

## Food as a Catalyst to Memories:

### A Diasporic reading of Amulya Malladi's *The Mango Season*

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**Abstract:** Food is an essential thing in every human being's life. Everyone needs food for their survival. It also plays a major role in building up culture and one's own identity. In diaspora food plays a major role, many use food as a connection to their homeland which they miss in the new land. They experience their homeland through food. Diasporic writers use food images as a tool to bring out the longing for their homeland. Food memories have become a recurring theme in the diaspora, as they are closely connected to their homeland. Amulya Malladi in her novel *The Mango Season* uses a wide range of food images to evoke the memories that have been experienced in the homeland. This paper focuses on the food images that serve as a catalyst to the memories of the protagonist which is experienced in the homeland.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Food, Identity and Memory

#### I. INTRODUCTION

“Food is a great communicator, connecting generations and helping build memories and friendships, it gathers us together and teaches us the importance of sharing not just food, but ourselves.”

-Rachael Ray

Food has always been a part and parcel of our lives. Food in times defines culture, emotions, identity, and race. Food images have become one of the major and recurring themes in diasporic writings. The diasporic people try to connect themselves to their homeland in their new land through food. Food is closely connected to the memories of their homeland. Many Diasporic writers use food images as the main theme to bring out the diasporic elements. Writers like Chitra Banerjee, Jumpha Lahri, Preeti Nair use a wide range of food images to bring out the diasporic elements in the novel. This paper analyses food as an important element to provoke memories of the individual of the past in their homeland.

Food and memory have always been closely related to one another. When we think of a dish it takes us back to a memory that is related to that particular dish. Holtzman in the essay "Food and Memory" states that "Food centered nostalgia is a recurring theme in studies of diasporic or expatriate population" (367). Food provokes the memories of an individual connected to the dish. "The terrible emotional overload of xenitia – living in a foreign land – is temporarily relieved by the experience of eating food, an experience consisting of a demand and an immediate satisfaction" (Sutton 125). Diasporic people find their home in the new land through food; it acts as a tool to bring out the longing for their homeland. It is through the food that they find relief of longing for their homeland in a way or another.

Merriam Webster's dictionary of catalyst as "a substance that enables a chemical reaction to proceed at a usually faster rate or under different conditions (as at a lower temperature) than otherwise possible or an agent that provokes or speeds significant change or action", a catalyst is an element which provokes a process or an even. Here food acts as a catalyst, which provokes the memories of the individual. This paper focuses on how food images act as a tool to provoke the memories of the past or the memories of the homeland. Food memories are always easy to

remember whether it is good or bad. Even when the whole event can't be remembered, the fragments of the incidents can be remembered. Food and memories always have a close connection.

## II. IDENTIFICATION AND RESEARCH

Amulya Malladi is a diasporic writer, born in India and has settled in Denmark. She has written eight novels such as *A Breath of Fresh Air*, *The Mango Season*, *Serving Crazy with Curry*, *Song of the Cuckoo Bird*, *The Sound of Language*, *A House for Happy Mothers*, *The Copenhagen Affair*, *The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You*. Her novels have been translated into many other languages.

In the novel, *The Mango season* food and memories of the homeland play a major role in the storyline. The protagonist Priya returns to India after seven years from the United States. She struck between the cultures, everything which seemed familiar and normal before has now become abnormal and unusual. Food plays a major role in the novel; the only thing the protagonist misses in America is the home food. The protagonist of the novel Priya lives in the United States and returns to India after seven years with the news of engagement with a foreigner. She returns home during mango season which is more significant. Mangoes and the season are very closely connected to her childhood memories. She describes mangoes as “HAPPINESS”.

Summer, while I was growing up, was all about mangoes. Ripe, sweet mangoes that dripped juices down your throat, down your neck. The smell of a ripe mango would still evoke my taste buds, my memories, and for a while I would be a child again and it would be a hot summer day in India. ...

There was more to a mango than taste. Nate and I called the mango stone  
HAPPINESS.

HAPPINESS was a concept. A feeling. Triumph over a sibling. (Malladi 2)

She always loves this season as it is a season of happiness and it holds a lot of memories with her family. While leaving America when her boyfriend asks “What are you looking forward to the most?” she says “HAPPINESS” without any hesitation (Malladi 2). This denotes her connection to her childhood memory.

The memories and the familiarity in having the food they have, which further taking them back to the memories and events connected to it, the way the memories flow through the minds of the people having are so natural. "As a form of memory, "nostalgia" has several different senses, generally and in respect to food. Some food literature (particularly outside anthropology) relies on a lay notion of sentimentality for the lost past, viewing food a vehicle for recollection of childhood and family" (Holtzman 367).

On arriving in India every other food she has taken her back to her memories of the past. Here food severs as a catalyst to her memories; it evokes the memories of her past. Priya goes to the “Monda market” with her mother to buy mangoes for the pickle making ritual. The mangoes should be picked very carefully and it must have a particular taste to make the pickle. While buying the mangoes the shopkeeper cuts a slice of mango and gives it to taste, her mother gives it to Priya to taste. When she brings the slice of mango close to her mouth, the smell of the mango takes her back to the memory that is associated with the smell of mango. “‘Here’, she prodded again, and shoved it closer to my mouth and the strong smell of mango and its juice sank in. And memories associated with that distinct smell trickled in like a slow stream flowing

over gently weathered stone” (Malladi 9). She remembered stealing mangoes from the neighbor's garden; she also remembered sneaking into the kitchen in the night to eat mangoes and also remembered eating raw mangoes with salt and chili powder with her brother Nate.

Priya has a heated argument and leaves the house and stops by “a small *paan* and *bidi*” shop and gets a “*goli soda*”, she remembers the *goli soda* she had for the first time and the incidents related to it. She had her first one while she went to a movie with Jayant and Anand. The family members instructed them not to have anything in the theater as they might fall sick. But Priya was stubborn to have one as she saw a girl drinking she was intimidated. Finally, they brought her one and asked her not to tell anyone in the family about it, but everyone came to know about it as Priya fell sick.

“The first time I had *goli soda*, I was five years old. I remember going for a movie with Jayant and Anand; it was an old black-and-white movie made in the thirties called *Mayabazaar*, . . .

I had seen some other children drink soda before the movie and I threw a tantrum to get one too. . . .

The soda came in thick green bottle and the gas of the soda was blocked inside with a marble. The bottle was opened with a black rubber opener that sucked the marble out with a big popping sound. As a child I could hardly resist the sound of the marble popping out of place and landing inside the neck of the bottle, or the fizz that appeared on the top. (91)

Priya and her father share a very good relationship in the novel. They go out to get “*kadipatha*”, meanwhile Priya was requesting her father to get her a sugarcane juice, he warned

her of getting it as she might fall sick but she was so much interested in drinking “*gaana juice*”. She used to have “*gaana juice*” often while waiting for her bus in her college days, it was her favorite during those days. She was taken back to her memories while having the “*gaana juice*” and it was so tempting for her to have one.

I knew I shouldn't, but it was too tempting, just like the *goli* soda had been. I could taste the sweetness of the juice; the long-forgotten memories came rushing back to my taste buds and the desire to take one sip became irresistible...

I tentatively sipped mine and sighed in pleasure. ‘This is what I really miss. This juice and *chaat*.’ ...

I finished my *gaana* juice slowly, savoring the taste through the last sip. (111, 113)

Priya and Sowmya go to see Sowmya's groom in a hotel named Minerva as soon as they finished their work. Priya used to come to this place often when she was in India, the place is still the same without any change. At the sight of place, she is remembered of long crispy dosas. “Minerva hadn't changed, even a bit. It even smelled the same way it had seven years ago. My mouth watered at the sight of long crisp dosas and sizzling vadas. It was hard to get good south Indian food in America. The chicken curries and tandoori places were in abundance but the all-out vegetarian, south Indian food was almost impossible to find” (193).

### III. FINDINGS

There are many food images in the novel that provoke the childhood memories of the protagonist. Priya enjoys having every food which she missed a lot during her stay in the Unites

States, most of the food she had taken back to the long-forgotten tastes and the memories. Thus the Food images in the novel serve as a catalyst to memories. The author uses food and food preferences to express the voice of the immigrants. Food is the only thing that can be closely connected to the roots of the people, which is to the homeland that they miss. Nostalgia or memory is one such thing that is more related to the diasporic people. Here the author uses food to bring out the childhood memories which is been forgotten or missed.

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