



Immigrant Kitchen: Culinary Identity in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

The article will address the strong symbolic value of food and food practices as a significant metaphor of the complex process of negotiating cultural identity in the life of diasporas. The analysis, through close reading of multiple short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, argues that the immigrant kitchen is a significant yet controversial space where memory, tradition, and assimilation intersect. The paper examines how ingredients, meals, and even cooking are physical, tangible, and sensory reminders of a lost homeland and, at the same time, become a source of conflict between first-generation immigrants and their children born in America. It explores how culinary labour is gendered and is usually carried out by women who become accidental archivists and translators of culture. In addition, the analysis delves deeper into how food serves as a language of love, a mode of communication, where words are ineffective, and a barrier or a bridge in cross-cultural relations. Finally, this paper argues that food in the fiction of Divakaruni and Lahiri is never simply food; it is a palimpsest onto which the anxieties, adaptations and the hybrid identities of the South Asian diaspora in America are vividly drawn.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Diaspora Studies, Food Studies, Hybridity, South Asian American Literature

Introduction

The physical displacement of one's native country is accompanied by drastic psychological and cultural deracination.

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In this liminal space between the familiar past of the home country and the uncertainty of the new country's future, objects and practices of the lost world take on heightened meaning. Of these, perhaps the most powerful, visceral, and day-to-day reminder of who one was, and by extension, who one is becoming, is the food. The kitchen thus transcends its domestic function and becomes a site of memory, identity formation, and cultural negotiation, where the competing forces of assimilation and cultural preservation are enacted through everyday culinary practices. Determining food preparation and consumption becomes a dominant theme in the literary terrains that Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni create as two of the first authors to chronicle the intricacies of cultural displacement, nostalgia, and hybridity.

Food is a complex literary tool in literature, as reflected in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Arranged Marriage* by Lahiri and Divakaruni, respectively. To begin with, it is a storehouse of recollection, a sensory evocation linking characters to a past that is spatially distant but emotionally nearby. Second, it is a place of gendered cultural labour where women are the traditional cooks and nurturers, and it is their responsibility to ensure continuity in the culture, frequently at a high price. Third, food is a measure of assimilation; its presence, absence, or change indicates how far a character is from, or how close to, the mainstream American culture. Lastly, it is an elaborate form of communication—a language of love, struggle, desire and reconciliation which, in many instances, is more eloquent than a speech. This essay will examine, through a comparative analysis of some of the main stories, how Lahiri and Divakaruni use the immigrant kitchen not only as a setting but also as a main character in the ongoing play of becoming American without ceasing to be Bengali, Indian, or South Asian.

The association of food and memory is virtually primordial, an idea popularly codified in Marcel Proust's madeleine. The

immigrant is not just nostalgic about this; it is a constitutive part of identity. In a new setting, the flavour of a certain dish can instantly bend time and space, providing a moment of revisiting a homeland. Food is this sensorial storehouse that Lahiri and Divakaruni use to great effect. In Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter," the common meals of Shoba and Shukumar, which were a ritual of their happy marriage, are a sore reminder of its breakup; however, the food—the culturally coded food that Shoba cooks—carries the burden of memory. Lahiri writes, "she would leave a mess in the kitchen to him to clean, a mess of onion peels, cilantro stems, tea cloths stained with turmeric, heaps of pots and pans and dishes he would clean slowly, painstakingly, when he had eaten" (9). The Indian leftovers—onion peels, cilantro stalks, the bright yellow hue of turmeric—are not just physical debris but the remnants of a collective cultural existence which is disintegrating. The spices are the imprints of a forgotten domesticity. Later, the confessions over the meals, prepared by Shoba in advance, are clearly Indian. The food turns out to be the silent, consistent spectator of their unburdening, its familiar taste sharply contrasting with the new truths being brought to light. It becomes the last thread of connection between them as a couple of Bengalis, only to be shattered into ruins by the ultimate revelation.

The Proustian power of food is also present in Divakaruni's stories. In "The Word Love," the main character, Rexnie, a young woman finding her way in life and love in America, is continually reminded of her kitchen in India and her mother. The food of her childhood is synonymous with safety, love, and identity. In an attempt to cook with her American boyfriend, she becomes overwhelmed with the memory of her mother, who was so precise and loving in her culinary practice: "she would grind the spices herself, a bit at a time, roasting cumin and coriander seeds in the heavy iron skillet, until the air was foggy and fragrant with their smoke" (Divakaruni 45). The spice-grinding reminds her of mother; a cultural reminder that strengthens her

in a culturally lost relationship. The fragrance of roasting spices is the scent of home, a scent of defence against her alienation. To these characters, cooking and eating are not only about sustenance but also a means of memory, a way to summon and hold on to a self which the new world is otherwise depriving them of.

The burden of cultural continuity in the traditional patriarchal order that frequently characterises the immigrant families portrayed by Lahiri and Divakaruni disproportionately lies on women. The kitchen is their space; the work of their labour makes them the unwitting archivists, translators, and upkeepers of culture. This position is a tense one since it simultaneously gives them power and puts them in a box.

This figure is possibly the most tragic in Lahiri's "Mrs Sen's." In her case, her attachment to her lost life in Calcutta is mainly through the ritual of cooking. Her personality is closely tied to her cooking. The main part of the story is that she skilfully uses a blade to catch fish and to prepare them, which fascinates the young American boy, Eliot, whom she babysits. When it is time to get married in the family, she says to him, "or it is a big party of any sort, my mother sends the word out in the evening, and all the neighbourhood women come out with blades like this one, and they sit in the courtyard . . . and they chop and chop" (Lahiri 115). The blade is not merely a device, but a representation of community, shared female labour, and a cultural background in which her skills are prized and shared. Chopping in her lonely American apartment is a desperate, lonely act of a performer without an audience. Mrs Sen's inability to drive to the fish market symbolises her broader difficulty in adapting to American life, underscoring her cultural isolation and sense of displacement. She is an archivist of a culture without a museum; her great archival virtuosity is made superfluous in a world of frozen fillets and fast foods. The subsequent minor car crash, which was a result of her trying to

drive to get a fish, epitomises the devastating clash between her culturally instilled role in life and the requirements of her new world.

Divakaruni often delves into the dark side of this gendered culinary labour. In “The Ultrasound,” a pregnant mother is also pressured by her mother-in-law to eat the traditional foods that are supposed to bring her a male child. The cuisine here transforms into a tool of patriarchal domination, a policing of the female body and degrading a woman into a container of male inheritance. Eating is not a joyous or memorable event, but rather a form of subjugation and worry. Similarly, food is used indirectly to resist or retaliate against the unfair domestic conditions faced by women in stories such as “The Bats” and “Clothes.” The kitchen is, as such, not a mere refuge but a place where power is exercised over food. The woman, as an archivist, is also a prisoner, charged with preserving traditions that could be sources of oppression.

Metrics of Assimilation: Culinary Negotiations and Generational Differences

The kitchen in the tapestry of the immigrant experience is much more than a utilitarian kitchen that is used to make food. Moreover, it is a refuge and a battlefield, a school and a museum of itself. Negotiations of being, belonging, and cultural fidelity are the most personal and powerful negotiations being put into practice within the realm of its premises and ingredients; recipes are the primary vocabulary. The traditional food can be both the anchor to the past, the concrete, physical and sensuous rope to a homeland that may be made of only a shadow that is activated by memory. American food can perhaps sometimes represent the grabbing impulse of the future, a future of convenience, assimilation, and, in some instances, cultural dilution. This embracing of or opposition to American eating patterns is then found to be a very important gauge of assimilation and maps the

expected, and in most cases painful, rifts between generations, which have rifted immigrant families. This culinary cultural clash is perfected in the fine, allusive fiction of contemporary authors like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who go beyond symbolism, placing food at the heart of love, confrontation, and intercultural relations. With a close examination of their work, particularly *Interpreter of Maladies*, *Arranged Marriage* and *The Mistress of Spices*, we track how the kitchen is becoming the central site for the performance of politics of identity that is being performed, argued, and renegotiated day by day.

Consequently, Western food practices adopted or rejected by an immigrant family are a significant indicator of assimilation. This food collision is usually employed to trace the traumatic intergenerational divisions within the diaspora household. Modern writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have brilliantly dealt with this conflict between these two gustatory cultures. Food in their fiction does not just symbolise; rather, it represents the material expression of love, conflict, and cross-cultural interaction. A close analysis of their works, particularly Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* and *The Mistress of Spices*, reveals that the kitchen is the primary scene of daily enactment, debate, and negotiation of identity politics.

Refrigerator as a Sign of Generational Divide

The contents of a refrigerator function as a revealing indicator of an individual's lifestyle, cultural affiliations, and everyday values. The given household object is frequently employed as an effective metaphor to demonstrate the cultural and psychological divide between generations in immigrant literature. It is not merely a question of taste but two radically different conceptions of food, community, and the self.

Divakaruni is eloquently vivid in her short story collection *Arranged Marriage*; it is in her story “The Names of Stars in Bengali,” from this collection, that she writes of this collision. The main character is an elderly Indian mother who visits her daughter, who is completely assimilated into American life. The old mother is out of place as she is introduced to the alien world of her daughter’s kitchen. She refers to it as a new land with new white food: a plastic bag of already-washed salad, a tub of yoghurt, a block of tofu, a chicken breast in a transparent bag, etc. (Divakaruni 132). This is a deliberately sterile and sensory-deprived description. The food is washed, packaged, and covered with plastic, portraying a culture of convenience, isolation, and preservation, which is the complete opposite of the culinary culture of the mother. The words are instructive, not descriptive; they are of efficiency, not of passion, the adjectives without any mention of vivid colour, intoxicating fragrance, or a variety of textures. This is gastronomy as energy, deprived of the culture and community values.

This is a stark contrast to the inner, memory-saddened world of cooking that the mother inhabits, which has a sense of richness and labour-intensive preparation and is filled with communal purpose. Her cooking is both a ritual of love and identity, her daily practice of connecting with her ancestors and her country. The individual, packaged chicken breast is the “antithesis of her life’s communal, labour-intensive, spice-filled cooking” (Divakaruni 133). The word “communal” is key here. The culinary tradition of the mother is social in nature, designed to be shared with the family and neighbours, and preparation is commonly a shared endeavour. The pre-prepared, isolated objects of the daughter symbolise an individualistic American life from which the mother feels lonely and alienated. The refrigerator, then, is not simply an appliance but an obvious transparent, glass-paned demarcation of two worlds. The whole story of their divergent lives is told in its contents: the one based

on the common recollection and sense-weaving of the past, the other on the future, independent and fast-paced.

The mother tries to fill this gap by preparing a Bengali fish curry, *maacher jhol*. This is not just a meal, but a deep effort to feed her daughter a memory and identity, to familiarise her with the flavour of her past. She is cooking as she recalls how “[her] mother’s saree end would smell of mustard oil and *kaalo jeere* even after the food had been consumed” (Divakaruni 135). The preparation of food is a prayer, an invocation of ghosts and customs into a kitchen devoid of any spirits. She dreams that the old, confusing tastes can become a Proustian *madeleine*, piercing the veneer of her daughter’s American life and reaching the Bengali heart underneath.

However, the daughter’s reaction is polite and aloof: “It is nice, Ma” (Divakaruni 136). This half-hearted approval is worse than rejection. It means that the food and, consequently, the culture it embodies have become a foreign language that her daughter can hardly comprehend, let alone speak. The divide between generations is absolute. The mother is the custodian of a culture which her daughter, by the twin influences of circumstance and decision, has abandoned. The unsuccessful communion with the fish curry underscores an ugly reality: the language of taste is not an innate gift but something that has to be taught and practised regularly, or it will be lost.

Similarly, in Lahiri, the mother cooks for Lilia some of the spiciest Indian food: “lamb curry with dried fenugreek leaves, oval-shaped naan bread with potatoes and spices, *kheer* with cardamom and pistachios” (Lahiri 25). To the adults, Mr Pirzada, a Bangladeshi scholar who lost his family in the 1971 Liberation War, and the parents of Lilia, it is a food that is crucial to them. It strengthens their subcontinental identity and turns into an exercise of solidarity and reassurance in the face of the panic of seeing their homeland being ripped apart in the nightly

news. The food is a first-hand, sensory association with the place and the people they fear.

This is the world Lilia, a young American, lives in. Her cultural collision is not at the dinner table, but in other places, in the greater American scene that she navigates with ease. It is the most important one when she chews a piece of American candy, included in her Halloween inventory, before Mr Pirzada. His answer is one of mere, unexplainable confusion. Halloween ceremony, dressing up, door-to-door trick-or-treating, and the collection of industrially manufactured sweet booty are totally foreign to him. This scene points out that, as an American raised in America, Lilia will find it easier to cross the divide than her parents did. Her palate is already bifocal, and she can relish her mother's compound kheer and the simple, artificial sweetness of a candy bar. This embryonic duality is the beginning of her own journey to a hybrid identity that her parents and Mr Pirzada can experience and perceive, but never actually live in, since they will always be elsewhere and in another time.

Food: A Language of Love and Strife

Along with a powerful symbolism of assimilation, food is primary and one of the efficient ways to communicate where cultural barriers and language block verbal communication. Food preparation and food sharing are the main forms of expression of love, conflict, and the complexity of intercultural and intergenerational relationships.

This symbolism is beautifully developed in Lahiri's "This Blessed House" and in *Interpreter of Maladies*. The novel focuses on a newlywed couple, Twinkle and Sanjeev, as they move into their new American home. They are at loggerheads over the recurrent discovery of gaudy Christian paraphernalia: a porcelain effigy of Jesus and a snow globe filled with the Three Wise Men, left behind by the former owners. Sanjeev, eager to

project an image of sophistication, respectability, and cultural propriety, wishes to remove the Christian artefacts immediately. Twinkle, by contrast, embraces their novelty and insists on displaying them, reflecting her more flexible and playful engagement with American culture.

This is a superficial clash over taste that stems from their opposing ideas about identity in America. This is reflected and enhanced in their relationship with food. Sanjeev has old-fashioned views of a wife, with an emphasis on cooking skills, especially Indian cuisine. Twinkle, on the other hand, is a very enthusiastic, yet extremely incompetent cook. This is the key language she needs to master to enter her anticipated role in culture, and her inability to do so is a constant source of stress and disappointment for Sanjeev. Her failure in the kitchen is a metaphor for her seeming inability to fit into the conventional role of an Indian wife, intensifying his fear of marriage and their status in society.

This culinary and marital conflict is solved, ironically yet brilliantly. Twinkle eventually wins Sanjeev's admiration by preparing the perfect dal, one sourced from a restaurant kitchen rather than her own. This domestic manoeuvre is far more than a simple illusion; it operates as a layered process of cultural translation and diasporic negotiation. Twinkle clearly grasps the performative expectations attached to an "authentic" Indian feast in Sanjeev's eyes. For him—and for many of his generation—food serves as a key marker of cultural continuity and social standing within the immigrant community. However, rather than conforming to the long-standing, labour-intensive expectations imposed on women in the kitchen, she strategically uses this awareness to fulfil a distinctly American ideal: hosting a seamless, impressive, and low-effort social gathering. By arranging a catered meal, she constructs a space of cultural hybridity, blending Sanjeev's traditional values with her own more adaptive modern outlook.

Food serves as a sort of diplomatic gesture in this situation. Even in the absence of her direct work, it becomes a delicate display of concern presented through a well-planned illusion. In addition to maintaining Twinkle's independence and enabling her to reject being restricted to household duties, this gesture allays Sanjeev's underlying concerns of cultural authenticity. In the end, the dinner masks their larger ideological differences by acting as an artificial point of togetherness. It is a friendship built on the practicality and ease of catering rather than on the collaborative effort of cooking. This calculated use of food reflects the complex and sometimes contradictory strategies required to navigate the fragmented realities of second-generation identity.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni extends this concept into the realm of magical realism, where food and spices take on literal transformative power. Tilo, the enigmatic spice mistress, runs a small shop in Oakland, California, but her role goes far beyond that of a shopkeeper. She serves as a healer and guide to members of the Indian diaspora, offering spices as remedies. Turmeric serves as a safeguard for families, fenugreek fosters unity, and red chilli wards off harm. To a homesick bride, she offers cinnamon for comfort; to someone disconnected from their roots, she provides the grounding scent of asafoetida. These customs turn spices into tools for cultural and emotional healing.

Although the novel is set in a fantastical world, it is an extrapolation of a deeper truth in Lahiri's more realistic books and in Divakaruni's earlier work: food is a powerful medicine for the soul. It is a language which can express wishes and solutions that words fail to express. In a narrative such as the story "Meeting Mr Kumar" from *Arranged Marriage*, a young woman employs her exceptional cooking skills to feed, entice, and connect with a man through the language of passion and

competence in the food she prepares. The food is a part of her, a gift of her talent and cultural background.

On the other hand, rejecting this language can be a strong form of aggression or disapproval. Making a meal that is unadventurous, a sacrifice by burning, or the regular consumption of uninteresting, fast food can be a shout of resentment in a family that goes unnoticed. A well-cooked meal is an offering to the heart, a feast, a grand event; a dinner that is skipped is a cold war in this complex culinary vocabulary. Sharing meals or not sharing meals turns out to be the best indicator of a relationship's health.

Furthering the Palate: More Literary Viewpoints

Although the theme of food as a measure of assimilation seems to have a groundbreaking structure in Lahiri and Divakaruni, it is diverse and abundant across the range of Asian American and immigrant literature. The other voices involved in this dialogue must be taken into account to appreciate it fully.

Korean American musician Michelle Zauner is a raw and powerful witness to this theme in her memoir *Crying in H Mart*. To Zauner, Korean food is an unbreakable connection between her mother and her identity. She starts the memoir by saying, "Since my mom passed away, I weep in H Mart." A Korean grocery store is a haven of flavour and recollection. The obsessive, demanding nature of the relationship her mother had with food, her hunt for the right ingredients, and her careful cooking of dishes such as kalbi and kimchi were her primary ways of expressing love. The purpose of learning these recipes by Zauner after her mother dies is a pathetic effort to maintain that contact and keep her mother's voice alive in her hands and her taste buds. It is a fight to learn recipes so she can reclaim the identity she feels is being lost through assimilation and loss. It is

a heartrending detail that, to the second generation, cooking can be an archaeological reclamation.

Likewise, in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*, food serves as a continual source of misunderstanding and attempted bonding between the Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. The mothers demonstrate love by forcefully offering food because they believe the daughters are not suffering from emotional malnutrition but from physical malnutrition. When a daughter rejects a traditional dish, it is not seen as a matter of taste but as a rejection of the mother. The well-known crab-dinner scene, in which the mothers scold the daughters for their preference for low-quality crabs, is a conflict of worldviews: the mothers' practical knowledge, gained through hard work, is opposed to the daughters' privilege, whose attitude to life can be characterised as naive. Their frustration and the inability to communicate due to the huge cultural and experiential gap transform into food on the table.

Theoretical Framework: Culinary Postcolonialism

The autobiographical struggles of Lahiri and Divakaruni are explicable within the context of the postcolonial theory, especially the ideas of hybridity and mimicry expressed by Homi K. Bhabha. The immigrant kitchen is a third space, a place of cultural negotiation, where the dominant and subordinate cultures of American and immigrant cultures collide and intersect. Such an interaction is not a one-way process of assimilation but rather a complex, sometimes contradictory, process that results in new hybrid identities.

In "This Blessed House," Sanjeev engages in "mimicry." He wants to imitate the ideal of a successful, assimilated American professional, but his wish is "not white but almost white" (Bhabha 86). By denying the Christian kitsch, he denies what he sees as a crass, low-end American culture that may jeopardise

what he wants to project: that of a refined assimilation. He desires to imitate a certain socioeconomic ideal of an American. Twinkle, on the other hand, is a hybrid. She is not afraid to blend cultural signs, exhibiting Christian figurines in a house of Indian Americans, serving Indian food at an American party prepared by a restaurant. Her identity is not an unsuccessful imitation of either culture but a new, aggressive thing, the product of their mixture. Her answer is a culinary take on what Bhabha outlines as the subversion of authority through repetition with difference.

The mother in “The Names of Stars in Bengali” is in a pre-hybridity phase, in which the original culture is the dominant, unchallenged frame of reference. Her daughter symbolises assimilation, in which the original culture has been dominated to a large degree. The conflict between them is on the original, the copy, the source, and its translation. The abortive fish curry mission is a symptom of the challenge and even the inability to convey profound cultural memory to an audience that is no longer equipped with the vocabulary to take it in.

The Global Pantry: Extending the South Asian Experience

Although this discussion has centred on South Asian American literature, the culinary generational gap is a near-universal aspect of immigrant literature. The theme of the potato, the traditional bread of poverty and famine, being rejected by the assimilated generation, is a common theme in Irish American memoirs. The embarrassment of the second generation toward smelly lunches of salami and provolone in school cafeterias, where one can only find a schizophrenic peanut butter and jelly sandwich, is a cliché of Italian American stories. The Jewish American authors frequently struggle with leaving behind the kosher kitchens for more secular diets, which becomes an indication of the breakdown of religious restrictions and community practice.

This universality highlights the fact that food is the most tangible and direct relation to culture. It is consumed and thus literally becomes part of the self. Hence, one of the most radical and intimate forms of assimilation is dietary modification. The battle it wages is not merely a battle of palate; it is a battle of the elements of the soul and of the body, of what we will admit to enter the body and what we will not admit to enter the body. The basic scenes upon which the drama of immigration and assimilation is persistently enacted are the kitchen, the refrigerator and the dining table. Through the careful, sensuous writing of authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one is made to realise that food is the surest gauge of distance from the homeland and the extent of the generational gap. It is a more artless and sincere language than the tongue frequently permits, and can represent the utmost affection, the most antagonistic, the most complicated bargains of a hyphenated identity.

The evolution of the first-generation labour-intensive, spice-filled curries to the pre-packaged, convenient, white food of the second-generation is a journey of tremendous change, rife with loss and gain. It is a tale of anchors raised and new horizons celebrated, not with great historical declamation, but with the silent, unheralded decisions of what to cook, what to eat and with whom to share it. Just as these stories reveal, to know the heart of the immigrant, one has to first know how to read the menu.

Neutral spaces in the immigrant kitchens of fiction by Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni do not exist. They are haunted by memories of the past, burdened with the baggage of cultural expectations, and strained by an existence suspended between two worlds. These authors show that identity is not a given but a process sliced, salted, roasted, and savoured day to day through their subtle descriptions of food and culinary practice.

Food is the most convenient and deepest storehouse of an exiled culture, a sense of rope to a homeland which is remembered more idealistically than ever before. However, this archive is operated mainly by women who are both empowered and responsible as custodians of culture. The change in generations toward American cuisine, or the clumsy incorporation of cultural cooking, traces the course of assimilation and the sour-sweet truth of the cultural shift. Furthermore, food is not material in human relations only; it is a very important language that reveals love, discord, and lust where words are helpless. In the end, it is implied that as the first generation attempts to recreate that same perfect, unchanging flavour of home, the second generation and, in fact, the future of the diaspora, is in developing something new, something hybrid, a hybrid cuisine. It is a food that may be a combination of nan bread and ready-made salad, or the use of traditional spices in different combinations. It is not a dilution of culture; it is its evolution, the testament of the power and versatility of identity itself. Set on a table with memory and innovation, the real tale of immigrant experience is served, meal after meal.

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