



EXPLORING THE LINK BETWEEN MEMORY AND CULTURE THROUGH FOOD IN SHOBA NARAYAN'S MONSOON DIARY: A MEMOIR WITH RECIPES.

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Abstract

Food till date is the topmost common denominator between different societies. One can find food connection through the Holy Scriptures like the Bible, the Ramayana, the Vedas, and indeed in the erudite works of Shakespeare up to 21st Century literature. One can draw multitudinous parallels between the significance of both food and literature as vehicles of cultural and social development. In short, both literature and food are means to save as well as transfigure social and artistic traditions. Shoba Narayan's Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes interweaves personal remembrances with succulent Indian recipes and reflections about Indian and American culture, culinary traditions, and her own eccentric family. This paper aims to bring out the significance of memory and culture through food in Narayan's Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes.

Keywords: Food, Culture, Tradition, Memory.

" You have to taste a culture to understand it" – Deborah Cater.

Every culture is unique and has its own traditions and rituals, its own cookery, and distinct eating habits, and so does its food culture. Therefore, events involving food from cooking to serving help to define the social association and cultural identity of the communities that give rise to distinct erudite traditions. This, in turn, evokes an avalanche of memories and, feelings through food writings as food involves all the other senses besides taste and smell.

Shoba Narayan's Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes weaves a fascinating food narrative that combines tasteful Indian recipes with tales from her life, stories of her delightfully eccentric family, and musings about Indian culture. Narayan illuminates' Indian customs while opining on American culture from the edge point of the sympathetic stranger. Her characters, like Narayan herself, have a thing or two to say about cuisine and life. In this creative and intimate work, Narayan's considerable submissive vegetarian cooking talents are matched by stories as varied as Indian spices – at times pungent, mellow, pungent, and sweet. Tantalizing recipes for potato masala, dosa, and coconut chutney, among others, crop from Narayan's absorbing tales about food and the solemn and quirky customs that compass it. Much further than a cookbook, Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes is a memorial of how food is as much a vehicle of culture and identity, as language and history.

Food is always central, and recollections of food are extremely pictorial and reported in great detail. The given twenty- one recipes incorporated into the textbook throughout the book come with the added value of commentary. The information about the culture of India and its traditions interweaves with remembrances of an intimate nature so that at times Narayan's Memoir becomes a source of veritably thorough and detailed factual knowledge on the Indian caste system, colorful carnivals, local customs and, culinary specialties of different regions, and the meaning of multitudinous rituals and ceremonies.

For illustration, Choru- unnal, or rice- eating, marks the first solid food of a child when, in the presence of the extended family and priests' morsels of mashed rice are fed into the baby's mouth. The Thula Baram ritual is an offering to Deity to give thanks for a safe birth of a child, and the prasadam stands for food that's presented to God and also distributed among the people. This instructive quality of Narayan's Memoir may come especially precious in the perspective of popular interest in Indian food.

Memories of childhood that earn special attention because of food include descriptions of Saturday outings in Madras, railway station stalls with " gloriously racy"(64) lately made puris," binges of gluttony"(65) during family visits to Bombay, a dizzying array of chaats vended in leaf bowls by street vendors, school girls' rivalry about the contents of their lunch boxes where a pecking order" had little to do with each girl's bents, personality, or smarts, and everything to do with her mama 's culinary prowess"(44).

Among similar remembrances, a particularly pictorial event is a night train trip from Madras to Mumbai on which passengers partake their food, furnishing access to " this noble, multicuisine, home-cooked food that made the train peregrinations of my childhood memorable"(61). Among the fellow passengers, there's a woman from Rajasthan with hot rotis stuffed with potato saag, a business like Gujarati with a "divine kadi (sweet and sour buttermilk haze), a boisterous Punjabi family offering rajma, intellectual Bengalis from Calcutta with their luscious rosgollas and sweet sandesh.

Narayan writes:

"If my school lunch box with its measly two containers was a Manhattan townhouse, the Marwari matron's tiffin carrier was the Empire State building, with more than a dozen impressively stacked stainless steel containers. She opened each one at strategic points during our train journey together. At dawn, we had roti and potato saag. At ten o'clock, a snack of crisp kakda wafers speckled with pepper. For lunch, a bounty of parathas (flatbreads stuffed with mashed potatoes, spinach, radish, paneer, and other such goodies).

My mother had brought our lunch in a tiffin carrier too: petal-soft idlis wrapped in banana leaf and slathered with coconut chutney. She always made idlis for train travel because, among their other virtues, they keep well. The Marwari boys scooped them up with gusto when my mother offered them, and wolfed them down with gentle satisfied grunts" (62).

The memoir of Narayan points to a mixture of the rich and long tradition of Indian cooking, uniqueness of regional cuisines, and the connection between food and identity. It may act as an agent re-enacting cultural bonds with homelands, being a cultural bonding mechanism, and a mode of maintaining relation with the past. Acting as a source of the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors, it defines the boundaries of ethnic and national groups. A site of cultural memory and tradition, food is a powerful signifier that articulates numerous meanings.

Narayan took great pains to explain many phases of Indian culture with which a Western reader may not be familiar. In the words of Arjun Appadurai, cookbooks reveal "the sturdy pragmatic virtues" (3) of a manual. Moreover, as noted by Zafar, they "present opportunities for authors to script a self, tell an exotic tale, recall a history [...] or memorialize a vanished place" (32), all of which is illustrated by Narayan in her memoir.

To sum up, in Shoba Narayan's Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes, food acts as a lens to the world where the past intertwines with the present, where the difference between the private and the public gets blurred, where memories of an individual speak of the cultural processes of identity formation of a whole group, and where the boundaries and constraints of genres lose substance.

Works Cited

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