

IMAGES OF FOOD IN THE SELECTED WRITINGS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper tries to explain food fiction as one of progressive transgressions in the contemporary Indian English literature. The reason is very clear — firstly, food has been an unusual topic in Indian writings and secondly the fictional cooks seem to be empowered through their food in the stories. Accordingly, food encouraged plural identities for women, at least fictionally. Moreover, it also drives to a totally different field of the diasporic Indian women writers writing with their commitment to food culture. Therefore, in this research paper the writers are not only foregrounding the kitchen as a gendered space, but also they are mediating the connection of food with their ethnicity.

Keywords: *Food, Culture, Gender, Ethnicity and Identity.*

[Badhwar, D. **Images of Food in the Selected Writings of Bharti Mukherjee.** *International Journal of Higher Education and Research* 2020; 10(2):272-279]. ISSN 2277 260X (online). <http://www.ijher.com>. doi: [10.7755/ijher170720.17](https://doi.org/10.7755/ijher170720.17)

Food in fiction is a new phenomenon. Rituals of food preparation and consumption have not been given due importance in the literary tradition. But there have been several researchers who have used feminist theories to read food in women's writings like Anita Mannur in her work, *Culinary Fictions* (2005) talks about literary and cultural texts of food in Diasporic novels alludes to the capacity of food to demonstrate Asian divergence in the American creative mind.

Indeed, even before I characterize my contention or the deficiency in that field. In this paper, I have to put food in Indian women's fiction in context. However, the importance of food in fiction had been given due weightage by the post feminists in the third wave of feminism. Food

and cookery have been considered women's traditional domain i.e. kitchen. As a result, contemporary fiction by woman writer is full of images describing food and consumption. The works of literature, in the present scenario depicts food in various stages of the production cycle—the inception of recipes, the process of baking, boiling, roasting etc, consumption and post-consumption rituals, incited related to body and signification of food per se. These images include the feminist agenda through the experience of women into literature. The women writers also respond to the broader questions of their racial, rational and ethnic identities. It is a common perception that there is a sensual relation among food, gender and identity. However, food is foregrounded as in empowering agency. The present study analyses culinary images in Bharati Mukerjee's *Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989), Mukherjee is a writer settled in America. In her novel, she reflects their immigrant characters through cookery and food consumption. Her character's life is full of dichotomies like inside-outside, east-west, and past-present. However, this study tells about the resolving of dichotomies with food images. Mukherjee has an equivocal stand in cookery. Cookery gives her characters some respite of cultural alienation like Dimple in *Wife*, her neurosis is shown in her disturbed imagination about food and body. Whereas Jasmine in *Jasmine* offers Indian food to change the taste of American's she interacts with. Mukerjee works at the root level to discuss food to its various manifestations. Mukerjee is very famous for enriching her works with symbolism and imageries related to food and kitchen. Mukherjee does not depict the kitchen as the domain to empower immigrant women. She delineates it as a combining space.

The protagonists of her novels are immigrant. They travel through various societies and culture to reach America. The protagonist's Dimple and Jasmine came from different classes they represent Indian bourgeois and the working-class respectively. Both of these characters belong to a different class, but they express their common desire to be American. Dimple cooks in the kitchen only as an imitator while Jasmine has mastered the art of serving subaltern culture and ethos to the mainstream. Malashri Lal says,

The threshold, and move onto different arenas. In Mukherjee's fiction culinary skills are considered as a relic of Indian tradition which is faithfully carried on by immigrants in America. Though Mukherjee attributes power to the women's traditional domain rather grudgingly, it is obvious that Dimple and Jasmine are

linked to the kitchen which in turn enables them to shape their identity in consonance with their ethnicity (Lal, 108).

The violent images predominate the fictional world of Mukherjee. However, food images acquire apocalyptic qualities. Moreover, it also represents that food shows the development and assimilation of the characters in a new culture. Anupama Jain find the common themes in South Asian women narrative, she observes that these works-

insist on female autonomy and independence they demand that each woman should be able to select which cultural traditions she will keep and/or continue...they notice how many women across cultures need to move outside of families and official histories in order to fashion alternative selves (Jain, 132).

Food in this paper falls into three stages, and they are the stage of production, consumption and ejection. Agrarian images in *Jasmine* pertain to the stage of production. However, culinary images in both the novels are related to the stage of consumption and finally, scatological images in Mukherjee's novels belong to the last category. These three different states of existence of food are based on Levi-Strauss's famous raw and cooked paradigm. Raw, cooked and rotten food are distinct but interrelated to each other. This classification of food passes from one to another form. Levi-Strauss expresses that raw food becomes cooked and if it is processed by nature becomes rotten.

Mukherjee presents the art of cookery in both her novels. Dimple in *Wife* is trained in culinary as she belongs to the middle-class Bengali family. She is expected to satisfy her husband through her culinary skills. Ian Joseph Somerhalder, the American actor even quotes "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach" (*The Vampire Diaries, Season 7*). It is thought that cooking is the only domain to reach her husband's heart. Dimple even sells her cooking skills in America. She is praised by others and identified by her culinary skills. She serves American dishes to Bengali guests and Bengali dishes to American guests. Ultimately her sense of aloofness accentuates in America. She has no interest in eating, even though she cooks regularly to resemble her normally before her husband and other people. Dimple tries to live a glamorous life; she wants to achieve self-actualization in her life. So, she does not want to remain confined in the kitchen. In *Jasmine*,

the protagonist possesses survivor skills. She is from the lesser privileged class. Therefore, she is more influenced by American culture than Dimple. Dimple is protected in her home. However, Jasmine mixes up with the mainstream of American culture to a great extent. The mixed-up food she cooks changes the dominance of culture in which she lives and helps her co-opt the moves of both the world. Lastly, Jasmine comes out of the domestic domain and starts exploring the outside world. *Wife* is a genetic title it consists of two main characters Dimple Basu, wife of Amit Basu. Amit Basu is a mechanical engineer. The novel describes the life of a Dimple Basu and Amit Basu. They got married and go to America. Anita Myles asserts that “the title of the novel is ironical as the protagonist is incapable of fulfilling this role in the traditional manner, as the demands are more than she can handle, develops a mental disposition which leads to failure in marriage” (Myles, 311).

Dimple eats food with medicinal values that can enhance her beauty- mustard oil massage, ground almonds, honey packs, chicken soup etc. We come to know that Dimple runs after glamour throughout the novel, but ends up failing miserably. We see her attitude when she dines with her husband at the Kwality restaurant. Her husband comes closer to her, but she does not respond to the passion of her husband. She pays attention to how to eat chilli chicken properly. Mukherjee writes in the novel – “She ate large spoonful of fried rice and worried about the most discreet way of eating chilli chicken. It was difficult to tackle the small pieces with knife and fork but eating with her fingers, Bengali – style in a restaurant, seemed terribly uncouth” (Mukherjee, 21). It is clear to her that her table manners are unpolished. She does not know how to appear refined and this obsession makes her dumb to her husband’s passion. She does not eat green chillies when she got married. But, she starts eating them, when she suspects she is pregnant. She thinks that green chillies would make her body return to its normal cycle. She tries her best to get her pregnancy terminated. She tries to vomit whenever she can and enjoys the sensation:

She would sneak off to the bathroom and crouch in front of the toilet bowl with both elbows on the rim and watch the arc of foul vomit crash against the sides. The vomit fascinated her. It was hers; she was locked in the bathroom expelling brownish liquid from her body. She took pride in the brownish blossoms, in the solid debris of chewed cauliflowers and lentils that sank fast; she grew arrogant

and possessive, resenting the flush that carried them away to some sea”
(Mukherjee, 30-31).

The graphical detail of vomiting has a masochistic dimension. She vomits artificially and forcefully. She enjoys the wild expulsion from the belly. This highlights the importance of food in our life. In the novel *Wife*, at the very beginning Dimple enjoys a lot in America. But, her disappointment grows in America. She expresses it through food. Dimple decides to treat Meena and Jyoti to some cheesecake. So, she goes to buy cheesecake from a meat shop. Dimple is surprised that the statement of the shopkeeper when he tells her that she has broken his God's law. Dimple is frightened with him, and she thinks that he may shoot her to death, but he says “nothing against you” as he is a meat merchant and cannot sell the milk products. Dimple is frightened and she goes back to the past. She thinks that in Calcutta nobody would have raised any objection in selling things to her. She does not satisfy her expectation and is not able to comprehend American sensibility. In fact, cheesecake shows the cultural difference between America and India. Dimple fails to understand the dietary laws of the Jews in America. She considers this incident as a racist attack on her. She is sure that cheesecake man had not “trapped” her, she would have had the courage to venture out of her house all by herself and would have been “strong and sane” (Mukerjee, 115). Dimple has no clarity about culture. Her confusion moves around food. She gives chicken legs to Amit and eats wings herself. Here she is performing the role of an ideal Indian wife by sharing the best meal share to her husband. Some type of trivial questions about the food habits of the American always disturbs Dimple. They intensify her sense of dislocation once she is surprised at Khanna's dinner party. At the party, some persons feel pride in eating with fingers like Indians. Both the guests and the host eat with their fingers. Some other persons especially Americans eat with forks and knives. Indians in the party considered it an imitation of the table manners of ‘sahib's’ a sign of a colonial master.

Paul Rozin observes contrast in the food habits of human beings. He says that the fear of new food is called ‘neophobia’ and the desire for a variety of food is ‘neophilia’ (qtd. in Falk, 286). There is a link between neophobia and neophilia. This relation is shown through the tropology of beef. In India, there is always contention between the two communities for eating beef. Beef is consumed by Non-Hindus. If any Hindu fellow eats beef, it is considered inauspicious, because

the cow is considered holy. Beef is symbolic of the classic 'other' who is impure. He can pollute through minimal contact. However, Dimple is shocked when she sees Hindu's eating beef in Ina's party. She rebels the idea of consuming beef. This incident leaves a powerful impact on her mind. She does not get even a wink of sleep at night. Sometimes, she feels the taste of beef in her mouth. Beef symbolizes the inexplicable fear of the unknown. She once again smells beef at the shop where she buys cheese, cake and the edible items. The immigrant always frightened that they are contaminated by the 'others' food.

When Dimple comes to America, she is attracted by the American kitchen. This is because the kitchen is full of white sugar, cake mixes and ultra-modern kitchen appliances. But she finds herself unable to handle these machines and loses her interest in these appliances gradually. She seems a pathetic creature among these appliances in the beginning and thinks that the American kitchen will provide a space to her for her creativity. However, in course of time, she loses her interest in it.

Dimple feels Ina and then Ina says "Why is food our national obsession? Why don't we make more time for happiness? For love?" (Mukherjee, 95). Dimple understands that the shortage and the material destitution in the Indian subcontinent make cooking and food-related exercises considerably more noteworthy than in the way of life favoured with surpluses. Dimple suffers more from mental agony than physical starvation. She inspires attention, love, glamour in her life, and she befriended to Milt over tea session with Ina. She prepares chocolate mousse as chocolate is for temptation, and she wanted to drive Milt's temptation towards her. Dimple and Milt goes for shopping food together and started cooking hamburgers as well. Food became the medium of Dimple and Milt's friendship. But on the other side, Kitchen has been treated as a plan off onslaught throughout the novel. Dimple kills her husband By stabbing knife seven times in his neck in the kitchen for no apparent reason "until the milk in the bowl of cereal was a pretty pink and the flakes were mushy and would have embarrassed any advertiser" (Mukherjee,212). She plans for the murder of a husband for a long time. She gets ready with the recipe for husband's dead body in her mind, expresses it with one of her Psychotic spells and now she is behind the bars to be free from the domestic confinement. It is worse than the domestic one. Thus, the novelist has empowered the protagonist with the weapon kitchen. It leads to her moral

and tragic downfall. The culinary idiom offers comfort only for a moment but it controls the immigrant subject and increases the sense of alienation.

If one talks about Jasmine, she is depicted as a food maker in the kitchen. She performs this task in the kitchen of several homes to be assimilated with the people in American society. Jasmine performs her role as a food provider. She does not break her link with the tradition of India. In a traditional society of India, the housewife has to remain confined in the kitchen for most of the time, and she serves food to all members of the family. Jasmine is connected with the domestic realm of the kitchen. It proves that she adheres to both Indian and American traits of cooking. She uses both the best of her knowledge. Jasmine's life is not shown as predominated with the images of food in India. However, images of Cookery became important in Jasmine's life in America. Thus, food plays a vital role in shaping Jasmine's life with the post-migratory state.

During Jasmine's transformation from infancy to childhood, Lillian teaches her-

to cook hamburgers and roasts, to clean toilets with cleaners that smelled sweeter than flowers and scrub pots and pans with pre-soaped balls of steel wool instead of ashes and lemon rinds, so we could hire our self out as domestics" (Mukherjee, 134).

Food is especially referred in Lillian Gordon's home. Sometimes, it seems that food is only one element of Jasmine's American life which keeps her in the present. Food is the meaning by which Jasmine might have imprinted herself on her New York surroundings by cooking diverse dishes confidently. She even took Indian dishes to charity events for familiarizing people with her Indian cuisine.

Whenever her American friend's visits her she used to cook their favorite Indian dishes like "globey" (gobi) or "motor pan" (matar panir) and does the fusion of dishes, which is the result of foreign invasion in the authentic cuisine of America. Jasmine even avers "I am subverting the taste buds of Elsa county" (Mukherjee, 19). She even defines her role through food in America, which is not much different from India. She reveals "I still think of myself as caregiver, recipe giver, and preserver. I can honestly say all I wanted was to serve, to be allowed to join..." (Mukherjee, 215)

Later, when Darrell calls Jasmine to save him from suicide and as she entered she got surprised with the fragrance of cumin powder and turmeric welcoming her, she got the idea that it was just an excuse as he wanted to surprise her with Indian spiced food. They both rushed towards the table, he took his heart out for her and here also we have witnessed the importance of food in their relationship.

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