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Postcolonial Loss of Identity and the Food Metaphor: Contemporary Indo-Pak Women Writers

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Abstract

Most postcolonial texts document a loss of identity, and a struggle to regain a lost self. Of all the devices used to explore this personal domain, the metaphor of food is the most potent and intimate. This paper aims to examine four books written by authors from the Indian Sub-continent that centre on identity issues in the wake of colonisation on various levels. In particular, it traces the food metaphor throughout the texts, looking for parallels in thought and expression. The striking similarity of a culinary vocabulary across these writings is a revelation in the understanding of the postcolonial predicament.

Keywords: Postcolonial; Loss of identity; food metaphor; culinary vocabulary; double colonisation; Anita Desai; Kiran Desai; Madhur Jaffrey; Sara Suleri

Introduction

In no sphere of human life has there been a more poignant reflection of identity loss than in the contortion of a relationship with food resulting from colonisation across culinary terrains. Gloria Naylor, in *Linden Hills,* uses the metaphor of food to comment on the problematic issue of African-American identity (Toombs, 1993). Bilbija (1996) examines the issue of Latin-American identity through the

use of kitchen metaphor in two Spanish American women writers, Laura Esquivel and Silvia Plager. Reluctant cultivation of a palate for alien foods at the cost of a suppression of the native taste has resulted in painful narratives of loss centred on a gastronomic vocabulary.[1] For example, Jhumpa Lahiri, in her book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, deals with the questions of identity in exile and shows that for the Indian immigrants and expatriates food serves as an important part of their identity (Choubey, n.d.). Food, and the guilt attached to perverse yearnings for what are considered 'inferior' dietary choices, provides another dimension to this postcolonial metaphor. Schoenberg & Trudeau (2006), while examining the works of Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, maintain that "food metaphors are often used to characterize people and their status in society." In this paper, we aim to examine four books, *Fasting, Feasting* (FF) by Anita Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* (IL) by Kiran Desai, *Climbing the Mango Trees* (CMT) by Madhur Jaffrey, and *Meatless Days* (MT) by Sara Suleri that centre on identity issues in the wake of colonisation on various levels. In particular, it traces the food metaphor, a pertinent metaphor for double or gender colonisation,[2] throughout the texts, looking for parallels in thought and expression. The striking similarity of a culinary vocabulary across these writings is a revelation in the understanding of the postcolonial predicament.

Loss of Identity and the Food Metaphor

The title of Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* is the most potent expression of food as a colonial metaphor. In his introduction to the book, Dasgupta says, "The novel, as the title suggests, is about practices of the body. It enters households from their refrigerators, dining tables and kitchens, and it recounts human relationships in the language not only of fasting and feasting but of greed, craving, taboo, denial and disgust."

In such writings, food becomes a pertinent metaphor for double colonisation (also termed gender colonisation) as female characters strive for recognition through the provision of appropriate nutrition to the male characters to validate their female identity.[3] Without such defining roles, they fear becoming nameless shadows. In *Fasting, Feasting*, Uma's mother enacts the female role for her daughter to observe and follow:

> 'Uma, pass your father the fruit.'
>
> Uma picks up the fruit bowl with both hands and puts it down with a thump before her father. Bananas, oranges, apples — there they are, for him.

> Blinking, he ignores them. Folding his hands on the table, he gazes over them with the sphinx-like expression of the blind.
>
> Mama knows what is wrong. She taps Uma on the elbow. 'Orange,' she instructs her. Uma can no longer pretend to be ignorant of Papa's needs, Papa's ways. After all, she has been serving them for some twenty years. She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in strips, then divides it into separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed, one by one, to the edge of Papa's plate. One by one, he lifts them with the tips of his fingers and places them in his mouth. Everyone waits while he repeats the gesture, over and over. Mama's lips are pursed with the care she gives her actions, and their importance.
>
> When she has done, and only pith and peel and pips lie on her plate, and nothing at all on Papa's except for the merest smear of juice, she glances over at Uma. Her dark eyes flash with the brightness of her achievement and pride. (*FF*; 23)

When this ritual ends, we are told 'Mama sits back. The ceremony is over. She has performed it. Everyone is satisfied.' This unquestioned play of servility by a woman, and an almost indifferent acceptance of his social superiority by the male, is centred on a fruit. Its nutritive juicy globules are for the male; its pith, pips and peel, leftover consolations for the female.[4]

This female dance of attendance extends to the son as well. At mealtimes, we are told, Uma's Mama 'watched over him [her son] like a dragon' because 'when Papa returned from the office, he would demand to know how much his son had consumed and an answer had to be given; it had to be precise and it had to be one that pleased.' [5] (*FF, 30*)

Mira-Masi, the widowed relative who sometimes comes to stay and is so loved by Uma for making the best *ladoos*, is not particularly welcomed by her mother. Mama is coloured by her husband's preference for western food and complains that Mira-Masi 'won't eat what the cook makes — she is so old-fashioned.' *Ladoos*, even if they are 'round and big and sweet' as Uma insists, are only considered good enough for inferior native tastes. (*FF*; 38)

The metaphor of eating is a deeply personal one. It reflects the hunger for an alternative, more fulfilling identity. In *Fasting, Feasting*, Arun becomes the

scapegoat in just such a hide-and-seek game for identities. Papa insists that Arun should eat meat,[6] and Mama is the agency that enforces the rule. It is a cause of great mortification for Papa to find out that Arun is a vegetarian. This is an embarrassing weakness that Papa attaches only to the inferior 'native'.[7]

> Papa was confounded. A meat diet had been one of the revolutionary changes brought about in his life, and his brother's, by education. Raised amongst traditional vegetarians, their eyes had been opened to the benefits of meat along with that of cricket and the English Language: the three were linked inextricably in their minds… Now his own son, his one son, displayed this completely baffling desire to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life. (*FF*; 32-33)

Meat is therefore forced down Arun's throat to make him become English, just like he is forced to play cricket. Later, in America, caught between two identities neither of which he completely owns, Arun is an uneasy vegetarian. Every meal becomes a battle in irony: 'Arun has made the mistake of telling the Pattons that his name means 'red' in Hindi, and Mr Patton has seized upon this as a good joke, particularly in conjunction with his son's name, Rod' (*FF*; p.169). Red, Rod … Red hates meat, Rod eats only meat. Red is reduced to just a sad distortion of Rod and has lost the Arun along the way. As a result, 'sadly, he resigns himself to the despised foods, wondering once again how he has let himself be drawn into this repetitious farce — the ceremonies of other tribes…' (p.171). Arun later recognizes the dual pressure he has been facing. Colonisation was twice removed in India. It was administered by his father and that is retrospectively easier. The pressure here was more direct and much more sharply felt. When Mrs Patton tries to tempt his palate by trailing him through supermarket aisles, he muses:

> How was he to tell Mrs Patton that these were not the foods that figured in his culture? That his digestive system did not know how to turn them into nourishment? For the first time in his existence, he found he craved what he had taken for granted before…that duty to consume what others thought he must consume…No, he had not escaped. He had travelled and he had stumbled into what was like a plastic representation of what he had known at home; not the real thing — which was plain, unbeautiful, misshapen, fraught and compromised — but the unreal thing — clean, bright, gleaming, without taste, savour or nourishment.' (*FF*; 188-189)[8]

Still, Arun cannot overcome his long-bred inferiority and thinks that 'there is no way that a small, underdeveloped and asthmatic boy from the Gangetic plains, nourished on curried vegetables and stewed lentils, could compete with, or even keep up with this [Rod's] gladiatorial species of northern power.' (*FF*; 195) It is a strange irony that Arun starves himself at home with disgust for the foods that were fed him forcefully, and Melanie stuffs herself with sweets and plenty to purge herself clean by being sick. Eating disorders and food aversions become strong metaphors for lost identities.[9]

Suleri's *Meatless Days* is another title speaking of loss, with a beautifully complex vocabulary of food, or the lack of. Born to a Welsh mother and a Pakistani father, Suleri probes her Pakistani-Welsh identity with intense scrutiny through her relationship with food. She then turns to her life outside Pakistan and examines her Janus-like identity.

Unlike *Fasting, Feasting*, Suleri's *Meatless Days* takes a step further, and compares physical nourishment and emotional fulfilment through the food metaphor.[10] In this way she tries to resolve the issues of emptiness and loss in her life. Her love, and an ultimate sense of betrayal about Pakistani food, is an echo of her identity crisis. The 'kidney' tale and '*kapura* parable' are both wonderful examples of mistaken identity. The connection between *kapura* and testicles, and kidneys and urine speak of loss of faith. Suleri recounts having been given a plate of kidneys to eat when she was a child.

> Wicked Ifat came into the room and waited till I had started eating; then she intervened. "Sara," said Ifat, her eyes brimming over with wonderful malice, "Do you know what kidneys do?" I aged, and my meal regressed, back to its vital belonging in the world of function. "Kidneys make pee, Sara," Ifat told me, "That's what they do, make pee."… Betrayed by food, I let her go… (*MD*; 26)

This causes an uneasy relationship with Pakistani food and breeds a sense of insecurity and suspicion. Suleri's mother would make sure that water, milk and every liquid was 'boiled ten times over' for Irfani, her brother. Local shops would be scoured for imported baby foods. All this resulted in Irfani's 'violent rebellion against the idea of food' very much Like Arun in *Fasting, Feasting*.

> … [A]ll of us were equally watchful for hidden trickeries in the scheme of nourishment, for the way in which things would always be missing or out of place in Pakistan's erratic emotional market. Items of security — such as flour or butter or cigarettes or tea — were always vanishing, or returning in such dubiously shiny attire that we could barely stand to look at them. We lived in expectation of threatening surprise…the milkman had accidentally diluted our supply of milk with paraffin instead of water; and those were not pistachios, at all, in a tub of Hico's green ice cream…I can understand it, *the fear that food will not stay discrete*, but will instead defy our categories of expectation in what can only be described as a manner of extreme belligerence…We in Pakistan were *bedmates with betrayal*…There were both *lean and meaty times*… (Italics mine. (*MD*; 28-29)

The surprise element of known foods 'turning against' you, speaks of familiar identities turning their backs on you just as one gets comfortable with them. Suleri herself says, 'Am I wrong…to say that my parable has to do with nothing less than the imaginative extravagance of food and all the transmogrifications of which it is capable?' (p.34)

In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, the food metaphor is more direct. It is a legacy of a colonial past and food aversion represents shame and loss.[11] One of the main characters, the Judge, is shown to be ashamed of his colour, his native food, his wife — everything to do with his land of birth. On his way to England to seek higher education, he is disgusted with the food his mother has packed for him to eat during his journey.

> Jemu picked up the package, fled to the deck, and threw it overboard. Didn't his mother think of the inappropriateness of her gesture? Undignified love, Indian love, stinking unaesthetic love…The smell of dying bananas retreated, oh, but now that just left the stink of fear and loneliness perfectly exposed. (*IL*; 38)

The Judge forces his wife to eat western food and scolds her when she cannot pronounce the correct words for the unfamiliar foods. Dual colonialism is at work here, since the wife is colonized both by her husband, as well as a literal colonial past which is constantly reinforced by the Judge.

> "What is this?" he asked holding up the bread roll.
>
> Silence.

> "If you can't say the word, you can't eat it."
>
> More silence.
>
> He removed it from her plate.
>
> Later that evening, he snatched the Ovaltine from her tentative sipping: "And if you don't like it, don't drink it." (IL; 171)

Much later in his life, as an old man back in India, the Judge still eats western food. His cook is instructed to make only '*Angrezi khana'*. The cook thinks that 'cooking English food, he had a higher position than if he were cooking Indian' (p. 17). His son, Biju, has been sent to America to carve a better future. It is a matter of great pride for the cook that his son was 'growing fat there' which was common knowledge: "Are you growing fat, *beta*, like everyone in America?" he writes to his son. His son answers that he is growing fat, 'ten times myself' (p. 233). That is the image of well-fed superiority which is sought by the cook.

Sai, the Judge's granddaughter has also been brought up with the same hatred for local foods. Not only that, she hates eating with hands. Gyan, a boy that Sai likes, is a nationalist who tries to make Sai understand her loss: "Don't you have any pride? Trying to be so Westernized" (p. 174). The incongruity of eating Indian food with a knife and fork reflects the comic pathos of the postcolonial predicament.

> She who could not eat with her hands; could not squat down on the ground on her haunches to wait for the bus…who had never chewed a *paan* and had not tried most sweets in the *mithaishop*, for they made her retch…she who thought it vulgar to put oil in your hair and used paper to clean her bottom; felt happier with so-called English vegetables, snap peas, French beans, spring onions, and feared — *feared — loki, tinda, kathal, kaddu, patrel* and the local *saag* in the market…she [was] revolted by his [Gyan's] energy and his fingers working the dal, his slurps and smacks. The Judge ate even his chapattis, his puris and *parathas*, with knife and fork. Insisted that Sai, in his presence, do the same. (*IL*; 176)

In *Climbing the Mango Trees*, a memoir by Madhur Jaffery who is a well-known actress and food writer, the author understandably projects her identity through her relationship with food. Hers is a gastronomic narrative and Jaffery's taste memories give us a good perspective on the effect of a colonial past on middle-class kitchens. Writing about her childhood, she says:

> Breakfast was, except on special weekends, Western, with jams in proper silver-lidded cut-glass jam jars, toast in silver toast-racks, Kraft cheese straight out of a tin — tins were considered modern and exotic — Marmite housed in its traditional dark brown bottle, and, every now and then, ham or sausages bought from Valerio's, a speciality bakery and meat shop owned by a Goan couple, Mr. and Mrs. Noronha. (*CMT*; 43)

Madhur Jaffery's parents, like many affluent middle class Indian families, sent their daughters to a Christian Convent school, where everything 'English' was promoted to a higher status. That is why children craved foods they had never even had.

> At school we recited "Half a pound of tuppenny rice, half a pound of treacle" and "four and twenty blackbirds, baked in a pie" as if to the manor born, even though we had never eaten a pie in our lives and had no real sense of what treacle was. (CMT; 50)

It was also at school that kitchen-colonialism came into effect. One of the subjects at Jaffery's school was domestic science. This included a cookery class. She writes: "The textbooks had not changed suddenly after independence. We were still being asked to prepare British invalid foods from circa 1930 and not much else. Blancmange still loomed large." (*CMT*; 203-4)

All of these dual influences that shaped the culinary and everyday social life of Madhur Jaffery made her see herself as a hybrid. She saw two kinds of Indians, and recognised herself as belonging to the former division and not the latter. She, nonetheless, questioned who were the real Indians?

> What had been becoming clearer to me as I was getting older was that there were two distinct types of Indians. There was my kind of Indian — a privileged product of British colonial India, who spoke English fluently but also spoke Hindi. We ate at a table with napkins, knives and forks, but would eat with our hands when we wished… We could talk about Tudor England just as easily as about Moghul India. One part of us was completely Indian, but there was this sophisticated Western overlay, a familiarity and ease with the West, that set us apart… Most of India consisted of this second kind of Indian, whose mastery of English was nil or limited; who, like my mother and her relatives in the Old City… lived much more traditional, unbifurcated lives. *Were they real Indians and we just hybrids created by a particular time and*

> *place, and would we now, after Independence, just be plowed under or left with no standing in our new society?* (Emphasis mine). (*CMT*; 202)

It is interesting that Jaffery carves this division not only through language differences, but differences in mannerisms around the table. However, it is clear that doubts about identity rose around these issues. Even after independence, it seems that it was difficult to reassess where one's real self resided. Postcolonial uncertainties about identity seem just as confusing as the fork and knife custom vis-à-vis finger-eating divide.

The post-independence scenario witnessed a quest for reclaiming native identity, and as a result western food was rejected by many. Jaffery writes of her uncle who worked in England for the BBC. He returned to India after independence having put all his savings into buying a doughnut machine that he was convinced would make him rich. But 'post-independence India, however sweet-toothed, did not take kindly to doughnuts, and his venture proved quite ruinous' (p. 69).

Conclusion

This culinary arena where battles for identities have been won and lost is a post-colonial metaphor with a unique flavour. It spans the most intimate grounds of nourishment, growth, and pleasure. Identity is closely connected with how we feed ourselves and what is allowed access into our bodies. It is not surprising that food vocabulary has played a central role in the writings of authors with a colonial past. In following the tracks of kitchens, tables and market habits, one can easily trace the most personal metaphors of loss and ultimate regain of a Self.

Notes

[1] Mannur (2009) shows that native food may not only make one to affirm but also resist one's notion of identity.

[2] A catchphrase in feminist and postcolonial criticism in the 1980s, double colonisation refers to the fact that third-world women are twice oppressed, first by their men as patriarchal colonisers and then by white (see Peterson & Rutherford, 1986).

[3] Sceats (2000), while drawing a connection between mothers, food and love, contends that "Food is a currency of love and desire, a medium of expression and communication.

[4] A similar event is narrated by Kate Grenville in *Lilian's Story*. Lilian's father demands meat at every meal and takes more than anybody else. Standing at the head of the table, he rips the meat off the bone with his teeth or slashes at it with his sharp knife.

[5] "Margaret Atwood uses food and eating in *The Edible Woman* (1969) to symbolise the differential power relation that exists between men and women (Piper, 2012).

[6] Adams (1990) considers meat to be the king of all foods; a symbol of the patriarchy. In Margaret Atwood's, *The Edible Woman* (1980), Marion's rejection of meat may be interpreted as the rejection of patriarchy by Marion.

[7] "Food and culinary items define social hierarchies, and serve as a driving force behind people actions. Food delineates privilege, economic class, and social position" Choubey, n.d.).

[8] "Not only food but the eating habits also become dear as it induces a sense of belonging. Eating with hands gives pleasure as no spoon or fork does" (Choubey, n.d.).

[9] "Food and its related concerns with feminine identity and domesticity have been given a central place in many works of women's literature. For example, authors such as Margaret Atwood have used food and eating disorders to address issues of gender, language, and sexual politics, as well as social dislocation" (Schoenberg & Trudeau, 2006).

[10] Ernest Hemingway often had his expatriate characters eat native foods, allowing them emotional access to the world they were living.

[11] A similar situation is depicted in *Silent Dancing* by Ortiz-Cofer in which she characterises her father as someone eager to assimilate to American culture whereas her mother is a loyal Puerto Rican, firmly rooted in her native culture.

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