

FROM HOME TO HOST: THE SECOND GENERATION IMMIGRANT PALATE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE :

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Abstract

This paper investigates the complex intersection of identity, cultural heritage, and food in the experiences of second generation immigrants. Food, more than a necessity for survival, emerges as a rich cultural symbol that reflects belonging and alienation, continuity and rupture. Through an analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, this study examines how food becomes a site of negotiation between two competing worlds i.e America modernity and Bengali tradition. For characters such as Gogol, Mousumi and Sonia, the act of eating, cooking, or even refusing certain food mirrors the larger struggle of assimilation and cultural retention. On one hand, food serves as a tangible connection to the homeland and familial bond; on the other hand, it often marks assimilation in to American society. Thus, the kitchen table, the dining room, and the social gatherings around meals become symbolic battlegrounds where generational conflict, diasporic identity, and questions of belonging are played out. By foregrounding the symbolic role of food, this paper underscores how Lahiri portrays culinary practices as a theme of diasporic identity and generational conflicts.

Keywords: immigrants, second generation, food, Bengali culture, assimilation

INTRODUCTION

The term diaspora refers to the dispersal of people from their homeland to different parts of the world, often due to conflicts, persecution, or economic necessity. It describes not only the physical relocation but also the cultural, emotional, and psychological negotiations that individuals and communities undergo as they adapt to new environments while preserving ties to their place of origin.

Life in the diaspora is marked by a sense of dual belonging. Individuals frequently navigate between the traditions, values, and identities of their ancestral culture and the influences of the society in which they now reside. This duality can be enriching, fostering hybrid identities and a sense of global citizenship by drawing from multiple cultural sources. At the same time, it may give rise to tensions such as alienation, identity crises, or the struggle for acceptance in both the homeland and the hostland.

Importantly, diasporic identity is not fixed but evolves across generations. While first generation immigrants often feel a stronger attachment to their homeland, later generations may relate more intimately to the culture of their birthplace, resulting in layered and complex identities. Yet, even across generations, a symbolic longing for the homeland frequently endures.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a notable diasporic writer, delves in to the intricate experiences of diasporic communities in her works. Born to Bengali parents from Kolkata and raised in the U.S from the age of three, Lahiri's personal history significantly influences her writing. Her fiction frequently explores the struggle with identity, cultural conflicts and the quest for belonging that define the lives of immigrants and their children in America. Lahiri's characters are often first or second generation immigrants grappling with the challenges of balancing their native cultural identity with the demands and realities of life in a new country. This dual perspective, informed by both insider and outsider viewpoints, enables Lahiri to explore themes of dislocation, cultural clash and the search for identity in the context of diaspora

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* thoughtfully examines the experiences of both first generation and second generation immigrants. Through characters like Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol, Mousumi and Sonia Lahiri explores the complexities of identity, belonging and the feelings of displacement. She vividly portrays the struggles of the older generation, who feel disconnected in a foreign land and the challenges their children face as they balance the expectations of their cultural heritage with the realities of growing up in a different society.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the last two decades there has been a surge of in anthropological and sociological studies on food and eating habits. When viewed through the lens of migration and diasporic community's food plays a pivotal role in maintaining community unity. Dietary customs frequently endure as symbols of ethnic identity more than other cultural elements such language, attire or even religion.

Anita Mannur's *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* is one of the recent contributions to the field of food studies providing an insightful analysis of South Asian culinary fiction within the context of diaspora. Mannur addresses the role of food in both literature and visual media, exploring how it is used to evoke immigrant nostalgia. She skillfully connects this nostalgia to culinary narratives, demonstrating how food functions as a metaphorical, economic and political tool that shapes, enables, expresses, confines and sustains the diasporic imagination.

Leading this discourse ahead, Amir Sayadabdi submitted a doctoral thesis on *Food and Identity: The Iranian Diaspora of New Zealand*. His main focus is how food and foodways can reconstruct, recreate and rebuild the feeling of home in the third space.

The Ethnic Restaurateur by Krishnendu Ray is a significant exploration of immigrant owned restaurants. His analysis provides significant insights in to the experiences and the role second generation immigrants play in shaping ethnic food businesses.

Binita Mehta published an article called *Bhaji, Curry and Masala: Food and/as Identity in Four Films of the Indian Diaspora*. Her article represents the connection between food and identity through representation of the Indian Diaspora in film. She selected four films Srinivas Krishna's *Masala*, Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*, Gurinder Chandra's *Bhaji On the Beach* and Vijay Singh's *One Dollar Curry*. Each film depicts eating and uses it to

anchor the homeland, pronounce the racism faced by Indians in foreign land or to introduce India to the west.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To analyse the influence of cultural heritage on food preferences
2. To investigate the role of food as a marker of cultural assimilation
3. To understand how food serves as bridge between two worlds, reflecting internal conflict of second generation immigrants navigating between familial tradition and their contemporary surroundings.
4. To evaluate the representation of food in the novel as a tool for negotiating identity and belonging in a multicultural environment

METHODOLOGY

This research will be a detailed study of the text of the novel *The Namesake* as the primary source of investigation on the chosen topic. Some of the worthy books and notable articles would be studied for critical analysis and to support argument. The current research being descriptive in nature qualitative method will be adopted. Also 9th edition of MLA style sheet will be used for my writing.

This essay deals with the characters of second generation immigrants and their food habits from the novel *The Namesake*. Second generation expatriates differ significantly from the first generation in their attitudes and relationships with both their country they now call home. As a result, they require a different set of criteria for evaluation. Shaped by the values of the country they are born, their thinking and way of life naturally diverge from those of their parents. Their connection to their ancestral country is often tenuous and indirect. However, their bicultural background creates a complex and intriguing relationship with both the countries. They tend to adopt American eating and living habits as their primary lifestyle.

In this novel Asima and Ashoke enjoy traditional Bengali dishes such as rice, lentils, various curries, puris etc. She often cooks these dishes at home to maintain a connection to their roots and also these are comfort food for them as they have been grown up eating these traditional meals. They aim to pass down their traditional culinary practices to their children. So Gogol has already learnt to eat by hands, not to stain his palm while eating, how to suck marrow from lamb, how to extract bones from fish.

Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist, has a complicated relationship with his cultural heritage, reflected in his eating habits. He is introduced to both Bengali and American food from a young age. The cultural dichotomy is a constant presence in Gogol's life. As a child he enjoys the food his mother prepares but as he grows older, he begins to reject aspects of his heritage including the food. During his teenage years Gogol gravitates towards American food which symbolizes his desire to assimilate and fit in with his peers. Lahiri writes "In the supermarket they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume: individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hotdogs. For Gogol's lunches they stand at the deli to buy cold cuts, and in the mornings Ashima makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. At his insistence, she concedes and makes him an American dinner

once a week as a treat, Shake ‘n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb.” This shift highlights his dual identity and his attempt to distance himself from his Indian roots.

In another instance Ashoke’s sabbatical marks a significant moment in the Ganguli family. During this period Ashoke and Ashima along with Gogol and Sonia return to India for an extended holiday which bring them closure to their roots but at the same time highlights the cultural divide between them and American born children Gogol and Sonia. They are deeply entrenched in American culture and express their resentment towards Indian food during the trip, symbolizing their struggle with dual identity. They miss the comfort of American food like Hamburgers which represent their longing for familiarity.

During his college days Gogol’s relationship with Maxine reflects his efforts to blend in to American culture. His relationship with American girlfriend such as Maxine, further influence his culinary preferences. For example when he spends time with Maxine’s family, he enjoys their American style meals which contrast sharply with his family’s Bengali cuisine. “He learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper.” Gogol appreciates the warmth and freedom of Maxine family. Maxine’s family, their dinner party represents a stark contrast to his own family and feast. “...he is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine’s family is a betrayal of his own.”

On the other hand Mousumi’s cosmopolitan upbringing exposes her to a variety of cuisines and European dining habits illustrate her broader cultural influences. For instance Mousumi takes pride in her ability to prepare elaborate French dishes, showcasing her culinary skills and her break from traditional Bengali expectations. Mousumi loves coq au vin, beef bourguignon, boeuf en daube etc. This shows the diverse and sophisticated culinary world Mousumi .

Gogol begins smoking and drinking during his college years as part of his effort to fit in with his American friends and distance himself from his Bengali heritage. For instance while dating Maxine, Gogol becomes more immersed in a lifestyle that includes frequent drinking at social gatherings and dinners. Mousumi adopts smoking and drinking as part of her desire to distance herself from Bengali culture. Even after marrying Gogol, she continues to drink and smoke which underscores her ongoing struggle with her cultural identity.

After marriage Gogol and Mousumi throw parties to Gogol’s colleague or Mousumi’s graduate students in contrast to their parents’ parties. “They entertain together on occasion, throwing the sorts of parties which their parents never had, mixing martinis in a stainless-steel shaker for a few of the architects at Gogol’s work or Mousumi’s graduate student friends at NYU. They play bossa nova and serve bread and salami and cheese.” They make Indian food infrequently sometimes on Sunday, they both crave for the food they have grown up eating tandoori chicken and pakoras and kabobs. Then they shop for basmati rice and Indian spices or go to a tea shop to drink tea on paper cups with heavy cream and then sweet yogurt and haleem. But normally their food consists of pasta or boiled fish or take out from a Thai restaurants.

Sonia, Gogol's younger sister offers another perspective on the intersection of food and identity. Growing up in the same bicultural environment as Gogol, Sonia navigates her relationship with food with a different approach. She is more comfortable embracing both American and Indian food culture. During family gathering, Sonia helps her mother cooking traditional dishes during festivals and celebration. "Sonia balances a plate of turkey and cranberry sauce on her lap next to a plate of her mother's biriyani."

CONCLUSION

In *The Namesake* Lahiri uses the eating habits of Gogol, Mousumi and Sonia to explore themes of cultural identity, assimilation and personal relationships. Gogol's rejection and eventual reconciliation with his heritage through food, Mousumi's complex relationship with culinary traditions and independence, and Sonia's balanced integration of both cultures illustrate the diverse ways individuals navigate their bicultural experiences.

Food in *The Namesake* serves as a powerful metaphor for the characters' internal and external conflicts, their attempts to define themselves and their connections to their heritage. Through the lens of eating habits, Lahiri paints a nuanced portrait of the second generation immigrant experience and the ongoing negotiation of identity in a multicultural world.

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