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### **Cultural Translation and Representation of Food: Revisiting Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Mrs. Sen's' and 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine'**

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**Abstract:** Since the 1980s, postmodern thoughts have been replacing the conventional ideas of purity, homogeneity, home/belongingness, 'certainties of roots' and older totalising (grand) narratives with the idea of non-centre, recognition of heterogeneous identity, 'contingency of routes' and hybridity; resulting in creating new possibilities, new knowledge and discourses. Diasporic literature always forges a cultural contact zone where 'people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations' (Pratt, 2008). Diasporic literature can be regarded as a practice of cultural translation based on the process of transaction, integration, assimilation, transformation and negotiation. The intermediate position that both the migrants and their children are deemed to occupy – living 'in-between' different nations, feeling neither here nor there, unable to indulge in the sentiments of belonging to either place. Therefore, migrancy can expose to them displacement, fragmentary world view and discontinuity. Religion, food, language, dress, music, dance, custom, myths and legends are the identity markers of linkages and divisions within the diaspora. Food, used as an exotica of homeland, functions as an alternative to dominant culture and thereby constructs a unique racialized ethnic subjectivity. Diasporic writers deploy food as a metaphor in most of their writings as a symbol of self-assertion, simultaneously connecting and disconnecting the cross-cultural cord. Food indeed opens up a critical space of subconscious resistance to the threat of cultural annihilation within the new world. The South Asian diaspora manages to create distinct identities and ways of life wherever it has settled. This paper seeks to explore cultural translation in two short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri—"Mrs. Sen's" and "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" with a special focus on the representation of food. My study will also try to examine how the collision and coexistence of two disparate cultural realities can influence each other and have the potential to create a new identity in a new context.

**Key Words:** *cultural translation, 'diaspora space', 'third space', food metaphor.*

Since the 1980s, postmodern thoughts have replaced the conventional ideas of purity, homogeneity, home/belongingness, 'certainties of roots'<sup>1</sup> and older totalising (grand) narratives with the idea of non-centre, recognition of heterogeneous identity, 'contingency of routes'<sup>2</sup> and hybridity; resulting in creating new possibilities, new knowledge and discourses. Diasporic literature always forges a cultural contact zone where 'people geographically and

historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations' (Pratt, 2008). Diasporic literature can be regarded as a practice of cultural translation based on the process of transaction, integration, assimilation, transformation and negotiation. There are different kinds of immigrants. But what is common is the hyphenated identity—hyphen between the land of origin and the land of settlement, between source culture and target culture, between 'lived past existence' and 'felt present experience'. They often wander between two un-reconciled worlds and remain stranger to both. Diasporic literature mainly focuses on the experience of this hyphenated existence. From this point, concepts like 'diasporic consciousness' arise in Diasporic discourses. It is the awareness of multi-locality that stimulates the need to conceptually connect oneself with others, both here and there. While 'diasporic consciousness' provides ethnic identity, a sense of selfhood, it also estranges them from the host culture. The displacement provides Diasporic writing its unique quality of loss and nostalgia. The intermediate position that both the migrants and their children are deemed to occupy – living 'in-between' different nations, feeling neither here nor there, unable to indulge in the sentiments of belonging to either place. Therefore, migrancy can expose to them displacement, fragmentary world view and discontinuity. Religion, food, language, dress, music, dance, customs, myths and legends are the identity markers of linkages and divisions within the diaspora. Food, used as an exotica of homeland, functions as an alternative to dominant culture; and thereby constructs a unique racialized ethnic subjectivity. Diasporic writers deploy food as a metaphor in most of their writings as a symbol of self-assertion, simultaneously connecting and disconnecting the cross-cultural cord. Food indeed opens up a critical space of subconscious resistance to the threat of cultural annihilation within the new world. The South Asian diaspora manages to create distinct identities and ways of life wherever it has settled. This paper seeks to explore cultural translation in two short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri—"Mrs. Sen's" and "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" with a special focus on the representation of food. My study will also try to examine how the collision and coexistence of two disparate cultural realities can influence each other and have the potential to create a new identity in a new context.

"Translation is a kind of activity that inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions" (Toury, 1980). Translators always encounter the problem of treating the cultural aspects of a source language or a source text in finding the most appropriate technique of addressing these aspects in a target language. The "cultural turn"<sup>3</sup> in translation studies over the last decades of the twentieth century has problematized the literal translation

of a text from one language to another. The phenomenon of texts moving across one language–culture to another may be loosely considered as cultural translation in Translation Studies. The cultural gloss makes the process of translation into a “a transaction not between two languages, or somewhat a mechanical sounding act of linguistic ‘substitution’, but rather a more complex negotiation between two cultures.” (Trivedi, 3). But Homi Bhabha interprets cultural translation in a different way in his book *Location of Culture* (1994). He expounds the term translation not as a transaction between texts and languages but in the sense of being carried across from one place to another. In short, for Bhabha, cultural translation focuses on a heterogeneous discourse caused by migration or displacement. He also emphasizes the idea that “all form of culture are continuously in the process of hybridity” and translation is a cultural non-linear process of negotiation that occurs in what he calls a ‘third space’—a place of confluence where conflicts are acted out and margins of collaborations explored (Wolf, 13). The dominant models of fixed identity and belonging cannot encompass the migrants, those who live ‘in between’. Now a transnational identity is emerging that can challenge the ‘certainty of roots’ with the ‘contingency of routes’. Bhabha also argues for the valuable productive nature of this cultural encounter in his book and asserts that the confrontation of the two cultures of the homeland and the host land can produce a hybrid identity that constantly deconstructs and reconstructs itself. This creation of a new transcultural form within the contact zone becomes an empowering condition as it allows the diasporic subject to question, challenge, contest and subvert the normalized boundaries. Hybrid identity is formed in what Bhabha calls the ‘third space’ of enunciation or the liminal space between the dominant and the marginalized cultures of the diasporic minority. Talking about ‘diaspora space’ Bhabha explains that it is highly conducive to forming counter-narratives. On the other hand, Avtar Brah in his *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996) differentiates the concept of ‘diaspora space’ from that of ‘diaspora’. The author points out that ‘diaspora space’<sup>4</sup> is inhabited not only by diasporic subjects; but equally by those who are constructed and represented as natives.

The South Asian American writer Jhumpa Lahiri was born of Bengali parents in London and brought up in America. Her family moved to the United States when she was only two. She grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island. Her family often visited the relatives of Calcutta because her mother wanted her children to grow up being well acquainted with Bengali heritage. Lahiri’s fictional characters constantly translate the relationship between their homeland and diasporic cultures to create a meaningful space of their own. Drawing

upon the theoretical notions of Bhabha and Avtar Brah, my present study explores two short stories from *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) to describe how the liminal situation has the potential to become a site of conflict and also to embrace the diversities of culture in the third place.

*Mrs. Sen's* relates the story of a thirty-year-old Indian Bengali housewife who moves from Calcutta to the United States as her husband has been offered a position as a university professor in the States. As a subject of involuntary displacement she soon begins to experience a sense of loss and alienation. Frustrated and bored, she decides to babysit an eleven year old American boy named Eliot. The notion of cultural difference, cross cultural communication, translation, transition and individual transformation are presented through the interactions between the two characters and the comparison Eliot makes between his mother and Mrs Sen. Lahiri presents her tale through the eyes of the native boy Eliot whose gaze she cleverly deploys as a trope for narrating the story. As the story unfurls, we can find that Mrs. Sen's identity is reduced to merely the wife of Mr. Sen when she places the advertisement, "Professor's wife, responsible and kind, I will care for your child in my home" (MS,111). She is bereft of any name; she is unnamed by the author. It is significant to note that even to find an occupation she has to depend on her identity as a professor's wife.

Throughout the story, the concept of home has a significant meaning as it is strongly attached to Mrs. Sen's sense of identity, nationhood and belonging. She constantly adheres to the tradition and values of her homeland culture. She has learnt to totalize her identity with the ideal image of womanhood. Her desire to fulfil this role as a perfect Indian woman hides her trauma of being an outcast or other. Her constant struggle to combat un-belongingness, alienation is at par with what Bhabha calls the distressing quality of living in-between spaces. She dwells in the boundaries of old and new social realities, between past lived experiences and present living expectations. She also feels that the possibilities of assimilation will pose a threat to her traditional cultural reality, so she ensures to state her peculiarities by wearing a 'shimmering white sari pattered with orange paisleys' (Lahiri, 112). She plunges into constructing a typical Bengali space within the confines of her home even in the host land. The space serves to soothe her anxiety up to a certain extent by reassuring and re-affirming her identity as a Bengali in a territory where there is a huge risk of being trampled down. Lahiri cares to describe minutely the Sen household where the wife covers the television and telephone set with 'pieces of yellow fabric', and to the immense astonishment of the native boy Eliot, uses a book -case as a shoe rack. In this way, Lahiri foregrounds the two

conspicuously different cultures, that of the Sen's and the dominant culture of the host land. In the sense of attire, Eliot's mother's revealing clothes "looked odd" to her son himself in comparison to that of Mrs. Sen who is all covered up in a sari and her room "where all things were so carefully covered" (MS, 113). We find a perfect juxtaposition of the covering and uncovering motifs. Eliot also notices the ethnic and cultural disparities of Mrs. Sen in many ways, who is perceived as a foreigner by Eliot.

To Eliot, Mrs Sen retains a sort of femininity, a domestic quality that his mother lacks. Eliot himself describes "Mrs. Sen's apartment was warm, sometimes too warm; the radiators continuously hissed like a pressure cooker" (114). In comparison to it, their tiny beach house started becoming cold by September. Warmth of love, emotion, womanhood and the affectionate nature of Mrs. Sen are pitted against the matter- of- factness which marks the character of Eliot's mother.

The identity of the Sens as Bengali is further reinforced through their food-habit. Mrs. Sen prepares elaborate meals involving highly strenuous and structured culinary skills as opposed to Eliot's mother's monotonous bread and cheese dinner. In Lahiri's text we can see the role of food used as a formation of cultural identities in Bengali diasporas. This story is no exception to it. Mrs. Sen is very much possessive about her culinary role as it allows her to connect with her past, her homeland and provides her the only chance to assert her agency/identity. The central food image is the fish which Mrs. Sen loves to buy, chop, cook and serve. She perceives food items as an emblem of home. She attempts to become a global citizen by maintain her Indian identity and at the same time she adapts to American culture. She also struggles to maintain her traditional role of the wife to Mr. Sen through her careful attention in preparing Indian cuisine collected from a seaside fishmonger; the fish is prepared with a special blade from India. This blade reminds her of the community of women she has left behind: "Whenever there is a wedding in the family...my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighbourhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in enormous circle on the rood of our building, laughing and gossiping" (115) .The preparation of food is an integral part of communal life and celebrations in a Bengali society which she misses badly in the foreign land. Contrarily, Eliot and his mother are neither invited in the Labour Day Party of their neighbours, nor are they seen laughing and drinking with them. In the United States she is at times assaulted by a cacophony of voices and street noises and at other times by an unbearable silence that keeps her awake all night. She loses the sense of belonging, her sense of shared human experience. She loses her own uniqueness

as she must make traditional meal without green bananas, an essential ingredient, thereby failing to fulfil her role she finds most satisfying. This ambivalent space helps to produce the similarities beneath the cultural differences and to subvert the exoticism of cultural diversities.

It is Eliot who can reject the otherness of Mrs. Sen and can go beyond the appearance of cultural diversity as he discovers a common sense of alienation, loneliness, miscommunication in the people around him. While cultural, racial, gender stereotypes are fixed for the adults in the story, Eliot becomes a trustworthy narrator who observes the exiting non-stereotypical elements in human relationship and reinforces the illusion of cultural differences and the reality of sameness. Despite the differences in appearance, food habits, dress and demeanour Eliot never feels distanced from Mrs. Sen. Cox rightly identifies that the children in *Interpreter of Maladies* perform the act of translating or interpreting between cultures, serving as a focal point or catalyst for intercultural contacts. That American child shows much openness, insight and mature understanding as opposed to his mother in accepting the food offered by Mrs. Sen. Again, it is in the company of Eliot that Mrs. Sen sometimes enjoys ‘clam cakes’ and ‘soda’ on their way to Mrs. Sen’s apartment from the fish market. This could be a brief attempt at integrating with American culture through her venturing of foreign food together with Eliot.

In her other short story *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, Lahiri again concentrates on the politics of food which serves as a microcosm of homeland, of family bond, community and culture. The story is about Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani Bengali scholar, who has left his family to continue his academic study in America. The story is etched against the backdrop of the Bangladesh freedom struggle of 1971 and is narrated through the eyes of Lilia, a ten year old daughter of an Indian family whom Mr. Pirzada had befriended while in America. The Indian family invites him to their house every night to watch the Indian national news about the ongoing war. The central food imagery in the story is obviously candy because through the lack of candy Lilia can understand the solemnity of a particular socio-political crisis. When the twelve days of war were going on, as Lilia remembers, Mr. Pirzada stopped bringing candies which he brought almost every day for her, and her mother only cooked boiled eggs with rice unlike the other days’ sumptuous meal with fish, a Bengali’s staple food item. At the outset Lilia is unable to point out any apparent difference between her father and Mr. Pirzada, as they speak the same language, have the same food habit and culture. To make her understand it, her father resorts to the map to teach her national borders, their fixed

historical and geographical events and the difference between the two cartographically separated identities, to explain the animosity between the two warring religious groups , Hindus and Muslims in the pretext of partition.

On her part, Lilia is a second-generation diasporic individual who is born and brought up in America, who goes to an American school, has native friends, is imbibing more the culture and customs of the host land than those of her country of origin. It is her father who wants to ensure that his daughter should know her own indigenous culture, customs, rituals, history and geography. It is through the critical eye of Lilia that Lahiri presents the chauvinism of American national discourses into which Lilia is being induced at school where there is no mention in her history book of any revolution or independence struggle in the other parts of the world except for the American Revolution. She can understand the radical difference in the reality of home where she learns to identify with the victims of the massacre during the partition of Pakistan, and outside it. So Lilia is created as a character who can critique and destabilize the universal monologic history, who is more sensitive, emotive and humane, who finds no reason behind religious intolerance, who can easily enjoy friendship with her American schoolmates and participates in the Halloween, who can replace the reality of the map only with tolerance transcending both religious and socio-cultural diversity. Therefore, Lilia continuously evolves in the process of translation in her coming to age story. It is through Lilia that Lahiri applies new translation to the concept of border and reveal its arbitrariness and fluidity. Lilia's family welcomes cultural differences and creates a new space for themselves to benefit from new opportunities and possibilities.

So, this paper explores the cross cultural communication and translation in Lahiri's works to suggest that diasporic condition is a constant process of negotiating, exchanging and translating cultures. While Mrs. Sen fails to assimilate into the host culture, Lilia and her family accept the dynamics and challenges of diasporic life. Cultural translation is essential for human relationships at different places, times and conditions. It germinates the notion of hybridity that can embrace cultural diversities. Through food imagery, we can also realize the multiple nuances of the outsider's perception of the insider and vice versa. Food imagery is central to both connecting and disconnecting cross-cultural ties. The two child characters, Eliot and Lilia venture to view beyond the borders of their accustomed food and in this process their growing understanding and compassion for the other can have the potential to defy the underlying static notion of identity.

## Notes

1. Conventional ideas of home or belonging depend upon a clearly defined, static notion of being in a particular place, firmly rooted in a community, homogenised group or a particular geographical location.
2. McLeod in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000) explains that the dominant models of identity cannot accommodate those who live “in-between”. Now a transnational model of identity is emerging that, in Paul Gilroy’s terms, can challenge the certainty of roots with the contingency of routes. Whether root stands for the place of origin, community of belonging, route is all about travel and transition.
3. ‘Cultural turn’ is a step forward in the development of translation studies. For advocating cultural approach in translation studies Susan Bassnett and Andre` Lefevere in their book *Translation, History and Culture* (1990) put emphasis on encompassing cultural factors and extra literary factors such as sociology, psychology etc. within the translation.
4. Avtar Brah expounds ‘diaspora space’ as a location where concepts of diaspora, border, and the politics of location are made immanent—that is, where they are played out along multiple axes of power.

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