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## ***Food Odyssey- Mapping Identity and Belonging through Native Cuisine in A House by the Sea by Sikeena Karmali***

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**Abstract:**

*How do cultural artefacts of food, rituals and customs shape the (Indian) diaspora in Sikeena Karmali's work of a woman's quest for her home will be the focus of the paper. This paper builds up the notion that the cultural artefact of food helps the immigrants unfurl questions relating to identity, citizenship, nationality and belonging in A House by the Sea by Sikeena Karmali. Mundane yet intensely symbolic items such as food are woven in complex and shifting ways into discourses of tradition and transformation, identity, and community. The immigrant on automation reconnects and recreates things from the past comparing and contrasting it with the present alien land. The pangs of dislocation are critiqued through culinary discourse. Food becomes a marker of national identity. The Indianness of an Indian immigrant is located from its ethnic cuisine. The symbol of food assumes an overwhelming importance as cuisine comes to be associated with the lost or abandoned homeland of the migrant.*

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, identity, belonging, dislocation, identity, migrant and food*

The bottom of the pan was a palette-  
Paprika, cayenne, dhania  
Haldi, heaped like powder-paints.

Melted ghee made lakes, golden rivers.  
The keema frying, my mother waited  
for the fat to bubble to the surface.

Friends brought silver-leaf.  
I dropped it on khir-  
special rice pudding for parties.

I tasted the landscape, customs  
Of my father's country-  
Its fever on biting a chilli.

- Indian Cooking by Moniza Alvi in *Presents from Pakistan* (The Country at My Shoulder 1993)

The idea of the short poem is apparent and succinct and coming from a woman south Asian diasporic author voices out the immediate concerns faced by the immigrant women. Writing by women contribute a very significant gendered perspective to the diasporic discourse as they get into the areas now known by the broader rubric of 'cultural studies' dealing with significant everyday realities like food, clothing and leisure activities while exploring identity constructions in the new spaces opened up by diasporic locations. Sikeena Karmali in her debut novel *A House by the Sea* explores the conundrums of identity faced by two generations of Indian migrants in struggling to find and retain their ethnic identity. How do cultural artefacts of food, rituals and customs shape the (Indian) diaspora in Karmali's work of a woman's quest for her home will be the focus of the paper.

Born in Nairobi to Gujarati Indian parents Karmali in her work besieges identity and belonging through food. Food develops a special affinity between the communities. The sharing of food is nothing less than a ritual, a tradition. Many migrants are used to eating in a familial setting but adapting to a new host culture they are forced more or less to change the habitual. Not only what they eat but what and when are ordained by circumstances. The generational conflict between first and second generation immigrants due to changing food habits is a part for conflict as the fear of loss of identity is frequent. This paper builds up the notion that the cultural artefact of

food helps the immigrants unfurl questions relating to identity, citizenship, nationality and belonging in *A House by the Sea* by Sikeena Karmali. What are the desires that these foods articulate and fulfill? How do women see these foods? What emotions do these foods create or engage? And most importantly, what is the dynamic between women and family that these foods articulate? These and other such questions form the central framework of the paper.

The focus in the present paper is on the female experience of migration and diaspora living and my analysis is based on literary representations of women's experience of dislocation, displacement and relocation in *A House by the Sea* by Sikeena Karmali. The core lies on the place of cooking and eating among the continuing habits, rituals, and common practices that are collectively used to sustain a shared sense of diasporic cultural identity, acknowledging the fact that culinary culture has an important part to play in diasporic identifications. Food getting, preparing and preserving, collective eating are symbolic of sharing and a feeling of rootedness. Notably in diaspora *breaking bread together* is an act of utmost significance committed to reclaim, through nostalgia, the past.

The novel *A House by the Sea* is located in east Africa comprising of Tanzania, Zanzibar and Kenya. The saga of the Indian settlers in east Africa is a mixture of success and frustration. Their induction in this colony of British Empire began in the 1860s with contract labourers from Punjab, with large numbers of emigrants both Hindu and Muslim joining from the Gujarat coast later on with expanding economic activities. Trapped in between the ruling Whites and the native Blacks, the situation of the Indians were insubstantial. Being neither the colonizer nor the colonized the Indians were being used as instruments to colonise. Consistent and vigorous attempts were made to create dissension between the non-White communities-the indigenous Blacks and, what Sikeena Karmali in her debut *A House by the Sea* calls the brown skin- the colour of coffee, 'A mass of faces from vanilla to almond-fudge to chocolate- cocoa.' (26) *A House by the Sea* deals with questions of identity, belonging and nationalism, inevitably diasporic in concern, but what differs the narrative from the multitudes of other such immigrant experiences is its preoccupation with food. Food is nothing less than a character which drives the story forward. The idea of home is never simple for any migrant. Anyone who has lived in exile never feels at home anywhere in the world but the idea forms a sort of nostalgic nationalism in his/her mind. Home is where there is a past, a shared history with a collective consciousness and this feeling of oneness is created for women through the agency of cultural artefacts and mainly food within it. The phenomena of imagining the homeland from the outside, constructing and reconstructing the nation for women migrants through food becomes a marker of identity. To use the metaphor Salman Rushdie immortalized in his 'chutnification' of history would be a just tribute as what is an immigrant but a hybrid, a mixture, a chutney of past and present life experiences.

*A House by the Sea* traces the young woman, Zahra's quest for roots in the form of a house owned by her paternal grandmother. During the journey her identity undergoes a sea change confirming her worst fears of not being the one she thought herself to be. Her identity crisis, sense of not belonging, search for roots mark out the nomadic urge of the exilic person. This imploring thirst to belong in the world maps out Zahra's flight across four continents coming to her through her namesake, her grandmother Zahra. Zahra's flight is unique in a way that it is interspersed with the cultural artefact of food being a constant, a presence. Descriptions of cooking and of meals assume overwhelming importance, as cuisine comes to be associated with the lost abandoned homeland of the migrant.

What can happen with foodways when people migrate? Food and foodways travel the globe. Food is of central importance in diasporic journeys as the migrants carry with them elements of the diet and eating habits of the *homeland*. Every nation's diet therefore bears the imprint of countless past immigration. The rise of a culture specific food system like south Asians in UK or Lebanese in Australia is the end result. Chinese takeaways or Indian diners specializing in curries are favoured. Chicken Tikka and Indian spices enjoy an enviable position not only in Britain but US and Canada as well. In fact, the arrival of diasporic foodways can more broadly transform the "host culture" into which migrants move. In Britain, for example, the migration of South Asian people has brought with it a variety of "immigrant" cuisines. While these were maintained initially for the migrant communities as a reminder of "home," their popularity among non-Asian Britons is longstanding and has continued to grow. Certain indigenized dishes, such as chicken *tikka massala*, are among the most enthusiastically and widely eaten meals in Britain today.

Food ways are adaptable: While migrations can map the movements of ingredients, foodstuffs, or methods of preparation into new habitats unchanged, they also tell tales of adaptation, substitution, and indigenization. As people and their cuisines move, they also change to suit local conditions. Not only the host culture receives the food but is influential in bringing out changes suitable to the native palate. Food comes up as an agent of assimilation as well acculturation at the same time defining boundaries, marking territories of belongingness through nostalgic nationalism.

- Food and Identity

Food is the most common way to approach the issue of identity. What one eats means who one is, to which culture one belongs or even how one negotiates one's belongings. Eating and food are powerful metaphors of one's identity, even of a gender identity. As women have been traditionally linked to the concept of nurturing, nourishing through food a female finds herself confined in the kitchen. The novel *A House by the Sea* shows the relevance of the link between food and body. The food imagery of hunger is connected with identity for Zahra. "Hungry-what are you hungry for? Don't you see dear? What you crave is right here..." (32) Through the introjections of food into one's body not only one meets the otherness, for example by eating food coming from other countries and other cooking traditions. Through eating, one can also reaffirm one's own culture, eating traditional dishes. The barbecued fish of Zanzibar draws Zahra as years before her namesake, her grandmother was drawn to it. Her identity as the chocolate woman, '*anissa al shocolat*' is the one she 'fit in'. The sharing of 'delicious tomatoes, eggplants, zucchini, onions, garlic, cilantro, long green chillies, crisp white cauliflowers...' (34) makes her feel belonged to in Cairo, 'city of chaos'. Into a diasporic and globalized context, where it is increasingly easy to taste foreign food, choosing what to eat seems to be the contemporary way to

reaffirm one's own subjectivity. Postcolonial topics often involve the theme of re-appropriation of identity by formerly colonized people and especially by women. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and bell hughes, writing is the way through which colonized people have the opportunity to become again subjects of their own lives and identities. Writing about food and cooking choices shows how rooted into one's body the building of identity is, and how diasporic subjects negotiate their identities.<sup>1</sup>

This mobility assures that food habits are usually maintained among diasporic groups. Occasionally entire culinary cultures may be preserved. More often, "traditional" foods are maintained only in particular symbolic meals or dishes. The immigrants are afraid of losing their cultural identity through Westernization. The immigrants are keen to maintain the cultural and religious significance of food habits and pass them on to future generations. The hostility between generations older and younger to practise ancient habitual eating or to adapt new things is classically depicted in *The Namesake*, a seminal work by Jhumpa Lahiri reinforcing the south Asian women diasporic voice. The most important life changing event in Zahra's tale comes while she is 'choking on my bitter-sweet imbli' and mouthfulls of 'cassava mogo sticks.' 'I savour the aroma of conspiracy..' (40) Zahra not only connects and reconnects to people like her Fatima Fui or her own parents Ali and Gulshan meeting them after a lapse of time but finds the love of her life in Hussein while eating fish. Their relation develops over delicious lunches of *barbecued fish* eating them plainly with hands in the seaside kiosk juices spilling over. This act of eating is in itself a defiant gesture challenging the norm of the society. Engaging in an adulterous affair with Hussein, Zahra is fascinated towards him to reclaim the past in the form of the house, as her lover and his father, the older lawyer Zamakshari, is inadvertently mixed up in the history of her inheritance.

Food doesn't only give identity to the array of characters in the novel like Ali homecoming to eat food made by his wife Gulshan in an alien country but acted as solace or sometimes comfort food. Food as a passage of rite, as gifts, as blessings, as beauty- cleansing body, hospitality, generousness all come up in the experience of novel *A House by the Sea*. At the marriage ceremony of Noor, the maternal grandmother of present day Zahra, the elaborate feast prepared fulfilled the role of acting as an agent in *community sharing* as well hospitality and creating hierarchy, developing class and caste. Milky sherbet, pink from the essence of rose petals...to expensive fish (57); green pistachio burfi fudge, badam almond in semolina...carrot halwa (58); the sugar and lemon syrup...used to strip away unwanted hair (59); they have brought gift platters of pomegranates, dried fruits and nuts...(59).

The age-old jealousy between women loving the same man and tugging for supremacy in a household; cunningly plotting to grab other woman's son as you are not blessed with one, the feeling of revenge, enmity all are conspired on kitchen tables, drinking teas and eating eggs-'between cups of tea, Zeenat plotted Gulshan's demise.' (116)

Festive food, celebratory feasts are all a part and parcel of human life but demise in the family though associated with food as community sharing is not actively associated with rich food. However in *A House by the Sea* Sikeena Karmali's description of death is in parallel to the food prepared. It is through *the distinct smells of mourning* – 'the scent of myrrh burnt to fumigate the body, mingled with brewing tea and spicy aromas from the kitchen' that the young Zahra wakes up to find one of her uncle dead. 'They sat cross legged on the mats and cushions, sipped teas, ate goat-meat pilaff and consoled our family' (87) is how the novelist describes the scene.

Food as love is used for creating atmosphere to seduce, to physically gratify the desires. Satisfaction both physical and gastronomical is dealt with food. The pleasure derived from sex has been equated with the pleasure of eating-'*He eats sexually*' (47). Food as a sensuous experience, eating with all your senses as Zahra does, while enjoying mangoes or barbecued fish is mesmerizing. 'She tastes it gently with her tongue, and the sense overwhelms her, her fingers becomes tense and she bites deep into the flesh, its filmy juice leaving her lips to trace sinews down her chin and neck, sliding upwards...' (83) Even the older Zahra is observed by her would be husband Vilayat Khan at the beach eating fish from a roadside vendor when he falls in love with her to whisk her away later for marrying. The very beginning of this identity search of Zahra's story is with *food*. Food is lurking behind every occurrence in the protagonist, Zahra and her family's life be it coming of age as shown in the older Zahra's case or curing a fever which is as miraculous in its happening as it is in its receding. 'When i am ill my mother makes me soup from chicken legs...saffron and turmeric.' (84) Emotional attachment through food be it in any form love/hate, friendship/enmity, or filial/marital bonding is omnipresent in *A House by the Sea*. As such the concept of comfort food, eating for emotional strength or fulfilment is not new for human history. Migrant existence reinforces the proven fact.

The imagery of food is predominant over any other in the whole novel. Not only the metaphor of food is exploited to the hilt but also the language used while revealing is completely related to cuisine. The aromas, smells, colours in the novel are all coupled with food, for example '...to buy lemons. I love lemons. They are yellow like the sun...we squeeze lemons to remove bitterness and envy from love' (129). The mundane seeming food is the focal point of the text. The characters, their life histories take food as their axis. From the most trivial to the essential, every incident, any occurrence is portrayed in the backdrop of food. This shows clearly the significance given to the cultural artefact of food. This fascination towards food in a diasporic discourse is not new though the treatment is definitely different and utilized to the maximum. Food is much more than life sustaining or life taking object. It has been elevated to a cultural attribute through which the immigrant reclaims and restructures their identity and belongingness in this era of no-mad-ness as exhibited by Karmali herself.

The existence of diasporic cuisine marks a complex negotiation between cultural identities. Mundane yet intensely symbolic items such as food are woven in complex and shifting ways into discourses of tradition and transformation, identity, and community. Diasporic diets, like all aspects of diasporic identity and culture, are constantly remade, even while some key elements endure over time.<sup>2</sup>

- Food, Culture and Memory

Nostalgic indulgence in food is not unheard of. As for the protagonist of *A House by the Sea*, Zahra homecoming is one such occasion to indulge in dreams and these dreams are all full of food items, made by her mother in a traditional way. This is where the 'as mother made it' pattern comes up emphasising the ritual of ethnic food. The creation of culture specific food, handing down such dishes to the younger generation is another food related incident. 'My mother prepares for my homecoming. She makes my favourite foods: khichadi, kheema matar, ndizi na nyama, plantain chips, Persian pilaff, aubergine bhurto, and of course Uganda toast.' (21) The array of foods from every perceivable country of their ancestry as India, Africa and Egypt cries out to claim an identity in such a *hybrid* situation. 'She misses the omelets and paranthas.' (32) 'Tea has always played a central role in the theatre of our family's conversations, gossip and memory.' (87) Memory is past history and through *food* migrants try to reclaim it. The migrants fuelled by nostalgia located in 'authentic' foods transform the act of eating into a performance of 'gastro-nostalgia' that attempts to create a cultural utopia of ethnic Indianness. The construction of an ethnic 'Indian' identity through eating food from the country of their origin or ancestry, acclaim the migrants need to seize a piece of belongingness in their nowhere existence.

Food and nostalgia intersect in ways that can produce new diasporic identities which connects people to a specific country across national borders. Anita Mannur, interested in foodways of migrants states:

"My book, *Culinary Fictions*, examines what food means in diasporic literatures of south Asia. It strives to understand the powerful place food occupies in our cultural imagination while implicitly engaging the many ways in which my own experiences as a diasporic child who learned to eat Indian food everywhere but India had impacted my intellectual growth".<sup>3</sup> Mannur recalls her childhood bodily memories in the article; she mentions that she ate Indian food outside of India when she lived in Papua New Guinea and Malaysia. Her experiences have shaped her diasporic identity.

Describing the Indian identity of the migrant the then Under Secretary of United Nations, Shashi Tharoor spoke his mind in a culinary way- "If America is a melting-pot, then to me India is a thali, a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate... That, to me, is the notion or metaphor of the Indian identity."<sup>4</sup>

Immigrant history is the human history which moves from place to place, assimilating, adapting, intermixing, influencing and forming a multicultural society. Food contributes an indispensable share in the formation of this immigrant history. As Sikeena Karmali writes in her novel *A House by the Sea* assuming different identities on the part of Zahra that - '*Unchanging spirits, new avatars. This is the lyric of my refuge.*' While engaging in secondary migration again the roots of the family are shattered, the sense of belonging is loosened awakening an urge to fit in the mind of the migrant. It is through the common everyday needs like food the immigrants try and belong. 'In Africa we used to wake up to the smell of coffee and the cocoa harvest... We ate fresh hot chapattis ... In later years we had corn flakes covered with sugar and hot milk. I never liked corn flakes.' (102) This dislike is due to the aversion towards anything foreign, not known and loss of the belongingness. The immigrant on automation reconnects and recreates things from the past comparing and contrasting it with the present alien land. 'i escape London to Ghulsan and Ali's Canadian refuge... Lake Louise replaces the sweet troubled waters of Lake Manyara. We snack on roasted corn seeds and peanuts..to picnic on mishkaki kebabs, wrapped now in tasted, soft, white disks of tortilla breads instead of naan... mangoes and papaya have changed to melon and nectarines.' (189)

*A House by the Sea* is a gastronomical journey for its characters. They find solace, love, sharing, disappointment, a sense of cultural identity through what they eat. The pangs of dislocation are critiqued through culinary discourse. Food becomes a marker of national identity. The *Indianness* of an Indian immigrant is located from its ethnic cuisine. The symbol of food assumes an overwhelming importance as cuisine comes to be associated with the lost or abandoned homeland of the migrant.<sup>5</sup> Food offers itself to the literary imagination as a site of desire, mimicking *presence* with its attributes of touch, taste and smell: yet trapped in the insubstantiality of the literary text, it is also frustratingly *absent*, reminding us that we never fully enjoy what we long for.<sup>6</sup>

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