



The Flavours of Exile: Culinary Memory and Refugee Identity in Kallol Lahiri's Indubala Bhaater Hotel

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Abstract: *The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most traumatic events in South Asian history, marked by mass displacement, communal violence and enduring psychological scars. While official histories document political negotiations and demographic upheavals, literary narratives often recover the intimate, everyday experiences through which trauma is lived and remembered. Kallol Lahiri's Indubala Bhaater Hotel offers a unique perspective on Partition by foregrounding food as a powerful medium of memory, survival and cultural continuity. This paper examines how food practices in the novel function as mnemonic devices that preserve personal and collective histories of loss, migration and resilience. Through the figure of Indubala, a refugee woman who establishes a modest rice-and-curry hotel in post-Partition Calcutta, Lahiri maps the transformation of culinary labour into an archive of displaced identities. Drawing on theories of cultural memory, trauma studies, and food studies, the paper argues that food in Indubala Bhaater Hotel transcends its material function to become a language of remembrance, enabling the articulation of Partition trauma beyond conventional historical discourse. The study thus highlights the significance of everyday practices, especially cooking and eating in reconstructing subaltern memories of Partition.*

Keywords: *Partition, food and memory, cultural trauma, displacement.*

INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 resulted in one of the largest forced migrations in human history, leaving deep imprints on the social, cultural and emotional lives of millions. In recent decades, Partition studies have shifted from macro-historical narratives to micro-histories that emphasize memory, gendered experiences and everyday survival. Literature has played a crucial role in this shift by capturing affective dimensions of trauma that remain absent from official archives. By foregrounding lived experiences, literary texts provide access to the emotional landscapes of displacement that statistics and political documents often fail to convey.

Kallol Lahiri's Indubala Bhaater Hotel contributes significantly to this memory-oriented discourse by situating the Partition experience within the domestic and culinary sphere. Unlike narratives that focus on spectacular violence, Lahiri's novel explores the quieter aftermath of displacement- hunger, nostalgia and the struggle to rebuild life in an unfamiliar urban space. This paper investigates how food operates as a narrative strategy through which memories of



home, loss and identity are preserved and transmitted. The novel invites readers to engage with Partition not only as a historical rupture but also as an ongoing emotional condition embedded in daily practices.

In addition to its historical magnitude, Partition continues to shape intergenerational memory and cultural consciousness in South Asia. The experiences of refugees were not limited to the moment of migration; rather, they unfolded over decades through persistent insecurity, economic struggle and emotional dislocation. Literary representations of Partition thus often engage with the afterlife of trauma- how it is remembered, repressed, or transformed within everyday life. Lahiri's narrative participates in this post-Partition discourse by emphasizing endurance over immediacy, focusing on how displaced individuals gradually reconstruct meaning in hostile or unfamiliar environments. The novel also suggests that trauma is not confined to those who directly experienced migration but is inherited by subsequent generations through stories, habits, and silences.

Calcutta, as represented in the novel, becomes a liminal city- simultaneously a site of refuge and alienation. Refugees arriving from East Bengal carry with them not only memories of violence but also habits, tastes, and cultural practices that refuse to disappear. Food emerges here as one of the most resilient carriers of memory, capable of surviving even when language fails. By centering the narrative on a bhaater hotel, Lahiri deliberately shifts attention from elite spaces to subaltern geographies where history is lived rather than recorded. This paper, therefore, situates *Indubala Bhaater Hotel* within a broader critical framework that recognizes ordinary life as a crucial archive of Partition memory while also emphasizing the role of sensory experience in preserving cultural identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars of Partition literature such as Urvashi Butalia, Gyanendra Pandey and Ritu Menon have emphasized memory and testimony as crucial tools for understanding the human cost of Partition. Feminist interventions, in particular, foreground women's experiences of displacement, often rooted in domestic spaces and emotional labour. These studies reveal how women's narratives complicate nationalist histories by highlighting survival strategies embedded in caregiving, food preparation and family preservation.

Parallely, food studies scholars like Arjun Appadurai and Anita Mannur argue that culinary practices are deeply embedded in questions of identity, migration and nostalgia. Food becomes a cultural text through which communities negotiate belonging and loss. However, limited critical attention has been paid to Bengali Partition narratives that employ food as a central metaphor. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by reading *Indubala Bhaater Hotel* at the intersection of Partition studies and food studies.

Recent scholarship has also begun to engage with the idea of intergenerational trauma and postmemory, particularly through the work of Marianne Hirsch. Postmemory explains how the second generation inherits the memories of traumatic events they did not directly experience but grow up internalizing through stories, images, and practices. In the context of Lahiri's novel, food becomes one such medium through which memory travels across generations, sustaining emotional ties to a lost homeland.

In addition to historical and feminist scholarship, literary critics have increasingly turned to sensory studies to understand how trauma is encoded beyond textual testimony. Smell, taste,



and touch are now recognized as powerful conduits of memory, particularly in contexts of forced migration. Within South Asian literary studies, however, such approaches remain relatively underexplored. Bengali Partition narratives, despite their richness, are often overshadowed by Punjabi and Urdu texts in mainstream criticism.

Indubala Bhaater Hotel occupies a distinctive position in this landscape by merging culinary realism with historical memory. While scholars like Appadurai emphasize the social life of things and Mannur highlights diasporic foodways, Lahiri's novel grounds these theories within a localized refugee economy. The bhaater hotel functions as a cultural microcosm where displaced subjects negotiate identity through shared meals. By bringing together Partition historiography, postmemory theory, and food studies, this paper extends existing scholarship and foregrounds food as a critical yet underutilized lens for reading refugee narratives in Bengali literature.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws upon four interrelated theoretical approaches:

1. **Cultural Memory Studies:** Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory helps explain how everyday practices like cooking function as repositories of collective remembrance.
2. **Trauma Studies:** Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as an experience that resists direct representation illuminates why food and routine become alternative narrative modes for expressing loss.
3. **Food Studies:** Theories of food as identity and memory underscore how taste and smell trigger recollections of a lost homeland.
4. **Postmemory Theory:** Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory explains how memories of Partition are transmitted across generations through embodied practices such as cooking and eating.

Together, these frameworks enable a nuanced reading of food as material sustenance, emotional expression, and intergenerational archive in Lahiri's novel.

FOOD AS MEMORY IN INDUBALA BHAATER HOTEL

In *Indubala Bhaater Hotel*, food serves as a tangible link between the past and the present. Indubala's cooking is infused with memories of her village in East Bengal, memories that cannot be verbally articulated due to the overwhelming nature of trauma. Traditional dishes recreate a sense of home for displaced refugees who frequent her hotel, transforming the space into a communal site of remembrance.

The act of cooking becomes a form of silent storytelling. Each meal embodies stories of loss, migration and endurance, allowing both the cook and the consumers to momentarily reclaim a fragmented past. Food thus emerges as an affective archive that resists erasure.

The sensory richness of food in the novel underscores its mnemonic power. The preparation of rice, lentils and traditional vegetables recalls seasonal rhythms of village life that stand in stark contrast to the instability of refugee existence. These meals are not extravagant; their simplicity reflects scarcity, yet it is precisely this ordinariness that anchors memory. Through repetition, food recreates familiarity and emotional security.



For customers of the hotel, eating Indubala's food becomes an act of collective remembrance. The shared recognition of taste produces a silent community bound by loss. Food thus bridges private memory and communal history, allowing trauma to be shared without explicit narration. Lahiri's narrative suggests that memory need not always be spoken; it can be consumed, savoured and momentarily felt through the body.

GENDER, LABOUR, AND SURVIVAL

Indubala's culinary labour is deeply gendered, reflecting the limited economic opportunities available to refugee women. However, the novel reconfigures domestic labour as a source of agency. By monetizing her cooking skills, Indubala negotiates survival while retaining cultural autonomy.

This section argues that women's culinary practices in the novel challenge patriarchal and nationalist narratives of Partition by foregrounding care, nourishment and emotional resilience as modes of resistance.

Indubala's journey reflects the broader condition of refugee women whose labour often remained invisible within nationalist histories. Cooking, traditionally confined to the private sphere, is recontextualized as public and economic labour. This shift challenges rigid separations between domesticity and productivity, revealing how women transform culturally prescribed roles into strategies of survival.

At the same time, the novel does not romanticize hardship. Indubala's work is physically demanding and emotionally taxing, underscoring the precarity of refugee livelihoods. Yet, within these constraints, culinary labour becomes a site of dignity and self-definition. The paper argues that such representations complicate dominant narratives of victimhood by highlighting agency embedded in care work.

THE HOTEL AS A SITE OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The bhaater hotel functions as more than a commercial establishment; it becomes a shared space where refugees gather, eat and remember. The communal act of eating fosters solidarity among displaced individuals, creating an alternative public sphere grounded in shared trauma and nostalgia.

Through this space, Lahiri illustrates how memory is socially produced and sustained through everyday interactions rather than monumental histories.

Spatially, the hotel operates as an informal archive where stories circulate through casual conversation and shared silence. Unlike official memorials, this space is dynamic and lived-in, shaped by daily interactions. The act of eating together temporarily dissolves social hierarchies, fostering a sense of belonging among displaced individuals.

The hotel also mediates between past and present, rural and urban, loss and survival. It exemplifies how memory is sustained through community rather than institutions. Lahiri's portrayal thus aligns with subaltern historiography, which values everyday spaces as legitimate sites of historical meaning.



LANGUAGE, SILENCE, AND SENSORY MEMORY

In *Indubala Bhaater Hotel*, memory often emerges through sensory experience rather than verbal articulation. Trauma frequently produces silence, as survivors struggle to narrate painful histories. Lahiri addresses this narrative gap by allowing food to function as a substitute language. The aromas and flavours of traditional dishes express what words cannot, enabling characters to communicate grief and longing indirectly. This sensory mode of remembrance challenges the dominance of written archives, suggesting that memory can reside within the body as much as in language.

FOOD, CLASS, AND REFUGEE ECONOMY

The novel also highlights the intersection of food and class within refugee survival. Indubala's hotel caters primarily to working-class migrants, students, and daily wage earners, emphasizing how food practices are shaped by economic constraints. Simple meals symbolize both scarcity and solidarity, revealing how communities adapt culturally while negotiating financial precarity. By portraying food as both livelihood and memory, Lahiri underscores the material realities of displacement often overlooked in nostalgic representations of homeland.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF MEMORY

Another crucial dimension of the novel is the transmission of memory across generations. Younger characters who did not directly experience Partition engage with Indubala's culinary traditions as inherited memory. Through storytelling, shared meals and ritualistic cooking, Partition becomes a living history rather than a distant event. This intergenerational continuity demonstrates how cultural practices sustain identity even as geographical ties fade.

CONCLUSION

Indubala Bhaater Hotel demonstrates that the memories of Partition are not only preserved in testimonies of violence but also in the ordinary rituals of daily life. Food, in Lahiri's narrative, becomes a powerful medium through which trauma is negotiated, identities are reconstructed, and cultural continuity is maintained.

By foregrounding culinary memory, the novel expands the scope of Partition studies to include sensory, gendered and subaltern experiences. This paper concludes that remembering Partition through food allows for a more inclusive and humane understanding of history, one that acknowledges survival as an act of quiet resistance.

Remembering Partition through food foregrounds the resilience embedded in ordinary life. *Indubala Bhaater Hotel* reveals how memory persists not only in moments of rupture but also in acts of continuity. By focusing on cooking and eating, Lahiri offers an alternative historiography that privileges survival, care and sensory experience.

This study demonstrates that food-based narratives expand the ethical and methodological scope of Partition studies. They invite readers to engage with history affectively, recognizing the body as a site of memory. Ultimately, the novel affirms that even amid displacement and loss, cultural practices endure, sustaining both individual identity and collective remembrance.



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