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The Politics of Food and Appetite in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* and V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life*

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Abstract: This essay contends that materialist as well as culturalist views of resistance to particular foods fall short of grasping the significance of this resistance in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) and V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001). It argues that a critical focus on postcoloniality is necessary to understand the treatment of food and appetite in these novels. These novels demonstrate how a history of domination has charged Indian material culture with political meaning: they implicitly relate the fates of their protagonists in post-liberation India to Mohandas Gandhi and Indian nationalism's ambivalence about whether to embrace the meat-eating of the former British colonisers or promote vegetarianism and fasting as elements of national identity. The novels suggest that a semantic over-determination of appetite and consumption transforms the sons' resistance to the ways of their fathers into an unintended repetition of the positions of coloniser and colonised.

Keywords: food, appetite, Mohandas Ghandhi, vegetarianism, Anita Desai, V. S. Naipaul

The novels *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) by Anita Desai and *Half a Life* (2001) by V. S. Naipaul share themes, character constellations, and structural characteristics. Both novels deal with sons who resist their father's dietary practices, who are raised in post-liberation India and later emigrate to the West, and whose lives highlight the political meanings of food and appetite in India. And both novels are driven by the tension between food and appetite, and dietary restrictions and self-

restraint. I argue that understanding the politics of food and appetite in these novels requires a postcolonial approach that exposes how a history of domination has charged material practices with political meanings. I show that Desai's and Naipaul's novels implicitly relate the fates of their protagonists to Indian nationalism's ambivalence about whether to embrace the meat-eating of the former British colonisers or promote vegetarianism and fasting as elements of national identity. Both novels' point of reference is Mohandas Gandhi, who first made meat-eating and then vegetarianism and fasting central elements of his liberatory nationalism. Both protagonists struggle with the legacy of their fathers, who either rejected or embraced Gandhi's call for a meatless diet. In this way, the novels offer different critiques of the politics of food and appetite in post-liberation India.

In Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*, the male protagonist turns against his father's practice of meat-eating. The novel suggests that the politics of food benefits men at the cost of the physical and mental starvation of women and that Gandhi usurped the position of women when he used vegetarianism to fashion men as representatives of a feminized Indian polity. Gandhi's focus on vegetarianism also reinforced the caste system. At the same time, the novel points out that vegetarianism is an alternative to the unlimited appetite associated with Western modernity. In Naipaul's *Half a Life*, the protagonist rejects his father's culinary and sexual self-restraint, which was inspired by Gandhi as a strategy, reserved for Brahmins, to maintain status under colonial rule. *Half a Life*'s political agenda is quite different from that of *Fasting, Feasting*: it critiques Gandhi as well as Indian traditions of self-restraint. The novel proposes that the Indian quarrel over the control or indulgence of appetite is concerned with both culinary practice and sexuality. In both spheres, Indian methods of regulating appetite came to signify opposition to the colonial appetite for new territories. My central claim is that the fates of the sons in both novels suggest that in post-liberation India and the Indian diaspora, the old political quarrel about dietary practice has led to a semantic over-determination of appetite and consumption. This in turn transforms resistance to the ways of the fathers into an unintended repetition of the positions of coloniser and colonised.

In addressing these issues, I seek to contribute to the understanding of Desai's and Naipaul's works and intervene in the debate in food studies over how to interpret resistance to particular foods. Critics and theorists such as J. M. Coetzee and Tobias Döring et al. understand it as the body's ability to resist cultural expectations, while others such as Michel de Certeau read it as a strategy, available to ordinary persons, for reclaiming agency from all-pervasive economic, political, and cultural forces. I argue that neither the materialist nor the culturalist view can account for the politics of food and appetite in Naipaul's and Desai's works because they pay too little regard to the historical dimension elaborated in these novels. Instead, it requires a distinctly postcolonial approach to make the present readable by exposing how a history of domination has charged material culture and its practices with political meanings.

I. *Fasting, Feasting*

Fasting, Feasting tells the story of Uma and Arun, a brother and sister in a Brahmin family. While food plays an important role in Desai's earlier novels *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) and *Clear Light of Day* (1980) (Jackson 162, 166), in *Fasting, Feasting* dietary practices form the material nexus of class, gender, and political distinctions between individual characters and between India and the United States. The nonlinear narrative of Part One focuses on the mundane practices that constitute Uma's life in India between the 1950s and the 1980s and suggests that she not only lives in her little brother's shadow but that the wealth of attention her brother receives depends on her continuing subservience to her male family members. Uma, who is having trouble finding a husband and is viewed as unattractive, is made to bottlefeed Arun. Throughout the day, she and her mother ensure "that a fixed quantity of milk was poured down his gullet whether he wanted it or not. . . . Then, when Papa returned from the office, he would demand to know how much his son had consumed" (Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* 30). In addition to receiving the best food, Arun is also given the best English-style education available. His father wants him to succeed in the modern world, the door to which the English supposedly threw open when they colonised India. Uma, on the other hand, is deprived of food as well as education. All she is fed are

the pious and, in the context of her situation, ironic words of convent school sisters: "The lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (20). When a potential husband is finally found and invited to the house, the man asks Uma's parents for the hand of her sister Aruna, even though Aruna is only thirteen. Uma's brother, Arun, will study in the US in accordance with his father's plans, whereas she is certain to live out her life in the confines of her parents' home. She does not openly rebel, but even while she is still going to school, she suffers the first of the fainting fits that will seize her throughout her life and will almost make her drown in the river where she and her family take a ritual bath. Uma's periodic fits transport her to another realm and thus are a form of resistance to her immobility and spiritual starvation (Poon 36).

Crucially, the privileges lavished upon Arun stifle and overburden him. The ambitious educational demands he must meet mirror his earlier force-feeding: he has to stomach the food as well as the books his father orders him to consume. Like Uma, his resistance to his parents' culinary regimen occurs at the bodily level but does so much earlier. When baby Arun is fed eggs, he turns away wildly, and his parents realize that he is a vegan. His father orders Uma to force cod liver oil between Arun's teeth, but Arun snaps them shut on her finger, which begins to bleed.

The scene encapsulates Uma's and Arun's dilemmas. As the male heir of the family, Arun thrives on Uma's bottlefeeding and the food she is not eating, and his biting transforms this parasitic relationship into a symbolic act of "cannibalistic gender discrimination" (Poon 39). Ironically, though, he simultaneously expresses resistance to eating meat and animal products such as the cod liver oil. Arun's biting but not ingesting stresses that his precocious veganism is a form of self-assertion against his father who believes his son needs to be fed meat in order to grow strong (Poon 35–37). Arun's veganism triumphs over his father's culinary pedagogy as if to demonstrate the body's ability to resist acculturation.

Food studies scholars often argue that bodies and the food that sustains them cannot be entirely disciplined by the pressures of culture and that a portion of the body will always resist acculturaion.[1] Indeed,

Coetzee makes this point about *Fasting, Feasting*: "At a precultural level, the level of the body itself, [Arun] resists the pressures of assimilation" (291). Coetzee prioritizes the material over the cultural. de Certeau, on the other hand, suggests that food refusal is best read as a consumer tactic against the pressures of economic and political forces (de Certeau 10–21).[2]

However, I argue that neither approach can adequately unlock the significance of Arun's refusal. The salient point of the passage explored above is only understood when we learn about the reaction of Arun's father:

> A meat diet had been one of the revolutionary changes brought about in [Arun's father's] life, and his brother's, by their education. Raised amongst traditional vegetarians, their eyes had been opened to the benefits of meat along with that of cricket and the English language: the three were linked inextricably in their minds. . . . Now his own son, his one son, displayed this completely baffling desire to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life. (Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* 32–33)

In light of his father's vexation, Arun's veganism is less a physical predisposition signifying the body's resistance to acculturation or a consumer's reclamation of an autonomy encroached on by economic forces than an unwitting return to the ways of his Brahmin forefathers. Arun embodies a reawakening of the traditional customs his father laid to rest for the sake of what he believes to be modern and progressive.

It is here that *Fasting, Feasting* implicitly invokes the mid-nineteenth-century debate over diet and national character to which Gandhi responded. In his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi discusses the chastening of appetite, the refusal of salt and spices, and fasting. As Parama Roy writes, these prescriptions all feature in the ancient Jain religion, which provided Gandhi with a template for his own alimentary ethics.[3] But Gandhi also drew from a political ideology promoted in the mid-nineteenth century by the spiritual Hindu leaders Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda. As

Coetzee relates, both men argued that Hindus had lost touch with their masculinity and sought to remedy this by adopting the same values that seemed to give the British their power (290–91). Roy describes how Vivekananda famously prescribed "beef, biceps, and Bhagvadgita" as a cure for the supposed effeminization of Indian men (79).

Surprisingly, before the 1890s British and Indian commentators largely agreed on the physical and moral inadequacy among Indians, as well as the notion that one of its causes was a meatless diet. In his autobiography, Gandhi recalls schoolboys singing the following song:

> Behold the mighty Englishman
> He rules the Indian small,
> Because being a meat-eater
> He is five cubits tall. (17)

After an initial revulsion, Gandhi adopted meat-eating as a nationalist duty and explicitly couched it in masculinist terms. Meat, he suggested, would nourish the Indian resistance to British rule and propel Indians into modernity: "I wished to be strong and daring and wanted my countrymen also to be such, so that we might defeat the English and make India free!" (18).

Only after some time in London did Gandhi renounce the eating of meat and, as Roy observes, it is no coincidence that he revised his valuation of vegetarianism while living in the heart of the Empire. Gandhi was a respected member of London's vegetarian societies, where he was deemed a representative of a culture with a long vegetarian tradition. Roy argues that the respect Gandhi received in London helped him replace his earlier sense of Indian weakness and inferiority with a kind of affirmative Orientalism and develop a culinary politics that was partly derived from the Jain philosophy of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, and addressed political and ethical concerns (89–95). Vegetarianism and fasting became central to India's struggle for independence because self-rule at a national level seemed meaningless without self-rule at the most intimate, bodily level (26). At the same time, Gandhi stopped wearing a suit and began to dress simply. He exhibited his vegetarian body; both his clothing and diet seemed to Londoners hyperbolic and even

provocative. Gandhi, through his vegetarianism, consciously sought to feminize his body, and by extension the Indian polity (Roy 83–85).

Indian nationalism's ambivalence about whether to embrace meat and masculinity or vegetarianism styled as feminine enables us to understand Arun's father's shock. Not only does Arun seem like a throwback to a time when a culture of non-meat-eating was second nature to some Brahmins, but his veganism also threatens his father's worldview, which is premised on masculinity, progress, and Englishness. Furthermore, what can be seen as a sign of weakness in Arun might turn out to be a sign of strength—a passive resistance to foreign domination that Arun applies to his family in a way scandalously similar to Gandhi's fasts. If the non-linear narrative of *Fasting, Feasting* evokes a sense of circularity reminiscent of the Hindu belief in reincarnation, then Arun's veganism reads as a material return of Hindu customs.

Roy's observation that "[d]iaspora (usually in the West), as the arena of temptation, testing, and sacrifice, is in many ways the most appropriate theatre for the turn, or return, to practices of dietary belonging and dietary fidelity" (11) applies to Arun: it is in the US that his alimentary practice is truly put to the test and reveals its full significance. Part Two of *Fasting, Feasting* switches its focus from Uma to Arun and his stay with his American host family, the Pattons, during his studies in Boston. Mrs. Patton, the mother of a son and a daughter, harbours secret vegetarian desires she has not dared to act on in her meat-eating household. Arun's vegetarianism encourages her to follow his example. Mrs. Patton fashions him as her fellow conspirator, a Gandhi in her backyard, a native sage of vegetarianism and self-restraint amidst a world of excess and consumption.

The revelation of Arun's veganism to the meat-eating Pattons is narrated in words rich in religious overtones. When the aproned Mr. Patton, performing at his mundane altar the evening rite of grilling hamburgers and steaks, offers Arun a piece of meat, Arun instinctively steps backwards: "Some stubborn adherence to his own tribe asserts itself and prevents him from converting" (Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* 166). Mr. Patton's shock mirrors that of Arun's father. Although the Pattons are never identified as Christians and Arun is never explicitly labelled a Hindu

believer, the identity of what Arun calls the "tribe" asserts itself in this moment to both men in religious terms: the eating of meat belongs to Christianity, veganism to Hinduism.[4] It is as if by refusing Mr. Patton's meat, Arun refuses to partake of the Lord's Supper, the body of Christ.

The unfolding narrative suggests that for the male members of the Patton family, Arun's refusal of meat is both the result and source of his weakness. Even Arun associates eating meat with strength and understands his veganism as the reason why he is unable to compete with Mr. Patton's athletic son. The triad of Christianity, carnivorousness, and masculinity finds its opposite in the vegetarian, feminized Hindu body. This is more or less the situation Gandhi faced under British rule, a situation which he initially answered by converting to meat-eating. But he later turned the vegetarian, feminized Hindu body into a characteristic of Indian identity.

Instead of transforming Arun into a heroic, Gandhi-like figure, however, Desai's portrait of Arun points to blind spots in Gandhi's position even while acknowledging its potential. Whereas Gandhi opposed the British Empire, whose appetite for colonies was reflected in its appetite for meat, Arun experiences the contemporary hegemon of Western modernity, the US, as a culture of excessive consumption that repulses him and leaves him hungry. America is "like a plastic representation of what he had known at home; not the real thing—which was plain, unbeautiful, misshapen, fraught and compromised—but the unreal thing—clean, bright, gleaming, without taste, savour or nourishment" (185).

The personification of the simultaneous abundance of food and lack of nutrition is the Pattons' bulimic daughter, Melanie, who is caught in a cycle of gorging herself on French fries and peanuts only to vomit in secret. Tellingly, no one in the Patton family truly sees her drama. It takes Arun to understand Melanie's illness—Arun who knows what it means to be stuffed, even force-fed, while at the same time being starved of what one desires. Arun's impression that hunger is at the centre of American consumption is strengthened by the fact that Melanie reminds him of his sister Uma, whose physical and intellectual starvation finds its counterpart in the inexpressible hunger underlying Melanie's bulimia (Poon 45–46). Looking at Melanie, he sees

> a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both licence and plenty. But what is plenty? What is not? Can one tell the difference? (Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* 214).

The fact that Arun has no political agenda, that he resists for neither consciously religious nor ethical reasons but is guided by bodily instinct, makes him more like Gandhi than it might initially appear. Gandhi was sometimes at a loss to explain the logic and value of fasting except in terms of an existential need. When he did not allow his ill son and wife to eat beef or drink broth even though doctors advised it, for example, he could not rationally explain his actions. For Gandhi, it seems, fasting worked as a revelation, a visionary experience not reducible to hygiene and social benefits, a yearning great enough to vanquish palate and libido (Roy 104–08). Maud Ellmann argues that "something more eschatological" might be "at stake in self-starvation" than a desire for slenderness, the wish for self-control, or political motives, rationales that tend to "explain away the strangeness of this discipline of disengendering" (16). As politically canny as Gandhi's fasts may seem, his self-starvation was at least partly the product of a more obscure source than his will to liberate India from British rule.

While Arun's resistance to meat is reminiscent of Gandhi's resistance to Western ways of consumption, it also sheds a critical light on the role of class and gender in Gandhi's politics. It recalls how Gandhi's nationalism used vegetarianism to fashion men as representatives of a feminized Indian polity. The position of women was thus not only underprivileged but also appropriated by men in order to turn it into a characteristic of Indian identity, adding usurpation to neglect. Moreover, vegetarianism and fasting reinforced the caste system, as the practices were—and still are—perceived as a return to Brahmin laws. The causes of both women and liberation from the caste system thus suffered in favour of national

liberation and an assertion of non-Western ways of life. *Fasting, Feasting* is scathing in its near-satirical portrayal of the Pattons as well as Arun, whose privileged upbringing as a male Brahmin shows in his incompetent cooking and general passivity. In India, the caste system and the traditional role of women serve men like Arun, but when these men go abroad, the novel suggests, their being used to such privileges renders them hungry and helpless.

Even in the US, Arun is overcome by the sensation of his family shoving a textbook under his nose and making him swallow food (Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* 175). Words and food are metaphors for each other, as both are force-fed to him without nourishing him, just as the prayers Uma learns at her Christian school leave a feeling in her stomach that is hard to distinguish from literal hunger. The belief that words can take the place of food is familiar to Christians like Gandhi, who know that "man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live" (*The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, Deut. 8.3).[5] Desai's novel ultimately debunks the idea of the interchangeable nature of words and food. *Fasting, Feasting* shows that the starvation Uma and Arun suffer is the effect of a homegrown misogyny to which Gandhi contributed when he appropriated the position of women for the sake of national liberation, as well as an after-effect of colonialism, an ambition to both emulate and resist the coloniser that converts food—and the words of textbooks—from nourishment into a means of self-assertion.

II. *Half a Life*

In *Half a Life*, Naipaul (intentionally or unwittingly) picks up the thread of Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*. As he weaves it into a narrative even richer in irony, his highly satirical novel throws a critical light on Indian traditions of self-restraint and develops a political agenda quite different from that of Desai's text. *Half a Life* begins with the father of protagonist Willie Chandran telling his son the story of how he, a Brahmin, took a vow of silence in a temple and became a holy man venerated for denying his appetites. The father's picaresque story begins in the early 1930s when he attends an Indian university modelled on the British

system. He has to read English literature he does not understand, a force-feeding reminiscent of Arun's but more clearly marked as a form of colonial violence since the substance he stomachs is literally English. Chandran adores the great names of the Independence movement less for the convictions they carry than the fact that their example promises an escape from the life that is expected of him; his father has destined him to serve the Maharaja and marry the school principal's daughter.

Gandhi inspires Chandran to act against the caste system. He wants to marry a girl of the lowest of the four Hindu castes, a Sudra. Chandran's father is shocked. His son goes on to become a clerk in the land tax department of the Maharaja, where he helps cheats by destroying evidence. When Chandran's misdeeds are finally discovered, he takes sanctuary in the town's old temple in order to dodge punishment: "Like my grandfather. At this moment of supreme sacrifice I fell, as if by instinct, into old ways" (Naipaul, *Half a Life* 26). (Chandran's grandfather was descended from a line of priests and was a priest at a temple himself.) Chandran's impulse is also reminiscent of Arun's falling into old vegetarian ways and, in fact, Chandran also practices a form of self-restraint. He is unwittingly helped by his wife's uncle, a vocal opponent of the caste law according to which Chandran and his wife must not marry: "It occurred then to me to do as the mahatma had done at some stage: to take a vow of silence. It suited my temperament, and it also seemed the least complicated way out. The news of this vow of silence spread. . . . I became at once a holy man and, because of the firebrand and his niece outside, a political cause" (28). The moment reveals that Chandran cares neither about liberation from the British nor about abolishing the caste system. His efforts to fashion himself as a victim of the caste system mobilize protests outside of the temple, and these protests prevent the police from arresting him (28).

The caste system thus helps him, and so does the British Empire when the writer William Somerset Maugham arrives and wants to see the holy man revered for self-restraint (31). (Maugham did travel to India and visited a holy man whom Naipaul used as inspiration for Chandran [Meyers 229–31].) Back in England, Naipaul's Maugham writes a travel book that includes Chandran and later uses this book as material for

The Razor's Edge (1944), a novel Maugham actually wrote that explores the meaning of life and the dichotomy between materialism and spirituality. In India, *The Razor's Edge* changes people's attitude toward Chandran, who is now revered as an "authentic" high-caste servant. The mutual Anglo-Indian deception about Chandran—now seen as a holy man rather than a criminal in both countries—thus helps to reinforce the caste system and manifest the coloniser's power to define Indian identity. Chandran happily accepts this because it serves him well. And he allows himself some liberties in his self-restraint. Although Gandhi had advised complete sexual abstinence, Chandran fathers Willie, the protagonist, with his low-caste wife.

Chandran's actions can be understood as the quirks of an opportunist. However, the fact that the novel includes many references to the Chandrans' family history and features the father's story at great length before launching into the protagonist's story signals that it is making a point about behaviour that repeats itself throughout the generations of a Brahmin family, if not about the history and identity of the Brahmin caste in general. Like *Fasting, Feasting*, *Half a Life* pits a circular sense of time against the narratives of progress inherent to both the project of British colonisation and many Indian nationalists' ideas of decolonisation. When Chandran says that he fell into old ways when he took sanctuary at the temple, he means that he repeats what his grandfather did. The priestly family had been wealthy before the Muslim conquest. When, in the 1890s, the patrons of the temple could no longer support it, there was very little to eat. Reduced to mere skin and bones, Chandran's grandfather left the community. After reaching a larger town, the grandfather, like Chandran, took sanctuary at the local temple where he was fed. He learned to make his living by composing letters for those who could not write and eventually became a clerk at the Maharaja's palace.

Chandran's refuge in the temple repeats his grandfather's escape from hunger. Although temple life means restraint on both men's appetites, it provides them with an income. The novel offers an irreverently materialist account of how the Brahmin ethos of self-restraint, including vegetarianism and fasting, first emerged. I agree with Coetzee who, in a review of *Half a Life*, argues that "Naipaul has diagnosed self-denial as

the road of weakness taken by loveless spirits, an essentially magic way of winning victories in the natural dialectic between a desiring self and a resistant real world by suppressing desire itself" (287). When Chandran uses self-restraint to ensure his survival, he does not abuse a traditional Brahmin practice; he re-enacts the origin of the practice. Naipaul was born to Hindu Indians who immigrated to Trinidad as indentured servants. His life story resembles that of the half-Brahmin, half-Sudra Willie rather than that of father Chandran (King 184). His novel debunks the customary assumption that vegetarianism and fasting have always been essential to Brahmin Hinduism: instead, the text suggests that the practices allow the Brahmins to disguise their material interest in maintaining their status in the face of foreign invasion by posing as holy men. In Chandran's case, the West unwittingly helps by taking fictions for facts: the more severe Chandran's self-restraint, the more pages Maugham writes about the supposedly authentic holy man and the more secure Chandran's position in India is.

The novel's critique is not limited to Brahmin identity. The novel also questions essentialising ideas of cultural purity. The caste system suggests that Brahmins and Sudras have always had their respective statuses, but what seems settled is in fact always already undergoing change. Castes and ethnic groups are shaped and perpetually modified in an open-ended competition for power, space, sex, and security in which some will dominate and some will be dominated. *Half a Life* suggests that history has always consisted of foreign invasions, diasporic movements from one place to another, and adaptation to new rulers in a continuous mixing of cross-cultural influences (King 193).

Gandhi's experiments with fasting can be seen as a prime example of this, as he drew on a global canvas of techniques ranging from physical exercise and enemas to the activities of the Sinn Féin that were in turn employed by the suffragists (Roy 99). *Half a Life* is critical of Ghandian dietary practices; in the novel's conception, they claim to be founded on universal political values but are in fact the strategy of an elite group to maintain their status. In his non-fiction text *India: A Wounded Civilization*, Naipaul is sweepingly dismissive of Gandhi, whose development and formative voyages he describes as

> an internal adventure of anxieties felt and food eaten, with not a word of anything seen or heard that did not directly affect the physical or mental well-being of the writer. The inward concentration is fierce, the self-absorption complete. . . . His experiments and discoveries and vows answered his own need as a Hindu, the need constantly to define and fortify the self in the midst of hostility; they were not of universal application. (102–05)

Such a denial of universal application seeks to question the political thrust of Hindus who, in Gandhi's wake, have exhibited dietary restraint by practicing vegetarianism or fasting. In the light that *Half a Life* casts on these customs, Arun's resistance to American meat-eating in Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* does not constitute an alternative to unrestrained Western appetites. It is instead an atavistic and hypocritical attitude embraced by those unable or unwilling to follow India's transition to modernity. *Half a Life*'s outlook is reminiscent of Vivekananda's and Saraswati's call for adopting British meat-eating and of Gandhi's initial carnivorousness as a form of nationalist duty (Roy 79–80).

It is fair to criticise *Half a Life* for presenting modernity as a Western invention[6] to be adopted by the Third World and for condoning and even welcoming India's colonisation by the British, who allegedly enabled India to abandon its atavistic traditions. *Half a Life* can also be blamed for naturalizing the conquest of cultures as the very heartbeat of history. As Bruce King observes, the novel suggests that people will always want more, that they will always rob others, that there will always be unfair social hierarchies, and that those who do not or cannot protect themselves will either fall victim to those who wield power or flee to other parts of the world (193).

However, the story of Willie Chandran's migration (to which I will turn in due course) shows that *Half a Life* does not uncritically glorify Western modernity. Nor does the novel put the blame for Willie's failures on Brahmin and Hindu traditions alone. Willie's father has lived "a life of sacrifice" (Naipaul, *Half a Life* 36), as he likes to call it, and Coetzee argues that Willie's life story demonstrates the unhappy consequences of being nurtured in a culture of self-denial (287). It is true that

Willie's story is one of failure. But colonisation is as much a cause of that culture of self-denial as the Brahmins' deliberate choice of it. Willie's struggle and failure in London are the results of complex, asymmetrical cross-cultural influences.[7]

As in *Fasting, Feasting*, the novel's invocation of Gandhi highlights the fact that Indian nationalism sometimes embraced the meat-eating of the British in order to be able to oppose them and sometimes embraced traditions largely taken from religious, hierarchical, possibly reactionary Brahmanism. In Willie's story, appetite and renunciation are chained to each other in a way that is reminiscent of Gandhi's initial meat-eating and his later vegetarianism and fasting.

Willie emigrates to London and purposely indulges in a life of unrestrained appetites. The only appetite he is supposed to satisfy abroad—the appetite for learning—is not his own: "The learning he was being given was like the food he was eating, without savour. The two were inseparable in his mind. And just as he ate without pleasure, so, with a kind of blindness, he did what the lecturers and tutors asked of him, read the books and articles and did the essays" (Naipaul, *Half a Life* 58). Reading the words put before him, Willie remains unsatisfied. He is reminded of his father's life story. Earlier, after hearing his father tell his story, Willie asks: "What is there for me in what you say? You offer me nothing" (35). His father answers: "It has been a life of sacrifice. I have no riches to offer to you" (36). As in Arun's and Uma's cases, words promise to nourish the self, but they ultimately do not.

When Willie turns away from his studies, he rebels not only against the former coloniser but also against his father, who started out as a pseudo-nationalist following Gandhi's call yet ended up flattering the colonisers and gladly profiting from Maugham's influence. Willie's resistance is only truly put to the test in the diaspora, as is Arun's. But Willie's endorsement of unlimited appetite positions him in the camp of those above-mentioned Hindu nationalists who associate meat-eating with masculinity and modernity. The sense that he specifically opposes Gandhi's later position is stressed by the fact that Willie's masculine appetite for meat translates into a fierce hunger for women, whereas his father practiced dietary and moderate sexual self-restraint like Gandhi.

Sigmund Freud drew attention to the close association between eating and sexuality. As Maud Ellmann shows, the fact that starvation endangers our physical survival whereas celibacy does not mean that hunger is more natural than sex or less imbued with cultural significance. Freud emphasizes that the two do not differ in this regard when he argues for sexuality's origin in eating (Ellmann 36–39). The relationship between eating and reading—important in *Fasting, Feasting* and *Half a Life*—is metaphorical because both nourish the self. But the relationship between eating and sex—particularly important in *Half a Life*—is far more substantial because it assures both the individual's and the species' survival.

Even without reference to Gandhi or religion, cultural critics observe that societies tend to perceive eating and sexuality as linked, even to the extent that each is able to represent the other. Deborah Lupton, for example, characterizes the relationship between eating and sexuality as follows:

> Both are seen to involve physical desires mediated through culture and both are viewed as animalistic and evidence of lack of self-control. Both are sins of the flesh; the word 'carnality' itself, stemming from the Latin for meat, makes the link between the human body, concupiscence and meat. There is also an intermingling of eroticism and pleasure in the eating process. (132)

Lupton remarks that the conflation of eating and sex is especially typical of Christian societies, but that it also characterises secular societies (132). Her comments help explain why Gandhi, a Christian, closely associates the two. They also cast light on the modern, secularized world that Willie inhabits in post-war London. Even there, sexual temptation and gluttony are seen as related, making it a territory in which Willie can practice carnality in the belief that it is an antidote to his father's abstention from carnivorousness.

Just as the salient point of Arun's vegetarianism in *Fasting, Feasting* is revealed only when compared to Gandhi's vegetarianism, the meaning of Willie's carnality becomes clear only if related to Gandhi. Gandhi's

turn to fasting as a moral instrument occurred along with his decision to practice sexual abstinence, or *brahmacharya*. For him, eating and sexuality were linked; he drew on the Brahmin view that sex is the most energy-depleting human activity. Brahmins aimed at a sublimation of semen,[8] and this was also an idea in the London vegetarian societies Gandhi frequented. Fasting as a form of self-control was thus also a means of curbing one's libido (Roy 94–98).

Willie's father named his son after William Somerset Maugham. He did not imagine that the obscene connotation of Willie's name would eventually make the name a fitting one. In London, Willie's carnivorousness *is* carnality, a chase after women named June, Perdita, Ana, and Graça, a chase that becomes the dominant theme of his life. Willie believes that his insatiable sexual appetite is the cure for the unhappy way of life propagated by Gandhi, whereas Gandhi propagated self-restraint as a healthy alternative to the excessive appetites of the British and of Western modernity in general. Willie believes that modernity is the cure for Gandhi's and his father's weakness. He is convinced that his father should have taught him how to seduce women and feels that Indians forgot the art of eroticism after the Muslim invasion. When he picks up a London prostitute and performs poorly, the woman tells him to "Fuck like an Englishman" (Naipaul, *Half a Life* 121), as if confirming his theory of Indian ineptitude.

Despite frequent humiliations and the fact that no woman satisfies him, Willie's compulsions suggest that his upbringing in a culture of self-denial triggered resistance in the form of an unrestrained appetite. It is in this sense that his carnivorousness is as little a deliberately chosen anti-Gandhian, pro-Western Indian nationalism as Arun's veganism is a consciously Gandhian resistance to that modernity.

III. Conclusion

The many opportunities for feasting in the West tempt Willie and Arun to take their opposite appetites to extremes. Yet this results in an experience of hollowness and unrelieved hunger for both. For Arun and Willie, it is not merely their Brahmin upbringing that is to blame for their perpetual hunger but also the colonial regimes that made

Brahmins embrace a dietary practice that had not always been essential to Brahmanism. Whether Indians adopted meat-eating or practiced dietary restraint, the result was an embattled semantic over-determination of appetite and eating and a situation in which fathers and sons replicated the positions of coloniser and resisting colonised and re-enacted colonisation's legacies within the family.

Postcolonial writers are not exempt from this dynamic of unconscious re-enactment but find themselves in a complicated situation when they are confronted, like Desai and Naipaul, with the appetites of predominantly Western audiences. *Half a Life* captures this dilemma in an arresting episode when Willie, after some years in London, publishes a collection of short stories with the help of a well-connected friend. His writing is a variation on his great-grandfather's letter writing, another repetition between generations; Willie, like his great-grandfather, writes in order to feed himself. Naipaul's irony could not be more acerbic when a newspaper reviewer writes the following about Willie's book: "Where . . . one might have expected an authentic hot curry, one gets only a nondescript savoury, of uncertain origin, and one is left at the end with the strange sensation of having eaten variously and at length but of having missed a meal" (123). The success of Willie's father depended on an English writer's taste for Indian spirituality. Willie fails because he does not cater to English literary tastes. His unwillingness to play to colonial stereotypes—including his father's "holy" self-denial—leaves him starving, because his books do not sell with a British public that relishes "authentic hot curry."

Regardless of whether readers agree with *Half a Life*'s political agenda, the politics of food and appetite in the novel, as well as in *Fasting, Feasting*, are readable only if we "interrogat[e] the interrelated histories of violence, domination, inequality, and injustice" (Young 20)—that is, if we read the text through a postcolonial lens. Like Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*, Naipaul's novel reminds us that the critical focus on postcoloniality, rather than ceding the field to theorizations of world literature or the new materialism, cannot be superseded in a world that continues to require us to revisit colonial history in its many and sometimes unexpected guises.

Notes

1 For example, Döring, Heide, and Mühleisen assert that "there are material markers resisting [culture's] appropriating fictions: bodies that may perform other cultural identities sometimes in subversion and sometimes in excess of written protocol. Eating nourishes these bodies and food sustains their power" (3).

2 de Certeau's approach has, in fact, shaped the methodology of a number of monographs on food, eating, and migrant cuisine. Examples include Fine and Adapton. However, de Certeau's culturalism has drawn criticism for its tendency toward essentialism and romanticized representations of its subjects (Parasecoli 277).

3 The influence of Jain thought on Gandhi is particularly visible in his belief that nonhuman animals have the same moral worth as human animals: "To my mind, the life of a lamb is no less precious than that of a human being. I should be unwilling to take the life of a lamb for the sake of the human body. I hold that, the more helpless the creature, the more entitled it is to protection from the cruelty of man" (Gandhi 208). See also p. 66 of Gruzalski.

4 There is a strong historical link between religion and dietary regimens, as Lupton explains. Judeo-Christian ethics are built upon the tenets of discipline and hygiene evident in ancient writings on dietary routines. Avoiding meat, sweet foods, and heightened flavours or spices are typical ascetic practices thought to prove one's ability to override the temptations of the flesh, including both appetite and sexual desire (Lupton 132).

5 Likewise, the angel of the Lord commands the narrator to eat the sacred book and tells him that "it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey" (Rev. 10.9).

6 For a critique of monolithic concepts of modernity and modernization, see Eisenstadt.

7 As King notes, a distinction easily missed by Western readers of *Half a Life* is that between a religious, hierarchical, reactionary Brahminism and a modernizing Hindu nationalism that crosses classes and castes (185).

8 Roy explains that for Gandhi, as for many Hindus, the "loss of semen through intercourse [was] computed as the equivalent of one day's mental activity or three days' physical labour. But semen can, if properly husbanded, be moved upward through the body to the brain and transformed into *ojas*, spiritual or psychic energy" (97; emphasis in original).

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