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Discussing Exile and Diaspora through Food: Diana Abu Jaber's Crescent.

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ABSTRACT

Food as a cultural trope that discussed in many scientific fields as anthropology, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and Literary criticism. In this view, food as trope that diasporic writers deploy to negotiate their existence and raise question about one self's identity and his displacement in the host land. Also, the use of the thematic representation of food let Arab Authors, Diana Abu Jaber includes, to discuss the political issue of otherness and self by representing this cultural trope. This paper aims to discuss the representation of food in diaspora and exile in linkage to identity within the writing of Arab-American author Diana Abu Jaber "Crescent". Moreover, how food is a marker that ease the existence of people in exile.

Keywords: Food; Cultural studies; Identity; Existence; Exile; Diaspora; self; Other; Crescent.

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1. Introduction

Food is the cornerstone of cultural studies that circuits and organizes human identities and the concepts of others. The foodways that every human consumes help affirm their diversity and social status. Food is the essence of our identity. Every human is constructed biologically, psychologically, and socially through the foodways, they choose to blend with as being in the host land. An individual finds himself forced to live in an exile situation that compels him to think differently. Thus, the exile or immigrants become'others'in the host-land, which assumes a new significance. Experiencing exile is a phase that composes and structures the exiled; Mahnaz Afkhami states, "through the disruption of the given and accepts, the exile experience brings into focus the sources on which the self is composed and structured."[1] From that standpoint, the application of Mahnaz epigram on ethnic food embodies a site of struggle where nationality is contested and destabilized, reinvented, remade, and re-mixed. Food aids

1 Mahnaz Afkhami, Women in Exile (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 43.

the diasporic communities and groups to trace the past through nostalgia, and memories of the migratory cooking memoirs facilitate the self-formation[2].

In addition, food resembles a medium through which minorities define, at the same time, issues and themes of inclusion in and exclusion from one community in which they live. Food plays a vital role in constructing immigrants' identities. For this reason, food gives strength and power to those minorities/exiles to re-create their past and nostalgic memories in their present and revive the totality of the old way of life.

2. Representing Exile and Diaspora:

The way migrants and exiles discuss their memories related to food permits them to evaluate their methods of writings. They are called, according to Sutton, the "nostalgia cookbook"[3] or, as Bardenstein, who named them "cookbook memories,"[4] which allocate memory instead of cooking as the primary reason. This kind of book explains how origin, loss, and nostalgia are conceived among immigrants.

Food is a powerful cultural marker. At home, food represents the taken-for-granted safety that provides ontological security. Moreover, food allows one to compose an imaginary bridge that keeps individuals connected with the memories of familiar faces, tastes, and smells left behind in the host-land. These features spotlight the essential role foodways plays in displaced communities of diaspora.

Many analyses deal with food and its relationship to exile or placelessness and the displacement concept that immigrants live in. Bardenstein concludes that in the beliefs of exiles without removal, food traditions would be transmitted, and identities are in action, authentic and questionable.[5] Thus, in diaspora and exile, food becomes an issue from which women conceive the feeling of loss of the homeland into a direct, original, and uncomplicated canal to an actual world in which men have not been engaged in cooking. In the same vein, Peter Scholliers determines that exile means pining for home, whereas diaspora suggests networks among compatriots. Exile may be mean alone or solitary, but diaspora is always collective.[6]

Moreover, removal in the sense of estrangement or alienation from home does not solely reserve for immigrants. In this way, Abu Jaber questions the representation of identity concerning exile to show how identities are fractured with spaces, namely here, the host land and exile. Internal exile represents a robust discourse related to alienating forces of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion. To make it clear, food in this sense links the old and the new lives in exiles, allowing the migrants to remain connected to the past. At the same time, they try to construct a language by which they can bargain their presence in the host country and ultimately choose to what degree they become part of their new arena, the host country.

The immigrants' practices in their everyday life, such as dress, language, manners, and food, represent differences and visibility. They can embody discrimination; in this way, the concept of home for people in exile is linked with the feeling of displacement or removal. Immigrants and exiles become redundant or unacceptable; however, they are unavailable in the case of food. Especially if they continue to eat foods that entail ethnic Otherness. For example, the smelly food Abu-Jaber and her friends take to the school signifies the family's identity as ethnic Otherness. She states that:

> our lunch bags open, and the scent of garlic, fried onions, and tomato sauces roll out – pierogi, pelmeni, Doro wat, teriyaki, kielbasas, stir-fries. Borsch, I become famous for my lunch bags full of garlic-roasted lamb and stuffed grape leaves (LB 160).

Rituals of the home have more than one meaning, in this respect, foodways' expression entails confirmation of culture and celebration of collaborative relationships rather than just one opportunity to live. Whether the exile is voluntary or by force, the exiled person has a shared

2 Ibid.
3 David Sutton, Remembrance of Repast, 67.
4 Carol Bardenstein, "Beyond Universal Baklava: 160.
5 Ibid., 162.
6 Peter Scholliers, "Meals, Food Narratives, and Sentiments of Belonging in Past and Present," in Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe since the Middle Age, Ed. Peter Scholliers (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001), 8.

sense of loss and displacement, often repeated through food. Margaret Morse, quoted in Khoo, states, "food is often considered a lived metaphor of culture itself"[7] . In the long run, food in exile symbolizes the exilic struggle that seems to adapt to life in the host country. In this way, "home for the exile means a transitional place, since the immigrants cannot reclaim original home, nor can its presence/absence be entirely banished in the remade home."[8] Correspondingly, food significance does not affect the physical and cultural aspects.

Discussing food in exile embodies a bridge between the old culture and the new life. The foodways permit the immigrant to be linked to the old home. This connection is endured through the language of sharing, preparing, and consuming food spoken by smells and tastes. It also studies how food is a language that a person negotiates their position of being in the received land, permitting exiles to choose between knowing their culture of origin and re-acting themselves in the new culture. Rushdie states that:

> The sense of who we are has been related to roots, the idea of coming from a place, inhabiting a kind of language that you share, and the type of social convention within which you live. And then what happens to the migrant is that they lose all three […] and they find themselves in a new place, a new language. And so, they have to reinvent a sense of self. [9]

Rushdie's use of "language" could similarly mean "food." Thus, food articulates with different meanings and significations; food has its own language of preparation. In this regard, Roland Barthes indicates that food is an "alimentary language.", Barthes describes this as subject to the rules regulating any signifying system. He breaks down the abstract non-specific "food" and its performative aspect.[10]

Reading food as an abstract Saussurean langue, Cuddon indicates that food is "the system or totality of language shared by the 'collective consciousness." [11] Thus, food includes grammar rules, including "rules of exclusion," which function by expression of taboos like Kosher or Halal laws that "signifying oppositions" like savory and sweet or raw and cooked.[12] The rule of "associations" acts at the dish level or menu level, which means the "rituals of use" that act as "alimentary rhetoric." [13]

In terms of food, this means that exiles must choose between living in their customary langue and coexisting with the different ethnicities in the new land. In this sense, Andrew Buckser affirms that although food is culturally designed, individuals must consume food physically; therefore, eating always implies a person's choice as to who is connected; to which group they belong.[14] In the first phase, the exiles can affirm their attachment to the langue, the food of their cultural community to signify their Otherness in the host culture, and resist assimilation. In the second phase, they can accept the langue of the host culture to communicate within their host land and reduce their affiliation. Exiles' food preferences are different from those of their host country. Therefore, they cannot quickly be invited to dinner where these laws or tastes are not followed, excluding them from much social interaction within the host culture.

The nostalgia felt by the exile for the one true home appeals to the desire for the persistence of identity and belonging. This fantasy arises from the human condition of incompleteness. It is what we can sense from the state of Hanif or Han in Abu-Jaber's novel Crescent as an intellectual exilic character in the host land. Edward Said states that the academic looks like a "shipwrecked person who learns how to live in a certain sense with land, not on it." [15] In short, the migrant, when he lives in the new land, is being open to strangeness; it means that one should not try to dominate and naturalize. Han in Crescent lives with the homeland so that he is always carrying home in his memory and not losing hope. Thus, Hanif experiences "the fate [of exile] not as a derivation and

7 Olivia Khoo, "Folding Chinese Boxes: Asian Exoticism in Australia," Journal of Australian Studies 24 (2000): 204.
8 Amal Talaat Abdelrazek, Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings (New York: Cambria Press (2007), 176.
9 Salman Rushdie, "In Bourne" in Voices: Writers and Politics, ed. Bill Udi Eichler and David Herman (Nottingham & New York: Spokesman, 1987): 63.
10 Ronald Barthes, Elements of Semiology, Trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hall and Wang, 1968), 14
11 John Anthony Cuddon, the Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory (WestSussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 449.
12 Claudia Roden, The Book of Jewish Food (New York: Knopf, 1996), 35.
13 Ibid., 36.
14 Andrew Buckser, "Keeping Kosher: Eating and Social Identity among the Jews of Denmark," Ethnology 38; no.3: 192.
15 Edward Said, The Edward Said Reader (London: Granta Books, 2001), 378.

something to bewailed, but as a sort of freedom" (C. 360).

Diana Abu-Jaber elaborates the quote of Edward Said through the following epigram "I miss…? The Kitchen? my Home? […] I miss my mother's coffee/ I miss my mother's bread" (C. 57). Abu-Jaber states that when he helps Sirine in preparing the Baklava, Hanif "misses everything, absolutely everything" (C. 59). In this sense, Sirine's food preparation from the old home metaphorically stands as a link to the ancient culture for Han, who is in the host-land as an exilic person. In this manner, Han's attending Um Nadia's café and preparing Baklava with Sirine and the way he uses food resemble his survival in the host culture and a bridge beyond exile.

The most dramatic cases of food are when it is a bridge to the past which occurs in extreme conditions where food is an issue of resistance and support against the most dangerous enemies, which is the "selves." Namely, the exilic person had to fight the self-confusion, homesickness, identity loss, etc. The suffering is mainly related to the psychological state of immigrants, according to David Sutton. He writes that exiles, in inconvenient situations, use food's memories to "defy dehumanization and to dream of the past and the future."[16]

3. Representing the Self in the Diaspora

Abu-Jaber's memoir The Language of Baklava, based on food preparation and how food stands as a marker of one identity and characteristic, indicates resistance and self-representation in a diasporic arena and exile. In this sense, she states that:

> making shish kabob always reminds the brothers of who they used to be – the heat, the spices, the preparation for cooking, and the rituals for eating were all the same as when they were children, eating at their parents' big table. But trying to kill the lamb showed them: they were no longer who they thought they were. (LB. 19)

To consume the appropriate "cultural emblems" both inside and outside of the homes, Allan Beardsworth and Theresa Keil note that ethnic foods "can retain their potency among a minority for several generations after their separation from the parent culture."[17] Similarly, Richard Raspa explains that cooking and eating ethnic foods "allow the performers to react their ethnic identity, maintain traditional boundaries and nurture familiar closeness."[18] Thus, the use of the same rituals and methods of preparing revive the memories of migrants in the host-land, and they feel as if they are home again. Susan Kalick discusses how immigrants maintain a connection to their mother culture by cooking and eating ethnic foods connected with the past and help relieve the shock of entering a new culture; thus, many struggles to cling to them despite the pressures for change. For example, "immigrants' open restaurants so that it is more convenient to get certain foods that take a long time to prepare; they open stores so that ingredients are available; they grow otherwise unavailable vegetables in their back yards." [19]

Food writer Claudia Roden states, "dishes are important because they are a link with the past, a celebration of roots, a symbol of continuity. They are a part of an immigrant culture which survives the longest." [20] On the contrary, the immigrants and exilic people reduce their longings and nostalgic sense for their homeland by consuming and preparing native food; they eat their shadowed memory. As Abu-Jaber affirms in her memoir:

> Dad says that everyone invented baklava. It occurs to me now to wonder what that means. Aunt Aya rolls her eyes. "Your father? He is the worst. He thinks he cooks and eats Arab food, but these walnuts were not grown from Jordanian earth, and this butter was not from Jordanian lambs. He is eating the shadow of a memory. He cooks to remember, but the more he eats, the more he forgets. (LB. 189-90)

Equally important, the way Aunt Aya explains how the father prepares food is the beginning of understanding the difficult life of a food preparer. The exilic food prepared and consumed by immigrants never has the same taste as the home. In this vein, Sirine affirms that she does not "know about that, but I think food should taste like where it came from. I mean good food especially" (C.

16 David Sutton, Remembrance of Repast, 67.
17 Allan Beardsworth and Theresa Keil, Sociology on the Menu, 53.
18 Richard Raspa, "Exotic Foods among Italian-Americans in Mormon Utah", 193
19 Susan Kalick, Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity, 37.
20 Claudia Roden, The Book of Jewish Food, 11.

20). From this quote, food prepared and consumed in the exile and alien area does not have the same taste and aroma as the food home. Thus, the exiles and immigrants eat just a carbon copy of their memory; they eat not to remember. However, they eat to forget about their situation in exile and the situation of Otherness they feel.

The exilic and diaspora writings focus on food, whether it is an actual thing or a concept of remembering. Food embodies the home and safety in the host-land. Hamid Naficy states, "a smell, a sound, or a taste suddenly and directly sutures one to the former house or home and cherished memories of childhood"[21] Furthermore, Amy Kaminsky highlights "all the familiar lands marks of home – food smells […] the sounds of a familiar language […] the kinetic knowledge of a place that is your home, where you can feel safe."[22] From this perspective, the home is what an exile can remember, more specifically, the kitchen. Han nods "the kitchen […] I liked the kitchen. The table. Stove […] (C. 18). In other terms, the image that entails the snail that holds its house on its back vividly captures the state of existence of the exile; in this sense, the home is on the road, as adaptable as imaginary. The ho me as the secured place is related to the hearth, the pillar of the house that entails the mother, who is the source of food, safety, and comfort. It illustrates that the exile and diaspora for the people preparing and consuming native food entail the home without hearth or the fire without fuel. This metaphor is reinforced by the concept of nurturing that applies to an exile's native land as "motherland." Thus, the motherland entails "a warm, cornucopian breast from which people selectively seek nourishment."[23] Moreover, Kaminsky indicates that the "mother" in Lacanian theory is "figured as the place," and "rootedness" comprises the "integration of self and place." [24]

In the end, food in Crescent stands as a fuel used by Sirine to make the characters recall the wealthiest details of their tales when they are in Um-Nadia's café. In addition, eating Arab food is a reminder of memories. In exile:

> only 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 homes- but they also love to watch Sirine (C. 16).

Sirine in diaspora and exile symbolizes the "hearth" and the fuel for people. Also, Sirine could resemble the mothers of those who are being in exile and diaspora. She senses unfamiliarity with objects and places. The process of repressing her memories began in her childhood. Sirine as a chef in the café re-feels and senses a symbolic exile:

> What Han says reminds her of a sense that she's had - about both knowing and not knowing something. She often has the feeling of missing something and not quite understanding what it is that she's missing. (C. 62)

Sirine's act of cooking was an act of existence for her and Han. She exists and was in the past, unfamiliar became familiar, and food was Sirine's embodiment of patience and more of reality.

She was also born with an abiding sense of patience and the ability to live-ability to live deeply and purely in her own body, to stop thinking, to work, and to exist inside the most straightforward actions, "like chopping an onion or stirring a pot" (C. 19). Edward Said points out that the individual who lives in exile exists in a median state, neither entirely at one with the new sitting nor fully disencumbered of the old. He besets with half involvements, half detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, a clever imitation or secretly ostracized by someone else.[25]

Food becomes a cross-cultural item; it connects between the homeland culture and hosts land culture. In addition, food reacts to develop the identity of the exile in what Said named the "median state" of removal. In this meaning, the speech or parole of the exile's language is an issue for adaptation to the new culture. Instead, langue is the "grammar" of language; parole is its performative aspect; to put it differently, parole surrounds recipes and cooking methods that entail an endless alternative by both groups and individuals. Thus, menus symbolize the langue

21 Hamid Naficy, Home, Exile, Home land: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place (New York: Routledge, 2013). 6.
22 Amy Kaminsky, After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.
23 Ruth de Souza, "A mirage of Stability and Continuity: How Goan Women Maintain Culture Despite Inter-Generational Exile," Unpublished paper presented at Poetics and Exile Conference (University of Auckland, 17-19 July, 2003).
24 Kaminsky, After Exile, 59.
25 Edward Said, Reflections on Exile and Other, 36.

and performance. The parole of food permits the exiles' play' in preparing and producing dishes related to their presence in the host culture that imposes it.

Food is a language, performance, or 'text' of food; the recipes stand to be like any other language. But, according to Derrida, all languages can deconstruct. Thus, the language of food also can be deconstructed. From this, Cuddon explains that there is "something quite different from what it appears to be saying and… may be read as carrying a plurality of significance… at variance with… a single stable meaning."[26] To complicate this image, the immigrants who operate restaurants in the host land, as Um-Nadia did, do so to prepare food that speaks and entails authenticity and longing to the homeland. However, the way immigrants eat food is a deconstruction to tell a story full of the hardship of life and adaptation.

Another way to present food, namely ethnic food, Diana Abu-Jaber links Arab and Mexican food as a stimulus against "the racist culture that degrades ethnic foodways as filthy and unhealthful. […]; An exploration of foodways in ethnic American literature reveals much about the way culture native and ethnic groups have measured superiority and inferiority."[27] As a result, the immigrants' resistance is demonstrated through showing their pride in the Arab culture, especially food. Sirine's food resembles Mexican rather than Arab because of her usage of many spices. This image indicates the common situation of both ethnic groups, Arab and Mexican. in other words, this symbolic image implies that ethnic groups should tie together, in the same manner as Sirine's use of spices in food, to fight against discrimination. Through the character Victor, Diana Abu-Jaber describes such a 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 as 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? (C. 187)

In this way, the combination of Mexican and Arab food leads to visibility of the two ethnic groups and their presence within the American community. Moreover, it shows the pride in both cultures. Still, it is an attempt to single out the richness of the multicultural elements in the American society that act as positive contributions by different ethnic groups. Thus, Fedda-Conrey illustrates that:

> creates a physical and psychological ethnic borderland in which other ethnic communities coexist and communicate. However, the basis of such acts of interethnic bridging encourages a search for anti-essentialist commonality since it engages 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'.[28]

4. Conclusion

Food in exile is not merely a connector between Sirine and Han and their identity. On the contrary, food proves one's existence, self-realization, and self-actualization; in Sirine's eyes, "cooking becomes agency: when all else failed in her life when she was confronted with uncertainty, confusion, and identity conflict, she goes to the kitchen and cooks herself and history into existence."[29] Besides, food "is 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"[30] Food preparation in the diasporic arena and exile can demonstrate and focus on the context of food preparation; it can entail self-empowerment and signify ethnicity or "American-ness" in the American mainstream.

26 Cuddon, the Penguin Dictionary, 210.
27 Gardaphé, "Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures", 6.
28 Fedda-Conrey, "Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland," 203.
29 Lorrine Mercer and Linda Strom, "Counter Narratives: Cooking up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu Jaber's Crescent", MELUS (2007): 40.
30 Barbara Frey Waxman, "Food Memoirs: What They are, Why They are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom," College English 70 (March 2008): 363.

What discussed above suggests the various relationships between food and identities; food and ethnicity, food and diaspora, and food and exile. The chapter depicts issues related to eating and tries to exemplify the notion that eating is a means of becoming. Thus, there is an undeniable relationship between who we are (ancestry identity) and what and how we eat (ethnic food we bring). The following chapter will highlight the metaphor of food and storytelling.

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