

Article

'Currying Identities': A Literary Re-Crafting of South-Asian Identities through Diasporic Women's Cookbooks

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Abstract: Food has been an enduring presence in the construction of collective identities of migrant communities. From honing cooking techniques and selecting ingredients and tools to developing cultures of consumption and appreciation, diasporic communities seem to hold food as one of the primary markers of identity. Women writers from the diaspora not only emblemized their identities by writing about food but also opened feminist methodological opportunities for writing resistance. These 'culinary fictions' have since been mined to delve into the gendering of migrant identities. The genre of cookbooks shares a significant overlap with 'culinary fiction' in terms of its scope by stabilizing 'authentic' identities. However, it surgically punctures the romantic appeal of food imagination, shifting its focus instead to the labor that produces the sensory stimulation of culinary memory. This article uses this overlap and this gap as incentives to read select cookbooks published in the heydays of culinary fiction. Reading cookbooks against the metrics of labor provides a certain intimacy of engagement that offers entry into complex negotiations of uncertain migrant identities. Affective labor and its postcolonial entanglements have been used as catalysts in the article to read into the multilayered understanding of the politics of women writing about food in the diaspora. To this extent, it will challenge the stabilized ways of reading culinary identities and open food writing to more robust negotiations of gendered writings of food.

Keywords: food; cookbook; diaspora; labor; affects; gendered; resistance; identities; nostalgia



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1. Introduction

"I think it was around this time that I swallowed a cookbook. I remember it well. It was the Boston Cooking School Book, with a faded buff cover and red lettering. At the front was a column for planning meals, followed by two whole chapters on method. I devoured material on how to bake, broil, sauté, stir, braise, roast, how to make puff-pastry and how to identify a variety of fruit and vegetables like turnips, kale and kumquats although I never saw these until many years later. The food on my plate turned into cookbook magic".

Ramabai Espinet (1994, p. 569)

Espinet's act of swallowing a cookbook to experience the wonders of Indian food (in this case, Indo-Caribbean food), one could argue, stands as a metaphor for the ways in which culinary memory has been shaped and consumed in South-Asian diasporic literature. It stands for a range of literary practices or 'culinary fiction' (Mannur 2010, pp. 1–3) that rely heavily on food memory to convey the complexities of the diasporic experience. Historically, food has been used as an adhesive in community-building measures and bonding, thereby materializing rather slippery identities. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that migrant communities would use food as a material anchor for their identities in the absence of other material markers that are associated with geographical location. As such,

this paper argues that food is a site of complex identitarian negotiations. In particular, South-Asian diasporic women's cookbooks, as a literary form, ruminate on multiple contestations, at the interstices of which are located women's ontologies of labor, agentic praxis, and effectively empowered selfhoods. Historically speaking, the cookbook has been perceived as performative of certain white fabricated constructions of ethnic identities. It has been argued by scholars of food studies, like Anita Mannur, that the myth of American multiculturalism has often rendered it obligatory for the South-Asian diasporic demographic to fabricate a kind of ethnic difference that is not only acceptable but also highly consumable in the North American context (Mannur 2010, pp. 31–36). As a result, this constructed ethnic difference characterizes the South Asian diaspora and, in turn, is also reinforced by it. This highly commodified idea of diasporic ethnic difference is often mediated through "culinary nostalgia" (Mannur 2010, p. 27), which is necessary to invoke a fabricated idea of a homeland that may or may not exist. The alleged implication of such scholarship is that diasporic women's cookbooks are a site of production of exotic culture and homeland which is rendered accessible to a white world through "culinary nostalgia". This article is an interrogation of such a reductive idea of diasporic "culinary nostalgia" (Mannur 2010) and instead argues that culinary nostalgia can be a powerful agentic site of affective solidarities actively produced in South-Asian women's cookbooks. As such, cookbooks, this article argues, contest the inscription of diasporic women's literary forms within a white prerogative of multiculturalism and globalization, negligent of women's labor enmeshed in material and affective mechanisms. We intended to read cookbooks by diasporic women as incentives to mine these over-familiar food narratives as sites of precarious conceptualizations of "affective labor" (Hardt). To this end, cookbooks serve as an obvious contrapuntal location for the mythopoetic construction of curry identities. This article includes readings from Madhur Jaffrey (2023), Sameen Rushdie, and Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta's cookbooks from the theoretical framework of "affective labor" to argue how the affective dimension of nostalgia offers a resistance to Western paradigms of multiculturalism that commodifies ethnic difference and mythologizes diasporic subjectivities as curry identities. Through such a modality of reading cookbooks, this article also redirects critical attention to how an alternate epistemology of selfhood derives a newer impetus from affective relationalities.

2. The Alterities of the Cookbook as a Literary Form

One might be tempted to argue that the diasporic cookbook bears all the components of 'culinary fiction', i.e., nostalgia, memory, identity, and its ensuing gendered identities (Raman 2011, p. 166). Ingredients, cooking techniques, and proportions all come together to concretize the experience of culinary nostalgia. This state of nostalgia is a spatio-temporal location where potions can be concocted to generate replicable experiential nostalgia (Srinivas 2006, p. 192). In its evocation of all these, it atomizes the concerns of culinary fiction as it reframes cultural identities, masala by masala. The form has no expectation to be read in a linear manner. Its fragmentary nature allows the reader to move between recipes as one likes, thereby forming an individualistic repertory of replicable sites of nostalgia. Porous discursive formations allow multiplicitous identity formation in a seemingly rigid frame. Endless possibilities of organizing experiences and curating them almost read like a practicum on feminist methodology, curating female knowledge practices that have taken shape in feminine spaces and have traveled through female lineage. This has offered gateways to construing distinct feminist trajectories of knowledge transmission. Women who labor in kitchens have traditionally formed closed networks, trading in the knowledge that encompasses not only recipes but processes and distills a range of cultural practices. Allowing everyone to partake in the recipes breaks away from the traditional female genealogy of knowledge transmission that is rooted in the ritualistic food practices of the South-Asian diaspora (Parveen 2016, pp. 47–48).

Unlike other forms, the cookbook offers a handbook of creating the experience of Indianness dissociated from the physicality of the nation. While it can help to concretize

what it might mean to be Indian by offering to curate ‘Indian cuisine’, it often dissociates from its political boundaries. To extend this idea, one might argue this more porous ‘Indianness’ allows women writers of cookbooks to resist cultural policing and surveillance. The cookbook as a form, one might suggest, incorporates forms of writing that are often outside the purview of heteropatriarchy. Recipes travel orally from generation to generation and are written as shorthand notes on diaries or abandoned pages of family ledgers, letters or a myriad of other forms of non-formal communication. The form itself has immense disruptive potential in how it bypasses forms of heteropatriarchy even when it addresses them. For one, it demystifies labor surrounding food. Unlike mystified recollections of food that one could associate with kitchens of lore, the ones that appear in the cookbooks depend on measures, temperatures, and technique. It travels beyond a confined collectivity that could be contained in fiction; instead, it invites the reader/consumer to draft their own narrative around the food. As one cooks or consumes these recipes from one’s own subjective location, one escapes the possibilities of containing culinary meaning-making within the authoritative reference points.

Sharing many characteristics with ‘culinary fiction’ interestingly does not guarantee the cookbook a seat at the high table. ‘Culinary nostalgia’ (to use Mannur’s term) is tested and found wanting in a very particular context: the understanding of culinary labor. When nostalgia is enshrined as the most deserving manifestation of diasporic identity, what happens to the forms of labor that underlie the fundamentals of this diasporic imaginary? This paper does not touch upon an important aspect of the imaginations of cultural/culinary labor: caste. We recognize that caste shapes distinct imaginations of food born out of centuries of neglect, humiliation, and resistance ([Kanjilal 2023](#), p. 5). The paper instead works with the general assumptions of ‘culinary fiction’ that rarely use an intersectional lens. We also understand that women’s labor and the ways in which it finds its food pathways are not uniform and divided across caste, class, and religious lens. While these categories become imperative in terms of how we read culinary fiction, here we use a collective identity as a rough measure to question the ways in which women’s labor remains silenced in these readings.

3. Diasporic Cookbooks and the Dismantling of Curry Identities

The last two decades have seen a surge in critical studies that concern reading culinary aspects of migrant narratives (most notably Parama Roy, Anita Mannur, and Ben Highmore). A number of these fictional narratives incorporate elements in the form of the ‘cookbook’, prescribing recipes, detailing the textures, and directing the sensory simulations of the consumer ([Parmar and Parmar 2019](#)). As experiential manuals, cookbooks offer a novel form to help mold their identity markers. Even as there seem to be critical overlaps between novels and cookbooks, the diasporic novel, true to its rather ‘open’ nature, has steered clear of engaging with the cookbook in a more direct way, exposing its inevitable limitations. The novel form then clearly emerges as more than the sum of its parts, and in this case, it seems to supersede the cookbook form ([Parmar and Parmar 2019](#)). The novel processes the gritty realism of everyday existence through a series of ethnic lenses to emerge as palatable nostalgia. One of the enduring takeaways seems to be the lingering aftertaste of the unexpected connections it establishes with the form of the cookbook. In the contemporary Indian situation, and to some degree generically, cookbooks appear to belong to the literature of exile, nostalgia, and loss. These books are often written by authors who now live outside India or at least away from the subregion about which they are writing. Sometimes, they are intended for Indians abroad, who miss, in a vague and generalized way, what they think of as Indian food. Sometimes, they are written to recollect and reconstruct the colonial idea of Indian food, and in such cases, their master trope is likely to be curry, a category of colonial origin” (18), i.e., “gastronomic imperialism under the colonial trope of curry” ([Appadurai 1998](#), p. 21). Though Arjun Appadurai has explained gastro-politics as the conflictual organization of social relations around the production and consumption of food in the Hindu-Indian context ([Appadurai 1981](#), p. 495), this

paper borrows ‘gastro-politics’, to explore the entanglements of race, white privilege, and globalization in informing unequal social relations around the production and consumption of food and cuisines in the context of South-Asian diaspora situated in North America. Global “gastro-politics”, as understood from Appadurai’s essay, has manufactured fictional narratives of globalization and concomitant celebratory multiculturalism located at the interstices of these are culinary fictions about South-Asian subjectivity singularly ordered as curry identities.

Curry identity is a colonial semiotic that essentializes South-Asian cuisine as constituted of curries that are overly spiced. Such gustatory profiling of South-Asian cuisine in North America has racial implications and is also rooted in the politics of labor. Some scholars consider “curry” as a signifier of globalization that allows a barrier-free flow of goods and ideas from across the world without allowing primacy to any particular location (Varman 2017, p. 355). Furthermore, Sen (2009, p. 7) notes “if any dish deserves to be called global, it is curry. From Newfoundland to the Antarctic, from Beijing to Warsaw, there is scarcely a place where curries are not enjoyed”. However, this situatedness of “curry” within the realm of globalization uncritically invisibilizes its colonial entanglements. The idea of curry, which is a “signifier of domination and global hierarchy” (Varman 2017, p. 350), imbricates with servitude and unequal modalities of labor that Varman euphemizes as “transnational transactions” (Varman 2017, p. 350). In truth, such “transnational transactions” uncritically delink globalization from the idea that first-world culinary leisure and consumption is predicated on the servitude and labor of immigrant and diasporic demographics in the global north. The popularity of curry and the hordes of curry restaurants in North America attest to this idea of unequal laboring praxes, in turn foregrounding the political contradictions and collusions of globalization and celebratory multiculturalism. The word “curry”, therefore, is reductive and co-opts colonialist frameworks in producing a homogenous idea of a “national cuisine” (Appadurai). “Curry” not only masks “racism” (Varman 2017, p. 355) but also fetishizes native labor as foregrounded in Sameen Rushdie’s *Indian Cookery*. Though originally published in the UK, Sameen Rushdie’s *Indian Cookery* was republished in the U.S. by Picador in 2018 with a preface by Salman Rushdie. What Sameen Rushdie says in her introduction to *Indian Cookery* attests to Arjun Appadurai’s negation of the impossibility of having a unified “national cuisine”. What is national cuisine is regionally inflected and, therefore, is a signifier of the diversity of the subcontinent itself.

I wondered whether I knew enough to present the banquet of flavours and experiences necessary to represent the full range of regional dishes and give you the opportunity of becoming acquainted with the incredible diversity that exists in the school of Indian cookery as a whole. I felt it was important to do justice to a cuisine that in the West has been shrouded in mystique and subjected to a mockery which has served to alienate many westerners from Indian food.
(Rushdie 2018, Introduction)

Colonial nostalgia about the days of the Raj is a locus of such collusions, and it has produced certain myths about the exotic East “with its different alluring smells of intricately blended spices; stories abound of nostalgic memories of sahibs and memsahebs picnicking on succulent quail and partridge on elephant back, under gaily coloured canopies” (Rushdie 2018, p. 11), while the barefooted natives served food equally exotically, proffering their cheap labor to build an exotic experience of a leisured meal. Such narratives propelled by colonial reminiscences have manufactured myths about Indian cooking as “labor-intensive” (Rushdie 2018, p. 11), indicating the meaninglessness of time and the cheap quality of profuse human labor. Curry, thus, is a product of a colonial imaginary that fictionalizes a diverse diasporic demography into curry subjects, affixing them together in a box of colonialist historicity. The absolute givenness of such “curry” meals and identities is what these diasporic cookbooks deconstruct. The corollary of such narratives of culinary fiction is an undifferentiated idea of postcolonial South-Asia, as Sameen Rushdie further says in her preface to the cookbook, *Indian Cookery*.

"I intended it to be a useful resource, as much for the absolute beginner as for the experienced chef: for those who like me, cook Indian food all the time; for the cook who produces the occasional Indian meal; as well as those completely new to Indian cooking. All three such cooks probably have a preconceived idea of what they think Indian food or a "curry" meal should taste like". ([Rushdie 2018](#), Preface)

As a sharp retort to such global gastro-politics, South-Asian cookbooks, like the ones written by Sameen Rushdie, offer a resistance with their "biopolitical" ([Hardt 1999](#), p. 99) imperatives of "affective" ([Hardt 1999](#), p. 99) female labor. It is also interesting to note that although Madhur Jaffrey titles her cookbooks "*Curry Nation*" and "*Curry Easy*", she subverts the colonialist imperatives of this word by reflecting serious reservations about prescribing the use of curry or curry powder in her recipes. Sameen Rushdie, in her *Indian Cookery*, dismantles the generic notion of Indianness produced by curry masala too: "To use a commercially ground, shop-bought, garam masala is like cooking with a generic curry powder rather than creating a subtle balance and blend of spices that makes each dish so distinctive" ([Rushdie 2018](#), Preface). In light of this, it is extremely significant that one reads diasporic cookbooks as a powerful culinary assemblage of differential praxes of subversive labor.

Such modalities of labor that have the potential of overthrowing the domination of collusive global democracies as well as excavating their hidden contradictions have been theorized by philosophers like Michael Hardt as "Affective Labor" ([Hardt 1999](#)). Theoretically aligned with this idea, this paper advances a reappraisal of the cookbook as a literary space of female "affective labor" that unpacks the political contradictions of globalization. Cookbooks, as women's literary forms, have reconfigured women's culinary labor. Such culinary labor bears the potential of effectively emplacing diasporic communities within foodways while also insinuating their alternate laboring regimes into the circuit of capital economy. As such, this paper reads cookbooks as political praxes of literary forms that reconfigure diasporic curry identities, offering alternative modalities of "affective labor" ([Hardt 1999](#)).

4. Cookbooks as "Affective Labor" That Is Ontologically Constitutive

Scholars like Shameem Black ([2010](#)) and Parama Roy ([2021](#)) have advanced "critical attentiveness to the transformative role of domestic labour in a globalizing world" ([Black 2010](#), p. 16). Shameem Black argues that Madhur Jaffrey's habitual disdain of Indian restaurants in favor of food cooked in and for the home foregrounds the agential power of domestic labor in galvanizing the discourses of cosmopolitanism (Black, 16). Scholars have been attentive to how cookbook writing affects the love and nurturance of the sanctified domestic space while further fixing women's gender conformity, "preserving the sanctity of the domestic home space, creating a space where members of the household feel nurtured, thus become important touchstones of women's labour" ([Allison 2009](#), p. 52).

This article, while acknowledging the merit of such readings, departs from such frameworks of women's labor and its situatedness within an apolitical "domestic" realm. Readings offered by Black and Roy reinscribe women's labor within the patriarchal paradigm that conceives women's labor as an embodiment of their role as nurturers. In a contrarian spirit, this article locates women's labor in the arena of global politics and its inroads into a capital economy. This article argues that the entrepreneurial imperatives of the sale of cookbooks, in turn, lead to the concomitant economics of the consumer demand for cooking paraphernalia, producing diasporic ways of life. The cookbook throws open a whole range of ontological meanings of the diasporic reclamation of cultural identity, mediated through the space of the kitchen, symbolically through the act of cooking, while also inviting an economic capital flow through the culinary participation of the outside world. Such a flow of cultural capital is entangled with a flow of economic capital too in a globalized world.

The conception of the social power of women's labor can be extracted from Marxist philosophies. Marx and Engels pointed out that the material conditions of human subjects

both precede them as well are actively produced through their labor. This ontology of labor that sustains life through a complex chain of the satisfaction of basic needs and the creation of newer needs hinges upon social relations and cooperation. This social character of labor, which involves humans reproducing one another, is an insight provided by Marx and Engels. Based on this understanding of the productive power of labor as advanced by Marx and Engels, theorists like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have theorized about the political power of labor to upend global paradigms of capitalistic imperialism. Though this article is theoretically affiliated with Hardt's theorization of "affective labor", it is equally indebted to Kathi Weeks's postulations about the political imperatives of women's labor which have provided creative impetus to Michael Hardt's "affective labor". Kathi Weeks's essay offers an important intervention in reconfiguring ways in which women's labor needs to be visibilized. By debunking discourses that either "glorify work" or "extol the realization or lament the loss of some genuine mode of being", the debate is to "create sites of contestation over the social construction of specific constitutive practices and thereby to raise questions about what we can do and who we can become" ([Weeks 1998](#), p. 124). Thus, rather than falling back on the age-old enlightenment-induced philosophical claims about unified and absolute selves, the category of labor should raise debates about the political potential of the social meaning of women's labor as an embodiment of women's subject positions or their standpoint. What we can become is mediated by our laboring praxis.

Predicated on the social meaning of labor, Michael Hardt's essay, "Affective Labor" ([Hardt 1999](#)), explores the production of "affects" through our laboring praxes and the interventionist nature of such praxes. According to Hardt, the production of affects through labor is essentially "anticapitalist" because affective labor produces collective subjectivities as opposed to the western ideal of a singular subject. Affective labor, in short, is the new laboring modality of such a "multitude", communities of people connected through the circuit of affects. Feminist analyses of affective labor have pointed out the significance of "care labor" and "kin work", whereby such mechanisms of labor produce "collective subjectivities, produce sociality and ultimately produce society itself" ([Hardt 1999](#), p. 89). Hardt attributes to such paradigms of labor a transformative potential of restructuring global capitalist economies. Affective labor is not to be misunderstood merely as labor produced by women's emotional entanglements with the works undertaken by them, such as caregiving or kin work. It is a systemic production of affects through what Hardt qualifies as "immaterial labor" ([Hardt 1999](#), pp. 95–98), that is intangible labor that cannot always be quantitatively evaluated, such as services based on communication, information, and knowledge sharing; in other words, labor that does not produce durable goods or tangible commodities. Scholars of "affect" have dissociated emotions from the realm of the physiological and have posited that affects are culturally produced. Cultural frameworks provide meaning to emotions ([Misra 2010](#), pp. 95–97). Affects are, therefore, a "culturally structured phenomenon" ([Shweder and Haidt 2000](#), pp. 397–414) that restructure the hermeneutics of selfhood.

Such dynamics of affective labor originate in the context of the transitioning of global economies towards "service" economies ([Hardt 1999](#), p. 92). This transition of global capitalist markets involves multiple stages of evolution, from agriculture and mining to industrial and service jobs. This evolution through multiple phases of economic development, especially in the context of hegemonic capitalist countries such as the U.S. in the 1970s, is referred to as "economic postmodernization" or, rather, "informatization" ([Hardt 1999](#), pp. 92–93). Hence, in contemporary times, informational transitions have revolutionized industries just as the industrial revolution transformed the agricultural economy. In the context of such newer paradigms of labor economy and service jobs, Hardt listed activities, such as health care, education, finance, transportation, entertainment, and advertising. However, this understanding of service jobs can, by extrapolation, be extended to refer to any service that consolidates affective socialities between communities of the new laboring or service providing multitude and, hence, is one of the "highest value-producing forms of labour" ([Hardt 1999](#), p. 93). This service economy produces value-rich networks

of information and communication, which are the new coordinates of global capitalist economies.

However, what is important for this paper is that such laboring practices, that is information and communication building, are not subordinate forms of labor. On the contrary, such services are strongly contingent upon social relations amongst laboring subjects that Marx and Engels had initially pointed out in their theorization of the social power of labor. Hardt's contribution is to an alternate conceptualization of labor, specifically focusing on the political implications of affects that characterize labor in contemporary global informational economies. The social value of such labor and its political imperatives lie in its communitarian and collectivist nature. Affective labor is not produced in social isolation, rather, it produces communities and concomitant newer socialities which open up newer sites of contestations towards a reconfiguration of subjectivities. Hence, such a framework of laboring praxes produces rhizomatic networks of laboring subjects who speak to power structures. Affective labor therefore offers a newer location of selfhood—a self that is constituted in relation to others. Affective labor gains power as a force of contestation because it consolidates the self's relationality to other laboring beings, creating a strong network of interpersonal bonds. This relational chain of laboring beings, according to Hardt and Negri, constitutes the "multitude" that, in the present context of the global nexus of capitalism, can be a powerful force of resistance. A relational self deeply embedded in social relations is the new unit of the global labor force and as such is a site of contestation itself.

This paper posits that South-Asian women's cookbooks are inscribed within such modalities of "affective labor" that are predicated on building a sense of well-being and interpersonal happiness while providing visibility to newer knowledge systems that constitute women's ontologies. As mechanisms of affective labor, cookbooks mediate information and communication about alternate ways of being at a global level while expanding global markets where immigrant cultural artifacts have insinuated themselves. Food and culinary products that powerfully communicate ontological information about other cultures and a multitude of other ways of being are ways of newer social consolidations. Diasporic cookbooks bear the potential to enable perpetual cultural flow while meaningfully contributing to informational economies. For instance, Madhur Jaffrey's cookbooks foreground the significance of "ethnic markets" in North America and she urges her global cookbook readers to source their raw materials from these alternate markets: "Jaffrey's narratives of cooking and eating strive to rewrite the dislocations of diaspora and migration into a rooted sense of place, literally domesticating complicated cultural collisions while accentuating the global intersections that inform the domestic sphere". (Black 2010, p. 1)

Women's affective labor, therefore, has ontological value as a form of, as Hardt suggests, "biopolitical production". Hardt and Negri conceptualize biopolitics not as Foucault understood it to be "power over life" (Smart 2012, pp. 1–10) of nation-states but as "power of life" (Hardt 1999, p. 98). This is power from below, and this power is embedded in the new affective regimes of labor of a new political subject, that is, the laboring subject. Hence, "biopolitics," as Hardt and Negri have theorized, is the production of life itself through praxes of affective labor. These newer modalities of reading cookbooks as literary forms advance mechanisms of reconfiguring women's "biopolitical production" that deconstruct North American paradigms of defining South-Asian identities.

Food maintains connections with 'home,' offering an anchor for the imagination of one's fractured identity. In its most basic avatar, 'home' is the immediate space of domesticity, and by extension, 'kitchen' is its distilled essence. The patriarchy invariably populated domestic kitchens with the women of the household and burdened them with the responsibility of extending its reach to ensure an irreparable connection with their 'homeland(s)'. Diasporic women writers were particularly attentive to these locations of productions of identities, as their fictional narratives are oriented around discursive practices that reclaimed these narrative spaces. The likes of Jhumpa Lahiri (2000), Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1997), Amulya Malladi (2004), and Nani Power

(2010) have since charted these food pathways. Following an explosion of writing in the last two decades, diasporic women and their fictional narratives are no longer positioned in the periphery but have provided significant inroads into mainstream South-Asian writing in English. Attempts to read them have turned to their sites of identity-making and food ticked multiple political registers. South-Asian women's fictional narratives have responded to questions of identity, cultural myth-making, communitarian solidarities, and citizenship.

Diasporic identities, especially of the South-Asian kind, have long relied on food to anchor their 'in-betweenness'. Recipes are carefully tweaked to accommodate new ingredients while appealing to a markedly South-Asian palette. Fiction, from largely privileged diasporas, helped to map this 'culinary nostalgia'. Rarely escaping penury, these writers came from privileged upper caste backgrounds, and they attempted to recreate familiar culturescapes through their culinary experiences. However, these rather romantic engagements with the curry palette rarely translated into reading women's labor. This article argues that these food-fueled diasporic identities foreclosed the diasporic kitchen to the possibilities of reading it as charged spaces of alternative conceptualizations of labor.

Sameen Rushdie offers a very interesting paradigm of labor in her book as she demystifies the masculinist constructs around cooking as "you have that special taste in your hands" (Rushdie 2018, p. 7). Rushdie says that "it also seems likely that men were the original architects of such mythology, cleverly constructed to justify their resistance or refusal to share in the drudge of daily cooking by paying women lavish compliments which praised them for their patience, endurance and delicacy and, finally, endowed them with special powers: taste buds in their hands!" (Rushdie 2018, p. 8) Such mythopoetic frameworks trivialize women's laboring praxis by predating them on some preconceived magical prerogative that automatically confers the status of masterful cooks on women. As opposed to this, Sameen Rushdie uses the space of her cookbook to wager that masterful cooking is an "acquired" skill and a "learning process", and therefore is something that involves painstaking labor. The cookbook becomes a literary tool by which constructs of hegemonic gender norms, which have historically invisibilized the affective dimension of women's labor, are systematically debunked. This idea becomes clearer in the section on "Lamb and Beef Dishes" in her book, where she asserts her identity as an Indian Muslim woman through eating meat. Interestingly, her culinary choices, which inform her identity assertion, shift according to her geopolitical coordinates. As someone who routinely enjoys meat in Bombay, she is Muslim; as one who enjoys vegetarian dishes, she is an Indian Muslim in Pakistan, and her curry identity renders her a generic South-Asian woman in Britain. She dismantles not only the cultural prejudices around the consumption of meat but also decolonizes the culinary supremacy of the Western practices of cooking meat. Then, her culinary praxis stems from her need to assert her identity as an Indian Muslim woman, contesting negative prejudices. Her recipe sharing, therefore, is an important literary form foregrounding her affective self as a way of resisting the politics of identity: "When we sat down at the school, to eat our tiffin, I was conscious every time I unpacked my containers that I was asserting my right to be Indian despite being a strict carnivore, a minority in a world of vegetarians. It is certainly a possibility that this private rebellion, the only political expression I was capable of at that young age, nurtured in me a strong relish for meat" (Rushdie 2018, p. 49). Dismantling the Western sense of supremacy constructed so often around the consumption of food, especially meat, she says "it is true that animals in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are much less well fed than in the affluent countries of the West. It does not follow, as is so often assumed, that the meat is of inferior quality. If we judge quality in relation to correct food value and nutritional balance, then it is clear why health experts and nutritionists are beginning to express such concern about the dangerous effects of eating too much inorganically fattened meat on people living in Europe and America" (Rushdie 2018, p. 51).

5. Cookbooks as a Political Praxis

The literary power of cookbooks as affective labor contributes to dialogues about decoloniality and the need to have newer feminist praxes from the fluid and rapidly evolving geopolitics of South Asia. A linguistic register of loss, fragmentation, and an obsessive need for some imagined conformity to an internalized Western ideal of identity has characterized a traditional reading of diasporic culinary pathways “for diasporic communities, spatially and temporally distanced from the geographic parameters of the nation-state, a collective sense of nationhood and an affective longing for the home, and a fear of ‘losing’ tradition morphs into a desire to vigilantly retain viability and visibility through a systematic attempt to ossify the fragments and shards of cultural practices deemed ‘authentic’”. Contrary to such sensibility of loss-inflected nostalgia, this article offers a close textual analysis of Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta’s *Bong Mom’s Cookbook* and wagers that cookbooks affectively emplace subjects within the arena of the diasporic kitchen and food and a female constituency of maternal figures are written from a place of well-being and interpersonal happiness. *Bong Mom’s Cookbook*, thus deconstructs an ossified foodways: “The world is therefore lulled into a false belief about Bengali’s fish-and-sweets-only diet” (Datta 2013, p. 2). Mukherjee Datta started out as a blogger and now has a steady presence on both Instagram and Facebook. It is interesting to see how mechanisms of literary writing negotiate shifting terrains from the literary to the digital. The digital age, among other things, was supposed to have sounded the death knell for books — the end of books as Robert Coover would put it—and for once (un)settled the hierarchies of textual knowledge production. With the advent of the born digital genres, offline modes of production and dissemination were deemed to have run their course. However, quite contrary to initial estimates, one of the earliest born digital genres, the blog, has often spawned the publication of books. A lot of questions in recent years have been centered around the sociological context of the book, readership, and reception. Of particular interest has been the text’s “trajectory of internal progression” (an intricate construct of basic formal units) and its outer trajectory of “delivery and reception”. These readings have kindled debates around hybrid forms in relation to the metaphysics of the text.

Posited at the intersection of a long history of women’s food writing and discourses on domesticity and non-linear modes of storytelling, these blogs and their print avatars raise certain fundamental questions about the aesthetics of reading recipes. Formalistically speaking, the blog appears to be an antithesis of the book, upsetting the formal expectations of publication, censorship, and permanence. In terms of intellectual history, however, it seems to be in sync with the genres often used to identify women’s writing. The ‘openness’ of the form of the blog informs her recipe book. A familiar, comforting narrative voice takes the reader from topical discussions to nostalgic reminiscences, providing a narrative frame for each recipe. This opens narrative spaces to possibilities of reading new female subjectivities in the in-between spaces of the blog (online) and books (offline) (Hegde 2014).

What is further interesting about Mukherjee Dutta’s cookbook is the way she reconstructs the space of her kitchen and cooking as affective communitarian labor; her culinary praxis is informed and shaped by, as she says, her ‘ma’, ‘ma-in-law’, aunts, and several other maternal figures. Her recollections of their cooking strongly invoke a distinctive idea of female labor that, though hinges on conformity to gender norms, also transcends those and produces newer spaces of female socialities of enabling and empowering affective entanglements: “In winter, when the first flush of fresh sweet green peas flooded the markets, my Dida would make koraishutir kochuri for those evenings of adda” (Datta 2013, p. 56).

The preparation of food also entails a whole range of feminine collaborative activity that induces a sense of interpersonal well-being as, soon after lunch, all the women would climb up to the terrace to collectively shell the sweet green peas to prepare the stuffed fried dough for an evening together. Other women of the locality would also join in, and they would passionately discuss Uttam Kumar’s new movie, discuss the third aunt’s daughter-in-law and complain about the peas not being as sweet this year as those in their

childhood (Datta 2013, p. 56). This veritable constituency of the woman can be seen as an affective emplacement for a self, deriving succor through relationalities. Mukherjee Dutta defines this assemblage as “bong motherhood”, where each of the mothers have their own distinctive culinary praxis constitutive of their personal selves. She painstakingly points out the heterogeneity of this shared homosocial space where her Ma’s recipes were vastly different from her Ma-in-law’s recipes, each bringing their personal socialities into their culinary ways. Recipe sharing is thus the biopolitical production of affective labor that transcends the narrow confines of gender conformity to build strong interpersonal bonds redefining the ontological universe of the female subject. The diasporic cookbook as a literary form foregrounds a relational collectivist self-constituted with interpersonal emotional succor and a sense of well-being from the social sharing of each other’s lives. Herein, as an alternate literary form embodying affective praxis, the cookbook advances significant ways of rethinking epistemologies of selfhood.

For diasporic working women like Mukherjee Dutta, an engineer by profession, her laboring praxis in the office space signifies her inscription into the American frameworks of corporate labor. Her cookbook offers her a medium of alternate labor, affectively regenerative, ontologically sustaining, and significantly offering her an autonomous space for entrepreneurial skills and laboring modalities crafted on her own terms. As such, through the cookbook, she communicates a deep sense of wellbeing and personal happiness. This also powerfully reverses the leisure/labor and domination/subordination dynamics and speaks to situations of subordination that diasporic communities find themselves in: “it was one of those uninspiring days at work. People talked incessantly at meetings and discussed strategies. While words like ‘synergic productivity’, ‘high performance’ and ‘peanut pink cookies’ were flung around like confetti, I doodled fish motifs on my iPad” (Datta 2013, p. 129). From her cookbook, it becomes apparent that her ‘corporate labor’ arena is fraught with undercurrents of white privilege and her unwilling submission to it:

It is the American boss’s brilliant idea to bring otherwise disgruntled employees, hacking away at the keyboard, to bond over falafel and chicken tikka masala. He has good intentions. I am not sure how much bonding happens but so far no one has complained about the falafel or the tikka. One time there was an issue with the rosogolla I had taken. The syrup had dripped down the sleeves of some ‘high up in the food chain’ guy’s dress shirt and there was much scoffing and annoyance followed by a chain of serious e-mails. (Datta 2013, p. 101)

The cookbook, as an alternate laboring paradigm, offers a stiff resistance to the corporatized forms of labor within the spaces of the “office”, while grounding women’s selfhood in relational networks of affective emplacement in food, the kitchen, and cooking. Another locus of affective emplacement is letter writing by women via the form of Mukherjee Dutta’s second cookbook: *Those Delicious Letters*, published in 2020. Mukherjee Dutta uses an epistolary form as a way of recipe sharing between a grandmother and her granddaughter. Much like the orality of the form of the blog, the epistolary form also eliminates any intermediary. The correspondents can afford an intimacy in the writing of personal letters that bypasses the strictures of literary writing. Women’s everyday experiences, otherwise ignored, can then form the basis for alternative knowledge networks.

She receives a series of letters from a grandmother in Kolkata who shares recipes with her. The implications of this form of writing are very interesting, as a new modality of expression of women’s inner lives is crafted through this form that bridges the chasm between the private and the public. The epistolary cookbook foregrounds the significance of letter writing as female affective labor as Mukherjee Dutta tells us: “this piece of blue paper was how we remained connected with family all the years that my father was transferred on his job and moved around the country. My mother wrote long letters in blue inlands to her parents in Kolkata from the cold valleys of Leh, the hot plains of Jamshedpur, the beaches of Chennai” (Datta 2020, pp. 14–15). The letter, as a literary exercise, imbricates with being the emotional center for the mother, affectively connecting the family through such networks of personal information. Adding a layer of complexity to the form of the cookbook, the

epistolary cookbook imaginatively reclaims the narrative space as distinctly female while inviting the reader to embark on an intriguing quest for the identity of the letter writer. Such novel crafting machinations strategize ways of reader participation while affectively engaging them in the sharing of the intimate inner lives of women like Sandeepa and her coterie of maternal figures. Presupposing that readers of cookbooks are predominantly women, the epistolary cookbook, therefore becomes a repertoire of information about how women used the form of letter writing to share not only their emotional lives but also their multiple participatory roles in building affective socialities between family members living across continents: “it was those letters that told my grandparents about my exams, my first prize in art, my new school and my annual report card. And it was one of these that one day bore the news that Dida, my grandmother, was no more” ([Datta 2020](#), pp. 14–15).

6. Reclaiming Nostalgia as a Creative Praxis

What further provides animus to the cookbook as a literary craft is the way it redefines nostalgia from a socio-ontological point of view. Nostalgia is not merely a passive submission to expectations and the demands of a white American paradigm of globalization. As this article argues, nostalgia bears a creative potential and is constitutive of biopolitical labor. It is not merely romantic but also bears the power of the epistemic recovery of female knowledge systems. Tulasi Srinivas says:

two decades into globalisation women are using this inherited knowledge, (a) to harness a unique agency located in this knowledge of food processing to insinuate themselves in the global capital neoliberal marketplace and (b) to use these strategic manoeuvres to shift women’s power from a domestic realm into an emergent public realm, thereby forcing male chefs and producers either to compete, or to create alternate venues of food production. ([Srinivas 2012](#), p. 232).

Cookbooks and women’s blogs on cooking are therefore the corollaries of creative and productive nostalgia. Nostalgia does not precede the diasporic subject, rather, it brings forth through active reengagement with the past, constitutive newer ways of being and creative alterity of labor. As Mukherjee Dutta says: “it is not easy for me to set a home-cooked dinner on the table every evening. But goaded by my mother, I like to think that I am the kind of person who believes in simple meals cooked at home” ([Datta 2013](#), p. 168). Nostalgia can thus induce creativity and an ontological need to mediate the historical continuum of one’s identity. Talking about cooking essentially for her daughters, Mukherjee Dutta says “in this journey I can also tell them who they are, where they come from and where they belong. Through the parade of spices in my kitchen I can talk to them about my dida, their didun, their thammi—and I hope they will talk about me one day in a similar fashion, in their own warm kitchens” ([Datta 2013](#), pp. 168–69).

Other cookbook writers such as Madhur Jaffrey also talk about how it was much later in life that she took to a nostalgic re-engagement with the past, which turned her into a cook and cookbook writer. Creative nostalgia, the ontological corollary of which is cooking and recipe sharing, is therefore political and a significant mechanism of the enactment of alterity. Cookbooks thus become a space for an enactment of the alterity of female subjectivity and sustaining the historical continuum of affective labor.

7. Toward Alternate Poetics of Indianness

Cooking as a way of life is a significant marker of identity, as ways of cooking tell us about different socio-cultural registers. Ashis Nandy says that “Indianness [is] a form of ethnicity that is being re-imported from the diaspora into India to reshape many domains of life, including the cultures of food within the country” ([Nandy 2004](#), p. 10). In this sense, food imaginaries have the capacity to re-imagine ‘authenticity’ that simultaneously allows for re-occupying archetypes ([Bhatia and Ram 2004](#)). In this case, that involves its rather tenacious relationship to the popularity of Indian cuisine in the form of restaurant food that has enjoyed immense popularity outside of India (see for instance, [Shum 2023](#); [Buettner 2008](#) and [Nasef 2023](#)). Sameen Rushdie’s *Indian Cookery* very significantly foregrounds

differences at the center of identity politics. Her cookbook emphasizes a differential Indian identity as contingent upon different modes of cooking. As opposed to a very prosaic and functional British culinary approach, Indians have a more spontaneous and creative approach towards cooking. The two different modes of cooking also throw light on two different forms of social organization: the Indian ways of cooking as independent of cookbooks and the British overdependence on cookbooks and the written word. This tells us that, in India, cooking and recipe sharing is deeply predicated on affective modes of social sharing where oral knowledge systems are more valued than the enlightenment-induced rational faith of the British on the written word. Sameen Rushdie attests to this idea:

I have never seen an English person cook for a dinner party without a recipe book open by the side of the cooker. It is equally true to say that I have never seen an Indian friend using a recipe book in quite the same way—at least not when cooking Indian food. The reason for this is right from the beginning such blind dependence on written recipes is not encouraged. We do not have the tradition of learning to cook with the help of cookery books. When you first start to cook you are usually taught by someone in your family. Even later, when you are eating at a friend’s house and are served with something that strikes you as unusual or delicious, it would be quite normal to ask how it was made. The recipe would be explained to you quite simply in a few minutes; you would have been told the basic ingredients used and given a short explanation of the method employed. ([Rushdie 2018](#), p. 10)

As Rushdie’s cookbook reinforces, cooking is affective labor; Indian cooking is performed with creative intuition rather than Eurocentric practices of following the cookbook with a zealous replication of scientific precision. Rushdie thus undermines the overtly scientific and technical approach towards cooking and foregrounds South-Asian ways of cooking as an embodiment of pluralistic and affective socialities.

8. An Alternate Paradigm of Selfhood

The political linkages between affective labor and an alternate paradigm of selfhood are firmly ensconced in the literary praxis of cookbooks. In advancing ideas of food, cooking, and sharing recipes through cookbooks as sites of affective emplacements, cookbooks significantly contribute to contemporary scholarship on well-being and happiness. Contemporary studies within the domain of social psychology acknowledge the eternal fragility of a self, enmeshed in vagaries of environmental, humanitarian, and multiple other forms of ontological crises. This ‘self’ has always been discursively constructed as monolithic by Western enlightenment-induced epistemologies. Discourses of reason and rationality have been perpetual markers of what it means to be human. However, such anthropocentric and ego-indexed perceptions of the self have not only collapsed but given way to multiple fault lines that have led the world towards violence and geopolitical degeneration. As opposed to reason and rationality, as structures attributing stability to the self, recent scholarship has turned their attention to “affects” as bearing significant political implications that have reconfigured the understanding of the self and selfhood. Rather than reason and rationality as constitutive modalities of selfhood, affects look to ground selfhood in a space of well-being. Indian scholars like Girishwar Misra have advanced extremely significant ideas of affects as constitutive of selfhood ([Misra 2010](#), pp. 95–112). However, this affective turn in scholarship and literary studies does not aim at re-figuring a stable self; rather, it acknowledges its perpetually fragmented status and thereby tries to reconstruct ways in which the self can negotiate with a world fraught with chaos and violence. The cookbook in mediating the relationality of a self, emplaced in the emotions of one’s own foodways in a diasporic world, therefore offers new pathways through which an alternative identity politics of female laboring subjects, in a global world, materializes.

9. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article posits that cookbooks, as a literary form, facilitate the transitioning of the private realm of the diasporic kitchen into a political constituency, marking the female diasporic subject not as a passive locus of “culinary nostalgia” but as a new political subject in the gendered domain of globalization. The kitchen as a political arena is marked by women’s “affective labor”, entailing both physical and affective self-enactment. It produces diverse and fluid paradigms of female entrepreneurship which infuses globalization with new feminist politics from the global south, geopolitically marginalized in the contemporary world order, where the global north is deemed dominant. It is a way of cultural provisioning as traditional systems of knowledge are passed on as well as creatively reconfigured in the diasporic kitchens. Cookbooks as women’s literature imbricate with an agentive production of differential subjectivity that is produced within the political arena of diasporic women’s culinary labor. Culinary labor, in the context of diaspora, is transformative as being entrenched in affects; it induces a deep sense of well-being and forges interpersonal relationalities. Read through such optics, diasporic cookbooks as a form of South-Asian women’s literature, depart from Western rubrics, advancing newer meanings of the self and selfhood.

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