

Food as a Means of Defining One's Identity and Culture in Selected Works of Arab-American Women Writers

by

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Abstract:

This research is an attempt to emphasize the connection between food, identity and culture in Arab-American women's writings. Many of the poems and short stories scattered throughout this research describe the ways in which the tastes and thoughts of certain foods arouse nostalgic feelings of cultural roots and thus approve the imminent usefulness and benefits of food as a means of defining the Arab identity and culture in the American melting pot.

Food-centered understanding is part of the social and the political comprehension of cultures. This understanding encourages personal engagement among people of different cultures. It is a brand of multiculturalism that Ghassan Hage believes it to offer merely "more diversity in the restaurants of the neighborhood" as says (Hage, 18). It seems that it is difficult to find and present a genuine multicultural voice due to the "conflict between social expectations and understandings of multiculturalism and the poet's own experiences, values, and positions" (Petrescu and MacFarlane,4).

Presenting food as a means of cultural representation has motivated debate within the Arab-American literary scene. Some writers believe that writing about food will not be understood as Arab symbols proper since Arab food has already melted in the mainstream America to a degree that foods such as *hummus*, *falafel*, and *tabouleh* have become part of the American kitchen. Barbara Nimri Aziz in "Beyond Baklava and Grape Leaves," emphasizes that food is the major way that Arab-Americans have related to America (Aziz, 2007).

On the other hand, some Arab-American writers believe that food as symbols can well present Arab culture and correct misconceptions about it. Two important books discuss this point: Gregory Orfalea's *Grape leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* and Joanna Kadi's *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*. D. Hassan and Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman in the introduction to the *MELUS* special issue on Arab-American Literature refer to these two texts saying that "[T]he reference to food can be seen as a trope of accommodation, as these anthologies seek to make accessible an Arab culture that is generally approached in an adversarial manner in the US" (Hasan, 8).

Food metaphors, vivid descriptions of native culture dishes and even cooking recipes decorate the Arab-American literary scene. Food is incorporated in the titles of several anthologies, such as, Diana Abu-Jaber's (b.1960) *The Language of Baklava* (2005) is a food memoir in which the writer weaves together narrative and recipes. The presentation of food, thus, is a major theme of cultural literature. Based on all of that, food is connected with memory, nostalgia, home, experience, identity and culture.

Joanna Kadi, in her personal essay "Five Steps to Creating Culture," indirectly expresses her worry about the loss of cultural heritage:

[T]here is a big, big difference between my grandmother and I. The knowledge is inside her; the recipe she needs has been handed down, one generation to the next. She is secure in the knowledge of what to do. I am not. I am foraging for a recipe, a tradition. . . . I am floundering, looking for recipes that let people know the place from which we came and the place where we are now . . . I'm trying to create, I'm trying to sustain my family." (Kadi, 233).

Reading this quotation for the first time, one thinks that Kadi speaks about the difference between the two recipes; hers and her grandmother's, but a thorough reading indicates something more important: identity and survival. Thus, food is a means in culture (the Arab) that directs, secures the Arab-American. Joanna Kadi then believes that food is a pedestal in the cultural knowledge of her grandmother since it represents tradition, memory and home (Ibid.).

Middle eastern or Levantine food is a symbol of Arab culture and identity. Writers celebrate and embrace, the theme of food to define a deep-rooted Arab identity. This might be linked to the tragedies of the sad history of colonization and occupation that Arab suffered from. Food metaphors and allusions in Arab-American poetry and fiction defines a true Arab identity against its stereotypical forms. It also shows how is it to be an Arab in America.

Suheir Hammad's (b. 1973) *Zaatar Diva*, is a collection of poetry that uses food as an indicator of Arab-American identity. This collection derives its diction from both the Arab cooking traditions as well as the American street. "Bag of Zaatar," is the first poem in the collection in which the poet describes herself figuratively through the ingredients in a brown paper bag.

She uses images that shed light on her own personal life and her Arab identity: "velvet / slippers for a china / doll" (ll.115-117).The

majority of this second category of images is foods, simply listed by name: “sumac,”(1.8) “sesame,”(1.18) “sweet oils,”(1.28) and “honey”(1.29). The Arab food mentioned lack detail and personality in contrast to her thus consequently, it demonstrates belonging to an Arab culture and community. Though the poet identifies herself as an Arab, she does not deny that she has become part of the American framework. The difference between the two cultures makes it necessary to identify one's self (1.19).

Multiculturalism influences the references to food in Hammad's short story *Drops of This Story* (1996),

I tell you I was raised around the delicious stinks of the ghetto. Fried plantains and smoked reefers, my mother's stuffed eggplant and the neighbor's pork ribs. Our apartment building was always swaying with the smells of the East, the Caribbean, and the South (p.6). Hammad's conflicting identity can be sensed in her desire to get rid of difference in food habits and eat the same American things as other children. But on the other hand, she does not want others to interfere in the traditional preparation of Arab food and cannot stand other people who like "her" food. This episode clearly demonstrates the unstable feeling Hammad possesses concerning her Arab background as she refers simultaneously to the can of Pepsi she had to drink to force her food down her throat after witnessing the conversation of the white girls. In other words, Hammad establishes a food boundary from the inside Arab community by commenting on the attitude of the American girls with respect to Arab food. On the one hand, she wants to be seen as an insider by the American society, but on the other hand, she wants to keep the Americans outside her community. Furthermore, the Americanization of Hammad manifests itself in an obscure way on several occasions and is only once recognized as such by Hammad herself when she narrates about how she disliked Ramadan just because she could not join the other children in lunch and eat candy:

The worst part was when they would serve chicken patties in the cafeteria, and I'd have to watch all the other kids, whose appetites were already spoiled from too many Skittles and Charleston Chews, chew on my favorite food. What I'd eat at home later, my mother's food, which I knew took hours to prepare, was never as appreciated as that nasty patty would have been. (16)

Americanization of Suheir manifests itself in some references to food. An example is when she was ill and was afraid of the needle and cried. Her mother tried to stop her cries by promising her to buy cheese doodles on her way home: a typical American snack that she really liked.

Another, more clear example is to be found when Hammad describes how her grandfather raised chickens in the Middle East to kill and eat them.

My grandpa would yell at me when I wouldn't eat his chickens. I was used to Perdue¹³ (Brand of poultry products), not these sorry, straggly birds that just a few days ago I saw running around the roof. He'd give me one of his daughter's dirty looks and call me a spoiled American brat (41-42).

Thus allusions to food of both cultures Arab and American illustrate how her fluctuating her feelings are which reflect her multicultural identity. There is a sense of non-belonging for two reasons: American people consider her to be Arab because she eats *hummus*, *falafel* and fasts on Ramadan, while her own family members regard her as an American. She is unable to identify her identity.

Lisa Suhair Majaj (b. 1960) is another Arab-American poet who uses food references to assert her Arab identity. Similar to Hammad's "Bag of Zaatar", her poem "Claims" is about an Arab woman who is proud of her Arabness. The difference between the two poems is that Majaj's is more didactic and is political.

Orientalism and racism are attacked in "Claims." The first three parts of the poem dispel myths and misconceptions of the Arab world literature, "I am neither harem's promise / nor desire's fulfillment," Majaj writes, as a reaction to the archetypal image of Arab women in literature (ll.7-8). "I am not a shapeless peasant / trailing children like flies;" begins the second stanza, which contests the notion of Arab primitivism and female oppression.(ll.9-10). "I am not a camel jockey, sand nigger, terrorist" is a comment on the insults poured at Arab-Americans.(l.17). She deconstructs those misconceptions and offensive beliefs of an Arab that exist in popular American culture and media.

Having referred to those misconceptions in the first three stanzas, Majaj tries to correct them by presenting the truth. The language she uses is agrarian and is derived from the natural world: “I am the laboring farmwife / whose cracked hands claim this soil” (ll.29-30).

Then she shifts to present images of the foods that the land yields: “I am the wheat stalk, and I am / the olive” (ll.37-38). Despite the fact that there are other references to food, these two crops (wheat and olive) are vital. They locate the speaker in her culture and reflect her identity. Olives and wheat are fundamental parts of an Arabian meal. The olive tree has a particular significance as it stands to remind the Palestinians of how the Israelis destroy their olive farms. These farms are considered to be an archetypal symbol of Palestine. They stand for the lost land and roots that have been occupied. In “I am the lost one who flees and the lost one returning” she suggests a sense of alienation and homecoming (ll.33-34). Thus, food, beside other images, helps Majaj to define her identity.

Mohja Kahf (b.1967) consciously differentiates between the types of Arabs she represents in her short story “The Spiced Chicken Queen of Mickaweaquah, Iowa.” Kahf uses food to both separate and draw together both cultures: Arab and American. Though the story is majorly about powerful versus offended and weak women, it is also about what it means to be Arab. Food is one of the markers of this identity in the story. The two major characters in the story are : Dr. Rana Rashid is an Arab-American nuclear scientist, who volunteers to help poor women and Mzayyan is the offended Arab-American woman.

Food, in this story is used as a means of ironic and comical commentary throughout the text. She also uses it to show the development of characters. An example is the way kahf introduces Dr. Rana Rashid and her husband, Emad:

They were not the huddled masses of the Greater Jersey City Mosque, reeking of incense and henna . . . and jabbing their fingers at the waiter and asking, ‘Is there pig in this dish? Is there pig in that dish?’ (Kahf, 137).

The two characters' identity is revealed through the choice of food as they are neither immigrants nor authentic Arabs: “Dr Rashid and her husband were the only Arabs, and they weren’t Arab. They were Arab-American. The hyphen said that they had been here a while” (Ibid.). it seems that Arab identity in America cannot save its authenticity unless it retains and reiterates its old world traditions including food.

In other parts of the story food is used to reveal not only Arab identity, but degrees of Arab identity. Using food depicts Joseph and Jocelyn Altonjay as less Arab than the Rashids. As Kahf describes them, the Altonjays are “so many generations removed from the slightest hint of Arabic accent or whiff of cardamom, that no one would notice if you dropped the ‘Arab’”(Ibid.). Cardamom stands out strongly to mark their identity.

Mzayyan is proved to be fully Arab. This is expressed through her delicious spiced chicken, which she brings into the shelter on an inviting platter. When Emad, Rana’s husband, tastes the chicken with “its juices dripping over heaps of steaming rice,” he is completely satisfied (Kahf, 144). Rana shows her irritation with his obvious enthusiasm for the food. She furiously says: “You want me to give up nuclear physics and cook for you?” (Ibid). Her words imply a woman cannot be good at everything at the same time. Rana indirectly expresses her fear of her loss of cultural heritage- symbolized in cooking Arab dishes. It seems that she has lost the ability to connect with her roots.

It is through her feminist attitudes that the writer defines what a woman should be. She challenges the stereotypical idea that Arab women are victims. She emphasizes the idea that domesticity is not a kind of submissive attitude. Food and cooking at the end of the story turns to be a source of power for Mzayyan. Food knowledge is used by Kahf to define the characters. The cultural identity might be lost if not guarded. Thus, cooking asserts Arabness.

Some other Arab-American writers use the theme of food to resist a controlling American culture. In Diana Abu-Jaber's food memoir presented in fiction, *The Language of Baklava*, recipes and descriptions of various food are considered to be a bold comment on the obsession of the American culture with diets and body shape. In her memoir, Abu-Jaber mentions how some of American girls were on diets who say "I first learn about this trend from my friend Kimberly, who is already so narrow and featureless that her skinny jeans barely cling to her hips." (Abu-Jaber, 160). It is clear that Abu-Jaber rejects American food standards and the tide of junk food and food behavior (including diets). She believes that she will not be impressed by that behavior or even her friends' quick loss of weight.

In “Immigrant Kid Friends,” Abu-Jaber reverberates her viewpoint (Ibid., 161). They know how important is food for understanding their and other cultures. They do not have fears as those of many American women such as those of weight gain and loss. As a result they enjoy eating food. As Abu-Jaber says, “Most of us have parents from countries where a certain lushness is considered alluring in a woman. We’ve grown up in

houses redolent with the foods of other places. We cook experimentally at one another's houses . . ." (Ibid., 161).

The way Abu-Jaber measures dieting is a kind of resistance. She refuses to change her food habits only to fit a dress size. This rejection of unhealthy food habits is a rejection of American standards of beauty and its image of woman. She and her "immigrant kid friends" realizes that the correct image of women is that in which they are not afraid if they eat much or they look fat.

In the same way, Suhair Hammad discards the American model of womanhood in which the woman should be calorie-conscious and slim. "Mama Sweet Baklava", is a poem in which Hammad compares a woman to this Arabian sweet. This comparison is an opposite image to the American. The woman in the poem is "...baklava / back bone strong foundation,"(ll.4-5). "her center / pistachio walnut crushed / years of rough pounded heart"(ll.13-15). Fortitude of women is more important than dieting for Arab women. "mama" in this poem resists repression. Using the image of baklava metaphorically, the mother is served to children and guests as sign of generosity and love. She feeds and cares for her family: "cutting precise like arched / eyebrows and enough / for everyone."(ll.34-36). In addition to that, she (symbolised in baklava) is a means of cultural continuation, inheriting her recipes to her own children:

her recipe old and passed
down through word of
hand creating and sustaining
substantial delicious. (ll.37-40)

This heritage of cooking Arab food is "substantial" and is a means of survival in difficult times (ibid.).

Naomi Shihab Nye's (b. 1952) poem "Red Brocade" criticizes a culture in which people are busy thinking of themselves only not of others. This selfishness is criticized through presenting the opposite image of generosity and hospitality in Arab culture. Food is a central image. she begins the poem with the memory of old times in her native land

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him before asking who he is (ll.1-4)

Such a generous behavior is missed in America. This adds to the idea that Arabs are strangers and treated as thus. Food is served to the guest to make him feel safe and comfort. Being the host herself, Nye shows how she devotes herself to serve the guest "I was not busy when you came! / I was not preparing to be busy."(ll.17-18)

The nostalgic tone of the poem faints at the end of the poem:

I refuse to be claimed.
 Your plate is waiting.
 We will snip fresh mint
 into your tea. (11.22-25)

finishing the meal with a cup of tea enhances the hospitality of the generous host. Nye rejects indirectly the anonymity of the American culture in favor of the caring approach to life.

Arabic food is omnipresent in Elmaz Abinader's (b.1954) short story "Just Off Main Street". Food is a marker of identity in the story. Abinader shows how food comforts her during times of troubles. It is food that comforts her when she sense her difference at school. "The smell was hypnotic and mitigated the melancholy I carried home with my lessons to do that night" (3). In a nostalgic tone, she remembers how her mother cooks many Arabic dishes such as "triangles of spinach pies, cinnamon rolls, and fruit pies" (2). She also evokes how food gathers the family and the relatives from different towns. These families never forget their culture serving pure Arabic dishes: "*hummus*, chick bean dip, *baba ghanouj*, eggplant with sesame, stuffed grape leaves, *shish kebob*, *kibbee*, raw or fried lamb and bulgur wheat patties, a leg of lamb, a turkey stuffed with rice and raisins and platter after platter of side dishes. The famous Arabic bread sat skyscraper high on plates at either end"(3)

She keeps serving such dishes to her friends in college to prove and show her Arabic culture. Her loyalty to Arabi culture and tradition can be touched in Abinader's reference to Arab bread which she says is the only type of bread eaten in the house even if they eat hot dogs, "Other bread was rarely eaten in our house; even when we put hot dogs on the grill, they were dropped into a half of "cohbs," then covered with ketchup"(2). This mixture between a typical Arab food (bread) and a typical American one (hot dogs) is an indication of the amalgamation of both cultures to make a multicultural identity. Food traditions maintenance is a way to cope with the new culture. Donna R. Gabaccia in her book ,*We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, believes that Arab-Americans have less control on their lives, works, and language and "At least they could exercise control over their meals" (Gabaccia, 48).These meals also create a kind of compromise between the old and the new homes.

Thus, food lessen the feelings of loss and alienation in the new world, for example a plate of *fuul* brings to mind the memory of Cairo. This is the reason why the Lebanese bride, Siham, in Susan Muaddi Darraj's short story, "New World," is attracted to the Italian Market. This market is of importance to her since it reminds her of Jerusalem's Old City. Darraj uses Siham as a means to describe the market:

full of men yelling out the prices of vegetables and
 women peddling their crafts, their embroidered

pillowcases and blouses. They even targeted tourists with photo frames and wall hangings that said in embroidered English, ‘God Bless Our Home’ (Darraj, 18).

This market symbolizes a major force in the life of both Siham and her husband, a life that was full of difficulties in this new home. This market reminds her of her origin and root in her old world that she left.

Diana Abu-Jaber in *The Language of Baklava* similarly concentrates on kitchens when she writes about old and new homes and about how Arab-Americans reconstruct their old home in the new one. She mentions how her mother and father cook with nostalgic hearts. The mother struggles to have simmer ingredients as those of her home land. This makes her more eager to taste the food of home. She writes: “I feel that at this moment we all want pancakes more passionately than we’ve ever wanted anything.” (Abu-Jaber, 36).

Another character in Abu Jaber's fictional memoir is Bud. He cooks also to remember his old home, Jordan. These memories that sway between forgetting and remembering shows the tension between two cultures, Arab and American. This tension appears in the permanent attempt to keep the same original recipes with no change. Aunt Aya tells Abu-Jaber that Bud "thinks he cooks and eats Arabic food, but these walnuts weren't grown from Jordanian earth and this butter wasn't made from Jordanian lambs. He is eating the shadow of a memory" (Abu-Jaber, 190). It is true that eating old home food is a kind of keeping the old culture, but this does not mean that the new culture has no influence it stand out. This is a kind of unconscious forgetting: “People say food is a way to remember the past. Never mind about that. Food is a way to forget.”(Ibid., 189).

Memory again is the core of Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem, “My Father and the Fig Tree,” in her *Different Ways to Pray*. It is a personal poem on her own father, Aziz Shihab. It shows how her father, Shihab, has a profound longing to eat figs as those that grow in his country, Palestine. He has tried hard to plant and cultivate different foods but not one single fig tree.

“Plant one!” my mother said,
but my father never did.
He tended the garden half-heartedly, forgot to water,
let the okra get too big.” (ll. 25-30)

He never stops his attempts till he plants one fig tree in Dallas, Texas. His joy, when he watches the fig tree, stems from the fact that it symbolizes his old world. He describes the fruit “like ripe tokens, / emblems, assurance / of a world that was always his own.”(ll. 39-41). Instead of being a symbol

of home, the fig tree becomes home itself. Carol Bardenstein, in “Transmissions Interrupted: Reconfiguring Food Memory, and Gender in the Cookbook-Memoirs of Middle Eastern Exiles,” summarizes this in her saying that “The poem presents one solution to the exile fixated on fragmented metonyms of the lost homeland: if you can manage to get hold of a fragment, then even Dallas, Texas, can ‘become’ a home / a Palestine.” (Bardenstein, 366).

In addition to the theme of food as a symbol of one's identity and culture, food is also a means used to bridge the gap between different cultures. Nye's poem “Travelling Onion”, represents this theme. In their “Counter Narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's Crescent”, Lorraine Mercer and Linda Storm, explains this usage of food in Nye: “images of food and household tasks into sacred objects that signify larger themes of gratitude, cooperation and connection” (Mercer and Storm, 34).

Using food as a means of connecting cultures emerges from Nye's belief that food is an example of “[t]he material world that gives us a sense of gravity” (Layton, 60). “Travelling Onion” records the importance of onion throughout history in different cultures: from India, to Egypt, to Greece and Europe :

When I think how far the onion has travelled
just to enter my stew today, I could kneel and praise
all small forgotten miracles. (ll.1-3)

Nye believes that it is the onion not the meat in the stew that makes a difference and is the most important ingredient. She adds that “the translucence of onion, /now limps, now divided” that “for the sake of others, / disappear[s]” (ll.15-16, ll.18-19). This importance of onions implies the considerable role that the minority and the immigrants play in constructing the history of the United States; a fact that is ignored by racism and other issues. The onion enhances the comprehension of other's cultures; a matter that enriches cultural understanding:

Shihab Nye’s focus on food and its link to histories of
marginalized...people underscores the notion that our
connections to each other must go beyond the
boundaries of self and geographical space (Mercer and
Storm, 34).

Another poem for Nye that helps in connecting cultures is “Arabic Coffee.” The father in the poem serves the coffee to both men and women from the two cultures “it was an offering to all of them” (l.24). This is not a tradition in Arabic culture but adapted from the American “And the place

where men and women/ break off from one another/was not present in that room" (ll.10-12). This very act serves to connect the father's tradition and his new experience which creates a new and unique tradition as both cultures " will gather/in small white cups" (ll.4-5).

To conclude is to say that food plays an important role in defining identity and culture. It is used by Arab-American writers as a metaphor for tradition and as a representative of culture. Food imagery arouses nostalgia for a home that is lost. These writers focus on such imagery to enliven their identities and culture from being melt in the American melting pot. Keeping recipes means keeping one's identity and culture. In *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, Donna R. Gabaccia states the relation between culture, identity and food

Psychologists tell us that food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with the greatest reluctance. Humans cannot easily lose their accents when they learn new languages after the age of about twelve; similarly, the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort (Gabaccia, 7).

Arab-American women writers use food to communicate their cultural values. The continued existence of food means the survival of identity and culture. Food for them is a return to the old home and a kind of connection to the new one.

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الطعام كوسيلة لتعريف هوية وحضارة المرء في اعمال مختارة

لكاتبات عرب - اميريكيات

م. د شيرين شهاب حمد

جامعة واسط/ كلية التربية

الملخص:

يؤكد هذا البحث الارتباط بين الطعام والهوية والحضارة في كتابات ادبية لكاتبات اميريكيات من اصول عربية. تصف عدة اعمال ادبيه مختارة و متنوعة - بين شعر ونثر - الطرق التي يثير فيها الاشارة لأطعمة معينة مشاعر الحنين الى الوطن والجذور الثقافية للمرء العربي ومن هنا تتبع اهمية الطعام في تعريف هوية العربي وحضارته في المجتمع الاميركي الذي يصهر الثقافات.