



Memories in Food, Food of Memories: Blurring Borders through Food and Foodways in *Indubala Bhatar Hotel*

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Abstract:

Food and foodways not only mark or construct our identity but also help us relive our memories. Precisely, our food habits, preparation, and emotional attachment to what we eat are cultural processes that map how an edible item becomes food. Besides being an important part of our cultural life, food and foodways are associated with individual and collective memories. They play an important role in reviewing our memories associated with little and sometimes insignificant moments of the past that form our personal history. On the other hand, food and food habits are connected with group activities in the form of production, preparation, and consumption, which help in reassessing the past by validating what should be remembered and what should not be relived in the past. This becomes more prominently discernible in the context of displacement or migration. The present paper intends to study Kallol Lahiri's novel *Indubala Bhatar Hotel* (2020) to focus on how food and foodways not only become the source of sustenance for a widow who runs a pice hotel to support her family but also help her blur the border and arrive at the other side where her roots lie.

Keywords: Food, Foodways, Memory, Hotel, History.

“Cooking is a game of estimates, jugglery and hypnotism”

Nowhere else has the very art of cooking been summed up so pertinently than this line of Shahu Patole. His book *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* (2024) has been dedicated to his mother, and there Shahu remembers this line that his mother used to say about cooking. Precisely, the magic that cooking creates binds the person who cooks with those who eat. This is the very essence of cooking, one that ties the bond—the bond of love, emotion, and most importantly our memories. Throughout the world, the very act of cooking and eating is strongly associated with our emotions. We are really what we eat. Food, its smell and taste, how and where it was

Article History: Received: 30 December 2024. Revised: 17 January 2025. Accepted: 31 January 2025. First published: 1st February, 2025.

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Published by: Adrija Press, India.

Citation: Chowdhury, Dr. Pradipta Shyam. (2025). Memories in Food, Food of Memories: Blurring Borders through Food and Foodways in *Indubala Bhatar Hotel*. *Newliteraria Journal* 6:1, 145-151. <https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2025.v06i1.015>

cooked, and especially the people with whom one shares the experience of food are essential parts of our memories, and they help us to relive the past. This paper intends to delve into the memories of food and foodways¹ that take us back to those bygone days, thereby blurring the thin borderline between the past and the present. Precisely, our food habits, preparation, and emotional attachment to what we eat are cultural processes that map how an edible item becomes food. Besides being an important part of our cultural life, food and foodways are associated with individual and collective memories. They play an important role in reviewing our memories associated with little and sometimes insignificant moments of the past that form our personal history. On the other hand, food and food habits are connected with group activities in the form of production, preparation, and consumption that help in reassessing the past by validating what should be remembered and what not to relive the past. This becomes more prominently discernible in the context of displacement or migration. D. E. Sutton, in *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (2001), observes the connection between displacement and the memories of food and comments that food, by its nature, is a powerful mnemonic that helps in remembering the past after one moves to a new place either by compulsion or by his or her own choice.

While speaking about the food and memory, I cannot help writing about my grandmother, who migrated from Bangladesh in 1947. After coming to India, my family settled in Hooghly, West Bengal, where our neighbours were primarily from this part of Bengal and were commonly known as ‘ghoti’² in Bengali, a word that strategically marginalised the migrants as ‘bangals’, a culturally pejorative term to identify the unwanted refugee community from East Bengal. The rift between the ‘bangal’ and ‘ghoti’ has several socio-political reasons. The most important among them may be the huge influx of the ‘bangals’ as East Pakistani refugees in West Bengal after the Partition that led to the practice of social discrimination and ‘othering’ of entrants as different, peculiar and culturally inferior by the Bengalee community of West Bengal. Moreover, the forced migration also brought poverty, over-population, and shortage of resources, which resulted in the complete disregard of their loss, miseries and trauma by the settled ‘Ghoti’ community of West Bengal. Interestingly enough, the discrimination and marginalisation were done not only in terms of linguistic difference, as the dialect of the ‘bangals’ was peculiarly different from the Bangla language spoken in Kolkata and the adjacent Gangetic plains of Bengal, which is considered the accepted and authentic Bangla of the genteel society, but also in terms of the foods and foodways. The use of chillies, the choice of food items, cooking patterns, and even the order of eating widened the cultural gap, which was never attempted to be bridged. The story of my grandmother was no different from those ‘Bangals’ who couldn’t bring anything but the memories of their homelands in mind and the memory of their food in their tastebuds. Therefore, food, as I have referred to, is a powerful mnemonic that helps us to remember the past as well as recreate it. Janowski, while writing about the memory of food and foodways of the Polish deported women comments, “Where migration is sudden, involuntary and traumatic, as, in the case of people deported from Eastern Poland in 1940, food takes on a very special role in ‘standing for’ a past life- a normal, happy life, but also an idealized life” (331). The adjective ‘idealized’ requires a special mention here, because the life that the migrants left behind them never comes back. History nowhere registers the story of the migrant returning to the homeland. Therefore, the homeland becomes elusive and subsequently idealized. All that the migrant missed in the new land is associated with the lost home. This elusive homeland is likened to the Polish idea of *ojczyzna*³ or the homeland in idyllic terms. The story of my grandmother and her lost home conflates with the idea of *ojczyzna* that she tried to recuperate through her memories of food. Years later, when she was a widow and quite a long time had passed since she came to India with her family; I noticed her having her lunch on a lazy summer afternoon. She had a heavy bronze plate (probably she carried that with her while crossing the border) and a small bowl, which she used to fill with green chillies. Each morsel of rice was accompanied by a green chilly and

while chewing, she used to close her eyes. It was a funny scene to me, who was then a boy of nine or ten, but now years later, I realise how she relished her food and how those chilly mixed rice morsels used to take her to the other side of India, to her village in Komilla, where a newly-wed woman completes her lunch with a handful of chilly beside her rice plate. This little snippet from my grandmother's life substantiates Sutton's observation on the relationship between food and memory, where the taste of the chillies took my grandmother back to her old days. Sutton's work shows how the experience of food "is not simply cognitive but also emotional and physical" (365). The taste of the green chillies mixed with rice not only enabled her to cross the border but also blurred the very border. All divisions and differences, torn memories, and wounded remembrances are mended and healed.

This little snippet from my grandmother's life perhaps triggered the idea of connecting the memory of food and foodways with borders, both real and imaginary and exploring how differences are erased and bridges are built. Food and foodways not only help us relive our memories but also mark or construct our identity. Monika Janowski, in her "Introduction: Consuming Memories of Home in Constructing the Present and Imaging the Future," starts by acknowledging the importance of food and foodways in understanding how people construct their ideas of who and what they are" (175). and further comments that in the context of migration, the memories of food and drink help the migrants understand the very process of migration as well as construct their identity by "maintaining kin, social, and cultural ties; in building new groupings within a migrant group" (175). Janowski's observations thus not only connect the gastronomic memories of the migrants with their past but also help them negotiate their process of relocation and readjustment in a new land. Their memories of food encounters with the new environment, new food habits, and experiences become instrumental in building new ties with the host community and their culture. It is interesting to note that memories of food and foodways work on two levels. On the one hand, the gastronomic memories that the migrants brought with them give them their essential cultural, religious, or political identity that resists change; on the other hand, they facilitate assimilation with new communities and cultures, thereby constructing their syncretic identity. Similarly, the host community also has the same experience, which emphasises the bridging capacity of the memories of food. Interestingly enough, it is often thought that the memories of food that the migrants carry with them remain the same as they have been brought from their homeland, but in reality, they change because of this assimilation and adjustment to the food habits and culture of the host. Though attempts were made to resist any change and to maintain continuity, assimilation could not be avoided. The food habits of the East Bengalee migrants, as I have already mentioned earlier, were markedly different from those of their counterparts in West Bengal. This difference in some way created a gap that hindered any scope of assimilation, but the attempts to maintain the essentiality and continuity of food and foodways were not successful, for the created gaps were mitigated by food itself.

Here, I would like to focus on another aspect of food and the foodways that might help in clarifying how food and memories of food resist change and celebrate change at the same time. The process by which an edible item becomes food is the main factor that juxtaposes these oppositions. Any edible item that we grow in the fields or buy from the market is merely marked by its economic value and the quality of its edibility. But when that edible item is processed and cooked, we mix with it our emotions, feelings, legacy, and cultural values, which in turn make the product as well as the process of preparation dynamic and alive. Apart from this, a cursory look at Levi Strauss's premise on the socio-cultural aspect of food shows that food and food emotions are important aspects of cultural conduct and membership, which results in the creation of social, religious, or cultural groups that share the same food, cooking recipes, and gastronomic memories as well. These groupings also validate social hierarchies, which determine the status of good and bad, high or low, and finally prescribed and prohibited

Memories in Food, Food of Memories: Blurring Borders through Food and Foodways in *Indubala Bhat* Hotel

food. Edmond Leach, in his essay “Oysters, Smoked Salmon, and Stilton Cheese” in *Claude Levi-Strauss*, comments, “What Levi Strauss is getting at is this. Animals just eat food, and food is anything available, which their instincts place in the category ‘edible’. But [amongst] human beings, it is the conventions of society that decree what is food and not food and what kinds of food shall be eaten on what occasions” (29). These lines from Leach point out that the edibility of any food item is not the sole criterion for it to become food for human beings. Various social conditions, cultural criteria, religious rituals, and political discourses process an edible item into food. This dynamism that can be found in the processing of food enables it to combine both continuity and change.

It is now clearly discernible that food and foodways are important cultural markers of change and continuity, and they play a significant role in the formation of memory, both individual and collective. Memories of food are very often used in creative works, and it is evident that memoirs on food are very popular because they help the readers compare and contrast their memories of food and foodways. We all carry a rich storehouse of gastronomic memories, both as individuals and as part of our collective identity. These memories help us to review and relive our childhood memories, our personal histories, and the memories that are distant and near. However, memories of food and foodways are not always authentic and accurate representations of the past. Very often, our gastronomic memories are tinged with our emotions and desires, which add some extra dimensions to them. This is also because, as I have already mentioned, gastronomic memories are always dynamic and alive as cultural markers, which is why they are at times ambivalent and dissonant. Janowski pertinently connects this ambivalence of food memories with the trauma associated with migration and opens up a new critical vista that shows how memories of food connect the past, present, and future. She writes:

The inherent potential for complexity and ambivalence attached to food is particularly likely to surface in the context of change, particularly where change is traumatic. Migration is in some sense always traumatic, and we must therefore expect a particularly intense creative ‘work’ of ‘remembering’ to occur with migration. An important point to bear in mind is that while ‘memories’ of the past reflect feelings about the present, they are also used to create the future. Food is an important grist to the mill of future creation. It provides the potential for being used in a creative way, drawing on memories of the past to construct not only the present but also the future. (177)

The above observation aptly connects the trauma of migration, the dynamism of gastronomic memories, and its ability to draw on the memories of the past to build the present and future, and points to the scope of creativity. On this critical premise, I would like to posit a recent Bengali novella, *Indubala Bhat* Hotel, by Kallol Lahiri. Before entering into the exploration of the food and gastronomic memories of an old woman who established a pice hotel for livelihood, we need to delve into the title of the novella. Lahiri very pertinently used the word ‘bhat’ (rice) instead of ‘pice’ to emphasise the difference between Indubala’s hotel and that of other running pice hotels in Kolkata. ‘Bhat’ or rice is not only the main food in Bengal but it also has deep-seated cultural and religious associations. Earlier, I was talking about how an edible item becomes food. Interestingly, rice as a food item turns to *anna* or *bhat* when it is no longer considered as a mere food item, but something that sustains and nurtures. Primarily, *Bhat* or rice is the main food of Bengal, and it is symbolically connected to Devi Luxmi, the goddess of wealth, prosperity and peace. In South India worshipping the food is known as ‘*annapurneshwari uapasana*.’ Here, we find that *anna* or *bhat* is ascribed the status of ‘Ishwari’ or goddess. There is also the cultural practice of worshipping Luxmi in the form of paddy or *dhan* in Bengal. In Bengal, Devi Durga is worshipped as *Devi Annapurna*, the goddess, who feeds and nurtures. Therefore, the name *Indubala Bhat* Hotel immediately adds something

more than mere economic profit and loss of hotel business. She becomes Devi Annapurna, the goddess who feeds and nurtures. “*Buri ei boyese unaner samne ese jikhon korai pete daran sakshat Annapurna mene gor kore aneke*” (Lahiri 2017) (When Indubala approaches to cook, many people pay their obeisance believing her as Devi Annapurna).

Kallol Lahiri’s *Indubala Bhaier Hotel* traces the journey of a woman from being a naïve rural girl of Khulna to being a Businesswoman, who measures and maps her loss, separation, and desolation with the memories of food and foodways that are connected to someone she has lost. Apart from underlining the struggle for self-sufficiency of a widowed woman, who has to open this hotel for the sustenance of her family, the novel aptly points to how she walks down through her memory while cooking those items that she learnt from her mother and grandmother at Khulna. Thus, Indubala’s culinary skill not only calls into question the patriarchal assumption that trivializes, if not ignores, cooking as having no economic value, but also enables her to bridge the gap between her childhood and present time with memories. These memories are entirely gastronomic memories that connect river Kapotakshya with Ganga and a woman sails through her memories to arrive at her roots. A cursory glance through the novel depicts that Lahiri has structured the novel in such a way that the story moves on with certain food items, recipes, food patterns and menus that string in the story of Indubala, her struggles, memories and the ultimate success at the end. The various recipes that are remembered, told, and cooked by her are likened to the unique recipe that is preserved in the uprooted, diasporic minds that dream of going back to the root, but can never do so. Therefore, Indubala couldn’t board the train to Bangladesh when her son arranged a trip to her motherland. On the day of her journey, she arrived at the station, walked down to the platform and went near the train. But when she touched it, the train that was supposed to take her to her memories becomes too much real, and palpable. She felt that some memories remain better as memories. Reality kills the charm, that longing for the past, the desire to go back. Thus, Indubala returns to her Home-cum-hotel at *Chenu Mittir Lane* in Kolkata, which takes her back to Khulna through her kitchen.

At the very outset of this paper, I wrote about my grandmother, who migrated from East Pakistan. Very often, she used to talk about her life there and the loss that she incurred due to the relocation and then she used to console herself saying that she could not bring anything from there save the tastebuds, that nobody could take away from her. How pertinently she realised the power of gastronomic memories which she considered her only belonging that she could take while crossing the border. Probably, Indubala had the same feeling. All the recipes that she cooked or remembered are connected to some of her relatives, friends or acquaintances whom she had lost. But all those lost characters come alive in her memories when she cooks those items in her hotel. Indubala’s hotel, thus, becomes not just an enterprise of a struggling woman, but a storehouse of memories, the memories of taste, smell, and flavour. But all these memories that revolve around the life of Indubala are not from the other side of the border; her struggling life took her out of her domestic borders to the world outside. Her plan of opening a hotel was triggered by another woman, Lacchmi (Luxmi), the fishwife, who on her way back home found Indubala in a distressed situation being tormented by her relatives and money lenders just after the death of her husband. Lacchmi not only saved her, but also gave her the plan to arrange lunch for her and other sellers of the market nearby. And, thus, Indubala Bhaier Hotel started. The bonding between Lacchmi and Indu points to the formation of female solidarity which breaks because of the sudden death of the former in a rail accident. But this bonding also adds a new set of memories in Indu’s storehouse. These memories too have associations of food. The novel tells the story of Indu’s cooking *Kochubaata* (mashed taro roots), a special delicacy of East Bengal. Lacchmi wanted to have *Kochubaata* cooked by Indu, and she told her that she would bring them for her. When Indu went to identify Lacchmi’s dead body, she found some fresh Taro roots and a basket that had been brought for identification.

Memories in Food, Food of Memories: Blurring Borders through Food and Foodways in *Indubala Bhater Hotel*

Indu brought both the items with her. She, who never wanted to keep a single photograph of her dead husband, preserved those last items of Lacchmi with her. The very next day, she cooked *Kochubata* (mashed taro roots) and special green tomato chutney with lemon juice, which she later named '*Lachmi Chutney*,' for her customers. Thus, Indubala not only commemorates but also celebrates her bonding with Lacchmi with the memories of food that brought the two souls together. So, all those gastronomic memories are not brought from the other side of the border, some have their roots here also. Indubala and her memories of food, thus, connect the past with the present, thereby combining the root and the route.

Precisely, Indubala Bhater Hotel becomes Indu's room of her own, which is personal as well as her corridor through which she connects with the world outside. If her memories of food allow her to ruminate about her bygone days, the present hotel and the flourishing sale enliven the lost recipes. The present generation, who come to her hotel for lost and rare recipes write about Indubala and the exclusive food that she serves through their Facebook pages and blogs. Undoubtedly, the world comes to know about Indu's food, but what about her memories? Indubala's memories that she collected, preserved and cherished throughout her life remain her own. They not only enabled her to cross the border but also bridged the gap that the border creates. Her food recipes get wings through virtual social media platforms, but the smell of 'aam tel' (Mango pickle dipped in mustard oil), or chandrapuli (semi-circular moon-like sweets made of cream and coconut) that she got at Chenu Mittir Lane in Kolkata take her back to Khulna.

Notes:

1. By foodways, I intend to refer to the cultural, social, and economic practices associated with the production and consumption of food. Very often, it refers to the food habits, cooking patterns, and practices of a particular region, culture or community.
2. 'Bangal' and 'ghoti' refer to the social sub-groups amongst the Bengalees. Those whose families migrated from the newly formed East Pakistan at the time of Partition are known as 'Bangals,' whereas those whose families were staying in West Bengal at that time were called 'Ghoti.' The initial rift between these two sub-groups was primarily because the 'ghoti' people considered the 'bangals' as crass, uneducated and quite unfit for the Bengalee 'Bhadralok' society. Maybe the initial wretched condition of the migrants 'bangals' was the reason behind this peculiar segregation. Later, when these refugees managed to secure a comparatively stable social and economic position in society, this rift partially disappeared only to remain in the football ground and food habits. Interestingly, the 'bangals' are supporters of the East Bengal football club, while the 'ghoti' are believed to be the staunch supporter of the Mohun Bagan Club. On the other hand, while the 'bangals' prefer Hilsa (ilish) fish, the 'ghotis' love lobster (Chingri).
3. I got the idea from Monika Janowski's article "Food in the Traumatic Times..." The Polish word *ojczyzna* refers to the homeland. The idea goes back to the Partition of Poland by Russia, Prussia and Austria and is associated with a strong sense of nationalism of the Polish people. During the interwar period, when Poland as a nation-state did not exist, the Polish people were dreaming of an independent Poland which led them to a resistance movement against the Nazi occupation. Janowski writes, "For Poles who were not able (or chose not) to return to a communist-led country, *ojczyzna* took on yet another set of meaning. For these women it brings together a patriotic concept, and their memories of their places of origin." (332)

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Bio-note

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