



## BEGETTING IDENTITY BY FEEDING MEMORIES

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### ABSTRACT

The kitchen space is often targeted to be a part of female's life, in South Asian context, and is the most debatable topic. The integral part of the household and females are linked automatically, making it their responsibility to nourish others, but the same Kitchen space and responsibilities, becomes a way of connecting oneself with the homeland, if living a life of an immigrant. Therefore, in this research paper, the seamless link between kitchen space, memories and nostalgia will be examined along the axis of food.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, Nostalgia, Food and Culinary, Homeland.

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Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a central square apartment combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onions in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chillies pepper, wishing there was mustard oil to pour into the mix. Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing she craves. Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing. (Lahiri, 1).

An immigrant travels with luggage of several kinds. There are suitcases packed with practical goods and memorabilia [...] and there is the baggage carried only in the mind, which contains flavors, aromas, and images from the kitchens of homeland and family. (Silva, 107)

"Kitchen space", as discussed in the various articles and reviews can be a site of oppression for some females, particularly in South Asian context, or it can be the site to form a queer relation as shown in the story *Lihaf* by Ismat Chughtai or movie *Fire* by Deepa Mehta. But the same kitchen area can become a source to stay connected with the homeland. For a woman living in strange and unknown surroundings, kitchen becomes her comfort, her domain; a territory of her control, as it becomes her way to assert her identity; her national identity. For them, then cooking is just not a daily chore, it is something that provides them with pride.

The epigraph is taken from Jhumpa Lahiri's 2003 novel, *The Namesake*. The plot of the novel involves the conflict that an Indian immigrant and her American born child faces, as the former tries to uphold her Indian identity, while the latter tries to understand the importance of that identity. Ashima Ganguli, the female protagonist of the novel tries to maintain her ties with her homeland, Calcutta, by upholding her cultural values, traditions and her national identity, while at the same time, trying to juxtapose it with the complete assimilation into

"America's multicultural ethos" (Roy and Khushu-Lahiri, 110). The juxtaposition shown in the epigraph itself between the two images- a central Square apartment and Rice Krispies and Peanuts and chopped onion, immediately places the protagonist's inner self in direct contradiction with the external reality. The conflict regarding her identity arises from her nostalgia; longing to get back with her family in Calcutta. In order to overcome those dilemmas of nostalgia, culinary practices are involved by the author, for the characters to maintain ties with their "homeland". As Lekha Roy and Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri have said in their paper *Forging Transnational Identities: A Post-Ethnic Re-imagining of "Home" in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake* that "Home becomes a "presence in absence" for the female characters in Lahiri's novel, challenging the idea of an identity based on the nation as a fixed, geographical entity, and the culinary becomes the site for cultural negotiation" (110). Thus for Ashima, kitchen becomes a place of pride, where she feels unfettered; creating food and nourishing others becomes her purpose in America. Subsequently, the kitchen space becomes the re-creation of her home in a foreign land.

Recognising the relevance of culinary culture as central to one's identity, Lahiri weaves the taste and smell of Indian food into her female character's ego. The visuals of the food and the smell and flavours depicted in the opening lines of the novel are unquestionably Indian, a Bengali sign of life in Calcutta. Lahiri uses food in almost all of her works to show the crisis an immigrant faces when he/she gets through the phase of nostalgia, something that she has seen in her own family. Her relation with the culinary images might be explained as she herself is an Indian Diaspora. It is a way to chart her own experience of travelling with food suitcases from India to America. While growing up as an outsider she knew that food becomes a memory that enables to recollect their detailed pasts, their familiar backdrops and most importantly their roots. "I like cooking and eating all different kinds of food...and I come from a very food oriented family. Like most children of immigrants, I am aware of how important food becomes for foreigners who

are trying to deal with life in a new world. Food is a very deep part of people's lives and it has incredible meaning beyond and obvious nutritional aspects. My parents have given up so many basic things coming here from the life they once knew-family, love, connections-and food is one thing that they've really held onto" (Lahiri, Values). Thus the description of culinary in her novel can be explained by her initial blog "*Indian Takeout*", in which she has called her parents as pirates "running the modern equivalent of the ancient spice trade".

For Lahiri food becomes a metaphor, a means to portray the reconstruction of characteristics by the Indian diaspora when they are encountered in situations that challenge their self-sufficiency of racial and ethnic categorisation. Using culinary culture and values as her metaphors to describe such encounters in a post-ethnic world, provides Lahiri with the understanding of the conscious minds of the immigrants. Anita Mannur in *Culinary Fiction: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* claims that "the culinary, functions as a site for cultural negotiation," and the term she has used to show the negotiation of such spaces is "culinary citizenship" (20).

Lahiri's literary works, especially *The Namesake*, can be categorised under culinary literature, a genre that has been largely neglected and overlooked especially in South Asian Literature. The reason of ignorance for such genres in the past, was due to the likeness for cook books and cooking shows. Nonetheless, the vast descriptions of food images in any novel becomes a great means of expression and exploring women's space, something that Lahiri involves herself with. Moreover, dwelling into such genres and writing specifically about Indian immigrants and exploring the female spaces has enable diasporic female writers to assert their own uniqueness (Rao Mehta, 120). For the diasporic people, traditional food is a critical element for their identity, otherwise if not maintained in the host countries, these traditions lose their uniqueness and are often neglected. Therefore, for characters like Ashima and Ashoke, food and eating habits becomes a way of continuity, as food becomes the trope through which they can pass on their cultural values and traditions onto the next generation, a way to

build the bridge between the homeland and home. Food for the immigrants becomes the important source with which they can tell their children about their homeland. 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 practises” (29). Likewise, the occasion of Gogol’s *annaprasan*<sup>1</sup> is held as a means of social gathering for the Bengali community, to forward the cultural information to Gogol. Ashima’s nostalgia during the rice ceremony can be seen as she hopes for her own brother to be there and also for better silver plates. “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 very first time.... Ashima regrets that the plate on which the rice is heaped is melamine, not silver or brass or at the very least, stainless-steel” (Lahiri, 39). Nostalgia is suffused in every character of the novel, be it important characters or unimportant. The whole Bengali community of Ashima and Ashoke’s friends are filled with nostalgia. Therefore, every weekend of social gathering is conducted in order to be in a friendly and known environment. “The families drop by one another’s homes on Sunday afternoons. They drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans. They sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore, passing a thick yellow cloth bound book of lyrics among them as Dilip Nandi plays the harmonium. They argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak versus those of Satyajit Ray” (Lahiri, 38). These social gatherings were a way to overcome the nostalgia by being with the people who don’t consider them as foreign. All the female characters used to turn up to Ashima, to ask about the food recipes: “The wives,

homesick, bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that is sold in Chinatown, that its possible to make halwa from Cream of Wheat” (Lahiri, 38).

Moreover, when the Gangulis move to a new house, they were able to sense the difference in their culture and food habits and the American ways. “Instead of cereal and tea bags, there were whiskey and wine bottles on top of the refrigerator, most of them nearly empty” (Lahiri, 32). Surrounded by a culture that has nothing in common with them makes them see themselves as aliens or foreign. Thus “home” becomes a nostalgic expression of the lost moment for the Gangulis. A cultural disparity that is made visible through their surroundings. “I thought Indians were supposed to be vegetarians”, she whispers to Alan” (Lahiri, 39). The moment they are considered as other” they turn to their home, to make it more like their past. “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). Lahiri’s characters have been characterised by an unhappy existence, in a lifelong condition of “impossible mourning” (Mishra, 9), even in her short story “Mrs. Sen’s”, where the female protagonist suffers from painful memories of the homeland. “Jhumpa Lahiri is at the forefront of Asian diasporic writer who have explored the issues of race, ethnicity, nation, home, culture and identity affecting the Indian diaspora in America” (Roy and Khushu-Lahiri, 111), through food. The unhappiness of her female characters can be seen as a direct result of post-colonial binaries, of the division between “us” and “them”, the “native” and the “alien”. Moreover, these binaries are not just limited to the first generation Gangulis, it is also visible in the second generations life. “Binaries such as “Asian-American”, by the very nature of being hyphenated, tend to centralise “American” and relegate “Asian” to the periphery, the politics of language ensuring that the “Asian” in the term would be judged by norms defined by Americans and hence would always remain at the margins of

<sup>1</sup> A Bengali ritual to mark the numerous meals that will come along the way till one is alive. It is also called as Rice ceremony which happens when the child is learning to recognize food meals.

mainstream culture, something that is prevalent in her stories.”

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