

Culinary Metaphors as Indicators of Cultural Identity in Contemporary Asian American Immigrant Literature

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Abstract: The present paper will review how culinary metaphors have been applied in recent Asian American immigrant writing. This discussion will be centered on how food represents cultural identity, assimilation, and emotional attachment. The paper discusses the role of food as a metaphor for the immigrant experience through an examination of major texts, such as *The Joy Luck Club*, *Pachinko*, and *The Namesake*, which help to highlight both the continuation of cultural identity and the conflicts related to a new culture. Food metaphors have been demonstrated to tend to depict emotional anchoring, which is comforting and gives them a sense of home, as well as a form of cultural alienation, as the characters continue to emphasize traditional practices amidst emerging environments. The paper places an emphasis on the importance of culinary practices, including the preparation of traditional meals or the fusion of cultural cuisines, in the negotiation of hybrid identities. The immigrants are shown to be in a state of having to maintain their ties with their background, and at the same time, trying to accommodate themselves in their new surroundings. These food metaphors show the emotionality's of working between the various worlds, as food becomes a survival system and a kind of resistance. Finally, the paper highlights the importance of culinary metaphors in their depiction of the intricacies of identity formation in immigrant literature. Through food, authors are able to express the plight and strength of the immigrant communities and the use of food to preserve cultural continuity. The paper ends by proposing that future studies may examine how the role of culinary metaphors is shifting to other diasporic literature, with a focus on the extended implications in a globalized society.

Key Words: culinary metaphors, cultural identity, asian american literature, immigration, assimilation, hybrid identities, food symbolism

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Introduction

Culinary metaphors (a metaphor based on food) are used to express more serious meanings in modern literature, especially in characterizing multifaceted cultural and social relationships. Food, in literary terms, is not simply a means of sustenance; it is also a strong force of identity, memory, and belonging. To Asian American immigrant writers, gastronomic metaphors can be used to delve into the realms of personal and cultural identity, family relationships, and migration (Lee, 2014; Tewari et al., 2013). All these metaphors are used in order to find the fine line between preserving cultural heritage and adjusting to new and much more foreign surroundings.

As something in immigrant literature, cultural identity is part and parcel of examining how individuals strike a balance between maintaining and expressing their cultural heritages in a subtle, delicate way in the face of societal requirements. The problem of assimilation and cultural conservation is addressed in the context of immigration in Asian American literature in particular (Mallapragada, 2021; Fadda-Conrey,

2014). One of the multifaceted and multi-layered approaches to studying these themes is culinary metaphors, since food may be the focus of personal and social lives (Wills, 2014). The eating and food behaviors, as presented by these writers, reveal emotional and psychological turmoil of clinging to the cultural links as they attempted to assimilate into the mainstream American culture.

In the present paper, the analysis of the application of culinary metaphors in the contemporary immigrant writing of Asian Americans as a reference to cultural identity is considered. Dwelling on the consumption of food to express the immigrant experience, the paper will seek to expose the worthiness of such metaphors in presenting the emotional multivariations and cultural negotiations that comprise the immigrant experience. Culinary metaphors as a literary study is a unique way to understand the issue of cultural assimilation, identity formation, and preservation in the migration setting.

Key Contribution

This essay will look at the application of culinary metaphors in the recent Asian American immigrant literature by looking at how food is used as a symbol of cultural identity. The greatest value of the paper is that it discusses culinary metaphors as a process of negotiating the complexities of assimilation, cultural maintenance, and identity bargaining as an aspect of the immigrant experience. Using the discussion of major literary works, the paper will illustrate how food-related symbols can provide a more in-depth understanding of the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of the immigrant experience, especially among the populations of Asian Americans.

The current paper explores culinary metaphors within the Asian American literature of immigrants and how food is used to represent cultural identity. Section I presents the idea of culinary metaphors and their significance. Section II explores examples of food metaphors in literature. Section III talks about the use of culinary metaphors as a measure of cultural identity and assimilation. Case studies of works with food as a metaphor are analyzed in Section IV. Section V summarizes and provides major findings and recommendations of further studies.

Culinary Metaphors in Asian American Immigrant Literature

The metaphor of cuisine is widespread in the contemporary literature of Asian American immigrants to represent the problems of cultural identity, migration, and assimilation (Hu et al., 2013; Quinsaat, 2014). Food, which often is the central theme of the immigrant experience, is re-contextualized as not a mere source of sustenance; it becomes a symbol of home, a sense of belonging, and a reminder of culture (López-Rodríguez, 2014). The works of renowned writers like Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club* and Min Jin Lee in *Pachinko* depict how food metaphors are reflective of tradition and the conflict of integrating into a foreign world.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan employs food as a representation of the relationship between generations of Chinese-American women, in which cooking traditional foods is a way of reaching out to the past (Bloemraad, 2011). To the mothers, cooking Chinese food is part of their culture, but when their American-born daughters encounter these foods, they become a symbol of cultural collision, as they balance between their family practices and their acculturation in American society (Ho, 2018).

On the same note, food in *Pachinko* is a source of solace, as it reminds the characters of their Korean heritage, and as a source of misery as they undergo in Japan (Bailey, 2017). The plates and sharing of food also demonstrate the quality of family relationships, but the acculturation of the characters to the Japanese

culture frequently involves changing their eating patterns, which depicts the sacrifices that the characters have to make in order to survive in a new country.

These food metaphors are useful tools in the examination of the duality of the immigrant experience, the urge to the familiar, as opposed to the necessity to alter. Food is employed by authors to convey the emotional complexity of assimilation, cultural continuity, and the complexities of identity formation as a result of migration. Analyzing the role of food as a metaphor in different works, it is evident that the symbols of food do not just show the hardships of the immigrant but also reflect the strength and mutability of the cultural identity.

Cultural Identity in Asian American Literature

Food as a Symbol of Cultural Preservation

Food is not just a simple need in Asian American literature, but it is also a strong tool for cultural preservation. To a good number of immigrant families, the traditional food practices are a way of keeping in touch with the homeland. These food traditions serve as emotional anchors to enable immigrants to experience belonging to their roots amid the physical distance between the homeland and the new country. Preparation and consumption of food, including dumplings, curry, or rice, are not only the functions of feeding but also the practices of memory, which strengthen the feeling of cultural identity on a new ground.

The cooking of traditional foods like fish, dumplings, and rice in works such as *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan symbolize not only food but the attempts of the mothers to save Chinese traditions and transmit cultural background to their daughters. Food in the works is a bridge between the past and the present of the immigrant parents and their children; it provides them with a physical connection to a culture that they might be growing more and more detached from.

Culinary Alienation and the Immigrant Experience

But food too turns into a place of alienation, particularly when immigrants have to face the problem of adjusting to a new culture. In numerous Asian American stories, protagonists encounter problems with the availability of familiar ingredients or the inability to adjust the old recipes to a new environment. This culinary alienation is a manifestation of a more general dislocation experienced by the immigrants who feel both out of touch with their homeland and have to manage the conflict between their own culture and the new one.

For example, in *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee, the characters have to deal with the marginalization that they are experiencing in Japan on a daily basis. However, they are strong-willed and are connected with foods in their motherland, and the process of preparing traditional Korean food hurts them as they are reminded of their displacement. Lack of recognizable food or difficulty of cooking traditional food in a new environment further alienates the characters. Food is used as a potent metaphor of the emotional cost of migration, both to create an emphasis on loss of the familiar and to try to maintain identity in a new world.

Generational Conflicts Around Food

Culinary metaphors in Asian American literature are also closely related to the theme of generational conflict. Food is a battlefield of cultural identity to many immigrant families, in which the younger generation tends to want to reject the traditions of their parents in a bid to fit into mainstream American

society. The most frequent ways that this conflict is portrayed are in the approach to food in the family. As the older generation is still close to the traditional food practices, the younger generation might be more inclined to the Americanized food, where they consider the food of their parents outdated or embarrassing.

In the book *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, the main character, Gogol Ganguli, goes through this generational gap through his multifaceted relationship with the food of his Bengali background. As a child, Gogol becomes more and more unwilling to eat the old-fashioned Bengali food prepared by his mother, as he wants to follow the conveniences of American cuisine and familiarity. This conflict shows the challenges that second-generation immigrants go through in trying to balance their cultural backgrounds and the need to assimilate and adapt with their counterparts. This denial of traditional food becomes a symbolic denial of the cultural background that the food symbolizes and an example of the larger identity battles of immigrant children.

The Resilience of Cultural Identity Through Food

Food is also used to signify the strength of cultural identity in Asian American literature despite the issue of alienation and generational conflict. Food is another powerful tool of resistance against assimilation pressures, a method for immigrants to affirm their cultural identity and retain their heritage. In their struggle to adapt to the challenges of immigration, immigrants tend to adapt by adopting aspects of their traditional food culture into their new lives and merging the old with the new to form new ways of cultural expression.

Food in such works as *The Namesake* is a notable place of reconciliation of dual identities. The fact that Gogol is able to eventually embrace his American identity and his culture is symbolized by his eventual acceptance of his food, which takes him back to his Bengali roots. The very process of making Bengali food on his own turns into a self-validation, a moment when he realizes his identity as being complicated. It is through food that Gogol can reconcile his past and present and adopt the hybrid identity of being a Bengali and an American.

Food as a Metaphor for Hybrid Identities

The hybridity of immigrant identity is also emphasized in food metaphors in Asian American literature. The immigrants usually have to bargain between two or more cultural worlds, and food turns out to be a representation of such a bargain. The intertwining of cuisines, e.g., the combination of Chinese and American cuisine, or Korean and Japanese cuisine, is a component of the greater process of forming a hybrid cultural identity. The immigrants adapt old recipes to new conditions, adding the elements of new cultures but preserving the spirit of the old.

The cases of such authors as Amy Tan and Jhumpa Lahiri are good examples of this hybrid identity, as they portray the struggle that characters experience between the pressures to preserve the culture and to assimilate. Food helps these characters bargain their role in the American landscape in which they seek ways to strike a balance between the old world and the new one. Food culture is made to be a metaphor of how these hybrid identities are negotiated, in that the immigrants adopt both cultures in a manner that would enable them to survive and prosper in their new land.

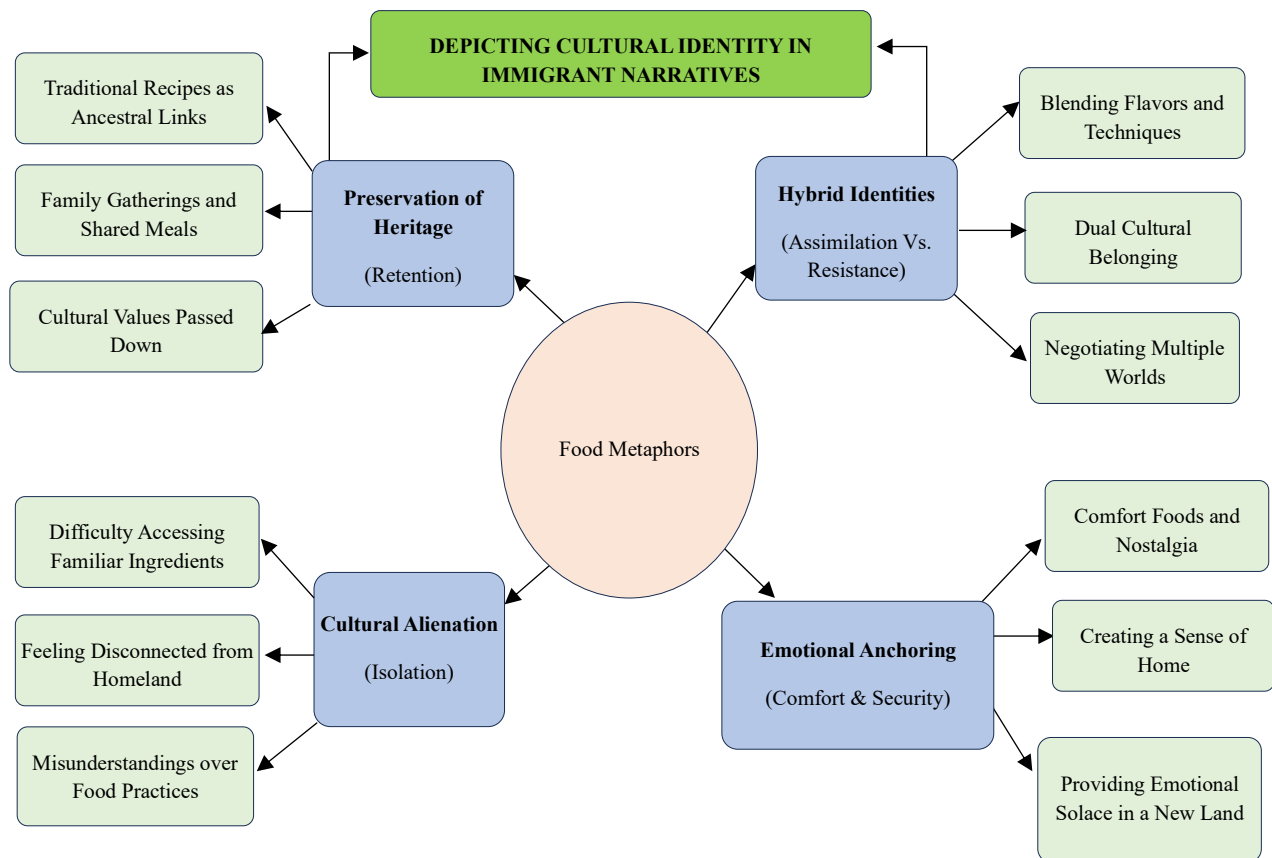


Figure 1: The Role of Culinary Metaphors in Asian American Literature

Figure 1 demonstrates the interconnection between food symbolism and cultural identity within the framework of immigration and how food metaphors are used to present cultural alienation, emotional anchoring, and hybrid identities in Asian American literature.

Table 1: Key Aspects of Culinary Metaphors in Asian American Literature

Aspect	Description	Example in Literature
Preservation of Heritage	Food is a connection to traditional recipes and cultural values.	Traditional dishes are passed down through generations in <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> .
Cultural Alienation	Struggles with food practices in a new country, leading to feelings of isolation.	Difficulty in finding familiar ingredients in <i>Pachinko</i> .
Emotional Anchoring	Food is a source of comfort and nostalgia for immigrants.	Comfort food in <i>The Namesake</i> is a link to home.
Hybrid Identities	Blending of food practices from both the homeland and the new culture.	Fusion cuisines reflecting dual cultural identities in <i>Everything I Never Told You</i> .

The main features of culinary metaphors in literature are summed up in Table 1 where it is possible to note that food may be used to characterize the difficulties and endurance of cultural identity in the immigrant experience.

Case Studies

To further explore the place of culinary metaphors in Asian American immigrant literature, explore more deeply the works in which food is central to the expression of cultural identity, belonging, and the conflicts of migration. Both case studies highlight how culinary metaphors have been carefully incorporated into the material of the characters' lives and have served to illustrate the difficulty of maintaining tradition and acculturation into a new society.

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

Food in *The Joy Luck Club* is not just a cultural object of the book, but also a place of emotional struggle and conflict between generations. To transmit values and establish a feeling of belonging to the old world, the mothers, being new immigrants, cook traditionally. Preparation of dumplings, cooking rice, or fishing fish are symbolic to preserve the culture. These are so deeply ingrained within the character that it reveals how these characters are connected to their culture.

But to the American-born daughters, food is an issue as well. They believe that the preparation of such traditional foods is laborious and lonely, an indication of the desire of the mother not to lose it in their culture. This food fight illuminates the bigger problem of cultural identity and the conflict to come to terms with the old and the new. The rejection of these foods by the daughters is a symbol of their desire to become a part of the American society and the clash of the generations.

Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*

Food is crucial in *Pachinko* as it depicts the fight of Korean immigrants in Japan, as they seek to preserve their culture and face marginalization as a system. Food is a reminder of the Korean identity of the main character of the story, Sunja, even in her new country. She cooks the traditional Korean dishes, such as kimchi and rice, as she fights the limitations and prejudices of her new life in Japan, so that she can keep the sense of home.

The availability of familiar ingredients, however, is restricted, and the characters have to adjust to the practice of Japanese food. This conflict of traditional Korean food with the Japanese cuisine they have to learn to make represents the larger issues of immigration: the grief of cultural displacement and the necessity to survive and adjust to a new culture at the same time. In this instance, food acts as a reminder of not only the sacrifices that were made, but also the strength of the immigrant spirit.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

In *The Namesake*, food is used as a symbol of the internal struggle of the main character, Gogol Ganguli, between his American identity and Bengali roots. The food that his mother cooks, like the biryani and mustard greens, is an indication of his family being of Bengali heritage, but to Gogol, it is a symbol of the stifling effect of his parental culture. Eating these meals reminds him of home, of his family traditions, but it also contributes to the drive to break away of the expectations of his parents.

Food serves as a way of rediscovering his own identity as Gogol grows and learns more about his multifaceted identity. When he cooks a Bengali dish to himself, it is the sign of acceptance of both his American and cultural background. This preparation of food is a significant experience of self-awareness which indicates that he is able to accept both cultures and not be divided between them. Table 2 shows the summary of culinary metaphors along with the case studies.

Table 2: Summary of Culinary Metaphors in Case Studies

Author	Literary Work	Role of Food	Cultural Theme
Amy Tan (Tan, 1989)	The Joy Luck Club	Food symbolizes generational conflict, the preservation of heritage, and emotional bonding through shared meals.	Intergenerational tension and cultural preservation
Min Jin Lee (Lee, 2017)	Pachinko	Food represents survival, resistance, and the tension between cultural erasure and identity retention.	Cultural survival and dislocation
Jhumpa Lahiri (Lahiri, 2003)	The Namesake	Food is a metaphor for identity negotiation, bridging heritage with the need to assimilate into American society.	Identity formation and cultural adaptation

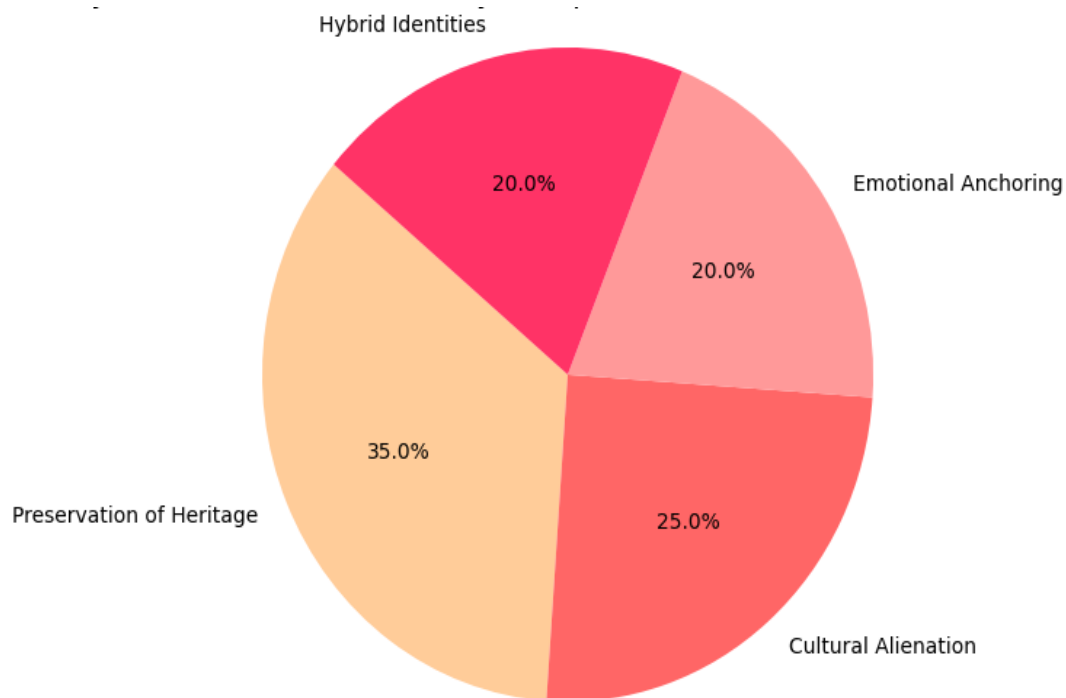


Figure 2: Hybrid Identities and Culinary Metaphors in Asian American Literature

Figure 2 visualizes how culinary metaphors are used to depict various aspects of hybrid identities in Asian American literature. It also elicits the balancing of heritage conservation (35.0%), cultural alienation (25.0%), emotional grounding (20.0%), and the exchange of hybrid identities (20.0%), to the immigrant experience. The graph shows that food is vital in the negotiation of such complexities of cultural identification, assimilation, and attachment to the roots as one attempt to fit into the new society.

Conclusion

The literature of Asian American immigrants written in the form of culinary metaphors is a powerful prism through which the problems of cultural identity, assimilation, and immigrant experience can be analyzed. Some of the works that have turned food not only into food, but also into an emotional touch to home, heritage, and family are *Pachinko*, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *The Namesake*. Food is a connecting element between the old and the new, since the traditional food represents the continuation of the culture and history, yet it also represents the difficulties of conforming to the new culture. Such metaphors serve a

number of purposes: food is a metaphor of the confrontation between cultural preservation and assimilation forces, and food preparation or eating out becomes an emotional lifeline in the alien land. At the same time, it also resonates with the feelings of alienation, particularly when the immigrants have troubles with certain aspects of the problems, such as the accessibility of familiar food materials or the misunderstanding of food culture in the new country. These strains reveal the issue of the hybrid identities whereby immigrants are engaged in the process of negotiating between their cultural heritage and the new cultural setting. Finally, culinary metaphors in Asian American literature provide the reader with an understanding of the intricacies of identity formation as part of the immigrant experience. They demonstrate the ways in which food can be a source of belonging and a location of conflict. Since food practices remain a key theme in the immigrant stories, the way forward in future studies can be to determine the changing nature of culinary metaphors in world literature, in terms of reflecting the cultural change in the world, which is becoming more interconnected. These metaphors have continued to be a vital resource to comprehend cultural survival and adjustment amid migration.

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