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Rebut: 16.09.2022. Acceptat: 07.10.2022

Per a citar aquest article: Morelli, Maria. 2022. "Culinary Discourse, Diaspora and Motherhood in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*". *Quaderns de Filologia: Estudis Literaris* XXVII: 129-144.

doi: 10.7203/qdfed.27.25744



## Culinary Discourse, Diaspora and Motherhood in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*

Discurso culinario, diáspora y maternidad en *Meatless Days* de Sara Suleri

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**Abstract:** The literal meaning of its title notwithstanding, Sara Suleri's days as portrayed in her memoir are far from meatless. In fact, *Meatless Days* (1989) is very much food-focused, with images of meat, and of food in general, figuring either literally – as part of religious traditions – or symbolically – in association with the nurturing maternal body. This article explores Suleri's recourse to the culinary trope as questioning and destabilising taken-for-granted issues of gendered national subjectivity (i.e., the identification of women with their social role as food purveyors), nativeness (i.e., the tie between migrants and their homeland) and postcolonial legacies (i.e., the idea of food as a repository of the national past). Food functions in the text not just as a mediator to an extended recollection of the author's pre-emigration culinary memories, but also and especially as a shifting signifier for deconstructing binary oppositions, here specifically between the coloniser and the colonised, the native and the non-native, the mother and the barren woman.

**Keywords:** food; women's writing; motherhood; gender roles; Sara Suleri; postcolonial literature.

**Resumen:** A pesar del significado literal de su título, los días de Sara Suleri tal y como aparecen en su autobiografía están lejos de ser *meatless* (sin carne). De hecho, *Meatless Days* (1989) gira alrededor del tema de la comida, con imágenes de carne, o de comida en general, empleados en sentido tanto literal –como parte de tradiciones religiosas– como metafórico –en conexión con la nutrición del cuerpo materno–. Este artículo examina el recurso del tropo culinario con el fin de cuestionar y desestabilizar asuntos de identidad nacional y de género (como por ejemplo la identificación de la mujer con su papel de cuidadora), pertenencia (como el nexo entre los migrantes y sus lugares de origen) y la herencia postcolonial (así como la idea de la comida como la depositaria de la memoria histórica). La función de la comida en el texto no es solo de mediadora con los recuerdos culinarios de la experiencia pre-migrante de la autora, sino (y sobre todo) un significante fluido para la deconstrucción de las oposiciones binarias, y en particular de las existentes entre el colonizador y el colonizado, el nativo y el no nativo, la madre y la mujer infértil.

**Palabras clave:** comida; escritura de mujeres; maternidad; roles de género; Sara Suleri; literatura postcolonial.

Issues of diaspora, food and motherhood intersect in *Meatless Days* (1989), the memoir of literary critic and theorist Sara Suleri (1953-2022) often cited as a foundational text of postcolonial theory. Born in Karachi, Pakistan, under British rule and a witness to the formation of the new nation after the country's partition, Suleri's difficult classification as either a "Pakistani" or "Indian" writer is further problematised if we consider that she spent most of her life in America, where she naturalised as a U. S. citizen. The singularity of her migratory experience and background informs her writings. A member of the Indian upper-middle class, Suleri left her home country to pursue an academic career as a professor of English Literature at Yale. Her autobiographical text considered in this article thus stages a split between the place of her memories and that of her writing, for it tells of the author's pre-diasporic, Indian experience through the lens of her American citizenship.

Partly an erratic autobiography and partly a biographical mixture of anecdotes concerning her family, *Meatless Days* stands, also, as a feminist account of Pakistan whereby the peripheral presence of the country's invisible women is brought back to the centre. The text has been recognised the merit of "repudiat[ing] master narratives" (Mannur, 2002: 20), to be understood here as both the gendered national subjectivity women are bestowed upon in and by Suleri's native country (with which the author will always maintain a critical stance), but also the objectification (fetishisation) of those very same women by Western eyes, whereby the colonised and the coloniser's gaze are quite remarkably made to coincide<sup>1</sup>. Divided into nine stand-alone chapters spanning both pre- and post-migration –childhood and adulthood– memories, Suleri's unorthodox memoir interweaves feminist reflections with humorous and affectionate sketches of the author's family members and closest friends, whose private stories function as an interface with the official history of the nation. It is through the tension that arises from this constant negotiation between the personal and the political that Suleri tries to forge her sense of individual identity. She does this through a decentered and ahistorical position as a Third World woman transplanted to the United States, from where she can deconstruct the grand narrative of her native Pakistan by superimposing her matrilineal genealogy onto it. In her memoir she thus sets herself the task of rewriting the stories of her (mostly female) family members against the gen-

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<sup>1</sup> The text's autobiographical "I" and subtitle "A memoir" are problematised if we consider that the author is underrepresented; a move that has been identified as bearing similarities with the postmodern technique of self-erasure (Ponzanesi, 2004: 66).

esis of the nation, in a move that makes private histories public, and public events a mere background to the narration.

The title *Meatless Days* refers to the controversial and much debated decision of the government of the newly born nation, following the formation of Pakistan (in 1947) to restrain from eating meat two days a week, so as to preserve the national supply of cattle and goats. The literal meaning notwithstanding, Suleri's days are far from meatless. In fact, they are very much food-focused, with images of meat, and of food in general, figuring either literally –as part of religious traditions– or symbolically, in association with the nurturing maternal body. The centrality of food in the shaping of her subjectivity is clearly stated by the author when she claims:

I am wrong, then, to say that my parable has to do with nothing less than the imaginative extravagance of food and all the transmutations of which it is capable? Food certainly gave us a way not simply of ordering a week or a day but of living inside history, measuring everything we remember against a chronology of cooks. Just as Papa had his own yardstick – a word he loved – with which to measure history and would talk about the Ayub era, or the second martial law, or the Bhutto regime, so my sisters and I would place ourselves in time by remembering and naming cooks (*Meatless Days* 34).

Just as her political enthusiast father, a fervent supporter of a Muslim state, keeps track of history through a succession of decrees and regimes, Suleri does so through a chronology of Pakistani cooks, thereby sanctioning the role of food in defining both her personal and collective identity. Too pervasive to be merely coincidental, the recourse to food imagery in *Meatless Days* has not escaped scholarly attention. Locating the gastronomic discourse in Suleri's memoir within the tradition of (South Asian) migrant literature, critics have foregrounded issues of culinary nostalgia (or lack of it) for one's homeland (Mannur, 2007), or else the tie between cultural roots and female identity (Roy, 2002). At a more corporeal level, it has been noted how Suleri locates the concept of food in women's sexed bodies on account of their maternal function, shifting the attention from the female body as a source of sustenance on to the act of being "consumed" through breastfeeding; that is, from the child's consumption of the maternal milk on to the mother's own consumption at the hand of the suckling child (Fagan, 2008). "In her awareness of the female bodies as homes for the unborn, and of the consumption upon birth of the mother through the infant's ingestion of the mother's milk", as Deirdre Fagan explains, "Suleri draws attention throughout *Meatless Days*

to not only the relationship between women and food, but to the concept of women *as food*" (2008: 182)<sup>2</sup>. Keeping in with the metaphorisation of the female body as food, in my reading of Suleri's text I focus on the author's recourse to the culinary trope as questioning and destabilising taken-for-granted issues of gendered national subjectivity (i. e., the identification of women with their social role as food purveyors), nativeness (i. e., the tie between migrants and their homeland) and postcolonial legacies (i. e., the idea of food as a repository of the national past). Food functions in the text not just as a mediator to an extended recollection of the author's pre-emigration culinary memories, but also and especially as a shifting signifier for deconstructing binary oppositions, here specifically between the coloniser and the colonised, the native and the non-native, the mother and the barren woman.

*Meatless Days* betrays Suleri's preoccupation with an essentialist model of femininity that casts women in the patriarchal role of carers. Crucially, the author affirms the centrality of food in her life, and in that of the other women around her, without, however, buying into a kitchen culture for which the relationship between women and motherly nourishment is thought of in prescriptive terms. In the first chapter of her memoir, called "Excellent Things in Women"<sup>3</sup>, she foregrounds and sets up a matrilineal genealogy by sketching the female figures that in one way or another have shaped her childhood and sense of self: her paternal grandmother, Dadi, her Welsh mother, Mairi, and her dear sisters and mothers to be, Ifat and Tillat. The culinary connection with femininity is made clear as early as the first lines with a reference to breastfeeding: "Dale [a fellow South Asian woman] will write a book about the secretive life of breastfeeding" (*Meatless Days* 1). A childless woman herself, breastfeeding must certainly seem alien ("secretive") to the author. Having established a correlation between women and their role as feeders for the newborn, in the following paragraph, she moves on to explain who these women are:

To a stranger or an acquaintance, however, some vestigial remoteness obliges me to explain that my reference is to a place where the concept of woman was

<sup>2</sup> The motif of women as food to be consumed reminds us of *The Edible Woman* (1969), the internationally renowned first novel of Canadian feminist author Margaret Atwood, where the protagonist, Marian, bakes a cake in the shape of her own image and offers it to her fiancé on his birthday, thus symbolically renouncing her former passive self and refusing to be manipulated any longer, providing him with a substitute to consume instead.

<sup>3</sup> Originally conceived as an essay, the chapter received the Pushcart Prize in 1987.

not really part of an available vocabulary: we are too busy for that, just living, a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant. By this point admittedly I am damned by my own discourse, and doubly damned when I add yes, once in a while, we naturally thought of ourselves as women, but only in some perfunctory biological way that we happened on perchance (*Meatless Days* 1).

Although there is no explicit mention of breastfeeding here, the allusion is not lost. Albeit implicitly, the reference is still to the “perfunctory” role of woman as functional to those she is in relation to as “a wife or a mother or a servant”, where the last term quite possibly is meant to encompass the other two. These are the women of Suleri’s native Pakistan who, thought of in “biological” terms, just like Dadi, marry at sixteen and cannot remember how many children they have born (*Meatless Days* 2).

Because the author posits her life in relation to that of other women from the start, the claim that “there are no women in the third world” (*Meatless Days* 20) –proffered to a student who has inquired about the scarcity of women writers in the syllabus– cannot not sound oxymoronic. In raising the issue of the absence of women in the Third World, Suleri’s text can be read as engaging in the feminist debate over postcolonial women’s subjectivity and (un)representability. Her stance would thus appear in line with Gayatri Spivak’s affirmation that “between patriarchy and imperialism [...] the figure of woman disappears” (1988: 304). In the case of Third World women specifically, Suleri’s claim that they do not exist is meant to denounce the impossibility to be spoken of outside of a Western vocabulary that constructs them not as subjects but as objects. This concept also tallies in with postcolonial studies scholar Chandra Mohanty’s denunciation of the representation of Third World women “under Western eyes”, as laid out in her seminal essay by the same title (1984). As the latter specified later on in response to the criticism she received for her previous work, however, she never intended to deny the possibility of solidarity between Western and Third World feminists, but rather to reinstate the necessity of affirming “the particular over the universal” (Mohanty, 2003: 503)<sup>4</sup>. In her memoir, Suleri does just that: she counters the public invisibility of Pakistani women through the fictionalisation of their

<sup>4</sup> Just like Mohanty, Suleri, too, speaks as a Third World woman from an elite (mainly, white) American institution. However, both scholars ultimately use their privileged position as a Trojan horse in occupying a favourable space and in giving a platform to their voiceless fellow women through their work. Specifically in the case of Suleri, who wrote *Meatless Days* while teaching at Yale, it could be argued that, in her female-oriented memoir, she also contributed to expanding the academic curriculum by positioning herself in it.

private lives and, in so doing, she inscribes them in the history of the nation, thereby, also, superimposing the individual onto the collective. Suleri is trying to extricate “women” from essentialist oppositions, that is, their inscription into (Western) general categories according to “a discourse of convenience” (*Meatless Days* 20) where food, among other variables, works as a measuring stick in their construction not as full subjects but as social functions. She iterates her point on the objectification of women in her essay “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition” when she writes:

The concept of the post-colonial itself is too frequently robbed of historical specificity in order to function as a preapproved allegory for any mode of discursive contestation. The coupling of *postcolonial* with *woman*, however, almost inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinkingly celebrations of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for “the good”. Such metaphoricity cannot exactly be called essentialist, but it certainly functions as an impediment to a reading that attempts to look beyond obvious questions of good and evil (1992: 758-59)<sup>5</sup>.

In this text, written just a few years apart from *Meatless Days*, Suleri restates the importance of specificity –of the female experience, that is– over the universal. It is to resuscitate the anonymous existence of the women in her life that she writes about them, thereby extricating them from the all-encompassing category of postcolonial subjects. When, writing from her new home in New Haven she claim “I miss, of course, the absence of women” (*Meatless Days* 19), the oxymoron of “missing one’s absence” again suggests the divide between the condition of Pakistani women, unaware of themselves as living outside of their categorical definition as wives or mothers (and outside of their kitchens) and the author’s new, non-communal and individualistic American life. Suleri’s task in the text is twofold. She reinscribes into history her female friends and family members, who have been silenced twice over by national erasure and patriarchal oppression and, at the same time, she also seeks to carve out a place outside of Pakistani culture by positing her narrative self in relation (albeit oppositional) to those very women. In line with Adriana Cavarero’s relational approach to autobiography (1997), Suleri foregrounds the role of the “necessary other(s)” as fundamental in the act

<sup>5</sup> In this essay, Suleri further investigates the demarcation between Western and Third World women and the question of authenticity (who can speak for whom) in postcolonial discourse.

of reconstructing one's story<sup>6</sup>. On the importance of relationality in *Meatless Days*, Oliver Lovesey claims that "Suleri is not her tale's protagonist" (1997: 43), while Shazia Rahman concurs: "Suleri's life story cannot be read except in relation to the stories of others in her life" (2004: 349). However, while reinstating the relational nature of one's story, Suleri also goes beyond Cavarero in extricating her sense of self from how others see and perceive her –that which the philosopher considers a precondition of autobiography (Cavarero, 2000: 24)– portraying instead how *she* sees and perceives them.

It is to Dadi, Sara's paternal grandmother, that large part of the narration in the first chapter is devoted to<sup>7</sup>, and particularly to her quasi-religious relationship with food: "we never quite determined whether food or God constituted her most profound delight" (*Meatless Days* 3). Moved by the "intensities" (*Meatless Days* 3) of food, Dadi would ritually ask for less and expect her plate to be filled with more than she has demanded. Her fascination lies in the slaughter and preparation of animals, which in Pakistan is performed sacrificially following the prayers of the Muslim festival Eid, when people slaughter and consume the goats they have bought and reared for the purpose. While Suleri's Welsh mother dismisses the "chopping up [of] animals for God" (*Meatless Days* 4), her grandmother instead lives and "pine[s] for choppable things" (*Meatless Days* 4). One year, Dadi buys a baby goat –which she plans to feed on "tender peas and clarified butter" (*Meatless Days* 4) so as to improve the texture of its flesh and make it more succulent –but makes the mistake of bringing it home months in advance of Eid<sup>8</sup>. What happens next is quite predictable, for the goat becomes the delight of Suleri and her brother and is therefore not to be slaughtered. Years later, however, once the idea of killing the animal-pet seems to have been written off for good, Dadi succeeds in implementing her original plan and, much to the horror of the whole family, brings it to the table, minced and cooked in shimmering sauce. While everyone else refuses to have it, the woman eats the butchered goat with eagerness, among her grandchildren's sobs, as if "she was making God talk to her as to Abraham and was showing him what she could do–for him–to sons" (*Meat-*

<sup>6</sup> On the relational quality of identity, and of narrating as inevitably bound up with the other, Cavarero writes: "la memoria pretende di aver visto ciò che si rivela soltanto allo sguardo dell'altro" [memory claims to have seen what, in fact, only the gaze of the other can reveal] (1997: 57).

<sup>7</sup> I will henceforth refer to "Sara" as the narrator of the text, as distinguished from "Suleri", the author.

<sup>8</sup> Suleri specifies that there are two Muslim festivals call Eid, one where you fast, and the other one –to which she is referring in the Dadi episode recalled above– that instead celebrates the seductions of food (*Meatless Days* 4).



less Days 5). While Dadi seems to have literally assumed Abraham's story, to which Eid is dedicated ("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", *Meatless Days* 5), Sara's mother is more disappointed than ever. What we have here is a clash between the two cultures –that of the colonised and that of the coloniser– of which the two women stand as representatives in the text. Because Dadi is such an entrenched spokeswoman of her Pakistani heritage, and sometimes even radically so, I do not wholly agree with Fagan's interpretation that her breasts turning into little "love knots" (*Meatless Days* 14) after she has scalded herself with boiling water symbolise an abdication from maternal functions (Fagan, 2008: 188)<sup>9</sup>. Leaving aside the obvious reason that, as the scholar herself admits, Dadi is far beyond childrearing and breastfeeding age, I find it more relevant and consistent, in consideration of the textual role of the character as a whole, to stress not just that the grandmother's breasts are no longer of use, but that they have shrunk to the point of almost disappearing now that her maternal "task" –as a source of milk, that is– has been performed. This is particularly significant if we consider the fact that, as previously mentioned, the woman is unable to even recall the number of children to whom she has given birth, which signifies her identification with her maternal functions. This interpretation of Dadi as a representative of a kitchen culture whereby women are thought of in functional terms would find further textual confirmation in the episode of Mairi's funeral, with Sara's grandmother behaving inappropriately and devouring her food with much appetite and little mourning "as though this death had reinstated her as mother of the house" (*Meatless Days* 16) –that is, metaphorically, sanctioning the victory of her (Pakistani) belief system and cultural roots over the (Western) one of her unwelcome "white legged" daughter-in-law.

In the chapter that gives the book its name, food becomes a particularly pervasive presence, one that frames the narration and serves as a ruse for the reconstruction of the narrator's past, but also as a compelling metaphor of Suleri's mother's way of filtering and processing –digesting, so to speak– her encounter with foreign, Pakistani culture. Suleri is already settled in her new

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<sup>9</sup> Fagan's claim should be cited in full: "The vanishing of Dadi's nipples seems to signify her withdrawal into herself; the return of them as mere love knots symbolize her transformation into something other, something apart, something also not necessarily motherly. Since nipples are, through breastfeeding, the source of a mother's nurturing milk, without them, Dadi has lost some of her ability to nurture or mother, even though she is well beyond child-bearing age" (2008: 188).



life in The United States, in New Haven, where she teaches English at Yale. One day her younger sister Tillat comes to visit and reveals the secret of a typical dish of Pakistani cuisine, *kapura*, which turns out to be made of animal testicles and not sweetbreads, as Suleri's mother had made her believe all along. The *kapura* betrayal serves as a prop sustaining the author's reflections on language, interpretation, and mediation with one's culture of origin:

My mother knew that sweetbreads are testicles but had cunningly devised a ruse to make me consume as many parts of the world as she could before she set me loose in it. The thought appalled me. It was almost as bad as attempting to imagine what the slippage was that took me from nipple to bottle and away from the great letdown that signifies lactation. What a falling off! (*Meatless Days* 23).

Suleri here compares the letdown inflicted by her maternal "gastronomic wrongs" (*Meatless Days* 23) to that of breastfeeding, the moment when you are turned away from the breast and to the bottle. In light of this cultural incident, I am suspicious of Fagan's association of maternal milk in the novel with the creation of a new feminine tongue (2008: 186). If maternal milk is to be interpreted as discourse, then this discourse is a deceitful one, as emblematically revealed by Mairi's untrustworthy mediation with her daughter's Pakistani roots. The duplicity of food in the novel is further emphasised by Suleri in connection to the food market in her country:

To some degrees all of us were equally watchful for hidden trickeries in the scheme of nourishment, for the way in which things would always be missing or out of place [...]. Items of security—such as flour or butter or cigarettes or tea—were always vanishing, or returning in such dubiously shiny attire that we could barely stand to look at them. We lived in expectation of a threatening surprise (*Meatless Days* 28-29).

This unusual association of food with deceit challenges the taken-for-granted assumption of migrants' narratives as depositories of culinary nostalgia, for Suleri's narrative is not so such an imaginary return to a homeland as "one that casts doubt on the certitude with which expatriates adamantly and passionately defend the alimentary practices [of their country of origin]" (Manur, 2007: 27)<sup>10</sup>. As such, the conversation with Tillat reveals Sara's conflict of double belonging, torn between her mother Welshness and the dilemma

<sup>10</sup> The reference is to Salman Rushdie's now classic *Imaginary Homelands* (1991).

of her Pakistaniness, which has been deceitfully undermined by maternal invention. Sara rightly feels betrayed, for she has just now learned that she was the only one among her siblings to be wrong about the true nature of the Pakistani national dish. *Kapura* thus serves as a foil to the cultural displacement of Sara's mother in a foreign country that she has made her home, a displacement that the daughter now discovers to have unwittingly inherited<sup>11</sup>. This produces a split from the feeling of being foreign in her own culture, her own nativeness, and ignoring the truth behind a staple dish that everyone else seems to know, from her sister-informant to her fellow Pakistanis living in New York. Sara feels crossed when Tillat confronts her on the topic, putting her knowledge to question:

“Do you know what *kapura* are?” I was cooking and I was a little cross. “Of course I do”, I answer with some affront. “They’re sweetbreads, and they are cooked with kidneys, and they are 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” (*Meatless Days* 22).

A hiatus opens up between the paternal and maternal culture, with Sara adhering to both of them and neither at once. She is aware that the socially prescribed role demanded of her body by her native Pakistan is that she becomes a vessel and a source of nourishment for the unborn, which she adamantly refuses. On the other hand, however, she is also suspicious of her mother's Western interpretations that, as a child, she used to take at face value. As such, she disenfranchises herself from both paternal and maternal (food) culture. Quite significantly, her mother's explanation of *kapura* is described in culinary terms as an attempt to make her daughter “consume” the world, leading Sara to ask herself “what else [she has] eaten on her behalf?” (*Meatless Days* 23). *Mamma* is and will remain foreign to Pakistan's food culture, as made emblematic in her opposition to the butchering of animals on occasion of Eid in the episode recalled above. Despite nominally accepting her spouse's Islam faith, Mairi is an outsider to a culture that she perceives as alien, confining herself to a perpetual condition of estrangement in her new country, “living in a resistant culture” (*Meatless Days* 163) and apart from

<sup>11</sup> In an entire chapter, called “What Mama Knew”, Suleri narrates Mairi's displacement in the culture in which she lives, and in which she always maintains a marginal position.

herself, retreating into Welshness and absent-mindedness as an antidote to alienation. As such, her reinterpretation of *kapura* can be taken as a way to process –or to digest, to keep with the food metaphor– the eating habits of her host country. But it can also be seen as an attempt to act as a mediator with her daughter so that she is not entirely swallowed up by a culture where, as put plainly by Suleri, women do not exist (*Meatless Days* 20).

Women, and especially postcolonial ones, are often regarded as the bearers of national values, of which the culinary tradition is *the* tradition par excellence, passed from one generation on to the next one down the matrilineal line, so as to create and maintain existing bonds between its female members. This is why Sara's mother's breaking with the tradition and betraying her role as homemaker, instead using her foreignness to entrench herself outside of "hidden cultural rituals she was too polite to disturb" (*Meatless Days* 79), is all the more emblematic. As argued by Ponzanesi, such "disavowal of familiarity suggests an alternative and creative location that can encompass the contradictions of migrancy and displacement" (2004: 77-78). "Mair Suleri" the scholar continues, "passes on to her daughter that study of tangentiality that allows women to survive in alien cultures" (2004: 78). As a result, the fact of living, and writing, from a marginal position with respect to one's native culture contributes to further increase the distance between the writer of the memoir (Suleri) and the subject of the narration (Sara). In so doing, the author sets *Meatless Days* apart from traditional autobiography understood as the linear development of a narrative self, to which she superimposes the fluid time of memory and the "women's time" of her female family members<sup>12</sup>. Food thus plays a crucial role in the shaping of the narrator's relationship with, and positioning within, family and society, but also in the (re)telling of her personal story. What is more, and as pointed out by Shazia Rahaman, by deconstructing the category of the native as the knowledgeable informant, it also works "against orientalism because the authentic native is crucial to orientalism [for] all of the assumptions of orientalism are based on the native as different from the non-native because she has authentic knowledge of her native culture" (2004: 355). Inaugurated by Edward W. Said influential work by the same name (1978), "orientalism" is the thinker's reading of the colonial

<sup>12</sup> The first chapter of *Meatless Days* was published by Chicago UP in 2013 with the extended subtitle: "Excellent Things in Women: a memoir of postcolonial Pakistan", which cannot not sound suspicious if we consider the position of the author with respect to the official history of the nation as discussed above.

enterprise as the West superimposing a mythical figuration on to an all-encompassing non-European and essentialised Oriental “Other”. Suleri realises that her native culture is not fully accessible to her, thereby undermining “the binary that separates native from non-native” (Rahaman, 2004: 355) on which the notion of orientalism is premised upon. Furthermore, and as noted by Warley, “the fact that *kapura* are goat’s testicles is not as significant as the narrator’s attempts to uncover the origins of her assumptions about food and the long personal history that she has with it”. Indeed, the task the narrator sets herself in the text is not so much “being in knowledge” but rather finding “ways of *coming* to knowledge” (1992: 114-15; my own emphasis).

Food, and the ability to produce it, is used in *Meatless Days* as a *fil rouge* connecting women and men with their expected social functions. According to Suleri’s grandmother, women are conscious not just of their ability to suckle others, but also of the memory of having been suckled themselves, while men, on the other hand, would “live as through they were unsuckled things” (*Meatless Days* 7). This gendered division is rendered textually in the different ways women and men are framed in relationship to food. Whereas female family members are described in connection with either breastfeeding (Ifat and Tillat) or eating (Dadi and Mairi), men (here specifically, Suleri’s father) are portrayed in relation to their approach to History. Women are “eaten up” by their children –to whom they provide food in the form of milk and by whom they are *selflessly* consumed– whereas men are in turn “cannibalized” by politics, to which they *selfishly* devote their whole life at the cost of neglecting their own kin. Nicknamed Pip by her family, which clear references to the Dickensian character of *Great Expectations*, the account Suleri gives of her father is affectionate and critical at once, a portrait of a man too busy writing about the nation to be able to provide emotionally for his family. When he is sent to London as a foreign correspondent, they all move with him, only to pack up their bags again and be shipped back to Pakistan after some years. Pip feels uneasy about living in the city because once more there he is part of a minority (*Meatless Days* 119), a status against which he has been fighting all his life. This is why he cannot conceive of his daughter’s choice to migrate to the United States: “For a while he looked at me as if I were telling him that I was not part of a nation anymore, that I was a minority” (*Meatless Days* 123). Unlike her father, for whom the ideal of a Muslim nationhood becomes his main reason in life –indeed what makes him feel “historical”– in Pakistan, Sara feels as if she is “an otherness machine” (*Meatless Days* 105) who has been following a script that somebody else has written for her. Her parting with Pakistan

coincides with her father's leaving the *Pakistan Times* and becoming the government's most vocal critic. History had been both his romance and eventual demise, as so much editing and writing turned him almost blind while he was too busy to even realise "History was turning his eyes inward" (*Meatless Days* 123), thereby, literally, eating him up. Upon moving to New Haven, the break from an endless circulation of political news and the thought of waking up without a newspaper at her door gives Sara some respite. Above anything else, she feels relieved by no longer being enmeshed in her father's business, which is visually rendered in the text through the image of Pip's typing machine, the "great machine at the heart of things [with] a manufacturer's name emblazoned on one side: [...] h-i-s-t-o-r-y" (*Meatless Days* 118), a machine that, following the food metaphor that permeates the text, swallows everything and everyone up, voraciously. Only by subtracting herself from her father, that is, by refusing to be cannibalised by his all-encompassing approach to History, can Suleri feel that she has become "historical, a creature gravely ready to admit that significance did not sit upon someone else's table like a magazine to which one could or could not subscribe" (*Meatless Days* 127).

When associated to religious practice, food in *Meatless Days* is depicted as a festive communal experience, such as we have with the Eid banquets adorned with "dried dates [...] soaked in milk, and carrots rich and strange [...] covered with green nutty shavings and smatterings of silver" (*Meatless Days* 5), or the *sehri*, the pre-fast meal designed to sustain the penitent until dusk with "bread dripping clarified butter, and curried brains, and cumin eggs, and a peculiarly potent vermicelli, soaked overnight in sugar and fatted milk" (*Meatless Days* 30). On these occasions, Sara is keen to wake up at dawn to enjoy the lavish foods, which make fasting all the easier. But food in the text does not only signify nourishment –whether actual or spiritual– for the body. It also denotes the transformation the female body undergoes when expecting, including the gain of excessive gestational weight due to overeating. The author details the pains of her sister Ifat when she is pregnant with Ayesha and, confronted with her ever expanding body ("I've eaten too much, I've eaten too much", *Meatless Days* 35) laments the fact that, with pregnancy, "there's too much body about the business [...] and too much of it is your own" (*Meatless Days* 35). When associated with breastfeeding, on the other hand, food becomes something meant for the newborn's consumption, which in turn repletes (consumes) the woman's body that has produced it. After giving birth, Ifat becomes a producer of food and a breast-feeding machine for a baby who refuses to suckle, bloating her breasts in engorgement. The image

of her lying in bed surrounded by breast pumps, which to her sister Sara look just like “instruments of torture” (*Meatless Days* 35), is a powerful one where the stress is on the disciplining of women’s bodies as subordinate to their biological function of bearing progeny. Filtered through Suleri’s eyes, Ifat’s traumatic experience of motherhood somehow recalls Adrienne Rich’s passionate denunciation of “the institution” of motherhood in her seminal *Of Woman Born* (originally published in 1976), written around the years of Suleri’s memories. Combining her personal experience with anthropological and historical research, Rich almost shockingly reveals her ambivalent relationship of love and hate towards her own sons:

Sometimes I seem to myself, in my feelings towards these tiny guiltless beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance. Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted. And I am weak sometimes from held-in rage. There are times when I feel only death will free us from one another, when I envy the barren woman who has the luxury of her regrets but lives a life of privacy and freedom (1977: 1).

However extreme these words might sound, Rich ought to be given the merit for voicing the ambiguity, and even the frustration, inherent in the experience of motherhood as an understandable response to having to adjust to an unknown territory. In an analogous manner, Suleri’s sister also expresses her exhaustion when she compares her own milk to an “extraneous liquid” (*Meatless Days* 35), and the child in her womb as a kicking intruder against whom she feels powerless and unable to defend herself (*Meatless Days* 35), where the emphasis is on the new mother’s sense of utter dispossession and alienation. Having made clear the distinction between motherhood as a “*potential relationship*” of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children” (1976: 13) and the “*institution*” that secures male control over it, in the introduction to her book Rich hastens to clarify that hers “is not an attack on the family or on mothering *except as defined and restricted under patriarchy*” (1976: 13; Rich’s emphasis). Similarly, the object of Suleri’s critical stance here is not so much motherhood as a conscious choice, but rather the social construction of “woman” that makes her subordinate to her function in society, divesting her of individuality in name of the maternal role she is called to perform.

Unlike her sister, the author refuses to be consumed and engorged by pregnancy: “expressing letters rather than breasts was my normal ken” (*Meatless Days* 35), and resists what she perceives as a bodily dispossession by re-

maintaining childless, thereby giving birth to books rather than babies. However, this does not come without any personal conflict on her part. While on the one hand she is aware that being “eaten” by babies is not something she will ever choose for herself, on the other hand she is also conscious that, in refusing to become a mother, she is betraying her biological potential: “You were born fit; you rendered yourself unfit” (*Meatless Days* 127), she writes of herself, thereby admitting her inner struggle. Not only does she reject motherhood, in a most emblematic dream she pictures her own mother as butchered into pieces of meat, which she steals and secretly eats up (*Meatless Days* 44); the incorporation of food here conjuring up the characteristic drives of the mother-child semiotic stage and suggesting a regression of some sort. This is not the only instance when the mother is seen as edible flesh. Later on in the text, maternal nostalgia will again be expressed in culinary terms, suggesting a form of oral fixation: “Flavor of my infancy, my mother, still be food” (*Meatless Days* 160). On the imbrication between food and the body, philosopher Julia Kristeva claims that identity boundaries (self/other; subject/object) are threatened by “that ambivalence, duplicity, or permanent or potential compound between same and other that all nourishment signifies” (1982: 76). In consideration of Kristeva’s paradigm, Suleri’s rejection of “being other” (*Meatless Days* 105), which is to be read as her refusal of being *m/Other*, can therefore be interpreted as the expression of the protagonist’s disenchantment with a culture that frames her as an individual in the service of other people, or as “an otherness machine”, in her own words (*Meatless Days* 105).

Food ways in the text function neither as mere narrative expedients nor as tropes of colonial nostalgia, but rather as a link to the author’s memory, cognitive tools that allow Suleri to come to grips with her past and make sense of it. Recourse to culinary imagery thus affords the author the possibility to assess the women around her with regard to the social roles they are called to perform; roles that are textually emblematised through the metaphorisation of food as a repository of one’s national and gendered culture. Measuring herself against these female figures, not only can Suleri understand who she is, but also problematise the link between food, female sexuality and (her own rejection of) motherhood and, ultimately, the implications of perceiving women in functional terms as dispossessed, *meatless*, bodies.

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