

Cross-cultural Marriages and the Politics of Food in Diasporic Arab Fiction**Majd Alkayid**

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Abstract: Food is an important aspect of recreating home for immigrants in their new lands. In fact, food does not only provide the nutritious value for people to survive and grow, but it also connotes multiple functions. It encodes various personal, social and cultural messages that immigrants use in order to recreate their homes. This paper aims at investigating the functions of food, including food as a language and as a metaphor for knowledge, food as a system of communication, and food as a theme that is interconnected with memory to re/construct cultural identity. These symbolic meanings of food are explored within the framework of cross-cultural marriages that are portrayed in Joseph Geha's *Through and Through: Toledo Stories* (1990), Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) and Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007).

Key words: Diaspora, Arab fiction, cross-cultural marriage and food

Food has many functions that are closely related to diasporic fiction. It connotes symbolic meanings and uses through which diasporic writers convey certain messages related to cross-cultural marriages. These functions of food include food as a language and as a metaphor for knowledge, food as a system of communication, and as a theme interconnected with memory to re/construct cultural identity. Arab diasporic writers like Diana Abu-Jaber, Joseph Geha and Fadia Faqir have portrayed the interconnection between food and cross-cultural marriages in their works: *Arabian Jazz* (1993), *Through and Through: Toledo Stories* (1990), and *My Name is Salma* (2007), respectively.

Many scholars have studied and used food as a language. For example, in "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption", Roland Barthes (1961) argues that food, like language, is a system of signs (Barthes 21). For him, food is "a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication" (*Ibid*). Food, he maintains, is "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (*Ibid*). Barthes considers food a structure that involves themes, functions and situations. Similarly, in

“Deciphering a Meal”, Mary Douglas (1997) argues that food is a code and that “the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed” (Douglas 36). In fact, Sabry Hafez (2000) stresses on the function of food as a “literary strategy capable of generating multiplicity of meanings within the text” (257). Therefore, food transcends its material existence and becomes loaded with multiple meanings that encompass individual, social and cultural connotations.

Moreover, food is analyzed as a figure of speech. In “Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures”, Fred Gardaphé and Wenying Xu (2007) argue that food is a kind of language and that its “tropes, metaphors, and images serve as figures of speech which depict celebrations of families and communities, portray identity crises, create usable histories to establish ancestral connections, subvert ideology and practices of assimilation, and critique global capitalism” (5). Moreover, Yousef Awad (2015) argues that food can be used as a leitmotif in which culinary codes intertwine with the aesthetic and thematic ends of the narrative (Awad 109). This means that food is a kind of language that artistically convey certain messages. In addition, in *The Origin of Table Manners*, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1978) highlights the connection between food and language as they both represent a method of communication. He ponders,

cooking, it has never been sufficiently emphasized, is with language a truly universal form of human activity: if there is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food. (471)

As this short survey shows, food is another kind of language that its metaphors, tropes and meanings are utilized to convey certain messages. Kyla Wazana Tompkins (2005) demonstrates that food is a cultural trope for racial and social differences (Tompkins 244). He adds that by reading “food-language”, racial and social differences are signified (Tompkins 244). Tompkins also discusses food as a metaphor for knowledge. He argues that “eating is consistently represented as a metaphor for the taking in of knowledge or for learning. This relationship in turn sets up a parallel between words and food: words become food and ‘bibliophagy’ is often encoded in literary texts about food” (246). In other words, food like words, have the capacity to inform and tell a lot about the ones who experience them.

To apply these ideas to the works of Arab writers in diaspora, one may point out that food plays a key role in cementing the cross-cultural marriage between Matussem and Nora in Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz* where food is tantamount to a language that the couple uses to communicate. The narrator says, “[t]hen he met Nora. She taught him to speak a new language, how to handle his new country. His American lover. Through the year of their courtship she took his hands and fed him words like bread from her lips” (Abu-Jaber 188). In this cross-cultural marriage, language is metaphorically turned into food (bread) that nourishes Matussem and fosters his love for Nora.

In *Arabian Jazz* (1993), Diana Abu-Jaber portrays the cross-cultural marriage of Jordanian Matussem and American Nora. Matussem lives with his two daughters Melvine and Jemorah. His wife, Nora, died of typhus when she went with her husband and daughters to Jordan. Despite the disapproval of the couple's families, they challenge all the difficulties and live happily with each other. For example, Nora's parents did not approve of her marriage and after Nora's death his in-laws accused him of killing their daughter. They never forgave him. His mother-in-law tells Jem that "it hurts too much ... to see so much of our daughter mixed up with the body of her murderer" (Abu-Jaber 85). Although Nora is the one who refuses to take the necessary vaccine, her parents see Matussem as the one who is responsible for her death.

In fact, there are many studies that explore the functions of food in Abu Jaber's works. However, these studies concentrate on Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and *The Language of Baklava* (2005). For example, Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom (2007) argue that in these literary works, "food functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory, and exile" (Mercer and Storm 33). In *The Politics of Food and Memory in Diana Abu-Jaber's Crescent*, Milton Sena (2011) explores the interconnectedness between memory and food in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* and their role in discussing ethnicity and political issues. Moreover, Brinda J. Mehta (2009) focuses on *Crescent* and explores the semiotics of food and its role in negotiating and forming a hyphenated identity. Priscilla Wathington (2007) discusses the function of food in *The Language of Baklava* as "a moment of discomfort and misfitting" (Wathington 45). However, as far as this study is concerned, food in *Arabian Jazz* has not been studied or analyzed thoroughly. All the previous studies gloss over the metaphorical function of food in Abu-Jaber's other works.

Food also can be a means of communication. Tompkins provides a physical explanation for the link between language and food. He argues that both of them are "experienced in the mouth" (Tompkins 245). This experience involves "what comes into and goes out of the mouth" (Tompkins 246). Therefore food, like language, is a system of communication that has personal, familial and communal dimensions. As for the personal dimension, in *Arabian Jazz*, Matussem remembers when he comes to America thirty years ago. He mentions that the first words that he has learnt in order to communicate are "hamburger", and "coke cola"(Abu-Jaber 188). In addition, Nora and Matussem are introduced to each other through food labyrinth. Matussem remembers how he falls in love with Nora from the first sight. In order to introduce himself to her, he does not use words but he uses food. After her order has been taken, Matussem asks the waiter, a Greek friend, to give him the chance to bring the meal for Nora's table. Matussem brings "her a tray with hamburger, milk-shake, and fries" (Abu-Jaber 189). When Nora thanks him, he does not talk about himself or ask her anything about herself, he simply "fell to his knees on the checkered drugstore floor and asked through his tears, you me marry?" (*Ibid*). Therefore, food is both the language and the context that makes this cross-cultural marriage happen in the first place.

In *My Name is Salma*, Fadia Faqir portrays the cross-cultural marriage of Jordanian Salma and British John Robson. Salma escapes from her village 'Hima' in Jordan to England after giving birth to a daughter out of wedlock. The daughter is taken from her without allowing her to see her baby. She always imagines that her brother Mahmoud searches for her to kill her for smearing their family's honor. In England, Salma feels that she is a foreigner and outsider as she is treated by many people as such. Later on, she meets John, her English teacher, who always treats her kindly and encourages her to study and pursue a university degree. With him, Salma feels that she is a respected person; a lady. At the beginning of their relationship, he informs her that he comes from a village where there are a lot of animals like goats and chicken. Salma remembers her village where she was a shepherdess playing the flute for her goats. She feels of extreme love for him to the extent that she wants "to cross the distance between us and grab his hand," (Faqir 199-200) but she knows that this man is her tutor and she must not become too emotional.

In Faqir's novel, communication between Salma and John becomes possible through the magic of food. In "Deciphering a Meal", Mary Douglas differentiates between the cultural use of drinks and meals. She argues that "[d]rinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family. Meals are for family, close friends, honored guests" (41). This means that people serve drinks for strangers and meals for friends and family members. Douglas adds that "[t]he meal expresses close friendship. Those we only know at drinks we know less intimately" (*Ibid*). To apply this to the novel, Salma/John relationship begins with drinks (coffee and juice), then develops into a friendship with food (yoghurt and herbal tea) and it eventually culminates in a happy marriage in which food, such baklava and dates, play a crucial role.

The first stage of the Salma/John relationship begins when Salma goes to the office of then her university tutor, Dr John Robson. Salma is very nervous because she wants to apologize for not writing her homework. When she enters the office, the coffee is dripping through her rucksack on the carpet because the flask is broken. Upon seeing this, John offers her help and gives her a towel. This indicates how this man is compassionate and helpful. Salma apologizes for not being able to give him the homework because she is busy with her family. She lies to him saying that she has a daughter and that she has "to cook for her and look after her" (Faqir 172). Salma uses cooking as an excuse for not being able to do her homework. Hence, one may argue that food has been a key element in setting up a rapport between Salma and John.

The second stage of communication between Salma and John takes place when she goes again to John's office to give him the essay. He notices that she does not have her flask and therefore he asks her if she would like a cup of coffee. Salma cherishes this idea and reminiscences on how John guides her to a café where he "opened the door for me and I entered as if I were a lady" (Faqir 200). In this scene, John and Salma begin to feel of familiarity and attachment to each other. John brings "a tray with two mugs of steaming coffee and a piece of flapjack" (*Ibid*). In this context, John asks Salma to stop calling him Dr. Johnson and only call

him John. Therefore the café is not only the space where people drink and eat, but it is also the place, or more specifically the safe haven, in which intimate and friendly relationships can be formed.

Furthermore, one may convincingly argue that food is intricately woven into the very fabric of the Salma/John cross-cultural relationship. To be more specific, in the third stage of their relationship, Salma and John meet in a pub. Upon seeing her, John greets Salma by raising his glass to her, and she greets him back by raising her glass of lemonade (Faqir 207). Here, drinks become the language of greeting between the couple. John's warmth and support for Salma increases in the fourth stage. John finds Salma lying on the ground and shivering. After he wraps her in his jacket, she vomits on his legs and shoes. This incident does not prevent him from helping her. He does not feel disgusted at all and offers her help, pulls her up and carries her to a toilet. John's support for Salma becomes evident when he brings her a tray with "some yoghurt, herbal tea, a bottle of water and a tablet for [...] migraine" (Faqir 236). In "Food, Self and Identity", Claude Fischler argues that one of the functions of food is to cure diseases. He affirms that "[a]ny food has medical significance" (Fischler 281). In this sense, John offers her the medicine not only for her migraine, but he offers himself as a metaphorical medicine to cure Salma's suffering. He stands beside her in her most difficult time. He seems to be her savior in her direst times where she is lost, disoriented and desperate.

In the next stage, John gives Salma a box "full of sweet things from the Middle East: a packet of dates, baklava with pistachio nuts, halva and Turkish delight" (Faqir 253). Metaphorically, this present Salma's dowry. It is also a proof that John is a man who respects, loves and appreciates Salma because he gives her something she misses and loves from her culture in the Levant. In fact, Claude Fischler (1988) argues that each culture marks and differentiates itself from other cultures by "asserting the specificity of what they eat" (Fischler 280). For example, he maintains, "Italians are Macaronis', the English 'Roastbeefs' and the Belgians 'chip-eaters'" (*Ibid*). Accordingly, each culture is defined by the food they eat. So, food is a means of individual as well as collective identity. Fischler asserts that once food is eaten and served by a certain culture, it becomes a label or a definer of that culture. He says that once "adapted to the conventional rules of a particular cuisine, food is marked with a stamp, labeled, recognized – in a nutshell, identified" (Fischler 284).

Fabio Parasecoli (2014) argues that migrants "cope with the dislocation and disorientation they experience in new and unknown spaces by *recreating a sense of place* around food production, preparation, and consumption, both at the personal and interpersonal levels" (416 emphasis added). In other words, migrants use food from their culture of origin to maintain a sense of belonging and familiarity with that culture. In the novel, John uses this gift of Levantine foods to recreate a sense of home for Salma and to tell her indirectly that he understands that she comes from a different culture that he accepts and respects. This gift is like a bridge that unites the two cultures together.

Salma and John live happily together until she begins to have unbearable nightmares of her daughter. Salma suffers from these nightmares every day, and once she becomes unable to breathe and speak. When John sees her, he hugs her and gives her a cup of sweet tea. This drink is like a remedy to her because when she has “a few sips my face muscles began moving” (Faqir 280) and she starts to speak. John, like the tea he serves for her, is warm and sweet. He surrounds her with persistent love and compassion and tries always to support her and convince her that everything will be all right. Despite the happiness that she has with John, her mother feelings for her daughter, Layla, is stronger and finally she goes back to her village in the Levant in order to rescue her. Accordingly, the sweet tea which is the last kind of food that they have together mirrors the last intimate and sweet moments of them together.

For Ghassan Hage, food provides “the basis for homely practices within the private sphere” (Hage 425). This private sphere transcends the personal to include the familial sphere in which family members use food as a sign of familiarity, welcoming and acceptance. In his collection of stories *Through and Through*, Joseph Geha portrays different functions of food in connection with interracial marriages. The study focuses on two short stories “Something Else” and “Almost Thirty” as they portray exogamous marriages. The short story “Something Else” tells the story of the exogamous marriage of Lebanese Tonia Yakoub and American Wayne. After few months of their marriage, Tonia does not feel at home with her husband and therefore she leaves him to live with her mother. Food has many functions in relation to this exogamous marriage. For example, it is used as a means of communication. For example, Tonia’s aunt tells Tonia “[y]ou tell Wayne I cooked special for him!” (Geha 62). Tonia’s aunt decides to cook for Tonia’s husband as a sign that signifies her support and welcoming of this man into the family. Through food, Wayne is welcomed as a member of the Yakoub family. Food also is a significant component of social and familial ceremonies. In Tonia’s wedding, food is served in order to celebrate this occasion. For Mary Douglas, food has a major function in familial ceremonies and religious rituals (Douglas 40). In Tonia’s wedding, food like rice, singing and dancing characterize the party. Tonia remembers this day when Wayne “puts his arm around her shoulders and, hunching against *the rice*, they run toward the camera” (Geha 60, emphasis added).

Ghassan Hage adds the public sphere as another dimension of food along with the private sphere discussed previously. He argues that food “also provided the basis for practices of home-building in the public sphere, in particular, fostering intimations of homely communality” (Hage 425). In other words, food becomes the means and context for a group of people to share their memories and experiences together. Food is also a marker of cultural identity. In *Eating Homes*, Priscilla S. Wathington (2007) analyzes food functions in Arab American writings. She classifies these writings into two chapters that she calls “Food Literature and the Old Home” and “Food Literature and the New Home”. She differentiates between the two arguing that old literary works are mainly memoirs and biographical writings that seek to affirm Arab identity and resist and counteract “the myths of Arab primitivism, ignorance and violence” (Wathington 15). In the

other chapter, Wathington argues that contemporary texts of the New Home literature “explore the critical moment of encounter between Arab and American” (Wathington 41). She adds that these new texts are not biographies but they are fiction and poetry (she adds Diana Abu-Jaber’s memoir *The Language of Baklava* as a kind of New Home Literature).

Wathington argues that food symbolizes Arab American identity. She says, “food stands for Arab American identity itself. *Falafel* and cardamom, among other foods, mark characters as Arab in both public and private spaces” (Wathington 43). In a sub-section to the chapter of the New Home Literature which is titled “Food as remaking the old home in the new home”, Wathington discusses the function of food as a means of “coping with change, cultural insecurity, and stress of difference” (Wathington 67). It is also “a source of comfort in an otherwise strange and foreign land” (Wathington 68). In other words, eating together is a way for Arab immigrants to recreate their Arab homes in the new strange land. Wathington adds that eating traditional dishes “reduces the need for a material return” (Wathington 71) and that food is a means to remember the past. Therefore, memory and food are interconnected aspects of home-building. Roland Barthes (1961) stresses the value of memory and food in cultures. He argues that cooking and eating strengthen the “nostalgic” value of food (Barthes 24). He adds that food permits man “to insert himself daily into his own past and to believe in a certain culinary being” (*Ibid*). Therefore, eating traditional foods is part of the memory of past cultures which migrants retrieve in order to feel at home in foreign and far away countries.

In “Almost Thirty”, Geha portrays the lives of the cousins and best friends Haleem and George and their constant feelings of anxiety, frustration and loss. however, they became capable of overcoming these feelings after their exogamous marriages to American women. In the story, food becomes a meeting point for the characters. Haleem, George and all their family members in America gather to eat in Walbridge Park. In these gatherings, Haleem clarifies that they eat traditional Lebanese foods like *phtire*, *tabouli* and *kibee* (Geha 46). Therefore, these traditional foods from Lebanon help these people to recreate a semi-Lebanon in America. This echoes Wathington’s stipulation that “[t]hrough cooking Lebanese dishes, the kitchen becomes another Lebanon. It furnishes both the physical and metaphysical comforts of the old home” (Wathington 70). This means that they recreate the physical and metaphorical sense of home by cooking and eating traditional Lebanese dishes. The Yakoub family recreate home through the foods they eat, the songs they sing and the *debkee* they dance. Ghassan Hage calls these kinds of gatherings “collective eating” in which migrants collectively sit around traditional foods “on weekends and special occasions, someone’s house or a hall transformed into a village party... often the party ends with a *dabkeh*, danced to the sound of traditional mountain shepherd’s music” (Hage 425). All these activities are performed by the Yakoub family in order to feel of belonging and familiarity in America.

In fact, different kinds of traditional food may undergo some changes and adjustments from one generation to another. Claude Fischler (1988) argues that cuisine systems “provide

reference criteria for use in *making choices* about food, tending to resolve or reduce the anxiety of the double bind and to authorize incorporation by giving it meaning” (Fischler 285, emphasis added). So, migrants have many choices of eating. For instance, they can have traditional foods from their past culture and resist eating American foods, or they can have a negotiation or incorporation process of eating. Parasecoli declares that there are many reactions to foreign culinary practices which vary “from enthusiastic embrace to participative negotiation to active resistance, all the way to total refusal” (Parasecoli 418). In “Almost Thirty”, Haleem and George experience a process of food negotiation and incorporation. Both Haleem’s and George’s wives hate and “cringed at the sight of raw liver with onions” (Geha 46), but they try to prepare Lebanese dishes for their husbands. Haleem demonstrates that he loves Lebanese food, but since his wife does not know how to prepare Lebanese recipes, he changes his eating habits. For example, he declares that

My wife tried to make *kibee* once, but it turned to concrete in your stomach. So, to this day George and I eat egg salad sandwiches at family picnics. “The *kibee* is not important,” we tell the others, and they shake their heads to see us eat the egg salad. (Geha 46)

This incident highlights two important dimensions of food in relation to cross-cultural marriages. First, Haleem’s and George’s wives try to cook Lebanese foods for their husbands in an attempt to create a sense of familiarity and belonging. Second, when the women’s attempts fail, Haleem and George have changed their eating habits by replacing Lebanese *kibee* with egg salad. They tell the others that *kibee* or any other food is not important and this indicates that whatever the foods they eat, the most important thing is the love and understanding between them and their wives.

To conclude, Arab hyphenated people, like other migrants, use food to recreate homes that are characterized by familiarity, belonging and love. For them, home is an on-going process of negotiation between home culture and host culture in which they use food to reconstruct a sense of belonging. The interconnectedness between migration, food and home are emphasized in the title of Ghassan Hage’s article “Migration, Food, Memory and Home-Building”. Hage argues that food is an important practice for immigrants to recreate a sense of home (416). In the discussed literary works, Arab hyphenated people recreate their homes away from homeland with their non Arab spouses. The interracial couples in Joseph Geha’s *Through and Through: Toledo Stories*, Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz* and Fadia Faqir’s *My Name is Salma* are able to construct a sense of belonging, freedom and dignity in the host culture. In these novels, food is used as a code, a mode of communication and a figure of speech that connotes different social and cultural messages that play a vital role in cross-cultural marriages.

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