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**Cookbooks with Nostalgia and Memories: A Critical Study of Sadia Dehlvi's  
*Jasmine and Jinns: Memories and Recipes of My Delhi* and Chitrita Banerji's  
*The Taste of My Life***

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**Abstract:**

"Culinary memoir" is a contemporary genre that is emerging in the vast pool of autobiographies. These memoirs often replicate the concept of ethnic recipe books, which by the 1980s often included family stories, photographs, and personal memories alongside family recipes. The proposed paper will critically analyze the emerging genre of culinary memoirs in the arena of Indian food literature through the textual analysis of two works: *Jasmine and Jinns: Memories and Jinns* by Sadia Dehlvi and *The Taste of My Life* by Chitrita Banerji.

The narratives of the selected memoirs explore how women's lives revolve around the recipes and food habits of their families. The food preparation, creation of recipes, and experiments in their cooking act as important mediums that give women a free space to express themselves. Thus, these memoirs can be perceived as significant literary texts that allow women to have a creative space. The research paper will investigate this space and further explore how women find their creative expression within the walls of the kitchen.

These new-age memoirs add a curious lens to contemporary culinary works and are often used as a major tool for defining ethnicity and cultural identity. These narratives bestow a wide range of cultural practices and norms in the form of recipes that are not known to the public sphere. The proposed study explores how the ethnic rituals of preparing, serving, and eating food are important cultural practices that are significantly connected with humans' social and emotional lives. The act of eating or cooking becomes a way to showcase and even expand one's personal identity. The paper will aim to understand how food is intertwined with personal identity.

**Keywords: identity, culture, ethnicity, food memoirs.**

## Introduction

Food is an integral part of life, one can't deny this notion. The famous saying by the great French writer Brillat-Savarin: "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are," explicitly defines one's relationships with culinary practices and selfhood. Our relationship with gastronomical practices begins from the moment we are born and continues until we take our last breath. From comfort food to traditional recipes, food is regarded as an essential part that shapes our cultural and ethnic identity.

Meal preparation, cooking, and eating can be intense emotional experiences that are often juxtaposed with an individual's subjectivity. A single recipe can create a rollercoaster of multiple feelings within a person. So, when one wants to have a particular dish or meal, she/he/they look for recipes or cookbooks. In the modern age, cookbooks play a crucial role in the circulation of recipes. They allow the readers to understand the tradition and ethnic background, along with the delight of cooking.

It's interesting to note that there's a boom in the genre of cookbooks. Lately, they are following the format of classic memoirs (usually including personal essays and anecdotes), shifting away from the classic format of cookbooks, which consists of a list of ingredients and instruction manuals. These cookbooks have recipes and wonderful pictures to accompany those food products, but they also have life lessons, personal stories, and the experiences of the chef. These memoirs hold a special ability to spread cultures and ethnic ideas through food and recipes. In the digital age of social media and food vlogs, where an amateur chef can look at thousands of recipes for a single dish, these memoirs help readers develop an understanding of the culture and ethnic background from which the recipe originally came.

Barbara Frey Waxman, in her essay "Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, And Why They Belong In The Literature Classroom", defined culinary memoirs as the growth and emotional development of the author through the lens of memories and nostalgia associated with food and its production (Waxman 364). These memories follow the concept of ethnic recipe books, which by the 1980s often included family stories, photographs, and personal memories alongside family recipes. The genre of culinary memoirs started with Elizabeth David's *French Country Cooking* and M.F.K. Fisher's multiple cookbooks like *The Art of Eating*, *Two Towns in Provence*, etc. Their books published in the 1990s explicitly involved food recipes intertwined with personal stories they had experienced.

Waxman delineated that the genre of food memoirs is “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” (363). These literary texts cover the gaps between people’s interest in cooking and the background stories that make the particular recipe more desirable and indelible. The memories and the associated recipes create a premise of the culinary memoir and compel these authors to share their stories with fellow readers who also love food.

Deya Bhattacharya’s article, “How the Traditional Cookbook Evolved into the Food Memoir,” recognized the subgenre of ‘food memoir’ as a significant descendant of traditional cookbooks. As these memoirs provide one of the best ways to share a person’s life experiences through food. She said that culinary practice can become a doorway to self-realisation, and familiar food items aid an individual to connect with his family and ethnic values.

In the paper, we’ll discuss two memoirs, Sadia Dehlvi’s *Jasmine and Jinns: Memories and Jinns* and Chitrita Banerji’s *A Taste of My Life*. The research article shall try to explore how these memoirs not only give instructions on recipes to the readers but also offer a straightforward way to communicate the knowledge of their communities across time and distance. The narratives of the select memoirs explore how women’s lives revolve around the recipes and food habits of their families. The food preparation, creation of recipes, and experiments in their cooking act as an important medium that gives women a free space to express themselves.

Both texts explore the lives of women and their involvement in the preparation of new recipes, cooking those familiar meals and the food habits of their families. We shall see these texts separately and critically analyze how these memoirs are significant literary texts that allow women to have a creative space. Furthermore, the paper aims to understand how the ethnic rituals of preparing, serving, and eating food are essential cultural practices that are immensely connected with humans’ social and emotional lives.

### ***A Taste of My Life* Chitrita Banerji**

Chitrita Banerji is one of the most famous food writers based in America. She grew up in Kolkata, where she discovered her family’s devotional relationship with food. In her memoir *A Taste of My Life*, she talks about the journey from her childhood place in Kolkata to Harvard as a young college student, then to Dhaka as the young bride of a Muslim man, and finally to her life

in the US. The format of her memoir is like a three-course meal where she presents her life stories with food recipes. She reveals how food has played a significant role in her experiences of loss, love, conflict, and most importantly, reconciliation with her family.

Culinary memoirs generally follow a chronological sequence of storytelling, but Banerji doesn't follow this convention to convey her experiences. Instead, she only uses certain stories (with different locations) that matter to her the most and presents them like a platter that consists of starters, a main course, and desserts. In the narrative, she vividly introduces the dishes that are significant and nostalgic to her, for example, Kadam Bhai's duck bhuna, chicken sandwich, lamb with posto, and her father's favourite drink.

The theme of nostalgia is deeply embedded in the text. "Nostalgia" originated from the Greek words *nostos* (homecoming) and *algos* (ache); which initially delineated homesickness. The idea of nostalgia has been a part of mankind's history since it was discovered in Biblical books and Greek poetry (the best example would be the epic poem "Odyssey," written by Homer). It's fascinating how the concept of nostalgia was initially considered a kind of sickness, but in today's world, this is commonly looked at as "yearning for yesterday". Banerji's memoir is filled with nostalgia and memories of her childhood.

It's crucial to understand that nostalgia creates a symbolic relationship between the people or significant events and the consumption objects that were previously associated with them (Belk 670). Gastronomical products in the form of recipes stir up nostalgic emotions and memories, as these recipes are generally connected to practices and rituals conducted on feast days, important days like birthdays and anniversaries, or even in physical discomfort or sickness. These recipes help structure families and support "intergenerational transmission of the know-how" (Vignolles and Pichon 5).

In the chapter 'Small, Round Things,' Banerji recalls a list of food items like Karmacha chutney, Topa Kuler Ambol, etc. that she used to enjoy in her childhood days. The food items become a symbol through which she goes back to her old life (33). In another chapter, 'Tea with My Father', Banerji recalls his father's love for tea and how their relationship got strained due to her love marriage with a Muslim man. When she returned to her hometown, her father offered her the familiar old tea, suggesting his way of offering blessings and love to her. In the narrative, tea is not just a beverage but immediately becomes a major tool through which they rebuild their relationship.

Gamal Abdel- Shehid in her article “Cultural Globalization and the Soul Food Memoir: Austin Clark, Ntozake Shange, and Marlon Riggs,” talked about how the identity of the authors of these memoirs remains in the middle of two traditions- an old, familiar culture that they grew up in and the new modern world. In the first one, they discuss the traditional or familial way of food preparation, while the other form depicts the same recipe in a global context (the updated version).

In the chapter named “Double Roti”, Banerji longs for her favourite Indian chicken sandwich, but because of the changes in culinary practice in general and her immigration to America, she is not able to recreate the same recipe ever again. So, she gives the reader an updated version of the chicken sandwich. Anita Mannur writes in her essay “Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora” that the population living abroad consciously wants to preserve the authenticity of the recipe, which is equivalent to preserving the ethnic culture that they belong to. She said that regular meals become a part of our identity, as they provide comfort and a sense of belonging to the immigrant community (15). The chicken sandwich here acts as a metaphor for the lost memory of the author, and the updated version of the same sandwich represents her action to embrace her lost memory with her new identity as an immigrant.

Abdel-Shehid explained that food memoirs with recipes had been said to work on a “logic of retracing” (457). Each dish (and recipe) serves to recall a memory and the memory of a place, “act[ing] as a sort of culinary signpost on a map of memories” (457). These memoirs provide a re-writing of cultural history from the point of view of the body, where food takes a central place. Shehid explained that “the memory is the place along which we retrace our journey, remember people, and, in effect, smell and taste the past” (457).

In the chapter, ‘Pleasure in a Cone’ Banerji talks about her mother’s habit of eating pan as a snack item. Though she never ate that pan, the smell and texture of it remained in her psyche. She writes:

“Decades have gone by and taken my mother and many relatives with them. I still have that little book-shaped silver pan box my mother carried in her purse...Once in a while, I open it and look inside. Is it my imagination, or is it true that a faint aroma of the Bengali *mithey pan* combined with my mother’s personal blend of perfumed tobacco still lingers?” (Banerji 21)

Here, we can see that even with the sight of the pan box, the author immediately goes back to her past and imagines the smell of the pan that she never had in her whole life. The smell of food reminds her of her childhood and family in Bengal, which she is nostalgic about.

### **Sadia Dehlvi's *Jasmine and Jinns: Memories and Jinns***

*Jasmine and Jinns* intertwined Sadia Dehlvi's experiences of growing up in the city of Old Delhi with the traditions of the city's historic past. The book describes the memories and nostalgia of Dehlvi through the art of cooking and serving. These memories comprise her home, family, and kitchen, as well as the old bazaar of Chandni Chowk, where food plays a significant role. The recipes that she shared in her memoir are traditional and limited to the people of *Dillwalla's* homes. In addition to that, it also gives an insight into the life and soul of this historical city through its transforming manners, cuisines, and customs.

In this book, she fondly recalls her mother, aunts, and grandmothers and their conversation that revolves around the preparation of *dastarkhwan*, which made her childhood joyful. She depicts the world of the *Delhiwallas'* kitchen, where women assert their control. She offered readers the origin stories of several classic recipes from Old Delhi cuisine. For instance, biryani, qorma, nihari, etc. Along with that, she divides her recipes according to the seasons of Delhi and describes the rich and traditional customs of Delhi. In her narration, she includes pictures of her family, the architecture of the city and its streets to depict its magical and flavorful diversity.

It is fascinating to note that the process of cooking meals has usually been looked at as the task of women, who are considered the makers of the kitchen. Their lives revolve around the food preparation and eating habits of their family members. Arlene Voski Avakia's, *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Writers Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking* explored the relationship shared by women with food and its preparation. She examined the fact that, though cooking is often regarded as an imposed duty on women, it is also a creative outlook through which several women construct their identities (6). While examining the connection between women and food, she said:

“If we delve into the relationship between women and food, we will discover how women have forged spaces within that oppression. Cooking becomes a vehicle for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance, and even power.” (Avakia 6)

This notion has been further theorized by Dr. Vrinda Verma in her essay “Constructing Women's Identities through Food Memoirs”. In the research article, she articulated the significance of these memoirs in the construction of women's identities. She said that the act of cooking and creating recipes in the memoirs can be seen as a metaphor for women's creative

outlook. In these memoirs, food acts as the “white ink” that creates food identities for women who cook or create recipes (137).

The women presented in the work of Dehlvi explore this very notion of food production. Dehlvi’s narrative describes the domestic space as a free space where women have the liberty to use their cooking as a creative expression. For them, preparing food is not only a job but is deeply connected to their identities. Several incidents in the book depict how women find their artistic outlook through their culinary practices. For instance, in the preface of the book itself, Dehlvi recalls the conversations that she had with her aunts, friends, and grandmother. She explains that women in her family are possessive of their recipes, and they don’t share them with strangers, as they consider them a part of themselves (xv). In another instance, she remembers *Ammi*’s (her grandmother’s) experiments with various brands of desi ghee to enhance the taste of her recipes (35).

*Jasmine and Jinns*, as a memoir, try to reveal that the cultural rituals of preparing, serving, and eating meals are significant parts of humans’ social, cultural, and emotional lives. Scholars like Jopi Nyman perceived culinary memoirs as an important literary work in the arena of cultural studies. She explained that these memoirs present a wide range of cultural practices and norms in the form of recipes that are not known to the public sphere (283). Dehlvi’s narrative juxtaposes the cultural practices of Old Delhi with the food habits of her family members and presents an image of her family’s history that is relatable yet unfamiliar to the readers.

Another interesting notion associated with these memoirs is the fact that the recipes that they are giving to the readers are part of their family history. The recipes were never really written as an important part of the historical document but were always transmitted from one generation to another. In an essay, “Remembering Cuisines: A Study of the Culinary Memory in Madhur Jaffrey’s *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India* and Asma Khan’s *Asma’s Indian Kitchen*,” co-authored by Diya Nissy Rajan and Dr Preetha Vasani, they analyzed that culinary memory is a significant part of oral history. The recipes, food habits, etc. that these memoirs provide are regularly discussed in the daily conversation of the author’s life. They said that the difference in the recipes (from the use of similar ingredients) showcases the difference in cultural norms and practices. (141).

They further said that “culinary is a complex and layered space” of literature as it occupies everyday communicative memory and at the same time becomes a cultural object that is passed on

through several generations. Dehlvi belonged to an old family settled in the lanes of Old Delhi, where she learned the art of hospitality and making or creating delicious recipes. The recipes and culinary traditions that she explained in her memoir are something that she gained from her day-to-day communicative memory. This ordinary memory becomes special when we see it as a cultural object of the same community and understand its tradition and ethnicity. This cultural memory of food recipes allowed us to understand food production and the ethnic practices associated with it.

## Conclusion

The culinary-based memoirs, written by these two women writers/chefs represent their loss, nostalgia, and live metaphors through their narratives. The memories and nostalgia connected with food act as metaphors in many literary books. But the way these women writers gave voice to women (their mothers and grandmothers) who found their creative outlook in the form of cooking is noteworthy.

Along with that, these memoirs allow the author to represent their culture and tradition through the act of recipe sharing. The memoirs juxtapose the memory and the nostalgia with the food recipes and create a delightful memory land for the readers. The memory lane not only depicts the culture of the author but also becomes an integral part of her individuality as a person.

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