



# Culinary Memory, Diasporic Selfhood, and the Therapeutics of Food: Identity Reconstruction in Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the symbolic, affective, and therapeutic functions of food in Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*, foregrounding culinary practice as a medium of emotional recovery and identity reconstruction within the diasporic experience. Situating the novel within the emerging discourse of food studies and feminist literary criticism, the study argues that cooking operates as an alternative language through which the protagonist, Devi, negotiates trauma, silence, and fractured selfhood following personal loss. The analysis demonstrates how food becomes a form of embodied expression, enabling Devi to articulate emotions that remain inaccessible through verbal communication. Furthermore, the kitchen traditionally conceptualised as a feminised domestic space is reconfigured as a site of agency, creativity, and relational repair, particularly in the context of the mother–daughter relationship. By tracing Devi's gradual return to speech, culinary creativity, and cultural belonging, the paper highlights the role of everyday food practices in mediating memory, healing, and self-reclamation. The study ultimately positions Malladi's narrative as a significant contribution to contemporary diasporic women's writing, expanding the critical possibilities of reading food as a transformative and restorative cultural practice.

**Keywords:** Food Studies; Diasporic Identity; Trauma and Healing; Culinary Narratives; Gender and Selfhood

## Introduction

In recent years, food has emerged as a significant critical lens within literary and cultural studies, particularly in the analysis of diasporic women's writing, where culinary practices frequently intersect with questions of memory, trauma, gender, and identity. Far from functioning merely as a marker of ethnic authenticity or cultural nostalgia, food in such narratives often operates as a symbolic and affective medium through which subjectivity is negotiated and healed. This paper examines Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry* as a culinary narrative that foregrounds cooking as a therapeutic language of recovery and self-reclamation. Through the protagonist Devi's turn to cooking following personal trauma, the novel reconfigures the kitchen from a traditionally feminised domestic space into a site of

emotional agency, creative expression, and identity reconstruction. By analysing food as a metaphorical language that mediates silence, grief, and diasporic belonging, this paper argues that Malladi's narrative positions culinary practice as a transformative mode of healing and self-articulation within the context of gendered and diasporic experience.

Amulya Malladi employs food as a crucial literary device to articulate diasporic experiences and emotional transformation in her novels. In *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Malladi uses cooking as a metaphorical language through which the protagonist, Devi, reconstructs her fractured identity and reclaims her agency. The novel chronicles Devi's journey from despair to self-acceptance, where food becomes both therapy and self-expression. Devastated by the loss of her baby and her job, Devi sinks into depression and attempts suicide. Although her mother, Saroj, saves her life, the incident leaves Devi mute—unable or unwilling to communicate through words. Instead, she turns to cooking, using the creative process of preparing food as a means of expression and emotional release.

During her recovery, Devi's psychiatrist advises her to keep a journal to record her thoughts and feelings, since she refuses to speak. In a symbolic act, she transforms her mother's cookbook into this journal, inscribing her emotions and experiments in its margins. Upon her return home, when Saroj offers her samosas with mint chutney, Devi instead enters the kitchen and invents her own version of the condiment using ginger, apricot, mint, and chipotle chilli peppers. The result is a revelation: "Pride swelled inside her and for the first time in a very long time she felt a small measure of confidence" (SCC 72). She later names it "Anti-Saroj Chutney" (SCC 78), signifying her assertion of individuality and creative defiance. As Asella notes, "The metaphorical meaning of food, which needs to be treated with care, therefore permeates into human relations creating similarities between food and human emotions" (132).

For Devi, food becomes a language of emotion—each meal reflecting her internal state. Malladi writes, "...Devi cooked outrageous meals every day. When she was angry, the food was spicy; when she seemed happy, there was a dessert; and when she was bored, the food tasted bland" (SCC 77). Through her cooking, Devi externalizes her psychological turmoil and gradually transforms her silence into a mode of communication. Her emotional recovery parallels her culinary creativity: food becomes both her vocabulary and her voice.

At one point, Devi contemplates suicide again but stops, recalling her doctor's words: "Inside you there's something that wants to live and taste and explore" (SCC 87). This statement marks a turning point in her self-realization. Through cooking, Devi reconnects with her mother, discovering a sense of closeness that had been absent before. She experiences profound joy and gratitude, recognizing that her culinary awakening is a legacy inherited from her mother. Cooking thus becomes a ritual of healing, a means of reconciling past wounds, and a pathway to self-reclamation.

Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry* ultimately portrays food as a redemptive and transformative force. The kitchen, often considered a domestic and feminine space, is reimagined as a site of empowerment and self-definition. Devi's culinary acts are not simply acts of nourishment but acts of self-assertion, reclaiming her voice, agency, and place in the world. Through her journey, Malladi highlights the power of food to translate trauma into creativity and silence into expression—demonstrating that, in the diasporic and gendered experience, the act of cooking can become an act of survival.

Her food tasted different from her mother's but she had learned to cook from Saroj and that made Devi feel closer to Saroj in a way she never had before. Silence and kitchen had brought them together, and it was a time and place that Devi had to relish. (SCC 121)

After four weeks, Devi begins speaking again following her doctor's visit. Her first request to her father, Avi, is to enroll in a culinary school. When they return home, Saroj welcomes them with her traditional South Indian meal of sambar and dosa. Devi delights in the familiar taste: "My memories of Sunday morning of eating hot dosas with sambhar and pickle are vivid. I'm glad that I'm living here again so that I can learn to appreciate the one thing that I never did learn to do before: Mama's impeccable south Indian cooking" (SCC 212). This moment signifies Devi's reconciliation with her Indian heritage and her acceptance of cooking as an integral part of her identity. Through food, Devi finds healing, rediscovering her lost self and regaining a sense of belonging that transcends guilt, loss, and alienation.

Devi's renewed passion for cooking helps her overcome insecurities and emotional stagnation. Once she immerses herself in the creative act of cooking, she finds purpose and peace, even forgetting her grief over her lost child. The culinary process transforms her, allowing her to emerge as a stronger, more self-aware individual. She rebuilds her relationship with her mother and realizes that life, though imperfect, must be embraced in all its complexity. By accepting responsibility for her past, reconnecting with her Indian roots, and valuing her family, Devi learns the importance of self-acceptance and resilience.

*Serving Crazy with Curry* ultimately reimagines food not as a passive symbol of cultural continuity but as an active, restorative force through which trauma is processed and identity is reconstituted. Devi's culinary journey transforms the act of cooking into a language of survival, enabling her to negotiate silence, grief, and fractured selfhood within the diasporic condition. The kitchen, often relegated to the margins of literary and feminist discourse as a site of domestic confinement, is refigured in Malladi's narrative as a space of empowerment, creativity, and emotional agency. Through Devi's gradual recovery, the novel underscores the capacity of everyday culinary practices to function as affective archives of memory, relational repair, and self-expression. By foregrounding food as a therapeutic and symbolic medium, Malladi's work contributes to a broader understanding of how diasporic women's narratives articulate healing and selfhood through embodied cultural practices, thereby expanding the critical possibilities of food studies within contemporary literary discourse.

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