

Cooking Home-food: Culinary Identity and Nostalgia in the Diasporic Stories of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Though any dictionary would define food as the source of basic nutrients required for the sustenance of life, it is far more than just biological need. The food we eat is intrinsic part our identity—geographical, ethnic, cultural, it is deeply embedded in our history and consciousness. It is just not what we eat that matters, but the way we eat, the culinary skills that make it palatable to us which comprises our culinary identity. By “culinary identity” I mean the food habits, the gastronomic practices, the spices and flavours, the culinary skills that are exclusive to a geography, race, tribe, and culture — an identity that has been acquired through history. Culinary identity varies from region to region; even from family to family and how deep-rooted it is in our consciousness is often overlooked by us as are the very presence of our limbs. It appears in our conscious and sub conscious thoughts, our dreams and imagination with an ease that we fail to notice it is there. However, we readily realize its essential centrality in our lives whenever we are denied our gastronomic choices on our daily platter. Away from home and home-food we become all the more conscious of our culinary identities. Bengalis, otherwise known for their love of travel and fairly cosmopolitan culture, when travelling places as diverse as Haridwar, Amritsar, or Coimbatore would be in search for Bengali eateries serving curried fish with steamed rice, *rasogollas* and *mishti doi*. It is intriguing to note that in a multicultural melting-pot like India, the Tamils would rather pertinaciously stick to *sambar* and *rasam* as Punjabis would do to *rajma-chawal* and *makki di roti*.

This strong attachment to regional food and cuisine comes through in the works of South-Asian fiction as has been noted by many including Anita Mannur in her work *Culinary Fictions* (2010). In this connection, reading Chirta Banerjee Divakaruni’s two volumes of short stories *Arranged Marriage* (1995), and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), I have noted a considerably high number of references and allusions to food and culinary practices which underline the diasporic experiences of the characters. In this paper I propose to study some of the short stories in the above-mentioned volumes by Divakaruni’s that essentially speak of immigrant Indian women’s experiences in the U.S. and yet love and nostalgia for home food is equally strong in the other sex. Though references to food and culinary practices are numerous in both the volumes of short stories for the sake of precision have chosen four stories for study from each of the volumes: “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter”, “The Intelligence of Wild Things” and “The Blooming Season for Cacti”, from *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* and “Affair” from *Arranged Marriage*. My reading will attempt to illuminate certain aspects of Divakaruni’s short stories: culinary identities of the diasporic characters in the multicultural setting of the U.S. stirs up memories of homeland; women use their culinary skills for cooking home-food to strengthen withering bonds within the family and also to forge new

relationships; culinary identity of immigrants problematises the process of assimilation to the dominant culture.

The Unknown Errors of our Lives opens with “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter” where sexagenarian Mrs. Prameela Dutta who has lived all her life within the bastions of a conservative Bengali family in her in-laws’ house in Calcutta goes to the U.S. to live with her only son and his family. Unlike the younger Indian immigrants, she does not come to seek fortune or a career but love and care of a son and grandchildren, for the sake of a family that she had cherished all her life. Her experience in her son’s house in this alien land soon becomes sour as she struggles to adjust to the foreign ways of life: the modern household gadgets, unfriendly neighbours, unfamiliar television shows. Mrs. Dutta’s struggle is not limited to coping with the alien land, its culture, its ways of life and livelihood; it soon starts on a very different plane near home as she senses irreverence, insensitivity and even hostility in the behaviour of her daughter-in-law, and her young grandchildren who are supposed to be her own flesh and blood. Even her son seems to be unfamiliar to her.

Mrs. Dutta longs for the life in Calcutta, busy and noisy with visiting neighbours and relatives, hustle and bustle of the crowded alleys, the call of street vendors, for “fragrant cardamom tea” brewed with real sugar. She cherishes the memories of her past, the home she had left far away, and to connect to her son who has grown estranged, to appease her daughter-in-law, to befriend her grandchildren she takes recourse to cooking and is reassured that the family is eating good Bengali meals “proper Indian food, rutis that puff up the way they should, fish curry in mustard sauce, and real pulao with raisins and cashews and ghee” (“Mrs. Dutta”). As an Indian homemaker cooking had been her forte for years and now she applies her culinary skills to survive in an alien land to hold on to a withering bond with her own family but sadly, her daughter-in-law complains under her breath of excessive grease in her cooking, of rising cholesterol and weight-gain. She would rather prefer her children to have frozen burritos than the oily home-cooked meals their grandmother cooked. It pains Mrs. Dutta to realise that within the family itself she is the other. Against the nuclear family of her son, his wife and children she feels herself to be unwanted and superfluous— “how alone she is in this land of young people. And how unnecessary” (“Mrs. Dutta”).

“The Intelligence of Wild Things” too is about failing bond within the family. Elder sister and brother meet after years of separation. Both are immigrants and had led their own lives in America away and independent of each other. The narrative is in the first person, voiced by the elder sister, who brings to the brother news of their dying mother and of her last wish— to see her children before she dies. A cold indifference has so frozen the previous warmth and familiarity that the sister is unable to reach out and give the message to the brother who seems to have snapped all relation with home. In such a situation, memories of shared meals that rouse confused feelings of pain and hope: “that dim kitchen, our own cave, with its safe odours of coriander and fenugreek; the small blue glow of the gas stove in the corner; three people, cross-legged on the cool cement, making food for each” (“Intelligence”). She wishes to preserve and eternalize those lost moments of her past life, “to keep it safe from loss—and from change, which is perhaps crueller than loss” (“Intelligence”). She manoeuvres to communicate to her brother through the expanse of frozen years of silence by stirring up memories, “[r]emember when Ma used to fry us pantuas for dessert, how we’d sit and

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wait for them to turn red? Remember our kitchen . . .?” (“Intelligence”), but immediately she realise her folly. Her brother has learnt cooking lasagna instead of pantuas in this alien land which is indicative of the onslaught of multiculturalism on the immigrant character. “*Food. Home. This way danger lies*” the sister helplessly reflects (“Intelligence”).

Home cooked food, its tastes and smell remain the connecting principle between individuals in “The Blooming Season for Cacti”. The story speaks of an unusual bond between two strange and dissimilar women Mira and Radhika. Mira is a young immigrant who works as a cashier in an Indian restaurant owned by a prosperous but rather dubious Indian-American named Malik. Radhika, though the second wife of Malik, is actually more of his mistress. Like many women from India, Radhika has been tricked into a fraudulent marriage to Malik. Mira and Radhika forge a nameless relationship which is beyond the regular descriptions of “friend, sister, mother” (“Blooming Season”). Mira, who had lost her mother in the Bombay riot, finds in Radhika something more than kindness. On the other hand, Radhika being the older woman not only dotes on Mira but tries to find a new meaning in life by clinging to her.

On entering Malik’s Indian restaurant in California Mira’s olfactory senses were invaded with “cumin and coriander, a roasted brown smell” which reminded her of her mother’s samosas. Her mother “used to make the best samosas, fat and crisp” and Mira remembers her culinary expertise (“Blooming Season”). And it is by frying “golden-crisp samosas” for Mira that Radhika wants to hold her back at home, closer to her and away from dating a man. In Mira’s mind the samosas surely associate with the memories of Mira’s dead mother but nonetheless fail to hold her back. Like many of Divakaruni’s characters, Mira envisions the U.S. as a land of promise and liberation and would not consider retracing her footsteps to the suppression and relative insecurity of her native land. Ironically, in spite of the strong desire of Divakaruni’s characters to break free from their stifling and patriarchal Indian background, complete “Americanisation” is not possible (Zupančič 87).

The poignancy of Divakaruni’s diasporic stories stem out of the characters’ unhappy realisation of the inadequacy of their hyphenated existence. They look back to India with nostalgia and yet are eager to explore the America that surrounds them as has been put by Vijay Mishra:

Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; (Mishra 1)

Arranged Marriage is the earlier volume of short stories with the underlying theme of incompatible, unhappy or failed marriages. Interestingly, the volume has a glossary attached to it which mainly comprises of Indian words and 35 percent of these words are either names of food or are associated to the culinary practices of India. This underlines the importance food in Divakaruni’s stories. In an interview the author has expressed:

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Food is an important symbol. It is particularly important for immigrants as the one thing they hope to be able to carry forward that is relatively easy to recreate, . . . food exists on many levels in my books. It reflects changes in our culture as we take shortcuts in how we cook our food, how it remains a comfort regardless.” (Divakaruni)

Stories like “Golden Pavements, Silver Roofs”, “Doors” “Affair” and “Meeting Mrinal” have a fair amount of references to home-cooked food that stir up old memories with poignancy. Women apply their culinary skills to reclaim their relationships with their loved ones, to connect and communicate but often it proves to be a futile exercise. I would particularly point out the short story “Affair” where the narrator protagonist Abha has been portrayed as an impeccable homemaker married to Ashoke, a first generation Indian-American. An excellent cook Abha meticulously maintains a “pristine kitchen” with shining of pots and pans all arranged in rows that could impress any man. However, to her husband this is of little consequence. He would order for a Domino’s pizza with mushroom and sausage toppings while freshly cooked red hot chicken curry cooked by his wife waited in the kitchen. Abha was the typical traditional Indian woman who had never thought beyond the kitchen, home and traditional wifely duties; good looks, fashionable clothes, even marital sex did not count much. Ashoke sneers at her “*prudish Indian upbringing*” (“Affair”). Ironically, it is her culinary skill that gives her new identity in the foreign land. She occupies herself with writing for a food column in a local paper and is even offered to author a cookbook. By the end of the story Abha earns confidence enough to bank on her new found career as a chef and food columnist to walk out of a loveless, suffocating marriage that is steadily heading towards mutual hatred.

Asha of “Meeting Mrinal” also undergoes a divorce as her husband walks out of their marriage to live with an American woman deserting her and their son Dinesh. Asha rues the fact that she had “wasted” much of her life “mincing and simmering and grinding spices” (“Meeting Mrinal”). In the multicultural cauldron of U.S. other allurements are stronger than home-cooked food and one’s culinary identity. It’s *kachori* versus burger, as it is the conservative Indian wife versus the alluring sexuality of the American woman.

Divakaruni’s short stories narrate poignant accounts of experiences lived by the immigrant Indian characters in the U.S. where the culinary identity of the diasporic population definitely is a persistent issue. The name of Indian recipes, the aroma of exotic tropical spices underlines the culinary identity of these diasporic characters all to whom struggle to recreate the taste of their home food in a far-away land. Home food gathers new meaning in the foreign land invoking memories of the past of which they were a part, memories of a homeland which was once their own, but it also underlines their essential alienation from their natal cultures. Rushdie beautifully illuminates this aspect of emigrant writing:

[W]riters in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge –

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which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will, not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost” (Rushdie 10)

Divakaruni tries to capture diasporic experience at the intersection of immigration, hybridity, multiculturalism, globalisation thus mapping the complexities of expatriate lives. These short stories show that while the Indian diasporic community long to hold on to their cultural identities they have to fight the opposing currents that drive them towards assimilation. They live in two worlds— one into which they were born, and the other that they come to acquire in their new country, and thus and keep on oscillating between the two polarities as Divakaruni herself mentions in an interview (Zupančič 94). The memories of home cooked food evoke nostalgia, but they are unable to deny the reality of America that surrounds them. Much of the poignancy of these stories is caused by this dilemma in the characters which is often expressed in their ambiguous response to food.

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