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## Intermingling of Collective Memories with Food in Lahiri's Fiction

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims to present an alternative reading of Lahiri's fiction by subverting the perception that food serves only as a substance of nourishment for human beings and by interlocking of collective memory, group membership and culture with food. According to the principal argument of the paper, food, in Lahiri's literary texts, becomes an instrument of restructuring of Indian immigrants' cultural peculiarity in America and giving rise to the awareness of cultural and social groupings which play an active role in reconstruction of collective memories as well as challenging the fact of overall extinction of commonly and collectively shared cultural values of Indians. The Namesake (2003) and "The Third And Final Continent", a short story from Interpreter of Maladies (1999), will be analyzed by extending the meaning of food further to such an extent that definably characterizes the fundamental pieces of immigrants' native origins that have been harboured in the face of distance.*

**Key Words:** Lahiri, food, memory, collective memory, group, culture, Indian immigrant

Memories construct an indispensable part of lives of human beings who cannot escape their impact no matter where they continue their lives, in which time they live or how old they are. As Connerton remarks it, "Concerning memories as such, we may note that our experience of the present largely depends on our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects ..." (2). Memories imply that the past events cannot be restricted to existing merely in their own period and cannot be said to be bound to remain in their original places in the past, so they in a sense defy the boundaries of time and place by being occasionally recalled by individuals and being able to be reconstructed as a mark of being extended beyond the past time or place to the present and future ones.

It is discussed that "Memory is a means of 'passing on,' of sharing a social past that may have been obscured, in order to activate its potential for reshaping a future of and for other subjects. Thus, acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and collective (Smith and Watson 20-21). In this case, memories are of special concern to more than one person or certain groups since they are felt and experienced as a shared activity at precise times that are exactly known by these groups; however, the number of group members can be increased due to the fact that memories carry the potential to be enlarged and penetrate those who were once not a part of that group; thus, the number of participants who take part in eminent activities of memories does not remain steady and fixed all the time. Nora raises another issue in relation to memory and contends that "It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of

remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived" (8). To put it another way, memories might lose their original structures easily and instantly owing to their highly flexible nature and might be modified after being subject to impacts springing from the outer groups, individuals or surrounding. Moreover, memories undergo the process of constantly forgetting and recalling, which makes them appear in the form of ambiguity even though their principal attributes maintain their presence in the face of devouring effect of time and other factors.

Memories could be accepted as open to classification, and Connerton underscores the concept of personal memory by arguing that: "These refer to those acts of remembering that take as their object one's life history. We speak of them as personal memories because they are located in and refer to a personal past" (22). Out of this definition, it becomes apparent that personal memories emerge out of individuals' distinctive experiences in the past as independent of collective social events which concern a society, nation or group. The second class of memories is collective ones which require certain group members, a long period of time, specific group contexts in which they might find a way to assert their existence and in which group members show a strong tendency to recall and revive their collective memories whenever these members gather and interact with each other (Coser 22). Participating in group activities prompts individuals to regenerate and recollect their collective memories on occasions where other group members frequently arouse

collective perceptions and sensations through physical contacts and inspiring speeches among each other. It would be of great importance not to confine collective memories to small groups but to associate them with considerably wider communities consisting of a large number of people such as nations. If a nation is accepted as a huge group that involves thousands or millions of people, it becomes plausible to presume that each nation possesses its own collective memories which have been recollected and nourished with typical cultural elements for centuries. Cultural traits and materials may be said to fall within the framework of collective memories because of their manifest feature of being experienced and sustained collectively throughout very long years or centuries by societies.

It may be held that a new interest of the scientific world for the relevance of food to "the social, religious and cultural lives of people" has been brought into focus with the aim of providing evidence as regards to what a great extent "individuals conceive of themselves, affiliate and identify with home, homeland, and a range of social groupings, and how the earliest and most persistently retained sense memories are profoundly incorporated into the creation and structuring of collective memory and cultural identity" (Bardenstein 356). According to such an assertion, food cannot be handled as a simple act of assuaging one's hunger and a personal activity or obligation in order to maintain one's life but as an essential part of reconstructing collective memories which uncover their concrete reflection during food consumption and eating activity.

Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian-American writer who "shows great skill in her explorations of human psyche, their inner turmoil and growth, the reactions to changes in culture and the powerful effect that our heritage can have on us" and whose characters are often "caught in the parallels in this double perspective between the ancient tradition and the baffling prospects of the new world" (Prasad 264). Despite being born in America as the second generation Indian immigrants, younger characters in Lahiri's texts cannot dispose themselves of the extensive impact of their native origins partly due to their parents' insistence on keeping alive their cultural practices and partly due to frequent travels to India where they find themselves in the heart of ancestors' culture, civilization and historical facts. In addition to such views and corresponding to the claim that "Food tropes, metaphors, and images serve as figures of speech which depict celebrations of families and communities, portray identity crises, create usable histories to establish ancestral connections, subvert ideology and practices of assimilation, and critique global capitalism" (Gardaphé and Wenying Xu 5), *The Namesake* (2003) and "The Third and Final Continent" from *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) appear as open to an analysis with a view to the

ways Indian immigrants succeed in establishing their bonds with their collective memories and cultural identity through the consumption habits of their national food stuffs.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri opens the novel by recounting how Ashima attempts to prepare one sort of Indian food that is commonly consumed in India:

On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in a kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard seed oil to pour into the mix. Ashima had been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of a snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and in railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. (1)

The reason why the novel's very first lines cover the depiction of a preparation of the Indian food may be comprehended from the way Lahiri attaches importance to the concept of food and the crucial role it plays in retaining the Indian immigrants' cultural link to their homeland. When it is assumed that pregnancy involves a period of loneliness, apprehension, stress and fear for Ashima, like many other pregnant women, she presents her effort to suppress such dismal feelings by preparing and eating Indian food which is filled with pepper, rice and spice. Similar to exiles that lessen their powerlessness and pining for their homeland by means of food that provides ease and pleasure as an antidote to their plight (Bardenstein 354), Ashima as an Indian immigrant in America seems to hit upon such relaxation through her act of eating her national food in the kitchen. As Nora proclaims that "Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects ..." (9), food in the novel is exhibited as a medium which offers a new space in which collective memories of India and its culture become visible and substantial in a foreign place that is thousands of miles remote from India. Lahiri manipulates food as an instrument which is, for Ashima, evocative of crowds, streets, platforms, sidewalks as well as the way this food is sold and eaten; therefore, food, aside from being a means of nourishment, provokes her to remember many other things about her homeland which may be enlarged further to clothing of the native citizens, architectural style and buildings along with lots of sections of the backdrop in India. Just as Smith and Watson define "remembering" as "a collective activity" as part of collective memories (19), Ashima's act of remembering turns into a collective one rather than being personal given that other Indian immigrants eat Indian food concurrently, recall many pieces of

cultural patterns and restructure collective memories of their nation in America or elsewhere across the world. That is, Indian immigrants carry on eating their native food and enable the re-emergence of collective memories whether they consciously or unconsciously carry on consuming their native food simultaneously in different locations throughout the world.

As well as eating food, its preparation, as is suggested in the novel, also carries significance, which could be inferred from Ashima's activities of preparation and probably spending long hours in the kitchen before eating her Indian food despite her pregnancy during which she is expected to have a rest instead of standing and trying hard in the kitchen in order to cook that food. Regarding this point, Gunew establishes that "Food is of course more easily attached to all the senses, even to the aural in that the sounds of food preparation, kitchen sounds and the labour of cooking are part of the food experience ..." (99-100). On account of their potential to turn her home in America into a much more traditional setting of Indian origins and bring Indian culture to her domestic life, activities of making a great effort to cook, spending time in the kitchen, hearing the sounds of cutting and preparing for Ashima can be said to be as comforting and reassuring as eating Indian food. She does not prefer to have a toast, hamburger or other types of fast food that do not require much effort in eating because she does not regard such undertakings as preparing, cooking, cutting or slicing in the kitchen as backbreaking and wearisome. The appeal of Ashima's food preparation activities in the kitchen to all of her senses and their relation to collective memories match up with the idea that "Memory is evoked by the senses – smell, taste, touch, sound – and encoded in objects or events with particular meaning for the narrator" (Smith and Watson 19). Indeed, through preparing and eating in the kitchen, Ashima is drawn into a space in which food appears as the central substance that establishes a milieu being dominated by Indian culture and memories in opposition to those of America.

Concerning the active role that groups play in reconstruction of memories, Connerton avers that "Groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localised and memories are localised by a kind of mapping. We situate what we recollect within the mental spaces provided by the group" and that "Our memories are located within the mental and material spaces of the group" (37). These perceptions might hold true for the novel which suggests that Indian immigrants set up their groups in which they invigorate their collective memories, in addition to strengthening their native Indian bonds by visiting each other, and in which new spaces enclosing Indian values are forged. It is narrated in the novel that:

Every weekend, it seems, there is a new home to go to, a new couple or young family to meet. They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends. Most of them live within walking distance of one another in Cambridge. The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that's sold in Chinatown, that it's possible to make halwa from Cream of Wheat. (*The Namesake* 38)

This part of the narrative may be claimed to give rise to an interpretation from the perspective which draws attention to interlocking of group relations with food in revitalization of collective memories along with cultural patterns among Indian immigrant. It is possible to construe social meetings and visits of Ashima and her immigrant neighbours with an emphasis on the profound effect of gathering of these immigrants on perpetuating their indigenous cultural values and collective memories that are surrounded by those of the Western civilization and that frequently face the prospect of being eliminated by the dominant position of the American culture and memories. In this sense, food may seem not to assume the main role in the revival of collective memories; instead, it at first glance functions only as a passive means being overshadowed by the prevailing factor of group meetings. Nevertheless, it is underscored that "Like all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart" (Mintz and Du Bois 109). Through such an account, it becomes evident that the central role in reviving collective memories belongs to food since it serves to provide group members with inspiration and motivation which are relevant to their sense of belonging and reinforcement of their group membership, social bonds, regular communication and visits, formation of sincere friendships and social network. After food achieves its fundamental task in forging such steadfast and firm ties for establishment of groups, collective memories naturally come into existence in spaces made available by groups. As for Indian immigrants in the novel, the quotation above referring to Ashima and her neighbours also opens up the possibility which signifies that food strengthens their group membership and supplies them with essential eagerness and enthusiasm in their social meetings before the emergence of collective memories.

Smith and Watson make it clear that "On a daily basis we move in and out of various communities of memory – religious, racial, ethnic, familial. Communities develop their own occasions, rituals, and practices of remembering. They establish specific sites for remembering" (19-20), and Lahiri could be supposed to adopt such an

approach as can be observed in her narration of a holy occasion on which the age of six months of Ashima's son, Gogol, is celebrated as a group comprising merely Indian immigrants and on which rice possibly becomes a site for drawing them into remembering their collective memories:

By February, when Gogol is months old, Ashima and Ashoke know enough people to entertain on a proper scale. The occasion: Gogol's annaprasan, his rice ceremony. There is no baptism for Bengali babies, no ritualistic naming in the eyes of God. Instead, the first normal ceremony of their lives centers around the consumption of solid food. They ask Dilip Nandi to play the part of Ashima's brother, to hold the child and feed him rice, the Bengali staff of life, for the very first time. (*The Namesake* 38-39)

Considering that this ceremony is held and celebrated by almost every Indian family whose son is six months old and that rice as one of the most widely consumed favourite foods in India, food occupies the central part of this ritual in terms of being reminiscent, for these immigrants, of their ancestors and a set of native values dating back to probably centuries ago. Emphasizing the sacred connotations that food incorporates in ceremonies, Civitello lays bare that "It has been used in rituals to guarantee fertility, prosperity, a good marriage, and an afterlife. It has been used to display the power and wealth of the state, the church, corporations, a person" (xiii). Accordingly, the selection of rice in Indian immigrants' ceremony is not accidental for the reason that they most probably believe in its power and influence over their children's future lives in which they desire to see their children as endowed with prosperity, bliss and loyalty to their consecrated values. Consumption of rice in such a ceremony illustrates the way a food stuff gains distinction and value despite the fact that it might be disregarded and thought to be consumed as a mundane product free from any significance by other societies. Why rice carries such great weight for Indian immigrants is generally predicated on Buddhism, being the second significant religion in India, and the Buddha who is believed to have eaten only six grains of rice a day during his fasting in order to figure out the misery and affliction of humanity (Civitello 23). For over centuries and since the beginning of Buddhism, rice, as reflected in the novel, has been consumed, retained and revered on holy occasions by Indian people in the form of groups or in a collective manner, which makes it an undisputed carrier of collective memories of the Indian society.

Through the celebration of annaprasan for Gogol, the novel raises the issue of taste and its impression on Indian children and nation as well as the way rice has possessed incomparable flavour from childhood to adulthood for ages as it may be

noticed from the proposition that "Definitions of taste belong to the cultural heritage of human society. As there are differing tastes and predilections among different peoples and regions of the world, so do tastes and predilections evolve over the course of centuries" (Montanari 61). Consequently, as in the case of Gogol and other children of Indian immigrants, the taste of rice embodies an enormous impact on adults developing an appreciative sense and inclination toward it and getting accustomed to its taste from their childhood and brings to mind how it has continued to be recollected as a result of collective awareness and attempts. "From this perspective, taste is not in fact subjective and incommunicable, but rather collective and eminently communicative. It is a cultural experience transmitted to us from birth, along with other variables that together define the 'values' of a society" (Montanari 62). By means of such celebrations, according to what Lahiri recounts in an insinuating way, children learn how to develop and display sensitivity to their sanctified food stuffs like rice, with which adults pass down collective memories from generation to generation. If it is the case that taste, counter to being an average physical act of tongue, takes on the capacity to take individuals and groups back to their primordial origins, it, then, functions as an essential part of spaces, supplied by food, in which collective memories resurface through tastes and types of certain traditional foods like rice that are unique to the Indian nation and culture.

In "The Third and Final Continent", Lahiri relates the story of a male Indian immigrant, being also the narrator, who immigrates firstly to England for his education and then to America in order to work in a library. What is striking regarding that story is that their traditional food like curry becomes central to their eating habits and cultural tendencies whenever this is combined with the deep effect of group membership and consciousness in a foreign territory. To illustrate, the narrator tells that "We lived three or four to a room, shared a single, icy toilet, and took turns cooking egg curry, which we ate with our hands on a table covered with newspapers" while staying in England with his Bengali friends in a flat (*Interpreter of Maladies* 173). Staying with other Bengali immigrants in the form of a small group could be claimed to lead the narrator and his flatmates to cling to their national eating habits and their native food. Such a gathering of Indian immigrants in a foreign land might be thought to recall them of the taste of curry which is one of the most widely consumed traditional foods in India and encourage them to ruminate their common culture and belongings. When having their meals, in place of forks and spoons, they use their hands, which denote consuming their traditional food in an indigenous manner instead of Western norms and cultural practices. In the light of the fact that eating with hands is generally regarded as a widespread



traditional habit in the Eastern nations, it could be established that the narrator and his friends use their hands, under group awareness and impression, in a deliberate fashion and in such a way that they prove their thorough commitment to collective habits of their parents and also forbears. The interlocking of formation of groups of the same roots with food consumption and thus collective memories is disclosed if the fact that the narrator's solitary stay in America, during which he almost never consumes Indian food, emerges after leaving England is taken into consideration. This can be exemplified by the narrator's acknowledgement:

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 ... 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. (*Interpreter of Maladies*175)

Instead of eating spicy food, rice and curry in his meals, the narrator places reliance on "milk" and "cornflakes" throughout the period he stands alone. However, as soon as his wife, Mala, moves to America from India in order to live together after years of living apart due to her husband's career, noteworthy shifts in eating tendencies of the narrator come to the fore in the short story. For instance, what is significant in their first meal is that they eat with their hands as the narrator articulates: "We sat at a bare table, each of us staring at our plates. We ate with our hands, another thing I had not yet done in America" (192). The beginning of alterations in his eating habits might be attributed to the arrival of Mala and constructing a small group with her at home. Besides, the narrator begins to observe how dishes at home change into those of national Indian culture after his wife settles there as is conveyed in the narrative: "When I came home from work there was a potato peeler in the kitchen drawer, and a tablecloth on the table, and chicken curry made with fresh garlic and ginger on the stove" (193). Hence, becoming a small group of Indian immigrants with his wife, without which he would probably abandon his consumption habit of nearly all types of Indian food, urges the narrator to take up his previous propensity for his native food again.

The following passage gives an overt illustration of the fact that the main concern of the narrator and his wife is merely connected with their ambition to convey their collective memories to the next generations via eating rice together with their children in the form of a group:

I work in a small college library. We have a son who attends Harvard University. Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents, but occasionally she weeps for

our son. So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die. (*Interpreter of Maladies*197)

Out of the narrator's utterance, it is possible to make an assumption which bears upon a comparison between Mala's sari which is put on by Indian women as a typical part of national clothing and rice which is consumed as a type of national food. Even though sari possesses notable implications for the Indian nation and represents the distinctive side of Indian women due to its use as a symbol of collective memory and culture, Mala no longer carries on wearing it as years go by. Mala's habit of wearing sari steers away from the essence of Indian culture and dwindles away as a result of alienation and her overriding impulse to resemble American women. The narrator seems to approve of such an attitude and alienation as he is never insistent throughout the story on convincing Mala about the necessity of wearing sari in pursuing Indian values. Conversely, with regard to the maintenance of the habit of rice consumption, the stance of the narrator and Mala changes into an ardent and keen one which could be traced from their strain and anxiety to make their child gain the habit of eating rice in the future in order to prevent it from dying out. At this point, as the citation above suggests, rice is of prime importance and becomes more essential when compared to wearing sari because the narrator implies that rice and their native language are of equal importance in terms of their crucial function in sustaining collective memories and cultural traits for centuries. Like the Bengal language which acts as an indispensable part of collective memory of Indian societies due to its role as a carrier of each pattern of cultural values across generations for centuries, rice is loaded with the same aptitude to operate in the form of reassurance for Indian immigrants from the viewpoint of occupying a space in the continuation of collective memory and culture.

As a result, food in Lahiri's works can be treated with an insight into certain aspects of its intrinsic attributes and be associated with collective memories, culture and social groupings from the perspective of Indian immigrants in America. In ceremonies, celebrations, social meetings, familial relations of Indian immigrants, food substances such as spice, curry and rice assume the role of forging new and familiar spaces in which these immigrants are sometimes mentally taken to their Indian land and in which their homeland and cultural aura are sometimes emotionally brought to their social and domestic life in America. During such instances, the reader often comes across the existence of correlation between food and groups in that food might trigger Indian immigrants to fortify their sense of unity and group membership in the resurfacing of collective memories while social and

cultural groupings could also beget their recognition of national food stuffs just before the revival of collective memories. Why food is broadly mentioned and accentuated in Lahiri's

works cannot be interpreted as an in advertent choice if it is witnessed that food is laden with many other absorbing and commonly shared implications nearly for each society.

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