

Reminiscence of Indian Cuisine in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

The Indian cuisine includes a wide range of regional and traditional food items and it varies according to the soil type, climate, and culture. There are different Indian cuisines like, the South Indian cuisine which includes Kerala cuisine, Tamilnadu cuisine, Karnataka cuisine and Andhra cuisine; and the North Indian cuisine which includes Maharastrian cuisine, Bengali cuisine, Assamese cuisine, Kashmiri cuisine, Punjabi cuisine, Bihari cuisine and Odishi cuisine besides many others. The present study is concerned with the Bengali cuisine. Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* opens with a cooking scene in U.S. Ashima cooks Bengali food in her kitchen in U.S. Ashima writes to her mother in Calcutta from U.S. about the favourite dishes of her newly married husband. Rice, fish and desserts play a significant role in Bengali cuisine. Sweets and dairy products are essential accompaniments. The present paper concentrates on exploring the 'Bengali Cuisine' with the aid of Lahiri's *The Namesake*. As Ashima is shifted to U.S. by the virtue of her marriage, she creates an imaginary island in her mind and concentrates on cooking in her kitchen everyday, and this is considered as a thing of escapism and this may be due to xenophobia too. Bengali cuisine is a cooking style which originated in Bengal, the eastern part of India which is now divided between Bangladesh and West Bengal. Bengali cuisine is famous for its use of 'Panchphoron', a term used to refer to the five essential spices namely mustard, fenugreek seed, cumin seed, aniseed, and black cumin seed. The speciality of Bengali food lies in the perfect blend of sweet and spicy flavours. Culture provides the identity for an individual. Culture is a symbol of expression, which passes from one generation to other generation to identify the self with one nation. On the whole, Lahiri's cultural expression is expressed in the novel *The Namesake* all the way through her Bengali cuisine.

KEYWORDS: Reminiscence, Indian Cuisine, Culture, regional and traditional food

Bengali cuisine is a cooking style which originated in Bengal, the eastern part of India which is now divided between Bangladesh and West Bengal. Bengali cuisine is famous for its use of 'Panchphoron', a term used to refer to the five essential spices namely mustard, fenugreek seed, cumin seed, aniseed, and black cumin seed. The speciality of Bengali food lies in the perfect blend of sweet and spicy flavours. For Bengalis, rice and fish are two important food items in their day to day life. A typical Bengali needs to have fish for every meal. Even the Brahmins in Bengal relish fish whereas in other parts of the country Brahmins do not eat fish. Fish is a part of every festival celebration. The popular Bengali fishes are salmon, ilish, bhekti, magur, carp, rui, pabda and prawns. Their distinctive cooking of fish is that, it is deep fried in mustard oil and then cooked in gravy. Most of the cooking is done using mustard oil. Traditional Bengali meal always ends up with mishiti that is sweet yoghurt. The most famous Bengali sweet is rasogullahs. Bengalis mainly use milk products because dairy farming is one of their chief occupations. Mutton and chicken are common delicacies.

Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* opens with a cooking scene in US. Ashima cooks Bengali food in her kitchen in US. To quote from the text, AshimaGanguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chilli pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix. Ashima had been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. (NS 1)

In the same novel, Ashima writes to her mother in Calcutta from US about the favourite dishes of her newly married husband. In her words, Eight thousand miles away in Cambridge, she has come to know him. In the evenings she cooks for him, hoping to please, with the unrationed, remarkably unblemished sugar, flour, rice and salt she had written about to her mother in her very first letter home. By now she had learned that her husband likes his food in salty side, that his favorite thing about lamb curry is the potatoes, and that he likes to finish his dinner with a small final helping of rice and dal. (NS 10)

In the same novel, when Gogol invites his American girl friend Maxine to his house Ashima warmly welcomes her with a variety of Bengali food: Along with the Samosas there are breaded chicken cutlets, chickpeas with tamarind sauce, lamb biryani, chutney made with tomatoes from the garden. It is a meal he knows it has taken his mother over a day to prepare, and yet the amount of effort embarrasses him. (NS 148)

Maxine after eating the delicious hot spicy Bengali food asks Ashima, "... how she made this and that, telling her it's the best Indian food she's ever tasted" (NS 149). Further she accepts his mother's "... offer to pack them some extra cutlets and samosas for the road" (NS 149).

Lahiri also remembered the famous Bengali dessert 'rossogolla' in the same novel. While Ashima's family visits her homeland Calcutta during their vacation, they were given sweet spongy rasagollas. The welcoming moments of their relatives is described as: "Once inside, he and Sonia are given cups of Horlick's, plates of syrupy, spongy rossogollas for which they have no appetite but which they dutifully eat" (NS 82). The communal visit among Bengalis is a tradition, and Ashima follows this tradition in the US. During these visits in the US, they relive the Bengali life with nostalgia and enjoy Bengali food. To quote from the text *The Namesake*, Every weekend, it seems, there is a new home to go to, a new couple or young family to meet. They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends. Most of them live within walking distance of one another in Cambridge. The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that's sold in Chinatown, that it's possible to make halwa from Cream of Wheat. The families drop by one another's homes on Sunday afternoons. They drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans. For hours they argue about the politics of the CPIM versus the Congress party. (NS 38)

In the same novel, AshokeGanguli ordered for tuna fish in an Indian restaurant in US (NS 65). It is evident here that Bengalis cannot forget their liking for fish wherever they may be. For Gogol's fourteenth birthday Ashima prepared a list of Indian dishes as Gogol desires to have it on the occasion: "She makes sure to prepare his favorite things: lamb curry with lots of potatoes, luchis, thick channa dal with swollen brown raisins, pineapple chutney, sandisesmolded out of saffron-tinted ricotta

cheese” (NS 72). Here ricotta cheese is used instead of Bengali sweet yogurt, because it is difficult to get in US.

Rice, lentils and legumes play a significant role in Bengali cuisine. Vegetables and dairy products are essential accompaniments. Tamarind is the chief souring agent. Basmati is their chief variety of rice ingredient. Phirni, which is made out of Basmati rice is their favourite dessert. Thus it is known from the analysis that Ashima is shifted to U.S. by the virtue of her marriage, she creates an imaginary island in her mind and concentrates on cooking in her kitchen everyday, and this is considered as a thing of escapism and this may be due to xenophobia too. The island which is visible to Ashima alone is carried out from her U.S. kitchen. The speciality of Bengali food lies in the perfect blend of sweet and spicy flavours. Culture provides the identity for an individual. Culture is a symbol of expression, which passes from one generation to other generation to identify the self with one nation. On the whole, Lahiri’s cultural expression is expressed in the novel *The Namesake* all the way through her Bengali cuisine.

References

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