

Cuisine Dialogues: Cultural Hybridity in Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*

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Abstract

This paper examines the contested meaning of food in a diasporic context by looking at Amulya Malladi's fictional work *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004). Drawing on the postcolonial critical theory of acculturation, contra-acculturation, and hybridity, the paper examines how food becomes a crucial site for cultural identity of first-generation and second-generation migrants. Through experimental cooking and fusion dishes, Malladi tries to incorporate the complex process of adaptation of different cultures, where Western influences transform traditional Indian food. Through the protagonist's inventive recipes, Malladi tries to challenge cultural authenticity and tries to showcase how food becomes a powerful site to preserve, alter or reinvent cultural identity among the migrants. The paper explores the concept of hybridity where migrants amalgamate the elements of native culture with the host culture and resist totalisation as experienced in the novel.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Food Studies, Acculturation, Contra-acculturation, Cultural Hybridity*

Introduction

Food plays a central role in shaping cultural identity. Its meaning goes beyond nourishment or survival, functioning as a powerful symbol of memory, belonging, and resistance. It reflects the emotional challenge of diasporic people, as they try to preserve the ancient traditional heritage and blend into new social and cultural environments. For many migrants who get displaced voluntarily or involuntarily, food becomes a bridge that connects them to their homeland. Das observes, “The diaspora understands “food as a portal” through which their ethnicity, tradition and culture can be kept alive, via their attempts to cook and eat familiar dishes” (Das 2).

The contemporary Indian diaspora has been influenced by numerous waves of migrations driven by various political, historical and economic factors. Among these, the migration of various indentured labour during British colonial period illustrates a significant example of how food acts as a site of acculturation and adaptation in a new cultural environment. When the indentured workers were sent to various nations like Caribbean, Fiji, Trinidad and Africa, they were deprived of the cuisine from their homeland and had little access to traditional ingredients necessary for preparing dishes of their native culinary culture. Thus, with the help of colonial rations and some local ingredients, they created ‘hybrid’ cuisine. Such food practices trace back to the start of acculturation and creolization of cuisine in a diasporic context. Various South Asian writers such as Sam Selvon, M.G. Vassanji, and Amitav Ghosh among others have portrayed such creolization of cuisine in their fictional works.

Indian diaspora witnessed multiple waves of migrations, including post-independence migration to various nations such as USA, UK, and also the Gulf countries. Each movement resulted in distinct form of culinary adaptations and cultural negotiations. While professional migrants were able to maintain close connections with their homeland and had access to imported ingredients, making culinary continuity possible. But on the other hand, refugees or indentured labourers had limited access to resources, and were not able to follow traditional cooking practices. This compelled them to modify such cooking practices shaped by local ingredients. This exercise of forced culinary adaptation gave rise to broader process of creolization and acculturation of cuisine. Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* (2011) dwells on such indentured labourers or migrants who use food as a means of preserving and cultivating identity in foreign environments. Displaced from their homeland, and deprived of resources, they are compelled to switch to local ingredients and adapt their cuisine, resulting in cultural hybridity. In this context, food represents resistance against cultural erasure. These culinary practices become archive of a migrant's "imaginary homeland"-a nation built by emigrants, expatriates, exiles, that cease to exist solely based on geography, but they try to reclaim the loss through fictional narratives (Rushdie 10).

Ketu H Katrak in "Food and Belonging: At "Home" in Alien-Kitchens" emphasizes on the significance of food in a diasporic context as she illustrates that she had little interest in food during her childhood years. But, after moving to the USA, food transformed as a source of connection with her homeland (263). As Katrak observes, the connection that diasporic people share with their native lands is often expressed through meals and culinary practices imbued with nostalgia and cross-cultural symbols. Culinary practices become important carriers of home, belonging and identity, enabling migrants to establish emotional connection with their homeland while negotiating with changing cultural environment. Thus, the meaning of food extends beyond sustenance, and can be understood carrying various

cultural symbols infused with meanings, highlighting narratives of migration, adaptation, assimilation and also cultural exchange. Kesler's work "One Reader's Digest: Toward a Gastronomic Theory of Literature" shows a connection between food in literature arguing it as "freighted with meaning. Just as in life, food in fiction signifies. It means more than itself. It is symbolic. It opens doors to double and triple meaning" (156).

In diasporic literature, food functions as a cultural signifier, embodying multiple meanings and serving as a powerful tool through which questions of a person's culture and identity is negotiated. Nayana Chakrabarti in her essay titled "The Migrant's Feast" discusses a migrant's desire to return to his abandoned home when he no longer can taste authenticity in the prepared meals. In a diasporic context, food bridges the gap between displacement and belonging. Recreation of dish by migrants is not merely an act of cooking but results in cultural translation. She further quotes, "The consumption of food, which is identified with the homeland, but yet has been cooked from ingredients sourced from the host country, indicates how the cook strives to map the imagined homeland onto the present's spatial reality; through the medium of cooked food" (147). Clifford also argues that the experiences of a diasporic person are "not definitively tied to a single place but 'in-between' various regions, nations and cultures" (10). Such dilemma causes fragmentation of identity. Many postcolonial theorists like Homi K. Bhabha, also emphasize the significance of culinary traditions as sites of cultural transformation within diasporic setting, arguing that food practices are transformed through cultural adaptation. 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.

Food and the Indian diaspora share a close and intimate relationship, a connection that has been acknowledged by many sociologists. Krishnendu Ray observes, "cuisine like religion, is one of the sites where the migrant turns away hesitatingly from the embrace of the

metropole” (K.Ray 1). Similarly, food researchers like Anita Mannur view food as an “emotional anchor”, while another scholar Emma-Jayne Abbotts talks about the ability of food to create “new subjectivities and orientations” (Mannur 27; Abbotts 117). These perspectives emphasize the role of food to be a carrier of culture and identity in Indian diasporic fiction.

A diasporic person experiences acculturation where culinary practices play a significant role in the process. According to Givson, “*acculturation* refers to changes that take place as a result of contact with culturally dissimilar people, groups, and social influences” (qtd. in Schwartz 1). The people undergo a shift in culture as they encounter new language, customs, and also cuisine. It involves assimilating into the host culture and preserving one’s roots. Similarly, Berry’s acculturation model describes the orientation of immigrants towards the new society on two dimensions relating to the extent to which individuals (1) desire to preserve their ethnic culture and (2) wish to interact with the members of the majority group (qtd. in Zee and Oudenhoven 120). Food becomes a crucial link, where the migrants, whether by force or choice, have to blend into the host country. However, the first-generation migrants also try to preserve their culture and maintain their connection with their homeland. As a result, they develop a form of resistance towards the host culture and undergo “contra-acculturation” that will be examined further in this paper. Concerning this context, Jhumpa Lahiri, focusing on the identities of diasporic people, illustrates in one of her interviews that “I wasn’t born here,” writer Jhumpa Lahiri once said of the United States, “but I may as well have been” (Navlakha). The dilemma of hybridized identity is evident in many of her novels, especially *The Namesake* (2003) where she uses culinary practices to explore this cultural fusion.

Similar to Lahiri’s works, Amulya Malladi’s books intricately describe the experience of an immigrant as she observes cross-cultural interactions. Her works explore nuances of South Asian identity, and in *The Mango Season* (2003), Malladi tries to instil complexities of

diasporic experiences through the use of food imageries. She tries to revisit her childhood memories, or tries to reconnect with her family through food. Food thus becomes a sensory reminder of one's homeland and culture. Malladi's another novel *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004) portrays first and second generational immigrant experience in the USA. The novel speaks how the protagonist Devi grapples with her fractured sense of self and reconstructs her cultural identity within the sphere of diaspora. After losing her baby and her job, Devi experiences a profound sense of disconnection and alienation. By resorting to cooking, she turns her silence into expression and self recovery. Food not only serves as a medium of nourishment, but it turns into means of connection with her family. Further, the blending of multiple cuisines mirrors the hybrid identity often associated with the people from the diasporic community, showcasing the interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation.

This paper examines how food mediates the process of acculturation and contra-acculturation in the novel where culinary traditions play a significant role in shaping the hybrid identities of migrants across generations. It also examines the in-between identity of a diasporic person and through cooking, preparing meals and remembering food, the characters of the present novel navigate the dilemma of assimilating into the host country and preserving one's culture. It can be observed that the fragmented identity of Indian as well as South Asian diaspora can be effectively understood through food as it becomes a vital means to connect with one's history, roots and community while simultaneously engaging with the host nation. In diasporic contexts, food becomes a site of cultural exchange, where tradition is not just preserved but transformed through interaction with other cultures. As Anita Mannur suggests by coining the term 'Culinary citizenship' food becomes a rather transformed cultural 'interorientation' (where people from different regions interact with one another). Thus, the diaspora attains hybrid identity. The idea of ethnic "absolutism proposed" by V. Mishra slowly disappears. People try to preach fluid and adaptive identity. The shift from first

generation to second generation migration shows a shift from rigid to adaptable identities which is also reflected in the cuisine- an assimilation of old recipes with new innovations.

Preservation and Resistance: The Mechanics of Contra-Acculturation

Serving Crazy with Curry gives a vivid diasporic insight of an Indian origin family settled in the United States. Saroj's experiences highlight a sense of alienation after relocating to the United States, as she highlights in the novel as, "When she stepped out of her house there was nothing familiar, no vegetable vendor selling coriander and mint, no coconut vendor selling coconut water. It was a bland place they'd moved to, this country with no *masala*" (103). Her experience of alienation is further heightened in public by being "the other" when people fixed their gaze on her after she wore traditional Indian clothes. Saroj expresses her dislike for the new country and recalls the environment being around people; chatting with the milkman in the morning, buying vegetables from the front yard, or the Indian ritual of tuning to Lata Mangeshkar or Kishore Kumar on the radio, among many others (103). Her sense of dissociation and also alienation is faced by most first-generation migrants; she emphasizes that the United States never felt home. Saroj works tirelessly to build connections with her daughters and being involved in their lives. However, she feels a sense of distance from their lives due to the differences in their lifestyle and cultural outlooks. Unlike Saroj, her children do not adhere to Indian traditions, which heighten her sense of isolation. She further feels a sense of estrangement in everyday practices when her son-in-law fails to enjoy a cup of *chai* with her, or does not hang around in the house teasing her like traditional Indian sons-in-law (25).

Food emerges as a powerful vehicle of memory in South Asian narrative evoking homeland through taste or smell. Sutton calls this experience as "embodied knowledge" (165). The protagonist in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* Ashima Ganguli embodies contra

acculturation as well. Her adherence to Bengali customs such as wearing silk sari, wearing vermillion, *shakhas* or covering her head before her elders signifies more than nostalgia, but preservation of embodied cultural memory in an alien landscape. Her resistance also enters the culinary field, where she tries to prepare Bengali dishes with the available ingredients. Similar to Ashmia, Saroj's attempts to resist American mode of living and engaging on Indian food is present throughout the novel. The actions of Ashima and Saroj illustrate that the first generations migrants cannot completely assimilate into the host culture by sticking to cultural symbols. Through food, rituals or attire, Saroj and Ashima use tradition as comfort as well as resistance.

Malladi highlights that moving to a different country comes with various challenges, many are observed in foodways, where spices, ingredients, and cooking methods often go through modification. In response, the migrants indulge in culinary authenticity by recreating or preserving the taste of home and safeguard their identity from becoming further fragmented. In the novel, Saroj tries to translate the terminologies of spices to get accustomed in a new country and avoid altering the taste of her meals. Even so, differences in geographical location and availability of materials lead to culinary hybridisation. To combat this sense of alienation, the first-generation immigrants attempt to preserve Indian tradition through cooking and preparation of meals. Through such practices, they resist complete assimilation of dominant culture, also termed as "contra-acculturation". "Contra-acculturation" as opposed to acculturation is a post-colonial phenomenon where the immigrants cannot completely blend into the new culture or completely turn away from their traditional roots (Jacob 569). First-generation migrants like Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake* (2003) cling to Bengali customs and food and go to Bengali gatherings. Nazneen in *Brick Lane* (2003) also recreates traditional Bangladeshi food and follows rituals of her hometown. Similarly, to further stick to her heritage, Saroj only eats and prepares Indian food in the

household. During various occasions or celebrations, she insists on making *biryani* instead of going to a restaurant and states, ““You can eat all the nonsense you like outside this house. In here, I will only make *good* Indian food”” (Malladi 107). Saroj’s insistence on following Indian methods of cooking is the example of contra-acculturation. She interrupts Devi during her cooking and insists Devi use Indian ingredients rather than foreign product and adds, ““Why are you adding Tabasco? Why can’t you add *apna* homemade chilli powder?”” (154). She attempts to incorporate traditional Indian values in her daughters and is usually disappointed when they fail to confirm to her expectations. During a visit to Devi’s apartment, seeing the empty refrigerator, frustrated Saroj prompts a remark, ““Why couldn’t she learn to cook like all good Indian girls””? (27). For Saroj, learning to cook is more than a domestic responsibility; it is a marker of cultural identity. Her expectation for her daughters to embrace Indian values indicates resistance to Westernized mode of living. It further exemplifies an important aspect of contra-acculturation through which first-generation migrants preserve their cultural heritage.

Saroj is constantly seen to resist the American culture and insists on sticking to Indian values and traditions. From Devi’s observations, much of her mother’s life is shaped by an effort to preserve Indian culture, customs and traditions. This is observed in her culinary habits where she resists the American lifestyle, and cooks or indulges only in Indian meals. She is ““Always chopping, dicing, and/or planning”” (79). She uses cookbooks to help her prepare different Indian cuisine. Devi struggles to understand Saroj’s unwavering obsession with Indian cuisine and her reluctance to other delicacies. She remarks reflecting on her mother’s habits, ““It is a shame that Mama doesn’t use the hundreds of other fruits and vegetables and spices available from around the world. If it isn’t Indian”” (143).

Like many other first- generation immigrants, including Ashima, Saroj prefers buying groceries from Indian stores to feel closer to home. Saroj and Ashima seek ingredients that

evoke sensory and emotional landscape of their homeland. The Indian store in America is a social space that diasporic people go to experience an Indian atmosphere, “The old New India Bazaar resembled a vegetable market from India; it was messy, full of people and smelled like a combination of not-so-fresh vegetables, rice, wheat and fried samosa” (22). Saroj takes the scent of mango in an American store and is transported back to India. “It was at times like this that the pain of not living in India pierced through her sharply” (23). She feels a sense of dissociation and always imagines travelling back to her native land. Food becomes a ‘vehicle of memory’ that helps the migrants to maintain affective connections with their homeland. As a result, food transforms into an important source to help migrants like Saroj to uphold culinary authenticity. These visits to the supermarket or buying mangoes for the entire family appear to be acts of preservation of culture. Such cultural preservation is also evident when the recipes are passed down from one generation to the other. Divakurani in the novel *Mistress of Spices* (1997) creates a mythical space where she focuses on passing down of recipes and ancient wisdom from older to younger generations. Even in texts like Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989) the protagonist tries new culinary experience with the available ingredients present in the foreign state like Iowa. This results in ‘hybrid’ dishes which emphasizes on the identity of a diasporic person. One example can be cited, such as the Indian pizza- which is prepared with the fusion of Indian and American methods of cooking. Through these culinary practices, the self is constantly reconstructed through fusion and adaptation. Thus, diasporic writers like Malladi, Divakurani and Mukherjee use food as a tool for cultural transformation.

Negotiating Change: The Process of Acculturation

While Saroj resists the American and Westernized traditions, her daughters occupy an in-between space of not being completely Indian or American. The cultural duality is reflected through Devi’s cooking. Devi is a second-generation migrant who incorporates western

ingredients in traditional cooking, a significant feature of acculturation central to the novel. From an early age, Devi always had innovative suggestions in her mind while her mother prepared food. She would ask, “Why can’t we add parsley in the *dal*”? (27) or “Why can’t we make a duck curry or rabbit curry instead of chicken curry”? (28) Saroj dismissed such creative suggestions from her daughter and persistently tried traditional methods of cooking. Following the unfortunate incident when Devi harmed herself and ended up in a hospital, she becomes emotionally detached and largely unresponsive. However, after entering Saroj’s kitchen, she gradually takes up cooking in order to communicate with her family and tries to express her emotions that she struggles to articulate verbally through her cooking. Each recipe she prepares reflects her mood, emotions, turning into a form of self-expression. At the same time, it also highlights her in-between identity.

Second-generation migrants like Devi face constant dilemma and a loss of identity in the diasporic world. Although Devi and her sister are accustomed to American and Western modes of living, they cannot distance themselves from their traditional roots. After the doctor’s visit, Devi clearly takes pleasure in her mother’s preparation of *sambhar* and *dosa*. She states that “My memories of Sunday morning of eating hot *dosas*, *sambhar* and pickle are vivid. I’m glad that I’m living here again so that I can learn to appreciate the one thing that I never did learn to do before: Mama’s impeccable south Indian cooking” (Malladi 212). Devi’s praise of her mother’s cooking marks another stage of acculturation and her self-discovery. This also indicates her homecoming is literal as well as symbolic. Through cooking, she reconnects with her Indian roots and begins to find meaning in practices she had taken for granted. As her interest in food deepens, she discovers that her love for cooking comes from her mother. This transformation enables her journey towards healing and she further requests her father to enrol her in a culinary school. She breaks the tradition of her

family where cooking was associated with just a domestic chore and transforms kitchen as a space for professionalism.

The Third Space: Chutnification of Culture

Malladi infuses various recipes of dishes in the book, emphasizing on the fusion of cuisine and culture. The first thing Devi prepares after she steps into Saroj's kitchen is "The Anti-Saroj Chutney" (Malladi 93). She resists making the classic chutney of coriander, mint and chilli and tries a ginger, apricot and mint chutney, along with chipotle chilli peppers to consume it with the *samosas*, giving it a Western touch while retaining Indian flavours. The kitchen becomes a microcosm of the exchange of cultures: Russian caviar, Mexican chipotle chilli peppers and Central Asian apricots are infused into Indian chutney. Devi's fusion of cuisine highlights how acculturation involves the blending of various culinary traditions into one. She also adds her mother's name to the chutney in order to resist making the chutney in the traditional manner associated with her mother. "Growing up Devi's memories of hot hot *biryani* were associated with special occasions. On Saroj and Avi's wedding anniversaries, Saroj would make *biryani*; on birthdays, she would make *biryani*. It was her standard "happy news" dish" (105). In order to rebuild a similar emotional connection with another dish, Devi tries her hand at another similar cuisine - Cajun prawn *biryani*; it is an infusion of the recipe of "*Louisiana barbeque shrimp*" in a pressure-cooked *biryani*. (112). She combines Louisiana spices, which she encountered in a restaurant in New Orleans with Creole flavours, like rosemary, thyme, paprika, oregano. This fusion transforms a traditional dish into a hybrid cuisine by blending with flavours of spices like cardamom, and also ghee. It symbolises Devi's identity; preserving Indian culture and American experiences. Her recreation also makes her mother enjoy it, someone who detested anything but Indian food. It indicates a shift in the attitude of Saroj; from rigid preservation of Indian roots to adaptation of hybrid cuisine. In another of her experimental dish called "Angry at Vasu Grilled Chicken" she

experiments with blueberries, which is a staple ingredient used in North America and made into a curried sauce; curry being popular in India and South Asian countries, using a twist of cayenne peppers. Stepping aside from traditional cooking, the flavours of white wine and blueberry constitute a fusion cooking as she adds the traditional Indian cardamom rice to it. It also symbolizes blending of cultures, fusing North American and Indian flavours. Another of Devi's recipe titled "Girish's favourite with a twist" includes traditional *sooji laddoos* with a twist of hazelnuts in them. The choice of hazelnut seemed to be an experimental element to it. In another recipe "The Lamb Clitoris", she fuses lamb with pomegranate. In "Mama's rasam with my pastry" *rasam* is a traditional South Indian recipe made in every household. But, Devi in her unconventional way paired it with pastry, combined and baked them together. Instead of keeping them separate, she turns it into a hybrid dish portraying her identity through her dishes.

This amalgamation of the dishes in the novel also signifies what Bhabha terms as "Third Space", a site where new identities of meanings are produced as a means of amalgamation or adaptation. The act of mixing ingredients, substituting ingredients or adapting traditional recipes with the available resources creates a space to preserve ancient memory as well as bring change. Devi, through these dishes, navigates her identity by dissociating from her mother's traditionalism, and her desire to reinvent Indian food and also Indian identity in the diasporic world.

Although Devi tries new methods of cooking, and her food is different from her mother, she credits her mother, from whom she learnt how to cook. Devi had observed her mother mixing spices, grinding ingredients, splattering oil and preparing simple meals. With a mix of her observations and her innovation, she tried creating her own cuisine and building her identity through her dishes. Food, thus becomes 'intractable measure of cultural authenticity' (Mannur 3), but at the same time it also merges into a different culture. Although

Saroj despised Western cooking, and rarely preferred going to restaurants to eat, she relishes the fusion cooking her daughter prepares. Conversely, Devi also observes a deeper appreciation of her “Mama’s impeccable South Indian cooking” (Malladi 235). A closer examination of Indian food reveals an amalgamation of various cultures and cuisines. Collingham rightly argues that, “The focus on authenticity fails to acknowledge that the mixture of different culinary styles is the prime characteristic of Indian cookery and that this fusion has produced a plethora of versions of Indian food from Mughlai to Anglo-Indian, from Goan to British Indian” (241). Devi’s fusion-cuisine helps us understand the importance of blending of two cultures, which can provide a fruitful result.

Homi Bhabha in his significant book *The Location of Culture* denies one inherent dominant culture or identity. He asserts, “The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from perspective of signifying position of the minority that resists totalisation ...producing other spaces of subaltern signification” (162). Through diasporic experiences depicted in the novels, it is evident that such experiences challenge the idea of one nationalistic identity. As minorities in a new land, they find ways to create a third space¹ where they fit into. Their experiences reveal that culture is never static- it is constantly evolving, unsettling and fluid. While preserving their traditions, diasporic individuals contribute to the formation of new culture, cuisine and identity through the process of hybridisation.

Conclusion

In the novel *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Amulya Malladi uses food not just as a cultural marker but also as a metaphor for diasporic identity. Devi’s cooking becomes a medium of self-expression and allows her to claim back agency over her hybrid identity. She balances

¹A post-colonial phenomenon proposed by Homi Bhabha in his work *The Location of Culture*, where he talks about how integration of two cultures creating a new space.

the inherent cultural weight carried by her Indian mother with her American lifestyle. Her kitchen becomes a space through which trauma, displacement or belonging is negotiated. After her failed attempted suicide, Devi turns to cooking as a means of silent communication to rebuild the bond with her family. Through Devi's revival, we get a glimpse of the power of food to rewrite narratives of survival. On one hand, the first-generation migrant, Saroj, anchors her identity through cooking and preserving flavours as a means of resistance against cultural erasure. But, on the other hand, Devi reclaims her identity by experimenting with food and finding her passion in culinary activities. For migrants like Ashima or Saroj, food becomes a space to sustain continuity and also portrays nostalgia in a foreign world, but it also tries to examine how migrants like Devi view themselves in their in-between world revealing complex situations suppressed between two cultural scenarios. It also reveals how food becomes a means of survival and self-discovery in a migrant's life.

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