Indian Food (Writing) in English

A dissertation submitted to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of
Master of Philosophy in English

Anwesha Chakraborty

Department of English
School of Humanities
University of Hyderabad
October 2009

Acknowledgements

This list will be a lengthy one as it gives me my first opportunity to officially thank all those individuals who have influenced me and my career till date.

To Professor K. Narayana Chandran, my supervisor and mentor and frankly one of the most brilliant individuals I have encountered in my life. From the day he asked me to work on this topic till today, it has been an unparalleled introductory journey into research. His magnificent readings of the simplest to the most complex socio-cultural codes are inspirational. He has made me 'think' and made me realise that there is absolutely nothing which can substitute hard work. The only way I can thank him is by working harder.

To my grandmother, who would have been overjoyed to hear that I completed a degree over and above my Master's, as I was always too keen on everything else and this seemed highly unlikely; to my English teacher from school, Miss N. Parveen, whose classroom lectures proved to be an inspiration in my later choice of English as a career. I wish I had a final chance to say thank you in person.

To Anna Ma'am, for teaching me the first real lessons in Indian Writing in English, to making me believe that I could do a number of things which I was unsure of. Thanks a million.

To Dr Pramod K. Nayar, for that excellent coaching in critical theory during my third semester as a Master's student; for his rare books and for helping me out with too many things.

To Lavanya Ma'am, for the intensive language courses which helped me develop some real-world writing abilities, for her critical comments on the dissertation as well as for her insistence that we should type more.

To Sindhu Ma'am, for being way too generous with her books and for being there always.

To Professor Mohanty, Professor Ramanan, Professor Uma, Professor Sailaja, Professor Sridhar, Professor Merchant, Dr Murali Manohar and Dr Sunita Mishra of the Department of English with whom I have had the great opportunity to interact with at varied lengths and durations in and out of class and who have taught me various lessons in this thing called 'English'.

To Nagarajan Sir, who has made me understand time and again how I would be a miserable person without his timely guidance in administrative affairs; to Ganesh and Suresh, who have helped me with the nitty-gritties of departmental matters for the past four years. A very big thank you to you all.

To my 05HEMA class: you guys have given me two of the most precious years of my life and without all those academic and non-academic discussions with you, I wouldn't have been the same person that I am today.

To Deepa Chattopadhyay of Cambridge University Press, for teaching me the valuable lessons in editing and helping me keep the much needed faith in academic enterprises.

To Aparna, Viju, Sreenath and Sreetilak, for helping me out with various aspects of my M.Phil life and for being there to listen to my queries regardless of how inane they were.

To Anupam Bhai and Jillet for too many (different) important and unimportant things.

To those enthusiastic 08HEMAs who always inquired after my research.

To Rakesh and Prasanth, aka Aristotle and Plato aka Tweedledee and Tweedledum aka friend, philosopher and guide (twice over).

To Douggie, Philosopher Dog and MD for being there always with their inquisitive and loving faces when I am down and out.

To Naruto, the hyperactive ninja who never gives up; to Amelie, for the little joys of life.

To Alex, for teaching me how to use the library well and for being the academic Naruto; to his laptop for containing in its large memory, apart from all the ingredients of amusement, my dissertation and its multiple drafts.

To Tore, Niels, and Karim, my friends indeed from across the seas.

To my friends from back home, Somi, Swatee, Amrita, for 'becoming' and 'remaining' my friends through thick soup and thin ice!

To Ma and Tinni, who I can never thank enough even if I were to write an epic about them. These two exceedingly awesome women have defied all odds and have taught me to do the same. They have always believed even when I have doubted. They are my heroes.

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

It is rather difficult to trace the history of writing food/food writing in English in India. The first writers in English on our food were certainly the British and the American missionaries in colonial India. The multivolume *Asiatic Researches*[i] carries sporadic, if impressive, accounts of eating, food items, cooking, and innumerable short and long references to edible fruit, herbs and vegetables common across the vast Indian subcontinent.

Given the transformational and generative processes that food and writing share in big and small ways, it is hardly surprising that Indian Writing in English has evolved as an important sub-genre of food literature. This includes accounts of making, accessing, and sharing food; descriptions of eating and rituals associated with it; tropes emanating from cookery, kitchen, dining spaces, community/social feasting and fasting etc., and in some special cases, elaborate and direct discussion of cooking and consumption of food interspersed with other narrative devices. This dissertation proposes to sample at least some examples of the above from Indian English literature, Indian English non-fiction and the

popular public media like newspapers and magazines. The publication of two anthologies—*A Matter of Taste: The Penguin Book of Indian Writing on Food* and *The Table is Laid: The Oxford Anthology of South Asian Food Writing*—indicate that this substantial body of writing is attracting academic attention. The writers included in these two collections range from the canonical literary figures like Salman Rushdie, R. K. Narayan and Anita Desai to renowned newspaper columnists like Vir Sanghvi and Mukul Kesavan. The variety of genres presented in these collections includes fiction and non-fiction, poetry and essays, short stories and personal accounts. The range of texts and the number of writers addressing the subject of food clearly show that it is a topic that requires greater academic enquiry. In this dissertation, I propose to look at how Indian writers depict Indian food in English. The study will also include food-related conventions, rituals, prescriptions and proscriptions typical to the Indian society. Writing about food involves translation of cultures, and my aim shall also be to look at how far Indian writers are successful in 'translating' these cultural specificities into English.

Literary gastronomy is a large and engaging theme. Few literatures in the world avoid this theme and it will be my objective

here to see how Indian writers have fared generally in treating food and food-related subjects in English. Linguistic and social conventions have aligned food and the word: *phagos/logos*. Both feed, and are fed by mouth. Food, like language defines our identity. Thus, it is not surprising that most of the major Indian English writers also address the subject of food. We cannot imagine a Sunday supplement without a column on food. Food is necessity as well as leisure. There are connections between food and books, too. Both food and books are produced and consumed. Both are inextricably related to the question of taste. One of the most comprehensive aesthetic theories in the Indian tradition, the *rasa* theory, describes an aesthetic experience as *rasa swadana*, or the tasting of flavour. Experiencing art is thus equated with tasting of good food. In "Food for Thought: Towards an Anthology of Hindu Food-images", A. K. Ramanujan also uses *rasa* in the sense of 'taste'.

The close relationship between food and language finds expression in food metaphors. Food metaphors are plenty in Indian Writing in English. In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Rushdie uses the metaphor of 'chutney' to signify the preservation of history. It would be interesting to note how chutney almost plays the role of

language—both are preserving agents as chutney can preserve tastes and language can preserve realities. It would again perhaps not be too far-fetched to argue that the first chapter in *The God of Small Things* (1997) is titled 'Paradise Pickles and Preserves' due to the same reason.

It is not a matter of mere coincidence that the first terms given to the language that arose from the contact of the British and the Indians had a direct relationship with food and housekeeping. Some of the first varieties of Indian English, 'Kitchen English', 'Butler English' and so on have intrinsic connection with food. Thus, it would not be wrong to assume that some of the first speakers of English in India were not government officials or educated individuals, but the cooks, the butlers and the housemaids in the English households. As there was an obvious hierarchy in terms of the powers vested in the masters and the servants, the English that arose out of this contact situation was, from the very beginning, relegated to the status of an inferior pidgin[ii], a status which has not improved ever since. As Priya Hosali remarks in her essay "Butler English":

> Butler English will always be measured against the contemporary version of the native speaker model to which standard Indian English is closest, namely British Standard English; and found to be different (if the researcher is sympathetic); deviant (if the researcher insists on using a rigid

> normative yardstick); or deficient (if a non-objective viewpoint is adopted). And if tomorrow it becomes extinct, it will not be because of any intrinsic linguistic inadequacy but because it could not compete against the overwhelming pressures of Standard English. (p. 38)

The diminutive status of this pidgin is reflected in the various nomenclatures of Indian English in the early colonial times, namely, ‘Kitchen English’, ‘Butler English’, ‘Boxwallah English’, 'Cheechee English’ and so on. This status gets highlighted more prominently when researchers point out differences between Standard English and non-standard versions, namely the use of the continuous tense with static verbs, the dropping of articles and the omission of auxiliaries. Even Braj Kachru places ‘Butler English’ at the lowest end of the ‘cline of bilingualism’, that is a scale to measure the proficiency of English amongst Indian speakers, thereby reinstating its status as the most inferior form of English spoken in India. Butler English is often an object of much ridicule, evoking scornful laughter from the speakers of Standard English. The following extract is from an article “Butler English” (which appeared in *The Hindu* on 23rd February, 2003) where an English master feels threatened when his butler speaks Standard English:

> The British masters were amused by Butler English as it had its own charm. They were sometimes annoyed when a Butler's English was faultless. For example, Ellis in George Orwell's "Burmese Days" is in conversation with his butler.

> Ellis: "How much ice you got left?"
> Butler: "Bout twenty pounds, master. Will only last today, I think. I find it very difficult to keep ice cool now."
> Ellis: "Don't talk like that, damin you — I find it very difficult! Have you swallowed a dictionary?' Please, master can't keep ice cool! That's how you ought to talk, we shall have to sack this fellow if he gets to talk English too well. I can't stand servants who talk English. D'you hear, butler?"
> "Yes master" said the butler, and retired."[iii]

Most of the conversations which are carried out in 'Butler English' is related to food and housekeeping matters. Hosali gives us a number of samples of conversations that she had recorded as specimens of Butler English. A few have been listed below.

> Thomas (reported age 22), is adept at mixing drinks. He describes the process: Bloody Mary's is – eh – tomato's juice, pepper, salt, pepper, salt eh rum, Worcester sauce, all mixing and what is the quantity. That is easy. Put it eh one slice lime also. Bloody Mary is red colour. That's tomato colour no. Tomato juice. Tom Collins. I will say whisky with sour –some fresh lime, whisky, soda.
> Pentaiah tells us how to make tea. That eh Brooke Bond's eh tea…that put it, and that tea in that…that top top tea-pot eh teapot. Put a little water, hot boil water. Milk separate and sugar separate. Keep it in tray.
> Narasimhaiah (reported age 45) does the same. I told ma – separate tea, separate milk, separate sugar. If he asking cup of tea, I put first tea then asking madam how many tea – milk, how many sugar? That's all. (p. 36)

Interestingly, all these speakers have suggested recipes of drinks learnt from their masters. The broken English used by the

speakers is a result of a curious case of translation—most likely from Standard English to the original language of the user to the present form. For the humble butler, the broken tongue conveys more than the language of recipe books.[iv]

***

A detailed documentation of Indian food writing in English also requires some understanding of the society from which this writing originates and which it seeks to reflect. I shall begin this background study with the present times. The growing consumption of Anglo-American food and the subsequent rise in the demand of Indian English food writing is visible in the burgeoning number of newspaper articles, cookbooks and cookery journals. This growth reflects the increasing importance of English in Indian social life. The advent of English culture upon the Indian social scene did more than just introduce a generous sampling of English dishes into Indian cuisine. It modified countless notions about food which were present in the Indian society. David Burton's *The Raj at the Table* (1994) argues that the influence of Indian cuisine on English food habits was far greater than the English influence on Indian cuisine[v]:

> In India, the lasting influence of British food has been so negligible it may be summarized as follows: biscuits (packed in solid corrugated cardboard, with brand names like Britannia), second-rate white soda bread, omelettes, and English breakfasts of porridge, boiled eggs, tea, toast and

> marmalade…By contrast, from the time the very first seventeenth-century trader sat down with Mogul princes to dine off delicately spices meats and saffron rice, the story of India's influence on the British diet has been vast, colourful and fascinating. (p. viii)

Furthermore, Burton uses the example of the popularity of Indian curries in London restaurants as an important instance of Indian influence on British food preferences. But one must remember that Burton's argument is steeped in the colonial romanticising tendencies which spoke in superlatives about Indian spices and their lavish use in curries. While the Englishman does consume the occasional curry with much enthusiasm, the Indian has imbibed many English eating and drinking habits into his/her daily routine. Thus one can claim, contradicting Burton, that the English influence on Indian food habits is far greater as it has affected the daily cosmopolitan Indian life which has continuously shown tremendous preference for English-mediated food habits.

The advent of the English people and their culture steadily influenced the eating practices of Indians by introducing various new dishes as well as cutleries and cooking methods. The practice of drinking 'bed tea', 'afternoon tea' and eating 'chops' and 'cutlets' are reminiscent of the habits of the British in India. The English people also appropriated a variety of Indian dishes and made them a

part of the ever growing English cuisine. What is known today as the 'Anglo-Indian cuisine' is an interesting concoction of British and Indian culinary practices. Some of the interesting dishes in this cuisine include 'mulligatawny soup' and 'kedgeree'. Mulligatawny is a variation of the South Indian 'rasam' and is a non-vegetarian dish, a far cry from the thoroughly vegetarian original. 'Kedgeree' is 'khichdi' with fish! Adrian Carton fondly remembers the brilliant kedgeree cooked by his Anglo-Indian aunt in "Remembering Kedgeree":

> Eating kedgeree was more than a physical act of gulping down an exotic rice dish. Eating was remembering. It was a symbolic ritual that allowed access into the hybrid world of the Anglo-Indian. It was the central feast around which the extended family congregated and through which it was given status and cultural identity. The fragrant grains of rice not only bound together the mashed slithers of fish, they also represented emotional links of a far-flung diaspora. (p. 326)

The importance of an English-mediated lifestyle is all the more prominent today, with the popularity of multinational companies like McDonalds, KFCs and Subways among the burgeoning middle classes. Most of these restaurant chains have adapted themselves to the demands of the Indian market. Thus, ham and beef which are largely taboo in our society do not figure in the menus of these places. While these places cater to the needs of the upwardly mobile, there are other less expensive options available

for the strictly middle-class buyers. Thus even in a less well-to-do household these days, we encounter festive celebrations which involve English food items like cakes, pastries and other bakery products. As Saleem Peeradina writes in his *The Ocean in My Yard* (2005), Eid celebrations always included items from the nearby bakeries. Renowned food writer Chitrita Banerji, whose strong English tastes are ever so evident, writes with great delight in *Eating India: Exploring a Nation's Cuisine* (2008) about India's willingness to embrace a variety of cuisines, even the ones which are pretty alien to its own culture.

Interestingly, the increased demand for Anglo-American food has also resulted in a burgeoning number of restaurants in cities and small towns. The chic interiors of these eateries provide a stark contrast to an average Indian kitchen, which is meant to be a secluded place frequented only by the family members. As A.K.Ramanujan points out in "Food for Thought", social distance is expressed through distance from the kitchen. Frank F. Conlon's "Dining Out in Bombay" argues that the culture of eating out is more of a western influence on Indian public life. This however is an incorrect formulation as the individuals who went out on pilgrimages or migrated to different parts of the country were accustomed to eating out. Although one must note in this context

that this act of eating out was more a matter of expedience, and perhaps survival, than a marker of indulgence. Much the same might be said about the preference of the new affluent middle-class for eating out. Conlon's argument is a contentious one; but it is true that whether or not eating out is an 'English' thing, it is definitely not affordable for everybody. The culture of eating out comes with modernity, and modernity comes with English, and at a special price. As the editors of the anthology *The Table is Laid* (2007), John Thieme and Ira Raja, point out following Conlon's argument:

> The large-scale migration of people from small towns and villages into the big cities has meant that there are many people eating alone, both at home and in local eateries and dhabas; their experience of eating out is more a matter of survival in the city than a special treat, making it very different from the restaurant experience of the burgeoning middle classes. (p. xliii)

Ashis Nandy quite correctly argues that this new trend of eating out is a means of entertainment[vi]. Following a similar line of argument, Frank F. Conlon locates "public modernity" in India (Conlon 1995) in the food culture which has shown some of the strongest signs of globalisation.

***

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "The Politics of Translation" argues that language is the process of meaning construction. The

same can be said about food—what we eat surely constitutes an important part of who and what we are. As Mary Douglas's "Deciphering a Meal" points out: "If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed." (p. 36) Thus we surely will agree upon the fact that a person in India whose daily meal consists of noodles, soup, packaged food and other food items which are collectively termed 'fast food', belongs to a small family, most probably lives with his/her roommates, holds a corporate job and is quite surely upwardly mobile and English speaking. In fact, the growing demand for fast food is also termed 'corporatisation of food' as the choice of this kind of food is perceived to be a result of the rise of the corporate sector. This growing demand has resulted in the large-scale replication of the same. Indian English writers like Pankaj Mishra and Chitrita Banerji have criticised the growing tendency to replicate non-Indian food items with meagre means. Their derision is also symptomatic of a power relation that is wielded by English and the proprietary laws which govern the making and eating of English food. In *Eating India*, Banerji comments on a group of labourers eating noodles with spoon:

> As the chipped ceramic plates were set down on the table, I saw the fast-food option for that day—a mound of noodles, gleaming with oil and streaked with reddish brown sauce. Bits of chopped vegetables and even rarer shreds of omelettes

> dotted the starch…the men ate with quick, ravenous, shovelling motions, drawing the dangling strands with slurping noises. After a few moments, I noticed that they did not eat with their hands as usual in India. Nor did they use chopsticks or forks. The utensil of choice was the teaspoon, a peculiarly postcolonial adaptation to a foreign food. (pp.66-7)

Contrast this translation of the humble Indian eatery, to the following description of mulligatawny, a dish which basically is a convenient concoction of varying food traditions:

> Another interesting food mutation courtesy of the British and the Anglo-Indian presence in India, is mulligatawny soup (a corruption of Tamil milagu-tannir, pepper water), more familiar today in Tamil and south Indian cuisines as rasam. The transformation of pepper water into mulligatawny soup rests in the colonial need to replicate the Western meal that consisted of separate courses. There was nothing in the Indian cuisines that could be served as a soup course, with the possible exception of a Muslim shorba. The British and their Anglo-Indian followers therefore took the Tamil pepper water and made it into soup with the addition of pieces of meat or chicken, stock, fried onions and a variety of spices. (p. 101)

One can hardly doubt the appreciative tone in the narrative which extols British invention and mildly condemns the Indian one.

In *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*, Pankaj Mishra shares similar contempt for imitation of English food in eateries and the growing demand for them. He writes:

> Elsewhere, I found a ‘fast-food’ restaurant where a pizza was grated Amul Cheese on sliced white bread, and a vegetable

> burger comprised of a tikki slapped between two fruit-buns. The restaurant, however, was crowded; duplication, however inept, was paying off. (p. 9)

As Mishra argues in his book, the desire for the consumption of fast food is created with the knowledge of an English-mediated world, and it is this very same knowledge which provides Indians with the necessary capital to have such demands. The knowledge of the English language is thus inextricably linked with the desire for the English way of life. The two feed on each other and reflect each other—together they co-respond[vii] to the Indian desire for English. Thus we can argue that the faster one gains the knowledge of English, the faster one climbs the ladder of 'modernity'.

Mishra also shows how the majority of the consumers belong to an essentially Anglicised group, whose lives have been thoroughly controlled and constricted by the English-mediated world. But that does not account for the entire group of consumers who are wooed consistently by the fast food industry. Multinational companies have in this case shown an incredible way of assimilating cultural differences. For the strict vegetarians, MacDonalds and Subways offer vegetarian sandwiches and burgers, an option that is not available in most parts of the meat-eating first world. Also, in order to reach out to a larger population, these companies advertise themselves using common cultural icons (like

Bollywood personalities) and 'Indian English' taglines[viii].

It is also worth noting how the growing consumption of fast food has to a great extent unbalanced our indigenous notions of healthy eating. As Ashis Nandy remarks in “The Changing Popular Culture of Indian Food: Preliminary Notes”:

> Prosperity, to the utter consternation of many, has not produced easy access to and a larger choice of healthier and better food but a surfeit of non-nutritive, expensive, often seductive, cleverly marketed food that has created a scarcity of food that one can eat and enjoy without preplanning or thinking. (p. 10)

Homemade food today is a trope, used in diasporic narratives largely, one would guess, to indicate the ‘anxiety of Indianness[ix]’. (Thus we find a character like Mrs Sen in the short story “Mrs Sen's” by Jhumpa Lahiri who yearns for fish curry cooked in her house in Calcutta.) One often forgets that healthy eating has been a major concern of homemade food. The concept of a healthy, balanced Indian diet—bitter vegetables for starters, then moving on to the carbohydrates and starch with rice and bread, accompanied with *dal* or other curries for proteins and ending the meal with curd to help in digestion—seems to have become less important with the rising intake of fast food. It is also interesting to note that in the first world countries there is an increase in the

number of researches which indicate the harmful effects of fast food, and yet, fast food joints continue to mushroom in the third world countries. One wonders whether in trying to be ‘white but not quite’, the affluent will completely forget the gastronomical pleasures and the nutritious qualities of slow cooked food. Saleem Peeradina's autobiographical *The Ocean in My Yard* recollects his father’s insistence on using traditional cooking methods to ensure tasty as well as healthy food.

While a certain derisive attitude can be detected in the representation of fast food in the narratives of the established writers, the popular writings which appear in cookbooks and dailies extol the virtues of fast food. A quick scan through some of the recipes published in “Metro Plus” in *The Hindu*, a leading Indian newspaper, will show the importance given to the time required to cook as well as the appliances which are used in cooking. On the cover of a popular ‘readymade paneer’, I have come across the text ‘no cooking required’. All that is required is heating the food in a microwave oven. This is probably the other end of the spectrum of food writing in India where minimalism has become the buzzword. From the large-scale cooking for entire families comprising innumerable relatives to the no-cooking scenario, Indian English Writing on food has clearly shown a steady adherence towards a

globalised English life. Needless to argue, food writers like Tarla Dalal and Sanjeev Kapoor have virtually become the best-selling Indian English authors. More importantly, their entry into the group of Indian English writers also signals a significant shift in the way we look at Indian Writing in English.

The preference for fast food is essentially due to the fact that it is supposed to be 'fast', as opposed to slow, traditional styles of cooking. 'Fast' is the key to success in the modern, globalised world and the concept of 'fastness' has apparently got to do with success which comes with modernity, which in turn is a result of knowledge of English[x]. Fast is also comfort, and fast food is thus gaining popularity amongst that section of the population which can afford the comfort. And it is this section of the population whose lives are influenced by English. English, the language, is considered to be the 'fast' track to success. Indeed, the domination of English has been so great that in a very short while it has managed to be the most sought after language in the country. In a nation of innumerable tongues, English is the youngest entrant into the first group of eighteen official languages prescribed by the Indian Constitution and also the one in which it was drafted. One can draw interesting parallels between the growth of English and the growth of fast food. Both have dominated the public imagination of the economically

strong section of the population. Cookbooks and cookery shows today discuss ingenious methods of cooking food in the fastest ways possible, relegating the art of traditional cooking to 'ethnic chic'. These books and shows are again targeted at the English-speaking/knowing audience and thus their preference of fast foods and texts easily readable and disposable is understandable.

K. T. Achaya's *The Illustrated Foods of India A-Z* (2009) comes as a fresh interlude amongst the body of writing on Indian food in English. A major food historian, Achaya shows in this book the diversity of Indian food from the early Vedic times to the coming of the British. This book can be read against the literature on fast food to see the difference between concepts of cooking then and now. While the book fails to capture the intricate workings on the English social life in the Indian society, it does manage to convey the idea of an Indian cultural past which was diverse and experimental. These writings, taken together, are also symptomatic of a society which has undergone varied degrees of modernisation, too quickly in some regions and too slow in others[xi].

***

The common understanding of Indian English Food Writing prevalent amongst readers and students alike is that it includes cookbooks, recipe books, cookery journals, and newspaper and

magazine articles. Often, these texts are not perceived to be a part of Indian Writing in English. This happens because the common understanding of Indian Writing in English includes works by distinguished writers like R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, to name a few. However, if we look into the body of work produced by them, we will find ample references to food and related customs, rituals and mores in their writings. One of Mulk Raj Anand's earlier works includes an entire text devoted to the study of food in India, *Curries and Other Indian Dishes*. In R. K. Narayan's *Vendor of Sweets* and Saleem Peeradina's *The Ocean in My Yard*, we find a number of recipes of dishes incorporated into the narratives. Thus, we find examples of food writings in the works of canonical writers. Food as a subject is addressed in various text-types as well. Imtiaz Dharker's and Dom Moraes's poetry, Vikram Seth's travelogue *From Heaven Lake*, and Mahesh Dattani's play *Mango Souffle*—all have instances of eating and sharing of food. The two anthologies mentioned earlier in the chapter—*The Table is Laid* and *A Matter of Taste*—have compiled a large number of narratives by renowned Indian English writers along with those by Indian English Food writers. The narratives of food writers like Chitrita Banerji, Vasundhara Chauhan and Vir Sanghvi have to be read alongside those by canonical writers. There

are striking similarities between the recollections of food in Vasundhara Chauhan's articles and the food narratives of diasporic writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, as I shall discuss in the next chapter. Again, Chitrita Banerji's search for food-histories which define her Bengaliness in *The Hour of the Goddess* is mirrorred in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, where the protagonist, Piya, comes into contact with her culture through food cooked by a humble boatman. These examples prove that Indian English Writing and Indian English Food Writing do not have clearly defined boundaries. Both borrow from each other and reflect each other's forms and contents.

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) is a good example of the integration of food-related discussions into the form of the novel. Here, we find the conflict between traditional and modern India depicted through preferences in food habits. In the character of Papa, the protagonist's father, we see a person who is unwilling to let his daughter consume alcohol as it is inappropriate, unIndian behaviour; and yet, the very same person has no qualms in letting his son drink. In yet another short story of Desai, "A Devoted Son", food becomes the major reason which causes a rift between an ailing father and his physician son. In yet another clash between tradition and modernity, the father repeatedly pleads with the son not to give him Western medicine; and instead give him food that he

is accustomed to eating. However, the son, much like the stereotypical upwardly mobile, English-educated individual, refuses the father, what he calls, oily and greasy food and instead prescribes an English diet that the father is least comfortable with. A similar acceptance of the foreign can also be seen in R. K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*, where the son's preference of American food causes a rift between him and his father. What all these writers are trying to tell us is that the preference, eating and sharing of food are major markers of social alliances.

Indian English food-fiction comprises writings by many of the major literary figures. While it is true that most of them have not devoted entire narratives on food, they have addressed food as an integral subject in their narratives, and have often used it as a metaphor. The number of instances where food is mentioned in Indian English fiction is plenty, and it will be in my interest to sample some of these in the coming chapters.

***

The body of work that can be collectively termed Indian Food Writing in English is a sub-genre of Indian English Writing. It is vast and varied, articulating a vast range of subjects which concern our society and culture. Thus, the range of issues that can be dealt with in this dissertation is overwhelming. I have decided to

devote the following chapters to three ideas which I shall address: “food”, “English” and “Indian writing”. Quite akin to the sampling of various dishes in different courses of eating, I will sample a reasonably wide range of genres and texts for this study. My intention is to provide a wholesome view of the range of writings available in this category of Indian English narratives.

In the second chapter, titled “Food and Memory: Describing Home in Indian English Narratives”, I shall argue that food becomes the language for far-removed individuals (both diasporic and non-diasporic subjects), in which they recollect their home/nation. The loss of the mother tongue, it would appear, is supplanted by the other tongue, which is food. As discussed earlier, sociological and linguistic conventions have aligned food and language as both feed, and are fed by mouth and in this chapter I propose to elaborate this idea at some length.

The third chapter is titled “The Changing Culture of Eating: Reflections in Indian English Non-fictional Food Writing”. Here, I shall examine the changing culture of eating in India as represented in non-fictional writings on food. Sampling a variety of genres which includes newspaper articles, recipes in cookery journals, and

food-travelogues, I hope to show how non-fictional food writing echoes the sentiments of its readers by talking about the growing acceptance of Anglo-American food preferences in the Indian society. Arguing against the trend are voices from the academia like Ashis Nandy's, who plead for exercising caution against the rampant proliferation of globalised goods. I will attempt to analyse the influence of the social life of English in the change of taste and preference of the public as reflected in popular writings. My aim here will also be to examine a different approach adopted by writers at home when compared to those who are away. While recollecting memories of food, diasporic writers tend to project Indian food as the only constant factor, a reminder of the slow and easy-going life, amidst their fast-changing surroundings. Their memories of Indian food are stuck in time. In the third chapter, as we shall see, the non-fictional writers at home negate this static image by highlighting the dynamic nature of Indian culinary and gastronomic imagination.

From the globalised makeover of Indian food in the third chapter, I shall turn towards the complex web of social network created through food in the fourth. In “Food-relations: Society in Indian English Food-fiction”, I shall discuss how Indian writers depict their society and its complexities in English. As we shall see,

food is one of the most significant cultural nodes around which social relations are built. The making, eating and sharing of food give rise to many social alliances/misalliances. In some narratives, food even becomes the one significant social metaphor. Indian English writers of fiction, as I shall argue, have varied reactions to these social relations constructed through food. Many of them are critical of the oppressive nature of some of these relations, and they use English as an empowering, neutral medium to discuss the shortcomings of the society. Others use English creatively to write about the centrality of food in the Indian concept of society.

Finally, in the conclusion I have given a brief summary of my arguments in the preceding chapters and I have offered a syllabus for a possible future course on Indian English Food Writing in the Appendix.

Notes

i. *Asiatic Researches* is a collection which was published by the Asiatic Society, Calcutta in the mid-nineteenth century. It contains research carried out by the Englishmen on the history of arts, sciences and literatures of Asia.

ii. The word ‘pidgin’, which is a linguistic term used to denote non-standard variants of a language, is also related to the word ‘pigeon’, a bird known for its capabilities to carry messages across. Thus, one can argue that the purpose of a pidgin is that of a messenger. By virtue of such an argument, pidgins cease to be a full-fledged language and at best, a link language arising only out of necessity.

iii. Yet another example of such an attitude can be found in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1997), where a character frequently uses the present continuous tense when conversing with her 'ayah', thereby assuming quite incorrectly that the ayah is capable only of understanding such a speech, while the ayah is shown to possess good English skills.

iv. This attitude has been lovingly described by Mark Tully in

No Full Stops in India (1992), where he discusses how his cook refused to go through cookbooks for cooking instructions and yet managed to conjure up gastronomical marvels almost instantaneously.

v. Burton posits this argument in the introduction to *The Raj at the Table*.

vi. Nandy posits this argument in his essay "The Changing Popular Culture of Indian Food: Preliminary Notes" published in the Sage journal *South Asia Research* Vol 24 (1).

vii. I am borrowing this phrase from S. Sreetilak's "Introduction" to *Fiction in Films, Films in Fiction* (Viva 2007).

viii. There has been much debate about the promotion of 'I'm loving it' as the tagline for MacDonalds in India. A number of arguments point to the fact that the company gently parodies what is considered to be a trademark feature of Indian English, the use of the continuous tense with a static verb.

ix. The phrase is borrowed from Meenakshi Mukherjee's essay of the same title (see Mukherjee 2000).

x. In this context, we can recall Macaulay's "Minute on Indian

Education" (1835). Macaulay had suggested that the demand for English language and education would increase in India as it would be considered as the language of opportunity.

xi. I am borrowing this argument from Milton Singer who in his book *When a Great Tradition Modernizes* (1972) argues that the developed countries have a monolithic view of progress which they superimpose upon the lesser developed countries.

Chapter 2

Food and Memory: Describing Home in Indian English Narratives

Food is one of the overarching tropes in Indian diasporic literature, and in most cases, it even becomes the language as it helps the diasporic subject recount his/her past. Settled away from home, the displaced individual is alienated from all things familiar, but what remains with him/her are memories of home, in which food plays a major role. Food becomes a powerful signifier which serves as the tie between the estranged individual and his/her home and homeland. What is missed is not just a specific food item but also the relationships that are built around the eating and sharing of food. Memories of food, thus, constitute narrations of the society and of the nation at large.

In this chapter, I will examine Indian English food narratives which revolve around memories. My examples will mainly include passages from diasporic literature. Jhumpa Lahiri's “Mrs Sen's” recounts the experiences of a Bengali housewife who feels a strong sense of displacement in the USA. Personal life is the focus in Saleem Peeradina's *The Ocean in My Yard* (2005) where the author

remembers stories of his childhood in Bombay. In Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), Arun, the young Indian undergraduate student, turns into a recluse in America. He cannot respond favourably to his surroundings as he realises that his life as a student in a foreign land is by no means as privileged as his life in India where he is the only son in the family. He remembers his home fondly, and the memories mainly comprise instances of eating and sharing of food. In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005), Piya, the Indian American cetologist finds herself in a maze of memories which brings forth her childhood, when she smells the food that Fokir, the boatman cooks. In an instant, the familiar smells transport her to her youth, where her mother tried to hold on to her own culture by cooking her native Bengali food.

The loss of the mother tongue is substituted in diasporic fiction by the "other tongue[i]" The other tongue, I argue, is food which becomes the language of the estranged individuals to talk about their homeland. As I have suggested in the introductory chapter, food and language have often been aligned by linguistic and social conventions due to their interesting similarities. In a number of passages and verses that I shall examine here, there are examples of this substitution of language by food. This replacement also takes place due to the fact that all memories of the past cannot

be translated to a different tongue. Thus Indian writers writing in English have to take recourse to alternative ways to express their feelings. Food becomes a language for them.

Most of the passages sampled here articulate sentiments of homelessness and nationalism. These are often considered to be characteristic features of Indian writing in English. Meenakshi Mukherjee's "The Anxiety of Indianness" argues that the Indian writers expressing themselves in English constantly need to validate their claim of belonging to the nation and hence, their themes and tropes are almost always about the nation[ii]. Literature on food exhibits similar thematic patterns. Indian food often becomes emblematic of the nation and national identity. By writing about food, the authors flavour their English narratives with a distinct Indian touch, often peppering narrations with a number of indigenous words. This presence of the other tongue in narratives of memory will be my focus in this chapter. My texts here comprise the various references to food that are apparent and/or embedded in reconstruction of memory by Indian English writers. I have tried to sample across genres. Thus my examples are not only passages by diasporic writers of fiction and poetry, but by newspaper columnists as well. I have also looked at diasporic characters created by celebrated Indian English authors like Anita Desai and Amitav

Ghosh. I argue that these characters often recollect the past in a less romanticised way when compared to the traditional diasporic authors.

Jhumpa Lahiri's short story “Mrs Sen's”, which appeared in the Pulitzer Prize winning collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), presents one of the most easily recognizable diasporic characters, who continuously remembers her home and hold on to the memories by replicating actions which she normally performed at home. Mrs Sen finds her existence in a foreign land a perpetually inferior experience to her life at home. Her only joy lies in chopping vegetables with her Bengali variant of a knife, a *bonti*, and she carries it out meticulously every single day. The making of food becomes a ritual which she has to perform lest her ties with her past are severed. The other thing that makes her genuinely happy is her visits to the fresh fish market for the same reason. As the other protagonist of the story, the eleven-year-old Eliot, observes:

> He [Eliot] especially enjoyed watching Mrs Sen as she chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor. Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas ... facing the sharp edge without ever touching it, she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash ... the daily procedure took about an hour ...
> She had brought this blade from India... . (pp. 282-3)

The chopping of vegetables with the *bonti* and the cooking of Bengali food are powerful acts which convey a lot of meaning to Eliot. He realises that Mrs Sen's happiness is completely dependent upon recollecting memories of her home. And these memories, as we find out, are mainly connected to the kitchen. She fondly narrates to Eliot how the making of food is a special time at her home in Calcutta when the women of the house get together to discuss their lives while preparing food. The young boy also realises that she gets frustrated that such experiences cannot be replicated in her new American surroundings where people are too absorbed in their own schedules and chores. In such hostile surroundings, the seemingly innocuous blade that she has "brought from India" gains new meaning in her life. The sheer foreignness of the blade provides a striking contrast to the other blades that Eliot has seen. Using the blade is Mrs Sen's resolve to hold on to a past that seems to be slipping away from her.

The pathos of the story lies in this sense of slippage. As we find out towards the end of the story, Mrs Sen meets with an accident while driving to the fish market to buy fresh halibut. Her driving without the supervision of her husband is prompted by the same sense of longing for her home as her using the blade to chop

vegetables—little acts which her husband fails to understand and appreciate. The following passage reveals her state of mind when she is unable to convey to Mr Sen the news about the arrival of fresh halibut, and the immediacy of the situation which requires prompt action:

> She called Mr Sen but he was not at his desk. A second time she tried
> calling, then a third.Eventually she went to the kitchen and returned to the living room with a blade, an eggplant and some newspapers...
> 'I am going to put these in a very tasty stew with fish and green bananas,' she announced. 'Only that I will have to do without the green bananas.'
> 'Are we going to get the fish?'
> 'We are going to get the fish.'
> 'Is Mr Sen going to take us?'
> 'Put on your shoes.' (p. 290)

Mrs Sen here is seen reminiscing on her own about the delicacies of her home, oblivious to the presence of the young American boy who will never quite understand the significance of green bananas in a fish stew. This signals a kind of breakdown of comprehension between the two main characters and the actual estrangement that they experience soon after, as Eliot's mother deems it unfit to keep him under Mrs Sen's supervision because of her inability to drive.

The uncooked fish stew is a masterstroke on Lahiri's part, as

she tells her readers a realistic tale of unfulfilled wishes of the diasporic imagination. Fish stew, or *maacher jhol*, is considered to be the signature dish of Bengali cuisine and the inability to prepare it amounts to the loss of Bengaliness. With the case of Mrs Sen, Lahiri shows us that this loss is inevitable for an immigrant settler. She also tells us that Mrs Sen is ill-equipped to survive in America. By constructing the antithetical character of Eliot's mother who is self-sufficient, is working and is able to drive, Lahiri outlines a few qualities that Mrs Sen lacks. The only claim of superiority that she can boast of is that she can cook. What adds to the pathos of her story is the fact that her identity is dependent on her cooking. To survive in the American society, she can no longer hold on to only those values which constitute her identity as an Indian, or a Bengalee. By presenting Mrs Sen's story in English, Lahiri also draws a striking contrast between the concept of food in India and America. While in India, the making and sharing of food is a social affair, in America it is intensely personal.

Mrs Sen's ardent adherence to all things homemade is mirrored in the narrative of Saleem Peeradina's autobiographical narrative, *The Ocean in My Yard* (2005). This bildungsroman is a narrative completely woven out of the memories of the young

Saleem in Bombay. Located in America, the adult Saleem is pursued by the urge to record his own history. Peeradina's story provides a vibrant picture of Indian middle-class life with all its joys and limitations. It draws the readers into a world which is brimming with events, familiar to those who belong to it, and quite unique to those who are unaware of a life similar to the author's. And in this world, food plays a major role in the building of bonds of kinship and the continuation of a social order.

Some of the most vivid childhood memories that Peeradina recreates revolve around food. As a self-proclaimed 'voyeur' (p. 29), he takes intense pleasure in describing the preparation of food items, an act that he, as a child, could not perform himself. He laces the descriptions of the making of an ice *gola* or the ritualistic Sunday ice creams with intricate details. In the following description, the author manages to translate the simple apparatus which is used to make the *gola*:

> This temptation [the ice gola] came on a four-wheeled hand cart gaily decorated with bottles of coloured liquid along the cart's perimeter. A simple wooden contraption with a blade served to shave the ice into a packed snowball. (p. 31)

Similar care is taken to ensure the recreation of yet another childhood memory revolving around the guilty pleasures of consuming, in copious quantity, what the heart desires:

> What fun it was to have home-made ice creams on Sunday evenings—gobs and gobs of it! The men would set up a bucket on a tall stool in the bathroom, pour the mix into a container, pack the ice and salt and all would take turns rotating the handle—the arm-aching and muscle-knotting exercise. The ice cold water would be drained from time to time. We made several batches and ate until we were sick. (p. 41)

In these descriptions, written with a kind of friendly humour that exudes the warmth of childhood, Peeradina stresses the quotidian, and yet exciting, existence of Indian middle-class lives. What is also implicit in these recollections is the inherent simplicity of desires. At every step, he conveys the idea of a world which is far removed from the modern amenities created in the West and acquired by the upwardly mobile classes in India. He also inverses the idea of the sanctified space of kitchen when he discusses the making of home-made ice creams in their bathroom.

Even the kitchen that Peeradina describes could be considered a reversal of most modern concepts of kitchen. Let us consider these two examples:

> The kitchen was the gloomiest and continued to remain so by father's fiat, another punishment for my mother: 'It is only a kitchen. Why do you need so much light in the kitchen? We need to save power. (p. 33)

> ...Coal and coal sigris and a weak kerosene chula were the standard cooking equipment in our house. The primus stove that made it big everywhere never entered our house; daddy

> was convinced it was dangerous—a few examples of household accidents were enough for him to make up his mind. Gas cooking, a widely accepted innovation, was rejected on similar grounds: gas cylinders were explosive devices to have in the house!
>
> The women struggled in the smoky and blackened kitchen (coal cooking in his estimate, a view widely shared, was healthier, more natural and made the food taste better), spending the better part of their day in cooking and cleaning chores. Fresh food was also healthier than food stored in the fridge—so no refrigerator entered our house. (p. 108)

In these two examples, we find an acute criticism of the attitude of the protagonist's father, who is deeply entrenched in middle-class insecurities, and yet exudes the tyrannical confidence of a patriarch. Peeradina blames his father for the preoccupation of the womenfolk in the house with the kitchen. He also points out how even though his father could have afforded the comforts, he always had a reason, however illogical, for not indulging in those comforts—a rationale which was well concealed in the garb of benevolent patriarchy that was sanctioned by age-old norms. Thus, though the womenfolk were in charge of the preparation of food, it was the man of the house who decided upon the major expenses, thereby clearly delineating the gender roles that everyone in the family was supposed to perform. Peeradina, however, also endearingly

recollects the attention that his father showered on him and his siblings on matters of eating during examinations. He writes:

> I remember also the selective care lavished on us during exam time: walnuts, almonds, pistachios—expensive at any time—were stored in bottles and served with hot milk spiced with nutmeg at bedtime and early morning before sunrise, when mother woke up with us to review study material for the exam. Our rested bodies and brains further stimulated by dried nuts and milk and aided by the freshness of the morning put us in a perfect frame of mind to digest knowledge from our textbooks. (p. 107)

Here we find a good example of one of the typical middle-class preoccupations, in this case, with academics. Excelling in studies is a serious matter in most households, and utmost care is ensured to provide the most nutritious food to the student during the days of the exam. Peeradina points out how his family—even though plagued by the limitations of a meagre income and the responsibilities to feed many, where "regular meals ... were made by measure and pieces of fish and meat were always counted" (p. 107)—always managed to provide the children with some of the most expensive foodstuff which would ensure good health during the time of the exams.

While Peeradina criticises the tyrannical reign of his father

over matters of kitchen, he is all praise for his mother's cooking—a trope which has become iconic in narrations involving memories. He exclaims:

> The finer points of Indian cooking—getting the onion fried to just the right state of golden crisp, the rice to the perfect moment of steaming where every grain stays apart instead of clinging in a lump, throwing the oil, cumin and garlic bagaar over the dal all are just minor techniques of the artist's flick of a ladle that I have retained from observing my mother's deft movements in the kitchen. (p. 45)

Here is a classic example of valorising the mother's culinary skills and likening them with the way the nation cooks. The mother's "deft movements" can be read in juxtaposition with the father's rejection of kitchen comforts; and we will find an emerging narrative of India itself, struggling with all the opposing forces. There is also a sense of positing Indian culinary skills as superior to Western ideas which are bound by recipes and accurate measurements[iii]. Peeradina privileges "the flick of a ladle" which creates Indian food, over the "bland American food" (p. 45), and indeed, other cuisines as well. Thus, there is both a sense of simplicity and mystery associated with the act of cooking that is presented in the narrative.

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* narrates the story of Arun, a

young Indian man studying in Massachusetts. He, like Saleem, is a student in America. However, unlike Saleem, he learns to appreciate homemade food the difficult way. Having lived a sheltered childhood where everything was spoon-fed to him, he now finds himself a misfit in the American reality. Although he had no freedom in his home in India to make his own choices, he had the warmth and love of his family which readily provided him with some of the most basic necessities like food and constant shelter, which he misses in America. The university summer vacation is a revelation for Arun, as it brings forth uncertainties that he has never faced before—questions regarding matters of survival like what to eat and where to live. When his family comes to his rescue by suggesting a house that he could live in, Arun is overcome with emotions that cannot be named:

> Immediately Arun was overcome by the sensation of his family laying its hands upon him, pushing him down into a chair at his desk, shoving a textbook under his nose, catching that nose and making him swallow cod liver oil, spooning food into him, telling him: Arun this, Arun that, Arun, nothing but... .(p. 175)

While he dislikes the fact that his decisions have already been taken for him, he doesn't reject it even with the apparent freedom he has due to the physical distance between him and his family. This inability to take his own decisions regarding matters of survival

becomes glaring when he has to take decisions about eating food. Mrs Patton, his kind host for the summer comments: “You'll be wanting your own kind of food, I'm sure, and I know I won't be able to provide that, my sister's written and told me how different your food is from ours.” (p. 177)

Arun is hesitant to voice his preference of food to his benefactor, Mrs Patton. In a brief episode with Mr Patton, we also come to know about the American disdain for vegetarianism. There is a sense of inbuilt racism in the exchange that Arun has with Mr Patton, where the latter cannot comprehend why anybody would refuse a piece of good meat:

> 'Oh, I'll just have the – the bun and – then salad,' he stammers and his hair falls over his forehead in embarrassment.
> Mr Patton raises an eyebrow – slowly, significantly – holding the spatula in the air while the steak sputters in indignation at this denial.
> Mrs Patton rushes in hurriedly, but too late. 'Ahroon's a vegetarian, dear--' ...
> 'Okay, now I remember,' ... 'Yeah, you told me once. Just can't see how anyone woulf refuse a good piece of meat, that's all. It's not natural...
> Mrs Patton begins to play the role of a distracting decoy ... 'Ahroon explained it all to us, dear – you know, about the Hindoo religion, and the cows -- '
> Mr Patton gives his head a shake, sadly disappointed in such moral feebleness, and turns the slab of meat over and over. 'Yeah, how they let them 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.' (p. 166, my italics)

The cultural superiority is evident in Mr Patton's dismissal of Arun's “feeble” traditions. When Mrs Patton tries to explain the reason in the context of Arun's culture, he vents his displeasure at the seeming illogical nature of that cultural rationale. Arun himself feels the burdens of a 'superior' culture imposing its meat-eating traditions upon him. In such a scenario, Arun realises that he misses his kind of food all the more, especially the food at home that he took for granted. In yet another episode, he tries to recreate homemade food with the keen eyes of Mrs Patton closely observing him, only to realise his incapability in fixing a decent meal for himself:

> He turns on the faucet and runs water over the lentils, washes them. With Mrs Patton watching, admiringly, he sets the pot on the stove and adds the spices she hands him, without looking to see what it is he is adding. Their odours are strong, foreign – they should be right. They make him sneeze and infect him with recklessness: he throws in some green peppers, a tomato, bay leaves, cloves.
>
> 'Is it the way your mother made it?' she blinks and asks when the steam begins to rise and enfold them in smells not altogether appetising.
>
> He cannot tell her that he has never seen his mother cook; she would understand that to mean that he never ate at home, but starved... . (p. 193)

His inability to cook is also a result of the patriarchal hegemony that has been the operative law in his household, which designates women to the space of the kitchen. It is the same logic that presents us diasporic female characters whose only memories of home seem restricted to the domain of the kitchen and the preparation of food. The character of Arun provides an interesting counterpoint to all those characters created by writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Bharati Mukherjee which are mostly at the receiving end of this hegemony. Sitting with the 'dhal' that he has prepared in front of him, Arun realises the importance of his home, the efforts that his mother has taken to bring him up:

> He would much rather chomp upon a candy bar than eat this. But Mrs Patton comes and sits by his side, commiseratingly, coaxingly. She smiles a bright plastic copy of a mother smile that Arun remembers from another world and another time, the smile that is tight in the corners with pressure, the pressure to perform a role, to make him eat, make him grow, make him worth all the trouble and effort and expense. Mrs Patton's smile contains no hint of pressure, it is no more than a mock-up. Gently, it flashes a message as if on a flickering screen: 'Eat, enjoy.' Helplessly, he does. (p. 194)

One of the most significant differences that Arun observes in the treatment of food in America when compared to India is the

deferring of the act of cooking. Most of the food is stored in refrigerators, and cooking happens at rare intervals. The food stored in the refrigerators often doesn't get transferred into plates either, resulting in massive waste. As Arun muses when he goes to shop with Mrs Patton at the supermarket:

> She [Mrs Patton] tosses packets and cartons into the shopping cart lightheartedly. It is Arun who grows tense, finds his throat muscles contracting, tight with anxiety over spending so much, having so much. Wondering if this is how Melanie feels and if it is what makes her sick, he tries to persuade Mrs Patton to put back a carton of ice cream... .(p. 208)

At home in India, there is a certain sense of immediacy in the way food is consumed— food is eaten soon after it is cooked and while it is hot, thereby reducing the chances of wastage as well as reinforcing a sense of warmth and intimacy in the act of eating. While Arun did not enjoy the strict supervision of his father regarding his health and the inordinate servility of the women in the house in matters of serving food, he realises that the American way of eating food is not praiseworthy either. The Patton family hardly sits together and eats, thereby enhancing the gulf which already exists in the relationships of the family members. As Mrs Patton, in a matter of fact manner tells Arun: “What I cook, they don't like. And they don't like sitting at a table either – like you and I do...” (p. 198)

Feasting and waste are closely tied, and by narrating Arun's story, Desai seems to point out to us how they are two sides of the same coin. The second part of the novel, which is set in America (and which I am examining in this chapter[iv]) can roughly correspond to the 'feasting' of the title. As Indians, we often tend to value life in America as far superior to ours because we believe that it is the land of plenty. Desai shows us how this land of plenty is also the land of waste. The kind of excess that Arun observes in every walk of American life serves as a stark contrast to the idea of India that resides in his mind, that of austerity and temperance. As I have argued earlier, by remembering food at home, Arun reconstructs the idea of a nation, of a culture which he misses. In going away from home, he realises that he can never get the same kind of nurturing in a different land. Nation nourishes, and this nourishment becomes a part of the memory which is difficult to go back to.

> It was left to him to extract what he wanted from this hoard, to slice tomatoes and lay lettuce on bread, or spill cereal into a bowl; she watched, with pride and complicity. Arun ate with an expression of woe and a sense of mistreatment. How was he to tell Mrs Patton that these were not the foods that figured in his culture? That his digestive system did not know how to turn them into nourishment? For the first time in his existence, he found he craved for what he had taken for granted before and even at times thought an unbearable nuisance – those meals cooked and placed before him whether he wanted them or not

> (and how often he had not), that duty to consume what others thought he must consume. (pp. 184-5)

Piya, the Bengalee-American protagonist of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, feels a kind of displacement similar to Arun's, in a foreign land when she encounters Fokir, a humble boatman cooking a meagre meal with his meagre means. However, Piya's American sense of caution regarding health is vanquished by the overpowering aromas of Fokir's cooking, which transports her back to the memory of a Bengali home in America which she resisted then:

> He took the stove to the stern, and when it was well out of the way of the shelter's inflammable roof, he lit a match and blew the firewood into flame. Then he washed some rice, drained it into a battered tin utensil, poured in some water and put it on the stove. While the rice was coming to a boil, he dismembered the crabs, cracking their claws with his knife. When the rice was done, he took the pot off the fire and replaced it with yet another blackened aluminium pot ... the smells were harch on Piya's nose. It was a long time now since she had eaten food of this kind: while in the field she rarely ate anything not from a can, a jar or a packet ...
>
> Now, as she sat watching Fokir at the stove, she knew he would offer her some of his food and she knew also she would refuse. And yet, even as she recoiled from the smell, she could not tear her eyes from his flying fingers: it was as though she were a child again ... they were almost lost to her, those images of the past, and nowhere had she less expected to see them than on this boat. (pp. 95-6)

Piya is a completely estranged diasporic subject who is willingly displaced from her ancestral homeland. Not only is she happy in her American set-up, she actually dislikes the thought of having to go back to a past which her parents belonged to. She compares the smells that rose from her mother's cooking to “domesticated animals” which clung to her even though she tried to drive them away[v]. Now, that she observes Fokir cooking, the discomfort of the *unheimlich*[vi], strikes her hard. Suddenly, she experiences the weight of a familiar history which she hoped to bury, with her past appearing in front of her eyes.

From Mrs Sen to Arun to Piya, we see a gradual transition towards a more ready acceptance of a foreign culture. However, even for the alienated Piya the memories of the food cooked by her mother are deeply embedded in her psyche, which she cannot forsake. The colour and odour of Fokir's food brings back memories of her mother and her mother tongue, both of which are elements from her past that is absent yet oddly familiar.

> She had imagined the kitchen as a cage from which they [the domesticated creatures] never ventured out, which was why it came doubly as a shock when she discovered, from pointed jokes and chance playground comments, that they followed her everywhere, like unseen pets[vii]. (p. 97)

In a far removed space and time, Piya realises that these colours and odours are strangely comforting, as they create an unspoken bond between her and Fokir. Food becomes the language for Piya in this unexpected jolt from the past. However, she cannot remember any of the words which denote these unfamiliar food items: “There were spices inside and their colours – red, yellow, bronze – were bright in the light of the hissing flame.” (p. 96). The sights which she had successfully pushed back into the recesses of her memory flicker past her reminding her of the losses. The “red, yellow, bronze” that she sees are the three most important spices used in Bengali cuisine—red chilli powder, turmeric powder and cumin powder—associations she is unable to make now. She is incapable of translating the food items into words. It is quite apt that this episode in the narrative is termed “Words”, thereby bringing together food and language in an interesting mesh.

Writing about Indian food in English signals the presence of the other tongue. As Sneja Gunew argues in her article “Mouthwork: Food and Language as the Corporeal Home for the Unhoused Diasporic Body in South Asian Women’s Writing”: “...those morsels of a foreign language strategically embedded in a text, as though there could be no translation for the specificity of

what these ingredients, these dishes provoke; they indicate a ghostly absence...” (p. 101)

Here I shall examine two Indian English poets, Tabish Khair and Imtiaz Dharker, who echo similar thoughts on translation of Indian food into English. In the following verses by these two poets, we find fond recollections of their favourite food items. The untranslatable nature of the food makes it even more desirable. The first poem quoted here is by Khair.

“Lichi”
Untranslatable name, Chinese
In origin, grown here
And there all over
North India, it

Could be bought in cans
In Copenhagen. Black, bullet-
Shaped stone extracted, just
White flesh flabby like fat,
Floating in half-juice, half
Conservative. No dry
And ridged skin—green
Bruised red—to peel. Tin
Can which we bought drunk
After an elaborate Indian
Dinner. Ate with relish: Only,
You still spat stones out.
(p. 44)

Tabish Khair, located in Denmark, tries to describe his favourite fruit *lichi*, only to realise the difficulties of translating a food item which is unavailable in the land where he resides at present. For Khair, the fruit contains the memories of a land he has left; a land which he knows too well when he utters the words "grown here and there all over North India". The certainty in his voice is unmistakable—the certainty of relishing a fruit that he loves. This certainty is replaced in the next lines with a hesitation: "it could be bought in cans in Copenhagen". *Lichi*, primarily a tropical fruit, can only be found in its preserved state in the temperate Denmark. Khair realises the unfamiliarity of the fruit for his Danish/English audience and describes its physical attributes with remarkable precision only to go back to the cultural specificities of the eating of *lichi* at the end of the poem, thereby reaffirming the untranslatable nature of the fruit.

The next few verses appear in Imtiaz Dharker's "At the Lahore Karhai" which also depicts similar anxieties of translation.

From "At the Lahore Karhai"

This winter we have learnt
to wear our past
like summer clothes.
Yes, a great day.

A feast! We swoop
on a whole family of dishes.
The tarka dal is Auntie Hameeda
the karhai ghosht is Khala Ameena
the gajjar halva is Appa Rasheeda.

The warm naan is you.

My hand stops half-way to my mouth.
The Sunday light has locked
on all of us:
the owner's smiling son,
the cook at the hot kebabs,
Kartar, Rohini, Robert,
Ayesha, Sangam, I,
bound together by the bread we break,
sharing out our continent.

These
are ways of remembering.
Other days, we may prefer
Chinese.

(The poem has been reproduced from the
webpage *www.imtiazdharker.com*)

The problem of translation can be felt here as the poet grapples with the difficulty of representing a specific dish in a foreign language. She finds the correlates of these dishes within her family. Specific dishes are connected presumably with the family members who were/are connoisseurs of the same. Thus, “Auntie Hameeda” is associated with “tarka dal” and “Khala Ameena” with “Karhai

Gosht".

The remembering of food is aligned with the remembering of family in Imtiaz Dharker's "At the Lahore Karhai".The food items and the family members are brought together like in a "feast". This feast is also a recollection of home. Dharker confesses that while on some days she may "prefer Chinese", there are days when she remembers her own cuisine, which in turn reminds her of her family and her nation. It is this remembrance that binds her with the other members of the Asian community even in a faraway place.

The bond created over cooking and sharing of food is emphasised in Vasundhara Chauhan's article "The Stuff of Good Evenings" (*The Hindu*, Sunday Magazine, Feb 22, 2009, p.8). Her voice is strikingly different from diasporic writers as she writes about memories of food eaten at home. The elaborate descriptions of spices and unique Indian cooking appliances common in diasporic fiction, which make Indian cooking a complex jargon, are absent here. Chauhan claims that Indian cooking is simple and hence unique. Here I argue that this discrepancy exists due to the different ways two writers located in different continents approach the question of nation. Chauhan, whose contact with the nation is

immediate, is familiar with its cultural manifestations. However, for Jhumpa Lahiri and others located elsewhere, their culture has frozen in time, and therefore has become less attainable. It also would appear that a lot of diasporic narratives often project a homogeneous and romanticised version of India and Indian food.

Like the diasporic writers, the concept of food is strongly related to the concepts of home and hearth for Chauhan. Her preference of Indian food in the houses of Anita and Nirmala gently counters her subtle dismissiveness of Kavita's experimental Spanish food. About food at Anita's home, she comments:

> Her menus are classic – no bought bread rolls and baked vegetables in white sauce on one side of the table while the other end has a few Indian curries. It's always Indian, with two or three excellent mutton or fish dishes and colourful, pretty vegetables. (p. 8)

Not surprisingly, the section which deals with food at Anita's and Nirmala's places is titled “At home” signifying her fraternal feelings about her hosts and their places.

In Chauhan's narrative, we also find some of the most commonly used tropes of home as seen in diasporic narratives. Home is closely connected to the idea of nation. Home is also about the “simple” and the “familiar”. Chauhan writes:

> ...the opposite of all this is what I consider a Good Evening. Where most of the company are familiar friends, with a peppering of new faces. Where the food is delicious and the menu simple. And has been cooked at home... .(p. 8)

Chauhan traces with astonishing detail the colour and texture of the food that she has had in her friends' houses. The descriptions, recollected in nostalgia, also exude the warmth of home:

> The *moong dal* there [at Anita's place] is delicate and fragrant. Mixed into steamed white rice, which I eat with my fingers, it's a soft foil to the spicy meat curries. ...
> She'll [Nirmala] make *meen vevichathu*, that intensely flavoured red fish curry...with tender green beans sprinkled with toasted sesame seeds. Or creamy, fragrant mutton stew with fluffy *appams*...and accompany this with vegetables as brightly coloured as a picture ... . (p. 8)

There is a considerable emphasis on the senses in these descriptions. All the senses converge in Chauhan's recollections, akin to Sujata Bhatt's ode to garlic and Piya's encounter with Fokir's cooking[viii]. Deeply embedded in these recollections is an indomitable sense of "love and care" which adds to the image of home as a place where one wishes "to go back at once".

The concepts of home and kinship are closely knit with food in "The stuff of good evenings". Chauhan has carefully chosen three friends with whom she shares a special bond—one in which

food and togetherness play a special role. “Breaking bread” has always been associated with kinship and love, and Chauhan clearly emphasises the relationships that are built around the act of eating. It is interesting to note here that the concept of breaking bread is a Christian one and yet it is applicable in a completely different cultural context. In one part of the narrative where Chauhan describes the food at Kavita's place, she asks herself: “Was the food great? Yes, maybe. But what makes me remember the evening is the love and care that had gone into the preparation of the evening.”

Thus we see, as argued earlier, it is not just the food item itself which constitutes the warmth of home. Food is the ultimate rhetoric of caring and sharing. Thus, even if the comforting familiarity of the mother tongue deserts an individual, s/he can still recollect the food prepared at home as it reminds her of those cherished moments which are difficult to replicate.

A different attitude towards recollecting food-related memories is to be found in Vir Sanghvi’s “Past Times: First Tastes That Lasted Forever”. Never granting any special status to homemade food through the narrative, Sanghvi shares a range of experiences of eating:

> Almost every person has memories of formative taste experiences. In my case, the cuisine of my forefathers (Gujarati) did not leave much of an impression on my palate. ... So, my earliest gastronomic memories are of non-Gujarati food. My mother had acquired a taste for bacon cooked very crisp ... from her college days in America and that's still my favourite way of eating bits of dead pig. ... I remember eating my first Italian pizza when I was nine at a cafe by the Fountain of Trevi in Rome. I've never been able to enjoy a fat crust pizza since ... (pp. 9-10)

Here we find an unorthodox, and to a certain extent, an uninhibited account of food-related nostalgia where we can hardly find traces of "the anxiety of Indianness". Sanghvi's account doesn't require a commitment to a territory, as his readers (the English-speaking elite) can easily identify with his reasons for locating his food-memories in different parts of the world. I will be examining similar narratives in the next chapter which involve discussions on the multiple foreign influences that characterise Indian culinary and gastronomic imagination. These narratives, including that of Sanghvi's, challenge the notion that Indian food is a monolithic identity, or experience.

Notes

i. I am borrowing this phrase from Probal Dasgupta's *The Otherness of English: India's Auntie Tongue Syndrome*. In this book, Dasgupta argues that English acquires the role of the other tongue in Indian society where most individuals are aware of their mother tongue and the other tongue, which is English. In this case, the other tongue is food which acts as language in recollections of the past.

ii. See Mukherjee 2000. “The Anxiety of Indianness”, *The Perishable Empire,* New Delhi: OUP.

iii. Attia Hosain, in her autobiographical narrative, “Of Memories and Meals” presents a similar point of view about Indian cooking, where she says that the art of cooking is based on *andaz* or hunch, rather than accurately measured proportions of ingredients:

> They [cooks] kept their recipes secret, handing them down from father to son. Accurate measurements were discarded; long years of apprenticeship and practice, and sensitive senses of taste and smell were their guide. 'A pinch of this, a pinch of that, fistfuls of lentils, water measured to the joints

of a ginger or thumb.' '*Andaz se*' was the answer to questions about measurements. Experience was their teacher." (p. 316)

iv. I will discuss the first part of the novel in great detail in the fourth chapter.

v. This kind of extrapolation where one sense is juxtaposed with a different object is termed synesthesia. For example, in Sujata Bhatt's poem "The Stinking Rose", the line "a round smell that spirals up" is an example of a synesthetic experience where the smell of garlic is perceived in terms of the spiral shape. Sneja Gunew (2005) argues that such synesthetic experiences are abundant in diasporic literature. Food experiences are often the most defining factors determining a diasporic author's thematic explorations; and they are often expressed in terms of synesthetic experiences.

vi. In *The Location of Culture* (1991), Homi Bhabha explains 'unheimlich' in Freud's own terms: 'the name for everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light' (p. 14)

vii. This can be compared to Eliot's experience in Mrs Sen's house, where the unfamiliar smell of cumin which hangs about in the air gradually grows familiar.

viii. There is a saying in Sanskrit “Ghranayam ardha bhojanam” which roughly translates to ‘smelling food is equivalent to partial-eating’. By recreating the smells of the food eaten, Chauhan seeks to experience the food once again.

Chapter 3

The Changing Culture of Eating: Reflections in Indian English Non-Fictional Food Writing

Post-liberalised India has witnessed a fast changing culture of eating which has been heavily influenced by Anglo-American food preferences. Consequently, Indian English non-fictional food writing is keen on reflecting this globalised makeover of food. Along with the changing culture of eating in the Indian society, there has emerged a new kind of food writing which actively endorses this cultural change. Examples of this kind of writing are to be found in English newspapers, magazines and cookbooks which portray the prosperous face of India by upholding the culinary wealth of the country and the people's growing purchasing power. Arguing against the rampant culinary narcissism are voices of the academia and the intelligentsia, which try to bring forth the downsides of these rapid changes in consumption patterns.

The variety of texts discussed in this chapter includes: cookbooks and cookery journals, newspaper and magazine articles, encyclopaedia, critical essays and food-travelogues[i]. This also

indicates that food is a significant topic addressed widely by Indian English writers. I will sample these texts here to examine how Indian non-fictional writers talk about their food in English. In the beginning, I will provide a brief outline of the history of the changing culture of eating in India. I will be focusing primarily on the role of English interventions in Indian culinary culture. Some of the texts sampled for this purpose include Chitrita Banerji's *Eating India: Exploring a Nation's Cuisine* (2008), Ashis Nandy's "The Changing Popular Culture of Indian Food: preliminary notes" and a few select passages from Pankaj Mishra's *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* (1995) for their distinct takes on the changing culture of eating. Next, I will discuss how Indian writers in English write about the new culture of eating in popular media like newspapers, magazines and cookbooks. For this purpose, I have tried to sample a reasonably wide range of texts like articles from *The Hindu, The Telegraph* magazine as well as Tarla Dalal's cookery journal *Cooking and More* and the very popular *Savvy Cookbook*. The purpose of this study will be to examine how Indian English writers of non-fiction write
about food and about the changing culture of eating in English.

***

Culinary cultural exchanges between India and the rest of

the world have existed for centuries. The exchanges have not been one-sided either. Although while examining the recent steady influx of Anglo-American foodstuff in the Indian markets we might assume that the English influence on Indian culinary imagination has been overwhelmingly one-way, there is adequate evidence of a more balanced, two-way transaction. David Burton's *The Raj at the Table* (1994), talks about the strong influence of Indian cuisine on British gastronomic practices:

> The whiff of spice lured Britain to India.
> In 1599 a group of London merchants, flushed both by an emergent spirit of capitalism and by the English victory over the Spanish Armada eleven years earlier, formed the East India Company in the hope, among other things, of driving down the cost of pepper...
> A fleet of armed East India Company ships bearing optimistic names such as *Clove*, *Peppercorn* and *Trade's Increase* was put to the sea... .(p. 7)

A number of accounts by early British settlers point towards the fact that eating was a major leisurely affair and it was carried out in grand style. A substantial amount of the revenue that was collected through huge taxations was spent in eating and merry-making. Burton also talks about the fondness for Indian food that, especially, the early settlers possessed. Thus, fusion of Indian and English cuisines was a confirmation of this affinity. Burton elaborates:

> Early European officials in India laid lavish tables. Mandelslo in 1638 noted '15 or 16 dishes of meat, besides the dessert' in the home of the president of the English merchants at Surat who al fowl, l lived together. Even in 1780 in Calcutta, Mrs Eliza Fay, a lawyer's wife and herself a dressmaker, wrote: 'We dine at 2 o'clock in the very heat of the day ... A soup, a roast fowl, curry and rice, a mutton pie, forequarter of lamb, a rice pudding, tarts, very good cheese, fresh churned butter, excellent Madeira (that is very expensive, but eatables are very cheap).' (p. 11)

The popularity of Indian food was palpable even in England where a number of 'curry houses' were set up from the late eighteenth century onwards. Dean Mahomed, who is also considered to be the first Indian author in English, was the first entrepreneur to set up a curry house in London. Martin Hickman of *The Independent*, pays tribute to Mahomed in the article "Sake Dean Mahomed: The Man Who Opened Britain's First Curry House, Nearly 200 Years Ago". Appreciating the man's tenacity and entrepreneurial abilities, Hickman points out that he was responsible for spicing up 'the life of an entire nation.' Hickman's article provides an interesting case in point, as it gives us a glimpse of the extent of Indian influence in English eating habits. He writes:

> Diners tucking into beef madras in the country's curry houses tonight may not appreciate their debt to one Sake Dean Mahomed. Almost 200 years before the Indian restaurant became a fixture on the British high street, Mahomed, a

> Muslim soldier, founded the first curry establishment in Britain, the Hindoostane Coffee House in Portman Square, London. It gave the gentry of Georgian England their first taste of spicy dishes.
> Two centuries later, the British are still in love with dishes flavoured with cumin, coriander, ginger, fenugreek, cayenne pepper and caraway. We spend an extraordinary £2.5bn in Indian restaurants every year. (p. 6)

The acceptance of Indian cuisine found expression in the inclusion of these dishes into the English vocabulary. Fusion of cultures also extended to the realm of words. K. T. Achaya provides a succinct list in *The Illustrated Foods of India A-Z*:

> ...some unique Anglo-Indian terms arose in the area of food. Punch was from panch, and denoted the five components used in making the drink. Toddy came from the Hindi tari for the fermented sap of the tala or palmyra palm, first called by the Portuguese palmeira or the excellent palm. ... Kedgeree for breakfast was the Hindi khichri, which visitors like Ibn Battuta in 1340, and Abdur Razzak in 1443, describe as a dish of rice cooked with dhal, usually that of mung. Rice cakes, appa or appam in Tamil, appeared at an English breakfast as hoppers; this was a word particularly used in Sri Lanka. ... The baking of meat in a seal of dough, dumpukht, meaning air-cooled in Persian, became dumpoke, frequently applied to a dish of boned and stuffed duck. (p. 59)

Achaya's book is a unique, authoritative English encyclopedia on Indian food. It is an important piece of work on

Indian food culture in English. The book presents comprehensive entries on a number of Indian food items and food-related customs. It pays attention to those food items which have been thoroughly assimilated into the Indian culture and are now considered to be Indian, like biryani, kebabs or the ubiquitous tea. But it doesn't include discussions on the latest entries into the Indian eating culture like pizza, pasta or burger. Thus, while the book does not track the latest changes in eating trends influenced by globalisation, it provides a succinct, academic look at the changing culture of eating from the historical point of view. Like other academic writers, Achaya's tone is serious, which is quite contrary, as it would seem, to food writing as found in the media where reading is a part of the voyeuristic pleasure. Even the illustrations in this book serve as visual guidance to identify food items—they are in single colour and do not add to any kind of voyeuristic charm of the book. The idea behind writing an encyclopaedia on Indian food in English is to share certain well-researched pieces of information about Indian food with the world which still hasn't quite come out of the general one-dimensional notion of Indian cooking, that is, spices. It also helps educate the English-speaking elite on the intercultural culinary transactions that have taken place over centuries.

Like Achaya's book, Ashis Nandy's “The Changing Popular Culture of Indian Food: Preliminary Notes” is an informative and analytical piece of academic writing which traces the changing culture of eating in India. Nandy points out that the influence of other cuisines on Indian cuisine is an older phenomenon than many of us would believe. He provides a list of food items which have become a part and parcel of Indian culture.

> ... at least Indian vegetarian cuisine would have been devastatingly poorer if potato, tomato, French bean, sweat potato, tapioca, cashew nut, capsicum, maize, rajmah, papaya and, more recently, cheese and cocoa were not made a part of the cook’s repertoire. Even more painful for the Indian food nationalist could be the fact that chilli, an inescapable part of Indian cuisine today, came to India from South America. So did pineapple, guava and chiku. Peach, pear, cinnamon, blackberry, lychee, cherry, and the ubiquitous tea came from China; cauliflower from Europe; onion from Central Asia. India is known for its spices, but some of its most important spices, including a few that are central not only to cuisine but to indigenous healing traditions, have come from outside. Among them are garlic, turmeric, fenugreek, ginger, cinnamon, and asafoetida. Both India’s diversity and uniqueness in the matter of food owe their vivacity to a certain cultural openness to the strange and the unknown. (p. 11)

As I had discussed in the earlier chapter, the representations of Indian food in diasporic fiction often indicate a homogeneous

culinary culture, replete with spices and other exotic factors which lend character to Indian food. However, as we all know, no tradition remains free from influences of other cultures, and ample historical evidence suggests that a number of foreign influences have left indelible marks on cuisines in different parts of India. Borrowing from Achaya, Nandy writes:

> Not merely ingredients came to the subcontinent, but also recipes. Recently food historian K.T. Achaya has demoralized Indian nationalists further by suggesting that the venerable idli, the pride of South Indians of all hues, acquired its present form from Indonesian kings who visited India to look for brides (Achaya, 1998a: 104–5). It is a homeomorphic equivalent, as Raimundo Panikkar might say, of the Chinese rice ball. Likewise, jalebi, Achaya archly suggests, might have come from Persia. These are only the tips of an iceberg. All around India one finds preparations that came originally from outside South Asia. Kebabs came from West and Central Asia and underwent radical metamorphosis in the hot and dusty plains of India. So did biryani and pulao, two rice preparations, usually with meat. Without them, ceremonial dining in many parts of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh is incomplete. Even the term pulao or pilav seems to have come from Arabic and Persian. It is true that in Sanskrit – in the Yajnavalkya Smriti – and in old Tamil the term pulao occurs (Achaya, 1998b: 11), but it is also true that biryani and pulao today carry mainly the stamp of the Mughal times and its Persianized high culture. (pp. 11-2)

While pointing out that foreign influence on Indian culinary

cultures has continued steadily over centuries, Nandy is severely critical of the way in which Indian writers today, especially popular writers of English cookbooks and magazines depict the growing American influence on Indian eating. He is cautious about the effects of this influence, especially in the present globalised context, which he believes to be harmful. The kind of food that has been the preferred choice of the people in the recent past reflects their aspirations to belong to a particular English-mediated lifestyle. Nandy is sceptical of the role of English in the social life of Indians as he argues that English, while bringing prosperity to the person who owns it, also brings in an unhealthy lifestyle.

Nandy writes in a disapproving tone about the popular media which, he believes, has aided the growth of fast food. He attributes the changing culture of eating partly to the popularity of celebrity chefs and their media presence, thereby criticising their role in popularising a variety of food which is fast becoming the urban malady. Fast food has not given rise to a counter-discourse in India which condemns it. He comments:

> In India, one rarely finds nutritionists or columnists on food lamenting the growing popularity of fast food. McDonald's is still viewed, as its advertisements claim, as a moderately fashionable family restaurant and Pizza Hut is seen as a haunt of the upper-middle class youth who have money to

spare. (p. 12)

"The Changing Culture of Eating in India: Preliminary Notes" is a critique of Indian writing in English on food. There is a tinge of contempt for the perpetrators of this new-age cuisine that is palpable in the following lines:

> Cooking classes, particularly courses in ethnic cuisine, are becoming increasingly popular in urban India and a galaxy of famous, mediagenic chefs have become household names, thanks to their popular television shows and frequent newspaper interviews. Their coffee-table cookbooks are also becoming important acquisitions. (p. 15)

In the sections on popular food writings, I shall analyse examples of texts written by these "mediagenic chefs" and discuss the salient features of these texts. I shall also look at the celebratory tone adopted by these texts which espouse the changing culture emphatically. These texts also provide the perfect antithesis to Nandy's restrained anxiety of the ill-effects of the change by being loud and clear about their positive stand on the same.

Chitrita Banerji's *Eating India* has to be placed in between the academic Nandy and the over-enthusiastic media. Banerji shares

Nandy's opinion about the multifarious influences on Indian food, when she writes:

> What tradition meant was less than clear, in a country that has seen numerous waves of external influences and internal melding. The chillies on our plates were a reminder that almost every cuisine in India had undergone a radical shift with the arrival of the Portuguese, who brought the capsicums from the New World. Now the variety and ubiquity of chillies in India rivals that of countries like Mexico. (p. 74)

However, unlike Nandy who criticises the media for upholding the rampant culinary influence of Anglo-American lifestyles, Banerji is jubilant about the positive image that India is sending out to the rest of the world about its tolerance in accepting and assimilating foreign ways of life. *Eating India* is an exciting attempt to bring together culinary nuances of multiple regions of India. In this food-travelogue, Banerji attempts to "explore the nation's cuisine". But the running theme of her book is the espousal of globalisation and not quite the multifarious Indian traditions that she tries to represent. Her appreciative attitude towards the fast changing consumption patterns rising due to mainly Anglo-American influences can be set in contrast against the criticisms levelled by Nandy about the same. While Nandy agrees, like Banerji, that India has always strongly embraced other cultures when it comes to

matters of the kitchen and eating, he is disapproving of the fact that the recent changes have been actively supported by Indian English writers instead of being criticised on grounds of being unhealthy. Banerji herself is guilty of endorsing this change when she writes:

> The American motto that I had fallen in love with and internalized during my years as an immigrant—Change is good—could equally be a Bengali or an Indian one when it came to food. The facade of unyielding traditionalism is just that—a facade. So, is the idea of unmitigated regionalism. In reality, curiosity, experimentation and metamorphosis are all at work. (p. 30)

Banerji's tone, while appreciating the inclusive nature of Indian culture, is largely silent on the issue of side-effects of this new trend of eating. As Nandy points out, although the entire world is actively writing about the health hazards posed by the escalating consumption of fast food, India has remained quite silent and even approving of the growth as it is considered to be fashionable. The supporters of globalisation are not to be found only amongst policy-makers, but also popular writers in India. Banerji is one among these English writers who view this change towards an Anglo-American lifestyle as a move towards development. This is evident when she writes about the adaptations of Indian culinary habits with Western dishes, a typical example of globalised trends:

> One evening in Ahmedabad, I saw a restaurant sign proclaiming the availability of 'Jain pizzas', that is, pizza

> without onions in the topping. Like so much in India, this, too, was an example of ingenious adaptation, being the other end of the spectrum from the chicken tikka masala pizza. (p. 209)

Fusion is the single-most recurring theme in her narrative. Banerji weaves interesting metaphors of food[ii] which suggest that India is a land of inclusion, yet another image of India as the land of 'unity in diversity' which has been publicized in the west. In yet another example, we find an appreciative spectator of fusion, who pays her tribute to the benevolent outsider for enriching Indian cuisine:

> The ice cream in Hyderabad's shops today, as in the rest of India, is the product of the interaction between East and West. Europeans, especially the ruling British, suffered even more than did Mughals in India's tropical heat. In a curious quirk of history, the ability to supply ice on a commercial scale and the subsequent introduction of ice cream into India linked the world's oldest and youngest immigrant nations. It was an American, Fredrick Tudor, who first successfully shipped ice from Boston to Calcutta in 1833. (pp. 172-3)

Throughout this food-travelogue, Banerji tends to attribute most of the changes in Indian culinary preferences to the influence of English. This is not quite an uncommon formulation if one

follows the food literature that is generated in English in India. However, there is a strong dissent against such literature which is resonating amongst the intelligentsia. I have already looked at Nandy as one such example. The other voice that I will comment on briefly is Pankaj Mishra who makes a number of poignant, witty remarks on the globalising trend in Indian cuisine in *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* (1995).

Butter Chicken in Ludhiana is a travelogue which charts the author's journey through small-town India. It comments upon globalisation and its cultural effects in middle-class India. Like Nandy, Mishra points out that it is exposure to a globalised Anglo-American culture that has brought in the changes in eating habits. He is also vehement in his condemnation of the new Anglo-American lifestyle that the Indian middle class is too keen to adopt. This is evident in the following quote:

> ...it [provincial India] was...bringing forth a new kind of sensibility: one that could combine in itself a taste for strident politics, violent films, ostentatious architecture, lewd music, rumour-mongering newspapers and overcooked food. (p. 11)

In this comment, Mishra aligns the major cultural forces which define an individual/a group of individuals. With his use of derogatory epithets, he shows a kind of contempt typical of an

intellectual, who is observing the degeneration of a large section of the population who are influenced easily by the west. The next quote will elucidate this argument: “The wedding-cake houses, the 'fast-food' restaurants, the Rap singer, the cheap perfumes: there was something profoundly pathetic about all of them.” (pp. 9-10)

In *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*, Mishra traces the influence of Anglo-American lifestyle in Indian small towns through the major cultural artefacts which have come to our society as by-products of globalisation. And these are primarily the things that Mishra is sceptical about. He believes that Indian variations of what is Anglo-American is mere imitation, and to elucidate that he gives vivid descriptions of food items like a burger in a roadside shop which actually comprises “an alu tikki slapped between two buns”. When English-mediated food gets ‘translated’ into the Indian context, according to Mishra, they become mindless 'duplication'. It would be interesting to contrast Chitrita Banerji's standpoint on the same issue. While Mishra sees this assimilation as duplication, Banerji appreciates the Indian tendency to appropriate cultural items in order to make them suitable within the given social contexts.

Mishra is also critical of the projection of India as a land of austerity and renunciation—ideas which add to the exotic mysticism of the orient. While describing the ploy of a miserly hotelier in Rajasthan, he writes: “Dinner that night was equally frugal: dry potatoes, a yellowish liquid which presumably was 'dal', lukewarm chapatis, rice—all this for Rs 150 per head.” (p. 87). The writer here is suggesting how the image of the mystical east is often a profit-making one for the Indians who can shrewdly cash on the prevalent notions. The hotel, as Mishra describes it, does not have electricity, and the guests eat simple dinner, in order to experience the so-called austerity of the place. However, the writer notices that the owner lives adjacent to the hotel in a well-lit quarter. Mishra here raises pertinent questions about the latent hypocrisies in the Indian society which portrays an image of apparent frugality in terms of eating habits to the world outside while its internal food politics are quite the contrary.

***

Much of the Indian English food writing published in newspapers and lifestyle magazines proposes to teach the readers to cook food which is often outside the more common fares like *dal*, *roti* and *subzi*. The spectacle of the foreign is a characteristic feature

of most popular Indian English food writings. One cannot overlook the importance of visuals in food writing, which provide a visual feast for the eyes much before the feast of the taste buds. Food is thus leisure and often voyeuristic pleasure too. We cannot imagine a Sunday supplement without at least one column on food. TV channels like 'Discovery Travel and Living', or the closer to home 'NDTV Good Times' thrive on food and cooking-based shows which entertain the spectators with culinary artistry. There is a kind of culinary narcissism evident in these shows where the cook always cooks excellent food and the kitchen is elaborately furnished with all the state-of-the-art amenities to the extent of being unreal. Needless to argue, these shows cater to the upper-middle class notions of the ideal kitchen.

Alongside the pronounced culinary narcissism, there also exists an implicit assumption of an elite, 'literate' readership that will be able to understand and appreciate the content of these Indian English food writings. To illustrate this, I am drawing examples from 'The Metro' in *The Hindu* and *The Telegraph* Sunday magazine *Graphiti*, published from Kolkata. If we read into some of the recipes carefully, we will find ample evidence of the elitism in the writings. A number of recipes which are provided talk about food

items which are often exotic in the Indian context. English enables the reproduction of a large variety of cuisines in the Indian context. It functions as the mediator between cuisines from various parts of India as well as international cuisines. Even the list of ingredients that need to be procured for cooking these dishes and the cooking appliances required are stuff that generally the upwardly mobile English-affected class can afford. Here are a few examples of the nomenclatures of the dishes written about in one of the December 2008 issues of *Graphiti*, a magazine of the Sunday Telegraph: 'matcha financiers', 'pan-seared Australian wagyu beef in truffle jus' or the more innocuous 'stewed egg noodles with boston lobster in ginger and scallion' – all these names conjure up an essence of the foreign which is exotic and hence welcome. What is interesting in the recipes of these dishes is the assumption of familiarity with ingredients like 'black truffles' or 'wagyu beefs'. It would not be incorrect to argue, thus, that Indian food writing in English assumes a food literate audience who can readily comprehend the dishes, the ingredients or the kitchen equipment being written about.

When a foreign food item is translated into the Indian context, a number of things seem to be happening simultaneously. There is a certain emphasis on the preferences of the majority. For

example, in keeping with the sentiments of the majority, very few beef dishes are written about in mainstream newspapers circulated nationwide. Thus, even though a particular item may have beef or pork as primary ingredients, they will almost often be substituted with the more traditionally consumed meat items. It is probably similar sentiments which also influence major MNCs like Subway and McDonalds to sell vegetarian sandwiches and McTikkis and stay away from selling beef and pork. There is also a definite trend of preserving the foreign-ness of the dish through the prescription of ingredients like Worcestershire sauces, red and white wines, etc. when the readers are located within India.

The writing of food in English, while exhibiting distinct elitism and narcissism, also ensures that a large variety of food is talked about. If we examine archives of newspaper articles on food across time and place, we will see a clear pattern emerging in the variety of food that is talked about—from the local, the regional to the international. While sifting through *The Hindu* archives on the section 'Eating Out', I have come across articles which range from 'In search of a fluffy omelette' (*The Hindu*, Metro Plus, Delhi May 26, 2005) in which Ruskin Bond shares his breakfast preferences, needless to say, omelettes, to something quite different in 'A date

with dim sum' (*The Hindu*, Metro Plus, Delhi May 16, 2005) which talks about a Chinese food fest, to the more international sounding 'Purely Pasta' (*The Hindu*, Metro Plus, Bangalore March 26, 2005) which reviews an Italian restaurant in Bangalore.

Almost all the restaurants which are reviewed in these papers belong to the high-end market, catering to the demands of the readers of these papers who are assumed to have a high purchasing power. Many of the articles also mention the offers that these restaurants come up with from time to time which are clearly targeted at the middle-level consumers who are also readers of these papers and would like to experience the ambience of a posh restaurant. The writing of these restaurants in English makes them immediately accessible to the English-empowered sections of the population, while excluding the rest of the population from participating in this elitist culture. Another important aspect about writing about restaurants is the importance given to décor and ambience. This augments the elitism of the writing, as it clearly shows a preference for 'high culture'. The following is a passage from a restaurant review which stresses artistic appreciation:

> If you thought that Little Italy in Nungambakkam was all about pasta, pizza, pecorino and panforte, well, you thought wrong. It's about the paintbrush too! As patrons of art and culture, the Italian ristorante is bringing their clientele the experience of the meeting of two cultures, Indian and Italian.

(p. 3)

The next quote is from an article about restaurants in Calcutta, which talks about the fervour with which restaurateurs are revamping their eateries to woo customers. The article appeared in the Sunday magazine *Graphiti* of *The Telegraph* in a December 2008 issue:

> ...they [the new upbeat restaurants] are a step-up from Calcutta's multi-cuisine giants which have traditionally offered 'Continental' cuisine at fairly reasonable prices. “That is not what fine dining is about,” argues Chatterjee [a famous restaurateur]. “There's no ambience to speak of and you're rushed through your meals.” (p. 5)

The importance given to the ambience in which food is consumed is a striking contrast to the daily realities of the majority of Indians. These writings highlight the great differences that exist in the economic and social fabric of our society—there are people who can afford the best ambience and there are others who can barely afford a meal. In a country of abject poverty and extreme cases of hunger, these writings on food and dining serve as grim reminders of the grotesque inequality that persists within India. What is probably more disconcerting is the fact that these writings reach out to a section of the society which uses these, in turn, to speak about the growth of purchasing power of individuals as a

marker of ‘development’ of India.

Food writing in newspapers is often accompanied by discussions on major health issues, like diabetes, obesity and the like. Often, we find reports about Western researches carried out regarding food-related diseases which stress the concepts of a healthy diet and the good effects of consuming vegetarian food. Interestingly enough, these reports almost always fail to stress the fact that such notions have been present in our own dietary laws. The reporters as well as the readers turn a blind eye to tradition and accept Western researches in the name of innovation[iii]. The following is an excerpt from the widely read *The Times of India* about the importance of consuming green, leafy vegetables every day:

> Researchers at Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and the Harvard School of Public Health have found that eating just one serving of green leafy vegetables or three servings of fruit a day reduces the risk of developing Type II diabetes. They also found that one serving of fruit juice a day increased the risk of Type II diabetes in women. Based on the results of our study, people who have risk factors for diabetes may find it helpful to fill up on leafy greens like lettuces, kale and spinach and whole fruits, like apples, bananas, oranges and watermelon rather than drink fruit juices, which deliver a big sugar load in a liquid form that gets absorbed rapidly," Tulane epidemiologist Dr. Lydia Bazzano said.”

Claims of innovation and research propel English ways of thinking into a new dimension of reverence by the validation of modern science. The social life of English gets strengthened in the process, rendering our own ideas about food and diet obsolete.

***

Cookbooks constitute a major category of non-fictional texts in Indian writing in English on food and hence they deserve serious academic interrogation. These books comprise some of the most widely sold English titles in India. As Appadurai points out in "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India":

> The last two decades have witnessed in India an extremely significant increase in the number of printed cookbooks pertaining to Indian food written in English and directed at an Anglophone readership. This type of cookbook raises a variety of important issues that are involved in understanding the process by which a national cuisine is constructed under contemporary conditions. Language and literacy, cities and ethnicity, women and domesticity, all are examples of issues that lie behind these cookbooks. (p. 289)

The popularity of cookbooks is visible everywhere now. Famous cookbook authors like Tarla Dalal and Sanjeev Kapur are celebrities in their own rights; and they command a faithful fan following

among the upper-middle class audience. Their visibility is ensured not just through print media but audio-visual media like televisions and blogs as well. Cookbooks form a part of a large body of writing, that also includes newspapers and magazines, which give a clear idea of a new, vibrant culture of cooking and eating that is not apologetic of espousing a lavish lifestyle, but celebratory of the growing purchasing-power of the Indian middle classes. With a large number of glossy advertisements of food and related items, these cookbooks are some of the strongest signifiers of Anglo-American consumerism in India.

Tarla Dalal's cookery journal *Cooking and More* and one of India's most widely read food and lifestyle magazines, *Savvy Cookbook,* are examples of the ever growing genre of English cookbooks in India. Both these books exhibit a number of similar characteristics that are to be found in Indian English cookbooks. One of the common features is the demand for food literacy among the audience. There is an implicit assumption that the readers are food literate, that is, they are privy to a specialised branch of knowledge which includes information about uncommon food items, specialised ingredients, utensils and cutlery. For example, an entire section in *Savvy Cookbook* carries a variety of recipes of a

particular food item called 'fondue[iv]'. Nothing else is explained about the dish as it is assumed that the readers are already aware of it. At times, attempts are made to educate the less-initiated readers on the specificities of equipment as seen in *Cooking and More*. The section, "Mocktails[v] Made Easy", teaches the readers how to use the correct bar equipment for a drinks party at home.

The magazines serve as specimens of the culinary narcissism that is palpable in Indian English cookbooks. Replete with large, colourful visuals, cookbooks project eye-catching images of grandeur, and promote a lifestyle that involves appreciating fineries. There is a strong element of voyeuristic pleasure involved in turning the pages of a cookbook, as it transports the readers to a life of colour and plenty. Instances of in-built appreciation of the foods cooked, the restaurants visited and reviewed can be found all through these books. Yet another commonality that these two share is a strong sense of culinary political correctness which ensures that recipes from different parts of India as well as the world are represented. While in *Cooking and More* Italian and Punjabi recipes are shared, in *Savvy Cookbook*, the culinary achievements of the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh and Mexico are discussed. In other words, the concerns of these cookbooks and journals are truly 'glocal'.

Tarla Dalal's *Cooking and More*, as the title suggests, contains articles and essays which are more than just about cooking and eating. This cookery journal helps the readers fashion a lifestyle for themselves. There are sections like “Flower Arrangement” and “Vegetable Carvings” and which, with apt pictoral demonstrations, teaches how to beautify the domestic space with innovative use of flowers, fruit and vegetables. There is also a significant emphasis laid on health-related discussions, and that is reflected in sections like “Diabetic Special” which provides recipes of Italian dishes for the diabetic patients, or “Salt Substitutes” which cautions people with high-blood pressure against the consumption of excess salt, and suggests a few recipes which require very little use of salt.

The journal's main feature is about beetroots and the unconventional ways in which they can be cooked and served. I will be examining this section closely in the next few paragraphs to elucidate my argument that Indian English cookbooks often exoticise the most commonplace foodstuff thereby, at the same time, distancing the reader from the foodstuff as well as adding an extra dimension to them so that they become viable options for the consumption of the public. The feature “Can't Beet This!” consists of multiple discussions like the medicinal properties of beetroots,

the various ways in which beetroot is cooked across the world, and a few uncommon recipes which make use of beetroots extensively. The feature is also a good example of a unique sub-genre in Indian English food writing, 'recipe-essay', that can be found in cookbooks, newspapers and magazines. Like an essay contains a sustained argument on a subject, a recipe-essay contains focused discussion on a particular food item and carries recipes of the same. “Can't Beet This!” is a good example of ‘recipe-essay’. It begins with a short paragraph on the physical specificities of beetroots; then it discusses the most common methods in which beet is prepared and also lists some of the lesser known dishes in which beet is used. The focus then shifts to the nutritious value of beetroot in the section “Why should I include beetroot in my diet?” after which there is a section called “Get gorgeous with beetroot” which aligns the concept of beauty and healthy eating. Finally, the essay provides three unique recipes where beetroot is the major ingredient. The primary focus of this essay is ‘beet’, and it is sustained from the beginning till the end.

The three unconventional recipes with beetroot as the main ingredient include: 'beetroot and dill salad', 'borscht' (an East European soup) and 'beet treat' (a health drink). The intention, as it would appear, is to make the readers aware of the culinary

possibilities that even the most mundane and unwanted ingredients can ensure. The glossy visuals which accompany these recipes aid greatly in creating a desire for the hitherto unseen, unheard of preparation. Let us examine the first recipe “Beetroot and Dill Salad” in some detail. Here is the text of the recipe:

> “Beetroot and Dill Salad”
>
> Aromatic dill blends well with beetroot in this wholesome salad. You can modify the dressing by using low fat curds instead of an oil base.
> Serves 4
> To be mixed into a vinaigrette dressing
> 2 tbsp salad oil
> 1 tbsp vinegar
> A pinch of mustard powder
> ¼ tsp sugar
> Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
> Other ingredients
> 4 medium-sized beetroots, boiled and cut into 25 mm (1”) cubes
> 2 tbsp chopped dill leaves (*shepu/suva bhaji*)
>
> 1. Combine the dressing and the beetroot in a serving bowl and toss well. Refrigerate till use.
> 2. Just before serving, add the dill leaves and mix well. Serve immediately.
> Handy Tip
> Add chopped parsley and gherkins to the dressing to offset the sourness. (p. 6)

The recipe exhibits one of the key features present in most of

the popular writings on food—culinary narcissism. A lavish list of ingredients is provided for a rather simple dish. The photograph that accompanies the recipe also gives an impression of grandeur, although, as its preparation time suggests, it can be made in a few minutes. The insistence on accurate measurements renders an almost mathematical quality to the dish. In this context, we can recall Peeradina and Attia Hosain's comments on Indian food being the marvel of a "flick of the ladle" or the "*andaz*" of the cook. Traditional Indian recipes which are passed on from one generation to another do not lay emphasis on such accuracy of measurements. When food is written about in English, it is most often universalised. Recipes, thus, often do not take into account personal tastes and preferences. Indian food, when 'translated' into English recipes, tends to lose its local Indianness.

Now, I shall shift focus to the second magazine in discussion, *Savvy Cookbook*. While there are a number of common points of reference between *Cooking and More* and *Savvy Cookbook*, the latter, I would argue, is more oriented towards the young, corporate readership whose choices have been thoroughly mediated by Anglo-American cultures. The cover feature of this

book is “Food for Love”, which is a striking contrast to the feature on beetroots and its various medicinal properties. The four articles that come under this feature, aptly titled “Love bites”, “Trigger your passion”, “It takes two” and “Sweet endings” express an easy candour in their alignment of food and sex. They teach the readers how to create the perfectly stimulating starters, main course dishes and desserts. Visuals accompanying these sections are marked by clever seduction tactics. They include instances of couples sharing intimate moments, apart from the visuals of the final outcome of the recipes presented. Here is a passage from the article “Love bites” which represents the uninhibited discussion of food and sex:

> “Different foods have long been associated with love, romance and ability to increase sexual desire and passion. Fruits, vegetables, and spices, herbs, sweets, seafood, and alcoholic beverages all have their place on menu's when it comes to romance,” says V. Srinivas, who recently held a week-long food fest on Aphrodisiac foods at Aqua at The Park, Chennai.
>
> “Foods have been considered aphrodisiacs due to their shape, color, spiciness, and aroma. Aroma is especially important for men,” he elaborates. “The smells of sweet pumpkin pie, fragrant lavender and deep vanilla have been shown to increase blood flow to you know where! (p. 27)

The intricate connection between food and sex has been addressed by many Indian English writers. In Saleem Peeradina’s *The Ocean*

in My Yard, food metaphors occur at regular intervals to signify sexual activities. The likening of consumption of food and enjoyment of sex has been explored by many creative writers and Peeradina does the same, especially when he narrates various episodes of his sexual awakening. Some of the expressions he uses to express his insatiable desire for one of his lovers include, “wallowing in unfulfilled appetites” (pp.209-10), “the hunger gnawing me was simply the suspension of the sensory life” (p.210), and in another instance, he compares his lover to a fawn waiting for “slaughter”(p.217)—a vivid imagery to express the consummation of love. A. K. Ramanujan’s “Food for Thought: Towards an Anthology of Hindu Food-images” lists a number of Hindu mythological writings where food and sex have been aligned together. He also points out that the Sanskrit root *bhuj* means 'to eat' as well as 'to enjoy sex'. (p. 19)

Coming back to *Savvy Cookbook*, the demand for food literacy takes an entirely new dimension in this magazine as more than almost half the recipes mentioned here are quite alien to a lay reader. In the section “Speedy Meals” which presents quick breakfast recipes, some of the dishes discussed include 'mimosa' (an alcoholic drink with orange juice and champagne), 'open faced

grilled tomato and mozarella sandwich' and 'smoked salmon eggs benedict'. The sheer complexity of the nomenclature of these dishes is bound to intimidate the uninitiated reader.

The phenomenon of creating something out of the common is emphatically present in “Southern Classics Remixed”. This section deals with modifications of a number of popular South Indian snacks like *idlis* and *dosas* into complex-sounding, globalised snacks. The readers are taught how to make 'crispy fried idli sandwich with tomato, mozzarella and coriander pesto', 'crispy fried idlis with tandoori aloo papadi chat' or 'dosa with prawn chettinadu'. While gastronomy purists may frown upon such fusion, there is no doubt that the young generation is accepting this new kind of English-mediated food. The changing needs of the readers/viewers/eaters are adequately incorporated by these cookbooks. Therefore, they become some of the most interesting texts which trace this changing culture of eating in India.

***

The rapid rise in the publication of popular food writings in English is a direct outcome of globalisation. The globalised image of India as an inclusive, progressive and developing culture has

influenced the present generation's attitude towards eating. It is evident from the cookbooks and other popular print media that this new culture of eating is here to stay. Their popularity is highlighted by their unabashed candour in the espousal of a lifestyle of plenty. Moral scruples regarding eating and spending on food cast aside, Indian English popular writings on food have embraced the culture of desiring for more. So long as India remains open to more socio-economic-cultural contact with the developed world, this genre of writing gain more popularity as the social life of English will get stronger and more powerful.

Alongside these narratives of opulence, there also exist those voices which bring forth the stories of the socially oppressed. P. Sainath is a journalist and writer of renown who brings forth some of the key issues regarding Indian food and eating in his articles. His writings on Indian food address the problems of the grass root levels of the society—the poverty, the hunger and the starvation which the mainstream popular writers almost invariably tend to gloss over. He is an important Indian English writer on food-related issues as is evident from his coverage of the hungry India in *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* (1996). The India that he writes about is shockingly different (and probably, more real?) than

popular non-fictional narratives on Indian food as he uncovers stories like mothers selling off their children for a meagre amount so that she can at least have one meal, or drought 'relief' funds being mishandled by the government and being given to private parties in the name of development.

Indian food narratives, thus, we can infer, address a large variety of social issues ranging from stories of plenty like Chitrita Banerji's *Eating India*, or a shrewd take on the food preferences of the middle class as seen in Pankaj Mishra's *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* to eye-opening accounts of deprivation and starvation by Sainath. In the next chapter, I shall examine some fictional works and how they bring forth the social complexities of food in India.

Notes

i. I have used the term food-travelogue especially for Chitrita Banerji's *Eating India: Exploring a Nation's Cuisine* which consists of a collection of essays on food across India. While the theme of the book is food, the genre is travel writing, hence the name food-travelogue.

ii. The story is about the Parsis who first landed in Gujarat and their subsequent interaction with the local Gujarati king, who sent a full glass of milk to the intruders as a symbolic message suggesting that the land cannot hold more inhabitants. In response, the Parsis mixed some sugar into the milk suggesting that they will integrate well with the population. The same story is narrated by Ramanujan in his essay “Food for Thought: Towards an Anthology of Hindu Food-images”.

iii. This attitude is ironically brought out by A. K. Ramanujan in his poem “Small-scale Reflections on a Great House” when he says that whatever goes away from the big house (that is, India) to the outside world comes back in a metamorphosed garb.

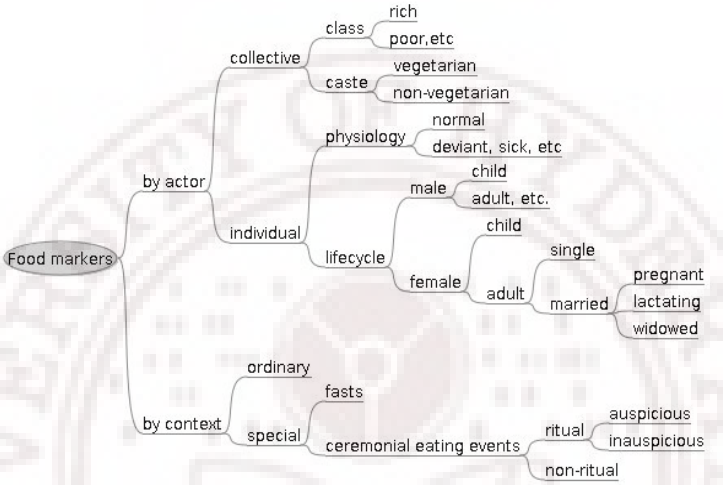
iv. Fondue is a dish made of melted cheese or chocolate into which one puts small pieces of meat, fruit etc using a long fork.

v. It is interesting to note that the word 'mocktail', although used extensively by many Indians, is not listed as an English word by the established dictionaries of the world. The word is most likely an Indian English invention.

Chapter 4

Food-relations: Society in Indian Food-fiction in English

Food-relations, or relations built on the making/eating/sharing of food, are depicted widely in Indian English fiction. Food encodes messages of social hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, prescriptions and proscriptions, all of which are peculiar markers of a culture. It is in this light that the discussion of social alliances as depicted in Indian English food-fiction becomes worthwhile as writers seek to represent social realities deeply rooted in one culture in a language that is not his/her own. A. K. Ramanujan's “Food for Thought: Towards an Anthology of Hindu Food-images” presents a concise diagram which outlines the social categories and allegiances that are based on the making and sharing of food in our society. I have reproduced this diagram on the following page.



The aim of this chapter is to analyse food-relations as presented in Indian English food writing. Food is the major point of contention that shapes and reshapes social alliances in our society. It is the reason behind the formation of a number of interpersonal relationships. The cooking and sharing of food mark one social group from another, creating both bridges as well as distances through the interplay of complex power-relations. For some writers, food even becomes the strongest marker of life itself as it reflects its complexities. Indian food fiction in English addresses diverse issues, and therefore it would not be incorrect to argue that Indian

writers are literally obsessed with the subject of food.

The texts that I shall look at are illustrations of the way Indian writers talk about social alliances and misalliances based on the cooking and sharing of food. Many of the narratives entail descriptions of both 'Indian' and 'Western' cultures which require a discussion on the dialogues that the cultures engage in. R. K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) and Githa Hariharan's short story “The Remains of the Feast” are three sample texts where Indian food-related practices and customs are shown to be in conflict with western notions. The characters in these narratives exhibit a preference of the 'forward', 'modern' western culture. In English narratives, there is often a tinge of disapproval at the prevailing Indian customs which are criticised on the grounds of being unscientific, dogmatic and even backward. Some of the other food-fiction that I will sample here also presents food as a powerful reflection of the intricacies of society as well as life. This selection includes Githa Hariharan's short story “Gajar Halwa”, three poems, namely, Dom Moraes's “Family Dinner”, Imtiaz Dharker's “Living Space”, A. K. Ramanujan's “Food Chain” and a few passages from the cult classics – *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *The God of Small Things*

(1997). The idea behind sampling a wide range of genres is to illustrate the importance that is given to food as a subject matter in Indian English food-fiction. By writing about Indian food and its related customs in English, Indian writers present a vastly different culture to the English-speaking world as well as broaden the scope of issues depicted in Indian English.

Food is one of the major themes in R. K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*, and it dictates the social and personal alliances that are formed between characters. In the novel, the absence of the crucial nourishing figure of the mother creates an ever growing rift between the father and the son. Jagan, the father adheres to the Gandhian ideal of plain living and high thinking with such remarkable fidelity that he even refuses to add salt in his food lest the addition makes it too desirable for consumption. The son, Mali, is a representative character of the younger generation who dismisses the kind of frugality that his father participates in. He fails to comprehend his father's genuine concerns about him. While Jagan tries to ensure that his son eats the healthiest food, he fails to realise his son's distaste for his insipid cooking:

> Jagan had an almost maternal obsession about the boy feeding properly. At home, he spent all his time cooking for his son; it had started when his wife had her first attack of brain-fever and was taken to the hospital. When he was old

> enough to notice things, Mali had asked 'Father, why don't you engage a cook?'
> 'I don't believe in engaging a cook.'
> 'Why not?'
> 'Do we engage a servant to do the breathing for us? Food is similar.'
> 'Oh, Father, Father,' the boy cried, 'don't you engage cooks in your sweetmeat shop?'
> 'Oh, that's different. It's like a factory and they are specialists and technicians,' said Jagan, giving full rein to his imagination.
> The boy failed to grasp the distinction and cried desperately, 'I don't want you to cook for me. We have our college canteen. I can look after myself.' (p. 30)

Mali's negation of his father's role as the maker of food reiterates the general perception which conceives the female in that position[i]. Jagan's strict Gandhian diet—his insistence on following ancient dietary laws and his aversion to western food—further alienated Mali who neither understood nor appreciated his taste and preferences. In fact, to his utter dismay, Jagan found out that Mali spent his pocket money on food from Ananda Bhavan, the rival eatery which was, like others, a profit-making organisation, and hence did not subscribe to Jagan's notions of purity.

With his characteristic astute observation, Narayan points out how Jagan's prescription of a natural diet (which he sent for publication at the local printers' and it had stayed with them for

“years out of count”) never found a follower except Grace, the American wife of Mali's, whose interest lay in the exotic novelty of such a concept. As the story moves, we are made aware of the changing mentality of the people with the change in time. Jagan becomes increasingly anachronistic in his own Malgudi which has now moved ahead of his pre-independence ideals of freedom from western thoughts.

Jagan's notions of purity of food cause estrangement between him and the other owners of major eateries in Malgudi. The fact that he insists on using the purest ingredients to make sweets becomes a cause of consternation among the other businessmen. Even while insisting on purity, Jagan doesn't hesitate to reduce the prices of his sweets drastically so that it becomes affordable for everybody. Jagan's sudden act of kindness of reducing the prices of sweets so that they become affordable for every buyer while not compromising on the quality raises an alarm amongst the hotel and canteen owners. They come to negotiate the prices with Jagan, and in turn, provide him with a new-age definition of purity itself:

> '...we can't always use pure ghee, and the government forces us to announce what we use; how can we do that when our

> customers like to be told, whatever the may actually consume, that they are being served pure butter-melted ghee?'
> 'The ideas about pure butter-melted ghee are antiquated,' said the canteen man. 'In fact, scientists have proved that pure butter and ghee bring on heart disease; the artificial substitutes have more vitamins.'
> 'They are not much cheaper either.'
> 'Their prices are going up nearly to the level of pure ghee.'
> 'So why not pure ghee? Asked Jagan, which really irritated his visitors..' (p. 108)

Through this conversation, Narayan comments on the hypocrisy of the Indian society where people appropriate 'western' scientific innovation to support their petty gains.

Jagan's gradual turn towards ascetic behaviour in terms of eating and living, is a direct result of the misunderstandings that occur between him and the people who he tries to communicate with. His most painful estrangement happens with his son, who (especially after going to America to pursue higher education) openly defies all the ideals that he had tried to instil in him. Mali takes to eating beef to the utter consternation of his father, who as a practitioner of non-violence is a strict vegetarian. When Mali comes back with his Korean-American wife and starts practicing the eating habits that Jagan abhors, the latter distances himself from them and partitions the house. The distance from the kitchen, as A. K. Ramanujan has argued in “Food for Thought” reflects the social

distance between individuals; and this seems to be the case here.

The distancing reaches its finality when Mali is imprisoned after alcohol is found in his car, while he was driving with his business associates. The thought of his son consuming alcohol doesn't shock Jagan any more as he realises that his son has completely transformed into his antithesis. There is no room for dialogue between them as their social lives are different and the cultures they follow are in opposition to each other. Jagan finally comes to terms with the fact that there has been a complete social distancing between him and his son—a distance that has been brought about by an Anglo-American lifestyle.

It is worthwhile speculating which of the characters Narayan favours vis-a-vis the kind of food they consume. He is critical of both Jagan's frugality and Mali's excess. Jagan's final solitude is primarily a result of the gulf between him and his son—a chasm which grows because of Jagan's strict adherence to his ideals and his shutting away of himself from his son's tastes and preferences. In distancing the son from the father, Narayan also comments on the social distance that is caused by following an English-mediated lifestyle and how for a follower of a traditional Indian way of life,

English will always occupy the position of an outside influence which is not always welcome.

Social distancing of English is an important theme which characterises a number of Indian English narratives which deal with complex interpersonal negotiations based on the eating and sharing of food. The power that English possesses as the language of command gives it a superior status to comment on a large number of issues as well as criticise them. The English-speaking intelligentsia comprises one of the most vocal classes of the Indian population and often they tend to speak in favour of Anglo-American modernisation, and vehemently oppose traditional practices as backward. English modernity, as A. K. Ramanjuan has argued in "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" often assumes a superior moral position and therefore gathers enough support from its followers to pronounce judgment on other cultures. Ramanujan is sceptical of the suitability of the English language to comment on Indian realities. He argues that English assumes that social realities are universal, whereas in India, every single social act is the product of a specific context[ii].

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is one such narrative where

the criticism of the overwhelmingly patriarchal social structure in terms of the making and sharing of food is intense. The novel voices the author's indignation at the subservient role of Indian women in matters of kitchen. In the narrative, we find the figure of an exceedingly helpless protagonist whose only purpose of existence, as decided by her parents, is the making and supervision of food. Through the story, we realise that she falls prey to a number of circumstances and the people around her, including her immediate family and relatives, are her major antagonists. Her parents prohibit her from going to school so that she can take care of her baby brother. They are reluctant to let her go out to dinner with her cousin, whose unconventional ways of life render him as the outcast of the family. They even deny her the only job offer that she gets, which is a chance to become a nurse with the local hospital. Desai weaves food into all these acts of oppression showing us how food becomes the most important responsibility that an Indian woman has to undertake.

Uma is the representative figure who embodies all the oppression that patriarchal India hands down to the women in terms of the cooking and distribution of food. She is in charge of supervising the cook of the house and making sure that the men in

the house, that is her father and brother, get the best portions of all the food that is bought or cooked. Desai also accurately points out the fact that women participate as whole-heartedly in the perpetuation of this system as the men. In Uma's mother, we find a woman who has been subjected to tremendous inequalities and has grown up to accept them without any questioning. She says:

> 'In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family.' (p. 6)

Uma's mother unwittingly perpetuates the same practice of serving the best food to the men. The following passage clearly indicates the position of women in the hierarchy of food consumption in the household:

> 'Uma, pass your father the fruit.'
> Uma picks up the fruit bowl with both hands and puts it down with a thump before her father. Bananas, oranges, apples—there they are, for him...
> She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in the strips, then divides it into separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed, one by one, to the edge of Papa's plate. One by one, he lifts them with the tips of his fingers and places them in his mouth. Everyone waits while he repeats the gesture, over and over...
> The finger bowl is placed right 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 a finger bowl; they are emblems of his status. (pp. 23-4)

The incident as described above serves as a powerful illustration of the husband's/father's privilege as the primary consumer of food in an Indian household. As he is often the sole bread-earner, the task of the women in the house is to appease him with the best treatment as if they were appeasing the gods. The serving and eating of food become strong social signifiers. The man of the house has to do the least work during the consumption of food as the women are bound to serve him to his utmost satisfaction. The only semblance of sovereignty that women have in their own house is in matters of what to cook and how to cook it[iii].

The patriarchal oppression which manifests itself in the sharing of food is evident in the importance given to the son over the daughter in the family. As we see in Uma's household, her brother, Arun, is showered with all the attention regarding nourishment.

> ..she [Uma's mother] watched over him [Arun] like a dragon, determined that 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[iv] (p. 30).

The proper nurturing of the son is also shown to be the father's major family concern. All the women of the house—the wife, the daughters and the ayah—are engaged in the fulfilment of this duty. In this context, the title, *Fasting, Feasting* becomes a social metaphor as it reflects the condition of the women in the generic Indian household. The share of food allocated to the male members in the family amount to that of a feast when compared to the female members' share.

Desai also points out the hypocrisies of the Indian middle-class which actively endorses English-mediated eating habits for the son and reprimands the daughter if she participates in the same. In the novel, while a mature-aged Uma is rebuked by her parents for going out with her cousin to a bar, and even termed a “hussy”, we find a disconcerted father of Arun, whose whole-hearted attempts at forcing his son to adopt meat-eating habits fail as Arun turns out to be a vegetarian. In the following passage, this dilemma is expressed:

> A meat diet had been one of the revolutionary changes brought about in his life, and his brothers, by their education. Raised amongst traditional vegetarians, their eyes had been opened to the benefits of meat along with that of cricket and

> the English language: the three were linked inextricably in their minds. ... Papa was always scornful of those of their relatives who came to visit and insisted on clinging to their cereal- and vegetable-eating ways, shying away from the meat dishes Papa insisted on having cooked for dinner.
> Now his own son, his one son, displayed this completely baffling desire to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life. (pp. 32-3)

It is important to mention here that Arun's father's transformation into a non-vegetarian was due to the English influence. Like many other individuals, he was also of the opinion that meat provided with the kind of physical strength that a vegetarian diet would never be able to provide. In Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, we find a confirmation of such a point of view, when Gandhi says that the British were perceived as a stronger race because they were meat-eaters[v]. The growing prominence of meat in Indian imagination can be attributed to the influence of English and can be cited as an example of the importance of the social life of English in India.

Tradition which has been followed and approved by time is a difficult, if not impossible, barrier to overcome. As Uma realises, in her subservience to the system and her perennial responsibility as the supervisor of the kitchen she is not alone. Her over-achieving cousin Anamika, who manages to win a scholarship to study at Oxford becomes one of the innumerable suffering housewives, for

whom the kitchen becomes the space of perpetual slavery as she is made to cook all day long for her husband's large family. She meets a tragic end in the hands of her in-laws, yet another case which is a common enough social phenomenon in India where the perpetrators of social violence are hardly ever prosecuted.

As contrasts to characters like Anamika, we have characters like Dr Dutt and Aruna, Uma's younger sister, both of whom are assertive about their work space and therefore manage to lead a life of contentment. One of the major reasons which enables these characters to live a successful life is their apparent freedom from the kitchen as well as their willingness to go beyond the paradigms of tradition. Both Aruna and Dr Dutt are influenced by English education. Desai attributes a lot of agency to English in the novel. The congenial character of Mrs O'Henry, the benevolent Anglo-Indian lady who befriends Uma, is projected as a contrast to Uma's mother. Although she belongs to the same age group as Uma’s mother, Mrs O 'Henry is much more energetic than her as she is engaged in many more activities other than housework. She is skilled in handicraft, and in one of the coffee-parties, she is able to convey to them that a woman's expertise lies beyond the kitchen as well:

> She sets out her coloured-papers and scissors and sequins and ribbons and stencils and, instead of educating the ladies in the appreciation of peanut butter and cookies, she is able to impress them—or at least Uma—by a demonstration of leaf-pressing and stencilling.
> When they leave, the ladies laugh gaily all the way back to their own homes and families where no one expects any such talents or expertise from them... . (p. 117)

Desai, as it would appear, seems to pity the women who will never get to understand the joys of living their lives beyond the kitchen. There is a strong sense of disapproval of the women's attitude of indifference to other people's achievements. Her favoured character is Uma, who is influenced by Mrs O'Henry and therefore tries to carve out a space for herself within the confines of her house by engaging in handicraft and not just work in the kitchen. Here I find an appropriate case of the distancing of English from the ground realities of the society. It is easy to caricature characters of women who seem to be willingly aiding patriarchy. But if we pause and consider their predicament slightly, we will realise that most women are interpellated into the matrix of the society in such a way that they tend to believe that their rightful place is in the kitchen. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik also remark that the kitchen is often considered to be an empowered space in many cases (Counihan and Esterik 3). While this may not quite be true in case

of India, it is still important to remember that the women are often in no favourable socio-economic position to choose an alternative career and negate duties in the kitchen.

The various kinds of inequalities and oppressive power-structures which relegate women to the background in matters of food have been represented by a number of Indian writers in English. One such story is Githa Hariharan's “The Remains of the Feast”. The story explores the bond shared between the protagonist, Ratna, a young medical student and her great-grandmother, Rukmini—a bond where food plays a major role. Ratna provides the ailing Rukmini with an opportunity to experience the delights of the foodstuff which she is forbidden to consume. The food that Ratna can procure for her is perhaps the greatest gift that she can ask for[vi]. It embodies the hint of freedom from the bondage of customs for the dying woman.

“The Remains of the Feast” tells us the story of an old woman's dying wish to defy tradition by expressing the urge to consume food items, some of which are prohibited for her ailing health and most others, which are prohibited socially. Most of the eatables that she wants to experiment with are fast food items like

bakery products, soft drinks and the like. Rukmini is aware that her only ally in this act of defying tradition will be her English-educated, liberal-minded great-granddaughter. This is evident in the following conversation:

> 'Those small cakes you got from the Christian shop that day. Do they have eggs in them?
> 'Do they?' she persisted. 'Will you,' and her eyes narrowed wit cunning, 'will you get one for me?'
> So we began a strange partnership, my great-grandmother and I. I smuggled cakes and ice cream, biscuits and samosas, made by non-brahmin hands, into a vegetarian invalid's room. To the deathbed of a brahmin widow who had never eaten anything but pure, home-cooked food for almost a century. (p. 57)

The rules imposed upon the old Rukmini regarding her choice of food are far too many. As Hariharan points out, she is thrice-estranged from the kind of food she desires—through her caste, her gender and her age. By making the liberal Ratna her spokesperson, the author voices her dissent against the conspicuous prejudices of the society which create barriers between individual choices and actions.

In Hariharan's narrative we find a similar preference for liberal characters as in Desai's. English plays dual roles in

Rukmini's story. Firstly, as already discussed, the only character who is able to fulfil the 'uncharacteristic' wishes of a Hindu widow, is a representative member of the young, middle-class intelligentsia whose English education makes her, as it were, a liberal and modern individual. Secondly, the kind of food that the dying Rukmini wishes to taste are products of the intercultural transaction between India and the West which has enabled a number of globalised food items to become an integral part of the Indian gastronomic imagination. Her change in taste can also be read as a change in the culture of eating in our society, where English goods have steadily become accepted as a part of life and also have influenced our tastes and preferences in terms of choice of food.

It is interesting to note how Indian writers highlight as well as criticise the characteristic features of our society while talking about the cooking, eating and sharing of food in English. Also noticeable is how English is used as an impartial language which can comment freely on Indian social realities. This power has been vested in English from the days of the *Raj* and it has helped the language become the link in a country of myriad tongues. English empowers the writers to deal with a wide range of subjects which cut across regional barriers.

Githa Hariharan's “Gajar Halwa” is one such narrative which discusses the troubles of a young girl from a rural background, who travels to the city to seek employment as a household help. The author here broadens the scope of Indian English Food Writing as she focuses on the subject of rural-urban divide which does not have a common space for dialogue. The title “Gajar Halwa” (Hindi for a sweet dish made of carrots and milk) serves as the overarching image of the city whose ruthlessness is compared to the flaming red carrot; and whose tendency to absorb every single individual under its fold is akin to the carrot absorbing the milk when simmering in a cauldron.

> The gajar absorbing, sucking in like a greedy round red mouth, swallows the sugar, the ghee and the milk. It sucks in everything, and the earlier spluttering becomes a faint but steady heave of red, like a heartbeat, then gentle sighs.
> It becomes one gooey red, suck, suck, heave, heave. I bend and bend over it. I don't see anything else. My stirring arm now caresses it, and I can feel the grainy, syrupy, strange thickness they call gajar halwa. Then the skin of the halwa breaks open, right in the middle, like a great big yawning mouth. It sucks in my louse-ridden head with one well-armed slurp. I am a part of it now, the halwa a foot above my head, part of the thickening red sweetness in the open mouth of this strange city. (p. 264)

For young Perumayee from rural Tamil Nadu, survival at the centre of ruthless cosmopolitanism, New Delhi, is a tough test. The city, according to her, embodies all the difficult situations she has to endure. Its strangeness is accentuated by the fact that the language spoken there is not her own. Thus, there is always the risk of breakdown of communication, which she faces at regular intervals. Delhi also is the place where she has to be subservient to her rich employers for her daily bread—a sharp contrast from her home where she was under the loving care of her mother. These factors contribute to the metamorphosis of the city into an all-engulfing entity for Perumayee. The only activity she can perform—cooking—becomes her sole purpose of life, her only communicative act which lets others know her worth. In the end of the story, when she obsessively stares into the open pot where the 'halwa' is getting cooked, her transformation—from a young, carefree girl to a professional cook in a big city—is complete. The author makes a significant rural-urban divide in the short story, and explains to us, through the metaphor of gajar halwa, how the unassuming rural individual is subsumed by the complex structure of the city, eventually losing her identity. The author deliberately uses a Hindi title to highlight the oppressive structure of the urban space, which claims victims from the rural populace and

perpetuates its own oppressive structure.

The story is also a prominent example of the growing registers of English writing in India, where new themes are being tackled with less dogmatic preferences of one specific culture over another. English, in this story, serves as a gap between the rural and urban characters and not as a point of reference for liberal attitudes. To convey the story of the Perumayees of India, Hariharan has to use English so that it gets communicated to all those people who are willing to hear it.

While Githa Hariharan's “Gajar Halwa” signifies the oppressive metropolis, Dom Moraes's “Family Dinner” talks about an oppressive father-figure in a dysfunctional family. The poet describes a Thanksgiving dinner, where the aggressive way in which the father tears off the flesh of the turkey represents the conflicts within the family. Food here becomes the marker of misalliances within the family.

“Family Dinner”

The spraddled turkey waited for the knife.
The scything holly clashed: the pleading peal
Of bells swung Christ back on a horny heel
To clutch the cross like a desired wife.

And now, pinned there, he flutters till they come,
The gross men and the women they are with,
Who kneel and take his soft flesh in their teeth,
And, chewing the holy cud, flock slowly home.

There as the golden children gather by,
Hung with chill bells, the harsh tree is displayed:
A delicate fear wets each child's eye

While the gross father, with the whisky flush
Deepening in his cheeks, prepares the blade
To pare off from the bone the warm white flesh. (p. 181)

The way in which food is eaten becomes a fitting tool for describing an abusive patriarch. The dining table becomes the site of conflict where relationships and alliances are defined. The “gross” father’s act of paring off “the warm white flesh” from the “spraddled turkey” can be read as a symptom of violence towards his wife and children, causing “a delicate fear” in the children's eyes. Yet again, with Moraes's verse, we see how even the manner of eating food can point at the complex interpersonal spaces shared between family members.

The fragility of human existence and relationships is symbolically represented in Imtiaz Dharker's "Living Space". The poet draws a parallel between eggs hanging precariously in wired containers as seen in small shops all across India and fragile human relationships. Here is the text of the poem:

"Living Space"

There are just not enough
straight lines. That
is the problem.
Nothing is flat
or parallel. Beams
balance crookedly on supports
thrust off the vertical.
Nails clutch at open seams.
The whole structure leans dangerously
towards the miraculous.

Into this rough frame,
someone has squeezed
a living space

and even dared to place
these eggs in a wire basket,
fragile curves of white
hung out over the dark edge
of a slanted universe,
gathering the light
into themselves,
as if they were

the bright, thin walls of faith.

(The poem has been reproduced from the webpage *www.imtiazdharker.com*)

Dharker here projects the wired basket as a microcosm of the world where boundaries are porous and loosely defined. If the eggs are seen as a summation of all human population, then the wired-basket is the world with its flimsy boundaries. This container, like the one which Perumayee (in “Gajar Halwa”) peeps into, carries all human existence. The space for the eggs in the basket is severely limited like the space available in this divisive world.

Egg is also a major symbol of fertility that appears in many Indian narratives in English. The female ovum responsible for human birth is also termed egg. Dharker's use of the metaphoric egg is scientific and symbolic. The image of the wired basket is typically Indian; and Dharker successfully manages to translate an essentially Indian thing into the English language and give a universal appeal to it. The poet manages to effectively communicate the physical details of a rather inconsequential object and extrapolate it to an accurate image of the world. Like many English writings on Indian food, Dharker brings together the local and the global/universal here.

Egg is also considered to be the signifier of human life in *Midnight's Children*. In the following passage, the protagonist Saleem Sinai talks about the "chutnification of history" in a pickle-jar which contains the eggs. Rushdie here is hinting at the concept of the history of nations that is contained in their populations. The people of a country create the nation; the nation exists in the preserved common memory of its people. He says:

> My special blends: I've been saving them up. Symbolic value of the pickling process: all the six hundred million eggs which gave birth to the population of India could fit inside a single, standard-sized pickle-jar; six hundred million spermatozoa could be lifted on a single spoon. Every pickle-jar (you will forgive me if I become florid for a moment) contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time! (p.202)

"Chutnification of history" can also be read as the history of a society interlocked in a complex web of interpersonal relationships. Rushdie shows a keen interest in interpersonal alliances. He comments that every single alliance cannot be recorded in history as each individual is responsible for the rightful preservation of the alliance. He presents a witty comparison between collective memories of individuals and halal meat when he writes:

> Family history, of course, has its proper dietary laws. One is supposed to swallow and digest only the permitted parts of it, the halal portions of the past, drained of their redness, their blood. Unfortunately, this makes the stories less juicy; so I am about to become the first and only member of my family to flout the laws of halal. (p. 59)

This can also be considered as a brilliant metaphor where one culture gets translated into another. The Islamic concept of halal, that is slaughtering an animal by puncturing its jugular vein, gets compared to family rules of recollection of memory, and both at the same time get translated into English. Metaphors of food often reflect social realities as they are projected as microcosms of the society. In a number of Indian English texts where food is a controlling motif, these metaphors emphatically underline the relationship between food and the society.

Arundhati Roy also flouts the laws of halal in *The God of Small Things* where she presents sordid details of the family history of the protagonists Rahel and Estha to the readers. She also uses the metaphor of pickles which signifies a collective memory that has been preserved, both in the minds of the characters as well as the narrative of the novel. The first chapter of the novel is aptly titled "Paradise Pickles and Preserves" where "pickles" and "preserves"

complement each others meaning and in a way become synonymous. Here again, an essentially Indian dish finds a suitable ally in an English word. Another noticeable aspect that comes into purview in this chapter is that it narrates the incidents described in the narrative, in a nutshell. Much of the narrative here reads like snippets of memory which have been preserved for posterity.

Perhaps the most emphatic expression of food in Indian Writing is presented in A. K. Ramanujan's “Food Chain”. Food becomes the signifier of life in this poem, and not just of the society. Translated from a verse in the *Taittriya Upanishad*, the poem is a biologically astute, philosophical musing on the cyclical nature of food. Food is what brings humans to life, and after death, humans become a part of the larger store of food. Food is the cause and effect of all organic life. It is the ultimate essence of our existence. Its cyclical regeneration is the reason for the continuity of life.

“Food Chain”

From food, from food
creatures, all creatures
come to be.

Gorging, disgorging

beings come
to be.

By food they live,
in food they move,
into food they pass:

food the chief
of things, of all things
that come to be,

elixir,
herb of herbs
for mortals,
Food, food, brahman is food:

only they eat
who know
they eat their god.

For food is the chief
of things, of all things
that come to be:

elixir,
herb of herbs
for mortals.

From food all beings
come to be,
by food

they grow,
into food
they pass.

And what eats is eaten:
and what's eaten, eats
in turn.

(pp. 2-3)

Food is equated with the divine in this poem. It is the source of sustenance of all life forms, and hence it is termed the “elixir”. “Food is brahman”, as Ramanujan further elaborates in “Food for Thought”, because “food is what circulates in the universe, through bodies which in turn are food made of flesh and bone.” (p. 4) Through this poem, Ramanujan conveys to us the centrality of food in Indian philosophical thought. This centrality is a common feature in many Indian writings in English and it manifests itself in narratives with food as the controlling motif.

The different social meanings that food acquires in diverse Indian social contexts merit independent enquiry. Caste is a crucial factor in understanding social alliances created through food, and its cultural specificities are, I believe, extremely difficult to be translated into English. The demarcations perpetuated by the caste system in India places the brahmins in the uppermost section of the hierarchy and empowers them in matters of food, as they can never be denied food. On the other side of the spectrum lie the untouchables, who are considered to be so impure that even their

touch will defile food. Githa Hariharan's “The Remains of the Feast” briefly addresses this issue, as already discussed earlier. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is one of the most defining books which deal, among other things, with the discrimination faced by the dalits in the distribution and eating of food. The episode where Bakha, the manual scavenger, picks up the leftover of a little portion of bread which has been flung at him is a difficult one to translate. The cultural specificity of this scene demands an extremely careful rendition of the social order in a different language, and it requires the calibre of the prolific Anand to translate it. A lot of regional literature which deal with food and the caste issues are available in translation.

My attempt in this chapter has been to examine some of the texts in Indian English fiction where food is the most important point of reference around which relationships are built. I have also looked at how Indian writers talk about the social significance of food in English—the kind of social alliances/misalliances are formed due to the cooking, making and sharing of food, how food is often used as a controlling metaphor of the society at large. Food is not just what is eaten out of the plate, but also a lived practice which embodies the socio-cultural realities of a people and a nation.

Writing in English gives most writers the agency to criticise the Indian society which clearly is excessively divisive in matters of food. This agency is inherent in English which has long been considered the language of our "intellectual make-up[vii]". Mark Tully is critical of this power that is present in the words of the English-speaking elite. In the "Introduction" to *No Full Stops in India* (1992) he writes: "The elite who dominate modern India believe that all that's good comes from outside and are certainly not without 'hatred of their own experience' but the 'desire to efface it'."(p. 12) While this remark comes down heavily on the English-speaking elites, there are certain voices which are often distant from the complex social realities. However, as I have already pointed out, there are other voices which use English judiciously while talking about Indian food and society. While social distancing of English is a reality, the language is also used by Indian writers creatively and carefully to bridge the gap in communication between the various sections of the society.

Notes

i. In his narratives, R. K. Narayan portrays strong female generic characters like the mother, the wife, the grandmother as the primary makers of food. Narayan himself shared a very special bond with his grandmother as described in *My Days*. He recollects with fondness his early life spent with his grandmother, with a particular emphasis on the tiffin and coffee that she made the moment he came back from his school. In *Grandmother's Tales*, he yet again narrates stories of his close proximity with his grandmother and her role as the maker of food.

ii. Ramanujan explains that the Indian word for text is 'grantha' which is a knot that holds palm leaves together. Thus he argues that the Indian idea of text is one which always has a context.

iii. Saleem Peeradina talks about the power of women in his household in terms of decision-making regarding matters of kitchen in the autobiography *The Ocean in My Yard* (2005). The social relations which are constructed around food: women as makers (as seen in the above extract), and men as

providers, is expressed in multiple instances throughout the narrative. In the chapter “Food and More Food”, Peeradina writes: “The marketing of fresh produce was normally done by the men...the women who did step out on shopping expeditions usually took care of the more specialized needs of the household...the meat market, on the other hand, was not an arena the women wanted to venture into.” (pp. 42-3)

iv. This tendency of being attentive in matters of feeding the son, albeit with a lesser degree of intensity, is found in the character of Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets*. In *The Ocean in my Yard*, Saleem Peeradina also recounts similar stories of the care that was taken by his father for his nourishment.

v. Dipesh Chakrabarty's “*Khadi* and the Political Man” also discusses, at length, the assumed merits of meat eating as conceived by Indians. Quoting Gandhi, he presents the popular rhyme espousing meat-eating:

> Behold the mighty Englishman
> He rules India small
> Because being a meat-eater
> He is five cubits tall.

vi. It can also be argued in this context that the parallels between food and the English language can also be stretched

to the discussion of what can be considered as a gift. Like English-mediated food items constitute Ratna's empowering gift to her great grandmother, similarly the English language can also be considered as a gift, especially to those who do not possess it.

vii. In the "Preface" to *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao writes:

> One has to convey in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit and Persian was before – but not our emotional make-up. (p. v)

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Literary gastronomy is an engaging subject. Indian English Literature has, as it would appear, addressed it substantially. Thus, it is not surprising to find a great volume of work which deals with this subject. In this dissertation, I have attempted to sample a few of these works. I have also discussed some of the major text-types and authors in the preceding chapters. The range of texts available in food writing reflects the importance of food in our social lives. Food is not just the basic source of sustenance. It is what defines our personal and social identities. As A. K. Ramanujan said, we are known by what we eat. The eating and sharing of food give us a sense of belonging—these acts help us interact with others and create new social alliances. Our choice of food defines our taste, lifestyle and even determines the nation we belong to. Food is also a site of social conflict as it demarcates classes and other social groups. The Indian caste system considers certain groups as pure and some others to be impure. Because of this, the sharing of food becomes the privilege of a few. Indian English Food Writing addresses all these issues which are often typical to our society. The

language that the writers use is English but the social reality that they talk about is Indian. Thus a curious case of 'translation' ensues where Indian socio-cultural texts are translated into the English language by Indian writers.

The difficulty of translation has been the focus of my second chapter. Here I have examined the dilemma of diasporic authors in reproducing memories of Indian food in the English language. Each food item carries the weight of cultural history behind it and therefore is virtually untranslatable. And yet, accounts and recollections of food constitute some of the most cherished memories of home. Authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Saleem Peeradina and Imtiaz Dharker recreate these food-memories to construct India in their minds. But while recounting memories, they realize the difficulty in 'translating' them. Thus food becomes the language in which they preserve, or "chutnify", their nation. Their concept of Indian food is, however, static as it is frozen in the time when they left the country for new shores. In the third chapter, I have tried to sample some narratives by Indian English non-fictional authors at home, who counter the idea of Indian food as a static entity. Popular food writers in newspapers, magazines and cookery journals negate the idea of Indian food as a monolithic text.

As Ashis Nandy points out, “mediagenic” chefs like Sanjeev Kapur and Tarla Dalal almost frantically endorse the changing culture of cooking and eating heavily influenced by Anglo-American globalization. While Lahiri’s “Mrs Sen” may be relying on her *bonti* (a long blade attached to a wooden plank used for chopping vegetables) even in America, the Indians at home have long adapted to the comforts of Western ‘modernity’. English is the preferred language to address this culture of change. The language has carried knowledge of other culinary cultures to India and has been instrumental in ushering in the change. In the fourth chapter, I shift focus from the cooking and sharing of food to the society where these acts are performed and what their implications are. Here, food acquires significance as a major cultural text in defining society and relationships. English plays an important role here as well as it tries to negotiate between the social practices and their intrinsic, often oppressive, nature. The problem of ‘translation’ exists here as well, as Indian English writers try to convey food-related customs and relations practiced in our country in a language which is, as it were, foreign to such cultural specificities.

The themes and texts I have sampled in my dissertation are meant to provide a glimpse into the tremendous possibilities of the

sub-genre, Indian English Food Writing. One can write complete dissertations on descriptions of Indian food in English, or instances of making and sharing of food, or even food metaphors. Recipes, restaurant menus, and even advertisements of food in print and television can also be studied as texts of Indian English Food Writing. The Internet, with its blogs and innumerable websites on food, is a constant provider of Indian English food texts. Even a number of popular women's magazines and cookery journals have easily accessible recipes online. The other great omission in this dissertation is of Indian writings on food in translation. Culinary themes are present in plenty in other Indian literatures, and quite a number of these texts have also been translated into English. Most of the major writers in other Indian languages—like Ashapurna Devi in Bengali, Vaikom Mohammed Basheer in Malayalam, Munshi Premchand in Hindi—have written about food and related social customs and practices. Some of their translated works are available in the two anthologies on Indian Food Writing—*The Table is Laid* and *A Matter of Taste*.

A wholesome appreciation of Indian English Food Writing entails not just reading the words on paper, but also a careful scrutiny of the food-related texts all around us. English has

influenced our social lives like very few other cultures have, and the effects of English can be perceived in our own surroundings. In our acts of eating a pizza, or heating our food in the microwave oven, we are creating our own Indian English food-identities and texts. The relevance of Indian English food texts is present in our everyday lives. I have thus proposed a sample course outline on this subject for possible future enquiry.

Appendix: Course Outline

Indian English Food Writing

The aim of this course is to examine Indian English Writing on food which occupies a substantial space in Indian English Literature. Food is a major subject that has been addressed by many Indian writers—both canonical as well as popular. The range of texts available in this body of work is astonishingly wide, as it includes fiction, memoirs, autobiographies, travelogues, cookbooks and cookery journals, newspaper and magazine articles, encyclopaedias and critical essays. Indeed, one may even assume that literary gastronomy is a favourite subject of our writers.

The purpose of this course is to sample some of the key texts and themes in Indian English Food Writing. Some of the themes will include—food-modernity, or the changing culture of eating in India; food-memories in the conceptualization of the nation; food as a site of social conflict; and food metaphors. Some of the key texts are listed below:

Novels

The Vendor of Sweets by R K Narayan

Fasting, Feasting by Anita Desai

Short Stories

"The Remains of the Feast" by Githa Hariharan

" Mrs Sen's" by Jhumpa Lahiri

Poetry

"At the Lahore Karhai" and "Living Space" by Imtiaz Dharker

"Food Chain" by A. K. Ramanujan

"Family Dinner" by Dom Moraes

"Coriander" and "The Stinking Rose" by Sujata Bhatt

Non-fictional and Popular Writings

Newspapers and magazines – articles on food from newspaper supplementaries like "The Hindu Magazine"; articles from popular magazines like *Woman's Era*

Samples from cookbooks and cookery journals like Tarla Dalal's *Cooking and More* and

Savvy Cookbook

The Ocean in My Yard by Saleem Peeradina (autobiographical account)

Eating India: Exploring a Nation's Cuisine by Chitrita Banerji

(collection of essays on Indian food history/food-travelogue)
The Illustrated Foods of India A-Z by K. T. Achaya (a concise encyclopedia for background research)

Critical Essays

"Food for Thought: Towards an Anthology of Hindu Food-images" by A. K. Ramanujan
"The Changing Popular Culture of Eating in India: Preliminary Notes" by Ashis Nandy
"How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India" by Arjun Appadurai

This list is by no means exhaustive. The idea here is to provide a sampling of the kind of texts that the course proposes to examine.

Works Cited

Achaya, K. T. *The Illustrated Foods of India A-Z*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Appadurai, Arjun. "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India." *Food and Culture: a Reader*. Eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Banerji, Chitrita. *Eating India: Exploring a Nation's Cuisine*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2008.

Bhatt, Sujata. "The Stinking Rose." *The Table is Laid: The Oxford Anthology of South Asian Food Writing*. Eds. John Thieme and Ira Raja. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. pp. 227-8.

Burton, David. *The Raj at the Table*. 1993. New Delhi: Rupa and Co., 1995.

Carton, Adrian. "Remembering Kedgeree." *The Table is Laid: The Oxford Anthology of South Asian Writings on Food*. Eds. John Thieme and Ira Raja. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. pp. 325-328.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "*Khadi* and the Political Man". *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002.

Chauhan, Vasundhara. "The Stuff of Good Evenings." Sunday Magazine *The Hindu* 22 February 2009: 8.

Conlon, Frank F. "Dining Out in Bombay." *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*. Ed. Carol A Breckenridge. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. pp. 90-127.

Dalal, Sanjay (Ed.). *Cooking and More*. Vol. 6: 6 (2009). <www.tarladalal.com>

Dasgupta, Probal. *The Otherness of English: India's Auntie Tongue Syndrome*. New Delhi: Sage, 1993.

Desai, Anita. *Fasting, Feasting*. UK: Vintage, 1999.

---. "A Devoted Son." *The Table is Laid: The Oxford Anthology of South Asian Writings on Food*. Eds. John Thieme and Ira Raja. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. pp. 90-99.

Douglas, Mary. "Deciphering a Meal." *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Eds. Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik. London and New York: Routledge, 1997. pp. 36-54.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines*. 1988. New Delhi: OUP, 1997.

---. *The Hungry Tide*. New Delhi: Harper Collins. 2005.

Gunew, Sneja. “Mouthwork: Food and Language as the Corporeal Home for the Unhoused Diasporic Body in South Asian Women’s Writing.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 40 (2005): pp. 93-103.

Hariharan, Githa. “Gajar Halwa”. *The Table is Laid: The Oxford Anthology of South Asian Food Writing*. Eds. John Thieme and Ira Raja. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.

---. “The Remains of the Feast”. *A Matter of Taste: The Penguin Book of Indian Food Writing in English*. Ed. Nilanjana S Roy. New Delhi: Penguin, 2007.

Hosali, Priya. “Butler English.” *English Today* 81 Vol. 21 (2005): pp. 34-39.

Kachru, Braj. *The Alchemy of English*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990.

Khair, Tabish. “Lichi.” *Where Parallel Lines Meet*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. p. 44.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. “Mrs Sen's.” *A Matter of Taste: the Penguin Book of Indian Writing on Food*. Ed. Nilanjana S Roy. New Delhi: Penguin, 2004. pp. 279-301.

Lewis, Antoine (Ed.). *Savvy Cookbook*. Vol. 5: 8 (2005). Mumbai: Magna Publications.

Mishra, Pankaj. *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1995.

Moraes, Dom. "Family Dinner." *The Table is Laid: The Oxford Anthology of South Asian Food Writing*. Eds. John Thieme and Ira Raja. New Delhi: OUP, 2007.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi. "The Anxiety of Indianness." *The Perishable Empire*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Nandy, Ashis. "The Changing Popular Culture of Indian Food: Preliminary Notes." *South Asia Research* Vol. 24 (2004): pp. 9-19.

Narayan, R. K. *The Grandmother's Tale*. Mysore: India Thought Publications, 1993.

---. *The Vendor of Sweets*. 1967. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1986.

Peeradina, Saleem. *The Ocean in My Yard*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005.

Ramanujan, A. K. "Food for Thought: Towards an Anthology of Hindu Food-images." *The Table is Laid: The Oxford Anthology of South Asian Food Writing*. Eds. John Thieme and Ira Raja. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.

---. “Is There An Indian Way of Thinking: an Informal Essay.” *The Collected Essays of A K Ramanujan*. Ed. Vinay Dharwadker. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999.

Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New York: Random House Inc., 1997.

Roy, Nilanjana S. *A Matter of Taste: The Penguin Book of Indian Writing on Food*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2004.

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1981.

Sainath, P. *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1996.

Sanghvi, Vir. “ Past Times: First Tastes that Lasted Forever”. *A Matter of Taste: the Penguin Book of Indian Writing on Food*. Ed. Nilanjana S Roy. New Delhi: Penguin, 2004.

Singer, Milton. *When a Great Tradition Modernizes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Spivak, Gayatri C. “The Politics of Translation”. *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. pp. 397-416.

Sreetilak, S. *Fiction in Films, Films in Fiction*. New Delhi: Viva, 2007.

Tully, Mark. “Introduction.” *No Full Stops in India*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1992.

Internet Sources:

Dharker, Imtiaz. “At the Lahore Karhai.” <www.imtiazdharker.com>

Dharker, Imtiaz. “Living Space.” <www.imtiazdharker.com>

Hickman, Martin. “Sake Dean Mahomed: The man who opened Britain's first curry house, nearly 200 years ago.” *The Independent*, September 30, 2005. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/sake-dean-mahomed-the-man-who-opened-britains-first-curry-house-nearly-200-yars-ago-509028.html>

“Cultural Crossover” The Hindu, Metro Plus, Chennai May 14, 2005. <http://www.hindu.com/mp/2005/05/14/stories/2005051401470300.htm>