

FOOD AND KITCHEN AS RECLAIMING OF WOMANHOOD IN DIANA ABU-JABER'S MEMOIRS

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Abstract

Food plays a central role in Arab-American women's writing because it bridges personal memory, cultural identity, and gendered experience. While previous studies have examined food as nostalgia or cultural preservation, fewer have explored how culinary practices and kitchen spaces function as feminist sites of agency and identity negotiation within the diasporic context. This Paper focuses on Diana Abu-Jaber's memoirs *The Language of Baklava* (2006) and *Life Without a Recipe* (2016) using the perspective of Food Studies, Arab-American Feminism and Diaspora Theory. The analysis aims to explore how food function as a narrative tool for Arab-American women to express identity, memory, and resistance within patriarchal and cross-cultural contexts. With Gaul's (2024) concept of food cultural and emotional symbol as main theory, this paper argues that Abu-Jaber transform the kitchen from domestic space into a site of empowerment and negotiation. This study employs qualitative content analysis to examine recurring food narratives, memories, and kitchen spaces in both memoirs, using close reading supported by theoretical categorization. The Result found that food in Abu-Jaber's memoir is not merely a cultural representation, but a feminist language that bridges Arab and American experiences. Through culinary memory, recipe, and everyday cooking, Abu-Jaber redefines female agency and articulates a hybrid Arab-American identity. The study conclude that Abu-Jaber's memoirs reflect a distinct form Arab-American feminism where food and the kitchen serve as mediums of self-expression, cultural preservation and resistance.

Keywords: Diana Abu-Jaber, food Studies, Arab-American feminism, diaspora, identity

INTRODUCTION

Food takes up a prominent position in cultural studies because it lies between biological needs and cultural constructs. Gaul explains that food has strong sentimental, emotional, and taste dimension, while also being universal because everyone need food to survive. Therefore, food can be used both to emphasize a sense of bond and construct social class and hierarchies. In literature, food related to works such as recipe books, popular texts, and literary works that raise the theme of food present detail of everyday life that are often not found in other genres. Thus, food can complement the reader's understanding with more subtle nuances (Gaul, 2024). On top of that the sensory memories attached to food can open the way of understanding certain cultural experiences and social backgrounds, even aspects that are not recorded in written texts. According to Gaul, thus makes food an important medium for seeing the connection between personal experience, identity, and culture.

Studies on food cannot be separated from issues of gender and identity, as kitchen has been historically associated with women. Gaul (2024) showed that cooking practice and domestic space are not only daily activities, but also full of social, emotional, and cultural meaning that are closely related to gender constructs. In the Arab-American context, Abdullah, Alsultany, and Naber (2011) highlight that although domestic spaces are often seen as symbol of subordination, they can also be arena of agency where Arab-American women negotiate identity, challenge patriarchal stereotypes, and build solidarity, according to Hall identity is not fixed but always 'in process' that shaped by diaspora's world.

One of Arab-American Writers whose voice stands for women experience in diaspora is Diana Abu-Jaber. In her memoir

The Language of Baklava (2005), Abu-Jaber presents Arab foods such as Hummus and Magloubeh as a symbol of memory and markers of identity for immigrant's families trying to support their homeland. Meanwhile, in *Life Without a Recipe* (2016), American baking traditions are used a metaphor for freedom, with the concept of 'living without recipe, symbolizing resistance to social rules that limit women voice. Both memoirs show how food as narrative medium for negotiating Arab American identity, which exists between two cultures and continues to shape new meanings in the context of diaspora.

Arab-American feminism provides the main frameworks for reading Abu-Jaber memoirs, as it highlights the experience of women at the intersection of gender, culture, diaspora, and global power structures. Abdullah, Alsultany, and Naber (2011) said that Arab American feminism appear as a response to the homogenization of western feminist discourse, which tends to unify the experience of women in different background in uniform manner, without considering specific social and political context. On the other hand, Arab-American feminism emphasizes the contextual experiences of Arab women who faced patriarchy, racism, islamophobia in their daily lives. Reading Abu-Jaber through this side reveals how a woman in diaspora uses food and domestic space not merely as cultural burden but as instrument for negotiating agency, constructing hybrid identities, and rejecting social norms that limits her role.

The concept of diaspora identity as explained by Hall (1990), shows that identity is not fixed or essential, but rather constantly in process of formation. Diaspora identity is fluid, born of cross-cultural interaction and constantly changing through representation and social practice. This

space is negotiable, where immigrants experience not only their origin but also new formula that layers from identities. The intersectional pressures faced by Arab-American women are further intensified by the racialization of religion, in which Islam is no longer treated as a belief system but is instead attached to cultural markers that function like biological traits, making Muslim identity read as a fixed racial category (d'Urso & Bonilla, 2023). In Abu Jaber's context, the experience between Arab and American cultures is reflected through food, which uses as a symbol of hybridity, Arab cuisine brings family memories and traditions, while American food practices open the way for expression of freedom. Thus, foods become an arena to negotiation of fluid and ever-changing identities, revealing the complexity of Arab American women's story in diaspora space. The study aims are to analyze how food in Abu-Jaber's memoir function as a narrative medium that not only represent but also to negotiate hybrid identity and resist patriarchal cage among Arab-American women. Therefore, this study seeks to address how does Diana Abu-Jaber represent food and the kitchen as spaces of resistance and self-expression in *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and *Life Without a Recipe* (2016) and How the intersecting frameworks of food studies, Arab-American feminism, and Diaspora Theory reveal the construction of hybrid female identity in Abu-Jaber's memoir.

Food uses not only for provide life but also as a symbol of social and emotional devices that connect human with collective and cultural background. This perspective of food studies put forward by Gaul (2024) who sees food not as biological needs but also as medium for identity formation and social construct. Food narrative in literary often capture affective and cultural details

that are often left out in other focus, especially because food is linked to sensory memories and women spaces. This point of view is important for reading Abu-Jaber's literature, where food not just as a complement to the plot but rather the center of a narrative that connect personal knowledge and the formation of Arab-American women identity.

Several studies reinforce this framework. Guebla and Maoui (2020) explain that diaspora culinary memoirs become a space of empowerment for women to rebuild their identities through cooking practices. Similarly, Abdillah (2022) shows that food in diaspora texts functions transnationally: preserving memories, strengthening identities, and resisting political erasure. Hamad (2016) highlights the role of food in shaping Arab-American identity through nostalgia, while Pazargadi (2021) views recipes as a form of feminist autoethnography that records memories and expresses female agency. Mansour (2022) asserts that diaspora can be an alternative space for women to gain freedom that is often restricted by the patriarchal system in their home countries. This view is relevant to Abu-Jaber's work, which describes the kitchen and cooking practices as an arena of negotiation between Arab and American cultures and as a symbol of women's freedom in the context of diaspora.

The intersectional experience of Arab-American women who face patriarchy, racism, and Islamophobia, unlike western feminism, where the purpose of movement to homogenize women's experience, Arab-American feminism bring specific social and cultural conditions and reexplained the domestic sphere as a space for agency as explained by Abdulhadi, Al-sultany, and Naber (2011). This framework is consistent with Djohar et al. (2023), who explain that women in conservative Arab

cultural contexts often experience restricted autonomy due to patriarchal expectations that pressure them to follow family traditions, illustrating how the domestic sphere becomes a site of negotiation and subtle resistance to gendered constraints. The kitchen no longer read as a symbol of women weakness but as a creative room for women to negotiate their identity and challenge patriarchal stereotype as argued with this framework.

The concept of diaspora hybrid identity that is not fixed stated by Hall (1990) is used and reinforce in this study. Hall argues that diaspora hybrid identity is not static but rather fluid and always in formation. Food function as a symbol of hybridity in this background, that serves Arab and American cultural experience. As explained by Moretti (1987) with the concept of Bildungsroman, this angle helps us to see the kitchen in Abu-Jaber's work as a space of negotiation and self-formation as a are proof that identity formation always lies between individual freedom and social demands.

Other supporting ideas to strengthen this analysis provide a broader context. Mocabil (2022) traces the historical roots of Arab feminism, while Bekkaoui (2024) highlights how Arab women writers must confront Orientalist interpretations in the reception of their work in the global sphere. This perspective helps to position Abu-Jaber as a diaspora writer who negotiates identity between two worlds, Arab and Western. Finally, Pucherová (2022) expands the discussion through a study of African women writers, showing that women's agency, identity, and cultural negotiation in the context of diaspora are transnational phenomena that connect the experiences of Arab-American women with the global feminist movement.

Previous studies on food and identity

in Arab-American women's literature (such as Guebla & Maoui, 2020; Hamad, 2016; and Pazargadi, 2021) have examined food as a marker of nostalgia and cultural preservation. However, these works tend to focus on the affective and cultural dimensions of food, while giving less attention to how the kitchen and culinary practices can serve as feminist sites of resistance and agency. Moreover, there is limited discussion on how food operates as a narrative strategy for negotiating hybrid identities within the diasporic and patriarchal context of Arab-American women. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how Diana Abu-Jaber transforms the kitchen from a domestic space into a symbolic arena of empowerment, resistance, and cultural negotiation through the intersection of food studies, Arab-American feminism, and diaspora theory.

METHOD

This research applies qualitative content analysis to examine how food, memory, and domestic space construct identity and agency in Diana Abu-Jaber's memoirs *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and *Life Without a Recipe* (2016). The method allows the researcher to analyze symbolic meaning through recurring textual elements such as food descriptions, family memories, recipes, and kitchen scenes (Mayring, 2014). As Creswell (2018) states, qualitative research aims to understand how meaning is formed through experience, making it suitable for literary texts grounded in personal narrative. The researcher functions as the main analytical instrument, selecting and interpreting the textual data from both memoirs through close reading (Rosida et al., 2022). Observation is used as a technique to name patterns, themes, and symbolic representations within the narrative (Bhat, 2019). Secondary sources, including scholarly works

on food studies, diaspora, and feminism, support the interpretation. Three theoretical frameworks guide the analysis. Food Studies (Gaul, 2024) is used to read food as a cultural and emotional symbol. Arab-American Feminism (Abdulhadi, Alsultany, & Naber, 2011) helps find how the kitchen and cooking become spaces of agency rather than limitation. Finally, Diaspora Theory (Hall, 1990) explains identity as hybrid, fluid, and continually negotiated. Together, these frameworks allow the research to reveal how food functions not only as representation, but as a narrative tool for expressing cultural identity, resistance, and belonging.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Language of Baklava (2005) and *Life Without a Recipe* (2016) serve food not only as a matter of physical needs, but it is also a cultural that keep and protect identity, memories, and form of resistance. Similar with Gaul's idea that says thinking of food can be seen as an outline of cultural memory a marker that stores emotional history, collective identities, and family experiences that are not memorized in formal history. Through culinary narratives, Abu-Jaber provides a space for women to rewrite their individual experiences while building relationships with their complex cultural roots.

In mainstream Western feminism, particularly liberal feminism, the kitchen is often understood as a restrictive domestic space because it ties women to housework that is considered repetitive and does not provide autonomy. However, Diana Abu-Jaber's memoir shows an unfamiliar perspective. Rather than being a prison, she interprets the kitchen as a space that brings together various identities and experiences that previously seemed contradictory, as explained by research that views the

kitchen in her work as an arena for meeting and negotiating identities (Mahfouf, 2024). For Abu-Jaber, cooking is not treated as an empty routine, but as a practice that preserves cultural memory, builds self-expression, and affirms a sense of belonging to a community (Barrebbah, 2020). This is also evident in the way she describes food as something that always points to a broader meaning, such as emotional and spiritual value and a sense of connection. Thus, the kitchen becomes a hybrid space that enables the process of identity formation, rather than a restrictive space, and even functions as a place of healing for fragmented diasporic experiences (Barrebbah, 2020).

Furthermore, Domestic spaces such as the kitchen are not merely symbols of women's attachment to patriarchal traditions but can also be spaces for agency and identity negotiation as state by the concept of Arab-American feminism put forward by Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber (2011). In Abu-Jaber's memoir, cooking and writing recipes not only mark family traditions, but also reflect women's freedom and creativity in the face of restrictive social values. This view is in line with Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of diasporic identity as hybrid and constantly 'becoming'. Abu-Jaber shows how the experience of living between two cultures Arab and American shapes an identity that is fluid, impermanent, but constantly evolving through memory, taste, and food narratives.

Food as Cultural Identity and Nostalgia

In *The Language of Baklava*, Diana Abu-Jaber presents food as a symbol of cultural memory that connects the past, identity, and a sense of loss in the context of diaspora. In one of the early scenes there is "*slides a whole side of lamb out of the refrigerator... and says, 'Here he is! Here's Marvin.'*" (*The*

Language of Baklava, 2005:14). This affectionately named piece of meat is not only a representation of culinary activity, but also an embodiment of the emotional connection between the body, culture, and memory. The act of naming food demonstrates an effort to keep a personal connection with Arab cultural roots that are beginning to fade in America.

The context, Abu-Jaber's kitchen becomes a kind of archive of memory where family identity is constructed through aromas, tastes, and cooking rituals this is in line with Gaul (2024) which says food functions as a cultural narrative that records affective history and collective experiences outside of official archives. Food becomes a means of reviving the past, while articulating an identity torn between East and West. When Abu-Jaber was a child and saw her father cutting meat while referring to it by human names, this action had symbolic meaning of an attempt to preserve a sense of 'Arabness' during an American culture that demanded assimilation.

Theoretically, this experience is in line with the concept of diaspora identity proposed by Stuart Hall (1990). Hall rejects the idea of an essential and static identity, viewing it instead as a constantly changing process of becoming through memory and representation. In this case, Abu-Jaber's culinary nostalgia is not merely a romanticisation of the past, but also a form of cultural negotiation, a way to mediate the tension between two different worlds. Through food, she creates a hybrid identity space of Arab in the kitchen, American outside the home. Thus, food in *The Language of Baklava* (2005) serves a dual purpose as a symbol of familiarity and emotional attachment to one's origins, and as a strategy for negotiating one's position in the diaspora. Nostalgia as Middle Eastern flavours not only mark a longing for the land of one's ances-

tors but also becomes a way to resemble an identity that has been rooted by migration and cultural differences. Through this memory engagement with food Abu-Jaber shows that culinary memory is not only a link to homeland but also a feminist act showing identity and discussing where to belong within the Arab-American diaspora.

In Abu-Jaber's memoir we can see when she writes, "*Memories give our lives their fullest shape, and eating together helps us to remember.*" (*The Language of Baklava*, 2005:11). The kitchen serves as a space where family memories and the history of the diaspora are stored, revived, and passed on. Cooking is not only a domestic chore, but a medium that holds cross-generational experiences and reconnects family members through shared memories. The metaphor that memories shape lives and that eating together helps to bring back memories affirms that kitchen activities function as cultural practices that maintain continuity of identity. Researchers point out that women play a prominent role as cultural archivists; through food, they preserve traditions, stories, and collective histories that might otherwise be lost if not passed on (Theopano in Bruce, 2020). Furthermore, the acts of cooking and sharing stories around food are understood as forms of agency because they create spaces for women to speak, remember, and negotiate their own identities (Bruce, 2020). This is in line with findings that the kitchen is often a place for the transmission of cultural values and memories, as seen when diaspora figures can reconnect with their family heritage through stories and culinary practices passed down by earlier generations (Djohar, 2021). Thus, the kitchen in Abu-Jaber's work is not merely a domestic space, but a living cultural archive and a space of cultural agency that strengthens family ties and diaspora identity.

Women Power and Resistance

Through Kitchen

In *Life Without a Recipe*, Abu-Jaber writes, “Never learn how to *sen*, cook, type, or iron.” *She bends over the board, passes the hissing iron back and forth, slave rowing a galley ship. “That’s how they get you.”* (*Life Without a Recipe*, 2016:12). And “*The worst thing you can do to your life. . . .*” *Gram closes her eyes, inhales cake as you might a bouquet. “The worst thing? Is to get married.”* (*Life Without a Recipe*, 2016:21)). A conflict of values arises when the character Grace who is Abu-Jaber grandmother appears as someone who represents the views of previous generations of American feminism, warning Diana not to get caught up in the role of ‘housewife,’ because she sees the domestic sphere as a symbol of female oppression. This attitude reflects the mainstream feminist view in America that women must completely free themselves from housework to be considered empowered. This perspective is in line with analyses showing that Arab-American women writers are often caught between two forces, patriarchy in their communities of origin and global feminist stereotypes associated with Western perspectives (Djohar, 2024). This view is reinforced by the Western attitude that often sees Arab and Muslim cultures as a single, unchanging entity, while the women within them are considered passive and bound by tradition (Djohar, 2025). However, Diana does not accept this view at face value. Although Grace warns her not to become a ‘housewife,’ Diana returns to the kitchen, not as a form of obedience, but as a space where she redefines her own life. The kitchen becomes a symbol that women’s identity and freedom do not have to follow Western feminist standards, which it is precisely through this domestic space that Diana finds the most authentic way to build her life.

We can see how Abduhadi, Alsulta-

ny, and Naber (2011) also reject the orientalist form that paint Arab women solely as victim of patriarchal culture. They offer an Arab-American feminist framework that sees diaspora women as active agents who negotiate power through cultural and domestic context. This framework see a kitchen with no longer a “Privat prison for women but a room where women can rewrite their position within a restrictive social system. Abu-Jaber uses the kitchen to shows that Arab-American women can challenge inherited gender norms, showing that control over ingredients, flavours, and recipes also means control over her own story.

Along with the act of cooking, this memoir can be read as a feminist performative practice a repetitive action that shows disrupt the boundaries between private and public space. Abu-Jaber deconstructing the structure of authority that figure out the right way to be a woman, wife or child with every mention about “cooks without recipe” or change the rule in a cookbook. This action mirror what Abduhadi, Alsultany, and Naber (2011) call situated agency, a form of freedom that grows from tradition, that against it entirely. The kitchen in Abu Jaber’s hands becomes a productive space form women to practice autonomy and creativity, that merely a place for preserving domestic norms. In this way, Abu-Jaber transform the domestic kitchen from a symbol of confinement into a narrative arena of Arab-American feminism, when women reclaim control over their stories and identities through the language of food.

Unlike the image of women who are resigned to domestic roles, Diana Abu-Jaber uses the kitchen as a space to make decisions, be creative, and reshape the direction of her life. We can see from the sentence, “*I couldn’t leave a recipe in peace; I*

had to be continually worrying it and playing with it." (*Life Without a Recipe*, 2016:17). She does not position herself as someone who simply follows household rules, but as an individual who has the freedom to decide how to cook, organise her space, and reinterpret traditions. This attitude is evident in her habit of never following recipes to the letter; she always feels the need to change, try again, and play with ingredients, which shows that cooking for her is an active and controlled act, not a passive obligation. This behaviour of changing recipes symbolises how she also manages her life by editing, adjusting, and rewriting her own identity. This perspective is in line with the views of experts who place culinary memoirs as a space for women to express agency and voice experiences that have been underestimated in patriarchal norms (Bower in Bruce, 2020). Furthermore, the practice of cooking is understood as an act with dual agency or the process of writing about food and the process of cooking are both forms of active action that are often undervalued when performed by women (Bruce, 2020). Thus, the kitchen in Abu-Jaber's memoir is not a space of restraint, but rather a space where she negotiates her own choices, boundaries, and freedom.

Metaphor of Freedom and creativity with Baking

In *The Language of Baklava* (2006) and *Life Without a Recipe* (2016), Abu-Jaber also writes, "I couldn't leave a recipe in peace; I had to be continually worrying it and playing with it." (*Life Without a Recipe*, 2016). And "The stories were often in some way about food, and the food always turned out to be about something much larger: grace, difference, faith, love." (*The Language of Baklava*, 2006:11). These lines show us the personal and symbolic relationship between women and the process of art, where recipe not only function as culinary guide

but also as social metaphors that classify women's lives. By "tinkering with recipe" Abu-Jaber refuse to send to the norms that inherited from patriarchal society about how women should live their live. The process of baking and creating new flavors becomes a form of gentle resistance against a system that limits women's autonomy.

The practice of writing recipe in the works of diaspora women as a from of feminist auto-ethnography, which is an attempt to write oneself and cultural history through the symbol of food has been interpret by Pazargadi (2021). From this we can conclude Abu-Jaber does not only cook for the household needs but also rewrites her identity as an Arab-American women in a domestic space that is often underestimated by both Western and Eastern cultures. Each culinary experiment marks a desire to negotiate personal freedom amid social pressures and traditional expectations. However, recipes become alternative text that record women's struggle to find their voice amid a symbolic system that often silence them.

As an Arab-American woman, Diana Abu-Jaber lives with an identity that is always in a hybrid position means, not entirely Arab, yet not entirely American either. Researchers explain that this kind of diaspora identity is formed through a mixture of migrant and Western elements, resulting in a new form of identity that exists between two worlds (Sherman in Aghazadeh, 2025). In the context of Abu-Jaber's memoir, the kitchen becomes an important space for reassembling these two sides of her identity. Through the activity of cooking, she makes food a cultural territory where various markers of identity meet, dialogue, and are negotiated (Aghazadeh, 2025). This is evident when she describes her life as an effort to 'combine various ingredients,' a metaphor that emphasizes

that the process of preparing food runs parallel to the process of understanding and unifying her identity. Thus, the kitchen functions as a space for reflection and self-assembly, a place where diasporic identity is not only confronted but also reshaped.

Abduhadi, Alsultany, and Naber (2011) express the act of not following the recipe can be understood as a creative strategy to reject social norm that a form of agency that in line with the concept of situated feminism. Abu-Jaber negotiate the tradition, she does not abandon the kitchen but refills it new meaning a space of experimentation, instead of rejecting entire tradition. Because of this the process of baking and writing recipe become a parallel form of creation such two different but complementary ways of constructing identity and freedom. Abu-Jaber act of breaking the rules of the recipe is metaphor of breaks the social expectations that stick on women, forming her broader narrative writing of using food as medium for feminist resistance and showing the definition of her own self.

Conflict Between Arab and American Food Traditions

In *The Language of Baklava*, Abu-Jaber writes, “I learn early: We are Arab at home and American in the streets.” (*The Language of Baklava*, 2006:13). This short but poignant sentence sums up the main dilemma of diaspora identity: living between two opposing worlds. Food is the most tangible space where this conflict is felt the family kitchen filled with the aromas of roasted meat and Middle Eastern spices on one side, and the outside world demanding practicality and assimilation on the other. Culinary moments like these do not merely illustrate differences in taste but reflect the psychological tension between preserving one’s heritage and adapting to the domi-

nant culture.

Stuart Hall (1990) explains that cultural identity in diaspora is not something fixed or pure, but rather a process that is ‘always in transit’ a production that is never complete, always in process. Within this framework, Abu-Jaber shows how Arab-American identity is formed through constant negotiation between ‘being’ (cultural roots) and ‘becoming’ (adapting to a new world). When she eats her father’s cooking at home, she absorbs warm, communal Arab values. But when she is outside the home, she learns to ‘become American’ hiding the smell of garlic and cardamom that clings to her clothes. The difference in food becomes a concrete metaphor for the fluid and never-ending boundaries of identity.

This conflict also holds deep emotional aspects: shame, alienation, and nostalgia. Abu-Jaber writes with the awareness that every Arabic dish her father cooked was not just about taste, but about belonging. However, ‘being Arab’ in America means constantly being on the threshold not fully accepted as an Eastern person, but also never fully American. Thus, food becomes a site of cultural negotiation a place where dual identities are negotiated through sensory experiences. Through this representation, Abu-Jaber not only depicts cultural clashes, but also shows the potential for reconciliation through taste and memory. Food no longer merely marks the ‘foreign’ or the ‘local’ but transforms into a new form of hybrid identity, an identity formed from fusion, not separation. Like Hall’s (1990) concept, Abu-Jaber shows that in diaspora, the wholeness of identity is born from fragmentation, from the ability to stand in two worlds at once without having to choose one over the other. This cultural tension reflects the central theme of Abu-Jaber’s memoirs on how food be-

comes a literary language for negotiating hybrid Arab-American identity within the postcolonial and diasporic experience.

Food as Feminist Transmission and Intergenerational Connection

In *Life Without a Recipe*, Abu-Jaber writes, “Every year between Halloween and Christmas, my grandmother Grace transforms her flat into a bakery... Baking can become a bigger conversation.” (*Life Without a Recipe*, 2016:12) This quote shows that baking is not just a family tradition, but a practice of intergenerational communication. Through cakes made with love, Grace passes on her values to her granddaughter, not through words, but through actions that carry symbolic meaning: perseverance, compassion, and the freedom to choose one’s own path. For Abu-Jaber, family recipes are not just a collection of ingredients and measurements, but a form of female knowledge passed down through taste and experience.

According to Gaul (2024), food functions as embodied cultural memory, memory that lives in the body and senses. In this context, the baking process becomes a form of archiving that is unique to women: a way to maintain cultural continuity during diaspora. While grand history is often written by men through documents and political narratives, Arab-American women preserve their history through kitchens and recipes. Every aroma of dough and sound of an oven opening is a sign that women’s memories are never lost, only transformed into meaningful daily practices.

Furthermore, Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber (2011) explain that Arab-American feminism emphasises matrilineal inheritance, a form of inheritance based on solidarity and women’s experiences. In Abu-Jaber’s memoir, the relationship between Grace, her mother, and herself forms a chain of feminist knowledge that is not

ideological, but practical and emotional. Grace teaches freedom through sugar and flour, and her mother teaches the balance between tradition and personal choice. This process shows that women’s agency is not always present in fierce resistance to the system, but in the way they preserve, change, and continue life through simple but meaningful actions. Through this intergenerational transmission of food and values, Abu-Jaber reaffirms the feminist continuity among Arab-American women, showing that domestic traditions can also serve as vehicles for empowerment and cultural survival.

CONCLUSION

Through a reading of *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and *Life Without a Recipe* (2016), it can be concluded that Diana Abu-Jaber uses food and the kitchen space as the main medium to discuss the identity, memory, and agency of Arab-American women. Both memoirs demonstrate that the kitchen serves not only as a traditional domestic space, but also as an arena of resistance and identity negotiation amid tensions between Arab and American cultures. Using the frameworks of food studies (Gaul, 2024), Arab-American feminism (Abdulhadi, Alsultany, & Naber, 2011), and diaspora theory (Hall, 1990), this study asserts that food in Abu-Jaber’s work is not merely a cultural symbol, but a narrative language that represents the hybrid identity journey of women in the diaspora. Through the practice of cooking and memories of recipes, Abu-Jaber asserts that women can find strength and freedom in a space that has long been considered limited by patriarchal constructs.

Furthermore, the kitchen in Abu-Jaber’s work becomes a metaphor for the process of becoming, or the formation of a constantly changing self, as explained by

Moretti (1987) and Hall (1990). In this context, food becomes a means of bridging the past and the present, the homeland and the new land, tradition, and modernity. Abu-Jaber shows that the diaspora experience opens new spaces for women to negotiate their identities and gain personal and cultural agency. The conclusion of this analysis affirms that Abu-Jaber's works represent a distinctive form of Arab-American feminism: a feminism that grows out of transnational experience, rooted in tradition but open to change. Through the language of cuisine, Abu-Jaber shows that the kitchen is no longer a symbol of limitation, but rather a space of resistance, creativity, and affirmation of Arab-American women's identities in an ever-changing world.

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