

Intersections of Food and Identity in South Asian Diaspora Literature

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Abstract

*Immigrants struggle when they relocate to a geographically, socio-politically and culturally different host land. Their lives reflect characteristics including identity, otherness, hybridity, mimicry, nostalgia and alienation. The diaspora ties their identity with their ethnic culture, which encompasses their eating habits, customs, traditions, way of life, and so on. Eating ethnic cuisine is frequently viewed as eating "the other." Food plays a key and powerful role in exploring memories related to the homeland. The ethnic culture of migrants is portrayed in academic work on food and identity; in addition to influencing people in the host country in terms of social structures and language, culinary habits have a significant influence as well. Food-centred nostalgia is a recurring theme. Recipes sometimes travel where people cannot. Food allows the diaspora to temporarily return to their homeland and serves as a link between nostalgia and diasporic identity. Restaurants, spiceshops, and other traditional shops act as sites of memory and agency in a multicultural society. Food points serve as a meeting place for ethnic minorities and mainstream western society, eventually breaking down the gustatory barriers. In this paper comparative research has been made on the impact of food on the identity of South Asians by analysing and interpreting the novels of these three female writers mentioned here. In the present paper, the impact of food preferences on the Identity of the diaspora is studied using the original novel Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. The researcher investigates comparative food identity in the first and second generations, as well as how national identities are consolidated in culinary terms. The character's identity crisis is examined critically in light of postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity.*

Keywords: *Diaspora, Literature, Food, Identity, Culture, Hostland, South Asian, First Generation, Second Generation.*

Food is a source of nourishment and energy. It traverses with symbolic, psychological and social aspects of human existence. It is a key mediator of social relationships. Food connotes a symbol of identity and is an indicator of social identity. A person's religion, ethnicity, class, and gender can be indicated by his different food habits. As such, food plays an essential role in making us who we are, our preferences for the type of food and eating patterns, go a long way in the development of our personality. It plays an important role as far as individuality, self-conception, cultural difference, and affinity are concerned. Food rises above the primary function of nutrifying an empty stomach to the act of consolidating collective memories of immigrants' ethnic identity. It connotes the history of people who have eaten it in past. Immigrants' traditions imply how food is eaten, when it is eaten, the various ingredients required to make a particular dish and whether it is authentic or not. There is an integral connection between identity and memory. According to Michel Bruneau, "food functions in diasporic contexts as a

culturally symbolic signifier and an icon that abridges the intricate web of linkages between the members of a community and their territory." (Bruneau, 38) When immigrants breach national boundaries to flourish in an alien land, they have to keep on with the activities of assimilation, tasks in which food preferences, the way of cooking and even the act of eating play a precise but strong role. Immigrants constantly strive for illusive authenticity. If they achieve that level of authenticity in terms of the taste and smell of whatever they are cooking, it gives a sense of control to them. They can reconstruct their identity in the host land.

South Asian literature provides us access to a homely atmosphere and eccentric foodways which are moulded into the thread of storytelling. It helps to explore the society and characters on which the narrative is centred. The concept of eating, preparation and the consumption of food forms a functional part of the narratives. These narratives encompass ethnic communities maintaining identity by

using food in the family as a cultural exchange during festivals, and rituals to maintain their historical ethnic identity.

Food-centred nostalgia is a recurring theme in all three novels. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali have made use of culinary memories. These writers tend to use gastronomic memories as a lens to analyse the state of immigrants and culinary practices functioning as an essential part of moulding their identities. These writers have devoted much attention to the relationship between ethnicity, culture, race and food in the novels namely the *Mistress of Spices*, *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane*.

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* narrates the life of Tilo who is trans-migrated in an old woman's body. She runs a spice store in Oakland, America. She sells spices which act as remedies for those who come to her store. Tilo exhibits four different identities as she continues to change from Nayantara to Bhagyawathitan to Tilottama and in the last Tilo becomes Maya. She ascribes mystical and healing properties to the spices. Her inborn insight is completely linked to her rootedness in her homeland.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, first-generation immigrants Ashima and Ashok move to America and develop an Indian way of life. They invent an Indian kitchen in an American house which helps them in remembering their cherished memories of India through culinary practices of cooking ethnic food and observing rituals and festivals of the homeland.

In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Nazneen is married to NRI Chanu who is twice her age living in London. She leaves her homeland, Bangladesh after marriage and settles in Brick Lane, London. Nazneen finds herself different from the people of the host culture whether it is language, autonomy, culture or race. Her poor linguistics skills hamper her communication with the outside world. She remained engaged with domestic chores. Nazneen's lack of belongingness to the host land is accentuated by the problems she confronts when making an effort to recreate and feel the concept of 'home' that she used to in homeland as against the cold, material idea of the 'house' where she dwells. In London, she reveals: "what can you tell to a pile of bricks? The bricks will not be moved."(BL,2003, p.87) Ashima stands in her Cambridge kitchen "combining Rice

Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper."(NS,2008, p.1). She tries to satiate herself by creating Bengali snack *jhalmuri* "the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms."(NS,2008, p.1) that would help her revisit the nostalgic taste of home. She is immediately jolted back to her present reality, due to the lack of certain taste she desires "tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing." (NS,2008, p.1)When immigrants come to the host land they did not only bring their language, and social structures but also their food habits. David E. Sutton in his work "Remembrance of Repasts – An Anthropology of Food and Memory" asserts that the smell and taste of food and its consumption act as a pneumatic trigger that evoke powerful recollections among human beings. He opines that smell and taste cannot be recalled at will. It is easy to associate these sensations with past experiences and it is very easy to recognise them. The smell and taste of food are responsible for producing lasting memory impressions. The experience of food involves aspects like cognitive, emotional and physical.

At midnight in a flat in Brick Lane, Nazneen "took a tub of yoghurt from the fridge and sprinkled it with sugar."(BL,2003, p.77) Chanu always insisted she to eat during meal time but she showed self-abnegation. It gradually becomes her habit. She derived pleasure "taking solace in these midnight meals."(BL2003,p. 77) Nazneen reminisces about her Amma who "used to make yogurt: thick and sweet and warm. Nothing like these plastic pots from the plastic English cows. But still, with the sugar, it when down."(BL,2003, p.77)Food works as an efficacious culinary zone and an "emotional anchor" (Mannur, 2010, p.27) whereby aspects like nostalgia, the resultant creation of hybrid meals and hybrid identities, cultural shock, attempts at cultural preservation through culinary recreation, fluidity of ethnicity, the clash between generations-are effectively staged.(Mannur, 2010; Pazo, 2014)

In *The Mistress of Spices*, the spice store appears as a home to immigrants. It relieves them from stress and conflicts. Spices represent Indian culture and give immigrants the taste and smell of 'home' in America. The buyers breathe in the air infused with the aroma of the

masalas and reminisce about their homeland. They relate themselves to homeland through food. Divakaruni asserts, "home is where you move frequently through the dark." (Sandhya, 2005, p.205) There is a reference to an elderly couple who visit Tilo's spice shop: "See, bunches of pudina leaves green as the forests of our childhood." (MOS, 1997, p.79) The smell and taste of food are associated with the homeland. It allows the immigrants to temporarily return to the homeland without physically returning to that space. South Asian customers visit shops associated with their ethnic community. They purchase commodities that help them maintain their ethnic identity.

The concise Oxford English dictionary explains identity: "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is." Hall maintains that "identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions." (1996, p.4) Diasporas possess dynamic, non-static, evolving multi-faceted identities. They are pressurized to flourish between the push and pull of different cultures. Their identity is like a journey and is a continuing process. People belonging to the same ethnic culture desire to live in their community. In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall (1998, p.224-226) perceives cultural identity as having two distinct features: Firstly, an individual's cultural identity is viewed from the community perspective where they connect by sharing the community culture. Secondly, through differentiating self from others as viewed from a personal perspective. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the spice store and traditional Tilo connect immigrants with their homeland. In *Brick Lane*, first-generation diasporas recreated a 'Mini Bangladesh' in London having traditional spice shops, sweet shops etc. It reflects the reality of the ghetto South Asian community in the US and the UK. Caught between two worlds of opposing cultures, the characters cohere with their homeland's way of cooking, feeding and eating. It helps them keep hold of their collective memories. There is mention of ethnic recipes like rice kheer, gulab jamun, Sabu papad, pulav, rogan josh, rasmalai, rajma, karela sabji, burfis, pakoras, methi saag, methi parathas in *The Mistress of Spices* and recipes like rice, dal, goat stews, pineapple chutneys, samosa, sandesh, chana dal, lamb curry, luchis in *The Namesake*. There is also a

reference of fish head curry, hilsa, basmati rice, laddu, Sandesh, and shamai in *Brick Lane*.

The rise of multiculturalism has revealed how food can be used as a political instrument of fusion, which further enhances exoticism, racism, fear and anxiety against ethnic minorities. (Ho, 2005; Xu, 2008; Mannur, 2010) As a result, food gets essentially connected to our identities. There arise several issues of racism. The South Asian immigrants being ethnic eaters are treated unfairly by a large number of their western counterparts in the host land. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Mohan is a vendor and sells Indian food under the boarding 'Mohan Indian Foods.' One evening, he is attacked by two white men. Mohan tried his best to resist them. He makes efforts to save his commodities from getting ruined. He is treated inhumanely by these white men. After this incident, Mohan is left devastated. He is unable to work for his family due to a permanent injury which limits his work and other activities for the rest of his life. In *Brick Lane*, the male protagonist Chanu sees a leaflet related to the racist attitude of whites. The distrust and apathy of whites are depicted against the immigrants who have settled in their country. "it's multicultural murder... your daughter will learn how to make a kebab, or fry a bhaji." (BL, 2003, p.251)

Multiculturalism and hybridization dominate the Western culinary scene today. Consumption of ethnic food is not only restricted to their home or within the socio-cultural communities of which they are part and ate these foods selectively with selective members. But this has extended beyond it. Several ethnic restaurants and food joints exist together. Each restaurant has some kind of ethnic affiliation of its own. A mixture of integration and confrontation lies in the culinary paradox seen in the West. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Raven, the Native American chooses spicy snacks instead of a milder brands. "The American holds up a packet of chanachur on which is written LIJJAT SNACK MIX VERY HOT!!!" (MOS, 1997, p.147) He regards the mixture's snack as an 'exotic' other and wants to experiment with it on himself. The 'exotic' other becomes acceptable and a part of the mainstream culture. Divakaruni has shed light on spices, food practices and traditions of India. "They are serving their men biryani fragrant with ghee, cool bowls of raita, Patra seasoned with fenugreek...gulab-jamun the colour of dark roses." (MOS, 1997, p. 50) In *Brick Lane*, society is pluralistic, comprising people from different

racers and religions inhabiting Tower Hamlets. There is a reference to Hindu Gods used for marketing by Raj restaurant. "Not Hindus, Marketing, Biggest god of all. The white people like to see the gods. For authenticity said Chanu." (BL, 2003, p.446) These references suggest that immigrants are instrumental in influencing the people of the host land.

First-generation diasporas try to amalgamate past and present cultures. The sense of nostalgia is most sturdy among the first-generation diasporic community. They act as the guiding star. The displaced characters bring their culinary knowledge to the host land. The smell of familiar food can trigger the kitchen memories of diasporas. This bridges their distance from their homeland. The inclination of first-generation diaspora towards their ethnic cuisine does not fade away. In *Brick Lane*, Chanu gets annoyed because of the regular visits of usurper Mrs Islam at his home in his absence. He is bound to pay a huge sum of money to her. To relieve himself from this unsettling situation he demands his wife Nazneen to prepare a sweet dish shamai "You look a bit hungry. Why don't you make some shamai? Let's have a little sweet something before bed." (BL, 2003, pp.202-203) Many times, they counter loneliness through cooking and consumption, which make smoother their attachment to the homeland and the host land. Mannur terms women like Nazneen as *cultural brokers*, "whose bodies and lives have been drawn by their labor within food preparation." (Mannur, 2010, p.137) First-generation diasporas like Ashima and Nazneen feel close to their relatives back homeland through cooking home food. Eating is a natural necessity and becomes a relevant way by which diasporas keep on to their identity and also learn to add new features to it. The concept that diasporic literature expresses through food can be regarded as Sara Littlejohn says "food narratives." (Littlejohn, 2008, p.1) The diasporas seek to establish their sense of belonging to an ethnic community by understanding food as a portal in the host land. For first-generation diaspora, food is nourishment and survival driven. Their food choices are thoughtful and economical. Second-generation diaspora born in the west, negotiate their identity differs from the first-generation diaspora. They show a preference for true western food and gradually move from their ethnic or traditional food. For them, food is freedom driven. It provides them with a sense

of pleasure and a feeling of extravagance. They emerge as individuals having fluid identities. Due to prolonged contact with host land they have borrowed eating habits from host land. The second generation embraces the food habits of white culture to show rebellion against their tradition. Nazneen's daughter Shahana preferred western food. "If she could choose between baked beans and dal it was no contest (BL, 2003, p.144) Ashima and Ashok's children Gogol and Sonia have adapted themselves to host land culture. They prefer hamburgers, cold milk, pizza, and pastas. The second generation does not have direct memory of ancestral land. They are unable to identify with the values and sense of belongingness that their parents try to inculcate in them. Food acts as a shortcut to bridge differences during festive occasions which creates a sensory space where the experiences of this displacement that is associated only with the first generation can be silently transmitted to the second generation in the form of 'post-memory.' Collective and cultural memories transmitted through food. Sometimes, a comforting identity can be secured by blending the east with the west. Nazneen prepares sandwiches, cream cheese spread, bird eye burgers, and baked beans for Shahana and Bibi and Ashima cooks Italian, French and other Western cuisines. Ashima is propelled to cook pasta, pizza, hamburger, and shakes to cater to her children's tastes. These first-generation females are reluctantly positioned between ethnic and modern lifestyles. They never let their roots loosen and prepare ethnic cuisines during festivals. Ashima prepares Bengali dishes like biryani, and sweet dishes during her son Gogol's rice feeding ceremony. On the occasion of Gogol's Birthday, Ashima prepares hot luchi, lamb curry, sandesh, chana dal. This act acknowledges food as a language that interweaves displaced human beings with their homeland culture. Ashima welcomes Maxine into her home by serving a glass of lassi, rice and dal. For Ashima, serving Indian dishes bridges the cultural gulf between India and America. It also helps in overcoming the suffering of belonging to a distant culture. Ashima cooking samosas with her daughter-in-law Moushumi suggests how throughout the time she pins her hope on ethnic culinary activity with pleasure to have a priceless time of instructing and cooking Indian dish samosas with her daughter-in-law in a similar way as happens back in India.

Eating and sharing food with others is generally seen as a daily activity that is taken for granted. Mary Lukanushi in "A Place at the Counter: The Onus of Oneness" (1993) asserts that eating is a "highly ritualised activity," culturally marked as something that should be carried out in the company of others. (115) Sharing of meals helps in keeping the values of communities together. Lukanushi affirms that not only physical hunger is appeased, but also an emotional one. (779) These writers have covered many aspects related to food to explain the tension existing between preserving homeland culture and the formation of new cultural and social identities. Food and identity are connected through the linkage of ethnicity and culture. Food defines 'who' we are which reflects our identity. It also tells us about our roots. Different practices related to food, the idea of proper food, various practices of food preparation and serving, etiquette, gender and social hierarchy are instrumental in shaping our identities. For diasporas of South Asian origin, food plays an eminent role in explaining the issues related to race, class, gender, ethnicity, national identity and notions of belongingness. Food connotes how these aspects are imagined, affirmed or resisted on the parameters of identity.

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