

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

NOSTALGIA OF INDIAN CULINARY IN *MRS. DUTTA WRITES A LETTER*

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ABSTRACT

In the literature of diaspora, Indian immigrant women maintain the ethnic cuisine, religion and cultural festival to raise the sense of nostalgia to produce the past in the western country. Traditional food stirs the longing for the nostalgia and immediately national identity. Therefore, these immigrant women through cherishing the ethnic food in the alien land have constructed and produced the mixture of the past and present. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such Asian American writer whose ancestral roots in Bengal India spent the first nineteen years of her life in India. She moved to the United States of America in 1976 to continue her studies and has been living here for three decades. The present paper intends to examine the nostalgia of Bengali culinary in the story *Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter*. In this story, Divakaruni depicts that food serves as an important part of immigrant's identity. Being a central part of the cultural imagination of diasporic population, it induces a sense of belongingness in an alien world. The result shows that food may recall the individual's memory, remembering the past and having nostalgia where they will attempt to reinvent the past to the present.

Key Words: culinary, nostalgia, memory, diaspora

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INTRODUCTION

The sense of nostalgia is often seen among the dislocated and displaced people in most of the diaspora writings. The immigrants find themselves put out of place from the home society, they are upset emotionally and strive to remember and place themselves in a nostalgic past. The themes such as exile, home and homelessness discussed, occupies the central place in diasporic writing. Nostalgia for home is the quintessence of Diaspora.

In diasporic literature, food has been garnering interest as a subject for cultural and literary enquiry. Despite the flourishing interest in food, ways there is a relative dearth of critical analysis of literature about food. It is a central part of cultural exchange and bonding as such its importance in the study of the diaspora cannot be

undermined. In the diasporic life, food is the link between the old world and new world, the motherland and the existing land, the past and present time, and involved its functions as the device of nostalgia. Depiction of food has performed in many different and often contradictory ways in literary works, particularly in writing by women.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has become a veteran writer in the South American text. The daughter of a Bengali family her heritage and culture are influenced by Indian and United States. This multicultural lifestyle, with perplexing experiences of these bi-cultural worlds is prominent in all her books. The sentiment of missing home-food has been echoed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with the strength of her narrative skills captures the crucial moments of life at the crossroads moments-caught

between past and present. Her Bengali culture has been liberally sprinkled throughout her tales. Her fiction creates an ambience of Bengaliness with the description of Bengalicuisine, which is pervasive in her text. Delineating all her heroine with their several senses of exile, Divakaruni relates them with their fondness for food. Divakaruni in her interview has clearly stated the usage of food in her text:

“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, although it was much harder in the early days when there weren’t many Indian groceries. Immigrants learned to make substitutions, like using Bisquick for gulabjamuns, tricks like that. I am interested in food in my personal life, too. But 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.” (Interview)

The page-turner short stories collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* is deliciously spiced with Bengali rhythms and phrases. The stories illuminate the discomfort, loss and alienation of the immigrants experience and change them into the drama of our common human existence. In the story *Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter* is a pathetic account of the experience of an immigrant woman Mrs. Dutta who resists the forces of patriarchy and the trauma of immigration simultaneously but food emerges as a metaphor in the story. She has to accommodate at his son’s family in America. Through the yearning and mental state of Mrs. Dutta, the story outlines the craving of native food.

In Indian family, food is not a matter of ‘proteins and fats’ but a metaphor of family closely related with traditions, habits, sentiments and warmth of personal relations. It also binds all members together of family at dining table. While food in many instances helps to keep the family members connect to their Bengali roots, it plays an important role in the Americanization of the new generation. In this story, Divakaruni uses the dining tradition of her Indian American characters to illuminate the importance of family. She explains how Indians in western country make an effort to sustain a sense of belongingness in the presence of

Indian food and dining custom. She is happy to see that all her family members are eating together since her arrival, she writes in her mind, “proper Indian food, rotis that puff up the way they should, fish curry in mustard sauce, and real pulao with raisins and cashews and ghee-the way you taught me, Roma-instead of Rice-a-roni. She would like to add. They love it,” (Divakaruni 9)

In India, women show their special interest and have a pride while cooking in kitchen, which becomes a paramount tool for creative expression and a marker of status. At this, place women take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing their families with moral values. The relation between woman, food and kitchen become an inevitable part of Asian-Indian tradition. It is also a very individual journey in which food becomes the perfect vehicle for an examination of personal and cultural identity and the very question of human existence. Divakaruni elucidates the perspective of both Mrs. Dutta and Shyamali, demonstrating how food can strain in-law relationships. Combating her feeling of isolation in the US, Mrs. Dutta uses food to maintain her homeland culture, while making herself useful, even indispensable, to her son’s family by cooking for them. On the other hand Shyamali affected by American -inspired medical concerns senses, through these food-based power struggles, that she is losing influence over her husband and children. Mrs. Dutta prefers to the Indian Bengali food like rice, alu-dum, rasgulla, fish curry in mustard sauce, brinjal pakora but her health conscious daughter-in-law preference for American food and does not appreciate the food which is cooked by her mother-in-law: “Cholesterol, all putting on weight, she’s spoiling you.” (Divakaruni 9)

Dinner becomes an important part of interaction in the south-Indian kitchen but in this story kitchen becomes a battle ground between Shyamali and her mother-in-law. Mrs. Dutta insistence on the right way to prepare and store food. She does not appreciate her casual attitude towards the management of food: “She pours the half-drunk glasses of milk down the sink, though Shyamoli. has told her to save them in the refrigerator. But surely Shyamoli, a girl from a good Hindu family, doesn’t expect her to put

contaminated jutha things in with the rest of the food?" (Divakaruni 8)

As a grandmother, she is at her best, loves her grandchildren, and is very careful in observing their preferences. Mrs. Dutta is impulsive to cook meal for her son's family that reminds her own country and her own flavor. In moments of loneliness, she keeps herself busy in cooking Bengali food. The crispy papads and fish gravy is highly appreciated by all. Examining the difference between Indian and American kitchen author describes the preparation of food as a moment of nostalgia for her Calcutta kitchen, which was filled, with the aroma of mouth-watering ginger and chill paste. However, in American kitchen her experienced hand throws all these spices into the blender without curry powder.

In diasporic literature food becomes the bridge between the old and the new world, the homeland and the present land, the past and the present time and works as the device of nostalgia. Not only alu-dum or rasgulla induce her belongingness of native place but flavored cardamom tea also indulges her to recall past. In this story, food becomes arena for memory for Mrs. Dutta and helps to make difference between her past in Calcutta and her present condition as South Asian immigrants in the United States where she does not get a chance to be alone with her son to have a cup of tea. She has a photographic memory of Calcutta: "as a child he would always beg for a sip from her cup offers to make him." She feels a sense of loss because no one has time to company her and this lack of emotional satisfaction in the company of her family was a serious vacuum in her life.

Conclusion

In diasporic literature, food plays a leading role to unveil the past. It helps to recall memory of one's identity in adopted land. As an ethnic product, it takes people to travel the past and bring them to the present. Therefore, it redefines the present as reflected in character's present attitude. Most importantly, this cannot be separated from the roles of women as the preserver of culture. For women, cooking may create a sense of identity. Kitchen, food, and women become the vital elements in the

food and memory. In this story through Bengali cuisine, Divakaruni emphasizes upon Mrs. Dutta's rootlessness, which provides her protection and peace in an alien land.

References:

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