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Seasoning Refugeehood through Food Memory: Tracing the Sensory Souvenir of Home in Beverley Naidoo's the Other Side of Truth

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Abstract

Forced migration constantly leads to a great extent of cultural difference between the native land and the host country. The impact of food plays a special relevance in refugees' post migration, as it symbolizes the earliest structural link with the homeland and societal construction. Food practice is a form of discourse that inexplicably circumscribes with the individual's identity in association with the self and the object split representation. Beverley Naidoo in *The Other Side of Truth*, scrutinizes food memory as one of the introjects that entails both the sense of continuity with the lost objects and also the feeling of up rootedness from the native culture. The flavours of certain food evoke the regressive feeling of non-belongingness among the repressed refugees by gustatory and olfactory stimuli. The correlation of food consumption, memory of homeland and refugeehood is analyzed through the theoretical underpinnings of sensory and emotional involuntary memory. This paper adopts an ethnographic approach and introspects the food memory through the protagonist's longing for African food in the host country. It also delineates how food consumption triggers refugees' past thereby eliciting a range of positive and negative recollection through sensory stimulation.

Key-words: food practices, refugee, Naidoo, food memory, nostalgia.

Introduction

Migration always leads to the magnitude of cultural differences between the native and host land, thereby refugees experience a sense of de-individuation and up rootedness from their native culture. Leaving their own social and cultural entities, refugees confront an uncertain and inconsolable life by carrying the stigma of being an outsider in the host country. In the foreign land, memory of the past acts as a coping mechanism to complete their mourning process and adapting the new hybrid identity. In particu-

lar, food memory becomes a way of consolidating and reworking the cultural identity. Migrant communities from different geographical and ethical background nominate food symbols for the nostalgic reminiscence of bygone culture and identity. The symbolic function of food consumption is to shape the familial bond, intergenerational links, vitalizing selfhood and transporting rituals.

Food practice is socially and culturally located term that holds a central part in literature. Food is an invincible symbol in literature, especially in diasporic and migrant literature, as it acts as a material substance as well as symbolic entity. Migrant culture has been widely predominated by food images and food consumptions as metaphor. In literature, food studies interrogate the symbolism, as it reflects on cultural identity which encompasses from societal role to family structure. For instance, in Anita Desai's *Fasting and Feasting*, and Thien Pham's *Family Style: Memories of an American from Vietnam*, food upholds multiple meanings that drive the plot, character and provides sensory image and texture to the familiar ground. As food stimulates all five senses, the memories evoked by idealised lost objects through aromas, textures, and tastes and serve as an alternative in reviving the past through food consumption. Food memories frequently strengthen a person's sense of cultural identity. Food customs, such as following traditional family recipes and consuming particular foods, evoke nostalgic memories and recollections because they provide a symbolic link to people or occasions in the past, and these customs are important remnants of the past. The memory is strengthened and increased by meals. It diminishes self-worth by briefly turning to an idealised past. A simple food flavour or culinary action can bring back the bygone memories.

Food Practices as Collective Memory

Memory through food practices intrinsically becomes burgeoning element in migrant literature. Proust observes in *Remembrance of Things Past* that remembering might involve experiencing or

relearning events, geographical settings, and people from the past rather than only looking back on past sensory experiences. Involuntary memories are triggered by a certain scent or flavour from the past. These automatic memories aid in recalling not only tastes and smells but also social connections, individual experiences, and relationships. Sutton's *Remembrance of Repasts* serves as a crucial beginning point for thinking about the correlation between food and memory. His theoretical underpinning refers to as a 'Proustian anthropology,' which is based on his observation on the Greek Island of Kalymnos frequently remember distant events through food—for example, the apricots they are consuming while exploring a deserted synagogue during the Nazi colonization, how the long-standing anthropological interest of exchange can be understood through reference to memory, since social relations are constructed. Sutton considers memory as the communicative channel between the individuals and the societies. He highlights the insights of Halbwachs's insights on collective memory, "our memory is in fact stimulated and shaped by the social milieus and the people, objects and institutions that make them up" (Carolyn 471). Halbwachs asserts that remembrance itself is a collective process, since "there is a come consistency and stability in the spatial/material world with which we interact" (Carolyn 471). Under those circumstances, food nostalgia becomes interpersonal, where "eating is both personal and social act. The sensory pleasure of eating is subjectively experienced, but it is often undertaken in groups" (Brown et al., 206)

Food as Agent

Food is one of the significant symbols in Beverley Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth* as it plays a pivotal role that encompasses geo-cultural differences from the homeland to host land, acts as a bridge between individual and society. Naidoo represents cultural themes of acceptance, resistance, and culture preservation through culinary practises and eating as symbols of narrative history, memory, and relationships. The novel captures the vivid

backdrop of execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa. The protagonist Sade's father voices against General Abacha by his writings. After encountering mother's death, Sade has been illegally smuggled to London with her brother Femi for their safety. The novel traces how Sade overcomes all the struggles and rebuild her identity in the host country through memory and recollection of past as the coping mechanism. This paper scrutinizes how Naidoo has used food as a powerful multivalent element in imparting the cultural and psychological connection to migrant's emerging hybrid identity. Food serves as a social, cultural, and personal declaration of one's beliefs.

Naidoo uses food as an agency to depict the strands between the cultural structure and familial bond. Tasting the native food in the host country helps in emotional refuelling among the diasporic spaces. In the novel, food has been examined as the means of nostalgia, introjection, and integration with the host land that leads to the emergence of hybrid identity. Naidoo engrosses the flavour and aroma of food substance as a powerful symbol to navigate and understand the sociocultural transition of protagonists in the land of asylum. Aunt Gracie as a foster mother in the novel, helps Sade and Femi for the bereavement of their lost culture and to acculturate the host culture through meal preparation and shared table. Naidoo ascertains the significance of food consumption and its contribution as one of the coping mechanisms by incorporating cuisines and eating habits in the beginning of some chapters, "A FRESHLY BAKED CHOCOLATE CAKE" (Naidoo 126), "AUNT GRACIE COAXED WITH A BOWL OF SOUP" (220), "WHEN AUNT GRACIE CAME with fresh orange juice..." (224). The author reiterates the importance of food practices even in her writing technique by bold capitalization for highlighting the cuisines. The food metaphor is interwoven throughout the novel, affixing the multidimensional layers to the plot, imparts distressing images that reflects the protagonist's mourning for lost culture. Naidoo's colourful imagery of food provides multiple symbols in the novel *The Other*

Side of Truth. She uses food and food preparation, in particular African food, to illustrate a geographical boundary that is made up of several discordant ingredients, tries to create a unified whole, characters try to stick with their traditional food practices. While Sade and Femi are predominately occupied with her native practices, as a narrative technique, Naidoo uses certain African dialects for cuisines and ingredients. For instance, Sade and Femi use their local dialect for certain food products: 'Gari' – ground cassava, 'pawpaw' – papaya, 'plantain' – a giant banana, 'yam' – a root vegetable, and 'peppersoup' – soup made with hot chillies.

In the initial stage of post migration, Sade and Femi are too passive and alienates themselves due to past traumas. Mrs. Gracie's meals preparation is one of the significant factors to cope with the loss, and rebuilding their disrupted identity. Specific flavours and aromas from Kings' kitchen become a prime symbol of the native society and culture in which Sade and Femi rely on in order to attain balance while encountering the new strange culture in the foreign land. Sade bereaves for her deceased mother when she is exposed to familiar smell and taste, "She stared at the creases in the printed pineapple all around her and ached for Mama's voice to call her to eat" (Naidoo 110-11). While bereaving for the deceased mother, Sade and Femi finds refuge in Kings' house and they replace their mother with Aunt Gracie through food practices. Aunt Gracie tries her best to comfort Sade and Femi. She learns African food from her Nigerian friend to make them feel home. But it lifts up their trauma by recollecting their actual loss, "Chicken stew with fried yams, fried plantains, and a spinach soup" (111). Food acts as a signifier for refugee and migrant communities, as the memory wafts from the native food, and the attachment forged between children and mother. It is a locus for socially constructed identity.

Hunger – Signifier of Refugeehood

The metaphorical value of food is more acute to the expatriates and forced migrants than the target

community because the food symbols carry additional cultural and familial connotation when the individuals are dislodged from the normalcy of the native residents. Hunger is an inevitable aspect that individuals experience during their forced migration. Naidoo has documented the high risk of hunger, poverty and hunger strike through the main characters: Sade, Femi and Florian Solaja. Naidoo strongly believes that the state of being homelessness primarily disrupts the individual's dietary and eating routine. Through the narration, Naidoo defines refugees are "those winding lines of starving people, with stick-thin children. People who carried their few possessions in dusty cotton bundles, struggling across deserts and mountains. Refugees were people trying to escape famine and war"(86).

Sade and Femi undergo the sense of being transported back to the lost images and they try to revive the past through memories evoked through sensory stimuli. Such concept is vividly demonstrated by Marcel Proust. He traces that the taste and smell of specific food involuntarily triggers to bring back the past hidden memories. After being abandoned by the smuggler, Sade and Femi lost their way to reach Uncle Dele. The aromas from food stalls in the streets of London exacerbate their feeling of uprooted from their homeland, and the inability to buy food becomes a residual trauma in the initial stage of post migration. As soon as they arrive in London, Sade and Femi realise the loss of class position and the social structure due to poverty and hunger, "How long could they manage like this without no money and no food?" (Naidoo 62). Local residents treat them as criminal and no one came forward to help Sade and Femi. Deprived from high social status in Lagos, Femi shows regressive feeling due to starvation and olfactory stimulation, "the smell of frying fish" (62), as it intensifies his bereavement over the lost culture. Another undeniable aspect in undocumented migrant communities experience in their post migration is hunger strike. In one episode, the novel registers that hunger strike is the only way for the refugees to voice out for their

rights, "'A hunger strike makes news. It *stays* news. OK, not for too long, but people will want to know what's happening'" (209). Florian Solaja uses the hunger strike is a significant plot which brings out the political unrest, activism and refugees' hardships.

Food Practices in Nostalgic Triggers

Volkan states that nostalgia is the byproduct attached to 'linking objects' and phenomena or it may function as a 'linking phenomenon.' According to David Werman, individuals often derive pleasure from the pursuit, even when aware that what they are seeking is irretrievable. Nostalgia provides a period of time for the refugee to adapt to a new country. When such process of searching the bygone objects takes place, the effect of nostalgia fades away, however it does not vanish entirely. The ambivalent relationship of the past lost objects continues in the mourner's involvement and predomination with the introject. The mourner's emotional entity torn and sways between an intense yearning for the restored presence of the lost person or thing, and an equal wish that the lost item becomes futureless. The presence of such 'introject' builds a façade of choices and reduces repressive emotions. However, having an introject always helps with the continuation of an internal struggle with it. In the novel *The Other Side of Truth*, food metaphors act as introjects linked with both positive and negative memories and entail paradoxical bittersweet emotions.

Gradually, Femi starts responding to the target community through eating habits. When Aunt Gracie bakes chocolate cake as a treat after their first day of school, Femi shows mixed emotion, by enjoying the food as well as suppressing his grief. Food habits evoke reminiscence of the past, thereby Sade and Femi sway between 'letting go' and 'holding on': the lost images and adapting the new culture, and holding on to the past trauma remembering through food metaphor. Food acts as an introject for Sade and Femi throughout the novel. Naidoo consistently brings out the eating practice of the protagonist's post migration, where food is

ubiquitous in Sade's life travelling through her tribulations and empowering her to face hardships. Sade recognizes uncertainty in her life through disruption and changes in her food practices. At the same time, Aunt Gracie's meal preparation helps Sade to revamp her ongoing uncertainties:

AUNT GRACIE COAXED SADE with a bowl of soup. She brought it into the bedroom on a small tray brightly painted and labeled FLOWERS FROM JAMAICA. Sade avoided looking at her, staring instead at the scarlet imitations of flowers that looked like flaming forest buds.

"My mother made the very same chicken broth, you know. She used to say, 'It build you up, so you better drink up!'"

"But I'm not hungry, Auntie," Sade tried to protest.

Aunt Gracie lifted Sade's hand, smoothing it between her own.

"I know," she said gently. "But your mama would have wanted you to eat."

It was the first time Aunt Gracie had mentioned Mama. Something silently burst, like the air exploding in Sade's ears up in the airplane. It was scary. Like entering somewhere new and strange.

"I'll try, Auntie," she whispered. She forced herself to take sips from the bowl, but was relieved when Aunt Gracie left her and she could block out all thoughts in sleep. (Naidoo 220)

The strong food smell often leads to bitter sweet nostalgic memories, evoking the sense love and belongingness, as well as the deep feeling of uprooted and mourning for the lost culture. But, for Femi the food imageries always generate bitter experience of past memories:

They came to a shop with plantains and yams piled up by the doorway and windows heaped with bags of rice and gari, that they could not resist going in. The shop smelled of Lagos. Spices, oils, dried fish and fresh vegetables were all crammed onto overflowing shelves. Bottles and tins did

extraordinary balancing acts like on Mr. Abiona's stall. (Naidoo 62)

The aromas of plantains, rice, gari, spices, oils, and dried fish in London helps Sade to revive the memories of Lagos. But on the other hand, Femi becomes aggressive and feels victimized when the shopkeepers treat them as thieves, "“This food isn't good. Not like in Lagos!” he said loudly. “Come on, Sade, well go to another shop!”” (Naidoo 63). Thus, Naidoo has highlighted the multidimensional approach of food metaphor by differentiating the eating practices, textures, flavours and tastes of food between Lagos and London.

Food Nostalgia forges the powerful link to the past, symbolically connecting the individuals to the people, place or events through the sensory experience of food consumption and practices. Even though individuals do not have specific memories linked to those flavor profiles, they are still likely to gravitate to certain food that have deep nostalgic pull. Eating is an act engaging individuals in multisensory experience, with smell and taste being particularly potent memory triggers. Food preparation during certain occasion leads to memory triggers, recollecting people from the past, and transporting them to another space and time through the sensory experience. Across the world, families gather around the shared tables, bonding over culturally built recipes, and nurtured flavours. In the novel, Sade longs for her routine Christmas rituals that she used to celebrate with her family in Lagos. In London everything looked strange for Sade, “This was nothing like any Christmas she knew” (Naidoo 233). Aunt Gracie makes Christmas preparation by decorated their house and preparing Christmas dinner, “pies, puddings and cakes” (233), and Sade helps her kneading the “cream-coloured dough” (233). During the meal preparation, Sade emotionally transports herself by recollecting her old Christmas Eve in Lagos,

“Christmas meant Grandma, Mama and Papa, uncles and aunts great and small, and endless cousins

with their cousins. Christmas meant chasing chickens and goats or climbing “Baba Baobab” (the oldest tree in the world, Femi claimed). Christmas meant listening to Baba Akin’s stories (like how he was chased in the forest by iwin when he was a little boy!). First they would watch Baba search the rafters for tobacco leaves, then crush them in his leathery hand and press them neatly with his little finger into his long pipe. Waiting for his pipe to light up was all part of waiting for the story. Christmas also meant cocks crowing in the morning. Waking up ears. Come alive! Come alive! Listen to the sounds of the day!” (Naidoo 234)

As it is believed that the Christmas meal preparation brings family together, Sade emotionally reunites with her family by recollecting her past Christmas like “*Homing pigeons*” (Naidoo 233), what her father used to call them during Christmas. Such occasions may carry different connotations that develop mental and emotional representation when encountered. Therefore, the image of food enclave is predominated with the sense of African identity. Through the protagonists Sade and Femi, Naidoo records the cross-cultural symbolic relationship between the post-colonial space and food images. Throughout the novel, the flavours of food are portrayed to have the special power and structure to aid the immigrant crisis. The parallel connection between memory and food can be attributed to key factors: Sade’s powerful bond with food memory stem from the ability to stimulate all senses, with smell and taste, which leave lasting imprints on her emotional and psychological entities even in her resettlement period.

Conclusion

Food acts as an elicitor to revive the memories of past. The emotional and psychosocial profile of the food practices triggered by nostalgia share links to sociocultural connections. Food consumption as a ‘linking object’ that has been discovered or its substitute can revive emotions from the past. The parallel between the sociological functions of food consumption and nostalgia strengthens the self-identity, and they both are ambivalent. Food-

centred memory is an evolving theme in the studies of diasporic and migrant communities. Throughout the novel, Sade’s and Femi’s emotional growth runs parallel with the acceptance of food culture. The food symbols that are represented in the novel *The Other Side of Truth* posit in the form of food rituals, sensory factors, food memories and resistance expressed by Sade and Femi in their post migration, as it preserves their native culture and communal bonding.

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