7. THE SWEET AND THE SOUR IN DIASPORIC IMAGINATION

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Food is at the core of South Asian diasporic literature. It is no accident that one of the earliest and most celebrated of diasporic writings—Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*—proclaimed its special place in the world of letters through a food metaphor. In Rushdie's exuberant novel, the identity, history and language of the protagonist Saleem Sinai (and India, by extension) undergo a process of "chutnification" within a narrative style that blends storytelling genres and cultural signifiers and pickles the fate of the individual with that of the nation. Chutnification—the merging of disparate ingredients to create a whole new gustatory experience— is crucially an attempt to remind an "amnesiac nation" of its aspirational origins, as Saleem explains:

> What is required for chutnification? Raw materials, obviously—fruit, vegetables, fish, vinegar, spices. Daily visit from Koli women with their saris hitched up between their legs. . .I supervise the production of Mary's legendary recipes; but there are also my special blends, in which… I am able to include memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Pakistan, or how it felt to be in the Sunderbans . . . (Rushdie, 1981)

Rushdie's redeployment of chutney—the ubiquitous metonym for South Asian food worldwide—as the appropriate literary device is playful, but also sincere in suggesting that a chutnified perspective can only be achieved by a migrant writer who has tasted the sweet-sour diasporic experience of hybridity and loss. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie underscores that experience of loss and recovery when he says:

> [E]xiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge— which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (Rushdie, 1983).

Food—the smell and taste of it—offers a potent tool of recovery of the past. In the rituals of nostalgia connected with cooking and eating, the Indian grocery store, with its unmistakable smells of intermingled spices, enacts a subtle shift of identity for the immigrant within a familiar ethos. Its potential as a contact zone between two disparate cultures and economies suggests exciting possibilities of hybridity and transculturation. In *Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni plays up the exotic possibilities of this space, and spices up the stories of immigrants, their hopes, struggles and anxieties. Her protagonist—Tillotama—perhaps modeled along the magic realist style that worked so well for Rushdie—runs an Indian grocery store in California (with its large South Asian immigrant population), where she (rather predictably) doles out spices as panaceas for the immigrant condition: turmeric for rebirth, chili for cleansing, fennel for cooling, and so on. More intended to titillate the taste buds of the western reader, and rather dubious fare for the Indian reader, the novel ends up Orientalizing South Asians as figures of displacement in the West, who must simply reconnect to their natal culture of spices for leavening their angst. Like the brightly-colored, sanitized spices in the Indian grocery store, the novel promises much, but delivers watered down flavors.

In Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tide* smells and flavors of the Bengali kitchen forge a transnational connection between two displaced subjects. In the novel, an American marine biologist of Indian descent—Piya Roy—travels to a remote part of India, the wetlands called Sunderbans. Raised in a white-collar immigrant home in Seattle, Piya reflects the migrant ontological crisis of being trapped between memory and desire, and engaged in a quest for authenticity. Interestingly, the person she most connects with is Fokir, a boatman marked by displacement and instability as a victim of state violence against hapless Bangladeshi immigrants. It is the smell of food, and the activity of cooking that forges their unique connection. Watching Fokir cook for her (work for which work he will refuse to accept money) Piya becomes a child again: "It was her mother's hands she was watching, as they flew between those colours and flames. They were almost lost to her, those images of the past, and nowhere had she less expected to see them than on this boat." A mother's unassuming and undemanding act of cooking signifies the familiarity of home, and in the novel, a cosmopolitan fantasy of

recovering that nostalgic space on the rickety boat of a third world impoverished immigrant Fokir.

Anita Desai's *Fasting/Feasting* offers an interesting and valuable departure from the trope of food as nostalgia. The strength of the novel resides, in fact, in the way that it uses the metaphor of food—as the title indicates—to forge a radically different transnational connection between the east and west than the ones examined above. The novel is sprinkled with images of food and eating, but using the lens of gender, it explores the subtle inequalities of eating habits in the family as symptomatic of rituals of male power in the middle-class household in both India and the US. Food becomes a measure and method of demarcating the privileged status of males in the household; women's wants can only be acknowledged surreptitiously. The mother's love of sweets is the only hint of her private, unencumbered self; her corpulent body suggests that sweets are at once poison and cure, emblematic of denial and fulfillment: "Mama said, 'In my day, girls in the

family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family. But ours was not such as orthodox home that our mother and aunts did not slip us something on the sly.' She laughed, remembering that—sweets, sly." (Desai, 1999)

The subtle starvation of the mother—who has been raised since childhood to putrefy in the listless bourgeois household—seeps into her lackadaisical motherhood, and recreates a malnourishing diet of emotional deprivation for her daughters, passed on to succeeding generations. Her rapprochement with her soul-starved older daughter at the end of her story can only be experienced as comfort (of) food: "Uma suddenly finds a hand clasping her tightly. Mama's eyes are closed and there are tears on her cheeks. 'Mama,' she whispers, and squeezes the hand back, thinking, they are together still, they have the comfort of each other. Consolingly, she whispers, 'I told cook to make puri-alu for breakfast and have it ready. Mama gives a sob and tightens her hold on Uma's hand as though she too finds the puri-alu comforting; it is a bond." (Desai, 1999) A similar motif emerges in the Western context as well, where a bulimic daughter, through her rejection of food, rebels against the passivity of the homemaker mother whose culinary activities function more as a mode of escape from her bullying husband and the disintegrating family. It is the image of the retching female body—the epileptic Uma in India and the bulimic Melanie in Massachusetts—that alerts the reader to the nexus between food and power across cultures.

Stepping beyond literature and into life, it is not an exaggeration to claim that food does, in fact, function as a primary marker of identity for immigrants whose cooking and eating habits differ radically from the culture they seek to be assimilated into. Indian food—its spicy taste, colorful look, variegated texture and potent smell—unabashedly proclaims its existence at any buffet table, and often meets with disapproval from those immured to milder palates. Acknowledgement of such food by members of the dominant culture therefore signals something far more meaningful and intimate than the consumption of an exotic dish. For the immigrant, food offers a limited, but an immediate, connection with the Other; it carries the suggestion of being included as part of a family and the comfort of being home. When my daughter announced yesterday that her social studies teacher had joked with the predominantly white class-"why have *raas*

malaai when you can have *goolaab jamoon*?”— displaying his relish for and easy familiarity with Indian food, the brown-skinned, dark-haired, rice-eating burden of invisibility lightened considerably.

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