

Hybridity Theory: Comparison of Food Memoirs of Diana Abu Jaber's The Language of Baklava and Crescent

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Abstract

Hybridity theory is the creation of space for those who have been experienced different cultures, customs, and traditions. In the aspect of culture, hybridity can be seen through the food. Food has cultural and traditional connotations. It has implications for people promoting a sense of nostalgia, and tradition, and essentializing their identity as a nation. Diana Abu Jaber is one of the most famous writers who writes food memoirs expressing her Jordan-American identity through food, food preparations, and stories related to food. Her books The Language of Baklava and Crescent reveals her distinct identity as a person who loved both cultures where she grew in. She writes the food memoirs to encourage her readers that they too can accept their identity and embrace diversity. **Key words:** Hybridity, foodways, cross-culturalism **Introduction:**

Every country is characterized by a set of cultures, customs, and traditions, which composed its identity. The distinct features of every country made them different from other nations. However, there are

times that some countries have combined identities, cultures, and languages, as they integrate with others. The diversity and variety of every nation represent the hybridity that occurs between mixed cultures. Hybridity theory is the creation of a new transcultural formation (Malik), mostly associated with the historical process of colonization. It involves the idea of the fusion of culture, language, traditions, and practices of two or more cultures, creating a third space, and transforming its elements from time to time. The new space is described to contain the cultural elements associated with different nations, for instance, the colonized and colonizer nation. The combination of elements from these cultures brings forth a new set of cultural beliefs and practices, setting a new meaning and identification (Marchi). In the aspect of culture, one of the aspects infused by hybridity is food. Food plays a major role in presenting the culture and history of a nation. It represents how a nation preserves its traditions and creates spaces for the community to promote the popularity of food. It has cultural and traditional connotations that has implications for people promoting a sense of nostalgia, and tradition, and essentializing their identity as a nation. Writers and authors who write life stories related to food and food culture reflect the role of food in setting the identity of a nation. The different narrations pertaining to food and their memories expose the formations of self and family in the context of interchanging cultures. The study of food and foodways is one of the aspects of cultural hybridity. It shows the practice and

culture of the people, providing an understanding of the development of identity, culture, and power in different nations. Food is one of the basic needs of humanity and a primary aspect of human experience. Humans have a complex and multidimensional relationship with food. It brings nourishment to the body and it symbolizes a deeper context such as love and a sense of belongingness. It also associates every individual with a collective idea through social and psychological functions (O'Kane and Pamphilon). This relationship speaks so much about the people. It would show the people's cultural foods, the process of preparation, the ingredients they include in their recipes, and the associated celebrations with foods. The process of understanding food can be associated with deciphering the word etymology and food study. It also highlights the cultural developments of a nation and the interactions that occur from one nation to another in the course of history. In this case, the relationship of food to humanity indicates the facets of human experience. One of the famous writers known to write about food memoirs and show hybridity theory through foodways is Diana Abu Jaber. She is an Arab-American writer known to write food-related articles and books combining her life and interests with Eastern and Western cultures. Her novels contain identities and interests related to the issues of culture and identities. In combining both cultures, she showed the concept of hybridity theory as she associates food with unique narrations and stories (Said-Jaber). Abu Jaber writes memoirs that exploit her identity as an Arab

American in the construction of transcultural culinary identity. This paper explores the differences and commonalities in the works of Abu Jaber, The Language of Baklava and Crescent. The process of comparison goes through the concepts of hybridity theory, relating her narrations in her identity influenced by both the Eastern and Western elements. The theme of hybridity can be found in her narrations. She explores stories of someone who had experiences from different parts of the world while searching for her roots. The two works The Language of Baklava and Crescent are food memoirs by Diana Abu Jaber, which contribute to the concept of hybridity theory, as the memoirs explore the many aspects of identity and culture.

Review of Related Literature

Hybridity Theory: The concept of hybridity comes from the colonial science legacy. Tolia-Kelly (2009) shows that this term has a significant effect on the post-colonial and cultural theories, but its meaning has already evolved through time. In the cultural theory, this idea forms a conceptual device that disrupts and implodes the bases of differences articulated during colonial times. One of the most common understandings of hybridity is the concept of Homi Bhabha, in which, "hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" (Malik). Hybridity can be seen in several aspects of society that include the historical, linguistic, cultural, and geographical. It is a multi-discipline concept that ranges through anthropology, sociology, and literature. It

is almost employed in all various fields such as sports, tourism, architecture, and food. Hence, hybridity is a controversial idea, implicating different areas of study. It has also been characterized by subversion to cultural and political domination (Kraudy). The first application of the term hybridity is in the field of agriculture, animal culture, and genetics. Later, it is then correlated in social sciences, linguistics, and anthropology. Generally, the term refers to the merging, blending, and mixing processes. In the aspect of culture Knepper defines hybridity as the heterogeneous aspects of the language intermixing, formation of cultures, and integration of political, racial, and cultural factors which emerge through uneven exchanges and contact of diverse cultures (Knepper). The formation of a new hybrid indicates profound changes that take place as implications of migration, multiculturalism, and mobility. Studying hybridity then would involve studying cross-boundary experiences of global and diasporic communities. The process calls for a widening of scope, especially with the process of globalization and the continuous mobility of the people worldwide (Martynuska). In the context of hybridity, there is a third space that is created as a cultural contact happens between two cultures, such as the colonizer and the colonized culture. The new space created becomes a complex formation of culture containing the elements of both nations. It also undergoes constant transcultural transformations, which involve the process of a selective combination of elements of cultural beliefs and practices that would make meaning

(Marchi). The fusion of cultures that occurs due to hybridity across borders also involves the movement of the different elements and international communication. The movement entails cultural commodities, motivated by geostrategic and commercial considerations. Mostly, the transfer and fusion of elements can be through mass media, where the exchange of ideas, people, and practices can be made easy. The media text provides itself the explanation of how one aspect becomes global popularity (Kraidy).

Understanding Food and Culture through Food Memoirs: Food memoirs are autobiographical writings that tend to emphasize their life in the modern self-reflective subjectivities. It does not just indicate the individual narratives about the preference of the writer for food, it also shows communal and cultural contexts as the writers insert their reflections into a historical and cultural aspect. For most, the narrative can include a story of an immigrant or post-colonial author, writing with a politicized function. It includes a notion of memory, which plays a strong role in the process of interrogation of history, power, and culture. Narrative memories are characterized by memories that are attached to material objects or places, shared memories, and memories that are linked to subjects used for the construction of identities (Smith).

Culinary and food memoirs are part of the construction of identities. It can be associated with public and private settings, particularly with ideas of home, families, and childhood. It provides ways to construct ideas that affect the formation of the writer or the subject, as they cross

from one culture to another. The author usually narrates their experiences and unfolds the past secrets that all embody the politics of memory. The narrative memories are autobiographical discourses that make their secrets known to a wider audience (Nyman).

Smith states that "We might then speak of the de/colonization of memory as an effect of memoro-politics. The de/colonizing subject is a subject of an overwriting and overdetermining official history. The politics of the secret is the politics of the psychic trauma of de/colonization, of the disavowal of difference. The secret is the secret of the virtual subjection of the post/colonial subject as the embodiment of the past of colonialism" (Smith 44). In this respect, the role of food is very important in the association of the roots, history, and traditions of the immigrants. The ethnic foodways are part of the culinary conservatism of the groups of immigrants as they maintain their traditions, pursue their religious beliefs, and create their identities and markers of social status. These writings then are useful for their descendants, as they too, would be affected by the issues related to ethnicity, class, and memory (Nyman).

Diana Abu-Jaber: Food Memoir Writer

Diana Abu-Jaber is a known food memoir writer who has released several books that relates food to her culture and identity. She was born in Syracuse, New York in 1960. Her father was Jordanian and her mother was an American. Her family moved to Jordan when she was still seven years old. Ever since she lived between Jordan and

the US. She had her college degree in Creative Writing from SUNY Binghamton and graduated in 1986 (Elia). Living in two nations with different cultures made her struggle to some extent. But her struggles paved the way for a sense of hybrid life, a sort of in-betweenness permeating her to write powerful fiction. She grew up filled with the stories of her father, which influenced her imagination powerfully.

Abu-Jaber used food as her subject in writing her narratives, where she has written one book to another. As she said, "Food is such a great human connector; it's so intimate. And Middle Eastern food, when it is done well, is amazing. I thought...let the food be a metaphor for their experience" (Lyceum Agency). She wrote books that chronicle her life and struggles of having a mixed identity. Her experiences with food who loved both Arab and American dishes make her come up with fascinating memoirs of great food and home truths.

Abu-Jaber writes books themed on food and cooking making them witty, informational, and entertaining. Jopi Nyman, states that Abu-Jaber is one of the post-colonial writers who writes about food in their memoirs as they lead readers to subjectivity. The novels of Abu-Jaber portray the aspect of dual-culture and transculturation between the Western and Eastern cultures. She narrates the different activities related to food, home, and memory of two cultures (Nyman). Abu-Jaber is also noted for writing pieces projecting culinary practices as an important connection in humans with the set of realities they are living in. In her interview, she admits that the culinary elements are

very significant for her exploration of her identity as an Arab American. She writes about food and culinary activities as means or vehicles in the redefinition of her dual identity influenced by both the Eastern and Western cultures. Her works project cross-cultural communication between cultures and nationalities. In this way, she creates a diasporic space for the intersection of cultures. She presents a locus of integration across boundaries (Berrebah).

Discussion: Comparison of The Language of Baklava and Crescent

Diana Abu-Jaber wrote many books associated with food and cooking. Among the two notable books by Abu-Jaber are Crescent and The Language of Baklava. Her books reflect the hybrid culture that she is exposed to and the kind of lifestyle that makes her different from both Westerners and Easterners. Abu-Jaber is portraying to the world the new hybrid world that she is living. As stated by Homi Bhabha, the hybridity she lives in is likened to a "Third Space of enunciation" (Bhabha 37). Being the third space, it pertains to a different kind of world, with different structures, styles, and tastes. In a way, she is forming a new category characterized by multiple identities and cultures (Said-Jaber).

In the hybridity theory, it explores a mixture of cultures. Homi Bhabha pertains to this as the rise of internationalism where there is the establishment of a new imagined community or middle passage. In this case, there is a community with interacting cultures influencing each other as they co-exist with each other. The third space then

becomes the space in between for translation and negotiation rooted in the polarity of politics leading people to “emerge as others of ourselves” (Bhabha 38–39). Being a writer with hyphenated identities, Abu-Jaber experience a split between languages and marginal cultures. Hybridity happens during historical transformation, where there is a sense of becoming as they live through the discourse of boundary. Hybridity then marks the difference between being safe in living with oppositional stances seeking cultural intersections (Al-Joulan).

Examining hybridity through the food memoirs of Diana Abu-Jaber requires looking into the context of the food influences she encountered between cultures. The consumption and preparation of food is a highly politicized aspect of a contested cultural life. As stated by Counihan, food serves as a prism that reflects the plethora of cultural phenomena. Examining the foodways, integrated with beliefs and behaviors, shows the relations of power, where every social group can have its respective unique foodways (Counihan). Abu Jaber, in her books, writes food recipes and preparations which provide a peek at her bi-cultural life. In her book *Crescent*, she draws her inspiration from the different relations she had, with extended family and friends.

While in *The Language of Baklava*, she writes her personal story as someone who is exposed to two cultures while growing up. Along with this, she presents food-associated memories such as the dishes prepared by her father, the celebrations of family, and the rich tastes

they had. For her, food is a memory that triggers nostalgic memories of childhood, triggering tastes, all comforting and familiar.

Abu-Jaber's Crescent and The Language of Baklava are both founded on story-telling set between the United States and the Middle East. She writes about the food of both these nations influenced her taste and choice of food. They register a kind of romance with a powerful mixture of the low and high articulates, together with other implications, as a response to the exclusionary politics of Arab Americans (Arfaoui). She emphasizes the prominence of the oral tradition in the Arab legacy. Her narratives in these books are products of storytelling which she experienced along with food, which was one of the foundations of her cultural education.

Crescent is a book that introduces the world to Arab cuisine and how they are prepared. The dishes found in Arab culture played a role in shaping the identities of the characters included in the story. Abu-Jaber particularly relates food to affect the character's diasporic experiences. The story evolves with the two characters Sirine and Han. Sirine is a cook at the Um-Nadia's café, while Han is an Iraqi linguistic professor in Los Angeles. The stories included in the narrative show culinary practices as a reality in the lives of the people living in a diasporic setting. It delivers different strategies associating the culinary practices and the diverse factors of identities confronting the perplexities of difference found in the US ethnic culture.

The primary idea in the book is the thought of, you are what you eat. The culinary practice found in the book shows the construction of culinary practice in the midst of the American culture. Sirine, an Iraqi-American woman, understands that she is different from both of her origin cultures, despite having lived in the US as her home. There is a sense of unbelongingness within her, in which, she finds a certain place where she can forget her loneliness. Working in a Mediterranean cafe made her feel at home because she encounters different immigrants, where she can join in their loneliness. She knows how to be an Arab in the midst of a US setting. As for her, an Arab can feel everything, where she feels her senses in her blood. She has a sense of patience that she feels even if she is chopping onions. She enjoys her work where she "simply exists inside the simplest actions, like chopping an onion or stirring a pot" (Jaber). The little things narrated in the story are part of realities in the dayto-day life of any immigrant who can relate to the story of the characters.

Abu-Jaber writes her narratives in this book by associating her stories with food. In this way, food and feeding are perceived to be anchored to spiritual and symbolic elements. While the food feeds the physical aspect of the body, the crisscrossing strategies of storytelling are forms of feeding the spirit and the mind. As described by Robin Field, this book is all about a "story of love, jealousy, and betrayal, of searching for belonging in a new country and for roots in the old, and of the importance of food and storytelling to the body and the soul"

(Field). She reinforced the exchange between stories and food coinciding with evidence of their interdependence. The interdependence is founded on the symbolic functions used in the literary works of Abu-Jaber, emphasizing the hybridity of the identities between the two cultures.

The experiences of Sirine stated in the stories contained in the narrative are similar to the experiences of the author. Diana AbuJaber, in her interview, admits that she induced cultural and culinary elements in exploring herself being an Arab-American (Field). Using food in her narratives are vehicles that would set a redefinition of the identities of immigrants like her. At the same time, it projects a communication crossing cultures and borders between characters having different backgrounds. In this case, she is able to create a diasporic space for the intersection of culture.

It also provides an area for the integration of the linguistic, racial, and national boundaries. Field explains the diasporic space where there are multiple positions juxtaposed for the subjects. It is also a sphere where they are both allowed and inhibited to interrogate. Furthermore, they have space where they can accept and mingle with others with the different syncretic forms that are disclaimed for the sake of tradition. To add to this context, it can be argued that the creation of such space by Abu-Jaber reconnects the characters with their homelands. In this way, they can feel at home and savor the desirable conditions. The unique space created a strong cultural code that

bridges the character to her country of origin (Berrebbah). Hence, the culinary and food practices serve a primary role in connecting people across time and place. The diasporic space maintains its connection to its country of origin. Abu-Jaber shows that the narrative of Sirine is a diasporic Arab figure who goes to Um Nadia's café to feel a sense of home.

Abu-Jaber's other book, *The Language of Baklava* is similar to the story of *Crescent* in many aspects. She feeds her readers with storytelling through their minds and soul in the same way as the characters are feeding themselves with food that relates to their identities. While *Crescent* shows a story of people living in the US while enjoying the Arab foods to be connected to their origins, *The Language of Baklava* shows post-colonial aspects dealing with the interferences of the Western culture to the East. In some ways, the book is a representation of the memories she remembered highlighting the contradictions that she faced during growing up. The struggles she encountered paved the way for her to create a hybrid culture and identity. Most of the conflicts she had were due to the differences in identity and culture that she and her family experienced. In the book, the conflict is shown in the fight between Diana and her father as they disagree to some extent on matters of customs and beliefs (Said-Jaber).

The *Language of Baklava* tells a story of a second-generation immigrant in an Arab American community in the US. The narrator

shows the inseparability of the memories of childhood with the food and food preparation. Ethnic food has a role in triggering nostalgia. The character states about the homesickness she felt, and the nostalgia of her family for their homeland. As she states about her father, "Bud misses the old country so much, it's like an ache in his blood. On his days off, he cooks and croons in Arabic to the frying liver and onions songs about missing the one you love " (Nyman). The narrative shows the attitude of Abu-Jaber toward food functions being markers of the sentimentalized view of the Americans.

The Language of Baklava also follows the Crescent in terms of the intertwining of food expressions and metaphoric descriptions of how the storytelling can feed the spirit just like food does to the body. However, The Language of Baklava is unique in many aspects. This narrative serves to be a reference for Arabic classic food recipes which are also American. Some of the foods included in the list are kabob, lamb kofta, muhammara, falafels, baklava, Arabic ice cream, tabbouleh, Mezza, roasted fish in tahini sauce, and others. AbuJaber made these recipes have Western touch by associating them with Western elements such as grilled chicken, pita bread, roast beef, panna cotta, and Velveeta sandwiches. The chosen dishes named in the book are known to trigger the connection to the combination of the Arab oral culinary customs as well as the familiarity of the American readers associating them with Arabic meals (Arfaoui).

The Language of Baklava also portrays a version of food politics where there is the implicit notion that baklava is all about the univocal authenticity language. It evokes a sense of nationality and ethnicity for both the Arab and Arab American cultures. The memoir of recipes also triggers nostalgia and sustains the evolving relationship of the characters with the cultures that they inhabit. It elevates the old homeland which is authentic, although fluid and complex. There is also the portrayal of complex articulations of the transnational affiliations that have been unsettled (Bardenstein). More than just the pastiche of food recipes and the ethnic ornamentation, the book embodies the process of recollection of memories by the character. The book is more on the personal stories of Abu-Jaber, in which, the narratives contained are personal and real for her. She patterned her strategies of presenting recipes that serve as stories telling her troubles and other embarrassing revelations about the family. The food rituals presented in the book serve as a connection to her telling of her identity as an Arab American.

Both the books Crescent and The Language of Baklava serve as sources of stories that manifest the volatility of borders. The culinary structure in the food narratives inspires the readers that would not downplay the sense of instability that would represent identity. The integral issue in both contexts is the emphasis on cross-culturalism. In a way, the food ingredients descriptions serve as a contact zone in which people separated through historical and geographical aspects

establish a sense of contact in ongoing relations. For instance, in the book Crescent, there is a domestic form of relations established as the character feels belongingness in spaces such as the kitchen, home, and cafes (Mercer and Strom).

Conclusion:

Diana Abu-Jaber is noted for writing food memoirs showcasing food preparation and consumption in the aspect of hybridity. Her books, Crescent and The Language of Baklava show how the aspect of food reflects the hybridity of the characters being exposed to dual cultures. Both books discuss stories and narratives related to food in the context of Arab and American culture. The characters in the stories are all searching for their identity and find a sense of belongingness as they explore the food of their origins, that is the Arab food, in the modern setting of America. The difference between them is that Crescent portrays a story of two people, as they search for their identity and feel a sense of belongingness to a certain café. The café is symbolic in such a way that it represents how people find their identity when they are in the midst of people who have the same situation. The exploration of the character is through her exposure to the world, while she works in the kitchen, creating memories as she prepares food for other people. The Language of Baklava is more akin to the author, Diana Abu-Jaber, as it tells her story of how she finds her identity through food and the memories associated with it during her childhood. She explores the food that she finds in America containing Arab elements and connected

these delicacies with certain parts of her childhood. The aspect of memory is very significant in this book as the author relates every food to a certain portion of her life when she was young. Both the books *The Language of Baklava and Crescent* use food as a metaphoric tool to describe the life of the writer. The ingredients that it provides in the books and the way they are prepared, provide hints of the life and lifestyle of the characters. It also highlights the power of the Arab oral tradition, where the author got most of her imagination and creativity. The oral dictions and culinary elements created a prominent intersection that provided nourishment to people. The narrative provides storytelling that nourishes the mind and soul, same as food nourishes the physical aspect of the body. The dynamic dichotomy between two different opposing cultures ended up in an intersecting world, where Abu-Jaber embraced hybridity. Diana Abu-Jaber is an Arab-American exposed to a mixed culture. Her life is a representation of hybridity, where she created an in-between space between the Jordanian and American sides. She shows hybridity in her narrative as she portrays the character's language, food, behavior, and lifestyle. Diana is able to establish a third space where the two cultures of Arab and American can intersect and interact.

The aspect of hybridity shown by Abu-Jaber is noted in a way where she both loves both cultures and cherishes everything about them. She does not show neglect for any culture and calls both countries to be her homeland. She has presented food and how they are prepared,

associating them with both the Eastern and Western culture. In effect, she created a new version of identity distinct from both the Arab and American cultures.

Diana Abu Jaber painted a new image that is a combination of both cultures. She showed this hybridity through her lifestyle. She talks about the food that is connected with festivities, childhood memories, and others. These aspects were also results of her struggles as she felt a sense of unbelongingness if she considers one culture only. The conflicts that she experienced made her create a new world where she can freely move and accept her identity. She writes these things through entertaining stories, relating them with food to make it more authentic, real, and touching.

Overall, the narratives of Diana Abu-Jaber contained in her books Crescent and The Language of Baklava is enriching and entertaining. She uses food as a tool to accept one's identity and embrace diversity. They are eye-openers to the people who have the same experiences with the writer. They are truly feasts for the body while nourishing the spirit and mind.

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