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## ORIGINAL STUDY

# Mrs. Sen's Sense of Cooking in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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### ABSTRACT

*Mrs. Sen's* is one of the short stories in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). In *Mrs. Sen's*, Lahiri narrates the story of an Indian woman immigrating to a new country due to her husband's occupation. Mrs. Sen has to leave her motherland and start a new life in a foreign country. She faces some difficulties in adapting to her new life away from India. For Mrs. Sen, the days, after moving to a foreign land, are surrounded by homesickness and loneliness. It can be observed that her reactions to these feelings are closely related to food and cooking rituals. Food-related routines are remedies for Mrs. Sen's struggle to cope with the difficulties she encounters after immigration. Namely, Mrs. Sen's personal experiences in her social life seem to interact closely with food-related details revealed in the story. Thus, this study aims to examine how Jhumpa Lahiri depicts food and cooking as significant instruments for sustaining an immigrant woman's personality traits in a foreign country. To this aim, *Mrs. Sen's* is analysed by considering the related literature and existing studies within this context. Accordingly, food-related details found in Mrs. Sen's story are evaluated to shed light on the significance of food and cooking in the identity formation processes of immigrant women. Moreover, the significance of the kitchen as the space for preserving and projecting cultural identity is examined by taking Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space into consideration. As a consequence of the study, it is revealed that, in fiction, a deep and intimate relationship possibly exists between daily food-related routines and immigrant women who suffer from homesickness, isolation, loneliness, marginalisation, and identity crisis after moving to a foreign country. Furthermore, it is concluded that food and cooking are not limited only to nutritional needs because they have additional roles in the identity development processes of the characters in fictional works.

**Keywords:** Food, Cooking, Immigrant, Identity, Woman

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## Introduction

Food has become one of the most frequently studied concepts in various fields, including literary, cultural, and social studies. Accordingly, “an abundant body of literature has firmly established that the study of food is imperative to understanding social phenomena” (Brady, 2011, p. 323). Food has a dynamic nature enabling researchers to consider food in a broader context while performing critical analysis. As it is known to all, food has the utmost importance for all living creatures, being the fundamental factor for sustaining life. Nevertheless, its significance for humanity is much higher since food can transmit lots of information about the people preparing, serving, and consuming it. Humans have to consume food and nourish their bodies to survive; however, the interaction between food and humanity is not limited to nutritional needs. Fischler (1988) asserts that “food is central to our sense of identity” (p. 275), and, accordingly, it can be said that food can work as a vehicle for understanding not only people’s preferences for nourishment but also lots of details about them including their identities, cultures, and lifestyles. Namely, “food can be used to identify who we are, what values we uphold and how we are different from others. Food is a metaphor of our identity” (Xin-hui, 2022, p. 340).

The focal point of scientific studies that prioritise food and culinary details can be related to cultural, national, religious, gender, racial, social or financial issues. In this regard, literature is a domain rich in food-related representations. When the fictional creations are examined, it can be observed that novels and short stories generally include scenes related to preparing, cooking, serving or sharing meals, and “in literature, it has been revealed that food has become more than nutrition in the lives of fictional characters” (Ayan & Yalvaç, 2021, p. 149). By means of fictional characters’ daily practices, authors reveal the possibility that food goes beyond its primary purpose of nourishment. Additionally, Brady in her article “Cooking as inquiry: A method to stir up prevailing ways of knowing food, body, and identity” (2011) states that:

Cooking as inquiry builds on the existing foundation of food scholarship by offering a methodological approach that understands food not simply as an *object* of study, but makes foodmaking the *means* of garnering understanding about food, identity, and the body. (Brady, 2011, p. 323)

Food apart from being a necessity for survival is a mean for expressing one’s cultural, societal, habitual and “identitarian spaces in which real-and-imagined places serve as an effective device. . . to investigate one’s own perception, feelings and dilemmas of identities that are preserved or rejected in multi-cultured spaces” (Ayan, 2020, p. 54). Moreover, via food, it is possible to witness various circumstances in which culinary details are tightly knitted to feelings, thoughts, desires, anxieties, and also the daily practices of individuals.

Food preferences and culinary inclinations in daily life are open to interpretation while looking for extra information about a single person or a group of people. For this reason, “understanding how messages are conveyed through culinary behavior requires an examination not only of virtuals but also of the preparation, service, and consumption of food—for all are grist for the mill of symbolization” (Jones, 2007, p. 129). The scope of analysis can be either narrowed or widened based on the subject matter to be dealt with. For example, the relationship between food and cultural identity is one of the matters to be discussed while investigating the experiences of immigrant people. Fischler (1988) points out that “human beings mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat . . .” (p. 280). In line with this, it can be underlined that the depictions of immigrant people come to the forefront when the issue is about the role and importance of food and food preferences in daily life.

Food has been an enduring presence in the construction of collective identities of migrant communities. From honing cooking techniques and selecting ingredients and tools to developing cultures of consumption and appreciation, diasporic communities seem to hold food as one of the primary markers of identity. (Chattopadhyay & Sinha, 2024, p.1)

One of the reasons can be that immigrant people might try to sustain their culinary habits in the countries where they start to reside or have a new life. Considering the significance of food in immigrants' lives, Caspari (2014) emphasises that "indeed, food has a symbolic value for the immigrant's experience" (p. 246), and food-related analyses are very crucial when focusing on the lives of immigrant people around the world. Nazeer, et al. (2025) reveal that "food is one the essential elements that helps immigrants to cope up with the feeling of alienation in foreign country" (p. 533). Since immigrants can go through similar kinds of experiences, including isolation, marginalisation, alienation, loneliness, homesickness, and identity crisis, following their immigration to a foreign land, it is possible to enlarge the scope of critical examinations about the relationship between food and immigrant people represented in fictional creations. As pointed out by Vallianatos & Raine (2008), "food is of central importance in maintaining connections to home, and signifying ethnic identity among diasporic community members" (p. 356). Especially after immigrating to another country or a multicultural region, people can consciously or unconsciously use food to reflect their own identities and cultures because "food and culinary practices are crucial element in maintaining a connection to one's cultural roots when living away from their homeland and serve as a means of preserving memories of their homelands" (Nazeer, et al., 2025, p. 533). Namely, food gains additional functions beyond individuals' daily nutritional needs.

Accordingly, another critical point is that food has two functions: separation and connection. Preparing a meal from a particular cuisine causes separation between meals as per their belongingness to cuisines around the world. By leaving the unfamiliar meals separated, a special meal connects other meals that belong to a similar culinary culture. Namely, when a person cooks egg curry, it is separated from the cultural flavour of the cuisine of other people consuming milk and cereal for their breakfasts. However, the prepared food has a connection with other meals, especially those that include curry. Thus, the recipes and preparation phases of dishes naturally require and include particular ingredients and cooking techniques specified to specific cuisines. As such, food has a function of separating and connecting different cultures in line with their culinary heritage. For this reason, an "analysis of complex symbolic meanings and associations of food and foodways provides a window into understanding how individuals construct subjectivity, and how various kinds of sociocultural boundaries... are demarcated" (Vallianatos & Raine, 2008, p. 356). On the surface of the representations in which daily cooking routines are carried out to sustain the nourishment of bodies, there can be deeper symbolic meanings or messages related to the issue that these cooking practices probably serve for the nourishment of emotions, thoughts, feelings or desires of the immigrant people by connecting them to their culinary heritage. For this reason, the insistence on cooking or eating food from traditional cuisines can help the immigrants keep their connection with their homelands and cultures.

In this regard, food has a crucial role in connecting the motherland and families of the immigrant people who try to maintain routines of their cultural backgrounds by means of preparing food from the cuisines belonging to their homelands. Garg & Khushu-Lahiri (2012) state that:

Through the repetitive ritual of food preparation and consumption the immigrants perpetuate their ethnic identities—this daily rite becomes the crucial

link between the binaries of home and abroad, the past with the present, and the imagined with the real. (p. 74)

Food is a mean that reflects immigrant people's way of preserving and projecting their identities in a foreign world where they reside in-between different cultures and traditions. Among other cultural features, "the everyday material practices of cooking and eating were the most significant, perhaps the only, concrete and symbolic manifestations of an ethnic identity" (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011, p. 279). That is to say, since the immigrants might feel marginalised or isolated due to various reasons, including their language, religion, clothing, and race, the only way to protect their identity can be their food preferences, which serve as a very productive way of self-expression without words. Moreover, they can also function as a source of relief and reassurance against unfavourable conditions, such as homesickness, isolation, marginalisation, loneliness, and identity crisis. The negative impact stemming from these feelings arising from such adverse conditions in a foreign country can be reduced by the help of maintaining the food-related routines of the homeland. Any phase of producing meals belonging to their cuisines can enable immigrant people to cope with the emotional burden of being far from their hometown. In other words, maintaining culinary habits can serve as a remedy for the suffering that appeared after immigration.

The discussions related to the immigrants' inclination to consume the food of their culinary heritage can encapsulate the subject matters related to both male and female characters. The focus of attention can differ as per the gender of characters whose experiences are depicted in fictional works. In this sense, immigrant women's cooking practices and their inclination to perform traditional food cultures following their arrival to a foreign country are among the points examined in critical studies. As it is known, the kitchen is the domain of women in most countries, where women create their art; thus, culinary products are closely linked with women's daily practices. In the kitchen, women actualise a kind of ritual through cooking by which they can exceed the limits restricting them. In that sacred place, they do not have to stay within the borders of societal rules although they frequently experience many troubles. Due to its significance in the actualisation of food-related routines performed by immigrant women in order to protect and project their own culture, the kitchen deserves critical attention while conducting academic research on food and identity development processes. Accordingly, the theoretical frame of the present study is based on Homi Bhabha's concept of Third Space, which helps us to acknowledge the importance of spatial details in the identity development processes of immigrant people depicted in fictional works. Homi Bhabha has significantly contributed to literary criticism and theory, and his concept of Third Space has been on the agenda of scholars conducting academic research, especially on postcolonial studies. Bhabha offers us a renewed perspective while analysing the interaction between the East and the West on a spatial basis. Considering the details, Bhabha (1994) reveals that "it is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (p. 37). While examining details related to space and identity development processes of fictional characters who immigrate to a foreign country, the concept of Third Space helps us to understand how these characters manage the adaptation process to a foreign country following their immigration. Ayan (2018) states that "the third space is associated with a sense of place for the ethnic people and immigrants who are left in-between cultures and borders where they try to construct an identity" (p. 49). It can be underlined that cultural enunciation can be ensured through the third space, where the cultures of the motherland

and the foreign country can be blended. Thus, a hybrid form of cultural formation allows the immigrant characters to handle the burden of being in-between two different cultures.

On the other hand, creating female figures who spend most of their time in the kitchen is one of the strategies used by women authors to give women an opportunity for liberation. As emphasised by Jones (2007), "If food-related symbolism is complicated, then the relationship between food and identity is no less problematic" (p.139). Namely, when the focal point is related to food and the identity development processes of fictional characters, there are possibly deeper meanings encoded within the narrative frame of literary works, which require attentive analysis processes. In this regard, it is underlined that

food maintains connections with 'home,' offering an anchor for the imagination of one's fractured identity. In its most basic avatar, 'home' is the immediate space of domesticity, and by extension, 'kitchen' is its distilled essence. The patriarchy invariably populated domestic kitchens with the women of the household and burdened them with the responsibility of extending its reach to ensure an irreparable connection with their 'homeland(s)'. Diasporic women writers were particularly attentive to these locations of productions of identities, as their fictional narratives are oriented around discursive practices that reclaimed these narrative spaces. (Chattopadhyay & Sinha, 2024, p.7)

In the fictional creations of women authors, traditional considerations about food and cooking and other kitchen details have been deconstructed and elaborated with additional functions, especially while representing female characters' experiences. It can be observed that female characters generally develop a sense of self as autonomous individuals and overcome various troubles, including personal, domestic, professional, financial, and social ones, through culinary agents. In their study, Hamid & Qazi (2023) reveal that

In the culinary narratives explored, the kitchen transforms into more than a space of sustenance—it becomes a canvas where cultural identities are negotiated, traditions are preserved, and the act of sharing meals becomes a powerful expression of human connection, offering a profound taste of the intricate stories embedded in each bite. (p. 198)

It is seen that female characters' food-related daily routines in the kitchen are enriched implicitly or explicitly with various details which are to be read and interpreted while conducting academic studies on women.

In fiction, food and food-related issues go beyond traditional notions of daily nourishment. Namely, authors can utilise each phase of preparing, cooking, serving, and consuming food as an attention-grabbing instrument while depicting their characters' stories. The richness of food-related depictions in fictional creations gives rise to critical analyses. As emphasised by Ayan & Yalvaç (2022), "it is not surprising to find abundance in food-related fictional representations in world literature because the diversity in the types of foods to be consumed and culinary tasks to be performed can be a rich source of inspiration and creativity" (p. 196). Accordingly, this study aims to reveal that food and food-related phases carried out in the kitchen can have extraordinary functions in the stories of female characters depicted by female authors. In line with this purpose, it focuses on the connection between an immigrant woman's food preferences and attempts to maintain her cultural identity in the third space reflected in the story, *Mrs. Sen's (MS)*. For this purpose, the first question to be answered is, "How does Jhumpa Lahiri depict food and cooking as significant instruments for sustaining an immigrant woman's personality traits in a foreign country?". In order to reveal the significance of preparing, cooking, and



serving traditional food in a foreign country, Mrs. Sen's culinary experiences are analysed, considering the related literature on the interaction between food, immigrant women, and identity. The second question is, "How does Mrs. Sen protect and project Indian culinary heritage in a foreign country where she copes with the burden of loneliness, alienation, and homesickness following her immigration?" The place where Mrs. Sen prefers to actualise herself by engaging in food-related rituals is a kitchen. Finally, the third question is, "What is the significance and impact of the kitchen in Mrs. Sen's life after her immigration?". Thus, the current study intends to shed further light on discussions regarding women authors' creations depicting the relationship between food, cooking, and female identity.

### Fish for feeding or fish for feeling

Among the women authors around the world, "Jhumpa Lahiri, a Bengali American writer who rose to fame on being awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her first work of fiction, is well known for her generous use of culinary images in her fiction" (Garg & Khushu-Lahiri, 2012, p. 73). Consisting of nine short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), written by Jhumpa Lahiri, focuses on the lives of people having a link to Indian heritage or Indian acquaintances. "Immigrant/Diasporic writers deal with the theme of displacement, alienation, cultural conflicts, identity crises, sense of homelessness, emotional, physical and mental isolation experienced by immigrants while trying to adapt to new language, people, culture and country" (Karkuzhali, 2016, p. 120). Accordingly, as the author of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri portrays "the displaced immigrant protagonists and second-generation Indian-American characters searching for a way to fit into a community" (Sharma, 2012, p. 1). In the quest for a new life, the characters can either closely adhere to their own national, cultural, and traditional identities or convert their lifestyles in accordance with their new destinations. Through the stories included, *Interpreter of Maladies* "represents themes of cross-cultural which create a natural opportunity to compare the presence of juxtaposed cultural values" (Sharma, 2012, p. 2). Various points regarding the heritage of different countries are open to interpretation within the scope of stories narrated in *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri who "has been considered as an important voice and an expatriate writer who searches for the meaning of identity in the case of immigrants" (Kilbert, 2024, p.7). The stories created by Lahiri can be evaluated from changing perspectives and by putting food-related concerns at the centre of the events experienced by different characters in different circumstances. In line with this, it is observed that some of the characters feel isolated and, in some way or another, experience a kind of incompetency while carrying out their responsibilities. In such stories, there is the possibility that "... immigrants are isolated from their families and their homes; children are isolated from their parents; and people are isolated from the communities in which they live" (Sharma, 2012, p. 3). In this sense of loss and isolation, one of the uniting factors is cultural cuisine. Deb (2014) points out that :

Critical studies on politics of food in Lahiri had primarily concentrated on conceiving food as a microcosm of homeland, through which characters assert agency and subjectivity in ways that function as an alternative to dominant culture, thereby giving them a transformative and productive potential. (p. 122)

It can be stated that the differences in language, religion, lifestyle, and other features lead to the isolation and marginalisation of the characters. Bhandari (2021) indicates that "Lahiri uses food items as manifestation of cultural bounding and disintegration" (p. 455).

In this regard, food preferences, one of the pivotal matters depicted in *Mrs. Sen's* in which Indian cuisine becomes a vehicle to reflect and maintain Indian culture in a foreign country, function as an opportunity to ensure personal integrity, which is in danger of disintegration after immigration.

The diversity in character representations allows for making interpretations from different perspectives. Throughout the book, readers can frequently witness the importance of the food metaphor, which reflects messages regarding the cultural identities of the characters. The study of [Garg & Khushu-Lahiri \(2012\)](#), in which the culinary details reflected in *Interpreter of Maladies* are examined, "underpins the fact that food not only acts as an identity marker but also negotiates personal, racial, sexual and social identities of the immigrant subjects" (p. 73). Accordingly, [Williams \(2007\)](#) remarks that "food is the means for characters to assert agency and subjectivity in ways that function as an alternative to the dominant culture" (p.70) in some of the stories revealed within the frame of *Interpreter of Maladies*. Additionally, "Jhumpa Lahiri in her collection of nine stories, uses food as a means to develop a new space in which she presents how her characters try to preserve and present their identities" ([Ayan, 2020](#), p.122). The characters might experience the feeling of in-betweenness caused by the appearance of diasporic community consciousness after immigrating to a foreign land. Being in-between different cultural backgrounds could lead individuals to cope with various troubles including the identity crisis, cultural clash, loneliness, and homesickness. [Sharma \(2012\)](#) states diaspora as "the dispersal or scattering of a people who feel alienated in their host country resulting to the identity loss or identity crisis as well" (pp. 1-2). Alienation, marginalisation, and the sense of displacement are among the themes that could be considered while investigating the experiences of immigrant people striving to form their identities. Additionally, "female characters in *Interpreters of Maladies* exhibit heterogeneous challenges of their diasporic existence that lead them to define and redefine their survival and resistant strategies for asserting their selfhood" ([Mehmood, 2023](#), p. 75). When *Interpreter of Maladies* is analysed, it can be determined that the interaction between food, cooking, and an immigrant female experience is a mostly dominant issue in *Mrs. Sen's*. Considering the case of Mrs. Sen, [Xin-hui \(2022\)](#) underlines that "because she cannot assimilate to her adopted country, she must create her own sense of community or home with the resources she can acquire" (p. 343). As seen in the story of Mrs. Sen, yearning for the motherland and ancestral origins may be a painful process for people immigrating to a foreign land. [Caspari \(2014\)](#) states:

"Mrs. Sen's" is one of the narratives of the award-winning collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*, . . . , in which food preparation and consumption play dominant if not constitutive roles in an attempt to create a sense of community and belonging closely linked to the home culture. (p. 246)

The story takes its name from the female character, Mrs. Sen, an Indian woman who starts living in a different country after her marriage to Mr. Sen, a mathematics professor. In the story, it can be seen that Mrs. Sen has to cope with various troubles including an identity formation crisis, a sense of alienation, homesickness, and loneliness after her immigration. Considering Mrs. Sen's story in which an immigrant woman's trouble in adaptation to her environment is depicted, [Mitra \(2006\)](#) assumes that "perhaps we are meant to see the story as a snapshot of a woman in the early years of her life as a struggling immigrant" (p. 195). Lahiri portrays a female character whose daily life is surrounded by changing difficulties related to her adaptation to the host country. Among other details regarding Mrs. Sen, a crucial point to be underlined is that the story does not include any information about her first name. Lahiri does not create a female character whose first name is known by readers. She is introduced in accordance with her marital status and her husband's



profession. She has to form her new identity as a married woman who has to re-establish her living standards as per the requirements of the foreign country where she starts to live as the wife of Mr. Sen. When Mrs. Sen needs to introduce herself to other people, she tells her surname and mentions about her husband's profession at the university. The narrative flow of the story does not include extra information about Mrs. Sen's first name. In line with this fact, the identity formation crisis that Mrs. Sen goes through as a woman in a foreign country is also reflected by means of leaving her even without a name belonging to her. She does not have an autonomous identity as a woman, which can be reflected via her name. For this reason, it can be inferred that she also yearns for her lost personal identity while striving to sustain her cultural and social identities.

Homesickness is one of the troubles that people immigrating to a foreign land frequently suffer, as seen in the story of Mrs. Sen. [Aruna \(2022\)](#) claims that

Isolated and separated from the well-known neighborhood and the empathy of friends and relatives, deprived of the affection of her family, Mrs. Sen is a generic prototype of the diasporic woman who is lost in the smells, sounds, sights and tastes in the crevices of her memory. (p. 591)

She is one of the characters who cannot prevent her obsession with her past while getting used to living in a foreign land.

“Mrs. Sen’s” demonstrates an agonizing oscillation between real and imaginary. Lahiri portrays a Bengali woman who collides with alienation and estrangement from American socio-cultural foreignness . . . Lahiri is particular in highlighting Mrs. Sen’s experience of exile as a first-generation diasporic woman who imagines her lost home as perfect by drawing comparisons with the loneliness in different and alienated American setting. ([Mehmood, 2023](#), p. 75)

She is torn between two cultures, and this fact causes her to feel depressed in her new home. She tries to escape from the daily routines of this place as far as possible. She prefers delaying some routines, including driving which is necessary for her new life. On the other hand, she organises her daily life mainly as per her cooking rituals. The number of people consuming her food is not important for Mrs. Sen, especially when she prepares Indian food. The abundance of food can be a satisfying concern for her. “The title character Mrs. Sen creates dishes from her native land to compensate for her irremediable sense of nostalgia and homesickness . . .” ([Xin-hui, 2022](#), p. 342) since the absence of family, friends, and relatives is tried to be filled through the amount of Indian food prepared by Mrs. Sen. It can be inferred that Mrs. Sen’s cultural heritage is enriched via food which is a significant agent in collecting memories. Namely, it is obvious in her story that “the culture also values communal food sharing and festive celebrations as cherished aspects of its rich heritage” ([Kilbert, 2024](#), p. 9). While she is cooking the meals enriched with available ingredients which are specific to their traditional cuisine, Mrs. Sen frequently remembers the meals prepared for celebrations like wedding ceremonies in India. The food’s scent, taste, and appearance serve as a bridge between Mrs. Sen and her homeland.

It is observed that when Mrs. Sen speaks anything about *home*, she refers to her home in Calcutta, and “throughout the story, the concept of home has a special meaning since it is strongly linked to Mrs. Sen’s sense of identity, nationhood, and belonging” ([Pourgharib & Asl, 2022](#), p. 1662). The reason can be the possibility that the apartment in which she lives with her husband does not cause Mrs. Sen to feel at home. In the story of Mrs. Sen,

A difference in cuisine and gastronomic habits stand for remembrance of all things past: they remind her every moment of her lost home, of the rituals and customs of her home, of her conflicts of belonging, of her fragmented identities and most of all, her alien present in a room which she cannot call her own. (Gupta, 2020, p. 271)

As can be understood from the story, Mrs. Sen strives to form her identity as an immigrant woman. In fact,

Mrs. Sen felt isolated and created a small-scale India in her American house with her recipes, books, make-up and clothes. Namely, she was trying to form a familiar place in an unfamiliar space in order to resemble the home she used to know. (Ayan, 2020, p. 129)

Mrs. Sen is worn down between two cultures: Indian and American. As a housewife, she continues living in an apartment which cannot become a "home" for her. When it comes to the issue of being at home, it is obviously the place where she lived with her big family in India. In order to survive the burden of homesickness and the feeling of loneliness, creating a third space, which is the kitchen, can be the most attainable solution for her. "In fact, places have distinctive meanings and values for people because they are constructed in space of movement, memory and association" (Ayan, 2018, p. 47). It is observed that Mrs. Sen cannot develop a sense of belonging to the apartment where she lives with her husband in America. However, the kitchen in that place might offer the opportunity to reconstruct her new identity as a married woman living in a foreign country far away from her motherland. Pourgharib & Asl (2022) underline that "when two disparate cultural realities confront one another, the female characters welcome a new space where they succeed in negotiating and translating their cultures" (p. 1657). It can be stated that cooking fish in accordance with the recipes of Indian cuisine in the kitchen can be a source of satisfaction and fulfilment for Mrs. Sen. However, this attempt does not work because she cannot attain the necessary ingredients in the way she used to in India. This inability also leads her to feel unsatisfied. She cannot adapt to the new life standards in America, which makes her a helpless and, thus, hopeless woman in frustration. It can be deduced that the sense of belonging to her new apartment cannot develop while Mrs. Sen is yearning for her home in India. Mrs. Sen suffers from the fact that she has difficulty in developing a sense of belonging. This case causes her to feel wedged between the customs, habits, and rituals of her own nation and those of the immigrated nation. Aruna (2022) reveals that "she is seen recreating a microcosmic motherland in her small university residential quarters and gradually folds over to the bottled-up trauma of cultural isolation" (p. 589). In this regard, it can be inferred that, as a consequence of this feeling, she generally insists on continuing her own habits as they are in India and resists embarking on the newly introduced lifestyle of the foreign country. Nevertheless, as Mitra (2006) argues "Mrs. Sen makes very little effort to adapt to her new environment, and her single-minded devotion to replicating traditional cuisine is a sign of her deep estrangement from American culture" (p. 193).

It is seen that she babysits Eliot, an eleven-year-old boy. Eliot has a significant role in Mrs. Sen's daily life because she intimately shares her feelings and thoughts with him. Considering the relationship between Mrs. Sen and Eliot, Aruna (2022) reveals that "hailing from an extended family, the eerie solitude weighs upon her and Eliot is the only confidante and friend she has" (p. 591). When she is happy, anxious or sad due to her new life, she can express herself as if she communicates with a mature person. Eliot witnesses Mrs. Sen's feelings, thoughts, attitudes or emotional responses to pleasant or

unpleasant events. It can be deduced that Eliot pays utmost attention to the issues related to Mrs. Sen. In this regard, Mrs. Sen's food-related experiences attract Eliot's attention. Eliot is interested in the food preparation processes handled proficiently by Mrs. Sen. He attentively observes his babysitter while she prepares and cooks meals belonging specifically to Indian cuisine. Considering Eliot's interest in Mrs. Sen's daily activities surrounded with food, [Caspari \(2014\)](#) points out that

Mrs. Sen, recently having arrived in the United States from India, becomes the babysitter of Eliot, who observes her daily shopping and cooking rituals with great interest and joy. The detailed description of Mrs. Sen preparing food shows Eliot's intense interest and forms a major part of the narrative. (p. 247)

It is stated in the story that the attitudes of Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother toward cooking are entirely different from each other. As a careful young boy, Eliot can recognise that his mother does not spend much time or energy while preparing, cooking or serving food. His attention towards Mrs. Sen's daily cooking practices probably stems from the fact that he has not encountered such food processing applications performed meticulously and efficiently by a housewife before. All the phases of cooking are narrated in detail and compared in line with the cooking practices performed by two women, Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother. In the story, there are various depictions of Mrs. Sen's cooking rituals, and one of them is narrated as follows: "... she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds. She could peel a potato in seconds" (*MS*, 114). In this passage from *Mrs. Sen's*, the names of various vegetables are stated along with their shapes formed proficiently by the cook, Mrs. Sen, who engages in these food-related practices at every opportunity. By cooking food from her own cuisine, Mrs. Sen can replenish her apartment with the smell of prepared meals and furnish the dining table with the served meals. Mrs. Sen tries to fill the gap that she feels deep inside, and food and kitchen-related instruments help her to lessen her suffering. In the flow of the story, various ingredients are placed in the kitchen of Mrs. Sen. However, as [Deb \(2014\)](#) discusses, Mrs. Sen's story "superbly explicates how fish as a sign works through the visual, tactile and olfactory senses of the title character" (p. 131).

Regarding the importance of fish for the Bengali culture, [Gupta \(2020\)](#) underlines that "the savoury trio of fish, culture and society bear witness to historical realities as also to innumerable stories of assimilation, migration, resistance and accommodation" (p. 271). Preparing fish recipes is like a ritual that enables Mrs. Sen to maintain her identity connecting Mrs. Sen emotionally and spiritually to the people in her homeland. For this reason, "receiving news of fresh fish from the local merchants is the only thing that makes her as happy as receiving mail from India" ([Williams, 2007](#), p. 74). In order to survive in her new place where she feels far away from her origins, she clings to her best way of feeling at home, as many immigrant people can do. Mrs. Sen is one of the characters resisting assimilation among foreign people and reflecting on her own origins by cooking Indian food for her husband as far as possible whenever she can be free from the dominance of the new culture. It is obvious that, apart from other dishes or ingredients, she strongly desires to buy and cook fresh food as she previously did in India. As [Karkuzhali \(2016\)](#) revealed,

she feels connected to her own people and country, when she cooks and eats fish. Since she has come from a place where people eat fish as their staple food, she finds it difficult to live without it. She is sentimentally attached to it. (p. 123)

However, she confronts two obstacles: obtaining the desired fish and going to the fish market independently. The first one directly influences her cooking rituals because she cannot get the desired product at the end of her cooking process, and as a result, she does not feel satisfied emotionally. Moreover, she "... finds her culinary efforts 'very frustrating' rather than challenging, as she often resigns herself to the impossibility of perfectly recreating the flavours of her homeland" (Deb, 2014, p.132). She always expresses her bewilderment at the scarcity of fish types in the place where she lives. Gupta (2020) points out that

her lament for the scarcity of fish blurs the past and the present and extends to the macro level, where the fish becomes symbolic of everything she calls home, everything embedded in her psyche as the imprints of one's own belonging, everything she searches for in this land of burgers ...". (p. 270)

She uses all the available fish types as a substitute for the ones she cannot find at the fish market. The lack of the desired fish does not stop Mrs. Sen from practising fish recipes:

For Mrs. Sen, the presence of fish on her platter serves as comfort food in a foreign land: hence she prepares a croquette, only substituting the tuna fish due to the non-availability of the bhetki on American shores, replicating the ritual of home in an imaginary homeland as a tribute to the established heritage of one's own country .... (Gupta, 2020, p. 270)

Apart from the non-availability of desired ingredients, another obstacle regarding fish in Mrs. Sen's life is that she cannot obtain fish from the fish market alone. The place where she can buy fresh fish is probably far from her house, and she cannot go there on foot. Since Mrs. Sen has not got her driving licence yet, she needs her husband's help at every turn. It can be inferred from the story that purchasing fish turns out to be a vital experience in her daily life because "in the process of finding a way to get to the fish market independently, Mrs. Sen establishes a link between her food preparation, the food, her sense of belonging, and Eliot" (Caspari, 2014, p. 247). Since she cannot drive the car without the assistance and guidance of Mr. Sen, she decides to go to the fish market by bus. However, she does not feel comfortable while taking the bus. As a final solution, she attempts to go there by car without waiting for Mr. Sen. Even though it is a challenging task for her; she suddenly decides to drive to the destination where she can buy fish. Eliot accompanies her on the way to the fish market, but her sudden attempt to drive the car without assistance ends in an accident. As it is revealed by Mitra (2006),

If fish is the tool of nostalgia, it is also the symbol of Mrs. Sen's alienation, her isolation, for it is the quest for fish that emboldens her, makes her assertive and decisive, but also leads to the (minor) tragedy of the story's ending. (p. 193)

The tragedy results from the car accident on the way towards the fish market. The catastrophe felt by Mrs. Sen is so powerful that she immediately stops preparing elaborate meals. It can be inferred that "her breakdown is gradual and is brought on by a lack of a sense of belongingness, the constant feeling of being a foreigner" (Aruna, 2022, p. 590). Although the car accident is minor, its impact is major, especially when Mrs. Sen's emotions are considered. The sense of inefficacy in keeping pace with the requirements of her new life leads Mrs. Sen to give up even cooking, which is the most significant foothold for her in her new life. Moreover, the babysitting experience carried out attentively by Mrs. Sen suddenly ends because of the car accident. When the accident happens, Eliot is also in the car. It is seen at the end of the story that Mrs. Sen fails to drive the car. Moreover, she

can no longer continue her occupation as a babysitter. This accident negatively influences Mrs. Sen's efforts to form her identity by gaining new skills. Her attempts at sustaining Indian food culture in the kitchen of her American apartment unfortunately fail which emotionally causes her collapse at the end of the story.

To sum up, it is evident that, in the short story *Mrs. Sen's*, food and cooking have additional functions coming to the forefront in the identity formation process of Mrs. Sen. Namely, for "Mrs. Sen, food means sharing and is something to preserve her Indian identity and familiar place in a foreign space. Thus, food reshapes Mrs. Sen's past and presents her present life" (Ayan, 2020, p. 130). Additionally, engaging in food-related routines of her own heritage offers Mrs. Sen the opportunity to lessen the suffering caused by the feelings of homesickness, alienation, isolation, and loneliness in a foreign country which is far away from her homeland. Specific food, especially fish, has specific roles in Mrs. Sen's story. Finally, it is observed that Mrs. Sen cannot create a physical kitchen where she can carry out Indian food culture which can resemble Homi Bhabha's concept of Third Space. Thus, the kitchen she is in in America, the foreign land, cannot become a foothold for her while she is suffering from the emotional burden caused by being far away from India, her motherland. Therefore, Mrs. Sen, with her food, tries to create an imaginary third space for herself.

## Conclusion

Food and food-related occurrences have been on the agenda of researchers in changing scientific areas. The dynamic nature of food enables researchers to conduct investigations by focusing on various themes and details. "Food, in Jhumpa Lahiri's prose, plays a multiple and complex role" (Deb, 2014, p.121), and Lahiri uses the kitchen as a place where food is produced especially to maintain cultural heritage in a foreign land. On the one hand, cooking is a fruitful way to reflect personal and cultural facts to other people. On the other hand, immigrants' inclination towards sustaining their own culinary culture in a foreign land is depicted as a fruitful solution to the isolation, homesickness, alienation, and loneliness they feel after immigration. The immigrant people preparing dishes use many ingredients which are mainly originated in their own cuisines which function as remedies for identity formation crises in a foreign land.

The reflections on food and identity are among the significant issues in the analysis of *Interpreter of Maladies*. "Pertinently, food in literature has been a very powerful tool for expressing individual and cultural memories in order to metaphorize physical and psychological hunger, and present complex ideas" (Hamid & Qazi, 2023, p.194). Accordingly, the relationship between Indian food and Indian identity depicted in *Mrs. Sen's* is the focal point of the current study. It is observed that engaging in various phases of cooking Indian food helps Mrs. Sen to cope with the sufferings stemming from the feelings of homesickness, isolation, alienation, and loneliness. The sense of self has a very intimate interaction with the sense of cooking in *Mrs. Sen's*.

With the guidance of the short story analysed within the scope of the current study, it is detected that the authors can provide information about immigrant women and their struggles to have a place in society in fictional environments. These characters generally pass through painful periods during which they are either active individuals resisting difficulties or passive ones defeated by the harshness of societal norms. No matter how it is transmitted, it is obvious that the relationship between food, cooking, and identity is a crucial factor depicted in *Mrs. Sen's*.

In *Mrs. Sen's*, a deep and intimate relationship is detected between food, cooking, and an immigrant woman's sense of self. Mrs. Sen endeavours to protect the culinary traditions

of her own culture by insisting on cooking food from Indian cuisine. Her insistence on preserving her own culinary heritage allows her to preserve and project details related to traditional Indian food culture. Accordingly, it can be concluded that, in fiction, food and cooking in the kitchen appear to be a relief for immigrant women who suffer from identity formation crises, alienation, loneliness, homesickness, and isolation in a foreign land following their immigration. Namely, the sense of cooking and the sense of self are closely related in the story of Mrs. Sen. Discussions regarding food and the identity formation process of immigrant women stated in the current research will shed further light on the studies conducted in food literature.

In sum, the study elucidates how food functions as a tool for preserving and projecting cultural issues together with identity formation, and the kitchen serves as significant place that presents interaction between food, cooking, and identity development processes as interpreted in Mrs. Sen's story. Briefly, food literature is an interdisciplinary field fruitful in interpretation of immigrant women's dilemmas, needs, longings, adaptations, and identity developments via culinary details of food cooking in multicultural places.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

### Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

### Author contribution

F.Y., M.A. contributed 50% to the Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing Review & Editing, and Visualization. F.Y. and M.A. contributed 60% and 40% to the Methodology, Software, Validation, Writing–Original Draft, and Project Administration, respectively. F.Y. and M.A. contributed 40% and 60% to the Supervision, respectively.

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