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The Language of Memory, Identity, and Power in Food Anthropology across Indian Landscapes

Subhashree A.¹, Susmitha S.², and Dr. S. Sumy³

¹B.A. English Literature, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women (PSGRKCW), Coimbatore,
Tamil Nadu, India

²B.A. English Literature, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women (PSGRKCW), Coimbatore,
Tamil Nadu, India

³Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature, PSGR Krishnammal College for
Women (PSGRKCW), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India
Email: 24sben014@psgrkcw.ac.in

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Abstract

This study explores food as a cultural narrative through the lens of Food Anthropology, examining how food practices and culinary experiences shape identity, memory, belonging and power in Indian culture. The study draws on Khalid Jawed's *The Paradise of Food* and Amitav Ghosh's *Ghost-Eye* to examine the cultural meanings embedded in food and its representation in literature. The study establishes a theoretical framework for understanding food as a social, cultural and symbolic practice. It examines foodways, sensory experiences, rituals and shared meals as carriers of personal and collective memory. It further analyses culinary labour, domestic practices, dietary restrictions and kitchen spaces to understand gender roles, hierarchy and resistance. Finally, the study considers the impact of globalisation and changing lifestyles on traditional food practices, cultural memory and identity, highlighting food as a medium through which culture and power are continually negotiated.

Keywords: Food Anthropology, Cultural Memory, Foodways, Sensory Experience, Cultural Identity.

Food extends beyond nourishment and serves as an important expression of cultural knowledge, memory and identity. How food is prepared, consumed and shared reflects the beliefs, customs, values and social relationships of individuals and communities. Culinary traditions are often passed down across generations through recipes, ingredients, spices, rituals, cooking methods and shared meals. Sensory experiences associated with food, particularly smell and taste, can further evoke memories of people, places and cultural experiences, connecting individual recollections alongside collective memory. Thus, food can function as a cultural medium through which knowledge and traditions are preserved and communicated.

This study examines the representation of food practices in selected literary works, with particular attention to their relationship to cultural memory and identity. It explores how changes in traditional food practices affect the continuity of cultural memory across generations and considers whether these changes lead to the loss, adaptation, or preservation of inherited cultural knowledge. The study also examines the significance of smell and taste in recalling and transmitting personal and collective memories. In addition, it investigates how food represents cultural identity amid social and cultural change, particularly through culinary traditions, ingredients, rituals and practices that connect people to community and heritage.

The study further considers food as a site where gender roles and power relations are expressed. It explores how gender expectations shape cooking spaces, culinary responsibilities and the distribution of food-related labour within the selected novels. It considers traditional assumptions about domestic and culinary work in relation to the representation of power and social roles. The study therefore examines how food practices preserve cultural memory while also reflecting changes in identity, social relationships, and gendered practices. Through examining these interconnected dimensions, the study intends to show the significance of food as a cultural practice through which literature represents memory, identity, tradition and social experience.

This research paper draws on two works of contemporary Indian fiction, each selected for the way it employs food to explore cultural memory, identity, and human relationships.

The Paradise of Food by Khalid Jawed, first published in Urdu as *Ne'mat Khana* (2014) and translated into English by Baran Farooqi for Juggernaut Books in 2022, is a first-person account of a Muslim joint family's gradual disintegration in North India over fifty years. The narrator, Hafeezuddin Babar, known in childhood as Guddu Miyan, recalls a household held together not by property or legal ties but by shared food practices, above all the Thursday fateha, a weekly ritual of cooking mutton curry and offering prayers for deceased ancestors. The kitchen, with its clay chulha and stone grinding slab, is the central space where cultural and religious identity is passed down across generations. As Hafeezuddin ages, the family dissolves: his sons, educated as engineers, dismiss the fateha as irrelevant, sell the ancestral home and plan to emigrate. The novel ends with a dreamlike scene in which the dying Hafeezuddin sees the dead seated in the old kitchen, eating sooji halwa and chapattis, unable to recognise one another. The food remains, but the memory and community that gave it meaning are gone – a quiet image of cultural loss that runs through the entire novel.

Ghost-Eye by Amitav Ghosh (2025) moves between Calcutta in 1969 and the present-day Sundarbans and Brooklyn. The novel opens when three-year-old Varsha Gupta, raised in a wealthy, strictly vegetarian Marwari family, suddenly refuses her food and asks for fish and rice, claiming she remembers a previous life lived beside a river with a woman named Jhorna. She speaks about catching and cooking different kinds of fish with a knowledge no child of her background could possess. Her family consults Dr Shoma Bose, a psychiatrist who studies children with memories of past lives, and the investigation that follows connects Varsha's cravings to the Sundarbans and its communities. Fifty years later, Shoma's nephew Dinu becomes involved in the search for Varsha, and the story expands into a larger inquiry about ecology, memory, and the environmental crisis threatening the Sundarbans. What begins as a child's unusual craving for food becomes a novel about what is remembered in the body and what is lost when a way of life disappears.

The study draws on Cultural Memory Theory, particularly Yuri Lotman's understanding of cultural memory as an active, generative mechanism, and Avishek Parui's extension of this framework to material culture in *Culture and the Literary: Matter, Metaphor, Memory*. Parui explains that material objects and events become semantic and semiotic codes through which memory is collectively produced and reproduced. Food exemplifies this process because dishes, spices, rituals and preparation methods preserve cultural knowledge while connecting the past with the present. In Khalid Jawed's

The Paradise of Food, this relationship is evident in the kitchen, which is described as a “constructed text” containing “thousands of hidden meanings” (37). The dishes prepared for religious ceremonies, festivals, and mourning rituals function as cultural signs that transmit belief, identity, and memory across generations. “The Thursday fateha, during which mutton curry is offered to ancestors, further demonstrates how food sustains spiritual and cultural continuity” (46–47). However, the narrator’s observation that modern kitchens have lost their connection with the ‘primordial kitchen’ reflects the decline of practices and meanings once sustained by the joint family system. The novel therefore presents the erosion of food practices as a corresponding erosion of cultural memory.

Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory further illuminates the relationship between inherited experience and present identity. Postmemory refers to memories of experiences not personally witnessed but transmitted through stories, objects, practices, places, and emotional associations. “Postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection” (Hirsch 33). In Amitav Ghosh’s *Ghost-Eye*, Varsha’s unexplained attachment to fish, language, family and place demonstrates this connection. Her insistence, “I want rice and fish,” despite having no remembered experience of eating fish in her present life, presents food as a carrier of identity and memory (4). Her recollection that “Our home is beside a river” further connects memory with family and landscape (5). Ghosh extends this relationship to ecological memory, as Varsha’s remembered world of fish, rivers, and the Sundarbans reflects a landscape threatened by environmental change. Although the novel complicates Hirsch’s model by presenting memories that cannot be explained solely through familial transmission, it demonstrates how food, place, and narrative preserve connections between past and present. Together, the texts represent food as a material and sensory medium through which cultural memory, identity, and belonging are preserved and transformed.

The analysis of the selected novels establishes food as a key cultural narrative through which everyday practices carry broader social and symbolic meaning. The study shows that foodways preserve not only recipes, ingredients, or preparation methods but also associations with family, community, place, belief and inherited experience. Consequently, changes in these practices affect both dietary habits and the cultural meanings attached to food, determining how such meanings are retained or transformed over time.

The findings further demonstrate that memory is closely linked to embodied experience. Taste and smell emerge as particularly powerful ways the past becomes available in the present. Sensory encounters with food can evoke people, places, relationships and experiences that could otherwise remain distant. The selected texts indicate that such memories can extend beyond individual experience to connect with familial and communal histories. Food therefore functions as a tangible point of contact between lived and remembered experience, enabling cultural associations to continue despite changes in their original contexts.

The study additionally highlights the social structures embedded within culinary practices. Representations of kitchens, domestic spaces and food-related responsibilities illustrate how expectations regarding gender and social roles shape culinary labour. These depictions make visible forms of labour that are often considered ordinary or overlooked, while also revealing the relationship between domestic practices and power. The selected novels show that food-related spaces can reinforce established expectations while also exposing tensions and changes within these roles.

The findings show that food functions simultaneously as material practice, sensory encounter, cultural expression and social practice. Its literary significance derives from its capacity to connect personal experience with wider cultural processes, integrating everyday life with questions of memory, identity and social relations. The selected works ultimately demonstrate that food provides a distinctive structure for understanding how cultural meanings are transmitted, recalled, transformed and imbued

with significance in evolving contexts. In this way, food emerges not simply as a subject in literature but as a means through which literature explores the relationship among experience, memory, culture and change.

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