

Jhumpa Lahiri's Metaphoric Food Notes: A Study of Food and/as Identity

Dr. Athira Prakash

Assistant Professor, Department of English

NSS Hindu College Changanacherry

9495525387

Synopsis

Over the past decades, the studies in diaspora have served as prominent research lenses through which to view the aftermath of international migration and multiculturalism. Addressing the question of relocation and rediscovery of the immigrant identity, Jhumpa Lahiri attempts to chronicle how the South Asian immigrants adapt to the American space, and how they involve in the making of the diasporic identity along with the process of acceptance and resistance in the alien land. In this process of acculturation, they redefine the parameters that determine their identity. The study of Lahiri's Food Narrative illustrates how far food functions as the metaphor of nation which is often used to sustain a collective sense of togetherness which ultimately lead to what we call identity.

Key Words : Diaspora, Acculturation, Cultural Identity.

A diaspora is a social construct founded on feeling, consciousness, memory, mythology, history, narratives, group identity, longings, and dreams, allegorical and virtual, all of which play an important role in establishing diaspora a reality. Jhumpa Lahiri is a significant U.S. based English writer of Indian origin and her readership stretches across geographical boundaries. Born to Bengali parents in 1967 in London, Lahiri moved to the United States in 1970 and became a U.S. citizen in 1987. Lahiri attempts to chronicle how the South Asian immigrants adapt to the American space, and how they involve in the process of acceptance and resistance in the alien land. Addressing the question of relocation and rediscovery of the immigrant identity, her writing unravels the process of acculturation, its heterogeneity and its barriers in the context of multiculturalism and transnationalism.

Stuart Hall is of the view that cultural identity enables the migrant in the host country to identify himself with the people of the same historical and cultural experiences and to experience a sense of togetherness at the cost of their shared cultural codes and value system. The cultural identity markers like food, clothes, language retention, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs, rites and rituals are retained, discarded or adopted differently at different times and places. Food is central to one's sense of identity. Recognizing the role of culinary culture in diaspora identification, cooking and eating are collectively used to sustain a shared sense of diaspora cultural identity in many of Lahiri's stories.

William Safran in "Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homelands and Return", discusses the fact that the word diaspora is used as a metaphoric designation for several categories of people- expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities. However, Safran details the six distinguishing characteristic features of the diaspora,

They or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more 'peripheral' or foreign regions. They retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland its physical location, history and achievements. They believe that they are not and perhaps cannot be-fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it. They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return-when conditions are appropriate. They believe that they should collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity. They continue to relate personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such relationship. (83-84)

Lahiri's story "Mrs. Sen's" deals with the same ethnic communal consciousness as described by Safran and the protagonist seems to suffer from loneliness, despair, and identity crisis. Mrs. Sen, a thirty-year-old wife

of an Indian mathematics professor of an American university is trapped in an ethnic enclave. She is leading an isolated and secluded life while Mr. Sen is busy with his academic pursuits. In spite of Mr. Sen's persuasion to learn driving and to take up a job, she loves to stay back at home, clinging on to the imaginary homeland. Mrs. Sen is also an isolated pocket of Indian culture within Western society and negates any thought of assimilation. Mrs. Sen time travels to her home very often and remembers that in her Calcutta, her dear city, where fresh fishes of favourite types are available in plenty all the time. She proudly tells Eliot:

In Calcutta, people ate fish first thing in the morning, the last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head. It was available in any market, at any hour, from dawn until midnight. All you have to do is leave the house and walk a bit and there you are. (Interpreter 123-124)

In "Immigrant Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*" Dubey says, "The immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world" (22). Twinkle and Sanjeev in "The Blessed House" decide to invite about thirty people for their upcoming housewarming party. The invitees include Sanjeev's acquaintances, people from the office, and several Indian couples in the Connecticut area. Many of them, Sanjeev barely knows, but they used to invite him, in his bachelor days, to supper on Saturdays. "He often wondered why they included him in their circle. He had little in common with any of them, but he always attended their gatherings to eat spiced chickpeas and shrimp cutlets, and gossip and discuss politics, for he seldom had other plans" (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 144-145). The ethnic identification of Sanjeev with them exemplifies Anderson's argument that the nations are distinguished by the way it is imagined.

Sanjeev in "The Blessed House" fondly remembers how eagerly he waits for Mughlai chickens and the spinach of the Indian restaurant across the Nass Avenue Bridge during his Boston days. After his marriage with Twinkle, he cannot help but think with a flicker of regret of the snapshots sent by his mother from Calcutta of prospective girls who could cook Indian dishes without referring to any book.

In *Imagined Communities* (1983) Anderson argues that the nation is an imagined political community that is inherently limited in scope and sovereign in nature. It is imagined because the actuality of even the smallest nation exceeds what it is possible for a single person to know—one cannot know every person in a nation, just as one cannot know every aspect of its economy, geography, history, and so forth.

The story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" addresses the issues of nationality and national identity of a South Asian immigrant in the US. The story makes use of India Pak division metaphorically as the backdrop to explore the complexities and dilemmas of the South Asian immigrant in the US. Hailing from Dacca, Mr. Pirzada a University Professor, reaches Boston on a grant to study the foliage in New England. The story is dated back to 1971 and it takes place in a New England college town. Lilia, the narrator in the story, is a ten-year-old Indian American girl, who helps her parents to reduce their sense of alienation by inviting the fellows with Indian names to her house. Pirzada also shares the same sense of loneliness and crisis as that of Lilia's parents. He loses himself in the thoughts of his wife and seven children who are in his homeland Dacca. This short story aptly demonstrates what Anderson talks of nationality in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*.

Finally, [the nation] is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings. (1)

In *The Namesake*, Ashima is the most spiritual and Indian figure of the family. Where there is a reminder of India and Indian customs, Ashima is at the heart of the matter. She establishes numerous parties with the invited Indian families in America—the circle of which grows larger each year—to maintain the Indian customs and create a surrogate India in America. Ashima and Ashoke integrate the American food as the children are more exposed to it than their traditional Indian cuisines. Gogol does not want to be seen as a stranger living in a foreign land, so he dresses like an American and follows the American way of living. The following extract shows how food acts as a catalyser in his process of assimilation:

They learn to roast turkeys ... at thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around the snowman, to colour boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter for the sake of Gogol and Sonia ... they celebrate with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati. (Namesake 64)

The friendship circle and the neighbourhood of the immigrant wives are exclusively made up of immigrant Indians who constantly share their longing for their left-behind motherland where as their children prefer to mingle with their American peers very often. This creates problems for first-generation diasporic Indians, especially in relation to their own progeny who define themselves as Westerners of Indian origin and cannot identify with their parents' ethnic self-fashioning. Defensive self-fashioning is thus an obstacle to integration into the host society, but it is the natural and defiant reaction against hostility, and even more so when a colonial perspective is taken. In *The Namesake*, Ashima keeps in touch with a close-knit web of immigrant friends who follow Bengali customs, rituals, and rites, and speaks the Bengali language and eats Bengali Dal curry and rice. William B. Moore in *Metaphor and Changing Reality* says,

Among the everyday cultural practices routinely used to maintain diasporic identities, food is common of central importance. Food traditions and habits are comparatively portable: groups that migrate around the world often carry with them elements of the diet and eating habits of the homeland (11).

Lahiri, also problematizes, the theme of displacement and the choice before the dislocated population – either to adapt to the host society or to withstand the forces of assimilation. This choice is an ethical conundrum for it puts the people in dilemma between their debt to the country of origin and their obligation to the country of migration. Debt not repaid and obligation not fulfilled may become the millstone of guilty conscience. Hence, self-fashioning – because of its voluntary, ever-changing, and somewhat artificial nature is an efficient process of constructing and reshaping human identities over time not just to suit circumstances, but to rescue one's self-respect from the mire of guilt-ridden mental landscape.

The tenacious holding onto certain elements of clothing, rituals, and food is brought out vividly in Lahiri's fiction where the female protagonists use these tangible signifiers of identity to define their status within the diasporic community and also to create their versions of homeland and belonging. Ashima in *The Namesake* finds no joy, no words and no happy events in the new world as it is found in India. In Boston, she is left with no relatives and no neighbours to talk and share her worries and fears.

In *The Namesake*, two weeks before Ashima's due date, Ashima is combining rice Krispies and planters peanuts and chopped red onions in a bowl. Then Ashima adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there was mustard oil to pour into the mix. This is the only thing Ashima craves before she goes to hospital for her delivery.

Migration, existential rootlessness, marginality, cultural alienation, identity crisis, east-west encounter, intergenerational gap, nostalgia, assimilation, acculturation, and negotiation and identity are some major themes, which brings to Lahiri immense popularity and worldwide acceptance in both the third world and the first world countries. Being the picture gallery of the human predicament, her works explore internal strife and changing human predicament among identities and cultures. She passionately writes about the terrible dilemma and culture divide feelings of an immigrant.

The imagined community of nation remains an extremely powerful conceptual entity that the immigrants in the works under this study are prepared to sustain the distinct national and cultural identity. In the name of their countries, they accept affinity with individuals they have never seen, nor will ever see and still, they regard the land as theirs, but on which they may never actually set foot. And even under the current pressures of globalization the nation still severely affects its members while continuing to underpin economic, political, social and cultural relations across the globe. Not surprisingly, it is this representation – the ways in which an individual and a community represent themselves, which sustains and sometimes even constructs the nations, providing people with the very basis of cultural identification.

Food occupies an important place in the social cultural and personal lives of the immigrant. It has significant implication in moulding their politics and re defining their cultural identity. Lahiri's most of the immigrant characters exemplify how ordinary people enact nationalism and how they are attached to national identity through everyday practices of making sharing and eating their food. Thus, the exploration of the connection of food to nationalism and national identity indeed will introduce a new analytical perspective to the study of migration and international relations.

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