

Blending Flavors, Blending Identities: Priya's Search for Self in *The Mango Season*

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INTRODUCTION

Amulya Malladi's *The Mango Season* delves into the complexities of identity formation through the prism of food and cultural traditions. The protagonist, Priya Rao, embodies the conflicts and hybridity associated with diasporic identities as she navigates her Indian heritage and her Westernized self. This paper aims to analyze and explore Priya's fragmented identity through the lens of diaspora studies, acculturation theory, and feminism while using select works by Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Anita Nair to draw intertextual parallels.

Food as a Marker of Identity

Food in *The Mango Season* serves as a potent metaphor for current and ever-evolving cultural identity and the intricate web of familial ties. Mangoes, in particular, symbolize and evoke both a powerful sense of nostalgia—a bittersweet reminder of a happy childhood deeply connected to her Indian roots—and tension. Priya's nostalgia however stands in stark contrast with her current predicament, the ensuing tension of having to face her family and inform them of her American fiancé— at the mango pickle-making ritual at her grandparents' house, which fortifies the familial expectations and obligations her family upholds. Her inability and her constant struggle with being able to embrace traditional Indian roles has led to a disconnect and this disconnection from her Indian roots is reflected in the ongoing evolution of her personal identity. The internal conflict arising from this disconnect can be aligned with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" as articulated in his work *The Location of Culture* (1994). "Third Space" as posited by Bhabha, refers to how cultural identities are fluid and dynamic while constantly being negotiated and redefined in the in-between spaces of hybridity. Priya's lived experience represents this notion and her dual identity— a blend of Indian and American influences— which emerges and takes shape as she grapples with her families' expectations and her chosen life in the United States. Her journey as she paves her path as she struggles to reconcile her past (Indian roots) and present (globalized outlook) becomes a testament to her evolving identity within the intricate landscape of diaspora and cross-cultural adaptation.

Priya's internal conflict can also be understood through Stuart Hall's concept of identity, where he refers to identity as a continuous process of negotiation. Hall in "Minimal Selves" (1988) just like Bhabha argues that identity is not fixed but rather fluid, shaped by personal and cultural influences. Priya's struggle is not simply about adapting to a new environment; it's about reconciling the multiple facets of her identity, navigating the tension between her Indian heritage and her American present. This constant negotiation, as Hall suggests, is an ongoing process, shaping Priya's sense of self as she grapples with the complexities of belonging and the search for a place where she feels truly at home. This fluidity is also evident in Priya's reflections on home, where she expresses a sense of belonging in San Francisco with Nick, while her native India feels foreign and unfamiliar. Priya says "Home was in San Francisco with Nick...India was as alien...as it would be to a foreigner" (Malladi 106). This feeling of displacement, even within one's own culture, again aligns with Bhabha's concept of "unhomeliness", a concept Bhabha defines as the feeling of being displaced even within one's native culture.

Acculturation and Hybrid Identity

Acculturation theory as propagated by John W. Berry et al in their work *Immigrant Youth in Cultural Transition: Acculturation, Identity, and Adaptation* (2023), examines the process and evolution of cultural changes that happen to individuals who have lived through diaspora. The theory emphasizes on the psychological adaptations that diasporic individuals evolve as they interact with the adopted culture. Berry's acculturation theory is another compelling lens through which Priya's experiences of navigating her identity between her Indian heritage and adoptive Westernization can be explored.

Acculturation theory is found entrenched in the field of cross-cultural psychology addressing how individuals and groups adjust to cultures and ensuing cultural expectations when exposed to multiple cultures. The acculturation model as disseminated by Berry, identifies four primary aspects, firstly assimilation, secondly separation, thirdly integration, and finally marginalization. These aspects try to analyze the varying degrees to which diasporic individuals maintain their original culture and adapt to the new one. This theoretical framework can be used for understanding Priya's internal and external conflicts as she negotiates her bicultural identity, as her character embodies the struggles and complexities of acculturation throughout the novel. As she makes her way to India after seven years, she has essentially changed as a person and she is forced to confront her past and the cultural expectations of her family.

Priya's acculturation journey can be mapped, particularly through the attempts at aspects like integration and the pressures of separation and marginalization imposed by her family. Integration with the adoptive culture is evident in her relationship with Nick and her swift acceptance and embracing of the ideals of American independence. On the opposite spectrum are the expectations her family demands from her, Separation an aspect of acculturation theory then also becomes relevant for Priya's journey, as her mother's insistence to reject various Westernized aspects Priya may have picked up over time and fortifying the need for retention of Indian cultural customs, and insistence on the importance of arranged marriage and adherence to traditional gender roles, and rejecting the influence of Western culture. This highlights the tension between her two worlds making her feel marginalized, another aspect of acculturation theory. She feels torn between her independent life in America and her family's expectations. She says "I had become so much a part of America" (Malladi 56) she further deliberates "It was as if there were two people inside me: Indian Priya and American Priya, Ma's Priya and Nick's Priya." (Malladi 56) leading to the question she seems to be negotiating throughout the novel "I wondered who the real Priya was." (Malladi 56) Her internal conflict is a reflection of the broader cultural clash between individualism and collectivism, a recurring theme in acculturation theory.

Intertextually, Priya's journey resonates with Jhumpa Lahiri's Gogol from *The Namesake* (2003). Both Priya and Gogol grapple the tension of balancing their cultural heritage and the freedom offered by their adopted cultures. Similarly, Jasmine from *Jasmine* (1989) by Bharati Mukherjee is confronted with her identity fragmentation as she searches for her individuality in a foreign land drawing a parallel with Priya's narrative, but diverging from these similarities *The Mango Season* focuses on food as a central metaphor for her complex identity negotiation. Food, becomes a symbolic representation of cultural ties, familial expectations and her personal freedom, adding a unique layer to Malladi's narrative. As we try to explore Priya's diasporic experience, food allows us to rise above just the abstract concepts of identity and belonging but bring to us her tangible, everyday experiences that shape her identity.

Gender Roles and Performative Identity

Priya's resistance to traditional gender roles requires more than acculturation theory to be metabolized, and theory of performativity by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), can be used to provide insight into it. Her meager cooking skills as opposed to them being an essentiality for tradition Indian women can be seen as her rejection to these expectations. She is met with barbs over her lack of cooking skills by Somwya, who in a fit of anger says "You have to learn to cook . . . And if you don't . . . just leave my kitchen." (Malladi 125) leaving Priya seething. But her inability to cook is rather an accumulation of her father's insistence to make her a "career woman" (Malladi 39) and his tradition-defying dreams for his daughter "You will make lots of money and you can just hire a cook. No chopping and dicing for my little princess."

(Malladi 39) And her mother's constant obsession with cleanliness and need for control over her kitchen also added to her never being able to learn to cook, she says "no way I could cook a meal for several people the way Sowmya or Ma could." (Malladi 39) further alienating Priya from traditional gender roles. As Priya moves to the west and encounters freedom her lack of cooking skills is no longer a constant gender role she is required to fulfill, as she travels back to India she carries this freedom with her, but this time she seeks autonomy beyond societal roles simultaneously challenging Simone de Beauvoir's notion of women's immanence in *The Second Sex* (1949)

Food, Nostalgia, and Memory

Nostalgia drives Priya's relationship with mangoes reflecting the bittersweet connection she has to her Indian heritage. The detailed recipes provided by Malladi and relished by Priya in the novel—from various mango pickles to ravaladoo—serve as more than just culinary instructions; they in this instance can be viewed rather as cultural narratives. The pickle-making ritual in Priya's family is laden with symbolism and has over time become a site of intergenerational conflict and reconciliation. The entire narrative is dependent on Priya's relationship with mango, which she fondly refers to as "Happiness". Similarly, Anita Nair's Mukundan from *The Better Man* nostalgically yearns for food from his childhood, but is disillusioned by the actual taste of 'puttu' prepared by Krishnan Nair and 'Kadal Curry' at Shankar's tea club, his anguish is similar to Priya's as she realizes that her nostalgia has made her idealize her past, she says that even the satisfaction she

garnered by certain mango treats “were forgotten and not even missed.” (Malladi 56) Both characters navigate their evolving identities through food and memory, highlighting the transient nature of cultural belonging.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored Priya’s emblematic diasporic experience with a marked focus on her negotiations with her dual identities and cultural expectations where mango and food become the central aspects as her character grapples to search for her selfhood. Malladi has successfully curated a narrative that intertwines Priya’s nostalgia, rebellion, and self-discovery with food, which makes this study significant. This paper with the theoretical insights from Homi K Bhabha, Stuart Hall, John W Berry, and Judith Butler provides a framework to inquire into the text, along with intertextual parallels to fortify Priya’s search for self. It is her ultimate decision to assert her independence that reflects her fluid and ongoing nature of identity formation, which blends flavors and her identity in a poignant exploration of her belonging and individuality.

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