
BREAKING THE SURFACE IN ANJALI JOSEPH'S ANOTHER COUNTRY

1.Dr. R. Thilagavathy

Assistant Professor in English, Sri Krishna College of Engineering and Technology, Kuniyamuthur – 641008, Coimbatore (Dt), Tamilnadu.

2.Dr. B. Kogilavani

Assistant Professor in English, Sri Krishna College of Engineering and Technology, Kuniyamuthur, – 641008, Coimbatore (Dt), Tamilnadu.

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Abstract:

Anjali Joseph's *Another Country* explores themes of identity, self-discovery, and belonging through the protagonist Leela's journey across different cities—Paris, London, and Bombay. The novel portrays Leela's transient lifestyle and her struggles with relationships, career, and a sense of home, reflecting the broader existential quest of modern youth. The narrative's introspective style delves into her emotional landscape, highlighting the tension between surface appearances and deeper personal truths. Through subtle storytelling, Joseph captures the complexities of migration, cultural dislocation, and self-perception. *Another Country* ultimately presents a nuanced exploration of the human condition, emphasizing the impermanence of relationships and the search for meaning in an ever-changing world. The novel's themes resonate universally, making it a compelling study of contemporary life.

Keywords: Identity, self-discovery, belonging, migration, cultural dislocation, existential quest, modern youth, relationships, Anjali Joseph, *Another Country*.

Introduction:

Anjali Joseph's *Another Country* (2012) is a contemplative novel that delves into themes of self-exploration, identity, and belonging. The novel follows Leela, a young woman navigating different phases of her life across three countries—England, France, and India. Her journey is both physical and emotional, as she grapples with relationships, career choices, and a deep sense of displacement. Joseph's writing style is understated yet poetic, capturing the subtle emotional undercurrents that define Leela's experiences.

The title *Another Country* is metaphorical, representing both the literal movement between nations and the psychological landscapes Leela traverses. As she moves through unfamiliar territories, she searches for stability and meaning, often finding herself caught between nostalgia for the past and uncertainty about the future. The novel's fragmented narrative reflects the complexities of contemporary life, where geographical mobility does not always translate into emotional grounding.

Anjali Joseph is deeply connected to Bombay, the city where she grew up, and often captures the quiet struggles of its people. In an interview with Alan Wong, she mentions, "When I began writing my first novel, *Saraswati Park*, I found myself wanting to write about my parents' and grandparents' bookish, quiet life" (*Bombay Buzz*).

The novel's protagonist, Lakshmi, has dutifully fulfilled her roles as a wife and mother, yet she finds herself increasingly lonely and estranged. Her husband, Mohan Kareka, a gentle and reserved man, shares a home with his emotionally distant wife. Mohan's profession—writing letters for the illiterate under a banyan tree in Fort—is a fading craft, and his true passion lies in collecting secondhand books, particularly those with marginal annotations. Their household is further complicated by the arrival of Mohan's nephew, Ashish, a 19-year-old English Literature student who struggles to focus on academics, preoccupied instead with his turbulent emotions.

Beneath the surface of their seemingly ordinary lives, unspoken frustrations and hidden grievances simmer. The tensions within the family remain concealed under a façade of normalcy, only becoming apparent when their carefully maintained lives begin to unravel. Breaking the surface in *Another Country* involves understanding the depth beneath Leela's seemingly ordinary life. Beneath her outwardly calm demeanor lies a constant state of questioning, dissatisfaction, and an unfulfilled longing for connection. Joseph masterfully depicts the nuances of modern existence, where young individuals struggle with choices that shape their identities and futures. The novel resonates with readers who have experienced the transient nature of modern relationships and the quest for personal fulfillment. By exploring Leela's journey, *Another Country* offers a poignant reflection on how individuals attempt to break through the surface of their emotions and experiences to achieve self-awareness.

Leela's emotional journey is intricately tied to her culinary experiences, which often evoke memories of home and identity. Eating becomes more than just a physical necessity; it serves as a means for her to navigate feelings of displacement and her ongoing search for belonging. In one instance, as she reflects on her past while consuming a meal, Joseph writes,

“Leela worked her way through hummus, tahini, and aubergine dip, and wondered why she wasn’t enjoying the food more. It was the Taj, after all. When she had to come here for a meeting, she fell on the biscuits and tea with delight. Now, she wasn’t having a particularly good time” (Joseph 247). Here, food connects her to past experiences, yet its failure to bring comfort underscores her emotional dissonance in the present.

Winnicott’s concept of transitional objects helps explain these dynamics by positioning food as a medium through which Leela negotiates her emotional transitions. As she moves through different stages of life and relationships, food becomes a symbolic anchor, offering a sense of stability and familiarity. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Leela’s interactions with food are not solely about physical sustenance but also serve as a source of emotional nourishment and continuity.

In *Another Country*, food plays a crucial role in Leela’s journey, reflecting her emotional state and aiding her transition through various personal and cultural shifts. Through the lens of Winnicott’s theory, food becomes a means of managing her emotions, providing comfort and familiarity amid life’s uncertainties.

Leela’s experiences with food further highlight her feelings of displacement and her desire for connection. For example, when she shares a meal with Nina, Joseph writes, “They sat on either side of the table, their folders out and their faces growing warmer, their expressions more indistinct as they drank and laughed and ate cheese and bread and salad” (Joseph 24). This scene illustrates food’s role as a transitional object, fostering intimacy and bonding between the characters. The warmth and camaraderie shared during the meal help alleviate Leela’s sense of alienation in an unfamiliar environment, reinforcing the comforting nature of food in social interactions.

Leela’s interaction with Simon further exemplifies how food serves as a bridge between her internal emotions and external surroundings. During a visit to Simon’s place, she finds herself unexpectedly at ease as he prepares tea. Joseph describes the moment: “Simon worked methodically, unhurried: he took tonic out of the fridge, and a lime, sliced it, got the ice cubes and so on as he made his drink. Leela watched. She was aware that he didn’t really care whether or not she had been there, and this made her relax and warm to him in a way she would have found difficult to explain” (Joseph 44-45). The simple act of preparing and sharing tea creates a moment of stability and acceptance for Leela, reinforcing food’s role as a transitional element in her emotional journey.

Winnicott's theory emphasizes that transitional objects help individuals navigate the space between their internal emotional worlds and external reality. In Leela's case, food frequently serves as this bridge, connecting her to her past and evolving sense of identity. When Leela reflects on her childhood memories and her parents' return to India, food becomes a conduit for these emotions. Joseph writes, "Leela's a strange place familiar only from early childhood and emotion, the India to which her parents had unexpectedly returned, a place of silence, bird calls, a balcony next to her room, trees outside, and the life of the facing building" (Joseph 24-25). The sensory details associated with food and home evoke a sense of nostalgia and longing, reinforcing the role of food as a transitional object linking her past with her present.

Moreover, Leela's culinary experiences often reveal her internal conflicts and emotional states. During a lunch with her friend Amy, the disarray in Amy's home and the chaotic meal preparation reflect Leela's own sense of turmoil and confusion. Joseph describes, "Amy viciously, whacking tea bags into not very clean mugs. 'It's disgusting here, disgusting. No one's washed up in weeks. We're paying a cleaner a hundred quid to come round and sort it out'" (Joseph 62-63). The state of the kitchen and the haphazard preparation of tea mirror Leela's inner chaos, underscoring the symbolic connection between food and emotion.

Winnicott's concept of transitional objects provides a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics. As Leela navigates her complex emotional landscape, food serves as a stable and comforting presence, offering continuity and familiarity. This is particularly evident in her interactions with different cuisines and culinary traditions, which not only reflect her cultural identity but also her emotional states.

In *Another Country*, food not only serves as a transitional object for Leela's emotional journey but also as a profound symbol of cultural identity and belonging. Through culinary experiences and food references, Anjali Joseph intricately weaves a narrative that underscores the complex interplay between cultural heritage and personal identity. Leela's cultural identity is deeply intertwined with her culinary experiences, which evoke memories of her Indian heritage and connect her to her past. When Leela reminisces about her childhood and her parents' return to India, the sensory details of food and home become vivid markers of her cultural background.

The juxtaposition of different culinary traditions in the novel further accentuates Leela's feelings of displacement and her search for belonging. In Paris, her interactions with French cuisine symbolize her attempts to assimilate into a foreign culture while grappling

with her own cultural identity. During a meal with Nina, Leela reflects on the foreignness of her surroundings and the familiarity of the shared experience: “It was instead the unspoken sense of their homes, in other countries: Leela’s a strange place familiar only from early childhood and emotion... For each girl, the other’s home was non-concrete, but superstitiously to be believed, in the way of a story heard in infancy” (Joseph 24-25). This passage underscores the cultural dissonance Leela feels and how food acts as a bridge, connecting her to her roots while allowing her to navigate her new environment.

Leela’s culinary experiences in London further illustrate her complex relationship with cultural identity and belonging. In one instance, she describes her mundane routine, highlighting how food becomes a marker of her emotional state and cultural dislocation: “Leela worked her way through hummus, tahini, and aubergine dip, and wondered why she wasn’t enjoying the food more. It was the Taj, after all. When she had to come here for a meeting, she fell on the biscuits and tea with delight. Now, she wasn’t having a particularly good time” (Joseph 247). The familiar yet dissatisfying food reflects Leela’s inner turmoil and her struggle to reconcile her cultural heritage with her current reality.

Moreover, food in the novel often symbolizes the complexities of human relationships and the search for connection. Leela’s interactions with others over meals reveal the emotional undercurrents of her relationships and her quest for intimacy. During a meal with Simon, Leela’s observations about his meticulous preparation of tea highlight the subtle dynamics of their relationship: “Simon worked methodically, unhurried... Leela watched. She was aware that he didn’t really care whether or not she had been there, and this made her relax and warm to him in a way she would have found difficult to explain” (Joseph 44-45). The act of sharing tea becomes a moment of connection, where food facilitates emotional intimacy and understanding.

Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects helps elucidate the role of food as a symbol of cultural identity and belonging. As transitional objects, food items provide a sense of continuity and familiarity, allowing individuals to navigate cultural transitions and maintain a connection to their roots. For Leela, food becomes a medium through which she negotiates her cultural identity, finding comfort and stability amid the uncertainties of her journey.

In *Another Country*, food frequently symbolizes the emotional turmoil and inner conflicts experienced by Leela and other characters. The sensory and ritualistic aspects of food serve as a reflection of their emotional states, illustrating how culinary experiences mirror their psychological landscapes. Leela’s solitary meals often reflect her emotional isolation and introspection. Her mundane routine of preparing and consuming simple meals

underscores her inner loneliness and search for meaning. Joseph describes, “She cleaned the bath. She went to the small supermarket on the High Road, and bought avocados, bread, butter, lemons, coffee, milk, cereal. She came home and put away the food” (Joseph 88-89). The repetitive and solitary nature of these activities highlights Leela’s emotional detachment and the role of food as a silent witness to her inner struggles.

The novel’s concluding scenes highlight the therapeutic aspects of food in resolving emotional conflicts. During a meal with Vikram, Leela contemplates the possibility of marriage and the stability it could bring. Joseph writes, “‘We should just get married, you know,’ Vikram had said. He’d smiled at her... ‘I could marry you tomorrow, too,’ she’d said” (Joseph 256-257). The shared act of discussing their future over a meal becomes a moment of emotional resolution, symbolizing Leela’s acceptance of her desires and the stability she seeks. Moreover, Leela’s final interactions with her family, involving shared meals and discussions, underscore the role of food in fostering emotional healing and connection. The act of sharing food with loved ones becomes a medium for expressing emotions and resolving conflicts, highlighting the therapeutic potential of culinary experiences.

Anjali Joseph’s *Another Country* uses food as a powerful medium for exploring and resolving emotional conflicts. By applying Donald Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects, this paper has illustrated how culinary elements in the novel serve as bridges between the characters’ internal emotional worlds and their external realities. Through shared meals and culinary rituals, the characters find moments of connection, understanding, and emotional healing, highlighting the symbolic significance of food in their journey toward personal growth and resolution.

Donald W. Winnicott’s *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (published by Tavistock Publications) is a seminal work that brings together his key contributions to psychoanalysis and child development. This collection includes essays on topics such as the mother-infant relationship, transitional objects, the true and false self, and the importance of play in emotional growth. Winnicott, a pediatrician and psychoanalyst, bridges the gap between clinical practice and psychoanalytic theory, emphasizing the role of early caregiving in shaping personality. His work has had a lasting influence on psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, and child psychiatry.

Anjali Joseph’s *Another Country*, the novel explores themes of belonging, identity, and the nuanced experiences of expatriates. The central characters, Karthika and her family, are grappling with questions of selfhood and place, as they navigate the complexities of being caught between two cultures. The novel’s ending reflects the unresolved tensions between

their desire for a connection to both India and the UK, pointing to the ongoing journey of understanding one's roots while adapting to new environments.

The conclusion resonates with the idea of breaking through the surface — shedding superficial assumptions and embracing deeper, more complex layers of identity, culture, and human connection. Joseph's subtle portrayal of her characters' inner struggles and their relationships with their surroundings suggests that true belonging is a continuous, evolving process rather than a final destination.

This thematic exploration, paired with the rich, reflective tone of the novel, offers a poignant meditation on the immigrant experience and the transformation that comes from living in multiple worlds.

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