

“HELP YOURSELF”: THE ROLE OF CULINARY IN *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*
BY KIRAN DESAI

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RESUMO: A fetichização do Oriente pelo Ocidente, uma das manipulações ideológicas mais sutis e eficientes em perpetuar uma pretensa hegemonia (SAID, 1978), tem sido constantemente alvo da crítica contemporânea. Não dissociada da formação da subjetividade e seu caráter de construção, apresenta várias camadas de vozes discursivas que permeiam o indivíduo que concorrem, cada um em suas próprias categorias. Com base em tais parâmetros, a necessidade de repensar os papéis que desempenham as representações culturais no campo literário é provocada. Neste estudo, pretendo explorar o romance *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), de Kiran Desai, situado na turbulenta região do Kanchenjunga, Índia, durante os conflitos indo-nepaleses da década de 90, através da perspectiva da divulgação dos limites (BABBHA, 1994) (HALL, 1992), concentrando-se em uma lente distinta, ou seja, a culinária. Acredito que ambos os cozinheiros apresentados na história - não por coincidência pai e filho - o primeiro, um profissional respeitado, aquele que detém as mais antigas tradições indianas, ainda em um decadente circundante, e outro, se transformou em um incidental, após imigrar para a América dos *fast-foods*, constituem-se de tal maneira, a fim de abrir um diálogo crítico com o imaginário a que pertencem. Seus confrontos, ou interação, evocam uma ironia sub-reptícia (Hutcheon, 1990) que através de um riso subversivo acaba invertendo as hierarquias demarcadas ao longo do texto, criando um olhar híbrido que surge na narrativa. Outras fontes teóricas, tais como, Arjun Appadurai, Patil Mallikarjun, Michel Foucault, e Chris Weedon serão devidamente analisados ao longo da minha investigação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Culinária; Pós-colonialismo; Ironia.

ABSTRACT: *The fetishization of the Orient by the Occident, one of the most subtle and efficient ideological manipulations in perpetuating a pretense hegemony (SAID, 1978), has been constantly targeted in contemporary criticism. Not dissociated from the constitution of subjectivity and its character of construction, it displays various layers of discursive voices that permeate the self, which compete, each on its own terms. Based on such parameters, the necessity of rethinking the roles which cultural representations perform in the literary field is brought about. In this study, I intend to explore the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), by Kiran Desai, set in the turbulent region of Kanchenjunga, India, during the Indo-Nepalese conflicts of the 90s, through the perspective of the dissemination of boundaries (BABBHA, 1994) (HALL, 1992), focusing on a distinct lens, i.e. culinary. I believe that both cooks presented in the story – not coincidentally father and son - the first, a respected professional, the one who holds the most ancient Indian traditions, yet in a decaying surrounding; and the other, turned into an incidental one, after having immigrated to the America of fast-foods, constitute themselves in such way in order to open up a critical dialogue with the imaginary to which they belong. Their confront, or interaction, evokes a surreptitious irony (HUTCHEON, 1990) that through a subversive laughter ends up by reversing hierarchies demarcated throughout the text, creating a hybrid gaze that emerges in the narrative. Other theoretical sources such as,*

Arjun Appadurai, Mallikarjun Patil, Michel Foucault, and Chris Weedon will be properly analyzed along my investigation.

KEYWORDS: *Culinary; Post-colonialism; Irony.*

It is a current assumption that narratives may also nurture; both body and soul depend on different degrees of what is ingested, be that for its intrinsic value, realm of biology, for its appearance, realm of aesthetics, for its idiosyncratic appeal, realm of psychology, or semantics.

Food has been behind man's destiny since the Bible's pages: knowledge metamorphosed itself on a tree, sin on an apple; a good omen was represented by fat cows, catastrophe by their apparent bones. The vegetarian Cain became infuriated because his offer of produce could not please God as much as Abel's succulent sheep. Therefore, he laid his body on the ground to go back to dust.

Dust, sterility, has threatened man's imaginary in which rivers of milk and honey may be taken as privileged symbols of paradise. The choice of ingredients may sound awkward in the tropics where the smell of cane fills the breeze. In that case other kinds of food temptations would constitute a better appeal to the senses; and, correspondingly, other taboos would be created. In Brazil, since colonial times it has been believed that mangos, abundant until recently in the country side, and milk, scarce on its turn, for the poor layers of population, together meant fatal poison. (Jewish individuals might interpret Abraham's episode, in which he condemns and subsequently saves his child from the flames, by substituting him with a lamb, as actually an opportunity to bring about at the time the discussion about certain primitive tribes' cannibalistic habits.)

Food is present in our ways of focusing on the world, on our empty or spicy lives and its representation is constant in discourse. Proverbs particularly elicit such presence. In Spanish you may hear "a fed indian, a gone Indian"; on the one hand that may sound an ingratitude, or opportunism by the part of whoever says it; on the other it may also show the speaker's concern in not delaying too much and therefore taking the host more of his or her precious time. The converse situation may be observed in Brazil as the host invariably offers the guest coffee: that might signal it is time to leave; if too soon, the place may look not so welcoming; if the coffee is not fresh, you are certainly not deserved so much such trouble. Any reference to food technology, such as an "instant," or, "perhaps a micro-wave" may sound offensive, or inopportune.

Literary practice, on its turn has also wakened to this theme, as it has shown itself a rich reservoir of elements in the depiction of a character and its relation to its social ethos. Correspondingly, in the diasporic context, food may establish a symbolic code of information, complex and revealing at the same time, by approaching not only individualities, but further than that, the concept of a culture. Around that, manifold pages have been already published, and among them, in Brazil, *A Fome dos outros: literatura, comida e alteridade no século XVI*, de Rodrigo Labriola¹, as in the US other works such as *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*² approaches the theme of food and its

¹ Niterói, RJ: EDUFF, 2008. 200p.

² University of California Press. www.gastronomica.org. Access: 28 Apr 2008.

representation, as well as the *Alimentum: The Literature of Food*³, give us an idea of the impact of the thematics in the academic world.

Following such train of thought, other names must be included. Anita Mannur, in a situation in tune with the novel I will explore, calls *culinary citizenship*, to QUOTE “A form of affective citizenship which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food”. (MANNUR, 2007, p. 13)⁴.

Michel de Certeau, on his turn, establishes a relation of rescuing the individual through food as the last port for the exiled, whichever reason might have taken him/her to such condition, constituting a link of belonging, between him and a social means he has been inserted into. Food, at least in celebrations would fix one’s feet on the ground as an ultimate measure of identity with his/her origin,” (CERTEAU, 2008, p. 250).

This paper thus intends to be another reevaluation of food’s representation in a literary text, to be more precise, in Kiran Desai’s novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. Besides relying on the theoretical guidance of gender scholars such as Chris Weedon (1987), in relation to the constitution of subjectivity, and Stuart Hall (2003) in relation to race and otherness, and also Linda Hutcheon (1990) in terms of postmodern strategies, I’m particularly in debt to studies on the subject of cooking and ethnicity performed by Glauca Gonçalves (2010) on the field of Arabic diaspora, both in the US and in Brazil.

In her discussion, Gonçalves raises the possibility of an intentional manipulation by Arabic authors of American readers around their expectations of exotic food, and its easy association with the East, as another example of orientalism, in Said’s terms; as opposed to that, similar literary manifestations in Brazil, that is to say, books produced by others of the same ethnic origin, would, however, not respond to such appeal.

Intrigued by Gonçalves’ point, I intend, to rescue Desai’s work from the stereotypical Western gaze in relation to the subject. I hope to prove that even though the role of food in the novel reaches the highest level of characterization, it does not add fuel to the alienation flame, which is rather intentionally played around with, within the framework of a double coded, both self-reverential, and self-critical text, as defined by Linda Hutcheon. (1990) I also believe Desai follows the tradition of other countries which having experienced starvation and oppression, elect cooking as a symbolic experience, leading one, to the mother figure as the counterpart for an unjust patriarchal system. For having settled her story both in a small town in India, and in contemporary New York at the same time, Desai’s novel makes use of ingredients as in a well balanced recipe, to call one’s attention to the trap in which unaware readers might be caught, whereas the more critical ones might enjoy “picking the joke,” or the irony, as Hutcheon would state. Desai keenly appropriates certain elements in a way which will take one to the reverse of such expectations and, by extension, the hierarchy of colonialist gaze. As Stuart Hall (2006) warns us the discursive character of the subject shows him to be fruit of several processes and its mutant character becomes his identity distinctive feature. Therefore, in the following pages I will try to illustrate, how subjectivity might be both constituted, praised or ridiculed, through a mix of tradition, taste, and irony.

As a first approach of Desai’s irreverent move, one can mention Patil’s

³ Available: www.alimentumjournal.com. Access: 28 Apr 2008.

⁴ “A form of affective citizenship which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food”.

considerations (2009), as he reads her side by side with Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy and others who challenge common sense's gaze as he affirms:

Regarding postmodern fiction it may be said there is not any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully so that when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects.

(PATIL, 2009, p.22)

What Patil has well observed was that Desai's novel has many doors to be explored, which never close; and I would say, among those entrances, the most profitable seems to be the kitchen door. Around that special place of the house characters gravitate, and their relationship with their selves and their culture is established.

However in order to proceed it would also be productive to infer a little more about the manipulation of memory as laid out by Paul Ricoeur (2004), as he analyses Pierre Nora's rejection of memory as celebration. By bringing about Nora's concept of "places of memory", the philosopher tries to alert one against the entrapments of one's "historicizing" in the name of memory. The expression, aiming in particular to criticize a certain blindness around French most ordinary and respected symbolic monuments and data, such as the arch, the tricolor flag, March 68 and so on, it may be associated with a betrayal of their conception. National symbols are thus put down by the two historians:

The destiny of these *Lieux de memoire* has been a strange one. The work was intended, by virtue of its conception, method, and even tide, to be a counter-commemorative type of history, but commemoration has overtaken it. What was forged as a tool for maintaining critical distance became the instrument of commemoration par excellence.

(RICOEUR, 2004, p. 90)

Further he adds:

Thus the very dynamics of commemoration have been turned around; the memorial model has triumphed over the historical model and ushered in a new, unpredictable, and capricious use of the past [...] What has been substituted for it are particular, fragmented, local, and cultural memories.

(RICOEUR, 2004, p. 91)

He regrets, or both regret the projection of what he calls the epistemology of scientific history rather than the phenomenology of memory. He melancholically assumes that,

although it was intended to be 'critical,' it was in fact only a deepening of that tradition.[...] The inversion that is at the origin of commemorative obsession is said to consist in the assimilation of defunct traditions, slices of the past from which we have become separated. In short, for him "commemoration has freed itself from its traditionally assigned place, but the epoch as a whole has become commemorative" and predict one day on which we will be free of commemoration.

(RICOEUR, 2004, p. 91)

He concludes by associating this manipulation of memory with the idea of justice. The quote is not far from Foucault's words as he states that QUOTE: "human beings need institutions, which is another way of saying that they make use of them as much as they serve them" (REVEL *apud* RICOEUR, 2004, p. 220). This trick of history leads us to the body of Desai's work and her strategic dicing, slicing, squeezing, and chopping in characterization.

One hint about the plot is necessary: an old decadent judge in India, gives shelter to a granddaughter so far unknown to him.. He had lost contact with his son and wife since they have eloped; and the fact of rescuing the child from the convent instead of an act of solidarity meant for him an opportunity for her "to help take care of Mutt, his she-dog. Not coincidentally his wife, who he had never loved, but belonged to a better caste than him, after several abuses had been sent back home pregnant, dies among a family unwilling to accept her. The judge obliterates the circumstances of her death by fire, at her uncle's house. The only interlocutor for Sai, the girl is the old cook, who had been serving the house for years; the latter has a son, Biju who had emigrated to the USA, to pursue the American dream. In this meanwhile, Sai gets involved with a Nepalese tutor who will send men of the guerilla to her house for arms and food. That's where we should start our discussion on subjectivity. Forced by the invaders, "the judge found himself in the kitchen where he had never been, not once, Mutt wobbling about his toes, Sai and the cook too scared to look, averting their gaze." (DESAI, 2006, p.6)

As opposed to the cook, who made the kitchen a warm refuge for the girl, the figure of the is alienated from such reality; as for the robbers, governors to be they assume airs of patrons exactly asking for and complaining about the food:

"House needs a lot of repairs," the boys advised.

"Tea is too weak, "they said in the manner of mothers-in-law."And not enough salt,"they said of the *pakor*s . They dipped the Marie and Delite biscuits in the tea, drew up the hot liquid noisily. Two trunks they found in the bedrooms they filled with rice, lentils, sugar, tea, oil, matches, Lux soap. And Pond's Cold Cream. One of them assured Sai: " Only items necessary for the movement.

[...]

They opened the cabinet and found bottles of Grand Marnier, amontillado sherry, and Talisker. Some of the bottles' contents had evaporated completely and some had turned to vinegar, but the boys put them in the trunk anyway.

(DESAI, 2006, p.7)

Another aspect of constitution of a subjectivity is still related to the young judge as he boarded a ship to go to England for his academic formation:

The cabinmate's nose twitched at Jemu's lump of pickle wrapped in a bundle of puris; onions, green chilies, and salt in a twist of newspaper; a banana that in the course of the journey had been slain by heat. No fruit dies so vile and offensive a death as the banana, but it had been packed just in case. In case of *What?* Jemu shouted silently to his mother.

In case he was hungry along the way or it was a while before meals could be properly prepared or he lacked the courage to go to the dining salon on the ship, given that he couldn't eat with knife and fork—

(DESAI, 2006, p. 38)

As another aspect of the relation between a character's individuality and food one can mention the following passage which shows the cook trying to please Sai. Here one can see how the author mixes icons, debunking colonialisms presumptions at the same time rescuing Indian cuisine as a value:

To welcome her, the cook had modeled the mashed potatoes into a motorcar, recollecting a long-forgotten skill from another age, when, using the same pleasant medium, he had fashioned celebratory castles decorated with paper flags, fish with bangle nose rings, porcupines with celery spines, chickens with real eggs placed behind for comic effect.

This motorcar had tomato slice wheels and decorations rolled out of ancient bits of tinfoil that the cook treated as a precious metal, washing, drying, using, and reusing them until they crumbled into tinselly scraps that he still couldn't bear to throw away.

The car sat in the middle of the table, along with paddle-shaped mutton cutlets, water-logged green beans, and a head of cauliflower under cheese sauce that looked like a shrouded brain.

(DESAI, 2006, p. 32)

As also a reverse of the coin in which modernity is mocked one has the experience of Biju, the cook's son going against his identity, a vegetarian working for fast-foods selling hamburgers:

To Biju he said: "Beef? Are you crazy? We are an all-Hindu establishment. No Pakistanis, no Bangladeshis, those people don't know how to cook, have you been to those restaurants on Sixth Street? *Bilkul bekaar.*" One week later, Biju was in the kitchen and Gandhi's favorite tunes were being sung over the sound system.

(DESAI, 2006, p.146)

A final interesting aspect concerning this shift the author proposes in the hierarchy of the text one can see the depiction of a New York far from one's dreams, lost amid rats although raising tall solemn stabs:

On to the Stars and Stripes Diner. All American flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below. Plus one Indian flag when Biju arrived.

"Where is Guatemala?" he had to ask. "Where is Guam?"

"Where is Madagascar?"

"Where is Guyana?"

"Don't you know?" the Guyanese man said. "Indians everywhere in Guyana, man."

"Indians in Guam. Everywhere you look, practically, Indians."

"Trinidad?"

"Trinidad full of Indians!! Saying—can you believe it?—‘Open a caan of saalmon, maaan’".

(DESAI, 2006, p. 22)

With this example one can feel the emptiness of urban scenery, a non place for an Indian man; there he would have to give up everything: his religion, his sense of a nation, his sense of taste also.

In both senses: Biju loses his taste for the big city and comes back in the middle of a terrible conflict where no guarantee was provided to anyone. The last scene of the book alludes to one's sense of truth, for it focuses on the peak of the mountains whose light would suggest that one has to stretch your arm and get it. Coincidentally the same peak is thus described in the beginning of the book above the vapor, Kanchenjunga was a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit.

It seems that the overlapping of the Lacanian gesture, this recurrent projection of desire, might suggest that such search for a mere satisfaction one can get in a place called home means what man can call also life.

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