

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Of the Thesis

MEMORIES, RITUALS AND CULINARY HEALING IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S DIASPORIC FICTION

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the criteria for the award of
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Submitted by

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- This thesis explores Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's engagement with the culinary motif. Through the analysis of her selected fictional works, this study has attempted to examine the presence of culinary space in her writing, and how she strategically transforms it into a space of refuge and solace for her dislocated characters, especially her marginalized women characters.
- Using critical and analytical inputs from semiotic theories as propounded by Barthes and Saussure, this thesis has explored food and its associated rituals and memories, as depicted by Divakaruni.
- It has gained insight into the food and kitchen space as presented in the chosen texts and has highlighted the strategies employed by the author to make this space an enabling and empowering one for the distraught Indian-American characters.

The texts have also been analyzed from diasporic perspective to explore the manner in which the hyphenated identities based in the host country reconcile and cope up with challenging issues such as cultural clashes, dislocation and marginalization and the integral role that the culinary space plays in this.

- Focusing on the culinary narratives in the chosen texts, this study has attempted to understand how diverse factors including the spices, aroma, energy and intentions with which food is cooked helps alleviate the pain

of dislocation and brings about healing – at the physical and individual as well as the emotional and collective level. Contextual references have been taken from Paul Ricoeur's Narrative theory to understand how Divakaruni's diasporic protagonists eventually heal their trauma of displacement through the culinary narrative.

- The selected works have been analyzed through the archetypal lens to understand the manner in which the author strategically employs the food motif in her fiction. Northrop Frye, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell are a few theorists whose viewpoints have been discussed and their definitions and concepts related to archetypal journey, myths, individuation and collective unconscious have been briefly taken into consideration.
- Socio-historical context of diasporic women writers in general and Divakaruni's fiction in particular has been delved into to gain insight into their doubly marginalized state.
- Live telecasts, personal blogs, recordings, interviews and podcasts have been rigorously perused to gain the authorial orientation and its intricate connection to her fictional world.

Research Questions

- How does food work in Divakaruni's diasporic fiction - as language, code and marker of status and class ?
- How can culinary space be re-conceptualized and how is this space used in her works ?

- What strategies does the author use in the chosen texts to exploit the food narrative to depict the emotional and psychological landscape of her characters ?
- How does the food semiotic work as an active agent that not only evokes the archetype of homeland but also helps her fictionalized diasporic characters navigate through the traumatic phases of their migratory journey ?
- Through which linguistic strategies does Divakaruni explore the food motif and depict it as a space of cultural and traditional rooting, especially with respect to its therapeutic, healing aspect ?

Research Objectives

- To critically examine the culinary metaphor in select works of Divakaruni's diasporic fiction.
- To analyze Divakaruni's employment of linguistic and stylistic strategies to navigate the food motif in order to delve into the inner, psychological space of her women protagonists.
- To explore the connection between culinary and cultural identity, especially within the diasporic context, as depicted in Divakaruni's works.
- To understand the manner in which Divakaruni evokes culinary memories and rituals connected to the 'original home' culture to help

her displaced, uprooted characters heal and assimilate in the host culture of the adopted country.

Limitations

For the purpose of this thesis, only the selected novels of Divakaruni have been analyzed and her other novels as well as the other genres she experiments with, namely young adult's fiction and poetry have not been delved into. As the main area of focus of this niche study is the culinary, the other thematic aspects in her fiction, such as woman bonding, identity crisis, magic and mysticism have not been highlighted much. The scope of this research is therefore limited to the culinary presence in the chosen texts only and Divakaruni's literary prowess in her engagement with the food motif.

KEY FINDINGS

Food and kitchen space function at multiple levels in Divakaruni's diasporic fiction and assist her displaced heroines in alleviating the pain of dislocation, enabling them to learn to survive in alien surroundings.

Culinary space, along with its associative memories, emotions, and rituals helps the women protagonists find solace and strength in their homes away from home and in navigating the tumultuous journey for fulfilling their personal quest.

The culinary metaphor intervenes at strategic points to empower the uprooted women subvert the patriarchal authority that assigns them a marginal, restricted space to them by creatively using food and kitchen space and transforming it into a central, dominant one.

The select works are replete with culinary references which are used not only to carry forward the subplot but also to operate as markers of social status and class. Ranging from lower middle working class, traditional class, elitist modern society to diasporic Indian community – cuisines representing all of these are interspersed in the texts by the author and offer the readers the chance to sample and savour the varied flavors of different cross-sections of the society.

Divakaruni employs the food motif in her fiction to enable her diasporic characters to come to terms with their individual as well as collective identity, reactivate their cultural memory and resurrect their unexplored narratives.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analyses of the selected works, this study draws forth the conclusion that Divakaruni's incorporation of the culinary motif works towards empowering the alienated marginalised subjects.

It establishes the significance of the culinary space in Divakaruni's select fictional narratives and highlights the strategies she employs as she navigates migratory memories through the food semiotic.

The thesis demonstrates how food functions as an interstitial space in the select works, creating opportunities for meaningful dialogues, bonding and healing to take place in the lives of the diasporic characters.

It emphasizes how the culinary semiotic evokes the archetype of the utopian home away from home and continues to nourish and nurture the diasporic subjects. Through associations with memory, rituals, homeland and home, food builds an anchor for the un-homed and provides roots for the uprooted.

This thesis also highlights how Divakaruni's employment of the food motif is essentially an acknowledgement of the healer, cook and woman who holds the home / family together. In that sense her fiction can be seen as womanist for it celebrates the contributions of the homemaker-healer-woman both in the homeland and in the diasporic world.

This research examines the manner in which Divakaruni foregrounds the culinary space as an empowering agency that enables the fictional diasporic subjects to construct powerful personal, cultural and national narratives and thereby bring about healing – at the physical and individual level as well as

the emotional and collective level. From linguistic, stylistic strategies and narrative techniques employed by the author – all have been explored to understand how food in her fiction acts as a signifier, healer and home for the uprooted characters.

SUGGESTIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

As the scope of this study was confined to culinary realms of Divakaruni's selected Indian women immigrant fiction, there undoubtedly remains a vast treasure to be explored further in her diverse fictional works. From comparative studies with other diasporic women writers, studies analysing intercultural aspects embedded in her works to thematic research exploring her trademark stylistic strategies such as magic realism and mysticism, Divakaruni's writings are an open hunting ground for upcoming South Asian women writers and research scholars alike and they will remain relevant and significant to the study of New Writings in English in the years to come. Since not much study has been undertaken to highlight the culinary semiotic in Divakaruni's fiction, hopefully this thesis can awaken interest in the same and open uncharted paths to explore this aspect further in a more extensive and elaborate manner, so that the immense relevance of food and kitchen space in diasporic fiction can be reinforced and reemphasized.

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