

Multiple Spaces of Cooking

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Abstract:

A recent surge of interest in South Asian culture has met with a wealth of outstanding novels by Indian, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan authors. These writers have contributed a fine balance between historical and modern settings, divergent religions, geographical diverse settings, and a wide range of literary techniques which has earned them worldwide acclaim. Artefacts such as food, clothing, music, art, or literature pertain to culture. Thus, food occupies an important place in the delineation of culture and is used abundantly in South Asian literature. Recent interest in food studies has opened doors to examine how the use of food imagery and metaphor represents complex ideas and deeper meaning in literature. Literary food studies analyses food symbolism to reflect on cultural identity. The domestic arena associated with femininity also becomes a space to reproduce cultural and national identity. Studying ordinary moments in everyday life can yield insights into the culture of the past and present. Women writers have used food and eating to symbolize cultural issues of acceptance, resistance, and preservation of culture, as well as symbols of memory, emotions, narrative history, relationships, power, and consumption. Food is a crucial indicator of individual and social identities. In the context of the diaspora, it is more than an indicator of one's nostalgia and search for rootedness. This paper seeks to explore whether food can be used as a tool of recognition-personal and national. The texts to be taken up for the present study are Esther David's *The Book of Rachel* and Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*. In which recipes are interwoven into the texts as part of the narrative process.

Keywords: food, recipes, culinary, recognition. Identity, culture.

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Cuisine is a characteristic feature of every culture. A lot goes into preserving traditional rules and eating habits related to each cuisine. Food appeals to the senses as well as serves as powerful imagery. It helps to evoke a greater deal of "memories and feelings. Food imagery may appear, therefore, in literature as a source of deeply embedded associations that lead into the depths of individual and cultural memory" (David 2003). Tannahill argues that: "... food is not only inseparable from the history of mankind but essential to it. Without food there would be no history, no mankind" (Ibid. 388). Food plays an important part in ritualized ceremonies in society. When sharing a meal together people observe the certain rituals. And it has been happening since the beginning of a mankind because rituals bring warmth to the domestic hearth. Eating habits and rituals help the better understanding of human society. Events of food preparing, serving and sharing help to determine the social organization. Therefore, it helps a better identification within culture. The theme of food takes a key place in many works of women's literature. The most evident features related to this theme are individual recognition and national identity. There are several racially, religiously and linguistically diverse communities in India. Some minority communities like the Parsi, Indian-Chinese, Jain, Syrian Christian and Indian Jew also exist in this vast milieu. Indian English Literature has gone a long way in exploring the dynamics involved in their identity constructions within the nation. The narration of the Bene Israel Jews and their experience in India has been vividly documented in the writings of Indian-Jewish writer Esther David. Her work is a blend of biography, history and culture foregrounding a hybridized Indian-Jewish ethos. As immigrants the complex relationship of the minority community with the nation is problematized in her fictional and nonfictional works. Her work is also concerned with the diasporic space that her community occupies in the state of India. As an emerging voice she works to create space and recognition for representations from the margins. Esther David (b.1945) is the daughter of well known animal lover, philanthropist and Padmashree Reuben David (1912-1989). She grew up in the midst of animals and birds rescued and adopted by her father along with the intricate Jewish rituals and practice that was a part of her family. Thematically, her works are varied, dealing with subjects ranging from identity crisis, ambivalence, hybridity, historical and political questions and diaspora.

There are three distinct groups of Jews in India that arrived at different periods. They are the Cochin Jews, Baghdadi Jews and the Bene Israel. Esther David's novels present a vivid picture of the Bene Israel community. Rachel, the heroine of her story, is frail and old and lives by herself in a house after the death of her husband Aaron and the departure of her children to Israel. She is one of the last surviving members of the small Bene Israel community that used to live in the hamlet of Danda, at Alibag, on the coast near Mumbai. Rachel's story is a collection of Jewish recipes which she employed to cook for her family. Each recipe is a reminder of a particular feast or episode in the saga of banishment of the original Jewish people from their original home in Egypt and their eventual assimilation as the Bene Israel community on the Konkan coast of Maharashtra. David has infused her character with her culinary skills to bring out history and personal memory. Fish is an important food ingredient for those who live in coastal regions. Esther David brings out all the imagery associated with fish in Jewish culture through Rachel's ability to use fish as a food metaphor. The novel opens with the storm at sea which reminds Rachel, the protagonist, of her ancestors who had escaped a storm in the same sea. The trauma of the few survivors who escaped the tragedy is vividly portrayed through the fish that is lashed ashore to Rachel's door step by the cyclone. Instead of frying the fish for her dinner, Rachel wishes to protect the

fish because it reminds her of her ancestors who were washed ashore in the same coast. The fish is “symbolic of protection” (1) and therefore she returns it to the sea. According to their tradition the eyes of fish are always open as they have no eye lids and being placed on either side of the head makes the fish vigilant. The Jews adorn their homes with a decorative hand sign that depicts a fish, the hamsas for good luck and protection. The fish is like the woman of the house who guards and looks after the well being of the family.

Bombil or Bombay duck fry is a favourite food of most Bene Israel Jews and Rachel cooks this preparation every time she wishes to please a friend or relative. Judah, a young, Bene Israel lawyer from Bombay helps Rachel with the legal issues of the synagogue. Rachel suggests that as the fee for his legal advice she can offer her daughter in marriage to him. This unexpected offer shocks the young man and he departs in anger. Rachel prepares bombil fry as a gift of peace and travels to Bombay to offer him and thereby please him immediately(). In another incident Rachel teaches Kavita, wife of Satish, the business man the art of cooking bombil perfectly when she understands her sincere support for the synagogue. She even allows Kavita to pass it off as her own cooking to impress Satish. The food creates the desired results and the synagogue is saved. Food, thus functions to reverse situations and resolve conflict. The narrative technique of the novel is interesting because each chapter is preceded by a Jewish recipe. The name of the recipe is the chapter’s title as well. The chapters are titled “Fried Fish”, “Mutton Curry with Tamarind”, “Peetha.” “Tandlya Chi Bhakri.” “Sown Kadhi” and so on. These recipes work at multiple levels in making the novel meaningful. The recipes reveal both personal story and communal history of the community. Food history of the community links both the personal and the communal histories. The chapter titled Peethal opens with the recipe of the food. Rachel cooks a simple meal for herself most of the days. Mordecai, the shrewd member of the synagogue visits her with the idea of selling the land on which the synagogue stood to Chinoy, a business man. Rachel dislikes Mordecai for disrespecting the synagogue and for wishing to sell it for profit. She cooks peethal and serves it with chapattis fully aware of the fact that peethal would cause acidity. This episode clearly combines Rachel’s story and the history of the Bene Israel Jews in Danda. Fragile, but determined Rachel represents the synagogue, the emblem of Bene Israel existence in India. This episode captures the nonchalant and cunning attitude of some of the Bene Israel Jews who are focused on destroying their precious heritage than preserving it for posterity and how they can be tackled with ethnic food. Rachel finds her solution in food. The recipes strategically placed at the opening of each chapter, introduce an important Jewish delicacy and impart knowledge of a particular Jewish custom and religious ritual of significance. For instance in the chapter called ‘Anashi Dhakacha San, Peesach’, Esther David discusses the food cooked for the Peesach eve or the Passover. In the absence of parsley, fenugreek leaves are used in the Peesach plate. Rachel cooks the Matzo bread, the way it is made in India roasted as chapattis on the iron griddle or tava, unlike the Israeli roasted version of the same. Matzo bread is the symbol of poverty, as the Jews ate it when they were slaves in the land of Egypt. Indian Sheera or Halech is symbolic of the mortar used by the Jews when they built the pyramids for the Pharaohs. Rachel makes Puranpoli and not cakes for Purim. Purim falls on a full moon night with Holi, the Indian festival of colours. Rachel remembers her roots and has also adapted well to the local culture. Even the songs she sings are set to the tune of Marathi Bhajans on Lord Krishna. Chitrita Banerji observes that “The Bene Israel have learned to relish the ingredients of the land—coconut milk, garam masala, turmeric, ginger, and cumin”. (284) The Bene Israel community that Rachel, the protagonist hails from is a diasporic community that found its root in the western coast of India around 2,000 years ago. It is believed that

they lost their religious scrolls, but remembered their prayers and the Jewish dietary law. As they have assimilated with the local cultures, they developed a cuisine unique to them which is a healthy blend of Marathi, Hindu and Muslim. The novel showcases Rachel's clever use of the local ingredients and thus promoting an Indian version of the Bene Israeli Jewish food. There are instances in the novel to demonstrate how Rachel converted the kitchen which is situated at the remotest corner of the house into a space of power. Although she cooks kosher meat only, she enjoys her fried fish in sticky rice with 'a sumptuous helping of ghee' (7), in spite of being aware that she should not mix meat with dairy, which is against the dietary laws of her religion. This act demonstrates that she has the ability to adapt to situations and that she has a will of her own. Although she follows the food rituals associated with the Bene Israel Jews she is not rigid and is willing to adapt.

The most important Jewish festivals for the Bene Israel are Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Simchat Torah and Passover (Peesach, Malida and Purim). On Rosh Hashanah the whole community appears in its finery in synagogue, and between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur it is customary to visit friends and family. During Rosh Hashanah sweet dishes are prepared to welcome the new year. On Yom Kippur the community dresses exclusively in white. The Bene Israel arrive at the synagogue before dawn, On Simchat Torah they celebrate by dancing merrily in the synagogue with the Torah scrolls. On Passover Bene Israel make matzoth, whitewash their houses and tin their copper pots. Purim, another important festival occurs a month before Passover. Rachel prepares puranpoli for Purim to commemorate the liberation of Persian Jews and the festival of Queen Esther. Every Purim she prepares the rich sweet to remember her almost broken engagement to Aaron, her husband on account of her thin frame. She recounts to her daughter Zephra that she had invited him to a feast of puranpolis on Purim and sat on the floor preparing the sweet. She observes that she looked plump while sitting down and Aaron relished the sweet and apologised for the misunderstanding. To celebrate her success, Rachel sent a box of puranpolis for her aunt, who was to become her mother in law. At the Passover the Jewish women prepare the matzah, the unleavened bread to commemorate the exodus from Egypt. Rachel recalls the elaborate Peesach plate preparation when women from the neighbourhood gathered in the courtyard of the synagogue to prepare the Indian matzo bread or bin-khameerchi bhakri. This resembles dry chappathis roasted on clay oven. The women would arrive first at Rachel's house and after a refreshing drink would start working at the synagogue which was next to her house. They would clean the synagogue and start rolling out the matzo bread. As they cooked, they sang bhajans about the parting of the sea and the Exodus. After her family had moved to Israel she receives boxes of roasted matzos which makes Rachel reminisce on the glorious past. After the birth of her granddaughter in Israel, her daughter asks Rachel for the recipe of the matzo bread. Rachel is delighted to pass the recipe over 69 telephone to her daughter, a member of the next generation of her community. For the Malida a platter of Ha'etz, Ha'adama and Bore mineh mezonaoth are offered to the Prophet Elijah, Eliyahu Hannabi. Ha'etz is fruit with hard trunk like dates, Ha'adama is fruit with soft trunk like banana, mango or melon, Bore mineh mezonaoth are wheat preparations like cakes and biscuits. Zephra, Rachel's daughter arranges for a thanksgiving with malida platter after Rachel recovers from her condition of unstable high blood pressure. The thanksgiving is also for discovering important documents from the synagogue using Rachel's key. This finding promises to transform the fate of the dilapidated synagogue from being disposed by Mordecai, the conniving member of the synagogue committee. At weddings Bene Israel Jews cook and serve rice to symbolize fertility. After the marriage ceremony the bride is showered with

rice to bless her with many children. Thus by serving traditional ritualistic food and by preserving the aroma, flavour and texture of the food they kindle the memory of the partaker who is constantly reminded of his/ her roots. This reiterates the notion that food is not merely a healthy balance of vitamins, minerals, and proteins but is a symbolic substance that sustains the individual and community. The second novel for the present study is Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*. Unlike Esther David's novel which is woven around the protagonist's culinary skills, this one centres around the protagonist who has come to her homeland in search of her roots. However, The title indicates the obsession with food that dominates the novel. The figure of the cook has a particular resonance in the reconstructed memories of the author, not just in recent literary fiction, but in contemporary memoirs, Indian cookery books and food magazines. From a distance, from the new home, the writers reconnect to a particular place via memories of food and childhood. Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (2000), is about Pakistani immigrant culture, a cook of legendary, almost magical, powers, crystallises memories of home. On a plane to Karachi, the narrator remembers the culinary (rather than the religious) significance of the festival of Ramzan: people tried to steal the utensils belonging to her Aunt's cook, to try and recreate the taste. "The delight was in his hand." (74) Here, the hand is symbolic of individualism, the art of the homemade, and the sensuality of food. Aliya recalled every delicacy which Masood cooked. Aliya's story revolves around this character, his culinary skills, his affair with Mariam and the mystery of their disappearance. The Iftar dinner comprised of " curly shaped jalebies, hot and gooey, that trickled sweet syrup down your chin when you bit into them, diced potatoes drowned in yogurt, sprinkled in spices, triangles of fried samosas, the smaller ones filled with mince-meat, the larger ones filled with potatoes and green chillies, shami kababs with sweet sour imli sauce; spinach leaves fried in chick pea batter, nihari with large gobs of marrow floating in the thick gravy, and meat so tender it dissolved instantly in your mouth; lassi that quenched a day long thirst as nothing else did and left us wondering why we ever drank coke when a combination of milk, yogurt and sugar could be this satisfying; an assortment of sweetmeats- gulab jamuns, laddoos, barfi." (75)

The Dard-e-Dil clan is a feudal family in Pakistan. Three generations of family members have their personal stories each. Aliya's grandfather Akbar and his brothers Sulaiman and Taimur each figure in the story as Aliya tries to solve the mystery of Mariam's disappearance. Aliya first recalls how she discovered that 'imli' was tamarind, and irresistible in this feudal set up when the cousin had switched to sandwiches-bread, mayonaise, mustard, salami, sliced roasted beef, lettuce, tomatoes, gherkins, tuna salad all are mentioned. (21). She would even go out with her father to the market where they would buy aloo puri, carrot pickles and halwa. Masood, the cook was a magician. Aliya says "I'd watched Masood cook, seen shape and colour transformed into texture, witnessed odour becoming aroma, observed vegetables that grew away from each other in the garden wrapping around each other and rolling through spices in his frying pan." (95) Mariam has been portrayed as a woman who never spoke to people but to Masood and that too only in questions to enquire about food (65). She comes into the Dard-e-Dil family on the day Aliya was born. Nobody knows about her whereabouts except for a letter that comes to Aliya's father mentioning that Mariam is Taimur's daughter. Her silence towards the questions thrown at her about her past and her parents later provides other characters to develop their own theories against her, "But she couldn't speak because speaking would mean answering questions which would mean revealing the truth. So, she remained quiet. Except about food because she knew if she developed one eccentric trait it would shield her." (128). Meher Dadi who lives in Greece as a foreign relic, surprisingly gets to taste shami kababs which seemed 'positively Masoodian' (222). As Khaleel gets all that food

from Turkey ,Aliya visualizes her Aunt Mariam and Masood's expert hand in that preparation. Aliya's renegade aunt Mariam brushes saffron off her husband's neck and dusts it on to her own lips, lists vegetables "as though the list were a ghazal".

Masood and Khaleel are the other two characters that are objectified the same way. They are from the lower strata of society, and they are the ones were on the receiving end in the class politics is operational. The reference is made to Masood in the whole novel is limited to his cooking skills and unmatched the taste of his food. The closest point to which reference is made in his awareness about us class limitation would be (if it can be taken so), "Masood almost that my shoulder, said, 'Don't worry, Aliya Bibi.'" (Salt and Saffron 76) Aliya's pair Mariam, the "not quite twins" story is akin in several respect. Both find true love despite the class distinction. The twin factor may be allusion to the emergence of a twinned India and Pakistan.

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6. Dr. S. Asha Professor, Government College Tonk (Raj) India Areas of Interest-Comparative Literature, Women Studies, Film Studies and language Studies.