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Change and Continuity in Food Habits of South Asian Immigrants: An Accommodative Analysis of Fictions by Smith and Naipaul

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Abstract

This article discusses the food issues pertaining to South Asian immigrants' interactions with the West. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* constitute the characters who are immigrants from Bangladesh and India to Trinidad to England. Having Hinduism and Islam as their religious roots, the characters manifest their traditional food preferences, taboos and wish to change. For instance, a Muslim character averting the pork, bacon and even the prepared meals and a Hindu character intending to avoid the chicken roast are the cases in hand. Similarly, the change landscape has been demonstrated by a Muslim character ordering for the bacon at a café, a Hindu pundit sitting on table while dining instead of asking for the flour sacks or sugar sacks with the cotton on top. These small-scale changes are the realities of the interstitial interactions of food traditions in the immigrants' lives. Thus, the article aims to examine the subtlety of food habits, food taboos and loyalty to one's own food traditions. To meet the objective of this study, the article has adopted accommodative analysis as an approach to analyze these two South Asian novelists' works that deal with the change and continuity in food habits of the immigrants. Accommodative analysis attempts to see the cultural negotiation as the attempt to foster a better life despite overt differences.

Keywords: Accommodative interpretations, cultural meanings, food values, forbidden food, reputation incineration

Introduction

Insofar as the food culture of immigrants involves, the study of fictional representation offers important insights. Food can be "depicted as embodying more than one set of meanings" (Vlitos 2) and the varieties of meanings associated with the food entail the complex array of interpretative horizons. The immigration fictions with South Asian characters contain a lot of debate about food culture. The novels by Zadie Smith and V.S. Naipaul, *White Teeth* and *The Enigma of Arrival* respectively have Muslim and Hindu characters from Bangladesh and India who hold the food issues in England. The

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Anglophone world poses threats to their food perceptions particularly because of their established food preferences. This article questions the debate in these fictional representations that face the challenges in upholding the immigrants' native food rituals. In fact, the efforts to continue the dietary rituals in the host land are the tragic farces. By implication, this paper suggests the need to have the liberal approach to native cultural ideals because immigration derives untold dynamism.

As in Smith's *White Teeth* and Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*, the fictional works that deal with the South Asian immigrants involve the food values crises. On the one hand, the immigrants have the impressions of their native food values; on the other, they come in contact with other food values. With this complexity at the hindsight, the research questions set for this article are: Why is it difficult for the immigrants to handle the pace of change in terms of food? How do the immigrants address the issues of food taboos and the loyalty to their food traditions? More importantly, the point that led to this study is the conflict between the loyalty to one's food tradition and the need for the inclusion of the 'other'.

In this article, I explain the central tenet of my argument. The immigrants, particularly, from South Asian nations seem to be sticking to their food traditions and even the food taboos, which in turn do not yield the attempt worth continuing. Certain food practices necessarily face the changes in the due course of time. The matter of course concerning the food values cannot be maintained in the land where one has migrated. The study of food can be done from the nutritional value as well as the cultural perspectives. The collaboration of these two is important for the fuller understanding (Gariné 18) of food habits as in the case of South Asian countries. Here, Gariné is referring to the importance of cultural meanings associated to the nutritional aspect of the study of foods. As in Smith's *White Teeth* and Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*, the fictional works that deal with the South Asian immigrants involve the food values crises. On the one hand, the immigrants have the impressions of their native food values; on the other, they come in contact with other food values. With this complexity at the hindsight, the research questions set for this article are: Why is it difficult for the immigrants to handle the pace of change in terms of food? How do the immigrants address the issues of food taboos and the loyalty to their food traditions? More importantly, the point that led to this research paper study is the conflict between the loyalty to one's food tradition and the need for the inclusion of the 'other'. This article takes two novels as the sources of data. *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith and *The Enigma of Arrival* by V.S. Naipaul. The rationale behind this selection is the necessity of immigrant characters from South Asia as the source location. Another reason for selecting these novels is that these fictions contain characters from Hindu and Muslim religious roots. These divergences as the inclusion criteria are considered to add the validity in the data for the discussion. The method for discussion is decided on the accommodative analysis. The purpose behind this choice is the attempt for the quest of coherence between and among the cultures. No matter what forms the cultures take, they are framed and formed for the overall support to the life. With this assumption at the hindsight, the accommodative analysis builds on the central premise of the permeability across the cultural board.

Changes in Food Habits

The study of changes in food habits does not form the unconventional body of wisdom. Owing to the changes in the locations, the geographies and the times, the food habits are changed. However, the map of food habits is changing because of the increasing trend of immigration. The study of food ways and the change "contributes to the understanding of subjectivity across cultures and historical periods" (Counihan 6).

Having cited Counihan here hints at the idea of changes across cultures, particularly for the understanding of the pace of changes in the food traditions of the immigrants. Marvin Harris and Eric B. Ross in *Food and Evolution: Toward a Theory of Human Food Habits* attribute the change of dietary habits to business and the changing of the homes (2). Immigration, thus, a form of changing the living places, becomes an important instrument for the change of food traditions.

The change in food traditions operates through Alsana Begum Iqbal, an immigrant from Bangladesh, Samad Iqbal, Magid Iqbal, Alsana's son and the pundit in these two fictional representations. Samad Miah Iqbal, husband of Alsana, one of the protagonists of *White Teeth* and Alsana debate over what sort of food to eat and what changes to bring in the dietary traditions. The cultural differences in England cause suffering to Samad and Alsana (Koseoglu 24). Their discussion is even in the concerns about the culinary affairs. Alsana is pregnant. One day, she asks her husband what she would eat while she would be hungry. This question comes from her, expecting some prepared meal for her because she cannot cook for herself or she wants some sort of rest. Samad cites the example of his mother and claims that his mother never spent money on the prepared meals. For the same reason, Alsana too should not spend the money on the prepared meals. She rejects Samad's viewpoints on the prepared meals: "'But tell me', she shouted, returning to her favored topic, 'where is our food?'... 'His mother did not', he said, 'spend the household money, as Alsana did, on prepared meals, yoghurts and tinned spaghetti'... Alsana punched him full square in the stomach. 'Samad Iqbal the traditionalist!'" (Smith 61-62). The disagreement over the prepared meal or the home-made meal reminds the tag laid down by Alsana to Samad – the traditionalist. If there is any character that seems to be against almost every activity of Samad, it is his wife Alsana who rarely agrees with Samad's views and decisions. Smith portrays change through the relations between husband and wife, and not so much from the interaction between other people from outside the family.

It is not only his wife who opposes Samad about food and modern lives; it is their son as well. When Samad is too worried about the culture of his children in England, he decides to send his son Magid to Bangladesh for the pure cultural life there. After staying in Bangladesh for a few years, Magid comes back to England to pursue his law career. One day, at a café where his father and father's friend would often dine and talk, Magid orders the bacon sandwich. Even the owner of the café is worried about the serving of bacon sandwich because the café would never serve this item. It was out of their scope. However, Magid argues with the owner of the café that the bacon is good for the health and his eating of the bacon would not break the heart of his father. It is the fat element in the meat that would break the heart of his father:

'I think' replied Magid, slowly surveying the dusty chalkboard menus on the wall, and then turning back to Mickey, his face illumined 'I should like a bacon sandwich. Yes, that is it. I would love a juicy, yet well-done, tomato ketchup-ed bacon sandwich. On brown'... 'You are a Muslim, inty? You don't want to break your father's heart with a bacon sandwich'. My father's heart will not be broken by a bacon sandwich. It is far more likely that my father's heart will break from the result of a build-up of saturated fat which is in turn a result of eating in your establishment for fifteen years. One wonders,' said Magid evenly.... (Smith 450-451)

We can attribute this behavior to the immigration phenomenon¹². There could be various reasons about why Magid chooses the bacon. However, the eating of the bacon would

not have been allowed to him in Bangladesh. The immigration opportunities allow one to have the food that is not acceptable to one's culture. Magid is a case in point.

Like Smith's *novel* that makes the cases for the changes in the food patterns of the immigrants from South Asia to England, Naipaul manifests similar observations through his characters in his novel. Naipaul's novel "mimics the gaze of the intrusive and puzzled anthropologist" (Goebel 98). In Naipaul's novel, the narrator's sister dies at Trinidad and the narrator leaves his place at London and goes for the funeral rites. The funeral rites are performed by Sati's son and the instructions are provided by the pundit. The pundit seems to seek some changes in his ways. His interpretations of the scriptures seem to have changed. He seems to have been accommodative in the interpretations of the Hindu scriptures for the people of other faiths. One observation by the narrator is about the eating time of the pundit. The narrator mentions the differences in the eating patterns of pundits in the past and there in Trinidad:

Afterwards, pundit had a lunch. In the old days he would have eaten sitting cross-legged on the blankets or flour-sacks or sugar-sacked spread on the top with cotton. He would have been carefully fed and constantly waited on. Now- sumptuously served, but all at once – he ate sitting at a table in the verandah. He ate by himself. He ate great quantities of food, using his hands as he had used them earlier with the earth and the rice and the sacrificial offerings of the earth altar. (381)

What would have brought the differences in these behaviors of pundit? The pundits in the past were strict about their eating and seating. The pundit here is ecumenical and seems to be liberal. Neither he is so strict about the issues of purity nor is he so serious, compared to the past. Not only does the pundit eat on his own, but he also accepts that he does not require the traditional arrangement for his seat: he is willing to sit on the chair for eating; it would otherwise be unacceptable to the strict pundits from the Hindu community. Thus, these cases that Alsana prefers the prepared meals, Magid wants the bacon sandwich and the pundit does not stick to the traditional arrangements in the eating time and manner suggest that the immigrants' pace of change is noticeable although very imperceptible to random readers.

Food Taboos and Their Threats

In order for understanding the complexities of food behavior changes, what precedes is the study of the force of food taboos in the lives of immigrants. Carole M. Counihan demarcates the edible versus inedible as the result of the cultural decision, "Food systems are of course intimately related to the local environment, but in most cultures people define as edible only certain products and execrate many other potentially edible substances" (7). These edible/inedible concerns are likely to cause the confrontation in between the cultures that are present in the contact zones. Naipaul's narrator, who is in England, is from India via Trinidad has a lot of journeys for his book writing project. Once he needs to go to New York, he manages the food for the journey. For the plane journey, he takes the banana so that he could avoid the foods offered in the plane. Although he is asked to take the roasted chicken, he feels guilty that he has taken the food that he should not have:

I had come to New York with some bananas. I had eaten some on the plane and left the others behind... I had also been given a roasted chicken... my family's peasant, Indian Hindu fear about my food, about pollution, and this was an attempt to stay it... eating secretly in a dark room, and then wondering how to hide the high-smelling evidence of this meal. I dumped it all in the waste-paper basket. After this, I needed a bath or a shower. (Naipaul 122-23)

His taking of shower for purification is the indicator that eating chicken roast in the Hindu community is an aversion. This is the forbidden food. If one eats the forbidden food, one is liable to the cultural punishment. For the same reason, the narrator takes the shower and cleanses himself. Anita Mannur provides the significance of this sort of behavior, "Food becomes a way to anchor cultural identity" (22). One sticks to the taboos of one's culture because of the conditioning to it and identity reasons. The "contradictory inclinations" to the Western foods and one's own cultural foods draw the people to tensions (Cwiertka 13). Naipaul's narrator has faced this predicament.

Added to this instance of food taboo in Naipaul's novel is Smith's Samad for whom the foods that his culture avoids are the sources for image incineration. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Samad Miah Iqbal's consciousness that an immigrant must be true to his/her native food culture. More often than not, Samad and Archibald Jones, an English friend to Samad, would dine in a café when they were the fighters for England at the Second World War. One day they are at a café and Archie orders the pork. Samad hesitates to eat the pork citing that the eating of pork is forbidden in his culture. "I'm a Muslim," said Samad, pushing a plate of pork away... 'why don't you eat it?' said Archie, guzzling his two chops down like a mad man... 'It's in our cultures, my friend'... Maybe deeper. Maybe in our bones'" (Smith 96). Samad's explanation of his behavior that his avoiding of the pork is because of his culture or it is in his bone substantiates that he is willing to abide by the taboos set by his culture. He does not eat the pork for cultural reasons. Although Samad is in England, he cannot "accede to the pluralistic mindset" (Charlotte 281). At that café, Archie enjoys the pork; Samad does not because he is conditioned to the taboos of his culture; he cannot be flexible enough to other cultures or foods unacceptable to his culture.

Another compelling instance in Smith's novel is the debate over the consumption of *bhang* ("edible substance from the leaves of cannabis plant") by Mangal Pande, the great grandfather of Samad Miah Iqbal from India. Mangal Pande seems to have a contested image that Samad Miah disagrees with. For Samad Miah, Mangal Pande is the hero who initiated the mutiny in 1846 in India. However, there were other historians who would argue that Mangal Pande had initiated the mutiny under the influence of the drug called *bhang*.

It didn't matter that *bhang*, hemp drink taken in small doses for medicinal purposes, was extremely unlikely to cause intoxication of this kind or that Pande, a strict Hindu, was extremely unlikely to drink it. It didn't matter that Samad could find not one piece of corroborating evidence that Pande had taken *bhang* that morning. (Smith 255-56)

Archie and Samad would disagree about the beginning of mutiny. Archie has the accounts of a lot of historians who prove that Mangal Pande had shot the English rulers under the influence of *bhang*; that beginning was the cause of many unnecessary casualties on both sides. Samad calls it "a slander," "puppet theatre" and "tragic farce" (Smith 256). Samad disbelieves that Mangal Pande, a strict Hindu, could not have taken *bhang* while Archie has a lot of historians to prove that the mutiny had gestation from the drug. The Hindus would not have associated the *bhang* and great hero of mutiny. This association of *bhang* and Mangal Pande has the purpose of incinerating the image of Mangal Pande. Attributing Mangal Pande's mutinous acts to the intoxicating drug has the underlying intention – the defamation of the hero. A hero's activities get turned to the acts of traitors only because the food taboo is associated to him. Thus, the food changes are subtle; the food taboos pose threats to the cultural connections. The immigrants are consciously loyal to their food traditions.

Immigrants' Making of Their Own Food Traditions

Presumably, one follows the food taboos because they are ingrained in one's behavior as Samad calls they are "in our bones" (Smith 96). However, loyalty comes to the forefront when one is willing to adopt the food values at more conscious level. Naipaul's narrator engages with the lives and views in England. The section "The Ceremony of Farewell" in the novel meditates on the death rituals of his sister in Trinidad. His elaborate discussion of the rituals instructed by pundit and the activities carried out by the pundit entail various food concerns. While performing those rites, the pundit seems to prefer slight changes. In addition, he follows the rituals as they are even in the foreign land -Trinidad:

The pundit went on with the physical side of his business. That was what people looked to a pundit for; that was what they wished to see carried out as correctly as possible- this pressing together of balls of rice and then of balls of earth, this arranging of flowers and pouring of milk on heaps of this and that, this constant feeding of the sacred fire. (381)

The pundit, the important figure in the ritual-scenario, is expected to follow the proper ways as the relatives of the deceased want the dead to reach the heaven. He follows the paths as correctly as possible. He exposes the sincere loyalty to the values and norms as dictated by the scriptures. His feeding of the sacred fire and handling of the milk and rice balls are the evidences that he has been the honest follower of the food-related offerings to the dead soul.

It is not only the pundit who operates the scriptural notions as dictated, he instructs Sati's son, son of the dead, also to perform as mentioned in the scriptures, "The pundit gave his last instructions. One brass plate with consecrated food was to be placed somewhere; another plate of food was to be cast into the river that had borne away her ashes: a final offering" (385). Granted that it is the pundit's order that consecrates the objects for offering to the dead, he does it for the last time before the ritual is over. Even here, the loyalty to one's food related norms and values are performed with due respect.

In the similar vein, Smith's novel manifests the obedience of Magid to his father Samad. To be more particular, the South Asian communities lay emphasis on the children's obedience to their parents. Smith emphasizes that Samad himself has not been able to follow the ideal ways set by the Muslim culture. Even though Samad is not the role model for his sons to follow, he cannot allow his son to eat the foods forbidden by his religion:

'Oh, come on, Sam,' began Archie gingerly. 'Give the lad a break.' 'I say he will not eat that at my table!' Mickey scratched his forehead. 'Stone me; we're getting a bit fundamentalist in our old age, ain't we?' 'I said - 'As you wish, Abba,' said Magid, with that same infuriating smile of total forgiveness. (456)

Magid digests the rejection by his father for marking his own obedience to his father so that his father would not be overtly hurt by his preference to the bacon sandwich. After his father's intervention, Magid no longer wishes to have the bacon sandwich for he seems to be loyal to his parents and their culture although he is not in the truest sense. Magid's loyalty to his food tradition avails the readers with the significance because the sons in the South Asian region are obedient to their parents to a large degree and the food traditions are respected even because they respect their parents.

Conclusion

The food traditionalism in the immigrant fictional works suggests that the food habits are facing the massive changes. The immigrants wish to claim their food traditions along with the taboos that they have learnt from their cultures. However, it is not that

easy to maintain the food traditions that one has been accustomed to. Like Smith's Samad, Alsana and Magid, Naipaul's narrator who goes to England for his writing career faces the similar situations. The discussion of the pundit, the ruler of the rituals, especially the religious one, too is shown to have changed in his eating manners. Thus, this article in its exploratory and analytical mode substantiates the idea that the immigrants intend to preserve and live with their food traditions. Although their efforts face numerous challenges, the immigrants need to be able to bring forth the transcultural viewpoints in the lives ahead.

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