

HEB

Memory and Meals: Remembering and Representing The Jewish Cultural Codes and Identity Markers in Esther David's Book of Rachel

CASS

Shiji Mariam Varghese & Dr. Avishek Parui

IIT, Madras

Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Despite its immense cultural importance, food studies have only recently started to gain the scholarly attention it deserves. Right from the time of Structuralists like Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, food has been recognized to be as significant a human behavioural code as language. Literary and critical engagements with food relate to complex cultural debates regarding identity, history, modernity, religion and gender. For ethnic communities like the Jews who are held together by a problematic concept of homeland, food practices denote and connote a way of defining these cultures, occupying borders, and negotiating with issues of power, memory, dislocation and belonging. Migrant food culture is invested with great emotional ambivalence, for it unites as well as divides people. It involves the discourses of control and exclusion, whereby certain objects and behaviour are defined as acceptable or deviant, marking a sense of belonging or of dissension.

Book of Rachel (2006) by Esther David portrays the life of a Rachel, a Bene-Israeli Jewess who is one among the last Jews left in Danda after most members migrated to Israel. She lives and relives her life through the process of cooking. Food and the ways to prepare food lend existential sustenance, asserting her happiness as well as grievances to different people in varied manners. The kosher (abiding to Jewish dietary laws) food typical of their culture becomes her spokesperson and plays a key role in uniting as well as dividing people. The paper aims to study the intermingling of culinary cultures and codes of consumption and how the same generates affective associations and appropriations pertaining to memory and markers of identity. More broadly, this paper is an attempt to examine the entanglement of food, memory and literary representation.

Key words: Cooking, Memory, Dislocation, Belonging, Identity

Access this Article Online

<http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies>

Quick Response Code:

Received on 20/02/2019
Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved



The literary engagement with the edible world demands complex ways of thinking about food. The migrant food culture of any community is invested with heavy emotional ambivalence as their original food culture and codes of consumption are increasingly diminished, and are often replaced with new diverse culture. The memory and nuance of the land where they lived and the aspiration to get to their destined homeland instil a cultural ambiguity in their life. The entanglement of the physical and emotional state of being for migrant communities is often marked by issues such as hygiene and purity informing their culinary tradition. The food, behaviour, norms and values become important nodal points of reference in the formation of a sense of community and belonging. Cooking food which is part of their personal cultural identity in the new territory marks their presence in society and asserts their identity in the new space especially through the culture, tradition and lifestyle.

The paper aims to examine the constructed quality of identities that are historically problematized by migration and assimilation. With special attention to space, domesticity and shared notions of purity, the paper places special attention to the politics of production and consumption of food and how the same become markers of extended embodiment. It draws on memory studies, affect theory and thing theory in examining how objects of preservation and consumption take up affective associations that are existentially as well as culturally negotiated. Such study also reveals how things shift from their objective ontological states to becoming markers of memory and experientiality. Uniquely in this paper, food becomes a product as well as a process of remembering and reconstruction, one that generates nostalgia as well as evokes an economy of emotional identifications.

For ethnic communities like the Jews who are held together by a problematic concept of homeland, food practices denote a way of defining these cultures, occupying borders, and negotiating with issues of power, memory, dislocation and belonging. The Jews are known to be wandering from the biblical times and their food culture has undergone vast changes. They are known to imbibe the traditions and culture of the host country and adapt it to their original life style. There are four main Jewish groups in India: the Bene Israel Jews, the Cochin Jews, the Baghdadi Jews and the Paradesi Jews. Each of these communities has their own distinct tradition and culinary culture that they do not relinquish even after going back to their promised land of Israel. They stick to their culinary traditions of the land of exile and practise them even in their 'new' home. Edna Fernandes in her non-fiction account *The Last Jews of Kerala* (2008) mentions an instance where she visits Eliahu Bezalel in Israel who had come to this 'new' place in the very first wave of Cochin immigration during the early 1950's from Kerala. She could smell the spices of Kerala on entering his home: 'Stepping into his home, I could smell the pungent tang of garam masala in the air: cumin, coriander, black pepper-the smells of the Cochin's tropical marketplace that first enticed the merchant seamen of King Solomon to India's shores almost three millennia ago' (Fernandes 163). The description underlines the combination of the mythic and the marketplace in its allusion to Solomon's seamen and also the materiality and affective markers pertaining to food smells and memory. The migrants also tend to make a business out of this interplay of food and memory and establish eateries in their new land catering to the taste buds of their old land of living:

They lived nearby and she ran a Cochin catering business in one of the disused greenhouses, catering to Israelis and tourists who wanted to taste Kerala cuisine. Her business was successful and a link to their old heritage. (170)

Book of Rachel by Esther David is an excellent example of a literary work where meals spatialize and respatialize the personal and collective memory of the simple Jewish home fighting to retain their ancient heritage. The story unfolds with the Bene Israeli cuisines which are markers of their distinct Jewish culture. Rachel, the protagonist of the narrative comes under the Bene-Israeli sect of Jews, lives a lonely life supported by her talent of cooking. Food and the making of food as markers of her cultural identity and nostalgia support her emotionally, physically and spiritually to draw existential sustenance amidst the experiential alienations suffered in her life.

The Bene Israeli or 'Sons of Israel' Jewish community are the largest communities of Jews in India based in the

Konkan region before they eventually settled around Bombay. Fernandez traces their first arrival in India between the eighth and sixth century BCE thus:

They were travelling along the western Konkan coast when their boat was shipwrecked during a storm near Navagaon, which lies some forty eight kilometres south of modern-day Mumbai. The community claims only seven women and seven men survived the tragedy, with the rest perishing in the treacherous Arabian Sea. The few bodies that were recovered were buried in a cemetery at Navagaon. The seven original couples grew into a community of thousands and lived in rural Maharashtra. (98)

Rachel is a liberal and devout Bene Israeli Jewess living close to her ancestral synagogue at Danda, Maharashtra. With much of the Jewish population in her neighbourhood making an *Aliyah* (the act of immigration of Jews from the diaspora to the Land of Israel), Rachel is left to fend for herself with an ardent wish to live and be buried in the same land her husband Aaron is rested in. With the absence of *minyán* (a quorum of ten men over the age of thirteen required for traditional Jewish public worship), the synagogue is shut down and since Rachel lives very close to the place, she becomes the incognito caretaker. Her solitary life finds its externalized signifier through the abandoned architecture of the synagogue, which in turn becomes the symbolic food to her soul and body. Rachel who falls sick in the course of the story, regains her strength with the invisible power through its keys which is usually tied to her sari. Synagogue becomes an organ of her body which completes her, becoming a classic case in point of extended embodiment for an existentially alienated subject. This was a known fact to everyone who knew her well:

When Zephra (Rachel's daughter) reached the hospital, Kavita was sitting next to Rachel. She had brought flowers which the nurse had arranged in a vase... With a sigh of relief, the first thing Zephra did was tie the keys to Rachel's sari. Her keys would defeat death. (David 151)

Every chapter starts with the recipe of a distinct Bene Israeli Jewish dish which unfolds the coded language of this family narrative through the eyes of Rachel. The lone survivor re-invokes her memory of the happy times each time she prepares a food, the making of food as a cultural and memory-marker becoming a symbolic act of existential reconstruction that is sensory and embodied in quality. The religion and the cuisines share entangled relationship in the Jewish culture. There are specifically some food which is to be made on special days of Jewish religion like Sabbath, Passover, Purim, festival of Ab and weddings. There are also dietary laws attached to the food which a person following Judaism should consume known as kosher. The devout Jew observes kosher and the coded quality in their food culture strictly. This makes them united as a community and divided from the people of other religion. In a typical Bene- Israeli community, the dishes that stand out in their community are Sol Kadhi, Peethal, Chicken Kesari, Anashi Dhakacha San(Pessach Platter), Bombay Duck or Bombils, Methi Bhaaji, Fish Alberas, Saat Padar, Kanavali, Tilkut Potatoes, Malida, Chik Cha Halwa, Miri Cha Maas and more.

The sensory quality of food is underlined and dramatized in the *Book of Rachel*. According to Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's work *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), food and the experience of consuming food often become deeply phenomenological and existential, humanizing the entire process while driving the human subject towards movement, affective associations and extensions (Gregg and Seigworth 2). The aroma and the taste of the food play a huge role in igniting memories both beautiful and bitter. The world of Rachel emerges before the readers from her kitchen, with food and the making of food forming the narrative metaphorically as well as literally. Memory connects immediately with the olfactory area of the body than any other senses. Repeated experiments were conducted by various scientists and have come to the conclusion of the emergence of Proustian phenomenon which alludes to the instance in the novel *Swann's Way* (1928) by Marcel Proust where the smell of madeleine biscuit dipped in linden tea triggers intense joy and memories of the author's childhood (Herz and Schooler). The politics of purity in the form of kosher food has a special

sentient and aspirational quality for the dislocated or migrant population anxious to reconnect to their memory markers existentially. Judah, a young lawyer in the *Book of Rachel*, fighting legally to get the rights of the synagogue into Rachel's hands, goes back the memory lane to the best days of his broken childhood through the culinary skills of Rachel. He gets so affectively attached to her home and her cooking that he can sense the specific dish even from miles away

'Aunty, these fragrances follow me wherever I go. I just have to close my eyes and think of you. And, believe me, I know what you are cooking. Today, I knew it was going to be besan laddoos!' (75)

This invisible strand of connecting across a distance through memories of food is also described and dramatized in the novel. The affective network of food is often generated because of the state of in-between-ness of the individual and this can bring about a sense of belonging and non-belonging at the same time. The liminality generated due to such affective associations may be described thus:

Affect marks a body's belonging to a world of encounters or; a world's belonging to a body of encounters but also, in non-belonging, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities. Always there are ambiguous or "mixed" encounters that impinge and extrude for worse and for better, but (most usually) in-between. (2)

There is an instance in the *Book of Rachel* when Jacob, Rachel's son, senses his favourite dish Methi bhaaji made in his own home far away across oceans in Danda while he is physically in Israel. The cognitive and existential entanglement of food, senses and memory is evocatively described here. The bitter herb, Methi was like an invisible bond between Rachel and Jacob that whenever she made it at Danda, Jacob would invariably call her. This often made her wonder on how he knows exactly when she cooks his favourite dish.

The taste of good food is powerful enough to invoke involuntary as well as autobiographical memories. The conscious and the unconscious participate in the act of tasting where taste structure involuntary memory but the corporeal taste of food also triggers a complex network of associative memories that emerge out of the narrator's unconscious and conscious minds (Tigner and Carruth 107). The memory and the love for the past come alive in the form of food in the *Book of Rachel*. Mordecai, Aaron's friend, who plays an important role in the novel, invokes dislike in Rachel's heart because of his shrewd and cunning nature. Rachel tries to read between the lines during interaction with him and Mordecai sensing this move softens her heart by talking about her weakness, cooking, which he also adored:

Rachel ignored his words and changed the subject. 'Since my husband died, I rarely cook lunch. I start thinking about food in the evening. Let me see what I have in the kitchen. I have some chappathis. Or perhaps I can make some peethal for you.'

Mordecai smiled. 'I often remember those good old days when Aaron used to insist that I eat lunch before leaving for Bombay. I remember, you made the best peethal I ever had, just like my mother's. But my wife refuses to make it for me, saying it gives me acidity. Actually, she is a Bombay girl, so she thinks peethal is food for farmers.'

A compliment always worked well with Rachel. At last she smiled. 'Of course, it is food for villagers. Let me see if I have any flour in the house.' (30)

As a marker of memory as well as affection, food emerges in this passage as a conveyor of emotion as well as emotional manipulation. It also emerges as a coded communication which conveys messages from the maker to the consumer. Sometimes specific messages can be condensed and articulated through food to evoke emotional reactions. This technique has featured in literary works across genres and periods. One of the most successful portrayals of this technique occurs in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) when the protagonist Saleem Sinai's aunt Alia induces her vengeance on the Sinai family through the food she made when they lived in her home in Pakistan. Alia was distraught when Ahmed Sinai refused the proposal of marriage with her and in turn marrying her sister Amina which shattered her heart. This made her heart cold towards the whole family even after the passage of time. The family could sense the anger

flowing through the food. Similarly Rachel tries to induce love between her daughter Zephra and Judas, a lawyer who helps her in saving the synagogue from demolition through the dish called Puranpoli which she made with love and pleasure inducing the secret wish to make the couple get attracted to each other, which instantly worked.

Rachel also tries to invoke affection between Kavita (Zephra's friend) and her husband Satish Chinoy by making Bombils for him mixed with the essence of love and affection. Rachel put her heart and soul in cooking it which eventually softened Satish's heart to Kavita and eventually bringing compassion and understanding to their relationship. At the same time, she discharges her hatred on Mordecai through the food she makes for him on his visitation. She stirs the dish called Peethal with vengeance with a hope that he gets a bout of acidity and that his family criticise him for eating it.

Food here thus emerges not only as a marker of memory and affection but also as a vehicle for vengeance enacted with a desire not just to connect but also to resent. This makes food a complex signifier of a range of emotions in the *Book of Rachel*, which makes the novel a rich text not just from the perspective of food studies but also affect studies and thing theory. The Jewish food culture is made complete with the forum of communal cooking. The diasporic population connects with each other and disconnects with others outside their group with their culinary culture. This aspect of Judaic living is enriched by the contribution of others who share the similar background establishing the 'communal' aspects of the experience. The adaptation process to the new land became hassle free with these interactions where they collectively expand and reshape their culinary competence to understand the new scenario. Such experiences from their place of origin also influence the way the community members are related to each other:

Communal practices such as food preparation, shopping, and celebratory meals simultaneously strengthen a sense of belonging through specific ingredients, dishes, and practices from the migrant's place of origin. These can become sources of emotional ambivalence between the need for comforting food that echoes the migrant's past and the awareness that the consumption of those very foods might mark them as outsiders in the host society in terms of flavors, smell, and behaviour. (Parasecoli, 422)

Corresponding to this passage, the Jewish community in Danda used to come together to prepare the food, purchased the commodities from their local Jewish merchant and celebrated the festivals as a gathering. This strengthened them as a community to survive in this new land of exile, emotionally and mentally, helping them to stick on to their traditions from their homeland. The Judaic religious practices happen when a *minyan* or a quorum of ten people is assembled. The synagogue in Dandi used to breathe with life before the state of Israel was formed in 1948. Rachel's life revolved in and around the synagogue. There used to various kinds of festivities associated with the place like the weekly Sabbath services, an Eliyahu Hannabi, a wedding, circumcision of a male child or a bar mitzvah. With the Aliyah or the immigration of people to the Land of Israel, the synagogue fell out of place. With these vibrant activities the Jews would come together in the courtyard of the synagogue and prepare food like matzo bread together as a community. Rachel wanted to bring back these colourful days and would always remember these special occasions when her home and synagogue will be brimming with people of their community. Spending Passover and various other Jewish festivals alone in her home and synagogue brought back vivid memories of those days of communal cooking which is now just a memory. As theorists such as Anne Whitehead and psychologists such as Eric Kandel state in their research, memory is not so much an act of remembering than an act of reconstruction. It is essentially and functionally selective, subjective and partial in quality. This paper examines the interface between personal/micro memory and collective/macro memory in the ways it configures and reconfigures Jewish cultural identities:

Those were days of laughter and happiness. Dressed in colourful saris, jewels and strings of flowers in their hair, the women would arrive early and gather in Rachel's courtyard... (48)

They swept the synagogue and sprinkled water in the courtyard. Then, spreading out the durries on the ground,

they washed their hands and settled down to roll the matzo, roasting it on griddles placed on clay stoves. Sometimes, Aaron lit the clay tandoor and spent the entire day roasting matzo breads. The women rolled them out and passed them on to him, as he slapped them inside the oven. When done, he used a wooden spatula to pull them out and throw them on clean white bed sheet, to be collected by the women and arranged in neat stacks in the store room of the synagogue. (48, 49)

The metonymic markers of such identities include food and codes of cooking, combination and consumption. In keeping with the current tenets in memory studies, identities in this paper appear not so much re-membered as re-constructed. This memory of the synagogue at Dandi was etched in her mind always. Rachel would always dream of another occasion when the synagogue would be full like in the old days. She always wanted Zephra to get married in this synagogue which would be a perfect occasion to bring back the aura of Jewish festivities back. With the dwindling number of Jews, the people associated with the making of kosher food also moved away from Dandi and took up other occupations to sustain themselves and their families. Hassanji Daniyal who used to make kosher meat was the cantor (a clergy member who fills a diverse role in the Jewish community) took a job of giving joy rides to children in the Alibaug beach. There is a position of shamaash in every synagogue which was conducted by Isaackjee before he made an aliyah to Israel. To support his family of nine children, his wife started earning by making snacks for Jewish families especially for the Day of Atonement and the New Year. The stagnant synagogue resurrected with life briefly with the arrival of Zephra. She decided to make a malida at the synagogue as Rachel regained her health after a brief breakdown. A malida is organized as an offering to the Prophet Elijah for a secret wish fulfilment. The activity surrounding the organizing of malida reminded Rachel of the time before the great immigration of the Jews to Israel. The old team of the remaining Jewish people came to the synagogue. It was another memory to add to the history of the place:

A makeshift tent had been put up in the garden so that Hassanji Daniyal and his family could cook the malida meal. Utensils and dishes of all shapes and sizes were brought out from the synagogue store room and given a good scrub, wiped clean and kept on rented tables covered with white sheet. Zephra had asked Hassanji Daniyal to prepare a menu her mother relished. He decided to make green chicken curry, coconut rice, curried liver, chauli beans, gharries and laddoos. As an afterthought he added sandans to the menu, as he remembered that Rachel had often told his wife that, somehow, she could never get them right. This was the right occasion to serve her sandans, soft, spongy and savoury. (154)

Cooking becomes a therapy when done with all your heart and soul. It has an aspirational quality to it which liberates Rachel from the trauma of solitude devoid of her family and members of the community. Cooking keeps her alive; emotionally, spiritually and physically and with this skill she transcends the liminal space of her home and synagogue to the world beyond the seven seas. She lives in the heart and home of her children who live far away through the dishes she has cooked for them in their childhood. This love for her and her taste connects them as a family even more especially in the industrialized world where homemade food is replaced by factory made food:

Zephra was the last to come on the line. She wanted the recipe for Indian matzo...

'It is very simple, but how come you are interested in cooking? In India you refused to even boil an egg!'

Rachel ached for her daughter as she heard her tinkling laughter. 'People change Mama,' she said. 'But do not have high hopes. This is just for Pessach. I am bored of eating this factory-made stuff. Just feeling homesick for your food.' (49)

Markers of memory through food operate in the *Book of Rachel* through the eyes of the lead protagonist Rachel. Every actor involved in this narrative is affected positively and negatively with the interplay of food in their lives. The participants connect with those who share them and they confirm their identities in the process. The ingredient, dishes,

procedures becomes the cultural marker of a community with a great heritage portrayed by Esther David.

References:

David, Esther. *Book of Rachel*. Penguin Books India, 2006.

Fernandes, Edna. *The Last Jews of Kerala*. Penguin Books India, 2008.

Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Herz, Rachel S., and Jonathan W. Schooler. "A Naturalistic Study of Autobiographical Memories Evoked by Olfactory and Visual Cues: Testing the Proustian Hypothesis." *The American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 115, no. 1, 2002, p. 21., doi:10.2307/1423672.

Parasecoli, Fabio. "Food, Identity, and Cultural Reproduction in Immigrant Communities." *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 2, 2014. *Summer*, muse.jhu.edu/article/549124/pdf.

Tigner, Amy L., and Allison Carruth. "Gustatory Narrative : Meals, Memory, and Modernist Fiction." *Literature and Food Studies*, Routledge, 2018, p. 107.