

## EXPLORING FOOD AS CULTURAL IDENTITY IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF SELECT NOVELS.

**Abdul Rasheed P**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, EMEA College of Arts and Science, Kondotty  
673638

### Introduction

Food as a cultural marker in literature provides a unique lens for examining complex themes of identity, heritage, and resistance, particularly within postcolonial contexts. In postcolonial literature, food frequently emerges more than a mere sustenance or tradition; it becomes a powerful metaphor for cultural expression, adaptation, and resilience. As Appadurai (1988) notes in his influential work on food and identity, cuisine can serve as an archive of social memory, preserving cultural resilience and community bonds. This sentiment resonates strongly in postcolonial literary studies, where food often acts as a conduit of both personal and communal identity. In the wake of colonial disruption, food takes on deeper, nuanced meanings, symbolising the enduring struggle to reclaim and redefine one's heritage in a world shaped by colonial histories and contemporary global influences.

Indian English fiction, especially in works published over the last two decades, frequently uses food as a multifaceted symbol that explores the intricate dynamics of postcolonial identity. Here, food is not simply incidental but functions as a repository of cultural knowledge, a marker of social boundaries, and a medium through which characters navigate the complexities of a globalised yet fragmented world. Brah (1996), a leading scholar on cultural identity, argues that food can act as a bridge between past and present, tradition and modernity, providing insight into the experiences of individuals negotiating identity amidst displacement and hybridity. By employing traditional cuisine and symbolically incorporating foreign foods, Indian English writers capture the complex negotiations of cultural identity within a diasporic and transnational landscape.

This study explores how food operates as both a cultural identifier and an instrument of personal and collective identity within four key Indian English novels: *The Hungry Tide* by Ghosh (2004), *The Immigrant* by Kapur (2008), *The White Tiger* by Adiga (2008), and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Desai (2006). Each of these novels offers a unique perspective on how food reflects, challenges, and even reconstructs cultural heritage. In *The Hungry Tide*, for instance, food is closely tied to the lives and identities of the Sundarbans' indigenous people, symbolising their connection to place and survival amid environmental and social challenges. In *The Immigrant*, food becomes a medium through which the protagonist negotiates her sense of self, torn between her Indian heritage and the pressures of assimilation in Canada. *The White Tiger* uses food to highlight class disparities, critiquing the social hierarchy in postcolonial India; here, food reflects the protagonist's transformation and social ambition. Finally, *The Inheritance of Loss* uses food as a symbol of dislocation and cultural nostalgia, emphasising the ambivalence felt by characters straddling two worlds—one shaped by colonial memories and the other by forces of modernity.

Through a postcolonial lens, this study seeks to understand how food functions as a cultural anchor for individuals entangled in the web of displacement, hybridity, and economic disparity. Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity offers a useful framework for interpreting food as both a form of resistance and adaptation, embodying the tensions between cultural continuity and change. The depictions of food in these novels reflect the broader postcolonial experience, where the reclamation and transformation of culture often occur in intimate, daily rituals like cooking and eating. This analysis situates food within the larger discourse of globalisation, considering how these literary works depict the balance between retaining cultural heritage and adapting to an increasingly interconnected world, where culinary practices are shaped by flows of migration and economic inequality, raising questions about cultural survival and identity in an interconnected yet deeply unequal world.

### Review of Literature

Food has become an essential focus in postcolonial literature, often serving as a potent symbol that transcends sustenance to embody themes of cultural identity, resistance, and autonomy. In postcolonial studies, scholars have highlighted how food functions as more than mere nourishment; it is a marker of cultural memory and resilience, revealing the complex realities characters face in navigating a world shaped by colonial histories and the forces of globalisation. Through this lens, food offers insight into the personal and collective identities of those grappling with displacement, nostalgia, and the quest for belonging.

Globally, postcolonial literature often uses food as a nuanced representation of cultural identity and hybridity. Appadurai (1988), a prominent voice in the field, discusses how food acts as a form of social memory, preserving the collective cultural experiences that connect individuals to their heritage. His work underscores the importance of traditional culinary practices in maintaining cultural identity, especially for those in diaspora. Heldke (2003) also explores the symbolism of food in postcolonial narratives, where it becomes a marker of identity and a site of negotiation between cultures. Heldke's concept of "cultural food colonialism" examines how food in literature reveals layers of adaptation, resistance, and survival in the context of oppressive colonial histories.

This theme appears across world English texts. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), food operates as a vehicle for social critique, highlighting entrenched hierarchies and family dynamics within Indian society. Through traditional dishes and culinary practices, Roy reflects on caste oppression and social divides, using food to symbolise both community bonds and social tensions.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) offers a different perspective, using food imagery to evoke survival, ancestry, and memory. In *Beloved*, food symbolises the African American experience of trauma, resilience, and cultural heritage passed down through generations. Morrison's portrayal of food transcends sustenance, transforming meals into symbols of shared history and resistance against the erasure of identity. Similarly, authors like Salman Rushdie and Chinua Achebe use food to assert native identity in the face of colonial power structures. In *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie, 1981), food mirrors the socio-political landscape of postcolonial India, while in *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 1958), food rituals underscore the complexities of pre-colonial Igbo society, where identity is rooted in traditional practices.

Within Indian English fiction, food as a cultural symbol carries unique meanings, often reflecting themes of diaspora, displacement, and the duality of identity in a globalised world. Scholars have observed that food embodies both nostalgia and the tension between tradition and adaptation, a theme particularly prominent in diasporic literature. However, research examining novels published in the current century that foreground food as a marker of cultural identity—especially in light of globalisation and class dynamics remains limited.

Mukherjee (2010), in her work on diasporic identity in Indian literature, notes that food often serves as a medium for characters to negotiate their sense of self in foreign settings. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), for instance, food functions as a link to cultural memory, helping characters remain connected to their homeland amidst the pressures of assimilation. Mukherjee highlights food's bittersweet role, evoking comfort and alienation, and capturing the complexities of a dual identity that is both rooted in and distanced from cultural heritage.

Shahani (2012) expands on this theme in her analysis of culinary representations in diasporic literature, arguing that food becomes a narrative tool through which authors explore how cultural identity is retained and reshaped by migration. While these studies address food's role in Indian English fiction generally, there is a distinct gap in scholarly attention to 21<sup>st</sup> century works that frame food as a symbol of identity in the face of socio-political and economic shifts in postcolonial India.

This research aims to focus on four notable post-2000 Indian English novels: Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* (2008), Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Each of these novels uniquely illustrates the cultural meanings ascribed to food within contemporary Indian society, examining its role not only as a cultural marker but as a point of negotiation in contexts shaped by globalisation, economic disparity, and lingering colonial legacies.

### Research Methodology

This study uses a postcolonial theoretical framework to explore key concepts of cultural hybridity, resistance, and identity, as outlined by Homi Bhabha and Edward Said. Both theorists provide essential tools for analysing how cultural markers, such as food, shape and reflect identities in postcolonial contexts. Food, in this framework, is not merely sustenance; it symbolises heritage, memory, and power dynamics. By examining how food signifies identity, adaptation, and resistance in postcolonial Indian fiction, this study investigates how authors use culinary elements to engage with the legacies of colonialism and globalisation.

Said's (1978) concept of cultural representation in Orientalism underpins the understanding of food as a symbol of identity assertion and resistance in literature. Said's ideas on how culture frames perceptions of self and other provide insights into how food acts as a means of resisting dominant narratives, allowing characters and communities to assert their autonomy. Meanwhile, Bhabha's (1994) idea of cultural hybridity, introduced in *The Location of Culture*, offers a perspective on how food in postcolonial narratives often embodies the blending of traditional and foreign influences. This "third space" of hybridity, where different cultural practices mix and reinterpret one another, highlights how food symbolises both cultural continuity and adaptation in postcolonial Indian fiction.

Avtar Brah's (1996) study on diaspora and cultural memory further explores food's role in cultural identity. Brah argues that for individuals in diasporic or hybrid contexts, food acts as an anchor for identity and connection to "home." This perspective is particularly relevant to Indian English novels, where food often recalls cultural belonging and the preservation of identity amidst the dislocating forces of migration and modernity.

### Methodological Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology centred on close textual analysis, focusing on the ways in which food operates as a marker of cultural identity in four Indian English novels: *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, *The Immigrant* by Manju Kapur, *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai. This qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the language, imagery, and symbolism related to food, providing insights into the emotional and cultural significance of culinary references.

The study delimits the study the following aspects across the selected novels:

1. Food as a Symbol of Cultural Heritage: The novel uses food to highlight characters' ties to their cultural roots, showing how traditional dishes carry the weight of heritage and memory. For example, *In The Hungry Tide*, regional foods reflect how characters anchor themselves within their physical and cultural landscapes.
2. Food and Class Dynamics: In *The White Tiger*, food becomes a symbol of economic disparity and social mobility, reflecting how access to different foods marks social status. This usage shows how food subtly yet powerfully represents class and identity in postcolonial Indian society.
3. Culinary Hybridity and Cultural Negotiation: These novels also depict food as a reflection of cultural hybridity, with characters often caught between cultural worlds. In *The Immigrant*, for instance, the protagonist's shifting relationship with food mirrors her identity negotiation within a diasporic setting, blending traditional and foreign influences.
4. Food as Resistance and Reclamation: Drawing on Bhabha's idea of hybridity as a form of resistance, the study examines how characters reclaim their identities through food, using culinary traditions to resist cultural homogenisation. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, food serves as a medium for asserting cultural roots in the face of external pressures.

Through postcolonial reading, this article tries to examine food as a cultural marker in postcolonial Indian fiction. By situating food within Said and Bhabha's postcolonial theories, as well as Brah's ideas on diasporic memory, this study highlights food's role as a culturally and emotionally charged symbol in literature. Through close analysis of four contemporary Indian novels, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how food reflects and shapes cultural identity, adaptation, and resistance in a postcolonial and globalised world.

### Food as Cultural Identity: An Analysis of Select Novels.

#### *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh

In *The Hungry Tide*, food becomes far more than mere sustenance; it symbolises survival, identity, and cultural continuity for the Sundarbans' marginalised communities, whose lives are

closely entwined with their environment. Ghosh captures the essence of this bond through vivid descriptions of fishing, foraging, and cooking. Fokir, for instance, has an almost instinctive knowledge of the waterways, shown by his ability to “read the tides as if they were written on the palm of his hand” (Ghosh, 2004, p. 87). His skill in sourcing food reflects a profound connection to his heritage, one that has sustained his people over generations and is as vital to his spirit as it is to his body.

Piya, an outsider and researcher, is struck by Fokir’s expertise, especially when he effortlessly catches crabs and fish to feed his family. Watching him, she observes that he “moved through the water like he was part of it” (p. 104), a powerful testament to his unity with the natural world and the traditional methods of survival his community has honed over centuries. These scenes highlight the resilience and independence of the Sundarbans’ people, who rely on their environment in a way that transcends the conveniences of modern life.

Ghosh also shows how food practices carry a deep cultural meaning. When Fokir and Piya prepare freshly caught fish over an open flame, the act becomes more than a meal; it is a ritual that connects them, bridging the gap between Piya’s foreignness and Fokir’s indigenous roots. Ghosh describes the “simple, unadorned meal” they share, emphasising the primal satisfaction and unspoken connection food can bring, rooting individuals in both their heritage and the natural world around them (p. 132).

As Maxey (2010) notes, these food practices embody a form of cultural resilience, preserving traditional ways of life despite the pressures of modern encroachment. Through these rituals, Ghosh’s characters find a way to both survive and uphold a unique identity that is deeply connected to the land. In *\*The Hungry Tide\**, food becomes a part of life that defies erasure, representing a heritage as inseparable from the landscape as the cycles of nature itself.

### ***The Immigrant* by Manju Kapur**

In *The Immigrant*, food is a tangible marker of Nina’s cultural struggle as she transitions from India to Canada. Initially, she clings to familiar Indian dishes, finding comfort in “the smell of cumin and coriander, in the bite of green chillies” (Kapur, 2008, p. 78). These spices evoke memories of home, helping Nina maintain her sense of self in an alien setting.

However, as Nina adapts to Canadian life, she begins incorporating Western foods into her diet, symbolising her shifting identity. She notes that eating salads and sandwiches made her feel “part of a new world,” yet it also brought an uncomfortable disconnection from her roots (p. 172). Mukherjee (2012) suggests that food in Kapur’s novel captures the complexities of cultural adaptation, with traditional foods serving as a reminder of “home” while also signalling the gradual changes Nina experiences in Canada. Through these shifts in diet, Kapur subtly conveys Nina’s negotiation between assimilation and the preservation of her cultural identity.

### ***The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga**

In *The White Tiger*, food serves as a potent symbol of class disparity and Balram’s journey from servitude to self-liberation, highlighting the stark social divides in postcolonial India. Balram’s early life is marked by modest, often inadequate meals, emblematic of his lowly status and lack of agency. He recalls that he “ate only bread and water, because I knew that as a servant, I



wasn't worthy of meat" (Adiga, 2008, p. 45). This restricted diet is not only a reflection of his poverty but also a constant reminder of his place in society—a position he is conditioned to accept, where he is literally and figuratively starved of power and choice.

As Balram becomes more integrated into the world of his wealthy employers, his perspective on food evolves, mirroring his shifting ambitions. The first time he tastes "chicken with butter and cream" (p. 197), he experiences it as a revelation, seeing it not just as a luxury but as a symbol of the life he aspires to. This dish becomes, for Balram, a marker of the wealth and indulgence he craves, contrasting sharply with the meagre sustenance he was once resigned to. His reaction to the rich, buttery flavours illustrates his desire to climb the social ladder, to feast as his masters do, and to escape the limitations of his lower-class background.

Food in Adiga's novel also reflects the moral compromises Balram is willing to make in pursuit of success. As he grows more disdainful of the simple meals he once ate, he becomes increasingly willing to adopt the unethical practices of the corrupt elite. His preference for his masters' opulent cuisine symbolises his desire to not just mimic their wealth but to absorb their power, even at the cost of his moral integrity. Kumar (2009) suggests that food in *The White Tiger* reflects both Balram's material ambition and the moral sacrifices he makes, highlighting his transition from loyal servant to ruthless entrepreneur.

Adiga uses food to critique India's rigid class hierarchy, where one's diet serves as an indicator of social standing. At one point, Balram observes that his employers treat food almost carelessly, as something they can waste or indulge in without concern, while he had once rationed every morsel. He recalls how he was made to watch his master eat lavish meals while he, a mere servant, remained "invisible and unfed" (p. 112). This disparity in food access exposes the insensitivity and excess of the upper class, who treat food as a disposable pleasure rather than a necessity, reinforcing Balram's growing resentment and his determination to attain their lifestyle by any means.

The contrast between his humble beginnings and his ultimate rise also highlights Balram's increasing alienation from his roots. He begins to scorn the simple food he once ate, seeing it as a reminder of his former subjugation. By rejecting the "bread and water" that once defined him and instead embracing the "butter and cream" of the wealthy, Balram symbolically discards his past, choosing instead to identify with his new, morally compromised status.

Ultimately, Adiga uses food in *The White Tiger* as a lens to expose and critique the deep social divides in Indian society. The luxurious meals of Balram's employers and the servant's initial meagre fare symbolise the chasm between the classes—a divide that is not just economic but moral and psychological. Through Balram's changing relationship with food, Adiga underscores the alienation, ambition, and moral erosion that accompany his ascent, making food a powerful motif of both aspiration and loss in the face of a deeply entrenched class system.

### ***The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai**

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, food emerges as a powerful metaphor for cultural dislocation, representing the fractured identities of characters caught between their Indian heritage and the lingering impact of colonialism. The judge's complex relationship with food is particularly

telling. His “nostalgia for English food” (Desai, 2006, p. 54) masks a profound resentment for his own cultural roots, revealing the internalised colonial values that have shaped his identity. He favours “scones and tea” over traditional Indian fare, a culinary choice that symbolises not only his longing to align with the colonial ideals he was once surrounded by but also a rejection of his heritage. The judge’s taste for English cuisine becomes a symbol of his ambivalence, torn between a colonial past that he despises yet cannot entirely escape.

Throughout the novel, the judge’s preference for Western food reflects his attempts to adopt an identity that distances him from his own culture. His disdain for Indian dishes, viewed as reminders of the “backward” homeland he sought to leave behind, embodies his desire to conform to colonial ideals, even at the expense of his personal heritage. In one instance, he remarks with contempt on the “greasy Indian food” he used to eat as a child, viewing it with the same disdain he feels for his own origins (p. 73). This disdain illustrates the judge’s conflicted self-perception, where food, far from being a source of comfort, becomes a painful reminder of his internalised prejudice against his own culture.

In contrast, characters like Sai find a sense of comfort and continuity in traditional Indian foods, which offer an emotional anchor amid the turbulence of identity struggles. Sai is drawn to the familiar “smell of dal and roti” (p. 164), dishes that remind her of home and familial warmth. For Sai, these foods evoke memories of her grandfather’s house, serving as a bridge to her Indian roots, even as she grapples with her own desire for a cosmopolitan, Westernised lifestyle. Her connection to Indian food symbolises a more balanced relationship with her heritage, allowing her to navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity in a way that feels more authentic to her experience.

Desai uses these contrasting culinary preferences to highlight the broader theme of cultural dislocation and identity. Sai’s relationship with food becomes a subtle form of resistance against cultural erosion, a way of preserving a sense of belonging amidst the influences of globalisation. Joshi (2011) observes that Desai’s portrayal of food illustrates the dual nature of cultural identity in a globalised world, with food representing both nostalgia and the struggle to maintain one’s heritage. For Sai, embracing traditional foods allows her to remain grounded, providing a counterpoint to the judge’s alienation and rejection of his own culture.

Food also plays a crucial role in illustrating the generational divide between characters. While the judge clings to English foods as symbols of status and sophistication, Sai’s more nuanced approach to food represents her ability to embrace her Indian heritage without feeling trapped by it. The judge’s rejection of his own roots in favour of English customs symbolises the painful legacy of colonial influence, where self-worth becomes tied to Western ideals. His insistence on English meals is not merely a preference; it is a manifestation of his internalised shame and unresolved identity conflict, reflecting a lifetime spent distancing himself from his cultural roots.

In a telling scene, the judge, indulging in tea and scones, criticises India’s poverty and corruption, aligning himself with the colonial mentality he was conditioned to admire. His culinary choices here underscore a persistent sense of superiority over the local culture, symbolising a profound disconnection from the very community he inhabits. Desai reveals how

the judge's rejection of Indian food signifies his struggle with a fractured identity, shaped by colonialism and marred by self-alienation.

Through these nuanced depictions, *The Inheritance of Loss* shows how food embodies the tension between embracing global influences and holding onto cultural heritage. For the judge, English food symbolises a painful aspiration to a world he never truly belonged to, while for Sai, traditional Indian dishes offer solace and continuity, even amidst her modern aspirations. Desai captures the ambivalence of cultural identity, showing how food can act as both a link to one's roots and a tool of resistance against cultural erosion in a globalised world.

### Thematic Analysis

1. Food as a Symbol of Cultural Heritage: In these novels, food acts as a bridge to cultural heritage, grounding characters in their roots. For example, *In The Hungry Tide*, traditional food practices represent the cultural legacy of the Sundarbans. Ghosh writes that Fokir "knew the rivers and forests like a story remembered," demonstrating how sustenance is intertwined with identity and survival (p. 53).

2. Food and the Politics of Class and Identity: Adiga's *The White Tiger* uses food to mark class divides. Balram's disdain for his own humble meals mirrors his aspiration to rise socially, with luxurious foods symbolising his desire to leave behind his lower status. Food underscores the stark class dynamics in postcolonial India, where access to different types of food delineates social standing.

3. Culinary Hybridity and Cultural Negotiation: Food in these novels reflects cultural hybridity, particularly in diasporic settings. In *The Immigrant*, Nina's evolving food preferences—"a salad here, a curry there"—capture her negotiation of identity between her Indian roots and Canadian surroundings (p. 146). This blend symbolises the cultural fusion and adaptation inherent in diasporic experiences, illustrating Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," where cultural meanings are continually reinterpreted.

4. Food as Resistance and Reclamation: In *The Inheritance of Loss*, food functions as a form of resistance against cultural homogenisation. Desai portrays traditional foods as "tethers to an identity threatened by globalisation" (p. 178), showing how food becomes both a marker of nostalgia and a means of reclaiming identity in the face of cultural dislocation. By preserving culinary traditions, characters assert their roots, countering the forces that threaten to erode their cultural identity.

### Conclusion

This study shows that food in post-2000 Indian English fiction serves as a richly layered symbol of cultural identity, capturing the intricate dynamics of heritage, resistance, and adaptation within a postcolonial setting. Each novel demonstrates how food acts as a cultural anchor, embodying characters' deep-rooted connections to their past while they navigate the demands of a globalised and often fragmented world. *In The Hungry Tide*, for instance, food underscores the bond between identity and place, with traditional practices symbolising resilience in the face of modern encroachments. In *The Immigrant*, food reflects the protagonist's inner conflict, caught between nostalgia for her Indian roots and the need to adapt to a new cultural environment, illustrating the complexities of diasporic identity. *The White Tiger* uses food as



an indicator of class disparity and social aspiration, highlighting the moral and social tensions surrounding the desire for upward mobility within a stratified society. Finally, in *The Inheritance of Loss*, food serves as both a reminder of cultural heritage and a site of ambivalence, reflecting the characters' sense of displacement and their complicated relationship with colonial legacies.

This exploration makes it clear that food in these novels is far more than a narrative detail; it becomes a powerful symbol of the ongoing negotiation between cultural continuity and change. By examining food as a postcolonial symbol, this study adds to our understanding of how Indian English literature addresses the dual pressures of globalisation and cultural preservation. Each of these stories demonstrates the power of culinary practices to evoke belonging, resist cultural erasure, and navigate social hierarchies, offering valuable insights into identity formation in a postcolonial and increasingly interconnected world.

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