



Treatment of 'Food': Food imagery and Cultural identity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract: Food is a recurring feature in many literary narratives. It refers not only to the preparation and serving of special food ingredients on certain occasions, but also to the multiple meanings of food as a cultural construct. Food is commonly used as a metaphor in literature because it is a familiar, universal substance that can be recognized and understood when used as a representational trope. Kunow describes the semiotic quality of representation as "a stand-in, a sign of something that is absent (or was done)". Postmodern culture has been heavily influenced by the use of food as a metaphor. Food narratives are also perceived as powerful literary tools which articulate postcolonial claims. Literary food narratives analyze food symbols to reflect cultural identity. This is one way in which cultural translation takes place because it is the process of cultural transfer. It is an accent on the singular special quality of women as women are mainly associated with cooking and serving food. Food narratives have dichotomous features such that at times the cultural image of food creates a racial and ethnic polarity and at other times the image of food defies structural norms to assert class dynamics. In Salman Rushdie's post-colonial Indian novel, *Midnight's Children*, food is used to describe different dimensions of plot, character and culture within the text. Rushdie uses the acceptance of food culture as a symbol for the cultural subject of resistance and conservation, as well as for memory, emotion, narrative, history, relationship and power. This article focuses heavily on the narrative of culture in food. In addition to highlighting thematic and aesthetic discourses, an attempt has been made to analyze the various dimensions of food and its associated socio-political equations over time.

Keywords: *Food narrative, tool, culture, semiotic, thematic, aesthetic*

Introduction

Food is a significant aspect of many literary narratives. It refers not only to the preparation and serving of special food ingredients on certain occasions, but also to the multiple meanings of food as a cultural construct. Considerations such as caste, class, and gender become essential for the evaluation of food. Food narratives also serve as powerful literary

tools to verbalize postcolonial claims and to propose a nation's independent identity. It foregrounds the special quality of women who are usually associated with the cooking and serving of food. Food narratives have dichotomous features such that at times the cultural image of food creates a racial and ethnic polarity and at other times the image of food defies structural norms to assert class dynamics. It also has wider socio-economic-political implications for the recent debate on food nutrition. For example, colonial powers once occupied and ruled India under the pretext of food procurement. A foundation of India and Indian cuisine helped them to colonize the country for centuries. By the same logic, the sub-continent combines diverse cultural and political voices into a homogenous expression. This paper aims to analyze these diverse dimensions of food and how food is associated with socio-political equations among nation/class/ caste/gender over time.

The study of food, cooking and eating was once a concern of anthropologists and sociologists as they appreciated its symbolic value in familiarizing themselves with indigenous peoples and their lifestyles. In the context of postmodern questions of 'reality', understanding food and related issues helps to situate the nature of ordinary people's lives. Historians have also recognized the importance of food in understanding the development of civilizations. Food is, therefore, employed as a cultural pattern for the growth of 'primitive' to 'exotic' culture. Analyzing the treatment of food imagery and cultural identity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* can be a rich exploration. The novel intertwines food with themes of heritage, identity, and power, showcasing how culinary elements serve as metaphors for broader societal dynamics. From the symbolic significance of pickles to the communal experience of shared meals, food becomes a lens through which Rushdie explores the complexities of postcolonial India.

Writers have used food to illustrate plot and character personalities in their writings. Diet helps a writer to weave a pattern that not only depicts literary trends, but also the culture of the place and time including women's position in society, interpersonal relationships, social customs etc. Roland Barthes, in his *Mythology* (1957), explores the semiotics of food and culture while writing about food; "It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies, and at the same time it is a system of communication, a set of images, a protocol of use, situations and behavior".¹ In the novel *Midnight's Children*, food acts as more than sustenance; it symbolizes cultural diversity and the collision of traditions. The protagonist Saleem's narrative is peppered with references to iconic dishes like

biryani and kebabs, reflecting the multicultural fabric of India. For instance, Saleem's description of his family's ancestral pickle factory highlights the preservation of tradition amidst political upheaval. The pickles, with their blend of spices and flavors, represent the amalgamation of different cultural influences, echoing India's multicultural heritage.

Food is commonly used as a metaphor in literature. It is a universal substance that becomes recognizable and understandable when used as a representational trope. Rudiger Kunow describes the semiotic quality of food representations as "a stand-in, a sign of something that is missing (or was done)". He says, "Food, of course, has always functioned as representation: Anthropologists and Cultural Studies scholars have long demonstrated how food not only feeds but also organizes us, how the making, consuming, and disposing of food is socially and culturally influenced."² Food provides an immediate, powerful visual image when used in different languages and cultures. Different foods can carry different meanings. In Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, the trope of food is explored from a Western and Eastern perspective. Rushdie introduces many textual elements related to the concept of food. As the Vedic concept emerges of 'cooking the world through sacrifice', the protagonist Saleem Sinai falls apart, leaving behind his jar of Chutney history for future generations. Sarah Upstone's essay 'Domestic in Magical Realist Postcolonial Fiction' includes a discussion on food in a broad overview of the concept of postcolonial space in *Midnight's Children*. "The trope of food, namely, the image of the jar, is key to understanding postcolonial notions of home, as the transition within the ritual jar is, on a smaller physical scale, the same transition from negative to positive space which typifies the domestic structure."³

Food tropes are used extensively in the novel *Midnight's Children* to depict the life of a family. Depicting several generations of the same family, the transition from one generation to the next is a significant change in the society in which they live. Throughout the novel the trope of food is used in conjunction with family life. Nevertheless, through connections with certain family members, their use expands from the private to the public sphere, creating yet another play with the meanings. Moreover, food becomes a tool for delineating social hierarchies and power dynamics. The feasts hosted by Saleem's grandfather, Aadam Aziz, are emblematic of colonial extravagance and excess, showcasing how food becomes a symbol of opulence and status. Conversely, Saleem's experiences with street food and communal dining underscore the resilience and adaptability of everyday Indians in the face of adversity.

The novel contains an allegorical function of shifting from public to private life about the Sinai family. Hanif Aziz, Amina Sinai's brother and a film director, conceived the idea of an indirect kiss in one of his films. He used a food item as a substitute for physical contact when actors were forbidden to touch each other onscreen due to political conditions. Thus, the concept of the indirect kiss, which symbolizes forbidden love, is transferred from cinematography to personal life. As noted in the novel, Amina Sinai transcribes a kiss on a secret date with her ex-husband Nadir: "My mother's lips pressed gently, nostalgically, against the molten glass..." In contrast, a milkshake choice in a secret date scene emphasizes the innocence or childishness of those involved in the relationship. Thus, the shift from the public to the private undermines the function attributed to the trope of food by recreating the mere visual representation of the metaphor rather than the symbolic implications behind it.

The search for food in Rushdie's canonical novel *Midnight's Children* is not a function of provincialism or strategic imperative. Instead, Rushdie speaks of the subcontinent's hegemonic food discourses that capitalize on their collective power to represent the creation of a self-conscious cosmopolitan identity. Although this novel discusses ritual as a central metaphor for writing, little attention is paid to the uses of food that emerge from larger cultural discourses. Positioned as a postcolonial hero, the significance of his enigmatic performance of self-sacrifice in the generation of Saleem's ritual, his omnivorous act, and his insistence on the accessible nature of his cooking are not unrelated aspects. Rather, these are interconnected as to how he speaks to a broader way of looking at food and consumption in his culture. The use of ritual as a central metaphor from an 'impure' cuisine in relation to what Saleem is eating reveals a new articulation of the ethical and transformative role of art in the postcolonial context.

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, came together as an extended allegory of the turbulent history of India's political situation shortly before the country's independence. Born at midnight on August 15, 1947, right at the time of India's independence, Saleem's entire life is filled with turmoil and angst that mirrors the political situation the country was in for the next thirty years. His life story is filled with an endless list of delicious descriptions of Indian food: 'mango pickle', 'samosa', 'cucumber kasaundi', 'lime chutney', 'coconut milk', 'masala paneer', 'pakora'. Within the overarching metaphor of comparing Saleem to India, Rushdie fills thirty chapters through the use of vivid food imagery with colorful representations of character, emotions, relationships, and culture. In short, Saleem has some

impressive gifts, including telepathic abilities and a strong sense of smell to connect with other 'midnight's children'.

Clearly, the chutney ritual has been used as a metaphor for preservation efforts. Judith Plotz portrays Saleem's 'chutney' as a narrative account of India's political history, identity and statehood. He argues that Rushdie's narrative is "a form of performative nation-building and that Saleem's 'chutnifying history' represents postcolonial Indianness in a self-reflexive postmodern text organized into loose and hybrid metaphors of his work and nationhood."⁴ This metaphor for readers of India opens a window to cultural identity – fragmented like chutney ingredients and unwilling to assimilate. Not only is modern Indian culture fragmented, but Saleem's family and life are also torn between India and Pakistan, between two families whose children have exchanged, between political parties, as well as good and evil.

The image of food in *Midnight's Children* is also noted as a symbol of power. In the traditionally patriarchal culture of Muslim India where Saleem's family lives, this shift in gender norms represents a resistance by the characters to traditional cultural norms within society. Thus, it helps to identify these female characters as possessing power through their privilege over food and cooking. For example, when Ahmed Sinai is 'sick' in bed, he takes control of the situation when he is with Amina. He decides to run Amina's kitchen for her which Amina agrees to, giving him a certain power over the family and over those who eat his food. Thus, the use of food makes Amina Sinai a strong, opinionated and determined character.

Moreover, Rushdie's use of food imagery also serves to challenge essentialist notions of identity. The novel's characters navigate a complex web of religious, linguistic, and regional identities, each leaving its imprint on the culinary landscape. Through food, Rushdie blurs the boundaries between "authentic" and "hybrid" cultural expressions, suggesting that identity is fluid and multifaceted. Furthermore, food acts as a site of memory and nostalgia, evoking a sense of longing for lost homelands and fractured identities. Saleem's recollections of his childhood meals with his family evoke a bittersweet nostalgia for a bygone era, while also highlighting the ruptures caused by partition and migration.

Conclusion

Rushdie's colorful food imagery serves multiple purposes in *Midnight's Children*. He uses food and food preparation, as a ritual, to describe a nation that is made up of disparate elements, trying to create a unified whole. Women are ready to raise emotions and trigger memories through their cooking. Some food represents emotion, love, or cultural identity, and some drives the action by encouraging the reactions of other characters and events in the plot. Beautiful and vividly worded, *Midnight's Children* showcases Rushdie's mastery of using food as a metaphorical language in this intense, unforgettable novel. Overall, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* offers a nuanced exploration of food imagery and cultural identity, weaving together themes of tradition, power, and belonging. Through his evocative descriptions of culinary practices and traditions, Rushdie invites readers to reflect on the complex interplay between food, culture, and identity in postcolonial India.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. (New York: Hill. Print, 1972): 147-48.

² Rudiger Kunow, *Eating Indians, Food, Representation and the Indian Diaspora in the United States. Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food*. Ed. Tobias Doring, Markus Heide and Susanne Muhleisen. (Germany: Universitatsverlag Winter. Print, 2003): 151-52.

³ Sara Upstone. *Domesticity in Magical- Realist Postcolonial Fiction*. (Frontiers. Print, 2007).

⁴ Judith Plotzm, *Rushdie's Pickle and the New Indian Historical Novel: Sealy, Singh, Tharoor, and National Metaphor*. (Journal of Postcolonial Writing. Web. 15, November, 2017):28-48.

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