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**Edible Archives: Food, Memory, and Diasporic Identity in *the Namesake* and *Crying in H Mart***

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines how everyday culinary practices function as sites of memory in diasporic contexts, focusing on Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart*. Drawing on cultural memory studies and diaspora theory, it argues that food operates as an embodied and affective archive through which displaced subjects negotiate loss, grief, and belonging across spatial and temporal dislocations. In narratives shaped by migration and cultural rupture, memory emerges not through official histories but through quotidian, sensory practices. This paper contends that food becomes a critical medium for preserving and transmitting experiences that remain unarticulated within dominant frameworks of representation. While *The Namesake* foregrounds culinary ritual as a mode of intergenerational continuity, *Crying in H Mart* presents food as a site of affective recall structured by mourning. Together, these texts produce transnational memory formations that unsettle fixed notions of home and belonging, positioning everyday practices as crucial archives of diasporic life.



## Introduction

Diasporic existence is defined by displacement, fragmentation, and the ongoing negotiation of identity across cultural and geographical boundaries. Within such conditions, memory rarely assumes stable or institutionalized forms. Instead, it persists within everyday practices that sustain connections to a distant or irrecoverable past. Among these practices, food occupies a particularly significant position, functioning not only as sustenance but as a medium through which identity is experienced, preserved, and reconfigured.

In literary representations of diaspora, food frequently appears as a marker of cultural differences. However, reducing it to symbolism overlooks its deeper role as an embodied practice that mediates memory. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart*, food operates not merely as a signifier of ethnicity but as a dynamic archive through which memory is stored, transmitted, and reactivated. These texts foreground the ways in which culinary practices enable diasporic subjects to negotiate the tensions between continuity and rupture, belonging, and estrangement.

Cultural memory studies have increasingly moved beyond textual and institutional archives to consider the role of embodied practices in sustaining collective identity. Jan Assmann conceptualizes cultural memory as a system through which societies “store, preserve, and transmit” knowledge of the past (Assmann, 2011, p. 36). Crucially, this process is not confined to written records but includes rituals and practices that enable continuity across generations.

In diasporic contexts, however, the transmission of memory is complicated by displacement and cultural discontinuity. Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora as a “homing desire” rather than a literal return (Brah, 1996, p.192) underscores the ongoing and often unresolved nature of belonging. This perspective allows us to understand memory not as a fixed inheritance but as a process of negotiation that unfolds across multiple spatial and temporal contexts.

Food occupies a unique position within this framework because of its sensory and embodied nature. Unlike textual memory, which relies on representation, culinary memory is experienced directly through the body. Taste and smell, in particular, have been identified as powerful triggers of recollection, capable of evoking memories that remain inaccessible to language. This sensory immediacy allows food to function as an archive that is both intimate and communal, personal yet culturally embedded.



Moreover, the repetitive nature of culinary practices aligns with Assmann's emphasis on ritual as a mechanism of memory preservation. Cooking and eating are not singular events, but ongoing processes that reinforce cultural identity through repetition. At the same time, these practices are subject to adaptation, reflecting the changing conditions of diasporic life.

While *The Namesake* emphasizes repetition and intergenerational transmission as mechanisms of continuity, *Crying in H Mart* is structured around loss, where food becomes a means of reconstructing memory in the absence of direct inheritance. Together, these texts offer complementary perspectives on how memory operates within diaspora, highlighting both its persistence and its fragility.

Through the figure of Ashima Ganguli, the paper explores how culinary practices sustain intergenerational continuity within migrant households, while Gogol's evolving relationship to food reveals the delayed recognition of diasporic inheritance. In contrast, Michelle Zauner's memoir foregrounds food as a site of rupture, where culinary memory is shaped by mourning and the absence of maternal transmission. By centering on these subjectivities, the paper demonstrates that food is not merely symbolic but constitutive of lived experience, functioning as a dynamic archive where identity is continuously negotiated, remembered, and reconstituted.

Extending the framework of cultural memory, this paper argues that food functions as an "edible archive", a site where memory is not only preserved but continually re-experienced through sensory engagement. By shifting attention from formal archives to everyday practices, the paper repositions the domestic and the sensory as central to the production of diasporic identity.

Thus, food can be understood as an embodied archive that mediates between memory and identity, enabling diasporic subjects to navigate the complexities of displacement while sustaining connections to cultural heritage.

### **Food and Intergenerational Memory in *The Namesake***

In *The Namesake*, food is not simply a cultural marker but a deeply character-driven practice, most visibly embodied in Ashima Ganguli. Her culinary labor is not incidental but foundational to the emotional and cultural architecture of the diasporic household.

Her early attempt to recreate a familiar Bengali snack using American ingredients - "a packet of saltines combined with peanuts, chopped red onion, and green chili" (Lahiri, 2003, p.1), is emblematic of



diasporic adaptation. It signals not only adaptation but a reconstitution of self through practice. The dish is neither entirely authentic nor entirely new; it exists in a liminal space that reflects Ashima's own position between cultures.

“For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 49).

This line reframes from Ashima's culinary improvisation as more than adaptation; it becomes a condition of suspended belonging. Her food practices emerge not simply from nostalgia but from this “perpetual wait,” where cooking functions as a compensatory act that stabilizes an otherwise unsettled identity. The kitchen, therefore, becomes a space where temporality is negotiated.

This act of improvisation highlights the material constraints of diaspora while also demonstrating the resilience of cultural memory. The absence of specific ingredients does not prevent the recreation of tradition; rather, it necessitates transformation. Food, in this sense, becomes a site where memory is both preserved and altered.

“She is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one” (Lahiri, 2003, p.6).

Ashima's cooking is not just cultural preservation; it is a response to structural isolation. Food becomes a substitute for absent kinship networks, becoming the “edible archive”

Ashima's kitchen functions as a crucial site for memory production. Through repetitive acts of cooking, she creates a sense of continuity that counteracts the dislocation of migration. These practices are deeply ritualistic, aligning with Assmann's notion of cultural memory as sustained through repetition. The preparation of meals, the observance of rituals, and the maintenance of culinary traditions all contribute to the preservation of identity within an unfamiliar environment. Her kitchen emerges as a private archive where Bengal is not remembered abstractly but re-lived sensorially. In this sense, Ashima does not merely preserve tradition; she actively performs continuity, ensuring that memory survives displacement.

In contrast, Gogol's relationship to food is initially defined by distance and resistance. As a second-generation subject, he experiences his parents' culinary practices as markers of difference, reinforcing his sense of cultural alienation.

“At his own birthday parties, his mother insists on cooking the food she knows” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 66).



This insistence marks food as a site of tension, where Ashima's continuity clashes with Gogol's desire for assimilation. The domestic table becomes a contested space for identity formation. His refusal of Bengali food parallels his rejection of his name, both functioning as sites of discomfort within his negotiation of identity. However, this resistance is temporally unstable. These early sensory experiences remain embedded within his memory, resurfacing at later stages of his life. The smells and tastes of his childhood, once rejected, become sources of recognition and connection.

It is only later, particularly after Ashima's gradual withdrawal and the fragmentation of familial structures, that Gogol's relationship to food shifts. What was once ordinary becomes archival. Meals shared in childhood acquire retrospective significance, transforming into sites of recognition and loss. This delayed engagement suggests that culinary memory operates beyond immediate comprehension; it is latent, reactivated through time and absence.

Thus, Lahiri constructs a generational contrast: Ashima as the custodian of memory through practice, and Gogol as the recipient of memory through recollection. Food bridges this gap, functioning as a medium through which intergenerational continuity is both sustained and reinterpreted. This transformation illustrates the temporal dimension of culinary memory. What is initially resisted may later be reinterpreted as meaningful. Food thus operates as an archive that is not immediately legible but becomes significant over time, shaping identity in ways that are both subtle and profound.

### **Food, Grief, and Affective Memory in *Crying in H Mart***

In *Crying in H Mart*, food is deeply intertwined with affect, particularly grief. The memoir foregrounds the role of culinary practices in mediating the author's relationship with her mother and her Korean heritage. Unlike the structured continuity in *The Namesake*, Zauner's engagement with food is shaped by rupture, loss, and the need for reconstruction.

Zauner's mother is not only a cultural transmitter but an embodied archive herself. Her cooking functions as a language through which care, discipline, and cultural belonging are communicated.

In *Crying in H Mart*, food is inseparable from the maternal figure, functioning as an affective language. Zauner writes:

“Food was how my mother expressed her love” (Zauner, 2021, p.61).



Here, food exceeds representation; it becomes the primary medium of emotional communication. It positions food as a primary mode of communication within a familial relationship. This formulation emphasizes the affective dimension of culinary practices, highlighting their role in expressing care, intimacy, and cultural belonging.

Following her mother's death, this mode of communication is disrupted. Food becomes a site of absence as much as presence, carrying the weight of loss. What remains is not continuity but fragmentation.

Zauner's continuous recreation of Korean dishes is an attempt to recover what has been lost, to reconstruct a connection that can no longer be directly experienced, revealing the limits of memory when detached from its living source. Recipes, once transmitted through gesture and presence, become partial and unstable. This shift foregrounds the vulnerability of the edible archive—it is not self-sustaining but dependent on relational continuity.

The space of H Mart functions as a powerful site of memory. Surrounded by familiar ingredients, Zauner experiences a convergence of past and present, where sensory recognition triggers emotional recall: "I cried in H Mart because I missed my mom" (Zauner, 2021, p.11). The supermarket becomes an archive of memory, where objects serve as a material archive, but one that underscores discontinuity. Zauner's attempts to recreate dishes reveal the fragility of transmission.

Unlike the ritualistic repetition in *The Namesake*, Zauner's culinary practices are marked by discontinuity. Recipes are incomplete, requiring interpretation and reconstruction. Zauner's culinary practice thus becomes an act of reconstruction rather than preservation. Unlike Ashima, who sustains memory through repetition, Zauner must piece together fragments, navigating loss through approximation. Food here is not stable; it is haunted by absence, shaped by what can no longer be fully recovered. This process reflects the fragmented nature of memory in the aftermath of loss, where continuity cannot be assumed but must be actively reestablished.

### **Comparative Analysis**

A comparative reading of the two texts reveals that food operates across distinct temporal and affective registers, shaping different modes of memory. It reveals that food structures not only memory but subjectivity itself, producing distinct modes of diasporic experience through character.



In *The Namesake*, food sustains continuity through repetition and rituals. Memory is cumulative, embedded within stable familial structures that enable the transmission of cultural practices across generations. The emphasis is on preservation and adaptation, where continuity is maintained despite displacement.

In *Crying in H Mart*, however, food emerges within the context of rupture. Memory is not transmitted seamlessly but must be reconstructed in the absence of the maternal figure. Culinary practices become acts of recovery, where the past is reassembled through fragments rather than sustained through continuity.

Ashima and Zauner's mother represent two forms of the archival figure - one sustained through continuity, the other lost through rupture. Ashima's presence ensures the stability of culinary transmission, while Zauner's mother's absence destabilizes it. Consequently, Gogol and Zauner occupy different positions within the edible archive.

Gogol's relationship to food is retrospective; he inherits memory gradually, through delayed recognition. Zauner's engagement, however, is immediate and urgent, driven by the need to reconstruct what has been lost. Where Gogol moves from rejection to acceptance, Zauner moves from presence to absence, from familiarity to fragmentation.

These differing trajectories reveal that the edible archive is not uniform but contingent on relational structures.

Despite these differences, both texts highlight the role of food as an embodied archive that transcends spatial and temporal boundaries. They challenge the privilege of formal archives by foregrounding everyday practices as critical sites of memory production.

Importantly, both texts emphasize the sensory dimension of memory. Taste and smell function as modes of recall that operate beyond language, enabling forms of remembrance that are affective and embodied. Food thus facilitates the creation of transnational memory formations, linking disparate contexts through shared sensory experience; it is mediated through bodies, relationships, and temporal shifts.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that food functions as an embodied and affective archive in diasporic narratives, mediating the preservation, transmission, and reconstruction of memory across conditions of



displacement. Through a comparative analysis of *The Namesake* and *Crying in H Mart*, it has demonstrated how culinary practices sustain continuity while also enabling the reconfiguration of identity in the face of loss.

By foregrounding the sensory and everyday dimensions of memory, the paper challenges conventional understandings that privilege formal archives and historical narratives. It instead positions embodied practices as central to the production of diasporic memory.

Food, as an edible archive, is not an abstract cultural repository, but a lived, relational practice shaped by the individuals who sustain, inherit, and reconstruct it. Through Ashima, Gogol, and Zauner, these texts demonstrate that culinary memory operates across generational, temporal, and affective registers.

Rather than functioning as a stable site of preservation, the edible archive emerges as dynamic—capable of sustaining continuity, but equally vulnerable to rupture. In this sense, food does not merely reflect diasporic identity; it actively produces it, shaping how subjects remember, belong, and endure loss.

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