

Food as a Significant Cultural Motif in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake***Yogita Bajaj**Associate Professor of English
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Jhumpa Lahiri, the author of the novel *The Namesake*, occupies a significant place amongst the contemporary writers. She can be categorized as a multicultural, diasporic, postcolonial, marginal South Asian woman writer. Lahiri regards herself as a product of three countries- England, India and America and lives in New York now. Her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories, got her fame and won for her the coveted 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. *The Namesake* is her first novel, which was published in 2003, followed by *The Unaccustomed Earth*, another collection of short stories. *The Namesake* was later adapted into the popular film of the same name directed by Mira Nair and was released in February, 2007. The novel deals with the themes of immigrant experience, identities and displacement, and ties and clashes between the generations. Jhumpa Lahiri uses food as a motif to convey the preservation of culture. This paper is an attempt to depict the significance of food in the novel *The Namesake*, its preparation and its consumption, and how food becomes a medium in shaping individual and cultural identity. Food serves as a metaphor or symbol of their culture, which the migrants have lost only physically; however, psychologically it remains with them at every moment. A reading of Lahiri's food account demonstrates how far food functions as the metaphor of a nation, which is frequently used to keep up a collective sense of togetherness, which eventually leads to what we call identity.

Keywords: Identity, Culture, Food, Displacement, Diaspora, Namesake

Food is an indispensable component of Indian Culture and occupies an important place in the social, cultural, and personal lives of the immigrant. It has significant implications in molding their politics and redefining their cultural identity. Lahiri's most of the immigrant characters exemplify how ordinary people enact nationalism and how they are attached to national identity through everyday practices of making, sharing, and eating their food. The immigrants express a strong affinity to their past food-related life and a constant comparison between what they are used to and what is currently available to them in the new food environment. Food connects people with their roots and alleviates the drastic changes in their lives in the diaspora. It engenders a sense of belonging and is a powerful reminder for displaced people that they share something deeply fundamental to their existence. Food is also the most significant part of our cultural imagination. Food aroma carries different spices, conversations around the dinner table, different flavors for different seasons, and different regions according to their demographic conditions. Whenever one feels nostalgic for one's homeland, food occupies the most important space in that reminiscence because it is necessary for survival. According to Wenying Xu in *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* "Food is 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."

Food is one of the major elements in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, which plays a pivotal role that encompasses the homeland to the host land, acting as a link between the first and the second-generation immigrants, society and individual, and men and women. Lahiri describes the various issues of the food metaphor and highlights the Bengali and American cuisines, eating manners, ever-changing tastes, and culinary practices. As a diasporic novel, Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* deals with the problem of identity, to which the sub-themes of family ties and clash of values, cross-cultural relationships, and love and loneliness etc. contribute. The novel beautifully intertwines the theme of identity with the significance of food. Through the culinary experiences of the Ganguli family, the novel reflects cultural assimilation and the evolving identity of the protagonist, Gogol.

In *The Namesake*, American products are being constantly adapted to suit Bengali traditions. Food tends to be one of the strongest defining influences for dislocated people. It's a powerful force in helping them to preserve their identities. From traditional Bengali dishes to American cuisine, food serves as a tangible link to the characters' heritage, providing a sense of comfort, nostalgia, and a bridge between generations. The meals and culinary traditions depicted in the novel reflect the characters' identities and the ways in which they navigate their dual cultural existence in the United States. The novel starts from the kitchen with the food motif. In the very beginning of the story, from the very first moment Ashima moves to the United States, she adapts American products to cater to her needs. While she is still pregnant with Gogol, she tries to reproduce the snack from Calcutta she likes so much. "Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planter 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." (1) Representing the stereotypical South Asian female subjectivity, she stands in her Cambridge kitchen attempting to exercise her culinary citizenship through an imperfect recreation of the favorite Bengali snack jhalmuri. The strange mix of American ingredients approximates the taste she craves, but also emphasizes just how far away she is from her native culture. While she thus prepares to gastronomically revisit the nostalgic taste of home, she is immediately jolted back to her present reality due to the lack of a certain taste she desires, and also by the second-generation immigrant- the yet-to-be-born Gogol. Food becomes a symbol of continuity and a means of preserving cultural ties in the face of assimilation and change.

In this novel, food plays a multifaceted role, serving as a tangible link to cultural identity, a medium for familial connections, and a tool for navigating the complexities of assimilation. Even the protagonist Gogol Ganguli's first official introduction to Indian culture is through the Annaprasan ceremony. When he is six months old, the community is large enough for a proper gathering in honor of his annaprasan: "The occasion: Gogol's annaprasan, his rice ceremony. There is no baptism for Bengali babies, no ritualistic naming in the eyes of God. Instead, the first formal ceremony of their lives centers around the consumption of solid food." (65) Ten traditional dishes are arranged in front of Gogol, including a warm rice pudding called 'payesh' that Ashima will prepare for him at each birthday alongside a slice of bakery cake. The pairing of

payesh with American birthday cake is symbolic of the mix and clash of the two cultures to which Gogol owes allegiance, a duality that will follow him all his life. The ritual surrounding food in these events showcases the cultural richness and family traditions. As Gogol grows up in the United States, his relationship with Bengali food evolves. In his teenage years, he rejects his given name, Gogol, symbolizing his resistance to his cultural roots. This rejection extends to his dietary preferences, as he becomes more accustomed to American food, emphasizing his struggle with identity. The novel depicts the shift in dietary preferences as Gogol embraces American culture. "A final meal is served, an herbed omelette topped with a slice of grilled tomato. Gogol savors each mouthful, aware that for the next eight months nothing will taste quite the same." (81)

Different food for different emotions, different personalities, and different generations makes it a cultural signifier. As A. K. Ramanujan in his essay Food for Thought,...."You are what you eat and, your taste expresses your Character"(79). This is what Jhumpa Lahiri tries to show through the personality of Ashok Ganguli because his imbalanced personality is a result of his improper food choices and imbalanced proportion of salt and sugar. For first-generation immigrants, food becomes a medium through which they can connect with various people in an alien land, while for second-generation immigrants Ethnic food does not arouse their senses and does not induce emotions in them for their native land. Rather, they are ready to assimilate and adapt according to the new place they have immigrated to. Gogol is ready to assimilate the food culture in the house of Maxine without any hesitation; rather, he shows disliking for the food habits of his own mother. "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 and freshness of the beans. His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest. Gogol and his girlfriend Maxine are having dinner together on the first night that they will make love, and she is preparing coq au vin. Gogol's move away from his mother's home-cooked Bengali meals to fast food symbolizes his struggle with assimilation and the distancing from his roots. The novel skillfully uses these culinary choices to reflect the characters' evolving identities and the clash between cultural heritage and the desire for a new, modern identity. Ashima and Ashoke integrate American food as the children are more exposed to it than their traditional Indian cuisine. Gogol does not want to be seen as a stranger living in a foreign land, so he dresses like

an American and follows the American way of living. The following extract shows how food acts as a catalyzer in his process of assimilation: They learn to roast turkeys ... at thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around the snowman, to colour boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter for the sake of Gogol and Sonia ... they celebrate with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati. (64)

Lahiri's detailed focus on food images, combined with the effortful exercise of cooking, lends a realistic charm to the novel, as in the last chapter Ashima is shown to be preparing special mincemeat croquettes:

It is the day before Christmas. Ashima Ganguli sits at her kitchen table, making mincemeat croquettes for a party she is throwing that evening. They are one of her specialties, something her guests have come to expect, handed to them on small plates within minutes of their arrival. Alone, she manages an assembly line of preparation. First she forces warm boiled potatoes through a ricer. Carefully she shapes a bit of the potato around a spoonful of cooked ground lamb, as uniformly as the white of a hard-boiled egg encases its yolk. She dips each of the croquettes, about the size and shape of a billiard ball, into a bowl of beaten eggs, then coats them on a plate of breadcrumbs, shaking off the excess in her cupped palms. Finally she stacks the croquettes on a large circular tray, a sheet of wax paper between each layer. (274)

The community of Bengali friends in Cambridge is ever growing, as young PhD students like Ashoke fly back to Calcutta and return with wives to start their families in America. Ashima

welcomes these bewildered young brides, sharing recipes to approximate Indian dishes. She teaches the newly arrived Bengali wives how to make halwa from Cream of Wheat, she fries the shrimp cutlets in saucepans, and she and the other Bengalis drink tea with evaporated milk (38). Ashima tries to adapt the American products to her Bengali dishes, but these do not take on a whole new different meaning. In fact, having to adapt these American products to her Bengali traditions brings much sorrow to Ashima since nothing is quite as it used to be back in her own country. The situation only makes her miss India even more.

The Gangulis do successfully manage to adapt American products to their own traditions; nonetheless, they are forced to give in to some American traditions that eventually create a unique type of Bengali culture that is neither entirely Bengali nor American. For instance, even though many of her customs are eroded by her experiences in America, Ashima successfully manages to adapt the American tradition of Christmas to her Bengali origins. Throughout the years her Christmas parties become very popular amongst her Bengali friends, so much so that towards the end of the novel we discover that everyone has come to “love Ashima’s Christmas Eve parties, that they’ve missed them these past few years” (286). She has managed to make Christmas her very own “adopted” tradition, using it as an excuse to cook Bengali dishes and to gather all her friends and loved ones together who become one big Bengali family. Food not only Americanizes the family but it also keeps them in contact with their own culture. Yet, this tradition she creates is not Bengali, for they do not celebrate Christmas, nor American because Ashima’s celebration takes a whole new meaning. Her situation has forced her to create a completely new culture that is composed of both her native and adopted traditions.

While food in many instances does help keep the Ganguli family stay connected to their Bengali roots, it plays an important role in the Americanization of the new generation. Lahiri skillfully uses food to highlight generational gaps. For Gogol’s parents, Ashoke and Ashima, Bengali dishes are a nostalgic reminder of home. However, their American- born children, particularly Gogol, exhibit a more ambivalent attitude, reflecting the tension between their dual identities. Throughout their lives, Gogol and Sonia never fully adopt the traditional dishes their parents eat; instead, their diet is based on American dishes and an adaptation of the Bengali eating traditions. From a very early age, Gogol eats peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and

frozen waffles for breakfast (55). Ashima and Ashoke eventually give in when they go grocery shopping, allowing him to “fill the cart with items he and Sonia, but not they, consume” (65). These eating habits show that inevitably, the new generation gradually adapts to American culture and food becomes a major distancing factor between generations. Although Gogol is initially taught to eat with “his own fingers, not to let the food stain the skin of his own palm” (55), as he grows up and becomes more distanced from his parents and his Bengali origins, he begins to use a fork when he eats, seemingly ashamed of his parents for not using one. Food, amongst other things, has managed to Americanize him and consequently the traditions that were supposed to be carried on by him and his sister. In this situation, the Ganguli’s are the “products” that are being exported and in turn are adapted to the new country’s culture. The family, however, does bring with themselves their own little piece of India that gets Americanized through the food and products they use. The Ganguli’s’ Bengali traditions are eroded by the influence American food and products have on their family.

Many pivotal family moments in the novel occur around the dining table. Whether it’s the celebration of festivals or the sharing of everyday meals, these scenes underscore the significance of food in fostering family bonds. For instance, the celebration of Durga Puja involves elaborate feasts, showcasing the communal and familial aspects of Bengali culture. Lahiri has also made sure to include an episode of death, whereby she presents the compatibility of death and food. One can notice how Ashima and her children observe a “mourner’s diet” for ten days, as they avoid meat and fish and instead find solace in bland vegetarian food (180). Shocked by Ashoke’s demise, food becomes the only thing that structures their grieving days, and each evening, they are “strangely hungry” and “eager to taste the blandness on their plates” (181). When everything else seems meaningless, food remains the only agreeable thing, bearing the capability to reinstate a sense of assurance, seemingly saving them from further mental disintegration. Mealtimes are the only moments when their grief somewhat loses its intensity, as by their deliberate rejection of certain foods, they feel closer to Ashoke. The mourning period ends with a religious ceremony alongside a funeral banquet, where they prepare an “elaborate meal” of meat and fish, “cooked as his father liked them best, with extra potatoes and fresh coriander leaves” (181). With the house once again filled with the smells of familiar foods, they

feel “as if it is just another party” that celebrates the victory and enlargement of Ashoke’s life (181).

Certainly, people from other cultures can adapt American products to their own needs; however, we must not forget that in return these products will eventually Americanize these cultures to a certain extent. Ashima and Gogol’s relationship to food in *The Namesake* proves to be a convincing example of this dual process. While food helps to maintain a connection to their Bengali roots no matter if it is made of American products, it also helps Americanize their traditions and the new generation in the family, who become subsumed into American culture and lose part of their Bengali originality. As Gogol navigates his dual identity, the changing food choices mirror his journey of self –discovery and acceptance, making *The Namesake* a rich exploration of cultural integration through the lens of gastronomy. Gogol’s gradual adoption of American food parallels his assimilation into American culture. His shift from Bengali cuisine to hamburgers and pizza reflects the broader theme of cultural adaptation and the challenges faced by immigrants in maintaining their cultural heritage in a new environment.

Across borders and boundaries food is also a way to hybridity of various cultures on the table, where food works as a cultural tool to fusions, mixings, and hybridity. As we see in the novel, earlier Ashima was making Sandesh in traditional style but over a period of time she learned to make Sandesh molded out of ricotta cheese and Halwa from Cream wheat. She accepts this change in a positive manner. Food actually helps in transcultural communication in a multicultural society. As such, food has always remained a subtle yet appropriate tool, and the culinary -a vital site -through which one can critique the complex diasporic experiences and dilemmas. The fragmented entity of diaspora is reflected in their understanding of food as a portal through which seek to establish their ethnic histories, cultural identities, and sense of community in a displaced world. Food functions as an effective gastronomic zone and an "emotional anchor"(Mannur). Culinary exercises throw light on the aspects of resistance, acceptance, and preservation of cultures. Certain meals and recipes serve as symbols throughout the novel. For instance, the “luchi” (fried bread) that Ashima prepares for Gogol’s lunch becomes a poignant reminder of her absence when Gogol is at college. Food in these instances becomes a powerful narrative device. In essence, food in *The Namesake* is more than sustenance;

it's a cultural marker, a familial glue, and a reflection of the characters' journeys in reconciling their Bengali heritage with their American lives. Lahiri skillfully weaves these culinary elements into the narrative, enriching the story with layers of meaning and cultural nuance.

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