

## **Chapter 5**

### **Culinary Healing In Divakaruni's Select Novels**

The pinched expressions of the cynical, world-weary, throat-cutting, miserable bastards we've all had to become disappears when we're confronted with something as simple as a plate of food.

– Anthony Bourdain

Divakaruni's women protagonists though in the beginning are portrayed as marginalized and suppressed, later turn out to become embodiments of empowered, resilient, and courageous beings. Through her deft craftsmanship, the author weaves together ancient story-telling strategies, myths, and folktales along with epistolary narratives and magic realism. Through her characters who are based in specific locales and are facing personal challenges, she manages to convey universal themes and touch the chord of common humanity and due to this reason, her fictional works resonate with one and all, irrespective of geographical boundaries, age, or gender. In most of her novels, it is not just the personal closure that her characters find at the end of their story, there is always a larger truth, a bigger perspective that the readers get to learn. She mentions in an interview to Girija Sankar, "For me, grace under pressure is when everyone comes together as a community; everyone is a protagonist and antagonist." From her own personal experiences – be it nostalgia for her homeland, childhood

memories of listening to folktales and mythical stories, near death experience post childbirth, traumatic aftermath of 9/11 tragedy, presence of spiritual Guru, and her weaving together storytelling sessions and culinary sessions to transfer cultural ethics and values to children – all find a space in her fiction. Her writings reflect conflicts, dilemmas, resilience, and resolutions of not only diasporic individuals on their migratory journey but also highlight common issues of the contemporary world and therefore, possess universal appeal.

The space meted out to the culinary in a typical Indian household is symbolic of the place that a woman occupies in the society. In a recently published article, Jug Saraiya, an eminent journalist with Times of India, has highlighted the commonly perceived role of Indian women – in the homes as well as in society, even in these contemporary times. In an article titled, *Ladies' room: The space we provide for women is an indicator of gender equality, or its reverse*, he mentions the deeply entrenched patriarchal notions that are still prevalent in our contemporary modern Indian society and how even the design of the house reflects the same. Describing his own experience of getting his house designed, he states that the award-winning architect, “unconsciously left behind a clue to his male identity.” While the other rooms were well-proportionally built, the kitchen was so cramped that it “seems[seemed] to have been added on almost as an afterthought”. He then elaborates on the reasons underlying this unintentional error made by the renowned architect:

In the Indian mindset, urban or rural, the kitchen space, and anything to do with cooking, is the domain of women, the mistress of the household, or a hired help who is generally a maid. Most men don't give the kitchen much thought, as our architect obviously didn't, judging by the hopelessly small dimension he assigned to it. The relative size of kitchens is *symbolic, or symptomatic, of the overall space that a society accords to its women.* (My emphasis)

Though he admits that the regressive notions have somewhat changed in recent times, as a society there is still a long way to go for an open and truly modern mindset to prevail. As far as job choices are concerned, Saraiya states, working women are now no longer expected to take up only "feminine" work options like teaching but can now avail of opportunities in defence forces and political offices as well. Yet, he observes that there is relatively less proportion of women as compared to men visible on any Indian street – rural or urban, at any given point of time. According to him, "The implications of this are obvious: *The proper place for women is at home, doing domestic chores like cooking,* public places being an unsuitable, if not downright hostile, environment for them." (My emphasis)

Quoting Juliet Kinchin, Robert Smith makes a similar observation about the limiting, marginal and restricting spaces designed for women implying that the symbolic value of spaces assigned to women signifies the privilege and position meted out to them in family and society. According to her a "political dimension" has always been there to

kitchen spaces and for centuries kitchens have been “poorly ventilated, shoved to the basement or annex”. She opines that kitchen areas have been duly ignored by design professionals as well because “it tended to be lower-class women or servants who occupied the kitchen space.”

Divakruni’s has expressed her dissatisfaction at women’s depictions in some of the Indian mythological texts. Whenever, Divakruni states, she listened to the stories of the Mahabharata, she was “left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women” (xiv) She used to wonder why that was the case, as there was no dearth of strong, complex female characters in the epic. It was the desire to retell the story of any of those powerful women characters from the woman’s own perspective that inspired the author to write the much-acclaimed novel POI, as she mentions in the Author’s note, “I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of men’s exploits. Better still, I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heart breaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it.”( xv) So, the focus, as she emphasizes, would be on the life experience, the questions and the vision of the ‘woman’ herself, and in the case of POI, it is the powerful and much envied Queen Draupadi who takes the centre stage.

### **Healing: Physical and Emotional Maladies**

This part of the chapter attempts to analyse the manner in which the culinary motif is evoked in Divakaruni’s fictional world to provide comfort and solace and healing to the displaced and marginalized

diasporic women characters. Reviewing BVG, the critic John Cheeran mentions that the characters in the novel “are linked through a fervent plea for love and understanding. Despite the essential errors that one is committed to make to give meaning to this wretched life, there is realization in the end that redemption is possible – merely in the things that comfort you”. The term ‘comfort food’ in fact has become one of the most trending words on the internet, especially during the post COVID times. In an article titled *Comfort food during COVID-19*, Kerry’s Senior Marketing Specialist Amy Devitt analyses grocery sales and market reports and the eating pattern during the pandemic times and comments on how nostalgia is connected to comfort food cravings: “The spread of COVID-19 is spurring insecurities about the future and feelings of fear and isolation as well as courage and unity. Through it all, one thing remains strong as ever: our emotional connection to food. Comfort foods offer consumers something soothing, familiar, and nostalgic. A majority of Americans report their favorite foods remind them of childhood, stirring up memories of a simpler, safer time.” An Indian Express article *Dal-rice, khichdi, soup: does comfort food actually comfort us?* highlights the underlying reasons for seeking solace in specific types of food during uneasy and uncertain times. As per the article, comfort food in a manner of speaking, provides “a personal anchor in a chaotic world” and it is possible that each individual, each ethnic group has its own idea of comfort food; it may be chicken soup for a certain community and *Pakodas* for another. For some people, specific dishes might remind them of their bygone happy

childhood memories, but for others it might be associated with a struggling period of their past. Whatever the case may be, “emotional distress – as has been widely experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic – is a natural trigger for many people to seek solace in food.” Interestingly, according to Google’s “Year in Search 2020”, most of the top searches for recipes was for carbohydrate-rich food like bread and naan. In the work titled *Emotions and Eating Behaviour: Implications for the Current Obesity Epidemic*, the authors elaborate on the connection between emotions and food and how sometimes eating certain specific foods promote positive effects:

While most work on comfort foods and emotions has been based on a model of negative reinforcement – using palatable foods to decrease negative emotions – Dube’, LeBel, and Lu point out that some individuals consume foods to induce positive emotions. . . . For example, men may be more likely to eat comfort foods to maintain or enhance positive emotions, whereas emotional eating in women tends to be driven by negative mood states. (Levitan and Davis 789)

In ancient Hindu tradition, food was considered as sacred and endowed with healing properties. In an article *Hinduism, Food and Fasting*, Jayaram V incorporates the translated quotes mentioned in the Upanishads that highlight the significance of food in our lives, “From food are produced all creatures which dwell on earth. Then they live by food, and in the end, they return to food. For food is the oldest of all beings, and *therefore it is called panacea*. (Taittiriya Upanishad) (my

emphasis) In the essay *Feeding their faith: recipe knowledge among Thai Buddhist women*, Penny Van Esterik, through various illustrations, establishes how culinary knowledge empowers Thai Buddhist women and enables them to occupy a central position in their society.

Food is the basis for interaction with the whole range of sentient beings who populate the Buddhist cosmos – the layers of hells, the realms of animals, guardian spirits, other humans, and deities, and the dimly perceived nothingness of nirvana. The links between givers and receivers of food are symbolic, and the manipulation of these symbols is in the hands and heads of women. Food offerings create and recreate the categories for conceptualizing the order of the cosmos. ... By defining categories of beings, and cycles of time, food interactions reinforce the total cosmology of Thai Buddhism and place women as key social actors at the centre of Buddhist action. (Counihan 100)

In QD, Rakhi derives immense strength and comfort from the small eating joint that she owns and Divakaruni emphasizes many a times in her novels how important it is for a woman to be actively involved in the pursuit of something constructive in order to stay stable and independent and not succumb to despair and depression when facing unforeseen hostile situations. Rakhi describes that how during the toughest period of her life, dealing with post-divorce stress and trauma, it was her passion for nurturing her café that empowered her and enabled her to stay focussed and channelize her energies in the right direction of growth and development:

Perhaps it's significant that the first thing that I managed to sketch after my divorce was a scene of the store's interior. It took me an excruciating three months and it wasn't very good, but at least I completed it without throwing it away, like I had done with all the others. I pinned it on my bedroom wall next to a sketch of Jona, and on bad days I drew comfort from its solidity. On those days the only thing that got me out of bed was knowing that without me they might not survive, my store and my daughter. (Divakruni 24)

Whether it is surviving in turbulent times, cooling tempers, cleansing, and stimulating organs, or enhancing complexions and skin tones, in the Indian set up, culinary is always woven with healing and therapeutic values. In SMH, Sunil and his autocratic father get embroiled in a feisty bout which lasts for a few hours, so the elaborate dinner prepared by his mother remains untouched. Later, Sunil and Anju are seen to be feeding on luchis (fried bread) and alu dum (spicy potatoes) and deriving healing and strength, much needed to face a volatile situation, from the culinary presence of the comfort foods brought all the way from the railway station. This is the first violent outburst they have encountered as a couple, and the culinary presence helps them bond together over this turbulent and testing time and enables them to plan to combat the impending scenario. (Heart 185)

This scene also sets up the tone for the future married life of Sunil and Anju.



In America too, in spite of the strained relations between them, when Anju becomes pregnant, Sunil pampers her with culinary affection, “Sunil comes home earlier nowadays. He’s brought home a stack of healthy-eating books from the library and often cooks for us, carefully balancing proteins and carbohydrates and using only extra virgin olive oil. Each day he makes me a drink of hot milk and crushed almonds, which he says will increase the baby’s brain power.” (Divakaruni 241)

Thus, the food semiotic acts as a healing, therapeutic tool that brings about some semblance of intimacy between the couple who are slowly starting to drift apart from each other. When Anju feels down and out after a breakdown, Sunil orders food from her favourite Chinese restaurant, The Golden Dragon, and that momentarily soothes her. As is stated in the novel, “Like a child I allow myself to be consoled by food and warmth, the voice of a loved one and his touch.” (Divakaruni 227). The transformative impact of food has been elaborated upon by Cammy Lee in his thesis:

Food can heal grievances, change our minds, will, and sense of freedom. And especially after a satisfying meal, food has the transformative power to reach emotions making most problems less daunting, more solvable, and approachable. As a material object then, food is highly charged and yet at the same time, without it we die: our survival, if not psychological, then emotional, and possibly even psychical depends on it.” (Lee 38)

During Sudha's brief stay with them, Anju derives considerable strength and sustenance, not only by Sudha's physical presence, but also her culinary expertise. As she constantly churns out mouth-watering, delicious Bengali dishes, it provides immense benefit to the ailing Anju and helps her stabilize and slowly recover from her physical and psychological condition that she had landed herself in in the host nation. Looking at it from the womanist perspective, Sudha assumes the role of the healer-cook-homemaker whose cooking not only nourishes Anju's physical body but also nurtures her personality. To bring her out of depression and coax her into resuming her college studies, Sudha yet again resorts to tempting or bribing her with authentic Bengali culinary indulgences. On re-joining college, Anju candidly admits that more than her college classes, what she mostly looked forward to being was coming back home where Sudha "will have a snack waiting, a khichuri made with rice and mung dal, a childhood favourite of them both, with a wedge of fresh lemon on the side. . ." (Divakaruni 54)

The shared culinary memories of their childhood are revived, and it can be observed how through the food motif, archetypes of home and homeland are foregrounded in the story and how Anju derives solace and strength through it. Apart from fulfilling the traditional expectations of women to be the nourishers and nurturers of the family, Sudha also helps transform the kitchen space into an empowering space, where Anju is able to regain her lost zest and drive and is able to resume college to pursue her creative writing goals seriously.

The well-known feminist author Bell hooks talks about the significance of the domestic space: “In our young minds’ houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place – the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learnt dignity, integrity of being there we learned to have faith.” (Hooks 55).

The terms ‘feeding’ and ‘nurturing’ have gained relevance once again during these post covid contemporary times, where people are becoming forced to accept the significance of maintaining healthy and disciplined lifestyle, not in order to achieve any health goal, but merely to survive. Once again ancient culinary gems are being unearthed and circulated amongst social media networks propagating the use of naturopathy and other alternative healing therapies and advocating bringing in drastic culinary changes as part of a newer healthier lifestyle to boost immunity. Naturopathy believes in treating and consuming food as one’s medicine and recommends incorporating farm fresh, seasonal fruits, green leafy vegetables instead of processed foods and off-the-counter vitamin supplements for curing diseases and healing oneself. (Bansal 116-118)

In MOS, the protagonist Tilo, hailed as the Mistress of Spices, is depicted as being instructed in the art of “spiceology”, where spices, “are used for more than flavorings. They have magical powers all their own, and they provide remedies for physical maladies as well as cures

for spiritual ills.” (Marcus, “The Spice of Life”) In Divakaruni’s fiction, her characters celebrate even a minor occasion by indulging in the culinary. In VD, Sudha’s culinary intervention acts as an ice-breaker which thaws some of the rigidity of her rich old client. When she discovers that Trideep’s father used to live near a tea estate in India, she decides to evoke the bygone memories of home and homeland by brewing his tea according to the recipe followed in the authentic Indian culinary culture; “She prepares it Indian style, the milk and water mixed together in a pan, the ground cloves and cardamom sprinkled in, lastly the tea bags – she has bullied Myra into buying a large box of Lipton’s Traditional Blend . . . She makes it strong, lets the fragrance weigh the air, stirs in sugar with a generous hand.” (Divakaruni 318). The tea semiotic has been effectively used here as the aroma of the richly brewed, strong Indian *cha* wafts in the home and overwhelmed by the associative memories, the old man reluctantly agrees to take a few sips.

Again, after weeks of refusing food, Sudha’s ‘patient’ finally gives in to her tremendous efforts and succumbs to the delicious culinary temptations prepared by her. In honour of this small victory, Sudha again turns to the culinary – she makes a “celebratory dinner: yogurt chicken, Basmati rice boiled extra-soft.” (Divakaruni 249) Later, Trideep and Myra celebrate the ‘good news’ of the old man beginning to eat by indulging in some fancy dining: “Matching napkins, white bone China, expensively thin crystal. Brass candlesticks shaped like peacocks. Trideep opens a bottle of Beaujolais.” (Divakaruni 255)

So whether it is cooking while setting out for a journey or cooking to celebrate an occasion, the culinary motif plays a significant role in it. It is interesting to note that Divakaruni herself confesses in her blog article “Just Having Written” that she herself follows a similar practice and indulges in culinary preparations to celebrate any happy occasion. When she had completed the draft of her novel BVG and submitted it to her publishers, she was ecstatic and so “To celebrate this euphoric state of just having written” she prepares Bengali-style-Stir-fried-Zucchini. She also reveals that while the writing process is on, her husband has to contend himself with dishes like steamed broccoli on a regular basis, and maybe on her “good days”, the modest Indian’s staple dish – khichuri.

According to Hinduism, food is verily an aspect of Brahman (annam parabrahma swaroopam). Because it is a gift from God, it should be treated with great respect. The gross physical body is called annamayakosh or the food body because it is nourished by food and grows by absorbing the energies from the food. Orthodox Hindus offer food to God mentally before eating. Food is identified with the element of earth. According to Prasna Upanishad, "Food is in truth the Lord of Creation (Prajapati). From food is produced retas (the sexual energy or semen) and from it beings are born." According to Manu, "Food, that is always worshipped, gives strength and manly vigour; but eaten irreverently, it destroys them both." Food should be eaten for the survival and strength of the body, with a religious attitude, to practice austerities and gain self-control, but not for pleasure. Eating is

therefore any other human activity which can be made into either a sacrificial act that would help in the liberation of soul or a mere pleasure activity that would lead to bondage and suffering. Even though in modern times, using cutlery to eat food has become the norm, there are still families, albeit very few, where the traditional ways of consuming food with hands is followed. This habit of eating meals with thoroughly clean hands has been mentioned in ancient shastras, and its relevance that was always appreciated by Ayurveda experts is also being highlighted by dieticians and nutritionists today. An article published by Times of India delves deep into the matter. It describes the how the formation of ‘mudra’, a yogic position, by the five fingers while inserting food in the mouth through hands, aids digestive powers. As the fingers touch the food, digestive juices are secreted, and this could be the reason for the food tasting better when eaten with hands. Luke Coutinho, who is a Holistic nutritionist, author and exercise physiologist, states: “Eating with your fingers helps your mind connect with your food better and you tend to eat less and more mindfully. Food tastes better when eaten with the fingers in a hygienic way . . . it is ancient Indian tradition and makes food more enjoyable . . . enjoying food is very important for digestion, and even absorption of nutrients.”

In the COVID times, of course, where immunity has become a mantra, everyone seems to be chanting, all digital social media as well as print and audio media is bombarding us every moment with new culinary concoctions that claim to boost our immunity and hence, keep the virus at bay. From blending long forgotten herbal ingredients with

contemporary food items, to mixing elaborate ancestral recipes with instant new age fixes, every article, podcast, health bulletin claims to have found the perfect culinary weapon that would arm and shield us from the fatal virus. *Golden milk, rotlos, kadhas*, which had become obsolete items especially for the junk food obsessed young generation, are now back under the spotlight and have now become household terms known to one and all. That is not all. Culinary abstinence has become as important if not more, than culinary intake. Due to the increased time spent indoor and that too mostly hunched in front of gadgets, the overall obesity levels have gone up and digestion related problems are on the rise, thereby increasing the risk of co-morbidities. In order to counter those risks, the health industry experts are instructing us to follow rules which have been prescribed in ancient ayurvedic texts centuries ago, such as – keeping long hour gaps between meals, avoid snacking etc so as to give ample time to the digestive organs to function optimally. As culinary habits often reflect other lifestyle related patterns, many celebrities of the film and TV industry, as well as other social media ruling Instagram celebrities who have huge ‘following’ are coming up with audio visual messages, and podcasts advocating a healthy lifestyle with specific meals set at specific time and season. The following ode to an important Indian food ingredient ‘ghee’ or clarified butter has been quoted on the website [www.livehistoryindia.com](http://www.livehistoryindia.com) and is originally mentioned in the sacred ancient Indian text called the Rig Veda. This ode bears

testimony to the fact that some of our food traditions that originated thousands of years ago are still widely used in most Indian households:

*These nourishing liquids flow together like streams, being purified within by heart and mind These waves of ghee rush, like wild beasts retreating from a javelin....*

*They float, like lovely young women to marriage assemblies, smiling, to Agni*

*The streams of ghee approach the kindling sticks. (Agni) delights, taking pleasure in them.*

*I keep gazing upon them, who are like maidens smearing on unguent to go their wedding*

*Where the soma is pressed, where the sacrifice is performed, toward that do the streams of ghee go purifying themselves.*

As per Hindu traditions fasting is an important purifying ritual considered to detoxify the body and the mind. Not only just the physical benefits, but values such as discipline, balance, self-control, and detachment are also developed in an individual who practices fasting regularly. Interestingly, Divakaruni herself has confessed in an article regarding matrimonial matters in India, how growing up she would practice culinary rituals such as fasting on specific days, along



with praying to certain deities in order to find a suitable partner for herself.

### **Healing and Culinary Rituals**

Our ancient texts are replete with numerous practices and rituals related to the culinary. From sitting in a cross-legged position while eating, using earthen pots for cooking, eating freshly prepared food to not conversing while eating – these and many more of such prescriptions have been handed over to us over the years. But in the blind pursuit of modern and convenient ways of contemporary hectic times, these long-standing culinary practices have been forgotten. From using plastic, aluminium, and non-stick cookware to consuming frozen foods cooked months ago and multitasking while eating, the new habits are the latest trends, and the earlier traditional culinary practices are considered obsolete in contemporary times. But health and nutrition experts as well as researchers in the field are proving that there was tremendous scientific backing to each of these practices. Though on the surface, it might appear that these ancient food related rituals are linked to specific religion and community, scientific research have shown the tremendous benefits gained from following these rituals. For instance, instead of eating fast food in a hurried manner or while walking around or text messaging or telephoning, if food is eaten mindfully, gratefully, and slowly, the overall digestion of an individual improves immensely. Even in the present Covid times, it has been recommended by all health organizations and medical authorities that

maintaining hygiene, repeatedly washing hands, mouth and throat gargling daily is the need of the hour. This insistence upon practicing oral and other hygiene has always been advised in our ancient sacred texts. Also, the use of turmeric and ginger and other spices and herbs has been propagated by the medical fraternity as well to increase immunity power of people and curb the spread of the virus. As every Indian is aware, most Indian households use large amounts of herbs and spices, ginger and turmeric being one of the most used ones. Hence it can be seen that most of the culinary traditions prescribed by our ancestors are based not on any superficial, superstitious, or religious ideas but on tried and tested, and now even medically proven scientific facts. Cooking in bulk to store for days ahead may be a boon for all modern working women, but as far as healthy practices are concerned, this is not recommended by any health expert who will opine that the nutritive value of such food will be considerably less, if not entirely lost as compared to freshly prepared food. Chanting a sacred mantra or offering food to the gods or idols before eating it is also a culinary ritual practiced in ancient times and yet these days, many people are realizing the medicinal benefits of sending positive vibrations to food positively changes the molecular structure of food as well as water and consuming such ‘positively charged’ meals work miracles. From recovering from chronic diseases to feeling energetic and active throughout the day, there are hundreds of instances where people will vouch for the fact that significant benefits were gained by making minor changes to the culinary practices they were following.

In Divakaruni's fiction, such rituals assist in foregrounding food as an active agency that reconstructs the archetypal home that provides the characters respite and refuge. One of the common culinary ritual frequently depicted in her stories is the tea ritual, which in a way, is the typical Indian indulgence where in one sips tea for numerous reasons – to freshen up in the morning, to socialize with friends, to impress guests with elegant tea crockery, to discuss matrimonial matters with potential suitors and their families or to just feel good and boost morale. In OG, when Korobi learns about the deception by her grandfather, she is feeling quite down and out and goes out into the bushes all by herself. The family cook follows her all the way into the bushes carrying tea and biscuits and the healing vibes start emanating, as is described in the lines:

“She squats down, holding out the steaming cup of tea and my favorite cream-filled biscuits. “Here, have some tea, baby. Tea always makes you feel better. And then tell old Cook what's wrong.” I'd expected to be too upset for hunger, but I find that I'm ravenous. I'm touched, too, by Cook's efforts. I'm about to give her a hug.... Then I dip the biscuits, innocent and delicious, in the tea, so they melt effortlessly on my tongue. (Divakaruni 57)

The pent-up emotions find a release due to the tender concern of the cook and the tea-biscuit combination and Korobi gains her appetite back, is overwhelmed by the kind gesture and is feeling better already. During Rajat's frequent visits to the Roy household, his driver Asif

becomes acquainted with the Roy house Nepalese gatekeeper Bahadur. At first Asif maintains his distance and slowly their friendship blossoms over shared tea. Asif is initially reluctant to strike a friendship with the old gatekeeper but later gives in to Bahadur's warm insistence and the two start to bond over shared tea and stories, as is described in the extract:

he would give a curt nod in response to the old man's effusive greeting, refuse his offer of garam garam chai with spices from Kathmandu, put on a pair of fake Armani sunglasses, and pretend to sleep. Through the rolled-down window, the scent of the tea, brewed with generous helpings of milk and sugar on a kerosene stove outside the gatehouse, assailed him.... When they returned, he asked bahadur, a trifle shyly, if he might take him up on that offer of chai. Soon they sat on the porch of the gatehouse, sipping, fanning themselves with old copies of the *Telegraph* and cursing the mosquitoes. Over the next nights, they shared dinner – the dal and coarse chapatis that Bahadur cooked, the fancier meal that Sarojini sent out to Asif. (Divakaruni 46)

Thus, tea bonding helps thaw the initial awkwardness between the two and helps them develop closeness over time and Divakaruni also ensures that through the culinary rituals practiced by the people, their class and status in society is also revealed and understood by the readers. Ahead in the story, when Rajat gets embroiled in a controversial face off with the factory workers and is feeling pressurized and pushed into a corner, the high-voltage situation is

diffused when a tea boy enters his cabin, “holding a tray with a cup of tea and a plateful of glucose biscuits” (124). After conversing with him for a few minutes, Rajat comes to know that the boy was concerned about him and so he is touched by this kind gesture. Tea and conversation have boosted his morale and he feels re-energized and rejuvenated enough to face whatever hurdles are awaiting him, as is reflected in these lines: “When the boy has gone, he finishes the tea and the biscuits and rises to his feet. He can handle things now, he thinks” (125). The physical healing aspect of culinary that is passed on from one generation to another and is part of common conversation, is clearly reflected in Divakaruni’s novels. In SMH, Anju’s mother-in-law has in-depth knowledge about the healing restorative benefits of various spices and herbs, and Anju vividly describes her mother-in-law’s elaborate preparations:

Sunil’s mother is a fervent cook. Like so many women, cooking is how she expresses love. [...] She manages to create dinners that are works of healthful art. Tonight she has made a musoor dal with green mangoes, which Sunil’s father says is excellent for cooling the temper – not that it helped him any. There is aged Basmati rice (easy to digest), mashed potatoes with steamed bitter melon (to cleanse the blood), and a curry of lady fingers with sautéed ginger (to stimulate the digestive organs). I’ve also brought in a raita of yogurt and cucumber (a rejuvenator) and a big plate of tangra fish, cooked crisp so they can be eaten whole (full of calcium). SMH 181 -182

Whether it is emotional or physical healing, food plays a significant role in the life of Indians in their homeland or host land, and Divakaruni's fictional characters bear testimony to the fact. MS is a perfect example of that where the 'mistress' Tilo's main occupation is that of healing emotional and psychological ailments by doling out the prescribed herbs and spices for the specific malady. Be it jealousy, insecurity, torture, or trauma – there is a reciprocal culinary remedy for it as is reflected in many instances throughout the novel.

### **Healing Hyphenated Identities**

As explored earlier in the study, through the purchasing, preparation, presenting, serving, and consuming food – the culinary space serves as a refuge and a comfort zone wherein familial and communal relationships are strengthened and physical and emotional maladies are healed. Further, an attempt will be made to observe how in Divakaruni's works, the culinary space becomes, in Bhabhanian terms, an 'interstice' where the displaced, uprooted immigrant settlers draw sustenance to rise up to the inevitable challenges of an alien culture and are empowered to form new, complete diasporic identities.

In most of her fictional narratives, Divakaruni evokes the journey motif and strategically uses it to depict the trajectory experienced by most Indian American immigrants. The physical journey is almost always accompanied by a parallel inner journey – where in her protagonists are on an inwards quest to seek answers to their own existential issues. The culinary helps these struggling displaced

diasporic women to traverse throughout the various stages of the arduous path and along with providing physical nourishment to the starved new settlers, the smells and sights of the food and kitchen space also nurtures them gives them a sense of home-away-from-home, helps heal the trauma so that over a period of time they are able to successfully assimilate in the alien culture.

Most of the women protagonists of Divakaruni – Korobi, Bela, Savitri, Tara, Rakhi are on a quest, be it inward or outward to reach out to unknown depths, uncharted destinations. This quest that maybe voluntarily undertaken by some and thrust upon by external situations in certain cases, brings these women out of their ‘shells’ so to speak, seek inner strength, arm themselves to combat situations for which they are totally unprepared, and, in this process, they find themselves moving from their hitherto marginal state to take the centre stage. Divakaruni comments on her popularity amongst women readers in an interview, “Women in particular respond to my work because I’m writing about them: women in love, in difficulty, women in relationship. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain because it will be harder to (be) prejudiced when they meet the in real life.” (The Border Book Festival)

In QD, the individual journey of the mother daughter duo Rakhi and Mrs. Gupta is effectively explored and intricately woven. While Mrs. Gupta, the mysterious dream teller embarks on a physical journey across the seven seas all the way from India to settle down in USA, her

daughter Rakhi, a second generation migrant is on an inward journey – trying to find a solution to the identity crisis she has had since childhood pertaining to her mother and motherland, struggling to excel at her art and earn a living through her small teahouse and trying to find stability as a young divorced single mother. Their respective journeys intertwine at times and Divakaruni adds just the right amount of mystery and magic to the tale thus keeping the readers mesmerized till the end.

It is noteworthy that in the novel BVG, the success Savitri refers to is related to the culinary field and the epiphanic moment is set in the kitchen space. The culinary has transformed into a space of refuge, where the women derive a sense of empowerment and endurance that helps them combat testing times, that enables them to stand firmly on the ground, without clutching on to any external agency. The inner power that is awakened is the result of their own hard work and so it is theirs to possess without owing any credit to anyone else. As Savitri found out when her lover's family kicked her out on the street and banished from their mansion, and Bela realized when her beloved husband Sanjay (for whom she left her family and came across all the way from India) divorces her suddenly, it is extremely important for a woman to be able to stand on her own feet. That is the only ray of hope against the vicissitudes of life, the only thing that offers stability and rootedness; otherwise, they are left totally vulnerable to the whims and fancies and shifting loyalties of partners, family members and well-wishers. Tara learns, belatedly, this much needed lesson from her



mother and grandmother's life. After reading the letter she feels, as though she has "... travelled halfway across the world without stopping" and she feels "strangely comforted, too" [ Goddess 206] She has understood that in the context of her grandmother's life, the problems, and issues she has in her own life are much simpler and less challenging. Tara realizes the value of this letter, the lessons her grandmother tried to convey to her, and she feels immense gratitude for this. This sense of being cherished by someone strengthens her and for the first time in her life, she finds herself returning what she had stolen, "a landmark moment" as she likes to term it in all her years as a kleptomaniac. [Goddess 202] Her feelings at having finally received the letter and finally feeling connected to her roots and her origin have been effectively described in the lines where she admits to herself that "the universe has given me an un-dreamed-of-gift. I must reciprocate." [Goddess 202] So she repays her 'debt' so to speak to the universe by displaying equal magnanimity and this small action of returning stolen things symbolizes her own 'return' to her inner sanctuary, to the inner source of her strength; her return journey to mend her ways, to seek solutions 'within' and not outside. The novel thus ends with a stronger and much-healed Tara, armed with her new culinary skills, emboldened by her own strengths, on the way to mending her self-sabotaging traits and chartering her own path.

Divakaruni uses the culinary narrative to evoke the archetypal journey motif, which reflects the quest of an individual for wholeness and individuality. Carl Jung's pioneering study on the archetype and

collective unconscious is a seminal work in the field of mythological studies. He applied the term “archetype” to what he called “primordial images, “the “psychic residue” of repeated patterns of common human experience in the lives of our very ancient ancestors which, he maintained, survive in the “collective unconscious” of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams, and private fantasies, as well as in works of literature. (Abrams 12). In Divakaruni’s fiction, while on the one hand we have the description of the outer, physical details of the protagonist’s journey, on the other hand we get the deeper perspective of the inner, psychological journey as well. On the surface, the chopping, the meticulous preparation, the serving of dishes and the act of eating – described in great detail, and simultaneously the inner dynamics – the agitation felt in the alien, hostile environment, the vulnerability, the exposure to racial discrimination, are indicated to the reader. Thus, the culinary theme reflects the latent psychological workings and helps navigate the physical journey in becoming a metaphor for one’s inward movement in the direction of self-awareness, wholesomeness, and self-individuation. In the book *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, the authors expand upon the term ‘Individuation’ that has been used by Carl Jung to denote the process where an individual becomes fully aware of his total personality, in the following lines:

Individuation is a psychological “growing up,” the process of discovering those aspects of one’s self that make one an individual, different from other members of his species. It is essentially a process

of recognition – that is, as he matures, the individual must consciously recognize the various aspects, unfavourable as well as favourable, of his total self. The self-recognition requires extraordinary courage and honesty but is absolutely essential if one is to become a well-balanced individual. [Guerin, et al. 204-205]

In QD, Rakhi's shifting culinary preferences from childhood to adulthood is symbolic of her assertion of her individuation process as well. During her childhood, she displayed fondness for pastas and pizzas – the typical American comfort foods and did not care much for her mother's Indian preparations. Eventually, however she develops a liking for Indian cuisine as well. And this shift is also in tandem where the shifting phases in her life – from a regular Indian teenager who is trying her best to assimilate in the American culture, she has moved towards being an Indian wife and mother and so unconsciously, perhaps, the culinary memories she has always associated with Indian tradition have come to the forefront. Her mother Mrs. Gupta has never displayed the typical Indian parents' authoritarian style of imposing their culinary preferences on their offspring. She understands that Rakhi's indulging in a certain kind of cuisine is symbolic of asserting her own individual identity by which she is associating herself – first with the American environment and then later with the Indian tradition.

The renowned American mythologist and writer Joseph Campbell, in his book *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, also emphasizes the psychological journey which corresponds to the physical journey

embarked upon by the 'hero' in the novels. As he explicates, " a hero is any male or female who leaves the world of his or her everyday life to undergo a journey to a special world where challenges and fears are overcome in order to secure a reward which is then shared with other members of the hero's community" ( Campbell 7) Campbell also applied Jungian psychology of the collective unconscious to propel the theory that as similar mythical events occur across geographical and cultural boundaries, it can be said that people across the globe have similar basic thought processes.

Most of Divakaruni's women protagonists embark on a journey – of one kind or the other. Anju migrates to America after her marriage to Sunil and Sudha is forced to leave India and flee to the US with her daughter due to the regressive patriarchal ways of the society; Korobi heads to the US in her quest to find her true parentage and authentic identity; Bela rebels against her mother's wishes and leaves her as well as her motherland to join her husband-to-be Sanjay in the US; Mrs. Gupta migrates to US after getting married to the love of her life and losing acceptance of her dream tellers family. Whatever the underlying reason might be, certain common patterns can be seen in the lives of these women. Along with the discovery of new ways of a new country, these women also discover their self-identity. While navigating the uncharted paths of the alien land, they themselves undergo tremendous change – in terms of self-education, maturity, letting go of any illusions they may be harbouring about themselves and their original culture. The psychological implications of the outward

physical journey are undeniable. Some characters like Rakhi, for instance, do not have to undertake any physical journey, but combat another kind of identity crisis – seeking to have a sense of authentic rootedness, while externally trying to establish stability and harmony in personal relationships with her father as well as ex-husband. The inner psychological journey that she is engaged into keeps fluctuating between bi-cultural pulls and other, post 9/11 community and race related issues. Finally, though she is able to find a middle ground and be at peace with ‘not’ knowing certain significant aspects of her life, be it her lack of complete understanding of her mother or her mother land, as she expresses the epiphanic moment when she receives the paintings as a gift from a mysterious stranger: “*They’re Indian – but in such different ways!* All this time she’s been putting boundaries around that word, too, what it can mean. Why, that word encompasses her just the way she is, with all the gap in her education, all her insufficiencies. *She doesn’t have to change to claim her Indianness.*” (Divakaruni 245) (my emphasis) In other words, she has arrived ‘home’, has learnt to be comfortable in her own skin, at peace with being herself – with all her incapacabilities – real and imagined ones. Understanding dawns on her that she does not need to make any external changes or efforts to feel or look or appear “Indian”; she is Indian enough without any external validation whatsoever. She has retreated into her inner sanctuary and has reclaimed her sense of identity.

In the thesis *An Appetite for Metaphor: Food Imagery and Cultural identity in Indian Fiction* the researcher Jennifer Burcham Whitt quotes Delmer Davis's statements from his "Food as Literary Theme" in which he says, "The centrality of food to human experience and to personal and cultural identity is mirrored in the food preoccupations of literature." [Whitt 2] This "centrality" gets amply reflected in Divakaruni's fictional works where most of her characters' epiphanic moments occur in the around the culinary space. The space often becomes the site which offer insights into the character's emotional upheavals, opening windows into their private lives and cultural complexities. In the novel *OG*, during factory workers - owner face off, Rajat has had to bear insulting treatment at the hands of the workers union, and so is in a sour mood. After being yelled at initially by Rajat, a tea boy named Munna confesses that he has not been sent by anyone but has come on his own accord when he noticed that Rajat had to skip lunch due to the skirmish. Rajat is touched by his concern and enquires about his favorite culinary dish. Munna gets excited at the question and gives an elaborate reply, "Mughlai parathas from the corner shop. Kesto fries them so crisp. The bread fluffs up like this, and he puts eggs inside, and green chilies and onions, extra if you ask. He'll even give spicy tomato sauce to eat it with." (Divakaruni 125) Rajat then offers Munna a hundred rupee note as a gift and tells him to buy parathas and sweets for himself and his family. Thus, the culinary motif is used to thaw the tense situation and it gives a moment of respite to Rajat's turbulent day, allowing him to breathe easy and look

at the bigger picture with a broader perspective. MH Abrams Glossary describes the word epiphany in the following manner: “

Epiphany means "a manifestation," or "showing forth," and by Christian thinkers was used to signify a manifestation of God's presence within the created world. In the early draft of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* entitled *Stephen Hero* (published posthumously in 1944), James Joyce adapted the term to secular experience, to signify a sudden sense of radiance and revelation that one may feel while perceiving a commonplace object. "By an epiphany [Stephen] meant a sudden spiritual manifestation." "Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object. . . seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany." [Abrams 80]

In QD, it is when Rakhi realises that she needs to revamp the café in a way that it reflects the real authentic Bengali culture that she can reverse the fortunes of her business venture. In Belle's life also we see how after years of indulging in the casual American dating scene, she finally feels like settling down with a traditional turbaned Sikh, who happens to have good culinary skills as well. In VD we see that Sudha, who is tired of depending either on her mother, in-laws, lover, friend, or acquaintance for the wellbeing of herself and Dayita, finally decides to take the plunge of returning to a new city in India as a nurse to Mr. Sen. In POI, when Draupadi is able to prepare a delicious first meal for

her husband in spite of the best efforts by her mother-in-law to the contrary.

In BVG, the moment when Sabitri creates her distinctive signature sweet dish all by her own painstaking efforts is very vividly described. After a long restless period of trial and error, when she finally approves a mango dessert of her making, she literally savours every bit of it. The softness, texture, proportion of sweetness – every little detail of the dish meets her own exacting standards, and she is overwhelmed by the magic of the moment, the moment she realizes that nothing or no one can bring you the sense of satisfaction that you derive from pursuing your passion and achieving success in it. The culinary success leaves her ecstatic, and it is one of the most cherished moments of her life which no external agency can take credit for. In OG, Korobi's bonding with Mitra's wife Seema also has a culinary association as it not only helps the two come together to form a unique friendship and help each other out in terms of need, but also helps thaw Mitra's animosity towards Korobi, albeit temporarily. Having cajoled the heavily pregnant Seema for an outside stroll, Korobi notices Seema staring lustily at mangoes at a store. Realizing that Seema might not want to buy expensive fruits like mangoes, Korobi decides to purchase them for her. That does wonders for Seema and Mitra too observes the positive change in her demeanour as soon as he steps inside his home. Buoyed by her improved condition, he finally gives Korobi the cell phone which he had been holding on to all that while in spite of the Boses' clear instructions that it was meant to be given to Korobi the



moment she landed in America. Thus, the culinary indulgence in this context is an epiphanic moment in the story as it brings about a sea change in Korobi's precarious situation, as she has not only gotten close to Seema but even her hostile husband has yielded momentarily and decided to finally reward Korobi with her long due cell phone, as is revealed in the extract:

We were eating mangoes and laughing about something silly when Mitra walked in. I became quiet because he is such a grinch, but Seema told him all about the walk and how the baby must have liked being outside, he kicked and kicked. Mitra didn't say anything; he just called her into the bedroom.... when she came out, she was holding a package in her hands, and it was my cell phone! Do you think he had it all this while and wouldn't give it to me, just to spite the Boses? But today when he saw I'd made his wife so happy, he changed his mind? (Divakaruni 137-138)

In BVG too, one of the most critical scenes, which is a turning point in the lives of all the main characters occurs at a food joint. Sanjay announces the tragic news regarding his upcoming divorce to his daughter at her favorite restaurant, just before she starts eating. She was excitedly sharing the experiences of her new college life and she had piled on her food in an arrangement that would enable her to savour her most favorite item for the last, when her father broke down his rehearsed speech about the impending separation. The graphic description of the food items arranged in the plate alongside Tara's

shocking expressions add to the tragic tone. He regrets his rash decision immensely for the rest of his life and berates himself for the pathetic timing of the announcement, wishing he could go back in time and at least let her complete her cherished dish before apprising her about his news.

Hyphenated identities abound in Divakaruni's novels. The plight of the second and third generation of the diasporic community is truly embodied in the character Tara, whose yearning for all things connected to her original culture translates into a strong feeling of deprivation that later transforms into stealing tendencies. Maybe the reason why she becomes a kleptomaniac is that she wants to 'consume' and satiate herself with whatever concrete object she fancies at a specific moment in the hope that she will feel a sense of completeness and stability, even if it is a momentary feeling. She has yearned since childhood for a sense of rootedness and wholeness, and her father's insistence on keeping her away from all things Indian is to a great extent responsible for her rootless existence. So, when she and her mother accidentally stumble upon an old picture of her grandmother Savitri, she is beset by the terrible urge to steal it away from her mother. Her craving has been described thus, "A familiar tingling begins in my hands and rises into my wrists, my forearms. I feel feverish and shivery. I want that photo. I want it so badly that my mouth goes dry. I must have it." [Goddess 197] She is conscious of the fact that it would be wrong of her to steal it away from her mother and she wants to distract herself in any possible way to keep herself away

from temptation but is quite helpless. As she tries to analyse her suppressed inner desire, she confesses, “It’s not just the craving. It’s also a sudden anger. *I could have known this woman, visited her, loved her, and been loved in return.* I might have been able to turn to her when everything in my life started to go wrong. Perhaps things would have ended up differently then. My mother kept me from all that.” [Goddess 197] [My emphasis]. These lines evoke her strong belief that had she known and had a close relationship with her Indian heritage, her family back home, she would have gained tremendous support which could have changed the direction of her life. Her craving for warmth, her need to be loved and cherished, her desire for close family bonding – all this is clearly reflected here. Stability, rootedness, and a sense of belonging is what she has been hankering after since childhood, and she admits it during a heated argument with her mother towards the end of the novel, “Do you want to know why I steal? I take things that *I should have had but didn’t get. Things that mean happy memories.* Things that stand for love and commitment. But sometimes I steal things that mean nothing. I steal them because there’s a big hole in the middle of my chest and stealing it fills it up for a moment.” [Goddess 204] [emphasis mine] The later years of her life, especially after her father abandoned her mother have been devoid of familial love and bonding and the early childhood years lacked traditional rootings in an authentic Indian environment, and thus she feels incomplete and rootless, neither fully embracing the western American values nor practicing any traditional Indian cultural ethical norms.

Seeking an identity is in fact the overarching theme in most of Divakaruni's fiction. In her paper on "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni", Sonja H. Streuber sheds light on this:

Divakaruni's major themes are centred on her desire to investigate the identity of Indian American women and the multiplicity of experiences-geography, culturally, psychologically, emotionally- that continue to shape and reshape it. Therefore, her works combine autobiographical stories about her childhood experiences in India and Hindu spiritualism with her experiences of American life, and a critical eye on how American Indian communities on the west coast. (68)

Thus, in most of her works we find her diasporic women protagonists out on a quest to seek their real identity, and this is no less true in Tara's case. The food semiotic plays a pivotal role here as well when she accidentally discovers her grandmother's culinary accomplishment and learns from it. At the end of the novel when she finally receives the letter written by her grandmother ages ago, the healing process starts. As she reads and re-reads the letter addressed to her and devours every word, the literal and underlying message in the letter and the concern her grandmother had for her begins to slowly sink in, and she starts taking responsibility of her situation and her actions. After the letter, she gains enough strength to return the letter back from where she had stolen it, and this is the first time in her life that she has kept back what she had grabbed when no one was looking. The letter of course traces back Savitri's own struggles and travails, her over-

vaulting ambitions and the repercussions following it. But the incident mentioned in it that has the deepest impact on Tara is the one describing the culinary success that Savitri achieved one day while experimenting with a new confectionary recipe. The satisfaction that Savitri derives after she has created her signature sweet means more to her than anything else she had felt till that moment. As Savitri admits in the letter, she was completely overwhelmed with the new recipe that she had perfected, “This was something I had achieved by myself, without having to depend on anyone. No one could take it away.” [ Goddess 208]

That sense of achievement, of having accomplished something great without taking any help or favour from anyone that Savitri describes is what she wanted her beloved granddaughter to experience too. So, the letter, while evoking special bygone culinary memories connected to her country of origin, also lends proper perspective to Tara, who realizes how tough it is for ordinary women to get opportunities where they can create their own independent life, carve their own niche, their own space. Further introspecting on the matter, she admits that she is indeed in an enviable position in the society where she is privileged enough to chase after her dreams and avail of the best opportunities the world has to offer. And this change in perspective will eventually bring about a change in her life as well.

The culinary semiotic employed in this case helps bring about a positive change in her and the signature dish of the grandmother with

its associative memories and emotions provides some sense of cohesiveness to the disjointed life the second generation Indian American and shape her identity. Cutting across continents, the food metaphor is used by the author to evoke the archetype of home and homeland and become an active agency that heralds a new beginning in the diasporic subject's life by continuing to nurture and live on in her memory. Also, from the womanist perspective, it can be looked as an acknowledgement of the nurturer-healer-cook woman because it celebrates the grandmother's culinary accomplishment and its contribution to the future generation.

### **Narrativizing Identities**

In Divakaruni's narratives, food performs multiple functions – it is a comfort zone, a buffer, a mediator, a crucible, an interstice, and a location. The culinary narratives that the author weaves around the lives of her diasporic characters enable them to create empowering narratives for themselves and establish their own unique identity. According to O'Neil, the term Narratology was used by Tzvetan Todorov “to designate a systematic study of Narrative firmly anchored in the tradition of the Russian and Czech formalism of the early twentieth century and French structuralism and semiotics of the sixties” (13). In the words of Gerald Prince, narratology is “the study of form and functioning of narrative” and that “it refers specifically to the theories of narrative structure” (4). The distinguished French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) came up with the concept of

‘narrative identity’ and ‘narratives’ and these have been applied across varied fields such as psychology, literature, psychology, medicine, anthropology and hermeneutics. He states that “this narrative interpretation implies that a life story proceeds from untold and repressed stories in the direction of actual stories the subject can take up and hold as constitutive of his personal identity. It is the quest for this personal identity that assures the continuity between the potential or inchoate story and the actual story we assume responsibility for.” (Narrative 74) He further goes on to explain how the way individuals construct narratives for themselves and others is inextricably connected to how they interpret their own identity and consequently their own life. Explicating the terms ‘emplotment’ and ‘narrativisation’ Ricoeur explores the manner in which our lives function within a framework of narratives – created by self or by others and how over the years these personal or public narratives that get woven around us start determining our personal and public identity. In other words, all of us to an extent are simultaneously creating narratives as well as functioning within the existing narratives. Divakaruni strategically develops the culinary motif within the narrativist frame. The narratives that her women protagonists weave for themselves empowers them, heals them and enables them to find completeness in their hyphenated lives. In QD, the story begins with Rakhi’s narrative about her shortcomings as a less endowed daughter, a divorced wife, a single mother and a struggling artist. Slowly as the story progresses, and especially after the death of her beloved mother, it is her father’s

culinary and conversational skills that bring about a transformation in her personal as well as professional life. She is finally able to weave an empowering narrative for herself and now visualizes a revamped authentic Chai House “with the tastes and smells of the old country...” (Divakaruni 172) In VD, the marginalized powerless single mother Sudha through her resourcefulness and culinary expertise, is able to weave an entirely new narrative for herself even during her brief stay in the US and is able to return back to India with a well-paying ‘job’ at hand and a secure future for her daughter. In BVG, the readers get an insight into Tara’s narrative about her imperfections, which she is convinced are the underlying reasons that she is not worthy of being loved by men. It is only towards the end of the novel that she starts being at peace with herself, taking charge of her ‘issues’ and this is possible only after she decided to change the ‘narrative’ she has woven around herself and others all these years, right from the day she is informed about her parents impending separation.

The authors Boutaud, Becut and Marinescu interestingly note in the introduction to their article titled *Food and culture. Cultural patterns and practices related to food in everyday life. Introduction* that “Bringing on stage cultural values, food becomes a central identity marker, defining personality, social class, lifestyles, gender roles and relationships, from family, to community, to ethnic groups or nationality, changing through time and place. To come to terms with one ‘s hyphenated identity in the host nation is an arduous task and adapting one’s taste buds according to one’s geographical location is



an important step in the overall adaptation to the culture of the host country as cuisine, culinary and culture are interconnected. “In QD, the protagonist Rakhi’s statement to her mother that “as long as there’s fresh bread in this world, things can’t be beyond repair”, conveys her fondness, attachment to the American culinary item and the positive vibes she associates it with (Divakruni 22). Though her mother nods her head in response, Rakhi is acutely aware of what she really feels about this, as she can read her eyes which convey, “My poor Rakhi, to place so much belief in bread! (Divakruni 22). This exchange depicts not only the culinary preference of different generation but also the symbolic associations that accompany the cuisine.

Post the 9/11 accident, the diasporic community members start gathering regularly at her Kurma House and her own circle of family and friends start bonding again. Similar to the grocery store in MS, the snack joint in QD becomes a refuge not just for the traumatized and victimized migrants from various ethnicities. The Kurma House starts functioning as a microcosm for Indian presence in the adopted country where diasporic members of diverse marginalized communities derive solace and strength. The author strategically portrays the culinary presence as an empowering agency that establishes a connection across the interstice of race and forges strong bonds between the communities sharing similar value system and cultural traits. Evoking the archetype of home and homeland, the food motif helps reconstruct the utopia of a lost home that is warm and safe, a sacred space where wounds are

healed, self-esteem is enhanced, long lost cultural bonds are realigned, renewed and restored.

Apart from the collective and national, food semiotic also helps construct and sustain the personal narratives of the hyphenated diasporic characters. Over shared food and stories, Rakhi's personal healing process also starts, and that starts manifesting in her passion for her art too. Divakaruni has used very stylized language to reveal how Rakhi's obsessiveness with 'Indianness' and her feeling of incompleteness over her lack of knowledge and experience of Indian culture, has slowly started to reduce. The break down and then rebuilding of her culinary space has initiated the rebuilding of her own life as well as her reshaping of own relationship with all things Indian, as is lucidly described by the author while narrating Rakhi's introspection on receiving the mysterious paintings,

She'll never know who sent her these paintings, but she has no doubts as to why they were sent. They've exploded the boundaries she had put around what art must be, and given her possibility... She doesn't have to change to claim her Indianness; she doesn't have to try to become her mother. Things are breaking down inside of her. She waits to see if she can build new, satisfying shapes from them. (Divakaruni 245)

Thus, the culinary space directly or indirectly assists these women diasporic characters in turning their life around by weaving empowering narratives about themselves.

## Healing Relationships

Apart from highlighting identity issues and curing physical and emotional maladies, the food and kitchen semiotic has been effectively used by Divakaruni in exploring the shifting dynamics of the relationships. In the novel QD, Sonny, who is a well-established US based DJ with a non-traditional upbringing has a clear fondness for authentic Indian cuisine, so much so that post Mrs. Gupta's demise, when he invites Rakhi over, he uses the traditional recipes handed over to him by Mrs. Gupta and painstakingly prepares the meal. The first meal that her ex-husband Sonny fixes for her has been described elaborately by Divakaruni as it is symbolic of the effort that he is taking towards mending his relationship with Rakhi as well as his genuine concern for her well-being post her mother's death. Rakhi is suitably impressed when she comes downstairs and finds "the table carefully laid for dinner: a real tablecloth, blue willow-pattern China, a vase of lilies, covered dishes." She is touched by his tender caring gestures as she admits to herself, "I can't remember the last time someone decorated a table with such care, just for me." (Divakaruni 136)

The food semiotic transforms the kitchen area into a space where new familial bonds are being formed, and old ones are being strengthened. The meal is symbolic of Sonny's attempt at renewing old ties, healing old grudges, mending bridges with a slight hope of restarting a better innings. The story has numerous instances where Divakaruni depicts

the domestic sphere comprising especially of the food and kitchen space as a microcosm of unity, completeness, and wholeness. Even beneath the underlying tensions in the Gupta family and the strained relationship between the husband and wife due to Mrs. Gupta's unusual work that involved interpreting dreams, the few good memories that Rakhi had regarding her childhood revolved around the dining space: "At dinner Father admired the creative shapes we'd made and said it was a meal at once delicious and instructive. he cleaned up the kitchen afterward, humming a Hindi song as he scrubbed the sink with Comet, his hands encased in neon yellow rubber gloves." (Divakaruni 8)

The food semiotic evoking the archetype of home and homeland, transforms the space into a warm and safe haven where young Rakhi feels nurtured, cherished and protected. Being aware of Rakhi's dissatisfaction about the intimate matters regarding her parents, Mrs. Gupta does not directly give any answer to her questions. She engages the disgruntled Rakhi in a fun cooking session to smoothen out the tensions; "She had never made ravioli before, but she looked it up in a cookbook. We spent the rest of the afternoon rolling, crimping, stuffing dough with cheese. The ravioli turned out lumpy, and the kitchen was a disaster, sauce smeared everywhere and shreds of cheese underfoot, but we were delighted with ourselves." (Divakaruni 7)

Here, the portrayal of Mrs. Gupta, who negotiates and absolves sensitive matters through the culinary metaphor, can be seen from the womanist perspective where she plays the role of an ideal cook-

homemaker-healer role. By subverting the domestic sphere assigned to most Indian women into an empowering, nurturing space, where the woman assumes central position, Divakaruni emphasizes the significance of the food motif, raising from a feminine task to a womanist text.

After the 9/11 attacks, when Rakhi is temporarily reunited with her daughter and ex-husband and the three enjoy a meal together after ages, the description of the kitchen space evokes nostalgic memories of warmth and homely love as Rakhi confesses to herself “Sunshine floods the kitchen, loosening my muscles. I feel warm and fuzzy and pleasantly full. I could commit to doing this every once in a while. Even if we can’t be a happy family 24-7, we can be it in bits and pieces.” Dreams [214] The culinary space here becomes the family space where safety, trust and affection abound and acts as a shield to protect them from any outward danger. Also, when the Kurma House is attacked and Rakhi’s family is terrified, her ex-husband Sunny stays over at her place and after ages when she cooks for him, it’s not just the aroma of the dishes that uplifts the ambience but the coming together of the whole family at this crucial critical juncture really goes a long way on boosting their morale and bringing them together. Food and the kitchen space thereby becomes an empowering agency that helps them strengthen their bonding, re-ignite their affection for each other, regain their shattered confidence as described... “... there’s a warmth to being in her small kitchen, Jona and him and herself crowded around the countertop, chopping green onions, sautéing

chicken with ginger...” [Dreams 276] A few weeks later after the accident, when Mr. Gupta is slightly better, and is aware of Rakhi’s work related stress, he employs his culinary skills and whips up a simple but nutritious breakfast for her, surprising her quite a bit. He lays down a table for her with her favourite fruit – melon, French bread, scrambled eggs, and orange juice and while serving her he expresses his desire to accompany her to the store so as to ease her burden for the closing down.

Thus, the culinary space becomes not only a space of nourishment and recovery, but also a space where positive exchange of ideas happens, and relationships start getting mended; where healing take place at multiple levels – physical, mental, and societal. Further we see Rakhi and her father’s strained relationship begins to heal during the late night conversations on the dining table after her mother’s death that the reconciliation takes place and slowly the new equation starts getting formed and the camaraderie starts building up ... .The dining area becomes the place where for the first time Rakhi gets an insight into her father’s side of the story, how and where he picked up his culinary skills back home in Calcutta. This newfound knowledge of her father’s past coupled with Rakhi’s own creative insights helps them revamp their café Chai House and turn it around from an unprofitable venture to a fairly successful one. (189)

Rakhi’s friend Belle is quite clear in her desire to abandon the ways of her original home country. From her attire, to her independent thinking

to her dating history and most importantly her culinary skills and food preferences, she leaves no stone unturned in proving to the world that she aligns completely and unapologetically to the modern American value system, that she will not be lured into her parents “safe Sikh nest” (Divakaruni 16) and for that purpose she has shed the “last vestiges of her desi-ness” (QD 15). She makes no bones about her dislike for the patriarchal expectations of her home country. As she confesses to Rakhi one time about her fears that her parents will “probably arrange my marriage to one of those upright young Indian farmers.... I can just see myself ten years from now, shrouded in fat and a polyester salwar kameez, a passel of snot-nosed brats hanging on to my dupatta, rolling out makkhi ki rotis for all my in-laws ...” (Divakaruni 27) The culinary motif is yet again employed by Divakaruni to carry forward the subplot of Belle’s love story. The young Sikh man, Jespal, is sent by her parents to deliver her a box of Indian grocery and herbs, which she refuses to accept citing “vegetable guilt” as the reason. As she informs him, she has no idea and zero inclination to cook the Indian dishes; in fact she admits she is clueless about most of the ingredients anyways. Her blatant refusal to accept the care package sent fondly by her parents provokes the man to retort that as she doesn’t know how to cherish the gift and considers herself “too cool to care about old-fashioned concepts like respect” for elderly people, he is going to take that package and use it all by himself. (Divakaruni 158-159). He stays on, lends a helping hand in the kitchen, and assists Mr. Gupta in making authentic Indian tea and

pakoras for the stressed-out ladies. Thus, the culinary space becomes a space where positive energy exchange takes place, where new relationships are formed, and new paths are discovered.

Over Indian tea, snacks and Indian songs being hummed by Rakhi's father, a warm and cosy ambience is created thereby reducing the gloomy energy of the impending closure of the shop and transforming it into a creative rejuvenating space. The flirtatious banter between Belle and her admirer, especially related to Indian cuisines and cooking practices keeps continuing for few weeks, until the two start dating each other seriously. The Sikh man has been portrayed as a modern bearded man proudly upholding the values of the Sikh religion, having culinary knowledge of traditional Indian Punjabi cuisine and slowly Belle too gets attracted to his persona.

In BVG, Pia – the daughter of the rich Bose family is very attached to her chauffeur Asif Ali, who reciprocates the genuine affection and is depicted as being caring and protective about her as she reminds her of his long dead younger sister. So, the two are quite upset when due to certain adverse circumstances Ali must suddenly quit his job. When on her birthday, they accidentally come across each other one evening, Pia, much against the wishes of her elder brother, goes out of the way to greet him and then gives him a really expensive pastry. Ali is overwhelmed as he discovers that her family's suspicion and anger on him has not diminished her trust and fondness for him. The food motif here signifies emotion and feelings of genuine respect and concern for



two people belonging to different religious ideology, age, class, and status as can be observed from the passage describing how Ali savours the pastry, “Asif takes a small, appreciative bite of the pastry, then rewraps it in the crinkly gold paper it came in and places it delicately in his pocket. Paper-thin layers of crispy dough, soaked with honey and studded with crunchy nuts. It’s delicious and different, the best thing he’s ever eaten, mostly because Pia-missy gave it to him, she’s probably being scolded for her generosity right now . . . Asif has a small fridge in his room, empty so far because he eats in the servants’ kitchen; he’ll save the pastry in there and eat it a tiny bit at a time. (Divakaruni 236 – 237) The food motif here can be seen as an active agency that brings people together, cuts across boundaries of class and religion, heals troubled relationships.

### **Healing Communities**

Divakaruni beautifully portrays the food motif as not only assisting the diasporic community at an individual, personal level, but also at an outward, societal, and communal level. Food helps blur the lines between the homeland and host land. As per Roland Barthes, the numerous activities involved in the culinary space – from purchasing raw ingredients to the techniques and rituals followed in preparing and serving it, each and every factor functions as a ‘signifier’. Hence the culinary space can be categorised as one that unifies and enables people of common ethnicity sharing similar food and eating patterns to form their own sub-culture in the host country.

Divakaruni uses the food motif to depict the manner in which communal and societal bonds are intricately connected to and strengthened by the culinary strain. In today's digital age, there are limitless online communities revolving around food which have sprung up and one can witness the insatiable appetite for food related images as the internet is flooded with food-centric content. As Jenny L. Herman analyses in his article #EatingfortheInsta, "At each stage and scale, food-related images on Instagram reinforce and potentially challenge certain socio-economic norms. These culinary posts function as digital self-representation, simulation of social belonging, and reinforcement of social class norms."

In QD, over a period, the café changes from merely being a place where tea snacks are served to a space with authentic Indian ambience where snacks were prepared from scratch, according to traditional Indian recipes and old Hindi film songs were sung and old filmi music was recreated. The café starts getting regular clients-cum-musicians in the evenings and their happiness at being at the café and creating music has been described by the author: ". . . what comes across most powerfully as they make music is their joy at discovering, like an unexpected oasis tucked into an arid stretch of dunes, something they thought they'd never find here in America." (Divakaruni 196) The uniqueness of the café, what sets it apart from other regular joints is its successful recreation of the authentic Indian ambience and it is this that pulls in their loyal client base. The culinary space has not only benefitted the immigrant owners' families but has touched the lives of

so many others by becoming an “oasis” in the arid dunes of the alien American land. The place rejuvenates the displaced people, helps them reconnect with their long-lost homelands, recharges their worn-out batteries, so to speak, and re-energizes and motivates them to accept the new challenges that await them in their adopted country. In fact, the bond that is forged between the regular customers and the owners is so strong that when an accident takes place at the café, most of them step forward to help out in whatever ways they can and that keeps the shop from shutting down. They set up a makeshift stage for the performances which is dismantled later on, and to restore the some of the stuff ruined in the mishap, they bring objects like – bells, rugs, mirror from home “My Kurma House (but was it ever mine?) is suffering a sea-change, growing into something very different from what I had envisioned. I feel as if I’m losing control. But when I calm down, I find that I quite like the creature it has become, this many-chambered nautilus.” (Divakaruni 240) The culinary space thus plays a significant role in shaping the lives of many immigrants, who have started looking at it as their space rather than just a place to visit. It has become a source of comfort and intimacy for them, their home away from home, where they can freely indulge in nostalgic memories of their home countries and reminisce about their migratory journey along with making new fond memories.

Rakhi, who at one point was anticipating a complete close down, is now pleasantly surprised at the turn of events. Her relationship with her father is also getting better and the same can be said about her

culinary skills, As compared to her earlier experiments in the kitchen, she is now becoming adept at stuffing the singaras in the perfect manner, surprising her father in the process. One day, her father suggests that instead of charging customers for each and every little snack they order, they should start charging a minimum amount, like in a buffet. He wants the customers to decide how much they want to voluntarily pay for whatever they've eaten and just put the cash accordingly in a bowl kept for the purpose. Appalled by the idea at first, Rakhi later gives in to the "honor system" scheme concocted by her father who opines that this "makes everyone feel trusted and doesn't disturb the musicians." (Divakaruni 241) Later, she has to admit that even though she didn't trust them, eventually she realizes that the customers have actually paid more than usual and so Kurma House ends up making more profit that way. Her father digs into the underlying reason behind the customers generosity, "It may be that Kurma House International has become more to them just a place to pick up something to eat. Maybe because they helped rebuild it, they feel it's theirs. They don't want to lose it. So, they're doing their bit to ensure we stay in business.". (Divakaruni 242) By evoking the archetype of home and homeland, the culinary space has strengthened the ties of the customers with the collective past, shared heritage and reminded them of their mutual history and traditional experiences and hence made them feel more rooted than ever before in the alien nation. Sarah Sceats in her book *Food, Consumption and the body in*

*contemporary women's fiction* explores the role food and eating play in identity formation and studies the social implication of cooking:

“The socially constructed significance of food is many-layered, and increasingly multicultural. Peter Farb and George Armelagos claim that since eating is something we normally do every day, it is a major means of self-definition, as well as important channel for the transmission of culture, eating habits being the most conservative of behaviour patterns. eating is influenced, they claim, by the whole cultural system: by the means through which a society adapts to and exploits its environment; and by ideology, the worldview of the society. (Sceats 125)

It is quite common to see Indian community members gather to celebrate social and religious functions. The warmth and shared camaraderie over-elaborate Indian cuisines help the immigrants find their bearings in an alien set up. M. Sotomayor highlights the ethnic identification experienced by diasporic individuals in his article “Language, Culture and Ethnicity in developing self-concept”: “Ethnic identification is nothing but identification or feeling of membership with others regarding character, the spirit of a culture or the cultural ethos, based on a sense of commonality of origin, beliefs, values, customs, or practices of a specific group of people.” (195) Erikson also highlights the significance of social identity when he states that it comprises of “a sense of being at one with oneself” while simultaneously being connected with the historical and mythological

aspect of one's community. Annual and other periodic community events organized by the diasporic communities reinforce and celebrate cultural cohesiveness and the culinary aspect inevitably plays the central part in this: "Such keen connection between food and national or ethnic identification clearly indicates the truth that cuisine and table narrative occupy a significant place in the training grounds of a community and its civilization, and thus, eating, cooking, and talking about one's cuisine are vital to a community's wholeness and continuation" ( Xu 19) Divakaruni's writings offer ample proof for proving how the culinary conveys deep physical, emotional and social significance and aids in healing at all these levels as well.

As a historian of American eating habits, Donna R Gabaccia writes in his essay, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, "Psychologists tell us that food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with the greatest reluctance. Humans cannot easily lose their accents when they learn new languages after the age of about twelve; similarly, the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort." (6) Arjun Appaduarai 's comment that "Food can be used to mark and create relations of equality, intimacy, or solidarity or, instead to uphold relations signalling rank, distance, or segmentation. This can be illustrated by looking at the use of food to communicate different types of class through consumption." also highlights the way culinary is deeply connected to class and status related matters in society.

Whether it is the cutlery used, the manner of serving, the table décor, the number of courses served or the seating arrangement – all such surface details actually contribute to conveying the underlying deeper meanings. Divakruni in the novel OG, has effectively explicated this by depicting realistically. Thus, we see how in elitist society, important business and political deals are managed over meals. The elaborate dinner prepared by the rich-but-facing-financial-challenges Bose business family. From the choice of drinks, main course to the dessert prepared by Mr. Bose himself, every subtle move made by the couple is to impress the politician guest of honour, Mr. Bhattacharya, and his wife, whom they hope to impress enough to get him to invest heavily in their project. Realizing that this dinner could make or break an important deal, Mr. and Mrs. Bose resort to every trick in the book to win the politician's favour. And the culinary aspect – each element of it, plays a crucial role in the matter. Simon Stano in her acclaimed work highlights the contribution of Mary Douglas in establishing a connection between culinary and *social codes*: “The opposition between meals and drinks also reflects differences in social relationships: drinks are generally available to strangers, acquaintances, and family. On the other hand, meals are reserved for family, close friends, and honoured guests.”( Stano 35) From the recess lights and the sophisticated dining table arrangements to the western menu and exquisite cutlery, the Boses leave no stone unturned to ensure that the right message gets across to the potential investors – that the Boses are not facing any major financial crunch, at the same

time they are not too well off either and would be highly obliged if they were to get a significant contribution from Mr. Bhattacharya. To ensure that just the right impression is made, Mrs. Bose has toiled and planned for the much-anticipated negotiation-over-dinner event at their home, as is revealed, “With this in mind, she has chosen her second-best Wedgewood set rather than the Spode. the goblets are glass, not crystal, the tableware merely stainless steel. She hopes she has not made a mistake. The menu is Italian, accompanied by French wine.” (Divakaruni 140) As the following extract from the book *Food and gender: identity and power* explicate: “In many cultures, the exchange of food is a most profound way of making social connection. Mauss (1967) has shown the pervasive cultural power of the gift which keeps individuals constantly indebted to each other and continuously engaged in positive interaction through giving. Food is an extremely important component of reciprocal exchanges, more so than any other object or substance.”

As discussed in the last chapter, many a times the mythic framework woven is with the culinary in Divakaruni’s fiction and that is also strategically used to bring about healing of the community. In QD, the day Rakhi’s shop is inaugurated, it is the ex-husband Sonny who requests his friends and clients to become the first customers at Kurma House, and the camaraderie he shares with Rakhi’s father over snacks impresses on an all present for the occasion. The author interestingly brings in the mythical reference to the coveted Indian culinary dessert – namely the rice pudding: “. . . reciting the history of various dishes.



The rice pudding, he says, is one of the oldest desserts of India, mentioned even in the Ramayan. It is what the gods sent to King Dasharath's barren queens to make them fruitful. He points to the laddus and informs Sonny's friends that they are made from the same recipe that Duryodhan's cook used in the Mahabharat to lure and poison his cousin Bheem – minus the poison, of course.” (Divakaruni 189). The three genres of mythology – myths, legends and folktales are used strategically by her in her fictional works to create a female universe. These mythological and culinary references woven together help in forging a deeper bond within the community who can relate to and associate themselves with these prevalent myths and legendary stories belonging to their home culture. In MS, along with an incident involving ‘devas’ and ‘asuras’ the origin and properties of ‘turmeric’ are also declared “I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when the *devas* and *asuras* churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the nectar and before the poison and thus lie in between.” (Divakaruni 13). Describing the unique properties of the sesame seeds along with mentioning the heavenly dancing girls in Lord Indra's court, Divakaruni narrates the conversation between the First Mother and Tilottama regarding the significance of her name and how it, “takes on the name of the most beautiful apsara of Rain-God Indra's court. Tilottama is the most elegant of dancers, crest-jewel among women (Divakaruni 44). They also talk about how ‘til’, the hindi name for sesame seed has amazing healing properties and hence the name ‘Tilottama’ has implications of

being life enhancing restorer of health and hope. When Tilo wants to seduce Raven, she beckons other spices like *abhrak*, *laki* and *makaradwaj* for improving her face, hair, and skin. Infact *makaradwaj* is denoted as a “rejuvenator whom the Ashwini Kumars, twin physicians of the gods, gave to their disciple Dhanwantari to make him foremost among healers. (Divakaruni 85) Thus we see numerous instances where Divakaruni hails the medicinal and magical healing properties of culinary items. When the king of all spices makaradwaj transforms Tilo into a beautiful young woman, Divakaruni again resorts to culinary comparisons to describe her: “. . . forehead was flawless liken a new opened shapla leaf, nose tipped like the *til* flower, mouth curved as the bow of Madan, god of love, lips colour of there are no other words for these crushed red chillies.” (Divakaruni 307) In QD, when Rakhi and her father start the arduous task of interpreting Mrs. Gupta’s dream journals, many of the journal entries mention interesting symbolic meanings of certain everyday culinary spices: “A dream of milk means you are about to fall ill. . . If you dream you are grinding salt, you will solve the problem that is overwhelming you – but you must be ruthless in your pursuit of the solution. In your dream if someone presents you with sugar, beware. Such a person is not to be trusted.” (Divakaruni)

In Divakaruni’s fiction, food symbolizes lifestyle and serves as a marker of class. In OG, the different sections of society like the driver, guard and servants dining areas and food habits are separate from the masters or homeowners. In the traditional set up of the Roy household,

strict Brahminical culinary rituals are followed and that is a stark contrast to the modern culinary ambience at her fiancé Rajat's home. Many a times the way Divakaruni presents the culinary also gives the readers ample opportunity to become acquainted with the cultural and social histories of different types of classes and communities.

In SMH, the discourse underlying the entire culinary preparations has been depicted in a tragi-comic, yet realistic manner by the author. Seething with jealousy against her much-awaited guest-of-honour Tarini, for her announcement over becoming a grandmother soon, Sudha's mother-in-law reaction clearly reflects the regressive mindset of a patriarchal society where the pregnancy news of a daughter-in-law is used as a bonus point to upstage or out do another family which is made to feel inferior and unfortunate over their inability to declare any such 'good news'. The scene also reveals the extent to which people can stoop and the pressure they take upon themselves to prove their superiority over others in terms of money and class by showing off in the culinary matters their exotic food choices and elaborate preparations that cannot be found in average middleclass homes of common people:

I am sitting on the kitchen floor, instructing the maid about which spices to grind – we are preparing a daunting feast, enough to give Aunt Tarini a week-long heartburn – when my mother-in-law hurries in. At first, I think she has come to check on the lobsters which our fish-seller delivered this morning, the hugest I've ever seen, clanging

their claws angrily at the bottom of a steel pail. Berhampur has no seafood worth speaking of, and my mother-in-law has gleefully confided in me that she can't wait to catch the look on Aunt's face when the lobster curry is served. (Divakaruni 202)

But later when it is found out that Tarini's daughter-in-law is pregnant, she is engulfed in furious jealousy and Sudha describes, "All her plans for victory over Aunt Tarini have come to nothing. Even the largest lobster in the world is no match for a grandson." (Divakaruni 204)

Through the culinary semiotic Divakaruni conveys that be it festivals, special occasions, or even casual events – food can be used as an icebreaker, a status symbol, a class signifier, and a reciprocal exchange tool in terms of hospitality. The culinary aspect plays a significant role in highlighting ethnic issues, fostering societal and communal ties and unifying the members of the Indian diasporic community.

### **Healing and Empowering women**

Through the strategic use of culinary motif, Divakaruni depicts how the food and kitchen space offer solace and rejuvenation to the marginalized, dislocated women protagonists, empower them for better conflict management and enable them to take charge of their lives. In her ethnographic study Carole Counihan states that for women ". . . food is a significant voice of self-expression. In the meals they cook, the rituals they observe and the memories they preserve, women communicate powerful meanings and emotions." (35)

In VD, Sudha feels quite distraught when she receives Ashok's letter from India as she is aware that it will be a painful reminder of the past that will increase her discomfort with her miserable present existence. In order to placate herself and allay some of her fears, she avoids opening the letter and resorts to taking refuge in culinary space:

“We want Sudha to open her letter, but she goes about her daily chores with exasperating meticulousness. Measure the rice: two cups. Leave it to soak in three and a half cups of warm water. Set out the chicken for thawing. Use the blender to grind six cloves, two teaspoons of coriander and cumin seed, a jar-lid full of peppercorns, three red chillies and a stick of cinnamon.... The chicken simmers in the pot, filling the room with the centuries-old smell of garam masala.” (Divakruni 90 -91).

The predictable, rhythmic pattern inherently embedded in culinary activities stabilizes her emotionally and psychologically and within a short time she feels calmer and is able to respond sensibly to the situation. Thus, the food motif evokes the archetypal home space that comforts and solaces Sudha – through the aroma of “centuries-old smell” and the ritualistic traditional cooking practices, she feels empowered enough to not yield to her instinctive response to tear the letter, but to rationally defer reading it until she feels better.

In POI, princess Panchaali is being coached by a sorceress who enlightens her about the different ways in which power operates for men and women: “The power of a man is like a bull's charge, while the

power of a woman moves aslant, like a serpent seeking its prey. Know the properties of your power. Unless you use it correctly, it won't get you what you want." (Divakaruni) In his essay titled *Food and sexual identity among the Culina*, Donald K. Pollock establishes the complex connection between sexual identity and culinary identity. He demonstrates men's and women's roles and responsibilities in relation to culinary production and discusses the symbolism and power dynamics of food:

"... An interaction of symbols is implied by the interaction of sexual identities, which takes the form of an exchange or obligatory conjunction of different categories of consumable substances. Men and women are proper male and female persons not only because they produce the proper symbols but also because they exchange them properly; when women procure meat, men must preserve the symbolic exchange by procuring garden products. (Counihan 24)

He also elaborates upon the way the culinary acts as a channel of exchange and connection. Incorporating illustrations from the Culina culture, he explicates the ways in which "food and sexual identity provide metaphors for each other." (Counihan 26) Sabitri, in BVG, uses her culinary prowess to seduce her husband for her ultimate aim of getting her revenge from the Mittirs. Taking advantage of his gullibility and his infatuation for her, she exerts her seductive and culinary strength and ensure that her not-so-ambitious husband gets promoted to the highest post he was capable of, so that she can later

show him off as a trophy husband to the Calcutta society at large and the Mittirs in particular. She later confesses in her epistolary plea to her beloved granddaughter Tara, that she “had been seduced by a different dream” (Divakaruni 23) She elaborates how during their initial phase of their married life she “cooked him the dishes he most enjoyed, the comfort foods of a man who had grown up poor – rice, yellow mung dal, fried brinjal.” and later graduated to hosting the best parties, where she “created desserts that became the talk of the town” and ensured that alcohol was in abundance. (Divakaruni 23-24) Her seductive skills, in addition to her culinary abilities empower her and she is able to turn the tables, succeed to the peak of her ambition and gain entry into the city’s elite society with ease.

Thus, Divakaruni has depicted the food space not as a marginal space where women are suppressed, but as a central space where women’s creativity finds complete expression and a place where they plan, take crucial decisions, manipulate things to their advantage and exert influence over significant family matters. By getting access into the culinary weakness of their family members, women can use this knowledge to their advantage. Cooking the husband’s favourite dishes, presenting and serving them in an appropriate style, creating the correct ambience, women can perfect the art of culinary seduction and considerably change the power dynamics in their favour, within the family set up. Mills, in her dissertation, analyses the manner in which the kitchen space is utilized by women to assert their creative and cultural identity:

Women who cook and enjoy spending time and energy with food preparation are asserting their agency. They are actively carving out the space and time to discover and rediscover their talents; to connect or re-connect to their culture, community, family, and more; and to possibly showcase their culinary abilities- something they are presumably inherently equipped to do successfully and easily but is not necessarily the case. In these instances, women in kitchens want others to recognize these creative efforts as distinct from perceived innate abilities to prepare meals. (Mills 21)

Many researchers have commented on the creative aspect of cooking; how cooking is much more than just another routine domestic chore that must be done. In the book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau and Luce Giard, “With their high degree of ritualization and their strong affective investment, culinary activities are for many women of all ages a place of happiness, pleasure, and discovery. Such life activities demand as much intelligence, imagination, and memory as those traditionally held superior, such as music and weaving.” Certeau and Luce Giard go on to explore how the culinary domain is one which has immense scope for innovations and improvisations; where the ancestral recipes are tweaked with contemporary touches and recreated, and where food has to be prepared, laid and served keeping in mind the context – be it the occasion, the budget, local availability of the ingredients, so on and so forth.



Hence, it is a highly intricate creative, dynamic act that employs high level knowledge skills like judgement, innovation, and flexibility. This is especially true in the diasporic setting, where due to lack of authentic ingredients, utensils and ambience meant for a certain dish, the immigrants must constantly improvise and judiciously alter the original recipes with the best available substitutes and new gadgets and methodologies at their disposal in their host country. In the alien environment the women immigrants are additionally burdened by the responsibility of preserving the traditional Indian cooking practices on the one hand, and at catering to the taste buds of the new age generation which has been exposed to various other continental and contemporary cuisines on the other hand. In SMH, when the bridal preparations have begun in full swing and that the two girls will be married off as soon as a good match is procured for them, all the ladies of the illustrious Chatterjee clan gather in the evenings over tea and the best crockery is used. The cups used for serving tea are dainty and exquisite, with dragons painted on the inside, so that “each sip taken uncovers a little more of their green, glittery scales.” Apparently, gifted by a travelling Chinese prince to their grandfather, the ‘dragons’ on these cups possessed special powers and if pleased, they could fulfil a wish. On being asked how they could be pleased; the girls are told that that is something they have to discover on one’s own. (SMH 111)

Divakaruni effectively explores the creative, aesthetic aspect of the food semiotic as well to describe its transformative power. In QD, the

readers are given the first glimpse of Rakhi's café from outside when she describes her friend and partner Belle setting out a tray of muffins:

“Chocolate chip, blueberry, bran, carrot, almond. They form a *warm mosaic* of browns and oranges, dotted with the *astonishing purple* of the berries. Next to them are lemon-glazed Danishes, and then a plate of the crumbly sugar-and-cinnamon cookies we've christened Delhi Dietbusters. The smell of strong coffee spills out onto the street. And *freshly baked* bread. . . I love this place – and I'm fortunate to have it.” (Divakaruni 22) (my emphasis).

The vibrant colours, the varied flavours of the muffin, the refreshing smells along with phrases like *warm mosaic* and *freshly baked* – all together paint a cosy picture. They are symbolic of the warmth, freshness, zest the cafe brings to her life and the reader comprehends the significance the place has in her life even before she proclaims that she loves it and is fortunate to have it. Even with all the turmoil going on in her personal life, and in spite of not-so-successfully handling her role as a daughter, wife, mother, and amateur artist, this is her one cherished spot where she feels at least partly successful; her one ray of sunshine in her cloudy surrounding – and the extract effectively conveys that. The use of the word ‘mosaic’ is also symbolic of her life – a motley of varied things. She's a mixed heritage product, confused between her Indian roots and American customs. She is a struggling painter who has invested in a culinary business venture; she's a single mother who still keeps tab on her divorced husband and she strongly

seeks her authentic Indian identity even though she is quite well adapted to the American lifestyle. This sense of mixed identity is further enhanced when the author elaborately describes the ambience and décor of the café. From antique carved chairs placed in the nook, hand puppets made from old silk saris strewn around, Mughal Garden paintings hanging on the walls to healthy houseplants covering the windowsill and huge glass coffee jars behind the counter – the café seems to be a mish mash of indo-western theme, an assorted collection of varied artifacts. Thus, the culinary space described by the author sets the tone of the story and gives an insight into the motley existence of the main protagonist. In her dissertation titled, *Cooking with love: food, gender and power*, Melinda Mills opines:

Because women are expected to engage in kin work and food work, many feel responsible for rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations organized around the everyday and the holiday. In some cultures, women are even expected to approach food work from an aesthetic perspective, ensuring that food feeds physical and visual appetites. Attending to the look of food is important, for instance, for Japanese mothers who make —obento's, or lunch box meals, appear artistic, attractive, and intricately arranged, contrasting food elements in colour, texture, and more (Allison 1991).

Paule Marshall, in her essay titled, *Poets in the Kitchen*, also emphasizes the empowering aspect of the kitchen space. She candidly describes her own growing up years, where a group of ladies would

gather around her mother's kitchen space and indulge in freewheeling discussions about all kinds of topics and issues. Paule Marshall states that these ladies suffered "a triple invisibility, being black, female, and foreigners." And as they were not comfortable with this state of being invisible and powerless, they tried to arm themselves with 'words' so that they could exert "some measure of control over their lives and the events that shaped them." She became greatly influenced by these informal talks and absorbed the most valuable lessons in not just culinary art but most importantly the narrative art from them. Apart from rote memorizing the orally narrated recipes, the young ones were also awed by the daunting tales of grit and resilience. Not just the content, but their manner, wit and humour, their creative unschooled, unpolished but unique voices is what inspired Paule the most. According to her, the group of ladies "using everyday speech, the simple commonplace words – but always with imagination and skill - they gave voice to the most complex ideas." She goes on to explicate how this kind of verbal indulgence in the kitchen space acted as the best and the cheapest form of therapy for these ladies, because it "restored them to a sense of themselves and reaffirmed their self-worth." She further confesses, that "more than therapy, that freewheeling, wide-ranging, exuberant talk functioned as an outlet for the tremendous creative energy they possessed." Grewal has opined on Divakruti's narratives in her work MOS, and how she has depicted healing through spices:

This narrative of the ancient and the modern [...] sutures the world of late-twentieth-century cosmopolitan travel and cuisine with American cultural feminism's new transnational spiritualities that enable empowerment through discourses of premodern and nonwestern goddesses. Exotic power is empowerment, and feminism and exoticism are first demarcated and then reconciled. Exotic spices enable women to become feminist subjects by using their magical and healing qualities to fight patriarchal Indian tradition. (77)

When Rakhi had come up with the idea of starting her own small eatery in partnership with Belle, her mother had supported her by stating: "Women need something of their own to make them independent . . . Something to give them a sense of self. Something to fall back on, if necessary." (Divakaruni 28) And this proves to be true later when Rakhi derives her strength and sustenance through the same culinary start up. The significance of that place in her life is best described when she admits that post her divorce, how the café saved her from drowning into the trauma and the emotional dilemma of having separated her daughter from a loving father. "Through those restless midnights of doubt," she says, "the Chai House gave me something tangible to hold on to, something that was exactly what it appeared to be, nothing more and nothing less. Taking care of it was a way to make at least one part of my life turn over right." (Divakaruni 24) These lines can be applied to Divakaruni's other stories as well where her women characters find refuge in the kitchen space, because unlike the transitional, altering, amorphous harsh

reality, at least dealing with ‘tangible’ reality where things are exactly what they seem to be, is great a source of comfort and solace for them.

In the novel *Before we visit the Goddess*, Divakaruni describes how Bela Dewan is able to resurrect her life by reviving her culinary skills. She was a person who was only qualified to be a good Indian wife and mother, and her life is in complete disarray when one fine day she finds herself “been fired from both jobs” as she confesses to her new neighbour Kenneth. [ *Goddess* 141] Thus completely at the mercy of fate, on the verge of personal and financial breakdown, she starts her life again from the scratch when Kenneth, who is highly appreciative of her culinary capabilities, beckons her to start her own cooking gigs. From small events to bigger shows and becoming a known food author and food blogger, the kitchen space literally becomes the space where she sculpts her life script again and is able to rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes. Vrinda Varma, in her essay “Constructing Women Identities through Food Memories” opines on the challenges faced by woman due to “insufficiency of a language where all languages are patriarchal” and elaborates on how food becomes the language which can assist in transgressing “the boundaries of patriarchal discourse that creates institutionalized food identities for women.” (1)

In *QD*, initially when Rakhi and Belle had come up with the food start up idea, it was met with resistance from both sets of parents,

except from Mrs. Gupta. Much to Rakhi's surprise, her mother understands the need for a woman to stand independently on her own two feet in this very transient world where there was no guarantee for any lasting relationship. The small budget café that the girls launch is a first step in that direction and the two want to validate their success to everyone. Their culinary business, though small allows them to be self-reliant. Simone de Beauvoir aptly summarizes the situation of independent women in *The Second Sex*: "Once a woman is self-sufficient and ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator." (Beauvoir 689)

Whether it is Sudha and Anju in VD, Rakhi, and Belle in QD, Korobi in OG and Savitri, Tara, and Bela in BVG, all of Divakrauni's women protagonists learn to become self-reliant at some point, and thus are able to survive the challenging arduous migratory journey of their life without the assistance of any male figure whatsoever. In BVG, the inter-generational saga of three strong resourceful women, all these women employ their culinary skills to good use; in Savitri's case her expertise comes in handy first in establishing her in the rich Mittirs family, later on in helping her convince her laid-back husband to help her achieve her ambition of becoming one of the top most family in town and lastly, after his death, to founding one of the most sought after sweet shop, for the sake of her daughter's stable future. In the case of her daughter Bela, who has been abandoned in an alien country by her husband as well

as her daughter, her culinary roots come in handy when she has to restart her life. From gigs, blogs to cooking shows and writing cookbooks, her culinary foundation enables her to transform into the quintessential late bloomer and she manages to not just survive but thrive in spite of all the hurdles and challenges that came her way.

In VD, it is Sudha's culinary expertise that turns things around for her. When she starts working for the old man, initially she has to bear a lot of harassment from him. From throwing food plates at her to spitting out cereal bowl on her face, he tries everything possible to make her turn tail and run away like the other nurses in the past. When Sudha tries to question his son Trideep about his father's culinary preferences, he responds that he is barely aware of them because on his brief visits to India, he never paid much attention to it. Then he describes his father's experience during his initial days of his US sojourn: "When he first got here, he wanted to try everything. Like America was a great big toy store, and he was a kid. He loves ice cream. We'd go to Baskin-Robbins every few days so he could try a new flavor. But now, whatever I bring him – chocolate chip muffins, lemon-raspberry yogurt – he doesn't even look." (Divakaruni 237) The loss of appetite and loss of interest in food in general is symbolic of the utter misery he feels and the drastic change of culinary habits represents the underlying deeper malaise – the drastic emotional change he undergoes about himself and his stay in America. From wanting to try out every flavor to completely repelling all food – his emotional and psychological state is depicted



through the culinary aspect. When Sudha decides to leave them, she goes on to make the most of her final day and in honour of that she prepares a dish called *Bhate bhat* for herself and her daughter. This was an old, steamed dish that Bengali people ate “before starting on a journey”. Then an idea pops up into her mind and she decides to make one last conciliatory attempt with the old man. Divakaruni has elaborately described Sudha’s culinary attempts at luring the stubborn old man: “The plate is so pretty, the cheerful green of zucchini, the warm yellow of the squash. The steaming rice, a small ivory hill. He must have eaten the dish many times in India. I want to taunt him with familiarity. I pour mango juice into a blue mug. He doesn’t look, of course.” (Divakaruni 247) The colorful plate represents the zest and cheerfulness that Sudha is trying to muster for the sake of her daughter and simultaneously in the hope that some of it would rub off on the old man too. She spreads a bedsheet and arranges velvet cushions and along with food she shares with Dayitya ancient stories about a king who set out to travel across the ocean during *rahukul*, and later loses his ability to speak. As Divakaruni has confessed many a times during her interviews, the strategy of mingling story telling with cooking is something that she follows in her personal life as well. Here too, we have a similar scenario when Sudha is attempting to change his approach by presenting to him her savoury culinary offerings as well as ancient tales aimed at forewarning him about his impending future, in case he does not mend his ways. This strategy works and after weeks of

long self-imposed fasting, he succumbs to her strategy and finally partakes of a few morsels of the authentic Bengali cuisine. Sudha relentlessly prepares her signature cuisines to bring over the old man to her side. Over the time, Sudha's elaborate culinary presentations of authentic Bengali dishes "Stuffed baby eggplants, chicken baked in yogurt-almond sauce, rice pudding studded with fat raisins" and the like seem to work their way around the old man's stomach as well as heart and he becomes amiable to her suggestion of going back to India with her as his nurse. So, her culinary expertise works miracles for her and her new employers are more than happy to ensure that her remuneration will allow her to provide for the best education for Dayita.

As Maite Zubiaurre states that the kitchen space can be used by women as a tool to regain a strong foothold in the patriarchal structure, and in a way "cooking becomes a new semantics, through which women learn about themselves, . . . and acquire an inebriating sense of empowerment" (30). Sudha has strategically used the old culinary traditions – altered and modified as per convenience, to evoke nostalgia for the archetypal home and homeland and she has taken up the role of the typical Indian homemaker and nurturer who excels at preparing and serving food to the family. Through her creative culinary delicacies and creative recipes, she has used the food and kitchen space in an innovative manner, not to merely perform the expected traditional Indian woman stereotypical marginal role but in fact to occupy a central empowered position

where she is the one initiating the crucial decisions and dominating the situation. Sudha's wounds have begun to heal as she is hopeful about a bright future for herself and Dayita. She is empowered for the first time in her life, to start leading her new life in India all over again, as an independent single parent, without any monetary assistance from her mother or mother-in-law or any other man, as she confesses to the old man, "Going back with you would be a way for me to start over in a culture I understand the way I'll never understand America. In a new part of India, where no one knows me. Without the weight of old memories, the whispers that say, *we knew she'd fail*, or *Serves her right*." (Divakaruni 321) Annam Ragamallika writes in her thesis titled *Intoning culture, gender, and space in the Diaspora: A study of select culinary narratives* comments on how the kitchen space can be converted into an enabling space and how culinary prowess empowers one. Interestingly she brings in the Bakhtinian perspective by stating:

When the act of cooking is studied in the light of Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque, it is noticed that women subvert the dominant practice using the kitchen space. Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal work, *Rabelais and his World* discusses the concept of 'carnivalesque', which we understand is a powerful cultural mechanism by which a culture can renew itself. Bakhtin expresses the view that "Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (10). Bakhtin opines that any given culture had the capacity to allow an individual to

subvert the most oppressive institutions. Extrapolating this notion of carnivalesque to the kitchen space, it is a possible cultural space that allows a re-telling of the dominant cultural practice and women use cookery skills to manipulate patriarchy. Thus, the kitchen becomes an empowering and enabling space for women. (Ragamalika 103)

From the Womanist perspective, Divakaruni's fiction seems to be celebrating women who also function as cooks, healers, and nurturers, strengthening and unifying the family and contributing to the preservation and celebration of the traditional cultural and communal bonds as well. These women seem to epitomize Alice Walker's womanist concept of universality with its emphasis on "survival and wholeness of entire people" (Walker 1983 xii)

The analyses in this chapter titled, 'Culinary Healing in Divakaruni's Select Novels' has revealed the way the author has employed the culinary motif in her select fictional works for multiple purposes – to highlight the challenges face by the displace diasporic community, to explore their inner psychological workings and to reveal the entire spectrum of experiences they endure in their migratory journey. At the outward physical level, the characters are struggling with the migratory journey in the host land, and at personal, spiritual level they are negotiating their archetypal journey back home and food becomes the prime agency in both these aspects. This chapter explores the transformation of the food and kitchen space into a space of healing – where issues pertaining to relationships,