

Cultural Semiotics of Food in the Memoir of Diana Abu Jaber

- Rama Hirawat

Abstract: Among the growing clan of post-colonial literatures is Arab-American literature and one of its prominent voices is that of Diana Abu Jaber. She has authored *Arabian Jazz*, *Crescent*, *Origin* and *The Language of Baklava*. In her works she confronts the issues related to Arab-American immigrants like racism, feminism, hybridity, and violence. Her memoir *The Language of Baklava* is rooted in her experiences of growing up as an immigrant's daughter for whom her culture is laid bare through food. The title is metaphorical as it speaks for the memoir content. The paper is an attempt to explore the connection between food and memories, and the semiotics of food in context of the immigrant experience.

Keywords: Arab-american literature, food memoir, Diana Abu Jaber .

*Memories give our lives their fullest shape, and eating together helps us to remember.*¹ This line from *The Language of Baklava* by Diana Abu Jaber describes the relation between food and memories. Food memoir is the conflation of memories and food in a narrative. It is the hybrid genre of literature. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theories* states:

The term hybrid genre is used to designate works of art which transgress genre boundaries by combining characteristics traits and elements of diverse literary and non-literary genres. (227)

It further says that the aim of hybrid genre is to distance itself from the single discoursed point of view of the conventional narratives. This genre presents thoughts in a layered structure. Food memoir is a hybrid of culinary writing and memoir. Culinary writing pertains to food, mainly recipes and may also include topics about nutrition and origin of food. Memoir, on the other hand is a brief account of the writer's life, his or her response to events, individuals or relationships that are important to him or her. Professor Maureen Murdock says:

A memoir is the writer's particular memory of an actual, not imagined, incident that occurred in her life. It is her angle of perception on what happened, her emotional truth of the event. (Murdock, Writing)

Memoir is a retrospective scrutiny of life, but it is different from an autobiography, in terms of chronology of events, and focus on personal growth. Memoir can deal with just one aspect, one relationship or it can go about as a search for a particular dilemma or question circumscribing the memoirist's life. As a quest, memoir has similarities with myth. Prof. Maureen says that both myth and memoir deals with the same set of questions like, who am I? Where am I going? And what is my tribe? She further says that "Memoirists are our contemporary myth makers helping us find meaning in our lives as they reveal the wisdom they have

mined from their memories". As myth reconciles human beings to the adversities of life by rooting them to pristine times, similarly by writing memoir the writer traces personal myths, gains insight into life and enriches the collective understanding of human life. Both forms rely heavily on memories. Myths are constructed by collective memory and memoir by personal memories. This reliance on memory poses question on reliability of memory. Memory is the ability of the mind to remember and is not considered very reliable as it is prone to fluctuations caused by the outer factors. But it is the only thing that humans can rely on, for emotional sustenance. In a memoir the emphasis is on the emotional reaction rather than factual description of an event. Though it is a non-fictional genre, the writer's selection of memories and his shaping them according to his perception, adds an ingredient of fiction in it. In this context one may ask why does a person needs to recall memories in narrative form when there are other media to get a glimpse of personal history like photographs, souvenirs, letter and videos? To borrow from *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theories*:

The complexity of a human life, with its many transformations brought about by the sheer passage of time, can become more palatable to our understanding if it is put in a narrative format. (231)

This desire to understand life and self is one of the main urge behind memoir-writing. A reflection on life gives an individual, an understanding of self, of present and an emotional power to deal with life and its incongruities in future. The perplexities of present when seen in context of past experiences are easier to comprehend. Memoir is an invocation of memory in order to construct a coherent identity. The need to articulate personal history in order to realize one's identity is very much pronounced in post-colonial writers and among those who were considered margins- women, dalits, and Queer. As somehow their personal history is embedded in communal history and there is a constant search for self which was till now largely defined by others. Among the growing clan of post-colonial literatures, is Arab-American literature and one of its prominent voices is that of Diana Abu Jaber. She has authored *Arabian Jazz*, *Crescent*, *Origin* and *The Language of Baklava*. In her works she confronts the issues related to Arab-American immigrants like racism, feminism, hybridity, and violence. Her memoir *The Language of Baklava* is rooted in her experiences of growing up as an immigrant's daughter for whom her culture is laid bare through food. The title is metaphorical as it speaks for the memoir content. It's about language of food in two ways, first, the language of food in context of cuisine and secondly, in socio-cultural frame. As such the recipes are seen from the personal and cultural perspectives, according to the incidents related to them. This memoir is Diana's journey through the archives of lived experiences in search for the roots of her hyphenated identity. She has opted for a food memoir, a hybrid genre, perhaps to complement her own hybrid identity. The spatial restrictions and fluidity of a hybrid identity may be best summarized in a hybrid narrative. Food memoir interlinks memories with food. It's a projection of past with reference to food and cooking. Author Brinda Mehta says that cooking is

a ritualized act which embodies sensory aspects of memory. Cooking affects all the senses and gets imprinted in our subconscious in such a way that even a slight scent of the specific food triggers all the moments attached to it. In the memoir food has been used, by the writer, as an organizing principle and it helped her focus, on clear pivotal moments to hinge the story on. She has used food not just as a device of emplotment to give coherent structure to her memories but has also tried to explore in a subtle way different connotations of food, and the semiotics of food in reference to her father, her relationship with him, her gendered self, her duality, and hardships faced as an immigrant's daughter. She has applied semiotics of food to enhance the richness of the text in, *The Language of Baklava*. The culinary semiology provides the strategy to understand author herself and her father Bud. Food in her memoir is semiotic of - identity, culture, memory, love, woman's power, bonding, survival and life itself.²

As it is a memoir the narrator is also the protagonist. It is told in present tense, though the time frame is of past but the homodiegetic narrator speaks as if it is happening now. In such narratives as in any autobiographical form, there are two voices, which are called *actants* by Spitzer. He differentiates between *erzählendes Ich* (the narrating I) and *erzähltes Ich* (the narrated I)³. In the memoir they are distanced by a difference in age and experience that gives the former a patronizing superiority over the latter, which is evident in some scenes, for example in the introductory scene Diana as a writer and an evolved version of the person who is being narrated, pokes fun at her own childish behavior:

But at the moment, as the Baron stands to leave, I realize I'm not quite done with him yet. I grab him by the back of his black rayon cape and announce on national television, "I'm hungry!" (4)

Indeed, viewing the past from the vantage point of present makes it possible for the writer to evaluate situations and enhance an understanding. In memoirs, the objectivity of the narrator is questionable, as it is the writer's perception of self in past and everything is presented through his views, readers see what the narrator shows. Though a memoir in itself is a form of flashback, yet Diana narrates it in present tense. The use of present tense in narrative is perhaps to negate the difference between the narrated self and the narrating self. This difference decreases as the memories move closer to the present of the narrator. *The Language of Baklava* goes about linearly, as Diana recalls her life since childhood, beginning from the time when she was six. Till sixth chapter, each chapter takes one year of her life. After that as she grew up, her conflicts and dilemmas about her identity increased and as such she has given more space to recall those critical years of her life. Memories are by and large interlinked, as our mind relates one thing with another. The reminiscences of food are always associative. Food and its rituals, by affecting all our senses, become emblematic not only of culture, but also of a person or relationship. In these terms food was very crucial in Diana's upbringing. It was the axis of Diana's relationship with her father. The earliest memories of her father cooking the Arabic food, with her slung over one arm, made the

memoirist correlate Arab food with her father. Her response to food corresponded to her relation with her father. The delicacies which, as a child, she loved and savored for their cultural associations got transformed into objectives of her hatred, as a result of her constant strife with her father, during her adolescence. She began to detest Arab food- a manifestation of the culture that was being imposed on her. When this struggle expanded, she was confounded by her duality, her being "Arab at home and American in streets" (pg.5). She couldn't comprehend her hyphenated self, her loyalties and her belongingness. This made her refute both Arab and American food as a symbol of respective cultures. Recalling that period of her life she ruminates that in form of food her body was rejecting "something more powerful than food" (pg.227). It was her refusal of the twin claims on her identity. Thus, her memories of rebellious adolescence, of invariable discord with her father, and of afflictions of dual cultures were coupled with food. Food changed its significance, its denotations with every stage of Diana's her life.

Food is specific to different geographical locations and cooking is culture specific, for that reason cooked food carries in it, both a sense of place and belonging, and a sense of culture and heritage. The physical offering of food, becomes a metaphor for being, mentally and emotionally fed with one's ethnicity and legacy. Author's father cooked and fed Arab food to his family, in an attempt to keep his culture alive in his daughters amidst threat of it being lost or shadowed. He was an Arab immigrant who cooked in memory of past, in apprehension of his future, and to feel rooted in present. For him food was the memory of home, a longing for past life that pulsed through his present. An anxious need to reclaim home's culture is evident not only in his cooking but also in the name given to his recipes like 'Nostalgic Chicken livers', and 'Lost Childhood Pita Bread'. On one hand food stands as a memory of old culture in the adopted land, while on the other it suggests the loss of that culture, because for the immigrant there is a change not just of location, but also a gradual change of mindset. In the memoir Diana writes the incident of shish kabob. The scent of shish kabob triggers childhood memories for her father and his brothers, but their failure at butchering the lamb, makes them realize that they are not who they were. This is best explained by Aunt Aya to the author, "he is eating the shadow of a memory. He cooks to remember. But the more he eats, the more he forgets." Though, author's father himself never realizes this. Another aspect of food which is reflected in the memoir is role reversal through the medium of food. Cooking is a tradition carried forward by women. They are considered to be cultural agents, who keep culture alive through various traditions. When a male shoulders the responsibility of imbibing culture into his progeny through food and cooking, there is a reversal of role and spaces through food. In the memoir Diana's father cooked Arab food and at the kitchen table he filled his daughters with family histories and childhood stories. His cooking signified his desperate need to assert himself at home, as outside posed a threat to his patriarchal power and his ideals. He made kitchen his zone; in an alien land he was comforted with a sense of belonging in the kitchen, as at least there he could reclaim his identity

and old world's culture. Thus here, kitchen, which is generally understood as a domain of woman, belonged to a man or let's say that the man belonged to the kitchen.

In the course of the narrative, Diana has shown two diverse feminist attitudes towards food. One is the popular belief that Cooking is a medium of women's oppression and victimization. It is a way to subjugate women to an inferior position, and to tie her down to domestic four walls. Contradictory to this view is the faith, that cooking is a means of empowerment. As author Arlene Voski Avakian says, "Cooking becomes a vehicle for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power" (pg.6). In the memoir, Diana's mother and grandma are ones who believe that cooking is a "form of imprisonment" and as such they relied heavily on ready-to-eat food. Unlike them, Aunt Aya loved to cook. She believed that cooking gave woman authority and control over oneself and others. During cooking Arabic delicacies she gave Diana interesting "tutorials in womanliness", like "high heels are good, but don't forget how to run". From her, Diana learns that the language of food is peace. In an interview Diana stated that food by transcending national boundaries builds unity and thus touches our inherent humanity. Food is a medium of bonding. It has power to conjoin people. Shared meal induces a feeling of inclusion. It is perhaps in keeping with this belief that more than once in the course of the memoir author has penned memories of communal gatherings and cross-cultural friendships made over food, and preparation of food. Bonding within same ethnic circles is predictable, and food only strengthens them, like the shish kabob picnic. It was an occasion for the family to be together, share their longings and aspirations and also an effort to moderate, if little, the feeling of alienation in their adopted land. Food is also an effectual tool to build camaraderie across cultures. The author recollects how in Jordan her American mother struck a chord with their neighbors and maid Munira when she cooked pancakes –an American food. Analogous to this, in America Diana's father made friendship with her friends and their Italian neighbor, Mrs. Manarelli through the medium of Arabic food. This tells how food reduces barriers and becomes a 'connective bridge'. Here, via food sharing, immigrants of different nationalities comes together and gain mutual strength. A flip side to this inclusion is exclusion. Food can be used to create a feeling of difference. In this context Diana narrates two essential memories. She writes about her father's experience that he was served ham by her grandma to highlight their difference and as a way to demonstrate her rejection of him. Another incidence was the one when her family cooked in their front yard, shocking the American neighbors absolutely. Consequently, she was teased for being out of place. Food created a sense of difference which was scathing to her adolescent mind.

Throughout the book, memories are linked with the presence of food, except for once. The incidence of the captivated Sri Lankan maid in Jordan, at the author's uncle's home is marked by an absence of food i.e. hunger. Diana's aunt complains that the maid is always hungry. Her

hunger symbolizes not just lack of food, but is a hunger for her home, her baby, and for being treated like a human. Diana doesn't throw any personal perspective on this memory, and its connection with absence of food. Though the reader wishes, she had given more space to it. Apart from this, *The Language of Baklava* comes across as a successful food memoir. It does full justice to the hybridity of the genre, as the memories and the recipes complement each other, in a way that one seems incomplete without the other. They are closely knit to make one coherent pattern fitting the life-frame of the memoirist.

Endnotes:

1. In the introduction to the memoir.
2. Semiotics of food has been applied in Abu Jaber's novel *Crescent* also.
3. As explained by Genette, in page 252.

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Sea of Life

- Lata Dubey

The sea of life is noisy today
 To drive away the ruggedness from its way
 So that you may sail through
 Amidst pebbles stones and sandy paths
 To fight back the tide; high, wide and framing
 Forward with myriad hues of life;
 Of pleasure, of pain, of losses, of gain
 Of times long past that
 Have been spent in vain,
 To oblivate in the bylanes
 Of the memory main
 For spreading all around the
 Gems to make a chain
 Valuable, worth cherishing but venerable again.

