

# **Food : Memory and Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine and Hell-Heaven***

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## Abstrak

Sebagai salah satu produk sosial, makanan merupakan salah satu sarana untuk menelaah budaya suatu masyarakat. Dalam kehidupan diaspora, makanan mampu membuka kembali memory individu atau masyarakat akan masa lampau sebagai pijakan untuk kehidupannya kini. Makalah ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap peran makanan sebagai sarana memori dan identitas masyarakat keturunan India yang tinggal di Amerika dalam cerpen *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* dan *Hell-Heaven* karya Jhumpa Lahiri. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa selain menguatkan identitas, makanan mampu mengungkap kembali memori seseorang atau masyarakat, mengingatkan akan masa lampau, dan bernostalgia, di mana mereka akan berusaha menemukan kembali masa lalu tersebut pada masa kini. Proses negosiasi antara masa lampau dan masa kini menjadi hal yang tak terelakkan.

Kata kunci : makanan, memori, nostalgia, identitas, diaspora, masa lampau, masa kini

## Abstract

As one of social products, food becomes one of apparatuses to observe culture and society. In diasporic life, food may uncover memory of individuals or society over their past as the stepping stone to their present life. This paper aims at discussing food roles as arena of memory and identity for Asian-Indians living the United States in Jhumpa Lahiri's *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* and *Hell-Heaven*. The result shows that food can strengthen identity. Furthermore, food may recall the individual's or community's memory, remembering the past, and having nostalgia, where they will attempt to reinvent the past to the present. Negotiation process between past and present inevitably occurs.

Keywords : food, memory, nostalgia, identity, diaspora, past, present

## A. Introduction

Having food is now not only regarded as the activities to fulfill the biological needs as food is inevitably social and cultural product. Food becomes one of apparatuses to observe and understand cultures as it can reveal a community's stories and histories and all important events of human beings (Rahn, 2006: 32). Sutton (2001:3) mentions "...*food can hide powerful meanings and structures under the cloak of the mundane and the quotidian.*" It means that food can unveil the hidden stories behind the obvious. Holtzman (2006: 364) mentions that food functions as marker for immigrant communities, an arena for nostalgia, and a connection with family.

In the diasporic life, food is the bridge between the old world and new world, the homeland and the present land, the past and present time, and engaged its functions as the tool of

nostalgia. Sutton (2001) observed through his research in Greek Island of Kalymnos on how food plays important roles in recollect one's memory. He found out that agricultural cycle, religious services and tradition, daily consumption, and other food-related events create a community's prospective memories. He also examined how one's sensory may potentially relate to remembering and reconnecting process in his informant. The experience with certain food then evokes the informant's recollection to the past about the homeland. This is also one of the evidences how food become a representation of region, even in wider circumstances such as country (Sutton, 2001: 74).

When one is away from the homeland, food plays a strong influence in the present community. Madhur Jaffreys in *Invitation to Indian Cooking* (qtd. in Mannur, 2010: 31) claims that the one's condition in diasporic life creates a significant longing for the homeland's comestibles. Once one leaves the physical borders of the homeland, the feeling of missing the homeland's apparatuses will rise. One will search for the apparatuses that may be able to bring his memory back to him as part of his surviving efforts to his upcoming life. In the US, where many people from almost around the world come, people usually bring the wealth of traditions and memories associated with their foodways (Rahn 2006: 34).

The burgeoning literature discussing living in the diaspora attracts some criticisms, particularly on the interactions between the differences. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of Asian-Indian-American writers whose writings are mostly about the life in the diasporic circumstance. Inspired by her own experiences living in diaspora, Lahiri elaborates most of her writings relating such topics. One of her masterpieces, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which wins 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and her other short stories collections, *Unaccustomed Earth*, tell mostly about the interaction of Asian-Indian experiences in the United States. *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* and *Hell-Heaven*, both taken from *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* consecutively, are quintessence of interaction process involving some apparatuses, including food.

## B. Memory and Identity

Memory is defined as an idea of experiences in the past as Holtzman (2006) uses the term for "*the notion of experience or meaning in reference to the past*". However, memories are not mere saved images taken from the brain, yet it is an interaction between the past and the present. (Sutton, 2001:9). Hodgkin and Radstone (2003 qtd in Holtzman 2006) state "*...memory intrinsically destabilizes truth through a concern with the subjective ways that the past is recalled, memorialized, and used to construct the present*". This involves variety of process for both individuals and society.

In life, identity cannot be separated from memory. Yet, it is not static. Lambek and Antze (1998:xxix) qtd in Sutton (2001: 9) quotes "*Identity is not composed of a fixed set of memories but lies in the dialectical, ceaseless activity of remembering and forgetting, assimilating and discarding.*" The past and its continuation in one's memory keeps in one's identity. Milligan (2003:384) states that place attachment may influence identity. When one is displaced to other region, identity discontinuity may result. The discontinuity may lead into nostalgia (Davis 1979 in Milligan (2003:384).

Memory is strongly related to nostalgia. According to New Oxford English Dictionary, the term of nostalgia falls into "*a sentimental longing, or wishful affection for the past, typically*

for a period or place with happy personal associations” (Walder, 2011: 7). Davis 1979 in Milligan (2003:384) defines nostalgia as “a positively toned evocation of a lived past in the context of negative feeling toward present or impending circumstances.” Michael Wood in Walder (2011:7) mentions that nostalgia is universal, as most cultures dream of their golden ages and ‘garden of Eden’, it becomes a piece of people’s past and a kind of patch that “...provoke tenderness, since it becomes fragments of people’s past.” The word ‘nostalgia comes from Greek ‘nostos’ which means ‘returning home’ and ‘algia’ meaning ‘pain’ or ‘longing’. It was created by Johannes Hofer in 1688 when he observed and tried to describe a condition of young Swiss abroad. He saw that his respondents suffered from a situation of ‘grief for lost charm of the native land’ which resulted in some physiological disturbances, even attempt to suicide. Though drugs could minimize the condition, yet the effective cure was returning home (9).

Proust puts the importance of sensory nature of memory. He distinguished voluntary recall and involuntary return of the past created by the scents, tastes, and images. It brings the truth of the past into the present (10). Boym in Walder (2011;10) views nostalgia as ‘generalised desire for origins, for unmediated experience, that tries to defeat time’, and figured as ‘mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility’. Since nostalgia involves the past, hence it needs a negotiation between the past and the present since nostalgia may shape the present. Therefore in diasporic life, when the physical border is obvious, one cannot leave the past at all, he will choose a process of negotiation between his past and present.

### C. Food in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*

*When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* discusses the story from the point of view of Lilia, a little girl whose parents are from India and then moved to the United States. Taken the setting in early 1970s, the short story tells the family interactions with a man coming from Dacca, Bangladesh, which used to be part of Pakistan due to the country’s engagement in Civil War. Mr. Pirzada, the man, receiving his one-year scholarship in botany in the US, as implied in the title, usually comes to have dinner with Lilia’s family. Dinner, becomes an important part of interaction in the Asian-Indian kitchen. Kitchen is regarded as the heart of the home, a place where families gather, share their private traditions, experiences, and express their identity through food to each other and to the world (Rahn, 2006:34). Christensen (2001 qtd. in Holtzman 2006: 370) views kitchen as *respository for memory*. When eating mincemeat kebabs with coriander chutney, Mr. Pirzada recollects his memory about his homeland in Dacca, imagining how desperate and frightened his family—his wife and seven daughters—he leaves in Dacca, facing predicaments during Partition. “One can only hope,” he said, reaching for another, “that Dacca’s refugees are as heartily fed...”(29). His pleasure in eating kebabs may bring him to revisit his past, his togetherness with his whole family, before the uproaring Partition. Kebabs for Mr. Pirzada, besides a tool for memory and strengthen identity as South Asian origin, also reflects his happy experience in the past in his homeland which is rather impossible for him to see that day due to the upheaval Partition. Though Lilia’s family do not experience the same thing with his, yet the emotional feeling as the same South Asia origins become one of supporting elements to memory and nostalgia. This is in line with Davis’ claim (qtd in Milligan 2003: 384) that each group in society may share the same feeling, share the same identity as South Asian origins as they also share the certain same memory.

The involuntary disruption may bring destruction to the past. The uncertain situation in Dacca destructs Mr. Pirzada's memory about his past, his time when gathering with his family. When watching television about the rising war in his homeland, his attitude spontaneously changes. When carving the pumpkin for Halloween, the knife slipped from his hand and it leaves a gash dipping to the base of the pumpkin (Lahiri 1999:36). This is one of the way memory shape one's attitude at the present. Mr. Pirzada's spontaneous attitude is the result of his memory in the past which is disrupted by the unexpected, involuntary move which renders to his next attitude. His flying to his homeland to find out the certainty of his family are reflections of the contribution of the past.

In dinner occasions, Pirzada and Lilia's family discuss the current issues on social and political matters accompanied by the South Asian menu provided by the mother. Rice, which is usually served in Lilia's family dinner, is the compulsory menu in Indian cooking, especially in South India and Bengal which are considered as rice-eating areas (Jaffrey qtd. in Mannur 2010: 33). Murcott (1996) qtd. in Holtzman (2006: 368) as his research in Europe notes that food reflects a symbol for creating imagined communities of nation. Rice is strongly related to Asian cuisine. Accompanied with curry and some vegetables, it becomes the mythic symbol of Asian India. Hence, food plays not only as representative of local custom but also a symbol of a country.

Madhur Jaffrey in Mannur (2012: 34) explains "*there is no place in New York, or anywhere in America where top-quality Indian food can be found—except of course, in private Indian homes.*" Hence, Indian home, including the kitchen is also a place to maintain the ethnic identity among the US community to protect, preserve, and strengthen the Indian national culture. The past experiences enables people in diasporic life to recreate the same kitchen in the present land.

The home was principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality. No matter what the changes in the external condition of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (i.e. feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially westernized (Chatterjee qtd. in Mannur, 2010: 34)

Therefore, women play crucial roles in preserving the Indian culture, including Indian foods. Indian mother is depicted as a housewife who is responsible for the home and kitchen, including nurturing the family with Indian values. The strengthening identity process is not merely of the menu, but also of the way people eat. They eat picked mangoes with meals and rice every dinner with their hands, chew fennel seeds after meals, and drink no alcohol (Lahiri, 1999: 25). Lilia's mother is also described as a caring housewife by bringing some Asian dishes such as lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in yoghurt sauce, followed by lemon and chilli peppers (30). Lilia's mother, though she also works as a tellerbank, is depicted as busy woman who must take care of family neatly, and busy with kitchen matters. When his husband talks with Mr. Pirzada on politics, during the commercial she must go to the kitchen to get more rice (31). The connection between woman, food, and kitchen become inevitable part of Asian-Indian tradition.

Rahn (2006: 34) argues that foodways are displayed and exchanged through kitchen, market, and festival. In the story, the monthly activity of going to Chinatown is one way to keep the memory and identity alive (Lahiri, 1999: 30). Not only as a place to buy and sell goods, Chinatown is also a place to recollect the memory since in the place people can interact each

other—things that differ from the self-service westernized supermarkets, make bargains, enjoy food cooking performance, and other Asia food and stuff activities. Having festivities is arena to gather and socialization. Even though Lilia's family and Mr. Pirzada come from South Asia, they also celebrate Halloween. Carving the pumpkin together, and doing trick-or-treat becomes parts of Asian-Indian to socialization with Americans. Here, negotiation between the past and present in the accommodation process happens.

#### D. Food in *Hell-Heaven*

As in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, *Hell-Heaven* also describes Asian-Indian experiences in the United States through the point of view of Usha, a little girl whose parents are from India. Having arranged marriage, her parents then moved to Berlin for years, where Usha was born, and then moved to America. Like the first short story, *Hell-Heaven* also depicts the tight tie among Asian-Indian community in the US. Asian-Indian diaspora in the US results in some gatherings and arena for socialization among them. In the second story, a young twenty-five year-old Bengali man named Pranab Chakraborty or Pranab Kaku, who befriends with Usha's parents and frequently come to their home, like Mr. Pirzada does.

In this story, food then becomes arena for memory for all. Like Mr. Pirzada, Pranab Kaku often comes for dinners, even lunchtime. Living in inappropriate apartment and having not had proper Bengali meal for more than three months, Pranab Kaku feels relieved when being served with only leftover curried mackerel and rice and eats with his hands. Being at Usha's parents home and having Asian-Indian foods may recollect his memory about his wealthy life in Calcutta. This is also reflected in his attitude to Usha's family, especially Boudi, Usha's mother and Usha herself. His past experience, the shared identity he receives from Usha's family determines his present attitude. Succeeding bringing back his memory, Pranab Kaku mentions his thanks to Boudi after saving him with her cooking—mostly Asian-Indian food—saying “...*this woman hosted my first real Thanksgiving in America. It might have been an afternoon in May, but that first meal at Boudi's table was Thanksgiving to me. If it weren't for that meal, I would have gone back to Calcutta*”(79). For Pranab Kaku, Boudi not only saves his life and destiny, but also brings him back to his nostalgia of comfortable life in Calcutta, making him to have family to talk to and enabling him to encourage himself doing achievements in his life.

Pranab Kaku tries to accommodate his past and present. His action taking Usha and her mother, Boudi, to *India Tea and Spices* (Lahiri, 2008: 66) is part of returning the family and himself to their Asian-Indianness in the US. By revisiting the past, it is also one way to strengthen their identity. In addition, teaching Deborah, his American fiancée to say *khub bhalo* and *aacha* and picking up foods with fingers instead of with fork are part of reinventing memory in the present life which then transformed to people from other Asian-India. Those ways accommodate both his memory recollection and his life today; a way of negotiation of the past experience and the present.

Foods also becomes a central arena where the characters interact. Like in when *Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, *Hell-Heaven* also uplifts the Thanksgiving party. As the Chakrabortys' invitation, Usha's family comes to the party, interacting with others and having some Thanksgiving dishes provided for the guests. For Boudi—and some Asian Indian—the Thanksgiving menu raises her complaint by mentioning that the foods are tasteless and bland,

different from the spicy and conspicuous Asian-Indian foods she usually serves. However, her uneasiness with the Western foods the Chakrabortys serve is related to her inner feelings, a mixture of jealousy with Deborah who 'grabs' Pranab Kaku from the togetherness with her and Usha, and the uneasiness seeing Pranab Kaku married to an American girl. The Boudi's jealousy is also supported by many situations. As in Asian Indian tradition, man becomes the breadwinner, responsible for external affairs, while women must deal with internal affairs, such as taking care of children and handling houseworks.

She had never worked, and during the day she watched soap operas to pass the time. Her only job, every day, was to clean and cook for my father and me. We rarely went to restaurants, my father always pointing out, even in cheap ones, how expensive they were compared with eating at home. When my mother complained to him about how much she hated life in the suburbs and how lonely she felt, he said nothing to placate her. "If you are so unhappy, go back to Calcutta," he would offer, making it clear that their separation would not affect him one way or the other (Lahiri, 2008: 76).

Her loneliness living in the diaspora, the husband's ignorance, drive her to have a small tolerance to other things different from her world, including in foods. Compared with the her husband, Boudi has less tolerance on differences. In Pranab Kaku's wedding day, she keeps talking in Bengali, feeling uncomfortable, and complaining about the formality of the proceedings and Pranab Kaku's less words to her due to his busy dealing with his new American family. Meanwhile, her husband keeps quietly enjoying his eating though he is not accustomed to eating with fork and knife (73-74).

Kitchen is also a multiple area for women dealing with their feelings. It can be an area to overtly express their feelings, area for escapism, and area for hiding. In the case of Boudi, after being burned with her jealousy and almost committing mischief when finally saved by her neighbor, Boudi returns to the home, to the kitchen especially. When Usha and her father come home in the evening as usual, Boudi is in the kitchen, boiling rice for dinner, as if nothing happens (83). In the kitchen, Boudi can hide her feeling, a secret that is kept for decades, and finally she told after the Pranab Kaku's divorce with Deborah. Like *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, kitchen and food become the evidence how women play their roles in keeping family.

#### E. Conclusion

Food plays significant roles in the diasporic life as it can unveil the hidden stories. Its functions as memory, including nostalgia, and identity are reflected in both short stories. As a cultural product, food can take people to revisit the past and bring them to the present. Food, like other cultural elements, can reinvent the past in the homeland to the foreign soil (Dasgupta: 1998:954). Hence, it can shape the present as reflected in the characters' present attitudes. Mr. Pirzada with his uneasiness knowing the uncertainty family life and Pranab Kaku's thank to Usha's family, especially Boudi, are parts of how memory is ever disrupted and then form to the new attitudes.

Memory and nostalgia are dynamic, as identity is always unstable. Being part of the past by having Asian-Indian food is also part of forming identity. The forming identity then not only in the scope of regional, but has moved to country area. Most importantly, this cannot be separated from the roles of women as the preserver of culture. For women, cooking may construct a sense of

identity (Williams: 2007:77). Kitchen, food, and women become the vital elements in the food and memory.

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