
From the Instructor

In Fall 2014 we introduced a new anthology for WR 098—*Globalization: A Reader for Writers*. Rosario's final paper is one positive result of this text, a collection that prompted enthusiastic engagement because the issues it explores resonate with international students. In her essay, Rosario demonstrates an engagement with texts that anticipates the use of exhibit and argument sources in WR 100 and 150 while following the final paper assignment for WR 098, which involves analyzing a theme by engaging with a novel and two essays from the anthology.

Rosario chooses passages from *The Namesake* quite astutely to support her claims and interweaves Lahiri's language smoothly and clearly with her own. Her paragraphs show a persuasive balance between evidence and analysis. She strategically adapts insights from Ali's essay to her analysis of the novel. Carefully acknowledging distinctions between the contexts she and Wasserstrom analyze, she challenges the central claim of his essay. Rosario's paper invites student writers of all levels to question others' arguments and to use well-chosen evidence and meticulous analysis to create their own contributions to intellectual conversations.

— Holly Schaaf

WR 098: Introduction to College Reading and Writing in English

From the Writer

Who would have thought food could play such a significant role in a family? Throughout Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* the character's diet makes recurring appearances that seemed to me to have been carefully planned by the author. Thus, my "Food: The Hard Work of Separating Families While Keeping It All Together" was born.

In my essay I ventured to analyze the role the food played in the development of the novel. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom's essay "A Mickey Mouse Approach to Globalization" and Tanveer Ali's essay "The Subway Falafel Sandwich and the Americanization of Ethnic Food" are used as a lens to my argument. Wasserstrom believes American products have no power to change cultures; Ali says that when adapting products and traditions from other cultures to our own these lose some of their originality. Ultimately, I believe these issues to be more complicated than they appear and the Ganguli family proves them to be so.

— Maria Del Rosario Castro Diaz

MARIA DEL ROSARIO CASTRO DIAZ

Prize Essay Winner

FOOD: THE HARD WORK OF SEPARATING FAMILIES WHILE KEEPING IT ALL TOGETHER

In his essay “A Mickey Mouse Approach to Globalization” Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom claims that “American products [take] on distinctly new cultural meanings when moved from the US” (22) into other cultures, and that it is superficial of us to equate globalization with Americanization. Yet, when looking closely at the characters of Ashima and Gogol and their relationship with food in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake*, we learn that this is not quite the case. These characters do not receive the American products in their native country as Wasserstrom argues; nevertheless, when the Gangulis first move to the USA they create their own little Calcutta where they gradually let in the influence of America. Throughout the novel, food plays an important role as a link between the characters and their Bengali roots. The characters, especially Ashima, tend to adapt American products to their own traditions. However, these very Bengali traditions become “Americanized” in the process. As Ali argues in his essay “The Subway Falafel Sandwich and the Americanization of Ethnic Food,” some quality of the original product must be sacrificed to fit the American standards (26) and such is the case with the Bengali food traditions in the novel. Moreover, Gogol’s relationship with food implies that “as generations settle in, the food, like the ethnic group itself, becomes subsumed into American culture” (25). Although American products can get adapted to other cultural traditions as Wasserstrom argues, Ashima and Gogol’s relationships to the food they consume suggest that the adaptation to America and its products is far more complex, making food not only a link to old traditions but also an important component of the Americanization of the new generations.

In *The Namesake*, American products are being constantly adapted to suit the Bengali traditions. From the very first moment Ashima moves to the United States, she adapts American products to cater to her needs. While she is still pregnant with Gogol, she tries to reproduce the snack from Calcutta she likes so much with Rice Krispies, peanuts and chopped red onion, all products bought in America, but she only gets to a “humble approximation” (Lahiri 1). Similarly she teaches the newly arrived Bengali wives how to make halwa from Cream of Wheat, she fries the shrimp cutlets in sauce pans, and she and the other Bengalis drink tea with evaporated milk (38). Ashima tries to adapt the American products to her Bengali dishes, but these do not take on a whole new different meaning as Wasserstrom claims Mickey Mouse did in China back in the 80s when he lived there (22). In fact, having to adapt these American products to her Bengali traditions brings much sorrow to Ashima since nothing is quite as it used to be back in her own country. The situation only makes her miss India even more. Ashima’s early attitude towards food seems to suggest that in fact, much unlike Wasserstrom claims, American products can Americanize other traditions, forcing them to adapt to American culture instead of the other way round. For example, for her son’s annaprasan Ashima regrets that “the plate on which the rice is heaped is melamine, not silver or brass” (39). She is forced to adapt her traditions to what she owns and has no option but to Americanize them, making them lose some of the original quality to adapt to the American standards as Ali claims in his essay.

The Gangulis do successfully manage to adapt American products to their own traditions; nonetheless, they are forced to give in to some American traditions that eventually create a unique type of Bengali culture that is neither entirely Bengali nor American. For instance, even though many of her customs are eroded by her experiences in America, Ashima successfully manages to adapt the American tradition of Christmas to her Bengali origins. Throughout the years her Christmas parties become very popular amongst her Bengali friends, so much so that towards the end of the novel we discover that everyone has come to “love Ashima’s Christmas Eve parties, that they’ve missed them these past few years” (286). She has managed to make Christmas her very own “adopted” tradition, using it as an excuse to cook Bengali dishes and to gather all her friends and loved

ones together who become one big Bengali family. Food not only Americanizes the family but it also keeps them in contact with their own culture. Yet, this tradition she creates is not Bengali, for they do not celebrate Christmas, nor American because Ashima's celebration takes a whole new meaning. Her situation has forced her to create a completely new culture that is composed of both her native and adopted traditions. Thus, I believe that Wasserstrom fails to see the dual role that in this case food can play in the Americanization of a family and its culture and how this same process can affect the originality of the traditions.

While food in many instances does help keep the Ganguli family stay connected to their Bengali roots, it plays an important role in the Americanization of the new generation. Throughout their lives, Gogol and Sonia never fully adopt the traditional dishes their parents eat; instead, their diet is based on American dishes and an adaptation of the Bengali eating traditions. From a very early age, Gogol eats peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and frozen waffles for breakfast (55). Ashima and Ashoke eventually give in when they go grocery shopping, allowing him to "fill the cart with items he and Sonia, but not they, consume" (65). These eating habits show that inevitably, the new generation gradually adapts to the American culture and food becomes a major distancing factor between generations. Although Gogol is initially taught to eat with "his own fingers, not to let the food stain the skin of his own palm" (55), as he grows up and becomes more distanced from his parents and his Bengali origins he begins to use a fork when he eats, seemingly ashamed of his parents for not using one. Food, amongst other things, has managed to Americanize him and consequently the traditions that were supposed to be carried on by him and his sister. This situation seems to suggest that the adaptation of American products to other cultures is much more complex and not as straightforward as Wasserstrom claims it to be. In his essay he refers to the exportation of American products to other countries; nonetheless, this same concept could be applied to those families that like the Gangulis emigrated to the USA. In this situation, the Gangulis are the "products" that are being exported and in turn are adapted to the new country's culture. The family, however, does bring with themselves their own little piece of India that gets Americanized through the food and products they use. Wasserstrom fails to look into the reverse situation in which the foreigners

go into the American culture and that potentially undermines his argument regarding Americanization. The Gangulis' Bengali traditions are eroded by the influence American food and products have on their family.

Certainly, people from other cultures can adapt American products to their own needs; however, we must not forget that in return these products will eventually Americanize these cultures to a certain extent. Ashima and Gogol's relationship to food in *The Namesake* proves to be a convincing example of this dual process. While food helps to maintain a connection to their Bengali roots no matter if it is made of American products, it also helps Americanize their traditions and the new generation in the family, who become subsumed into American culture and lose part of their Bengali originality.

WORKS CITED

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