

Published on 14, April - June 2026

ISSN:2320-4842 (P) 3049-2688 (O)

Edible Fluidities: Water, Gender, and the Politics of Identity in Culinary Narratives

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Abstract

Edible Fluidities: Water, Gender, and the Politics of Identity in Culinary Narratives analyzes the interlocked functions of food and water in constructing cultural remembrance, gendered work, and diasporic identity in recent fiction. Drawing on Amit Majmudar's *The Abundance*, Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Erica Bauermeister's *The School of Essential Ingredients*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, the study explores how water functions both materially and metaphorically within culinary narratives. Engaging postmodern narrative theory, ecofeminism, and diaspora studies, this article contends that water is greater than the background to foodways: it is a liquid arena where identity, resistance, and sustainability are worked out. The analysis shows that literary foodscapes represent kitchens and meals as spaces where women, migrants, and minority voices encounter environmental uncertainty and cultural dislocation. Through the tracing of water's symbolic and political meanings in these works, this paper brings to the fore how fluidities that are eaten disrupt rigid categories of tradition, belonging, and gender, providing new readings of the politics of identity in twenty-first-century literature.

Keywords: Water Politics, Culinary Identity, Gender and Food, Diaspora and Memory, Ecofeminism

Introduction

Water has always been one of literature's most eloquent metaphors, standing for renewal, peril, banishment, and home. In the classical literature of *The Odyssey*, it stands for risk and change, but in Indian thought, especially the Upanishads, it is sacred material essential for both survival and contemplation. More recently, interdisciplinary areas like the Blue Humanities, Hydropolitics, and Liquid Modernity have redefined water as a cultural and political medium that constructs identity, ecology, and social organization (Neimanis 2). These viewpoints insist that water is never a natural resource: it also functions as a dynamic force for shaping cultural memory, gender relations, and community resilience.

This discussion becomes more profound when examined from the perspective of food narratives, in which water's function is more than just functional. In the kitchen, water is as essential to cooking as it is to preserving customs, negotiating migration, and enacting gendered labor. Literature brings these dynamics into the forefront, illustrating how food and water in combination produce places of cultural survival, resistance, and transformation. This study focuses on four novels-Amit Majmudar's *The Abundance*, Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Erica Bauermeister's *The School of Essential Ingredients*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*-to examine how edible fluidities articulate identity and belonging across contexts of displacement and change.

In order to contextualise this analysis, the paper is informed by three interconnected viewpoints.

The following research questions are the key priority of this study:

1. How are the metaphoricity and materiality of water merged into stories of food?
2. How does water relate to sustainability, gender, and diaspora in these books?
3. Beyond representation, how do these books advance the political debate on water?

Postmodern narrative theory (Hutcheon, Baudrillard) points up water as a signifier at large, caught up in fractured identity and symbolic multiplicity. Ecofeminism (Shiva) points up the intersections between women's work, food sovereignty, and water politics, implying that kitchens can be spaces of both oppression and resistance. Last but not least, diaspora and cultural identity theory (Hall, Bhabha) uncovers how culinary and hydric practices facilitate hybridity, memory, and belonging in migratory and cross-cultural contexts.

This essay contends that in today's food stories, water exists at the same time as a material essentiality and a symbolic power, organizing gendered labor, diasporic home-making, and cultural resilience, thus making visible the politics of identity inscribed in food and literature.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

This research positions water in culinary fiction within an interdisciplinary theoretical context drawing on postmodern narrative theory, ecofeminism, cultural and diaspora identity studies, and planetary awareness. Considered together, these perspectives foreground water's double role as material substance and symbolic resource in creating gender, memory, and identity in new fiction. Instead of addressing these frameworks as discrete entities, this review combines them with literary analysis to show how edible fluidities appear in the novels under consideration. Postmodern narrative theory is one such lens to begin with, describing water as a "fluid signifier." Linda Hutcheon's theory of postmodernism stresses fragmentation, intertextuality, and meaning instability, a viewpoint which is especially appropriate when water is interpreted as literal ingredient and symbolic metaphor in the texts of food (Hutcheon 4). Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality extends this duality further by illustrating how depictions of food and water erode the distinction between material need and symbolic performance (Baudrillard 6). For instance, in Amit Majmudar's *The Abundance*, rinsing rice or cooking lentils are both

functional acts of sustenance and symbolic representations of cultural preservation, highlighting the unstable conflation of necessity and performance of identity.

Ecofeminism provides a second lens by placing emphasis on the intersection of gendered labor, ecological sustainability, and resistance. Vandana Shiva's attack on water commodification is illustrative of how women, especially in marginal contexts, carry the differential weight of making ends meet through water-related work (Shiva 22). Diasporic fiction kitchens are thus not individualistic sites of domesticity but contested sites where power dynamics of patriarchy, ecology, and identity intersect. In Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Devi's water-centered cooking practices become acts of healing and self-retrieval, resisting both gendered oppression and diasporic dislocation. Here, ecofeminism illuminates how women transform cooking into a form of agency that links ecological care with cultural continuity.

Theories of diaspora and cultural identity further contextualize the role of water in negotiating belonging. Stuart Hall defines cultural identity as "not a fixed essence but a positioning" (Hall 394), while the concept of hybridity by Homi Bhabha underscores how migrants blend inherited customs with their new cultural settings (Bhabha 112). Water commonly portrays this hybridity in diasporic kitchens as at once a reminder of homeland customs and as a vehicle for adaptation within foreign settings. Arjun Appadurai's assertion that "culinary authenticity is constructed through memory and repetition" (Appadurai 15) is apparent in Majmudar's *The Abundance*, as culinary rituals with water maintain generational memory. Salman Rushdie's metaphor of exile—"the past is a country from which we have all emigrated" (Rushdie 12)—rings true in the manner in which everyday actions like brewing tea or kneading bread using water become ritualistic journeys back to an imagined homeland, connecting memory and reinvention.

Lastly, Dipesh Chakrabarty's "planetary" places water in an extensive environmental and historical horizon, stressing the indivisibility of ecological and cultural histories (Chakrabarty 212). In Erica Bauermeister's *The School of Essential Ingredients*, water-based cooking not only provides individual characters with emotional rejuvenation but also mirrors international issues of sustainability and connectivity. In joining ecological awareness with cultural identity, planetary thinking underscores water as a means of connecting intimate food practice to communal survival.

Together, these radical views demonstrate that water in food narratives can neither be explained away as mere material need nor literary trope; it is both. Postmodernism emphasizes its symbolic uncertainty, ecofeminism underscores its involvement in gendered resistance and work, diaspora theory places it in memory and hybridity, and planetary awareness connects it with environmental realities. These intersecting frameworks inform this study's methodology, allowing for a rich reading of edible fluidities through which water acts as the intermediary of the politics of gender, resilience, and cultural belonging in contemporary fiction.

Literature Review and Analysis: Water, Culinary Narratives, and Identity

Water in culinary fiction is never just an abstract element of nourishment; it is a material requirement and a symbolic ledger through which identity, memory, and power are circumnavigated. This chapter weaves together postmodern narrative theory, ecofeminism, and diaspora studies with close readings of the novels to explore how water is a location of cultural continuity, gendered work, opposition, and ecological awareness. By reading texts such as Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Amit Majmudar's *The Abundance*, Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*, and Erica Bauermeister's *The School of Essential Ingredients*, the analysis foregrounds water as both an edible fluidity and a metaphorical resource for negotiating belonging and transformation.

Water as a Fluid Signifier: Identity and Diaspora

Postmodern narrative theory offers the first entry point. Linda Hutcheon's conception of postmodernism as a tendency towards fragmentation and multiplicity places water in the position of being what could be described as a "fluid signifier," refusing fixed meaning and instead carrying transformation and instability. Jean Baudrillard's own work on hyperreality further enforces this impression of slippage, especially in diasporic food writing where water in recipes shifts between its physical function in boiling or washing and its symbolic function as work of memory and cultural performance.

In diaspora stories, water represents the fluidity of identity that Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha identify. Hall's repetition that cultural identity is "not a fixed essence but a positioning" finds colorful expression in kitchens where migrants adjust recipes because of new resources and contexts. In *The*

Abundance, Majmudar's narrator remembers the precise amount of water in dough as a metaphor for assimilation of culture: "just as the manner in which culture assimilates itself determines one's identity." Here water at once grounds tradition and records alteration. Bhabha's hybridity is also summoned when recipes journey from rivers and wells of remembered homelands to the faucets of suburban diasporic kitchens. The change of water sources is characterized by continuity and break, nostalgia and invention.

Memory and nostalgia further compound this function. Arjun Appadurai emphasizes that culinary authenticity is perpetuated by repetition and memory, and Salman Rushdie's now-celebrated assertion that "the past is a country from which we have all emigrated" situates food preparation as a ritual return to lost territories. In Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*, the protagonist Devi pours water into a pot, watching it swirl with spices, a gesture that invokes both her cultural inheritance and her need for healing after trauma. The act is simultaneously ordinary and profound: water becomes a conduit through which she rebuilds identity and reconnects with fractured memory.

Diaspora accounts, therefore, deploy water to keep in balance competing imperatives of heritage and adjustment. Kitchens in such narratives are more than spaces for cooking: they are sites of memory where water literalizes fluid identity by fusing nourishment with nostalgia, survival with symbolic rebirth.

Water, Gendered Labor, and Resistance

If water in diaspora stories registers cultural mobility, in feminist interpretations it indicates contested ground of work, power, and agency. Vandana Shiva has contended that the commodification of water disproportionately impacts women, especially in the Global South, whose reproductive work is inextricably linked with resource management. This ecofeminist critique resonates with literary representations of kitchens where water's ubiquity contains within it both constraint and resistance.

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is representative in this case. Marian's increasing distaste for food is not separate from the rituals of washing, boiling, and cooking with water—rituals mirroring the invisibility and devaluing of women's domestic work. Atwood depicts Marian as feeling "spread out like a layer of melted butter," a metaphor of blurring boundaries that echoes the penetrative fluidity of water in her life. Food preparation, enabled by water, becomes a symbol of patri-

archal control; yet Marian's refusal to eat reclaims bodily autonomy, transforming water from an agent of confinement into one of resistance.

This dynamic extends to diaspora texts like Majmudar's *The Abundance* and Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*, where women's use of water in cooking is both an act of care and a declaration of independence. In *The Abundance*, the bubbling of rice conjures a home long abandoned, turning water into a mnemonic anchor. In Malladi's novel, Devi's culinary improvisations with water after personal crisis serve as small acts of survival and resistance, gesturing toward Silvia Federici's insight that reproductive labor, though undervalued, is foundational to social life.

Ecofeminist concerns also surface in relation to purity, contamination, and access. Traditionally, water in religious and ritual use has been policed on the basis of caste and gender, determining who may touch or drink it. Shiva calls out this as one of the mechanisms of wider capitalist-patriarchal exclusionary systems. Fiction reinforces these anxieties by placing women in kitchens where the act of boiling or running water unmasks broader social hierarchies. Whether water is presented as oppressive (in Atwood) or liberatory (in Bauermeister's *School of Essential Ingredients*), it inscribes the landscape of gender politics, both registering the elusiveness and inescapability of women's work.

Water, Transformation, and Ecological Futures

Aside from memory and gender, water also functions as a medium of change and sustenance, connecting personal identity to planetary ecological issues. Dipesh Chakrabarty has countered that climate change requires a "planetary" vision that surpasses national histories. Water, in this context, connects the intimate (cooking a pot of rice) to the planetary (hydropolitics, shortage, and ecological crisis).

Erica Bauermeister's *The School of Essential Ingredients* is a beautiful exploration of water's restorative power. In Lillian's culinary school, water acts as a mediator of healing and regeneration: the vapor of a kettle holds narratives, laughter, and recollections, causing characters to relive wounds and recover fluid selfhood. For Claire, a young mother, cooking with water is a means to embracing the fluid shapes of her life, a suggestion that resonates with bell hooks' claims that food is an arena of resistance and cultural validation.

But transformation is haunted by crisis. Amita Baviskar's concept of "waterscapes" as disputed arenas of inequality clarifies how novels place wa-

ter in hydropolitics. In *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Malladi depicts water as neoliberal economized, its scarcity as a metaphor for personal loss and structural injustice. Equally, Majmudar's *The Abundance* captures the measured use of water in dough as a delicate balance between tradition and change, survival and want. Such are the representations echoed by Jamie Linton in his argument that water has moved from being a common good to being a politically managed resource.

The environmental and political aspects of water also overlap with gendered experience. Women, disproportionately burdened with cooking and care, are most affected by water shortage and privatization. Ecofeminist scholars such as Shiva and hydrofeminist scholars such as Astrida Neimanis point to how water bridges the human and nonhuman bodies within an interspecies ecological fate. Literary representations of women adapting recipes in situations of water shortage, or taking solace in its ritual usage, highlight resilience alongside a critique of exploitative practices.

Synthesis: Edible Fluidities and the Politics of Survival

Together, these works build water into material and metaphorical, everyday and cosmic. In diasporic writing, it supports cultural memory and figures hybridity and adaptation. In feminist analyses, it represents both the restrictiveness of domestic work and the potential for resistance. In ecological analyses, it connects culinary practice to planetary crisis, reminding us of the inseparability of identity and environment.

By interlacing postmodern fluidity, ecofeminist critique, diasporic hybridity, and planetary consciousness, food narratives bring into prominence the edible fluidities of water at the heart of survival questions, memory, and belonging. Water, in these novels, is not merely that which boils rice or simmers curry; it is also what transports histories, supports identities, and calls for reimagining futures in the wake of ecological and cultural transformation.

Conclusion

Water in literary recipe books and food narratives appears as much more than a physical ingredient: it is a high metaphor for gendered work, diasporic belonging, environmental struggle, and cultural continuity. In novels like *The Abundance*, *Serving Crazy with Curry*, *The Edible Woman*, and *The School of Essential Ingredients*, water is a unifying medium through which characters navigate belonging, recall homelands, subvert social norms,

and imagine futures. In Majmudar's work, water sustains diasporic identity through culinary ritual; in Malladi's fiction, it enables reinvention in the face of dislocation; in Atwood's novel, it marks the double bind of women's oppression and resistance; and in Bauermeister's narrative, it becomes a catalyst for healing and renewal.

Three essential themes result from these readings. First, diaspora kitchens show that water rituals transmute memory into cultural continuity, connecting past and present and concretizing the fluidity of hybrid identity. Second, gendered labor places water both as a signifier of servitude and as a resource of empowerment, politicizing the politics of domestic space. Third, political and ecological readings remind us that water is always politicized: its commodification, scarcity, and crisis place culinary practice within broader discussions of sustainability, climate change, and food sovereignty.

Through the incorporation of postmodern narrative theory, ecofeminism, diaspora studies, and Blue Humanities, this paper illustrates that water is a site of particular importance wherein literature establishes edible fluidities—the meeting points of survival, culture, and resistance. The research advances literary food studies through the prioritization of water as a focal analytical category, illuminating how cooking and consuming not just feed bodies but provide sustenance for identities and challenge power.

Scholarship in the future may take these ideas further by working more intensively with Indigenous water knowledges, ecogastronomy, and feminist hydro-ethics, or through comparative analysis of culinary narratives with other water-themed cultural texts. In a time of climate emergency and hydropolitical struggle, literary representations of water recall that sustenance is always more than material. Literary food and water practices uncouple ecological and cultural survival, compelling us to envision more equitable and sustainable futures.

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