

An Exploration of the Edible Dimension of Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy

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Abstract:

This paper examines the food imagery in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy to comprehend its association with the various dimensions of identity, such as, race, culture, religion, region, gender, caste, class etc. Gastronomic peculiarities, dietary preferences, food consumption habits, nuances and varieties of culinary art, convoluted customs concerning food are integral part of a cultural construct and can locate an individual in a social matrix. The individual identity, be it national, social, racial, gender-based or caste-based, is reflected in the practices of the edible world. A thorough study of the food imagery would lead to the observation that harvest, preparation and consumption of edible articles is a potent symbol of individual and group identity.

Key words: Food, Culture, Identity, Community, Self

Introduction: Amitav Ghosh, an acclaimed writer of Indian origin, has produced brilliant works in both fiction and non-fiction. However, he is best known for his fictions which are written in complex narrative structures set against the backdrop of critical historical settings. From being shortlisted for Booker Prize to winning Jnanpith, Amitav Ghosh has achieved his fair share of recognition in the literary world. His fiction incorporates themes and issues that are essentially Post-modern concerns located in a post-colonial era. One such issue - the question of human identity occupies a prominent place in the fictional oeuvre of Amitav Ghosh. From the "tiny threads" of narration he constructs a grand "tapestry" of alternate history that recounts the stories of innumerable "other" identities that are subsumed in the European metanarrative. (Mondal 130) Set against the backdrop of The First Opium War, *Ibis* Trilogy is a series of historical novels written in an epic mould. As is wont in an epic structure, *Ibis* Trilogy portrays a wide array of characters hailing from different nations, religions, cultures, classes, castes, professions. Consequently, this series provides ample

opportunity to examine the concept of identity in its various forms. Identity is never conceived and represented as something fixed. It is essentially plurivocal, heterogeneous in a transcultural and transnational world. It is ever-changing, always in a fluid motion, and forever in the process of forming a new one through the combination of the existing ones. Many cultural aspects are used by Ghosh to represent this complicated construction of identity. One of these tropes is the edible objects and practices built around their consumption that trace the construction of such identities. Anthropologists have found food to be nourishing substance as well as symbol. Thinkers like Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes have argued that food is much like a system of communication or a sign system, resembling a linguistic structure. They believed that studying food can lead us to important observations pertaining to social structure and experiences. (Counihan and Van Esterik) Concept of Gastropolitics introduced by Arjun Appadurai argues that food “encode a complex set of social and moral propositions, food serves two diametrically opposed semiotic functions: it can either homogenize the actors who transact in it, or it can serve to heterogenize them.” (Appadurai 494) This paper attempts to explore the intricate relationship between food and identity presented in the *Ibis* Trilogy by Amitav Ghosh. Gastronomic peculiarities, dietary preferences, food consumption habits, nuances and varieties of culinary art, convoluted rituals concerning food are integral part of a cultural construct and can locate an individual in a social matrix. The individual identity, be it national, social, racial, gender-based or caste-based, is reflected in the practices of the edible world.

The Recipe of Power and Oppression

The very title of the first novel in the series, *Sea of Poppies*, contains a food item which underscores the identity of a colonized nation. Before British oppressive rule forced farmers to grow more and more poppy for opium, it was cultivated sparingly. This forced cultivation gradually led to a scarcity of staple food and useful quotidian produces. The novel opens with Deeti, a Bihari peasant-woman wondering at this helplessness of her colonized people. Poppy becomes a symbol of the oppression of an imperialist force. (Sea of Poppies 29-30) Due to Deeti's involvement, we become instantly aware of another layer of identity that is inextricably linked with the food. Composition of diet and consumption of food has a close association with the gender identity. We meet Deeti, one of the main characters of this series, a housewife in Bihar, India. Married to an opium addict who works at the Opium factory run by the East India Company, Deeti prepares a meal and packs it for her husband to

eat later, while she whips up a few *rotis* which she and her daughter will eat with the leftovers. “Deeti cooked them quickly, before poking out the fire: the rotis were put aside, to be eaten later with yesterday’s leftovers - a dish of stale alu-posth, potatoes cooked in poppy-seed paste” (*Sea of Poppies* 7).

Consumption of leftover immediately marks the subordinate status of a woman within the boundaries of domesticity which reflects the larger social dynamics. Moreover, gender-specific roles of primary care-givers, such as mothers and wives, are closely associated with rituals constructed around food, its preparation and consumption. Chi Mei, Chinese mistress of Bahram, the Parsi merchant who divides his time between India and Canton, refrains from cooking for him; but makes sure to follow the custom of serving his food herself and fanning it seating by his side while he eats. Shireen, wife of Bahram, rejuvenates the bond with her married daughters by preparing traditional old Parsi recipes for weekly dinner with them. Even after Shireen leaves her home, her country, she assumes this role for her host, Dinyar in Canton. While men, mostly merchants, discuss politics, war, trade and commerce, Shireen keeps herself busy with laying down an authentic Parsi table. “Shireen was, as usual, a largely silent spectator at these deliberations: while men talked, she would orchestrate a steady flow of food and drink for them, from the villa’s kitchen” (*Flood of Fire* 482). But these gender specific roles are problematized by other variables like social, religious class. Chi Mei, whose existence remains outside the social and religious norms that are binding on Bahram, could seat with him at meals, but another other woman Elokeshi, the mistress of Raja Neel Rattan Halder is not allowed to share his table. This ritualistic exclusion of Elokeshi marks her as a woman belonging to the unclean section of the society as dictated by contemporary Upper class Hindu religious authorities.

...the rules of the Raskhali household were strict in regard to whom the Raja could eat with, and unclean beef-eaters were not a part of that small circle – even Elokeshi was not included in it, and had always to feed herself in secret when Neel came to spend the night in her house. (*Sea of Poppies* 106)

Rituals concerning food consumption serve at times as a bridge between the feminine and the masculine world. Shireen uses the meal time to broach uncomfortable subject with feminine subtlety. She breaks the news of her betrothal with a friend of her late husband to her relative and host Dinyar over a meal comprising his favourite dish as if to mellow the

shock. The shock is supposed to be particularly harsh as her fiancé is a man of different religion and a foreigner too.

Of late Dinyar had been noticeably cool towards Shireen, as had the other seths. She'd been led to wonder whether they'd heard rumours about Zadig and herself, or whether something else was amiss. She wanted to probe Dinyar about it, but he had been avoiding her and she hadn't been able to corner him. But soon after the *Mor* hoisted sail Shireen was able to create the opportunity she needed. She had instructed the cook to prepare aleti-paleti – masala fried chicken gizzards – one of Dinyar's favourite Parsi dishes. After it was brought to the table she sent the stewards away and served it to Dinyar with her own hands. (*Flood of Fire* 564)

A Fusion Menu: Negotiation and the awkward gap

Women are not the only ones who use food as a strategic tool of diplomacy, men uses dinners and feasts as platforms to exchange and negotiate political ideology, commercial policies, and crucial information. Roland Barthes identifies this function of food in "Toward a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption":

For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical and nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviours. (Barthes 24)

These sumptuous feasts depicted by Ghosh offer an assortment of delicacies that highlight the cultural identity of the concerned parties. Filled with premonition at the sight of a vessel of unknown origin, Raja Neel Rattan Halder, Raja of Raskhali, an estate in Bengal, invites his European business acquaintances for dinner only with a view to glean information from them. The food served is an amalgamation of European delicacies and traditional Bengali dishes; duck soup and chicken roast are followed by famous *chitchky* of *Pollock saug* (a dish of spinach). One of his European guests Mr Doughty seems particularly taken with this Bengali dish.

Ah, at last – the karibat,' said Mr Doughty [...] When he found what he was looking for, he pointed a jubilant finger in the direction of a brass bowl that was filled with spinach and tiny silvers of fish. 'Isn't that the famous Rascally ckitchky of pollock saug? Why, I do believe it is!' (*Sea of Poppies* 114)

The custom followed during this meal, however, does not mark cultural exchange. It is an awkward gap between two cultures that the readers witness. The host, forbidden to eat with unclean foreigners, seats politely at the table with a heap of food piled on his plate untouched. This only perplexes the newly arrived American who is unfamiliar with the ways of the Upper class Hindu households. Similarly, Indians experience difficulty in familiarizing with a common Western ritual associated with the consumption of food – picnic. They find it highly unusual that anyone in their right mind might want to eat in a setting where imminent threat from preying animals looms large.

That year the officers and their ladies had taken up a strange new kind of entertainment, apparently in imitation of a fashion in their homeland. They would ride into the jungle with baskets of food and drink; then they would spread out sheets and blankets and sit down to eat – right there, in the open. This was a great annoyance to the orderlies because they would be taken along to chase away snakes and keep a lookout for tigers and elephants. It seemed senseless to them that anyone should wish to eat in places where they might themselves be eaten by wild beasts – but orders were orders and they went along and did as they were told. (*Flood of Fire* 202)

Meeting of two or multiple cultures does not necessarily include an awkward gap in the fictional world of *Ibis* trilogy. Shared meals among people from diverse cultures in *Achha* Hong (Indians were called *Achha* by locals in Canton), the living quarter of Indian merchants and their entourage in Canton, only assert a sense of solidarity and mark a healthy cultural exchange. In the essay “Foodways: Roots, Routes, and What They Tell Us” Ada Artuzer Young points out, “As peoples become deterritorialized they carry an array of cultural artefacts, products and practices central to their reterritorialization in new lands. Foodways are at the center of a larger process of hybridization and cultural mixing. Both the receiving and host cultures are transformed by this reciprocal process.” The food served in *Achha* Hong stresses not only the cultural exchange among diverse cultural groups of India but also is a product of their association with the culture of the host land and other trader from different countries. Here food becomes the symbol of the hybrid identity these traders are acquiring.

Of these the one that was most commonly provided was a Uighur speciality called a *samsa* – these were small triangles of pastry, stuffed usually with minced meat; baked in portable tandoors they were sold hot in the Maidan and were easy to procure. Being the ancestor of a popular Indian snack, they were consumed with much relish in the

Achha Hong and were spoken of familiarly by their Hindusthani name – *samosa*. (*River of Smoke* 191).

Distinct varieties of dishes served at the dinner party thrown by the association of Cantonese merchants represent the peaceful coexistence of heterogeneous group of businessmen on foreign soil. Whereas the dinner parties arranged by Mr Burnham, a British merchant settled in India, lack this element of cultural exchange and reeks of the audacity of an oppressive class. The menu served in those parties, which are often used by Mr. Burnham to preach his doctrine of Free Trade, is quintessentially European and lacks diversity.

Prepared with Local Ingredients - The constructed culture and Transnational self

While many studies show that food is a powerful symbol of personal and collective identity, it is notable that this seemingly steadfast aspect of identity can also be found in a state of flux. (Warde 1997) The point that merits mention in this discussion is the formation of hybrid identity of individuals depicted by Ghosh. The hybrid nature of cultural identity is not shown in these texts as being exclusive to heterogeneous groups. *Ibis* trilogy deals with individuals as well who form hybrid identity. For example, Paulette Lambert, daughter of a Botanist of French origin, is raised by a Bengali ayah who feeds her *Khichri* as her first weaning food. This particular dish underscores her hybrid identity. As for Zachary Reid, the mulatto carpenter turned sailor, his fast depleting, rotten ration identifies itself with the cultural identity that must embrace the dietary choice of Lascars, sailors from the parts around Indian Ocean, in order to survive in a foreign atmosphere.

On the serang's advice Zachary also made a change of diet, switching from the usual sailor's menu of lobsouse, dandyfunk and chokedog, to a Laskaree fare of karibat and kedgereee – spicy skillygales of rice, lentils and pickles, mixed on occasion with little bits of fish, fresh or dry. The tongue-searing tastes were difficult to get used to at first, but Zachary could tell the spices were doing him good, scouring his insides, and he soon grew to like the unfamiliar flavours. (*Sea of Poppies* 23)

This incident, again, stresses the point that food habits, dietary preferences of living beings emerge out of their relationship with the physical world. Thus edible culture is conditioned by the geographical variables. This intricate relationship between dietary choices and natural world that constructs a particular culture is further emphasized in the wonder

evoked in Jadu, a lascar, at receiving the information that Chinese people eat certain bird's nest found in Great Nicobar. (*Flood of Fire* 23)

The God worshipped and the food consumed

As anthropologist Emiko Ohnuky-Tierney points out, in order to function as a metaphor of self, food needs "two interlocking dimensions. First, each member of the social group consumes the food which becomes part of his or her body. The important food becomes *embodied* in each individual. It operates as a metonym for being part of the self. Second, the food is consumed by individual members of the social group who eat the food together." (Ohnuky-Tierney 129-30) In Ibis Trilogy food often plays an instrumental role in defining religious identity. The Parsi characters are repeatedly marked by their traditional dishes, be it Shireen's cooking, or treats prepared by Bahram's loyal retinue of servants or feasts arranged in Villa Nova. The food prepared as an oblation to the Hindu deity singles out the religious identity of the Zamindar. In the prison of Nanhae, Muslim prisoners locate one another through their dietary preference. Here their identity as a community is not made conspicuous through the food consumed together, but by the food (pork) forbidden to them. It forges a bond to last through tough times and prepares an unlikely band of potential soldiers for Chinese Empire.

One day they were even given a bit of meat but Jodu suspected that it was pork and didn't take it. The jailers asked why and the lascars told them that it was against their religion. That was when they learnt, to their amazement, that they were not the only Muslims in the prison, as they had thought. There were many others of their faith there – most of them Chinese! [...] But there are Muslims from other places too, in and around China – Turks and Uzbegs, Malays and Arabs. These prisoners welcomed the lascars into their midst as if they were brothers. [...] They were allowed to cook their food separately. No one makes trouble for the Muslims because they are known to stand by each other. (*Flood of Fire* 290)

However, the dietary preferences based on religious identity create a particularly complicated dilemma in the Indian sections of East India Company's Army. An anxious father articulates his reservations about letting his son join this particular army in the following manner:

Say what you like, Bhyro Singhji, he said. But these Angrez firangis are beef-eating Christians. For Rajputs it can only bring shame on our families if we work for them. Isn't it true that everyone who joins the Company's paltans must eat unclean and forbidden things? That he must live side by side with men of all sorts, including the lowest? (*Flood of Fire* 69)

Once inside the army, with the change in their circumstances, more specifically the change of their physical reality, these religious restrictions lose tenacity:

They were from different places – Awadhs, Mithila, Bhojpur and the mountains – and of different castes as well: Brahmin, Rajput, Aheer, Kurmi and a few others. At the start some of them grumbled about eating together, but Kesri was quick to dhamkao the complaints out of them. Didn't they know that they would have to travel on transport ships? Didn't they understand that on ships it was impossible to carry on as if they were back in village? And so on. (*Flood of Fire* 229)

Nation is a variegated platter

Regional identities too are underscored by diet and culinary art. Girmitiyas from different parts of India find a point of commonality in mango pickle, but they are astonished to find that each one of them has a different way of making it, or has a different combination of condiments to add. As the novel reads “It was astonishing, for example, to discover that in making mango-achar, some were accustomed to using fallen fruit while others would use none that were not freshly picked; no less than was it surprising to learn that Heeru included heeng among the pickling spices and that Sarju omitted so essential an ingredient as kalonji” (*Sea of Poppies* 241). An ailing woman among Girmitiyas, Sarju parts with her bag full of seeds on her deathbed. She requests Deeti to sow these seeds of medicinal plants and exotic spices in the new land only because she wanted to be remembered. An urge to perpetuate the identity is evident in Sarju's request which in extension would build the unique identity of these Indian immigrants in the new land.

Moreover, particular nuances of culinary art are often found intertwined with regional, national, and cultural identity. Chi Mei's style of cooking with mild spices and Bahram's taste for spicy food highlight their distinct identities. A Cantonese woman running a kitchen boat, Asha Didi's cooking tracks her lineage back to her Bengali mother; Brahmaputra boatmen's fame rests on their special cooking skill.

Conclusion: An exploration of the intimate tie that binds food and identity enriches our understanding of the cultural history reconstructed by Ghosh in his novels. Following the gastronomic map one can traverse a complex network of identities which joins one another and finds new routes along the way. It examines how various forms of identities, such as religious, social, gendered, economic, and national identities overlap and conflate to build a specific one, unique yet nothing but a combination of many.

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