

AN APPETITE FOR METAPHOR:  
FOOD IMAGERY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN INDIAN FICTION

by

Jennifer Burcham Whitt

May, 2011

Director: Richard Taylor, PhD

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Postmodern culture has been greatly influenced by food images and the usage of food as metaphor. Recent interest in food studies has opened doors in literary studies to examine how the use of food imagery and metaphor represents complex ideas and deeper meaning in literature. Literary food studies analyzes food symbolism to reflect on cultural identity which includes various issues from social position to sexual desire to gender relations. In three postcolonial Indian novels, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*, food carries multiple meanings that serve to drive the action of the plots, characterize the characters, and reflect on aspects of the Indian culture. The writers use food and eating to symbolize cultural issues of acceptance, resistance, and preservation of culture, as well as symbols of memory, emotions, narrative history, relationships, power, and consumption. After examining each novel for its relevance of food images, this thesis will conclude by revealing the ways the food metaphors therein reflect directly on the Indian cultural identity as one of political and social fragmentation, postcolonial hybridity, patriarchal oppression, and repressed sexual desire.



AN APPETITE FOR METAPHOR:  
FOOD IMAGERY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN INDIAN FICTION

A Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the Department of English  
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts Degree in English

by

Jennifer Burcham Whitt

May, 2011

@2011, Jennifer Burcham Whitt

AN APPETITE FOR METAPHOR:  
FOOD IMAGERY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN INDIAN FICTION

by

Jennifer Burcham Whitt

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: \_\_\_\_\_  
Richard Taylor, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_  
Seodial Deena, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_  
Andrea Kitta, PhD

CHAIR OF THE  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH: \_\_\_\_\_  
Jeffrey Johnson, PhD

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE  
SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_  
Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my husband Patrick for always believing in me and inspiring me. Thank you for loving me when I was deprived of sleep and cranky. I would also like to dedicate my thesis to my mom and dad for their unending enthusiasm and encouragement in all I have ever undertaken to accomplish. It has been their stories that have made me want to read every other story.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Rick Taylor for his confidence-boosting support, expert guidance, and unbelievable patience. His encouragement and wisdom were essential to the successful completion of this project. I would like to thank Dr. Seodial Deena and Dr. Andrea Kitta for their guidance pertaining to the topics explored in the thesis, as well as for their helpful suggestions throughout the planning, writing, and revision of this thesis.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: ACQUIRING A TASTE FOR LITERARY FOOD REPRESENTATIONS .....	1
Food in the Global Postmodern Culture .....	2
Food Studies and Foodways .....	5
Food Studies in Literary Criticism.....	7
Food as Metaphor .....	9
Food as Cultural and Personal Identity.....	12
Food Culture and Cuisine in India .....	13
CHAPTER 2: VERBAL CHUTNEY IN <i>MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN</i> .....	16
Chutnification of History (and Future?) .....	16
Chutney as Memory Trigger.....	20
Powerful Foods, Powerful Women.....	21
Foods and Repressed or Begotten Love.....	23
Food as Acceptance and Resistance of Culture and Religion.....	26
CHAPTER 3: FORBIDDEN FRUIT IN <i>THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS</i> .....	28
Cultural Preservation or Resistance .....	28
Secrets Sealed and Secrets Spilt .....	32
Kinship and Gender Issues.....	33
Mocha Latte Desire.....	33
Lemondrink Fear.....	34
Let Sophie Mol Eat Cake.....	35



CHAPTER 4: DIGESTING <i>FASTING, FEASTING</i> .....	39
By the Power Vested in Food .....	39
Mighty Meaty Men .....	41
India's Fasting.....	44
America's Feasting .....	45
Family Ties and Unties .....	47
Fasting and Feasting: Binging and Purging.....	49
CHAPTER 5: DRAWING CONCLUSIONS ON CULTURAL IDENTITY .....	52
Political and Social Fragmentation.....	53
Postcolonial Hybridity .....	53
Patriarchal Oppression .....	55
Repression of Sexual Desire .....	56
Universal Appeal of Food Images .....	57
WORKS CITED .....	58

## CHAPTER 1: ACQUIRING A TASTE FOR LITERARY FOOD REPRESENTATIONS

“Tell me what you eat, I’ll tell you who you are.

--Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

I grew up eating a lot of beans. My parents grew up eating them mostly out of economic necessity, for survival. When you are one of eleven children, as my mother was, beans and bread is dinner on a good night. In later years, a pot of simmering pintos, especially with a ham hock thrown in, became comfort food to them, and somehow a family tradition of a love of beans grew, eventually translating into an annual bean party. The “Annual Burcham Bean Party” started when I was young and has continued for the past twenty-eight years. How the beans are prepared, the toppings, and the side items have varied through the years, reflecting culinary trends, financial status, and the cooks’ personal preference, but the beans themselves are basically the same as they were when I was young. Now, I just might add onions or chow-chow to my bowl. As I have aged, however, the richness of the beans has grown beyond the flavor of the vegetable to the meaningful representations I have come to associate with the pinto bean. It is just one small vegetable, but it is more than substance to me; beans now seem to carry a wide range of emotions, trigger memories from the past, and connect me to my family through our common social history and celebration of the bean.

And I am not the only one influenced by food on such a grand and deep scale. Since Eric Schlosser labeled America with his bestseller *Fast Food Nation* a decade ago, this country has been thinking more about food than ever—by making nutritional changes, but also with expanding culinary arts and advances in all things gastronomic. Convenience and speed are still food goals for our overly fast-paced lives, driving the production of more microwaveable

items than consumers had ever thought possible. However, focus on food has changed to include more production-sensitive foods, with a push towards organic and local. Not only have our thoughts of food grown to include its origins and production, but our palates have expanded to expect more options, multi-ethnic foods, and higher-quality inventive dishes—haute cuisine meets gastronomic innovation. And one cannot forget about the presentation!

Of course food is essential to all life, but universally, it is also an indulgence, even a passion, that more are exploring; and its juices are dripping into so many areas of life and of study that it is hard to ignore. Food research is growing in new ways—out of the literal context of production and consumption, into the colossal role it plays in culture—crossing lines between anthropology, sociology, arts, and humanities. Food studies and foodways open windows into private lives and diverse, complex cultures by investigating the connotative meanings of different foods and eating habits. And as with all parts of culture, food imagery is reflected in literature. Delmer Davis suggests in “Food as Literary Theme,” “The centrality of food to human experience and to personal and cultural identity is mirrored in the food preoccupations of literature.” The usage of food in literature is undeniably significant, and the study of food imagery in literature is gaining recognition and momentum as a way of understanding characters, actions, and cultures represented in literature.

### Food in the Global Postmodern Culture

All areas of contemporary culture, including food studies, have been vastly influenced by postmodern thought. Postmodernism became increasingly popular in the late twentieth century as an intellectual and artistic movement that transcends from, or reacts against, earlier modernism. In Jean François Lyotard’s influential work “The Postmodern Condition,” he asserts that knowledge and truths are not definite and may be altered, particularly by technology. The

postmodern culture is one that skeptically questions the world, considering truth and reality as relative and not fixed. It rejects boundaries, embracing hybridity and plurality, as well as juxtaposition and fragmentation. Frederic Jameson expanded postmodern theory into the study of late capitalist culture which extends to globalization theories. Globalization is significant as a key representation of the inclusiveness of postmodern theory and culture.

Douglas Kellner explains in “Globalization and the Postmodern Turn” how some theorists see globalization as “eroding local cultures and traditions through a global culture,” whereas others see it as “a lever to produce positive social goods like environmental action, democratization, and humanization” (23-24). Some see it as positive progress into the future, and others as a link to the past—“a replacement for imperialism, . . . a cover to neutralize the horrors of colonialism” (25). Globalization is easily linked to colonialism, as, historically, many foods and eating practices have been exchanged in colonial rule. Kellner continues, “In addition to the development of a new global market economy and shifting system of nation-states, the rise of global culture is an especially salient feature of contemporary globalization” (28). Globalization, he asserts, “involves the dissemination of new technologies that have tremendous impact on the economy, polity, society, culture, and everyday life” (28). Food is one area of culture and everyday life that has been greatly impacted by globalization.

Food connects humans, and perhaps all living things, by a common need for it that all share. It is in many ways an ordinary thing, but it is essential to all. Through globalization, food now connects people in very literal, physical ways. Seodial Deena argues that “Globalization, especially through technologically advanced transportation and communication, has reduced the world to a global village” (25). In this “global village,” increased food availability and accessibility has changed the foods many people eat, particularly in more affluent societies.

Where it was once necessary to travel to India to taste chicken tandoori, diverse ethnic foods are increasingly available options in restaurants and grocery stores because of the global food market. Similarly, McDonald's can be found in over 115 nations as an ambassador of American fast-food culture (McDonald's *Annual Report 2009*). This example of globalization has become so overwhelmingly predominant that sociologist George Ritzer coined the term "McDonaldization" to refer to society reflecting the influential, world-wide fast-food restaurant. With the spread and exchange of foods (and ideas), each party and culture is put in contact with the other, influencing each other, no matter the distance or familiarity. In "Eating Indian(s): Food, Representation, and the Indian Diaspora in the United States," Kunow describes this globalized connection: "Food always goes around . . . and this circulation has by now reached unprecedented dimensions as food has become fully integrated into capitalist globality. . . . All sorts of food, from meats or tropical fruits to luxury items are now circulating around the world, constantly available without regard to season or location" (155).

Globalization is not only responsible for the spread of spices and recipes. Sidney Mintz and Christine Du Bois argue in "The Anthropology of Food and Eating" that it is also one of three major movements responsible for the remarkable growth in food scholarship and literature: "[G]lobalization; the general affluence of Western societies and their growing cosmopolitanism; and the inclusivist tendencies of U.S. society, which spurs even disciplines (and professions, such as journalism and business) . . . to consider cross-cultural variations in foodways" (111). The global postmodern culture and world food market has stimulated new questions regarding foods as an important part of cultural study, spurring the recent growth in food studies.

## Food Studies and Foodways

Food Studies grew out of the social sciences fields (primarily anthropology, sociology, and history) and cultural studies, to embrace the arts and humanities, including foodways, literature, gastronomy, and culinary history. Food studies includes all areas of food-related issues: methods of production and consumption, as well as the social function of eating, including habits, rituals, and choice of dining companions. All are studied to give insight into human society and cultural identity. Amy Bentley writes, “Scholars across disciplines have studied food for a long time, most notably anthropologists and folklorists, but it is only in the last ten to fifteen years or so that food as a focus for scholarly study has gained real acceptance” (114). This rapidly growing area of interest was mostly considered a trivial area of study before the 1980s. In “Writing the Food Studies Movement,” Marion Nestle describes the creation of food studies as both an intellectual and social movement, as well as an academic field first founded at New York University in 1996, explaining how her own interest in food studies began when “food [was] far too common and quotidian to be taken seriously as a field of study, let alone as an agent for social change” (161). In fact, she remembers how even in the late-1980s, “Universities typically discouraged doctoral students and instructors from wasting time on anything so intellectually trivial” (162).

As early as 1888, anthropologists Garrick Mallery and William Robertson Smith published writing on food and eating (Mintz and Du Bois 100). Among literary and cultural theorists, Roland Barthes was one of the first to explore the semiotics of food and culture, collecting his ideas in *Mythologies* (1957), in which he wrote of food: “It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior”

(167). In the mid-1960s the study of food and eating developed more significantly with the writings on food and foodways by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas (Mintz and Du Bois 100). But it was not until 1982 when Jack Goody published *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* that food studies began to gain recognition and grow as an area of research (Mintz and Du Bois 100). After New York University's food studies program was founded in 1996, interest in food research escalated, similar programs to New York University's developed across the country, and internationally, and the field rapidly expanded.

The term "foodways" was first used by folklorists to refer to "the connection between food-related behavior and patterns of membership in cultural community, group, and society" (Camp). In "Food in Folklore," Jonathan David writes:

In order to establish such a framework about food in folklore, . . . we should first examine the subject of folk cuisine itself, and folk eating habits. Together, these constitute the domain that scholars in the field of folklore and folklife have come to call 'foodways.' The food traditions of any one community include not just recipes, but the methods by which foods are gathered, stored, prepared, displayed, served, and disposed of.

"Foodways" also examine the rules that govern cultures' choices of foods, such as "ideas of health and cleanliness" and "foods that are especially esteemed or shunned," as well as "specific rules governing the contexts in which particular foods may or may not be eaten" (David). Folklorists study food habits or traditions and eating behaviors within a community or culture "to identify the primary cultural attributes of an individual or group of individuals" (David). These references to food may be found in folktales and folksongs, but they may also be seen in other expressive genres, such as folk dance, festivals, costume, and even architecture (Camp).

“Foodways” is also used to mean the way in which people of a particular region produce or obtain, prepare, and consume food.

A noteworthy marker in the creation and growth of the food studies discipline is the founding of scholarly journals in the field. Although several journals have been founded focusing on foods and foodways, two journals that are especially important to food studies in the humanities are *Gastronomica* and *Alimentum*. *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, first published in 2001, describes itself on its website as an eclectic journal that “uses food as an important source of knowledge about different cultures and societies, provoking discussion and encouraging thoughtful reflection on the history, literature, representation, and cultural impact of food” (Goldstein). Another journal focusing on food is *Alimentum: The Literature of Food* which was first published in 2006 and particularly focuses on writing about food and eating. Both journals are evidence of the growth of food studies and show how the discipline has expanded to include the study of food in literature.

#### Food Studies in Literary Criticism

It makes sense that food imagery has featured in significant literature since ancient times. In the “Introduction” chapter of *Critical Approaches to Food in Children’s Literature*, Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard argue that “food is fundamental to literature:” “If food is fundamental to life and a substance upon which civilizations and cultures have built themselves, then food is also fundamental to the imagination and the imaginary arts. Food is fundamental to the imagination, because food is fundamental to culture” (5). *The Odyssey*, one of the oldest and most influential examples we have of world literature is full of food imagery and feasting. In fact, there are forty-two meals included within this great epic. Keeling and Pollard write of *The Odyssey*, “Food is fundamental to the plot and to character interactions, to the very propelling of



the adventure forward throughout the story; the ritual barbecues, the feasts, the slaughtering of bulls and pigs and sheep, and occasionally, humans” (4). From Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* to Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, food imagery is repeated in many of our most beloved works of literature.

Although food imagery has been used in literature throughout the ages, scholars have just recently begun to study texts for the significance behind the foods and eating. Keeling and Pollard attest that “Food has not always been deemed a subject worthy of literary study, despite its omnipresence in literature” (6). However, as food studies grows, as well as cultural studies in general, literary theorists are increasingly seeing the value of studying literature for food usage for various reasons, as food serves several different purposes in literature. The study of food in literature is useful as a way to view a range of elements in a fiction novel—formal and contextual.

At the very literal level, food related images in literature, particularly when used with rich details and descriptions, appeal to the senses of the reader, enhancing the realism of the work. They provide sensory images readers can relate to—especially sights, smells, and tastes that may be familiar to readers. In “One Reader’s Digest: Toward a Gastronomic Theory of Literature,” Brad Kessler insists, “Food in fiction engages all the reader’s senses (taste, touch, feel, sight, and smell)” (151). He explains how food draws the reader into the text: “Meals are magnets; they draw people together. They are drama, in fiction as in life” (153). Kessler argues that food also serves as memory triggers, reminding characters of the past, transporting them to another time through the memory of a similar previous sensory experience (157). In these ways, food related images may be used to create a specific mood, offer a visual for readers, help convey an idea, express an emotion, dramatize a situation, or increase the realism in a specific text. They often

help to characterize people in novels, helping readers to understand a character's dilemma, social status, personality, emotions, or even ethnicity, among other factors surrounding a character and plot.

The most important purpose of food in literature, Kessler states, is as a cultural signifier. He describes food as “freighted with meaning. Just as in life, food in fiction signifies. It means more than itself. It is symbolic. It opens doors to double and triple meaning” (156). Literary critics approach the usage of food as a way to open these doors, search for deeper meanings and views into the cultural and even personal identity of characters, and extend connections within the text and from literature to life.

#### Food as Metaphor

Food is commonly used in literature as a metaphor because it is a familiar, universal substance that is recognizable and understandable when used as representation. Kunow describes the semiotic quality of representation as “a stand-in, a *sign* of something that is (or was made to be) absent” (151). He states, “Food has, of course, always functioned as representation: ethnographers and cultural studies specialists have long been demonstrating how food not only feeds but also organizes us, how the making, taking, and disposing of aliments are socially and culturally inflected” (151). Food is naturally rich with symbolism, and has been since ancient times, because of its centrality to life. Foods provide an instant, strong visual image when used in language, and in different cultures, various foods may carry different connotations that create instant mental connections when referenced. Food-related language uses these associations by providing concrete wording to describe experiences, events, people, and emotions, often abstract ideas that seem to be completely unrelated to the food itself. In literature, food may represent many different things, such as power or social status, religion, family or relationships, gender,

sexuality, wealth, and group identity.

In “Curry at Work: Nibbling at the Jewel in the Crown,” Mark Stein praises the effectiveness of food metaphors resulting from the universality of food, stating, “Food cuts across the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ – in its ordinariness it connects all human beings, irrespective of differences. Food, the external that is ingested, internalized, only to be expelled again, points towards the paradoxical relationship that humans can have to their surroundings, and that texts can have to their contexts” (147). He describes the various functions of food metaphors:

In the world of fiction they are a reminder of the material world; they can also serve to remind us of the history (and presence) of exploitation; as we all need food, food metaphors point to a shared humanity, if under greatly variegated circumstances; food metaphors therefore often contain the power to affect sensually, . . . At the same time, food and eating are symbolic practices, . . . food metaphors . . . help texts to reach out. (147-8)

Using imagery of food and eating to represent much more complex ideas is not a new device. Throughout history, food has functioned as metaphor in some of our most ancient texts. Early Christianity created some of the most enduring and recognizable food metaphors which are preserved in the Bible and serve as foundations of the religion’s beliefs. As early as the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve consume fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The tree and the fruit represent temptation, indulgence, pleasure, and sin. This well-known metaphor is commonly referenced in culture, even outside of the religion’s realm. “Forbidden fruit” is a common metaphorical phrase which refers to this Biblical account and describes an object of desire that should not be acquired because it is immoral or possibly harmful. Even the larynx, the

lump protruding prominently in men's throats, is referred to as the "Adam's apple" in remembrance of Adam's snack. Chapter three of this thesis is also entitled "Forbidden Fruit in *The God of Small Things*" to refer to the giving in to temptation within the novel.

One of the most important Biblical metaphors is the usage of bread, particularly in reference to Jesus. John 6:35 says, "And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life; he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst" (King James Version). In this passage, Jesus compares himself to bread, representing nourishment and fulfillment. Bread is used repeatedly throughout the Bible, and Jesus returns to this reference in the passage describing the Last Supper. In Luke 22:19-20, Jesus was gathered with his disciples for the Passover feast, and the scripture states, "And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: do this in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you" (King James Version). The meal that Jesus shared with his disciples consisted of bread and wine, but the text describes how Jesus used the food as metaphor for his own body and blood, foreshadowing his imminent death. This metaphorical representation is recreated in Christian churches as it is shared through the sacrament of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, in which members of the church partake of bread and wine, metaphorically ingesting Jesus in remembrance of the Last Supper. In chapter two, this thesis will explore another way bread is used as a religious symbol.

In fiction, the usage of food is more than just a literary detail that provides readers with a realistic visual image. By questioning what, how, and how much a character eats, as well as how food is prepared, shared, served, avoided, or even bottled and preserved, literary scholars can gain a deeper perspective into a character's ethnicity, status, gender, and all parts of their cultural

and personal identity.

### Food as Cultural and Personal Identity

Food imagery helps readers to understand their characters' true identities, because in many ways, food defines people and cultures. In editors Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau's collection *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, an article titled "Food in Literature—Introduction" states, "Recent psychoanalytic theory suggests that eating practices are essential to self-identity and are instrumental in defining family, class, and even ethnic identity. Although food and related imagery have long been part of literature, psychological theories have led to the examination of food and eating as a universal experience." Food can serve to signify the belief systems, religious rules, and complex ideologies of a particular person or character, or that of an entire community or culture, that may not be explained explicitly in a text.

In "Introduction: Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures," Gardaphé and Xu explain, "Ethnic identity formations have been shaped by experiences of food productions and services, culinary creativities, appetites, desires, hunger, and even vomit" (5). He continues to describe French sociologist Claude Fischler's convincing argument in "Food, Self and Identity" which states "that food constitutes the self. . . . The saying, 'You are what you eat,' bespeaks not only the biochemical relationship between us and our food but also the extent to which food practices determine our systems of beliefs and representations" (7). Food and eating practices are essentially ways of defining a culture's ethnic identity, reflecting on those persons' identities within the culture.

Food not only reflects and expresses personal identity in life and in literature; it also mirrors cultural identity and can create boundaries and differences between cultures. Mark Stein states, "Food does more than satisfy one's biological need for calories, nutrients, water. Food

choice divides communities and has the power to delineate the boundaries between them. Food taboos can serve to mark outsiders as unclean, unhealthy, unholy” (134). In the article “Food for Thought,” Andy Martin states that “our sense of identity . . . depends on the application of apartheid to taste.” He declares, “The truth is, we are what we do not eat” and that we “define ourselves in opposition to the menu of another country or community; conversely, we equate the Inedible with the Other.” Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss would agree with both Martin and Gardaphé. He argued that “what we eat and the way we eat it are graphically revealing about our habits of mind” (Martin). His “culinary triangle” analyzed cooking methods as reflection on human nature and “demonstrated that the domain of food is not only that of appetite, of desire, of pleasure, but also the reflection of a society’s structure and world vision” (Martin). Food may perhaps be one of the most basic and common ways for one to distinguish himself from others or for a community or culture to differentiate themselves from the Other. In every novel, whether a character is eating, cooking, serving (or whether he is not) means something. What a character is eating or refuses to eat, who the eating companion is, and what role food plays in the character’s life define the character and reflect on the cultural identity of the character.

### Food Culture and Cuisine in India

One of the most ancient and rich cultures in the world is that of India. The lush diversity of the culture contains a mixture of religions, languages, and ethnicities which can be attributed to a history of empires, invasions, colonization, restructuring, and migration. India’s history may be described as tumultuous, but it resulted in a colorful multiplicity of subcultures to which the Western world is allured. Indian cuisine is as varied as the cultures from which it springs and equally as enticing to food studies. To describe Indian food in one particular manner would be as faulty and presumptuous as trying to encapsulate the Indian culture(s) in one sentence. One

cannot say there is either one Indian food or one Indian culture. Indian foods, however, are characterized mostly by a wide variety according to various regions and the extensive use of the spices and herbs that have become so popular worldwide.

Western eaters have shown interest in Indian foods as early as the late 1500s when Dutch explorer Jan Huighen van Linschoten introduced the word “curry” to the English language in his travel accounts (Stein 135). However, the spread of popularity in Indian foods truly resulted from the British Raj, Britain’s colonial rule of India from 1858 to 1947. In “Curry at Work: Nibbling at the Jewel in the Crown,” Stein states that Indian foods, particularly curry, had “been both adapted and adopted and during the nineteenth century [was] becoming rather fashionable in Britain” (137). Since that time, Indian foods have been embraced by England to the point where in a 2001 speech describing Britain’s multicultural state, British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook hailed, “Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish,” given to its extreme popularity and adaptation to British taste preferences (Cook). Interest in Indian culture and Indian food is growing in popularity around the world. Likewise, in literary food studies, Indian literature is a new, exciting place of exploration and is being examined for the ways food is used in texts and the rich cultural representations behind the foods.

The ways in which food connects to cultural and personal identity is unique and particularly significant in India, creating many avenues for study. The diversity of religion in the country leads to a range of diets, often including refraining from eating various foods that are viewed as either sacred or unclean, such as pork, beef, or meat in general. Universally, food means more in culture and to individual identity than merely substance. However, in India, food acts as a social, political, and religious statement of personal belief, as well as a barrier between cultures.

In the next chapters, I will explore and add to the scholarly conversation suggesting that food in three postcolonial Indian novels, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*, has multiple meanings beyond the literal, denotative understandings and is used to represent various aspects in the plots, characters, and cultures within the texts. I will identify the symbolism implied by the food imagery, as well as explain the purpose behind the food usage. As you will see, the three novels similarly use food and eating as metaphor for emotions, culture, and relationships; these metaphors serve to drive the action of the novels, assist in characterization of the characters, and most importantly, reflect on aspects of the Indian culture represented.



## CHAPTER TWO: VERBAL CHUTNEY IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

*The New York Review of Books* called Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* "an extraordinary novel . . . one of the most important to come out of the English-speaking world in this generation" (Towers). This bold claim was confirmed when the novel won the "Best of the Booker" award in 2008 when voted by the public as the best book of the Booker Prize winners since the prize was first given forty years prior. And the accolades are true. *Midnight's Children* is a brilliantly constructed, gripping tale—a masterpiece of Indian fiction. Rushdie's historical novel, published in 1981, was assembled as an extended allegory of the turbulent history of India's political condition from the time shortly before the country gained independence through the following thirty years. The narrative is told by Saleem Sinai, whose own autobiographical narrative parallels that of the nation's story. Born at midnight on August 15, 1947, the exact time of India's independence, Saleem's entire life is full of turmoil and angst that mirrors the political conditions in which the country was engrossed for the next thirty years. The story of his life also seems to be filled with a never-ending list of delicious descriptions of Indian foods: mango pickles, samosas, sweetmeats, cucumber kasaundies, lime chutneys, coconut milk, masala, cheese pakoras, and pathoras (to name only a few). Within the overlying metaphor comparing Saleem to India itself, Rushdie has filled the thirty chapters with colorful representations of characters, emotions, relationships, and culture, many of which are shown through the usage of vibrant food imagery.

### Chutnification of History (and Future?)

Near the beginning of the novel, readers learn quickly that Saleem has several impressive gifts including telepathic powers which he uses to connect the midnight's children (he and the

one thousand other children born within the first hour of India's independence) and a powerful sense of smell. Although his "cucumber nose" is stopped up for half of the novel, through most of the novel he is able to sniff out the slightest smells, as well as emotions. Readers also learn early in the text that now (at the end of his life story) he manages a pickle factory, but like the character himself, there is nothing ordinary about this fact. This introduces a metaphor that runs through the background of the entire novel: not only is Saleem recording his familial and personal history on paper to preserve and pass on the facts of his life story, he is also creating chutney to preserve them. Saleem states:

I, Saleem Sinai, possessor of the most delicately-gifted olfactory organ in history, have dedicated my latter days to the large-scale preparation of condiments. . . . And my chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribbling—by day amongst the pickle vats, by night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks. (37)

The author uses pickling and preservation—of fruits, vegetables, vinegar, spices, and herbs—as metaphor for the conservation of memory, an attempt to immortalize his magical stories and recollections through the "chutnification" of history. Saleem describes how each of the thirty chapters he has written corresponds to a label on a jar of chutney he has filled with his "special blends" of "memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know" what he has lived through, what he has seen, and how it felt (530). He shares precisely how he preserves his memories for future generations: "Every pickle-jar . . . contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time! I, however, have pickled chapters. . . . in words

and pickles, I have immortalized my memories” (529). And the reason for and importance of his work is also clearly stated at the end, as he must fill the jars (except for one he leaves empty for the future) and finish his stories before it is too late: “To pickle is to give immortality . . . One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth . . . that they are, despite everything, acts of love” (531).

It is clearly stated that the pickling of chutney is a metaphor for the attempt to preserve history. However, why would Rushdie choose chutney as a metaphor? What representations are behind this common Indian condiment? In “Rushdie’s Pickle and the New Indian Historical Novel: Sealy, Singh, Tharoor, and National Metaphor,” Judith Plotz describes Saleem’s chutney as a narrative history of India’s political history, identity, and state. She states, “The astringent mixture of pickled mangoes—thirty years of Indian history, thirty chapters of narrative—epitomizes Rushdie’s programmatically promiscuous contribution to the modern Indian historical novel” (28). She argues:

‘[C]hutney’ suggests the difficult unification more or less harmoniously, more or less positively, of powerfully different elements. At the same time, pickling is also a metaphor that is bound to be contested, bound to offend. . . . the ingredients resist bland assimilation but retain powerfully astringent differences. Yet if those differences are not safely ‘bottled,’ not contained in some medium, then there can be no ‘chutnified history,’ no possible solutions for the diversity of modern India. (29)

Plotz describes Rushdie's narrative as a "form of performative nation building" and his task and the purpose of Saleem's "chutnifying history" as "representing postcolonial Indianness in self-reflective postmodern [text] organized extravagant, exigent, and hybrid metaphors of nationality" (29). This metaphor opens a window for readers into the cultural identity of India—one that is as fragmented and unwilling to assimilate as the ingredients of chutney. Not only is modern Indian culture fragmented, but Saleem's family and life are also fragmented—between India and Pakistan, between two families whose babies were switched, between political parties, good and evil, and in the end, into six million specks of dust.

Laurent Milesi looks at the chutney metaphor differently, focusing on how it relates to issues of memory and preservation. In his article "'Promnesia' (Remembering Forward) in *Midnight's Children*; or Rushdie's Chutney versus Proust's *Madeleine*," Milesi contends that the "'promnesic' effect of Rushdie's chutnification as, perhaps, characteristic of the postmodern's, and in this case postcolonialist's, self-assumed 'pickles' of (hi)story" is actually a "successful culinary embodiment of history, memory, and time, amounting to a political gesture" (180). He explores the meanings behind the narrator's combination of cooking and writing as ways to "fight against the ravages of time" (182), stating, "'cooking' becomes a crucial textual-historical skill whose mastery enables the successful reprocessing of the past toward the creation of a more relishable future for the community" (182-83). In other words, Milesi argues that the narrator is attempting to not only remember or even remain in the past, but to transform the past into future memories "as an act of politico-historical resistance through fictional allegorization" and a "mingling of fantasy and naturalism," also found in the literature of Latin America and other postcolonial nations (198). Milesi proceeds, "Rushdie's narrator, thanks to his transindividual fragmentation, encapsulates the 'pickles' of history in order to open on to a prophetic utterance

and offer a foretaste of the future of a nation; in the very act of the narrator's pointing forward to the empty jar of the future" (199). After preserving the narrative in thirty pickle jars, Saleem has left one empty jar standing which is representative of himself, his final story: "I shall have to write the future as I have written the past, to set it down with the absolute certainty of a prophet. But the future cannot be preserved in a jar; one jar must remain empty . . . What cannot be pickled, because it has not taken place is that I shall reach my birthday, thirty-one today, . . . " (532, followed by a list of prophesied future events). Milesi states, "Rushdie's novel . . . captures the constructive spirit of promnesia by giving us as 'physical text,' beyond the point of convergence between experienced time and time of narration, the future not yet lived in the last pages, as if it were envisaged and remembered through the narration-writing, willed into existence through the compelling (magical realistic) effect of food" (201). Rushdie is using the chutnification of the past to prophetically describe the future—"a more political and historical 'remembering forward' . . . that would help to forge the amnesiac nation's 're-membrance of future things'" (Milesi 202).

### Chutney as a Memory Trigger

Not only is chutney a metaphor for helping remember the past or even for "remembering forward," but several times in the text, chutney is used as memory triggers—to help the characters themselves remember the past. With Saleem's sensitive nose, he easily connects current scents and tastes with events or people from the past, once even stating that just the fumes from pickles was enough to "stimulate the juice of memory." Throughout the text, the grasshopper-green chutney of Mary Pereira, Saleem's second mother, has the capability of transporting the eater to past times. Saleem even states that he "required the assistance of chutney" to help him carry on with his work and to defend himself from danger (240). When the

green chutney is brought to him, he shares with those around him, and soon the chutney “carried them back into the world of my past . . . mellowed them and made them receptive,” and Saleem went on to describe how “the green chutney was filling them with thoughts of years ago; I saw guilt appear on their faces, and shame” (241-42). The use of chutney represents a powerful memory trigger that changes the attitudes of those listening to Saleem’s story. Near the end, Saleem himself is transported back in time by chutney he is served on his trip back to Bombay with Picture Singh. He was surprisingly served it without any warning of its effects: “Yes, a little aluminum bowl of chutney, green, my God, green as grasshoppers . . . it had carried me back to the day when I emerged nine-fingered from a hospital and went into exile at the home of Hanif Aziz, and was given the best chutney in the world . . . the taste of the chutney was more than just an echo of that long-ago taste –it was the old taste itself” (525). By just tasting the food, he remembered the exact moment when he had tasted it before, and his mind was carried back to those days in the past. This memory drives the action by motivating Saleem to search for the creator of this chutney, thereby finding Mary; in fact, he states that it was chutney that actually saved him. As in these examples, food is often used as memory triggers in literature to expand on the character’s past, to tell the reader more about the character, and to drive the action of the text.

#### Powerful Foods, Powerful Women

Food imagery in *Midnight’s Children* is also a signifier of power. Interestingly, the characters empowered by food in this novel are female, and the characters often subject are the male characters. In the traditionally patriarchal culture of Muslim India in which Saleem’s family lives, this gender norm reversal represents a resistance by the characters to traditional cultural norms within the society. In this way, it assists in characterizing these female characters endowed with powers through the usage of food. The first woman who uses food as a power in

the text is Reverend Mother, Naseem Aziz, who barred her kitchen doors after her husband, Aadam insulted her by offering to help with the cooking during her pregnancy. Reverend Mother threatened to bash Aadam's head in with a weighty pot if he entered the kitchen, determined to not allow Aadam a single word in what she would cook, and refused to served dinner at the dinner table. But when she was further angered by her husband, she completely denied him food at all, and thus the "war of starvation" began (43). Neither character was willing to give up power, and Aadam began to grow thin until their daughter Emerald asked, "Will you be able to vanish completely?" (43) Although Reverend Mother certainly held a power over her husband, she was concerned about his starving and finally acquiesced to his dining needs; their daughter Alia "extended the olive branch to her father, in the shape of a bowl of chicken soup" (43). Reverend Mother again took control of the situation when she and Aadam stayed with Amina during the time that Ahmed was "sick" in bed: she decided to run Amina's kitchen for her to which Amina agreed, giving Reverend Mother a certain power over the household and all those who ate her foods. Saleem states, "Reverend Mother doled out the curries and meatballs of intransigence, dishes imbued with the personality of their creator; Amina ate the fish salans of stubbornness and the birianis of determination," influencing the eaters in various ways (158). The usage of food characterizes Reverend Mother as strong, determined, and prideful. She would not give in to her husband and family, and she did not seem concerned about any sort of gender expectancies within the doors of her kitchen.

Food is often used as a metaphor, especially in literature, for power and status. Other women in the novel also used the preparation of foods to control the emotions of anyone who ingested their food by filling the foods with their own sorrows, sadness, anger, and revenge. By transferring her emotions to the consumer, Mary's chutneys were filled with guilt and fear from

her lingering sin. Amina “made pickles together [with Mary] as they talked, and Amina stirred her disappointments into a hot lime chutney which never failed to bring tears to the eyes” (200). However, it was Alia whose “culinary witchcraft” was most apparent and intentional, producing the most dramatic results of all the women (380). Alia was jealous of her sister Amina for marrying Ahmed, whom she thought would marry her, and angry for having been left a lifelong spinster. Her jealousy turned into an evil, vengeful spirit that influenced everyone around her through the foods she prepared. Saleem narrates, “What she had, during the lonely madness of the years, raised to the level of an art-form: the impregnation of food with emotions. . . . she fed us the birianis of dissention and the nargisi koftas of discord; and little by little, even the harmonies of my parents’ autumnal love went out of tune” (378). The reader may examine the emotions imparted in the foods to characterize Alia throughout the novel. The effects of Alia’s weighted food were the most damaging of any of these powerful women’s recipes, affecting everyone in the family, especially Ahmed and Amina who actually became physically and mentally ill and whose relationship and business were torn apart. Rushdie uses Alia’s vengeful use of food to characterize her through her deepest, most evil feelings and to drive the action forward, causing the destruction of Saleem’s immediate family in many ways; he and his parents were changed forever from the results of Alia’s culinary creations.

#### Foods and Repressed or Begotten Love

In two scenes in the novel, food and eating practices are obviously (and scandalously) symbolic of the repressed sexual desire, particularly that which is characteristic in the Muslim Indian society. It is natural and common for many foods and the practice of eating to be linked with sexuality. Kessler describes the link between the carnality of eating and the sexuality of desire: “Eating involves putting things into our bodies, and usually when things get put into our



bodies . . . the activity is done in private. Eating transgresses the boundary. That it is done in public is a relatively modern phenomenon (in some countries eating in mixed company in public is still taboo)” (157-158). The culture in which Saleem lives is one of those that may look down on an unmarried or unrelated man and woman eating together in public. However, Amina’s film director brother Hanif shocked his audience by a scene that was considered overtly sexual, although neither character ever touched the other. The medium used to express the repressed desire and sexuality: food. The narrator describes, “Pia kissed an apple, sensuously, with all the rich fullness of her painted lips; then passed it to Nayyar; who planted, upon its opposite face, a virilely passionate mouth. This was the birth of what came to be known as the indirect kiss . . . how pregnant with longing and emotion!” (162) The couple in the film move on to kissing “cups of pink Kashmiri tea; . . . kissing mangoes” (162). The reaction from the audience was pure intoxication and excitement.

Later, a similar scene broke Saleem’s heart—watching his own mother Amina share a drink with Nadir that confirmed his suspicions. He describes exactly what he saw:

[M]y mother’s hands raising a half-empty glass of Lovely Lassi; my mother’s lips pressing gently, nostalgically against the mottled glass; my mother’s hands holding the glass to her Nadir-Qasim; who also applied, to the opposite side of the glass, his own, poetic mouth. So it was that life imitated bad art, and my uncle Hanif’s sister brought the eroticism of the indirect kiss into the green neon dinginess of the Pioneer Café. (249)

Through this simple, quietly sexual, sharing of a drink, Saleem—even as a young child—can acknowledge the reserved manner of the pair and presume the hidden feelings represented in that glass.

It is often said that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Parvati-the-witch used her supernatural powers, along with some pampering and a good meal, to win over Shiva until she could get what she wanted from him. The narrator explains, "she took off his boots, pressed his feet, brought him water flavored with freshly-squeezed limes, dismissed his batman, oiled his moustache, caressed his knees and after all that produced a dinner of biriani so exquisite that he stopped wondering what was happening to him and began to enjoy it instead" (473). In fact, he enjoyed it for four months until she had finished using him and told him she was pregnant, soon after which he delivered her back to the magicians' ghetto. Food here is used as a strong, almost debilitating, power, again reversing the expected gender status within the culture.

Saleem also attempts, however in vain, to charm a character with food—his (adoptive) sister Jamila Singer, no longer the Brass Monkey of her youth. Bread is used as a metaphor in the novel to represent Saleem's relationship with Jamila, in particular his forbidden love for her which he tries throughout the remainder of the novel to repress. Because of her passion for bread, particularly leavened bread, Saleem visits the nuns at Saint Ignacia regularly to obtain the "yeasty loaves" Jamila so enjoys. Saleem explains:

I think I was already in love with her long before I was told . . . is there proof of Saleem's unspeakable sister-love? There is. Jamila Singer had one passion in common with the vanished Brass Monkey; she loved bread. . . . the best bread in the city was handed out through a hatch in an otherwise blind wall, every Thursday morning, by the nuns of Saint Ignacia. Each week, on my Lambretta scooter, I brought my sister the warm fresh loaves of nuns. (361)

However, Saleem's love goes unreturned, and the bread seems to symbolize something much more sad than powerful—Saleem's misplaced attempts to capture Jamila's love in return. Saleem

describes how Jamila began to avoid her brother's presence completely while he "continued, slave-fashion, to fetch leavened bread" and "avoided handing her the loaves himself" out of shame and embarrassment of the situation (379).

### Food as Acceptance and Resistance of Culture and Religion

This same bread contains a deeper metaphor: it also represents a resistance to the restrictive traditional Muslim culture. Although his sister had a rebellious fling with Christianity when she was younger, his family appears to usually adhere to their religious culinary laws, accepting their traditional culture. As a child Saleem describes times in which the family fasted during Ramzàn, and an older Saleem describes a few of his religious culinary beliefs, once listing, "Sacred: . . . halal meat, . . . profane: . . . pig-meat" (364). But traditional Indian breads like "Chapatis, parathas, tandoori, nans" were not the types Jamila craved and Saleem gathered (361). Instead it was the nontraditional leavened bread offered by the nuns every Thursday morning. As described in the Biblical metaphor in chapter one, bread is a sacred symbol in Christianity. By taking the yeast bread from the Christian nuns and giving it to Jamila, the bread becomes representative for a break in continuity of the religion passed down from Saleem's ancestors to him and, in some ways, a gentle acceptance of Western culture, Christianity, and change in general. By collecting the bread from the nuns, Saleem is characterized as being open-minded to change, tolerant, and confident. Saleem states, "Criticism was entirely absent from my heart; never once did I ask my sister whether this last relic of her old flirtation with Christianity might not look rather bad in her new role of the Bulbul of the Faith . . ." (361). By the end of the novel, he even imagines that his sister is still alive, baking bread with the nuns at Saint Ignacia. Through this belief (or fantasy), he is showing the comfort he finds in thinking of Saint Ignacia and the Christian nuns as a safe haven and happy place for his much-too-beloved sister, also

showing his open-minded acceptance of others from different cultural backgrounds and beliefs.

Rushdie's colorful food imagery serves multiple purposes in *Midnight's Children*. He uses food and the preparation of food, particularly pickling, to describe a nation that is made up of various discordant ingredients, trying to create a unified whole; characters who resist or accept traditional culture and are also fragmented or repressed; and women who are powerful, evil, and full of sexual desire, ready to create emotions and trigger memories through their cooking. Some foods represent emotions, love, or cultural identity, and some drive the action by spurring other characters' reactions and events in the plot. Beautifully and vividly worded, *Midnight's Children* exhibits Rushdie's mastery of using food as figurative language in this intense, unforgettable novel. It is no wonder that Arundhati Roy repeated some of the same brilliant and versatile food images in her own novel *The God of Small Things* which critics have compared to Rushdie's work. However, Roy's characters have more secrets and scandals to hide in their jars than Saleem did, and perhaps greater punishments waiting for any leakages.

## CHAPTER THREE: FORBIDDEN FRUIT IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

Although Arundhati Roy's first and only novel *The God of Small Things* quickly met with critical acclaim and international success as one of the most important Indian novels written in English, its release also spurred scandalous, controversial debate in India, including a much-publicized lawsuit regarding the intimate scene at the end of the novel between two persons from different castes. The shocking and memorable novel presents the nonlinear, intricate story of a middle class, Syrian Christian family in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The plot centers around Estha and Rahel, the twin daughter and son of Ammu, who together at the age of seven experienced tragic, life-changing events and have now, at thirty-one years of age, returned to their family's home in Ayemenem. The narrative jumps between the "then" and "now," describing the various pieces of the puzzle that led to the weighty and unforgettable ending. The novel is known for its vivid imagery, poetic language, and mastery at creating a kaleidoscopic effect in the end. Food imagery and metaphor is woven through the novel, adding depth and multiple layers to the plot, providing dramatic images that reflect on emotions and personalities of characters, and revealing intense cultural truths.

### Cultural Preservation or Resistance

Casting a shadow over the plot as a whole is the family's former food business, Paradise Pickles & Preserves. The factory looms in the background of the entire plotline, serving as a metaphor; it is symbolic of something more than the jars of jams and pickled fruits Mammachi, the twins' maternal grandmother, began making years ago. The idea of preservation itself is of extreme importance to the characters in the novel, especially the oldest generation in the family—Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, the grandaunt. Certain ideals and traditions are

meticulously preserved by Kerala society and passed down to future generations by the elders, including the Love Laws and the maintaining of caste rules, both critical aspects of the Keralan culture that Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are devoted to protecting. Roy writes, “It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag. That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (33). Although there is a large population of Syrian Christians in Kerala, of which the family is a part, caste systems are traditional and are still enforced in Christian communities—which is ironic considering many untouchables converted to Christianity in an attempt to escape the cruelty of the strict caste system. The Love Laws and caste rules play an important part in the family’s and society’s culture, and although the Kochamma family are touchables, their freedoms are still limited within the family as they are in the general society.

The metaphor of food preservation as the attempt to conserve societal expectations through the Love Laws and the caste system drives the action through the novel as different characters decide to either adhere to the laws and culture or resist. Ammu, Rahel, and Estha ultimately resist the preservation of these traditional cultural rules. The narrator suggests in a frequent refrain, “Things can change in a day” (156). However, if it was left up to Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, things would not change. Ammu, on the other hand, is different from anyone else in her family; she contains a wild, rebellious spirit that does not fit into the repressive society in which she lives. After having divorced her alcoholic, abusive husband, a rare disgrace in the Indian culture, she returns to her parents’ home with her two children where she is surrounded by disapproval. However, she persists to reject the preservation of the cultural expectations of her society. In “Unsettling Race, Coloniality, and Caste,” Saldívar discusses the

character's continued resistance to the traditional ideals Mammachi and Baby Kochamma try to force on her, stating, "Ammu's defiant response to her family's insistence in maintaining caste rules coherent in Keralan culture and society is to make the twins Rahel and Estha 'promise' her that they will 'always love each other' – especially in the face of what Roy refers to as the local 'love laws'" (359). Ammu struggles with these "normative rules of kinship in Kerala" that Mammachi and her family try to preserve, in the same way as the pickles and jams in their factory, ultimately leading to her forbidden love affair with an Untouchable, the god of small things, Velutha (359). The way Mammachi and Baby Kochamma handle the situation is one of the most shocking transgressions of the novel, finally resulting in the deaths of both Velutha and Amma.

Rahel and Estha also resist the expectations of the Love Laws after returning to their childhood home as adults, rediscovering each other, and sharing their pain and "hideous grief" by making love (311). Saldívar calls it "a transgressive 'acting out'," stating, "The adult twins do so by making the love laws and its rules incoherent" (361). Saldívar states that the characters' decisions are based on "an understanding of the brutality of caste, the love laws, and of the necessity and urgency to deinstitution them" (362). As children, Rahel and Estha had seen the effects of the caste system; their mother's sexual relationship with an Untouchable had resulted in Velutha's beating and death, the twins' separation, Ammu's forced move from the family's home, and Ammu's own death. They are not impressed by the restrictions of the Love Laws and the societal expectations that their family members chose to uphold and preserve, and they respond by not preserving the laws themselves.

. In "In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," Bose explains, "Both [sexual affairs] violate the most basic 'love laws' that govern their

societal existence; the transgressions are the result of conscious decisions by the emotionally overcharged characters” (59). She argues that Ammu, Estha, and Rahel chose to “act out” of a political context: “[Ammu’s] own politics are embedded in her ‘rage’ against the various circumstances of her life. . . . It is not only sexual gratification that she seeks; she seeks also to touch the Untouchable” (64). Similarly, Bose argues that Rahel and Estha’s lovemaking “is proof once again of the subversive powers of desire and sexuality in an arena that is rife with the politics of gender divisions and the rules that govern them” (64). According to Bose, these characters chose not to preserve traditions passed on in the culture because of the stress and expectation of those rules placed on them. She discusses the inevitability of death as a result of Ammu’s and Velutha’s desire and states, “Perhaps Ammu’s death is in itself something of a political statement” (62). In her review of the novel in *Herizons*, Uma Parameswaran agrees with Bose, stating the novel “is about the politics of desire” and Ammu’s affair shows “political undercurrents.” She continues, “Part of Ammu’s attraction to Velutha is that he is a card-carrying communist.” Velutha was a dangerous choice for Ammu, but it seems that part of what intrigued her about him was his involvement in the revolutionary political action in the community: “Suddenly Ammu hoped that it *had* been him that Rahel saw in the march. She hoped it had been him that had raised his flag and knotted arm in anger. She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness he housed a living, breathing anger against the same smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (167). The defiant spirit of Ammu, Rahel, and Estha to resist cultural expectations (and the family’s preservation of these expectations) and to desire what they could not or should not have drives the action of the novel forward, leading to the irreversible, devastating conclusion.



### Secrets Sealed and Secrets Spilt

The preservation metaphor in *The God of Small Things* continues as a representation of the many secrets that are “bottled up” throughout the novel and hidden from sight whether out of shame or protection. The narrator describes the hiding of a secret: “It was pickled, sealed and put away. A red, tender-mango-shaped secret in a vat” (191). Just as the preserves, fruits, and pickles are jarred and stored away, the family’s pickle factory symbolizes the desire to keep the secrets “bottled” and scandals hidden from the view of outsiders. As a young boy, Estha does not tell anyone about what the Orangedrink Lemondrink man did to him at the cinema. Estha and Rahel secretly visit Velutha, getting to know and love him. Ammu makes her own secret trips to see Velutha. However, as Mark Stein explains, “[S]ecrets are found out . . . barrels crack open. . . . Roy’s narrative is interested in such leaks and spillage. . . . Meaning . . . may in fact lie in the spillage. It may lie in that which is *not* pickled and preserved and instead oozes out and covers everything in reach” (145). Similarly, Mammachi once thinks back on her first days in the pickling business, remembering how her first batch of “professional pickles” leaked: “Bottled and sealed, standing on a table near the head of the bed, . . . The pickle bottles stood in a pool of oil. . . . The pickled mangoes had absorbed oil and expanded, making the bottles leak” (159). She continues, “Even now, after all those years, Paradise Pickles’ bottles still leaked a little” (159). This serves as a metaphor and foreshadows how secrets will also be leaked in the family. When Mammachi and Baby Kochamma learn about Ammu’s touchy relationship with Velutha, the Untouchable, they go to drastic measures to keep the secret affair “bottled” and their family name clean. Baby Kochamma even convinces Estha to lie about Velutha to the police in order to save the children’s mother (although they were actually saving Baby Kochamma herself). Baby Kochamma tries to preserve the family’s reputation, but in the end, she is most concerned about

protecting herself.

### Kinship and Gender Issues

In *The God of Small Things*, Paradise Pickles & Preserves also reflects kinship and gender issues which also serve to drive the action and characterize several characters. Although Mammachi had begun the company many years ago as a modest pickle and jam kitchen, the twins' uncle Chacko has since returned to take over the running of the factory, demoting Mammachi to "Sleeping Partner" (55). He invests in expensive equipment, takes over the running of the small factory, and attempts to manage the workers, including Velutha. The hierarchy of leadership in the company reflects the family's organization with Chacko at the top of the ladder. Chacko does not hesitate to take control of the pickle factory, and he immediately sees the company as his. This reflects the normal gender expectation in this South Indian community that Ammu calls a "wonderful male chauvinist society" to which Chacko responds, "What's yours is mine, and what's mine is also mine" (56). Salvádar explains "kinship" in the novel as "not just a situation Rahel and Estha, Ammu and Velutha find themselves in, but a set of practices in postcolonial Kerala that are, as Roy suggests, controlled, performed, ritualized, and monopolized by those in power" (361). In this society, "those in power" are clearly the Touchables and men.

### Mocha Latte Desire

Chocolate is loved by women around the world for its rich flavor, creamy texture, and rumored aphrodisiacal effects. Although there is no proof that it truly stimulates desire or arousal, chocolate is unarguably associated with romance. Roy uses this well-known food image to give the reader an important clue of the sexual taboo to come later in the novel. As foreshadowing for the incest between brother and sister, the narrator includes several metaphors

using chocolate and other foods to represent sexuality and desire between Rahel and Estha. Throughout the novel, Rahel observes Estha, noticing his smooth muscles and shape. After returning to the house from a walk in the rain, Rahel watches Estha undress, describing his skin as darker in some places and “honey-colored” where his clothes were: “Chocolate with a twist of coffee” (88). The descriptions of Estha are repeated in the novel, and a similar chocolate description is used to depict Velutha as Ammu sees him, showing a more obvious attraction. The use of chocolate, honey, and coffee evokes the senses, and for the narrator to describe Rahel’s thoughts of Estha in such a tasty, sweet way denotes Rahel’s desire and that she perhaps is thinking of Estha himself as tasty and sweet. However unplanned their affair was in the end, the references to chocolate and honey as used to describe Estha’s body signifies Rahel’s sexuality and physical attraction to Estha.

#### Lemondrink Fear

Another food metaphor that drives the action in *The God of Small Things* is that of the Orangedrink Lemondrink man and the lemon drink which come to represent disappointment, fear, and shame for Estha. On an excursion to the cinema to see *The Sound of Music*, Estha is offered a free lemon drink from the man behind the refreshments counter whom he refers to as the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man. Estha is called behind the counter to receive his drink where the man molests him. The narrator describes the experience as Estha’s “first encounter with Fear” (113). This experience is frightening and shameful for Estha, physically making him sick on his stomach immediately. He does not tell anyone (although Rahel can sense that the man did something to him), but he carries the fear and guilt with him back home to Ayemenem where he cannot stop thinking about the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man and his words that Estha took as a threat to come to Ayemenem to visit. The fear of the Man walking through the door of his home

at any moment is real and tangible for young Estha, and it leads to Estha's thoughts that "(a) Anything can happen to Anyone. And (b) It's best to be prepared" (186). This line of thinking results in the idea of getting a boat and taking provisions to the History House—to "prepare to prepare to be prepared" (191). The incident with the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man is influential in driving the action forward to the point in which the twins' cousin Sophie Mol, visiting from England and irrationally loved by all, drowns in the river after the boat carrying preparatory provisions flips.

### Let Sophie Mol Eat Cake

The hybridity of the culture in the Kochamma household is obvious and intriguing and can be seen as a result of postcolonialism. Although Estha and Rahel are half-Hindu, the family belongs to the Syrian Christian community; however, they maintain the caste system beliefs and intend to enforce these rules. At the same time, the family is Indian, yet they have been greatly influenced by England through travel and education, as well as the nation's former place within the British Empire. The family speaks both Malayalam and English, and the twins are said to particularly have "a real affection for the English language" (50). In many ways, the Kochamma family, and perhaps the Keralan state in general, seems to be in love with English culture and persons. Within the Keralan society, the English seem to be idolized and almost worshiped. They are often described as being sweeter and more pure at heart than Indians themselves, more refined, and sophisticated. Chacko, who studied at Oxford in England, acknowledges to the twins "that, though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles. They were a *family* of Anglophiles" (51). Chacko continues with a metaphorical statement of their situation:

Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. He explained to

them that history was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside. . . . But we can't go in . . . we've been locked out. . . . our minds have been invaded by war. . . . A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves. (51-52)

Ammu responds to Chacko: "*Marry our conquerors, is more like it*" (52). Chacko and Ammu here are directly speaking of the adulation of the British by the Indian people to the point of even self-hatred or reverse racism.

There is nowhere in the novel where the high regard of English culture and persons is more apparent than in the details surrounding Sophie Mol's and Maragaret Kochamma's arrival to India and the Ayemenem House. In this scene, the tall, carefully iced "Welcome Home Our Sophie Mol" cake serves as a symbol of the effort and Anglophiliac affection extended to Sophie Mol and Margaret Kochamma. The cake was prepared especially by Kochu Maria for the reception of Sophie Mol, Chacko's Anglo-Indian daughter, who is described as "Loved from the Beginning" (176).

Before Sophie Mol and her mother Maragaret Kochamma even arrive in India, all preparations have been carefully made to ensure that everything goes smoothly and perfectly. With all the characters intrigued by Western culture, and in anticipation for Sophie Mol's arrival, the family predicts what Sophie will enjoy, practices songs in English, plans perfect outfits for the trip to the airport, and prepares for a perfect welcoming home event. Rahel and Estha are excited to have their cousin with them, but it is clear that there is some anxiety that everyone will love Sophie Mol more than them. And in truth, it does seem that everyone, especially Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Kochu Maria, is enamored by Sophie Mol and impressed by

everything about her, from her fair features to her height. By the time Kochu Maria finishes baking and icing the “tall, double-deckered” cake that says “Welcome Home Our Sophie Mol,” the reader is well-aware of Kochu Maria’s often grouchy behavior and attitude toward the twins (161). Yet, Kochu Maria smiles widely at Sophie Mol and serves cake in celebration of her arrival. Kochu Maria and Baby Kochamma despise the children who are most like them, embracing Sophie for her beauty and expected moral qualities. Comically, the narrator describes the apparent difference between the twins and Sophie Mol, or at least how the twins must have been feeling: “Littleangels were beach-colored and wore bell-bottoms. Littledemons were mudbrown in Airport-Fairy frocks with fore-head bumps that might turn into horns” (170). Sophie is seen as an angel simply because she is fair and English, reflecting the belief of these Indian women that the English cannot be anything but innocent and pure.

As part of the play planned for Sophie Mol, Mammachi plays a special song on the violin and cake is served to everyone. However, Rahel and Estha do not eat any. Estha is missing (he has gone to hide in the pickle factor), and “Rahel said she didn’t want any of the stupid cake” (176). No one notices Rahel’s behavior because they are completely absorbed with Sophie Mol’s every action: “Sophie Mol . . . walked out of the Play to see what Rahel was doing behind the well. But the Play went with her. Walked when she walked, stopped when she stopped. Fond smiles followed her. Kochu Maria moved the cake tray out of the way of her adoring downwards smile . . .” (177). By using the imagery of the cake, the reader clearly understands how the Ayemenem women (Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Kochu Maria) endeavor to welcome, impress, and even ingest Sophie Mol into their culture. This scene shows all of the attention bestowed upon Sophie Mol while the twins are not giving or receiving any attention themselves.

Throughout the novel, Roy uses vibrant food images to indirectly characterize the characters, drive the action of the plot forward, and reflect on personal and cultural identity within the text. Various foods and preparation of foods represent the desires to keep secrets and preserve tradition. In turn they also reflect secrets that are revealed and resistance to cultural norms. The usage of food in figurative language enhances the novel, adding deeper meaning and providing vivid images to the reader. Anita Desai's food-obsessed novel *Fasting, Feasting* features similar ways of using food to signify deeper meaning, but in this novel, the importance lies less within the foods prepared or preserved and more within who is feasting and who is not.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DIGESTING *FASTING, FEASTING*

Hailed by *The Independent* as “India’s finest writer in English,” Anita Desai’s transnational novel *Fasting, Feasting* focuses on family conflict, gender issues, and consumption to compare the culture of an Indian family with that of a family in America (Hopkinson). The Booker Prize finalist in 1999, this significant novel is broken into two parts, both using food frequently in metaphorical and literal ways. Part One centers on Uma’s unfulfilled, imprisoned life in India with her overbearing parents whom she refers to as MamaPapa. Part Two follows Arun’s summer in Massachusetts with an American family whose problems are uncomfortably dissimilar to his own family’s troubles; however, in the end he finds a connection between the two worlds that enables him to grow in his understanding of the world. Food imagery is used to symbolize power and status, acceptance or resistance of traditional culture, gender stereotypes and oppression, relationship bonds or weaknesses, and consumption issues. The dichotomous title itself suggests multiple intended meanings, including the contrast between the Indian and American consumer cultures, the contrast between modes of treatment between genders, and even the representation of the binging and purging of the character Melanie. The novel is filled with food and eating images teeming with multiple layers of meaning that reflect on the characters’ personal identities and carry the action forward.

### By the Power Vested in Food

In food studies and universally, food often relays information about power and status. This is reflected in literature, where food frequently signifies power and status of characters. In *Fasting, Feasting*, the reader meets Uma, the naïve, somewhat slow, completely powerless daughter of MamaPapa and the central character in the first half of the novel. In “Let Them Eat



Curry,” Francine Prose describes Uma as “doomed from birth by character and appearance, by the bad luck of having been born in a culture in which a plain middle-class woman has little hope of making an advantageous marriage, and by the additional misfortune of having parents who cannot see her as an individual entitled to freedom and happiness” (10). Although Uma is a grown woman for most of the novel, she is restricted to her parents’ home, where she serves her parents by completing chores and preparing food and drink, particularly for Papa. She is also forced to give up on her education at the convent school to care for her new, much younger brother Arun. Uma is given very few choices and treated like a child; she is supervised and ordered around by MamaPapa on a daily basis and given no freedoms. Angelia Poon states in her article “In a Transnational World: Exploring Gendered Subjectivity, Mobility, and Consumption in Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*,” “Uma’s powerlessness and lack of status is signaled in relation to food in other scenes where we see her—in the manner typical of daughters raised in traditional Indian homes—having always to serve food to her father. She passes the food along, but must not partake of it” (39).

This hierarchy of familial power is most apparent in a scene in chapter three that shows acceptance of the patriarchal culture, in which Mama peels an orange for Papa, then carefully places each piece on his plate. When Mama and Uma have finished watching him eat, the narrator describes the ceremonial washing of his hands: “‘Where is Papa’s finger bowl?’ [Mama] asks loudly. The finger bowl is placed before Papa. He dips his fingertips in and wipes them on the napkin. He is the only one in the family who is given a napkin and finger bowl; they are emblems of his status” (24). Papa is shown to have the most power in this family, followed by Mama. Uma accepts this as part of the culture, and she does not at any point resist her parents’ orders and leadership. Uma’s parents’ life is a relatively easy one; their rare argument usually

involves, as seen in the opening excerpt of the novel, whether or not they will have sweets with their fritters at tea that afternoon. Her mom tends to make most final decisions regarding the foods she and the father eat at home. Uma is rarely given the chance to make any decisions, except for a couple of times when she independently instructs the cook on what to prepare for breakfast.

Uma's powerlessness may also be seen as deriving from her gender. Uma's young brother Arun, with his late, surprise arrival in MamaPapa's life, is celebrated and becomes the major source of pride for both Mama and Papa. He is given more power (and more attention) by the parents than either Uma or her younger sister Aruna. While Uma metaphorically fasts on education, culture, experience, and travel, she is forced by MamaPapa to care for her young brother Arun and help Mama to provide to him with the strict diet Papa has prescribed to encourage his nourishment and growth into a strong man. The narrator describes Arun's diet: "a fixed quantity of milk was poured down his gullet whether he wanted it or not and, later, the prescribed boiled egg and meat broth. Then, when Papa returned from the office, he would demand to know how much his son had consumed and an answer had to be given . . ." (30). Arun's diet is strictly based on the fact that he was a boy and surpassed the importance of Uma's education or desires. Throughout the novel, he is given other privileges based on his gender and the increased mobility allowed to him, including the opportunities to travel, receive education, and experience other cultures.

### Mighty Meaty Men

Interestingly enough and perhaps out of a deep-seeded resistance to his parents' control, Arun does not enjoy the diet arranged by his father and seems to stay small and sickly: "They took it in turns to try – Mama, Uma, and the ayah – to spoon mouthfuls into him when he was

not looking. . . . mostly he averted his face at just the right moment, or else spat out what they had forced in” (32). When they understand the fact that Arun is a vegetarian, Papa is perplexed and disappointed. The fasting-feasting binary may also be seen in the male characters, their relationship with meat, and the stereotypes conveyed by their decisions. Although most of the people in Arun’s Hindu culture do not eat meat, including many in Arun’s family, Arun’s somewhat-progressive father feels strongly that meat is an important of the diet, as a “meat diet had been one of the revolutionary changes brought about in his life, and his brother’s, by their education” (32). He sees meat (along with cricket and the English language) as true progression (32). However, Arun rebels against his father’s wishes and practices vegetarianism. The narrator describes Papa’s feelings, “Now his own son, his one son, displayed this completely baffling desire to return of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life. Papa was deeply vexed. He prescribed cod liver oil” (33). Poon argues that “Arun’s refusal of meat amounts to a devaluation of masculine identity” to his father (44). She insists that his refusal is a form of resistance, stating, “Having been pampered and raised on a strict diet from a young age, Arun’s rebelliousness in encoded in his vegetarianism, which stands in the novel as a form of passive self-assertion against the meat-eating version of hypermasculinity extolled by his father and the male members of the Patton family in the United States” (36).

Meat also seems to equal manliness in the American culture described in the novel, and Arun’s resistance to this traditional American cultural norm is not taken easily by Mr. Patton. Mr. Patton has an apparent love of meat and grilling, often stopping on his way home for meat that Arun describes as “whatever carcass Mr. Patton has chosen to bring home tonight” (202). In fact his cooking on the grill seems to be his personal expression of manliness. He doesn’t understand Arun’s choice to abstain from eating meat and chooses not to even acknowledge his

wife's new decision to also be a vegetarian. Prose describes Mrs. Patton giving up meat "much to the chagrin of her husband, who considers manning the barbecue grill to be a crucial part of his head of the family" (10). He continues to cook meat on the grill for her and Arun, either forgetting or disregarding their wishes. Mr. Patton shows his ignorance and disrespect of Arun's dietary differences on one such occasion, saying, "Just can't see how anyone would refuse a good piece of meat, that's all. It's not natural" (166). When Mrs. Patton reminds her husband about how it is part of what Arun had already explained to them about the "Hindoo religion, and the cows –," and Mr. Patton continues, "Yeah, how they let them out on the streets because they can't kill 'em and don't know what to do with 'em. I could show 'em. A cow is a cow, and good red meat as far as I'm concerned" (166). Poon explains Mr. Patton's irreverent behavior, "In the United States, in the land of plenty, Arun's vegetarianism again surprises and causes anxiety. His diet cuts him off from the red-meat-eating and sports-mad world of Mr. Patton and his son, Rod" (44). Arun's decisions seem to reflect on him stereotypically, reducing his masculine appearance and identity in the eyes of the other male characters.

Mr. and Mrs. Patton's son Rod is also portrayed as an all-American, hamburger-and-steak-eating young man. Always jogging and exercising in an effort to make the football team, Rod exudes masculinity that Arun wishes in some ways he obtain, but Arun resigns himself to believing he could not be like Rod: "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 gladiatorial species of northern power" (191). At one point, Arun sees and describes in surprisingly frightening detail the image of Rod as a ravenous meat-eating animal:

[Arun] glances out and sees, on the patio, . . . the smouldering remains of the barbecue at its edge. And there is a forager standing beside it, peeling the shreds of leftover meat from the implements that lie scattered about. From the size, the bulk and the clothing, he sees it is Rod. Rod has returned. . . . He is standing there at the edge of the patio, legs apart, gnawing at whatever nourishment he can find. (188)

Images like these and Mr. Patton's bag of meat, seeping with blood express Arun's disgust of meat contrasted with Mr. Patton's and Rob's intense love of meat.

### India's Fasting

Part One shows the many ways that India's culture, especially exhibited by this particular Indian family, is one of fasting. Papa can be characterized as being thrifty despite having wealth. Although Uma's eyesight is deteriorating, he does not want to spend the money to send her to a specialist. Extra measures are taken to make sure that unnecessary money is not spent in the household on things such as extra postage when money could be saved. And, of course, Papa will never let Uma forget that he paid two dowries for her, and neither marriage came to fruition. Metaphorically, Uma also represents fasting. To take care of Arun, she went without furthering her education. Because of MamaPapa's restrictions on her, she is immobile, as Poon describes her—unable to travel as she would like, experience different religions as she is interested in them, or accept employment and gain any amount of independence. At one point, the narrator hints at Uma's true feelings that she might would describe in a "letter to a friend – a message of despair, dissatisfaction, yearning" (135). These emotions tell the reader that Uma wants more in life than what she has and is, thereby, fasting her life away at home with MamaPapa.

The one character that most embodies “fasting” on a literal and metaphorical level is Mira-masi, Uma’s distant relative whom she travels with to an ashram, briefly discovering the beauty and pleasure of strict Hindu practice. Poon describes Mira-masi, “Freed from a husband, the widowed Mira-masi is irrepressible and indefatigable in her spiritual journeys, taking advantage of an access to mobility seldom available to single and married women” (40). Although Mira-masi is able to explore India and enjoy travelling, she is a very frugal person and deeply religious. In “Eating Indian(s): Food, Representation, and the Indian Diaspora in the United States,” Rüdiger Kunow describes how Mira-masi is not as progressive as MamaPapa’s lifestyle with its leanings towards a somewhat Western lifestyle: “She is religious, ‘visiting one place of pilgrimage after another like an obsessed tourist of the spirit’ (38). This obsession does not make her a particularly welcome visitor in MamaPapa’s household . . . Mira-masi’s cooking and eating follow strict protocols, the disciplinary rigor of which stands in marked contrast to the self-indulgence practiced in MamaPapa’s household” (164). Fasting is an important part of her religious practices; later, in her life, her eating habits are very simple, involving simple fruits and no cooking. Kunow argues, “[T]he Mira-masi character and her excessive insistence on pure food serves as a cultural marker in the tripartite organization of the book, juxtaposing it to the different excesses over food in the US and the insipid Indian middling modernity represented by MamaPapa” (165). In the fasting-feasting binary, Mira-masi represents fasting as an important part of traditional Indian culture and religion.

### America’s Feasting

Part Two of *Fasting, Feasting* contrasts Uma’s life in India with Arun’s experience in the United States and the excess, overindulgence, and phoniness he observes there. In the descriptions of America, everything seems to be bigger, bulkier, and more disposable than what

Arun is used to in India. There's the expansive, polluted parking lot outside of his dorm where "students hurled beer cans out of the windows, sometimes entire garbage bags filled with them" and the occasional sound of "enormous pieces of sound equipment" that breaks the silence in his dorm room (169). "[W]hat he had previously known as cars" in India, he describes in America as "whole establishments, solid and rooted in their bulk, all laboriously acquired: weightage, history, even an inheritance. Their backseats piled with baby seats, dog blankets, boxes of Kleenex, toys and mascots adhering to their windows like barnacles" (182). The Patton's house was also filled, especially with food.

At the Patton household, surplus is a rule; Poon explains how "he sees how the Patton family lives in a consumerist land of plenty that is so remote from the concerns of his family in India" (35). This section of the novel represents feasting, as the American culture is portrayed by the Patton family as enormous consumers of food and grocery products. Prose states that Arun "learns how very differently the secret language of food expresses and influences the inner lives of Americans" (10). Interestingly enough, Arun seems sickened by the waste he observes in the Patton house and at times appears to be fasting himself, keeping himself from indulging in the American culture surrounding him, especially not partaking of meat. Poon states, "The sheer excess of American consumerist society and its material culture is bewildering and disorienting" (43-44). Arun is forced to distinguish his own personal and cultural identity through his food choices. Desai places many labels on American culture through the portrayal of foods in this American home. It is as though there cannot be enough purchased to make them happy.

Poon argues about the character of Mrs. Patton: "The act of buying and stocking groceries defines her subject position as wife and mother even though no one eats what she cooks" (44-45). This, of course, makes Mrs. Patton seem a shallow, artificial character, as though

she feels satisfied she has done her wifely and motherly duty by going to the supermarket, filling her cart to the brim with groceries, and taking them home to store in the refrigerator and cabinets. The narrator says, “She had provided: she had foraged, she had gathered, she had put forth. Now she stood beaming, her arms crossed . . . her eyes flashing the message of the bond between man and woman, between woman and child, brought to ideal consummation” (185). Arun hates that he has to not only witness these shopping, or hoarding, extravaganzas but be her accomplice and shopping partner on these trips to the store. Arun does not understand the need to keep buying food when the cabinets and freezer is already full, and at one point, when Mrs. Patton tells Arun it’s time to go shopping again, he tries to resist: “‘Mrs. Patton,’ he says, ‘I think we should finish the food in the freezer first.’ She stares at him in astonishment. ‘Finish the food in the freezer?’ she repeats. ‘What an idea! Whyever should we do that? What would we do in an *emergency?*’” (207).

#### Family Ties and Unties

Despite Arun’s discomfort around the Patton family, food is the tool Mrs. Patton uses to show her warmth toward Arun and her desire to connect and bond with him. When Arun tells Mrs. Patton he is a vegetarian, she hastily decides that she will become one too. She says, “I’ve always wanted to be one myself. . . . Look, Ahroon, you and I –we’ll be vegetarians together!” (179) Arun tries to argue that that would be unnecessary, but Mrs. Patton is already getting caught up in her plans to shop for and prepare vegetables. She insists, “It’ll be my vegetarian summer . . .” (180). Mrs. Patton’s thought process is probably kindled by a sincere effort to help Arun feel welcomed, and he certainly recognizes her kindness; however, this is obviously not necessary and comes across to the reader as though Mrs. Patton is making light of a serious decision or even mocking his vegetarianism. It does not help the situation when Mr. Patton



refuses to acknowledge either character's decision to abstain from meat. Mrs. Patton also attempts to cook Arun vegetarian dishes. The dishes are hardly edible, and Arun doesn't have the heart to tell her that the food isn't good or what he would be eating at home in India. The author describes Arun's feelings, "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?" (185). Although Mrs. Patton may have meant well with her efforts, Arun often felt even more excluded and disheartened by the extent to which Mrs. Patton went to make him happy and well-fed. So while some of the Pattons are feasting, Arun is often fasting in the middle of the land of plenty.

Unfortunately Mrs. Patton does not put as much of an effort into feeding the rest of her family as she does trying to feed Arun. Melanie Patton constantly gorges herself with peanuts and chocolate bars. Although the Patton kitchen is full of food, Melanie tells Arun, "I'm so hungry I've got to eat this shitty candy . . . I can't eat that goo you and Mom cook down there" (195). While Mrs. Patton is worriedly trying to prepare vegetarian dishes and ethnic foods for Arun, she is neglecting her own family by not cooking anything for the rest of the family, particularly to the taste of Melanie. Although Melanie displays a rebellious teenager's attitude to her parents, it is still Mr. and Mrs. Patton's responsibility to provide for the needs of their child. It seems though that both parents are nonchalant in their resignation that Melanie just will not eat the food Mrs. Patton has purchased. Arun shows sincere distress over Melanie's unhealthy diet, but he seems to be the only one in the household that does until Mrs. Patton finally finds out first-hand about Melanie's larger problem: purging.

### Fasting and Feasting: Binging and Purging

The most interesting use of food as a symbol is the bulimic purging of it by Melanie. Shortly after Arun notices Melanie's diet of junk food and peanuts, he sees that she is vomiting on a regular basis. He is confused and concerned—even more so than Rod appears to be when Arun approaches him about the situation, although he also knows of Melanie's habit. Rod tells Arun, "Man, she's nuts, that kid, . . . That's all these girls are good for, . . . Too lazy to get off their butts and go jogging or play a good hard ball game. So they've got to sick it up" (204). Meanwhile, Mrs. Patton hardly notices the decline in Melanie's health, apparent to Arun by her physical appearance. She finally says to Melanie one day, "Daddy thinks you ought to go outdoors and play games, Melanie, . . . You have such a bad colour. You're not sick, are you, dear?" (206). This shows how completely oblivious Mrs. Patton is to her daughter's needs and to the extent of their relationship. Melanie lashes out at her mother when she fixes her scrambled eggs: "Why can't you make me what I *want*? What do you think we all are – garbage bags you keep stuffing and stuffing? . . . Everything you cook is – poison!" (207). Mrs. Patton's response is one of denial and misunderstanding until she finds Melanie in her own vomit one day and seems to realize the seriousness of the situation. Melanie's purging of food represents her emotional reaction to her mother's neglect and her own unhealthy lifestyle in the American culture. The author appears to imply the result of the excessive American culture and how the gluttony of it can make one sick. Desai describes Arun's response after seeing Melanie vomit, "This is no plastic mock-up, no cartoon representation such as he has been seeing all summer; this is real pain and real hunger" (45). This excerpt shows how the author uses Melanie's character to show both fasting and feasting; Melanie is truly hungry for nourishment, love, and attention, but she tries to fill herself—feasting—with candy instead, making herself sick to hide

the pain and embarrassment afterwards. The reader can assume Melanie also purges to keep from gaining weight after bingeing, in attempt to have an “ideal” body figure such as represented in American media.

At the end of the novel, Arun has an epiphany, noticing a connection between the two cultures that he thought were nothing alike—the fasting of Indian culture and the feasting of American culture. Arun sees a glimpse of his sister Uma in Melanie in the end, bringing the story back around to a full circle. The narrator explains:

Then Arun does see a resemblance to something he knows: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both license and plenty. (214)

Poon describes this coming full circle: “Uma’s spiritual, intellectual, and emotional starvation finds its physical counterpart in the inexpressible hunger underlying Melanie’s eating disorder. This is Arun’s epiphany and the one tangible link between the two worlds and two different subjects” (46). Through this realization, Arun matures and grows, truly experiences another culture stripped of its façade, and makes a genuine, comforting connection with Mrs. Patton in the end.

Food and eating habits in *Fasting, Feasting* takes on multiple meanings at both literal and figurative levels, showing ways in which fasting and feasting are universal elements of all humanity. Hunger and feeling filled is something all characters and persons are familiar with, whether American, Indian, male, female, oppressed, or free. The universalism of food and eating

make it an understandably useful image and metaphor in this novel, easily crossing cultural lines and nationalities to represent power, gender stereotypes and inequality, adherence or resistance of culture, family or relationship bonds and weaknesses, and consumption.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DRAWING CONCLUSIONS ON CULTURAL IDENTITY

Before making conclusive statements regarding Indian cultural identity as presented in the novels *Midnight's Children*, *The God of Small Things*, and *Fasting, Feasting*, it is imperative to understand that Indian culture cannot be described or categorized in one particular way. Since the “heyday of the Indus Valley civilisation” (2600-1700 BC), there have been numerous divisions, creating separate kingdoms and languages (Singh et al. 38). As the birth place of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, as well as home to one of the world’s largest Muslim populations, religious divides have created further variations between cultures on the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, it is impossible to say that there is one predominant Indian culture. India is a nation of many ethnic groups and cultures. Having advised such, the cultural identity represented in these three novels is not intended to necessarily represent all cultures of India, and this thesis, exploring how food metaphors reflect on the Indian culture, certainly does not speak for all Indian cultures or imply that there is only one cultural identity.

The three novels examined in this thesis represent different religions (Muslim, Syrian Christian, and Hindu) and various regions in India. The characters are all very different, face dissimilar conflicts, and meet various resolutions. However, all three writers use food imagery and metaphors to reveal the personalities of the characters and to keep the action and plots moving along, as explained throughout the previous three chapters. Most importantly though are the comparable ways that images of food, food preparation and serving, and eating are used to signify aspects of the Indian cultural identity. Foods in *Midnight's Children*, *The God of Small Things*, and *Fasting, Feasting* similarly reflect a cultural identity that is politically and socially fragmented, hybrid in identity due to prior colonial rule, oppressive to women in society, and

repressive of sexual desire.

### Political and Social Fragmentation

Literally, India is an extremely fragmented country. For thousands of years, it has been divided and restructured. In more recent history, the partition of India that occurred after receiving independence from British imperialism tore the country apart, creating borders based on religion and increasing migration. Fragmented culture is easily recognized in *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things*. Rushdie uses his chutney to represent a mixture of various ingredients that will not dissolve into each other. This mirrors the political turmoil and tensions between religions as expressed throughout the novel—groups refuse to work together or melt into each other, even for a greater good. Saleem Sinai's family and life are also shown as fragmented like chutney—moving between India and Pakistan, belonging to two families because of a switch at birth in the hospital, and finally, becoming six million specks of dust. Roy similarly uses the preservation of pickles, jams, and fruits to represent the society's hold and conservation of the caste system that causes fragmentation in the culture. Because of the caste system, an important part of the traditional Hindu culture, the people of Keralan society are disjointed, broken into unlike groups, much like the political movements that are also breaking the community into opposing groups. The caste rules do nothing but break the society apart and lead to communal violence. The fragmentation of the culture plays an important part in both novels and is, therefore, represented by the extended preservation metaphors that are present throughout the backgrounds of the novels.

### Postcolonial Hybridity

Hybridity is represented in *The God of Small Things* and *Fasting, Feasting* by various foods. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy uses Sophie Mol's cake to represent the Indian identity

as influenced by colonialism. In this part, Kochu Maria bakes a “Welcome Home Sophie Mol” cake, Mammachi plays the violin, and the twin children learn English songs—all to celebrate Sophie Mol’s “homecoming.” Truthfully, she is not coming “home” at all, as her home is planted in England; she is visiting with her mother for the holidays after the death of her stepfather. Nevertheless, the older women of the Ayemenem House are eager to welcome her there. Their idolization of her is obvious, and they imagine her as an innocent angel, pure of heart and beautiful. These feelings may be interpreted as stemming from lingering colonial imaginings of Great Britain as the “motherland.” Common amongst colonized nations is the adoration of the colonizer by the colonized as a nurturing, caring mother-country. Many Indians feel most privileged to travel to England to study or work. Throughout the novel, this seems to be a mark of achievement. By carefully baking and icing a tall cake for Sophie Mol, Kochu Maria shows the young girl’s importance which seems to be based mostly on the fact that she is from a country that the Indians see as more refined and sophisticated, even morally upstanding than their own. One might even go as far as acknowledging that in some postcolonial societies, worship of the colonizing nation even leads to self-hatred, as the colonized persons do not see themselves as being as worthy, capable, or productive. This type of thinking leads to reverse racism, a psychological result of postcolonialism.

Hybridity is also apparent in *Fasting, Feasting* through Papa’s somewhat progressive lifestyle. Although Papa can be extremely conservative at some times and in some ways, he shows that he has some leanings towards a Western lifestyle, particularly through his meat-eating diet. He himself admits that eating meat was a revolutionary change in his life, but it is one that he sees as extremely beneficial to his health and wellbeing. Other ways that Papa influences their household with hybrid cultural thinking is by sending the children to a convent school although

they are Hindu and eventually sending Arun to a Western college in America for the best educational opportunities. The influence of Western culture on MamaPapa's household is apparent and contrasted with the devout traditional religious ways of Mira-masi who eats nothing she deems unclean including meat.

### Patriarchal Oppression

In *The God of Small Things* and *Fasting, Feasting*, the influence of the patriarchal society in India is apparent. Chacko's status and power as the only man in the Kochamma household permeates much of the novel's action, as he has the most influence on and control of the family's day-to-day decisions. When Chacko moves into the Ayemenem House, he immediately takes control of Paradise Pickles & Preserves. There does not seem to be any discussion with Mammachi over the fact that he will now control the operations and manage the workers, reducing her in importance to "Sleeping Partner" of the business she began. Chacko's control of the food factory shows his dominance in the family and reflects the patriarchal cultural identity. *Fasting, Feasting* also features Papa as a dominant male who is served by the women of the household. When a son is born, it is he who becomes most important in the household among the children, and he is given a special diet to represent the special care and handling he will receive as a boy. Food is used in this novel as a metaphor for the higher status as a man, particularly in the usage of meat images. Throughout the novel, meat is explained to be very important to both Papa's and Mr. Patton's lifestyles and dietary habits, and chapter four of this thesis discusses the relation between meat and manliness as implied by the male characters' feelings towards meat (except Arun's). Meat is an appropriate, intentional metaphor for implying that men are at the top of the social hierarchy of power. In the natural world, animals are at the top of the food chain. Less powerful creatures eat organisms and plants, but only the more dominant species eat



animals. As humans, it seems as if eating meat is one way to represent status at the top of the food chain, showing power and supremacy.

In contrast, *Midnight's Children* features several women that use food as a power, overcoming the obstacle of patriarchal oppression. Women including Reverend Mother, Alia, Amina, and Mary use food (or the withholding of it) to obtain power over others, including men. This is a remarkable reversal in the normal gender dynamics of the culture.

### Repression of Sexual Desire

Food images often represent sexuality, but in *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things*, food imagery seems to signify repressed desires. Rushdie uses the images of men and women in a film kissing opposite sides of apples, mangoes, and cups of tea to represent their passion and desire for each other. Although this may seem tame to modern Westerners, this type of sharing was scandalous to the crowd watching the film. Similarly, even as a child, Saleem knew something was not right about the intimate way Amina and Nadir shared a glass. This scene also represents the desire the two characters hold for each other. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy uses more obvious food images to represent the sexual feelings Ammu has for Velutha and the attraction Rahel feels to Estha. By using sweet images of chocolate, honey, and coffee to describe the skin of Velutha and Estha, readers are treated to images that stimulate the senses and the imagination—a velvety, smooth touch; an intoxicatingly sweet smell; a dark, rich, creamy taste. However, these desires would be breaking the important Love Laws of the strict society. These images are tempting to the characters and represent their ill attempts to repress these desires.

### Universal Appeal of Food Images

The three writers also use food images in metaphorical ways to represent universal cultural truths—aspects of the Indian cultures represented that seem to permeate all nations and cultures. These include the “bottling” of family secrets in an attempt to hide them out of view of others, much like the jars of jams, chutney, pickles, and fruits in Roy’s and Rushdie’s texts; literal and figurative hunger and the pain found therein, such as in Desai’s novel; and certainly family conflicts represented by various food metaphors in all three novels. These could be seen generally as a part of human culture, as they indicate that life tends to go on in the same way it always has in all parts of the world.

Through the literal and metaphorical usage of food images, including food preparation, serving, and consuming, these three significant works of Indian fiction are enhanced by multiple layers of meaning to be consumed by the critical reader’s mind. The food representations not only make these textual dishes more inviting and colorful, but they add a robust seasoning to create a more satisfying and memorable meal. A suggestion to readers: devour these metaphorical culinary additions; savor and digest the flavors within these rich texts. Bon appétit!

## WORKS CITED

- Aylesworth, Gary. "Postmodernism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2010. Web. 13 Jan. 2011.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill, 1972. Print.
- Bentley, Amy. "Introduction." *Food and Foodways* 16.2 (2008): 111-16. Web. 21 Jan. 2011.
- Bindloss, Joe, Mark Elliot, Patrick Horton, and Kate James. *Lonely Planet: Northeast India*. Oakland, CA: Lonely Planet, 2009. Print.
- Bose, Brinda. "In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Ariel* 29.2 (1998): 59-72. Web. 10 Apr. 2010.
- Camp, Charles. "Foodways." *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*. Gale, 2003. N. pag. *Answers.com*. Web. 11 Jan. 2011.
- Cook, Robin. "Robin Cook's Chicken Tikka Masala Speech: Extracts from a Speech by the Foreign Secretary to the Social Market Foundation in London." *The Guardian* 19 Apr. 2001. Web. 1 Feb. 2011.
- David, Jonathan C. "Food in Folklore." *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*. Gale, 2003. N. pag. *Answers.com*. Web. 11 Jan. 2011.
- Davis, Delmer. "Food as Literary Theme." *Identities and Issues in Literature*. N.p.: Salem, 1997. N. pag. *eNotes.com*. Web. 6 Feb. 2011.
- Deena, Seodial. *Situating Caribbean Literature and Criticism in Multicultural and Postcolonial Studies*. New York: Lang, 2009. Print.
- Desai, Anita. *Fasting, Feasting*. New York: Houghton, 1999. Print.

- Dietrich, Carol E. "The Raw and the Cooked: The Role of Fruit in Modern Poetry." *Mosaic* 24.3-4 (1991): 127-44. Web. 8 Feb. 2011.
- Dvorak, Marta. "The Ethno-Semiotics of Food: A.M. Klein's *Second Scroll* as Recipe for Multiculturalism." *Mosaic* 29.3 (1996): 15-33 Web. 8 Feb. 2011.
- Featherstone, Mike. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Sage, 2007. Web. 10 Feb. 2011.
- Firat, A. Fuat and Alladi Venkatesh. "Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption." *The Journal of Consumer Research* 22.3 (1995): 239-267. Web. 13 Jan. 2011.
- "Food in Literature—Introduction." *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 114. Gale Cengage, 2006. N.pag. *eNotes.com*. Web. 6 Feb. 2011.
- Gardaphé, Fred L. and Wenying Xu. "Introduction: Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures." *MELUS* 32.4 (2007): 5-10. Web. 11 Jan. 2011.
- Goldstein, Darra. "Welcome to *Gastronomica!*" *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*. U of California P, n.d. Web. 15 May 2011.
- Holy Bible: King James Version. Nashville: Nelson, 1972. Print.
- Hopkinson, Amanda. "Sorrow at the Supermarket." *Independent* 29 May 1999: n. pag. Web. 15 May 2011.
- Jameson, Frederic. *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. New York: Verso, 1998. Print.

- Keeling, Kara K. and Scott T. Pollard. "Introduction: Food in Children's Literature." *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature*. Ed. Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Kellner, Douglas. "Globalization and the Postmodern Turn." *Globalization and Europe: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*. Ed. Roland Axtmann. Herndon, VA: Pinter, 1998. Print.
- Kessler, Brad. "One Reader's Digest: Toward a Gastronomic Theory of Literature." *The Kenyon Review* 27.2 (2005): 148-165. Web. 11 Jan. 2011.
- Kunow, Rüdiger. "Eating Indian(s): Food, Representation, and the Indian Diaspora in the United States." *Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food*. Ed. Tobias Döring, Markus Heide and Susanne Mühleisen. Heidelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2003. Print.
- Leynse, Wendy and Romona Pérez. "Food as Metaphor." *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*. Gale, 2003. N. pag. *Answers.com*. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984. Print.
- Martin, Andy. "Food and Drink: Food for Thought: What We Eat and How We Eat It Says a Lot about Both Our State of Mind and the State of the World We Live in." *The Guardian* 19 Aug. 1995: T30. Web. 9 Jan. 2011.
- McDonald's Corporation. *Annual Report 2009*. Oak Brook, IL: McDonald's, 2009. Web. 9 Jan. 2011.
- Milesi, Laurent. "'Promnesia' (Remembering Forward) in Midnight's Children; or Rushdie's Chutney versus Proust's Madeleine." *Sensual Reading: New Approaches to Reading and*

- Its Relation to the Senses*. Ed. Michael Syrotinski and Ian Maclachlan. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2001. Print.
- Mintz, Sidney W. and Christine M. Du Bois. "The Anthropology of Food and Eating." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 99-119. Web. 11 Jan. 2011.
- Morton, Timothy. "Food Studies in the Romantic Period: (S)mashing History." *Romanticism: The Journal of Romantic Culture and Criticism* 12.1 (2006): 1-4. Web. 11 Jan. 2011.
- Nestle, Marion and Alex W. McIntosh. "Writing the Food Studies Movement." *Food, Culture and Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 13.2 (2010): 159-171. Web. 7 Feb. 2011.
- Parameswaran, Uma. "Reviews: *The God of Small Things*." *Herizons* 13.2 (1999): 33-34. Web. 11 Apr. 2010.
- Plotz, Judith. "Rushdie's Pickle and the New Indian Historical Novel: Sealy, Singh, Tharoor, and National Metaphor." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 35:2 (1996): 28-48. Web. 6 Jan. 2011.
- Poon, Angelia. "In a Transnational World: Exploring Gendered Subjectivity, Mobility, and Consumption in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*." *Ariel* 37.2/3 (2006): 33-48. Web. 17 Apr. 2010.
- Prose, Francine. "Let Them Eat Curry." *New York Times Book Review* 9 Sep. 2000: 10. Web. 17 Apr. 2010.
- Ritzer, George. "The McDonaldization Thesis: Is Expansion Inevitable?" *International Sociology* 11.3 (1996): 291-308. Web. 17 Feb. 2011.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New York: Harper, 1997. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. New York: Random, 1981. Print.

Salv́idar, Jos . "Unsettling Race, Coloniality, and Caste." *Cultural Studies* 21.2/3 (2007): 339-67. Web. 10 Apr. 2010.

Singh, Sarina, Lindsay Brown, Mark Elliot, Paul Harding, Abigail Hole, and Patrick Horton. *Lonely Planet: India*. Oakland, CA: Lonely Planet, 2009. Print.

Stein, Mark. "Curry at Work: Nibbling at the Jewel in the Crown." *Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food*. Ed. Tobias D ring, Markus Heide and Susanne M hleisen. Heidelberg, Germany: Universit tsverlag Winter, 2003. Print.

Towers, Robert. "On the Indian World-Mountain." *New York Review of Books* 24 Sep. 1981: n. pag. Web. 15 Mar. 2011.

Williams, Laura Anh. "Foodways and Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*." *MELUS* 32.4 (2007): 69-79. Web. 5 Feb. 2011.

Wintour, Patrick. "Chicken Tikka Britain Is New Cook Recipe." *The Guardian* 19 Apr. 2001. Web. 1 Feb. 2011.

