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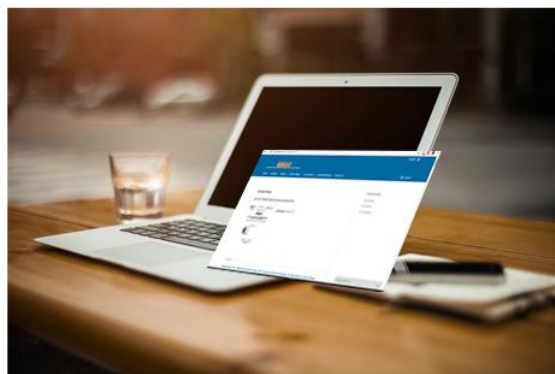
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Nostalgia Through Food and Culinary Habits in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction

Abstract : Food plays a very significant role in diasporic studies. It acts as a symbol of love and care as it helps in developing new relationships in the society. In Post-colonial literature, many writers employ food abundantly in their fiction hence it is necessary to consider its critical strength to analyze how food is an influential factor in the formation of the identity of diasporic immigrants. Cuisine or food is an important part of culture and religion of a country and the culinary habits are one of the aspects which any nostalgic and diasporic immigrant consciously tries to adhere and maintain in a foreign land. Food is one of the major elements in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction which plays a pivotal role that encompasses from the homeland to hostland, the first and the second generation immigrants, society and individual, and men and women. She describes the various issues of the food metaphor and highlights the Bengali and American cuisines, eating manners, ever-changing tastes, and culinary practices. The contrasting behaviour with respect to food habits between the first and the second generation immigrants is apparently visible in Lahiri's fiction. In *Interpreter of Maladies* Lahiri explores food as a medium to depict the intricacies in familial bonds and cultural transition from Indian to American ways of life. In *Unaccustomed Earth* she defines that sharing of food establishes the ties among scattered subjects in diasporic spaces. In her debut novel, *The Namesake*, food has been explored as a means of nostalgia, negotiations, and assimilations with host culture that creates a new hybrid culture. In her novel, *The Lowland*, food signifies the adaptation of hostland culture in an ironical manner. This study also explores how the immigrants recollect the taste of food from homelands, their adaptations to new food habits of hostland and their gradual development into hybrid identities. Readability of copy is of paramount importance.

Keywords - Food, Diasporic, Identity, Transition, Nostalgia, Adaptation

I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'Food' has as many meanings and symbolic connotations that are transcendental to our imagination. It joins the literature to the real world and one cannot deny its importance simply saying insignificant in literature. 'Food analysis' is a nascent trend in the world of literary studies. The things related to food should be read deeply to examine their hidden and symbolic meanings as it is not easy to explore its intrinsic meanings. Since last few years, food is underseen solemnly in academic studies.

Food has multilayered significance in diasporic literature. It becomes a mirror which reflects the nostalgia of the diasporic characters. Flavors and smell of their ethnic food may offer a transitory and temporary reprieve from the pain and anguish emerged due to dislocation and estrangement in a foreign country. In post-colonial literature, many writers employ food abundantly in their fiction thus it is necessary to consider its critical strength to analyze how far the food is an influential factor in the formation of the identity of diasporic immigrants.

Food criticism paves the way to invent various hidden meanings in the day-to-day life. In Writings Food Studies Movement, Marion Nestle, a biologist and William Alex McIntosh, a sociologist defines that "food studies can be considered to constitute a new movement, not only as an academic discipline but also as a means to change society" (Nestle & McIntosh, 2010:160). The importance of food in academic researches and in the day to day life is observed by the Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik in Food and Culture: A Reader as:

Food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is the central pawn in political strategies of states and households. Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds and contradictions. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family and community relationships...Food is life and life can be studied and understood through food. Food is both a scholarly concern and a real life concern. (Carole & Penny, 1997:1)

As Francis Bacon depicts "some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed and some few to be chewed and digested." (Francis, 2001:50). Thus this research hopes to display that the cuisine/food images create their own web that needs to be carefully chewed and digested to decrypt various layers and find the hidden meaning of their rich figurative taste and

smell. Cuisine or food is an important part of a culture and religion of any country and culinary habits are one of the aspects which any nostalgic and diasporic immigrant consciously tries to adhere and maintains in a foreign land. It will also help to recognize the symbolic power that food holds and it has been explored in the literary explorations in diasporic writings.

Food and culinary practices are more national than anything else. Fred Gardaphe agrees that “food is a cultural sign that participates in the representation of ‘race’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘gender’, ‘class’, ‘nationality’ and ‘exile’. (Gardaphé & Xu, 2007: 10) They create a connection and belongingness among diasporic women in any foreign country. Cooking of a specific food in a host land is a means for diasporic women to find affinity with their homeland and an effort to make a ‘mini homeland’ in a hostland. They make use of food habits to negotiate with the host culture and the home culture. So the preservice to the native culinary habits signifies the affirmation of the identity, not only of an individual but also of the ethnic groups. In a foreign country the Bengali community, in their get-together, cook and serve rice and other Indian foods which create a sense of belongingness. Food is noted for the whole community and not for an individual. It acts as a metaphor that obligates and simultaneously makes apart a community from the other.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a noted Diasporic writer, employs food amply in her fiction. Lahiri in an interview depicts, “Food is a land issue. Food is culture for immigrant, serves an important part of their identity. When away from home, the food from one’s land brings as much pleasure as mother’s voice on overseas calls. Food provides a link; it induces a sense of belonging in an otherwise alien world.” Food in Lahiri’s fiction acts as “the means through which the women characters assert agency in their diasporic contexts. In these stories, culinary practices both reenact the homeland and articulate difference.” (Gardaphe 8)

II. FOOD AS THERAPEUTIC AGENT IN INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) a short-story collection, won prestigious Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The stories in this collection define food as a sense of belonging and to examine relations between food and the immigrants. Food has been projected as a binding factor for Shoba and Shukumar in the story, entitled ‘A Temporary Matter’. The food items in their house describe their specific choice:

“The pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they are cooking Italian or Indian ... meals that appeared to have taken half a

day to prepare from things she had frozen and bottled, not cheap things in tins but peppers she had marinated herself with rosemary, and chutney that she cooks on Sundays, stirring boiling pots of tomatoes and prunes.” (6-7).

Shoba gets nostalgic regarding Indian food and remembers ‘Rogan Josh’ (10). During their dinner time on a dark night due to an electrical fault in America, she recalls rice ceremony in India. “I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark.”(P11). Though they are living in a foreign land and Shoba would give birth to a child there but she had already decided to feed her child first taste of solid food as per the rice ceremony in an Indian way.

In the story ‘When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine’ Mr. Pirzada an immigrant from Dacca and Lilia and her parents, the Indian immigrants have a sense of belongingness. Food and their identical eating habits establish a strong familial bonding among them. Lilia describes the similar food habits of her family and Mr. Pirzada in these words: “They ate pickled mangoes with their mangoes, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as digestive, drank no alcohol for dessert, dipped auster biscuits into successive cups of tea.” (25). All of them share a perfect harmony with these food items, some of them are Pakistanis and Indians both. The food helps to seek a shelter in a country whose natives are indifferent towards them.

In the story ‘A Real Durwan’ Boori Ma, an East Bengali refugee, a caretaker, does the odd jobs for the residents in an apartment building in post-independence, post-partition Calcutta. She memorizes her wealthy past. In a diasporic way, she depicts the different delicacies that were offered in her third daughter’s marriage, “The rice was cooked in rosewater ...mustard prawns were steamed in banana leaves. Not a delicacy was spared. Not that this was an extravagance for us. At our house, we ate goat twice a week. We had a pond on our property, full of fish.” (71) This reflects that food plays a pivotal role in Indian customs and rituals and it also provides Boori Ma a soothing effect from the sufferings of alienation and displacement.

In the story ‘Sexy’ Lahiri has projected food that signifies Miranda’s desperate love for Dev, a Bengali married man, however, it is an extramarital relationship. Miranda frantically waits for Dev on Sundays and makes arrangement for the food of his likings, “she went to Deli and bought a baguette and little containers of things Dev liked to eat, like pickled herring, and Potato Salad, and tortes of pesto and Mascarpone Cheese. They ate in

bed, picking up the herring with their fingers and ripping the baguette with their hands.” (94) Lahiri conveys the excitement for love through Miranda’s zeal for the preparation of the food for Dev.

In the story entitled ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ food becomes the nexus of the story. Mrs. Sen, a Bengali immigrant woman, is always seen busy in the preparation of food. She plans to serve Eliot’s mother as: “a glass of bright pink yogurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, a bowl of semolina halvah.” She is very happy to cook Indian recipes and nostalgically enjoys it. “The other thing that made Mrs. Sen happy was fish from the seaside. It was always a whole fish she desired, not shellfish...” (123) she is so much excited to know about the arrival of the stock of fish in the local market just like a news from the homeland. Under the obsession over to have a fresh fish, she takes a risk to drive the car herself while she is not accustomed to driving and eventually crashes the car. In fact, food becomes the leitmotif in the story. Mrs. Sen has brought a special knife from India for chopping vegetables in America, “Carved like the prow of a Viking Ship.” (62) The knife named ‘bonti’ in Bengali becomes a means of nostalgia. It makes her feel an affinity of her homeland that lacks in the foreign land.

In the story ‘This Blessed House’ Sanjeev, the first generation Indian immigrant in the USA marries Twinkle, the second generation Indian immigrant. Lahiri has realistically defined the differences in the process of assimilation and attitude of both the generations simultaneously. Both of them have different food habits. Sanjeev is very fond of Indian food and he recalls the Indian restaurant where he used to go “...to order Mughlai chicken with spinach from his favorite Indian restaurant on the other side of the Charles ...” (138). Twinkle, a second generation immigrant, has no interest in cooking like an Indian immigrant wife. “Indian food, she complained, was a bother; she detested chopping garlic, and peeling ginger, and could not operate a blender, and so it was Sanjeev who, on weekends, seasoned mustard oil with cinnamon sticks and cloves in order to produce a proper curry.” (144) On observing Twinkle’s ignorance about Indian cuisines, Sanjeev nostalgically reminds and regrets, “He thought with a flicker of regrets of the snapshot his mother used to send him from Calcutta of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook.” (146) In the housewarming party typical Indian dish ‘Samosa’ is enlisted in the menu along with other food items, “The menu for the party was simple: there would be case of champagne, and samosas from an Indian restaurant Hartford, and big trays of rice and chicken and almonds and orange peels, which Sanjeev has spent the

greater part of the morning and afternoon preparing.” (140) Food in this story has been depicted as a means to portray the differences between the first generation and the second generation immigrants’ affinity for homeland food.

In the last story of ‘The Third and the Final Continent’ the food, and the eating habits prompt a sense of belongingness in America between a Bengali gentleman and his wife, Mala “the smell of steamed rice marks a home as different from an apartment.” (192). Eating food with hands gives them more pleasure and a feeling of homeland and more satisfaction than that of any spoon or fork. They even transmit this habit to their son. However, Mala knows that it is a custom, “he will no longer do after we die.”(197) Indians settled in abroad have a great fondness for this habit of eating with hands which adheres them to their homeland. “In India, most of the characters may speak English but no English food is an intrinsic part of Indian cuisine or diasporic identity.”(Choubey)

III. FOOD AS A SOCIO- CULTURAL MARKER IN UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

Lahiri in her second short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, describes the food as a source of belongingness and nostalgia. In the title story, ‘Unaccustomed Earth’, Ruma, the second-generation Indian immigrants, oscillates between two cultures as she is born to Indian parents and raised up in America. She follows both the homeland and the hostland cultures. She eats the food with her hands but she follows this habit only in her father’s presence, “She ate with her fingers, as her father did, for the first time in months, for the first time in this new house in Seattle.”(22) In the swing of assimilation and adjustment, she does not teach her son Akash, the third generation immigrant, this habit of eating food but Akash desires so, “...wanting to eat with his fingers, too, but this was something Ruma had not taught him to do.”(22) This is an indication of her assimilation in the host country as well as the perseverance of homeland culture.

In the story ‘Hell-Heaven’ Aparna, an Indian immigrant woman, remains busy in her kitchen as her daughter Usha reminds, “...I would find her in the kitchen, rolling out dough for luchis.”(63). Aparna and her husband never like to host Thanksgiving party “the ritual of a large sit-down dinner and the food that one was supposed to eat was lost on them.”(77). Though they serve food to Pranab Kaku, another Bengali immigrant, but they celebrate it in an Indian way of sharing food together at home. In America, Aparna and Pranab Kaku nostalgically memorize the Indian delicacies “...for the best jelabis and moghlai parathas.”(64) In the same context, Alfonso-Forero rightly says that the “Indian meals bring

together friends and family.” (Alfonso-Forero, 2011: 138) Thus it reveals that sharing of food establishes the ties among scattered subjects in diasporic spaces.

In the story ‘Hema & Kaushik’ Kaushik, after his mother’s death has not been accustomed to Indian food. He, however, has no nostalgia, as an adult, but when he tastes the food at a resort that makes him, “But this food caused him to feel strangely sentimental.”(325). It reminds him of his childhood days and the typical food his mother used to prepare for him. Chitra, Kaushik’s step-mother, an Indian immigrant prefers to have her house in the vicinity of Bengali families and Indian grocery shops, “...other Bengalis nearby and an Indian grocery in the town, things that were more important to Chitra than the proximity of the ocean and Modernist architecture...” (292) Hema also reminds her childhood days and nostalgically remembers, “...the rooms filled with the smell of lamb curry and Pullao.”(223). She also memories the typical Indian food cooked by her mother, to be served to Bengali guests in a party. Thus it indicates that the first, as well as the second generation immigrants, still feel nostalgic for Indian food whenever they find Indian food at any restaurant or grocery shop.

IV. FOOD AS NOSTALGIA IN THE NAMESAKE

In *The Namesake* (2003), Lahiri opens her debut novel, with nostalgic Ashima, an Indian immigrant, preparing a typical Indian meal in America. She is pregnant and craves to have the Indian taste in her Cambridge kitchen. She has been consuming, “...this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railways platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones.” (Lahiri, 2003:1)

The preparation of such Indian delicacies indicates her craving for the motherland and her own people as well. During pregnancy stage, Indian woman craves to have different types of food and the presence of some near and dear one around her. In the hospital, during the childbirth contractions, Ashima recalls her family and how they enjoy tea in India, “in the Kitchen of her parents’ flat on Amherst Street.... A servant is pouring after-dinner tea into steaming glasses, arranging Marie biscuits on a tray.”(4-5) She remembers the moments during her departure from India to Boston when her grandmother showed her love for her by preparing Ashima’s favourite dish, “...had entered the kitchen after over a decade’s retirement to cook Ashima a light goat and Potato Stew.”(37)

Ashima remembers the preparations for Gogol's rice ceremony, which took a week-long, "the Biryani, the carp in yogurt sauce, the dal, and the sin vegetables dishes." (39) She further reminds how they managed the remaining food items, "boiling rice and warming the previous night's leftovers, filling their stomachs.....sleepy and sated, as their palms turned yellow and dry." (165) She does not bother rather enjoys preparing food items alone to serve the guests.

Ashima is the mother who negotiates between the food of homeland and the hostland. On the occasion of Gogol's birthday, she arranges for both the types of food. But she herself does not eat the hostland food items which Gogol used to eat "cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hotdogs." (65) During the process of the assimilation and adaptation, she used to prepare American dinner once a week. She prepares Indian food by mixing the ingredients available in a supermarket in the USA. Ashima teaches Gogol, a typical Indian habit of eating with his hands, "not to let the food stain the skin of his palm." (55)

As a part of passing on the legacy of Indian cuisines, Ashima imparts skills of making Indian food to her daughter Sonia who usually cooks the food when Ashok, her father is away from home and Gogol comes to visit them "often it's Sonia who does the cooking." (189) Ashima does not bother rather enjoys preparing food items alone to serve the guests.

It's a moment of negotiation when Ashima manages to create an ethnic group of diasporic Bengali women to share her experiences and teaches the newly arrived friends how to cook American food and counsels them, "for recipes and advice and she tells them about the carp that's sold in China town, that it's possible to make halva from cream of wheat." (38) Alfonso-Forero observes that Ashima's Bengali friends become "a surrogate family and a microcosm of the India that was left behind." (Alfonso-Forero, 2011: 158). Such type of adjustments are the indication of negotiations, adaptations with host culture and the creation of a new hybrid culture; neither totally American nor Indian but a blended mixture of both.

V. CULINARY HABITS IN THE LOWLAND

In *The Lowland* (2013), the food is not depicted as much as it is discussed in *The Namesake*, the reason behind is the protagonist Gauri, in *The Lowland* has not been portrayed as an Indian ideological woman who tries her best to keep the ethnicity of her homeland in the form of food, eating habits and culture as well. But Lahiri very skillfully defines the food experiences in her novel to convey the importance of food in a foreign land. Subhash and

Gauri were invited to a get together of Indian couples by Narasimah and Kate in Rhodes Island. Their Indian women brought with them the Indian “dishes they’d cooked, dals and vegetables and samosas, tasty accompaniments to the lasagna and salad that Kate had served.” (Lahiri, *The Lowland*: 139) The food here signifies that the Indian women preserve their homeland cultural, traditional and ethical values in a hostland.

Through food Lahiri describes how a widow is treated in India and the partial behaviour towards her is depicted through the character of Gauri. Subhash notices the difference towards Gauri in his house when she was eating her food. Subhash observes her food, “....watching her eats some dal and rice....she was dragging a few grains of salt with her index finger from a little pile at the edge of the plate and mixing into her food, He saw that the fish he had been served at lunch had not been given to her.”(95) This indicates the biased behaviour towards a widow in Bengali custom.

Gauri, during the process of her assimilation, adapts the American food culture. Though she doesn’t know the proper way of the usage of some American ingredients, “she broke it into pieces and ate it into its own, standing in the parking lot of the groceries. Not knowing it was intended to be spread on a cracker or bread, savouring the unexpected tastes and texture in her mouth licking the paper clean.” (131). Gauri, unlike an Indian woman, shirks preparing food in America though its smell doesn’t bother her as it’s been in Calcutta. Thus Subhash alone cooks food in America for them: “two plates, two glasses of water, two mounds of soft rice accompanied by whatever he had made” (130).

When Subhash comes to India, he eats Indian food with his hand, “...dal and slices of fried bitter melon, rice, and fish stew. Sweet Pabda fish from the river, their cooked eyes like yellow pebbles.... The freedom to eat with his fingers.” (92). Eating with hands is an Indian food habit and Subhash feels himself informal and carefree while eating with hands in his own house in India. In America, Subhash himself cooks his food, sometimes he cooks for his friend Richard, “cooked curry and boiled a pot of rice.”(p.40) who in return teaches him car driving. In this way, food serves as a means of negotiation and also develops bondage of relations between an immigrant and a native in America.

Both Ashima and Gauri are the first generation Indian immigrants but Gauri never bothers to teach her daughter Bela, the traditions and customs of Indian food and eating habits. When Subhash and Bela visit India after the death of his father, then Bela tries to eat with her hands, “to pick up rice and lentils with her finger, her grandmother told Deepa to

fetch a spoon. When Deepa poured some water from the urn that stood on little stool in the corner of the room, her grandmother reproached her. Not that water, Give her the boiled water. She's not made to survive here." (194)

Through the character of Bijoli, Bela's grandmother, Lahiri highlights the maturity of the grandparents regarding the attempts of assimilation and adaptations of their children and grandchildren in a foreign land. As in the story, *Unaccustomed Earth* Ruma's father teaches his grandson, Akash, the Indian traditions and eating habits but Bijoli, instead of forcing her granddaughter, Bela, to learn Indian traditions, assists her to live as per American way of lifestyle even in India also. She is quite aware that it's of no use to teach Bela, the customs which she cannot maintain in a foreign land.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, an attempt has been made to depict food as a sustaining force to counter the alienation, aches of humiliations, the clash of culture and sufferings of dislocation and relocation in a foreign country. Lahiri highlights that food inspires the ethnic group to assimilate and adopt the mainstream culture in a foreign land. Besides, Lahiri describes the importance of food in building a sense of belongingness and the interpersonal relationship among migrants as well as she addresses their issues of assimilation, adaptation and transformation. This study also explores the ironical differences between Indian food culture and American one which lead to differences between the first and the second generation immigrants. So the study focuses on the real aspects of food-related issues in the selected short stories and the novels of Lahiri's fiction rather than on their metaphoric significances.

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