

Gastronomic Identities: The Role of Food in Cultural Belonging

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Abstract

*Literary works provide cultural values, ideas, and attitudes in order to shed light on the habits and beliefs of numerous cultures. A multitude of heterogeneous cultures coexist worldwide, each encompassing a plethora of viewpoints and convictions. Authors often acquaint readers with diverse cultures in addition to expressing their own perspective. Literary works convey cultural values through the author's expression. Food has garnered interest from diverse fields, particularly economics, literature, human rights, ethics, sociology, anthropology, and others. Multiple studies have been undertaken to explore the importance of food for the human race. Food is employed in literary works as a means to examine and explore cultural disparities. Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting Feasting*, is replete with metaphorical allusions to food and consumption. The novel's title suggests the concept of consumption, exploring how characters interact with food to reveal disparities in who feasts and starves. This paper focuses on the analysis of narrative that revolve around culinary elements, such as metaphors, symbols, and representations, and their connections to identity and culture.*

Keywords: *Culture, Food, Gender, Identity, Women.*

Introduction

Writings from several cultures have become a popular genre in the modern era. It is associated with writings by authors from other countries, and these writings are always focused on the cultural context of the authors homeland. They consistently demonstrate the writers' love and passion for their homeland. In the modern world, immigration has become very common. Diasporic literature is a term that can describe the works produced by immigrants. It has become prominent over the past few decades and is called "Immigrant Literature." The essential traits of diasporic writings are not based on any idea or philosophy. Instead, they are based on the immigrants' personal experiences. The contributions of immigrant writers and their creative works have enriched Indian writing in English. A desire for social and cultural assimilation is suggested for Indian immigrants, as is a desire to adopt a new identity. The most important aspect of immigration is the process of adaptation and identity modification. While doing so, these authors also serve as a link between their homeland and their readers by providing a visual representation of that homeland in their works. The writers of Indian literature in the diaspora can be categorized as first and second-generation authors. The first-generation authors are the immigrants who lived in their native country for a while before migrating to another and trying to adapt themselves. In contrast, the second-generation immigrants are the offspring of the first-generation immigrants. The immigrants keep the best features of their own culture and the new one they have settled in (Akilandeswari & Sundararajan, 2022).

In narratives, food has a crucial impact on the tone and flow of a scene, often leading to significant changes in the plot. Similar to the way language and symbolism are used in literature, food has the ability to effectively represent and pass on cultural aspects. Food is more than just the externalities and internalities of the physical body; it is a dynamic social, gender, political, and cultural marker. It is a distinct presence within both our shared and individual sense of self. The connection between food and literature corresponds to the connection between the author and cook. While the latter arouses a desire for food and satisfies cravings, the former ignites a passion for language. An insatiable desire to move beyond our own selves and connect with the experiences of others. An intense desire to experience the lives of these

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individuals and bridge the gaps of nationality, class, culture, race, and gender. Furthermore, there is a certain extent to which this applies to consciousness as a whole. Numerous writers have explored the intertwining of cooking and food with memory, social conventions, stereotypes, habits, and the conflict between individual and communal identity, among other themes. When authors recognise the significance of food in the lives of their characters, they employ detailed depictions of it to demonstrate to readers how food influences and symbolises a society or individual at a specific moment in history. The table around which a group of individuals gather to eat and converse often symbolises diversity, culture, hierarchy, and social standing, among other things. The concept or perception that develops through food subsequently transforms into a collective and personal identity (Mishra & Devasahayam, 2019).

If literature holds up the mirror to life, it is manifest that it also represents food. Not only is food an essential facet of survival, but it also binds communities together and becomes that language that breaks the barriers between two people or groups from varied backgrounds. Considering the vitality of food, it has not only been prominently featured in literature but has also been the focal point of many narratives. Its prominence comes to no surprise evaluating the fact that the first widely read and encountered narrative; The Bible thrives with gastro-literary representations. Extending from the venison that bought the rights of the eldest son in the story of Jacob and Esau to the metaphor of God as the bread of Life, to water turning into wine at Cana, the Last Supper, and so many more prove that food and drink are indissociable from the routines of daily life (Mishra & Devasahayam, 2019).

Eating is an essential human function related to social behaviour and necessary for survival. Themes and imagery associated with food and eating are employed as literary devices to create something aesthetically and emotionally impactful. Thus, according to psychoanalytic theory, one's eating habits help define who they are and reflect their ethnicity, race, social status, and family. Literature by and about women and children's literature frequently explores the issue of food. The recent surge in curiosity about literary uses of food imagery provides an opportunity to learn how authors have conveyed complex ideas and hidden meanings through culinary metaphors. Food studies address various social concerns, including gender relations, identity, and particularly in the work of immigrants, social position, and cultural identification. The importance of food criticism is growing as food becomes a symbol of identity and culture. Food is considered the most powerful tool often employed by the women diasporic writers of Indian English literature. Their expressions of longing, rejection, and anguish constantly reveal the hidden connection between immigrants and their homelands. An academic examination of food involves analysing its various aspects, including how individuals experience it, its socio-cultural importance, and its role in world politics. An examination of the developing genre of culinary narratives entails an exploration of women's encounters with food, influenced by the socio-cultural environment they inhabit and its relationship with the global food landscape.

It is often difficult to interpret the implicit meanings of food when it is used as a literary device in narratives since they pertain to the most personal and impenetrable perimeters of human rationality as well as irrationality. therefore, food in narratives needs to be read in between the lines because we as well as the characters in literary narratives not only eat to survive, or because we/they are hungry. But also due to anxiety, and sometimes to satiate an emotional hunger. Additionally, while food often represents self-definition and affiliation to a community, it can also function as a feature of the process of oppression and stereotyping (Mishra & Devasahayam, 2019).

Culture refers to the distinctive attributes and accumulated knowledge of a specific community, including elements such as language, religion, cuisine, social customs, music, and the arts. The Centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition takes a more advanced approach by defining culture as collective patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive frameworks, and knowledge that are acquired through socialisation. As a result, culture can be defined as the growth of a group's collective identity through distinctive social patterns that are unique to the group (Pappas & McKelvie, 2022). The sharing of food between cultures is a frequent and effortless occurrence, surpassing any other custom in its frequency and ease. There are occasionally specific culinary traditions associated with certain types of food, such as the use of chopsticks. In other instances, different food varieties blend together with established culinary

traditions, resulting in the creation of novel syncretic cuisines. An example of this is Tex-Mex food, which emerged from the fusion of Mexican and US Southwest culinary traditions. Similar to culture, food is exchanged and transferred among tribes, adjusting to evolving conditions and environments. Food exhibits adaptability; however, it is intricately intertwined with individuals' cultural identities, serving as a means for defining and differentiating themselves from other social groups. Within the context of cultural identities, the term cuisine is employed to denote distinct cultural practices related to the art of cooking, preparing, and consuming food (Hasty et al., 2022)

The study of food has a long history in anthropology and weaves together various subfields of the discipline. Among other things, food connects to nutrition and health, rituals and behaviors regarding production and consumption, and worldwide trade networks and the related diffusion of plants, animals, and artifacts. Distinguishing between what is and what is not food is a major concern within and across most human cultures. Food varies not only from one society to another but also across genders, classes, family groups, and seasons. As both a source of sustenance for the body and a means of establishing or advertising one's social status, food plays a major role in personal and cultural identity. In globalized Western culture, people regularly eat foods that originated in other cultures such as sushi, gyros, tacos, spaghetti, and crepes, to name just a few but practices such as avoiding certain foods (food prohibitions) and even eating one's family members or enemies (forms of cannibalism) are cross-cultural food traditions that are likely less familiar (Hasty et al., 2022, pp. 431–432)

Literature Review

The thesis “An Appetite for Metaphor: Food Imagery and Cultural Identity in Indian Fiction” examines how food metaphors and images have shaped postmodern culture. Literary studies may now explore how food imagery and metaphor convey complex concepts and deeper meaning in literature because of food studies. Literary food studies examine food symbolism to represent cultural identity, including social status, sexual desire, and gender relations. In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, food has multiple meanings that drive the plots, characterise the characters, and reflect Indian culture. Food and eating represent memories, emotions, narrative history, relationships, power, consumption, and cultural challenges of acceptance, resistance, and preservation (Whitt, 2011). The thesis “Cultural Politics of Food A Study of Selected Indian Writings” evaluates how cultural practices relate to societal power and hegemony, focusing on food. Food is used as a mode and marker of discursive terrains to examine how meaning is formed, distributed, and contested in different social formations. The project examines food narratives and their impact on dalit, women, and diasporic communities. Food choices, preparation, and sharing shape communities and individuals. Food was the driving force behind early human communities. As tribes established themselves, food became a symbol of acculturation and more than just fuel. Food plays a significant role in cultural identity, continuity, validation, and social control in such situations. Food behaviours, identity, and subject development help us understand our place in complex contexts (Singh, 2017). The article “Food and Identity in Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White*” portrays that food is recognised in various fields, including anthropology, sociology, food science, semiotics, literature, film, and culture. The way one eats reflects our identities and self-formation. Philosophical investigation, particularly in postmodern times, focuses on self-understanding and true existence, making food a crucial factor. The article proposes interpreting Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* as a tale of three generations of women through food. Diasporic women writers often use food to communicate their longing, rejection, and acceptance of their native culture. The novel is remarkable about a mother and daughter's struggle for their identity (Anukriti and Rana, 2016). The article, “Psychological Reflection on the Role of Gustatory Emotions in Aimee Bender's *The Particular Sadness of A Lemon Cake*” interprets that recent research has allowed literary scholars to examine how food images and metaphors symbolise complex ideas and profound meanings. Literary food studies examine food symbolism to reflect cultural identity, including social status, sexual desire, and gender relations. Food has many connotations that shape stories, characters, and culture. Literature about food and eating indicates cultural reception, resistance, and the preservation of civilisation. Their themes include memory, emotions, relationships, power, and consumption (Shree, 2019). The paper “Introduction: Food in Multi- Ethnic Literatures” examines how food is used as a literary device to depict identity, culture, and social dynamics in multi-ethnic American literature. Food and

foodways play a significant role in multi-ethnic American literature, serving as powerful metaphors and symbols for exploring themes of identity, community, and resistance against assimilation. The way ethnic individuals relate to food can reveal the influence of pressures to conform and feelings of cultural inadequacy, as well as the resurgence of ethnic identity. The paper “Consuming Appetites: Food, Sex, and Freedom in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*” analyzes how literary depictions of food and characters’ relationships to food can reveal deeper insights into texts, particularly in the work of women writers. Exploring the portrayal of food in literature can provide valuable insights into characters and cultural perspectives on hunger, eating, and the human body. Food takes on a significant meaning in the writings of women authors, as their societal roles and expectations create intricate connections with food. Examining the portrayal of food in literature can provide valuable insights into a text and its broader cultural significance (Dowbnia, 2014). The article of research, “Food Choice, Symbolism, and Identity: Bread and Butter Issues for Folkloristics and Nutrition Studies” delves into the intricate connections between food, cuisine, and eating, and their profound influence on identity, culture, and nutrition. By exploring the symbolic nature of food and eating, the paper aims to shed light on potential avenues for future research and practical applications in fields such as nutrition education and dietary change (Jones, 2007). The present study is the exploration of how the threads of cultural identity are portrayed through food in *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai.

Methodology

In the chosen novel, this qualitative study delves into the exploration of cultural identity through the lens of culinary practices. This framework provides a central focus for a comprehensive analysis conducted to explore the literary work.

Discussion

Anita Desai’s significant novel *Fasting, Feasting* features food and eating illustrations with multiple interpretations. Food cooking and consumption are regarded as the main concerns. It has two sections. Section one is in India, and section two is in America. Arun connects these families. He studies in Massachusetts and spends summers with an American family. Anita Desai illustrates the two different cultures of these two families. These two families overlap in female concerns, despite their disparities. Women are victims regardless of their age or social standing in both cultures. Uma, the oldest daughter in the Indian family, narrates part one. Uma and Aruna are raised in a typical Indian family. Papa’s ego dominates the household, and Mama finds contentment in satisfying him. Women are not treated fairly or with compassion. Uma has abandoned her studies to focus on caring for Arun since his birth. An opportunity to attend Oxford University is presented to Uma’s cousin Anamika, but she is compelled to marry. Desai paints a bleak picture of domestic life for women, in which they are confined like birds in cages and forced to spend their whole lives catering to the whims of males. “Get the parcel ready for him to take. Get it ready, Uma. First go and cook, Uma. Tell cook fritters will not be enough. Papa wants sweets” (Desai, 2008, p.4). Women consistently forsake their wants to meet the needs of others. Uma’s eye ailment is left untreated, and although she provides for her whole family, society still views her as a helpless, uneducated woman. Her life is as blurry and unfocused as her eyes, and the fact that her father won’t let her get treatment for them is a metaphor for the power dynamic between men and women. Despite cultural differences, American and Indian women endure the same challenges in their own homes. The men in the family perpetually neglect Mrs Patton and Melanie. Men concentrate only on their work and sports. As in the Indian family, Uma suffers from an eye ailment; here, Melanie has bulimia, which is left unnoticed until Arun discovers Melanie half-conscious in her vomit. Melanie undergoes recovery later. Food is a basic human activity and cultural representation. Food habits, culture, and society are intertwined. Food also expresses identity. In the novel, Anita Desai compares two households through food. Food symbolises their culture and ethnicity. Desai compares the culinary perspectives in India and America. Desai uses food to depict family women. Cooking and serving are women’s strengths, and these activities are given priority over exposure or education. The same food shows how women are ill-treated, and the concept of gender inequality is portrayed. Women are not supposed to taste a few good things like sweets, nuts, etc.

“Mama said, In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something

special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family. But ours was not such an orthodox home that our mother and aunts did not slip us something on the sly. She laughed, remembering that sweets sly” (Desai, 2008, p.6).

Desai gives the tale an Indian flavour by describing the fritters and sweets served during tea. It seems customary in most homes in her country to stock up on tasty holiday treats. Men have no regard for what women feel and will order whatever they want, regardless of what women desire to consume. Likewise, Uma needed to be provided with options to choose from. Uma serves as a victim who just prepares food and serves. Food depicts the supremacy of men. In the narrative, Uma offers her Papa an unpeeled orange, which he declines. Mama urges Uma to peel and then serve. This reveals the supremacy of men.

“Uma picks up the fruit bowl with both hands and puts it down with a thump before her father. Bananas, oranges, and apples-there they are, for him. Blinking, he ignores them. Folding his hands on the table, he gazes over them with the sphinx-like expression of the blind. Mama knows what is wrong. She taps Uma on the elbow. ‘Orange’, she instructs her. Uma can no longer pretend to be ignorant of Papa’s needs, Papa’s ways. After all, she has been serving them for some twenty years. She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in strips, then divides it into separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed, one by one, to the edge of Papa’s plate. One by one, he lifts them with the tips of his fingers and places them in his mouth. Everyone waits while he repeats the gesture, over and over. Mama’s lips are pursed with the care she gives her actions, and their importance” (Desai, 2008, p. 23).

Mama's eyes sparkle after meeting Papa's wants. Papa is the only family member to provide a serviette and finger bowl. These privileges he enjoys during food time reflect his status in the family. Mama and Papa treat their daughters differently from Arun, despite being educated. As a son, Arun receives more attention than his sisters. The treatment of food provides insight into its status and strength. Papa emphasizes meat because he is certain that eating it makes Arun stronger, despite being raised in a vegetarian household.

“It was years before they understood what Arun’s tastes were, and accepted the fact that he would not touch the meat Papa insisted he should eat: Arun was a Vegetarian. Papa was confounded. A meat diet had been one of the revolutionary changes about in his life, and his brother’s, by their education. Raised amongst traditional vegetarians, their eyes had been opened to the benefits of meat along with that of cricket and the English language: the three were linked inextricably in their minds. They had even succeeded in convincing the wives they married of this novel concept of progress, and passed it on to their children. Papa was always scornful of those of their relatives who came to visit and insisted on clinging to their cereal and vegetable eating ways, shying away from the meat dishes Papa insisted on having cooked for dinner” (Desai, 2008, pp.32-33).

In the second section of the narrative, Arun, the protagonist, notices that the two cultures vary in the places they dine. In Indian families, debates and discussions about food occur at the dining table, where family members unite to eat. The Patton family comprises four members, and they hardly interact. Mrs. Patton stores food in a refrigerator. They never dine together. Patton’s family eats ineffectively. Melanie gulps sweets. As she is all alone, she spends her time only with food, resulting in bulimia. In this context, the food expresses their isolation. Melanie's sickness and subsequent recovery may be attributed to the food she consumes. She has bulimia because she does not eat healthily and consumes excessive amounts of sugary foods. Later, she recovers her health with a proper diet.

Desai highlights how women's eating habits contribute to their mental health issues and undermine their sense of self. Culture has a role in the development of eating disorders. Therefore, Melanie's behaviour might react to her mother's neglectful treatment. This exemplifies the unhealthy lifestyle that underlies American culture. Desai uses vivid descriptions of food to highlight the differences between two families living in different locations. India and the United States could not be more different regarding the act of eating. Indians traditionally use banana leaves and their bare hands while dining. In contrast, most Americans have never tried eating off banana leaves and instead rely on cutlery like spoons and forks. Desai makes good use of the differences between these two settings, which stem from the most fundamental

concept of eating. Food and cuisines serve as vehicles for describing social stratification, national identity, and feminist ideals. Both fasting and feasting may be noticed in Melanie's character. She starves herself for attention and affection while stuffing her face with sweets whenever she has free time. On the other hand, Uma fasts to tend to her brother Arun. She gives up all of her dreams to please her parents. Uma's care for their every need makes lives for Mama and Papa a constant feast.

Fasting, Feasting is a novel not of plot but of comparison. In beautifully detailed prose Desai draws the foods and textures of an Indian small town and of an American suburb. In both, she suggests, family life is a complex mixture of generosity and meanness, license and restriction: The novel's subtle revelation is in the unlikely similarities. In one dark moment, Arun recognizes in the Pattons' bulimic daughter a version of his own unhappy sister Uma, and the shock provokes a reflection on these two frustrated women: But what is plenty? What is not? Can one tell the difference? Desai's novel is a moving, eloquent exploration of that question (Brownrigg, 2000).

Conclusion

Annie Hauck Lawson, a dietician, introduced the concept of food voice. She suggested that “what one eats or chooses not to eat reveals about a person's identity or emotion in a manner that words alone cannot” (Almerico, 2014, p.3). Food choices reveal an individual's or a group's passions, knowledge, background, and other details. Food choices tell families, migrations, and personal and group identity stories. Culture is the beliefs, values, and attitudes that a group or community members practise and accept. Culture is not inherited; it is learned. Food ties us to our families and culture. Food is about family, community, and identity; one nourishes all things during a satisfying food time. Food is a powerful cultural symbol that represents culture. The way one eats may be a window into one's heritage and personal background. The act of eating itself may be interpreted in several ways. Just as translation links speakers of different languages, so can pictures of food connect viewers from different backgrounds and cultures. In works written by women who have left their nation, the protagonists sometimes serve as a link between the authors and their descendants back home. Food and eating are fundamental to our existence because of the connections established between them and our sense of self. The portrayal of gender, healthy and unhealthy lifestyles, and unity and isolation are explored with the help of food related images. Thus, Anita Desai, as an immigrant writer, effectively employs food as a means to elucidate the cultural differences between India and America. The kitchen serves not only as a private space but also as a medium through which readers can acquire insight into the cultures of both America and India.

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