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Studying Culinary Practices in Jhumpa Lahiri's When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine through the Lens of Cultural Preservation

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Abstract :

This article explores how and why culinary practices bind together to recreate cultural identity and cultural preservation among the community with special reference to Jhumpa Lahiri's *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*. Several philosophical and sociocultural theories can shed light on how the culinary choices and the practices surrounding food play a crucial role in maintaining and preserving a culture. These choices serve as repositories of historical depth, values, and beliefs. The culinary traditions not only safeguard cultural identity but also foster unity, transmit cultural notions, and reflect the core values of a community. Embracing and perpetuating traditional culinary choices is crucial for the on-going preservation and celebration of Multicultural perspective for diasporas in particular. Jhumpa Lahiri's "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" has many sensory details about the various Indian dishes, conjuring the reader's own memories of taste and texture. The story allows the reader to deeply connect and empathize with the diasporic identity crisis of the characters portrayed in the story.

Keywords: culinary practices, cultural identity, cultural preservation, sociocultural theories

Somebody rightly observes that recognizing that food is more than sustenance—it is an expression of culture, heritage, and creativity. Food and culture are deeply intertwined. Across different societies, food plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural identity

and traditions. Recipes passed down through generations, distinct tastes and flavors, and the ways in which meals are prepared and shared all contribute to defining a culture's culinary heritage. With the increasing population of Diasporas all over the world, especially in European countries along with USA and Middle East, it is pragmatic to study culinary tradition through the lens of cultural preservation. Globalization has led to the fusion of various cuisines and the creation of new culinary traditions. Moreover, changed attitude, political awareness and multiculturalism within the host country persuaded the increasing number of emerging diaspora communities. The culinary practices within a culture can evolve over time due to various factors, including changes in societal values, globalization, and technological advancements. As societies and communities change, so do their food choices and culinary practices to reflect new lifestyles, tastes, and dietary needs. The emphasis on communal dining in some cultures reflects the importance placed on togetherness and social harmony (Sheffer, 1986).

It is very much conceivable that some food consumption habits and sense of identity exhibited by the member of a diaspora group is more ingrained in the group's culture and is therefore, less likely to change, regardless of the extent and duration of his/her contacts with the indigenous population. Levi-Strauss defined food practices "as a language, identifying the primary binary opposition, common to all cultures, between nature and culture" (cited



by Lupton, 1996: 9). Similarly, Douglas (1975) underlined the important role of food in social life in both western and non-western culture by describing it as part of rituals. At the personal level, food is able to identify the level of 'intimacy and distance' (Douglas 1975:256). By stating 'drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen... Meals are for family, close friends, honoured guests', Douglas (1975:256) justifies the role of food in creating and distinguishing social relationship. By analyzing meals across various people and class, she also mentioned about food's representations in social class system. Similarly, by arguing that 'eating is never a purely biological activity', Sidney Mintz (1996:7) underlines the role of food as a practice, which is 'conditioned by meaning' (Searles, 2002).

Certain philosophical and sociocultural theories can highlight the importance of the interdependence of culinary tradition and cultural preservation. These theories highlight how food is a powerful tool for the expression, preservation, and transmission of cultural identity providing valuable insights into the significant role that culinary practices play in maintaining a culture's unique heritage and identity.

Gastronomic Existentialism :

This theory posits that individuals express their unique identity and existential freedom through their food choices and culinary practices. By selecting certain foods and engaging in particular cooking techniques, people not only express their personal preferences but also and transmit cultural norms and values. It can lead to contemplation on the impact of food on one's identity and the potential existential crisis that can arise from the experience of unfamiliar or isolating foods.

Sociocultural Theories :

These theories suggest that food choices and culinary traditions are deeply intertwined with a community's history, lifestyle, values, and beliefs. Individuals within a culture often make culinary choices based on social and cultural influences,

thereby perpetuating traditional practices. Mealtime rituals, ingredients unique to a specific locale, and social status attributed to particular foods all contribute to the preservation of cultural traditions.

Symbolism of Identity and Social Relationships

Food serves as a symbol of cultural identity and fosters social belonging. The cooking techniques and mealtime rituals unique to a culture can act as powerful symbols of that culture's identity. Furthermore, food choices can contribute to the construction of social relationships and group membership, further reinforcing the connection between culinary practices and cultural identity.

Hofstede's seminal paper on "The Cultural Relativity of Organizational Practices and Theories", laid out one of the most influential models for understanding cultural influences on organizational behavior. His Cultural Dimension explains how India being collectivist society has diverse culinary choices reflecting a greater diversity in cultural values and traditions, contributing to cultural richness and complexity. In collectivist societies, the bond between people is much stronger, and society revolves around various in-groups. In these societies shared ideals and opinions are very strong and ideological change is very slow. The culinary traditions often foster a sense of belonging and solidarity within a community, as people come together to prepare, share, and savor traditional meals, strengthening social cohesion and cultural continuity.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies" contains various culinary references that enrich the stories with cultural and emotional resonance. The story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" exemplifies this by intertwining the characters' experiences with South Asian cuisine and the broader themes of longing, connection, and displacement. The protagonist, Lilia, reminisces about Mr. Pirzada, a family friend from Dacca, eating classic South Asian dishes with her family. Notably, the story also delves



into the impact of political upheaval on the characters' relationship with food. As the political situation in East Pakistan worsens, the culinary traditions serve as a poignant link to their homeland and loved ones left behind³. Moreover, the absence of food as experienced by Lilia's parents when they refuse to eat or cook during times of anguish symbolizes the breaking of cultural and interpersonal connections.

The backdrop of the story is the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, the main action consists of a series of dinners in suburban Boston. **Lilia**, the story's narrator, is looking back on her childhood as the daughter of Indian immigrants. The family's frequent dinner guest, **Mr. Pirzada**, on the other hand, hails from the city of Dacca in East Pakistan (what is now known as Bangladesh). Yet despite their differences in nationality, all of the characters bond over a shared cuisine: Lilia's **mother** delights Mr. Pirzada with a rotation of traditional South Asian dishes, and Mr. Pirzada never fails to give Lilia a delicious **candy**. Moreover, as the political situation abroad worsens—and as Mr. Pirzada begins to fear for the family he has left back in East Pakistan—South Asian food allows both Lilia and Mr. Pirzada to feel close to people and places on the other side of the world. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," therefore, the titular dining is not only a necessary routine but also an important source of cultural belonging and interpersonal connection.

The writer draws her readers' attention to how her parents' eating habits are similar to Mr. Pirzada's. All of them eat "pickled mangoes with their meals" and "rice every night with their hands." Then, all three of them "chew fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, dr[ink] no alcohol, and for dessert dip austere biscuits into successive cups of tea." To 10-year-old Lilia, this unity in eating habits suggests a deeper commonality than shared citizenship or religious belief—especially because, as she mentions earlier in the story, most other families in their small suburb have very different eating habits from her and her parents. Furthermore, Lilia and Mr. Pirzada's

bond begins with food: he gives her a fancy candy every night, and at first, this ritual is the only time Mr. Pirzada speaks directly to her. Here, food is even more useful than language in creating a connection—Lilia might not know what to say to this strange adult, but she is able to savor the edible gifts he gives her, suggesting an understanding that is based on taste instead of on talking.

Perhaps because food is such a sensory experience, it also allows Lilia and Mr. Pirzada to connect with India and East Pakistan, thousands of miles away. When Lilia's mother serves Mr. Pirzada a mincemeat kebab, his first thought is that "one can only hope [...] that Dacca's refugees are as heartily fed." The taste of home-kebab is a classic Bangladeshi dish—brings his mind instantly to Dacca, and to the wife and children he has left behind there. Similarly, while Lilia struggles to watch the carnage in Dacca on the TV news, Mr. Pirzada is "calmly creating a well in his rice to make room for a second helping of lentils."

Most tellingly, moments when connections are broken—either culturally or interpersonally—are associated with the *absence* of food. Often, Lilia's parents associate great moments of conflict with a refusal to eat or cook. Lilia's **father**, explaining **Partition** (1947 the division of British India into India and Pakistan) to her, says that it has left such deep wounds for Hindus and Muslims that many finding eating together "unthinkable" even decades later. Later, when India commits to joining the Bangladesh Liberation War, Lilia's mother refuses "to serve anything other than boiled eggs with rice." In each case, the absence of a family-style meal suggests a situation in which connection is impossible. Along the same lines, after Mr. Pirzada returns to Bangladesh, Lilia realizes she will never see him again, and she copes with her grief by throwing away the candy he gave her. She feels that there is "no need to" continue eating the candy if she will never again see the man who gave it to her. In no longer eating the candy, Lilia is resigning herself to the impossibility of continuing a relationship with



Mr. Pirzada—suggesting that even though they have been apart for months, being able to eat the sweets Mr. Pirzada gave her is what has kept their bond alive for Lilia.

Conclusion :

Lahiri masterfully employs food as a metaphor to portray the characters' feelings of home, displacement, and longing. Meals symbolize the characters' sense of belonging and distance from their roots, reflecting their yearning for connection and familiarity, bridging cultural gaps, and evoking a sense of community even in the midst of displacement. This thematic culinary motif highlights the universal role of food in human experience and emotional expression. The transmission of these traditions fosters a sense of community and historical continuity within these societies in diasporic context.

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