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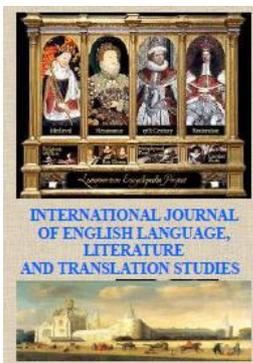
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2 3 4 9 - 9 4 5 1

Vol.2.Issue.1.,2015

THE SEVERED TONGUE: FOOD AS A VEHICLE OF IMMIGRANT REBIRTH
AND MATURATION IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines critically the role of gastronomy in Indian American literature. Bharati Mukherjee's immigrant centred novel *Jasmine* features an Indian immigrant protagonist who leaves a native collective for life in the United States and in the process, experiences a rebirth of the individualism which her collectives have silenced. This reawakening is reflected by author's treatment of culinary preparation and consumption. This culinary practice provides distinct commentary on the immigrant experience. The aim of this paper is to explore how the commonality and divergence of culinary incidence reflects upon the nature of the immigrant experience.

Key words: Gastronomy, Culinary, Divergence, and Immigrant

Article Info:

Article Received:12/03/2015

Revised on: 21/03/2015

Accepted on: 30/03/2015

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For this paper I wished to examine the intersection culinary praxis with the wider immigrant narrative, encompassing the physical journeys, the spiritual compromises and the rejection/embrace of communities, all of which influence the post-migratory experience. I felt that the tangential points of contact between culinary practice and the immigrant experience would shed more light on literary portrayals of food, than would a study of books which focus deliberately on food. I chose novel with geographical uniformity-those which feature Indians who travel to America and shared culinary and social theme but took distinct approach to the individualist journey: *Jasmine* (1989) by Bharati Mukherjee. *Jasmine* is an illegal immigrant who travels to America with other trafficked illegals.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*:

The protagonist *Jasmine*, begins life as *Jyoti*, a rural girl, who bears little prospect of marrying despite her beauty and intelligence. Her husband renames her *Jasmine*, in expectation that she will grow into a sophisticated city woman; subsequent events take her through more name changes turning her from *Jasmine* to *Jazzy* to *Jase* and finally to *Jane Ripplemeyer*. Bharati Mukherjee willingly sheds the mores and trappings of her origin, in favour of complete immersion in the adopted homeland. Within this narrative, food helps

Jasmine establish her niche in an American life by performing two functions. Firstly, it allows her to overcome the trauma of her voyage by providing a sense of routine and security. Secondly, it serves as a tool with which Jasmine courts her adopted homeland, and asserts her identity gently enough to not startle its native inhabitants, allowing her to ingratiate herself into a secure existence.

Jasmine's father's untimely death and mother's illness thrust her into the role of culinary provider to her native collective. In this role she meets her future husband, Prakash. When they marry, Jasmine leaves her family collective to join Prakash's. This instils in her the pragmatism which will ensure her post-migratory survival. During this phase Prakash suppresses her individualist urges, prepares her for American individualist rebirth and re-growth. During this the reader watches her pass through the life stages of childhood, adolescence and courtship before reaching the full maturation of her American self. In these stages of maturation food plays a necessary and transformative role.

Figurative Death of Jasmine:

In Jasmine her figurative death takes place in three stages. First days, before Prakash is set to voyage to America for technical training, her husband is murdered by Sukkhi, a former friend turned Sikh terrorist. In her second stage of death, she decides to take her husband's voyage instead, with plans to commit sati on the campus of the technical college he was meant to attend. Her trans-oceanic voyage is a long process of starvation, rape, uncertainty and humiliation. The third stage takes place shortly after her arrival on American soil, when —Half-Face takes her to an abandoned motel, beats and rapes her. Up to this point, Jasmine has been planning to kill herself. Indeed, Jyoti Vijn, the protected village girl, would have seen no alternative to suicide. It is for the sake of survival, therefore, that Jasmine sheds her former self, rebirthing as Kali, the Hindu Goddess, often portrayed with her tongue protruding and dripping blood.

In that moment turns from suicide to homicide, she says, —I could remember my father's and my husband's cremations.... I had left my earthly body and would soon be joining their souls. (Mukherjee 1989, p.117). Here, facing the steam fogged mirror, Jyoti Vijn dies and American Jasmine, the woman who will survive and thrive is born. The period proceeding Jasmine's immigrant rebirth is marked by starvation, both obligatory and deliberate. Food is scarce even before her journey begins, as she and fellow illegals wait in the airport. Once, she reaches Amsterdam and boards the Gulf Shuttle, she loses the agency of spending money, and food is acquired through —the numbed surrender to various men for the reward of an orange, a blanket, a slice of cheese (Mukherjee 1989, p. 101). This voyage was also marked by Jasmine's deliberate renunciation of food. Honouring all prescriptions for a purified body, anticipation only release from this world, she had not eaten anything and taken no water. It can be argued that she had not starved herself, it might have been her hunger-addled mind that gave her the strength to kill her assailant, and not herself.

Upon leaving the abandoned motel, she finds herself in an infantilised state, her —swollen, festering tongue (Mukherjee 1989, p. 128) rendering her unable to eat, speak or even ask for water, and completely at the mercy of strangers. She is taken in by Lillian Gordon, an American who houses immigrant Kanjobal women who —had lost their husbands and children to an army massacre (Mukherjee 1989, p.131). It is Lillian who introduces her, as one would an infant, to her first solid food on American soil. Then she takes her to Dairy Queen, which Jasmine remembers as —my first true American food. How it soothed my still-raw tongue. I thought of it as a healing food (Mukherjee 1989, P. 133). It is fitting that Jasmine, in her new born state, would be fed ice cream, which like early baby food, is homogenous, cool, and unchallenging to a delicate palate.

Jasmine's Immigration: Infancy

Food plays an instrumental role in recreating Jasmine's sense of familiarity with the post migratory space, and provides a methodology by which Lillian's women proceed with the mundane, in order to stave off the cruelties of the past. Following a sudden memory of Prakash, —an image triggered the tears, the screams... the Kanjobal women left the room, Lillian stayed with me, brewing tea (Mukherjee 1989, p.132). During her period of infancy, Jasmine also encounters the comforts of American farming, in —fields on either side of the highway... dense with tomatoes, eggplants, and okra...I had travelled the world without ever leaving the familiar crops of Punjab (Mukherjee 1989, p. 128). During Jasmine's transformation from infancy

to childhood, Lillian teaches her to cook hamburgers and roasts, to clean toilets with cleansers that smelled sweeter than flowers and to scrub pots and pans with pre-soaped balls of steel wool instead of ashes and lemon rings, so we could hire ourselves as domestics (Mukherjee 1989, p.134).

Jasmine's Immigration: Childhood Stage

The next stage takes Jasmine to her post-migratory childhood; a period spent in Professorji's home is marked by the familiarity of Indian domestic setting and culinary practices. This is the period of incubation that offers security and predictability. Vadheras provide her the luxury to grow bored and restless with her state and yearn for a life where she is not a widow —permanently on the sidelines (Mukherjee 1989, p.143) Her restlessness compels her to obtain a gorged green card and leave the Vadheras, seeking employment with the Hayes family. Food is noticeably absent from the Hayes chapters. Food is a focus in Lillian Gordon's home because it is sometimes the only element of Jasmine's American life that keeps her in the present. It is with Hayeses that Jasmine transforms from childhood to her post migratory young adult state.

Jasmine's Immigration: Adulthood

Food is a means by which jasmine might have imprinted herself on her New York surroundings. In —The Exuberance of Immigration, Ponzanesi speaks of —that location of hybridization and ambivalence that allows subjugated subjects, in this case the female subaltern, to operate in the vacuum of the hegemonic authority, and create their own empowerment (2004, p.37). The Hayeses' awareness of the subjugated subject is far from ambivalent, and is indeed so keen that they are able to ironies western hegemonic subjugation and spread it around their living space.

Jasmine feels understood and accepted, acknowledging that —Taylor didn't want to change me. He didn't want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. (Mukherjee 1989, p.185) There is little Jasmine can do to fill their already crowded domestic space, and little she has to do to assert her identity, whether through cooking or other cultural acts.

The recurring culinary object is the Hayeses' —sleek microwave (Mukherjee 1989, p.169), which Wylie Hayes says she does not have to use, —if you have a thing about radiation (Mukherjee 1989, p.169), a comment which demonstrates the ceaselessly accommodation approach. The microwave itself symbolises the ready-made family in which she finds herself, a family that is instantly trusting and accepting as demonstrated when Wylie says, —I'm not going to ask you for references, Jasmine...Kate's already told us something about you. Jasmine accepts Taylor and Wylie as her parents, teachers and her family. Hayes family is perhaps too instant, it falls apart two years after Jasmine joins it. Here microwave which is a tool of instant food preparation mirrors Jasmine's instant integration into this family.

The perceived safety of her Manhattan life disintegrates completely upon the appearance of her husband's killer, convincing her that the security she feels in New York is limited to the Hayes apartment and can no longer extend to the public sphere. She has lost the anonymity she sought as a new immigrant, though the threat now stems from her past not from an immigration official. It is fitting that she should escape New York by moving to Iowa, a state known for its flat fields. In rural Iowa, terrorist hot dog vendors have few crowds amongst which to hide and she would be hidden from the threats of her past. She no longer fears the spectre of the immigration official which suggests that she has attained an elevated certainty of her right to be in America. The Iowan stage represents the full flowering of Jasmine's American self, and evokes Malashri Lal's observation:

—Mukherjee's heroines have pushed out the barrier of home/not home to reach beyond the geographical limits of the country itself. Breaking out of traditional roles converging upon the known and the knowable in their inherited culture, the protagonists strain at all manner of controlling force.(1995, p.145) page 304

What Jasmine needs is a home where she feels safe, a family structure which will not disintegrate as the Hayes family does, and a place to live where hot dog vendors do not turn into potential assassins. A traditional, patriarchal household, in her eyes, signifies safety.

Jasmine's Ingratiation into Americanness:

In Baden she identifies completely with the farmers of Elsa County, even though Bud himself is a banker:

—we're no-till, we conserve our topsoil, and we've got a phantom crop of dead corn stalks poking the snow in orderly rows... we're puritans, that's why (Mukherjee 1989, p.237).

Few native Punjabis would call themselves Puritans: Jasmine labelling herself as such indicates that she considers herself lowan. She does not court Bud Ripplemeyer—her partner and father of her child—but Elsa County itself, as the potential vessel of a stable and settled American life. She courts Elsa County through her cooking, and food becomes the form in which Badenians are able to digest her identity both literally and intellectually which indicates that she is at least comfortable with her culinary foreignness.

She ingratiates herself into her lowan home through a form of culinary courtly love, gifting the county with her food, rather than explicitly presenting herself as a lover, as someone who covets the Badanian life. Mukherjee implies that Jasmine's fastest route to Elsa County's heart, is through its stomach. By feeding the residents of Baden, she is —subverting the taste buds of Elsa County (Mukherjee 1989, p.19). The verb —subverting suggests hidden persuasion; she has found a factor of her identity that is, quite literally, palatable to lowans. Her Indian cooking begins to take on a reputation of its own, as indicated when she serves dinner to Du, her Vietnamese son, and Darrel, a young local farmer. She served the known dishes with the unknown ones as a gentler way of introducing her identity to the natives. It was well received and they get disappointed if there's not something Indian on the table.

Jasmine gives of herself via food, a more palatable version of identity than stories of her past and her struggle. The Iowa chapters, interspersed throughout Jasmine's account of her immigrant experience, recount the slow breakdown of Elsa County's farming life, and the disintegration of the security she finds in Bud's home. Mukherjee uses a culinary vehicle to illustrate Darrel's breakdown; just as she used food as a medium of his indirect flirtation with Jasmine, she changes course, and uses a dinner scene to illustrate Darrel's direct, and ultimately ugly, appeal for her affection. Food and culinary practice, as well as a dogged determination to thrive, have brought Jasmine from her position as a nearly suicidal, raped, starved and illegal immigrant to one who feels secure enough to choose the course her life will take.

Passing through a number of collectives and gleaning from each a layer of maturation, Jasmine grows into a classic Mukherjee heroine, an individual who has shed the cultural exigencies of her past, and customised and nature of her post-migratory existence. Having lived with Taylor, a man in whose home food is a non-entity, Mukherjee suggests two possibilities for her heroine's new phase. First, her new position as Taylor's partner, rather than Duff's nanny, will give her increased obligation and agency in the kitchen, encouraging her to bring Hasnapuri cuisine to the Hayes home; it can be assumed, however, that she will not be —subverting any taste buds, as Duff and Taylor would presumably be familiar with Indian cuisine, and not —make a show of tanning their mouths (Mukherjee 1989,p.9). On the other hand, it is possible that food will continue to be a non-entity in Jasmine and Taylor's home, representing a complete obliteration of her Indian past, for the exuberant embrace of a fully matured American identity.

CONCLUSION

The aesthetic tradition of the immigrant culinary narrative is a long-standing and prolific one. Food has come to the fore in the immigrant story as consistently as the larger questions of politics, religion and economy. Food is hardly the stuff of revolutions, but its inherent ordinariness makes it indispensable to the immigrant narrative, for several reasons. Food is a daily requirement, and the protagonists of Mukherjee can have a profound effect on a character's sense of well-being. Food is a daily test of success and failure; while an immigrant's financial and social success can remain frustratingly obtuse, the cooking act is a self-contained experiment, the results of which can be deemed positive or negative. Cooking serves as a repetitive, predictable gauge with which to assess and portray the immigrant experience.

The importance of food lies in its elements of ownership and connectivity. An immigrant's post-migratory space is surrounded by the unfamiliar where linguistic, social and economic spaces often exclude and deny, native food—or an approximation thereof—engenders both comfort and corporeal ownership, through the act of chewing, swallowing and thus consuming. Through food an immigrant may introduce his

native identity to his/her host community, working himself into their awareness on the level of a basic physiological need. It is a digestible manifestation of identity, and can pique a host community's interest more widely than political or historical discussion. Jasmine like any culinary recipe, is conglomeration of past influence and future potential. In —Food and Belonging: At Home in Alien Kitchens , Ketu Katrak observes, —A recipe has so many different hands and minds in its history—I cannot recall who taught me what, and parts I invented. That is the boundaryless pleasure of cooking; no one authorship. What counts is the final taste: (2005, p.271). Jasmine represses her individuality for the good of the collective, her complexities smudged for the sake of progress, a process which mirrors the generalisation of Indian cuisine itself.

However, while Jasmine and Indian cuisine eventually discover their distinct identities, their processes of discovery move in opposite directions. Indian cuisine maintains its complexity within the Indian setting; Indians themselves are cognisant of regional culinary distinctions. When this cuisine moves into the Western setting it is grouped and labelled —Indian food . Jasmine follows the opposite trajectory; her individuality is largely ignored in the Indian space, in the interest of grooming them for entry to the West. Upon her separation from her native collectives and arrival on American soil, she begins to define her individuality. The reason behind this inverse trajectory is that food, a passive object, may be labelled and summarised as suits a particular discourse. Jasmine on the other hand, is active and sentient being , though she may have been temporarily suppressed by her collectives, she has the potential – and indeed the obligation, if she is to successfully assimilate – to eventually seek out and claim her individual identity.

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