

Food as a Symbol of Culture and a Marker of Immigrant Identity in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

The aroma from a kitchen can conjure up the historical and cultural background of its owners, and thus, food is not merely a collection of items for consumption but also a complex system of communication loaded with cultural symbols, as discussed by Ronald Barthes in his work 'Mythologies'. In literature, food studies have emerged as an essential area of study and have served as a mirror reflecting the complex and dynamic human experiences unfolding the layers of cultural identity, race, religion, and gender. This study aims to explore the ways in which food imagery and symbolism intersect with 'Indianness' in the context of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Being an immigrant herself, Jhumpa Lahiri has been adroit enough to articulate the struggles Indian immigrants face in the West.

Keywords: Food Studies, Immigrant, Culture, Identity, Food Symbolism

Introduction

In his essay 'Towards a psychosociology of contemporary food consumption,' Ronald Barthes outlines food as the "first need" that has become highly structured and evolved into a communication system. Food studies emerged in the 1960s, out of the social sciences and cultural studies fields, and has become an essential part of literary studies. Claude Levi-Strauss, one of the pioneers of food studies, established it as an essential field of study comparable to language and linguistics. Further, Claude Levi-Strauss developed the "Le Triangle Culinaire" based on the concept that just like each culture has its spoken language, there is no culture that does not have its food practices. Another theorist, Claude Fishler, in his essay 'Food, Self and Identity,' stated that one human group's food behavior helps it assert its oneness and otherness with another human group. He also establishes the two-dimensional relationship between humans and food, wherein food serves the nutritional and symbolic function and connects the individual to the collective.

In literature, the depiction of food is a vehicle for exploring complex human experiences and emotions, as food can reflect societal structures and inequalities and evoke nostalgia and memory. Additionally, food serves as a medium of interaction among the characters and between the text and its audience. By including food in their narratives, authors can make their works resonate with readers on a deeper level. This paper aims to analyse the ways in which food symbolism underscores the complexities of immigrant identities in the two great

works of Jhumpa Lahiri: *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies*. ‘*Interpreter of Maladies*’ is Lahiri’s first short story collection, while ‘*The Namesake*’ is her first novel.

Food shares a multifaceted relationship with diasporic communities, and through food, authors can express the embodied experiences of immigrants and the diaspora’s broader socio-cultural and political dynamics. When Indian immigrants leave behind their place of origin and enter unfamiliar territories, the acts of cooking and consuming traditional food help them to retain their bond with the home left behind and also help them to create a new space in the adopted foreign land. The smells, tastes, and textures of their ethnic food stir memories and evoke nostalgia, often transporting individuals back to significant places and moments associated with their childhood and cultural celebrations. Thus, food practices help the immigrants sustain a bond between their home and host country as well as the past and present, and food becomes a vehicle for cultural preservation and adaptation.

Nilanjana Sudesh, also known as Jhumpa Lahiri, is a second-generation Indian Immigrant writer whose writings depict the inner and outer worlds of Indian immigrants. Food is both a symbol of culture and a conduit of communication in Lahiri’s works, and through food, Lahiri depicts the nostalgia for home, the search for identity and root, and the complexities of familial bonds among Indian immigrants.

Food is a pervasive symbol in nearly all the stories in ‘*Interpreter of Maladies*.’ In one of the stories called ‘*A Temporary Matter*,’ the marital dynamic between Shobha and Shukumar is depicted through the lens of food imagery. We learn that Shobha has recently experienced a miscarriage. Lahiri contrasts the situation before and after the miscarriage. Previously, Shobha enjoyed cooking, and the kitchen was always stocked with food, symbolizing their marriage’s abundance of love and joy. On their first wedding anniversary, Shobha prepared an elaborate ten-course meal for Shukumar, but he seemed to take it for granted. After the miscarriage, things begin to change, but Shobha withdraws from the kitchen and immerses herself in her professional work. Shukumar fails to notice this change, takes on the responsibility of managing the kitchen, and continues to use up the food from the pantry without restocking it. This symbolizes his neglect of Shobha’s emotional needs and represents the depletion of their needs. At the same time, this role reversal reflects their ways of coping with grief. They begin to avoid each other, and a lack of communication pervades their relationship. However, power outages due to electricity repairs come as an opportunity to bridge the gap between them when they are compelled to dine together, leading to moments of confession over food. This does not do much; finally, Shobha confesses her plans to move out and have a separate house. Moreover, Shukumar confesses that their dead baby was a boy. They both then weep together.

Written against the backdrop of the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971), ‘*When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*’ is another story from the collection ‘*Interpreter of Maladies*’ that is rich with vivid food descriptions. The story’s narrator, Lilia, is the daughter of Indian immigrants. She recalls a regular dinner guest, Mr Pirzada from Dacca, who came to dine with them when she was a child. Despite their differences in nationalities and religion, her family bonds with Mr.

Pirzada over food. Lilia's mother cooks delicious South Asian food when Mr. Pirzada comes over to dine with them, and Mr. Pirzada never fails to bring candy for Lilia. Thus, food becomes a bonding material between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family. Food also serves as a means for them to connect with their respective homelands. For Mr. Pirzada, the taste of mincemeat kebabs and coriander chutney triggers memories of Dhaka and evokes nostalgia and concern for his family left behind during turbulent times. Eating these kebabs allows him to reconnect with his homeland and his loved ones emotionally. Similarly, Lilia's family, although not directly experiencing the same circumstances, shares a South Asian heritage that ties them to similar cultural traditions. Sharing South Asian food allows them to celebrate and honor their roots, fostering a sense of connection and identity.

Food serves as an essential theme in Lahiri's 'Mrs. Sen.' The title character, Mrs. Sen, is a Bengali woman who settled in America. The story is told from the perspective of Eliot, a white child Mrs. Sen is babysitting. Through Eliot's eyes, we see Mrs. Sen's struggle in a new place with a husband preoccupied with his job. Her hardships symbolize the struggles faced by all Indian immigrant women who have settled in a new country after marriage. Through Mrs. Sen's culinary practices, Lahiri sheds light on the profound impact of nostalgia and the universal need for belonging, particularly in the context of migration and adaptation to a foreign land. Through her daily routines, Mrs. Sen honoured and kept her Bengali heritage alive. She cooked using Indian vessels and a blade from India to slice vegetables. Fish, especially, symbolized her connection to Bengal. She found solace and comfort in purchasing fresh fish by the seaside, reminiscing about her days in Calcutta, where she consumed it twice daily. One day, Mrs. Sen drove alone with Eliot in the car to procure fresh fish, resulting in a car accident. Upon returning, she put away her blade and discarded the eggplant pieces. She offered crackers to Eliot before retreating to her room. This marked Eliot's final afternoon with Mrs. Sen. Mrs. Sen's story, highlighting immigrants' complex hardships in their constant attempt to adopt the host culture while preserving their native identity. Hence, the immigrant community constantly finds itself in a 'state of liminality,' an 'in-between' space shaped by historical legacies, current geographies, and social conditions. This 'state of liminality' results in instability and identity crisis, as pointed out by Bhabha. The last chapter, 'The Third and the Final Continent', illustrates the journey of an unnamed narrator from India to UK and finally to the USA highlighting the complex process of assimilation and adaptation. His journey is not merely a physical journey but also the journey of the soul. The narrator is introduced as a bachelor who has just moved to London for a job and lives in a shared house with other bachelors. They all share a single toilet and take turns cooking egg curry which they eat with their hands on a newspaper-covered table. From London he moves to the United States where he arrives in Boston on July 20 which coincides with the historic event of America's landing on the moon. When the narrator relocates to America, the cultural and culinary adjustments become even more noticeable as the narrator attempts to adjust to different currency and traffic regulations and dietary habits. He buys milk and cornflakes as his first 'American meal' which symbolises the small everyday adjustments that the immigrants have to make in order to survive in a new country. When his wife Mala arrives in

Boston to live with him, she prepares a Bengali breakfast but he encourages her to adapt in the new culture by telling her that cereal was fine. So, now Mala prepares an American breakfast and a Bangali dinner. Thirty years later we see that the narrator and his wife become naturalised American citizens living in the suburbs of Boston where their son is attending Howard, a testament of their success and achievements in their new homeland. Despite adopting an American lifestyle they maintain a strong bond with their roots through their food and eating habits. For instance, the narrator finds joy in the Indian practice of eating with hands and even his son who is westernised in his manner embraces this habit of enjoying steamed rice with his hands. The narrator compares his journey of strength and resilience with that of the victory of the astronauts who landed the moon and firmly believes that his son too will overcome any challenge in life.

The Namesake is the story of the two generations of a family of Indian immigrants living in the United States. Ashoke and Ashima are a young couple who met through an arranged marriage in Calcutta. Ashima had lived her whole life in Calcutta but after marriage moves to the USA with Ashoke who is studying engineering there. Their son is named Gogol in honor of Ashoke's favourite author and their daughter is named Sonali/Sonia. When seen from through the lens of food presents a vivid picture of diasporic experience and the struggle of diaspora to adjust in a new culture while preserving the old native culture. Written through the perspective of both first and second generation of immigrants, the novel illustrates the identity crisis of immigrants. Food as a cultural symbol is present throughout the novel and is very evident from the start as we see a pregnant Ashima standing in her kitchen and attempting to recreate her favourite Bengali snack 'jhaalmurhi' which is also an attempt to recreate the childhood memories from her native land. But when she tastes the 'jhaalmurhi' she finds that something was missing. The opening scene efficiently sets the tone for the novel highlighting the central themes such as the identity crisis faced by the immigrants and the perpetual sense of 'something missing'. Throughout the novel, food appears in both ordinary and special occasions. Food images not only propel the story forward but also highlight the inner psyche of the character. Ashima's character represents immigrant mothers as cultural negotiators. Their diasporic experiences not only involve the complexities of identity but also the unique struggles of women. Numerous scenes of community feasting such as Ashima's son 'annaprasan' or rice-feeding ceremony or the final celebratory meal that Ashima prepares for her children mark as occasions where the Indian diasporic community come together to celebrate any landmark occasion of their community member as well as to preserve and continue their cultural heritage. Later, in the novel Ashoke's death comes as a shock and when the mourning period is over, there is a funeral feast wherein they prepare an elaborate meal consisting of Ashoke's favourite food, a way to preserve his memory. Thus, consumption is not only a physical act meant for survival and enjoyment but also it underscores the complex and dynamic journey from cultural assimilation to cultural adaptation.

Conclusion

This research aims to highlight the many ways in which food plays an important role in defining one's sense of ethnic roots and identity. In Indian context food plays an essential role in defining the social, political and spiritual aspects of an individual and community. It is a medium that both separates and binds two different individuals or communities together. This is the reason why Indian immigrants hold an exaggerated connection with their ethnic food in order to feel closer to their native land. For Indian immigrant writers like Jhumpa Lahiri food has emerged as a vehicle for exploring and articulating the inner turmoil of the immigrants. In both the works discussed in this research, Lahiri attempts to highlight how food and the act of consuming food can help the immigrants to come to terms with the binaries of home and abroad and past and present that take over their psyche.

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