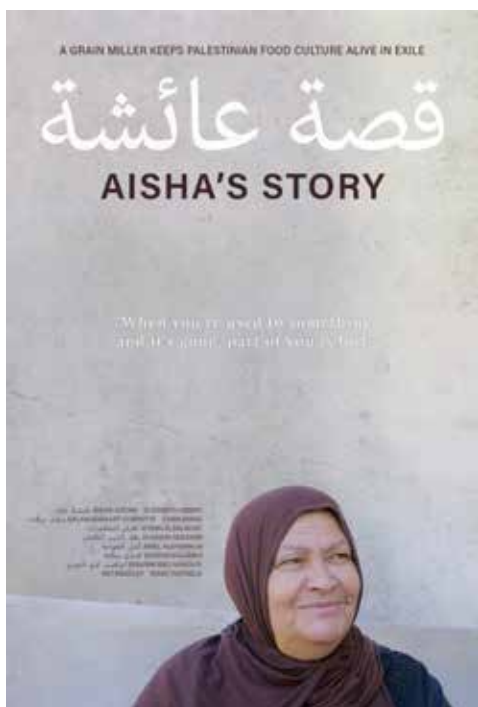


Reviews

From Mill to Memory: A Journey of Food Practices in Exile

Review by Yafa El Masri

Aisha's Story. Directed by Elizabeth Vibert and Chen Wang, with Aisha Azzam and Salam Barakat Guenette. Thinking Garden Productions, 2024. Trailer online at vimeo.com/889407916/7b6b44b947.



Abstract

The 2024 documentary *Aisha's Story* centers on the life of Aisha Azzam, a displaced Palestinian woman who uses food to create an entire world of belonging, identity, food security, growth and care for her family and community. Scenes of picking herbs, exchanging ingredients and recipes, cooking, baking, and eating together as a family, illuminate the everyday life of Palestinians living in exile and the extraordinary practices of resistance that maintain connections to Palestine's past, present, and future.

Keywords:

Palestinian refugee women; Palestinian food; gender; documentary film; food culture; oral history; climate change.

The first few scenes of *Aisha's Story*, the 2024 documentary directed and produced by Elizabeth Vibert, Chen Wang, and Salam Barakat Guenette, were just too familiar for me.¹ Central to the film is the story of Aisha Azzam – a displaced Palestinian woman who uses food to create an entire world of belonging, identity, food security, growth and care for her family and community. I, too, am a Palestinian refugee who was born and raised in a refugee camp. Even though Aisha and I have had very different lives – Aisha was displaced to Baqa'a refugee camp in Jordan and my family was displaced to Burj al-Barajna refugee camp in Lebanon – Aisha was almost telling my own story, my mother's story, or even the broader story of displaced Palestinian women. Hearing Aisha talk

about her relationship with heritage wheat in the opening scenes of the film, I could imagine my mother's mornings, smell her baking, and hear her call out that breakfast is ready. In this documentary, Vibert, Wang, and Barakat Guenette visually present daily and mundane experiences of an exiled Palestinian. Within scenes of picking herbs, exchanging ingredients and recipes, cooking, baking, and eating together as a family, one observes the very essence of displacement and the extraordinary practices of resistance.

The documentary opens with a quote from Aisha: "When you're used to something and it's gone, part of you is lost." The film then continues to elaborate, through multiple scenes of Aisha speaking and cooking, the experience of loss that older members of her family endured upon their forced expulsion from Bayt Mahsir in Jerusalem subdistrict in 1948. Through storytelling, interviews, and archival material, the film covers Aisha's life, from her childhood between Jerusalem and Jordan to her indefinite exile in Jordan into old age, while also showing how Aisha constantly uses the materiality of food (including the practices around food preparation) between the *here* of Baqa'a camp and the present and the *there* of Palestine.² She showcases the heavy stone mill, used to make the family's daily bread, that her grandparents carried all the way to Jordan. Aisha explains the struggle of carrying such a heavy object, but also notes how indispensable it was: "Wheat is the heart of Palestinian life."

Indeed, objects of displacement are heavy, but mostly with memory: they tell biographies, expose crimes, and bring back fragments of a once-upon-a-time paradise.³ The stone mill has been passed on from generation to generation in Aisha's family since 1948, and Aisha still carries it around to farmers markets and heritage markets today. Aisha and her husband also took over the family mill in Baqa'a refugee camp. This act, so deeply connected to the inheritance of 1948, is undertaken to support the family and to safeguard Palestinian heritage by making healthy and authentic heritage durum wheat available to the camp and surrounding areas. For thirty-five years, her mill has been a destination for Palestinians and Jordanians seeking healthier choices by buying heritage durum wheat and flour. After her husband begins to struggle with blindness and then cancer, Aisha takes on a massive burden of caring for him and their children while running the mill to generate income and feed the family. Bodily and economic sustenance, culture and heritage, and memory are thus intertwined.

In addition to material objects, women in exile like Aisha carry recipes of traditional meals that they continue to cook, such as *musakhan* and *maftul*. Aisha lingers to think about the herbs that she wishes she could have, the ones that grow there and not here, such as wild thyme. She highlights the differences between here and there when she explains that Jordanians cook *mansaf*, while we, Palestinians, cook *maqluba*. Aisha is aware that the distance between the two places is not simply physical. In her words, she wishes she could just walk across the Jordan River and go home. She remembers what she calls the most difficult piece of news that she has ever received: that she would no longer be able to visit Jerusalem and pray with her father at al-Aqsa Mosque after the 1967 war and the occupation of Jerusalem. Forced separation is the essence of displacement, and the distance between here and there marks a painful absence that

needs to be filled. We see Aisha filling the distance with stories and recipes, attempting to make the distance smaller, attempting to bring there, Palestine, closer.

Aisha undertakes extensive efforts to defy the separation and keep her Palestinian culture alive in exile. She employs memory in the revival and protection of her family's sense of identity. We meet a few of Aisha's children, who identify as Palestinian despite being born and raised in Jordan, and who speak extensively of their intimate relationship to a land that they have never seen. They learn about the landscape of Palestine, and the right of return, from the many stories that Aisha tells them while cooking, collecting herbs, or making food with them every day. Indeed, the difference between memory and history is that memory is a site of relocation, which has the capacity to transport you from here to there, despite borders and restrictions.⁴ Therefore, Palestinian memory is more than a mere recollection of historical facts or a chronological narration – it is rather a reproduction of Palestine in exile to protect it from erasure.⁵

Aisha's mother taught her everything she knows, and therefore she aims to do the same with her children. When Aisha cooks with her children and grandchildren, she uses the term “hand by hand” to refer to their intergenerational cooperation in preparing the daily food. She seems to be describing how she includes the younger ones in a collaborative reconstruction of Palestine. Even though Aisha claims to focus on teaching the daughters how to cook (because of presumed gender roles), we constantly see the young boys watching, helping out and lending a hand, asking questions, and learning about the sociopolitical circumstances of access to food and land. What might be dismissed as simple chatter about food might better be understood as what Aisha herself calls “oral history” methods employed to preserve Palestinian culture.

Aisha's knowledge of wheat and other plants also reflects a deep and native connection to the land. In the film, she explains how organic wheat should not be artificially irrigated but is rather irrigated by rainwater only. This enables the wheat to absorb its nutrients from the soil and the land, she explains, while non-organic and imported grains gain their nutrients from irrigation water and chemical fertilizer. Her explanation highlights how irrigation and chemicals break the sacred link between the plant/food and the earth, and the resulting loss of taste and nutrition. Aisha is knowledgeable and aware of the wider realm of challenges that threaten the earth and consequently her community's social and cultural well-being. The documentary takes us on a journey into the way Aisha's community experiences the impact of climate change. We visually experience the community's struggles in accessing water, as Aisha narrates her perception of decreasing rainfall and hotter winters through the impact on the crops. Her specific knowledge of both the changes in the rainfall periods and variation in temperatures as determinants of change in the quantity and quality of agricultural production conveys a deep connection to the earth and an awareness of its response to exploitation.

Throughout this film, we come to see the many difficult responsibilities that Aisha has taken upon herself between protecting her Palestinian memory and protecting her

family. Aisha cooks not only to maintain the Palestinian food traditions, but also to provide for her family. Despite the heavy history and harsh reality, Aisha navigates her continuously changing world with strength and love. She brings a family of twelve children and twenty-two grandchildren together over a hot meal, even when she cannot afford all of its ingredients. She teaches her daughter the secrets of nutrition while picking herbs in the olive grove. She bonds with her neighbors and friends over chats about where to buy high quality olive oil. Aisha weaves care as webs of safety for the people and things that matter in her life. She is enmeshed with a caring life partner, a loving family, good friends, and connection to the land, all providing support as she faces social expectations, a difficult market, and a changing ecology. These connections are meant to provide, nourish, preserve, and protect.

Through excruciating circumstances, Aisha is patient. She speaks of waiting to go back to Palestine, *inshallah*. Indeed, Aisha shows us that waiting is more than an undynamic act of nothingness; it is an act of standing strong and being unmoved in the face of challenges. While waiting in exile, these simple acts of acquiring a skill, feeding a family, and caring for a sick partner are acts of survival and resistance.⁶ While Aisha waits, she prepares for the return.

Aisha's Story is more than the mere biography of a woman building a life in a waiting zone. It is the story of an entire community that was promised return over seven decades ago and which has been constructing its own vision of return ever since. Aisha, like hundreds of thousands of uprooted Palestinians, has been building her own Palestine in exile. She builds it with all sorts of material – with the stone mill, the *musakhan* recipe, the stories of her family's life near Jerusalem, the medicinal plants, the folklore songs, the quality time with her children, and the gossips with her friends. They are all building blocks of a replica-world of Palestine, meant to preserve the Palestine she knew, so that it does not fade away.

This documentary explores Aisha's emotional and physical worlds. The film's many portraits of the refugee camp evoke the landscape of displacement and attend to the visual contrast between the green home and the grey exile. Aisha speaks of a land full of plants and herbs, yet she inhabits a land of permanently temporary structures. For a refugee, this film will feel a lot like home, for its portraits of both Palestine and exile. For those who have never experienced displacement, this film will be like walking in the shoes of someone who lives it. Even if you only experience for one hour what Palestinians have been living for decades, I hope these scenes will linger beyond the film itself, and that you will remember Aisha as you cook, share family meals, or reach down to pick herbs from the soil.

It is possible to walk away from this documentary with the feeling that you have developed a personal relationship with Aisha the mother, the refugee, the baker, the entrepreneur, the herbalist, and the activist. She may remind you of some amazing woman in your life, or many of them. When I asked the filmmakers about the personal relationship they developed with Aisha throughout this project, they instantly talked about the role of intuition and emotion in mediating this entire interaction (along with the immense role of interpreters, of course). They also applauded Aisha's talents as

a filmmaker: she apparently had a way of always knowing what and how to show things. Before Vibert and Wang could even ask, “What does that look like?” Aisha would be visually representing the concept in question. So when you see her picking the fresh thyme, laying it to dry, and then crushing and milling it, or when you see her eating *zayt* and *za‘tar* for breakfast with two of her grandchildren, know that these were scenes suggested by and led by Aisha. Hence the documentary’s name: This is not a story *about* Aisha, this is *Aisha’s Story*.

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Endnotes

- 1 *Aisha’s Story* has yet to be officially released at the time of writing this review, but the filmmakers granted me the privilege to watch it in its almost-final form. The documentary was produced as part of the dissemination activities of Vibert’s SSHRC-funded research project. The larger project looks at community-level initiatives that aim to protect local food systems and resist global and national neo-liberal and extractive pressures and threats in various geographical settings, including Jordan.
- 2 Jean-Xavier Ridon and Alistair Rolls, “Between Here and There: A Displacement in Memory,” *World Literature Today* 71, no. 4 (1997): 717–22, online at doi.org/10.2307/40153293.
- 3 See Dima Saad, “Materializing Palestinian Memory: Objects of Home and the Everyday Eternities of Exile,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 80 (2019): 57–71.
- 4 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* no. 26: 7–24 (1989), online at doi.org/10.2307/2928520.
- 5 Sama Alshaibi, “Memory Work in the Palestinian Diaspora (Personal Essay and Art),” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 27, no. 2 (2006): 30–53.
- 6 See Alison Mountz, “Where Asylum-Seekers Wait: Feminist Counter-Topographies of Sites between States,” *Gender, Place, and Culture* 18 no. 3 (2011): 381–99, online at doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2011.566370.