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Eating Culture: Reading Food in Indian American literature

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Abstract

This article focuses on how food can be a driving factor for identity construction in the Diaspora and how it has been studied and analysed in the literature of the Indian American Diaspora. It examines the issues of nostalgia and cultural identity constructed by food in the Diaspora. It is a well known fact, that the migrants are often noticed to be reminiscing about their homeland and their food. This paper explores the role of the women authors and their roles in making food as one of the important cultural parameters to construct a cultural identity. In this paper, I have tried to analyse the autobiographical novel, ‘Monsoon Diaries’ by Shobha Narayan in terms of cultural identity and nostalgia, which are often experienced by the Diaspora. The essential rationale of this paper highlights the literature of the Diaspora focusing on the culinary idioms that play a crucial role in the Diaspora.

Keywords: Migration, Literature, cultural identity, nostalgia, women authors, South Asian diaspora

Introduction

As food studies have conquered a very wide area of criticism and representation in films and literature, it must be noted as one of the salient features that food is constructed in such a way within the rubrics of the narrative which pushes the narrative forward. As a film studies scholar, Laura Lindenfeld (2007, 7) notes:

‘food, meal, preparation and eating provide the central driving force for the meal’s narrative structure and thus provide excellent barometers to measure social hierarchies and relationships’.

Through this paper, I have tried to analyse some of the salient features which are represented by literature in the Diasporic lives.

One of the remarkable critiquing of the treatment of food in Asian American literature is that it ‘eroticizes’ the Diasporic life and their problems associated with their racialized and classed lives of the immigrants.

The Diaspora in fiction

A notable size of the Indian Diaspora has occupied a considerable portion of the country. There are many fiction writers of Indian Diaspora, who has acclaimed fame worldwide. The fiction of the Indian Diaspora constitutes a major portion of the contemporary Indian literature.

Primarily the Diasporic novels deal with the shifts of moving in and moving out of the cultural dilemma that is present in the Diaspora. These form uniqueness in the fictions of the Diaspora. Their identities often blend with their feelings of homelessness, confused identity and the equal urge to acculturate and assimilate in a new land. The double cultural experiences an idea of a lost homeland, the deterritorialization, racial discrimination, language problem, cultural shock form the main motifs of the representation of the Diaspora. The writers of the Indian Diaspora are deeply rooted in their own cultures and we find them taking up the issues of their land and the issues of diasporic sentiments globally and representing it through their cultures. Whether they are the first generation immigrants or the second generation immigrants, all experience the issue of the dilemma of in-betweens. The writings of the Diasporic authors are characterized with hybridity, creativity and experiments with languages.

Food in Fiction

Memories of food are evoked only when an individual becomes an immigrant. For an Indian immigrant, his/her ‘naturalization into American citizenship minorizes her identity’. The disinterest in food that one faces while at home; transforms itself into a new feeling. After migration, one is discarded of his/her homeland. The only residue left of homeland is the memory of the home. The feeling of displacement and dislocation urges the migrants to cling to their memories and recreate and remember the memories. The migrant feels the desire to embrace what is left of the past; when they are geographically displaced. The inability to return to their homelands becomes prominent with the sense of displacement. The Diaspora tries to relate to these memories with the help of innumerable factors. The culinary idiom plays a crucial part in reflecting the lost memories of the past and reconnect with the home. Studying of culinary narratives must also be given a different dimension of defining national identity. The Diaspora feels a longing to reconnect with their homelands and food acts as a medium. The ample

cookbooks, fiction reflecting the Diasporic sentiments of connecting with the homeland brings out the sentiments vividly. They reflect the pangs of migratory displacement and the nostalgic feeling for their home. As said by Sunaina Maira (2002), ‘critical nostalgia as a more reflexive form of nostalgia attuned to the politics of consumption. To consume culture in all its varied forms, or to be more nostalgic for cultural artifacts, is as much about imagining an inclusive future as it is about commemorating memories of the past’.

In this paper, I have tried to analyse the fiction composed by Indian-American female writers, where food has played a central role in the immigrant lives of the protagonists. I have tried to summarise the novel and about the author in the following sections of the novel.

Shobha Narayan

Shobha Narayan is an award winning author, journalist and columnist. She is the author of the award-winning *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* (2003) and has also written four other books. Narayan writes about food, travel and culture and is a regular contributor at the Hindustan times. She had moved to the United States after getting married and has been living in the US for a span of almost 20 years. She lived in New York with her husband and two daughters. When asked about her experience as a migrant in the US, she says, ‘I came to America as a tabula rasa. I was a young college student from a sheltered family who hadn’t the space or time to think about things. America taught me independence, feminism, and instilled a spirit of adventure and enterprise. I am who I am because of this country and I love America and its people for that reason. Beyond that, we carried back lots of memories. Fall in New England. My first snowfall’. (<https://indianewengland.com/2018/01/qa-shoba-narayan-author-milk-lady-banglore/>)

Narayan’s books and writings have always contributed to the memories and experiences of an Indian migrant living in the United States. Her writings echo the voices of the immigrants and their struggles that they face each day to survive in a foreign land with the memories of food and the nation.

Monsoon Diary by Shobha Narayan

In this unparalleled piece of writing, Shobha Narayan, narrates her life through meals. Her entire narrative is about her delicious accounts with food from childhood in South India (specifically Kerala), her college days in America, her arranged marriage in New York City and her frequent visits from her family.

Born in South India, Narayan begins with the Hindu rice-eating ceremony, traditionally held when a baby is six months old to mark the transition from liquids to solids. In the very first chapter, she talks about the rituals of rice eating ceremony of a baby for the first time and the various rituals associated with serving rice to a new born baby, which is followed in India. To be specific, here, Narayan, illustrates how rituals (generally linked with religion) effects the food practices in India. The preparation of ghee and its major importance in Indian food is widely described. Since she belonged to a vegetarian, South Indian Hindu family, her food practices varied from the rest. These food practices, in one way, define the culture of the family. Though she was just a few months old, when the ceremony took place; this is just a mere repetition of her mother's narration of the incident. The author, here, tries to bring out the differences that are practiced in food habits of an Indian child to that of an American child.

Gradually, Narayan, brings out the love and the warmth that she received at her maternal grandparents' home as a child. She fondly remembers the memories from her maternal grandmother's kitchen; the ample number of spices that she used, the cozy and happy childhood memories.

Throughout her life, food was infused with greater and deeper feelings. This autobiographical novel is filled with memories and images from her life with food being the primary factor to create memories, relationships and opportunities.

In one of the chapters, we find a very interesting account mentioned by the author, where the meal for the pet of the family was also designed by the prevalent cuisine of the family.

'Curiously, Teddy relished our food and remained a life-long vegetarian'. (Monsoon Diaries, 33)

Narayan's childhood memories are decorated with her images from her mother's kitchen, where she was first introduced with the various spices used in the kitchen; and their daily uses in human life.

Another societal or cultural dimension that defines class in Indian societies is caste. Though caste is not a very good term to signify the classes of people in the society and it is not a very good term to be used in contemporary Indian and American societies, but Indian families still identify themselves by caste. Indian food, is again set in standards by another form of identification, i.e; caste. This vast topic sets the rules of foodways for people belonging to different castes in India.

She also pays special attention to the difference in beverage consumption throughout India. People hailing from North India tend to consume tea ‘be it milky chai with ginger and cardamom or plain Lipton- South India drinks coffee.’ (Monsoon Diaries, 51)

Though appreciative of her heritage, Narayan wanted to study in the USA, which her parents reluctantly allowed her only after she passed the test of preparing a delicious meal and serving it to her family.

‘A smell can carry a memory, and certain foods can compress the memory of an entire childhood into them’. (Monsoon Diaries, 51)

Food resides in the memories of the Diaspora. It enlivens the sense of belonging and the attachment that they feel towards their homeland. The Diaspora leaves their homeland; but the traditions remain etched within them. Curry leaves, forms an essential ingredient of South Indian cuisine, and since the author hails from the southern part of India, she is reminded of this particular ingredient as she mentions, ‘There are transplanted *maamis* who now live in Washington D.C, growing giant curry leaves inside their homes’. (Monsoon Diaries, 54)

Culture; especially culinary culture, varies from people to people and across countries. With stepping in America, Narayan gets a first glimpse of the American culture and how it differs from Indian culture.

Narayan got to be steady in her cooking skills when she created a dinner to raise funds for her tuition. Her idea of globalism again came to her mind, with Doug’s idea of the concept of ‘world cuisine’. With immigrants pouring in America, this was a new and contemporary issue to be dealt with. Therefore, the benefit dinner was more of an integration of cuisines from different cultures of the respective countries. With the mix and match of Indian cuisine with cuisine from different cultures, we also come across the first instances of globalization.

‘I replaced the wasabi with asafetida, the soy sauce with tamarind, the soba noodles with basmati rice, the *umeboshi* paste with mint chutney, and the spaghetti with vermicelli’. (Monsoon Diaries, 194)

The author replaced her fusion cooking with Indian dishes, ‘using childhood memories and hastily written recipes’ as her guide.

At the end of this book, the author conveys her feelings as to how she connects her memories in her homeland with food.

'When I discovered that I could duplicate the flavors of my childhood, I realized how much I missed them and how much I enjoyed creating them'. (*Monsoon Diaries*, 195)

Food and Nostalgia

Food acts as a social parameter that has defined and marked the women's territory in the country as well as the Diaspora. Food memories are considered the earliest memories that ignite the feeling of belongingness in the Diaspora, the craving to be an Indian and remain an Indian in the Diaspora. Shobha Narayan, the author has grown up in India and spent most of the part of her childhood and adolescence in India connecting deeply with the Indian exotic culinary traditions practicesd in her home and her grandmother's home. This topic of nostalgia is deeply rooted with foodways and culinary traditions that has found space in the novels. In *Monsoon Diaries*, Shobha Narayan speaks about her childhood memories where she becomes nostalgic about her childhood days. She goes on to illustrate her childhood when she used to visit her grandmother. The second chapter is more of a reminiscence of her childhood memories at her maternal grandparents' place at Coimbatore with some daily encounters of food served in the household.

'A light meal of rice, rasam and a couple of vegetable curries'. (*Monsoon Diaries*, 17)

Narayan's childhood memories are decorated with her images from her mother's kitchen, where she was first introduced with the various spices used in the kitchen; and their daily uses in human life.

'Cumin and cardamom are arousing, so eat them only after you get married, she said. Fenugreek tea makes your hair lustrous and increases breast milk, so drink copious amounts when you have babies. Coriander seeds balance and cool fiery summer vegetables. Mustard and sesame seeds heat the body during winter. Asafetida suppresses, cinnamon nourishes and lentils build muscles'. (*Monsoon Diaries*, 49-50).

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cuisine, and since the author hails from the southern part of India, she is reminded of this particular ingredient as she mentions, ‘There are transplanted maamis who now live in Washington D.C, growing giant curry leaves inside their homes’. (*Monsoon Diaries*, 54)

The confusion increased more on the breakfast table, once she reached America. The flavours and colors varied as the breakfast table constituted with people pouring in from all parts of the world.

‘I told my breakfast mates that I wasn’t used to eating sweet food- jams, jellies and syrup- so early in the morning. When I added that a main component of my morning meal was a spice dosa with chilli powder, they looked shocked. A Japanese student added that she ate rice and salty miso for breakfast, it was my first lesson in Globalism’. (*Monsoon Diaries*, 112)

Cultural Identity and Cuisine in the Diaspora

Identity is constructed by certain predetermined parameters- ‘language, myth, history, psychology, gender and race’. These instances are directly linked with the migrants’ ‘self-image and the unconsciously inherited positionings’. Food, in the migrant space, becomes an enlivening factor for carving one’s cultural identity. It defines the place of ethnic origin of the migrants, and this is how, the migrant distinguishes themselves from the others.

Shobha Narayan, in her book, *Monsoon Diaries*, has brilliantly pointed out the diversity in Indian cuisine, which varies from state to state.

‘Marwaris are from the colourful desert state of Rajasthan, and Marwari women are fantastic cooks. They are also known to be generous, which makes them dream companions for a long train journey. Enterprising Gujratis, on the other hand, were more businesslike, which meant that I had to ingratiate myself by performing small favors in order to gain access to their divine *kadi*(sweet and sour butter milk soup).a boisterous Punjabi family was always good for card games interspersed with *Rajma*(spiced kidney beans). Intellectual Bengalis from Calcutta were a challenge. I had to match wits with them before they would share their luscious *rosogollas* and sweet *sandesh* with me. I didn’t bother with the South Indians, being one myself’. (*Monsoon Diaries*, 61)

She also pays special attention to the difference in beverage consumption throughout India. People hailing from North India tend to consume tea ‘be it milky chai with ginger and cardamom or plain Lipton- South India drinks coffee’. (*Monsoon Diaries*, 51)

Narayan's house is filled up with the smells of Indian spices. Her New York kitchen is a typical modern day kitchen in a New York apartment. It is a compilation of a variety of modern accessories and conveniences, but the Indian spices reminds her of her Indian roots (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1244700>).

Conclusion

To conclude, it has been vividly pointed out that women authors in the Diaspora have been able to construct strong women characters in the Diaspora who describe the diversity and multiculturalism of the migrant community. It is food that has carved out their identity in the Diasporic society. Therefore, it can be clearly mentioned that food is not just used to satisfy one's physical hunger, but also express cultural identity and to express other emotions. Culinary idioms and images abound Indian-American literature and portray their ethnic culture. These rich culinary idioms prove that Indians in America have been racialized and classed in their involvement with food. In my observation, reading food in Indian American literature demonstrates their relationship with the dominant culture in their host country.

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