

IDENTITY QUEST THROUGH MEMORY IN DIANA ABU-JABER'S ARABIAN JAZZ (1993) AND CRESCENT (2003) AND LAILA HALABY'S ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND (2007)

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ملخص:

تحاول هذه الدراسة تسليط الضوء على البحث عن الهوية من خلال الذاكرة في روايات الكتاب العرب الأمريكيين مثل الجاز العربي (1993) والهلل (2003) لديانا أبو جابر، ولليلي حلبي مرة واحدة في أرض الميعاد (2007). تحلل هذه الدراسة كيفية تآثر ذاكرة الشخصيات الرئيسية بالغذاء والحكاية كوسيلة للعودة إلى الجذور، الأصل، إلى ماهية العربي في حين يعانون من عبء ازدواجية الهوية.

الكلمات المفتاح: الذاكرة، الغذاء، الحكاية، البحث عن الهوية، الروايات العربية الأمريكية

Résumé :

Cet article tente de mettre en lumière la quête identitaire à travers la mémoire dans les romans d'écrivains Arabo-américains tels que *Arabian Jazz* (1993) et *Crescent* (2003) par Diana Abu-Jaber, et *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) par Laila Halaby. L'article analyse comment la mémoire des protagonistes est évoquée par la nourriture et le conte, les ramenant à leurs racines, à l'origine, à la question 'que est-ce qu'un Arabe' tout en subissant le fardeau d'une double identité.

Mots-clés: Mémoire, nourriture, conte, la quête identitaire, romans arabo-américains

Abstract :

This paper tries to shed light on the identity quest through food and memory in the novels of the Arab-American writers like Diana Abu-Jaber's novels *Arabian Jazz* (1993) and *Crescent* (2003) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). This paper analyses how the main characters' memory is evoked by food and storytelling, taking them back to roots; to origin; to who is an Arab while suffering the burden of identity doubleness.

Keywords: Memory- Food-storytelling-identity quest- Arab-American novels.

Memory could be considered as a safe zone or escape when the characters, in the novels, feel alienation, rejection, and discrimination in a harsh mainstream environment. Food and storytelling often reactivate their memory. By cooking Arab food or telling stories, the characters make a journey to the past in their quest for identity. Arab-American novels usually address such issues like *Arabian Jazz*, *Crescent* and *Once in a Promised Land*.

The impact of the heavy past, that deeply haunts the present of Arab-American characters, acts as a reminder of their identity and origin. Sometimes the past works as source of relief and consolation, and more precisely as a method of resistance, and sometimes as an incurable wound that awakes the feeling of loss and exile; this quest for identity is reflected through the journey to the memories of past. Chérif asserts that Diana Abu-Jaber has contributed “to the genre of the journey to the past, recurrently adopted in contemporary minority group writings and meant to restore that past for the assertion of a distinctive ethnic self” (207) and resisting both the marginalization in America and the confining construction of Arabness. Abu-Jaber uses memory and the journey to the past of her female fictional characters to devise a constructive way of dealing with the present (Chérif 207).

In *Arabian Jazz*, the main characters are an immigrant family from Jordan, Matussem, a Jazz musician, and his daughters Jemorah and Melvina. They are caught between two worlds. They live in a racist New York while feeling a deep longing to their home-country Jordan. The dilemma of identity is prominent throughout the novel, where the two characters (sisters) struggle to identify either with the Arab World or America. Both sides require certain conformity and relinquishing of the other side to be fully integrated within their values and meet their demands. The novel “confronts issues which occupy the works of many Arab American writers [...] such as [...] the fault lines between being Arab and American [...] discussing the racial

indeterminacy of the protagonist, Jemorah Ramoud, as she struggles to understand her own identity” (Hartman 153-4). This quest of identity and origin is based on the “female characters’ perception of their present as a result of the acknowledgement and articulation of that past” (Chérif 209). Both sisters are often driven by memories of the past through old Arab sayings and proverbs and the emersion in storytelling. In one of their conversations, Melvina reminds her sister of a famous Arab Badouin saying:

“Just stick with me,” Melvie said. “And remember the Bedouin saying: ‘In the book of life, every page has two sides (6)

This proverb has many connotations about the Arab-Americans who are caught between two worlds, and the “two sides’ are in fact multiple sets of two sides (two cultures, two families, and two languages) that culminate the term Arab American” (Naous 62). Besides, Matussem “uses his own cultural memory of childhood stories, legends, and fairy tales to translate Arabian culture to his daughters and American culture for himself. These stories become the only way he can understand the real America so that he can translate it for his children as they also engage in the process of defining who they are as Arabs in America” (Gómez-Vega 27-28). These stories, though not always understood or appreciated by his daughters who think that they contain no logic, “represent Matussem’s cultural memory, his only way of preserving what remains of his culture” (Gómez-Vega 30). The following extract Matussem explains the longing to the storytelling moments of his childhood by retelling the story of Za’ enti Da’ar” who refuses to leave her house on fire:

I am beauty of these house. I don’t care if it is on fire, you don’t get me out in the street.’ And so, because she Za’enti da’ar, she burned up completely. They could hear her screaming out in the streets, aieeehhaaa!” The girls would already have their hands over their ears. “There nothing left of her after that but a gaddamn golden doorknob.” (97)

Melvie usually wishes a different ending to the story but Matussem answers her by saying: "That is just how these old-time stories are: there is no reason" (98). In this story, there is a hint for the choices could be made by some people to stay in the motherland in spite of all the harsh conditions of life instead of daring to leave to the unknown.

In the second novel by Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, Sirine a daughter of an Iraqi father and an American mother is a hybrid character who shifts from one culture to another without having a clear identification with one culture or the other. Having a white skin adds to her complicated identification. Being white of Arab origin contradicts with the general spread perception of Arabs as colored people. Her perception of herself reflects the general feeling of Arab Americans quest for identity. When Sirine looks at herself in the mirror, "she performs a swift act of self-criticism reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of 'double-consciousness'" (Fadda-Conrey 197):

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. She thinks that she may have somehow inherited her mother on the outside and her father on the inside. (195)

Storytelling plays a role of taking the main character from her identity-dilemma to her roots and establishing a special effect on the narration that is typically Arabic and inspired by the *Arabian Nights*. This technique shows the richness of Arab culture and the writer's pride of the oral tradition legacy. It is at the same time an attempt to represent a different and special technique to defy the western tech-

niques of narration. Abu-Jaber has her own vision towards storytelling technique in her novels. She explains:

And that storytelling, along with food, was one of the great pillars of my own cultural education. Thus it was really important to me to try to bring some of that format into *Crescent*. I wanted the uncle to be telling Sirine, his niece, a story throughout the course of the book. I wanted the story to have the flavor of the oral narrative, and the surprises and the nuances of the spoken voice. And I wanted it to function as a kind of looking glass for the characters, that would in some way reflect upon the motifs of their reality in an indirect way. (Qtd in Field 221)

The novel is full of scenes of storytelling about Abdarrahman Slahadin the adventurer who tells his story in the typical *Arabian Nights* style and context:

Bear in mind, of course, that this is a form of love story in disguise. And who does love stories better than the Bedu anyway? Remember that Bedouin love poem in which the Bedouin is so in love that he says that his he-camel is in love with her she-camel? A classic.

The latest purchaser of Abdelrahman Salahdin—the Covered Man—moves with charm of birdsong; Abdelrahman watches his slight gestures as they walk together through the crowded souk and he becomes entangled in his own thoughts and snag-gled in his emotions. He suspects the man is a jinn of some sort, come to steal him from the water—which is exactly what his mother always told him would happen. He believes that this man has looped a bit of the thread-leash through a corner of his soul. (47)

The dilemma is well reflected, as well, through confusion and shock of the characters in Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) because of the unexpected events of 9/11. However, pride and escape are translated in the art of storytelling which imitates

the old ways of grandmother's style of oral tradition. Storytelling starts with the famous Arab introductory phrase while narrating, transliterated in English letters, "Kan ya ma kan fee qadeem az-zamaan", instead of the English version "once upon time." This technique again refers that the writer is showing a deliberate pride of the Arab cultural legacy as a subversive technique to challenge the language of the American mainstream:

kan

ya ma kan

fee qadeem az-zamaan

They say there was or there wasn't in olden times a story as old as life, as young this moment, a story that is yours and is mine. It happened during half a blink in the lifetime of the earth, a time when Man walked frayed tightrope on large, broken feet over an impossible pit of his greatest fears (vii)

Fatima, Mutassem's sister in *Arabian Jazz* shows the pride and longing to the Arab culture and way of life through food, while thinking: "Americans had the money, but Arabs, ah! They had the food, the culture, the etiquette, the ways of being and seeing and understanding how life was meant to be lived" (360). Moreover, Thanatoulos Bakery which Fatima visits, represents a contact zone where the Arabs mingle with other minorities and create a safe place and intimate space. The "original Thanatoulos family gets replaced by other families and races (Asian Indians, Albanians, and Lithuanians) so that the bakery feels like a gateway for immigrants" (Kaldas 182). This bakery shop also takes Fatima back to the cherished memories of the homeland:

Fatima was comfortable there; they lived and communicated in the same way her family in Jordan had, jostling, deliberately following each other around. They screamed at each other in a torrent of words that was their regular tone of voice [...] The

place allowed her to visit home without feeling the pain that it had held for her. (365)

Crescent, on the other hand, is devoted to food and cooking since the main character, is a cook at Nadia's Café. The language of food "serves as a way back to ethnic history, culture, and roots. Food forms a kind of contact zone" (Mercer and Storm 39). This contact zone which is usually Nadia's Café, is a place for meeting and making contact between different nationalities, ethnic groups, and Arabs and white people who gather around food as a key cultural element. Put simply, Nadia's café becomes the homeland substitute. In such context, the characters display their longing to the origin and home by reproducing similar milieu, ceremonies, and gatherings over food parties and at the restaurants. Nadia's Café represents a perfect corner for such cozy space as described in the novel: "The men spend their time arguing and being lonely, drinking tea and trying to talk to Um-Nadia, Mireille, and Sirine. Especially Sirine. They love her food—the flavors that remind them of their home (7). Besides, "the exile's foodways have the capacity to function as a cushion from displacement and homelessness, as comfort food that momentarily transports the exile to the ever-elusive home" (Gardaphé 7).

In the novel, Abu-Jaber associates Arab food with Mexican one as a reaction to "the racist culture that degrades ethnic food ways as filthy and unhealthy [...] An exploration of food ways in ethnic American literature reveals much about the way cultural superiority and inferiority have been measured by native and ethnic groups" (Gardaphé 06). Thus, the resistance of ethnic groups is embodied in showing pride in the Arab culture through food. Sirine's usage of a lot spices in her food makes her look more Mexican than American. This comparison is an indication of the common situation of both as Arab and Mexican groups. This metaphor indicates that both ethnic groups need to come closer and unite like the spices in Sirine's food, to face discrimination. Victor, a Mexican friend of the main character, describes such situation:

[Aziz] turns and smiles suavely at Sirine. "You've got the soul of a poet! Cooking and tasting is a metaphor for seeing. Your cooking reveals America to us non-Americans. And vice versa."

"Chef isn't an American cook," Victor Hernandez says. "Not like the way Americans do food-just dumping salt into the pot. All the flavors go in the same direction. Chef cooks like we do. In Mexico, we put cinnamon in with the chocolate and pepper in the sweetcakes, so things pull apart, you know, make it bigger?" (187).

The parallel between Mexican and Arab food results into a combination that leads at the end to a fragrant visibility and presence of both groups. It is more than showing pride in both cultures, but it is an attempt to single out the richness of the multicultural elements in the American society that act as positive contributors by different ethnic groups. Fadda-Conrey concludes that *Crescent*:

...creates a physical and psychological ethnic borderland in which different ethnic communities coexist and communicate. The basis of such acts of interethnic bridging, however, encourages a search for commonality that is anti-essentialist, since it is engaged in an informed understanding of the inherent differences within and between ethnic communities. Only through such strategies can the ethnic borderland transcend exclusionary limitations and become a transformative site extending beyond what Castillo describes as "the refused other" (Fadda-Corey 203).

Food and memory are quite interrelated in the question of identity quest; food takes characters back to memorable souvenirs such as childhood and happy family meetings which in turn revive the nostalgic past related to the motherland. Food "is clearly a link among generations of immigrants and exiles; those who cook and write about

food are ‘culture-tenders’ and at the same time teach people outside the cultural community about that community’s values, rituals, beliefs” (Waxman 363).

The protagonist, as a cook, tried many kinds of world food but at the end she switched to the early dishes brought by her father from his homeland. It seems an indication of the return of the Arab-Americans to their Arab roots and culture. In one way or another, it remains Sirine’s favorite if not the best culture and a source of pride; Arab food remains the best, for her, after trying other cuisines:

Sirine learned how to cook professionally working as a line cook and then a sous chef in the kitchens of French, Italian, and “Californian” restaurants. But when she moved to Nadia’s Café, she went through her parents’ old recipes and began cooking the favorite—but almost forgotten—dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents’ tiny kitchen and her earliest memories. (9)

The food Sirine cooks, is a substitute and duplication of a cherished home. It is the only link between Sirine and the world of her father that she has never seen; Iraq. She wants to identify with Arab cuisine as a link to the past, to the lost country: to be an Arab. In spite of being American by birth, she succeeded in mastering the cooking of Middle Eastern recipes with the help of memories of childhood. Her mother has perfectly learnt the Middle Eastern cuisine from her Arab husband:

Sirine learned about food from her parents. Even through her mother was American, her father always said his wife thought about food like an Arab. Sirine’s mother strained the salted yogurt through cheesecloth to make creamy Labneh, 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. (39-40)

Through food, the main character expresses her identity. The kitchen is where “she attempts to clarify her origins and forge her identity” (Mercer and Storm 41-2). Sirine explains this link with her origin by saying “I think food should taste like where it came from. I mean good food especially. You can sort of trace it back. You know, so the best butter tastes a little like pastures and flowers, that sort of stuff. Things show their origins” (59). The following extract displays her vivid memories, taking her back to the precious moments in the kitchen with her mother preparing food her father adores:

Sirine’s earliest memory was of sitting on a phone book on a kitchen chair, the sour-tart smell of picked 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.

The smell of the food cooking always brought her father into the kitchen. It was a magic spell that could conjure him from the next room, the basement, the garage. No matter where he was, he would appear, smiling and hungry. (40)

The memorable instants have deeply affected and polished her taste and talent towards Arab recipes and acted as a guidance, inspiration, momentary solace, and escape in times of identity crisis. Her father, as well, has always been attracted to the Arab recipes as a lasting flavor reminding him of his past and home.

Once in a Promised Land, also, reflects the food effect on characters by taking them far away from the present to taste and regret the past during the harsh moments of the present. The main character Salwa while tasting fennel seeds, she felt a sudden awakening that reminded her of her Arab husband and her Arab identity when she went far away in betraying her husband with the white American, Jake:

“Here, have some of these.” Jake held out a small plastic container with tiny seeds coated in pink and white and yellow.

“This is shumur! Sorry. I don’t know how you say that in English.”

“Is that what they are? I found them at the Arabic grocery store. It says ‘candy-coated fennel.’”

“I love these. Actually, I’ve only had them like this in Indian restaurants, but we use shumur, fennel, in some foods, and the flavor is so distinct that one bite and I taste them.” The crack of fennel in her mouth brought back desserts eaten only during Ramadan, brought back home in one tiny burst and then another, fireworks in her mouth that took away her breath. (208-9)

Salwa’s husband, Jassim, also remembers the taste of the past through food when he vividly remembers the lunch he ate at his uncle’s farm: “The wrinkle unfolded at lunch, over lamb that had been roasted with garlic in the outdoor stove. For years to come Jassim could taste it, the garlic having left a pleasing taste in the recesses of his mouth and, later, in his years of being away, a taste of home” (39). This memory came as an escape from a moment of turmoil just after the 9/11 events:

Jassim slid into the water at the end of lane #2, the tension of the past two weeks detaching itself in clumps, the wreckage of four planes cluttering the space around him, ash filling his lungs...As he swam steadily, Jassim’s thoughts tiptoed away from this picture and down a dusty path leading to his youth, to an early summer afternoon spent with his uncle Abu Jalal. (39)

Both Salwa and Jassim turned to their origin through food memories as a reaction to the unbearable moments in their new home America that provides an uneasy environment. So, the couple found a

comfortable escape through travelling through food flavor to take them home temporarily.

Writers as Abu-Jaber and Halaby “skillfully depict this struggle of their immigrant parents and themselves. Understanding such struggles helps American readers to move toward more tolerance of the immigrant who does not desire total assimilation into American culture” (Waxman 370). Through food and memorable moments of the past, the characters in *Arabian Jazz*, *Crescent*, and *Once in a Promised Land*, found an instant refuge and a window through which they breathe and taste the Arab culture. However, the question of identity quest remains debatable and unresolved despite the various strategies of escape and disguise.

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