

CULINARY KNOWLEDGE AS CULTURAL TRACTS: FOOD, MEMORY, AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSFER IN YOUNG ADULT FICTION BY SELECT SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN IN DIASPORA

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Abstract

In South Asian diaspora literature, food operates as a cultural tract through which culinary knowledge is inscribed and interpreted across generations. These tracts function pedagogically, encoding cultural memory, social practices, and collective identity within recipes and rituals that connect diaspora youth to ancestral homelands. From Jhumpa Lahiri to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, culinary narratives have preserved and transmitted cultural knowledge, a tradition now entering the realm of young adult fiction. Unlike static documents, culinary tracts constitute living curricula that encode not only cultural content but also the social, political, and economic structures that govern consumption. This paper examines how culinary knowledge operates as an intergenerational cultural tract in young adult fiction by South Asian diaspora women writers. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and third space and Jan and Aleida Assmann's communicative and cultural memory, this research paper investigates how these embodied texts are passed down and rewritten. Through a close analysis of Sandhya Menon's *From Twinkle, with Love* (2018), S.K. Ali and Aisha Saeed's *Once Upon an Eid* (2020), and Adiba Jaigirdar's *The Henna Wars* (2020), this study demonstrates how these narratives function meta-pedagogically, both representing cultural transmission and providing frameworks through which young readers can engage with their own culinary inheritance. Furthermore, this paper investigates three dimensions of culinary knowledge transfer. First, it examines how cooking rituals transmit language, religious practices, and familial structures, functioning as embodied forms of cultural memory that connect diaspora youth to homelands they have never physically inhabited. Second, it analyses food narratives as contested sites where generational conflicts over gender roles, cultural authenticity, and preservation imperatives reveal tensions between inherited traditions and contemporary adaptations. Third, it explores how young protagonists reinterpret and transform culinary inheritances, creating hybrid food practices that honour ancestral knowledge while asserting independent cultural identities, demonstrating that intergenerational transmission involves both receiving and reshaping cultural texts.

Keywords: Indian South Asian diaspora, Young Adult Literature, Intergenerational Transfer, Cultural Memory, Culinary Pedagogy, Hybrid Identity.

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Introduction

For South Asian diaspora youth, cultural literacy frequently originates not through linguistic acquisition but through gustatory experience. The pungent intensity of raw mango preserved in summer achaar, the aromatic complexity of cardamom-infused chai, and the layered heat profiles of a grandmother's curry constitute a sensory vocabulary through which cultural identity is initially encountered and continuously negotiated. Prior to developing capacity for articulating concepts such as homeland, hybridity, or belonging, young adult people born in diaspora families acquire cultural knowledge through the embodied experience of culinary difference: transporting lunch boxes whose aromatic profiles mark them as foreign within school environments and navigating the disjuncture between domestic food practices and those of the dominant culture. Food thus operates as a primary medium through which diaspora identity is constituted, functioning not through intellectual comprehension but through somatic memory, wherein taste and olfaction bypass linguistic mediation to inscribe cultural knowledge directly into embodied experience.

Claude Lévi-Strauss theorized food as a semiotic system, observing that culinary practices function as symbolic language organizing and stratifying familial and social relations (Lévi-Strauss 1966). Literary scholars have extended this framework to examine how food operates within narrative structures. Susan Leonardi argues that "food is never just food: it always carries and encapsulates meanings, memories and identities," positioning culinary elements as vessels containing emotional investments, cultural memory, ritual practices, and relational structures embedded within quotidian existence (Leonardi 1989).

From the elaborate wedding feasts materializing class negotiations in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) to the politically saturated domestic kitchen space in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), culinary practices operate as repositories of memory, sites of power negotiation, and media through which identity is simultaneously preserved and contested (Mannur 45-49). In diaspora contexts, where geographical displacement generates ruptures in cultural continuity, culinary knowledge assumes heightened significance as a living archive, constituting a pedagogical practice through which cultural memory traverses generational and geographical boundaries (Mannur 70-72). The transmission of cooking techniques, recipe knowledge, and food-related rituals becomes a mechanism for maintaining cultural coherence across spatial and temporal dislocations that threaten collective memory.

Writers including Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have produced influential culinary narratives exploring how immigrant families negotiate belonging, loss, and cultural continuity through food practices, establishing theoretical and representational frameworks for understanding diaspora food culture (Mondal 3-4). However, culinary knowledge in young adult fiction operates through distinct mechanisms compared to adult literary representations. While adult diaspora fiction often presents food through nostalgia and loss, young adult fiction portrays culinary traditions as active and evolving. Young protagonists are not passive recipients of culture; they question, reinterpret, and reshape inherited food practices, turning culinary transmission into a dynamic process of adaptation and agency.

This study examines how culinary knowledge operates as intergenerational cultural tracts in young adult fiction by South Asian diaspora women writers, investigating the mechanisms through which these embodied pedagogical forms are transmitted and rewritten across generations. The central research question animating this investigation is: How do culinary narratives in South Asian diaspora young adult fiction function meta-pedagogically, simultaneously representing processes of intergenerational cultural transmission and providing interpretive frameworks through which young readers can critically engage with their own culinary and cultural inheritances?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology, combining close reading techniques with theoretical frameworks from postcolonial studies and memory studies. The research is grounded in interpretive analysis of three primary texts: Sandhya Menon's *From Twinkle, with Love* (2018), S.K. Ali and Aisha Saeed's *Once Upon an Eid* (2020), and Adiba Jaigirdar's *The Henna Wars* (2020). These texts were selected based on specific criteria: publication within the last decade, authorship by South Asian diaspora women writers, classification as young adult fiction, and significant engagement with food and culinary practices as narrative elements.

Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and third space provide the framework for understanding how culinary practices function as sites of cultural negotiation in diaspora contexts (Bhabha 36-39). Jan and Aleida Assmann's distinction between communicative memory, which encompasses lived, interpersonal knowledge transmitted across three to four generations, and cultural memory, which refers to institutionalized knowledge preserved across centuries, illuminates how culinary practices operate simultaneously as intimate family transmission and broader cultural pedagogy (Assmann 111-114).

The analysis focuses on three interconnected dimensions of culinary knowledge transfer. First, examination of how cooking rituals transmit language, religious practices, and familial structures as embodied forms of cultural memory. Second, analysis of food narratives as contested sites where generational conflicts reveal tensions between inherited traditions and contemporary adaptations. Third, exploration of how young protagonists reinterpret and transform culinary inheritances, creating hybrid food practices that honor ancestral knowledge while asserting independent cultural identities.

Review of Literature

Food has emerged as a significant site of scholarly inquiry in studies of diaspora, memory, and cultural transmission. For South Asian diasporic communities, culinary practices operate as powerful vehicles through which cultural knowledge, identity, and belonging are negotiated across generations and geographical boundaries. Anthropological and phenomenological scholarship establishes that culinary knowledge represents a distinct form of embodied knowing that resists linguistic codification. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's work on *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (1991) demonstrates that knowledge acquisition occurs through participation in communities of practice rather than abstract instruction (29-33). Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) theorizes how the body itself possesses practical intelligence operating below conscious thought (143-45). Moreover, Parama Roy's *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* (2010) examines food practices like disgust, abstinence, famine, and spice appetites in colonial and postcolonial South Asian contexts, revealing how they shape gendered power dynamics, cultural identities, and imperial encounters through a postcolonial feminist lens.

Jan Assmann's theorization of communicative and cultural memory provides essential groundwork for understanding how culinary practices mediate between embodied, everyday recollection and more durable forms of cultural transmission. Assmann distinguishes communicative memory, the lived, biographical memory transmitted through daily interaction, from cultural memory, which is "characterized by its distance from the everyday" and stored in symbolic forms, rituals, and material practices that can be reactivated by later generations (Assmann 110-111). This distinction proves particularly valuable for analyzing culinary routines in diasporic narratives, as recipes,

spice rituals, and mealtime stories function simultaneously as intimate, quotidian acts and as formalized cultural "tracts" that encode and transmit collective knowledge across generations.

Anita Mannur's work, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (2010), stands as the most influential monograph on South Asian diasporic foodways in literature and popular culture. Mannur demonstrates how culinary discourse mediates complex negotiations over nostalgia, domesticity, race, class, and gender across a range of Anglophone South Asian diasporic texts. Her analysis of "culinary nostalgia" reveals how food becomes a key idiom through which cultural difference is both commodified and contested in mainstream Western contexts. Mannur traces how second-generation South Asian subjects navigate what she terms "palatable multiculturalism," wherein ethnic cuisine serves as an acceptable, consumable marker of difference that simultaneously reinforces and challenges dominant cultural hierarchies. However, while Mannur's work attends to second-generation experiences and generational tensions around food, her primary archive consists of adult novels, films, and media representations rather than YA fiction explicitly written for adolescent readers.

Complementary scholarship traces how texts such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Anita Desai's *Feasting, Feasting* (1999), and Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary* (2003) deploy culinary motifs to explore memory, homeland, identity, and ethical concerns (Maheshwari 2024; Mazumder 2021). These studies foreground food as metaphorical connective tissue between first and second-generation immigrants, arguing that culinary practices serve as "vessels of memory" that enable continuity across temporal and spatial displacement.

Scholarship on South Asian diasporic food practices consistently emphasizes the profoundly gendered nature of culinary labor, positioning women as primary custodians and translators of food-based cultural knowledge. Mazumder's doctoral thesis, *Culinary Culture of the Indian Diaspora: A Study of Women and their Identity in the United States of America* (2021), examines how Indian diasporic women deploy cuisine to negotiate identity, ritual, and belonging across generational divides. Drawing on food practices, culinary blogs, and case studies, Mazumder demonstrates that food functions as "materialized emotion" and as a boundary marker of ethnicity, class, and caste within diasporic communities. Her research shows how caste, class, and gender hierarchies embedded in Indian food systems are reproduced and transformed in diaspora, as first-generation women maintain ritualized, often caste-inflected foodways while gradually loosening restrictions, and second-generation daughters craft more hybrid identities through fusion cooking and selective rejection of inherited norms. However, the project remains focused on autobiographical prose and adult fiction rather than YA readers.

Critically, while existing research documents nostalgia, authenticity, and generational differences around food, it does not explicitly theorize recipes, cooking scenes, and shared meals in YA narratives as a curriculum through which older generations instruct, discipline, or mentor younger ones in cultural scripts. The surveyed scholarship treats food as metaphor, symbol, and social practice but does not investigate how YA texts may structure entire narrative arcs around culinary "tracts": embedded lessons about religion, caste, gender, queerness, or racialization delivered through kitchen conversations, family feasts, or peer food-sharing. This study addresses these gaps by examining a corpus of YA novels by South Asian diasporic women in which food functions as a central narrative and thematic element, demonstrating how culinary knowledge operates as intergenerational pedagogy that both socializes young protagonists into and enables them to critically interrogate inherited norms of gender, caste, religion, and national belonging.

Culinary Knowledge as Cultural Tracts

The concept of "cultural tracts" employed in this study reimagines how to understand the transmission of cultural knowledge in diaspora contexts (Mannur 1-4). Unlike static textual documents such as cookbooks or written recipes that preserve culinary knowledge in fixed form, cultural tracts are living pedagogical documents existing through performance, embodiment, and social practice (Mannur 20-22). The term "tract" invokes both a written document, suggesting intentional transmission and pedagogical purpose, and an anatomical pathway, suggesting embodiment and sensory experience, capturing the dual nature of how culinary knowledge operates. When a grandmother teaches her granddaughter to make biryani, she transmits not merely ingredients and procedures but an entire cosmology: the proper way to wash rice, the feeling of correctly tempered spices, the patience required for dum cooking, the social protocols governing who serves whom, the stories embedded in family variations, and the unspoken knowledge of when a dish is complete (Mannur 90-92).

Cultural tracts are dynamic rather than static because they must be performed and reperformed across different contexts. A recipe for samosas practiced in Dhaka or Delhi carries different meanings when performed in London or New York, where ingredients may be substituted, social contexts change, and the dish becomes marked as ethnic or exotic (Mannur 105-7). Each performance constitutes a moment of translation, where the cultural tract is interpreted for new circumstances while maintaining connection to ancestral knowledge, echoing Jan Assmann's account of communicative memory as constantly reactivated in present contexts (Assmann 111-13). South Asian diaspora young adult literature demonstrates this concept through its depiction of kitchen spaces as pedagogical sites where cultural tracts are actively generated and transmitted. The cooking scenes analyzed across Sandhya Menon's *From Twinkle, with Love* (2018), S.K. Ali and Aisha Saeed's *Once Upon an Eid* (2020), and Adiba Jaigirdar's *The Henna Wars* (2020) reveal how culinary knowledge functions as a multi-dimensional tract that encodes religious calendars, family hierarchies, linguistic conventions, and sensory memories simultaneously. When Yusuf's grandmother layers biryani while his mother supervises brownie preparation, multiple cultural tracts operate concurrently: one tract transmits the technical knowledge of spice tempering and layering techniques, another encodes the temporal rhythms of Eid celebration and post-prayer communal gathering, and yet another establishes generational roles and responsibilities within the family structure (Ali and Saeed 27). These tracts are not discrete or separable but rather constitute an integrated knowledge system that must be learned holistically through embodied participation. Nishat's navigation of cutlery protocols at the Bengali wedding in Ireland exemplifies how cultural tracts adapt to hybrid contexts while maintaining ancestral connections (Jaigirdar 31). Her observation that guests must "eat like white people even at a Bengali wedding" reveals the performative labor required to translate cultural tracts across social boundaries, where hand-eating traditions encoded in South Asian dining practices encounter Western utensil expectations. This moment of friction demonstrates that cultural tracts are not simply transmitted intact but are constantly renegotiated through performance, with each enactment producing subtle variations that accumulate into adaptive evolution. Similarly, the introduction of the Cinnamon Chai donut in the short story *Don't Break Tradition* by S.K. Ali represents the creation of a new cultural tract that synthesizes South Asian flavor profiles with North American bakery traditions, materializing acculturation within a single confection while simultaneously establishing a new ritual object for Eid observance (Ali 58). The bakery's recognition of the family's tradition, and its response through new product innovation, shows how cultural practices can create mutual recognition within host societies.

Hybridity and Third Space in Culinary Practices

Bhabha's framework of hybridity and third space proves essential for understanding how culinary practices function as sites of cultural negotiation in diaspora contexts (Bhabha 1-4). The third space, as Bhabha theorizes, emerges in the interstices between cultural systems, generating new forms of meaning and identification that cannot be reduced to either origin culture or host culture but constitute genuinely novel cultural productions. Culinary practices exemplify third-space dynamics in concrete ways. When diaspora families prepare traditional dishes in new geographical contexts, they inevitably create hybrid forms: ingredients are substituted based on availability, cooking times adjust to different schedules and lifestyles, presentation adapts to different social contexts, and meanings attached to foods shift (Mannur 120-122). A dish prepared for religious festivals in the homeland may become, in diaspora, a marker of general ethnic identity consumed at multicultural events.

The texts analyzed in this study demonstrate how third-space culinary practices operate as sites of identity formation rather than identity erosion. Yusuf's brownie preparation for Eid represents a hybrid cultural form that occupies the third space between South Asian festive traditions and North American dessert culture (Ali and Saeed 26). The brownies are not simply Western confections imported into an Islamic celebration, nor are they traditional South Asian sweets awkwardly maintained in a Canadian context. Rather, they constitute a new cultural practice that synthesizes both traditions into something distinct: an Eid dessert that participates fully in the religious calendar's temporal rhythms while employing culinary techniques and ingredients associated with North American baking. Roshan's subsequent innovation of adding tart flavoring further demonstrates third-space creativity, where individual agency operates within inherited frameworks to produce variation that is neither rebellion against tradition nor slavish adherence to it. The family's negotiation of this innovation, weighing tradition against experimentation, enacts the ambivalence Bhabha identifies as characteristic of hybrid cultural production (Bhabha 44-45).

In young adult fiction, food becomes particularly powerful for exploring third-space dynamics because it allows representation of hybrid identity formation as embodied, everyday practice rather than an abstract intellectual problem (Musthafa et al. 6-7). Nishat's experience at the Bengali wedding in Ireland exemplifies the affective complexity of third-space negotiation (Jaigirdar 31). Her observation that guests must perform Western dining etiquette "even at a Bengali wedding" reveals how hybrid contexts generate contradictory imperatives: the wedding simultaneously demands Bengali cultural authenticity through its food selections and Western cultural conformity through its dining practices. This contradiction produces the third space not as a comfortable synthesis but as a site of ongoing tension and negotiation. Nishat's covert consumption of second helpings alongside her sister Priti suggests strategies of tactical resistance, wherein young diaspora subjects navigate imposed cultural codes while carving out spaces for their own desires and practices. The dropped cutlery incident, rather than representing mere social embarrassment, materializes the instability of third-space existence, where mastery of either cultural code remains perpetually incomplete and performative competence is always vulnerable to disruption.

The donut tradition in "Don't Break Tradition" offers perhaps the clearest illustration of third-space cultural production. The family's establishment of Mr. Laidlaw's Bakery donuts as central to Eid celebration represents a hybrid practice that operates simultaneously within Islamic religious temporality and North American commercial culture (Ali 47-51). Kareem's wordplay, "Don't ever break Eid tradition," linguistically performs the third space through its bilingual pun that requires fluency in both English language play and Islamic cultural knowledge to be fully comprehensible. The bakery's subsequent creation of the Cinnamon Chai donut specifically for

Eid demonstrates how third-space practices can generate reciprocal cultural exchange, wherein the host culture adapts to diaspora innovations rather than simply imposing assimilation (Ali 58). The donut's flavor profile, combining Western pastry formats with South Asian spice traditions, performs cultural hybridity at the sensory level, creating taste experiences that could only emerge in diaspora contexts.

Bhabha's emphasis on hybridity's ambivalence resonates with how food operates in young adult diaspora narratives (Bhabha 44-45). Young protagonists often experience culinary hybridity with mixed feelings: pride in creating something new combined with guilt about departing from family traditions, pleasure in sharing food culture combined with shame about being marked as different, and desire for belonging to both cultures combined with recognition that full belonging to either is impossible. Nadia's anxiety about maintaining the donut tradition while her mother lies ill exemplifies this ambivalence. However, the narrative validates the donut tradition as authentically meaningful to the family's Eid practice, refusing hierarchies that would privilege homemade traditional foods over hybrid commercial products. This validation suggests that third-space practices generate their own forms of authenticity rather than representing diluted versions of pure origins. The affective complexity Nadia experiences, rather than being a problem to be resolved, constitutes the lived reality of diaspora identity, wherein cultural reproduction necessarily proceeds through innovation and adaptation rather than replication.

Culinary Practices as Communicative and Cultural Memory

Culinary practices in diaspora families occupy a complex position within the Assmanns' framework of memory transmission, simultaneously participating in both communicative and cultural memory in ways that blur the theoretical boundaries between these categories (Mannur 70-72). Jan Assmann distinguishes communicative memory as informal, everyday knowledge transmitted through direct interaction within living memory spans of approximately three generations, characterized by instability and continuous reinterpretation, while cultural memory operates through formalized, institutionalized practices that communities deliberately preserve across longer temporal horizons, often mediated through fixed symbolic forms and specialized custodians (Assmann 110-118). Culinary practices in diaspora contexts demonstrate the inadequacy of treating these memory modes as strictly separable, instead revealing how everyday food preparation can simultaneously embody informal transmission and formalized preservation.

As communicative memory, cooking and eating together constitute everyday interactions through which cultural knowledge passes organically between generations within household spaces. The kitchen becomes a site of storytelling where family histories are narrated alongside cooking instructions, technical skills are demonstrated through direct participation and observational learning, and the sensory experience of shared meals creates affective bonds of collective identity (Strand 5-6). When Yusuf's grandmother layers biryani while overseeing the broader Eid meal preparation, she transmits knowledge through multiple communicative channels simultaneously: verbal instruction about spice proportions and timing, physical demonstration of layering techniques, olfactory cues about when spices are properly tempered, and tacit modeling of the patience and attention that are required for complex dishes (Ali and Saeed 27). This transmission occurs within the informal social space of family interaction, characterized by the casual conversation, joking exchanges, and incidental teaching moments typical of communicative memory. Yusuf's learning happens not through formal instruction but through apprenticeship embedded within functional household labor, where mistakes like burned brownie edges generate immediate problem-solving improvisations that teach resilience alongside technique.

The knowledge transmitted through such interactions exhibits the instability characteristic of communicative memory. Each generation necessarily modifies recipes based on available ingredients in new geographical contexts, adjusts techniques to accommodate different kitchen technologies and time constraints, and reinterprets the meanings and social functions of traditional foods in light of contemporary circumstances. Roshan's experimental addition of tart flavoring to the brownies exemplifies this adaptive quality, introducing innovation within inherited frameworks through the organic process of individual experimentation that characterizes communicative memory's fluidity (Ali and Saeed 26). Similarly, the donut tradition in "Don't Break Tradition" represents communicative memory's capacity for radical reinterpretation, where the family collectively establishes a new practice centered on commercially purchased Western pastries rather than home-prepared traditional sweets, yet fully integrates this innovation into their Eid observance in ways that feel authentically meaningful to family members (Ali 47-51).

Yet culinary practices simultaneously function as cultural memory, particularly in diaspora contexts where food becomes a conscious strategy for maintaining connection to ancestral homelands across spatial and temporal displacement (Sharma and Lambert-Hurley 1-2). Certain dishes achieve iconic status as carriers of ethnic or national identity, their preparation governed by strict normative expectations about authenticity, proper technique, and appropriate contexts of consumption (Mannur 90-92). The biryani that appears across multiple texts in this study operates as such a symbolic food, its cardamom and clove aromatics immediately signaling South Asian cultural identity, its layered preparation technique requiring specialized knowledge, and its association with festive occasions marking it as ceremonially significant rather than quotidian (Ali and Saeed 27; Jaigirdar 31).

The wedding feast in *The Henna Wars* illustrates this formalization, where the array of dishes, including kebabs, shashlik, biryani, lamb curry, naan, daal, and tikka, materializes Bengali cultural identity through a standardized repertoire that community members recognize as constituting an authentic wedding menu (Jaigirdar 31). The feast's abundance and diversity serve symbolic functions beyond nutritional necessity, performing cultural identity for community validation and transmitting to younger generations like Nishat what constitutes proper Bengali wedding practice. In diaspora contexts, the very act of teaching traditional cooking to younger generations becomes a deliberate preservation effort, consciously motivated by anxieties about cultural loss and recognition that without intentional transmission, these practices might disappear within one or two generations (Assmann 124-126). This transformation of what might otherwise be casual household interaction into heritage preservation work imbues everyday culinary transmission with heightened significance and emotional intensity. When Yusuf's mother guides him through brownie preparation for Eid brunch, this interaction operates simultaneously as an informal family activity and as a conscious cultural transmission, where the mother ensures her son acquires not merely baking skills but specifically the capacity to perpetuate this family's particular Eid tradition (Ali and Saeed 26-27). The dual operation explains why culinary transmission in diaspora families often feels simultaneously intimate and fraught, casual and ceremonial; it must function as both everyday practice and heritage preservation, balancing the fluidity necessary for adaptation against the fixity required for continuity (Shukla 5-6).

Nadia's determination to maintain the donut tradition despite her mother's illness exemplifies these heightened stakes, where what might appear as a simple bakery purchase carries the weight of cultural reproduction and family cohesion (Ali 47-53). Her recognition that Eid requires not just specific foods but also characteristic sensory atmospheres, including "delicious smells" and "happiness in the air," demonstrates awareness that cultural memory operates through affective

and sensory dimensions that cannot be reduced to mere recipe execution. The narrative's resolution, wherein Mr. Laidlaw and Joy arrive with additional donuts, including the new Cinnamon Chai flavor specifically created for Eid, validates the family's hybrid tradition as worthy of institutional recognition and accommodation, suggesting how diaspora innovations can themselves achieve cultural memory status when communities collectively recognize and perpetuate them (Ali 58). This moment demonstrates that cultural memory is not exclusively ancestral inheritance but can incorporate recent innovations when communities invest them with symbolic significance and establish mechanisms for their continued transmission.

Cooking Rituals as Embodied Cultural Memory

Cooking rituals in South Asian diaspora young adult literature function as embodied cultural memory, preserving heritage through sensory, performative acts that transmit language, religious practices, and familial structures. These kitchen-centered scenes negotiate hybrid identities, blending tradition with adaptation amid migration and generational shifts. In *From Twinkle, With Love* (2018), *Once Upon an Eid* (2020), and *The Henna Wars* (2020), food preparation serves as a tactile archive, evoking ancestral knowledge while fostering communal bonds during Eid and weddings.

In *From Twinkle, With Love*, the pancake scene serves as a metaphor for the blending of cultures and the comfort found in domesticity. Sahil's father's cooking reflects a familial bond that contradicts Twinkle's experiences at home, emphasizing her longing for a sense of belonging and acceptance that transcends cultural barriers. (Menon 181). *Once Upon an Eid's* short story titled "Yusuf and the Great Big Brownie Mistake" depicts how brownie batter-mixing ritualizes Eid memory (Ali and Saeed 26). Within the household's annual Eid observance, a ritualized culinary practice persists as Yusuf and his mother engage in the collaborative preparation of traditional baked goods, meticulously sifting flour, incorporating eggs, and liquefying butter according to documented family recipes. This intergenerational transmission of culinary knowledge operates despite contemporaneous innovations introduced by Roshan, whose experimental incorporation of tart flavoring represents a negotiation between tradition and adaptation. Yusuf's assertion of proprietorship over "fresh out of the oven" modifications reflects the individual's agency in personalizing inherited practices, thereby enacting what may be understood as a form of identity-affirming ritual performance.

The domestic labor distribution reveals hierarchical structures of culinary authority and generational responsibility: the grandmother executes the layered assembly of biryani, the mother assumes supervisory coordination, while Yusuf bears designated accountability for dessert preparation in anticipation of the communal post-prayer brunch gathering following congregational masjid attendance (Ali and Saeed 27). The episodes of culinary imperfection, such as the occurrence of charred edges, necessitate improvisational problem-solving and material salvage, thereby functioning as pedagogical moments that cultivate adaptive resilience.

Both texts- *From Twinkle, With Love* and *Yusuf and the Great Big Brownie Mistake* depict kitchens as memory loci: Twinkle witnesses paternal authority; Yusuf enacts filial duty. Spices' heat evokes diaspora negotiation, while Eid synchronization embeds faith. Familial structures emerge through labor division, with youth apprenticed via mishaps, ensuring transmission (Mannur 70-72). *The Henna Wars* complements these scenes via wedding feast rituals, where kebabs, shashlik, biryani, lamb curry, naan, daal, and tikka materialize cultural memory amid Ireland's Bengali diaspora (Jaigirdar 31). Protagonist Nishat piles plates ravenously, navigating cutlery etiquette clashing with hand-eating norms, embodying hybrid tension. She observes the

expectation to "eat like white people even at a Bengali wedding," revealing the performative pressures of diaspora existence (Jaigirdar 31).

In *"Don't Break Tradition,"* the intricate relationship between culinary practices and cultural observance operates as a central mechanism through which personal memory and collective identity are constructed and maintained, while simultaneously illustrating processes of acculturation within diasporic communities (Ali 47). The donut, as the story's primary culinary symbol, functions as a material manifestation of cultural hybridity. The family's established Eid tradition of purchasing donuts from Mr. Laidlaw's Bakery represents a syncretic practice that merges Islamic religious observance with North American commercial food culture. Kareem's humorous dictum, "Don't ever break Eid tradition," linguistically encodes this cultural negotiation through wordplay that simultaneously references Western confectionery and Islamic custom (Ali 51). The elevation of commercially produced Western pastries to the status of ritual objects demonstrates how immigrant communities actively construct new traditions that integrate elements of both heritage and host cultures. Each family member's personalized donut preference operates as a symbolic representation of their individual position within the family constellation, transforming the act of purchasing confections into a demonstration of familial intimacy and relational knowledge (Ali 52-53). The narrative's climactic introduction of the Cinnamon Chai donut, specifically developed by the bakery to honor Eid, embodies culinary fusion that combines Western pastry forms with South Asian flavor profiles, thus materializing the acculturative process within a single confection (Ali 58).

The narrative establishes sensory experience as fundamental to the phenomenological construction of cultural celebration and memory. Nadia's recognition that the household lacks the "delicious smells" and "happiness in the air" typically associated with Eid reveals how olfactory and atmospheric conditions serve as essential markers of festive authenticity. This sensory void motivates compensatory actions to restore traditional elements, including the procurement of donuts and the retrieval of her mother's jasmine perfume, acknowledging that cultural identity is experienced through multiple sensory modalities beyond food alone.

These culinary scenes illustrate the mechanisms through which cooking rituals facilitate the transmission of linguistic practices, religious observances, and familial organizational structures across generational boundaries. Linguistic elements embedded within culinary contexts, including recipe nomenclature, debates regarding spice selection, and discussions of appropriate utensils, function as oral repositories of cultural heritage that undergo adaptive transformation within diasporic settings (Mannur 90-92). Religious practices become integrated through temporal coordination with sacred observances: the consumption of biryani and brownies following congregational Eid prayers operates to sacralize quotidian meals and materially embed faith commitments within embodied practice. Familial hierarchies manifest through stratified culinary responsibilities, wherein elder family members exercise supervisory authority over signature dishes while younger generations engage in apprenticeship roles, thereby reinforcing intergenerational role distributions even as adaptive modifications occur. The sensory materiality of culinary practice, particularly aromatic profiles and textural characteristics, functions as a mnemonic anchor that facilitates the negotiation of hybrid cultural identities. The contested elements, including differential spice tolerance levels, conflicts regarding culturally appropriate cutlery, and the improvisational recovery of culinary imperfections, collectively sustain cultural continuity while accommodating situated adaptations (Strand 5-6).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study demonstrates that culinary knowledge in South Asian diaspora young adult fiction operates as cultural tracts that simultaneously preserve tradition and enable its transformation. The texts analyzed reveal three critical dimensions of culinary knowledge transfer: cooking rituals as embodied cultural memory, food narratives as contested sites of generational negotiation, and young protagonists' active reinterpretation of culinary inheritances to create hybrid practices.

Future scholarship should expand this analysis to include broader geographical and cultural contexts within South Asian diaspora young adult literature, examining how different regional cuisines and migration histories shape culinary transmission. Comparative studies with other diaspora literatures could illuminate universal and particular aspects of food-based cultural pedagogy.

Research should also explore the role of digital media in transforming culinary transmission among diaspora youth, examining how food blogs, YouTube cooking channels, and social media platforms create new forms of cultural tracts that complement or challenge traditional intergenerational transmission. The intersection of culinary knowledge with other identity markers such as gender, sexuality, class, and religion deserves deeper investigation to understand how food practices negotiate multiple forms of difference simultaneously.

Conclusion

Culinary knowledge in South Asian diaspora young adult fiction functions meta-pedagogically, simultaneously representing intergenerational cultural transmission while providing frameworks through which young readers can engage with their own cultural inheritances. These narratives demonstrate that cultural transmission is never a one-way process of passive reception but involves active negotiation, creative adaptation, and the production of genuinely new hybrid forms. Young protagonists who learn to make traditional dishes while adapting them to contemporary contexts model for readers how to honor ancestral knowledge while asserting independent cultural identities.

The concept of cultural tracts captures the dynamic nature of how diaspora families preserve and transform cultural knowledge across displacement. Cultural tracts refer to living pedagogical documents that exist through embodied performance rather than static text. Food becomes the medium through which complex negotiations of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity are enacted in everyday practice, making abstract questions of hybridity and liminal cultural space tangible and accessible to young readers.

These culinary narratives validate the complexity of diaspora youth experience, affirming that hybrid identities are not failures to maintain purity but creative achievements that enable cultural survival and flourishing across displacement. By representing cooking and eating as sites where tradition meets innovation, where family histories intersect with contemporary lives, and where cultural memory is both preserved and reimagined, South Asian diaspora young adult fiction provides young readers with models for engaging their own inheritances with both respect and agency. Culinary knowledge operates not merely as content to be transmitted but as a living practice through which diaspora youth continually create and recreate their cultural identities.

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