

Flavours of Identity: A Comparative Study of Indian and Western Culinary Narrative in Women's Literature

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ABSTRACT

“One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well” (Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, The Hogarth Press, 1935, Page- 28). This quote implies the significance of Food over anything and everything in our lives. Food not only nourishes the physical self but also the inner self. The connection between food and emotions has been evident through the various experiences that one portrays through literature. Culinary narrative literature bridges the gap between soul and food and goes beyond the horizon of recipes. This research paper aims to explore the impact of culinary narrative on the characters in the novels: *Climbing the Mango Trees* by Madhur Jaffrey and *Comfort me with Apples* by Ruth Reichl. It analyzes the differentiation and integration of cultural values, Identity and flavors in food.

KEYWORDS: Culinary narrative, Culture and Food, Comfort and Hope

INTRODUCTION

Roland Barthes in “Mythologies” serve food as a cultural marker which inhibits the elements of culture and symbolically identifies with the related culture. In *Climbing Mango Trees* by Madhur Jaffer, we can analyse the showcase of the cultural representation of Indian experiences throughout the narration making it clear of its identity and impact. Culinary narrative holds a special place in cultural studies as it provides an insight into the culture and the celebration of food within the culture. These narratives are significantly essential to study and learn about different cultures. Likewise, Arlean Avakian essay – *Cooking up lives – Feminist Food Memoirs* gives an insight into the Feminist perspective of food narratives and life writing. It opens the gates of gender, identity, oppression, economy, orientation in relation to food in the essay. Feministic culinary experiences are different based on the gender and status in the society. It does impact the way of life and writing as in *Comfort Me with Apples* by Ruth Reichl. It captures the gendered inequalities and issues related to career and prospects of life. It encapsulates the blend of food and passion in female writing of culinary narratives.

- **Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India**

- Madhur Jeffrey

Introduction

Climbing the Mango Trees is Madhur Jaffrey's one of the popular memoir and it is well timed, as food culture is a growing and important field of academic study due to the acknowledgment that food is an indicator of culture, geography, identity and time period. Culture and food are inseparably intertwined as

Jaffrey reveals, food can be the ideal site for the expression of identity. Jaffrey also expresses that how much cultural and especially religious identity shapes one's diet, yet she also exposes how cuisine is where her family expressed its cultural hybridity and how diet is an inevitable part of every individual's lifestyle. Jaffrey recognizes food as a component of communal identity as she says, "*all social occasions, the times when communities come together, are fueled by food and drink*" (92). Because she grew up in the joint family system so she is keenly aware of how food and eating can be a matter of what people considers acceptable.

Flavours of Identity in Climbing the Mango Trees :

Madhur Jaffrey's memoir, "Climbing the Mango Trees" recounts a vivid depiction of her early life in Delhi, India. Born into a large and prosperous family, Jaffrey spent her childhood in an ancestral home where the cultural and culinary heritage of her family was richly ingrained. In her family there were several siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles, each bringing their unique touch to the collective family identity. Despite the size and potential for chaos, there was an ordered rhythm to the household, often centered around the kitchen and dining table. Food always played an integral role in Jaffrey's upbringing, Like morning preparations and the delicious aromas from the kitchen sparked a lifelong passion for cooking. The family's cooks and elder women were the guardians of traditional recipes, each dish telling stories of the past and showcasing the family's cultural heritage. Madhur Jaffrey's childhood was filled with diverse flavours and ingredients. The mango trees in her home's lush gardens held special significance, symbolizing freedom and joy. Picking and savoring mangoes, as well as making chutneys and pickles, was a cherished experience that shaped her palate and deepened her connection to flavours.

Family gatherings were a keystone of Jaffrey's childhood, serving not just as social occasions but as celebrations of culinary tradition and family bonding. Each festive occasion had its own signature dishes. During the Hindu festival of Diwali, for example, the family would prepare sweets like laddoos and barfis, alongside snacks such as samosas and pakoras. For the wedding, the dishes including rich biryanis, succulent kebabs, and an assortment of chutneys and pickles. To prepare these dishes each member of the family used to come together and help each other. Through her recollections of these family gatherings and traditional meals, Jaffrey emphasizes how food is much more than sustenance; it is a medium of connection, a keeper of memories, and a continuous thread linking past, present, and future generations.

Delhi's culinary landscape was shaped by its rich history, particularly the Mughal era's influence. The Mughal dynasty, which had ruled India for centuries, left a permanent mark on the cuisine of the region. The Mughals' love for rich and aromatic cuisine turned Delhi into a culinary hub, blending Persian, Turkish, and Indian traditions into a distinctive and luxurious food culture. Mughalai dishes were not just meals but feasts fit for royalty, characterized by their richness and depth. Among the most beloved Mughlai dishes were biryanis, kebabs, and kormas.

Jaffrey confesses that, "*When I left India for England, I could not cook at all*" and that she failed cooking in school, yet when she arrives in England she finds herself "*writing home to my mother begging her to teach me*" (6, 229, 242). When Jaffrey started going to a convent school where English was spoken, her homemade lunches - filled with parathas, pickles, and curries - stood out from her classmates' simple sandwiches. These meals connected her to her roots and provided comfort in a new environment. Sharing her Indian lunch with classmates helps Madhur Jaffrey build connections and friendships, bridging cultural gaps and fostering understanding.

The 1947 Partition disrupted lives, causing friends to separate and homes to become sources of anxiety. Madhur Jaffrey recounts the sudden division, the fear, and how her family home once a heaven, became a place of anxiety and uncertainty. As ingredients became scarce and migration disrupted food supply chains, families in Delhi had to adjust their cooking. Despite challenges, food served as a source of solace and cultural continuity. Shared meals became acts of defiance and hope. Food helped preserve cultural identity and provided comfort during a period of significant upheaval. After Partition, Delhi's cuisine was enriched by Punjabi migrants who introduced tandoor cooking and iconic dishes like tandoori chicken and dal makhani, which have become integral to the city's food identity.

In this way, in *Climbing the Mango Trees*, Food is depicted not just as sustenance, but as a storytelling medium—reflecting ancestral identities, historical layers, and cultural synthesis. Jaffrey portrays cooking as a deeply personal and ancestral art—each recipe a bridge from past to present, woven into identity and belonging.

- **Comfort Me with Apples**

Love, Adventure and a Passion for Cooking – Ruth Reichl

Introduction

Comfort Me with Apples is an extravaganza of culinary narration written by an acclaimed American writer Ruth Reichl. It is a memoir which embodies the life transformation of the protagonist from dependency to self realization of self worth and identity through culinary experiences which brings her to the transcendental stage of life. The title “Comfort Me with Apples” has a biblical allusion as it relates to the verse in Song of Solomon in 2:5 which says – ‘Stay me with falgons, comfort me with apples, for I am sick of love’. This interpretes that the writer intended to have comfort and bliss for herself which she probably achieved through her yearning for cooking whereas apples being a symbol of temptation and nourishment signifies the importance of food which categorically provided the function to both the aspects in her life. Food served as medium to heal from the past giving her a promising future ,allowing her to liberate herself from the barriers of bonded relationship and blending her into an independent personality.

Flavours of identity in ‘Comfort Me with Apples’ -

Ruth aspired to become a famous restaurant critic wherein she would picture herself dining in some fabulous restaurants having caviar and champagne. That was exactly the life and class she was hinting to have in the very beginning of the narration. “*Easy for him to say : He was independently wealthy.*” (1, pg.1) This was said by Ruth as she exclaims the desire of her husband being fine with her not working as he was independently wealthy. This adds up to the feminine urge of identity and financial stability. Having caviar and champagne also suggests that she wanted to upgrade her life from a middle class zone to elite class. The fact that she didn’t want to financially depend on her partner made her take decisions that gave an extra edge to her life and identity. Ruth’s passion for her career came underway her marriage as her husband preferred simple meals which was mostly vegan. He was a devotee of millet and was far away from fancy food which formed the basis of difference of opinion in their choices and ways of life too.

For the purpose of art ,Ruth and her husband moved to Berkeley and lived an affordable life. The culinary narration about their visits to the local restaurant ‘Chez Panisse’ illustrates the life and culture of the locals around Berkeley. A simple meal of brown rice, tofu and lentils was an everyday affair but going to the restaurant meant ordering fancy food which came with fancy price. Sweet pigs cooked on fire, red wine and squid gained its popularity as a part of the restaurant but what was even more evident was the food

grown by the people who cared for earth and who cared for each other. The distance between Ruth and her husband widened during this phase as he was always busy with his work and Ruth was eagerly waiting to grow into her profession. She would go to restaurants as critic, meet people, food editors and other critics. They would discuss about champagnes, fish course, lamb, cheese, wine and other culinary experiences.

Ruth wanted to explore and understand food as a critic. She wished to travel to France to taste and know more about cheese. When her husband parted from her due to work, she would indulge herself in cooking as usual which is evident in the line – ‘*I put down the phone and did what I always do when I am upset: I cooked*’. (ch 2, pg 308) Cooking gave her the emotional support which she required during her downfall and allowed her to gain strength. She made crab cakes to make her realize her worth by affording luxurious crab meat and butter. It demonstrates her inert passion for cooking and self appraisal. The recipe of the same is given in the book offering a sensory treat to the readers.

Ruth's journey from Berkeley to Paris marks her path to culinary success in her life which engulfs the primary necessity of love and passion attached to it. She goes to Paris as a critic and meets Colman. They share some great chemistry over food. They begin with '66 Krug and a pot of caviar. They further had baked oysters, wrapped in lettuce, with caviar and dunked in beurre blanc, warm toast, cheese and Corton-Charlemagne. They exchanged talks about New York, Paris and Rome something that Ruth always desired for. She craved for luxurious food, fancy restaurants and food talks. This elevated Ruth's mood to another level of satisfaction which was a combination of food and temptation.

She woke up to this sudden and abrupt change in her life. Colman as she considered was a perfect man for her. She always believed to have someone who was completely devoted to food and had expertise about the subject. Colman was exactly the one from her dreams. She chose him over her husband not because she didn't love him but because she loved food. Food primarily was her first love which she symbolizes as an apple that comforted her and nurtured her to become the person she intended to.

Ruth's extreme love and passion for food inclined her towards having elaborate culinary experiences which she evidently portrayed in the narration. Her love for caviar, cheese, champagne boosted her fantasy and gave length to her narratives. It is a rich display of popular western recipes and dishes that curates the culinary experience for the readers. Ideas of self empowerment, liberty, self love remains constant theme in the memoir. Above anything, food being the central medium to pave way to emotions, cultural exchange, bonding, identity building forming a path breaking idea for women. Western ideas of freedom, independence, women empowerment can be very well witnessed from the narration which is so well supplemented and accompanied with food and cooking stories.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of both the text concludes that food serves as a channel of identity whether cultural, individual or feministic depending on the varied experiences of individual. Identity formation through culinary narratives delves deep into multidisciplinary approaches like psychology, sociology, demography, philosophy, and varied aspects of life. Food brews the narratives of individual and cultural representation in literature. The interrelation elevates the interdependency and leads to purgation of emotions, culture and language.

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