

## **(En)gendering diaspora: Negotiating food, culture and women in select Indian diasporic novels**

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### **Abstract:**

*This article revisits two well-known novels in Indian diasporic writing, Anita and Me (1996) by Meera Syal and The Namesake (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri, to examine the cultural agents behind the formation and sustenance of the Indian diaspora. The article first establishes the multivalence of food to understand Indian literature and culture and then contextualizes the novel into the tradition of Indian diasporic food writing. By focusing on the culinary discourses in the novel, the article argues that Indian women employ their culinary strategies and ingenuities to produce a cultural version of Indianness, central to the construction of the Indian diaspora. The article draws the theoretical framework from Anita Mannur's postcolonial concept of "kitchen Indians" to unravel the structural working of gender roles that operate at the foundation of the Indian diaspora.*

### **Introduction**

One of the most fundamental elements of human existence and civilizations is food. Food's elementality is not only based on its nourishing value but also on its symbolic value. For literary authors, this is especially befitting as "food has long served as a cultural marker of complex and oft-conflicting desires, affiliations, and identities" (Coghlan, 2020, p. 1). Hence, poets, novelists and other literary authors from all around the world have employed the semiotic and representational value of food to portray social, cultural, and sometimes imagined contexts and

realities since time immemorial. From Homer's *Odyssey* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, all testify to the engagement of literary authors with the edible world. Sensing its literary valence, literary critics and theorists in the past few decades have also started to engage with the multifarious aspects of food in literature, which has given birth to the field of literary food studies. Literary food studies as a field of enquiry "re-evaluates, rethinks and rediscovers the importance of food and eating in understanding the ways we live and communicate" (Piatti-Farnell and Lee Brien, 2018, p. 1). It tries to understand food as a potent semiotic device to encode meanings and contexts. Roland Barthes underlines this semiotic value of food when he writes, "For what is food? It is not only a collection of products ... It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (2013, p. 29). Thus, food as a communicative medium contains several meanings and discourses, making it a fertile area for literary food studies critics and researchers to investigate. Sarah Sceats also emphasizes this discursive aspect of food in the following words, "Food is not bound within any single discourse, but becomes impregnated with meanings from the many and various frameworks within which it figures" (2004, p. 126). Hence, the discourses around cooking, eating, and the relationship of food to the self and communities become a critical site to explore cultural contexts and critical meanings present in national and transnational literary and cultural productions.

Food and diasporic cultures interlace with each other in complex and entangled ways. Food informs and gets informed by diasporic communities through different means and routes. On the one hand, food can become a window to know about the embodied experiences of immigrants in the diasporic communities; on the other, it can provide an epistemological site to know the very nature and formation of diasporic cultures. Hence, the authors who write from a diasporic viewpoint rely on food to engage with the diaspora as a socio-cultural and political phenomenon. Speaking on the valence of food for diasporic authors, Asma Sayed writes, "Many diasporic authors invoke cuisine and eating places in more nuanced ways, using them to demonstrate cultural differences and fractures, and also as productive spaces" (2020, p. 277) to explore diasporic realities. The reliance on food to register the renderings of diasporic sensibilities and emotions becomes more understandable for the Indian diasporic authors as "South Asian civilization has invested perhaps more than any other in imbuing food with moral and cosmological meanings" (Appadurai, 1981, p. 496).

The present paper analyses two forerunner Indian diasporic novels, *Anita and Me* (1996) by Meera Syal and *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri, to unveil the gendered configuration of the Indian diaspora by looking at women's culinary practices. The article first attempts to locate the significance of food in Indian diasporic literature. The article explores the idea of "kitchen Indians" to provide a new dimension to the understanding of the Indian diaspora from the perspective of gender. It argues that the culinary practices of diasporic Indian women are not simply menial chores but ways of constructing and sustaining the diaspora.

### **Food and Indian diasporic literature**

From the perspective of Indian immigrants, the preparation and consumption of food have far-reaching importance in their subject formation. Therefore, when they cross their national boundaries and enter unfamiliar territories, the acts of cooking and eating homeland food become one of their most meaningful and frequent exercises. In this context, Asma Sayed observes, "Food not only sustains ties to the home left behind but also helps to create a new home space in adopted lands, triggering memories of places, people and cultures" (2020, p. 277). As such, food has always been a central route for the diasporic Indians to remember and recreate their lost home. So, Indian diasporic literature is replete with food imagery, culinary metaphors and gastronomic references in the literary renderings of the Indian diasporic experiences. Many novels and memoirs carry gastronomic references even in their title. This food-title concurrence can be found in a number of works which include *Nisha Minhas's Chapatti or Chips* (1997), Bharati Kirchner's *Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries* (2003), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices* (1998), Shobha Narayan's *Monsoon Dairy: A Memoir with Recipes* (2003), and many more. The propensity towards gastronomic titles also spills into the other cultural representations of Indian diasporic life, e.g. films such as Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991), Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), Harmage Singh Kalirai's *Chicken Tikka Masala* (2005) and Amit Gupta's *Jadoo: Kings of Curry* (2013). Overviewing this over-usage of culinary signifiers by Indian diasporic authors, Graham Huggan notes, "India ... is more available than ever for consumption; and more prevalent than ever are the gastronomic images through which the nation is to be consumed" (2001, p. 82). However, the interesting fact about this consumptive aspect is that it does not involve any physical level of ingestion but engages in other visceral forms, which Anita Mannur calls "hyperreal eating" (2013, p. 84). So, one actually eats without really engaging in real eating. Reading from this perspective, the attempts of the authors to consciously, even

sometimes unnecessarily associate their works with the Indian culinary repertoire may speak to their positions in the highly contentious literary marketplace “eager to consume marginal cultural products” (Katarak, 1997, p. 195). But though for some authors, viability in the literary marketplace can be one of the reasons for their employment of culinary metaphors and narratives, for others, food can be a window to depict the imagined worlds of diasporic Indians enmeshed with a whole set of realities.

Food as a postcolonial symbol often carries ambivalence in itself. Culinary images and metaphors in Indian diasporic literature bear this ambivalence that cautions both readers and scholars to approach food in diasporic literature with sensibility, due to “alimentary images being so context-sensitive” (Wong, 1993, p. 19). The elusiveness of culinary images in Indian diasporic writing also raises potential limitations and challenges for authors in employing food to capture diasporic experiences. On the one hand, these narratives run the risk of being misinterpreted, while on the other, they tend to become too palatable or even orientalist. These issues are raised by literary critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee, Sheetal Majithia and Anita Mannur in their study of Indian diasporic narratives. Meenakshi Mukherjee analyses Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* to trenchantly critique the text for carrying an orientalist tone in its employment of culinary symbols and images (2000, pp. 200-201). Similarly, Sheetal Majithia echoes the former to note that the diasporic narratives like *The Mistress of Spices* “fetishize the experience of immigration, so as to perpetuate easy translation and dubious interpretation, processes that uncannily resemble Orientalist and imperial projects of literary and critical representation” (2001, p. 52). While affirming her predecessors, Anita Mannur goes a step further to unearth another underlying logic behind the employment of culinary images and metaphors in Indian diasporic narratives. She notes that:

This form of sugarcoating might be understood as a writerly strategy: an attempt to render palatable narratives about the exigencies of race, class and capital. As such, a praxis of reading whereby we don’t necessarily fetishize only endings and beginnings emerges as a strategy to work within an ethics of social justice while creating a palatable exterior. (2013, p. 111)

Her analysis not only underlines the ideological investment in food as a metaphor by diasporic authors to explore the nuanced realities of the Indian diaspora but also emphasizes the exigency of critical and contextual awareness required by readers to approach the slipperiness of food as a symbol while reading Indian diasporic literature.

Food is never neutral but always political and ideological. Similarly, the Indian diasporic literature rooted in “food narratives” (Littlejohn, 2008, p. 1) can also be deeply discursive and work as an epistemological gateway to the different socio-cultural aspects of Indian diasporic lives. Novels like Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, Anita Desai’s *Feasting Fasting*, Amulya Malladi’s *Serving with Curry*, and Amit Majumder’s *The Abundance* take the multivalent aspects of food to explore the crucial themes concerning the Indian diaspora; the conception of homeland, family connections, acculturating strategies, inter-generational chasm, formation of communities, socio-economic survival and hybridizing tendencies of the new generation. So, food creates a space for the authors to represent the embodied experiences of the diaspora, which are central to the imagination and configuration of the Indian diaspora. Along with that, these novels essentially chart the various ways in which everyday Indianness is inscribed within the language of consumption and culinary practices. But these novels represent a gendered logic to the production and consumption of the Indian diaspora that women in the diaspora should be responsible for the faithful reproduction of Indianness. Women, as the custodians of Indian tradition, should preserve the distinctiveness of the national culture through their culinary practices and customs. Similarly, women’s kitchens become a space to produce an authentic version of Indianness where diasporic women are made to play the role of bona fide brokers of Indian culture through their culinary acts.

Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*, published in the year 1996, encapsulates the diasporic experiences of Indian immigrants living in the fictional mining village of Tollington in 1960s Britain. The novel opens new doors to the Indian diaspora by weaving a narrative that intersperses women, food and diasporic culture. Taking the multivalence of food into textual significance, the novel employs the narrative voice of Meena, the nine-year-old daughter of Indian immigrants Mr. Shyam Kumar and Mrs. Daljit Kumar, to depict how the British Indian diaspora is built and sustained through the continuous efforts of women. Further, the novel encapsulates the embodied experiences of diasporic Indian women by narrativizing their culinary efforts in everyday diasporic life through characters like Daljit, Auntie Shaila, and other female immigrants of the diaspora. The second novel under study is *The Namesake*, written by Jhumpa Lahiri and published in the year 2003. The novel focuses on the lives of Ashima and Ashoke, Indian immigrants living in America, and their children, Gogol and Sonia. By taking food as a key textual modality, the novel establishes the interconnection between gender, culture and national identity through the representation of multiple instances of Ashima’s culinary fare. The narrative portrays Ashima’s intimate connection with Indian food

in her attempt to build a “home” in a foreign country both at the personal and the communal level.

### **Anatomy of “kitchen Indians”**

Anita Mannur propounded the concept of “kitchen Indians” in her book *Culinary Fictions* (2010) to refer to the women of the Indian diaspora who are often tied to the notion that the reproduction of national culture takes place in the culinary sphere. The term reveals the gendered performativity of food to produce Indian identity and culture in the diaspora. Mannur comments, “Gender roles continue to be implicated in the scripts of women’s nationalisms and ‘cultural identities,’ particularly as they take root in the culinary realm” (2013, p. 44). So, the task of producing and preserving national and cultural identities is unproblematically assigned to women. As wives, mothers and aunts, Indian women are expected to produce the cultural essence of Indianness through the food they cook and feed with. The term also suggests the everyday situatedness of Indian women in the domestic space to undertake the reproduction of Indianness. Anita Mannur notes, “The domestic arena, so frequently associated to femininity, also becomes a space to reproduce culture and national identity” (2013, p. 30).

Elaborating on the role of Indian women in the diaspora, Anita Mannur opines, “It is the task of the female Indian immigrant subject in diaspora...to be vigilant about the faithful reproduction of Indianness” (2013, p. 35). Indian women are handed over the responsibility to produce an authentic version of Indianness through their kitchen rituals. So, the kitchen space becomes a space where Indian cultural values are both produced and upheld. This is clearly evident when Meena, the daughter of Daljit, describes one of her daily kitchen routines in the following words:

My mother would right now be standing in a haze of spicy steam, crowded by huge bubbling saucepans where onions and tomatoes simmered and spat, molehills of chopped vegetables and fresh herbs jostling for space with bitter, bright heaps of turmeric, masala, cumin and coarse black pepper whilst a softly breathing mound of dough would be waiting in a china bowl, ready to be divided and flattened into a round, grainy chapatti. And she, sweaty and absorbed, would move from one chaotic work surface to another, preparing the fresh, homemade meal that my father expected. (Syal, 2004, p. 61)

Then, the daily labour-intensive kitchen rituals by Daljit are the ways of living up to the expectation of Indian cultural values, which dictate that “the performative roles associated with

the production of food are strictly reserved for women” (Maji, 2019, p. 1). The everyday kitchen rituals of diasporic women like Daljit also suggest how gender roles work seamlessly and relentlessly in diasporic kitchens. Hence, in *The Namesake*, when Ashoke takes the place of Ashima in the domestic kitchen during her second pregnancy, it comes as an incongruity to their son, Gogol. Lahiri poignantly captures Gogol’s bewilderment in the following words, “It is odd to see his father presiding in the kitchen, standing in his mother’s place at the stove” (2019, p. 54). Gogol’s naive bewilderment emanates from the deep-rooted notion that culinary activities are exclusively reserved for women and his father’s presence in the kitchen seems incommensurate with the existing gender roles of the Indian diaspora. Indrani Karmakar emphasizes this aspect of Indian diasporic cultural values in her study by stating, “The connection of food (and kitchen) with ‘conventional’ gender roles... underscores the centrality of food for female diasporic subjects” (2019, p. 48).

In *Anita and Me*, Daljit is represented as a prototype of an Indian woman who could keep the cultural distinctiveness of Indian culture intact by resorting to ingenious culinary ways. In the first chapter of the novel, Meena describes the demographics of their garden as “a boring rectangle of lumpy grass bordered with various herbs that mama grew to garnish our Indian meals” (Syal, 2004, p. 15-16). She feels embarrassed that her mother, Daljit, grows herbs like *thunia* (coriander) and *pudina* (mint) that are used in Indian cooking. But for Daljit, cultivating and preparing “Indian” food with her culinary ingenuities are attempts at the “poetics of gastronomy” (Maji, 2019, p. 2) to produce her quintessential diasporic identity of an Indian. Similar culinary ingenuity can be found in Ashima who improvises on the ingredients available to her to make *Jhalmuri*<sup>1</sup> in America. For Ashima, making *Jhalmuri* out of incongruous ingredients to satiate her craving in a foreign land is as much a yearning for Indian comfort food as an attempt at creating and sustaining her Bengalianness/Indianness in America. Hence, the author describes her earnest efforts of preparing it in the following way:

Ashima Ganguly stands in the kitchen of a Central Square Apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix. Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India. (Lahiri, 2019, p. 1)

Ashima’s craving and ensuing efforts to make the dish during her pregnancy can be mistaken as an exclusive nostalgic act, but it is much more than that. It becomes a cultural negotiation in

a foreign land to reassure her Bengali subjectivity and, at the same, an attempt at building and maintaining sensory and gustatory Bengali culture in America. Hence, throughout the novel, Ashima cooks up Indian cuisines routinely, as is expected of her as a diasporic Indian woman. Arezou Zalipour and Ann Hardy note, “The assignment of the responsibility for the everyday maintenance of culture in diasporic situations to women is common” (2016, p. 778).

In both novels, the central characters, Daljit and Ashima, frequently inform the younger generation female immigrants about the rudiments of Indian cuisine. Their insistence on teaching Indian cooking speaks of three important aspects of women and the Indian diaspora. Firstly, it alludes to the idiosyncratic nature of the Indian marriage system in which culinary skills are the main prerequisites to getting married. Hence, Daljit says to Meena while persuading her to learn Indian cuisine, “You are going to have to learn to cook if you want to get married, aren’t you?” (Syal, 2004, p. 62). The resonance of the interrelation between marriage and women’s kitchen skills can also be found in Lahiri’s *The Namesake* when Ashima’s mother tells her prospective in-laws that Ashima is “fond of cooking and can knit extremely well” (2019, p. 7). Her “mother’s salesmanship” (Lahiri, 2019, p. 9) alludes to the critical aspect of Indian marriage, where a woman’s culinary knowledge and expertise hold a significant value in staking a claim to be a suitable wife. Moreover, in the case of diasporic women, these values are more desirable as “It is women...who reproduce nations – biologically, culturally, symbolically” (Yuval-Davis, 1993, p. 622). Secondly, it speaks of the liability of diasporic Indian women to entail Indian culinary knowledge to younger generation female members as they are the future task-bearers of preserving and perpetuating the national culture. Hence, it is unsurprising that “the wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that is sold in Chinatown, that it’s possible to make halwa from Creams of Wheat” (Lahiri, 2019, p. 38). Emphasizing this aspect of women’s cultural agency, Nira Yuval-Davis writes, “Women are often the ones who are given the social role of intergenerational transmitters of cultural traditions” (1993, p. 628). Thirdly, women are constructed as the perennial reservoirs of national culture in consolidating the distinctiveness of Indian cultural values as “nationalist discourse frequently casts the woman as a broker of cultural traditions” (Mannur, 2013, p. 35).

Another important aspect of the culinary performances carried out by diasporic Indian women is to assert Indian cultural identity viz-a-viz hostland cultural identity. So when Meena invites Anita Rutter, her British neighbour and friend, to her house for dinner, Daljit prepares two menus: one Indian and one British. She makes sure that all the Indian food is lined up before Anita even though she is utterly baffled and chooses fish fingers and chips over Indian



food. The culinary assertion can be interpreted from Meena's observation of her mother's keenness to "educate the sad English palate" (Syal, 2004, p. 253) of Anita. A similar culinary assertion can be noticed in Ashima's preparation of an array of Indian dishes when Gogol brings his girlfriend Maxine to Ashima's home, whom both she and Ashoke do not approve of much. This "gastronationalism" (DeSoucey, 2010, p. 433) played out by Daljit and Ashima through their culinary activities is an act to evoke national attachment and reinforce their national cultural identity as part of the Indian diasporic project.

### **Indian diaspora: A "kitchen Indian" project**

Though women's culinary practices provide the Indian immigrants a space to foster and even assert their cultural identity, it is also through and for culinary preferences that racism is meted out to Indian immigrants. In the novel, after an altercation with Anita, when Meena starts getting demeaning notes, the content of one note is very intriguing. In the note, the sender tried to racialize Meena by trying to write chapatti, scribbling three spellings of it, "SHUPAT...CHUPAT...CHARPUT...and then the final defeated version, SHITTY ARSE" (Syal, 2004, p. 305). Here, a culinary idiom is adopted to racialize Indian immigrants. The novel captures multiple instances of such misrecognition and racialization perpetrated against Indian immigrants through an everyday signifier like food. So, the immigrants feel a sense of unwelcomeness and develop a feeling of distrust towards the indigenous population. In order to deal with this state, the diasporic Indians crave to form a community where women and their food strategies play a very crucial role. The frequent assembly of Daljit, Shyam, Aunty Shaila, Uncle Amman, and other aunts and uncles, referred to as *mehfils* in the novel, elucidate this very aspect of women's culinary traditions in the Indian diaspora. As described in the novel, *mehfils* (gatherings) are occasional family gatherings of Indian immigrants where Indian culture is reproduced through Indian food and other cultural manifestations. In the *mehfils*, the Indian immigrants create a "diasporic intimacy" (Mannur, 2013, p. 48) through the communal meals of Indian food forged out by female immigrants of the community. So, the *mehfils* reinforce the gendered liabilities of "kitchen Indians" as the culinary incumbencies on these occasions are exclusively shouldered by women like Daljit, Aunty Shaila and other aunties. Describing one of the *mehfils*, Meena notes:

My Aunties had formed an assembly line with Mama at the head, who warmed up a chapatti on the griddle before passing it down the line on a plate onto which each Auntie plonked a serving of meat, rice, vegetables, and yoghurt, straight into the waiting hands of the men. (Syal, 2004, p. 116)

The *mehfils* signal the way in which women are constructed as the producers and preservers of Indian culture who can actuate and upkeep the Indian diaspora through the gendered performances of their culinary rituals and kitchen chores.

The gendered culinary activities creating diasporic intimacy among Indian immigrants in these social gatherings allude to the formation of a home away from home as part of the diasporic project. Home in diasporic formation is a “mythic place of desire” as well as “a lived experience of locality” (Brah, 1996, p. 92). In order to build the diasporic project of “home,” cultural acts and religious rituals play a significant role for the Indian immigrants. Roger Ballard, in his volume *Desh Pardesh*, formulates that South Asian immigrants “find substantial inspiration in the resources of their own particular cultural, religious, linguistic inheritance” in order to “rebuild” lives “on their own terms” (1994, p. 5). In the formational process of the diasporic home, Indian women remain instrumental agents as food takes the central stage in Indian cultural customs and religious rituals. The role of food mediated by women in the exercise of building a home is evident in all the cultural, religious and ritual gatherings that take place in Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. The elaborate ritual paraphernalia of culinary items arranged by Ashima in Gogol’s *annaprasan*<sup>2</sup> is described thus:

The fragrance of cumin seeds, sent in the package [from the grandmother] lingers in the weave. ... The food is arranged in ten separate bowls. Ashima regrets that the plate on which the rice is heaped is melamine, not silver or brass or at the very least stainless-steel. The final bowl contains payesh, a warm rice pudding Ashima will prepare for him to eat on each of his birthdays as a child, as an adult even, alongside a slice of bakery cake. (Lahiri, 2019, p. 39)

Lahiri’s comprehensive description of Gogol’s *annaprasan* intersperses the ritual importance of food and the role of women in creating *desh pardesh*, a home away from home in the host country. It is also important to note here that the culinary rituals emphasize the role of food in the diasporic community formation. Hence, in Gogol’s rice ceremony, Ashima and Ashoke ask Dilip Nandi, a fellow Bengali immigrant, to “play the part of Ashima’s brother, to hold the child and feed him rice” (Lahiri, 2019, p. 38-39) as the custom suggests. Similarly, when Ashoke dies and Hindu death rituals necessitate a commemorating feast for blood relatives on the eleventh day of the demise, Ashima and her family “prepare an elaborate meal, fish and meat” and “invite their [Bengali] friends to mark the end of the mourning period” (Lahiri, 2019, p. 181). Observing these food rituals as part of the Hindu Bengali culture alongside the other members of the diasporic community emphasize Ashima’s attempt at recreating a home at both

personal and communal level. In her bid to create a home for her family and the community through the ritual economy of food, she both metaphorically and literally mothers the Indian diaspora (Karmakar, 2019, p. 55).

In compliance with their roles as the preservers of the diaspora, Indian women bear the responsibility to draw cultural boundaries between Indian immigrants and native neighbours. Shyamasri Maji writes, “Most women from India... play the lead role in keeping intact the cultural borderlines between the communities and races within the diasporic domains of the hostland” (2019, p. 7). In constructing and maintaining these boundaries, Indian women constantly evoke culinary preferences and differences to demarcate between “us” and “them”. To establish this cultural chasm, Daljit and other aunties disapprovingly point out English culinary practices; “the way they wash up, they never rinse the soap off the dishes... I will never understand this about the English, all this puffing up about being civilised with their cucumber sandwiches” (Syal, 2004, p. 33, 58-59) and Daljit’s reprimand of Meena’s food misadventure of having a lard sandwich at one of the neighbour’s houses. In Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, Ashima starts her diasporic journey with the same sense of cultural rigidity that can be made out from her intransigence to adopt American foodways, as the author notes, “Ashima would not have touched the chicken, even if permitted; Americans eat their chicken in its skin” (Lahiri, 2019, p. 5). The culinary demarcation can also be seen in her intractability to cook brown rice instead of white rice, which her neighbour Judy lends. However, with the passage of the novel and her life, she acculturates herself with new culinary ways, if not for herself, then for her children, Gogol and Sonia. This can be noticed in her acquiescence to prepare “sandwiches with bologna or roast beef” or her concession to make “American dinner once a week as a treat” (Lahiri, 2019, p. 65) for Gogol and Sonia. Ashima’s culinary tractability reflects the changing nature of the Indian diaspora which is continuously mutating with the new generation of Indian immigrants. Hence, though Indian women serve as the guardians of the geo-cultural lines of the Indian diaspora drawn through their culinary proclivities, these lines are always porous and amorphous.

## **Conclusion**

The paper suggests that gendered culinary discourses are deeply imbricated within the textual fabric of Indian diasporic literature. It sets the stage for an extensive discussion about the intricate layering of food, women and the Indian diaspora. By bringing food as an axis of analysis into the novel, it becomes clear that the formations of the Indian diaspora have a gendered aspect. The concept of “kitchen Indians” helps understand how women’s culinary

practices are elementary in reproducing Indian culture and identities in the diaspora. Making references to female Indian immigrants' culinary traditions, the article demonstrates that the Indian diaspora is largely dependent on women to build and sustain itself. In doing so, the article further provides a discursive grounds to understand the structural workings of gender norms inherent in the Indian diaspora. Finally, in explicating the process of formation of the Indian diaspora, the article leaves with the proposition that diasporas are adaptive forms of socio-cultural organization that are constantly evolving.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jhalmuri is a commonly found street food in Kolkata, a city in the state of West Bengal, India. It is a savoured snack of Bengalis in India and abroad.

<sup>2</sup> Annaprasan is a ritual ceremony typically observed by Hindu Bengalis to initiate the six-month-old baby into the consumption of solid food. It is also called rice ceremony because the baby will be fed rice for the very first time since birth.

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