

# Food as a Metaphor for Memory with reference to Imtiaz Dharker's *At Lahore Karhai*

Ranjini Selvarani, Assistant Professor of English, Government Arts College (Autonomous)

Coimbatore, India, ranjiniselvarani@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Food is a necessity for the survival of human life. All living things keep themselves going only with food being the main component. Food has deep roots to one's genesis thus creating strong bonds with its taste and flavour. This idea has been well substantiated in a poem by Imtiaz Dharker, a British poet born in 1967 in Lahore, Pakistan. Her poem *At Lahore Karhai* is a metaphorical rendering of food as a symbol for one's identity. She extols her ways of remembering her mother's hand in the Pakistani cuisine which she terribly misses but at the same time her nostalgia coexists with assimilation in the new land turns out to an invaluable aid for those at a loss of their motherland.

**Keywords** — food, memory, identity, immigrant, multiculturalism, assimilation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Memory is the storage of certain unforgettable images or messages that are deposited in the inner recesses of the human brain, which are brought to the surface when triggered by looking at certain people or place and while feeling certain objects or when tasting certain food. Memory is a cognitive process which involves chemical and biological processes which are required for a proper well-being. This faculty of the brain becomes the foremost priority to have a sane mind and body. Moreover, when this power of memory becomes disarrayed it leads to a lot of psychic disorders which in turn disturb the psychological balance of the mind and body. When a person remembers too much about one's past and is not able to live in the present, he loses his future. This state of mind may lead to schizophrenia, Obsessive Compulsive disorder and paranoia. Such kind of personality disorder may make a person to be intrinsic in nature. A balance is always required to keep oneself sound both in mind and body. Thus memory plays a vital role in our everyday life.

### A. Diasporic Writers

Memory has connections to past. In literature, memory studies have gained vaulting popularity. Memory studies include themes on Wars, Holocaust, Migration, displacement, quest for identity and so on. This research paper is proposed to deal with the connections between Food and Memory replicated in the poem *At Lahore Karhai* by Imtiaz Dharker. The central theme that connects food and memory is displacement at large. Displacement is otherwise termed as undesired migration which might take place as punishment, aftermath of wars, persecution etc. Migration takes place due to various reasons – for employment in search of green pastures, for better climate and luxurious environment, for health reasons etc. These factors are subjective and self-imposed; this kind of

migration is voluntary. Writers who migrate from their motherland to a new land do so mostly for a better readership, to expose their new themes which were not welcome in the motherland. In Indian history, partition has left an indelible mark on many families that were displaced forcefully from their own soil to a foreign land. Writers who have either migrated on their own accord or who have been uprooted forcibly from a well-rooted soil and are thrown to thrive in a new soil are all brought under the umbrella term Diaspora. Displacement, dislocation, search of identity, search of roots, wailing for their lost land, memories of the motherland often form the themes of Diasporic writers. The first generation of diasporic writers was migrated forcibly to work as slaves in a foreign land. The writers include those whose ancestors who were forcibly made to work in rubber plantations and banana plantations in the Caribbean Islands, They may be those whose forefathers were African slaves transported to the western countries. The writers who belong to this generation wrote in agony and pain about the loss of their motherland. The themes also included search of identity in the new land and search of roots that is routed to the mother soil. V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a phenomenal work of the first generation writers. The second generation writers are burdened with a dichotomy in their mind and hearts either to mourn for the loss of motherland or to survive in the new soil. *Piano and Drums* by Gabriel Okara is a representative of this kind of theme. The third generation writers are those whose ancestors were migrated forcibly but the present generation is the citizens of the new land and they do not feel the pang of their ancestor's motherland. They do not possess a strong bond to roots. The long rope that was connecting the motherland and the new land seem to have faded. The present generation writers still have a strong positive note to tell the fellow diasporic writers that there is no necessity to mourn the loss of the motherland rather to adapt to the new land that has a sea of opportunities. The *Immigrant's Song* by Tishani

Doshi beautifully exemplifies this idea. Tishani, a Chennai based poet records her emphatic idea thus:

*'Naming them will not bring them back.*

*Let us stay here, and wait for the future to arrive. . .'* [3]

#### B. At Lahore Karhai by Imtiaz Dharker

Imtiaz Dharker, is another third generation British Poet, whose roots are in Pakistan. She was immigrated to Glasgow, even when she was a child. Dharker is the proud recipient of Queen's God Medal for her English poetry. Dharker was born in Lahore, Pakistan. Dharker's themes are about her home, freedom, journeys, displacement, culture, geography etc. Her poems brim with her personal experiences which specifically includes multiculturalism, hybridity, intercultural relationships in her new land Glasgow in Scotland. Dharker uses food to tap her memories of her past. Thus, Food is a subjective entity that is close to one's heart. Dharker re-counts her experience when a multicultural troupe sets out on a long drive to Wembley where Lahore Karhai, a restaurant that caters to the taste buds with its Pakistani cuisine is situated. In the process of detailing her pragmatic attitude towards living a happy life in a foreign land, she geographically fixes Lahore Karhai and a dhaba on the Grand Trunk Road of 2500 kilometers, stretch that connects Bangladesh and India via Delhi and Lahore, in juxtaposition.

Karhai, translated as Saucepan in English is an emphatic document of an immigrant how she conducts herself in a multicultural land, blending as one in a foreign land without losing her identity in any way. This integrity in the poet permeates through every gesture she exudes. As the poem begins, on a Sunday afternoon, a multiethnic troupe made of a Sindhi refugee and his wife, a young Englishman, two young girls from Bombay and the poet herself set off on a pilgrimage to Lahore Karhai travelling an extra mile to realize the deity which is the Pakistani food here. With such fervour, she compares the food of her motherland. Thus food is deified to the position of a god.

Still in a foreign land, she does not forget to assert her religious identity that she is Muslim when she is about to be served with beer. "No beer, we're Muslim" [1] is insistent of this assertion of identity in a new land.

Cultures grow out of conscious and unconscious interactions with each other, define their identity in terms of what they take to be their significant other, and are at least partially multicultural in their origins and constitution. Each carries bits of the other within itself and is never wholly sui generis. This does not mean that it has no powers of self-determination and inner impulses, but rather that it is porous and subject to external influences which it assimilates in its now autonomous ways. [2]

The arresting proclamation of Dharker's linguistic identity and the pride of establishing it are strewn throughout the poem is the usage of Hindi and Urdu utterances like 'Yaad na jaye', 'tarka dal', 'karhai ghosht', 'gajjar halva' etc. This autonomy of using Hindi and Urdu utterances become very strong when there is authorial reticence. Dharker never attempts to explain or provide a glossary for these terms.

Dharker is at her best when she uses the metaphorical imagery to compare the weary truckers pulling in the dhaba on the Grand Trunk Road after their weary drive across Punjab to Amritsar after lusting and craving for the home food is synchronously treated to the same with these immigrants who have set off a pilgrimage after a long weary journey afar from their homelands and whose taste buds have been craving for the real food with their mother's hand in the cooking. The importance is not only given to the craving of taste for the Pakistani culinary but the memories and sentiments that blossom in multicoloured hues at once in the weird snowy garden of the mind. These memories nurture and water the garden of nostalgia and give the elixir to prolong the present life. The diasporic moments could be subtly felt when Dharker pines

*'... we're truckers of another kind,*

*looking hopefully (years away*

*from Sialkot and Chandigarh)*

*for the taste of our mother's*

*hand in the cooking'. [1]*

Food thus has the predominant quality of arousing nostalgia and diasporic moments which are exclusive to any immigrant.

It is at once to be appreciated and acknowledged that the poet does not mourn for the loss of her motherland and the culinary of her home food. Rather, she revels in the new culture which she adapted but still cannot sever the chord of belonging to Pakistan.

Dharker is at the pinnacle of wisdom and optimism in the following simile.

*'This winter we have learnt*

*to wear our past*

*like summer clothes.' [1]*

Unlike the previous generation immigrants, Dharker does not live a compromising life in a foreign land; rather, she is true to that multicultural society to which she has assimilated herself. Rather, she revels in the new culture which she adapted but still cannot sever the chord of belonging to Pakistan. As Bikhu Parekh puts it,

This feeling of being fully a citizen and yet an outsider is difficult to analyse and explain, but it can

be deep and real and seriously damage the quality of one's citizenship as well as one's sense of commitment to the political community. [2]

She uses the imagery of summer clothes in a temperate country where summer is sparse and wearing of summer clothes is sparing. At the same time, in temperate countries, summer is also inevitable though it comes only for a short period of the year. In the same way, though Scotland is her second home, she cannot but remember Pakistan once in a while.

An immigrant's nostalgia for her home is vividly expressed in 'the family of dishes' listed. Each dish connects to an identity – tarka dal reminds aunt Hameeda, karhai ghosht reminds Khala Ameena, gajjar halva reminds her of Appa Rasheeda. She interweaves her regional culture metaphorically through food.

## II. CONCLUSION

At Lahore Karhai is thus an account of Imtiaz Dharker's nostalgia for her motherland which is aroused and intensified through food. Food and memory become inseparable entities for any human being especially for an immigrant. Dharker showcases her life to be exemplary one when one has to be an immigrant in a foreign country. In her life, nostalgia coexists with assimilation. This sense of assimilation is expressed through these emphatic lines

*Other days, we prefer*

*Chinese.* [1]

Dharker suggests the immigrants that remembering one's motherland can happen in so many ways, and this way, she advocates is also one of the ways of remembering. Assimilation spiced up by assertion of one's identity would be a wise way to remember and add tribute to the motherland. Memory is a marker to mean that anyone is alive. Memory is thus a reservoir of past experiences, realized in the present. Thus memory is an inevitable component for everyone to lead a dignified life. This is a universal lesson Dharker offers to immigrants across the globe.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Dharker, Imtiaz, *At the Lahore Karhai*. *I Speak for the Devil The Technical Writers Handbook*. Penguin Books India, 2003. Print
- [2] Bhikhu Parekh, "What Is Multiculturalism?" *Multiculturalism: A Symposium on Democracy in Culturally Diverse Societies* 484 (December 1999), <http://www.indiaseminar.com/1999/484/484%20parekh.htm/>.
- [3] Tishani Doshi, "The Immigrant's Song" from *Everything Begins Elsewhere*. Copyright © 2013

by Tishani Doshi. Reprinted by permission of Copper Canyon Press.