

The Socio-Cultural Meanings of Ethnic Cuisine: Culinary Representations in Indian English Literature

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Abstract

Food is constantly part of a socio-cultural identity and it paves way to understand the complexities of identity which are visible and invisible. Food is an identity marker of social group identification based on caste, tribe, lineage, family, ethnicity, religion, class and kinship.

To analyze the manner in which one eats and with whom, what, when and why is vital in comprehending the socio-cultural landscape. This expands to the interplay of relationships, the gamut of emotions, the status hierarchies, and the myriad of social transactions that take place within this context. The culinary act, therefore, transcends sheer sustenance, becoming a rich text through which the intricacies of postcolonial identity and social structure can be interpreted.

Food Studies surfaced from the interdisciplinary nexus of social sciences—mainly anthropology, sociology, and history—and cultural studies, expanding to include the arts and humanities. This academic field now includes the examination of food ways, literature, gastronomy, and culinary history. Food Studies scrutinizes the numerous dimensions of food-related phenomena: the means of production and consumption, the social roles and purposes of eating, surrounding habits, rituals, and the selection of dining companions. Such analyses aim to elucidate the intricate connections between human society and cultural identity. This article analyses the treatment of food in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

Keywords: Culinary Representations, Ethnic Cuisine, Food Studies and Indian cookery traditions

Introduction

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Roland Barthes, while discussing about the semiotics of food and culture, in *Mythologies* (1957), wrote of food: “It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (167). Food Studies surfaced from the interdisciplinary nexus of social sciences—mainly anthropology, sociology, and history—and cultural studies, expanding to include the arts and humanities. This academic field now includes the examination of food ways, literature, gastronomy, and culinary history. Food Studies scrutinizes the numerous dimensions of food-related phenomena: the means of production and consumption, the social roles and purposes of eating, surrounding habits, rituals, and the selection of dining companions. Such analyses aim to elucidate the intricate connections between human society and cultural identity.

In the effervescent and diverse landscape of Indian English literature, ethnic cuisine emerges as a profound semiotic system, a repository of cultural memory, and a vehicle for identity negotiation. The intricacies of Indian cookery traditions, with their regional specificities and historical resonances, offer fertile ground for literary exploration. Through the prism of food, Indian English writers navigate the complexities of postcolonial identity, diaspora experiences, and the interplay between tradition and modernity. This paper delves into the socio-cultural meanings of ethnic cuisine as depicted in Indian English literature, illuminating how culinary

representations summarize the numerous dimensions of the Indian ethos. This article analyses the treatment of food in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

Culinary Representation and Cultural Memory

Ethnic cuisine in Indian English literature frequently functions as a symbolic repository of cultural memory, invoking the sensory experiences of taste and smell to remind the past. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* illustrates this interplay between food and memory. The protagonist Saleem Sinai's narrative is satiated with references to food that serve as mnemonic devices, evoking historical events and personal memories. The chutney, a recurring motif in the novel, symbolizes the amalgamation of diverse cultural influences that define the Indian subcontinent. The act of preserving chutney becomes an act of safeguarding history, encapsulating the layered complexity of India's colonial and postcolonial identity.

Navigating Identity through Food

In Indian English literature, ethnic cuisine too is turned into a space for identity politics, drawing on the theme of diaspora. Hybridity in cuisine is similar to hybridity of diasporic identities more generally, as people attempt and at times sacrifice their cultural identity after arriving abroad. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses the act of moderation through spices as a way for Tilo to remain a mediator while still embracing her different cultural identities in *The Mistress of Spices*. Every spice in the novel is layered with allusions, allegories of Indian heritage and the characters that make a personal visit to their roots. The blending of culinary genres in diaspora literature often parallels the characters struggle to synchronize their bifurcated selves. The migration story at the heart of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* features a heroine whose habits in the kitchen are shaped by diverse cultural environments. Jasmine Adding flavor of different cuisines in her cooking represents the flexibility and changeability that she has undergone as a person. It is a technique of visualizing in taste from the blending of cultural identities - encapsulating affect with flavor, much like diasporic identity itself.

Cuisine as a Site of Power and Resistance

Apart from its symbolic and identity functions, ethnic cuisine in Indian English literature is frequently depicted as a site of power and resistance. The politics of food; who cooks, eats, and what is eaten often reflects broader socio-political dynamics and power relations. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the prohibition against the consumption of certain foods underscores the firm caste hierarchies and social taboos in Kerala's society. The forbidden love affair between Ammu and Velutha, a lower-caste man, is marked by the challenging act of sharing food, violating the deep-rooted caste boundaries and social norms.

The subversive prospective of food is further investigated in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, where the struggle for endurance is intricately attached to the politics of food production and consumption. The novel depicts the harsh realities of rural India, where the control over agricultural resources and food supplies becomes a battleground for power and resistance. The characters' fight for sustenance against the milieu of famine and economic exploitation highlights the profound socio-political implications of food in the Indian context.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

Amitav Ghosh presents food as a symbol of cultural convergence and historical transformation in *The Glass Palace*. Set against the milieu of the British colonial era in Burma and India, the novel illustrates how food reflects the changing socio-political landscape. The protagonist, Rajkumar, a young Indian orphan in Burma, rises to prosperity and power, and his journey is often marked by significant cuisine-related scenes. The novel intricately depicts the colonial imposition on local cuisines.

British colonizers introduce their culinary preferences, which often clash with indigenous traditions. For instance, the grand feasts in the royal palace of Mandalay are laden with both Burmese and British dishes, signifying the cultural intermingling and the imposition of colonial tastes on local traditions. This juxtaposition highlights the cultural erosion and adaptation resulting from colonial rule. Furthermore, in *The Glass Palace*, food serves as a marker of social mobility and economic status. Rajkumar's ascent from a street vendor selling sweets to a wealthy teak merchant is reflected in the increasingly urbane and diverse food he consumes and offers. The luxurious banquets he hosts symbolize his triumph and assimilation into the superior echelons of society. However, this prosperity is also tinged with nostalgia for simpler times and traditional foods, indicating a loss of cultural purity and personal innocence.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* uses food as an effervescent metaphor for the chaotic and versatile nature of post-colonial India. The novel's central character, Saleem Sinai, born at the instant of India's independence, embodies the nation's turbulent history. Food in this narrative is not just sustenance but a means of exploring identity, memory, and politics. Rushdie's illustration of food is enthusiastic and often fantastical, aligning with his magic realist style. The famous scene of Saleem's mother preparing chutney, with its potent aromas and flavors, serves as a metaphor for the preservation of history and memory. Each ingredient symbolizes a fragment of the past, meticulously preserved to preserve the essence of bygone eras.

Chutney turns out to be a culinary chronicle of Saleem's life — and, by default; India's history unfolds in chutney: the collection of human culture and humanity. More than that, food in *Midnight's Children* frequently symbolizes collective accord and discord. The culinary thalis, all brimming with unique flavors from their home region are celebrations of the country's diversity. On the other hand, when food is in scarcity due to political instability and economic crises, this likewise reflects the nation-state issues at large as well as government influence on our everyday lives. These characters reexamine food in their lives as they reconsider where and how they fit into an ever-evolving India post-independence. Splendidly and eloquently expressed, *Midnight's Children* displays Salman Rushdie's insightful mastery in utilizing food as a metaphorical device throughout this powerful and remarkable novel.

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* contrasts the culinary cultures of India and the USA to survey themes of gender, family and cultural identity. The novel is divided into two parts, each focusing on different members of the same family and their experiences with food in diverse cultural background.

In the Indian section, food is a medium through which gender roles and family dynamics are imposed. The protagonist, Uma, resides in a conventional household where women are confined to domestic roles, and their prime duty is to prepare and serve food. The act of cooking becomes a symbol of female suppression and lack of autonomy. Uma's monotonous and

mundane culinary tasks accentuate her constrained existence and the restricted opportunities available to her.

In contrast, the American section, which follows Uma's brother Arun, presents cuisine as a symbol of alienation and cultural dissension. Arun, living with the Patton family, is confronted with the glut and consumerism of American food culture, which harshly contrasts with his frugal upbringing. The Patton family's fascination with dieting and body image further alienates Arun, stressing the superficiality and emptiness of their prosperous lifestyle. Desai uses food to accentuate the cultural clash and the protagonist's sense of displacement in a foreign land.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winning *The God of Small Things* intricately intertwines food as a dominant symbol of social stratification, reflecting the complex hierarchies and cultural tensions in Kerala, India. The novel uses food to demarcate class and caste distinctions, with the characters' interactions with food mirroring their social positions. For example, the affluent and fortunate members of the Ipe family enjoy sumptuous meals, representing their upper-caste status and wealth. In contrast, the lower-caste characters, like Velutha, are linked with simpler, often meager fare, highlighting their marginalized and subjugated status. The preparation and consumption of food also serve as a battlefield for asserting supremacy and control. Ammu's forbidden love affair with Velutha is symbolically challenging not only because of their caste disparity but also because it defies the stiff social order that dictates who can eat with whom.

Moreover, food is used to enforce social boundaries, as seen in the unbending dining protocols and the use of separate utensils for lower-caste people. Through these vivid representations, Roy exposes the deeply embedded prejudices and the ways in which food reinforces societal divisions, making it a poignant symbol of the pervasive disparity in the narrative.

The novel's complex narrative, which shifts between the past and present, uses food imagery to suggest the socio-economic inequality and the personal tragedies of its characters. The Aymanam house, where much of the story unfurls, is a site of culinary differences. The lavish meals served at the family's gatherings contrast stridently with the simple, meager fare of the lower-caste characters, highlighting the entrenched social hierarchies. The difference

between the sumptuous dining of the wealthy and the humble meals of the marginalized reflects the wider inequalities within the society.

Roy uses food to symbolize forbidden desires and transgressions. The secret love affair between Ammu and Velutha, a lower-caste man, is marked by covert exchanges of food, which serve as acts of rebellion against the rigid caste system. The forbidden fruit motif reappears throughout the novel, indicating the illegitimate and perilous nature of their relationship. These culinary symbols give emphasis to the novel's critique of social norms and the shocking consequences of challenging them. Moreover, the enduring colonial legacy is apparent in the characters' culinary preferences and lifestyle. The influence of British colonialism is evident in the hybridization of local and foreign cuisines, with conventional Kerala dishes often contrasted with colonial-era delicacies. This fusion of culinary practices reflects the cultural hybridity and the continuing impact of colonialism on the region's social structure. In the novel, Roy uses flamboyant culinary imagery to delicately demarcate the characters, advance the narrative, and investigate themes of personal and cultural identity.

Conclusion

The depiction of ethnic cuisine in Indian English literature serves as a versatile lens through which the socio-cultural dynamics of Indian society can be examined. From the evocation of cultural memory to the negotiation of identity, from the politics of food to the tensions of globalization, culinary representations offer profound insights into the Indian ethos. As a semiotic system, cuisine summarizes the complexities of cultural heritage, power relations, and identity formations, representing it as a potent symbol in the literary imagination. Through the intricate portrayal of ethnic cuisine, Indian English literature not only celebrates the richness of India's culinary traditions but also interrogates the broader socio-cultural processes that shape the Indian experience.

In investigating the treatment of food in *The Glass Palace*, *Midnight's Children*, *Fasting, Feasting*, and *The God of Small Things*, it becomes clear that food is an intense and adaptable narrative device. Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, and Arundhati Roy each use culinary imageries to explore themes of colonialism, cultural identity, social hierarchy, gender roles, and personal memory. Through their nuanced illustration of food, these authors enhance their narratives and offer readers an intense understanding of the complex socio-cultural

landscapes of their stories. Cuisine, in these novels, is not merely a backdrop but a central component that reflects and shapes the lives of the characters and the societies they inhabit.

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