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Colloquial Crumbs: Reclamation of Spaces in Food and Memory in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*

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*Autobiographical narratives—in the form of travelogues, memoirs, diaries, and other personal accounts—are crucial literary interventions that have aided a global and cosmopolitan expansion. Such self-narrations, excavating the lives of writers, elucidate and explore various cultural associations within society. Moreover, as the process of self-narration and the creation of an identity progresses, autobiographies, cumulatively known as ‘life-writing’ since 1990, essentially highlights the differences between the public and the private self, which gives rise to a tendency to marginalise the woman writer—who is often characterised by an ambiguous existence in the public domain. My paper will explore this idea of self-reflection and self-discovery in its attempt to situate Sara Suleri’s memoir *Meatless Days* (1989) within the postcolonial female identity, thereby unravelling the domestic space as a crucially inventive and creative space for the reclamation of the identity of a writer. The relationship of the domestic space with metaphors of food significantly emerges as a unifying trajectory to an imaginative home/land in turmoil. It forms a site emblematic of cultural identity and critical contentions in the ways in which they were presented and represented, beginning to allow an efflorescence of not only an aesthetic imagination of the domestic space but also a way of reclaiming it. Essentially, through an analysis of the memory and food and consumption metaphors (often extending out to be the feminine domestic space) that Suleri significantly uses in her narrative, this paper will explore facets of identity creation and continuity as a counter-narrative of patriarchal nation-building against the backdrop of ongoing political turmoil.*

Auto/biographies have remained intertwined with narrative and historiography since their global and cosmopolitan expansion into avenues of postcolonial literary and cultural studies in the 1990s. Philip Holden, in his attempt to situate the term ‘auto/biography’ within the postcolonial context, highlights the use of ‘/’ in the term and confirms that, “Auto/biography studies [...] has recently made greater use of the term ‘auto/biography’ and ‘life-writing’ as concepts more inclusive” (Holden 107). He extends this argument to support the existing understanding of the idea from Phillippe Lejeune’s definition of the term ‘autobiography’ and the nature of its existence¹. Additionally, autobiographical narratives, in the form of

¹ Lejeune’s definition of autobiography: “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his [sic] own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (qtd. in Holden, 107).

travelogues, memoirs, diaries, and other personal accounts (more significantly and cumulatively known as life-writing since 1990) have remained crucial literary interventions excavating the lives of writers and the ways in which they were wrought into various cultural associations within the society. Needless to say, the notion of self-narration involved in the ongoing process of life-writing—which, for Mary Jane Kehily, is a simultaneous process of identity creation and presentation of a sense of self for public consumption (Kehily 8)—often comes across, in all its popularity, as a way of prioritising the male professional or public self. Kehily argues that “traditional male autobiographical writing constructs an identity that is free of ambiguity and contradiction, shaped by and for the public domain” (8). Therefore, as far as life writing is concerned, there remains a tendency of marginalising the woman writer—who is often characterised by an ambiguous existence in the public domain—in this traditionally male-dominated field. Expanding on the ambiguity of a woman’s position, it is important to note that critics like Bart Moore-Gilbert focus on the existence of “decentred lives” in women’s autobiographies that attempt to “counter the centrifugal power of the old unitary self of Western rationalisation” (Moore-Gilbert 28), therefore allowing for a creation of lives alternative to the ones predominately associated with the genre, thriving in “ambiguity and multiplicity” (Moore-Gilbert 28).

Interestingly, Philip Holden, in his essay, “Postcolonial Auto/biography”, further expands on such ambiguous cultural associations and hints at the formation of a ‘cultural other’² and a ‘cultural self’. He asserts that “as the 20th century wore on, anthropology became increasingly self-reflexive, seeking to understand the way the study of the cultural other involved the construction of the cultural self” (Holden 108). While the ‘cultural other’, in Holden’s words, draws an important correlation between the postcolonial woman writer and her ‘quest for finding the self’, Linda Anderson, in her essay “Autobiography and the Feminist Subject”, traces the advent of self-reflection and self-discovery in feminist autobiographies slowly emerging beyond patriarchal alignments. She states:

In the 1960s and 1970s, as second-wave feminism flourished [...] autobiography seemed to provide a privileged space for women to discover new forms of subjectivity, both through the reading of autobiographical writing by women including historical as well as contemporary,

² See Holden’s 2010 review of Bart Moore-Gilbert’s *Postcolonial Life Writing: Culture, Politics and Self Representation*.

and through the production of texts which explored the female subject in franker, less constricted or more inventive ways [...] Toward the end of the 1970s, therefore, the notion of a female selfhood which could be triumphantly liberated from its neglect or repression under patriarchy and made visible through writing was put into question. (Anderson 3)

My paper would explore this idea of self-reflection and self-discovery in its attempt to situate Sara Suleri's memoir *Meatless Days* (1989) within the postcolonial female identity, thereby unravelling the domestic space as a crucially inventive and creative space for the reclamation of the identity of a writer. Essentially through an analysis of memory and food and consumption metaphors (often extending out to be the feminine domestic space) that Suleri significantly uses in her narrative, this paper would explore facets of identity creation and continuity as a counter-narrative of patriarchal nation-building against the backdrop of an ongoing political turmoil.

Postcolonial narratives have had a steady process of creation and identification within the ambivalence associated with it, which, eventually, opened the field up to an emerging discourse of female identity significantly branching out of life-writing. The 'postcolonial female identity' is effectively constructed around the history, territory, culture, and language of a home/land, and life-writing has played a significant role in the process of representing women as a part of their legacy and heritage. The South Asian diaspora has evidently explored issues of representation, identity, nationalism, global companionship, and marginalisation within the emerging body of life-writing, thereby offering a critical understanding of the domestic space and its spatial, cultural, and cosmopolitan associations. While the postcolonial female body has been enumerated as a significant emblem of nationalism throughout discourses of struggle and contestation, it is imperative to note that the life-writing venture of the South Asian diaspora flourished concomitantly, oscillating between the private and public realms of society, often with an enhanced connection with certain motifs of consumption. The relationship of the domestic space with metaphors of food significantly emerges as a unifying trajectory to an imaginative home/land in turmoil. Food, therefore, above all else, formed a site emblematic of cultural identity and critical contentions in the ways in which they were presented and represented, beginning to allow an efflorescence of not only an aesthetic imagination of the domestic space but also a way of reclaiming it.

In *Meatless Days*, Sara Suleri opens with an almost candid conversation weaving a recollection of her memories. She is keen on drawing her personal anecdotes using inventive language. For instance, in the chapter "Papa and Pakistan", one of the crucial instances of

inventive language and metaphors of consumption arise with the use of words like *anther* instead of ‘another’ as a part of the colloquialism Suleri’s father is accustomed to. The words demonstrate a deliberate consumption of the vowel sound in the English alphabet and a gradual movement towards the assimilation of the English language and culture within a nation cautiously struggling to find its independent political footing. Suleri, therefore, traces her genealogical association with the act of writing alongside the impending formation of Pakistan through her father’s relation to politics and journalism. Further, Suleri intensifies her association to the act of writing by narrating her father’s almost naturalised domestication of the creator of Pakistan, her motherland: “Jinnah the maker of Pakistan was hardly an easy idea to domesticate – and yet Pippy did it. He loved everything about that man: his design, his phrase, his clothes.” (Suleri 278) The ownership of language that emerges here is, as Susheila Nasta introduces, an alternative concept of the ‘father tongue.’ With the use of this term, she encourages a breakthrough in the larger scope of writing women that has already been present through the ages. In *Motherlands: Black Women’s Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, she further argues that language forms a sequestered ideation of a woman, mother, and creator; she goes on to say: “Language is both a source and womb of creativity, means of giving birth to new stories, new myths, of telling the stories of women that have previously been silenced; it can also become a major site of contest, a revolutionary struggle.” (Nasta 14) Suleri’s father had passed on a heritage to her where he gradually moved, from one profession to another, consuming the history of an embryonic Pakistan:

But Pip was always a wonderful consumer of context: he would eat it up alive, just like a cannibal, so no audience that came his way departed without feeling slightly stripped. It was hardly simple, playing the part of never to his now, but then which good humour would not soften at the manifest satisfaction with which he ate? He ate up his past, too, in the manner of a nervous eater, so that my attempts to establish some sense of the narrative of his days always filled me with a sense of uneasy location. (Suleri 220)

As a postcolonial writer, Sara Suleri, enumerating a “sense of an uneasy location”, highlights her association with a fluidity of space within the form of narration. This fluidity of space is described by Homi Bhabha as a passage that mobilizes cultures and inhabits hybridity, called the ‘Third Space’, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot “in

itself” be conscious.³ Upon further discussing the ‘Third Space’, Bhabha notes that the space is an important potential location where “meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, historicised and read anew” (37). Thus, channelling such kinds of cultural hybridity in meanings and traditions, the Third Space acts as a crucial landscape for the postcolonial contexts, narratives, cultural interchanges, and, as Bhabha calls it, ‘translations’ to take place. It is amidst such spaces of cultural exchange that the life-writing process sustains itself.

For instance, Kamila Shamsie, in her introduction to *Meatless Days*, attempts to understand the various kinds of literal and metaphorical languages Suleri uses, which, for her “sometimes baffling” (Suleri 10) experience, are often non-linear forms of narratives. She quotes Suleri—“My audience is lost, and angry to be lost”—and highlights that Suleri re-affirms her process of creating a sense of meaning through partly consumed narratives: “Suleri acknowledges – or teases – as early as the second paragraph of the book” (Suleri 9). Further, Antonija Primorac explores the question of Suleri’s intended audience. She says, “Is the text involved in an othering process that exoticises it?” (Primorac 5) She attempts to answer the question in two separate ways: Suleri’s “substituting a dialogue with a lost audience for a monologue dedicated to them” and “Suleri’s justification of the intimate tone of the narrative and the explicit disregard of the reader uninitiated in the life of a Pakistani elite” (Primorac 5). Suleri’s memoir, above all, creates a fluid form of narrative that often seeks an anchor in the women around her who embody and contribute to the continuity of the domestic space, often dismissed from the canonised larger narrative of the nation.

The narrative of the nation is one of the crucial aspects that develops in the context of postcolonial writing and life-writing. Nira Yuval Davis, in her essay “Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations”, analyses the idea of a ‘nation’ within two broad categories: the ‘institution of State’ and the nationalist ideas and movements. While this extremely neat demarcation of the idea of ‘nation’ is discussed in Davis’ essay, she does not define ‘nation’ exclusively as an entity that has its own history, language, territory, and culture, but provides three dimensions to the nationalistic projects: genealogical dimension, cultural dimension, and citizenship. Of all the three dimensions that have been highlighted by Davis, I find it imperative to discuss further the closely-knit connection that the construct of a nation has with gender. Gender differences have been institutionalised in the formation of a nation and, as critics like Cynthia

³ See Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994).

Enloe enumerate, nationalisms have often risen with a “masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” in mind (Enloe 106). The national body and the political relations that are a part of the mainstream discourse of a nation have limited space for the women. Women are often enmeshed within the idea of being the cultural token of representing the values of their nation or homeland and writing themselves and their characters as beings with desires, aspirations, and progressive thought processes.

Suleri retells various unrelated events in her life and the lives of her family and friends intertwined with the larger context of the domestic space. Interestingly, Suleri’s two different lives—shown through the characters of her Welsh mother and Pakistani grandmother—exist together in her narratives of food and festivities, thus expanding on the domestic space and its cultural associations. She juxtaposes her mother’s uneasiness about “chopping up animals for God” (Suleri 20) and emphasises distinctive cultural associations by emphasising physical and metaphorical location—“She could not locate the metaphor and was uneasy when obeisance played such a truant to the metaphoric realm” (20)—with the ease with which her grandmother accepts the merging of food metaphors into religion: “For Dadi had successfully cut through tissues of festivity just as the butcher slit the goat, but there was something else that she was eating with that meat. I saw it in her concentration; I know that she was making God talk to her as to Abraham and was showing him what she could do – for him – to sons. God didn’t dare, and she ate on alone.” (21) The deliberate use of animal husbandry metaphors in her language incorporates Suleri’s attempt to reclaim various spaces of existence where women were often, as an extension to their domesticated selves, allowed to venture in, for instance, the butcher’s shop where the goat was reared and cut for food. The food metaphors are interwoven into the existence of customs and beliefs of Suleri’s limited, colourful world:

Dried dates change shape when they are soaked in milk, and carrots rich and strange turn magically sweet when deftly covered with green nutty shavings and smatterings of silver. Dusk was sweet as we sat out, the day’s work done, in an evening garden. Lahore spread like peace around us. My father spoke, and when Papa talked, it was of Pakistan. But we were glad, then, at being audience to that familiar conversation, till his voice looked up, and failed. There was Dadi making her return, and she was prodigal. Like a question mark interested only in its own conclusions, her body crawled through the gates. Our guests were spellbound, then they looked away. Dadi, moving in her eerie crab formations, ignored the hangman’s rope she firmly held as behind her in the gloaming minced, hugely affable, a goat. (Suleri 22)

Suleri's narrative effortlessly converges Dadi's old body with that of the animal feasted on, thus bringing the public and the private spaces close enough to be overlapping. In her attempt to reclaim the domestic space she draws cultural and political elements together, gradually identifying with the women often pushed to the fringes of society.

Suleri's domestic space and its emblematic women simultaneously extend to form a major political backdrop. When Pakistan leaves India to form a full-fledged nation, Suleri situates her personalised and significantly unclaimed domestic space within the political implication of the public realm: "We left, and Islam predictably took to the streets, shaking Bhutto's empire. Mamma and Dadi remained the only women in the house, the one untalking, the other unpraying." (Suleri 42) In fact, Suleri's grandmother's death was significantly intertwined with history: "... Dadi was now dead. It happened in the same week that Bhutto finally was hanged, and our imaginations were consumed by that public and historical dying" (Suleri 44). It is Suleri's decision to steer away from a chronological linearity of her narrative that often fails to identify the cultural anchorage of a domestic space incorporated in most of the chapters. The domestic space here, presented in metaphors and comparisons, needs to be explored to completely grasp Suleri's narrative.

What is the domestic space for a woman? Rosemary George compiles a handful of ideas of de-territorialized domestic spaces in *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction*. She notes that, in "Claiming an Identity", Michelle Cliff writes of a garden that resembles a "private open space" (George 11). Caren Kaplan, who herself talks about a train where writers meet amidst movement, calls Cliff's garden "a new terrain, a new location in feminist poetics. Not a room of one's own, not a fully public or collective self, not a domestic realm – it is a space in the imagination which allows from the inside, the outside and the liminal elements in between" (qtd. in George, 11). Cliff's garden is a place where, for George, writing occurs without loss or separation. Further, Chandra Mohanty talks about the 'temporality of struggle', which she elaborates as "an insistent, simultaneous, non-synchronous process characterised by multiple locations rather than a search for origins and endings." (qtd. in George, 11) Most of the feminist critiques in the later period advocate moving away from the 'home' into transient spaces.

For George, the idea of such a feminist criticism is primarily deconstructive and it has created discomfort around the issues of home in the nation and the empire; the self and the home; domesticity and aspirations; Subject versus Other. The domestic space was a construct

of the male gaze, and such transient feminine selves who write and critique gendered narratives have found a comfortable space in between the very binaries constructed by societal and cultural coercions, and have consequently pelleted fixities of institutions like culture, society, canons, and gender. Women in Suleri's world narrate themselves into recognisable roles within the very discourses of control: patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and history. For instance, in the chapter 'The Immolation of Ifat', Ifat says, "Men live in homes, and women live in bodies" (Suleri 283), keeping the flesh in constant connect with the woman writer. For instance, the writer as a subject and history is an intersection for Trinh T. Minh-ha, who locates the act of writing within it in her book *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. She identifies three kinds of intersections—'woman writer', 'writer of colour', and 'woman of colour'—that are often at odds with the actual process of writing (Minh-ha 6). Suleri attempts to capture the essence of these three distinct kinds of intersections:

'Sara,' said Tillat, her voice deep with the promise of surprise, 'do you know what kapura are?' I was cooking and a little cross. 'Of course I do,' I answered with some affront. 'They're sweetbreads, and they're cooked with kidneys, and they're very good.' Natives should always be natives, exactly what they are, and I felt irked to be so probed around the issue of my own nativity. But Tillat's face was kindly with superior knowledge. 'Not sweetbread,' she gently said. 'They're testicles, that's what kapura really are.' Of course, I refused to believe her, went on cooking, and that was the end of that. (Suleri 51)

The humour in these lines bring the two women together with a sense of harmony and nostalgia. Anita Mannur's essay, "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora", appraises the nostalgic practices of using food to trace the idea of their homeland and strew it together, where "the desire to remember home by fondly recreating culinary memories cannot be understood merely as reflectively nostalgic gestures; rather such nostalgically-framed narratives must also be read as meta-critiques of what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one's relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which yoke national identity with culinary taste and practice" (Mannur 13).

The interconnectedness of the female figure with the domestic structures and the intimacy of food conversations represents a tradition of reclaiming patriarchal public spheres. While homes have always been associated with women, and their presence has been written and represented as the carriers of tradition and culture across generations, life-writing often penetrates as a counter-narrative to the built-in patriarchal structures from such spaces of

comradeship. The domestic space, an essential construct of the male gaze, has often been shifted to the fringes of the society. The idea that the female identity and subjectivity, enmeshed within a broad category of life-writing, is constantly associated or written in terms of belonging and home is significantly explored and is progressing on its way to encroach as a postcolonial 'canon' itself.⁴ For the postcolonial female writer, life-writing narratives attempt to situate an ever-evolving culture of travel and motif of transient personal journeys concomitant of female characters in postcolonial narratives. They develop alongside a structural history of lineage, culture, stories, and life experiences that not only create a sense of belonging, but also consecutively string a community of divergent histories and cultures together. Thus, transient female selves like Sara Suleri, propelling such counter-narratives, seek a comfortable space in between the very binaries assembled by societal and cultural coercions and have consequently pelleted fixities of institutions like culture, society, canons, and gender constructs.

⁴ See Mirza Zubair Baig's *Canon is Written Back: A Feminist/Postcolonial Critique* (2015).

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