

FOOD AS A CULTURAL SYMBOL IN M G VASSANJI'S *UHURU STREET AND WHEN SHE WAS QUEEN*

*Dr. Zeenat Khan, Sr Assistant Professor, Mehr Chand Mahajan DAV College for Women
Sector 36A, Chandigarh*

Abstract:

*The whiff of masalas in Biryani, a tinge of cardamom in Chai, the crispy potatoes in Samosas and many more exotic mouth-watering flavours appetize the readers to their full in M G Vassanji's writings. Each character emotes millions of feelings and tells stories through the metaphor of food in Vassanji's writings. Traditional Indian foods work as comforting recipes which offer a solace to the hunger for roots and lends voice to the pent-up longing for 'something' which is amiss in the lives of characters in Vassanji's fiction. The conspicuous engagement in Vassanji's work has been the search for hidden, erased and unaccounted histories and roots, where food acts as one of the important fueling agencies in this arduous journey. **Food** is a symbol of assurance to the immigrants that they still are near to their roots and have been successful in preservation of their culture in the alien land. It becomes a strong symbol of cultural faith, solidarity and loyalty to one's culture. Complex emotions that surround the metaphor of food are multilayered in Vassanji's stories and thus call for a deeper and closer reading which leads toward the larger questions. What role does food play in the writings? How does food lend voice? Does it satiate the hunger for home in immigrants? How food plays the role of an important cultural symbol in an alien land? These are some important questions that my paper will explore with respect to his short story collections *Uhuru Street* (1992) and *When She Was Queen* (2005).*

Key Words: Culture, Metaphors, Food, Nostalgia, Roots.

Introduction

"If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food ... Like the post-structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable"

- Terry Eagleton

Food is not just what we eat but also who we are. In our foods lies our collective past and our inherited legacies which are passed on from one generation to the other through the ages. Food is a strong cultural symbol. When immigrants migrate to a foreign land, they carry along with them the cultural artefacts in their memories. The rites, rituals, myths, legends, languages, dialects, clothes and food are the main cultural symbols that serve as adhesive forces for the communities living abroad, far away from their home-lands. Diasporic fiction especially Indian diasporic fiction has a conspicuous element of cultural representation and food symbolism forms an important part of it. India diaspora literature offers a rich site for studying food dynamics in literary cultural / food studies. On the vast canvas of Indian diaspora literature where food is interspersed in the stories and myths, rites and rituals ubiquitously, M G Vassanji's fiction is remarkably replete with rich cultural symbolism. An Indo-Afro-Canadian writer Moyez Ghulam Vassanji himself dons a hyphenated identity. His works are also equally varied and carry variegated ethos of the lands he has had connection with as a 'home'. This paper will examine how his characters engage with food and its flavours as medium to conserve and preserve their identity.

Food or "culinary narratives are frequently employed to portray migrant identities and societies in Asian diaspora literature" (Yiu 3), and in Vassanji's fiction, food forms an important cultural metaphor that adheres the community together. It connects past, present and the future, and most importantly comforts and protects the diasporas in the alien lands. Food acts as a binder between generations, where recipes and tastes are passed on to the next generations. In this paper flavours of food as cultural symbol in diasporic culture in Vassanji's short story collection *Uhuru Street* and *When She Was Queen* will be closely observed. It is quite remarkable to note how the complex issues of identity, resistance, and preservation of culture are expressed through the metaphor of food extensively and effortlessly in Vassanji's works. The study of Vassanji's work from culinary perspective is nevertheless uncommon and there is the need to study "food imagery in literature" as it "is gaining recognition and momentum as a way of understanding characters, actions, and cultures represented in literature" (Whitt 2).

Metaphor of Food as a Cultural Symbol

M G Vassanji has portrayed the life of Asian immigrants (Dukawallas, the shopkeepers) in Dar es Salaam in his stories which transport the reader to the hustle and bustle of *Uhuru Street* where Vassanji himself grew up and spent his childhood days. Thus, *Uhuru Street* is based on East African experience of Asian immigrants, whereas *When She Was Queen* maps the world, the stories in this volume depict the flight of Asian immigrants from Africa to the Western countries like Canada and America. The stories are mostly about Indian immigrants belonging to Dukawalla (shopkeeper community) in Dar. The stories in both the volumes are knit together by a common theme of life-style, struggles and hopes of an immigrant community in their adopted lands. These communities adhere to their root culture in the adopted lands and food plays an important role in keeping the feelings of kinship warm and comforting for them in an alien land. *Uhuru Street* opens with the scenes where, "the last strains of Akashwani on the airwaves from India mingle with the smell of hot ghee, fried onions, and saffron that wafts down from people's homes." (Vassanji *Uhuru Street* 13), such a description pictures the microcosmic India of 80s instantly in the reader's mind. Here we notice that the word food symbolises much more than mere a physical nourishment. One can feel how the gustatory-olfactory experiences of food warm the cold and alien air. It is a metaphor that has to be read in between the lines. Food means Identity, Roots, Comfort, History and so much more for diaspora communities. In literature, food has always been there on the platter of the characters in fiction. Especially in diasporic fiction, food has been much more conspicuous, However only lately culinary narratives are given due attention and space in critical analysis. The awareness towards symbolic multi-layered meanings that food conveys has added to the knowledge about our diasporic communities. There is an upsurge in studies to explore "the potential and versatility of the culinary as a discursive space where cultural, psychological, ethnic, racial, or emotional aspects can be subtly encoded" (Pazo 12).

Vassanji's short stories in *Uhuru Street* and *When She Was Queen*, as examined, are replete with food symbolism. We can get a feel of strong Indianness when a lady in the story, "fetched a plate from inside and ... squatted and counted out five samosas and spooned out the chutney." (Vassanji *Uhuru Street* 18), it immediately brings a similitude to the street foods markets in India. In Vassanji's fiction the evocative and emotional power of food as a cultural cushion is omnipresent. The smell and the taste of samosas and chutney build a sensory experience with the native roots. Food thus becomes a site of refuge from an alien/ foreign culture. The "sweet and fragrant yellow rice and curry ... on the plate" (Vassanji *Uhuru Street* 119) bring out a special ethnic, comforting and homely relationship that Indians have with rice and curry. It is not just a literary representation in a particular short story but it conveys cultural and social identity that binds together the immigrant community and enables it to endure the foreignness. Thus, we may note that food "often constitutes amore or less conscioustool for benign and voluntary self-definition and/or affiliation with a certain community" (Pazo 11). It transcends from the boundaries of physical satiation and move to the emotional satiation and bonding.

The "wrapped chappatis" (Vassanji *Uhuru Street* 112), or "a cup of tea from the thermos that stood by Mother's feet, or having been treated to bhajias from Khatibai's Saidi." (Vassanji *Uhuru Street* 56), all these are metaphors where the love and care that food provides play a very significant role. Thus, food encompasses a vital role as it builds a connection between past and present. From homeland to host-land, from first generation to second generation, between society and an individual, the food metaphor is conspicuously extensive in Vassanji's stories where food "often functions as a symbol of and focalizer for certain cultural concerns, including individual and group/ethnic identity, highlighting issues of heritage and lineage and concerns with intergenerational and collective memory, imaginary homelands." (Forman np). It becomes a comforting cushion and a cultural shock absorber as "an Indian evening music, biryani, laapsi, kulfi for dessert, and a moviean oldie." (Vassanji *When She Was Queen* 201) seem to give a respite from the barrenness of an alien culture in an alien land. Food "locates us across "spacialized discourses," physically or geographically, in particular bodies, buildings, neighbourhoods, communities, regions, nations and the world as a whole; it also locates us in particular cultural spaces with important and sometimes problematic cultural boundaries." (Padolsky np). Despite of this, like other cultural artefacts the platter of food also cannot become and stay completely insulated to the cultural influences of the host land. This spilling over of cultural markers of home-land and host-lands is inevitable. In the given lines of *Uhuru Street*, the native foods of Dar es Salaam are as integrated in the food menu of the Indian immigrants as is *biryani* and *samosa*. The immigrant's platter becomes a symbol of a hybrid cultural melting pot as we read in the following lines,

The dough would be ready by her side, yellow and yeasty, which she would pour with a ladle into the small woks in front of her. Then she would prod the contents and turn them with a long skewer until they were raised like little tummies, brown and crisp, sizzling in the oil, almost filling the woks. Baby loves *vitumbua* and she could eat two at a time. I would watch as Zarina brought them out one by one, and Amin would get the first lot to take away and sell. (Vassanji *Uhuru Street* 21)

Whether it is African dish *Vitumbua* or Indian saffron(ed) fragrant yellow rice or "onion omelettes, cornflakes, and black tea and milk in English style" (Vassanji *Uhuru Street* 228), Vassanji's deft prose brings the flavour of food in a perfect blend of cultures. Reading of Vassanji's stories give a wholesome picture of a cultural blend which is imbibed in the sensuous aroma of "rich spicy dishes the chicken tikka, the lamb biryani, the coconut and coriander fish, and the naans and parathas; tourist handbooks raved about its tantalizing aromas and rich tastes." (Vassanji *When She Was Queen* 9). This taste and fragrance is etched in the psyche of an immigrant across the dimensions of space and time. The "food as subject, as form, as land- scape, as polemic, as political movement, as aesthetic statement, and as key ingredient in literature" (Shahani 2) can be read in Vassanji's fiction writings on several levels. Vassanji's food symbolism is not only limited to the diasporic nostalgia but it is a truly transnational and transcultural phenomena where food as a metaphor is a true representation of a cultural melting pot. Whether it is *biryani* pot with a fragrant whiff of saffron in the Eid celebrations or *langar* in Darbar Sahab as depicted in the following lines:

This morning I went to the Darbar Sahab to help with the langar. It had rained earlier and the mist was lifting, and the golden temple shone so brilliantly, it had to make you happy. At the gates two men were polishing the silver doors which you told me your grandfather had worked on. The food was bhindi and baingan, and the halwa had almonds in it. It seems as if we are deter" (Vassanji *When She Was Queen* 255).

It is an open space, yet, the attachment to one's own culture, rituals, foods is very evident in the foreign culture, also it inculcates a fear of losing one's roots. The strong clinging to even a cup of *Chai* becomes a symbol of preserving one's roots. "Now here too, in Toronto, murmurs had arisen against the morning cup. In this new environment where so many of the old ways had died, would this teathis special chaisurvive?"

(Vassanji *When She Was Queen* 231), the question on *Chai* is not about just a food item but it carries a gamut of emotions that an immigrant preserves in minute daily events of his or her life-style in an alien land. The other cultures are adopted and adapted but own roots/ food/ culture hold a special place as we read in the ensuing lines,

When the gong sounded, they walked to the dining hall together. George joined them at the tables. Lunch was maize meal and red beans, another reason to go and eat something decent in the town, come weekend. But she had in her room enough supplies of chevdo and gathiya, Indian savouries, to placate taste buds clamouring for spices" (Vassanji *When She Was Queen* 282).

Food remains a complex metaphoric symbol, where flavours of adopted culture may change but the basic ingredients one's own culture remain the same as read in Vassanji's *Uhuru Street* and *When She Was Queen*.

Conclusion:

Thus, it may be asserted firmly that the recent momentum in literary food studies signals towards a positive trend as there is a need to engage with these critical studies around Diaspora literature with a more focussed approach. The rich body of Indian diaspora fiction calls for a more rigorous and exhaustive focus on literary food studies. Writers like M G Vassanji have mapped the journey of first, second and even third generation Indian diasporas across the length and breadth of their works. M G Vassanji himself has a hyphenated identity and in his fiction, food remains an omnipresent source of cultural cohesion among the Indian diaspora communities. For Vassanji, "food becomes yet another way of engaging the complex issues of individual belonging, group relations, gender, class, race and ethnicity" (Padolsky np). Each of the stories in *Uhuru Street* and *When She Was Queen* are part of the whole diasporic experience, in these stories food forms an important cultural metaphor of identity and home.

Works Cited

1. Forman, Ross G. "Food and Literature: Identity, Memory and Diaspora, Module: English and Comparative Studies", 2021. <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/special/foodandliteratureidentitymemoryanddiaspora/>
2. Padolsky, Enoch. "You are where you eat: ethnicity, food and cross-cultural spaces." *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2005, p. 19+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A140708000/AONE?u=anon~7f61a544&sid=googleScholar&xid=e144e9e9
3. Pazo, Torreiro Paula. "Diasporic Tastescapes: Intersections of Food and Identity in Asian American Literature", 2014. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/61910855.pdf>
4. Shahani, Gitanjali G. "Introduction: Writing on Food and Literature". *Food and Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 2018.
5. Terry Eagleton, "Edible Ecriture," *Times Higher Education*, October 24, 1997, www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/edible-ecriture/104281.article.
6. Vassanji, M G. *Uhuru Street*. Emblem Editions: McClelland & Stewart Ltd, 1992. (All Excerpts from e-Apple Book).
7. Vassanji, M G. *When She Was Queen*. Anchor Canada, 2005 (All Excerpts from e-Apple Book).
8. Whitt, Jennifer Burcham. "An Appetite for Metaphor: Food Imagery and Cultural Identity in Indian Fiction", May 2011. https://thescholarship.ecu.edu/bitstream/handle/10342/3535/Whitt_ecu_0600M_10386.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
9. Yiu, Man Ting. "Are We What We Eat?: Negotiating Identities Through Cuisine and Consumption: A Thing Theory Approach to Alison Wong's *As The Earth Turns Silver*", 2018. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1221778/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.