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Culinary Conflicts: A Study of the Evolving Significance of Indian Food in the Select Diasporic Fiction by Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni*

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Abstract

Food has emerged as one of the basic components of culture preservation among the Indian Diaspora throughout the globe. Indian food with its unique blend of flavours and tastes establishes its separate identity from the food consumed in the orient as well as in the occident. The strong attachment of the first-generation diaspora towards Indian culinary practices and their attempt to recreate elaborate Indian meals in their adopted homes in the foreign land, is a part of the nostalgic longing for homeland that the diaspora experiences; however, it may also be read as the resistance to the western influence that most of the first-generation migrants consider corrupting for their children. In this paper a close reading of selected works by Jhumpa Lahiri (The Namesake and Interpreter of Maladies) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Mistress of Spices has been made, in order to study the importance of food as a device of culture preservation as well as an instrument of resistance against the foreign cultural hegemony by the Indian Diaspora.

Keywords: food, diaspora, nostalgia, culture preservation, resistance, mongrelization.

Introduction

The ancient Indian scriptures testify, what one eats expresses his/her character. The balance of the three 'Gunas' or the essence of all things, namely 'satva', 'rajassu' and 'tamassu' play a vital role in the evolution of one's temperament. In his essay "Food for Thought," A.K. Ramanujan claims that in the Indian society, "Class and caste, male and female, child and adult, ordinary and special occasions, auspicious and in auspicious events, sickness and wellness are all marked by foods that are associated with them." (81-82) He further adds, "As figures of speech get their effects by both exploiting and violating common language codes, 'figures of food' use the system to communicate irony, defiance, appreciation, intimacy etc by collapsing commonly held distinctions or reversing them." (85)

As varied is the culture of India, so is its food. Food provides a distinct identity to the culture of a community in India just as its language, dress or customs do. In the words of Vatika Sibal, "...understanding a culture through food is an interesting process because once a person starts asking these questions, such as how something is made, what ingredients are in it, or why it is called a certain way, the answers obtained go beyond culinary learning. In these answers, food tells us something about a culture's approach to life." When driven out of their geographical habitat, by the unforgiving dictates of globalization, the Indian communities attempt to hold on to their roots through a continuation of their traditional culinary practices, mingling/substituting the spices of the homeland with those that are available in their adapted lands—often giving rise to some creole dishes. As such, food becomes one of the basic components of culture preservation

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among the Indian diaspora throughout the globe, as the immigrants try to recreate the cherished moments of the home, through a mythic reconstruction of the dishes that attempts to bring back the taste and smell of their loved ones who had once served them.

Indian food has its unique blend of flavors and tastes that establishes its separate identity from the food consumed in the orient as well as in the occident. Although the colonial era played a significant role in introducing the Indian delicacies to the western palate, and the popularity of Indian dishes like chicken tikka masala or Mulligatawny soup in United Kingdom testifies the fact that food travelled before the people; it is undeniable that the diaspora played a significant role in popularizing Indian dishes in the global banquet. The strong attachment of the first generation diaspora towards Indian culinary practices and their attempt to recreate elaborate Indian meals in their adopted homes in the foreign land, may be considered as a part of the nostalgic longing for homeland that the diaspora experiences; however, it may also be read as the resistance to the western influence that most of the first generation migrants consider corrupting for their children. Thus, as a part of their culture preservation and passing on the prized heritage of the homeland to their mongrelized children in the host countries, the Indian mothers prepare extravagant Indian dishes to manipulate the taste buds of their children, thereby averting the influence of the dominant western dishes.

Discussion

The tremendous importance of food, particularly the significance of delicacies of the homeland to a migrant's existence, might be judged through a close reading of the expository scene of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, where the homesick Ashima attempts to make a compromised version of the Bengali "jhal muri" in her Massachusetts kitchen, though feeling a lack, deep within. The author opens her maiden novel in "1968. 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 into 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" (1).

The brilliant exposition at once reveals the cravings of the migrant soul for the touches of the homeland, the attempts to create a surrogate home, with the strands of memory from the home lingering in the mind, and the resulting frustration from such futile attempts. The missing element in her "jhal muri" is the correlative of the missing element in her life abroad. Despite having a loving husband to care for her in the difficult days of her pregnancy, Ashima terribly misses her family back home, and perhaps all the fuss they would have made on getting the news of her expecting her first child. It is not just Ashima, but this nostalgic longing for the native land is a part of the exiled existence, as the soul of the migrant continually goes back to the mother land to seek her caressing comforts.

Lahiri's short story "Mrs Sen's" revolves around the titular character whose life simultaneously revolves around the food she prepares in her American home. Eliot, an American boy, whom Mrs Sen babysits, observes her elaborate, daily ritual of chopping vegetables with a curved blade "bonthi" instead of the knife and preparing food by sprinkling salt and spices using her fingertips. The quantity of food she prepares and the amount of vegetables she chops, almost mesmerizes little Eliot, who is otherwise habituated to see his mother, ordering pizza on most of the nights

after she comes back from work. There are only two things that make Mrs Sen jubilant: a letter from her homeland and fresh fish. She has the typical Bengali obsession for fish and tries out compromised versions of Bengali delicacies like cutlets of tuna in place of “bhetki”, but is never satisfied with the end result. Finally, this obsession for fish brings about the catastrophe and snaps the bond that had just begun developing between Mrs Sen and Elliot—figuratively between the Indian immigrant and the American milieu. Although she hated driving and was yet to receive her license, she decided to drive all the way to the market to procure a fresh fish, especially reserved for her by the friendly shopkeeper and on the way crashed against a telephone pole. Eliot’s mother who had never liked the imposing nature of the babysitter, gladly accepts the opportunity to keep her son locked up alone in her bleak house, evidently to the dislike of Eliot, who preferred the warmth and the abundance of Mrs Sen’s apartment. Mrs Sen’s entire life in America revolved around the food she cooked and the preparation that preceded her cooking because it was the only way that connected her to her homeland and somewhat relieved her from the continual longing for the life back in India, which marriage had compelled her to leave behind. Like Ashima, the food she cooked was not able to satiate her hunger which was within her soul, not merely a physical one.

Nostalgia is a part of the human life in general. As a being of superior intellect, man is endowed with memory of the past events that connects him/her with his/her antecedents. Nostalgia is a fragment of this memory, which is impossible to leave behind with all other ties in the native land, while migrating. Therefore, all the meals that the first generation migrants cook are shadows of the food they have tasted all through their lives in India. The western delicacies, that perhaps have a strong sway among the youth, even within India, appear bland to their tongues. Along with the songs of Nazrul and Rabindranath, the discussions on Bengali cinema and politics, the friendly gatherings of Indian immigrants are further enriched by the shrimp cutlets, the mutton curry and such other Bengali delicacies, that the host takes much care to prepare and serve. Bharati Mukherjee makes a hilarious and rather intriguing reference in her novel *Desirable Daughters*, to an Indian cook who accompanied his immigrating masters to America, but soon died because, “He couldn’t find good fish in the market and he didn’t recognize the vegetables and he hated the taste of American milk, so he curled up in his bed and died” (Mukherjee 244).

However, the situation changes with the change in generation among the diaspora. For the children of the Indian immigrants, the second generation diaspora, ham burgers, pizzas, peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches take the place of rice and curries. The emotions that “The plates of syrupy, spongy rassogollas” (Lahiri 82) invoke in the hearts of their Bengali parents, have no appeal to them. At the rice ceremony of Gogol in *The Namesake*, his mother takes much care to feed him the traditional Bengali pudding made with rice--Bengal’s staff of life. However, though Gogol relishes it in his infancy, he gradually outgrows his likings for Bengali foods cooked elaborately in their house during the weekend gatherings or served at the Bengali festivals or in their trips to Bengal. The likes of Usha, Akash or Sang from the short stories “Hell-Heaven”, “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Nobody’s Business” respectively, are explicit about their preference of pizzas and burgers over the Bengali meals their parents prepare. Thus, when Mrs Dutta in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “Mrs Dutta Writes a Letter” prepare Indian curries and fries seasoned with an extra dose of motherly love and a little extra oil/ghee, her grandchildren complain to their mother and crave for the American fast food that Mrs Dutta doubts their mother allows them to have behind her back.

Resistance is futile. The youth conditioned in the environs of the host-land finds the Indian food too spicy, oily and cumbersome in contrast to the more convenient and easily available

American/Italian/Mexican alternatives. The evolving ethos associated to food across generation of migrants is aptly enunciated in an Armenian-Canadian academician Dr. Ara Norenzayan's words, as he confirms: "My two children have had the privilege of enjoying food from everywhere in the world. They don't find it remarkable at all that in the same week, they could go on a worldwide culinary journey that could include sushi, samosas, tamales, and tabbouleh. Through food, they have come to learn about and celebrate the rich cultural traditions and identities that make Vancouver the wonderfully diverse city that it is."

Evidently, conditioned by the peer-groups the successive generations of the diaspora feel more satiated by the bulk of fast food decked upon the shelves of the supermarkets or food courts, and even if they consume the home cooked Indian dishes, it is more with an urge to please their parents and avoid unnecessary squabbles in the household, than finding any comfort in that food. Food here becomes a part of their filial duty that they must confine to in order to show their gratefulness for the sacrifices their parents have made for their better prospects. Eventually, their parents learn to adapt to the food of their choice, occasionally preparing American food and even introducing the forbidden beef in their kitchens for the sake their children as a concession. It may be seen as one of the many compromises that the diaspora is made to go through, to assimilate in the foreign culture. *The Namesake* highlights this conflict over food when the author claims, "There are other ways in which Ashoke and Ashima give in . . . 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, hot dogs. For Gogol's lunches they stand at the deli to buy cold cuts, and in the mornings Ashima makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. At his instance, 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).

With age, the second generation diaspora tends to distance themselves from the Indian food as much as possible, like all other things Indian. They are continually under a pressure to acculturate and thereby blend into the locale, which is a more pressing concern among the second generation than with the first generation, because the first generation has the comforting memories of the homeland to fall back upon, when marginalised. However, having no such memory to hold on to and being unable to accept their parents' mythic homeland as the tangible home, the second generation desperately wants acceptance in the milieu and overcome the stigma of being the outsider—who is often labelled as a freak in the western society. Although they mould their lives to suit the tastes of the time and the land, their taste buds often betray them. The flavours that are subconsciously embedded deep within the mind cannot be ignored permanently. Thus begins the inner conflict: between the homeland and the host-land, between the peer-pressure to adapt to the present and the familial pressure to cling to the past.

After his wedding in *The Namesake*, often Gogol and his wife Moushumi have longings for the foods that they had eaten in the years of growing up. In between all their Italian, French, Chinese, Thai etc culinary adventures a sudden nostalgia leads to, "craving the food they'd grown up eating...piling their plates with tandoori chicken and pakoras and kabobs, and shop afterwards for basmati rice and the spices that need replenishing." (229) Again in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* we find the second generation Indian-American girls whom the protagonist Tilo fondly calls Bougainvillaea girls, come to the spice shop to purchase Indian spices for cooking some Indian dishes occasionally, guided by the recipe books, to serve their husbands or perhaps their American boyfriends. At one such visits, they claim, "Our office, they're having a potluck, we're each supposed to bring something ethnic, you know from our culture, make it ourselves. We didn't have a *clue*." (Divakaruni 255) Raven, who was at hand, considers such girls to be less

Indian than the likes of Tilo. But Tilo, having a much better understanding of the culture of the diaspora is quick to realise that “the bougainvillea girls are in their way as Indian as I. And who is to say which of us is more real.” (256) Thus, the protagonist here acknowledges the uniqueness of the second generation Indians in America to be as much Indian as the first generation, it is only their preferences which are gradually adapted to suit the tempo of the new nation. These sudden cravings reveal not only their complex tastes, but the complex nature of the second generation migrants. They are neither like their parents who simply cannot take in any other food except the typical Indian dishes they are accustomed to, nor are they able to adapt their taste buds wholly to the American or Continental tastes, as a lingering flavour of the Indian curries stay back at one corner of their tongues.

"Communities aren't monoliths and that's reflected in the diversity of food and eating practices that exist. People can have different ways of making the same dish, and we can learn a lot about a particular group or individual's history and culture by being curious about these differences." says Shirley Ting, a second-generation Chinese Canadian academician. Thus, food assumes altogether a new significance in Lahiri's short story “When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine”. The story is narrated by young Lilia who recollects the visits of a certain Mr Pirzada to their American home for a specific duration, during the years of her growing up and the anxiety that her family shared over Mr Pirzada's concerns for his family back at Dacca, at the times of Bangladesh liberation war. Although separated by nationality and religion, Mr Pirzada and Lilia's parents seemed no different to the girl in her childhood, as they talked in the same Bengali language, discussed and watched the same issues on the Television and ate the same food. Interestingly when six years old Lilia couldn't understand the difference between a Bengali from India and from Bangladesh, her father uses food as a simile to explain the dissection for the nation to satisfy political greed: “One moment we were free and then we were sliced up, he explained, drawing an X with his finger on the countertop, like a pie. Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us. He told me that during Partition Hindus and Muslims had set fire to each other's homes. For many, the idea of eating in the other's company was still unthinkable.” Evidently the story suggests the vagueness of concepts like caste, creed, religion or even nationality among the diaspora who all sail on the same boat of home-sickness irrespective of the geopolitical positioning of their homelands and food serves as the unifying bond with eating together used as the metaphor for transcending the domestic squabble, as Lilia comments almost immediately afterwards, “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 mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands...chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea” (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 25).

Mr Pirzada had come to America for his research project from Bangladesh and Lilia's parents bonded with him, overcoming the “narrow domestic walls” as Tagore calls it, over their shared heritage and food as Bengalis. Lilia's family provided comfort to the distressed man in form of food and enabled him to feel closer to home psychologically. Mr Pirzada on his part made it a daily ritual to bring confections for little Lilia as he came for his daily dinners, which she meticulously stored and consumed one at a time, after a prayer for the wellbeing Mr Pirzada's family.

Conclusion

To conclude, it may be said that, in the diasporic space, food plays a significant role. It replicates the legacy of the great Indian kitchens left long back and enables the migrant to pamper his/her

taste buds in the indulgence of feeling at home, at a moment when all other senses are overcome by the anxiety of separation from the home. The diaspora must thrive in the “unaccustomed earth”, trying to recreate their lives in their new homes with memories of the days left back at their homeland, even though it might be a compromised version of the reality: just as the Bengali food cooked without the inaccessible mustard oil. Food remains as one of the of the basic elements through which the diaspora seeks to preserve their culture, their traditions, while it simultaneously becomes an object of conflict between the successive generations, as the younger generation fails either to inherit the taste buds of the parents, seasoned with the Indian flavours, or to completely overcome the memories of the food catered to them in their years of growing up. A looming after-taste stays back in the mouth; because in the words of M.G. VasANJI “We are but creatures of our origins and however stalwartly we march, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our past stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off” (25).

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