

## Nourishing Identity: Food's Role in Diasporic Experiences in La-hiri's 'A Temporary Matter' and 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine'

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### Abstract

*Food forms a fundamental element in the cycle of life, influencing not only individual behavior but also shaping the actions of communities and entire societies. For immigrants and those living away from their homeland, food plays a crucial role in preserving identity. Di-asporic literature—works created by writers residing outside their country of origin—often re-flects this connection. This paper analyzes how food plays a significant role in exploring di-asporic themes within two short stories from Jhumpa Lahiri's renowned collection, Interpreter of Maladies: "A Temporary Matter" and "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine."*

*The central aim of this study is to explore how food symbolically shapes and reflects the diasporic experiences portrayed in these narratives. In "A Temporary Matter," Lahiri por-trays a couple dealing with emotional distance following a personal tragedy, where food serves as a symbolic representation of their changing relationship, with meal preparation and con-sumption mirroring their inner emotional landscapes. In contrast, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" highlights cultural dislocation against a backdrop of political unrest, using shared meals as a medium for connection and remembrance of home.*

*This paper emphasizes the sensory and emotional roles food plays in these stories, of-fering insight into how Lahiri intricately weaves culinary imagery to represent the complexities faced by diasporic individuals. Ultimately, the analysis seeks to show how Lahiri's nuanced portrayal of food functions as a powerful metaphor for the broader diasporic journey, enriching the conversation on the role of food in diasporic literature.*

**Keywords:** food, cultural displacement, diasporic identity, metaphor, emotional states, strained marriage

*"Food carries the flavor of home in every bite and represents a cultural journey on every plate." Beyond its basic function of providing nourishment, food serves as a rich expression of culture, identity, and emotional connection. It becomes a form of communication that tells sto-ries rooted in tradition and heritage. Literature and food are deeply intertwined, connected through themes of culture, memory, and sensory experience. In literary works, food often takes on symbolic meaning, acting as a trigger for memories, a means of bringing characters togeth-er, and a tool*

for building emotional bonds. Shared meals often create a sense of community and closeness, while the absence or scarcity of food can reflect suffering, loss, or harsh social realities.

These qualities make food a powerful element in diasporic literature, which explores themes of migration, identity, and the tension between one's homeland and the adopted culture. Such narratives often reflect feelings of nostalgia, efforts to adapt, and the longing for belong-ing. Diasporic literature is generally produced by writers who reside outside their native coun-tries. Notable voices in this genre include Jhumpa Lahiri, V. S. Naipaul, Chitra BanerjeeDi-vakaruni, and Uma Parameswaran.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a writer of Indian-American origin, is well known for her works in Eng-lish, including short stories, novels, and essays. As a second-generation member of the Indian diaspora, she brings a unique perspective to her work. Born in London and raised in Rhode Is-land, USA, Lahiri moved to America as a young child with her Bengali parents. She earned her undergraduate degree from Barnard College and later completed a Ph.D. at Boston University. Influenced by literary greats such as Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, and Richard Yates, her writ-ing is marked by clarity and simplicity. Lahiri consciously avoids heavy use of figurative lan-guage, favoring direct and accessible prose.

Her works often explore themes such as emotional turmoil, longing for one's homeland, and key aspects of the diasporic experience, including alienation, displacement, rootless-ness, existential uncertainty, and a sense of loss. In 2014, she was honored with the National Humanities Medal for her literary contributions. Some of her notable works include *Unaccus-tomed Earth*, *The Lowland*, *The Namesake*, *Whereabouts*, and *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Released in 1999, *Interpreter of Maladies* is a compilation of nine short stories that earned the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in 2000. Translated into more than 20 languages, the collection addresses themes of love, identity, and the immigrant experience. The paper focuses on "A Temporary Matter" and "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" to explore how food contributes to the diasporic narratives in these stories.

The short story "A Temporary Matter" explores the strained marriage of Shoba and Shukumar in the aftermath of their infant's death. From the outset, the author introduces a scheduled power outage, which serves as a key symbolic device throughout the narrative. The couple's growing emotional and physical distance—evident in their avoidance of each other—signals deep fractures in their marriage. Shukumar's absence during the child's birth has fur-ther widened the emotional gap between them.

Previously, Shoba had been diligent in meal planning and food shopping, always pre-pared for unexpected company, highlighting how food and shared meals once played a vital role in their relationship. Her withdrawal from these routines after the miscarriage reflects not just a loss of interest in cooking, but also a withdrawal from the relationship itself. In contrast, Shukumar stepping into the role of preparing meals suggests his lingering desire to salvage what remains of their connection.

*The story unfolds over five nights of hour-long blackouts, during which the couple begins a routine of dining together and revealing personal secrets. At first, these dinners appear to offer a chance for reconnection, a momentary return to intimacy. However, as the confessions deepen, the emotional gap between them widens. Rather than healing, the process leads to painful truths and further detachment. On the final night, Shukumar's act of clearing the dinner table and taking the plates to the sink symbolizes the final blow to their relationship—a quiet, yet powerful gesture marking the end of any remaining hope for reconciliation. The removal of the plates becomes a striking metaphor for the loss of intimacy and the irreversible damage to their bond.*

*In the story, the enforced nightly power outages bring Shoba and Shukumar to the dinner table together, initiating a process of emotional unveiling. At first, their conversations are minimal and detached, consisting of routine exchanges with little emotional involvement. For example, Shukumar prepares lamb for dinner, but Shoba offers no real response, and their interactions seem to serve only as a way to pass time before retreating into isolation.*

*The dynamic shifts when Shoba suggests they play a game during the blackout—sharing one secret each night. Presented as light-hearted and insignificant, the game offers a space where they can speak openly, shielded by the cover of darkness. This darkness becomes a buffer, making it feel as though they are confessing into empty space rather than to each other, reducing the emotional risk.*

*As the game continues, Shukumar gradually realizes that Shoba has a purpose behind it: she is using it to prepare him for the news that she intends to leave. The progression from small, harmless secrets to increasingly significant ones becomes her strategy to ease into this difficult truth. The game, rather than fostering true communication, acts as a controlled space for emotional avoidance, culminating in Shoba's final confession on the last night, when the electricity returns.*

*Shoba reveals her plan to separate, and a devastated Shukumar responds with his own painful truth: he had known the gender of their stillborn baby, something Shoba had deliberately chosen not to find out. Shoba, shocked by the disclosure within the context of her own game, breaks down emotionally. This moment of mutual vulnerability dissolves the emotional wall that had separated them since their loss.*

*The story ends on an ambiguous note, with the couple sitting together in tears. Though the future of their marriage is left unresolved, this shared emotional openness suggests that healing—either together or apart—might still be possible. Shoba's action of turning off the lights at the end subtly indicates her reluctance to fully face their emotions, yet it also reinforces the theme of emotional intimacy emerging through shared silence and vulnerability.*

*In *A Temporary Matter*, food emerges as a powerful symbol reflecting the emotional distance between Shoba and Shukumar, representing Shukumar's longing for the affectionate, attentive version of Shoba that existed before the loss of their baby. Previously, Shoba's care in stocking the pantry and preparing elaborate meals had signified joy and intimacy in their relationship. However, following the stillbirth, grief reshapes Shoba, leading her to abandon the culinary routines that once brought them together. Her disengagement from cooking symbolizes her*

*emotional withdrawal and detachment from their shared past. In contrast, Shukumar takes over the kitchen responsibilities, using cooking as a way to maintain a connection with their earlier bond. His efforts in the kitchen serve as a subtle gesture of hope and an attempt to restore what was lost.*

*Gastronomy theory provides a valuable perspective for examining the significance of food in A Temporary Matter. This perspective highlights food as a cultural and symbolic artifact, illuminating how the characters use meals as a means of coping with grief and trying to rebuild their relationship. The detailed depictions of food not only stress its cultural relevance but also emphasize its emotional and ritualistic significance, reflecting larger themes of transience, connection, and personal healing.*

*In another of Lahiri's short stories, When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine, set in 1971 in a New England college town, the narrative centers around ten-year-old Lilia, an Indian American girl. Her family frequently invites Mr. Pirzada, a visiting scholar from Dacca (now Dhaka, Bangladesh), to dinner. As the Bangladesh Liberation War unfolds in his homeland, Mr. Pirzada becomes a regular guest in their home, sharing food and conversation that temporarily turn him into a part of the family.*

*Lilia wrestles with her hybrid identity, shaped by her Indian roots and American upbringing. Although she initially assumes that Mr. Pirzada is Indian based on his appearance, her father corrects her, pointing to the historical consequences of the 1947 Partition that altered national identities. Lilia's struggle to differentiate between nationality and ethnicity under-scores her reliance on surface-level indicators, such as skin color and accent, rather than the deeper cultural ties that unite them. Her father, ironically, uses a colored map to explain the separation between India and Pakistan, reinforcing how race and borders are socially constructed divisions. Lilia's continued efforts to identify visible signs of Mr. Pirzada's "otherness"—such as his pocket watch set to Dacca time—reflect society's tendency to define people based on superficial traits.*

*At school, Lilia is discouraged from exploring her South Asian heritage, reinforcing a narrative that prioritizes American identity while marginalizing her cultural background. Despite being born in America, her physical appearance categorizes her as an outsider. These experiences, along with her mother's desire for an uncomplicated life in the U.S., deepen Lilia's identity conflict. Lahiri thoughtfully examines how race, though visible, does not determine meaningful human connections. The story challenges racial stereotypes and illustrates the persistent external labeling Lilia faces beyond her home environment.*

*Food plays a central role in When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine, offering comfort and continuity amidst the chaos of war and displacement. While the conflict in Dacca looms in the background, the story unfolds primarily through shared dinners in suburban Boston. These meals, rich in South Asian flavors and traditions, create a common ground between characters from differing religious and national backgrounds. Despite being strangers initially, the act of eating together fosters emotional closeness between Mr. Pirzada, Lilia, and her family.*

*The daily ritual of Mr. Pirzada giving Lilia a piece of candy becomes a symbolic bridge that connects them without words. This simple act reinforces how food can transcend language and build deep emotional bonds. Moreover, food becomes a sensory link to distant home-lands—Mr. Pirzada finds emotional refuge in the familiar smells and tastes of South Asian *cui-sine*, while Lilia uses the candies and a carved sandalwood box to connect with her Indian heritage and memories of her grandmother.*

*Moments of emotional or cultural disconnect are often marked by the absence of food.*

*For example, during significant emotional upheavals, such as Mr. Pirzada's departure, Lilia's family refrains from cooking or eating. When Lilia decides to stop eating the candies he gave her, it symbolizes her acknowledgment of the end of their connection. Throughout the story, food operates as a universal language that preserves traditions, bridges cultural divides, and sustains emotional connections across distance and time. Lahiri's vivid descriptions of the meals allow readers to share in the sensory experience, enhancing their empathy and understanding.*

*Using postcolonial theory to analyze *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* provides a deep insight into how the characters—particularly Mr. Pirzada—cope with issues of identity and displacement within the diaspora. The story captures the lingering effects of colonialism, the trauma of Partition, and the complexities of living between cultures. It highlights the struggles of cultural hybridity, where characters juggle their native identities with their lives in a foreign land. Language, identity, and transnational ties are central themes, with Lahiri portraying the diaspora not as a singular condition, but as a space of ongoing negotiation and adaptation.*

*Meanwhile, gastronomy theory offers a complementary perspective by foregrounding food as a cultural and emotional anchor. It emphasizes how meals in the story serve as markers of belonging and tools for navigating dislocation. From Lilia's mother's carefully prepared dishes to the symbolic exchange of sweets, food becomes a means of connection, memory, and expression that helps characters navigate the complexities of their diasporic existence.*

## **Conclusion**

*In conclusion, this paper examines how food and literature intersect in Lahiri's stories 'A Temporary Matter' and 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine', illustrating how she employs food to convey themes of grief, intimacy, cultural dislocation, and identity. In both narratives, food transcends its basic function to become a medium for emotional expression, a tie to one's roots, and a reflection of evolving relationships. Through this lens, Lahiri presents food as a profound symbol in diasporic literature, revealing how deeply it is woven into the human experience of love, loss, and belonging.*

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