



# Food, Therapy and Healing: Exploring Culinary Practices As A Therapeutic Approach in Amulya Malladi's Serving Crazy with Curry

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Open Access

Manuscript ID: BIJ-2025-OCT-075

Subject: English

Received : 25.09.2025

Accepted : 08.10.2025

Published : 31.10.2025

DOI:10.64938/bijri.v10n1.25.Oct075

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## Abstract

The study explores how food functions as a healing to the traumatized Indian immigrants in the United States as portrayed in Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*. The research focuses how cooking becomes an expression in the healing process of the main protagonist Devi Veturi, a second-generation immigrant in the United States. Devi's fusion of Indo-Western cuisine indicates her mediation between tradition and modernity and her struggle to merge her crumbled identities. Through this study, the paper discusses how cooking becomes a therapeutic process and as a form of Devi's way of resistance and survival in the face of adversity.

**Keywords: food, cooking, healing, therapy, suicide and trauma**

The research intends to focus mainly on how food functions as a healing agent to the disillusioned Indian immigrants in the United States as portrayed in Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*. The Indian writers are creating works with their unique touch and which receive international acclaim. The last decade of the twentieth century was brimming with success stories of the Indian Writers in English. More than a hundred novels of good calibre have been published. This has, quite naturally, enriched Indian English novel as a literary form. In the seven hundred years of English literary history, many

writers have contributed to the development of the English language. Amulya Malladi is one such prominent writer who has basked in fame through her literary genius.

Amulya Malladi was born in Sagar in Central India in 1974. She portrays the life of the Indian diasporas abroad. Amulya Malladi is a diasporic Indian writer in English and is famous for her literary works such as *A Breath of Fresh Air* (2002), *The Mango Season* (2003), *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004), *Song of the Cuckoo Bird* (2005), *The Sound of Language* (2007), *A House for Happy Mothers* (2016), *The*



Copenhagen Affair (2017), *The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You* (2019) and *A Death in Denmark* (2023). Amulya Malladi's novels have received international accolades and thus it was translated into several languages. All her novels feature India as the ethnic background of her protagonists. Her novels explore the themes of cultural identity, relationships and personal growth. Malladi's writing style is characterized by its emotional depth and exploration of cultural and global ethnicity. She often delves into the intricacies of identity, sense of belongingness, family and relationships. Her lucid writing style makes it comprehensible for readers. The narrative of Amulya Malladi's novel resonates with the words of the Indian English writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, as it portrays a perfect blend of food, culture, heritage, history and tradition.

Several researchers have conducted research on the disillusionment of the diaspora, immigrant outpourings, identity crisis, trauma theory and psychological aspects of Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*. The current research will focus on the gap in the research area, exploring how food serves as a therapy to the protagonist and eases out her guilt and trauma.

Devi Veturi is an Indian American second-generation immigrant living abroad. She is caught between two cultures. Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* defines "The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience" (Brah 190). Devi struggles neither to assimilate nor to adapt to the society around her. She is on the very verge of killing herself when she faces continuous failures in her life. She is filled with guilt when she betrays her sister, by having an illicit relationship with her brother-in-law. A miscarriage and the shock of losing her job traumatize her even further. Yet before taking any fateful decision, Devi tries to contemplate the reasons to kill herself against the reasons to survive. This chain of thought acts as a message to the readers why they should never give up and keep going. The author conveys an ethical standpoint that suicide is never a solution to any problem, underscoring that there are always avenues for a person through which they can heal themselves

from depression. Amulya Malladi's message in the novel echoes the famous English saying, 'Every cloud has a silver lining'

Devi's silence plays a vital role in the novel. Her silence and muteness do not indicate defeat but rather her resistance. Devi refuses to talk to her family; in a way it forbids the chance for her family to express their views about her. When Devi's grandmother Vasu tries to unveil the reason behind her suicidal attempt, Devi resorts to silence instead of answering her question. "Life is precious, Vasu said and your life is golden. I want you to think about living, about going on, about moving on. I want you to tell me why you wanted to die and then I want you to tell me how you are not going to let this despair take over you again" (223)

Everyone in the family and the people around Devi had a thousand questions to ask her. All of them had the same question "Why? Why? Why?" (224) and were left with their own selves to predict the reasons for Devi's suicidal attempt. Her silence even brings turmoil inside her family, as each of the family members end up with conflicting ideologies. It completely disturbs Saroj's peace of mind as she always wishes to take care of every individual in the family. Thus, Devi's silence creates substantial amount of stress in the family.

Devi Veturi moves from her silent phase to a therapeutic phase, where cooking acts as a healing to her trauma. The healing therapy begins in the kitchen. She finds peace and solace while cooking for her family members. Thus, the kitchen transforms into a multicultural milieu, a 'third space' according to Homi K. Bhabha view, where Devi's fragmented self deliberates about her Indo-Western cultural background. Homi K. Bhabha reflects 'third space' as "though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (Bhabha 37). This perception of the third space is evident in Amulya Malladi's depiction of the blending of Indian and American ingredients, which creates a fusion of Indo-Western cuisine.

Devi Veturi in the novel traverses between Indian tradition and Western modernity through her culinary



skills. Cooking, for her, mirrors her fragmented identity and the process of healing. It shows her attempt in bringing order to her disordered life. She explores the usage of various ingredients like cashew and blueberry by experimenting with them in a traditional dish. For instance, by introducing Cajun (Cashew) in a regular prawn biryani and blueberry in a traditional chicken curry. The flavour of cashew adds a special essence to the biryani and elevates the taste of the dish and tantalized the taste buds of her family members. The appreciation from her family members encourages her to explore more in the culinary field. A fresh confidence in the kitchen opens new avenues to her. By winning over the hearts of her family members in cooking, she slowly builds a sense of belongingness that she has longed for years. Avi was very proud that his daughter was finding a way out of a post-suicidal collapse.

Saroj was the sole proprietor of the kitchen. "Saroj who spent her entire life in the house... Saroj never held a job, spent all her time in the kitchen cooking." (15) But after her daughter's entry, Saroj lost control over her area of dominion. Women in general consider the kitchen as their private zone and they can never accept the access of others into their dominion. "The Kitchen was the crowning glory" (208) Saroj was one such woman who tends to hold the keys of her kitchen to herself and cannot accept even her daughter's entry into her kitchen.

After her suicidal attempt Devi resorts to complete silence and never opens up to anyone. Even when questioned by physicians and psychiatrists she doesn't vent her emotion. Through the course of the novel, the reader understands that Devi has found a voice through her cooking. Cooking acts as a therapy to her wounds. All her wounds and pain are diminished in her act of cooking. This is clear through the words of Girish, "She seems to be pretty much back to normal, except for the talking and cooking. And the doctor did say that those who cook are not very inclined to commit suicide" (268)

Devi finds comfort and solace in cooking. Devi "liked the idea of cooking, being in a kitchen, an uncomplicated world of spices, produce, lentils, meat, poultry, and rice. There were no arguments here. This was sacred land." (206) Kitchen was like

a safe haven to her, which didn't allow anyone to judge her.

Devi's cooking skills makes her feel serene and relaxed. The progress in her psychological state is visible through the taste of the dishes she cooked. "Her mind could wander on all sorts of possibilities here, anything was possible and everything was acceptable as long as she kept her mind confined to food and cooking" (206). Thus cooking becomes her way of expression and she answered all their questions with her culinary skills.

Devi's innovative ideas in cooking bring in a lot of accolades from her family members. She prepares a chutney using ginger, apricot and mint mixed with the smoke-dried ripe jalapeno chili peppers which give a smoky and a tangy flavour to the plain Indian mint chutney. She infuses blueberry into chicken curry, a completely novel and daring culinary gesture. "Her chicken with blueberry curry sauce, served with fragrant cardamom rice, was peeling off the first layer of everyone's stomach lining." (337)

Cooking brings life back to her inert existence. Her cookery skills give expression to all the unexpressed emotions pertaining to guilt, trauma and silence. Edwin S. Shneidman defines suicide as "the act of killing one's life" (6). However, Devi Veturi regains momentum after her suicidal attempt. She discovers her own self during the post-suicidal period. Malladi traces the transformation of Devi Veturi's character who is initially moved by the emotions of depression and commits suicide but she recovers from her past by using cooking as a therapeutic event that heals her emotional distress.

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