



## FOOD AS A METAPHOR IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE CONCH TRILOGY*

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### ABSTRACT



Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a postcolonial, diasporic woman writer who keeps returning to her native Bengali culture, its rich traditions, myths, practices and customs while tracing the contemporary immigrant experience. Food is an integral part of her culture that she keeps bringing back in her novels to recreate memories of home for the Indian immigrants in foreign land. However, references to food have many cultural connotations and reflect the beliefs, practices, traditions and intricate ideologies of Bengali culture. The present paper aims at examining how Divakaruni uses food as a metaphor in her trilogy for children, *The Brotherhood of the Conch*.

**Keywords:** *Food, Memory, Culture, Love, Fellowship.*

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The word 'food', though on the surface level seems to be an easily definable term, has many cultural connotations, especially in the context of diasporic literature. It performs significant national as well as social functions. Jon D. Holtzman in his essay, "Food and Memory," terms food as a cultural construct like family, gender, or religion. Holtzman talks about the powerful connection that exists between food and memory. Food according to Holtzman "offers a potential window into forms of memory that are more heteroglossic, ambivalent, layered, and textured" (373). This paper examines the relationship between food and memory. These relationships include:

. . . memories constructed through food; food as a locus for historically constructed identity, ethnic or nationalistic; the role of food in various forms of "nostalgia"; dietary change as a socially charged marker of epochal shifts; gender and agents of memory; and contexts of remembering and forgetting through food. (364)

Holtzman also observes that nostalgia centered around food "is a recurring theme in studies of diasporic or expatriate populations" as it provides a temporary return to home by evoking longing among immigrants through the smells, tastes, and sights of the native food (367). With regard to the Indian diaspora in America, Keya Ganguly rightly states in her work, *States of Exception: Everyday Life and Postcolonial Identity*, that it "is difficult, if not impossible, to think of immigrant Indian existence in the United States without at the same time thinking of Indian food." Asha Choubey, a lecturer in English in a college in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, India, notes that food is one of the most significant aspects of community life that binds communities. She goes on to say:

Food and culinary items define social hierarchies, and serve as a driving force behind people's actions. Food delineates privilege, economic class, and social position. Food is a land issue and a power issue. Food sustains life. Food is a

motivating factor that propels action on the part of an individual, a community or an entire society. Food is part of the cyclical pattern of life; food is culture. . . .

Anita Mannur in her popular work, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*, opines:

Food, as a central part of the cultural imagination of diasporic populations, becomes one of the most viable and valuable sites from which to inquire into the richly layered texture of how race is imagined and reinterpreted within the cultural arena, both to affirm and resist notions of home and belonging. (8)

Almost all South Asian diasporic writers include references to the native food of the immigrants. Food is an intrinsic part of their indigenous culture and one aspect of their culture that they can easily carry with them to the new country. It is thus an integral part of diasporic identity. Many South Asian diasporic writers have started focusing on food as one of the main metaphors in their works. Some of the notable works in this regard include *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* (2003) by Shobha Narayan, *Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries* (2003) by Bharati Kirchner, and *The Mango Season and Serving* (2003) and *Crazy with Curry* (2004) by Amulya Malladi. Another very important name in the field of culinary fiction is that of Indian-American writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Divakaruni is a postcolonial, diasporic woman writer whose works have been mesmerizing readers across the world. She has penned several novels such as *The Mistress of Spices* (1998), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013) and the latest, *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016). Divakaruni is also known for her work in poetry and has written some well-known and acclaimed collections such as *Black Candle: Poems about Women from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh* (1991) and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997). She has also produced significant works for children, such as *Neela: Victory*



Song (2002), *Grandma and the Great Gourd* (2013) and *The Brotherhood of the Conch* Trilogy that comprises of *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005), and *Shadowland* (2009). Her works fuse magic, myth, and traditions of her native Bengali culture with the current reality, dealing with modern issues. They trace experiences of Indian immigrants in a foreign land (America in her writing), especially that of women immigrants who face greater obstacles being embroiled in the patriarchal structure of their society.

An integral part of Bengali culture that Divakaruni keeps bringing back in all her works is food and several beliefs, rituals and practices associated with it. Food occupies a crucial place in her works. Shashi Tharoor's remarks about her first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, hold true for her other novels as well:

Though Divakaruni does magic rather well, writing about the mystical spices in prose that rise lightly off the page like so many wipes of incense, she is best at realism. She has a keen feel for immigrant life.

Thahiya Afzal in "The Confluence of Spices: Paradigms of Identity and Self Discovery in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*" states that food indicates "the belief systems, religious rules, and complex ideologies of a particular person or character, or that of an entire community or culture, that may not be explained explicitly in a text."

The present paper aims at examining how Divakaruni uses food in *The Brotherhood of the Conch* Trilogy. This series traces the fantastic adventures of a young Indian boy named Anand, a street urchin, Nisha, and their mentor, Abhaydatta. They are on a mission to return a magical object, a conch, to its original place in the Silver Valley in the Himalayas and to save the world from destruction.

The first part of the trilogy, *The Conch Bearer*, has references to detailed and mouth-watering descriptions of food – its texture, aroma, recipes, and even health benefits. The writer's website states the following with regard to this novel:

Mythical, mystical — and impossible to put down . . . *The Conch Bearer* is a feast for the senses with a multitude of colors, smells, sounds, and textures. It's a feast of the emotions as readers feel fear, hope, joy, trepidation, sadness, and wonder — right along with the main characters. And it's a feast for adventure-lovers – a fast paced story that races across contemporary India to a dramatic climax in the Himalayas.

The novel opens on a cold day in Kolkata with the description of the tea-stall where Anand, the young protagonist, worked as a helper. References to food can be observed from the onset of the novel. Food indicates the economic class and defines social hierarchies. The tea-stall owner, Haru (under whom Anand worked), fries onion *pakor*s in stale peanut oil. *Pakor*s are a popular snack in Bengal enjoyed by people from all classes of society with tea, especially during winters or monsoons. The frying of the *pakor*s in stale oil reflects the social status (lower-middle class) of the stall's owner, Haru, and indicates that the tea-stall caters to the common people who are interested in a quick and inexpensive meal. The smell of the hot onion *pakor*s that Anand carried for Shaheen, the cloth merchant, drives him crazy as he was famished. It is only during his break that he is allowed a cup of tea and some stale food from the previous day. College students who visit the tea-stall order a plate of *pooris* and *aludum*. Anand is embarrassed by his growling stomach as he serves the puffed fried bread and spicy potatoes to the students. Food thus defines social ranks. While the students enjoy reasonable but delicious food, Anand cannot even afford that because of his financial situation. Thus, he has to do with the leftovers given by the owner. At the same time, Divakaruni's description of snacks served at the stall is mouth-watering and delightful and exhibits the richness of Bengali culture.

The status of a family can be deciphered through the kind of food cooked and eaten. The prosperous and comfortable lifestyle of Anand and his family is reflected in the exquisite and assorted



dishes his mother used to make for her children when they had a decent amount of money. When Anand's father disappears and the money stops coming from Dubai, Anand's family is forced to leave their comfortable apartment and shift to a one-room shack in the slum area. This also affects their capacity to buy expensive food. They are forced to eat meagre meals comprising of boiled rice with potatoes and radish, or *khichuri*, a stew made with rice and lentils. *Khichuri* is the staple food of Bengalis, especially of the poor sections. Anand is bored of this food. He yearns to eat some vegetables. He hopes to go to the vegetable market to buy a bunch of fresh, crisp spinach, or some beans to fry up with chillies from the vegetable bazaar. Anand also craves for mangoes and wishes to buy one. The financial crisis has prevented him from eating such expensive fruits. Divakaruni gives an appealing description of this scrumptious and succulent fruit: "They were plump and soft and just the right ripeness, their skins a glowing orange streaked with red . . . He swallowed imagining the sweet juice that would fill his mouth when he took a big bite . . ." (CB 15). Anand feels more frustrated and envious imagining the families who can afford to eat hot and sumptuous meals like chicken curry with rice and sweet milk pudding from the kitchen.

Food helps in strengthening the bond between loved ones and serves as a medium of expressing love, especially towards children. Anand's father used to take him and his sister for movies and buy them hot roasted peanuts. Food also acts as a reminder of memories of a loved one and the moments shared together. Anand's mother cooked a lavish meal comprising of her husband's favourite dish, lamb curry, with the first salary he had sent from Dubai. Food brings together people from all walks of life and age groups. It helps in establishing a bond between strangers too. Anand and Nisha get close with each other with the sharing of food on their journey. The children's bond with their mentor, Abhaydatta, is also developed through food. Both Anand and Nisha get attached to Abhaydatta and begin to think of him as their grandfather as he showers his affection on them and indulges them by buying their favourite food.

Delicious food is a big enticement for children in particular. Surabhanu, the evil apprentice, knows how to attract children towards him. In order to find the location of the conch from Anand, he lures him with his favourite food. Divakaruni here provides a rich account of many Bengali delicacies:

There were piles of deep-fried *pooris*, golden brown and still steaming. There were the crisp triangles of *samosas* stuffed with spicy peas and potatoes, and green coriander-leaf chutney to dip them in. There was chicken cooked in yogurt sauce, and the biggest fried *pawns* Anand had ever seen. Next to them sat sweets of several kinds – juicy red *gulabjamuns* and the orange twists of *jalebis*, and, in a large, shining silver bowl, his absolute favourite: rice pudding studded with raisins and pistachios, which he hadn't eaten in ages and ages. His mouth watered. (CB 67)

Food also brings excitement, particularly among children, to the otherwise long, boring and tiresome journeys. Anand and Nisha get excited when Abhaydatta offers them to eat whatever they want on their long and arduous journey to the Silver Valley. Abhaydatta buys from the station some freshly fried *samosas* (a popular Indian snack) stuffed with cauliflower to eat with red chutney sauce. He also buys them food that they can eat easily on their journey – walnuts and raisins, sweets made from jiggery and sesame seed for energy. They eat tangy puffed rice with chillies and lemon juice in it. Nisha eats *alupakoras*, roasted peanuts, some yogurt, and *rasogollahs* – sweet and spongy with oozing syrup. Anand asks for some bread and potato curry. The three of them also drink *lassi*, a frothy yogurt drink. Simple, plain and relishing food comprising of rice, eggplant curry and yogurt, is served by the inn-keeper in the factory town of Koila Ganj to Anand and his companions.

Divakaruni's description of food in her novels is not just limited to the smells and sights of food but also includes some recipes for cooking in traditional Bengali style. When Abhaydatta comes to



visit Anand for the first time, Anand can only offer *khichurito* the famished old man. To make it, he “threw a few handfuls of rice and lentils into the pot, and added water, salt, turmeric, and chilli powder. In twenty minutes it would form a bubbly stew” (CB 22). Abhaydatta also offers some vegetables to be thrown in the *khichuri*. With the help of magic, he adds flavours to the dish – it had never earlier tasted so “smooth and buttery like this, with a delicate hint of cumin and cardamom and cloves, the spices his mothers used when they had money” (CB 35). *Alupakorras* are golden brown balls of potato mix, dipped in banter in a huge wok and deep-fried.

Even the second part of the trilogy, *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*, is incorporated with several references to food. This novel takes the readers three hundred years back in time when *nawabs* ruled over Bengal. Thus the special focus of the novel is on the detailed descriptions of the luscious and tempting food enjoyed by the *nawabs* of Bengal. Patricia D. Lothrop states in this regard:

Divakaruni's novel offers the flavors, sounds, sights, and stories of past and present Bengal. The description of a jinn is masterly, and the values (don't run away; think for yourself; don't expect to be good at everything; use kindness and humility, not force) are solid, but unexceptionable.

The apprentices at the Brotherhood are served lavish and elaborate Bengali delicacies made from the vegetables and fruits grown at their own farm. Divakaruni gives an elaborate account of abundant, exuberant and sumptuous meals served:

. . . served fragrant, steaming rice; soft wheat chapatis fresh from the tawa, still puffed up; rich stews of lentils in jewel colors; eggplant simmered in a spicy yogurt sauce; tiny potatoes fried whole and crisp; and tangy emerald-green chutneys made with mint and coriander. There was a whole tableful of desserts, too, from milky-white sandesh to pale green burfis made from pistachios to the orange

squiggles of jalebis that spurted syrup when bitten into. (MFD 9)

However, not all the meals at the Brotherhood are so lavish. Self-control and perseverance are important characteristics of a Healer at the Brotherhood. The young apprentices who come to learn magic and healing are taught how to build these qualities that are required to survive under different situations. These are best learnt by practicing control over one's pleasures, including temptations for delicious food. In order to learn to adapt to all kinds of circumstances, a Healer is supposed to eat whatever is served. There are days when the apprentices are served only rice and *dal* and there are also days when there is nothing to eat and they are supposed to rummage in the fields and eat whatever they can find. There are days when Anand looks forward to the usual breakfast comprising of hot aromatic tea and a spicy *paratha*, stuffed with potato filling, but gets only lukewarm bowl of rice porridge and a basket holding shrivelled green apples.

In the second part too, food is used as a metaphor to indicate the economic class and social stature of the people. In the village of SonaDighi, where villagers are made to work in the ruins of a palace by the evil sorcerer Kasim, the crew generally cooked rice and lentils (*khichuri*) over a fire they had built on the floor to keep snakes. *Khichuri* is a staple meal of the poor as discussed previously.

When Anand is transported to the palace of Nawab Nazib's three hundred years back in time, through the mirror, the entire city is depicted to be in celebration mode, participating in *shahzada*, Mahabet's birthday. And food forms an intrinsic part of any celebration. There is lamb roasting on spits and entire place is filled with aroma of sumptuous smells of wheat *parathas* and potato *tikkas* being cooked on flat *tawas*. Divakaruni paints an exciting and busy picture of Nawab Nazib's kitchen:

Servants dressed in white kurtas and pajamas were busy chopping onions and garlic or cleaning goat meat in a corner, while assistant cooks were stirring large bubbling pots or rolling out *parathas* and frying them on sizzling iron *tawas*.



Oh, and all the different fragrances in that kitchen! (88)

Zafar, the chief chef of the Nawab's kitchen, takes a special liking to Anand (identity changed to Abbas in that era) because he is from the same village as Zafar. He expresses his special affection towards him by occasionally offering him the leftovers of the delicious meals cooked for the *nawabs*. Anand is given a steaming bowl of chicken curry and a thick piece of naan. At another point, Anand is fortified by a delicious meal of fried fish, vegetables, and *pulao*.

Again in the second part of the trilogy, some recipes of the meals cooked for *nawabs* are discussed. Zafar prepares mutton biryani for Haider Ali, the Chief Minister of Nawab Nazib, by soaking rice in saffron water all afternoon. Zafar at one point, mentions the difficulty of preparing *kulfi* (a popular frozen dairy dessert from Indian subcontinent) in a short time. He would "need a cartload of ice blocks, not to mention half a day to boil, cool, sweeten, and freeze the milk?" (MFD 150).

The health benefits of food are also discussed at several points in the trilogy. Zafar prepares a special dish, *pistapulao*, for Nawab Nazim, by using fresh pistachios from Kabul and aged basmati rice that are easy on the nawab's weak digestive system. He thinks of making him a *lassi* with fresh yogurt and roasted cumin powder. *Lassi* is supposed to settle the ill humors in the body. Zafar also makes cardamom tea for stressed-out Latif as it helps in calming the tense nerves.

Food also acts as a metaphor to connote exploitation of the marginalized by the rich and the powerful. The noblemen at Nawab Nazib's court expect the servants to come up with a solution to every command they make. Zafar is frustrated and angry because Mahabet, the *shahzada*, ordered him to make *kulfi* immediately in large quantity, without thinking once that it is almost impossible to make so much in such a short span.

Jonathan Culler David in his article, "Folklore, Food In," discerns that practices related with food apart from being concerned about recipes also involve chores connected with collecting, storing, displaying and serving of food. The food at the dinner party hosted by Haider Ali is served in gold

plates. It comprises of fragrant rice *pulao*, savoury fried chicken, goat and lamb curries, and vegetable *kurmas* of several kinds. Each guest is also given a hookah to smoke. According to the customs of the *nawabs* of Bengal, a woman usually does not appear in front of male guests or serve them food. However, Haider Ali asks his niece Paribanou (Nisha) to serve dinner to noblemen to show the guests that he considers them his brothers and thus Paribanou is like their own daughter.

As discussed previously, food evokes memories of the loved ones and precious moments spent with them. Far away from home, Anand misses his family. He is reminded of his mother as he recalls how his mother used to cook the best *rasogollahs*, a popular Bengali dessert. She used to make them on his each birthday: "On his birthday she'd wake him up with a kiss and a bowl of the sweet white balls floating in the syrup. Even after they'd grown poor, she would somehow save up enough money to make a few for his birthday, because she knew how much he liked them" (MFD 234).

After winning the battle against the evil sorcerer Kasim and his jinn Irfit, injured Anand is brought food by Mahabet from the royal kitchens, specially made by Zafar: "Inside was a wonderful meal of buttered chapatis, pulao rice with pistachios, and pieces of chicken grilled on the tandoor until they were a delicious golden red" (MFD 281).

Divakaruni also poignantly portrays the plight of villagers of Sona Dighi affected by the worst drought that have led to extreme shortage of food. When Anand, Nisha and Abhaydatta return to the village, Tara Ma informs them that things have taken a turn for the worse in the village. The fields have turned hard and barren making it impossible to grow crops. In their frustration, the people were forced to eat the seed grain saved for planting. The situation is augmented by the condition of the men who are still sick in their spirit because their souls were extracted by the jinn. The healthy ones have left for the cities to find work and never returned. It is only women, children, and the very old that are left. They have been foraging in the woods to find food that is extremely scarce. Some of them have died and many are on the verge of starvation. Anand is "shocked at their gaunt faces and ragged clothes, the bones that



juttet from their emaciated bodies, their dreary, hopeless stares" (MFD 307). During such a situation, Abhaydatta decides to cook a meal for the starving villagers and hosts a feast to celebrate the festival of Holi. The villagers are served steaming rice, fried fish, vegetable curry, and milk-sweets from the magical pots that always remained half full, no matter how much was taken out of it. An old man thanks them for feeding them and asks what they want in return. "For no one, we've learned, does anything for another except when he wants something in return" (MFD 309). Food here serves as a symbol of fellowship and solidarity. It becomes a medium of bringing all the villagers together and instils in them a new motivation to confront their difficulties.

The final part of the trilogy, *Shadow land*, takes the young protagonists, Anand and Nisha into the future Kolkata, a world ruled by science with absolute class division and utter disrespect for values and ethics. Due to environmental degradation, the land has become completely barren. Traditional Bengali food has given way to artificially produced fruits and vegetables that are made at the Farm with the help of enhanced fertilizers. This food is reserved for the rich scientists and their families while the commoners have to do with tasteless food. However, they are not aware of the long-term adverse effects of these enhanced fertilizers. The scientists have also created many hybrid foods such as huge bananas that taste rubbery. Food again marks boundaries between the rich and the poor. While, the rich relish the best delicacies in abundance, the poor youths working for the rich are fed meagrely.

A party organized at Future dome offers snacks such as a flat bread piled with crisp, baked potato slices, vegetables dipped in batter and fried, and pieces of roasted hybridized bird. Anand can not help but miss the food in the valley where on Tuesdays, they used to get a hearty rice-and-lentil stew filled with home-grown fresh vegetables and fried potatoes on the side. The commoners have not tasted real food since many years. Grandma Maya yearns to eat desserts like the ones made by her mother when she was small – "curds thickened with jaggery, and red pantuas dipped in syrup" (S 103). There was a time when they could eat imported chocolates, which factories in Kolkata also began to

produce before they were shut down after the Great Divide between the scientists and the magicians. Only one factory continued to make chocolates but only for the scientists. They also used to drink fizzy Orangerooos in tall narrow bottles. Now they are also available only at Futuredome and their stock is quickly dwindling. The only thing that would be left is water, and that too will have to be sipped through purifier straws.

Food brings people together. After the scientists and the magicians patch up and begin to work together to save their city from collapsing, several changes are made in the city. One of them includes the opening of kitchens offering low-priced meals and a place to sit and chat. Thus, food becomes a medium for bringing the people together. These kitchens have quickly become popular with the residents of the city: "Folks were starving – not just for food but for company, because the previous laws had forbidden them to gather except when ordered to by the council,'. . . 'Now they sit together for hours, talking, laughing, gathering news – and gossip!" (S 153).

Thus, food serves as an appropriate indicator of the writer's native Bengali culture by bringing to the forefront its beliefs, traditions, behaviours, attitudes and values. The main aim of the writer in incorporating references to food has been to provide readers across the world an insight into the Indian Bengali culture. By providing comprehensive descriptions evoking the smells and sights of the rich, lavish and savoury Bengali food, Divakaruni succeeds in presenting an authentic picture of her indigenous culture.

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