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Eating Well, or, the Incalculability of the Other

Parama Roy. *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)

What does it mean to eat and to be eaten? And how, given that one *must* eat, should one eat well? Jacques Derrida's abiding questions about responsible ingestion both inaugurate Parama Roy's book in the form of an epigraph and inhabit its tracts in the manner of a symbiotic parasite. Derrida's provocations, which recast the mouth in place of the face as an ethical frontier, provide the bases for some of Roy's most important conceptual manoeuvres, as she orients our attention toward the sensual, lingual, verbal, carnal, haptic and olfactory appetites and aversions that precede and set the terms for encounters with otherness, and whose transmutations both feed and throw into crisis the regulatory apparatuses that have structured these encounters. Reciprocally, Roy's accounting of religion, caste, race, nationhood and gender as densely intermeshed grammars that dictate appetite and make it meaningful brings a resolutely postcolonialist set of commitments to bear on contemporary engagements with Derrida's speculations on hospitality, carnality and anthropophagy in 'Eating Well' and elsewhere. The book that results from this merger is a historically dense, fluidly metacritical, lucidly theorized and exquisitely written meditation on eating as a poetic and political practice in South Asia and its diaspora from the mid-1800s to the present – one that would be of equal interest to postcolonial and literary scholars, as well as to interlocutors of the emerging areas of critical animal studies, posthumanities and food studies. The nexus of literary and historical texts in which Roy situates her inquiry enables her to pose a series of questions regarding what she calls the 'biomoral' (p.16) stakes of eating that are both stimulating and original. While it would be impossible to do justice to all of the author's contributions in the space of this review, I attempt below to emphasize how the two poles of satiation and starvation that Roy holds in tension across her four chapters irrupt in the form of enduring questions regarding mimetic violence, sacrifice and the calculability of justice.

Before moving on to these, let me offer an overview of Roy's particular and generative approach to alimentation. In the introduction to her book, she describes the alimentary tract (encompassing not

just the mouth, but also 'skin, sinew, and gut', 'olfactory organs, and nerve endings') as both a 'somatic political unconscious' and as an 'alimentary habitus' that has deeply impacted the trajectory of colonial and postcolonial transactions in South Asia and its diaspora (p.7). With this cross-disciplinary binding, which jointly invokes Fredric Jameson's theory of narrative form and Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of cultural comportment, Roy conceptualizes the body in the colonial contact zone as a somatic archive – a structure that structures and is dialectically structured by warring dietary practices, and which is crucially generative of tropes of encounter (like caste, pollution, cannibalism, culinary patriotism or vegetarianism). Furthermore, she emphasizes how collective and only partly conscious alimentary dispositions have shaped colonial and postcolonial attitudes, engagements and forms. Embodied inclinations toward certain foods, she proposes, together with tastes and protocols of incorporation and purification, are not only coded as axiomatic and unconscious, but have, at critical moments, coagulated asymmetric power relations in the colony and postcolony.

Although she does not theorize it as such, Roy's harnessing of these literary and ethnographic models for examining the material culture of eating encourages us to think of food as a medium rather than as an object or event. Indeed, her discussions of eating in its literal and tropic dimensions encompass numerous registers of mediocrity, positioning food variously as an environment or milieu of existence; a state marking the mid-point between two extremes (life and death, satiation and starvation); a spiritual or political intermediary (as for instance, in sacrifice); an intervening substance that acquires and transmits cultural impressions; and a material or technical means of aesthetic expression which both sets limits for and generates expressive possibilities.

The role of the alimentary habitus in policing the permeable boundaries of bodies and identities among uncomfortably proximal cultural groups – colonizer and colonized, host and immigrant communities – is the primary preoccupation of Chapters 1 and 4, which chronologically book-end Roy's project, being situated in the mid-eighteenth century and the contemporary moment respectively. In these chapters, Roy explores contagious culinary tropes, artefacts and signifiers (grease, bread, spices, curry powder) whose capacities for multiplication, leaching-through and reproducibility indicate the paradoxes of

cultural authenticity, particularly in those situations when the quest for authenticity is taken to its logical extreme, and, folding upon itself, turns into its opposite.

The first of these chapters concerns the ‘digestive troping’ (p.32) that pervades literary accounts of the 1857 Mutiny, and which for Roy symptomatizes the enduring nature of the anxieties regarding bodily sanctity and infringement that affectively motored the rebellion. Weaving through official, historical, biographical, literary and critical accounts of the Mutiny, the author notes how this disaggregated and fragmented event is given narrative shape and form by a pervasive fetishistic investment in alimentary pollution. Rather than fixating on the cartridges greased with cow and pig fat (apocryphal to high-caste Hindu sepoys as well as their Muslim counterparts) that are commonly attributed as the singular and incontestable origin of the conflict, Roy attends to these culinary signifiers as vectors that open onto the gendered, sexual and caste-riven landscape of this slowly unfolding event and its aftermath, which involved instigations and antagonisms not only between Hindu sepoys and British imperialists, but also peasants, landlords and various other fringe constituencies.

The provocative argument that follows – regarding the complex investments of not only high-caste Indians but also the Anglo-Indian ruling classes in the delicate regulatory economy of difference held in place by the system of caste – bears recounting in some detail, given the ways it reverberates through the subsequent chapters. The disruption of this regulatory system, as Roy outlines it, unleashed a contagion of sameness that could only be held in abeyance by apotropaic acts of scapegoating violence wherein one group sought to imitate what made the other unique – if only to mark the other as profane, debased or alter. Labelling this unsanctioned desire for the other as ‘caste envy’ (p.72), Roy tallies a series of mimetic strikes and counter-strikes that together comprised the eventfulness of the rebellion: the curious alacrity with which the Anglo-Indian population acquired the literacy to read and participate in the subaltern grammar of rumour, transmitted as it was through a clandestine information economy of *chapatis* (Indian flatbread) changing hands; repeated references to Western dietary taboos in lore regarding the mutineers’ vengeful attacks on Anglo-Indian prisoners, who were allegedly forced to engage in cannibalism and autophagy; and the reciprocal desecration of caste-decreed taboos in the punishment of mutineers during the counter-

insurgency, in which rebels were forced to eat beef and pork, lick blood or smeared with animal fat before execution.

Chapter 1 draws to a contemplative close by questioning the function of such scapegoating violence against the threat of cultural contamination and homogenization. Circling around the apparently seamless substitutability of words and things, animals and humans, victims and aggressors in cross-cultural encounters, Roy ultimately defers an observation that Rey Chow has articulated as follows, in an essay on sacrifice, mimesis and victimhood: ‘Like sacrificial violence, sacrificial victims are surrogates, substitutes or stand-ins whose destruction helps save others (like them) from some larger horror’.¹ That this ultimate horror is, perhaps, the horror of sameness, is a realization that Roy withholds from the reader until the final chapter of her book, when she returns, albeit in a softer and more playful register, to consider the uses of imitation as a cultural prophylactic in the contemporary South Asian diaspora. Chapter 4 travels a full circle from Anglo-Indians in the colony to the conundrums of authenticity of cosmopolitan Indian immigrants in the metropole, refracted through the figure of celebrity chef, actress and cook-book author Madhur Jaffrey. Here, Roy traces transformations in Jaffrey’s references to ‘spices’ as an autoethnographic trope across her literary and cinematic career, noting how subtle modulations in the connotations of this trope – from representing culinary authenticity, exoticism, singularity and heterogeneity to conveying cultural homogeneity, mass-reproducibility, flatness and sameness (as encapsulated in the catch-all product ‘curry powder’) – have enabled Jaffrey to differentially leverage and modulate her iconic appeal to South Asian and British audiences in the former colonies and abroad. Indeed, Roy’s account of Jaffrey’s self-orientalizing strategies in this final chapter functions as a response to the open questions posed in the first, even if this response takes the form of a dilemma: one that suggests that Jaffrey’s brand of chimerical play with difference and sameness – which incorporates and regurgitates the distorted gaze that mediates performances of ethnic difference – may be the only viable strategy open to postcolonial ethnics in the context of capitalist multicultural liberalism, where the desirability of difference can turn just as quickly into intolerable sameness.

Compelling as the first and fourth chapters are, some of the most beautiful points in Roy’s book are raised in Chapters 2 and 3, which deal in turn with

hunger and starvation as a political performance and as a lived subaltern reality. Superficially, these chapters seem unrelated, but together they read as meditations on two very different modes of advocacy that attempt to respond to the ethical problems of subalternity: M.K. Gandhi's political performances and Mahasweta Devi's literary practice. Chapter 2 is concerned largely with Gandhi's dietary experiments, ranging from vegetarianism, to hunger fasts (most prominently those aiming to draw moral attention to the disenfranchisement of untouchables), to ascetic eating. But rather than situating Gandhi's dietetics in the context of his mission of spiritual self-discipline or the philosophy of non-violence, as previous critical studies and biographies of Gandhi have done, Roy frames them as tensely gendered exercises in power, which struggled at the national level to invest new symbolic strength in the emasculated or 'flaccid' image of the Hindu vegetarian male, and grappled at the domestic level with the inescapably patriarchal implications of the *ahimsaic* principles of asceticism and sacrifice.

Roy places the figure of the subaltern (in many ways the symbolic beneficiary of Gandhi's sacrifices) at the centre of Chapter 3, and in so doing, deepens the quandaries concerning sacrifice that confronted Gandhi at the limits of his political practice: 'Who is it who can undertake the responsibility of sacrifice? If sacrifice is a burden it is surely also an entitlement and an assertion of one's rights over one's body and one's actions and those of others. Can a woman be a sacrificer?' (p.109). These are questions that pervade Chapter 3, which chronicles the staggering sacrifice of the subaltern populations of India in the form of chronic malnutrition and dearth born of long-standing state neglect, abandonment and disregard. Labelling these peasant, tribal and *adivasi* (aboriginal) populations as the 'unaccountable' noncitizens of the biopolitical state, Roy argues

that the fact of subaltern hunger and starvation is precisely what is eclipsed by the catastrophization and spectacularization of famine (and coming on the heels of Gandhi's hunger fasts, we might include, the iconicization of celebrity performances of starvation). Turning to the fiction of the social activist and writer Mahasweta Devi, Roy beautifully and painstakingly reveals how Devi's approach to prose – which interweaves magical and documentary realism, demographic data and fiction, journalism and ethnography – attempts a just accounting of how the subaltern noncitizen repeatedly eludes the myopic calculations of governmental agencies and humanitarian advocates alike. As a tentative title for the genre of Devi's prose, which she argues is 'neither modernist nostalgia for the primitive nor an exercise in science fictional time travel [...] [but] tragic lament, passionate denunciation, and apocalyptic foreboding' (p.141), Roy offers the 'bureaucratic gothic' (p.127). As with the other chapters in her book, Roy provides no easy answers in this one, but powerfully asks about the ethical role that literature – in its reading, writing and accounting – can achieve in postcolonial circumstances where the so-called gifts of government subsidies and humanitarian assistance are set up to fail.

Notes

¹ Rey Chow, 'Sacrifice, Mimesis, and the Theorizing of Victimhood', in *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p.102.

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