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Mitigation of Migration Trauma through Culinary Traditions: An Analysis of *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract: Every human undergoes trauma when a change happens in his habitat, a total revolution takes place. The psychological condition of the migrant remains the same as the law of inertia suggests, to have a tendency to continue in the state of being. Identifying oneself in the new land has always been a nightmare for every migrant irrespective of any categories or groups. As an essential requirement and a major cultural artefact, food helps migrants to connect to their homeland and attain a feeling of home while being in a far location. This paper aims to analyse how the Migrants preserve culinary traditions in order to overcome the trauma of migration with special reference to the 2003 novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. Even though the diasporic novel *The Namesake* talks about the life of Gogol in search of his name and its heritages, it depicts how the Indian women abroad create 'home' by the act of preserving the Indian traditions of cooking. The novel itself opens with the aromatic scene of Ashima preparing Indian food in their American household, depicting how the writer has potentialised the act of cooking as the re-creation of a home itself while living far away from the roots. The research will undertake a qualitative analysis of the novel *The Namesake* based on how the Indian women try to cope with the trauma that migration has caused, through the act of cooking, thereby contributing to the larger discourse on diaspora and culinary studies.

Keywords: *Migration, Trauma, Mitigation, Identity, Culinary Traditions*

Introduction

Migration is an unending phenomenon, that transforms the ordinary into a sensory experience. It entails a fundamental disruption of ontological security by thrusting the individuals into a special, temporal and psychological displacement. To have a tendency to continue in the state of being. Identifying oneself in the new land has always been a nightmare for every migrant irrespective of any categories or groups. Even the minute details of one's identity acquires an additional emotional intensity in the migrated spaces. For the migrant communities, the domestic practices, whether a meal, a family ritual or even a familiar ingredient become the most immediate means of retaining a connection with the homeland. They try to maintain the emotional connection to the homeland through these everyday practices, even though the homeland is no longer physically accessible. In both literary and cultural fields, the migration trauma often describes the persistent effects of rupture, disorientation, separation, dislocation and even the inability to integrate a changed reality of surroundings. Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* defines trauma as an experience that is not fully possessed at the moment of its occurrence, but returns "belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (4).

The Namesake, the debut novel by Jhumpa Lahiri published in 2003 talks about a Ganguli family who had to migrate from India to America. Even though it primarily talks about the acceptance of the name Gogol, the novel tries to vividly capture the immigrant experience of the family. It is through the ordinary practices of cooking, eating, hosting and remembering they commemorate the life back in India. Among these practices, the family highly depend on the act of cooking as a strong tie towards their traditional values because, food being a necessity of human life connects the bodily experiences with the historical memory, especially with that of the lost homeland. Different forms of eating, in which food is prepared domestically, consumed privately, exchanged socially and transmitted intergenerationally are depicted in the novel.

The novel opens in 1968 in Cambridge, Massachusetts and tells the story of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, the Bengali immigrants who build a family in Massachusetts along with their children Gogol and Sonia. Ashoke is initially moved to America and Ashima after marrying joins him in there. In the primary period Ashima has to follow Ashoke to world which was socially and culturally alien to her. Lahiri has portrayed the immigration of the couple not as a mere process of changing the locations, but as a difficult process that has changed their whole lives and culture. Even though the novel does not identify clinical traumas, the writer has tried to explain the trauma of migration and the difficulties of being alienated in the new land through the character of Ashima. The loneliness, homesickness, racial differences, unfamiliarity, the difficulty of creating a whole emotionally

meaningful life in a place which is geographically far from the homeland is presented in the novel. The burden of being the transmitter of culture even while going through the process of becoming a newly married wife and a mother is clearly depicted through Ashima in the novel. She has to build an emotionally stable family in an environment where the customs that shaped her are no longer the dominant. The writer was successful in creating this emotional graph through which the experiences of the migrant could be evidently pictured. The novel repeatedly dramatizes the delayed and recurring effects of displacement till the end.

As Edward Said in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* observes, exile is “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (173). Thus, migration is inherently traumatic. Ashoke’s migration cannot be understood separately from the train accident, which later becomes a crucial turning point of revelation for Gogol. In fact, this accident itself becomes an indirect reason for Ashoke’s decision to move to America. It was during the survival and recovery from the accident that he began to dream about a life beyond India. Thus tracing the causes of Ashoke’s migration reveals that the decision was driven by the desire to escape the geographical confines associated with his trauma, rather than by the aspirations of better life and possibilities. Yet, migration does not erase the accident, he carried it throughout his life and even transmitted to his son. It remains embedded in his body, memory and relationship to literature. He names his son Gogol as a remembrance of the pages of Nikolai Gogol’s writings that helped him with the survival, renewal and a dream of a new life.

Ashima’s trauma seems to be much quieter when compared to Ashoke in the novel. Marriage is the only reason behind her migration to America. She moves from Calcutta to Cambridge and confronts the unfamiliarity of the American households. While analysing the novel, we can see that the kitchen chores are not unfamiliar to Ashima, it is the displacement from the locality that makes them unfamiliar. We see her preparing Bengali snacks in an American kitchen with the available ingredients. These scenes of cooking are highly relevant in the novel, because the desire to consume traditional food in the new land marks the intersection of bodily memory with material deprivation. Ashima always shows a tendency to reproduce the taste associated with her home in Calcutta, but it is the unavailability of the ingredients that becomes a major hindrance. The resulting dish is neither fully Indian nor fully American, rather, it is a hybrid form much like their identity and thereby becomes an object of culinary displacement. These scenes exemplify an important principle hidden in the novel; the effects of migration are experienced through the different senses. Ashima tries to overcome her sense of alienation through her sense of smell, taste, texture and while focusing we realise it is mainly through the food. Thus, food marks the difference between being physically present and being emotionally living. The immigrant body always relives their past through the culinary traditions. Thus,

in all these aspects, culinary practices become an attempt to bridge the distance between the past and the present, while also it to the future.

When geographic relocation creates a distance from the physical contact with the homeland, sensory memories of food frequently becomes the primary apparatus through which the migrants attempt to reconstruct a lost world. In postcolonial and diasporic literature, culinary practice emerges not only as mere factor to satisfy the appetite, but a crucial semiotic affective and ritualistic mechanism for mitigating the migration trauma. In a diasporic context, gastropolitics takes on a therapeutic dimension where the preparation of the traditional meals become a sovereign act within an unfamiliar event. Arjun Appadurai in his essay *How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India* terms this field as “gastropolitics by emphasising how food serves as medium through which the social hierarchies, intimacy and the cultural differences are continually asserted and negotiated” (494). While everyday cooking mitigates routine homesickness, the formal culinary rituals serve to anchor the cultural memory across time and space.

This paper examines the power of food and the impact of culinary traditions in mitigating the migration trauma for the characters of the novel *The Namesake* specifically in five aspects of the interrelated functions. First, how food acts as a sensory archive for preserving the memories of the past and the homeland. It explains how cooking creates a ritualistic structure that can transform private spaces into a shared cultural practices. Next, it tries to explore how the consumption of food can produce a networking and thereby releases the migrants from the clutches of alienation. As the third dimension of the paper, it identifies immigrant kitchen as space of constant continued negotiation. The paper also provides a light to the transgenerational approach of the diasporic community towards food. Finally, the paper tries to analyse the culinary adaptations that enables the characters to negotiate the hybrid identities rather than having to choose between cultural preservation or assimilation. These five practices of the culinary aspects are often treated as a therapeutic function in a broad cultural sense, because it provides a symbolic space for managing loss, maintaining continuity, and experiencing a sense of belonging. However, the novel does not employ the elements of food as an uncomplicated cure, instead it also portrays how these culinary traditions can also reproduce a tension on the generations and can intensify the gendered burden on women as the custodians of culture. This study demonstrates how culinary traditions function as a portable medium for domesticating alien landscapes, for mitigating affective alienations and for negotiating hyphenated identities.

Food as Cultural Memory of the Immigrants

Food is considered as the most powerful tool to evoke the senses. Since it connects recollection directly to the body, food is considered as the utmost influential form of cultural memory. A taste of the

food or even the aroma of certain ingredients can bring back the memories involuntarily. Science confirms that the smell can activate a memory even before the subject consciously identifies its source. The relation between the food and memory in the novel *The Namesake* can be related to what Jan Assmann states as cultural memory in *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. According to Assmann “cultural memory relies on objectified and institutionalised forms of remembrance to maintain group continuity over centuries” (126). The Bengali food, which can be broadly categorised as Indian food in the American context, acts as a symbolic form of cultural memory. Food communicates far more than its nutritional value. It recalls the regional identity, family relationships, religious observances, seasonal customs and the social world of Bengal itself. Cooking becomes a way of keeping the absent present in a distant location. The homeland is not simply preserved, instead it is reanimated through recurring sensory everyday events, specially through the act of cooking.

Ashima’s cooking preserves a cultural diversity that includes a wide range of variety ingredients, methods, combinations and occasion. These could be altered according to need of the time. This process is particularly important; every immigrant memory is selective and reconstructive in its own terms. The Ganguli family does not reproduce everything of India in America. They choose certain practices, which are often closely related to their identity and that can be enacted in the domestic space of American households. The culinary preferences are also of the same concerns. They choose the foods which are especially adaptable because it can travel through recipes and can be altered according to the availability of ingredients. The recipes become a compact cultural archive, it carries the whole environment of knowledge across borders even with the flexibility of change and transformation.

Ritual repetition is central to the process of mitigating migration trauma. Rituals provide repeated forms through which the subject organizes their experience of time. The culinary rituals, visibly repeated in the novel *The Namesake* shows how these repetitions has helped the characters to create continuity across the rupture. The repeated ritualistic act of preparing and sharing food tells the immigrants that despite loneliness, grief and generational change, there are some forms of life still continuing. Each repetition is not mechanical, instead it occurs in a new context and therefore modifies the meaning of the tradition every time. In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton argues that “rather than relying entirely on text, human groups actively counteract social amnesia because images of the past and the recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performances” (4). Thus, the cultural memory about India and Calcutta is not stored only in mere stories, but it is enacted through the senses and repetitions.

Role of Food at Community Gatherings

When we go through the novel, we realise that the Bengali culinary practices of the Ganguli family are not restricted to their household or confined to their generations. They practice it on a large scale during the Bengali gatherings. These gatherings are very crucial for the diasporic communities because, it is within their immigrant spaces they create a collective environment in which they can temporarily suspend the pressures of assimilation. They recreate a world they miss. The guests speak their language, they exchange the news from India, and share food that carries a common cultural meaning. These gatherings and the food shared transforms a group of geographically scattered individuals into a community. The gatherings help the immigrants to address one of their major concerns of isolation. Even though they cannot create an exact space like that of Calcutta, they can create a sense of kinship, neighbourhood, and cultural familiarity while living in a distant location. In this sense, these gatherings provide a partial substitute for the streets of Calcutta. It is an imagined extension of a home made concrete through social repetition.

Food is a central character that brings life to these gatherings in its totality: it reciprocates the obligations. The people at these gatherings bring ingredients, share recipes and thereby exchange a sense of cultural belonging in the new land. These exchanges prevent cultural preservation from becoming an individual burden into a shared social responsibility. Food can unite people even while revealing generational and class distinctions. The communal meals thus become a space of both solidarity and negotiation. In Calcutta, Ashima possess an established cultural identity which is strongly embedded in the family and community. But in America, she is initially isolated and uncertain. It is through cooking, that Ashima creates a meaningful role within the emerging Bengali – American culture. When Ashima establishes her authority by preparing authentic traditional Bengali food in the American household, a practice that is unfamiliar to the American women, she creates a space for herself within the community and thereby develops a sense of belonging.

Migration strips individuals of their familiar social roles and forms of authority. These diasporic gatherings demonstrate migration just as process of reterritorialization and not as a complete loss of the identity. Not everyone in the community relates India or its sense in the same way. Some are more nostalgic, while others are more assimilated and some are more critical of the traditional expectations. However, for the next generation these communal gatherings often disrupt their freedom and are not of their interests. Gogol's discomfort reflects the next generation subjects' difficulty in positioning themselves. Thus, culinary communities, on the one hand, mitigate the migration trauma and foster a sense of belonging for one generation. On the other hand, for future generations, they can produce a sense of alienation.

Kitchen as a Space of Identity Negotiation

The novel begins with Ashima cooking Indian food in the kitchen of her Massachusetts home during her final stage of pregnancy. Every scene in the household and the kitchen reveals it as a central space of identity negotiation. It is in this kitchen space that Ashima translates memory into material practice, while American conditions gradually enter the Bengali traditions. Even though cooking takes place within the home, cuisine or the so-called culinary products play a major role in organising family relationships and social networks beyond the household. The kitchen becomes a space of continued competence. This concept of kitchen as a space can be deeply understood through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Bourdieu deepens the understanding of social reproduction through his foundational framework where he states "the habitus as the system of embodied dispositions through which social practices become naturalized". (170) Ashima's cooking reflects a Bengali habitus which is carried into the landscape of Massachusetts. Culinary preferences emerge from a cultural world that has become embodied, yet the American environment challenges the habitus because it requires a modification. As a result, the kitchen becomes a space where inherited dispositions encounter new conditions. Kitchen becomes a diasporic space which is produced through memory, practice and adaptation.

However, the therapeutic healing effect of kitchen is inseparable from the gender politics. Even though the women find happiness in cooking and sharing the traditional culinary values, it often becomes their sole responsibility within the household, thereby placing the emotional burden of the preserving these traditions on them. Ashima's culinary labour is closely connected to her loneliness, as her ability to feed and care for others often conceals her own need for care. She is often expected to perform these responsibilities rather than making her labour fully recognised. She is expected to sustain the cultural continuity through the Indian foods and within the kitchen space. Ashima is made responsible for maintaining Bengali customs and transforming the household into a space which is culturally legible. From this perspective, Lahiri reveals that the preservation of culture within an immigrant household is not a simple or automatic process rather it requires considerable labour and this labour is deeply gendered. Women often become the sole transmitters of culture to the society and to the next generations. The burden of preserving identity often falls disproportionately on immigrant women. However, Lahiri does not portray this responsibility as purely oppressive, because through cooking Ashima retains a sense of creative and social power within the immigrant community.

Kitchen is often treated as a naturally feminine space, yet the novel reveals that this naturalness is socially produced. Ashima's cooking is connected to marriage, motherhood, hospitality and cultural respectability. Cooking provides Ashima the power of agency. It makes her knowledgeable, socially

valuable and capable of creating an entire community of her own. She actively uses the culinary practices to build a life and her eventual independence demonstrating that cultural tradition can coexist with self-transformation. Migration therefore intensifies the domestic labour of migrant women. The kitchen becomes a site where the loss of extended kinship is managed through the individual labour of Ashima in the novel. Thus immigrant kitchen spaces serve as a crucial cultural anchor by acting as domestic, commercial and community hubs that preserve, adapt and pass down the culinary heritage across the generations.

Transgenerational Approach Towards Culinary Traditions

The novel *The Namesake* presents migration and its after effects through a transgenerational perspective. Although Gogol, the first son of Ashoke and Ashima, is born and brought up in the United States and faces the consequences of being perceived as a non-American, he never experiences migration in the same way as his parents. His unusual name, when compared to the American children, gives the identity of his parents' history, which he proudly realises in the climax. In the initial period of his schooling the name was a burden and a matter of embarrassment for him. He even tried to change his name to Nikhil. Gogol becomes an example of what Homi K Bhabha describes as the "ambivalence of cultural hybridity, where the identity is neither Indian nor American but rather settles in an unsettled third space" (*The Location of Culture* 54). When discussing the concept of identity, it is impossible to overlook Gogol's relationship with food. Even though Gogol resists the Bengali cultural life and his name from the beginning, he remains connected to his parents' roots through the meals prepared by Ashima and the family gatherings of the Indian friends of Ashoke. It is these simple acts of daily life, that keeps the next generation connected to heritage of homeland even while living far away and even belonging to the second generation.

The culinary archive in the novel is intergenerational. Both Gogol and Sonia encounter the Bengali culture through the meals prepared by their mother even before they recognize it as a system of identity. They are introduced to the roots of their parents through these repeated ritualistic act of consuming Indian cuisines. The children learn their identities through these repetitions. By eating particular food at particular gatherings, watching Ashima happily preparing the Indian meals, observing the female groups exchanging ingredients and discussing traditional recipes, and participating in the recreations of Indian celebrations in America, they unknowingly reconnect with their homeland. Such forms of learnings, Jan Assmann suggests, are embodied rather than formally instructed. Even though the children are not initially valuing the practices, unintentionally it becomes the part of their sensory journey. The children do not experience India as a lost everyday environment,

rather the Bengali culture is inherited only through the family practices and is not remembered through direct displacement.

The dynamic acceptance and rejection of rituals complicate the assumption that cultural inheritance depends solely on repetition and transmission. Gogol often resists the meanings attached to his name and family background, but this resistance does not hinder him from accepting the Bengali identity. Both his body and biography remain shaped by the domestic culture he seeks to escape. It is the culinary preferences that helps to explain the paradox of Gogol's life. A person may reject an explicit identity while still retaining the tastes, rituals and emotional associations formed in the childhood. Food mediates the relationship between the generations, it provides a flexible medium through which he can reinterpret his history. Ashima and Ashoke interpret food as a necessary connection to home; whereas Gogol and Sonia interpret the same food as an evidence of differences of their parents. For them, it is experienced as parental memory rather than personal memory, allowing them to distance themselves socially from their heritage, while being unable to erase the embodied archive of childhood.

Culinary Adaptations in the Immigrant Community

The process of using food as a healing mechanism relies heavily on what Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* categorises as restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. He defines restorative nostalgia "as a desire to reconstruct the lost home in its original purity" whereas reflective nostalgia "as dwelling on the lingering details, fragments and irrecoverable nature of the past" (41). The culinary practice in the diasporic community often oscillates between these two modes of restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. This refers to the migrants' attempts to precisely recreate the authentic flavours of the homeland (restorative) while recognising that the substitution of ingredients and the altered physical setting inevitably yield a hybrid product (reflective). The Gangulis in the novel remain connected to Bengali tradition precisely because they revise it enough to make it possible in the American household.

In the absence of the ingredients and the authentic space for recreation, the immigrant women try to transmit the culture that shaped them in the new land. They make use of the available products in a hybrid, yet creative method. The resulting culinary practice is neither considered as cultural purity nor as cultural abandonment, yet it is a negotiated habitus. The ingredients are substituted, the quantities are altered and the meals are adapted to suite the American spaces. Thus in every sense, kitchen in the diasporic communities becomes a laboratory of cultural survival. It satisfies Homi K Bhabha's account of hybridity, "where cultural practices are repeated, translated, misread, displace" (*The Location of Culture* 144). The food in the novel becomes an interstitial space. In the novel *The*

Namesake, culinary hybridity allows the characters to inhabit American life without abandoning the cultural practices that make the family comprehensible to itself.

Food also mediates language. The culinary terminologies in Bengali would not be familiar to the people in America, may be not even to the second generation of the Indian immigrants. The children's growing use of English alters the linguistic environment in which food is discussed. Culinary vocabulary becomes a small but significant arena of bilingual identity. A dish may remain culturally Indian even when described in English or prepared using American ingredients in American kitchens. The hybrid meal therefore becomes an appropriate metaphor for the novel's structure. *The Namesake* itself moves between the Indian and the American, the past and the present. Thus, food in the novel reflects this form by combining continuity with alteration.

Conclusion

Thus the central setting of the novel, the home of Ashoke and Ashima with their children in America is not only a simple residence or habitat. It is a site where the displaced cultural forms are recreated repeatedly and relived. Their culinary practices transform the immigrant home into a site of cultural recognition and emotional survival. At different instances, their apartment consists of Bengali food, Bengali speech, Bengali visitors and Bengali rituals. Even after all these efforts, they are unable to create Calcutta in its totality, but they provide a structure of recognition and the home becomes "homing desire" as Avtar Brah describes in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (83). Through the act of cooking and eating, Gangulis, specially Ashima tries to create a home away from home, and makes the home portable.

The novel also demonstrates that memory is not always pleasurable. Although it can help individuals to recall the past, it can also evoke a sense of absence and a lack of belonging. For Ashima, cooking and serving Bengali dishes in the American household intensifies the awareness of the family and the roots left behind while accepting a new life abroad. Even when the Bengali meals provide comfort to Ganguli family, it also resembles the distance with their belonging. Therefore, culinary memory has a double structure, where at the same time it soothes and wounds. The culinary preferences not only mitigate trauma by removing pain, but also give a recognizable and sharable form for pain.

In the early stages of migration, Ashima is making culinary experiments can be identified as part of the material conditions of migration. She was forced to adjust with unfamiliar ingredients, limited access to ethnic markets and the absence of relatives who could provide practical assistance while living in a different new world. The improvisations she makes in the recipes are both painful but

creative as well. The use of American substitutes to cook her favourite Bengali dish demonstrates that the cultural continuity is dependent on material circumstances that are available. Traditions often survive through adjustments and not just through the perfect replications.

Throughout the novel, we can identify that Lahiri has represented food and culinary traditions as a form of embodied cultural meditation. It is through maintaining these culinary traditions, the Ganguli family survives the migration trauma. Preserving the culinary traditions is a significant means of mitigating psychological and cultural trauma of migration. Food is the only element that can make memory tangible and repeatable which can be relived every single time. The elements of substitutions, scarcity, improvisations and communal exchange keeps these traditions reassembled. Bengali food in America can never be exactly the same as the food prepared in the homes of Calcutta, but this altered form is a material expression of the diasporic life rather than a symbol of the failure of the authenticity. For Ashima and Ashoke the act of cooking Bengali food in America operates as a performative reclamation of home itself. Gastronomy can strongly act an affective bridge that metabolizes the trauma of dislocation while registering the intergenerational tensions in the reconstruction of “home”. Culinary traditions in *The Namesake* becomes a form of cultural resilience even in its imperfect, gendered, adaptive and emotionally powerful way. Food becomes a part of everyday life through which migrants sustain themselves and make survival possible in the new land.

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