Interpreting a Culinary Montage: Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract
Jhumpa Lahiri, a Bengali American writer who rose to fame on being awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her first work of fiction, is well known for her generous use of culinary images in her fiction. She writes about Bengali Americans and the daily challenges they face in their lives. This paper intends to examine the relevance of food consumption and its significance at the personal level as well as the broader political level in Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). At the textual level, the paper shows that food acts as an aid to compensate for the understated narrative style of the author. Further, this paper underpins the fact that food not only acts as an identity marker but also negotiates personal, racial, sexual and social identities of the immigrant subjects.

Abstract in Malay
Jhumpa Lahiri, penulis Amerika berketurunan Bengali yang terkenal disebabkan penganugerahan hadiah Pulitzer kepadanya kerana kerja fiksyennya yang pertama, dikenali dengan pengunaan gambaran-gambaran tentang masak-masakan dalam karyanya. Beliau menulis tentang rakyat Amerika berketurunan Bengali dan cabaran yang dihadapi mereka dalam kehidupan seharian. Artikel ini bertujuan memeriksa kaitan antara pengambilan makanan dan kepentingannya di tahap individu dan juga di tahap politik yang lebih besar dalam *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) karya Lahiri. Dari segi tekstual, artikel ini menunjukkan makanan sebagai pembantu dalam menyerlahkan tulisan penulisnya yang berkarya tanpa penekanan yang jelas. Selain dari itu, artikel ini menekankan fakta bahawa makanan tidak cuma berfungsi sebagai penanda identiti tetapi membolehkan perbincangan tentang hal individu, bangsa, seks dan identiti sosial para penghijrah.

Keywords
Food, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bengali-American community, Indian diaspora, identity, nostalgia

Keywords in Malay
Makanan, Jhumpa Lahiri, komuniti Bengali-Amerika, diaspora di kalangan kaum India, identiti, nostalgia

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The immigrant trajectory is the journey away from the geographic "home" towards an imaginary homeland, but instead of developing its roots unquestionably in the routed space the immigrant community invests in a few ostensible symbols of identity including food. Food is a part of the whole array of things an immigrant is expected to adopt and adapt. Through the repetitive ritual of food preparation and consumption the immigrants perpetuate their ethnic identities – this daily rite becomes the crucial link between the binaries of home and abroad, the past with the present, and the imagined with the real.

Through the seemingly commonplace and rather personal narrative of food, Jhumpa Lahiri negotiates the political question of identity of the immigrant community. She presents Bengali Americans as diasporic subjects who reiterate their identity through the repetitive ritual of cooking and consuming Bengali food. Lahiri uses food as *mise en scène*, which enables her characters to merge seamlessly into the backdrop. Food is an omnipresent symbol in almost all the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Lahiri contrasts the inside with the outside, and she establishes the difference between the world indoors (makeshift homeland) and the world outside the window. In the story entitled "Boori Maa" the protagonist, an immigrant from Bangladesh living in West Bengal in India, enumerates all the delicacies that were served at her daughter's wedding and even arouses pity for her present destitution where she eats from her rice bowl. Boori Maa's pathetic tale is symptomatic of the immigrant condition of looking at a golden past, which is achieved by distorting the vacuous category of "home." As for Boori Maa, the magnitude of grandeur about her home increases for the immigrant communities, the tastes and smells associated with home, become more and more significant. Thus, they hanker after the pristine taste of their homeland – associated with bounty, authenticity, identity, "richness" in terms of culture and heritage.

In addition to persistent nostalgia which is presented through food imageries in the stories, food has a different set of signification where it problematises and gives an added dimension to the rites of passage in an immigrant subject's life cycle. At the personal level, gastronomic details in Lahiri's fiction can be construed as the signifier of success, failure or placid complacency in the personal relationships between characters. Somdatta Mandal and Paul Brians maintain that Lahiri's fiction deals with various characters' inability to communicate (Mandal 18; Brians 196); we contend that Lahiri employs alimentary details as an alternative mode of communication not only between the characters but also between the text and the readers. Lahiri's subtle and restrained writing style paradoxically foregrounds linguistic excess, which culinary images provide. As Terry Eagleton remarks, "If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food – it is endlessly interpretable – materialised emotion" (204). Food and its multiple significances expose Lahiri's fiction to myriad interpretative possibilities. Metonymically, food becomes the

third space, the space in between home and abroad. Thus, food becomes the site of domesticity with its liberating as well as constricting possibilities. The alimentary details etched out in Lahiri's stories construct a tabloid representing the day to day lives of the immigrant subjects who psychologically exist in different time and spaces. The subtitle of this collection is aptly called "Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond." The "beyond" of the subtitle, is not just a geographical place, but the mental space of the characters.

The very first story, "The Temporary Matter" is about the lacklustre marital relationship of the Indian couple Shukumar and Shoba in the United States, and is conveyed through gastronomical imagery. We are informed that Shoba had a miscarriage six months ago when Shukumar was attending a conference and this had caused a rift between the two. The strain which has crept into their relationship is manifested by the food habits of the couple and the condition of their kitchen. Lahiri has drawn a striking contrast between the situation before the miscarriage and after. Prior to her miscarriage, Shoba loved cooking and tended to fill up the kitchen store with surplus supplies, "There were endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats from the Muslim butchers at Haymarket, chopped up and frozen in endless plastic bags…. It never went to waste" (6-7).

The overwhelming presence of food implies the emotional surplus in the couple's relationship. Shoba was an ambitious and meticulous cook and their daily food included rich and elaborate chicken/meat preparations. Dining together at the table was a familial ritual. The readers are told that Shoba and Shukumar do not have meals together any longer. There have been many studies which examine the importance of family meals; De Vault, for instance, argues that family meals are rituals of "producing home and family" (79). While Charles believes that "sharing of food is seen as indicating a close relationship" (101), he further states that during divorce petitions, one of the indications of separation is that the couples do not share their meals any longer. He argues, "The sharing of food is therefore something that happens within family households and is an indication of their existence" (101). In the case of Shoba and Shukumar, not sharing meals indicates they are in the penultimate stage of separation.

After the miscarriage, Shoba abandons all the household chores she was particular about in the past, and burdens herself with extra work at office and comes home late. Consequently, Shukumar takes over the kitchen and cooks for both of them. After the miscarriage, they seem to have interchanged their normative roles. Shoba, who was a server and the cook, becomes a passive consumer, while Shukumar becomes the active producer and facilitator in the kitchen. Far from resenting this fact, he enjoys his new role. Though Shoba busies herself in her proof-reader's job, Shukumar cannot concentrate on his research. He is worried about the deteriorating quality of his marital life. Lahiri,

with her binary logic, juxtaposes the manner in which grief is experienced by the two sexes, by delineating the alimentary habits that aid the reader to understand this binary. Cooking provides Shukumar the solace he needs, with the kitchen becoming a protective fold for him, and the domestic arena comforting him instead of constricting him. For Shoba, the world inside, the realm of domesticity epitomised by the kitchen, stifles her instead of comforting her. She moves away from her home into an impersonal space that her office provides. Her profession of a proof-reader also indicates that her relation with the text she reads, corrects and spends time with, is relatively passive. It is a sharp contrast to her earlier activity of cooking in the kitchen where she gave expression to her creativity. In her neat handwriting Shoba documents her culinary endeavours meticulously including the date she cooked a particular dish for the first time and her personal omissions and exclusions from the given recipe, which were her own liberty with the text. This document becomes a memoir of the couple's life together. In her analysis of Madhur Jaffrey's cook book, Parama Roy maintain, "By its very form the cookbook is the product par excellence of an age of Mechanical reproduction, one that streamlines procedures, calibrates time and ingredients precisely, universalizes a gastro etiquettes, and reaches a mass audience" (488). Interestingly, Roy points out the fact that Jaffrey insists on the individual traits of her cookery and convinces the audience that her cookery is a singular experience and thus cannot be replicated mechanically. Similarly, Shoba rewrites her own recipe – interpolating the original text and exercising her individuality in a creative manner. Shoba seems to have a dual existence in this story – of an active cook and a passive proof-reader. Further, she seems to be passively tolerating her marriage, when rather unexpectedly, she arranges for a separate house, and actively severs her marriage, quite unilaterally. Shukumar is surprised at his wife's decision. He feels cheated and angry. Earlier, he was fascinated by his wife's "capacity to think ahead" (6). But the same tendency sickens him when Shoba breaks this news to him.

Finally, the resolution of the plot is brought about by the mutual confession of the couple while sharing dinner in the dark during power cuts. The food habits of the characters and their daily rituals of sharing food give hints to the readers about their future. "This Blessed House" is one of the most humorous stories in the collection about yet another incompatible marriage. It is about Twinkle who is full of vigour and childlike enthusiasm, and Sanjeev who is relatively staid. Lahiri's love for the ordinary is reasserted in the story through food images. The story revolves around the new house they move in after their marriage, in which the newlyweds discover numerous Christian relics left by the earlier occupants. The pleasure that these relics give Twinkle irritates Sanjeev. Along with the Christian paraphernalia, she finds a bottle of malt vinegar (136). While Twinkle is filled with excitement at her booty, Sanjeev

advises her to throw it away. Twinkle suggests that she would use vinegar in her food and keeps the bottle despite Sanjeev's protests. It is Sanjeev who is normally responsible for cooking, but Twinkle surprises him by cooking tomato stew with vinegar. Contrary to the readers' expectation, Sanjeev likes the stew though he is told that it contained vinegar. The inherent paradox of a food that is "alien" is that the consumer is both attracted and repelled by it. So Sanjeev is enthralled by the newness of the taste, and thus is eager to procure the recipe so that he could harness the unfamiliar and make it familiar by repeated renditions. This meal of Italian bread and vinegar stew brings about a resolution of their discord; he brings himself to appreciate his wife's erratic cooking which is reflected in her attractive but somewhat un-orderly behaviour. He comes to terms with the fact that Twinkle will always have her way, and resigns from the power struggle and opts for a lifelong status quo. Just as Sanjeev learns to digest the unfamiliar vinegar from the bottle left by the earlier Christian occupants, he learns to "digest" his wife's unpalatable behaviour.

"When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is yet another story in which food marks the intimacy between characters. It is through the medium of food that the differences regarding nationality and religion upheld in India are dissolved in America. Mr. Pirzada is a Muslim from East Pakistan who is serving a term in a New England university. He visits the narrator's Hindu household regularly for dinner. Mr. Pirzada is the classic other, he is a Muslim and belongs to Pakistan with which his country is locked in a war-like situation. But Lilia's Hindu parents defy the barriers of religion and national politics. Their geographical propinquity and shared culinary culture of Lilia's family and Mr. Pirzada surmount the differences and they share meals regularly. For young Lilia, her parents' eating habits and Mr. Pirzada's were identical. As Irma Maini observes, "Food is clearly an important part of the culture that binds them despite barriers of nation, nationhood, or nationalism" (161). Lilia finds Mr. Pirzada's habit of consulting his pocket watch which was set to local time in Dacca very strange. It is then that Lilia realises that Mr. Pirzada belonged to a place which was in a time zone that was eleven hours before the the part of America she was living in. She observes, "I imagined Mr. Pirzada's daughters rising from sleep tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school. Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged" (31). This observation brings home the fact that immigrant/diasporic kitchens, lifestyles and habits are actually a shadow of the "original" version of the homeland. Nostalgia reduces the culinary activity of the immigrants into a mimetic activity. The food preparation, unwilling alterations and consumption is a twofold activity. First, it placates the nostalgia for the Edenic homeland and second, it fuels yet another wave of nostalgia at the diasporic platter's difference from the original, unadulterated gastronomic experience. Thus, diasporic food

ritual paradoxically satiates and reinforces nostalgia. It responds to homesickness simultaneously triggering it further. Food reaffirms the consumer's identity in terms of nationality and race. Young that Lilia is, she seems to imbibe the food as well as the ethos of her family. Yet, we can see that as an individual, she has her own eating mores, and invests her own significance in the act of consumption. She confesses in the story that the first time she ever prayed in her life was for the safety of Mr. Pirzada's family. She would nonchalantly pop a candy into her mouth as if she were eating for Mr. Pirzada's sake and then pray. It is pertinent to note here that many scholars have written about the preoccupation of oral experience in women's writings, ranging from food consumption to language of signification. Sneja Gunew points out, that experience seated in the mouth includes food as well as language. We can see that Gunew's main thesis is exemplified by Lilia's ritualistic chocolate eating. She evolves an ingenious system of signification, may be even a supra linguistic one, by her eating. Gunew in her paper quotes Maud Ellmann where she remarks at the independent status of food and speaking – both the functions cannot occur simultaneously (98). But Lilia in her ritual attaches a significance to eating, which generates a meaning as potent as language itself. This ritualistic eating seems to be a farfetched derivation of the wine and bread distributed in Christian communion, which is symbolically consuming Jesus's flesh and blood. Or the Hindu practice of eating deity's leftover as "prasad." Such rituals, as George Simmel observes, transcend individuality and enable each person to feel part of the community (Simmel, 112). No doubt, Lilia's solitary consumption is quite different from the communal eating that Simmel theorises. Paradoxically, Lilia eats without relish or for any nutritive benefits; her consumption is propelled by a non-personal, communal motive. The candy eating ritual becomes redundant when she is told that Mr. Pirzada reached Dacca, now in Bangladesh, safely. The closing lines of the story are, "Since January, each night before bed, I had continued to eat, for the sake of Mr. Pirzada's family, a piece of candy I had saved from Halloween. That night there was no need to. Eventually, I threw them away." (42) The magic of the ritual worked, rendering the chocolates as well as the ritual redundant.

"Mrs. Sen's" is another story told from a child's perspective. This story depicts the identity crisis of a newly immigrated Mrs. Sen in America. It also alludes to the Bengali predilection with fish. Mrs. Sen tries to come to terms with her new life in a new country by clinging on to her old ways – including sartorial and culinary habits. Eliot, an eleven year old ward under Mrs. Sen's day care, notices that the two things that made her happy were the arrival of a letter from her family in India and buying whole fish from the seaside. This story invariably reminds one of the Japanese American poet and activist, Janice Marikitani's epigram, "Making fish is a political act." In her poem, Marikitani writes about the effect on her grandmother's stew because of a racist comment

made by a vessel vendor. Thus, preparing fish becomes a silent way of battling racial subjugation and to perpetuate the national identity of the diasporic subject. From the broader political perspective to the persistence of personal identity, making fish, or for that matter any culture specific food, has multiple meanings in different aspects of diasporic life. The otherwise objectified immigrant cooks her own food and thus, becomes an active subject in her kitchen. A particular manner of preparing food also negotiates the gendered nature of the cook and the consumer. Mrs. Sen makes numerous phone calls to get fishes of her choice. Even the mundane and repulsive process of chopping the fish is filled with sensuous detail. Preparing a meal is a time consuming and laborious process, but Mrs. Sen is shown to have enjoyed it. She consumes nostalgia, literally. It has been contended elsewhere that the enclosed domain of the kitchen is not constricting but full of creative possibilities (Khushu-Lahiri and Rao). It is the space which belongs solely to Mrs. Sen in the new world, which is otherwise entirely unfamiliar to her. According to Eliot's point of view, Mrs. Sen's domain, i.e., her kitchen, was full of mysterious, even dangerous things.

In more than one place the contrast between Eliot's mother and Mrs. Sen is delineated, for example, Eliot notices that his mother looked bare in her somewhat revealing attire in contrast to Mrs. Sen draped in sari. Eliot's mother's kitchen mores and food habits highlight her independence. Eliot knows that his mother ate very little. His family consists of his single mother and himself, and his mother's unwillingness to prepare elaborate meal or even consume a stomach full foregrounds a non-normative family. This difference is further underscored when Eliot remembers the last time his mother prepared fillets was when a man from her office was invited for dinner. Eliot's mother hardly cooks; her culinary activity is centred around a guest who is incidentally a male. It is hinted that Eliot's mother indulges in culinary activity only when there are chances of heteronormativity in her life. Though she is overtly independent – she works, fends for herself and her son, knows how to drive, she is dependent on an external stimulant to venture into the gastronomical alleys of her own kitchen. On the other hand, sari clad Mrs. Sen who is not skilled to work outside the house, who cannot drive or even venture out of her house without Eliot's company, cooks fish for herself, rather than for her husband. Even when her husband advises her to cook chicken instead of fish, she ventures to the fish market to serve her own desire to replicate and reinforce her "Bengaliness." She seems to cook fish for the sheer joy of cooking and eating. Though she is the producer and mute server in the domestic setup, she has the will to serve herself with the food she desires the most. Figuring at both ends of the kitchen – producer and consumer, she becomes an active participant in the food cycle. Her desire to consume whole fish is not a craving for comfort food, but a way of reasserting her Bengali identity. Her craving for

fish seems comical and even borders on insane rebellion when she meets with an accident on her way to the fish shop with Eliot before procuring a driver's license. Her peculiar behaviour stems from her desire to become more independent in order to consume what she desires. As mentioned earlier, cooking Bengali food, metanomised by fish, is a way to uphold their culture in the private domain of a Bengali immigrant's household. According to Krishendu Ray:

> Rice and fish become particularly potent symbols of Bengaliness precisely because outsiders, be they other Indians or Americans, are considered unable to appreciate them or incompetent in handling the bones. Rice and fish is considered a real insider delicacy.... There is also a sense that you have to keep doing it – repeat the recipes over and over and keep eating rice and fish in the Bengali style. There is anxiety that it will vanish if it is not repeatedly performed.... Through repetition, rice and fish become the quintessence of Bengaliness. (190-91)

Thus, and as the title of his essay suggests, meals and migration are connected intrinsically. Food associated with an ethnic community becomes the quintessential marker of identity. And repetitive meals only reinforce the immigrant identity with all its strengths and baggage. Mrs. Sen's constant yearning for real taste of home and her faithful attempts to recreate the flavours of her homeland has a lot to do with her gendered position within her society, which makes her a preserver of culture. The route of Mrs. Sen's immigration is overtly similar to her husband's; nonetheless different sets of gendered societal norms propelled her immigration. For a woman belonging to Mrs. Sen's society, there is a compulsion to marry well. Mrs. Sen's trajectory from the native land to the foreign land is the route of social and economical upward mobility upheld by her society. But despite the desirability of this mobility, women are given the task of adhering to the overt as well as inert manifestation of the culture, thus, it is important that she becomes bold and learns to drive, but does not stray from her sartorial practices or discontinue preparing food. Despite the narrow role given to her by her culture, Maini feels that Mrs. Sen creates "her narrative, not through writing but through food she prepares, cooks, serves, and eats. This is a space she can call her own; here she gains agency and can assert her identity" (159). Through her kitchen, she refuses to assimilate into American mainstream culture and yield to her husband's pressure to learn to drive or to stop buying fish.

While "Mrs. Sen's" is a story which portrays mainly the daily life of an immigrant woman in the U.S., "Sexy" is more about the interaction between individuals belonging to the American mainstream and the immigrant minority. This story opens with Laxmi, Miranda's colleague, who munches Hot Mix regularly as she updates Miranda with a "spicy" story of an Indian friend and

her marital discord. Later, when Miranda visits an Indian store because of her new found interest in Indian things she recognises the Hot Mix that Laxmi munches, but the shopkeeper intervenes and warns, "Too spicy for you" (99). While he says this he stares at Miranda's body, reinforcing her "otherness." Here, Miranda is seen as the exotic other at the Indian store. Another threatening image is the "too spicy" Hot Mix, which implies that she may not have what it takes to hang on to Dev" (200). Her own cosmopolitan route to know and understand India is propelled by the desire to eat of the other, in order to know the other. Her desire to know Dev and his culture makes her experiment with her food. When Dev's wife visits India, they date at various eateries – food here acts as inducer of the sexual act, probably as an aphrodisiac. After his wife returns, Miranda buys things which she thought "a mistress should have" (92). She buys lingerie and an expensive cocktail dress. When Dev does not notice any of them, she buys a lot of food stuff like, "baguette and little containers of things Dev liked to eat, like pickled herring, and potato salad, and tortes of pesto and mascarpone cheese" (93). She resorts to conventional "feminine" practices to gain control over Dev; she tries to capitalize first from her body and second from food. At Miranda's place Dev consummates his passion and the food Miranda has shopped. We can see Dev as a typical consumer, he is at the more privileged end of the food cycle and Miranda is the facilitator.

Observing the importance of everyday rituals of life, Luce Giard rightly points out, "Every alimentary custom makes up a miniscule crossroads of histories" (171). Every meal prepared and consumed is significant in history. The ingenious concoction of a food item, the commonplace practice of mediation of the recipes, its cultural legitimisation, repetitive preparation and consumption, and its travelling across the culture, all contributes and mirrors the state of world affairs. "The Third and The Final Continent" is about mundane, everyday feats of an immigrant's life, which according to the protagonist is no less than a miracle. In this story we encounter several houses which the unnamed protagonist occupies during his student days at England and then at America. The story is about trivialities of life, which immigrants have to adjust to in the process of settling in another country. The ordinary runs parallel to the extraordinary feat of America's moon mission. The grandeur of this celestial event is reasserted along with the protagonist's rite of passage in America:

> While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each

> person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (198)

Each mile he has travelled is as important as each meal he has had, from egg curry to cornflakes, to the "proper" Bengali meals prepared by his wife, food he consumes is metonymic of his social and economic standing and his gradual upward social mobility. The moon mission and immigration are but two great feats of human history. As Mrs. Croft is filled with pride and disbelief at the U.S. flag fluttering on the moon, the protagonist is filled with wonder at his own achievements and his journey from his home in India to two different continents, viz., Europe and America. He knows that though ordinary, his private conquest of settling in a country that is not his own, is the metanarrative of human history. His infinitesimally insignificant life may not even deserve a passing reference in the history of humankind; however, there are countless stories such that have collectively shaped world politics, economy and culture. Millions like him, who chose to travel under favourable or hostile circumstances around the world, have transmuted the direct ascription of any population group with the nation state. Food becomes the symbol of this hybrid world, consisting of people of different nationalities and skin colours under one aegis, for instance, the United States is home to individuals of almost every country in the globe. Food trails the footsteps of the population group settling in a new place. Through the routes of cultural exchange, food gets into the kitchen of different groups, and then into the commercial arena of catering and hospitality sector. Ultimately, it becomes the symbol of the people to which it belongs.

In this paper we made an attempt to establish that food symbolises disruption of normative households and becomes an alternative mode of communication. It has heightened significance in the diasporic context. The contrast between the worldview of the first and the second generation immigrants is successfully shown through food. In addition to the cultural significance of food, Jhumpa Lahiri highlights in her work the importance of food in the interpersonal transactions of people in their daily lives. Food becomes the symbol of love and care, it harbingers a new relationship and it has cathartic effects. However, it also becomes the locus of difference, a site of contention in the bi-polar world differentiating between an authentic citizen and the "other." The diverse symbolism that food evokes creates continuity in Lahiri's stories and furthermore, links them to the social text of everyday life and culture of the diaspora.

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