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Omnivore Perspectives of Food and Cultural Identity in

Digging to America

Alisha Salvador

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, a French lawyer, politician, and author once said, “Tell me what you eat, I will tell you who you are” (de Garine 487). His words denote that a person’s individual and cultural identities are reflected in the acts of preparing food and feeding (Epp 47). The relationship between human identity and food can be understood using French social scientist Claude Fischler’s “Incorporation Principle” and “Omnivore’s Paradox.” The “Incorporation Principle” suggests that when we take food into our bodies, we ultimately become what we eat. According to Fischler, “the food we absorb provides not only the energy our body consumes but the very substance of the body” (278). Our physical features, behaviours, and identity all stem from this ‘substance’ produced by the food we consume. Fischler also suggests that the incorporation of food into our bodies is a central component in the development of a sense of collective belonging (278). Thus, the consumption and preparation of food can aid in incorporating an individual into a culture or group as the individual participates in a specific, collective culinary system (Fischler 279).

Expanding on the “Incorporation Principle,” the “Omnivore’s Paradox” presents humans as omnivores. The paradox indicates that, “on the one hand, needing variety, the omnivore is inclined towards diversification, innovation, exploration and change, which can be vital to its survival; but on the other hand, it has to be careful, mistrustful, ‘conservative’ in its eating: any new, unknown food is a potential danger” (277). Some omnivores embrace the ‘incorporation’ of other cultural cuisines in an effort to appreciate ethnic diversity, whereas others experience ‘incorporation anxiety’ (283). Incorporation anxiety compels omnivores to defend, preserve, and fossilize their own familiar cultural identity and refrain from exploring unfamiliar foods and practices. This concept relates to Anne Tyler’s novel *Digging to America*, wherein two families of different cultural backgrounds, the Donaldsons and the Yazdans, experience opposite sides of the “Omnivore’s Paradox”. The Donaldsons wish to explore and incorporate ‘foreign’ foods and traditions into their lives, whereas the Yazdans want to

SALVADOR

preserve their own separate cultural identity. After critically analyzing the novel *Digging to America*, I will argue that Anne Tyler uses the leitmotif of food to illustrate instances of the “Omnivore’s Paradox” during intercultural encounters between the Yazdans and the Donaldsons. I will then explain how these intercultural encounters emphasize the role of women in determining the level of distribution and incorporation of food that is necessary for each family’s cultural survival.

In *Digging to America*, the two families experience different acts of feeding and culinary traditions, which speaks to their position in American society and the “Omnivore’s Paradox”. American cuisine appears to be shaped by the country’s natural wealth. Most American foods are processed, artificially flavoured and mass produced. Since the Donaldsons are reliant on these foods, especially when it comes to their arrival parties, they can be perceived as a white, middle-class family that embody an all-American identity. Despite this socially constructed perception, the Donaldsons present themselves as ‘omnivores’ who continue to welcome and embrace the incorporation of other cultural cuisines and traditions into their lives. The Yazdan family, however, does not reciprocate this cultural generosity. When the Yazdans practice their Iranian culinary traditions in America, they represent a ‘foreign’ identity. Iranian foods are naturally flavourful, delicately prepared, and composed of many fresh, high-quality ingredients. To the Yazdans, these foods are pure in themselves and in the way they are prepared, which contributes to the family wanting to maintain cultural purity within their household. The two families’ positions in American society are significant, since their willingness to embrace or refrain from exploring unfamiliar foods reflects the relative freedom of different cultures to express their culinary values. The Donaldsons are free to experiment and to incorporate other cultures through their experience of the “Omnivore Paradox.” The Yazadans, by contrast, feel insecure in America and are forced to the other end of the Paradox, resisting change and attempting to fossilize their culinary culture.

The Donaldsons’ desire to participate in the Yazdans’ ‘foreign’ culinary practices also stems from an effort to appreciate ethnic diversity, a key principle in the “Omnivore Paradox.” The interaction between diverse ethnic groups, whereby food or recipes are exchanged, helps create a society with ephemeral or transitory borders and boundaries (Epp 48-49). Once these boundaries have been broken down, the free exchange of culture so essential to the incorporative aspect of the “Omnivore Paradox” is made much easier. Cultural interaction can, however, also have the opposite effect, further solidifying the differences between two ethnic or cultural groups. For example, cookbooks aid in the exchange

of recipes and are “a significant source by which ethnic groups maintain a public connection with homeland culture, reinforce ethnic identity, integrate into a new culture, and form new hybrid identities” (51). When undisclosed recipes from one ethnic group become available to others, culinary boundaries become blurred or redefined. The sociologist Liora Gvion advises that the blurring of these boundaries may result in the invention or “creation of dishes from one country being dressed up with features characteristic of dishes from other countries” (62). In *Digging to America*, the Donaldsons, particularly their matriarch Bitsy, wish to participate in the Yazdans’ ‘foreign’ culinary practices and add an ‘American’ twist to traditional Iranian recipes. Bitsy’s eagerness to exchange recipes is depicted in the following excerpt, in which she discusses recipes with the matriarchal figure of the Yazadan family, Maryam:

They wanted to know the names of everything, and when Bitsy learned that Maryam had cooked it all she inquired almost shyly if she might have some of the recipes. “Well, of course,” Maryam said. “They’re in any Iranian cookbook.” By now she was aware that Americans thought recipes were a matter of creative invention. They could serve a different meal every day for a year without repeating themselves – Italian-American one day and Tex-Mex the next and Asian fusion the next – it always surprised them that other countries ate such a predictable menu. (Tyler 34)

Bitsy, as the major matriarchal figure in the Donaldson household, is responsible for maintaining a sense of cultural appreciation within her family and dictating whether or not food is shared with people outside of their household or culture.

According to Maryam, like all Americans, Bitsy and the Donaldsons think that Iranian recipes are a matter of ‘creative invention’. She believes that re-contextualizing or ‘dressing up’ recipes removes the deep cultural meaning and authenticity attached to foods. By modifying or re-inventing Iranian recipes according to ingredient availability and American taste preference, however, American readers and writers of cookbooks are able to extend ethnic and culinary knowledge to members outside of the Iranian community (Gvion 56). Gvion explains that by including recipes that are either authentic or modified, American cookbook writers “can turn foods into commodities to be consumed by everyone and on diverse occasions” (56). Thus, food or recipe exchange can be recognized as a positive intercultural encounter because Iranian recipes may

SALVADOR

become further enriched with diverse cultural meanings due to the contributions of others from different ethnic backgrounds. Amita Handa, author of *Of Silk Saris and Mini-Skirts: South-Asian Girls Walk the Tightrope of Culture*, reminds us that like food, “culture is not static, but constantly being reconstructed and re-imagined” (6). Corresponding to the “Omnivore’s Paradox”, Bitsy and the Donaldsons are inclined towards diversification, exploration, innovation, and change within the culinary realm because such promotes the development and expansion of cultural knowledge through food. In contrast, Maryam and the Yazdans are inclined to refrain from sharing Iranian recipes, since aiding in the creation a society with blurred boundaries could undermine the authenticity of the family’s food and culture.

Anne Tyler uses the leitmotif of food to illustrate how changes in recipes may correspond to changes in multicultural societies. The survival of individual and cultural identity is dependent on continued growth and transformation. For example, when Bitsy understands why the Yazdans prepare tea the way they do, she feels proud that some of the Yazdans’ cultural and culinary knowledge has transferred to her (Tyler 64). Bitsy feels comfortable accepting personal, cultural, and culinary change because she holds a secure position in American society as a white, middle-class woman. Bitsy’s political and social stability allows her to freely exercise power, which enables her to negotiate the meaning of different foods; in this way, she is able to integrate American and Iranian traditions into a new culinary system. Maryam, on the other hand, fears the potential ‘dangers’ created by ethnic diversity via food preparation since she occupies a vulnerable position in American society as a ‘foreigner.’

As Iranian immigrants, the Yazdans are categorized as part of a minority group that lacks political and social power in America and is subject to certain discriminations, exclusions, and other differential treatment. Such differential treatment of minority groups in America is seen during one of the first intercultural encounters between the Donaldsons and Yazdans, when Bitsy says, “we certainly love *your* cuisine” (28). Although Iranian and American cuisines are undeniably different, the word “your” shines an even greater spotlight on the Yazdans as ‘foreign’ identities in America and creates a cultural divide. Often minority groups are expected to incorporate or, in most cases, assimilate into the mainstream, dominant American society. The expectation of cultural assimilation has been embodied in the notion of the “melting pot,” a food metaphor pertaining to the attempt of the United States to create a homogenous society, a society resembling a cooking “pot” that is composed of a mixture of various ingredients melted together to form a new, harmonious whole. David Michael Smith takes

this melting pot metaphor one step further, describing America “as a place where immigrants shed their past modes of being as ethnics of a different land and contribute certain aspects of their experiences to the genesis of a new type of person, the American” (390). The Yazdans, especially Maryam, are presented as ‘omnivores’ that experience incorporation anxiety because they fear exactly that sort of incorporation into America. They fear that incorporation will cost them their cultural identities, memories of ancestry, and ‘foreign’ culinary practices.

As the matriarchal figure in the Yazdan household, Maryam believes that it is her responsibility to protect her family against “dangerous” or unfamiliar foods and practices that may threaten the preservation and fossilization of their cultural roots. Both Bitsy and Maryam, the matriarchal figures of their respective families, are viewed as the families’ cultural carriers and are responsible for dictating whether or not food is shared with people outside of their household or culture (Epp 50). Consequently, Bitsy and Maryam decide which side of the “Omnivore’s Paradox” each family occupies. On one hand, Bitsy and the Donaldsons wish to explore and incorporate ‘foreign’ foods and traditions into their lives. They represent the aspect of the omnivore which seeks to explore, incorporate, and diversify in order to survive. In this respect, Bitsy functions as a gate-keeper, welcoming others into her home with open arms. On the other hand, Maryam and the Yazdans strive to preserve their own separate cultural identity. They are careful, conservative, and mistrustful omnivores. Maryam too is a gate-keeper, but this time keeping the door shut and the homestead safe.

As a first-generation immigrant, Maryam attempts to cope with her disorientation and dislocation in America by “recreating a sense of place around food production, preparation, and consumption” (Parasecoli 416). Her desire to prepare and eat Iranian food is mediated by a form of nostalgia. Living in America produces in Maryam a longing for Iranian-coded foods because these foods become an intellectual, psychological and emotional anchor to her distant homeland (Mannur 27, 31). Maryam envisions her kitchen as a domestic space where she can preserve her ‘foreignness’ and experience these feelings of deep emotional and cultural attachment to Iranian foods privately without American influence. Metaphorically speaking, the melting pot boils over into Maryam’s domestic space when she becomes romantically involved with Dave Donaldson. Maryam construes Dave’s interest in her Iranian customs as an intrusion on her privacy, resulting in the following conversation between Maryam and her son, Sami:

“All [Dave’s] fuss about our traditions,” she said. “Our food, our songs,

SALVADOR

our holidays. As if he's stealing them!"

"Oh, well, but, Mom," Sami said. "That's a good trait, his interest in our culture."

"He's taking us over," she said, unhearing. "Moving in on us. He's making me feel I don't have my own separate self. What was that sugar ceremony but stealing? Because he borrowed it and then he changed it, switched it about to suit his purposes." (Tyler 212-213)

Here, Maryam mistrusts Dave the way she mistrusts American sugar. Maryam considers cube-shaped American sugar a re-invention or dressed up version of cone-shaped Iranian sugar. Similarly, by the end of Dave and Maryam's relationship, she perceives him as a member of the national elite who wants to usurp her culture. Rather than seeing Dave as a companion, Maryam aligns him with the dominant cultural group who controls the development of the melting pot as well as "the creation and maintenance of national identities" (Smith 388). In her eyes, Dave is out to "steal" her food, songs, and holidays. Again utilizing the leitmotif of food, Anne Tyler uses food analogies to illustrate how Maryam's explosive behaviour towards both American sugar and Dave is a direct reflection of how many immigrants feel about America in general. Many immigrants experience varying degrees of resistance and refusal when it comes to negotiating or sacrificing their cultural identity in order to 'belong' in the melting pot. Corresponding to the "Omnivore's Paradox," Maryam and the Yazdans are inclined to be mistrustful, careful, and 'conservative' in their eating because unknown foods and traditions bring the family that much closer to America and further from Iran. The survival of the Yazdans' Iranian culture, which is also a huge part of Maryam's individual identity, is dependent on her dedication to "defend an often imagined past that is perceived as threatened with extinction and to claim roots that are constantly antagonized or negated by the surrounding environment" (Parasecoli 431). Understandably, immigrants cling to traditional culinary practices and memories associated with their cultural ancestry since their domestic space may be the only place in America that can bring them back to Iran and protect them from cultural dilution and extinction. Living in a melting pot country forces Maryam and the Yazdans to express their cultural values and traditions strictly within their household because it is the only space that allows the family to appreciate the importance of their homeland.

Throughout the novel, the exchange of food between the Donaldsons and Yazdans tends to either alleviate or amplify the anxiety associated with the incorporation of foreign practices and the blending of cultures. Bitsy and the Donald-

sons explore and re-invent ‘foreign’ foods in order to spread cultural knowledge and unite individuals of different backgrounds. Maryam and the Yazdans strive to preserve their cultural identity by preparing and eating authentic Iranian food due to their apprehension of being ‘mixed’ into the American melting pot. In my opinion, Brillat-Savarin’s quote “Tell me what you eat, I will tell you who you are” (de Garine 487) displays some truth; individuals of various backgrounds attribute different intellectual, emotional, and cultural meanings to various foods. These culturally defined attributes are then incorporated into the body, providing individual meaning and purpose. Who we are is not, however, solely based on the food we eat. A part of who we are is based on those we share our culinary experiences with and those who share their culinary experiences with us. Eventually, the Donaldsons and the Yazdans are able to put their differences aside and unite as a culturally ‘blended’ family. The two families are able to develop a sense of collective belonging and eat either authentic or modified foods together within the same domestic space. Using the leitmotif of food to illustrate instances of the “Omnivore’s Paradox” during intercultural encounters between the Yazdans and the Donaldsons, Anne Tyler is able to promote the creation of a society that allows all omnivores to have the freedom to express their cultural values through culinary practices.

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