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Food to the Rescue: Mediating Diasporic Intergenerational Conflict in Select Indian English Fiction

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Abstract:

Treading across borders, members of the Indian diaspora negotiate their cultural practices and lifestyle to survive in new environments without losing the sense of their cultural legacy. Rooted deeply in their own culture, they have gradually adapted to global contexts to develop as world citizens. Their literature reflects this duality—while being quite global in its themes, it remains Indian at its core. The present research attempts to examine the tussle over convictions between two generations within diasporic families through a study of select Indian English fiction. While the first-generation settlers often seek to closely guard their culture, jostled with hybridity and create a "third space" for themselves, the second-generation immigrants, responding to pressures of social belonging, experience tension between their inherited culture and those of the host country, leading to serious acculturation dissonance. By focusing on texts such as Preethi Nair's *100 Shades of White*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, and Amit Majmudar's *Abundance*, this research investigates how everyday cultural practices, especially food, act as an affective site wherein such dissonances are negotiated and resolved, effectively leading to the reestablishment of intergenerational bonds within Indian diasporic families. It calibrates the significance of culture for diasporic Indians and observes the conditions that lead second-generation diasporic individuals to gradually re-engage and eventually show acceptance and pride in imbibing their age-old wisdom and cultural legacy. With reinforcement from sociological insights of Rubén Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, and the cultural theory of Stuart Hall, this study explores food narratives as transnational cultural texts that mediate to reduce inter-generational frictions amongst the Indian diaspora, of which one protects and the other initially rejects it, only to come a full circle of acceptance, belonging and cultural continuity.

Keywords: World Literature, Intergenerational Identity, Diaspora, Food Narratives.

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While attempting to fully comprehend the criteria that elevates a work of art as "World Literature," one can rely on David Damrosch who, in *What is World Literature?* aptly explains,

> I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language… In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base…a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture. (4)

By this definition, Indian English literature by diaspora writers qualifies as world literature as it carries narratives of Indians beyond their "home base" (Damrosch 4). These writers operate from a space that is non-native to them and so, while they locate themselves away from home, their deeply relatable literature encompasses the human experience of encountering world cultures and lifestyles and the complex interactions and intersections of the same.

Migration—whether forced or voluntary— results in the translocation of cultural practices, lifestyles, beliefs, and mythologies. Initially, the immigrants resist assimilation into the host culture, believing it to be a sign of disloyalty towards their own, yet, gradually eroding distinctions over the years, through persistent interaction, the process yields "hybridity" and creation of a "third space" as theorized by Homi Bhabha (54-55), although not without disruptions, discords, and dislocations. After much dissent, the resolution shapes in the form of an amalgamation of cultures. This study examines the obstacles navigated and negotiations undertaken by Indian immigrant "generational cohorts"—designated as 1.0, 1.25, 1.5, 1.75, 2.0, and 2.5 as per Rumbaut (1185)—to achieve cultural equilibrium. It probes intergenerational tensions within Indian families abroad, tracing their culmination into a hybrid coexistence, with food as a pivotal mediator. As culture's most visceral emblem,

Akin to the universal reception of culinary traditions, literature transcends linguistic barriers by articulating fundamental human affects and existential concerns. In recent times, the Indian diaspora has secured a significant position within the global literary canon, contributing narratives that navigate a distinct transnational identity. This identity, shared across diverse diasporic communities, underscores a common experience of displacement and relocation. A possible dissonance emerges regarding cultural praxis and lifestyle while successive generations establish themselves within non-native environments. These thematic preoccupations are observed across various national literatures, exploring the friction inherent in the acculturation process. Furthermore, intergenerational conflict leads to a critical revaluation of cultural identity, allowing individuals to synthesize the complexities of their ancestral heritage with the norms of the host society. Native cultural value become the primary site of contention where, driven by technological advancement and shifting global perspectives, these conflicts get intensified within the diasporic household. This research posits that while culture serves as the core of these disputes, it also functions as the essential framework for the resolution of such dissonance through food.

Food as a part of culture intertwines with memory and complicates the position of people at large and the diasporic Indians in particular. They grapple with memory of the homeland which is equated with the tangibility of native cuisine and preservation of their national identities whilst negotiating with heavy handed assimilation. Their identities are ever evolving and as Stuart Hall explains in his work, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” that identity is a dynamic and ever evolving, ongoing process, influenced not just by culture, history, and social contact but also by food that is the core of all negotiation between cultural interactions. He further clarifies, “[c]ultural identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past,” and that “[c]ultural identity... is a matter of “becoming” as well as being [and, therefore,] [i]t belongs

to the future as much to the past" (Hall, "Cultural Identities" 225).

Just as cuisine transcends national boundaries, literature achieves global resonance regardless of its linguistic origins by articulating the profound joys and anguishes of the human condition. Indian diasporic narratives have thus secured prominence on the world literary stage. This transnational identity—shared with diasporas worldwide—fosters commonalities in lived experience. As successive generations exhibit transnational movement, dissonances over cultural practices and lifestyles inevitably emerge becoming relevant and recurrent themes across global literatures.

Such intergenerational conflicts prompt cultural revaluation, enabling fuller appreciation of heritage alongside host cultures. Fueled by scientific and technological advances, evolving lifestyles, and global exposure, these tensions equip later generations enhanced privileges and opportunities. Resulting frictions over life choices and aspirations intensify in diasporic contexts, with cultural values at their core. This research asserts that richness in native culture draws the diaspora to itself notwithstanding the pressures of acculturation, the process is gradual and is mediated ably through food.

Food, as cultural consuetude, interlaces with memory, complicating diasporic Indians' negotiations between homeland nostalgia—embodied in native cuisine—and assimilation pressures. Identities constantly reimagine themselves, remaining fluid, as Stuart Hall explains that cultural identity constitutes "a matter of "becoming' as well as 'being' " ("Cultural Identity" 225), an ongoing process shaped by history, sociality, and cuisine at the nexus of cultural exchange. In Hall's words, a diaspora identity is akin to liv[ing] with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. ("Cultural Identities" 235; emphasis in the original). With these words, Hall challenges the old beliefs which regard identity as a fixed notion and his theory gains prominence when

cultures from different corners of the world interact. They do not cancel or threaten each other, in Hall's opinion they respond and alter with repeated engagement. In his other famous work, he remarks,“ [i]dentities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular, multiply constructed, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions” (Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?” 4). This idea of identity is approached by other theorists and sociologists to observe the attitudes of the generations of immigrants and their connection with their native food and cultural praxis, underlining the intergenerational clashes over the same.

Ruben Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes in their work, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (1990 edition) discuss at length, the clashes that arise between the generations of immigrants – parents versus their children with regards to the acculturation process. They note how children acculturated faster than the parents going to extended social interactions in schools and public spaces. According to Rumbaut and Portes, children adopt the new culture of the land partly for ready acceptance and partly for its novelty that results in a breakdown in communication, conflicts and alienation within the family” (41).Intergenerational conflict arises as parents try and avoid the new culture while the children accept it and this is seen as a “rupture in the family solidarity” (42) and parents lament the distancing of their offsprings from their native culture. The dual demands of ethnic heritage and mainstream society forges the second generation’s identity which becomes very complex.

There seems to be a rejection of native culture at the onset but gradually there is a shift that tries to imbibe the best of both cultures for a positive mental and personality balance that can reduce the disruptive risk of acculturation dissonance. “Successful adaptation demands a balance and integration of old and new cultures rather than a wholesale rejection or uncritical acceptance of either” (Rumbaut and Portes,*Legacies* 111). Optimistically, Rumbaut and Portes assure that, “What the second generation tries to forget, the third

generation tries to remember" (Rumbaut and Portes, *Legacies*110). Hence, while cultural identities adapt and evolve, food plays the significant role of the anchor for the same. Even while it begins to negotiate at the periphery, more so for its survival, its core remains the same — warm and native.

Gregory L. Pettys and Pallassana R. Balgopalan made a study which was published in 1998 in *Families in Society* and it resulted in an in-depth study of the mindset of each of the generations of the migrants focussing on the differences in their opinions and ideologies towards life. Their study reveals that there has always been a nagging tension in diaspora adaptation. The process has never been smooth. The first-generation immigrants believe in duty to their traditions, continuity of cultural practices, collectivism, and traditional arranged marriages that were a norm in Indian society. Second generation youth have a completely contrasting belief set, growing up in western culture their inclination is towards western values individualism and independence in making life or career choices. Unlike their parents, they do not welcome suggestions and advice from their elders and despite their coloured identities try to completely adhere to Western ideas in the hope of easy assimilation into the Western society.

With the advent of media, the influence of the host country rises manifold. Concepts of personal space and privacy arise which is shocking to Asian parents. Deeply exploring ideological and social disjunction that come in the way of diaspora adaptation Pettys' and Balgopal observe this friction as sprouting from "generational differences in subscribing to Indian values," (425) the disagreements and differences creating emotional estrangement, aversion to native tradition and an attempt, despite prominent disparity in colour, to be accepted into the predominant white Western fold. This research therefore explores the role of food in softening the edges of such conflicts. It explores the healing and repairing effect of food in bringing about intergenerational truce so that a hybrid identity is paved for. The inter

generational disagreements lead to a hybrid identity but the all-encompassing presence of food, representing culture, renders the complex and crucial process notably manageable.

Ping Chen and Kathleen Mullan Harris deduce from their national study , " The Acculturation Gap of Parent–Child Relationships in Immigrant Families" that in diaspora families such friction between generations revolves around the adherence of the second generation to the host culture which stirs familial instability and poor incohesion in relationships. Chen and Harris circumstantiate , " Second-generation adolescents will have greater dissonance in their acculturation and less consonance in their parent–child relationships than first-generation adolescents" (1750). The dangers of stringent enforcement of ethnic culture has been aptly addressed by Min Zhou and Roberto G. Gonzales in "Reflecting on the Theory of Segmented Assimilation" that friction over cultural praxis gets intensified if parents practise unbridled enforcement of culture, creating thus a "diasporic ethnicity" that the second generation feels is performative or restrictive. Zhou and Gonsalves bring in a third aspect - "transnationalism" explained as, " whereby parents' transnational activities and concerted efforts to expose and immerse their children in their ethnic cultures, nurture and sustain diasporic ethnicity as social capital, yet can also produce significant intergenerational friction" urging a need for diplomacy and restraint on the part of the older generations to allow space and consent of the younger generations of diaspora (2159) .

The resolution of these conflicts is catalysed with food as Anita Mannur discusses in *Culinary Fiction: Food in South Asian Culture* (2010) how food is centre stage as an expression of culture in shaping identities. Food can be used either to resist or to affirm identities. It can also show solidarity to one's native country. According to Mannur, food transcends mere sustenance to represent "diasporic cultural imagination"(2). Food, being the most representative and regularly visited dimension of culture, seems to lend an anchoring support to these dynamic negotiations of identity. In order to preserve one's cultural identity,

several literary works give proof of such resistance to the food culture of the host country versus the vehement protection of the culture brought along from India. For instance, this is reflected prominently in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, stories from *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, Preethi Nair's 100 Shades of White, Amit Majumdar's *Abundance*, and many more.

Hailing from a space of extreme insecurity on account of culture owing to the

oppressive rules of colonizers throughout India's history, the adherence and performance of cultural practices which are carefully handed from generation to generation is sacred. Not just their unparalleled hospitality, even their generous community meals like *bhogs* in temples and *langars* at the Gurudwaras exhibit a common shared cultural tradition most valued by them, exuding a kind of solidarity and power even in a foreign country.

The constant trials to reconstruct the food that can elicit the same taste as it would do on the streets of Kolkata, India, hits hard in the opening lines of *The Namesake* by Lahiri where all Ashima can achieve is a "humble approximation"(1) of her native place's favourite street snack. The realisation that American Rice Krispies and genetically modified groundnuts cannot bring on the organic taste of "home": "Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing" (Lahiri 1). Years later, Ashima cooks elaborately as opposed to the cold meals and instant readymade food available in America. She sets the table meal after meal with Bengali delicacies in the hope that her children will be lured towards their native cuisine which Ashima and Ashoke make it a point to relish. Both Ahima and Ashoke pose as embodiments of first-generation immigrants who deeply nurture every symbol of Indianness.

Nalini from Preethi Nair's *100 Shades of White*, when uprooted from her hearth and haven to London neither learns to speak in English nor eats the food as she believes that her chances of returning home will be negligible if she seeks comfort in the culture of the place

viz. food and language. Like Ashima, she also adorns the table with South Indian dishes that her children refuse to touch. Met with the threat of dissolution, the display of Indian culture seems to take on even more power than usual. Rumbaut's acculturation dissonance comes into play the moment a horrified Nalini comes to know that her children are shamed because they display Indian cultural traits like eating with their hands: "All the other children looked at me when I ate with my hands. Miss Davies then taught me how to use the knife and fork"

(22). This is contrary to the Indian belief of eating your food with your fingers which represent the five elements of nature, "[f]ingers connected you to food in a way no other instrument could" as Ammamma would tell Maya, yet it is the first thing that the Nalini's children adopt from the western culture (239).

As soon as the young children are exposed to burgers and fishfingers, they begin to refuse Indian food, making Nalini desperate to bring them back to their origin, and so, she

"secretly garnish[es] these with spices so that [the children] … never forget where they [are] from" (82). Nalini even gives them English omelette with coriander as she believes that it will keep them connected to their roots. Redirecting thoughts towards Zhou and Gonsalves who fear that parents who try to " immerse their children in ethnic cultures" through transnational ties sometimes experience that it just back fires into creating " diasporic ethnicities" which the second generation disapproves of as performative and restrictive. For instance, Nalini's children, Maya and Satchin, feel no qualms at throwing away food from their lunch boxes if they even slightly suspect their mother of packing Indian food. Later, the trials make Maya bitter and she tries to break all ties from her family and culture. This remonstration towards Indian culture is resolved only when Maya visits India alone and experiences the solace that belonging brings and after having accepted and found her roots, she has a complete change of heart that she expresses in the following words:

> I spent days on end sitting in the kitchen area [...] I watched spices being ground with stone, leaves being soaked and dried in the sun, fruit being preserved into pickles, dishes prepared from scratch with love and attention […] I wanted to savour everything that India had given me ; a sense of peace and stability like I had never felt before. (252)

A sense of belonging comes from acceptance and feeling a sense of pride in practising one's culture. This is like a moment of epiphany for Maya and is provided to her by food being cooked, served, and consumed. She is able to understand the significance of what her

Ammama had urged her to do as a child, her words come back to Maya: "Mol, promise me… You won't forget the language, the smells, colours, the people, will you, Mol? Don't ever forget where you're from" (Nair 16). The spices help to resolve the crisis of identity, and a middle ground of hybrid cultural acceptance is reached in Maya's case.

In *The Namesake,* Gogol's fourteenth birthday is celebrated with pizza and friends on a convenient weekend but closest to the actual day, Ashima adorns her table with rich Bengali dishes. "She makes sure to prepare his favourite things: lamb curry with lots of potatoes, luchis, thick channa dal with swollen brown raisins, pineapple chutney, sondeshes moulded out of saffron-tinted ricotta cheese (Lahiri 72). The use of ricotta cheese to prepare the Bengali sweet, sondesh is markedly Homi Bhabha's hybridisation, although Indian culture reigns supreme in the hearts of the first generation of immigrants. This clearly indicates that American culture may be followed superficially for social obligations, but when it comes to meaningful celebrations, they must be celebrated in the most Indian manner.

Anita Mannur, in her research, regards food as an anchor for memory. Food is the mainstay for culture and traditional practices especially in non-native spaces. In deep empathy with first generation migrants, she has coined the term "culinary citizenship"(12) which does not only include replicating the flavours of your home country but also interprets

as readily accepting and adopting the approximations innovated in the host country. This concept lends better mileage to the adaptability quotient for all migrants. The children, Gogol and Sonia, being second generation immigrants are comfortable in the environment they have grown up in and cannot understand why their parents need just the tiniest excuse to have a get together of Indians at their homes. They fail to understand the inherent urge to meet and chat casually in their native tongues, for women to drape brightly coloured sarees, listen to old Hindi movie songs and the need to set up a table full of Indian delights and the comfort and reassurance that provides a group of educated ,well placed, homesick Indians, away from home but united in their longings- orchestrated through culture. Gogol and Sonia are completely under the influence of the host culture and are quite indifferent to their native cultural practices.It is sorrow that binds them back together and shared meals that

The fear that these cultural activities may die out owing to the disinterest of the younger generation to preserve it in exchange for the convenient culture of the urban people of the west, writers of Indian English have also taken upon themselves the intricate task of recording ceremonies, festivities and all the rituals that are connected with them. Jhumpa Lahiri adds much more intensity and solemnity to the bereavement of the Gangulis when Ashoke suddenly passes away, alone, in a hospital in another city. Gogol and Sonia snuggle close to their mother in grief and shock, which is only natural, but they also find solace in observing Indian rituals of bereavement, the prayers, the acceptance of condolences from friends and the simple meals they partake in each others' warm silence. All their young life they deny their Indian roots and refuse to accept their native culture, but this event becomes a turning point in their outlook towards life and their Indian culture.

It provides them solace and peace and the united strength to face the loss of the anchor of their lives, Ashoke. Even Maxine's intervention in taking Gogol away with her so that he can be relaxed and distracted, is rebuffed by Gogol because he curtly tells Maxine that

he wishes to be with his family and grieve his father's death. Gogol emulates his father in the manner in which Ashoke had once mourned for his own father, accepting and practising his native culture from what he had observed as a young boy. For ten days following his father's death, he and his mother and Sonia eat a mourner's diet, forgoing meat and fish because "this meatless meal is the only thing that seems to make sense" (Lahiri 180). Indian rituals during the periods of mourning bring stability to a dishevelled mind. In the thirteen days of mourning after a death, the condolences help the mourners to accept the permanent absence of the loved one, the support of the immediate family helps to emotionally rebuild one another. These processes heal internal wounds so that during the days of bereavement, the dear ones can restructure their lives for the future.

The sincere attempt at safeguarding culture can be seen in the poignant analogy of preserving the "culture" of dahi by the narrator in Amit Majumdar's *Abundance*. The narrator, a grandmother now, recalls how she had smuggled a sample of Indian curds in her baggage hidden from the probing eyes of the American custom officers. She explains in terms of dahi, how she loves the "continuity" and that each generation of freshly set dahi tastes different from the previous one and also in part decides what the next generation would taste like. The metaphor and comparison is apt both literally and figuratively where dahi stands for Indian culture then it is true as it were, that its expression, memory, and practice slightly alters even fuses with the new cultures- creating in Bhabha's words, a "hybridity," but the quintessential "culture" of *dahi* which is the core of setting more curds, remains the same.

This dahi the narrator sets and shares with her other diaspora friends traces its origins to India, just like the people who navigate their way for years in foreign lands but don't lose a hold over their native culture. In *Abundance* the conflict is between the mother and daughter over cooking Indian food. The disappointed parents realise that immigrant lifestyle has cost them their children, Mala and Roshan. Mala, born and raised in America, cannot understand

why “elaborate” Indian food needs to be a part of her daily chores. She finds cooking subservient and through her youth rebels against her mother’s Indian ways. Food comes to

the rescue of the mother and daughter relationship when Mala, a doctor herself realises that her mother is terminally ill. Mala tries to make up for years of bickering by assisting and engaging in all the activities that would give her mother joy. Mala thus learns and begins to enjoy the process of Indian cooking as with every recipe she feels closer to her mother. The misunderstandings that surface are eliminated, old wounds heal and differences of opinions find calm negotiations. In *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, food both complicates as well as resolves the severe conflict that is occurring at Geeta’s home. The dispute is about Geeta’s Mexican love interest. Like her parents, she does not want an arranged marriage and her upbringing in American culture cannot see any fault in marrying a Mexican. An erstwhile loving household about to shatter with anger and displeasure had to be held together by Geeta’s grandfather. He requested the Mistress to give him some potion that could make his health condition so critical that the family would have no choice but to rebond and bury their hatchet. Later, as Geeta and her father come to thank the Mistress for bringing them together, she makes a remedy for the ailing grandfather with fennel.

Food, therefore, refreshes relationships in subtle ways and negotiates conflicts with taste and comfort. Whether it is the disagreements between Ashima-Ashoke and Gogol, or the long standing misunderstandings between Nalini and Maya, from aversion to love for Indian cooking in the case of Mala or the exercising of choice for a life partner for Geeta, the generations of Indian immigrants in a diaspora family have clashed yet sought resolutions through food to engage in the peaceful amalgamation of cultures and beliefs. Acculturation dissonance between the two generations takes a laborious amount of time yet at the most crucial moments is salvaged through food and other cultural praxis.

Navigating through the intergenerational conflicts owing to acculturation

dissonance as explained by Rumbaut and Portes,and recently by Chen and Harris and a fiercely independent manner of making personal decisions as mentioned by the study of Pettys and Balgopalan, this essay has attempted to demonstrate how food heals the cracks that appear between familial bonds. With Mannur's culinary citizenship and Bhabha's hybridization, it becomes fascinating to note that identities across generations of diaspora are in the constant process of "becoming" according to Hall, not despite but in collaboration with host cultures creating a transnational definition of the citizens of the world in today's parlance.

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