

Spices of Memory: A Literary Journey through Indian Cuisine

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Abstract

Food and spices constitute an essential component of any human society and history. With the dawn of civilization sufficient production and proper consumption of various food items / types has been a serious concern for researchers, farmers, scholars and governments across the world. In fact, food and human existence go together and no human endeavour is possible without sufficient food for it satisfies the basic need and provides the required energy. It comprises grains, pulses, vegetables, fruits, meat, fish, cheese, poultry, eggs, etc. Since the days of yore, food and literature form a significant part of any society or culture. Food is essential equally for survival and social function, and is interrelated to creative writing and artistic works. Pertinently, food in literature has been a very powerful tool for expressing individual and cultural memories in order to metaphorize physical and psychological hunger, and present complex ideas. In this paper, an attempt will be made to explore the cultural richness and culinary tapestry in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, focusing on Lahiri's culinary narrative and characters' evolving sense of self across continents, and Roy's street food scene in India examining happiness, sorrow, and resilience through the lens of the nation's culinary landscape.

This paper will also invite readers to savor the rich narrative offerings of Indian literature, where the act of cooking and sharing meals or food becomes a vessel for cultural preservation, a metaphor for identity, and a means for exploring the complex narratives of a diverse and ever-evolving region. In this literary feast, each page resonates with the essence of a dynamic cultural heritage, leaving a lingering taste of tradition and innovation.

Key words

Cuisine, cultural identity, culinary narratives, diaspora, heritage, meals & tradition

I have no qualms about admitting that I am curious. I like to know about other people – what they wear, what they eat, whom they love, whom they hate, what they read, who their friends are, whether they floss, what secret quirks they have...
–Anita Nair

We are what we eat. – Ludwig Feuerbach

When we think about food we are often thinking and writing about something else. Food always means something beyond the fact of what we put into our mouths. Food...is a loving and living and dying.
– Paul Schmidt

Introduction

A thorough research reveals that food representations are prevalent in both religious and literary works across the world. For instance, bread is used as a powerful symbol in the Bible and it represents nourishment and fulfillment. In the Last Supper, Jesus gives thanks to his disciples and gives them bread and wine, symbolizing his body and blood. This metaphor is still used in churches during Holy Communion. In Islam and Hinduism religious texts, fasting, feasting, and food rituals are seriously observed. In fact, Islam treats food as a sign from God, referred to as wholesome things, and is a blessing to be enjoyed observing rules based on halal and haram concepts. Jains follow a strict vegetarian diet, avoiding root vegetables as well, to minimize harm to living beings. Sikhs too have dietary guidelines for maintaining a vegetarian diet during religious events. The langar, a community kitchen, serves vegetarian meals to all in order to emphasize equality and community.

Food has been a central and often symbolic element in cultural, religious, and social contexts. In the recent times, food, an interdisciplinary field of study involves anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, and science, has gained momentum in literature research due to its significant relationship with human society. The role of food as a cultural symbol proves its role in a society, history, or resistance to host culture, sensory factors, and food memory. In fact, food

imagery has been used in literature to refer to various social, cultural and political meanings. Keeling and Scott Pollard in *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature* discuss threadbare about the role of food in literature and treats it as a fundamental element of literature. This book also asserts that food is a fundamental substance for civilizations and cultures. It is also essential for the imagination and imaginary arts. In fact, "The study of food, an area associated with domesticity and women's work, suffered from sociological neglect for decades. Folklorists and anthropologists long ago saw the importance of food in the development of cultures, religions, group dynamics, symbolism, communication, and other sources of meaning in human life. But sociologists have been reluctant to adopt food as a central focus. Even today, when food makes a stronger appearance in studies of class and stratification, consumption, and labor, rich sociological work on food is limited to a few areas" (Pilcher 2012:136). Food, beyond its role as sustenance, transcends the boundaries of the dining table to become a profound expression of culture, tradition, and identity. In "One Reader's Digest: Towards a Gastronomic Theory of Literature," Brad Kessler emphasizes that the paramount role of food in literature is its function as a cultural symbol. He describes food as "freighted with meaning. Just as in life, food in fiction signifies. It means more than itself. It is symbolic. It opens doors to double and triple meaning" (156). In the intricate tapestry of human existence, the preparation, sharing, and consumption of food stand as rituals that link generations, shape cultural landscapes, and tell stories of heritage.

This paper delves into the multifaceted relationship between food and tradition, exploring how the culinary realm serves as a vessel for cultural preservation, a mirror reflecting the identity of a community, and a dynamic force in the ever-evolving narrative of a diverse society. From the aromatic kitchens of familial homes to the bustling streets of cultural hubs, food plays a pivotal role in shaping the traditions that define a community. Kessler opines in "One Reader's Digest: Towards a Gastronomic Theory of Literature," that "Food in fiction engages all the reader's senses (taste, touch, feel, sight, and smell)" (151). He explains how food draws the reader into the text: Meals are magnets; they draw people together. They are drama, in fiction as in life" (153). Kessler argues that "food also serves as memory triggers, reminding characters of the past, transporting them to another time through the memory of a similar previous sensory experience" (157). The act of cooking becomes a living tradition, a repository of culinary knowledge passed down through generations, preserving flavors that carry the weight of history. Each recipe, carefully handed down, encapsulates not only a list of ingredients but a narrative thread that binds families and communities together. Moreover, the sharing of meals becomes a communal celebration, a moment where individuals come together to forge and strengthen social bonds. Whether in the elaborate rituals of a traditional feast or the casual sharing of street food, the act of eating transforms into a shared experience that transcends mere nourishment. It is within these moments of collective indulgence that cultural practices are reaffirmed, and the sense of belonging is deeply entrenched. "Cooking is a moral process, transferring raw matter from 'nature' to the state of 'culture', and thereby taming and domesticating it... Food is therefore 'civilized' by cooking, not simply at the level of practice, but at the level of the imagination" (Lupton 1996: 2).

This paper explores the dynamic relationship between food and tradition, revealing that cuisine is a reflection of a society in flux. It explores how flavors become a language, conveying stories of migration, resilience, and adaptation. By unraveling the connections between food and tradition, we gain insight into the heart of a community.

Savoring Complexity: Food Studies in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness serves as a compelling illustration of the intimate connection between individuals, their culinary practices, and the cultural environment. Roy's storytelling employs food studies not merely as a backdrop but as a lens through which to explore profound themes of identity, resilience, and the intricate socio-political landscape of India. Arundhati Roy skillfully employs gastronomy as a literary device, offering readers a sensory immersion into the diverse culinary landscapes of India. As we traverse the streets of Old Delhi, where the aroma of korma mingles with the complexities of life, the study of food in this novel becomes a gateway to understand the intricate layers of Indian society, reflecting both tradition and innovation.

In novel, Begum Zeenat Kauser's choice to share her living space with a widow of similar age introduces a communal dimension to her daily life. "Begum Zeenat Kauser settled down in Shahjahanabad in a tiny room with a kitchen and a view of her beloved mosque. She shared it with a widow roughly her own age" (Roy 2017: 62). Communal living arrangement may symbolize the broader societal connections forged through shared meals and the exchange of culinary traditions. Her occupation of "supplying mutton korma to a restaurant" (62) further emphasizes the economic and cultural significance of food in the region. Her culinary skills contribute not only to her livelihood but also to the gastronomic experiences of foreign tour groups seeking an authentic taste of local cuisine. This aligns with the theme of food as a cultural signifier and a means of cultural exchange. The repetition of "stirring the same pot every day for thirty years" (63) becomes a powerful symbol of continuity and tradition. It underscores the endurance of culinary practices over time, suggesting a commitment to preserving and passing down cultural flavors from one generation to the next. The mention of her scent, reminiscent of korma and akin to the fragrance "of ittar and perfume" (63) worn by other women, brings forth the idea of olfactory memory associated with food, highlighting its sensory and emotional dimensions.

The act of serving food, particularly the meticulous arrangement of the "omelettes, bread, kebabs" (231) and other items by Ashfaq Mir, can be analyzed through the Michel Foucault's concepts of power and discipline. The precise arrangement

of the food items reflects a form of discipline, an imposition of order upon the chaotic situation. The act of serving food in a specific manner mirrors the exercise of power and control over the physical space and the individuals present. The way the food is presented reflects a specific cultural disposition and an implicit set of rules regarding dining etiquette. It becomes a symbolic representation of cultural values and hierarchies. The choice of food items, such as omelettes, bread, kebabs, tea, etc. also carry cultural meanings and distinctions. Each food item represents a part of a cultural repertoire, and the combination of these items in a specific context reflects a particular culinary tradition or cultural practice.

Food is not merely sustenance; it is embedded in the fabric of daily rituals, social interactions, and a sense of belonging. The vivid details of homes abandoned mid-activity, with “hot tea not yet drunk, books open, homework incomplete, food on the fire, the onions frying, the chopped tomatoes waiting to be added” (285) create a powerful narrative around the centrality of food in people’s lives. The untold stories lie in the untouched cups of hot tea and the food left simmering on the fire that may never be completed. This disruption underscores the deep psychological and cultural ties individuals have with their culinary practices. It raises questions about the loss of not only physical homes but also the emotional and cultural connections tied to the act of preparing and sharing meals. The left-behind meals, like fragments of an unfinished story, highlight the emotional and cultural ties embedded in the act of cooking. It prompts questions about the preservation of culinary heritage, the endurance of memories tied to food, and the challenges of maintaining a sense of self amidst upheaval. The abandoned food items become symbols of interrupted narratives, frozen in time that become silent witnesses to the psychological toll of displacement. In this culinary diaspora, the fragments of flavors and aromas become a bittersweet memoir of what once was – a testament to the enduring link between food and memory, persisting even amidst the chaos of forced migration. The tastes, smells, and textures of food can serve to trigger memories (Lupton 2008: 668), serving as fragments of a once intact – cultural identity. These sensory triggers serve as conduits to the past, evoking not just the flavors of a particular dish but the shared moments, cultural rituals, and a sense of belonging that accompanied them.

The preparation and sharing of a Kashmiri feast, including “gushtaba, rista, martzwangan korma, shami kebab, chicken yakhni” (360), symbolize the significance of preserving culture through culinary practices. Musa’s meticulous cooking reflects a commitment to maintaining and passing on traditional Kashmiri recipes, each dish embodying a piece of cultural heritage. “Each nation has its national dishes, and in many countries, each region its special cuisine, by which it identifies itself and is identified by others” (Lupton 2008: 680). The mention of Gulrez’s father as a “professional” (360) cook from Godzila’s village underscores the importance of culinary skills as a cultural legacy. Despite the challenges and dangers in their environment, the act of preparing and sharing these traditional Kashmiri dishes becomes a deliberate effort to safeguard and transmit the rich cultural identity embedded in Kashmiri cuisine. Through the shared meal, the characters form a spontaneously constituted family, reinforcing the idea that food acts as a powerful medium for preserving, celebrating, and passing down cultural practices even in the face of displacement and danger. Musa’s metaphorical description of “our stomachs are graveyards” (360) can be seen as an embodiment of cultural symbolism. The stomach becomes a vessel that holds not only the physical remnants of meals but also symbolic representations of cultural values and experiences. Musa’s statement implies that what is consumed becomes a part of one’s identity. “The idea of food and identity is, “You are what you eat” (Almerico 2014: 4). The dietary choices of the community carry a shared identity and affiliation, shaping the way they are perceived within their cultural context.

Palates of Identity: Culinary Explorations in *The Namesake*

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, food emerges as a nuanced form of non-verbal communication, intricately woven into the fabric of cultural identity and familial connections. In the face of the Ashoke’s decision to study abroad, Lahiri paints a poignant tableau of familial resistance, the mother’s resolute silence, marked by a three-day abstention from food. The act of “refusing food for three days” (41) becomes a silent yet profound protest, a visceral language of sorrow and disagreement that transcends spoken words. Mary Douglas’s cultural theory underscores this, revealing how the symbolic refusal of food acts as a code, communicating emotions and dissent within the family structure. Lahiri deftly uses food as a vessel for communication, illustrating that, in times of significant life decisions, the kitchen can be as eloquent as any spoken conversation, and the act of withholding sustenance becomes a silent protest against the inevitable departure of a loved one.

Ashima’s ability to cook and adapt to her husband’s food preferences becomes a tangible expression of cultural capital within the domestic space. Cultural capital refers to the cultural resources, knowledge, and practices that Ashima acquires, utilizes, and negotiates as she navigates the transition from her traditional Indian background to her new life in Cambridge. Cultural capital is gained mainly through an individual’s initial learning, and is unconsciously influenced by the surroundings (Bourdieu, 2000). The traditional assets manifest in various forms, notably in the realm of food practices. The sumptuous flavors of traditional Bengali dishes to the assimilation of American cuisines, the narrative delves into the rich symbolism of meals, family gatherings, and the transformative power of food. The “unrationed” (10) ingredients symbolize not only material abundance but also the richness of cultural resources she incorporates into her culinary repertoire. Ashima’s proficiency in preparing meals goes beyond the technicalities of cooking; it becomes a narrative of cultural exchange. Her mastery of traditional Indian recipes, coupled with her adaptation to her husband’s taste

preferences, exemplifies the nuanced negotiation of culinary cultural capital. The kitchen transforms into a symbolic space where diverse cultural elements coalesce, and the choice of ingredients becomes a language through which she communicates her cultural identity. The kitchen, in this sense, becomes a site of cultural negotiation, where ingredients, recipes, and rituals converge to create a tapestry of flavors that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

Gogol's father, taking on the role traditionally assigned to the mother, disrupts the established habitus in the kitchen. The act of cooking, typically associated with the mother, is now performed by the father, reflecting a shift in gender roles and the renegotiation of cultural capital within the family. The absence of Gogol's mother alters the sensory experience of dining, creating a void in the familiar soundscape of familial conversations and the background noise of the television. The father's attempt to replicate the mother's culinary gestures, like mixing "rice and curry" (56), highlights the symbolic importance of preserving cultural practices even in her absence. However, Gogol's reluctance to eat without his mother's presence emphasizes the emotional and psychological dimensions of food beyond its utilitarian aspect. Food, in this context, becomes a conduit for expressing and grappling with complex emotions tied to family, identity, and loss. The dining table, once a site of togetherness and connection, transforms into a space marked by a palpable sense of loss and yearning.

The "Kitchen that appears to occupy an entire floor of the house" (130) and adorned with culinary-themed decorations, serves as a focal point for cultural expression. The open display of "hundreds of cookbooks, food encyclopedias, and volumes of essays about eating" (130) signifies a rich cultural repository. This aligns with Bourdieu's notion of embodied cultural capital, where knowledge, tastes, and practices related to food become integral elements in the construction of identity. Cookbooks contribute practical knowledge, sharing recipes and techniques that reflect cultural, historical, and regional culinary practices. Cookbooks serve as practical guides, acting as repositories of culinary wisdom passed down through generations. They encapsulate not only the recipes themselves but also the stories behind them, revealing the intricate web of cultural traditions woven into the fabric of cuisine. Food encyclopedias provide a comprehensive understanding of the origins, ingredients, and cultural significance of dishes, providing historical context and tracing global journeys. They highlight the interconnectedness of food cultures and the impact of culinary practices on diverse societies. Essays about eating contribute to food studies by exploring social, economic, and philosophical aspects of food consumption, food security, ethical considerations, and cultural symbolism.

In *The Namesake*, acculturation is a central theme that unfolds as the characters, particularly the protagonist Gogol Ganguli, grapple with their dual cultural identities. Born to Indian parents in the United States, Gogol experiences the intricate process of acculturation as he navigates the complexities of blending his Bengali heritage with the American culture in which he is raised. The concept of dietary acculturation is indeed a complex and multidimensional process, as outlined in various research papers exploring the impact of cultural transitions on individuals' eating habits. These studies often delve into how dietary patterns evolve when people relocate from their home country to a host country with distinct food environments and cultural norms.

Research in this field acknowledges that acculturation is a complex, multidimensional process by which a person's diet changes and adapts when they move from their home country to a new host country with a different food environment or culture. Acculturation is palpable in the culinary experiences depicted in the novel. Gogol's interactions with food symbolize his negotiation between two worlds. Traditional Bengali dishes, such as the ritualistic preparation of rice and fish curry, coexist with American staples like pizza and fast food. The protagonist's evolving taste preferences and dining habits become markers of his acculturation, reflecting a fusion of his Indian roots and American upbringing. Food serves as a powerful symbol of Gogol's acculturation journey – "He learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parch" (137). The novel depicts the blending of traditional Bengali cuisine with American dietary practices, mirroring the protagonist's navigation of dual cultural identities. Scenes of Gogol enjoying Bengali dishes like rice and fish curry coexist with his experiences of American fast food, showcasing the fusion of culinary traditions. The act of sharing meals becomes a cultural bridge, reflecting Gogol's negotiation of his Indian roots and American surroundings. Further, Maxine's praise for the Indian food not only acknowledges the culinary skills but also breaks down cultural barriers, fostering a connection through shared gastronomic experiences. The mention of Maxine's appreciation for Gogol's mother's cooking telling her "It's the best Indian food she's ever tasted" (149) and her acceptance of "extra cutlets and samosas" (149) demonstrates how food becomes a medium for cultural exchange and bridge-building and creates a shared space where diverse cultural identities can intersect harmoniously.

Conclusion

This research paper explored the profound interplay between food, culture, and identity, unraveling the intricate threads that weave through societies and individuals. Food studies has given way to a recognition of its significance in understanding cultures, religions, and human interactions. As demonstrated by Kessler, food transcends its role as sustenance, becoming a symbolic language that opens doors to layered meanings. The exploration of Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and Lahiri's *The Namesake* underscores the pivotal role of food in literature. In Roy's narrative, gastronomy serves as a literary device, offering sensory immersion into the diverse culinary landscapes of India. The act

of preparing and sharing traditional dishes becomes a deliberate effort to preserve culture amidst upheaval. In Lahiri's work, food becomes a nuanced form of communication, reflecting familial resistance and the negotiation of cultural capital within the domestic space. The culinary explorations delve into the sensory and symbolic dimensions of food, emphasizing how flavors become a language conveying stories of migration, resilience, and adaptation. This study underscores that cuisine is not static; it is a dynamic reflection of societies in flux, where tradition and innovation coalesce in a delicate dance.

In nutshell, in the culinary narratives explored, the kitchen transforms into more than a space of sustenance – it becomes a canvas where cultural identities are negotiated, traditions are preserved, and the act of sharing meals becomes a powerful expression of human connection, offering a profound taste of the intricate stories embedded in each bite. Through the lens of food studies, this research invites a continued exploration of the sensory and symbolic dimensions of food, urging a deeper appreciation for the narratives, traditions, and shared experiences that unfold within the universal language of cuisine.

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