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The Carnival of Culinary Metaphors in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies*

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ABSTRACT:

Indian literature has unlocked a new platform for assorted sorts of human life in the fashionable society. The literary traits have focused on the motif of food, gender, culture, society, heritage, and tradition in their creative reaps. Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the noted Indian-American novelists has come to prominence with her fictional fruitages. Her first novel *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) has won the most prestigious Pulitzer award in 2000. She has delineated the culinary metaphors with inordinate passion in her fiction. The novel focuses on the state of Indian-Americans who suffer at various degrees of life. Therefore, the paper makes a sincere effort to study the carnival of culinary metaphors in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies*. Initially, the paper shed light on how food finds a place in determining the inconspicuous narrative flamboyance of the novelist. Later, it connotes the fact that food is considered not only as a character indicator, but also conveys social, ethnic, sensual, and individual characteristics of the colonist hassles.

Key Words: Food, Culture, Carnival, Culinary, Metaphors, Identity, Diaspora.

Introduction:

In the progression of human endeavours, the identity of an individual, groups, and families is decided by the culture, religion, language, and food. Food is an integral and the most important thing for a human to adopt in any situation. With the repetitive custom of food preparation and eating, the settlers achieve their ethnic status in an alien condition of living. One of the renowned novelists Jhumpa Lahiri has conferred the political issue of uniqueness in the immigrant society. Being an Indo-American, she delineates the plight of Indian Americans as prominent diasporic theme who restates their individuality through the recurring metaphor of Indian victuals. She employs food as an essential menu to facilitate her dispositions at different genres of human existence in the background. In the literary flare-up of Jhumpa Lahiri, the food is considered as a ubiquitous symbol in more or less all the tales narrated in *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999).

All over the world, food has been considered as a nostalgic element for both the psychological happiness and physical energy. The concept of food is presented through culinary metaphors in the tales with the purpose of highlighting immigrant's existence. It has an assorted set of implications where it problematize and provide an extra facet to the life of migrant's succession. Primarily, the minutiae of cooking in Lahiri's novels can be interpreted as the symbol of success and failure. It also helps to comprehend the happiness in the personal associations flanked between characters. The clever and

reserved literary rupture of Lahiri ironically centers on the images of culinary and language issues prevalent among immigrant characters. The culinary and its diverse connotations represent the fiction of Lahiri to innumerable

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interpretations. Figuratively, the carnival of culinary is regarded as a third space, which defines the state of living in the experience of native land and out of the country. As a result, the culinary metaphors are treated with the notion of domestic perceptions with its therapeutic and contracting potentialities. In *Beginning Postcolonialism*, John McLeod writes:

Interpreter of Maladies speak about the South Asian diasporic community with the notion of identity loss. Diaspora literally refers to the dispersal or scattering of a people who feel alienated in their host country resulting to the identity loss or identity crisis as well. This living in-between condition becomes painful and marginalizing for these diasporas. (2000)

The opening tale of *The Interpreter of Maladies* is "The Temporary Matter." The story narrates the conjugal relationship between Shukumar and Shoba, the Indian couple in the alien American landscape. The relationship is expressed through the relevant images of culinary dishware. The story deals with female protagonist Shoba, who came across miscarriage half year ago. During this critical time, her husband Shukumar was participating in a conference. This incident made a way for misunderstanding between the couple and created a rift. The physical and mental agony of couple has started to spoil the relationship. The misunderstanding between couple is very much noticed in the food and kitchen activities. Lahiri has tried to shed light on the traumatic condition of couple i.e., before and after the miscarriage. Before the miscarriage, the female protagonist Shoba had great interest in cooking. She loved to have all the cooking ingredients in the kitchen.

The well equipped kitchen with delicious foodstuff indicates their past incidents of happiness and fruitful relationship. She was really determined to spend time in the kitchen and was an expert in baking different type of dishes made of meat. The couple used to enjoy the food as a family custom. Unfortunately, after the sneak of misunderstanding things have changed and were not in a position to enjoy the food together. The disgusted condition of couple indicates a phase of separation in pathetic manner.

After experiencing all these traumatic incidents, the female lead Shoba has kept herself away from the everyday household activities. She works meticulously in the office and returns to home late. As a result, her husband Shukumar started to cook in the kitchen for both of them. In a way, the couple has decided to exchange their everyday roles as a token of love and greater understanding. The newly accepted roles highlight Shoba as a passive eater, whereas Shukumar has turned into an active cook in the house. Being an expert in the observation of dual sense, Lahiri contrasts the approach of couple. The real sadness of couple is seen and comprehended by the two sexes. The situation describes hidden and treacherous customs of the couple who have multi-approach towards their wounded and pathetic progression in life.

True to her conscience, the female lead Shoba has been able to understand the condition of a person who involves in domestic activities at home. Being aware of the reality, she has decided to walk away from her home into a secluded place that her office accommodates. Her occupation as a proof reader helps to express her role with the book she studies, approves and spends leisure hours with others is absolutely inactive. This change in attitude is treated as a sharp distinction to her past commotions in kitchen. But this has opened up a new window in bringing out the creativity. Her legible writing becomes a tool for documenting the culinary interests. She developed a habit of documenting what she had baked for the first time and the names of dishes with greater passion and freedom. Later, this habit of documentation becomes a record of their life spent together.

The female protagonist Shoba appears to have a multiple roles in this tale. She is not only seen as an energetic cook, but also a submissive document reader. Being an orthodox woman, she bears the role of woman who is under the surveillance of marriage knot. But as the need of the hour, she makes arrangement for separate house and lives alone for comfort. Her husband Shukumar is really shocked and surprised at the decision of wife. Initially, he considers himself annoyed and resentful. Later, the attitude of Shoba brings him a kind of mental agony and illness. As a focal point, the decision of outbreak has drawn common confession between the couple. They have decided to share buffet in the cloud of darkness during the hours of power cut. The culinary metaphors have brought some solace between the couple. These culinary issues act as a remedy for the couple to reunite amidst internal differences.

One more imperative tale found in *The Interpreter of Maladies* is 'This Blessed House.' The story is about mismatched nuptial of Twinkle with Sanjeev. The female lead Twinkle is known for energy and childishness, whereas her husband Sanjeev is comparatively serious. The admiration for food is reasserted in a lucid manner by Lahiri through culinary metaphors. The entire story is set in the new home as and when they shift after the nuptial. In the new home, the couple explores the different residues of Christianity left by the previous dwellers. The protagonist Twinkle wants to use vinegar in dishes amidst the objection from her husband Sanjeev. In the normal course, Sanjeev plays the role of a cook in kitchen. But as a surprise she bakes tomato bubble using vinegar.

Here, the reader perceives that Sanjeev wouldn't like the food made of vinegar. He accepts the food made of vinegar by his beloved wife Twinkle. The irony of food is alien when the eater is both fascinated and disliked by dish. Consequently, he is enchanted by the inventiveness of flavour, and keen to obtain the method. He thinks of trying out his hand in the kitchen to prepare the same dish as a token of expressing his gratitude and liking wife. In reality he understands that his wife Twinkle will always have her own way of life. The male lead accepts the untoward situation just like he accepts the food made of vinegar, even though he doesn't like to consume.

In the process of human existence, the food preparation, reluctant changes and eating is always a dual bustle. In the initial stage, every aspect of culinary is accepted and consumed as a matter of mutual respect. But in the later situations, it acts as an important factor in the smooth going of relationship between couples and family. The relationships tend to get adulterated just like the culinary ingredients get adulterated. The diasporic food habit ironically fills and strengthens melancholy among the family hierarchy. The culinary situations reassess the identity of eater with respect to the concept of nation, gender, and culture.

In *The Interpreter of Maladies*, 'Mrs. Sen' is an imperative story from the perspective of children. It delineates the crisis of identity in Mrs. Sen, a newly immigrated woman found in America. The story highlights the fondness of Indians for fish. The culinary habit of Mrs. Sen is quite interesting when she understands new life in America. She takes care of an eleven year old boy Eliot. The consumption of fish, caring of Eliot and letter from Indian family provides her the required happiness in America. For Mrs. Sen, the preparation and consumption of fish acts as a tool for fighting the ethnic suppression and to seek national identity in diasporic condition. Both from the perspective of politics and asserting individual identity, the baking of fish symbolizes the racial, cultural, ethnical and national issues of diasporic existence in the alien America.

The immigrant woman Mrs. Sen cooks food of her choice and becomes a symbol of lucid cook in kitchen. Her typical way of cooking food is observed as an act of negotiation in the kitchen both as a cook and consumer. She makes frequent telephone calls to the vendor of fish to get the required variety of fish. Even the ordinary and disgusting course of slicing fish is packed with the aesthetic features. The preparation and consumption of food is an arduous procedure, but being an ardent lover of fish she enjoys both. In the literal sense, the consumption of fish becomes reminiscence for the female lead. Here, the notion of kitchen for Mrs. Sen is observed as a place for innovative dish preparation. In the real logic, kitchen is something which fills every aspect of contentment in life for the female lead Mrs. Sen.

The young boy Eliot makes a comparison between his mother and Mrs. Sen. He understands the situation and tells himself that his mother cannot match with Mrs. Sen in the Kitchen activities. His mother doesn't show the real interest in cooking delicious food. Either she is not willing to have stomach full of food in any instance. She needs to have a normal course of life by consuming normal food. Her culinary fascination is hardly seen by the boy, except when guests visit the home very rarely. For Eliot's mother, cooking is a serious activity only when the guests visit the home occasionally with the intension of some meaningful purpose.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Sen is not a skilled person to work outside the home. She doesn't know how to drive a vehicle or to go out of home in the company of Eliot. She is seen as selfish because she cooks food for herself, not even for her husband. She never prepares chicken or meat, in its place she brings fish and cooks. Her culinary approach clearly indicates the menu of Indian food. She loves to cook fish in the Indian style with greater enjoyment and satisfaction. She is

someone who never cares for other people and lives as per the wishes of her inner voice. In kitchen her desires are fulfilled, as she performs the role of both cook and consumer. The consumption of fish all the time not only indicates her fulfillment of desires, but also contends her Indianness.

At times the consumption of fish by Mrs. Sen appears as comical. But it reflects the inner suffering when she met an accident on the way to fish market with Eliot before obtaining the driving license. Her consumption of food is not just a desire, speaks of the confidence that affirms at every stage of life. It directly or indirectly advocates the culture of mother land India. In *Meals, Migration, and Modernity*, K. Ray contends:

Rice and fish is considered a real insider delicacy... There is also a sense that you have to keep doing it... There is anxiety that it will vanish if it is not repeatedly performed... (2008)

Here, food is connected with the aspects of culture, ethnicity, tradition, and heritage in every community. It acts as a mark of identity which strengthens the power of immigrants in alien lands. The continuous liking of Mrs. Sen for fish also indicates her continuous efforts for gaining identity in the diasporic condition.

In the story of 'Mrs. Sen,' the concept of gender has dealt with the status of woman in alien society. The character of Mrs. Sen throws light on the condition of woman in male dominated hierarchy. In such a situation, the women are bestowed with secondary roles. She is seen as inferior to man in every stage of life. But women are capable not only to cook delicious food, they also play a major role as and when her presence is needed. She is not subservient to man in any domain of existence. She is the real symbol of culture, bravery, patience, tradition, and intelligence in every aspect of civilization. She is fit not only for cooking food within four walls of the kitchen, but also she can be bold and drive long distances without any fear and hesitation. In *Gender, Ethnicity and Familial Ideology*, Alissa Trotz writes:

Households are considered the domestic domains in which women are expected to be better equipped to assume an attendant responsibility has been documented extensively. Existing literature elaborates on the traditional familial and gendered ideologies that strongly suggest that women manage the household, including food preparation... (2002)

In the contemporary world, the culinary aspects of a woman are symbolic of cooking skills. The habit of cooking opens a window for woman to show cases her cooking talent. In addition, it provides her an opportunity to assert the inner identity and nationality in the United States. For the diasporic people, the process of culinary metaphors helps to sow the seeds of Indian culture, heritage, and tradition in a new-fangled terrain. In a way, the concept of food knowingly or unknowingly helps to exchange the cultural vitalities for the sake of healthy relations between the nations. Eventually, the culinary metaphors are visualized as a carnival of deliciousness and culture for human endeavours.

Conclusion:

Food is treated not only as a booster of physical energy, but also as a soothsayer of internal pleasure. It juxtaposes the elements of healthier society like history, culture, heritage, tradition. The culinary metaphors are not confined only to household activities, but they become the medium of communication among nations. It has taken the new shape in dealing with the issues of immigrants and diasporic milieu. Therefore, the stories narrated by Lahiri dealt with carnival of culinary metaphors which made way for the soothsaying elements of human life like love, taste, concern, respect and affection.

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