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HETEROTOPIA IN TASTE: A STUDY OF RUKMINI SRINIVAS'S TIFFIN AND SHOBHA NARAYAN'S MONSOON DIARY

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ABSTRACT

Rukmini Srinivas's Tiffin: Memories and Recipes of Indian Vegetarian Food and Shobha Narayan's Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes are cookbook memoirs that present the author's close association with food while in their home country and abroad. Shobha Narayan and Rukmini Srinivas state that they have difficult encounters with food while visiting a foreign country. They recollect their taste memory from childhood, through their cookbook memoirs by incorporating their favourite recipes in them. The challenging scenario with food in the transnational space as an Indian diaspora in the United States of America has made them discuss it along with their own solutions. The transnational space of the immigrants in a foreign land can be observed as a heterotopia where the diaspora resides in a state of crisis, especially in association with the food that they consume due to the different cuisines to which they have to adapt.

Keywords: Cookbook Memoirs, Transnational, Heterotopia, Diaspora

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Michael Foucault, heterotopia is a disturbing or transforming space and has deeper layers of meaning. This research paper aims at analysing the transnational space as a heterotopia, where the expatriates create their recipes combining traditional and foreign tastes to create a utopia for themselves. This research study also overlooks how the Indian authors of the select cookbook memoirs recreate recipes to suite their palate while living in or travelling to a foreign country. Food memoirs combine autobiographical elements with vivid descriptions of meals which throughs a glimpse into the memoirist's food culture. It proves that food can be a powerful tool in evoking nostalgia and the personal history of the writer. The select memoirs under study Rukmini Srinivas's *Tiffin: Memories and Recipes of Indian Vegetarian Food and* Shobha Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* delves into the author's relationship with food and how food and cooking have shaped their lives in their native land and in the foreign country to which they have migrated.

2. HETEROTOPIA IN TASTE: A STUDY OF RUKMINI SRINIVAS'S *TIFFIN* AND SHOBHA NARAYAN'S *MONSOON DIARY*

This research paper focuses on analyzing the two select memoirs with Foucault's heterotopia. The transnational space in which the migrant authors live is seen as a heterotopia that combines different contradictory elements in a single entity. Also, the kitchen and even a tiffin carrier can be seen as a heterotopic space. In the present-day scenario, both regional food and cosmopolitan food are considered equally appealing and alluring, especially in the growing scenario of migration. Love for regional cuisine can be traced back to the memory of the roots of the immigrant and that cosmopolitan can be the incite to be modern. This research study Heterotopia in Taste: A Study of Rukmini Srinivas's *Tiffin* and Shobha Narayan's *Monsoon Diary* overlooks how the immigrants from India recreate their traditional recipes in a foreign land.

Michael Foucault's heterotopia is a disturbing or transforming space and has deeper layers of meaning. "The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also in itself, a heterogenous space" (3) remarks Michael Foucault in his essay *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias.*

A transnational space created by immigrants living in a foreign land can be observed as a heterotopia as it causes many difficulties to the people migrating to a host country. This research study Heterotopia in Taste: A Study of Rukmini Srinivas's *Tiffin* and Shobha Narayan's *Monsoon Diary* discusses the issues faced by the select authors Rukmini Srinivas and Shobha Narayan while moving to a foreign country with special reference to to to food and also looks at transnational space as a heterotopia, where the expatriates create their recipes combining the traditional and the foreign tastes to create a utopia for themselves. The utopia that they create becomes the Creole culture which combines their native tastes with foreign tastes. "In a culture like ours, which is given over to forgetting, in which we spend so much time choosing, buying and consuming, the heterotopias are privileged places, perhaps the last, real places of this living memory" (Foucault 6). It is thus through the heterotopic space of the diaspora that the memories associated with the homeland are recreated.

Shobha Narayan is an Indian author who is the author of the cookbook memoir titled *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes*. She takes a great interest in South Indian cooking during her stay in America as a student and as a married woman. Her traditional Indian cooking style blends with her foreign cooking experience in America, which is a space that bridges different cultures. Moreover, the Indian kitchen of an immigrant in America becomes a place where diverse recipes and tastes join reflecting a heterotopic space within the transnational space as it includes multiple elements in a singular space. Also, the interplay between past and present in the memoir creates a temporal experience which is a heterotopic dimension in time. The narratives about the childhood experience in India and the current life in America are juxtaposed in her cookbook memoir.

As an Indian bride trying world cuisine in a foreign land, Shobha Narayan had to find and use appropriate substitutes to incite interest in her culinary exploration. Shoba Narayan took to cooking after her marriage. Her husband Ram liked Indian food and during their stay in Connecticut, she experimented with her culinary skills. One of her insightful thoughts on her culinary experiments as stated in her cookbook memoir *Monsoon Diary* is about tofu.

> The tofu version of the *chienchaud*, however, proved to be staggeringly bland, even after we dressed it up with ketchup, salsa, and mustard. The tofu ham was even worse, and the tofu bologna took the cake for the worst-tasting soy product we had ever eaten. (Narayan 203)

As a South Indian accustomed to spicy food the bland taste of food in the foreign country troubled her. When Shobha Narayan experimented with modifying the recipes to suit her taste as well as to incorporate the taste of the new place, her husband Ram refuted making changes to the Indian recipes. "Why are you experimenting with recipes that have already been perfected through five thousand years" (Narayan 193) asks Ram and he prefers Indian dishes made traditionally, according to the authentic recipe, which makes the food simpler as well as good.

The desire to remember home by fondly recreating culinary memories cannot be

understood merely as reflectively nostalgic gestures; rather, such nostalgically framed narratives must also be read as a metacritique of what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one's relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which unflinchingly yoke national identity with culinary taste and practices. (Mannur 29)

As Anita Mannur states, Ram's interest in solely Indian food can be associated with reflecting nostalgic food memory and interrelating his identity as an Indian to the culinary taste and practices while residing outside the home country.

When her grandmother whom they call Nalla-ma comes to visit Ram and the author, it is declared that Nalla-ma would be eating food that she prepares with her bare hand as she says, "this was a foreign land…and one never knew if errant cooks had accidentally dumped lard in the supposedly vegetarian items" (207). This prior reaction of the old lady portrays how difficult it is for the migrants especially the old generation to get accustomed to the new food culture in the host country. Moreover, when Shobha Narayan with her husband and grandmother went to the hotel's dining room for the complimentary breakfasts, "Nalla-ma would sit discreetly in a corner and eat the glutinous rice porridge that she'd brought with her. She'd hide the container on her lap because she thought that the management would throw her out for bringing her food" (208).

During their cross-country trip, it was declared that "Nalla-ma would take her rice cooker, a bag of rice, and a tall bottle containing the spicy tamarind relish (*puli-kaachal*) that she had concocted. She would cook her rice in the rice cooker and subsist on that and the *puli-kaachal* during the trip" (209). But as she forgot the rice cooker at home, they had to buy plain rice from a Chinese restaurant so that she could have it with the spicy tamarind relish. She used to read the ingredients of all the items she bought to look for any questionable substance. It was an aversion for her to try foreign food but later she tried pasteurized milk, strawberry yoghurt, coffee from Dunkin' Donuts, and French cruller which she called *jilebi*, as she found it similar to the Indian relish with the same name. Being a vegetarian while trying potato chips from a supermarket she had to make sure that the yeast in it is not an animal product so that her grandmother could have them. Her grandmother was indeed happy when she found out that she could get the taste of Indian *rasam* from the Wendy's ketchup. Shobha Narayan states,

While I was buying a sandwich at Wendy's, Nalla-ma discovered that mixing their ketchup with hot water gave her a fluid that tasted like Indian *rasam*. When she learned that the ketchup packets were free, she took about twenty of them, which lasted her until Los Angeles, when we went to Wendy's again. (211)

She took the free ketchup packets that lasted for a long throughout their journey. *Rasam* is a lentil broth made from tangy tomatoes, which can also be replaced by other ingredients as well. It serves various purposes in healing the body. *Rasam* made with ground pepper has the properties to clear the sinuses of a sick person. "After my brother was born, my mother was given *rasam* with mashed garlic to increase the flow of her breast milk" (18) says Shoba Narayan in her memoir *Monsoon Diary*. *Rasam* is an indispensable dish of a South Indian and the grandmother's obsession with Wendy's ketchup which tasted similar to *rasam* marks how important *rasam*is are in the diet of a South Indian.

Apart from the taste preferences of the grandmother, Shobha Narayan herself found the food she prepared based on the recipes and culinary practices of the host country as a mess. All of these were either awful or turned out to be a "morass of taste" (Narayan 193). Therefore, she tried her hands at replacing certain foreign ingredients with Indian ones. "I replaced the wasabi with asafetida, the soy sauce with tamarind, the soba noodles with basmati rice, the *umeboshi* paste with mint chutney, and the spaghetti with vermicelli" (Narayan 194). She then decided to embrace all that was Indian and chose to cook a different Indian dish each day. Gradually, her culinary skills developed and she could "understand and enjoy the nuances of each dish she (I) cooked: the heft of a rich pilaf…the piquancy of cumin" (Narayan 195). For her, "A rice pilaf, *channa masala,* and a *raita* make a complete rustic meal" (Narayan 199). She took pleasure in cooking and recovered her childhood taste memories and recreated them in a foreign land. She says, "The thrill of cooking is the immediate gratification it gives" (Narayan 195).

Ian Cook and Philip Crang in their article *The World on a Plate: Culinary Culture, Displacement, and Geographical Knowledge* point out the effectiveness of the art of cooking in forming a Creole food culture. "In culinary culture, particular emphasis might be laid on how the arts of cooking and presentation allow food ingredients to be locally and creatively re-worked" (137). Similarly, Shobha Narayan through the art of cooking allows the food ingredients to be locally and creatively reworked.

Just like Nallama, the grandmother of Shobha Narayan who is a vegetarian, the author of the next select memoir under study, Rukmini Srinivas is a vegetarian and a connoisseur of good food. Rukmini Srinivasan as a South Indian Brahmin mother shares her recipes with her daughters living in Boston, America; upon their request through her cookbook memoir titled *Tiffin: Memories and Recipes of Indian Vegetarian Food*. Rukmini Srinivas is the wife of the famous sociologist Dr. M.N. Srinivas. She expresses her love and passion for cooking especially vegetarian food. These recipes

sent to the daughters who are living abroad are the sole example of how food and tradition are passed on to new generations. She hails from Tanjore district in Tamil Nadu, which is the richest rice-growing region of South India.

Barbara Frey Waxman in *Food Memoirs: What are They, Why They are Popular and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom* points out regarding the popularity of food memoirs recently that it "has to do with the food's elemental power to stimulate our olfactory system and in turn the limbic system of the human brain, that system of interconnected structures below the cerebral cortex where memories are stored and emotions regulated" (363). Rukmini Srinivas just like Shobha Narayan recollects her memory associated with food through the cookbook memoir *Tiffin*. Apart from looking at transnational space as a heterotopia, the tiffin carrier itself can be seen as a heterotopic object as it is a vessel used to transport different foods of varied tastes and aromas. A tiffin carrier is seen as a heterotopic object as it holds multiple elements, even conflicting elements within it.

Being a staunch vegetarian, the memoirist Rukmini Srinivas found it difficult during her travel abroad to fully resort to vegetarian dishes that suit her palate. The history of the practice of vegetarianism is many centuries old.

> The 1960s was a period of great dissatisfaction with the social order of things, and young people were looking for ways and philosophies they believed would bring about a change for a 'better world'. Vegetarianism was one way of experiencing a different culture, philosophy, and lifestyle. (Srinivas 273)

"Part of this vegetarianism is economic in origin since animal foods are comparatively expensive. But a more compelling force is the ethical one against the consumption of food that necessitated the taking of life" (Achaya 262). Religions of Indian origin, Buddhism, and Jainism opposed the Vedic practices of animal sacrifices and took a keen interest in protecting life forms by any means. India is a source of wide-ranging vegetarian food ingredients that are high in nutritional quality.

Rukmini Srinivas expresses her aversion to non-vegetarian food in her cookbook memoir *Tiffin*. She narrates her first journey through the sea on a ship. She says, "I had not eaten much during our voyage, subsisting on apples and crackers, partly because I was seasick, added to . . . the nauseating smell of somewhat stale non-vegetarian food permeating the air in the dining room" (230). She also shares her experience in having cheese which is made from renin from the stomach membrane of a calf. She states, "Thankfully, today, some of the best-known cheeses are made with the use of certain fungi and are vegetarian" (230). On the ship journey, she also came across rice boiled in chicken broth rather than plain water. But recently, both European and American menus have included plain yogurt, non-fat yogurt, and fruit yogurt besides Greek yogurt. It took several years for the arrival of completely vegetarian food to be used widely in these foreign lands.

At Circle Pine Centre in Delton, Michigan Shoba Narayan met several vegetarians who either spoke highly about elm tea or are into organic food.

> Tom and Daisy ate only one vegetarian meal a day, a habit they said they cultivated while in prison years ago. Mathew believed in UFOs, lived in school buses, and was always on fruit juice fasts to clean out his system. Kim, the resident naturalist, ate leaves, flowers, and dead insects. (Narayan 150)

When they travelled, "Nalla-ma, the grandmother came with little packets of food" (207). Gradually, while travelling, Nalla-ma had to start using the foreign food rather than eating food that was prepared by her own hands. "In Cleveland, she tasted strawberry yogurt for the first time and decided that she liked it" (210). At the Italian restaurant, Grandma ate Chinese rice with her tamarind chutney while Shoba Narayan and her husband ate pasta and pizzas. Step by step, Nalla-ma started using potato chips and ice cream her favourite was "Edy's No Sugar Added ice cream" (210).

In a transnational atmosphere, modern substitutions are made from less available ingredients, which are not considered authentic but a different version of the same dish with new ingredients and new tastes. As Rukmini Srinivas states, date palm sugar rice pudding is a dessert from Bengal. "If palm sugar is not available, you can substitute with jaggery or dark brown sugar. I have, at times, used sweetened condensed milk and less jaggery, which may not be authentic but tasty" (Srinivas 95). Having grown up in a mixed atmosphere of both traditional and city life, Rukmini Srinivas used to enjoy Indian dishes such as "…flaky pea samosas dipped in sweet and sour chutney; sojji halwa, seductively soft semolina fudge…vegetable upma; and in summer, slices of sweet flavourful Alphonso mangoes, the prized fruit of the Ratnagiri region in Maharashtra" (Srinivas 52).

During her stay in Berkeley, Rukmini Srinivas used to take vegetarian cooking classes for a few students, wherein she enjoyed teaching the methods to cook simple Indian vegetarian food. And one of her students in the first batch mentioned, "'you are what you eat'" (Srinivas 273). Cooking and eating is a means to experience various cultures,

philosophies and lifestyle. People used to also receive food as reward for the service they provide. Rukmini Srinivas's uncle who is a doctor by profession used to receive edible materials as consultation fee during the olden days. "An elderly woman came to the door of the hut as we were ready to leave, folded her hands in a gesture of prayer and gratitude and offered Dr.Chitappa, a coconut, a few betel leaves and a couple of bananas" (Srinivas 23). Whether it is vegetarian or other food that the individual prefers; the influence of the native food tradition and home culture has its prior importance in the life of the expatriates.

Shobha Narayan speaks of different physical spaces from the noisy Indian markets to the quieter supermarkets in America. These different heterogeneous spaces have their own norms and cultural significance. The traditional markets have paved the way for supermarkets. A traditional market is run by local farmers and small farmers from neighboring villages. These markets were open to customers on special days and it sells fresh produce with soil clinging on to them. Rukmini Srinivas in her cookbook memoir *Tiffin*, mentions the local market Poo Santhe in the district of Tanjore in Tamil Nadu. "The Poo Santhe opened to customers by six o'clock on Sunday mornings, but the bullock carts laden with fresh produce started arriving before dawn" (182).

The market was divided for both wholesale and retail transactions. In Poo Santhe "all sales were by volume and in units of fixed prices" (Srinivas 183). There were no weighing scales, weights, and bargaining. She speaks of the native place Tanjore, which is rich with coconut palms, lime-green paddy fields, and white jasmine flowers that add to the beauty of the village cafes with hot coffees served in metal tumblers. One gets nostalgic about the food cooked at their own home in their homeland as tastes get embedded in the memory of an individual. All people who reside in a foreign country try to find an equivalent substitute for their native ingredients to prepare their favorite traditional dishes from the supermarkets which stand now as a substitute for the traditional markets. The individual or communal preferences of an Indigenous group have received pan-global attention. Even though everything is available in a global market, it is necessary to go to the exact place of origin to find the authentic item. "To get the best quality and to choose your selection, you have to go to the point of origin" (Purkayastha 33).

The Indian immigrant cookbook authors in America like Shobha Narayan and Rukmini Srinivas whose cookbook memoirs become the core of the study have found specified ways to combine the regional to the foreign food culture. A transnational space can be observed as a heterotopia, which is a real space that operates across national boundaries. These sites where the migrants live in the host country function as sites of deviation and transformation. On considering the changes that happen to the migrants with specific reference to the food they eat, it is observed that in a transnational space, the food preferences of the migrants seem to deviate from the traditional recipes but at the same time not completely adapt to the foreign cuisine. There is a transformation in the recipes and the food habits of the migrants.

Foods that were used frequently in India but that were in only low to moderate use in the United States were *ghee*, yogurt, *dal*, *roti*, rice dishes, and tea. Foods that were in low to moderate use in India but in frequent use in the United States were fruit juice, canned or frozen vegetables, American bread, dry cereals, cheese and cheese dishes, and soft drinks. Coffee consumption also increased. (Kittler, Pamela Goyan and Kathryn P. Sucher 460)

Like Foucault's heterotopia, these transnational sites suspend social norms and hierarchies associated with food thus resulting in a transgression in the food habits or choices. Each transnational space created by the migrants has unique characteristics concerning food preferences and availability.

The transnational space as a heterotopia also has a temporal dimension, which transforms through time. The transnational space challenges the conventional notion of space and they shape new social practices and interactions.

The other very interesting thing about the influx of people is that although their tastes may have changed from generation to generation and they may or may not have become assimilated, most of the cuisines of these peoples did survive. Sometimes they evolved, making use of ingredients available in the United States, or they may have toned down the flavors after a few generations. (Foucault 221)

Both the cookbook memoirs under study embody features of cultural intersection in the transnational space. They present diverse spaces and juxtapose the native space with the foreign space and the temporal shifts. These memoirs bring forth a heterotopic essence by blending varied cultural factors into a single narrative.

It can be inferred from the study that heterotopia can result in a Creole culture. As Foucault states heterotopia is a heterogenous space that hold multiple contradictory elements in a single space. Creole culture is formed when different cultural elements mingle through the interactions of different cultural groups. In a transnational space where the migrants live in a foreign country which in itself is a heterotopia, different or at least two cultures blend to form a creole

culture. A creole culture is thus formed in a heterotopic space. An amalgamation of different cuisines happens in this heterotopic space resulting in the formation of a Creole food culture. Therefore, creole food culture arises from complex interactions of recipes within the heterotopic transnational space thereby developing a new and dynamic food culture.

A majority of Americans of Asian-Indiandescent make an effort to obtain traditional food products. Many markets in the United States specialize in Indian canned and packaged food products, including spices, and many stores provide mail orders. Fresh foods are more difficult to find. Some fruits and vegetables can be bought at Asian specialty markets, and Indian bakeries featuring sweets and *tiffin* items have opened in some areas. (Kittler, Pamela Goyan and Kathryn P. Sucher 461)

Indian immigrants in America have found various measures to adapt to the taste preferences of their heterotopic space in a foreign country. The transnational space of the migrants exists outside the normally followed societal structure and that is why it can be called a heterotopia. Therefore, the diaspora has taste preferences that diverge significantly from the mainstream societal standards.

People incorporate unique flavour combinations or culinary experiences that challenge notions of food as portrayed by the memoirists Rukmini Srinivas and Shoba Narayan in their cookbook memoirs which become the core text of this study. The diasporic people possess tastes that diverge from what is commonly followed be it in their native space or the foreign land. Their food preferences encompass food combinations that blend traditional tastes with foreign tastes which creates a Creole food culture. Moreover, personal taste heterotopia points out that human taste preferences are subjective and result in an ever-evolving landscape of taste preferences.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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