FOOD AND IDENTITY IN WORKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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Abstract
Much has been said and written about the nature of identity construction in diasporic communities. This paper explores this area through the otherwise ignored category of food as a symbol through which members of a diasporic community relate to concepts of nationality, ethnicity and belonging. In the process, it focuses on two short stories – “Mrs.Sen’s” from the Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri and “Orbiting” from Middleman and Other Stories by Bharati Mukherjee. Finally, it problematizes the issue of identity construction and looks at the phenomenon whereby ethnic foodways are relegated to the status of exoticised commodities.

Food and Identity in Works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee
The changing dynamics of global diasporic communities have been the loci of several anthropological, political, sociological and literary studies. Coupled with diasporic fiction, this has resulted in the formation of an entire corpus of postcolonial writings centred around the themes of exile, migration and immigration. An appropriation of the process of construction of individual and collective identities within diasporas has been a primary concern of this body of literature.

Studies of diaspora call for a revaluation of the notions of homeland, nation, and ethnicity, the co-ordinates that define identity formation in diasporic communities. Homi Bhabha, one of the foremost theorists in this field, believes that the migrant experience is a form of “half-life” since migrants repeat the pattern of their lives albeit in a disruptive time sphere (139). This peculiar “doubling” of time wherein the past functions not just as a source of nostalgia but also as a force that redefines “cultural contemporaneity” becomes a characteristic feature of the migrant experience (4). This doubling also informs the rift between nationalist pedagogy and performativity i.e. people of a nation exist in two dimensions for the purposes of studying the process of nation building – firstly, as objects shaped by primordial and predetermined ideas of nation that originated in the past, and secondly, as subjects who continuously redefine the concept of nation through their daily acts of intervention. People of a nation are therefore both affected by pre-ordained historical notions of nationhood and responsible for creating contemporary perspectives shaped by the “recursive strategy of the performative” (Bhabha 145).

Identity formation in diasporic communities
Within the framework of ethnicity, Stuart Hall asserts that identity formation is contingent on the interaction between an individual’s psyche and the power structures that affect it. He goes on to say that this process is never complete resulting in the formation of subjects “in-process” (3). Christie Karner builds on his ideas and asserts that ethnicity enters into everyday life by furnishing different ways of seeing and structures of action and feeling through which an individual negotiates with his or her surroundings (73). Consequently, multiple ethnic frameworks intersect and overlap in complex ways resulting in the emergence of hybrid identities. Therefore, diasporic identities are not rigidly defined or pre-ordained, instead, they are forged by the interplay of cultural, social, economic and political factors.

Several theories have been proposed regarding the dynamics of identity formation within the sphere of ethnicity in diasporic communities. The essentialist or primordialist approach emphasises the role played by biological aspects like skin colour, facial features and cultural aspects like myths, legends, food, dress etc. as tokens through which an ethnic identity is maintained. The psychological approach studies the association between people and the cultural attributes mentioned above including a common history, folklore and other binding signs. On the other hand, the instrumentalist approach believes that the desire behind maintaining ethnic identity is grounded in very practical concerns which are divorced from any sentimental or essentialist moorings (Sheffer 18). Finally, the approach that seems to have gained academic currency in the recent past is the constructivist approach, premised primarily on Benedict Anderson’s definition of a nation as an “imagined political community” (6). This approach destabilises traditional notions of nationhood, replacing them with the idea that a nation is an artefact of modernity that gained momentum at the end of the eighteenth century. This concept of the nation as an abstract, imagined entity has been used to study ethno-national diasporas; in fact, Anderson even coined the term “long distance nationalism” to study the phenomenon. However, one has to synthesise select elements from all these approaches to study the finer nuances of a diasporic community.

This paper will attempt to study this complex framework within which individual identities are forged in diasporic communities. More specifically, it will study tokenistic symbols through which this process is mediated to represent a particular set of values related to nationhood, ethnicity, religion etc. If one accepts that members of a diasporic community try to recreate an idea of their homeland by holding on to a certain set of cultural symbols, the nature of this process needs to be problematized.

Role of food in South Asian diasporic literature

Study of foodways and food habits has been a major practice in the fields of sociology and anthropology. Claude Levi-Strauss posited the concept of the “culinary triangle” which studies three different ways of cooking food – boiling, roasting and smoking – and places them within the dynamics of nature v/s culture. Mary Douglas in her essay titled “Deciphering a Meal” analyses the contents and nature of a meal to look for a specific ‘pattern of social relations’. According to Douglas, a meal encodes a message about “different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transaction across boundaries” (61).
However, food studies hasn’t emerged as a prominent area of research within literary academic circles. James. W. Brown, in 1984, was one of the first literary critics to study culinary symbols in nineteenth century French literature. It is only in the recent past that food studies has emerged as an important discipline in postcolonial criticism and critics are focussing on foodways and patterns of consumption as important signifiers of race, ethnicity and nationality in literature emerging from diasporic communities.

Food practices are now being studied both as material indicators of the lived migrant experience and means through which migrants create an imaginary homeland. On the one hand, foodways and patterns of consumption are symbolic of material concerns like class, race, gender etc. while on the other hand, they are tokens through which migrants relate to their ethnic and cultural origins. Besides this, foodways are also reflective of the historical and social journeys undertaken by members of different diasporic communities. For instance, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong asserts that “alimentary images…symbolize Necessity – all the hardships, deprivations, origins. Besides this, foodways are also reflective of the historical and social journeys suffered as immigrants and minorities in a white-dominated country” (20).

In the backdrop of South Asian diasporic culture, food often becomes a visible symbol of ethnic otherness, a means of registering difference and alterity. The notorious smell of Indian curry has been utilised as a trope that marginalises immigrants in several modes of popular culture. At the same time, a sizeable portion of South Asian immigrants make their living through food either by opening Indian restaurants or grocery stores. Thus, food simultaneously defines them as the Other and gives them a sense of selfhood in terms of financial stability. This gives rise to a peculiar dynamic where foodways can be used to study the politics of difference within a multicultural setting. Having said as much, it is also important to question if the status of food has been reduced to a marketable commodity whose value is its fetishized exoticism.

Short stories written by authors of South Asian American origin like Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee prove to be fertile grounds for the practice of literary food studies. Laura Ahn Williams believes that food reflects character’s poverty (both monetary and emotional) and isolation in Lahiri’s first collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies* (70). In the story titled “Mrs. Sen’s”, food functions as an atavistic link to memories of home for Mrs. Sen, the wife of a university professor who has recently migrated to America. Throughout the story, her name is never revealed and she exists simply as the wife of Mr. Sen, who, as she repeatedly mentions, “teaches mathematics at the university” (Lahiri 112). It is only through the acts of procuring authentic Bengali ingredients and cooking a traditional, sumptuous meal that she substantiates her existence. Lahiri goes to great length to describe the intricate details involved in the preparation of meals and the ceremonious value attached to them. For Mrs. Sen, food provides not only gastronomic but emotional nutrition as it invokes memories of her homeland and her family.

Irrespective of the central role played by food in her life, she feels the need to hide all signs of her culinary activities in the public sphere. For instance, when she chops vegetables using a traditional Bengali knife, she ensures that Eliot is a safe distance away. When it is time for Eliot’s mother to pick him up, all signs of cooking and slicing of vegetables are carefully removed from the room. In other words, she consciously makes an attempt to hide any indicators...
of foreignness and difference. In an instance where a bus driver questions her about the smell coming from the fish she is carrying in her bag, she is made to feel like a racial other and she pledges never to take the bus ride again. At the end of the story, as Anita Mannur puts it, Mrs. Sen “returns to a world where she negotiates the pangs of loneliness and alienation that she feels as a woman with no real community located far away from her family” (160).

Lahiri uses food as a metaphor to articulate one of the central dynamics of diasporic literature – the tension between the instinct to preserve ethnicity in the private realm and the need to assimilate in the public realm. A similar opinion is articulated by another South Asian author, Monica Ali in her more recent book titled Brick Lane. One of the novel’s characters, Mrs. Azad says that “If I want to come home and eat curry, that’s my business. Some women spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English” (Ali 114). Clearly, one can see the transformation in the subjectivity of immigrants that has taken place over a course of four decades which is the interval between the temporal settings of the two works in question. Lahiri bases “Mrs. Sen’s” in America of the 1960s when America hadn’t embraced the tenets of multiculturalism and the sense of alienation felt by immigrants was more pronounced than it is today while Ali’s novel portrays London of 2001 where a character like Mrs. Azad can afford to be unapologetic about her hyphenated existence. This is not to say that immigrants in the 21st century do not feel any anxiety but the way they choose to mediate with their status as immigrants undergoes a considerable change.

In fact, more contemporary diasporic writing seems to portray a growing level of comfort with the exhibition of immigrants’ cultural moorings as these begin to gain acceptance within the society. However, this seemingly harmonious model of assimilation still falls under the purview of suspicion. For instance, the central protagonist Rindy, in Bharati Mukherjee’s short story titled “Orbiting” from her collection Middleman and Other Stories, sees her boyfriend Roashan’s body in a new light when he slices the Thanksgiving turkey into perfectly sculpted pieces. Roashan or Ro is an immigrant from Afghanistan who lives in a neighbourhood called Little Kabul and is saving money to attend New Jersey Institute of Technology. In the meantime, he earns his living by butchering chickens, a profession which engenders images of abject violence. For Rindy, Ro becomes beautiful primarily because he comes from a “culture of pain” (Mukherjee 73); for her, Ro is a “chance to heal the world” (Mukherjee 74). Clearly, the immigrant becomes subject to the exotic gaze of the Americans as markers of ethnicity are fetishized. This leads to the disturbing possibility that cultural tokens like food could become subject to a fetishizing process which turns “cultures of the non-Western world into saleable exotic objects” (Huggan 10)

Exoticisation of the postcolonial

Over the past decade, the contours of the post-colonial as a conceptual category have undergone a significant transformation. This section of the paper will study the phenomenon wherein cultural difference becomes an exotic commodity in a global capital driven market. More specifically, it will focus on how food has matured (or not) as a symbol of cultural and ethnic belonging and the ramifications of such a transformation.

In the field of culinary studies, Frank Chin has coined the term “food pornography” to signify the practice by which people make a living by exploiting the exotic appeal of their ethnic foodways.
In other words, immigrants make a deliberate effort to exaggerate the foreignness of their cuisine for several reasons – to make material profits and to seek assimilation within the dominant discourse. However, even if this assimilation is achieved, it fails to destabilise hierarchies as an immigrant still remains the ‘other’ in many ways. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong comments that even as cultural practices are glorified to highlight ethnic differences, the phenomenon is disturbing because it divorces cultural practices out of their contexts which are then displayed to gain approval from white patrons (56). According to her, this produces a version of culture which has been “domesticated, ‘detoxed’, depoliticised, made safe for recreational consumption” (56).

Anita Mannur studies fusion cookbooks to articulate a somewhat similar concept. She problematizes issues of assimilation and cultural hybridity by questioning the apparent palatability of difference. She suggests that even as food is the most palatable of cultural differences, it might not translate to an experiential change in the lives of immigrants. According to her, fusion cuisine is “enacted in the cultural realm, where mixing is always only ephemeral and not capable of transforming the structural nature of race in the United States. Differences are rendered palatable, easily consumed and digested” (193).

These developments suggest the emergence of a commodifying process which markets cultural difference as an exoticised and fetishized product. Graham Huggan believes that the aesthetic value of cultural difference is measured in terms of the exotic appeal of ethno-cultural commodities (13). Huggan defines the exotic as a “semiotic circuit that operates between the poles of strangeness and familiarity” (13). The exotic, then, is a double edged sword – while it highlights cultural difference instead of suppressing it, the process of assimilation is never complete as the attribute of foreignness needs to be preserved. Under this rubric, a commodity undergoes what Arjun Appadurai calls the “aesthetic of decontextualisation” (28) whereby the value of an exotic artefact is premised on its removal from its cultural context.

Within this context, one needs to reassess the role played by cultural tokens in recent diasporic fiction. One needs to question if their potential as cultural markers has been compromised by their fetishism. In other words, have they been decontextualized to a point where they have become empty stereotypes incapable of articulating any ethno-cultural value for immigrants? Instead of functioning as a means of asserting ethnic identity, does food become a fetishized commodity that ensures the survival of a frivolous multicultural model which fails to address the deeper concerns of cultural assimilation.

This question is of paramount importance as it anticipates a bigger concern in the field of postcolonial literary production. To understand this concern, it is imperative to draw a distinction between postcolonialism and postcoloniality. Ella Shohat hints at this difference in the essay titled “Notes on the Post-Colonial” and it is later elucidated by several postcolonial critics. Even as a definition of postcolonialism remains ambiguous at best, it can be understood as a means of literary resistance against colonialism. Postcoloniality, on the other hand, is more difficult to define. Huggan describes it as a system of symbolic and material exchange in which the language of resistance may be manipulated (6). Postcoloniality is involved in a value-regulating system whereby forms of cultural production are ascribed a place in the global capitalist marketplace. According to Huggan, postcoloniality underscores the emancipatory agenda of
postcolonialism and the two are so intricately related that the dissent articulated by postcolonialism has itself become a commodified entity.

Significantly, the process of exoticization hasn’t been limited to cultural commodities, instead, postcolonial cultural criticism has become indistinguishable from commodity fetishism, in the words of Aijaz Ahmad (217), who is one of the strongest critics of what he calls an “opportunistic kind of Third-Worldism” (86). According to Ahmad, this has given rise to a body of self-serving postcolonial intellectuals who align their intellectual activity in accordance with the dominant course in Western metropolitan universities. Extending a similar argument to the field of fiction, Huggan questions if authors of diasporic fiction are affected by the prevailing trends in criticism, and if their role has been reduced to that of “bonafide cultural representatives” (26).

Based on these developments, it is possible to argue that the literary genre of postcolonialism seems to have undergone a similar phenomenon as have cultural tokens – both started off as being significant indicators of ethnic identity, as means by which immigrants could mediate their cultural and national belonging and assert their subjectivity. Yet, the exoticization of marginality itself under the forces of the global capitalist marketplace and the postcolonial intelligentsia made way for a situation where their potential as instruments of dissent and resistance might have been seriously undermined.

Works Cited


