

## A Case of Food and Self in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Affair"

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### Abstract

Food and food related activities forms a major part of a person's everyday life. The constant perusal of food centric choices and habits reaffirms our personal and cultural identity. For an immigrant the most proximate sign of culture and comfort space is food. It is empirical to acknowledge how writers deploy food as a literary element to negotiate the self. Food studies have recently emerged as an important discourse in analyzing a literary text. It encourages an understanding of intricate familial bond and inter-personal connections. This paper analyzes ways in which food and the self are deployed across this oeuvre.

**Keywords:** Culture; Food; Identity; Self; Space.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995) is a debut collection of the author's ravishingly beautiful short stories. The stories are skillfully crafted to explore the spaces of disempowerment in an immigrant's life and display accounts woven with profound sentiments. As one of the early writings of Divakaruni, it explores the institution of marriage in the lives of immigrant women. The women protagonists in her works sense a conflict to abide by the old beliefs or be a spokesperson of a conscious self. Divakaruni lays bare the crucial issues that affect the lives of her characters in form of attitudes, customs and nature. Her work "Affair" casts Abha's journey out of her cocoon, a confined self.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through her character stands consistently against the vulnerability and suppression as faced in daily mundane lives. Her primary focus remains on the nature of change in itself rather than a big change in society or an ideology. "Affair" explores the life of Abha as a subject who evolves with a sincere consciousness and discovers a personal identity distinct from the roles ascribed to her by the community and society. Banerjee reveals a connection between food and Abha's life, com-

bating her feeling of loneliness the character makes use of food to ensure her survival in a house where she feels no harmony. The recurrent trope of food assumes a language of its own, Annie Hauck-Lawson calls it "the food voice" (24). Hauck's concept of "food voice" takes form of a research tool to examine various aspects of an individual identity.

The notion of identity can be understood through the protean term self. Self of a person refers to his idea or concept about his/herself, which is a result of the society one lives in, culture one is subjected to and behavior one engages in. Self-identities are the "labels people use to describe themselves" (Biddle et al. 326). The introspection about identity becomes important as it results in a strong premise to understand the character and persona in texts of literary nature.

Literary critics who engage in a criticism about food understand that the food is employed in poems, plays and novels to "explain the complex relationship between the body, subjectivity, and social structures regulating consumption" and authors employ food in their writing because "they are usually telling the reader something important about the narrative, plot, characterization, motives, and so on" (Fitzpatrick 122). Ashis Nandy's article "The Changing Popular Culture of Indian Food: Preliminary Notes" (2004) explores the idea relating to cuisine, dining, consumption, health, taste, authenticity and much more in Indian context. Ketu Katrak, an Indian American cultural critic in her essay "Food and Belonging: At 'Home' and in 'Alien' Kitchens" (1997) speaks of nostalgia in narratives that provokes memories of the home country. This autobiographical essay speaks of food as an experience that locates emotional depths of Katrak.

Food studies came to be a serious field of study in 1970s, works of structuralism, sociologists and anthropologists provided grounds for it to establish its critique. Although Food studies is an interdisciplinary field of subject and does not owe its existence to any specific method. It rather works on research agendas and discourse analysis. The critiques have turned to food in order to understand the relationship between individual and society. The theories reflect the importance of food in literature, how food emerges as a lens to see the micro and the macro spaces in a multicultural world.

A study devoted to explore the place of food in literature in order to understand cultural continuum has some unique challenges and possibilities for an inquiry relating to society and individual. The study of food typically falls under the purview of sociology and anthropology, believing it has a mere material value, and is still not widely read or acknowledged

from a literary point of view.

The selection of fiction in the genre of short story adds a focused view to the content. Such works can be finished in a go and they present an in-depth scope for interpretation as does any other form of genre in literary framework. There is a fair access to locate the voices in short stories, even though in its brevity, it offers complexity. In the blog "From novels to short stories", James Aitcheson, an acclaimed novelist writes "The short story is more technical, more succinct; it requires greater precision of language and phrasing. Every word matters. What is not said can be just as important as that which is made explicit." Through the selection of this genre, the study would be better able to probe the ideas on cuisine, culture and identity.

Ruth Maxey in her chapter "'Mangoes and Coconuts and Grandmothers': Food in Transatlantic South Asian Writing" quotes Graham Huggan that "India... is more available than ever for consumption; and more prevalent than ever are the gastronomic images through which the nation is to be consumed" (1). She also notes that the "tropes of food and eating" especially "in a familial setting" shows mark of cultural productions where "food has become a means of depicting south Asian Diasporic" lives (1).

"Affair" takes up the narrative of a woman who is reserved and passive. Abha is at a midpoint in her life where she shares a loveless marriage with her husband Ashok. Her marriage leaves her no agency on her life. To perform the role of a wife, she puts aside her own self and resorts to a personality that is passive, indecisive, and dependent. Abha's journey of self discovery is associated with food on various levels. Food is a part of her journey through out as if a partner in itself. It's a support, an emotion and a career prospect that helps Abha to cross the boundary of a constrained arranged marriage.

The connection between food and Abha illustrates series of events that makes her realize what she truly wants from her life. Since the very beginning of the story, Divakaruni brings in the phenomenon of housekeeping and the kitchen space to the fore. The opening is dramatic and food centric, "I WAS IN THE KITCHEN CHOPPING VEGETABLES FOR DIN-ner when I found out about it" (231). Ashok tells her about her dear friend Meena's affair. Abha feels enraged to hear the news from Ashok. Ashok intends to mock her all the time and chides her for her "prudish Indian upbringing" (234). Abha's marriage to Ashok has turned so toxic that in the fit of the moment, "The knife slipped and nicked my finger. I watched the blood appear as though from nowhere, dyeing the meticulously sliced

carrots a deeper orange (231)".

Abha feels betrayed; she busies herself in the kitchen with "chopping onions" so that she'd have "a valid reason for tears" (232). Ashok won't disclose who the lover of Meena is. Food in Abha's life functions as vectors of resentment. The culinary images and scenes negotiate with the persona of Abha and communicate her subjectivity. "Angrily I dumped a couple of extra teaspoons of red pepper powder into the chicken curry. Hot food gives Ashok the most terrible heartburn" (233).

Michael Camille mentions Foucault's quote from his work *History of Sexuality* that, "Never did sexuality enjoy a more immediately natural understanding and never did it know a greater felicity of expression" (58). The story mentions in detail the journey of Abha accepting herself and her body. She believes that, "Even under the best of circumstances I am no beauty" (235). She doesn't have fair skin, or curly black hair or long lashes. Abha is suspicious that her husband is the one with whom Meena has an affair with, she even dreams of them having sex. The next day, she, Ashok, Meena and Shrikant, Meena's husband meet at a party. Ashok and Meena dance seductively together, to which Abha gets upset. Abha displays a glimpse of self care when she buys a night dress for herself. She wears the peach robe, puts some lipstick on, sprays Chanel no. 5 on herself, slips in a pair of high heels, and pairs them with a pair of dangly crystal earrings (258). Abha nourishes herself with this getting ready ritual. She feels confident and that self love is heightened when Shrikant knocks at her door and acknowledges that she looks nice when she meets him. Abha remodels herself into a more confident woman who is about to completely find out what she wants from her life.

Abha would occasionally freelance, write recipes for Indian papers. Indian culture is reinforced in the foreign land with Asha's cooking. She prepares "chicken curry", "rogan josh", "pista kulfi". The Indian Courier, a paper approaches her to compile a cookbook. For which Abha would be "visiting the restaurants, sampling the menu, choosing the best dishes for the book, observing how they are prepared, and writing a simplified version suited to the western lifestyle and plate" (253). She goes for a lunch with the editor of the paper, Suren. At first the idea of having lunch with a man other than her husband is not comforting to her. But slowly she realizes what a gentleman he is and she rather enjoys her time with him.

In the final section of the story, we get a glimpse of Abha's new found self. She gets to find out that Meena's affair is not with her husband. Even so, she decides to leave him to pursue a career as a chef:

Sitting on the guest bed now in a house that had never, for all its comforts, been my home, I closed my eyes and tried to see my new life- not as I wanted but as it really would be. Struggling to maneuver enormous skillets and saucepans and tandoor ovens in a vast, dark kitchen with the smell of old grease heavying the air, amid the heat and the sweat and the curse words of the rushing waiters. Living in a one-room apartment above some garage where on my off days I heated soup over burner. (271)

Abha writes a letter to Ashok where she confesses her feeling about their marriage. There was no hope left in their relationship and it was becoming bitter with each passing day. She writes, "Its better this way, each of us freeing the other before it's too late... so we can start learning, once more, to live" (271-72).

Literary works of fiction have the perfect ingredient to make its content culturally authentic. The use of Food trope in the works helps to locate - identity of characters, communities and cultures, authenticity and assimilation, power relations and so on. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Affair" has rich descriptions of culture, eating manners, culinary practices, choices and ever changing tastes.

The eventually failed marriage and separation at the end of the story suggest that even though for most women it is not easy to step beyond the socially constructed barriers and sexual vulnerability, some find courage and passion to seek a self that is absolute and who is able to practice agency. Abha finds a high plane of understanding and consciousness. There are glimpses given by the author that Abha has changed. She is now ready to face the raw and grave life, full of challenges and hard work. Having restored the strength to pursue her dream of working as a chef, she can begin anywhere anew and afresh. She has finally able to pose a response against the conditioned functioning of women according to the world.

Her life has been a case of chicken curry against Dominos. She is a wonderful cook, is able to prepare delicacies, but her husband rather chooses to order out, a pizza with sausage and mushroom topping. Her heart aches to see her effort go futile as her curry sits uneaten on the kitchen counter. (237)

Anita Mannur in her work *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* quotes "Edible Ecriture" by Terry Eagleton, "If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food - it is endlessly interpretable - materialized emotion". She notes that *Mistress of Spices*, a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni overflows with aroma and passion of Indian Spices

(107). Indeed Chitra Banerjee's most works makes use of Food apropos. More such examples are *Oleander Girl*, "Meeting Mrinal", "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter", "The Blooming Season of Cacti" and etc.

The wide culinary imagery evoked in the story offers insight into the diasporic subjectivity. It frames and navigates the cultural continuum. The fictiveness of such writings paves access to understand immigrant life and foodways. It engages the readers with authentic cultural details and weaves a palatable narrative. Food studies is not bound by any discipline, it is free and abstract. In the story "Affair" the study of food elements agrees with the journey of self discovery of the character Abha. The ample precision paid to the culinary idiom and descriptions of everyday activities and encounters of food projects a story large enough to absorb the emotions, issues and conditions of a woman protagonist struggling to find an individualist access to life.

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