



THE HOMELAND ON A PLATE: FOOD, MEMORY, AND PARTITIONED DIASPORA IN *INDUBALA BHAATER HOTEL*

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Abstract: Set against the backdrop of the Bangladesh Liberation War, *Indubala Bhaater Hotel*, an adaptation of Kallol Lahiri's Bengali novel, brought to screen by Debaloy Bhattacharya as a web series, explores the lasting trauma of displacement and the struggle for identity. The narrative follows Indubala, a woman exiled from East Bengal who attempts to rebuild her life in an unfamiliar land. Like many who endured the Partition of 1947 and subsequent conflicts, she grapples with the loss of home, fractured cultural ties, and the impossibility of return. Her act of cooking becomes a means of preserving memory, forging continuity between past and present, and resisting the erasure of identity.

This article examines how *Indubala Bhaater Hotel* represents displacement, cultural memory, and identity reconstruction through food. Using a postcolonial and diasporic studies framework, the analysis draws on the works of Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Amitav Ghosh to explore how forced migration creates an interstitial space where identity remains in flux. Methodologically, this study employs textual analysis, comparing the novel and its screen adaptation to trace thematic continuities and divergences in the portrayal of migration, nostalgia, and resilience. The series illustrates that while the homeland may remain elusive, identity and belonging persist through rituals, storytelling, and culinary heritage, resisting cultural erasure in the face of exile.

Keywords: Bangladesh Liberation War 1971, Displacement, Partition Nostalgia, Food Memory, Diaspora, Resilience

Introduction

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 had a profound impact on society and culture. Beyond the broader socio-political lens, personal stories from the war bring an emotional depth that resonates deeply highlighting how the war disrupted the social fabric of the region but also paved the way for a reimagining of community and identity. The gendered impact of the war - the long-term trauma and the resilience of women, and their fight for justice in the face of unimaginable suffering- is another crucial aspect that demands attention.

Indubala Bhaater Hotel is a 2023 drama Bengali web series is based on the eponymous Bengali novel by Kallol Lahiri, is about the life and struggles of Indubala, the protagonist. It follows Indubala, a woman from East Bengal who moves to Kolkata after marriage and struggles to adapt to city life. Widowed early, she raises her sons alone and starts a small home-based restaurant, which gradually gains popularity. Despite her success, she remains deeply nostalgic for her ancestral village, a place she can never return to due to the Partition of 1947 and Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Through food, she bridges the past and present, carrying memories of home while building a new identity in a foreign land.

The series serves up a beautiful tale and sentiments of the two Banglas- surrounding opar Bangla or what is now Bangladesh, and epar Bangla or today's West Bengal, play a pivotal role in Bengali literature. The marks of Partition were intense and the stories of the time and of the land left behind have made their way down to the present generation as well. The plot of the series unfolds against the context of immigration and the desolation of having to leave one's roots. Indubala, travels to Kolkata from a village in Bangladesh

post marriage and even after spending the rest of her life here in this city, her heart remains with her desher bari.

Food plays a pivotal role in *Indubala Bhaater Hotel*, weaving together themes of reminiscence, displacement, and identity. The widowed Indubala, rooted in her Khulna past, opens a pice hotel in Kolkata's Chenu Mittir Lane on the day East Pakistan becomes Bangladesh. Through her dishes—kochubata, holud gala chingri, chandropuli, and aam tel—she relives memories of home and loss. Each chapter, named after a dish, reflects a personal story, echoing the deep connection between food, nostalgia, and the people who shaped her journey. Lahiri emphasizes that every dish carries a history, making food a bridge between past and present.

Partition narratives often capture the pain of displacement, nostalgia, and the struggle to forge a new identity in an unfamiliar land. The novel intertwines personal and collective histories, exploring how food becomes a bridge between the past and present, memory and survival, home and exile. Her pice hotel, started out of necessity, evolves into a symbol of resilience, where every dish carries a story of loss, longing, and cultural continuity. Speaking of how Indubala was characterised, Lahiri says that she is no one in particular, yet someone we all know. She is present in every other kitchen and household.

This article will examine *Indubala Bhaater Hotel* as a diasporic narrative, focusing on how it constructs national identity through themes of displacement, memory, and cultural preservation. By analyzing the role of food, nostalgia, and evolving nationalist narratives, the paper aims to highlight how her somber life, punctuated with fleeting hopes of happiness, exemplifies a human's yearning to return to one's roots, only to be shackled by the heaviness of responsibilities and the vagaries of geopolitics. The war didn't just end in 1971—it left behind a legacy that continues to shape the region's identity and governance.

Literature review

This research aims to address the existing gap by contributing a fresh, multidisciplinary perspective—merging diaspora studies, gender studies, food studies, and Partition literature. While Partition narratives in South Asia have been extensively studied, much of the focus remains on Punjab and Sindh, leaving Bengali experiences—especially those of displaced women—largely underrepresented. Despite *Indubala Bhaater Hotel* being a significant literary and cinematic representation of displacement, there is a notable lack of scholarly work analyzing its diasporic themes.

Existing discussions primarily focus on the novel's narrative and emotional depth, but they fail to engage with its exploration of migration, nostalgia, and cultural identity. Partition studies often focus on large-scale violence and geopolitical aspects, overshadowing the personal and economic struggles of women. Unlike dominant male-centric migration narratives, which emphasize loss of land and identity, Indubala's journey illustrates how women, despite being uprooted, carve out spaces of agency and belonging in unfamiliar territories.

There is a key research gap is the role of food as a cultural marker in diasporic identity. While migration literature explores food studies, few examine Bengali cuisine as a means of preserving lost histories. In *Indubala Bhaater Hotel*, Indubala's pice hotel becomes more than economic survival—it bridges East and West Bengal, carrying the essence of a lost homeland. Each dish recreates memories, turning cuisine into an emotional and political archive of displacement. The web series provides a unique perspective on how migration fractures identity, where 'home' is no longer a fixed geographical entity but a space of longing preserved through memory.

METHODOLOGY

This paper will be focusing on a textual analysis of the web series *Indubala Bhaater Hotel* with a qualitative and analytical approach and employ a postcolonial framework and examines the discourse on diaspora, displacement, and cultural identity, through the lens of food, nostalgia, and gendered experiences of migration, paving the way for a deeper analysis of its role in shaping diasporic narratives and national identity. This study will also incorporate gendered perspectives to highlight how Indubala's story reflects the unique struggles of women in diasporic communities. A comparative analysis with existing Partition and migration literature contextualizes Indubala's narrative within broader diasporic discourses. Through close reading of the series, this paper will explore how food functions as a cultural marker and a bridge between the past and present.

ROOTLESS BELONGING: FOOD, MEMORY, AND GENDERED DISPLACEMENT DURING PARTITION IN *INDUBALA BHAATER HOTEL*

Diaspora identifies a relational network, characteristically produced by forced dispersal and reluctant scattering. It is not just a word of movement, though purposive, urgent movement is integral to it. Diaspora is more than physical exile; it is an emotional and cultural rupture that reshapes identity, memory, and the idea of home. The Bengali Partition diaspora, a result of the 1947 division, displaced millions, forcing them to migrate across newly drawn borders. This displacement, marked by violence, loss, and uprooting, led to a fractured sense of belonging. However, the trauma of forced migration did not end in 1947. The aftermath of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War brought another wave of displacement, particularly affecting those who had already been uprooted by Partition. The socio-political changes in both Bangladesh and Kolkata deepened the crisis for many, as identities and allegiances were further challenged by shifting national boundaries.

Rooted in the trauma of migration, Debaloy Bhattacharya's web series *Indubala Bhaater Hotel* portrays how the idea of 'home' is constantly redefined through memory, resilience, and cultural continuity. Indubala, the protagonist, is a woman forced to leave her homeland in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after marriage, only to find herself lost in an unfamiliar city. Through her journey, the series delves into the emotional and psychological turmoil of displacement, echoing the struggles of millions who have been uprooted due to Partition and migration.

Suvir Kaul's *Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/National in Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines"* examines how personal memory, displacement, and nationalism intersect in the novel. The paper highlights how Ghosh's fragmented narrative structure, shaped by memory and storytelling, reflects the disjointed experiences of individuals navigating the boundaries of nationhood.

A key theme relevant to *Indubala Bhaater Hotel* is the diasporic condition and cultural displacement. The narrator's identity is shaped in contrast to Ila's, illustrating the tensions between rootedness and cosmopolitanism, much like Indubala's longing for a homeland she can never return to. Tridib's death further underscores how borders, both physical and emotional, shape lives, much like the invisible yet binding ties Indubala experiences with her past.

Tham'ma's realization that borders are artificial constructs aligns with Indubala's own struggles with belonging, where home is neither fully the place of origin nor the place of residence. The novel critiques how memory constructs identity, just as Indubala's culinary heritage becomes her only tangible link to her lost homeland.

Rufus Cook's work *Place and Displacement in Salman Rushdie's Work* shows Rushdie's exploration of displacement and identity in *Shame* aligns with *Indubala Bhaater Hotel* by highlighting how alienation can be both liberating and disorienting. Like Rushdie's protagonists, Indubala navigates cultural loss and reinvention, embodying the paradox of longing for a lost home while forging a new identity. Rushdie's idea of an "imaginary country" reflects the way Indubala reconstructs her past through food and memory, resisting erasure while adapting to her present. His emphasis on storytelling as a means of reclaiming lost places parallels Indubala's preservation of cultural heritage, reinforcing the theme that home is both a physical space and a remembered, evolving construct.

Chandrima Karmakar's *The Conundrum of 'Home' in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora: An Interpretive Analysis* explores how diasporic individuals grapple with displacement and the evolving meaning of "home." First-generation immigrants often anchor themselves to their lost homeland through nostalgia, cultural memory, and, most significantly, food. Traditional dishes like mustard fish, hilsa, dal, rice, and luchis serve as more than sustenance—they become tangible links to the past, evoking a sense of identity and continuity.

The concept of "home" differs for second- and third-generation Indian immigrants. While their parents cling to nostalgia through cultural markers like food, the younger generations often struggle to relate, leading to a sense of alienation rather than belonging. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Mrs. Sen's*, the protagonist preserves her identity through the preparation and consumption of traditional Bengali cuisine, highlighting food as an act of cultural preservation. Similarly, *The Namesake* illustrates how first-generation immigrants hold onto an "imagined India," whereas their children redefine or even reject this inherited sense of home.

Homi Bhabha's concept of *interstitial space* is used to explain how diasporic individuals exist between two cultures. To find belonging, they must either embrace transformation, as Bharti Mukherjee suggests, or remain in a liminal state of in-betweenness. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* exemplifies this struggle, depicting the challenges of identity and cultural adaptation faced by the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, and his family. Lahiri elaborates upon this in her novel:

"Gogol makes the mistake of referring to New Haven as home... Ashima is outraged by the remark, dwelling on it all day. 'Only three months, and listen to you,' she says, telling him that after twenty years in America, she still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home" (2003: 1).

Karmakar references theorists like Avtar Brah and Salman Rushdie to highlight how diasporic subjects exist in this continuous negotiation of identity. Benedict Anderson's concept of *imagined communities* is also crucial, as first-generation immigrants often recall a pre-Partition India that included Pakistan and Bangladesh. Their notion of *desh* (homeland) extends beyond contemporary national borders, reinforcing how memory shapes identity.

The ending of the series poignantly encapsulates the themes of diaspora, displacement, and the elusive idea of 'home.' Indubala, who had spent her entire life longing to return to her homeland, finds herself at the threshold of that journey, only to turn back at the last moment. Her refusal to visit as a tourist—

"Ota amar desh, okhane ami tourist hoye jabo na"

—speaks to the deep rupture between memory and reality. For Indubala, home is not just a geographical space but an emotional and cultural identity, one that cannot be reclaimed through a mere visit. Her decision highlights the tragic reality of the diaspora: the homeland, once lost, remains forever inaccessible, existing only in memory and longing.

Indubala's kitchen becomes a sacred space where she reclaims her history, preserving 'home' through the act of cooking by treating food as a bridge to a lost world. The small eatery is used as a microcosm of the broader societal changes and challenges faced by people during this period, where she does not just serve meals—she serves memory, identity, and the remnants of a life that was once hers. By exploring migration, identity, and resilience, the novel provides insight into the socio-cultural landscape of its era.

Centering on Indubala, a resilient woman displaced from Bangladesh, the novel captures the emotional and cultural continuity of those affected by the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Indubala's journey to Kolkata, where she establishes her eatery Indubala Bhater Hotel, symbolizes the broader migration patterns that followed the war. Although she did not arrive as a war refugee, her displacement reflects the historical experiences of those who sought stability in an unfamiliar land. Her eatery, more than a food place, becomes a cultural sanctuary that preserves memories of her homeland through culinary traditions. Through Indubala's story, it mirrors the journey of countless individuals uprooted by war, seeking stability and a fresh start in an unfamiliar city. This distinction highlights how personal displacement can parallel historical upheavals, making her story universally resonant.

The paper *Memories in Food, Food of Memories: Blurring Borders through Food and Foodways in Indubala Bhater Hotel* by Dr. Pradipta Shyam Chowdhury The paper explores the deep connection between food, memory, and cultural identity, particularly in the context of migration and displacement. It begins with Shahu Patole's idea that cooking is an art of estimates, emotions, and memories, highlighting how food ties individuals to their past and loved ones. Using personal anecdotes, the author illustrates how food serves as a powerful mnemonic, recalling the story of their grandmother, a Partition migrant from Bangladesh, who found solace in the familiar taste of green chilies, symbolizing her lost homeland.

The paper also examines the cultural rift between East Bengali migrants (*bangals*) and native West Bengalis (*ghotis*), where food habits became markers of social identity and exclusion. Drawing on scholars like D.E. Sutton and Monika Janowski, the discussion highlights how food helps migrants preserve their past while also negotiating assimilation into new environments. Food memories work on dual levels—resisting change by maintaining cultural identity and facilitating change through adaptation.

The paper engages with Levi-Strauss' concept that food is more than sustenance; it is shaped by cultural and social conventions that dictate what is considered edible, meaningful, and acceptable. The process of cooking imbues food with emotional and cultural significance, making it a dynamic force in identity formation and social belonging. Ultimately, food serves as a bridge between the past and present, blurring borders and fostering both resistance and integration in new cultural landscapes.

Alicia Jacob's paper *Devouring Bodies: An Exploration of Love Through Food Representation in The Lunchbox* shows food in *The Lunchbox* serves as a powerful medium for expressing love, nostalgia, and identity. Ila, a neglected housewife, seeks to rekindle her husband's affection through cooking but instead forms an unexpected emotional bond with Saajan, a lonely widower, through an accidental tiffin exchange. Their evolving connection, communicated through food and handwritten letters, highlights themes of isolation, longing, and unspoken emotions. The film critiques gender roles, illustrating how food reinforces and subverts patriarchal norms—women cook as an expression of care, while men are often passive consumers.

"I think we forget things if we have no one to tell them to."

This resonates deeply with *Indubala Bhaater Hotel*, as Indubala's memories and identity are preserved through the food she cooks, much like how Ila's meals become a means of expressing herself and forming a connection in *The Lunchbox*. Food serves as both an emotional archive and a language of remembrance.

Much like *Indubala Bhaater Hotel*, *The Lunchbox* portrays food as more than mere sustenance—it becomes a bridge between past and present, personal and cultural identity, and unfulfilled desires. In both narratives, food serves as a connection to lost loved ones, memories, and a sense of belonging. Ila's act of cooking mirrors Indubala's journey, where food embodies history, resilience, and emotional healing. The universality of food as an emotional language transcends personal struggles, making it a potent symbol of love, loss, and identity in both texts.

Poetics Of Gastronomic Images In Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" by O. Yalovenko explores Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) explores the cultural hybridity of Indian immigrants in America, particularly through the motif of food. The novel highlights how food is not just for sustenance but also a reflection of identity, tradition, and assimilation. First-generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima cherish Bengali culinary traditions, treating cooking and eating as sacred rituals, whereas their children, Gogol and Sonia, prefer American fast food, symbolizing their detachment from their heritage.

The contrast between Indian and American food culture is central to the novel. Bengali immigrants value slow, communal meals, while Americans see food as a mere necessity. Lahiri details the differences in portion sizes, eating habits, and food preparation, emphasizing how food bridges generational and cultural gaps. For instance, Ashima attempts to blend cultures by cooking American dishes with Indian spices, symbolizing her struggle to maintain tradition while adapting to a new homeland.

Lahiri portrays food as a means of communication and cultural exchange. Gogol experiences the differences firsthand, from his mother's elaborate meals to his girlfriend Maxine's minimalist American dining habits. The novel highlights how food shapes personal and cultural identities, serving as a metaphor for the immigrant experience—caught between preserving the past and embracing the present.

Beyond nostalgia, Indubala's cooking also conveys love and healing. She expresses emotions through meals, offering warmth and comfort to those who visit her modest eatery. The sweetness of *Patishapta* recalls childhood festivities and the presence of her mother, while *Lau Chingri* represents the simple yet soulful flavors of home. Desserts like *Chandrapuli* bring back the flavors of lost celebrations, while the tangy *Aam Tel* embodies the lingering taste of summer afternoons spent in her ancestral home.

In the series, cooking is also a form of silent expression—of love, longing, and even resistance. Through food, Indubala connects with people, offering not just meals but warmth and understanding. Her hotel becomes a space where food heals emotional wounds, providing comfort to those who are lost or seeking familiarity. It also symbolizes migration, resilience, and survival. Through her cooking, Indubala does not just serve meals—she safeguards a cultural legacy, keeping the taste of her homeland alive in a land that no longer feels like her own. Yet, just as food carries the weight of remembrance, it also becomes a tool for resistance—a quiet yet powerful defiance against the forces that seek to erase her roots. This defiance, however, is not only personal but also deeply intertwined with the larger socio-political landscape of displacement and identity.

The Partition and migration in the series is presented through a gendered lens, focusing on women's displacement, oppression, and resilience. Indubala's journey is not just a story of physical migration but of emotional exile, forced adaptation, and silent endurance—a reflection of countless women's experiences in post-Partition Bengal. Indubala, much like these refugee women, is trapped in an unfamiliar land, subjected to neglect by her in-laws, and forced to rebuild her life in the face of rejection and hardship.

The refugee crisis in West Bengal led to hostility between locals and migrants, where refugees were initially welcomed as persecuted minorities but later labeled as "illegal migrants" due to their growing numbers. Indubala's personal experience reflects this paradox—she is both an outsider and a survivor, struggling to claim a space in a society that continuously displaces her. Her mother-in-law, instead of offering support, constantly reminds her of her outsider status, calling her a *refugee*, which deepens her sense of displacement.

"There's no place for the refugees" -

Her words reflect the broader struggle of Partition refugees, who, despite seeking safety, often found themselves unwelcome—whether in government camps, new settlements, or even within families that saw them as burdens.

Language, a fundamental marker of identity, becomes a tool of humiliation, reinforcing Indubala's 'otherness' within her own household. This mirrors the real-life struggles of displaced individuals, who were often ridiculed for their dialects and cultural differences, further deepening their sense of exile. The mockery of her language by her husband and mother-in-law underscores the linguistic alienation that many East Bengali refugees endured in West Bengal.

Displaced and without support, many refugee women became silent victims of domestic violence, unable to return home or seek justice in a hostile new environment. Indubala's suffering from the sexual abuse of her husband highlights the acute vulnerability of women in patriarchal, post-Partition households and also portrays a marriage where she is stripped of bodily autonomy—much like how her homeland was forcefully taken from her.

Ratan's decision to hide the last letter from Indubala's dying father shows the denial of her final connection to her roots, he not only exercises his dominance but also attempts to sever her emotional ties to the past. This act mirrors the cruel realities of Partition, where families were torn apart with little hope of reunion. Bureaucratic barriers and political hostility made homecoming an impossibility, leaving countless individuals, like Indubala, stranded between memories of the past and an unwelcoming present.

Resilience of Woman in Amrita Pritam's Pinjar by Jessica Rawson and Hira Bose explores the complex portrayal of women during the Partition of India, particularly through Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*. It challenges the traditional narrative that reduces women to mere victims of communal violence, instead highlighting their resilience and agency. The protagonist, Puro, is abducted by Rashida and disowned by her own family, a fate shared by countless women during Partition. However, rather than succumbing to victimhood, Puro reclaims her autonomy, eventually transforming into Hamida—a figure who not only survives but also extends her strength to others by helping abducted women find safety.

The analysis situates *Pinjar* within a broader corpus of Partition literature, referencing works by Khushwant Singh, Bhisham Sahni, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Saadat Hasan Manto. These narratives expose the horrors of communal violence, particularly the systemic exploitation and abandonment of women. The paper highlights how Pritam critiques the patriarchal structures that condemned abducted women to a fate worse than death—ostracization by their families and society. While many stories of Partition focus on loss and destruction, *Pinjar* offers a nuanced exploration of survival, resilience, and self-determination.

The paper argues that *Pinjar* redefines women's roles in Partition literature by examining themes of identity, displacement, and gendered violence, Pritam presents women not as passive sufferers but as individuals who, despite their trauma, reclaim control over their destinies. The paper ultimately asserts that *Pinjar* serves as a powerful counter-narrative, one that challenges dominant discourses on women's victimhood and highlights their enduring strength in the face of historical atrocities.

The paper delves into the intersections of gender, identity, and displacement in *Pinjar*, illustrating how women's bodies became battlegrounds for communal honor during Partition. Pritam's nuanced portrayal of Puro/Hamida reflects the broader struggle of abducted women who were denied the right to return to their families. The novel critiques the rigid patriarchal norms that viewed these women as tainted, reinforcing societal hypocrisy. Furthermore, the paper situates *Pinjar* within feminist discourse, drawing connections with contemporary gender studies and postcolonial theory. By foregrounding female agency amid historical trauma, the analysis underscores the novel's enduring relevance in reexamining women's roles in Partition narratives.

Conclusion

Indubala Bhaater Hotel captures the essence of displacement through the life of Indubala, a woman exiled from East Bengal who struggles to anchor herself in a foreign land while yearning for the home she lost. Through cooking, she reconstructs her identity, transforming her culinary skills into a bridge between past and present. The pain of forced separation haunts her, and like many in the diaspora, she remains caught between two worlds—the one she left behind and the one she struggles to belong to. Her longing for her lost homeland manifests in her attachment to memories, traditions, and, most significantly, food.

Indubala's journey mirrors the experiences of countless individuals uprooted by Partition and subsequent socio-political upheavals. Her refusal to return as a tourist underscores the permanence of her loss—home is no longer a tangible place but an emotional construct preserved through remembrance. Cooking, remembering, and storytelling become acts of cultural continuity, allowing individuals to navigate fragmented histories. Her small eatery is more than a place of sustenance; it is a site of memory, where lost homes are reclaimed through flavors, and the past is kept alive through shared traditions.

The broader discourse on diaspora, as explored in works by Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Amitav Ghosh, reinforces how displacement creates an interstitial space where identity is in constant negotiation. Diaspora is not merely about exile but also about adaptation and resilience. Indubala Bhaater Hotel—alongside these literary explorations—reveals that the diasporic experience extends beyond geographical displacement; it is a profound rupture in identity, memory, and belonging.

Indubala's story highlights that while the homeland may remain elusive, identity and belonging endure through rituals that bind individuals to their roots. Food, in particular, serves as a bridge between past and present, an archive of memory, and a form of resistance against cultural erasure.

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