

**Othering through Culinary Preferences: A Study of Jhumpha Lahiri's
*Interpreter of Maladies***

L. Santhosh Kumar
Assistant Professor
Department of English, Dr.
N.G.P. Arts and Science
College (Autonomous),
Coimbatore, India

Abstract

Culture Studies is a broad and comprehensive term which includes Literature, Economics, Politics, Sociology, numerous Ideological influences, scientific, technological advancements and new communication technology. Due to the advent of Cultural studies the gap between the Humanistic Scholars and Social Scientists has been bridged. Anthropologists and Scholars of Humanities today thrive on an intellectual give and take. This is the beginning of an interdisciplinary approach to Knowledge.

Keywords- *Multivalency, Immigrant, Diaspora, Culture*

Eating is not merely a material pleasure. Eating well gives a spectacular joy to life and contributes immensely to goodwill and happy companionship. It is of great importance to the morale. **Elsa Schiaparelli**

Introduction

Among the different aspects of culture, food plays a very important role. Food foregrounds a human's race and culture to which s/he belongs. In Diasporic Literature, food plays an important role in creating the literariness of the text. Even though food it is considered to be a lighthearted thing it can be closely associated with everyone's heart. Recent interest in food studies has paved way for the use of food as imagery that adds to the multivalency of the text. In Indian Literature in English, food serves as a tool to create the Indianness in the text. Literary Food studies attempts to blur the line between the social and political factors. Jhumpha Lahiri in her work *Interpreter of Maladies* showcases the multidimensionality of the expatriates through food and attempts to suggest a solution to 'diversity as being conflictual' problem. According to Keya Ganguly

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Culinary activity functions as a sort of “technique of nearness”, gathering up into present space the magic of the past and permitting the imagination of ideas, objects, and events that are no longer available or repeatable except in a relay through food matters. Eating well and in the company of others, then, is about not paradise lost, but paradise regained... The very taken-for-grantedness of alimentary customs – seeing the elaborate meal as a representation of an unquestioned Indianness – allows people to come to terms with their emergent and upwardly mobile investments in bourgeois individualism (4)

It is true, in *Interpreter of Maladies* Mrs. Sen suffers from cultural shockwaves and she longs for the Kolkata life and which clearly portrays her diasporic sensibility. She is said to be an archetype of the Bengali womenfolk and for her fish is the ultimate in food. Jhumpa Lahiri through Mrs. Sen constructs a character through food too. Whenever fish is mentioned, Mrs. Sen is said to be the happiest person on earth and she believes that through eating fish she can reconnect to the Kolkata life. Even though she faces so many hardships to buy fish and sometimes she also acts crazy, she is culturally comfortable with a food item. Diaspora today has become a blanket term absorbing a variety of experiences. Locations, both of origin and of adoption, plays a vital part in the Diasporic studies. As custodians of culture, women in the home-bred spaces are important. Through Mrs. Sen, the author suggests that culinary preferences can foreground the problem of ‘not-belonging’ and how they can also aid hybridization.

According to Ryan Bishop & John Philips “Diasporic communities result from the power of sovereignty to expunge those who oppose it and are, indeed, the manifestation of this power”.(5) It is evident, that everything Mrs. Sen has known or loved is in India and sees the effects of her displacement when she eats. The aspects of confusion and despair of a young Indian wife are delineated in the context of immigrant life. For Mrs. Sen fish is not only the desired food but in fact she welcomes it as a piece of news from home. It gives her a sense of proximity to her people. Confined to the narrow world of her ‘Home’, and reluctant to learn car driving, Mrs. Sen seeks her husband’s help, in buying fish, every time they arrive at the local store. When it is not possible for her husband, she does not mind taking a bus to the local store to buy fish. When the other passengers travelling by the bus object to smell, though not an expert driver, she tries driving the car herself, with Eliot, to buy fish. As mentioned earlier fish, in fact, serves as a metaphor for ‘home’. It is also to be noted that this story presents Mrs. Sen’s attempts to escape the prison of the ghastly and ghostly world

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around her. “Nostalgia for the past Indian life in case of Mrs. Sen is not a conscious revolt against assimilation, nor is it a refusal to be remade in the colonizer’s image” (Lloyd 276). It is just that Mrs. Sen finds herself in an environment with which she cannot relate fully and the one with which she is at ease is no longer her given now, but a distant dream. It can be boldly stated that this story illustrates the diasporic experience in cultural terms through Food. The cultural loss operates at various levels. The experience of a simultaneous existence in two cultures is a subtle one and invites the writer from the diasporic community to express it in a variety of ways.

Dr. Delores Bobbie Jean Philips in his dissertation raised a question “Can the Subaltern Cook? Third world Appetites and Subaltern Subjectivity”. He believes that Culinary autobiographies position themselves at the convergence of multiple vectors of the Subaltern, in ways that define Subalternity as a microphysics of power rather than an identity formation. It is true, the works which deal with the Culinary Preferences particularly in the Diasporic Context showcases the author in placing him/her as a Subaltern Citizen and through Food they can register their Nostalgia.

It can also be said that Mrs. Sen is a Subaltern Citizen in the U.S.A and where she tries to foreground her nostalgic feeling through fish. To the question ‘Can the Subaltern Cook?’ the author answers through Mrs. Sen that subalterns can cook and their culinary preferences foreground cultural conflicts which they face and also through culinary preferences it can be inferred that the subalterns too are human beings with infinite variety.

In the last story in the collection, *The Third and Final Continent*, Lahiri foregrounds the nostalgic space of the character which had been represented in the static time. The protagonist is not friendly with any American except Mrs. Croft, his landlady, whose age is more than a century. Through his narration it is evident that he is alienated from the foreign society. He had his Higher Education in Britain and then his job takes him to America. In any discussion of diaspora, there is a double discourse present almost at all times more specially when it comes to the Indianness of the Indian Diasporans. In this story the smell of steamed rice and eating the food using hands instead of using fork/ spoon creates a relaxed cultural space. According to Pheng Cheah “The concept of Hybrid Culture is formulated in Polemical opposition to both the canonical concept of culture that grounds philosophical cosmopolitanism and the anthropological concept of culture”(6). It is true, the narrative of the diaspora is a split narrative right from beginning to end. It also has multiple pasts. Loneliness, isolation, social ghettoization are as much a part of the present as success, affluence and recognition. The world of the immigrant is marked by a separation between the public and the private spaces, the

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public and the private worlds. The past is carried over and sanctified. It is evident through Mrs. Sen and also through the protagonist of the story titled *The Third and Final Continent* when his son follows the same habit while he is eating food without using spoon/fork. He is considered as an inferior being among the people. Through these characters it can be seen that the 'Self' is constituted through the conjunction of these multiple pasts as they coexist in the present.

'Identity' is said to be the external layer related to colour, race, class, food, social position, economic status, nationality and a whole lot of other outward indicators, while 'self' is the deepest layer, the 'core', constituted through cognitive processes, reflection, memory, education, media, exploration and exposure. It is also constituted by the act of choice amongst other things. The diasporic journey into the past or to the homeland is often in search of wholeness. In Saidian terms the Orient is a timeless space, changeless and static with no growth and development. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, the nostalgic spaces of most of the characters represent this type of static time. The concept of Orientalism also assumes that the Orient is possibly a suitable object for study and a legitimate ground for the West to study. The stories in this collection do not reveal any such locations and in fact the subtitle of the collection mentions that the stories are stories of Bengal, Boston and beyond. *Interpreter of Maladies* takes place in Bengal and other stories take place in Boston.

A Temporary Matter is about the growing estrangement between Shukumar and his wife Shoba. Shoba's disinterest in cooking comes because of her alienated feeling. Shukumar and his wife Shoba belong to the second generation of the Bengali Immigrants in the U.S who feel the sense of alienation. Shoba's disinterestedness in cooking comes because of a miscarriage. Jhumpa Lahiri records that when the marital life was a bliss to them the kitchen space was happy. Shoba's intention to keep the kitchen in a proper condition is somewhat related to the marital life which she learnt from their ancestors. Referring to the ancestors as custodians of culture she traces her roots to Bengal. Traditions seem to be an important treasure for the people of diaspora particularly Indians. It can be boldly stated that Jhumpa Lahiri is successful in portraying the dislocated relationship between the families who are longing for their traditional values. Food as mentioned earlier does not deal only with eating but is a tool of construction of an individual through which one could infer one's race, culture, and milieu. This paper tends to show the diasporic sensibility through food and it also gathers around the cultural collision faced by characters. Pain and anxiety, displacement, nostalgia and search for an imaginary idealized home, a return to roots have been foregrounded in this paper.

As Stuart Hall says,

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Cultural identity as a matter of 'becoming' and 'being': It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere have histories. But [...] they undergo constant transformation (7).

Food studies delineate the culture on the move. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, food acquires a character. Food makes a shift from mere diaspora to multicultural identities by interaction and re-mediations and this is showcased in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.

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