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**WE THINK WHAT WE EAT: CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR AND THE CULINARY MIND IN THE LANGUAGE OF BAKLAVA****Anfal Jabbar Nouri and Asmaa Khalaf Mohaisen**

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<https://doi.org/10.59009/ijllc.2026.0201>*Received Date: 18 April 2026 / Published Date: 26 May 2025*

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**ABSTRACT**

In Diana Abu-Jaber's memoir, the language of baklava, food functions as a universal language, battleground, and peace treaty rather than a means for survival. While the work reveals a teenage girl's rebellion against her Jordanian father's traditions, a deeper cognitive struggle unfolds beneath the surface, a conflict and struggle best illustrated by conceptual metaphor theory. This theory, developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980, states that humans understand abstract concepts by subconsciously mapping them to tangible, and physical experiences. In Abu-Jaber's work, the dominant and generative metaphor is: culture/identity is food. This conceptual framework frames the characters' thoughts, inflames their conflicts, and ultimately charts the narrator's path toward a hybrid self. By analyzing chapter thirteen that carries the same title of the book, we see how Bud, the father, is trapped in the sub-metaphor "food is a fading memory," while Aunt Aya champions the idea that "food is a creative act," and the narrator's journey is one of cognitive remapping.

**Keywords:** Food, Identity, Baklava, Conceptual metaphor.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

Are we what we eat? Or we eat what we are?, these two questions present a false dichotomy. Identity is not a stable essence manifested solely in food, nor it is a blank slate written only by food.

Rather, identity is shaped in the space between what we eat and who we are. It is a dialogue between inner self (beliefs, memory, and the need to belong) and the outside world with which we interact. We bring our past to the table, eating what we are, but the meal itself with its context, flavour, and shared experiences shapes us to become, in part, what we eat. Food functions as a universal language that bridges cultural boundaries and expresses emotions that language alone cannot. In the language of baklava, food plays a vital role, as a generative metaphor of culture and identity.

The concept of metaphor underwent a radical transformation with the rise of cognitive science, representing a vital shift from its traditional rhetorical interpretation to cognitive model. In contemporary linguistic and philosophical thought, metaphor is no longer viewed as a merely decorative element in language or a stylistic figure that is limited to poetic expression. Rather, it is recognized as an essential mental mechanism, closely associated with human perception and deeply embedded in the cognitive processes, meaning creation, and conceptualization. Within this modern framework, metaphor precedes language; it functions conceptually as a basic structural principle, guiding how individuals understand abstract phenomena and how they shape their own lived experience. As a result, metaphor plays a

crucial role in generating meaning, framing thought patterns, and enabling the production of multiple contextually connected interpretations. This shift challenges the older classical assumptions, where metaphor was traditionally reduced to a mere language substitution based on analogy and focused largely on aesthetic effect (Awatef, 2026).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The word "metaphor" is derived from the Greek word "metapherein," meaning "transfer from one place to another" (Abduboriyevna, 2019). Metaphors are prevalent in human perception and behavior in everyday life, not just in language. From Aristotle to the present day, many linguists have sought to unravel the mysteries of metaphor (Hussein and Ismail, 2025). Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 6) state that "human thought processes are largely metaphorical." They define metaphor as the mapping of something in one domain to something else in another domain.

In their book *Metaphor We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson have provided the groundwork for conceptual metaphor theory in 1980. This model represents an essential shift from previous linguistic models, as it states that metaphor is not a marginal characteristic of language, but rather a central organizing principle of human cognition. Within the framework of cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor is understood as a systematic link between two distinct conceptual domains: the source domain, which is typically rooted in concrete and embodied experience, and the target domain, which is often abstract and less readily accessible. Through this connection, individuals can understand complex or abstract phenomena through more familiar experiential constructs.

Proponents of conceptual metaphor argue that virtually no abstract concepts can be discussed without metaphor: there is no direct way to grasp them, and we can only understand them through the lens of concrete concepts we experience firsthand (Abduboriyevna, 2019). Conceptual metaphor redefines metaphor as an essential and pervasive element of human cognitive systems, extending beyond literary discourse to encompass everyday communication, social practices, and cultural representations. By highlighting the cognitive dimension of metaphor, this approach provides a suitable analytical framework for studying the relationship between language, thought, and reality (Awatef, 2026).

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative approach informed by cognitive linguistics and literary analysis. Its main aim is to explore cognitive framework that shape metaphorical language in literary texts and to understand how these frameworks influence the creation of meaning and conceptual representation. The data of this study is Diana Abu-Jaber's memoir "the language of baklava" particularly chapter thirteen which carries the same title. Language of Baklava is a memoir that heavily examines the theme of food to define cultural identity, familial love and memory. The book utilizes culinary memories to reveal Diana Abu-Jaber's dual identity as a Jordanian-American person.

## 4. DATA PRESENTATION

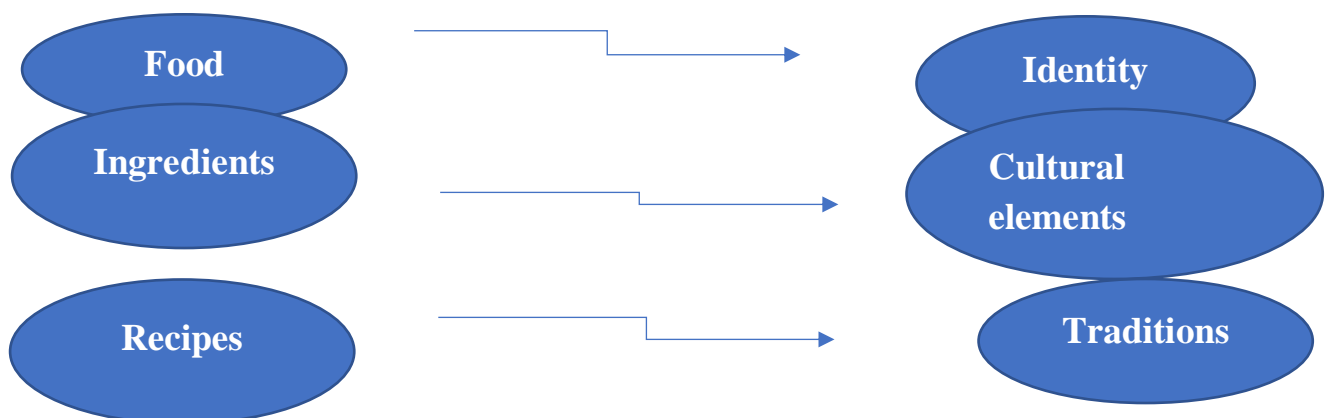
### *Bud's Cognitive Prison: Food Is a Fading Memory*

For Bud, the father who is struggling against the American dream, food is the vital means to maintain his disappearing heritage. His conceptual mapping is rigid and nostalgic: ingredients represent lost homeland, recipes represent tradition, and eating corresponds to an act of cultural preservation. This analogy is painfully evident in his cooking. He believes that

by imposing “Arabic food”, he is imposing a Jordanian identity. When Diana’s, the narrator, Americanized behaviour erupts the bad grades, the sullen “fine”, his solution is to banish her from the kitchen: “you are going to live with Aunt Aya”. In his logic, placing her in a Jordanian kitchen will force her to assimilate the culture and thus identity with it. His deepest fear is that her daughter cannot properly digest her heritage. The most telling expression of his cognitive bind comes from aunt Aya’s poignant analysis: “He eats the shadow of a memory. He cooks to remember, but the more he eats, the more he forgets.” This line is a direct commentary on a failed conceptual metaphor. The source domain “food” is linked to the target domain “Jordanian identity” that is no longer a tangible reality, but a mere illusion. Walnuts are not from Jordanian soil; butter is not from Jordanian lamb. Thus, the mapping between them is flawed. Each and every meal he cooks is a cognitive act of grasping at a shadow, causing him frustration and a growing sense of loss. He is the man who is trying to feed his family with a recipe that requires ingredients that no longer exist.

The Source Domain

The Target Domain



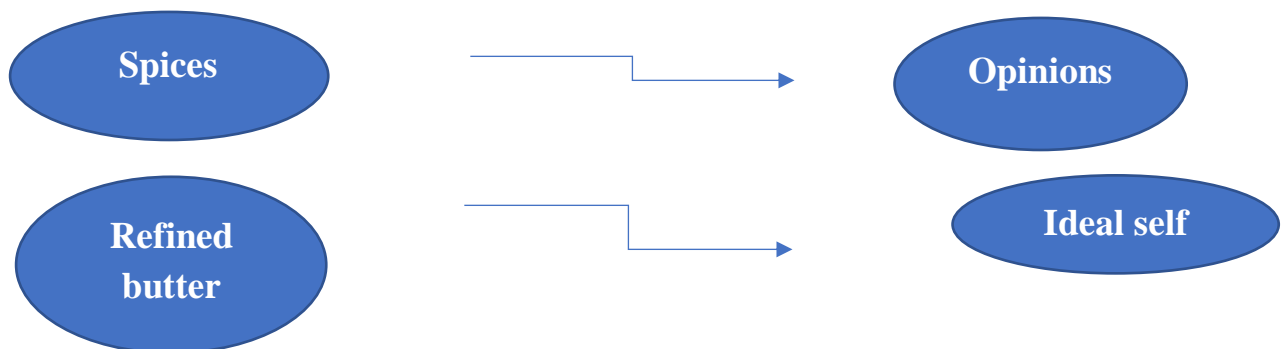
### **Aunt Aya’s Liberating Logic: Food Is a Creative Act**

In contrast to Bud, aunt Aya employs a flexible and generative metaphor: “Food is a Creative Act”. Within her cognitive framework; the kitchen is a laboratory, ingredients are possibilities, and recipes are open to be revised. This allows her to navigate multiple worlds- Bedouin herbalist, J.C. Penny enthusiast, and a global paster chef. She immediately defuses the narrator’s crisis by rejecting the very foundations of the conflict. When, Diana, the narrator, declares that she hates Arabic food, expected to be punished, Aunt Aya simply replies “I hate it too”. This is a masterful rhetorical move that reshapes the conceptual domain. It serves the automatic connection between “Arab” and “food” thereby opening up a new cognitive space. Aunt Aya’s subsequent question “But how do you feel about baklava?”, is the key. She offers a new perspective. By linguistically shifting from the Arabic “Baklawa” to the Greek “Baklava” and declaring its unknown origin, she detoxifies the dish. It is no longer a symbol of particular culture to be rejected or accepted, but rather a product of shared human artistry “a poem about the deeply bred luxuries of Eastern cultures”. Her lessons extend this metaphor:

“Heat up your spice before you add it to the mix so it will have something to say.” Here spices represent opinions that must be activated to contribute. “We clean the butter to remind ourselves of the way our lives should be—light, delicate, and pure.” Here the refined butter represents the ideal self. Her most radical statement “food is a way to forget”, reveals that for her, food is not for clinging to the past, but for transforming; a tool for emotional and cognitive digestion.

The Source Domian

The Target Domian



### Diana's Cognitive Remapping

The narrator's internal conflict represents a struggle between two competing conceptual systems. At first, she accepts her father's framework (food is culture/identity), but she reinterprets its meaning. If being Jordanian means eating and submitting to Arabic food, then she will reject it to reject the identity that it represents (Jordanian identity). Her declaration: “I hate Arabic food!.. it is like a rush of cold air after holding in my breath for too long “, is a cognitive as much as a culinary revolt. This physical sensation reveals the embodied nature of this conceptual shift; she rejects an “component” of her Arabic identity. Aunt Aya's intervention helps her in learning new ways of mapping things. The baking classes that she offers are like a cognitive training session. They both don't start with the loaded Arabic baklava, but with cream puffs and strudel- foods less associated with Arabic culture. This enables the narrator to rebuild the “food is creation” metaphor in a neutral way. When the baklava is finally made with homemade filo pastry, the narrator experiences a sense of sensory inspiration: “The baklava is so good; it gives me a new way of tasting Arabic food.” This is a literal description of an intellectual breakthrough. Taste is no longer just an incentive for rebellion, but has become a complex aesthetic and emotional experience.

## 5. CONCLUSION

At its core, “The Language of Baklava” states that identity is not a fixed recipe to be followed, but rather an art to be created. Through the lens of conceptual metaphor, we see that the family's battles were never limited to baklava or algebra grades, but were instead clashes between unconscious cognitive worlds. Bud's concept of “food as a faded memory” results in isolation and conflict, while Aunt Aya's concept of “food as a creative act” opens a path toward agency and integration. The narrator's journey from “I hate Arabic food” to “Thank you for sharing this baklava” is the story of her mind learning to taste differently, how it breaks down a painful inherited metaphor, and how it constructs its own nourishing and innovative one. Ultimately, the memoir itself becomes a cognitive art, merging story and recipe to demonstrate that how we think about what we eat shapes the essence of our identity.

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