



Food, Memory and Everyday Transnationalism in Chitrita Banerji’s Culinary Memoirs

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Abstract

Steven Vertovec suggests that the “dimensions of everyday transnationalism” are located in a range of social practices and institutions that links immigrants to their homeland (61). Homeland food is a marker of transnational identity as well as a vehicle for transcultural memory: the preparing and consuming and circulating of such food are significant social practices through which multiple dimensions of everyday nationalism emerge. The increase of transnational and transcultural flows has also witnessed a complementary increase in online and offline mobilisations of homeland recipes—and the stories embedded in and around them—through food-blogs and culinary memoirs-cum-cookbooks. This paper proposes to explore the manifestations and mobilizations of transnational memories, identities and everyday practices through food in the culinary memoirs of the Bengali-American writer Chitrita Banerji, focusing on three of her works: *The Hour of the Goddess* (2001); *Bengali Cooking: Seasons and Festivals* (2007); and *Eating India: Exploring a Nation’s Cuisine* (2007). Consciously writing for a transcontinental, multicultural readership, Banerji engages with Indian—and especially Bengali—food in a deeply personal way. Yet, as she writes in her website, food is her “primary medium” for narrating stories of her homeland, “a story of arrivals, encounters and assimilations — a process during which natives and outsiders shaped each other’s lives in and out of the home” (<http://www.chitritabanerji.com/food/>). This complex and enmeshed memorialization of the personal and the cultural in her culinary memoirs allows Banerji to reclaim personal and cultural homeland stories and histories and also, through the sharing of recipes, to expand and provide a toolkit for socializing similarly-situated immigrants. Reading food through the lens of everyday transnationalism, this paper hopes to investigate how Chitrita Banerji’s writings negotiate the shifting and layered meanings of the personal, the local and the global.

Keywords

food, identity, memory, recipes, transnational

* This article was submitted to this journal before 14.06.2019.

“For Chitrita Banerji food has been the primary medium of storytelling. It is a story about the land she comes from, far from the land where she now lives.... It is a story of arrivals, encounters and assimilations.... Personal and historical memories are woven through the depictions of food and culture in Banerji’s writings.” (Banerji, “Food,” www.chitritabanerji.com)

The extract quoted from Chitrita Banerji’s website reveals a critical self-awareness of her own transnational location, as well as an awareness of the agency evolving from writing transnational and transcultural encounters and identities through food. It also implies that she is consciously addressing a multicultural, transnational readership who can perhaps share or empathise with her stories of food which are embedded in mobility and change. This paper deploys Quayson and Daswani’s definition of transnationalism: “As a paired term to diaspora, transnationalism on the other hand focuses on various flows and counterflows and the multi-striated connections they give rise to,” while emphasizing the distinction between diaspora and transnationalism: while diasporas are associated with dispersal, often forced, transnationalism is marked by more voluntary trajectories and “elective modes of identification” (Quayson & Daswani 4). Banerji, in her culinary memoirs, locates herself in this elective transnational space, and positions her food writing as a deliberate, self-chosen strategy of negotiating this fluid, sometimes-conflictual, sometimes-confluent space. For instance, she physically situates herself in her book, *The Hour of the Goddess* (2001), in her adopted American home, where she shifted as a student and where she has resided since then: “In New England, as I look out of my window,” at a sombre autumn caught up in the “serious business of living,” while she imaginatively journeys to her “native region of Bengal,” where autumn is the “antithesis of such earnestness” and is, instead, both festival season and “the time to *eat well*” (Banerji, *Hour* 3; emphases added). This constructive use of food, ritual and memory as tools to traverse transnational and transcultural spaces is a defining feature of Banerji’s works. She narrates her own engagement with these tools and tropes and offers these to her readers to adopt and adapt as well. This paper will examine three of Banerjee’s works, *The Hour of the Goddess: Memories of Women, Food and Ritual in Bengal* (2001); *Bengali Cooking: Seasons and Festivals* (2007); and *Eating India: Exploring a Nation’s Cuisine* (2007). The aim is to look at how she deploys various tropes of everyday transnationalism in her food writing to negotiate the shifting and layered meanings of the personal, the local and the global that are implicated in the flows of transnationalism.

Transnationalism and Food

“In America, where I now live, cooking odours can still provide a key to the ethnic identity of households in urban neighbourhoods.” (Banerji, *Hour of the Goddess* 87)

Steven Vertovec suggests that the “dimensions of everyday transnationalism” are located in a range of social practices and institutions that links immigrants to their homeland (61). Most of these quotidian transnational practices are located within families: “The provenance of most everyday migrant transnationalism is within families” (Vertovec 61). The family is also the site of preparing, consuming and perpetuating food that is imbued with flavours and memories of the country of origin. Chitrita Banerji observes that, in large cities where “immigrants from many countries live side by side,” it is possible to identify families through their culinary products and practices: Chinese families associated with “soya sauce, garlic and Szechwan peppercorns,” Italians with “tomato, basil, garlic” and Bengalis with “*panchphoron*, a five-spice mixture that is the building block of many of our favourite dishes” (*Hour* 87). This homeland food is a marker of transnational identity as well as a vehicle for transcultural individual and collective memory. The eating of ethnically marked homeland food and sharing their recipes are significant social practices through which multiple dimensions of everyday nationalism emerge.

Anthropologists have studied how “food-centered nostalgia is a recurring theme in studies of diasporic or expatriate populations,” also noting that “the theme of gustatory nostalgia is particularly evident in analyses of *Indian* immigrants” (Holtzman 367; emphasis added). Within transnational families, the provisioning and preparing of food are often gendered activities and it is usually a woman’s responsibility to ensure that the culinary heritages of the home country are re-created, preserved and perpetuated. Despite a gradual increase in the participation of Indian men in household chores, especially in urban or diasporic families, “domestic cooking and family provisioning remains, by and large, a female realm” (Srinivas 199). In practice, this means that women have not only to cook homeland food, but also to pass on traditional and ethnic culinary knowledges to future generations of women. The transfer of culinary knowledge is usually done through recipe sharing. Feminist scholars have long considered cookbooks and recipes as “embedded discourses” that reveal significant meanings at domestic, economic and cultural levels (Leonardi 340). Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster assert that “[p]ersonal histories or pasts, constructed through memory, or the process of remembering with

others, are often centred on food” (Floyd and Forster 7). Homeland food recipes, transferred through female genealogies, or sourced from and circulated in female-centric networks, become significant tools of identity creation in transnational families. Desolate in the “pent-up nostalgia for a lost autumn” during her first Christmas in America as a student, and unable to access the “signature festive foods” of Bengal that are usually prepared and served by her “mother and relatives,” Banerji writes to her mother “asking for recipes and directions” and embarking on “long-distance cooking lessons” that functioned also as identity building projects (Banerji, *Hour 5*).

With the development of digital communication, the long-distance transnational communication flows between women (mothers and daughters, for instance) have gained a speedier, virtual dimension that mimics the offline, intimate exchanges evidenced in multigenerational families. Researching Hindu transnational families, sociologists have concluded that “technological developments also play an important role concerning the intensification of virtual communication,” and make it possible for the “extensive transnational family” to “be considered as a source of cultural identity” (Lourenco & Cachado 54). The technological advancements of the internet-enabled era not only make it possible for members of dispersed and extended families to connect virtually, but also enable the sharing of ethnically-marked recipes or other cultural resources via the World Wide Web. The desire to recreate, disseminate and archive the tastes and recipes of homeland food is an important factor behind the rise of online food-blogs. To cite one popular example from the large number of diasporic Bengali food-blogs, there is *Bong Mom’s Cookbook* by Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta, who also wrote a print cookbook with the same name. The US-based Mukherjee Datta’s blog and book describe how she learnt to cook “*dhokardalna*” from her India-based mother through virtual encounters on “Skype”; how her blog is a site to present her “much-loved Bengali food...on a global platform”; and how she sources and curates recipes from “all Bong motherhood” in the hope that her two young daughters will also one day “don the mantle of ‘Bong Mom’” (Mukherjee Datta 116; 100; 3-4). Mukherjee Datta’s blog and book are templates that are replicated by several transnational food writers: a print or online collection of recipes surrounded by personal stories and recollections, with the primary focus being on the recipes.

Although aware of the potent, discursive power of recipes, Chitrita Banerji does not merely collect and circulate such recipes, she embeds them in frame narratives with which the recipes have “a variety of relationships” (Leonardi 340). None of her books

discussed in this paper can be reduced to the utilitarian category of “cookbook,” and, in fact, *Eating India* does not contain any actual recipes with detailed ingredients and processes. Instead of—or along with—recipes, 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. By shifting the focus from recipes to stories of food, Banerji moves away from the materiality of food to its experientiality, where her own lived experience also becomes the “quasi-mimetic evocation of a real-life experience” that resonates with her transnational readership (Fludernik 12). In that sense, Banerji’s food writing can be categorised as culinary auto-narratives navigating the multiple worlds inhabited by post-colonial transnationals.

In a literal sense, Banerji’s world of Bengali food is transnational—between or beyond national boundaries—as it embraces both Indian Bengali and Bangladeshi cuisines. She has travelled and resided in both Bengals, as her husband was from Bangladesh, and her food memories evoke geographies spanning from Kolkata and “Bolpur in West Bengal” to “Dapdapia, [her] husband’s home village in Barisal” (Banerji, *Bengali* 148-152). She explicates the similarities and distinctiveness of Bengali and Bangladeshi cuisines, rooted largely in different religions but linked through a common language and topography as well as a centuries-old culture of exchange. Banerji also reiteratively emphasises the transnationalism at the heart of Bengali cuisine by tracing the historical journeys of multiple culinary ingredients across cultures and continents. She writes, “many vegetables, which are now part of the daily diet, were imported to Bengal during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the Dutch, French and Portuguese traders,” including quotidian staples like cabbages, cauliflowers, potatoes, tomatoes, beets and green peas in her list (Banerji, *Bengali* 138). Thus food—here, specifically Bengali food—becomes a metaphor for transnationalism, as much as it is a tool to negotiate transnational flows. Moving beyond the concept of transnationalism as a late capitalist, post-globalisation phenomenon, Banerji’s writing foregrounds the geographical and historical transnationalism of Bengali food to suggest how food has always formed connections among peoples, eras and nations. Going back to the initial definition of transnationalism as “flows and counterflows and the multi-striated connections they give rise to,” I would argue that Banerji’s texts attempt an engagement with food that emphasises this very transnational sense of connectedness, although she is

also hyper-aware and shadowed by what is commonly termed as a diasporic sense of exile and loss (Quayson & Daswani 4).

Tropes of Transnationalism: Memory

“This taste of Bengal remains hard to define, quantify, memorise and reproduce, though easy to recall with nostalgic longing.” (Banerji, *Bengali Cooking* 32)

Banerji’s food writing emblematises the essential condition of transnational/diasporic existence, enmeshed between forging connections and losing connections. In this inevitable struggle between remembering and forgetting, memory—both personal and collective—becomes a very significant element of transnational and/or diasporic existence. Whenever the sense of loss or loneliness is experienced, there is a deeply felt need to create a bulwark of and through homeland memories to ward off disconnections and to re-create old connections. Banerji’s cooking and subsequent food writing have been impelled by such a desire and need for memorializing. “I was suddenly filled with a determination to hold on, to capture memory in every shape and form so that neither time nor distance made a void in my heart” (Banerji, *Hour* 5). She reclaims and concretizes food memories by learning to cook long distance from her mother through letters and visits, and then accretes archives and disseminates these memories by documenting and sharing her recipes and experiences of food. Over the years, Banerji has reoriented herself to accept her new home as “the very different beauty of the New England autumn has, over time, become as precious to me as the remembered season of Bengal” (Banerji, *Hour* 5). Encompassing both “imagined” and “encountered” homes, “the concept of diaspora”, which Avtar Brah likens to transnationalism, “signals these processes of multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries” (Brah 191). Banerji’s existence is transnational because of her fluid journeying—both embodied and memorialised—between multiple locations she accepts as her home/s.

Yet Banerji remains poignantly aware of the ever-imminent threat of loss. Although she narrates how one of her “most-remembered fragrances is that of roasted *panchphoron*” and documents a homeland recipe for “*Narkel Aloor Chachhari*” that re-configures the aromatic associations of *panchphoron*, she realises that *panchphoron* is not as ubiquitous in her life now as it was earlier: “Their absence from my day-to-day reality seems, to me, a perfect metaphor of the distance that now intervenes between my origins and myself” (Banerji, *Hour* 90-91). Remembering old homes, re-remembering and

adjusting to new homes, and traversing transnational flows require effort and time: there is always an unbridgeable difference between the effortful re-creation of the old in the new home and the earlier effortless experiencing of homeland cultures and cuisines. The protective and resourceful bulwark offered by gastro-nostalgia and cultural memory is often sporadic and precarious, especially with increasing spatial and temporal distances. Banerji articulates her fear of this threat, which impacts not only her, but all transnational and diasporic individuals: “Like many members of the diaspora, I wonder how the accumulated weight of that distance will eventually affect my memory of what was once so real, so inescapable” (Banerji, *Hour* 91).

Tulasi Srinivas extends this transnational context to include all cosmopolitan experience (which is also marked by dislocation and movement) in order to explain the paradox of such migrant existences:

The paradox of the cosmopolitan in an existing multicultural context is that as the local becomes less significant physically, the memory and the imagination of that place become stronger. For people who live abroad or away from what they consider their ‘home culture’, the idea of ‘homeland’ becomes an important nucleus for nostalgic sentiment. (Srinivas 205)

This nostalgic sentiment is attached to food and other cultural markers, and it often idealises and falsifies the past. Gastro-nostalgia is a complex experience, combining “private remembrance, public displays of historically validated identity, an intense experience of an epochal historical shift” with a “reading [of] the present through the imagining of a past that never was,” all “processes in which food is implicated” (Holtzman 372). Banerji’s use of memory similarly comprises personal recollections of various distinct periods of her life—her childhood in her natal home in Kolkata, her student and professional life in America, and her briefer stays in her marital home in Bangladesh—richly supplemented through her recording of food and ritual stories heard from her mother, grandmother, and other female relations, as well as her reading and research into popular oral history, Bengali literature and scholarly accounts of Bengali culinary and cultural history.

Banerji’s gastro-nostalgia, although complex and layered, however, is remarkably clear-eyed in its looking back. She does not attempt to selectively remember or idealise the past: instead, she recollects it in all its flawed messiness. In a chapter memorializing “Patoler Ma,” the “daily maid” who assisted her mother in the kitchen of their “three-storied house in south Calcutta,” Banerji recalls how the daily labours of the “stick-thin”

maid struggling with the “Herculean task” of grinding spices on the huge stone *shil-nora* gave the child Banerji her “very first sense of the unfairness of life, and particularly the unfairness that women contend with every day in many traditional societies” (Banerji, *Hour* 29). Banerji does not dismiss or invisibilise the classed and gendered inequities of labour and power within the patriarchal structures of Bengali families. Although she is aware of the impossibility of exactly reproducing the past and she “mourns the absence of freshness and intensity that only fresh, stone-ground spices can produce,” she willingly accepts the substitute “mechanical process” of electrical gadgets in her “modern American kitchen,” because her memory of “that long-gone ritual of spice grinding” is inextricably allied to and “inevitably overlaid by a film of another colour—that of Patoler Ma’s sadness” (Banerji, *Hour* 34). In assiduously documenting and preserving her past through recipes and stories of food, family and rituals, Banerji’s memory allies with her feminist critical awareness to realise the benefits of altering traditions and adapting to newer—and perhaps less gendered and “unfair”—realities.

Tropes of Transnationalism: Adaptation

“Orthodox Bengali cooks will of course raise their eyebrows at peas and *boris* figuring together, but I quite like breaking conventions if it means variation and improvement in taste.” (Banerji, *Bengali Cooking* 50)

Banerji, while referencing various literary sources to describe the process of “*bori*-making” and the lost variety of traditional *boris*, frankly admits that she herself is “slightly unorthodox” in her “applications of *bori*,” adding it to peas in an unconventional “*laughanto*” or to “*Begun pora*” which is then “eaten like the Middle Eastern baba ganoush” as an “appetiser” (Banerji, *Bengali* 130-131). The equating of *begun pora* with baba ganoush indicates a flexible, cosmopolitan sensibility willing to innovate and adapt. Elsewhere in the book, she declares that “with most Bengali dishes, there is always room for experiment and adjustments” (Banerji, *Bengali* 93). This willingness to adapt and change culinary orthodoxy or traditions exists simultaneously with a desire to preserve and replicate the culinary authenticity of recipes inherited from female genealogies.

Food scholars like Tulasi Srinivas emphasise the importance of cooking food “as mother made it” since “the familial link of mother and grandmother are mentioned to authenticate and legitimate the recipes and the food” (Srinivas 211). In spite of acknowledging the familial sources of many of her recipes—she even names a mutton dish learnt from her grandmother as “Grandmother’s meat without onion and garlic”—

Banerji pragmatically chooses to accommodate adaptations and variations in cooking food (Banerji, *Bengali* 114). Instead of looking at adaptations as inauthentic, Banerji insists that changing recipes is an integral part of female culinary tradition, a practice followed by her mother and grandmother as well as by other women of her own generation. “In adding my personal touches to some of these ceremonial dishes, I am only doing what my mother and grandmother did when they added their signatures to the recipes they had inherited” (Banerji, *Eating* 325).

There are multiple reasons triggering these culinary adaptations. Besides a desire to experiment and explore, as noted above, often recipes are modified in transnational environments because of necessity. For instance, lack of original ingredients and implements in the adopted country will perforce require substitutes. Banerji observes, “Expatriate Bengalis in the West have tried various fishes in their desperate nostalgia for the hilsa, and the one that most of them think *comes closest* to their unique fish is the shad. In shape and size it is certainly a *fair equivalent*, but the flavour and taste of the hilsa are unique” (Banerji, *Bengali* 91; emphases added). In this extract, it is evident that the substitute can replace but never completely replicate the original; there will always be an unbridgeable, interstitial difference.

However, as a transnational food writer, Banerji attempts to navigate these transcultural interstices in affirmative ways. In detailing a recipe for hilsa or *Ilishpaturi*, for instance, Banerji offers the substitute of “aluminium foil” for the original “banana leaves,” and suggests that “the process can also be duplicated in an oven set at 150 degree C (330 degree F, gas mark 1)” (Banerji, *Bengali* 94). Describing *pulipitha*, another recipe redolent with culinary and festive nostalgia, Banerji remembers how both her grandmother and mother “regularly made this on the last day of Poush,” and while she acknowledges that the original ingredient of *khejurgur* cannot be replicated, she also suggests that “the only way to make this in the West will be to substitute white sugar,” which will “provide an essential Bengali delight” even though “in the absence of *gur* a vital flavour of Bengal will be missed” (Banerji, *Bengali* 166). In yet another recipe, she reconstructs the Bangladeshi dish of leafy greens and shrimps: “Though I know it is absolutely impossible to duplicate the delicate taste of *dhenkishak*, the other ingredients, available in the West, can be combined with chopped spring onions and potatoes to *produce a different but equally delicious dish*” (Banerji, *Bengali* 85). Recipes are not invariably replicated but selectively reconstructed and adapted to changed circumstances in the new location.

Instead of over-romanticising the old home, Banerji chooses to cope with the everyday conditions of the new home. In these and several other instances, Banerji attempts to provide accessible tools for recreating homeland culture in the new land, thereby offering ways in which she and other immigrants can manage transnational dislocations, absences and multiplicities better in their new location. Discussing the “mechanism of managing multiplicity,” Vertovec suggests that by “considering culture as a kind of ‘toolkit’” it is possible for immigrants to “engage in their everyday activities by ‘selecting certain cultural elements...and investing them with particular meanings in concrete life circumstances’” (Vertovec 72). Extending Vertovec’s argument, Banerji’s recipes may be read as culinary and cultural toolkits that allow readers to select material objects available in the new land (shad, white sugar, aluminium foil, spring onion) and invest them with memories and meanings carried over from the homeland.

Although Banerji’s stories are limned with the diasporic recognition of interstitial and temporal loss, the accumulation and circulation of recipes with necessary adjustments enact and re-enact a voluntary transaction of renewal of homeland culture and resistance against its loss. Banerji repeatedly offers readily-available, convenient substitutes for ingredients, implements and processes which allow the transnational migrant to adapt to the new home by mimicking—almost but not the same—the culture of the old home. The adaptations that she suggests are based on the practicality of day-to-day living, and she acknowledges that one’s daily lifestyle is subject to change not only because of the spatial distances of transnationalism but also because of the temporal and socio-cultural distances engendered by neoliberal modernity and urbanisation. In an essay on the gradual disappearance of the Bengali *bonti* from urban kitchens, Banerji notes:

The kitchens of Bengal are rapidly changing. Knives rather than *bontis* are becoming the cutting implements of choice....Women no longer live in extended families, nor do their mornings consist of the leisurely ritual of *kutnokota*, when several women worked together, forming a sisterhood of the *bonti*. Now women are likely to work outside the home, which leaves little time for that kind of domestic fellowship. But for those of us who remember, the *bonti* will continue to be part of a woman’s kitchen life. (Banerji, *Hour* 83)

She positions change and the need for adaptations beyond the context of transnationalism to include the wider generational contexts of increasing women’s employment and dissolution of joint families. Her lamentation for the disappearance of the *bonti* is

accompanied, and somewhat contradicted, by her pragmatic acceptance of geographical and historical changes and her determination to use memory as a fortification against loss. The imbrications of the elegiac and the assertive is a recurrent motif in Banerji's writing, as seen in her engagement with the tropes of memory and adaptation, and as will be further evident in the following section, which explores the trope of journeys in her writings.

Tropes of Transnationalism: Journeys

“Despite this, for me, in the course of life's journey, encountering and appreciating differing food habits and practices has led to unexpected enrichment.” (Banerji, *Hour of the Goddess* 49)

Transnationalism by definition is predicated upon journeys, and, as a transnational writer, it is inevitable that Banerji's culinary auto-narratives will focus amply on journeys, both in the physical and metaphorical senses. Banerji self-identifies as a “traveller...who was born and raised in India before migrating and settling elsewhere” (Banerji, *Eating* 311). Her involvement with food and writing is initiated by the first long transnational journey she made from India to America as a young student, and the “pent-up nostalgia” and yearning generated from that encounter (Banerji, *Hour* 5). Yet, as the above quote demonstrates, transnational journeys have not just brought a sense of loss, but also an experience of enrichment. In an essay on how Bengal discovered *chhana*, Banerji attributes a similar combination of positive and negative effect to journeys: referring to Vasco da Gama's journey to India, she writes how that journey was “pivotal” in bringing the “sad scourge of colonialism” but also brought “a very special sweetness that is the gift of the Portuguese,” tracing the history and variety of *chhana*-based Bengali sweets like the *rosogolla* and the *sandesh* (Banerji, *Hour* 122). Her recipe for *sandesh*, given at the end of the essay, indicates the materiality of enrichment made possible by journeys.

Banerji's encounters with Bangladeshi food are also enabled by her regular journeys to her husband's country of origin. The Bangladeshi recipes that she includes are often accompanied by evocative narratives of these journeys: “I made the overnight journey by steamboat from Dhaka to Barisal, from where we took the boat to my husband's home village of Dapdapia. ...For me it was a journey made magic by the sound of oars in water, the rustle of leaves” (Banerji, *Bengali* 84). Although there is a world of difference between these slow boat journeys and the supersonic jet journeys that mark the

age of transnationalism, they are similar in that they bring about encounters between peoples, cultures and nations.

Banerji's journeys are not only about discovery (of the cuisine of Bangladesh or America, for instance), but also about re-discoveries. As a transnational individual, she has experienced "one of the greatest ironies of India's food story," which is the way in which, in the west, "curry became synonymous with Indian food, thus papering over all the subtleties of regional cookery" (Banerji, *Eating* 100-101). Attempting to debunk the spurious blanket term of Indian cuisine, and to rediscover the regional varieties of India's culinary heritage, Banerji embarks on a series of journeys that culminates in the book *Eating India: Exploring a Nation's Cuisine*. Re-enacting the transnational neo-nomadic existence on a smaller, subcontinental scale, Banerji journeys during three years from 2003 to 2006 via air, rail and road to Bengal, Goa, Bangalore, Amritsar, Delhi, Benaras, Ahmedabad, Mumbai, Cochin, and Bhopal and also beyond urban territories to the tribal Santhal Pargana of Bengal. In documenting the culinary experiences enabled by these journeys, Banerji has a declared purpose: "My objective was to see how much authenticity in food and cookery could possibly survive in the changing, young-old, immigrant nation that is India" (Banerji, *Eating* xi). In a sense, this objective is also the challenge that is the crux of transnational existence: how much of the authentic old culture (including cuisine) can survive in the new land? Banerji's journeys to various parts of her country of origin suggest that it is possible to experience and archive the old cultures and cuisines although her texts resonate with the imminent threat of loss.

Banerji's journeys of culinary discovery and rediscovery in *Eating India* produce a "narrative of anxiety" which marks cosmopolitan existence in urban as well as diasporic India (Srinivas 205). Eating hot "jilebis" near a Shiva temple at dusk in Benaras, she has an epiphanic sensation that the temple bells are "encouraging [her] to savour this moment before it vanished" (Banerji, *Eating* 193). Fittingly, it is the Hindu "theory of rebirth and reincarnation" and well as the American "motto" that "change is good" which console and sustain her, and she is able to juxtapose the diasporic anxiety with affirmation and hope (Banerji, *Eating* 325; 30). Thus, it is her transnational Indian-American identity which is both the cause of, and antidote to, her cultural anxiety. Through multiple journeys, Banerji is able to access, re-live, reconfigure and transform individual and collective memories and histories into narratives that impose a sense of affirmation and continuity.

Being a food writer and historian, Banerji also traces the journeys located within numerous food ingredients like *chhana*, potato, tomato and brinjal. For instance, deconstructing the essential Bengali spice mix, *panchphoron*, Banerji narrates how *kalojeera* is “native to countries bordering the eastern Mediterranean” and fennel is “native to Southern Europe and was carried by Arab traders all over the Middle East and to India” (Banerji, *Hour* 88). Banerji recounts how these foreign ingredients travelled separately to Bengal before, at some unknown juncture, “Bengalis came up with the magic formula of combining these five disparate elements into a single-flavour package” (Banerji, *Hour* 89). In a way, these ingredients with their histories of travel and enrichment become metaphors of transnational existence, as immigrants travel to new lands in the hope of improved lives and better opportunities, even as they retain traces of their old lands and cultures.

Conclusion: Multi-placed Homes, Hyphenated Identities

“If anything, it was my native Bengali food that gave me the strongest sense of identity.” (Banerji, *Eating India* 34)

In her writing, Banerji repeatedly self-identifies as a Bengali, performing this ethnic identity through food, positioning herself more specifically as a Bengali food writer “championing the cause of regional food cuisine” of her “native Bengal” (Banerji, *Eating* xix). Yet she also embraces America as her “home” even as Bengal, and India, become distant areas marked on a map: “Back *home in America*, I spread out and peruse the large detailed map of India that I had acquired.... The map possesses many levels of meaning and mystery, much like the sumptuous Goan cake *bebinca*” (Banerji, *Eating* 311; emphases added). The map indicates a duality of past memory and future possibility. Even as Bengal, or India, becomes a remote destination left behind, the map also charts potential journeys to renew cultural and familial ties. It keeps Bengal, and India, present and accessible even in her adopted American home, both as manifested past as well as future mobilizations. Like the multiple, sticky layers of *bebinca*, the ‘then’ and the ‘now’, the ‘here’ and the ‘there’, coexist and commingle in transnational existence, separate yet confluent.

Belonging to two or more homes and cultures, there is always a flux or tension in Banerji’s writing between these multiple homes and identities. As diaspora theorist Avtar Brah asserts, “the concept of diaspora places the discourse of ‘home’ and ‘dispersion’ in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of

fixed origins. The problematic of ‘home’ and belonging may be integral to the diasporic condition” (Brah 189). Coming back to the notion of voluntariness that defines transnationalism (and distinguishes it from popular notions of diasporic exile), the creative tension between homes that is evident in Banerji’s writing is always accompanied by a willing affirmation of the choice that is the impetus behind transnational migrations. She writes, “Families have traded the inheritance of culinary and cultural traditions for the freedom of being nuclear and mobile” (Banerji, *Eating* 18).

The gains of transnational existence come with attendant losses, and Banerji is keenly aware of both:

I know that even my best efforts will produce only an approximation of what I grew up eating; things don’t taste the same in India and America. Nevertheless, there is pleasure in striving to recreate remembered dishes. The joy of eating, especially for an immigrant in her adopted country, is a complex—part nostalgia, part discovery, and art creation. (Banerji, *Eating* 325)

Banerji’s gustatory nostalgia—like that of the other transnational food-writers and food-bloggers—is not just a debilitating yearning. It is a tool—that requires effort or “striving”—to facilitate a renewal of the old cultures in new settings. Through the agency of cooking, nostalgia becomes allied with discovery and creativity, and transformed into an affirmative, joyful, everyday experience. As Brah states, the transnational or “diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively,” to which we may add the everyday food that is made, eaten and shared, and the everyday rituals that are performed (Brah 180).

Banerji identifies “an incomparable genius for assimilation and regeneration” in India as well as in America, which make them “ideal immigrant nation(s)” (Banerji, *Eating* 312). Claiming to belong to both nations makes her identity hyphenated: Indian-American, which is both and neither simultaneously. The negotiation of transnational or hyphenated identities soften hinges on constructing specific yet imbricated cultural citizenships linked to the countries of origin and destination. These cultural citizenships are enacted through active participation in, and consumption of, culturally-coded markers like food, festivals, dress, language, rituals and media artefacts (films, for instance). This produces a sense of belonging to the multiple geographies that a transnational individual may call home/s.

Banerji chooses to develop her connections to homes mostly through the markers of food, and sometimes through rituals. Food is both temporary and permanent, even as each dish cooked is consumed and finished, the ritual process of cooking ensures that cuisines—whether traditional or modified—will continue to exist and nourish. Banerji observes this “carefree assumption of impermanence” in all culinary and even “artistic endeavours surrounding the life and rituals of Bengal” (Banerji, *Hour* 141). By documenting her stories of Bengali rituals and food, and by sharing her recipes in enabling, adapted ways, Banerji is extending her own authorial and culinary empowerment to her globally dispersed transnational readership, who can also choose to perform everyday transnationalism through these recipes and rituals to assimilate the multiple dimensions of their original and encountered locations. In conclusion, it may be suggested that over and beyond the underlying anxiety about the threat and inevitability of loss, it is the very transience and circularity of food and ritual that imbues Banerji’s written and lived negotiations of her multiple homes and hyphenated identities with a certain buoyancy, reassurance and hope.

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