

Culinary Delights: Reading Food in the Diasporic Habitus**Anitta Jose¹**

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Article Received: 16/09/2025**Article Accepted:** 14/10/2025**Published Online:** 16/10/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.10.303**Abstract:**

Food studies is an interdisciplinary field that has opened its doors in literary studies to examine how the use of food imagery depict profound meanings in literature. Food is one of the sites to which the migrant turns to reinstate their identity and sense of community in a displaced world. Food images in the diasporic texts are interlaced with individual and cultural memories. This paper attempts to explore the culinary tapestry in the diasporic texts and observes how food is presented as a medium of communication in preserving the Indian culture. In this literary feast, readers are invited to savour the rich narrative offerings of Indian diasporic writers to examine the adaptation of culinary practices, the impact of food in identity development and cultural hybridisation through the lens of nation's culinary landscape.

Keywords: Food, Diaspora, Culture, Identity**Introduction**

Food is essential for living and sustaining life. As Indians travelled, so did their food and culinary process. Diasporic groups who migrate for different reasons carry their culture along, that they either spread the same in the immigrant country or seek nostalgic relief through food, lifestyle, relationships etc... Food and literature have a long-lived relation and it can no longer be swept under the carpet. Although food imageries were ever-present in works of literature, literary food studies have only recently achieved the much needed scholarly attention. Within the domain of food and literature, food has a significant place in Diaspora Studies. In them, the notion of 'memory' resonates profoundly. It refers to recollection of cultural, historical, and ancestral experiences, often tied to a homeland or place of origin. It is in the flavours of a grandmother's recipe, the spices that waft through an open window, and the ritual of feasting.

'Homeland', in the diasporic context, emerges not as a physical location but as a realm of collective memory, nostalgia, and aspiration. It is captured in the traditional dishes,

aromas, and flavours that go beyond geographical boundaries, connecting individuals to their roots. Furthermore, 'identity', the most intricate thread in this narrative tapestry, is intricately interwoven with food. It is forged through the cultural and sensory connections to food, serving as a powerful symbol of heritage, and the preservation of traditions.

Indian diaspora is not a monolithic group but it includes various communities with different traditions, religions, cultures and linguistic backgrounds. Each of it has its own unique food practices and delicacies. Among literary and cultural theorists, Roland Barthes was one of the first to explore the semiotics of food and culture, expressing his ideas in *Toward a Psycho-sociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* (1961), in which he wrote, "For what is food? It is not only a collection of products.... It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour" (21). Anita Mannur's research paper *Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora*, published in 2007, shed light on the intricate relationship between food, memory, and cultural identity within the South Asian Diaspora. It explores how food invokes nostalgia and plays a pivotal role in defining identity. Food also serves as a powerful metaphor for diaspora communities, capturing the longing for familiar things while adapting to new cultures. This paper attempts to explore the culinary tapestry in the diasporic texts and observes how food is presented as a medium of communication to help make cultural preservation, adaptation and hybridity. The different culinary experiences and their importance in forming identities will also be studied.

The Potpourri of Indian Diaspora

From the perspective of Indian immigrants, the preparation and consumption of food have far-reaching importance in their subject formation. The Indian diasporic literature rooted in food narratives paves a gateway to the different socio-cultural aspects of Indian diasporic lives. Novels like Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004), *The Mango Season* (2003), Bharati Kirchner's *Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries* (2003), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1990), Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* (2003) take the multivalent aspects of food to explore the crucial themes concerning the Indian diaspora; the conception of homeland, formation of identity and the hybridizing tendencies of the diaspora.

Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry* highlights how cooking is used by the protagonist Devi to recover from her long depression and find her ability. Devi undergoes a significant change from a depressed individual who commits suicide to a person who finds happiness and discovers her identity through cooking. Devi was able to overcome her insecurities because of her passion for cooking. She even forgot she had a baby after she started cooking. She is a better, new person, and cooking has greatly altered her. Devi is interested in cooking dishes with a western flavour breezing over Indian culinary staples and this experiment is now with blueberries, native to North America, fused in a curried sauce that owes its origin and popularity to India. This leaves the space to analyse the food-fiction from the lens of cultural hybridity and investigate deeper to understand the complex notion of hybridity that Devi puts together in her culinary affairs.

In the novel, *The Mango Season* by Amulya Malladi, there are many food images that provoke the childhood memories of the protagonist Priya. She enjoys having every food which she missed a lot during her stay in the United States, most of the food she had taken back to the long-forgotten tastes and the memories. She describes mangoes as “HAPPINESS”. She remembers stealing mangoes from the neighbour’s garden; she also remembers sneaking into the kitchen in the night to eat mangoes and also remembered eating raw mangoes with salt and chili powder with her brother Nate. Food images in the novel act as a tool to provoke the memories of the past or the memories of the homeland.

In Bharti Kirchner’s novel *Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries*, the protagonist Sunya runs a Seattle bakery which is famous for Sunya cake. Despite being a small business owner, she is able to survive in Seattle because of her great spirit. Sunya denies revealing the recipe saying, “Secrecy is still the most alluring spice” (9). Though Sunya runs a small bakery *Pastries*, it has no equal in Seattle. She establishes an identity of her own in her immigrant land. She views the kitchen as a space for artistic expression as well as self-expression.

Food in the novel *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni represents the kaleidoscopic picture of India. The protagonist in *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilottama, also known as Tilo, is a mistress of Spices who resides in Oakland, California. She offers every Indian product in her spice shop. Through her spices, she possesses the miraculous ability to heal people both physically and psychologically. The entire gamut of narrative encapsulates the interplay of spices, their personification, and their influence on the journey of life of Tilo. *The Mistress of Spices* navigates the intricate web of food identity, employing spices not merely as culinary agents but as sentient beings, intricately woven into human lives. Divakaruni masterfully portrays the significance of food through Tilo, the mystical spice mistress, elucidating how spices transcend their inherent nature, assuming roles akin to complex human characters. The novel weaves an intricate tapestry where spices mirror human emotions, asserting control and influencing lives.

Anita Desai uses ‘food’ as metaphor in the *Fasting, Feasting* of the title to compare and contrast the two families. In one culture, food is used as a vehicle to express communion. In the other way, it is used to express isolation. In India the sharing of meals assumes almost ritualistic importance. The family is drawn together for their meals even though communication falters and all are there to cater to the father. Food is a frequent topic of discussion, when to cook, what to cook, what food to offer guests, and who should or should not be invited to share meal. On viewing the text through the lens of food, the characters exhibit their various characteristics in their interactions with food. Additionally, food also serves as a medium that highlights the relationships among the characters—of kinship and otherwise—and ultimately, shapes and moulds their individual and collective identities. A more holistic view towards the characters invites the appreciation of the richness of Desai’s story world as being a true reflection of the real world.

The novel *One Hundred Shades of White* by Preethi Nair deals with the story of three women from three generations: Ammu, the grandmother who never leaves India, Nalini, the mother who immigrates to the UK with her young children at the age of 24, and Maya, the daughter who immigrates to the UK at the age of four and stays there her entire life. Nalini carries on her mother's talent for the kitchen. Working as her mother's assistant in a small town in Kerala where the mother-daughter team lived in harmony with the environment and supported themselves as chefs, Nalini had absorbed all of her mother's culinary knowledge regarding the therapeutic effects of spices and food. While Maya, rejected her mother's cooking and fell in love with the cuisine there. Maya resisted Nalini's best attempts. Later in the story, Maya travels all the way to her grandmother's village in Kerala and it becomes a metaphor for her quest for identity since it brings back a part of her that she never knew existed. Maya finally embrace her roots and accept her ancestry and true identity.

Conclusion

Before making conclusive statements regarding Indian cultural identity as presented in the novels, it is imperative to understand that Indian culture cannot be described or categorized in one particular way. The novels examined in this paper represent different religions and various regions in India. The characters are all very different, face dissimilar conflicts, and meet various resolutions. However, all the writers use food imagery and metaphors to reveal the personalities of the characters and to keep the action and plots moving along. Images of food, food preparation and serving, and eating are used to signify aspects of the Indian cultural identity. Foods in these novels similarly reflect a cultural identity that is politically and socially fragmented and hybrid in identity.

Through the literal and metaphorical usage of food images, including food preparation, serving, and consuming, these significant works of Indian fiction are enhanced by multiple layers of meaning to be consumed by the critical reader's mind. The food representations not only make these textual dishes more inviting and colourful, but they add a robust seasoning to create a more satisfying and memorable meal.

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