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"Like Mother, Like Daughter?" Perspectives on Mother to Daughter Succession in Diasporic Culinary Fiction by Women

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Abstract

This work is based on the role migrant women have played in history as preservers of culture especially through the culinary domain. Then shifted the focus to fictional representations of migrant women. Popular culinary fictions by migrant women writers typically highlight the cooking mother 'from home' as a symbol for continuing traditions and for nostalgic reminiscences of nurturing. This study attempts to look beyond this familiar paradigm and to explore the significance of these mother figures in new and insightful ways which draw attention to their cooking as a powerful motif as well as their ability to influence the way in which their daughters navigate their diasporic existence.

This work analyzes mother-daughter bonds represented in the fictions of two writers, namely Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni and Amulya Malladi and then studird how the 'traits of these fictional mothers are 'carried forward' by their daughters highlighting the way in which the mothers' skills often undergo a process of

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transformation in their daughters' hands. This type of lineage or succession which resonates with the idea of a matrilineal traditions expounded by feminist theorists can be further complicated by the associations with queer diasporas and global capitalism.

Keywords: *Migrant Women, Culinary Fictions, Mother-Daughter bonds*

Introduction

Mother- to -daughter succession in culinary fictions

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* has declared famously that "(w)e think back through our mothers if we are women" (Woolf, 1929), invoking the primacy of the mother figure in the consciousness of women from which perhaps the need or desire to trace a matrilineal history/ legacy has sprung especially in the context of women who seek to express themselves in a creative context.~~,~~ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar deal extensively with the impact of a (lost) matrilineal legacy or tradition upon the female creative artist in their path-breaking *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They argue: "it is possible, as Mary Shelly's introduction tells us, for the woman poet to reconstruct the shattered tradition that is her matrilineal heritage. Her trip to the cavern of her own mind despite (or perhaps because of) its falls in darkness, its stumbling, its anxious wanderings, begins the process of remembering". (Gubar, 2000)

Therefore, the desire to connect oneself with a maternal tradition can be sometimes discerned in certain aspects of feminist writing. In this study, I will particularly deal with how fictional mothers' traits or skills are carried on to the next generation, usually through a process of succession from mother to daughter in selected South Asian diasporic writing by women. I hope to investigate the manner in which such 'legacy' bestowed by mothers would impact the lives these daughters' lives as migrant women interacting with the host culture. However, I would also like to inquire as to which of the values associated with the older women are 'allowed' to come into the diasporic setting. What a mother has passed on will, I hypothesize, often be modified/

remodeled so that it 'fit' the host culture. Therefore, the question whether the mothers and the values they are associated with are being 'refashioned' to suit the values upheld by the host culture is also worth asking. While the image of younger women incorporating the mothers' skills into their diasporic existence might come across as a classic instance of assimilationist east-west blending, it would be interesting to consider which traits of the mothers are deemed 'desirable' or 'undesirable' in the new diasporic setting. I hope to demonstrate that while often positive nostalgic sentiments are associated with the carrying forward of a mother's traits, such succession is often fraught with complexities. There may be instances where a mother's skills are transformed, suppressed or excised entirely from a daughter's life. I would like to contend that often a suppression of the "mother element" accompanies the daughter's integration into the host culture. Exploring the manner in which this is done would add fresh insights to the study of matrilineal traditions and mother-daughter bonding in literature.

A sense of cultural continuity or succession is often seen to be established within culinary and related fields. This is perhaps due to the fact that food is often associated with nostalgic reminiscences involving 'home'. Mothers, due to their (assumed) association with domesticity and the production of food, are posited in literature and elsewhere as a repository of knowledge about culinary and related arts. A certain validity given to their skills (most of which are enacted in the domestic sphere) makes us reevaluate the domestic site and motherhood associated with it as well. Annette Svenson, (Svenson, 2010) comments on how family recipes from home are often passed on from mothers to daughters. Tulasi Srinivas too speaks of the pressures on diasporic Indian women to reproduce 'authentic' Indian fare, as "mother made it" (Srinivas, 2006). It becomes clear therefore that older women and their relationships to younger women as setter of standards, model, critic and guide (especially in the domestic sphere) form an integral part of the lives of the migrant women

reflected in the works of migrant women writers (see (Ranaweera, 2022).

I will be engaging in a close literary analysis of two novels by popular Indian migrant women writers. *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni and *Serving Crazy with Curry* by Amulya Malladi will be closely analyzed while a few selected works by other similarly placed migrant women writers will be referred to. I will be engaging with feminist critics working on matrilineal genealogies, theories on migration and Homeland and would also look at the possibility of a queer reading of kinships and connections integral to the South Asian diasporic narratives.

Findings and Discussions

Handing down recipes and other things: the politics of inheriting culinary traditions

This sense of cultural succession through a matrilineal line is depicted clearly in *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni. The writer creates a setting in which ancient knowledge about spices and magic is passed on to young women, budding "spice mistresses" by the "Old One" an archetypal mother figure. The novices are seen to learn and train in their art in an unknown, mysterious island, which if we go by the description Divakaruni provides us with defies and transcends boundaries of location and time: "If you ask me how long I lived on the island, I cannot tell you, for time took on a different meaning in that place". The island also refuses to be located in geological or historical terms: "the island has been there forever … the Old One also. Even we who saw the mountains grow from buds of rock . . . do not know their beginning" (Divakaruni, The Mistess of Spices, 1997, p. 24) .

References to Tilo and the other students as the old one's "daughters" evoke a sense of a matrilineal community. Portraying a line of continuity through which knowledge has passed on, Divakaruni traces the origins of the line to spring from a "grandmother" as opposed to a male or patriarchal source; "The old rules which keep the world in its frail balance, which have

been there forever, before me, before the other Old Ones, before even the grandmother" (Divakaruni, The Mistess of Spices, 1997, p. 148). In fact, this form of succession could also be understood in the light of Rajayshree Khushu -Lahiri's and Shwetha Rao's reading of the oral-based transfer of knowledge depicted in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, where knowledge and skills are passed on from woman to woman. (Lahiri, 2012) Khushu-Lahiri and Rao see this to constitute an alternative to the strictly male system of *Gurukul,* where knowledge is passed on from men to men in a male-only enclosure . (Lahiri, 2012) .The "daughters" in turn are seen to perpetuate the Old One's legacy in their respective diasporic location through the spices and other cultural artifacts they dispense to other Indian women residing in the diaspora. Not unlike many diasporic daughters seeking to create food which tastes 'as mother made it', the knowledge/power associated with the spices from its mystical source, the "Old One's" island, is transmitted to the domestic sphere of the Indian migrant kitchen; "but here is another image. A woman in a kitchen, cooking my rice. . . . Is she one, is she many, is she not the woman in a hundred Indian homes who is sprinkling, over sweet kheer that has simmered all afternoon, cardamom seeds from my shop for the dreams that keep us from going mad" (Divakaruni, The Mistess of Spices, 1997, p. 64)?

Amulya Malladi in "Serving Crazy with Curry" *(*from now on *Serving Crazy)* also deals with a mother's traits being passed along a matrilineal line of descent in a diasporic context. This time the focus is strictly on culinary accomplishments. Devi's sudden and hitherto unknown passion for cooking after her thwarted suicide attempt puzzles all her family members. Her uncharacteristically creative cooking is ascribed to many factors, a bout of insanity or a healing mechanism to deal with her trauma. However, Devi in a moment of self-realization understands that she "inherited" her culinary skills, albeit in an almost unconscious manner, from her mother. Having never shown any respect for Saroj's identity as a traditional home- maker Devi begins to appreciate anew the mother's "genes" in her as a powerful factor enabling her to deploy

her creativity in an influential manner; “she who has never cooked, never been part of the kitchen militia, was a general now. She loved it. And she realized that she owed her culinary epiphany to her mother” (Malladi, Serving Crazy With Curry, 2004). The sense of continuity is evident in the following lines; “even now as Devi started to pick out the spices . . . her fingers automatically went through the ingredients she had seen her mother pickup” (Malladi, Serving Crazy With Curry, 2004, p. 133)

It is interesting that she begins to appreciate the mother as the source of her skills at the same time that she discovers the power cooking and serving offers women. Shari Daya sees the cooking scenes in the novel subverting notions of Indian femininity, tradition and domesticity. Daya points out that “Devi turns the traditionally feminine, subservient practice of feeding others into an act of violence” (Daya, 2010, p. 485). She further states, “as with Margaret and Akhila, food is clearly an expression of frustration at the equation between traditional ‘proper’ Indian femininity and sexual oppression and repression, with the added complexity of her second generation identity” (Daya, 2010, p. 485). The fact that Devi acknowledges her mother as the source from which her culinary instincts (which in turn enable her to claim an amount of subjectivity and power) spring can be seen to echo a womanist notion of a mother-daughter lineage as envisaged by Alice Walker (1984) in her *’In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens’*, Walker observes: “yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write are our mother’s stories. Only recently did I fully realize this. that through years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have absorbed not only these stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories –like her life- must be recorded”. (Walker, 1984, p. 407)

It is possible to read Devi’s appreciative acknowledgment of her “ordinary" mother in the light of Walker’s comment given above; “no matter how much she resented her mother’s interference in her life, now she was starting to realize that every part of her life was touched in some way or the other by Saroj . . . pesky, annoying Saroj, . . . a woman with no career and no self-respect, a doormat, had given her so much (Malladi, Serving Crazy With

Curry, 2004, p. 135). Both Devi in *Serving Crazy* and Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* are seen then, to perpetuate the cultural traditions of their "mothers" in the diasporic setting by cooking and performing magic respectively.

This pattern is also discernible in many other popular works by migrant women writers, some of which I will briefly mention before moving on to the implications of these patterns. In Preeti Nair's *100 Shades of White* the protagonist's mother's cooking and later her pickle- making is deeply influenced by the grandmother's presence and memory. In *Haunting Jasmine* by Anjali Bannerjee the protagonist is seen to inherit her aunt's powers to communicate with ghosts. (Bannerjee, 2011) In *The Queen of Dreams,* yet another novel by Divakaruni the grandmother's ability to interpret dreams is inherited by the granddaughter. (Divakaruni, 2004) Roma Tearne's *Bone China* also reflects this pattern, where the grandmother's looks and personality and her culinary skills are replicated in her granddaughter and daughter-in-law. In Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* (Gooneratne, 1991) the expatriate daughter Jean constantly refers back to her mother's, mother-in-law's and grandmother's skills and advice in the domestic sphere.

Taking into account several nationalist discourses which link motherhood (Narayan, 1997) and the nation together it is possible to see this 'perpetuation of the mother' as a desire to bring a part of the homeland into the diasporic setting reinforcing once more the position of women as creators of nostalgia and preservers of cultural traditions. However, the question of what exactly is taken forward or carried on in a process of intergenerational and intercontinental succession remains. Generally speaking, the carrying forward of a mother's skills or a mother's traits is seen as a "positive" factor which brings comfort and nostalgic pleasure to the diasporic subjects, both men and women. The notion that one's bonds with a mother are not completely severed, and that 'she lives in us' is often seen to add a sense of security and an assurance of continuity to their lives. However, are the mother's

skills and her traits 'inherited' or 'reproduced' as they are, without any mediation or alteration? One must go back to the texts concerned to determine this.

In *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) as shown in the previous chapter the mother figure, 'the Old One' keeps a strict vigilance over the activities of her representative Tilo with the help of a strict code of conduct and the spices in the store which act as her accomplices. Like other native mothers from more "realist" fiction, "the Old One" literally seeks to establish her claim on "her daughters" chiefly through the domestic sphere, through the artifacts of the culinary art. Yet Tilo is seen constantly to question the status-quo, and at several instances she directly transgresses the First Mother's orders when carrying out her duties. Her transgressions are seen to have a considerable impact on the way she dispenses her cures among her immigrant clientele. Portrayed as an imaginative woman constantly craving more autonomy than is granted by her First Mother she basically rewrites the "usual" cures taught and sanctioned by her. Refusing to play the part of a selfless, passionless preserver of Indianness (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 71) she reinvents and recreates both the prescribed cures and the laws of conduct governing a mistress' life. She ventures out of the store to help troubled customers, buys and wears American clothing, interacts with non-Indian customers including African Americans and the Native Indian American Raven with whom she later has a sexual relationship.

We see this type of transgression in the cuisine of Devi in *Serving Crazy* (Malladi, 2004) although she does acknowledge that she *is* carrying forward her mother's skill in cooking. Devi too like Tilo displays a disregard towards the mother's strict rules regarding what is acceptable as authentic Indian food as shown in; '"why can't we add parsley in the *dal?*" Devi would ask. "Because Indians don't use parsley, only coriander", Saroj would say' (Malladi, Serving Crazy With Curry, 2004, p. 19) and in "You can eat all the nonsense you like outside this house, in here, I will only make *good* Indian food" (Malladi, Serving Crazy With Curry, 2004, p. 90).

Interestingly, Devi starts her cooking career after her suicide attempt when her emotions are seen to be "unstable". Her initiation to the rarely visited mother's kitchen starts on a note of violence and disruption. Devi's frustration with her own life encompasses her anger with her mother:

> Damn her mother, always cooking the same old food. First she saves her life, and then she cooks boring food. Unexplained anger bubbled through Devi as she let her hands fly over spices and vegetables while Saroj watched, in wide- eyed horror, as her fridge and spice cabinet went from neat and tidy to something completely the opposite.
>
> (Malladi, Serving Crazy With Curry, 2004, p. 77)

Thus, the results of Devi's cuisine are shown to be outrageous and unpredictable, in the same vein that Tilo's ministrations which violate her first mother's rules also produce unexpected, even violent results. The spices(invested of a life of their own) warn her of impending danger when she reworks an ingredient in a customer's cure; "*Tilo you should not have played with forces beyond your understanding, the destruction you have set in motion will touch every life around you. The entire city will shake with it* [emphasis in original]*"* (Divakaruni, The Mistess of Spices, 1997, p. 307).

Saroj's rigid "strictly Indian" recipes are thus "transformed" in Devi, her daughter's hands. The food Devi creates is invested with more modern, hybridized and cosmopolitan traits; "Devi made a ginger, apricot, and mint chutney, along with a good amount of chipotle chili peppers found in a bottle . . . the end result was a fiery, smoky, tangy concoction that beat the pants off of Saroj's mint chutney" (Malladi, Serving Crazy With Curry, 2004, p. 72). Often the merging of American and Indian ingredients is seen to symbolize Devi's hybrid identity and probably her more successful assimilation into America.

The nature of the fusion emanating from Devi's food imagines much more than a simple union of white Americanness merging with Indianness. Anita Mannur (2010) comments on the complex notion of hybridity that involves merging with other ethnic or minority food traditions which is reflected in *Serving Crazy*. According to her; "Devi's culinary repertoire reimagines fusion, not as a transaction between groups of color but as a strategy that would reverse the direction of fusion" (Mannur, 2010, p. 214) . Mannur further points out that:

> more often than not the best-selling fusion cuisine cookbooks in the United States allow for a combination of white and Asian, but implicitly disallow fusion between other "colors" or races. The difficulty of imagining Black-Asian fusion cuisine in the cookbook market suggests that in many cases, fusion is acceptable only when it incorporates cultural markers of whiteness. (Mannur, 2010, p. 214)

Devi's defiant incorporation of American and more importantly, Black and ethnic ingredients into Indian cuisine shock her mother in the same way her liaisons, sexual or otherwise with other minority groups appall her: "everyone heard of that one. Devi Veturi was dating a black hippie with dreadlocks and was seen kissing him outside some Indian restaurant in Fremont. Saroj was furious" (Malladi, Serving Crazy With Curry, 2004, p. 157). Tilo's transgression of the First Mother's dictum "Help your kind only" (Divakaruni, The Mistess of Spices, 1997, p. 70) also involves forming links with other ethnic/minority groups at times through the sharing/ exchange of food.

Conclusions

Both Devi's and Tilo's rebellious acts involving culinary items and cooking can be seen as a protest against firstly, the nationalist, patriarchal forces that confine the migrant woman's role to that of an agent of nostalgia and secondly against an American (especially White) notion of a seamless assimilation of migrants into the American (white) mainstream culture as "model minority"

subjects. (Inkelas, 2006) These transgressions from the normative, accepted White-Asian duality in diasporic cultures also point at a possibility of a queer reading. As David.L Eng points out, a queer reading of diasporic culture draws our attention to relationships, subjectivities and "other relations of affect and desire dissonant to traditional conceptions of diaspora." (Eng, 2010, p. 14)

What most critics have not considered however, is the disruption or the violence inflicted on the mother's presence in the course of a daughter's assimilation into the more cosmopolitan, hybridized culinary domain. Anita Mannur (2010) dwells on the tendency to modulate Indian excesses in fusion cooking, suppressing the "excesses" such as oiliness, greasiness and fieriness to suit the western palate. I would like to hypothesize that suppressing the "excesses" resonates closely with the suppression of the "mother presence" in the daughter's diasporic and culinary ventures. In *The Mango Season* (2003), another novel by Malladi, a telling instance where excess is inscribed in no other place than the mother's body is captured in these lines:

> Her face, along with the rest of her body, had puffed up and any remnants of beauty were submerged by obesity. Ma blamed her weight problem on birth control pills. They did the damage, she would accuse, as if eating mountains of white rice with lots of fat smeared on it was not responsible for the abundance of fat tissue in her body. (Malladi, The Mango Season, 2003, pp. 29-30)

In a forthcoming paper titled *Mother - Goddess or Control Freak? The Maternal Presence In Diasporic Women's Lives* (Ranaweera, 2021 forthcoming) I examine in further detail how the mother presence from home has the potential to be nurturing as well as violent and destructive especially with relation to the culinary arts. Although the possibility of a psychoanalytic reading in which the oedipal rupture from mother figures necessitates the

progression of the diasporic daughters is aligned with my premises, I am aware that other more recent critical developments, such as the discourse surrounding the queer diaspora, question and complicate matters related to mothering and diaspora. As Eng puts it in *The feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of intimacy,* a queer reading of diasporic lives "forces us to imagine an alternative sphere of family and kinship relations lived outside the sanctioned boundaries of the Oedipus complex and incest taboo." (Eng, 2010, p. 19)

It is significantly the mother's dictums that Tilo bends in order to serve a more cosmopolitan (and not exclusively Indian) clientele. (Divakaruni, 1997) It is mainly the frustration with the "same old boring" (Malladi, Serving Crazy With Curry, 2004, p. 77) mother's Indian food that propels Devi to engage in a more global approach to cooking which constantly substitutes the mother's ingredients with other more international ones. They may have inherited the art of healing/cooking from their mothers, but to advance themselves and to survive in the diasporic setting they constantly "rewrite" their mother's recipes. Saroj, after her daughter's descent into the kitchen finds herself ousted from it and the First Mother upon learning of Tilo's disobedience gradually "fades away" from the narrative, literally shrinking in size and looking older and weaker (Divakaruni, *The Mistess of Spices*, 1997, p. 250). It is hinted that Tilo's reworking of the cures of the spices is somehow responsible for the First Mother's decline. This interesting duality rendered by the kitchen as both private and public sphere(s) recalls premises upheld by critics that Divakaruni's and Malladi's writing demonstrates a post-feminist concern about the integration of public and private spaces. (Singh and Goswami 2019) (Jayshree Singh, 2019)

For Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices,* rupture with her First Mother is quite painful. Tilo's act of "editing" the mother's cures and especially her increasing interactions with the outer American world with its multiple communities diminish the mother-presence in her life. The result is a spice mistress who is willing to share her skills not just with the Indian community, but is ready to "go global." She will wear American clothes, eat American food and engage in rituals signifying her entry into the American

consumer culture. Although Divakaruni is careful to trace Tilo's path as that of a woman battling racism and resisting nationalist pressures by venturing out of the confines of her spice store, the implication that Tilo will start employing her spice mistress skills in a more global setting are there (Divakaruni, The Mistess of Spices, 1997, pp. 335-338). Devi too in *Serving Crazy* rewrites her mother's exclusively Indian recipes and the resulting fusion dishes can be argued to represent her more cosmopolitan, globalized outlook earning her a chance to study culinary arts professionally in an American or British school. Similarly, to quote a few brief examples from works by other migrant writers; Nalini who owes her pickling skills to her mother in *100 Shades of White* opens a pickle business to serve a growing clientele in London. There are several instances in Roma Tearne's *Bone China* where altered versions of the grandmother's recipes are served and eaten in a diasporic setting. In Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* Jean who used to seek her mother's and grandmother's guidance in her culinary endeavors in her early days as a migrant Sri Lankan living in Australia later opens up her own restaurant which specializes in fusion food in Australia.

These younger women seem to stress the need to assimilate themselves into the mainstream culture by altering and sometimes deemphasizing the mother presence in their lives. Responding often to a pressure to assimilate into the host culture that Anita Mannur points out is a defining characteristic of many young expatriates (Mannur, 2010, p. 187), they often subdue or erase all traces of their mother "in" them. This pressure to conform can be linked to what critics have termed as the "model minority myth" (Inkelas, 2006) and is discernible at many levels in many works of South Asian women writers. Therefore, the lineage or the mother-to -daughter succession as envisaged by Feminist thinkers appears to be negotiated by a global appeal or a tendency to "standardize" as far as diasporic culinary fiction is concerned. In a previous study I have observed further how these fictional mother figures and their culinary legacies stand in

conflict with the global consumerist trends of the countries where their daughters reside (Ranaweera, 2018)

Alleviating this pressure in the works of many diasporic writers seem to amount, I maintain, to an erasure or suppression of the mother-presence in the lives of their fictional characters. The shedding of "migrant excess" that Mannur argues is reflected in streamlining migrant cooking for the western palate, and in streamlining migrant *lives* to suit mainstream White America is, I contend, a shedding of the mother –presence which is portrayed as volatile, excessive and even violent in the lives of these fictional diasporic women. Taking this line of conjecture further, one might want to explore how mother figures in diasporic situations are essentially racialized when they are deemed excessive or "moderate enough". (Eng, 2010, p. 21)

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