

Metafora Makanan
dalam Novel *The Lowland* Karya Jhumpa Lahiri
(Food Metaphor in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*)

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Abstrak

Karena makanan kini bisa ditelaah melalui kacamata ilmu-ilmu sosial, hubungan antara makanan dan sastra menjadi tidak terhindarkan. Dalam identitas diaspora, keberadaan makanan menjadi salah satu elemen yang dirindukan para imigran. Tulisan ini membahas metafora makanan dan budaya makan dalam novel *The Lowland* yang ditulis Jhumpa Lahiri. Melalui analisis berperspektif poskolonial, didapat hasil bahwa makanan dan budaya makan secara metaforis merepresentasikan nostalgia yang dialami para tokoh utamanya. Makanan juga merupakan arena untuk menunjukkan identitas sekaligus proses negosiasi yang menjembatani perbedaan oposisi biner. Lebih lanjut, Lahiri juga melukiskan metafora makanan sebagai bentuk penindasan terhadap perempuan karena adanya nilai-nilai patriarki di dunia lama. Lahiri juga mengimplisitkan bagaimana makanan mampu menyandingkan isu dunia lama dan dunia baru: kemiskinan dan kecukupan, dan perlawanan terhadap kapitalisme.

Kata kunci: identitas, makanan, nostalgia, oposisi biner, penindasan

Abstract

As food is now also observed through the lens of social sciences, the relation of food and literature is inevitable. In diasporic identity, the existence of food as one of elements that immigrants usually long for is thus unavoidable. This paper discusses the metaphor of food and foodways in the novel *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri. Through postcolonial analysis, the results show that food and foodways metaphorically represent nostalgia experienced by the main character. Food also becomes the field of showing identity, and negotiation process which bridges the binary cultural differences. Moreover, Lahiri also implies the metaphor of food as the oppression of women due to the existence of patriarchal values in the old world. Domesticity symbolized through food and foodways puts women in an uneasy situation. Lahiri also parallels the food as the medium of the old and new world: the poor and sufficiency, and the resistance to capitalism.

Keywords: food, binary opposition, identity, nostalgia, oppression

INTRODUCTION

"Food is important. In fact, nothing is more basic. Food is the first of the essential of life, our biggest industry, our biggest export, and our most frequently indulged pleasure. Food means creativity and diversity. As a species, humans are omnivores; we have tried to eat virtually everything on the globe, and our ability to turn remarkable array of raw substances into cooked dishes, meals, and feasts is evidence of astounding versatility, adaptability, and aesthetic ingenuity (Belasco 2006:viii).

The essential of food is inevitable in human beings. In postmodern culture, food engages important roles as culture is highly affected by food. Recent studies in food prove the evidence that food embraces reflection of society. Food can reflect equality/inequality in the matters of gender, class, and other social markers. Fernand Braudel, as in Montanari (2004:5) asserts that food plants are “the plants of civilization” as diversity of food is a mixture of the acts in economy, politics, culture, and religion.

Food unveils the hidden symbols about what the community conducts in their daily routines. Since food is considered as important in culture and human’s life, Keeling and Pollard (2009:5) assert that food is essential for imagination as culture and civilization attach closely to food. Quoting the story of Odysseus epic where food may affect one’s mental state and emotion, Keeling and Pollard (2009:4) argue that:

One of the earliest texts of world literature the integral role of food as signifier, not only the product of culture but one that gives shape to the *mentalites* that structure thought and expression. The presence of food, food production, and scenes of eating and feasting –all thread through the epic. One can read the epic as adventure tale, but food is fundamental to the plot and to the character interaction, to the very propelling of the adventure forward throughout the story: the ritual barbecues, these feasts, the slaughtering of the bulls and pigs and sheep and, occasionally, humans.

Therefore, food and foodways become a steady interweave in the works of literature that is connected through the intrinsic aspects. In literature, the presence of food and foodways become signifying matters that reflect the social and cultural settings in the story. Kessler who proposes *Gastronomic Theory of Literature* argues that “[...]just as in life, food in fiction signifies [...] It is symbolic” (2005:156). This is in line with Roland Barthes who argues in his book *The Elements of Semiology* that puts food as one of signifying system paralleled with garment system, car, and furniture system (1967:27-28).

In diasporic identity, food is indispensable as food is one element that diasporic people usually miss in the new land. This paper is intended to observe the metaphor of food and foodways in the novel written by Asian-Indian-American writer and the winner of 2000 Pulitzer Award, Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland*. As the second generation of Asian-Indian immigrant to America, Lahiri found that food consists of various meaning beyond its biochemical aspects. Inspired by her experience as an immigrant, most of her fictions involve food and foodways in both countries reflecting her interaction of food from both old and new world.

Starting its setting in the 1960s, *The Lowland* tells a story about two brothers: Subhash and Udayan, who experience the different life. Subhash, thirteen months older than Udayan, is described as a “sweet boy,” obedient, in contrast with rebellious and critical Udayan. Growing up, both choose the different paths to pass, when Subhash

moves to America and commits to being a scientist, while Udayan joins Indian communist party, Naxalite, and gets involve in some rebels against Indian government. When Udayan was killed, Subhash returns to India and finds that he should save Gauri, the expectant Udayan's widow, by marrying her and taking her to Rhode Island, America.

Living in a new country with the different habits somewhat brings uneasiness to Gauri. The situation of living in-betweeness, a situation that is experienced mostly by diasporic people, haunts Gauri's mind. In addition, marrying a person she casts doubt deteriorates Gauri's condition. Gauri's unconsciousness forces her to commit an act that rebels the condition to let her out of the situation. When Subhash and Bela, the Gauri's daughter, make a visit to India, Gauri leaves home to California, involving in academic works as a lecturer. She just returns Rhode Island to sign divorce agreement over thirty years later when Bela has been a single mother of a five-year-old girl.

METHOD

Steven Vertovec (1999) defines diaspora in three types; the first, that diaspora is identified as "social form," which is characterized by relation among the diasporic community, the new land, and the land of origin. Second, diaspora connotes as "type of consciousness" in which contains the meaning that there is paradox of old and new, which can result in double consciousness. This second definition also leads into the contexts of past and present; and then rooted and uprooted. Third, diaspora acts as "mode of cultural production," which is emphasized in the process of "production and reproduction" in the social and cultural configuration.

In line with Ketu Katrak (in Mannur 2010:1) who acknowledges that food becomes a substance that builds their imagination with the homeland—and thus brings a feeling of rootedness in the US—Jhumpa Lahiri also perceives the same ideas. Though she has been in England, America, and the Italy for the last, the memory of Indian food cannot be uprooted from her mind. In her essay on "Indian Takeout," Lahiri (2015) explains how in the 1970s she and her family brought food suitcase to India and filled it with a wide array of Indian foods. She still remembers how the father was busy with eating and shopping Indian foods to be taken back to America. The longing for comestibles from India is stimulated by the sense of rootedness to the homeland, in which is difficult to erase.

Memory, sets of experience occur in the past, is not something stable, yet it is changeable through correlative action between past and present (Sutton 2001:9). Hodgkin and Radstone (2003, as quoted in Holtzman 2006:363) mentions that in memory, the past is recollected and commemorated to build the present. Hence, people will make effort to bring the past to the present and recreate situation in the past to the present. Asian-Indian's way of recreating the past by conducting Asian Indian gathering in the newland—and then serving Indian foods—and some visits returning to India are parts of recreating and reinventing the past in the present time. Subhash's habits in occasionally cooking *curry* and boiling rice is one of

evidences of putting nostalgia as his family usually do. His efforts to present Indian food is one of the feelings of yearning Indian food. Therefore, there is an action of reassembling history in the past and putting it in the present. The emotional recollection of what his mother cooks in the past is gathered and comes into memory presented in the present.

Subhash also usually shows his ability to cook Indian food when Richard, his American friend visits him (Lahiri 2013:49). However, Subhash feels that he should show his Indian identity when people from other group come and taste the Indian food. Hall (2003:236) puts it that identity “is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth.” Furthermore, Hall also argues that cultural identity is “a positioning.” Subhash consciously identifies and positions himself as Indian people by cooking Indian food. When there is “the other” – people or group coming from other biological traits and nationality, people will show their position as “the owner” of the culture. Food, the curry, becomes the tool of showing his position as Indian identity, which is not owned by Americans. Moreover, this also reflects that Subhash cannot detach his rootedness to be Asian-Indian by cooking and consuming Indian foods.

At the same time, enjoying Indian food and American beers is considered as negotiation process where people are in diasporic identity. It can also be seen in Subhash’s visit to Italian restaurants (Lahiri 2013:54) and cooking American foods in his daily life in the new land. Putting *dals*, vegetables, and *samosas* together with *lasagna* and salad in the gathering is also part of negotiation (Lahiri 2013:166). Living outside the homeland borders may force people to face binary opposition as Homi K. Bhabha mentions. Oscillating between the two cultures leads people to negotiate by bridging the two poles through the liminal space as Bhabha puts it as quoted in Supriyono (2004:145), “Negotiation of cultural identity involves continuing of cultural meetings and exchanges so that it will result in acknowledgment of cultural differences from both sides.” The failure of bridging the poles will bring the tension between the two caused by failure in assimilation.

Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) mentions that truth and knowledge are not fixed and changeable. There is no boundaries, hence there will be hybridity and plurality characterized by fluidity and flexibility. Thus, dealing with American foods is not something strange for Subhash as the massive encroaching American values, including in foods, and the acceptance in Subhash’s consciousness that he can go hand in hand with the foods from the new land. Cultural identity is fluid and then borderless.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Food, Domesticity, and Oppression

After her father-in-law brought back a fish from the market, it was her job to cut the pieces, coat them with salt and turmeric, and fry them in oil. She sat in front of the stove on the flats of her feet. She reduced the sauce they would put the fish into for evening, seasoning it according to

her mother-in-law's instructions. She helped cup up cabbage, shell peas. Rid spinach of sand.

If the servant was late or had a day off she had to grind the turmeric root and chilies on a stone slab, to pound mustard or poppy seeds if her mother-in-law wanted to cook with them that day. When she ground the chilies her palm felt as if the skin had been scrapped off. Tipping the rice pot onto a plate, she let the water drain, making sure the cooked grains didn't slip out. The weight of the inverted pan strained her wrists, steam scalding her face if she forgot to turn it away (Lahiri 2013:355).

Putting Paul Gilroy's note that families act as both the nation in sphere in microcosm and arena for changing of social processes, Anita Mannur (2010:51) claims that family and home are "the primary socializing agents of the nation in microcosm." Family is the medium where the national and cultural values are preserved, including division of gender roles. Public sphere is associated with masculinity, while private or domestic sphere is correlated with femininity. Thus, home is part of private sphere in which the values of domesticity and status of gender are reaffirmed and maintained.

In *The Lowland*, food contains metaphor of domesticity, power, and status of women. Gauri, used to be an activist, must encounter the power of patriarchal system once she is married and living with Udayan's family. Outside the fact that she is rather unexpected daughter-in-law, Gauri's presence occupies a lower status in her husband's family. She lost the opportunity of reading her books in the morning as used to be. Instead, she must work in the kitchen to cook and prepare foods for the whole family before going to campus. In the absence of the house boy, Gauri must serve the tea for family, that she never joins to partake (Lahiri 2013:113).

As there is a stark division of gender roles, these duties are not applicable to Udayan. Udayan and her father-in-law, on the other hand, are the parties that should be served. Food becomes arena for exerting male domination over female. On the other hand, female cannot exerting her domination over the male. Male domination and Gauri's status as women lead her to receive fewer opportunities, including in food portion division. This situation is deteriorated with Gauri's status as daughter-in-law that receives the lowest position after her mother-in-law. The intersectionality of sex and class forces Gauri to obey her mother-in-law's command to cook and help (Lahiri 2013:355).

Days after Udayan was shot, in the time of condolence, Gauri should dress-up in white and wear no accessories, and eat only rice without fish or meat though she is expecting and needs more nutrition (Lahiri 2013:112).

"You've taken away her colored clothes, the fish and meat from her plate."

"These are our customs," his mother said.

"It's demeaning. Udayan would never have wanted her to live this way" (Lahiri 2013:136).

However, Gauri does not want to defend herself as she realizes that it will complicate her relations with her parents-in-law. The hegemonic tradition on patriarchy puts women in the lower position in society. This also occurs to Bijoli, Udayan's and Subhash's mother when losing her husband after long years later. Bijoli's acts of wearing white saris with no patterns or borders, and eating fishless (Lahiri 2013:219) represents the submission of women towards patriarchal system in society. Women should leave the symbols of pleasure, including their consumption, as the empathy of their husbands' death. Meat and fish are expensive and categorized as luxurious foods, therefore, consuming both foods in mourning time is considered inappropriate. Committing resistance will invite the uneasy situation with society as the tradition has been passed down through generations and embeds strongly in society.

Food Metaphor of Binary Opposition

Gauri's termination of eating meatless and fishless comes when Subhash stops the tradition and marries Gauri, despite the askance look of his parents. Subhash's idea to marry her and then moves to America can be viewed as a tool to set Gauri free from the patriarchal traditions. In addition, it will bring opportunities that seem used to be impossible for Gauri to gain. America is positioned as the country that upholds equality and liberation, while India is depicted as a country which still holds traditional values, including oppression of women. Gauri's moving to the US is expected to bring the Western values, and leave the old traditional values.

In the matter of food, the binary opposition of India versus America is also apparent. Although rather in a subtle way, Lahiri puts India versus America paralleled with poor versus sufficient, yet not extravagant. She describes the miserable 1960's India, during some rebels by Naxalite as follows:

He met tenant farmers living in desperation. People who resorted to eating what they fed their animals. Children who ate one meal a day.

[...]

He ate what he was given. Coarse grains of rice, thinned lentils. Water that never quenched his thirst. In some villages there was no tea (Lahiri 2013:409-410).

The severity of India situation due to unstable political system is metaphorically depicted when food becomes crucial element affected by the political and social system. The food available in Gauri's and Udayan's wedding party – the cutlets, fish fries, and some sweets – are one of evidences of the lack of food at that time, although at that time the mentioned foods were regarded sumptuous. The humble wedding party, famine, and the shortage completely describe India during the revolution, in which becomes the reason for Naxalite to commit the rebels.

This situation is in contrast with that of America. Although it is not of abundance, the America's sufficiency is quite different from that of India's poverty. With enough money that he earns, Subhash is able to spend it in any kind of foods, going to Italian

restaurants, and not to worry about his life. The contrast between old and new world is analogous with Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting* where food can be a tool to juxtapose India and America to represent power, gender stereotypes, inequality, adherence or resistance, family ties, and consumption (Whitt 2011:50-51).

The binary opposition is not only about India versus America. Moreover, the novel also is about a juxtaposition of traditional versus modernity. Bela's profession as environmental activist leads her to commit actions and campaigns for maintaining the cleanliness of earth and its natural resources. She proposes people to arrange community gardens so that they do not depend on the food banks, the supermarkets, owned by capitalists (Lahiri 2013:272). Bela's commitment to environment which is considered as earth's friendly activities is viewed as returning to traditional yet earth friendly way.

In Rhode Island, she went through his refrigerator, chiding him for the apples he continued to buy from supermarkets. She was opposed to eating food that had to be transported long distances. To the patenting seeds. She talked to him about why people still died from famines, why farmers still went hungry. She blamed the unequal distribution of wealth (Lahiri 2013:273).

Her repudiation of patenting seeds and buying foods from supermarkets is symbol of subaltern resistance towards capitalism. Capitalists are blamed for the inequality of the political, economy, and social situation that leads into the gap between the rich and the poor. Hence, they are viewed as responsible for the negative effects they caused. Bela's critical thinking and resistance against stability created by the capitalists is somewhat resembling the attitude of Udayan, whom people usually considered as rebellious (Lahiri 2013: 273).

CONCLUSION

Lahiri's affection of food is reflected in her works, one of them is *The Lowland*. For Lahiri, food cannot be detached from one's mind as food is part of the sense of rootedness. Putting her father's experience with foods in "Rice", Lahiri (2009) explores her writings almost in the same way her family deals with foods. Comparing her writing in "I am, in Italian, a Tougher Writer" (2016), which depicts her experience in learning Italian in her purpose of moving to Italia, Lahiri experienced what she calls as "language exile", where she must skip her English for months to improve her Italian. People must ignore their mother tongue and switch their mind to the learning language. Implicitly mentioning that dealing with food is different from that with language, it can be said that two opposed food can go hand-in-hand, while two languages cannot be used at the same time. American food can be served at the same time with Indian food—like *dals* and *samosas* that are accompanied with lasagna and salad.

Nostalgia, negotiation, and identity are reflected in food. People will always attempt to reinvent the past in the future through the process of negotiation. By showing identity, they agree that there is also an action of "positioning." Cooking *curry* can be meant of nostalgia and showing identity, but at the same time is also about the negotiation process when accompanying with Western foods.

Power relation is also symbolized in food. Gender status and roles which lead to oppression become a reflection of food practices. Food becomes tool of strengthening the male domination and at the other hand, lowering women's position. Women must be actively involved in food preparation, yet not in food consumption. Women are drained their energy for preparation, but never receive the proper foods even though the nutrition is essential for their body and health. Additionally, power relation between subaltern and capitalist and the acts of resistance are parts of the metaphor of food itself. The 'back to nature' movement is depicted as the counter of the capitalist movement that spread their webs throughout the country.

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