Diaspora, Emotion, and Memory: A Gastrocritical Perspective on Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Abstract
The acts of consumption bear diverse corporeal, socio-cultural, and transcendental implications within the confines of literary discourse and cultural analysis. They are a means for exploration into the complexities of the human psyche by traversing beyond their function as sensory indulgences. This paper employs the lens of gastrocriticism to analyse Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), in its entirety to explore how food becomes an actant in the lives of dislocated individuals grappling with diasporic existence. The eight short stories in this collection showcase the significance of taste and consumptive practices in the experiences of diaspora, on which the paper focuses. Furthermore, the paper aims to study the emotions that characterise the diasporic condition and the ways in which they get elicited through the medium of food. The paper also demonstrates the association of food with memory to elucidate its potential to evoke nostalgia and facilitate emotional healing in characters who experience displacement and social integration.

Keywords
Food discourse, gastrocritical lens, Indian diaspora, sense of taste, emotional complexity, gustatory memory

Introduction

Diaspora, literally meaning 'dispersion,' encapsulates the notions of a shared sense of identity, an attachment to a homeland, and a collective memory that

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binds dispersed communities together. It continually reshapes the idea of space and entwines the past with the present and the future. Stuart Hall defines diaspora "as a specific structure of transformations, displacements and condensations" (Hall 29) in the process of which "identities are summoned up, mobilised, transformed and interrogated" (29). As exiled individuals continually navigate the complexities of transnationalism and acculturation, art and literature emerge as potent platforms for expressing the multifaceted dimensions of diasporic existence. Since the proliferation of postcolonial studies, academic research has focused on exploring the symbiotic relationship between literature and diaspora. It discusses how literary texts across various epochs and geographical contexts illuminate, contest and reimagine the contours of the diasporic self and consciousness.

The totality of the diasporic condition can be aptly comprehended through one of the quotidian aspects of human existence: food. Food diligently acts as a "cultural marker of complex and oft-conflicting desires and affiliations, and identities" (Coghlan 1). The discourse on food was established as a legitimate field of scholarly inquiry when the third wave of feminism challenged the traditional views that marginalised women's roles in food preparation. Subsequently, Terry Eagleton drew upon the post-structuralist definition of food as "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (Barthes 14) and reckoned it to be "endlessly interpretable" (204), lending further gravitas to the newly germinating critical arena. The escalating focus on the ramifications of the literary representations of food in the past decades gained momentum with the coinage of "la gastrocritique" (625) by the eminent scholar of French literature, Ronald W. Tobin. The term roughly translates to gastrocriticism, which can be defined as a theoretical framework that examines the cultural, social, and psychological significance of food and culinary practices in literature and culture. This distinctive approach combines "the methods of cultural history, close reading, and archival research with concepts drawn from both literary studies… and food studies" (Tigner and Carruth 4). It explores how food acts as a symbol and narrative device, reflecting and shaping identities, memories, and emotions. By investigating how food-related activities convey deeper meanings about relationships, power dynamics, and cultural integration through a "culinary lens" (8), gastrocriticism reveals their relevance in narratives.

In this context, locating various manifestations of food within the boundaries of Indian diasporic literature, this paper analyses all eight short stories collected in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) from the perspective of gastrocriticism. The paper attempts to delineate how the characters' engagements

and responses to culinary activities and gustatory experiences mirror their emotions, inner struggles and persistent confusion regarding their selves and relationships in a transnational space. The paper also explores the notions of food-generated associative memories and mnemonic cues in the above context to further contribute to understanding the Indian diaspora.

Conceptualising Food within a Diasporic Framework

The notion of food has always been a foundational element of the diasporic condition. This is so because, as social scientist Claude Fischler notes, "The way any human group eats helps it assert… both its oneness and otherness" (275). So, one of the chief concerns of gastrocriticism is to theorise food and its intricate relationship with the transcultural space. Vera Alexander, a scholar of diaspora and South Asian writing in English, elucidates in her essay, "Transcultural food and recipes for immigration," how food can be conceived as a 'contact zone.' She writes: "[I]n making food, materials and competencies from different cultural and spatial origins combine" (Alexander 42). Marie Louise Pratt initially conceptualised a "contact zone" (34) as a social space wherein different cultures "meet, clash and grapple" (34) to comprehend the various aspects of colonial encounters. Drawing from this principle, food can be acknowledged as a site of transnational and cross-cultural interactions. The consumptive practices serve as a platform for native individuals and migrants to imbibe new traditions and pass on their own customs. Therefore, food can act as a space for the interaction of the host and migrant cultures wherein identities are negotiated, and socio-cultural integration occurs. Theorising food as a contact zone consequently leads to the idea of "cultural heterogenization" (Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference," 5) which refers to the coexistence of contrasting cultural elements in a specific context. The heterogenisation of cultures hence allows the preservation of age-old recipes, as well as the assimilation of the cuisine of foreign cultures. It also involves the adaptation of traditional cuisines to local ingredients and tastes in a foreign space and facilitates the creation of a unique, hybrid identity. Therefore, this process empowers food to uphold and reinvent diasporic identities.

As a cultural construct, food negotiates with various other cultural elements such as language, religion, and societal practices. Thus, interpreting the interrelationships of food with such elements becomes crucial to studying the diasporic condition. Firstly, as recipes, culinary techniques, etc., are often passed down through generations via oral or written language, holding on to food-related traditions implies holding on to linguistic terminologies. Also, food can transcend language barriers and be a mode of communication in a diasporic setting. Secondly, religion significantly influences dietary practices, stating what,

when, and how people eat. Many religions have dietary rituals that dictate food preparation and consumption; for instance, vegetarianism in certain sects of Hinduism, halal practices in Islam, and kosher laws in Judaism. So, practising a religion correctly in a foreign space is entangled with opting for the permitted food preferences. Furthermore, as food is a central element in social functions such as weddings and funerals, conducting them in a place away from home authentically involves preparing and sharing food according to ethnic customs. Besides, socio-economic status also impacts food habits; being able to afford traditional ingredients in the host country is not a viable option for all diasporic individuals.

Within the psychological domain, the sensory experience of food possesses the capacity to evoke emotions and memories. Anita Mannur, a distinguished scholar of Asian American Studies, foregrounds food as an "emotional anchor" (27) in her work *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (2010). The homeland's cuisine enables an assertion of cultural distinctiveness and allows the displaced individuals to remain tethered to their heritage in a foreign land. Therefore, food bridges the migrants and their native place and mentally anchors them to their home's comfort, warmth, and solace. The familiar flavours and aromas provide emotional support and reduce feelings of displacement and isolation. Scientifically, an emotional anchor is a stimulus that causes a person to re-experience their past, so such a stimulus can also trigger memories. Likewise, the food-based experiences generate specific mnemonic cues that evoke memories of family and home in diasporic individuals, metaphorically transporting them back home. These memories, in turn, motivate them to hold on to their ethnicity and culture. The approach of gastrocriticism utilises this foothold that food has upon an individual's subjectivity and memory to highlight the impact of the affective value of gastronomic experiences and gustatory nostalgia in diasporic communities.

Tracing the heterogeneity of food in Indian diasporic fiction

The members of the Indian diaspora share a deep-rooted connection with the flavours of their homeland. The notable anthropologist Arjun Appadurai notes that the prolific genre of Indian cookbooks can be read as "the literature of exile, of nostalgia and loss" ("How to Make," 18) as they are being curated, primarily by emigrant authors for the diasporic readers who ardently crave the taste of Indian cuisine. The unbridled production of such recipe books indicates the depth of the sentiment the immigrant Indians feel towards the food of their nation and culture and the intense yearning with which they endeavour to recreate it. Citing that handling familiar ingredients leads one to lose the sense of time and

place, Krishnendu Ray elaborates, "immigrants crave some of the distinctive products of their homeland" (132) to feel a proximity to the haven left behind. Their longing "for a lost cuisine, or the attempt to recover it in a foreign kitchen" (Chaudhuri ix) is interlaced with a desire and commitment to transmit cultural legacies to their coming generations. So, it is unsurprising that authors of Indian descent, navigating a diasporic existence replete with similar inclinations, would gravitate towards pursuing the multifaceted roles of food within their literary creations.

Food is omnipresent in all the leading fictional and non-fictional texts organised into the canon of Indian diasporic literature. Its functions range from serving as metaphors, motifs and literary devices to being dynamic actants propelling narrative arcs. In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), which arguably laid the foundations of the Indian postcolonial novel, it becomes evident how food discourses are appropriated to symbolise interconnectedness in diversity and the emergence of cosmopolitan identity. The very title of Anita Desai's celebrated novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1991) suggests the dichotomy between the Indian and American consumer cultures, thereby signifying Indian culinary values. Again, the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee – for example, *Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989) – highlights the importance of food as a locus of assimilation and resistance across cultures. In contrast, Amitav Ghosh has woven culinary elements into *The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004) to exemplify resilience in social upheaval and ecological change. On the one hand, food is an intermediary for navigating love, loss, and self in Anita Nair's fiction, namely *Ladies Coupe* (2001) and *Mistress* (2005). On the other hand, it becomes a metaphor for personal and communal healing through culinary magic in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). Furthermore, in novels like Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), food and religious beliefs intersect to reflect the pressure upon diasporic individuals to conform to specific food choices or practices and abstain from others. Also, the dynamics of traditional food and social customs are featured in works such as Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996) and Manju Kapur's *Immigrant* (2008). Additionally, the language of food, which includes words in regional languages like Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, etc., or several local dialects, features in all the works mentioned above, which provide insights into the role food-based terminologies play in the experiences of the diaspora.

Locating food representations in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri

The inaugural South Asian awardee of the Pulitzer Prize, Jhumpa Lahiri (1967 –), commands a noteworthy presence in the late twentieth-century literary canon. Her thematic concentration on the tribulations of immigrants, rooted in her

personal experiences and her inclination towards the short story genre, augments the readability of her works and amplifies her acclaim within literary circles.

The works of Jhumpa Lahiri stand out amidst the entire body of Indian diasporic fiction for displaying food's sizeable potential to express diasporic complexities and engaging it as a significant, consistent element. Lahiri's works respond to the central inquiry regarding the migrant's table: "What insights can be gleaned from migrants' eating and cooking practices regarding amalgamation, assimilation, and pluralism?" (Ray 4). Her stories frequently depict food as the outcome of a creative endeavour while portraying cooking as a performative act. The classic opening scene of Lahiri's debut novel, *The Namesake* (2003), showcases Ashima, the protagonist's mother, struggling hard to assemble a "humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks" (1) without mustard oil, in her apartment in Cambridge. This incident is labelled as one of the defining instances of the immigrant sensibility. The consistent incorporation of food imagery becomes pivotal to the narrative progression, offering insight into the character's perspectives. It is exemplified by moments such as Gogol's rice ceremony, his rejection of Ashima's rigid consumption rituals, his appreciation of the American dining culture of Maxine's family, and his preparation of his father's funeral feast with his mother.

Moreover, alimentary aspects serve as a unifying thread, binding together the short stories in Lahiri's celebrated collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), wherein she interlaces the acts of preparation with that of literal and symbolic consumption to deepen the exploration of diasporic complexities. An extensive academic study conducted on stories such as "A Temporary Matter," "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," "Mrs. Sen's," "This Blessed House," and "The Third and Final Continent" has uncovered how food serves as a tool for dealing with afflictions, affirming agency and subjectivity, and signifying 'Indianness.'

Jhumpa Lahiri continues her projection of emotional landscapes and transformative conflicts onto the minutiae of everyday life in her second short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Although most characters belong to the community of Bengali Americans, Lahiri allows heterogeneous perspectives to arise from the stories. The collection is divided into two parts and consists of eight short stories. The stories "Unaccustomed Earth," "Hell-Heaven," "A Choice of Accommodations," "Only Goodness," and "Nobody's Business" comprise the book's first part. The second part is a story cycle comprising three short stories – "Once in a Lifetime," "Year's End", and "Going Ashore." Second-generation immigrants narrate all the stories, with occasional input from their first-generation counterparts or an unnamed narrator. Herein also, food becomes actants in the narrative framework. Therefore, this paper analyses the

food motifs and alimentary aspects portrayed in these stories by applying the theoretical concepts of cultural critic Ben Highmore and anthropologists Jon D. Holtzman and David E. Sutton to study the role of food in evoking emotions and memories in the context of diaspora.

Navigating the affective function of taste in *Unaccustomed Earth*

The term taste, in the context of consumption, "is generally used to denote the sensation people feel" (Lupton 94) upon eating or dining and can represent both a personal proclivity and a universal criterion. Analysing taste becomes significant in the interpretation of food within the framework of gastrocriticism, for there exists a bi-directional relationship between an individual's emotional states and food preferences or rituals. Accordingly, Lyman maintains that "foods determine our moods so do our moods determine what we eat" (44).

The prominent scholar of culture studies, Ben Highmore, elaborated in his essay "Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics" that the affective dimension mobilised by taste unveils profound insights into any culture. He articulates that senses and affects intermingle and posits that "every flavor has an emotional resonance" (Highmore, "Bitter After Taste" 120). This assertion directs toward the agential nature of alimentary aspects, thereby deeming it necessary to focus on the affective function of the gustatory elements incorporated within the diasporic texts. Highmore, in the essay "Taste as Feeling," writes that taste "drives and articulates identity" (548) and hence has the potential to alter one's social circumstances. Taste as a notion may be conceived in two ways – as a catalyst for sensory transformation and as an emotion. Either taste can interact with other senses to create a comprehensive gustatory experience and provoke physical reactions, or it can alter one's psychological state and evoke emotions tied to personal and cultural memories. Both these aspects of taste render it a crucial agent in shaping the diasporic condition.

The predicaments of second-generation diasporic individuals that Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* describes are often embedded in its gustatory references. Examining the affective function of taste in its short stories offers us insights into their liminality and struggles with conformation. The introductory story "Unaccustomed Earth," from which the collection derives its titular designation, tells the tale of Ruma, a Bengali-American woman living in Seattle with her husband, Adam, and their son, Akash. Adam's generous salary allowed Ruma to be a stay-at-home mother while carrying their second child. Throughout the story, Ruma grapples with the grief of her mother's sudden demise while trying to reconnect with her estranged father and raise Akash with the values of

both Indian and American cultures. The motif of food is entangled with all these key aspects of the story. Jhumpa Lahiri narrates: "Ruma's cooking didn't come close, the vegetables sliced too thickly, the rice overdone" (22) and "the begunis broke apart" (23). Her inability to replicate the authentic taste of Bengali cuisine or manage the kitchen affairs in a manner congruent with traditional Indian femininity personified by her deceased mother engenders a feeling of inadequacy in her. The anthropologist Tulasi Srinivas affirms that the desire to recreate the culinary practices of one's mother serves as "a powerful paradigm in shaping women's emotions over food" (194). Hence, her incompetence makes her feel detached from her mother and adds to her pain of losing her. In a broader sense, her frustration is emblematic of fear of the irrevocable loss of cultural artefacts that characterise the diasporic existence. Ruma's awareness of the gradual erosion of her cultural identity exacerbates her inner conflict.

In the following story, "Hell-Heaven," Usha recounts the unusual friendship of her mother and Pranab, a stranger who came up to her on the street, hoping to find the warmth and comfort of a Bengali home. Usha's mother welcomed him into the family, and they both forged a bond wherein she became the nourisher and Pranab the nourished. Usha narrates how her mother, who felt isolated in her marriage in a faraway country, found joy in her connection with Pranab. Later, her happiness turned to melancholy when Pranab married Deborah and eventually moved away. Usha's mother and Pranab exemplify the domineering influence exerted by taste upon the trajectory of immigrant individuals' lives. It is considered that such people require a continual tether to their homelands and may do so through the taste of their culture. The newly arrived Pranab developed a palpable discomfort with the American culture, particularly its gastronomic manifestations. His quest for the taste of home led him to Usha's mother. The simplicity of a modest meal of "leftover curried mackerel and rice" (Lahiri 61) that she offered imparted solace to Pranab and imbued him with the motivation to stay – in the absence of which he would have left his career and returned.

Conversely, Sang exhibits a notable absence of affinity for the flavours of her culture, save for the occasional consumption of microwaved rice with lime pickle. In the story "Nobody's Business," another Bengali-American woman, Sangeeta, referred to as Sang, is shown to be living in Cambridge, working at a bookstore after dropping out of Harvard, dodging marriage proposals of men from her community and managing a conflicted relationship with Farouk, her partner. The conspicuous disinterest of Sang in the traditional taste may be interpreted as a comment on the deliberate negation of hyphenated identity by certain immigrants as they assimilate into the American cultural milieu. Sang's

predilection for typical American snacks like yoghurt and crackers further reinforces her inclination toward non-indigenous dietary preferences.

Furthermore, in the story "Once in a Lifetime," Hema discerns Kaushik's disengagement from Indian cultural and culinary aspects despite his extensive residence there. This story marks the beginning of the Hema-Kaushik story cycle. Both Hema and Kaushik hailed from Bengali-American families and had known each other since childhood; their families remained close until Kaushik's family returned to India. "Once in a Lifetime" is narrated from the perspective of Hema, who recalls Kaushik and his family staying at her home for a few months while his mother underwent treatment. She remembers reconnecting with him as he struggles with his mother's terminal illness and their sudden move back to America. As a troubled teenager trying to fit back in, Kaushik displayed indifference towards the elaborate meals put together by Hema's mother. His favouring simpler fare, such as toast, tea and fruits, reflects a loss of appetite for the flavours of the Bengali cuisine that once defined his palate. The food of his culture exerted a negative impact on his mental state, and as a result, he avoided them on all occasions.

Later in his life, Kaushik resonated with the taste of certain foods he encountered. This is illustrated in the following story of the cycle, "Year's End," which he himself narrates. Years after his mother's passing, a grown Kaushik resides with his father's new family for a while and thereafter leaves his home behind forever. Being unable to accept the erasure of his mother's memory and trace from his father's life and home, he lashes out at his step-sisters. In the aftermath, he storms out, driving across the country, far up to the Canadian border. The taste of the peculiar local food he consumed during this phase of his life left an indelible mark on him: "I still savor the taste… no other food had nourished me before then" (Lahiri 290) and played a significant role in his self-discovery. This exhibits that the food experiences of the host culture often bring about visible changes in a diasporic individual who cannot find comfort in the traditional ones.

Consumption can be comprehended as an instance of synaesthesia, as taste is a harmonious arrangement of sensory experiences. Highmore instructs on the inclusion of all senses to discern "the cross-modal networks that register links between perception, affect, the senses, and emotions" ("Bitter After Taste" 120) at the nexus of which food can be located. Though Kaushik's disinterest in Indian food persists, in "Year's End," his mouth waters at the sight and aroma of the array of dishes his step-mother Chitra served him in accordance with authentic Bengali customs: "the old-fashioned, ceremonious way I remembered my grandfathers eating in Calcutta" (Lahiri 261). Despite not having any

propensity towards such food or eating practices, his latent emotions are awakened by the combination of the sensory elements of the meal presented to him. Though momentarily, this experience reconnects him to his heritage.

Taste also possesses the power to assign value to a specific aspect within a particular culture or demean the same in another. It can be substantiated by the characters' attitudes towards the taste of alcohol in the stories "Once in a Lifetime" and "Only Goodness." Consuming alcohol is regarded as a vice within the Indian socio-cultural setup. The fondness for it is condoned, and embracing it is construed as accepting Western influence and transgressing Indian ethos. This is demonstrated by the disapproval Hema's parents show to Kaushik's parents' regular ritual of emptying bottles of Johnnie Walker (a kind of whisky). The story "Only Goodness" focuses on the issue of alcoholism and shows how children of the diaspora often succumb to it through the lives of Bengali-American siblings Sudha and Rahul. In his earlier years, Rahul was brimming with possibilities but fell into depression and alcoholism, ultimately dropping out of college. Despite a period of recovery, he relapses while caring for Sudha's son, jeopardising the child's safety. This incident forces Sudha, who had remained supportive, to finally cast him out. "Only Goodness" displays that taste determines the worth of alimentary aspects in a particular social context. The tendency of Rahul's parents to reinforce the typical Indian mentality shows a lack of taste towards alcoholic beverages and contempt for their children's drinking habits. In contrast, his and Sudha's affinity for alcoholic drinks is characteristic of diasporic teenagers trying to fit in, be more likeable and acceptable to their American peers.

Often, taste plays a pivotal role in a character's psychological trajectory. In Rahul's case, it serves as a marker of depression, rehabilitation, and relapse. Though, initially, he hated the taste of alcohol, he is gradually drawn to it to the extent of addiction. His succumbing to alcoholic taste becomes symbolic of isolation, suppressed frustrations and a constant fear of failure caused by the persistent weight of parental and societal expectations. Later in the story, his discerning choice of "club soda mixed with some orange juice" (Lahiri 164) over wine and his inclination toward culinary arts indicate his recovery, instilling hope within his sister Sudha. However, his eventual yielding back to the allure of alcohol's taste leaves him wholly estranged from his family. Rahul's sufferings exhibit the angst of second-generation immigrants as they negotiate the confluence of cultures and constant pressure to be successful citizens of the host country.

The relationship between emotions and food is rooted in personal, social, and cultural contexts. Emotions not only influence our preferences in food but

also affect how food is produced and consumed. Highmore notes that "flavors and feelings are knotted together in complex and contradictory ways" ("Bitter After Taste" 133). On one hand, the sentiments tied to a specific food experience may enhance or deteriorate its sensory qualities. However, on the other hand, the experience itself can alter the present psychological state of the individual. This can be seen in the story "Once in a Lifetime," where Kaushik's sudden interest in food ignited amidst his mother's preparation of an English trifle was prompted by the affection he harboured for her – "that evening you hovered there, excited by the promise of trifle" (Lahiri 248). As he struggled with the nearing of his mother's demise, the tantalising flavours of the trifle evoked a sense of elation, offering a temporary respite from the harsh reality and imparted a feeling of normalcy.

Subsequently, Kaushik's annoyance in the story "Year's End," triggered by the sight of the dining table and kitchen, rearranged to suit his step-mother Chitra's preferences and in ways opposed to his mother's refined taste stands as manifestations of his enduring attachment to her: "I was suddenly sickened… the space still retained her presence more than any other part of the house" (Lahiri 263). Kaushik's father had recently married Chitra and taken in her daughters to start a new family – a fact that Kaushik found difficult to accept. For him, Chitra, with her penchant for tea, *chanachur* (a Bengali snack) and heavy elaborate meals, symbolised Bengali traditionality – from which he had fully disengaged himself to become a typical American. On the contrary, his mother welcomed Western influence and tastes and raised him as a regular American child. This led him to associate more with his mother and added to his hostility towards Chitra. Despite his proclivity to beer, he yearned for the familiar taste of his mother's cherished Johnnie Walker, driven to rekindle a sense of connection with her. Partaking in this beverage, mirroring his mother's ritual, was a homage to their shared moments of conviviality. These instances portray how feelings are entangled with even minute gustatory or culinary aspects and the immense potential of such connections to exert a meaningful impact on an individual in a diasporic context.

Distaste is another crucial aspect of gustatory experiences that conveys significant insights into a person's personality, circumstance, and social background. In a broader sense, it may also say a lot about a particular society and culture. Discussing distaste, Highmore writes that it is communicated through a range of emotional responses that inflict torment, especially "when emotional interest is involved and where approbation is sought" ("Bitter After Taste" 125). This notion applies to second-generation immigrants who attempt to recreate traditional dishes to reconnect with their heritage. When met with

distaste, it creates a sense of despair in them for failing to honour their culture, gain community acceptance, and pass on traditions to their children. In "Unaccustomed Earth," Ruma's anguish is further enhanced by her son's disavowal of the Bengali delicacies she endeavours to prepare, as he says: "I hate that food" (Lahiri 23). Besides reminding her of her insufficiency in being a good mother, it signifies the attenuation of cultural lineage with each successive generation.

Likewise, in "Hell-Heaven," the general distaste that Usha's mother harboured towards American culture, lifestyle, and people got directed to the food she had to prepare for Pranab and his American girlfriend, Deborah. A shift in the story occurred when the culinary process that erstwhile manifested contentment in Usha's mother generated resentment and animosity as Pranab started bringing over Deborah for meals; she complained "about having to make the food less spicy… feeling embarrassed to put a fried fish head in the dal" (Lahiri 68). A comparable aversion is observed in Hema's mother in "Once in a Lifetime." She disliked the weekend dinners with Kaushik's family due to a distinct lack of taste towards American cuisine, even though they were primarily designed to provide her respite from her culinary duties – "They enjoyed… acquired a taste for things like steak and baked potatoes, while my parents had not" (Lahiri 246). Quite similarly, the fact that the taste of traditional food bore no significance for Rahul in "Only Goodness" posits that his resentment for his parents broadened into his nonchalance towards Bengali food, which otherwise is an alien phenomenon for diasporic individuals.

Exploring the dynamics of food-memory interaction in *Unaccustomed Earth*

Ketu H. Katrak recalls: "I kept a packet of garam masala… take a long whiff in order to be transported to my tropical home in Bombay" (270). In the context of diaspora, recognising the affective resonance of gustatory or culinary aspects and the potentialities of taste and distaste leads to the comprehension of the sentimentality that underpins homeward memories for migrants. The tangible taste of food triggers an intricate web of associative memories by acting upon the diasporic individual's conscious and subconscious thoughts. This concept firmly establishes "taste-generated memory as key to the narrative" (Tigner and Carruth 107). The inexplicable connection between food and memory has already been solidified by Marcel Proust's madeleines, which serve as catalysts for detailed and vivid remembrances that fill pages after pages in his legendary novel, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913).

In his essay "Food and Memory," cultural anthropologist Jon D. Holtzman discusses the relationship of consumption with memory, which includes "embodied memories constructed through food… contexts of remembering and forgetting through food (364)." He asserts that the nostalgia elicited in diasporic individuals by the gustatory cues of the homeland facilitates a reversion to a period when their lives were unfragmented. It occurs as the sensory experiences of eating often function as the loci of memory by transmitting "powerful mnemonic cues (Holtzman 373)." Several stories from the collection *Unaccustomed Earth* provide illustrations in support of this notion. In the story "Unaccustomed Earth," "the faint coconut taste" (Lahiri 18) of Nice biscuits reminded Ruma and her father of her deceased mother and the tea times spent with her. Similarly, for Kaushik, food is intricately associated with the fond memories of his mother, as is evident in the stories "Once in a Lifetime" and "Year's End." As he indulged in the *luchis* served by Chitra in "Year's End," he was transported back to his days in Bombay: "I could hear my mother complaining cheerfully in the kitchen" (Lahiri 261). Even the sight of a bottle of Johnnie Walker in "an ad for it on a billboard or in a magazine" (Lahiri 265) never failed to evoke remembrances of her. Furthermore, thinking of the Tupperware containers filled with various Armenian recipes prepared by Mrs. Gharibian, the nurse who cared for his ailing mother, served as painful reminders of his mother's gradual decline – "food that now reminds me of my mother dying" (Lahiri 267). Sudha also reminisced in the story "Only Goodness" that a significant aspect harking her back to her childhood was McVitie's biscuits, which her mother immensely enjoyed. She also recalled the underwhelming experience of eating an adult English breakfast of "toast with margarine" (Lahiri 134), which was intertwined with the memory of the birth of her brother Rahul.

Another prominent anthropologist, David E. Sutton, in his work *Remembrance of Repasts* (2001), elaborates on how food becomes memorable as a sensory and social experience and brings in the idea of *xenitia.* The Greek concept of *xenitia* signifies a longing for an imaginary home that exists in one's nostalgia. Drawing from Greek poetry, Sutton's work mentions it as an "absence from the physical comforts of home" (77). Within diaspora, *xenitia* thus embodies the emotional and psychological struggles of living away from one's native land. It reflects the yearning for familiar tastes and traditions, which serve as anchors in an unfamiliar environment. In this respect, gastrocriticism aims to study how the intersection of food and memory can express the sense of *xenitia* that is often believed to be untranslatable. In the story "Hell-Heaven," Usha's mother and Pranab, being two displaced individuals in a foreign land, are found to be reminiscing about the "best jelabis and moghlai parathas" (Lahiri 64) sold in the

street shops in their hometown, Calcutta. It evoked memories of the comfort they had left behind and this shared absence they felt deepened their bond. Another instance is found in the last story of the collection, "Going Ashore," where Kaushik felt transported back to his childhood through the local cuisine of Khao Lak. This story narrates Hema and Kaushik finding their way back to each other years later and falling in love, but only to get separated in the end. After Hema left him to move on with her life, Kaushik travelled to Thailand for work where the food he encountered overwhelmed him: "reminded him a little of his childhood: steaming rice, dense brown and yellow curries, whole red and green chilies floating in sauce" (Lahiri 325). Despite his exposure to numerous culinary experiences and ability to adapt to various cuisines, the taste of 'home' proved to be a powerful catalyst, resurrecting memories he believed to be distant and forgotten. The displaced individuals also try to derive a sense of completeness from the conception that in consuming food of their culture, even in exile, they are integrated with others who are consuming the same back home. For instance, the picnics Usha's mother went on with Usha and Pranab featured "hard-boiled eggs and cucumber sandwiches" (Lahiri 66), just like the ones she enjoyed with her family years ago, which they may still be enjoying back home. Both remembering and consuming them make her feel closer to 'home.'

However, juxtaposed with the nostalgic sentiment towards traditional cuisine lies the aspect of forgetting or amnesia, wherein culinary traditions gradually erode from memory, particularly as successive generations become increasingly distanced from their ancestral origins. In the story "Unaccustomed Earth," Ruma's son, Akash, had no recollection of his grandmother or her culinary prowess – "I don't remember it. She died" (Lahiri 23). He lacked the inclination to engage with her recipes or the memories they held. Ruma's unsuccessful attempts to replicate these dishes and her son's indifference towards them reminded her of her mother's admonition about the significance of preserving traditions.

While a gustatory encounter can be painstakingly reconstructed, a disparity persists between the original experience and its following renditions. Extensive research has demonstrated that the current perception of a specific food item diverges from the recollection of its flavour. Lisa Heldke, a scholar of philosophy, while comparing the flavour of a cracker with that of its memory, writes: "My evidence that they are different is precisely the feeling of loss, longing… that I experienced… feelings are just what conjured up the memory-taste" (21). Within this discrepancy, the recollection of earlier experiences becomes paramount, serving as a way of holding on to bygone times and forsaken traditions. Jhumpa Lahiri, in her autobiographical piece "Rice," describes her

father's routine of cooking pulao: "Despite having a superficial knowledge… I have no idea how to make my father's pulao (4)." This personal experience of the author finds expression in the story "Unaccustomed Earth," where a similar instance can be seen. The dishes Ruma laboriously prepares for her father fail to satisfy her as they bear no semblance to the 'memory-taste' of her mother's cooking.

Although gustatory memories rejuvenate one's sense of self, sometimes they evoke pain and instil self-doubt, as evidenced by an instance in the story "A Choice of Accommodations." This story revolves around Amit, another Bengali-American, as he struggles to craft a successful life in America. He suffers from insecurity, often feeling like an impostor, continually fearing his life and marriage would fall apart at any moment. Amit's haunting recollection of the "piece of dried apricot" (Lahiri 90) that his daughter nearly choked upon in the story becomes a potent reminder of his vulnerabilities. This recollection brought back the dread Amit experienced, encompassing the potential loss of his child and the possible disintegration of his meticulously constructed life. Similarly, in the story "Going Ashore," after they got separated, Hema's agony and longing for Kaushik was intensified by the remembrances of the Italian flavours they shared over the course of their relationship.

Conclusion

Communities form and evolve around the preparation and consumption of food, necessitating the consideration of gustatory aspects in documenting human experiences. For diasporic individuals, food embodies their history, memories, and emotional ties, thereby becoming integral to their subjectivity and resilience amidst displacement. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* dramatises the pivotal role of consumption and culinary acts in highlighting the fragmentation that stems from the negotiation of multiple cultural identities. While the emotions effectuated by what one prepares or consumes often alleviate or exacerbate the turmoil, gustatory memories lessen the sense of isolation and the feeling of being dislocated. When viewed through a lens of gastrocriticism, the relationship to and interaction with food of characters such as Ruma, Kaushik, Pranab, and Rahul reveal their fragmented identities, interpersonal conflicts, agony of cultural exile and utmost desire for reconciliation with the 'lost' homeland and forgotten heritage.

In the contemporary world governed by globalisation, we all struggle with a lack of rootedness and some form of displacement – whether from our nation, culture, or language. In such a scenario, connecting with traditional cuisines and culinary customs offers emotional sustenance and belongingness

fostering adaptation and community bonding. Thus, besides treating food as a symbol, it is essential to theorise consumption to understand how it intensifies or remedies the complexities of diasporic existence. Herein, the relevance of food studies and gastrocriticism in literary analysis becomes significant.

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