

# A Mango for Every Palate: Food as Identity in Madhur Jaffrey's *Climbing the Mango Trees*

Ariel Little

**English**

**Supervisor:** Leigh Matthews

## **Abstract:**

*In her book, Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India (2006), Madhur Jaffrey, one of the most prominent Indian culinary authorities, illustrates how memory and the past are often best encapsulated by food. Jaffrey's memoir is well timed, as food culture is a burgeoning field of academic study due to the acknowledgment that food is an indicator of culture, geography, and time period. Culture and food are inextricably intertwined and, as Jaffrey reveals, food culture can be the ideal place for the expression of identity. Jaffrey does acknowledge how much cultural, and especially religious, identity shapes one's diet, yet she also exposes how cuisine is where her family expressed their cultural hybridity and how diet is inevitably altered to the individual's palate. These factors enable food to become an acceptable field for experimentation for Jaffrey, ultimately allowing her to adopt a culinary cosmopolitanism and consequently a multicultural identity distinct from her communal one. However, Jaffrey does not abandon her Indian character, choosing to maintain her culture through embracing Indian cuisine once abroad. For Jaffrey, food's dual nature, as both an important cultural signifier and an acceptable field for experimentation, renders cuisine the ideal method for enabling Jaffrey to develop a multicultural identity while still maintaining her heritage. This research will demonstrate the significance of food culture studies by exploring Jaffrey's depiction of food as a flexible medium for expressing the various types of identity.*

In her book *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India* (2006), Madhur Jaffrey, "one of the most prominent Indian culinary authorities," illustrates how memory

and the past are often best encapsulated by food (Black 1). Jaffrey's memoir is well timed, as food culture is a burgeoning field of academic study due to the acknowledgment that food is an indicator of culture, geography, and time period. Culture and food are inextricably intertwined for, as Jaffrey reveals, food can be the ideal site for the expression of identity. Jaffrey does acknowledge how much cultural, and especially religious, identity shapes one's diet, yet she also exposes how cuisine is where her family expressed its cultural hybridity and how diet is inevitably altered to the individual's palate. Her family's dietary hybridity and the individualistic nature of taste enabled food to become a field of cultural experimentation for Jaffrey, ultimately allowing her to adopt a "culinary cosmopolitanism" (Black 3) and consequently a multicultural identity distinct from her communal one. However, Jaffrey does not abandon her Indian character once abroad, choosing to maintain her culture by embracing Indian cuisine. Jaffrey's maintenance of her Indian culture, as part of her new multicultural identity, suggests that her particular brand of multiculturalism is about meeting her individual cultural "tastes" by drawing on all cultures while being bound to none. Food's dual nature, as both an important cultural signifier and field for experimentation, renders cuisine the ideal avenue for Jaffrey to develop a multicultural identity while still maintaining her heritage, ultimately allowing her to create her ideal cultural existence.

In her essay "Cooking up Memories: The Role of Food, Recipes, and Relationships in Jeanette Lander's *Überbleibsel*" Heike Henderson asserts that, "second to no other form of human expression, food embodies culture" (236-7). Scholars such as Shameem Black have noted that "an emphasis on food [as culture] is especially prominent in the construction of the South Asian diaspora" of which Jaffrey is a part (6). Jaffrey recognizes food as being predominantly a component of communal identity, as she says, "all social occasions," the times when communities come together, "are fueled by food and drink" (92). Because she grew up in the joint family system, Jaffrey is keenly aware of how food and eating can be a matter of what the group deems acceptable; for example, one of the effects of her family's leaving Kanpur to re-join the family in Delhi was "We would have to eat all of our main meals in Number 7," the family estate (71). On Jaffrey's family's annual holiday to the "hills" the "only organized activity ... was the mountain picnic," an event centred around the consumption of food. The fact that choosing of the picnic site and all other preparations begins "weeks in advance", shows the significant role attributed to food by Jaffrey's joint-family community (109).

In addition to the communal nature of food consumption, Jaffrey depicts particular foods as being synonymous with a respective culture. Anita Mannur, in “Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora”, reports that in immigrant literature, “[t]o be seen as ‘Indian’ implicitly demands a particular set of performative behaviours” (24). For Jaffrey one of these performative behaviours is the production and consumption of food. For example, Jaffrey’s family’s cultural position as part of India’s elite is reflected in the drink “*daulat ki chaat*,” literally translated as “the snack of wealth,” which was “the most ephemeral of fairy dishes” made with dried sea foam (14-5). Their wealth, along with their British influence, is the reason why Jaffrey’s parents insist on keeping napkins clean and the proper use of finger bowls (60). The connection of food with one’s national community is highlighted by Jaffrey’s description of lunches at her British Convent school. The culturally British children ate sandwiches and leftover roast as opposed to Jaffrey and her sister’s curries; one presumably culturally mixed girl’s food alternated between Indian dishes and “English sausage” (52). The children’s lunches reveal how culture, not individual preference, was the primary influence on their diets, testifying to Jaffrey’s belief in the centrality of food to identity.

In her analysis of Jeanette Lander’s following of Jewish kosher laws, Henderson states, “[w]hat is eaten has the power to transform our bodies and thus ourselves, which is one of the reasons why so many cultural and religious rules covering food ... exist” (240). Jaffrey discusses in great detail how, in India, the food one eats is greatly determined by one’s religion. When speaking of her religiously diverse school friends’ lunches, Jaffrey claims that “there also hovered over each dish an air of indefinable religious sensibility that could be seen and tasted but eluded pinpointing,” labeling her friends Abida and Zahida’s foods distinctly “inner-city Muslim” (176). Jaffrey often identifies food as belonging to particular religions, such as “earthy Punjabi village *parathas* ... Syrian Christian ... *idlis* (steamed rice cakes) and coconut curry ... orthodox Jain ... boiled potatoes and some mixed spices,” etc. (204). Even in Jaffrey’s liberal family, members were expected to maintain their Hindu cultural identity with, as Jaffrey relates “[w]e could question anything, and we did, but we followed Hindu family traditions” (146). Often these are culinary traditions such as the Hindu taboo on unclean foods or the celebration of the “Thirteenth Day Feast” as part of mourning rituals (188, 236). In Jaffrey’s eyes, the clearest sign of a person’s culture, whether religious, class, or national, is his or her cuisine which demonstrates how central food is to her personal cultural identity.

Jaffrey and her family's multifaceted cultural background leads to food being the primary way in which their hybridity is expressed. Jaffrey's family "was Hindu by origin, but heavily veneered with Muslim culture and British education" (31). This Hindu-Muslim-British identity is reflected in their meals; Jaffrey records that "[b]reakfast was, except on weekends, Western," "[l]unches were Indian," and "[d]inners were often a mixture" (43, 59). The family's hybridity extends to their method of consumption, with meals involving the switching between using hands or cutlery (59). Unlike most Indian families, Jaffrey's crosses the religious culinary barrier with Sunday lunches featuring either a Hindu or a Muslim dish, and the males possessing a love of Muslim style kebabs (194, 189). The family even has unique dishes; as Jaffrey claims, "[w]e knew no other community that pickled dumplings," suggesting they possess a distinct micro-culture (145). As perhaps best communicated by the "*masala* [spiced] omelet with bacon," food was where Jaffrey's family most aptly expressed their hybrid cultural identity (15).

However regulated cuisine may be by cultural identity, food has an inherent focus on "the idiosyncratic and unique" tastes of individuals "that defy national or group identification" (Black 15). What one eats is largely culturally determined, but it is also determined by the individual's palate. For example, Jaffrey's mother could not add "too much chili powder, as my father could not stomach very hot food" (61). At the family gatherings centred around the *khomcha-wallah* vendor visits, "[t]hose who wanted a mild cumin ... got only the black mixture ... Those who said gleefully, as I did, 'Make it very hot' also got the yellow and red mixture ... If one had an extra craving for a sweet-sour taste one would ask for a tamarind chutney" (75-6). The respect and accommodation for the individual's taste preference is even present in everyday family evenings with the choosing of favourite nuts for beverages and the choice between mild or spicy *pakorīs* (94). Even at the highly planned and regulated annual family picnic in the "hills" there are mangoes provided for every taste: "*langras* from Benares for those who liked their mangoes tart; *dussehris* from Lucknow for those who liked them sweet and smooth; and *chusnis*, small suckling mangoes, for those who preferred ... to suck the juice straight from the skin" (109). Within the rigidity and crowdedness of Jaffrey's joint family there is allowance for individual autonomy in the highly significant category of food; however, the degree of autonomy permitted is all within the bounds of Jaffrey family's food culture.

The combination of her family's diet modeling its unique identity, and the food being flexible with individual desires made food a safe area for Jaffrey to experiment with culture. At

“the age of four ... I began to explore the hot and sour” Jaffrey tells her readers (4), revealing how at a young age she was allowed to explore specific taste preferences. Experimentation with food culture, as an acceptable type of deviance, is demonstrated by the behavior of Jaffrey’s mother. When Jaffrey desires to have *paratha* from vendors in the old city, she acknowledges that her “father frowned on all bazaar foods so my mother at first denied my request.” Yet Jaffrey’s mother eventually “capitulated” feeling that it was a harmless form of disobedience (130). Jaffrey’s family’s “genuine spirit of tolerance to all faiths,” beyond establishing their acceptance of other cultures, also indicates that they accept the food of other cultures, as culture and food are so intertwined (22). Jaffrey also has particular room to negotiate her personal identity as an eater, due to her place in the family, declaring, “I was given the luxury of rebellion ... I was way beyond the heir and the spare” (39). Her place in the family, being “way beyond the heir,” made Jaffrey not responsible for upholding family traditions, thereby giving her the freedom to shape her own personal culture while still remaining tied to the family.

Jaffrey delights in broadening her cultural horizons, loving the *paratha* for “what a taste it was ... pure Old Delhi,” in other words, for being a gateway to a wholly different world from that of her privileged, hybrid community (131). Rejecting her family’s home-produced milk, Jaffrey comes to favour Western-style “homogenized milk from a proper dairy” (158). In addition to their clothes, the culinary cultures of her Muslim, Jain, and Punjabi school friends are adopted by Jaffrey. Jaffrey relates how “there was one other way at school of sharing –and actually tasting– the inner city ... that was at lunch, which we ate together, as far away from the stone school building as possible” (175). The mention of eating away from the school coupled with Jaffrey’s statement, “I always found my own food the least interesting and barely touched it,” implies that sharing lunches with her school friends was Jaffrey’s way of breaking free from her communal food identity to one she found more amenable (177). This acceptance and enjoyment of the food of all of India’s cultures very much reflects how Jaffrey was a “firm follower of Mahatma Gandhi” and his championing of a multicultural India (179). In her article “Recipes for Cosmopolitanism: Cooking Across Borders in the South Asian Diaspora,” Black identifies that Jaffrey demonstrates that a “gustatory relish for the food of ‘Others’ [helps] contribute to an appreciation of their presence in the national community” (6). Mannur notes how, in her cookbooks, Jaffrey treats the sharing of food as a way to ease cultural friction, strengthening the view that for Jaffrey the dinner table is the place to adopt multiculturalism (27). Just as Gandhi’s

“prayer meetings were nonsectarian, nondenominational,” so too is Jaffrey’s diet illustrating how her experimentation with food led to a distinct personal identity (179).

After India gains its independence in 1947, a generation gap develops in Jaffrey’s extended family as the young begin to seek out their autonomy (180). The flexibility of culinary identity is why food is where the generation gap is seen to creep in, for the “younger generation in our family ... regularly patronized restaurants,” whereas, the elder ones did not (194). The young are drawn to the outbreak of restaurants, as they are “the place to express” the new, heavily Punjabi-influenced, national spirit of India that they enjoy (192). Leftover K-rations from World War II are prized by Jaffrey’s generation, who “open them as if they were Christmas presents” (194). The older generation, although tolerating the children’s personal experimentation with these foods, insisted they “stayed out of the dining room” for they did not perceive them to be a part of the communal food culture (194). Beyond giving her generation a separate identity, Jaffrey views her experiences with K-rations as the beginning of her exploration of Western culture, for they were her first taste of standard Western foods like olives and fruit cocktail (194). Jaffrey, with her British influenced upbringing, was always exposed to some Western foods such as “decorated Easter egg[s]” and “odd pastries and cakes” (61, 191). However, once she is an adult Jaffrey begins to seek out cuisines beyond India’s borders, a foreshadowing of her move to Britain. The greatest example of this is her embracing of Coke, which Jaffrey equates with her “newfound internationalism” (240). Jaffrey’s ability to seek out a new place in the world in order to find a more amenable lifestyle was precipitated by her developing a transcultural identity through experimenting with food.

Jaffrey confesses that, “When I left India for England, I could not cook at all” and that she failed cooking in school, yet when she arrives in England she finds herself “writing home to my mother begging her to teach me” (6, 229, 242). In her work, Mannur observes how “food becomes an intellectual and an emotional anchor” for those who move away from their homeland (11). Jaffrey’s need for her culture’s food is part of a recognition that she cannot, and does not want to, extricate herself fully from her culture, even though she wishes to live apart to gain more freedom. Jaffrey is aware of how Indian culture is an intrinsic part of her; she records how all the Indian flavours of her childhood were “somewhere in my depths ... ready to be drawn up when the moment was ripe” (240). The novelist Lander, as quoted by Henderson, once disclosed, “cooking connects all of my worlds” (236). Jaffrey echoes this sentiment, reporting how “I hardly

knew that my old and my new worlds would start to mingle as soon as they touched, and that so much of my past would always remain in my present” (242-3). The relative portability of food culture enables Jaffrey to remain tied to her heritage even when isolated from her community. When the children were sent to the convent school, Jaffrey’s father “trusted us to withstand the tsunami of Westernization ... and to hold on to our Indianness as he and his father before him” (41). For Jaffrey this is ultimately accomplished by holding on to her community’s food culture, facilitating her development of a multicultural identity that is both free of some of the restraints of Indian culture while retaining the elements she cherishes.

Through *Climbing the Mango Trees*, Jaffrey confirms how “Eating habits are concrete symbols of cultural and personal identity” (Henderson 244). Jaffrey clearly does not feel that food allows for a fluid expression of both cultural and individual identity, only because it is a non-significant aspect of culture. The story Jaffrey composes for Masterji’s class demonstrates the centrality of food as two archetypal Indians, a traditional Hindu and a privileged hybrid, come together for a meal (202). The meal’s significance to the story emphasizes that food is both an important and a shared aspect of most cultures. Although for some, the “globalization of culinary traditions [provokes] dystopian anxieties about world-wide homogenization” Jaffrey does not share these fears (Black 5). The very reason why the family’s caterers’ hands are “magic” is because they “could easily prepare the lamb meatballs of our erstwhile Moghul emperors and the tamarind chutneys of the streets with equal ease,” in other words, because the caterers’ are able to move between different cultures’ cuisines while still representing them authentically (5). These cases demonstrate how food is both a signifier of a distinct culture and a site to experience multiculturalism, which is why Jaffrey uses food to remain tied to India while living a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Even with something as inherently simple and Indian as mangoes, through acceptance of the individual palate, there is room for personal and communal identity to be expressed in harmony and for the traditions of the past to be joined with the innovations of the present.

### **Works Cited**

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