

**Self-Acceptance through Serving Food in Amulya Malladi's  
*Serving Crazy with Curry***

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**Abstract**

The concept of 'Self' is defined as a set of one's characteristics that makes one different from others. Self-acceptance is a major factor that contributes to a psychological well-being of a person. Various cultural practices largely contribute to the formation of one's 'self' and food is undoubtedly a basic identity marker. Food is as deeply connected to one's psychology as it is to one's culture. Food literature has garnered more attention in the recent times and many writers explore the possibilities of various themes connected with food. Amulya Malladi is one such author who projects food as a basic source of expression in her works. Her novel *Serving Crazy with Curry* is a story about Devi, a second-generation Indian immigrant in America who is a lost soul. Devi, a serial failure in her life, fails in the attempt to end her life. And worse, she is saved by the one person whom she avoids the most - her mother. Devi stops speaking because of her trauma and uses food as a means of communication. She serves crazy twists to the Indian traditional dishes over which the family bond and each of their craziness is brought to light and compromises are made. At the end of the novel Devi learns to accept herself with all her faults and begins a new life. The aim of this paper is to analyse how the process of cooking is used as a catharsis by Devi who emerges successful in her self-acceptance.

Amulya Malladi is an Indo-Danish novelist in English who is prominent for her diasporic writings. She has authored the following novels: *A Breath of Fresh Air* (2002), *The Mango Season* (2003), *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004), *Song of the Cuckoo Bird* (2005), *The Sound of Language* (2007), *A House for Happy Mothers* (2016), *The Cophehagen Affair* (2017). All her novels offer a fresh perspective of Indian diasporas and their experiences in the alien soil ranging from social to personal. Amulya Malladi often uses food as a major trope in her works and *Serving Crazy with Curry* tops this list. The aim of this paper is to analyse how the process of cooking is used as a catharsis by Devi who emerges successful in her self-acceptance.

Devi is the quintessential misfit or black sheep of her family of overachievers. Her father, Avi Venturi is a successful businessman in Silicon Valley despite the fact that he has lost his right arm in the Indo-Pak War of 1965, when he was just twenty-nine years old. Devi's sister Shobha is a Vice President of a software company. Devi's grandmother Vasu served as a military doctor and she retired as a Brigadier. The only person whom Devi looks down in her family is her mother

Saroj. Devi holds her in contempt for her being a housewife, for her blind adherence to traditional Indian values despite her immigration to America. Hence, she feels humiliated in front of her family as she is saved by Saroj. In order to take charge of her life, Devi feels the need to prove herself in something and she decides to take the place of her mother in the kitchen as she knows Saroj loves cooking and it is her passion. Devi defies Saroj by cooking fusion cuisine by adding twists to Saroj's traditional Indian dishes.

According to Freudian psychoanalysis, the unconscious realm of the human mind consists of fantasies, unfulfilled desires of a person. These desires come out in the disguised form through several mechanisms such as condensation, displacement, sublimation, symbolism and so on. Of these, 'displacement' is a common mechanism that is employed by everyone. According to Freud, displacement is "The substitution for an unconscious object of desire by one that is acceptable to the conscious mind" (Abrams and Harpham 248). This can be applied to the novel's protagonist Devi's predicament who tries to prove her mother wrong. Devi's contempt of her mother not only comes from the fact that Saroj is a housewife but also that Saroj is partial in her love for her daughters. "The first time Saroj compared Shobha and Devi was when she was in labor with Devi" (Malladi 26).

Shobha's birth was an easy one, a normal delivery and Shobha was very perfect as a baby. She came out within a few hours of labor, cried less, slept more and hardly disturbed Saroj. On the otherhand Devi's birth was full of pain. The labor lasted for thirty-five hours and the doctor has to perform a C-section to pull her out. In complete contrast to Shobha, Devi cried more and became a handful for Saroj. Saroj never forgets to bring this up whenever she gets an opportunity. This pattern continued till Devi's adulthood. Devi is constantly criticised by Saroj for her selection of non-Indian boyfriends, American lifestyle, and repeated lay-offs. "And each time something went wrong, Saroj thought how wonderful it would have been if Devi was just a little like Shobha..." (Malladi 29). This becomes the base for Devi's hatred of her mother.

It is to be noted that Devi is highly conscious of her skin colour because of the White boy Dylan whom she has kissed for the first time in her life called her "A brownie slut" (Malladi 55). Devi came home crying and when she related the incident to Saroj, she burst out. Saroj even told her that she deserved the title for her cheap behaviour. Vasu scolded Saroj for her remark and the two started fighting. Seeing the fight, Devi ran away from the house but returned soon after meeting a church Father who changed her heart. This is the reason for Devi's colourful love life which provokes Saroj to the core. She dates guys without any restrictions in the age, colour and profession.

Devi sees Shobha as her competitor because Shobha is clearly her mother's favourite and this is why she starts an affair with Girish. Devi feels like an equal to her sister. Though she is not serious about Girish in the beginning, she falls for him. Devi gets pregnant but she does not want to get humiliated in front of her family and so she aborts the child. When Devi is sacked from her job, she could not take it anymore and she slits her wrists.

Despite all her faults, Devi is not a selfish person. She loves her family and she wants to mingle with them. But she does not know the way to do it. Her desire for cooking stems from this very reason – she wants to mix with the family. Devi is not aware of this until she feels the satisfaction for the first time in bringing her family together for dinner. The whole family is present almost every day to taste Devi’s crazy food preparations. Devi’s Psychiatrist asks her to keep a journal as Devi is not ready to talk yet. Devi chooses one of Saroj’s recipe notebooks as her journal. Saroj loves cooking and it is her only passion. By choosing one of Saroj’s notebooks Devi indirectly wants to steal the passion from her mother. Devi cooks fusion cuisine by adding twist to traditional Indian dishes cooked by Saroj. With each cook, Devi feels a change inside her.

The first crazy dish is the result of Devi’s anger caused by Saroj’s boasting – the role played by Saroj in saving her life. When Saroj asks Devi to have samosas and mint chutney, Devi enters the kitchen and prepares new chutney made of ginger, apricot, mint, and chipotle chilli peppers. When everyone praises Devi for her fusion chutney, she feels happy. “Pride swelled inside her and for the first time in a very long time she felt a small measure of confidence” (Malladi 72). The usage of chipotle chilli peppers reflects the anger Devi feels for Saroj and Devi names the chutney as “The Anti-Saroj Chutney” (Malladi 78), which is quite self-explanatory. From that point, whenever Devi wants to express her emotion she uses food as her medium.

Kitchen is almost a sacred place to Saroj and she never allows anyone to cook there. She is utterly helpless when Devi begins cooking in her kitchen.

Saroj lived in fear that Devi, Shobha, or even Vasu would put things away in the wrong place or ruin her perfectly managed kitchen. That was unacceptable and to avoid any kitchen mishaps, Saroj banned everyone from using her kitchen. She never said it out loud, but everyone knew anyway. (Malladi 70)

Devi feels extreme pleasure when she accidentally slips a spoonful of sugar on the kitchen floor and demolishes the herb pot of Saroj. All these actions are manifestations of Devi’s unconscious desire of outdoing her mother.

“The metaphorical meaning of food, which needs to be treated with care, therefore permeates into human relations creating similarities between food and human emotions” (Assella 132). Devi establishes a connection between her cooking and her emotions. The novel is written in third person narrative except Devi’s recipes which are in the first-person narrative. This emphasizes the importance of Devi’s cooking which purges her pain, anger, and suffering.

Devi’s “Cajun Prawn Biryani” (Malladi 93) is the result of her wish to celebrate the obtainment of her driver’s license back. Saroj wants to cook Biryani to celebrate the occasion. Devi intervenes and cooks her own celebratory dish which becomes an instant hit. Devi chooses prawns because Saroj disapproves the usage of prawns in her biriyani. The reason for Saroj’s disapproval is Avi hates prawns. As usual, Devi deliberately adds prawns in her Biryani.

Ironically Avi who hates prawns is the first one to polish off his plate much to everyone's surprise. Again, Devi gains an upper hand. Devi is unable to believe her culinary skills, "Was she creating her own identity by cooking her own kind of food? She didn't know" (Malladi 134). When Devi contemplates suicide again, she is not able to implement her idea as she realizes that she has lot "to live and taste and explore" (Malladi 87) as her doctor said. Meanwhile the members of the family are spending time together and they are revealing their own craziness.

The choice of ingredients and the items she prepares indicates her desires – both hidden and expressed. "When she was angry, the food was spicy, when she seemed happy, there was dessert, and when she looked bored, the food tasted bland" (Malladi 77). The next crazy dish is "Grilled Chicken in Blueberry Curried Sauce" (Malladi 122) – the result of Devi's anger over Vasu's decision that she must go to India to see her hospitalised friend. Her very choice of large quantity of cayenne pepper – which is known for its hotness - reflects the anger she feels within. "Her chicken with blueberry sauce, served with fragrant cardamom rice, was peeling off the first layer of everyone's stomach lining" (Malladi 119). After tasting this dish, Vasu puts hold on her plan and stays with Devi.

Devi's love for Girish is also expressed in her cooking. When Devi prepares "Sooji Ladoos" (Malladi 148) for Girish, she waits for his remarks like a kid awaiting test results. Her ladoos are packed with nuts and they taste delicious. The very fact that she has selected a dessert item to cook for Girish indicates that she is still in love with him. When Girish praises them, she blushes like a teenage girl. She might have put an end to the affair but still she loves him and it is revealed through the dessert. It is because of this confirmation Girish splits from Shobha and moves to Oxford and hopes that Devi would offer him another chance.

The next crazy dish is "Lamb Clitoris" (Malladi 163) which is made by cooking lamb curry in the traditional way with all the spices in addition to the pomegranate as a twist. Devi cooks this dish when her secret is revealed to her family by her friend Jay who also happens to be her ex-boyfriend. Jay often tells that pomegranate is similar to clitoris, pink and succulent and hence she gives the name. The name of the dish is reflective of her sexual desires, her romantic relationships. It is to be noted that the lamb has a powerful Christian association. The lamb is usually offered as a sacrifice to Lord Christ and this can be compared to Devi when she sacrifices her baby for her family. She does not want to hurt her family anymore. When the news of her miscarriage is known to everyone, Devi expects Saroj to burst out but all Saroj does is to hug and comfort her. Nobody pressures her to tell anything regarding the loss of her baby. After this, Devi's attitude towards Saroj change. Devi finally experiences her mother's love for which she has longed for since her childhood. Saroj's change indicates that she begins to accept her daughter as she is.

Devi's closeness with Saroj is only increased when Devi allows Saroj to help her in making rasam powder. "For a moment Saroj thought Devi would refuse. She probably thought that she didn't need her mother's help and Saroj wanted so much to help" (Malladi 164). Devi

makes rasam with flaky pastry on top and it becomes a hit. The important thing is Devi allows Saroj to make rasam and she only adds the pastry on the top. Until that day Devi has not allowed Saroj to help at all but once Saroj starts respecting Devi's choices and accepts her, Devi's hatred begins to dissolve. On the same day Avi and Saroj talk about their marriage and sort out the differences between them. Immediately after their re-union, Saroj takes over the kitchen from Devi. Devi simply obliges and hopes for Saroj. "Maybe now daddy will start appreciating her just as I have" (Malladi 179).

Devi finally speaks to Shobha regarding Girish and asks her forgiveness. After her final meeting with the doctor, Devi asks Avi to put her in a culinary school. Avi happily accepts her decision. When they return home, Saroj's Dosa with Sambhar awaits them, Devi feels grateful and enjoys her mother's dish. "My memories of Sunday morning of eating hot dosas with sambhar and pickle are vivid. I'm glad that I'm living here again so that I can learn to appreciate the one thing that I never did learn to do before: Mama's impeccable south Indian cooking" (Malladi 212). Devi's desire of hurting her mother dissolves the moment she realizes that her mother has loved her always and she feels stupid that she has not understood that before. The very fact that she favors Indian dish over her fusion cuisine indicates that Devi finally accepts her Indian roots and she is proud of her mother.

Devi's desire of avoiding her mother results in the opposite. Saroj and Devi bond over cooking in the kitchen – their shared domain now – and this helps them dissolve their emotional hurdles too. Devi realizes that she will always have the influence of her mother in her own life. "Her food tasted different from her mother's, but she had learned to cook from Saroj and that made Devi feel closer to Saroj in a way she never had before. Silence and the kitchen had brought them together, and it was a time and place that Devi had started to relish" (Malladi 133). Devi finally breaks the emotional wall that has stopped her from realising her worth. She has lost a baby, lost her job and lost her guy. But still she hopes for the better. Till then Devi has been struggling her whole life to be a perfect daughter to her mother, to be an equal to her sister but all in vain. In the end Devi understands that life is not perfect, and she has to make do with whatever she has. Devi takes responsibility for her failures, begins to respect her Indian roots, loves her mother more and above all she accepts herself with all her shortcomings.

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