Food and the Habitus: Imaginary Homeland in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

Luyi Ni[1, a]

[1]Woldingham School, Surrey, CR3 7YA, UK

[a]Email: luyi_ni@outlook.com

Abstract. This study explores the role of food as a cultural borderland in Jhumpa Lahiri' s Interpreter of Maladies. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu' s concept of habitus, it analyzes how food functions beyond mere sustenance to reflect the complex identities of Indian immigrants navigating between tradition and assimilation. Food serves as a semiotic tool, revealing cultural nostalgia and the "struggle of memory against forgetting," as Salman Rushdie describes. Through characters like Mrs. Sen, food is shown to embody class distinctions and national identity while highlighting ambivalent feelings toward cultural adaptation. The preparation and sharing of food emerge as powerful expressions of belonging, yet simultaneously underscore the alienation experienced in a foreign land. This project suggests that foodways in Lahiri' s stories not only mark ethnic and social identities but also act as a poignant symbol of immigrants' fragmented sense of home, underscoring both collective memories and personal struggles within their adopted communities. By situating food as a central theme, the study reveals its significance in shaping social interactions and sustaining an imagined homeland, bridging past and present, familiar and unfamiliar, within the immigrant experience.

Keywords: Food; Cultural borderland; Interpreter of Maladies.

1. Introduction

Salman Rushdie in his book *Imaginary Homelands* quotes Milan Kundera, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (14). What happens when an Indian immigrant crosses national borderlands and his or her life encompasses two or more national cultures? What symbolizes "the struggle of memory against forgetting" regarding Indian immigrants' existence in America? What unites Indians when parts of Indian nationals separate, secede, and are sliced off, rendering some Indians Pakistanis, while others Bangladeshis? Suffering from geopolitical splits, or, in Rushdie's terms, the "the physical fact of discontinuity (12)", for the second-generation Indian-Americans, what reconstructs their imaginary homelands from their intelligible, incomplete, and fragmentary memories? Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) reveals such questions. In this short-story collection, Lahiri situates the semiotic significance of food within the tensions revolving around the issues of national identity versus cultural identity, collective memory versus individual memory, and assimilation versus resistance, exploring "the lives of Indians in exile, of people navigating between the strict traditions they have inherited and the baffling New World they must encounter everyday" (Bala 11). This project explores how Indian foodways—taste preferences, eating habits, and culinary practices—operate as borderlands that structure the characters' subjectivity and identity and their perceptions of others in *Interpreter of Maladies.*

"Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are (296)." This oft-quoted maxim of the nineteenth-century philosopher and gastronome Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin posits a direct correction between foodways and identity. Brillat-Savarin's saying, first appearing in 1825, has been under critique, rejection, paraphrase, and rearrangement by scholars of food studies, gender studies, historians, sociologists, anthropologies, politicians, and nutritionists. Superficial it may be, this saying captures the crucial significance of foodways. As Mary Douglas points out, "If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries" (61). Following Douglas's logic, what an individual *eats* and *does not* eat define his or her position in the hierarchical ordering system that determines one's social

class, as well as whether he or she is an outsider or an insider of a social group. Foodways—people's preferences of taste and their divergent ways of cooking, eating, feeding, and sharing food with others—serve not only bodily sustenance but also the habitus disclosing "who they are, where they came from, their current social, cultural, economic, and religious circumstances, and what their aspirations might be" (Kaplan et al 121).

Ethnic foodways, however, pose certain challenges to the positive correlation between food and an individual's identity. It is the centered-peripheral mentality rooted in the multicultural milieu that makes ethnic foodways *othered* and *exotic*. For example, Indian immigrants sooner or later discover that Americans, or members of other ethnic groups in America, or even "West Indians" and "East Indians" in America, "do not eat the same things in the same ways as they themselves do" (Kaplan et al 122). Foodways classify an insider within a group and further identify what a smaller group an individual belongs to within that group. Furthermore, it is almost impossible to maintain the identical foodways to those in the homeland. "Specific ingredients may be unavailable in the new land; substitutions are inevitable. More important, however, are the influences of a new setting, for as food is an integral part of life, so are foodways intrinsic to social and cultural life. As life style changes—both work habits and leisure-time activities—so do foodways" (Kaplan et al. 123). In a sense, to immigrants, in particular with first-generation immigrants, ethnic foodways manifest their "struggle for memory against forgetting" (Rushdie 14), thereby reflecting their struggle with hyphenated identities in the multicultural context of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and socioeconomic status in America.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of class distinction and Guillermo Verdecchia's idea of borderlands, this project primarily deals with how foodways underscore the intersection of race/ethnicity, nationhood, and class in *Interpreter of Maladies*. In the area of Asian American studies, relatively little attention has been paid to the connection between foodways and class, compared to the prevailing studies of racial emasculation and gendered inequality. Perrucci and Wyson explain the inadequacy of class-related research, arguing that it is due to "the national reluctance to examine how the class system of the United States operates on a day-to-day basis" (4). To mask the structural inequalities, "the majority of disadvantaged Americans must be persuaded to believe that the way things work out for people is fair. This is done by distracting attention from class inequality and focusing the national spotlight on conflict between Blacks and Whites, women and men, gays and straight, pro-choice and antiabortion partisans" (Perrucci and Wyson 4-5). As a consequence, discourse of class has been displaced and marginalized, "embedded in the recesses of our cultural and political unconscious" (Aronowitz 30).

As Mike Savage points out, "class identification is usually ambivalent, defensive, and hesitant" (36). In Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, foodways thematize, dramatize, and problematize these "ambivalent, defensive, and hesitant" moments: the characters' race/ethnicity consciousness is complicated by their class identification. This project attempts to break off the binary explanations of foodways and identity, in the hope of exploring the "ambivalent, defensive, and hesitant" moments of the characters' in-betweenness positionality, subjectivity, and assimilation-resistance.

2. Class Distinction: The Habitus and Foodways in "Mrs. Sen's"

The habitus, in Norbert Elias's pioneering description, refers to "second nature" or the forms of "embodied social learning" signifying subjective internalized self-consciousness. Bourdieu extends Elisa's notion of the habitus to class-demarcated behaviors.

Systematicity is found in all the properties—and property—with which individuals and groups surround themselves, houses, furniture, paintings, books, cars, spirits, cigarettes, perfume, clothes, and in the practices in which they manifest their distinction, sports, games, entertainments, only because it is in the synthetic unity of the habitus, the unifying generative principle of all practices. Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, is the generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of

distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, clothing, language or body hexis. (173)

What connects the notion of the ritualized social interaction with the habitus is that each element—"houses, furniture, paintings, books, cars, spirits, cigarettes, perfume, clothes" and the system of taste preferences—determine communal belonging and class. In a sense, what distinguishes the habitus of the American working class or lower middle class from that of middle class Indian immigrants has to do with the "radically different ways in which the experience of class is felt in the domain of everyday life" (Ganguly 121). Bourdieu's notion of the habitus and the resulting personal penchants for "houses, furniture, paintings, books, cars, spirits, cigarettes, perfume, clothes" reveal how class distinction plays out in an individual's seemingly unconscious choices in daily life. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, the following section deals with how foodways release Mrs. Sen's self-consciousness in terms of class and ethnicity.

Lahiri recalls the prototype of Mrs. Sen in an interview with Vibuthi Patel of *Newsweek International*, "[Mrs. Sen] is based on my mother who babysat in our home. I saw her one way but imagined that an American child may see her differently, reacting with curiosity, fascination, or fear to things I took for granted" (60). Mrs. Sen epitomizes a young first-generation middle-class immigrant from India who is cast into the poignant silence of assimilation-resistance in the late 1960's United States. It was a time when African-American civil rights movements swept the country, accompanying a spate of feminist movements aiming for breaking down barriers for women. It was a time when multiculturalism and pluralism hadn't yet become postmodern concepts but were omnipresent because of the loosening of stringent anti-Asian immigration policies initiated and implemented since the 1920s.

Wife of an Indian professor of mathematics at a small liberal arts college in New England, childless Mrs. Sen is a new immigrant to America at the age of around thirty. Coming from a middle-class family in Calcutta, India, she does not know how to drive because "at home, [she has] a driver, a chauffeur" (113). Mrs. Sen attempts to maintain her middle-class life style in America by decorating her apartment and dressing up. Inside her apartment, the TV and the telephone are covered by embroidery "pieces of yellow fabric with scalloped edges. There [is] tea in a tall gray pot, along with mugs, and butter biscuits on a tray" (112); in her bedroom, she has the drawers of closets that are "filled with saris of every imaginable texture and shade, brocaded with gold and silver threads. Some were transplant, tissue thin, others as thick as drapers, with tassels knotted along the edges" (125). Her family and friends in India think that she "[lives] the life of a queen […] in a palace" (125). However, the interior decoration and her dress, paradoxically, dramatize her otherness, repeatedly reminding Mrs. Sen of her status as a foreigner, an outsider, or, even an intruder. Everything is unfit: "mismatched remnants of other carpets were positioned in front of the sofa and chairs, like individual welcome mats anticipating where a person's feet would contact the floor" (112). The apartment's "mismatched" interior decoration foregrounds Mrs. Sen's otherness out of the regularity of Americanized life style.

Staying at home when her husband teaches at a nearby college, Mrs. Sen passes the time as a babysitter for Eliot, an eleven-year-old American boy, who is brought up in a working-class family. As opposed to Mrs. Sen's warm apartment, Eliot and his single mother live in a tiny house where they have to "bring portable heater along whenever they moved from one room to another, and to seal the windows with plastic sheets and a hair drier" when days turn cold (113-114). Through Eliot's perception, "Mrs. Sen's" unfolds how Mrs. Sen and Eliot establish a subtle yet affectionate bond that traverses boundaries of race, class, gender, and age, which is developed and solidified by Mrs. Sen's culinary practices and her caring personality.

Eliot notices that Mrs. Sen spends hours carefully preparing dinner everyday, marveling at her culinary prowess:

Each afternoon Mrs. Sen lifted the blade and locked it into place, so that it met the base at an angle. Facing the sharp edge without ever touching it, she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters,

speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds. She could peel a potato in seconds. At times she sat cross-legged, at times with legs splayed, surrounded by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water in which she immersed her chopped ingredients. […] Brimming bowls and colanders lined the countertop, spices and pastes were measured and blended, and eventually a collection of broths simmered over periwinkle flames on the stove. It was never a special occasion, nor was she ever expecting company. It was merely dinner for herself and Mr. Sen. (114-17)

Noticing that it is because of Mrs. Sen's middle-class status that allows her to spend so much time washing, chopping, slicing, and grinding food every day. She needs to justify that she lives "the life of a queen" in America (125) by elaborately preparing and cooking Bengali dinners for her husband, even "it was never a special occasion, nor was she ever expecting company" (117). Malathi de Alwis notes that women empower themselves through "multiply layered constructions of 'home' by invoking sites over which they have control: the kitchen and the sleeping quarters" (226). In the case of Mrs. Sen, the kitchen utensils—the blade that she buys from India, "where apparently there was at least one in every household" (115), and the bowls, colanders, stove, and riches of food ingredients—serve as what de Alwis calls "multiply layered construction of home". As such, the kitchen becomes the core space of Mrs. Sen's imaginary homeland, her familiar domain, and her territory where she is in control, temporarily mitigating her anxiety as an outsider in America.

Furthermore, I would argue that in this kitchen, childless Mrs. Sen reclaims her power by creating her identity of motherhood through carefully feeding Eliot. Every day, she supplies Eliot "crackers spread with peanut butter, and sometimes a popsicle, or carrot sticks sculpted with her blade" (115); the first thing she gives Eliot when they walk back from the school bus is "a sandwich bag […] the peeled wedges of an orange, or lightly salted peanuts, which she had already shelled" (119). As Anita Mannur notes, "'Mrs. Sen's' thematizes an alternative narrative of migration for the immigrant woman who works within the home and must implicitly uphold the burden of maintaining traditions from the 'homeland'" (158). What constitutes a traditional Indian household? A caring couple with a child or children; the husband brings home the paycheck while the wife takes care of the housework. Cooking and feeding people, thereby, become the centrality of women's responsibility to maintain the dynamics of domestic order. As Rosemary George notes, "the word 'home' immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection" (1). In preparing food and feeding Eliot and Mr. Sen, Mrs. Sen indulges in her maternal and wifely roles.

As opposed to Mrs. Sen's middle-class status that allows her to afford time and money necessary to prepare a fine dinner, Eliot's mother, a working-class single mother, feeds herself and Eliot with junk food:

She didn't eat lunch at work. The first thing she did when they were back at the house was pour herself a glass of wine and eat bread and cheese, sometimes so much of it that she wasn't hungry for the pizza they normally ordered for dinner. She sat at the table as he ate, drinking more wine and asking how [Eliot's] day was, but eventually she went to the deck to smoke a cigarette, leaving Eliot to wrap up the leftovers. (118)

Pizza is the staple food of Eliot and his mother's dinner, inexpensive, lackluster, and unhealthy. In his *book The World on a Plate: A Tour Through the History America's Ethnic Cuisines* (2003), Joel Denker describes American fast-food culture, which appeals to working-class people, as "quickly assembled, easily assimilated dishes" (98). The expected sameness of pizza, French fries, and hamburger for the working-class Americans constitutes the stark contrast to the fine and healthy diets, accompanying delicate bowls, forks, and matching plates for the middle-class or upper class Americans.

According to Bourdieu, due to its fixity and stability through iterablity and transmission, the habitus become the mental status of naturalness: it is an existential condition of which the subject is often unconscious. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that

The basic opposition between the tastes of luxury and the tastes of necessity is specified in as many oppositions as there are different ways of asserting one's distinction vis-à-vis the working lass and its primary needs, or—which amounts to the same thing—different powers whereby necessity can be kept at distance. (31)

Echoing with Bourdieu, Saul-ling Cynthia Wong elaborates that the primary needs are "contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded," whereas luxury needs are "attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism" (13). In the case of Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother, the former focuses on both the contents and forms of the dishes while the latter merely wants to satisfy her hunger.

Mrs. Sen's preferences of taste not only come from her middle-class status but also from her nostalgia for home. As such, purchasing the staple food item that she used to eat, fish, becomes her idiosyncratic way of returning "home". She tells Eliot, "[I] had grown up eating fish twice a day. […] In Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head" (124). However, in New England, near the ocean, what she can find in the supermarket is "[fish] that I can feed a cat thirty-two dinners from one of thirty-two tins, but I can never find a single fish I like, never a single" (123). Mrs. Sen desires for a whole fresh fish, neither shellfish tins, nor fried fillet that Eliot's mothers enjoys. When Mrs. Sen has the opportunity to purchase fresh fish, she dresses herself up as if she would attend a party, "[tossing] the saris one by one from the drawers, then [prying] several from their hangers. They landed like a pile of tangled sheets on the bed. The room was filled with an intense smell of mothballs" (125).

Paradoxically, while Mrs. Sen allows Eliot to completely access to her imaginary homeland, she desperately hides the sights and smells of Bengali cuisine from Eliot's mother. As Anita Mannur points out, "before Eliot's mother comes to fetch him, all signs of Mrs. Sen's otherness, notably the smell of difference and foreignness, are carefully covered up" (159):

Mrs. Sen always made sure all evidence of her chopping was disposed of. The blade was scrubbed, rinsed, dried, folded, and stowed away in a cupboard with the aid of a stepladder. With Eliot's help the newspapers were crushed with all the peels and seeds and skins inside them. (117)

The kitchen utensils are scrubbed, "peels and seeds" are disposed, and the smell of food is masked. Mrs. Sen's acts manifest that she is clearly aware of her otherness and desperately attempts to lessen her otherness by systematically removing anything that might intensify her status as a foreigner, an outsider, or an intruder.

The cultural gulf between Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother seems unbreakable, which is reflected in Eliot's mother's refusal of Mrs. Sen's food. During their first meeting, Eliot's mother "refused a biscuit each time Mrs. Sen extended the plate in her direction, and asked a long series of questions, the answers to which she recorded on a steno pad" (113). Each evening when Eliot's mother comes to pick him up, Mrs. Sen insists on serving her something to eat and drink: "a glass of bright pink yogurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, a bowl of semolina halvah" (118). Eliot's mother, confessing to Eliot that she does not like Mrs. Sen's food, takes one obligatory sip or bite, and half-heartedly comments, "It's delicious." (118). As Sarah Sceats notes in her study of women's power and food, "What connects so well with Foucault and [women, power, and food] is that feeding is established psychologically as the locus of love, aggression, pleasure, anxiety, frustration, and desire for control. Precisely, in other words, the ingredients of power relations" (118). As such, Eliot's mother's reluctance to consume Mrs. Sen's food symbolizes her resistance to Mrs. Sen's culture and her emotions.

Similarly, when Mrs. Sen carries a bag of fresh fish at the fish shop and takes a bus back home, she is been rejected again by other Americans:

The driver turned his head and glanced back at Mrs. Sen. "What's in the bag?"

Mrs. Sen looked up, startled.

"Speak English?" The bus began to move again, causing the driver to look at Mrs. Sen and Eliot in his enormous rearview mirror.

"Yes, I can speak."

"Then what's in the bag?"

"A fish," Mrs. Sen replied.

"The smell seems to be bothering the other passengers. Kid, maybe you should open her window or something." (132-33)

The smell of homeland for Mrs. Sen becomes the fishy odor for other American passengers. When the driver startles Mrs. Sen with his questions, he takes for granted that she cannot speak English. He instead speaks directly to Eliot, again ignoring Mrs. Sen's presence and thereby underscoring her status as a marginalized outsider. Eliot's mother, the driver, and other passengers' reactions to Mrs. Sen only accentuate her otherness: "her odor of mothballs and cumin" (121); "the column of vermilion fresh in her part. […] Her sari, a different pattern each day, fluttered below the hem of a checkered all-weathered coat" (119); and, "the red bindi on her forehead" (134). All these signs remind Mrs. Sen that her presence, as her apartment's interior decoration, is unfit and mismatched in mainstream American culture.

As such, food is Mrs. Sen last and residual pride of her once privileged status. If food is a code to social relationship, as Mary Douglas asserts, then Eliot's mother's resistance to Mrs. Sen's food only reinforces the irrevocable Western and Eastern cultural conflicts between Mrs. Sen and the mainstream American whites. In other words, Eliot's mother's refusal delineates, solidifies, and justifies the national borderlands between them. Furthermore, following Bourdieu's notion of class distinction, foodways also function as borderlands of class, the materiality of patriarchal hierarchy. The different habitus between people of middle class and that of working class cannot be transmittable—each class: working class, middle class, and upper class, has its own position and space in the hierarchical ordering system—thereby, when traversing the borderlands, Mrs. Sen is trapped in the in-betweenness space where she is always an exile, an outcast.

In a review of "Mrs. Sen's", Madhuparna Mitra reads Mrs. Sen's insistence to cook Bengali cuisine as a self-proclamation that she "makes very little effort to adapt to her new environment, and her single-minded devotion to replicating traditional cuisine is a sign of her deep estrangement from American culture" (186). Mitra's review, however, does not fully acknowledge that Mrs. Sen's path towards American assimilation-resistance is an "ambivalent, defensive, and hesitant" one (Savage 36). In his study of queer performativity, Jose Esteban Munoz invents the term "disidentification" as an alternative to a simple binary between good and bad subject positions. Munoz explains that "the first mode is understood as 'identification,' where a 'Good Subject' chooses the path of identification with discursive and ideological forms. 'Bad Subjects' resist and attempt to reject the images and identificatory sites offered by dominant ideology and proceed to rebel, to 'counter-identify' and turn against this symbolic system" (11). Disidentification, Munoz concludes, is "the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such as structure nor strictly oppose it; rather disidentification is strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (11).

Mrs. Sen's insistence to cook Bengali food is complicated by her efforts to learn how to drive, and to share American fast food such as French fries and clam cakes with Eliot, which disrupt the binary either-assimilation-or-resistance logic, or as a "Good" or "Bad" subject. Mrs. Sen is not a "Good" subject, because she refuses to follow the performative script prescribing to integrating into American culture; while at the same time, her anxiety to hiding her foreignness and otherness in front of Eliot's mother does not lead her to fight against her racialized otherness and racial discrimination. In a sense, "in Lahiri's culinary suburbanscape, Mrs. Sen's Bengali foodways are not rendered exotic and colorful; indeed, Mrs. Sen must take pains to hide all visible signs of difference lest she is deemed an unfit caregiver" (Mannur 160). Mrs. Sen continues to inhabit the position of a housewife who prepares Bengali dinner for her husband, as well as of a babysitter preparing Americanized food for Eliot. In other words, Mrs. Sen's disidentificatory acts challenge that binary logic of assimilation-resistance.

In sum, the notion of habitus-as-class-demarcation provides a nuanced reading of those "ambivalent, defensive, hesitant (Savage 36)" moments of Mrs. Sen's struggle with her class, race, and ethnicity. She is an exile and a "disidentified" subject in the postcolonial American landscape where the borderlands of nationhood and class are difficult to break down. Contrary to the binary

logic of assimilation-resistance modeling, Gary Okihiro's essay, "When and Where I Enter" provides a better answer to Mrs. Sen's frustration about her immigrant existence in America. As Okihiro explains, "when and where of the Asian American experience can be found within the European imagination and construction of Asians and Asia within their expansion eastward and westward to Asia for conquest and trade" (7). Asian Americans had entered the racial backdrop of America long before the first immigrants' arrival. When American consumers are eating Asian food, they are actually digesting the Americanized version of a specific ethnicity, be it Indianness, Koreanness, Japaneseness, or Chineseness. In the same vein, Mrs. Sen's preference Bengali food over American fast-food also decodes her ingrained bias for American culture, perhaps, in her distorted and fragmentary imagination, even long before her arrival in America.

3. Foodways as Borderlands: "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "A Temporary Matter"

On 15 August 1947, people in British-Empire controlled India attained independence following nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. Partition occurred right after Indian independence: after August 1947, some Indian residents became Pakistanis; after December 1971, some Pakistanis became Bangladeshis. In the grim face of national splits, how to do with their common cultural customs that people had passed for centuries? Would these traditions lose or change as the nation is separated? More complicated, what happens when these people settle in America? What still subtly unites Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Indians? The portion of this project deals with how foodways function as temporary borderlands that unite national identity and cultural identity for people who were once called "Indians" before August 15, 1947.

In his studies of Guillermo Verdecchia's play *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders* (1993), Pablo Ramirez points out, "Nations work to create a bounded relation between subjects and national territory, using official histories as both producers and products of borders. As a result, a person's history and sense of self become intelligible through the inside-outside logic of a bounded space; one is either a native or a foreigner, an insider or an outsider" (273). The logic of insider-outsider suggests that traversing/crossing borderlands and inhabiting multiple cultures will render an individual's identity inarticulate and incomplete because he or she will always be a foreigner, an outsider. Guillermo Verdecchia's *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders* reflects such identity crisis. Guillermo Verdecchia, the character in this play, is an Argentinean Canadian. Having traversed borders between Mexico-America and Canada-America, Verdecchia finds himself disoriented. In his efforts to explain his bewilderment, Verdecchia paraphrases Carlos Fuentes and informs the audience that "a border is more than just a division between countries; it is also the division between cultures and memories" (21). As borderlands divide memories, memoires creates imaginary, fragmented, and even distorted histories. In the process of "struggling memory against forgetting" (Rushdie 14), an individual who traverses the national borderlands is inevitably creating what Salman Rushdie calls an "Imaginary Homeland," one that is made up of "the shards of memory [that] acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities" (12).

Although *Fronteras Americanas* depicts the Latino-American diasporic community, Verdecchia's idea of borderlands provides a useful axis of reading of Lilia's bewilderment about Mr. Pirzada's identity in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine". Second-generation Indian-American, Lilia, a ten-year-old girl, is born and brought up in New England when her parents settle their home in America from Calcutta, India. Set in the fall of 1971, this story unfolds the historical backdrop when Bangladesh was attacking Pakistan for its own sovereignty. Mr. Pirzada leaves his home in Dacca, Pakistan, when he visits America "for he had been awarded a grant from the government of Pakistan to study the foliage of New England" (24); However, when he attempts to return" home" in Dacca, it already has turned into Bangladesh. For Lilia, Mr. Pirzada is an Indian man, coming from the same country with her parents:

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference, and he led me to a map of the world taped to the wall over his desk" (25)

For Lilia's Hindu Indian parents, "Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is a Muslim" (26). For Lilia, however, the signs of Mr. Pirzada's language, way of speaking, putting down shoes before entering the room, and more important, eating habits, are the habitus that demonstrate that he is, an Indian.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Erving Goffman proposes the notion of "staging cue" to decode the implicitly of the insider-outsider and insider-insider within a social group:

Since it is not necessary to retain social distance or be on guard before those who are one's colleagues in occupation, ideology, ethnicity, class, etc., it is common for colleagues to develop secret signs which seem innocuous to non-colleagues while at the same time they convey to the initiate that he is among his own and can relax the pose he maintains toward the public. (192)

Goffman highlights the implicit inclusion-exclusion, "the secret signs" that an individual develops and maintains in order to make sense of his or her own position within a social group. Similarly, Foodways historians Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell note, "foodways bind individuals together, define the limits of the group's outreach and identity, distinguish in-group from out-group, serve as a medium of inter-group communication, celebrate cultural cohesion and provide a context for performance of group rituals" (5). In a sense, foodways obviously serve as the borderlands to delineate nationhood. Goffman's notion of secret signs explains why Lilia's parents, who are from Calcutta, eastern India, share more in common with Mr. Pirzada, who comes from eastern Pakistan (later Bangladesh), in terms of the preferences of taste and ways of speaking, than an Indian from north or south India.

In her discussion of everyday life and postcolonial identity for Indian-Americans Keya Ganguly notes, "food, eaten Indian-style with one's fingers, is inescapably about the synesthetic charge of touch and taste; consumed collectively and conspicuously within everyone's vision, it also becomes an expression of a mode of being in the (new) world, a visual presentation of the self in everyday life" (136). In other words, when an Indian is accepting, touching, and digesting food from another Indian (s), he or she is actually expressing one's identity and sharing bonds with each other. Every time when Mr. Pirzada visits Lilia's home, Lilia's mother elaborately prepares a fine dinner for them: "as soon as they were seated my mother appeared from the kitchen with a plate of mincemeat kebabs with coriander chutney. Mr. Pirzada popped one into his mouth" (28). Mr. Pirzada's acts of touching and eating Lilia's mother's food indicate that he also identifies himself with an Indian, regardless of religious belief. Every night, American-born Lilia, her Hindu Indian parents, and Muslim Mr. Pirzada watch the television about the up-to-dated tensions between Bangladesh and Pakistan as they eat their dinner together:

From the kitchen my mother brought forth the succession of dishes: lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yogurt sauce. I followed with the water glasses, and the plate of lemon wedges, and the chili peppers, purchased on monthly trips to Chinatown and stored by the pound in the freezer, which they liked to snap open and crush into their food. (30)

The notion of foodways-as-borderlands problematizes the concept of home. Is home entirely determined by a geopolitical territory? Or, is it an emotional space and sense of belonging? And, what is a home for Indian immigrants from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh, which were once called Indian Nationals? Home is never a neutral space. Instead, it is a contested site which" manifests on geographical, psychological and material levels. [Home] is recognized as such by those within and those without and thus becomes an important site for disciplining subjects to perform their given identity role" (George 9). Geopolitical changes cannot entirely sever the ties between people who once were brought up within the same cultural customs.

In her arguing against the concept of diaspora as it neglects the structural inequalities against native people that accompanied the process of colonization, Shu-mei Shih, instead, advocates that: "Diaspora has an end date. When the (im)migrants settle and become localized, many choose to end their state of diaspora by the second or third generation" (45). Shih goes further to argue that "roots as place-based rather than ancestral, and routes as a more mobile understanding of homeless rather than wandering and homelessness"; in other words, "routes, then, can become roots" (46). In the case of Lilia's family, Lilia's parents clearly make their efforts to "end" their diasporic status by adapting to mainstream American culture, as manifested in their celebration of Halloween. India is their roots, but they also attempt to make America their home throughout their routes of migration. In the process of assimilating into American culture, Indian foodways develop bonds between Indian immigrants, making "routes become roots" (Shih 46).

Nonetheless, the bond established by foodways is often temporary and vulnerable. Noticing that when Lilia attempts to relieve her anxiety for Mr. Pirzada's family in Dacca, it is not Indian food that brings her comfort but the American confections that Mr. Pirzada gives her:" the steady stream of honey-filled lozenges, the raspberry truffles, the slender rolls of sour pastilles" (29). Each night Lilia would "put the chocolate in my mouth, letting it soften until the last possible moment, and then as I chewed it slowly, I prayed that Mr. Pirzada's family was safe and sound" (32). As Lilia swallows the Americanized candy she seems to believe that she is sharing Mr. Pirzada's sorrow and scare, and developing a connection with India, a country she is unfamiliar with and only sees on the television. Lilia chooses to end her diasporic status by becoming "localized", as she reassures herself:

I knew, I was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity. I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my rooftop, or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had. (26-27)

However, this bond is broken when Mr. Pirzada returns to Dacca. Without Mr. Pirzada's presence, Lilia finally cuts off their bonds, eventually throwing away the candy.

Lahiri endows Indian food with critical positions in Indian immigrants' life. However, as manifested in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," although foodways function as borderlands to delineate identity and develop bonds, the borderlands are often in temporality, contingent on specific space, time, and emotion. The opening story of *Interpreters of Maladies*, "A Temporary Matter," depicts a story of Shukumar and Shoba, a young Indian-American couple on the verge of divorce. Like Lilia, Shukumar, the husband in "A Temporary Matter," is inherently an American:

Shukumar hadn't spent as much time in India as Shoba had. His parents, who settled in New Hampshire, used to go back without him. […] As a teenager he preferred sailing camp or scooping ice cream during the summer to going to Calcutta. It wasn't until after his father died, in his last year of college, that the country began to interest him, and he studied its history from course books as if it were any other subject. (12)

As such, Shukumar does not follow the traditional Indian patriarchal patterns. Although he feels anxiety that "he was still a student at thirty-five" (3), he chooses to stay at home to write full-time his doctoral dissertation, while his wife, Shoba, brings home the paycheck. Lahiri depicts Shukumar relishing in the stereotypically feminized activities of cooking for the family:

Shukumar gathered onion skins in his hands and let them drop into the garbage pail, on top of the ribbons of fat he'd trimmed from the lamb. He ran the water in the sink, soaking the knife and the cutting board, and rubbed a lemon half along his fingertips to get rid of the garlic smell, a trick he'd learned from Shoba. (5)

Here the reader witnesses how Shukumar also performs daily rituals of scrubbing, washing, cutting that recur in "Mrs. She's". Shukumar's choice to prepare dinner for his wife reflects the more progressive feminist movements of the late 1990s, tremendously different from the setting of "Mrs. Sen's", the late 1960s, when Asian immigrants were still under cruel racial discrimination, and as a result, "were forced to be cooks, waiters, laundry workers, and domestics—jobs traditionally considered "women's work" (Cheung 175).

An unexpected five-day loss of electricity seems to save the estranged couple from their impending separation and divorce caused by Shoba's failed labor. The couple starts to share a meal at night in the darkness. Each meal is prepared by the husband with love and care, in the hope of reuniting their relationship. However, when the lights finally come back on, the couple's ties also sunders. Marred by the ting of irrevocable estrangement, food is only able to create a sense of affinity between Shukumar and Shoba when all else around falling apart. Once life returns to normalcy, the temporary bond developed by food finally breaks apart.

The images of purchasing, preparing, serving, and eating food in "A Temporary Matter" function as a nostalgic longing for a lost relationship. Prior to Shoba's failed labor, it is often she who purchases and prepares food.

When she used to do the shopping, the pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian. There were endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats from the Muslim butchers at Haymarket, chopped up and frozen in endless plastic bags. (6)

When Shoba stores up food items, she is actually accumulating her hopes and expectations of her life: her future child, her romantic relationship with her husband. All her hopes are shattered as the death of her son, however. Since the moment she stops purchasing and serving food for her family, the relationship between her and her husband has already collapsed.

4. Conclusion

Sarah Sceats asserts in her study of women, power, and food that, "Each meal incorporates political, cultural, personal, and psychological ingredients" (125). The notions of foodways-as-borderlands and habitus-as-class-demarcation provide a nuanced reading of those "ambivalent, defensive, hesitant (Savage 36)" moments of the characters' struggle with class, race, ethnicity, and domestic order in *Interpreter of Maladies*. It is important to look beyond the thematic implications of foodways to investigate the various racialized, gendered, nationhood and familial constructions on which foodways function as borderlands that structure multiply situated forms of social interaction for the Indian immigrants. By exploring the suggestive symptoms and temporaries that foodways presented in this short-story collection, we get a multilayered narrative of how foodways play out in the inter-generational tensions and the transitioning of Indian immigrants and their families.

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