

The Role Of Food, Festivals, And Cultural Practices In Indian Diaspora Literature

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Abstract

Indian diaspora literature is rich with narratives of identity, nostalgia, adaptation, and cultural survival. Among the most prominent symbols of diasporic memory and resistance are food, festivals, and traditional cultural practices. These elements serve as powerful conduits for sustaining ethnic identity and transmitting heritage across generations. This paper explores how Indian diaspora authors use these cultural markers to portray the complexities of belonging and alienation in host cultures. Through close readings of selected works by writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Salman Rushdie, and Monica Ali, this paper demonstrates how food becomes a metaphor for memory and assimilation, festivals symbolize resistance and unity, and traditional rituals reflect tensions between preservation and adaptation. Drawing on diaspora theory and postcolonial frameworks, the paper argues that these cultural expressions not only resist erasure but also help construct hybrid identities in multicultural societies. Ultimately, Indian diaspora literature reclaims cultural memory through the intimate and public enactment of rituals that bind the past to the present.

Introduction

The migration of Indians across the globe, especially since the colonial and postcolonial periods, has produced a vibrant and diverse body of literature known as Indian diaspora literature. These writings offer deep insights into the lives of individuals negotiating identities in foreign lands, often navigating the dual pulls of assimilation and heritage preservation. While the themes of displacement, nostalgia, and belonging are central to these narratives, the role of food, festivals, and cultural practices as literary motifs has received growing scholarly attention. These cultural elements are not just background details; they are vital expressions of selfhood and collective memory. The preparation of familiar dishes, the celebration of traditional festivals, and the observance of rituals serve as mechanisms through which diasporic individuals connect with their roots. They also function as strategies for asserting identity in multicultural societies that often privilege homogenization over diversity. This paper argues that in Indian diaspora literature, food, festivals, and cultural practices are not merely ornamental but serve as potent tools for storytelling, resistance, and identity formation.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study is anchored in the theoretical contributions of diaspora and postcolonial scholars such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Avtar Brah. Bhabha's concept of hybridity illuminates the ways diasporic subjects navigate between cultures, producing new, syncretic forms of identity. Stuart Hall emphasizes that cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as much as 'being,' formed in response to the changing social and historical conditions of diaspora. Avtar Brah introduces the idea of the "diaspora space," where various subject positions—native, migrant, settler—interact and contest identity politics.

The methodology is qualitative and interpretive, relying on close readings of selected literary texts from Indian diaspora writers especially Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'. The analysis focuses on how specific references to food, festivals, and traditional practices in these texts contribute to character development, plot progression, and thematic depth. The chosen texts span various diasporic contexts, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

Food as Cultural Memory and Identity

Food is a motivating factor that propels action on the part of an individual, a community or an entire society. Food is part of the cyclical pattern of life; food is culture of a particular society or nation. The significance of food is even more remarkable when the person resides in the alien country. Indians who live abroad are afflicted with a 'sense of exile'. The absence of the sense of belonging that these 'trivials' experience makes them resolved to achieve communication. There is always a lingering awareness of 'clutching at a world that does not belong to them' but at the same time there is the propensity towards initiation, subsequent reconciliation and final communication.

In the surroundings of heart-breaks and aches of alienation, the food certainly serves as an important part of their identity. When away from home, the food from one's land brings as much pleasure as mother's voice on overseas calls. It is something like oasis in the desert. Food provides a link; it induces a sense of belonging in an otherwise alien world. Food serves as a key to bond. In a strange land familiar items of food are as welcome as familiar faces. Just as music or art breeds familiarity, food also serves as a medium of connection. It is an important part of cultural exchange and bonding as such its importance in the study of diaspora cannot be undermined. Jhumpa Lahiri has effectively used food and dining manners of Indians to suggest their diasporic consciousness in *The Namesake*.

The Namesake focuses on the lives of Indians and Asians who have migrated abroad. Her writings tell us about the problems of alienation and identity-crisis of Indians (both first and second generations) who have now settled in America. The tension of adhering to Indian culture and imbibing American culture, between upholding family tradition and subscribing to the individual freedom and realization that one is an outsider even though one is born there, is beautifully highlighted in her works. Jhumpa Lahiri portrays immigrant experience and the clash of cultures. *The Namesake* is the story of the Ganguli family. Following an arranged marriage in Calcutta, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli move to the U.S. and settle in Cambridge and Massachusetts. A research student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Ashoke adapts more quickly to life in America in contrast to his wife, who initially resists all American things and pines for her family in Calcutta.

In fact, the novel starts with the description of Ashima in the kitchen, making a sort of concoction which she consumes throughout her pregnancy. Jhumpa Lahiri very tactfully depicts her in these words:

—Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chilli pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix... tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing.¶ (P. 1)

Thus, through the medium of lacking of mustard oil in the concoction, Lahiri suggests there is something missing in the life of Ashima on this foreign land. The absence of mustard oil actually signifies the absence of familiar faces and things that make every presence in the new country seem alien.

As the time passes, they grow their own friend circle of Bengali acquaintances. The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that's sold in Chinatown, that it's possible to make halwa from Cream of Wheat. The families drop by one another's homes on Sunday afternoons. They drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans.

When Gogol is six months old, they celebrate the occasion: Gogol's Annaprasan, his rice ceremony. There is no baptism for Bengali babies. Instead, the first formal ceremony of their lives centers around the first consumption of solid food. Lahiri minutely depicts this occasion in the novel. Ashima makes biryani, the carp in yogurt sauce, the dal, the six different vegetable dishes etc. for the guests. It suggests that though Ashoke & Ashima live abroad, they still believe in their deeply rooted traditional Indian values.

In the first meeting of Gogol and Ruth on the train, food serves as a medium to narrow the space between them. He offers her to go the cafe car. She asks him to get her a bag of potato chips and a cup of tea with milk. They continue talking, Ruth eating the chips, brushing the salt from around her lips with the back of her hand. They talk about Indian food:

—He tells her about the meals he'd eaten on Indian trains and slightly sour dal ordered at one station and delivered hot at the next, the thick vegetable cutlets served with bread and butter for breakfast. He tells her about the tea, how it was bought from giant aluminium kettles, the milk and sugar already mixed in, and how it was drunk in crude clay cups that were smashed afterwards on the tracks.¶ (P. 112)

When Gogol falls in love with Maxine, he is actually fascinated by the Ratliff house, and Gerald & Lydia (Maxine's parents)'s manner of living the life. The medium of Food serves as an intrinsic part to build this enchantment in his mind:

—He learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper. He comes to expect the weight of their flatware in his hands, and to keep the cloth napkin, still partially folded, on his lap. He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood. He learns not to put wooden spoons in the dishwater... he learns to anticipate, every evening, the sound of a cork emerging from a fresh bottle of wine.¶ (P.137)

After witnessing the way of life lived by Ratliffs, he unconsciously compares his own parents with them. The way his parents behave when they are the host in the parties at home is totally different from the Ratliffs as the hosts. The Ratliffs are more decent and they enjoyed the party thoroughly whereas the Gangulies seem much stressed to manage the event. At the Ganguli house, meat and fish are served side by side; so many courses that people had to eat in shifts, the food still in the pans they were cooked in crowding the table. Unlike Gerald and Lydia, who preside at the center of their dinners, his parents behave more like caterers in their own home, solicitous and watchful, waiting until most of their guests' plates were stacked by the sink in order finally to help themselves. This difference in the food and dining manners between the two families actually depicts the vast cultural difference between the two countries.

On many occurrences, depiction of the food and culinary items laid its deep insightful influence. For example, Ashima's kind and caring treatment to Maxine on the dining table (serving samosas, breaded chicken cutlets, chickpeas with tamarind sauce, lamb biryani, chutney made with tomatoes), Gogol's simple food habits along with Ratliffs (boiled corn from a farm stand, cold chicken, pasta with pesto, tomatoes from the garden sliced and salted on a plate) at the lake house in New Hampshire, Ashima's food (simple meals of buttered toast and dal and an omelette) when she is alone at home, the mourner's diet after the death of Ashoke (rice and dal and vegetables, plainly prepared, forgoing meat and fish), Gogol and Moushumi's frequent meetings in the restaurants in the early stage of their relationship, their food habits after the marriage and throwing the sort of parties their parents never had (mixing martinis in a stainless steel shaker and consuming alcohol), At the end of the novel Ashima's food preparation for the party (the laborious process of making mincemeat croquettes for the guests), her memories attached with these croquettes (making it first time in her kitchen in Cambridge, for her very first party, her husband at the stove in white drawstring pajamas and a T-shirt, frying the croquettes two at a time in a small blackened saucepan, Gogol and Sonia's help when they were small, Gogol's hands wrapped around the can of crumbs, Sonia always wanting to eat the croquettes before they'd been breaded and fried) etc.... Thus, the food and dining manners serve many purposes in the novel, i.e. to further the novel in a cogent way, to build the relationship, to influence the relationship of different characters, to suggest the deeply rooted cultural values and its difference from each-other, to delineate the past memories through the medium of food etc.

Food in Indian diaspora literature functions as a powerful symbol of memory, identity, and adaptation. It represents a sensory link to the homeland and evokes familial warmth, tradition, and continuity. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), food is often used to signal emotional connections or cultural dissonance. In the short story "Mrs. Sen's," the protagonist's obsession with fresh fish, a staple from her native Calcutta, becomes a metaphor for her longing and inability to adapt to American life. Her elaborate food preparation rituals become acts of cultural preservation, contrasted with the cold convenience of the host society.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) presents food and spices as magical elements deeply embedded in cultural identity. The protagonist Tilo uses spices not only to cure physical ailments but also to heal diasporic dislocation. Through her, Divakaruni emphasizes how culinary traditions serve as repositories of ancestral knowledge and emotional healing.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) also explores the role of food, albeit in a magical realist mode. Pickles and chutneys, carefully preserved, are symbolic of stored memories. The narrator Saleem Sinai's family pickles are not merely condiments but "the jars that preserve [his] past." Thus, food becomes a metaphor for history, memory, and the desire to preserve cultural essence amid shifting political and personal landscapes.

Festivals as Rituals of Resistance and Belonging

Festivals in diaspora literature are communal rituals that defy the isolation of the migrant condition. They create shared spaces for the performance of identity and solidarity. In *The Namesake* (2003), Lahiri depicts the Ganguli family's efforts to celebrate Bengali festivals such as Durga Puja and Saraswati Puja in Massachusetts. These celebrations, though scaled down and adapted, become powerful acts of cultural

resistance. They allow the characters to construct a mini-India within their diasporic home, providing both comfort and a sense of continuity.

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) highlights how festivals can also generate tensions between tradition and change. Nazneen, the protagonist, initially participates in religious celebrations passively, but over time, begins to question their relevance and gendered limitations. While festivals bring together the diasporic Bangladeshi community in London, they also expose internal divisions—between men and women, between generations, and between the secular and the devout.

In M.G. Vassanji's *No New Land* (1991), the Hindu festival of Diwali is shown as a means of asserting presence in a multicultural Canada. Public celebration of the festival not only preserves cultural heritage but also asserts visibility in a society that marginalizes immigrant traditions. Thus, festivals in diaspora literature function as tools of negotiation—between memory and modernity, between self and society.

Cultural Practices and the Struggle for Continuity

Beyond food and festivals, other cultural practices—such as marriage rituals, clothing traditions, language use, and religious observances—are crucial to diaspora literature. These practices often become arenas of conflict between first-generation immigrants and their children born or raised abroad.

In Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), the generational conflict is highlighted through disagreements about arranged marriages, family expectations, and the preservation of cultural roles. While the older generation sees these customs as vital to identity, the younger characters often view them as burdensome or irrelevant, leading to feelings of guilt, rebellion, or confusion.

In Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995), a series of short stories explore how traditional practices like dowries, marital obedience, and caste boundaries impact women in the diaspora. While some characters rebel against these norms, others internalize them, revealing the complex ways diasporic individuals adapt or resist tradition.

Language is another key cultural marker. The loss of native languages—Hindi, Bengali, Tamil—in favor of English often symbolizes a deeper cultural rupture. However, many texts celebrate code-switching and bilingualism as markers of hybrid identity. Rushdie's playful manipulation of English, laced with Indian vernacular, exemplifies how linguistic hybridity can challenge colonial legacies and affirm diaspora creativity.

Conclusion

Indian diaspora literature offers a rich tapestry of stories that explore how migrants navigate identity in unfamiliar lands. Food, festivals, and cultural practices emerge as essential tools for preserving memory, resisting assimilation, and crafting hybrid identities. They provide continuity with the past, build communal bonds in the present, and shape the narratives of belonging for future generations. By examining these cultural expressions, this paper has shown how diaspora authors turn the personal and the domestic into powerful acts of cultural storytelling.

As globalization continues to reshape identities, the role of everyday cultural practices in diasporic life becomes ever more significant. Indian diaspora literature not only reflects this reality but also shapes it—one meal, one ritual, one story at a time.

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