusing on the identity formation and alienation of the mirroring characters, the death, trauma, and the uncanny. The second chapter examines the

Symbolic order, concerning language and the collapse of norms, alienation and fragmented identity of the characters, symbolic lack and desire, and the role of the other and symbolic recognition.

Lastly, the dissertation ends with a general conclusion summarizing the most important points of this research.

## **II/ Method and Materials:**

### **1-Method:**

This section explains the research method used to study how trauma is explored in the two novels: *Crescent* (2003) and *Netherland* (2008). Jacques Lacan is a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who was born on April 13, 1901 in Paris. His work up to the period of structuralism, his theory illustrates how trauma shapes the human identity and how it is manifested in both engaging in shaping the characters and the narratives. This study uses Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to analyze trauma in the two novels because it effectively explores unconscious desires, symbolic losses, and disruptions caused by traumatic events. This framework fits perfectly with the novels' themes of fragmented identities in a post-9/11 world, allowing for a deeper understanding of how traumatic experiences shape characters' emotions and sense of self.

Lacanian theory places trauma not as a past event but as an unrepresentable center of the Real that deconstructs the imaginary dimension of trauma and manifests in persistent behaviors, linguistic slips, and existential voids present in the two narratives. The analysis relies on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory that focuses on how identity is formed through language, social structures and desire, and on how the unconscious mind is structured like a language, which offers a rich framework for understanding trauma in terms of the three registers: The Imaginary, the Real, and the Symbolic.

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory reshaped the understanding of human subjectivity by centering language, desire, and structural incompleteness. It relies on three interdependent orders that organize psychic experience and social reality. They offer an organized manner of exploring how subjects work through identity, desire, and unconscious drives. First, the Imaginary Order that takes place in the mirror stage between the age of 6 to 18 months, where an infant misrecognizes its fragmented body experience as a complete whole

through reflection. This realm of images, illusions, and dual relations promote ego formation as a defensive structure based on idealized identifications and fantasies of wholeness.

For Lacan, the ego is inherently alienating as it mediates the subject's internal lack and external perceptions, creating a division between "self" and "other." The Imaginary extends into adulthood by controlling relations through opposition, empathy, and the projection of complete identities onto others. Yet, it remains in subordination to the Symbolic, which structures its meaning. Second, the Symbolic Order is connected to the Oedipal complex and the Name-of-the-Father that is a symbolic father figure who inserts himself between the infant and the mother, breaking up their dual unity. The subject is tied into an already existing network of signifiers meaning words and social conventions by means of language, but this entrance also divides the self that signification cannot fully capture the essence of subject, leaving a lack to fuel desire. The unconscious structured like a language manifests in slips, dreams, and symptoms revealing chains of repressed signifiers.

Lacan maintains that desire is always the desire of the Other moderated by social codes and unattainable ideals. For example, a child's demand for a toy that is the Symbolic masks an essential lack that is the Real that no object can satisfy. Lastly, the Real Order cannot be symbolized that it is trauma and the impossible. As opposed to reality, the Real is what resists representation portrayed in moments of irrational horror, bodily pain, or existential constraints like death. It is not a material realm but a structural absence that disrupts the Imaginary and Symbolic.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Lacanian Three Concepts:**

Lacan's theory breaks down human experience into three interconnected aspects. The Real represents the unattainable things we desire, like a lost object or an unfulfilled longing. The Symbolic refers to the rules, language, and social norms that structure our reality. The Imaginary involves how we perceive ourselves and others, shaping our identities. These aspects interact and influence each other, as seen in a musical performance that follows genre rules (Symbolic), is perceived by the audience (Imaginary), and involves uncertainty and anxiety on stage (Real). By understanding these dynamics, Lacanian analysis aims to help people reframe their relationships with desire and loss, revealing the underlying fantasies that drive their thoughts and behaviors.

Through the use of Lacan's theory, our dissertation extends beyond surface level analysis to examine how trauma repeats itself through the engagement of these registers, and how the characters of the two narratives attempt and sometimes fail to redescribe their experiences within the Symbolic order. This provides a good framework for analyzing the cultural manifestation of trauma. Trauma helps to understand how it shapes the characters' identities and how it influences their behavior, by examining it, we aim to explore how deeply personal and unspoken experiences shaped the way the characters perceive themselves and the world.

Instead of unifying the ego. Lacan tries to dissolve its imaginary unity by revealing the divided subject's dependence on the Other. The Lacanian theory reshapes psychoanalysis as an engagement with the limits of language and void at the essence of subjectivity. By examining the interplay between Imaginary identifications, Symbolic imperatives, and Real disruptions, it reveals the paradoxes of desire and the fragile constructions of human identity<sup>10</sup>.

### **2-Materials:**

This section of our study includes primary materials used to achieve our research. It introduces the biographies of the writers Abu-Jaber and O'Neill, their cultural backgrounds, educational histories, and literary careers are emphasized. It is followed by the summaries of their bestselling novels, *Crescent* (2003) and *Netherland* (2008), to provide a broader understanding of the issues, character developments, and cultural contexts discussed in these novels. By analyzing Abu-Jaber's bicultural Jordanian and American background and her concern with Arab-American identity and dual cultural issues, as well as *Netherland's* search for identity and displacement by O'Neill, this overview positions the two novels in the personal and cultural lives of their authors, deepening critical understanding of their literary texts. This part of our dissertation will attempt to provide a deeper understanding to consider how the two novel engage with the themes of trauma, identity, exile, and hybrid culture.

This part explores the historical and sociopolitical contexts that inform the narratives of both *Crescent* (2003) and *Netherland* (2008). It is important to situate both novels within the historical and sociopolitical circumstances that have shaped their characters' courses of trauma, identity, and displacement. *Crescent* is set in the context of the Arab displacement in America marked by colonialism, war, and forced migration from Iraq and the Middle East. Similarly, *Netherland* is set in post-9/11 New York, a city impacted by the trauma of the attacks and the alienation and uncertainty that comes with it.

#### **a) Biography of Diana Abu Jaber:**

Diana Abu-Jaber, an acclaimed American novelist, was born in 1960 in Syracuse, New York, to an American mother and a Jordanian father. From the age of seven, she spent her childhood between the United States and Jordan, an experience that inspired her early interest in writing; she began writing at a young age, she received her master's degree from the University of Windsor and her doctorate at SUNY-Binghamton. Abu Jaber's first three novels were published between 1993 and 2005; they are entitled *Arabian Jazz* (1993), *Crescent* (2003) and *The Language of Baklava* (2005). She won several awards for her literary works that

explore themes of immigrant experience, identity and family, that made her a figure in modern literature. She has also spoken about the trauma of being an Arab-American woman in a post-9/11 world.<sup>11</sup>

**b) Biography of Joseph O’Neill:**

Joseph O’Neill is an Irish American novelist, born in Cork, Ireland in 1964, the son of a Turkish mother and an Irish father. O’Neill spent his childhood in Mozambique, Turkey, Iran, South Africa and the *Netherlands*, he attended the Lyceé Français La Haye and The British school in the *Netherlands*. He studied law at Girton College, Cambridge, preferring it over English. O’Neill began writing poetry but had turned away from it by the age of twenty - four, after that he spent a year writing his first novel. O’Neill then was a full time lawyer in London writer, he is best known for *Netherland* which was published in May, 2008 and was featured on The Lover of the New York Times Book Review. He also wrote *The Dog* (2014), and *A Good Travel* (2018). Joseph’s works often examine displacement, existential uncertainty, and the psychological effects of personal and collective Trauma.<sup>12</sup>

**c) Synopsis of Diana Abu Jaber’s *Crescent* (2003):**

*Crescent* is a novel written by Abu Jaber, published in 2003 and set in Los Angeles. The story is about Sirine, a thirty - nine years old Iraqi American chef who works in a small middle Eastern Café owned by Um Nadia. She lives with her uncle who raised her after her parents’ death. Her world changes when she meets Hanif Al Eyad who is an Iraqi exiled and a teacher at the same department where her uncle teaches in the University of California Los Angeles. He is deeply troubled by his separation from his family in Iraq.

The novel deals with themes of identity, exile, food and culture reflected by the trauma that the characters have carried carried. *Crescent* explores trauma as not just an individual

experience but rather as a collective one, particularly among immigrants and exiles. It suggests that trauma cannot be erased but can be understood and shared to be transformed into connection and resilience. Another major theme of the novel is the tale telling of Sirine's uncle, presenting Abdelrahman Salahadin's personal universe that mirrors Sirine and Hanif's loss of home.<sup>13</sup>

**d) Synopsis of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008):**

*Netherland* is a post 9/11 New York City novel written by O'Neill, which was published in 2008 and set in Manhattan after the events of 9/11. The story follows the protagonist Hans van Den Broek from the Netherlands, a Dutch financial analyst left alone in New York after his English wife and son return to London for safety reasons. Struggling to cope with their absence and the trauma of 9/11, Hans reflects on his childhood in the Netherlands and his past experiences. Chuck Ramkisson, a Trinidadian immigrant, befriends Hans in 2002 and introduces him to the Staten Island Cricket Club. Through cricket, Hans explores his identity and sense of belonging in post-9/11 America, reconnecting with his past and finding a sense of community.

The novel deals with themes of identity and belonging, alienation, culture and trauma, reflecting Hans's Dutch roots, his experience as an immigrant, and the broader tensions of cultural integration and identity in a globalized world shaped by trauma and doubts. Hans's marriage is tested by the tensions of distance and new love, and his friendship with Chuck reveals possibilities and the risks of chasing dreams in a fragmented world. Chuck's mysterious death remains unresolved but reveals deep consequences of his risky adventures.<sup>14</sup>

## **Results:**

Based on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, particularly his concepts of the Symbolic Order, the Real, and the Mirror Stage, this dissertation aims to explore the complex nature of identity from the lens of trauma in Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). Both novels, set in different cultural backgrounds, examine how trauma

disrupts the construction of identity and forces individuals into a continuous process of negotiation. The characters' dual heritage and cultural backgrounds complicate their renegotiation, as they grapple with unrealistic expectations imposed by both societies. These conflicting ideals lead to internal psychological struggles, forcing them into a constant process of identity negotiation.

Our first finding helps to support Lacan's idea that trauma represents a disruption for the Real that destroys the consistency of the Symbolic order that generally structures identity. In *Crescent*, the Iraqi-American identity of Sirine is haunted by the death of her parents, preventing her from completing the symbolization of her loss, trapping her in the Imaginary realm of illusions and fractured self-perception. In *Netherland*, Hans's displacement and loss due to 9/11 destabilizes his sense of home. His engagement in cricket is an attempt at restoring order on his fragmented identity. Both of these characters demonstrate the impossibility of forming a consistent sense of self when trauma disrupts the social and cultural frameworks that form identity.

The second finding is related to the two different ways through which individuals negotiate their identity against trauma which is by Lacan's "Big Other" as social authority. Sirine in *Crescent* embraces cultural hybridity, reimagining the Symbolic Order through mixing her Iraqi background within American society. Hans, on the other hand, in *Netherland* struggles with alienation, rejecting both the social conventions of America and Britain, using the Imaginary world of cricket as comfort which deepens his fragmentation. In this context, the imaginary world of cricket serves as a comfort mechanism for Hans, a character in the novel *Netherland*. Cricket represents a nostalgic connection to his past life and cultural heritage. These responses illustrate Lacan's idea that trauma transforms identity into a continuous debate between absence and reconstruction where the individual is always incomplete and fragmented. These three Lacanian orders illuminate further the identity fragmentation that both novels'

characters struggle with. Sirine's fixation on her Iraqi identity is a Lacanian "ideal ego" as a misconstrued self-image that promises wholeness but is founded on lack. Similarly, Hans's involvement with cricket gives him a sense of temporary escape and wholeness, allowing him to momentarily forget his feelings of dislocation and fragmentation in post-9/11 America. The game provides a comforting, imaginary world where he can find stability and belonging. This shows in Lacan's idea that the ego emerges from misrecognition in which characters hold onto external images as a means of replacement for inner fragmentation.

In Lacanian terms, Sirine's grief over her parents' loss represents the "Real" - a traumatic, unrepresentable void that disrupts her sense of self and cultural narratives. This emotional pain can't be fully expressed or symbolized, creating a sense of disorientation and fragmentation in her life. The loss resists narrative closure, leaving a persistent, haunting presence. Compared to this, Hans finds the Real in 9/11's horror and family breakdown pushing him away from home that structured his subjectivity. His cricket obsession is a desperate revival of the Symbolic in which the rules of the game artificially create his broken self.

Overall, this discussion confirms that identity under trauma is not fixed but is a process of evolving negotiation based on continuous disruption of the Real and the individual's efforts to reconcile with the Symbolic order. Identity in the context of trauma is a dynamic and ongoing process of negotiation between individual experiences and symbolic structures. Trauma disrupts the sense of self, leading to fluidity and fragmentation. Individuals must continually reconstruct their identity, navigating the complex interplay between traumatic experiences and symbolic order, to find meaning and coherence. This process highlights the importance of acknowledging and working through trauma, rather than trying to fix or stabilize identity.

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### **III. Discussion:**

#### **Chapter One: The Imaginary and The Real Order in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008).**

The following chapter investigates Lacanian's concepts of the Imaginary and the Real in Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). This discussion begins with situating the historical and sociopolitical contexts of the two novels to understand the characters' internal conflicts. This chapter then analyzes the two concepts according to the main characters of the two novels: Sirine, Hanif, Hans van den Broek, Chuck Ramkissoon, and Sirine's absent parents, examining their identity formation, as well as misrecognition and alienation are based on idealized images. We will also examine how certain characters' function as mirror figures in both texts within the Symbolic order. Concerning the Real order, this chapter will study trauma as well as the surreal elements focusing on the events that disrupt the Symbolic order. Finally, we will deal with the scenes that confront raw reality such as death, loss, and violence which confronting the Real.

#### **1. Historical Background:**

This part will explore the historical and sociopolitical contexts that inform the narratives of both *Crescent* (2003) by Abu Jaber and *Netherland* (2008) by O'Neill. It is important to situate both novels within the historical and sociopolitical circumstances that have shaped their characters' courses of trauma, identity, and displacement. *Crescent* is set in the context of the Arab diaspora in America marked by colonialism, war, and forced migration from Iraq and the Middle East especially. Similarly, *Netherland* is set in post-9/11 New York, a city impacted by the trauma of the attacks and the alienation and uncertainty that comes with it. Both novels are deeply informed by the historical effects of war, migration, and cultural dislocation to understand the identity formations of the characters.

## **1.1/ Iraq and the Post-Gulf War:**

Saddam Hussein's rule was marked by brutal violence, including the invasion of Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990, leading to devastating conflicts and immense human suffering. His regime was characterized by tyranny, violence, and corruption, creating a culture of fear and oppression. The aftermath of his rule saw millions of Iraqis displaced, fleeing their homeland in search of safety and security. Those who escaped faced significant challenges and collective trauma, struggling with mental health issues, loss of cultural traditions, and a sense of dislocation. The impact of his regime continues to reverberate, affecting not only those who lived through it but also future generations.<sup>15</sup>

They also had difficulties to form social connections in displacement and to adapt to new countries and cultures, resulting in the loss of their identities and belonging. The trauma of war followed by forced migration led to a fragmented sense of self especially in the US where Iraqi immigrants faced challenges related to Islamophobia and being associated with terrorism.<sup>16</sup>

## **1.2/ Post 9/11 New York:**

In the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, New York went through deep social, political, and cultural changes. The event resulted in the death of 3,000 people and estimated injuries between 6,291 to 25,000 people. The grieving caused significant psychological trauma where New Yorkers were dealing with anxiety and fear. Economically, the collapse of the Twin Towers caused huge damage to the surrounding buildings mainly the World Trade Center. The attacks had also an impact on New York City's financial and touristic fields, leading to the destruction of the city's economy. It also generated a big wave of Islamophobia especially against people

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who were perceived to be Middle Eastern. Security measures were enhanced, public safety policies and immigrant laws were also changed.<sup>17</sup>

In response to the ‘terrorist’ attacks, the United States had adapted severe security measures against immigrants, primarily through the US PATRIOT Act, which was signed into law on October 26, 2001. The legislation expanded immigration authorities' powers to combat terrorism by enhancing surveillance, detention, and deportation<sup>18</sup>. Under Title IV, "Securing the Border," immigration officers gained greater authority to detain individuals who considered it a threat to national security, and they did not need to get much approval from judges to take action. Detention periods were extended beyond 90 days, potentially lasting six months or more if removal proved impossible. Additionally, the Act improved FBI access to criminal databases for foreign nationals' background checks and imposed stricter admission requirements for immigrants linked to terrorism. These measures aimed to strengthen national security and prevent potential threats. This detention can be continued over 90 days to six months or more where removal was not possible. The Act also enhanced FBI criminal data base access for investigating foreign nationals' backgrounds and impose stricter admission requirements for immigrants linked to terrorism.<sup>19</sup>

Other than the PATRIOT Act, the government passed laws such as the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System targeting Middle Eastern, South Asian, and North African immigrants, particularly Muslims, for heightened inspection, tracking, and detention without charges <sup>20</sup>. Thousands were arrested in hidden trials, often without public awareness of charges or evidence, justified broadly under "national security purposes". These actions generated big controversy about civil liberties, privacy rights, and racial classification since

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many felt that they were discriminatory against specific ethnic and religious communities. The PATRIOT Act's expansion of surveillance power of the government has also created concerns about exaggerated and severe constitutional protections. In general, post-9/11 security policies profoundly rebuilt U.S. immigration policy by prioritizing national security at the expense of significant controversies involving immigrants' civil rights. <sup>21</sup>

The aftermath of 9/11 saw a significant shift in cultural expression, with literature, media, and arts reflecting on the trauma and its impact on individuals and society. Works explored themes of displacement, identity, and nationalism, seeking to process the tragedy and its lasting effects. This creative response helped to preserve the memory of the event, fostering a deeper understanding and facilitating healing and reflection. After the 9/11 attacks, 'Scapegoating' was a dominant and dangerous response in the United States, with South Asian, Middle Eastern, Arab, Sikh, Hindu groups and especially muslims being unfairly blamed and targeted as potential terrorists. 'The scapegoating' was fueled by political rhetoric portraying these communities as national security enemies, opening the door to mass Islamophobia and hate crimes. Government policies like the National Security EntryExit Registration System, legitimized the scapegoating by disproportionately restricting these communities. 'The scapegoat' is employed as a symbolic vessel upon which society places its fears and anxieties so that ruling groups are able to mask their own inequalities and maintain power by excluding the marginalized group. This same pattern was then repeated in interventions like the « Muslim Ban » under the Trump administration, which further solidified the labeling of specific ethnic and religious groups with terrorism in the absence of facts. 'Scapegoating' since 9/11 represents profound underlying racial and political divisions in order to unify certain groups around a

definition of an out-group that is dangerous and not American, while hiding the actual causes of social and political issues.<sup>22</sup>

## **2-The Imaginary:**

### **2.1/ Identity Formation:**

Identity formation also called identity development. Identity formation is a complex process through which a person comes to acquire a clear sense of who they are, including their values, beliefs, personality, cultural heritage, and social roles. It usually starts in childhood and continues into adolescence to adulthood, as individuals explore various dimensions of themselves and their place in the world. This self – discovery is influenced by family, culture, religion, and personal experiences<sup>23</sup>. According to Mercadal Trudy:

“Identity formation refers to the intricate process through which individuals develop their sense of self, often influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. This process which is particularly significant during adolescence, encompasses various stages and can involve deep exploration of personal roles across different social context such as family, school, and community.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Food as a Lacanian Mirror:**

In *Crescent*, Abu Jaber portrays the protagonist Sirine as ‘Somehow, thirty-nine and a half years old; her parents are dead; she has never married’ (p.37). She is an Iraqi American woman working as a chef in a small middle eastern café located near the University of California in Los Angeles that belongs to a Lebanese woman Um Nadia. Born to an Iraqi father and an American mother, she was raised by her uncle in Los Angeles after their death. Sirine’s cooking skills are a big part of her character, reflecting her cultural identity.

Considering food in Abu Jaber's *Crescent*, functioning as a Lacanian mirror, Sirine's experience with food in the kitchen is a way to connect and create both personal and cultural

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identities and can be seen as a manifestation of the imaginary. It shows in the act of preparing traditional Arab dishes such as maqluba, lamb with rose petals or baklava with chocolate that she learned from her parents. Even though her mother was American, her father always tells his wife that she thought about food like an Arab. Sirine's mother strained the salted yogurt through cheesecloth to make creamy labneh, and stirred the onion and lentils together in a heavy iron pan to make mjeddrah, and studded joints of lamb with fat cloves of garlic to make roasted kharuf. Sirine's earliest memory was of sitting on a phone book on a kitchen chair, the sour-tart smell of pickled grape leaves in the air:

“Her mother spread the leaves flat on the table like little floating hands, placed the spoonful of rice and meat at the center of each one, and Sirine with her tiny fingers rolled the leaves up tighter and neater than anyone else could—tender, garlicky, meaty packages that burst in the mouth.” (p.51).

Food serves as a mirror reflecting the chef's attempt to reconnect with her past roots and the unattainable fantasy of wholeness. Her dishes and her act of cooking become a mirror for her search of her fragmented identity: "Tasting a piece of bread that someone bought is like looking at that person, but tasting a piece of bread that they baked is like looking out of their eyes" (p.192)<sup>25</sup>. Sirine's physical features as a light skinned woman put her at a complex place both within American and Arab cultures, profoundly affecting how she constructs her identity. Since she tends to "pass" for white, she is usually seen by others as white, which ironically makes her Arab heritage invisible. This invisibility makes her belonging difficult, as she witnesses a form of erasure common to many Arab Americans in a multicultural – settings<sup>26</sup>. Her internal reflection as inheriting her mother on the outside and her father on the inside defines her identity formation.

This double inheritance symbolizes her fragmented identity, split between visible signs of race and the invisible ties to heritage and family history. Sirine's "whiteness" can bring her

social advantages, but it also alienates her from claiming her Arab identity in a society that often racializes and stereotypes Arab Americans as non-white or foreign. This energy reflects Abu-Jaber's critique of assimilation expectations<sup>27</sup>, where Arab Americans are forced to lighten the hair, thin the lips, change the name, effectively erasing their history to fit in. For Sirine, this is an exercise in dislocation and homelessness, as she struggles to find a home both in her American environment and her Arab heritage<sup>28</sup>.

### **Hanif Al Eyad and his Search for Home:**

Hanif Al-Eyad, known as Han is a significant and complex character in Abu Jaber's *Crescent*. He is an Iraqi exiled filmmaker and new professor of Arabic literature in Los Angeles University, where Sirine's uncle works. He was described throughout the novel as an attractive and intellectual person, usually mentioned by his friend Nathan, an American photographer who traveled the Middle East often and his poet friend Aziz. Han fled his homeland due to political unrest. His character portrays the complexities of displacement and yearning for his homeland, navigating his identity and culture, he develops a romantic love interest with Sirine that influences his understanding of himself<sup>29</sup>. His attraction to her is not simply romantic but deeply symbolic. She represents a connection to an Arab world that still exists. The Imaginary order influences his relationship with Sirine, their interaction portrays his desire for understanding and belonging. Through Sirine, Hanif explores his cultural memory leading to his identity formation. His love for Sirine reflects his attempt to create a new home and identity, saying to her:

“Can I give you something?” Sirine lifts her hand. She is holding a new silver key. “It’s to my apartment”, he says. She looks at him, startled. “I would like

you to have it". I mean, if you don't mind". "You want to give me your key?" "I was just thinking about it". "Somehow I was thinking it would make me feel better... knowing that you had this". (p.101).

The key represents Han's life and home. This act shows Hanif's search for home and belonging through his connection with Sirine. The connection between Sirine and Hanif in *Crescent* is guided by cultural memory, emotional longing, and the desire to recreate personal identity. His affair with Sirine reveals the tension between lived diaspora and learned identity<sup>30</sup>, Hanif is burdened by the real, loss whereas Sirine discovers her Arabness to be something more of magic and fantasy. This difference creates failure where Hanif is defensive out of carrying with him the pain of his forced displacement and lost homeland that makes him unable to convey his suffering effectively to express his suffering, whereas Sirine deals with it with warmth and vulnerability. This encounter shows the ways in which trauma and displacement produce different coping mechanisms, Hanif remains rooted in the past while Sirine attempts to live between her past and present.<sup>31</sup>

### **Hans Van den Broek and the Cricket Enthusiasm:**

Hans navigates his Iraqi diaspora experience, cultural memory, and romantic relationship with Sirine to shape his Arab American identity. Similarly, "Hans in the Netherlands" (2008), copes with displacement in post-9/11 New York, finding solace and connection to his Dutch heritage through the sport of cricket. In *Netherland*, the main character and narrator Han, is a Dutchman- born immigrant, living in New York City Manhattan with his wife and young son after the 9/11 events. He is a financial analyst and a cricket enthusiast. His life changes when he befriends Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian immigrant who dreams to promote cricket in America. After the return of his wife Rachel and son to London, he stayed

alone in New York, struggling between nostalgia, loneliness, and dislocation. He struggles with the feeling of disconnection to find his place in post 9/11 New York.

To begin with, O’Neill’s protagonist uses cricket as a connection to his Dutch heritage and to his experience as an immigrant to reflect his identity, playing cricket provides him with a sense of belonging to a community and to preserve a sense of home. It highlights his desire for identity, connection, and self-discovery, this sport also serves as a means of connection and self-expression especially with his friend Chuck. It allows the protagonist to navigate his desires, identity, and self-perception. It illustrates the Imaginary order’s role in shaping one’s identity, gaining an insight into the complexities of Hans. Using this sport creates continuity with his past, used to recreate a sense of home in displacement. From a Psychoanalytic perspective, cricket becomes part of Hans’s Imaginary order that shapes his sense of self. The shared experience of this game and the bonds it creates with other characters especially Chuck, allows him to construct a coherent identity”<sup>32</sup>, as Chuck says:

“Now, games are important. They test us. They teach us comradeship. They’re fun. But cricket, more than any other sport, is, I want to say— Chuck paused for effect— —a lesson in civility. We all know this; I do not need to say more about it”. (p.15).

### **Chuck Ramkissoon’s Vision on Cricket:**

Secondly, in O’Neill’s *Netherland*, Chuck Ramkissoon is a Trinidadian immigrant dreamer living in New York City. He is an ambitious and passionate character and a cricket devotee, which serves as a common interest that brings him together with Hans. He is a big entrepreneur who dreams to establish a cricket stadium in New York. Chuck’s self-formation process is a reflection of his efforts to recreate and adapt himself in cultural transition in

Manhattan. His ambition and entrepreneurial pursuits illustrate his will to make a new life for himself in the city.<sup>33</sup>

Cricket serves as a connection to his Trinidadian heritage, as well as a platform for his self-expression and identity formation. He adopts the name “Chuck” from “Khamraj” to sound more American. The reporter says, “This is about Kham, ah, Khamraj Ramkissoon...?” “Chuck”, I say, sitting down at the kitchen table. “It’s Chuck Ramkissoon.” (p.8). Cricket is more than a game to him but a unifying force that has the potential to encourage multiculturalism and redefine American identity in the Post 9/11 era. Chuck’s business ambition is an illustration of his determination to transform himself and the city, showing how immigrants contribute to shaping their new world. The project for a cricket stadium embodies Chuck’s desire to start a new chapter in US history, transforming cricket into a domain of self-expression and identity formation. Chuck Ramkissoon’s character and cricket ambition portray the immigrant struggle for rebirth, community, and identity in New York<sup>34</sup>. He explains to Han:

“I’m saying that people, all people, Americans, whoever, are at their most civilized when they’re playing cricket. What’s the first thing that happens when Pakistan and India make peace? They play a cricket match. Cricket is instructive, Hans. It has a moral angel. I really believe this. Everybody who plays the game benefits from it” (p.195).

For Chuck, cricket represents a way for him to integrate into his new world and to transform his immigrant experience.

## **2.2/ Misrecognition and Alienation**

### **Sirine The Half Iraqi and The Half American**

Sirine's sense of self is shaped by how others see her, particularly her uncle and Oum Nadia. They're drawn to her warmth and beauty, but this image feels disconnected from her true self. She's idealized as exotic and nurturing, reflecting stereotypes rather than her real identity. Sirine's self-perception is formed by these external views, showing how her identity is constructed by others' opinions rather than her own sense of self.

In Lacanian terms, Sirine is caught in the Imaginary order through these idealized images, this delusional identity alienates her from her true subjectivity. As she becomes the others' objects of desire rather than the subject of her own, revealing the fragility of her identity. Sirine's identity is deeply determined by other characters' perceptions that highlight her feeling of alienation and misrecognition<sup>35</sup>. Hanif, for instance, sees her as embodying a dual identity, always questioning the validity of her Arabness since she is raised in America and her lack of fluency in Arabic: "She grew up around Arabic conversations and she feels the presence of Arabic somewhere behind her mind, like a ghost language – crisp, clear, and ocean – blank. And she feels guilty that she can't speak it." (p.115).

This external perception makes Sirine to question her identity and wonder where she actually belongs, being a half - Iraqi and half -American female. Furthermore, her physical appearance leads others to misrecognize her heritage, leaving her again an outsider among both Arab and American communities<sup>36</sup>.

"She stares at the portrait of herself in the metal – framed mirror. All she can see is white. She is so white. Her eyes wide, almond – shaped and sea – green, her nose and lips tidy and compact. Entirely her mother. That's all anyone can see: when people ask her nationality they react with astonishment when she says she's half – Arab. I never would have thought that, they say, laughing. You sure don't look it. When people say this she feels like her skin is being peeled away" (p.201).

### **Hanif EL Eyad and Longing for the Homeland:**

In *Crescent* by Abu Jaber, the Iraqi exiled Hanif experiences misrecognition as he is lost and searching for belonging. He struggles with his identity because he holds to an idealized self– image of himself from the past connected to his homeland, where he can no longer return to. He confesses to Sirine:

“I miss everything... Leaving my country was like—I don’t know – like part of my body was torn away. I have phantom pains from the loss of that part – I’m haunted by myself. I don’t know – does any of that make any sense? It’s as if I’m trying to describe something that I’m not, that’s no longer here” (p.159).

Hanif’s experience of exile has left him feeling lost and disconnected from his identity. He’s struggling to reconcile his past with his present, grappling with the person he used to be and the person he has become. This identity crisis is fueled by the cultural dislocations of being caught between two worlds. As a result, he feels alienated and isolated, unable to fully fit into American society or connect with his own family. His inner conflict stems from navigating multiple identities, highlighting the challenges of diaspora, mixed identity, and the fragmentation that can occur when one’s sense of self is disrupted. This struggle reflects the broader themes of identity, belonging, and the search for a sense of home in a new world<sup>37</sup>.

### **Hans Van den Broek**

Hans van den Broek, the protagonist of Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008), experiences deep misrecognition and alienation as a Dutch immigrant in Post 9/11 New York. While he is professionally successful as a financial analyst. Hans feels deeply isolated, struggling to

communicate effectively with his wife and often unaware of his surroundings, which further intensifies his sense of disconnection and loneliness. In this sense, he says:

“Our fading marriage, the two New York years in which she withheld for me all kisses on the mouth, withheld these quietly and steadily and without complaint, averting even her eyes whenever mine sought them out in emotion, all the while cultivating a dutiful domesticity and maternal ethic that armored her in blamelessness, leaving me with no way to approach her, no way to find fault or feelings, waiting for me to loss heart, to put away my most human wants and expectations, to carry my burdens secretly, she not once in my mourning, mentioning my mother, even that time when I wept in the kitchen and dropped a bottle of beer on the floor out of pure sorrow” (p.117).

Hans alienation and misrecognition in *Netherland* are manifested in his relationship with himself and others, displacement in culture, and his inability to find identity and community in an immigrant context shaped by trauma and the uncertainty of the American Dream. Hans is alienated in many ways, culturally alienated where he is white and Western but still a stranger in America. His emotional alienation is portrayed by the failure of his marriage as he becomes more and more distant from his wife and Jake his son. Finally, Hans suffers from urban alienation that Post 9/11 New York is a haunted and paranoid city where he navigates it with detachment<sup>38</sup>.

### **2.3. /Mirroring Characters:**

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, "mirroring characters" refers to characters in a story who reflect similarities with each other in terms of their identity, desires, and roles, often highlighting their own aspects through each other. They often see each other as a reflection of themselves or as someone they want to become. This creates a connection between them, based on a mistaken idea and misunderstanding of who they really are<sup>39</sup>. In Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003), the mirroring characters and the imaginary order of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory are used to examine the identity formation and the relationship between the self and the other. It is

concerned with the two characters: Sirine and Hanif. The character of Sirine portrays the struggle with fragmented identity and the search for self in cultural displacement. Her internal conflict is an expression of the Lacanian Imaginary order where the self is built on an external image or “mirror” that stays incomplete<sup>40</sup>. Sirine’s sense of exile is not just physical but psychological as well, she is haunted by the feeling that something is missing, a lack which language and memory cannot complete. Hanif on the other hand struggles with doubt, mirroring the tension between his Arab past and his American present. His failure to “let go of the other”<sup>41</sup> and simply be himself reflects the struggle between the image of himself given by the society and the Imaginary order revealing his alienated identity in exile. Sirine and Hanif in *Crescent* are reflecting characters whose relationship and personal struggle symbolize themes of cultural identity, exile, and search for belonging<sup>42</sup>, as Um Nadia says:

“The lowliness of the 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 when his mother’s lap; it threatens to swallow him whole when he leaves his own country, even though he marries and travels and talks to friends twenty – four hours a day” (p.21).

Both of them are Arab Americans navigating their complex identities in a multicultural and diasporic context, Sirine as a half - Iraqi and half -American chef preserving her culture through food and Hanif as an Iraqi scholar haunted by his past and trauma of exile. Their love story is the union of their fragmented identities and search for home, Sirine embodies adaptation and cultural continuity through cooking as a way to maintain connection to her heritage, while Hanif embodies the pain of displacement and the struggle to reconcile his past and present self. Their relationship is interrupted by gestures of kindness and healing from each other but also Hanif’s internal conflict with guilt and loss that complicate their relationship. Sirine and Hanif

mirror each other as two halves and a diasporic experience, both capturing the emotional and psychological struggles of Arab American identity and belonging in *Crescent*<sup>43</sup>.

Beyond the imaginary dimension, there is also the Real order which contributes to the formation of identity according to Lacan. These are fundamental concepts which complement each other. Considering O'Neill's *Netherland*, the relationship between Hans Van Den Broek and Chuck Ramkissoon exemplifies the imaginary dimension's process of mirroring, where identity is shaped by identifications and images with others. Hans, a Dutch banker who feels lost after the return of his wife and son to London after the 9/11, sees his friend Chuck as a stronger, more hopeful version of himself, whereas Chuck a Trinidadian, who loves cricket has big dreams representing the kind of confident and connected person Hans wishes he could be. Hans sees in Chuck an image of hope and belonging that he doesn't feel in himself. He is left feeling lost again and realizes that life is full of sadness and that hope does not always last. This highlights how the protagonist's identity is reflected through others, revealing the emotional pain and cultural struggles of feeling caught between belonging and isolation in post-9/11 New York, showcasing their alienation.<sup>44</sup>

Hans's identification with Chuck is a living proof of the Lacanian Imaginary order where the self is constructed through images and idealized others. Chuck has this energy and authenticity that Hans needs but cannot achieve. But this identification is paradoxical. As Hans idealizes Chuck's charm and ambitions as well as struggle with his own fractured-self caused by his displacement and loss of family. Chuck's fictional self therefore becomes a painful reminder of what Hans lacks, a firm sense of place and purpose in post-9/11 New York. Nevertheless, the novel also finds the limits of this idealized identification. Hans experiences the alienation of his self. Stuck between social expectations' Symbolic order and the real loss

caused by historical trauma. Hans's identity remains unsettled, marked by the tension between hope and despair, as he finds himself navigating through a fragmented landscape where belonging is continuously delayed.<sup>45</sup>

### **3. The Real Order: The Unpresentable and the Unspeakable:**

It is one of the complex registers of human experience in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, representing the unpresentable, the unconscious, trauma and disruption. It deals with the experience that is beyond language, beyond representation, and beyond what can be symbolized. Lacan's use of the term "real" as a substantive date back to an early paper, published in 1936. The term was popular among certain philosophers at the time, and is the focus of a work by Emilie Meyerson a polish- born French chemist and philosopher of science defines the Real as "an ontological absolute". In speaking of the "real", then, Lacan is following a common practice in one strained of early twentieth – century philosophy. However, while this may be Lacan's starting point the term undergoes many shifts in meaning and usage throughout his work.<sup>46</sup>

#### **3.1/ Death:**

A significant manifestation of the Lacanian Real in *Crescent* is the missing figures of Sirine's parents. Her dead parents are never completely symbolized or remembered, but their impact on her desire and identity is deep. They died while working as Red Cross relief figures in Africa in a clash between tribes when Sirine was nine years old:

“Sirine's parents died when she was nine. They were emergency care personnel for the American Red Cross, killed in a clash between tribes while on assignment in Africa. On the day she learned of their death, Sirine went

into the kitchen and made an entire tray of stuffed grape leaves all by herself".  
(p.52).

Sirine's parents portray the Real as a lack. Sirine is deprived of a stable cultural and familial identification, attempting to negotiate through her cooking and her romantic relationship to fulfil the void. In *Crescent*, the death of Sirine's parents is a profound trauma that aligns with the real order. Their sudden death leaves Sirine with a lack in her life, framing her identity and relationships around this lack but cannot be repaired or articulated. Rather than reliving the experience in every aspect, the novel conveys this trauma by Sirine's silence and the way she unconsciously attempts to meditate her loss through food. Her knowledge of food and the understanding of Iraqi cuisine serve as a substitute for the lost object of her parents and homeland origins, trying to create a hybrid sense of identity in displacement. This void also extends to her relationship with Hanif. Abu Jaber's story portrays Lacan's real by depicting trauma not as a narrative to be solved but as a structuring lack but shapes Sirine's experience, prioritizing memory and ritual over expression to convey her unspeakable matter of grief.<sup>47</sup>

In O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008), death plays an important role in shaping the story and its deeper meanings. The novel opens with the discovery of the Trinidadian Chuck Ramkissoon dead body in the Gowanus canal in New York City in 2006 "There were handcuffs around his wrists and evidently he was the victim of a murder" (p.8). His mysterious death, tied to his dangerous business dealings, is more than just a personal tragedy. It also represents a failure of the American dream. Chuck was full of big ideas and a big dreamer who wants to build New York's first real cricket field, representing hope in a city full of immigrants. This event makes the protagonist Hans Van Den remember his friendship with Cuck and the hard times after 9/11 in New York<sup>48</sup>. Hans think about Chuck's dreams and how reality crushed them, saying:

"I felt shame – I see this clearly, now – at the instinctive recognition in myself of an awful enfeebling fatalism, a sense that the great outcomes were but

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randomly connected to our endeavors, that life was beyond mending, that love was loss, that nothing worth saying was sayable, that dullness was general, that disintegration was irresistible”. (p.30)

In short, death in *Netherland* is both a real event and a strong symbol. Chuck Ramkisson’s death marks the end of dreams and hope, highlighting the darker side of the American dream after 9/11. Hans’s thoughts on death reveal the emotional and cultural losses that immigrants and others face in a changing world. He also says: “perhaps the relevant truth is that we all find ourselves in temporal currents and that unless you’re paying attention you’ll discover, often too late, that an undertow of weeks or of years has pulled you deep into trouble” (p.61), this captures how death and loss shape not just events, but also our sense of identity and the stories we live by”.<sup>49</sup>

### **3.2/Trauma:**

In both *Crescent* and *The Netherland*, death reveals the underlying trauma experienced by the characters. This trauma shapes their responses and deepens the emotional complexity of their journeys. Professor Hanif embodies the psychological consequences of exile and loss such as sadness, nostalgia, and identity fragmentation. In *Crescent*, he is portrayed by Abu Jaber as a romantic figure to Sirine as he is a haunted man who witnessed political violence in Iraq. Hanif’s past is marked by traumatic events, including the death of his sister and the imprisonment of his brother. These experiences have left him deeply scared, leading to emotional fragmentation and an inability to fully express his pain. His trauma runs too deep to be understood or put into words. Hanif says to Sirine:

“It’s a tricky place for Iraqi man—there’s the army, jail, torture, hangings. I’m wanted by the government for dodging army duty. For me. There are plenty of other aggravating factors”. Hans stares at his praying fingers. —The ruler is famous for his ruthlessness. When his sons-in-law returned to Iraq after breaking out of the country without permission, Saddam’s idea of mercy was

allowing them to apologize for escaping before having them execute”.  
(p.117).

The silence and the lack of details in Hanif’s story as he is portrayed in the novel are not just gaps. They show that he is psychologically and emotionally broken. Hanif’s silence and fragmented storytelling reflect the depth of his trauma, which is not just personal but also echoes the collective pain of displaced communities. It’s a trauma that’s too profound to be fully expressed or understood. This is where Hanif represents Lacan’s theory of the Real, a part of life and mind which is too complicated to express in words. His psychological distress comes out through his silence, the way he repeats certain actions, and his mood swings. This reflects how certain traumatic experiences are too hard to describe properly, so they get stuck inside the human mind coming out in small broken ways. The professor’s struggle with exile, war, and torture after the rule of Saddam Hussein on Iraq embodies the limits of language and forces Sirine to witness<sup>50</sup> these realities as they are: “But she finds that she struggles to remember these things, and that certain memories—from the early time before her parents’ death—are especially difficult to recollect” (p.121).

Hanif, the male lead in Abu Jaber’s *Crescent*, experienced a profound trauma from being kicked out of Iraq forcibly due to his political opposition to Saddam Hussein’s regime. His trauma is connected with loss of home and the suffering of his family. This causes profound guilt and helplessness, as Hanif feels a guilty because he endangered his family. Besides the political and familial losses, Hanif’s trauma destroys his sense of identity, caught between his Iraqi past and his current life in America<sup>51</sup>. Hanif’s traumatic past, marked by forced exile and loss, has led to a profound sense of isolation. The familiar has become unfamiliar, echoing the Freudian concept of the uncanny. Unable to return to a changed and unsafe Iraq, Hanif’s pain persists in exile, longing for a homeland that no longer exists. The novel *Crescent* explores the

psychological and emotional weight of displacement, loss, and fragmented identity through Hanif's narrative<sup>52</sup>.

In *Netherland*, the trauma of the 9/11 attacks deeply changed Hans's life, shaking his sense of safety, family, and identity in a city that suddenly feels unfamiliar and frightening. O'Neill's *Netherland* portrays the disintegration of Lacan's Symbolic order concerning the language, law, and culture that structure reality in a post - traumatic context. Hans van den Broek, living in a shattered New York, struggling with death, nostalgia, and existential disintegration, mirroring the effects of death on these structures<sup>53</sup>. The novel opens with Hans's statement: "Life was beyond mending, that love was loss, that nothing worth saying was sayable, that dullness was general, that disintegration was irresistible" (p.30). This shows the incapacity of the Symbolic order to heal subjectivity after trauma. Hans's fragmentation and alienation from his wife, Rachel, and son is paralleled in the city's physical and cultural breakdown. Cricket is his desperate attempt to restore the Symbolic order through nostalgia. This sport mirrors his existential shift: "The great outcomes were but randomly connected to our endeavors" (p.30).

Hans's homesickness for England and his marriage reflect the power of the Imaginary. Meanwhile, Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian businessman and NYC immigrant, embodies the Symbolic order, as conceptualized by Lacan. His dream of cricket stadium project is a "field of dreams" for a "New America" is a representation of the Imaginary's illusions. His corpse found in the Gowanus Canal shows the impossibility of reconstructing identity in the presence of Symbolic fragmentation<sup>54</sup>. Hans clings to his Dutch heritage as a way to cope with his identity crisis. He is struggling to find his place in America, feeling like he failed to become what he

wanted. His attachment to Europe is a temporary distraction from his sense of emptiness and disconnection.<sup>55</sup>

### **3.3/ The Uncanny and The Surreal Elements:**

The uncanny is a psychological term used to describe the strange feeling which arises when something familiar becomes strange or unfamiliar, producing a sense of discomfort. It is usually a mix of the known and the unknown, creating anxiety by destroying our sense of what is real. Both Surreal and Uncanny involve the blending of familiar and strange, but to different purposes and with different consequences. Uncanny is aimed at causing unease by presenting the almost familiar as disturbingly strange, stimulating psychological discomfort. Surrealism is an art and literary movement that blends reality with irrational or dream-like elements to tap into the subconscious mind. While the Uncanny is concerned with the affective level of unease, Surrealism plays on the irrational and bizarre to engage the imagination and to reveal hidden desires and tensions<sup>56</sup>. The German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch in 1906 described and popularized the term “Uncanny” in an essay by Sigmund Freud in 1919:

“The ‘uncanny’ is the psychological experience of a phenomenon that is strangely familiar, yet alien, engendering a sense of anxiety. While artists and art historians have revisited the uncanny throughout the decades, this exhibition uncovers women’s authorship of uncanny narratives, revealing how the concept is used by women artists to regain agency and probe feelings of revulsion, fear, and discomfort”.<sup>57</sup>

From the quotation we understand that the "uncanny" is a feeling of unease that arises when something familiar becomes strange. Women artists use this concept to regain agency and express complex emotions like fear, revulsion, and discomfort. By creating art that's both familiar and alien, they challenge societal norms and prompt reflection on the human experience. Building on this an understanding of the Uncanny, O'Neill's *Netherland* perfectly

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portrays this sense in its exploration of identity, displacement, and boundary crossing between the strange and the familiar in the life of the protagonist.

In *crescent*, surreal moments reflect the characters' inner struggles, revealing the uncontrollable aspects of life that affect them and shaping their emotional and psychological experiences. It happens when characters become dislocated from themselves, or their surrounding leading to a feeling of strangeness or unreality. Sirine's often feels displaced in her life, she was born and raised in America, but is strongly identified with her Arab heritage. This split between the two cultures creates a sense of never belonging. This feeling shows how her identity is not stable. Sirine's struggling to make a sense of who she really is. This confusion brings out the Real the part of her life that cannot be easily understood. Um Nadia's café also shows where the surreal exists. The café filled with smells, conversations, and music that remind the characters of a distant homeland. It becomes a dream like setting in which time seems to stop and stories take over reality. These moments reveal the emotional trauma of exile and disconnection from one's native land.

Another example of the uncanny where Sirine's dreams of her lost parents, whom she lost when she was a child. Her dreams filled with strange images and sensation which she cannot explain. This shows how the Real returns in the form of haunting memories or overwhelming emotions that cannot be explained. In brief, the uncanny and surreal moments in *Crescent* demonstrate how the Real bursts into the ordinary life. It is through affective confusion, memory, dreams, and cultural dislocation that Sirine and other protagonists have experiences that cannot be understood but are deeply felt. The experiences reflect the Real as a

trans-linguistic experience, one that reveals the unconscious truths of identity, loss, and longing.<sup>58</sup>

In O'Neill's *Netherland*, the Real and the Uncanny are juxtaposed in the novel's exploration of alienation and displacement in New York City after 9/11. The city itself becomes a "netherland," in-between the known and the unknown portraying the psychological and emotional struggles of protagonist Hans van der Broek. This strange atmosphere is brought by the juxtaposition of Hans's Dutch history with his current location in New York, creating an interrupted and an undefined reality that disrupts the sense of self and home. In *Netherland*, the Post-9/11 tragedy has been depicted as traumatic and troublesome involvement for the hero Hans and the characters around him. These oppressing assaults have a profound effect on the characters' connections and feelings, the novel captures the fear and uncertainty that filled New York in its aftermath questioning their identities and sense of belonging as foreigners. The author centers on the mental and emotional impacts of the event rather than its details, offering a profound look into the characters' development rather than details of the attacks. Hans Van Den Broek is searching for his identity in dislocation after 9/11, he struggles to express his trauma because of the arrival of the Real. He said:

“I was a political- ethical idiot. Normally, this deficiency might have been inconsequential, but these were abnormal times, if New Yorkers were not already jumpy enough from the constant reminders of the code orange level of terrorist threat, there was another peril to concern us: the fires underfoot” (p.94).

The novel intertwines the uncanny and surreal elements disturbing the symbolic order along the lines of Lacan's idea of the real: the traumatic unsymbolizable world fragmenting the coherent reality. Hans van den Broek, makes this disruption of the past visible in his disorienting experiences within Post 9/11 New York. <sup>59</sup>

To conclude, while both *Crescent Netherland*, deal with the same themes of identity, displacement, and self – image, each novel portrays the trajectory of their protagonists through different cultural and psychological perception. Both Sirine and Hans deal with issues of belonging and self – perception based on their internal perspectives and societies around them. The tension is reflected in Jacques Lacan (1977) Imaginary and Real orders which serve as lenses through which to examine their identity crises. Sirine’s sense of self is deeply tied to the Imaginary order, where her sense of self is formed by idealized images of herself as a nurturing figure and a romantic partner. Her kitchen is the space where her self – image is performed and temporarily stabilized, the Real intrudes on this through political unrest, her lover Han’s absence, and the gap between her American present and her Iraqi origins, these interruptions destabilize her sense of self showing the fragility of the Imaginary.

Hans, on the other hand relies on the symbolic order looking for order meaning and stability in his finance career and membership in a cricket club. His imaginary self is that of a rational, and working member of New York society. But the traumatic effects of 9/11 tragedy, his failing marriage, and his conflicted relationship with Chuck Ramkissoon gradually uncover the emptiness of his constructed image. As the Real breaks through emotional detachment and existential doubt, Hans becomes more disillusioned unlike Sirine, she finds difficulties to reconcile between image and reality. While both characters are shaped by their self – image and social influence, each respond differently to the conflict between the imaginary and the real. Sirine resolves this tension through internal resistance and emotional awareness, while Hans responds with detachment and abandonment. These different approaches reflect the complexity of their identities in the transnational, post traumatic context and reveal how Lacanian theory can deepen our understanding of literary representations of the self.

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## **Chapter Two: The Symbolic Order in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008):**

The following chapter studies the representation of the Symbolic order in both Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). It investigates how the Symbolic order affects the identity of Sirine, Hanif, and Hans, and the way changes in this order challenge how they see themselves and their place in society. The novels offer a profound exploration of the Symbolic order, a concept introduced by Jacques Lacan. They delve into how language, cultural norms, and social expectations shape the lives and identities of the protagonists, including Sirine, Hanif, and Hans van den Broek. The narratives intricately weave together themes of alienation, identity crises, and the Symbolic lack, revealing the complex dynamics of desire, the role of the Other, and the quest for Symbolic recognition. The three characters at first seem well integrated into the social and cultural environment they live in respecting the expectations of their societies, but as the narratives start to evolve, their social roles start to breakdown. As the characters navigate their societies, their social roles initially define them. However, as their stories unfold, these roles begin to break down. Through their relationships and experiences of cultural displacement and conflict, they gain insight into the limitations of societal expectations. They struggle to balance their personal desires with the roles assigned to them, leading to a shift in their identities.

### **1. The Symbolic Order:**

From early childhood, as individuals begin acquiring language, they learn a system of norms, rules, and taboos that are collectively sustained by society, typically. This is described by Lacan as the passage through the Oedipus complex, wherein the child is confronted with the « Name-of-the-Father » a signifier that designates the law and power that regulates desire and social order. The child gains an understanding of the structuring role of the Symbolic order that

mediates desire by setting cultural codes and norms upon it that must be internalized for effective socialization.<sup>60</sup>

Language, the cornerstone of the Symbolic order, facilitates human communication and expression. However, it also introduces a dimension of alienation, as language precedes individual existence, presenting itself as an external force that shapes our thoughts and identities. This dualism “language as both facilitating and dislocating” is the essence of Lacan’s understanding of how the Symbolic order functions in the production of subjectivity. Additionally, the Symbolic order is not just language in the narrow sense; it encompasses all social convention, including law, morality, kinship systems, and other normative systems that regulate acceptable behavior and thought. In the order of the symbol, meaning is produced not through direct reference to the real but through the differential relations among signifiers “words or symbols that stand in for something else” so that meaning will always be relational and contextual.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, the Symbolic order is, for Lacan, the condition of possibility for human being, subjectivity, and the unconscious; it is the machinery upon which communication, thought, desire, and social relations are possible and given meaning. It is dynamic rather than static and is continuously reproduced and reworked in language, law, and social practice and is therefore a central object of study for psychoanalysis, cultural theory, and the social sciences. In this regard, Dylan Evans claims:

“Symbolic (sympolique) The term ‘Symbolic’ appears in adjectival form in Lacan’s earliest psychoanalytic writings (e.g. Lacan, 1936). In these early works the term implies references to symbolic logic and to the equations used in mathematical physics (Ec,79). In 1948 symptoms are said to have a ‘symbolic meaning’ (E, 10). By 1950, the term has acquired anthropological overtones, as when Lacan praises Marcel Mauss for having shown that ‘the structures of society are symbolic’ (Ec, 132).<sup>62</sup>

## **2. Language and the Collapse of Social and cultural Norms:**

In Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003), Sirine and Hanif El Eyad embody the deep struggle of expressing trauma through language, shaped by their fragmented identities and exile. Sirine, is living a life defined by disconnection from her Arab heritage. She is not able to speak Arabic and does not have any clear religious identity, which isolates her emotionally and culturally<sup>63</sup>. Her trauma is portrayed in silence and dislocation, and despite her uncle's stories. She's disconnected from her heritage and struggles to understand its significance. This disconnection leads to a defensive and reserved personality, protecting herself from the pain of her fragmented identity. This internal conflict affects her interactions and drives her towards healing.

Hanif, an Iraqi professor in exile, carries another but equally profound trauma. His past is marked by suffering from his exile in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime. This exile creates a deep loss as he is displaced from his homeland and family, which disrupts his identity and masculinity. Hanif's trauma is expressed in his silence and refusal to reveal his past to Sirine, creating an obstacle in their relationship, Han's past remains an open question to the protagonist, his incapacity to express his trauma into words symbolizes the deep internalized pain and alienation that exile causes. The lovers' language and communication struggle also manifest in their relationship, Sirine's feelings for Hanif are profound but also disturbed by the silence of his secrets about his past, making her unable to fully understand or connect with him. Hanif is searching for belonging through Sirine while his identity is caught between two worlds. Yet, his search for belonging is complicated by the unspeakable traumas that they both carry which language fails to fully articulate.

Sirine's cooking at the café is the symbol of her attempt to heal and express her identity

through sensory and cultural memory rather than language. She uses food to reunite fragmented communities and memories, bringing people together who have shared a similar loss and exile. But this form of expression also shows the failure of language to directly express trauma; it is through taste and ritual rather than explicit narrative that healing and identity formation appear. Sirine's silence about her roots and Hanif's mysterious past illustrate how trauma can make speech ineffective, forcing them to use other means such as stories, food, and love to express their pain and seek for belonging. Moreover, *Crescent* (2003) shows how trauma, when it cannot be put into words, impacts both individual's sense of self and their relationships with others <sup>64</sup>:

“She stares at her knife and wishes she were smarter about things. Wishes she knew how to say something wise or consoling to him, something that wouldn't sound frightened or awkward. But then she remembers the time after her parents' death, when people would approach her and try to explain her loss to her; they said things that were supposed to cure her of her sadness, but that had no effect at all. And she knew then, even when she was nine years old, that there was no wise or consoling thing to say. There were certain helpful kinds of silences, and some were better than others.” (p.88).

This shows the inability of language to fully capture the complexity of trauma, this gap in communication creates instances of misunderstanding and emotional distance between them. But it is exactly in these silences and fragmented narratives that Abu Jaber conveys the complex reality of trauma. Their struggle to express trauma becomes a powerful evidence to the limits of language and the persistent human need for connection despite those limits<sup>65</sup>.

Similarly, O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008), introduces protagonists who are unable to express their traumatic episode. The protagonist Hans Van Den Broek has great trouble putting his trauma into words, reflecting his fragmented identity and the emotional paralysis in the Post 9/11 context. His trauma is not only personal – marked by his failed marriage and solitude – but

also cultural and historical as he navigates the disoriented space between his Dutch past and New York present in the Post 9/11 era<sup>66</sup>.

Hans trauma is portrayed in his inability to articulate a coherent narrative of his life and the events surrounding him. He experiences a deep alienation from his past selves, stating: “I find it hard to collect oneness with those former selves whose accidents and endeavors have shaped who I am now... my natural sense is that all are faded, by the by, discontinued” (p.47). This detachment from his own past is symbolic of his inability to reconcile his identity and trauma on a linguistic level; his past and present are discontinuous making it hard for him to find a stable voice or narrative.

The novel's fragmented narrative, flashbacks and reflections mirrors Hans's inner turmoil. This non-linear storytelling style reflects how trauma disrupts his ability to express himself clearly, fragmenting his memories and emotions. As a result, Hans is stuck in a state of confusion, struggling to connect with his feelings and make sense of his past. Hans's life after 9/11 is described as being lost in New York, a metaphor for his psychological state where language is not fully able to convey his trauma. Hans's immigrant status deepens his language struggle, as a Dutch man in America caught between cultures and language, complicating even more his ability to express his trauma. Hans's trauma is linked with his shattered marriage and family breakdown, which he cannot fully articulate. Being abandoned by his wife makes him isolated, and his attempts to find meaning and comfort in friendships, especially with Chuck Ramkissoo, and through cricket, reflect his search for a language of connection and belonging that he keeps failing to discover.

The novel illustrates how trauma cannot be reduced to neat language overview, as

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Hans's narrative is full of gaps, silences, and fragmented memories. Overall, Hans Van den Broek's failure to express trauma in *Netherland* (2008) is deeply tied to his fragmented identity, his status as an immigrant, and the post 9/11 period. Trauma disrupts his ability to form a coherent narrative, pushing him into a state of emotional numbness and alienation that O'Neill's novel effectively portrays through its own fragmented structure and Hans's thoughts.

In O'Neill's *Netherland*, the collapse of social and personal norms in New York in the aftermath of 9/11 is associated with the psychological dislocation of the central character Hans van den Broek. It is symbolized through cricket as a fragile juxtaposition to collapse. The language of the novel portrays Hans as "noticeably lost"(p.68) a "netherland" that represents geographical and emotional displacement. This state shows in the breakdown of his marriage, national identity, and the American Dream. Cricket is a symbolic order in the novel in which immigrants find stability in shared rules. Hans portrays this sport as: "environment of justice" (p.111), where men in white coats are momentarily beyond chaos. Chuck Ramkissoo's dream of building a cricket stadium in New York is his and Hans's attempt to find order through sport. The language of cricket as an "unspeakable individual longings"(p.111) is a metaphor for surviving the collapse even as social and personal norms breakdown permanently<sup>67</sup>.

In *Crescent* and *Netherland*, language represents dislocation and disruption, highlighting the characters' feelings of alienation and identity fragmentation. It's a barrier that separates them from others, but also a bridge that helps them navigate their complex identities and find belonging in a fractured world. Language symbolizes their ongoing struggle to reconcile their cultural heritage with the pressures of adapting to new environments.

### **3. Alienation and the Divided Subject:**

In *Crescent* (2003), Abu Jaber presents Sirine as a complex protagonist whose identity crisis and sense of alienation are influenced by her position between two cultures. Born in America to Iraqi parents who died when she was young, Sirine is trapped in a liminal space where she cannot reconcile her Arab heritage with her American present. This duality fuels her continuous internal conflict and the feelings of not belonging. Sirine's alienation is deeply tied to her fractured connection to her origins, she states "I guess I'm always looking for my home, a little bit. I mean, even though I live here, I have this feeling that my real home is somewhere else somehow" (p.116), highlighting her rootlessness and her search for belonging. Raised by her uncle after her parents' death, Sirine feels disconnected not only from Iraq, her parents' homeland, but also from the United States. Her own house in which she has lived for many years is not considered a home to her either, highlighting her deep sense of displacement.

This alienation also appears in Sirine's relationship with language and culture. She is struggling with Arabic language, metaphorically showing how distant she is from her heritage. The novel's portrayal of Sirine listening to Arabic conversations but not fully understanding them shows further her position as an outsider from her own group. Symbolic order's alienating effect on Sirine is directly connected to her experience of dislocation and belonging. Exile is represented in the novel as a deep disruption of the formation of identity where social structures and her assimilation in the Western context disturb Sirine's own sense of self. In Lacanian theory, the Symbolic order is known as the system through which individuals acquire social validation and unified identity that is inaccessible to Sirine. She remains in a position of in-betweenness showing the tension between her internal self and the created identity based on external expectations and desires. Sirine's desire to belong shows in moments of dislocation, as she experiences herself becoming detached from her cultural heritage. The Symbolic order is unable to provide her with a solid foundation on which to base her identity, but it alienates

her even more by constructing different demands that disrupt her sense of self. The novel uses Sirine's experience to illustrate how exile and assimilation destroy the symbolic constructions that secure identity and belonging.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, Hanif Al Eyad, represents the deep identity crisis, alienation, and displacement felt by most Arab immigrants in diaspora. Being an exiled Iraqi Arabic literature professor, his identity is fragmented by his expulsion from his homeland as a young boy during Saddam Hussein's rule. This early exile sets the stage for his enduring alienation and identity confusion, articulating his loss in the following way: —The fact of exile is bigger than everything else in my life. Leaving my country is 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” (p.159). His attempt to define himself by this absence only highlights the void within his identity. His selfhood is fragmented by the rupture from his native land and the cultural dislocation imposed on him by living in the United States, he exists between two worlds, unable to fully embrace his Iraqi heritage and integrate into American society where he finds himself in a continuous state of isolation and exile<sup>69</sup>. In this sense, Hans says to Sirine:

“Sometimes when I see some of those homeless people on the street—you know, the ones walking around talking to the air, shuffling around, an old torn-up clothes—sometimes I think I've never felt so close to anyone as those people. They know what it feels like—they live in between worlds so they're not really anywhere. Exiled from them”. (p.159).

Hanif's isolation is not only geographical but emotional and social as well, it is reinforced by the silence and mystery on his past which creates a barrier even with his closest relationship with Sirine. He told her:

It's not very comfortable, is it? It's just- it hadn't really occurred to me -I mean, that I would need things like chairs and bookcases. I've moved around so much between schools and teaching posts and about a million different apartments. I haven't had much incentive to buy furniture. I

suppose in some way I had the sense that I would be like a commitment-to a place, I mean. (p.70).

His inability to tell her about his past shows the internalized pain and unresolved trauma that define this exile, yet through his relationship with Sirine he discovers a short term escape from exile offering him a sense of home and self. Hanif's struggle is representative of broader themes in *Crescent* (2003) concerning the immigrant experience, this character demonstrates how this experience includes a painful adjustment of self where the past is both a source of identity and a source of fragmentation. Abu Jaber uses Hanif story to show the complexities of Arab American identity, the emotional struggles of exile, and the search for a unified sense of self in the context of displacement and cultural duality.<sup>70</sup>

Dealing with the same idea of alienation, O'Neill's protagonist, Hans Van Den Broek, experiences a deep identity crisis that transforms his life in post 9/11 New York. As a Dutch born and a financial analyst who relocates to New York with his English wife Rachel and their son, Hans is caught between multiple cultural and personal worlds, never fully belonging to any. His identity crisis starts with his transnational existence: torn between his Dutch origins, his life in London, and a new unsettling environment of New York after the attacks. The novel's structure through flashbacks, mirrors Hans dislocation, emotional, and geographical disconnection in a city that has become a "netherland". Hans's alienation is both personal and cultural. His marriage with Rachel starts to fail as she returns to England with their son leaving him isolated in America. This physical separation reflects his emotional isolation and his inability to maintain a coherent identity within his family and community. Hans's attempt to find comfort in cricket which he associates with his friends Chuck Ramkissoon and with the immigrant communities, symbolizes his search for belonging in a city that does not include him despite his attempts at assimilating into it.<sup>71</sup>

Cricket is a metaphorical bridge into a multicultural America that contrasts with his own privileged yet alienated cultural existence. It is an imagined community defined by Anderson Benedict as a socially constructed group whose members view themselves as part of a collective identity even if they do not know each other<sup>72</sup>, feeling a sense of belonging, for immigrants where cultural identity and desire for belonging are performed: “Cricket was the first modern team sport in America. It came before baseball and football. Cricket has been played in New York since the 1770s” (p.95). *Netherland* also examines Hans’s struggle with memory and history that complicates even more his identity crisis, he is haunted by the death of his parents and the emotional detachment from his past selves referring to himself as —faded, by the by, discontinued (p.47).

This fragmentation extends to his current life where he cannot find cohesion or continuity. His struggle to organize his son's photograph reflects his deeper struggle to come to terms with his personal past and the traumatic national event of 9/11. By having someone else organize the photo, he's seeking a sense of order and a narrative that can help him make sense of his experiences and emotions. This task becomes a metaphor for his attempt to reconcile his own story with the broader historical context. In summary, Hans Van den Broek’s identity crisis and alienation in *Netherland* are shaped by his transnational background, the trauma of 9/11, and his fragmented family life. His struggle to belong in post 9/11 New York is captured through his engagement with Cricket, his fractured memories, and his complex relationships. The novel portrays Hans as a man stuck in a “netherland” of lost identities caught between past and present, home and exile, belonging and alienation.<sup>73</sup>

In addition, alienation in O'Neill's *Netherland* is rooted deeply in the character of Chuck Ramkissoon, an immigrant from Trinidad who lives in post-9/11 New York City. His immigrant

experience reveals the tensions between identity, belonging, and displacement. Chuck is a charismatic, energetic individual who personifies the American Dream, but he struggles with alienation. His dream to build a cricket stadium called Bald Eagle Field is his attempts to claim a space for himself and his people in a foreign and fragmented city. Chuck is not just socially alienated but existentially as well. He is split between two worlds, trying to reconcile his Trinidadian heritage with the necessities of the American life. The novel starts with the news of Chuck's death, a reminder of the fragility and impermanence of his big plans. His death that seems to be related to his criminal enterprise is used as a symbol for the weakness of the dreams of immigrants and their isolation. <sup>74</sup>

Hans's identification with Chuck also portrays their alienation. As a Dutch expatriate, Hans is also distanced from his wife and family and lives in a position of cultural and emotional displacement. Chuck's presence in Hans's life provides a sense of connection and belonging through their shared activities at the Staten Island Cricket Club. The club is a space for immigrant communities to hold on to their cultural identity while navigating life in a new place. Yet, both men are left alone, Chuck by his social status and fate and Hans by his dysfunctional family life and existential crisis. Hans's reflection on the "weight"(p.122) of Chuck's memory and the open-ended meaning of his death shows the novel's portrayal of alienation as a permanent and unresolved condition for immigrants. <sup>75</sup>

#### **4. The Role of the Other and Symbolic Recognition:**

In Lacanian theory and its Symbolic implication, subjectivity is framed through the gaze and language of the other, as Lacan's most famous formulation says: "Man's desire is the desire of the other" <sup>76</sup>, he is stating that what we want is influenced by what others want or

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desire from us. In Lacan's theory, our subjectivity is created through language and social expectations around us which he calls the Symbolic order. The "Other" is not just another person, but a system of language, culture, family, and loss we do not want things for ourselves; our desires are based on how society and language tell us what is important. Our desires are never for something specific but for something we feel is missing inside us which we try to fill up with goals, but this feeling of deficiency never fully goes away<sup>77</sup>. The way we sense ourselves is always controlled by the way we sense others sensing us which determines our desires and identities that are connected with language, culture, and other people trying to fill the gap within us that can never be fully satisfied. Lacan claims that our identity is not something we figure out on our own, instead, it's shaped by other people around us especially through language and other people's gaze<sup>78</sup>. The Symbolic recognition helps us to understand Sirine, *Crescent's* protagonist and Hanif El Eyad, and *Netherland's* protagonist Hans Van Den Broek on how they perceive themselves and the world around them.

Despite preparing Sirine's Arabic dishes and serving the immigrant customers at Um Nadia's café, she feels disconnected and she is always telling people that she just cooks and she does not truly understand who she is. Sirine's identity is built on what people tell her, see in her, and what they want her to be, she is not aware of her own voice or desire; she is shaped by the Lacanian terms and the discourse of the Other.

Sirine's longing for Hanif's love illustrates the human desire for validation, echoing Lacan's concept of seeking desire from the Other. Both characters grapple with loss and unfulfilled yearnings, Sirine seeks connection to her cultural roots, while Hanif yearns for

home. Their identities are shaped by external relationships, with Sirine's self-image shifting depending on her role: daughter, cook, or idealized refuge.<sup>79</sup>

In Han's interactions with Sirine and others portray how his identity is being reconstructed as a response to displacement. He is shaped by the others' perceptions of him as an intellectual, immigrant, and refugee and by his efforts to hold on to his cultural identity through memory, stories, and language. His desire for Sirine is not only for herself but for what she embodies: home and comfort, but since these are lost to him his desire remains unfulfilled. From a Lacanian perspective, he is always searching for Symbolic recognition as to be seen and acknowledged in a world that has exiled and excluded him.<sup>80</sup>

Abu Jaber's *Crescent* masterfully weaves together a diverse cast of characters, including Sirine's uncle, Um Nadia, and Professor Aziz, each embodying distinct facets of Arab-American identity and exile. Through their experiences, the novel explores the intricate process of identity formation, highlighting the role of symbolic recognition in shaping one's sense of self. These characters serve as vital links to heritage, cultural rituals, and intellectual diasporic experiences, showcasing the complex negotiations individuals undertake to reconcile their hybrid identities. By examining the relationships and interactions between these characters, Abu-Jaber sheds light on the multifaceted nature of identity formation in diasporic contexts. The novel demonstrates how individuals navigate the intersections of cultural representation, social conditions, and personal identity, ultimately striving to find a sense of belonging and connection to their past, present, and future.<sup>81</sup>

Through this nuanced exploration, Abu Jaber provides a powerful portrayal of the Arab-American experience, one that is marked by diversity, complexity, and resilience. By delving

into the lives of these characters, readers gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which identity is shaped, negotiated, and performed in the context of exile and diaspora.

Concerning Hans Van Den Broek in O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008), the protagonist is displaced both geographically and emotionally; separated from his wife and son, distanced from his home in the Netherland, and alienated in the traumatized New York. He is fragmented in the order of language and cultural context, it is manifested when he says: "I felt like a ghost... visible to none" (p.101). His invisibility shows the failure of symbolic recognition where he is not seen or desired by the social structures around him and he continuous to question his place and value. Hans's state of solitude attracted him into Chuck Ramkissoo, his American dream gives Hans a sense of purpose, but his desire for validation is tied to Chuck's perception, making him meaningful only in relation to Chuck's goals <sup>82</sup>. As Lacan argues that we are never fully satisfied because there is always something missing, something we cannot name or find. Hans's story portrays how much we depend on others in order to know who we are, his search for identity in *Netherland* illustrates Lacan's idea on subjectivity that is always mediated by the gaze and desire of the Other. The protagonist's fragmented self and desire for recognition portrays the fragility of the symbolic formations that makes us who we are in post 9/11 world<sup>83</sup>.

In *Netherland*, the novel explores identity and belonging not just through the main characters Hans and Chuck, but also through other characters who embody the complexities of identity in post-9/11 New York. This dynamic is essential to understand how the novel negotiates difference and the Symbolic order in a world marked by trauma and displacement. The second major character is Rachel, Hans's wife who contrasts with Hans's rationality and detachment. Rachel embodies a more emotional and moral connection with identity and the Other, and she continuously disturbs Hans's

"moral laziness"(p.222) and his inability to make moral judgments about America, terrorism, and his friendship with Chuck. Rachel's ability to "identify with her younger incarnations"(p.47) and to remember the past affectively marks a symbolic recognition of the self as continuous and relational, in contrast to Hans's self-alienation. By Rachel's character, the novel focuses on the ethical and affective dimensions of an encounter with the Other suggesting that Symbolic recognition involves more than understanding but it requires moral and affective openness.<sup>84</sup>

The novel also contains a sequence of immigrant characters who occupy the world of cricket, representing the Other within the American national space. The immigrants are generally of working class and postcolonial backgrounds, they portray the novel's use of Otherness as a symbol of exclusion. The cricketers' effort to occupy a place in America's sports culture is the search of immigrant communities to be seen and acknowledged in their new society. The novel uses cricket as a symbol of the othering of this group and the need for recognition. In addition, the post-9/11 setting of the novel deepens the experience of the Other, as Western protagonists fear and apprehend terrorism and cultural otherness. The characters' efforts to connect with the other using sport, friendship, or cultural exchange are portrayed as tentative steps toward symbolic integration.<sup>85</sup>

In conclusion, both *Crescent* (2003) by Abu Jaber's and *Netherland* (2008) by O'Neill's portray the idea of Lacan's Symbolic order that helps to understand how people define and go through trauma after the events of 9/11. Both novels suggest that after this traumatic experience, the usual discourses of expressing loss and suffering fall apart. The characters struggle to articulate their trauma, revealing language's limitations in capturing the horrors of 9/11, a failure that extends beyond personal experience to a broader societal issue. Language's failure in this

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case is not just personal but a social problem where an entire society cannot fully capture with words the horror of 9/11. The characters in these two novels experience deep identity crisis torn between who they are and what the world expects them to be. This is one of the major concepts of Lacan's theory that people are never complete, but always divided by the expectations of society and language. After 9/11, this division is deepened by the trauma which leads to the characters' alienation that they do not fully belong anywhere. This shows how the Symbolic order is necessary in identity formation but also creates a sense of loss or lack in the self, the characters' struggles with identity illustrate how trauma can affect alienation and sense of self making it more challenging. The symbolism of lack and desire is very prominent in the novels, longing is always based on deficiency or what is lost according to Lacan. It is portrayed in the loss of homeland or a dream which can never be completely realized. This search for home is both personal and political because the loss is tied into real events such as displacement, war, and social conflict.

These two novels address both themes of loss and desire but *Crescent* focuses more on the political and historical aspects of loss such as exile and loss of home, while *Netherland* focuses on the emotional in psychological affects that lack and desire can have on the self. These different approaches help us to understand how the Symbolic order functions on different levels, both social and inner life of the characters.

The role of the Other is also essential to understand the novels' characters and their struggles. According to Lacan, the Other can refer to two distinct things: The Big Other which includes society, language, and law, and the Interpersonal Other which signifies another person who recognizes and relates to us. Both forms of the Other determine the way characters see themselves and how their desires are framed. These differences between Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008), offer a richer understanding of how the Symbolic order functions under different contexts and how characters struggle to deal with trauma differently.

Together, the novels use Lacan's Symbolic order to explore how identity, trauma, and desire are experienced after 9/11. They show that language cannot fully express trauma, identity becomes fragmented, desire is driven by loss, and the other plays a big role in shaping subjectivity. Despite all these challenges, the Symbolic order remains the framework which characters use to try to make sense of themselves and the worlds around them, even though this order is disrupted it is still the place where people seek recognition, belonging, and meaning. It makes Lacan's ideas useful in understanding the deep psychological and social effects of 9/11.

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## **V. General Conclusion:**

This dissertation has made a critical analysis of the theme of trauma within two distinct literary works which are Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). The post 9 11 issue has inspired many writers, as it had been the case of Abu Jaber and O'Neill, where they both portrayed protagonists struggling with trauma caused by displacement, loss, and identity crisis. To understand trauma's effect on the formation of identity, this research used Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, paying special attention to the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real orders.

The aim if this study is to analyze how trauma disrupts the Lacanian orders in the two novels influencing the characters' fragmented identities. The findings establish that trauma disrupts the coherence of identity, according to Lacanian perspective. Trauma is never fixed but a continuous process regarding to the active interaction between the three orders. This research emphasizes the value of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory as an interpretive approach within literary trauma studies.

The first chapter explored the Imaginary and the Real order in both novels. It has dealt with the Imaginary order that examined the characters' journeys of identity formation that was influenced by cooking, romantic relationships, and cricket. It has demonstrated how the cultural heritage impact the individuals' process of identity formation in a new setting.

Furthermore, the chapter has analyzed the characters' misrecognition and alienation of their dual identities in displacement and the traumatic events that they have been through. This order focused on the mirroring characters as they try to navigate their identities as Arab Americans in exile through each other. It shows how trauma from losing a loved one can deeply affect a person's sense of self. Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* also explores the impact of traumatic events, such as violence and exile, on individuals. Finally, this

first chapter ends with the Uncanny and Surreal elements that analyze the characters' struggle to express their trauma and the process of searching for identity in dislocation.

The second chapter examines the Symbolic order and its profound impact on the characters, where they struggled to express their traumas in language. This section also examined the identity crises and alienation of the main characters in the two narratives. We have investigated the symbolic lack and desire concerning moments of loss and the absent homeland of the characters. Finally, we have dealt with subjectivity through the Lacanian symbolic dimension by the gaze and language of the other.

To conclude, future research can extend this work by reading additional thematic concerns in *Crescent* and *Netherland*, such as exile, belonging, and cultural hybridity. Comparative studies can further explore how trauma connects with race, gender, or class in diasporic narratives. In addition, a more detailed study of narrative structure and memory in representing trauma would enhance a better understanding of these novels.

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