

Cultural Preservation and Cultural Assimilation in Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: a memoir with Recipes*

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Abstract

Migration has become increasingly common in recent times and with it comes the challenge of understanding and adapting to the new cultural environment. The difficulty of blending into their new environment while simultaneously struggling to preserve their own cultural identity from their homeland can be seen in Shoba Narayan's popular food memoir *Monsoon Diary: a memoir with recipes* (2004). This paper deals with the cultural differences between India and America and how the author, Shoba Narayan manages to hold onto her inherent Indian culture and at the same time try to explore, adapt and assimilate with the American culture. This paper also analyses how food is used as a symbol to represent the cultural differences. Food is an essential and integral part of everyone's life, deeply interconnected with the culture, rituals, way of living of a particular place and its people. A foodoir or a food memoir captures the role of food in a community's culture more vividly than any other element. This dynamic between cultural preservation and cultural assimilation is a not much researched area and it offers an insight into the experiences of immigrants abroad and thus will help people to resonate with the characters and incidents in the novel. This paper has used the MLA Ninth edition for research methodology and documentation.

Keywords: Food memoir, Homeland, Assimilation, Immigrant, Comfort food, recipes

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Food is the fuel of life. It nourishes all the beings in the world and helps them survive. Food at a glance could be a trivial subject to be dealt with, but it is a shared ritual and it connects people. Food can be analysed in various ways and perspectives due to its interdisciplinary nature. Researchers from various fields explore the multifaceted nature of food and illuminate the vast interconnectedness of food with each of the disciplines, thereby, offering various perspectives. The aspect of food could be spread across various fields like anthropology, sociology, psychology, feminism, nostalgia and much more. When food and literature intersect, it sparks some new dimensions to analyse. Food in fiction is a recent trend in research that is gaining more popularity. Literature examines a character, its nature, passion, dreams, trauma and worries through the depiction of food. Literature has the ability to take a trivial matter like food and portray the emotions experienced by the character or stand as a metaphor or symbol for their trauma and dreams or even become a mnemonic device to represent something.

Culinary narratives emphasize food as a symbol, thereby elevating and offering new perspectives on the entire literary work. Writers create cookbooks, memoirs, or fiction that heavily feature food as a symbol. These works often include recipes, recounting of childhood nostalgia tied with food or use of any specific food to represent traits of character's identity. These are the elements that resonate with the readers' taste and make them immerse in the book of flavours. Indian writers like, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Amitav Ghosh, have incorporated culinary narratives to embellish their description and improve the representation and interpretation of their fiction. In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), food plays a major role in recollecting the past. The sensitivity to taste and smell also acts as a powerful symbol in the story. The character Saleem preserves the pickles and the chutneys but in reality, he preserves his childhood memories and nostalgia and thereby preserves the same for the generations to come. In Anita Nair's *Fasting and Feasting* (1999), the use of food metaphor is seen not only in the novel but also in the title. The title itself serves as an example of how the writer contrasts and highlights the contradictions between two distinct cultures. Food becomes the symbol of power and gender stereotype.

In the Indian family the dining table becomes a place of communication and a facilitator to build familial relationship, whereas, in the foreign land people do not eat together and are not much concerned about other's likes and dislikes. For instance, in India, Uma's family gathers at the dining table and Uma's mother (mama) serves Uma's father (papa) without him needing to say a word, whereas, in America, Arun observes a detached family where the mother prepares the food and stores it in the fridge and turns unconcerned with whether the family is eating. Meanwhile, the father prepares bacon only for himself and does not ask the other members of the family if they want any.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) talks about various themes like man's love towards nature, history in fiction, significance of indigenous people and their knowledge and many more. One could find traces of use of food to show the distinct differences between the food choices of Piyali and the other native people. Kiran Desai in her novel *Inheritance of the Loss* (2006), uses food as a symbol of the cultural identity of the characters. Though being an Indian descendent, Sai is completely anglicized and prefers English ways of eating food over Indian ways. Whereas, her beloved Gyan prefers Indian ways. The choice of food and eating method provide not only a differentiation between the characters and cultural differences but also an additional layer in comprehending the characters

Jhumpa Lahiri, a British-American writer, became well known by her debut novel *The Namesake* (2004). As she is an Indian descendent, her novel captures the difficulties faced by the second-generation immigrants, especially the name of the protagonist. The novel closely analyses how the protagonist gets perplexed when his name is odd to the surrounding that he resides. Apart from the name and other aspects and difficulties of the second-generation immigrants, the novel also subtly talks about food in the narrative. The Bengali couple, Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, move to America and it is the preparation of Indian food, and eating them helps the couple to imagine their homeland. Particularly, Ashima, who is pregnant, prepares an authentic Bengali dish that serves as her comfort food, offering her a sense of familiarity and relief in an unknown land. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), explores themes like family, societal rules and caste discrimination while also using powerful food metaphors. For instance, the family's earlier pickle business, "Paradise Pickles &

Preserves" symbolizes how they preserve not only their cultural heritage but also certain societal norms and practices. The usage of food imagery to represent and describe the love between Ammu and Velutha and the attraction between Rahel and Estha. This improves the narration of the plot and helps the readers to easily understand and the emotions exhibited by the characters.

Food images and employment of food as a metaphor are not only seen in fictional novels like these but also in the memoirs. Merriam Webster defines memoir as "a narrative composed from personal experience." When a writer incorporates food recipes, their attachment with specific dishes, their personal experience with food can be called as a food memoir. Barbara Frey Waxman in her journal "Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom," defines about food memoirs and food memoirists as,

It's also about the treasury of metaphorical associations that link food with love and emotional nourishment that are often present in the personal histories and confessions of food memoirists; these resonances are purposefully, creatively used by most food memoirists to elicit feelings from readers and evoke their memories. And it's also about the associations of food with cultural identity, ethnic community, family, and cross-cultural experiences; these matters are prominent themes of food memoirs. (Waxman 363)

These memoirs with the inclusion of food are also called as foodoirs. The work may trace the author's journey from childhood till adulthood and their association with food. As the foodoirs reveal the personal connection of authors with food, it easily connects with the readers and they find it relatable. In some foodoirs, the food imagery or recipes not only tells the personal connection of the food memoirist with food but also depicts something more than that, like a metaphor for life incidents. Food memoirs in Indian literature are a recent trend and many writers have contributed to it.

Madhur Jaffery, an Indian born British woman is an actress and a cookbook writer, who is known for her contribution to introducing the Indian cuisines to Western world. Her work *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India* (2005) is a foodoir, in which she shares her childhood in India. Though she covers her experiences

of partition, the memoir majorly deals with her relationship with food. She describes her experience like a picture, for instance, the part where the kids climb the mango trees equipped with salt, pepper and other required spices. The images of Toffee man selling toffees in the verandah, eating meat-balls, travelling in train with home packed food all of these resonates with the reader especially Indians and the Indian immigrants.

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's *The Settler's Cookbook: A Memoir of Love, Migration and Food* (2008) explores the difficulties faced by the author's family in migration and how food evoke memory in them and how food defines their identity. Being born in Uganda to an Indian Muslim family, the author connects with her roots through food. The adaptation of the family's food practices evolves according the basic availability of the local ingredients which creates a "food creolization" (qtd. in Tomczak 7) as mentioned in the article, "Cookbook-Memoirs by Indian Diasporic Writers." The frequent mention of association of food items with its health benefits and the Indian traditional dishes like, *khichiri* clearly depicts how the food holds tradition and passes on to the future generations.

Rukmini Srinivas' *Tiffin: Memories and Recipes of Indian Vegetarian Food* (2015) is another notable memoir with recipes that explains not just the recipes in detail but also rich in tapestry of experience centred around food. Having travelled in various places, Rukmini has had the opportunity to taste a variety of cuisines and share the recipes. Yet, the traditional home-cooked comfort food, prepared by her family with secret recipes and love, not only invokes the desire to consume it but also evokes nostalgia for home and the stories surrounding the food. Anahita Dhondy, a popular chef and writer's work *Parsi Kitchen: A Memoir of Food and Family* (2022) is another foodoir in which the author popularizes her traditional cooking recipes with the stories that connects her to the past. Her companionship with food began from the time she was a kid and helping her mom in the kitchen. Her memoir vividly describes the recipes along with her memories of childhood associated with the food.

In the examples of the food memoirs seen so far, one could understand that most of them deal with, migration, nostalgia and remembrance of childhood, life incidents associated with food. Thus, a food memoir and food memoirist could always bring more

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to the table about nostalgia on food, memory evoked by food than a fictional writer and a bonus point is that readers not only get to resonate with the stories but also receive the recipes of the dishes as well. One such early writer on food memoir in Indian literature was Shoba Narayan, who wrote *Monsoon Diary: a memoir with recipes* (2004), blending her personal life with connection with her food.

Shoba Narayan, an Indian author, is also a journalist and columnist for around thirty years, who writes about food, culture and travel. She has written about six novels which deal with themes like food, culture, nostalgia and travel. Shoba is the winner of James Beard Award and has received Pulitzer Fellowship. She did her postgraduate courses in America. Yet her works touch upon the nuances of the lives of people living in India. Her novels make the readers not only read about what is it to be in India but also make them feel and breath the air of India. Having spent many years in America, Shoba could bring out the contrast of living in America and India, thus, satisfying the experience of people of both places.

The novel *Monsoon Diary: a memoir with recipes* (2004) is a foodoir which is memoir with food recipes, which makes the description of food in the novel a significant element. Shoba Narayan, the author of the memoir, provides a detailed description on her life from childhood in India to her education and adulthood in America, along with the significance of food in her life. This study examines how an Indian immigrant navigates the balance between preserving the heritage of their homeland and adapting to the new culture of their host country, with a particular focus on the significance of food and culture in Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: a memoir with Recipes*.

India is a country rich in traditions and Shoba throughout the novel mentions her life amidst the practices of those traditions. Shoba's paternal grandparents belong to Kerala, whereas, her maternal grandparents belong to Tamil Nadu. As per the Indian tradition, the relationship between a baby and food commences from it being a toddler. The first solid food consumption of the baby is considered as a grand ceremony and every family cherishes that moment. Thus, her association with food began from one such ceremony called *choru-unnaal*. Food was not just a means of sustenance but also was rich in its medicinal properties. The food recipes like, "milk spiked with saffron, ground

almonds and jaggery or cane sugar, which provided iron and calcium for my mother's growing body" (Monsoon Diary 10). In order to strengthen a woman's body post-pregnancy, the food options used are healthy and this knowledge is culturally infused.

Being brought up in such culture rich land, Shoba faces cultural shocks once she reaches America for her studies. Shoba is a vegetarian and she was taken aback to see people consuming beef and drinking alcohol. Her Indian traditions and upbringing prevented her from consuming meat and alcohol. The culinary culture with which she has grown up has eventually changed into her personality and her identity. During her early days in America, she was stunned to observe Americans having sweet foods for breakfast as she was accustomed to a more savoury morning meal.

. . . cold cereal instead of warm *idlis* in the morning. . . . There was a dizzying array of food: softly folded omelettes that I spiced up with Tabasco sauce... I told my breakfast mates that I wasn't used to eating sweet foods – jams, jellies, and syrup – so early in the morning. When I added that a main component of my morning meal was a spicy *dosa* with chilli powder, they looked shocked. (Monsoon Diary 111-112)

Over the years, Shoba became familiar to a variety of flavours of food from around the world which broadened her palate and made her taste buds open to global cuisine. Food not just satisfies once hunger but it is blended with one's personality and culture so much that one may get adapted to the new tastes of food yet yearns for their comfort food which is the cuisine of their homeland.

During her early days in America, she was a young woman raised in Indian culture, now exploring American etiquettes, family dynamics, and social behaviours. One of the biggest cultural shocks she experienced was the dining etiquette, as Americans ate with cutlery, unlike Indians who traditionally use their hands. America, a multi-cultural society, serves as a melting pot where individuals from diverse communities coexist bringing with them their unique culinary traditions. In this environment, one can experience a wide array of global cuisines, from Japanese and Indian to Chinese, all within close proximity. This openness to international food cultures provided Shoba with the opportunity to explore various dishes, eventually

discovering her personal preferences. However, despite this culinary exploration, she consistently returned to the comfort of her heritage – Indian cuisine – which remained a constant source of solace and familiarity.

Not just food, but the social paradigm of America is inclusive and equal opportunities for everybody, which Shoba found motivating and supporting. For instance, Shoba, who was tom-boyish when she a girl and she had to face many restrictions from her parents and grandparents. She had to plead to the boys in her street to get a chance to be the batsman. But America and Americans did not reason her gender to stop her from pursuing her desires. In fact, she was good at welding and creating sculptures and in doing so she felt, “. . . like a Superman. Or rather, Superwoman” (Monsoon Diary 115). Shoba realized that she could become anyone she wished to as there were no discrimination in America and opportunities were open to everyone. The strength and opportunities changed her personality to a more self-sufficient, independent and bold personality. As a part of Shoba's assimilation to the unknown land was her change in her personality. Her palate also turned welcoming to a wide range of cuisines and she understood the global cultures very well which could be seen in the chapter where she prepares meal for a charity dinner. A charity dinner for a multi-cultural country like America, should include dishes from various countries, and Shoba practically did that.

Assimilation was never a difficult concept for her, as she was used to taste various dishes even within India during her train journeys. From her school lunch time food sharing to sharing of food during train journeys gave her a trail to taste dishes from various parts of the country. So, while tasting new flavours and exploring unfamiliar food was not difficult for her. But the nostalgia and longing towards the homeland flavours is an often alarm that every immigrant faces and Shoba was no different from that. Food becomes a cultural bridge that helps Shoba to easily assimilate into the new culture. When Shoba ate grilled fruits at a nightclub in Boston, she gave it a desi touch by adding *chaat* to it. Though she loved to try different dishes like – pizza, pasta and falafel, she always returned to her comfort food, which Indian food. “But I always returned to Indian food. While the foreign flavors teased my palate, I needed Indian food to ground me. When all else failed, I would sit in my dorm room late at night, mix some

rice with yogurt and a dash of salt, and gobble it down" (Monsoon Diary 118). This serves as a significant example of how Shobha skilfully adapts to the new cultural environment in America, embracing its diverse culinary traditions, while simultaneously preserving her Indian heritage. Shoba demonstrates a delicate balance between assimilation and cultural preservation, ensuring that her connection to her Indian roots remains intact even as she navigates the complexities of a foreign society.

Shoba understands the cultural differences and tries to assimilate into the new culture. With the help of her dorm mates, she gets introduced various authentic dishes of Greek, was able take part in Thanksgiving party at a friends' house. Her friends in America hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds, provided Shoba with the opportunity to engage with a wide array of global traditions, understanding of global cultures. She understands her plight of cross-cultural identity that she faces. "The contradictions between two cultures - one that I was born into and one that I adopted - were enormous" (Monsoon Diary 124). The impact of cultural differences is faced by many people living there. Shoba mentions that a mammi whom she knows grows tulsi and curry leaves to prepare her Indian dishes. Due to globalisation, one may get anything and everything in American stores and there are many Indian restaurants in America as well, but the authentic taste of home-made dishes with ingredients grown and included with love cannot match any restaurant style. For instance, Shoba shares a moment about having idlis in America which explains this clearly,

Idlis are made from rice-and-lentil batter that is allowed to ferment for a day. It is simple recipe with sensational results. I have never eaten a good *idli* in America, although countless Indian restaurants offer them. American *idlis* are hard and lack a tangy sourdough taste. For good *idlis*, you have to go to my hometown. If you're lucky, a South Indian will invite you home for breakfast, and there you will encounter the authentic, spongy *idli* in all its glory. Or you can become your own expert *idli* maker. (Monsoon Diary 50)

During a cab ride, Shoba happened to meet a Keralite family residing in America. They quickly established a connection, bonding over their shared nativity. As a result, she was graciously invited to their home, where she had the opportunity to partake in a

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traditional Kerala sadhya, a lavish vegetarian feast. "I fell on the food with the fervor of a parched desert traveler spotting an oasis. Red rice straight from Kerala, spicy onion *theeyal* with a dollop of ghee on top, and a delicate *olan* brimming with coconut milk. It was a sublime, returning to me the memory of several bus trips that my parents and I had undertaken in Kerala" (Monsoon Diary 130). Though Shoba enjoys being in America and explores her new wings provided by this land, the memory of her homeland cuisines creates a longing. The foods like, idli, coffee, rasam are not just recipes but memories attached to her life and people she loves, like, Nalla-ma's rasam, mom's steamed soft idlis, dad's brisk filter coffee. There are emotions attached to it and that is the reason for Shoba's longing created through food.

The food in this foodoir not only highlights but also symbolizes the cultural contrasts between America and the Indian subcontinent, emphasizing the stark differences between two worlds that are often considered poles apart. Shoba, an Indian woman living in America, embarks on a journey to explore the land and embrace the diverse opportunities it offers. While the initial cultural shock challenges her, she gradually adapts to her new environment, navigating the complexities of life in a foreign land. However, despite the inevitable changes she experiences, Shobha's inherent Indian values and cultural identity remain firm. Throughout her journey, she artfully balances the rich tapestry of both cultures – honouring her Indian traditions while thoughtfully assimilating into the American way of life. This delicate balance between preserving her heritage and embracing a new cultural reality ultimately reflects the flexibility of her identity. Shobha's narrative stands as a paradigm to the complexities of cultural hybridity and the power of food as a bridge between disparate worlds, illustrating how one can hold fast to one's roots while also adapting and thriving in a globalized society.

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