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REPRESENTATION OF FOOD IN SIGNIFYING ONE'S RACE, ETHNICITY, GENDER, IDENTITY AND CULTURE OF NORTHEAST INDIA THROUGH THE SELECT NOVELS OF EASTERINE KIRE AND MAMANG DAI

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Abstract: This paper explores how food acts as a medium for personal experiences, social dynamics, cultural identity and societal issues. By analyzing selected novels of Easterine Kire and Mamang Dai, the study highlights the ways in which food transcends its literal meaning, playing a crucial role in character development and the evocation of a sense of place. This paper draws upon various frameworks including food as a symbol of community and belonging, contrast between tradition and modernity, spiritual significance and others to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex intersections between food and culture in the literature of Northeast India.

Index Terms - Food culture, Nostalgia, Identity, Ethnicity, Tradition, Source of Healing.

I. INTRODUCTION

Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, craving and identity.

---Jonathan Saran Foer

This study tries to understand one's race, tradition, culture, identity issues of Northeast India through the representation of food in Easterine Kire's **A Respectable Woman** and Mamang Dai's **Escaping The Land**. Engaging with food and its related dimensions, this paper deconstructs the numerous socio-cultural nuances attached to food culture in the tribal and non-tribal world. Food represents not only a community and society at large but also that of an individual's identity. As an important artifact in any culture, food becomes an invariable gateway to understand the unique food culture, food preparation, food related rituals, food seasons, ingredients, etc. of every household, community and class. Easterine Kire, one of the most prominent voices from Northeast India is a unique individual whose artworks highlight the struggles faced by native tribals, as well as their culture, values and customs giving the reader an intimate look at the many stages of Nagaland's evolution. She highlights the ethnic food habits and cultural significance of food in the Angami Nagas of Nagaland state in India in the select novel **A Respectable Woman**. Padma Shri awardee and acclaimed poet and novelist, Mamang Dai has written a plethora of works such as *River Poems* (2004), *Mountain Harvest* (2004), *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) and *Stupid Cupid* (2008). In her select novel, **Escaping The Land** she highlights the past attachment and memory of the native folks with the homeland. The primary necessity of every living thing is food. Food practices of Nagaland depicted as a marker of

Naga identity. Traditional dishes and ingredients such as fermented bamboo shoots or smoked meat connect characters to their heritage. Northeastern people are worshiper of nature. Their preparation and consumption of food deeply emphasizes the harmonious relationship with nature. Food also plays a very crucial role in creating bonds within families and communities. The collective spirit of Naga culture reflects through their feasts and gatherings where food becomes the central source of celebration. Food often acts as a medium of memories of the past, displacement and longing. It helps to link characters with their roots. Broader cultural transformation takes place in Naga society through change in dietary habits and the introduction of non-local foods. As a source of physical and emotional healing food represents traditional remedies and also nurture sacred role in various ceremonies. Dai and Kire use food not just as a sensory detail but as a profound metaphor for memory, identity and culture, enriching the narrative with layers of meaning.

Cultural Identity and Tradition

Food serves as a profound symbol presenting cultural identity, roles of women within their respective societies and tradition in both Kire's **A Respectable Woman** and Dai's **Escaping The Land**. Kire and Dai both highlighted the role of women in presenting and transmitting cultural identity through food preparation and rituals. Dai's narrative delves into the intricate relationship between the people of Arunachal Pradesh and their environment with food acting as a central motif whereas Kire highlighted cultural practices of Nagaland. Angami is one of the tribes of Nagaland. They are foodie and they mostly depend their livelihood on village produce. Northeast tribes have good knowledge about wild vegetables. Their ethnic food carry nutritional food values juxtaposes to culture and ethnicity of tribes. They are deprived from getting food supply because they live quite distant metaphorically from the main stream India and this made them set up their tradition, rootedness and individual identity. In born novels food becomes the medium for the preservation of cultural identify and tradition. Cultural affirmation and communal bond and the transmission of heritage reinforce by me preparation and sharing of traditional dishes. This culinary tradition highlights women's role in sustaining and nurturing cultural identity within their communities.

Connection to Land and Nature

Northeastern India is one of the richest floras in India where people depend on shifting cultivation system and forest-based food products for their sustainable survival. In kire's novel, food underscores the symbiotic relationship between people and their environment. The rhythms of the seasons and traditional ecological knowledge are tried by the gathering and preparing food. Individual's association with the land of Arunachal Pradesh is evocated in Dia's description of food. Hunting, fishing and gathering ingredients is the traditional way to survival and identity. The description of traditional meals, such as millet beer, smoked fish, and rice cakes symbolize a way of life closely tied to the land and its seasons. The characters' intimate relationship with their environment is reflected by ingredients preparation method and culinary traditions. The touch of modernization disrupts the traditional food – land relationship. In both the works of kire and Dai, food is a profound source of the characters' connection to their land.

Healing and Spiritual Significance

The representation of food as a source of healing process and spirituality is a significant theme in the works of Kire and Dai. In Kire's novel **A Respectable Woman** food highlights the therapeutic and restorative qualities. Herbal remedies and traditional recipes are depicted as vital for physical and emotional healing. Rural women of Northeast India have selected many wild plants and non-vegetarian foods through trial and error. Women have conserved many local crops, ethnic vegetables and indigenous fruits used in local diet for food and ensure nutritional security. This region is a treasure of indigenous knowledge system pertaining to agriculture, food, medicine and natural resources. Most of the time womenfolk collect these materials either from forest areas or kitchen gardens. Sharing food is the symbol of reconciliation, love and care. Food prepared with care and love always foster emotional recovery among characters. Consuming food from nature becomes a spiritual act of honoring the earth. The eternal connection of food with nature emphasizes the interdependence between humans and nature. Feasts and meals strengthen bonds and food becomes a medium for preserving indigenous traditions. Dai in her novel **Escaping the Land** portrays food as medium drawing on indigenous knowledge of herbs and plants. Food is also regarded as story telling

device. Elder generation loves to share their traditional recipes with younger generation through story telling but younger generation is no longer interested in learning about these foods system, thus threatening the traditional foods and eco-cultural of tribal societies. Food is not just consumed but shared, symbolizing care, compassion and restoration of broken relationships. In the works of Kire and Dai food embodies sense of healing, tradition and spirituality. Through their nuanced storytelling, food emerges as a metaphor of sustenance, community and a sacred connection to the land and its people. The profound wisdom in everyday acts of nourishment, spiritual essence of indigenous knowledge and practices are presented by food in the works of the writers.

Memory and Nostalgia

As a cultural marker and a medium to bridge the past with the present, food plays a significant role in evoking memory and nostalgia in the works of Dai and Kire. Both the authors from Northeastern region of India utilize food to explore themes of belonging, interconnectedness, identity and passage of time and the erosion of tradition. Food always helps to tie us with our homeland and family, makes us rooted. In Kire's novel **A Respectable Woman** the traditional Naga dishes like smoked meats, fermented bamboo shoot and sticky rice associated the protagonist and other characters with their childhood and communal way of life. These dishes reflect the rhythms of a harmonious society because communal feasts and family gatherings evoke sense of nostalgia. Traditional cooking methods and sharing meals represent interconnectedness of Naga people. On the other hand, the themes of displacement and the impact of modernity on the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh are highlighted by Dai in **Escaping The Land**. Urbanization, migration and modernity disrupted the traditional ways of life and also effected food habits. Both Kire and Dai's novels food transcends its role as sustenance and acts as a vessel of memory.

II. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the intricate relationship between food culture of Northeast India and literature with a particular focus on the novels of Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire. Throughout the analysis we have seen how food serves as a powerful lens through which to examine personal experience, identity, gender issues and human connection with lands and nature. These works are not only showcased the richness and diversity of Northeastern cuisine but also highlighted how food acts as symbol of both traditional and modern change. We can interpret and understand the multifaced roles of food in character development. It is evident that the representation of food in literature not only enriches our cultural understanding but also offers a profound insight into social tapestry of India itself.

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