

CULINARY IDENTITIES: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FOOD IN SHAPING CULTURAL AFFILIATION

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Abstract

Literary works serve as vessels for conveying cultural values, ideas, and attitudes, illuminating the customs and beliefs of various societies. Across the globe, a multitude of diverse cultures coexist, each reflecting an array of perspectives and convictions. Through their writings, authors not only express their personal viewpoints but also introduce readers to the richness of cultural diversity. Cultural values are often articulated through the author's narrative voice. Among the many themes explored in literature, food has captured the attention of scholars from fields such as economics, human rights, ethics, sociology, anthropology, and literature itself. Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the pivotal role of food in the human experience. Within literary texts, food frequently serves as a lens through which cultural differences are examined and understood. Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* abounds with metaphorical references to food and its consumption. The novel's title itself evokes the concept of consumption, delving into how characters relate to food as a means of highlighting inequalities—who indulges in abundance and who endures deprivation. This study centers on the narrative strategies that employ culinary motifs, including metaphors, symbols, and representations, to explore their intricate ties to identity and culture.

Keywords: cultural values, customs and beliefs, human experience, metaphorical references, culinary motifs.

Introduction

Writings from diverse cultural backgrounds have emerged as a celebrated genre in contemporary literature. This genre primarily encompasses works by authors from foreign lands, often rooted deeply in the cultural contexts of their native homelands. Such writings consistently reflect the authors' profound love and enduring passion for their places of origin. In today's globalized world, immigration has become a widespread phenomenon, giving rise to a body of literature known as diasporic or "Immigrant Literature." Over the past few decades, this form of writing has gained prominence, characterized not by adherence to any specific philosophy or ideology, but by the deeply personal experiences of immigrants.

The creative contributions of immigrant authors have significantly enriched Indian literature in English, offering a unique lens into the complexities of identity and belonging. These writings often highlight the immigrant's yearning for both social and cultural assimilation, as well as their pursuit of a new identity in their adopted land. Central to the immigrant experience is the process of adaptation and transformation, which becomes a recurring theme in diasporic works. Through their narratives, these authors act as bridges between their homeland and their readers, vividly portraying the landscapes, traditions, and ethos of their native cultures.

The authors of Indian diasporic literature are often divided into two categories: first-generation and second-generation writers. The first-generation writers are immigrants who have spent a portion of their lives in their homeland before migrating to foreign shores, where they navigate the challenges of adaptation. In contrast, second-generation writers are the descendants of these immigrants, born and raised in their new country, yet connected to their ancestral roots. Together, these writers explore the interplay of cultural duality, retaining the finest elements of their native heritage while embracing aspects of the new cultures they inhabit (Akilandeswari & Sundararajan, 2022).

In literary narratives, food plays a pivotal role in shaping the tone and progression of a scene, often serving as a catalyst for significant shifts in the plot. Much like the use of language and symbolism in literature, food serves as a powerful medium for representing and transmitting cultural values. However, food extends beyond its physical and corporeal aspects; it functions as a dynamic marker of social, gendered, political, and cultural identities. It occupies a profound space within both our collective and individual consciousness.

The relationship between food and literature mirrors the connection between the author and the cook: while the cook evokes a longing for nourishment and fulfills physical cravings, the author kindles a passion for words and language, instilling in readers an unrelenting desire to transcend their own experiences and connect with the lives of others. This desire bridges boundaries of nationality, class, culture, race, and gender, fostering a deeper understanding of human experiences. To a certain extent, this phenomenon extends to the very nature of consciousness itself.

Numerous writers have delved into the intricate intertwining of food and cooking with themes such as memory, social norms, stereotypes, habits, and the tension between individual and communal identities. When authors acknowledge the profound significance of food in the lives of their characters, they employ vivid and detailed descriptions of it to illustrate how food serves as both an influence and a symbol of societal or personal identity at a particular moment in history. The dining table, where individuals gather to

share meals and conversations, often becomes a microcosm symbolizing diversity, culture, hierarchy, and social status. The meanings and perceptions derived from food evolve into both a shared and personal identity, reflecting the interplay of individual and collective experience (Mishra & Devasahayam, 2019).

If literature serves as a mirror to life, it inevitably reflects the presence of food. Beyond being a fundamental necessity for survival, food possesses the unique ability to unite communities and serves as a universal language that transcends the barriers between individuals or groups from diverse backgrounds. Given its intrinsic significance, food has not only occupied a prominent place in literature but has also often emerged as the central theme of numerous narratives. Its literary prominence is unsurprising when considering that one of the earliest and most widely read narratives, *The Bible*, abounds with gastro-literary representations.

From the venison that secured the birthright in the tale of Jacob and Esau, to the metaphor of God as the Bread of Life, from the miracle of water transformed into wine at Cana to the profound imagery of the Last Supper—these instances demonstrate that food and drink are inseparably woven into the fabric of daily existence. Such depictions underscore the enduring relevance of food as both a literal and symbolic element in human life and storytelling (Mishra & Devasahayam, 2019).

Eating is a fundamental human function, intrinsically tied to both survival and social behavior. In literature, themes and imagery surrounding food and eating are often employed as powerful literary devices, creating works that resonate aesthetically and emotionally. Psychoanalytic theory suggests that one's eating habits not only define aspects of their personality but also serve as reflections of their ethnicity, race, social status, and familial ties. The themes of food are frequently explored in literature about women as well as in children's literature, revealing its profound symbolic and narrative significance.

The recent surge of interest in the literary use of food imagery offers valuable insights into how authors convey complex ideas and hidden meanings through culinary metaphors. Food studies have emerged as an interdisciplinary field addressing a range of social concerns, including gender dynamics, identity, and, particularly in immigrant literature, cultural identification and social positioning. The symbolic weight of food as a marker of identity and culture has further amplified the importance of food criticism in literary analysis.

Food, as a literary motif, is notably wielded by women writers in the Indian diasporic tradition of English literature. Their expressions of longing, rejection, and anguish often unveil a profound and often hidden connection between immigrants and their homelands. An academic exploration

of food involves a multifaceted analysis of its significance—encompassing personal experiences, socio-cultural importance, and its intersections with global politics.

The evolving genre of culinary narratives delves into women's experiences with food, shaped by the socio-cultural contexts they inhabit, while also examining its relationship to the broader global food landscape. Such narratives illuminate the intricate ways in which food embodies identity, memory, and cultural belonging.

Interpreting the implicit meanings of food as a literary device in narratives is often challenging, as such meanings delve into the deeply personal and impenetrable boundaries of both human rationality and irrationality. As a result, food in literary narratives requires a nuanced reading—one that uncovers the layers of significance hidden between the lines. Characters in literature, much like individuals in reality, do not eat solely for sustenance or to satisfy physical hunger. Instead, their act of eating may stem from anxiety or an attempt to fulfill an emotional void.

Moreover, while food frequently symbolizes self-identity and a sense of belonging within a community, it can also serve as a vehicle for oppression and stereotyping. Thus, the multifaceted role of food in literature highlights its power as both a source of meaning and a reflection of complex societal dynamics (Mishra & Devasahayam, 2019).

Among the many elements of culture, the sharing of food between cultures stands out as a frequent and seamless practice, surpassing nearly all other customs in its regularity and ease. Certain culinary traditions, such as the use of chopsticks, are uniquely tied to specific types of food. In other instances, different food traditions merge with established cuisines, giving rise to new, syncretic culinary creations. Tex-Mex cuisine, for instance, is a product of the fusion between Mexican and Southwestern U.S. culinary traditions.

Much like culture itself, food transcends boundaries, adapting to changing environments and conditions while simultaneously remaining deeply rooted in individuals' cultural identities. Food serves not only as a means of nourishment but also as a medium through which individuals and communities define and distinguish themselves from others. Within the broader framework of cultural identity, the term "cuisine" refers to the specific cultural practices associated with the art of cooking, preparing, and consuming food, reflecting the intricate connections between food and identity (Hasty et al., 2022).

The study of food boasts a rich history within the field of anthropology, interweaving numerous subfields of the discipline. Food serves as a nexus, connecting areas such as nutrition and health, rituals and practices surrounding its production and consumption, and the expansive networks of

global trade that facilitate the diffusion of plants, animals, and artifacts. A central concern across most human cultures lies in distinguishing what constitutes food and what does not.

Food is a dynamic cultural element, varying not only from one society to another but also across genders, social classes, family structures, and even seasons. As both a source of physical sustenance and a marker of social identity, food plays an integral role in shaping personal and cultural identity. Within the context of globalized Western culture, individuals routinely consume foods with origins in other cultures—sushi, gyros, tacos, spaghetti, and crepes, to name a few. However, other practices, such as food taboos or prohibitions, and even the more extreme customs of consuming family members or enemies (forms of cannibalism), represent cross-cultural traditions that may feel far more unfamiliar (Hasty et al., 2022, pp. 431–432).

Anita Desai's notable novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, employs food and eating as powerful illustrations imbued with multiple interpretations. The narrative revolves around themes of cooking and consumption, which are treated as central concerns. The novel is divided into two sections: the first set in India and the second in America, with Arun serving as the connecting thread between the two families. Arun studies in Massachusetts and spends his summers with an American family. Through this dual narrative, Desai vividly portrays the contrasting cultures of these two households, while simultaneously highlighting the shared struggles faced by women within both contexts. Despite their cultural disparities, both families overlap in their treatment of women, revealing a universal plight where women are subjected to subjugation regardless of their age or social standing.

The first section of the novel, narrated by Uma—the eldest daughter of the Indian family—depicts the traditional confines of an Indian household. Uma and her sister Aruna are raised in a patriarchal family where Papa's ego reigns supreme, and Mama derives her sense of purpose from catering to his needs. Women within the household are neither treated with fairness nor compassion. Uma is forced to abandon her education to take care of Arun, the son, from the moment of his birth. Even Anamika, Uma's cousin, who is offered an opportunity to study at Oxford University, is denied the chance and coerced into marriage. Desai paints a grim portrait of domestic life for Indian women, likening them to caged birds condemned to live their lives in servitude to male whims. The repetitive commands directed at Uma—"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)—emphasize how women are expected to sacrifice their desires to meet the demands of others.

Uma's untreated eye ailment symbolizes her neglected status in the household and serves as a metaphor for the gender power dynamic that leaves her life as blurry and unfocused as her

vision. Her father's refusal to let her seek treatment underscores the broader societal neglect and lack of agency granted to women.

In the second section of the novel, set in America, Desai draws parallels between the lives of women in the Patton family and those in the Indian household. Despite the cultural differences, American women like Mrs. Patton and Melanie endure similar struggles within their domestic spaces. The men of the family—preoccupied with their work and sports—are emotionally distant and neglectful of the women's needs. Just as Uma's health issues are ignored in India, Melanie suffers from bulimia, an eating disorder that remains unnoticed until Arun discovers her half-conscious in a pool of vomit. Melanie's eventual recovery highlights the potential for change, but her earlier neglect underscores the universal nature of women's struggles.

Through the lens of food, Desai interweaves themes of culture, identity, and societal structures. Food habits are portrayed as deeply intertwined with cultural practices and social dynamics, serving as both a basic human activity and a symbolic representation of identity. By contrasting the culinary traditions of India and America, Desai examines how food reflects familial structures, societal norms, and gender roles. In both cultures, cooking and serving are portrayed as strengths traditionally relegated to women, yet these very activities are prioritized over women's education and personal growth. The act of preparing and serving food becomes a symbol of the oppression faced by women, as they are often denied access to certain luxuries, such as sweets and nuts, that they are expected to prepare for others.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Anita Desai uses food not only to draw cultural and ethnic comparisons but also to illuminate the enduring issue of gender inequality. Food becomes a poignant metaphor for the struggles of women, who remain confined by societal expectations and denied the autonomy to savor life's offerings.

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 infuses the narrative with a distinct Indian essence by vividly portraying the fritters and sweets traditionally served during tea. It appears customary in many households within her country to prepare an assortment of delectable holiday treats. However, men show little consideration for the preferences of women, insisting on ordering according to their own desires, irrespective of what women might wish to consume. Similarly, Uma is denied the autonomy to make choices for herself. Reduced to the role of a passive participant, she is confined to the task of preparing and serving food. Within the story, food emerges as a symbol of male dominance. This dynamic is further illustrated when Uma offers her father an unpeeled orange, which he

refuses. At her mother's insistence, Uma is directed to peel the fruit before serving it, an act that underscores the patriarchal authority pervasive in the narrative.

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 gleam with satisfaction upon fulfilling Papa's desires. Papa is the sole family member afforded the luxury of a serviette and finger bowl, small yet significant privileges that symbolize his elevated status within the household. Despite their education, Mama and Papa maintain a distinct disparity in their treatment of their daughters compared to Arun. As the son, Arun commands greater attention and care than his sisters. The depiction of food within the narrative serves as a lens through which familial power dynamics and societal values are revealed. Papa, firmly believing that the consumption of meat fortifies Arun, prioritizes its inclusion in his son's diet—even within a household traditionally rooted in vegetarianism—thereby reinforcing patriarchal notions of strength and superiority.

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, observes the stark contrast between the dining practices of two cultures. Within Indian families, the dining table serves as a space for unity, where food becomes the focal point of debates and discussions, drawing family members together. In contrast, the Patton family, composed of four individuals, exhibits a striking lack of interaction. Mrs. Patton stores food in the refrigerator, yet the family rarely dines together. Their approach to eating appears disjointed and ineffective. Melanie, left to her own devices, consumes excessive sweets, finding companionship only in food. This leads to her struggle with bulimia, a manifestation of her profound isolation. In this context, food emerges as a metaphor for disconnection and estrangement. Melanie's illness, as well as her eventual recovery, is closely tied to her dietary habits. Her bulimia stems from an unhealthy pattern of consuming excessive sugary foods. Ultimately, she regains her health by transitioning to a balanced and proper diet.

Desai intricately explores how women's eating habits intertwine with their mental health and erode their sense of identity. Cultural influences play a pivotal role in shaping the development of eating disorders, as evidenced by Melanie's behavior, which may be a response to her mother's neglectful treatment. This highlights the unhealthy lifestyles often associated with American culture. Through vivid depictions of food, Desai contrasts the lives of two families situated in vastly different cultural contexts. The act of eating becomes a symbol of divergence between India and the United States. In India, dining traditionally involves the use of banana leaves and bare hands, a practice that stands in sharp contrast to the American reliance on cutlery such as spoons and forks, with little familiarity with banana leaves. Desai skillfully employs these cultural distinctions in dining practices to underscore broader themes of social stratification, national identity, and feminist ideals.

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).

Both fasting and feasting are metaphorically embodied in Melanie's character. She deprives herself of sustenance in a bid for attention and affection, yet indulges in sweets compulsively when left alone. In contrast, Uma fasts in service to her brother Arun, surrendering all her aspirations to fulfill the expectations of her parents. Her unwavering devotion to their needs transforms her parents' lives into a perpetual feast, as Uma's sacrifices sustain their comfort and satisfaction.

Conclusion

Annie Hauck Lawson, a dietician, introduced the concept of the "food voice," proposing that "what one eats or chooses not to eat reveals a person's identity or emotions in a way that words alone cannot" (Almerico, 2014, p.3). The choices individuals make regarding food unveil their passions, knowledge, heritage, and other defining traits. These choices narrate stories of families, migrations, and both personal and collective identities. Culture, encompassing the beliefs, values, and attitudes embraced by a group or community, is not inherited but rather learned. Food acts as a profound connector, binding individuals to their families and cultural roots. It signifies family, community, and identity, nourishing these aspects during the shared experience of a satisfying meal. As a potent cultural symbol, food reflects tradition and heritage, offering a glimpse into one's lineage and personal history. The act of eating itself can be interpreted in various ways, much like the translation of languages bridges speakers from different linguistic backgrounds. Similarly, images of food can foster connections between people of diverse cultures and histories. In works authored by women who have emigrated, the protagonists often serve as intermediaries, linking the writers with their homeland and descendants. Food and the act of eating hold fundamental significance, establishing profound connections between nourishment and one's sense of self. Through vivid food-related imagery, themes such as gender dynamics, healthy and unhealthy lifestyles, unity, and isolation are thoughtfully examined. As an immigrant writer, Anita Desai masterfully utilizes food as a lens through which the cultural distinctions between India and America are illuminated. The kitchen, in this context, transcends its role as a private space, becoming a powerful medium through which readers gain insight into the cultural landscapes of both nations.

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