

Food as an Emblem of Cultural Memory: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract: Food is an essential aspect of diasporic studies. Because of its positive impact on fostering new relationships within communities, it serves as a symbol of care and affection. In post-colonial literature, many writers use food a lot in their works. Because of this, it is significant to look at its critical strength and see how food shapes the identities of diasporic people. In diasporic literature, food takes on multiple symbolic meanings. It becomes a mirror that shows how the diasporic characters feel about their home countries. The aromas and tastes of their ethnic food can provide a brief solace from the suffering and agony brought on by being dislocated and estranged in a foreign land. Many writers in post-colonial literature use food a lot in their narratives, so it is essential to look at its critical strength to figure out how much food shapes the identities of diasporic communities. The kitchen is a vital home component, and women are inevitably linked to it, making it their obligation to feed others. However, if one lives as an immigrant, that same kitchen and responsibilities become a method of reuniting with one's homeland. As a result, the seamless link between the kitchen, memories, and culture will be studied along the food axis in this research paper.

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Memory, Food, Post-colonial literature.

Introduction:

Nilanjana Sudeshna, also known as "Jhumpa Lahiri," is an American author. The Bengali-born author, born in London on July 11, 1967, has been awarded the PEN Prize for excellence in short stories. Her first collection of short stories, "*Interpreter of Maladies*," was published in 1999; publishers rejected her short stories for years after she received a fellowship at the province town's Fine Arts Work Centre. She received several degrees from Boston University. She later became associated with "The New Yorker." Her novel "*The Namesake*" became a successful film, gaining her notoriety and recognition. She was appointed to President Barack Obama's presidential committee. She is currently a professor of creative writing at Princeton University.

Discussion and Findings

Memories are an indispensable part of the lives of people who cannot escape their influence no matter where they live, what time zone they live in, or how old they are. Connerton remarks, "Concerning memories as such, we may note that our present experience largely depends on our past knowledge. We experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects ..." (2). Memories suggest that previous events cannot be confined to their time and cannot be claimed to be constrained to their original place. They defy the limits of time and place because people sometimes remember them, and they can be put back together. It shows that they go beyond the past and into the present and the future. Lahiri's literary works, particularly *The Namesake*, might be classified as culinary literature, a genre that has been generally disregarded and ignored, particularly in South Asian literature. Due to cookbooks and food shows' popularity, such genres should have been more appreciated.

Nonetheless, the extensive descriptions of food imagery in any work become an excellent method of expression and exploration of women's space, in which Lahiri herself is involved. Furthermore, by focusing on Indian immigrants and exploring female areas in these genres, diasporic female authors have been able to claim their distinctiveness. Therefore, for characters such as Ashima and Ashoke, Food and eating habits become a means of continuity, as food becomes the theme through which they may pass on their cultural values and customs to the next generation, a means of bridging the homeland and home. For immigrants, food becomes crucial for teaching their children about their native country. As Mannur articulates that "the desire to remember home by fondly recreating culinary memories cannot be understood merely as reflectively nostalgic gestures; rather, such nostalgically framed narratives must also be read as a metacritique of what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one's relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which unflinchingly yoke national identity with culinary tastes and practices" (29).

Food criticism paves the way to invent various hidden meanings in day-to-day life. In *Writings Food Studies Movement*, Marion Nestle, a biologist, and William Alex McIntosh, a sociologist, define 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 and McIntosh 160). The importance of food in academic research and day-to-day life is observed by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik in *Food and Culture: A Reader*:

Food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is the central pawn in the 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. (1)

Food is an essential aspect in Jhumpa Lahiri's literature, playing a pivotal role that includes the homeland to host land, first and second-generation immigrants, society and people, and men and women. She discusses the different concerns surrounding the food metaphor, focusing on Bengali and American cuisines, eating habits, ever-changing tastes,

and culinary traditions. Lahiri's fiction depicts the disparities in food habits between first and second-generation immigrants. In *"Interpreter of Maladies,"* Jhumpa Lahiri uses food to illustrate the complexities of familial connections and the transfer from Indian to American culture. In her first novel, *"The Namesake,"* she looks at food as a way to remember, negotiate, and blend into the host culture, which creates a new hybrid culture.

As she has observed in her own family, Lahiri employs food in nearly all of her writings to illustrate the problem of immigrant experiences. Given that she is of Indian descent, her connection to the food imagery may be understood. She learned that food is a memory that allows people to recall their detailed pasts, familiar settings, and, most importantly, their roots.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri opens the novel by recounting how Ashima attempts to prepare one sort of Indian food that is commonly consumed in India:

On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, AshimaGanguli stands in a kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and planters peanuts, and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, and thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there was mustard seed oil to pour into the mix. Ashima had been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of a snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. (*The Namesake* 1)

The representation of the preparation of Indian food may be deduced from Lahiri's emphasis on the notion of food and its vital significance in preserving the Indian immigrants' cultural ties to their home place. Like many other pregnant women, Ashima is expected to experience feelings of isolation, uncertainty, worry, and dread during their pregnancy. She reveals that she attempts to combat these emotions by making and eating spicy, peppery, rice-and curry-heavy Indian food. Ashima, an Indian immigrant living in America, appears to achieve this tranquility by consuming her food in the kitchen. Nora proclaims, "Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects ..." (9). The novel uses food as a medium to create a new setting where people thousands of miles away from India may experience tangible manifestations of their shared memories of India and its culture. Aside from being a source of nutrition, food inspires Ashima to recall many other features of her birthplace, such as native inhabitants' clothes, architectural style, structures, and many other aspects of the Indian backdrop. In the novel, it is implied that food preparation is just as important as eating it. It was obvious from Ashima's preparation activities and the likelihood that she spent many hours in the kitchen before serving her Indian food. While pregnant, she is expected to rest rather than stand and laboriously prepare food in the kitchen. Ashima finds comfort in cooking, spending time in the kitchen, and hearing the sounds of chopping and prepping since they may change her house in America into a more traditional Indian setting and introduce Indian culture to her domestic life. She does not enjoy toast, hamburgers, or other sorts of fast food that only requires a little work to eat since she does not consider kitchen tasks such as prepping, cooking, chopping, or slicing to be backbreaking and tiresome. Ashima's activities in the kitchen are attractive to all of her senses and remind her of

things she did with her family at home, "Memory is evoked by the senses—smell, taste, touch, sound—and encoded in objects or events with particular meaning for the narrator." (Smith and Watson 19)

For diasporic people, traditional food is a crucial component of their identity. Nevertheless, if these traditions are maintained in their host nations, they retain their distinctiveness and are frequently remembered. So, for characters like Ashima and Ashoke, food and eating habits become a way to keep things going. Food is a way for them to pass on their cultural values and traditions to the next generation. It is a way to connect the homeland and the home. Food becomes an essential source of information for immigrants to share with their children about their origins. Mannur denotes that "the desire to remember home by fondly recreating culinary memories cannot be understood merely as reflectively nostalgic gestures; rather, such nostalgically framed narratives must also be read as a metacritique of what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one's relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which unflinchingly yoke national identity with culinary tastes and practices" (29).

Additionally, the Gangulis could see a difference between their culture and eating customs and American ones when they moved to a new home. "Instead of cereal and tea bags, there were whiskey and wine bottles on top of the refrigerator, most of them nearly empty" (The Namesake 32). Being surrounded by a culture with nothing in common makes them feel like aliens or foreigners. As a result, "home" for the Gangulis becomes a reminder of a bygone era. Differences in culture can be seen in their daily lives. She murmurs to Alan, "I thought Indians were supposed to be vegetarians." (The Namesake 39). When people start treating them differently, individuals often retreat to their familiar environments to feel more at ease. "The inside of the home is seen as a space that is culturally sacrosanct, an Indian space where traditional Bengali food dominates, reasserting that for the Indian Diaspora, the homeland denotes a particular geographical region in India with its own distinct culture and language, rather than India as a nation" (Roy and Khushu-Lahiri 120).

Ashima is the mother who negotiates between her native food and the host country's food. She makes arrangements for two types of meals on Gogol's birthday. However, she does not consume the host land foods that Gogol used to consume, "cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hotdogs" (The Namesake 65). During the assimilation and adaption phases, she prepared an American supper once each week. She makes Indian food by mixing ingredients found in an American supermarket. Ashima teaches Gogol, a typical Indian habit of eating with his hands.

About the active role that groups play in the reconstruction of memories, Connerton asserts that "Groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localized, and a kind of mapping localizes memories." "We situate what we recollect within the mental spaces provided by the group," and "Our memories are located within the mental and material spaces of the group" (37). These impressions may be accurate given the novel's suggestion that Indian immigrants form their organizations to revitalize their shared

memories, deepen their relationships with one another and with their native Indian culture, and create new spaces that encompass Indian values. In the novel, it is stated that:

Every weekend, there is a new home to go to, a new couple, or a young family to meet. They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone, they are friends. Most of them live within walking distance of one another in Cambridge. The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, and engineers. The homesick and bewildered wives turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp sold in Chinatown and that it is possible to make halwa from the cream of wheat (The Namesake 38).

This narrative aspect may highlight the role of group ties and food in revitalizing collective memories and cultural patterns among Indian immigrants. It is feasible to interpret Ashima's social gatherings and visits with an emphasis on the profound effect of these immigrants' gathering on sustaining their indigenous cultural values and collective memories, which are surrounded by those of Western civilization and regularly face the danger of extinction due to the dominant position of American culture and recollections.

Through such an account, it becomes clear that food plays a crucial role in bringing back collective memories because it gives group members inspiration and motivation relevant to their sense of belonging and the reinforcement of their social relationships. Regular communication and visits, the development of friendships, and social networks are all facilitated by food, which also strengthens group membership. Collective memories emerge spontaneously in the spaces made available by groups once food completes its primary duty of creating strong and enduring bonds and the formation of groups. As for Indian immigrants in the novel, the quote above referring to Ashima and her neighbors shows that food increases their group membership and provides them with intense zeal and passion in their social gatherings before forming collective memories.

Smith and Watson clarify that "daily, we move in and out of various communities of memory – religious, racial, ethnic, familial. Communities develop their occasions, rituals, and practices of remembering. They establish specific sites for remembering" (19-20). Lahiri may take the same approach, as seen in her description of a holy day when the six-month birthday of Ashima's son, Gogol, is celebrated by only Indian immigrants. Rice may be a place that helps them remember their shared memories:

By February, when Gogol is a month old, Ashima and Ashoke know enough people to entertain on a proper scale—the occasion: Gogol's annaprasan, his rice ceremony. There is no baptism for Bengali babies and no formal naming in the eyes of God. Instead, the first customary ceremony of their lives centers around solid food consumption. They ask Dilip Nandi to play the part of Ashima's brother, to hold the child and feed him rice, the Bengali staff of life, for the first time. (The Namesake, 38-39)

Because practically every Indian family with a six-month-old son participates in this ceremony and celebrates it, rice is one of India's most popular dishes. Food plays a significant role in this ritual by serving as a reminder of native values and ancestors for these immigrants

that date back perhaps hundreds of years. Emphasizing the sacred connotations that food incorporates into ceremonies, Civitello says that "it has been used in rituals to guarantee fertility, prosperity, a good marriage, and an afterlife. It has been used to display the power and wealth of the state, the church, corporations, and a person "(xiii). So, the fact that Indian immigrants use rice in their ceremonies is not a coincidence since they probably believe in its power and effect on their children's future lives. They want their children to be rich, happy, and true to their sacred values. As a result, the choice of rice in the Indian immigrants' ceremony is not by chance because it is pretty likely that they think it has power and influence on their children's lives in the future and that they want them to be blessed with success, happiness, and commitment to their core values. In this kind of ceremony, rice is eaten as an example of how a typical food can become unique and essential, even though it might be overlooked and seen as just another thing in other places. Buddhism and Buddha are often given as reasons why rice is essential to Indian immigrants.

According to legend, the Buddha fasted for forty days while consuming only six grains of rice daily (Civitello 23). As stated in the book, Indians have been eating, keeping, and honoring rice on holy days in groups or in a coordinated way for hundreds of years and since the beginning of Buddhism. This makes rice an undeniable keeper of collective memories of Indian culture.

Conclusion

As a result, Food in Lahiri's writings can be analyzed in terms of its intrinsic qualities and related to memory culture and social groupings from the perspective of Indian immigrants to the United States. In ceremonies, celebrations, social gatherings, and familial relations of Indian immigrants, food substances such as spice, curry, and rice play the role of forging new and familiar spaces in which these immigrants are sometimes mentally transported to their Indian homeland and in which their homeland cultural aura is sometimes emotionally transferred to their social and domestic life in the United States. When this happens, the reader often finds a connection between food and groups. For example, food can help Indian immigrants strengthen their sense of unity and group membership when collective memories come back to life. However, social and cultural groups can also make them aware of national foods before collective memories come back to life.

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