A Gastrocritical Approach to Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava and* Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary*

اعـــداد

أ.م.د/ دعاء سيد عبد العظيم

أستاذ الأدب الإنجليزي المساعد - كلية الألسن جامعة الأقصر

Abstract

The aim of this study is to apply a gastrocritical approach to Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* and Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes*, showing how their culinary memoirs could weave some food recipes into personal experiences while discussing some cross-cultural issues. Gastrocriticism is a growing theory that tackles food and foodways in literary texts. By analyzing Abu-Jaber's and Narayan's memoirs, readers can figure out the relationship between food and transnational identity of migrant writers who have to move from their native countries to some different destinations affirming their experiences while describing some food recipes. Describing recipes from their original countries or destination countries shows the writers' abilities to bridge the gap between two different cultures. In addition, Abu-Jaber and Narayan have utilized food to delineate their concepts of some gender issues, subverting some traditional stereotypical gender roles and challenging some others. Besides, in their food memoirs, they both follow a similar pattern to structure the forms of their food writings by relating some chronological life experiences and incidents to certain meals, revealing a distinguished cultural identity.

Keywords

Food memoirs Gastrocriticism Transnational Identity Gender Roles

I. Introduction

The description of food in some writings has been deeply rooted in literature. Food has been portrayed in the canon of the different genres of English literature. The different banquet scenes in Shakespeare's plays such as *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*, food as a prize in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the description of the feast in Ben Jonson's poem "Inviting a Friend to Supper," the conflict between hunger and satiety in Charles Dickens' novels, *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Caro*l, and the recent recipes of preparing tasty meals in Richard C. Morais's *The Hundred-Foot Journey* and Ruth Reichl's *Delicious* are a few of many examples of the various aspects of the role of food in literary texts. Yet, proposing food consciousness as a theoretical framework to examine some literary writings has been debatable.

However, "food has not always been deemed a subject worthy of literary study, despite its omnipresence in literature" (Keeling & Pollard, 2009, p. 6). For example, Jaques Pepin, in his autobiography, *The Apprentice*, mentioned that in the 1970s he wanted to write down his doctoral dissertation about Flaubert's description of the wedding feast in *Madam Bovary*, but his advisor nixed the idea because "cuisine is not a serious art form. It is far too trivial for academic study" (Pepin, 2003, p. 212). Then, Brown (1984), who has discussed the function of fictional meals in French novels, has noted that "fictional meals are above all literary signs: consequently they are to the same kinds of analysis as any other literary phenomenon" (p.3). Therefore, one can safely state that the real academic scholarship of food studies and literature began by the end of the previous century. Gilbert (2014) referred to what some have called "recipe novels" due to the various novels which included narratives enriched by recipes, and he added "we now face an ever-expanding pantry full of recipe magazines, recipe poems, recipe memoirs, recipe histories, recipe travelogues, and even recipe polemics" (p.4). Then, some volumes have been published on food and children's literature, food and Asian American literature, and food and early modern literature, leading some critics to think that such writings "might be treated as a call for an overarching method for

thinking about food in relation to the literary text" (Shahani, 2018. para.2). Thus, constructing a theoretical framework has become essential to study the food manifestations in literary texts.

"Gastronomic studies in literary works are summarized in terms of gastro-criticism" (Ambarwati, Darihastining & Wahyuni, 2020, p.88). The term "gastrocriticism" was coined by Roland Tobin, an American professor of French Literature, in 2002 when he defined gastrocriticism as being "a multidisciplinary approach that links gastronomy and literary criticism" (Tobin, 2002, p.24). The gastrocritical approach has been applied by many writers since the turn of the millennium. It is a growing critical approach that came out of the discipline of food studies and has been considered a branch of it that explores the importance of the presence of food and/or drink in a text. A gastrocritical reading to any literary text needs a thorough analysis of the symbolic and social significances of food that is related to human existence. It is also "an approach to literature and food that integrates the methods of cultural history, close reading, and archival research with concepts drawn from both literary studies— such as narrative, rhetoric, form, audience, authorship, and taste— and food studies— such as foodways, food justice, gastronomy, and agrarianism" (Tigner & Carruth, 2018,p.4). In addition, gastronomy and literary criticism might be tackled across various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, medical, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and philosophy to discuss food from different perspectives. Recently, Klitzing (2023), argued that the core characteristics of gastrocriticism are: " being informed by and linked to a multidisciplinary approach (food studies/ gastronomy); acknowledging an active presence of a non-human entity (food and foodways) in literary texts; an eclectic and inclusive canon; a strong but not exclusive concern with issues and context; an understanding of a reciprocal relationship between literature and life; a comprehensive grasp of the functions of food and foodways in texts" (pp.355-356).

Moreover, reading a gastronomic literary text may shed light on other cultural or social issues such as the relationship between food and some economic and political questions or food and cultural formation; for example, Xu (2008) placed "in the spaces of food, cooking, hunger, consumption, appetite, orality, and the like

a wide range of identity issues such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, diaspora, and sexuality" (p.2), and Soler and Meredith (2013) argued that through food consciousness, they rethink the national and transnational limitations- "particularly in terms of gender, sexuality, race, and class" (p.2). Besides, it is pointed out that many of the American "shifting, blended, multiethnic eating habits" have come as a result of merging the food ways of the colonists, indigenous people, and the increasingly diverse masses of immigrants (Gabbacia, 2005, p.5). This leads us to think thoroughly of the relationship between food and identity- specially the migrants' identity.

The migrants who left their original countries did not get rid of the recipes of their homelands' cuisine; on the contrary, they kept their food recipes as a part of their identity which they needed to retain and convey to the country of destination. Some migrants who have been identified as transnational migrants could utilize food practices to establish ties among their original homelands, current destination, and globality. "In the context of transnational migrant communities, food practices express group and individual identities as well as multiple social positionings within the current environment" (Chapman & Peagan, 2013, p. 367). Some transnational migrant writers have woven their literary writings or memoirs with food recipes relevant to their culture.

In recent decades, authors who migrated from the developing or under developing countries to Europe and North America introduced a new literary genre which describes "the formation of migrant identities that do not primarily rely on nationality – neither on the original one nor on that of the country of destination. Instead, these identities are formed by a variety of almost equal factors such as parents' birthplace, place of residence, work, language, education, lifestyle, and culture" (Wiegandt, 2020, p.206). These migrants who could adapt their original nationality as well as their new nationality of their country of destination are called the transnational migrants and are "therefore related to a social formation that exists across national boundaries" (Wiegandt, 2020,p. 207). The term "transnational" was first introduced in anthropology. It is argued that firstly, the term can describe social groups such as ethnic communities scattered across many nations; secondly, it can suggest a type of consciousness that produces individuals with de-centred

attachments to more than one nation or attachments that go beyond nationality; and finally, the term "transnational" refers to a type of cultural production: a "fluidity of constructed styles, social institutions, and everyday practices" (Vertovec, 2009, p.7). The hybridisation of styles relevant to particular nationalities produces "transnational styles in literature, art, dance, food, and fashion" (Wiegandt, 2020,p. 2). Eating, drinking, banquets' gathering, and cooking are some of everyday practices that may expose the transnational identity of some migrants. Some food writings such as Diana Abu-Jaber's memoir *The Language of Baklava* and Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* show the identity of the transnational migrants that rely on two different cultures utilizing food recipes as a means to construct their memoirs while relating their experiences.

Food memoirs are a kind of autobiography that is based upon personal experiences and foodways' description. They are considered a type of autobiography because they include the elements of the autobiography which are derived from the components of the term: "auto (the self), bio (life), and graphy (writing)"(Goodwin,1993, p.3); yet, food is another basic element that distinguishes the food memoir from the conventional common memoirs. Diana Abu-Jaber's memoir *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* relate their life histories from childhood to adulthood showing the different and sometimes contrasting influences in their life. Their books are also food memoirs that deal with "the association of food with cultural identity, ethnic community, family, and cross-cultural experiences" (Waxman, 2008, p.363). Diana who was born to a Jordanian father and an American mother may embody the assimilation of the almost contradictory western and middle-eastern attitudes. While using humor to show the conflict between the Arab concepts and the American lifestyle, Diana weaves some Arabian recipes into her narration. Growing up between the United States and Jordan, Abu-Jaber could depict the concept of the transnational migrant while struggling to find her place between the two countries. While Diana was born in America and traveled to Jordan to finally decide to settle down in America, Shoba Narayan, is an Indian writer who was born in India to Indian parents and traveled to the USA as a foreign fellow at Mount Holyoke.

In her book, *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* (2003), Narayan narrates her memoir that relates food to her Indian cultural identity in India and America. In fact, Abu-Jaber's and Narayan's books underline some major characteristics about food memoirs and the themes of Identity, family relations, gender, and culture, while structuring their narratives around food tales and recipes . Thus, I argue that a gastrocritical reading of Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* and Narayan's *Monsoon Diary* may reveal how food can reflect the transnational migrant identity, gender identity, as well as the structure of food memoir.

II. Food and Transnational Migrant Identity

The first wave of Arab migration to the United States of America began around 1880 and lasted until 1920. With the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act's quota system in 1924, the immigration from the Arab world was drastically reduced to about 1000 people yearly. After World War II, the US began to increase the number of the immigrants coming from the Arab world, selecting the highly skilled experts. As a result, "many educated people from countries like Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq came to the United States, marking the beginning of a phenomenon known as the "brain drain" (Little, 2022, para.11). Besides, the Refugees Relief Act in 1953 permitted many Palestinian families to immigrate to the USA; especially, after the 1948 war which led to the establishment of Israel and the displacement of many thousands of Palestinians. Other great numbers of Arab immigrants moved to America when the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 canceled the discriminatory quota system of 1924. Arab immigration declined when president Donald Trump signed an executive order to restrict the immigration of the Arabs from some predominantly Muslim countries.

Many of the Arab migrants' children who were born and raised in the USA moved back to their parents' homelands for different reasons and have experienced "re-acculturation"(Wiegandt, 2020, 208). Diana Abu Jaber's Jordanian father who was born to a Palestinian mother immigrated to the USA and married her American mother. Diana experienced re-acculturation when she moved with her family to Jordan a few times during her childhood and adulthood. Diana begins her book with

a reference to her transnational identity when she suggests: " I believe the immigrant's story is compelling to us because it is so consciously undertaken. The immigrant compresses time and space-starting out in one country and then very deliberately starting again, a little later, in another" (Abu-Jaber, 2005,p.xi). Throughout the aforementioned words, Diana defines herself as an immigrant who is very well aware of her situation that imposes on her to move from one country to another challenging time and place. That restart act adds a lot to the personality and experiences of the immigrant who acquires new skills and knowledge in each different country.

Besides, the issue of transnational identity is shown from the earlier pages of her memoir, when Diana Abu-Jaber was six years and interviewed by a show presenter who tried to pronounce her family name with some difficulty then asked her "Now, Diana, tell me, what kind of a last name is that" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p.3). Diana sums up her hybrid identity case in her comment: "What an idiot! I've got green eyes and pale skin, so evidently he feels I must speak English, unlike the rest of the row" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p.3). The show presenter who was not able to pronounce her family name and felt that the names of her cousins and sisters do not sound western or English felt satisfied with "evident relief" when he read Diana's name and saw her European features, but then he was confused regarding her family name and, consequently, her real identity. Diana answers, "English, you silly!" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p.3). The ironical remark "you silly" that the little child, Diana, uses to deride the show presenter may reveal the fallacy of false dichotomy that the show presenter commits when he insists on putting Diana either in the American identity or outside it while the little Arab American child, Diana, feels completely at ease to be both Arab and American at the same time. The American show presenter would like to construct the binary opposition between West and East, but Diana has come to deconstruct them by determining to retain her dual identity. Diana, who belongs to two different worlds represented by her American mother and Jordanian father, has the characteristic of the dual identity which sometimes seems as a question she has to deal with from an early age. Yet, she could reach a middle-ground between West and East through her dual identity when she affirms, " I learn early: We are Arab at home and American in the streets" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p.6).

In addition, this distinguished position of a narrator belonging to two contrasting cultures leads Diana to create a compromise to cope with the requirements of both cultures by adopting Arab traditions at home and American values outside. So, this unique intermixture has given Diana the asset of negotiating across "the cultural, spiritual, racial, and physical barriers" (Smith, 2008, p.4).

In her culinary memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, Diana Abu-Jaber has utilized food as a means to negotiate across the cultural barriers, emphasizing the question of transnational identity. For example, chapter one, which is entitled "Raising an Arab Father in America," discusses her father's and uncles' attempts to acculturate to American society and describes two recipes of "SHISH KABOB" and "LENTIL SOUP". She refers to her father as the "original Bud" who was trying to get involved in the American community while communicating with Americans frequently using the same greeting "Hey, Bud !" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p.4) Besides, each of her uncles has two names, the original Arabic name and another American one, such as: "Uncle Hal is really Uncle Hilal, Jack is actually named Jaffer, Danny is Hamadan, and Frankie is short for Qadir" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p.5). The two names they take for themselves refer to their desire to have a dual identity to comply with the large American community and their Arab familial community. In the same chapter, Diana tells readers about the "SHISH KABOB" meal that her father was preparing for his extended family members. Diana's Jordanian father and his brothers, who immigrated to the United States, have tried to immerse themselves into American society and, at the same time, strengthen their Arab family ties in Syracuse by sharing some dinner banquets together. These dinner banquets which are mainly prepared by her father on weekends are made by some oriental ingredients borrowed from each of her uncles. So, the contributions of each one of the extended family who provide the ingredients of "Shish Kabob" that Diana's father cooks and the whole family, including American wives, shares eating comes to symbolize "family unity, love, and stability" (Abarca, 2013,p.123). Eating together food of these mealtimes, including American and Arab family members, becomes a means of inclusion of the diverse cultures, for it interconnects the biological and cultural functions as well as the individual with the collective.

Her father and uncle Hal share "ferrying the sizzling skewers" and the narrator tells her readers about the secrets of "Shish Kabob" that should be eaten "when it is hot enough to burn your fingers and scald your tongue" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p.8). Besides, Diana narrates how her Uncle, Hal, distributes meat among relatives saying, "[t]his piece is for you and this one for you." Then she gives the recipe of the Arab meal "Shish Kabob" in detail, merging culture with the biological function of food and emphasizes how such a family gathering gets her father and uncles together and strengthen their bond with their Arab culture that is shown to their American wives and children while sharing some mealtimes. Food is used as a means to cross borders, bridge gaps, and underline the transnational identity.

Besides, Diana Abu-Jaber explains how some gestures made while eating may show the differences between the table manners applied by Arabs and Americans while eating together. The conflict between the Arab habits of eating and the American dainty has been underlined when the narrator describes how the grown ups pile the children's plates "with too much food" and refers to her uncle, Hal, "who likes to feed the children gaping mouthfuls of food from his own hands" and tries to feed their mother and unties, "who roll their eyes and bat his hand away, preferring their own dainty American portions on forks" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p.15). According to Montanari (2006),

> Since actions performed with others tend to [go beyond] the simply functional level to take communicative value, our human socializing instinct immediately attributes meaning to the gestures performed while eating. So in this way we define food as an exquisitely cultural reality, not only with respect to nutritive sustenance itself but to the ways in which it is consumed, and to everything around it and pertaining to it. (p.93)

Thus, the gestures of rolling eyes and bating Hal's hands have come to show the differences between two cultures seeking to meet each other without eliminating their cultural characteristics. Neither the Arab family members nor the American ones have stopped sharing meals or eating together.

Similarly, Shoba Narayan tells her readers in the prologue that her father's first visit to America was characterized by his fascination with American food:

> When he first visited me as a newlywed in America, he spent the entire winter making up an alphabetized list of all the foods he had never tried, and systematically went about trying them. He started with avocadoes, which are unknown in tropical South India, and quickly moved on to anise candy, chipotle peppers, Etorki cheese, Fig Newtons, Kettle chips, molasses, quince, tomatillos, *zahtar*, and everything in between. (Narayan, 2003,xiii)

Recognizing and exploring America via food, Shoba's father, who has been fond of the culinary adventures in America, tried to create a contact zone with the American culture throughout food; specially, when he tried to bring some original national Indian ingredients such as "powders, pickles, *papads*, and sweets" to his new destination in America, but the customs of JFK airport threw them carelessly (Narayan, 2003,p.202). As he wants to keep his bond with his homeland while exploring the new world by frequenting grocery shops, Shoba's father has been adding some substances he has newly known and bought from American grocers to the Indian meals that his wife was preparing.

Also, Shoba Narayan realizes the conflict between the Indian culture she was brought up with and the American culture she began to face after moving to study and live in the USA: "The contradictions between my two cultures — one that I was born into and one that I adopted — were enormous. India's fatalism was in direct contrast to the flux I felt in America. " (Narayan, 2003, 124). To overcome such cultural conflict between what is inherited and what is adopted, Narayan has used food to bridge gaps between Indian and American culture. She had to prepare a charity dinner to collect money from guests to support herself and be put through school. She served different international meals she tried to cook to satisfy the different tastes of the various immigrant guests as she believes that America is the country of immigrants. She chose to serve Turkish" babaghanouj,"

"Japanese umeboshi paste," Ethiopian "Aleecha," and Mexican "churros" (Narayan, 2003, 144). Yet, she finally decided to make "umpa," an Indian meal, when guests did not like some of the served meals. So, Narayan utilizes some Indian food to affirm her identity and create connection with other cultural identities. "Food is also tightly linked to people's **cultural identities**, or the ways they define and distinguish themselves from other groups of people" (Hasty, Lewis,& Snipes,2023, 14.3) . Not only did Narayan distinguish herself from other cultural identities, but she also sought to integrate her special cultural heritage into the new American milieu.

Besides, the first step towards creating a transnational identity began with the Doug's family, the host family in America, at supper time when Narayan suggests: "salad, bread, rice and beans for me, chicken for them, a fruit tart of some sort, and coffee afterward"(Narayan, 2003, 113). Supper time shows how Narayan could achieve harmony between her Indian dietary and American food traditions at the Dougs house. Yet, Narayan rejected the idea of eating meat which is considered a prohibited meal for some Indians. "As with all cultural institutions, there are various rules and customs surrounding food and eating. Many of these can be classified as either **food prescriptions**, foods that one should eat and are considered culturally appropriate, or **food proscriptions**, foods that are prohibited and not considered proper" (Hasty, Lewis,& Snipes,2023, 14.3). For Narayan, it is possible to eat vegetables and beans and impossible to eat meat: 3

> I couldn't bring myself to eat meat, and the fact that Claire described a hamburger as tasting like "chewing gum" didn't help either. I learned to love cheese and tolerate eggs, and I didn't eat anything that moved. But I always returned to Indian food. While the foreign flavors teased my palate, I needed Indian food to ground me. When all else failed, I would sit in my dorm room late at night, mix some rice with yogurt and a dash of salt, and gobble it down. (Narayan, 2003, 113)

Narayan has chosen to retain food prescriptions while adopting American culture when she declares that she can "tolerate eggs," for she would like to connect with the culture of the host country; but she abides by her native country food proscriptions when some of the host country foods challenge her Indian culture or conventions; for Indian food is essential to "ground" her personality in a remote unfamiliar milieu.

Therefore, food in Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* and Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* could create a contact zone between the original culture and the adopted one for both writers. Food could symbolize the syncretism of different cultures and identities, becoming a way of negotiating complexities of identities. Using food recipes entitled with names such as "Pongal" from India and "Mansaf Leben" from Jordan and describing the meals' preparation in English may underline the fusion of cultures which is implied in the use of English language while explaining meals which belong to Eastern cultures. The act of preparing and sharing the native foods becomes a way of reinforcing their connection to their original identities, even though they are physically distanced from that culture. The food serves as a comfort and a reminder of the difficulty in finding balance between the original cultural identity and the adopted one.

III. Food and Gender Identity

Food has been used to deconstruct the stereotypical gender roles in Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* and Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary*. Although the two memoirs mainly discuss the various food recipes which reflect the Arab cultural identity of Abu-Jaber and the Indian cultural identity of Narayan, they have also shown the issues of gender roles, redefining the gender identities by giving a broad scope to the concept of gender identity.

It is noted in both memoirs that males, represented by the narrators' fathers, show a deep concern of cooking food for their families in spite of the fact that preparing and cooking food for family is one of the domestic tasks that is commonly assigned to women. For example, Diana narrates how she initially recognized the culinary world from her father, she writes, " Bud, my father, carries me slung over

one shoulder when he cooks; he calls me his sack of potatoes. Mom protests, pointing the safety issues, but Bud says it's good for me, that it'll help me acclimate to onion fumes" (Abu- Jaber,2005, p.4). Therefore, the traditional gender roles have been challenged when Diana's father easily takes the domestic mission of cooking while her mother instructs him about what should/not be done towards important "safety" issues.

Like Diana's father, Shoba's father- who tries to prepare some meals for his family members after arriving in America- embraces a different gender role, even though he is not a talented or skillful cook, for he had not practiced cooking while living in India. Shoba states "One morning we woke up to find him brandishing a bowl full of chutney" (Narayan, 2003, p.199) . Thus, Narayan and Abu-Jaber could defy the traditional system that relegated women solely to the realm of cuisine, paving the way for a new vision of food as a means of broadening the scope of meaningful identity. They used food to blur the boundaries between masculine and feminine domains, as fathers adopted roles traditionally reserved for women, showing that love and family connections can transcend gender barriers.

Moreover, both Diana and Narayan utilized food to affirm their meaningful identities, rebelling against the submissive inferior positions imposed upon them by their communities. For example, Diana tries to defend her right to stay in the USA, disobeying her father's orders of sending her back home to Jordan. Diana's father was criticizing the way she was dressed, the late hour she returned home, and her bad marks, putting the blame of her adolescence on the United States as he believed that "in Jordan the problem would be solved" (Abu Jaber, 2005, p.182). The first sign of defiance has been shown in food when she declares "I hate Arabic food, " which, according to Diana's point, seems worse even than saying she's "not an Arab" (Abu Jaber, 2005, p.185). Finally her aunt, Aya, suggests cooking "baklava" as it might be a Greek, Turkish, or an Arabic meal, and Diana agrees. While the Arab food that Diana tells she hates has come to highlight the conflict between Diana's American identity and her father's Arab identity, another recipe, "Baklava" has come to bridge the generation-gap between Diana and her father. Baklava, with its layers of sweetness and complexity, reflects Diana's own layered identity—her

internal struggle to reconcile the sometimes conflicting aspects of being both American and Arab, as well as her evolving relationship with her father, who embodies the old-world traditions that sometimes clash with the American ways she is also accustomed to. Spending afternoons together baking "voluptuous pastries from a variety of ethnicities," Diana and her aunt, Aya, have been trying to find a special "womanly way in the world" (Abu Jaber, 2005, p.186). This womanly way has been shown when Aya advises Diana "Ask yourself, Do I want a baby or do I want to make a cake?" then she tells Diana " For me, almost always, the answer was cake" (Abu Jaber, 2005, p.186). So, food is more than a domestic chore, for it becomes an act of self-discovery and personal freedom.

Similarly, Shoba, used food as a means of defiance against the norms and societal restraints imposed upon females- specially, when her family invited Ram, the suitor who later became her husband- in preparation for an arranged marriage. Shoba, who does not believe in arranged marriage, tries to challenge such a way of getting married through food. Shoba narrates:

> As I sat down, plate in hand, Nalla-ma hissed, "A new bride does not stuff herself with bondas. Don't eat a thing on your plate." I defiantly ignored her glares and proceeded to eat every delicious morsel, fending off solicitous offers for seconds with a practiced wave of the hand. (Narayan, 2003, p.185)

By eating each morsel on her plate, Shoba challenges the feminine image imposed upon her by her grandma who creates a connection between the expected standardized woman behaviour and food as the ideal bride should not eat anything from her plate; an image that the elders retain and try to bequeath to the young females. Shoba rebels against the submissive role assigned to her about cooking and serving food to feed and nourish others,especially males. Besides, Shyam, Shoba's brother, declares that he intends to marry "a beautiful Iyer girl who can cook well" and should be at least four years younger than him so he can "boss her around and not have to put up with all this feminist stuff that Shoba comes up with" (Narayan, 2003, p.185).

Therefore, while food has been employed by the patriarchal society to objectify women, the female memoir writers employ it to affirm their own identity. Diana Abu-Jaber and Shoba Narayan could reclaim cooking as a space of independence, creativity, and empowerment. They also gave a broader significance to the concept of gender identity when they referred to their fathers culinary activities in the kitchen.

IV. Food memoir structure

Food memoirs always trace the writer's journey from childhood to maturity through which they discover their passion for food while "eating it, cooking it, writing about it, [or] traveling to experience it" (Waxman, 2008, p.365). Both Diana Abu- Jaber and Shoba Narayan tell their experiences with eating food that is served for them, then realizing its components, traveling to explore it, and finally writing about it. The most fully conceived form of the food memoir, according to Waxman (2008), is that which "chronicles the growth and development of the memorists through the lens of food memories, in narratives that either begin with childhood or that interpose frequent flashbacks to earliest formative experiences"(p.364). In both memoirs, it is noted that food recipes are a fundamental cornerstone of the structure of the two books: *The Language of Baklava* and *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes.* Diana Abu-Jaber and Shoba Narayan started their experiences with food as children watching their parents while cooking and serving food to them. As they grow up they begin to participate in preparing food, noting its impact upon their communities. Finally, they construct their food memoirs which revolve around personal experiences connected with food.

Diana and Shoba begin their memoirs with a direct reference to food either in the "Forward" or in the "Prologue" earlier pages of their memoirs: "The stories were often in some way about food" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, xi); "FOR ONE WHO EATS so little, my father has an unquenchable fascination with food" (Narayan, 2003,xiii). So, from the beginning they initiate their readers to food writings; consequently, readers become ready to receive information about food recipes and food stories. Besides, by using first person point of view, both writers could apply a strong

authentic voice, showing their unique perspectives and creating a sense of intimacy with readers, especially when they use the native names of their meals.

Diana devotes the first two chapters to relating her childhood memories about her family, especially her father and his extended family. It is so easy for readers to notice that she relates the main incidents of her life to some main meals, explaining their ingredients. For example, in chapter two, she describes how her father was not able to secure himself a good job in America and was spending time cooking some Arab meals for his family such as chicken livers meal that Diana gave it the title "Nostalgic Chicken Livers" to refer to her father's nostalgia because he was not able to comply with the American lifestyle. Then she tells her early experience at Saint Mary's school as a pupil and how sister John was invited to dine with them, so Diana explains a rice recipe that is entitled "Bud's Special Rice for a Special Company." Therefore, Diana's recipes come to symbolize special feelings and moods represented by the adjectives, "Nostalgic" and "Special," which she adds to the recipes' titles to reveal either her father's sense of homesickness or her family's suspicious reaction towards sister John's mischief at school, for she was fond of eating Diana's special meals that she was taking from her home; thus, Diana's parents decide to invite sister John to know more about her personality and inform school administration about her misbehavior. Diana moves to chapter three which is considered the longest chapter as it spans nearly 40 pages in which she describes, in detail, her personal experience as well as her family's in Jordan. The chapter is entitled "Native Food" and includes five recipes many of them represent the Arab culture such as "Sambusik Cookies" and "Bedouin Mensef Leben." As usual, Diana describes many recipes which are coming from the Arabic culinary while narrating their relation to some incidents that took place in Amman. For example, she tells how she decided to take her siblings to buy ice cream and got lost; then, she provides the recipe of "Amazing Arabic Ice Cream" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p.47). Each chapter ends with a detailed recipe about preparing a specific meal and the number of individuals it serves.

Shoba Narayan, likewise, constructs her memoir of life history and Indian food recipes. Shoba's memoir is divided into eighteen chapters; nearly, in each

chapter she provides a recipe of an Indian meal. The first chapter that is entitled "First Foods" informs readers that the first foods she ate were "rice and ghee" (Narayan, 2003,p. 3). Shoba highlights Indian culture while discussing the relationship between food and some religious rituals. She was six months when her parents conducted "Choru-unnal ceremony at the famous Guruvayur temple in Kerala" (Narayan, 2003,p. 3). Shoba explains that "Choru-unnal" means "rice-eating" and the ceremony celebrates the first meal of an infant, and she concludes the chapter with the ghee recipe. "Food operates as one of the key cultural signs that structure people's identities and their concepts of others. Although commonplace practices of everyday life, cooking and eating have far-reaching significance in our subject formation. " (Xu, 2008, p.2). That has been clearly shown in Shoba's book through which food serves as a cultural touchstone representing the values, rituals, and family ties. For example, she describes how the Holi harvest festival has been characterized by Thandai drink that she explains its recipe as follows:

> Thandai fortified by hhaang, a local intoxicant made from the cannabis plant, is a favorite drink during the Holi harvest festival. Bhaang seeds are similar to coriander seeds. They are powdered and added to the recipe below to give it an intoxicating kick that lasts hours. This is a benign but delicious version. (Narayan, 2003,p.78)

The ingredients are coming from India or Asia.

It is also noted that the two memoirs reflect the physical and psychological growth of Diana and Shoba " like the bildungsroman [that] traces the evolution of a youth into a mature food aficionado, into a food professional and (often) into a contended adult " (Waxman, 2008, p.364). Both writers have narrated their life history from childhood to adulthood, portraying the places and incidents which witnessed their maturation and their relation with food. As Diana was born in America and moved to Jordan, then to America once more to settle down, she begins her food memoir's earlier chapters with describing her childhood milieu focusing upon her father's and family members' relation with food, then she tells her memories about Jordan and her father's decision to take his family to live there and

his final decision to go back to live in America. These phases parallel Diana's physical and psychological growth. In Jordan as a little girl she befriended Hisham who was ten years and psychologically "confuse being a child with being an adult" invited her to introduce her to his mother and offered her "Sambusik cookies" which are among her favorites "and speciality of Hisham's mother- hers dissolve on the tongue in buttery flakes" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p.42). Hisham, who liked the little Diana and was negotiating the details of their engagement, did not like Bennett, his competitor, who reveals his biased racist views when he rejects to taste "Sambusik cookies," saying, "I never eat native food. Neither should you" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p.42). The native Arabs' food that Hisham offers to befriend Diana has been rejected by Bennett because he disdains the Arabs and their food. Throughout debates about eating native food, Diana begins to realize that her father's Jordanian food, whose taste she liked as a child, symbolizes the Arab's identity or "the other" for Bennett, the young English boy, who distances himself from consumers of native Jordanian food to underline his own sense of superior Britishness. Therefore, Diana has had to reconsider her position as an American-Arab child. Later, in high school in the USA, Diana tells how immigrants' kids were not on diet- unlike their American female counterparts who were on diet. The parents of immigrants' kids have been coming from countries "where a certain lushness is considered alluring in a woman" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p. 161). She describes their lunch bags, saying, "Our lunch bags open and the scent of garlic, fried onions, and tomato sauce rolls out- pierogi, *pelmeni, doro wat*, teriyaki, kielbasas, stir-fries, borscht…..I become famous for my lunch bags full of garlic-roasted lamb and stuffed grape leaves" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p. 160). Therefore, the lunch bags of the immigrants' kids refer to different cultural identities which are distinguished in the high school, in addition to a more developed sense of self-awareness that motivated Diana to compare the content of her lunch bag which appreciates lushness in females with that of the American girls who are always on diet. "Food, as the most significant medium of the traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies, organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self in distinction from others who practice different foodways "(Xu, 2008, p.2). Diana, who became a teenager, recognizes the different beauty standards of immigrant and

American females; yet, she is still proud of her food, which symbolizes a different cultural identity, while being tolerant towards others. The immigrants' food, in general, and Diana's food, in particular, became a means to signify their uncommon traits stressing their self-esteem. Finally, when Diana became a matured younglady she becomes more able to articulate her vision and admits:

> Come back, I want to say to my second self, *there is tea and mint here, there is sugar, there is dark bread and oil*. I must have these things near me: children, hometown, fresh bread, long conversations, animals; I must bring them very near. The second half draws close, like a wild bird, easy to startle away: It owns nothing, and wants nothing, only to see, to taste, and to describe. It is the wilderness of the interior, the ungoverned consciousness of writing. (Abu-Jaber, 2005, p. 327)

She finally feels that she should reunite her two selves. One of them is very much concerned with food and the taste of Jordanian meals and family life and another is interested in writing about personal experiences and food. By writing her memoir, Diana achieves her complete autonomy and self-discovery.

Also, Shoba begins with her childhood stories about food in India and how food accompanied the rituals of her birth and her further growing up. She narrates how her consciousness as a little girl could create a connection between food and religion: " As a child, after a long morning of prostrating myself before multiple deities, I would stand in line for the *prasadam*—food that is presented to God and then distributed to the devotees—which in my mind was the best part of the visit" (Narayan, 2003, p.6). Tasting delicious food that is presented to the Hindu deities has initiated the Hindu rituals to Narayan's consciousness.

As a child, Narayan was left to live with her grandparents after her mother had given birth to her baby; so, she tells readers about some Indian traditions which are relevant to cooking and domestic tasks. She informs readers that her grandmother like her female ancestors "would not light the stove until she had taken a bath. The early-morning hours were for prep work: cutting vegetables, grating coconut, and measuring out spices" (Narayan, 2003, p.15). She reveals some eating manners of

Indians, specially, about eating with hands- an Indian tradition she began to appreciate when she got older. Then she mentions how her grandmother makes "spectacular rasam: a mild yellow lentil broth" which is a better meal for the chilly days. She stresses the benefit of rasam with mashed garlic when she informs readers about her mother who was given rasam to increase the "flow of her breast milk" (Narayan, 2003, p.19). She concludes the chapter with a rasam recipe introducing its benefits and usage in India and the USA. "A heartwarming comfort food that South Indians eat with rice as a first or second course accompanied by vegetable curries, *rasam* is served in America as a starter soup on a winter night. I offer a diluted version as a hot drink with appetizers or fried *papadam*" (Narayan, 2003, p.20). Her trial to compare the Indian Rasam recipe with the American one might be another way of affirming her hybrid identity.

Like Diana Abu Jaber, Shoba Narayan was sent to a Catholic nuns' school, for her parents believed that such schools impart a better education. At School Narayan began to know that she is permitted to befriend Muslim children but the tacit understanding was that she wouldn't " eat at their homes because they cooked and ate beef" (Narayan, 2003, p.44). That is why, she wasn't supposed to share Amina, her Muslim friend, the chicken biryani prepared by her mother. Throughout the various meals at school, Narayan began to grasp her Hindu Brahmin identity and follow the cuisine of vegetarianism. She "would have received a clip on the ear" from her mother, if her mother found out that she had shared Amina eating meat or chicken. She adds, "I circumvented my mom's clear instructions not to eat meat by having Amina remove all the chicken and meat pieces before giving me morsels of rice" (Narayan, 2003, p.44). To make that balance between retaining her Hindu identity and befriending Muslim schoolmates, Narayan started during her early childhood to be trained to keep her religious teachings and be tolerant with others by accepting the fact that there are differences among the different religions and cuisines come to underline differences among different religious rituals. Not only did food identify Shoba's religious identity, but it also refers to the characteristics of the others' religions.

Moreover, Narayan draws on food when her uncle suggests that they might allow her to travel to the USA to join Mount Holyoke college - but only if she cooks them a vegetarian feast and they like it. Once again, Narayan uses food as a signpost to her life history and evolution. She decides to cook okra and concludes the chapter by giving a recipe of "Okra Curry." It is also noted that before describing that recipe, Narayan narrates a legend about a poor young man who wanted to marry a princess whose father challenged him to play a game of chess with his cleverest minister. The young man could beat the minister after he was advised by an old woman to eat okra for the whole week because it increases his "brain power" (Narayan, 2003, p.108). Also, she describes the circumstances of her marriage and she concludes the chapter by providing the recipe of the "panagam" beverage that was continuously consumed during her wedding party;yet, before revealing the ingredients of that beverage, she digresses to narrate the tale of "asura- a really bad man" and how he was killed by "Narasimha (man-lion)" whose favorite drink was "panagam" (Narayan, 2003, p.190). Narayan seizes the opportunity of telling her memoir to merge some personal incidents with specific meals' descriptions while relating these meals' recipes to some Indian folk tales or legends. Thus, food has been utilized by the narrator as a device to illustrate Indian culture, stressing the point that food might be considered a potential element of folklore.

Finally, inserting food recipes in each chapter in both literary texts of Abu-Jaber and Narayan shows what has been described as being the culinary moments which are often "to be found in digressions and asides, seemingly incidental to the text. Yet, they are critical to the writer's form and imaginative landscape" (Shahani, 2018, para. 5). The forms of both memoirs have been based on the culinary moments which are relevant to personal experiences emerging from distinguished cultural identities and rich imagination. The concluding recipe of each chapter in both memoirs come to seal a specific time period in the life history of the two writers. Both writers do not impose recipes upon text; on the contrary, the food context is fundamental in their literary texts as it portrays the scenes mentioned in their memoirs.

V. Conclusion

For many centuries, the presence of food and/ or drink has been shown in many literary texts which encouraged some literary writers and critics to review and re-examine many of the food scenes and food writings, using the lens of gastro-criticism to study the mutual influence between literature and real life; and thoroughly understand the cultural significance of food and foodways within literary contexts. Therefore, proposing a gastrocritical approach has become an essential perspective, specially, for the literary writings that include food recipes such as: Diana Abu-Jaber's memoir *The Language of Baklava* and Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes.* Applying a gastrocritical approach to the two memoirs could reflect how preparing and sharing meals has shown the transnational identity of both writers and some members of their families, gender identity, and the structure of food memoirs.

It is noted that the concerned memoirs have portrayed the transnational identity of the migrant writers and some of their family members. While both writers' relationships with their families may be fraught with tensions around cultural differences and expectations, sharing a meal together becomes a way to bridge those gaps and express affection. In a sense, food in their memoirs transcends mere consumption and becomes a conduit for love, history, and familial connection. In her memoir, *The Language of Baklava,* Abu-Jaber has shown the characteristics of the transnational identity throughout the dinners' meals that her father was preparing for and sharing with his extended family. Describing recipes from the Arab Jordanian cuisine highlights the idea of utilizing food as a powerful means of fostering inclusion, stressing the biological and cultural function of food. Also, Shoba Narayan employs food as a means of connecting and harmonizing Indian and American cultures, discussing the cultural tension between the inherited traditions and adopted practices. Enjoying dinner time with some Americans illustrates how Narayan managed to find a balance between her Indian culinary heritage and American food customs while sharing meals with some American families. By using English language to describe some native recipes, Abu-Jaber and Narayan could remould the language into new usages to portray the transnational identity that could

make a balance between their original culture, represented by native recipes, and the adopted culture, represented by the American community they have involved in, sharing some of its members eating the native food and finally writing about it..

Moreover, both Abu-Jaber and Narayan could use food to redefine gender identity by challenging some stereotypical gender roles. They confronted the traditional system that confined women solely to the realm of cooking, introducing a fresh perspective on food as a tool for expanding the concept of a meaningful identity. They utilized food to dissolve the lines between masculine and feminine roles, particularly, when fathers took on tasks typically associated with women, demonstrating that love and family bonds go beyond gender divisions. While patriarchal societies have historically used food to marginalize and objectify women, female memoir writers like Diana Abu-Jaber and Shoba Narayan have reclaimed cooking to become a space for independence, creativity, and empowerment. By highlighting their fathers' involvement in culinary activities, they also expanded the understanding of gender identity, challenging traditional norms and redefining the role of food in shaping personal and cultural identity.

Furthermore, throughout their memoirs, Abu-Jaber and Narayan have applied a similar structured pattern in their books. In each chapter, Abu-Jaber and Narayan include food recipes tied to significant life incidents or rituals, highlighting the distinct role of cuisine in shaping their special cultural identity. By introducing that noteworthy form in their writings, they could establish a specific structure for the narratives of food memoirs. Narrating their memoirs in a chronological order that traces their physical and psychological evolution makes their food narratives a bildungsroman food genre.

Finally, one can safely state that gastrocriticism is a growing critical theory which might be applied to various literary texts and genres, enlarging the scope of literary criticism and interdisciplinary studies.

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