

# Re-constructing Food Identities in Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*

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## Abstract

Migration is often a result of forced escape from political or social uprisings, subordination faced on different levels or a free will to explore a nomadic lifestyle. The consequences faced range from cultural shock and alienation to acclimatizing to a foreign world. The basic elements that seek drastic changes are the food practices and traditions. Food is an integral part of a culture which can vary from culture to culture in terms of the style of cooking to the types of food consumed. This leads to a formation of the Self and the Other which the migrants find strenuous to grapple with. The paper *Re-constructing Food Identities in Min Jin Lee's Pachinko* intends to navigate the lives of select characters in the chosen novel, that have paved their way in life through hybridized societies and hegemonic identities, along food cultures. It will study the clashes, confrontations and negotiations that finally lead to acculturation. It will also explore hybridization of indigenous culinary practices which create dissimilar yet known traditions that become difficult to comprehend and follow. Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* depicts a re-construction of food identities in different generations of wars and colonial occupations.

**Keywords-** Food, culture, hybridity, migration, gender

## 1. Introduction

Food and food practices often serve as markers of cultural differences and similarities. "Food not only nourishes but also signifies" (Fischler, 1988). According to Bhabha, the spatial and temporal nature of culture leads to it always evolving and forming a mixture of distinct cultures that results in hybridization (Bhabha, 2012). Migration leads to an amalgamation of polar opposite cultures. It infuses the elements of one culture into another. Food is the essence of cultural and traditional rituals, and it finds itself constantly evolving through the moving population. Hybridity in cultural studies and fields of anthropology dealing with displacement and migration becomes essential in comprehending the psychological, behavioral, and everyday practices of a dislocated population. A hybrid person is "the product of at least two or diverse cultures" (Babaei and Pourjafari). Similarly, a hybrid food practice or tradition results from the mixture of consumable food items or cooking practices and ingredients, from distinct cultures. This leads to a change in the way migrants associate with different foods followed by a disruption of the previously constructed identity that found home in certain food items.

The oscillation between two cultures creates an "in-between" or the "third space" where the displaced population finds itself. The creation of a third space becomes an integral part of the analysis of migrated populations and their food cultures (Bustin and Speake). The food practices that come to being in a third space are sometimes assimilated or a product of acculturation. They might share some features in terms of ingredients or cooking methods with the dominant culture or develop new ones by an amalgamation of existing diverse traditions. Acculturation results when the "migrant/minority group adopts the cultural patterns of the host/majority population" (Jasti et al., 2011). Dietary acculturation becomes a major element of the process of acculturation where migrants try to incorporate the eating practices and food habits of the host country (Jasti et al., 2011). This process comes as a jolt to the food identity of migrants. Food is central to an individual's sense of identity and helps in asserting "both the oneness and otherness of individuals depending on the person consuming it" (Fischler, 1988). It proves to be of great importance in the lives of migrants and diaspora where food can help "create a sense of continued belonging and reiterate affiliations to 'home'" (Abbots, 2016). But the incorporation of items and practices from the foreign culture also keeps the culture evolving and results in the formation of a new one with elements from both the native and foreign culture making it a hybridized food practice which then becomes a tradition for the next generation. The assimilation of foreign food practices into one's native culture results in the loss of the distinct nature of the ethnic food ways and leaves a tradition that is barely recognizable. This tradition grants a new "in-between" identity to the migrants.

## 2. Literature Review

There is an emergence of research on food identities and migrations in recent times. Some are ethnographic while some deal with sociological and economic aspects but there are also a couple that deal with food and identity formation in migrants. Anna Pechurina (2017)

explores the idea of cultural identity and food practices that make sense to the diaspora community. She delves into the nostalgia of migrants through food and the cultural practices that might not make sense to the host country but keeps the migrant communities connected to their nations. Imilan (2015) believes that the relationship between food and home is inseparable. Therefore, he propounds that the definition of national identity in terms of food remains highly valuable for the migrants residing away from their homelands. He expounds on the idea of holidays and them being a way for migrants to celebrate their identities through native foods. Naidu and Nzuzza (2017), through an ethnographic study using interviews, talk about the implications of migrations and the ways in which the migrated population preserves a sense of self in a foreign land. They discuss the effects of food changes and maintaining one's ethnic and cultural identity through the food that belongs to 'home.' The idea of reconstructing one's identity through food in a foreign land is also touched upon in the study. *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee has become of significant interest to researchers working in identity and migration. Mali (2019) discusses the immigrant experience in Lee's *Pachinko*. He explores the alienation and identity crisis that falls upon the migrated characters. The researcher brings out the discrimination and dislocation that the Koreans living in Japan must endure which ranges from social to economic as well as personal and cultural differences. The study also brings out the prejudice of the Japanese towards the Koreans and the humiliations that the Koreans must go through. Arya R.S. (2019) discusses the cultural insecurity that grips the immigrants in *Pachinko*. She navigates Lee's work with the ideas of xenophobia and hegemony in the relocated migrants. She also tries to analyze Butler's "precarity" in the characters of the novel. Tablizo (2022) explores the *Zainichi* in Japan and the multi-generational changes in that identity through Lee's *Pachinko* that tells the story of "ordinary people" of history. It navigates the historic idea of pure identity in Japan and how it affects the immigrant population and their next generations who are always straddling two identities.

### 3. Textual Analysis

Min Jin Lee, a Korean American author takes it upon herself to bring out the experiences and atrocities faced by Koreans during the Japanese annexation of Korea in the twentieth century. The real-life experiences of the aggravated Koreans during multiple wars of the twentieth century serve as a backdrop for Lee's critically acclaimed 2017 novel *Pachinko*. It presents a family that deals with migration and cultural change over four different generations. From the colonization of Korea to the dislocation faced in Japan, the family faces drastic changes over time. Lee portrays a multitude of characters that struggle with issues of identity and dislocation. She makes use of food items to bring out the social, cultural and economic standings of the characters over multiple generations. These characters either feel at home through their food or find themselves disconnected with their cultural eating habits and food ways. The feeling of otherness is compounded with the alienating cultural habits of a new place and leaves the characters striving to establish an identity that incorporates traits from their native culture as well as the foreign one.

One of the most prominent changes, in food culture, that occurs because of Korea's colonization is the establishment of Japanese restaurants in Korea. It dominates the indigenous cuisine and makes the native food for the consumption of the colonizers. The natives become a minority in their own homeland. There is a creation of the "third space" where Sunja's family strives to maintain their cultural identity through their eating habits. In Sunja's homeland, the vegetables are grown by her mother in their vegetable garden, and it helps them survive the war with ease compared to the population that is at the mercy of the rising prices of food items. The tenants that stay at the boarding house run by Sunja's family try to pay rent in the form of food items like cooking oil and fish. For them, food becomes a means of security in exchange for a roof over their heads. The cheap rates and homegrown vegetables that Sunja sees in Korea are a contrast to the prices that she faces in Osaka, Japan. The type of food eaten in Korea becomes different from the one she must consume in Japan because of financial and colonial reasons. There occurs a shift in food practices and thereby her identity that she struggles to maintain throughout her life. The change in consumption of food items also brings a "change in the construction of the eater's identity" (Fischler, 1988).

Sunja and Kyunghye cannot afford to buy meat and rather make do with the bone that no majority/native Japanese citizen would buy. The migrants are succumbed to use leftovers of the natives. It changes the way they would cook traditional Korean soup and other food items. The omnivore's paradox described by Fischler enables an individual to be good at adaptability and this helps migrants adjust in new places with novel and distinct eating and cooking habits, but it also proves a constraint when it comes to variety. This omnivore nature makes man subject to "...a double bind between the familiar and the unknown, monotony and change, security and variety" (Fischler). The characters in *Pachinko* are therefore able to survive through the different changes in eating habits and cooking practices. Sunja is left wonderstruck by her sister-in-law's ability to cook up delicious food items despite the economic and ingredient constraints. The cuisine of a particular community or group can be seen as a "body of practices, representations, rules and norms based on classification" which brings about stratification and establishes hierarchies in societies especially colonial ones (Fischler, 1988).

The migrated population is also affected by the cultural practices of the dominant population. It imbibes certain traditions and norms that might not otherwise be considered in the native culture of the migrants. Like, the working of women outside the kitchen. The relationship of women with food is socially constructed and not a true division of labor (Van Esterik, 1999). With rapid changes in all predetermined entities, there also comes a shift in women's identities. Women are considered the source of nutrition and are burdened with the task of food provision. From being the production house of milk for babies to preparing food for the household, women are associated with food on all levels. The normative gendered role often sees a shift in migrated populations when situations in the host country become financially hostile. This is evident in *Pachinko* when Sunja and Kyunghye are not permitted to work outside the house and indulge in any activity other than the kitchen work. But it soon changes when Sunja makes up her mind and stands for herself to make a living for her children on Isak's imprisonment. She does not succumb to the tradition that demands her to stay within the walls of the kitchen. She looks toward her native

food culture for help and starts selling *kimchi* in the market. It is not by choice or free will but, in some ways, migration propels the women of the house to find autonomy and discover themselves in an unfamiliar environment.

The dislocation faced by the population not only affects eating practices but also, the kitchen space, the place of food production. Migrants are often dealt the lowest standards of housing which ultimately shrinks the area allotted to the cooking space. Sunja's place of stay in Japan had a "kitchen that was no more than a stove, a pair of washtubs... a fraction of the size of the kitchen in Yeongdo" (Lee, p. 150). The meagre and inadequate space with minimum items for food production, forces the migrants to come up with foods that require no refrigeration. But, other times, the food has to be prepared multiple times and in limited quantities so that it does not get spoiled (Lee, p. 152).

Food plays a significant role throughout the novel. Sunja and Isak come to terms with their marriage of convenience over a bowl of *Udon* noodles that becomes Sunja's first experience of the Japanese cuisine. The foreign food and ambience of another culture becomes a premonition of the impending struggle that follows Sunja in Japan. Isak tries to familiarize Sunja with *udon* by comparing it to a Korean dish, *kalguksu*. It is only through reference to a known element that one can place a foreign one in their practice (Abbots, 2016). Yangjin, Sunja's mother knows the importance of food and tries to make Sunja's meal after her wedding, the last meal in her homeland, as traditional and ethnic as possible. She wanted "...them to taste white rice again before they leave home" (Lee, p. 108). The white rice, indigenous to Korea becomes a symbol of the dominance that Japan holds over the ethnic Korean food and its consumption. Here, the natives become foreigners and strive for a sense of their ethnic and most native self to consume an item that is homegrown and cultivated in Korea itself. An item that defined the Korean identity becomes a means of othering in their own home country. Vendors do not wish to sell white rice to Koreans in case there is a shortage for the Japanese customers and they "get into very hot water" (Lee, p. 106). White rice becomes a coveted item that Korean migrants yearn for in Japan as well as in Korea itself. For Sunja, it becomes synonymous with home as her last meal in Korea and first meal in Japan become the same. Her sister-in-law, Kyunghee tries to reassert Sunja's idea of home through white rice as a welcoming meal in Japan with the statement "This is your home now" (Lee, 139). Culturally, Sunja's identity starts evolving and mixing when her life in Japan becomes a mixture of different traditions. Millet and barley replace white rice soon and it is only after years of struggle that she gets access to white rice comfortably. But, by then her relationship with food is constructed over and over throughout the years and there is a loss in meaning and associations with food items she once cherished.

Food practices help migrants reinstate and reconstruct their identity in foreign worlds (Abbots, 2016). The reification of her identity through food becomes an integral part of Sunja's life in the foreign country. She tries to maintain her cultural identity through food practices to the best of her ability. The process becomes hybridized over time just like her *kimchi* cart that gradually becomes loaded with Japanese sugar candies and other items to attract more customers. Initially, the smell of *kimchi* proves a hindrance to Sunja's business. The peddlers would not allow her to sell the pungent item because it might "stink up" their area (Lee, p. 290). But, once settled in her spot, Sunja becomes one of the most sought-after peddlers in her area. She later evolves into a successful peddler with a shop that also sells candy, and her identity becomes one with food and she becomes known as "...the lady who sells sweets." (Lee, 355)

The migrant population suffer on their part but their settlement in the foreign land also brings a change in the market trends of the host country (Abbots, 2016). From ingredients ethnic to the migrants to various other cultural products, there is an influx of their lifestyle products in the host market. The hot *genmaicha* served to Kyunghee and Sunja by the Korean loan shark is an example of the migrants imbibing the food items of the foreign land. There is a change in the food traditions of the host country as well. The movement of people across borders also means the movement of food, its ideas and material culture. Therefore, there is an incessant process of (re)rooting and embedding food in new cultures (Abbots, 2016).

Migrated families often tend to be succeeded by a generation that grows insecure of their own culture. Sunja's son Noa, in *Pachinko*, does not like to be associated with *kimchi* because his classmates at school make fun of him for smelling like one. He ends up with the smell of *kimchi* all over him because his tiny home is used as a production and storage house for *kimchi* that Sunja and Kyunghee start to sell in times of crisis. The smell of *kimchi* in this case becomes a means of discrimination and marginalization that fills Noa's life with dislocation and alienation. This further creates an identity that Noa does not like belonging to.

Sunja's grandchild, Solomon, becomes part of a generation that is still discriminated because of its origins even though he becomes American in his way of living and eating. For him, Japanese and Korean food traditions both become a part of his culture, but he incorporates American meals into his life. His identity in terms of food is re-constructed because of his lifestyle and association with a multitude of cultures. Phoebe, his girlfriend who is a second-generation Korean in America, faces a cultural shock on her move to Japan with Solomon. She finds it hard to cope with the changes revolving around her eating habits. From eating processed and easily accessible food to witnessing the process of cooking through Sunja, Phoebe becomes averse to the changes in her eating identity. The cultural change that she presents to Sunja is incomprehensible for the woman who maintained her Korean identity for generations. Sunja cannot comprehend that Phoebe does not know how to cook traditional Korean dishes. For her, it is second nature and comes naturally with being Korean.

Ko Hansu is a character that is hybridized from the beginning of the novel. He lives in Japan as a wealthy mafia who does not bend before the hegemonic population and establishes himself as a powerful man. His life is hybridized along with his food practices that he acquires from his visit to various parts of the world. His involvement in Sunja's life after her move to Japan becomes an essential and unavoidable part of the latter's life that sustains her in times of crisis. It is only through Hansu's provision of food supplies that Sunja is able to survive the tribulations of a foreign and war-induced society. Hansu lives an entirely different life than Sunja and her family. For Hansu, food

becomes a way of reconnecting with his son, Noa. Dining at expensive restaurants and taking his son out to dinner become an essential part of his life when Noa goes to university. There is a clash between the eating habits of father and son who have different identities, culturally and socially. Even though they are both ethnically Koreans, Noa enjoys "...something simple that Aunt Kyunghee made" (Lee, p. 293) while Hansu likes indulging in exotic and foreign foods. Noa, however, changes when he discovers his biological identity of being a bastard. He gives up his Korean name and pretends to be Japanese to live a solitary life with no relation to his past. His connection with his ethnicity is scarce and he re-constructs his identity at his own will, which is ironic because he does not really have control over the shaping of his identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

"To identify a food, one has to "think" it, to understand its place in the world and therefore understand the world, and in particular to distinguish, order and classify the elements of which it consists" (Fischler, 1988). The migrated communities and populations reassert their identities in foreign lands through food practices and eating habits native to their homelands. With changes in social, cultural and political identities, food becomes one of the only major elements that helps them reinstate their identity. The repetition of certain codes over and over creates a culture and a sense of familiarity that changes with change in place and availability of cultural products. Food plays a critical role in terms of migrants' sense of home. It helps them in providing a sense of belonging in alienating cultures and upholding ethnic identities. Food traditions, for migrants, can be empowering but they can also be a means of discrimination and oppression. The entanglement of migrants with various cultures shapes their identities in novel ways resulting in an identity that bears resemblance with a hybrid of the hegemonic population as well as the minority migrant one. The cultures become mixed and so the culinary practices and food habits become ever evolving through different generations. Acculturation makes a sustainable use of food traditions and customs to bring out new ones that enable acclimatization of migrated populations. The re-constructed food identities most often lie in the gaps or "in-between" cultures that the migrated populations are exposed to. There remains little to no point of reference for locating the new identity.

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#### Authors contributions

The idea of the research article stemmed from Dr. Senguttuvan M. Vaishnavi was responsible for the study design and analysis. The manuscript was prepared by Vaishnavi and further revised and edited by Dr. M. Senguttuvan. The final draft was approved by both authors.

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