

## **‘What’s Cooking?’- Cookery and Creativity in *The Mistress of Spices, Serving Crazy with Curry and Book of Rachel***

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**Abstract:** The staggering amount of fiction written on food lately has brought kitchen activity out of the undercover of domesticity and, as a result, food and fiction on food is becoming a high art form. We propose to intervene critically and probe into the politics of representation governing this literary genre. We have two propositions in the paper; first, fictionalising food is a part of feminist narrative, wherein essentially women’s experiences (physical, psychological and social life within the domestic domain allotted to them by patriarchal/matriarchal conventions) acquire their due literary space. Second, depiction of food in contemporary women’s writings serves a number of purposes, the most crucial being self-referentiality. Writers consciously bestow upon food images the dual role of underscoring their indigenous cultural ethos as well as of validating their identity as creative writers. The written text becomes analogous to the food prepared through culinary endeavours within the text. Thus, food gains a metonymic dimension and cookery is exalted to the echelon of creative writing. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Amulya Malladi’s *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004) and Esther David’s *Book of Rachel* (2006) are fictions on food that interrogate and negotiate the ethnic, sexual and creative identities of the protagonists and their creators.

Cookery was until late a low profile act occurring uneventfully within the confines of the kitchen. Though the authorial eye learned early to observe bedroom activities with voyeuristic gusto, authors have been reluctant to focus on women’s traditional domain i.e. the kitchen. Though trivialized and neglected by art theories, cookery has been seen as an everyday ritual enabling women to only exhibit their creativity in a circumscribed domain. Just as quilting has become a metaphor for American women’s creativity, cookery has become a dominant symbol of women’s unchronicled and unacknowledged creativity worldwide. We propose to intervene critically and probe into the politics of representation governing this literary genre. We have two contentions in the paper: first, fictionalising food is a part of feminist narrative, wherein essentially women’s experiences (physical, psychological and social life within the domestic domain

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allotted to them by patriarchal/matriarchal conventions) acquire their due literary space. Second, depiction of food in contemporary women's writings serves a number of purposes within the text, the most crucial being its self-referentiality. Writers consciously bestow upon food images the dual role of underscoring their indigenous cultural ethos as well as of validating their identity as creative writers. The written text becomes analogous to the food prepared through culinary endeavours within the text. Thus, food gains metonymic dimension and cookery is exalted to the echelon of creative writing. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004) and Esther David's *Book of Rachel* (2006) are fictions on food that interrogate and negotiate the ethnic, sexual and creative identities of the protagonists and their creators. While Divakaruni and Malladi are diasporic Indians settled in the U.S and Denmark respectively, Esther David lives in India and is diasporic in the actual sense of the term, since she belongs to the Bene-Israel<sup>1</sup> community.

In this paper we contend that culinary activity is an artistic device asserting and negotiating the identities of these authors. Can discourse on cookery be considered serious art? What are the implications of such widespread food fixation in contemporary fiction? The paper will validate the discourse of cookery as a serious art by exploiting the Barthean demarcation between 'work' and 'text'. Further, we contend that cooking is an act asserting racial and sexual identity. In addition, the paper tries to focus on the metafictional and intertextual aspects of these works. Culinary fiction is self-conscious fiction in one way or other. Moreover, as is the case with all the self-conscious fiction, even culinary fiction tries to interrogate its own legitimacy as a fictional genre. Authors endow subversive power to cookery, thus making it analogous to creative writing. Consequently, cookery becomes a medium through which women collapse restrictive physical and psychological boundaries.

### Domestic "Work" as "Text"

Elaine Showalter theorized about women's textile work as alternate history and Jude Chicago in *The Dinner Party* (1979) has re-stitched the missing patches of women's artistry<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, quilting ceased to be treated as a craft and patches and embroideries were for the first time acknowledged to be a significant part of material culture. Quilts and patchwork were taken out of the closet of domesticity and exhibited in full glory in high art galleries. After the image of the 'melting-pot' was discarded due to its hegemonic implication; the image of a multicultural multiethnic 'quilt' took over the American Imagination.<sup>3</sup> Considered only as a feminine craft earlier, quilting is now seen as a powerful form of art, having a semiotics of its own. Showalter in "Piecing and Writing" observes, "Metaphors of pen and needle have been pervasive in feminist poetics. The repertoire of the Victorian lady who could knit, net, knot, and tat, has become that of the feminist critic, in whose theoretical writing metaphors of text

and textile, thread and theme, weaver and web, abound" (224). Further, she maps the changing relationship between quilting and women's writing. Most noteworthy for her is the fact that the technique of piecing has been constantly alluded to in works theorizing the aesthetics of women's writing. Though slighted and trivialized by masculine art theories, quilting is a part of the movement that strives to "reclaim a female heritage and its practices" (229).

Although cookery has been traditionally placed in the category of trivial domestic work, this paper considers it as a cultural text, in much the same way quilting has been viewed lately. It considers authors as cooks, their pens as ladles, and texts as literary dishes that transform cookery into a symbol of female creativity. Thus cookery is no longer a mundane task, but part of a feminist meta-text. Cooking in the enclosed space of the kitchen is not an act of submissiveness but of challenging the dominant cultural mode. Cookery as depicted in the texts under discussion becomes a cultural marker and a metaphor for creativity. This exemplifies the post feminist phase, when the vehement radicalism of the feminist rebellion has subsided and literature and literary theories underpinned female experiences, albeit, subtly. In the feminist phase, women's writings celebrated the aesthetics of the body politic. The private unhesitatingly entered the public.

Until lately, women's writings asserted a "very powerful sexual determination in language and language use, and in particular to valorise sexual difference as male/female, female versus male, by an appeal to signs and correspondences of a femininity, a femaleness – flow, liquid, lips, holes – as well as to specifically women's experiences – menstruation, pregnancy, and so on" (Heath 221). In the post-feminist phase not only physical experiences, but also the social, economic and cultural life of women is captured in women's writings and diverse female experiences are given their due space. As Rosenfelt observes, "post-feminist literature is a reflux of 'other' voices" (287). These experiences, which are a part of women's collective consciousness, are problematized in contemporary literature. This also explains the recurrence of tropes and motifs such as embroidery, knitting, quilting and cookery in women's writings. Patricia Meyer Spacks explains that women write differently "...for readily discernible historical reasons women have characteristically concerned themselves with matters more or less peripheral to male concerns, or at least slightly skewed from them. The differences between traditional female preoccupations and roles, and male ones make a difference in female writing" (8).

Certainly Divakaruni, Malladi, and David's literary 'dishes' are attempts to record the 'peripheral activity' of females. They themselves are 'peripheral' not just because they portray a traditional female activity, but because they all belong to culturally marginalized groups. The women writers in question are not a part of mainstream culture but are situated in the interstitial space of diasporic Third-

World people. Aijaz Ahmed in *In Theory* (1992) places the category of 'third world women' within the broader gamut of third world writing. According to him third world women are, "non-white women who needed to articulate a feminism different in some key respects from the high-bourgeois feminism of many white professionals, with oppressions of race and class layered together with the issue of gender" (87). Race, class, nationality, ethnicity, religion and gender are served together, spiced and synthesized, in these novels through culinary idioms. By co-opting the domestic idioms, the writers legitimise their creative identities. Hence, culinary fiction is a part of the movement, which articulates the unspoken and theorizes the trivial.

Cookery is not just drab 'work'; it entails much more than the edible matter prepared in the kitchen. Roland Barthes distinguishes 'Text' from 'Work' in "From Work to Text." Following the same distinction, one can claim cookery to be a continuous text. Further, as Barthes points out, a text "exists in the movement of a discourse"; it is experienced "only in an activity of production" (156). Culinary art involves the production of food material, the inception of recipes, the process of baking, boiling, roasting etc., dressing the food synthesized by this process, consumption, and finally, the post-consumption ritual. It will not be hyperbolic to state that, though mostly overlooked and hardly theorized, gastronomical activity is eternal. According to Barthes, a text is held in language, which is symbolic in nature. Even cookery has its own signifiers; it is an alternate language. Food and the meaning that it conveys is plural, just as a text is. According to Thieme and Raja, "Its (food's) discourses are complex semiotic systems, or metalanguages that offer vocabularies for commenting on virtually all areas of social experience" (xix). Even A. K. Ramanujan points to the multiple paradigms through which food participates in Hindu culture and draws a system of signification through it (2). In her critical work, Sarah Sceats analyses images of food in the work of some women writers.

She contends that women's writings "manifest far more diverse areas of engagement than such basic explanations suggest, ranging from explorations of female culinary sensuousness, creativity and authority in cooking, to the exercise of power or political responsibility through food and acts of eating, to the revisiting of earlier depictions of women's sexuality through appetite and eating..." (2). Food and its preparation has inspired deliberate discursive practices amongst writers and theorists. Thus, one can accept culinary art and its product as a serious art. However, unlike painting, writing or quilting, the product of culinary endeavours does not last. It perishes because it *is* meant to be consumed. Does the fact that food prepared cannot stand as a testimony to the ingenuity of its maker, make its preparation less of an art? Food ultimately constitutes the body of the devourer. Even the recipes do not remain static (of

which more later). Changes in culture are reflected in changing culinary practices. Jane Bennett in "Edible Matter" discusses how the food consumed becomes an integral part of the consumer.

Edible material is an agent inside and alongside intention-forming, morality-(dis)obeying, language-using, reflexivity-wielding, culture-making human beings. Food is an active inducer-producer of salient, public effects, rather than a passive resource at the disposal of consumers.... Eating, then, reveals not only the interdependence of humans and edible matter, but also a capacity to effect social change inherent in human and nonhuman bodies alike. (134)

Civilization is not just built by human perseverance, but by the joint venture of human and non-human bodies alike. Food is, as Bennett hints, more than "inert, brute matter" (134). Food acts upon humans and propels them into action.

### **Culinary Idioms and Creativity**

Writers often resort to the trope of cookery using it as a symbol for creativity. Culinary fiction is a self-conscious fiction, which tries to legitimize itself. Writers cut, marinate, and sauté words seasoning them with human emotions, and present them on the platter - their ingenious fiction fresh from the generic oven. We frequently stumble upon ceremonious instances, where a parallel between subject matter and written text is sought. Theoretically, metafiction means fiction that analyses its own making as a fictional work (Waugh 6). It puts reality under scrutiny, enquiring its relation with reality. Culinary writing seeks a parallel between fiction and food and puts the culinary enterprise under critical examination. Protagonists constantly allude to food as being a product of their emotional labour, and through this the writers ponder over the process of creating fiction. We can deduce that kitchen activity and fictional creativity can be synonymous.

The selected novels, discussed at length below, constantly uphold the mundane act of cooking thus validating food and cookery as legitimate subjects of fiction. Divakaruni's text treats spices as a cosmic agent capable of bringing about a revolution in the world. The text is interspersed with the graphics of spices and indigenous names of spices are used as titles of chapters. The very text of *The Mistress of Spices* becomes a condiment box, portraying qualities that spices have. Malladi uses cookery as an alternative form of communication; what words fail to express, food can. Thus, *Serving Crazy with Curry* endorses fusion food, in the process foregrounding its own fusion of genres - a recipe book and a novel. David uses food and cooking as a pivotal narrative thread in *Book of Rachel*. The text seems to have been cooked and prepared the way food is shown to be processed - the story line of each chapter is in accordance with the

protagonist's preparation of food. The fiction is seasoned with recipes and graphics designed by the author herself. Consequently, the text is an interesting amalgam of genres, as food is that of ingredients and memories.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices* has exploited a wide gamut of signifieds that spices evoke. Spice, as Timothy Morton rightly points out, "is a complex and contradictory marker" (9). Divakaruni exploits the symbol of spices for sketching the colonial – postcolonial continuum. The novel depicts the postcolonial site as being 'mastered' by a female from an ex-colony. On the one hand the novel boldly addresses the issue of racial discrimination in contemporary America, and on the other, it presents India in the era of witchcraft and occult through a commodity pre-eminently associated with India. "But the spices of true power are from my birth land, land of ardent poetry, aquamarines feathers. Sunset skies brilliant as blood" (18). Viney Kirpal points out in *The Third World Novel of Expatriation* (1989) that the third world writer undercuts the superiority of the West by "pitting the spiritual, community-oriented, tolerant value system of India/Africa/West Indies, against the materialistic, individualistic, racist, power-hungry exploitative system of the West..." (5). Tilo, the "mistress of spices" is a power figure from the orient settled in post-modern America. Her shop in America becomes a spiritual embassy ensuring happiness for her clients. Tilo calls herself the "architect of the immigrant dream" (28). The problems faced by the customers are grounded in contemporary America; be it getting a green card, dealing with the phenomenon of lay-offs, or coping with racial abuse or inter-racial marriages. All problems are solved by Tilo's art of administering spices. At this juncture, the novel seems to take on metafictional dimensions. There are numerous analogies between Tilo and her maker, Divakaruni, the most obvious one being that both are expatriates. Quite notably, Tilo perpetuates the myth of 'mystic India' through her spice-magic shop, while Divakaruni does the same by her writing. Tilo's spices are therapeutic and so is Divakaruni's writing. Undoubtedly, fictionalising traumatic experiences is an exercise of catharsis. Tilo gives a pinch of sandalwood powder to Haroun and asks him to rub it on his palm, as he narrates his woeful past. "'Hush', I said, willing away the old lines from his palm, setting his sorrows free into the dim air of the store. His sorrows circling and circling above our heads to find a new home as all released sorrows must" (27). Thus writing releases sorrows too; the circular rubbing of the palm corresponds to non-linear narration, where yearning for the past and fear for the future merges with the uncertain present. It is evident that Tilo's role as a reliever coincides with Divakaruni's role. Tilo with her powers divines the predicament of her tired and tattered lot, while Divakaruni senses these problems through her insight as a creative writer. Both women work with their intuitive power; while one mitigates pain through the medium of spices the other does so through the medium of words.

Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry* is about an Asian-American girl Devi, who after surviving a suicide attempt, vows muteness. In life devoid of speech, cooking becomes for her the sole mode of communication. Her creativity is given vent through her culinary experiments. Even her mood swings are limned by the food she prepares, just as an artist's experiences are mirrored in her art. "When she was angry, the food was spicy, when she seemed happy, there was dessert, and when she looked bored, the food tasted bland" (77). As a result, food becomes an extended part of her personality as a text becomes that of the writer's. A review posted on Malladi's website proclaims that the novel "is as satisfying as Devi's homemade blueberry curry—and interspersed with delicious recipes."<sup>4</sup> Thus food, described in the text, may be seen as analogous to the written text. Each recipe rigorously described by Devi aids the readers to map the events from the building up of the climax to the denouement. Clearly, the author's experiment with the genre corresponds to the central character's experiment with cookery. Here, the most significant fact is that food doesn't merely function as a central trope within the text, it also becomes a metaphor for the text itself.

*The Book of Rachel* is a celebration of Bene- Israeli cookery. It is the story of Rachel Dandekar, living alone in her ancestral house in a coastal village named Danda. The text and the food prepared within the text represents a Jewish community hence both campaign for the spatial rights of Jewish minority in India.

Likewise, David's incorporation of the intricate and almost extinct Bene-Israeli recipes in her work is a way of preserving them in the pages of literature. Indeed, literature is a reputed preservative of the culture pickle. Here, food stands analogous to the synagogue, as a symbol of the Jewish presence in India. Food serves as a strong political device that enables her to sustain her cultural identity. Rachel's gastro-memoir instates food and its preparation as the central trope of her familial and communal life.

Bennett's observation about food being a proactive commodity inducing changes in human body and mind is apt; the novels under discussion portray spices and other ingredients as having a life of their own. "When I hold it in my hands, the spice speaks to me. Its voice is like evening, like the beginning of the world" (13). Tilo and spices, both take equal part in the healing processes. She converses with the collective voice of spices throughout the novel and, thus, endlessly indulges in spicy sorcery in America. Her chanting bridges the chasm between cultures:

I will split once again tonight kalojire seeds for all who have suffered from America...All night instead I will whisper into air purifying prayers for the maimed, for each lost limb, each crushed tongue. Each silenced heart. (173)

In all the three texts, we find an inextricable link between words and the ingredients of cooking. They are either complementary or substitutive for each other. The potency of spices is awakened only after Tilo chants the spell. Spices, thus soaked with words, bring revolution. In Devi's case, cookery becomes a substitute for words. Devi conveys her gratitude to Girish, her brother-in-law, with whom she has an affair, by cooking Sooji Ladoos, sweetened wheat balls, "with a twist"(148). We can observe that cookery becomes a strong medium of non-verbal communication. Food reinvokes the pleasures of the past. Rachel narrates the story of how she won her husband's heart before marriage by serving him 'puranpoli', a popular sweet dish. She cooks it again when she hurts Judah, her lawyer, to propose to her daughter ...[and]... Zephra. She says, "'I have a soft corner for puranpoli. They bring love and happiness' Zephra understood the meaning of her mother's words" (121). Food becomes the harbinger of happiness. Food and spices are enriched here through association with spells and magic. It endows symbolic values to them, making auguries out of them.

Saroj, in *Serving Crazy with Curry* explains that if one is careful to roast it right, "the spices come alive" (165). Food functions as a medicine for various corporeal and psychological maladies. Rachel instinctively senses her son's silence as his reluctance to communicate with her. She plans to cook roasted tongue for him: "Her recipes would loosen his tongue...He prepared himself for his night of revelations...The food was delicious. Slowly with each morsel he told Rachel about Ilana"(187). After his confession, he gifts a black coloured outfit to Rachel saying, "Because, after forcing me to eat those roasted tongues and that magical black peppers sauce of yours, you made me feel good..."(191). Raven, in *The Mistress of Spices* reacts in a similar vein after eating chana drizzles, or roasted gram with black pepper. Unabashedly, he narrates his long-repressed story of his past. Soon afterwards, he too realizes that his tongue "loosened" because of the pepper: "Whew. This pepper stuff is pretty potent" (162). In *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Devi who is angry at her grandmother's decision to return to India cooks what she names, "ANGRY AT VASU GRILLED CHICKEN IN BLUEBERRY CURRIED SAUCE" (122). Devi's mother Saroj understands this as her mute daughter's resentment, and says sympathetically, "It is very spicy...I am angry too" (121). The writers foreground food in their writings as their working language.

Almost all the spices displayed in the novel *The Mistress of Spices* have a function. Even the seemingly mundane spices imported from India acquire political significance. Divakaruni tries to impart racial as well as sexual connotation to spices. Spices and other ingredients are feminine commodities, and narrativizing them empowers the conventional female domain. Cookery is a creative process and preparation and consumption of indigenous food in an alien terrain asserts one's cultural identity. Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry* is all about giving a twist to authentic Indian recipes by adding some typically



American ingredients into it, thereby celebrating hybridized identity. Devi's first culinary venture is born out of rebellion against her authoritative and orthodox mother Saroj's cooking. Devi christens her creation "The Anti-Saroj Chutney" (78). The ingredients are meant to shock a connoisseur's taste buds and the manner of eating recommended is meant to outrage her mother's sense of etiquette, "the chutney is best savoured when licked" (78). Cooking, evidently, is a tool of resistance against cultural homogenization.

Saroj's recipe book has a page where she had translated the names of the spices in English, before she leaves for America with Avi, her husband:

<u>India</u>	<u>US</u>
Jeera	Cumin
Dhaniya	Coriander
Dal Chini	Cinnamon
Lavang	Have to ask Avi. (67)

Translation is an attempt to rule the world by the word. Saroj expects cultural alienation as she migrates to America. Once she is comfortable with the associations of the new signifiers with the old signifieds, she clings on to them. May Shakespeare pardon me, but would spices named differently not smell the same? Saroj cooks Indian cuisine in her kitchen but consumes American food when dining out. The semblance of India is maintained through her cooking. She voluntarily chooses to live in two worlds. In *Book of Rachel* the heroine explains the tedious method of preparing 'Kiddush' for the Passover dinner. After narrating the entire recipe, she adds naughtily, "Optional: Wine!" (46). Rachel has a choice to cook the Jewish way or the Indian-Jewish way. The fact that she chooses the latter speaks volumes about her identity assertion.

### **Recipes: Food and Texts**

The concept of ownership is problematized in these novels. Recipes are not without their own dispensers, the mother figures. Here, recipes are given to daughters by authoritative 'mothers'. The Old One transfers her secret knowledge of spices to Tilo; Rachel's mother teaches her all the tricks of the kitchen, which she in turn passes on to Zephra, her daughter. Devi's mother inspires her to cook, though in an inverse manner. One senses a strong matrilineality here. Recipes are normative as well as prescriptive. Once their secret is divulged, the master hood (mistress hood) is transferred to the new learner. There are cautionary measures of all kinds which accompany the knowledge of these kitchen secrets – do's and don'ts one has to keep in mind. Rachel has the Jewish Dietary Laws to fall back on and check if she is cooking it 'right'; Tilo has the Old One's dictates and Devi has her own instincts working

against her mother's culinary art. Interestingly, these women cooks try to subvert the rules repeatedly. Rachel has "fried fish mixed with sumptuous helping of ghee, although she had a vague idea that it was against the dietary law" (7). Devi makes most unlikely changes in the traditional Indian recipes though warned against it by her mother. Tilo uses the power of spices to serve her own selfish interest to be at a "beauty summit" (203). She breaks the rules to enjoy her Cinderella moment with her prince charming, Raven. In the discourse of cookery, as in any other, there are transgressions.

There is no copyright system for recipes. In *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Devi finds her mother's old diary in which the only recipe recorded is named "Girija's goat sabzi," the goat curry made by Girija. Then the author continues, "...but she'd (Saroj) never revealed that the recipe belonged to some woman called Girija and that Saroj had acquired the recipe in 1970 in Jorhat" (66). What belonged to Girija, now belongs to Saroj and through Saroj's diary to Devi, who will metamorphose it with some of her own ingenious additions. The recipe changes constantly under different hands and exists simultaneously in the food prepared by different people connected across the spatio-temporal boundaries.

Doesn't food and fiction on food form a cultural text of its own? Food belongs to the category of art just as writing, painting and music do; one just cannot dismiss it as a commonplace activity. As Barthes says,

The work is caught up in a process of filiation. Are postulated: a *determination* of the work by the world (by race, then by History), a *consecution* of the works amongst themselves, and a *conformity* of the work to the author. The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work: literary science therefore teaches *respect* for the manuscript and the author's declared intentions, while society asserts the legality of the relation of the author to the work...As for the text, it reads without the inscription of the Father...the metaphor of the Text is that the *network*, if the text extends itself, it is as a result of a combinatory systematic...Hence to vital 'respect' is due to the Text: it can be *broken*, it can be read without the guarantee of its father, the restitution of the inter-text paradoxically abolishing any legacy. (160-161).

The question of copyright does not arise in recipes prescribed by mothers. The text can't remain static; it has to change and must evolve in each hand. The authorship is a negotiable, elastic category here and authors/cooks display their recipe through the print medium, calling forth further interpolations and assimilations. Susan Leonardi's observation on cookbooks holds true for food fiction too, "...the root of *recipe* – the Latin *recipere* – implies an exchange, a giver and a receiver. Like a story, a recipe needs a recommendation, a context, a

point, a reason to be.<sup>5</sup> Thus, passing on the recipe comes as naturally as oral narratives, which has been passed on from mothers to daughters, generations after generations. The authors-cooks problematize the feminine enterprise of cooking. Food acts as a locus for amalgamation of the traditional and the modern; it concocts the writer's creative identity. Therefore, it is possible to claim that the project of culinary fiction is metafictional.

### **Conclusion: Crossing the Threshold**

After her failed suicide attempt, Devi "enjoyed waking up at the same time every day, cooking lunch, then dinner...there was comfort in monotony" (134). Thus, cooking is not just a creative release but also an escape from reality. The daily chore of cooking keeps Devi from facing the problems. She feels insecure when her mother takes over the kitchen, "she was bored. She hadn't cooked in two days and she was bored stiff. Now that she was not cooking she was forced to think about the future" (189). Rachel recalls that she had spent her entire life cooking for her husband and her children and she enjoyed 'serving' food. She never sat down and ate with them and when her husband insisted, "she scolded him, telling him not to rob her of simple pleasures"(6). Lack of cooking made her feel worthless. Tilo, the alleged 'mistress' of spices, is actually a slave to the rules of spices. Her living and performing space is her shop, her spice clinic. But she has no right to cross over the domain of her shop. She is not allowed to venture out in the 'real' world outside; she is simultaneously all-powerful and imprisoned. According to Malashri Lal,

...I suggest that 'writing the self' for a woman writer in India is a matter of negotiating a paradigm which may be called "The Law of the Threshold." It denotes a strong sense of that which is "inside" and that which is "out there." The threshold is a real and symbolic bar marking a critical transition. Traditionally men have ignored the barrier and partaken of both worlds whereas for women, a step over the bar is an act of transgression. Having committed the act a woman may never re-enter the designated conventional space except by public "confession" and must otherwise live in the "outer world" by her irretrievable choice. The "law" allows multiple existences for men, a single for women, and women have long been complicit in such gendered roles. As has been pointed out by sociologists, the term "Griha-Lakshmi" cunningly juxtaposes woman's "deification" and her confinement in domesticity. (188)

The protagonists of the texts discussed symbolize the maimed power of females over the centuries. In the traditional world order the only place allotted to women was the kitchen and food was the only medium to exercise that power. These novels do not perpetuate the stereotype of cooking woman/mother. Rather, the

stereotypes are inverted, for all the three main characters wield power. All of them have to leave the domestic domain and enter the outside world, where they fare well. They all "cross the threshold" (58) if only to re-enter the domestic domain. Spices and food empower them.

The scalding red chilli powder combats racial abuses; the auspicious yellow turmeric prevents a marriage from falling apart. Thus the domestic battalion fights battles outside the domestic sphere with the tools of the kitchen. Devi moves out of the inner domestic domain and joins the outer commercial domain by becoming a trained chef. Tilo rebels against the traditional spices and the prevalent racial injustice in America. These women do not reject the legacy of culinary art, but challenge the hierarchic, traditional world order. They do not struggle to reject the world of cookery, but to cast off their tethered space. In the post-modern world where multiple identities are celebrated, these women writers and their corresponding central characters seem to negotiate their right of multiple existences. Spaces for them have to be collapsible and movements non-restrictive. Therefore, Tilo attains her desires and participates uninhibitedly in the social makeover of the US. Though the spices leave her, she seeks Raven's earthly paradise by ameliorating the world. Despite the fact that Devi sets out of the kitchen into the man's world, it is the semiotics of the kitchen that empowers her. Eventually, even simple-minded Rachel concocts a way to bring Mordecai, the usurper of the Synagogue, confess his forgery by stuffing him with mince-cutlets. Her culinary skill helps her become friends with the builder's wife. Ultimately, they form an alliance to pressurize the builder not to demolish the synagogue. Cooking empowers her to challenge her spatial and mental confinements and fight for her rights.

The novelists problematize the category of the culinary, prodding other writers to explore the realm of the kitchen further. Through culinary idioms, these works legitimize the right of the women to "cross and re-enter" sexual, literary, linguistic, mental, cultural, racial and national "thresholds." In these novels kitchen mores and food-lore are fictionalized. Food and spices are alternative mediums of communication and they bind the entire human community. The domestic symbols of spices are endowed with universal significance. The poetics of food is shown to be potent enough to resolve the politics of gender and race. These writers/cooks exploit their creativity by exploring the culinary idiom. The writers/cooks serving food on a literary platter perpetuate their identity through cookery. As a result, it no longer remains just a craft, a trick, or a mundane practice of brewing and boiling edible materials; these novels hail cookery as a creative thing raising it from a feminine task to a feminist text!

## End Notes

- 1 The majority of Jews in India belong to Bene - Israel community. According to Dr Shalva Weil, "The forefathers of Bene Israel were shipwrecked and washed ashore the Konkan coast, south of Bombay. The survivors - seven men and seven women - buried their dead in a site near the village Nawgaon, which later became the Bene Israel cemetery." Most of them settled in the western parts of India. After Zionism a large part of the community migrated to Israel. For more information please browse: <<http://www.bh.org.il/Communities/Archive/BeneIsrael.asp#weill>>
- 2 Jude Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979) is a mixed media creation, which presents a ceremonial feminist banquet as a parody of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. A large triangular table set with thirty-nine plates made of embroidered butterfly or flower pattern resembling vulva, set out for distinguished females from the world history. Presently stationed at the Brooklyn Museum, Chicago's work was first of its kind to reinscribe women into history through embroidery.
- 3 Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, 169.
- 4 Patricia Mayer Spacks quoted by Elaine Showalter in "A Literature of Their Own," ed. Mary Eagleton. *Feminist Literary Theory : A Reader*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993. 11.
- 5 In Amulya Malladi's official web-site: <<http://www.amulyamalladi.com/crazy/crazy.htm>>
- 6 Susan Leonardi quoted in Parama Roy, "Reading Communities and Culinary Communities: The Gastropoetics of the South Asian Diaspora" *Positions : East Asia Cultural Critique* 10.2 (2002): 478.

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