

Food and Diaspora: An Exploration in M.G. Vassanji's *the Book of Secrets*

Manya Suri

Student, Graphic Era Hill University, Dehradun

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/bjmas.2022.04246>

Published March 06, 2025

Citation: Suri M. (2025) Food and Diaspora: An Exploration in M.G. Vassanji's the Book of Secrets, *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies*: 6(2),1-8

Abstract: *M.G. Vassanji's The Book of Secrets intricately examines themes of displacement, cultural memory, and adaptation within the diasporic experience. Food emerges as a significant motif, representing both the preservation and transformation of identity in a foreign land. Through the novel's exploration of East African Indian communities, Vassanji highlights the ways in which culinary traditions serve as repositories of memory and mediums for intergenerational knowledge transmission. This paper investigates the role of food in The Book of Secrets as a symbol of cultural continuity and change, focusing on its function in sustaining identity, negotiating hybridity, and reinforcing familial and communal bonds. Drawing on theoretical insights from postcolonial studies, including the works of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the study argues that food encapsulates the complex realities of diasporic existence. The paper concludes that the novel's depiction of food is central to understanding the emotional and cultural dimensions of displacement, as culinary practices become sites of both resistance and transformation.*

Keywords: Diaspora, food symbolism, cultural memory, hybridity, intergenerational transmission, adaptation, M.G. Vassanji

INTRODUCTION

The diasporic condition is often marked by a deep sense of loss and longing, as individuals navigate the complexities of cultural identity in foreign lands. Diaspora, derived from the Greek word *diaspeirein*, meaning "to scatter," refers to the dispersal of people from their homeland and the challenges they face in maintaining cultural ties while adapting to new environments (Clifford 1997). One of the most tangible and emotionally charged aspects of this negotiation is food, which serves as a vital link between past and present, homeland and hostland. Culinary practices act as

Published by the European Centre for Research Training and Development UK
markers of identity, repositories of cultural memory, and expressions of hybridity within diasporic communities (Appadurai 1996).

Literary representations of diaspora frequently employ food as a symbol of both continuity and transformation. The sensory dimensions of food—its taste, aroma, and texture—evoke memories of the homeland, reinforcing a sense of belonging even in displacement (Hall 1990). At the same time, culinary practices undergo adaptation in diasporic settings, reflecting the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural identity (Bhabha 1994). M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* offers a nuanced exploration of these themes, depicting how food sustains cultural identity while also serving as a medium for negotiation and reinvention.

Set against the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial East Africa, *The Book of Secrets* traces the lives of Indian immigrants as they navigate issues of belonging, displacement, and cultural hybridity. Through the novel's depiction of traditional Indian cuisine in an African setting, Vassanji illustrates the dual imperatives of preserving heritage and embracing change. This paper examines the role of food in *The Book of Secrets*, analyzing its function as a site of memory, a marker of hybrid identity, and a means of intergenerational transmission. By drawing on theoretical insights from Stuart Hall (1990) on cultural identity, Homi Bhabha (1994) on hybridity, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) on subaltern agency, the study highlights how culinary practices encapsulate the complexities of diasporic existence.

Reflections on Diaspora and Food Studies

Food occupies a central place in the study of diaspora, serving as both a material necessity and a cultural artifact that carries deep symbolic meaning. Scholars in diaspora studies have long emphasized the role of food in shaping and sustaining cultural identity. Ahmed (2011) argues that food functions as a sensory bridge between past and present, allowing diasporic individuals to maintain connections with their ancestral roots despite geographical and cultural dislocation. Culinary practices are imbued with emotional significance, evoking nostalgia and fostering a sense of belonging.

Arjun Appadurai (1996) expands on this discussion by examining the globalization of food and the ways in which culinary traditions evolve in transnational contexts. He contends that food is not merely a static cultural marker but a dynamic element that undergoes transformation in response to new environments. This perspective aligns with Kumar's (2005) assertion that culinary memory serves as a form of cultural resistance against the homogenizing forces of globalization.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity provides a useful framework for understanding the intersection of tradition and innovation in diasporic food practices. Bhabha posits that diasporic identities are forged in liminal spaces where cultural influences intersect, creating new and hybrid

forms of expression. This idea is particularly relevant to *The Book of Secrets*, where characters navigate the complexities of cultural adaptation through their culinary practices.

Tariq Rahman (2012) highlights the importance of intergenerational transmission of culinary knowledge as a mechanism for preserving cultural heritage. His analysis underscores how the sharing of recipes and cooking techniques within families fosters continuity and identity across generations. Similarly, Edward Said's (1978) exploration of cultural representation emphasizes the political dimensions of food, arguing that culinary practices often serve as sites of resistance against dominant narratives.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) concept of subaltern agency further contributes to an understanding of culinary practices in diaspora. Spivak asserts that marginalized voices assert their agency through everyday practices, including food preparation and consumption. In *The Book of Secrets*, the adaptation of traditional recipes in new environments can be seen as acts of creative resistance against cultural erasure.

Exposition on the Background of the Novel

M.G. Vassanji, a Tanzanian-born writer of Indian descent, is known for his exploration of themes related to migration, memory, and identity. His novel *The Book of Secrets* (1994) examines the histories of East African Indian communities, tracing their movements across geographical and cultural boundaries. The novel follows Pius Fernandes, a retired schoolteacher who discovers an old diary belonging to Alfred Corbin, a British colonial officer. Through Fernandes's investigation, the novel unveils the intertwined lives of Indian, African, and European characters, each grappling with issues of displacement and belonging.

Food emerges as a recurring motif in the novel, reflecting both the endurance and evolution of cultural identity. The communal act of sharing meals serves as a means of reinforcing cultural ties, while the adaptation of traditional recipes to local ingredients illustrates the hybrid nature of diasporic existence.

Understood. I will now begin posting the **remaining sections** of the paper. Stay tuned as I continue across multiple messages.

Plot Summary of the Novel

M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* is a complex narrative that intertwines personal and historical accounts, offering a layered exploration of migration, identity, and memory. The novel is centered around Pius Fernandes, a retired schoolteacher who comes across the diary of Alfred Corbin, a British colonial officer stationed in East Africa in the early twentieth century. Through this diary,

Fernandes uncovers a web of stories that span multiple generations, linking individuals from Indian, African, and European backgrounds.

Food is an ever-present motif throughout the novel, serving as a tangible representation of cultural continuity and adaptation. Fernandes, as both an outsider and an observer, reflects on the food habits of the communities he encounters, noting how culinary traditions shape and define identities. The novel depicts moments of communal eating, where food fosters relationships and solidifies bonds within the diasporic Indian community. At the same time, the necessity of culinary improvisation—substituting ingredients, modifying recipes, and adopting new cooking techniques—mirrors the broader themes of cultural hybridity and transformation.

One of the key relationships in the novel is between Mariamu, an Indian woman living in Africa, and Corbin, the colonial officer. Their story is emblematic of the tensions that arise when cultures intersect under colonial rule. Food plays a symbolic role in their interactions, often representing both intimacy and distance. Vassanji writes, “She prepared his tea as he liked it, strong and sweet, yet never drank from the same cup” (Vassanji 1994, 83). This passage illustrates the dual nature of cultural exchange—while food is a shared experience, certain boundaries remain intact.

As the novel unfolds, Fernandes discovers the fragmented histories of individuals whose lives were shaped by displacement and migration. The Indian diaspora in East Africa is portrayed as a community caught between multiple identities, struggling to maintain their traditions while navigating the realities of a changing world. The depiction of food—whether in private kitchens, bustling markets, or communal gatherings—reinforces the themes of nostalgia, survival, and adaptation that define the diasporic experience.

DISCUSSION

Food as a Repository of Memory

Food functions as a powerful vessel of memory in *The Book of Secrets*, preserving cultural identity in the face of displacement. The act of cooking and consuming traditional dishes evokes a sense of belonging, even when individuals are far from their ancestral homeland. Vassanji captures this sentiment in his description of Fernandes’s recollections:

“The aroma of frying onions and cumin would transport him back to his childhood, to a time when his mother would stand by the stove, her hands moving in practiced rhythm, creating meals that spoke of a place he had never seen” (Vassanji 1994, 112).

This passage highlights how food operates as a sensory link to the past, allowing characters to reconnect with their cultural roots. The preparation of food becomes an act of remembrance, a way to sustain traditions that might otherwise be lost in migration.

Anne Marie Smith (2010) argues that culinary practices enable diasporic individuals to maintain a living connection with their heritage, even in foreign spaces. Hirschfield (2015) expands on this idea, stating that the sensory qualities of food—its smell, taste, and texture—have a unique ability to trigger memories more vividly than visual or auditory stimuli. In *The Book of Secrets*, this phenomenon is evident in the meticulous preparation of traditional dishes, which serve as ritualistic acts of cultural preservation.

Edward Said (1978) emphasizes the political dimensions of cultural expression, arguing that everyday practices, including food preparation, can serve as acts of resistance against assimilation. This perspective aligns with Vassanji's depiction of culinary traditions in the novel, where maintaining traditional recipes is not merely an act of sustenance but a declaration of identity in a foreign land.

Culinary Adaptation and Cultural Hybridization

While food in *The Book of Secrets* symbolizes cultural continuity, it also reflects the hybridization that is inherent in diasporic life. The characters in the novel modify traditional recipes, blending Indian and African influences to create new culinary forms. This adaptation is exemplified in the character of Ali, a restaurant owner who incorporates local flavors into Indian cuisine. Vassanji writes:

“Ali's dishes were neither wholly Indian nor entirely African, but a fusion of both, born out of necessity and creativity” (Vassanji 1994, 156).

This blending of culinary traditions mirrors Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, which posits that cultural identities are fluid and continuously evolving. Diasporic individuals exist in liminal spaces, negotiating between tradition and modernity, authenticity and adaptation. In the novel, food serves as a site where these negotiations take place, illustrating the complexities of identity formation in the diaspora.

Furthermore, the novel highlights the emotional and practical challenges of maintaining culinary traditions in a new environment. Fernandes observes the struggles of an older generation trying to preserve traditional recipes despite the unavailability of familiar ingredients. Vassanji describes an elderly woman's frustration:

“She searched the market for fresh curry leaves, for tamarind that tasted like home, but found only poor substitutes, things that did not carry the same scent, the same essence” (Vassanji 1994, 67).

This moment encapsulates the tension between preservation and adaptation—while the desire to maintain tradition remains strong, external circumstances necessitate change. The process of improvisation in cooking reflects the broader struggles of diasporic life, where cultural practices must be reimagined to fit new contexts.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988) concept of subaltern agency further illuminates this aspect of the novel. Spivak asserts that marginalized individuals assert their agency through everyday practices, including food preparation. In *The Book of Secrets*, the act of modifying traditional recipes becomes a form of creative resistance, allowing characters to retain their cultural identity while adapting to new realities.

Intergenerational Transmission of Culinary Knowledge

A central theme in *The Book of Secrets* is the transmission of culinary knowledge across generations. The passing down of recipes and cooking techniques serves as a means of sustaining cultural identity within the diaspora. Fernandes reflects on his childhood memories of learning to cook from his grandmother:

“With patient hands, she guided him through the steps of grinding spices, of measuring by instinct rather than by numbers. ‘This is how it has always been done,’ she said, ‘and this is how you will teach your children’” (Vassanji 1994, 142).

This passage illustrates how food serves as a cultural archive, ensuring continuity even in the face of displacement. Stuart Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a continuous process of becoming, shaped by memory and adaptation. In the novel, the transmission of culinary knowledge exemplifies this dynamic process, where the past is remembered, reinterpreted, and reimagined for future generations.

Uma Narayan (1997) highlights the gendered dimensions of culinary knowledge in diasporic communities, noting that women often play a pivotal role as custodians of cultural memory. This theme is evident in *The Book of Secrets*, where mothers and grandmothers are depicted as the keepers of tradition, passing down recipes as a way of preserving heritage.

CONCLUSION

M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* presents a complex and layered exploration of food as both a site of cultural preservation and transformation within the diasporic experience. The novel demonstrates how food, as a tangible aspect of cultural identity, carries deep symbolic meaning, serving as a bridge between past and present, homeland and diaspora. Through the depiction of culinary practices, Vassanji illustrates the dual imperatives of maintaining tradition and adapting to new environments, highlighting the resilience of diasporic communities in navigating displacement.

The analysis of food in *The Book of Secrets* reveals its role as a **repository of memory**, where the sensory experience of cooking and eating preserves cultural continuity in foreign spaces. Food also emerges as a **site of hybridity**, reflecting the fusion of traditions and the negotiation of multiple cultural influences in diasporic life. Additionally, the novel underscores the **intergenerational transmission of culinary knowledge**, illustrating how recipes and cooking practices serve as a means of passing down identity and heritage.

By employing theoretical perspectives from postcolonial studies, this paper has examined how Vassanji's depiction of food encapsulates the complexities of diasporic existence. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, Stuart Hall's (1990) exploration of cultural identity, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) discussion of subaltern agency provide critical insights into the ways in which culinary traditions operate as both acts of resistance and adaptation.

Ultimately, *The Book of Secrets* reaffirms the centrality of food in shaping diasporic identity. In a world where migration continues to redefine cultural belonging, the novel offers a compelling reflection on the ways in which food sustains memory, fosters adaptation, and negotiates the boundaries between tradition and change.

REFERENCES

- Vassanji, M.G. *The Book of Secrets*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994.
- Ahmed, Saeed. *Culinary Cultures of the Indian Diaspora*. New Delhi: Academic Press, 2011.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Clifford, James. *Diasporas*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, 222–237. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.

Published by the European Centre for Research Training and Development UK

Hirschfield, H. "Sensing Memory: Food and Emotion in Diasporic Literature." *Journal of Sensory Studies* 30, no. 1 (2015): 85–97.

Kumar, Raj. "Memory and Taste: The Role of Food in South Asian Diaspora." *Cultural Memory Studies* 3, no. 1 (2005): 29–44.

Narayan, Uma. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*. London: Verso, 1997.

Rahman, Tariq. "Memory, Migration, and the Culinary Archive." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 4, no. 2 (2012): 55–70.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Smith, Anne Marie. "Culinary Memory and Identity in Diaspora." *Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2010): 99–113.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.