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Negotiating Homelessness through Culinary Imagination: the Metaphor of Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

Kalyan Chatterjee

Government General Degree College, Manbazar-II, Purulia, West Bengal

Abstract

This paper seeks to look at the culinary associations of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* to explore the metaphor of food as it is employed by Lahiri to delineate different shades and nuances of the lives of mostly the expatriate people, concentrating especially on how food negotiates the unease in living in an adopted land. The first section of this paper introduces the critical issues related to food and eating, and the second section moves on to the analysis of her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, relating the stories to the issues discussed in the first section of the paper.

Keywords: Food, Diaspora, Indian American Diaspora, Jhuma Lahiri

Introduction:

This paper seeks to look at the culinary associations of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* to explore the metaphor of food as it is employed by Lahiri to delineate different shades and nuances of the lives of mostly the expatriate people, concentrating especially on how food negotiates the unease in living in an adopted land. Although her fiction also represents people who are not exactly dislocated, the questions of home, homelessness, displacement often lurk around them. The first section of this paper introduces the critical issues related to the topic of the paper and the second section moves on to the analysis of her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, relating it to the issues discussed in the first section of the paper.

I

Food, Memory, Nostalgia

Food, as Jon D. Holtzman (2006) rightly observes in his essay "Food and Memory", is "an intrinsically multilayered and multidimensional subject – with social, psychological, physiological, symbolic dimensions..." (p. 362). The subject of food becomes especially significant in the context of the diaspora, because food is, above everything else, "a vehicle for memory" (Holtzman, 2006, p. 365). No wonder then the writings of diasporas are often full of references to food, feasting and eating – nostalgic as they are – making food a veritable centre of attention for both the readers and the critics alike. But 'food' as an issue in these writings has not only drawn a scrutinizing gaze to them, but has also invited hostile criticism to diaspora fiction. Frank Chin, for instance, dubbed much of contemporary Asian American women's writing to be "food pornography" for their deliberate over-use of a culinary idiom (as cited in Mannur, 2010, p. 15). However, notwithstanding Chin's opposition to this idiom, critics do not find such writings unjustifiably soaked in nostalgia, as "...[T]he combination of the physical and the mental", writes Supriya Chaudhury (2011) in her introduction to *Writer's Feast*, "in the longing for a lost cuisine, or the

attempt to recover it in a foreign kitchen, suffuses diasporic writing about food with a nostalgia that exceeds its object: it is as though the absent homeland, like the absent real, lies behind the imagined but unobtainable item of food" (p. x-xi). Anita Mannur (2010) in her book *Culinary Fictions* has expressed similar opinion in this regard: "...among the most common of the complex emotions food engenders for diasporic subjects is a sense of nostalgia..." (p. 20). And this nostalgia is especially relevant in the context of the globalization and its corollary movements, dislocations and disorientation, because: "Food, and especially nostalgia about home cooking, plays a crucial role in anchoring us in a world that refuses to stay still" (Ray, 2004, Intro.). However, the memory stirred in by food and its accompanying nostalgia can neither be simple nor be linearly related to home, because "[m]emory is, Dipesh Chakrabarty stresses, "a complex phenomenon that reaches far beyond what normally constitutes a historian's archives, for memory is much more than what the mind can remember or what objects can help us document about the past" (Chakraborty, 2002, p. 115). Food, therefore, "offers a potential window into forms of memory that are more heteroglossic, ambivalent, layered, and textured" (Holtzman, 2006, p. 373). Lahiri's fiction, we will see, encompasses this complexity engendered by food, often to mark within the materially prosperous life something amiss.

Food as Metaphor for Racial Identity and Multiculturalism

It is obvious that food as a metaphor is potent in its use in literature. Anita Mannur's *Culinary Fictions* (2010) is a work that has tried to explore some of these metaphors by examining the dimension food has acquired in the migrants' culture all over the world. Mannur has pointed out in her introduction the multifarious significances food has acquired over the years in relation to the diasporic – and consequently the racially other – population particularly in the West (Mannur, 2010, p. 1-10). Mannur has referred to Lalit Mansing's (former Indian Ambassador to the USA) attempt at justifying the term 'coconut' – sometimes leveled on the diasporic Indian Americans and South Asian Americans who are eager to assimilate themselves into the white crowd of their new-found home despite their racial otherness reflected in their brown skin. In his effort to do so Mansing adds an emphasis on the resilience of the coconut tree symbolizing similar quality in the Indian Diaspora in America. The term 'coconut', however, as Mannur has pointed out, holds an underlying sense of ethnic betrayal: trying to negate one's racial identity by carrying a white consciousness within the self. Secondly, Mannur has discussed the hotly debated speech by the British foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who tried to portray CTM (the famed abbreviation for 'Chicken Tikka Masala', an Asian food mistaken for a while as British for its huge popularity in Britain) as an instance of British multiculturalism, as CTM, supposedly, demonstrates Britain's "ability and willingness to "absorb" and adapt the culinary histories of its immigrants and formerly colonized subjects" (Mannur, 2010, p. 4). By pointing out the otherwise invisible cracks in such apparent flexibility of the English culture, Mannur has dubbed Cook's rhetoric as little more than a "fantasy of British-style multiculturalism" (Mannur, 2010, p. 4). Finally, Mannur has held that "For South Asian diasporic cultural texts, the "culinary" most typically occupies a seemingly paradoxical space – at once a site of affirmation and resistance" (Mannur, 2010, p. 7). Laura Anh Williams holds similar views on this issue, as she says: "In Asian American literature, food as metaphor frequently constructs and reflects relationships to racialized subjectivity and also addresses issues of authenticity, assimilation, and desire" (Williams, 2007, p. 70). Lahiri's fiction dwells on these dilemmas and paradoxes as the analysis of her short stories and novels will show.

The Unique but Gendered Act of Cooking

John Krebs in his *Food: A Very Short Introduction* (2013), on the other hand, has endeavoured to divide food into three categories (cooked, farmed and preserved) to understand the relevance of food in the evolutionary road undertaken by the *homo sapiens*; and it is interesting to note the importance that has been bestowed on ‘cooking’ as it left “profound impacts not just on our diet, but also on our anatomy, brain, and social life” (Wrangham as cited in Krebs, 2013, p. 7). No wonder “Charles Darwin thought that cooking, after language, was the second greatest discovery made by man” (Krebs, 2013, p. 7). In a similar fashion, James Boswell thought man’s uniqueness lies in its being the only “cooking animal” in this planet, as “no beast is a cook” (as cited in Wrangham, 2009, p. 10). Wrangham, however, considers “the control of fire and the advent of cooked meals” to be the “transformative moment that gave rise to the genus *homo*” (Wrangham, 2009, p. 4). In his book, *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (2009), Wrangham suggests that the advent of cooking freed up men by providing them with extra time for hunting or even leisure, and most of this was possible because of the less chewing time for the softened up cooked food. But for women cooking did just the opposite: it trapped them into a job that restricted them from much of the external world. The gendered discourses on food and cooking are significant in that they relate to the world Jhumpa Lahiri creates in her fiction with food, a considerable amount of which are found at the kitchen. They are food ready to be cooked, or just cooked to be served hot the Bengali way or, occasionally, food of the third variety that Krebs talks of – the preserved foods, which signify, more often than not, a departure from the customs of an Indian home where most of the eatable items are cooked fresh by convention, including the famously simple Indian bread known as the *chapathi*. The second section of this paper will relate these issues to Lahiri’s short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Food, Sex/ Sexuality

In his essay “Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective”, Robin Fox (2015) has included a section on “Food as Seduction” analyzing food’s association with sex and sexuality (p. 11-12). Fox begins the section invoking the analogy between the praying mantis, a species whose female devours its male partner after mating for nutrition, and human beings, who more or less expect its males “to make some show of feeding to be acceptable” (p. 11). In fact, Fox argues that “The males and females of all species...seem to be involved in this mating gamble with food as the bait” (p. 11). Fox finds food and sex “closely linked”, as “[t]hey are physically linked in the limbic system of the brain, which controls emotional activity generally” (p. 11). It is for this association probably the ascetics prohibit gluttony or any pleasure of the food. However, Fox holds that for production the female needs provisioning, especially during the suckling period, and as a natural response to this need, for the female of our species, “a male’s willingness to provide food” becomes an important index of his suitability as a mate” (p. 11). Fox has also mapped the male-female courtship through the choice of setting for food: first date – a crowded public place like disco or bar. The second date moves to a restaurant where the male pays the bill showing his eligibility and the next setting comes when the couple decides between “your place or mine” for love-making which is closely followed by a breakfast, and if the relationship gets serious “the next important ceremonial meal is likely to be with her family” (p. 11). Fox ends the section by invoking the example of “the film *Tom Jones*, where the marvelously sensual meal becomes both a prelude to, and an analogue of, intercourse” (p. 12). The analogy between food/ eating and sex/ sexuality is not infrequent in academic and critical discourses, however. Malthus, for instance holds that

“[t]he most powerful of all desires is the desire for food, closely followed by the passion between the sexes” (as cited in Zwart, 2000, p. 121). In the second volume of *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault holds that in ancient times “food ethics was no less prominent than, and existed side by side with, sexual ethics and medical ethics...” (as cited in Zwart, 2000, p. 114). Lahiri’s stories and novels invoke this association subtly on several occasions, as we will see in the second section of this paper.

Exile

As we speak of food, the word ‘home’ keeps appearing at regular intervals, because ‘food’ serves as a bridge between the state of exile and the ‘home’ the migrant characters of Lahiri left behind. In fact, the issue of ‘exile’ is unavoidable in dealing with the literature of the diaspora, because “...a whole genre of twentieth century literature is ‘extraterritorial’, a literature by and about exiles, symbolizing the age of the refugees” (Steiner as cited in Said, 2001, p. 174). The state of exile is compelling rather than convenient, because, as Edward Said has aptly observed, exile is in no way “a matter of choice: you are born into it, or it happens to you” (p. 184). That is exactly so, as exile, although one kind of dislocation in being “a consequence of [both] willing or unwilling movement from a known to an unknown location” (Ashcroft et al 2004, p. 73), is markedly different from other such similar states, like the one of refugee or of an expatriate or that of an émigré. The distinction of exile from the other forms of dislocation is perceived by Said. According to Said, exile stands out for carrying with it “a touch of solitude and spirituality” (p. 181). The exile also stands out for suffering under the constraint of an unwilling movement from home, which is unlike an expatriate who is definitely dislocated by choice; and the exile is, also, considerably different from an émigré, who ‘may’ have been dislocated by choice as well (Said, 2001, p. 181). Beginning his edition of *The Oxford Book of Exile* (1995) with the Biblical episode of God’s banishment of Adam and Eve from Paradise resulting in mankind’s perpetual exile on earth, John Simpson states the obvious to probe deeper into the collective experience of exile:

Each of us is an exile: the thought is a hackneyed one, but it still retains a little force. We are exiles from our mother’s womb, from our childhood, from private happiness, from peace, even if we are not exiles in the more conventional sense of the word. The feeling of looking back for the last time, of setting our face to a new and possibly hostile world is one we all know. It is the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added expression to an inner fact. (p. vii)

Simpson’s view on exile as a universal experience amplifies the scope for analyzing the note of sadness that runs through Lahiri’s fiction notwithstanding the difference that, according to Said, exists between someone who is displaced by choice and someone who is not. Lahiri’s stories, as though, would gaze at a gray zone between the so called ‘choice’ and ‘unwillingness’, as the infinite complexities of a human mind will playfully topple the hierarchy that Said creates by romanticizing the state of an unwilling mover. Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* explicitly manifests the pangs Said speaks of when her characters are exiles. But, at the same time, Lahiri’s characters resist the strait-jacketing of terminologies like ‘expatriates’ and ‘émigrés’ by bringing into play a cultural context not entirely familiar to the theorists of the arena; for instance – the Indian marriage that always puts a woman in exile, without ever acknowledging it. It is possible, because in India (or in the East) the marriage is supposedly done with the consent of the woman, although the displacement – as a given consequence of a marriage – is covered up by the heavy machineries of patriarchy running clandestinely right from the birth of a girl-child through even lullabies, folk-

tales and rhymes. Lahiri's fiction shows the suffering the characters in exile undergo in countless ways, and, as in the case of Mrs. Sen, sometimes they reflect powerfully through food-motifs.

Home

The significance of home and homelessness in the context of the migrants' lives is at once acknowledged in what Krisnendu Ray writes in his *The Migrant's Table* (2004): "We are forever mired in polarities of dread and desire for home and homelessness" (Intro). Although considered to be a complex blend of language, custom, climate, landscape, people, history and probably many more things, the concept of 'home' has become further complicated due to the mass movements of people caused by the globalization and the formation of diaspora. Benzi Zhang in her article "The Politics of Re-Homing: Asian Diaspora Poetry in Canada" (2004) has problematized the concept of 'home' in relation to the diaspora. According to Zhang, 'home', for the diaspora, is no longer fixated in space or time, and the diaspora's pain is not a direct result of its 'dehomming' but an expression of its 're-homing' desires: a perpetual throe for the imaginary. "Reconfigured between fact and fantasy", Zhang writes, home "is no longer a closed familiar place, but rather a dialectic sphere open to crossroads, or a shifting terrain related to far-away memories, or an ahistorical moment that has both passed and not yet arrived" (p. 105). Much of Lahiri's fiction will dwell on these issues, and much of these concerns will reflect through her characters' penchant for food, feasting and eating, as we will see in the following section.

II

Interpreter of Maladies

The descriptions of food often have within them subtle hints of sexuality. It is not particularly extraordinary, as Supriya Chaudhury (2011) points out that "gastronomic and sexual appetites are frequently fused together in literary evocations of eating" (p. xiii). Food's association with sexuality is there for obvious reason as sex and food, Mary Douglas (2014) points out, have both social and biological components combined into it (p. 61). In the food the migrant pines after Chaudhuri (2011) also sees his/her homeland which is 'always out of reach' (p. x-xi). Jhumpa Lahiri's first published collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), manifest both these aspects of literary representation of food. Out of the nine stories contained in this collection "A Temporary Matter", "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", "Interpreter of Maladies", "A Real Durwan", "Mrs Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent" are especially important for their references to food and eating.

"One thing that made him feel productive"

The collection opens up with "A Temporary Matter" which is a story about a young couple – Shoba and Shukumar by name – drifting away from each other after Shoba gives birth to a still born. Strangely the growing estrangement and increasing silence between the couple allow a proportionate increase in Shukumar of a knack for cooking. "Shukumar enjoyed cooking now", because "It was the one thing that made him feel productive" (Lahiri 1999, p. 8). The growing attention to food also covers up the way the home the couple once chose to be together in is falling apart. And behind the silence and pretensions of togetherness Shoba, Shukumar finds out later, has been looking for an apartment to settle down without Shukumar. With the revelation of Shoba's intention food and cooking turn out to be little more than an illusion that sustained

Shukumar till truth forced its way to him through a confession-game they play during evenings of temporary power-cuts caused by a snow-storm. Throughout the story the reader shares with Shukumar his utter discomfort in sharing a home with Shoba. The feeling is so strong in Shukumar that he takes shelter in a part of the house which is the least likely to be visited by Shoba: the room where they planned to put their baby. Shukumar's cooking spree is a desperate attempt at covering up this unease in living.

"Knowing a land and/or a country means tasting it"

In "When MrPirzada Came to Dine" an émigré from the erstwhile East Pakistan, Mrpirzada, seeks the warmth of home in his frequent visits as a guest to a Bengali family. The family consists of a couple and a child. The friendship among the three adults is seen through the eyes of the little girl of the house, Lilia. Although culturally undistinguishable, the three adults, Lilia is told by her father, are from two different countries: India and East Pakistan. The latter within the course of the story emerges as a new nation called Bangladesh. In her effort to figure out the difference between her parents and Mr. Pirzada, Lilia is distracted in her studies at school library and leaving her project she finds books on Pakistan and studies them:

I returned to the blond-wood shelves, to a section I had noticed labeled "Asia". I saw books about China, India, Indonesia, Korea. Eventually I found a book titled *Pakistan: A Land and Its People*...I began turning the pages, filled with photos of rivers and rice fields and men in military uniforms. There was a chapter about Dacca, and I began to read about its rainfall, and its jute production. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 33)

Interestingly, Lilia's awakening of the consciousness of the cartographic space can be linked with her eating a piece of candy every night, which she does as part of her prayer for the wellbeing of the family of Mr. Pirzada. The gradual melting of the chocolate in her mouth may well be a metaphor for knowledge unfolding, as "Knowing a land and/ or a country", writes Lorenzo Pavolini, " means tasting it, savoring it...In this literary assonance between knowing and savoring, tasting and creating, enjoying food and enjoying speech, is to be found the inner nature of our outlook" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 50).

Call of the exotic, the quirky

"Interpreter of Maladies" depicts a young diasporic couple consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Das visiting India, their ancestral land, with their three children. Though they belong to the second generation diaspora in the USA, they appear hardly distinguishable from any other foreign tourists to their tour-guide-cum-driver, Mr. Kapasi. Food as a metaphor is in operation here as well, although with a lesser number of references in comparison to the stories set in America. Food, in this story, can be divided into two categories: food from Indian origin and food which are not. The gum the children chew is of the latter category as is the coffee, the preparation of which leads Mrs. Das to an adulterous sexual union with her husband's friend from India, ultimately resulting in her bearing a child by him. The Punjabi friend of her husband "made love to her swiftly, in silence, with an expertise she had never known..." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 64). This fascination for the unfamiliar (represented by the unknown Punjabi) corresponds with Mrs. Das's strange pull for the puffed rice she keeps munching all through the story especially when this food is not considered as a delicacy in India and is more of a cheap food for the plebian. Perhaps, it's the quirkiness of this food that draws her to it and charms her, just as that extramarital sexual experience did "without the meaningful expressions and smiles Raj [her husband] always insisted on afterwards" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 64). This story with its undercurrent of sexuality right from the

start (with Mrs. Das's Shaved legs seen through Kapasi's eyes, the eve-teasing of hers in a roadside stall, Kapasi's thoughts on his frustrating sexual life with his wife, the sexually charged symbol of the monkey recurring sometimes amazing and sometimes threatening the group and finally the secrets revealed before Kapasi about the adultery) has a kind of unsettling/ disturbing charm to it which is quite unlike the other stories of the collection. Apart from adultery the story has as its central theme the discomfort Mrs. Das carries within her, something she expects to be cured by Kapasi. The naïve expectation of Mrs. Das from Kapasi propels us to assume that Kapasi may here be symbolic of the 'home', reaching which can allay all discomfort and sickness.

"Gustatory nostalgia"

"A Real Durwan" is about an old pauper woman (Called Boorima), who resides in the stairs of a multi-storied apartment inhabited mostly by petty-minded lower-middle-class people of different ilk. The woman is an exilic who was forced to leave her native land and re-locate to Calcutta by the infamous partition of India in 1947. As a result of that the exilic traits are manifest in her character without any ambiguity. Her reminiscences of the past are full of exaggerations that tickle her audience and sometimes irritate them as well. Interestingly, most of her rumination is related to food and feasting, grand as they used to be in "those days" exposing a tendency which is quite natural in an exiled person like Boorima, as Holtzman (2006) terms this tendency as "gustatory nostalgia" or "food-centered nostalgia [which] is a recurring theme in studies of diasporic or expatriate populations" (p. 367). The exaggeration in it is quite natural, because "[w]illfulness, exaggeration, overstatement: these are characteristic style of being an exile..." (Said, 2001, p. 182). The old lady is, however, evicted from the apartment when she is caught in the cross-fire of petty quarrels and jealousy among its dwellers. Against the backdrop of the destitution of the exile of Boorima, the story exposes the hypocrisy and meanness of the lower-middle class urban people.

"Dehoming and rehoming"

The use of food as a metaphor in "Mrs. Sen's" is stronger than most of the other stories in the collection. Irma Maini, in her article "The Politics of Home and Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*" (2007) has restricted her analysis within two stories of the collection: "Mrs. Sen's" and "When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine". Maini finds in the displaced house-wife of Mr. Sen, a university professor, an erosion of identity leading to a lack of self-worth in Mrs. Sen, a troubling feeling that makes her grope for means that may restore them. Cooking for her is that means:

Lacking a sense of identity in this new country, it is vitally important for her to hold on to her memories of a time when she was somebody. However, instead of just remembering the past, Mrs Sen uses the past to give meaning to the present by preparing and cooking foods of her native Bengal...Cooking is one activity Mrs Sen takes pride in; this is what gives her a measure of self-worth in a country that sees her as an outsider. (Maini, 2007, p. 158)

Maini has pointed out how through food her political state within the American society as a "cultural outsider" is accentuated. And hence, for Maini, cooking to Mrs Sen is a reaction to this experience of exclusion. In Kalyan Chatterjee's "The Representation of Fish in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Mrs Sen's': A Study in Exile" (2011), however, Mrs Sen's cooking is more a response to her state of exile from home than her inability to blend in or find self-worth in America. In this essay,

Chatterjee has principally focused on ‘fish’ as a metaphor for home for this exilic character, pointing out the apparently great amount of emotion invested upon the food. Fish and rice being the quintessential part of the Bengali life she misses and ruminates before the little American boy Eliot, Mrs Sen tries to construct home through cooking them; especially the fish. The desperation that drives her to do something she detests the most, namely driving a car, is unaccountable unless we accept that fish (she was driving to get fish from a faraway market) is more than a mere food item to her. It is emblematic of home she is estranged from under compulsion of an Indian marriage that comes with compulsory dislocation of a woman from one’s own home. Food and cooking in this story again, thus, bring out the unease of living in an adopted land.

Measuring time with “each meal” eaten

“The Third and Final Continent” is a nostalgic rumination of the journey undertaken by the narrator from India to America through England, covering virtually three continents. The struggle, success and transformation that he went through are at the center of the story, and it is interesting to note that food all through this course of his journey has been a marker of his state of being. His days of austerity, his acquaintance with a new world, his gradual progress toward solvency are marked by his eating habits. Even the honeymoon is, among other ventures, an exploration for places that sold fish or bay leaves and cloves. Quite normal again, as “the gustatory [is] central to the creation of memory, ranging from the sensory clues the shops evoke, the cultural mnemonics of the commodities purchased, and how the goods acquired allow for practices that foster historically validated forms of identity” (Holtzman, 2006, p. 367). The story ends on a note of amazement at the recollection of the journey (that is life) undertaken; and, again, time spent on this course is measured with, among other things, meals eaten. The metaphor of food, thus, asserts its presence all through this collection of short stories by negotiating the pangs of homelessness through representations of food, cooking, feasting, eating and not eating.

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Kalyan Chatterjee is Assistant Professor of English in the WBES and is at present the Head of the Department of English at Government General Degree College, Manbazar-II, Purulia, West Bengal. Previously, he was the head of the Department of English at Jhargram Raj College and Government General Degree College, Singur, Hooghly and served as Assistant Professor of English at Hooghly Mohsin College and as Lecturer in English at Sri Ramkrisna Sarada Vidya Mahapith, Kamarpukur, Hooghly. He received his Ph.D. Degree for his research work on the writings of Jean Rhys from the University of Burdwan.
