



## Jhol, Memory, and the Maternal Hearth: Food, Identity, and Female Agency in Pratim D. Gupta's Macher Jhol (2017)

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### Abstract:

This paper undertakes a theoretical analysis of Pratim D. Gupta's Bengali culinary drama film *Macher Jhol* (2017) by applying the interdisciplinary food-studies framework developed in contemporary Food Studies. The paper wants to read the central signifier of the film, *macher jhol* (fish stew), as a multi-layered cultural text negotiation as an identity, memory, diaspora, motherhood and the politics of culinary authenticity in the Bengali context, through the theoretical apparatuses of Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Elspeth Probyn, W.E.B. Du Bois, Adrienne Rich, Carl Jung and Gloria Anzaldua, among others. The paper argues that, just as the Chicana foodscape functions simultaneously as a space of subjugation and radical empowerment in Mexican American literature, the Bengali kitchen and its emblematic dish operate as both an incarcerating and a liberating force in Gupta's film. Food, in *Macher Jhol*, transcends its visceral properties to become what Barthes calls a 'veritable grammar' of cultural selfhood — a potent voice of the individuated and discursive self, formed in the act of negotiating the conflicting value systems of diaspora, domesticity, gender, and modernity.

**Keywords:** Bengali cinema, food studies, foodscape, *macher jhol*, cultural memory, diaspora, motherhood, identity politics, slow food, culinary authenticity

### 1. Introduction: The Bengali Foodscape and the Grammar of Fish

Food is inextricably woven with one's identity — be it native, national, transnational, or post-transnational. The opening lines of the dissertation *Metate Murmurs* record a Bengali researcher's personal admission: "Cooking in Bengal is not just incidental but intricately intertwined with our cultural and psychological landscape and such an obsession with food manifests itself in rituals and rhymes, replete with culinary images reflecting the climate and topography, the informal web of personal relationships, trauma of transference, joys of homecoming, abundance or crisis." This autobiographical insight — that food in Bengal engenders a "supra-sensory experience" and that "modern representations of food in Bengali literature and cinema reveal a convergence of art and cuisine, masterfully recreated to objectify food as temporally three-dimensional and as a bridge between mortality and divinity" — is nowhere more vividly cinematic than in Pratim D. Gupta's *Macher Jhol* (2017).

The film centers on Dev D (Devdatto), a Paris-based Michelin-starred chef who returns to Kolkata after thirteen years when his mother falls gravely ill. His sole culinary mission is to recreate the quintessential Bengali dish — *macher jhol*, a light fish stew — precisely as his mother used to make it, deploying the full arsenal of his professional training in the service of the most elemental of memory foods. The film is thus, as Roland Barthes would have it, a "veritable

grammar of foods,” in which a single dish “carries certain shades of meaning” and functions as an orderly system of cultural communication.<sup>1</sup>

Applying the theoretical framework elaborated across the dissertation — which draws on food studies, feminist theory, postcolonial criticism, psychoanalysis, and border theory to analyze Chicana food narratives — this paper argues that *Macher Jhol* participates in a globally resonant foodscape discourse in which the kitchen, the maternal body, memory, and cultural authenticity are contested and reclaimed through the act of cooking.

## 2. Food as Cultural Grammar: Levi-Strauss, Barthes, and the Semiotics of Macher Jhol

Claude Levi-Strauss’s culinary triangle — the raw, the cooked, and the rotten — posits that cooking is not merely a nutritional act but the very marker of the transition from nature to culture: “not only does cooking mark the transition from nature to culture, but through it and by means of it, the human state can be defined with all its attributes.”<sup>2</sup> In *Macher Jhol*, this transition is literalized in Dev’s obsessive quest to source the right variety of fish from the right vendor in the right Kolkata neighborhood market. The film’s camera lingers lovingly over the raw ingredients — the gleaming scales of fresh rohu, the pungent spices, the golden turmeric — before they are transformed through the precise cultural technology of Bengali cooking into the cooked, the civilized, the meaningful. To cook *macher jhol* correctly is, in Levi-Straussian terms, to perform one’s cultural humanity.

For Barthes, food is “an organic system integrated into its specific type of civilization,” and understanding its constituent units requires a transformational analysis of particular foodways.<sup>3</sup> The dish *macher jhol* in Gupta’s film operates precisely as such a system: its preparation is governed by what the dissertation calls “a thread of continuous knowledge [that] underpins standards of traditional production, preparation and consumption, passed from one generation to the next.” Dev’s mother has internalized this grammar over decades; Dev himself must re-learn it, decoding its logic through his professional palate — a palate trained in Paris but homesick for Kolkata. The film thus dramatizes the Barthesian insight that food is simultaneously a system of communication, “a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behavior.”<sup>4</sup>

## 3. Diaspora, Double Consciousness, and the ‘Food Voice’

The paper draws substantially on W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness” — “the consciousness of what one is in oneself (self-consciousness) as opposed to the cultural image or stereotype imposed by the racism of others”<sup>5</sup> — to theorize the Chicana experience of negotiating between two cultures. The concept translates with striking fidelity to Dev’s situation in *Macher Jhol*. A Bengali man who has spent thirteen years cooking French haute cuisine in Paris, Dev embodies a postcolonial double consciousness: he is at once a world-renowned chef who commands professional authority in the European culinary establishment and a son who cannot reproduce the single most important dish of his own cultural inheritance. His Michelin-starred skill renders him, paradoxically, an amateur in his mother’s kitchen.

Annie Hauck-Lawson’s concept of “food voice” — which “crystallises the dynamic, creative, symbolic, and highly individualised ways that food serves as a channel of communication”<sup>6</sup> — illuminates the film’s emotional core. Dev’s mother’s food voice has been silenced by illness; her craving for *macher jhol* is less a dietary request than a demand

for cultural recognition, for the reassurance that her son still speaks the language of home. Dev's entire journey is a recovery of that lost voice: through sourcing, tasting, adjusting, and finally perfecting his version of the dish, he re-enters the communicative grammar of Bengali domesticity. The film powerfully dramatises the dissertation's argument that "like language, the tangled sense associated with food and cooking continues to be in a constant state of flux, undergoing manipulation to deliver context-specific messages, at times articulating, and at times implying, the various requirements of the selves."

The film also engages the dissertation's framework of the foodscape. Dev's Kolkata foodscape — the fish markets, the neighbourhood vendors, the smoky home kitchens — is "globally local" in the dissertation's terms: it summons up the complexities of broad cultural and economic contexts (globalisation, diaspora, professionalisation of cooking) while remaining anchored in family dynamics and local social codes. Director Gupta himself noted that the idea for the film arose during a trip to Italy where he was struck by local restaurants serving the recipes of mothers and grandmothers — a discovery that resonates directly with the dissertation's Slow Food analysis.

#### **4. The Maternal Kitchen: Nurturance, Othermothering, and the Archetypal Mother**

The paper's extended analysis of the mother-figure — drawing on Adrienne Rich, Marianne Hirsch, and Carl Jung — provides a rich framework for reading *Macher Jhol*'s central relationship. For Rich, "mothering" often becomes patriarchal equipment even without the incumbents realising it; Jung locates the mother-complex in the individual unconscious and traces the collective unconscious as a site predominated by the ambivalence of the universal Madonna–Whore dichotomy.<sup>7</sup> Mother-figure possession by Gupta, in the person of Mamata Shankar, is depicted in classic Jungian terms as belonging to the Jungian Madonna of culinary wisdom, cultural continuity, and unconditional nurturance.

The paper notices that "social arrangements, cultural icons stereotype the nurturance as male activity, the giving of nurturance as a female one"<sup>8</sup> as noted by Caroline Walker Bynum, the paper finds that in *Macher Jhol*, the reverse is heart-wrenchingly true, that in this case the sick mother who has always served as a nurturance provider is now himself incapable of cooking, now the son is the one expected to play the role of the woman, the female cuisiner, the giver of nurturance. Similarly to *Like Water for Chocolate*, in which Tita practices what the dissertation terms "othermothering," or the authentic nurturance of those who never received it, the act of cooking to his mother is a form of spiritual repayment, rather than the expected feminine exchange of culinary nurturance.

The paper is also reflected in the film when it speculates that food is a mnemonic device: as Brinda Mehta in the conclusion of the dissertation argues, the smelling of a favorite dish is a form of "sensory reconstruction of the homeland island: a re-creation of the aromas of the homeland by the occupation of space through culinary space."<sup>9</sup> The desire of the mother of Dev to taste *macher jhol* is not a single whim but a psychic coming home - an effort to rebuild through taste and aroma a self that time and sickness have worn away. The food is the Proustian madeleine of Bengoli cultural identity.

#### **5. The Kitchen as Dichotomous Space: Incarceration and Empowerment**

Among the main arguments of the paper, one should note that the kitchen is a kind of “dichotomous space, in which women are imprisoned by long and fatiguing hours, and yet, which justifies them as independent agents of tradition and family unity”. In *Macher Jhol*, this formula is used gendered-inverse and revised. The kitchen is a place where Dev spent her life; it is where her mother used to exercise power, her knowledge and identity. Her disease is nothing less than a physical decline, but an alienation from the kitchen and contextualizing her selfhood.

Elsbeth Probyn’s argument that bodies “eat with vigorous class, ethnic and gendered appetites, mouth machines that ingest and regurgitate, articulating what we are, what we eat, and what eats us”<sup>10</sup> is cinematically embodied in the film’s treatment of Dev’s professional body in conflict with his domestic one. In Paris, his body is a precision instrument of haute cuisine; in Kolkata, it is awkward, humbled, estranged from the rhythms of the home kitchen. The film’s drama is precisely the re-education of that professional body — its return to the tactile, sensory knowledge of the domestic foodscape.

The study’s argument that cooking fosters “place-making and identity formation, reformation, negotiation” and that “instead of feeling confined, the kitchen becomes a platform from where women revolt, rebel, resist” finds an interesting cross-gender echo in *Macher Jhol*. For Dev, the act of mastering *macher jhol* is not an act of resistance against patriarchy, as it is for Tita or Delfina, but rather an act of resistance against the forces of globalisation, professionalisation, and cultural amnesia that have alienated him from his roots. The kitchen becomes his site of recovery — not empowerment in the feminist sense, but re-membering in the Jungian sense: a reassembly of a fragmented cultural self.

## 6. Authenticity, Slow Food, and the Politics of Culinary Memory

The study’s extensive engagement with the Slow Food Movement — as a reactionary force against “the forces of globalised consumer culture — born of mechanical reproduction, the green revolution, giant agribusiness” — is directly applicable to *Macher Jhol*. Dev’s insistence on sourcing the correct variety of fresh fish from the right market vendor, on using his mother’s spice ratios rather than his professional instincts, on taking the time that the dish demands, positions him squarely within the Slow Food ethos. As Denise Chavez declares in *A Taco Testimony*: “Mexican food takes a certain amount of time to cook. If you don’t have the time, don’t cook it.”<sup>11</sup> The substitution of ‘Bengali’ for ‘Mexican’ leaves the sentiment unchanged: *macher jhol* demands time, attention, and emotional presence.

The paper draws on Walter Benjamin’s concept of the ‘aura’ to theorise the Slow Food Movement’s attempt to retrieve the “cult of the original and authentic flavours of the past” — “in order to bring us into the presence of the ‘aura’.”<sup>12</sup> Dev’s entire culinary quest is Benjaminian: the dish he seeks is the ‘authentic’ *macher jhol* — not the technically superior version a Michelin-starred chef could produce, but the irreproducible original that carries in its flavours the ‘aura’ of his mother’s kitchen, her hands, and her love. The movie is painfully cognizant of the fact that one cannot regain this aura entirely. *Dev Macher Jhol* is not a reconstruction, a translation, a palimpsest of loss and longing (which is, indeed, what lends it its emotional power).

The paper also warns against the “bourgeois fetishization of memories” in diasporic food narratives, and *Macher Jhol* is not entirely exempt from this critique. The nostalgia that Dev experiences is a privileged kind of it: he is a high-paid celebrity chef, and he can fly home, spend the days sourcing high-quality ingredients. The warm cinematography and the defence of artisanal food preparation in the film risk aestheticising poverty and erasing the class dimensions of the culinary culture that the dissertation, following Goody and Mintz, demands. However, even here, the poignancy of the film, the recurrent failures of Dev, his modesty in the face of the awareness of his mother, his awareness that these processes of professional mastery are no approach to close culture, justifies the nostalgia of the movie.

### **7. Food, Identity, and the Bengali Foodscape: Towards a Comparative Framework**

The paper opens by tracing its genesis in a Bengali researcher’s recognition of deep structural affinities between Indian and Mexican foodscapes: the parallel between tacos and Indian rolls, tortillas and rotis, quesadillas and samosas. *Macher Jhol* provides an opportunity to close that autobiographical and theoretical loop: to apply to a Bengali food narrative the same interpretive machinery that the dissertation developed for Chicana texts.

The parallels are illuminating. Like *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Macher Jhol* uses food as the primary vehicle of emotional communication between characters who cannot or will not speak directly to each other. Like *A Taco Testimony*, it testifies to the custom of associating food with mothers in immigrant families, where “immigrants and their children glorified their mothers as ‘feast makers’ and culinary artists, in words that emphasized the warm sensuality that linked food to maternal love.”<sup>13</sup> Like both Chicana texts, it positions cooking as a form of cultural resistance against the homogenising forces of globalisation and mass-produced food culture.

Where *Macher Jhol* departs from the Chicana paradigm is in its gendering of culinary agency. The dissertation’s feminist framework foregrounds women’s seizure of the kitchen as a site of resistance against patriarchal domestication. In Gupta’s film, the kitchen is already a feminised space of maternal authority that a man must humbly enter. The dish does not empower Dev in the political sense that cooking empowers Tita or Delfina; rather, it humbles him, draws him back into relation, and ultimately reintegrates him into the family and cultural fabric he abandoned. This suggests that the food-studies framework developed in the dissertation has genuine cross-cultural generativity — it can illuminate Bengali food narratives as readily as Mexican American ones, while remaining sensitive to the specificities of each cultural context.

### **8. Conclusion: ‘Heaven is Memory’ — The Discursive Self and the Bowl of Fish**

“Heaven is memory, I think,” Denise Chavez writes in *A Taco Testimony*.<sup>14</sup> The sentence might be used as the epigraph of *Macher Jhol*. The whole emotional structure of the film is based on the assumption that food is the unfaithfulness to collective memory, the most sensory route to remembering the self once lost in the process of migration and ambition. At the end of the dissertation: A potent voice of the individuated self, “food is also the voice of the discursive self which is created in the process of negotiating conflicting value systems, race, class, culture-ethnicity and lastly gender”.

On Macher Jhol, the following formulation has, then, the effect of making the film a prolonged meditation on that discursive self of the Bengali diaspora the discursive self which is constituted by the negotiating of professional cosmopolitanism of Paris and the communal domesticity of Kolkata, by the haute cuisine of Le Cordon Bleu and the ancestral wisdom of the domestic kitchen, by the cooked in the Levi-Straussense of the culturally transformed and the 'raw' in the emotional and emotional requirement which is beyond all professional ability to sublimate. The bowl of macher jhol, which Dev finally sets before his mother, is not just a dish but in the fullest theoretical meaning of that term: it is a grammar, a letter written in the language that they both speak.

The theoretical framework of the paper that has been formed by analyzing the Chicana food narratives, therefore, shows that it can be used cross-culturally in the Bengali film scene. It is because, as the dissertation states, Food Studies is navigating through "uncharted territory and must map unfamiliar territory in its inassimilable plurality and disciplinary promiscuity"- and Macher Jhol is exactly one of those uncharted territories: a film, which, almost desperately, is trying to question what it means to cook for the person who initially taught you the concept of food as love.

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