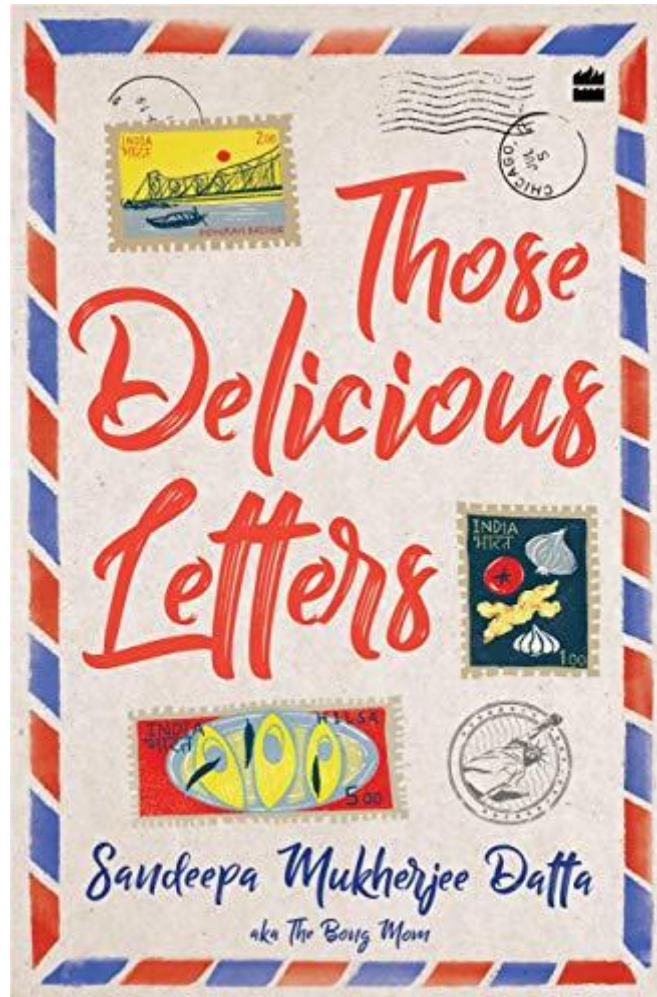


Collective Food Memories in a Transnational Space: A Study of Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta's *Those Delicious Letters*

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Courtesy: www.amazon.com

Abstract

Academicians have been curious about the ways in which people of different cultures communicate with one another in the context of diaspora ever since globalization first started to gain a foothold around the world. The intensity of people's voices increased as a result of their proximity to one another, which was powered by subsequent causes such as migration and trade that brought people together.

Food, a vital aspect of culture, has also gone through such discursive transformations as civilizations merged and overlapped with one another. This allows a cultural and anthropological approach to food studies, which diverges from the extant scientific and nutritional approaches taken to food to a great extent.

Memory Studies, on the other hand, has broadened its scope beyond a purely physiological one and has stepped into the psychological and sociological realms on account of recent discoveries and studies in the subject area.

Conducive to both these developments in the respective disciplines, this article presents a reading of the novel *Those Delicious Letters* by Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta, set in a transnational diasporic setting that unravels the role of collective food memory in Bengali culture. The expressions of transnational collective memory are investigated by examining the gastronomic elements present in the story of the Bengali American author. It is accomplished via the negotiation of unique personal experiences of characters in the novel and a collective understanding of natives of the culture, both of which confirm one another.

Keywords: Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta, *Those Delicious Letters*, cuisine, culture, collective memory, diaspora, transnational, family, and recipes.

Food in Diasporic Literature

Literary depictions of immigrant life, cultural transitions, nostalgia, feelings of alienation, the sense of home, homelessness, and other related subjects have been studied by academics working in the field of Diaspora Studies for several decades. Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amitav Ghosh, Sunetra Gupta, Anita Nair, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are some of the well-known Indian authors who have contributed to this literary tradition. Other authors in this tradition include Amitav Ghosh, Sunetra Gupta, and Anita Nair. Migration, marginalization, homesickness, conflict, identity crisis, racial, cultural, and gender bias, cross-cultural encounter, and disintegration are some of the topics that are discussed. Many of these issues have their roots in culture. Each of these subjects is analyzed considering its relationship to the others.

Food, which is a crucial component of these cultural challenges, has also been investigated in the works of several of the authors that have been mentioned above, such as

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The Mistress of Spices, Interpreter of Maladies, Fasting Feasting, Wife, Jasmine, Moonlight into Marzipan, and other works. Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta's *Those Delicious Letters* is a contemporary novel. Owing to her articles and blogs on the internet under the penname "The Bong Mom," Datta has gained some reputation.



Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta

Courtesy: www.amazon.com

Following the popularity of her food blogs, she moved on to write this novel, which once again interweaves a narrative about culinary customs, childhood memories, romantic relationships, and the ties that bind families together. Food memory plays a significant role in the plot of the novel, which propels the events from one to the next, unveiling layers of ties and the interplays of two cultures in a transnational environment that is present throughout the entirety of the work.

Memory and its Collective visage

Irrespective of when or where they were born or how old they are, humans remain inexorably tied to the recollections they make throughout their life. This is true regardless of how long they've lived too, be it a child or an elderly person. In the book titled *How Societies Remember*, the British social anthropologist Paul Connerton makes the following observation: "Concerning memories as such, we may note that our experience of the present largely depends on our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects..." (2).

Memories show that things that happened in the past do not remain in the past forever; they are recalled and brought into the present scenario by people, which in a sense defies the limitations of time and space. Memories are a testament to the fact that people can bring the past into the present. It is also vulnerable to reconstruction because of the process by which the mind recalls and evaluates past events. Memory serves as a mode of transmission; it provides a means of transferring a colonial past that may have been buried, and it has the power to reshape the future. Consequently, "acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and

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collective.” (Smith and Watson 21)

Collective Food Memory as evoked in *Those Delicious Letters*

Carol Bardenstein, an expert in comparative literature, writes about "how the earliest and most persistently retained sense memories are profoundly incorporated into the creation and structuring of collective memory and cultural identity" in her article titled *Transmissions Interrupted* (356). According to his theory, the act of eating cannot be restrained to the fundamental activity of satiating one's hunger or maintaining one's health; rather, it must be seen as an essential component in the process of reconstructing collective memories. They reveal reflections of the psyche of the individual in context of his or her participation in a larger group, such as a family or a larger cultural setting.

Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta in her novel *Those Delicious Letters* represents food memories in such a way that it reflects on the familial ties, culinary habits, cultural pasts, nostalgia and corresponding emotions. A scroll.in article that reviewed the book said so:

"And the soothing and heartwarming presence of food is woven into that story of coming into one's own and returning home (..) Through the lens of their love of food and their fondness for food-related memories, the people in this region tell stories about courtship, about how children remember their mothers and grandmothers, about the changing seasons, and about how people rediscover themselves and find a new calling in their lives through the food that they eat. These stories include tales about how people rediscover themselves and find a new calling in their lives." (Gooptu)

The protagonist, Shubhalaxmi Sengupta, runs a publishing company that she and her friends founded together. The company faces many adversities which Shubha and the other stakeholders try to overturn. Sameer who is married to Shubha is a successful businessman. He is very devoted to his work and has a lot of passion for what he does. They have two daughters Riya and Piyu. When Shubha reached the age of forty, she started to question the purpose of her life. That is when she began receiving letters from an unknown woman who claimed to be her grandmother and addressed her as Moni. Although Shubha is certain that she does not share any familial ties with her, she begins to develop a respect for the letters and the recipes that she sends along with each of them, which Shubha then attempts to recreate. The story unfolds to reveal who the woman is, how Shubha finds her, how she resurrects the dying flame in her marriage with Sameer after his termination at work, and how she achieves profit at the publication house she and her friends run.

Shubha is able to retrieve and solidify her memories of food through the process of learning to cook through long distance correspondence of letters from Didan. She then documents and disseminates these recollections by sharing those recipes and experiences of food in a book that she aspires to have published someday. Over the course of several years,

Shubha has reoriented herself to accept her new home, its culinary traditions, and its culture. Nevertheless, she goes on to say that she has continued difficulty with the following:

“Twenty-five years since my mother passed away. All that remains now is, as the Portuguese say, ‘saudade’- presence of an absence. In the beginning, it was too painful to cook those same dishes that she conjured with such love (..) Over the years, I’ve painstakingly learnt to cook foreign flavours, food that does not carry the aroma of my mother’s kitchen.” (Datta 10)

These lines are the first indication that the letters she is about to receive from a mystery grandmother have the potential to rekindle her memories of food, bottled up emotions they carry and manifestations of the same in her everyday activities. The first letter Shubha receives from the mystery grandmother ‘Didan,’ has mentions of how Shubha used to tug on her saree and ask for *hing kochuris* and *aloor tarkari* when the rest of her friends would cry over heavy rains during playtime, and she goes on to point out that food was the solution to all her problems. Reading this, Shubha notes, her stomach rumbling with “this tiny shard of pain at not having Dida around,” her real grandmother. (17)

Likewise, when Jai talks about cloudy Sundays back in India when his mum would cook mutton curry and *khichuris*, the descriptions carry Shubha to her past memories: “...his words evaporated and spun a picture around me. It was like a hologram and I could see Baba in our kitchen on such rainy evenings...” and she goes on to recounting specific events. (63)

This nostalgic sentiment attached to food and other cultural markers often idealizes the past. ‘Gastro-nostalgia’ is a complex experience, combining “private remembrance, public displays of historically validated identity, an intense experience of an epochal historical shift” (Holtzman 372)

The same kind of feeling is evoked at Jai’s home when Shubha reads a letter from Didan which elaborates the recipe of *mishti basanti pulao* that is “straight from Ma’s kitchen.” (Datta 127) Later in the novel, Shubha’s husband Sameer plans on preparing sixteen delicacies for Piyu’s sixteenth birthday, of which some dishes are neither solely Indian or American.

He comes up with dishes like *Khichuri weds Risotto*, Morrocon Lentil Soup tempered with *Panch Phoron*, *Maggi* with bits of bacon and green onion, Roasted Asparagus with *Pesto Kashundi*. This reflects on how collective memory is carried on in a transnational space, not just from one’s own familial past or experiences but from the present experiences of one’s own or of close kins.

In a transnational space, the same food can be perceived differently by different people, even those of the same family like in the case of Shubha and her daughter Piyu. Shubha tries

making *Kochuris* and her daughter remarks that they contain oil which could clog arteries. This upsets Shubha; she says “That is not how I had ever looked at *Kochuri*. It clogs my heart no doubt, but with the weight of its love.” (22) There is an instance when Shubha talks of Claire’s great-grandmother’s lava cake: “as if I am eating some precious antique, steeped in age and stories as it is passed from one generation to the next,” wherein it is seen how nostalgia need not necessarily come from food belonging to personal past but one that has a similar cultural value. (103)

Food scholars like Tulasi Srinivas emphasize the importance of cooking food “as mother made it” since “the familial link of mother and grandmother are mentioned to authenticate and legitimate the recipes and the food” (Srinivas 211). One of Didan’s letters elaborates on *Hilsa* fish curry which brings about a gush of memories in Shubha. She starts ruminating on how days at her Dida’s were when *Hilsa* or *Ilish* fish was cooked, the kitchen space; the neem tree just outside; the crows cawing away for a taste; the neighbourhood cats waiting for pieces after feasting on scales etc. Hearing about a similar memory that embodies common familial recipes bring about collective memories that trigger emotions alike.

“Memories can be deeply social in the sense of being shaped by our interactions with the humans, objects, and institutions that make up society, without necessarily needing to be widely shared,” opines Anthropologist David Sutton in his article *A Tale of Easter Ovens: Food and Collective Memory*. (158) True to these lines is the experience Didan has had in Madurai where she developed love for *Sambar* and *Kari Dosa*. Though her roots do not produce that nostalgia, Didan’s interactions with that society taught her the dishes and allowed her to engender a strong bond with them.

Shubha, after myriad attempts to uncover truths about Didan, decides to leave Kolkatta. She stays with her aunt, Pishi during her stay in India. While departing, aunt Pishi presents her with Shubha’s old diary which had in them notes her mother put together on her own recipes, culinary tips, and foreign recipes cut out from old magazines. Shobha recounts how the diary smelled like the turmeric stained on her mother’s cotton saree as she cooks and casually wipes it on her saree. It is pure coincidence that Diden penned the final letter during the latter days of her life, which also happened to be the time when her amnesia was at its worst. It had mentions of her witnessing two people who had passed away, her spouse and her ex-fiancé. Both the deceased individuals held a significant place in her life. On seeing them, Diden responds by saying that she is willing to go with them and accept death. She says she would take *Sondesh* with her for the two of them while accompanying them on their path to demise.

Such is the impact that food has had on the woman, and it is something that she takes with her to the place where she will be laid to rest. This juxtaposition of food and feelings reveals how deeply ingrained her memories were with regard to food, despite the fact that she

was experiencing a decline in her memory. “She was losing her memory... She started writing letters to save what was most precious to her: her recipes and the story of her life.” (Datta 234)

Conclusion

In David Sutton’s words:

“...the power of these memories is that they unite very different levels of experience, whether we think of them as mind and body or sensory and social, or something else; they move seamlessly between taste and social relationships, and this wholeness allows them to stand for and powerfully evoke entire periods of time.” (178)

Culinary elements in Datta’s works, the novel *Those Delicious Letters* and the blog *The Bong Mom* hold the baton to intrinsic attributes of collective food memories and transnational culture considering the lives of Indian immigrants in America. Apart from culture, it is a mirror to human relationships, emotions and the associations culinary traditions have with them, that they move the readers who relate to the plot irrespective of their roots.

Memories of food have the capacity to nurture or famish humans in every which way, not just physically but emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually depending on the medium through which the reminiscences are made.

Cultural subjectivities on personal and collective levels are brought out through the assertions, obscurities and inconsistencies memories make, and analyzed. This analysis helps in decoding the operations of memory; sensory, chronic, rational, or dialogic, that food entails. Therefore, food memory transactions in any narrative form are often heavily loaded with simple yet lucid observations of human experience.

In fictional tales like that of *Those Delicious Letters* which are set in a transnational space, the dynamics between food memory and cultural identities make revelatory exchanges between people and societies in a sense. These dynamics also pave to further investigations into the individual psyches and a collective acclimatizing that takes place in both the home culture and the borrowed culture.

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