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Food for Identity: Imtiaz Dharker's "At the Lahore Karhai"

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Food is a culture act; a political statement. The way we understand and we relate to food, food practices, is always related to our identity, in the deepest manner. The danger that comes along with this approach is to understand the fundamental dimensions – identity, food, culture – on their ontological or essentialist dimension, shifting from identity to the identification with the good, the best, the ideal in culinary. Roland Barthes has looked at food as a domain fit for developing a humanistic approach, seen as a total social fact, including different metalanguages.

Food embodies a permanent dialectics between the attachments to our origins' model, with its emblematic, or totemic dishes, its recipes, its rituals and practices, and, the other way around, the need to ceaselessly explore, seeking new tastes, new savories, new recipes, or manners of doing and being. Food is caught in this dialectics of withdrawal, of return to the origins, to tradition, and at the same time, the opposite, of exploring, discovering, looking for the surprise, 'the search for the unexpected'. The relation to food and culture translates the tension that defines our identity construction between finding refuge in a frame, in order to retrieve our own being, and escaping from this frame and discovering oneself throughout new worlds of flavors and sensations. This oscillation is sustained by two identity dimensions which are at the heart of the relationship between food and culture: a narrative dimension and a figurative dimension.

On the narrative level, eating means living and meeting, being himself or herself and becoming another. Identity and alterity based on a constant relating to the other, from attraction to repulsion, with all the variations from good to bad taste, or even distaste. On the figurative level, food and culture take us through all the repertoires of social life: objects, places, situations, roles, practices and behaviors, involving all the sociological levels.

"At the Lahore Karhai" by Imtiaz Dharker can be read through the frame of intertwined relationship between food, culture and identity. Nostalgia and homesickness which torments the migrant speaker no longer hold her back as she has found a sense of home in the food she takes in the restaurant. She creates a space for herself in which questions of gender, religion or nationality no longer seem to matter. The culture she left can be remembered in a shared meal with friends if she feels in the mood for it but if she does not, there are other possibilities. The reading of the poem in a new trajectory of food politics hopes to bring out new vistas in the understanding of the relation of food practices with culture and identity.

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Introduction

Food is a cultural marker with the power to be viewed as a symbolic cultural artifact. Beyond the tribute of satisfying biological necessity, food plays a vital role in the mechanism of individual and cultural identity. Thus it can be surmised that food has a broader social purpose, other than its physical purpose. Food is a symbolic indicator to define ourselves in terms of religion, ethnicity, social class and so on. Though the impact of globalization has resulted in overlapping of cuisines and culinary, and has unsettled the static notion of food and identity, it is presumed that the individual's and community's identity are closely related to the food that he/ she shares with his/her family or community members. Fox suggests that "Food is almost always shared; people eat together; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together. Food is an occasion for sharing . . . for the expression of altruism" (1). Sharing of food, from the everyday meal to the ritualistic meal on special occasions, becomes a very powerful act inherently layered with meaning for cultures across the globe.

Everyday foods offer some insight into the cultural norms and tradition of the individual and about the community that he/she belongs to. Every culture can both shape and be shaped by the foods eaten and by the foods that are considered as staples in that cultural purview. Everyday foods are vital as a means to find an identity in a cultural group or as a means to struggle to fit in. On the other hand, rituals create a space in the communal realm where food becomes an interactive vehicle. The multiple individuals who are involved in the ritualistic meal puts in an effort to perform the ritual properly, playing a particular role in the ritualistic practice. This helps the individuals to define their identity within the community. Thus food can be seen as retaining its ability throughout one's lifetime to act as a mechanism of identity and establishing cultural, social spiritual and ethnic belonging.

Immigration is a painful process of displacement and reestablishment. The process would embark on the need to rely on some cultural artifacts as pieces of nostalgia that would soothe the migrants about their feeling towards their home country. Quite often it is the food that the migrants count on to retrieve and to hold tightly their culture and tradition in a new social and cultural scenario. As Barthes claims, food can be seen as a sign communicating something in addition to itself. It can act as a means of communication with the past, lost culture and nostalgic memories.

The paper is an attempt to study the cultural repercussions of migration in Imtiaz Dharker's "At the Lahore Karhai". It purports to probe into the question of cultural adaptation of the migrants through the vehicle of food. It is an endeavour to centralize food as a cultural marker in exploring and interpreting the varied meanings that we share across continents.

A writer of Pakistan origin, Imtiaz Dharker migrated to Glasgow with her family in her early childhood. She cannot be defined within a specific geographical boundary, but belongs to multi-local diaspora. Though her writings allude to the detachment to her homeland, her poetry is fraught with the themes of dislocation and disruptions caused by diasporic movements. She undergoes a conflict between her homeland and hostland which accentuates her inner divisiveness. Though she has tried throughout to distance herself from the nationalistic discourse, "home" always remains as an emotional space which ties her down. The third space which she inhabits is fraught with tensions and chaos that she has tenuous relations with the two nations, her homeland and hostland. She indulges in a dialogic relation with the two locations that she is tormented by the questions of her real identity. She revels in the new culture that she has adapted, yet craves at times for her lost culture and tradition.

Dharker's poetry describes the South Asian migrants' efforts to settle down in the new hostland. Yet, the pain of loss of the homeland is woven deeply into the fabric of her poetry that she repeatedly recreates her lost land in her writings. Her choice to remain as a transnational has forced her to stay away from the longings for home. But distancing herself from the geospace does not render her free from tensions. She portrays immense emotional trauma that permeates her

inner self at the thought of her homeland. The new hybrid identity that has been proffered by the process of acculturation does not smother her desire for the past culture and the lost land.

Dharker utilizes the images and objects that bring together memories of attachment and the absence of loved people in her poetry to bring home the theme of alienation and displacement.

Food becomes the predominant vehicle used by Dharker to relate her relation with the homeland. Through her poetry she depicts the cultural value of food as she believes that the unique cuisine of her homeland is a sign of her individual cultural heritage. "At the Lahore Karhai," "Campsie Fells" etc penned by Dharker stand as perfect examples of how the poet establishes and retrieves back her lost identity through the medium of food. She uses different items of food and dishes to depict the memories rekindled in the hearts of the diasporic people. The varied and unique items of the cuisine become a means for the dislocated to revive and to revisit their lost culture. The entangled associations with different food items help the poet to reconstruct the many emotions linked with them, thereby revamping the lost link with the homeland.

Analysis of the poem "At the Lahore Karhai" by Imtiaz Dharker would read it as a representation of the immigrant's nostalgia for home, explored through the metaphor of food. The title itself speaks volumes about the nostalgic longing of the migrant speaker for the dishes at "home" as the poet brings in a day at the Lahore karhai, a famous hot cuisine for a Pakistani. The visit to the Lahore Karhai at Great Britain on every Sundays is described as a pilgrimage sanctifying her gesture to be in touch with the roots. The ethnic identity is reestablished by referring to her religious identity as well: "No beer, we're Muslim." This differentiation of the religious identities based on the food and the drink underlines the correlation of food with personal and collective identities.

The trope of food is continued in the poem to connect the mental space of the speaker with the geographical space. The ambience of the restaurant reminds her of the dhabas that ornate the Grand Trunk Road which connects Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. The term 'Dhaba' itself is a cultural signifier as it represents the linguistic domain of the Northern India and Pakistan. Dhabas are the solace of the truck drivers travelling this road tired and hungry away from their homes. The dhabas ensure the taste of their mothers' hand in cooking which is well sought after by those who are distanced from their homes. The speaker who eats at the Lahore Karhai gets the same consoling and warm taste of her mother's cooking which she relishes with rapture.

The group with whom the speaker is sharing the food is heterogenous, yet majority of them represent the South Asian landscape though belonging to different religious sects. This heterogeneity proclaims of the inclusive nature of the South Asian cultural panorama. The unified culture of her homeland is being reawakened in the poem. At the table all of them enjoy the morning sun and the old Hindi song which again speaks of their cultural bonding.

The focus on each food item on the restaurant table shifts the readers' attention to interconnected memories of the food and the familial ties. The poet, Dharker deliberately uses food as an implicit and extended metaphor for her cultural roots. By relating each of the food items with her relatives at homeland, the poet ties cuisine with people and their identities.

A feast! We swoon on a whole family of dishes.

The tarka daal is Auntie Hameeda

the Karhai ghosht is Khala Ameena

the gajjar halwa is Appa Rasheeda.

The warm naan is you.

Dharker uses metaphors of food no less than five times within this stanza. The dishes awaken memories about her aunts who would have cooked the same dishes for her at her home. Dharker remembers food as an expression of love,

reinforcing interpersonal relations. Though settled in Britain, she is reminded regularly of the deep family ties in the Indian subcontinent and misses those emotional knots with almost every member of her extended family – cousins, uncles and aunts. Hence, the speaker poet evokes the distinct cultural practice of her homeland by juxtaposing the fond remembrance of relatives with warm and savoury dishes. As the poet writes:

These
are ways of remembering.

The poet powerfully depicts that food is a medium to stay connected to home. Moreover, it also helps in forging relationships in the present. The poet identifies that she is not the only one who enjoys the meal at Karhai, but the whole group at the table in the restaurant are 'bound together' by the food they eat and that they share a common culinary legacy. The power of connectedness is presented through the metaphor of food.

The last lines of the poem have a dubiousness. Though the poet was relishing on the fond memories of the unique cuisine of Lahore, she jumps to a widely variant Chinese culinary in the final words.

Other days we may prefer
Chinese.

The overriding nostalgic mood of the poem is reverted to the present realm. The sentimental thoughts about the taste of home-cooked food are juxtaposed with the immigrants' adaptation with the taste and culinary habits of her new homeland. The acculturation process has transformed the identity of the immigrant so positively that the transition to the new ambience is not difficult for her. There is no sense of conflict with the host society and the poet declares no resistance in the adoption of other, foreign cultures existing in the host country. Effortlessly do they enjoy the transition from one cultural ethos to another. Dharker brilliantly merges nostalgia with assimilation. The multiculturalism that the immigrants are attuned to is being pictured subtly through the metaphor of food. Thus Dharker's poetry explores the arena of food as the cultural markers of identity.

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