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'Flavours of Identity' in Nitoo Das's Poems

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Abstract

Food makes up our bodies, just as words make up our mind." - Terry Eagleton

This paper explores the role of food imagery in Nitoo Das's poem *Consuming Home* (Cyborg Proverbs), where food transcends its basic function of sustenance to symbolize cultural identity, memory, and belonging. Through vivid depictions of indigenous Assamese foods such as Bhut Jolokia (Ghost Pepper), Bhedai Lota (Stink Vine), and Tengamora (Roselle Plant), Das constructs a sensory palette that deeply connects individuals to their cultural roots. In doing so, she illustrates how food not only nourishes the body but also sustains cultural traditions and fosters a strong sense of self-awareness. Drawing on Food Studies theory, particularly Roland Barthes's concept of food as "a system of communication," this paper examines how Das's food imagery functions as a vehicle for memory, identity, and cultural continuity. Furthermore, it highlights how her portrayal of Northeast India's culinary heritage enriches Indian writing in English by expanding the cultural scope of the literary canon. Das's use of food imagery plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and contributing significantly to the ongoing discourse of Indian writing in English, particularly in relation to regional diversity and food as a medium of identity and memory.

Keywords: Indigenous food, cultural identity, memory, traditions

Introduction

The culinary traditions of Northeast India, particularly those of its indigenous communities, offer a fascinating lens through which to explore the intricate intersections of food, identity, and memory. The indigenous people of this region, living amidst dense forests and hills, have developed a deep, symbiotic relationship with their environment, relying heavily on forest food products for sustenance. For these communities, food is not merely a matter of survival; it is intimately tied to their cultural practices, histories, and identity. In a nation as diverse as India, where the dominant culture often marginalizes regional traditions, food becomes a potent means of expressing local identities and resisting cultural assimilation. Roland Barthes, in his seminal work *The Language of Food*, asserts, "Food is not only a collection of products... it is also a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior." Food, then, is not simply something we consume to nourish our bodies; it is a profound narrative that communicates cultural stories, shared experiences, and historical legacies.

The indigenous people of Northeast India frequently stereotyped and pejoratively labeled as 'Jungle' or 'forest dwellers,' have long been custodians of a culinary tradition that is as much about cultural survival as it is about nourishment. Isolated from the more dominant cultures of India, these communities have developed food practices deeply rooted in the land and its ecosystems. The food they eat -wild vegetables, locally sourced herbs and indigenous crops, embodies the careful adaptation to their environment over centuries and carries deep cultural significance. Yet, these practices are often misunderstood or looked down upon by the mainstream population. In this context, food becomes more than just sustenance; it becomes an act of cultural resistance and a symbol of resilience in the face of pressures to conform to national or global norms. These culinary traditions are a form of defiance against the erosion of indigenous identities and a refusal to be subsumed into a singular, homogenized culture.

In her poem *Consuming Home*, Nitoo Das vividly uses food as a metaphor of identity, memory, and belonging. Through her use of Assamese foods such as, *Bhut Jolokia* (Ghost Pepper), *Bhedai Lota* (Stink Vine), and *Tengamora* (Roselle Plant), she offers the readers an

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immersive sensory experience that links these foods to the emotional and cultural landscapes of Assam. By incorporating such specific and potent food imagery, Nitoo Das moves beyond mere descriptions of cuisine - she transforms food into a symbolic tool that connects the reader to the collective memory, traditions, and the land of Assam. The foods she mentions are not just items of sustenance; they embody stories of survival, continuity, and resistance. They carry with them the emotional weight of generations and serve as potent symbols of cultural heritage, deeply tied to the landscape and history of Assam.

This paper seeks to explore how Nitoo Das uses food imagery in *Consuming Home* to convey themes of cultural identity, historical memory, and continuity. Drawing upon Roland Barthes's concept of food as a "system of communication," this paper will analyze how Nitoo Das's use of food in her poem functions as a vehicle for communicating complex cultural meanings. Barthes famously states, "By consuming food, we eat the whole system of cultural meaning associated with the food." In *Consuming Home*, the foods of Assam are not simply consumed; they are imbued with layers of cultural and historical significance, allowing the poem to convey the sensory, emotional, and cultural landscape of the region. Food, in this context, becomes both a personal and collective narrative: one that speaks to the continuity of traditions and the resistance to forces that seek to erase or diminish indigenous cultures.

Theoretical Framework: Food as a System of Communication and Identity

Food, as an object of consumption, transcends its basic biological function of sustaining life and emerges as a complex cultural symbol that plays a vital role in shaping identity, memory, and social dynamics. It is through food that cultural meanings, identities, and values are constructed and communicated. The idea of food as a "system of communication" has been explored by several prominent scholars, including Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Terry Eagleton, and others, whose theories provide a foundation for understanding how food operates as a symbol of both individual and collective identity.

Roland Barthes (1961), in his influential work *The Language of Food*, posits that food is far more than a physical substance; it functions as a "system of communication," conveying cultural messages in much the same way that language does. Barthes asserts that food is "a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior," meaning that food acts as a medium through which a society communicates its values, beliefs, and customs. For Barthes, each instance of preparing, consuming, or sharing food is imbued with social and cultural significance and codes, creating a semiotic network of meaning. As Barthes famously claims, "By consuming food, we eat the whole system of cultural meaning associated with the food." In this view, food is not merely a material need to be fulfilled, but a powerful signifier that encodes messages about culture, identity, and social affiliation.

Building on Barthes's ideas, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1965) takes a structuralist approach to food, viewing it as part of a broader cultural framework that reflects social structures and values. He describes food systems as "mythology of food," a system that represents and reinforces societal

norms, beliefs, and hierarchies. For Lévi-Strauss, food is deeply intertwined with social order, functioning not just as a biological necessity, but as a reflection of cultural beliefs and worldviews. In his famous assertion, "Food is culture, and the human being is what he eats," Lévi-Strauss emphasizes the role of food in constructing identity and social relationships. In this framework, food is a cultural artifact that preserves and expresses the values and norms of a community. It is not only an object of consumption but a vital means of communication through which individuals assert and negotiate their identities. In his essay, "Edible Ecriture" (1997), Terry Eagleton says:

"If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food...Like the post-structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable, as gift, threat, poison, recompense, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation."

He further expands on the role of food in identity formation, arguing that food is "endlessly interpretable," serving as a dynamic symbol that reflects personal and cultural histories. His concept of "edible écriture" frames food as a narrative device that encodes social, political, and historical meanings. Food thus functions as both a personal and collective marker, with its consumption linked to specific cultural identities and social affiliations. It is not just an element of daily life, but a rich source of cultural memory and an essential tool for understanding the emotional and historical landscapes that shape a person's identity.

David Sutton (2001) focuses on the role of food as a "memory trigger," noting that food has the power to evoke sensory experiences tied to significant moments in one's life. His theory of "synesthetic memory" highlights how the taste, smell, and texture of food are embedded in personal and collective memories. In this way, food becomes a bridge between the past and present, offering a medium through which individuals and communities can access and preserve their histories. Sutton's concept of "prospective memory" further emphasizes how food serves as a point of connection between past experiences, present realities, and future possibilities, particularly in contexts where cultural practices are threatened or endangered.

In literature, food often functions as a narrative device that deepens the reader's engagement with characters and themes. Brad Kesler (2011) asserts that food in fiction engages all of the reader's senses- taste, smell, touch, sight, and sound, creating a deeply immersive experience that enhances the emotional and sensory resonance of the narrative. Food, in literature, serves not just as a plot element but as a conduit for exploring identity, memory, and belonging. Kesler further suggests that "Meals are magnets, they draw people together," and by extension, food serves as a marker of shared experience and collective memory. Through food, writers can evoke both personal and historical narratives, deepening the reader's understanding of cultural identities and social dynamics. The intersection of food and identity is especially significant in the context of globalizing forces that seek to homogenize cultural practices. E. N. Anderson (2005) highlights how food choices are shaped not only by biological needs but also by social, cultural, and political forces. His bio-cultural approach views food as a site of social contestation, where identity is negotiated and expressed through consumption and production. Food becomes a vehicle for asserting cultural identity and resisting the erasure of local traditions in the face of global pressures.

In *Consuming Home*, Nitoo Das's use of food imagery encapsulates these complex layers of meaning. Through her vivid depictions of Assamese foods, she communicates not only the sensory experience of the food but also the deep cultural and emotional resonance that these foods hold for the people of Assam. The foods of Assam, tied to the region's history, geography, and cultural practices, become symbols of resistance, survival, and continuity. By employing food as a symbolic tool, Nitoo Das navigates the themes of cultural identity, historical memory, and cultural resistance, offering readers a glimpse into the lived experiences of Assam's indigenous communities.

Sensory Landscapes of Assamese Culture: Immersive Food Imagery in Nitoo Das's Poetry

In Assam, food is far more than mere sustenance; it is a reflection of the land, the people's resilience, and their cultural identity. In her poem *Consuming Home*, Nitoo Das weaves an immersive sensory experience, allowing the reader to engage not just with taste, but also with sight, smell, and the emotional resonance of Assamese cuisine. Through her vivid portrayals of foods like *Bhut Jolokia* (Ghost Pepper), *Bhedai Lota* (Stink Vine), and *Tengamora* (Roselle Plant) in the poem 'Consuming Home', Nitoo Das connects these culinary traditions to the deep cultural heritage of Assam, where food becomes both a symbol of cultural expression and a medium of identity.

In the first section, *Bhut Jolokia*, she immerses the reader directly into the intense, fiery world of the Ghost Pepper, turning what is typically a food item into a multi-sensory experience. The line "*It needs a large mouth, an idiomatic gasp,*" immediately signals the overwhelming nature of the pepper, suggesting that encountering it requires more than just tasting; it demands an all-encompassing, physical reaction. The visceral descriptions of "*splitting open hands*" and "*imploding eyes*" amplify the pepper's power, elevating its heat from a mere spice to an experience that engages the entire body. Through this imagery, Das portrays the Ghost Pepper not just as an ingredient but as a symbol of endurance and survival, mirroring the resilience of the people of Assam. The line "*Courage is hot around it*" underscores the emotional and cultural significance of the pepper, transforming the experience of eating the pepper into a metaphor for the strength and courage embedded in Assamese heritage.

The second section, *Bhedai Lota* (Stink Vine), takes the readers on a sensory journey that begins with discomfort. The vine's pungent odour, which she aptly dubs as "*the fart plant,*" elicits a visceral reaction, mirroring the initial off-putting nature of the plant. But Das masterfully transforms this repulsion into admiration, revealing the vine's unexpected beauty: "*climbs up the walls, flowered like white trumpets with mauve hearts.*" What once seemed unpleasant gradually becomes something striking. This shift from distaste to appreciation deepens as Das introduces the vine's role in Assamese culinary culture. When mashed with fish, *Bhedai Lota* imparts a distinct aroma and earthy flavor, turning it into a cherished, exotic and unique Assamese dish. As she writes, "*after the leaves' sins were washed away, the green defeated into nothing, and the mash hissed with fish,*" Nitoo Das does not just describe a recipe, she captures a time-honored tradition. This practice of blending locally sourced herbs and ingredients highlights the deep ecological

connection embedded in Assamese cuisine, where nature and culture coexist harmoniously.

Tengamora (the Roselle plant), in the last section, offers yet another compelling sensory layer in Assamese cuisine. Known for its sharp, sour taste, *Tengamora* is used in a variety of dishes to add a distinctive tang. Das vividly captures the plant's essence, its sourness, describing it as "*magenta soured by death,*" a phrase that not only reflects the vibrant color of the plant but also the intensity of its flavor. The line "*blood that swells with jam and breeds thorns of spits*" enhances this imagery, linking the plant's sharpness to its transformative culinary uses. Through this rich metaphor, Das emphasizes *Tengamora*'s role in Assamese kitchens, where its sourness gives way to a multitude of dishes, from curries to jams, symbolizing the versatility and creativity embedded in Assamese cuisine. The transformation of *Tengamora* from a wild plant to a beloved culinary staple highlights the cultural ingenuity that connects Assamese food with its history, nature, and people. In these three sections of the poem, "*Consuming Home*", *Bhut Jolokia*, *Bhedai Lota*, and *Tengamora*, food serves not only as sustenance but as a living symbol of Assamese cultural identity. As Brad Kesler observes, food is a sensory experience that transforms from a simple plot element to an immersive experience resonating deeply with the reader. Through her sensory exploration of Assamese foods, Das creates a layered narrative where food is not just about flavor but about connection - connection to the land, to ancestral practices, and to a community's shared history. Her portrayal of these regional foods transcends their materiality, using them as symbols of resilience, survival, and cultural continuity. Food in this context becomes a cultural code, linking the land to its people, their traditions, and their history. The people of Assam rely heavily on natural resources for their sustenance, livelihood, and healthcare. These communities act as the custodians of an indigenous knowledge system that spans agriculture, food practices, and medicinal traditions. The traditional cuisines of Assam, known for their simplicity in preparation, delightful flavors, and nutritional richness, are an essential aspect of their daily life. Many ethnic groups incorporate medicinal herbs into their regular diets, using them as vegetables, spices, or condiments. This culinary practice not only enhances the aroma, color, and delicacy of the dishes but also reflects a deep interconnection between food and their ancestral wisdom and traditions. In Assam, medicinal properties of foods like *Tengamora*, *Bhedai Lota* and *Bhut Jolokia* holds a significant place in community healthcare practices, with many individuals relying exclusively on herbal remedies passed down through generations. The role of such foods in Assamese cuisine extends beyond their nutritional and flavor-enhancing qualities, as they are an integral component of the region's healing practices. Das, through her exploration of such regional foods, demonstrates that the act of eating is not merely a sensory experience but also has a profound connection to the land, ancestral traditions, and the shared history of the community. She highlights medicinal foods like *bhedai lota*, *tengamora*, and *bhut jolokia*, underscoring how these ingredients are central not only to the cuisine but also to the cultural and medicinal heritage of the region. As observed by Roland Barthes, food is a semiotic and linguistic system where products and foods are not a simple compilation but are "*assembled as a structure, inside of which each*

component defines its meaning” (Monterari) He further states that the significance of food is embedded in its appearance, preparation, consumption habits, and sensory experiences- elements that collectively form part of a broader system of signification (Monterari, 2006). By engaging with the regional culinary foods and traditions, Das enriches the broader discourse of Indian Writing in English, giving voice to the historically marginalized Northeast. Her work exemplifies how food, as a symbolic language, serves as both an anchor to cultural heritage and a form of resistance against forces seeking to homogenize or erase regional identities.

Indigenous Culinary Creations: A Sensory Journey

In *Consuming Home*, Nitoo Das invites readers to embark on a sensory journey through the rich and distinctive landscape of Assamese cuisine. Her exploration transcends the act of consumption; food is experienced not just through taste but through sight, smell, and touch. Das uses vibrant imagery to evoke the intense heat of the *Bhut Jolokia*, the cultural significance of *Bhedai Lota*, and the tang of *Tengamora*. These sensory experiences serve as a gateway to understanding Assam’s complex cultural identity. Assamese cuisine, rich in locally grown herbs, fermented foods, and indigenous spices, reflects the deep connection between the people and their land. The flavors embody the region’s resilience, ingenuity, and historical continuity. In Das’s hands, what may appear as simple ingredients transform into symbols of cultural memory, illustrating the intertwining of survival, history, and creativity. Through her vivid descriptions, food becomes a living tradition that sustains both the body and the soul, reinforcing Assam’s unique cultural heritage.

Nitoo Das also incorporates specific Assamese food names, such as *Bhut Jolokia*, *Bhedai Lota* and *Tengamora*, to ground her work in a particular cultural context. These names are not mere references to food; they are laden with deep cultural significance, evoking emotional and historical connections to the land. Drawing on Roland Barthes’s semiotic theory, Nitoo Das’s food imagery connects the *material* (the food) to the *symbolic* (identity and cultural heritage). Eating these foods is more than just sustenance; it’s an act of cultural reaffirmation, preserving identity through sensory experience. This sensory connection to food becomes a medium for storytelling, linking the personal and collective. Each food item is a marker of identity, allowing Das to reflect on her roots and the broader cultural narrative of Assam. Food, in this context, is both a necessity and a potent symbol of cultural resilience. It bridges past and present, offering a way to preserve traditions in the face of external pressures and globalization.

Contribution of Northeast English Literature to Indian Writing in English

Northeast Indian English literature plays an essential and often overlooked role in enriching the broader landscape of Indian Writing in English. As one of the most culturally diverse and politically complex regions of India, the Northeast has long been marginalized in mainstream literary discourse, yet its literary traditions offer fresh perspectives, narratives, and insights that challenge and expand the national literary canon. Authors from the region, through their works, have contributed significantly to the dialogue about identity, belonging, and cultural continuity, providing

a platform for voices that have been historically underrepresented or misunderstood.

Nitoo Das’s focus on local Assamese foods and cuisine introduces a crucial regional perspective that has often been overlooked in the broader discourse of Indian Writing in English. Indian literature has historically been dominated by voices from metropolitan centers or North India, with the Northeast’s unique experiences marginalized. Through *Consuming Home*, Das ensures that these voices are heard, enriching the narrative of Indian identity by offering fresh insights into the cultural practices and values of Assam. Through her exploration of Assamese food, Nitoo Das highlights how food and culinary traditions can be both a form of cultural preservation and a means of resistance against cultural assimilation. Food becomes an expression of identity and a way to assert one’s place in the world amidst globalizing forces. In the broader literary landscape, *Consuming Home* challenges the dominance of mainstream cultural narratives by focusing on the Northeast. Nitoo Das’s work emphasizes how food, as a regional cultural expression, can act as a powerful tool for cultural communication and survival. The role of food in her poetry can be seen as a powerful entry point into the larger conversation about the contributions of Northeast literature to Indian Writing in English. The region’s culinary food and practices reflect a close, almost symbiotic relationship between the people and their environment, and in her depiction of these practices, she gives voice to a marginalized region often overlooked in national literary discussions. Assam’s traditional cuisine is deeply rooted in local ecology, and her exploration of it through sensory imagery invites readers to engage with a cultural context that might be unfamiliar, yet profoundly rich and important in the broader narrative of Indian identity.

Nitoo Das’s focus on food introduces a new dimension to Indian Writing in English by incorporating culinary practices as central elements of narrative and identity. In doing so, she brings the everyday practices of the people of Assam into a global literary conversation, transforming food into a metaphor for survival, resilience, and resistance. By foregrounding the unique foods of Assam she introduces readers to aspects of Assamese culture that might otherwise remain invisible in the context of broader Indian literature. The focus on regional foods in her work complicates the notion of ‘*Indianness*’ as it is often represented in mainstream literature. By foregrounding food as a central cultural signifier, she invites readers to reconsider the diversity of cultural experiences within India.

In conclusion, *Consuming Home* is a profound exploration of the role food plays in shaping cultural identity, memory, and survival in Indian Writing in English. By focusing on Assamese cuisine, Nitoo Das makes a significant contribution to Indian literature, offering new perspectives on how food, culture, and identity intersect in the face of displacement and cultural loss.

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