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Culinary Cartographies: Inheritance of Belonging of Memory and Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's '*The Namesake*'

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Abstract

This Paper explores the ways food serves as a crucial site of cultural memory and signifier of diasporic identity. Utilizing Lahiri's complex depiction of immigrant experience, the analysis begins by tracing food as a cultural archive through which cooking practices and ritual play a vital role in sustaining ties to the ancestral home and transmitting the past to future generations. The fictional kitchen, the dinner table, and the feast become symbolic places where culture is deposited, recollected and repeated. The second concern is with identity and belonging, and looks at how culinary practice mediates the characters' balancing act between Bengali tradition and American assimilation. Food becomes a contested arena of cultural negotiation, sometimes a point of alienation, but also a place where belonging can be rediscovered through hybridity and adaption. The article, finally, considers the symbolic association of food, nostalgia, and memory. Tasting home in *The Namesake*, Culinary markers in *The Namesake* bring back taste of home, stir memories of familial intimacy and cook up emotional frugality in the middle of dislocation. Embedded within these descriptions is a view of food that seems to exceed its role as nourishment to become a medium for communicating the affective links between past and present, while orienting the diasporic underpinning of being. Placing Lahiri's tale in the context of wider deliberations centering food, memory and migration, this paper suggests that culinary acts in *The Namesake* function as cartographies of belonging locales which delineate the symbiotic relationship between exile, legacy and cultural selfhood.

Keywords: Diaspora, Cultural Memory, Identity, Food and Belonging, Jhumpa Lahiri

Introduction

For centuries, food has been much more than just sustenance; it is a tool that allows cultures to remember, protect and showcase their values and identities. In the situation of diaspora where the dispersal and mass relocation of people preclude any consideration of a home, food frequently becomes an intimate cache of memory and cultural heritage. Making and serving traditional foods gives the diaspora sexual chocolate, a taste of home with lip-smacking flavours that inspire memories even if born elsewhere. In literary studies, this point of convergence where food, memory and identity intersect has become an important critical paradigm to read the south Asian diasporic narrative, in which culinary habits frequently are a site of cultural stubbornness, nostalgia and synthesis. Cooking and eating traditional cuisine allow people in diaspora a taste of home, its delicious flavours stirring recollections even for non-natives and those several generations removed or who have made only the briefest visit. When discussing these intersections, an analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* ^[1] proves relevant. It traces the immigrant journey of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, a Bengali husband and wife trying to forge a life in America after he's snatched a life itself. The text argues for a tension between handed down cultural practices and the form of life in an alien land. Food specifically often has a more-subtle but no less important hand in displaying these tensions. In Asima's stubborn homemaking, the story demonstrates how culinary practice functions as a record of memory, reviving memories from some fragments of the home in a displaced land. For Gogol, though, food is an ambiguous inheritance, both a signpost of cultural belonging and a font of alienation as he tries to blend in. The paper explores food as a part social vehicle that archives cultures, makes marks on the characters' persona and serves to be a conduit of history.

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It contends that the novel's culinary practices chart diasporic belonging, presenting a sensory cartography with which to negotiate memory, cultural legacy and the reconstruction of identity in exile. The phrase 'culinary cartographies' draws attention to these spatial and affective dimensions of food in diaspora, how it maps the passage between homeland and host land, etching belonging across shattered geographies. The theoretical backdrop for the study is formed by Paul Connerton's ^[2] concept of "incorporating practices", focusing on the body as a mnemonic device in rituals such as cooking and eating. This study also draws on Hirsch's ^[3] notion of postmemory, helpful to understand the way in which second generation inherit cultural memory not through direct experience but through affective and sensorial practices. Also, Arjun Appadurai's ^[4] gastro-politics highlights the important cultural and political roles of food in diasporic negotiations. Combined, these views enrich the understanding of how Lahiri's story sites food as an embodied memory repository, a form of cultural membership badge and as a place of emotional resilience. By positioning *The Namesake* within discussions of food and diaspora in South Asian literature, this study draws attention to the centrality of culinary practices in shaping diasporic subjectivities. Food in the novel is never just a domestic detail; it serves as a symbolic framework encoding displaced emotional landscapes of yearning and belonging. The study finally holds that Lahiri locates the culinary act as a cartographic means of memory and identity by means of which her characters carry the strain of exile during the preservation of an ancestral presence through time and space.

Culinary Memory as Archive: Preserving Ancestral Ties through Food

In *The Namesake*, food becomes a potent memory site and means of cultural preservation positioning itself as a diasporic archive that protects its connection to the motherland. For Ashima, cooking Bengali food abroad is not just about eating sustenance, the female exemplar is an embodied tribute through which traces of Calcutta are washed into her domestic space in America. In that way, then work to find ingredients, cook the food, and teach its cuisine to others becomes resistance against cultural extinction and the yearning to remake "home" in exile. In fact, these very processes come to symbolize food as memory, where in every recipe and meal holds stories of belonging, family, and forebearers. Unlike textual or institutional archives, culinary memory functions through the sensorial realm such as taste, smell and touch, Connerton ^[5] describes as incorporating practices, or memories inscribed in the body through repeated ritual. Each meal in Lahiri's narrative is a performance of continuity, a way of keeping alive the cultural past in the present. For the immigrant generation, food bridges the rupture of displacement by offering a sensory map of home. For the second generation, however, food assumes the status of postmemory ^[6], an inheritance of cultural knowledge transmitted not through American -born, access their Bengali identity through such culinary rituals, where eating becomes an act of remembering, even when the memory itself is mediated through parental nostalgia. Also, food calls the gastro-politics of a diaspora according to Arjun Appadurai, in which the kitchen itself serves as a symbolic battleground of cultural confrontation. The insistence on

cooking traditional food both preserves culture and constitutes a quiet assertion of cultural identity in the host country. Lahiri lays bare this tension when Ashima grieves the absence of extended kinship networks in celebrations as if food tries to somewhat fill in for fractured community ties created by migration. These meals become rituals of remembering and surviving, somewhat constructing a sense of belonging out of the lonely landscape of exile. In a similar vein, in *The Namesake*, food symbolizes an identity in motion. Food maps cartographies of memory and belonging, maintains ties across generational positions and geographical boundaries, labels culinary endeavours and life experiences as the personification of diasporic identity. Food, as imagery, is Lahiri's tool to demonstrate how culture, heritage, and the heartaches of home find residencies in kitchen spaces and dining tables.

Assimilation and Alteration: Hybrid Food practices in Diaspora

In the diasporic narrative, food is not a static emblem of culture, instead, it is a living tradition related to negotiation, alteration, and fusion. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, cooking methods become a medium for this transition as they either alter or deviate American counterparts on traditional Bengali cuisine, showing the gritty life of migration alongside cultural efforts in assimilation.

The single powerful striking incident occurs at about the very start when Ashima is nearly due to deliver and has just arrived in Cambridge, trying to prepare muri-mix, a famous Bengali street snack. She does not at all the ingredients as she would in Calcutta, so for muri, she substitutes Rice Krispies, and for spiced nuts from home, planters' peanuts. It really serves as a comfort snack in some changed form; it anchors her memory while adjusting itself within her present American environment. The moment conjures the notion of "third space" coined by Homi K. Bhabha, an in-between cultural milieu from which hybrid practices emerge. Food thus works as a mechanism for survival and yet at the same time stands as a metaphor of identity, which serves neither purely as a symbol of Bengali migrant culture nor purely as a symbol of American culture but rather exists somewhere in between as a hybrid that carries the best attributes of both worlds.

Hybridization also surfaces in the Ganguli family's participation in America rituals such as Thanksgiving. Lahiri notes their careful preparation of a turkey, which Ashima stuffs with spices and flavours drawn from her Bengali repertoire. The bird itself came to symbolize assimilation into American cultural life, while its seasoning insisted on the continuance of cultural heritage. The culinary modification transformed one of the national symbols of different styles into a dish bearing the imprint of Ganguli's Bengal identity, conferring upon it what Avtar Brah terms "diaspora space", which consists of the continuous reconstitution of identities through cultural encounters. For the second generation, hybrid food practices are especially fraught. Gogol, being raised on Bengali meals at home and American food culture outside, ranges to pizza, hamburgers, and other staples of his peer group. In moments of personal loss or crisis, particularly after the death of Ashoke, Gogol opts for appreciating the dishes of his mother once again. These shifts between going- assimilation and return constitute Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory in which cultural bonds are passed down not through actual

experiences but rather through affective and sensory transmission. For Gogo, Bengali food is at once and inheritance and an estrangement, an emblem of his parents' world that he cannot wholly reject, nor fully claim as his own. Food hybridity, in a sense, counters the idea of "authentic" cultural preservation. In his gastro-political discussions, Appadurai says, "Food meanings are always socially and politically mediated". It goes without saying that in a diaspora setting, a so-called "traditional" dish can never be properly prepared but has to be altered with modifications in ingredients, context, and meaning. Such alterations should not signal loss but continuity through change, an alteration of cultural identity that is a memory and adaptation.

Hence, in *The Namesake*, hybrid food practices mean much difference from mere culinary improvisation as they utter affirmation in the interplay of assimilation, culture, and identity. Alterations to recipes stand as metaphors for the diasporic life informed by give and take, creativity, and sheer will-power, and hence, emphasizing how cuisine can bind together fast-fading memories of the familiar past and alien present of the diaspora.

The Taste of Nostalgia: Food as a portal to Homeland

Nostalgia in diasporic stories is commonly tied with the sensations that remind a displacing moment of the sounds and smells of the homeland. In *The Namesake*, food is a kind of nostalgic medium for remembering Calcutta and for re-establishing a new notion of home in exile. Thus, culinary rituals become the metaphysical land of plenty-six states away evoking emotional associations that rise above sheer geographic and temporal dislocation. To Ashima, food is intimately linked to homesickness, the creation of Rice Krispies in Cambridge is her nostalgic desperation to capture the taste of *muri-mix*. There being foreign ingredients, she tastes this hybrid cuisine that momentarily opens up the sensory universe of Calcutta. This links to Svetlana Boym's distinction of restorative versus reflective nostalgia, the former seeks to forge a future home through a mechanistic attempt at historicism that is, an artificial reconstruction of history and the latter consist in remaining in the condition of yearning without full retrieval of the past. The Rice Krispies episode converges on reflective nostalgia as a bittersweet, aching reminder of what is absent but which also offers comfort in exile.

The celebratory foods of the novel further highlight nostalgic factors about food. In the company of other Bengalis, the more formalistic array of fish curry, rice, and sweets of heavy flavours bind in a communal rhythm the life in Calcutta. Such meals are less about nutritional sustenance and more about affective continuity, a method of reinforcing the ties with the motherland through collective remembering. Food, therefore, assumes the function of yet can be termed by Pierre Nora as a *lieu de memoire*, a site of memory, in which cultural identity is stored in sensory and ritual mode.

For the second wave of people, nostalgia works somewhat differently. Gogol and Sonia have to be born in America, thus, they cannot nostalgically recount Calcutta with direct memory. Their bond with homeland food is an afterthought from the longings of parents. This constitutes the postmemory of Marianne Hirsch, the array of transmitted, inherited memories that construct identity through embodied affects. When Gogol eats food prepared by his mother, he

does not enter into his own past, rather he enters into the world of nostalgia belonging to his parents. Food then becomes a bridge between generations, a sensory inheritance of homeland for children who have never been there.

The intensity of nostalgia heightens in moments of rupture and loss. After the death of Ashoke, Gogol tends to his mother with renewed focus. The taste of her cooking transports him to realms of cultural memory and intimacy, reminding him of how flimsy are familial ties and a sense of belonging. In cases like this, food bridges the gap in time and space, acting as a gateway through which the characters return to their concept of homeland and connection. Ultimately, the sociological pull in *The Namesake* is one of bittersweet taste, it comforts but also illuminates absence, it preserves identity while accentuating dislocation. Food being the portal by which Lahiri maps the diasporic subject as an ongoing negotiation between loss and remembrance. Nostalgic tastes become the spatial memory, emotional cartographies that yet ground one's self amid the shifting landscape of diaspora.

Conclusion

Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* goes into the realm of acting as much more than just domestic matter, it also acts as a plot medium, an archive of emotions, and a symbolic map for diasporic experience. By means of culinary concerns, the novel underscored the complex negotiation of memory, belonging, and identity that define the immigrant condition. Each act of cooking and tasting is intertangled, a little preservation, a little adaptation and a little longing that tells and illuminates the very lived realities of displacement. The line of inquiry into culinary memory as archive explains how food functions as a living repository of cultural heritage. Preparation of Bengali-fare, in the terms of Ashima and Ashoke, serves to reproduce ties to the ancestors and to regenerate bits of homeland in the isolate patches of America. In contrast to institutionalized archives, these culinary memories do not end with memory, instead, they keep alive in taste, smell, and touch, and are transferred from one generation to another that lie in the next generation with strong emotional appeal. But food in diaspora is not static. This assimilation and alteration suggest noises made by hybrid practices in response to material and cultural barriers. The adaptation of Bengali snacks like Ashima did with American substitutes, and a Thanksgiving turkey seasoned with Bengali spices by the Ganguli's, exemplify very creative transformations of culinary tradition. These hybrid meals are a metaphorical marker of the so called third space as formulated by Bhabha, the space where cultural identities are negotiated rather than preserved in hydroscopic pure form. Nostalgic tastes, meanwhile, speak to food's function as a conduit to the homeland. To first-generation immigrants, food evokes the intimacy of Calcutta and reconstitutes a collective if pathless belonging in exile. For members, food is post-memorializing, it is the means by which children, Gogol and Sonia, create postmemory for the culture they never knew firsthand. Those nostalgic tastes become the bridges time and space create through which the diasporic subject links to the old world and kinship. Independently considered, the three dimensions of food analysis archive, hybridity, and nostalgia, these represent the culinary mapping of the diaspora. As regards, they depict and formulate the

emotional and cultural displacement, in terms of the interstitial positions that diasporic subjects spontaneously carry in memory during the assimilative longing processes. Lahiri's novel speaks to the idea that food is not simply sustenance, it is a language by which diasporic communities say "we belong", preserve their identities, and negotiate the conflicts and offsets of their exile. *The Namesake* has, in turn, been regarded as a Diaspora for the food wash, that culinary practices arise as a necessity for the cultural survival of any diaspora, preservation through the memory of the ancestors, a hybrid space for adaptation, and access to the motherland through sensory nostalgia. To put it simply, in Lahiri's eyes-president, the diaspora narrative is not cut into names and languages but also into tastes and recipes, private archives, that preserve identity from one generation to the next and from one geography to another.

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