

The Culinary Sub-Text in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'When Mr. Pirzada Comes to Dine' in *Interpreter of Maladies*

Namrata Chowdhury

Abstract

When it comes to South Asian diaspora, families, communities and relations within the private space of the family is often pitted against the unfamiliar if not hostile territory of the public space. It is also a common understanding that while the process of assimilation works within spaces, the kitchen and the food prepared at home is the sacrosanct core that speaks of home and smells of home. This paper attempts to walk into one such home that might be given a label of a South Asian diasporic home with Jhumpa Lahiri's story 'When Mr. Pirzada Comes to Dine' from the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* to question the role that certain specific social spaces play in the event that a war plays out within the four walls of this home and the effect that the culinary nostalgia has on the traumatic suffering of the war. This paper would also like to contest the engendering of stereotypical roles in the interface between food, families and identities.

Keywords: diaspora, discourse, homeland, South Asia.

Introduction:

Roland Barthes in the seminal essay ‘Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption’ writes: “[f]or what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour” (21). And it is with the publication of this essay that research had followed a line of investigation of what food choices, preferences and consumption patterns uncover about culture and society. However, as has happened with other disciplines and discourses, the culinary ‘foodscape’ or ‘tastescape’ has witnessed a singular and distinctive enquiry in the South Asian socio-geographical space as cultural theorists studied customs and rituals allied with gustatory experiences in the region.

As Jayanta Sengupta would write in the chapter titled India: “[t]he basic division in scholarly discussion of Indian food lies in the examination of food as an aspect of material culture, on the one hand, and that of food as an entity endowed with cultural and moral characteristics on the other” (70). Sengupta also went on to talk about how the history of Indian food is seen in the contemporary light of the immigrant population and their participation in the genre that he refers to as ‘culinary nostalgia’ (85). It is to this genre that the present paper will belong to as well as contest the very assumptions that the genre is based on.

Jhumpa Lahiri has been known in the literary circle for her fiction that brings to the forefront the lives of the Indian-American diasporic communities, and it is through her short story that the present paper would like to comment on certain aspects of the spatial dynamics that accompany these narratives. *Interpreter of Maladies* was published in the year 1999, and the author has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction as well as the Hemingway Foundation/ PEN Award for this book in the year 2000. It is the second short story in the collection titled, ‘When Mr. Pirzada comes to Dine’ that the paper would like to explore in the

context of the cultural spaces that are born within the crisscrossing lines of the interrogation of the memories of home and that of the host nation. While the focus of the stories in this collection has been over the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses vis-à-vis a close examination of eating etiquettes (Deb 2014), another has chosen to focus on the different registers in the culinary experiences of first generation and second generation immigrants and how Lahiri's fiction has delineated hybrid identities, taking in the best of the homeland and the hostland (Sharma 2018) and another would speak about Lahiri highlighting through this collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, how food becomes the signifier that stands in for the signs of deteriorating familial bonds (Godfree 2010). The paper aims to question the implications of the unfolding of a traumatic event in the host land and the role played by the culinary metaphors to embalm and calm the mind with nostalgic remembrances of the home land. The socio-cultural spaces within a diasporic home, are the focus here, and not the essential South Asian home nestled within a foreign culture and custom and geographic territory. Penetrating the walls and the doors within this home with Mr. Pirzada, the paper aims to draw forth interpretations vis-à-vis the engendering and stereotyping of social and emotional spaces and identities.

Section I: The Gendered Boundary of the Culinary Space

Ashis Nandy in 'The Changing Popular Culture of Indian Food: Preliminary Notes' writes, "[f]ood is never medically or morally neutral" (10). It is along these lines that the paper proposes to read the cultural context of the meals that are artistically woven in to the narrative of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story. Badri Narayan, in the Introduction to the book *Culture and Emotional Economy*, aptly sums up the interstitial space that brings us to the culinary trope:

The diasporic community always idealizes the homeland because it is physically absent from the homeland and consequently in most cases remains socially

excluded from the host society. This idea gives rise to the often occurring problem of finding a place where diaspora belong and they are trapped in between the homeland and the host country even though globalization has made it easier to access their homelands....They often claim to live in the hyphen of the two countries since the hyphen acts as something that separates as well as joins two terms. (5)

It is the diasporic kitchen that occupies the space in-between the countries and thereby has informed research into the narratives of displacement, be it migration or immigration or even exile. The pitfalls of an immigrant life and how they can be a deterrent to the connect between the home and the abroad can be read through the almost casual matter-of-fact mention of the fact that “[t]he supermarket did not carry mustard oil” (26) but it has huge implications in the kitchen space because no substitute for mustard oil will bring out the same taste in the Bengali fare cooked, thereby altering not only the taste but also the palate and the flavor and would eventually end up producing a ‘hybrid’ dish.

However, it is also an accepted notion that the conversation or representation of food and culinary practices would inevitably bring in the ‘domestic’ space and the woman together, as Nandy writes, ‘[the] history of food consumption has been read in the domestic framework for India’ (9). In the book *Recipes and Songs: An Analysis of Cultural Practices from South Asia*, there are two separate chapters on the women of the diasporic community. While the author had a sample selected from families from Kashmir and Punjab who have settled in the north of England, the methodology of research consisted of extensive documentation of the oral literature, with the focus mainly on recipes and songs. Quite expectedly, the cultural practice would retain a lack if the research did not talk about the woman, and the author pens a chapter titled ‘Mapping the Matrilineal’ another titled ‘Space, Time and Female Empowerment in Diaspora.’

In Lahiri's story, it would not be altogether condescending if the role of the woman, who is mother to Lilia and is seen through the eyes of the child comes across as an element of the production of the culinary spectacle that she rustles up, in the words of Lahiri: "She was busy at the stove, presiding over a skillet of fried spinach with radishes, and could not hear me [Lilia] because of the drone of the exhaust fan and the fierce scrapes of her spatula" (27). Ashis Nandy in the section titled 'The Social World of the New Indian Cuisine' writes:

The predicament of these middle-class women is quite complex, however, for the homogenization of a certain middle-class life style calls for diversification of consumption patterns in many domains, including clothing, interior decoration, and cuisine. In the domain of food, the push to diversify the housewife's culinary skills comes from a variety of sources: the push of guests who want to taste your regional specialties...the push of children who are tired of "the same old thing" and the push of ambitious husbands to display the metropolitan culinary ranges of their wives. (7)

And thereby one could talk about the expectations to cook and produce or rather re-produce the authenticity that is on the woman who occupies the space of the producer of South Asian cuisine. But when traditional notions associate the role of the woman in the kitchen with female empowerment, the role of the mother here seems more like an indentured labourer, bound by the social contract of marriage, whose meaning can only be read when the services rendered in the kitchen are able to produce commodities, dishes of the South Asian, typically Bengali fare, and are consumed by the male members of the community or household. This can be seen when Lahiri writes, "[w]e returned to the kitchen, where my mother was draining a pot of boiled rice into a colander" (29). Again she writes, "[a]s soon as they [Lilia's father and Mr. Pirzada] were seated my mother appeared from the kitchen with a plate of mincemeat kebabs with coriander chutney" (31) and Mr. Pirzada would veer the conversation towards his concern whether

“Dacca’s refugees are as heartily fed” (31) and this produces the notion that to feed is the responsibility of the woman, and that of the man is to consume and give the service of the woman a validity and thereby her identity through her position.

Section II: The Space of Intimacy and What Becomes Trouble in Paradise

When Partha Chatterjee wrote about the national movement and the construction of the idea of nation along the gendered lines, by the creation of the identity of the ‘new woman’ who could stand as the paradigm of the national spirit, he talked about the construct “remains trapped within its framework of false essentialisms” (632) one among which would be the “identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*” (624). From the rhetoric of the legitimate subordination of the woman in her newly inscribed role in the nationalist discourse to the rhetoric of the matrilineal space in the immigrant families that acts as a preserver of the roots, culture and traditions, the woman remains forever a cultural construct to be manipulated by the hegemonic forms of coercive authority.

But Lahiri’s narrative moves between the kitchen and the living room which doubles as the dining space throughout the story except for the end when the dining table comes into picture. Leaving aside the traditional role of the woman, the second section of the paper would like to address the issue of the practice of eating together in the Bengali household, a microcosm of the South Asian community. Cultural theorist Ashis Nandy in the section titled ‘Culinary Texts and Standards in Indian History’ in his article writes, “[e]ating together, whether as a family, a caste, or a village, is a carefully conducted exercise in the reproduction of intimacy” (10).

Lahiri writes “...Mr. Pirzada lived in a room in a graduate dormitory, and did not own a proper stove or a television set of his own. And so he came to our house to eat dinner and

watch the evening news” (26). And these are the two elements that both implement the idea of ‘the reproduction of intimacy’ as well as contesting the very claims of intimacy and bonding. While eating together is like a ritual, the intermittent interruption of the chaotic and anarchic images of the war being broadcast on television interrupts the normative discourse. The narrative gives partaking dinner an overall ritualistic appearance by the narration:

That night like every other night, we did not eat at the dining table, because it did not provide an unobstructed view of the television set. Instead, we huddled around the coffee table, without conversing, our plates perched on the edges of our knees. From the kitchen my mother brought forth the succession of dishes: lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yoghurt sauce. I followed with the water and glasses, and the plate of lemon wedges, and the chili peppers...which they liked to snap open into their food.

(33)

While ‘huddled around’ gives the semblance of warmth and intimacy in a land away from home, there is also a dichotomy there as they huddle around a coffee table that speaks of a coffee drinking ritual that is not South Asia. The closeness of the bodies at dinner would ultimately put up a contrast with the mental distance, as they are transported to their homeland through the course of the meal time. The mechanical reproduction of the war images, of the refugees, and the repeat broadcast of similar news and images for a prolonged time, during the visits of Mr. Pirzada brings us to read these interruptions as a parallel to a repressed memory that re-surfaces after the ‘latency’ period is over, which is akin to the incubation period. In the words of the noted psychoanalyst, Freud, “[we] invariably find that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by deferred action” (356). The trauma that I read in the text is enacted not upon one individual but rather on the whole ritualistic act of intimacy, in their eating together. Cathy Caruth, one of the most prominent figures of trauma theory “[t]he impact

of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (9).

Section III: Making the Unfamiliar Familiar

The traumatic interruption of the war threatens the normativity of their South Asian identities and subtly hints at an imminent erasure of what they call their religious identities divided along the geographic lines of the territory on the map. The partition or the divide is not referred to vis-à-vis the trope of Bengali cuisine but rather along different lines. Hindus and Muslims were in a moment in history cut up and divided “like a pie. Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us” (27).

The trauma however is capable of rewriting the ritual of intimacy that Ashis Nandy was writing about as Lahiri writes about Halloween. “For the first time we all gathered around the dining table, my mother, my father, Mr. Pirzada, and I. While the television aired unattended we covered the tabletop with newspapers. Mr. Pirzada draped his jacket over the chair behind him, removed a pair of opal cuff links, and rolled up the starched sleeves of his shirt.” (39) This too is a ritual not of South Asian descent but rather one in the United States, which too sees a pumpkin carved up to resemble a scary face on the jack-o-lantern and it, is the preparation for the almost ceremonious carving that brings the family into an intimate gathering for the first time around the dining table.

The carving too is interrupted midway by the television broadcast, symbolizing the ‘belatedness’ of trauma, and this leads to their coming to a compromise to cover the gash or wound on the skin of the pumpkin, “[w]hat resulted was a disproportionately large hole the size of a lemon, so that our jack-o-lantern wore an expression of placid astonishment, the eyebrows no longer fierce, floating in frozen surprise above a vacant geometric gaze” (40). This serves to project an alternative narrative of the hyphenated existence, where woman and

man and their social and culinary roles are no longer limited to the production and consumption divide of the discipline. To wield the knife is to wield power and it is taken up first by Mr. Pirzada and second by Lilia's father.

The conventional and traditional ways of looking at the role of the masculine and the feminine in the culinary discourse is reinstated by even the event of the Halloween. Razia Parveen in her book writes about Beoku-Betts which says "women often take responsibility for cooking and feeding, and they appear to be the custodians of food rituals and practices that perpetuate the group's [marginalized] survival." (48) It is an essentialism that the woman is supposed to be the preserver of culture, and this is something that the story asserts.

Conclusion

While Partha Chatterjee was writing about the nineteenth century Bengal, Ashis Nandy is writing about the contemporary Indian food scenario, and what remains a constant is the fact that national identities can be legitimized through the 'recasting' of women, imagined in a more traditional and incorrupt core of the immigrant family. The "expatriate Indians in search of their culinary pasts" (Nandy 15) is to be enacted in the space of the culinary sub-text, be it the kitchen or the cookbook, through the narratives of women. In prioritizing the claim of the woman as the preserver of the authentic cuisine of the home, there is also the figure of the South Asian man who brought "honey-filled lozenges, the raspberry truffles, the slender rolls of sour pastilles" (32) to a traditional dinner gathering, thereby bringing with him a touch of foreign flavor as dessert to the otherwise traditional main course, and ultimately celebrate the hybridity. The privacy of the social spaces within this diasporic home is never threatened by the advance of Mr. Pirzada rather they help him recuperate from his traumatic experience of the war, and the man remains not at the passive end as a consumer but rather his redemptive capacity is enhanced when he plays a role in the process of production.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Edited by Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik, Routledge, 1961/2013, pp.22-30.
- Caruth, Cathy. Ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Chatterjee, Partho. "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India". *American Ethnologist*, vol. 16, no. 4, Nov. 1989, pp.- 622-633. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/645113. Accessed 25 August 2020.
- Deb, Paromita. "The journey of food from 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' to 'Mrs. Sen's' in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*." *South Asian Diaspora*, Vol 6, Issue 1, 2014, pp. 121- 135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2013.862102>
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Aetiology of Hysteria". The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Edited by James Strachey, 24 vols, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 1953/1974, vol.3.
- Godfree, Tori E. "Food and Dining in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies'." *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse* 2.04 (2010). <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=238>. Accessed 25 August 2020.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. <https://archive.org/details/LahiriJhumpaInterpreterOfMaladies>. Accessed 25 August 2020.
- Nandy, Ashis. "The Changing Popular Culture of Indian Food: Preliminary Notes." *South Asia Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1, May 2004, pp.- 9-19. doi: 10.1177/0262728004042760. Accessed 25 August 2020.
- Narayan, Badri. *Culture and Emotional Economy of Migration*, Routledge, 2017.

Parveen, Razia. *Recipes and Songs: An Analysis of Cultural Practices from South Asia*.

Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. doi: 10:1007/978-3-319-50246-5. Accessed 25 August 2020.

Sengupta, Jayanta. "Chapter 3: India". *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical*

Association Companion to Food History. Ed. Paul Freedman, Joyce E. Chaplin, Ken Albala. California: University of California Press, 2014.

Sharma, Ambika. (2018). Nostalgia Through Food and Culinary Habits in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction. *SMART MOVES JOURNAL IJELLH*, 6 (7), 12.

<https://www.ijellh.com/OJS/index.php/OJS/article/view/4243>. Accessed 25 August 2020.

About the Author

Namrata Chowdhury has completed her Master degree from the Department of English, Presidency University, Kolkata in 2013. She qualified the UGC-NET (National Eligibility Test) in the year 2013. She has held Guest Faculty positions with Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Vivekananda Vidyabhavan, Seth Anandram Jaipuria College (Morning), and at Naba Ballygunge Mahavidyalaya. She went on to join Pakuahat Degree College, Malda, West Bengal as an Assistant Professor of the Department of English in the year 2017 and shifted to St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata in 2019, where she holds the position of an Assistant Professor till date. She has presented papers in national and international seminars and conferences and published in academic journals. She is also a doctoral scholar at the Department of English, West Bengal State University, carrying out her research under the supervision of Dr. Chandrava Chakrabarty, who is currently the Head of the Department of

English, West Bengal State University. The subject of her doctoral research is the mapping of the city, Calcutta through a decoding of the culinary registers in select non-fiction works by the migrant and immigrant authors. Her research interests also include the city and the space, postcolonial literature, Indian English Literature, popular culture, cultural studies.