

**Confluence of Food, Culture, and Identity in Selected Novels of
Manju Kapur**

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Abstract

The centrality of the familial space is a common aspect of Manju Kapur's novels. Her projection of the complex terrain of the Indian family highlights the formation/disruption of the identity of her women protagonists. Focusing on familial issues, several contemporary writers have looked at the issues projecting the new Indian women in her changed circumstances. This paper aims to look at the metaphor of food present in the works of Kapur while connecting food and its preparation to the cultural environment and identity in her fictional space. The paper also looks at the kitchen as an important domain for women where various power plays are enacted. Food in Kapur's novels opens up vistas of politics and power equations within the family. This paper takes up this particular issue and critically looks at Kapur's depiction of food as a status symbol in various contexts. Attempt has been made to understand the way the author presents women's intimate and yet universal relationship with food and the space in the kitchen and thus, place food as the central link between the individual's identity and the cultural background.

Keywords: food, culture, identity, culinary, patriarchal, kitchen, cooking, religion, status, immigrant, politics

The various facets of woman's identity in Indian English writings have undergone tremendous change over the years. The introvert, uneducated and easy to dominate image of the Indian women has been replaced by authentic portrayal of the bold, educated, working women at par with their male counterparts. This new identity of the Indian woman has been dealt with by many contemporary authors. Noted writer, Manju Kapur, brings out the various shades of this image of the 'new woman' in her works. Her novels delineate the changes that have taken place in the Indian families and the larger society while focusing on the women.

Kapur's heroines are rebellious and not ready to be tied to the shackles of the patriarchal society. They seek for independence and go through tremendous hurdles of attaining mastery of their own selves. Manju Kapur, very interestingly, delineates these changes in her women by focusing her attention on the shift in culture from the past to the present. A close study of her novels reveals the various ways that Kapur represents the dynamics of culture and identity. This paper takes up her use of the metaphor of food in various contexts and its association with the cultural phenomena of the locality as well as the identity of individuals. Food and its preparation dominate Kapur's books and in doing so highlight her ideas on the changing notions of the domain of women. Culinary skill, which seems to dominate the concept of ideal womanhood, is dealt with in various contexts in Kapur's novels. In a meaningful manner, the location of the kitchen and the activities there, inadvertently present in all her books, attain a metaphorical significance. The juxtaposition of food with culture and identity is not new in the domain of literature. Several authors, both Indian and Western have brought out interesting facets of the connection between food, cooking, culinary ingredients, etc. and the complexities of identity and culture. This paper is an attempt to study the dynamics of culture and identity in conjunction with food in three highly acclaimed novels of Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *Home* (2006), and *The Immigrant* (2008).

Kapur's novels deal extensively with culinary skills in different contexts. She takes up the issue of the necessity of women's mastery of cooking in the Indian scenario. Her first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, depicts this mindset prevalent in our country from time immemorial. Virmati's mother, Kasturi, was fortunate enough to belong to a family which gave importance to education for girls. Influenced by the teachings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati and the tenets of the Arya Samaj Reform Movement, Kasturi is trained in "...reading, writing, balancing household accounts and sewing" (*DD*, 62) until she graduated at the age of twelve. However, her family never forgot that all these training had one sole purpose, to become a worthwhile wife, daughter-in-law, and mother, and so the more important training towards that started so that she could please her in-laws. Her elaborate training in culinary skills mentioned by the author depicts the cultural scenario of the then time period:

"With all the breads she could make, puris with spicy gram inside, luchis big as plates, kulchas, white and long, tandoori rotis, layers of flaky flour, paranthas, crisp and stuffed. With morrabas, never soggy, and dripping juicy sweet. With seasonal pickles of lemon, mango, carrot, cauliflower, turnip, red chillies, dates, ginger, and raisins. With sherbets of khas, roses, and almonds, with hot and cold spiced milk, with sour black carrot kanji, with lassi, thin, cool and salty, or thick and sweet. With barfis made of nuts and grains soaked

overnight, and ground fine between two heavy stones. With sweets made of thickened milk. With papad, the sweet ones made out of ripe mango, the sour ones with raw mango, the ones to be fried with dal and potato.” (DD, 62-63)

The importance of culinary skills is depicted in Kapur’s novel, *Home*, where much like Virmati’s training, the priority of the kitchen for women is highlighted time and again. Nisha’s mother is horrified to discover that her sixteen year old daughter, who had been sent to her aunt’s house during her childhood, returns with hardly any knowledge of cooking. Enraged with her sister for having not given the most important part of a girl’s training to her daughter, Nisha’s mother take matters in her hand immediately and try to mend matters. Her dissatisfaction and anger pour out as she keeps on scolding her daughter, “Spoilt you, do you hear? Useless – even ginger I have to do myself. Now quickly cut up cucumbers for the salad – here, do it like this, rub the top, take out the bitter, then wash, then peel, then slice, do the same with onions, tomatoes, and green chillies.” (*Home*, 125) Nisha is quick to understand the separate world of women in her home, dominated by the activities of the kitchen. She recollects the tensed environment at the dining table that she had witnessed as a child innumerable times when she had realized that “...it mattered if food was not cooked properly. Her father’s sense of taste was very acute. Her mother watched anxiously as he took the first bite of any dish. He was capable of frowning, saying too much asafoetida, too little turmeric, the cumin has been over-roasted.” (*Home*, 126) The knowledge of cooking is equally important in a prospective bride as much as her beauty and social standing. Entry into a respective family like that of the Banwari Lals demanded that the daughter-in-law is perfect in that skill. Happel in her research on food habits of indigenous groups noted that choices in food and culinary skills reflect the social and personal identity of individuals and community. She says, “Similar practices and shared values regarding food – the ingredients considered edible, the method of preparation, and the conditions of food consumption and feasting – assist in the creation of a relatively homogenous community, or group. On the other hand, differences in food related customs often increase polarization, or opposability, between social groups.” Seen in the perspective of the Indian familial terrain, food and the expertise in its preparation remain as one of the most important criteria to judge a prospective daughter-in-law’s inclusion in her new family. Things have hardly changed in the context of the kitchen even after decades and when the Banwari Lals finalize on Rekha as a suitable bride for their son, Vijay, it is not only the dowry and similar backgrounds of the two families, but the girl’s perfection in culinary skills which seal the bond. Rekha’s suitability is agreed upon as her future in-laws are informed that “...she was attending cookery classes, specializing in

Continental vegetarian. Today's girls like to indulge in fancy homemaking, said her mother. These twisted cheese straws she made, dusting them with chilli flakes, was her idea, as was decorating the eggless chocolate cake with Cadbury Gems." (*Home*, 159) Kapur's books portray the fact that even with various developments in the society, food has still remained as the domain of woman and the mastery of culinary skills her priority.

In Kapur's novels, kitchen is not merely a space where food is prepared, it is rather a metaphor for the daily life of the women in the household. Many a times, the kitchen serves as the battle field where family politics take shape and silent and yet profound wars are fought. Kapur's protagonist, Virmati, in *Difficult Daughters* is a rebel and unlike her mother and the other women of her times, occupies herself with her studies instead of being tied to the kitchen. Her incompetency in culinary skills is repeatedly highlighted as she fumbles in the kitchen and cuts her hands while peeling and chopping vegetables. On the other hand, her husband's first wife, Ganga, is an expert in cooking and other household works. Virmati's alienation in her new home stems not only from being ignored by the members of the family, but also not being allowed inside the kitchen. Ganga, who has already sacrificed her husband to a new wife, blocks Virmati's access to her kitchen and establishes her superiority and domination over the family by claiming her sole rights to the most important space in the house. Virmati, who was hardly ever bothered by household chores in her own home, comprehends the meaning of this alienation and her position vis-à-vis the status of the Professor's first wife in the house:

"When his friends came, he sent orders to the kitchen that their favourite samosas – kachoris – pakoras – mathris should be made. Along with the khas, almond or rosewater sherbet of the season. All the effort of pounding, grinding, mixing, chopping, cutting, shaping, frying was hers....And what about her? What kind of wife was she going to be if everything was done by Ganga?" (*DD*, 216)

Virmati, who is reduced merely to a decorative piece in the house, also has to be the victim of Ganga's wrath which she very often showed in her own way. Food becomes a way to express grievances and dissatisfaction and Virmati flinches every time when she is served food by Ganga similar to a guest, and thus negating her any hope of ownership. Ganga uses food as her weapon to demean her competitor and soon Virmati realizes that Ganga's venom towards her is being coursed through the food served to her and she is forced to give up "...drinking lassi, or eating anything that her husband didn't eat, because hers was always too sweet, too salty, too fried, too soggy, too stale and, if possible, too dirty." (*DD*, 230) The politics over food and its preparation take a drastic turn when Virmati tries to go to the kitchen as an act of

rebellion to make her own meal but is forced to give up when the peace of the house is completely disrupted due to Ganga's constant weeping and wailing. Ganga, who had protested meekly at her husband's bringing a new wife, raises a hue and cry at the possibility of the loss of her space in the kitchen and Virmati can only stand away and look at Ganga's "...ritual cleansing of every pot and pan to wash away her polluted touch....It was clear that not an inch of that territory was going to be yielded. If Virmati had the bed, Ganga was going to have the house." (DD, 230) Thus, the kitchen assumes a very important place in Kapur's fictional world and plays a dominant position in establishing power roles in the household. In Kapur's book, *Home*, similar politics over kitchen and its paraphernalia is seen in various situations. Aptly titled, the book portrays among various issues, the tug of war between the women in a joint family house, where food and its preparation assumes the role of the most important household task and the position of the women dictated by the comparative amount of authority in the kitchen. Kapur depicts the tension in the Banwari Lal house when the youngest daughter-in-law in her urge to take over the superior position, does not allow the mother-in-law to serve food to her husband. For Sona, the only way to bond with her newly married son seems to at least get his attention while serving him food "...but there was Pooja armed with the things he liked already cooked by her maid, ready to serve him, hover over him, careful that no one else should do the things she had been married to do." (*Home*, 260) Kapur's projection of such intricate details makes her readers understand the magnanimous position of food and its preparation in the daily lives of her women and how the kitchen plays a very important role in matters of family equations.

Kapur's novels are situated mostly in the midst of families and she concentrates on relationships in the family set up. Her books bring forth various connotations of food in relation to individual and familial identity. The importance of food is seen in establishing desired status in the family and larger community. Marriages are occasions when food plays a major role in affirming the family's status. Elaborate mention of all the dishes served to the guests during a marriage in the Banwari Lal family highlight the predominance of food to maintain the status quo: "Puris, kachoris, naan, tandoori parantha, aloo sabzi, channa, fried potato, grilled paneer and mixed vegetables, paneer in tomato gravy, dahi pakori, soft pink ice-cream, gulab jamun, spiced sweet milk served in kulhars, then paan, sweet and plain, and lots and lots of bottled drinks, enthusiastically swung around by children, drunk, split, finished, drunk, split, finished again." (*Home*, 88) The association of food with one's status is depicted in Kapur's *The Immigrant* where Nina's first realization of social elevation at marrying the NRI Ananda dawns at 'The Oberoi' and even though she tries to sound calm,

her excitement is pronounced while relating the evening to her mother - "First we went to the bar. He had a drink, I had a juice, then we went to the Chinese restaurant, though he said it wasn't real Chinese. He insisted on eating only the things I ate. It was all very expensive." (*The Immigrant*, 71) In Kapur's fictional world, food is not merely something to fill one's stomach with, it assumes a primary determiner of social status too.

An important aspect of Kapur's depiction of food in her novels is its association with the culture and identity of individuals in her fictional space. Kitchen, which is a woman's domain, is not accessible to her during certain phases in her life. Kapur's book, *Home*, brings out one such cultural belief when a new mother happily let goes her presence in the kitchen during the time period immediately after the birth of the baby. Sona, who had struggled immensely due to her inability to conceive for a long time, is not at all bother to remain away from that important space in her home during her 'unclean' period. Kapur's *Home* also brings about various other cultural beliefs related to women and food. Worthwhile to note is the Banwari Lal women's beliefs in many religious rituals which involve fasting. The preparation of food, which is the primary and dominating task of the women, is foregone during the 'Karva Chauth' and the other 'pujas' and the men of the family treat their women in a special way during those occasions by buying delicious snacks from outside. Kapur's diasporic novel, *The Immigrant*, portrays cultural clashes and adjustment problems faced by Indians in Canada. These differences between the East and the West are majorly over food. Ananda comes across a whole new world in terms of food habits on his reaching Canada. His first lesson on being different starts in his own maternal uncle's house where his aunt is clueless on what to serve him during meal times. Similar shocks are faced by Ananda when his friend's mother graciously serves him a 'fish bouillabaisse', specially made for him since he does not eat meat. The friend has to explain to his mother the seriousness of Ananda's food habit, "Mom, Andy doesn't eat meat, fish or chicken, he is *pure* vegetarian." (*TI*, 32) The NRI Ananda, like many in his position quickly gets bored of his limited choices and is attracted towards a whole new range of possibilities - "He couldn't bear to eat another boiled vegetable, another sliver of cheese. He wanted to be able to eat fast food: burgers, hot dogs, sandwiches filled with bright pink meats." (*TI*, 35) Embracing this new food culture would bring about convenience, and more importantly, a sense of belongingness as well as acceptance from the larger community. The importance of food habit as a central link in the chain of community living is explained by Claude Fischler as the principle of incorporation. He says, "Incorporation is also the basis of collective identity and, by the same token, of otherness. Food and cuisine are a quite central component of the sense of collective

belonging....Human beings mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat, or more precisely – but it amounts to the same thing – by defining the otherness, the difference of others.” Ananda thus, struggles initially but gives up his Indian ways of eating in his urge to belong to his new world. His wife, Nina, is however, not able to adapt to this new identity like her husband. Her adjustment starts at her own home, where, upon her arrival to Canada, she is shocked to find that her husband has already turned non-vegetarian. The small kitchen in the couple’s flat in Canada is projected as an important zone where their budding relationship is tested, tried, and formed. The impact of cultural differences in an alien setting provides sufficient impetus to the new couple to understand each other as they discover each other’s tastes and preferences:

“...they cooked in the small kitchen, rice, dal and raita for Nina, with an additional grilled fish for Ananda.

‘Is this how you eat everyday?’ asked Nina.

‘Hell, no. I just fry some hamburger patties, whole wheat bun, salad on the side, or I grill some fish with a bit of lemon and butter. On the weekends I may make a steak, sirloin or T bone, with some mashed potatoes and peas.’

‘So you never eat Indian?’

‘Too much trouble, too much time. I only cook Indian when I have guests, they seem to expect it,’ he added gloomily.” (TI, 118)

Kapur projects the different ways in which an immigrant reacts to the new culture and environment. For some, like Ananda, the initial shock gives way to adjustments and acceptance, whereas, for people like Nina, it is endless sufferings. Nina’s inability to cope up with the food of her newfound land forces her to distort her food habit – “She buys junk and nibbles it on the way: chips, chocolate, candy. She ruins her appetite, but she doesn’t need much of an appetite to do justice to the canned soup and toasted sandwich that will be her lunch.” (TI, 122) The alien food culture comes in the way of enabling Nina to embrace the place as her own. It is not only in her own home, but also in social gatherings, where she is a subject of curiosity and inconvenience. She is forced to announce “I am a vegetarian” whenever she visits family and friends and is much vexed to see the immediate reaction and confusion of her hosts to arrange suitable food for her. The familiar terrain of food in the Taj Mahal hotel in Canada finally offers respite to Nina and she breathes in the welcome aroma of known spices and savoury that she had been missing the most:

“Turmeric, yellow turning into brown as it bubbled in hot oil, red chillies that crackled as they roasted, onions and garlic that turned pink then brown, releasing sharp smells, tomatoes

that became soupy as they were swished around, cumin and coriander that gave out pungent flavours, these smells and imagined sights travelled across the world from north India to eastern Canada to kick her sharply in the stomach.” (TI, 139)

The clashes of the East and the West in terms of food, however, prove to be too inconvenient for Nina and even though reluctant, she too has to give way to the new food culture of the alien land. For Nina, exploration of the taboo dishes start with her venture into an extra-marital relationship. As she crosses the threshold of the sanctity of marital relationship, it seems quite useless and petty to her to keep alive those traditional beliefs in food habits too. Identifying her change of mind and circumstances, she muses, “(w)hen she first came to Halifax, not eating meat had been a way of remaining true to her upbringing. In Halifax her vegetarianism was treated respectfully, as part of her beliefs, but she felt false every time she concurred with a picture of herself as a traditional, devout Hindu. Really, what did she care about a religion she never practised? After she had had sex with Anton, it seemed especially hypocritical to hang on to vegetables.” (TI, 266) Food, thus, in Kapur’s fictional space serves as a link between individual identity and the transitions in choices and circumstances. Nina’s acceptance of non-vegetarian food comes with her changed preferences and lifestyle.

Manju Kapur’s treatment of food in her novels is very impressive and she is able to beautifully juxtapose various issues in her books with that of food and culinary skills in an apt way. An interesting issue in her novels is the way her characters bond through food and the preparation of it. Kitchen serves as an important locale in her books where people interact and bond through the intimate act of eating and preparing food together. Food also serves as the means of interaction and getting close to each other as well as a medium of comfort. Kapur’s heroine, Nina, in *The Immigrant*, decides to bond with her husband by making a non-vegetarian meal for him even though that meant that she had to let go of her sensibilities and touch meat. Taking cues from the recipes in *Canadian Cooking at its Finest*, she prepares a three-course meal to the delight of her husband who offers his best appreciation to her saying, “...you are fitting in nicely.” (TI, 128) Brought up in the Indian way, Nina knows the importance of homemade food and the magic that it can do to relationships. Even though Ananda has tuned himself to the Canadian lifestyle, he is genuinely impressed at his wife’s efforts and relishes the meal. Making a comparative analysis of different cultures in terms of eating habits, Claxton says, “The techniques utilized to prepare and procure foods and the ways of serving and consuming it, which vary from culture to culture, can have an important influence on social and familial relationships. American fast foods and the manner in which they are consumed, for example, do not encourage those who favour such food to spend an

entire evening conversing with friends over a meal, either at home or at a restaurant, which is a favourite social activity for many continental Europeans. The fact that American families eat together as a family much less often than those in Europe is reflected in the difference in family solidarity in the two cultures.” What Claxton refers for the continental Europeans can very well be applicable to the Indians as well who believe in the strong foundation of eating together in families and social gatherings as a means of strong bonding. In Kapur’s novel, food is also seen to bring strangers closer and the women in the all-women ‘The La Leche League’ that Nina joins, bond in the kitchen over cups of tea and coffee. The lonely Nina draws comfort from food during her initial lonely phase in Canada and Kapur narrates her forages in the departmental stores, piling those ‘soothing stuff’ to keep her mind away from all her worries and anxieties – “Slowly she chose. Corn chips. salt and vinegar chips. Onion and garlic dip. Mint and coconut chocolate. Cinnamon sweets. Buttery shortbread biscuits. Then sugarless gum, because her teeth were going to feel yucky. oh, and they were out of milk and yoghurt, these were needed to weigh the shopping down in the scales of sanity.” (TI, 177) Food, in Kapur’s fictional space, provides her characters with relief in times of loneliness as well as act as a means of bonding.

Manju Kapur’s novels are mostly read from the perspective of her engagement with the concept of ‘new woman’. Her books bring about various issues and concerns within the familial space and relationships. This paper is an attempt to look at those issues, albeit from a different viewpoint. The kitchen built at the corner of a house or the modular kitchen attached to the dining area always has one thing in common, women. Kapur’s books portray the relationship of food and its preparation with the identity of her women characters in various contexts. These narratives present women’s intimate and yet universal relationship with food and the space in the kitchen and thus, place food as the central link between the individual’s identity and the cultural background.

Notes:

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