



Research Paper

Recipes of Return: Food, Nostalgia, and Post-Immigration Identity in Lara Vapnyar's Select Fiction

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ABSTRACT: Food is an essential piece of the cultural mosaic. As identities become diversified, it casts its reflection in food- its preparation, the different variations, and amalgamations. Post-immigration literature is an ensemble of experimental tropes, and the depiction of food is inherent to these narratives. Soviet born American author Lara Vapnyar feature food and culinary experiences as a pivotal centrepiece in her works, forming an indispensable ingredient in her representations of a post-immigration space. Food and taste not only exemplifies the various chapters of Vapnyar's works, but also illustrates the life trajectories of her characters. Vapnyar creates a familiar feeling of home through food, by means of enrapturing the taste buds of her characters with a familiar flavour, one that momentarily carries them back to their homeland. Such culinary transportation invoking a sense of nostalgia of the motherland and affirmation in a foreign land can be witnessed in her novel *Memoirs of a Muse* (2006) and her short story collection *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love* (2008), both of which are situated in the milieu of Soviet immigrants in the United States.

KEYWORDS: Food, Post-Soviet, Nostalgia, Memory

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(I)

Food is a basic need for human survival, alongside clothing and shelter, dating back to the beginning of human civilization, representations of food in art and literature have appealed specifically to the human mind. From the apple in the *Bible*, to Lord Krishna's antics with butter, to Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, to Ben Jonson's "Inviting a Friend to Supper", to contemporary literature, as seen in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*, the representations of food and use of food as metaphor have provided considerable inspiration to human imagination. The representation of food and the subsequent analysis has aided representations of complex notions and meanings for readers. Food provides representation of cultural identity constructions; it initiates acceptance, resistance, and preservation of cultures (Whitt) through its representations of memory, emotion, and nostalgia.

Food, is, as a significant agent of cultural identity a crucial piece of the jigsaw of identity. With the untimely advances of globalisation, and ever present representation of human transition from one location to another, identities and food and its consumption have become more diversified than ever. In the post- immigration narrative, food and an individual's emotional perceptions whether from sight, smell, taste, and/or feel of the food have considerable significance - particularly for Russian immigrants who have left the former Soviet Union and living abroad. This paper will attempt to explore the symbols attached to the food representations in the post-immigration narratives of fiction by Lara Vapnyar, a contemporary Russian-American anglophone author.

Fundamentally, post-immigration narratives lie at the intersection of two or more differing cultures that often have their implications wrapped in food and its various representations- preparation, fusion, and consumption. There is immense food symbolism throughout Vapnyar's fiction. In fact, it can be said that it is a signature feature of her prose - a centrepiece in the jumble of post- immigration narratives that she has constructed.

Lara Vapnyar was born in Moscow in 1971 and has lived in the U.S. since 1994. She has published three books so far. The two story collections, *There Are Jews in My House* (2003) and *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love* (2008) and the novel *Memoirs of a Muse* (2006). "In immigrant literature, food is of course an important marker of symbolic ethnicity," writes Adrian Wanner in "The Russian Immigrant Narrative as Metafiction." This statement rings true especially for Vapnyar's fiction, as through its characters; she examines the connection

between the preparation-consumption of Russian food, as immigrants in the U.S., and the subsequent evocative experience of nostalgia that overwhelms the sensibilities of each character post-consumption.

(II)

As noted by critics Musya Glants and Joyce Toomre in the 'Introduction' to *Food in Russian History and Culture*, "The study of foodways brings together the past and the present by shedding new light on former beliefs and customs" (Glants and Toomre XXV). In *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love* Vapnyar uses the trope of food as a bridge into the character's pre and post immigration life. For instance, in the short story "Borscht", the readers are introduced to Sergey, the protagonist of the story, who lives in New York and installs carpets for a living. His relationship with his wife Lenka, who lives in Russia, goes downhill due to strains caused by the distance and absence of intimacy. Instead of "begging him to return home sooner" Lenka now "sighed and yawns" (Vapnyar 28) whenever they talk over phone. Heartbroken over this, Sergey decides to visit Alla, a Russian girl who engages part-time in sex work, and soon finds himself in the middle of an uncanny relationship with her. Sergey is not just looking for a sexual rendezvous. As an immigrant from the former Soviet Union, he feels isolated and is looking forward to spending time with someone who reminds him of home. One evening, post-coitus, Anna offers Sergey a bowl of hot borscht "steaming, bursting with colours ... purple of beats, deep orange of fat rings, white sour of cream, dark green of parsley hits" (Vapnyar 48). Both the characters seem to bond over a plate of hot Russian soup and not on the sexual act. Sergey and Alla felt at home in the comfort of the familiar taste and smell of Russian food. They ended their night by drinking homemade vodkas. By sharing a bowl of borscht and vodka, Alla and Sergey is not just sharing a meal but a culturally and culinary Russian experience. For Alla and Sergey, the bowl of hot borscht is representative of their ethnicity and through them Vapnyar gives the readers a glimpse into the Russian kitchen. Food as a marker of identity for both Alla and Sergey can be concluded as what sociologist Herbert Gans calls a "nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation" (Gans 204).

"Some of the characters in *Broccoli* are well aware of their role as providers of exotic nourishment suited to the American palate" writes A. Wanner in *The Russian Immigrant Narrative as Metafiction*. In Vapnyar's "Puffed Rice and Meatballs" when the protagonist of the story Katya is questioned by her American lover "about her childhood... about the horrors of communism" (Vapnyar 51), Katya realises that he was not interested in knowing her better. Rather, in Katya's words, "He was simply asking for entertainment... sexy story about the exotic world to which his lover had once belonged" (Vapnyar 52).

A particularly rich example of cooking metaphors is visible in the short story "A Bunch of Broccoli on the Third Shelf". The central character of the story Nina is defined by her obsession with American vegetables. "My wife is a vegetable lover" (Vapnyar 9) Nina's husband introduces her to his friends. After Nina's husband leaves her, she keeps herself engaged in a profligately illustrated Italian cookbook, with pictures of a woman's smooth, capable hands working in the kitchen: "Nina fantasized that ... It was she who pushed the hard, stubborn stuffing into the bell peppers, or rinsed grit off lettuce leaves, or chopped broccoli florets, scattering tiny green crumbs all over the table" (Vapnyar 13). "Her enjoyment of them is sensual, involving sight, smell and touch... experience with vegetables is described by Vapnyar as mildly erotic" (Ryan 68). She seems to engage much more intimately with vegetables than with her husband, reading a cookbook in bed:

"Her favourite book, *Italian Cuisine: The Taste of the Sun*, included step-by-step photographs of the cooking process. In the photos, smooth light-skinned female hands with evenly trimmed fingernails performed all the magical actions on the vegetables. They looked like Nina's hands, and Nina fantasized that they were hers. It was she, Nina, who made those perfect curled carrot slices. It was she who pushed the hard, stubborn stuffing into the bell peppers, or rinsed grit off lettuce leaves, or chopped broccoli florets, scattering tiny green crumbs all over the table. Nina's lips moved, forming the rich, passionate words of the cooking instructions: "Brush with olive oil," "bring to a boil and simmer gently," "serve hot," "scoop out the pulp," "chop," "slice," "crush," "squash." When eventually she put the book away, cuddled against her husband's back, and closed her eyes, her lips continued moving for some time. (Vapnyar 13-14)

Vapnyar is playful with this device, saturating her text with cooking metaphors to the point of self-parody (Ryan 68). Her description of fennel is unambiguously phallic: "It had a funny, slightly ribbed surface, and it was heavy and spouted weird green shoots that seemed to grow out of nowhere" (Vapnyar 19). Vapnyar's linking of Nina's cooking with marriage is quite ironic as it is only Nina's cooking escapades that had triumphed, her marriage failed miserably.

After years of staying in the U.S, many characters in Vapnyar's works undergo a process of Americanisation. For instance, in *Memories of a Muse* the central character Tanya's first meal at her aunt's place upon her first arrival in the U.S. is characterised by the pomp and splendour of a lavish spread, typical to the American Thanksgiving dinner. Her uncle and aunt were more concerned to show to their newly emigrated niece the plentiful riches of the U.S instead of welcoming her with a warm homely meal. "There was indeed plenty of food on the table – sharp, heavy loud food. Each bit had to be announced and supported with comments" (Vapnyar 73). The fact that each dish had to be explained what it was to Katya shows a lack of cultural continuity. After the meal, Tanya becomes ill from "eating too much", as pointed out by her aunt "She saw all the food and couldn't

stop herself" (Vapnyar 81). The fact that Tanya could not control her appetite and ate until she fell sick is completely preposterous. The over dramatization of providing a Soviet immigrant in the U.S with bountiful of plate due to poverty and lack of essential eatables back home is completely silly and ridiculous. But what it reflects is the notion of the already settled immigrants, in Katya's case her uncle and aunt, and their memories of pre-immigration hardships which they faced.

For Tanya, Food is the only source to keep the memories of her parents alive in America: "Do you remember that fish soup I used to make you? Your grandmother taught me right before my wedding. Your father liked it a lot. The soup is delicious, and so simple; you'll have no trouble cooking it. You put just any kind of fish there, even canned fish, and onions. Potatoes too. Carrots? I can't remember. I'll look up the recipe for you. Tanya, call me please keep calling me. (Vapnyar 128)

Through the fish soup, Tanya not only associates her mother with it but also her home in Moscow and the familiar Russian culture. She wants to present her partner Mark a slice of her Russian culinary culture by making him a bowl of soup "with gentle taste and aroma" (Vapnyar 128). Through this, Tanya makes gentle efforts in not only keeping herself rooted to the Russian culture abroad, but also attempts in integrating Russianness in their conjugal life. Furthermore, another marker in Tanya's life that is symbolic of her post-immigration journey is coffee. In Russia, Tanya was "crazy for coffee" (Vapnyar 56). While filling out her immigration application, she is fuelled by fantasies about the coffee she will be able to drink in Brooklyn, "Turkish coffee, Swedish coffee, Arabic coffee! ... Cappuccino, espresso, iced coffee". But after her immigration to the U.S, she began disliking coffee. This may be due to her drinking it as per her partner's specifications, but her "enthusiasm was lost". This is indicative of Tanya's post-immigration adjustment and a shift in her cultural consciousness.

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Julia Moskin in her New York Times article "Her Killer Meatballs Are the Stuff of Fiction" writes "Along with immigration, food and love, nostalgia for the lost world of Soviet Russia has informed Ms. Vapnyar's fiction". From the above discussion of Vapnyar's works, we can conclude that the characters in her texts reflect a post-immigration endeavour to create a feeling of familiarity and homeliness in their stay as immigrants in America, and the efforts made by them to eliminate feelings of a liminal existence - of being neither here nor there. Vapnyar's characters makes conscious efforts to reclaim a sense of belonging in a foreign land through the preparation and consumption of Russian food, that in return, cultivates fragments of home and conjures a nostalgia in a foreign land.

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