

**Recognition and Identity through Culinary Art: Hassan Haji's
raison d'être in Richard C. Morais' *The Hundred-Foot Journey***

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Contemporary literature has dealt with the theme of food. Food is the representation of one's psyche, culture, identity and individuality. Eating is a biological process which is the most important factor for survival. Francis Bacon states in his famous essay *Of Studies* "Some books are to be tasted, others are to be swallowed, some few to be chewed and digested" (Bacon and Whitely 422). *The Hundred-Foot Journey* is a famous novel by American writer Richard C. Morais. This novel belongs to the genre, bildungsroman which means 'novel of education' and 'novel of formation'. It focuses on the protagonist's psychological development and identity. Morais narrates the life journey of a young Indian boy Hassan Haji and his incredible growth as a star. Hassan Haji, the protagonist, begins his life as a boy who belongs to a poor family in the slum area in Mumbai and later, he becomes a famous chef in Paris.

In *The Hundred-Foot Journey*, Hassan Haji's family runs a restaurant in Napean Sea Road in Mumbai. People who belong to Haji community are specialised in cooking like how Halwais are specialised in sweet-making. Hassan's grandfather is a dabba-wallah and sells snacks on bicycle. Selling snacks is the main source of survival for Hassan's grandfather. "They sold sweets made of nuts and honey, milky tea, but mostly they sold bhelpuri, a newspaper cone of puffed rice, chutney, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, mint, and coriander, all mixed together and slathered with spices" (HFJ 5). He had great culinary skill and knew every nook and corner of Indian cuisine.

Childhood skills and beliefs play a vital role in the formation of an individual's identity. People have some innate qualities through their forefathers than acquisition. Likewise, Hassan Haji has inherited culinary skills from his ancestors. He states that his interest for culinary art started from his birth. "I suspect my destiny was written from the very start, for my first sensation of life was the smell of machli ka salan, a spicy fish curry, rising through the floorboards to the cot in my parents' room above the restaurant" (HFJ 1).

In the earlier stage of Hassan's life, his family moves to London where they want to get a better life. Hassan's father searches for a suitable place for his restaurant but in London Hassan feels lonely and he terribly misses his mom who died due to the local communal riot in Mumbai. He searches and questions himself for creating his own identity. "I wanted to blurt out, Yes, help me. Help me find my Mummy. Help me find myself" (HFJ 44).

He was ready to work as a sales-boy in a jalebi shop where his minds feels soul satisfaction. He feels joy through the sounds of simmering oil and his own voice during selling. He tries to find his identity through his job. According to Erik Erikson, personality development is the most important factor for acquiring an identity. Quest for identity is considered to be a major focus in the adolescence period. “The person becomes aware of individual inherent characteristics, such as likes and dislikes, anticipated goals of the future, and the strength and purpose to control one’s own destiny” (Campbell et al. 201).

Hassan’s father Abbas Haji finds that Hassan is the best cook like his grandfather and selects a better place for his restaurant in Lumiere. He names it Maison Mumbai in front of the famous French inn Le Saule Pleureur. Hassan was skilled in cooking non- vegetarian foods especially fish curry and chicken. Cooking and eating non-vegetarian food do not appear strange to Hassan Haji because eating non- vegetarian is widely practiced among Haji community.

Madame Gertrude Mallory is a chef’s chef. Her restaurant Le Saule Pleureur had won two Michelin stars. She comes to know that Hassan has an excellent skill in culinary art. “Talent that cannot be learned. That skinny Indian teenager has that mysterious something that comes along in a chef once a generation. Don’t you understand? He is one of those rare chefs who is simply born. He is an artist. A great artist” (HFJ 93). She offers Hassan the post of chef in Le Saule Pleureur. She tells her opinion to Hassan’s father that, “This is a chance for your son to become a truly great French chef, a man of taste, a proper artist, not just some curry cook working in an Indian bistro” (HFJ 126). Madame Mallory’s offer brought a huge change in Hassan’s life. His decision directed him to earn his identity.

Hassan was ready to accept Madame Mallory’s offer but at the same time he feels for leaving his restaurant Maison Mumbai and his family members and his spices, kitchen and everything related to it. He expresses his complexity. He was ready to come out of his comfort zone to reach his goal and get his identity. “I crossed the street. A lot of emotion went into that hundred-foot journey, cardboard suitcase in hand, from one side of Lumière’s boulevard to the other” (HFJ 133).

In Le Saule Pleureur, Hassan learns the intricacies of French Cuisine. He follows the proverb When in Rome, do as the Romans do. He is completely moulding himself to become a great chef. His experiences enrich his culinary skill. After his apprenticeship in Le Saule Pleureur, Hassan moves to La Belle Cluny, a Michelin star restaurant. His arrival elevates and gives one more Michelin star to that restaurant. He wins two Michelin star and is ready to start his own restaurant Le Chien Mechant. He prepares food with the touch of French and Indian cuisine. His fusion gives recognition to him. He is a French chef, but his dishes have a touch of Indian cuisine.

That means no cleverness, no fireworks, no fads. Our mission, from now on, is to make a simple boiled carrot or a clear fish broth sing. Our mission is to reduce every ingredient down to its simplest, deepest nature. We will draw on the old recipes for inspiration, yes, but we will renew them by stripping them back to their core, removing

all the period embellishments and convolutions that have been added to them over time.
(HFJ 204)

Hassan's expertise in cooking fetches him another Michelin star. "The third star! Michelin has just given you the third star!" (HFJ 227). He is the first Indian to have won three Michelin star in France. "You are the first immigrant ever to win the third star in France. It quite an honor" (HFJ 229). He killed those who criticised and humiliated him with huge success. Hassan strongly believes his mother's words. "Never be afraid of trying something new, Hassan. Very important. It is the spice of life" (HFJ 24).

In the post-modern era, hybridity is inevitable. It refers to the cross breeding of two different things. Adaptability and fusion are the key concepts of hybridisation. It applies to music, fashion, culture and cuisine. Hybridity plays a vital role in the modern world. Hassan adapted the French cuisine and fused it with Indian cuisine. His adaptability and passion made him a renowned chef in Paris. He gets recognition and identity through culinary art which makes him a super chef star.

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