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**Culinary Narratives, Representations, and Discourses**

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*This paper argues that ever since Salman Rushdie highlighted the pluralist culture of independent India through the symbol of 'chutney' in *Midnight's Children*, Indian cosmopolitan writers such as Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh have successfully employed culinary narratives in their fiction to examine the complex sociocultural dimensions of food and dietary habits in the South-Asian postcolonial world. In her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai masterfully uses culinary narratives to comment upon the middle-class diasporic Indians' sense of alienation in the West and their constant longing for an ideal homeland. Taking a more cosmopolitan approach, Amitav Ghosh promotes a distinctively South-Asian cosmopolitanism in his *Ibis* trilogy (*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*) through the motif of 'food'. On the one hand, Ghosh's brilliant depiction of the ritualistic use of native food and language by the Indian indentured laborers celebrates their quest for origin and identity, and on the other hand it underlines the cultural similarities among diverse South-Asian groups on the littoral, that survived the colonial onslaught of British imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In tandem, Desai and Ghosh's novels indicate the increasing importance of culinary narratives in contemporary postcolonial discourses.*

**Introduction**

In 1981, Arjun Appadurai coined the term “gastro-politics” to examine the social dimensions of food and culinary traditions in India. In his essay “Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia,” Appadurai analyzes the main categories in which food acquires sociological significance: the household, the temple, and the public gatherings. In households, different roles are assigned to people at meals based on their gender, kinship, or age. In temples, food represents both the act of worship and that of offering. In large public gathering, sharing food serves to strengthen mutual acceptance and solidarity. In all three domains, food is used to convey two opposite concepts. As Rogobete points out, food “can be a provider of homogeneity when it functions as a sign of equality, intimacy and solidarity among people and one of heterogeneity when it emphasizes rank, distance and social segmentation” (34). A remarkable study in itself, Appadurai's essay set the stage for exploring the sociocultural constructs of food in the Indian subcontinent.

In light of Appadurai's intervention, it is important to note that Salman Rushdie's Booker-prize-winning-novel

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*Midnight's Children*, also published in 1981, underlines the literary importance of food-metaphors and culinary narratives in Indian English Fiction. Rushdie's analogy of the pickle-jar celebrates writing as a fine blend of diverse literary that creates a literary epic such as *Midnight's Children*. In a way, Rushdie blends elements history, myth, heteroglossia, memory, and imagination to create a *chutney* of words, inviting readers to relish it not only for its exotic taste but also its power of self-preservation. Rushdie's chutnification of words in *Midnight's Children* creates an appetizing culinary narrative "by putting together disparate items, stirring them by means of shocking images of intertextual associations till they form a coherent whole and their flavors combine" (Rogobete 45). Thus, the pickle-metaphor in *Midnight's Children* becomes synonymous with the multidimensional nature of the Indian English novel and demonstrates the importance of culinary narratives in Indian postcolonial fiction in general.

Since the publication of *Midnight's Children*, Indian fiction writers have creatively employed food-metaphors through culinary narratives to further investigate the rich history of Indian culinary traditions and their cultural significance. For instance, Bharti Mukherjee (*Wife*); Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*); Anita Desai (*Fasting, Feasting*); and Hari Kuzru (*The Impressionist*) explore the sociocultural aspects of the Indian society through culinary motifs. In a way, it is Rushdie himself, who provides Indian fiction writers with the creative space to write about food by leaving a pickle-jar empty in *Midnight's Children*. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator Saleem draws readers attention to one empty jar that sat beside the thirty full of pickle: "One empty jar...how to end? Happily, with Mary in her teak rocking-chair and a son who has begun to speak? Amid recipes, and thirty jars with chapter-headings for names?" (Rushdie 531). While Rushdie indicates the fulness and literary richness of his story through the filled jars, he leaves open the possibility of further literary creativity through the one empty jar. Just as India, the heterogenous, multi-faceted nation cannot be contained by any homogeneous, centripetal narrative, the imaginative power of Indian fiction cannot be exhausted through one novel – however epic-proportions it may acquire. Therefore, Rushdie's pickling of history and chutnification of words in *Midnight's Children* has not subsumed every aspect of culinary narratives in Indian fiction; in fact, it has only set the trend and pointed a direction that other Indian writers could take.

In fact, Indian cosmopolitan writers such as Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh have employed culinary narratives to describe the Indian diasporic subject from postcolonial perspectives, thus widening the scope of culinary narratives in contemporary Indian fiction. By focusing on the role that food and culinary habits play in the social interactions of Indian characters, both diasporic and native, Desai and Ghosh reflect on the sociopolitical dimension of food. In particular, the two writers correlate the ongoing effects of colonization and imperialism with the way people of India understand various culinary traditions, including their own. Therefore, I would like to claim that through their fiction Desai and Ghosh expand the scope of culinary narratives in Indian English fiction by placing them in the globalized contexts in a cosmopolitan world. Specifically, I would demonstrate that in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai makes a postcolonial critique of both capitalist multiculturalism and fundamentalist nationalism that tend to alienate and disempower the postcolonial subject. I would further argue that, somewhat differently from Desai, Amitav Ghosh promotes a distinctly South Asian, diasporic cosmopolitanism by weaving his story around the culinary traditions of diasporic Indians. In tandem, therefore, both Desai and Ghosh illustrate the critical potential of food-based literary themes and indicate ways in which postcolonial fiction can continue to dialogue with the contemporary globalized world.

Kiran Desai's award-winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) presents the writer's attempt to reconcile the different 'worlds' she inhabits. Through her cosmopolitan background, Desai has spent a considerable time in India, received education in UK, and lived in USA for a number of years. However, it is her Indian partly ancestry and childhood experiences of life in India that dominate her fiction. *The Inheritance of Loss*, for instance, follows the various cultural and political involvements of a few characters from the Indian hill-station Kalimpong in present-day West Bengal to the

extent that, in narrating their story, “life becomes a novel and novel becomes a life” for the author (Desai 2009: npg). *The Inheritance of Loss* centers around Indian characters such as Jemubhai, a retired judge; Sai, his teen-aged daughter; Gyan, Sai's Nepali tutor; and Biju, Jemubhai's cook's son, who lives in New York as an illegal immigrant. It is through Biju that Desai brings her immigrant experience in conversation with her Indian upbringing by reflecting on Biju's predicaments as a diasporic Indian. Narratives from the two worlds – that of Kalimpong and of New York – constantly interact and intersect to make produce a powerful critique of contemporary society that pits middle-class Indians against the forces of multiculturalism and aggressive nationalism.

The metaphor that permeates both native and multicultural narratives in *The Inheritance of Loss* is that of food. Throughout the text, Desai employs various culinary motifs and food imagery to describe the sociocultural peculiarities, mentalities, and predilections of the main characters. Thus, Desai depicts Jemubhai through his overwhelming preference for the Western cuisine and disparagement of Indian food; describes Biju through his longing for Indian food and dislike for *Angrezikhana* as well as other foreign cuisines; and explores Sai through the ambiguity of her feelings towards the Indian cuisine. While Sai's grandfather Jemubhai remains anglicized in his approach to food, both Biju and Sai grow in maturity by learning to appreciate different cuisines. However, food and culinary traditions play a major role in shaping all three characters in the text.

Desai critiques an outdated and imitative colonial mentality by portraying Jemubhai's obsession with Western food. Although living in independent India and facing the wrath of the Nepali youth for having been a British-servant, Jemubhai insists on a Westernized life-style. For instance, he demanded that every day tea should be served in a proper way along with “at least a cake or scones, macaroons or cheese straws;” the absence of these goodies was a “travesty” for him that “undid the very concept of teatime” (Desai 2015: 3). Jemubhai's inability to embrace the Indian food and culture, as evident in obstinate demands for Western food and snacks in his house, make him a curmudgeon, shockingly out of touch with reality. Essentially, Desai creates a flat character out of Jemubhai, who comes across as an “anachronistic Anglophile elite...whose admiration for the English and contempt for the Indians render him a foreigner in his own country” (Sabo 383). At one point in the text, Desai mocks Jemubhai's artificial Englishness by making him wonder on the joke that his cook mispronounced an English dish, 'roast bustard' as 'roast bastard.' After having a good laugh at the joke, Jemubhai reflects if “he, too, was...part of the fun” (Desai 2015: 63). For all his fascination with soups and puddings, cakes and scones, Jemubhai's remains a hybrid Indian – capable only of a meek mimicry of his colonial masters, which, in fact, turns into an act of self-ridicule.

Biju, Jemubhai's cook's son, represents a continuity between the colonial world and independent India, between the East and the West, between rural India and cosmopolitan US. Biju straddles the two worlds uneasily, struggles to come to terms with his diasporic identity and often expresses his longing for his homeland India in culinary terms. In fact, Desai articulates Biju's sociocultural dilemmas at three levels: firstly, through his constant longing for Indian food; secondly, through his inability to like 'American food,' and thirdly through his hatred for other ethnic cuisines such as Mexican, Chinese, and Japanese. To illustrate, soon after arriving in the US, Biju writes to his father, especially mentioning that, “*Angrezikhana* only, not Indian food, and the owner is not from India. He is from America itself” (ibid 14). Moreover, while acquainting himself with ethnic restaurants in New York, the memories of native food-items assail his mind: “He thought of samosas adjoining a spill of chutney coming by on a leaf plate” (270). Nevertheless, being an illegal immigrant in New York, Biju can only dream of his favorite food, while harboring a strong grudge against the other foreign migrants like him, in the process, displaying the immigrant mentality of jealousy and hatred towards other migrants on account of the socioeconomic competition they pose. Biju's portrayal as a struggling Indian migrant in a First-World country, underscores Desai's ability to capture the social as well as psychological struggles at the intersection of colonial and

postcolonial terrains.

The culinary theme also allows Desai to problematize the socioeconomic and cultural divide between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'; in the text, Jemubhai's granddaughter represents the former, and her Nepali tutor-lover, Gyan, the latter. Gyan's justification for ending his short-lived love-affair with Sai emanates from the fact that her tastes were Western. For example,

She who could speak no language but English and pidgin Hindi... who had never been to a temple but for architectural interest; never chewed a *paan* and had not tried most sweets in the *mithaishop*, for they made her retch... felt happier with so-called English vegetables, snap peas, French beans, spring onions, and feared—*feared*—*loki*, *tinda*, *kathal*, *patrel*, and the local *saagin* the market. (Desai 2015: 176)

The disparity of food-habits indicates the cultural distance between Sai and Gyan – a fact that ultimately leads him completely away from her and into the Gohrkha agitation for a separate nation. Desai clearly indicates that Sai's aversion to Indian food is engendered by her alienated upbringing by an Anglicized grandfather; for in his care, she had learned that “cake was better than *laddos*, fork spoon knife better than hands... (and) English was better than Hindi (29-30). The pointed references to Sai's Westernized taste “call attention to how even ostensibly elite people (like Sai and her grandfather) can be disempowered by other factors” (Jackson 40). Gyan's abandonment of Sai emphasizes the mutual nature of alienation felt by the rich and the poor alike; for although, far above Gyan in economic terms, Sai suffers from her the same degree of rejection and disparagement that she assigns to Indian food and culinary traditions.

Without a doubt, Desai has portrayed Sai out of her own experience of resembling a bewildered Westernized teenager, trying to understand India from an elitist perspective and failing in it. While discussing the genesis of *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai claims that “the emotional and historical parallels draw the narrative forward” (Donadio 2008: 172, as quoted in Sabo). In fact, as Desai further remarks, “the book quickly took her back to India and made her feel much more Indian” (ibid 168). Interestingly, Sai's attempt to roll bits of dough into chapatis ending in “all kinds of shape,” including that of “[m]ap of India,” mirrors Desai's attempt to re-claim India by writing about it and feeling inadequate in her effort. Seen in a different light, Desai also seems to suggest that her own knowledge of India is like Sai's cooking skills in making Indian dishes, such as *chapatis*: a sincere attempt without much expertise. Nevertheless, like Sai's offer to make tea for a stranger at the end of the text, Desai, too, never gives up trying. Crucially, Desai makes the culinary image of 'tea-making' central to Sai's final attempt to embrace her Indianness.

Taking a more cosmopolitan approach than Desai, Amitav Ghosh promotes a distinctively South-Asian cosmopolitanism in his Ibis trilogy (*Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015) through the motif of 'food'. On the one hand, Ghosh's brilliant depiction of the ritualistic use of native food and language by the Indian indentured laborers celebrates their quest for origin and identity, and on the other hand it underlines the bond of cultural similarities among diverse South-Asian groups on the littoral – a bond that survived the colonial onslaught of British imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While Desai permeates her narrative with culinary elements throughout *The Inheritance of Loss*, Ghosh deploys them strategically in select places to celebrate a familial cosmopolitanism that survived among the subaltern diasporic Indian in the British era.

In the *Ibis* trilogy, Ghosh attempts to recuperate a distinctively South-Asian cosmopolitanism of the subaltern and, in the process, celebrates certain culinary practices of the diasporic communities that proved successful in preserving the communitarian character of the Indian diaspora. The valorization of the diasporic Asians' inherent unity and resilience against Western imperialism, especially the British colonization, in the trilogy adduces to Ghosh's self-conscious attempt to re-write the colonial history through historical fiction by dwelling closely on the marginalized subjects in colonial

history. In other words, Ghosh celebrates the “cosmopolitan subject that could be understood to be postcolonial and transnational” owing to place “within a world connected through its resistance to European colonization” (Grewal 180). The culinary narratives embedded in *The River of Smoke* and *The Flood of Fire*, therefore, attain added importance in light of Ghosh's overall ideological emphasis in the trilogy.

The beginning of *River of Smoke* underlines the author's unmistakable reverence for the traditional Indian culinary customs among the diasporic communities. The text opens with the matriarch Deeti's part-celebratory and part-ritualistic annual visit to her memory-shrine in which food plays a vital role in strengthening family bonds. Ghosh portrays Deeti – one of trilogy's main characters and the wife of Kalua, a Dalit, who dared to elope with her and settle on a Mauritian island – as the embodiment of the diasporic spirit that embraces the new without forgetting the old. Not surprisingly, then, Deeti ensures that her clan remember their patriarch Kalua through a ritualistic celebration of his lucky escape on the sea. Interestingly, Ghosh describes in some detail the various food items that Deeti prepares for her children and grandchildren, who have grown up in Mauritius as a diasporic clan. For instance, “the feast that followed the puja” required “choppers and chakkis, mortars and rolling pins” that transformed “heaps of vegetables...into stuffings for parathas and daal-puris” (Ghosh 2011: 4). Ghosh also underlines the Indian character of Deeti's ritual feast with her family. “Those meals were always vegetarian and perforce very plain, for they had to be cooked on open fire, with rudest utensils” (8). The family feasts together on the staples such as “parathas and daal-puris” along with “chutneys of tamrind and combava fruit, and ... achar or two or lime or bilimbi” (ibid). Considering from a sociological perspective, on the one hand, Deeti's family-meal at her shrine exhibit the elements of Appadurai's all three domains: the family, the temple, and the public-gathering. On the other hand, however, it transcends these categories by mixing them up and adding a diasporic characteristic to it. Here Ghosh affirms not only the primacy of food and culinary traditions in the perpetuation of the native culture among the Asian diasporic communities, but also emphasizes their vital function in the identity-formation of the diaspora.

Yet, Ghosh refuses make the Indian diaspora an inward-looking community of foreigners who eschew the host culture. On the contrary, as the description of Deeti's annual family-meal reveals, Ghosh seems to promote a healthy intermingling with the host country's culture. For example, Deeti not only serves her clan a delicious pure Indian meal; she also includes local dishes such as “finely ground mixes of the island's most toothsome vegetables – purple arwi and green mourouge, cambare-beti and wilted songe” (6). Ghosh succeeds in establishing the links between Deeti's community and the local dietary traditions of Mauritius because of the freedom that historical fiction affords him. Fiction being the realm of the imagination enables Ghosh to conceive, express, and celebrate the culinary connections between the Indian diaspora and other cultures. As Ghosh himself states in his essay “The Diaspora in Indian Culture,” fiction-writers can create fictions to match their conceptions of the narrative worlds because the relationship between a diaspora and the native country is “so much a relationship of the imagination” (Ghosh 2002: 250). The beginning of *River of Smoke* captures Ghosh's brilliant imagination – one that artfully blends history with fiction, reality with the ideal, and the home with the away.

Crucial to understanding the anti-colonial character of Ghosh's culinary narratives is their overall impact in the triumphant tone of the *Ibis* trilogy. The opening scene of *River of Smoke* in fact takes place in the aftermath of Ghosh's imagined story of Kalua and his five companions, who successfully thwart the oppressive forces of British imperialism to make a lucky escape to freedom on the ship called the *Ibis*. In light of the trilogy's historical background, then, Ghosh celebrates a small subaltern group's victory over the might of the British Raj, achieved through sheer determination and familial-spirit. While the *Ibis* trilogy's narrative is largely fictional and over-optimistic, it nevertheless affirms a dilemma evident in Ghosh's writing. It concerns Ghosh's impulse “to give voice to the casualties of history and thereby to bear



testimony to the occurrence of a series of historical events that have been largely ignored...by the powerful Eurocentric master narrative (Sankaran xxi). Through Deeti's elaborate, festive, and culinary celebration of this event, Ghosh critiques an imperialism that strove to annihilate the subaltern Asians' resistance through military power and political oppression. In *Flood of Fire*, Ghosh valorizes the same spirit by creating the character of Ashadidi, the Indo-Chinese woman who grew up in Bengal and set up an Indian restaurant on a Chinese harbor to keep her Indian roots alive. In the final analysis it should be noted that, Ghosh immortalizes the Indian diaspora of the 19<sup>th</sup> century not only through its fictional recreation but also by nourishing it with a vibrant culinary narrative that traces its root in India and thrives in diaspora.

Even though, both Desai and Ghosh transcend the boundaries of the Indian postcolonial fiction, as evident in the preceding analyses of *The Inheritance of Loss* and *River of Smoke*, the one jar of Indian fiction still remains empty. Indian fiction is as rich and infinitely creative as the Indian culinary traditions and therefore no single novel can make a definitive statement on the culinary narratives' importance in Indian fiction. The two constantly reinvent themselves like Rushdie's story-teller to describe the multicultural, pluralist, exotic, and spicy India that constantly appeals both the native readers as well as the global audience.

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