



Food Creolization as a Medium of Cultural Hybridity: An Exploration of the Graphic Novel *Rare Flavours*

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Abstract. Food as an entity is principally attributed with the functionality of demonstrating cultural roots, pertaining either to a specific geographical landmark or community of people following varied traditions. The emerging field of Food Studies in literature illustrates how food constitutes a pivotal role in highlighting authentic cultural values and beliefs, through various storytelling techniques; fictional or non-fictional. This article, however, examines the work *Rare Flavours* (2023), a graphic novel written by Ram V and illustrated by Filipe Andrade to explore how the plot interweaves different remarkable Indian cuisines with culture, which is effectively enkindled by Rubin Baksh's, relentless quest for culinary relish. Nonetheless, a multitude of research works exemplify the manner in which cooking and food culminates in the galvanization of distinct experiences, memory, culture, or even as an adaptive strategy. Food predominantly substantiates cultural transformation with evolving times, yet the aspect of hybridity of culture facilitated by cuisine remains underexplored. Therefore, the emphasis of this article is centered on a profound dissection of the amalgamation of existing cultures and emergence of new cultures that is further accentuated by various recipes. With each recipe and its ingredients chronicled in the graphic novel, conducting as a connotation of cultural prominence; *Rare Flavours* (2023) is subjected to a scrupulous analysis from the lens of creolization theory. A theory that customarily examines the process of cultural mixing enabled by the concurrent presence of different languages, traditions or belief systems; the purpose of this theory can also be stretched to food studies. The colourful illustrations in the graphic novel (2023) accentuates the essence of the plot through the visual imagery and metaphors that serves as the carriage of deeper meaningful implications of memory and individuality, as constructed through food culture. Rubin Baksh's journey of experiencing different culinary delight displays creolization through cuisine, as a conspicuous element of cultural hybridity and subsequent identity formation, as it is moulded by the enormously diverse cultural influences.

Keywords: Culture, Food, Cultural Hybridity, Creolization, Identity, Recipes, Graphic novel.

1 Introduction

Food, a vital element that unswervingly attributes to the very subsistence of living beings, to such an extent that, when devoid of its attainability, sustenance of life as a whole, would steer towards non-viability. However, the prominence of food, in general, transcends beyond the matter of sustenance alone, to radically symbolize the distinctiveness of culture, tradition and identity [19]. Owing to the proximate interconnectedness between food and culture, the people perceive food as a factor that aligns deftly with enkindling a sense of identity rather than merely savoring it as an element that contributes for survival. As described in the article titled *Transglobal Culture: Hybrid Food and Cultural Identity*, “reflection of cultural identity, food is one of the media to express ‘the self’ that can create uniqueness of certain community, even society. However, in Indonesia, cultural identity is not a single unified identity.” [10] Moreover, the aroma and taste of the food has the power to persuasively influence the psyche of the individuals, by prompting them to relish various emotions and memories. Highlighting the psychological impact food can engender in the individuals, Strand (2023), asserts that “food memories are not solely concerned with tastes and aromas but with people—those with whom we shared dinner, those who cared enough for us to cook us a meal—and with hospitality, trust, reciprocity, and emotional intimacy.” [11]

The food cultures prevalent around the world witness substantial degrees of diversities, which is primarily dependent on the cultural and geographical difference of the communities of people. Therefore, it could be established that food, through its palatable reflection of deeply-rooted tradition, proficiently emerges as the carriage of culture in its own distinct way.

Since culture is created and impacted by the varied units of people, the food culture too, becomes highly influenced by the people belonging to a particular spatial or community spectrum. Any manner of variation discerned in the food culture, considerably foregrounds the evolving nature of culture in itself, which could have originated on the basis of several causes. Moreover, the concurrence of different cultures subsequently enables the confluence of distinct food cultures, which could gradually even pave the path for the emanation of a new one. This process of amalgamation of two or more different cultures, in literature, can be analyzed from the lens of Creolization, a term coined by the Jamaican historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite, who is “one of the pioneering figures in the study of creolization” [4]. The employment of creolization as the tool for examination, illustrates how art, music, language, traditions and even the quotidian lifestyle of individuals highlight the culture being subjected to immense modification through intersectionality. This research, however, aims to comprehend the enormous capacity of cuisine as a dynamic cultural force and therefore, centers around the study of creolization of food. As described in

the article titled, *Food as a factor of collective identity: The case of creolisation*, “Creolisation in food first refers to cultural intersections that occurred in these societies to provide what is known locally as Creole cuisine. More broadly, it refers to the identity processes crystallised in food, in multicultural Creole societies, reflecting their internal structures” [9]. This is established in the article through the critical analysis of a graphic novel titled *Rare Flavours* (2023), written by Ram V. and illustrated by Filipe Andrade, which blends mythology and cuisine to demonstrate the flavors of nostalgia, vulnerability and resilience.

The intersectionality of literature potentially causes it to merge with several other arenas, especially of humanities and social sciences, thus, offering a comprehensive scrutiny of eminent subject matters relevant in the current societal trend. *Rare Flavours* (2023) accounts for the fusion of two enigmatic domains of food studies and fiction; which is an expanding field of study in the present research scenario of literature. Many texts, fictional and non-fictional, implement cuisine as a crucial theme, mostly with the intent of developing a concealed connotation for experiences such as subjugation, suppressed memory and trauma. Food’s intertwinement with repressed emotions and traumatic memories of the past is well established in Laura Esquivel’s novel *Like Water for Chocolate* [18] that employs food and cooking as a metaphor for illustrating the navigation of distressed emotions spaces induced by the accentuating tension in human relationships. As observed in the article *Decoding the Semiotics of Food Culture and Emotions Like Water for Chocolate*, “Food in the novel becomes a metaphor for sex, for love, for longing, for hope, and for happiness. From the title to the chapter division, food is in the heart of the novel. The tragic story of Tita unfolds with food being the most significant element along with the traditions and culture of her Mexican family. Thus the author did an incredible job in creating food metaphors with the emotions of Tita. In a way she has made a cookbook of feelings and emotions disguised in the form of a novel.” [8]

Thus, the existing researches substantiate how food and cooking emanate as the medium of reviving past memories, materializing at times, as the coping mechanism for dealing with distressing circumstances. This article, although, emphasizes on the underexplored aspect of food studies in literature and examines food through the lens of culture and its evolving nature. This paper, by adopting a method of qualitative study, has the potential to inculcate a novel perspective on approaching food studies and cultural studies. Nonetheless, it is significant to note that though the graphic novel analyzed in the article by being exclusively centralized on food, it is not perfectly devoid of the theme of memory and there are elements of nostalgia; albeit it is depicted from the stance of cultural cuisine prominence.

“A graphic novel is like a novel and it is complete in itself” [20]. This assertion arises owing to the visual aspect of storytelling associated with graphic novels. The distinctive illustration of culinary narrative institutes Ram V. and Filipe Andrade’s *Rare Flavours* (2023) as a conspicuous text, wherein it chronicles numerous recipes and ingredients pertaining to various parts of the modern day. Initially produced as a comic series consisting of six sequences and each part depicting an extensive embellishment of a

particular cuisine, the sequences were later consolidated with the objective of establishing it as a single graphic novel, which was published in 2023. Andrade's appealing visuals in the graphic text further endorses the essence of the plot by quintessentially amplifying the meticulously represented latent implications that entails meaningful connotations. A riveting tale that emerges as the conjuncture of culture and mythology, *Rare Flavours* (2023) is prominent in whimsically depicting the primacy of food in the society; since food too, as rightly asserted by Holtzman (2006), is a cultural construct like gender, family or religion. [12]

2 *Rare Flavours* (2023) as a Prominent Graphic Novel

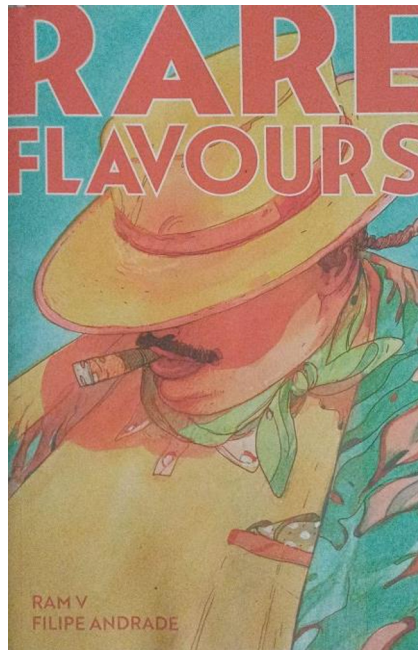


Fig.1. Cover Page of the Graphic Novel (2023)

Myth and history is amalgamated in contemporary Indian fiction to preserve the tradition, while simultaneously dissolving away from it [17]. The conventions and prejudices associated with it are questioned while retaining and celebrating the cultural roots. The graphic novel [1] renders its protagonist, Rubin Baksha, by harnessing inspiration from the Indian mythological character, a demon named Bakasura. A terrifying figure from the epic Mahabharata, the very character of Bakasura is

clustered upon his ravenous appetite, which eventually ensues in his assassination by Bhima, one of the five Pandava brothers from the prominent epic. Described as a “journey of culinary delight” [7], Rubin Baksha’s unrelenting quest to document different cuisines of India, stems from the deeply entrenched connection between himself and Bakasura. Rubin Baksha, classified as “a demonic rakshasa” [7] and a centenarian, is none other than Bakasura himself, who disguises himself as a human to embark upon a journey of chronicling several delightful cuisines through film. The oneness of Rubin Baksha and Bakasura is established in the graphic novel [1] by demonstrating the similitude in their physicality, through the spectacular art of Filipe Andrade.

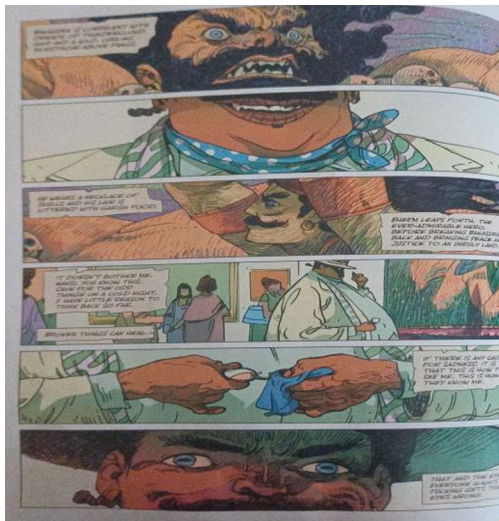


Fig.2. A page from the graphic novel that establishes Rubin Baksha’s true identity as Bakasura through the remarkable visual illustrations. From *Rare Flavours* by Ram and Filipe Andrade, 2023.

In order to construct his aspiration of documenting the cuisines into reality, Rubin Baksha selectively approaches Mohan, referred in the story as Mo, a dejected young filmmaker with a melancholic past. Although reluctant at the first instance, Mo represses the mental encumbrances of his past memories to eventually plunge into the venture with a sense of uncertainty looming within him. Henceforth, Rubin Baksha and Mo, in essence emerge as the two major characters in the story that are depicted to be tantalizingly peripatetic; with each distinctive cuisine transpiring as their port of call. Rubin Baksha is a character whose perception of cooking emerges remarkably similar to Schiavone’s (2024) assertion, who notes, “cooking and loving are activities that are closely related and oscillate between the passion of the body and the composure of the soul.” [13]

3 Creolisation in *Rare Flavours* (2023)

As Brathwaite (1971) has asserted in his seminal work “The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820”, creolization indisputably surfaces as a “cultural action” that can be “material, psychological, and spiritual” [3]. *Rare Flavours* (2023) is delineated with food occupying the centrality of the narrative, thereby propounding for the material aspect of Brathwaite’s theory of creolization and it incepts in the text (2023) from the initial chapter titled Masala Chai, which surfaces as Rubin Baksha’s reminiscence of the story of a man named Satish. Masala Chai, a customarily a frequent consumption in the present day, when traced back to several years, in the narrative of Satish, appears as a delicacy with its own specialty, different from the regular tea consumed by people. “It was passed down, like some ancient treasure, the answer to all things. The hope in the darkest hour.” [1]

Employment of the term ‘ancient treasure’ by Ram V. [1] is a testimony to the functionality of food as a figure of cultural prominence, wherein it is passed down from one generation to the next like a materialistic ancestral possession. Evaluating Satish’s emotional reliance on the masala tea, it can be denoted as an ancestral food, which “have the ability to communicate a legacy, they are a series of images that come to have a protocol of behaviors and procedures, carry a series of signs and symbols that express meanings that make up the cultural identity.” [16].

On the other hand, ‘hope’ highlights the food as a coping mechanism, offering solace and reassurance in dire times. An in-depth insight of the process of food creolization can be further obtained through an observation of the two beverages of tea and masala tea. From the regular tea, which is an exclusive Indian beverage, arose the popular masala chai that witnesses the inclusion of additional spices such as cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, ginger and black pepper. Thus, masala chai is per say, a creolized version of tea that marked the emergence of a new prominent beverage in India at the time of British Raj. The irrevocable collapse of Satish’s ‘Bhanusree Tea Stall’, from being a highly sought after liquid refreshment that potentially materialized into his livelihood, yet again spotlights the alteration, through the lens of the people, wherein with the passage of time, the once special masala chai creolized into a generally obtainable common drink, similar to the normal tea. The experience of Satish emphasizes on the fact that the altering attitude of individuals occurring with time, with respect to a dish or drink, too contributes to the creolization effect on food, besides its style of preparation.

As the next terminal, the graphic novel [1] locates Rubin Baksha and Mohan near Jodhpur in Rajasthan, a place distinguished for its raging produce of Mathania Laal Mirch. This chapter elucidates the creolization of one specific ingredient rather than emphasizing on a cuisine as a whole. The Red Chilli pronounced its arrival in India during the time of Portuguese rule; who instituted the active trading of distinctive, eminent spices. As observed in the article titled *How Chillies Arrived in India*, “The Portuguese introduced Chillies to their new colony. It was not long before the Goans

started using Chillies, in preference of the long pepper and black pepper they had used in the past. From Goa, the use of Chillies spread rapidly through India to become the country's favourite spice.

But it did not end there. As often happens when there is a mixing of cultures, you find that cuisines start becoming fused. Portuguese influences began to enter local Goan cuisine, and vice versa. Gradually, a unique fusion cuisine was created and led to what we know today as Goan cuisine. It is a cuisine melting pot of East and West, as unique as it is delicious." [5]

The aforementioned lines elucidate how the commendable locus of red chillies in the Indian cuisine commenced from Goa; however, this chapter does not regale in the creolization of chillies from the perspective of a Goan food culture. This section of the graphic novel [1] features the process of creolizing through its evolution from red chilli into mathania laal mirch, a cultural modification enabled by the difference in geographical landscape; which culminated into an enticing trademark of Rajasthan. "The dry heat and sand of Rajasthan gave the chilli a new home – most famously in Mathania, a province not far from Jodhpur" [1]. The chapter of Mirchi emerges as a substantial element of the graphic novel [1]; not merely on the account that it illuminatingly presents the creolized Indian version of the red chillies, on the other hand, this chapter delineates a thriving revelation of the true identity of Rubin Baksha. "I love food. And I love the people." [1], could be identified as more of a confession than an assertion of his preferences.

Ram and Andrade's graphic novel [1] is idiosyncratic in its capaciousness, wherein it essentially harbors the multifarious nature of creolization. As this article fixates its focal point on food, the evolving cuisine culture is scrutinized not only from the lens of the modifications effectuated in the end product, which is the dish in itself; nonetheless, even the miniscule of alterations discerned in the method adopted for the preparation of a recipe or the differences in the dimension and complexion of the ingredients, reflects the characteristics of creolization. This assertion could be further substantiated through Rubin Baksha's recital of the delicacy 'Raan', that is subjected to assume its creolized version through adopting a varied method of preparation. Foregrounding the dish as a "frontier food older than history itself" [1], Rubin Baksha adequately accredits the significant methodical refinements discerned in Raan when he remarks "Since then, the dish has been tempered and tamed often to mean Roast Leg Lamb" [1]. Whilst disclosing to Mo the past of Naeem, Rubin Baksha alludes to Naeem resorting to the modern oven for the preparation of the special meat instead of the airy heat of the tandoor", which transpires the variation in the taste and texture of Raan, thus inducing a certain manner of creolization.

Yet another exemplar instance that imparts a resemblance to the creolization of Raan is Daal Fry, a renowned Indian delicacy. "Traditionally, the daal is cooked in an earthen pot. The lentils are boiled in water on a high flame until soft (easily mashed to paste when pressed with fingers). For the more contemporary cook, the daal can be cooked in a pressure cooker with two and half cups of water until soft" [1]. The adoption of

modern pressure cookers is a demonstration of the creolized version of the several thousand years old recipe.

The eminent recipe of 'triple scheszwan rice', prepared by Rubin Baksha himself, entails as the most acknowledged food creolization by amalgamating the cuisine culture of two different countries, namely India and China. The recipe, described by Rubin as "the flavours of a cuisine born in China, brought to Kolkata by labourers and made famous by anyone with a dream, a wok, a food cart and taste." [1], necessitates the consumption of the ingredients of rice and noodles, staples of India and China, respectively. Although, the origination of this variety of rice dish could be traced back to China; it eventually also, discovered its own shelter in India, hailed by the term Indo-Chinese food, which was instituted through the immigrants from China. According to Tibere (2015), "Creole cuisine thus shaped a common reference system, which was enriched through migration and acted as an integrating element for Indian and Chinese migrants who arrived during the nineteenth century. It is a sort of symbolic and concrete territory which each group marked – and still does – with its own degree of influence, in an ongoing process of collective appropriation" [9]. The refinement from scheszwan to 'triple' scheszwan, which was developed with the intent of assuring contentment to the savory of the people of Mumbai, illustrates the cultural evolution the dish encountered with its variation in the geographical region. The article titled "Mumbai Loves Its Triple Scheszwan Rice, But Why Has The Dish Never Made It To Delhi?", sheds light on the emergence of the food as a locale culinary rather than being perceived an international cuisine; wherein, it states, "this unique culinary landscape was born in the bylanes of Kolkata's Tangra area, from the kitchens of Chinese immigrants and their children who opened restaurants and slowly started to adapt their traditional dishes to the local palate.

The love for Indo-Chinese food spread steadily outwards and became a staple in cities around the country with unique dishes that bridge the international divide between China and India. Said to date back to the late 1980s, when Chinese cuisine began appearing on Mumbai's food landscape, this innovative dish quickly captured local hearts and palates. The "triple" component typically includes fried rice, hakka noodles, and crispy fried noodles, all generously doused in a fiery Scheszwan sauce, often topped with a half-fried egg for good measure." [6]

4 Conclusion

Food is, indisputably, the most significant repository of memory [14]. The prominence of food as a cultural element is further accentuated by the statement "Food is language and language is memory." [1], which furthermore offers an insight into the interconnectedness of food and memory, yet another theme dominant in the narrative. Language is, assuredly, an element that supremely bolsters in imparting the cultural lineage in the society, which could occur amongst people belonging to different ethnicity, geographical landscape or even the generational variation. Either penned down or orated verbally, it is through the nuanced articulation of language, with individuals

enacting as the medium, that the traditions and its roots establish their ingrained foundation in society. Nonetheless, this ingrained foundation is garnered well within the intellect of the people, which they better comprehend as memory. The endurance of a language evinces the bearing of a cultural identity in the memory of the individuals whereas the erosion of a language in a community is a testimony to the decaying of culture, underpinned by perishing of memory. Aligning well with this statement, Rajagukguk, Maelms, & Ginting (2022); remark a pivotal observation on language in their work [2], which describes language, “as a crucial component of individual and collective identity. It is the means through which people express their thoughts, emotions, and sense of self. When a language is lost, a significant part of a community's cultural heritage is eroded. The loss of a language often leads to the disappearance of unique oral traditions, folklore, and traditional knowledge.” [2]

Therefore, language could even be commended as the emissary of memory and culture, and thus, sternly discerning the waves of variations wrought in a language would stimulate the proper deciphering of culture itself. “Language is inextricably tied to culture. It carries the stories, traditions, and identities of a community” [2]. Elaborating further on the significance of language, Rajagukguk et al. (2022), argue, “Each language carries its own unique set of words, expressions, and structures that reflect the cultural, historical, and environmental context of its speakers. For instance, cultural nuances: Languages often contain words that are untranslatable into other languages, expressing concepts deeply embedded in the culture of the speakers. For example, the Japanese word "tsundoku" refers to the habit of acquiring books and letting them pile up, unread.” [2]

The foregoing words in the above paragraph, directly annotated from the graphic novel [1], establishes a parallelism among language, memory and food; the three factors that indisputably concoct themselves as the cardinal ingredients to comprehend the intricate progression of culture. The scrumptious elaboration of each of the recipes is no less than a tasteful dissemination of a palette of Rubin Baksha’s nostalgia associated with several parts of India. Though at the surface level, his character is illustrated as a shallow being plagued by an insatiable hunger, Rubin Baksha’s journey eventually emanates as a phenomenal recreation of his delightful memories that also serves as a testament to the immense diversity in India’s food culture, with each chapter narrating the history and peculiarities of the various creoled cuisines.

The graphic novel [1] remarkably engenders food as an element of salvation; as food is the medium through which Rubin Baksha’s demon like identity and nature transforms into a human with emotions. Therefore, food, in addition to its cultural significance in society, also has the power to facilitate a profound impact on the character and psyche of an individual. Food emanates as the source of healing for the traumas Rubin Baksha endured in his life experiences. Food emerges as an eminent tool effective in achieving the desired outcome, wherein emotions and moods are influenced by the food. [15]

Every recipe documented in the graphic text [1] spotlights that it is the significant impact produced at an individual level that eventually contributes to the process of creolization, thereby ensuing in a cultural prominence. The food, recipes and ingredients

cannot be merely deduced as a preference of a particular location or community and hence, the graphic novel [1], endows an irrefutable validation to their cultural significance through a nuanced description of its history and evolution. Andrade [1] resorts to contributing a separate panel with different colours for the representation of the culinary, rather than merging it with the tale of Rubin Baksha and Mo, assuring equivalency in conveying the prominence of both the fictional narrative and culinary cultural narrative. The conspicuousness of *Rare Flavours* (2023) is enhanced by its very structure of being a graphic novel; that with its appealing visual illustrations propounds to beneficially engender finite amount of awareness on the texture and colour of the culinary addressed in the work, besides introducing the several diverse Indian cuisines.

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