

Beyond Sustenance: Food as Memory, Identity and Resistance in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Mistress of Spices and Padma Lakshmi's Love, Loss and What We Ate

Deepthimol. D

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government College Kottayam

Abstract

The study investigates how food has been portrayed as a gendered cultural artifact in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Padma Lakshmi's *Love, Loss and What We Ate*. It uses Alice Mclean's concept of gender and food identity as a theoretical framework in analysing the text. The study says food is not something that human beings eat to survive. Cooking and eating food is a method of storytelling in *The Mistress of Spices* and *Love, Loss and What We Ate*. Food helps in people's memories, identity and resistance. *The Mistress of Spices* and *Love, Loss and What We Ate* employ food in such a manner. In Divakaruni's novel spices are like a store of family knowledge and a healing of emotional wounds. In Divakaruni's novel spices are like a store of family knowledge and a way to heal emotional pain. She "connects her traditions with her new life through spices." Lakshmi's memoir is similar in that she writes down her recipes and memories of food to tell her story of hardship moving to a place and being vulnerable. Food is like a language that helps her survive and understand herself. Lakshmi's memoir and Divakaruni's novel they both show food as a way to express oneself and Divakaruni's novel and Lakshmi's memoir make food a big part of understanding oneself. The study is about perceptions of self-esteem for women in their homes and kitchens. Theories used are related to food and gender, psychosocial memory and interaction and postcolonial international relations. The analysis has demonstrated that narratives of women and food have the power to liberate women rather than imprison them. Food is a part of identification and is a vehicle for political and cultural statement. Women writers use food to communicate their feelings and rebel against the stereotypical ideals that men have set for women. Food is also used as a communication tool by women writers to locate their identities in a country and express their voices. This study is important because it examines the use of food as a medium of self-expression for women in literature. Storytelling of food is one of the ways women can empower themselves and get their voices heard. Finally, food is conceptualized as an embodied form of storytelling that empowers women to transmute quotidian practices into acts of cultural resistance and self-authorship.

Keywords: Food Studies, Memory, Identity, Resistance

Introduction

Virginia Woolf's words sum up the relationship between food and human well-being. Food not only nour-

ishes the body but also the mind and spirit. It is both a necessity and sacred ritual, a cultural artifact, and a medium through which love, memory, identity and resilience are articulated. Over the years, food has formed a universal language that can express feelings and emotions that are sometimes beyond words. The first memories we have are those that involve eating—tastes of meals cooked by a grandmother, festival dishes, and the effect of familiar tastes during challenging moments. In moments of celebration, we feast; in grief or longing, we cook or remember. Food has no prejudice; it is forgiving. It accepts hunger without prejudice and becomes a vessel of love, nostalgia or resistance. Food has attentive symbolic potential in literature, symbolizing class, culture, desire, memory and even rebellion. It becomes a dramatic device around which characters and relationships grow—tables become a scene for conflict and tenderness and revelation.

In women's writing especially, food takes on many meanings. Food in such contexts codifies the messages of women's writing in particular as it pertains to issues of labor, care, limitation, and liberation. Food becomes a trope around which silences are shattered, identities are constructed, and personal and political narratives are constructed.

The paper examines how food chronicles memory, identity and resistance in female writing with special reference to Chithra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Padma Lakshmi's memoir *Love, Loss and What We Ate*. Both the texts locate female at the centre and bring out how migration, trauma and cultural displacement shape the lives of these women. Food is the chosen medium of emotional and cultural communication in both the texts. Based on Alice McLean's concept of intersection of gender and food studies, the study argues that the culinary practices depicted in the narratives are more than domestic routine; they are sites of power, self-expression and negotiation. Ingredients accompany Lakshmi's memoir that is characterized by a life of abuse, illness, and migration. On the other hand, Divakaruni's novel presents Tilo as a mystical healer of spices who remedies the emotional harms of migrants with her knowledge of food. Food provides strong narrative power and a feminized literary device, through which the female protagonist in the two texts construct and appropriate meaning from histories personal and communal (ibid). By placing food as a powerful gendered narrative strategy, the study looks at how a personalized female experience is turned into a political and cultural expression.

According to Alice Mclean, the culinary practices and social relations of power can never be separated. According to known histories, women have been assigned the role of cooks, preservers, and transmitters of culinary traditional making food a site of emotional labour and cultural reproduction. McLean argues that these culinary practices shape female subjectivity and are instruments of oppression and resistance. Analysing literary texts on the basis of this framework will allow us to see food as a narrative code to express gendered experience. By not confining cooking into the limits of domesticity, feminists give new dimensions to it by positioning it as a powerful agency and cultural memory. This approach makes it possible to read Divakaruni's and Lakshmi's texts as feminine expressions where food becomes a repository of emotional and cultural experiences.

Food as Memory

Food in the *Mistress of Spices* and *Love, Loss and What We Ate* acts as an archive of memory. The tales of migration, longing and suffering are interwoven in Tilo's spices. Each spice evokes an emotion within her which helps her to diagnose the pain of her customers. The spice shop is also a symbolic space where personal memories are translated into collective narratives of diaspora. So, food is a 'site of memory' where certain silenced voices are heard.

In a similar way, Padma Lakshmi's memoir has conceptualized food as an archive for personal history. Memories of the meals prepared by her mother, grandma and later on by herself are coupled with emotional precarity. Poverty, domestic violence, and illness are remembered through the sensory experience of taste and smell, in a bid to make proposed that memory is not abstract but embedded. Food thus functions as a sensory language that archives poverty and domestic violence and emotional precarity. The gendered reading of food by McLean thus explains how memory is represented as feminized and domestic in both texts. Through the culinary practices, women preserve tradition and cultural memory thereby changing everyday activity into acts of remembrance. When culinary rituals, practices and recipes are transmitted from one generation to the other as cultural artifacts, the memories inextricably linked with it are also shared and this means that memory is not a heap of historically preserved records.

Food as Identity

Food does more than fill you up—it shapes who you are, especially in the stories we read. Take Tilo, for example. Her identity as a spice healer is totally wrapped up in what she cooks and knows. She's not just making dinner. She uses food as a source of real power, not just something that serves others, and that authority is hers alone. Still, you can feel the push and pull in her life. There's always this tension between doing what she wants and what her culture expects—something a lot of women in the diaspora know too well. That struggle shows up in her personal longing and the mysterious role she plays as a healer.

Lakshmi's story isn't all that different. For her, food is a way to figure out who she is too. As an immigrant moving between Indian and American worlds, she turns to cooking to keep her Indian roots alive. But she's not stuck in the past—her mixed identity, shaped by moving across borders, comes out in how she experiments with global cuisines. Food turns into a bridge, connecting different cultures and helping these women define themselves. According to McLean's ideas, identity gets made through the work and the taste of cooking. Tilo and Lakshmi both show how food stands between the body and culture, giving women a way to speak up, even in systems that usually try to keep them quiet. In the messy business of building a life, cooking becomes a powerful tool—especially when you're dealing with loss or feeling out of place.

Food as Resistance

Food isn't just about comfort or tradition. It fights back. In both stories, food becomes a form of resistance. Tilo, even though her role is seen as feminine and maybe even submissive, flips that around. Her deep knowledge of spice healing turns her into a figure of power, challenging both patriarchy and racism. She uses her skills to heal those pushed to the margins. By breaking the spiritual rules to connect with others, she pushes back against the forces that want to keep women's desires hidden. Lakshmi's version looks a little different. Through writing her own story and sharing her memories through food, she takes control. She opens up about abuse, illness, and being treated as an object, but she does it on her own terms. Cooking becomes her way of staking a claim—caring for herself and refusing to accept shame or violence. Both stories show women working within spaces that are usually seen as “women's work,” but they turn those kitchens into places of real strength. Food, in their hands, becomes a language of protest woven right into daily life.

Conclusion

This paper looks at how *The Mistress of Spices* and *Love, Loss, and What We Ate* use food to explore

gender, memory, identity, and resistance. Drawing on Alice McLean's work about gender and food, it argues that cooking in these books isn't just about survival. It's a way for women to define themselves and speak out, using food as both a personal and political tool.

Divakaruni and Lakshmi turn the idea of home on its head. Instead of a place that traps women, they show it as a space where women take charge. In their stories, food isn't just about meals—it's a way to hold on to memories, a record of feelings, and a lifeline for culture. Food becomes its own language, and through it, these writers push back against the old belief that women's work at home doesn't matter. This paper adds something new to literary food studies. It shows how women use food and cooking in their writing to shape who they are and to take back their own stories, especially when they're far from home. There's room to go further, too. Researchers can look at Dalit women's autobiographies or indigenous food stories to see how food brings out the voices and experiences of people on the margins.

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