

**Dynamics of Cultural Cuisine and Rituals of Eating: Explorations of
the Jewish Identity in Israel Through Amos Oz's
*A Tale Of Love And Darkness and Judas***

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Societies are defined in the way they represent its people and culture. The very existence of a society demands its association with a specific group of populaces, which would exhibit a collective behaviour to be distinct or distinguished from other groups. The possibility of any societal subsistence is unattainable without the interaction between its people and their collective behaviour which is also dignified as “culture”. Culture is evolved and modified through centuries to ease human functioning. Man has the privilege to make variations in his collective behaviour so that the possibilities for his progress are expanded. Thus, culture cannot be considered as a static phenomenon which would remain as the foundation for communal existence, without attempting any changes for a better need. Culture or the collective communal behaviour in this context, thus represent the driving force which is undeniably flexible and offers affinity towards progress. It significant to acknowledge the fluid nature of culture to understand that this changeability helps individuals to acquire better skills and knowledge, beyond the geographical and socio-psychological restrictions. So, culture represent the manifestation the ideas, the tradition, the custom and the social behaviour of a specific group of people.

Since the emergence of research in sociology, researchers have been keen in analysing the distinctiveness of each culture in particular. They have realized the need to make such attempts so that intellectual reflections and contemplations can be made on the process of cultural transformation around the globe. Culture, as a whole consists of several elements that would define its indiginity to glorify and to celebrate the distinctiveness of a society in particular. Every society will have its own characteristics which can only be understood and interpreted by keen observance and appreciation. Man has the tendency to disregard anything beyond his territory, of doing which he will forfeit in the task of analysing the hybridity of human nature. Thus, studies on cultural characteristics and their developments need to be initiated to provide an extensive consciousness of collective human behaviour in specific groups.

Middle East is one such geographical area where the amalgamation of different cultures can be observed but unquestionably in conflict with each other. The dominant ethnic groups have their ways to emphasis on their pre-eminence and the minorities are often marginalized from the mainstream. The socio-cultural implications of Middle East have emphasised on the need to be distinguished from one another in their language, attire, food habits, religion and customs. The ever ending dispute among the Middle Eastern countries point at the fact that societies will constantly attempt to prove their superiority and the elements which make these distinctions represent the individuality of each society which should be recognized, appreciated and celebrated. Middle East's geographical reality submits to a region that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to Afghanistan in the east. It encompasses four different culture areas; Arab, Turkish, Iranian and the newly emerged Israeli culture. Except the Israeli culture which was evolved after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, all other areas share the same ethnic identity with minute variations. Thus, Israel demands attention and further deliberations to explore on its dual identity and customs.

Israel is a plural society consisting of Jews and Arabs, two dominant claimants to the same land. Jews practice Judaism and the Arabs are Muslims practicing Islam. Both the groups fight for their domination in the land, though the global politics has announced the state as the permanent homeland for the Jews. The birth of Israel as a state has emerged from the Jewish persecutions and the holocaust that had attempted at extreme eradication of Jewish race. They were tortured, mercilessly murdered and driven out of wherever they had gone. Jews were scorned for their ethnic identity. Judaism was ridiculed for its orthodox customs and indignity, but it was in actual, the fear over Jewish intellectuality which is capable of ruling the world itself. They were made to wander in search of peace and settlement but were not welcomed in any country. Finally, with the rise of World Zionist Organisation in Russia, a recreation of conventional Zionist ideology, the Russian Jews initiated the global need for establishing a land for Jews who are still persecuted and unsettled. Israel, as a state was established following several disputes but finally offered a permanent national home for the Jews and also shared the land with the Arab minority.

Judaism is not just a religious practice; it involves the essence of being a Jew. Jews belong to a conventional ethnic group where they follow stringent laws and religious practices. Though Israel has created a liberal atmosphere for the Jews, they are observant of preserving their individuality by performing their unique religious and cultural rituals. It became their need to emphasis on their Jewishness as an answer to all the struggles they have faced all these years. Jewish food habits or their cultural cuisine and the rituals of eating are distinguished features of Judaism. They make sure that their laws of appetite are followed throughout generations to nurture and celebrate their Jewishness. Jews follow a law dealing with the food habits named

“Kashrut”. It encompasses the list of foods that can be and cannot be consumed by the Jews and the laws regarding how the food should be prepared and how it should be eaten. Kashrut is actually a set of biblical dietary restrictions concerning the eating rituals of the Jews. People often fall into misconceptions that the Rabbis or the priests “bless” the food to make it “kosher” which describes that the food meet the standards. But in reality Jewish food can be “kosher” without any religious interventions.

General Rules of “Kashrut” or the Cultural Cuisine of Jews

- Restriction includes the flesh, eggs, milk and any other organs of the forbidden animals which should not be eaten at all.
- The birds and mammals that may be eaten must be killed according to the Jewish law.
- Certain organs of the permitted animals are forbidden from consuming.
- Blood must be sapped or broiled out from the meat before it is eaten.
- Bugs are not “Kosher” thus they should be inspected and removed from the fruits and vegetables.
- Meat and dairy should not be consumed together.
- Cooking surfaces and utensils which are used for meat should not used for dairy.
- Grape products made by non-Jews should not be eaten.
- A Jew who is required to follow “kosher” should be involved in the preparation of food.

Rituals of Eating in Judaism

Judaism follows certain laws pertaining to the way food should be consumed or the rituals of eating in particular. The major component of Jewish eating is “ablution” or the ritual washing. It takes two forms in general. There rituals of hand washing are found in the Hebrew bible but are followed within the Orthodox Judaism. Conservative Judaism practices these rituals with certain exceptions whereas Reform Judaism does not practice ritual washing. The two components of “ablution” or the ritual washing are “tevilah” which is the entire body immersion in “mikveh” (a bathing pool for purifying body)” and a “netilat yadayim” which involves washing of the hands with a two-handled cup called “netal”.

“Netilat Yadayim” observes several kinds of hand washing. Jews are supposed to wash their hands when they wake from their sleep, three times, sporadically over each hand. This washing cleanses them from the evil spirits from their fingers. They are supposed to wash their hands before cutting bread for one’s supper and that bread should be made from one of the five principal grains according to Judaism, wheat, spelt, oats, wild barley and cultivated barley. Washing of hands are mandatory at a dining table where the salt of Sodom is served. Prior to eating Jews are supposed to practice this ritual of “netilat yadayim” when one dips a morsel of

food within a liquid which later clings to the morsel. Fruits do not require washing of hands in Judaism. Though these practices might sound strict, Jews hold them as the factors of their ethnic pride. Following the rituals and cultural cuisine help them represent Judaism globally. They are persistent about differentiating Jewish cultural sovereignty through following their conventional approaches towards the ways of leading a Jewish life.

Personally, I do not believe in world reform. No I do not believe in any kind of world reform. Not because I consider that the world is perfect as it is- certainly not, the world is crooked and grim and full of suffering- but whoever comes along to reform it sinks in rivers of blood. Now let's drink a glass of tea and leave aside these obscenities you've bought me today. If only all religions and all revolutions vanished from the face of the earth someday, I tell you-all of them, without exception-there would be far fewer wars in the world. (*Judas* 68)

The two novels, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and *Judas* written by Amos Oz, the prominent Israeli writer deliberate on the struggles of Jews in identifying their national and personal identities in the newly established state of Israel. Though the novel discusses the issues of Jewish persecution, trauma, Zionism, identity crisis in Israel and the conflict between Jews and Arabs, the author does give instances where the reader can actually feel the desperate attempts of the Jews to uphold their ethnic pride through various forms. Author portrays Mrs. Fania, the female protagonist of the novel *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, preparing the food for her family in accordance with the Jewish law though they are not provided with enough rations at the time of dispute. The family even initiates a garden where they were supposed to grow fruits and vegetables free of impurities and "bugs". For them, the celebration of Jewishness was more significant than opting for comfort and the influence of modernization. On the other hand, in *Judas*, the rituals of eating define the life routine of the characters. Though they are caught in between the trauma of the past and the uncertainty of the future, Oz's characters identify their private and indigenous cuisine and eating rituals to celebrate Jewishness in their personal spaces.

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