



The Role of Food in Shaping National and Cultural Identity

*Geetika Patni¹  and Kirti Bala² 

¹Swami Keshvanand Institute of Technology, Management & Gramothan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India-302017

²Bhartiya Skill Development University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India-302042 *geetika.patni@skit.ac.in

Abstract. To analyze the world around us and to explore the everyday to the global food and nationalism axis provides a prismatic observation over a much neglected area of study: the connection between food, nationalism and literature. Food is always considered as an essential area of a culture because it's a way of expressing oneself as deeply ingrained in our cultural identity and to pass it to the generations its rich cultural heritage. It's not only the means of sustenance but also can define and perpetuate culture. It appreciates and incorporates other ways of life also by cultural blending for social interactions and rituals because food is the centerpiece of celebrations and social gatherings like weddings, birthdays or parties of any kind. Sharing and passing down traditional dishes of this cultural blending and bring unique local cuisine and traditions which can be often made with fresh, locally sourced ingredients to give it a unique sense of identity. Hence food access is not mere subject of nutrition and physical health but it is continuity of tradition, customs and memories to the generation to come navigating amongst multicultural landscapes. Through food not only the culture is shared but also emotions are passed to new generations passing the legacy so that they can pass it to their coming generation. Shared emotions and shared food makes the bond stronger and gives a colour to the culture. However there is a generation gap food becomes the binding element from one generation to another representing culture at large.

Keywords: Food, Culture, National Identity, Literary Representation, Culinary Traditions, Heritage, Memory, Globalization, Migration, Symbolism.

1 Introduction

This section specially investigates that a variety of food traditions representing diasporic food cultures through social media or by any means negotiates and challenges the assumptions by society about the present, the past and the future of food and eating. This paper represents the contributions of the diasporic culture and tradition of food cultures, identities and futures within an increased polarized world contributing to a social and ecological breakdown to diasporic culinary traditions.

© The Author(s) 2026

S. Sharma et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Emerging Food Studies: Intersections of Culture, Science and Sustainability (ICEFS 2026)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 1017,

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-583-6_8

There is deep observation about our connection with food which is not related to mere survival as Chef Auguste once said that good food is the foundation of genuine happiness. The creative writing of immigrant authors and their characters often offers a unique lens into the complexities of self identity and sense of belongingness in the special context of food, that are explained beautifully for exploring practices by different societies, ritual development and cultural identity which encompasses human connections to the family cuisine. Their yearning for food and cultural assimilation in the adopted land becomes a recurring theme in diasporic work in shaping the tone and progression of a scene often serves as a catalyst to bring vital shift in the plot. The relationship between author and a cook is showcased between the food and literature where there is a kindled desire for words and language by the author while a longing for nourishment and physical craving is the urge of a cook to transcend their own experiences and connect with the lives of others. Literature is the way by which we tell our stories related to culture and tradition. It gives us the nostalgic feeling when we think about food because it reminds of our legacy from grandmother.

A theoretical framework to examine how food contributes to enrich a text and how it adds to the nostalgia will be done to initiate the process of writing this paper to share the experience about eating habits and traditionally food serving as archives to cultural history. Next, we'll talk about how immigrants and second immigrants found strong connection with food relating with their individuality and sense of belongingness.

1.1 Food as a Cultural Text

Food is considered with academic lens as a multifaceted cultural text which reflects social impact giving light on its symbolic meanings and showing historical connections too. It is believed that food language speaks of identity, social connection, beliefs and human emotions at large. The concept of semiotic for understanding food as an enriching text basically includes—the study of signs, symbols, and their implication. We would like to talk about the work of theorist like Roland Barthes who in his assessment of semiotics portrayed that food is not just the assimilation of different-different ingredients rather it indicates profound cultural messages even with a humble dish which sometimes carry a profound and multilayered meanings. For example, a specific regional dish is an intricate network of geographical and historical events to add collective value as whole.

Food related activities are highly determining of cultural norms, social status and collective identity. The concept of Habitus by Pierre Bourdieu which states that our eating habits and demands are deeply rooted temperament which gets influenced by our society we live in. The age old techniques which we inherited from our ancestors reinforcing gender roles transmitting cultural knowledge that often captured

by literature focuses on character navigation, challenges and endorsement of implied rules of their culinary worlds. Claude Levi-Strauss emphasized how alteration of food from its natural to cultural state happened. He denoted that raw to cooked state of food symbolizes basic human shift from nature to culture because of human intervention which is similar to Mary Douglas speaking about taboos and dietary regulation about food not as hygienic issue but to define social boundaries, explaining cluster identity and expressing moral convictions above all. While analyzing food it brings this insight that group eating habit is not a subjective one but traditional and cultural based system. Therefore food and culinary arts are intrinsically tied to literature both for survival and social behavior resonating through literature aesthetically and emotionally.

1.2 Food and Historical Narratives

When we talk about culinary experiences Literature has the capability to present national conflicts and changes within the society by the amalgamation of food into the larger picture of historical narratives. Sharing a table brings bonds, culture and identity which is more than satisfying hunger, commensality is without doubt is the multiplicity of exchanges to bring a kind of independency for the generations to come, because it underscores the practices of preserving and evolving simultaneously. Per-formative memory like act of kneading, dicing, serving, offering and sharing food becomes habitual memory that speaks through our senses as physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual satisfaction which comes from food memories depending on narratives where ambiguities, affirmations and contradictions represent an individual and groups cultural subjectivities. The novel like 'Water for chocolate' by Laura Esquivel expresses a bond and feeling through delicious cooking of Tita who expressed that food has the ability to transcend the ordinary to special. Hence commensality is not just domestic activity rather it's an act of confrontation, communication and the presentation of a distinguishing heritage

In literature traditional foods are reclaimed from a post-colonial standpoint to be an essential step of national freedom and self-assertion. Nigerian food is particularly considered as a crucial aspect of the female character's identity as she navigates American life in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. Although there is no historical epic in the same sense as Esquivel, *Americanah* employed food highlighting subtly the intricacies of post-colonial identity and the declaration of one's own heritage. Food is shown as a source of comfort during her relocation and remaining herself connected to her own roots to showcase an essential part of her Nigerian identity because this cultural nationalism and a celebration of a unique heritage only helped her to withstand colonial oppression.

2 Food in the Context of Migration and Diaspora: Asserting and Re-negotiating Identity

In Diaspora food serving reflections of their ethnicity, social status, and race and family ties often appears as a key, to find their way to the turmoil experienced by immigrants during migration. Diaspora people have always been observed that they reconstruct symbolically the identity of their homeland amidst unfamiliarity's of an adopted land by equipping themselves in the aromatic preparation of the traditional and regional dishes giving a sense of nostalgia by giving minutest details in their literature. It is evident from the lines of vikash pal:

“Food is a dynamic cultural element, varying not only from one society to another but also across genders, social classes, family structures, and even seasons. As both a source of physical sustenance and a marker of social identity, food plays an integral role in shaping personal and cultural identity. Within the context of globalized Western culture, individuals routinely consume foods with origins in other cultures—sushi, gyros, tacos, spaghetti, and crepes, to name a few. However, other practices, such as food taboos or prohibitions, and even the more extreme customs of consuming family members or enemies (forms of cannibalism), represent cross-cultural traditions that may feel far more unfamiliar”.

In literature the second immigrants produce hybrid identity to food by altering its traditional way of cooking fusing it with local ingredients to give the cuisine a new identity. The clever way to embrace local ingredient into the traditional way of cooking is the symbolic representation of a novel process of cooking by mixing new flavours and techniques for the fusion of unfamiliar cultural experiences, by articulating their complex, bicultural identity, and create new community structures. Like Naomi Duguid and Jeffrey Alford, celebrated food writers, observe, *“Food is our common ground, a universal experience.”* In Diaspora, this universal ground gets longer and re-forms, creating new culinary landscapes.

3 Food and the Politics of Identity: Commoditization, Appropriation, and Power

Food is deployed in literature as a cultural artifact to challenge and to dispel negative stereotypes to act as a powerful tool showcasing labor, history indulged in the preparation and consumption of ethnic cuisines to humanize initial step to a different culture. The elaborated description about food in culinary art can be oversimplified stereotype into a nuanced heritage to cultivate friendship by understanding and subvert prejudice. Tradition, purity and roots in regional food represents authenticity is the primary focus to broader nationalistic objectives. The moral imperative to narrate in literature food by preserving authentic cuisine effectively leverages to reinforce national identity and strengthen nationalistic sentiment.

3.1 Authenticity vs. Commodification

In the politics of food the significant issue is the tension is amongst authenticity, commercialization and gentrification of ethnic food. Diversification of food ways often experience processes of standardization, simplification, or "elevation," which can result in deprivation of their authentic cultural context and its importance so that it can be popularize worldwide. Like an inexpensive, traditional street food can be repackaged and served as a gourmet meal in an expensive and fancy restaurant, thus only to exclude the neighborhood from which it originated.

The authors have often criticized this dynamic to express regret over the "dilution" of traditional dishes in order to appeal to a broader, less discriminating palate by the characters. They observe in sheer disappointment for the food of their community is separated from its cultural roots and abridged to a passing trend.

3.2 Food and Stereotypes

Literature is a true reflection of Food that is frequently used to showcase or, more persuasively, disprove national and cultural stereotypes. A complex and diverse culture can be simplified or caricatured when it is reduced to a few "representative" dishes. For instance, a character from a particular Asian nation is constantly depicted consuming only spicy food, oily or eating rice and noodles, or a Latin American character is mostly depicted with overtly spicy food, perpetuating limited and often inaccurate stereotypes. Its propensity to reduce varied culinary landscapes into a single, easily assimilated image for an outside observer is what makes "exotic" food problematic.

However, the talented writers challenged the characters who on purpose defied these stereotypes and their gastronomic expectations introduced a huge variety of dishes from a single culture presenting its very culinary diversity. In the novels its showcased that a British character who looked down the classic fish and chips or on the contrary an Italian character is depicted as to favour Asian fusion food. By doing so, literature not only promotes a more complex and flexible understanding of cultural identity by directly challenging obsolete cultural presumptions and elevating individual identity above constrictive national clichés. In conclusion, literature treats food not as a passive backdrop but as an active, contested battleground for identity. By critically analyzing its depiction, readers and critics can understand how the production and consumption of food are inherently political acts that either affirm or challenge the dominant narratives of culture, belonging, and power.

4 Critics' Perspectives

For literary representations scholars have provided critical perspectives about profound connection between food, memory and national identity for example in his essays on "gastropolitics," Arjun Appadurai portrays how through food people negotiate status, Power and collective identity, which becomes a "dense signifying arena." It is absolutely evident from Appadurai's work that regional dish or national dish not only symbolizes culinary innovation but also a symbol of national identity infused with regional or minority culinary traditions.

According to Sidney Mintz's in his famous book 'Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History', emphasized that the historical production, trade and consumption paths are strongly connected to national development and collective experience. Despite concentrating on a single ingredient, every country has some special connection to sugar made food as it reflects social structures, economic systems and cultural preferences throughout the world. His research forces us to look beyond the plate because our sense of national identity changes along with dietary preferences.

Finally, Carole Counihan, whose work is basically concerned on how cooking food and transferring recipes from one generation to other often by female gender is the only way to preserve the tastes and methods of the past to continue for the upcoming generations who frequently examines the relationship between food and gender, provides insights into how culinary customs, especially in the home, reinforce identity and transmit cultural memory. Carole's major works speak of gender roles relating to food providing varied consideration through literature constructing national heritage and collective memory by culinary art.

Fabio Parasecoli a critic on food studies presented a framework for a better understanding the intricate relationship to deeply dive into the relationship between food of varied culture and globalization, He presents his argument that although we are living in globalized world which not only facilitates intercultural communication, but also presents significant issues with respect to authenticity, intellectual property, and power disparity in the global food system. There is a question of cultural ownership and economic justice. As Parasecoli's work majorly is concerned it represents the support of the commodification of cuisines from our culture demanding multinational corporations over communities from which roots of food culturally belong to. This research basically peeps into how literary works depicting literary works presents a paradox of a cuisine awaiting its recognition or fair compensation acquiring international acclaim. Authors have employed Characters in their literary works to illustrate the moral quandaries for commercial exploitation of cultural symbols that result from this appropriation or to challenge it. Literary narratives often highlight the deep politics behind eating food representing power dynamics of food to the larger landscapes from private cultural tradition to the arena of global commerce and political identity design.

5 Reflections

In literature, food is considered to be more than food especially in the context of diaspora where culture keeps evolving to form new and hybrid identities. The immigrants try to stick to their culture strictly by inculcating their food and eating habits after settling in the foreign land that actually connects the emotional significance of food through aromas, flavors, to feel pride about their land embracing equally the new influences to create mix expressions to preserve their cultural legacy. Highly sensory facets of food's role in identity, multidimensional capacity of food is shown in literary representation are conveyed in a unparallel way. There is a unique window into personal, emotional and frequent way that a single individual or communities relate to food is unlike sociological data or historical records. There are authors who skillfully evoke the tastes, smells, textures, and rituals of eating, allowing readers to intuitively understand the clash of cultural appropriation, the pride in a culinary tradition, the comfort of a well-known meal, and the yearning for a lost homeland. Food is not only a basic commodity but also a living symbol overflowing with human emotion in literature.

6 Conclusion

In literature food is beyond just serving as a background, rather is a powerful symbol for setting up and safeguarding national and cultural identity. For Diasporas writing it serves as an important connection to their past land and serves as a medium for socio-cultural structure, historical significance and nostalgia to memory. To conclude food is the essence of human relationship to culture expressing M.F.K Fisher's assertion that in literature hunger is more to write about love for our individuality, culture, and nationality at large.

Acknowledgments. We are grateful to the college administration and management for their constant encouragement and for providing a conducive environment for academic research.

References

1. Adichie, C.N.: *Americanah*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York (2013).
2. Almerico, G.M.: Food and identity: Food studies, cultural, and personal identity. *Journal of International Business and Cultural Studies* 8, 1 (2014).
3. Appadurai, A.: Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia. *American Ethnologist* 8(3), 494–511 (1981).
4. Barthes, R.: Towards a psychosociology of contemporary food consumption. In: Counihan, C., Van Esterik, P. (eds.) *Food and Culture: A Reader*, pp. 20–27. Routledge, London (1997).
5. Bhabha, H.K.: *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, London (1994).

6. Bourdieu, P.: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. (Transl. Nice, R.) Harvard University Press, Cambridge (1984).
7. Counihan, C., Van Esterik, P. (eds.): *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Routledge, London (1997).
8. Douglas, M.: *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge, London (1966).
9. Erdrich, L.: *The Round House*. Harper Perennial, New York (2012).
10. Esquivel, L.: *Like Water for Chocolate*. Doubleday, New York (1992).
11. Lahiri, J.: *Interpreter of Maladies*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston (1999).
12. Lévi-Strauss, C.: *The Raw and the Cooked*. (Transl. Weightman, J., Weightman, D.) Harper & Row, New York (1969).
13. Ligrani, R., Niewolny, K.: Community food work as critical practice: A faith-based perspective through narratives. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 7(4), 61–77 (2017).
14. Mintz, S.W.: *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. Viking, New York (1985).
15. Ozeki, R.: *My Year of Meats*. Penguin Books, New York (1999).
16. Pal, V.R.: Culinary identities: The significance of food in shaping cultural (2026).
17. Parasecoli, F.: *Al Dente: A History of Food in Italy*. Reaktion Books, London (2014).
18. Pilcher, J.M.: The embodied imagination in recent writings on food history. *The American Historical Review* 121(3), 861–887 (2016).
19. Said, E.W.: *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, New York (1978).
20. Scholliers, P.: Meals, food narratives, and sentiments of belonging in past and present (2001).
21. Tan, A.: *The Joy Luck Club*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York (1989).
22. Toussaint-Samat, M.: *A History of Food*. John Wiley & Sons (2009).

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

