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Imagining Food and Identity: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Jhumpa Lahiri has an important place among the contemporary writers. She got fame with her first collection of short-stories title *Interpreters of Maladies* which won for her the coveted Pulitzer Prize for fiction. *The Namesake* is her first novel and has been followed by *Unaccustomed Earth*, another collection of short- stories. It has been one of the best-sellers and has been named as the 'Best Book of the Year' (2003) by the USA Today. Based on this novel, the film of the same name directed by Mira Nair was released in February, 2007.

Lahiri's *The Namesake*, explores many issues and aspects of immigrant families in an alien milieu, but primarily addresses the problem of identity. As a diasporic novel, it deals with the problem of identity to which the sub-themes of family ties and clash of values, cross-culture relationship, and love and loneliness etc. contribute. As the title suggest, the novel attaches great importance to the question of identity and this paper is concerned with the exploration of the text from the perspective of food, its preparation and its consumption, and how food becomes a vehicle in determining individual and cultural identity.

Food is necessary for survival and sustenance. According to Wenying Xu in *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* "food, as the most significant medium of traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies, organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self and distinguishes us from others...." (Xu n.p.).

And identity, according to *Dictionary.com*, is "the state of having unique identifying characteristics held by no other person or thing or the individual characteristics by which a person or a thing is recognized." In this paper, literary representation of food throws light on identity imagined by the characters and their Indian culture identity on the whole. So, food acts as a signifier of identity.

Due to the geographical displacement, the immigrants miss their original home, relationships, location or habitat etc. There remains a lack or a bare space inside their hearts which they try to fill through various things, the things which can reconsolidate their identity and the past in to the present. Here, through food the characters imagine their identities. Imagining identities reduces the gap between homeland and hostland for a while. Ashima is a typical Indian woman. She is aware of the 'barely space inside her.' This absence is pronounced with pain which she attempts to fill through cooking. She tries to recreate the taste of the reminiscence which is alive in her memories. According to Bardenstein "Cooking and eating food from home are 'acts of memory'. Food is "able to take migrants back in time and space to their homeland, through the synesthetic experience that touching, tasting and smelling food can offer" as Sutton has said (qtd in Elena Costantino pdf n.p.). So, food becomes a substitute of compensation for the things, she has lost.

The novel starts from the kitchen with the food motif. Ashima trying to recreate a snack that gives her a sense of belongingness but at the same time is also evocative of her loss and rootlessness:

“On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour in to the mix. Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing she craves. Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there’s something missing.”(Lahiri 1).

Food becomes the part of the cultural imagination of diasporic settlers. Ashima attempts to consolidate her identity in culinary terms, albeit a sense of alienation is also involved. Ashima’s journey to the past has evoked the nostalgia of happiness, gloominess, pleasure and desire. It is associated with home or an imagined home. The same views are also expressed by the critic Bernali Dutta. She says, “in the diasporic voyage of the Indian immigrant women abroad, ethnic food symbolizes the retuning of the past in the lives of the immigrant women....Ethnic food arouses the longing for the nostalgia and simultaneously evokes the national identity. Hence immigrant women through cultivating the ethnic food in the alien atmosphere have constructed and produced the amalgamation of the past and the present. Nostalgia is such an outlet where Ashima recreates the fragmented past” (n.p.).

Food is a culture signifier and in the novel also, it represents culture. Americans have different views about Indian cuisine and vice-versa. They thought that Indians are vegetarians. The same views are expressed in the novel when Judy whispers to Alan that she thought “Indians were supposed to be vegetarian” (39). Gogol’s girlfriend Maxine finds it depressing when he tells her that his mother cooks every day. In the same way, Ashima’s efforts for the preservation of her culture results in the disliking of American cuisine. She does not like to make pea-nut butter and jelly sandwich which her children like to make. Every culture has its food taboos. These taboos are given expression in the novel as “Ashima has not touched the chicken in its skin, even if permitted; Americans eat their chicken in its skin, though she (Ashima) found a butcher on Prospect Street willing to pull it off for her” (Lahiri 5). She also learns that Americans prefer to eat brown rice while Indians give preference to white rice.

Food, its production, preparation and consumption may be the representative of the dislocation of Indian culture. How food is cooked, who cooked it and who are the consumers, are also crucial factors. Regular cooking removes the appetite of the cook as this happens to Ashima. “Normally cooking for parties leaves her without appetite but tonight she looks forward to serving herself, sitting among other guests”(Lahiri 277). Ashima cooks various dishes but she gets the sense of conviviality in cooking Bengali dishes. Kessler argues that food also serves as memory triggers, reminding characters of the past, transporting them to another time through the memory of a similar previous sensory experience (qtd. in Whitt n.p.).

The concept of alienation has played an important part in the novel. Food acts as conducive to facilitate between the past and the present during the immigrated and diasporic circumstances. Regarding this issue, Valeri Loichot agree with the view of Edwidge Danticat that food as “an unavoidable and complex form of language necessary to remember the past and

to heal the self and communities in the aftermath of diaspora, immigration and exile” (qtd. In Dutta n.p.).

Food, in the novel, also signifies different personality types which is also a marker of identity. As A.K. Ramanujan in his essay *Food for Thought* says, “... you are what you eat and your taste expresses your character” (79). Ashoke Ganguli is found to be knotted to the ethnic culinary items like rice, dal and lamb curry with potatoes. He likes his food on the salty side as Ashima came to know. Ashoke’s gustation of the Indian food with extra salt signifies some imbalance in his personality which may be due to the train accident he had met with which is still alive in his memories. Gogol’s food choices demonstrate that his identity is problematized as he tries to adopt the mainstream culture of America. He is hardly overwhelmed by the indigenous food and culture as he has interiorized American approaches to life. He can be termed as the product of split identity or ABCD (American born confused desi) because he is very introvert and sensitive about his name which he thinks is neither American nor Indian but Russian. And this oscillating trait is visible in his disliking of ethnic Indian cuisine. During their trip to India, “a final meal is served, an herbed omelet topped with a slice of grilled tomato. Gogol savors each mouthful, aware that for the next eight months nothing will taste the same” (Lahiri81). This shows his inclination towards the American food. He gets embarrassed with what his mother has cooked for them when he brought Maxine to his house on Pemberton Road. “Along with the samosas, there are breaded chicken cutlets, chickpeas with tamarind sauce, lamb biryani.... It is meal that has taken his mother over a day to prepare yet the amount of effort embarrasses him” (Lahiri148).

For the second generation immigrants, ethnic food carves a way through which they can get attached with their homeland culture and tradition in the alien land but the second generation does not think in the same way. Moushumi’s gives preferences to the Italian, French or Chinese cuisines rather than the Indian ethnic cuisine. She says that her mother is appalled that she is not making Indian food for him. Moushumi’s is a product of transcultural identity “She is always flattered when they assume she herself is French or half-French” (Lahiri 253). But at the same time she also oscillates between the two cultures. They do not make Indian food frequently yet they crave for “the food they’d grown up eating, they ride the train out to Queens and have brunch at Jackson Diner, piling their plates with tandoori chicken and pakoras and kabobs, and shop afterwards for basmati rice and the spices that need replenishing” (Lahiri229). But the Indian food does not induce emotions in them for their native land. By giving preference to ethnic rituals and cuisine, first generation immigrant want to recreate fragmented past in the present along with nostalgia. So, ethnic cuisine hardly arouses his senses. “...Food is one of the chief planes upon which the young Gogol and his sister Sonia work to define themselves against their Bengali heritage. They insist on pizza and Coke. Dining rituals often provide a framework that reflects and expresses human desires and behaviors. Ultimately though, Gogol is drawn back by forces as bewitching as the emotional potency of aromas – his mother’s cooking, his father’s horrific trauma and, strangely enough, the Russian author from whom he inherits his name” (Flaherty n.p.). Gogol begins to love the food Maxine and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment:

"Lydia serves the food on broad white plates: a thin piece of steak rolled into a bundle and tied with a string, sitting in a pool of dark sauce, the green beans boiled so that they are still crisp. A bowl of small, round, roasted red potatoes is passed around, and

afterwards a salad. They eat appreciatively, commenting on the tenderness of the meat, the freshness of the beans. His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest. She would have kept her eyes trained on Maxine's plate, insisting that she have seconds and then thirds. The table would have been lined with a row of serving bowls so that people could help themselves" (Lahiri 133).

Food transgresses the borders of nations and cultures and help in creating 'hybrid identities.' Like the linguistic borrowings, the culinary borrowings frame the basis of the food cultures overseas countries as "assimilated foods become naturalized and normalized in the course of time" as examined by scholar like Njeri Githire. Nevertheless, Githire has concentrated on the interconnection between the food, diasporic consciousness, identity and belonging (qut. in Dutta n.p.). Being the one of the most fundamental manifestations of culture, food can become a transcultural device. In the case of Gogol, it is reminiscent of the roots he does not want to belong. Here, food becomes a matter of embarrassment for him when he compares the ways of Indian hospitality with the mainstream culture. "Unlike Gerald and Lydia, who preside at the center of their dinners, his parents behaved more like caterers in their own home, solicitous and watchful..."(Lahiri 141).

Food as metaphor employed by the Indian writers usually is posited as a counter-culture within the framework of identity. Food has also fusions, mixings and hybridity. Though, acculturation is a slow process in which acceptance, resistance and preservation of culture can be seen. And this process is in a way unearthed by gastronomic factors. Through food, Ganguli tries to preserve their culture in the host country. On the occasion of Gogol's annaprasana, a ceremony marking his sixth-month birthday, Ashima made payash, a warm rice pudding and biryani, the carp in yogurt sauce, the dal, six vegetable dishes. Later, for the sake of their children, they began to prepare peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a slice of bakery cake on each of Gogol's birthdays. Sometimes, they order pizza or Chinese for the kids. Gradually, intermixing of cultures is inevitable. Therefore:

"In the supermarket, they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume: individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, and hot dog. For Gogol's lunches they stand at the Deli to buy cold nuts, and in the morning Ashima makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. At his insistence she concedes and makes him an American dinner once a week as a treat, Shake'n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb" (Lahiri 65).

Food items do not only project the priorities of the first and second generation immigrants delineate the process of culinary fusion also. Over a period of time, Ashima has learned to make, sandesh moulded out of ricotta cheese and halwa fro cream-wheat. But negotiation results in a positive manner in the case of Ashima as, "she feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign."(Lahiri278).

Food has the power to establish humanity, and negotiation for the different cultures. Gastronomic factors serve to propel the action of the plot while affecting their relationships. "Food habits are dynamic and subject to change, and so it is undesirable to make direct

connections between food and concept of national identity. Even though people often tend to associate countries with particular foods, such attitude can lead to the creation of stereotypes and retention of boundaries with food serving as a demarcation of “us” and “them”. Despite the high frequency of this view, food has been increasingly shared across the boundaries due to migration flows, globalizing forces and capitalism” (qtd. in Food as transcultural Metaphor pdf).

Food is a key signifier of ethnicity. Xu takes food as “the central site of cultural and political struggles waged in the seemingly private domain of desire in the lives of Asian Americans Food and its related concerns” (n.p.). As Ashima’s feminine identity and domesticity seem to be acknowledged in task of cooking for Bengalis, she, therefore, finds the task of feeding a handful of American children is very stressful. Being associated with personal feelings, food helps her to make her relationship strong with her husband. “By now she has learned that her husband likes his food on the salty side, that his favorite thing about lamb curry is the potatoes, and that he likes to finish his dinner with a small final helping of rice and dal” (Lahiri 10). The struggle for survival in an alien land becomes the struggle for arranging ingredients for ethnic cuisine for Ashima. And this results in culinary fusion.

Culinary practices become one of the primary ways of signifying the nuances of nostalgia and displacement and lack of identity, especially for the first generation immigrants. In the last chapter, Ashima is cooking croquettes, thinking about how Gogol and Sonia helped her when they were small. Culinary practices and memory is interwoven in the diasporic fiction. Through memory and food enable Ashima to maintain her relationship with her family in India. Craving for the non-existent is pronounced with an ache but ethnic food, though temporary; provide solace to the first generation immigrants.

Food frames the ways in which minorities can gain acceptance in a multicultural society. And the consequences result in the multiple identities, composed during the process. In Cambridge, during Ashima’s pregnancy, American breakfast is served to her; “a tray holding warm apple juice, Jell- O, ice cream, and cold baked chicken is brought to her side”(Lahiri 5). But she does not like this type of breakfast. This shows Ashima’s efforts to preserve her Bengali culture and her Indian identity. Hence, “in the foreign domain, when on one hand, gastronomical factor carries the national identity, on the other, the intertwinement between the global and local builds up the diasporic identities apart from their national identities. Nonetheless, the sustenance of national cuisine can be illustrated as the method for resistance of the mainstream foreign culture to ethnic minority culture” (Dutta n.p.). This is evident Gogol’s American friends came to his home on his fourteenth birthday, half of whom are allergic to milk, all of whom refuse to eat the crusts of their bread (Lahiri 72).

Culinary exercises throw light on the issues of resistance, acceptance, and preservation of cultures. “In view of semiotics, food functions as communication. It transmits messages about identities and social relationships, and it develops and transforms over time due to social shifts. It can also facilitate transcultural communication through food sharing across cultural boundaries, and through altering and re-creating food habits according to contexts. Comprehension of the relation between food and its implications can shed light on the employment of food references in literary works...”(qtd. in Food as Transcultural Metaphor pdf).

Difference between cultures can be visible through food choices. Alan and Judy, their landlords came to see Gogol, holding “a dish she’s made covered with a checkered cloth in her hands, says she’s made a broccoli quiche...uncorks a bottle of cold champagne” (Lahiri 33). Liquor like champagne is the symbol of celebration on the auspicious occasion but in Indian culture, milk and lassi is served. This marker of culture is offered by Lahiri in the novel when Gogol and Maxine came to meet them, “Ashima offers them glasses of frothy pink lassi, thick and sweet- tasting, flavored with rose water” (Lahiri 147). In the novel, the peripheral characters like Maxine’s family members friends seem to distinguish between the continental dish and the sub-continental dish. The process of acculturation and assimilation of minority group of Bengalis in the mainstream culture is signified by cooking and eating.

One can say that Lahiri has tried to underscore the predicaments of Bengali diasporic identity stories through multiple nuances of the food imagery by highlighting the specificity of Bengali cuisine and, thereby, in the development of their Bengali immigrant identity. On the one hand, the recurrence of the food motif in *The Namesake* novel, symbolizes the survival and sustenance of the first generation immigrants to the ethnic Indian culture and cuisine and on the other hand, it symbolizes the proneness of the second generation immigrants to the continental food rather than the Indian cuisine.

Hence, by mentioning the various kind of food, Lahiri has enhanced the interest to discuss the different aspects of culture and proves a vehicle in construction of identity. In the mainstream culture, the immigrants or the diasporic communities generally endeavor to cling to the native land through forging the ethnic culinary practices to a great extent. So, the gastronomical factor endeavors a lot in the formation of the national identity and ethnic identity as well along with the individual identities. Throughout the novel, gastronomical factor performs an instrumental role in the diasporic fiction and reflects the connection and disconnection between the characters and their culture.

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