



FOOD AS A MIGRATORY MOTIF IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*

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Abstract

This paper explores how food serves as a central motif in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies, symbolizing cultural transition and identity crises experienced by the characters in a foreign land. For many, food becomes a hold-on to their roots, a comfort, or an escape. It is a marker of identity for the diasporic community, reinforcing where they come from and who they are. For others, it helps them forget the past and explore new lives. As M.H. Abrams defines, "a motif is a recurring element that contributes to the development of the theme." In this case, food is more than sustenance; it is a symbol deeply tied to emotion, culture, and identity.

In Indian culture, food is more than a necessity; it is an expression of life, emotion, and celebration. Special dishes are tied to significant occasions, and each region has its own unique culinary traditions. In Lahiri's stories, food is not only a basic need for the diaspora but also a cultural anchor, continuously reminding them of their heritage. It can also express emotions, as noted by Eve Jackson in her exploration of the meanings attached to food:

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My exploration of the subject of food and eating was stimulated by interest in the complex meanings we attach to food...References to particular food-stuffs need to be evaluated in terms



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of individual and collective associations... The latter are deeply ingrained in our culture and may hark back to the experiences of our Paleolithic ancestors and beyond.

The “maladies” in *Interpreter of Maladies* stem from the pressure of balancing old and new identities. Lahiri's own life is reflected in these stories, as she, like her characters, has struggled with finding clear roots. Her parents, originally from Bengal, moved first to Britain and then to America, seeking better opportunities. Jhumpa Lahiri, born in Britain and raised in America, experienced a similar sense of not belonging. In interviews, Lahiri reflects on the conflicting nature of her family's choice to immigrate, driven by the desire for better prospects but also marked by a sense of misgiving about leaving behind their homeland.

The recurrent imagery of food in Lahiri's stories is rooted in her own experience of cultural displacement. She recalls feeling intense pressure to balance loyalty to the old world with the need to adapt to the new world. This tension is reflected in her writing, where food often becomes a source of connection or a reminder of what has been lost. In her short story *An Unaccustomed Earth*, for example, a mother feels embarrassed by her son's rejection of Indian food, highlighting the generational divide in the immigrant experience. Jhumpa Lahiri's own two children "are pretty good about that. They eat Indian food; they will eat Chinese food. They sort of live on pasta. And they love beans and rice. You know, my husband is from Latin America, and that is his comfort food. Black beans and rice on a Sunday morning: they love that."

The wide gamut of stories is related by Lahiri with an array of emotions. None of the stories are like the other; the subject matter differs in all of them. But all of them use food as an expression in some way or the other. ‘Food becomes the Interpreter of Maladies.’ “Eating is traditionally largely something we do with others” (Jackson, 1996).

In *A Temporary Matter* a couple struggling with their marriage falling apart, use food to connect with each other and say things they could not say before. In M.S.A. Rao's contributions to *Food, Society, and Culture*, he states, “If a shift in residence occurs across the cultural regions, then the question whether the migrants retain the same food habits or change in favor of the dietary style



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of the locals in the new place of residence, becomes a significant one.” The same affects Shukumar and Shobha; being far away from their native land, they have adopted the dietary habits of America. The essence of Indian meal timings is lost for them.

In the second story, *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, Mr. Pirzada gets entry into Lilia's family to find solace, comfort in his lonely life, and bring company to Lilia's distressed parents during dinners. *Interpreter of Maladies* brings forth the unknown secrets from the Das family with Mrs. Das's puffed rice being the harbinger of upcoming events. The search for Indians each new semester and invite them over for dinner to their home depicts her parents need to feel at home in a foreign land. While in India it was common to associate and bond over food in each other's place which her parents feel the loss of in America. In *The Migrant's Table*, Krishnedu Ray's study of Bengali-American households, he notes: “women do express and maintain their social position in the community through food work. They keep account of friends and neighbors who have invited them for dinner and the number of times they have been invited” (Ray 122). These meals were bonds of affinity which transgress the boundaries of countries. “These dinners served as a refuge for Mr. Pirzada in his home-sickness.” (Dr. Asha Choubey)

The third story from the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* is the one after which the collection has been named. Das family has come to spend their holidays in India and go about sightseeing to Sun Temple in Konark. Even though the family is quite foreigner in their ways and living, they enjoy the ‘Indianness’ as they enjoy eating at a dhaba. Mr. Kapasi is invited to join them by Mrs. Das who strikingly does not enjoy the company of her own family. “Just who is invited to the table is a thorny question. We prefer to ask only those we feel comfortable with...” (Jackson, 1996). “And so, together, they had bottled mango juice and sandwiches and plates of onions and potatoes deep-fried in graham-flour batter... Mr. Das took more pictures of the group as they ate.”

Sexy, the fifth of the collection showcases the verve of an American woman (Miranda) in a relationship with a married Indian man (Dev). This story is arresting as it is told from the point of view of the ‘other woman’ in a relationship with a Diaspora Indian man rather than the man himself. It is about her experiences which she has with him and how they affect her life and turn her into a mature woman. In *Sexy*, an American woman in love with a married Indian man,



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trying to get close to him through the food of his country, realizes her self-worth and comes to terms with her life. Once when she visits an Indian grocery store and goes through the food items the man at the cash register suggests that she does not try those as they are “Very spicy...Too spicy for you”. This comes as a portent of her contagious relationship with Dev which is not for her and would not do her any good.

Mrs. Sen is a story about a lonely wife babysitting a young boy, going at great lengths to acquire a “whole fish” as that connects her back to her native land. As stated by Dr. Asha Choubey, “Fish becomes the leitmotif in the story.” In *The Third and Final Continent*, a Bengali man confused regarding his identity is helped by his wife who brings him back to his roots through her Indian ways and food. When he moved to America, he had to adjust to new ways of living, “Even the simple chore of buying milk was new to me.”

His life turns sour as his milk. “The lack of social cohesion is mirrored in irregular eating patterns, sandwiches gulped down on commuter trains, breakfast taken standing at a kitchen counter, foods that come in prepackaged portions...when people live alone...they often neglect to cook at all” (Jackson, 1996). He gets used to his life in America when there is an entry by his wife Mala which discomforts him. He suddenly feels embarrassed because of her Indian ways. But soon this divide too seems to elude. She brings with her a packet of Darjeeling tea which reminds him of his native land. Suddenly his food habits change with Mala’s arrival. “We ate with our hands...”

When their son is born, they are mostly afraid that he might lose hold of his own culture. They try to embed their cultural values in him so that he imbibes the love for his country. “...So that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die.” This is a thought which worries almost all of Diaspora parents that their children might have to struggle like them and never understand and embrace their own culture. As stated by Jackson, “For many people growing up now the table will have lost its traditional significance.”

The analysis of the stories threadbare presents before us the ‘exile’ experienced by the people displaced from their home and culture. “Home” here can be symbolic of not just the place a person spends most part of his life in, but the one to which his soul connects him. Malashri Lal



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affirms that “many women writers in India are using food imagery to talk back to patriarchal society that insists on situating them in domestic space” (Jain, 2004:105). Similar is the case with Lahiri who convincingly and tactfully employs women characters in her stories do this job, whether it be Mrs. Sen, Miranda, Mala, or Lilia. It is also interesting to see the characters struggling for their freedom and coming to terms with their new life whilst keeping intact their cultural identity. And when someone or something tries to spoil this balance, they revolt back or succumb to it.

“Throughout the entirety of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri uses the food customs and dining traditions of her Indian-American characters to illuminate the importance of family and community.” (Godfree, 2010) Ray quotes Alice Waters, a chef and culinarian in *The Migrant's Table*: “If you see the same ingredients every place you go you lose a sense of time and place. Then nothing is special” (Ray 132). He explains, “...that is exactly why immigrants crave some of the distinctive products of their homeland, notwithstanding time or place” (Ray 132).

Food serves as a link between the old and new world traditions. One can notice surprisingly, how an individual acquires more of his culture when displaced from it rather in his own country. While the Diaspora citizens look for means to come closer to their land, the Indians are moving away from it. Like it is taken as low for a person to eat out of his hands in India and he is termed as uncouth but abroad these are the practices revealed and enjoyed the most.

Food is a motivating factor that propels action on the part of an individual, a community or an entire society. Food is part of the cyclical pattern of life; food is culture, but the question of the 'Indianness' of Indians acquires a particular poignancy overseas, as Indians abroad are presumed to shed their regional, linguistic, and ethnic identities in deference to the more general identity of being an Indian. It is arguable that one is more easily an Indian abroad than in India; the category of 'Indian' is not contested abroad as it is in India (Choubey)

But this practice is not just a matter of connection but of choice as well. Not all individuals drawn away from their homeland look for such linking factors that would bind them to their culture. Sometimes people are ready and willing to do away with the old practices to assimilate



with the new ones. This contradicting factor can be seen in the case of Twinkle from *This Blessed House*, who is very comfortable with the life in a country in which she technically does not belong. But she is prepared to and thus does not feel displaced or dislocated like Sanjeev who never feels at home. One can point out that this conduct of hers might be an outcome of her never being close to her homeland. Unlike Lilia's case, most probably, her parents never took the pains to make her learn and practice their cultural integrities. Thus, it also points out that the second generation gets the basic knowledge of their culture and religion through their parents and it is the choice of parents as to how much they want their child to get accustomed to it.

The lack of understanding of the importance of meals and proper dinners can be attributed to this. It can be taken as an imperative to be comfortable in their new lives. While some can carry both old and new with them, some are not and they prepare themselves in such a way that it does not impede their personal, social, economic growth in a foreign land where they are both literally and metaphorically alone. So, according to them it is better to be one with the people of the new world rather than hanging on to the burden of the old. It comes as an advantage to many. So, its advantages cannot be undermined. "We now have greater flexibility, liberation from the tyranny of set mealtimes and an alimentary eclecticism matched

by the possibility of relatively free social exchange" (Jackson, 1996). This is how they can adjust to the "fast-paced, time-consuming and demanding" (Godfree, 2010) life of the unknown.

In the end all that can be said, is that food is of course a vital means of survival for the ones alienated and dislocated. The amazing dimension in which food's significance has been laid down in a subtle manner is indicative of how noiselessly the meals do their job. Even in normal circumstances, whether in happy or tumultuous situations we unconsciously drift towards food to serve as a medium of transferring our emotions. Henceforth, it becomes a motif in our daily life.

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