

Food, Memory, and Diasporic Space: Semiotics and Cultural Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and Kallol Lahiri's *Indubala Bhater Hotel*

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Abstract

This paper examines how food functions as a semiotic system, a vehicle of memory and identity in two South Asian diasporic texts: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and Kallol Lahiri's *Indubala Bhater Hotel* (novel; adapted as a 2023 web series). By reading selected stories and episodes through the combined lenses of semiotics, memory studies, and diaspora theory, the paper argues that food in both texts operates as a mnemonic repository that sustains displaced homelands, a place of cultural negotiation where hybrid identities are continually produced and contested. While Jhumpa Lahiri often renders food as subtle, oblique gestures that indicate emotional distance or cultural dislocation, Kallol Lahiri stages food more overtly as a material practice – an entrepreneurial and communal anchor for a refugee woman traversing the post-partition and post-liberation displacement. The comparative reading highlights both convergences (food as connection to homeland; ritualized culinary memory) and divergences (public vs. private economies of food; the narrative centrality of a food enterprise) and concludes that culinary sign-systems in diasporic fiction rework belonging in ways that are gendered, political, and historically specific. Food emerges as both a mnemonic device and a performative cultural practice, shaping diasporic identities across generational, spatial, and emotional boundaries.

Keywords: food, memory, diasporic narrative, semiotics, cultural identity.

Introduction

Food is never purely sustenance in diasporic fiction: it is a cultural text, a mnemonic and a signifier of belonging, exclusion, and transformation. As Roland Barthes observes in *Mythologies*, “food is not only a collection of products meant for consumption; it is also a system of communication” (Barthes 21). Avtar Brah, in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), extends this semiotic understanding into the domain of migration, framing diasporic space as a site where memory, longing, and adaptation coexist.

By reading food semiotically, we uncover the deeper ways in which diasporic subjects negotiate nostalgia for their homelands while adapting to host cultures. Food thus becomes a practice, a material record of migration, and a carrier of affective memory. This paper explores food as semiotic practice in two texts that attend to Bengali displacements and formations of identity: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and Kallol Lahiri's *Indubala Bhater Hotel*. Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning debut uses minute domestic details – including food – to reveal ruptures in communication and belonging among Indian and Indian American subjects (Santhi 67). By contrast, *Indubala Bhater Hotel* centres a refugee woman who establishes a small eatery, explicitly connecting food, memory, and community in the wake of Partition and later political ruptures (Chowdhury 61).

Methodologically, this paper combines close textual analysis with semiotic theory, scholarship on culinary memory, and diaspora studies. The aim is comparative: to show how different narrative scales and forms (short story vignettes vs. novel and adaptation) modulate the semiotics of food and thereby produce divergent yet complementary commentaries on diasporic identity.

Ferdinand de Saussure: Semiotics of Food

Food functions as a complex sign in literature. Following Saussure, we may treat a food item as a signifier whose meaning is socially mediated. A dish can be an icon (sensory resemblance), an index (causally linked to history, e.g., migration), and a symbol (a cultural convention). Diasporic foodways exemplify this polyvalence. For Saussure, every sign has two parts viz.: *Signifier*: the form (sound, word, image) and the *Signified*: the concept or meaning attached to that form. Saussure's theory when applied to food can help establish food or dish e.g., a plate of rice and fish curry, or the word naming it – *machher jhol* as the signifier and the meaning of comfort of home,

Bengali cultural identity, nostalgia for childhood as the signified. Thus, when an immigrant eats *machher jhol* in Boston or London, the food is probably more than nutrition – it signifies “home,” ‘heritage,’ or “belonging.” Similarly, food operates within a cultural system: *Roti* vs. *Rice* in Indian households encodes class, region, and identity. *Machher jhol* vs. *Butter chicken* implicitly relates to regional identity (Bengali vs. Punjabi). In diaspora, *curry* vs. *hamburger* implies difference between South Asian tradition and American normal. Thus, Saussure helps us read food as a system of signs where meaning arises from cultural convention and difference.

Roland Barthes: Food as a Semiotic System

Where Saussure gives the structural foundation of signs, Roland Barthes expands it into a cultural semiotics of everyday life – and food is central to this. Barthes built on Saussure’s idea that signs consist of the signifier and the signified, but he extended semiotics into the realm of culture and everyday practices. In works like *Mythologies* (1957) and essays such as “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” he argued that food is not just nourishment but a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, and a situation of behaviour. Barthes conceives of food as a signifier within cultural systems: it communicates values, ideologies, and social identities. For instance, in France, wine becomes a national signifier of vitality, tradition, and masculinity (Barthes 58). Food operates within a network of myths, disguising historical and cultural constructs as “natural” truths. Applying this to diasporic narratives, food signifies memory, homeland, and cultural continuity while also being reshaped by host land influences.

Memory Studies and Culinary Remembrance

Memory scholars such as Jan Assmann have argued that material anchors – objects, rituals, and practices – sustain cultural memory. Food is a paradigmatic “embodied mnemonic”: recipes and tastes reanimate personal and collective pasts. Jan Assmann’s influential theory of *cultural memory* provides a crucial framework for examining the role of food in diasporic narratives. In *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Assmann distinguishes between *communicative memory* and *cultural memory*. *Communicative memory* refers to short-term, everyday acts of remembrance transmitted orally and experientially across three or four generations, whereas *cultural memory* denotes more enduring, objectified forms of remembrance embedded in rituals, traditions, texts, and symbolic practices (Assmann 36-40). This distinction illuminates how food practices, simultaneously embodied and symbolic, function as carriers of both personal memory and cultural heritage.

Food in diasporic contexts often operates as communicative memory through the intimate rituals of cooking and eating. Such acts transmit memory through the body and the senses, sustaining a lived connection to the homeland. For instance, in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*, Mrs. Sen’s preparation of Bengali dishes becomes a form of everyday remembrance. Her insistence on acquiring fresh fish and her laborious chopping of vegetables in her American apartment represent more than culinary practices; they embody her attempts to preserve her homeland’s tempi and transmit them into the diasporic space. These culinary gestures are communicative in Assmann’s sense, as they rely on lived, embodied practices and are fragile in their dependency on immediate generational continuity.

At the same time, food practices also move into the realm of *cultural memory*, where they acquire permanence as collective markers of identity. Unlike the transient nature of communicative memory, cultural memory is stabilized through ritual repetition and shared participation. Kallol Lahiri’s *Indubala Bhater Hotel* exemplifies this dynamic. Indubala’s rice-based meals, deeply rooted in her memories of East Bengal, become codified in her eatery, transforming private nostalgia into a shared cultural heritage for her displaced community. The hotel functions as a cultural store, where recipes and rituals of eating ensure the continuity of East Bengali identity across generations. In this way, food transcends its immediate role as sustenance and becomes what Assmann terms a “figure of memory” – a material form that preserves and communicates the past across temporal distance (Assmann 128).

Food also embodies the *ritualistic dimension* that Assmann identifies as central to cultural memory. The act of preparing, serving, and consuming particular dishes is ritualized repetition that anchors individuals in a shared temporal and cultural continuum. In diasporic settings, this repetition becomes a subtle act of resistance against cultural assimilation, ensuring that the identity of the displaced community remains intact despite geographical dislocation. Moreover, Assmann’s temporal framework highlights the generational dynamics of culinary memory: while recipes orally transmitted from grandmothers to children typify communicative memory, the institutionalization of such recipes in restaurants or cookbooks extends them into the realm of cultural memory, enduring the immediate community of migrants. Thus, Indubala’s hotel not only symbolises her personal refugee memory but also etches it into the collective cultural identity of her community.

In sum, Assmann’s theory underscores how food serves as both *embodied communicative memory* and *enduring cultural memory* in diasporic literature. In works like *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Indubala Bhater Hotel*, culinary remembrance becomes the medium through which displaced individuals and communities negotiate belonging, transmit cultural identity, and transform private nostalgia into collective continuity.

The Two Texts:

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is a collection of nine stories that examine Indian and Indian American lives caught between cultural roots and diasporic realities. Domestic detail – including food and dining – functions as an index of dislocation and assimilation (Xin-hui 29). On the other hand, Kallol Lahiri's *Indubala Bhater Hotel* (2021) tells the story of Indubala, a widow displaced from East Bengal who makes a livelihood in Kolkata by running a rice eatery. Food becomes livelihood, mnemonic practice, and communal binder. The narrative foregrounds refugee subjectivity and culinary resilience (Chowdhury 62). The 2023 Hoichoi web adaptation visually amplifies these dynamics through food-centred mise en scène (Ghosh).

Jhumpa Lahiri: Food as Private Semiotic Gesture

In “Mrs. Sen’s,” food is a centre of cultural identity. Mrs. Sen’s meticulous preparation of Bengali dishes – with particular implements and ingredients – denotes fidelity to her homeland. Food becomes an embodied act of memory in an isolating immigrant environment (Xin-hui 30). “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” juxtaposes meals with geopolitical unrest. The act of dining together constructs a transnational intimacy, turning food into a vehicle for empathy across borders (Santhi 70). Across the collection, food signifies absence as much as presence: an unshared meal can symbolize alienation, while abandonment of traditional dishes signifies cultural drift (Godfree 4).

Kallol Lahiri: Food as Public Practice and Historical Archive

Indubala's *Indubala Bhater Hotel* functions as both enterprise and memorial. Her recipes recall East Bengal and provide customers with nostalgic connections to their own displacements. Thus, food becomes both commodity and archive (Chowdhury 65). The narrative also collapses binaries between private and public: Indubala's domestic cooking becomes entrepreneurial, transforming feminine-coded labour into economic agency. In the *Hoichoi* adaptation, food sequences are rendered with visual tactility – close shots of rice steaming, spices sizzling – turning memory into shared sensory spectacle (Ghosh).

Food as Mnemonics, Identity, and Culture in Jhumpa Lahiri and Kallol Lahiri

Both Jhumpa Lahiri and Kallol Lahiri use food as a central image through which diasporic subjects negotiate memory, cultural belonging, and identity. Food, as theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jan Assmann suggest, functions not only as sustenance but as a system of signs and a transporter of memory. In the works of both authors, meals, recipes, and culinary rituals emerge as mnemonic devices that preserve cultural memory while reflecting the tensions of displacement and assimilation.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), food often appears as an intimate link to the homeland and a mnemonic trace of lost cultural identity. Mrs. Sen's yearning for fresh fish is perhaps the most conspicuous example. Her inability to access the same textures and flavours in America underscores the fragility of diasporic identity, where food becomes a sensory reminder of a homeland that cannot be physically revisited. The chopping of vegetables and her meticulous preparation of traditional Bengali dishes transform her physical kitchen into a space of remembrance, embodying what Assmann calls communicative memory – a fragile form of cultural transmission that depends on embodied acts and lived experiences (Assmann 37). In these stories, food is also tied to identity, marking both inclusion and exclusion: while Mrs. Sen clings to Bengali culinary practices as a marker of self, her inability to find fish “fresh enough” simultaneously signifies her disaffection and alienation in America.

Kallol Lahiri's *Indubala Bhater Hotel* (2019) offers a complementary yet distinct treatment of food as mnemonic and cultural device. Indubala, a refugee from East Bengal, transforms her personal nostalgia for the lost homeland into a community resource by running a small eatery in Kolkata. The dishes she prepares – particularly rice meals – function as cultural memory, stabilizing East Bengali identity for a displaced community. The hotel, then, becomes more than a place of eating; it is a cultural archive where culinary practices carry forward the traditions of a lost (home)land. Unlike Jhumpa Lahiri's diasporic characters, who often struggle with the tension between assimilation and cultural retention, Indubala's food represents endurance, resilience, and the transformation of individual memory into collective continuity.

Food in both texts also operates semiotically, in line with Barthes's argument that food is a system of communication (Barthes 29). For Jhumpa Lahiri, food often communicates silence, longing, and emotional distance in immigrant households, where meals represent the gap between generations or between spouses. For Kallol Lahiri, food communicates solidarity and shared cultural identity, turning the act of eating into a collective ritual of remembrance. If Mrs. Sen's fish is a signifier of nostalgia and alienation, Indubala's rice meal is a signifier of cultural survival.

Thus, in the works of both authors, food becomes a mnemonic device that translates memory, an identity marker that differentiates diasporic belonging from assimilation, and a cultural dock that preserves traditions across displacement. Taken together, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kallol Lahiri demonstrate how the semiotics of food and the

dynamics of cultural memory converge in diasporic writing to articulate the complexities of identity, belonging, and loss.

While Lahiri's stories use food as private mnemonic gestures dispersed across vignettes, Kallol Lahiri consolidates food institutionally in the *Indubala Bhater hotel*. The former emphasizes interiority and dislocation, the latter foregrounds communal survival and history. Both texts highlight gendered labour, yet with different outcomes: Mrs. Sen's culinary ritual is melancholic and isolating, while Indubala's food work becomes public empowerment. Historically, *Indubala* situates food in Partition and Liberation War memories, while *Interpreter* emphasizes the psychological aftermath of migration. Culinary semiotics thus performs both personal and political work.

Conclusion

Food functions as a semiotic resource in diasporic writing, carrying memory, identity, and belonging. Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories deploy food as intimate markers of dislocation, while Kallol Lahiri's narrative turns culinary practice into public, communal survival. Together, the texts demonstrate that food is a central language of diaspora, shaping cultural identity in gendered and historically specific ways.

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