



Collage of Cuisine in *the Interpreter of Maladies* - A Retrospective Insight of Indian Culture

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore the diasporic sensibilities of Jhumpha Lahiri as demonstrated through the culinary montage she appends to the retrospection of her life and history narrated in her anthology of short stories titled *Interpreter of Maladies*. The article highlights how Indian women living abroad find difficult to shed off the memories of their native land during their process of assimilation. To camouflage her apprehension of losing her identity and ameliorate her sense of dislocation in a foreign land, Jhumpha Lahiri persistently makes references to Indian food habits and culinary skills. Further she reminisces of rituals practised in the kitchen room and uses excessive food imagery to substantiate the physical and psychical conditions of Indian men and women and also to evaluate their intensiveness of relationship- cordial or complicated

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Introduction

Indian women writers living abroad have been ceaselessly contributing to the sustenance of Indian writings in English under the aegis of Diaspora Literature. The fictions of NRI women writers in English, despite the fact that they are permeated with stereotype characters, abounding sexual episodes, intone of masculine and feminine conflicts and ethnic revolts and western rationality, their narrative discourse bears the quintessence of Diaspora literature and that has fetched them reputed literary awards.

The term 'Diaspora' emerged during 1990s and has become one of sensational components of globalisation compelling the people to migrate from one country to another. Women writers, who go abroad in search of green pasture as single or married, find foreign land exposing them to peculiar situations that perplex them to a large extent. But they are the fortunate lot unlike their counterparts in India for they have the luxury of owning up a 'room of their own' in a foreign land to voice out their diasporic experiences through the genre of fiction or nonfiction. A survey of diasporic novels of women writers, tell the tale of women caught between two homes—the migrated home and the native home. Home, is not just an imaginary place used as a setting to build stories for the diasporic writers. It is an alternate for the home that they leave at their native towns in India. A notable feminist Gloria Anzaldua says, 'I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry home on my back...' "Home" permeates every sinew and cartilage of my body." Similarly, Indians during their dislocation carry their home wherever they go and never hesitate to talk about it to express their indigenous sentiments.

Jumpha Lahiri who belongs to Kolkata delineates the diasporic sensibilities of women by exposing their queer experiences in an alien land. Lahiri has been living in America for decades, yet her American way of life has not robbed her off the exuberance in remembering and recalling her native land Bengal. Salman Rushdie, himself being a Diaspora writer explains in his novel *Shame*, the impact of nostalgia and dislocation on diasporic writers: "... our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of

reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short create fictions... imaginary homelands, India of the mind." (pg.76) Lahiri makes a retrospective trip to India via her imagination and evinces the nuances of Bengali home and life style in almost all her novels and short stories. Home that she lives in the migrated place, becomes the diasporic social domain representing her home land. In other words, American home is the miniature of the place she hails from. The food that is prepared at home stands not just an item satiating the appetite of the family members. Instead it is a vital factor sustaining the interpersonal relationship between family members; a potential ingredient integrating the physique, psyche and the soul of the individual; a modus operandi reconciling the dis severed hearts; an art defining and differentiating occidental and oriental cultures; a time capsule detailing the history and geography of a country.

Jhumpha Lahiri in her anthology of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* invests her culinary art both on male and female's shoulders. In the story 'In a temporary matter' Shukumar explores, evaluates and commends his wife, Shoba's inner dynamics and physical calibre using enormously the kitchen imagery. Her filling up of pantry with food items demonstrates her sense of her predictability:

It astonished him, her capacity to think ahead. When she used to do the shopping, the pantry was always was stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian. There were endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goatsIt never went to waste. (6-7)

Knowing the food habits of wife is a good sign of healthy conjugal relationship. When women characters in other stories and novels of Lahiri grumble at their husbands' insensitivity, we find here Shukumar cherishing a thorough comprehension of his wife's pain, joy, anxiety etc. in terms of food cooked and eaten especially in an ambience reflecting their moods. In dark night with candles lit, he cooks for his wife who is mourning for their still born child. The death of the baby has made them inactive

and silent. But the process of cooking brings them to normalcy and they resume talking:

“You made rogan josh,” Shoba observed looking through the glass lid at the bright paprika stew.

Shukumar took out a piece of lamb, pinching it quickly between his fingers so as not to scald himself. He prodded a larger piece with a serving spoon to make sure the meat slipped easily from the bone, “It’s ready,” he announced.

The micro wave had just beeped when the lights went out.

“Perfect timing,” Shoba said. (10)

This conversation continues to bind them close and share their nostalgic thoughts. Nostalgia, especially the culinary nostalgia in Lahiri’s stories is a technique used to retain one’s cultural identity. The food montage continues in almost all the short stories in *The Interpreter of Maladies*. Most of the male and female characters, when they recall the past they bring to their memory, the food they have eaten, relished and cherished at their native place. Fish, though a common food eaten by all, bears a cultural identity in the story *Mrs. Sen*. Mrs. Sen, as she is addressed throughout the story, is the wife of a professor at an American University. She suffers due to a sense of dislocation from her home land that in turn causes much anxiety to her. She grumbles and gets annoyed when she cannot find fish to eat in her new home: “To live too close to ocean and not to have so much of fish” (123). Bengalis culture is closely linked with fish, a food that is mandatorily included in their dining catalogue:

“In the super market I can feed a cat thirty-two dinners...., but I can never find a single fish I like, never a single,” Mrs. Sen said she had grown up eating fish twice a day. She added that in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, 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. (123-124)

It is proved scientifically that favourite food triggers positive emotions. (Marie Hopf, 2010) Mrs. Sen’s persistent cravings to buy her favourite fish necessitate her to shed off her inhibitions and compel her to drive her car searching for it. This incident is worth mentioning as it marks a transformation of Mrs. Sen’s personality from being a docile wife to a courageous woman. Fish escalates her sociableness. Mrs. Sen dares to fight with her husband who remains unaffected to her desire or disappointments. She even learns to ignore his passionless behaviour. Her pursuit for the moment is to find fish, cook fish and eat fish. Lahiri continues to revel in Mrs. Sen’s love for fish while defining her art of dissecting it with a surgical preciseness—the dexterity she has inherited as a Bengali, ever cooking fish:

... She pulled the blade out of the cupboard, spread newspapers across the carpet, and inspected her treasures. One by one she drew them from the paper wrapping, wrinkled and tinged with blood. She stroked the tails, prodded the bellies, and pried apart the gutted fish. With a pair of scissors she clipped the fins. She tucked a finger under the gills, a red so bright they made her vermilion seem pale. She grasped the body, lined with inky streaks, at either end, and notched it at intervals against the blade. “Why do you do that?” Eliot asked.

“To see how many pieces. If I cut properly, from this fish I will get three meals.” She sawed off the head and set it on a pie plate. (127)

Lahiri’s description of Mrs. Sen’s character is fused with her etiquette and culinary art. Mrs. Sen enjoys pampering Eliot’s mother ignoring her reticence with “a glass of bright pink yogurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, and a bowl of semolina halvah.” (118). Unmindful of Eliot’s age, she chirpily explains about her good old days when she sat along with other women to cut vegetables:

“Whenever there is a wedding in the family,” she told Eliot one day, “or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighbourhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night.” (127)

When modern women grumble and complain about cooking here is character basking over “Periwinkle flames on the stove.” (117) There is no such thing as uninteresting for Mrs. Sen regarding cooking. She loves speaking about food and cooking – a typical characteristics of an Indian wife waddling through the pool of domestic chores with no say about the patriarchal oppression, a phenomenon usually percolated in all women’s fiction.

Lahiri’s fictitious women characters, posited in India are ingrained with an attitude to enter into men’s heart, and to accomplish this they engage in perennial cooking process while the women characters living abroad, express multifarious interests. Shoba and Mrs. Sen are two women characters living abroad who make it a choice to cook and eat Indian food sheer to commemorate and retain their Indian images of whom they have been and who they are. (Miller, 1995: 35) They are careful never to let their memories of the native land and its culture drown into oblivion. Even while constructing the character Miranda, Lahiri holds on to Indian sentiments and assigns her the role of an Indian woman satiating the appetite of her male companion, offering him the food he relishes the most. In the story *Sexy Miranda*, an American woman has an illicit affair with an Indian who is married already. She discards her American identity to gratify his needs and hunts for food that pleases him: “Miranda looked forward for Sundays. In the mornings she went to a deli and bought baguette and little containers of things Dev like to eat, like pickled herring, and potato salad, and tortes of pesto and mascarpone cheese.” (93) Normally food is one of the cultural habits that none would like to change and if they do so it is with much reluctance. (Gabaccia, 1998) But Miranda as she is in love, shackles the proven truth and willingly cleaves to her partner’s culture and food habits to take pleasure in eating Indian spicy chicken to tone her taste buds akin to Dev’s. Food in *Sexy* is only a sensuous symbol fortifying Miranda’s and Dev’s promiscuity.

In the story ‘Interpreter of maladies’, Lahiri makes conspicuous of Mrs. Mina Das’ ostentatious display of her clandestine behaviour through the food imagery. Mina Das is an Indian woman settled in America. Yet her western connection has not refined her uncouth behaviour either in private or public occasions. The straw bag in her hand is a symbol that demonstrates her reckless behaviour and a packet of puffed rice dumped into the bag is a trivial but a snack item commonly eaten by both the rich and the poor. It holds no cultural value in this story. Yet Lahiri attributes some significance to it to establish that Mina das is a disorganised woman and less caring for her children’s safety. She eats the snack all by herself without sharing it with anyone. She continues to eat to pass her time when left alone with Kapasi inside the car. She also confides to him, the filthy secret about the birth of her second

child that she has been hiding from her husband for eight years. Once she disgorges her secrets she pulls out the puffed rice from the bag, and walks out of the car spilling it all the way plus inviting the mischievous monkeys after her. The aftermath is a mild tragedy, hurting her son Bobby. Mina Das, unmindful of her own sloppiness, blames the place she has visited: "God, let's get out of here," Mrs. Das said... "This place gives me the creeps." (69)

In India a wide gap exists between upper class and lower class people. This unhealed breach has been the subject for many writers to ponder upon. Lahiri is not an exceptional. Like any other social writer, she too explores the Indian society and discovers how food is a social factor demarcating the rich and the poor. In the story 'A real Durwan' she substantiates the social status of Boori ma referring to her food habits. Boori ma engages the residents with details of her past and present life to impress them and win their sympathy. As a victim of partition of Calcutta, she was forced to leave the luxuries she enjoyed at East Bengal. Boori ma flaunts verbally her richness while recounting the wedding ceremony of daughter and the prestigious food that was served then: "We married her to a school principal. The rice was washed was cooked in rose water. The mayor was invited... Mustard prawns were steamed in banana leaves. Not a delicacy was spared Not this was an extravagance for us. At our house we ate goat twice a week. We had a pond in our property full of fish.." (71). Using rose water, eating meat twice and possessing a fish tank signify richness. Today partition of Bengal has deprived her of the luxury she had been enjoying earlier. She is no more a rich woman but the one who relies upon the residents for the leftovers offered. However her poverty has not diminished her desire for food, naturally for the food what is affordable. She cannot imagine the plentiful and the prestigious food that she has eaten before her deportment. She decides to wander through market and spend "her life savings on small treats; today a packet of puffed rice, tomorrow some cashews, the day after that, a cup of sugarcane juice."(81) This rumination of food costs her the little savings and also her job as Durwan.

'When Mr. Pirzada came to dine' is another story about partition of Bengal. The entire story is narrated from the perspective a young girl, Lilia. Lahiri lets an aura of perceptible love and friendship ascend upon the dining table between a Muslim man and a Hindu family. She uses inexhaustible food imagery to express the bond between Pirzada and Lilia's parents. Lilia's mom is not tired cooking for a stranger, Pirzada, a Muslim man from east Bengal who has decided to share their food only to minimise his expense in a foreign land. Pirzada, entertains the young girl, Lilia offering her candy. Lilia accepts Pirzada as her own family member that she never feels like thanking him when he offers her "the steady stream of honey-fizzed lozenges, the raspberry truffles, the slender rolls of sour pastilles." (29) With no reactions on her face but with awe and respect she receives and stores them in her special receptacle: "It was inappropriate, in my opinion, to consume the candy Mr. Pirzada gave me in a casual manner. I coveted each evening's treasure as I would a jewel, or a coin from a buried kingdom, and I would place in a small keepsake box made of carved sandalwood beside my bed,... [and] the next day, opened the lid of the box and ate one of his treats." (30)

Lilia is astonished to know from her father that Hindus and Muslims don't cherish any camaraderie, and they harm one another despite they share common attributes.

Lahiri identifies the commonness between Hindu Bengali from India and Muslim Bengali from Bangladesh in their consumption of food and other culinary practices. She uses Lilia as her mouthpiece to voice out her discomfort and disregard toward the partition of Bengal. This sober mood is manifested through her excessive usage of food imagery:

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mango with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like many parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seed after meals as a digestive, and drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. (25)

This entire story of Lilia and Pirzada brims with such details of Bengali cuisine that contributes to the symbolic function of expressing Lahiri's identity in an adopted culture. (Mouloud, Bouteldja, 278)

Thus we find that the concept of food has provided voluble themes for Lahiri to discuss on race, culture, identity and humanity as a whole. She has carefully set her 'Kitchen' as a place making or mutilating human relationships. Sometimes it emerges a spa, invigorating an immigrant wife's tired soul; a laboratory to experiment and satisfy the appetite of her husband; an alternate home bringing back memories of mom's cooking; an arena to combat with cultural conflicts. To conclude, it is appropriate to say that Lahiri has effectively expended the opportunity to reflect upon culinary nostalgia to manifest her indigenous sentiments through her fictions. To remember Indian cuisines is to remember the culture and tradition of India.

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