



The Role of Food, Language, and Rituals in Shaping Cultural Memory in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

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Abstract:

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri provides a heartrending examination of the function of culinary habits, lingo selection, and customary practices as cultural recalling systems of the immigrant family. This paper claims that the three components of the argument, namely food, language and rituals are interconnected processes that allow the main characters to maintain and negotiate their Bengali identity as they adjust to the American society, namely Ashoke, Ashima, and their son Gogol. The essay, through a close study of the storytelling and the works of Lahiri, and academic contributions on the topic of diaspora memory, shows that shared meals and recipes invoke a sense of nostalgia about the homeland, bilingualism communication holds connections between generations, and traditional ceremonies (such as naming ceremony and religious holidays) cement identity across borders. The differences between the generations, especially the failure of Gogol to accept and acceptance of these cultural aspects, points to the dynamic nature of cultural transmission. Through the analysis of these themes, the paper demonstrates that Lahiri demonstrates cultural memory as a living archive: it is an archive that is embedded inside the family life and negotiated by itself. This understanding in totality highlights the idea that first-generation immigrants preserve these memories of the past and present, and these thoughts are transferred into their children in sensorial or affective ways. Finally, the movie The Namesake shows the immigrant experience as a hybrid identity experience of food, language

and ritual as collectively constituting the so-called diaspora space in which cultural memories are not only preserved but also modified.

Keywords: Diaspora; Cultural memory; Food and identity; Language and identity; Ritual traditions;

Jhumpa Lahiri.

I. Introduction

The Namesake (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri is a book that records the lives of the Bengali immigrants living in the United States, Ashoke, and Ashima Ganguli as well as the children born in America. The novel abounds with issues of identity and belongingness and the immigrant experience based on personal family stories. The main theme of these is the aspect of cultural memory the manner in which the history and values of a community get handed over to future generations through symbols, habits, and story telling. The cultural memory in the context of immigrants is commonly dependent on the concrete actions, such as preparing traditional cuisine, speaking a native language, and participating in traditional rites. To the characters in Lahiri, food, language and ritual serves as the locations of remembering which roots them to an Indian past even though it was an American present. According to scholars, food often becomes a close storehouse of memory and culture as part of the diasporic life. This essay presents an argument that Lahiri employs these aspects, cuisine, language, and ceremony as some of the main elements of cultural memory. Food also has the nostalgic effect and passes down family values; language (both English and Bengali) experiences the changing identity and belonging; and rituals (i.e. naming ceremonies and festivals) offer continuity with the family heritage. The paper demonstrates that Lahiri describes cultural memory as a living, dynamic archive by looking at how Ashoke, Ashima, and to a great extent their son Gogol negotiate these aspects. We observe, through thorough descriptions and critical references, that the meals, bilingual discussions, and ceremonies of the Gangulis, on the one hand, maintain their Bengali culture and, on the other hand, enable them to fit in the American setting. This new space provides a third space of hybrid identity whereby cultural memory is actively reconstituted.

II. Food and Identity

Food is a strong connection between the past and the present of the Ganguli family. Cooking and eating as presented in the story by Lahiri are both a daily routine and a form of remembering. As one of the critics notes, food and eating habits are some sort of continuity to characters such as Ashima and Ashoke. The making of traditional Bengali food is what helps Ashima to always recreate the Calcutta taste in her kitchen in Boston, thereby supporting her culture. As an illustration, when Ashima and the novel begin, she mixes Rice Krispies,

peanuts, onion and spices to replicate the muri-mix snack that can be found on the Indian streets. This modest dish is not simply a sustenance; according to Bhat, Ashima takes food as a memory that enables individuals to remember about their specific past, familiar environment, and, what is the most important, their origins. Repeating acts of cooking introduces Ashima to her senses, the smells and the flavors take her back to her homeland and its markets and kitchens. This way, all the food eaten at the Ganguli home will be a repository of cultural heritage. Lahiri reveals that Ashima takes hours to chop, stir, and reminisce, in other words, make her American apartment more traditional Indian by food. Concisely, Bengali food offers Ashima (and by implication, Ashoke) intimate caches of memory and cultural heritage in her and his dislocation.

This food worship is also spreading to the younger generation. To Ashoke and Ashima, meals are not merely a self-indulgence, but they are also a lesson. Traditional cooking as the analysis by Masroor Un Nabi Bhat Bhat puts it turns into the topic in terms of which they can transfer their cultural values and customs to the new generation, a method of reconciling the homeland and the home. In fact, Ashima frequently fantasizes about educating her male child Bengali by cooking before his eyes or narrating Calcutta tales to him as he consumes his food. She even first refuses to make Gogol American-style food on his meals, on the contrary, she insists on such Indian custom as to eat with his hands. These rituals highlight the fact that food is a component of identity formation to the parents. Since, after all, in their home, they are used to the traditional Bengali food, which is the main feature that makes their living place culturally sacrosanct. The layout of their kitchen alone mustard oil, spices, and mithai tells Gogol how his family was founded. Therefore, food serves as a marker of belongingness and constantly keeps reminding first-generation immigrants of their origin.

Meanwhile, Lahiri emphasizes the role played by the context of the diaspora in changing food. Recipes change in a foreign land. In times when Ashima struggles to get muri or Indian spices in Cambridge she replaces Rice Krispies and peanuts. The story describes that this snack, which reminds her of home, grounds her throughout even in a foreign environment. Such a process of replacement is indicative of a hybrid cuisine: an example is Ashima preparing a Thanksgiving turkey, which is spiced with Bengali curry leaves and ginger, making it an American icon with the stamp of Ganguli Bengal identity on it. This creative mixing in the words of Lahiri forms a 'diaspora space' that is defined by the ever-reconstitution of identities by the experience of cultures. In this way, culinary practice is not a fixed thing, neither Indian nor American, but in between, a process that represents the negotiation of two cultures on the part of the immigrant. It is comforting to Ashoke, even more withdrawn, in this mixed cooking. He misses his homeland in the form of meals prepared by

Ashima and gives Gogol a bite of payesh (rice pudding) to replicate an annaprasan ceremony of Bengali annaprasan.

Nevertheless, there is a generation conflict. Gogol (their son) is first irritable towards the food-based culture of his parents. He is as a kid and a teenager attracted to pizza, hamburgers, and ice cream, the symbols of American young people. He becomes humiliated by the overwhelming spices and new vegetables made by his mother. In fact, as victims of bullying, he shelters himself in the American staple foods instead of his parents lentils and fish. But food memory is not lost also by Gogol as displayed by Lahiri. Gogol subconsciously goes back to childhood meals after the sudden death of his father. During the crisis time of the story Gogol simply chooses eating the dishes of his mother once again. These movements, of non-assimilation and non-assimilation, are, according to Marianne Hirsch, postmemory: Gogol inherits attachments to cultures not based on any actual experiences but rather on affective and sensory passages. Practically, even the American-born Gogol is not able to absolutely get rid of the taste of home; the discovery of the recipe that his parents used makes him relapse back to the identity that he inherited. Therefore food is a generational connection: to Ashoke and Ashima it represents a living tradition, and to Gogol it is the emotional and memorial museum.

Overall, the food is presented by Lahiri as a symbol, as well as a way of maintaining culture. It is nostalgia, instruction and comfort simultaneously. In the diaspora narrations, food according to scholar, Masroor, is not a fixed symbol of culture but a living tradition of negotiation. To the Gangulis, every meal is the statement of identity: a bowl of payesh is a prayer to their parents, and a well-cooked turkey is a thanksgiving to tradition. Combined, the commitment of Ashima and Ashoke to Bengali food and the multi-faceted reaction of Gogol underscore the role of food as a place of cultural memory, as such, maintaining connections to a home country and adapting to the environment of a new one.

III. Language as a form of Cultural Anchor.

The Namesake is a language acting as a connector and separator of cultures. Lahiri constantly demonstrates that at home when they speak Bengali, Ashoke and Ashima can always feel like they are at home, despite having children in America. The parents speak in the Bengali language to one another as well as to baby Gogol specifically because he wants to know the language his ancestors spoke. Such an intentional usage of mother tongue is typical of immigrant families: this way, the young generation would not lose touch with the family identity. Actually, one of them includes the fact that one of the analyses points out that Bengali

language serves as a connecting factor among generations connecting characters with their identities and maintaining their cultural identity. Ashima and Ashoke retain their cultural memory using their daily speech, which is the Bengali language in private life. Even their naming is linguistically traditional: when Gogol went to school, his English name was Nikhil, but Ashoke never manages to call him anything but his pet name, Gogol, the nickname he got in Calcutta when his father was reborn. This duality of names helps to emphasize the split personality: to me and your mother, you will never be other than Gogol, assures Ashoke. In this case language and name represent memory - the very pet name Gogol has is a direct allusion to a literary hero of his father, meaning that he is symbolizing a connection with the past which Ashoke desires to share.

However, there is a clash between language as well, in which Lahiri depicts the clash between language instead of cohering. Gogol grew up in a household of Bengali speakers and England of English speakers which makes him feel between the languages. He has problems with his name, not only because it is not the name of his colleagues, but also because it represents a Bengali culture that he is confused with. One of the critics observes that Gogol has a struggle with the strangeness of his name and the challenge it presents in cementing his sense of place. Gogol dislikes his name and hears it being mispronounced or said in an insensitive manner on numerous occasions in the novel. He desires to have a typical American name, and Gogol appears to be an embarrassment to him. The fact that he does not want to be called Nikhil in school, he is afraid to be a Nikhil, a person who he does not know, is yet another indication of how language is used to define identity. Gogol at first denies the Bengali and Indian identities; he only considers himself as an American to the extent of disregarding the native language of his parents. But strangers make him know it is not so (You are Indian, teachers say) which makes his isolation even more. Through these, linguistic difference makes Gogol know of his inability to belong anywhere.

Nevertheless, language gives continuity in the end. When Gogol grows up, he starts to understand the value of Bengali and the significance of his name. He goes on to listen to Tagore songs with Moushumi and admires the sound of his own name after the death of Ashoke. He acts as the translator in his family towards the end, which shows that at some point he must come to terms with the language of his parents. This was established through a bilingual family of Ashoke and Ashima. It is interesting to note that Ashima and Ashoke often switch between English and Bengali on their own, adapting themselves to a situation without losing their language. Such bilingualism symbolizes their mixed lives: it enables them to live in the American society (they use English when communicating with strangers) and at the same time, to ground themselves in Bengali

every day. Therefore, in the novel there is no fixed language but the language is flexible carrying the cultural memory. It gives Ashima the opportunity to express the feeling of dislocation that has afflicted her since her departure of Calcutta even when she cannot speak. In briefly, the linguistic practice in *The Namesake* highlights that identity may be both individual and inherited - the Bengali terms, adages, and names that dominate the lives of the Gangulis hold a personal history that may be informative of the changing identity of the children.

IV. Rituals and Continuity of Tradition.

Rituals in *The Namesake* can be regarded as specific points, during which cultural memory is directly performed. Lahiri compares the ways in which Ashoke and Ashima are holding on to Bengali rituals, but Gogol in the beginning perceives it, in a detached manner. The rice-feeding ceremony, which is the annaprasan of Gogol at the age of six months is one ceremony that provides one of the most vivid illustrations. According to Lahiri, by February when Gogol is born, Ashima and Ashoke have sufficient contacts to entertain in an appropriate manner- the event: Gogol annaprasan his rice ceremony. Compared to the practices in Western culture, Bengali naming rituals do not involve baptism of infants but rather they mark it as a communal ceremony. The parents request their family friend (Dilip Nandi) to feed Gogol rice with rice being his first meal, a symbol of nourishment and a promise of future by the family. The rice, the staff of life of the Bengali people is the focus: by feeding Gogol it is hoped to bring success and happiness. According to Lahiri, rice is among the most popular dishes in India and in the immigrant setting it is used to remind about the values and ancestors of the native ones. Including this vivid scene, Lahiri demonstrates that Ashima and Ashoke highly appreciate the connection between a food and a ritual. Even such small detail as Ashima worries about her plastic plate and not a metal plate is an example of how she holds on to custom. The annaprasan is a memory place not only to the baby, but also to the community of immigrants who share it (as Smith and Watson would put it, it is a certain occasion of a community of memory). By doing so, even a simple item (a bowl of payesh) and an activity (feeding rice) become a tool of the cultural heritage.

Other than naming, Lahiri describes other rituals that ground identity. The aspect of festivities celebrated by Ashima is recurrent. She celebrates Durga Puja every year in Cambridge and packs her house with Bengali music and food. As an example, Ashima hosts Bengali holidays parties at which her guests sit on the floor, play different games and sing songs by Rabindranath Tagore and Nazrul, which evoked the Indianness atmosphere. These events are characterized by very Indian cuisine and art and, therefore, they are

multi-sensory clarifications of tradition. Even the dressing style (she still wears saris) and ornamentation of the house reminds traditional places of rituals. Likewise, she insists on the Indian-style birthday foods of Gogol (curried goat, rice, sweets) when his American friends stare at her bewilderedly. Ashima deliberately recreates the Calcutta atmosphere in all these rituals. As one commentator notes, she is very embedded in her culture and as hard as she can be to practice the Bengali culture at home. The Gangulis observe time according to the Bangladeshi rituals as opposed to the American ones through these ceremonies. It is interesting to note that Ashima even celebrates Christmas and American traditions to satisfy her children, and such celebrations are also done on her conditions (she may go to midnight Mass, but also she praises Durga and Saraswati, and she cooks turkey with Bengali spices).

The attitude of Gogol to ritual changes dramatically. He does not pay much attention to the ceremonies of his parents as a child and as a teenager, even he is not fond but rather resentful of it. He goes out insulting to escape pujas or pretends to be asleep when Bengali prayers are going on. These traditions are foreign and archaic to him. Nonetheless, Lahiri depicts a moment of transition: with the death of Ashoke Gogol suddenly re-relates with forgotten Bengali traditions. This awakening after the shock makes him do all the mourning rituals (such as the Bengali tradition of son shaving his head) and accept an arranged marriage with Moushumi, which is what he is supposed to do. The rituals seem to bring back the memory of the father in Gogol. This change in generation is an indication that traditions of a culture are potent and even a child who was once opposed to such culture can be drawn back to the ceremony. It is true, as one of the review analyses states that the second-generation character usually does not live in either of the worlds, and the depiction portrayed by Lahiri is not an exception as Gogol ultimately comes to the agreement that his identity consists of these rituals. At the end of the novel, the things that, previously, seemed foreign to Gogol (such as burying him in Bengali rituals or praying in the name of his father) become his instincts.

In conclusion, the rituals in *The Namesake* are the cultural memory expressed in a collective manner. Both the naming ceremony, religious festivals and life-cycle rites serve the purpose of keeping in touch with the past and strengthening group identity. They are conscious remembrances, which drag the characters back to home. Lahiri reveals that with these practices, culture, heritage and all the heartaches of home are housed in kitchens and dining tables, as a matter of fact, every puja, meal and prayer at the Ganguli house is a reminder of Calcutta past in suburban America.

V. Inter-relationships of Food, Language and Rituals.

To ensure that food, language, and ritual do not act independently, food, language and ritual are interlaced that forms a whole of the cultural memory in *The Namesake*. All of the elements strengthen each other. To take an example, family celebrations combine all three: at the annaprasan of Gogol or Durga Puja we can hear Bengali, eat their traditional food and even perform some sacred rituals. This sense of home is further created by this synergy between the Gangulis and their community. According to Smith and Watson, communities of memory create certain places of remembering by their rituals. These are the very places of the home and its happenings in the novel by Lahiri. Language contains the prayers, food contains the taste of homeland and ritual organizes the celebration. With this, they create a “map of memory” connecting continents together.

This intertwined cultural recollection also gives pressure on the immigrant experience. The Gangulis are highly conscious of the assimilation pressures. Ashima compromises (speaks English out of the house, cooks one American meal per week, etc.) but holds on to basic traditions. Gogol first opposes these traditions in support of American ones (he is eating pizza with friends instead of Bengali food at home), which is what Parameswari et al. describe as struggles of one generation that affects others succeeding it. This interaction is evidenced in the turning point of the novel that Gogol undergoes: as he attends his American wedding, he is shedding most of the traditional aspects; as he attends the marriage of Moushumi, he gradually starts to appreciate the rituals that his parents so dearly cherish. Therefore, assimilation and nostalgia separate and converge respectively. *The Namesake* exists on cultural memory in this dialectic - it is as though the characters can feel, speak, or even craign their cultural identity at moments and forget it at others. However, Lahiri suggests that change is the continuation of preservation. The notion of the so-called diaspora space demonstrates that one can always make identity being not lost: a spiced turkey at Thanksgiving, a multilingual house, a rice ritual in Boston all have the trace of the Bengali culture despite the American environment.

Finally, the story told by Lahiri implies that the intersection of food, language and rituals creates the so-called venues of memory where immigrants live their lives. In the case of Ashoke and Ashima, these similar practices are actually the conscious efforts of not forgetting: when everything around them seems alien, they revert to the comfortable setting of their own home and build a world of Indianness around them. These mixed memories, which are captured in a taste, a word, a song become so ingrained in Gogol that it drips into him, and this is a fact that Marianne Hirsch puts across when she argues that family memories and traditions can

be passed down to the future generation. These cultural aspects set each other in motion: a meal is a time to speak mother tongue (Ashoke telling stories over curry), a ritual meal makes characters feel like they are at home, and a recited lullaby brings back memories of a home land. Thus Lahiri depicts identity as this cloth of strands whereby the supporter of assimilation is bound by the strengthening threads of tradition.

VI. Conclusion

In the *Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri is a heart touching story of how the cultural memory is maintained and changed with simple actions. The novel does not include food, language and rituals as some background information; they are essential forces that define the identity of every character. Cooking Bengali food and speaking Bengali to the first-generation parents are some of the responsible things they do to ensure that they preserve their history in a foreign country. In the case of Gogol, these aspects are alien to him at the start but later on become reference points to his self-knowledge. In a way one of the studies summarizes, Lahiri proves that cultural practices may not only bring people together, but also separate them, as well as, more importantly, that people may move back and forth along the continuum as they age. Lahiri, through cultural memory, has her immigrant protagonists residing in a between world: their cultural components will make a line between the homeland and the new one.

The fusion of these components creates a well-layered account of the immigrant experience of *The Namesake*. Food is memory (a taste which reminds childhood), language is identity (a name which has a sound which has a meaning), ritual is narrative (a ceremony which narrates the stories of ancestors). These aspects are mutually reliant in the story by Lahiri: they collaborate to form a living record of the Bengali culture in America. The narrative presented by the Gangulis reveals that cultural memory does not live in museums and textbooks and it lives in kitchens and conversations in festivals and family meetings. In the end, Lahiri hints that despite the acculturation of new cultures by immigrants, the cultural heritage still lives through the easiest of things - recipe passed down through generations, mother tongue lullaby, a prayer at a holiday - this way the past will still find its echo today.

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