

Desi Food Culture and Diasporic Identity: Mukherjee’s Jasmine, Lahiri’s The Namesake, and Ali’s Brick Lane

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Abstract

In this paper, I have examined the role of *desi* food culture in shaping diasporic identity through a comparative analysis of Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*. The study explores how food operates as a dynamic cultural signifier within immigrant communities, functioning both as a marker of continuity with the homeland and a medium of negotiation in the host country. Drawing attention to the interdisciplinary frameworks of food studies and postcolonial theory - particularly Homi K Bhabha’s concept of “in-betweenness” and Michaela Wolf’s “mediation space” – I have critically investigated how culinary practices become mingled with the issues of gender, memory, adaptation and resistance in the diasporic life. Immigrant women play a central role in sustaining and transforming *desi* food tradition within domestic spaces. By analyzing the representations of Panjabi, Indian Bengali, and Bangladeshi Bengali cuisines, in this study, I have argued that *desi* food culture functions as a performative discourse that both preserves cultural memory and reshapes identity in the face of displacement and globalization.

Keywords: diaspora, in-betweenness; mediation space; food and food studies; culture; identity

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian-Canadian writer, writes on Indian Panjabi diasporic generations, Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian-American writer, writes about Indian Bengali diasporic generations, and Monica Ali, a Bangladeshi-British writer, concentrates on Bangladeshi Bengali diasporic generations. Mukherjee, Lahiri, and Ali, as South Asian diasporic writers, represent three distinct kinds of immigrants who migrate to three different countries. Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* moves from Hasnpur to the USA and then Canada, Lahiri’s *Ashima* and *Ashoke* from Kolkata to the USA, and Ali’s *Nazneen* and *Chanu* from Bangladesh to England. The similarity of all immigrants is that they cook *desi* foods despite different challenges in

‘diasporic space.’ In the multicultural settings they taste diverse food items; but they make different kinds of *desi* foods at home. Mukherjee shows Panjabi foods and Lahiri focuses on Indian Bengali foods, and Ali concentrates on Bangladeshi Bengali foods. Indian and Bangladeshi immigrants consciously maintain close cultural ties with home by cooking *desi* foods to form and reform their identities. This study traces the shifting meanings of *desi* cuisines from a symbol of continuity to a catalyst of transformation.

In diasporic literature, food helps to negotiate identity, memory, and cultural belonging. Culinary practices operate not only as symbols of cultural continuity but also as tools of negotiation in the face of assimilation, generational tensions, and gendered expectations within diasporic narratives. Anita Mannur’s seminal work, “Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture,” gives a theoretical framework that culinary acts function as an “epistemological anchor for diasporic belonging” (Mannur 17), when diasporic people navigate the boundaries between homeland and host land. In Mukharjee’s *Jasmine*, food is represented as minimal because Jasmine temporarily detaches from Indian culinary practices for self-reinvention and assimilation. Conversely, Lahiri’s *The Namesake* centers on food as both intergenerational conflict and cultural preservation. Ashima’s preparation of Bengali dishes represents an effort to sustain cultural memory. The shifting relationship of Gogol to Bengali food reflects his evolving diasporic identity. Ali’s *Brick Lane* offers a more overtly political rendering of food. Nazneen cooks and evolves into an entrepreneurial pursuit, reflecting both her gendered agency and diasporic negotiation. Ali shows that food becomes commodified and preserves the cultural identity of the diasporic community. *Desi* food culture is neither merely nostalgia nor static; it is a dynamic narrative technique that reflects the multifaceted experiences of immigrants. Whereas *Jasmine* underscores the erasure of culinary memory, *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* affirm its persistence and transformation.

This analytic research is a comparative study on the primary sources: *Jasmine*, *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* focusing on diasporic people’s practices of preparing and consuming foods and their in-between situations.. The analysis will be structured by postcolonial theoretical frameworks, particularly those that address displacement, hybridity and cultural negotiation. To analyze the concepts of ‘*desi* food culture,’ from Homi K. Bhabha’s perspectives of ‘in-betweenness and third space’ and Michaela Wolf’s ‘mediation space,’ I have engaged methods which are interdisciplinary and qualitative in nature. Stuart Hall’s theory on cultural identity and diaspora further shape the interpretation of food as a site of ongoing formation of identity. Secondary sources have been consulted for understanding the broader

areas of food studies and diaspora studies, such as, globalization, in-betweenness, hybridity and identity. Thematic motifs such as “home,” “homeland,” and “taste” are critically unpacked to understand how the diasporic subject experiences identity as both grounded and shifting. . The basic questions in this study are: first, what is the role of Indian and Bangladeshi immigrants? Second, how does gender work in the diaspora? Third, how is the concept of *desi* food and food culture related to literature and cultural studies? The methodology and the comprehensive analysis of the novels using theories direct the critical reading of Indian and Bangladeshi diasporic literature.

Desi Food Culture: Indian and Bangladeshi Perspectives

India and Bangladesh share deep historical, linguistic, and cultural bonds that shape their culinary landscapes. While each nation nurtures its unique identity, its cultural practices - particularly food-remain intertwined due to shared colonial legacies, regional proximities, and transnational flows. The term *desi* refers to the collective cultural essence of the Indian Subcontinent, referring to the people, products, and practices rooted in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal. The word *desi* is used widely by South Asians and South Asian Diasporas, who face discrimination, stigmatization, and racism abroad.

Food enriches social relations among different races and the cuisines of India and Bangladesh are considered as *desi* foods which the diasporic people disseminate in other parts of the world, so Marjorie L. De Vault writes in *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*, “What we eat, where we get it, how it is prepared, when we eat and with whom, what it means to us – all these depend on social (and cultural) arrangements” (DeVault 35). The arrangements of food represent the socio-cultural phenomenon of a race, and Indian and Bangladeshi immigrants make *desi* foods at home and in different programs.

Food influences South Asian immigrant women, as Mukharjee writes on Indian Panjabi, Lahiri on Indian Bengali, and Ali on Bangladeshi Bengali immigrant women who engage in homely activities and practice *desi* cultural identities. In “Women of the South Asian Diaspora,” Sunanda Ray mentions:

The South Asian immigrant women’s contribution to the family is emotional, social and often financial too. The majority of the immigrant women came to the US when their husbands were either struggling to establish themselves in the initial stages of their careers

or were going to graduate school. At that stage, many of the immigrant women support their families while others were single-handedly taking care of their families so that their husbands could spend more time and energy on their jobs and studies. Without the support system of an extended family, the husbands become totally dependent on their wives. (Ray 175)

Family is the main place for immigrant women and their husbands remain busy to develop their careers. In the patriarchal settings of South Asian countries men are not accustomed to cooking, and immigrant men depend on their wives or mothers at home. Mukharjee, Lahiri and Ali write about first generation immigrants of the 1960s. Immigrant women prefer to recollect the memories of home through cooking *desi* foods. Bob Ashley et al. write, “Cooking is a process whereby the raw materials given by nature are transformed into culture” (Ashley et al. 40). Food and cooking are principal means for the first-generation women to retain home cultural practices.

While Indian and Bangladeshi cuisines differ in ingredients, preparation, and religious influences, they converge in their emotional and cultural significance. Spices, rituals of cooking and the sharing of food are embedded in the social fabric of both nations. The culinary traditions continue to shape the identity of *desi* communities abroad, turning the act of cooking into a cultural performance that bridges past and present, homeland and host land.

Indian and Bangladeshi Diasporic Literatures: Mukherjee, Lahiri, and Ali

Indian and Bangladeshi diasporic literature plays a significant role in South Asian literary expression, representing the cultural, political, and psychological negotiations of identity in migratory contexts. These literatures foreground the tensions between belonging and alienation, continuity and rupture, and memory and transformation. Indian diasporic literature reflects multiple waves of migration - categorized as Pre-European, Colonial, Postcolonial, and Global or transnational diasporas. Early diasporic writers are V. S. Naipaul, Raja Rao, D. V. Desani, Santha Rama Rau, Dhalchandra Rajan, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Ved Mehta etc., who portray the intellectual and spiritual dilemmas of cultural dislocation, often negotiating the colonial burden and the ambivalence of Western modernity. The tradition of Indian diasporic writing was expanded by some female writers, Bharati Mukharjee, Chitra Benerjee, Divakaruni, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, and Jhumpa Lahiri, who foreground gender, memory, and hybridity.

Bharati Mukherjee, as a first-generation immigrant, explores rootlessness, nostalgia, cultural conflict, disappointment, assimilation, resentment, and a sense of belonging. Jhumpa Lahiri, as a second-generation immigrant, portrays the lives of first- and second-generation immigrants in the USA. She focuses on issues like homesickness, cross-cultural encounters, identity crisis, conflict, generational gaps, cultural differences, disintegration, and racial identity.

In parallel, Bangladeshi diasporic literature has gained prominence, especially since the 1990s, with a growing number of writers articulating post-independence anxieties, dislocation, and transnational belonging. The prominent Bangladeshi diasporic writers are: Monica Ali, Zia Haider Rahman, Adib Khan, Tahmima Anam, Fayeza Hasanat, Dilruba Z. Ara, and others. Adib Khan, a Bangladeshi-Australian writer, plays a significant role in Bangladeshi diasporic literature, as Stefano Mercanti writes, "Khan's novels are the exploration of the difficulties of belonging to different cultural traditions" (Mercanti 124). Dilruba Z. Ara writes on the issues of women in *Blame*. Monica Ali has come to the forefront after the publication of *Brick Lane*, a short listed book for the Man Booker Prize in 2003. Tahmima Anam, a Bangladeshi-English writer, is well-known for her writings, *The Golden Age* (2007), *The Good Muslim* (2011), and *The Bones of Grace* (2016). Fayeza Hasanat writes about gender issues, love, diasporic identity, questions of identity and belonging in *The Bird Catcher and Other Stories* set in Bangladesh and the United States. Neamat Imam's *The Black Coat* and Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* are remarkable representations of Bangladeshi diasporic literature.

Both Indian and Bangladeshi diasporic literatures thus intersect in their preoccupations with alienation, cultural negotiation, and hybrid identities, yet they also diverge in historical, political, and geographical inflections. The works of Mukherjee, Lahiri, and Ali form an important cross-section of this evolving transnational narrative, interrogating how migration not only displaces but also redefines the self in a globalised world.

Desi Food in Indian and Bangladeshi Diasporic Writings

Contemporary South Asian women writers from Bangladesh and India, and their fictions especially concentrate on diasporic women who stay at home, do homely chores, and prepare different kinds of *desi* foods. Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Monica Ali don't write under the influence of the colonizers or contemporary male writers. They write about complex global issues like globalization, migration, postcolonial feminism, cosmopolitanism,

war, violence, religion, and geographical space etc. Mukherjee and Lahiri represent the food practices of Indian cultures of Punjab and Kolkata, and Ali focuses on the Bengali Muslim food culture of Bangladesh. Mukherjee, Lahiri, and Ali write about Indian-Canadian, Indian-American, and Bangladeshi-British immigrants who migrated to the First World countries for a better future. First-generation immigrant women face oppression at home and bear the burden of preserving and disseminating *desi* culture through cooking food and socialization.

As far as gender issues are concerned, women normally stay at home, and they are treated as ideal in Indian and Bangladeshi cultures - men practice patriarchal norms. As Bob Ashley et al. in *Food and Cultural Studies* remark, "In planning meals, women employ a large and diverse amount of tacit knowledge" (Ashley et al. 130). Women, getting married to men residing in the UK and the USA to enhance the family status in society, pay attention to cooking *desi* foods. Sathi S. Dasgupta in *On the Trail of an Uncertain Dream: Indian Immigrant Experience in America* writes, "When South Asian women get married to total strangers and come to the United States, they face the fear and instability of a new relationship without the support they had in their home countries" (Dasgupta 140). When men come home from their jobs, they expect traditional *desi* food items for dinner. Women integrate the new culture through *desi* food preparation and sharing among foreigners.

The study critically focuses a constellation of postcolonial and cultural theories to explore diasporic spatiality and identity through the lens of food and kitchen practices in diasporic literature. There are some interrelated concepts of 'diaspora space,' 'third space,' 'mediation space,' and gastronomic identity - the frameworks illuminate the nuanced ways in which diasporic subjects negotiate belonging, difference, and hybridity through the everyday act of food preparation and consumption.

Avtar Brah's idea of 'diaspora space' focuses not only on geographical displacement but also on a dynamic site where multiple identities and power relations intersect. It provides the foundation as she defines it, not merely as a geographical displacement but as a site of intersectionality - a discursive and material space where political, economic, cultural, and psychic dimensions of migration and identity collide. In *Cartographies of Diaspora* Brah notes, diaspora space is one where "multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed," (Brah 205) and where borders are not fixed but rather negotiable and capable of reconstruction. The kitchen becomes a privileged diasporic space - simultaneously private and political - where

identities are performed and inscribed through acts of culinary labor and memory.

In parallel, Homi K. Bhabha's theory of 'hybridity' and the 'third space' serve as a vital postcolonial framework for understanding the cultural negotiation. Bhabha thinks that the; 'third space' is not a synthesis of two cultural roles but rather a productive zone of ambivalence where a new, hybrid identity emerges. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha states, "the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the "third space" which enables other positions to emerge" (Bhabha 211). The cultural encounter creates cultural hybridity, which results in "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone" (Ashcroft et al 118) usually produced by the dominant culture. The third space, inherently liminal and unstable, allows for the re-articulation of cultural meanings in ways that resist essential binaries of home/host, self/other, or purity/impurity. In this regard, food becomes a potent medium of hybridity, representing both continuity and rupture.

Further extending Bhabha's idea and Michaela Wolf's concept of 'mediation space' - drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production - emphasises the transitory and relational character of diasporic encounters. Mediation space, as Wolf suggests, is neither fixed nor purely oppositional; rather, it is a field of dynamic cultural transfer and reconfiguration, when new symbolic and social relationships are constantly re-"mixed" and re-negotiated (Wolf 112). The kitchen in diasporic narratives thus operates as a mediating site, linking the ethnic traditions of the homeland with the adaptive demands of the host land.

This intersection of space, culture, and identity is particularly evident in the realm of literary food studies, which positions food not simply as sustenance but as a cultural signifier and a narrative device. In *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* Wenying Xu states, "Food operates as one of the key cultural signs that structure people's identities and their concepts of others" (Xu 2). This symbolic dimension of food acquires further resonance in diasporic texts where culinary practices serve as sites of memory, resistance, and affect. Through nostalgic recollections of traditional meals or hybrid food inventions born of necessity, food becomes a material articulation of diasporic consciousness - a way of simultaneously preserving, transforming, and negotiating identity. Food items that can be considered a part of what Sara Jane Littlejohn calls "food narratives as they are connected to narrative, performative language, and ideology" (Littlejohn 1).

Gina M. Almerico defines, “Food studies is not the study of food itself; it is different from more traditional food-related areas of study such as agricultural science, nutrition, culinary arts, and gastronomy in that it deals with more than the simple production, consumption, and aesthetic appreciation of food. It is the study of food and its relationship to the human experience” (Almerico 2). Almerico explains that food studies are less concerned with food’s physical composition and more with its cultural and social implications, investigating food’s relation to the human experience. Food functions as a powerful gastronomic zone and an “emotional anchor” (Mannur 27), whereby issues such as– nostalgia, the resultant creation of hybrid dishes and hybrid identities, shocks of arrival as of return, attempts at cultural preservation through culinary recreation and fluidity of ethnicity.

In diasporic literature, food often functions as a gastronomic archive, encapsulating histories of migration, cultural trauma, and racialisation. It becomes a means of community formation, a kitchen turned into zones of gendered labor, intergenerational transmission, and political assertion. In *Food and Culture: A Reader*, Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik state, “Food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is the central pawn in the political strategies of states and households. Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds and contradictions” (Counihan and Esterik 1). Food mediates between past and present, between memory and adaptation, and between belonging and estrangement.

Within these theoretical frameworks, diasporic food practices emerge as complex acts of cultural negotiation, situated in what Bhabha terms the ‘in-betweenness’ of identity and what Wolf articulates mediated encounters. The diasporic kitchen thus becomes a powerful symbolic and material site where hybrid subjectivities are both constituted and contested. Through culinary performances, the diasporic subject negotiates the dull pull of nostalgia and assimilation, reconfiguring identity within the fluid topographies of diaspora space.

Desi Food Culture and Identity in Diaspora: Jasmine, The Namesake and Brick Lane

The dream of the immigrants becomes ashes when they face the in-between situations of two cultures and two identities as “Identity is an essence that can be signified through signs of taste, beliefs, attitudes, and lifestyles” (Barker 220). *Desh* (motherland) and *Desi* culture, especially *desi* food, is a matter of desire to the first-generation immigrants like Jasmine, Ashima, and Nazneen, and their next generations adopt multicultural food practices for the

promotion of health, convenience, and variety. Mukharjee, Lahiri, and Ali demonstrate that food makes immigrants nostalgic and helps to form identity and inter-ethnic relationships.

Jasmine

In Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, Jasmine, a passive village girl, faces cultural conflict both in and out of her own culture. She always searches for a complete identity and transforms into a modern woman. She positively forms a new hybrid identity after migration and negotiation between two cultures. She assimilates with other cultures as she states, "I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane" (Mukherjee 175). She dreams of a modern life, and her husband, Prakash, motivates her to turn into a modern and ideal woman. In America, at the university, people who want to study any subject on Indian culture take help from her. They question the traditional Indian foods she cooks, and some like to eat Indian vegetable diets. Shweta Greg and Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri in "Interpreting a Culinary Montage: Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*," mention, "food associated with an ethnic community becomes the quintessential marker of identity" (Garg and Khushu-Lahiri 80). Food is a symbol of individual identity and group identity and sharing food can bring different ethnic groups together. Jasmine minimizes her sense of identity crisis in America by cooking Indian food and serving Indian dishes to Du, her Vietnamese son, and Darrel, a young local farmer.

Jasmine becomes alone after the sudden and unexpected death of Prakash and she remarks, "I could remember my father's and my husband's cremations . . . I had left my earthly body and would soon be joining their souls" (117). The period preceding her immigrant rebirth is marked by starvation, both obligatory and deliberate. Following the sudden death of Prakash she recollects, "an image triggered the tears, the screams . . . the Kanjobal women left the room, Lillian stayed with me, brewing tea" (132). Tea is very special to Indians who make tea using *masalas*. Jasmine recollects and adopts American cultural identity through learning to cook American hamburgers and roasts from Lillian.

She negotiates with the new cultural identity and somewhat maintains Indian cultural identity while facing the processes of acculturation, transformation and assimilation. Food is intrinsically connected to the process of her identity formation. She changes Bud, Du and Darrel by serving Indian foods as she boldly states, "They get disappointed if there's not something Indian on the table," (7). Mukherjee shows cultural interaction and the

adoption of culture as Jasmine introduces Indian foods to others and mentions, “I took gobi aloo to the Lutheran Relief Fund craft fair last week” (146). The Panjabi food item ‘gobi aloo’ is very popular in India. Cultural identity is formed in a multi-cultural get-together, but the impact is temporary as Bud is never curious to know about India.

The Namesake

Lahiri in *The Namesake* intricately weaves food into the diasporic experience of Ashoke, Ashima, and their children, using culinary practices as markers of identity, memory, and cultural negotiation. Ashima’s attempt to recreate Calcutta Street snacks using US ingredients “Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts” (Lahiri 1) symbolizes diasporic yearning for home and the creative adaptation required in exile. Ashima wants to be connected with the home through preparing *desi* snacks during her pregnancy, prepares traditional meals like lamb curry with potatoes and *payesh* “the biryani, a carp in yogurt sauce, the dal, the six different vegetable dishes” (39) during rituals such as Gogol’s *annaprasan* (39), and organises feasts that blend religious observance with diasporic community bonding. Food functions as both a sensory link to the homeland and a site of cultural preservation.

Food determines immigrants’ identity, - “the meanings surrounding food enable us to shape the identities which give meaning to people’s sense of themselves as social agents, especially in respect of national identities forged in opposition to their others” (Ashley et al. 85). Ashima cries for home and asks other Bengalis for advice about the recipes for some dishes, for example, how she can cook *halwa* with wheat flakes. On Sunday, people from the Bengali community visit each other’s houses to taste “tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans” (Lahiri 38). Food preserves culture and it connects or disconnects people.

Lahiri presents numerous scenes of banquet: Gogol’s *annaprasan* and the final celebratory goodbye meal that Ashima prepares for her children and her significantly enlarged circle of friends. Apart from the transmission and renewal of cultural messages, such kind of communal feasts represent “victory” of a privileged section of the Indian diaspora, as they settle and grow “at the world’s expense”, or so to say, thrive at the expense of the hostland (Bakhtin 283). These ethnic foods and ceremonies help the diaspora to pass around the knowledge of gastronomic hybridization, as the new immigrant wives, “homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice” (Lahiri 38) on how to approximate the foreign atmosphere as well as the unfamiliar food items.

Indians are supposed to be vegetarians, but Indian Bengalis eat fish, meat, egg etc. In Gogol's 14th birthday his mother "makes sure to prepare his favourite things: lamb curry with lots of potatoes, luchi, thick channa dal with swollen brown raisins, pineapple chutney, sandeshes molded out of saffron-tinted ricotta cheese" (72). *Desi* foods make an affinity with their homeland and an effort to make a "mini homeland" in a hostland. The Bengali community cook and serve Indian foods in social programmes to feel a sense of belonging. Gogol, from second generation, "feels bored of eating the same everything" (55) and is very much interested in different foods as his parents order pizza or Chinese for them. He is torn between two kinds of concepts- assimilation of American culture and a connection with his family traditions. To celebrate Gogol's graduation, his parents throw a party and Ashima cooks Bengali dishes like rice, dal, and various cuisines.

Gogol's American friends primarily hesitated to eat, but they eventually enjoyed Bengali food items. Ashima also cooks peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and a slice of bakery cake on each of Gogol's birthdays. Therefore:

In the supermarket, they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume: individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, and hot dog. For Gogol's lunches they stand at Delhi to buy cold nuts, and in the morning Ashima makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. At his insistence she concedes and makes him an American dinner once a week as a treat, Shake'n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb. (65)

Gogol struggles with his cultural identity, feels disconnected from Bengali culture, and assimilates with American culture. Gogol tells his American friend, Ruth, about the Indian foods he'd eaten on Indian trains the time he traveled with his family to Delhi and Agra. He mentions, "the rotis and slightly sour dal ordered at one station . . . the thick vegetable cutlet served with bread and butter for breakfast. He tells her about the tea . . . poured it from giant aluminum kettles, the milk and sugar already mixed in" (112). When Gogol meets Maxine's family he learns to love the foods "the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper" (137). Gogol assimilates with American cultures and when Maxine comes to his home, Ashima cooks *desi* foods, "samosas, there are breaded chicken cutlets, chickpeas with tamarind sauce, lamb biryani, chutney made with tomatoes from the garden" (148) to treat her.

After Ashoke's death, Ashima and her children observe a "mourner's diet" (180) for ten days, as they avoid meat and fish and "eat only rice, dal and vegetables, plainly prepared" (180). Food practices structure their grieving days, and each evening, they are "strangely hungry" and "eager to taste the blandness on their plates" (181). When everything else seems meaningless, food remains the only agreeable thing. Ashima, Sonia, and Gogol, by their deliberate rejection of certain foods, feel closer to Ashoke. The mourning period ends with a religious ceremony alongside a funeral banquet, where they prepare an "elaborate meal" of meat and fish, "cooked as his father liked them best, with extra potatoes and fresh coriander leaves" (181). With the house once again filled with the smells of familiar foods, they feel "as if it is just another party" (181) that celebrates the enlargement of Ashoke's life.

Brick Lane

In *Brick Lane*, Ali writes about Bangladeshi immigrants, Nazneen and Chanu. In *Post-Colonial Women Writers: New Perspectives*, Sunita Sinha states, "Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is the first novel to focus almost exclusively on the lives of Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets" (Sinha 233). Nazneen moves to London, and Mamta gives "a tin plate of rice, dal, and chicken curry" (Ali 10). Ali gives the dominance of Bangladeshi cooking as Nazneen buys local yogurt from a nearby supermarket. The moment she takes a tub of yogurt from the fridge, she recollects her childhood days back in Bangladesh when her mother used to make fresh, "thick and sweet and warm" (62) yogurt at home. The plastic pot of the yogurt "from the plastic English cows" (62) compares unfavourably with the natural one of her mother's.

Immigrants resist a sense of isolation through cooking and consumption, which facilitate a mode of belonging at once to the original nation and the adopted land. Mannur terms such women as cultural brokers, "whose bodies and lives have been drawn by their labor within food preparation" (Mannur 137). Nazneen uses traditional ingredients to prepare her dishes and the ingredients are purchased from the local shop "stacked with kebabs, tandoori chicken, bhajis, puris, trays of rice and vegetables, milky sweets, sugar-shined ladoos, the faintly sparkling jelabees" (Ali 400), where the other diasporic members do their shopping, the same choice of dishes and cooking rituals definitely strengthen ethnic ties and this "establishes the 'communal' aspects of the experience" (Parasecoli 419). Food strengthens mutual relationships with other members of the community. Despite living in Britain for some time now, Nazneen remains strict to the influences of the host culture and rigidly practises Bengali culinary tradition. Apart from carefully prepared dishes, she attaches great importance to more formal norms relating

to the aesthetic role of food. She lays the tablecloth that she wants to be spotless and carefully cleans the glasses, rubbing them with some paper to make them shine.

Another scene that demonstrates the superiority of Nazneen's traditional culinary habits is the picnic in St. James's Park, London. The description of a wide range of the sophisticated dishes that Nazneen has cooked by herself is really impressive. In a family get together all members sat on the grass and Nazneen prepares,

Chicken wings spread in a paste of yogurt and spices and baked in the oven, onions sliced to the thickness of a fingernail, mixed with chillies, dipped in gram flour and egg and fried in bubbling oil, a dry concoction of chickpeas and tomatoes stewed with cumin and ginger, misshapen chapatis wrapped while still hot in tinfoil and sprinkled now with condensation, golden hard-boiled eggs glazed in a curry seal, Dairylea triangles in their cardboard box, bright orange packets containing shamelessly orange crisps, a cake with a list of ingredients too long to be printed in legible type. (Ali 246)

The display of the dishes of *desi* foods is absolutely stunning and eye-catching. In no way can their picnic food be compared to that of the native British. Nazneem puts the food on paper plates, lays out plastic cups, and places them all on tea towels, which definitely enhances the aesthetic appeal of the meal.

A Comparative Analysis: *Jasmine, The Namesake, and Brick Lane*

Mukherjee, Lahiri, and Ali show immigrants who are in the third-space of in-betweenness, hybridity, and mediation space of cultures and encounter diverse food items which form new identities. Stuart Hall remarks, "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 222). He further explains that "cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'; it belongs to the future as well as to the past" (225). *Jasmine*, *Ashoke* and *Ashima*, *Nazneen*, and *Chanu* eat *desi* foods to overcome the trauma of migration. They gradually go through the process of fusion not only in food, but also in communities by eating *desi* food and adopting foods from other cultures.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima makes Indian Bengali food, *jhal muri*, which is very famous as a street food, to recollect the memories of Kolkata. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen feels an affinity with and between the people in her community regarding the same culinary behaviours. The smell of the curry being cooked by neighbours reminds Nazneen of her early years at home. Food creates a tie among neighbours, and the Bangladeshi culture is that Bengalis borrow some spices or other necessary ingredients from their neighbours to cook traditional desi dishes. Ashima cooks *macher jhol* (fish curry) by grinding the spices by hand, and traditionally prepares the dishes. In “Meals, Migration, and Modernity,” Krishendu Ray writes:

Rice and fish become particularly potent symbols of Bengaliness precisely because outsiders, be they other Indians or Americans, are considered unable to appreciate them or incompetent in handling the bones. Rice and fish is considered a real insider delicacy . . . There is also a sense that you have to keep doing it – repeat the recipes over and over and keep eating rice and fish in the Bengali style. There is anxiety that it will vanish if it is not repeatedly performed . . . Through repetition, rice and fish become the quintessence of Bengaliness. (Ray 190-91)

Food is a maker of identity and immigrants get association with ethnic communities through *desi* food practices. In *Brick Lane*, Ali shows that Nazneen and Chanu invite Dr. Azad for a get-together for dinner and Nazneen prepares some desi dishes as “. . . there was the dal to make, and the vegetable dishes, the spices to grind, the rice to wash, and the sauce to prepare for the fish that Chanu would bring this evening” (Ali 8). In fact, both Lahiri and Ali show that rice, dal, and fish are common foods for both Indian and Bangladeshi Bengalis. Being associated with ethnic feelings, food makes Ashima and Ashoke’s relationship stronger as “By now she has learned that her husband likes his food on the salty side, that his favorite thing about lamb curry is the potatoes, and that he likes to finish his dinner with a small final helping of rice and dal” (Lahiri 10). Rice, dal and lamb curry with potatoes are common *desi* food as Ali shows that Chanu “scooped up lamb and rice with his fingers and chewed” (Ali 23). Nazneen also cooks desi foods such as “rice and potato and cauliflower curry” (96). Lahiri and Ali also focus on making tea, drinking tea, and the fascination for tea.

Lahiri shows the changes in food habits in the second generation who eat sandwiches and ice cream, and drink juice and lassi. It is observed that immigrant’ children are fascinated by adopting the culture of the new country. Gogol finds a sense of freedom and independence at the dinner table at

Maxine's house. "A bowl of small, round, roasted red potatoes is passed around, and afterward a salad. They eat appreciatively, commenting on the tenderness of the meat and the freshness of the beans. His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest . . ." (Lahiri 133). Ali shows that Sahana buys "lassi" (Ali 292).

Gogol and Moushumi are the consumers of foreign cultures, as through their numerous relationships with people from different ethnic backgrounds, they embark on a hyperreal "gastronomic tour" (Friedman 119). Food plays a revelatory role, along with its obviously aphrodisiac role as Lahiri describes, "a thin piece of steak rolled into a bundle and tied with string, sitting in a pool of dark sauce, the green beans boiled so that they are still crisp. A bowl of small, round, roasted red potatoes is passed around, and afterward a salad" (Lahiri 133). Gogol begins to appreciate the scarce food items served at Maxine's house

A celebration of their long and triumphant stay in America is marked by their final Christmas Eve party. Mannur rightly comments, Ashima's "final act of communion with the *desi* community is one that, unsurprisingly, centers on sharing food" (Mannur 147). Lahiri's detailed focus on food images, combined with the effortful exercise of cooking, lends a realistic charm to the novel, as the preparation of Ashima's special mincemeat croquettes is described:

First, she forces warm boiled potatoes through a ricer. Carefully, she shapes a bit of the potato around a spoonful of cooked ground lamb . . . She dips each of the croquettes, about the size and shape of a billiard ball, into a bowl of beaten eggs, then coats them on a plate of bread crumbs, shaking off the excess in her cupped palms. Finally, she stacks the croquettes on a large circular tray, a sheet of wax paper between each layer. (Lahiri 274)

The party reflects the scenes of the banquet and serves to present what Bakhtin calls "the true epilogue," containing "potentialities of the new beginning" as they gain perspectives in their lives (Bakhtin 283).

Ashima matures into a transnational person and decides to divide her time between the homeland and the hostland. On her visits to India, she no longer feels the need to arm herself in the kitchen. Her job at the library brings her into contact with other foreign women of her age outside her Bengali group. She occasionally lunches at her house and goes shopping with her American friends on weekends. The binaries of "inside" and "outside" worlds

of Ashima create a relationship with the two cultures she inhabits. Nazneen undergoes a transformation from an obedient wife to an independent woman towards the end of the novel: “[Nazneen] took more rice. She took more dal. She offered more to her daughters” (Ali 402). Nazneen makes her daughters habituated with Bengali foods to manage the family easily in England after Chanu’s shift to Dhaka.

Mukharjee’s Jasmine survives in America through food practices. Prakash motivates her to become American; still, food plays a transformative role in her maturation. She brings cooked Indian food items to country events and makes the fusion of foods in multicultural settings. She never makes any attempts to correct the American friends’ misconceptions about Indian culture, but she does give any reaction if her signature dish is called ‘motor pan’ by Darrel instead of *matar panir*. She later says, “it is matar panir. Matar for peas and panir for cheese” (Mukharjee 216). *Matar paneer*, a very delicious dish in India, has become popular in the world.

Lahiri and Ali write about common Bengali food items as - rice, dal, lamb curry with potato, tea, samosa, haleem, payesh etc and Mukherjee writes about Panjabi foods gobi aloo, *matar panir*, vegetables, and tea. All of them show cultural integration of the characters and the transformation of identity. For Bhabha, as Jonathan Rutherford notes, “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity that displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiative. The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha 211). Lahiri and Ali’s characters have homesickness, and the same kind of missing home is not observed in Mukherjee’s Jasmine, who has been fascinated with the American culture throughout her journey and accepts a fluid hybrid identity.

Conclusion

Food, as an essential part of culture, helps to form and reform the identities of Indian and Bangladeshi immigrants who use numerous ingredients, methods of preparation, and cooking techniques to make, serve, and consume diverse cuisines of the world. Mukherjee, Lahiri, and Ali depict the issues of immigrants, food culture, identity, and cultural distinctiveness. They focus on the distinguishing aspects of their native culture (the culture of the Other) within a clash of civilizations, which initially motivates a resistance to the foreign culture, only to stimulate, eventually, the development of a hybridized form of culture. Jasmine, Ashima, and Nazneen represent their own

cultural heritages by making *desi* foods. Cooking of *desi* recipes by diasporic women helps different diasporic generations to communicate and establish ethnic ties. In the book, *Food and Foodways in African Narratives: Community, Culture and Heritage*, Jonathan Highfield claims that “. . . the food people eat and the way it is prepared speaks volumes about their relationship to the culture, their place in society, and their interaction with the environment” (Highfield 157). In this paper, I have posited that *desi* food culture, as depicted in the works of Mukharjee, Lahiri, and Ali, plays an integral role in mediating the diasporic condition - bridging memory and identity, homeland and hostland, and ultimately shaping a dynamic, evolving sense of belonging rooted in hybridity and cultural negotiation.

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