# 'Taste'of 'Home' Through Food: Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Mrs Sen's*and Chitra Banerjee's *Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter*

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**Abstract**
*The significance of Foodsurpasses its usual role of filling the stomach and reaches to connote culture and is a source of emotionally overwhelming nostalgia in the diasporic context. It has important social and national functions. This paperattempts to highlight the immigrant's attachment to his/her ethnic food, its role in evoking the consciousness of nostalgia, their longing for home with the help of two short storiesMrs Sen's by Jhumpa Lahir iand Mrs Dutta Writes ALetterby Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The paper also aims see through the various connotations attached to food and related cultural and gendered significance and how it becomes a multivalent symbol of home and identity in a foreign land.*
***Keywords****: diaspora, culture, food, gender, nostalgia*

Culture is signified through an amalgamation of a lot of things ranging from dresses, lifestyle, food; it is a way of life for a group of people which is passed on to the coming generations like hereditary. It is an important tool in shaping any individual. Food becomes a multivalent symbol in context of diaspora. When individuals and families move to new lands, they carry along with them their gastronomies, which is dependent on the social environment keeping in mind the fact that language and food changes within every 20 kms.In India itself, we have different cuisines in different parts of the country. A diasporic person, who lives seas away from their homeland, food becomes a potent symbol of otherness, exoticism, racial marginalization and even nostalgia. The longing for food is least written but the most obvious longings in diaspora as it is a strong reminiscence of their bond with the homeland.

In her book, '*Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diaspora Culture* 'Anita Munnar opines:

> "Food, as a central part of the cultural imagination of diasporic populations, becomes one
> of the most viable and valuable sites from which to inquire into the richly layered texture
> of how race is imagined and reinterpreted within the
> cultural arena, both to affirm and
> resist notions of home and belonging". (8)

Talking about the Indian diaspora, in her work '*States of Exception: Everyday Life And Postcolonial Identity*'(2001), KeyaGanguly states that how impossible it is to imagine the existence of an Indian without his/her ethic Indian food. Food binds communitiestogether. It defines social hierarchies, demarcates the privilege, economic class and social position. It also carries with itself the issues of power and land. Thus, it holds more importance than merely sustaining life. It motivates actions on part of individual, community or even society.

The desire to remember home by fondly recreating culinary memories cannot be understood merely as reflectively nostalgic gestures; rather such nostalgically-framed narratives must also be read as meta- critiques of what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one's relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which yoke national identity with culinary taste and practices. Food, for people in diaspora, specifically the first generationmigrants is an embodiment of pre-diasporic recollections. It holds meaning and significance of the immigrant's culture, their

ethnic identity which helps them find balance between 'here' and 'there', 'before 'and 'now'.

Madhur Jaffrey in her cookbook "*An Invitation ToIndian Cooking*" which is quite autobiographically organized, talks about how 'cooking' Indian food is also signifies a potent connection with the place "back there". Concurrently, the desire for Indian food is mediated by a form of nostalgia that can only exist once she has left the physical borders of India. The conditions of becoming diasporic, or living diasporically, produce a fundamental and affective longing for Indian-coded pabulums. Many Indiandiaspora writers have used food as a tool to assert their identity in foreign land. SalmanRushdie's *Midnight's Children* served as an encouragement for other writers to use food metaphors to delve deep into the traditional culinary and cultural significance attached to it. Bharti Mukherjee. Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Hari Kunzru, Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri also explore culinary motifs in their fiction.

The taste of Bengali culture can be seen sprinkled over the fiction of Chitra Banerjee and Jhumpa Lahiri. Both the writers have used food as an evocation. Their fiction explores the complex relation between olfactory and gustatory experiences and the link of the memory and understanding the outside stimulus with sensory experiences and memories.

Lahiri's short story '*MrsSen's*'from the short story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is about Mrs. Sen, a middle-aged Bengali woman living in America, who is babysitting Eliot, an eleven-year-old boy. Written from a perspective of a white child, the story is an account of the diasporic experience and how her culinary skills are her only resort to happiness; something that makes her feel at home. Lahiri systematically exposes the dominant home sickness of Mrs. Senwherein she uses an omniscient narrator to dive into Sen's anguish. attempting to fight this homesickness in America, she uses her culinary skills to feel more at home. Her cooking also serves as an emotional anchor and her coping mechanism after she is uprooted from her natural habitat through the institution of marriage. Sunil Bhatia and Vijay Prashad in their book,. American *Karma: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Indian Diaspora (2007)* see the domestic space for "desis" – diasporic south Asians, as a refuge from racism to which an immigrant is subjected to when in abroad,and also a place to uphold the native culture and identity of India. (Bhatia, American 223; Prashad 121) in this process of spacemaking, three cultural practices are included – rituals,routines, rites of passage. .

MrsSen's nostalgia are seen in her religious following of her culinary routine, her special attachment to fish.in the story there are multiple accounts of how much work she puts herself through to get her favorite fish. Fishserves as a leitmotif in the story. Her existence and her survival in this alien land sort of depends on this food item. She is happy like a kid when she gets it, but sulks when she doesn't. Fish is not just her source of sensory pleasure but also gives her a sense of proximity to her people. It seems like the only recognizable sign post left in herlife, a reassuring bit of homeland that she clings to in absence of anything meaningful.

In his essay 'Food and Memory" (2006) Jon D. Holtzman sees food as a construction of culture, just like family, gender and religion. He talks about the strong link between food and memory. According to Holtzman 'food offers a potential window into forms of memory that are more heteroglossic, ambivalent, layered, and textured" (373). It aims to examine the relationship between memory and food. which include: . . . memories that are created through food; food being the nucleus of construction of historical, ethnic, nationalistic identity, role of food in evoking nostalgia, and how socially epochal changes happen due to dietary changes, agents of memory and contexts of forgetting and remembering food (364) Holtzman also observes that nostalgia centered around food "is a recurring theme in studies of diasporic or expatriate populations" as it provides a temporary return to home by evoking longing among immigrants through the smells, tastes, and sights of the native food (367).

The use of '*Bonti*' instead of knife in America is another act of self-reaffirmation of ethnicidentity. Eliot, a little boy from the west, finds this instrument unfamiliar and describes it as "blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas" (62).*Bonti* is a traditional kitchen tool used in India , which associates with something far beyond mundane. Thestrong attachment to her community takes her practicetraditional culinary even more. Cooking, as already mentioned, becomes a way of

bonding for women. In the story too, Mrs. Sen tells Eliot that how women used to carry this blade from their houses, sat in circles, chatted and cut vegetables all night before a wedding or any large function.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, another Indian origin Bengali living the U.S shares poignant experiences of the immigrant Indian characters in the U.S. where she deals with recurrent culinary identity. Her fiction has subtly embodied the importance of traditional Indianfood, no matter where the character stays. The mere names and flavors of Indian and the aroma of the home grown and ground spices dishes like of *Alu Dom, Roshogulla*, cardamom tea makes not just the protagonist muse over the good old days, but alsomakesthereader see the underlined culinary identity of these characters who are struggling to find the essence of home in a faraway land. In a foreign land. '*Ghar Ka Khana'*gains much impetus as it reminds the immigrant of not just the homeland but also suggest their alienation from their natal cultures. Illuminating this aspect of diasporic writing, Salman Rushdie says:

> "[W]riters in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense
> of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars
> of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge which gives rise to
> profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means
> that we will, not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost" (Rushdie 10)

*The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001) empathizes with the lives of immigrants who go through the crisis between home and the host land. In these nine prominent stories, Divakaruni expresses her sentimental concern of changing familial relationships in the process of migration. It openswith "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter". the protagonist is Mrs. Prameela Dutta who belongs to a very conservative Bengali family, and has come to the United Statesto spent time with her son and his family. She is quite taken aback by the cultural difference of the west and the east and takes her own time understanding it. She struggles with the gadgets, not- so friendly neighbors, unfamiliar and in comprehensible tv shows. The problem is not just with the things outside; but it also creeps inside the house as she finds it difficult to bond with her alienated son's family. Her orthodox ways of living are nothing but embarrassing for her daughter in law. many concepts are incomprehensible to her like using washing machine, her son helping with the household chores, not socializing with the neighbors in the Indian way. Her traditional Indian self is unable to grasp the American concepts. Her family seems to be drifting away from her. She, assuming her traditional role in the family, aims at feeding the family with traditional home cooked Bengali food. This pure gesture ofMrs.Dutta becomes a struggle as she finds it difficult to adjust with the new way of life.She longs for her life full of hustle bustle in Calcutta, visitingneighbors and relatives, street vendors calling for "fragrant cardamom tea" infused with real sugar. In an attempt to appease and connect with this family of hers, who have become indifferent to her, she begins to cook and feed the family "proper Indian food, *rutis* that puff up the way they should, fish curry in mustard sauce, and real *pulao* with raisins and cashews and *ghee*" ("Mrs. Dutta").

In an alien land, Mrs.Dutta feels that her culinary skills will not only help her survive here, but also draw her family closerto her, but this gesture is not appreciated for long. The family, especially Shyamoli who is initially enjoying the Indian meal, aftera while becomes quitevary of theexcessive oil in the food and how it could give them risen cholesterols and weight. Her children would rather have frozen burritos, than the oil soaked home cooked food their grandmother made them. Mrs.Dutta examines how different both the kitchens are; the American and the Indian, Calcutta kitchen, which has the aroma of mouthwatering ginger and chili paste. But in the America kitchen, all the spices are thrown into the blender without the curry powder.

Mrs.Dutta is writing a letter to her friend in Calcutta, Mrs.Basu, about how happy she was and how ridiculous her fears about not being able to adjust in America were. It is a painful realization to Mrs. Dutta that how she is another in the family itself. She feels, alone, rejected in this family' of hers she realizes— "how alone she is in this land of young people. And how unnecessary" ("Mrs. Dutta"). She reads her letter that she had written innocently in the afternoon and reframes it with symbolic truth.

Apart from the food itself, in both the stories, other kitchen rituals that are strictly followed in India are also highlighted. Like the concept of 'Jutha' food not being kept in the refrigerator, not having stale food, washing dishes by hand, using original spices rather than curry powder, bonding with neighbors through food.

Both Mrs.Dutta and Mrs. Sen feel 'othered' in an alien land, despite of having families. Thus, food comes as an old loyal friend in both the women's lives, which helps them achieve some level of familiarity and the feeling of being at 'home'. In diasporaliterature, food keeps reminding us of the past, which leads to recalling one's identity in the adopted land. It makes them travel to past whilst in present,interpreting their attitude in both.

The cultural significance of food is seen in its role in building social relations, familial bonds, simultaneously also the cultural and gender ideology and its symbolism. Traditionally, cooking was considered the work of the lady of the house. It was her job to prepare food for her family and the success of this job reflected through the health of the family. Kitchen can be seen as a site of female agency, even in new lands, as women fail to gain agency in other parts of the house. Thus, she turns kitchen into her personal shrine of Indiannness. As Rogobete points out, food "can be a provider of homogeneity when it functions as a sign of equality, intimacy and solidarity among people and one of heterogeneity when it emphasizes rank, distance and social segmentation" (34)

Kitchen was also a space for reciprocity, sisterly company and bonding. It was a kind of homely space, where women talked to each other in their mother tongues, shared exclusive recipes, their culinary secrets, which made the same dish taste different, stories recollecting their days in India. In *MrsSens's*, when Mrs Sen asks Eliot whether anyone would come to her aid if she screams her lungs out or not. She recollects how, back in India, they could shout on tip of their lungs and people would gather around to help. On similar lines of bonding with neighbors, Mrs Dutta, , who wanted to go over and meet their next door neighbors with some rasogollahs, have nice little chat with them over tea, just as she used to do in India . Shyamoli tells her how different the norm was here; this otherwise sweet gesture would be considered as unnecessary invasion of privacy. MrsDutta's urge to walk over with a bowl of freshly cooked *Alu Dom* to greet a woman resurfaces when she sees her through the window.

The diasporic women developed a 'culinary capital' as LeBesco and Naccarato called it. It referred to the skills of cooking for extra income for women. It can also be seen as resource which included food and practices as vehicles for performing illusionary identity. Here, it signals the recreation of traditional cuisine in the new country and latently transferring the knowledge during these social gatherings through the older generations in diaspora. This shows that how women of the family tend to promote their region and religion specific food choices even in a foreign setting to assert and keep up with the ethnic identity.

It is important to note that whatever culture maybe the role of preserver of the family and its culture couldn't detach itself from the women. Diasporic women-diasporic married women-are often wedded to the belief that the faithful reproduction of "Culture" inheres in accurately replicating. The domestic arena, so frequently associated with femininity, also becomes a space to reproduce culture and national identity. In both the stories, especially in *MrsDutta Writes A Letter*, when she sees her daughter in law not adhering to their traditional role, she assumes it herself. As Katrak's essay illustrates, immigrants often invent an image of the homeland as an unchanging and enduring cultural essence and are often singular about the ontological coherency of their national cuisines, despite the fact that memories are fragmentary, partial, and "irretrievably lost" (9).

Both the stories discussed above carry a complicated and ambivalently coded discourse. in the genre of immigrant or diaspora literature, the culinary discourse provides a platform for further discussions on the overlapping layers of food, nostalgia and national identity. these phantasmic and contradictory homelands become either emancipation or enslavement or even both for an individual when even through discursive renderings of nostalgia. therefore, the consumption of the ethnically replete food becomes more than just a cultural obligation dealing with cultural obligations dealing with ritual and kinship, it also become a practice in global commerce and exchange. Thus, the culinary discourse substantiates the historical processes of migration dislocation resulting from

diaspora no matter how multilayered the concept of actual dislocation may be.

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