Salt, Sugar, Spice: The Food Dis(h)-course

Jeno bashonar shera basa rashonay[90]

(which can be translated as, 'Know that the home for the most fragrant is in cooking'.)

I like food. I cook as well. I learnt cooking from my mother before I went to England. I didn't want to take any chances because I liked to eat good food. I've been out of touch for a few years but it is like cycling, I wouldn't forget it. There's a great drama, a theatre and epical quality about food, especially in middleclass Bengal or India which I wanted to capture in *A Strange and Sublime Address*.[91]

The epistemic potentiality of food has its receptionist richness but curiously it has not been much explored as a paradigmatic correspondence in Indian English fiction. Working on this malnourished zone concerning the hermeneutics of food in its relation to Amit Chaudhuri's oeuvre, one finds in its consequent interpretability, a socio-cultural semiotic. Chaudhuri, while staying in the realist tradition, marinates his writing with ingredients from 'different' traditions of food history, to cook up a delicious postcolonial text that is flavoured with the concept of food as metaphor, a social qualisign, an economic index, an imprint of individuality (*Afternoon Raag*, 82); Freedom *Song*, 138), and even, in quite a metaphysical vein, with food that is not food ('You mean you eat this?', they'd say. *A New World,* 54; *Freedom Song*, 13). In this chapter, I intend to explore how the food

[90] See Samir Dasgupta, *Shukhadyer Sandhane* (Kolkata: Subarnarekha. 2001), 34.

[91] See Sumana R. Ghosh, "Aalap: In conversation with Amit Chaudhuri" in *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition* eds. Anu Shukla and S. B. Shukla (Delhi: Swarup and Sons, 2004).

dis(h)-course in Amit Chaudhuri's novels, while communicating Bengaliness and, to a certain extent, Indianness, offers significant pointers to the current problems of postcolonial politics. Rather than using food tropes which remain circumscribed within the coloniser-colonised bind, Chaudhuri's work pokes its grilling irons into the politics of postcoloniality which haunt postcolonised societies. The ingredients of Chaudhuri's dish are not the Englands and Americas but little Indias; the recipe that he adopts is to create translational semiotics between little cultures, the lady's with the lackey's, the master's voice with the subaltern's song; and yet the platter in which this dish is served – the language- is the globalised English. What I intend to demonstrate (quite in the manner of a chef!) is to locate the food tropes that Chaudhuri uses in the postcolonised kitchen that gives birth to them, in other words, link, in some ways, Chaudhuri's postcolonised discourse on food with the tradition of food writing in Bengal. In doing so, I try to 'appropriate' Chaudhuri's writing for my own end to show that 'postcolonial food' cannot be an imaginary construct created out of a social and cultural vacuum; rather (t)his culinary aesthetic has its seeds in the kitchen garden of the literature of Bengal, and Chaudhuri's writing is an exploration in this alternative tradition of how an Indian English-Bengali writer (I use the hyphen consciously) uses both traditions (the coloniser's discourse to talk of the colonised's dish) to post-colonise food (I use the hyphen consciously once again).

Chaudhuri constructs a unique discourse on rice, the ultimate semiotic of Bengaliness. Like the rice on the plate around which curries, fish, meat and desserts arrange themselves, Chaudhuri's sememes on rice is the centre around which other culinary tropes configurate. He shows how central rice is to attain a Bengali element of completeness ('Anna' means 'rice' or 'food', and 'purna' means 'full' or 'complete', *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 68). Chaudhuri's text becomes, as it were, an extension of the medieval Bengali text, the *Shunya Purana*, which extols the virtues of the fifty kinds of rice then grown in Bengal. Rice and the manner of eating it, in Chaudhuri's semiosphere, become indicators of social difference. Reading two passages juxtaposed together would make my point clear.

My father, the most serious person at the table, uses, unexpectedly, a fork and a spoon to eat. He cannot begin till he has been served, and till that moment, remains sombre and paralysed. Once started, he floods his plate with daal, till it has made a yellow lake with white hillocks of rice upon its banks (*Afternoon Raag*, 46).

Then she (Haridasi) sat in one corner of the kitchen, the only one awake in the house, a guest, a stranger, a friend, and ate from a plate with a heap of rice and a puddle of dal and vegetables on one side. . . . Without being aware of it, she tried to mix the puddle of dal uniformly with the huge quantity of rice. She loved rice (*Freedom Song*, 29)

Note the different registers of rhetoric used : the raised 'hillock' on the father's plate versus the razed 'puddle' on Haridasi's plate; the father's use of spoon versus Haridasi's efforts at 'uniform mixing'. The love of rice ('She loved rice' has a flavour of condescension) is quite East Bengali, bangal to be precise. The love of rice is often used by the culturally snooty ghoti to satirise the rice-loving bangal, here represented through the cultural, financial, and social subaltern, the servant Haridasi. Rice is not only the paramanna, but its flour is used for alpana, drawing motifs or Lakshmi footprints on festive occasions.

Rice also appears in a different guise, a different preparation and a pre-fix, as 'puffed rice', muri. As muri, it takes on socially recognizable contours. Spicy puffed rice (the ubiquitous pan-Indian jhal muri), with its share of the rich-man-at-leisure's tongue-tasty ingredients is very different from the servant Saraswati's preparation of puffed rice soaked in water (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 83-84), a bangal cure for almost every illness under the sun. Like its locus of origin –East Bengal- and its associated naivete and ignorance in the ghoti's eyes, Saraswati's disease and its cure of soaked muri, too, is a malady rooted as much in its ignorance of cause and symptom as it is of the feverish body.

Chaudhuri's invocation of mustard oil as a pickling agent, for sunning 'both tamarind and babies' is a continuation of the Bengali tradition, from the *Charaka Samhita* written in

AD 1060 by Chakrapani Datta, through *Khanar Vachana* , a Bengali work of the eleventh century which recommends free use of mustard oil in Magh, a cold month to the *Sushrutha Samhita* which recommends the use of mustard oil for body massage prior to taking a bath.[92] The malleability of mustard oil, therefore, for pickling and preservation, moisturising and tanning children's bodies, for frying and cooking, is also noticed in a totally unlikely activity, in killing an insect in the alien space of the ear.

Saraswati heated a bowl of oil, Mamima dipped her little finger in it, and holding it an inch away from the earhole, let a drop of oil fall into the dark tunnel (*A Strange and Sublime Address,* 2).

This, however, is not only an evidence of Chaudhuri's faithfulness in recording the Bangla life-scape, but an adept combination of two epistemes of food history: the use of red mustard seeds to subdue evil spirits;[93] and the word 'abhaya', meaning fear-inspiring, used for mustard seeds in the *Atharvaveda.*[94] Not just content with this, Chaudhuri invokes the tradition of writing about the unique pungent flavour of mustard oil. Just as Mukundram Chakravarti, in the *Chandimangala* (16th c) writes about the tamasic nature of Lord Shiva reflected in the fact that his food is cooked not in ghee, which is a luminous sattvika product, but in pungent mustard oil,[95] similarly, Chaudhuri's writing about Chhotomama's fascination for the jaam-mixture, spiced with mustard oil, is an indicator of the uncle's tamasic, easily excitable nature.

This 'jaam' mixture (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 23-24) also becomes a social trope for communality and familiality; unlike the world of an urbanised biscuity Bombay ('Meanwhile, biscuits / dominated our shelves', *Real Time*, 157. The use of biscuit as a trope of 'otherness', of a culture that is 'foreign' to an indigenous Bengaliness is part of a long and rich tradition, as evident in this chora or child rhyme: "All right very good/ Pauroti biscuit/ Mem khai kut kut/ Saheb bole very good" which means 'All right very good/ Bread and biscuit/ The mensahib nibbles at the biscuit/ The sahib says very good' *Tapur Tupur*, 4.), Sandeep finds in his uncle's house in Calcutta, an opportunity to be a

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[92] D.C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (University of Calcutta, 1911), 1-24.
[93] Margaret Stutley, *Ancient Indian Magic and Folklore* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 58.
[94] Om Prakash, *Food and Drinks in Ancient India* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1961), 7-33.
[95] France Bhattacharya, 'Food Rituals in the Chandimangala', trans. Radha Sharma, *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1985, 169.

part of a 'food chain', where everyone contributes to the democratizing process of shaking the jaam-filled pan with clenched teeth to render it 'soft and moist and pulpy, purplish in colour, both sweet and tangy, delicious' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 23-24). While Chaudhuri is, in a way, making an effort to reduce the very Bengali cuisine of makha (mashed) and bata (ground)[96] into English words, he is, also, by using the word 'jaam' instead of an English synonym, trying to define a social semiotic of Bengaliness. Such is the Bengali's fondness for this fruit that he has made the moyra (the sweetmeat maker) create a simulation in the sweet delicacy kalo-jaam or gulab jamun, purplish brown in colour and served in sugar syrup.

And how could one leave out the mishti (sweets) from the narrative on Bengali food? If K.T. Achaya has a separate entry for Bengali sweets (next to the one on Bengali food) in his *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food*, Chaudhuri constructs a counter-discourse to his discourse on home-cooked food. Apart from the mother-made pittha (*Afternoon Raag*, 133), all sweets are bought.

> So numerous are professional sweet-meat makers, and so varied and so excellent are their products, that households prefer to buy them, making at home only the simpler payesh and pithe, desserts that derive from milk and thickened milk, rice, rava, coconut, and sugar or palm jaggery.[97]

Quite significantly, sweets become markers, not of taste or affection, but of social position for Chaudhuri's semiotic of sweetmeats is always closely allied with the optic of the printed name of the sweet parlour it has been b-r-ought from. For the middle class relatives living far away from Calcutta, 'Ganguram' is a name that evokes not only the taste of a desired-but-denied delicacy, but also a fantasy-discourse, only within reach of their rich relatives ('It was nothing, of course, only Ganguram's sweets and yoghurts, but they fussed and fussed and created the illusion that it was something, something unique

[96] Kiran Lekha Roy, *Barendra Randhan* (Calcutta: Subarnekha, 2000), 13-21.
[97] K.T. Achaya, *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 23.

and untasted and unencountered' *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 66). (The cost of food as a designator for social status also comes across in *Freedom Song*, 23).

Sandeep taking a sandesh from Satyanarayan for Chhotomama in his hospital chamber (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 118), with the optical discourse of sandesh in big black Bangla filling the page, is a way of 'showing' readers how sweets, especially the sandesh (significantly, a Portuguese contribution), its offering as prasad, or a tasty health supplement ('Doctors give them to their patients', *A New World*, 185), is a part of the Bengali's culinary psyche. This becomes evident also in Jayojit's mother insisting on his taking the box of sweets she has got him (*A New World*, 184-85). Jayojit, while talking about the possible reaction of the custom officials at the JFK airport, is making an indication of the 'foreignness' of this food in their eyes. The point I am trying to make is not just about cultural, and therefore, culinary difference, but on the stress on 'foreignness' of food. This trope of foreignness operates in a different manner elsewhere. Chaudhuri's culinary affair with otherness does not extend beyond the Chinese concoctions of chowmien, chicken manchurian, chilli sauce and the Parsi dhansak. The Rajasthani cuisine of the guru (*Afternoon Raag*, 112) is represented in a language that is far from appetizing. Note the Bengali Mr (and Mrs) Chatterjee's reaction to the Rajasthani wife's preparation of ladoo ('This'll give me indigestion', he said. *Real Time*, 142), at least more lovingly prepared and packed than Ganguram or Nepal Sweets. The ladoos are left to be eaten by a John, probably some one with a more Catholic culinary tongue. This 'closedness' of the Bengali's tastebuds manifests itself in various ways: in the narrator's uneasiness with Shehnaz's vegetarianism ('That day I realised, with the disappointment one feels when discovering another person's hidden nature, that Shehnaz was a vegetarian' *Afternoon Raag*, 61)'; in the dialectic Jayojit draws between 'home-made food' in India and 'frozen dinners' (*A New World*, 23-24) in America. The difference, albeit one of a leisured home-bred culture and a fast-paced work culture (home-bred versus pizza-bread), is more of the openness of the temperament and the tongue ('Home food was safe and insipid, and had a tranquility about it', *A New World*, 14). The contrast extends to the simplicity, yet tastefulness of home-made food against the glamorization of food in America (*A New World*, 14); the emotionality of food

cooked by the mother here ('It was an honest, even joyful, effort by his mother, though it had not quite worked; but it was not wholly tasteless either' *A New World*, 14) against the impersonality of food cooked there ('These days, in America, he looked at food, as he did many other things, emotionlessly, as something that could be put to use and cooked quickly', *A New World*, 23-4). The addition of the Chinese narrative to the kitchen discourse, a creeping little narrative of the 'eating out' culture into the Bengali rannaghar (kitchen), to Chaudhuri's contemporary culinary chronicle, is his effort at polyglotism. The clamouring of 'chowmein chowmein' (*Freedom Song*, 38) becomes a mimic-discourse of the instant noodle Maggi advertisement 'Maggi chahiye humein abhi', a semiotic of how the media-generated culture of consumption influences the cook and his culinary art. Continuing with Chaudhuri's strained relationship with culinary otherness, the Chinese 'meal' in the middle class Bengali kitchen is always a 'snack', never a 'meal' (*Freedom Song*, 38). In Bhaskar's mother's rannaghar, it is always the peripheral narrative, the other, while fish and rice remain at the centre, the staple of the Bengali's diet.

But the othering of food is a constantly shifting paradigm for what is othered becomes dependent on the Bengali subject's locale. As a schoolboy, the 'taboo' and the 'exotic rubbish' were the other (*A New World*, 51) – the denied was delicious; but for a divorced lecturer in America surviving on frozen dinners, the indigenous luchi has transmuted into the exotic other. One encounters in Real Time, Chaudhuri's most recent work, a subtle moving away from his earlier fiction, a more opentonguedness to other cuisines. His dastar khwan, in the short stories, has a place for variety: chicken tikka, kababs, koftas, chicken korma, bhuna meat, dhansak, biryani, chicken manchurian, fried rice, fish and chips, an emblem of a culinary cococolonisation in the polyglot bazaar of the world.

Chaudhuri also constructs a semiotic osmosis of cultures where the contrast between the mother's (*Afternoon Raag*, 45-46) and father's method and manner of eating –

My father, the most serious person at the table, uses, unexpectedly, a fork and a spoon to eat (*Afternoon Raag*, 46) – become indexical of a subtly hidden dialectic between an

indigenous culture's resourceful way of dealing with situational constraints of the famine of food by the narrative of remembering and another culture's osmotic adaptability in accepting other's customs and making them their own.

Strangely, although Chaudhuri himself claims to have learnt, if not mastered, the culinary art, in the politics of his representation, it is only the women who cook. In his texts, we find women in the tradition of Behula of the *Mangal Kavyas*, feeding their husbands with culinary erotica, and winning over the world as mistresses of spices. The taste of food becomes indexical of the bou's worth ('You must taste the koi' she said. 'Our bou made it' *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 70. This again, is a continuation of the same tradition of Bangla literature; "Shona nache kona/ Balad bajay dhol/ Sonar bou redhe rekheche/ Ilish macher jhol" which means 'Shona dances in the corner/ The ox plays the drum/ Sona's wife has cooked/ Hilsha fish curry'.[98] The only difference is that Chaudhuri changes the 'ilish' (hilsha) fish, a trope for East Bengaliness to the koi. It could have been any other fish too.); the mother in Afternoon Raag is presented as the mistress of miracles, the creator of magic potions ('Such a good cook was she, and such an inspired purchaser of herring and stewing lamb, that my poor father, neglected and underfed for six years, rapidly gained weight and happiness after marriage', *Afternoon Raag*, 57). It is only in the eyes of the greencard holder son that the mother is seen as 'a domestic machine', a relic from the nineteenth century household (*A New World*, 40). In Chaudhuri's semiotic system, the art of cooking is certainly the first step in becoming a sugrihini (This child rhyme perhaps sums up this attitude the best: "Chi chi chi chi/ Rani radhte shekheni/Jjathaimake bole, jholey masla debo ki?/Suktonite jhal diyeche, ambolete ghee/ Chi chi chi chi/ Rani radhte shekheni/ Paramanno redhe bole, fan felbo ki?/ Bhojbarite khoj poreche- ekhon upai ki// Chi chi chi chi/ Rani radhte shekheni" which means 'Shame shame shame shame/ Rani hasn't learnt to cook/ Asks her aunt, 'which spices should I put in the curry?'/ She has put chillies into the bitter curry, and butter in the sweet and sour dish/ Shame shame shame shame/ Rani hasn't learnt to cook/ Having cooked payesh, she asks whether she should throw out the starch water/ There's a call from the house holding the feast; now what is the solution? /Shame shame shame shame/

[98] See *Misti Chora Tapur Tupur*, (Calcutta: Paschim Banga Bangla Akademi, 1998), 22.

Rani hasn't learnt to cook'.[99] Apart from the men who are labeled as cooks, there are only two men who talk of their encounter with salt and spices in the kitchen. The young man, whose parents have thrown a housewarming party, claims to be a good cook; but his foray into the kitchen is not shown (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 198-99). The other man is the uncle, the oddity, but he survives mostly on instant mixes rather than a self-cooking system. The tastelessness of this male-cooked dish is quite easily discernible in The old house at Belsize Park had foul curry smells (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 151).

In this food-feminine discourse, Chaudhuri also brings in the typically female narrative on the chewing of paan, the betel leaf ('Chhordimoni. . . had spent the morning making little pyramids out of betel-leaves, stuffing them with betel-nuts', *A Strange and Sublime Address,* 80). This is again a continuation of the tradition from Kalidasa'a *Raghuvamsa*, Shudraka's *Mrcchakatika*, and the travel writing tradition of Ibn Batuta. Chaudhuri's use of this sign becomes a socio-cultural comment on this communal discourse of the lady's few hours of leisure before she gets back to the only room she can call her own, the rannaghar (kitchen).

Apart from a couple of mentions of hard drinks and an occasional Gold Spot, Fanta or Coca Cola, the only drink brewing in Chaudhuri's bawarcheekhana is the tea. Amidst the various language games that Chaudhuri plays in stirring out the cuppa, the optic of the tea liquor constructs a social semiotic of its own. Tea is the binder of social conversation, the promoter of the Bengali adda culture (*Freedom Song*, 20); once the coloniser's drink, it is the heralder of the Bengali's morning ritual. Significantly, the different preparations of tea are also indexical of social stratifications: the tea taken by the insomniac mother in *Afternoon Raag* ('so weak that it has a colour accidentally golden' *Afternoon Raag*, 15) the very light liquor, is a culinary trope for the upper middle class, the kind of people who give their servants Pears soap to use (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 173); the tea smelling rancid is drunk in the middle class household ('The smell of tea, strong and bitter-sweet and a little rancid, like sweat, had begun to waft through the kitchen',

[99] See Prabhat Basu & Mohendranath Dutta, *Chhotoder Chora Sanchayan* (Calcutta: Sishu Sahitya Sansad Pvt Ltd, 1959), 48.

Freedom Song, 9), the kind of people who wash their hands with Lifebuoy soap (*Freedom Song*, 9); lowest down in this menu is the tea prepared by Rahman for the new maidservant (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 184). Apart from the changing status of tea produced by juxtaposition of a contrary (*A New World*, 26), the most interesting use of the tea-sign is Chaudhuri's use of it as a 'grown-up' drink ('it was a sign of adulthood to drink tea', *Freedom Song*, 8) which is a clever counterpoint to the beer of the West. Another way in which Chaudhuri uses tea to communicate Bengaliness is to use the 'cha-biscuit' as a sign (*Freedom Song*, 152; *Real Time*, 157).

Chaudhuri frequently resorts to juxtaposition of contrary signs to interpret differences in the taste of food. These juxtaposed contraries, without becoming hybridities, is Chaudhuri's postcolonial spread: Jayojit's luchi with Bonny's cornflakes; luchi and pithha of the Bhaskar household with the hybrid breakfast of milk and toast and rosogolla of the Mohit household (*Freedom Song*, 8); Bonny's daal with the curry and fish of the other Chatterjees. But the most interesting juxtaposition is the one between the narrator and his father's empty plate and the 'beggar's plate' of the mother ('At dinner, our leftovers – chicken bones, ribs, the white comblike tail of the pomfret, which is simple and symmetrical – we deposit upon her beggar's plate for her to chew and gnash and then blissfully spit out' *Afternoon Raag*, 46). This is not merely a record of food habits but a socio-political comment on East Bengali cuisine.

There is a greater degree of adventurous inventiveness in the cooking of East Bengal. Perhaps it is because of the terrain, which is untamed, crisscrossed with the great rivers of the Bengal delta, rivers that rage with flood waters, erratically change course, blithely destroy human settlements, and throw up intensely fertile silt deposits that produce rich harvests for new settlers. Perhaps, under such a prevailing sense of uncertainty, you learn to make do with very little and yet turn it into something palatable to accompany the 'mountains of rice' needed for the voracious Bangal appetite.[100] The reiterative use of the fish-head sign is not an indicator of the frugality of the thrifty Bengali. Rather Chaudhuri comments:

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[100] See Chitrita Banerji, *The Hour of The Goddess: Memories of Women, Food and Ritual in Bengal*, (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2001), 41.

My mother made things from peelings, fish-heads, dried fish. It was East Bengali cuisine, with its origins in villages on drought and flood-hit riversides, a poor man's diet, perfected by people who could not afford to throw away even the skin of a white-gourd or the head of a fish, transformed into food by adding oil and garlic and chilli paste and poppy seed and common salt (*Afternoon Raag*, 82) (The significance of the fish-head can also be tasted in this simple child rhyme "Mach katle muro debo/ Dham bhangle kuro debo" which means ' If I cut the fish, I will give you the head of the fish/ If I thresh the paddy, I will give you the rice'.)[101]

This is the only possible diet of the 'refugee' East-Bengali, a marginal, anonymous people who were neighbours with history, one of the millions, studying, discussing politics, listening to songs, living in hostel rooms, eating in the 'cabins' of North Calcutta (*Afternoon Raag*, 87).

This brings us to the defining semiotic of the Bengali: fish ('He loved this city. He loved its fish, rui and katla and koi with black oily scales, and during the monsoons he would cry out a truism that he repeated with great ardour at this time every year : "Ilish is the king of fishes!"', *Freedom Song*, 52). Chaudhuri's writing, albeit a continuation of the tradition of the *Brhaddharma Purana*, is essentialised in that famous comment by Ramakrishna Paramahansa in 1833:

I love to eat fish in any form.[102]

Fish appears in both its forms: fresh and dried. And is often compared with children ('With their frantic miniature limbs and their brown, shining bodies, they look like little koi fish caught from the Hoogly river, struggling into life', *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 5). And though it is the fresh rui, boal, pabdaa or parshe (the fish without bones is given preference, a typically probashi Bengali trait) that swim across Chaudhuri's curried pages, he also talks of dried fish, whose smell withstanding ('bitter and sharply intimate as the scent of a woman's sex', *Afternoon Raag*, 21), has a unique taste by itself. The dead fish, with its eye, still, in the socket, is a unique sign again (*A New World*, 15-16); one encounters, not for the first time in his work, an appetizing food item presented

[101] See *Misti Chora Tapur Tupur*, (Calcutta: Paschim Banga Bangla Akademi, 1998), 26.
[102] See K.T. Achaya, *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 128.

in a curious and questionable manner. The fresh fish, perhaps not to be found outside Bengal, also becomes an exotic other (*Real Time*, 107)). So important is the fish in the Bengali's world that the Bengali Brahmins, with a sleight of the hand of the mantras, vegetarianised the denizens of the deep, calling them the 'fruits of the ocean' (the Chatterjees in *A New World* are fish-eating brahmins) and fish motifs or the fish itself are a must in almost every festive occasion. The image of the piscatorial Bengali ('When the faint aroma of the fish preparation drifted through the air, they breathed deeply, in a satisfied way, as if the moment of subtle inspiration had passed, leaving them fulfilled', *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 119)) is most revealingly brought out by Chaudhuri's politics of exclusion: there is hardly any meat-loving Bengali (Jayojit is an occasional steak-eater, *A New World*, 173) in his work. Chaudhuri's phrase, used for the men of the 'other' England, 'the last chain-smokers and meat-eaters of England' (*Afternoon Raag*, 193) sounds, in fact, like an indictment. There is, on the reverse side, another important exclusion: although Chaudhuri takes us to two shraddh (funeral) ceremonies, he shows us people having sweets (*Freedom Song*, 5; *Real Time*, 67); matsomukh, the day of going back to the normal meal of fish and rice is never shown.

Another important narrative to this discourse is the relation between food and health, how this discourse is translated and transmuted from academic journals to the Third World doctor's tongue, and how it also appears as a part of the narrative in a book of fiction or the common man's sense.

'You know one thing', the doctor had said, 'a lower middle-class Bengali's meal is one of the best a doctor can recommend. Low cholesterol, with harmless fish protein. It's cheap and it's good for you; you know certain kinds of fish fat are good for the heart. Anyway, I was reading somewhere', he said (these doctors, even in their semi-retirement, kept up with the latest medical journals), 'that Americans eat much less meat than they have ever before and have fewer heart attacks. On the other hand, heh' he laughed, partly in embarrassment at his own amusement, 'Bengalis go there and find a plethora of meat, and eat much more of it than they ever have, and consequently die like flies' (*A New World*, 173).

Quite significantly, it is the young characters in his fiction who show and talk about this awareness. ("Sugar?"; "Two". "Two?", she said noting he was overweight. *Real Time*, 79).

Or,

He (Jayojit) himself felt tempted (by the jhalmuri), but he'd promised himself not to get diarrhoea or gastro-enteritis if he could help it; or wind (*A New World*, 58).

Thus, on this ground, there is a counter-discourse to the one constructed by the earlier generation.

A suspicion found its way to his head which he'd never harboured before: had his father become so bulky because his mother had overfed him during his working life? He'd always assumed that his father, at some point in his life, had inadvertently eaten too much; but now he wondered if his mother had deliberately played a part (*A New World*, 45).

Not content with this, Chaudhuri uses the trope of food itself as a rhetorical and literal marker for age: while 'toast' might be the synecdoche for the Admiral's breakfast, the manner of having it (buttered, with marmalade or dry, *A New World*, 40-41) becomes a marker for his age. But dietary habits, of course unhealthy, are also indexical of living habits, loneliness, laziness ('His dietary habits were strange, like those of people who had lived all their life in the desert'. *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 152). Often, in this discourse, it manifests itself as a 'lack' ('They sat in the dark for some time, talking about why servants were all like this, and they decided it was because they had not eaten proteins when they were children'. *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 176); this 'lack' can also manifest itself in a different guise:

It was a beautiful flat, and to her (the maidservant's) eyes everything in it seemed to be made either of sugar or pistachio or jaggery or caramel or some fragrant, edible thing. The raised marble platform by the window would be sweet and cold as a mint lozenge if one could possibly

taste it, and the dark wooden furniture would have the bittersweet taste of burnt sugar (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 179-80).

Here, the new maidservant's mental landscape is inhabited by a gastronomic psychographics, a possible result of the manifestation of the most vital trope to her existence – food.

New tropes come to add themselves to the postcolonised Bengali food discourse. One such is the caterer, in many ways, an expression of the noveau riche (*Freedom Song*, 5); another is the metamorphosed 'new' kitchen.

The kitchen had been painted; new shelves had been fitted; and the earthen oven, dust-coloured, hollow, into whose sides Durga pushed wood and coal, had been put in the shed at the back of the house where coal and wood used to be kept. Durga herself had returned to her village (*Freedom Song*, 36).

In a land where good food is found, cooked, and eaten, in Francois Bernier's words, 'the best place in the world to live in' (AD 1600)[103], it is but natural that no conversation can veer away from food

'When will you come here again?, asked the doctor.
'. . . . Early April, in this awful heat'.
'Oh, very good!' said Dr. Sen, and chuckled. 'Just in time for the mango season'.(*A New World*, 174-75).

That is why Chaudhuri makes the Sikh driver's Bengali in Hindusthani accented 'language smell of onions and chappatis' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 45) or Sharma's words 'smell (of) chick-peas being roasted in their shells' (*Afternoon Raag*, 131). Pain and pleasure, agony and ecstasy, all the different fibres of life, come to be metaphorised in tropes of food.

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[103] See K.T. Achaya, *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 128.

'It cut as if someone were putting salt upon it, Khuku re', (*Freedom Song*, 42) says Mini about the pain in her arthritic foot. This, following Khuku's mother's words, 'Ei Nando',. . . 'Bring the salt and the oil !' (*Freedom Song*, 33), a few pages earlier is an ironic use, by Chaudhuri, of similar signs to represent two different planes of experience, pain, and the quintessential Bengaliness of a meal.

There are polarities in Chaudhuri's food discourse too. Note the registers he uses in describing chilli sauce and gur.

It (the gur) was like a clod of earth. . . . . 'You mean you eat this?' they'd say. (*Freedom Song*, 200)

. . . thick drops of the sauce, pale green, like something that flows in drains, had fallen out sluggishly. (*Freedom Song*, 38).

On being asked, Chaudhuri says,

I always thought that sort of thing looked both poisonous (some of these sauces have been banned because of the chemicals in them) and irresistible; I have also been both repelled, and oddly fascinated, by drains. Joyce's image of the snot-green sea has also always fascinated me. But I was trying also to describe what chilli sauce seemed to me like in memory.[104]

At the other end of the spectrum is Chaudhuri's use of food as prasad .

She arranged slices of cucumber and oranges and sweet white batashas on three brass plates and placed them in front of the gods. (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 35-36).

The oranges, batasha and cucumber, significantly, a semiotic simulation of the Indian tricolour, offered to the gods and goddesses, become Chaudhuri's tropes for using food as a political and/ or national discourse.

[104] Quoted from one of my correspondences with Amit Chaudhuri.

Significantly, there is one optic missing from Chaudhuri's culinary semiotic: the semiotic of colour. Very rarely are food items (re)presented in terms of their colour. In doing so, Chaudhuri is taking a political stance against the contemporary culinary discourse of representation of exotic rubbish that is spruced up with all kinds of colours and decoration. Television shows of cookery programmes and magazines with sections devoted to cooking 'glaze surfaces, to round them off, to bury the food under the even sediment of sauces, creams, icing and jellies. This of course comes from the very finality of the coating, which belongs to a visual category, and cooking according to Elle is meant for they eye alone, since sight is a genteel sense'.[105] Chaudhuri does away with one of the major 'developments' of genteel cookery: ornamentation. His culinary discourse is grounded in the real, not the magical of these surreal programmes which mythicise the everydayness of food. 'Pieces of boal fish, cooked in turmeric, red chilli paste, onions and garlic' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 6) has no 'mythical economics'[106] behind it. Chaudhuri's is neither the 'idea-cookery' nor the 'cuisine of advertisement'; his food discourse, in being rooted to a social semiotic, the 'great drama' centering around food in middleclass India (see interview with author), proves itself to be a subversion of the prevalent food discourse of consumerism. But to make up for that, or as the culinary discourse would have it, to mask that lack of flavour, Chaudhuri gives us a text that is seeped with the smell of spices ('our fingers retained a smell of spices' *A Strange and Sublime Address,* 199). And just as the hand retains the smell of the food eaten, the tongue of the reader's mind holds within itself the flavours of the gourmet's paradise that is enclosed between the covers of Chaudhuri's fiction.

Let us read two passages on how the Bengali meal goes.

Pieces of boal fish, cooked in turmeric, red chilli paste, onions and garlic, lay in a red, fiery sauce in a flat pan; rice, packed into an even white cake, had a spade-like spoon embedded in it; slices of fried aubergine were arranged on a white dish; dal was served from another pan with a drooping ladle; long, complex filaments of banana-flower, exotic, botanical, lay in yet another

[105] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* selected and translated from the French by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), 78.
[106] Ibid., 79.

pan in a dark sauce; each plate had a heap of salt on one side, a green chilli, and a slice of sweet-smelling lemon. The grown-ups snapped the chillies (each made a sound terse as a satirical retort), and scattered the tiny, deadly seeds in their food.

This is the second passage:

The procession of tastes at a Bengali meal runs from a bitter start to a sweet finish. Lunch will start with a bitter item shukto (this is usually omitted at dinner) made from neem or other bitter leaves, the bittergourd, brinjal, potato, radish and green bananas, with spice pastes that use turmeric, ginger, mustard and celery seed. Rice is first savoured with hot ghee, salt and green chillies; then comes dhal accompanied by fried vegetables (bhaja) or boiled vegetables (bhata), followed by spiced vegetable items like dalna and ghonto. Then comes fish items, first lightly spiced ones like maccher-jhol, and then those more heavily spiced, followed by a sweet-sour ambal or tauk (chutney) and fried papads. A dessert of mishti-doi (accompanied by dry sweets), or payesh (accompanied by fruits like the mango) ends the meal, with paan (a betel quid) as a terminal digestive.

With a few concessions to a literary style, aren't these passages almost interchangeable? The first is from Chaudhuri's first novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* (6). The second is from Achaya's *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food.*[107] This juxtaposition of two passages, meant for two kinds of intended readers, however, makes a few things clear: Chaudhuri's narrative is rooted to the 'real' kitchen of middleclass Bengal and, by virtue of its anthropological nature (and therein the similarity with the discourse of the food historian Achaya), shares an affinity with television programmes like 'Zaike Ka Safar' (A Journey of Tastes) which are rooted to the 'heshels' (kitchens) of small town India rather than Indian television shows like 'Khana Khazana' or 'Tarla Dalal Show' which have artifice and baroque as their unique selling proposition.

This passage from *A Strange and Sublime Address*, which almost reads like a 'menu-card' of a quintessential Bengali meal has another story to tell us. Let us read this passage

[107] K.T. Achaya, *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21-22.

(from *A Strange and Sublime Address* p.6 quoted above) along with a similar Bengali child rhyme which does almost the same thing. The spirit of both the pieces is similar:

Biyete jabi?
Eksho baar.
Fisti khabi?
Eksho baar.
Khasta luchi?
Eksho baar.
Alur kuchi?
Eksho baar.
Bhetki fry?
Eksho baar.
Sauce o chai?
Eksho baar.
Macher jhol?
Eksho baar.
Mutton roll?
Eksho baar.
Ghee pulao?
Eksho baar.
Achar chao?
Eksho baar.
Chutney papar?
Eksho baar.
Doi tarpor?
Eksho baar.
Kheer sandesh?
Eksho baar.
Taaler payesh?
Eksho baar.
Sonpapri?
Eksho baar.
Sar rabri?

Eksho baar.

Chandrapuli?

Eksho baar.

Hajmi guli?

Eksho baar.[108]

which means

Will you go for the wedding?

A hundred times.

Will you have a feast?

A hundred times.

Will you have fried luchi?

A hundred times.

Fingerchips?

A hundred times.

Bhetki fish fry?

A hundred times.

Do you want sauce as well?

A hundred times.

Fish curry?

A hundred times.

Mutton roll?

A hundred times.

Ghee pulao?

A hundred times.

Pickles too?

A hundred times.

Chutney and papad?

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[108] Annadashankar Roy, *Kheyal Khushir Chora* Vol 2. (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh Publishers, 1997), 14.

A hundred times.

Doi after that?

A hundred times.

Kheer sandesh?

A hundred times.

Payesh of taal?

A hundred times.

Sonpapri?

A hundred times.

Sor rabri?

A hundred times.

Chandrapuli?

A hundred times.

Digestive tablets?

A hundred times.)

This child rhyme is quite aptly and humorously called *Borjatri*, and its name makes clear, in many ways, how the spirit of both the pieces, Chaudhuri's and Annadashankar Roy's, are similar. Both seem to be enonces of what Bakhtin categorized as a "banquet for all the world".[109] 'Borjatri' in Bangla refers to the people who accompany the bridegroom to the wedding (bor: bridegroom; jatri: passengers); in the culture of Bengali weddings, these people who accompany the bridegroom are traditionally meant to be big eaters for whom the wedding feast is the greatest festivity imaginable. Although Chaudhuri's passage is about a simple Bengali meal, not banquets, the spirit of his passage, its 'gay and triumphant tone' has a kinship with Roy's poem. It is not only is this particular passage that this spirit comes through; the 'table talks' (that dominate the short piece When We Moved to this House, in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 197-199), the 'positive hyperbolism'[110] in the descriptions ("These men emerged from hot, swinging kitchen doors with plates balanced upon their palms, and on the plates were huge 'paper'

[109] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 278.
[110] Ibid.

dosas. These are large white cylinders made of rice paste; from a distance, they looked like rolled-up rugs, and coming closer, they resemble ridiculous headdresses of vast importance; from table to table, the waiters bore them glumly, as if they were gifts". *Afternoon Raag*, 45), that make eating and drinking seem such a carnivalesque affair in Chaudhuri's work give evidence of his rootedness not to a monological discourse of postcoloniality but rather to a folk tradition, a tradition of the people, a tradition of Bangla child rhymes, lok geeti (folk songs) as well as to the 'universal spirit' of abundance that unites all folk literature (as Bakhtin's critique of Rabelais proves), a discourse whose subtext is that 'no meal can be sad'.[111]

There is another manner through which Chaudhuri, as an Indian writer in English, postcolonises food, and it is a method which postmodern writers have used often: this is the tool of intertextuality. Chaudhuri, a Lawrence scholar of note (his book *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* uses intertextuality in its various forms as a reading tool to 'understand' Lawrence's poems) ends his second novel *Afternoon Raag* with a quotation from a poem by Lawrence. (Significantly, Jaidev, the twelfth century Bengali poet, ends his magnum opus *Geetgovinda*, a book about the cowherd-god Krishna and his beloved Radha, with tropes of food, specifically sweets, like Chaudhuri does here.) The poem is "Ship of Death" and Chaudhuri effects a masterstroke in reading this English poem by a modernist English writer with tropes of the colonised's food- pitha.

A little ship, with oars and food
and little dishes, and all accoutrements
fitting and ready for the departing soul...(*Afternoon Raag*, 132)

By 'translating' Lawrence's poem through the filter of the narrator's psyche to produce the metaphors of food ('...the memory of daal and sweet-potatoes being ground and mashed all day in the kitchen, then patted, shaped, and fried into pithhas, and left overnight in syrup' *Afternoon Raag*, 133), Chaudhuri creates breaks on the surface of the 'original' Lawrence text, gaps that are filled up by the 'transferred' metaphors of the

[111] Ibid., 283.

narrator's cultural text. In doing so, Chaudhuri shows how, through this reading (of the author Lawrence) and then writing (by the Indian writer Chaudhuri) of the osmotic process of interculturality, 'foreign' culinary practices, which I have shown, are in many ways, a continuation of the vernacular Bangla tradition of writing of and about food (especially in the child rhymes which seem to be seeped with the flavours of an essentialised Bengaliness), come to be coded and recoded through a 'glocalised' 'dish-course' as 'postcolonial food', as this enriched site of an Indian novelist writing in English and responding and reacting to two traditions (represented by Lawrence on the one hand and Jaidev on the other) proves.