

Food as a symbol and site of Cultural Memory in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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ABSTRACT

Food is something more than mere sustenance in life as well as in literature. Food is a socially and culturally loaded term that holds a central part in our cultural imagination. For South Asians, food regularly plays a role in how issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and national identity are imagined as well as how notions of belonging are affirmed or resisted. Food in literature thus becomes a material substance as well as symbolic entity. In the Literature of the Diaspora especially, food becomes a way of creating and consolidating cultural identity.

This paper represents how the diasporic writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have chosen food as a powerful multivalent symbol in communicating the psychological and cultural meanings in connection to postcolonial identity. The immigrants at different part of the world form their own ethnic groups in their new land and they nominate food symbols for nostalgic enactments of culture and identity, there by seeking the ethnic identity. Those food symbols are represented in the selected novels in the form of food performances, resistance, sensory factors and food memories expressed by the immigrant characters in the host land to have a communal bonding and preserving their native culture. The writers have made their characters nostalgic in their attempt in using food symbols as a representation of their identity.

Keywords: Food, Indian Diaspora, Identity, Nostalgia, Memory

INTRODUCTION

Food is an omnipotent symbol in Diasporic Literature but it never becomes a monolithic one. Food becomes a medium where various expressions and experiences of the characters highlight different concerns of the author. Food plays a very significant role in diasporic studies. It acts as a symbol of love and care as it helps in developing new relationships in the society.

Food is one of the major elements in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction which plays a pivotal role that encompasses from the homeland to host land, acting as a link between the first and the second-generation immigrants, society and individual, and men and women. She describes the various issues

of the food metaphor and highlights the Bengali and American cuisines, eating manners, ever-changing tastes, and culinary practices.

In *Interpreter of Maladies* Lahiri explores food as a medium to depict the intricacies in familial bonds and cultural transition from Indian to American ways of life. In *Unaccustomed Earth* she defines that sharing of food establishes the ties among scattered subjects in diasporic spaces. In her debut novel, *The Namesake*, food has been explored as a means of nostalgia, negotiations, and assimilations with host culture that creates a new hybrid culture. Food is intrinsically linked with one's psychology. In the story "BoriMaa" (who was immigrant from Bangladesh) the taste and smells associated with home become more and more important. Food becomes one of the last remnants of the richness of her culture and heritage. Food thus becomes tied to history and the site of cooking becomes a last ditch effort for the preservation of culture. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni employs the food substance 'spice' as a potential symbol to navigate the identity of the immigrants in the land of America. The central character of this novel Tilottama shortly called as Tilo, narrates the story of her life journey with shifting geographical locations, from an unnamed Indian village to a mysterious island in India to Oakland, a city in the state of California, US. Tilo is sent to Oakland from the mysterious Island of spices through Shampati fire by her Old Mother to own a spice shop and cure the problems of her own people who are immigrated from India but strictly not any outsiders. Tilo is concealed in the body of an old woman who is ordered not to be in physical touch with her customers but only to see them from distance and prescribe them suitable spice.

In the first place, the author gives the symbolic rendition to the spices by naming the chapters with the name of the spices, Turmeric, Cinnamon, Fenugreek, Asafoetida, Fennel, Ginger, Peppercorn, KaloJire, Neem, Red Chilli, Makaradwaj, Lotus Root, and Sesame. She provides a characteristic trait to each spice that turns out to be the solution for the immigrants' problems. Spices stand as a grand symbol of native culture and tradition which the immigrants must rely on in order to gain balance with their encounter of an alien culture in the foreign land. The author portrays the spices as a divine remedy and in fact, the spices are given superior power than that of Tilo's powers, to which Tilo must be submissive. A lot of hard and fast rules are imposed on Tilo, which she must not dare to trespass. At the same time, the spices also appear as a warning to the immigrants that they should not infringe on the values of indigenous culture.

Chita Banerjee Divakaruni makes use of magical realism throughout the novel to examine the difficulties raised in the lives of the immigrants and to deal with it through spices, the symbol of native culture. Divakaruni combines the medicinal knowledge of Ayurveda along with the mystical healing methods to achieve the same. In addition to that the novel is framed with the appeal of Indian food enclave, i.e. the spice store with the images of sacks of rice and dal, metal bins with atta, glass bottles with mithai, burfis, rasogollas and laddus and many other Indian provisions in the store which is accessible for the customers and an inner secret room for purest spices that she gathered from the island for special needs. This image of food enclave is itself overloaded with the sense of Indian identity. Tilo, the protagonist, having blessed with the power to see through the problems happening in the lives of Indian immigrants, she resolves to cure them with the power of her spices. When she stands in front of the shelves of spices, matching the problems, the spices come to her hands based on

their qualities to cure. This way she cures the problems of many Indian immigrants from personal to professional.

Thus, through the character Tilo, Divakaruni records the cross-cultural visual symbolic relationship between the postcolonial bodies and the system of food images. Throughout, the spices are portrayed to have the special power and characteristics to fix the immigrant crisis. Divakaruni, brings forth Ayurveda, the ancient traditional Hindu system of medicine and cooking which is practiced in India for health care, as a representation of indigenous culture. “Shalparni-herb of memory and persuasion” (26) which Tilo prescribed for herself to call the serpents, “Chandan-that relieves the pain of remembering” (27) is prescribed to Haroun to forget his awful past. Haroun, the native of Kashmir, had faced a lot of turbulence during Indian independence and he migrated to America with a lot of dream and hope “to find a new home” in America. Tilo gives him hope through her spices and promises him for a bright future. “Great things will happen to you in this new land, this America. Riches and happiness and may be even love” (28). “Kalo-jire-protector against evil eye(32)” to be kept in Haroun's car for his protection, “Lanka- the red chilli, the most potent of spices works as the cleanser of evil”(39) for him.

At another occasion, the combination of “Cinnamon, Cardomom and Clove” (41) is prescribed to the Indian boy Jagjit to bring solutions for all his problems. The fresh fragrance from those spices will change the perspective of people around Jagjit and will do wonders for him. Fenugreek prescribed to the bougainvillea girls to make them “ ready for loving” (49), ginger root and ada given to Tilo by her old mother to give her “steadfastness and to keep her strong in her vows” (60), “garam masala to bring patience and hope” (64) in immigrants family, dhania to remove old guilts (72), amchur to “bring back love of life” (72), asafetida as an “antidote to love” (76),tulasi to curb the ego (80), hartuki for mothers to bear the pain caused by their children (80),Daksha (seed of black pepper) and amla for women to show resistance, astringent leaf to “reduce mistrust and avarice” (84).

Other spices like tola (from lotus root), prishniparni, abhrak, amlaki and makaradwajas anti-aging spices (85), brahmi oil to settle down anxieties (88), incense made of champak flower to bring harmony at home (90),powder of almond and kesar to sweeten the words in family (94), ginger to bring in courage (104), manjista to get away from bad friends (128), poppy seeds mixed with jaggery to form opium- “the

spice of seeming” (135),methi to heal the breaks in relationship(146),amchur to make right decisions (146), kalomarich to give the ability to tell secrets (158), kantakari- the magic potion to make people to listen and obey whatever you say (190), boiled milk with neem powder for glowing skin (201), ritha pulp for shiny hair (201) and many such spices are prescribed as remedies to the immigrants who come to Tilo's spice shop.

Tilo re-introduces the indigenous spices of rich heritage and culture that could help in re-establishing one's identity in an alien land. The symbolic value of these spices is more intense to the immigrants than the residents of India because the spices carry additional cultural connotation when it is dislodged from the normalcy of the native place. Back home in India, people take the spices for granted for its easy availability and the usage is so regular unlike in abroad, especially in the place like Oakland

where most of the South Asians live, striving hard to improve their economic condition. Thus the spices, the culinary raw materials of native land have more connection to the sense of cultural identity. On the other hand, Divakarauni bring regional connections of India beyond national connections by touching the lives of people from various parts of India, indicating the cultural diversity and in turn the culinary diversity of India.

Though Tilo had the mystic power to talk to the spices and call out the suitable one as a remedy for her customers she does not own the power completely, as the spices seem to have a personality of their own which is the symbol of purity and native. She had been warned by her old mother that the magic will work only under the circumstances of Tilo's complete devotion to spices. At this point, the author brings the allusion of Hindu mythology of "your body is but a vessel" where Tilo is only a mere vessel to carry the spices which are symbolized as a real soul of culture. That must be the reason why the old mother warns Tilo with following lines before she entered into shampati fire to come and serve in Oakland. "Remember... You are not important. No Mistress is.

What is important is the store. And the spices" (5). Having said that, it is obvious that the culture is identical and symbolized with spice, likewise, Tilo just as the vessel or body is identical to the immigrants. This symbolic representation draws many parallel to the experiences of those immigrants who have been displaced and settled across the globe. The vessel/the immigrant must be selfless at any point of time and must be totally devoted to the culture. But this devotion is highly challenged at the 'interstitial' space in the foreign land, for the immigrants are succumbed to switch codes "of language, behavior, and cultural practices in order to negotiate cultural identities and operate in diverse social and cultural contexts" (Sen 122). The cultural clash that the immigrants face is paralleled with the plot when Tilo, who has been an ardent devotee to her spices so long, loses her control at a point of time and starts to break the rules. As a result, the spices start to revolt against her when she claims superiority over spices and helps the non Indian people like Kwesi- a black American. In another situation, Tilo extends her support to the idea of Geetha getting married to a non-Indian and she also prescribes spices for the peacefulness to prevail at their home to overcome this cultural clash.

Further, the spices show a lot of disregards and resistance when Tilo instantly develops an attraction towards the American named Raven. She even steps out of the spice store to meet Geetha, Haron and to have date with Raven. As she keeps breaking the rules Tilo loses the power of magic with her spices and things happen to fall out the other way around, unlike the way she expected. At this point, spices the symbol of purity and indigenous culture uses resistance as a potential tool in their attempt to make Tilo abide the rules of the Old Mother and the Island. However, Tilo decides to yield for her desire to spend a normal life with Raven at least for a night and then sets for the Sampathi fire to destroy herself. This action of Tilo to trespass is yet again the symbol of immigrants' condition and their constant struggle with cultural identity when they switch codes trying to adapt themselves to the foreign iculture.

Further, as the plot evolves, in the unfortunate turn of events, the entire city is destroyed by an earthquake which comes as a result of the wrath of spices. Tilo's attempt to put herself in sampati fire and return to the mysterious island of spices is failed, for the spices are not ready to take her back. This particular event once again parallels the condition of immigrants, for they are not accepted by

their natives and ethnic groups as one among themselves when the immigrants choose to switch codes in their new land which puts them in the state of ambiguity and in-betweenness.

Throughout the novel, spices, a major culinary substance, acts as an aid to understand the narrative style of the author. Further spices are skillfully used as symbols by the author in order to negotiate the highly political question of postcolonial identity. Spices stand as a “crucial link between the binaries of home and abroad, the past with the present, and the imagined with the real” (Garg 74), thus making the narrative discourse on spices and foods as an added facet in postcolonial studies. Furthermore, the wide audience of this novel would be the American mainstream apart from the Indian audience, which gives them an exotic impression of Indian food and spices for its magical qualities of resolving interpersonal problems.

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