



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

‘FOOD’, AN ELIXIR OF HUMAN MALADIES

Malavika Suresh

Guest Lecturer

I.H.R.D. College of Engineering, Kottarakara, Kerala, India

Abstract

Food as a theme is universally accepted, unique and unparalleled. It is acclaimed as lifesaver. Food has no nationality, caste and Religion or colour difference. It is loved and cherished by the young and old and the rich and poor equally. Hunger, the most dominant human emotion is influenced by food and it can compel people to commit murder. History is replete with stories of wars for having fought among countries for securing food. The reference to food is in abundance in our classics and mythology and still that tradition is being followed. Famous writers have given due prominence to food in their writings. The writer Jhumpa Lahiri is no exception to this. She is a well-known American writer who won the Pulitzer prize for fiction in the year 2000. The Interpreter of Maladies (1999) is her debut collection of short stories. It has been divided into seven chapters. The first section of the paper deals with food and its universal implications. The second section deals with how food works in different contexts and its wide ranging effects.

Keywords: Food, Indian Culture, Indian American Diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri,

Introduction

“Eat, Drink and Be Merry, for Tomorrow you Die”.

-Epicurus (371-270 BC)

This famous philosophy of Epicurus often reminds me of the purpose of life. Why do we live? What is its sole purpose? Is leading a successful life means no hardships, no worries, successful bondings and commitments. Well, I think it's a choice. But before food, we don't have any choice. Because food is an emotion. As Epicurus held that, the senses are the source of all our ideas and one can undoubtedly say that the only magic that can appeal to our senses is food. Food is about enjoyment, the perfect combination of odour, flavour, colour, texture, adding up to an experience that both satisfies our hunger and pleases our sense. That craving and intense desire for delicious food can make you mad sometimes. The image of a drooling chocolate will make you think like “How delicious and crazy figure it is”. So food is all about memories, traditions, love, compassion, and sometimes hatred too. It can give you glimpses about the lovely food prepared by our mothers and grandmothers pouring their love which makes us feel like a drooling chocolate. It brings you the pleasures that you need and even helps you forget your pain. Food should be tasted like a medicine. Because it has the healing power. And most importantly that healing power doesn't work in every human being. One's consciousness or sense of mind or attitude towards food is very crucial in determining whether a certain food item works in your system. A person who eat food with love and compassion and if he enjoys it, then he needs not much and works on his system effectively. Hence attitude towards food is also important. Food is a ritual and god itself. The only god who is really sustaining, giving life, existence is food. When we dine with our family, we thank god for providing us good food. We bow our heads before food for providing us what our body and mind need. Every element in the universe is sacrificing and uniting for providing nourishment for our families. It is giving our life for our sake. It's what yogis says 'oneness of the universe'. And that unique oneness is the backbone of family bondings. People share mostly share their emotions, feelings, attachments, detachments, friendships, love and compassion when they dine with their family. Sometimes crucial decisions will be taken during a dinner time. Such is the magical power of food. If you eat something you love the most when you are frustrated then it will turn things around.

Food is a string which is connecting and linking various frameworks. And this is the reason why food becomes a common metaphor in many books. It is very commonly used in literature as symbols, metaphors, because it is a familiar common universal substance that is recognizable and understandable when used as representation. It represents religion, family, relationships, social status, cultural practices, wealth, sexuality and power as well. When food is depicted in literary works, it worked like “stream of consciousness”. Usually writers employ this technique to describe the happenings in the flow of thoughts in the minds of the characters. It provides readers with clear cut

visual images and helps them understand their characters inner workings of their mind and exposed their true identities. With the depiction of the food, the inner probing's of their characters mind came out easily.

The portrayal of food in books reminds me of bible. We have a lot of references for food in bible especially, 'last supper'. Jesus sharing his last supper with disciples is symbolic of the love and concern that is shared between people. Jesus and his disciples drank wine and ate unleavened bread. And this has become a tradition among Christians. The practice of taking communion originated at the last supper. So food has something to do with the culture as well. The tradition of drinking wine and gathering together continued in the breathtaking works of Plato and Shakespeare. Plato's "*symposium*" (385-370BC) literally means "drinking together"/ a drinking party. A banquet is conducted at symposium. In a banquet, we can see sparkling plates, bowls, cups, spoons and varieties of food as well. So, men who wish to attend a banquet can drink as much as they like, can speak those secrets which one can't reveal in front of a huge crowd, can sing music and can do whatever one likes to do. So in "*symposium*", the host has challenged the men to deliver a speech in praise of love. And symposium simply points out that one can't simply ignore the integral part of food in life. Food can make you confess your unrevealed desires. And when it comes to Shakespeare's "*As you Like It*" (1623) things are different. Hunger and thirst sometimes moves man into an unstable state. During duke seniors feasting party, Orlando threatens to kill him with his sword if they don't give him food. He threatened Jacques also and behaved in a rude manner towards duke senior. But he apologised for his improper behaviour and they shared their tasty and delicious lunch. He thanked them for nourishing. One can live without love, without dress, without culture. But cant without food. Because food defines who you are and what you are.

Lewis Carrol's "*Alice in Wonderland*" (1865), Virginia Woolf's "*To the Lighthouse*" (1927), Kenneth Graham's "*The Wind in the Willows*"(1908), Maurice Sendak's "*In the Night Kitchen*" (1970) are works which got its fame through the depiction of food. Even though food is not a usual theme in literature, very recently it began to be recognized. In most of the works, food is used as a vehicle to convey certain emotions, to dramatize certain states of harmony and disharmony, limitations, bonding's, rituals, desires, behaviour and so on.

As discussed earlier that food is not an entity that is enclosed in a single discourse. But it's a chain of different discourses. Every countries culture is represented by their food. Like that, the culture represented by the food in the American context is different from that of Indian. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "*Mistress of Spices*" (1997), Amit Majmudar's "*The Abundance*"(2013), Anita Desai's "*Fasting, Feasting*"(1999), Arundathi Roy's "*The God of Small Things*"(1997) handles themes which is different from those literary works produced by American writers.

'Food', How it Pervades all Human Relationships, the Reliever of Tensions

In Indian context, kitchen is a boundary which is handled by women only. Preserving and serving food by women is considered as a tool for gaining independence and a solution for the oppression and empowerment as well. At the same time it helps to define the role of women in the family. The kitchen area reflects positive and healthy relationship between husband and wife, mother and daughter etc. a perfectly cooked breakfast or lunch or dinner is a clear representation of her love towards her husband. And in some books we can see that women cook food for pleasing her husband and for gaining his attention. And such scenes are very usual in the Indian context. But if it is done by a man to please his woman, then it's more than unusual. '**A Temporary Matter**', the first chapter in Jhumpa Lahiri's "*Interpreter of Maladies*" (1999) discusses the detached life of Shoba and Shukumar. Even though they are husband and wife they are living like strangers, until the notice informed them that there will be temporary electricity cut off for an hour for five days. The reason behind such strangeness between them is that because she lost her baby. And her doctor revealed that she would not be able to have children in the future. Since then Shoba became mentally and physically detached from her husband. Even dining together has become an illusion in their life.

For months now they'd served themselves from the stove, and he'd taken his plate into his study, letting the meal grow cold on his desk before shoving it into his mouth without pause, while Shoba took her plate to the living room and watched game shows, or proofread files with her arsenal of coloured pencils at hand (8).

After Shoba's desperative condition, it was Shukumar who took the initiative in cooking. And their cookbook descriptions even revealed about the first time they had eaten the dish together.

He combed through her cookbooks every afternoon, following her pencilled instructions to use two tea teaspoons of ground coriander seeds instead of one, or red lentils instead of yellow. Each of the recipes was dated, telling the first time they had eaten the dish together. April 2, cauliflower with fennel. January 14, chicken with almonds and sultanas. He had no memory of meals, and yet there they were, recorded in her neat proof-readers hand. Shukumar enjoyed cooking now. It was the one thing that made him feel productive (7).

On the first day of power cut, Shukumar was busy in arranged a royal dinner. He went to the kitchen and brought the plates and arranged them on the table. He lit the candle and breaks out a bottle of wine. Shoba was very surprised to see him preparing special food items for her and she complimented and thanked him. It was during these power cuts that they talked a lot and their intimacy became

stronger. Shoba began coming home early after work. They began to plan in advance what they would talk during the meetings during power cut. Through this the writer tries to tell us how their relationship as husband and wife became intimate while sharing food and the vital role that food can play in human relationships.

The difficulty faced by the immigrants in terms of food is something not casual. And this notion is well portrayed in the second chapter "**Mr. Pirzada came to Dine**". The title character Mr.Pirzada belongs to Dacca community which was once part of India. But when Pakistan was engaged in civil war, Dacca had be invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistan army. And the other characters in the same chapter are Indians who had migrated to America. Mr.Pirzada dines with the family almost every day. When 'Lilia', the daughter of the Indian parents preparing a glass for Mr.Pirzada, her father enquired about it. And she replied "A glass for the bottle Indian man" (28). Her father corrected her by saying that "Mr.Pirzada is no longer considered Indian" (28). But Lilia finds it hard to recognize the difference between her parents and Mr.Pirzada and this is very clear when she says

Mr.Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr.Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, and drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea (25).

Even though Lilia is a small child, she understands the meaning of food much better than her parents. And her thought simply points towards the fact that before food there are no boundaries, no barriers and no obstacles. The concern and love is all that matters at the end. What really hooks in one's mind when reading this chapter is Lilia's act of storing candies which she got from Mr.Pirzada because for her it's kind of treasure.

It was inappropriate, in my opinion, to consume the candy Mr.Pirzada gave me in a casual manner. I coveted each evenings treasure as I would a jewel, or a coin from a buried kingdom, and I would place it in a small keepsake box made of carved sandalwood beside my bed, in which, long ago in India, my father's mother used to store the ground areca nuts she ate after morning bath. It was my only memento of a grandmother I had never known, until Mr.Pirzada came to our lives I could find nothing to put inside it. Every so often before brushing my teeth and laying out my clothes for school the next day, I opened the lid of the box and ate one of his treats (30).

Through her action, one can undoubtedly say that food has a crucial role in creating memories and fulfilling ones desires. Even though she is a little girl, she helps her mother prepare the table for dining, and for putting spices. And this is very evident when she says "I followed with the water glasses, and the plate of lemon wedges, and the chilli peppers, purchased on monthly trips to china town and stored by the pound in the freezer, which they liked to snap open and crush into their food" (30). And her description about her mother's activity of bringing forth "the Succession of dishes" is clear evidence of the daily routine of traditional Indian women where they put together their efforts and energy to feed the family and also expose the fact that only a woman who cooks food can convert a dining area into a special place where love is served.

The next chapter "**Interpreter of Maladies**" itself opens in a tea shop where Mr Das and Mrs Das bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet. Usually tea shop is a casual place where people used to sit and talk in a relaxed manner where important decisions are being served. This itself clearly reveals that the premises are important. Mr and Mrs Das are Indian born foreigners. They have three children- Tina, Bobby and Ronny. And they are on a vacation in India. They hired Mr.Kapasi as tourist guide. Apart from other stories in the book, this chapter contains very less reference about food as Kapasi is in charge. He takes them to different places like Sun Temple at Konark. What really strikes is that the habit of chewing gums as for time killing and also for a pleasure is a recurring image in the chapter, when one of the boys asked for it "I want to give it a piece if gum,"(44). Like chewing gums, Mrs Das also had a habit of eating puffed rice wherever she goes. "She opened the car door and began walking up the path, wobbling a little on her square wooden heels, reaching her straw bag to eat handfuls of puffed rice"(66). Eating puffed rice and chewing gums are a usual thing in western countries but to somewhat extend its unusual in Indian context.

Mr.Kapasi has a secret affair towards Mrs Das. But Mrs Das is not aware of it and he is only a kind of friend for her. Throughout the story we can see that Mrs Das was more acquainted with Kapasi than her husband and sharing unrevealed secrets to him. Even though Kapasi is just an ordinary tourist guide, they shared a huge space with them during Lunch. This incident really made him happy because he never thought they would give him space as they are more sophisticated people.

As the Das family settled together under a magenta umbrella fringed with white and orange tassels, and placed their orders with one of the waiters who marched about in tri-cornered caps, Mr.Kapasi reluctantly headed toward a neighbouring table. "Mr.Kapasi, wait. There's room here," Mrs.Das called out. She gathered Tina onto her lap, insisting that he accompany them. And so together, they had bottled mango juice and sandwiches and plates of onions and potatoes deep – fried in graham – flour batter. After finishing two omelette sandwiches Mr Das took more pictures of the group as they ate. (54)

Jhumpa Lahiri very well demonstrates that before food there are no differences. There are cultural differences, religious differences, differences in terms of race, creed etc. but when it comes to food, everybody is same. The only place where people unite, discuss, share and express love is dining area .

In the chapter titled “Mrs.Sen’s”, again dining plays a crucial role. The story is narrated through the eyes of the character Eliot. Mrs.Sen’s hard labour shows her tribute and dedication towards cooking. The reason behind considering cooking as an art is very brilliantly portrayed through the eyes of young Eliot.

Mrs.Sen as she chopped things, seated things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor. Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas..... facing a sharp edge without even touching it, she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart : cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds. She could peel a potato in seconds (114)

And how much a blade is significant in cooking in their community is revealed when she says

Whenever there is a wedding in the family, or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighbourhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night...It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter (115).

Through this, it is clear that an act of chopping or slicing can bring together different types of people where they can do and share what they like. Jhumpa Lahiri once again deals with the issues of immigration in this chapter also. As an immigrant, Mrs.Sen not only faced the problem of longing, but also she missed the taste of food especially sea food.

The other thing that made Mrs.Sen happy was fish from the seaside. It was always a whole fish she desired, not shell fish..... to live so close to the ocean and not to have so much fish. She said, she liked to go to a market by the beach. She added that while the fish there tasted nothing like the fish in India, at least it was fresh. In the supermarket I can feed a cat thirty two dinners from one of thirty two tins, but I can never find a single fish I like, never a single. (123).

Another striking chapter in the book is “**This Blessed House**”. Like the title itself the life of newly wedded couples Sanjeev and Twinkle are very beautifully woven. They are just shifted to Connecticut and little bit struggling to order things in their new house. Sanjeev is a great cook and twinkle is not. But she always experiments with food. Even though she is not a great cook, she has an intense desire towards cooking. They are a perfect, made for each other couple in terms of cooking. In the midst of arranging things Sanjeev went back to his college days when he saw his college books and through that he recollected those days where he ordered his favourite mughlai chicken.

Still, the presence of his college books in the room reminded him of a time in his life he recalled with fondness, when he would walk each evening across the mass. Avenue bridge to order Mughlai chicken with spinach from his favourite Indian restaurant on the other side of the Charles and return to his dorm to write out clean copies of his problem sets (138).

If Sanjeev is an all -rounder Twinkle is an enthusiastic person. Her enthusiasm towards cooking and treasuring every minute things amazed him. Sometimes she cooks western food for him as if it’s an experiment. But whatever she cooks, she always compliments it. When she made a new dish she said “ I hope this taste good – planting the steaming pot on top of the jesus trivet. There was a loaf of Italian bread in a little basket, and iceberg lettuce and grated carrots tossed with bottled dressing and croutons, and glasses of red wine” (143).

Sanjeev and Twinkle invited neighbours for their housewarming and decided to make something unique for the natives. They invited thirty people and both decided to provide champagne, and samosas from Indian restaurant in Hartford, and big trays of rice with chicken and almonds and orange peels, which sanjeev had spent the greater part of the morning and evening. Both are equally sparing their times on food preparations and this is a proof for how food rather that a commodity or a nourishing agent plays an inevitable role in one’s lift.

In the story “**The Treatment of Bibi Haldar**”, food is used in a different context. if dining together is a cure for strengthening family bondings as we can see in ‘A Temporary Matter’, here it is used for curing Bibi Haldar’s ailments. An Indian woman who is 29 year old who has been considered as an outcast and an untouchable, suffered from an ailment that baffled everyone in her society. She has been employed in her cousin Haldar’s cosmetic shop. In the Indian context turmeric powder is used in different dishes for easy digestion and it’s an antiseptic too. So like that when Bibi Haldar was shuttled from one specialist to the next, certain special food items were prescribed for her good health like “garlic, consume disproportionate quantities of bitters, meditate, drink green coconut water, and

swallow raw duck's eggs beaten in milk"(159). Even though she struggled with it, she obeyed it. Because food has more healing power than medicines.

Bibi Haldar was always in a melancholic mood just because she's not married. As everyone in the society treats her as an outcast she knew that nobody will come to the forefront. During such sad situations, there are a few people who loves her and they consoles her by giving "smoked corn on the cob sprinkled with lemon juice, or two paisa caramels"(167).

The last chapter "**The Last and Final Continent**" is about the story of loneliness, strangeness, immigration, wanderings and also craving for homely food. The story opens in 1964 when the narrator leaves for London for job. There he works at the university library and stays in a house occupied by penniless bachelors like himself. They lived three or four to a room, shared a "single, icy toilet, and took turns cooking pots of egg curry, which we ate with our hands on a table covered with newspapers"(173). This itself conveys the problems faced by immigrants in terms of food and accommodation. Wherever one goes leaving his homeland, the first thing he misses is that tasty and delicious food prepared with love by their mothers, daughters or wives. The narrator even mentions the first meal eaten by him when he moved to America "In the end I bought a small carton of milk and a box of cornflakes. This was my first meal in America. I ate it at my desk" (175).

For the narrator everything relating to the food was new, because he never cooked before, he never went to a supermarket to buy anything. Even the simple chore of buying milk was new to him. But he adjusted with it because food is a necessity and inevitable thing. And this is evident when he says, "In a week I had adjusted, more or less. I ate cornflakes and milk, morning and night, and bought some bananas for variety, slicing them into the bowl with the edge of my spoon. In addition I bought tea bags and a flask, while the salesman in Woolworth's referred to as a thermos (a flask, he informed me, was to store whiskey, another thing I had never consumed)" (176).

Apart from all the stories in the book, this final story has a different element in it. Here the narrator and other Bengali immigrants use hands for eating. Eating food with hands is a part of Indian tradition and culture. And the taste which comes from when using ones hands is unpredictable. It's a fact that eating is more than a habit and necessity and in it lies our existence. Jhumpa Lahiri has very successfully woven each tale in the book and portrayed food in a different dimension.

Works Cited

- Bala, Suman (Ed.). *Jhumpa Lahiri: The Master Storyteller (A Critical Response to "Interpreter of Maladies")*. New Delhi: Khosla Publishing House, 2002.
- Chakrabarti, Basudeb and Angana Chakrabarti. "Context: A Comparative Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's 'A Temporary Matter' and Shubodh Ghosh's 'Jatugriha.'" *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* 30.1 (2002): 23-29.
- Choubey, Asha. "Food Metaphor in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*." *The Literature & Culture of the Indian Subcontinent (South Asia) In the Postcolonial Web*. 2001.3 May, 2003.
- Dunn, Maggie and Ann Morris. *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*. Studies in Literary Themes and Genres 6. New York: Twayne, 1995.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1999.
- Maini, Irma. (2007). The Politics of Home and Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. In Sanjukta Dasgupta & Malashri Lal (Eds.) *The Indian Family in Transition: Reading Literary and Cultural Texts*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Mannur, Anita. (2010). *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Ray, Krishnendu. (2004). *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American House Holds*. Philadelphia. PA Temple University Press.