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# Food, Family and Cultural Identity: Culinary Nostalgia and the Immigrant Experience in *Venba*

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Food is among the most important memories immigrants carry with them to their adopted lands. The act of cooking traditional food helps members of immigrant communities to maintain their cultural identities in spaces that are far from the familiar and therefore food becomes a symbolic connection to their roots. This paper is a study of the 2023 video game *Venba*, developed by Visai games, which is a narrative driven independent game that tells the story of a Tamil immigrant family in Canada. *Venba* foregrounds the act of cooking as being central to the creation and preservation of cultural identity, through gameplay that blends the preparation of traditional Tamil dishes with storytelling that conveys the emotional journey that the characters undergo through the course of the narrative. By placing food at the centre of the family narrative, *Venba* engages with some central ideas of the diasporic relationship with food that is often explored in fiction. The purpose of this paper is to examine *Venba*'s narrative and its gameplay mechanics to see how it engages with the idea of food cultures as important points of connection with the homeland for diasporic communities. Through the story of an immigrant family and their relationships not only with each other but also with food, this paper will also look at the way the game engages with the concept of "culinary nostalgia" found in diasporic literature.

**Keywords:** food, nostalgia, diaspora, culture

The narrative video game *Venba* explores the immigrant experience through the lens of food, memory and intergenerational conflict. The story focuses on a Tamil family that moves from India to Canada in the 1980s, with the mother, Venba, at the centre of the narrative. As Venba tries to preserve her culture through traditional South Indian cooking, *Venba* shows how food serves a critical link between memory, identity and culture in diasporic contexts.

This paper mainly approaches *Venba* through a close ludonarrative reading alongside feminist, diasporic and postcolonial frameworks to examine it as a narrative and cultural text. Through a close reading of the gameplay mechanics in conjunction with the storyline, the paper investigates how the game's puzzle solving mechanics function not only as *play* but also as symbolic acts of cultural memory and preservation. The paper also foregrounds through analysis the motifs of culinary nostalgia and immigrant identity that resonate through the game. The analysis is also informed through feminist theory, using the concept of affective labour as articulated by Hardt and Negri, and extended through the works of Srinivas to consider the gendered nature of cultural transmission where the onus of preserving tradition through food falls on women. Further, the paper draws on postcolonial and diaspora studies to contextualise the complex ideas of hybridity and acculturation using the work of theorists such as Mannur, Koc and Welsh, and Katrak. Finally, the game is situated within the socio-historical context of the Tamil diaspora in 1980s Canada, allowing for an exploration of how *Venba* engages with the lived realities of displacement and assimilation as well as the affective dimensions of diasporic food practices.

Published by Visai Games in 2023, *Venba* is the story of first generation Tamil immigrants to Canada – the titular Venba and her husband Paavalan. The birth of their son Kavin, coming at the beginning of the game, is the primary reason that Paavalan and Venba, who have been struggling to find ways to make ends meet in their new country of choice, choose to stay on instead of returning to India. Through the course of the game, the player takes control of Venba over a span of several years and 'helps' her to prepare various

traditionally Tamil dishes that are listed out in the cookbook she inherited from her mother. The cooking sections are interspersed with glimpses into Venba's life – these scenes outline the challenges that she (along with her husband, until his untimely death) undergoes, not only in terms of dealing with the economic concerns and social isolation that come with life in Canada, but also in her relationship with her son Kavin.

The overarching narrative of the game allows for a further understanding of the migrant experience. Although it does not explicitly go into details of the reasons for their decision to move to Canada, it is suggested that Paavalan and Venba migrated due to an inter-caste relationship that would be subjected to stigma and exclusion in India. However, the act of migration also comes with its own caveats – in a way they exchange the exclusion that comes with societal disapproval of their marriage for the exclusion faced by a migrant community. This idea of exclusion plays a significant and recurring role in the game. It has been documented (Phillimore and Goodson 2006) that migrants face social exclusion and are marginalised in labour markets in various ways, including persistent disadvantages and inequalities in employment opportunities. Despite being educated, Paavalan and Venba find it difficult to find steady employment, preventing them from integrating with the larger community to any great extent. Kavin too, feels a kind of distancing and exclusion of his own. Born and raised in Canada, he feels distanced from his Tamil heritage and struggles to reconcile his parents' traditions with his upbringing and his constant need to assimilate with Canadian society. The game highlights this growing distance in various ways. For instance, it is shown in the way he tries to anglicise his name: while he is named Kavin by his parents, he insists on being called 'Kevin' as this is more likely to be accepted in Canadian society. His weakening link with the Tamil language his parents speak is also shown in the game, where visual markers in the text indicate his inability to follow what they are saying and, as he speaks primarily in English even at home, his parents' inability to understand him in turn. This generational gap reflects larger trends in immigrant families, where language, customs, and values often fade over time (Espiritu, 2003).

Depictions of the immigrant experience are often glimpses into the fluidity of identity and culture. The immigrant is both tied to their ancestral home and bound to become a part of the new space that they occupy, a hybrid identity that has often been explored in fiction. In the diasporic imaginary that formed by the binary of 'home' and 'not home', home is defined by the idea of something that is connected with psychological and cultural wholeness but is lost through displacement. The concept of identity, when it comes to narratives of migration, is therefore one fraught with conflict. Mustafa Koc and Jennifer Welsh argue that identity itself is a fluid concept, borrowing from Hall when they say that it is part of defining the relationship of "Other" to oneself. Identity is therefore constructed through a process of defining difference and is tied to the idea of belonging. Cultural identity comprised of the various everyday practices such as religious observations, language, clothing, art, literature, music and food. Koc and Welsh cite the immigrant experience as one of the best examples of the fluid nature of identity, as the immigrant moves from one cultural and geographical space – the space of 'home' – to another, alien space. "The immigrant experience offers a rare glimpse to the fluidity of identity, and the cultural boundaries of resistance and change" (Koc and Welsh, 2023, p. 46) and therefore it is interesting to see how these two forces – resistance and change – interact to create the immigrant identity.

One of the ways in which identity is constructed is through food and foodways. When one examines the importance of food within migrant communities, one finds that food is perhaps one of the most significant ways in which communities are bound together and as such it is not only an essential component of culture but also central to our sense of identity (Fishler 1988). Food is often used by migrants to represent themselves as members of specific ethnic groups and negotiate their place in the host society. Food cultures are often generationally passed on from parent to child – the passing of recipes and cooking methods often forms a kind of bond for immigrant children with homelands that are entirely alien to them. It is therefore unsurprising that food plays such a central role in *Venba*.

Immigrant food is also not free from the acculturation process that marks the diasporic experience. In his model of acculturation, Berry (1980) puts forward four models of acculturation, based on the extent to which migrants adopt elements of the host society: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalisation. The adoption of foodways can also be used to distinguish different migrant techniques of and responses to acculturation. Through the preparation of ethnic foods, the displaced migrant community creates a way to survive the changes they experience in terms of climate, language and societal integration. Further, consumption and preparation of familiar dishes also helps to mitigate the culture shock and the psychological impact thereof by serving as nostalgic objects, reconnecting individuals to the pleasant and the familiar (Locher et al 2005). The need of the immigrant to remain connected is what leads to a large number of home kitchens and cafes that serve ethnic food prepared by diasporic communities. Food is therefore inextricably linked to national identity. Cooking becomes a both literal and symbolic act of preservation. It represents the struggle to maintain cultural roots while adapting to a new environment.

Scholars of food studies like Mannur (2010) have opined that the myth of multiculturalism has made it necessary for the South Asian diaspora to fabricate an acceptable ethnic difference. This very fixed (and often commodified) idea of diasporic ethnic difference is mediated through "culinary nostalgia" – the invocation of the homeland through food. In the case of the Indian diaspora, cookbooks play a significant role in invoking this nostalgia as well, representing generational knowledge of food preparation and offering a way to construct 'Indianness' outside of India.

The gameplay mechanics in *Venba* are designed to reflect the themes of cultural preservation, memory and generational conflict, all through the preparation of food; the cooking of Tamil dishes serves as both a narrative device and a mechanical one that allows for an exploration of diasporic life and cultural identity. Much like the way that immigrants employ adaptive strategies to preserve their traditions in an unfamiliar environment, the player must also navigate the incomplete cookbook through intuitive reconstruction or trial and error

in order to succeed in cooking the recipes to perfection. The cookbook in *Venba* is therefore not a collection of recipes alone but also a tangible link to her homeland and her family's culinary traditions. Players help Venba recreate traditional recipes from a battered cookbook given to her by her mother. The act of reconstructing the recipes in the book is therefore a metaphorical reconstruction of links to the past. As Abhi, the game's creator, puts in an interview, "Given that the themes of the game deals with culture and the importance of holding on to it, a damaged recipe book that players can only partially read from made a lot of sense to me!" (Torossian, 2023).

Later in the game, when Venba's son Kavin inherits the book, it becomes even more of a symbolic bridge between generations: Kavin has long since drifted away from his South Indian identity in terms of language and food practices, but when he attempts to cook using a recipe in the book, a recipe in a language he cannot read, it becomes a physical reminder of the way that food and foodways can bridge generational gaps, and re-establishes for Kavin a sense of belonging within his diasporic identity. The cookbook therefore "symbolises the cultural erasure inherent in migration, yet its restoration represents a hopeful endeavour to reclaim what was once lost" (Jayadev, 2024, p.43) The gameplay mechanics of this sequence also interestingly help to reinforce the role that memory plays in bridging these gaps: in this case, the player's prior knowledge of the mechanics, such as the knowledge of the fact that tomatoes release water when heated in a pan, allows them to assist Kavin in puzzling out the recipe in the book.

In traditional Indian society, food is inextricably linked with the female space and therefore the authenticity of recipes is often vouched for by mothers and grandmothers. The preparation of 'authentic' food also therefore becomes another facet of culinary nostalgia. In the case of migrant households, 'home' is the immediate space of domesticity, and by extension, the kitchen is its distilled essence. Patriarchal constructions require domestic kitchens to be populated with the women of the household, burdening them with the responsibility of extending the reach of the kitchen with the concept of the 'homeland' and authentically native foods. *Venba* in its narrative aligns with this image of South Asian, and in this case South Indian,

motherhood. The game begins with her preparing idlis, quintessentially South Indian, for her husband before he leaves for work, despite the fact that she has been displayed to be ill. This performance of womanhood, of the wife who cannot bear to see her husband subsist on coffee instead of the wholesome food that she is capable of preparing, is the very first scene of the game. While the game does veer away from this view of the kitchen being a female space by allowing Kavin to cook at one point, it is clear from the visual difference between his and his mother's workspace earlier in the game that he is struggling in an unfamiliar space that is the kitchen in comparison with Venba.

The image of the good South Asian mother has always been conceptualised as being part of a nurturing relationship between mother and child that becomes a metaphor for relations of caretaking and dependency. "Feeding the child and provisioning the family are key components of the role of mother and wife. The good mother is one who feeds the child on demand with wholesome home-made complex foods of the particular ethnic and caste-based group of the patriliny" (Srinivas, 2006, p. 198) Venba's constant insistence that her son eat Indian/Tamil food also aligns with the idea that many Indian households believe that Indian food is healthier and more nourishing than Western 'junk food'. This also reinforces the image of motherhood where the woman is also responsible for the physical well being of the members of her household by ensuring the consumption of wholesome home cooked meals.

The idea of the nurturing Indian mother also aligns with Hardt and Negri's concept of affective labour. The concept of affective labour is defined as the labour of human contact and interaction, often involving the production and manipulation of affects. The products of such labour are therefore affective "a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion" (Hardt and Negri 2004, 96). This concept has been adopted into feminist theory, particularly in terms of domestic labour where repeated material tasks, such as cooking, are not only required, but also become part of the production of affects (Hardt and Negri, 2004). In this context, affective labour highlights how emotional and relational dimensions are embedded within daily

routines, revealing how emotional regulation and care essential components of work traditionally performed by women. Such labour, while often invisible or undervalued, sustains the emotional fabric of households and communities, underscoring how the personal and emotional are intricately tied to systems of economic and social reproduction. Srinivas (2006) extends on this premise, concluding that the nostalgia that diasporic Indians indulge in creates a cultural utopia exemplified by mothers' home cooking, located in the collective imagination of the ethnic community. This "narrative of affiliative desire", exemplified by wanting one's child to eat the food of one's ethnic group, is a powerful driving force for diasporic women. The act of cultural preservation is therefore not an abstract concept, but one that is concrete and embodied through food practices - highlighting the agency of the diasporic subjects as the creators and carriers of culture.

One must consider the gendered aspect of this idea of food practices carrying culture, as once again, the onus of passing on said culture falls upon diasporic women. Srinivas (2006) mentions in a study of Indian diasporic women that there is a 'meta-narrative of loss' that invest the preparation of food for South Asian families. In other words, there is a kind of anxiety that surrounds food practice, particularly from the perspective of the women for whom food and food preparation are central to the practice of daily life and an integral part of the affective labour that they undertake. Food choices are often driven by a fear of losing 'Indian' culture, however loosely defined it may be, and therefore women feel that there is a constant need to have Indian food on Indian tables. This anxiety of cultural dissolution is present in several moments in *Venba*, for instance when she tempts Kavin to eat puttu – which can become a 'rocket' (referring to the steam that is released when it is prepared), instead of pizza as a celebratory meal. Home cuisine is often glorified in immigrant narratives, represented as "wonderful pots of comfort food that tastes like no other food in the world? What about those flavourful South Indian rasams…? The layered, perfumed Hyderabadi biryani that has been made for generations in your family? … Will the cooking of authentic regional home food become a lost language?" (Melwani,

2004, as cited in Srinivas, 2006) Diasporic mothers often feel a child's food preferences to be linked closely with the cultural identity they choose to adopt, which is to say that a child's choice of food being that belongs to a different ethnic community is also indicative of the child choosing to belong to the other community themselves.

However, there are different layers to children choosing to distance themselves from native foods – the fear of ostracism from their peers, especially in schools. Venba points out to Paavalan that Kavin even at the age of five, doesn't eat the lunches she packs for him at school, and instead brings them back with an excuse. When Kavin is preparing to leave for university too, there is an instance of outright rejection of native foods. Venba has packed biryani, as well as "podis, pickles and sweets" (*Venba*, 2023) Kavin rejects the food, saying that the "whole car will smell". The immigrant child's relationship with food, extended from formative years into young adulthood, is one of embarrassment and a fear of ridicule. "I don't want to smell like 'Little India' anymore. I just… want to be normal. For once" (*Venba*, 2023). This experience of otherness is echoed by several other experiences that immigrant children have had with food. The theoretical ideals of diversity in multicultural societies therefore clash with the real-life limits of tolerance. Often, what the mainstream considers intolerable, unappealing or "inedible" shapes the food choices and culinary practices that society accepts and normalises (Wu, 2002. p.216).

In an interaction with his colleague at the end of the game where he is consulted for feedback on the experience of an immigrant child in a school cafeteria, Kavin's colleague Kris puts forward vindaloo and chicken tikka as possible options, reflecting a kind of good-natured ignorance of the specificities of real Indian food and food practices which are culturally and regionally diverse. Kavin himself is more inclined to reflect his own experiences rather than an idealised version of diversity.

> Kavin: (…)What if we show her eating nothing? Like, I would bring back my lunch a lot lol. I was too embarrassed to eat it at school. Maybe we can touch upon that?

> Kris Kendall: Ohh…Thaaaat might not fit the tone of the show. It's just a fun scene that celebrates different cultures and cuisines that really represent Toronto. (*Venba*, 2023)

While his ethnicity is not specified, it can be assumed that Kris is not from an immigrant family and therefore unfamiliar with the very real concerns faced by diasporic communities, particularly in a period that was less accepting of cultural differences. Kris's disinterest in portraying an immigrant child weighed with the anxiety of assimilation is also reflective of the need for multicultural societies, and media that is based on them, to maintain a façade of acceptance and multiculturalism. Kavin, however, has experienced discrimination in his youth, which he expresses in a reply to Kris that he goes on to delete. Kavin shares the truth of his experience as an immigrant with 'alien' food in his lunchbox, and how the idea of dismissing such concerns seems to him an act of trivialising the very real exclusion that a migrant child would face for their native culinary practices.

> It just feels weird for me to write a scene where she isn't even a bit apprehensive about the lunch. I was terrified to even open the lid. I get we're celebrating it but a scene like this would make me feel like I was worried about nothing, when I wasn't. (*Venba*, 2023)

In "Food and Belonging: At Home in Alien Kitchens", culture theorist Ketu Katrak (2004) talks about how culinary narratives often manage immigrant memories and imagined returns to the 'homeland'. She talks about how her childhood disinterest in food later went on to become a need for food as a cultural connection to that same space of the homeland. Katrak's experience is echoed by several Indian immigrants who find a pathway to reconnection with their native culture through culinary pathways. For a first-generation immigrant like Venba, cooking links her to her past in India, bringing back memories of her mother and the life she left behind, whereas for Kavin it is a way for him to reconcile his conflicting identities.

The synesthetic experience of handling food can lead to the creation and triggering of cultural memories (Conroy 2008). As Sutton points out, "food is a medium of memory that carries with it the sensory

and emotional landscapes of home" (Sutton, p. 8). *Venba* makes this connection clear through its aesthetic choices, like the sounds of spices sizzling, the visual warmth of home-cooked meals, and the Tamil music that plays in the background. Food *literally* becomes linked to memory when Kavin tries to recreate naatu kozhi kulambu based on the cookbook that Venba, having moved back to India, has left behind for him. The experience of cooking, the taste and smell of the dish, brings back a specific memory (Venba reacting to the news of her own mother's death over a phone call) to Kavin. This, again, ties in with Sutton's analysis of food, particularly smell memories, being "emotionally charged" (Sutton, p.9).

Throughout *Venba*, there is a commingling of two themes: through the generational divide between Venba and her son, and the difference in their experiences as members of the South Asian diaspora in Canada, the game explores the anxieties of migrant experiences. While the first-generation migrants Venba and Paavalan are seen to struggle to find a place in society, facing racism and unable to find financial stability, Kavin is able to assimilate much faster and feels, as Visser (2020) suggests, a "strong sense of belonging to the larger society". Through its engagement with food, it expands on this idea, but presents food and foodways as a possible bridge between these generations, presenting as Brah (1996) suggests, the idea that diasporic identity is "embedded in the genealogies of dispersion and the practices of everyday life". It is only through everyday practices – even those as simple as the preparation of food – that reconciliation and hybrid identities are formed. The final scene of the game is of Venba and Kavin reconnecting after years of cultural and emotional distancing. Kavin's story therefore comes full circle – he goes from assimilating himself within Canadian culture and eschewing his Tamil identity, to realising that it is as significant a part of him as the one that his family adopted for him and seeking out a new way to engage with his roots. Identity, the game suggests, is not necessarily fixed in the case of the diaspora, but fluid and formed by constantly shifting cultural boundaries.

In conclusion *Venba* is a playable exploration of the way that food functions as a bridge between the diaspora and the homeland. The game illustrates how food practices can evoke feelings of longing

and nostalgia while serving as a means to preserve cultural identity in the face of displacement. By allowing players to participate in the preparation of South Indian food, the game itself becomes a carrier of culture, encouraging players who may not be familiar with the milieu to learn more about it, and for those who share a similar background to engage with the more personal aspects of the story. Therefore, the act of foregrounding food and foodways, *Venba* offers an exploration of the intersection between memory, identity and nostalgia and contributes to broader discourses on diaspora and culinary practices.

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