



Taste of Their Lives: A Study of Select Women's Food Memoirs

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Abstract

Food images and the use of food as a symbol have had an enormous impact on Postmodern culture. A new domain in Cultural Studies, namely, Food Studies, was introduced in the twentieth century to explore the cultural significance of food, cooking and eating. Food Studies is an emerging area in literary studies exploring how food symbolism and imagery bring subtle, intricate ideas and more profound meanings into literature. This paper analyses texts that are often relegated as women's cookbooks or food-related writing, the genre of Food Memoirs. The article attempts to foreground how food helps women mould their identity and transcend societal barriers through works like Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* and Madhur Jaffrey's *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India*. In-depth analyses of these texts show that rather than acting as a marker of female oppression, food, cooking and eating play a pivotal role in an individual's journey to self-realisation. These texts portray how food has opened new arenas in front of the writers rather than limiting their possibilities.

Keywords: Food Studies, Food Memoir, Self-Discovery, Female Oppression and Liberation

Introduction

Food Studies is a multidisciplinary subject area that explores the multifarious relationships among food, society and culture from several branches in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Sciences. This new branch of literary studies challenges researchers to probe deep into the acts of cooking and eating and find deeper meanings in these quotidian activities. People's food choices, either as individuals or groups, can reveal their thoughts, likes, and dislikes and tell stories of households, migrations, assimilation, resistance, and changes over time. The food we eat defines us; it can act as an agency for defining individual identity or communal identity; it can also reveal a lot about

the hegemonic potential of patriarchal society and the processes of gender stereotyping and oppression. Many myths regarding food consumption and food-related stereotypes can be shattered through an in-depth analysis of our food habits and food choices. Every meal served on a plate reveals personal connections, nostalgic longings, a sense of belonging and racial pride.

The term food habits (also known as food culture or foodways) (54) was formulated by Kittler, Sucher, and Nelms to explain how humans consume food, including its selection, cultivation, and distribution to who cooks, serves, and eats it. Human beings alone perform these acts. Hauck-Lawson came up with the idea of food voice (24). She suggested that what one eats or does not eat can reveal manifold facets of one's personality.

Food and Identity

Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard, in the "Introduction" of *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature*, assert that food is fundamental to literature, "If food is fundamental to life and a substance upon which civilisations and cultures have built themselves, then food is also fundamental to the imagination and the imaginary arts. Food is fundamental to the imagination because food is fundamental to culture" (5)

Culture can be defined as the thoughts, beliefs and viewpoints followed by an individual who is part of a group or community. Culture cannot be inherited but must be cultivated by a deliberate effort. The food habits of various cultures are often related to racial practices and sacred rituals that are part of religion. Thus, in the cultural context, one can say that what one eats defines who one is and is not. According to Kittler, Sucher and Nelms, "Eating is a daily reaffirmation of [one's] cultural identity". (54) A good number of people value the foods from their culture, foods that are part of their ancestry and childhood with warmth. Food is an integral part of who we are as individuals. As adults, when we experience stress or frustration, foods that are part of our childhood, our culture can often provide us with comfort or solace.

Culinary Memoir: Genre, Form and Function

A Culinary memoir or Food memoir is a form of autobiographical writing. Contemporary food memoirs put food at the centre of their narratives. Still, they are more systematically biographical, chronicling the authors' lives through cooking and eating rather than mere narratives about food that include personal anecdotes. In the paper "Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom," Barbara Frey Waxman notes that this form is "about the treasury of metaphorical associations that link food with love and emotional nourishment that are often present in the personal histories and confessions of food memoirists" (363). According to Waxman, food memoirs are based on the theme of food and its association with cultural identity, ethnicity, family and cross-cultural experiences. Until recently, very few thinkers attempted to bring a feminist perspective to their work on food, as many feminist scholars focussed their attention on women's food pathologies like anorexia, bulimia, and other eating disorders alone. Women's studies scholars addressed domesticity problems but ignored cooking altogether, blindly assuming it as a marker of patriarchal oppression. Many contemporary women Food Memoirists regard their work as resisting conventional notions and fixed identities. Culinary memoirs are not mere individualist narratives of foods; the culinary memoirs have a cultural and communal significance as the narrator is placed in a cultural and historical scene. It is particularly politicised and marked by the difference when it comes to the immigrant and post-colonial authors. The culinary memoir promotes the construction of individual identity. It is linked to personal and general settings, the notion of home and childhood, and how they affect the person's formation, very much so in the case of the individual migrating from one place to another or straddling between two worlds.

This paper analyses two Food Memoirs- *Monsoon Diary* by Shoba Narayan and Madhur Jaffrey's *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India*, two books that present fascinating autobiographical sketches through food images. These texts share several traits, but they are thematically and emotionally different. They are set within the global Indian context, target an English-

speaking population, and the authors are women of Indian origin living abroad. Thus, they speak of immigration, dislocation or displacement, and exile- aspects that play a pivotal role in shaping the group identity of Indians residing outside the country.

Barbara F. Waxman explains, "Culinary memoirs generally trace the memorists' passage from youth to a maturity in which they have discovered a passion for food (eating it, cooking it, writing about it, and travelling to experience it) and established a niche in the world" (365). In the texts analysed here, food is not a mere detail or an embellishment in the backdrop; food is the protagonist, playing varied roles, such as that of a bond between generations of migrants, as an identity marker, and as a symbol of religious rituals, superstitions and remembrances.

Shoba Narayan's Culinary Trail

Shoba Narayan was born in 1968 to Tamil Brahmin parents in South India. She graduated from the Columbia University School of Journalism. Her articles on food and travel have found a place in celebrated publications like The New York Times, Financial Times and The Wall Street Journal. Narayan published *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* in 2003 during her immigrant days in America. The book chronologically portrays the author's life, from her birth in Madras to her adult life as an immigrant in America. Food is always central to the text, and she vividly recounts her food memories. She has incorporated recipes into the text that present a slice of the memory that she shared in each chapter.

Narayan has interwoven into the fabric of the text cultural aspects of the South Indian Tamil Brahmin family that she grew up in. One gets a detailed understanding of the region's different local festivals, customs and culinary specialities, the importance of various rituals and ceremonies, and the prevalence of various castes in Indian society. The first chapter, 'First Foods, ' talks about her "Choru-unnaal" ceremony or "rice-eating" ceremony that marks a child's first proper meal, wherein the family members and priests feed the child nibbles of mashed rice, lentils and ghee.

Narayan highlights the significant role of ritualised sensorial experiences in the lives of middle-class Indian families through her remembrances. These culinary experiences act as milestones in her journey to selfhood as a Keralite, Indian, and Indian-American. Lisa Heldke, in *Exotic Appetites*, talks about the strong interconnections between cuisine and culture and argues that food adventurers who opt for foreign cuisines for their strange nature are largely unaware of this vital connection. She observes: "Food is just food [...] We ignore any attachments it may have to the social practices, religious traditions, economic conditions of a culture" (50). Narayan in *Monsoon Diary* provides many such descriptions that reaffirm food's cultural significance, enabling the reader to identify the associations between meals, spices, flavours, and people's lives.

Shoba narrates one of her most vibrant memory of growing up in India in the chapter 'Mumbai Train', wherein she sketches in detail her family's train journey. Narayan recounts this episode and looks deeper into how communal values, rituals and traditions enhance the day-to-day act of consuming food. October starts the monsoon season in India, and it is also vacation time for school kids. Shoba's family travelled to their relatives' houses in Bangalore and Bombay on the Lal Bagh Express, between Madras (Chennai) and Bangalore (Bengaluru), or the Bombay Express, between Madras (Chennai) and Bombay (Mumbai). Narayan remarks, "the most important thing when travelling by train in India is not the location of your seat [...], whether you have confirmed tickets or even your destination. The crucial element is the size of your neighbor's tiffin carrier" (Narayan 60). Tiffin carriers are a special kind of "lunch boxes" used in India, made of stainless steel or brass where containers with lids are stacked one atop the other and secured by a metal clamp. Young Shoba chose her seats wisely based on the number of vessels piled in the tiffin carrier of her travelling companion.

If my school lunch box with its measly two containers was a Manhattan townhouse, the Marwari matron's tiffin carrier was the Empire State Building, with more than a dozen impressively stacked stainless steel containers. She opened each one at strategic points during our train journey together. At dawn we had roti and potato saag. At ten o'clock, a snack

of crisp kakda wafers speckled with pepper. For lunch, a bounty of parathas. (Narayan 62)

Monsoon Diary epitomises the Epicurean philosophy and the pleasure of eating. When we think of food as means of pleasure or nourishment, the category of pleasure predominates. This memoir enriches what the food scholars or culinary chroniclers call "the sensory embodiment of food" (Pilcher 695). While illustrating Indian customs, Narayan comments on the difference between Indian and American cultures from an outsider's vantage point. The book traverses her life, childhood in Kerala, her youth or College days in America, and her arranged marriage and life after that in New York City. It showcases her coming-of-age journey. The book is an excellent example of how a memoir intertwines public events with personal details and creates a "public identity" (Rak 485). For Narayan, *Monsoon Diary* was a platform for presenting herself as a writer to the world and a chance "to construct, package and market identity so that others will want to buy it" (Rak 486).

Narayan fondly remembers her mother's baking classes and how her father always supported her mother's talents and let her set up a Tutorial. After shutting down Bright Tutorial, her mother enrolled in a community college to learn cosmetology and became a certified aesthetician. With the wholehearted support of her husband and children, Sobha's mother started a beauty parlour in their house, 'Kadambari Beauty Parlor', and it was inaugurated on Sobha's fourteenth birthday. Sobha is in awe of her mother's multivariate talents. It is very evident from her account of her mother that this woman has influenced her enormously and has played a significant role in moulding her personality. In another part of the book, she unapologetically asserts her identity as a Keralite-

I am from Kerala, which means that regardless of where I live at any other point in my life, I will love coconuts in any form. I will habitually douse my hair with warm coconut oil and wash it off with ground herbs during a weekly "oil bath," I will be enchanted by the sight of large expanses of water, and the smell of the rain will transport me back to my childhood. (Narayan 80)

Food has shaped her past and has played a vital role in deciding her future. When she received a scholarship to join Mount Holyoke College in the USA for her graduation, her family members were apprehensive about her going to America. After days of arguments, protests and cajoling, Sobha's uncle came up with an idea, "Cook us a vegetarian feast like this one. If we like it, you can go to America. If we don't, you stay here." (Narayan 106). Her future hung on her ability to cook, to mix flavours and spices. Even though she had seen her maternal and paternal grandmothers churning out delicious feasts for hordes of visitors and her mother who cooked appetising meals effortlessly, Sobha had never ventured into the kitchen to cook a meal. This was a challenge she embraced wholeheartedly because she badly wanted to go to the US for higher education. At the end of the feast she prepared, her family members could not stop themselves from eating. Her grandfather, Nalla-pa, who had a demanding palate, ate so much that he belched unapologetically, which meant Sobha was going to America.

Sobha encountered Feminism for the first time at Mount Holyoke and learned that it is about choices and freedom. She compares Indian women with their American counterparts. She says that rules and traditions bound women like her mother, but they still had achieved many things like these women in America. When the American women question and overthrow the system, Indian women navigate within the system's confines and achieve their goals. Which made a woman happier, Sobha is not sure. What Sobha Narayan has done for herself is that -she has stuck to her roots, the culture and tradition that she grew up in, and has successfully concocted a new identity as a bold career woman. In this journey to selfhood and independence, the food and traditions of her parent culture have been crucial for her. Food and cooking here function as tools of liberation and not as instruments of oppression, suppressing the potential of women. Food has helped Sobha realise her dream of foreign education, at first to go to America and then to stay an extra year there. Food opened new arenas for her, both personally and professionally.

Madhur Jaffrey's Taste Trail

Madhur Jaffrey is an Indian origin British writer, actor and culinary figure. In her delectable memoir *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India*, Jaffrey draws a colourful pen picture of the myriad smells and tastes she grew up on, stimulating her passion for food. In the Prologue of her book, Jaffrey narrates how flavours and aromas have played a pivotal role in her life right from the day she was born. Like in Narayan's memoir, Jaffrey also starts by recounting her first food memory- her grandmother welcomed her to this world with sacred blessings with honey put on her tongue. There are many similarities in these memoirists' life journeys. Both Sobha Narayan and Jaffrey left India for the US and England for higher studies.

When she reached England, Jaffrey hardly knew to cook; she was far from the Culinary Guru that she is today. However, her childhood tastes and smells were inside her, enriching her palette. "...I could not cook at all, but my palate had already recorded millions of flavours. From cumin to ginger, they were all in my head; waiting to be called to service...I could even 'hear' the honey on my tongue." (Jaffrey xiv). Jaffrey calls this "taste memory". This taste memory shapes an individual, and it is something one will carry with oneself wherever one travels and till the end of one's life. Young Jaffrey, who left for England, carried in her mind the heady aroma of spices and flavours that she tasted and smelled as a child, and this, in turn, has moulded her tastes as an adult. As an Indian living in England, this taste memory is what kept her going.

Jaffrey points out that "...that so much of my past would always remain my present." (231). This underscores the importance of food in moulding individual identity. She emphasises the taste memory, which emphasises her ancestry and its traditions:

The innocent Indian honey of my infancy was now mixed with pungent Indian spices, the sour and bitter, the nutty and the aromatic. Interwoven with these flavours, like tenacious creepers, were births, deaths, illnesses, caste and creed. Yet somewhere in my depths, each bite, each taste of all I had

eaten lay catalogued in some pristine file, ready to be drawn up when the moment was ripe (Jaffrey 231).

The tastes and flavours that an individual grows up with will remain with him/her until death.

Jaffrey brings a food memory each into her narrative to portray family dynamics. She depicts interactions between her uncle Shibbu dada and the children and calls him the Pied Piper for the family's young ones, as he arranged fun and games eliciting delight in the children. She recalls special visits to their home, arranged by Shibbu dada, of the 'khomcha-wallah', seller of coveted food delicacies, "hot, sour and savoury snacks known through much of North India as chaat" (Jaffrey 69). The narrator recounts how the 'khomcha-wallah' would bring half-prepared foods, such as fried split-pea patties, with him and finish preparing the treats like 'dahi baras' in front of his eager customers, adding their selection of spices, sauces, and yoghurt blended together and placed atop the food. There is a mouth watering description of chaat preparation by the 'khomcha-wallah'. This food experience is portrayed as gastronomic heaven for the children. Jaffrey likens it to giving Western children the opportunity to spend an entire afternoon in a candy store (Jaffrey 68).

The Tiffin Carrier lunches are another instance referred to by both authors, and the graphic description of the Tiffin-carrier lunches that Jaffrey and her friends enjoyed in school helps to bring out the diversity of India's culinary traditions. She explains that even though the ingredients were the same, the taste was entirely different, and each food item represented a particular culture and religion- the Muslim food brought by her friends Abida and Zahida, the Jain food of Sudha and Promela, who brought Punjabi food.

Jaffrey's book is suffused with nostalgia. The author recalls images of bygone days joyfully. She recalls her trips with her mother to 'Parathe Vali Gulley' in Old Delhi, where they devoured steaming hot 'parathas'. The past is here idealised and romanticised. Jaffrey describes her mother as a woman of "uncommon intelligence" (Jaffrey 31); She did everything to perfection, be it cooking, sewing or embroidery. Jaffrey feels she has inherited her mother's desire to

excel. However, unlike her mother, who was not educated and quietly accepted society's limitations, Jaffrey rebelled against conventions and her "loving and indulgent parents" (Jaffrey 32) let her choose her own path in life. Through this memoir, Jaffrey reaffirms that the tastes and flavours she imbibed in her childhood have helped her build her identity as a Food Connoisseur and Food Writer. The tastes she grew up with have also served as an emotional anchor to her in her adult life abroad.

Conclusion

A negotiation and reconnection with their origins precede the migration to the West for both Narayan and Jaffrey. In her memoir, Shoba Narayan says: "I was ready to embrace Indian food, using childhood memories and hastily written recipes as my guide." (194). The culinary memoirists not only use this subgenre as a venue to trace their life story but also to redefine cultural markers. The culinary memoir is a hybrid genre, poised between cookbook and autobiography; it recounts the dilemma of the members of the Diaspora and depicts an intense uneasiness that Shoba Narayan pinpoints in *Monsoon Diary* "it's about juggling cultures, straddling lifestyles, never fitting in anywhere, questioning the values that you have grown up with, and having your kids grow up as Americans." (104).

Preserving relics from the past is a gesture of comfort and consolation for members of the Diaspora. It is a means of cultivating roots and consolidating a fragmented identity. It is a therapeutic activity in which recipes and associated rituals are recorded to preserve the past-particular events, social rituals and traditions in the case of culinary memoirs. These memoirs depict food-assisted personal metamorphosis and the chance of taking one's life in hand. The popular notion regarding food and cooking is that it is a tool of oppression. However, home cooking and kitchens can be seen as domains where aspirations and desires take root; as places that allow identities to emerge; especially in the case of the Diasporic community, it leads to personal and cultural deterritorialization yet completes the endless pursuit of an identity that accepts the present and appreciates and celebrates the past.

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