

Beyond A Gastronomic Expedition: Reading Chitrita Banerji's *A Taste of My Life* as Food Talk

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Abstract

Women throughout history have had an enduring association with food, but it is only with the advent of food studies that the multi-faceted role food has played in women's lives has started getting documented. Food studies has ventured beyond its focus on food in recipe books as a vehicle to satisfy physiological requisites and had begun to consider them as narratives that record women's voices. Women through archiving recipes in their works become an active contributor as well as transmitter of their culinary heritage. They publicize their traditions and blend it with their personal stories thereby becoming culinary custodians. The memoir *A Taste of My Life* by Chitrita Banerji lays emphasis on the significant role that women play in preserving and disseminating culture. Being an Indian expatriate writer living in the United States, Banerji's works are usually studied in the light of transnational perspectives for their role in addressing the issues of identity and diaspora. This paper focuses on reading the memoir from a feminist food perspective. It questions the trivialization of woman's role in the transmission of culture, in the light of women's centrality to food practices and attempts to read Banerji's memoir as a valuable document of woman's history. The evocative memoir is analysed as a medium through which Banerji engages in a food talk with her readers which triggers their imagination and personal experiences.

Keywords: food talk, intergenerational transmission, Bengali food, recipe archives, culinary memoir, culinary chats

1. Introduction

Food is not seen merely as a means for sustenance of the corporeal body, instead it plays a significant role in understanding the cultural, social, historical and economic structure of a country. Warren Belasco (2002) states "The connection between identity and consumption gives food a central role in the creation of community, and we use our diet to convey images of public identity" (Belasco, 2002). In a country like India which is known for its rich cultural and culinary practices, there has not been adequate study of food practices and their role in community building and transmission of culture. A study of such food practices would help to foster a greater understanding of India's diversity and give greater insight into food related discourse genres. In this regard, Chitrita Banerji's memoir *A Taste of My Life* contributes towards publicizing Bengali food tradition by documenting its culinary history and through the infusion of personal food anecdotes throwing light on a social organization of language centred around food. The memoir revolves around her childhood in Kolkata and her journey to America on an academic and professional pursuit and subsequent rise as an expatriate writer in the diasporic literary circle.

The representation of recipes in her narrative defamiliarizes the idea of considering recipes as a mere instructional manual and considers culinary practices as being more than the physical act of eating and drinking. It aids in understanding the personal histories, familial dynamics and societal hierarchies. Using the gendered lens in recipe transmission emphasizes the active role women play in preserving culinary traditions by passing down recipes across generations and questions the depiction of women being a passive contributor in histories. In Indian society like most of the other societies, women play a primary role as caregivers and cooks in their families, but their contribution is generally devalued. The paper does not merely challenge the traditional gender roles but instead celebrates the culinary knowledge Indian women possess and their ability to transmit their culinary treasures by publicizing regional cuisines through their culinary memoirs across generations. Culinary memoirs are those which "present a personal story interlaced with reminiscences about cooking, dining, and feasting. These are autobiographical gestures that have an emphasis on food, but they may or may not provide recipes" (Kelly, 2001). It is a means through which women counteract the erasure of their voices in the history. The paper examines how women navigate gender roles in the context of recipe sharing and questions how women have contributed in the preservation and dissemination of culinary knowledge across generations. It also highlights the role of recipe sharing in the maintenance and transmission of culinary traditions. In addition to this, the paper also sheds light on the relevance of food talk and culinary chats in this memoir. The

writer's endeavour to fuse recipe chronicling with other literary genres to enrich culinary narrative and to imbue it with a greater complexity is brought to the forefront.

1.1 Research Methodology

The study is based on the hermeneutic research paradigm where Chitrita Banerji's *A Taste of My Life* would be analysed from food and feminist lens and it adheres to the qualitative mode of enquiry.

2. Feasting Words: Food in Fiction

Food is a powerful prism to shed light on human existence. It is a truism to say that food is a universal language that cuts across cultural and linguistic barriers. "The food, behaviour, norms and values become important nodal points of reference in the formation of a sense of community and belonging" (Parui & Varghese, 2019). Studying food traditions and practices offer valuable insights in to the complex social and cultural dynamics that shapes the understanding of a community. Tompkins, K. W. (2005) in his work 'Literary approaches to food studies: eating the other' states "Studying food in literature is one mode of studying material history. Thus, it is particularly useful to pay attention to the food objects that are associated with particular social locations. In studying what kinds of food appear in literature we can trace the economic and cultural circuits that are in play during the moment of cultural production" (Tompkins, 2005). The inclusion of culinary aspects to literature especially through poems, novels, plays add critical and significant value to the work and the world it tries to paint. "When authors refer to food they are usually telling the reader something important about the narrative, plot, characterization, motives and so on" (Fitzpatrick, 2013).

The growing appetite for food studies has expanded its horizon with literary studies especially in examining the intricate notions and layered implication it carries through the use of food metaphors and imageries in literature. Food has held a crucial position in literature throughout history. Tracing literary works ranging from the ancient Greek writers like Homer and Ovid's description of feasts and culinary delights in their works, the mention of the forbidden fruit in the Genesis, the depiction of food in *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, the use of food symbols and metaphors in Shakespeare plays, exploration of food in the novels of Charles Dickens to the contemporary use of food in cookbooks and food memories states the immemorial presence of food in literature. The use of food as a metaphor or element in literature did serve various purposes from portraying the role of food in one's society, to portray their status, to depict their manners, to paint their culture, to even show one's personal history and familial dynamics. Solomon H Katz (2003) in his work *Encyclopaedia of Food and Culture* states "Feasts and food in literature, however portray more than the mere physical appetite for food and a triumph over nature in festivals" (Katz, 2003). Writers seasoning of food metaphors and elements in their literary works highlights the potential agent that food can serve in appealing the audience across time.

3. Culinary Dichotomy in The East and The West

Food ritual plays a prominent role in the Eastern and Western culture though they vary from one another to a larger extent. "Each Culture, with its own tradition of literature, also maintains its own distinct cuisine and distinct traditional rules that govern acts of eating" (Katz, 2003). In the Eastern Culture especially in a country like India, food is often offered to deities as a form of worship. Fasting is a custom that is observed during specific occasions in the East which serves as a means to promote Purification, Self-control and discipline. Specific food is associated to specific occasions, for instance Ladoo, a popular Indian sweet is distributed on joyous occasions and is offered as prasad in temples on auspicious occasions. Communal dining fosters social harmony and food rituals in the East are visibly practised during festivals and celebrations. Indian Cuisine use rich varieties of spices and flavours and vegetarianism is a tradition that is followed as a part of the religious practices. Whereas, in the western culture, table manners and etiquettes are followed during a social gathering. Raising a glass and cheering is a ritual during social events and its marks their celebrations. Certain cuisines are prepared during specific occasions in the West especially during New Year's Eve, Champagne Toast is a customary part of their menu. Cutting a cake in weddings is a part of their tradition which symbolizes happy union. Restaurant Culture, an indication of a specific culinary setting is often prominent in the western culture and is a common social activity to mark a special event. Fast Food culture is observed in the west over the east. Though there are various differences between the both, the blurring of this clear demarcation has become inevitable due to the rise of globalization.

4. Savouring Women's Culinary Tales

Women share their culture through cuisine with others and maintain their ethnic heritage. Carole Counihan (2012) in her work 'Gendering Food' states "Contemporary social scientists have pushed deeper and looked not only at how women used food consumption or denial to "speak", but also at how talking about and through food can be a powerful form of self-expression" (Counihan, 2012). Women use food as a vehicle to express their creativity and demonstrate their skills in the domestic realm. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (2005) in their work *Feminist Food Studies: A Brief History* states "Some women's studies scholars have discovered that food practices and their representations, interwoven as they are in to the dailiness of life can reveal the particularities of time, place and culture, providing an excellent vehicle to contextualize women's lives" (Avakian & Haber, 2005). Food narratives seek to break the notion of considering culinary tradition which is static by seasoning it through tracing the heterogenous practices that developed across time. Food studies indeed contextualize women's lives.

Food generally is perceived from a monolithic perspective of considering it only as a traditional gender role, but recent feminist scholarship seeks to understand it as a means through which women can essentialise their experiences in a nuanced manner and can

express the complex relationship with food. Women's engagement with food though remained as the result of a man's imposition or social conditioning as homemakers, they did transform it to gain a sense of autonomy as what Abarca (2006) calls it as a shift from 'women's place' to a 'woman's space' (Abarca, 2006).

The heteronormative worldview on food is repositioned through emphasizing how food can serve as a voice for women to represent themselves in the history. Food transcends the ornamental functions by broadening the domestic sphere from a site of perpetuating patriarchal value to a place where women can express and exert their identity, power and culinary expertise over the public and political spheres. Women's food narratives create a base for the vast culinary repertoire throughout the world. Through them, women use food as a mnemonic device as they are often the keepers of family recipes and cultural traditions. Cultures are regarded as the repositories of knowledge which includes food practices. Women solely do not just preserve food knowledge through passing them across generations but do practice it through cooking.

4.1 Pickling Palates: Food Across Generations

Abarca (2006) in her work 'Voices in the kitchen' uses a series of culinary chats as a theoretical framework to understand the everyday culinary discourses and how woman use it to "season her sense of self" (Abarca, 2006). This is modelled as a series of personal interviews that she has with the Mexican and Chicana working class women. She defines Charlas (chats) as a "free flowing conversation" which helps create a "dialogue where unconventional fields of study, of knowledge come together" (Abarca, 2006). Through this she was able to find that there is "not just one history but many stories" and "not just one intellectual form of knowledge but many ways of knowing and being intellectual" (Abarca, 2006). She also extends this understanding to Spivak's title 'Can the subaltern speak' and interprets it as "How the subaltern speaks" (Abarca, 2006).

Whereas Swinbank (2021) in her work 'Cultural Memory and Female Intergenerational Culinary Culture' uses the term 'food talk' and says that it is "part of women's everyday conversation, building up a stock of food and cooking knowledge that comes to constitute a locally distinctive regional cuisine". (Swinbank, 2021). She refers to Sutton and Roden, and accentuates that the food talks women have while sorting beans and peeling vegetables or other activities are often dismissed as gossips (Swinbank, 2021). But it has been a part of women's routine through which they perpetuate the stock of their culinary knowledge across generations.

It is quite evident from the above observations that food talk generally revolves around food and food trends whereas culinary chats are in the form of structured interviews. Though culinary chats involve transmission of knowledge regarding food including the political, personal and other stories that lie parallel to the mainstream history, the term originally used by Abarca is used to denote a research methodology. Therefore, culinary chats which are "not just verbal expressions inscribed in written form" but "actions, practices, and even silences" (Abarca, 2006) is restricted to experimental research intended pursuit. However, both these are mostly dialogical in form and informal in tone which contributes to the academic, objective recording of history.

In the chapter 'Seeds of dreams' the author has a conversation with her mother where the mother reminisces about how much the author's father loved all the dishes she made with posto or white poppy seeds, a ubiquitous ingredient in Bengali cuisine. As Srinivas (2006) says, "one of the key ingredients of the descriptions of foods that appeal to gastro-nostalgia is the evoking of 'home cooking' as 'mother made it'" (Srinivas, 2006). That entire conversation revolves around the mother sharing the list of dishes that she made with the ingredient. There is an inclusion of personal anecdotes and their association with certain recipes. This is interpreted as food talk where the author invites her readers into her culinary realm. This culinary dialogue is so filled with nuanced language and metaphors that the reader is expected to treat it as a literary text.

The very term Recipe is derived from the Latin word 'Recipere' which indicates 'to exchange.' The exchange or imparting of culinary knowledge among women is seen as a manifestation of trust and friendship. Women play a principal role in negotiating the relationship between family and tradition and consider it as an obligation to keep their culture's legacy alive. Food memories remain intractable in establishing one's identity and culture. Women hold extensive knowledge in the food domain but this knowledge is often subjected to trivialization and minimalization.

Food talks redefine traditional gender roles of considering women solely responsible for carrying out domestic chores to highlighting them as cultural custodians as they revitalize cultural heritage. This reassures the continuity of culinary knowledge across generations. Traditional recipes are passed down through women, making them an important component of a community's cultural legacy as they uphold a particular culture's culinary tradition. "Traditionally, knowledge of food and cooking has been handed down from grandmother and mother to daughter and granddaughter in a long continuous line linking the generations" (Swinbank, 2021). This female intergenerational transmission contributes to the preservation of a culture's legacy.

The interplay between women and food showcases a rich tapestry of variations, shaped by an array of experiences and journeys. Diasporic women use food as a powerful conduit to foster a deep-rooted connection with their ancestral homeland through which they preserve their identity. For instance, the diasporic character Rachel from *The Book of Rachel* who leads a solitary life finds solace only through food in an alien land. Ravindran & Gayathri (2022) state "Food and the preparation of food as markers of her cultural identity and nostalgia help her to draw existential sustenance amidst the life's experiencing alienations on an emotional, bodily, and spiritual level" (Ravindran & Gayathri, 2022).

Food is hetero- connotative in nature where it is considered both as a means of oppression as well a way through which women can

establish their agency. “Feminist food studies has locked on to the domestic sphere as a conflicted site, one that simultaneously reproduces patriarchal values and, hence, the physical, intellectual, and ideological subordination of women and that serves as a space where women enjoy an amount of power and control far surpassing that which they exert over the public and political realms” (McLean, 2005). Swinbank (2021) refers to Cairns and Johnston and states that “the demeaning of cooking as something to be rejected in the interests of women’s liberation is in fact, contrary to a feminist ethic” (Swinbank, 2021). This is because cooking as a women’s forte “has the potential for creative satisfaction and a sense of control or authority” (Swinbank, 2021). In other words, women can be said to use food to establish their agency, autonomy and thereby contest food patriarchy.

4.2 Food for Thought: Feminine Gastronomy

Food consideration with literature did remain a devalued subject of investigation as it was closely associated with women though the writers of literary canon consciously incorporate food to indicate the unveiling of important twist and turns in a narrative. Food is an idiosyncratic genre as it encompasses works from various fields of knowledge from literature to scientific treatise. The relationship between women and food helps in understanding how women used food as a source to rebel and resist gender conformity. Women choose recipe as a genre in their writings to satiate their hunger to represent their creativity. “Recipes convey information not only for women but about them” (Eves, 2005). Women through illustrating culinary traditions in their narratives potentially attempt to create an edible art gallery that would be made digestible to their readers. The intersection of women’s writing and food studies helped in understanding the importance of a serious enquiry of the daily ordinary lives of women. It did throw light on the active role women play in the transmission of gastronomic heritage across generations. Gathering from various food scholars, Alice Mclean (2013) states “women’s cookery as a form of community building and self-expressing and explore women’s cookery instruction and recipe writing as a means of recording and preserving the values and traditions that characterize familial, social, ethnic, racial and national foodways” (Mclean, 2013). Food writings by women was hindered from its recognition as an independent genre due to the patriarchal underpinnings of literary hierarchy.

Women authoring food narratives did not just record recipes from the past instead it can be a window to their personal diaries where they unveil their culinary discoveries, experiments and their stories. Food served as a powerful form of challenging women’s muted voices in history. Feminists used food activism as a new form of social movement to challenge the inequalities that are surrounding in a society. The transmission of recipe entails the knowledge of their culinary customs. Recording recipes would integrate a gastronomic past with their narrative identity as it creates a connection between food and their personal history.

5. Documenting Recipe Archives

Recipes encapsulate several flavours, ingredients and cooking techniques and serve as an agent in propagating culinary practices across generations. It reinforces certain culinary rituals which indicates one’s identity and is a tangible representation of historical connections. Tracie Marie Kelly (2001) in her work *If I were a voodoo Priestess: women’s culinary autobiography in the culture in America; Popular Representations of Food, Gender and Race*, characterises three kinds of culinary autobiographies: (i) Culinary memoir- a memoir centring food as a theme and recipe as an option;(ii) Autobiographical cookbooks- a blend of recipe and memoir;(iii) Autoethnographic cookbooks- combination of autobiography, personal narratives and culture. Inscribing recipes impart insights on the social and cultural contexts in which they are created which in turn throws lights on the daily experiences and practices in various societies. It fosters the longevity of culinary legacy against the ravage of time. Archiving recipes by women through documenting it is a valuable historical record which carries a rich culinary heritage. “Cookbooks which usually belong to the humble literature of complex civilizations, tell unusual cultural tales” (Appadurai,1988). Docketing recipes is a means through which women actively contribute to the history of a nation. It is also a way through which a sense of identity and belonging is maintained. “The textualization of culinary traditions was intensified by the arrival of the printing press” (Appadurai,1988). Cookbooks were produced to transmit culinary lore and it did serve a higher purpose than merely recording the oral culinary knowledge. “The new cookbooks are not simple or mechanical replicas of existing oral repertoires” (Appadurai,1988). In India, for a very long-time food did remain the subject of medical and mythological interest and the production of cookbooks eventually broadened it to the recording of the middle-class domestic life. The evolution of cookbooks did document the changes that happened in the eating and cooking habits. Bengali cookbooks played a significant role in recording the “assimilative nature of Bengali consumption culture” (Halder, 2016) by incorporating both traditional Bengali cuisine and the cuisine that resulted from the British intervention in India. This in a way reconstructed the established food practices that centred around religion and caste. Gastronomic narratives gained its prominence and culinary memoirs became another popular form of writing. “Food memoir that incorporates food laced memories that feed reader’s desire to redefine themselves” (Abarca, 2016). Food memoirs are generally perceived as a form of autobiographical writing as it intertwines culinary experiences and personal stories. Food writing by women challenge the dominant narratives which are highly male centric by providing alternative narratives or what Lyotard calls the micro narratives, through which they provide a voice for the voiceless.

6. Women as Culinary Custodians in Chitrita Banerji’s *A Taste of My Life*

Chitrita Banerji’s *A Taste of My Life* is a memoir published in 2021, in which she styles like a three-course gastronomic delight with sections titled the sundries, mains and the endings. Shankar (2022) interprets sundries section as reflecting sweet childhood, the mains section describing the challenges she faces in an alien land and the endings section highlighting sorrowful incidents and the fond memories she shares with her family. Her memoir defies linear fashion as she delves in to various chapters of her life. The memoir is rich in culinary encounters where she vividly describes the political and personal shifts that occurred in her life. Food plays a range of roles in

her life from being a catalyst for uniting people, to having religious significance to becoming a potential source of causing contention. At the very end of the memoir food becomes a therapeutic agent where her dream of her husband offering her breakfast fills the “void with generosity of shared sustenance” (Banerji, 2021). The memoir is filled with mouth-watering recipes and intoxicating fragrances. She nourishes the literary palates of the readers with her exquisite incorporation of recipes in her work.

Chitrita Banerji being a Bengali Food Writer, captures Bengali Traditions by imprinting them on her cover page. She begins her memoir with an author’s note stating “food is the stuff of life, the energy that propels us to action, movement and progress. Its absence signals the extinction of the flame, the inevitable conclusion of a journey” (Banerji, 2021). Through this she elevates the role of food from merely being a means of sustenance to something that forms the basis of human life. She provides a rich tapestry of Bengali culinary tradition in the very beginning of her memoir where she recollects tasting the mochar ghonto, a stir-fried Banana blossom dish, at a Bengali home: “it’s a classic of Bengali cuisine, which is known for its flavourful yet delicate use of spices and wide range of ingredients” (Banerji, 2021). The writer uncovers the tradition of Bengal by highlighting the food rituals that was practised in their region. She says, “Aside from pitha, one of Bengal’s favourite home-made desserts is payeesh or rice pudding. It has an aura of sanctity that makes it ideal for ritual offerings” (Banerji, 2021). Banerji also mentions about another sweet Sandesh which comes “as a surprise to many that the sweet is mentioned in Chaitanya Charitamrita, the biography of the saint and founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, which was written in the sixteenth century by Krishnadasa Kaviraja Goswami. But Chitrita Banerji is quick to point out that the sandesh of those times were sweetened pellets of khoya kheer and not the chhana-based sweetmeat of today” (Kanjilal, 2021). This reveals her preoccupation in the memoir about the relationship between food, local traditions and religion. Through this she talks about the association of food with religion where certain foods are offered to deities of their region.

She also throws light on certain culinary rules that are followed in her region and religion. “The first of these small fruits, topa kul and narkel kul, came with a bind. Bengali Hindus are forbidden to eat them until Saraswati Puja, when the goddess of learning and music is worshipped with great fanfare” (Banerji, 2021). It is evident through this that food matters spiritually (Freedman, 2021) and religion imposes food restriction and people tend to follow those food rituals. The extension of not consuming specific food items is fasting. “For observant Hindus in Bengal, the calendar is dotted with numerous occasions that require one to fast-for a day or part of a day- with or without drinking water” (Banerji, 2021). The writer mentions about how she was asked to fast on specific days and her struggles in resisting the temptations. “Religions impose food restrictions with different justifications: as penance (strong in Christianity), or as a form of ascetic but self-enhancing observance (the Islamic month of Ramadan), prevent sacrilege or pollution (Jewish or Hindu regulations), or to avoid killing animals (Jains, Buddhists)” (Freedman, 2021). The author also highlights food taboos that are associated with their religion “What is forbidden in one set of religious practices might be sacred in another” (Freedman, 2021) stating the potential implication that it could do to their culture. “Eating beef, usually forbidden to Hindus, is common among Muslims. Would my palate, too, be so defiled? The mere possibility seemed to cast a shadow of pollution over the daily offerings set before the family gods” (Banerji, 2021). This indicates a difference between amish and niramish ahar in Bengali Hindu cuisine where Bengali Hindus consume only Niramish food during Durga pooja.

The writer accentuates the intergenerational transmission of traditions by stating that “When daughters reach puberty, mothers and grandmothers start inducting them in to the intricate rituals of the believer’s life” (Banerji, 2021). The writer documents various recipes all throughout her novel which again emphasizes the rich regional cuisines of Bengal namely Topa Kuler Ambol, Karamchar Chutney, Narkel Naru etc., and subsequently pens down her personal stories with it. It is only through intricate rituals women pass on their cultural traditions across generations. The passing down of tradition contributes to the preservation and dissemination of cultural legacy which eventually enhances a civilization. Food serves as a mnemonic device in the memoir as she says “The memory of the previous year’s pleasures filled us with the itch to bite in to these sweet- and- sour fruits displayed in the Calcutta markets and sidewalks stalls” (Banerji, 2021). This also indicates on how one gets nostalgic about food. The writer yearns to experience the taste while reminiscing the past especially after moving to the west. “On each visit to India, the chicken sandwich of my youth continues to tantalize me like the fabled golden deer that lures one in to unfamiliar byways with the promise of gratification” (Banerji, 2021).

The exchange of recipes is generally known as culinary fusion. Sandwich which was not a part of the Indian tradition did get in to the Indian culinary dictionary with the arrival of the British to India. Still the traditions of the past remained intact within the community, “Teatime guests in ordinary Bengal homes like mine were likely to be offered samosas, fritters and sweets, not sandwiches. There was no need for the sandwich to change its identity from snack to meal, as it had in the West, even though the term itself, like many other foreign words, had become incorporated in to most Indian languages” (Banerji, 2021). it is equally undeniable to state few transition that occurs due to globalization and imperialism. Chitrita Banerji mentions the gastronomic transactions and transitions that occurred stating that “the culinary imagination refuses to rest on the laurels of the past” (Banerji, 2021).

The writer focuses on the relationship between women, food, and Indian history, technically, the gastro ethnic aspect of a culture narrowing it down to Bengal’s history specifically to the use of opium and its history. Her first revelation about the usage of opium in their dietary, happened when she was in college. She recollects how her grandmother used to take an opium pill with a glass of milk and begin to tell stories until she fell asleep. In her attempt to reason out why this became an important part in the local diet, she refers to an event in Indian Colonial history where the British, after dismissing the last nawab of Bengal, forcefully made the farmers of Bengal give away their lands for the cultivation of opium. At this juncture the author blends her personal story with the historical event thereby making that which is personal political.

The author casts light on the Indian origin of specific ingredients like the production of sugar. She says that “the history of sugar production in India goes back to antiquity, as can be seen from the references to sugarcane in Sanskrit texts written as early as 1500 BCE. The etymology of the terms for various kinds of sugar bears testimony to a long-time gastronomic presence” (Banerji, 2021). Confectioners in Calcutta went beyond the traditional rules in preparing rosogolla by using a light syrup of Khejur gur to immerse it in the winter. She talks about how it was “A shocking idea for the traditionalists, this new version of rosogolla is delightful revelation for the unprejudiced palate” (Banerji, 2021). Food did transcend geographical boundaries.

Through recording the events from the culinary history, and tracing the origin of certain Indian ingredients in her culinary memoir, it is evident that “women’s long association with food held untold stories that could illuminate both women’s history and the history of food” (Counihan, 2012). The coffee house, symbol of a globalized public space, is again a borrowed culinary setting where intellectual discussions happen. Mitra (2019) refers to Dipesh Chakrabarty and argues that in urban Bengal, coffee houses became intellectual spaces where ‘reactionary’ intellectuals engage in conversations. The coffee house is also criticised as an upper middle-class space to gossip which he calls *adda* (Mitra, 2019). In her memoir Banerji also notes that coffee houses were one of the most “luring portals” where conversations happen among the leftist thinkers. (Banerji, 2021). She says “although politics aroused little interest in me, the charged atmosphere of Coffee House brought a new kind of excitement to my life” (Banerji, 2021). This shows the gastronomic exchange that took place over time in India.

The writer portrays the established gender differences with respect to food in her memoir where the cooking part is conventionally associated with the female members of the family, especially the mother, and the savouring part is carried out by the male members of the family. “My mother was a renowned cook and my father was not only a discerning shopper but also a consumer with an exquisite palate” (Banerji, 2021). Food plays multifaceted roles in her memoir where it unites people through marriage; the writer’s mother encapsulates the concept of marriage with eating food together for life. “Marriage is lifelong undertaking to eat together” (Banerji, 2021). Food is a common factor that connects couple together. Even the rituals conducted at the time of marriage involves “feeding the fire and then feeding each other” (Banerji, 2021) Chitrita Banerji talks about how her parents were united by food irrespective of their differences. “My conflicted parents shared one enthusiasm-food. She was a fabulous cook, a true artist, and he had a rare and subtle palate” (Banerji, 2021). Food creates rift between people as well. For instance, when the writer travels abroad, she feels disconnected and longs to get back to her country to eat food from her homeland. Food is highly therapeutic in nature: after the death of the writer’s husband, food is the only soothing agent in the writer’s life. “Nothing can take away the meals and the words that I have already shared with *Jai*” (Banerji, 2021).

Thus, the memoir explores the various means through which food can carry meaning: it can be a significant marker of a country’s culture, act as a bridge as well as a rift in a relationship and can even act as a therapeutic agent, a holder of memories. The memoir also highlights the importance of the food talk as a transmitter of memories. Banerji reminisces the food talks her mother had with her in her childhood including conversations about recipes. While the recipe book is considered one of the many “disembodied and decontextualized forms of food talk,” Banerji through the use of conversations and anecdotes from her life in her culinary memoir adds context and meaning to this food talk (Riley and Paugh, 2019). One could also argue that Banerji’s sharing of food stories from her life to her readers constitutes another kind of food talk. The author through blending recipes with her personal familial stories uncovers the potential role culinary memoirs play in contributing to female voices to a largely male centric and male-authored history of humanity. Through her culinary memoir *A Taste of My Life* Chitrita Banerji has food talk with her readers even as she transmits her tradition and culture across generations.

7. Conclusion

Recent scholarship on food studies emphasizes on how food has surpassed the primary function of meeting just corporeal needs. Its multi-dimensionality accentuates food as a potential way in which women in particular can raise their voice against normative definitions of food and the women’s role. This paper contributes to the growing academic interest on food memoirs which has gained traction in understanding the social, cultural, historical and personal dimension of food. Women’s domestic role has always been a subject of trivialization but through the act of cooking and documenting recipes, women play an active role as a carrier of traditions across generations through which they keep their cultural legacies alive. Chitrita Banerji’s memoir commands attention as she documents her experiences by blending both the flavours of native land as well as the nuances of cross border existence. Her memoir goes beyond the linear narratives by presenting various events of her life deviating from the chronological progression. Sarkar (2019) states “Banerji focuses on recollected individual memories of food, researched histories of food, and stories of festivals, rituals and activities associated with food, all of which are rooted in Bengali cuisine and culture”(Sarkar, 2019). Unlike other Bengali culinary histories which lack an interpersonal element, Banerji’s textured narrative repositions transnational memories and culinary histories through weaving it with the autobiographical account of her life. Banerji uses food talk to invite readers on a journey through her culinary memories which are in turn a documentation of the regional, national, and transnational histories of Bengali cuisine. As such, Chitrita Banerji’s memoir can be read as a valuable document as it serves to bridge the gap between the past and the present and ensures continuation to the future generation. This discourse encompassing food talk throws light on the significant shift in considering food talk as a form of cultural transmission rather than a mere gossip perpetuated by women. Though we acknowledge women’s role in contributing, preserving, and transmitting culture through the preparation of food, overemphasizing that particular social role, which is still largely gendered, could limit, potentially hinder women from expanding their horizons and venturing on to other socio-cultural avenues which have less female representation. Striking a necessary balance between the two would aid in understanding and crediting women for their contribution to food practices while

allowing them to flourish beyond the culinary realm.

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