

*Ms Divya R Krishnan

Assistant Professor

Christ University

Bengaluru, India

divya.krishnan@christuniversity.in

**Dr Chetan Deshmane

Associate Professor

HPT Arts and RYK Science College

Nashik, India

dausche@gmail.com

Culinary Anxieties in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Mrs Sen's* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mrs Dutta Writes a Letter*

Abstract: A sense of displacement is an essential element of the immigrant experience and food is one of the most important aspects that help in understanding ideas of separation, memory and longing for the homeland. Food becomes a metaphor for home and the connections between people and an integral part of the migrant's attempt to acculturate or hold on to idea of the homeland. This paper aims to look at food and culinary activity as a means to negotiate the various dilemmas of the diasporic experience through two short stories by the diasporic writers Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Culinary anxieties thus become a symbol of and focalizer for certain cultural concerns, including individual and ethnic identity, highlighting issues of heritage and collective memory.

“Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools.”

Salman Rushdie (Imaginary Homelands 15)

The ‘in-between-ness’ of the diasporic experience is rightly emoted by Rushdie as the struggle for assimilation, the nostalgia for the homeland and the resultant fluidity of identity. Diasporic narratives that express this flux usually engage with “cultural and spatial markers through the inclusion of tropes such as food, rituals and fashion” (Pandurang et al. 4-5). In recent years, with the dissemination of cultures around the world, culture studies and diasporic studies have started looking at food as one of most important aspects that help in understanding ethnicities, national identities, cultural memories and the diasporic experience. Across different genres, contemporary literature has explored how food becomes a metaphor and helps in understanding issues of migration, heritage and lineage, intergenerational and collective memory and nostalgia. Indian migration spread the Indian cuisine throughout the world and today there is rarely a discourse about India that doesn’t include the customary Curry and Chicken Tikka.

Tulsi Srinivas observes that, “Food consumption is fueled by nostalgia located in ‘authentic’ foods— ‘as mother made them’—temporarily transforming the act of eating into a performance of ‘gastro-nostalgia’ that attempts to create a cultural utopia of ethnic Indian- ness...” (Srinivas 191) This nostalgia is almost always recreated in diasporic literature as a means of recreating the memories of the homeland. In the book *Culinary Fictions*, Indian American cultural critic Ketu Katrak suggests that culinary narratives, suffused with nostalgia, often manage immigrant memories and imagined returns to the “homeland.” (Mannur 1) However, it cannot be seen only as a nostalgic gesture; it is rather to be understood as the constant negotiation of cultures that a diasporic member engages in, in this context through food resulting in what is most aptly described by Anita Mannur as “culinary citizenship”, ‘an ability to articulate national identity via food’ (Mannur 20)

In this paper, the researcher attempts to trace ‘culinary anxieties’ of diasporic existence and memory through a study of two short stories by Indian diasporic writers: *Mrs Sen* (1999) by Jhumpa Lahiri and *Mrs Dutta Writes a Letter* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1998). ‘Culinary

anxieties' here refers to the range of emotions like turmoil and anguish related to the engagement with food that are a part of the migrant psyche.

Lahiri's Mrs Sen is a newly married lady who has just come to America with her husband who teaches Math at the university. Her statement "Everything is there" is instantly emotive of her deep memory and nostalgia for home. It is also indicative of her refusal to acculturate, for instance she is not very interested in driving which limits her experiences there and adds to the feeling of alienation. The 'cultural displacement' that she feels is most evidently brought out by her self-confinement and her failure to understand the foreign culture she is forced to inhabit

"Everyone, this people, too much in their world" (Lahiri 121)

Most of Mrs Sen's day is spent in cooking and it is then that she seems at ease with herself and more conversant with Eliot, the child she takes care of during the day. To Eliot, the elaborate preparations that involve the cooking of every meal make him wonder if it is for a feast though it is just for Mr and Mrs Sen. The cutting of vegetables and meat on the curved blade brought specially from India and cooking them in the traditional style she is used to, is a means of her constant reconnection with her homeland. Preparing food thus becomes a kind of culinary performativity which recreates the originary home with all the stories and the memories surrounding it. This is especially evident as she recollects her life in Calcutta; how the women in her neighborhood would bring their respective blades and cut vegetables the whole night whenever there was an occasion. This conceptualizing of food preparation as a kinship within the domestic world is one that Mrs Sen seems to miss severely. The home, the kitchen and food itself are sterile and neutral places but sites of creation of the idea of nation and culture and it is this almost sacred and spiritual experience that Mrs Sen clings on to. The curved blade which is daily companion in her kitchen and irreplaceable in her cooking is 'not a mere tool, it is , in Mrs Sen's recollection, the symbolic centre of a community of women' (Mitra 186)

Hence, the stark difference between the community of women versus her solitary daily routine of cutting the vegetables makes her loneliness even more pronounced. Probably this is why she makes an effort to form a female companionship with Eliot's mother by welcoming her inside her home every day in a typically Indian way of tending to guests and insists on serving her some snack every evening.

She belongs to the eastern part of India where fish is the staple diet and an integral part of life. Every instance of her trying to find fish in the foreign land and cooking the fish is an instance of re-connecting with her lost homeland. Mr Sen is a professor of Mathematics at the university and this probably makes his acculturation easier. Mrs Sen however is a housewife who has been uprooted from her comfortable life in Calcutta and she negotiates with this alien environment by preserving her Indian identity through food. Fish as an irreplaceable part of the Bengali diet is a recurring motif in the story.

She added that in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head. It was available in any market, at any hour, from dawn until midnight. (Lahiri 123)

In fact, food acquires the position of a character in the story and the act of cooking Indian food becomes a coping mechanism. It also brings out insights about the immigrant experience. It is one of the things that make her happy like the letters she receives from her home. Indeed, the only two things that Mrs Sen looks forward to in her life in America are the letters and the availability of fresh fish. In her moment of assertiveness and defiance, she decides to take the bus to get the fish she craves. This also is an attempt on her part to adapt to this new world around her; however unfortunately for her, this becomes the incident which marks her as the immigrant all the more. The old woman who complains about the smell caused by the fish and Mrs Sen's resultant mortification accentuates the cultural chasm between her and the American people. Understandably, she never takes the bus again. This deep estrangement with the American culture and way of life is also what leads to the accident at the end. In another ambitious moment created by the lure of availability of fish she takes out the car and causes the minor accident. The desperate desire to live in maintain one's culture thus becomes counter-productive and further poses obstacles to her acculturation. 'The all-encompassing "Everything is there" is telling for its corollary is "Here there is nothing"' (Mitra 188)

A nostalgia for the Bengali culinary experience can also be traced in the second text selected for this study; Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'Mrs Dutta writes a letter'. It is one of Divakaruni's stories that explore the cultural conflicts faced by the protagonist Mrs Dutta when she goes to America to live with her son. The story follows two days in the life of Mrs Dutta, from the very

beginning many instances of conflict are seen. If acculturation and assimilation are difficult for a migrant, it is all the more so for a dependant female immigrant. As the title itself suggests the act of writing letters help in negotiating the process of assimilation by performing roles of homeland connectors and markers of definitive ruptures. (Stoican 59)

In Indian family, food is not just a source of nourishment but a metaphor of family, closely related with traditions, habits, sentiments and warmth of personal relations. It also binds all the members of a family at a dining table. While food in many instances helps to keep the family members connect to their Bengali roots, in this story it becomes the means for an elderly widowed Bengali mother to re-connect with her son and recreate the scene of family and 'home'. Divakaruni explains how Indians in western country make an effort to sustain a sense of belongingness in the presence of Indian food. Mrs Dutta is happy to see that all her family members are eating together since her arrival, she writes in her mind, "proper Indian food, rotis that puff up the way they should, fish curry in mustard sauce, and real pulao with raisins and cashews and ghee-the way you taught me, Roma-instead of Rice-a-roni. She would like to add. They love it," (Divakaruni 9)

One of the memories related to food is intertwined with the landscape; it is not only the vegetables and food that she misses but the surrounding experiences around it too.

It's been a good day, as good as it can be in a country where you might stare out the window for hours and not see one living soul. No vegetable vendors with wicker baskets on their heads, no knife-sharpeners calling scissors-knives-choppers, scissors-knives-choppers to bring the children running (Divakaruni 20)

According to Holtzman, there are many facets to the relationship between food and memory, for in various ways they are both 'floating signifiers', shifting and indeterminate, reflected in the multilayered, multidimensional way they are experienced, spoken and written about by researchers and their participants (Holtzman 365)

For Mrs Dutta the thoughts of food keep shifting between the immediate environs and her act of cooking and her memories of the homeland as a young bride. As she struggles between her old livelihood and the new place she must get adjusted to the only comfort she has is her ability to cook for the family and nourish them.

Busy in the kitchen, Mrs. Dutta has recovered her spirits. Holding on to grudges is too exhausting, and besides, the kitchen -- sunlight spilling across its countertops while the refrigerator hums reassuringly in the background -- is her favorite place. (Divakaruni 10)

As with the whole story, every aspect of her current environs takes her back to its equivalent back in her homeland. As with Mrs Sen, food is never an isolated entity, it comes with the whole experience of kinship with it; it has the power of transporting her to the comfort of the familiar, the 'homeland'

The mouthwatering smell of ginger and chili paste, ground fresh by Reba, the maid, and, in the evening, strong black Assam tea brewing in the kettle when Mrs. Basu came by to visit. (Divakaruni 11)

In fact, food becomes one of the important means through which she connects with the various members of the family. How they react to her food determines their relation with her. Her son loves her cooking and this reinstates for her his love towards her whereas her daughter –in-law's initial enthusiasm and the gradual lack of it affects her relation with her. The children with their American palate which is unappreciative of her cooking are also hence, a disappointment to her. With her son happily married and involved in his own domestic duties, her culinary activities make her feel wanted again in his life, a part of his life and time that only she can cater to. Everytime she offers him something to eat, she is paranoid that she would be turned away.

One of the recurring culinary motifs in the story is the Indian 'chai', an integral beverage of the Indian household that immediately evokes numerous memories in the migrant psyche. Mrs Dutta is constantly reminded of the long conversations with her friends over tea and the most valuable item from her kitchen is the tea set that once belonged to her mother-in-law. The tea and the way it must be made is sacrosanct and she is pleased to be able to provide this to her son

Sagar laughs so hard that he almost upsets his tea (made with real sugar, because Mrs. Dutta knows it is better for her son than that chemical powder Shyamoli likes to use). (Divakaruni 25)

Thus, in the texts selected for this study food becomes a window into how contemporary diasporic literature broaches such topics as migration and diaspora, memory, nostalgia, and

attempts of reconnection with the homeland. The anguish, turmoil and nostalgia expressed in these stories are hence ‘culinary anxieties’ which recreate the memories of the homeland and which are an essential part of the migrant psyche.

“What is patriotism but the love of the food one ate as a child?”

-Lin Yutang

References

- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary homelands: essays and criticism, 1981-1991*. : Penguin Books, 1991.
- Pandurang, Mala, and Delphine Munos. "Mapping Diasporic Subjectivities". *South Asian Diaspora*, 2014. Vol. 6, No. 1, 1-5. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2013.847252>2014
- Srinivas, Tulasi. 'As Mother Made It': The Cosmopolitan Indian Family, 'Authentic' Food and the Construction of Cultural Utopia. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, Vol 32, No. 2 (Autumn) 2006.
- Mannur, Anita. *Culinary fictions: food in South Asian diasporic culture*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2013.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of maladies*. Harper Collins, 2013.
- Mitra, Madhuparna. 'Lahiri's Mrs Sen's'. *The Explicator*. Spring 2006. Vol.64, No.3, 186-188
- Stoican Adriana E. Layered Female Identities In Mrs. Dutta Writes A Letter ,Mrs. Sen's And Winterscape. *University of Bucharest Review*. Vol. X, No. 2. 2008 59-66
- Holtzman J. (2006) 'Food and Memory', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 35: 361-378.
- Divakaruni, Chitra B. "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 25 July 2016, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/04/mrs-dutta-writes-a-letter/377092/.