



Food, Senses and Memory: A Sensory Reading of Indian Fiction

Vimal A

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Stella Mary's College of Engineering, Aruthenganvilai,
Azhikal Post, Kanyakumari Dist, Tamil Nadu, India.

E-Mail: vimal99.a@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines how food, sensory perception, and memory intertwine in four Indian English novels. Using interdisciplinary perspectives from food studies, sensory anthropology, and memory theory, the analysis focuses on select passages that emphasize tastes, smells, and domestic culinary practices. Drawing on theoretical work by Halbwachs, Nora, Assmann, and Connerton on collective memory, as well as recent food-memory scholarship, the paper investigates how novelists encode cultural memory in gastronomic imagery. Methodologically, combined close textual reading with qualitative coding of sensory motifs in the narrative. Close readings reveal themes such as food as cultural archive, taste and smell as embodied memory, kitchens and gendered memory, ritual food and diaspora nostalgia, and food politics in postcolonial society. Quotations from the novels are interpreted in light of theory. Overall, food emerges as a multisensory mnemonic device, as memories of food are deployed to re-create home in the diaspora and exist in recollections, nostalgias, and forms of forgetting. The findings underscore the multisensory nature of narrative memory in literature.

Keywords: Food studies, sensory memory, cultural memory, postcolonial identity, diaspora, culinary heritage.

1. Introduction

Literature has long used food as a potent symbol of identity, memory, and cultural heritage. In the context of Indian fiction, culinary imagery often carries layers of historical and familial significance. Food is the vital component in the connection with culture and gives the identity of the particular culture. (Vimal, 2023) This paper explores how four Indian English novels evoke personal and collective memory through the senses of taste, smell, and touch as experienced in food and cooking. While previous studies have examined food as a class marker or symbol of nostalgia, few have systematically analyzed sensory food descriptions in relation to memory theory.

Drawing on scholarship in food studies and memory studies, this research addresses that gap by focusing on sensory details that trigger remembrance. How food scenes in each novel function as sites

of cultural and personal archive, and how they reflect postcolonial tensions. For instance, Kiran Desai's judge longs for English teatime treats ("a cake or scones, macaroons or cheese straws") to endure political unrest, explicitly linking taste to colonial training. We argue that these narratives use food as a multisensory means of encoding memory and meaning.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly work on food in literature underscores its role in identity and memory. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik note that food transcends sustenance to become "symbolic of cultural and social relations" in narrative contexts (Counihan, 1997). In diasporic studies, Mannur (2010) highlights emotional attachment to culinary nostalgia, describing the diaspora dish as an edible memory that connects migrants to homeland traditions. Abarca and Colby (2016) similarly emphasize narrative food memories, calling them the seasoning for the stories of our lives.

From anthropology, scholars like Seremetakis (1994) and Holtzman (2006) have shown that taste and smell uniquely trigger embodied and collective memories in material culture. Recent overviews by Mihalache (2026) argue that food memories are often deployed to re-create home in the diaspora, with food's materiality rich in "recollections, nostalgias, and forms of forgetting" (Mihalache, 2026)

Literary critics have begun applying these insights, for example, Nayana and Arya (2022) analyze the politics of food and gender in *Fasting, Feasting*, and Harrini and Shanthichitra (2022) discuss *Mistress of Spices*' role in conveying Indian authenticity through spices (Harrini, 2026). This review draws on both classic memory theory (Halbwachs, Nora, Assmann) and contemporary culinary studies to situate our analysis of sensory food imagery in fiction.

3. Research Gap

Although food has been studied as a marker of class, gender, and nostalgia in South Asian literature, the nexus of food, senses, and memory in Indian novels remains under-explored. Scholars like Sutton (2001) and Fox & Alldred (2019) recognize food's mnemonic power in cultural contexts, but their focus has been largely anthropological and not integrated with literary analysis. Few critics have systematically examined how Indian novelists encode memory through multisensory food scenes. By applying memory frameworks to close readings of culinary passages, this study fills that gap and highlights the overlooked role of sensory detail in narrative structure.

4. Research Questions

1. How do the selected novels use food and sensory details to evoke memory?
2. What types of memory (personal, familial, cultural, historical) are triggered by culinary imagery?
3. How do food memories relate to identity, class, and postcolonial themes in each narrative?

5. Objectives

To identify and code sensory passages in each novel, interpret these passages using memory theory, and compare how different authors use food to negotiate tradition and change.

6. Methodology & Framework

This qualitative study uses close reading and thematic analysis of literary texts. The corpus consists of four novels, *The God of Small Things* (Roy, 1997), *Fasting, Feasting* (Desai, 1999), *The Mistress of Spices* (Divakaruni, 1997), and *The Inheritance of Loss* (Desai, 2006). Textual sampling focused on passages explicitly involving food preparation, eating, or sensory descriptions. These excerpts were coded for sensory modalities (taste, smell, touch, etc.) and linked to memory-related themes (personal memory, cultural tradition, nostalgia, etc.). A comparative approach contrasts each novel's perspective on food and memory. The analysis does not rely on quantitative measures but on interpretive textual evidence, supported by theoretical concepts from memory studies.

The analysis is grounded in theories of memory and the senses. Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory suggests that individual memories are sustained through social frameworks. Pierre Nora's idea of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) aligns with the notion that ordinary spaces like kitchens or family dinners become mnemonic anchors. Jan Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory and longer-term cultural memory, implying that culinary rituals and recipes can serve as living archives of tradition. Paul Connerton emphasizes the embodied nature of memory through ritual and habit. From sensory theory, scholars such as Seremetakis (1994) and Assmann (2011) highlight smell and taste as particularly powerful triggers of involuntary memory. Wierzbicka (1999) outlines how literary texts can evoke olfactory and gustatory imagery.

Food studies scholars (e.g. Abarca & Colby 2016) note that the memories evoked by food carry social and cultural ideologies that shape identity. In sum, treatment of food descriptions in the novels as enactments of memory, as Abarca and Colby put it, food and its evoked memories set "into motion a process vested with social and cultural ideologies by which we define and redefine who we are".

7. Discussion and Analysis

7.1 Food as Cultural Archive

In these novels, food scenes function as living archives of cultural memory. *The God of Small Things* richly details Kerala cuisine to anchor family history. Roy describes a humble kitchen filled with "tempting smells of frying onion, ground coconut and coriander" (Roy, 1997) as the children await tea, later she catalogs household dishes like *rus chawal*, fish curry, and nightly puddings ("caramel custard, rice pudding... falooda") (Roy, 1997). Even simple fruits become sacred, the Alphonso mango is called

“Food for the Gods” by the father. These specific flavors and dishes encode the region’s heritage and the family’s own traditions. Similarly, in *The Inheritance of Loss* the retired judge clings to British culinary memory. During a raid he “demands a cake or scones, macaroons or cheese straws” (Roy, 1997) at teatime, insisting on “something sweet and something salty” an insistence that reveals his deeply ingrained colonial tastes.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni’s narrative is literally structured around the origins and meanings of spices. The narrator proclaims, “I know their origins, and what their colors signify, and their smells... At a whisper they yield... their hidden properties, their magic powers” (Divakaruni, 1998). Here the spice shop itself is a repository of Indian history and lore. Across all texts, specific foods and spices serve as mnemonic anchors. As Mannur observes in a diaspora context, dishes become “edible memory” (Divakaruni, 1998), linking characters (and readers) to a shared cultural past.

7.2 Taste, Smell and Embodied Memory

These novels consistently link gustatory and olfactory sensations to memory. Roy often evokes taste to summon recollection, seeing the “taste of curry leaves” makes the child narrator appreciate the childhood setting (Roy, 1997), blending flavor with a visual memory of leafy canopy. Divakaruni goes further by personifying spices, they seem to whisper and reveal magic properties (Mannur, 2010), so that smelling them literally unleashes ancestral knowledge. In *Fasting, Feasting*, the parents are obsessed with sensation and abundance. When deciding afternoon treats they fret, “We are having fritters for tea today. ... Or do you want sweets as well?” and insist that “there must be sweets, too” (Desai, 1999), highlighting the sensual urgency of sugar and crispness.

In *Inheritance of Loss*, a dinner scene shows how sensory unfamiliarity marks cultural difference: the judge “could tell Gyan had never eaten such food in such a manner” (Desai, 2006), a moment that contrasts refined dining with rustic immigrant fare. These examples illustrate that sensory detail the “olfactory ... gustatory” imagery available in literature directly links characters to their memories and identities. Readers, too, are invited to taste these memories through vivid description. (Pollan, 2006)

7.3 Kitchens, Domestic Space and Gendered Memory

Domestic kitchens in these novels are deeply gendered sites of memory. In *Small Things*, much of the sensory action takes place in mother and grandmother run kitchens, where recipes and rituals are passed down through the women of the family. The kitchen becomes a space where the private and political histories of the household play out silently. In *Fasting, Feasting*, Uma’s role as a daughter is tied to cooking and serving food, and the family’s expectations revolve around her preparation of meals, embedding her memory of duty in each recipe.

The Mistress of Spices centers on a female protagonist (Tilo) who channels ancestral culinary wisdom to heal and remember, explicitly linking feminine power to spice knowledge. Even in *Inheritance of Loss*, the English-born sisters find refuge in cooking: Lola and Noni retreat to their kitchen to recreate colonial recipes, preserving the mother's memory through mutton soup. In sum, these narratives suggest that women's culinary labor is a vessel for memory even when not explicitly stated, the domestic space of the kitchen holds generations of familial experience.

7.4 Ritual Food, Migration and Nostalgia

Ritual and festive foods carry strong migratory nostalgia. In *Inheritance of Loss*, Sonia's Aunt Mamachi and Noni find comfort in remembered English dishes, Desai lyrically describes a late night kitchen scene where "Oh, beautiful soup in the copper Gyako pot... mutton steam in their hair" (Desai, 2006), invoking the colonial homes they lost. Roy's characters recall festival foods (mangoes, sweets) to combat separation, and in *Fasting, Feasting* the very title points to the ritual cycle of fasting rituals followed by celebratory feasting, emblematic of cultural rhythms.

As Mihalache points out, food's materialities are rich with "recollections, nostalgias, and forms of forgetting" (Mihalache, 2026). In these novels, ritual foods act as sensory time capsules, a bite of sugar or a whiff of spice instantly bridges the gap between past and present, the home country and the adopted one.

7.5 Food Politics, Class and Postcolonial Identity

Finally, food in these novels often signals social power, class, and colonial histories. In *Inheritance of Loss*, the narrator observes that the Indian cook's son reasons, if his father cooks "English food," he must hold a "higher position than if he were cooking Indian food" (Desai, 2006). This comment explicitly ties cuisine to colonial hierarchies. In *Small Things*, subtle class differences appear in food, for example, the Affluent family's elaborate dinners contrast with the meager fare of poorer characters, suggesting caste and wealth through diet.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, the split between modern and traditional meals illustrates generational and class tensions (the village family's simple dal versus Moushumi's aspiring to Western desserts). Divakaruni critiques postcolonial exotification: her spice shop clients seek exotic experiences, commodifying memory. (Olick, 2007) Across the texts, cuisine choices reveal how tradition, modernity, and power intersect for characters, as for nations, what one eats is never a neutral act but a statement of identity and status.

8. Comparative Synthesis

Taken together, the four novels show both overlaps and contrasts. All treat food as a mnemonic device, but with different emphases. Roy’s *Small Things* focuses on richly sensory childhood memories linked to place and personal trauma; Anita Desai’s works juxtapose domestic food against global influences (with *Fasting, Feasting* emphasizing family expectations around feasting and fasting). Divakaruni weaves magical realism with cultural nationalism, making spices literal repositories of history. Kiran Desai uses cuisine to juxtapose colonial and indigenous identities. Below table summarizes each novel’s context key food motifs, and memory themes.

Novel	Food Motifs	Memory Themes
<i>The God of Small Things</i>	Spices, Alphonso mangoes, traditional curries and pickles	Childhood trauma, family history and Kerala tradition
<i>Fasting, Feasting</i>	Tea fritters and sweets, home-cooked meals and Western desserts	Gender roles, domestic obligation and migration
<i>The Mistress of Spices</i>	Cinnamon, cumin, turmeric and variety of spices	Cultural heritage, diasporic longing and empowerment
<i>The Inheritance of Loss</i>	English teas and cakes, curry and fusion snacks	Postcolonial identity, class conflict and colonial nostalgia

9. Summation

The analysis finds that food imagery serves as a multilayered mnemonic device in each novel. Food acts as a “*cultural archive*,” preserving customs and collective history within daily life. Tastes and smells often transport characters to childhood or ancestral memories, making the sensory experience central to narrative perspective. Gender and domestic roles shape these memories: in all texts, women’s cooking anchors personal identity and heritage. Migration and assimilation appear through modified food practices: characters adapt tastes to new environments yet cling to nostalgic flavors. Overall, sensory food passages encapsulate complex memory work, confirming that literature can convey deep cultural memory through the body’s experience.

This study has shown how food, senses, and memory intertwine in contemporary Indian fiction, highlighting an overlooked dimension of narrative identity. By analyzing gastronomic passages in four major novels, we uncovered how authors encode history and selfhood in flavor and aroma.



9.1 Scope for Future Research

Future research might apply similar methods to additional texts, or incorporate reader reception to sensory writing. This work encourages scholars to view culinary description not as mere detail but as an essential site of memory and meaning.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr. Pon Partheeban, Associate Professor and Dean, Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Stella Mary's College of Engineering, for his constant motivation, encouragement and unwavering support in the process of writing this research article.

Funding

Not applicable

References

- [1] Abarca, M. E. & Joshua, R. C. (2016). Food Memories, Seasoning the Narratives of Our Lives. *Food and Foodways*, 24 (1). 1–8.
- [2] Anu, R., & Deepa, P. (2024). Navigating the Labyrinth of Indian Cultural Tapestry and Societal Norms: An In-Depth Analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Literary Canon. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 14(5), 1537-1544.
- [3] Assmann, J. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge UP, 2011.
- [4] Counihan, C, & Penny, V. E. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Routledge, 1997.
- [5] Desai, A. *Fasting, Feasting*. Picador, 1999.
- [6] Desai, K. *The Inheritance of Loss*. Penguin Books, 2006.
- [7] Divakaruni, C. B. *The Mistress of Spices*. Anchor Books, 1998.
- [8] Fox, N. J. & Pam, A. (2019). The Materiality of Memory: Affects, Remembering and Food Decisions. *Cultural Sociology*, 13(1). 105–25.
- [9] Harrini, Binu, J. S. & Shanthichitra. (2022). Food and Culture in Reference to the Novel *Mistress of Spices*. *World Journal of English Language*, 12(4), 62–68.
- [10] Holtzman, J. D. (2006). Food and Memory. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 35, 361–78.
- [11] Mannur, S. P. *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*. NYU Press, 2010.
- [12] Mihalache, I. D. (2026). Food, Memory, and the Everyday. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Food Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780197762530.013.180>



- [13] Nayana, G. & Arya. P. V. (2022). Identity in Consumption: Reading Food and Intersectionality in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*. *Rupkatha Journal*, 14(5), 1–12.
- [14] Olick, J. *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. Routledge, 2007.
- [15] Pollan, M. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. Penguin, 2006.
- [16] Roy, A. *The God of Small Things*. Random House, 1997.
- [17] Seremetakis, C. *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- [18] Vimal, A. (2023). The Depiction of Cultural Context: A Study on Chetan Bhagat's *2states*: The Story of My Marriage, *LangLit*. 206-210
- [19] Vimal, A., & Pillai, S. R. (2024), Exploring Narrative Techniques in Chetan Bhagat's *The Three Mistakes of My Life*: A Critical Analysis. *World Journal of English Language*, 14(5), 218-228
- [20] Vimal, A., & Pillai, S. R. (2024). Portrayal of Indian Contemporary Society in Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* and *One Night @ the Call Centre*: A Comparative Analysis. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 15(6), 1775-1781.
- [21] Vimal, A. (2026), Articulating the Silenced: Voice, Voiceless and Structures of Suppression in Maari Selvaraj's *Bison Kaalamaadan*. *Journal of Literature and Linguistics Studies*, 4(2), 73–79. <https://doi.org/10.61424/jlls.v4i2.913>
- [22] Wierzbicka, A. *Food: A Cultural and Linguistic Perspective*. Oxford UP, 1999.