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**The intertwining of Food and Identity: An Interesting Aspect of  
the Male Protagonists in Chitra Banerjee  
Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams***

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Sujatha Girish

Research Scholar (Ph.D), Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury, Professor & Director, School of Arts & Humanities  
REVA University, Bengaluru

**Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com**

**ABSTRACT**


Preparation and consumption of food is a reflection of the personality and the mindset of people. The gastronomic identity is influenced by the ethnic identity of a person. This paper attempts to explore the intertwining of 'Food and Identity' with respect to the male protagonists in the narrative *Queen of Dreams* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni which is an interesting aspect of the narrative. Divakaruni diligently delineates the culinary skill of Mr. Gupta and its significance on his identity in the diasporic context. The author also narrates Sonny's interest for cooking which is indicative of his multiple identities. The paper analyses the correlation of food and identity in the lives of Mr. Gupta and Sonny and its impact in the narrative. The paper highlights how the preparation of food, forms and reforms the identities of the male protagonists which also impart a transcultural identity to them. This paper debunks the stereotypical idea that preparation of food is a natural skill of female domain and brings to foreground the fact that culinary skills are neutral to gender identity.

**Key words:** identity, gastronomic, ethnic, diaspora, transcultural, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

**Introduction**

Food is an integral part of the lives of people. The preparation and consumption of food is closely associated with the personality of a person. The likes and dislikes of a person with respect to food, the dynamics of his food consumption forms the gastronomic identity of the person, which is influenced by his ethnic identity. Appadurai in his article, "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India: Comparative Studies in Society and History" asserts, "As historiographical research on food production, consumption and distribution, cuisines and gastronomy has enlightened, local, regional or national cuisines are symbolic representations of the Nation and of the identity of a people" (Appadurai, 1988). True to this statement, the cuisines preferred by people symbolize their ethnic identity.

It is evident from the study of evolution of human race, that the food habits of the humans is entirely based on their living style and the culture adopted by them at different points of time. Before the discovery of fire, the early man who lived in the caves ate raw food. With the discovery of fire, the humans learnt to cook the food using fire. As the years

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Received on 20/02/2019 Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved	

progressed, the human race evolved and so did the preparation and the consumption of food leading to a close association between the identity of people and the food they eat. R. D. Harrington in his article, 'Defining Gastronomic Identity, Journal of Culinary Science & Technology' asserts that historical, environmental and cultural (religious, ethnic) factors influence the food habits of people and states, "A regional or national culinary identity is determined by those factors and takes shape through the repetitive use of the same dominant ingredients and flavors and using the same preparing and presentation techniques." (Harrington, 2005). The geographical conditions and the cultural aspects form the base for the foodways of people. The movements and mobility of people also had an impact on their cuisine choices. The foodways hold a mirror to a person's life style and his culture and speaks volumes about his identity. Food is a reflection of the social milieu as well. Y. Chen in his article 'Food, Race, and Ethnicity' while discussing about the factors affecting the food habits states,

"As the History of humanity is above all a composition of histories of movements and mobility, the travels of cuisines, food products and technologies have entailed transformative processes impacting local cultures, consumer tastes, regional economies and political developments. Food can also be a powerful tool for the acculturation or assimilation of minorities" (Chen 428-443).

True to the aforesaid statement, the functionality of food is quite significant because, food certainly works as a means for the acculturation of multicultural communities which is predominantly evident in the enchanting diasporic narrative, *Queen of Dreams* (2004) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. *Queen of Dreams* is an amazing illustration of intertwining of the food and identity of the two male protagonists. Though the food related aspects are considered to be the domain of women, from times immemorial, it has been observed that men have equally excelled in the culinary arena. In the Indian mythology, preparation of food by male characters has been represented in a fascinating way. Emperor Nala was famous for his culinary expertise. Bheema, one of the Pandavas assumed the role of a chef during the exile of Pandavas. In the modern times, male chefs are quite popular across the globe. Their foodways are pre-determined by their geographical location and the culture of the particular place. Their preparation of food and the eating habits hold a mirror to their identity.

*Queen of Dreams* set in the diasporic backdrop tells the tales of Mr. Gupta and Sonny and their association with food influenced by their ethnic identity in the diasporic context. Mr. Gupta is a first generation immigrant who takes up his transcultural journey from Calcutta to California. His wife Mrs. Gupta who is a dream teller cooks only Indian food at home to keep alive their ethnic identity. Food signifies a bridge between the motherland and the imagined homeland in Mr. Gupta's household. Indian food plays a pivotal role in his immigrant family and represents their ethnic and diasporic identity. Homi. K. Bhabha discusses about the case of such immigrants and opines that in the case of immigrants in any society, their identity is threatened by the host country. He speaks about the concept of 'hybridity' in his book *The Location of Culture*. (1994) Hybridity refers to a state of 'in-betweenness' of an immigrant who stands between two cultures. The immigrant follows a pattern of location, dislocation and relocation. The process of acculturation is slow and one-sided and is accompanied by a sense of loss and exile. According to Bhabha, "This interstitial passage between fixed identifications open up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 4, 92). The foodways of Mr. Gupta's family mediate the process of acculturation with their 'hybrid identity'. Divakaruni diligently delineates the ways in which Mr. Gupta's knowledge of Indian food changes the equations between him and his daughter Rakhi, after the sudden demise of her mother. For Rakhi, a young divorcee fighting a battle for custody of her daughter, her 'Chai House', a small scale restaurant is the only source of income. Her failing business shakes her up and she decides to close down her store. Mr. Gupta, who had been a passive parent till his wife was alive comes to her rescue and offers his assistance to resuscitate her business. Though Rakhi and her friend Belle have been in

the food business for some time, it is the culinary touch of Mr. Gupta, a man which works wonders and helps them to rebuild their business. The narrative implies that the preparation food is not restricted to female domain; the culinary skills are neutral to gender identity.

Divakaruni narrates the element of doubt of Rakhi when she looks at the list of snacks Mr. Gupta proposes to prepare. “Can her father really transform himself into a chef extraordinaire and turn out these items from the mundaneness of flour and sugar syrup, chili, eggplants, peanut oil? Is he heroic enough to take on such a metamorphosis? (166)” But Rakhi is pleasantly surprised by his culinary expertise. Divakaruni reveals to the readers Mr. Gupta's culinary training in his childhood days back in Calcutta. As Mr. Gupta tells the tales of his encounter with the secret recipes at Keshto's tea shop, for Rakhi, her father assumes a new identity. He becomes the key to the magical Pandora's Box of India. Divakaruni describes Rakhi's excitement. “Here is the kind of story she had waited for her entire life. . . . And to think it was waiting all this time inside her father, the drinker, the singer, the skeptic who never believed in dreams”(168). Under Mr. Gupta's able guidance Rakhi's 'Chai House' rechristened as *Kurma House* picks up the business. Divakaruni insightfully describes the transformation in Mr. Gupta's identity in the diasporic set up due to his culinary skills. The novel becomes a culinary narrative unraveling the food preparations in the Kurma House. The narrator tells the readers the way Mr. Gupta prepares exotic Indian dishes and presents to the customers along with relevant stories which fascinate the customers.

My father makes a dramatic entry from the back room, bearing aloft an emerald-green bowl of chutney, and impresses them by reciting the history of various dishes. The rice pudding, he says, is one of the oldest desserts of India, mentioned even in Ramayana. It is what the gods sent to king Dasharath's barren queens to make them fruitful. (189)

Mr. Gupta's musical talent becomes added attraction of the 'Kurma House'. The Indian diaspora visit in scores to taste Indian food and listen to the old Hindi songs. This situation can be easily related to the Robin Cohen's thoughts on diaspora expressed beautifully in his book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (1997). Cohen describes diasporas as communities of people living together in one country who 'acknowledge that “the old country”- a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions (preface ix). For the Indian diaspora settled in America for long, eating Indian food and listening to Indian music in a foreign country is a way of acknowledging their old country and displaying loyalty towards their Nation. Over a period of time, the 'Kurma House' becomes a place where the diasporic community comes to make music and connect with their ethnic identity through the means of food. Mr. Gupta's new identity as 'one of Calcutta's greatest chefs' as proclaimed by Sonny(195), combined with his singing talent attracts the diasporic customers who are natives of not just India but other countries as well in large numbers, prompting Rakhi to comment, “I guess good music crosses all boundaries, like good food. . . .” (196)

Divakaruni impressively narrates the incident of the fire accident which causes a lot of damage to the 'Kurma House' and how its multicultural diaspora helps Rakhi to rebuild it by contributing the decorative items and also ensuring that the business does not suffer. The Kurma House now belonged not only to Rakhi, but other people too who had become dependent on it to cherish their ethnic identity. In fact, as Anita Mannur argues, for a community who has been historically racialized through their eating habits, food is much more than mere physical sustenance, as “it also feeds into the literary rendering of [the group's] subjectivity,” providing “a language through which to imagine Asian alterity in the American imagination” (Culinary Fictions 13). The participation of people in rebuilding the Kurma House is an evidence that the food assumes the role of a language which binds them together even in the times of adversity.

The Kurma House once again goes through a transformation and adorns an international appeal with a Tibetan bell, a small Persian rug in jeweled colors, an African mask, a woodcut from Afghanistan, a jade figurine, a beat-up mirror that looks Russian, with carved metal doors you can open and close(240). Rakhi decides to call her eating joint as *Kurma*

*House International*. Divakaruni portrays the emotional connect between the diaspora and the Kurma House in a spellbinding manner. Mr. Gupta who gets a new identity through his culinary expertise gives an international identity to the Kurma House. Arul Renuga. C in her Ph.D thesis on 'Themes of Magical Realism Myth and Culture in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Select Novels' discusses about the impact of Kurma House on the diasporic community and observes, "Rakhi's coffee house becomes a site for vibrant multicultural assembly. In the transformed Kurma House International, people move across borders and boundaries." Mr. Gupta's identity associated with foodways assumes special significance in the diasporic context converting the Kurma House into a site of multicultural assembly. Mr. Gupta's hybrid identity compels him to change the payment mode of the customers. He suggests to Rakhi to arrange the food as in a buffet and place a bowl in the counter for payment. She terms it as 'honor system'. Rakhi questions when this system was not followed in his Indian tea shop, why should it be introduced in her business. Mr. Gupta responds, "But now we're in a different country, with different people. We can't just follow our old ways. We've got to be flexible, no?"(241). Mr. Gupta's diasporic identity enables him to think of the right changes suitable to run the business successfully. Borrowing Terry Eagleton's words, food constitutes and "endlessly interpretable" object of "materialized emotion" (204). Mr. Gupta translates the craving of diaspora for Indian food into materialized emotion.

Divakaruni's portrayal of Sonny's character is equally interesting. Sonny, a DJ by profession, is a second generation immigrant and ex-husband of Rakhi. Sonny cooks food with ease that surprises Rakhi and comforts Jona, their three year old daughter when she stays with him. His familiarity with preparation of food and passion to learn Indian recipes give him a unique identity. Divakaruni narrates Sonny's bonding with Rakhi's mother which is strengthened by the common interests between them; the culinary interests. Divakaruni describes Sonny's efforts to cook and serve dinner to Rakhi during her first visit after their divorce. Rakhi is pleasantly surprised. "I come downstairs to find the table carefully laid for dinner: a real table cloth, blue willow-pattern china, a vase of lilies, covered dishes. In spite of myself, I'm touched" (136). Sonny's presentation of food makes Rakhi feel elated. It shows his love and affection for Rakhi even after their separation. He uncovers each dish with a flourish which is poignantly described by the author. "A grated-carrot salad seasoned with cilantro and lemon juice, a rice-and- chicken- kurma casserole. Jona carries in glasses of mango juice"(137). As Rakhi stares at the dishes, she feels they look surprisingly good and familiar. She thinks to herself, "I hadn't known Sonny's repertoire extended past hamburgers"(137). Being a second generation immigrant, Sonny only knew to prepare the American dishes when Rakhi and Sonny lived together. His interest to learn the Indian dishes prompts him to learn from Mrs. Gupta. Divakaruni, mesmerizingly narrates the way Sonny involves Jona in the kitchen. Probably it is because of such acts that Jona feels quite comfortable with Sonny even in the absence of her mother. As decided by Jona they cook pancakes for lunch and Jona with confidence tells Rakhi, "Sonny and I will make them, mom. You just watch."(213) Both father and daughter put on aprons and help each other in preparation of the pan cakes. Jona fetches the ingredients and Sonny measures them. They both together cook the pancakes to the accompaniment of laughter. The pancakes are topped with fresh strawberries and cream. Jona pours orange juice. Rakhi herself is taken aback by the ease with which they carry out the task. This culinary narrative encompasses a multi-layered reading of food as material and symbolic signifier. Sonny is a classic example of 'hybrid identity' of a diaspora. His culinary expertise is a beautiful blend of the Indian food as well as the American food. He exhibits assimilated diasporic culture and diasporic identity as he can prepare hamburgers and pancakes. At the same time, he echoes ethnic identity too, which is reflected by his eagerness to learn the elaborate Indian recipes and cook them with passion. Preparation of food gives him an identity as a 'good father' as well. He, in a play way manner teaches his daughter to prepare food. He involves Jona in readying the meals. Jona is trained by him to serve the juices. Sonny, like a perfect dad, gives her good company. The kitchen space is also a playground for the father-daughter duo. Preparation of food becomes a bonding time activity for them. Sonny

successfully and effortlessly establishes emotional connect with two different generations; Mrs. Gupta, his mother-in-law and Jona, his daughter, through the medium of food. Sonny's culinary interests assist him in acculturation and enable him to sustain his ethnic identity. He also contributes well in the reviving of business in 'Kurma House' by bringing customers. He becomes a means of publicity and thereby establishes a beautiful bond with Mr. Gupta. The food once again mediates the construction of a new relationship between Mr. Gupta and Sonny.

Divakaruni paints the characters of Mr. Gupta and Sonny, whose identities form and reform through their foodways. The Experiences of cooking and eating together feed into a rich culture of emotional belongingness in a diasporic space. Avtar Brah in his book, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* explains about the nature of diasporic communities. He points out that distinct diasporic communities are created out of the 'confluence of narratives' of different journeys from the 'old country' to the new which create the sense of a shared history (183). In alignment with the aforesaid statement, Mr. Gupta's culinary expertise acquired in his old country becomes instrumental in establishing his ethnic identity in an alien land with which he creates a distinct diasporic community. Food and music become attractions for the diasporic community visiting the Kurma House. Sonny's affinity and passion for cooking Indian dishes as well as the American food, symbolizes his hybrid identity. He makes an effort to connect with his native land through Indian recipes. The later part of Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* can be considered as a culinary narrative which demonstrates the intertwining of 'Food and Identity' of Mr. Gupta and Sonny. Mr. Gupta who is portrayed as a passive character in the beginning of the novel takes the centre stage in the later part of the novel and gives a twist to the tale. His passion for cooking transforms his identity as a father and as an Indian diaspora. His new identity not only helps him to bridge the gap with his daughter but also revives his culinary talent which he had acquired in his childhood days. Divakaruni's narrative delineates the significance of Mr. Gupta's gastronomic identity in establishing a connection with the diasporic community beyond the geographical boundaries of nations. Divakaruni's interesting representation of Sonny as a DJ who cooks elaborate Indian dishes for his wife and prepares pancakes with his daughter fascinates the readers. His gastronomic identity brings him closer to Mrs. Gupta and after her demise, Mr. Gupta as well. While the food mediates in Mr. Gupta's revival of his ethnic identity in the diasporic context, it imparts ethnic identity to Sonny.

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