

‘Food that increases at-homeness’: Migrant’s food-nostalgia in selected partition narratives

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Introduction:

Following the Partition of British India, millions of migrants—like my grandparents—were uprooted from ancestral homes and compelled to relocate across newly drawn borders, carrying with them not only material remnants of their past lives but also memories of familiar foods. For many of them, these memories remain intimately tied to how a sense of home is reconstituted after displacement. Within such homes, long before I embarked on as an ethnographer, I observed that food often functions as a site where sensory traces—of taste, smell, and texture—magically conjure up what otherwise appears to be irretrievably lost. In these food-centred recollections, an already past seems to intrude upon the present, as though time itself had loosened its linear progression. The clock that hung above our table had always been slightly out of sync with the time of the nation. It is in this sense that Bodh Prakash’s argument—that the nostalgic “memory of partition” can “imaginatively reorder place and time” (Prakash 2012, 23)—remains true particularly when such memory resists the singular and stabilised narratives endorsed by postcolonial nation-states.

In general, nostalgia gains specific relevance for the migrant communities because migrants are more likely to experience, as Parvaneh observed analysing Bhaba's work, a "half life," inhabiting disjunctive time spheres (Parvaneh 2016, 157). And, nostalgia drives migrants to repeat the prior patterns of life that enables them to find "anchor," "continuity" and meaningfulness of life through commensality or the collective self (Arcadu et al. 2025; Tierney 2012, 121). Especially, while nostalgia can be of added importance for the displaced communities, it is indeed a universal phenomenon concerning the passing of time. Linda Hutcheon noted, "It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia's power, for conservatives and radicals alike" (Hutcheon and Valdés 2000, 31). For migrants, however, this very inaccessibility of the past may open up possibilities to create a space in which alternative futures can be imagined. This is why nostalgia, I think, has the potential to become politically generative, enabling what Hamilton describes as efforts to sustain "the political project of the oppressed" (Hamilton 2008, 67). Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia provides an important framework here. While restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct a lost home as a stable and continuous entity, reflective nostalgia dwells within fragmentation, ambivalence, and inconclusiveness (Boym 2001, xviii). It does not attempt closure. Instead, it allows the coexistence of longing and critical awareness. Building on this distinction, scholars such as Dennis Walder and Anindya Raychaudhuri have demonstrated how nostalgia, situated within contexts of displacement, marginalisation and "historical inequalities," may acquire a counter-hegemonic potential as nostalgic memory conducts a "reordering of the present" (Walder 2009, 944; Raychaudhuri 2018, 12). For Raychaudhuri, nostalgia's home-making impulse is neither fixed nor conservative; it is fluid, adaptive, and capable of transforming oppressive structures into spaces of more egalitarian belonging (Raychaudhuri 2018, 15). Additionally, Jill Bradbury's insight—that nostalgia may also be a longing for futures that never came—becomes particularly suggestive for the present

inquiry (Bradbury 2012, 342). It allows us to think of nostalgia not only as in relation to the past, but as a temporal orientation that marches forward. Building on these perspectives, this paper conceptualises nostalgia as a form of mourning that operates across time: it is directed toward a home that is at once remembered and projected.

We can fit this concept of nostalgia within the broader historical context of post-Partition modernity in South Asia. Ananya J. Kabir notes, the colonial modernity and the formation of postcolonial nation-states priorly disrupted “emotional contracts” between communities and the past. In contrast to European models of nationhood, where belonging emerged through gradual cultural consolidation, South Asian migrants acquired national belonging at the “expense” of other forms of belonging (Kabir 2013, 21-22). Additionally, the national subjectivity portrayed following Partition was not only about incarceration imposed by national borders but it was also concerned with the reinforcement of internal divisions based on identities—class, caste, gender, and ethnicity—many of which had previously been institutionalised under colonial rule.

Gyanendra Pandey observes, those who refused to conform to the state-sponsored narratives of national identity were frequently subjected to exclusion (Pandey 2001, 160). The demand for assimilation thus became embedded within the very structure of belonging, producing subjects whose identities were expected to align with a singular nationalist template. Migrants, by virtue of their histories, problematises this normalising tendency. They invoke connections with spaces kept outside the border and a time already gone, after which according to nationalists a brand new era began following the border enforcement. It is here that migrants’ food acquires a particular significance. While according to Kabir (2013, 22) displacement entails the loss of region, place, community, and material resources, culinary memory remains portable. And, food memory carries within it traces of earlier worlds, even when it functions on new conditions.

This inquiry is not detached from my personal investment. Having grown up in migrant households, and belonging to what may be called a post-memory generation of Partition, I have read, listened to and later collected narratives in which loss and affirmation coexist in complex ways. I think the afterlives of Partition remain deeply embedded in everyday experience across South Asia, but within these experiences, there also persist forms of connection that foster the decisiveness of division. In the search of an antidote to that, I used food nostalgia as a conceptual framework to closely read a selection of texts to examine how food nostalgia becomes instrumental in reimagining belonging within the fractured landscapes of Southeast Asia. The interviews used in the work were collected by me on behalf of the 1947 Partition Archive. The novel I read here was originally written in Bangla. There is no English translation available of the text, so the relevant sections have been translated by me for the purpose of the paper. While translating I have maintained the Bengali syntactic pattern and have kept Bengali words, often explaining its meaning and significance in English. Oral history and fiction, despite the opposition existing between private and public representation of memory are used simultaneously, because these two types always inform each other and share a dialectical relationship in case of any representation of Partition memory which naturally begins with an “I”. My intention is to trace the narrators’ subjective control or the lack of it upon the food memory, particularly concerning the self and home-making in the present. Finding belongingness or making home, is an extremely resilient act given the migrants precarious experience of homelessness. Since it is an entirely mnemonic process, narratives become my primary field of investigation, particularly because it keeps track of the exerted control upon memory.

I have dealt only with 4 interviews and 1 novella, which is in no way a list of exhaustive primary material. But I am not using them to claim that migrants make home or fail to do so. In general, to suggest that belongingness that comes with food nostalgia is complete, would be

misleading. After all, the structural conditions that produce displacement—inequality, territorial confinement, and exclusion—continue to persist. In turn, a major point of inquiry would be to find the tension between the two, of belonging and non belonging. I expect to find through this practice the “sense of inadequacy” that Walder suggests nostalgia carries, one that reflects both the impossibility of restoration and the desire for something more (Walder 2010, 12). If this tension can be found, crucial would be to unravel the productive potential of food nostalgia, drawing on Bloch’s conception of the world as fundamentally unfinished to conceptualise migrants’ engagement with food memory as part of the ongoing process of becoming. Then, the following couple of sections are expected to show that these nostalgic practices do not replicate the past in any simple way. They involve processes of adaptation, hybridisation, and selective retrieval. They create spaces of transcultural exchange that challenge the authority of national histories. At times, they assume an oneiric quality, where memory and imagination converge. At other moments, they manifest everyday practices—cooking, sharing, and feeding—that subtly reconfigure social relations.

“Today’s Menu”: Food, Memory, and the Reconfiguration of Home

Indubalar Bhater Hotel (Indubala’s restaurant for rice-based meals), a novel written by Kollol Lahiri, does not open with a dramatic moment of displacement. Instead, insidiously “misfit” Indubala, a village girl, arrives in Kolkata from Khulna through marriage, not actually as a refugee. The terms of her arrival that were arranged hurriedly by her family members in anticipation of Partition, however situate her within the backdrop of the historical rupture. Her shift from Khulna to Kolkata is not geographical; it reorganises her relationship to language, food, domestic space, and even her own body. Her husband’s aversion to her East Bengali identity—her dialect, culinary practices, rural habits—makes her feel improper and out of place. The domestic interior

does not absorb her difference; rather magnifies it with an abusive conjugal relationship. Violence, both physical and affective, becomes one of the first registers through which she encounters the city. If this is a home, it is one in which she is not permitted to belong with dignity. However, the novel resists narrating this condition solely through suffering. Instead, it turns insistently toward food. The structure of the novel itself reflects this shift. Chapters are organised around specific dishes: each preparation unfolds alongside a metadramatic fragment of the past, an experience of the present. Time does not move forward in a linear sequence. It gathers, folds, and returns. One such moment is triggered by pumpkin blossoms:

The garden connected through her backdoor is illuminated with pumpkin blossoms, with moist and dew precipitated. Amidst spring, a cuckoo chirps in this desert of woods, stones and irons. Indubala wipes her arm upon the tender blossoms. No one knows how, but that small garden in the stuffy blind lanes of old Kolkata suddenly became a yard located at Kolapota village in Khulna. Where dried date leaves were being slowly burned in a clay-made fireplace, and sweet pumpkin blossom fritters were sizzlingly fried. Before serving her grandma used to put some poppy seeds carefully on those. She usually kept waiting with her brothers, with bowls in their hands. In a moment, today's menu changed. Plucking a bucket of pumpkin blossoms, the old lady returned and wrote with chalk on the blackboard: Rice, lentil soup, sweet pumpkin blossom fritter, mastered fish, and wild olive chutney. (My translation.) (Lahiri 2020, 10-11)

The passage begins in Kolkata: cramped, unhomely, dim and enclosed. The “blind lanes” signal a lack of space, the density of the human population, which are characteristics of the city's older neighbourhoods. Within this carceral arrangement, the expected continuity of the present gets interrupted. The pumpkin blossoms refuse to remain contained

within their immediate temporal allocation. What is striking is that the narrative does not say that the garden reminds her of Kolapota. Instead, the garden becomes Kolapota. The transformation is immediate and inexplicable: “No one knows how.” This refusal to rationalise the shift is important. It preserves the intensity of the moment without reducing it to metaphor. The transformation, however, does not remain internal. It leads to an action:

Plucking a bucket of pumpkin blossoms, the old lady returned and wrote with chalk on the blackboard: Rice, lentil soup, sweet pumpkin blossom fritter... (Lahiri 2020, 11)

Here, the pumpkin blossom functions as a sensory trigger that collapses geographical and temporal distance. It begins as an object rooted in the present but is immediately re-signified through memory. By placing pumpkin blossom fritters on “today’s menu,” Indubala’s memory is not preserved as something absent but reactivated. This movement exemplifies what Svetlana Boym describes as the spatialisation of time, where nostalgia allows one to “revisit time as space.” Two distinct temporalities—rural past and urban present—are superimposed here. Chances are that the values embedded in the remembered past, particularly those of sharing, would also be reintroduced into the present through culinary practice. They are articulated explicitly, particularly in Indubala’s recollections of a legend to her granddaughter: ‘Unannounced guests are gifts... If you do not feed them, crops do not grow.’ (Lahiri 2020, 13)

This must not be mistaken as a remembered saying. It imparts an ethical standard that structures her present, carrying with it the memory of a place of abundance where, as she recalls, no one returned unfed. But in Kolkata—shaped by famine, scarcity, and class division—that world no longer exists. Still, something of it persists. Her rice hotel does not abolish inequality. It cannot. Instead, it introduces a different ethical paradigm—a space where identity is not

immediately determined by religion, caste, or political affiliation. The remembered ethic of hospitality becomes a way of interrupting the present. This is why she tries to also feed those who arrive penniless. She does not always ask for payment. Of course, generally, she cannot afford it. The encounter with Alok sharpens this dynamic.

Alok lights a cigarette. 'As it seems you don't know anything. How can you feed us without knowing anything? Do you know what the whole city calls us? Indubala nods. She doesn't know. Alok firmly says, Nakshal (ultra-left communists)! Indubala in a moment remembers that today at noon the clerks from the collector's office were whispering among them: A few boys have been murdered...at the bank of the Ganges. Everyone is a Nakshal...they will change everything after the revolution. Indubala eyeballs Alok. 'When you first arrived, knocking at my door, Did I ask your identity? Why are you informing me today? My mother used to say, unannounced guests do not have any identity. They are God.' Alok could be a smart boy, but he failed to reply back or even face Indubala. Though he is deceiving a couple of shrewd detectives, and the whole department is currently chasing him in the streets of the city... the boy on that night could not have stared back at that uneducated, simple, rural, widow. He just muttered, 'I do not believe in god, comrade. But you need to be here. Your existence validates ours.' (My translation) (Lahiri 2020, 20-21)

Alok arrives marked by his relationship with the state, as a representative of its counteractive politics. But inside Indubala's home, this politics loses the urgency. When Alok identifies himself in ideological terms, Indubala refuses the relevance of such categorisations within her home. She responds instead through a different ethical register: that of unconditional hospitality. For Alok, this is disorienting and disarming. The categories through which he is

habituated to navigate the city — class identity and political affiliation — do not operate in the same way here. Indubala actually has exuded a space in which the hierarchical and conflict-ridden logic of the external world, particularly antagonism, is temporarily suspended. For Alok, this space represents not merely refuge but an alternative social possibility—one in which the conditions that necessitate political revolt appear momentarily absent. Alok says: “You need to be here, comrade. Your existence validates ours.” (Lahiri 2020, 21)

Indubala’s home, then, can be called an affective counter-space that reorders the terms of belonging. This reordering is achieved through the selective and creative deployment of memory. Food, in this context, functions as what might be termed a portable archive: it carries fragments of a lost world while allowing them to be reconstituted within new material and social conditions. This form of belonging appears in the oral narratives too, which I collected while pursuing an internship at 1947 Partition Archive. Purnima’s account is particularly telling (Mukherjee 2023). After migrating from Khulna, my grandmother, Purnima lived in what she describes as a “pigeonhole” in Dumdum. Her brothers do not support her education. Then, one day, she cooks: Dui Kumror Ghonto, Chingrir Bora, Potoler Dolma... (Mukherjee 2023). The dishes are specific, regionally marked and tied to East Bengali culinary practices. They were prepared for prospective in-laws of his brother, but their impact extends beyond the immediate purpose. “That East-Bengali couple... recognised we live in a home... like their home back at the bank of Bhairab.” (Mukherjee 2023)

Recognition is the key here. The space itself has not changed. It still is small, crowded, and materially limited. But through food, it becomes legible as home—that is not because it replicates Khulna, but because it evokes it. And, what follows? ‘After a week, my elder brother appeared at my school... he was ready to pay my fees.’ Food does not directly cause this shift, but it participates in it. It reconfigures the emotional and relational dynamics within the household by allowing Purnima to be seen differently— as someone capable of producing value, connection,

and recognition. Anima's narrative carries this further into a different geographical context: 'In Jharkhand... everything was unfamiliar... But after dinner... all the hassle of the day could end as it did in our very own home.'(Ghosh 2023)

The phrase "our very own" does not refer to Jharkhand becoming home. It refers to a temporary enclosure within it—a space produced through cooking and eating where estrangement has momentarily ceased. The dish—*kochupata diye chingri* (Prawn cooked with taro leaves)—is not identical to what was prepared in Sirajganj, Anima's real home. Ingredients are also different. Conditions differ too. But, the affective power of food lies not in its authenticity but in its capacity to evoke the bygone. The memory attaches itself to the act of cooking and eating, allowing the experience to be partially reconstituted. Visibly, in these narratives, Indubala returns to Khulna, Purnima takes others to Khulna or brings Khulna to a place that her elder brother ironically mentions as "not Khulna", Anima inserts their Sirajganj in a culturally different place, Jharkhand, and Anjuman goes back at NWFS (now in Pakistan) through smells (Zafar 2024). These imply that food can initiate a process of metaphoric homecoming, a feeling that the land with which migrants have increased literal distance across space and time, as though imaginatively is appearing in tangible proximity.

Kavita Punjabi, narrating her family history, says that in the form of a dish, Shikarpuri Khoya, a chunk of 'earlier' life was carried by one of her family members, Sumana. "Even when the family scattered—my parents, for instance, shifted to Calcutta from Kashmir after their marriage—she kept the family connected. She carried some of the earlier life into our extended family with delicacies like Shikarpuri Khoya" (Ray 2017, para. 3). Uniting families is an action that Sumana carries out because she possesses the magical and transformative memory of that dish. Such action of uniting family is a desire to receive the affective thrust of the food memory in order to relive the

past. Purnima after relocating from Khulna, for almost 40 years could not have connected with any of her family members. One day, her daughter (Namita, my mother) invited her friends from the Chandan Nagar Mountaineering Club which she was part of, for a get-together and lunch at their house in Baranagar. Purnima knew none of the visitors, but Shankar Chatterjee, one of the guests, after having lunch which Purnima cooked for everyone, asked:

Shankar asked me, how could you perfectly cook the same mutton preparation that I used to have in my home? Where are you from? I said I am from Khulna, Chatterjee Family. But I was astonished, well, how could he know this preparation? This is something our family members only know. My great grandmother's recipe, my mother kept that as a secret. But increasing my wonder, he said he too is from the Khulna and Chatterjee family. As I asked his father's name, he said Girija Mohon Chatterjee, who happens to be my elder brother! (Mukherjee 2023)

What helped two family members of a fragmented family reconnect after relocation, is a simple mutton curry using Ghee (Organic butter) and Garam Masala (a type of Indian spice combination), in which Purnima added a special spice of her familial heritage. Purnima inherited the knowledge of that spice, and according to her, it changes the 'smell and colour' of the dish. Shikarpuri Khoya kept the memory of a united family back in rural Kashmir, and Sumana cooked that dish and kept on reuniting family members. Purnima's narrative more explicitly shows how it is done, and with what power. Her power is stored in the secret spice that restores certain pastness that emanates in the form of a recognisable smell and vision for people who share the same past. If the memory of a united family resonating with the lost home is what that the mutton curry reserved, cooking becomes a credible means to partially reinstate the connection again, reducing the distance between the home left there and letting that lost home in a way enter into the home that is anchored in the present.

I argue, across these accounts, a pattern emerges. Food does not transport individuals back to their place of origin. It creates moments where distance becomes negotiable. Anindya Raychaudhuri, drawing on Benjamin, suggests nostalgia can generate a “sense of nearness” (Raychaudhuri 2018, 78). This nearness is not geographical. It does not collapse borders in any literal sense. But it alters how distance is felt. Khulna or Sirajganj does not come closer in miles. It becomes accessible in another way. In other words, spatial and temporal distances are not erased but reconfigured, allowing the lost home to appear in partial and affective proximity. Anjuman’s account of Khatai (a type of cookie) makes this particularly clear:

I would not tell these Khatai is as authentic as Khanpuri Khatai, that I used to have had in my childhood before we migrated to GTM Nagar in Mumbai. In that dry Khanpur... herbal tea and Khanpuri Khatai made a fascinating combination... But you know what — that fluffiness I dreamt of bringing here, is not easy to come by... You simply can not bring that fluffiness with any oven. I never returned there, yet whenever I munch Khatai, I feel ecstatic. Who knows who sprinkles water from the Swat River? It is as if I will listen to some fine Pashto lyrics... (Zafar 2024)

The emphasis is straightaway on difference. The Khatai she prepares is marked as “not authentic,” but its affective power is not diminished. The inability to reproduce the exact “fluffiness” of the original becomes part of the experience itself. What is produced is not a degraded version of the past, but a new culinary form that carries memory. This distinction is important when placed alongside Anita Mannur’s formulation of culinary nostalgia as a relation structured by distortion. In fact, Mannur’s emphasis on the present as a “distorted” version of the past risks assuming that memory operates through a desire for mimetic fidelity—as if there exists an original, stable image, in her words, “unchanging and enduring cultural essence” against

which all subsequent recreations are measured (Mannur 2010, 31). Anjuman's narrative suggests otherwise. The past is not preserved as immutable; it is encountered through transformation. Rather than distortion, what appears here is a process of reworking—closer to what Svetlana Boym identifies as the coexistence of multiple temporal layers. A similar movement can be traced in Indubala's cooking. Over time, she incorporates both *Bangal* (East Bengali) and *Ghoti* (West Bengali) culinary practices: 'Despite initial aversion, her mother-in-law teaches her West Bengali cooking, which Indubala continues after her death, amalgamating it with her own methods. (Lahiri 2020, 18)

The resulting dishes do not belong exclusively to either tradition. They are hybrid—marked by negotiation, adaptation, and inheritance. But, they continue to evoke memories of East Bengal. What matters is whether food can rejuvenate an affective relation to that origin while existing within altered conditions. Food, here, becomes less a vehicle of preservation than a site of transcultural exchange. Shibani Dasgupta's narrative extends this argument beyond food into objects and practices (Dasgupta 2023). Her narrative also indicates that subjects gripped by food nostalgia can resist idealisation and still keep track of lost times. She uses a big black "boti" (a sharp blade) that her grandmother brought from Rangpur, now in Bangladesh: "I do not know why she brought that, but when I cut vegetables with it, a scene emerges in my mind. My grandmother, wearing a red-bordered white saree — chunking an orange pumpkin on the open space in front of our clay-made house..." (Dasgupta 2023) This blade now has turned into a nostalgic object. Shibani still chooses to use it for non-vegetable preparations as it was used before in her grandmother's time. She says, "I never stopped using that boti for Nirimishi (vegetarian) dishes. Being a Hindu widow, my grandmother used to keep that sanctified from any Non-vegetable touch". Interestingly, she adds, "I do eat meat even after being a widow. But I have maintained her rule about using that boti." (Dasgupta 2023) It can be recognised that the translation of the past concerning this object is selective. She retains the practice of

using the boti for vegetable based preparations but she is a meat-eater herself, she adds, “even after being a widow”, thereby, she rejects the broader normative framework that governed her grandmother’s life. What is preserved is not the entire past, but consciously selected elements of it. Different experiential dynamics, ideological standpoints and freshly acquired ethical views, after relocation restrict a simple restoration of the past, recognising its impossibility and unjustness. Indubala’s own practice reflects a similar tension between inheritance and transformation. She gains economic independence through her rice hotel, yet remains acutely aware of its limits: “Had she had the capacity, Indubala would have fed everyone without any exchange of money...”(Lahiri 2020, 33-34).

The desire to feed all persists, but it cannot be fully realised. She accepts money from most customers. Again, this adjustment marks a shift from restoration to negotiation. Her home becomes a space of transformation in more than economic terms. It draws from the memory of the abundance of rural life but rejects the oppressive structures embedded within it—feudal hierarchies, gendered control, and communal anxieties. Her relationship to this past, I trust, is ambivalent. She does not seek to return to it. She works with what can be carried forward. Other narrators also reinforce this sense of incompleteness in restoration and also in memory itself.

Purnima says: “I do not have any exact recipe... to produce the same taste... What makes me remember... is not exactly the taste perhaps” (Mukherjee 2023). Anjuman, when asked to describe the taste of Khatai, admits that she cannot fully articulate it. Shibani modifies recipes due to the absence of ingredients. Purnima does not remember the taste her mother and grandmother produced but noteworthy that does not restrict her from making her elder brother’s place a home or reconnecting with Shankar. Indubala, despite economic constraints, sustains practices of feeding that exceed strict exchange. A restaurant in Karachi can evoke “an old Delhi” to a blogger even when its owner

acknowledges how much has changed. Fact is, as Salman Rushdie once remarked, the displaced are “not gifted with total recall.” (Rushdie 1991, 11). And, that is precisely the point, one does not have to perfectly remember to reinstitute the at-homeness, nor can the partial bringing of it completely transform the conditions of unhomeliness, but still a fortification against malevolent modernity can be achieved, and the borders inscribed within and outside the nations would seem nearly melted inside these homes with the power of revitalised temporal sentiment of the lost.

What emerges, then, is a model of nostalgia that cannot be neatly framed within a single category. The distinction proposed by Svetlana Boym—between restorative and reflective nostalgia—remains useful, but insufficient. In these narratives, elements of both coexist. There is a desire to retain, but also an acceptance of transformation. There is longing, but also critique. The past is neither fully restored, nor entirely relinquished. Food, in this context, does not have to be “authentic.” It functions instead as a palimpsest, layered by overwritten temporalities. In other words, by setting a contemporaneous gaze on the culture of a left geography, memory has been imperfectly put on to use with creative potency by these narrators. The aesthetic value of these narratives is to engage hierarchically aligned, alien cultures and the mainstream in the nation-states, which represents the transformation of traditional purity, but at the same time they testaments to the discourse of modernity that has been also subjectively controlled, concerning the attachment to the tradition. Therefore, the tensions between individual creativity and the assimilative pressures of nation-states—and between tradition and modernity—shape how these narrators experience and articulate the layered affect of hybridised food which overpowers the dominant structures of feeling that exist in modernity. At the same time, these stories write a history of reciprocation and transcultural dialogue after the partition. These narrativised food and home-making, in turn I think, interpolates the official narratives of postcolonial nation-building to pinpoint the indecisiveness of imperial act of partition.

Marinated Mutton: Processuality of Home-making and the futuristic belongingness

The narratives analysed in the previous section, represent how the primeval qualities of home were contrived by putting memory's half-forgotten corpora into creative use, despite the conditions of not-belongingness. That is to say, the cultural representation of the new forms of belongingness that emerge in the modernity, should not be understood as completely fulfilling for these migrant subjects, which might be 'practically' impossible to find, as long as the deep structures of inequality embedded in the postcolonial nation-states and the condition of territorial confinement continue to exist. It might sound slightly counterintuitive, but my contention is that partial belongingness does have radical possibilities for these migrant narrators. This radical possibility will only be visible, should we acknowledge the coexistence of both the possibilities, of belonging and not-belonging. I think that is also what the undoing of the entwinement between home-making and conservativeness should entail. If the reflective counterpart of nostalgia produces homes, it signifies finding of a belongingness that is not contingent on the attitude of replication, one that is more creative and productive. And, a creative home-making does not have to delimit the possibility of not belonging. Recognising this coexistence can be particularly important while examining the utopian dream in these narratives affected by food nostalgia. Generally, imagination is an associated component of inhabitation, as Bachelard thinks, particularly when one looks for a place to belong and struggles to get it: "...whenever life seeks to shelter, protect, cover or hide itself, the imagination sympathises with the being that inhabits..." (Bachelard 2014, 5). This sympathy is how imagination strives to find the belongingness that has been lost or never was.

Towards the end of the novel, after making Chandrapuli, Indubala comes to the terrace.

Indubala, standing on the open terras was drenching in rain.
It seemed, along with her, her ancestral home is also

drenching — the climbing spinach trellis, the pomegranate plants, aromatic lemon, sugar apple plant, and piper chilli climbing the log of the coconut tree, all of them are being drenched. Does it still overflow there? Who knows? Does anyone catch white prawns with gamcha (a cotton-made indigenous towel)?... Constantly, she keeps on drowning in the rain. She prays, Thakur (God), let this drowning never come to an end! (Lahiri 2020, 78)

Indubala is actually drenching in Kolkata. Unreasonable would it be to think that it is also raining in her ancestral home in Khulna which is miles away from her present location. And, after a certain point, more illogically, she starts to drown in the rain, instead of being drenched. Leaning towards the realm of possibilities, being gripped by nostalgia, she does not have much to do with the rationality now, instead she is driven to imagine the coming of the complete belongingness at the expense of even pushing the boundary of the real, by conflating the times two places that belongs in two different nations. I would argue this passage shows the fundamental quality of dream, as time and places are conflated, as though the place signifies the time. The question—Does it still overflow there?—remains unanswered. It does not seek factual confirmation, rather opens a space of uncertainty. What follows is not recollection, but desire: ‘let this drowning never come to an end’. This is not a wish to return to the past. It is a wish to remain within a condition where separation no longer holds. The moment gestures toward something that has not yet been realised. It is here that Ernst Bloch’s understanding of the present as unfinished becomes useful as a way of naming what is already unfolding. The present, in these narratives, does not appear as complete. It is marked by lack—of continuity, of full belonging. And it is this lack that gives rise to imagination. Complete belongingness appears to her in a mode of continuous but never-ending arrival, replenishing the lack that never is entirely replenished. In turn, the home, having lost the anchor in the here and now, turns out to be a transitory mode of becoming, potentially unmoored.

But — where and when — I mean, aiming which spatiotemporal direction is the home conceptualised? For answering that I look into the spatio-temporal location of the dream in these narratives. In Anjuman's narrative, (quoted before) — the space which is being imagined, evoked by the taste of a different Khatai, is one in which 'Water of Swat river' would be sprinkled on her and she would listen to some fine Pashto lyrics. She is not remembering that water from Swat that had been sprinkled before, or that she heard music. It is through imagination that she seeks the possibility of belonging rather in a brand new time - where in response to her munching of Khatai in Mumbai, water and lyrics from Khyber Pakhtunwala would hover her around. I would argue these imaginary happenings take place in her futuristic projection. Both Anjuman and Indubala's visions conflate the past and boundless spatio-temporalities in the dreaming, where all 'remains' — the lost images and natural landscapes, are rejuvenated in another time-space junction. The functioning of imagination can be understood here as a concatenated action, of 'reception' and 'creative participation'. To find belongingness, Indubala and Anjuman first receive the image of the past and then participate in the "elemental unconscious that opens up a timeless future". Pashto lyrics, Swat river, the climbing spinach trellis, the pomegranate plants, aromatic lemon, sugar apple plant, piper chilli climbing the log of the coconut tree — all these images from the bygone spatiotemporal junction, I argue, enter in a repose, where the boundary between past and the time boundless, are blurred, so is the boundary between Khyber Pakhtunwala in Pakistan and Navi Mumbai in India or that of between Khulna in Bangladesh and Kolkata in India. Anima takes this process into another level as she can imagine an absent aroma that she used to have had in Sirajganj (Bangladesh), when she is in Jharkhand (India):

...I wish I had the chance to feed you Kumro Patar Ilish Paturi (Steamed Hilsa wrapped in Pumpkin leaf) that my mother used to have made in Jharkhand. Earlier, when we were in Sirajganj, she used Shaluk (Water lily) leaves for wrapping. I can't explain what was lost because of the lack of

water lily leaves, which we couldn't manage there. I think it is the mixing of the smell of Hilsa and those leaves, a typical aroma that used to submerge me whenever I ate that. Same preparation only with pumpkin leaves as a fact do not have that smell...' (Ghosh 2023)

If in Kumro Patar Ilish Paturi that lost smell image is absent, as Anima clearly states, then how can something absent submerge her? I think the presence of that aroma is in the realm of imagination. The reason I call her entrance is in the oneiric space is evident in the word 'dubie dae' (submerges me). The action word commonly is used to signify the action of causing something to be in a different reality than air, commonly an underwater reality. The submerging takes place by the means of imagining an aroma. The sense of lack in inhabiting the new modernity has been symbolically foregrounded through the absence. It is important to also note that Anima, Anjuman, and Indubala through their daydreams attempt to reside beyond the border, in a zone that will never be found on the maps, nor in the linearity of time. This utopian place may lack the exactitude of spatiotemporal location, but that lost aroma can be accessed even when it is factually not here. The lack of belongingness of the unfamiliar present, symbolised by that absence of aroma, has been replenished in the virtual home, at least the possibility of having it (as an imaginative feeling) has not been discarded.

So, nostalgia is primarily thought to be about the past, but my suggestion here is that it also has a pivotal role to play in thinking about the future. The reality that appears in these future-oriented dreams is certainly amorphous and uncertain, but it remains full of potential forms. What emerges, I argue, is a textual space of imagination—one in which it becomes possible to taste and smell a hierarchy-less context, momentarily transcending the territorial and affective entrapments of the nation. If this is the direction toward which these homes are moving, then such movement requires an anticipatory gaze—one that remains anchored in the present even as it reaches beyond it. This anticipatory

orientation can be found in Indubala's wish and prayer, in Anima's longing for an absent aroma, and in Anjuman's evocation of water being sprinkled from the Swat River. At the same time, it is sustained by a retrospective gaze toward the past, as discussed earlier. What takes shape, therefore, is not a linear movement between past and present, but a cyclical and recursive engagement with time. In this sense, the open-ended and forward-looking processuality of home-making begins to unsettle the Enlightenment notion of linear progress—one that historically functioned to detach colonised subjects from their cultural rootedness. The model of food nostalgia that I am elaborating here is distinctly postcolonial in this regard. It operates through a cyclical mobilisation of memory, one that never seeks completion in a teleological sense, but instead sustains an ongoing process of becoming.

I am hardly the first to observe such temporal configurations in postcolonial contexts. Bill Ashcroft observed that a circular relationship between multiple temporalities is already embedded within indigenous knowledge systems and has been manifested in postcolonial literature in general (Ashcroft 2012, 188). My purpose here, however, is to extend this insight by suggesting that nostalgia, in these narratives, becomes a condition for postcolonial utopianism. It interrupts the closure of history with the end of the empire, particularly the imperial narrative that sought to render the Partition as a final and irreversible rupture. By allowing fragments of an undivided past to reappear within future projections, these narratives do not aim at restoration. Instead, they open up the possibility of imagining new forms of belonging—forms that may or may not have existed before. It is in this sense that food nostalgia acquires its transformative potential. It does not simply recall; it reimagines. It does not stabilise history; it unsettles it. And in doing so, it begins to outline the contours of an alternative future—one that resists the fixity of borders and the closure imposed by national histories. Purnima's reflection offers a particularly evocative articulation of this temporal orientation: "Whenever I use that spice to marinate mutton (which brought Shankar back), I expect someone to connect again." (Mukherjee 2023)

The image of marination is instructive. The dish is not yet complete; it is in preparation. It carries within it the residue of memory, but also an anticipation of what might unfold. The act of cooking, in this sense, becomes a medium through which memory extends itself into the future. So, neither the memory of an undivided country nor its imagined future counterpart can be fully realised. And yet, both continue to shape the present. They allow these narrators to inhabit their homes as spaces of becoming—spaces that are continuously being prepared, much like the marinated dish that is always on the verge of being cooked, yet never entirely complete. The tangibility of this future orientation becomes visible in everyday practices. Indubala's ritual of enchantment before cooking—"May food be reserved for everyone!"—does not correspond to material reality (Lahiri 2020, 34). She does not possess the means to feed everyone. Yet this daily repetition of this wish introduces an ethical direction into her home-making. It gestures toward a condition that does not exist, but is nevertheless imagined as possible.

Similarly, her culinary practices extend beyond the confines of her own past. She cooks *Buirlir Dal*, a distinctly West Bengali dish, and shares Litti (Iconic Bihari Cousine) with her supplier Laxmi—foods that do not belong to her East Bengali memory. If her home were constructed solely through the replication of a lost past, such incorporation would be unlikely. Instead, what emerges is a space shaped by openness and exchange, where belonging is not restricted to origin. Home, then, cannot be understood as purely mnemonic. It is equally imaginative—an entity oriented toward a future that remains unrealised. Indubala's own admission—"Had she had the capacity, she would have fed everyone without any exchange of money"—makes this explicit (Lahiri 2020, 33). The impossibility of the condition does not negate its significance. On the contrary, it reveals the utopian impulse that animates her practice. This utopian orientation is not detached from memory. It is often grounded in it. Indubala's vision of food autonomy resonates with her recollection of a landscape marked by abundance, but it also notably raises a humanitarian political voice in a post-famine city.

Purnima's commitment to gender-inclusive education draws, in part, from the influence of her Nao-Kaka—"a school teacher, an advocate of girls' compulsory schooling". Later, Purnima reconfigures gender roles within her family: "My husband and I decided to go for alternative parenting... My daughters are highly educated, and my sons-in-law and grandsons are fantastic cooks" (Mukherjee 2023). These memories are not simply reproduced. They are reworked, often in tension with other elements of the past that are consciously left behind. This selective engagement is crucial. It ensures that the imagined future does not always unknowingly inherit the oppressive structures of the past. Feudal hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and communal exclusions do not re-enter uncritically, in other words, an ethical standard takes position with the passing of time. What is carried forward are those elements that can sustain more fairer and equitable forms of belonging. These are not complete transformations. They are partial, situated, and contingent. But they demonstrate that the imagined future is not entirely abstract. It begins to take shape within the present. In this sense, the homes that emerge through these practices can be understood as provisional sites—what Wright (2011, 37) would call "accessible waystations" — on the path toward an egalitarian world. They do not offer a finished model of that world, but provide fragments—small, situated experiments in reimagining belonging. It is precisely in this fragmentariness that their significance lies. These narratives do not claim to resolve the contradictions of modernity. They keep them open and refuse to give up the hope that another world is possible.

Conclusion

This nostalgia is far from any simplified return. It can be understood as an evolving tendency that combines memories of unbordered India with the aspiration for an inclusive, borderless future. Migrants' home, the outcome of this tendency, in its way of being processed in relation to this nostalgia, resurfaces the ghosts of an undivided past that today's nation-states want to bury, and thereby it retains the dream of the funeral of these post-Partition nation states, by being an expecting entity driven towards the aim of food

security, food autonomy, gender neutrality, and unrestrained mobility across the subcontinent. This dream is of a "better life," as Bloch argues in *The Principle of Hope*, "than that which has so far been given" (Bloch 1986, 5). Therefore, in the case of migrants' multiple lives, a realisable utopia can be understood as rectification of all the previous lives, including that of pre-colonial. Jill Bradbury extended an amazing metaphor, which I think can portray migrants' journey for finding belonging: "The mythical Ghanaian bird, Sankofa, flies forward while facing backward to gather the wisdom of the past" (Bradbury 2012, 342). I think, an inherent forward mobility is embedded in migrants' homes, it is more like a rolling stone, and they do not have to entirely lose the tie with the past. For a radical change of the bordered status quo, food nostalgia thus provides a crucial precondition: expanding the temporal scope of mnemonic sojourns, it functions multi-directionally and allows reimagination of history and the future. Of course, imagination of complete belongingness does not bring any real change in the situation, but without it, achievements, successes, partial belongingness, finding agency and excising autonomy in resettlement, that these memory narratives enumerate — could be entirely impossible, for utopia gives migrants something to hope for, without which they could sink in the quicksand of anxiety. Instead, mitigating the precarity of homeless conditions, what they do as an extremely resilient activity is that they exude homes across the borders involving a shared pattern of remembrance of an undividedness and the imagination of an alternative future. Indeed, the continuity of having the subcontinent unbordered might have apparently been interrupted in 1947, but the very mnemonic strategies of creating a corner in the world has the potential of defying the interruption and calling it merely inconclusive. Food nostalgia, I would suggest therefore, is a binding spirit that runs like a subterranean river between these conflicting nations.

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