

Food, Tea, and Transformation: Anjali's Path to Resilience in Malladi's 'A Breath of Fresh Air'

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intricate relationship between food, tea, and identity formation in Amulya Malladi's novel *A Breath of Fresh Air*. The protagonist, Anjali, navigates her journey from depression to resilience through her culinary practices, which serve as a mode of communication and a tool for emotional healing. The study draws on critical theories of identity formation, particularly those from diaspora studies, to analyze how food and tea act as symbols of cultural identity and personal transformation. By examining Anjali's interactions with food and tea, the paper highlights how these elements reflect her emotional states, social relationships, and cultural heritage. The analysis is enriched by the theoretical perspectives of scholars like Arjun Appadurai, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Carole Counihan, who emphasize the communicative and symbolic roles of food in shaping identity. The findings suggest that Anjali's culinary practices are not merely about sustenance but are deeply entwined with her efforts to reclaim her identity, connect with her heritage, and navigate the complexities of her life. The paper concludes that food and tea in *A Breath of Fresh Air* are powerful motifs that facilitate Anjali's emotional and psychological healing, underscoring the transformative power of culinary practices in personal and cultural identity formation.

Keywords: Amulya Malladi, *A Breath of Fresh Air*, Identity formation, Food symbolism, Cultural identity, Diaspora studies, Emotional healing, Culinary practices, Resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Amulya Malladi's novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* (2002) intricately weaves the personal struggles of Anjali, a woman who transitions from a bubbly young girl to a woman in a troubled marriage. Her decision to take a stance for herself, after a life-altering incident – the Bhopal gas tragedy- is the very beginning of transitioning her depression to determination, within the broader narrative of her life's challenges.

Sophia Mary in her doctoral thesis *From Depression to Determination: The Process of Transformation in Amulya Malladi's Select Novels* has talked about the broader theme of breaking barriers, particularly those faced by women in traditional and modern contexts. Her work focuses on two of Malladi's works *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004) and *The Sound of Language* (2008) to explore and analyze the female characters and their journey of breaking barriers of cultural, social, and economic nature. Her findings are akin to that of Anjali's dilemma in *A Breath of Fresh Air* which are left unexplored at this point by Mary. This research paper explores how Anjali's story mirrors the central theme of overcoming adversity and achieving resilience commonly established in various works of Amulya Malladi, but this paper aims to achieve this with food playing a pivotal role in communicating her journey. Her journey toward determination is marked by small, yet significant, victories over her inner demons. An analysis of various culinary elements, whether as metaphors for emotions, emotional states, and catalysts for character development have been scrutinized in this paper within the framework of the concepts of food as communication, drawing from Roland Barthes and Lévi-Strauss. Barthes posits that food can be understood as a form of language that communicates cultural values, social structures, and individual identities. Lévi-Strauss in *The Origin of Table Manners* (1978), argues that food and food practices serve as a form of communication and how food is prepared, presented, and consumed reflects the structure of the society. In the context of *A Breath of Fresh Air*, Anjali's interactions with food and tea can be seen through Lévi-Strauss's lens of food as a system of communication. Her culinary practices communicate her cultural identity, personal values, and social relationships. The preparation of

traditional dishes and the ritual of tea-making serve as ways for Anjali to assert her identity, connect with her heritage, and navigate her place within the social structure.

Food and food motifs transpire as a powerful image in Malladi's narrative, epitomizing Anjali's emotional states and her gradual transformation. The act of cooking, and sharing meals and tea becomes a form of communication, transcending words and connecting characters on a deeper level. Food serves as a medium through which Anjali expresses her love, anger, and fear.

Both relationships for Anjali begin with tea, from making tea for *Divya Aunt* "I put the teacups on a steel tray along with a small plate of fresh badam burfi that I had made just that morning." and serving it with grace to show herself in the best light for Prakash the prospective groom, to a shared cup of tea in the University canteen to escape sunstroke with Sandeep "We were on our way from the department building to the canteen to get a cup of tea and some university gossip... We talked aimlessly for a short while and then I suggested we go to the canteen, before one of us has a sun stroke."; tea can be seen as a running motif in Anjali's life, she uses 'Chai' to assuage Sandeep's guilt over, giving Anjali the cold shoulder at the very beginning of their relationship. It is also important to note how different these two cups of tea are in the social structure, while one is served in bone china the other in cheap use-and-throw cups in the canteen. Steffi and Sangeetha in their paper *Determining the Symbolic Representations of 'Food' in Life and Literature* emphasize how food in literature extends to reflecting cultural and social dynamics. They impress that literary works often use food to explore themes of class, economic disparity, and human emotions. The availability and type of food consumed often highlight economic disparities.

In the narrative, serving of tea is one such example, but the economic disparity is also reflected in the type and quantity of food that is made when she is married to Prakash as opposed to Sandeep. The food served while Anjali is married to her first husband, who is an Army Officer, with a stable economic background talks of parties, lavish spreads, and experimentations to please her inattentive husband, when we hear Prakash's side of the story he says "When I came home, she was there with a beaming smile and a cup of tea. She always had the best meals ready whenever I felt like one and she made an absolutely stunning hostess. I invited other officers over and showed the hell off with the wife I didn't want"; as opposed to only eating something special on Sundays and limiting the intake of *Okra curry* based on its market value and availability is peppering the narrative with a stark contrast in Anjali's lifestyle: Amar loved Anjali's okra curry, and that's why she made it as often as the prices and the season would allow it. My son was smart and understood the financial intricacies of our lives. He told Anjali that if he ate okra curry too often he would stop enjoying it and he wanted to continue to like it. Anjali had laughed with him and then cried with me. It was not fair, she had said, that a little boy knew what his parents' limitations were". Anjali's dilemma after the resurgence of her ex-husband in Ooty and her constant internal struggle of questioning her life choices are beautifully masked by food. Anjali and Sarita gossip about running in Prakash and his wife at the vegetable market "What was she like?" "Pretty, pretty." "Not prettier than you," Sarita claimed, and I laughed. "I don't want him, Sarita," I told her, as I sprinkled chopped coriander on the dum aloo."

Anjali's efforts to cook lavish meals, host grand parties, and her constant hope to share meals with Prakash exemplify her dedication towards her first marriage as she strives to gain attention, affection, and approval from her negligent husband. "The cardamom chai in the evening when he came back from work, the delicious breakfasts, and the perfect parties—I did everything I could. And finally I think he stopped disliking the idea of marriage. I was an asset and for a while I convinced myself that he even loved me.". The relationship between Anjali and Prakash undergoes significant deterioration due to Prakash's neglect which can be seen in the drop in efforts from Anjali's side. The text exemplifies that his persistent neglect erodes her self-worth and passion for cooking, transforming what was once an expression of love into a mere routine "I started paying less attention to Prakash, though he didn't seem to notice. He didn't complain about having toast and jam for breakfast instead of the stuffed parathas I used to make, and neither did he complain when I sometimes heated leftover dal and curry for dinner".

Prakash's negligence is embodied in his emotional unavailability and constant disregard, upon marriage Anjali enters an emotional turmoil affecting her overall zeal for life, which can be seen in her diminishing culinary passion and the choice of foods that she moves towards. Food here has been used by Malladi as a means of expressing emotions, which are otherwise left unsaid, as she moves from making lavish feasts for breakfast to serving "Bread Jam", her life which seems to have been neglected of love and her cultural roots is mirrored in her soulless cooking, that is also detached from her previous cultural identity. Anjali's love for cooking and Prakash seems to be deteriorating with emotional neglect from him, which underscores the profound impact it can have on shaping an identity. This culinary aside provides an insight into the

emotional landscape and her psyche. The identity Anjali seems to shape for herself during her time as Prakash's wife is that of a lost soul, she cannot fit well with the "bridge-playing wives" of the senior officers nor can she keep up with the gossip running rampant in the cantonment, which left her thinking she was not privy to a secret- ironically about her husband's affair. Her only respite was a new friend Harjot "How are you enjoying your summer holidays?" I asked. "I am bored." That was exactly how I was feeling, so I invited her over for tea. And that became a ritual." It is upon meeting Anjali again in the vegetable market that Prakash notes "Her eyes were bright now. As if she had found her purpose and her meaning. When we had been married she'd had stars in her eyes, now she had confidence and maturity." which reinforces resilience in Anjali's identity.

According to, Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, identity formation is a crucial phase during adolescence and early childhood, he further adds that identity formation is a continued process that is dependent on coherence and integrating past experiences with future aspirations (Erickson, 1968). Anjali's continued identity formation during the course of the novel can be read from the perspective of diaspora studies, where identity formation is a complex process and individuals are navigating multiple cultural influences and a continuous parley with their sense of belonging, from their homeland to their adoptive culture (Hall,1990).The aspect of food communication resonates with the theoretical perspectives on the role of food in cultural identity formation, so for Anjali, food acts not only as a bridge between her past and present but also as a reconnect to her lost cultural identity. This culinary nostalgia is not made apparent in the text as would be in common experiences of immigrants and individuals living away from their homeland but is quite similar. She has been picked up from her social class and married into a different world/class "Somehow army wives knew how to do that. They had class and elegance, which we civilians seemed to lack.", providing the symbolisms in changes in food and eating habits. Malladi has used food silently to explore the theme of this class-based displacement and emotional loss of belonging to further depict her walk toward depression stemming from the erasure of her cultural heritage. And, later when she is in a happy relationship, walking towards determination, and cooks again for her family and son, Malladi exemplifies how culinary practices serve as a repository of cultural memory. So, when Anjali cooks for Amar, her ailing child; this act can be seen as her way of providing sustenance, communicating her affection, providing nutrition, and also providing her bedridden son some worldview. Above all, Anjali cooking traditional meals for her son and family can be seen as her reclaiming her identity after losing her 'self' and passion for cooking during her first marriage, which according to Malladi was her love language and carried cultural and emotional significance.

For instance, Anjali's determination to prepare traditional Indian food at home, for her ailing son and family reflects at her attempt to preserve her cultural identity, pass this link of tradition to her son, and also to anchor herself amidst the chaos unfolding in her life. The meticulous nature of planning she puts into her cooking and also in the process of cooking, is both necessary and therapeutic for her. This allows her to do the task mindlessly even when she is tired and also to find solace or even a sense of control, as she feels her life is chaotic and is not in her control anymore. Food in this instance can be viewed as more than just mere nourishment, but also as a channel for the emotional and psychological healing for Anjali. According to Counihan (1999), food and food practices are acutely entrenched in our cultural identities and can serve as a medium to maintain a semblance of continuity, when facing emotional upheavals. Further reading into Lupton's (1996) argument that food evokes memories, provides connections and comfort helps food evolve as an effective tool for coping with trauma and loss. Hence, food in *A Breath of Fresh Air* is not merely a backdrop for the story but a dynamic element that influences Anjali's actions and interactions. And is being communicated as a coping mechanism for Anjali and the sensory experiences of the food- taste, texture, and aroma- soothe her emotions. This culinary experience also evokes memories, taking the narrative from the past to the present, and from the perspectives of Anjali, to Sandeep, and to Prakash. Malladi uses this connection between food and memory to emphasize the role culinary practices play in shaping and forming individual and collective identities. In the narrative, Anjali's preparation and consumption of these traditional dishes, especially for her son, connect her to her heritage. "I made dal and cauliflower sabzi for dinner. I just have to cook the rice. It will take fifteen minutes." The preparation methods "I was sifting the wheat flour for dinner when my mother finally tore herself from Amar", "I washed some rice and put it along with some water into the small pressure cooker." And "I chopped a raw mango for the stuffing. I added a spoonful of turmeric, another spoonful of chili powder, a dash of fenugreek seeds, and some oil to the raw mangoes and mixed them together with my hand. I opened the gourds carefully to put the stuffing inside." and the meals "Stuffed Karela" "Okar Curry" and "Dal and Rice" reflect the cultural significance of food in Indian culture, where culinary practices and culture are often passed down to generations, with various stories and values (Appadurai,1988).

Anjali evolves as a person with food as her language of love, she cooks to appease, receive approval, nurture love, provide comfort, and also socialize. But we see a decline in her cooking-feeding tendency during her marriage with Prakash, as her

love dwindled with neglect. This decline comes to a long pause while she is stuck in the adversity of being deserted by her parents in not supporting her divorce fearing social stigma. As she begins to rebuild her life after her divorce, the university canteen food, tea, and the hospitality of her friends is the language of love she adopts and comes back to her cooking-feeding tendency with offerings of help. The act of sharing meals and tea can be viewed as a form of emotional bonding, the narrative provides various occasions of communal dining or tea being relished in company. The shared experience becomes a space where apprehensions are shared, friendships are formed, relationships are mended, and plans are made. This aligns food within the narrative as a culturally significant aspect to achieve social cohesion and emotional expression.

Malladi has used tea; the act of preparation, serving, and sharing beyond the initiation of her relationships. A ritual of evening tea shared by Sandeep and Anjali can be seen as solace or comfort drawn, not just by spending time together but by the drink itself. When Anjali is battling with the resurfacing of Prakash in her life it triggers an emotional turmoil which she ponders over as the tea roll-boils on the stove, it is over this ritualistic tea that she narrates the events of the day, communicating her fear and apprehensions. It is interesting, how she contrasts her current life with what could have been, all while she toils in the kitchen, rushing to cook after a busy and emotionally flummoxed day at work. It is with her ritualist evening tea that Anjali plans a private audience with Sandeep to override any miscommunication “I went into the kitchen and started to make tea, wanting privacy to talk to him about Prakash before Komal started her nagging routine.” As Anjali begins to confront her past and the emotional baggage associated with it “I had no idea why. In a way I felt guilty because I had wanted to see Prakash again after meeting him in the market.”, Sandeep senses this turmoil in Anjali but remains supportive of her “He held his hand out to me and pulled me to my feet into his arms. He rocked me gently and we stood there for a long time, listening to the crickets and the whistle of a train far away. The sounds of the night blended into each other and soothed me. It didn’t matter that Prakash was back in my life, or that Mrs. Gujjar had interrogated me. It was enough to have Sandeep.”, just as he sits with his cup of tea listening, rather interrupting her obsession over Prakash “I don’t want to talk about Prakash,” Sandeep groaned. “I just want to be with you for a while. I am tired and I don’t want to discuss your ex-husband and his motives.”.

Just as Anjali has been building comfort for her son in terms of food and drawing her solace on tea, food within the narrative has social limitations of assigned gender roles and expectations. The social expectation of a woman being solely responsible for the act of cooking-feeding draws heavily on Anjali’s shoulders, Sandeep says “Komal didn’t cook often, which bothered Anjali. But Anjali didn’t complain and I appreciated her for that. She came home tired and immediately started to cook every day. On Sundays she cooked lavish meals, coaxing Amar to taste new dishes.”. Malladi with Anjali’s role in preparation of food draws attention to this social role/obligation being bestowed upon Anjali, along with this we can also read the same instance in terms of economic disparity between her two marriages, Prakash upon reaching home from the vegetable market is met by a hired help, “Our cook took the vegetables from Indu and she sat down on the sofa. She sprawled on it, her body meshing with the velvet fabric, yet she managed to look alert and sharp. It was a lazy posture, but Indu never looked lazy. She looked ladylike, no, queenlike”. Anjali is seen constantly tormented by her past and the expected life she would have had, had she not divorced Prakash. Initially, the advantageous match of an Army Officer and the naivety of a young girl had her propound her self-worth with her cooking and nurturing skills, which come naturally to her in her second marriage, although with a tired body and stressed mind. The lucrative life of an Army Officer's wife, with luxuries of house help and economic stability is something she is constantly at battle with when contrasting her past and present where food serves as a bridge. This has caused significant stress in Anjali’s life and relationships, which she tries to navigate with constant support and love from Sandeep, just like that ritualistic tea they share every evening along with other daily rituals like “It was our daily ritual—Sandeep sat and talked to me while I cooked, and he helped with the dishes when I was done.”

Some of the major events of the narrative unfold in the vegetable market “The fog was rolling softly into the vegetable bazaar and people were flocking around the vendors in woolen shawls and sweaters.”, the base space for the procurement of food in its raw form. It can be read as a free space for multiple classes to intermingle while they perform the basic activity of gathering/buying food for survival. Prakash with his sophisticated wife Indu “She was wearing an impeccable brown silk sari with a long flesh-colored woolen coat. She looked at me and smiled.”, resurfaces in Anjali’s life in the vegetable market and another consequent meeting also takes place here. We also see basic emotions like guilt, jealousy, and fear take over Prakash, Indu and Anjali in this space.

Anjali’s description of having first glimpsed at Prakash at the Vegetable market “The bitter gourd was just ripe enough and I brought it close to my nose. My weathered Pashmina shawl was slipping from my shoulders so I pulled it up. That was when I saw him, from the corner of my eye, my nose still taking in the scent of the gourd. It took a moment to register who

he was for an instant he was just a familiar face. His eyes lifted and he saw me. I let the shawl fall.” Has two motifs running parallelly. The bitter gourd can be seen to refer to the bitter taste her failed marriage has left in her mouth and the pestering shawl that finally slips off her shoulder can be seen as the final moment of having come face to face with him. “I turned around as if unaware of who it was. I had practiced this in my head numerous times in past years. He would say hello and my eyes would glaze over. I would nod my head and ask him if I was supposed to know him. He would say his name and I would let my eyes brighten with recognition. Somehow, I had always hoped I would not recognize him.” The juvenile thought of having to pretend to not know him was dropped at the very last moment, leaving her almost breathless after the encounter. Upon reaching home, the motif of food, its preparation is also used as a support system by Anjali to divulge information about her encounter “He is posted to the Defense Staff College at Wellington,” I added, as I rolled the gourds in the frying pan with a metal spatula. “I met him at the market . . . with his wife.”

Anjali has been portrayed through the lens of ‘from depression to determination’ through various stages of her life as part of her character evolution. Bhopal gas tragedy and her husband’s infidelity overlap in a certain context, this left her like a broken shell. As she wakes up in the hospital, she lies there thinking of a way out, when she decides to and is determined to take the step for her separation from Prakash, her parent’s desertion hits her hard and leaves a lasting impact on her psyche and physical health. At this point, Malladi uses vivid descriptions as a tool to illustrate Anjali’s despair and hopelessness, her depression, and her battle with mental health issues, which carry forward for the rest of the narrative and are made palpable to garner sympathy from the readers. Anjali’s interactions with other characters, particularly her husband Sandeep and ex-husband Prakash, play crucial roles in her emotional evolution. The fact that most of these interactions are interspersed with food, re-align the research gap being targeted in this paper. These relationships, fraught with conflict and reconciliation, highlight the complexity of human emotions and the process of healing through food. In diaspora studies, Krishnendu Ray (2004), elaborates how food provides a connection, almost tangible in form to homeland, hence a source of comfort and stability. In the narrative, Anjali engages with food and tea in a similar dynamic, where they serve as a connect to her heritage. They provide her with the strength to navigate challenges in her journey and seek comfort and healing through them.

In conclusion, Malladi’s novel and Anjali’s journey within it, provide a nuanced perspective on the interplay between food and emotions and how it communicates these emotions to facilitate transformations/evolutions in one’s identity. The narrative is a testament to how achievement of resilience can be tracked via something as mundane as food is considered in our life and recognizing the real transformative power of culinary practices.

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