

Spicy Pleasures: Postcolonial India's Literary Celebrities and the Politics of Consumption¹

Tobias A. Wachinger

I

In a special issue of the *New Yorker* on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of India's independence, a photograph subtitled "India's leading novelists" figures prominently. The group shot, taken in London on May 30, 1997, shows eleven writers more or less self-confidently glancing at the camera, their hands in a gesture of jovial intimacy resting on their respective neighbours' shoulders. Let me start my essay, which examines the politics of metropolitan consumption of subcontinental literary products, with some remarks about this photo which seems graphically to epitomize the Anglo-American reception, determination and, indeed, very production of contemporary 'postcolonial' writing in a framework of cultural commodification.

Among the features of the photo that call for critical attention there is, first, a principle of selection in favour of diasporic writers. It is not enough that all eleven novelists depicted work exclusively in the English language. Most of them live in Britain or the United States, and only go back to India for family visits or readings. Another illuminating aspect is the writers' arrangement. While Salman Rushdie occupies the centre position, surrounded by his disciples and resting his hand benignly on Arundhati Roy's shoulder, others, like Romesh Gunsekera (the only Sri Lankan in the photo), are half-covered or, like Amitav Ghosh who is standing in the corner of the backmost row, are completely out of focus. It is tempting to interpret these obvious expressions of attention and neglect by the editorial board of a paradigmatic metropolitan high-profile magazine in terms of the more general question of what kind of literature from a 'Third World' culture gets recognition in the West.² Certainly, as Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, Gunsekera and Ghosh

belong to “a different kind” (148) of fiction than the ebullient, blatantly ironic, deliberately exoticized type of literary representation of India introduced and successfully embodied by Salman Rushdie. In the photo, the politics of labelling that favours a certain kind of ‘Indian’ literature and that appropriates the authority of defining the ranks among ‘India’s leading novelists’ calls out for further inquiry. But let me proceed to the most curious aspect of the group shot’s selection. Three of the eleven writers in the photo—Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Ardashir Vakil—had not published a single work before 1997, the year to be celebrated. Among them, only Arundhati Roy was already on her way to big success (and, indeed, in December 1997 her novel *The God of Small Things* was to receive the prestigious Booker Prize). Kiran Desai, by contrast, had her very first story published in the same special issue that also featured the photo. It is not an overstatement, therefore, to say that it was the *New Yorker* that turned Anita Desai’s daughter into a member of the ‘imagined community’ of India’s literary elite. Benedict Anderson’s term is suggestive here. For what is constructed through the tag ‘India’s leading novelists’ is nothing less than a unified notion of India created by the print media. If Anderson emphasizes the vital role that newspaper and novel play as providers for the material basis of thinking oneself a national community, much the same process is to be observed with respect to the imagining of a celebrity community of Indian novelists, with the one—crucial—difference that this national community is not exclusively constructed by and for themselves, but that the western metropole is of central importance both as the commodifying, often enabling power behind narrative production and as the target audience for these novels.

Certainly, the importance of Salman Rushdie’s blockbuster *Midnight’s Children* (1981) cannot be underestimated in this respect. If Indian writing in English has over the last decades become a public commodity in the West, Rushdie’s Booker-prize winning novel has been the touchstone that has introduced a new kind of writing from the subcontinent to the English-speaking world. The novel’s success—in the words of Bill Buford, chief-editor of the *New Yorker*—“made everything possible,” showing “Indian writers that great novels—could be fashioned from

Indian stories, with an Indian sensibility and a distinctly Indian use of the English language,” thereby indicating to “publishers in the West that books by Indian writers could sell” (8). I will come back in the course of my argument to what Buford and others conceive as ‘distinctly Indian’ (a category painstakingly repeated, rather than illuminated by Buford). The point, in any case, that is made about Rushdie as the turning point of Indian literature definitely holds true insofar as the emergence of an incredible range of new Indo-Anglian writers is concerned. Without Rushdie, there would probably be no Shashi Tharoor, no Vikram Chandra, no Arundhati Roy, or at least not the highly celebrated, globally read authors as we know them. As Timothy Brennan puts it in a recent essay: “*Midnight’s Children* exploded this literature of constipation and threw open the doors to an entire generation of younger novelists for whom empire, race, immigration, and religious fundamentalism had been the basic food” (“Cultural Politics” 112).

The metabolic metaphor of ‘Indian writing’ that Brennan, half tongue-in-cheek, employs to describe the tremendous influence of *Midnight’s Children* is well chosen, for one of the most prominent features of Rushdie’s narrative is a remarkable imagery of food and consumption. Indeed, the ‘chutnification of history’ can be read as a meta-commentary on the production and consumption of ‘postcolonial’ literature from the subcontinent. The pickles that narrator Saleem Sinai produces (and that he continuously likens to his narrative of the nation’s fatal history after decolonization) cunningly mirror the way postcolonial India circulates on the global market. The process of chutnification, the novel’s central trope, focuses on the mediation and packaging of “the authentic taste of truth” (*Midnight’s Children* 461), and comments on the function of India in world-wide commodity culture.

If Rushdie’s paradigmatically new deployment of this distinctive food trope in its connection to the ‘Third World’ has rarely been seriously investigated by critics, the novel’s culinary imagery has certainly proved the model for English-language writers of Indian descent throughout the eighties and nineties. In this essay I will examine narratives produced in the wake of *Midnight’s Children* that negotiate Indian cultural politics via the world of South-Asian food and spices, alert to the flourish-

ing metropolitan industry of exotic convenience products. I will have a closer look at the different ways that the 'Midnight's Children formula for success' is applied in novels ranging from Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) to Romesh Gunesequera's *Reef* (1994), and from Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Ardashir Vakil's *Beach Boy* to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (all published in the celebratory year 1997). Conscious of the fact that my own point of view is restricted due to both my European upbringing and metropolitan location, I will explore the following questions which quite deliberately focus on the text's relation to the *West*: How is subcontinental food represented and functionalized in Indo-Anglian writing? What use do these texts make of India's exotic cachet in the metropole? Do they simply cater to mainstream views of India or refuse all-too-easy consumption? In other words: How spicy are these hot Indian commodities thrown on the literary market? I will start with a closer look at the pickling project in *Midnight's Children*.

II

Two pages before Saleem Sinai's narrative ends with the narrator collapsing to 630 million particles, the job of pickling India is nearly done. Only one pickle jar still needs to be filled, while thirty of them, neatly lined up on a shelf above his desk, are ready for delivery: "One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth. . . that they are, despite everything, acts of love" (461). With this passage, full of hope and sentiment, Saleem strikes the final chord of his ramified narration which is highly charged with food imagery. In the end, as is made clear, the pickles that he has been jarring over the course of 500 pages and that correspond, as he repeatedly emphasizes, to the chapters of his narrative, are for sale. But as the jars are to be released upon the world, the readers wonder if the customers, who will buy and consume the product of his work, will be able to bear what is delivered to their tables. Of course, it is not only India as the world of overpowering exotic aromas that is likely to chal-

lunge the consumers' palates; the troubled history of three generations of Indians is also in the jars, and has to be swallowed along with the delightful condiment. This is how Saleem himself describes what he does at the Bombay factory that turns his nurse Mary Pereira's private recipe into the stunningly successful brand 'Braganza Pickles':

What is required for chutnification? Raw material, obviously—fruit, vegetables, fish, vinegar, spices. [. . .] Cucumbers aubergines mint. [. . .] I supervise the production of Mary's legendary recipes; but there are also my special blends, in which, thanks to the powers of my drained nasal passages, I am able to include memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Pakistan, or how it felt to be in the Sundarbans. . . (460)

The raw ingredients ("fruit, vegetables, fish") are for Saleem apparently little more than the nourishing base for what he really wants his customers to taste: "memories, dreams, ideas." Writing against the backdrop of the turbulences of the seventies, Saleem, who finds himself the victim of Indira Gandhi's emergency, sets out to preserve for the benefit of future generations, the spirit of an India enjoying democratic independence. The chutnification of history is in this respect "the grand hope of the pickling of time" (459) to counter a whole nation's forgetting. There are, however, some severe doubts as to the success of this preservation, not only with regard to inevitable seepage,³ but also because personal memory is a medium of inevitable subjective distortion: "memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality" (211). Perfect preservation, Saleem tells us frankly, is impossible, and even undesirable for such a bluntly egocentric narrator and mediator as he is:

In the spice bases, I reconcile myself to the inevitable distortions of the pickling process. To pickle is to give immortality, after all: fish, vegetables, fruit hang embalmed in spice-and-vinegar; a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste, is a small matter, surely? The art is to change the flavour in degree,

but not in kind; and above all (in my thirty jars and a jar) to give it shape and form—that is to say, meaning. (461)

But where is the borderline to be drawn between changing the flavour in degree and in kind? Obviously, there is a crucial ambivalence inherent to the chutnification process. While to pickle means on the one hand to increase the shelf-life of perishable products (or events subject to forgetting), on the other hand the spices and vinegars used for preservation alter and intensify the flavour of what is pickled, and so manage, as Michael Gorra points out, to “transform otherwise quite unpalatable things—an unripe mango, a massacre in Bangladesh—and thus make them bearable” (148).

This half-conceded impossibility to convey “the authentic taste of truth”—both with regard to the indigenous fruits and vegetables and to the key moments in South Asian history with which Saleem wants to acquaint his eating/reading audience—foregrounds once more the fact (proudly announced by Rushdie himself) that the narrative account is rendered through an unreliable narrator.⁴ It also sheds a curious light on the political trajectory of *Midnight's Children*. The *poetics* of pickling that Saleem meticulously draws up is from the outset invested in a highly complex *politics* of food representation. While the narrative's obsessive focus on food on the one hand gives expression to Saleem's desperate attempt to create meaning, it on the other hand provides Rushdie with a poetological self-location. It may well be due to the problems of this double task that the focus on chutneys seeks legitimization in (over-)explanation, when we are constantly reminded of the not only synchronous but entirely equivalent task of writing and pickling:

Rising from my pages comes the unmistakable whiff of chutney. So let me obfuscate no further: I, Saleem Sinai, possessor of the most delicately-gifted olfactory organ in history, have dedicated my latter days to the large-scale preparation of condiments. [. . .] I grant, such mastery of the multiple gifts of cookery and language is rare indeed; yet I possess it. [. . .] And my chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings—by day amongst the pickle-vats, by

night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks. (37–8)

In this passage alone, there are references to Sir Walter Scott's declaration of the historical novel's purpose of preservation,⁵ to Lawrence Sterne's meaningful play with his protagonist's nose in *Tristram Shandy*, and to Marcel Proust's famous connection between food and memory in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Drawing on these prominent literary models, Rushdie affiliates his work with 'world literature.' Moreover, this affiliation with the respective Western models of three major modes of *Midnight's Children* (as a historical novel, as a self-reflexive novel and as a poetic exploitation of the meaningful power of food), situates Rushdie's novel explicitly in the Western literary tradition. India remains only the object to be negotiated and pickled in this process of refinement.

If memory's/history's culinary containers so ambivalently 'preserving' India's cultural identity are in the end thrown onto the global marketplace, does this mean that Rushdie 'sells out'? And how are we to assess Saleem's comment that the wide range of ingredients that constitute the contents of his pickle jars indeed represent an Indian reality as multifarious as the chef's imagination is inexhaustible: "to understand me, you have to swallow a world" (383)? Rushdie certainly is highly conscious of the fact that food has always been the paradigmatic site of encounter with other cultures, and as such, a marker of difference that nowhere is a foreign culture as easily consumed as in the act of eating and drinking. How far, then, does *Midnight's Children* tacitly participate in, if not actually initiate, the unprecedented commodification of Otherness it ironically exposes? In order to trace this question and to further explore the stakes of the food trope in the context of representations of the 'East', let me bring Romesh Gunesequera's 1994 novel *Reef* into the discussion.

III

Midnight's Children presents culinary activity in closest interdependence with the history of the Indian subcontinent during and after colonization so as to foreground the shaping of national identity. By contrast,

Gunasekera's novel introduces from the outset a post-independence Sri Lanka that denies any such direct relation between history and *cuisine*:

[The old cook Lucy] had seen [. . .] Sheffield silver replaced by coconut spoons. But [. . .] cooking [. . .] remained timeless. The rice still took twenty minutes to cook, and if the lid was lifted before the dimples appeared all would be lost; [. . .] you still could not tell a fresh coconut without shaking it, and you could not make a *pol-sambol* without breaking it. Culinary taste was not fickle, she would say, and the way you swallow food [. . .] has not changed throughout the history of mankind. (*Reef* 15)

This strongly ahistorical point of view with regard to the preparation of food is foregrounded throughout the novel's first-person narration. While the book only glances at the serious political problems of post-colonial Sri Lanka, the protagonist Triton who works as cook for his idolized employer Mr. Salgado goes into delicious detail when he describes his recipes and cooking secrets. We learn the right temperature for a perfect string-hopper dough, how to prepare coconut *kavum*, a love cake or a curry in a hurry, or how to disguise the dubious taste of a parrot fish with a sauce rich with chilli *sambol*. And we should not underestimate either "the omnipresence of the onion, constantly appearing like the heart's throb of our kitchen life" (14). Just as the change from colonialism to independence is reduced to the merely gastronomic matter of cutlery ("Sheffield silver replaced by coconut spoons" 15), the whole country is represented in terms of food.

At first glance the similarities between Triton and Saleem are striking. Both narrator-protagonists are employed in the condiment business, both spice, refine and at the same time mediate the raw products of subcontinental descent. While Saleem plays out his role as 'food informant,'⁶ titillating his reader's palate with suspense ("I mustn't reveal all my secrets at once," *Midnight's* 14), Triton unfolds his idealist philosophy of stimulating taste: "Taste is not a product of the mouth; it lies entirely in the mind. I prepare each dish to reach the mind through every possible channel. The mouth I only need to tickle, get to salivate, and

that I can even do by the picture I present, the smell [. . .] the sizzle of a hot dish or some aromatic tenderizing herb” (*Reef* 87). Moreover, like Saleem, who puts emphasis on the act of ‘preserving’ cultural memory, Triton also—with an anxious eye on the fact that the coral reef is vanishing and as a consequence the island is threatened by the encroaching sea—comes to the conclusion that “to conserve, to protect, to care for the past is something we have to learn” (*Reef* 178). If both of them claim to preserve their country, they both do so by offering subcontinental culture in commodified culinary form in the West. Triton, convinced that “we will never really produce anything here” (*Reef* 158), leaves in the end for England where he opens a restaurant to show “the world [. . .] something really fabulous” (*Reef* 177).

Not surprisingly, for his first novel, Gunesequera received a response as similarly polarized as Rushdie still gets for every one of his books.⁷ While *Reef* got high critical acclaim in Britain where it was published (and shortlisted for the Booker Prize), the response from Sri Lanka often gave short shrift to Gunesequera’s “blinkered attitude” (Perera 75) to his country of birth (he now lives in London). Walter Perera argued, for example, that the novel ‘translates’ Sri Lanka in a jaundiced manner to the metropole by focussing “on the ‘exotic’ in terms of cookery” (69). This critique, however, seems overstated to me, especially when contrasting Gunesequera’s politics of food representation with Rushdie’s allegory of the commodification and consumption of India.

Postcolonial writing has often been compared to travel writing to the extent that it performs the function, as Mary Louise Pratt argues in *Imperial Eyes*, of producing the “rest of the world” for a metropolitan readership (5). It is certainly true that Triton attempts to get “the seated, already heady, imaginations to explode with sensation” (*Reef* 86). Despite his repeated claim for political ignorance—“But I am only a cook” (111)—he knows very well that he functions as “guide, protector and entourage” (117) through the culinary joys and virtues of his country. Yet Triton is not content with overwriting the Sri Lanka of vile practices, murder, and mutiny with alluring images of curry dishes and fried fish balls. When the reader of *Reef* starts to lean back and indulge in Triton’s mouth-watering guided tour, he or she is confronted with the

less appetizing aspects of the *production* of food, such as the brutal professionalism of the fishmongers at the market:

The clammy stench of fresh fish blood, guts, bile and brine cooking in the magnified heat rolled down the dusty road to greet us. [. . .] There was a terrific trashing on the ground and I saw the fat, grey body of a reek shark twisting as a fishmonger hacked at it with a cleaver. Blood spurted. The creature flapped and writhed. The man brought the cleaver shining down again and again like a hammer. Smart, fat thunks punctuated by the sharper sound of the blade sparking off the concrete beyond the shark's beady eyes. It did not die until the head had been severed, and the man stood up with its curved slit of teeth smiling in his hand. Thick, black blood pumped out of the body on the floor, forming a pool. Someone chucked a bucket of water and washed it into the gully. (117)

Such crass descriptions are not to be found in *Midnight's Children* in which Saleem promises to disregard "proper dietary laws" in order to present the reader with all the "juicy" bits of (his)stories there are (59). The process of chutnification is important in this respect in that it helps to alter and intensify the flavours using the spices and vinegars that preserve them, so that in the end a 'tasty' mass-produced India is ready to be packaged and exported. In his essay "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie touts the now familiar image of "the infinite possibilities of the country" (16). One could say that in *Midnight's Children* this enabling multitudinous character of the subcontinent is translated into a vision of India as a horn of plenty producing the fresh resources that call for refining, packaging and delivery to the rest of the waiting world.

IV

The imagery of India as cornucopia is always on the verge of collapsing into the subcontinent's alleged incomprehensibility and mind-boggling vastness as it emerged from 'Indological' discourse. In the study *Imagining India* (1990), Ronald Inden has delivered an excellent analysis of presuppositions and assumptions about India as they were largely

constructed in this branch of Orientalist discourse, trying to keep India “eternally ancient by various Essences attributed” to this construction (1). Of course it would be inappropriate to deny the correctness of certain representational markers, such as the country’s immense diversity, on the grounds that such attributions were exploited and used for the self-definition of Europe as the civilized, enlightened centre of rational thinking.⁸ The way, however, in which this image is dealt with is a very delicate matter. I have argued so far that the representation of India/the Orient in terms of food is potentially complicit with Orientalist presuppositions, but does not necessarily call out for easy consumption, just as Gunesekeera’s novel *Reef* seems to moderate the commodifiability of the food-trope as it is established by *Midnight’s Children*. There are, however, other literary examples that even seem to radicalize the neo-orientalist⁹ substrate of Rushdie’s novel, exploiting India’s cachet in the West as the paradigmatic realm of the authentic, fascinating Other.

Consider Arundhati Roy’s celebrated and contested debut, *The God of Small Things* (1997), a novel replete with playfully presented Orientalist icons. Here is the paragraph that begins the narrative:

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red banana ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun. (3)

India’s lush nature, her endless nourishing supply, the peaceful, slightly overeaten atmosphere of spring: this Edenic image could arguably as well be found on a billboard advertizing India’s wonders to potential western tourists. It serves the order of representation that Timothy Mitchell has analytically captured in the formulation ‘the Orient as exhibition,’ the organization and production of an objectified ‘East’ turned into “a place of spectacle and visual arrangement” (297).

Arundhati Roy can be seen as typical for the new generation of Indian writers working in English who are immensely successful producing an alien sensibility for western markets. The deftly constructed plot of

The God of Small Things and Roy's flirtation with exoticist expectations on the side of her metropolitan readership suggest immediately a comparison with Salman Rushdie. And indeed, *The God of Small Things*, winner of the Booker Prize in 1997, has been celebrated (and commercialized) as "the biggest thing since *Midnight's Children*." Interestingly enough, it was Pankaj Mishra who coined these words (Huggan 253), the same critic who also pointed to the spreading infection of 'Rushdieitis' among young Indian writers.¹⁰ Roy herself, however, makes her novel's indebtedness to the great model explicitly obvious by drawing on the prominent image of pickling in *Midnight's Children*.¹¹ Also in *The God of Small Things* a pickle factory plays an important role, and just in case some readers should miss the intertextual reference, we are told that the model for Mammachi's 'Paradise Pickles & Preserves' is a Bombay factory called Padma Pickles (159). This unmistakable Rushdiesque taste sticks to the whole narrative; personal secrets are pickled in red tender-mango-shape; we are given the recipe of the family's famous banana jam; there is a discourse on the possibility of preserving (Roy makes clear that seepage is inevitable); and, perhaps most significantly, the focus lies again on the business of *mediating* the taste of the Indian South, on "the squashing, the slicing, boiling and stirring, the grating, salting, drying, the weighing and bottle sealing" (163). With Roy so obviously at pains to conjure up an India as tasty as Rushdie's, it is ironic that the novel's narrator keeps pointing out that Mammachi's pickle factory is run-down and deserted by the time of the narrative's present. On the other hand, the novel clearly focuses on the time when the family's marketing energy is invested in keeping the brand Paradise Pickles & Preserves alive:

It was Chacko who christened the factory Paradise Pickles & Preserves and had labels designed and printed . [. . .] At first he had wanted to call it Zeus Pickles & Preserves, but that idea was vetoed because everybody said that Zeus was too obscure and had no local relevance. [. . .] (Comrade Pillai's suggestion—Parashuram Pickles—was vetoed for the opposite reason: too *much* local relevance).

It was Chacko's idea to have a billboard painted. (56)

It is certainly tempting to read a passage like this as indicative of the way Roy's novel has been carefully crafted to be the long-sought successor to *Midnight's Children*.¹² Without a doubt, to be favourably compared with Rushdie means being granted considerable cultural authority, but it also means being labelled so as to fit into a certain merchandizing apparatus in which 'Rushdie' functions as brand and '*Midnight's Children*' as trademark for a specific negotiation of India tailored to Western tastes. While the scandal that *The God of Small Things* caused in India (because of its frank representation of sexuality and its uncompromising treatment of the precarious issue of caste) arguably helped to further the novel's success in the West, Roy's commodified version of India presents for metropolitan readers the perfect mixture of the strange and the familiar, making the consumption of the foreign world an exciting, but not too dangerous matter.

V

Roy herself is certainly not innocent in her rise to the new shooting star of cosmopolitan Indo-Anglian literati. Intertextuality itself is never innocent, and especially not in a context of postcoloniality in which drawing on other texts is a way of stating one's affiliation. Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*, like his protagonist Saleem Sinai, sets out to adopt as many literary fathers as possible. For the generation of writers after the crucial year 1981, Rushdie himself becomes an authoritative literary father worthy of affiliation.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989) further illustrates this problem. Again, food is of central importance for this narrative self-location. If the protagonist Jasmine, on the different stations of her way from the confines of Hasnapur to New York, Iowa and California, aims at reconciling her different selves and worlds, getting rooted in the United States and trying more and more to become an American, she still lives her Indian self in the kitchen. Jasmine alias Jane Ripplemeyer takes pride in the fact that "[p]eople are getting used to some of my concoctions, even if they make a show of fanning their mouths. They get disappointed if there's not *something* Indian on the table" (9). That an Indian character sees him- or herself as "caregiver, recipe giver, preserver" (215) sounds

all too familiar by now, and right; Saleem's pickles have found their way even to distant Elsa Country, Iowa: "Darrel stands in the middle of his kitchen, wearing a butcher's apron and holding a bottle of Bombay lime pickle in a hand that's bleeding from where he cut it on the jagged edge of the bottle's tin cap. Third World packaging" (215).

If chutneys delivered from Bombay have the potential to hurt their Western customers, there is also a strong emphasis throughout Mukherjee's narrative on the actual power involved in the process of preparing Indian food. It is not enough that Jasmine tells us that "[f]ood is a way of granting or withholding love" (216). She also claims to be "subverting the taste buds of Elsa Country" (19). The "sacrilegious smells" filling her kitchen when she puts "pot roast and gobi aloo" into the oven (213) points to some, heavily gendered, subversive power that accrues to the one who has access to the exotic condiments now present in the western kitchen.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 1997 bestseller *The Mistress of Spices* has recently proved that such an incantation of the magic power of Indian spices in connection to a blunt emancipatory interest still finds a mass audience in the United States and elsewhere in the Western metropole. If Mukherjee's reversion to the magic of subcontinental concoctions is constantly in danger of rehearsing the very stereotypes about the East the novel otherwise exposes (for example if we hear that Jasmine's Iowa husband Bud had thought of Asia "only as a soy-bean market" 14), Divakaruni's novel is eager to deliver every single blatantly exoticized notion of India as the mythical realm of divine spiritual relief for jaded industrialized souls. In a wonderfully poignant article, Amitava Kumar takes satirical issue with *The Mistress of Spices* for reducing Indian culture to "easy-to-swallow nonsense" (Kumar 88). A pinch of what the novel tastes like may suffice to confirm Kumar's point:

I am the Mistress of Spices. I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth, sand and stone. [. . .] But the spices are my love. I know their origins and what their colours signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true-name it was given at the first, when earth split like skin and offered it to the sky. [. . .] Yes,

they all hold magic, even the everyday American spices you toss unthinking into your cooking pot. [. . .] But the spices of true power are from my birthland, land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers. Sunset skies brilliant as blood. They are the ones I work with. (3)

Each chapter of Divakaruni's book is devoted to a particular spice, which Tilo, the mistress of spices, uses to aid diasporic Indians in need who come to her grocery store in Oakland, California. Turmeric, ginger, fenugreek or makaradwaj prove—"under the supervision of a qualified mistress" (np)—divine remedies against all kinds of physical and spiritual violations. Kumar quippingly dubs the protagonist "Mother Teresa of the Bay Area" (88), but there is also, as might go without saying by now, a good deal of Saleem Sinai behind Tilo. The fetishization of the power of spices can again be traced straight back to *Midnight's Children*. Here is Saleem once more:

There is also the matter of the spice bases. The intricacies of turmeric and cumin, the subtlety of fenugreek, when to use large (and when small) cardamoms; the myriad possible effects of garlic, garam masala, stick cinnamon, coriander, ginger . . . not to mention the flavourful contributions of the occasional speck of dirt. (*Midnight's* 461)

It is probably unfair to compare Mukherjee's much-acclaimed *Jasmine* with Divakaruni's merely popular novel. Both narratives, however, clearly have something in common. Even if Bharati Mukherjee hardly succumbs to as wholeheartedly euphoric a treatment of India as Divakaruni (Jasmine for example describes her subcontinental past in terms of "a lotus blooming in cow dung," 46), and even if *Jasmine* does not share the bathos of *The Mistress of Spices*, both texts capitalize in their distinctive way on the exotic cachet of India as realm of the fabled and fabulous in the West. If Tilo presents herself straight away as a sage, Jasmine knows very well that "Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am" (200). And if

Divakaruni readily cashes in on the trendy commodity value of Eastern mysticism, Mukherjee knows very well how to successfully present a domesticated culinary India to her Western reading public.

VI

While the new generation of Indo-Anglian writers turn their faces resolutely towards the west, Kumar claims, many of them produce inoffensive narratives that “pose no threat to anyone, least of all to the West” (84). Graham Huggan even argues that the spate of novels of subcontinental descent has itself to be seen as a product of the “globalization of (Western-capitalist) consumer culture, in which ‘India’ functions not just as polyvalent cultural sign, but as highly mobile capital good” (253). Already with regard to Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, we have seen that both views may be inseparably intertwined, with *Midnight’s Children* operating as the connecting text. This model text’s authority over younger writers and a publishing industry’s commercial exploitation of the commodity value of the buzzword ‘Rushdie’ join hands to create what is paraded as new Indian writing in English.

Ardashir Vakil’s first novel *Beach Boy*, published in 1997, is another plain example for this co-operative establishment of what might ironically be called a ‘Rushdie food chain.’ Just looking at the cover blurbs we find, right under the novel’s title, the definite authorizing words from Rushdie himself: “Sharp, funny and fast.” And on the back of the cover is printed an excerpt from a *Time Out* review that reads: “Extraordinarily vivid. . . it is a pleasure to return to the Bombay of *Midnight’s Children*.” Plain as this commercializing strategy may be, it is predicated on the fact that the narrative itself sets conspicuous intertextual markers that connect this newer work with Rushdie’s novel. Nor is it just that the thirty chapters of which *Beach Boy* consists echo the number of Saleem’s pickle jars. The endless enumerations of local relishes are also strongly reminiscent of *Midnight’s Children*.

If I went to the Krishans’ at twelve, the Vermas’ at one-thirty and the Maharanis’ at two-thirty, I could manage to have a bite at three houses. I was drifting off on trays of food: mutton

korma, thick gravy full of cardamon, poppy seeds, tender slow-cooked meat, mangoes, onion uttapams, cheese toast with tomato and garlic, shrivelled baby brinjals that look like mice, aloo parathas flaky with ghee, mint chutney, cool milky curds. (Vakil 114)

The narrator, parsi boy Cyrus Readymoney, is not only an “amateur aficionado of Hindi cinema” (5), but most of all a voracious eater who greedily consumes every taste he can get in his home city of Bombay:

I comforted myself with Granny’s hot chapatis filled with clotted cream and strawberry jam, the scrambled eggs made to perfection and the sweet sesame ladoos after lunch. She cooked delicious evening meals, too: rus chawal, with its tender goat and coconut milk, khichri kheema; lentil-stained rice with healthy portions of clove and cinnamon-flavoured mince, machhinosas, a thick white curry with tails of pomfret. There was a pudding every night: caramel custard, rice pudding, home-made ice-cream, falooda and an opaque pink ghas nu jelly. (165)

Already of *Midnight’s Children* with its “rasgullas and gulab jamans” (155), its “ladoos, pistaki-lauz, meat samosas, kulfi” (234), it has been said that though “earlier novelists had used Hindi words for food, Rushdie overfills the plate” (Gorra 136). There is more behind this play with the (mainly western) reader’s ignorance than an undoubtedly exoticizing effect (you don’t have to know what’s on the plate, and can still savour the “authentic taste of truth”). On the one hand, the reference to ‘indigenous’ food implies insider knowledge, designating who is allowed to speak about India and who is not. Significantly, it is by way of a food simile that Rushdie in his essay “Outside the Whale” (1984) derides Paul Scott for the picture of India he draws in *The Raj Quartet*, arguing that the novels’ “overall effect is rather like a literary version of Mulligatawny soup. It tries to taste Indian, but ends up being ultra-parochially British, only with too much pepper” (*Imaginary Homelands* 90). On the other hand, exaggeration is a trope kindred to the constant self-irony Rushdie practises in his narratives. As a matter of course,

the appeal of Indian food as both fascinating and dangerous object for consumption is ironically twisted itself. At one point in *Midnight's Children*, for example, Saleem is told by a tourist "that India was indeed a truly wonderful country with many remarkable traditions, and would be just fine and perfect if one did not constantly have to eat Indian food" (416). Still, though, as we have seen, Rushdie's narrative, ironic as it may be, negotiates India as subject of what Aijaz Ahmad, following Marx, calls "commodity fetishism" (217). Like Scott, but under the guise of ironic exposure, Rushdie playfully represents desires for exciting other worlds through narrative. It is "consistently difficult to tell in Rushdie's parodies where complicity begins and ends," writes Tim Brennan accurately (*Salman Rushdie* 92). And indeed, the self-parodic awareness omnipresent in Rushdie's fiction can well be seen as a safety-net, designed to enable him to touch even 'hot dishes' without burning his mouth.¹³

Rushdie's mastery in the double-edged tactics of fabricating marketable myths of an authentic, magic India while at the same time exposing the targeted readership's Orientalist predilections is already so integral an ingredient of the *Midnight's Children* blend that the numerous Indo-Anglican texts trying to apply Rushdie's recipe are busy peppering their narratives with the same "momentary indulgences in self-pleasuring destabilization" (Krishnaswamy 134). Whether, like Arundhati Roy, these writers may themselves be attested mastery in the skill of self-ingratiating mockery, or whether, as in Vakil's case, the scheme of serving a spicy India to the rest of the world is to a lesser degree thwarted by an ironic undercurrent, the gesture is towards a further confirmation of their credo of being a card-carrying member of the Cosmopolitan club of 'India's leading novelists,' rather than a critique of the highly problematic commodification of an India ready to be consumed.

VII

Let me come back to the special issue of the *New Yorker* with which I started my argument. In its introduction Bill Buford asks: "Why are there suddenly so many Indian novelists?" (7). Provocatively reformulating this question (that, of course, the very existence of the special issue

seems to answer), I want to conclude by asking why so many of them are so similar, and what kind of ‘India’ is represented in the culinary narratives I have examined. In a review, John Updike comes up with a startling list of similarities and parallels between *Beach Boy* and *The God of Small Things* which he does not judge as plagiarism of any kind (the novels were published within a few months anyway), but rather attributes to the fact that “[t]hese novels come from the same India—the same Western-educated, mercantile social class, the same western coast—and similarly touch on the same kathakali dancers, ravenous kites, and colorful circumambient poverty” (160).

Updike’s comment is helpful in drawing attention to at least three important points. First, his argument about the distinctive class of writers through whose eyes we get to see the subcontinental scenery, ties in with what Anthony Appiah has infamously called the “comprador intelligentsia” of postcoloniality: “a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery” (348). Second, there is the merely spectacular effect of the ‘Orient as exhibition.’ It is not that obvious problems of contemporary India like overpopulation and hunger would not exist in these narratives. The problem is that the representation of these problems is always on the verge of collapsing into recuperative Orientalist images of fascinating other worlds (“colorful circumambient poverty” as Updike puts it). India, the continent’s slums and jungles as well as its villas and metropolises, figures as “a site not of conflict, but of pleasurable diversion” (Huggan 252). As such, texts like *Midnight’s Children*, *The God of Small Things* or *Beach Boy* serve a jaded mainstream always on the look for “hot spices, tropical birds and sorcerers” (Iyer 48) to rejuvenate itself. Finally, Updike’s observation about the similarity of two novels could, as my reading of other texts has shown, well be extended to a range of further texts. There are several recurrent themes, but most notably the deployment of a special food trope derived from *Midnight’s Children* through which these texts comment on their own status as trademarked consumer items in the “belly of the metropolitan beast” (Krishnaswamy 133)—a trope that makes them immediately recognizable as products of the new India-born literary elite.¹⁴

"Unfortunately," writes Meenakshi Mukherjee, "today many Indian novelists, lured by the economic dividends of world-wide distribution and driven by the mirage of international fame, tend to adjust their self-image to the expectations of their allotted (sic!) role in the context of world literature" (Mukherjee 148). As my argument has shown, I would qualify this statement, arguing instead that *Midnight's Children* has provided a recipe for success on the western book market to which most of India's new celebrity writers more or less adhere. There is, however, also the crucial question of who gets recognition—who is published and whose status is advanced by reviews (and photos), but also by literary awards. I won't go into further detail here, but it is another very interesting matter that the Booker prize, Britain's top prestigious award, has helped turn three of the novels I have explored—*Midnight's Children*, *Reef*, and *The God of Small Things*—into conspicuous commercial successes. It seems ironic that the award's sponsor, Booker MacConnell, is a former food conglomerate that has already played a major role in an earlier, more materialist form of commodification and consumption of India (Todd). If already in the first East-West trade, spices became India's primary commodity, now novels from the subcontinent are proving spicy pleasures tailored to western reading desires.¹⁵

Such exotic consumer items need to be recognizable to secure marketing success. The deliberate connections between consuming food and consuming narrative that are suggested by all of these novels shows how conscious they are of the commercial apparatus in which they fuel the "otherness machine" (Suleri 105) of a metropolitan industry of strategically exoticized products. As neatly homogenized and packaged goods, these 'authentic' Indian flavours are thrown out on the market. Again it is Saleem Sinai who seems to be telling us that even though we may never be able to comprehend India as a whole, we can certainly *ingest* it, simply swallow it. His own structuring device of dividing his narrative into thirty-one pickle jars provides "manageable, swallowable, mouthfuls" (Crane 180) that make the consumption of 'India' easier. But also the texts in the wake of *Midnight's Children* are spicy *pleasures*, guaranteed not to be too hot, and promising not to cause severe indigestion in "the belly of the metropolitan beast."

Notes

- 1 Earlier versions of this essay were presented as papers at the conference “Food Representation in Literature, Film and the Other Arts” at San Antonio, Texas (February 17–19, 2000) as well as at the symposium “Eating Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Food” at Frankfurt/Main (April 29–May 1, 2000). A favourable research scholarship by the DAAD has enabled me to complete this paper as a postdoctoral research fellow at UBC, Vancouver. Special thanks are also due to Graham Huggan and Tabish Khair for critical comment.
- 2 One should not underestimate, though, the difficulties of getting all these writers, who had in some cases never seen each other before, together for the moment of the shot. Bill Buford in his introductory comment to the *New Yorker* issue gives a vivid account of the “muted panic” (7) that apparently prevailed in what was supposed to convey serene community.
- 3 Richard Todd yields a reading of the novel in terms of the governing metaphors of leakage, seepage, the porous and the fissured, 286–290.
- 4 In “‘Errata’: or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight’s Children*” (1983), Rushdie contends after some examples of his narrator’s little mistakes: “It is by now obvious, I hope, that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator, and that *Midnight’s Children* is far from being an authoritative guide to the history of post-independence India” (*Imaginary Homelands* 22–3).
- 5 In his postscript to *Waverley*, Scott explains that it is “for the purpose of preserving” the cultural memory of the Scottish past and “of the ancient manners of which I have witnessed the almost total exclusion,” that he has written this novel (*Waverley* 493).
- 6 In her recent book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Spivak traces the figure of the “native informant” through literature, history and philosophy. Spivak herself draws attention to the fact that: “[c]ertain members of the Indian elite are of course native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other,” but comments that “one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous” (270; original emphasis).
- 7 *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) was highly praised, for example, by Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo, while the reviews of Meenakshi Mukherjee, Pankaj Mishra and Michael Gorra were less favourable, with especially Mishra criticising Rushdie for merely exporting Eastern narrative methods in adapted form to the West.
- 8 The same problem is already apparent in Edward Said’s landmark work *Orientalism* when Said on the one hand tries to reveal the distortions in the constructed image of the Orient, and on the other hand denies the very existence of any ‘real’ Orient; cp. Clifford’s sharp comment in *The Predicament of Culture* (260) and Schulze-Engler’s analysis of Said’s methodology that also accounts for this ambivalence.

- 9 On 'Neo-Orientalism' cp. Boehmer's brief introduction "Questions of Neo-Orientalism" (1998) as well as Gayatri Spivak's conception of "new orientalism" as it is discussed in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (cp. 277).
- 10 Rushdie himself, tongue firmly in cheek, admits to be the main victim of this infection ("Damme" 54).
- 11 Roy has later denied the connection, pointing to some differences between Rushdie's work and her own ("Interview"). Despite the disclaimer, the intertextual model is obvious.
- 12 Padmini Mongia was the first to comment on the well-publicized emergence of Roy on the stage of literary India. Her paper "The Making and Marketing of Arundhati Roy," given at the 1997 Barcelona Conference 'India: Fifty Years After Independence,' is unpublished. For a brief summary of Mongia's paper see Huggan (252).
- 13 The explosively-charged reception of his later novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), culminating in the death-sentence of the *fatwa*, proved in a macabre way that this 'safety net' does not hold when Rushdie performs his ironic tricks in front of a fundamentalist audience. My point here is not in the least meant to support the invectives against Rushdie for 'making fun of the Prophet.' I rather see a problem in Rushdie's capitalization on his trendy alterity in the West that gives way to an ebullient deployment of exoticist clichés, and that is clearly perceptible in every single work to date.
- 14 There are, of course, exemptions. Consider, for example, Sara Suleri's autobiographical novel *Meatless Days* (1989), that can be seen as a sharp commentary on the exploitation of culinary India in recent writing. Food as discursive element of literature is explored in all its manifestations, be it as Proustian generator of *memoire involontaire*, as maternal nurturing, or as sexual stimulation. Ramzan, the Muslim month of fasting, figures as prominently as the Freudian cannibalistic desire of incorporating one's mother, the issues of food rules both private and public, or food poisoning and the ideal of purity. More of a meta-food narrative than a novel of culinary representation, *Meatless Days* parodically overdoes "the imaginative extravagance of food" (Suleri 34), making easy consumption impossible. Also Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting*, published in 1999 and shortlisted for the Booker prize, circumvents the Rushdiesque politics of consumption by focussing of the 'eating disorders' that her Indian character Arun experiences in his American host family in suburban New England: meat-addiction and vegetable fetishism, hysterical anorexia and bulimia live side by side in the Pattons' home. It is unsurprising that when Arun eventually leaves, he finds that "he has lost his appetite" (Desai 216). If Indian food seems to be tackled from a different angle than in the various novels examined in this paper, however, it is important to take into account that Suleri who teaches English literature at Yale might not even want to be counted among the group of "India's leading novelists" selected by the *New Yorker*, while Anita Desai, who is in the photo, was 'there' even before the path-breaking publication of *Midnight's Children*.

15 Nupur Chaudhuri gives valuable insights into the important role of Indian commodities and food in Victorian Britain.

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