

The Denial of Food and the so called Cultural Norm in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Food and literature bring pleasure to all human beings. Food is considered one of the greatest innovations of mankind. One cannot survive without food. Food is also a part of the culture. The taste of food is different in different cultures. Culture is identified on the basis of food too. Food is one of the essential parts of life. The nutritive content in food gives strength to all lives. But on the contrast, people are forced to adopt a culture in terms of food.

Indian society is different from all others. The food and culture of India bring out a unique place worldwide. Indian flavors are all much unique and Bengal food is one among them. Naturally cooking in the Indian culture is based much on women. Household chores, especially cooking food is especially associated much with women. Women consider cooking as one of the pleasures because she fills the hunger and happiness of her family.

Many diasporic writers mentioned the differences in culture and food in many of their novels. One among them is Jhumpa Lahiri born at London to Bengali parents and was brought up in the United States. Lahiri is herself an immigrant and her short stories particularly focused the marital differences, the disconnection between first and second generation as Indian immigrants. Lahiri's works are much autobiographical with fictional elements and characters. She draws down her own experiences her parents experiences and which they were met with their relations or neighbors, or where her parents have conveyed to her. Lahiri's characters move away to the new land by leaving culture and its traditions. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* brings out the importance of humanism and culture.

The Lowland is the story of Subash and Udayan born to Bengali parents and Subash is elder by fifteen months to his brother Udayan. Days passed and the two brothers were separated by the paths which they chose. Subash moved to the US and there he started to cook his own meal and in India Udayan joined the Naxalbari movement, it was a movement of armed peasants

revolt. Udayan married Gauri, before his brother Subash and he was against Indian culture in which he was bred. Gauri, one of the protagonists of the novel was interested in studying. Instead of going to college, she was advised by Bijoli to do household duties. “Her mother-in-law had told her, the first morning, to put away the book she'd brought with her, and to concentrate on the task at hand” (*The Lowland* 354). In very few days Udayan was planned and killed by the police and Gauri became a widow. Subash married Gauri to make her free from the culture bound society. The present paper studies about denial and the foods that were prohibited to Gauri and the culture of cooking food in the Bengali tradition.

Bijoli, the mother of Subash cooked and took care of the household. The culture of Bengali is to have complete meal every day and it must also fill for all the members of the family. Though the family was running in poverty, she had given much importance for the meal and is evident when she complained of the less quantity of the things purchased. “If their mother complained that he hadn't brought back enough, He'd say, better to eat a small piece of fish with flavour than a large one without” (91).

Bijoli's family had eaten and purchased what the culture had taught them. The purchasing of groceries was the duty of men and the cooking was of the women. “. . . he and Udayan had accompanied their father to shop or to pick up rationed rice and coal" (91). The culture of Bengal and most parts of the people in India consume meat, especially on holidays. "On Sundays, they bought meat" (92).

The culture and food of Bengali are one of the unique ones. Bijoli and Gauri cooked simple food. Gauri's suffering is partly in cooking food and much in cooking with the coal it was the toughest job for her, who wished to pursue her education but culture being the main barrier she suffered much and was partly happy in reading books brought by her husband. Subash too at times hated western foods. He loved the food of his country. “he was ravenous for the simple meal, dal, and slices of fried bitter melon, rice, and fish stew. Sweet Pabda fish from the river, their . . .” (109). It was the women who cooked and also served the food. Men even if they wished they were not allowed to do so. “His mother ladled the dal onto his rice” (110).

Gauri who lead a happy life would find it difficult to sit in front of coal, kerosene and dung patties. This was also one of the reasons for Gauri's lack of interest in cooking even with the help of her mother-in-law. It is observed that the smoke would affect many women and cause breathing problems which would affect the future generations too. “Thick smoke stang her eyes, blurring her vision as she fanned the flame” (354).

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To put away the book was hard for Gauri and the culture which the Bengalis follow had made Bijoli stop Gauri from studying and she also helped Gauri in cooking. The family of Udayan being strict followers of culture and traditions had taught Gauri to be patience in her activities. The hard works that she did were very much new to her and being a good daughter-in-law she did not complaint her pains to her husband. "If the servant was late . . . she had to grind the turmeric root and chillies on a stone slab, . . . When she ground the chillies her palm felt as if the skin has been scraped off. . . . The weight of the inverted pan strained her wrists, steam scalding her face if she forgot to turn it away" (355).

Her tender hands had become rough and she did not mind it for she knew the culture and the importance that her in-laws have towards it. Udayan was also at the same time patriarchal when he calmed her by saying Subash's wife would help her one day. This can be seen as dominance because of the culture they followed, where he was not trained or his mind was not set up to help a woman in cooking. The men of the household earn for the living does not take up the raw sufferings of women during their time of cooking food.

On the contrast, Subash cooked his own meal against his cultural norms. His mother would have denied and condemned him for she believed it is women who had to cook foods. He cooked in the Rhode Island and also share with his friend. He liked cooking for the taste of US did not suit him. "Most nights Richard was out at dinnertime, but if he happened to be home he accepted Subash's invitation to share a meal, . . . Subash cooked curry and boiled a pot of rice" (49). During a conversation with Gauri, it can be completely known that he cooked his own food. "Is there a mess hall? No. Who cooks for you, then? I do" (117). These two incidents prove the cross cultural difference. How was against his cultural norm. but he liked his own cooking "You're staying at the International House? I preferred a place with a kitchen. I wanted to make my own meal" (45). Professor Narasimhan being an eastern born and brought up had helped his wife in the western land. he cooked dishes and also invited subash to dine with them. "I'll make you my yogurt rice on of these days, Narasimhan called out" (46). Men too cook at times and is evident through the incidents in the novel.

Nutritive value is important for all human on this earth and especially to the women around the world. But the culture had denied few food to Gauri during her gestation period. This is very harming and being a woman with a baby this would affect both. She was made to cook when she likes to study, was forced to eat only very few dishes which would make her and the baby weak. She must be cared by giving good and healthy intakes. The culture had stopped Gauri from eating fish and this blind attitude would result in weakness of the mother and child. Food is common to all but the restrictions laid on a pregnant widow lady would bring hatred towards culture. The humans framed the rules to follow the customs and traditions and had made it for their own wish not barring the people who get affected through the wrong belief of culture.

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“Is it because of my parents that you're not eating fish?” (112). Their parents are the great holders of culture and it had made them neglect nutritive foods to the widow who was carrying.

One cannot live a long life without consuming food and it must also be of a balanced one for good health. The culture must not be brought to intervene between the food and consumers. Culture portrays a group and must not be the factor to put down the group. Cooking being the essential one and is a fine art in the hands of women. The men of the household can help by lending their hands to women to withstand the smoke and the barriers in cooking. The denial and the cooking which are associated with women should be broken off and culture can be reframed as a good one suiting all.

Works Cited

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