



Seasoning Culture through the Trope of Food in Esther David's *Book of Rachel*

Anjali Singh

Research Scholar

Department of English

Banaras Hindu University

anjali19@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This paper examines Esther David's novel, *Book of Rachel*, as a cultural artefact through the lens of food. *Book of Rachel* presents the story of Rachel Dandekar, an elderly Bene-Israeli woman living in India who refuses to return to Israel. The story carries the emotional, social and cultural episodes of Rachel's past and present life around Bene Israeli culinary practices. The analysis of food tropes is essential to unveil the complex cultural meanings embedded in the narratives associated with diasporic foodways. The significance of this research lies in exploring and connecting the threads of language, identity, memory, and religious regulations and duties that form and shape the Bene Israel diasporic culture of India. The study maps the different ways in which food operates and communicates in a culinary narrative. The research also reveals that this novel acts as an anchor for the dissemination and preservation of the Bene Israel diasporic culture. Applying Stuart Hall's circuit of culture as a theoretical framework, this research employs a qualitative approach centred on literary analysis and close reading of the text.

Keywords: Culinary narrative, Food, Diaspora, Culture, Memory, Identity.

Introduction

The multifaceted significance of food in diasporic literature has been extensively explored on issues such as identity (Alfonso; Parveen), culture (Mintz; Narayan), and memory and nostalgia (Holtzman; Mannur; Sutton). However, these critical interventions have predominantly focused on the respective subjects in isolation without situating them within a broader cultural process of meaning-making. In particular, there remains a lack of study that can account for the dynamic interplay between language, identity formation, literary production, consumption, and the factors that regulate and shape a particular diasporic culture as narrated in a culinary text. In addition, many existing scholarships have primarily focused on the Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani diasporic communities. While situating food as the centre of analysis in literary writings, the culinary narratives of the Bene Israel diaspora remain underexplored, especially within a pluralistic interpretive framework. This paper examines the novel *Book of Rachel* by Esther David using Stuart Hall's theoretical framework, the Circuit of Culture, which provides a holistic approach to critically analyse the layers of meaning ingrained in the diasporic foodways of Bene Israel Jews.

The selection of Esther David's *Book of Rachel* as the primary text for this research is justified by its status as a canonised literary work, having received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2010, and its exceptional depiction of the Bene Israel Jewish culture in India. This text remains understudied, with existing scholarship limited to a few perspectives, such as memory and culture studies (Varghese and Parui; Bhandari and Singh), and narrative analysis (Bandelu and Lokhandwala). This study adds to existing examinations of the text by using Hall's framework to dissect the novel as a cultural artefact that embodies several more interpretive nodes to analyse and delineate how culture is formed and circulated through culinary writing.

The point of discussion is how the narratives constructed around food inform the culture of a diaspora in different ways. Anita Mannur, in her “Introduction: Food matters,” states that:

Food, as a central part of the cultural imagination of diasporic populations, becomes one of the most viable and valuable sites from which to inquire into the richly layered texture of how race is imagined and reinterpreted within the cultural arena, both to affirm and resist notions of home and belonging. (8)

By ‘cultural arena’, Mannur refers to everyday practices like media, restaurants, family traditions, and social interactions, where immigrants connect with other cultures and try to preserve their identity. The diaspora follows certain food habits to emphasise their presence in the major culture of which they are part. Therefore, employing food as a lens to comprehend the cultural dynamics of a community, country, or region is essential as “food is culture when it is produced.... food is culture when it is prepared... food is culture when it is eaten” (Montanari 11-12).

Raymond Williams, in his work *Keywords*, describes culture as “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development...a particular way of life whether of people, a period, a group, or humanity in general... and as the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (18).

Thus, culture as a continuous and dynamic process shapes and is shaped by human experiences over time. The lived realities of diasporic communities, whether defined by geography, historical period, social identity, or humanity at large, underscore how culture permeates everyday behaviour, values, and worldviews. This definition casts culture within the realm of intellectual and artistic activity, recognising the creative expressions and works that both reflect and influence cultural development. It highlights that culture is simultaneously lived, produced, experienced, and created. Hence, culture as a multi-dimensional concept

encompasses a dynamic process of meaning- making and identity formation, shaping personal and collective lives and helping individuals and groups navigate and express their social realities. This leads to the central argument of this article that the novel, *Book of Rachel*, is a work of intellectual, artistic creativity that mediates the Bene Israel culture with a web of meanings.

The text presents the lives of the Bene Israel diaspora and their Indo-Jewish cuisine culture in Maharashtra, India. David, mainly writes about Jewish life in India, illustrating Jewish culture and tradition. In the text, the recipes are interwoven as part of the narrative.

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design. The mode of inquiry is close reading, involving the examination of food symbolism, metaphors, emotions and diasporic food practices to uncover the deeper cultural representations. The analysis is done by positioning the text within the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall's circuit of culture, along with the application of related concepts and theories on memory, identity, cultural hybridity, language symbolism, and Jewish rituals and traditions. The text is analysed as a site where language, memory, identity, power, and formal and informal codes surrounding food practices define Bene Israel Jewish culture.

Theoretical Framework

Stuart Hall, a pioneering British cultural theorist, introduced the concept of the circuit of culture in his work *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* published in 1997. His theory asserts that the formation and dissemination of culture consist of five interconnected processes: production, representation, identity, consumption, and regulation. According to this theory, culture is a set of shared meanings, and meaning is arbitrary, shaped by various factors such as power, identity and context.

Applying this model to the novel *Book of Rachel*, unveils the intricate relationships between media (novel), individuals (characters and readers), and society (Bene Israel Diaspora), highlighting the dynamic interaction through which cultural media is produced, represented, identified, consumed and governed. The circuit involves five moments: -

Production: The first stage of the circuit focuses on the creation of cultural products. Producers reflect specific ideologies, values, and goals through this process, and they work within a particular context, time, and situation.

Consumption: How consumers engage with media products. They actively consume and extract meanings based on their personal experiences, knowledge, and cultural backgrounds.

Identity: This is a culturally constructed meaning that is not fixed but evolves and changes as per time, place and situation, and creates a sense of belonging to a specific group. There is a kind of emotional bond being created by producers and regulators to attract consumers and shape their identity.

Representation/Signification: This process refers to how the products/media texts are encoded with specific meanings. What is included as well as excluded, in particular ways, to construct a desired message. This is influenced by social and cultural dynamics to reinforce certain ideologies.

Regulation: This stage of the circuit concerns the social and political forces that govern and regulate media and cultural production. It includes laws and policies that shape the production and consumption of media products.

Thus, the circuit of culture illustrates that meanings are not static but are continuously shaped by producers, consumers and regulators. There is no one-way flow of meaning, but it is subjective, cultural, social, and political, as influenced by the respective agencies. This

framework offers an inclusive understanding of culture, through a deeper examination of cultural products.

Bene Israel Community

Bene Israel, - Sons of Israel, also known as Shanivar Teli is a community of Jews in India. They migrated from villages in the Konkan region to nearby cities throughout British India (Fischel 123). The Bene Israel represent a unique category of the Jewish diaspora, characterised by a quiet and retiring disposition and a history that blends ancient Israelite heritage with Indian cultural traditions. The community is described as both exotic and little-known, with a distinct social identity and centuries of isolation from the mainstream Jewish world. The early Jewish diaspora is associated with their painful exile from Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, retaliated mercilessly against the rebellion initiated by Zedekiah, a Jewish leader. The Jews were held captive in Babylon, and after the Babylonian exile, they migrated to different parts of the world, seeking refuge. The Bene Israel Jewish diaspora, which this book refers to, was shipwrecked off the Konkan coast of India around 175 B.C.E. Mumbai, Pune, Ahmedabad, and Karachi (Pakistan) are the places where they gained prominent positions within the British Colonial Government and the Indian Army. Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the British withdrawal from India, the majority of the community- approximately 25,000 emigrated to Israel, while about 5,000 remain in India. (Weil 12-13).

Discussion: Decoding Culture through Food

To interpret and analyse the meanings entrenched in the culinary novel *Book of Rachel*, we must first consider this work a cultural unit that was premeditated and produced by the author (producer). Hall's circuit of culture includes production as a vital element in the process of meaning-making. The author, through literary writing, has produced the novel itself as a

carrier of the meanings to be conveyed. The work of writing is not free from the author's set of ideologies, experiences, identity and roots. In other words, it can be said that the author is not dead in a work of fiction, as Foucault argues that the author is not a person who precedes a work, but a function who "characterises the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (Foucault 305).

Esther David belongs to the Bene Israel Jewish community of Ahmedabad. In the acknowledgement section of the novel, she states that:

At the age of seven, if grandmother Shebabeth had not forced me to cut frills around the kippur chi puri, had I not received Aunt Abigail Solomon's recipe book from cousin Elizabeth Elijah, had I not travelled to Alibaug and Danda to research for Book of Esther and discovered the small Jewish community, cooking in the traditional way, had I not written about a black sauce in *The Walled City*, not knowing what it meant, had I not read a clipping about another Rachel who spent a lifetime looking after a cemetery in Pakistan, had I not got involved with the Vadodara cemetery, had I not collected Jewish artefacts for Ahmedabad's city museum, had I not heard cousin Sybil David become nostalgic with details of some long-forgotten recipe, had I not remembered the fragrance of green coconut curry my mother, Sarah, used to make on Sundays and if Julie Pingle had not demonstrated the finer points of Bene Israel Jewish cooking while making the rose coloured chik cha halwa, *Book of Rachel* would not have materialized.

(Book of Rachel)

The author, Esther David, admits that this work of fiction would not have taken place if she had not experienced certain things about her identity and roots within her own family circle and researched and read the original; personal accounts of Jewish people and their foodways in India and Pakistan. Her aspiration to gain a deeper understanding of her

community and Jewish foodways motivated her to become an author as a function, who projects her “psychological traits of creativity, profundity, manifests her intentions and original inspirations onto the text.” (Foucault 307)

At the beginning of each chapter, the author has added a recipe from the Bene Israel community, which serves as a cultural archive of Jewish food. Throughout the text, the author narrates the story of a woman named Rachel, who preserves the culture of her Jewish identity with the memory of her loved ones: Aaron, her husband who died and her children who returned to Israel, by cooking Jewish food and preserving an ancient synagogue.

Consumption as an integral component of the circuit of culture can be contextualised in the novel through nostalgia. Nostalgia is situated as a commodity to be consumed by the characters and the readers. This nostalgia is food-evoked, consumed through visibility, eating, and cooking of food, while characters recall and readers dive into their own culinary world through words. Proust’s madeleine cake is a well-known example of such food-evoked nostalgia, in which sensory consumption transcends mere physicality, becoming a portal to culinary recollections and an emotional connection to Aunt Leonie. (Proust 295)

Similarly, by presenting the recipes at the beginning of each chapter, David evokes the old memories of her tradition and culture. Rachel, the protagonist, cooks traditional food to mark the Jewish festivals and to instil a sense of parent culture in the younger Bene Israel. The novel presents many incidents around eating and cooking that eventually lead to ‘nostalgia’ as a major part of the narrative, and it is consumed by the protagonist when “Rachel remembered that when Aaron was alive, every Friday for the Sabbath, she used to prepare a festive dinner, a coconut curry of chicken, mutton or fish, with mounds of steamed white rice. This tradition came to an end when Aaron died, and the children left for Israel” (David 4).

The passage describing Rachel's cessation of the Friday Sabbath festive dinner after Aaron's death and the children's departure reflects a disruption in the gastro-nomic order, as Fischler theorised. Gastro-nomie refers to the culturally structured, socialised, and ritualised dimensions of eating; which provide identity, continuity, and social cohesion. When it is disrupted or resisted due to personal or collective loss, it is called gastro-anomie, in which the individual is left isolated in their choices, deprived of the social or emotional anchors (Aaron and children) that once were part of the rituals and celebration. (Fischler 205)

Rachel is nostalgic about her husband, who has died, and her children, who have returned to Israel. The memory of people is linked with the food, which is about emotions, because she used to be excited and happy about Sabbath dinner when her family was there; now, she escapes this traditional cooking and eating as she is more comfortable feeding herself with the taste of nostalgia rather than food itself, as "appetite is emotionally flavoured hunger" (Lupton 1). For example, Rachel used to enjoy eating fried fish, but now she sees it as a gift from the Lord, coming at the doorstep with the waves of the Arabian Sea, and this reminds her of "the dark night when the Jews had been shipwrecked in India, in fact in this very sea" (David 2). Fish is alive, and Rachel chooses not to make any recipe of that fish as she prefers nostalgia over the epicurean pleasure of eating. She places the twitching fish in the bucket of water.

The representation part of the circuit of culture, also called signification, refers to the production of meaning through language, which consists of signs and symbols encoded with a desired message to be disseminated to the public.

In the chapter, Mutton Curry with Tamarind, there is a description of the Tamarind tree in the synagogue courtyard, where Rachel often sits and enjoys the fragrance of its leaves, and the very smell of the leaves transports her back to the memories of the first year of her married life. Moments spent near this tree made her happy. But what is noticeable here is the mention

of the Tamarind and the tree itself as an anchor to the memories of her life spent with her husband, Aaron. Also, the name of the tree Tamarind can remind readers (consumers) of the Tamarisk- tree (*eshel*) which is religiously associated with Abraham, who planted one in Beersheba as a symbol of faith and “called there on the name of Lord (*Havayeh*), the Everlasting God (*Elolam*)” (Gen 21:33). Abraham is the common Hebrew patriarch of the Abrahamic religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Judaism, Abraham is the founding father who began the biblical relationship between Jewish people and God. Hence, the symbolic significance of the Tamarind tree and the desired encoded meaning of conveying Jewish religious beliefs is represented through the food that is Tamarind and it becomes “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour” (Barthes 24). When food becomes the carrier of cultural expression, it allows diverse identities to voice their histories in the narratives.

Another element in the Hall’s circuit of culture is identity. Identity marks a significant step in the making of a culture. Culture is achieved through cultural capital, in which consumption and taste are symbolic of social positioning and identity, as cultural practices create social groups (Bourdieu 3-7). In the context of diaspora, the construction of identity is performed in the kitchen space or at communal gatherings, and achieved through food cooked using traditional recipes. On the occasions such as cooking for the Sabbath, Pessach (the first day of Passover), Malida (an offering to the Prophet Elijah for a secret wish fulfilment) and Purim (the day commemorating the liberation of Persian Jews and the festival of Queen Esther), the Bene Israel community builds, unites, and preserves their identity. In the novel, on the occasion of Purim, another important festival that occurs a month before Passover, Rachel prepares puranpoli to commemorate the liberation of Persian Jews and the festival of Queen Esther. Every Purim, she prepares the rich sweet to remember her almost broken engagement to Aaron, or whenever she is happy, such as for the birth of her grandchild or when she senses

that Zephra was attracted to Judah. This festival falls on a full moon night, with the Indian festival Holi. This day symbolises warmth of love and affection, as this day marks the beginning of the spring season in which birds and animals mate. She narrates to her daughter Zephra that she had invited Aaron to a feast of Puranpolis on Purim to discuss the broken engagement and how communication cleared the misunderstandings between them. They reunited, and Rachel sent a box of puranpolis for her aunt, who was to become her mother-in-law. As Terry Eagleton says, “food looks like an object, but it is actually a relationship”, so, for Rachel, Purim is not just a festival and puranpoli is not just a food, but it is the epitome of love and happiness. The day she found her soulmate, Aaron. Rachel makes puranpoli and not cakes for Purim. Thus, Rachel remembers her roots and has also adapted well to the local culture. Cultural duality and unity cause identity to become hybridised and reside within “in-between” (Bhabha 2) spaces. In the in-between spaces, cultural differences are not fixed or pure but continuously negotiated and transformed through the interaction of diverse cultural elements.

The fifth and final part of the circuit of culture is regulation, which refers to the laws and policies that govern and regulate media products. Here, the product is the Bene Israel culture and its foodways, which are formed and controlled by religious rules and communal traditions.

In many religious cultures, women are excluded from formal religious rituals, and the Jewish culture is no exception. However, for Jewish women, cooking and serving food are religious acts. Therefore, they participate in religious activities by cooking and feeding others. Jewish women adhere to their religion by celebrating festivals, following traditional customs, and practising rituals by cooking and serving food. (Sered 129-131).

Women prepare kosher food in accordance with Jewish dietary laws, which forbid pork and shellfish, and ensure that meat and dairy are never cooked together in a kosher kitchen.

Elizabeth Ehrlich observes that “Keeping kosher is in the Torah. It’s an obligation. It’s not an opinion. It’s a discipline, a kosher kitchen. It is an encompassing way of life, in which discipline and meaning, the mundane and the spiritual, are inextricably tied” (19). Therefore, the practice of maintaining a kosher kitchen helps Jewish women to connect with the food history of their community and in the case of diaspora, following such customs makes them feel connected with their roots. However, in the novel, Rachel reveals that even though kosher food prohibits mixing meat and dairy, she enjoyed eating sticky rice with fried fish and added ‘ghee’, which is not ideal in traditional Jewish food culture. This exemplifies the concept of cultural hybridity as articulated by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (6). Hybridity is not simply the dilution of a tradition but a productive site where identities and meanings are rearticulated, embodying both continuity and change. She mentions that she did not know that this was against the dietary law. This is where we find the assimilation of one food culture with the other, along with the portrayal of food culture informed by laws and regulations.

The regulation of meaning formation and cultural preservation is also connected with the cooking and serving of rice in Bene Israel Jewish weddings, as rice symbolises fertility. After the wedding, the bride is showered with rice and confetti. In the novel, Rachel cooks rice with almost every recipe, whether it is sol kadhi, chicken kesari, tandya chi bhakhri (rice chapattis) or saat padar (pancakes). Jewish women believe that serving food to the hungry is a significant duty (*mitzvah*). In the novel, we see Rachel feeding Brownie, the cat, the goat and the birds before eating herself.

Conclusion

This analysis unfolds the complex cultural code of food practices in the novel *Book of Rachel*, through the interpretation of meanings with the help of Stuart Hall’s circuit of culture. Food and the food practices propel layers of meaning which are interrelated and need to be

decoded, such as negotiating identity, culinary memory through nostalgia, foodways shaped by religion and community, language symbolism and the author's desire to transmit her own personal experiences and research as a member of the Bene Israel community by producing the novel itself. This text acts as a medium to understand the Bene Israel culture, and the account of food-related rituals, memories, and incidents creates an active site where meaning is produced, circulated, and contested.

This study makes food transcend its role as a mere plot anchor and situates it as an identity maker, memory trigger, communicator, ritual, and carrier of law. Food practices serve as a cultural crossroads where meanings intersect and complement each other. The various stages of meaning-making overlap, suggesting a strong correlation. The construction and negotiation of identity reveal a hybrid culture and signify more than what is written with the symbolic power of food. Chitrita Banerjee observes that "Bene Israel have learned to relish the ingredients of the land—coconut milk, garam masala, turmeric, ginger, and cumin" (284). They have integrated their roots into the local culture. They have invented cuisines which are a unique and healthy blend of Marathi, Hindu and Muslim. Rachel uses the local ingredients while remembering and practising her own traditional foodways and thus celebrating an Indian version of the Bene Israel Jewish food, resulting in the formation and sublimation of cultural meanings from the text.

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