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Razia Parveen

# Recipes and Songs

An Analysis of Cultural Practices from South Asia

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*For my mother*

## OVERVIEW

This book is a study on how recipes and songs can generate an identity in relocation. I focus upon the South Asian community in Lockwood, West Yorkshire, and show how cultural practices have migrated and relocated from the homeland to the diaspora. This monograph uses a rooted ethnographical pattern to consider issues of current literary philosophical and theoretical concerns. A simultaneous consideration of the topics of some social conventions will allow for me to shed light on current diverse theoretical approaches, ranging from narratology to oral history to Derridean philosophy. I read these oral texts as literature, which allows them to be heard outside the domestic arena. Following an oral history methodology, this ethnographical study focuses on three areas of significance: the matrilineal, nostalgia and space. Each of these themes has been used to reveal how diasporic identity is attained and maintained through recipes and songs. I illustrate how the dynamics of a particular type of nostalgia, which I have termed as migrational nostalgia, allows a community in diaspora to flourish. The concept of space and time is revealed as complex and becomes multi-layered when discussing a diasporic community. I have drawn upon the works of Julia Kristeva and Homi Bhabha, in particular, to analyse these narratives and position them within a liminal space. I further question what it means for a cultural practice to be legitimate and explore the idea that ultimately for those in diasporic communities authenticity can be found in the maternal voice. I show that the validation for a dish or a song is sought after in relocation, and this is sustained by transmitting the oral texts through dimensions of maternal genealogy. All of these factors culminate in a unique identity for a diasporic group, which has its foundations in an alternative space and time.

## PREFACE

My mother was born in the subcontinent of South Asia in Jalandhar, India, around 1936. I say ‘around’ because nobody knows her exact date of birth as all she was told was that ‘the sun was burning hot and the hay needed cutting that year.’ What I do know for certain is that she began her life as an Indian national. This was however soon to change as the War of Partition began in 1947 when she was in her eleventh year. It was during this war that she lost her own mother in difficult circumstances. During this war between India and Pakistan, she migrated to the Pakistani-controlled part of the Punjab. The traumatic death of her own mother left an emotionally and psychologically scarred child. She travelled with the remainder of her family to the newly born nation of Pakistan. Many people had lost loved ones and many children were orphaned so the idea of loss became embedded. The loss of the mother or the absence of a mother does not result in the vacancy of a mother figure. In difficult times in the homeland, the figure of a mother—real or not—was of significant importance, and this is a sentiment that is deeply entrenched in the diasporic community of Lockwood.

My mother was 12 years old when she lost her mother, and as a result all the culinary skills and cultural practices that she learned were from older sisters, aunts and other women in the community. As most of her childhood was spent fleeing from one side of the border and ‘settling’ on the other side, her education was at best scattered and almost non-existent. This resulted in her being illiterate. This was very common amongst the female population of those times in South Asia. This was a very bloody war and there were many casualties on both sides of the state line. As a result

memories, nostalgia and community became the few constants in the lives of the newly formed enclaves. Communities called upon cognitive strategies of remembrance and recall to allow themselves to live in new spaces.

My mother was soon married and became a mother of two children, and her husband, my father, travelled to England with the promise of employment. As her husband was overseas and working in Lockwood with the promise of an imminent return, she endured the temporary hardship. As the weeks turned to months and these months became years, she decided to emigrate with the children to England. When she arrived she was unable to speak, read or write English. This posed many challenges when dealing with educational and health bodies. As a result she and other women in the community found themselves more isolated from what they viewed as a growing hostility to them from the host community. Great value was placed upon the cultural habits and practices that they had brought with them. This is why female genealogy is vital as a survival tool for women not only in the homeland but also in diaspora. They found solace and comfort in the language and cultural habits they had in common. This formed a communal bond between the women that extended throughout the rest of the community.

She soon had three more children (including myself) and was, like many of the women in her position, bound to domestic familiarities. My siblings and I were educated in the local schools and became bilingual as a result. To my mother and other women, it was important that the younger generation kept their culture, and speaking Punjabi to children became essential. To this day, any community events are also advertised in Punjabi or Urdu and also the language is retained in many other cultural practices such as recipes and songs.

With a view to returning to the homeland and to the extended family, my father worked in temporary factory jobs whilst my mother dealt with all the domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking and raising the children. Living in an alien landscape but within a community of people from the homeland brought with it few comforts. The habits of the women left to raise children and look after the home included repeating the recipes they had learned. The women formed a small ring of friendship and called upon each other for support. The recipes and songs they had learned in the homeland were now repeated in Lockwood. The recipes and songs are thus retold in a language that retains the cultural habits of a community and helps to generate an identity.

Over the years the local school and community centre would put on English classes for the local immigrant populace on an annual basis, which

tied in with the school term. The local educational leaders were aware of the cultural pattern of segregating women, and attracting these women would increase attendance of the classes. Wives of migrants were offered the chance to learn to write and speak the language. These classes were well attended but their success remained problematic with many women; of those who attended local classes, some learned the language whilst others were less successful. Some women were not consistent in attending, whilst others had little enthusiasm for learning a new language.

The cultural practices that travelled from one nation to the next were then to travel to a diaspora in a Western nation. The women that came to Lockwood after marriage had little in the way of possessions and brought only their memories and culinary knowledge with them. They repeated the cultural practices of the homeland in the diaspora and, through this repetition and the process of mimicry, alongside the transmission of these practices from the homeland to the diaspora, made a significant contribution to the maintenance of their cultural life and to the formation of an identity. By their very nature, memory and nostalgia are individual but through the presence of a community with a shared history the memory and nostalgia became *collective*. This coming-together aspect of communal cultural practices is what allows them to be sustained in diaspora.

The only method employed for keeping the practices alive was to pass them onto younger women in the household and in the community. This has been achieved with recipes and songs. To this end I have focused on these two genres of cultural practices in Lockwood. The recipes and songs all emerge from subalternity in the homeland, be that India or Pakistan, and have migrated along with their carriers across national boundaries multiple times to settle in the north of England.

Growing up I acquired much of my culinary knowledge from watching my mother, older sister, aunts, neighbours and community women cooking these recipes and singing these songs. The horizontal and vertical transmission of female genealogy was and still is in full practice. Watching and learning practices from my mother and older women in the community offered the vertical dimension of female genealogy, and watching my sister and friends of a similar age as an adult serves as the horizontal dimension. As a result many adult women now sit in the vertical and horizontal axis as they have learned from both their mothers and their sisters and friends. These cultural practices live not only in the memories and nostalgic remembrances of a community, but they are also transmitted to the younger generations of the community.

The migrant community carved out a space and time in which to practise their cultural patterns. The community has held close to the notions of time. The loss of space was something experienced during the war so the gaining of space became significant. Without spaces in which to enact cultural practices, the emotion of loss that was experienced during the War of Partition in the homeland would resurface in diaspora. As a result space becomes a point of identity that is significant to the individual and the community. The notion of loss—the loss of a home combined with the loss of a mother—played heavily on community members who held this emotion very close to them; losing a place of belonging was something most of the diasporic members had experienced. In this space, recipes and songs were practised and repeated on an almost daily basis, and the mother’s voice became the most important voice to mark out authenticity. The spaces of Lockwood have been ‘swapped’ with the dusty streets of the homeland for the diasporic community, and it is these spaces that have been transferred with the cultural practices. Culinary knowledge was gained through actively watching sisters, foster sisters, mothers, aunts and other women in the community. This resulted in memories, nostalgia and maternal genealogy all co-existing in a fairly small space. Nostalgia for the loss of the mother as well as the homeland space is a significant feature in the domestic sphere of each diasporic home in Lockwood. To this end, memory and nostalgia are used as legitimate tools employed by diasporic people to survive in alternative times and spaces. This monograph acknowledges and sees the cultural value of nostalgia and memory to first-generation migrants and presents how knowledge of cultural practices has been transmitted to second and third generations.

As the years went by, my mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness and regular trips to the local hospice ensued. During one of these stays, she was asked to take part in a ‘local art and culture’ class. She agreed and this class was time spent making what my mother and I thought was the most bizarre thing: a clove orange pomander ball. For those less acquainted with this cultural practice, it is a whole orange studded with cinnamon cloves and is used as a Christmas decoration. In British culture it is a nostalgic cultural practice stemming from the Victorian era. It is practised today during a particular festival. To us this was not only a waste of food but more importantly it served no medicinal purpose. This highlights the issue that some cultural practices do not cross boundaries even in the same space and time; however, the mode of transmission of cultural knowledge remains the same to all cultures. The orange was a perfectly good fruit,

and the cloves to my mother should be used in ‘proper’ cooking. This particular culinary cultural practice did not register in the mind of a South Asian diasporic woman at all.

Nostalgia is transmitted to younger generations through recipes and songs that are repeated in Lockwood. It is of significance that the passing on of this is kept within the spatial paradigms of diasporic homes within Lockwood. These oral narratives are just as important to this diasporic culture as the Christmas decoration is to British culture. The recipes and the songs exist in a parallel spatial and temporal framework to the pomander cultural practice; they are both of cultural value in Lockwood to different strands of the community. My monograph argues that the cultural practices that migrated with the South Asian women must be understood as literature and that they have too long been neglected as such and are consequently poorly understood in terms of their contribution to the diasporic communal identity.

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