



Platter of my Heart: Negotiating and affirming identities through culinary heritages in a diasporic land in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Mrs Sen's*

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Abstract

The cuisine and culinary practices of every geographically demarcated region has a major contribution towards its cultural history, heritage and inheritance. They become a mark of identity for the creation of a homogeneous community as well as the signifiers of identification to the rest of the world. These area specific cuisines, culinary preferences and their ways of preparation have a ritualistic significance with their own distinct spaces in the cultural registers of any community. They constitute a rich heritage in themselves as prominent identity markers through which the past is re-lived in the present, preserving them for the future.

Diasporic literature all over the world deal with the anguish, identity crises and complexities faced by the migrant communities as they straddle between the diverse ways of two unlike and unfamiliar worlds striving to maintain their own cultural distinctiveness and at the same time challenging the fears of being rejected by both their motherlands of the past as well as the lands of the present. These struggles and conflicts often create a volatile zone of conflict between the migrants and the hosts, occasionally leading to cultural feuds. The present paper makes an attempt to read Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Mrs Sen's* as a document of this conflict and diasporic existential crisis and show how the protagonist holds on to the cuisine and gastronomic preferences of her homeland with ritualistic significance as the means of asserting her own identity and proclaiming the cultural supremacy of her own nation's culinary heritage. It also focuses on the role memory plays in this constant negotiation of affirmation of one's identity along with providing sustenance to her anguished self as she negotiates the cultural displacement and shifting cultural registers.

Keywords

Culinary Practices, Cultural Heritage, Diaspora, Identity Conflict

“Are there manifestations of collective memory, identity and heritage among diasporic communities that are detached or different from nation- state based manifestations?” (Anheier and Raj Isar, intro, 11) Every culture has its own distinctive ways of identity creation, identity formation and identity definition which become the signifiers of ethnicity as well fosters and cements the bonds of kinship within the community. Heritage survives in the form of oral narratives, historical relics, sartorial styles, culinary habits and they are strong vehicles of the rights to space and time. Rituals and performances constitute a major segment of this inherited heritage of cultural property which are often location specific, owned and traded with pride, and then transmitted on to the later generations as cultural heirlooms. These rituals and performances become significant as invaluable specimens of the past, which are to be performed with utmost sacredness in the present and also to be guarded and preserved for the future. In the case of the diasporic communities, who are constantly straddling between two divergent and dissimilar worlds, they provide the comfort factor and soothes their weary souls amidst their conflicts and crises of identities. These relics, histories and memories become potent signifiers of identity and self-identification and serve to foster and stabilise collective bonding, and serve as the signifiers of distinctiveness from other communities. This paper endeavours to show how Mrs Sen, a Bengali woman who shifts to America after her marriage, finds solace in the culinary heritage and gastronomic preferences of her homeland and how she tries to recreate the same in this alien land with ritualistic significance as the means of negotiating and asserting her identity in Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story of the same name.

Besides the topography of any specific region, the culinary choices and preferences, the recipes of preparation, the serving customs as well as the ways of feasting all constitute the creation of a homogeneous community and an ethnic social group. Through the transmission of these culinary and gastronomic practices to successive generations as a living heritage by their predecessor’s food and cuisine cease to be an everyday ritual and transcends beyond it as a socially strong marker of identity. Mrs Sen, the protagonist of Lahiri’s short story, having being born and brought up in an essentially Bengali household amidst the culinary procedures typical of Bengalis, holds on to these customs even in the alien land of America where she settles after her marriage. The fact that she prefers to sit cross- legged on the floor, with a heap of vegetables and bowls of water by her side is absolutely unfamiliar in an American household and hence surprises Eliot, the eleven-year-old American child she looks after. Moreover, the fact that she does not use a knife to peel and slice the vegetables, but takes the aid of “a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas” and is hinged at one end to a narrow wooden base (Lahore, 114) surprises Eliot even more. The sight of a woman from the east, sitting on the floor in the western world, lifting and locking the blade and hacking apart whole vegetables without even looking at it, becomes an amusing spectacle for him. Bengalis would immediately recognize the blade as a *bnoti*, which has a mandatory presence in every kitchen. The fact that Mrs Sen makes use of this unquestionably Bengali *bnoti* as she spilt and slices vegetables into halves, quarters, florets, cubes and shreds is the way in she maintains her unique Bengaliness: the entire process becomes a ritual to hold on to her own heritage and preserve and honour it in her everyday life. Similarly, presenting Eliot’s

mother with “a glass of bright pink yogurt with rose syrup”, or “breaded mincemeat with raisins”, or “a bowl of semolina halvah” (Lahiri, 118) becomes significant markers of eastern rituals on one hand, while on the other they become the signifiers which assert Mrs Sen’s eastern identity and also point out her difference with the western woman. In the case of the diasporic population, where an individual strives to adjust and adapt to two diverse world views and cultural registers, a conscious reworking of such rituals reinstates the inseparable bond with the heritage of the mother country: a retrospection of the past and introspection about the present as well as the imagined futures where the past heritage of the motherland is remembered and preserved for present and future sustenance.

Bengal is blessed with a plethora of rivers running through and across it which provides the region with a considerable amount of rich alluvial soil and a remarkable deposit of silt by flooding rivers. This explains the ubiquitous presence of fish on the Bengali platter as the rivers, lakes, ponds, canals are perpetually teeming with multiple variants of fish, ready to serve the taste-buds which places these marine creatures as one of the prevalent cultural markers of the Bengali palate. For Mrs Sen, the presence of fish on her platter serves as comfort food in a foreign land: hence she prepares a croquette, only substituting the tuna fish due to the non-availability of the bhetki on American shores, replicating the ritual of home in an imaginary homeland as a tribute to the established heritage of one’s own country which Chitrita Banerji fondly describes as “...the immigrant imagination tr(ying) to recreate ancient homegrown traditions.” (Banerji, intro, xiv) The fact that she is in close proximity with the sea brings back memories of her homeland and the easy availability of multiple variants of fish only to elicit a response of helpless lament from her: “To live so close to the ocean and not to have so much fish,” (Lahiri, 123) a marked contrast from the land she calls her own where all one has to do to find a good supply of fish is to only walk a bit around one’s house. Her lament for the scarcity of fish blurs the past and the present and extends to the macro level, where the fish becomes symbolic of everything she calls home, everything embedded in her psyche as the imprints of one’s own belonging, everything she searches for in this land of burgers and hotdogs.

“Rituals work by allowing people to enact, perform or otherwise celebrate ultimate cultural values.” (Ashworth, 41) highlighting the performativity of cultural practices, traditions and occasions which validate similarities and simultaneously construct difference and otherness. These ritualistic performances work as a means of transmitting and transferring heritage on the one hand, while they also become demarcating factors around which cultural politics evolve and revolve. They constitute the basis for integration of the community and homogeneous authentic community behavior. In this globalised world, where the lines between centres and margins are constantly overlapping and blurring one another, there arises the problematic of identity construction and preservation amidst the forces of globalization. In the case of the diasporic population, where an individual strives to adjust and adapt to two diverse world views and cultural registers, holding on to the ritualistic practices upholds one’s long inherited heritage, either lived or imagined or a blend of both, which provides solace to the soul in diasporic conflict and also becomes an important means to assert one’s identity. These practices become sacred rites of passage,

to shape collective perceptions of selves and others and influence social behavioural patterns.

“History, myth-making and culinary skills of a particular region also became entangled with the narratives of a lost world.” (Ray, 211) All over the world, Bengalis are famous for their penchant and preference for fish, and are often fondly referred to as *machhe- bhaate bangalee*, a community which swears by their rice and fish. This penchant and extreme affinity towards fishy delicacies has created a separate niche for this marine creatures in the social and cultural milieu, which is validated by historical documents as well. The savoury trio of fish, culture and society bear witness to historical realities as also to innumerable stories of assimilation, migration, resistance and accommodation. Besides being an inseparable and indispensable ingredient of the Bengali platter, fish is a symbol of fertility and prosperity amidst the Bengali community and is a part and parcel of every auspicious occasion from births to bereavements, not to forget weddings and a baby’s first formal introduction to an adult diet. Hence for Bengalis, fish is an emotion close to their heart, with an immense ritualistic and sanctimonious importance in the social fabric. The land of Bengal is famous for its various culinary experiments with fish, both traditional and innovative, which has a major contribution towards its cultural and culinary heritage which has been handed down from the preceding generation to the succeeding one with pride and glory. Lahiri speaks of Mrs Sen’s longing for fish not only to foreground her Bengali identity and its forever presence on the Bengali palate, but also of the diasporic longing for home. Here, a difference in cuisine and gastronomic habits stand for remembrance of all things past: they remind her every moment of her lost home, of the rituals and customs of her home, of her conflicts of belonging, of her fragmented identities and most of all, her alien present in a room which she cannot call her own.

Cultural heritage become the sites to be preserved, restored and rebuilt to contribute to collective memories and identities which in turn, shape the collective perceptions of ‘selves’ and ‘others’ and the ways in which these two binary groups interact with one another. In America, which operates on an absolutely different cultural register, no such emotion is attached with this aquatic species, it does not enjoy the supreme position on the dietary hierarchies, nor is it awarded any special status; it is seen only as one of the many items on the map of consumption, which feeds the hungry American. Contrary to the Bengalis, for whom the heads, tails and even the fish eggs made for sumptuous snacks and meals and who could consume fish “first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school,” (Lahiri 123) Americans never see fish as an entire meal in itself nor do they find every part of the fish edible. Since fish does not constitute such an indispensable position in the cultural heritage of the American nation, Eliot’s mother and the other Americans fail to comprehend Mrs Sen’s attachment and obsession with this marine species. Eliot looks in amazement at the way Mrs Sen “stroked the tails, prodded the bellies, pried apart the gutted flesh” Of the fish with experienced and deft hands. He keeps on watching her as she “grasped the body, lined with inky streaks, at either end, and notched it at intervals against the blade.” (Lahiri, 127) It is an unusual and unfamiliar sight for Eliot as he had never seen a fish being observed so minutely and handled with so much dexterity and acumen by the inhabitants of his own country. For Mrs Sen, the recipes and culinary customs which she has inherited from her homeland remain the only ones with their mark

of authenticity and sacredness of inherited treasures from a rich cultural heritage, while to the eyes of the white American population, all these elaborate procedures and emotions are nothing more than a classic example of much ado about nothing. This creates the great cultural centre- margin demarcations between the host community and the migrant community with respect to their individual ways of life. The host 'self-categorizes everything in the classic parameters of the west and the rest, and completely refuses to accept the 'other's ways, while the migrant 'other' strives to create their own spaces in the host country by replicating rituals of home on foreign shores. Utsa Ray goes on to describe in her book *Culinary Culture in Colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle Class* about how culinary and gastronomic preferences prevalent and cherished in one geographical area can evoke feelings of disgust and revulsion in the other. (sometimes even within the same state as in the case of Bengal, though both follow the same dietary patterns) Hence, a bag of fish being carried in a public bus is a sight Americans are unaccustomed to and the unfamiliar smell creates almost an olfactory revulsion in the host 'other,' while the same smell leaves a lingering taste of the homeland in the migrant 'self', reminiscent of life by the Bay of Bengal.

Since heritage as a resource and as intangible process uses sites, objects and social practices to transmit ideas, it is often "a product of the present that draws upon an assumed imaginary past, and justifies itself by reference to an equally assumed imaginary future." (Ashworth, 21) Rituals might be defined as prescribed action patterns, having a social and cultural acceptance, relating and pertaining to collective groups rather than individuals. Both heritage and rituals are transmitted in the form of fashion, sartorial preferences and culinary tastes. Heritage becomes the patterns transmitted through generations cementing the past, present and future between structure and society, transition and transcendence while ritualistic performances, bearing a sense of sanctimony and holiness of their own become the medium of communication and works at a revival of cultural traditions and historical relics. Cultural heritage becomes the chief means of assurance and reassurance of the community's presence through the repetition of the same rituals and performances to maintain a specific order and a reassertion of belonging to a specific community. A visit to the seaside brings back fond memories of home and fresh sea fish to Mrs Sen's mind; to her it is no less than a sacred rite of passage through which she pays homage to the land of her heart's desire through the palate of her heart. The manner in which she puts on "a red sari and red lipstick" freshens "the vermilion in her part" and rebraids her hair, (Lahiri, 129) foregrounds the fact that she sees this as an auspicious ritual through which her exiled soul might find some comfort and solace. The Tabasco sauce and black pepper she puts on her clam cakes reminds her of the relishing taste of pakoras, a fried snack indigenous and popular all over India and psychologically she is transported back in time and space to the land she calls her own, away from her troubled present, revisiting her homeland through food and memory through her taste buds.

"Cultural performances bring past events into presence, making them accessible to present experiences." (Wulf, 8) Mrs Sen's reminiscences of the large celebrations where neighbourhood women "sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night." (Lahiri, 115) along with her skilful and authentic practices of the rituals of the homeland is the process through

which she negotiates and ultimately affirms her identity. On the one hand, she sees them as ritualistic and sanctimonious performances through which she can create an imaginary homeland of the mind. On the other hand, these solemn rites are also her only consolation which provides solace and soothes her aching soul in a state of “a double estrangement” (Ang, 83) where one is separated from one’s homeland and also discriminated against in the country of settlement, validating and affirming the existence of the migrant cultural traditions and heritage in a diasporic land.

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