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# Food Figures at the Forks: The Intersection of Feminist and (Post)Colonial Politics of Food Imagery in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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## **Food Figures at the Forks: The Intersection of Feminist and (Post)Colonial Politics of Food Imagery in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss***

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In *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*, Anita Mannur argues that food offers ‘an alternative register through which to theorize gender, sexuality, class, and race’ in literature by and about the South Asian diaspora.<sup>1</sup> The use of food in these texts is not merely a figurative flourish, but rather an ‘important vector of critical analysis in negotiating the gendered, racialized, and classed bases of collective and individual identity’ of South Asian bodies.<sup>2</sup> Food is always already political; it must not merely be tasted, but must be *read* in terms of how it (re)presents and (re)produces intersecting power differentials. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, winner of the 2006 Man Booker Prize, impels this kind of reading as injustice and violence consistently situate themselves around food: members of the Gorkhaland National Liberation Front demand an afternoon tea after robbing the judge, and Biju is continuously mistreated as an illegal Indian immigrant working in New York City's food industry, for example. By reading how food imagery and food politics function in these circumstances one can unpack how violence is enacted at the intersections of colonialism, classism, racism, and sexism. Yet the literature has largely neglected anything more than a simple recognition of the presence of violence in the relationship between Jemubhai (a Cambridge-educated judge working in India) and his wife, Nimi (who has never left India). An analysis of food, however, enables a more thorough and nuanced reading of the violence enacted upon Nimi, situating it at the intersection of (post)colonialism, racism, and patriarchy.

In his M.A. thesis on *Food Practices and the Construction, Performance, and Politics of Identity in Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss'*, Johan Bernard van der Winden argues that

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<sup>1</sup> Anita Mannur, ‘Culinary Fictions: Food in the South Asian Diaspora Culture’ (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

through food, Desai constructs an unstable identity for the judge—an identity torn between his Indian heritage and Western (British) aspirations.<sup>3</sup> van der Winden explores how the judge's reliance upon mimicry ultimately collapses: 'disrupted food rituals indicate that mimicry reproduces difference and that the judge's attempt to turn into a white man is impossible.'<sup>4</sup> I argue, however, that the most significant disruption of food rituals and subsequent collapse of mimicry occurs through the judge's relationship with Nimi—a relationship in which he doubly colonises her as an Indian subject and woman. In 'Postcolonial Loss of Identity and the Food Metaphor: Contemporary Indo-Pak Women Writers', Shazia Sadaf and Mujib Rahman highlight how 'the Judge forces his wife to eat western food and scolds her when she cannot pronounce the correct words for the unfamiliar foods. Dual colonialism is at work here, since the wife is colonized both by her husband, as well as a literal colonial past which is constantly reinforced by the Judge.'<sup>5</sup> As Nimi disrupts the judge's Westernised food practices, she disrupts his mimicry of the British colonisers; and I argue that the judge's reaction to this disruption is precisely what produces the *difference* that will always exclude him from what he seeks to become through mimicry. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha states that colonial mimicry is '*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite...constructed around an ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.'<sup>6</sup> A close reading of Desai's use of food in articulating the judge's relationship with Nimi reveals the *slippage*, *excess*, and *difference* that emerges in his violent reactions—reactions which ultimately doubly colonise Nimi as a woman and Indian subject.

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard van der Winden, 'Food Practices and the Construction, Performance and Politics of Identity in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*' (master's thesis, Leiden University, 2015), 63.

<sup>4</sup> van der Winden, 'Food Practices in *The Inheritance of Loss*,' 63.

<sup>5</sup> Shazia Sadaf and Mujib Rahman, 'Postcolonial Loss of Identity and the Food Metaphor: Contemporary Indo-Pak Women Writers,' *Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences (Pakistan)* 19 (2011): 3, accessed April 6, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man,' in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 86.

The judge's most obvious attempts at mimicry are: his use of a powder puff to transform his skin into the ideal pink-white flesh of the colonisers, and his rejection of Indian food and practices for Western ones. Yet upon his return from Cambridge, he is denied both as his relatives mock his use of the powder puff with their thick Indian accents transforming it into “Pauvdar Paaf,” sounding like some Parsi dish.<sup>7</sup> The judge is forced to simultaneously confront Indian food and the absurdity of his attempt to lighten his skin tone. The relationship between the judge's powder puff and food is made even more intimate by a metaphor: the judge discovers his powder puff has been hidden between the breasts of his wife, which are now ‘ghoulishly sugared in sweet candy pigment’.<sup>8</sup> The judge's desire for his powder puff—for the sweetness of the candy—is distorted into a violent desire for her body as the judge ‘stuff[s] his way ungracefully into her.’<sup>9</sup> Through food, Nimi's body becomes a paradoxical site of repulsive desire: she represents all the Indian excess that the judge strives to reject, yet she is also what he always returns to, resulting in his own slippage into excessive violence. The judge is shocked and revolted by the ‘grotesqueness’ of his own actions, a term that is by definition excessive and different: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines grotesque as ‘characterized by distortion or unnatural combinations; fantastically extravagant; bizarre’.<sup>10</sup> Despite this recognition, the Judge continues to repeat the violence:

the *grotesqueness* of it all shocked him: the meeting of reaching, suckering organs in an awful attack and *consumption*; maimed, bruise-coloured kicking, cringing forms of life; *sour*, hair-fringed *gullet*; agitating snake muscled malevolency; stench of urine and shit mixed up with the smell of sex; the squelch, the marine squirt, that uncontrollable run—it *turned his civilised stomach*.

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<sup>7</sup> Kiran Desai, ‘The Inheritance of Loss,’ (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 167.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 169.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> ‘grotesque, adj.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed April 11, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/Entry/81794?rskey=QfVltO&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

Yet he repeated the gutter act again and again. Even in tedium, on and on, a habit he could not stand in himself. This *distaste* and his persistence made him angrier than ever and any cruelty to her became *irresistible*.<sup>11</sup>

Nimi's body is the site at which the Judge's mimicry collapses: the point at which excess and difference are produced. Through the violent raping of his wife, he becomes sour in contrast to the sweetness of the white powder he uses to mimic the coloniser. The stomach he has trained by solely consuming Western food is turned away from civility—that which the coloniser (British) possesses, but the colonised (Indians) do not. Cruelty, not civility, is what the judge can no longer resist; that which should be distasteful (excessive violence) to a civilised Westerner, becomes precisely that which is irresistible.

The judge's consumption of English foods and violent consumption of Nimi's body are confused, revealing how his attempt at mimicry through food is always plagued by an excess—a violence that ultimately always differentiates him from the 'civility' of the coloniser. The *OED* defines consumption as 'the action or fact of eating or drinking something' and 'the action or fact of destroying or being destroyed.'<sup>12</sup> The image of consumption, thus, signals to the destruction of the judge himself and of Nimi. The judge's consumption shifts from a means to mimic British food practices to 'a habit he could not stand in himself,' resulting in the consumption (destruction) of his identity. In his seminal text *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi recognises this process as one of two inevitable responses to colonisation: mimicry of the coloniser. Memmi describes how 'attempts at imitating the coloniser require self-denial'<sup>13</sup> and that the colonised can never escape the resultant 'painful discord with himself,' which is reflected as the judge's distaste for raping Nimi

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<sup>11</sup> Desai, 'The Inheritance of Loss,' italics added, 170.

<sup>12</sup> 'consumption, v.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed April 11, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/Entry/39997?redirectedFrom=consumption#eid>.

<sup>13</sup> Albert Memmi, 'The Two Answers of the Colonized,' in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfeld,, 172.

eventually becomes irresistible.<sup>14</sup> Nimi is destroyed (consumed) as she is doubly colonised: she is not only oppressed by the legacy of British colonisation, but is also oppressed by virtue of being a woman who is expected to submit to her husband's violence. Nimi's rape is incited as she steals the judge's powder puff—a crucial component of his mimicry and internalised racism—and the raping is encouraged to prevent family shame from undermining her husband's authority: “Break the bed,” shouted an ancient aunt [...] and they all began to giggle and nod in satisfaction.<sup>15</sup> The violence is not only permissible, but expected, and it is at the site of this consumption (of Nimi's body) that the judge's mimicry collapses. This can be better understood by returning to Bhabha's theory of mimicry: ‘*almost the same but not white*: the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction...a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed.’<sup>16</sup> This perfectly articulates where the judge's mimicry is made visible (where difference is produced): at the crossroads of his patriarchal authority over his wife (that which is known and permissible in his society) and the violence towards his wife (that which is known but never overtly revealed beyond family). The violence may be permissible, but the judge ultimately knows it is wrong as he recognises of the ‘grotesqueness’ of his actions, creating space for the ambivalence that undermines his mimicry. Mannur notes how food has traditionally been used to render ‘palatable depictions of *desi* life’ and to negotiate ‘palatable’ versions of multiculturalism<sup>17</sup>; however, the judge's relationship with Nimi is far from ‘palatable’—it is not simply unpleasant, but repugnant, and the judge seems to ultimately be aware of this too.

The judge is also repulsed by his wife's traditional long, dark, oiled hair: a signifier of beauty in India, but otherness in the Western world. This repulsion is most clearly articulated

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<sup>14</sup> Memmi, ‘The Two Answers of the Colonized,’ 184.

<sup>15</sup> Desai, ‘The Inheritance of Loss,’ italics added, 169.

<sup>16</sup> Bhabha, ‘Of Mimicry and Man,’ 89.

<sup>17</sup> Mannur, ‘Culinary Fictions,’ 85-7.

through food: Nimi's 'long hairs escaped no matter how tidily she made her bun. The judge found them winging their way across the room, treading air; he found one strangling a mushroom in his cream of mushroom soup.'<sup>18</sup> The judge's Western dish (notably a soup coloured brownish-white) is contaminated by a marker of his wife's Indian ethnicity and womanhood. To be more accurate: the judge's soup is not just contaminated, but *strangled*, thus producing Nimi (through the metonym of her hair) as that which destroys (strangles) the judge's attempts at mimicking the Western coloniser. Once again, the act of consuming food is the site at which the judge's mimicry is challenged. The noun 'bun' can be read as an up-do hair style or a plain form of bread that is traditionally consumed in the West with soup; Nimi simultaneously completes the judge's Western food practice by providing the bread, but also disrupts it since her bun is always falling apart and contaminating the food. Even more significantly, the *OED* notes that 'the word [bun] generally denotes in England a sweet cake,' which once again evokes the judge's repulsive desire for Nimi's sweetness.<sup>19</sup> The narrator notes 'the pungency of her red hair oil that [the judge] experienced as a physical touch'—a kind of touch that could simultaneously arouse and repulse.<sup>20</sup> Hair oil is not only a traditional marker of feminine Indian beauty, but also evocative of the West's stereotype of Indian cuisine as a cheap, oily (excessive) indulgence. The multiplicity of ways in which Desai masterfully intertwines images and symbols of food with Nimi's hair allows her to emphasise that the judge's abuse is not merely rooted in patriarchal marriage dynamics, but also in internalised racism instilled through a legacy of colonialism.

The tipping point that finally leads to Nimi's expulsion from the judge's home is—unsurprisingly—centred around food: Nimi 'had [unknowingly] partaken of scrambled eggs and

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<sup>18</sup> Desai, 'The Inheritance of Loss,' 172.

<sup>19</sup> 'bun, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed April 11, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/Entry/24721?rskey=n7wC0s&result=2#eid>.

<sup>20</sup> Desai, 'The Inheritance of Loss,' 169.

toast with top members of the Congress Party,' which risked the judge's career.<sup>21</sup> When the judge confronts her about the breakfast, Nimi defies him by stating "*You are the one who is stupid*", thus inciting the judge to violently beat her.<sup>22</sup> Nimi's 'blotchy bruises showed the next morning in a disastrous contrast to the sight of contented civilisation—eggs in eggcups, tea cozy on the pot, newspaper.'<sup>23</sup> Nimi's bruised body is placed in contrast to the food—in contrast to both the female domesticity associated with food preparation, and in contrast to Western ideals of food practices and, hence, Western notions of civility. Ultimately, Nimi diverges from all that she resists: her passive domestication as a woman and her assimilation into Western culture. While the judge resented her for not eating enough (or any) Western food, the brother-in-law who takes her in 'resented every bite that entered Nimi's mouth. He watched for signs that she was growing fat under his generous care.'<sup>24</sup> This consumption of food is the only explicit explanation given for why the brother-in-law would want Nimi dead. The judge receives a telegram that 'a woman had caught fire over the stove,' and chooses 'to believe it was an accident,' although the text suggests that she was intentionally killed:

Oh, this country, people exclaimed, glad to fall into the usual sentences, where human life was cheap, where standards were shoddy, where stoves were badly made and cheap saris caught fire easily—

—as a woman you wanted dead or—

—well, as a woman who wanted to kill herself—

—without a witness, without a case—

—so simple, a single movement of the hand—

—and for the police, a case so simple, just another quick movement of the hand—

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<sup>21</sup> Desai, 'The Inheritance of Loss,' 303.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.



—the rupees made an oiled movement between palms—

“Oh thank you, sir,” said a policeman.

“Nothing to thank me for,” said the brother-in-law.

And in the blink of an eye you could have missed the entire thing.<sup>25</sup>

It is fitting that Nimi’s life ends in the kitchen: a space that prepares food, just like the food imagery upon which her double colonisation—the source of her consumption (destruction)—converged. Nimi’s murder gets overlooked ‘somewhere in the course of those dusky years’ during World War II and Indian Independence; her life gets lost somewhere during the transition from colonisation (the Indian Army fighting on behalf of the British during WWII) to decolonisation (the Indian Independence movement) and the struggle to create a stable postcolonial nation (‘the departure of the British left such a vacuum of power’).<sup>26</sup>

Textually, Nimi gets lost between the dashes. Vijay Mishra opens *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorising the Diasporic Imaginary* with: ‘diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identifies as indicated on their passports. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen.’<sup>27</sup> Although she never left India herself, Nimi was forced into this hyphenated, diasporic existence. The hyphen and dash both clearly mark the separation between things, but are also the vehicles that brings the things together, just as Nimi is the site upon which the judge enunciates his mimicry and also the site that reveals his difference. The hyphen and dash also signify a disruption in a word or sentence, just as Nimi signifies the disruption in the judge’s mimicry. It is sad, but fitting that even in her death, Nimi is reduced to mere sentence fragments that get lost between dashes due to the (post)colonialism that forced her into an oppressed and hyphenated diasporic existence. She also gets lost due to the

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<sup>25</sup> Desai, ‘The Inheritance of Loss,’ 305-6.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Vijay Mishra, ‘The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorising the Diasporic Imaginary’ (London: Routledge, 2008), 1.

shame she brings upon her family by failing as a wife—as a woman—who angers her husband and does not ask for forgiveness; she is reduced to nothing more than ‘woman’, with no particularity to differentiate her from a monolithic ‘Third World Woman’.<sup>28</sup> This is not a fault of Desai’s feminism, but rather an intentional stylistic manoeuvre to articulate the reality of what so often happens to doubly-colonised women. Nimi, thus, becomes the subaltern that cannot speak in Gayatri Spivak’s *Can the subaltern speak?*; she gets lost in the ‘differend’ that Spivak articulates—the space between what is spoken and what is heard, tradition and modernisation, culturalism and development, *patriarchy and imperialism*.<sup>29</sup>

Through his double colonisation of Nimi, the judge’s mimicry collapses and difference is produced as he becomes everything he despises in the colonised: excessive, violent, and uncivilised. The judge ultimately expresses recognition of this and becomes ambivalent towards his violent treatment of Nimi: ‘now Jemubhai wondered if he had killed his wife for the sake of false ideals. Stolen her dignity, shamed his family, shamed hers, turned her into the embodiment of their humiliation. Even they couldn’t accept her then, and her life could only be useless after that...’<sup>30</sup> Nimi’s character never achieves an identity for itself; instead, through her double colonisation, she is simply used as a site upon which to express and disrupt the judge’s mimicry.

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<sup>28</sup> Chandra Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,’ *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 62-3, accessed October 10, 2015, doi: 10.2307/1395054.

<sup>29</sup> Gayatri Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ in *Can the subaltern speak?: reflections on the history of an idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 61, italics added.

<sup>30</sup> Desai, ‘The Inheritance of Loss,’ 308.

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