

FROM INHERITED RECIPES TO IMPROVISATIONAL SELF-AUTHORSHIP: FOOD, DIASPORA, AND GENDER IN DIANA ABU-JABER'S MEMOIRS

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Abstract

This paper examines how Diana Abu-Jaber's food memoirs, *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and *Life Without a Recipe* (2016), use food to negotiate questions of diasporic identity, gender, cultural inheritance, and self-authorship. Rather than treating food as a stable symbol of ethnic nostalgia, the study argues that Abu-Jaber presents meals, recipes, kitchens, and bodily responses as contested sites where belonging is remembered, fractured, revised, and remade. Using qualitative textual analysis informed by food studies, postcolonial and diaspora studies, and intersectional feminism, the article analyzes key culinary episodes, including the failed lamb slaughter, Bud's Jordanian cooking, Grace's baking, Diana's nausea and reliance on *lebeneh*, the *magloubeh* scene, and the embedded recipes that interrupt the memoirs' narrative structure. The findings show that food functions simultaneously as a sign of diasporic fracture, a Third Space of minority home-making, a gendered field of domestic power, a bodily site of refusal, and a formal strategy that disrupts linear autobiography. The comparison between the two memoirs reveals a movement from inherited culinary and cultural "recipes" toward improvisational self-authorship. By foregrounding food as memory, conflict, form, and agency, this paper contributes to Arab-American literary studies, food studies, and women's life writing by showing that belonging in Abu-Jaber's memoirs is not passively inherited but actively prepared, adjusted, and remade.

Keywords: food studies; culinary memoir; diaspora; Arab-American literature; gender; self-authorship

INTRODUCTION

Food is one of the most intimate and visible ways through which culture is remembered, practiced, and transformed. Beyond its biological function, food carries meanings about family, community, class, gender, religion, migration, and belonging. Meals, recipes, ingredients, and cooking rituals often preserve memories that are not

always recorded in formal histories, making the kitchen an important site of cultural transmission. In diasporic contexts, food becomes even more significant because it links migrants and their descendants to ancestral places while also revealing the changes produced by life in a new cultural environment. Thus, food does not simply express identity; it helps produce, negotiate, and sometimes unsettle it.

For immigrant and diasporic communities, culinary practices frequently become a language of memory and survival. Traditional dishes can recall lost homelands, sustain family bonds, and mark cultural difference within dominant societies. At the same time, food may also expose conflict: between generations, between homeland and host country, between nostalgia and assimilation, and between cultural duty and personal desire. In Arab-American literature, these tensions are especially important because food often mediates how Arab identity is represented, misunderstood, preserved, or revised within American life. The dinner table, the recipe, and the kitchen therefore become narrative spaces where questions of ethnicity, belonging, gender, and power are worked out in everyday form.

The culinary memoir is particularly suited to exploring these issues because it joins life writing with the material and sensory world of food. Unlike conventional autobiography, which often emphasizes chronological development, the food memoir organizes memory around taste, smell, preparation, and shared meals. Recipes within such texts do more than instruct readers how to cook; they preserve family histories, mark cultural inheritance, and interrupt narrative time. For women writers, culinary memoirs can also transform domestic spaces into sites of authorship, resistance, and self-definition. This makes the genre useful for examining how identity is shaped through both inherited traditions and acts of revision.

Within this broader context, Diana Abu-Jaber's two memoirs, *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and *Life Without a Recipe* (2016), offer powerful explorations of identity, family, and memory through Middle Eastern and American cuisines. *The Language of Baklava* narrates Diana's upbringing as a Jordanian-American girl in New York who must navigate the cultural tensions between her boisterous, food-obsessed Jordanian father, Bud, and her practical German-American grandmother, Grace (Abu-Jaber, 2005). Food in this memoir becomes a language of connection to a faraway homeland, a weapon in a "culinary war" for her loyalty, and the very fabric of her family's narrative. The recipes included at the end of each chapter act as tangible artifacts of her bicultural formation.

Continuing this journey, *Life Without a Recipe* follows Diana into adulthood as she develops her career as a writer, negotiates relationships, and confronts her doubts about motherhood. Although her father's influence remains present, this memoir shifts its focus toward the legacy of Grace and the challenge of creating an identity beyond the "recipes" handed down by family and culture. It is a story of improvisation: of finding a way to build a family and a life when prescribed instructions no longer fit (Abu-Jaber, 2016). Together, the two books trace a movement from an identity shaped by inherited culture

toward one consciously revised and created, making them significant works within Arab-American literature and the genre of the culinary memoir (Jaber, 2021).

Because Abu-Jaber's memoirs place food at the center of questions about memory, gender, diaspora, and selfhood, they have become important texts for scholars of Arab-American literature and culinary memoir. Existing studies show that food in her writing is never merely decorative or nostalgic; rather, it functions as a contested language through which cultural belonging and personal agency are negotiated.

Building on this scholarship, this paper examines how Abu-Jaber uses culinary narratives to challenge romanticized ideas of ethnic inheritance and to represent identity as a process of conflict, negotiation, and transformation. Its principal objective is to analyze food as a dynamic site where diasporic dislocation, gender roles, and cultural inheritance intersect across *The Language of Baklava* and *Life Without a Recipe*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Diana Abu-Jaber's culinary writing has commonly begun with the question of how food represents ethnicity, memory, and belonging. Bardenstein's study of *The Language of Baklava* is particularly important because it challenges the assumption that ethnic food automatically produces a stable connection to homeland. Rather than treating baklava, shish kabob, or other dishes as simple signs of Arab identity, Bardenstein argues that Abu-Jaber deconstructs the "food-as-ethnicity" trope by showing food as unstable, ambivalent, and sometimes painful (Bardenstein, 2010). This reading is useful for the present article because it shows that Abu-Jaber's culinary scenes do not simply celebrate cultural preservation; they also expose the fractures, losses, and contradictions produced by migration. In this sense, food becomes a medium through which diasporic subjects remember the homeland while also realizing their distance from it.

Other scholars focus on the narrative form of Abu-Jaber's memoirs, especially the way recipes interrupt and reshape autobiographical narration. Alexa Weik von Mossner uses cognitive narratology to examine how the memoirs' structure, which moves between prose memories and recipe instructions, shapes the reader's understanding of the author's hybrid identity (Von Mossner, 2022). From this perspective, recipes are not decorative additions placed outside the main narrative. Instead, they function as meaningful textual interruptions that invite readers to move between memory, sensory experience, and cultural interpretation. Similarly, Pazargadi's work on Abu-Jaber's "gastrographies" emphasizes the semiotic function of food, arguing that culinary signs create meaning beyond nourishment (Pazargadi, 2021). These studies help explain how Abu-Jaber's memoirs formally transform food into a language of self-representation.

A related body of scholarship examines food memoirs through gender and women's life writing. Varma argues that women's food memoirs construct identity through bodily, emotional, and domestic experiences, showing how food can express both belonging and rootlessness (Varma, 2015). This argument is especially relevant to Abu-Jaber because her

memoirs place female subjectivity at the center of culinary conflict. The kitchen is not only a private domestic space but also a field in which gendered expectations are negotiated. Abarca's work on women's voices in the kitchen also supports this view by showing how writing about food can become a counter-narrative through which women reclaim authority over spaces traditionally associated with service and domestic labor (Abarca, 2006). Together, these studies clarify why Abu-Jaber's representations of cooking, baking, eating, and bodily refusal should be read as part of a larger feminist discourse on agency and self-definition.

Studies of Arab-American literature and diaspora further frame Abu-Jaber's memoirs as narratives of hybridity and cultural negotiation. Jaber reads *The Language of Baklava* and *Life Without a Recipe* through the dynamics of hybridity, arguing that Abu-Jaber's identity is shaped by the constant movement between Jordanian and American cultural references (Jaber, 2021). Majaj's broader discussion of Arab-American literature also situates such writing within histories of displacement, racialization, and cultural in-betweenness (Majaj, 2008). In this context, Abu-Jaber's food writing can be connected to Bhabha's idea of the Third Space, where identity is produced through negotiation rather than through pure origins (Bhabha, 2003). Food therefore becomes one of the main sites where the memoirs stage the instability of belonging and the creation of new hybrid forms of selfhood.

More recent scholarship has expanded this discussion by connecting Abu-Jaber's food writing to trans-memory, decolonial identity, and the politics of home-making. Dundar, for example, reads immigrant food as a carrier of trans-memory, emphasizing how dishes can preserve memories that move across generations and geographies (Dundar, 2016). Djohar's work on Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* similarly describes culinary spaces as forms of "minority kingdom," where marginalized subjects create alternative homes within dominant American culture (Djohar, 2019). These arguments are valuable because they shift attention from food as a symbol of private family memory to food as a social and political practice. In Abu-Jaber's memoirs, culinary acts do not only remember the past; they also remake space, contest assimilation, and imagine forms of belonging that resist cultural erasure.

Scholarship on *Life Without a Recipe* specifically highlights the movement from inherited cultural scripts toward improvisational self-authorship. Tabačková argues that food in this memoir becomes a "storyteller" that helps Abu-Jaber narrate a life shaped by uncertainty, cultural mixture, and the absence of fixed instructions (Tabačková, 2018). This interpretation complements readings of *The Language of Baklava* by showing that Abu-Jaber's later memoir does not abandon food as a central metaphor but reworks it. If the first memoir often presents food as an inheritance shaped by family conflict and ethnic memory, the second memoir presents food as part of a looser, more self-directed process of making a life. Thus, the two memoirs together trace a movement from receiving recipes to questioning, revising, and finally living beyond them.

Although these studies provide important insights, they often emphasize one dimension of Abu-Jaber's culinary writing at a time: ethnicity, narrative form, gender,

diaspora, or memory. This article builds on their contributions by bringing these approaches together in a comparative reading of *The Language of Baklava* and *Life Without a Recipe*. It argues that food in Abu-Jaber's memoirs functions simultaneously as a sign of diasporic fracture, a gendered site of power, a postcolonial challenge to assimilation, and a formal strategy that disrupts conventional memoir narration. By foregrounding these overlapping functions, this paper shows how Abu-Jaber moves from inherited culinary and cultural "recipes" toward an improvisational authorship of identity.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of Diana Abu-Jaber's two food memoirs, *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and *Life Without a Recipe* (2016). These texts are selected because both place food at the center of autobiographical narration while presenting different stages of Abu-Jaber's negotiation of family, ethnicity, gender, and selfhood. Following Smith and Watson's understanding of autobiography as a constructed narrative practice rather than a transparent record of life, the primary units of analysis are culinary scenes, embedded recipes, descriptions of eating and bodily response, and passages in which food mediates family relationships or cultural memory (Smith & Watson, 2010).

The analysis is guided by three interconnected theoretical perspectives. Food studies is used to read meals, recipes, and culinary practices as cultural signs rather than as ordinary domestic details. Postcolonial and diaspora studies provide a framework for examining hybridity, displacement, assimilation, and the instability of homeland, especially through Bhabha's concept of the Third Space (Bhabha, 2003). An intersectional feminist perspective is also applied to show how gender, ethnicity, family authority, and domestic labor overlap in Abu-Jaber's representation of female subjectivity (Crenshaw, 1991). These frameworks are not treated separately but are used together to interpret how food becomes a site where cultural and personal identities are contested.

The analytical procedure consists of three stages. First, the study identifies recurring food-related episodes in both memoirs, including the failed lamb slaughter, Bud's Jordanian cooking, Grace's baking, Diana's nausea and reliance on *lebeneh*, the *magloubeh* scene, and the metaphor of living without a recipe. Second, these episodes are interpreted through close reading, with attention to imagery, metaphor, narrative placement, bodily description, and the relationship between prose and recipe form. Third, the findings from both memoirs are compared in order to trace Abu-Jaber's movement from inherited culinary scripts toward improvisational self-authorship. This comparative procedure allows the article to connect the reviewed scholarship with specific textual evidence while keeping the focus on how food functions as narrative form, cultural symbol, and embodied experience.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Food as Diasporic Fracture: The Failed Lamb Slaughter

An important moment in *The Language of Baklava* that shows the complexity of diasporic identity is the failure of the Abu-Jaber brothers to slaughter a lamb. This moment was written and shown as a counter-narrative to the romanticized immigrant stories of preserving their homeland's traditions that is often written other writers. After buying a live lamb to prepare for a feast, the Americanized brothers find themselves emotionally and physically incapable of the act, which results in a gruesome and botched attempt that leaves them shaken. The episode ends with Bud's admission, "We thought we could still do it... But we couldn't".

"We thought we could still do it," Bud said. "But we couldn't." 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." (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p. 26)

This scene directly supports the argument that Abu-Jaber's work deconstructs the "ideology of homeland" common in ethnic memoirs. Bardenstein argues that, instead of presenting a nostalgic and "univocal" connection to the past, the memoir shows moments of doubt, fracture, and ambivalence (Bardenstein, 2010). The failed slaughter is therefore not a successful transmission of cultural heritage but a painful confirmation of cultural change and loss. It reveals that the brothers are no longer the "wiry, tough-skinned wild boys" of their youth in Jordan, but men irrevocably changed by their American experience. Food, in this instance, does not serve as a comforting bridge to the past; it serves as a reminder of distance from it, complicating any simple equation of food with ethnic identity (Mostafa, 2025).

The Kitchen as Third Space and Minority Home-Making

Beyond trauma and cultural loss, the culinary space in Abu-Jaber's memoirs also functions as a form of resistance to Anglo-American dominance. Drawing on Djohar's analysis of the immigrant kitchen as a "minority kingdom," Bud's insistence on cooking elaborate Jordanian feasts in upstate New York can be read not only as nostalgia but also as a postcolonial assertion of space. By filling an American domestic environment with the scents of garlic, onions, lamb, and spices, Bud transforms the kitchen into a Third Space where Jordanian memory and American daily life meet. The kitchen therefore becomes a site of world-making: it validates Arab identity in a context that often renders it invisible, while also showing that belonging must be actively produced rather than passively inherited.

Culinary Cold War: Gender, Power, and Domestic Agency

Throughout both memoirs, the kitchen functions as a warzone where gender roles and cultural values are contested, mainly between the Diana's father, Bud, and her

maternal grandmother, Grace (Dundar, 2016). In *Life Without a Recipe*, Grace's worldview is reflected and shown in her advice to her granddaughter: "Never learn how to sew, cook, type, or iron... That's how they get you". Yet, Grace herself is a masterful baker, she distinguishes the creative "art" of baking from the menial chore of daily cooking, which she frames as a patriarchal trap. This ideological conflict is waged through food, with Bud's savory, traditional Jordanian dishes representing his cultural authority and Grace's sugary, American-style cookies and cakes representing a form of female independence and rebellion.

"“Never learn how to sew, cook, type, or iron.” She bends over the board, passes the hissing iron back and forth, slave rowing a galley ship. “That’s how they get you.” She pauses long enough to turn that shrewd gaze on me and after a moment I look away. There’s cooking, sure, but then there’s baking. I learn from Grace that sugar represents a special kind of freedom. It charms almost everyone; it brings love and luck and good favor. Cakes and cookies are exalted — a gift of both labor and sweetness — so good a smart woman is willing to give herself to them.”
(Abu-Jaber, 2016, p. 12)

An intersectional reading shows that the culinary cold war between Bud and Grace is not only a conflict between different dishes but also a contest over Diana's gendered and ethnic subjectivity (Crenshaw, 1991). Diana is positioned between Bud's patriarchal Arab expectations and Grace's white American domestic rebellion. Grace's warning to "*never learn how to sew, cook, type, or iron*" because "*that's how they get you*" frames domestic labor as a trap, yet her baking is presented as a creative art and a source of pleasure. Bud's cooking, by contrast, often carries the pressure of cultural continuity and paternal authority. Diana's identity develops within this tension, as she must negotiate two inherited models of womanhood without fully accepting either one.

This dynamic aligns with scholarship on women's food memoirs, which argues that food often becomes a medium for negotiating gendered identities, especially for women caught between cultures (Varma, 2015). The contrast between Bud's savory Jordanian dishes and Grace's American sweets does not simply represent ethnic difference; it structures Diana's coming-of-age as a negotiation between cultural inheritance and female agency. The kitchen is therefore not a stable domestic refuge but a contested space where love, authority, rebellion, and self-definition are all expressed through food.

Magloubeh against the Melting Pot: Food as Decolonial National Identity

"Magloubeh is one of the dishes that people think might actually have originated somewhere within the region of Jordan. Before Jordan was created in around 1921 by the French and British and an assorted tribunal of other European men who liked to say they owned it, it was loosely and unattractively called Transjordan. It also had other names and owners before that. There were Assyrians, Nabataeans, Romans, Alexander the so-called Great, Persians, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Crusaders, Mamluks, Turks . . . you can't imagine the comings and goings! All of them stomping over the broadbrowed Jordan Valley and announcing: This is

mine. But Bud says through all those name changes and political deals and horse trading, there was always this same bunch of Bedouins living there in their goat-hair tents with their wars and their loud arguments and their big mustaches and their music and their prayers and their night stars over the white desert floor and their big pots of upside down." (Abu-Jaber, 2005, pp. 121-122)

Abu-Jaber challenges the assimilationist demands of American culture through a performative subversion of patriotism centered on *magloubeh*. In *The Language of Baklava*, the family gathers around the "upside-down" pot, and Uncle Jack points to the dish, declaring, "Here it is, our national identity" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p. 129). The family then salutes the food while singing the American patriotic anthem "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." This irreverent gesture reclaims ethnic cuisine as part of American life and replaces the homogenizing metaphor of the "melting pot" with the layered structure of the *magloubeh* pot. Unlike the melting pot, where cultural differences disappear, *magloubeh* depends on the visible layering of rice, meat, and vegetables. In this way, the dish becomes a decolonial model of national identity, one that values coexistence without erasure and allows Arab-American identity to remain visible within the American social body.

The Body as a Site of Refusal: Nausea, *Lebeneh*, and Female Agency

In a part of the book from *The Language of Baklava*, Diana returns home from college and finds herself struck with a mysterious illness: she feels intense nausea and she starts vomiting every time she eats her father's beloved cooking. She notes, "The nausea begins to occur with such regularity on my visits home that I wonder if this mysterious virus is somehow embedded in the walls of my old room". The only food that seems to cure her is "the simplest dish in the world: yogurt that's been drained and thickened so it's mild and rich as cream", *lebeneh*, which she calls "Mother's milk".

"The nausea begins to occur with such regularity on my visits home that I wonder if this mysterious virus is somehow embedded in the walls of my old room. I consider that it might be psychosomatic, since it happens only when I return home. But the sickness is so immense, crashing over and swamping my whole body, that I can't imagine it's something that comes simply from my mind. That seems much too clean and abstract for this pitching agony." (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p. 200)

This physical reaction can be interpreted as a somatic manifestation of her psychological struggle for independence, which is a key stage in her *bildungsroman*. Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo has extensively argued that the female body can become a site where cultural pressures and internal conflicts are physically expressed (Bordo, 1995). In this case, Diana's body is literally refusing to digest the patriarchal and cultural identity her father is "feeding" her. Meanwhile, this aligns with another observation that food in the memoir can emphasize "both belonging as well as rootlessness" (Varma, 2015). Her ability to find solace only in *lebeneh* is symbolic, it represents a return to a simpler, more primary and maternal form of nourishment, free

from the cultural obligations tied to her father's elaborate meals and signifying a turn towards a more personal, less conflicted form of identity.

Read through an intersectional feminist lens, Diana's nausea becomes an embodied response to powerlessness and cultural pressure. Her body refuses the food that represents paternal authority, but it accepts *lebeneh*, a simpler and more maternal form of nourishment. This distinction shows that her rejection is not a rejection of Arab food itself. Rather, it is a refusal of the obligations attached to particular forms of cultural inheritance. The body therefore becomes a critical site where Diana begins to separate nourishment from coercion and heritage from control.

Recipes as Narrative Interruptions

Diana uses a narrative technique where her use of recipes functions as a form of intertextual commentary. These recipes are not just mere appendices, but they are deliberately written "interruptions" of the main narrative that force the reader to engage with the creation of a hybrid identity (Von Mossner, 2022). A prime example of this is the placement of the recipe for "Peaceful Vegetarian Lentil Soup" at the conclusion of the chapter that details the violent and failed lamb slaughter. The prose narrative is filled with the lamb's screams, the brothers' panic, and the emotional fallout, but the chapter ends with a quiet, simple recipe for a dish that requires no slaughter or blood being shed.

This structural interruption also unsettles the traditional linear movement of the European *Bildungsroman*. As Djohar (2021) argues, contemporary Muslim women writers often adapt the coming-of-age form to represent crisscrossing identities that do not fit a single path toward assimilation. Abu-Jaber's recipes work in a similar way. They interrupt the prose, redirect the reader's attention to cultural materiality, and preserve collective memory inside the memoir's structure. Rather than moving smoothly toward Americanization, the narrative repeatedly pauses over food, showing that Diana's development is communal, sensory, and diasporic rather than purely individualistic.

PEACEFUL VEGETARIAN LENTIL SOUP

1 cup lentils (if using dried lentils, soak overnight, then drain)	1 carrot, sliced
1 medium onion, chopped	3 cloves garlic, crushed
¼ cup olive oil	1 teaspoon ground cumin
4 cups water	Juice from 1 lemon
1 stalk celery, sliced	Salt and freshly ground pepper

Figure 1. The Recipe of Peaceful Vegetarian Lentil Soup

"Wash the lentils thoroughly, picking out any debris. In a large saucepan, sauté the onion in the olive oil until translucent. Add the remaining ingredients and cook over medium heat for 30 minutes, or until the vegetables are tender. SERVES 6" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p. 26)

This juxtaposition is used as a literary device that functions on multiple levels. The recipe acts as a sign that offers a conclusion and absolution where the narrative itself offers none (Pazargadi, 2021). It is a textual peace offering that cleanses the palate, both literally and figuratively, of the preceding trauma. This approach also shows how this technique makes the reader an active participant in understanding the author's emotional and moral landscape (Von Mossner, 2022). By presenting these two contrasting “texts”, the story of violence and the recipe for peace, side by side, Abu-Jaber demonstrates the process of meaning-making itself, it shows how different narratives can coexist to form a more complete and more complex meaning.

Life Without a Recipe: Improvisational Self-Authorship

The title of the second memoir, *Life Without a Recipe*, serves as the culminating thesis for Diana's entire journey. The theme is established in the book's introduction, where she recounts getting lost as a six-year-old because construction blocked her usual “recipe” for walking home (three blocks straight, turn right). After spending her youth defined by the competing “recipes” of her family, her adulthood is a process of learning to improvise. This journey is marked by choices that defy her inherited “recipes”. Diana starts to pursue a writing career, she navigates divorces, and, she finally decides to build a family through adoption. The memoir concludes not with a perfect resolution, but with an acceptance of ongoing creation, a sentiment captured in her thought, “It takes such a long time...to get to the starting place.”

“The air was shaking. That’s what it felt like—enormous, roaring machinery, prowling over the street. And just me, six years old, limparmed, stumped, mid-sidewalk. Usually there was a cloud of other firstgraders to walk home with, drifts and school-spent. But today, alone, watching the machines rear up, I backed away in horror and turned down another street. It wasn’t the way to our house: I only knew one way—three blocks straight, turn right, three blocks straight. Nobody ever mentioned that one day the turn-right might be filled with machines.” (Abu-Jaber, 2016, p. 7)

In this later memoir, food becomes a storyteller for an improvised life. The narrative is no longer centered only on reconciling Bud's shish kabob with Grace's cookies, but on creating new traditions (Tabačková, 2018). Shared meals with Scott and the experience of watching her daughter, Gracie, develop her own tastes mark the creation of a new culinary and familial world. By embracing a life “without a recipe,” Abu-Jaber completes the movement traced across both memoirs: she shifts from being shaped by inherited family scripts to becoming the author of her own narrative.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* and *Life Without a Recipe* portray food not as a simple reminder of heritage but as a dynamic medium through

which identity is contested, revised, and remade. Across both memoirs, food reveals the fractures of diasporic belonging, the pressures of cultural inheritance, and the gendered conflicts that shape the narrator's movement toward self-definition. The failed lamb slaughter exposes the limits of nostalgic return, while Bud's cooking and Grace's baking turn the kitchen into a contested space where paternal authority, female creativity, and bicultural identity are negotiated.

The analysis also shows that Abu-Jaber's culinary writing works both thematically and formally. The kitchen becomes a Third Space in which Jordanian memory and American life meet, while *magloubeh* offers an alternative to the assimilationist metaphor of the melting pot by preserving difference within a layered model of belonging. Diana's nausea and reliance on *lebeneh* further show how the body can refuse coercive forms of inheritance while seeking more personal forms of nourishment. At the same time, the memoirs' embedded recipes interrupt linear autobiography and create a hybrid narrative form that mirrors Abu-Jaber's own hybrid identity. The movement from *The Language of Baklava* to *Life Without a Recipe* therefore marks a shift from inherited cultural scripts toward improvisational self-authorship.

By presenting food as memory, conflict, form, and agency, Abu-Jaber's memoirs contribute significantly to Arab-American literature, food studies, and women's life writing. Her work suggests that belonging is not simply inherited through tradition but continually made through negotiation, revision, and creative improvisation. Future research could extend this gastrocritical and postcolonial framework to other Muslim women writers, especially those from the Global South, in order to examine how food, embodiment, and domestic space shape narratives of identity beyond Western diasporic contexts. In this way, Abu-Jaber's memoirs show that identity, like cooking itself, is not merely received from the past but actively prepared, adjusted, and remade.

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