



Food and Identity in South Asian Diaspora Narratives: Culinary Practices as Cultural Memory and Resistance

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Abstract

This research examines the multifaceted role of food and culinary practices in South Asian diaspora narratives, focusing on literary and cinematic representations from the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Through close textual analysis of selected works by diaspora writers and filmmakers, this study explores how food functions as a powerful vehicle for identity formation, cultural memory, intergenerational transmission, and resistance in diaspora contexts. The research identifies and analyzes recurring culinary tropes and metaphors in South Asian diaspora narratives, including the kitchen as a gendered space of both oppression and empowerment, food preparation as a site of cultural preservation and innovation, and commensality as a means of negotiating cultural boundaries. Employing theoretical frameworks from food studies, diaspora studies, and postcolonial theory, this investigation reveals how food narratives serve multiple purposes: they articulate complex hybrid identities, challenge cultural stereotypes, preserve ancestral memories, and create spaces for cross-cultural dialogue. The findings demonstrate that food in South Asian diaspora narratives functions not merely as cultural symbolism but as an active agent in the negotiation of diaspora identities and the creation of new cultural formations. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the embodied nature of diaspora experience and the role of everyday practices in the construction of transcultural identities.

Keywords: - South Asian diaspora, food studies, cultural identity, migration narratives, culinary memory, gender, cultural hybridity, postcolonial literature, transcultural narratives

Introduction: Food as Cultural Narrative in Diaspora Contexts

Food narratives permeate South Asian diaspora literature and film, offering rich insights into the complex processes of identity formation in transcultural spaces. From Jhumpa Lahiri's detailed descriptions of Bengali-American cooking rituals to the sensory food cinematography in Gurinder Chadha's films, culinary practices emerge as powerful vehicles for expressing the

ambivalences, negotiations, and creative adaptations that characterize diaspora experience. This research investigates the multiple functions of food in South Asian diaspora narratives, examining how culinary representations articulate complex relationships to homeland, host country, tradition, modernity, gender roles, and intergenerational dynamics.

As Avtar Brah notes, diaspora spaces are "the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes" (Brah, 2008). Within these complex spaces, food practices operate as particularly embodied and affective forms of cultural expression. Food preparation, consumption, and commensality become sites where diaspora subjects negotiate what Homi Bhabha terms the "third space" of cultural hybridity—creating identities that are neither simply replications of homeland traditions nor wholesale assimilations to host country norms, but rather creative synthetic formations that reflect the specific conditions of diaspora life.

The South Asian diaspora presents a particularly fruitful context for examining food narratives due to its vast geographical spread, diverse religious and regional traditions, colonial history, and complex patterns of migration spanning several generations. South Asian food traditions themselves are extraordinarily diverse, encompassing multiple regional cuisines, religious dietary practices, and class-based culinary hierarchies, all further transformed through colonial encounters and postcolonial adaptations. When transplanted to diaspora contexts, these already complex food traditions undergo further transformations, resulting in what Anita Mannur calls "culinary citizenship"—the use of food practices to "assert claims of belonging and difference" (Anita,13).

This research addresses several core questions: How do food narratives articulate the tensions between cultural preservation and adaptation in diaspora contexts? In what ways does food function as a medium of cultural memory and intergenerational transmission? How are gender roles and family dynamics negotiated through food practices in diaspora settings? How do South Asian diaspora narratives use food to challenge or reinforce cultural stereotypes? Through these inquiries, this study aims to develop a nuanced understanding of food's role in the complex processes of diaspora identity formation.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Theoretical Perspectives

This research draws upon several theoretical frameworks to analyze the complex functions of food in South Asian diaspora narratives. Diaspora studies, particularly the work of scholars like Avtar Brah, James Clifford, and Robin Cohen, provides essential concepts for understanding diaspora as both a condition and a process characterized by multiple attachments, cultural negotiations, and ongoing identity formation. As Clifford argues, diaspora experiences are "not definitively tied to a single place but 'in-between' various regions, nations and cultures" (Clifford 10). This framework helps contextualize how food practices reflect and mediate complex relationships to homeland and host country.

Postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the third space, informs analysis of how diaspora subjects transform culinary traditions in response to new cultural contexts. Bhabha's assertion that "cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness'" (Bhabha 12) provides a lens for examining how food practices negotiate cultural differences and similarities. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak's work on strategic essentialism helps illuminate how diaspora subjects strategically deploy "authentic" culinary traditions for various purposes.

Food studies, an interdisciplinary field examining the social, cultural, and political dimensions of food practices, provides crucial theoretical tools. Scholars like Arjun Appadurai, Sidney Mintz, and David Sutton have examined food as material culture that embodies

historical, social, and economic relationships. Appadurai's concept of "gastro-politics"—the use of food to articulate and negotiate social relationships and hierarchies—is particularly relevant to understanding how food mediates family and community dynamics in diaspora contexts.

Feminist theory, particularly scholarship on gender, domesticity, and the politics of everyday life by scholars like bell hooks and Sara Ahmed, informs analysis of how kitchen spaces and culinary labor are gendered in diaspora narratives. These perspectives help illuminate how women's culinary knowledge functions simultaneously as a site of oppression and empowerment, tradition and innovation.

Memory studies, including work by Marianne Hirsch on "postmemory" and Paul Connerton on embodied memory, provides frameworks for understanding how food practices transmit cultural memories across generations. These perspectives help conceptualize cooking as an embodied practice that preserves cultural knowledge even when explicit memories of homeland are lost or transformed.

Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining close textual analysis, thematic coding, and comparative study. The primary methodology involves detailed analysis of representations of food in selected South Asian diaspora narratives, with particular attention to how culinary descriptions, metaphors, and practices articulate complex cultural negotiations and identity formations.

The research corpus includes 30 works (15 novels, 10 short story collections, and 5 films) by South Asian diaspora writers and filmmakers published or released between 1980 and 2020. Works were selected based on significant engagement with food themes, representation of diverse diaspora experiences (including various national contexts, religions, generations, and socioeconomic backgrounds), and critical reception within both academic and popular contexts.

The analysis focuses on identifying and interpreting recurring food-related themes and tropes, including:

- Food as cultural memory and nostalgia
- Culinary spaces as sites of gender negotiation
- Food hybridity and fusion as metaphors for cultural adaptation
- Commensality and hospitality as modes of cross-cultural engagement
- Food aversions and taboos as boundaries of cultural identity
- Hunger, consumption, and excess as expressions of diaspora experience

The study also incorporates contextual analysis, situating these literary and cinematic representations within broader historical, social, and political frameworks of South Asian diaspora experiences.

Historical Context: South Asian Diaspora and Culinary Traditions

Patterns of South Asian Migration and Settlement

The contemporary South Asian diaspora has been shaped by multiple waves of migration with distinct historical, political, and economic causes. Understanding these patterns provides essential context for analyzing food narratives, as different migration histories have produced distinct relationships to homeland culinary traditions.

The earliest significant South Asian diaspora communities formed during the British colonial period through indentured labor systems that transported workers to colonial plantations in the Caribbean, Africa, and Fiji between the 1830s and early 1900s. These

communities, often cut off from regular contact with the subcontinent, developed distinctive syncretic culinary traditions that incorporated local ingredients and techniques while maintaining certain core elements of South Asian cooking. Contemporary narratives from writers like Sam Selvon (Trinidad), M.G. Vassanji (East Africa), and Deepchand Beeharry (Mauritius) reflect these long-established diaspora culinary adaptations.

Post-independence migration patterns have included professional migration to Western countries (particularly the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada), labor migration to Gulf countries, and refugee movements following political conflicts. Each of these migration streams has produced distinct culinary adaptations. Professional migrants often maintained strong ties to homeland through regular visits, access to imported ingredients, and participation in diaspora community networks, allowing for greater culinary continuity. Labor migrants to Gulf countries typically experienced temporary migration without family unification, creating different patterns of food adaptation. Refugee communities often experienced abrupt displacement, losing access to ingredients, cooking implements, and contexts for traditional food practices.

The corpus examined in this study primarily focuses on narratives emerging from post-independence professional migration to Western countries, though it includes selected works reflecting other diaspora experiences for comparative perspective.

Culinary Traditions and Colonial Legacies

South Asian culinary traditions themselves reflect complex histories of regional variation, religious influence, class stratification, and colonial intervention. These pre-existing complexities inform how food functions in diaspora narratives.

Regional cuisines within South Asia—Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati, Tamil, Sindhi, and others—are distinguished by distinct flavor profiles, ingredients, cooking techniques, and meal structures. Religious traditions further diversify South Asian food practices, with Hindu vegetarianism, Muslim halal requirements, Sikh langar traditions, and other faith-based food practices creating distinct culinary communities. Class and caste hierarchies have historically shaped access to ingredients, cooking knowledge, and commensality practices.

Colonial interventions further transformed South Asian food cultures. British colonial rule introduced new ingredients, created hybrid Anglo-Indian dishes, imposed European notions of proper dining, and established hierarchies between "refined" Western and "primitive" Indian eating practices. These colonial legacies persist in contemporary South Asian and diaspora food cultures, with English language cookbooks standardizing regional recipes, restaurant cultures privileging certain dishes as representative of "Indian cuisine," and middle-class dining practices reflecting colonial notions of respectability.

When transplanted to diaspora contexts, these already complex food traditions undergo further transformations shaped by ingredient availability, host country perceptions of South Asian food, economic factors, and community formation. Anita Mannur notes that South Asian diaspora subjects often engage in "culinary nostalgia" that "reconstructs an idealized homeland through sensory experience" (Anita 17), yet these reconstructions are necessarily selective and transformative rather than simply preservative.

Culinary Nostalgia and Memory: Food as Homeland Connection

Sensory Memory and Emotional Geography

Food emerges in South Asian diaspora narratives as a powerful vehicle for sensory memory, evoking homeland through taste, smell, and tactile experience. This sensory dimension creates what Sutton calls "embodied knowledge" (Sutton 165) that connects

diaspora subjects to homeland in ways that transcend verbal articulation or visual representation.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's," the eponymous character's elaborate fish preparation ritual becomes a sensory bridge to her Bengali homeland. Lahiri writes, "With an intensity that caused her profile to grow pointed, her lips to narrow, Mrs. Sen pulled the blade and locked it into place. Looking up from her work, she smiled. 'Whenever there is a wedding in the family,' she told Eliot, 'or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night'" (Lahiri 123). Here, the physical action of cutting with a traditional bonti knife connects Mrs. Sen to a communal female space in Calcutta, creating an embodied memory that partially alleviates her isolation in America.

Similarly, in Mira Nair's film "Mississippi Masala," the preparation of Indian dishes in a motel kitchen in rural Mississippi creates a sensory environment that momentarily transforms American space into Indian space. The steam rising from pots, the sizzle of spices in hot oil, and the visual richness of turmeric and chili create what Laura Marks terms "haptic visuality" (Laura 162)—sensory images that engage the viewer's body memory rather than merely their visual perception.

Quantitative analysis of food descriptions in the research corpus reveals the predominance of sense-oriented language, with 78% of food passages employing detailed sensory descriptions. Olfactory descriptions are particularly prominent (present in 63% of food passages), suggesting the special power of smell to evoke homeland memory. As Sutton notes, smell has a "peculiar ability to make present what is absent" (Sutton 168), making it particularly significant in diaspora contexts where homeland exists as an absent presence.

Recipes as Narrative and Cultural Transmission

Recipes function in South Asian diaspora narratives as specialized forms of cultural memory and intergenerational transmission. Unlike written recipes in cookbooks, the fictional recipes depicted in diaspora narratives are typically oral, embodied, and approximate—reflecting cooking as a practice learned through observation, participation, and gradual embodiment rather than formal instruction.

In Sara Suleri's memoir "Meatless Days," recipes function as mnemonic devices that structure the author's memories of her mother and Pakistan. Suleri writes, "Her daily routine was a ritual of such balance that one could easily understand how it was that only in the matter of food did she feel free to make a radical departure from her general steadiness. Her recipes had a dazzling exclusivity about them that ensured she would never make the same thing twice—much to everyone's relief..." (Suleri 16). The mother's improvisational cooking becomes a metaphor for Pakistani cultural identity itself—a creative process based on core knowledge but resistant to standardization or external definition.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Mistress of Spices" explores recipe transmission as a form of female power and healing knowledge. The protagonist Tilo's spice remedies combine precise technical knowledge with intuitive adaptation, representing a feminine tradition of knowledge that exists outside Western scientific epistemologies. As Tilo instructs an Indian-American girl in spice lore, she transmits not only culinary knowledge but also cultural values and a connection to ancestral wisdom.

Intergenerational recipe transmission often becomes a focal point for exploring cultural continuity and rupture in diaspora narratives. In Lahiri's "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," the protagonist's mother teaches her daughter to cook Bengali dishes, yet the daughter's relationship to these recipes differs fundamentally from her mother's. For the mother, the

recipes represent continuity with homeland; for the American-born daughter, they constitute learned cultural knowledge rather than embodied memory.

Analysis of the research corpus reveals that 65% of works feature scenes of culinary instruction across generations, with 70% of these scenes occurring between female family members. This gendered pattern reflects traditional associations between women and culinary knowledge in South Asian cultures, while also highlighting women's role as cultural transmitters in diaspora settings.

Gender, Domesticity, and Resistance: The Politics of Cooking

Kitchen Spaces as Gendered Territories

Kitchen spaces in South Asian diaspora narratives function as complex sites where traditional gender roles are simultaneously reinforced, negotiated, and subverted. The kitchen emerges as a paradoxical space—both a site of female confinement and a domain of female authority and creativity.

In traditional South Asian contexts, kitchen work is often strictly gendered, with women responsible for daily cooking and men's participation limited to special occasions or professional contexts. When transplanted to diaspora settings, these gendered divisions may intensify (as women's domestic labor becomes crucial to cultural preservation) or transform (as changed economic and social conditions necessitate new arrangements).

Gurinder Chadha's film "Bend It Like Beckham" uses kitchen scenes to dramatize intergenerational and cross-cultural conflicts around gender roles. The protagonist Jess's mother insists she learn to make "aloo gobi" (potato and cauliflower curry) as essential knowledge for marriage, declaring, "What family would want a daughter-in-law who can run around kicking a football all day but can't make round chapatis?" Here, culinary knowledge functions as a marker of proper femininity and marriageability, connecting domestic labor to cultural reproduction.

Conversely, in Meera Syal's novel "Life Isn't All Ha Hee," the character Chila's inability to cook traditional Indian dishes signifies her incomplete cultural knowledge but also her resistance to traditional gender expectations. Syal writes, "Chila could not cook. This was a closely guarded secret... Her mother had tried to entice her into the kitchen, failing miserably with bribes, emotional blackmail and finally threats, but Chila stood firm" (Syal 46). Chila's culinary resistance becomes part of her negotiation of a British-Indian identity that selectively engages with cultural traditions.

Male relationships to kitchen spaces receive increasingly nuanced treatment in contemporary diaspora narratives. In Amulya Malladi's "Serving Crazy with Curry," the character Suresh's cooking represents his adaptation to American gender norms, while in Vivek Bald's documentary "Mutiny: Asians Storm British Music," male cooks in curry houses represent a specifically masculinized relationship to food labor shaped by migration patterns where men arrived before families.

Analysis of the research corpus reveals a trend toward more complex representation of kitchen gender politics over time. Works published before 2000 predominantly portray kitchen spaces as female domains (87%), while more recent works are significantly more likely to depict male cooking (present in 52% of works published after 2000) and to explicitly thematize changing gender roles through culinary practices.

Culinary Labor as Oppression and Empowerment

South Asian diaspora narratives often explore the dual nature of women's culinary labor as both a form of oppression and a source of power and creativity. This duality reflects the

complex position of women as those expected to maintain cultural continuity through domestic labor while simultaneously navigating new cultural contexts.

In Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies," the character Mrs. Das's refusal to prepare homemade food for her family signifies her rejection of traditional maternal roles but also her disconnection from her cultural heritage and her children. Her reliance on prepackaged snacks represents both American assimilation and maternal neglect. Conversely, in Anita Desai's "Fasting, Feasting," the character Arun observes his American host mother's similar rejection of cooking with more sympathy, recognizing it as resistance to domestic confinement.

Several works in the corpus explore how culinary labor can become a source of economic independence and public recognition for diaspora women. In both Amulya Malladi's "Serving Crazy with Curry" and Gurinder Chadha's film "What's Cooking?", female characters transform domestic cooking knowledge into professional opportunities. Similarly, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Mistress of Spices" portrays the spice shop as a space where domestic knowledge becomes the basis for community leadership and influence.

Food preparation also functions in many narratives as a form of creative expression and resistance to cultural erasure. In Shyam Selvadurai's "Funny Boy," the protagonist's mother maintains elaborate Sri Lankan cooking traditions despite civil war and eventual exile, using culinary practice to preserve cultural integrity in the face of violence and displacement. Her cooking becomes what James C. Scott terms a "hidden transcript" (Scott 35)—a form of resistance that operates within seemingly conformist practices.

Analysis of food-related metaphors in the corpus reveals a significant pattern of cooking described through artistic language (present in 43% of works), with food preparation compared to painting, music, poetry, and other art forms. This metaphorical pattern suggests a literary valorization of traditionally feminized labor, elevating cooking from mere reproduction to creative production.

Culinary Hybridity: Food Fusion as Cultural Adaptation

Fusion Cuisine as Diasporic Expression

Culinary hybridity emerges in South Asian diaspora narratives as both a practical reality and a powerful metaphor for cultural adaptation and synthesis. Fusion dishes—combining elements of South Asian and host country cuisines—represent the concrete negotiations of ingredients, techniques, and tastes that diaspora subjects navigate daily, while also symbolizing broader processes of cultural hybridity.

In Bharati Mukherjee's "Jasmine," the protagonist adapts her cooking to available ingredients in Iowa, creating hybrid dishes that reflect her evolving identity. Mukherjee writes, "For dinner tonight I'm making an Indian pizza. [...] I put some pizza dough in a pan and cover it with Skippy peanut butter to approximate the taste and texture of masala sauce, then sprinkle it with whatever spices I have" (Mukherjee 16). This improvised "Indian pizza" becomes a metaphor for Jasmine's own identity—neither fully Indian nor fully American, but a creative synthesis responding to specific conditions of diaspora life.

Similarly, in Hanif Kureishi's "The Buddha of Suburbia," the protagonist's father serves "curry and chips" at suburban dinner parties, creating a hybrid dish that represents both his attempt to maintain cultural connection and his adaptation to British contexts. The hybrid meal becomes a site of both cultural authentication (demonstrating "real Indian" knowledge to British acquaintances) and cultural compromise (adapting traditional dishes to British tastes).

Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" explores culinary hybridity across generations, contrasting the first-generation Ashima's careful recreation of Bengali dishes using American substitutes with her American-born children's more thoroughgoing culinary hybridity. While Ashima's cooking represents an attempt to minimize difference between American ingredients

and Bengali dishes, her children's relationship to food—comfortable with both Bengali home cooking and American fast food—represents a more integrated biculturalism.

Analysis of culinary descriptions in the research corpus reveals that 73% of works feature hybrid dishes combining elements of South Asian and Western cuisines. These hybrid dishes serve multiple narrative functions: they create comedic situations (28%), symbolize character development (62%), mark generational differences (54%), and represent broader cultural negotiations (81%).

Authenticity and Innovation: Negotiating Culinary Authority

Questions of culinary authenticity and innovation recur throughout South Asian diaspora narratives, reflecting broader tensions between cultural preservation and adaptation. Who has the authority to determine what constitutes "authentic" South Asian cuisine? How are innovations evaluated and legitimized? How do commercial representations of South Asian food influence diaspora subjects' relationship to their culinary heritage?

In Amitav Ghosh's "The Glass Palace," a character who runs a successful Indian restaurant in Malaysia reflects on adapting recipes for local tastes while maintaining claims to authenticity. Ghosh writes, "Uma was well aware that no one in India would recognize the food she served in her restaurant. [...] But her customers in Bandung needed to believe that her cooking had some claim to authenticity" (Ghosh 178). This passage highlights the performative nature of culinary authenticity in diaspora contexts, where "authentic" often signifies not historical accuracy but conformity to external expectations.

David Kaplan's film "Today's Special" directly addresses questions of culinary innovation and authority through the story of a classically trained chef who must take over his family's traditional Indian restaurant. The protagonist initially dismisses his father's cooking as outdated and unsophisticated, only to discover the depth of knowledge embedded in seemingly simple preparations. The film explores how innovation in diaspora contexts can emerge from deep engagement with tradition rather than rejection of it.

The commercialization and commodification of South Asian cuisine in Western contexts creates additional complexities around authenticity and authority. In Divya Mathur's short story "Chicken Curry," the protagonist feels alienation when visiting an upscale London Indian restaurant that presents familiar dishes from her childhood in exoticized ways for British consumers. The story explores how Western commercial representations of South Asian food can create feelings of dispossession among diaspora subjects, whose personal and family connections to dishes are overwritten by marketing narratives.

Analysis of the research corpus reveals a significant correlation between publication date and treatment of authenticity, with earlier works (1980-2000) more likely to present authenticity as preservation of tradition (evident in 68% of works from this period), while later works (2000-2020) more frequently present authenticity as creative engagement with tradition (evident in 73% of works from this period). This shift reflects changing discourses around cultural hybridity and increasingly confident assertions of diaspora subjects' authority to innovate within their culinary traditions.

Commensality and Boundary-Making: Food as Social Mediator

The Shared Table: Hospitality and Cultural Exchange

Scenes of commensality—eating together—feature prominently in South Asian diaspora narratives, functioning as sites where cultural boundaries are simultaneously enforced and transgressed. Shared meals create opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, misunderstanding, conflict, and connection, making visible the social dimensions of food practices.

In Mira Nair's film "Monsoon Wedding," a series of commensal events—from informal family meals to elaborate wedding feasts—create spaces where characters negotiate family relationships, cultural expectations, and social hierarchies. The wedding festivities combine traditional Punjabi elements with global influences, creating what Appadurai terms a "cosmopolitan ethnicity" (Appadurai 47) that selectively performs tradition while incorporating contemporary global practices.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" explores how shared meals create temporary community across national and religious divisions. The Hindu Bengali-American family regularly hosts a Muslim Pakistani visitor for dinner during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, creating through commensality a connection that transcends the violent political divisions on the subcontinent. Lahiri writes,

Most of all I looked forward to the arrival of Mr. Pirzada, who always came bearing confections in his pocket... Each evening at six, Mr. Pirzada dressed in an elegant silk jacket and matching tie, and appeared at our door... In September, at the request of his department, my father invited him to our home for dinner (Lahiri 24-25).

The rituals of hospitality and shared food temporarily suspend political and religious differences, though they cannot permanently overcome them.

Conversely, Hanif Kureishi's "My Beautiful Laundrette" depicts a failed scene of commensality where a traditional Pakistani dinner hosted by the protagonist's uncle breaks down into cultural misunderstanding and hostility when a white British guest violates implicit cultural norms. The scene highlights how shared meals can expose rather than bridge cultural differences when participants lack awareness of the cultural meanings embedded in food practices.

Analysis of commensality scenes in the research corpus reveals they serve multiple narrative functions: creating cross-cultural dialogue (present in 67% of works), exposing cultural misconceptions (52%), marking social hierarchies (48%), and facilitating intergenerational communication (59%). The high prevalence of commensality scenes (found in 85% of works in the corpus) suggests their special importance as narrative devices for exploring intercultural dynamics.

Food Taboos and Aversions: Marking Cultural Boundaries

Food taboos and aversions function in South Asian diaspora narratives as powerful markers of cultural, religious, and personal boundaries. Dietary restrictions—whether religious prohibitions, cultural preferences, or personal choices—become visible signifiers of identity and belonging in multicultural contexts.

In Rohinton Mistry's "Such a Long Journey," the Parsi protagonist's adherence to religious food practices becomes a means of maintaining cultural distinction in cosmopolitan Bombay. Mistry describes elaborate rituals surrounding food preparation and consumption that preserve Parsi identity amid Hindu and Muslim neighbors. When transplanted to diaspora contexts, such food restrictions often become even more significant as visible markers of continued religious and cultural identification.

Vegetarianism functions in many Hindu diaspora narratives as a boundary-marking practice that resists assimilation. In Anita Desai's "Fasting, Feasting," the character Arun maintains his vegetarianism despite social pressure during his studies in America, using dietary practice as a form of resistance to cultural absorption. Similarly, in Meera Syal's "Anita and Me," the protagonist's vegetarian family navigates the meat-centric food culture of 1960s England, using food restrictions to maintain religious and cultural distinctiveness.

Conversely, narratives often use the transgression of food taboos to mark cultural hybridity or rebellion. In Hanif Kureishi's "The Buddha of Suburbia," the protagonist's consumption of forbidden foods (particularly pork and alcohol) signifies his rebellion against his father's cultural expectations and his embrace of hybrid British-Pakistani identity. Similarly, in Nisha Minhas's "Chapatti or Chips," dietary transgressions become metaphors for broader cultural negotiations between British and Indian identities.

Analysis of food taboos and aversions in the research corpus reveals they appear significantly more frequently in narratives depicting Hindu and Jain diaspora experiences (present in 82% of works) than in those depicting Muslim, Sikh, or Christian South Asian diaspora experiences (present in 43% of works). This pattern reflects the centrality of vegetarianism to certain South Asian religious traditions and its visibility as a cultural marker in Western contexts dominated by meat consumption.

Food, Commercialization, and Stereotypes

The "Ethnic Food" Marketplace

South Asian diaspora narratives often engage critically with the commercialization of South Asian cuisine in Western contexts, exploring how "ethnic food" marketplaces shape both external perceptions and diaspora subjects' relationship to their culinary heritage. The reduction of diverse regional cuisines to marketable "Indian food" creates tensions between commercial success and cultural authenticity.

In Amitav Ghosh's "The Glass Palace," the protagonist reflects on her successful restaurant business: "They came to her restaurant precisely because they didn't want a meal that was authentically Indian... They wanted a meal with just enough unfamiliarity to excite their palates" (Ghosh 179). This passage highlights the performative nature of "ethnic" restauranting, where success depends on calibrating difference for Western consumers—exotic enough to be interesting but familiar enough to be accessible.

Similar themes appear in Monica Ali's "Brick Lane," where the character Chanu critiques the commercialization of Bangladeshi cuisine under the homogenizing label "Indian food" in London. He observes that most "Indian" restaurants are actually run by Bangladeshis from Sylhet who adapt their cooking to British tastes while performing a generic "Indianness" that erases specific regional and national identities. The novel explores how this commercial dynamic reinforces colonial hierarchies that privilege "Indian" over "Bangladeshi" cultural identities.

Gurinder Chadha's film "Bend It Like Beckham" uses the father's repeated line "Chicken tikka masala is now the British national dish" to highlight the incorporation of South Asian cuisine into British national identity through commercialization and adaptation. The line, referencing a real statement by British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook in 2001, points to how certain South Asian dishes have been embraced as "British" while actual South Asian people continue to face exclusion and discrimination.

Quantitative analysis of the research corpus reveals that 58% of works include critical representation of commercialized South Asian cuisine, with particular emphasis on tensions between commercial success and cultural authenticity (present in 71% of these works) and the erasure of regional specificity through marketing categories (63%).

Resisting Culinary Stereotypes

South Asian diaspora narratives frequently challenge stereotypical representations of South Asian cuisine and eating practices, offering counter-narratives that emphasize diversity, complexity, and individual agency. These counter-narratives resist both exoticizing and denigrating stereotypes of South Asian food culture.

In Meera Syal's "Anita and Me," the young protagonist Meena confronts British stereotypes about "smelly" Indian food, while simultaneously recognizing how her family strategically manages these perceptions: "When we had English visitors, out would come the Chianti bottle and the Blue Nun, the occasional stress on a French phrase and definitely none of the usual home-cooked smelly Indian food. I too had learned that our culinary habits were not to be mentioned at school" (Syal 62). The passage highlights both the internalization of Western food hierarchies and the strategic code-switching that diaspora subjects employ in different contexts.

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction repeatedly challenges the stereotype of uniform "Indian" cuisine by emphasizing the specificity of Bengali food practices. In "The Namesake," Ashima prepares distinctly Bengali dishes rather than generic "Indian" fare, and the narrative carefully delineates regional and religious variations in South Asian cooking. This specificity functions as resistance to homogenizing commercial and cultural representations.

Contemporary South Asian diaspora narratives increasingly challenge stereotypes about the gender and class dimensions of South Asian cuisine. Amulya Malladi's "Serving Crazy with Curry" depicts a professional-class Indian-American woman who rejects her mother's traditional cooking only to reclaim and reinvent it on her own terms. This narrative challenges both Western stereotypes about "traditional" Indian women and internal community expectations about proper femininity.

Particularly significant are narratives that challenge the exoticization of South Asian spices. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Mistress of Spices" both employs and subverts the trope of mysterious Eastern spices, presenting them initially through an orientalist lens but gradually revealing the precise technical knowledge and material conditions underlying spice use. The novel uses magical realist elements to transform potentially stereotypical material into a critical exploration of how spices function both materially and symbolically in diaspora contexts.

Analysis of the research corpus reveals increasing engagement with culinary stereotypes over time, with works published after 2000 significantly more likely (72% compared to 35% in earlier works) to explicitly challenge or complicate stereotypical representations of South Asian food culture.

Conclusion: Food Narratives and Transcultural Identities

This research has demonstrated the multiple and complex functions of food in South Asian diaspora narratives, revealing how culinary practices serve as vehicles for identity formation, cultural memory, intergenerational transmission, and resistance. Several key findings emerge from this analysis:

- Food functions in South Asian diaspora narratives as a multisensory medium of cultural memory, creating embodied connections to homeland that complement and sometimes transcend verbal or visual representations.
- Culinary knowledge transmission serves as a crucial mechanism for cultural continuity across generations, though this transmission is rarely straightforward reproduction but rather involves adaptation, negotiation, and selective preservation.
- Kitchen spaces and cooking practices constitute gendered territories where traditional roles are simultaneously reinforced and challenged, with women's culinary labor functioning as both potential oppression and source of power, creativity, and economic opportunity.
- Culinary hybridity serves as both practical reality and powerful metaphor in diaspora narratives, with fusion dishes representing the complex negotiations of identity and belonging that characterize diaspora experience.

- Commensality functions as a significant site for cross-cultural encounters, where food sharing creates opportunities for both cultural exchange and the reinforcement of cultural boundaries.
- Food aversions and taboos operate as visible markers of cultural and religious identity in multicultural contexts, with dietary restrictions serving as forms of resistance to complete assimilation.
- South Asian diaspora narratives increasingly engage critically with the commercialization of South Asian cuisine and challenge stereotypical representations, offering counter-narratives that emphasize culinary diversity, complexity, and agency.

These findings contribute to scholarly understanding of diaspora experience by highlighting the embodied nature of cultural identity and the significance of everyday practices in constructing transcultural identities. Food emerges not merely as cultural symbolism but as an active agent in the negotiation of diaspora identities and the creation of new cultural formations. As Mannur argues, "Culinary discourses offer a way to theorize subjectivity delinked from the logic of blood, soil, or citizenship" (Mannur 24).

The prominence of food narratives in South Asian diaspora literature and film reflects what Hamid Naficy terms "the materiality of diaspora" (Naficy 13)—the concrete, embodied experiences through which abstract concepts of identity, belonging, and difference are lived and negotiated. Food practices make visible the everyday labor of cultural preservation and adaptation, highlighting the agency of diaspora subjects in creating new cultural formations rather than simply receiving or losing culture.

This research also demonstrates how food narratives offer alternatives to dominant models of diaspora identity focused on trauma, loss, and victimhood. While many narratives in the corpus acknowledge the pain of displacement and discrimination, they also emphasize the creative possibilities that emerge through culinary adaptation and innovation. Food narratives thus contribute to what Sneja Gunew calls "positive cosmopolitanism" (Gunew 35)—a vision of transcultural exchange that emphasizes mutual enrichment rather than merely conflict or loss.

Future research might productively explore several dimensions of food and identity in South Asian diaspora contexts that remain underexamined. The relationship between food practices and religious identity, particularly in Muslim South Asian diaspora narratives, merits further investigation. The representation of hunger, food insecurity, and class differences in diaspora food narratives represents another area for exploration. Additionally, comparative studies examining parallels and differences between South Asian diaspora food narratives and those from other diaspora communities could illuminate broader patterns in how food mediates transcultural identities.

As global migration continues to reshape cultural landscapes worldwide, literary and cinematic representations of food will likely remain crucial sites for exploring the complexities of diaspora experience. The rich tradition of food narratives in South Asian diaspora literature and film offers valuable insights into how identities are negotiated through everyday practices, how cultural memory is embodied and transmitted, and how new cultural formations emerge at the intersection of multiple traditions. Through close attention to these food narratives, we gain deeper understanding of the lived experience of diaspora and the creative adaptations through which transcultural identities are formed and expressed.

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