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National Identity: A Creation Through Consumption

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The very basis of a society rests in its shared culture. Admission into a society requires the members to consume and partake in all that is encompassed in the umbrella label of its culture: languages, clothes, customs and traditions. While all these are overt markers of culture, what is at once overt and yet covert is that aspect of culture which is literally consumed—food. For as much as it is regarded as being confined to the inner and feminine domain and hence, rendered inconsequential, food was and continues to play a large and defining role in the formation and cementing of a cultural, ethnic, and national identity that holds true in the motherland as well as in the scattered expatriates that are largely regarded as the diaspora. This paper seeks to explore how a collective belonging to the very notion of 'Indian-ness' is upheld, sometimes unintentionally but mostly with clearly conscious intentions, through the culinary practices of the people who identify as such. Through the systematic readings of a few culinary narratives, this thought is realised as it can be seen that a certain kind of national cuisine is being established, an 'Indian' cuisine that adheres to the 'Indian' identity. This national cuisine is one that is formed and propagated by many agents, of whom are primarily women in the domestic space, and is ultimately seen to be an ever-expanding label that subsumes under itself the various regional and communal cuisines.

Keywords: *Food, cultural identity, national identity, Indian cuisine, culinary narrative, food culture*

Introduction

The notion of a person's identity is a rather complex one. A person is defined by the many layers that make up their identity— physical appearance, personality, religion, gender, sex, sexual orientation, nationality, and many more such aspects. Owing to a person's communal and social relations, there are still many more levels at which their identity is defined at in relation and association to a group of other individuals who ascribe to the same notion of a larger identity. This idea of a group or a collective identity is what is clubbed under the all-encompassing notion of a cultural identity. One's cultural identity refers to identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural

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categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion. Cultural identity is constructed and maintained through the process of sharing collective knowledge such as traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms and customs. As individuals typically affiliate with more than one cultural group, cultural identity is complex and multifaceted. (Chen)

A specific community is distinguished from another based on the set of customs and practices that they call their own. This includes a plethora of cultural markers like their dressing apparel, language(s), and the like. While these are governed by their traditions and customs, another often ignored aspect of their cultural identity is their food and foodways.

“Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are,” says Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in *The Physiology of Taste* (qtd. in Mannur, *Culinary Fictions* 13). This is a testament to the fact that the food that one consumes is an irreplaceable part of their identity. Food is simultaneously an overt and covert cultural marker. While it is widely acknowledged that a set of culinary practices are often specific to a community, it is also often left out of the aspects under study due to various reasons: which range from being seen as an act of consumption and desire and hence, part of the frowned upon hedonistic way of life, and also because it is considered to be too ordinary and routine-like.

With the growing consciousness of culture and literature which reflects culture, largely owing to translation of literary works into English and an increased fervour in writing of literature in English, we see an appreciation and observation of food and food culture as part of the larger web of individual and group identity. This is especially prevalent in works which arise from diasporic populations scattered far away from their homelands. A nostalgic longing for the place they used to call home, and the desire to hold on to the last vestiges of their national and regional identities have resulted in an expansive boom of literature that is steeped in the memories of their homelands. And quite often, consciously or unconsciously, these narratives are coloured by the culinary space; for their memories are charged by an experience that titillates all five of their senses: taste, touch, sight, smell, and hearing.

Conversely, food is also seen as a way to denounce one cultural identity and adopt another. Food is a marker that can be used to make a subtle statement which can echo repeatedly if the need arises. And hence, these are the reasons as to why Anita Mannur in *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* sees “the culinary as an enunciative space, one that vitally articulates race, food, class, labor, and culture,” for “food is an equally important vector of critical analysis in negotiating the gendered, racialized, and classed bases of collective and individual identity” (24).

A National Cuisine

Owing to the large scale phenomenon known as globalisation, it can be clearly seen that a lot of the conventionally Western practises have trickled into the customs and traditions that was once uniquely 'Indian'. With the rise in the urban population who are adopting more Western practises into their lives, there is an increased pigeon-holing that can be seen with the local traditions and customs which are receiving the label of 'ethnic' and 'traditional', whether they may be 'ethnic clothing' or 'traditional cuisine.' This results in the attempt to put on an identity, especially when a situation arises for them to showcase the regional or national aspect of their identity

In the case of food, this is where one decides to consult traditional recipes that have been handed down for generation. A more modern equivalent to that which is often available in a diasporic setting are the numerous cookbooks that can be found in the market which cater to a large variety of regional and communal cuisines.

“The existence of cookbooks,” says Arjun Appadurai in his essay “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India,” can be understood as “an effort on the part of some variety of specialist to standardize the regime of the kitchen, to transmit culinary lore, and to publicize particular traditions guiding the journey of food from

marketplace to kitchen to table” (3). What is ironical here is that the idea of an 'Indian' cuisine is something to be “scoffed at”, says Chitrita Banerji (15), for there is no uniformity among the numerous regional and communal cuisines that exist in the Indian subcontinent to actually form a cuisine which can be unanimously agreed upon to be 'Indian'. The imaginary notion of an 'Indian' cuisine is largely created by the diasporic population and Appadurai also notes that it is seen to have evolved from a “spatially mobile class of professionals” who are characterised by their “multiethnic, multicaste, polyglot and Westernized tastes” and this creation of the label of the 'Indian' cuisine is largely a “postindustrial, postcolonial process” (5-6).

Women: Stakeholders in Nationalism

“Nationalist discourse frequently casts the woman as a broker of cultural traditions,” says Mannur (*Culinary Fictions* 35). This is a sentiment that is an echo of Partha Chatterjee's “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question” wherein he says that:

in the entire phase of the nationalist struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture. . . . The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality. No matter what the changes in the external condition of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (i.e. feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become *essentially* westernized” (emphasis in original). (239)

While this might seem to be contradictory to the earlier idea that a Westernised urban and diasporic population was which led to the formation of a national 'Indian' cuisine, what is key here that they remain 'essentially' Indian in the post colonial world that is becoming increasing Westernised through globalisation. The cookbooks which tout a ubiquitous 'Indian' cuisine are for the benefit of the urban woman so that she can claim to be 'Indian,' 'national,' and in touch with the indigenous traditions and the local culture.

“Cookbooks allow women from one group to explore the tastes of another, just as cookbooks allow women from one group to be represented to another” (Appadurai 6). A precedent to this was seen in the way urban women would exchange recipes verbally, and most of these cookbooks written in the shared language of English ensured that it could read most of the female urban populations. And as Appadurai rightly says, “recipes sometimes move where people may not,” as India is a society where interactions across ethnic and caste boundaries are quite delicate and fragile. It is this interplay and interchange of recipes and other practices of the culinary space that has resulted in the “regional inflections and the national standardization” which have ultimately led to the formation of a ubiquitous 'Indian' cuisine (7, 6).

Beyond Exoticisation

The Mistress of Spices by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a novel that has and continues to be praised in popular culture. But in spite of that acclaim or perhaps because of the same, this novel has been shunned by critics at large and there is a staunch refusal to accept this as part of 'serious' literature. Mannur, in unanimity with a large body of critics, finds that this culinary narrative plays into what Frank Chin rather disparagingly termed as the concept of "food pornography": “a form of cultural self-commodification through which Asian Americans earn a living by capitalizing on the so-called exoticism embedded in one's foodways” (qtd. in “Culinary Fictions” 59). Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong observes that while it appears that “food pornographers” promote their ethnic heritage, the overall result is however of a negative value as “what they in fact do is to wrench cultural practices out of their context and display them for gain to the curious gaze of outsiders... they feed their white patrons “foreign matter” that has been domesticated, 'detoxed,' depoliticized, made safe for recreational consumption” (56). Meenakshi Mukherjee believes that for those in India, spices are basic

and common ingredients and they are too ordinary to carry any “cultural connotations”. “They assume a symbolic value only when dislodged from their normal context” (qtd in *Culinary Fictions* 91).

Mannur interprets this as an attempt by the author to engage in the “use of Orientalism to render race palatable” (*Culinary Fictions* 21). A more accurate term to be used here would be that of “Re-Orientalism,” according to the concept put forth by Lisa Lau in her seminal work “Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals.” Essentially, this is a form of Orientalism that is propagated by the Orientals themselves, especially by diasporic Orientals (571). On closely observing *The Mistress of Spices* and seeing beyond that harsh criticism that surrounds it, one can notice the ideas that Mannur directs us towards: that “the novel effects an immediate shuttling between reality and Orientalism to position spices, not as commodities within circuits of colonial exchange and exploitation, but as magical palliatives that counter the effects of racism and social inequity” (*Culinary Fictions* 95).

The novel begins with Tilo proclaiming her identity as the Mistress of Spices. An interesting piece of information that is often ignored is that she “can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth, and sand and stone.” But she chooses to be the Mistress of Spices, for the spices are her “love.” While she says all spices have powers, “even the everyday American ones,” the ones of “true power” are the spices from her “birthland” (Divakaruni 8). The spices that are doled out as solutions to complex problems by Tilo, the Mistress of Spices, are the very basic ones that can be found in any traditional Indian spice larder. As the sequential characters deal with issues of racism, unhappy marriages, domestic abuse and the like in the foreign land wherein they are a part of the diasporic population, what is seen here is an increasing awareness of their regional and national identity. It bolsters a thought that perhaps the strengthening of their identity might help them in facing and surviving their problems.

Divakaruni presents the spice store as a symbolic microcosm of the homeland that all the characters have left behind, another connecting factor which forms a community of the people who visit the store. This particular narrative works not to create a national cuisine but to tap into the need of a national cuisine and the symbolic way in which a shared cuisine unites these people who are part of the diaspora. In India it is the regional identity that one strongly holds on to while in lands far away from the homeland, this gives way to the larger, all-embracing national identity of the 'Indian'.

Diaspora in India

Rohinton Mistry's novels *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* depict the Parsi community in India, a community which can be considered to be a diaspora in India. While it may be too much of a stretch to categorise these as culinary narratives, these are undeniably cultural narratives, and hence the culinary could be considered as a part of it. The mentions of food here are typically Parsi, but what is interesting here is that a typical Indian can easily recognise these dishes and have, in all probability, consumed these at one point in time or another.

Such a Long Journey has mentions of “a *kutchoomber* of onions, coriander and green chillies to go with the *dhansak*” (23), “leaf-wrapped fish steamed in green coconut chutney” (189) which are features of the stereotypical Parsi cuisine. The Goan Malcolm was always vehement in his praise for beef, mutton and other meats, which was enthusiastically echoed by the Parsi Gustad.

While *A Fine Balance* has copious mentions of food, it serves as a way to bring people together. What matters is the presence of food rather than what the food really is. However, their affiliation towards food is expressed in the way someone claims at a gathering that where “Parsis were concerned, food was number one, conversation came second” (41). There are multiple mentions of pulao, dals, and various meat dishes; quite similar to the broader 'Indian' cuisine, an indication perhaps that the diaspora fits right in with the majority.

A diaspora in India also has a rightful place in the formation and adoption of an 'Indian' cuisine and an Indian

identity. The melding and fusion of culinary and other socio-political practices has resulted in a mutual give and take relationship which has benefitted social relations and enriched the culinary space.

Nostalgia and Belonging

Madhur Jaffrey's *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India* is tinged with the kind of nostalgia that teases at all the senses. This autobiography of the acclaimed food writer, Jaffrey is and continues to be the face of Indian food for a lot of people. The diasporic setting that she is a part of makes her relatable and approachable for a lot of Indians who are a part of the diasporic population.

While her cookbooks make it seem that her life revolves around food, her autobiography makes us realise that she just has a heightened awareness of the sights, tastes, sounds, smells, and textures of food that she comes across in her life. She begins the book with the origins of her name, “Madhur” is “sweet as honey” in Sanskrit, and the childhood memories she has of her eating slices of raw mangoes with a mixture of spices sprinkled on them (14). The variety of tastes that she evokes her, from the sweetness of the honey to the spicy sourness of the mangoes will be considered quintessentially Indian, even for those who might never have even tasted the same. The creation of this flavour profile is integral to the larger picture of the “Indian” cuisine that she adds to; narratives, culinary and otherwise, brimming with nostalgia unequivocally ascribe regional and/or national sentimental significance to certain dishes and here, the spice-sprinkled sour mangoes are considered to be a part of the classic Indian culinary fare. There is a generous mention of the typically 'Indian' culinary paraphernalia: cardamom, ginger, red and green chillies, coriander, cumin, cinnamon, mango powder, basmati rice, *karhai*, and tamarind chutneys; an endless list. The narrative she spins is interspersed with mentions of Hindu mythology, temples, ancestral houses, Kashmiri shawls, terra cotta cups, and indigenous fruit trees— all these add to the 'Indian-ness' of it all.

Another crucial element of the 'Indian' cuisine is brought out in the later chapters— milk. “India is a milky nation,” Jaffrey says as she lists out the delicacies that are made with it. “Without milk, India, this highly lactose country, would just wither away” (43). The decadence of her descriptions are contrasted with the simplicity of a basic meal that is familiar to most Indians: that of rice or a few wheat *rotis* with a side of green chillies and raw onions. Jaffrey partakes in this meal not with her affluent family but with the gardener who is employed by them. This serves to bring in the idea that the national 'Indian' cuisine is one which caters to all the economic sections of the society, while establishing the idea that a basic Indian meal is all that you need to extend to revel and relish in one's altruistic nature. This meal is highlighted by more ideas of the national, for she says that this is a meal “of very basic national starches enhanced only with the most basic of local seasonings” (46).

Chunks of chicken and goat meat cooked with aromatic spices and the traditional tomato and onion base present the part of the cuisine that caters to the ones who indulge in non-vegetarian fares.

Jaffrey's admission of her upbringing being a fusion of Indian and Western values and customs in pre-Independence India: a convent education and *pooja* (worship) rooms, English porcelain teacups and “spicy potato and pea-filled samosas” (25), “squiggly jalebis” (40) bring forth the idea of staying true to the precepts of the national cuisine even if Western influences seep into the other facets of life.

Conclusion

The culinary space is the inner space, both literally and figuratively. Shrouded in the inner sanctum of the home, it is part of the feminine, domestic space. “The domestic arena, so frequently associated with femininity, also becomes a space to reproduce culture and national identity,” says Mannur (*Culinary Fictions* 30).

India being the huge land of diversity that it is, it seems quite unfathomable to conceive the existence of a national cuisine that is indelibly 'Indian' in nature. Even the multifarious cuisines that are part of the numerous communal groups in India are so diverse that it is impossible to set even the least degree of standardisation. And this is where the widespread network of Indian kitchens comes in, each one different from the next; a disparity that is cumulative when compared from one end to the other. We see how a national cuisine is created through the aid of these kitchens and the agents of operation in these spaces, who are conventionally women, which subsumes the various regional and communal cuisines to give rise to the very 'Indian-ness' which almost every Indian at heart tries to hold on to as a symbolic statement to their regional and national identity.

It is quite easy to see the 'Indian' label as one which contains, limits, and sets up boundaries, for that is what labels do. But the very existence of South Asian, Indian, South Indian, Kerala and even Malabar Muslim cookbooks, and the unimaginable variety that we see in the uncountable culinary narratives across different media are proof that such labels are more defining in nature rather than limiting; each label is part of another and contains many other labels within. Similarly, the 'Indian-ness' that one can boast of encompasses various other layers to their identity.

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- A term usually used in the Social Sciences, foodways are the cultural, social, and economic practices relating to the production and consumption of food. This term is often used to refer to the intersection of food in culture, traditions, and history.
- A Parsi dish consisting of goat, lentils, and vegetables.
- A wrought iron or steel flat bottomed cooking vessel with steep sides. Similar to a Chinese wok.
- A Muslim community that is primarily settled along the Malabar coast in Kerala.