

Food Metaphor: Reading Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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The depiction of food and foodways abounds in Indian American writer Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize winning debut *Interpreter of Maladies*, creating an enticing element to arrest readers' attention. In this collection of short stories, Lahiri uses food as a means to navigate alienation and affection, as a conduit to recapture and relive old memories, and as a vehicle to articulate cultural construction of a new identity. Her manoeuvre of culinary writing is so adept that each item of food constitutes a situation to signal deep-hidden meaning beneath its surface information. Thus food becomes signs or metaphors of overseas Indian diasporic experience.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, food metaphor, diasporic experience

Introduction

In the book entitled *Eating Identity: Reading Food in Asian American Literature*, Wenying Xue states that food, as the most significant medium of the traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies, organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self in distinction from others who practice different foodways (2008, p. 2). In addition to the nutrition it provides to maintain people's daily subsistence, food is vital to people's mental well-being—the construction of the sense of belonging in particular. Just as sociologist Claude Fischler observes, food not only nourishes but also signifies (1988, p. 276). Foodways, from preparing, cooking, to eating, is central to people's subjectivity for the reason that this process involves people's imagination of who we are. British critic Terry Eagleton summarizes the signifying properties of food in this way: "If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food—it is endlessly interpretable—materialized emotion" (1998, p. 204). And the materialized emotions can be best evident in the familiar proverb: We are what we eat. In other words, food can be used to identify who we are, what values we uphold and how we are different from others. Food is a metaphor of our identity.

For overseas Indians, the notion of "Indianness" is closely associated with Indian food they consume in adopted countries. As a famous Indian diasporic writer, Jhumpa Lahiri recognizes the significance of food as she uses it as a main consistent element throughout her collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*. "Lahiri recognizes the potential that food can serve within the literary realm and makes the taste buds of those in her audience tingle and mouths savor while addressing the various important roles of food in any culture" (Garcia,

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2015). She uses food in more than one way to address its thematic significance. She uses food as a means to navigate tension and affection, as a conduit to recapture and relive old memories, as a vehicle to articulate cultural construction of a new identity. This is most evident in the short stories *A Temporary Matter*, *Mrs. Sen's* and *The Third and Final Continent*. Her manoeuvre of culinary writing is so adept that each item of food constitutes a situation to signal deep-hidden meaning beneath its surface information. Thus food becomes signs or metaphors of overseas Indian diasporic experience.

Affection and Alienation Between a Couple in *A Temporary Matter*

Lahiri does not just operate a casual mention of Indian food and dishes but writes about the relationships between her characters and their foodways. The first story *A Temporary Matter* touches upon rifted relationship between an Indian American couple and food serves as a metaphor in it. Shoba and Shukumar have become gradually estranged in marital alienation after a miscarriage. They no longer cook together or eat food together. The couple's sharing meals together is essential to their marital bliss, while eating separately is, of course, deteriorating their once happy marriage. But before the death of their baby, the situation was much different. Shoba was responsible for taking care of her household, extremely passionate in cooking good food and keeping her kitchen well-stocked with food stuff. Lahiri's presentation of those happy days of the couple can be evidenced by a detailed description of food items purchased by Shoba:

The pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian. There were endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats from the muslim butchers at Haymarket, chopped up and frozen in endless plastic bags. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 6).

Shoba used to be a meticulous cook and fascinated with food stuff, all of which hints her affection to her husband. Shukumar also reminisces that "for their first anniversary Shoba had cooked a ten-course dinner just for him" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 18). But Shukumar simply takes Shoba's preparedness and sacrifice for granted. After the misfortune of their still-born child, things begin to change and so does the kitchen. But Shukumar fails to notice it and simply goes on consuming the food left in the kitchen pantry without replenishing it. Here, Shukumar's consumption of food in the pantry is thematically significant, indicating Shukumar's depletion of Shoba's love. Shoba, overwhelmed by the blow of miscarriage, finds no comfort and love from her husband in times of difficulty. Therefore, the sense of alienation and failure of communication creep in their lives in the form of their foodways:

For months now they'd served themselves from the stove, and he'd taken his plate into his study, letting the meal grow cold on his desk before shoving it into his mouth without pause, while Shoba took her plate to the living room and watched game shows, or proofread files with her arsenal of colored pencils at hand. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 8).

A freak loss of electricity comes as a chance for the couple to repair their deteriorating marriage. For five consecutive days their power supply will be cut off for an hour in the evening, forcing the couple to eat together by candlelight. "Tonight, with no lights, they would have to eat together" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 8). But this time the responsibility for the preparation for the meals goes to the husband, Shukumar who dutifully fulfills his role. "The first night with no power, Shukumar puts out placemats, makes an expansive dinner, breaks out a bottle of wine, and lights candles. Shoba shows surprise at this when she sees it, compliments his work, and thanks him"

(Tori & Godfree, 2010). Apparently, the only means to bring the two of them closer together than they have been for months is nothing but food. Shukumar really cherishes such a chance to bridge their rifted relationship. Anita Mannur observes that each meal is prepared with love and care, each meal rendered more complex than the previous one (2010, p. 158). As the week goes on, both the couple looks forward to these meals. Shoba comes home earlier than usual; Shukumar plans the meals carefully and prepares various dishes elaborately for them to enjoy. Their relationship seems to be getting better. They even begin to confess secrets to each other while taking dinner together. Here Lahiri demonstrates how eating together can help temporarily improve marital relationship. The only chance of communication between the couple, when all else around them has failed, is created by food.

But all seems too late. When the light comes back on, the couple drifts away ties. The morning of the fifth night comes the ominous news that the electricity has been resumed ahead of schedule. Shukumar's despair is again found in food: "He was disappointed. He had planned on making shrimp malai for Shoba but when he arrived at the store he didn't feel like cooking anymore" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 20). The power is only temporarily off, and it comes back soon. Once life returns to its normal track, food loses its ability to keep the couple together.

Shukumar's "exhaustion of Shoba's well-stocked pantry, without replenishing it, therefore becomes a signifier of the way he has exhausted and emptied his wife, the way he has assumed their marital problems were temporary without investing any care in restoring or replenishing their relationship" (William, 2007, p. 72). By taking his wife's affection for granted but not devoting enough love and care to his wife in times of her emotional crisis after the miscarriage, Shukumar fails to replenish affection in their marriage until it is too late. Shukumar focuses merely on emptying the food of their pantry which is a metaphor of comfort and marital bliss for his wife. Unable to find such kind of comfort and bliss at home, Shoba eventually ends up with leaving her husband to another home elsewhere.

Nostalgia and Homesickness of a Housewife in *Mrs. Sen's*

Mrs. Sen's deals with the life experience of immigrant woman who works within the home, bearing the burden of nostalgia and homesickness in the new land. In an interview with Vibuthi Patel of Newsweek International, Lahiri states that *Mrs. Sen's* was her attempt to imagine what life might have been like for someone like her mother, a young South Asian immigrant cast into the lonely vastness of a largely white America of the 1960s: "one character is based on my mother who babysat in our home" (1999, p. 60). In this story, Lahiri successfully presents a narrative of the hardships of the new immigrant woman whose husband is a preoccupied professor in an American University, leaving her to suffer isolation and boredom alone at home.

Food again occupies a central role in this short story. The title character Mrs. Sen creates dishes from her native land to compensate for her irremediable sense of nostalgia and homesickness by using a blade "that curved like the prow of a Viking ship" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 177). Josephine Smart points out in *Culinary Nostalgia* that immigrants will often fulfill such feelings as nostalgia, homesickness by means of creating, eating, and participating in the preparation for food familiar to their native lands.

Immigrants are connected to the past, live in the present, and imagine a future through culinary nostalgia and the historical significance of food as a symbol of place, and as an object through which people understand and make sense of the world around them. (Smart, 2010, p. 157)

The blade mentioned above is of significance in Mrs. Sen's culture in Calcutta. She tells Eliot of its significance in Bengali during important ceremonies: "all the neighborhood women.....bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle of the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 115). However, in America, Mrs. Sen chops vegetables solitarily and misses her families and friends in Calcutta desperately. Here Lahiri demonstrates the strong sense Mrs. Sen attached to the past life in her home land. Actually, Mrs. Sen uses her blade to keep a part of her culture alive with her in America. It is a "recollection of another time and place through the use of food" (Smart, 2010, p. 157). Lahiri uses tool and food as a conduit to recapture and relive those unforgettable memories in the past. Consequently, however labor-intensive it is, Mrs. Sen revels in cooking dinner for her husband and Eliot who she baby-sits:

She took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds. She could peel a potato in seconds. At times she sat cross-legged, at times with legs splayed, surrounded by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water in which she immersed her chopped ingredients. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 114)

For Mr. Sen, the United States where he is offered a better job opportunity that he may not have received in his homeland looks like a promised land. But for Mrs. Sen, being obligated to follow her husband to this country, it is a different story. "Mr. Sen cannot seem to conceive of the existential importance of fresh fish, or the ways cooking helps his wife shape her identity in the United States" (Williams, 2007, p. 74). For Mrs. Sen, cooking has become the only way of reconnecting with her past and maintaining a sense of self, "so she must resort to cooking as her only form of comfort" (Caspari, 2014, p. 249). This is exactly what Mrs. Sen is attempting to do through her excessive indulgence in preparing food.

Because she cannot assimilate to her adopted country, she must create her own sense of community or home with the resources she can acquire. This can be best exemplified by her desperate craving for fish which serves as essential staple in her Bengali diet. The arrival of fresh fish at local store is considered as a piece of news from home and she is always too anxious to acquire it and cook it. Her incorrigible longing for fresh halibut prompts her to drive illegally one day and ends up with getting into a car accident with Eliot in the car. Here, the missing ingredient—fresh fish, is highly symbolic. As Dr. Asha Choubey argues, for Mrs. Sen fish becomes her home, her state, her neighborhood, her friend and her family. Fish gives her a sense of proximity to her people.

"Food preparation and consumption play dominant if not constitutive roles in an attempt to create a sense of community and belonging closely linked to the home culture" (Caspari, 2014, p. 246). The only panacea for Mrs. Sen sense of home can be food and "related aspects of eating etiquettes, culinary practices, menu, choice of condiments and even the quantity of food intake, as a fundamental signifier of one's identity" (Deb, 2014, p. 121). Lahiri vividly depicts Mrs. Sen's living experience in an alien land revolves around and depends upon food and food items. When she gets them, she is satisfied; but when they are unavailable for a long time, she sulks like a child. In this sense, food reflects a metaphoric value for Indian immigrant's diasporic experience.

Assimilation and Integration of a Graduate in *The Third and Final Continent*

Unlike Mrs. Sen who fails to adapt to American style of life, in the last story of this collection, *The Third and Final Continent*, Lahiri creates a protagonist that appears rather adaptable and flexible to American culture. This

marks a subtle shift of Lahiri's attitude towards diasporic experience, turning to be more positive than she is in the two stories mentioned above. Lahiri introduces a character, unnamed to the audience, who has just settled down with job in USA from graduation in UK to illustrate the social changes and the gradual initiation of a Bengali gentleman. Invariably, food plays a central role in witnessing the transformation process of the unnamed protagonist. Here the protagonist's being unnamed is of symbolic significance. Lahiri uses an anonymous character as symbol, to represent all those younger generation of Indian Americans who starts to assimilate and integrate into American society.

Lahiri manoeuvres food as a navigation for readers to relate to this newly-arrived immigrant, by playing on what Mary Waters and Tomas Jimenez refer to as "benchmarks of assimilation" in their sociological study, *Assessing Immigrant Assimilation: New Empirical and Theoretical Challenges*. Lahiri's mention of food begins in the third page of this story by stating that he now "drifts away from his familiar place and acquaintances and that he instantly realizes the fact by being told normal comforts like an English cup of tea is not available here" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 267). Shortly after settling down in his room, the protagonist hurries out to the closest store to buy his "first American meal". He takes milk and cornflakes instead of "hamburgers and hotdogs" which he does not favor; the protagonist's purchase of what he assumes to be "American meal" apparently reveals his readiness to embrace the first benchmark of assimilation into the new place he has just landed. He eagerly purchases milk and cornflakes in the hope of quickly getting integrated into this new culture. After adapting to different ways of life in three continents, he becomes more mature and flexible to retain his new cultural identity.

For any immigrant, "the endgame is to get well on their way to becoming fully integrated into American Society" (Waters & Jimenez, 2005, p. 106) and food is symbolic of this assimilation process which immigrants can easily get themselves involved into the new land. Lahiri uses the purchase of milk and cornflakes to demonstrate the integration and assimilation of new immigrants into the daily experience of American life. Jimenez and Waters advocate that "the emerging literature on immigration will have to take a new theoretical focus" (Waters & Jimenez, 2005, p. 107) and Jhumpa Lahiri's writing exactly corresponds to this advocacy. She writes in such a way that pays a great attention to real life experiences and true feelings of Indian immigrants as reflected in her characters' choice of food.

Conclusion

Food is an element found at the heart of any civilization to date. Lahiri pays tribute to this sacred role of food by placing it at the heart of each of her stories, *A Temporary Matter*, *Mrs. Sen's* and *The Third and Final Continent* in particular. Lahiri works food into these stories in such a way that is not annoying or burdensome, successfully arresting readers' attention to her stories.

Actually, throughout the entirety of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri uses the food customs and dining traditions to illustrate "food is the means for characters to assert agency and subjectivity in ways that functions as an alternative to the dominant culture" (Williams, 2007, p. 70). We see "in these stories [that] culinary practices both reenact the homeland and articulate difference" (Gardaphe & Xu, 2007, p. 9). For Shukumar and Shoba, food is reminder of their golden days in marriage, and Shukumar's depletion of Shoba's food supply shows the alienation of their marital relationship. For Mrs. Sen, food becomes a symbol of her home culture where she finds her comfort. For the unnamed character, food speaks for his adaptability and flexibility to

the new culture. Ultimately, in this way, food carries metaphoric significance of overseas Indian diasporic experience.

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