

Mapping Emotions, Culture and Identity through Food and Memory in Esther David's *Book of Rachel*

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Abstract

Food imagery has appeared in literature from time immemorial but food studies have started to gain impetus in the very recent years. From the twentieth-century French philosopher Michel de Certeau who has worked on the 'natural history' of food with reference to material, social, technical, and economic history up till the contemporary researchers like Deborah Lupton who has worked upon the relationship of food to body and identity, establish how food codes in literature act as significant connotative language. The Jewish diaspora throughout history is considered as most savage exile creating numerous Jewish communities in different countries. Bene Israel is the community of Jews in India. The experience of displacement leads to cultural ambivalence, a feeling of homelessness, and culinary nostalgia. Esther David's *Book of Rachel* is a story of Bene Israel woman Rachel, who fights to preserve the heritage and culture of Bene Israel Jews after most of the members of the community migrated to Israel. Food in the novel acts as a cultural code to bring back the community together. The research paper explores how food, consumption, and recipes in the novel recreate the Jewish identity, an essential reconnect with home through culinary memories.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Dislocation, Consumption, Recipe's, Diaspora, Culinary Nostalgia, Esther David's *Book of Rachel*.

Introduction to Food and Memory

Food is the most basic and primary to human existence hence springs up its involvement in almost all aspects of life. On the account of its cardinal significance to human life traditionally and even in the contemporary times food can be regarded as the most inevitable theme to study human psychology and culture, which is celebrated in various art forms. Food and food behavioral patterns act as a language to communicate the affective domain and reflect upon the complex relationship between the subject and the object. From cooking to consumption, the ingestive etiquettes are reflective of a person's state of mind. Apart from the physiological essentiality food also carries multiple connotative meanings which are an embodiment of ideas. Counihan explains

An examination of foodways- behaviors and beliefs surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food – reveals much about power relations and conceptions of sex and gender, for every coherent social group has its own unique foodways.(6)

Food can be critically examined in various contexts. It can be explored as a commodity, embodiment, memory, and emotion. These associations evoke a colossal of ideas in the minds of writers where they have built characters communicating their emotions of frustration, resentment or on the contrary of pleasure and comfort by the means of their association with food. In diasporic literature, culinary narratives are mapped with feelings of nostalgia and lack of belongingness. These culinary narratives are reflective of an attachment with the cultural identity of an individual. People communicate and identify their distinctiveness through the medium of food. Deborah Lupton explains

Food consumption habits are not simply tied to biological needs but serve to mark boundaries between social classes, geographical regions, nations, cultures, genders, lifecycle stages, religions and occupations, to distinguish rituals, traditions, festivals, seasons and times of day.(1)

The narrative in the novel connects memory and meals. Each recipe in the novel connects Rachel to some peculiar memory from the past. In an incident when Rachel is preparing a meal for Mordecai, she is reminded of the mustard fields from her childhood. It is interesting to observe how the affective aspect of food builds a nostalgic narrative in the life of Rachel. Kathleen Stewart, an anthropologist explores on nostalgia and unravels the possible reasons to why an individual nostalgizes about the past. She defines nostalgia as, "a cultural practice, not a given context; its forms, meanings, and effects shift with the context-it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present"(252). With reference to the novel, it can be established why food becomes a means of nostalgia in the life of Rachel. She reminisces about her childhood days and reveals to her daughter about how her mother was worried about the colour of her skin. She would apply gram flour mixed with fresh milk and cream to improve her complexion. Food becomes a means to connect Rachel's childhood to her after-marriage life which is reflected when Rachel uses the same natural beauty remedy to lighten the skin tone of her daughter Zephra.

The author in the novel uses culinary discourse to build a bridge between Rachel's past and present. Tamarind tree in the courtyard of the synagogue in the chapter "Mutton Curry with Tamarind", reminds Rachel of the first year of her marriage. It also acted as a catalyst to bring Rachel and Aaron into a more intimate relationship. Regarding the relationship between food and memory Sandra Gilbert avers:

When we focus on food we focus not just on the literal schedule of meals we all consume but also on the stirrings of memory and desire and joy and, yes even grief that those meals evoke in us. We stir readers when we add food because we remind them of their places at the complicated buffet of self, family, culture. Our recipes are histories of who we are, transmitting the tastes of the past through precept and example, even as they suggest how we can sometimes revise our lives by adjusting the menu. (2)

At the birth of her first grandchild, Rachel feels abysmal at the thought of not being able to be present with her family. She decides to conduct the celebration at her village with *chicken kesari*, cooking it exactly the same way like she did when she was pregnant. The incident is indicative of Esther David's technique of writing to bridge memory and meals. Likewise, *Matzo bread* in the chapter "Anashi Dhakscha San, Pessach", connects to the memory of the Exodus of Jews from Egypt. David in this chapter exposes the symbolic meaning of *Matzo* as the "symbol of poverty" bridging it with the history of Jews revealing its signification with the Jewish culture as a thing that "inspires Jews to work for freedom, justice, and peace." (David 45) While she prepares a *Pessach* plate for the festive season of Passover, Rachel reminiscences about how "women gathered at the synagogue to make the matzo for the entire community." (David 48).

Methi reminds Rachel of Jacob. She cherishes the memory of how her son loved it so much that she would call him "methi-mad". Cooking *methi* reminds Rachel of her son and how he relished eating it. *Puranpolis* were very significant in the life of Rachel and while she was cooking it for Zephra, her daughter, she is reminded of her how in the past she maneuvered her husband to accept the marriage proposal. *Puranpoli* becomes the symbol of the reconciliation of the couple. Telling the story to her daughter she expresses "So my dear Zephra, I have a soft corer for *puranpoli*. They bring love and happiness." (David 121)

Rachel employ's her cooking skills to communicate to different members of her family, from her husband to her son. Upon getting a feeling that something was bothering Jacob, Rachel prepares an extensive meal to express her concerns and initiate a talk.

Mapping Emotions through Food and Memory

Food behavioral patterns are metonymic of psychological unrest. It can be used as a language to communicate and reflect upon desire, abjection, identity, and power. The research paper reflects upon the emotional engagement pertinent to culture manifested in the physical involvement with food. The novel talks about Rachel's consistent conflict to save the synagogue as a bene Israel in India from people like Mordecai. In a fit of anger and vengeance Rachel "offered Mordecai a plate of *peethal* and *chapattis*, hoping, by the time he reached Bombay, he would get an attack of acidity and his wife would scold

him for eating something as ordinary as *peethal*." (David 33). Rachel undergoes a similar kind of emotional turmoil where she feels mixed emotions at once in the chapter "Bombay Duck" when she felt emotionally depleted, enraged, and depressed in one when Mr. Chinoy and the other committee members take a drive around the synagogue, indicative of their intention to sell the synagogue. Rachel expresses her emotional unrest as feeling "like a bombil weighed under stone pestle". To explain this behavior Bernard Lyman informs

food determine our moods so do our moods determine what we eat. The view is part of our folkore, but when one tries to find out just what food are preferred during different emotions there are few specific answers, for example, that individuals tend to drink milk when sad, eat a great deal when bored, or eat high-calorie deserts when frustrated.(44)

This behavior can be ascertained when, as a remedy to pacify the internal bitterness that aroused as a consequence of the ill behavior by Mordecai, Rachel chooses to cook and eat *karelas*, assuming that the bitter taste of *karelas* would kill the bitterness inside her. In the novel as food is indicative of a means to reflect upon the bitter emotions of Rachel, it also instruments in forging a strong bond with Judah. Rachel builds a motherlike relation while Judah is working on the case to save the synagogue and bene Israel culture in India. Food and meals together help in building a warm relation. In an incident from the novel, upon a sudden visit from Judah, she expresses her surprise by saying "How did you know that I was making *Besan laddoos*?" (David 75). To which Judah replies "Aunty, these fragrances follow me wherever I go. I have to just close my eyes and think of you. And, believe me, I know what you are cooking. Today, I knew it was going to be *besan laddoos*!" (David 75). *Besan Laddoos* become a token of gratitude as Rachel suggests Judah to take them for greeting *hazzanbaba*. Ahead in the novel, recipes become a means to reverberate and reflect the difficult and the tense atmosphere created because of the machinations designed by Mordecai to sell the synagogue. The chapter "Miri Cha Maas" describes *miri cha maas* as "greyish black, like the sky on the night of the shipwreck" (David 175)

Mapping Cultural Celebration through Food and Memory

As its focal point, the research paper will discuss how food and the culinary discourse in the novel are reflective of the affective entanglement of the protagonist to her cultural identity and how 'memory and identity' in the diaspora is distorted and recreated as a corollary of the host country and its culture. "Food is a prism that absorbs and reflects a host cultural phenomenon" (Counihan 6)

The novel is about Rachel, her beliefs, preferences, and her attitude. She is a bene Israel widowed woman to preserve and protect her cultural identity in the host country. The novel is an articulation of how culture is a direct determinant of Rachel's behavior. Each recipe in the novel has some cultural significance. Her food-related routines and consumption patterns are reflective of her desire to protect her culture. In the novel, she carries all the religious observances like Sabbath which requires abstinence from work, and took care of the synagogue. Such festivals of food are reflective of the Jewish background and her efforts to protect her cultural identity. Food becomes an avenue to understand the history and contemporary society of bane Israel.

She cooked for herself only on Friday, the Sabbath eve, perhaps fish or chicken and a goblet of the home-made sherbet for the Kiddush with a Sabbath bhakhri instead of bread.

... Friday was the only day Rachel ate well and kept some food away for the next day's Sabbath lunch. Religiously on Friday afternoons, Rachel opened the ancient lock of the synagogue and oiled it so that it did not rust easily. Then humming a Hebrew prayer in Marathi, she swept floor, mopped it, wiped the chairs and saw to it that the synagogue was neat and clean. She believed that one day there would be a service and her efforts would not go to waste. ([David](#), 5)

Apart from the cultural association, food and festivals are often intertwined and mapped with memory and emotions. Sabbath prior to Rachel's husband's death was an occasion of euphoria which was celebrated with delicious food whereas after his death it merely became a tradition to follow which carried only cultural significance.

The narrative in the *Book of Rachel* is submerged with culinary metaphors which is a celebration of Jewish culture. Structured in a way that each chapter begins with a recipe and a description of its ingredients. The recipes are intertwined with the narrative of the main plot in a way that it is reflective of some symbolic signified. The first chapter of the book "Fried Fish" ([David](#) 1) tells the symbolic meaning of fish associated with protection and fertility. As the novel proceeds, we observe that the recipes are not just culturally symbolic but are also connected to the character's emotions and past. Upon giving the Jewish significance to *Sol Kadhi* as the "queen of curries" ([David](#) 11), Rachel expresses feeling energized with sol curry, entitling it as "elixir of life" ([David](#) 14). Saffron is symbolic of celebration and freedom.

In the chapter "Tandlya Chi Bhakhri", David declares that rice is considered as the cultural symbol of fertility, "After the wedding, the bride is showered with rice and confetti, so that she becomes the mother of many children." ([David](#) 67)

As the novel proceeds, we observe that Esther David follows a structured pattern where she begins every chapter with a recipe and tells us about its Jewish cultural significance. In the chapter *Malida*, David exposes that "*malida* is organized as an offering to the Prophet Elijah, Eliyahu Hannabi, for a secret wish fulfillment." ([David](#) 142) Later in the chapter, Rachel falls ill due to the emotional turmoil suffered because of the construction work around the synagogue. Zephra conducts *malida* with the help of Rubybai so as to keep the tradition alive even in the absence of her mother "she serves traditional dinner of *chicken curry, chauli beans, saffron rice, sandan and coconut laddos*." ([David](#) 151)

Food patterns are specific to cultures and ethnic identity. Cooking the same recipe in different cultures is different. Ingestive etiquettes, cooking patterns, preparation techniques are peculiar to cultures. Recipes and meals are in a way cultured, a manifestation of the sociocultural environment. The chapter "Indian Omelette" in the novel explains the Indian way of cooking *Omelette*. Deborah Lupton's assertion is an explanation of the above said

Cooking is a moral process, transferring raw matter from 'nature' to the state of 'culture' and thereby taming and domesticating it. (2)

The novel is not just a reflection of an individual's efforts to protect and preserve her cultural identity but in a way, it also throws light on hybrid identities. Rachel in the novel is well versed in Marathi, a language which she knew from birth, a fact that helped her build an intimate relationship with the other people from the village. Apart from the adaptation of the language, Food's cultural influence can also be seen in the novel "Influenced by Indian ritual, Jews also believe that coconut is auspicious for new beginnings" (David 11). By showing an influence of the practice of Hindu caste culture, Ester David excogitates food to reflect upon the cultural influence of the host country.

Mapping Sexual Identity through Food and Memory

With the many embodied meanings that food conveys, food and its symbolism are inextricably intertwined with gender and sexuality. The food association of maleness and femaleness is different in different cultures. Various gendered identities and roles are associated with foodways defining femininity and masculinity. Carole Counihan in her book reflects

In many cultures, eating is a sexual and gendered experience throughout life. Food and sex are metaphorically overlapping. Eating may represent copulation, and food may represent sexuality. (9)

Esther David works upon how food serves as a metaphor for sexual identity. In an incident from the novel when Rachel climbs the tamarind tree in spite of being restricted to, the author describes a few intimate moments between Rachel and her husband where the writer describes Rachel's body and skin texture as "deep-brown skin, velvety soft like the ripe fruit of tamarind" (David 23). Tamarind tree becomes the symbol of intimacy and love bringing the couple even more close. "Aaron carried her into the house and made love like never before". (David 23) Warren Belasco reflects upon the intertwined relationship between food and sexual intercourse

The connection between food and sex are primal. Both are central to biological reproduction and to the establishment of strong social ties. Both involve the incorporation of outside entities within the private body. Both are highly personal, indeed intimate; both involve the primary senses of sight, smell, touch, and yes, taste. (35)

Likewise in another incident, Zephra defines *puranpolis* as "made with an aphrodisiac" (David 23), as she cannot understand why she feels attracted to Judah after eating *puranpolis*, the same *puranpolis* that became a means to reconcile her parent's broken engagement. She expresses a will to eat *Birda* as a remedy to flee from the feeling of falling in love with Judah.

Women and Food

Women have a deep-seated relationship with food. Women are not just mere consumers of food they are also producers of foods. Women have the capability to produce milk for their infant babies and not just that, they are also chief producers and providers of food in the family. Traditionally and even in the contemporary world women have been responsible for nourishing and nurturing members in the family by cooking and serving food. Johnston in her book explores the complex and inseparable

connection between food and women and how they view themselves, especially related to issues of health, weight management, parenting, and economic status. Having such enormous involvement entails in the manifestation of one's internal state of mind in the act of getting involved.

In the novel, Rachel spent her lifetime cooking for her husband and family. Cooking for her was not merely a task but an endeavour she thoroughly enjoyed. Upon being asked to sit and accompany her family for meals, she resisted and denied expressing her extreme joy in serving and feeding rather than consuming.

Women are involved with food at both physical and psychological level. Physically in the act of consumption and production and psychologically in the way they are culturally groomed. It is mostly the psychological involvement that paves path for their physical involvement. The psychological involvement constructs femininities through foodworks that communicate love and care. Johnston delineates

Despite progress in gender equality, food and femininity are still tightly interlinked. Many women connect how they see themselves as women with their ability to perform or engage with food.(1)

In the chapter "Anashi Dhakacha San, Pessach" Rachel's daughter feels nostalgic about home and mother's care. Food here becomes a reminder of mother's love. She expresses "I am bored of eating this factory-made stuff. Just feeling homesick for your food." (David 49)

Food and having meals together on the dinner table are reflective of the building relationship between Rachel and Judah, whom she approaches for lawful help for saving the synagogue. Having meals together gives them an opportunity to build a cordial and strong relationship. Food not only becomes the means to establish comfort between Rachel and Judah but also becomes an expression for the apology. In an incident where Rachel unintentionally vexes Judah by speaking on the subject of marriage communicates her apology by cooking *Bombay duck*. "She knew the way to a man's heart was through his stomach, and she would definitely reach it. She has come to love him, like her own son" (David 63).

Upon approaching Zepha's friend Kavita for help, Kavita reveals how in her family women did not have any voice in matters of the family business. If they would ask anything in that regard, they were told that "women of the Chinoy family are supposed to manage all these houses we have and fulfill our social obligations." She tells Zephra how all her time is consumed in planning and managing meals and house parties. Later in the novel, Kavita attempts to convince her husband claiming if she wants anything from her husband "Just have to serve him a plate of *bombil*, and I can even get away with murder" (David 131) This is reflective of how women use food and their cooking skills to convince their husbands.

Conclusion

Food in the novel, therefore, serves as a language and representation of emotions, culture, and sexual identity. Through her narration, Esther David employs food codes as markers of memory to connect Rachel's past and present. The writer has appropriated food rituals to reflect upon the distorted notions of cultural identity and the influence of the host culture. By the means of implying culinary imagery, the author reflects upon Rachel's struggle to ascertain her cultural identity. Thus, Esther David's peculiar structural pattern in the novel, where she begins every chapter with a recipe is a technique employed to reflect upon cultural, emotional and sexual symbolism, through food tropes.

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