

The Dynamics of Hybridity in Diana Abu Jaber's *The Language of Baklava and Life Without a Recipe*

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: May 17, 2021
Accepted: June 15, 2021
Volume: 4
Issue: 6
DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2021.4.6.2

KEYWORDS

Hybridity, Mixed identity, Mixed culture, Diana Abu Jaber, The Language of Baklava, Life without a Recipe

ABSTRACT

This study explores the portrayal of hybridity in Diana Abu Jaber's two memoirs, *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and *Life without a Recipe* (2016). Many researchers have dealt with the cultural issues that are portrayed in Diana Abu Jaber's novels, especially *Crescent* (2003) and *Arabian Jazz* (1993). This study is distinguished from previous studies by focusing on the cultural aspects that are portrayed in Abu Jaber's two memoirs. The main concern of this study is to shed light on Diana Abu Jaber's contributions to the exploration of the concept of hybridity in her memoirs from many aspects, such as the hybridity of identity and culture. Furthermore, it highlights the basic differences between the memoirs in portraying the influences of the mixed culture and identity in Diana Abu Jaber's life. On the other hand, this study tries to explore the influences of mixed parentage of the writer on her writing of the two novels and her depiction of hybridity in identity, culture and language. Her American mother and her Jordanian father are the main motivation for Abu Jaber to focus on the mixture between Arab- American cultures in her writing.

1. Introduction

It is known that each country throughout the world has its own identity, language and culture that distinguish its people from others. Nevertheless, some people in many countries have combined two different identities, languages and cultures, in their practical life. These varieties of people represent the term hybridity which means a mixture between two cultures, such as Eastern and Western cultures. It is worth mentioning that these people of mixed cultures are different from Eastern people and from Western people.

Diana Abu Jaber is an Arab- American writer who combines Eastern and Western cultures in her life. Therefore, she shows a marked interest in the issues of identity and culture throughout her novels. She also portrays the theme of hybridity in most of her works. In her novel *Crescent* (2003), she tells the story of an expatriate woman and in her first novel *Arabian Jazz* (1993), she portrays the need for improvising Arab identity in the United States. Alison Hallett (2005) and Amy Driscoll (2016) state that Diana Abu Jaber tries to illuminate the Eastern culture in her novels by showing the importance of food and Arabic meals to displaced people.

This study sheds light on Abu Jaber's portrayal of the theme of hybridity through her narration of different stories of non-belonging people who search for their roots and identities in her two memoirs, *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and *Life Without a Recipe* (2016). This examines Diana Abu Jaber's contributions to the exploration of the concept of hybridity in these two memoirs from many aspects, specifically, identity, culture and language.

2. Literature Review

Various studies have examined the cultural issues that Diana Abu Jaber and other Arab- American writers have discussed in their writing. Jopi Nyman in his study *Cultural Contact and the Contemporary Culinary Memoir: Home, Memory and Identity in Madhur*

Jaffrey and Diana Abu Jaber (2009) draws attention to different ethnic and post-colonial writers who use food in their memoirs in the making of subjectivity. The writer tries to analyze two modern memoirs which are written in different representational strategies: *The Language of Baklava* by the Arab- American writer Diana Abu Jaber and *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a childhood in India* by Madhur Jaffrey. He mentions that these two novels portray the transculturation² between the Eastern and Western people by using different activities such as food, memory and home. The essay argues that this transculturation constructs new forms of multicultural identities.

Carol Bardenstein's article "Beyond Univocal Baklava: Deconstructing Food-as-Ethnicity and the Ideology of Homeland in Diana Abu Jaber's *The Language of Baklava*" (2010) focuses on Abu Jaber's representation of the complex configuration of homeland relations in her cookbook memoir, *The Language of Baklava*. The writer argues that this work of Diana Abu Jaber is distinguished from other works of Arab- American authors in portraying the term hybridity. The article focuses on the differences between this memoir and the other cookbook memoirs by explaining that this memoir presents a more complex portrayal of the hyphenated living and interaction of Arab- Americans in the United States.

The thesis *The Politics of Food and Memory in Diana Abu Jaber's Crescent*, which is written by Milton Júnior Ferreira de Sena, explores the portrayal of food and memory in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003). It also explores the representation of multicultural people in this novel, which discusses different ethnic, cultural and political issues. The paper discusses Abu Jaber's depiction of food as a method to commemorate her Jordanian father's culture. The researcher argues that the food in the restaurant that chef Sirine works at serves as a convergence of cultures that attracts different people of Arab and non- Arab origins to Nadia's Café. De Sena's study also examines the importance of photographs and different objects such as a scarf to the expatriate people and how such objects constitute a site of memory. As is the case in many studies under review, the researcher uses one of Abu Jaber's old writings to analyze different cultural issues.

What distinguishes this current study from previous studies is its attempt to expand the analysis of the cultural aspects in Diana Abu Jaber's memoirs *The Language of Baklava* and *Life Without a Recipe*, by highlighting the concept of hybridity. Furthermore, it explores her representation of mixed identities through the memoirs. It also compares Diana Abu Jaber's portrayals of the theme of hybridity in each of them.

3. Methodology

The methodology that will be used in this study is descriptive and analytical. The researcher seeks to analyze the various cultural issues in Abu Jaber's two memoirs, *The Language of Baklava* and *Life Without a Recipe*. The focal point of this study will be Abu Jaber's portrayal of hybridity in these two memoirs. The researcher will also use post- colonial theory, especially the theoretical methods of Homi Bhabha, to analyze the memoirs. On the other hand, comparative and textual approaches will be applied to clarify the development of the concept of hybridity from Abu Jaber's point of view during the period of writing the two memoirs.

4. Results and Discussion

The Jordanian-American writer Diana Abu Jaber tries throughout her two memoirs *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and *Life Without a Recipe* (2016), to accentuate her hybrid identity and culture by presenting her lifestyle that differs from the lifestyle of both Easterners and Westerners. In other words, Diana tries to portray her own new hybrid world, the world that Homi Bhabha (1994) refers to as the "Third Space of enunciation" (p. 37), which has a different structure from the two original worlds, West and East. Actually, from an external perspective, it can be believed that Diana is an American woman because she looks like them, and it can be believed that she is an Arab woman because of her last name Abu Jaber. While, from an internal perspective, Diana forms a new category with multiple cultures and identities.

The hybrid culture is a term created by the critic Homi Bhabha as an attempt to overcome the other cultural terms such as cultural diversity and multiculturalism. Referring to the meaning of Bhabha's book entitled *The Location of Culture* (1994), it can be understood that he tries to prove that there is a location that contains people whose culture is hybrid. Furthermore, in his attempt to study the cultural effects of the Western colonization of the East, Homi Bhabha sees that the cultural mixing between the colonized and the colonizer helps develop the differences of their cultures, leading to creating the hybrid culture that takes its new entity. He means that they are in a state of interdependence and mutual construction.

In her memoir *Life Without a Recipe*, Diana portrays the interdependence by describing her relationship with the American babysitter Janet. The moment Janet starts taking care of Diana's daughter, Diana can spend more time writing. She believes that Janet helps her to practice her life as usual before she becomes a mother. Diana knows that Janet faces difficult conditions. She

1- Transculturation: a process of merging two different cultures which leads to acquire new cultural principles and lose or change the original ones.

tries to help her by preparing food and sending it home with her. One day Janet asks Diana to prepare dishes that Diana does not know, which helps her to learn something new. Besides, since Diana likes cooking, Janet provides her with a new cookbook saying that she can learn more. Therefore, Abu Jaber (2016) states that: "Who is the served and who is the servant? What I learn and relearn is they're inseparable, and frequently, quietly, they change places. The roles are unfixed, despite class, education, gender, despite anything. The one requires the other" (p. 115).

Diana's memoirs *The Language of Baklava* and *Life Without a Recipe* demonstrate aspects of post-colonial theory, one of the theories that deals with studying the influences of Western colonialism and the analysis of critical speeches that justify their colonization of the East. The two memoirs clarify the implications of Diana's growth within a mixed world of cultures, identities and languages. Besides, they discuss many cultural issues that Diana faces during her life, either in Jordan or America. The memoirs show Diana's attempt to search for her own identity and culture

Moreover, the two memoirs clarify Diana's attitude toward both cultures, Eastern and Western. Throughout her writings, Diana Abu Jaber seeks to satisfy both, Western and Eastern readers. For this reason, she always tries to be realistic and honest in her writings. Like many Eastern- Western writers, she tries to present the right portrayal of the Eastern culture and identity, which contradicts the portrayal that is presented by Western texts and speeches. Actually, the years she has spent in Jordan and her father's culture helps her present a true image of Easterners and their culture. It can be noticed that most of her works highlight the features of Eastern identity and culture for her Western readers, which confirms Diana's pride in her Arab identity and origin. On the other hand, Diana and her father's conflicts that Diana talks about through her memoirs because of his rules do not prove the West's point of view that the Easterners are ignorant and uncivilized. The community where Diana lives is the influencing factor of her behavior; during her life in America, she always wants to behave and live like American girls, while during her life in Jordan, she behaves, plays, eats and becomes like Jordanian children. So, her only distinguishing features are the colour of her skin and eyes.

The Language of Baklava and *Life Without a Recipe* represents the memories that epitomize the conflicts and contradictions that Diana Abu Jaber faces during her life either during her childhood or adulthood, which are the reason for creating her hybrid identity and culture. In fact, all the conflicts in Diana's life are fundamentally based on the difference in cultures and identities for her family. She lives with her Jordanian father and her American mother, whose origin is Irish-German. In *The Language of Baklava* the conflicts are portrayed as a fight between Diana and her father about the beliefs and customs that Diana has to face during her childhood while in *Life Without a Recipe* the conflicts are portrayed as a fight between her father and her grandmother about Diana's work, marriage and motherhood. Sometimes the conflict between Bud and Grace is represented by the type of food and the way of cooking that Diana has to learn. Furthermore, in the two memoirs, Diana also tries to present the right Eastern identity by portraying Bud and his brothers' culture and how their culture affects her life. She clarifies that Arabs have different tendencies, interests and dreams. For example, she explains that her father settles in America because of his wife while some of her uncles settle there because of work and education. In addition, Diana talks about her Jordanian aunt who never married. Although she is an Easterner woman, Aya always seeks to work and to be independent.

Food is considered one of the main representatives of identity and culture for Arabs living in America. In other words, it is considered as an image of Eastern culture. Arabs use it as a means to express their nostalgia for their home. It is believed that food is a language associated with a particular community; it helps to identify this community, so Diana Abu Jaber uses it in her works to portray Eastern culture. The most types of Eastern food that Diana focuses on are stuffed grape leaves, shish kabob, baklava and knafea, and the smells associated with the Middle East, such as bather, mint and jasmine. Food plays an important role in forming Diana's identity and culture. During her childhood, Diana is distinguished from her classmate at the school because of her lunch box that is full of the food that her father prepares. Besides, when she becomes an adult, she is distinguished by her way of cooking; she usually uses flavors and spices like her father. On the other hand, food is sometimes used to portray Western culture; Diana mentions her mother's attempt to prepare pancake for breakfast when they are in Jordan. This attempt leads the Arab neighbours to change their point of view about the American food that is considered useless. Moreover, it can be noticed that throughout the two memoirs, Diana refers to Bud's tale about the dishes that Grace prepares in the first two meetings between her and Bud.

Through the means of food, Diana emphasizes numerous Eastern customs and traditions. She talks about the strong social relationship and the permanent meetings between her father and his brothers that continue during their life in America because these meetings remind them of family warmth. During their meetings, they express their nostalgia for home in different ways; they usually cook a traditional meal when they meet, such as shish kabob. They prepare it and the way they eat always remind them who they are and take them back to their childhood. Diana also talks about the hospitality of the Arabs. It can be noticed that Bud is presented as an Eastern person who has always honored his guests regardless of their religion and origin. In *The Language of Baklava*, he invites Sister John, a teacher where Diana studies, for dinner and he tells her a lot about his home,

especially, when he knows that she is interested in the Holy Land. Moreover, Diana mentions that Bud's main goal to establish a restaurant is to feed people regardless of the type of food they will offer. In *Life Without a Recipe*, Diana explains some situations that highlight the generosity of Bud; one of them is that when he invites his Doctor to eat the stuffed grape leaves he prepares.

It can be noticed that the social relationship takes root in Diana's personality. In *The Language of Baklava*, Diana explains that she grows up within an extended family. She gets used to spending most of her time having fun with her cousins, so when she moves to Jordan at about the age of seven, she does not face difficulty interacting with Jordanian children and does not recognize the differences between her and them. On the contrary, her Western friend Bennett, who has been forced to spend a short time in Jordan because of his father's job, does not adapt to living there. Bennett always refuses to behave like them. It is perhaps because he does not live as Diana lives amongst her cousins. In her memoir *Life Without a Recipe*, it can be noticed that though Diana always tries to settle in a house without her family, her relationship with her parents is still very strong; she takes care of her father during his illness. Besides, she spends most of her time with her parent; she clarifies that when she mentions that they help her to take care of her daughter.

Diana focuses on people who try to affect her personal life depending on their identity and culture. For example, she mentions her grandmother Anissa who is of Palestinian origin. Although Diana has never met her yet, Diana tries to explain how the Palestinian identity of her grandmother affects her life in different ways; she is one of the motivators for Diana to have a child because she gives birth to eight children. Diana notices her grandmother's love for her children through Bud who has learnt how to love his children from her. Diana (2016) states that: "You know that she loved her children because your father had learned to love so well. He is domineering, erratic, and volatile, but also affectionate, doting, outlandishly proud. She must have loved them enormously" (p. 102). Besides, Diana learns the way of preparing knafeh from her relatives who have inherited it from her grandmother Anissa. Actually, this dessert has a big influence on Diana's life. It helps her understand what the home is and balance between things to reach her goals.

In this way, Diana becomes conscious of balancing between what she has learnt both from her father's culture and her grandmother's culture. In other words, she tries to build a bridge in order to solve the conflicts that she faces because of the cultural difference of her family, such as the conflict of food which is one of the conflicts that Diana focuses on throughout her memoir *Life Without a Recipe*. It can be noticed that Diana spends her life in between food and dessert. She usually prefers to cook food in the way that her father does. At some period in her life, baking overcomes food because she believes that baking is a way to achieve happiness but, actually, it causes problems for Diana's health. At the end, she recognizes that she has to balance between them in order to be able to protect herself from disease and to achieve a sense of pleasure. In other words, Diana understands that when she balances between things in life, she can achieve what wants.

Diana's mother plays a basic role in influencing Diana's choices and decisions. In *The Language of Baklava*, Diana clarifies that her mother always provides her with stories and books to read. She also encourages her that she has to study and to enter university. It is worth mentioning that Diana learns from her mother that she can be a mother and work at the same time. Though Diana's mother is a teacher, she balances between her job and her family. In *Life Without a Recipe*, Diana explains that she lives in the world that her mother and her father create, so she recognizes that the real homeland is the place where her family is. Her father leaves Jordan and settles down in America because he wants to marry her mother. Besides, her mother does not mind living in Jordan when Bud wants that, she says :

Or perhaps after a few years of suburbia, she really is ready for the adventure. In either case, I have no recollection of my mother resisting the move: She sells the furniture as stoically as she gave away her wedding dress to the nun's charity the last time we moved to Jordan. (Abu Jaber, 2005, p. 118)

5. Conclusion

It can be noticed that throughout the two memoirs Diana tries to find her own identity, culture and homeland. The main difference that is portrayed in the two memoirs is that in *The Language of Baklava*, she searches for her identity during her childhood, while in *Life Without a Recipe*, she searches for her identity during her adulthood. Diana ends her first memoir by describing that she does not belong to one country without the other; she explains that both Jordan and America exist inside her. She understands that: "Once we are grown, we are no longer so porous, our identities do not connect with a place as much as they do when we grow up with a place and the places, in turn, grow into us" (Abu Jaber, 2005, p. 266). On the other hand, she ends her second memoir explaining that both her father and her grandmother's identities and cultures are the reason she can

create her own life. Although she undergoes failed experiences because of her family's desires, such as her two marriages, she finally finds her way in life. Besides, she becomes able to take any decision without a recipe.

To sum up, because Diana Abu Jaber has a mixed culture and identity, her life can be considered as a representation of the term of hybridity. Her life distinguishes her from both Jordanians and Americans. Her hybrid identity and culture are portrayed by her behavior, language, food, and lifestyle. Based on Homi Bhabha's point of view, Diana belongs to the third space in which identity and culture are created by the interaction between Eastern and Western cultures. It can be noticed that Diana has portrayed the hybridity of her identity by explaining that she wants to live in America and Jordan at the same time because the two countries are, in fact, her homeland. In each one of them, she has the things that associate her with the country. It is worth mentioning that Diana's hybrid identity leads her to be careful to present the right image of the Eastern culture for the Westerners and to present a real image of the Western culture for the Easterners. On the other hand, Diana has portrayed the hybridity of her culture by focusing on her lifestyle. For example, by talking about food, Diana gathers Eastern and Western food at her table. By talking about her achievement, she becomes a good mother and a successful writer at the same time. Despite the difficulties and conflicts that she has faced throughout her life, she becomes able to establish her own hybrid world where she lives happily and comfortably. It can be considered that these difficulties and conflicts are the main reasons that help Diana to find her identity and culture. So, future studies can comparatively read more works by Diana Abu Jaber to illustrate the points investigated in the present study future.

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