

Eating up differences: Food as a Portable Marker of Home and Identity in Diana Abu Jaber's *Birds of Paradise*

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The first utterance of most human beings is almost always one which refers to food. The centrality of food, and identity construction lies at the heart of Diana Abu-Jaber's novel, *Birds of Paradise* (2011). The novel, this paper argues, delves into the metaphysics of human emotions and the human psyche using the metaphor of food and eating. This study analyses the metaphor of the self through the experiences of the self and in relation to the other. It makes pertinent use of Martha C. Nussbaum's concept of 'transition', as well as her theorisations on anger and violence. Sara Ahmed's notions of othering, and that of emotions and their affect, also play a crucial role in the analysis of the work concerned. In this novel, Abu-Jaber, provides ample space for the many meanings and multiplicities of significations of the self, and through it, of being itself. The socio-cultural ambiguities which shape the individual are at the crux of the narrative. The self, here, is a signifier of endless significations, multitudinous possibilities — all under the purview of a metaphorical 'I'. Apart from this, the paper also looks at the panoramic view which the novel provides of the multicultural West, and the politics of cultural transmission from one community to another. Lastly, this paper seeks to offer a concise analysis on the problematic implications of 'home' and its relationship to the food tropes.

Key words: *Food, Self, Psychology, Identity reconstruction, Home, Multiculturalism.*

Introduction

"A cookie... is a soul" (11), is the first line of Diana Abu-Jaber's novel, *Birds of Paradise*, which was published in 2011. This is not just the crux of this particular novel, but Abu

Jaber's oeuvre in totality as well. Thus, this paper investigates Abu-Jaber's literary text by focussing on her obsession with food. Diana Abu-Jaber, an Jordanian-American writer, has successfully found her way into people's literary lives through the medium of food, and not just as a metaphorical usage but as a living entity and reality. As a professor at Portland State University, Abu-Jaber published her first novel in 1993. Subsequently, ensued the experiments in literary cuisine of her own variety, which has hardly any precedence in American literature. George Lakoff opines in his book, *Metaphors We Live By* (2003), that "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (5). The food in Abu-Jaber's writing becomes the metaphor of human existence, and of the human mind. This is the central argument of this paper and it will be investigated through an in-depth analysis of the text and its vicissitudes (Ahmed, 2000).

Abu-Jaber's, *Birds of Paradise*, begins with a flashback to the point where Stanley and Felice are kids, and their mother Avis, a pâtissier, are baking and reviewing homemade cookies and wafers. The short prelude encompasses an idyll of a family which shatters step by step, throughout the narrative. The novel is set in the City of Miami and its suburbs, which come to life through her meticulous descriptions and vivid detailing. The exotic location adds to the strange racial concoctions narrated throughout the story. Avis is married to the Ivy-league lawyer Brian Muir. She has led a peaceful life until her teenage daughter, Felice, decides to leave the house. Felice left the house not once but many times, and she was always brought back. Eventually, Felice does not come back at all. Felice, the daughter, makes up her mind to meet her mother once in a while, but each time never ends up making it to the meeting. This leaves Avis rattled, and depressed, making her the shadow of the woman she was. This also has a longstanding impact on her family life as well, with her husband finding his Cuban co-worker interesting, and her son going off tangentially with regards to his work, education, and personal life. As a mother, she had put all her hopes into Felice, her daughter, leaving her son Stanley feeling unwanted, all the time.

Psychological Maze

The novel procures a psychological maze out of its manifold chapters, each dedicated to one family member, going into the deep recesses of their minds in a zigzag fashion, and all leading towards one final point — Felice, the centre of their universe. The now 18-year-old daughter of the family, however, has her own universes to gather and serve: a junkie, a wannabe model, and a streets-person, she lives a life of borderline danger, dire poverty, and utter desperation. The author weaves a tale of desperation for both the characters and the reader, as she frantically moves from one perspective to another and nobody is aware of the real reason behind this wayward search. The absurd family drama does not come to a conclusion until the very last pages of the novel. Abu-Jaber's mastery over narration and her deep, introspective writing style aids her with the creation of this mind-maze.

The open-ended string of associations founded by each of the characters connects one with the other, and one's psychological dilemma with the others. They are all constantly grappling with the idea of pain, and a resistance towards it clinically, and with extreme emotional complexity. Each character has their own venting mechanism as well. Avis, leaving aside her disintegrating relationships with her son and husband, obsesses over her runaway daughter, and she transforms this obsession into her culinary centrepiece. The desserts she makes for her clients are often overwhelmingly representative of her internal chaos and her desire to reach perfection. Her daughter was her idea of perfection, as she wanted to become the perfect mother. Being born to a mother who was the least motherly, Avis wanted to change that in her life, and Felice was the only site where this could have been undone. When that space evades her, Avis finds it impossible to reckon with. This desire to have a daughter through which she can change the past is again resounded when after the argument with Stanley and his pregnant girlfriend, Nieves, Avis assumes that the future grandchild would be a girl. Avis believes that Nieves is Stanley's way of replacing his cinematically beautiful sister Felice; but in fact, the child already seems to be Avis' replacement of her daughter, Felice, who has drifted away from her. This idea has seeped into Nieves as well, that she is herself a figure like Avis (in fact, she has had issues with her own mother, who never had individual time for her), and that her own daughter might become someone like Felice. It is also because of this reason that Nieves tries to build a bond with Felice, trying to understand her side of the story, and her psychology (Ahmed, 2014).

Brian finds solace in his compulsive fixation with the figure of Fernanda, a fellow co-worker, her Cuban beauty, and the way she eludes him every time. Brian comes off as the perfect gentleman, but he is never her idea of transgression. Until the point at which he realises this, Brian sets aside everything else that is supposed to make him worried and focusses on only her. However, once the realisation dawns upon him, he decides to breathe freely, and to rekindle the fire of his dying familial relationships. As a father, Brian has been quite liberal and understanding, but his own behaviour with his daughter Felice, and her absconding, remains like a Bermuda Triangle in his life. Like his wife, Brian also realises that his life had been centred more on Felice than around Stanley, and things changed after Felice had left. Her abandonment had a different effect on Brian, making him more cut off from the emotional rollercoaster ride that the family was taking, and from each person. His attempt to find peace elsewhere is symptomatic of this escapist mentality. This is again seen to change when Brian comes face-to-face with Felice, whom he was avoiding all these years, and takes the first initiative to rebuild that missing emotional connection. He is quite sympathetic towards Stanley, and his girlfriend Nieves as well, even when his wife seems to disapprove of the relationship, and of the pregnancy in particular.

Stanley's perspective of the story reveals a side of parenting that often goes unnoticed: negligence. Being the elder, male sibling among the two kids, Stanley had to grow up before

his time. Stanley is shown as a sensitive, sensible young man, with intelligence and a strong sense of emotional understanding of the other. However, this has driven him away from his mother, who failed to recognise him for what he was. He was always interested in her work, the art of patisserie, and more than his sister ever will be, but his mother never acknowledged this. Moreover, she made it a point to discourage him by giving negative comments. Stanley had quit baking ever since the episode where he had baked a *castagnaccio*¹ and all Avis had to say was that “It’s fine, but it isn’t quite right” (34). Stanley has avoided sugar ever since (34).

Both parents never quite saw through Stanley’s mind, and it is evident in their reaction towards Nieves. She is the kind of person Stanley would find attractive, but the parents fail to see what he saw in her. The rawness of her character eludes them. Moreover, they, from their stances of sophistication, look down upon her with utter disdain. Stanley’s choice, though, was always visible in his life decisions; he had declined Ivy-league opportunities to open an organic market aimed at the welfare of the society. He is somebody who wishes to do the little he can do to make the world a better place and is somebody who looks at the universe around him without many inhibitions or preconceived notions. This is again seen in his behaviour towards Emerson, who is a brawny fellow with little intellect. Stanley appreciates him for the workman that he is, and also evaluates him as a possible candidate who could join his workforce. It is not from a utilitarian perspective that he comes down to this analysis, but with great empathy and liking towards a good human being.

Felice belongs to a very peculiar frame of mind; very similar, yet strangely different from the rest of her family. The entire novel begins as a quest to find Felice, and to decode the reasons of her elopement. However, eventually, it winds down into a family’s journal, a monumental evidence of their history. Felice, unlike her brother, is less sensitive to human life and emotions, but is righteous at the same time. The reason for her misery stems from this aspect, as she ridicules a friend, Hannah, for letting her body be used by the music teacher out of sheer desperation. The girl wanted some sort of sexual gratification, which in turn would work as a validation for her. Felice happens to interrupt Hannah and Mr. Rendell, the music teacher, in the act of sexual intercourse, and she interrogates Hannah later, to know why she had done this. Her reasoning was that Mr. Rendell was interested in Felice, and since she did not regard him at the very least, he made do with her, Hannah. The frivolousness of her argument repulses Felice, and it eventually culminates in a letter which her friends draft to ridicule Hannah. The letter leads to Hannah’s suicide and this becomes a turning point in Felice’s life. She happens to stumble upon some of Stanley’s personal writings, where he had drafted a manifesto of his life, and she decides to do something similar. As a repentance to her ill-thought deed, she makes a resolve to let go of all the riches, all that she would inherit owing to her upbringing and her family background and live a life of frugality. She runs away

¹ It is a gluten-free, chestnut flour cake from Tuscany.

from the house six times before she convinces her family to let her be, to not keep looking for her. She lives in an abandoned apartment that has been used by many homeless young people, drinking, and smoking up. However, her self-restraint has stopped her from becoming someone who has let go of her morals completely. She lives conscientiously, in whatever way she could afford to do so, trying to make her place as a model, and to earn her own livelihood. She goes through the kind of ridicule Hannah had been through, or even worse, and finds balm to her remorse in the act of doing this.

Felice's stubbornness finds its tender edges with the arrival of Emerson, a boy she knew at the place where she was put up, and he, in a way, takes her back to her family. There is a sense of the familial emanating from the man that Emerson is. For instance, his build, the masculine exuberance, the goodness which possibly could remind Felice of her own brother and father; all this has something very intimate about them, resonant of a family structure, and its comfort. It is this sense of belonging, to someone and someplace, which leads Felice back to her brother Stanley, and by that, reacquainting herself with her family. Emerson and Nieves act as the binding forces in this process of restructuring the broken family. The unborn baby also plays a crucial role (Nussbaum, 2005).

The underlying sense which the reader gathers from the family's day-to-day agony is their essential inability to talk each other's language. Their desire to communicate, yet the ineptitude to read the mind of the other or speak one's own mind, reflects in their interior monologues. Stanley is unable to tell his family about the woman he is with or about his child who will soon see the light of the day. When it does come to common knowledge, the elders of the family prove inefficient to react accordingly to the sensitive situation. The formal structure of the family denies Felice the space to confess. She pits the goodness of her family, and its members, especially of her mother, against her own sinful existence. Brian cannot reach out to his wife, nor can he commit adultery. Avis believes baking to be her language, that she can communicate with her family through it, but her neighbour Solange makes her realise it is not so: "Sugar is like a compass. It points to trouble", she says (230). This inability to read or to substantiate the emotional quandaries of one's own near and dear, precipitates as frustration, anger, and resentment within each of the characters.

Martha C Nussbaum, in her book, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (2016), situates anger as an emotion with some usefulness. She argues that it is "a signal to self and/or others that wrongdoing has taken place, as a source of motivations to address it, and as a deterrent to others, discouraging their aggression" (6). She derives a concept called 'transition', which is the capability of the human self to let go of irrational, vengeful anger by transforming it to a future-oriented, positive mindset which will culminate in personal and social welfare. Nussbaum goes further to elucidate three major standpoints on anger, which are often resonant in multifarious literature, both philosophical and everyday ones. She says

that, firstly, anger is necessary, when one is wronged, to the protection of dignity and self-respect. Secondly, anger at wrongdoing is essential to taking the wrongdoer seriously, rather than treating him or her like a child or a person of diminished responsibility. Thirdly, anger is an essential part of combating injustice (6).

These judgments are central in the analysis of *Birds of Paradise*, and the character of Felice. At a very young age itself, there grows within Felice a sense of anger, directed towards herself and by association, it transpires into a resentment towards her family. Being responsible for Hannah's death in some way, Felice finds it only natural to be angry at her own wrongdoing, which she considers as something to be taken with due seriousness, and therefore, she takes action against herself. She confronts herself and realises that no court of law can punish her for this, and thus, she decides to indict herself for the crime that she has done (Nussbaum, 2016).

Stanley's sense of frustration and deep-seated resentment takes him away from the conventional modes of living, steering towards humaneness and ingenuity that he considers greater than anything else. This idea possibly stems from the fact that his mother, although a perfectionist, is an imperfect human being, and mother. There is a lack of genuine intensity in her love, other than when it comes to his sister. The way he addresses her, as "mother" and not "mom", makes Avis realise this as well (189). Avis' anger is often directed towards the rest of her family, setting aside her daughter Felice, who is one of the core causes of it. Avis' intolerance towards the neighbour's bird signifies this anger. It takes a purgatorial visit to the seaside, where she strews pieces of a cake that she had made for Felice, to let go of this anger. Her neighbour Solange, who guides her through this journey, becomes the keeper to her soul, as well as her spiritual guru. Solange makes her understand that her pride is at the base of her existence (Mercer and Linda, 2007). Avis often would think highly of herself and her cooking, but she then realises that desserts are, in fact, "a metaphor for something unresolvable" (32). "Sugar is a metaphysical problem: each occasion of eating asserts its own needs", she says (171). The franticness with which she tries to bring sugary sweetness to her life backfires every time, as it results in bittersweet moments and memories. She becomes aware of her own shortcomings as a mother and a partner: "Minds and bodies tell one story: I tasted; I loved; I was young. But the *now* burns everything in its oven" (172). Her husband, Brian, on the other hand, is a combination of both his children: Felice, and Stanley. He turns inward and looks for positive approaches towards the given situation. He is somebody who cannot live in the misery of the self or resentment. He tries to fortify their lives in every way possible. He tries to not linger over bad memories or events. He is a transient soul, living in the moment alone.

In order to understand the mind of the characters, it is important to delve deep into the milieu of the novel. Sara Ahmed, in the Introduction to her book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*



(2004), opines that the “alignment of family, history and race is powerful, and works to transform whiteness into a familial tie, into a form of racial kindred that recognises all non-white others as strangers, as ‘bodies out of place’” (2). This sort of an alignment is particularly evident throughout the narrative of this novel. For instance, the Irish-German ancestry has been mentioned over four times through the course of this work. The exoticisation of Cubans, Haitians, and other coloured American communities, is also a common thread in the entirety of the narrative. Brian’s workplace is teeming with such characters, and their eccentric lifestyles which shock him and then suggests to such a linear alignment towards a white perspective, as opposed to the coloured lives and their perspectives. This is again evident in Felice’s chapters, where she mingles with audacious white kids, and seemingly outlandish kids of Mexican, Cuban, and other South American origins. Avis’ distrust and dislike towards Solange, and her exotic bird resonates this aspect of the narrative as well. Eduardo, a help from Stanley’s market, even mentions in the passing to Avis that she is still a slave of the European masters, and cleverly, he adds that we all, in the modern day, choose our own masters as well; this slavery is sealed with consent (Lyotard, 1984).

As a diasporic writer, Abu-Jaber’s decision to portray a racial mixture of the Americans and the Europeans itself points to a slightly prejudiced admixture of superiority, as promoted by the white-skinned ideological masses. The others are painted as unconventional, while the white lifestyle has an air of permanence. This ‘making strange’ of the other’s culture, is what Sara Ahmed discusses in another one of her critical works, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*. Ahmed argues that it is through this process of narrativizing the other, by portraying the other as strange, and by association, their culture becomes strange as well (as mentioned above, with regards to textual instances). Ahmed suggests that the real dilemma for these white portrayers is that when they objectify the other’s culture as a “strange culture”, they are becoming the very object owing to proximity (12). It is the phenomenology of this exploration which becomes evident by analysing the emotions and effects of the self. It becomes important to analyse such minute aspects, as the self is a concomitance of the multiplicity of perspectives and the subsequent experiences.

Quoting Spinoza, the Jewish-Dutch philosopher, Sara Ahmed says in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, that “emotions shape what bodies can do, as ‘the modifications of the body by which the power of action on the body is increased or diminished’²” (4). Felice and Avis both represent this idea of the emotive body, capable of more than what anybody would imagine them to do. According to Ahmed, the cultural politics of emotions is developed not only as a critique of the psychologising and privatisation of emotions, but also as a critique of a model of social structure that neglects the emotional intensities, which allow such structures to be reified as forms of being (*The Cultural Politics of Emotions* 12).

² Quoted from *Spinoza’s Ethics: And on the Correction of the Understanding*, published by Everyman’s Library, London in 1959. Translated by A. Boyle.

The narrative of this novel is in itself, a result of such a cultural and cross-cultural politics of emotions, where the inherent social structure contradicts the thematic of the quintessential American family. The moment of peripeteia in the narrative is rooted in this idea of the cultural disjunction and an inability of this white-American self to accept the same. Solange, for instance, casually, yet with much pain, tells Avis that she had left her son behind. To Avis, this leaving is quite different from Felice's running away. Although it is the same act of abandonment, the cultural connotations make the experience of departure dissimilar. Solange is almost a refugee, living on an expired visa. Felice, with her white-American heritage, is at a superior position, even when she lives frugally, starving herself half the time. The concept of leaving, as in the story Nieves tells Felice, as a departure from the familiar, and towards the strange, lies a recurrent repetition of this pattern, which appeals to Felice. This is so because she has the upper hand, and she has the right to choose. Even Emerson is her choice; nothing is forced upon her. However, Solange had no other option than to leave. She had become a political absconder, and even beyond that, she has a nomadic soul which belongs to the soil, the roots, and the peripheries. Someone like Felice can never be part of the periphery. The narrative is, in a way, resisting what the French philosopher Lyotard calls the grand narratives, as it conforms to the cultural patterns associated to the colonial past, and its residual modernity (Lakoff and Mark, 2003).

Body and Food

In Abu-Jaber's, *Birds of Paradise*, the body is portrayed as a container of the food. Her narrative sheds light on the representations of the body and food within the narrative. Any narrative of food is intrinsically associated with the body and its behavioural tendencies. In Abu Jaber's, *Birds of Paradise*, food functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory, and exile. It also becomes an avenue for questioning the boundaries of culture, class, and ethnicity. Food is a natural repository for memory and tradition and reveals the possibility for imagining blended identities and traditions (Mercer & Linda, 2007).

Birds of Paradise subscribes to a purveyed notion of beauty and normalcy, as approved by the society in which it is supposed to take place. Felice, for instance, is described as unnaturally beautiful, and her body petite and tall. This needs to be analysed with regards to her mother's occupation, that of a patisserie. This suggests a deep-running eating disorder which is somehow because of her mother's obsession with sweets, and her inability to focus greatly on nutritious food and cooking. This is emphasised upon in the scene where Eduardo, Stanley's help, brings vegetables to Avis and comments that her son disapproves of her eating habits and wishes she would eat *more* food. Stanley had a vegetable garden at home as well, which again suggests to the same fact that Avis rarely cared about the holistic development of her children's' bodies; she was rather interested in pleasing them with the

magic of her expertise. Stanley, being the son, was taken in for a while, but Felice never cared for the same. This brings us to another point, one of gender roles and their reassertion throughout the novel. It is to be noted that conventional gender roles are conformed with and accepted within the framework of this novel. Like when Stanley is dissuaded from being a chef or a baker, whereas there is a dream, an aspiration growing in Avis' mind for her daughter to follow her footsteps. Brian insists that Stanley joins his line of business. Again, Felice wishes to fall into the conventional American dream of being famous, and being a model. Returning to the earlier point, this obsession with not eating, and also, with careers where the body is central, points to the unseen emphasis on the body and its perishable nature. This idea hits the reader in the face after the revelation about Hannah's death, and the rape attempt which follows, where, to save Felice, Emerson had to kill the white man and hurt his accomplice as well. As described by Elizabeth Grosz in her book, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (1995), the preferred body is always the one which is under the control of the subject's will. By leaving the comforts of a home, and by subjecting herself to pain and trauma, Felice no longer possesses a body which is capable of containing itself to its own will; it fluctuates under the feeble powerlessness of its self. Emerson, on the other hand, is the representation of power, and inner-strength; he also has an astute capability to be single-minded in most situations. By neglecting the body, both Felice and Avis are feeding to a "crisis of reason", a destruction of all knowledge, all history, and its reproduction which the body is entitled to (Grosz 25–6). This act is one of violence on the self itself. Nussbaum, in her article entitled, "Women's Bodies: Violence, Security and Capabilities", argues that violence, bodily violence in particular, is most disabling as far as a woman's life and her ability to lead a normal life are considered (168). The violence of the self on itself is, thus, as criminal as that of the other on it. The subjectivity of the self is as much crippled by this violation as by any other. Felice, in the narrative, undergoes physical abuse multiple times as well, the most fatal occurrence being the attempt to rape her. The only reason why her body had escaped the trauma of that violation is because of Emerson, who underwent far greater psychological trauma and suffering for her sake. This magnifies the idea of justice, as repeatedly projected within the narrative (Grosz, 1995).

In the famous Chomsky-Foucault debate³, there is an interesting turn when the two great theorists and philosophers of our times contemplate upon a case for justice (Foucault, 1991). Foucault believes that justice needs to be studied in terms of the social struggle, whereas Chomsky emphasises on the legality and better justice, as opposed to law and ideal justice. This debate here is a transitional phase between the modern and postmodern dilemmas; it moves from the ideal, absolute power to the fragmentary power vested in multifarious agencies. In this particular novel, the agencies of power are subverted in several ways. For one, Felice takes justice into her hands when she punishes herself, in order to discipline, which again is a crucial concept Foucault talks about in his book, *Discipline and Punish: The*

³ See "Debate: Noam Chomsky, Michel Foucault: On Human Nature" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wfNI2L0Gf8>



Birth of the Prison (1975). This is again seen in the instance where Emerson murders a man in order to save Felice; this is a society faintly reminiscent of what Émile Durkheim would describe in his concept of anomie⁴. It is a society where normlessness prevails and the whole is broken down into lawless bits. Although not altogether anomic, the society depicted here goes beyond the curbs of law and legality, and the modern dilemma (Durkheim, 2002).

To sum up, Abu-Jaber has used her narrative to reveal the racial differences which look like food's ingredients that can sometimes create a new harmonious society. This study began at a point of studying the metaphor of the self, as depicted in Diana Abu-Jaber's, *Birds of Paradise*. This study has taken a course, such as Lakoff's aforementioned description of metaphor, in analysing the metaphor of the self through the experiences of the self in relation to the other, for which the particular novel was a vast playground of meanings, with variegated significations. The self, here, is a signifier of endless significations, and multitudinous possibilities — all under the purview of a metaphorical 'I'. It is loaded with the inner-and-outer self. Exploring the self, for Abu Jaber, is like preparing a new dish of food with a recipe.

⁴ In his book titled *Suicide* (1897).



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