

Food as the Cultural Marker of Identity and Metaphor for Memory: Understanding Imtiaz Dharker's poem *At the Lahore Karhai*

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Imtiaz Dharker, who was born in Lahore and grew up in Glasgow, now lives in Mumbai and London. She doesn't want to confine herself to particular geographical, cultural or religious boundaries. Therefore, she considers herself a "Scottish Muslim Calvinist", who is adopted by India and married into Wales. Her opportunities of growing and living in two continents, Asia and Europe, and three countries, Pakistan, Britain and India suggest that she has cross-cultural interactions. Literally, food denotes edible objects but has a broader cultural significance. The way we understand food practices, food preparations, is linked with the religious and cultural identity of a person or community. The aim of this paper is to investigate how Imtiaz Dharker in her poetry *At the Lahore Karhai* uses food as an instrument of understanding cultural patterns and of nostalgia for the immigrants.

Key Words: colonialism, hybridity, heteronormativity, identity, violence,

Bhikhu Parekh states, "Cultures grow out of conscious and unconscious interactions with each other, define their identity in terms of what they take to be their significant other, and are at least partially multicultural in their origins and constitution. Each carries bits of the other within itself and is never wholly sui generis. This does not mean that it has no powers of self-determination and inner impulses, but rather that it is porous and subject to external influences which it assimilates in its now autonomous ways". Imtiaz Dharker's poem *At the Lahore Karhai* is taken from her book *I Speak for the Devil*. Fox suggests that "Food is almost always shared; people eat together; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together. Food is an occasion for sharing...for the expression of altruism".

As Sunday is considered to be a holiday, the poet along with a multicultural troupe takes it as an opportunity to visit a seemingly 'holy' place - a restaurant named the Lahore Karhai situated at Wembley, England. For them, it is not merely a place of food, but a place of worship and food served there is elevated to the position of deity. Apart from serving food, the restaurant named after Karachi serves nostalgia for her birthplace i.e. Pakistan in England. Though the poet lives abroad, she does not forget her religious identity when she says, "No beer, we're Muslim". The

differentiation of religious identities based on food and drink highlights the importance of food in marking and shaping the cultural 'identity' of individuals and communities. She is served the drink which is as fresh and bright as the Sun and enjoys listening to an old Hindi song 'Yaad na jaye' sung by Mohammed Rafi on a portable music player. The song is of much significance as the English translation of the lyric is "memories don't leave". The song not only suggests her liking to Bollywood movies but also helps her memorise past.

Food is of spatial importance - it connects the space of the poet's mind with the geographical space. The restaurant reminds her of dhabas along the Grand Trunk Road, a multi-national highway connecting Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. The truck drivers halt at dhabas to relish foods that remind them of the taste of homemade foods. Such foods provide them relief from exhaustion and hunger. The term 'dhaba' is a geographical, cultural signifier as it is a roadside eatery in the Indian subcontinent that provides authentic, delicious foods at a cheap price. The Lahore Karhai restaurant, like dhabas, reminds them of homemade foods.

The sense of displacement is expressed by the poet by comparing themselves with truck-drivers. Like the truckers, the poet and her diasporic friends carry the weights of memories of the past, the desire for belongingness. On Sunday, they undertake not only physical but also emotional journey to reach Lahore Karhai, a restaurant where they can connect with their cultural roots and feel the taste of homemade foods. The restaurant gives them an opportunity to reestablish their connections with the motherland over foods.

Dharker presents a picture of communal harmony by describing people who join her at the same table, at the same restaurant. Although they belong to different cultures, they present a picture of inclusivity and camaraderie - a refugee from Sindh, his beautiful wife who is a practitioner of Hindu religion and offers prayer to Lord Krishna, an Englishman who is "flavoured" by the British Raj, and girls from Bombay.

Just as wearing summer clothes in winter provides comfort, remembering the very essence of the motherland in foreign country provides them solace and comfort. It also suggests a possibility to adapt and assimilate into a new cultural landscape while resorting to own ethnic culture.

Dharker showcases how each food on the table reminds her of the familial ties. The "tarka daal" reminds her of Auntie Hameeda, "the karhai ghosht" of Khala Aameena and "the gajjar halva" of Appa Rasheeda. In fact, those foods trigger in her mind the memories of aunts who used to cook same foods for her. Here, food acts as a means of establishing emotional bonding.

Dharker states that she is not only the one who is enjoying the food, but all the members of the group are united by food - by sharing the same bread among themselves. Through savouring dishes at the Lahore Karhai restaurant, they get a chance to remember their past. The last line, stating their preference to Chinese food other days, suggests their assimilation and adaptation to

the taste and culinary habits of the host country. According to Saumi Mary M, “The sentimental thoughts about the taste of home-cooked food are juxtaposed with the immigrants' adaptation with the taste and culinary habits of her new homeland. The acculturation process has transformed the identity of the immigrant so positively that the transition to the new ambience is not difficult for her. There is no sense of conflict with the host society and the poet declares no resistance in the adoption of other, foreign cultures existing in the host country”. (67)

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