

The Power of Recipes: Culinary Practice as a Strategy to Deconstruct Arab-American Identity in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*

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Crescent (2003) is an example of the kind of Arab-American literature that has emerged noticeably in the early years of the 21st century. It signifies a hypothesis that culinary practice is an essential cultural component for diasporic figures to define their identities, especially in a multi-cultural society. These figures embrace such component to strategically define themselves and assert their belonging and affiliation to their original homelands. This paper, as such, examines the extent to which Arab-American characters in the novel, namely Sirine and Han, consider culinary practice as a key tool to understanding their identity, locate themselves in a multi-cultural society, and re-discover their true belonging. The study of this novel shows that culinary practices, as indicated in the narratives, deconstruct Arab-American identity through various dimensions, including memory, nostalgia, hybridity, and essentialism. In addition to employing critical and analytical approaches to the novel, this paper relies on a socio-cultural conceptual framework based on perspectives of prominent critics and theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Brinda Mehta, Dallen Timothy, and Stuart Hall, to name a few.

Keywords

Arab-American; culinary practice; food; identity; hybridity; multiculturalism; essentialism; memory

Food for us was a complex cultural emblem, an encoded script that embodied the long history and collective memory of our Near Eastern culture.

Balakian (52)

Food and culinary practices function as an important tool for diasporic figures to negotiate, express, and navigate their multiple identities: cultural, social, national, regional, communal, and in some case, religious. Brinda Mehta explains the complex semiotics of food and culinary practice when she states that “thinking about food has much to reveal about how we understand our personal and collective identities. Seemingly simple acts of eating are flavoured with complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural meanings” (28). Culinary practice as cultural heritage also elucidates a sense of space and belonging and reiterates affiliations to “home”. People of the diaspora practise culinary traditions to not only retain the bond with their familial roots, but also to facilitate communication in a multicultural setting, such as the USA. It is in this context that food “plays a key role in immigrants’ desire to keep their ethnic identities alive in an immersion of otherness that can, if not guarded against, supplant the traditions of home” (Timothy 66). In other words, the diasporic desire to attach one’s self to food demonstrates both the status of being dislocated in the adopted country and the process of identity preservation.

Sidney Mintz, similarly, argues that food has always been regarded as an identity signifier and a medium to project self-expression:

For many people, eating particular foods serves not only as a fulfilling experience, but also as a liberating one – an added way of making some kind of declaration. Consumption, then, is at the same time a form of self-identification and of communication. (13)

What Mintz draws upon in this quote is the idea that culinary practice has a deep context and significance in the self-projection of those who feel invisible, and it tells a story of the marginalised. Culinary tradition as a cultural practice situates itself within identity politics in that it contributes significantly in shaping, preserving, and producing one’s identity. As Susan Kalcik explains, “foodways provide a whole area of performance in which statements of identity can be made – in preparing, eating, serving, forbidding, and talking about food” (qtd in Dalessio 2).

Diana Abu-Jaber, in her novel *Crescent*, introduces to us how food and Arab cuisine play out in several realities to shape her characters’ identity and affect their diasporic experiences, with a special focus on Sirine and Han – the former is a passionate cook at Um-Nadia’s café and the latter is an exiled Iraqi professor of linguistics at a university in the city of Los Angeles.

Abu-Jaber's novel projects culinary practice as an important human connector and a reality that affects people's lives in a diasporic setting and as a sublime meta-context in Um-Nadia's café, where most events in the novel take place. Through its narratives, *Crescent* delivers a set of strategies to establish profound consonance between culinary practice and various identitarian factors as well as to confront the perplexities of diversity and difference that feature in many US ethnic cultural productions. The crux of culinary practice in Abu-Jaber's novel, I argue, is that we are what we eat. Culinary practice, I should stress, stands for Arab-American identity and its construction.

Diana Abu-Jaber, in an interview conducted with her, admits the significance of this culinary and cultural element in exploring herself as an Arab American (Field 217–218). She uses food and culinary practice in her writings as a vehicle by which to redefine Arab-American identities and project cross-cultural communication between characters of various nationalities and backgrounds. This results in the creation of a particular diasporic space for cultural intersections and a locus of integration across national, linguistic, and racial boundaries. Avtar Brah, relevantly, defines diasporic space as a sphere “where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed, or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition” (208).

In addition to Brah's arguments, people in such space also endeavour to reconnect with their homelands, actualise their feeling of home, and position themselves in a desirable condition. In other words, food and culinary practice are of central importance in connecting across place and time, and it is commonly known by diasporic people that such cultural constructs are the essential components of maintaining connections to countries of origin. Diana Abu-Jaber demonstrates this argument in her narratives through Sirine and the Arab diasporic figures who come to Um-Nadia's café, a space that triggers their sense of home. For instance, in Um-Nadia's café, there is “a TV tilted in the corner above the cash register, permanently tuned to the all-Arabic station, with news from Qatar, variety shows and a shopping channel from Kuwait, endless Egyptian movies, Bedouin soap operas in Arabic, and American soap operas with Arabic subtitles” (Abu-Jaber 22–23). Not only this, this unique space also provides a strong cultural code that creates a bridge between the diaspora and the Arab countries of origin – Arab cuisine. The menu when the café was re-opened, as the narrator tells us, was “Real True Arab Food”

(Abu-Jaber 21). The words “real” and “true” show the extent to which Arab diasporic figures crave genuine food that takes them back to their origins, helps retain their Arab identity, actualises their sense of belonging, and satisfies their affinity for an authentic taste of home. Although the title of the menu can be critically viewed as a marketing strategy to hook in the diasporic clientele and give life to the café, the effects of the food itself on the consumers are profound to the extent that the café starts to be a meeting point for those who want to resurrect their forgotten memory and nostalgia for home. In other words, the quality of food being passionately cooked and prepared by Sirine and Um-Nadia strengthens the credibility of the menu’s title.

In the same context, considering the culinary practice in Um-Nadia’s café as a vehicle for diasporic figures to remember and commemorate their belonging and origin strongly matches Dallen Timothy’s opinion that “food is among the most important memories immigrants carry with them to their adopted lands” (6). In fact, culinary practice is described as a tool for creating love and harmony. This is projected through the words of Um-Nadia: “The thing about *knaffea* [...] is that it is said to be so delicious that it brings even the wild animals home” (Abu-Jaber 44). She further comments on the impact that food – Arab food – has on Arab immigrants who are dispersed across different locations in the USA: “I see Arab men come here from far away all the time. They all come to me because we make something like home in this country. It helps” (Abu-Jaber 94). Indeed, food is helpful to alleviate the feeling of homesickness and foreignness resulting from being away from home. This sense negatively affects all types of immigrants such as students who see in the Arab cuisine and the café a cultural shelter from the feeling of estrangement. One of them, for instance, is fond of Sirine’s Arab dishes; he “would linger at the counter talking to Sirine. He would tell her how painful it is to be an immigrant – even if it was what he’d wanted all his life [...] For many of them the café was a little flavor of home” (Abu-Jaber 22). Remarkably, Sirine herself shares similar feelings with her Arab clients. As an answer to Han when he asks her about the place that she feels most at home, Sirine, referring to her cooking job in the café and its Arab cuisine, says that “work is home” (Abu-Jaber 132). In this regard, Diana Abu-Jaber asserts that culinary practice is a mechanism and strategy by which home is de-mythologised – she seems to critique Salman Rushdie’s concept of Imaginary Homeland (1991): Rushdie reveals that because immigrants endure a loss of the physical reality of the places in which they grew up, they, as an alternative, create imaginary versions of them. Abu-Jaber’s characters in her novel, however, overcome the choice

to fictionalise their homelands and they instead recreate them through food and culinary practice in a diasporic setting – Um-Nadia’s café.

Abu-Jaber’s use of food in her narratives to denote the characters’ nostalgia and homesickness mirrors the arguments of other diasporic authors in the USA about the significance of such cultural metaphor in forming ethnic identity and its existence. For instance, the Indian American cultural critic Ketu Katrak, in her short autobiographical essay “Food and Belonging: At ‘Home’ and in ‘Alien’ Kitchens” (1997), proposes that culinary narratives, while imbued by nostalgia, often control memories of immigrants and their imagined return to the homeland. She further comments on her experience of dislocation and how food was an essential factor to rebuke the effects of longing and sense of non-belonging:

my own memorybanks about food overflowed only after I left India to come to the United States as a graduate student. The disinterest in food that I had felt during my childhood years was transformed into a new kind of need for that food as an essential connection with home. I longed for my native food as I dealt with my dislocation from the throbbing Bombay metropolis. (270)

On this basis, the relationship between diasporic figures of different nationalities in the USA – such as Indian Americans and Arab Americans – might demonstrate how both ethnic communities approach culinary traditions for the same purpose and subjectivity.

Diana Abu-Jaber, furthermore, uses culinary practices in her narratives to denote the hybridity of identity in the character of Sirine who cooks Arab food to celebrate American traditions – for example, Thanksgiving. Sirine announces that “this year will be an Arabic Thanksgiving with rice and pine nuts and ground lamb in the turkey instead of cornbread, and yogurt sauce instead of cranberries” (Abu-Jaber 206). The term Arabic Thanksgiving brings together two words of different cultural connotation. The culinary practice and the use of Arab cuisine to celebrate Thanksgiving in this instance function as, borrowing Warwick Frost and Jennifer Laing’s words, “ongoing markers of cultural identity and evolve with hybridised forms and characteristics” (37).

In the same sense, Sirine’s attempt to manifest both traditions, Thanksgiving and Arab cuisine, can be clarified through Dallen Timothy’s statement that immigrants’ culinary practices reflect a combination of two pursuits: “the adaptation to a hybridized identity in the adopted land and an anxious

attempt to grasp onto something of the home land” (66). Indeed, what can be called hybridised identity is Sirine’s reality of being both Arab and American, on one hand, and what symbolises the anxious attempt, on the other hand, is her cooking of Arab food as a significant heritage inherited from her parents and a reminder of her origins. Um-Nadia herself, similarly, signals her Arab roots through the preparation of Thanksgiving when she describes it as “old-time Arabs’ cooking” (Abu-Jaber 215). As such, Diana Abu-Jaber shows the extent to which culinary practice functions in defining Arab-American identity – a hyphenated one pillared by transformative and transnational visions.

In addition to this, celebrating Ramadan – defined by the narrator as “a month of daily fasting and, broken by an *iftar*, a special meal after sunset and a bite before sunrise” – adds more phosphorescence to Sirine’s hybrid identity in that she celebrates both these different cultural traditions: Ramadan and Thanksgiving. Even though the former is practised for religious commitments, this projects the extent to which Sirine positions herself, or her identity to be precise, between both cultural practices that results in creating a space in which she holds both of them concurrently as a mode of navigating her hybrid identity. This sort of cultural negotiation recalls Homi Bhabha’s concept of Third Space. According to Bhabha, cultural hybridity is a projection of third space that enables other positions to emerge and float on the surface. It symbolises the interconnectedness of first space [of Arabness] and second space [of Americanness]. This new space, in the opinion of Bhabha, delivers to the individual the ability to practise self-expression to better locate her/himself in a society that, consequently, starts to be perceived differently by that individual. In this context, he comments that “these ‘in-between spaces’ provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2). In other words, this space of in-betweenness, or third position as Vince Marotta calls it, “allows diasporic figures to develop a ‘double perspective’ that facilitates the intersection of cultural styles and values and contributes the production of innovative and creative identities” (Marotta 308–309).

In the case of Sirine, her hybrid identity enables the emergence of both Arabness and Americanness – two different realities, or discourses in some cases, that circumscribe her life in the setting of diaspora. It is cultural hybridity that ascribes to Sirine and other Arab-American figures a uniqueness and complexity of identity that does not represent a stable position; cultural

hybridity is, borrowing Bhabha's words, "a process that gives rise to something different, something new and recognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (131). Indeed, hybrid identities, as Floya Anthias argues, "are never complete and are being continuously made and remade. The term hybridity also designates the formation of new identities that may have a more transethnic, and transnational character" (135). Diana Abu-Jaber in this respect, within the cultural connotations of culinary practice, challenges the idea that Arab-American identity is based on a cluster of homogeneous components. She manifests through her female protagonist, Sirine, that Arab-American identity is a point of intersection and a mixture of various and distinctive categories, discourses, and realities – a point of hybridity.

Equally important, it is also possible to argue that culinary practice functions as an inclusionary practice; food brings different people with the same commonalities – whether historical, national, cultural or even religious – into one place in what seems a form of inclusiveness. It is a practice by which collective cultural identity can be produced and demonstrated. Stuart Hall, a Jamaican-born British Marxist sociologist, cultural theorist and political activist, reminds us of the two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first one is the position from which cultural identity can be defined in terms of identical commonalities that bring diasporic figures together on the basis of one shared culture that should be critically viewed as

A sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people of a shared history or ancestry hold in common [...] our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitude of our actual history. (223)

The second position, as Hall asserts, considers cultural identity as dynamic, fragmented, and full of raptures and discontinuities. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It undergoes constant transformation and it can help to "understand the traumatic character of the colonial experience" (225). Through the analysis of Abu-Jaber's narratives and her characters who come from different cultures, it is possible to argue that the novel strongly projects Hall's first position of defining cultural identity. To support this argument, it might seem necessary to draw attention to the use of "shared cultural codes"

in Hall's arguments and apply it to culinary practice and Arab cuisine in Abu-Jaber's novel. On the basis of what Stuart Hall draws upon, culinary practice can be importantly considered as a remarkable example of shared cultural codes that endorse the oneness and collective identity of diasporic figures who come to Um-Nadia's café to taste and enjoy Sirine's recipes and cooking. This is evident in the novel, where Muslims from all over the town crowd into Um-Nadia's café, queuing outside and waiting for tables, to celebrate the first *ifrar* of the first day of Ramadan. This includes people of different nationalities who share the same cultural and religious propensity: "Iranians, Saudis, Palestinians, Lebanese, even Malaysians, Pakistanis, and Croatians" (Abu-Jaber 297). They crave to taste the food they always wait for such as "killaj, pastry, qatayif pancakes, zalabiyya fritters, and ma'mul cookies" (Abu-Jaber 297).

Um-Nadia's café, furthermore, can be seen as a site of multiculturalism on the basis of the shared cultural code it provides – food. Sneja Gunew, for example, asserts that ethnic food and culinary practice have an important role in the manifestation of multicultural community. She argues that "the notion of multiculturalism as food [becomes] the most benign version of accommodating cultural difference in various national contexts" (227). Gunew's argument is evident in Abu-Jaber's narratives when Sirine gets into a good relationship with an Iranian cook who has a restaurant next to Um-Nadia's café. He shares with her a recipe for Persian Khoresht fessenjan which she promises to learn (Abu-Jaber 23). This happens despite certain religion-related historical atrocities and inconveniences between Iran and Iraq, her country of origin. Keeping in the same vein of arguments, given that Um-Nadia's café is characterised by various social constituencies and distinctive cultural backgrounds and nationalities, this multicultural setting embodies, taking Jeffrey Weeks's definition of the concept of multiculturalism, "a notion of different communities evolving gradually into a harmonious society where difference was both acknowledged and irrelevant" (92).

The concept of multiculturalism, moreover, pertains particularly to a society defined by cultural diversity. In an interview, Bhabha comments on this concept as a representation of "an attempt both to respond to and to control the dynamic process of the articulation of cultural difference, administering a *consensus* based on a norm that propagates cultural diversity" (130). Multiculturalism can be considered as a reference to the "policy or process whereby the distinctive identities of the cultural groups within such a society are maintained and supported" (Ashcroft et al 163). Indeed, as seen

on the first day of Ramadan at Um-Nadia's café, culinary practices, while neglecting differences and distinctiveness, produce a sense of homogeneity amongst the multicultural clientele. In fact, Abu-Jaber's portrayal of such homogeneous relationships and cross-cultural communication between diverse ethnic communities in the café might seem as an implicit challenge to Homi Bhabha's opinion that, however rational a person may be, "it is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily coexist" (130). In this regard, Diana Abu-Jaber, through her narratives, informs us that it can be also possible to achieve cultural integrity and fit together various forms of cultures and identities in one place by a certain shared cultural code, such as food and gastronomic traditions. Moreover, Um-Nadia's café is also politicised by Abu-Jaber as a diasporic space, or as Bhabha puts it, a space of "gatherings" on the edge of foreign cultures which lead to "the cultural construction of nationness as a mode of social and textual affiliation" (291–292). In accordance with Bhabha's argument, such kind of space and human assemblages, as Myria Georgiou asserts, should be scrutinised "to capture the meanings of diasporic and migrant identities" as well as understanding "the connections within and across space that provide human subjects information and communication for being and becoming" (17).

Abu-Jaber's employment of this term – space of gatherings – is apparent in her portrayal of the café as a primary destination for diasporic Arab figures from different parts of Los Angeles. This importantly concerns the Arab students in the café whose names literally refer to the four cardinal directions in Arabic: Jenooob, Gharb, and Schamaal and Shark (Abu-Jaber 23). This ascribes to the café, or culinary practice particularly, the quality of being able to gather people – including several types of diasporic figures such as exiles, emigres, or refugees – from different destinations in one space. In an interview with Shalal-Esa (2002), Diana Abu-Jaber, referring to her novel *Crescent*, asserts the role of food in collecting people of cultural differences: "that's why food has been such an important metaphor. To me, that's one of the most immediate and powerful ways of creating the metaphor of the hearth and a gathering place, a place where the collective forms". Interestingly enough, Um-Nadia's café not only acts as a place of gathering on the basis of the Arab food it provides, but it also works as a place of Arab cultural wealth and legacy manifestation. This can be evidenced by the Arab students' performance of Arab and Middle Eastern music: "they sit at the tables outside and play drums with their fingers, the one-stringed rebab, the violin, the flute, Arabic music sailing through the walls of

the café so no one working inside can hear themselves think” (Abu-Jaber 42). Their efforts to re-create the feeling of home through eating Arab food and playing Arab musical instruments in the café express their nostalgia towards their cultural belonging – an Arab Middle Eastern one. Equally important, Diana Abu-Jaber’s use of the café in her narratives as a place of diasporic gathering is not the only one. This diasporic activity appears in other places in the narrative such as Sirine’s house where Arab friends and companions of different nationalities come over to celebrate Thanksgiving. The scene includes “Han, Mireille, Victor Hernandez and his cousin Eliazer, Aziz the poet, Nathan, Um-Nadia, Cristobal the custodian, Shark, Jenoo, Abdullah, Schmaal, and Gharb – five of the lonely students from the café – Sirine, and her uncle” (Abu-Jaber 215). Upon this matter, Sirine’s uncle comments and reflects on this gathering with regards to cultural commonality that centres the characterisation of transnational diaspora, and maintains the relationship between different ethnic minorities. He says:

Well, look at us [...] sitting around here like a bunch of Americans with our crazy turkey. All right, now, I want to make a big toast. Here’s to sweet, unusual families, pleasant dogs who behave, food of this nature, the seven types of smiles, the crescent moon, and a nice cup of tea with mint every day. *Sahtain*. Good luck and God bless us everyone. (Abu-Jaber 217)

The process of diasporic gatherings at either Um-Nadia’s café or Sirine’s house, on the basis of culinary practice as a shared cultural code, may seem strategic to a great extent. It is strategic in that it signifies the identity of people living in the diaspora, projects their cultural sense of belonging, recreates for them the intimacy of home, and mostly, represents them by standardising a public image. In this context, it is possible to adopt Gayatri Spivak’s term Strategic Essentialism to clarify how such diasporic gatherings work. Although it has a political connotation, the term is also entrenched within cultural studies. Given that the space of gatherings signals a collective identity, the term refers to a working method to essentialise this identity with regards to “shared cultural codes” while strong differences might remain or be subverted. In its broad context and general meaning, Essentialism is, in analyses of culture, “an assumption that individuals share an essential cultural identity” (Ashcroft et al 96). It is a form of diasporic project and practice that extends over the notion of Diaspora itself. Kenneth Wald, for instance, claims that “rather than speak of “a diaspora” or “the diaspora” as an entity, a bounded group,

an ethnodemographic or ethnocultural fact, it may be more fruitful, and certainly more precise to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices, and so on” (1305). Moreover, Elizabeth Eide in her critique of this term explains that strategic essentialism “entails that members of groups, while being highly differentiated internally, may engage in an essentializing and to some extent a standardizing of their public image, thus advancing their group identity in a simplified, collectivized way to achieve certain objectives” (76). Building on Eide’s arguments, the primary objective of diasporic characters’ gatherings, as seen in Sirine’s house and Um-Nadia’s café, is to essentialise their group identity strategically and create a special space that further defines the notion of diaspora. In this regard, Diana Abu-Jaber denotes the extent to which culinary practice and Arab Cuisine can be perceived as an incentive to practise strategic essentialism and substantiate diasporic gatherings.

Interestingly, Sirine’s uncle in his speech demonstrates the duality of identity that defines the majority of attendees at the Thanksgiving celebration – being both Arab and American. This concerns Han, Mireille, Aziz, Um-Nadia, Shark, Jenooob, Abdullah, Schmaal, Gharb, Sirine, and her uncle. It is possible to interpret Sirine’s uncle’s words “sitting around here like a bunch of Americans with our crazy turkey” as a manifestation of Americanness despite his and their Arab origins – such sense of Americanness is projected through the American culinary traditions of a Thanksgiving celebration. He implicitly hints at juxtaposing realities that, regardless of other factors, define Arab-American identity. In other words, he celebrates his identity in that an Arab American is an Arab as much as being an American and vice versa.

This binary reflection upon identity is also established by Etel Adnan, an Arab-American poet and literary critic of Lebanese origin. She argues in her poetry, referring to Arab Americans in the USA, that “to be an Arab is already being a bit an American. And being an American is already being almost an Arab, even without knowing it. Americans are a nomadic people. Arabs are a nomadic and restless people. Both are restless and reckless” (86). Adnan in her explanation brings together Arabness and Americanness on the basis of shared features and commonalities: a nomadic and restless nature. This conveniently resembles how culinary practices function to project this binary identity as shown at the Thanksgiving gathering. In this respect, it is evident that Arab-American identity is miscellaneous and dynamic. Arab-American identity is a good example of diasporic identities that, according to Anh Hua, “are not fixed, rigid, or homogeneous, but are instead fluid, always changing, and heterogeneous” (193).

In addition, it is also possible to argue that culinary traditions function as a means to trigger memory and practise the past in the present (Turkon and Weller 58). Memory is one of the outstanding themes in Arab literature produced by female authors. The inscription of it in postcolonial Arab women's writing, as Mehta Brenda argues, "provides the basis to engage in meaningful discussions of gender, race, class, nationhood, sexuality, and culture" (3). The process of such inscription, as Abu-Jaber's narratives show, is facilitated by the demonstration of culinary practice. This is also evident in Abu-Jaber's opinion that culinary practice is a "metaphor for cultural memory" (Field 217). Dallen Timothy, on this subject, further comments on the relationship between food preparation and memory, especially for immigrants and diasporic figures. He contends that food is "a trigger of childhood or early-life memories, not necessary in relation to immigrant predecessors, but of personal experiences in time and place. This can and does commingle with the first type when childhood memories represent a parent, grandparent or great grand-parent from the ancestral homeland" (66). Diana Abu-Jaber's novel, in this case, provides a relevant scene by which Timothy's arguments can be clearer. This is apparent when Sirine moves to Um-Nadia's café. The narrator tells us that "she went through her parents' old recipes and began cooking the favourite – but almost forgotten – dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents' tiny kitchen and her earliest memories" (Abu-Jaber 22). In fact, the outcome of such practice is stronger than that – Sirine remembers happy moments from her childhood, cooking and learning recipes from her mother and father: this includes straining "the salted yogurt through cheesecloth to make creamy labneh [...]" the onion and lentils together in a heavy iron pan to make mjeddrah, [...] joints of lamb with fat cloves of garlic to make roasted kharuf" (Abu-Jaber 56).

The process of cooking food with her parents, as seen in the last quote, denotes that Sirine is also in the process of inheriting the tradition of cooking food – a culinary heritage, which results in identity preservation. Sirine's endeavours to go through her parents' old recipes to cook her favourite dishes fall within Dallen Timothy's belief that "culinary heritage also involves the ways in which families pass gastronomic knowledge from generation to generation" (68). Furthermore, Sirine's inheritance of culinary practice demonstrates her gendered identity in that, presumably, the woman is responsible for preserving the cooking practice and recipes through inter-generational handover that results in providing her with the cultural authority in a home or domestic

place in which she acts as “the protector of the family’s alimentary heritage” (Timothy 68–69).

In addition, besides its impact on memory, culinary practice is also central to the individual’s attachment to his/her country of origin and functions as a locus of personal heritage and the sense of nostalgia that surrounds it. The preparation of Baklava with Sirine in the café, as a mere example, revives a forgotten memory of Han’s family and kitchen back home. It works to remind him of his home’s kitchen and situate him as a typical, nostalgic diasporic figure who shows his compassion for the tradition of food preparation back in his country Iraq: “I never much wanted to be up in my father’s orchard. I liked this. I liked the kitchen. The table. Stove. Where the women were always telling stories. My mother and my aunts and the neighbors and – my sister” (Abu-Jaber 68). In fact, Diana Abu-Jaber draws for us an image of the kitchen’s atmosphere and the culinary practices in it when Sirine attempts to cook up Iraqi dishes that project the “childhood foods that she’d heard Han speak of”:

sfeehas – savory pies stuffed with meat and spinach – and round mensaf trays piled with lamb and rice and yogurt sauce with onions, and for dessert, tender ma’mul cookies that dissolve in the mouth. She stuffed the turkey with rice, onions, cinnamon, and ground lamb. Now there are pans of sautéed greens with bittersweet vinegar, and lentils with tomato, onion, and garlic on the stove, as well as maple-glazed sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, and pumpkin soufflé. (Abu-Jaber 215)

The scene about preparing Iraqi dishes for Han denotes that food and culinary traditions can keep the bond between persons strong and unbreakable. Sirine adopts her culinary practice strategically to be close to Han in the same way her mother did for her father. For instance, Sirine, when she was a little girl, “thought that this was why her mother cooked – to keep her husband close to her, attached to a delicate golden thread of scent” (Abu-Jaber 56). Furthermore, the previous quote about Iraqi food preparation not only shows the ingredients of the recipes that Sirine uses in her cooking but it also denotes the components of her memory and affiliation to the tradition of Arab cuisine: it turns out that Sirine has nostalgia for the past for when she used to do cooking tasks alongside her American mother, especially the preparation of Baklava – a famous dish in Middle Eastern cuisine. In this

context, Carol Bardenstein in her study of Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* – a cook-book memoir – argues that “partaking food in the present is often portrayed as a ‘restorative’ or ‘reconstituting’ process, as a gesture that aims to restore the (past) whole through partaking of a present (fragment) – an integrated and ‘happy’ if compromised ending, that seems to heal and remove the previous tensions of displacement, or being ‘of two worlds’” (161). In this sense, the Baklava preparation gives Sirine the ability to restore her identity, reconstitute her true belonging, and remedy her feeling of loss and displacement while living in a multi-ethnic community and being between two conflating worlds: Arab and American. This falls within Vijay Agnew's opinion on the conditions of diasporic individuals who struggle to locate themselves adequately between the foreign land in which they reside and the homeland where their memories exist. He further comments that “the individual living in the diaspora experiences a dynamic tension every day between living ‘here’ and remembering ‘there’, between memories of places of origin and entanglements with places of residence, and between the metaphorical and the physical home” (4). In the same context, in her *The Language of Baklava* Abu-Jaber offers a comment that mirrors Agnew's argument. She says:

I believe the immigrant's story is compelling to us because it is so consciously undertaken. The immigrant compresses time and space – starting out in one county and then very deliberately starting again, a little later, in another. It's a story of fantasy – to have the chance to re-create yourself. But it's also a nightmare, because so much is lost. (xi)

What Abu-Jaber and Agnew agree on is that the state of displacement and in-betweenness has a profound impact on immigrants and diasporic figures' lives. It is also a process of re-creating the self through accepting losses and deprivation. The dish of Baklava, moreover, is also symbolic for other Arab characters – a group of students – who visit Um-Nadia's café to eat it and refresh their sense of identity: “the Baklava is important – it sheers the students up. They close their eyes when they bite into its crackling layers, all lightness and scent of orange blossoms” (2003, 66). The dish of Baklava in this regard can be seen as a key culinary practice that signifies cultural belonging. It, in fact, links Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* to her memoir *The Language of Baklava* (2005). In an interview with Angela Miyuki Mackintosh about the impact of *The Language of Baklava* on herself, Diana Abu-Jaber says:

When I was working on my memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, I was constantly trying to re-evolve and re-live the past and I was equally surprised by how much detail I remembered and how much I didn't. I also am quite fascinated by the idea of memory repression – it seems like a kind of magic to me, the way we can “lose” things that we've lived through, and then, almost ineffably, rediscover them, sometimes years later, again. (2007)

Diana Abu-Jaber, in this piece, positions herself in parallel with her Arab characters in the novel, *Crescent*, in terms of the endeavours to revive the past in the present through culinary practice, and how memory functions as a way to rediscover one's identity. Like her female protagonist Sirine, Abu-Jaber manifests the extent to which her life, and memory in particular, are interwoven with culinary practice that signals the dynamics of commemoration and remembering.

In a nutshell, given that the narratives are told from the perspective of Sirine's uncle, Abu-Jaber's novel offers an insight into the intersection between culinary practice and identity of diasporic figures, namely Arab Americans. Abu-Jaber suggests that culinary traditions have significant impact on the process of cross-cultural communication and engagement; they can erase political, social, and cultural barriers for the sake of integrity and harmony between communities of different backgrounds and nationalities. They can also be adopted as a strategy and effective mechanism to overcome the ramifications of displacement and foreignness: this includes nostalgia and mourning the absence of home. Furthermore, the preparation of Arab dishes, as seen through Sirine in this study, seems essential to restore memories of home and family and resurrect her shadowed Iraqi Arab origin. For her, this culinary activity *per se* creates a bridge between her two interwoven identities: Arab and American – a formation of hybrid identity. Equally important, Abu-Jaber's employment of memory in her novel endorses the thematic framework of Arab-American literary production. Layla Maleh, for instance, in her discussion of Arab-American literature, denotes that “memory becomes a pretext that frames the content of the authors' experiences, and a pretext to construct a dual or juxtaposed picture of their mental and emotional make up” (37). In this regard, memory signals a connection between the authors' lived experiences and their narratives and creative literary outputs. The culinary practice as seen in Abu-Jaber's novel, hence, is represented as a powerful mode of identity projection, i.e., it can play out in several realities to the extent that it supersedes

other cultural and social markers of ethnic identity, such as language (Frost and Laing 39).

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