

Eat and Be Eaten: The Gastropolitics of the (Post) Colony

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Parama Roy. *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial*. Duke University Press, 2010. 277 pp.

If ever a work took seriously Jacques Derrida's insistence that we must understand eating as an act through which we both consume and are consumed, it is Parama Roy's remarkable new book, *Alimentary Tracts*. Here, Roy sets out to articulate how appetites, hungers, and aversions in colonial and postcolonial South Asia function all at once to confirm and deeply unsettle social relations in and beyond the colony. Far from being merely another boundary that differentiates the colonizer from the colonized, Roy argues that the alimentary tract reveals how desires and distastes confirm colonial identities and histories while also undoing them. Summoning both body and text in her use of the term "tract" (from the Latin *tractatus*—a literary discussion or treatment), Roy insists that the bodily passage (from mouth to anus) must be thought in relation to the proscriptive dietary logic that differentiates social bodies. Indeed, "tract" is also the French *trait*, evoking Levinas's concept of the trace, the line that marks the divide between the self and the other, that differentiates inside from outside in terms of both body and community, but which is also the terrain of ethics.

The book's central focus is the grammar of alimentarity in colonial and postcolonial narratives, how food and gastronomy are represented and articulated across an array of South Asian texts, from often overlooked colonial accounts to more widely read narratives such as Gandhi's diet-driven autobiography and Madhur Jaffrey's nostalgia-laden cookbooks that never fail to titillate Western tongues. Through a series of attentive readings of historical events, autobiographical accounts, literary texts, and popular figures, Roy persuasively illustrates how and why it is no longer enough to think of the self as the one who eats and the other as that which is consumed; instead, her careful analysis of gastronomical grammars insists that eating—perhaps more so than any other human act—complicates the distinction between self and other precisely because by eating we take into our own bodies the bodies (or cultures, or histories) of others. As such, Roy's text implicitly refuses the oft-regurgitated trope of "eating the Other" by persistently reminding us that the alimentary tract, as both

boundary and portal, incorporates as much as it differentiates the internal from the external.

Roy builds off of anthropological, deconstructive, and historical food studies to consider the work of appetite and aversion in the production of subjectivity in the South Asian context. Bringing to the proverbial table a host of critical inter-disciplinary food scholarship ranging from Claude Lévi-Strauss' formulation of the organizational link between language and cooking (cooking *as* language), Arjun Appadurai's work on the nostalgic and self-partitioning functions of Indian cookbooks, Derrida's provocative account of anthropophagy (the Greek word for cannibalism) as a form of ethical engagement with the other, and Leela Gandhi's account of how counter-cultural groups in late-nineteenth-century Europe linked vegetarianism to anti-colonial activism, Roy illustrates how food consumption and refusal are not extraneous to political relations in the colonial and postcolonial world but are rather at their marrow.

Organized along four key tropes—"disgust," "abstinence," "dearth," and "appetite"—the book engages in-depth and nuanced readings of how such figures across disparate colonial and postcolonial texts complicate official historical narratives. Beginning with the Indian Mutiny in 1857-58—a mutiny that is now legendarily evoked as having begun as a response to the rumour that the British had greased cartridges with pig and cow fat, thus defiling both Hindu and Muslim sepoy as they bit into the cartridges—Roy sets out to examine how staple food items of the colony such as salt and chapatis became signs of impurity, foment, and rebellion couched within the edible. Building from Ranajit Guha's work on the social function of rumour in the colony, Roy reads colonial accounts of the mutiny that illuminate the pivotal function that the fear of alimentary contamination played in Anglo-Indian governance and colonial dissent in British India. Through the accounts of British authorities and their colonial subjects, Roy illustrates how the valences of the gustatory served as a practice of "self-fashioning" that functioned not only to define who was properly British and who was Indian, but also to radically upset such categories.

Roy then turns to an examination of how eating and abstinence figure in (and to a lesser extent beyond) Mohandas K. Gandhi's autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. While many have noted the autobiography's insistence on the mundane aspects of everyday life and its preoccupation with sexual abstinence, scholars have largely ignored the nuances of eating and alimentary abstinence in his writings. Engaging with the work of Joseph Alter, Leela Gandhi, and Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph, each of whom have attended to the political import of Gandhi's eating from different vantage points, Roy argues that the contradictions and valences of eating in Gandhi's self-representation reveal two interrelated tracts. First, how meat and meat eating are inextricably linked to modernity in Gandhian thought. Gandhi's

relationship to vegetarianism shifts across his life, emerging first in the autobiography as a practice that as a young adult he imagined led to India's colonization by the carnivorous British, then as a vow to his mother that he will abstain from meat while pursuing his studies in Britain, and finally as a political vow that is linked to *ahimsa* (non-violence) and national independence. Second, how meat in the Hindu vegetarian household exposes the complex gender hierarchies that speak through Gandhi's evocations of who eats, who abstains, and from what. What Roy so convincingly illustrates is how in Gandhi's history and thought, "the tongue functions as a vehicle of violence both in its abstinences and in its indulgences" (115). As such, she refuses the conflation of vegetarian eating and nonviolence that constitutes the iconic make-up of Gandhi as *mahatma*, and urges us instead to consider Gandhian alimenterarity as a practice that is often marked by internal conflict and various forms of violence.

In her chapter "Dearth," Roy puts two pivotal events in modern South Asian history—the Bengal famine of 1943-44 and the Partition of India in 1974—into conversation with the "famine fictions" of Bengali writer and activist Mahasweta Devi. She explicates how these tales undermine the preconception that famine is a result of food shortage by engaging Amartya Sen's work on the social (as opposed to environmental) production of famine. These nuanced readings of Devi's fiction articulate the failure of modern liberal subjectivity, a subjectivity that refuses to acknowledge and act against the violence that constitutes postcolonial bourgeois life. Each of these narratives hinges upon the bourgeois liberal subject's desire to "do good" and his inability to reconcile such a desire with his own complicity in the subjugation of others, both human and animal. In Roy's own terms: "famine itself as a figure that, like all figures, exceeds the conventional logic of numeration, accounting, and modularity" (123). The incommensurability of famine in Devi's fictions, the impossibility of calculating degrees of human suffering or responsibility, marks a crisis of liberal subjectivity and as such these texts confront the reader in intimate and disturbing ways. Perhaps the most persuasive aspect of her work on Devi is how Roy articulates the intricate relation between India's *adivasi* (first inhabitants) and prehistoric animals across "Shishu" and *Pterodactyl*. The pivotal question of the animal in postcolonial studies begs more intellectual attention than it has received, and here Roy anticipates a critical postcolonial animal studies to come.

Turning away from hunger to "appetite," Roy examines culinary diasporas through the public persona of the "grand dame" of Indian cookery, Madhur Jaffrey. These consecutive chapters, as Roy adeptly remarks, "constitute the contrasting bookends of a distinctly uneven postcolonial continuum" (165). Here she illustrates how gastronomy in the diaspora (in stark contrast with the ill-fed subaltern classes of Devi's work) is teased out through nostalgic (sometimes bordering on orientalist) evocations of a past and place which both tantalizes and escapes the Western reader as culinary

devotee. Weaving the most famous gustatory fictions of the South Asian diaspora—namely Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days*—into her readings of Jaffrey’s cookbooks, especially *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*, Roy explores how the diaspora reveals and conceals “native” identities through the culinary. For example, while Jaffrey decries the use of the term “curry,” revealing its origins as a British term that flattens and conflates the extraordinary diversity of South Asian cuisines for British ease, she also makes use of the term, and of curry powder itself, to sell the quickness and ease of her culinary secrets to desiring and aspiring cooks in the West. Through the interpretation of such slippery rhetorical turns, Roy illuminates how enmeshed diasporic culinary grammars are with other paradoxes such as the desire for and desired distance from “home,” and the comforts and destructions of Western hegemony and advanced capitalism.

Roy’s engaging new book leaves us to consider how the postcolonial extends beyond the particular geo-political context of her work. How, for instance, does Roy’s focused analysis of the gastronomical grammars of South Asia and its diaspora reflect or extend itself to other (post) colonial grammars? *Alimentary Tracts* paves the way for such work, for a thinking of how gastronomical concerns, so prevalent and recurring in colonial and postcolonial narratives around the globe, might follow other gustatory tracts.

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