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Food as a Cultural Marker: A Comparative Study of Cultural Dimensions in the Novels of Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* and Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man*

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Abstract

Cultural studies not only aid to generate aesthetic evaluation but also negotiate with cultural constructs and further pave way to lead a life of hybridity. The recurrent problems that occur to immigrants in general are the problem of bicultural misunderstanding. Writers of both the countries have taken up this aspect in their works and have both explicitly and implicitly discussed the significance of food as a cultural marker of the society. The paper also concentrates on how the characters presented in both the novels can achieve different levels of success or failures by culturally transplanting themselves into the host society.

Keywords

Culture; Border-Crossing; Biculturalism; Society and Cultural Transplantation.



Culture is unique to all. Everyone has their own way of activities and habits. For example, Barbara Miller, in her book *Cultural Anthropology* says that,

The eating habits of the people depend upon their culture. It is the culture, which shapes the people, as when to eat, what to eat and the meanings of food and eating. Also culture defines foods that are acceptable and unacceptable. In China, most people think that cheese is disgusting, but in France, most people love cheese. Throughout China, pork is a widely favored meat. The religions of Judaism and Islam, in contrast, forbid consumption of pork. (Miller 10)

How to eat is also an important aspect of food behavior. Dining rules in India require using only the right hand. While in Western countries, people use cutlery for eating. In some cultures, it is important to eat only from one's own plate, whereas in others, eating from a shared central platter is considered proper. So, we cannot deny the fact that, migration from one country to other country will certainly cause certain cultural misunderstanding. Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* dramatizes the process of cultural transplantation or the cross-cultural adaptation process as it is experienced by the Hong Kong Chinese immigrants in Britain in the post war period. And Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* explores in the same way as in *Sour Sweet* the bicultural merits and demerits that are examined by Indian immigrants in England.

Food has been often used as an image to delineate national and cultural identities. In April 2001, then British foreign secretary Robin Cook argued in a much quoted speech that popularity of chicken tikka masala was a metonymic expression of a positive new multicultural Britain:

Chicken tikka masala is now a true British national dish. It is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external

influences coming to terms with multiculturalism as a positive force for our economy and society will have significant implications for our understanding of Britishness. (Speech to the social market foundation, London)

Food has been seen by some as a way in which minorities can be recognized in a multicultural society. Optimistic diaspora theorists have argued that, once one accepts the 'foreign food' of another ethnic group, one has broken the first barrier and mixed with alien culture.

Food can be seen by the immigrants in two ways:

1. Food as a sign of cross- cultural understanding
2. Food as a form of imperialism.

Even though we can see food as two extremes, one cannot deny the fact that food is a strong marker of identity and culture.

Food has strong connection with one's culture and national identity. It brings the nostalgia of one's country, when one recognizes a particular food which belongs to their country in the alien country. Usually, the immigrants prefer to eat their own country's food. If metaphors are the things considered as important by all, then food can be taken as the primary metaphor of humankind. Importance of food given in *Sour Sweet* can be understood by the words of Rachel Cooke as,

Chinese food was the first foreign food I tasted as a child, but I knew early on that what I was being given was not for real. In 1982 Timothy Mo published *Sour Sweet*, a novel I decided to read only because it appeared to have been named after my then favorite dish : Sweet and Sour pork balls. (Rachel Cooke)

In *Sour Sweet*, food is given major importance. This is because, Chen's family, who are the immigrants in Britain, are mainly doing restaurant business. If one considers food as a sign of cross cultural understanding in *Sour Sweet* it is quite ironical. The restaurant, which is started by Chen and

Lily, is named as ‘Dah Ling’ which is the name of Lily and Mui’s home village but it becomes anglicized as “Darling restaurant”.

In fact, the food that they serve in the “Dah Ling” restaurant is really British food. In Chen’s restaurant “The food they sold, certainly wholesome, nutritious, colourful, even tasty in its way....it bore no resemblance at all to Chinese cuisine (*Sour Sweet* 105)”.

The question that naturally arises to all is, whether the plural eating means a plural society. That is, by eating Chinese food by English people cannot mean that, they know the Chinese culture and tradition. So, it is clear that one cannot learn about China by eating Chinese food. This is clear in the passage: “She (Lily Chen) and the customers ignored each other; they couldn’t even look another in the eye. Each regarded the other as a non-person (*Sour Sweet* 135)”. Even though, by looking food as a cultural marker, one cannot learn others culture. But by this cross-culture restaurant one can make a new society which leads to the possibility of merging with others.

Even on one occasion Chen’s family tries to eat English food. From this incident, one can understand each character and how they mingle with alien society:

Shall we try? Chen asked Mui was already half-way through the door. And the food was quite good, really not bad at all. Even Lily...had to concede it was good stuff as she bit a long finger of potato in half (*Sour Sweet* 159)

From this, we can understand the different types of resistance that is maintained by the members of Chen family.

Mui is known for assimilation. She sticks firmly to the alien culture and it is further more evident in this area. She is the first to the “Fish and Ship” shop door. Lily is the next character, who is more-resistant. But she at last tastes English food.

Chen does not eat the food willingly but he accepts and eats it. And also, he is the one, who suggests to try “Fish and Chip” for the first time.

In *The Nowhere Man* also there are some references to food. When the two sons leave their home, in order to participate in war, Vasantha prepares English breakfast but along with this, she packs home-made pickles for Seshu. This clearly shows that, along with the foreign food, their own ‘ethnic food’ is also given importance. And also, it is clear that both Srinivas and Vasantha belong to the caste of Brahmin in India. They remain as vegetarians even in England. But it cannot be said, their sons too remained as vegetarians, because Laxman immersed himself fully with alien culture and Seshu leaves home for war so young.

Even after Srinivas’s cross-cultural living with Mrs. Pickering, an English woman, he continues to remain as a vegetarian in the same house, where Mrs. Pickering, who is a non-vegetarian, stays with Srinivas. He does not object Mrs. Pickering’s cooking of non-vegetarian in his house. He simply accepts and also allows Pickering to cook according to her own wish.

The recurrent problems that occur to immigrants in general, are the problem of bicultural misunderstanding. The reason for this is, for everyone cultural leaning begins from the moment of their birth. And also people’s cultural learning is unconscious, occurring as a normal part of life through observation, hearing stories and watching performances of rituals and dramas. As a result, when people of a particular culture move to other country, they become victims of many problems.

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