

# Remembering Cuisines: A Study of the Culinary Memory in Madhur Jaffrey's *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India* and Asma Khan's *Asma's Indian Kitchen*

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**Type of Work:** Peer-Reviewed

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jems.v16.n3.p2>

#### How to cite this paper:

Rajan, D.N., Vasan, P. (2020). Remembering Cuisines: A Study of the Culinary Memory in Madhur Jaffrey's *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India* and Asma Khan's *Asma's Indian Kitchen*. *IRA International Journal of Education and Multidisciplinary Studies* (ISSN 2455-2526), 16(3), 137-142. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jems.v16.n3.p2>

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### ABSTRACT

*The culinary is a field that offers a wide scope of study because of its essential but complex nature in relation with human beings. This paper will utilize the framework of memory studies to examine the nature of the relationship between the culinary and memory in Madhur Jaffrey's climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India and Asma Khan's Asma's Indian Kitchen. Communicative memory and Cultural memory are the key terms that will be employed in understanding the spaces of memory that the culinary occupies. This study will explore the intersectional space occupied by the culinary and memory in analyzing how the two distinct memory sites merge or collapse within the culinary.*

**Keywords:** Culinary, Memory, Communicative, Cultural.

### I

The culinary is a vital component of everyday life. Its vast spectrum includes food, different cuisines, various approaches to cooking, geographical specificities, culture-specific ingredients, and even varied eating practices. According to John D. Holtzman, one can primarily define food in a realist sense as something that is consumed by organisms by virtue of their need for energy. The world revolves around food as one of the most basic necessities for survival. However, food or culinary cannot be limited by the realist definition. It is also a carrier of one's experiences and memories. The culinary is inextricably connected with the social, psychological, physiological, and symbolic dimensions of life (Holtzman 365). Thus, the culinary is an integral part of one's identity since the awareness of one's selfhood is deeply rooted in the tastes and smells of experience. The culinary sphere, therefore, presents a large scope for the study of culture, identity, and all that it entails.

Memory studies, a field of academic study that looks at the memory as a tool for remembering one's past, emerged as a method of study in the late twentieth century. Barbie Zelizer traces the history of memory studies in her essay, "Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies", to reveal how the academic sphere has moved from the rigid boundaries of thinking and analyzing memory as a tool of retrieval to understanding memory in its various, layered relationships with other entities. She first looks at the birth of contemporary memory studies in the field of psychology. The act of remembering was understood as a psychologicistic process or a cognitive device that helped individuals retrieve information from the past. Memory was thought to reproduce events in person, lived experiences as they had happened, or with some explainable deviation. Scholars like Proust and Freud studied the nature of memory, its accuracy, and its suggestive nature that evokes images. Most attempts at studying memory looked at the memory as being less accurate over time from the event that is remembered. With more distance between the event or life experience and the memory, the less accurate the memory became. By the 1930s, this narrow scope of understanding memory was questioned. Henri Bergson said that memory made time relative; it acted as a meeting ground between the past and the present. Zelizer talks about Frederick C Bartlett, who in his book, *Remembering*, argued that memory was a type of constructive activity, the enunciation of claims about the past through shared frames of understanding. He conducted a series of psychological experiments to conclude that memory operated through some kind of social framework (Zelizer 215).

Having looked at memory beyond its simplistic definition of it being the act of remembering, one can also see how memory has to be approached with all its complexities that include processes of how internal selves connect with external environments, past with the present and random experiences with unconscious routines (Zelizer 214). Memory also moves beyond the personal to the collective. Zelizer states that that memory becomes collective memory because of the shared dimension of remembering which includes sharing, discussion, negotiation, and contestation. Memory studies, therefore, are multidisciplinary. Holtzman also says that memory intrinsically destabilizes truth through the subjective ways in which the past is recalled, memorialized, and used to construct the present (Holtzman 363).

Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and the art historian Aby Warburg independently developed theories of a "collective" or "social memory." Collective memory, until that point of time, was theorized in biological terms as an inheritable or "racial memory". Halbwachs and Warburg's work shifted the discourse around collective memory from a biological framework to a cultural framework (Assman and Czaplicka 125). Jan Assman and John Czaplicka in the essay *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity* look at the concept of collective memory as defined by Halbwachs. Collective memory is based exclusively on everyday conversations that constitute the field of oral history. It is not fixed; it is disorganized, has thematic instability, and takes place between partners who can change

roles. Halbwachs shows how each individual composes a memory that is socially mediated and relates to a group. This everyday form of collective memory which constitutes itself in communication with other groups, who conceive their unity through a common image of the past, is called “Communicative memory” by Assman and Niethammer. Communicative memory offers no fixed point which would bind it to the past and it is limited to its temporal horizon of eighty to a hundred years or three or four generations at the most. Fixity can be arrived at only through cultural formation which lies outside everyday informal communicative memory (Assman and Czaplicka 125-129).

Cultural memory is characterized by its distance from the everyday. Cultural memory has a fixed point and its horizon does not change over time, unlike communicative memory. Cultural memory is neatly disembodied, exteriorized, objectified, and embedded in cultural institutions such as feasts, texts, archives, and other symbolic forms. The difference between communicative and cultural memory is also exhibited in the social participatory dimension. Cultural memory in its institutionalization always has its specialists like priests, artists, teachers, scholars, chefs, clerks, rabbis, and mullas (Assman 38). Aby Warburg also ascribed a type of “mnemonic energy” to the objectivation of culture. In cultural formation, a collective experience crystallizes, whose meaning, when touched upon, may suddenly become accessible again across millennia. Assman uses Warburg’s concept to look at the power of cultural objectivation in the stabilizing of cultural memory over many years, even thousands in certain situations (Assman and Czaplicka 129).

Literature has often employed the use of the culinary to many different ends. It has been used to root texts in certain geo-political and socio-economic contexts, it has been used to explore issues of identity and it has served to convey people’s sense of longing for places and people. Within this range of literature that uses the culinary, culinary memoirs have played an important role. Barbara Frey Waxman defines culinary memoirs as writing that chronicles the growth and development of the memoirist through the lens of food memories, in narratives that either begins with childhood or that interpose frequent flashbacks to earliest formative experiences (Waxman, 364). Rukmini Srinivas in her culinary memoir *Tiffin: Memories and Recipes of Indian Vegetarian Food* articulates her childhood growing up in various parts of India through the culinary. Diana Abu-Jaber’s book, *The Language of Baklava*, interweaves the food memories of the two cultures of her upbringing – American and Jordanian.

Madhur Jaffrey, the author of *Climbing the Mango Trees: a Memoir of a Childhood in India*, is an actress, food and travel writer, and television personality. She is most recognized for bringing Indian cuisine into the spotlight in America with her debut cookbook, *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*, published in 1973. This book was inducted into the James Beard Foundation’s Cookbook Hall of Fame in 2006. She has gone on to author many other cookbooks and has appeared on several television programmes. She is most notably known for the show *Madhur Jaffrey’s Indian Cookery*, which premiered in the UK in 1982. *Climbing the Mango Trees* is her childhood memoir of India during the final years of British colonization in India. The book was published in 2006. Asma Khan is an Indian-born British chef and restaurateur who authored the book *Asma’s Indian Kitchen*, published in 2018. Khan never learnt to cook while she grew up in India but started learning once she moved to England when she started missing the food she grew up with. Her restaurant *Darjeeling Express* in London’s Soho is well-acclaimed and she has been featured in the Emmy-nominated Netflix documentary series, *Chef’s Table*. Khan was also listed number 1 in *Business Insider’s* “100 Coolest People in Food and Drink”.

This paper will seek to explore the intersectional space occupied by the culinary and memory. It will engage with how the culinary occupies the sites of communicative and cultural memory. This study will examine whether the two distinct memory sites merge or collapse within the culinary.

## II

Memory plays an integral function in Madhur Jaffrey’s book as she recalls her childhood and upbringing punctuated with food as the central point of focus. Jopi Nyman states that culinary memoirs can be seen as a form of autobiographical writing (Nyman 283) and autobiographies according to Gillian Whitlock, can suggest a multiplicity of histories. Jaffrey’s culinary memoir not only talks about her childhood through the lens of the culinary, but it also touches upon various facets of family, culture, and political life.

Jaffrey differentiates between two versions of history she was exposed to. One version was that of the tales passed on by her grandmother which were undocumented versions of history consisting of fables, family customs, and

hearsay (Jaffrey 5) like the story of the kite becoming the *kuldevmata* or tutelary goddess of the Kayasthas. This history can be seen as an example of what Assman calls communicative memory (Assman 37). It has no fixed point; it is disorganized and consistently relies on communication. This version of the past recorded by Jaffrey is an oral historical account. Jaffrey talks about another history, a recorded and documented history of her ancestors found in the book, *Short Account of the Life and Works of Raj Jeewan Lal Bahadur*. This book was clear, precise, and filled with copies of letters and documents to substantiate the claims of the past it made. It begins with a mythical account of the origins of the Kayastha sub caste. Jaffrey calls this the retelling of old beliefs and says the family's "real history" begins in the seventeenth century with the story of Raja Raghunath Bahadur, one of her ancestors (Jaffrey 14). She traces her ancestry to men who worked for the Mughals and eventually the British. The Kayasthas, the caste Jaffrey belonged to, were known for being historians, scholars, and record keepers. Their profession revolved around the "inkpot and quill set". One can see this historical account as an example of what Assman calls cultural memory. This memory is institutionalized through documentation (Assman 38). Assman also states that the only way communicative memory can achieve fixity is through the cultural formation. The cultural formation lies outside everyday informal communicative memory and is characterized by its distance from the everyday. It is exteriorized and disembodied in the form of institutions, texts, and other such forms (Assman and Czaplicka, 125-129). The documented version of history seems to fit neatly into the category of cultural memory. It has its specialists in the form of Kayastha scribes who inscribed and archived information across generations whereas Jaffrey's account of the oral history that has been passed down seems informal and disorganized. However, this informal oral history also has its informal specialists in the form of grandmothers, mothers, and other unrecognized storytellers who keep this oral history alive beyond the hundred years that Assman talks about. This oral history consists of recipes, customs, traditions, and practices that have passed through generations. Culinary memory becomes a vital part of this oral history and this culinary memory is absent in the official family historical document. One can argue that culinary memory, through oral history, can transcend the informality of everyday conversation and communication to become cultural memory, unlike Assman and Halbwachs' position that oral history exists exclusively within the realm of communicative memory. Therefore, this oral history is also a form of cultural memory. Jaffrey brings a marginalized oral history to the centre through the culinary. The culinary offers a version of history that is more vibrant, conversational, and multicultural than the documented male version of history that is found in the *Short Account of the Life and Works of Raj Jeewan Lal Bahadur*. There is an absence of the culinary in this documented history but Jaffrey's culinary memoir closes the gap between oral and documented history by recording her culinary memory. Therefore, Jaffrey's writing can be seen as subversive.

Jaffrey, in tracing her childhood through the culinary, also gives an account of the socio-cultural milieu of the time, especially her family, although Hindu in religion was heavily influenced by Islamic and English culture. Breakfasts would include a lavish spread of eggs, toast, ham, and coffee. The eggs would be accompanied by tomatoes, green chilies, and onions. There would also be spiced masala eggs with bacon. Dinners and lunches often had meat dishes influenced by Mughal cuisines like kebabs, ground lamb samosas, murgh korma, aloo gosht, and keema mattar. This varied culinary space shows Jaffrey's hybrid and multicultural childhood. The multicultural culinary space can be seen as a microcosm of India's multicultural fabric. The variety of cultural influences points to the porous boundaries of the culinary which is not always fixed. The socio, cultural and political changes in society influence and inform changes in the culinary just like everyday conversation and communication propagates and influences communicative memory.

Jaffrey's private culinary memory records the various socio-cultural and political changes the nation goes through. She talks specifically about the time of Partition. In the changing scenario of religious tension and socio-political upheaval, Delhi becomes the microcosm for the changes in post-Independent India. Before the Partition, Jaffrey recalls how her school lunches would be multicultural. There would be different lunchboxes informed by the different culinary practices of different communities like that of Muslims, Hindus, Jains, and Christians. Jaffrey and her friends feasted on different dishes like goat cooked with spinach, roti, pulao. They ate Jain dishes like chickpea flour dumplings and Punjabi dishes like makki ki roti (corn flatbreads) and sarson ka saag (mustard greens). The violence of Partition tore previously co-existing communities apart. There was a clear demarcation based on food because food became a cultural ethnic marker. Jaffrey says there was a refusal to share food from the "other's" lunchbox. Here one can see how the culinary becomes a fixed, rigid space that is used as a cultural object to categorize and separate individuals into different identities. In this scenario, the culinary take on the space of cultural memory. Thus Jaffrey's culinary memory becomes a site to remember and record the events of national socio-cultural and political history.

### III

Asma Khan structures her cookbook on the idea of “Feasts.” Recollecting the importance of feasts in her childhood in Calcutta, now Kolkata, Khan divides the recipes in the book into “Feasts for Two”, “Family Feasts”, “Feasting with Friends” and “Celebratory Feasts”. Khan talks about her large family and extended family frequently gathering for “dawaats” or feasts. Her last visit to Kolkata, before her family home was sold, was marked by a last “poignant meal” a “happy and fulfilling” dawaat (Khan 134). Thus the concept of feasts becomes an integral part of Khan’s culinary memory. Feasts, according to Assman, are a form of cultural memory (Assman 38). At the same time, much of what Khan learns as a cook comes from oral traditions. Family cooks like Muhammad Babu passed on many of the recipes to Khan. In an interview, Khan recounts how it was her aunt, Rukhsana Hamidi, who first taught her to cook after Khan moved to Britain (Masing 2019). Khan states that many cooks in her family felt it unnecessary to note down their recipes. Instead, recipes were taught in the same way as stories. Khan insists that recipes learnt as stories cannot be forgotten. One of the cooks taught Khan how long to fry onions by telling her that ‘the onions need to look like pearls’ (Khan 32). Aby Warburg talks about “mnemonic energy” which allows meaning to become accessible across millennia because of cultural formation (Assman and Czaplicka 129). Stories contain this mnemonic energy which allows it to persist across generations.

Khan insists that recipes are not mere lists of rules to be followed. Instead, one has to see a recipe as a series of moments that one can imbibe with their own uniqueness. In a society where there was the only access to the same set of ingredients when she was growing up, the only way to differentiate dishes was through the variations brought in by the cook’s lightness of touch. Thus, even though Khan’s cookbook is a written record of the culinary, it is not a fixed, institutionalized space. While feasts are a record of the cultural memory, Khan’s approach to the culinary is more communicative and conversational in nature.

Khan, like Jaffrey, starts her cookbook by tracing her family’s history. However, unlike Jaffrey, Khan does not refer to a fixed document of her family’s history. She talks about the inherited culinary heritage from the royal traditions of her paternal and maternal ancestry. Her style of cooking and the recipes she gives in the book are influenced by diverse flavours from diverse spaces. Her paternal family adopted the food traditions of the Mughal courts that had a mixture of Turkish and Persian influences. Her maternal family was from North Bengal and therefore their ceremonial feasts included distinct Calcutta Mughlai dishes. Other influences include Bihari Muslim food from the home of Khan’s maternal grandmother and Hyderabad food from the close connection Khan’s family had with the royal family of Hyderabad (Khan 8). Khan also recollects various memories in Calcutta. In talking about these varied influences and in remembering different cuisines within India, Khan presents a microcosm of India’s diversity through the culinary. She remembers eating food from Punjabi Dhabas in Calcutta, Rogni rotis made in Uttar Pradesh with its Persian roots, Anglo-Indian Coconut Rice or Peela Pulao from Chennai and Bengali Jaggery Kheer. Khan even talks about the colonial influence in India’s culinary space. She initially understood the word “malai” in Macher Malaikari to be cream but recently discovered that the name of the dish came from its roots in the Malay Peninsula. During the British Colonial rule, Bengali labourers were sent by the British to build the railways. These labourers used coconut milk to make their fish curry (Khan 48). Khan talks about her paternal great-grandfather whose ties and visits to England caused the addition of oranges and cashew nuts in a yoghurt based chicken dish, a dish called Narangi Korma (Khan 152). Khan states that Aloo Gobi, a very popular dish, also has colonial roots because it was the British who first brought cauliflowers to India. Khan’s multiple influences again points to the porous nature of the culinary sphere. It is informed by everyday experiences and it is also influenced by cultural memory that has lasted hundreds of years through the specificities of various cuisines.

### IV

Therefore, one can see how Khan’s book shows the culinary as having characteristics of communicative and cultural memory. Jaffrey’s culinary account transcends the boundaries between communicative and collective memory. Culinary memory exhibits the different characteristics of both communicative and cultural memory. The culinary is a complex sphere that functions on different levels of memory and therefore it cannot be categorized into monolithic categorizations of memory. The culinary requires a more nuanced understanding of the way it interweaves between the everyday communicative form and the more fixed, lasting form as a cultural object.

The all-encompassing nature of the culinary as being a vital component of human existence and culture allows it to be approached from multiple perspectives. This paper viewed the primary texts from the perspective of memory in terms of the various spaces the culinary occupies in its relationship with memory. With the analysis of the two texts,

one can see how the culinary is a complex and layered space. It occupies the space of everyday communicative memory in its daily social practice and at the same time, the culinary becomes a fixed cultural object that is passed on through generations. Through cultural formation, the culinary becomes a site of cultural memory. Culinary memoirs showcase the fixity and flexibility of the culinary. The culinary memoir uses the culinary to also talk about various aspects of family, home, and nation. Jaffrey looks at the changing socio-cultural milieu of India while also critically commenting on the patriarchal nature of her large joint family. Her private culinary memory becomes a record of marginalized oral history. This culinary memory subverts institutionalized, male-documented memory in the way that it articulates socio-political and cultural changes through the private space. Khan's memoir also exhibits the adaptable, conversational nature of the culinary that allows it to be an important cultural aspect in society. The culinary carries tremendous significance for the individual while also becoming an important cultural marker in the larger collective. Both Madhur Jaffrey and Asma Khan approach the culinary through their emotional attachment to food. The culinary opens itself out to a variety of other fields of study besides those addressed in this paper. From an academic perspective, the culinary is a vast field filled with the potential of being studied in multiple ways because of the complex and layered relationship the culinary has with culture, individuals, and society. This paper attempted to engage with the complex relationship that memory has with the culinary.

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