

ESSAY

# The alterities of hunger



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

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In two of the more prominent fictional works that are part of the diasporic South Asian literary production, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, food is presented as a conceptual apparatus that makes palatable the tensions of 'multiculturalism' and offers a critique of class barriers—if not always at the level of economics, but at the level of consciousness. Like all aspects of our increasingly polarising, splintered world, the production of food, its preparation, and its consumption have become deeply politicised. Perception of food is carried out on a gradational scale—from the global north's hierarchisation of healthy, organic, locally produced, ethical food to the everyday, domestic, heteropatriarchal culinary practices to the internet's obsession with clean, lean, visually appealing food content—not all food is made equal.

Literary food portrayals are about the relationship between food and language, language and politics, and above all, consumption—literary and literal. Lahiri's seminal novel opens with the description of a pregnant Ashima making a makeshift jhal muri in her American home, marking it as a performance of her Bengali-ness.

Throughout the novel, Lahiri stages discussions organised around the elitism of food. For the protagonist Gogol, falling in love with his American girlfriend Maxine is falling in love with her "manner of living". In a particular paragraph about Gogol's rise in the gastronomic ranks, Lahiri uses the phrase "learns to" five times, indicating a schooling of sorts, a necessary surrender to the hegemonic 'food chain'. Gogol "learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood." He further "learns to not put wooden spoons in the dishwasher." Later, Gogol begrudges the knowledge that Maxine's gift basket with tinned pâtés and jars of cornichons will never be consumed by his parents—a knowledge that establishes further the hierarchisation of his Americanised food sensibilities.

Contrarily in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid reverses the culinary Orientalism endemic to the colonial expedition. Here, the protagonist Changez is a culinary ambassador to the unnamed American man in Lahore. Set in a café and told entirely in the form of a dramatic monologue, where the American is silenced and the Muslim man speaks for and over him, the novel's metaphoric serving of food is part of the double narrative Changez is supplying—he both wants to reverse

the Eastern versus Western food fare and uses food as a diversionary tactic to conceal his admittedly more sinister intentions. With extreme, uncomfortable humility, Changez offers him one typical deshi delicacy after another and with each offering, the reader becomes more attuned to the throbbing undercurrent of tension he is concealing—the American is his prey, and food is his offering.

Such opulent usage of food as cultural envoy aside, literary food studies must also contend with the opposite of abundance, the scarcity of food and the sort of indelible, dehumanising hunger that is on the opposite spectrum of this discourse. In *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx said, "Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail, and tooth." Between the twin hunger Marx speaks of—delicately consumed delicacies and the unadorned, primal hunger—lies a 'civilizational' crisis. In her essay titled "Concerning Hunger: Empire Aesthetics in the Present Moment", Mrinalini Chakravorty investigates the coalition between the "aesthetic representations of hunger" and how they are informed by the "liberal affects such as sympathy, charity, and self-interest." The liberal humanist project of the West (think Adam

Smith, Charles Darwin, and Thomas Malthus), produced right alongside the oppressive regimes of colonialism and enslavement, utilised hunger as a metric for evoking sympathy in the "human" for those they deemed their "subhuman" other. Put alternatively, hunger is 'uncivilised' and sympathy for the hungry unfortunate is a marker for civilization and indeed, humanity.

Consequently, in recent scholarship in literary food studies, food's relationship to postcolonial, gender, and critical race studies has been examined in great detail. In her essay on postcolonial tastes, Parama Roy examines the "dialectic between metropolitan appetite and the production of deprivation in the colony, focusing in particular on slave hunger in plantations and on recurrent famine as one of the features of colonial rule and the market-driven order it institutes." One cannot think of colonial hunger without thinking about Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin's shattering sketch work detailing the Bengal famine of 1943, offering a sharp critique of the food shortage produced by the British. Hunger is also a defining trait of memoirs on the Holocaust. In Primo Levi's haunting accounts of survival, hunger and bodily incapacities help detail the horrors of Auschwitz and demonstrate how

such corporeal indignities determine the humanity of the captive in the lager. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, hunger overwhelms Baby Suggs who, after being freed from the clutches of slavery, is "hungrier than she had ever been in her life." On the run, Sethe too, experiences a cannibalistic hunger and is "eager for his eyes to bite into them . . . to gnaw his cheek." *Beloved* herself craves sweet—a narrative detail that ties hunger to the institution of American slavery—"it was as though sweet things were what she was born for." Hunger, therefore, is both a part of political economy that marginalises the nonhuman other and is part of our cultural aesthetic.

Such ignominy produced by hunger's all-encompassing force is brilliantly revealed in Humayun Ahmed's short story "Khadok". The protagonist Moti Mia is a professional eater who considers his ability to gorge on food as "bidya", a gift from the Almighty. Ahmed's crisp, minimalist prose lays bare the grotesque: a spectacularised display of food exhibitionism transpires as the Khadok forces himself to eat an entire cow while his own hungry children—"dekhok", "na-khaontir dof"—stare at their father. The short story at its core is about dearth of the vilest kind, as such dehumanising practices can only be possible in the face of acute food inequality, and through it, Ahmed makes explicit the vulnerability of the hungry and powerless. A sharp commentary on the politics of conspicuous food consumption and its resulting voyeuristic exhibitionism, "Khadok" is a cautionary tale for our contemporary moment.

Yet, literary food portrayals can also deftly capture quotidian moments of resistance, especially when it comes to food restrictions. In Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Purbo Poschim*, the quiet, introspective medical student Tutul stages a major intervention into the Bengali Hindu food code when she convinces her widowed mother Shupriti to eat a plate of khichuri made with onions—a seemingly innocuous and frankly, ubiquitous item of vegetable present in Bengali cuisine. Restricted for the widow as it makes her "shorir gorom"—a euphemism for desire, alluding to a different kind of hunger and its discipline and management—the onion sets the ground for a small revolution in the Majumdar household.

In the end, for every portrayal of the bounty and glory of food in fiction, for every detail there exists on the politics of identity via food, there is that question of deprivation and poverty, of scarcity and unavailability. Fictional discourses on systemic, politicised food inequalities help configure the racial, gendered, and ultimately structural inequalities that exist in our present moment. Thinking about such critical food paradigms thus, is one important way in which such collective food disparities can be rethought of.

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MUSINGS

# The matriarchy of food

TASHFIA AHMED

It is a truth universally acknowledged that food is the undisputed sixth love language that Gary Chapman forgot to mention in his 1992 book. Or maybe it's just the gastronomie in me speaking.

As a Bangladeshi though, one must attest to how one's parents use food as a tool for the communication of a love that they otherwise suppress beneath crackling layers of high expectations and steadfast rules. I know this because I have seen this phenomenon memed to no end in Facebook groups like Subtle Curry Traits and tumblr posts from 2016; because my friends from university and I had bonded over stories of how our mothers scolded us about getting fat and then apologised in the form of our favourite dish served for the next meal; because students in my Literature classes tell me similar stories of grandmothers greeting them with their favourite foods spilling over from the dining tables; because a friend recently posted on Facebook "How do I explain to my brown mom that she is overfeeding our cat?" and I could very much relate it with how my mother literally spoon-feeds freshly boiled chicken to our cat, Mochi, and runs after him with that spoon when he displays reluctance towards eating.

In all this, I find it very significant to note how the Bangladeshi mother uses the language of food in a way that is, stereotypically, so different from the fathers'. South Asian fathers are famous for outsourcing their expression of love

to nature as they bring fruits home and encourage everyone to have some as they list out the nutritional benefits. For our mothers, on the other hand, food is a domain they rule with generations of inherited skill, sharpened with the incessant blades of experience, unpaid labor, and a socialised sense of duty—all of which they take and simmer down to aromatic flavours of love.

My mother, on her maternal side, comes from a long lineage of women who are known far and wide for their culinary skills and fondness for feeding people. Her maa-khala are daughters of the Khan-bari in Manikganj's Dashora area, famous for hosting feasts on any and all Islamic occasions throughout the 50's to 70's, where they cooked for hundreds of town-dwellers. My nanu, Ms Hafsa Khanam, 71, showcased her skills acquired from the Khan-bari feasts to entertain guests from all over the world when they visited her workplace at Bharateswari Homes. Her sister, Hippolyta (yes, named after the Shakespeare heroine), extended those skills towards furthering her status as a socialite amongst those in her political, literary, and social spheres. For the Khan-bari women, food became a part of their familial and personal identity, birthing such monikers as "Khane-wala-bari" that still get thrown around in conversations of acquaintances reminiscing their heydays. Even after her passing, her exceptional skill in cooking Mughal dishes to buttery perfection remains Hipu nanu's legacy throughout the recollection of relatives, close and distant alike. As for my nanu, her cakes and puff pastries remain synonymous



DESIGN: TASHFIA AHMED

with her name among her colleagues and superlatives, long after she retired.

Now, when my mother was sent to the kitchen to cook her first meal at her in-law's, she knew she had to follow down the path of some massive footprints. To put things in perspective, I think the equivalent of that for me, as a writer, would be if I were a descendant of Virginia Woolf. I reiterate: massive shoes to fill!

However, my mother has not only worn those shoes and ran miles in them, but she has worn them out and outgrown them too. This might be the words of a biased

daughter, but I have borne witness, closer than anyone has, to how poetically ammu has bent and remoulded her language of love to create her own identity alongside the Khan-bari hall of fame, with her own innovation on dishes from deshi-bideshi cuisines alike. The kitchen is her studio, and her patishapta, kacchi biryani, shawarma, et cetera, are the varied artworks she puts out into the world—bringing her acclaim amongst anyone who has ever had the fortune to experience her hospitality, whether as surprise guests at home or as my colleagues on potlucks.

But if we call back to that first showdown with the fire on a stove, my mother had barely left that ring unscathed, having made polau with every masala she could find on the shelves. She did not have any recipe books to follow that might have been passed down over the generations in the family. Whatever recipes the women of Khan-bari ever replicated from the elders came in the form of folktales passed down as word of mouth, with one's own imagination taking away and adding elements to these culinary tales as they pleased. And when any recipe with scribbled measurements were ever doled out to an outsider who bore no relation to this lineage, they came back saying, "I followed all the instructions but it came out nothing like yours!"

Some few months ago I had shown my mother an Instagram reel from the comedian Zarna Garg, ranting about the young generation always asking for the recipe and not using their "common sense" and then another video from local TikTok

star, Emily in Dhaka, talking about how when she asked her mother-in-law for the recipe of dudh-cha, she was simply told something along the lines of, "You put tea leaves in the water and boil until there is colour and then you put milk and boil until the colour is right." Now, in my amateur opinion, she had every right to be perplexed by those instructions, but as my Banglali maa would argue, echoing the thoughts of Garg and Ms. Emily's MIL: you use your common sense; you feel what you cook and then you just know when it's right. And I believe this is where the beauty of Bangladeshi cuisine, and food itself, lies—it is an effortlessly intersectional form of art that culminates from the various personality traits and characterising identities defined by its maker's national identity, socioeconomic status, financial stability, geographical setting, as well as the climate and political conditions where they live.

So the fact that the Bangladeshi household runs on a matriarchy of food is endlessly fascinating to me. Here, as the men venture outside to uphold their Jenga tower of patriarchy at the altars of their corporate temples, the housewives rule their own turf inside the home. Making commands under the guise of grocery lists, they manoeuvre the temperamental landscape at home. Thus, these women discreetly dictate the very thing that the capitalist slaves among us serve to earn under the pestle of patriarchy: food, with its myriads of creative and loving expression.

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