The Cultural Archive on the Plate: Food, Memory, and Identity in Diasporic Fiction

Dr. Zeel Khatiwala
Department of English
VNSGU

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Abstract:

Food serves many purposes in literature, and nourishment is just one of them. It serves as a cultural means of communication, by which memory, identity, relations within families, migration, and belonging can be expressed. The paper explores how recipes and cooking can be considered a cultural medium in the selected South-Asian diasporic literature. In this research, the authors make use of theories, including Cultural Memory Theory, Archive Theory, and Food Studies. Their method of research is based on qualitative textual and discourse analysis to show how culinary knowledge helps in encoding and transmitting memory related to family, place, tradition, and migration. Throughout their analysis, the authors point out that recipes should not be regarded simply as utilitarian instructions; rather, they represent living archives because the meanings of recipes materialize through reading, cooking, tasting, sharing, remembering, and adapting. The authors also state that culinary archives can be alternative or counter archives that can save everyday history, especially those related to women's knowledge and experiences, which are not recorded in formal historical narratives. At the same time, recipes don't keep culture unchanged. Migration, changing surroundings, generations, and cultures are constantly altering culinary arts. Hence, the recipe is a document of both continuity and change. The article introduces the idea of a "living cultural archive", using literature and memory theories, the theory of archives, and food studies as the methods to show how culinary arts preserve the past and give the interpretation of it in the present.

Introduction:

Food is hardly ever seen as merely an object of consumption in literary and cultural narratives. More often than not, food is used considerably as a cultural marker which makes it possible for people to express and construct their identities, tell apart the insiders from outsiders, uphold traditions and negotiate their belonging in social groups. According to Fischler (1988), food is strongly linked to identity since the process of eating serves for the purpose of forming both individual and collective boundaries. How food is consumed, what it is, how it is prepared, and with whom it is enjoyed makes it clear that food is able to express cultural and social values. Thus food in literature serves as a key to understand relations between individual experience and collective culture, past memories and present lives, as well as geographic origin and similar territories.

Food and memory become important during times of migration and displacement. Migration is usually a breakage of connection with familiar people, places, communities, and tradition. Cooking traditions are likely to provide a sense of continuity in such cases when other

cultural areas are lost or disrupted. Sutton (2001) proves that smell and taste evoke memories about people, places, and things in a very vivid form. Using one of the recognized products or cooking methods can be helpful in feeling the familiar place. Thus, food becomes a form of cultural memory that can be used in various geographical places by nakedly displaced individuals.

The current research shifts the perspective from food as a physical object to the recipe as a cultural phenomenon. A recipe is more than just a list of ingredients and instructions. It may embody knowledge about cooking methods, local traditions, family customs, cultural rites, geographical environments, and interfamily contacts. Bower (1997), who examines community cookbooks, shows that culinary works can convey auto/biographical, social, historical, and cultural accounts and stories in addition to real recipes. Such works cast doubt on the suggestion that recipes are simply functional documents.

This perspective is especially applicable in the discussion of gender. Historically cooking has been connected to women and the role of women has been to pass on the culinary knowledge from one generation to another. In the research completed by Bower (1997) it is proved that community cookbooks are able to depict experiences and knowledge of women that is usually neglected in the traditional historical documents. However, it is important to understand that the practices of women in cooking cannot be perceived as being empowering per se. Cooking could reflect the issues of unequal domestic load as well as give the cultural power.

Migration makes the archival function of recipes more complex since cooking styles are seldom transmitted in their unchanged forms. Certain ingredients might no longer be available, practices can change, and new culinary influences can be adopted. According to Erll (2011), cultural memory undergoes mediation through cultural items, and its reconstruction is unceasing instead of being a mere transfer from one medium of memory to another. Thus, a recipe passes through the process of continuity and stands for the process of transformation at the same time.

Although the topic of food, memory, identity, and migration has been examined in great detail, the use of recipe in literature as a preservation medium has not received sufficient critical evaluation. Studies have shown that food does represent identity, memory, community, and culture (Fischler, 1988; Sutton, 2001). Research focusing on community cookbooks has also demonstrated that recipes have historical and autobiographical significance (Bower, 1997). The aim of this study is to combine the two scholarly positions in order to view the recipe as a cultural artifact. This study asks three interrelated questions: In what way do literary images of

the recipe and culinary practices help register and transmit individual and collective memories? In what way can these practices assist in the making of identity and sense of belonging during the process of migration and dislocation? In what way can women's culinary knowledge be used as an alternative way of memorizing everyday history?

The article claims that literary recipes are alive in relation to the cultural archive that keeps memories, identity, and relationships alive. The author uses the word "alive" deliberately. A recipe is not an archive in the sense of an archival document but becomes alive through its performance. The recipe is read, interpreted, made, eaten, shared, modified, and taught. Hence, the article claims that the value of a recipe does not lie simply in the stored past information but in its ability to recreate the past in the present.

Theoretical Framework:

Cultural Memory Theory:

The Cultural Memory Theory can be relied upon to understand how food knowledge is passed on from one person to another, across families and even societies. According to Halbwachs (1992), memory is defined socially, and thus through social links that we establish with other individuals, we reconstruct the past. The point can be explained by the example of recipes, because they are associated with families, communities, religions, and regions. The recipe passed on from a previous generation contains not only a cooking method but also memories about the person who taught it, the place of cooking and occasions for eating.

The differentiation made by Assmann (2011) is of great importance with regard to the idea of communicative memory and cultural memory. In the context of food knowledge, it can be categorized as communicative memory when it is transmitted and passed on during interactions. Thus, a grandmother shares her cooking technique, a mother tells about the ingredients, or relatives recreate some recipe by watching other people cook. However, culinary knowledge can also be recorded in a notebook or a cookbook, which will contribute to its transition to cultural memory. However, it is not necessary for culinary memory to be written down for it to survive. Repetition in cooking acts is enough for transmission of knowledge.

According to Erll (2011), cultural memory is a process that involves mediation and reconstruction. The reason for this is that culinary traditions are hardly repeated in their original forms. Different regions, technological advances, personal tastes, and reformulations over generations lead to changes in terms of basics, processes, flavors, and meanings of any dish. Therefore, a recipe helps to maintain cultural identity but does not fix it. Instead, it is important

to consider that the relevance of the recipe is determined by its ability to be executed in various conditions.

The sensory aspect of food reinforces the role of food in preserving memories. It has been shown by Sutton (2001) that taste and smell can help recall various people and places. As a result, the recipe acts as a uniting element between the knowledge obtained from the texts and the knowledge gained from one's own experience.

Archive Theory:

The idea of Archive Theory makes us think more deeply about traditional views of what the term archive means. Derrida (1996) points out that the issue of archives is also about power and choice. Whatever gets kept is not completely neutral because the very nature of archival systems influences what gets counted as evidence of the past. Based on this idea, it is possible to shift our attention to recognizing recipes as other types of archives.

A family recipe can show a local ingredient, a method of cooking passed down through generations, a name of a family member, a custom or some modification made after migrating. Such types of information can help pass on the day-to-day history that official archives may fail to present. This significance of archiving is demonstrated by Bower (1997), who refers to community recipe books where recipes and life stories are combined.

Food Studies:

Food studies is the third framework that describes cooking experience in context of identity, social relations, power and belonging. Fischler mentions the connection between food and identity, while Mintz and Du Bois stress that food and eating are part of broader social and cultural relations. Food tells about people and where they belong.

Counihan provides another evidence stating that cooking practices intersect with gender, power and social structuring. This is especially important for the analysis of women's cooking work. The woman who keeps and passes on her recipe may have a cultural authority, however, the obligation to do so comes from gender-based understanding of the division of domestic tasks.

Methodology:

The current study utilizes qualitative literary research based on textual and discourse analysis. A qualitative approach is deemed appropriate as the study concerns meanings rather than measures. The goal is not to count the mentions of food in texts but to elucidate the way in which recipes and cooking practices contribute to memories, images of migrations, identities, and sense of belonging.

The selected texts were done in a purposeful manner, bearing in mind the presence and importance of the culinary practices in the plots. The key texts include Chitrita Banerji's A Taste of My Life: A Memoir in Essays and Recipes (2021), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Mistress of Spices (1997), and Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies (1999), focusing on particular short stories: "Mrs. Sen's," "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," and "The Third and Final Continent". The chosen texts are not treated as the same text types of "recipe texts" but represent three different types of culinary storage.

Close reading was carried out in order to extract passages with recipes, ingredients, culinary practices, food-related memories, and aspects of cooking. Thus, the authors had to analyze the texts in terms of vocabulary, preparation and eating information, references to traditions, and omens of migration. Consequently, the focus was given to cases where culinary knowledge is passed, recalled, transmitted, and changed.

Analysis and Discussion:

Recipes as Cultural Archives:

Having A Taste of My Life, Banerji gives the most evident example of recipe as a literal textual archive. In the memoir, recipes are incorporated structurally instead of being just incidental notes on the food. Together with childhood memories, family, culture, place of living and other events, recipes serve the dual purpose because they have a role of memory store.

The archival function of recipes in Banerji's case exemplifies Halbwachs's (1992) conception of socially framed memory. Culinary memory is linked to the people and communities and its essence does not consist in the isolated memory itself. The recipe serves as a means of transforming the individual experience into the memory that is transferable to other generations.

The same goes for The Mistress of Spices. In the novel, the archive is embodied in spices and cooking knowledge, rather than presenting recipes as text. Tilo's knowledge is in connection to the Indian culture while she lives in Oakland, symbolizing the immigrant culture. The spice shop is a location where inherited knowledge is brought to another cultural context. Cooking information plays the role of preserving cultural heritage, even if in physical form.

Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies presents another version. In "Mrs. Sen's," cooking, food processing, and ingredients help the protagonist to have her personal connection with India. Cooking has stopped being simply a household task. It becomes a process that repeats cultural memory through generations. In Deb's article, she pays a lot of attention to food in the stories and its role in the representation of Bengali diaspora and the life of immigrant women.

The trio of representations provides an essential clarification. Banerji refers to the recipe as a textually-based archive; Divakaruni uses spices as the empirical archive of cooking knowledge; and Lahiri presents cooking as a domestic and experiential archive. The dissimilarity here is an asset in promotion of the main idea. There may be different materials of the archive. What is vital is its ability to preserve and disseminate cultural knowledge.

Memory and Intergenerational Transmission:

Culinary archives are immensely impactful as they link generations. Recipes are passed down in families as knowledge that is both functional and emotional. They can be acquired through watching, verbal instruction, written documents, or repeated practice (Assmann, 2011).

An illustration of this process can be found in Banerji's memoir where she links cooking traditions with different phases of her life and her cultural heritage. A recipe is able to recall a person's memory while at the same time transferring the knowledge of that same person beyond that particular relationship.

In "Mrs. Sen's", Lahiri demonstrates the physical aspect of transmission. With her skills in cooking, Mrs. Sen is able to recapture many aspects of a culture that she can no longer access. The key aspect of this practice is its repetitive nature. Preparing, cooking, storing, and talking about food ensures that the cultural memory persists. The notion mentioned by Sutton (2001) that taste and smell are essential in understanding how those practices are related to memory explains the process. Culinary processes engage not only cognition but also functioning of the body.

Divakaruni employs the same concept in presenting culinary knowledge as passed down and rooted in one's culture. Tilo's knowledge of spices encompasses more than just practical knowledge of cooking. Spices bring out the specific meanings and establish connection between the main heroine and immigrant community, surpassing merely utilitarian function of food. Culinary archive is thus more than just knowledge about food components.

Migration and the Portable Archive:

Migration illustrates the archival dimension of culinary trends. Persons migrating carry their recipes along with them. Unlike monuments and landforms, which cannot travel, recipes may be transported, reproduced, modified, and compared, serving therefore as a mobile archive of culture.

Banerji's memoir is the best example of this aspect of movement. The movement of culinary knowledge across India, Bangladesh, and the USA goes hand in hand with the movement of the self across geographical and cultural domains. Mohanty and Satapathy (2024)

argue that Banerji's recipes bring coherence to this transnational life. The recipes mean for the cultural memory to cross the borders without needing the migrant to recreate the original context.

Divakaruni's store works in a similar way in Oakland. The physical point exists in the USA, but the knowledge connected to the spices links it with the Indian cultural space. Therefore, the store is a cultural archive placed in the intermediate position between the home culture and the local culture.

The work of Lahiri "Mrs. Sen's" seeks to show both the limitations and advantages of the idea of the portable archive. There are certain elements which tie Mrs. Sen to India; however, in America, it is not easy to find them. This difficulty reveals the nature of materiality in case of the diasporic community. Food might be the source of home; however, it still can't recreate the original home. Culinary memory, therefore, is a medium through which a modified perception of place comes into being.

The immigrant recipe can be both a means of keeping the culture alive and transforming it. The fact that the ingredients might be changed, the techniques of cooking altered and influence of culinary behaviors might be introduced doesn't mean that the culture is lost. It rather implies the existence of the cultural identity that adapts and survives.

Gendered Knowledge and the Domestic Archive:

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Another important aspect of the culinary record is its gendered character. In the history of humanity, women have been assigned the function of passers of domestic knowledge, such as recipes and cooking methods. Bower (1997) demonstrates how community cookbooks serve to document women's lives and experiences. Thus, culinary writing is capable of making visible certain forms of knowledge that otherwise would remain confined to domestic sphere.

Banerji's book is important because it takes culinary knowledge out of the kitchen and makes it part of literature. Recipes that are attributed to domestic sphere enter both cultural and literary archives. The movement is not only from the private to the public venue; it also means a change in the status of knowledge. One set of culinary actions, which used to be treated as mundane, receives the status of cultural knowledge.

Recipes as Counter-Archives:

Banerji's memoir gives evidence of how culinary writings can convey domestic experiences into cultural history. There is a lot information provided by a recipe about migrations, since it communicates the story of a migrant person, tells about the family history, and that of home. In this case it does not mean that the recipes are replacements to archives , they come as a supplement allowing to preserve experiences that might not be provided by the institutional records.

Derrida's (1996) reflections on archival authority comes to usefulness here because it reminds us that the preservation of documents is closely related to power issues. What is preserved may serve as further material for interpretation.

Nonetheless, the phrase counter-archive should be applied with caution. A recipe does not merely provide antagonism to an established narrative. It may mirror and reproduce ideas about culture, gender, and authority. Its value lies in revealing access to a new archive, not in claiming that knowledge obtained at home is in itself superior or liberating. Thereby, the culinary archive becomes a platform for negotiation between memory and power, labor and identity.

Place, Identity, and Belonging:

The correlation between food and place is established in all three discussed works, since culinary practices have the ability to modulate spatial settings to meaningful places. This is especially important in diasporic literature, as distance is created with the help of physical movement.

In Banerji's memoir, recipes establish a connection among the different places in the context of one transnational identity. Indeed, culinary memory enables people to experience being in one place while physically located in another (in India, Bangladesh, or in the USA).

In a similar way the spice shop of Divakaruni establishes a connection between place and identity. It is located in Oakland and is regarded as the language of memory pertaining to Indian culture. In this case, the shop functions as a threshold between the origin and the land of residence.

The experiences of Mrs. Sen illustrate the fragility of such reconstruction. Food gives an Indian connection, but the American situation cannot recreate the social and sensory situations

in which she lived. Therefore, culinary practices create a sense of belonging but remind the migrant of his displacement. Sutton (2001) notes that food memory connects people to places, but he also claims that remembering a place does not rectify it.

Thus, belonging is not the same as geographical return. A person can practice a relationship with the place through recipes, tastes, memories, and culinary practices with no real return to it. However, owing to the adaptation of culinary traditions, such belonging is not static in nature and is therefore also not purely nostalgic.

The Recipe as a Living Cultural Archive:

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This distinction supports the idea of living cultural archive. The recipe is not just for the descendants' reference on what happened in the past; it is a method of operating and living through certain aspects of the past. Each time someone prepares the dish, he/she can repeat the knowledge passed down and at the same time bring something new to the ritual. Cultural preservation happens not just through repetition, but also through alteration.

Living archive also combines three theories. Cultural memory theory explains the process of transmission, archival theory explains preservation and selection, and food studies covers the importance of cooking rituals in identity, social relations, and belonging. The recipe combines the function of the text and a body, the memory and matter, and the individual and the collective.

Conclusion:

The examination of A Taste of My Life, The Mistress of Spices, and Interpreter of Maladies affirms that recipes and cooking processes have a cultural impact that goes well beyond the mere act of eating. They serve to evoke memory, share knowledge, connect people to places and cultures, and open doors to cultural identity. According to Banerji, recipes become visible as written documents that record individual and transnational memory. Divakaruni treats spices

and cooking knowledge as documents of culture transfer. Whereas Lahiri shows how cooking acts as a memory practice.

The major contribution of this study is the idea of recipe as a dynamic memory archive. This perspective does not consider recipe as a fixed tradition. Recipes are important for cultures since they can be repeated and modified. Migration, displacement, and meeting different cultures transform the cooking practice while keeping its roots alive. The archive preserves the past as well as the progress.

Furthermore, the study deepens the traditional definition of the archive by highlighting individual and collective histories. Culinary activities help to keep memories that could otherwise be ignored by chroniclers of history, such as the memory of migration, family, women's work and community. However, culinary practices should not be idealized. Culinary practices, on the one hand, have an empowering nature but on the other hand, they serve to uphold gender expectations.

In conclusion, the kitchen appears as a cultural space where memory is realized through culinary practices. Recipes can transport places, relationships, traditions and migration experiences but the processes of their alteration only contribute to the reshaping of their meanings. Thus, treating recipes as cultural archives brings changes to literary ideas of history and identity, since the culinary processes of cooking, tasting, sharing and remembering are determined by the use of recipes.

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