

\$5 Vol. 3 No. 1

# Rungb

A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment & Criticism

## The Food Issue

### Food, Poetics and Startle

Ven Begamudré Anees Jung

Aritha van Herk Donna James

Sadru Jetha Mina Kumar

Shirin Neshat Lakshmi Kannan

Weyman Chan Anita Rai Badami

### Anorexia My Love

Fiction by Smaro Kamboureli

### The Stinking Rose

Poetry by Sujata Bhatt

### India's Parallel Cinema

Shyam Benegal interviewed







## Shirin Neshat

### *Women of Allah*

This work is concerned with the spiritual experience in Islam and its inseparability from politics and violence. I pursue various themes within the subject, however the main character remains a female Martyr (Shahid). I focus on the ambiguities and conflicts surrounding her spiritual conviction, femininity, beauty in one hand and her hatred, violence and destructive abilities on the other.

Here, images and words together convey profound complexities and paradoxical roles of Islamic women living today under extreme social, political and religious conditions. I regularly use four components in my work: body, associated with sin—shame—secret; veil, suggesting a physical boundary—invisibility; text, a voice—the visible; and weapon, symbolizing violence—politics.

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# Rungh

Volume 3, Number 1

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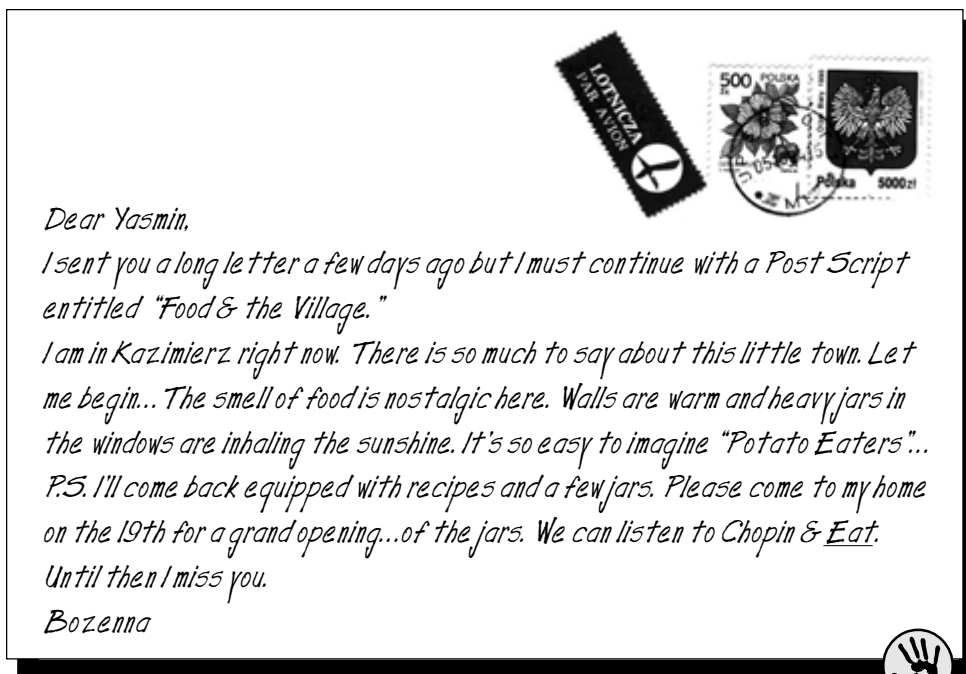
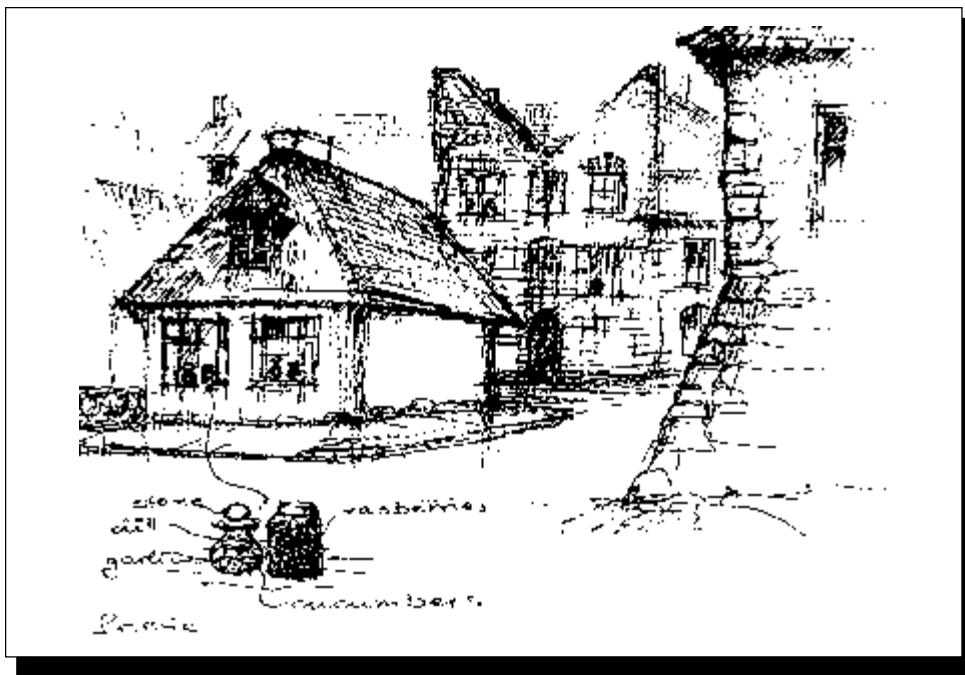
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# Editorial

Personally, I have always wanted *Rungh* to broaden out, both internationally and within Canada. In this issue, I have just touched on it. I hope future guest editors push for a wider scope of contributors and readers because *Rungh* is ready.

What I fell in love with is the loves and startles in these works around food, be it: innuendos, illness, class, yearnings, slyings, chants, anger, under-underneath language dished out piping hot, voluptuousness (never say gluttony), and that much touted statement "politics and food"...there is a baring generosity which the contributors have brought to this theme, but then food is co-creativity between giver and receiver.

—Yasmin Ladha, Guest Editor



Dear Yasmin,

I sent you a long letter a few days ago but I must continue with a Post Script entitled "Food & the Village."

I am in Kazimierz right now. There is so much to say about this little town. Let me begin... The smell of food is nostalgic here. Walls are warm and heavy jars in the windows are inhaling the sunshine. It's so easy to imagine "Potato Eaters"... P.S. I'll come back equipped with recipes and a few jars. Please come to my home on the 19th for a grand opening...of the jars. We can listen to Chopin & Eat. Until then I miss you.

Bozenna

Bozenna Wisniewska is an architect and teacher at the Alberta College of Art and the University of Calgary.

# Anorexia

## My Love

He peeled an orange, letting the juice run onto her naked belly. He rubbed the orange peel in her vulva and sucked the broken peel, sniffing. Yiota bit at his fingers as he fed her the juicy segments of orange.

"Ci Ci Ci," Andreas mouthed without sound. "Vitamin Ci. It's good for you, but I'm not good for you."

That was their sixth evening together. Yiota measured their relationship in evenings, beginning in June.

She would continue to count until nine months later when it was all over. Meeting twice a week, that made seventy-two evenings. She never stopped counting. Forty-two in his *garçoniera*, five on the beach in Kalikratia, nine in The Swings bistro in Panorama, that made fifty-six evenings. The remaining were spent in tavernas, in the car driving out of town, in Seih-Sou, that little pine forest outside Kastrá. She had by pure instinct found consolation in numbers. They came to her with the ease of first-spoken words. With the same ease that Andreas read her lips. She cherished the solidity of numbers as much as she did the abbreviated messages he wrote in capital letters on scraps of paper, on restaurant napkins, sometimes on the inside of her palm, the shank of her bared arm, her thigh. It took Yiota a while to learn to read his lips. It was not so much a matter of understanding what he said but rather of concentrating on his mouth alone, localizing her desire for him in the shapes his lips made. Andreas wasn't completely mute, but Yiota could not always comprehend the sounds he made. They reached her untrained ears as inarticulate cries, sounds of a foreign language. Yet, his deafness and muteness did not stop them from talking. She learned to speak slowly, and after a while she eliminated the sound of her words altogether. They talked through their silently moving lips, their hands, their scribbles, their eyes.

Still, sound was an important element in her relationship with Andreas. She could recognize the noise of his Citroen engine, could even tell where he parked. His comings and goings from his parents' penthouse altered the air around her, changed her breathing. Unconsciously, she registered his movements, a knowledge she did not do anything with. It was just there, a natural register of her days and nights.



by Smaro Kamboureli

Andreas was an endless source of little pleasures and riddles. She never asked herself if she loved him.

Her body thought: palmed belly, licked nipples, sweat pearls, arched neck, dry mouth, flesh rippling on flesh, spooned back, clutched legs, eyes yoked, head snapped back, stark still. Her belly full of his words.

With eyes bulging, her left hand on her stomach, her right holding her mouth closed, Yiota pushed the bathroom door further ajar with her foot, and with a groan she could not suppress emptied her mouth and everything her belly held into the toilet bowl. She stood directly over it, her head bent as if in supplication. Water from her eyes streaked her cheeks, saliva dripping from her lower lip.

The beef cooked in her mother's delicious fresh tomato sauce, served with fresh peas and artichokes cooked in virgin olive oil and fresh dill and fennel, was now a slimy substance floating in the bowl.

"Oh Panayitsa mou," Yiota sputtered, as she flushed the toilet and wiped off her mouth.

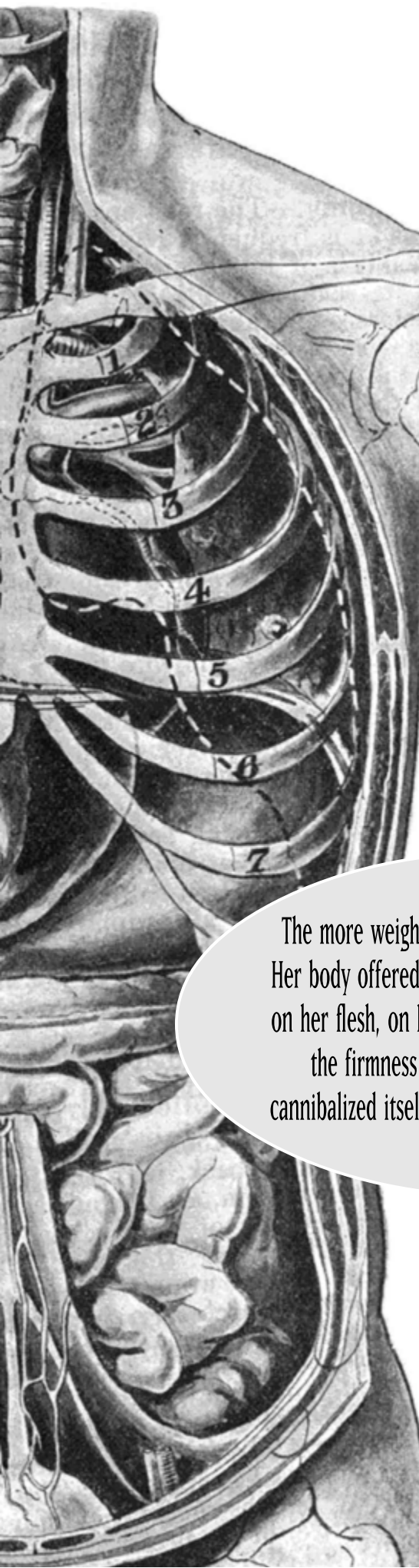
Her parents were at the door, immobile, staring at her. She collapsed on the tiled floor, her chest heaving, elbows resting on the toilet seat.

Her body felt hollow.

That was how it all started. That was why she was crossing the Aegean, leaving Ios behind, going to the Lourdes of Greece. That young girl on the *Naïas*, that girl with the bruised lips, with the bony arms, with the shoulder blades sticking out of her fuchsia T-Shirt, did not want the journey to end. Did not want to lay eyes on Tinos. No miracles for her; Oh no. There was nothing to cure. Didn't the doctor say there was nothing wrong with her body? She had agreed to come on the trip because she could no longer stand her mother's whining—eat, eat, eat—her bringing home the priest for holy unctions, the parading of family friends whose services were sought in the hope of seeing her fed. Orders for bedrest. Threats of intravenous feeding. She was overwhelmed by all that, occasionally a little scared.

Same old story—that was what disturbed her most often. Her loss, her pain, her completed longing were clichés. Yiota couldn't bear that. She





felt abandoned and shattered because of Andreas' disappearance from her life, but there were days too when it was her suffering itself that troubled her. *Déjà vu*. She viewed herself as a stranger, a character walking in and out of her own life, someone vaguely familiar who prowled in the maze her mind had become. Through her cool analysis of those permutations she came to believe that she had no choice, she was acting out someone else's script, she was the bereaved heroine of many scripts. At times this was a consoling thought. Locating the culprit of her story in all those other stories, she felt lighter if not cunning. There is an other, and I'm like her, and I'm other to others, she often muttered to herself with haughty satisfaction.

She came to realize that destiny was a matter of repetition, not the absent and ruthless *Moira* her mother blamed for all her calamities. *Moira* is not unlike Mary, Yiota sometimes thought, she's a callous creature we create because we're afraid of reckoning with repetition. *Moira* and Mary, Mary and *Moira*—they are the name of *chasma*, the figure of *chiasmus*—she couldn't recall what *chiasmus* meant but it felt right in the context, a slant rhyme teasing her arduous logic. Yes, Marcella had it all wrong. Most first loves ended tragically, Yiota was sure of that, she didn't read for nothing. For some reason, still unfathomable to her, she knew that the ending of first love was already what its beginning desired the most, at least in Greek literature—unless, unless of course one mistook one's emotions. She'd read something about that but couldn't quite remember

The more weight Yiota lost, the ghostlier she looked. Her body offered itself as the rival of her loving. It fed on her flesh, on her complexion, the lustre of her hair, the firmness of her buttocks, her memories. It cannibalized itself. She had never known such gluttony.

what  
or where.

Armed with those thoughts, she developed a smugness about people's reactions to her body or her temperamental approach to food. She was precocious or aloof depending on whom she had to deal with. For she felt obliged, owed it to herself, to take care of her abjection.

Only her throat inflamed from the vomiting fits and her anus sore from her exacerbated constipation reminded her that there was a kind of reality that might go around under cover, wear-

ing a second face. Her constipation distressed her a lot. Logically, she surmised, she shouldn't have to shit, since she ate practically nothing. Nothing made sense any more on her worst days she felt doomed to spend her life either leaning over the sparkling whiteness of the toilet bowl her mother washed after Yiota's each visit, or sitting on its oval ring, elbows on knees, straining, sometimes lifting a foot off the floor to push harder, her face red from the effort.

Marcella kept the toilet bowl so clean Yiota could often see her face reflected in it as she held her long hair against her nape to keep it out of the way when vomiting. It became the mirror Yiota spent most of her time in front of. Her mother used a disinfectant that turned the water a cobalt blue. Yiota couldn't stand that glimmer of a sky, yet she seemed drawn to it.

Her mouth moving like that of a marionette, Yiota sat with both elbows on the table to test her father. But he didn't say anything. No Yiota-elbows-off-the-table-when-eating!

Instead, her mother pointed her fork and knife at Yiota's still full plate.

"This is your favourite pie," she said, avoiding her daughter's name. "At least eat just a piece. You've hardly eaten anything since yesterday morning."

"Leave the girl alone," her father replied on her behalf. "She'll eat when she feels like it. Besides, there's too much nutmeg in this pie."

"Is that right?" Marcella said sarcastically, her fork working furiously at her plate.

To put an end to what might have led to yet another ugly argument, Yiota picked up with her fingers some bits of the pie's golden crust. She chewed them as quietly as possible, for she knew the one thing in the world her father couldn't abide was noise, especially unwarranted eating noise.

It had been almost a week since her first bout of vomiting. She had eaten sparingly since then. She didn't feel hungry. Even when her stomach reminded her of its emptiness, she couldn't eat much. Nausea overpowered her when she forced food down. The ominous silence in the apartment when she was around and her parents' muffled angry words that she heard at night from behind closed doors did not help either. Her belly made fun of her. Thou shalt not eat, it commanded. Her tongue complied, grew lazy, developed a yellowish white film. And her mouth, also obliging, was perpetually bitter and dry. Yiota managed to pulverize the phyllo crust and swallow it without gagging. Feeling her mother's eyes on her, she made another effort. This time she used the fork to eat some of the spinach filling.

She concentrated really hard. Her jaws moved mechanically in an almost circular

fashion, her tongue disentangling the spinach threads. When she tried to swallow, though, not a morsel went down. She chewed a little longer. But every time she began to swallow the food, something stopped her, and she choked. The silence at the table was so thick she could cut it with her knife. She emptied her mouth into her paper napkin.

"Too much nutmeg for her highness?" Marcella screamed at her. "I've had enough, enough! You won't leave the kitchen until you clean your plate, do you hear me?"

In her rage Marcella overturned her glass of water as she got up from the table. The glass shattered on the marble floor into three big pieces and many little ones, gleaming here and there around their feet. Tiny stars, wee little glass stars, Yiota thought. But she too was shaken. She watched her father bite his tongue, a sign of pent-up anger. His face grew red. No words escaped his lips.

She was the cause of their turmoil, she knew that, but she sat there without compunction. What was done could not be undone—Grandma Amalia's motto every time a disaster hit the family. Besides, she wasn't sure what she'd done in the first place. She wanted to plead innocent but, after Marcella's initial explosion, she'd decided she wouldn't argue with her. She had her own rage and pain to deal with, her longing, as inexhaustible as her sleepless nights—and a dread, a fluttering of her heart far different from the pangs of love, when her parents spoke of her in the third person as if she must be deaf, invisible.

There was nothing she could do really, except do as her mother told her. She cleared her plate of all the mashed-up food. She spooned the two wedges of spinach pie and the shredded lettuce salad into a napkin, got up quietly, disposed of it in the garbage bin, and presented the clean plate to her mother.

"Here," she said calmly, and walked out of the kitchen.

She closed the door of her room to keep out as much as possible of her parents' shouting. She resolved, without any mediation, to never again try to make out what they quarrelled about. She would seal her ears. Let them fight as hard as they pleased.

She looked at the Zoro poster on the wall, an old gift of Loula's. She was riveted by his impromptu plans to expose the schemes of bad guys, the graceful undulations of his black cape against a mauve sky, the way he jumped on or off his horse, lassoed with an incredible speed. But the best moment, the climax of every Zoro film, came when he removed his black mask to show his face.

She imagined she was draped in a cloak of invisibility. She willed herself to become spider woman afloat in her black cape, clinging to the medieval walls of the city, keeping an eye on

teenage girls' parents.

Her withered appetite the penumbra of her virtue.

Yiota could swallow nothing. The idea that something might flow into her, through her mouth, down her throat, trickling in a messy mass of unrecognizable substance through the obscure parts of her body which she could not see, which she could not make diagrams of even if her life depended on it, caused spasms in her pharynx. Just the tinkling of pans and pots in the kitchen was enough to turn her stomach upside down. She held her nose when she went into the kitchen, averted her eyes from the plates when she joined her parents at the table. Everything that had to do with eating had declared war against her. Just the sight of a recipe book, of a bowl covered with a tea towel, the crispness of lettuce that she could feel when she opened the fridge for a glass of cold water, and she would cringe, a tight fist in her throat. Her windpipe contracted, her head turned away, her eyes wanted to leap out of their sockets. She spent what seemed hours kneeling over the toilet bowl. Emptying an empty stomach. Her nose, mouth, glottis, and throat perpetually sore from all the retching.

From where did that svelte body draw the bitter bile that burned her oesophagus? What kind of orgasm was taking place in the dark of her mouth? Her heart was a festering wound, polluting her body.

Yiota's body, with a will entirely its own, began to reconstruct itself, redesigning its curves, carving a new life by consuming itself.

Dr. Fostieris declined her mother's request to give Yiota an internal examination. He said that her amenorrhea was not a sign of pregnancy. He was a wonderful doctor. Dr. Fostieris also told Marcella there was nothing organically wrong with her daughter, she was anorexic because she was distraught, and all that was normal under the circumstances.

Dr. Fostieris chuckled and his eyes locked with Yiota's. She enjoyed that conspiratorial gaze immensely. She had come to anticipate these visits.

Yiota loved the dimples on either side of Dr. Fostieris' mouth. They matched the dimple in his chin. But his hair is too thin, she thought.

Dr. Fostieris had told Marcella to leave the examination room before he asked Yiota to undress.

Tap, tap, tap.

"All is fair," he said as he turned his back to let her dress. When Marcella was ushered into the room again, he told her that the reason Yiota's psychiatrist had refused to continue their sessions was that it was entirely inadvisable that Marcella stay in the same room with Yiota and the doctor, which Marcella had insisted on

doing during the first session.

"It is just not done, Mrs. Vergini. It defeats the purpose of the whole enterprise."

Marcella blushed. Yiota was thrilled by her mother's embarrassment.

Dr. Fostieris had also declined to renew her mother's prescription for Librium.

"You must still have some left, Mrs. Vergini, no?"

"Six of them, I think, Doctor," Yiota volunteered eagerly.

The more weight Yiota lost, the ghostlier she looked. Her body offered itself as the rival of her loving. It fed on her flesh, on her complexion, the lustre of her hair, the firmness of her buttocks, her memories. It cannibalized itself. She'd never known such gluttony, such boldness. She felt trapped in that circuit of her body and flesh. Her physical needs (hunger, sleep, bowel movement) became superfluous. Her appetite was her body's instrument that cancelled out her will. She didn't recognize her eyes. They were those of a voyeur, their gaze mocking her in the mirror. For the first time her body became a body in and of itself. It asserted its shape, while she went to pieces. So, the two of them assumed the form of a diptych. She was not sure who spoke when her mouth opened. Sometimes she had difficulty remembering herself. Andreas had consumed all her memory cells.

Eat—Marcella's only word. There were days when it seemed she shunned all language around Yiota except the imperative form of the verb—eat eat eat—and those wordless gestures of substance of course, her silent offerings of Yiota's favourite sweets, mandarin tarts, parsley sauce, cheese and zucchini souffles, spinach pies, green salads. Every nook and cranny in the kitchen smelled of fresh butter cookies, crisp watercress sandwiches, home-made mayonnaise, *jambon*, delicacies all soon to be turned into mushy, putrid, noxious things. Inside Yiota's belly. Yiota's laboratory of transformation.

Her face turned to the side, Yiota saw through the corner of her eye the freckled hand coming towards her mouth holding a tablespoon of milk with a tiny morsel of bread floating in it. She kept her jaws tightly shut against the persistent hand. She took in some of the milk, but began retching, rage swelling inside her as Marcella wiped off with a napkin the white liquid running down Yiota's chin. There was a vehemence in that gesture. She despises me, Yiota thought, and I hate her, I surely do hate her.

"I'm not a baby. I can do this myself," she snapped at her mother.

Marcella refilled the spoon. This time Yiota



made no effort, milk and moistened crumbs trickling down Marcella's arm.

"You've lost your mind entirely, you have. You'll be my death. Do you hear? My death," Marcella yelled, and she ran out of the room.

Yiota used to love to drink chilled milk, or milk with cocoa and a dash of sugar, but she could no longer tolerate its smell. Her reaction became even more acute when Marcella tried to force her to drink goat milk. It was impossible to get such milk in the city, but Marcella knew some neighbours who came from a dairy not too far from Thessaloniki, and managed to negotiate delivery once a week. She paid an arm and a leg, but that was the third month of Yiota's condition—Marcella's word—and she was at the end of her rope. Fresh milk was supposed to be more nourishing, but Yiota could not abide its strong smell and creamy consistency. The thick yellowish crust that formed on top of it when it was boiled disgusted her. Of course, if it had been her own milk...

She cupped her breasts and squeezed them lightly. Took the left breast out of her bra and held the nipple with her fingers, raising it a little the better to see it. It's not fair, she thought, not fair at all that a woman produces milk only for someone else. Why not have milk all the time? Why not have a longer and more pliant neck, a giraffe neck, to reach down, take that nipple into my mouth and suck, fresh milk, my own milk.

Marcella bought a little notebook and made two columns in it, one in which to record Yiota's intake of food, the other the times she threw up what she'd eaten. Soon Marcella became quite bold about her project. She made her jottings in front of Yiota, sometimes reading aloud what she wrote.

*Mond. 14, 8:30 a.m.: a quarter of a glass milk, a few morsels of bread soaked in it, two orange sections (first in a week), a few grapes—12:45 p.m. a small sliced tomato, two squares of melba toast, a thin wedge of kasseri cheese, half a pear (peeled), a glass of water with half a lemon squeezed into it and a dash of sugar. 8:15 p.m.: a few okras (no sauce at all), the tender heart of a lettuce head, and glasses of water throughout the evening with lemon squeezed in.*

*Didn't throw up but spat cheese and fruit in napkin, also the tomato skin—refused to take pills—no bowel movement. Nausea over dinner. She says she's not taking vitamins but there are four missing from the bottle.*

Yiota didn't mind. She was fascinated by her mother's fascination with her stomach's behaviour. Her body had taken over. It had become a naughty child, and Marcella cared for

it more than she did for Yiota. When Yiota showed signs of going under thirty-six kilos, her mother gave up accompanying her to the drugstore to witness her weight's fluctuations.

Marcella bought a scale instead.

On the afternoon her mother had placed it under the sink in the bathroom, Yiota approached the scale with caution. She looked at it with a smirk on her face, her right eyelid batting uncontrollably. She took off her right Scholl clog and with it smashed the glass surface of the scale. Then she got into the tub and gave her legs a perfect shave.

She carried it all with her, Yiota. When she shut her eyes she could see it inside her, when she shut her ears she heard it. That it defied naming, for it was all and nothing.

It was what had made her stomach her foe.

She did not understand the war inside her. She wanted to leap out of her body, abandon it, uncover the enigma feeding on it. When she looked at her pale-lipped face in the mirror, when she traced the blue veins in her wrists and legs, felt the thinning circle of her waist, dwelt on the black rings under her eyes, on the interruption of her menses, she saw a cipher.

The body Yiota went to bed with, that body was hers, but it did not want her, and she found both torment and delight in that uncanny feeling. In her bed at night she felt strangled, yet there were no hands on her throat. She spent most of her time being still, her body tense, waiting for something as yet undetermined.

Her fingers wanted to locate the shape that held her, to trace the geography of her diminishing self. She tried to seduce herself but to no avail. She would touch her cunt, her fingers wet with her saliva, but nothing would happen. Not the slightest response, only fear stirring inside her. And Andreas' image, fading day by day.

She began to avert her eyes from her bare skin until it became an unconscious habit. Her body threatened to become its own garrison (stingy with itself as it was), lest she forget that it was by its own negation that she produced her knowledge of it.

She did not know that pleasure, any kind of pleasure, was unthinkable without Andreas. That he had already become artifice, that his absence was present in the immolation of her body, that her memories of him were now the bait of her specular loving.

Lacking an appetite sometimes gave her a kind of freedom.

She was fully aware by then of her body's plurality. She delighted in its inconstancy. Her blackouts were epiphanic, her belly's gurgling and growling noises became a foreign language she couldn't understand, her fragility her strength. She no longer paid heed to her mother's nervousness, her father's sorrow. She spent

more and more time flipping through her Tin-Tin and Asterix collections, reading the books that Loula brought over, watching late-night TV.

Andreas was at ease, buried as he was deeply inside her. The bruises on her arms and legs from pulling at her skin when she came restless, her sagging bum, her dry skin, her listless hair—all were haloed by the scars his presence had left behind. Love proved to be a matter of biology, sin the name of her passion.

Four months after Mr. Varezis proved the efficiency he advertised, almost a year after Yiota's first date with Andreas, Marcella decided that it was time to try for the rarest and best cure of all—a miracle. She announced her decision to Yiota on a rainy August day.

Yiota was on the balcony, with an electric-blue silk scarf wrapped loosely around her head. It was an hour or so after a heavy thunderstorm that threatened to flood the city. Marcella had asked her to close the window shutters, but Yiota lingered on the balcony impervious to the heavy rain that rushed into the room. For a few moments she had forgotten herself. She grabbed the broom from a corner of the balcony and started to sweep, all the while enjoying her sense of the soaked scarf becoming one with her scalp, her hair falling on her face heavy with the rain. And then she saw Andreas running across the street to get into his car, parked in the usual place. She froze for an instant, but continued cleaning the balcony with greater speed, using her fingers to help the rain wash off the dirt collected in the wrought iron of the rail. Her legs were shaking, and she began retching, having nothing to throw up since she'd hardly eaten all day.

That was the last time she saw him.

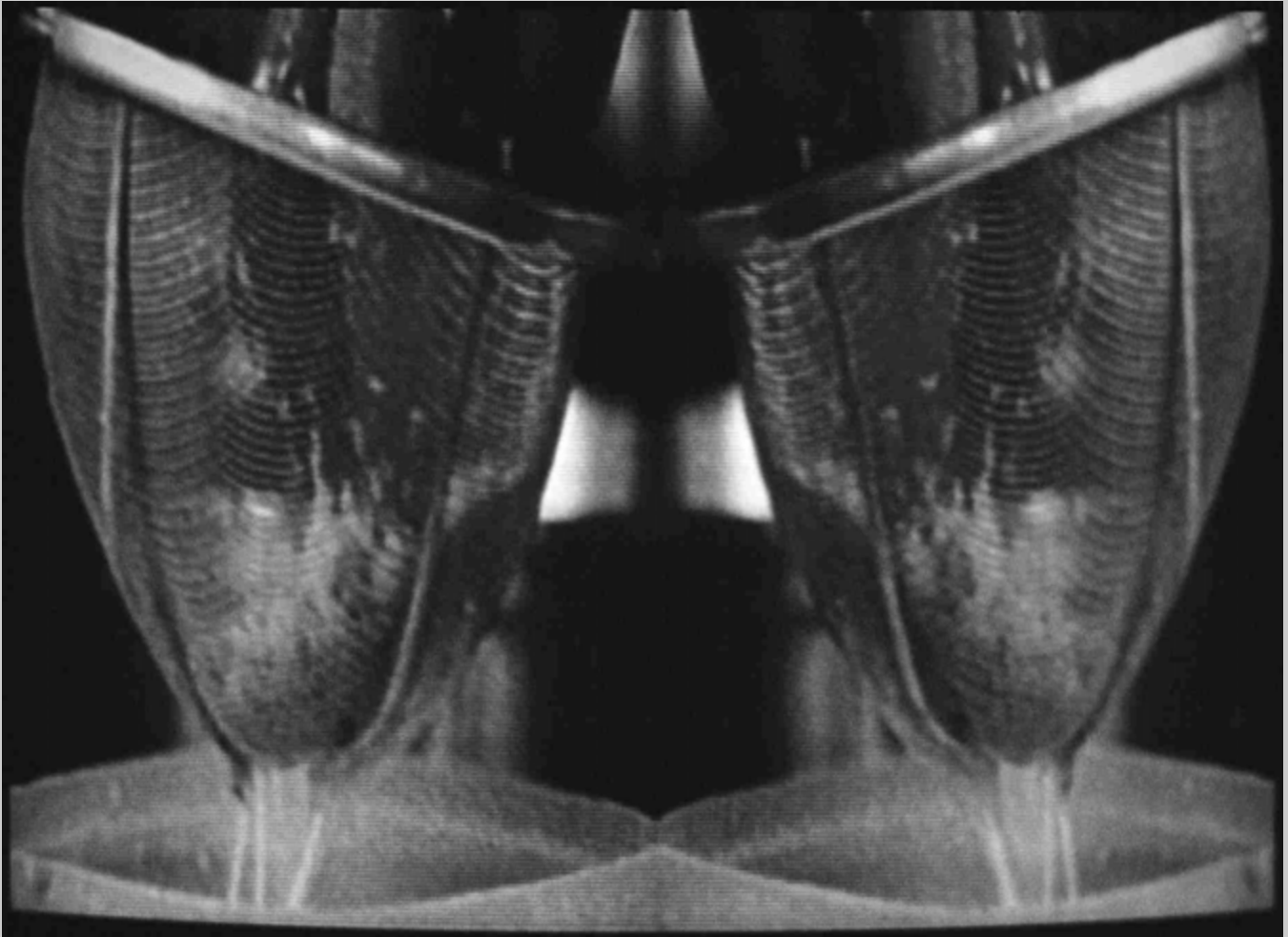
It continued to rain for another hour. Then the rainstorm turned into a hailstorm, the hardness of hail pounding her body, the cement of the sidewalks, the mosaic floor of the balcony. She gathered a handful of hail and stuffed it into her mouth, her teeth crushing the hailstones before they had time to melt.



Smaro Kamboureli has published short fiction, a long prose poem, *in the second person*, and a lot of criticism on Canadian Literature. She is the editor of an anthology, *Making a Difference: Canadian Multiculturalism and Literature* (forthcoming), and co-editor of *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*. She is also an active member of the editorial board of NeWest Press. She teaches Canadian literature at the University of Victoria, and is presently writing a book on ethnicity and culture in Canada. The excerpts included in this issue are from her first novel recently completed.

Images: The Avon International Cookbook (1983); Grays's Anatomy, (1977).



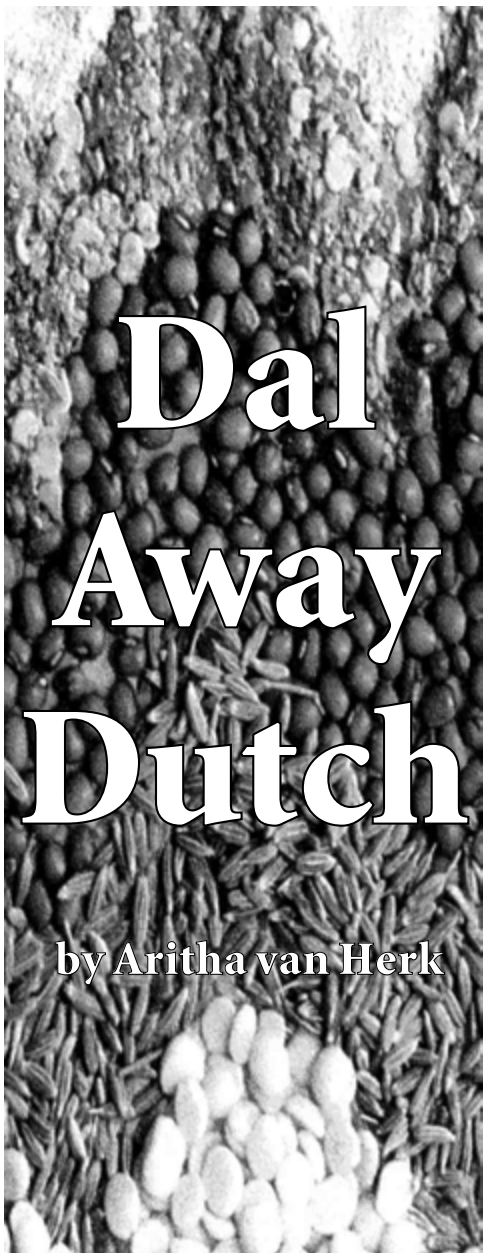


*I am grated coconut*

*squeeze and juice me in  
preparation for Sunday's rice 'n'  
peas*

BORN: Kingston, Jamaica  
Resides in Ottawa, Ontario

**Donna James** grew up in Nova Scotia where she studied photography at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1984. Her video tape ***Maigre Dog*** is in the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada, the Canada Council Art Bank and the Alberta College of Art.



# Dal Away Dutch

by Aritha van Herk

Dutch women (too) keep clean kitchens, scour the counter cracks with toothbrushes and cleanser, polish their sinks with steel wool, spray room freshener. Terrible dread of dirt, they have. She (Dutch too) has a white and polished-stone kitchen, white, white, white, too contemporary to be steamy with years of old cookings. She has forty-three cookbooks, with recipes for making crepes, de-boning chicken, peeling rhubarb. She emulates the elegance of *marsepein* roses, lightly oiling a light bulb and rolling it three quarters of the way around the outer edges of a *marsepein* nub to a thin transparent disc. It is the *pein* in *marsepein* she works, like *pijn* but more pleasurable, one pain for another. She is not addicted to recipe books, does not read them religiously, with head bent and hands folded. Scattered *rotzooi* of food erotica, the gorgeous excess of food photography, when she cooks for friends, she

pulls all the cookbooks out, opens them to measure what she might make, but ends up slamming them shut, chopping and frying serviceable food, tasty but plain, cheese and cucumbers, hothouse cucumbers. Her mother learned English from a cookbook. *Pijn* too. She learned (Dutch too) from a dictionary.

She wants to cook dal, mung dal, Classic Quality—washed—a packet of kernels that glows inside her pantry, lighting up its dark shelves with a shivering aura. She wants to cook tender, make dal an eloquent *marsepein*. She dreams of her small sandbag of dal waiting to be cooked; she is useless with dal, a dal tourist (Dutch too), voyeur, dal curious more than connoisseur, and that too a French concept, like *pain* or *pijn*, expert without consanguinity's blessing. She wants to cook dal, cook dal tender, wants to know *how* to cook dal, wants to believe in the outcome of her recipe. But there is no recipe for dal, she can find no guide for how to kiss the grains, sift them into a measuring cup, skin the water from their bubbling.

She mines cookbooks, thumbing index and contents, appetizers and main dishes, stews and stuffings. No dal. Lentils mentioned, sneeringly, peasant food, substitution for *real* vegetables, carrots and potatoes? Advice: "Cook lentils with spices to relieve their blandness." What blandness? What spices? Nutritious and protein-rich, she memorizes to soak or not to soak, earnest mysteries. She needs a treasure of story, yearns dal's bare-footed unfolding, peasant, garlic and *marsepein*, Dutch dal impossible, no words for love and terror, more tourist than woman, and woman and dal alone are a conundrum, a couple grappling in the dark through layers of winter clothing.

Her packet of dal sits in the pantry and glowers like a stomach colony. She wants to make love to dal. Cookbooks conspiring, relentlessly European (Dutch too), zabaglione and spätzle, coquilles saint jacques and endive. No dal. She finds miso soup and shui may and even basmati rice. Dutch dal, what would that be? Thick, pureed, full of milk. A grain of rain, a texture of herring, wrong translation.

Her mother made curry the chicken pieces simmered, the pepper and cumin added in tense amounts, the smell mounting high in the house, fogging up the polish of kitchen, garlic and onions in oil, windows open to the sky's prairie blandness, and the pierce of hot hot hot, the ring of them seven around the table, and her father spitting the first bite onto his plate, the burn of curry, coriander, cumin, turmeric and cayenne, too sharp, too gloriously strange for him to dare to swallow its sword. Her mother furious, swearing and running to shut all the windows against the taste of taste, blaming the recipe, the measurements, the

numbers and words that promised this curry would be tractable, docile (Dutch too) as other food. "The recipe is wrong," she cried. "They can't mean that it should taste so sharp." They watched her push the curry into the slop pail for the pigs as if the food were dangerous, poison terrible, and ate shaves of gouda cheese on brown bread for supper instead.

She (Dutch too) loves dal, its sing and ring, its sweet deportment. She wants to leap into a bin of dal, to wade, pour profligate handfuls over her head, feel the smooth shillings lap against her belly and thighs, flat teardrops of strung protein, granular water. In her dreams dals cook in an endless pot, steaming the nourishment of sweat's food, working class sustenance more than celebration, the sinewy body channeling legume to strength, translating the lift and sway of carry and tired. Dal can sustain a poor woman through an endless trek for water, through days of wind and prairie dust, through Calgary air.

She tries to transform herself (Dutch too), eats dal with her fingers, right handed, a reverent pat, a delicate pinch, tongue foreplay. But dal resists her stranger, turns its back, mysterious as sand. Dutch canal raga into a pallauv falling off the shoulder, her queer inquisitive heart jostling difference, sadness researching strange food and heat, when the heart holds the only measurement, when distance is a voyeur.

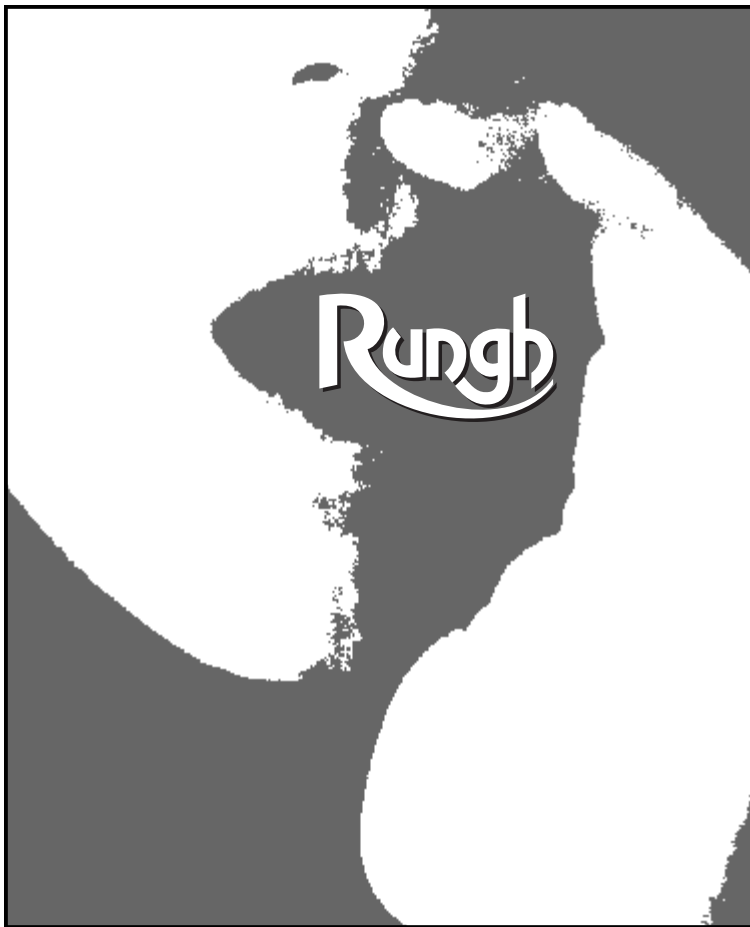
Please come close, *marsepein* (Dutch too) she cries, riding dal's knees, pulsing with want for hands hardened by callouses to push under her shirt, touch the bend and push of body steps, turn and turn again, artery's rhythmical stroke, stroke and flood, knees weakening. Pale as a spring sun, shucked with the skin of an embrace, hull and hollow, chafe and palea, such a carapace. Come closer, she cries, yearning the soul of journey, milky allegory, dal dancing toward the spinach of gossip and trust, Dutch goosefoot and cauliflower bottoms, the thyme of almonds cinnamonong across an ocean or two, sly immigration that garlics and rosemary and tarragon of all hollandaise. She will coriander the simmer and skim off dancing kernels, pimento the pot that brings dal to a boil, dal flowering into the dish of taste, caress brief as a zucchini blossom. Willing, tractable, pleased, scooping hands full of alchemy without recipe book recitation of mimicry, red/orange the sizzling burn, lazy with pinches of extra and add, with the moment that lifts the lid. Sprinkle the world and sing, she cumins her (Dutch too).



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Image from Namasté (Vol 1 No 4, 1985)





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—Morris Wolfe, Globe and Mail

**Careful thought and fine writing**

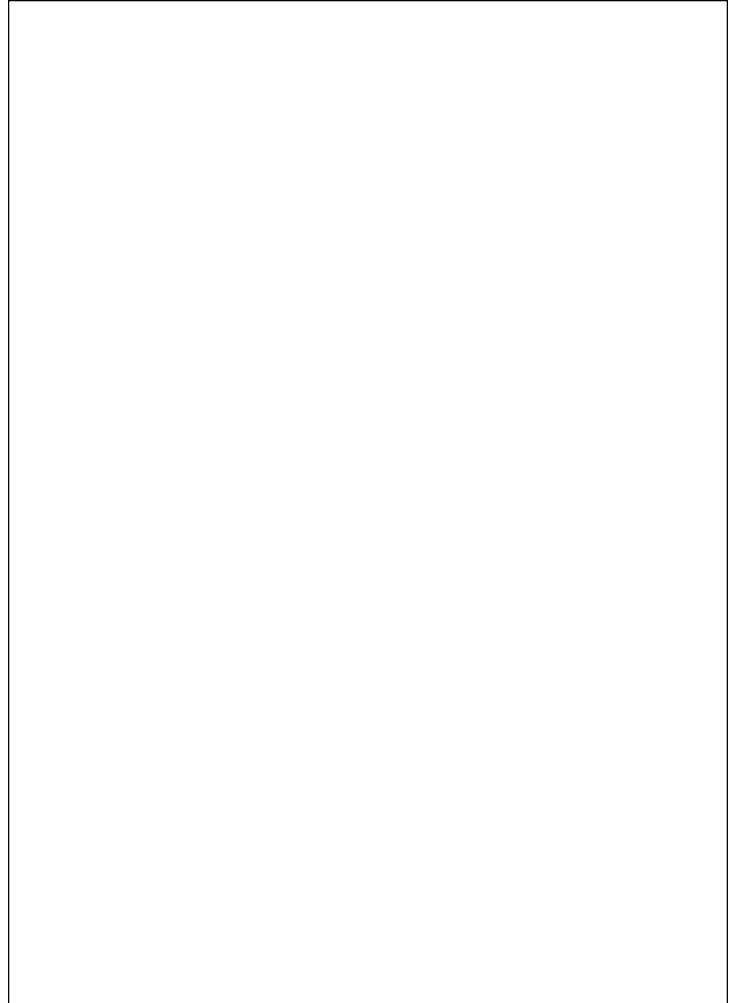
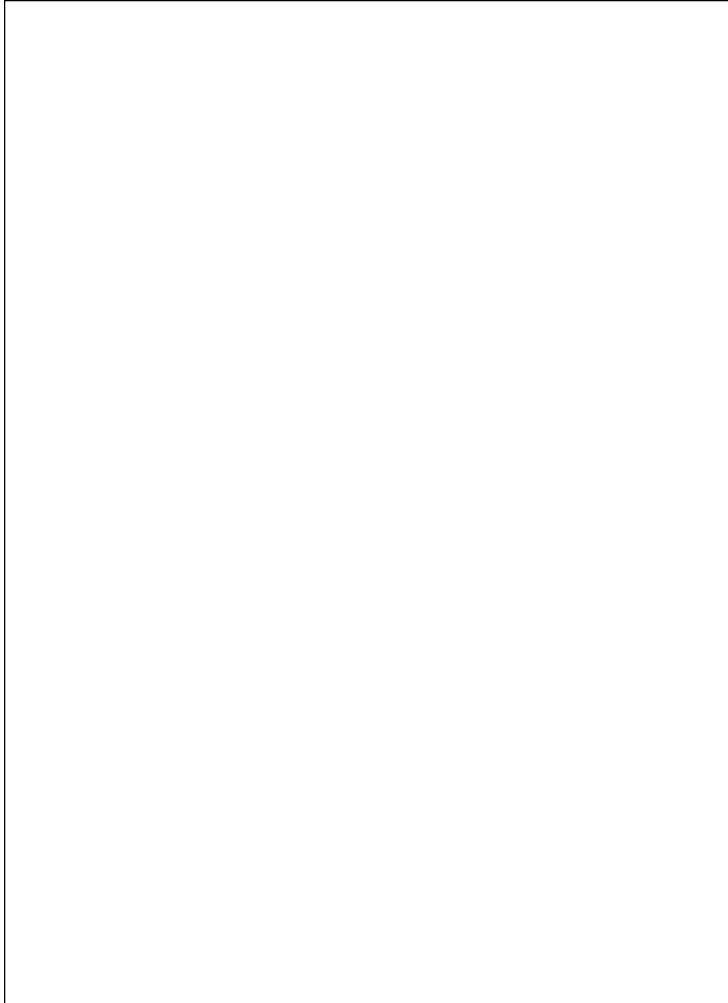
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**Different from the usual  
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**Hip...Collaborative effort**

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# Indian Cookery

(a work in progress)

Believe it or not, there are people in this world who still prefer the satires of Jonathan Swift. Take Albert Lawlor. His favourite Swiftian verse is taped to the fridge:

So, naturalists observe, a flea  
Hath smaller fleas that on him prey;  
And these have smaller still to bite 'em;  
And so proceed *ad infinitum*.

Albert would like to sleep but he can't. He is too tired. It's early morning in Vancouver, and he has been working all night. Where other men might run to the Museum of Anthropology to exhaust themselves (and admire a Haida canoe being carved on the beach), Albert cooks.

Just now, he is waiting for a batch of lentils to thaw in the microwave. He is admiring a row of Tupperware bins. Each holds one and one half litres of a different kind of pulse. There are seven such bins, arranged like the colours of a rainbow. The red kidney beans, *rajma*, are dark red. The aduki beans, *ma*, look like little kidney beans. Sometimes he switches the order of the kidney and aduki beans. The red split lentils, *masoor dal*, are more salmon than red, so they pass for orange in his rainbow of pulses. The *chana dal* comes next since it's similar, though not identical, to yellow split peas. And the whole green lentils are, in fact, a greenish-brown. There's nothing close to blue, indigo, or violet in the arrangement (nor is there beige in a rainbow), so the last two bins throw off his colour scheme. The black-eyed beans, *lobhia*, are beige ovals marked with a dark dot. The chickpeas are also beige.

It's only natural Albert should be fascinated by lentils and peas and beans. He's a nuclear scientist. He has devoted his life to understanding the forces which keep the nucleus together, and these days he is concentrating on the pion, or pi-meson. He explores the sub-nuclear realm by bombarding deuterons, the nuclei of heavy hydrogen, with pi-ons. Friends who know little about physics consider his work mysterious (even exotic). He doesn't. Not any more.

Albert does his experiments with a particle accelerator called TRIUMF. It's located on the grounds of the University of British Columbia—as is the Museum of Anthropology. Mind you, he has never been inside the museum.

Every three months, he and five companions, all men, spend a week at UBC. They don't live in Vancouver. They live far away, east across the Rocky Mountains. While at TRIUMF, they work around the clock because each eight-hour shift needs at least two men to carry on experiments. In theory, the men take turns cooking dinner in the guest house; in practice, Albert makes dinner every night.

The others help, of course. As soon as they arrive, Albert sends the graduate students, Gary Hansen and Spiro Papaconstantinou, off with a shopping list. Once the rented van returns, four of the six men set to work in the kitchen. The other two are already at TRIUMF checking in, or visiting department heads. The secret of success in modern science, after all, is not experimentation; it's diplomacy.

Seated at a large, wooden table, Albert measures out the spices for the week and seals them into Ziploc bags: all the turmeric and salt, whole cumin seeds, ground coriander, cayenne pepper, and black pepper. Even the *garam masala* which Gary and Spiro pick up, ready-mixed, on Main Street.

Albert's colleague, Jeff Matthews, stands at one end of the counter. Here he chops and minces and grates. He chops onions and tomatoes, minces garlic, and grates ginger—enough for a week's worth of dinners. The onions and tomatoes go into Tupperware tubs, the garlic and ginger go into smaller Tupperware canisters, and all this goes into the fridge.

At the other end of the counter, near the stove, Gary and Spiro do their part. They measure the lentils, peas, and beans; pick out grit; wash the pulses; and drain them in one of two collanders. The kitchen is not fancy, but it is well equipped. While Gary and Spiro work, they chat about the coming week. More often, though, they dream. Without knowing it, they dream about the same thing: each, in his own

mind, is composing his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. But the Nobel Prize must wait; back to the everyday grind. They cook the pulses in separate pots, always in batches of two hundred grams in one and one-half litres of water. The red split lentils, which must be simmered for an hour and a quarter, are the messiest. A scum collects on the top and has to be spooned off. As for the chickpeas, Garth measures three hundred and fifty grams into one and three-quarter litres of water. The chickpeas must soak for up to twenty hours before they can be cooked.

Each batch of lentils or peas or beans serves six, so there is always just enough. Though Albert is vegetarian, he will make a meat dish and cook either rice or pasta. If his fellow boffins had their way, they wouldn't have pulses every night for a week, but none of them likes to cook, and a man can't do his best work on weiners and beans. Thus, Albert is the king of the kitchen; the others are his minions. This is what they call themselves, too: Lawlor's Culinary Minions.

Fortunately, today is their last full day at TRIUMF for another three months. Albert will be glad to go home. Travel excited him once. Not any more. Like Gary and Spiro, there was even a time Albert dreamt of winning a Nobel Prize. Now he wants nothing more than to build his own boat. A seagoing boat. He will sail it to the South Pacific and wander among islands. He will follow in the wakes of Paul Gauguin; of Robert Louis Stevenson. Wouldn't that be the life? But Albert's daydream ends when he shudders from lack of sleep. He sighs,

by Ven Beqamudré



opens his notebook, and switches it on. All his recipes are computerized.

Moving to the stove, he starts on today's pulse dish. It's red split lentils with cabbage, or *masoor dal aur band gobi*. When Gary and Spiro were cooking the lentils on the first day, Albert added half a teaspoon of turmeric to the pot. Now he measures five tablespoons of vegetable oil into a frying pan and turns the stove to medium. While the oil heats, he measures out the last of the garlic and onion. His calculations were so precise, he has exactly what he needs in the Tupperware: three cloves of garlic, minced, and seventy-five grams of onion. The onion should be in thin slices for this recipe, but he makes do with chopped. He knows enough about cooking to break the rules, just as he knows enough about science to realize it will no longer save the world.

He finds it incredible to think there was a time he believed such a thing. This was back in the sixties, when he kept a poster of another Albert (Einstein) taped to his fridge. Just before leaving to come here, our Albert found the poster in a mailing tube. He wanted to put the poster up to inspire his daughters, but it was dog-eared and faded. Back it went into storage—with his first microscope, still in its original wooden box. He once thought if he kept the poster and microscope long enough they might become antiques. Now he shakes his head. He's the antique, and age hasn't increased his value.

Albert guesses the oil is hot and adds a teaspoon of cumin seeds. He lets them sizzle for exactly five seconds, then adds the minced garlic. He moves the pieces about with a spatula so they'll brown but not burn.

He knows what his problem is—it's more than just a midlife crisis—but there's no one he can ask for advice. It shocks him: how few close friends he has. It's not that he wants to abandon science. It's just that he wants to start over. He wants to leave his comfortable house, leave his wife and daughters, and vanish. He wants to start somewhere else, with a new identity, a new name. Oh, Albert, he tells himself. You've got everything you ever wanted—a family, respect—and you've got nothing left to prove. But he can't just disappear (he loves his family too much) and building a boat might be too ambitious. The next best thing would be to see India. Not the Taj Mahal, and he has no illusions about the romance of poverty. No, he wants to find himself, and what better place for a man to find himself than in India? This is called doing Head India. Yet he knows the pitfalls awaiting a man: finding everything but himself. Besides, while Albert's not so conceited as to think he's the only man who has ever faced a crisis of faith, it galls him to think that, by doing Head India, he would follow in the footsteps of countless westerners.

Tens of thousands: X times ten to the fourth.

With the garlic browned, he adds the onion and the cabbage—two hundred and twenty-five grams of cabbage—which Jeff Matthews cored, shredded, and also stored on that first night. While steam rises from the leaves, Albert chops a green chilli and adds this as well. He stir-fries the cabbage mixture for ten minutes. He tries to find solace by thinking of those who love him, but he's too tired now to think of even love. He switches on the radio and tunes it to CJVB. It's a multicultural station, and, yes, it's playing Indian music. The cabbage has browned and turned slightly crisp. He adds a quarter teaspoon of salt, stirs it in, and turns off the heat. Now for the lentils. After taking them out of the microwave, he spoons them into a heavy pot and adds the remaining ingredients: another teaspoon of salt, half a teaspoon of grated ginger, and one hundred and ten grams of chopped tomatoes. He covers the pot and, after bringing the lentil mixture to a boil, lets it simmer for ten minutes. With the strains of an Indian raga soothing his scattered brainwaves, time passes. Quickly. He uncovers the pot, adds the cabbage mixture and the oil from the frying pan, and stirs. After the whole thing has simmered (uncovered) for three minutes, he turns off the heat. The pot, once it cools, will go into the fridge. Albert will finally go to bed. Another night, another dollar, another pion-deuteron reaction.

He sinks onto a chair and waits for the raga to end. On the fridge is a spool of magnetic tape he brought back with him at the end of his shift. There are often arguments at airport security over these tapes, but someone else will handle it. Jeff Matthews, most likely. He's the team leader: the one in charge of setting up apparatus, supervising Gary and Spiro while they calibrate the electronics and, best of all, filling out grant applications. Albert is just the cook. Chief cook and bottle washer. Well, not quite. That's what grad students are for. Ladies and gentlemen, let me tell you, Albert Lawlor is a valued member of our team. What he lacks

in enthusiasm in the lab, he more than makes up for in the kitchen. Home, oh, home. Once they all fly back, he will take the rest of Monday off. Maybe even Tuesday. He will teach for two days straight, then start analyzing the data on the tapes. First things first, though. Sleep. Now.

At four this evening, he will get up and make the rest of dinner: lemony chicken with fresh coriander, which he won't eat, and spiced basmati rice, which he will eat. He will follow this with a bowl of yoghurt and so get his complete proteins—from a pulse, a grain, and a dairy product. The men finishing their day shift will have beer with their meal. The men on the six o'clock to midnight shift will have coffee. After dinner, Albert will go to a nearby theatre for the second showing of a foreign film. Tonight's film is *Ganeshatru*, adapted by Satyajit Ray from Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. Albert will not have popcorn. He would feel guilty stuffing himself while watching an Indian film. Then he will start his midnight shift. Tomorrow morning the six men will pack, drop the van at the airport, and catch their flight home. Albert will sleep the whole way. And while their plane wings east, over the Rockies, Albert will dream. He will dream of a rainbow made of lentils and peas and beans, all the colours pulsing with energy, all the tiny particles colliding into a dazzling mass of beige. Sleep well, Albert. Sweet dreams.



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Images: Amir Ali Alibhai.

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# From Sundaramma's Kitchen

by Anita Rau Badami

Always, always start with a clean pot. You might think, this Sundaramma is so fussy, what does it matter if the pot has one particle of rice stuck in a corner, who will notice that particle swimming in a sea of *sambhar*. Ahaha, you don't know what all I see! The smallest bead of oil will not escape my eyes. And believe me, that tiny piece of rice is what will spoil the whole *sambhar*!

See, the other day my cousin's wife, the one who lives in Arsikere *taluk*, she had a huge gathering to celebrate the birth of her first grandchild and she had cooked jack-fruit *payasa*. Not the ordinary kind with sugar and a few *kaju-kishmish* thrown in. No, no, for an auspicious event like the birth of a child and a male child that too, it has to be a royal *payasa*. So my cousin's wife decided on *amrita-pradamana*, nectar made in the kitchens of Lord Vishnu himself.

Now whatever else my cousin's wife is, and I will tell you about her some other time, she is not tight-fisted. So she made the *payasa* with the sweetest jackfruit in the garden, half a kilo of whole cashew, the best *elakki* pods that the Shetty had in his shop and jaggery straight from Mandya. She even paid the milkman two rupees extra to make sure he did not water the

milk down. For jack-fruit *payasa* you need pure, thick milk, otherwise there is no point making it. But you know, nobody asked for a second helping and my cousin's wife, poor girl, had to throw the whole thing down the drain. I took one sip of the *payasa* and knew immediately that she had used a dirty pot—one in which she had cooked garlic *saaru* the previous day.

"But I cleaned it with my own two hands Sundaramma," she wailed when I told her why nobody had touched more than two drops of *payasa*. "That pot, I myself polished first with ash and water, then with mud and then with lemons to make sure there was no smell left."

"Not enough," I told her, "Especially for *payasa*, you need a separate pot. Don't use it for anything except sweet dishes. And if you do have to wash, sometimes you cannot keep separate vessels for each dish, it is best to use besan flour. That is a secret from my great-grandmother, she was the head cook in Sri-Sri Thirumalachar's kitchens long before your time,



and if anybody knew anything about cooking it was she."

I have a lot of little rules like that. Before making *karela palya*, soak the gourd in buttermilk. That way your guests won't go away with a bitter taste in their mouths. There will be a small bit of *kaduva*, but oh, it will be there only to

enhance the flavour of fresh cumin and coriander. And remember what I say about the mustard garnish for *saaru*? Never, never, fry the mustard in the pot and then pour the dal in.

That will most certainly cancel out all taste. After, the *saaru* has come to a rolling boil, add mustard which you have fried

in a separate container. Then you will notice the special *ruchi* that makes my *saaru* famous.

Some people say that I have these rules just to establish my importance in the world, but who can stop idle tongues wagging? The discerning ones appreciate the trouble I take to do my work well. After all, being the cook in Toy Palace Krishnamoorti's house is no small thing. I have a tradition to uphold, a big house like this, important people come and go all the time. What kind of thoughts will they take away with them if the food is badly cooked and the corners of their bed-rooms not even touched by a broom-stick, tell me? We might just be the servants in this house, but it is our job to uphold the *maryada* of this family. Not that I am really a servant of course, don't mistake me. I belong to a good Brahmin family. My father's younger sister married Krishnamoorti's uncle's youngest son. It is because of his kindness that I got this place here when my no-good husband died. No doubt Krishnamoorti's wife Achamma had heard about my *chutni-pudi* and *sambhar-pudi* as well. I don't like telling the world about my own virtues, but it is true that in all ten towns this side and that of my own, there is no one who cooks better than I do. Ask Gopi the son of the house if my *bisi-bele-bhaath* isn't the most delicately spiced he has ever tasted. He has gone out of this little town and tasted food in big-big cities, he knows what from what. Of course you will say that Gopi is naturally kind, he will never hurt my feelings by criticising my art. He is kind, no doubt, just like his father. Otherwise why should he take such an interest in my son Seenu? He buys the boy pencils, books, all kinds of things.

"Swami, you are spoiling my son," I said to him again and again. "He will forget his station in life, he will get a big head and then I will have trouble."

But that Gopi didn't even listen to a word

I was saying, so fond of my child he was. Sometimes I get a little worried, you know. Too much of attention from big people isn't good for Seenu. Tomorrow we might be out in the world and he won't know how to look after himself or his old mother.

"Ayyo Sundaramma, why are you getting grey hair over the boy?" says Janaki the maid when I tell her my worries. "Look at that smile of his, look at his moon-like face. What else do you want? Toy Krishnamoorthy will arrange for a bride with a big dowry for him. Why I have heard that Revanna already has an eye on the boy. He has only one daughter and ten acres of wet land."

Sometimes I even like Janaki, though I am never sure if she is teasing me or what. Certainly my Seenu has a smile like Lord Krishna's, even my mistress Achamma had remarked on it.

శ్రీశ్రీశ్రీ

Today I am making *pheni* for Vani the daughter-in-law of the house. Though she has never said so, I know she loves my *pheni*. She is a quiet girl, too quiet. I agree that it suits a girl to be modest and soft, but not so soft that even her husband ignores her existence. And they have been married only two years. Now from what I have seen and heard, (of course my loafer husband was different but that is my tragedy), by the time a year is up, the man is like a moth near a lamp with his wife. Not our young master Gopi, it seems. He spends the whole day out in the fields and in the evening takes my Seenu away to the Small House, there near the coconut grove, to teach him arithmetic. I am not happy about that I can tell you, it seems as if I am deliberately pushing my son between husband and wife. I have tried to make my Seenu understand, but he just smiles at me, the rascal, and says that Gopi will be angry if he doesn't go for reading and writing practice.

That Gopi is out to make my boy an engineer or doctor or something. And who am I to tell a grown man that instead of spending time with a child he should be spoiling his

young wife! The poor girl sits at home like a *bombey* making miles of crotchet mats. What we will do with mats in this house I don't know. Sometimes she comes to the kitchen to help me though her mother-in-law isn't very pleased with that I can tell. Achamma is good at heart, but she spent two years finding the perfect bride for her only son, and what happens? Nothing, that's what. Instead of giggling and flirting like every other bride, Vani sits in the kitchen with me or in her room making table covers. I am not saying that Vani is less than perfect. She is a lovely girl, why just the other day, Rakhma Athey was visiting us from Bangalore and she gave Vani a whole hundred rupee note.

"The girl's beauty is startling!" she exclaimed, pushing Vani's chin this way and that, checking her face for any imperfections and at the same time making sure that her ear-studs were pure diamonds. That is how Rakhma Athey is. She never does anything without having two or more reasons for it.

"Well child," she continued, "When are we going to see little faces as pretty as yours in this house?"

Vani hung her head and didn't say a word, but her mother-in-law couldn't keep quiet.

"Ayyo, Rakhma," wailed Achamma banging her forehead with the flat of her hand. "What can I say, there must be something wrong with the girl. We have treated her like a queen, she couldn't have come to a better house. I even make sure she drinks two glasses of *badaami*-milk every day, but no sign of any good news."

"Why do you straightaway jump on the girl Achamma?" said Rakhma piously.

That is how she is. Stirs up the pot herself and then throws water to calm things down! She left her box near the entrance to the house and came straight towards the central courtyard where I had put out *shandigey* to dry. I ran out of the kitchen to move the *shandigey* trays that



were on the bench there. I knew Rakhma Athey, she would just push them all to the ground and that would be the end of two days' work. Yes, it took me two whole days to make it. I can see you raise your eyebrows and say, "My goodness, the old woman is slow." But let me tell you a secret about making *subakki*

*shandigey*. It has to be spread out as thin as the skin of your hand otherwise the middle won't dry and when you fry it, you can eat only the edges. And if you think you can spread two hundred *shandigey* that thin in less than two days, not forgetting that you have to cook three meals and tiffin for the family as well, then maybe you are right and I am an old fool!

"Yenamma, Sundaramma?" said Rakhma fanning herself with her pallu. "Are you happy and healthy? How is that ulcer that was bothering you last time I was here? How is your son, Seenu, isn't that his name? Oh my memory is so bad, one of these days I will look at myself in the mirror and call myself god knows what. Can you ask your Seenu to put my box away inside and Sundaramma, maybe you could get me a glass of water?"

"Ayyo, Athey," I exclaimed with just as much noise and flourish as that drama-lady (she should have joined Prabhaat Players). "You come to Toy-Palace Krishnamoorthy's house and expect only a glass of water? What an insult that is to us!"

"No, no, I didn't mean any insult," said Athey, "It is just that after that dusty auto ride my throat yearns for water, that's all."

"Sundaramma is just teasing you," laughed Krishnamoorthy's wife. "But you must certainly have some mango *panaka* after you drink water. If you don't we will most certainly be offended. What do you say Vani?" She glanced at her daughter-in-law who hadn't opened her mouth and then sighed. "Courtesies like this should be performed by the younger people in the house. It is my *karma* that I still have to do them myself."

"She is still new to this household," soothed Rakhma. "She will pick up by and by. It is hard for a bride. First she has to learn about the man who shares her bed, then about the family she has earned by marriage and finally the house that surrounds her. Come my dear, sit next



to Aunt Rakhma and tell her all about your life here. And you Sundaramma, when you have finished listening to all our conversation, maybe you can call that boy of yours to carry my bag in?"

"Atthey, if you only gave me a chance to talk I would have told you that Seenu is out in the fields with the young master. So let your boxes remain there, when the milk-man comes in this afternoon he will carry it to your room."

Seenu is my only child. That way I am lucky, quick throw a pinch of salt over your shoulder in case a bad spirit is listening, if I had more than one child, god knows how I would have managed. Also, may Sri Rama be praised, my boy has his father's looks but none of his bad habits. His nose especially, is like the stem of a jasmine flower. Again, I am not one to show off, but after all I am the child's mother, sometimes my pride bursts through, I am sure you will understand. Yes, my Seenu is a good boy, though sometimes I worry about how quiet he is. If silence in a woman is tolerable, it is not at all good for a boy. After all if he doesn't open his mouth at all how will people know who is the man of the house tell me? Of course in the case of the Big Master's son Gopi, it doesn't matter, for him his money speaks. See, without saying *oon* or *aan* he got a high-class bride from a rich family. Do you know, Vani has two sets of diamond earrings and a *petti* full of silver? But in the case of my boy, silence will get him a big round *sonney* that is all.

"You will have to support your old mother very soon, Seenu-raja," I've told him, "You need to be more outgoing, otherwise nobody in the world will pay any attention to what you say."

He always smiles when I say that. "Don't worry Amma," he says, the darling child. "I will be here for you always."

It is in god's hands, that is all. I shouldn't be grumbling, because like I said he is a good boy, never hurts my feelings, is respectful to his elders and most important does his school-work without any problems. That, according to my cousin's husband Raghava who is a teacher in Chikkahalli High School, is what is

most important.

"Sundaramma," he said to me the other day, "You need a good education to get anywhere in this world these days."

"What do I know about books and things, Raghava?" I said to him. "My life has been spent in the kitchen, I never learnt to read or write anything except my name, only god has looked after me and my child."

"That is what I am saying Sundaramma, if only you would listen," said Raghava helping himself to another piece of *pathrodey*.

I admit I am not very fond of him, but he is kin after all, and a school teacher must know more things about the world than I do, so who am I to open my mouth?

"Raghava, I am listening to every word," I said, passing him some fresh butter to put on the *pathrodey*. The leaves for *pathrodey* were from my own garden and the spices from my own money, otherwise I wouldn't have sat there quietly watching Raghava eat them all, one after another. I am an honest person, uneducated maybe, but I will never cheat my employers. Maybe Raghava thought that the *pathrodey*

was from the Big House kitchen which was why he wouldn't stop eating.

"You must give my wife the recipe for this, Sundaramma," he said at last after wiping the final crumbs off his moustache.

"Yes, I will, after you give me some advice about my boy," I said sharply.

"Ah yes, Seenu," said Raghava. "I hear that young master Gopi is taking a special interest in his education."

"Sri Rama in heaven be blessed," I said. "My boy is indeed fortunate. The young master spends hours teaching the child math and reading big-big books."

"Yes, that is good, maybe he will pay for a college education too," said Raghava. "You should put in a word about college fees and such things in Krishnamoorthy sahib's ear straight away. Right now Gopi is taking an interest in your son's life. But remember, he is a married man and tomorrow he will have a son of his own, and then who will even throw a glance toward the cook's boy?"

Well to tell you the truth, I am torn between my Seenu's life and the mistress' happiness. These days poor Achamma goes about the house with a big face, and when her face looks like that, not even my *badaami-kheer* will bring a smile. It is a year since she brought Vani into this auspicious house, filled her arms from wrist to elbow with green bangles from Srirangam, and still there is no sign of a grand-child. The other day she was so happy when the girl did not have her monthly flow, she offered ten coconuts to the Amman temple. But it was only late and Achamma's forehead darkened again. My heart is full for Vani also. Like I said, she is a nice girl, always stops to tell me how fine my *pheni* is, never forgets to bring a piece of *prasada* home for me from the temple.

"You talk to her Sundaramma," said Achamma a few weeks ago. "She seems to like you, maybe she is scared to say anything to me, I am her mother-in-law after all."

See what I mean by being torn? On the one hand it is good for my son if Vani doesn't have a child, her Gopi might even think of adopting my boy. That will be a burden off my shoulders. But *chhee* what an evil thought! I have eaten the salt of this house for fourteen years, how can I wish ill on it, tell me? So the other day, as soon as Vani came out of the bath to the courtyard to dry her hair, I decided to talk to her. But first I told Janaki the maid whose nose is as long as my middle finger, to go to the market to buy *brinjal*. She was being as quiet as a mouse, but I knew she was sweeping the rooms on the far side of the courtyard. My kitchen is a good place to be in, I can see straight into every room, except when the doors are closed of course.

"Vani, child," I said taking the towel from her hands and pushing her down on the bench where I dry *appala* and *shandigey*. "Sit, sit, let Sundaramma dry your hair today. We mustn't let this hair get spoilt, eh? What will our Gopi say?"

The girl just bent her head and didn't utter a word.

"You are not angry with me for teasing you?" I said anxiously. The girl was so silent I didn't even know, after two years of seeing her, what went on inside her head.

"After all a bride needs to be teased to keep the colour in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eye, eh?"

"I want to go home to my parents," said Vani all of a sudden. My heart stopped beating completely, I am telling you. Why did Achamma





tell me to talk to this girl? I am an old fool, who knew what had dropped out of my illiterate mouth?

"Akka, I am sorry if I said something to offend you, old Sundaramma babbles sometimes, she doesn't mean anything bad," I said.

"I want to go home," said the girl again and burst into tears.

"Akka, what have I done, rama-rama. Don't cry, I'll make you some hot tea with ginger, that will make you feel better. Tell old Sundaramma what is wrong. See if I won't make things alright," I babbled, really frightened now.

Like I said, though I am not a servant, I am a dependent and it isn't good to upset the daughter-in-law of the house. Tomorrow Achamma, may swami give her a hundred years, will close her eyes and this girl will be the mistress.

"I don't want to stay in a house where nobody likes me," sobbed the girl.

My head was whirling, what was she talking about. Had anybody ever done anything but pamper the girl? Why Achamma had never even raised her voice to her. As for her father-in-law, every time he went to Bangalore city he brought back the latest Canjeevaram sari with pure *jari* border. And didn't I always make special dishes for her alone, thinking, the child is missing her home, she needs to be fed properly as if she is in her mother's house? I even got my Seenu to get her the sweetest tender-coconut straight from the tree. It is good for the bowels you know. True the boy grumbled, but he is a child doesn't like doing work about the house, that is all. Why even that witch of a maid Janaki brings a string of fresh jasmine for Vani Akka every morning.

"Akka, akka, what are you saying? You are like our own daughter. We treat you like a *rani*, after all you are Gopi's wife," I said quite irritated by her unreasonable words.

The crazy girl whipped her hair out of my hands. "Tell me Sundaramma," she said leaning close to me, "what is wrong with me?"

"What is wrong with you?" I said, frightened at this new *roopa* the daughter-in-law had assumed.

"Am I cross-eyed? Or ugly? Or do I smell?"



"Akka, if you were any of those things, would you have come to this house as a bride?" I said quietly. The girl was definitely unwell. Tomorrow I would make her a special *kashaya* with milk and turmeric and black-pepper. Maybe I would whisper a few words in Achamma's ear about performing a *homa* at Thirupathi temple.

"Then why doesn't your Gopi come near me?" shouted Vani. I didn't know which way to look I tell you. I have eyes in my head and the kitchen is right across from Gopi's room and I can smell that things are not alright between husband and wife. And of course, that long-nosed maid Janaki had also been whispering things about the sleeping arrangements in that room, but to hear the daughter-in-law herself fling it at me? I was shocked. I thought she was such a quiet girl.

I was so upset for the rest of the day that I even snapped at my Seenu. These days I hardly see him in our own house. Whole day he goes to school, in the evening he goes off with Gopi to study and I am sitting all alone watching a plate of food go cold.

"Don't start getting big ideas about yourself my fine peacock," I scolded when he finally came home. Though to tell you honestly, the boy looked so beautiful, I was melting with pride. But it is not right to give young people too high an opinion of themselves, they slip away from your hands then.

"It isn't right for you to take up so much of Gopi's time. After all he is a family man now, and doesn't want a young *nai-mari* hanging around his ankles," I said.

The cheeky boy didn't even reply, just gave me a look, such a funny look it was too, I cannot even describe it. If he wasn't my boy, the child I had brought up in the beneficent shade of the Toy Krishnamoorthy house, I would have thought it was a cunning look. But no, but no, if he was up to something, I would have heard about it by now. In a small town everybody knows everything, and I know everybody.

So I just ignored that look and continued, "You come home straight from now on, understand? As it is Vani Akka is angry with me. No, I shouldn't say that, she is angry with the whole

world and for what? I don't know. She doesn't deserve such kind in-laws!"

"She is stupid," said my Seenu, just like that, without even warning me. He never opens his mouth and when he does, it is to drop out gems like this! Everything was going wrong today.

"She doesn't even know two plus two," continued the piece of coal I had borne from my belly. He had taken after his no-good father after all.

"Has some wicked spirit stolen your brain?" I said, "You owe your life to this family remember that."

For sure tomorrow I would have to make some *Neem kashaya* for the boy. Someone had cast the evil eye on him, otherwise had anyone ever heard him talk disrespectfully like that? Maybe it was my own fond eyes that had touched him. It happens you know. Yes, I will make *kashaya* for him and perhaps feed two Brahmins at the temple. It isn't right for the son of a cook to talk too much. Tomorrow people will say, she is an ambitious one that cook in Krishnamoorthy's house. She is pushing her son forward, taking advantage of their kindness. Maybe that is why Vani Akka was angry with me. She thinks my boy is stealing her Gopi's time away from her. But Seenu is only a child, what does he know of the delicate strings that weave a relationship between a man and his wife?

"Seenu," I said to the witless boy, "from tomorrow you will let Gopi come straight home to his wife. Enough math sums and all that nonsense stuff that you bother him with. You listen to your mother understand?"

This time the boy did not say anything, he just smiled at me again. He is beginning to puzzle me, but isn't that how every mother feels about her growing child? Yes tomorrow I will have to make two *kashayas*—one for my boy and the other for the daughter-in-law of the house. You must have heard of Sundaramma's *kashayas*? They always work. I got the recipes from my great-great grandmother who was known this side and that of the Nilgiri Hills for her cooking.



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Images: Madhur Jaffrey's A Taste of India (1985)











# THE WORLD ACCORDING TO SHYAM BENEGAL

**Ameen Merchant  
interviews the  
celebrated  
filmmaker  
at the  
Vancouver  
Film Festival**

*Shyam Benegal is one of the most celebrated filmmakers of India's parallel cinema. Known for his path-breaking and award-winning films, which include **Ankur**, **Nishant**, **Manthan**, **Bhumika** and **Trikaal**, he is also the director who is recognized for introducing fine actors like Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Anant Nag and Deepti Naval to the Indian film viewer.*

*Shyam Benegal was in Vancouver to promote his most recent work **Suraj Ka Saatvan Ghoda** (*The Seventh Horseman of the Sun*) at the Vancouver International Film Festival.*

**Ameen** I would like to begin with the issue of context. Your films, I know, are set in a specific Indian cultural milieu and portray a particular Indian reality. But your audience in North America—especially at an International film festival is predominantly white. Given this fact, how do you deal with the problem of a imminently possible de-contextualized viewing?

**Shyam** You see, for a film the context is, broadly speaking, the human context. At least, thematically. As long as your theme is not restrictive—like if you're dealing with the human condition—your film has an

eventual reach. It points to an identifiable human condition. Thematically speaking then, you have touched the whole world and there is no difficulty in comprehension. However, the problem of comprehension is essentially in the area of language and imaging because these two components are culture specific. This really has to do with semiology, or the semiotics of the culture, and hence there is a chance that the specificity may be lost in an international context.

**Ameen** Exactly. And that is the point I'm making. Given such a specificity, couldn't the lack of cultural awareness on the part of the audience lead to a dangerous decontextualizing? For instance, let's take the recognition of the myth you allude to in the title of your latest film, *Seventh Horseman of the Sun*...

**Shyam** Well, the mythic aspect of this film is yes, specific. It refers to the Sun's chariot, which according to Indian mythology is drawn by seven horses—one horse for each day of the week. This points to the perennial nature of life, an eternal cycle, so to speak. Beyond that there is no deeper significance, and in any case, the allusion is made clear in the film. But then again, decontextualized films are fairly common. This happens most when you exploit cultures for their exotica because they are different, colourful and have a perceived romantic aspect to them. And some films indulge in such romance as they allow the audience to fantasize, but that is not the kind of film-making I'm into.

**Ameen** Yes, I am aware of that. In fact, you were at the vanguard of what is today referred to in India as the Parallel Cinema. Your *Ankur* was the first milestone in this movement. I am curious to know the response to your films in the international film circuit especially with reference to the 'human condition' you have just talked about. Do you think something crucial is lost in 'universalizing'?

**Shyam** No, you see, it becomes universal not because you wish to 'universalize' it. It becomes universal when you are dealing with the human condition. And when you are dealing with certain fundamental aspects of humanity or when you are dealing with humanity as such, and your concerns are



human, then they go past all cultures. Your milieu can be very culture-specific because that is very important for the film to remain authentic—you must be able to smell the soil as it were—and that is very important for me. Otherwise I find it very difficult to make a film. For if you don't have that specificity you wouldn't have any hook to hold on to and as a result your stories will not carry the same kind of insight because of the lack of authenticity. And that's very important. Certainly, for me, it has been very important. But mainstream Indian cinema never relies on any of these things, as you know. Mainstream Indian cinema is not culture-specific.

**Ameen** Mainstream Indian cinema is another chapter altogether, and this leads me to my next question: How do you situate your films in the Indian context?

**Shyam** I have not found it difficult in the Indian context, nor even in the context worldwide. Take for instance the films of the Japanese film-maker Yasujiro Ozu. Even in the Japanese context his films are extremely culture-specific. Yet, with the fact that they are so specific to Japanese life—they transcend such a specificity because they are human—they deal with the way human beings relate to each other. Human relationships—it doesn't matter where you are—they translate themselves anywhere, because you know they are the same anywhere. How people relate to one another is not very different from one place to another. Yes, they may be different in form; but in content they hardly ever change. So it doesn't really matter what form you take then.

**Ameen** I know that the Television industry in India has in some ways facilitated, and has also been a major source of accessibility for the practitioners of the Parallel Cinema. *Doordarshan* (Indian Television) has helped in the expression of non-mainstream talent and ideas...

**Shyam** Yes, as far as public exposure is concerned, it has been helpful. Not in the economics of film-making though. The economics of such film-making can only be helped when more people see these films in the cinema-houses which in turn depends on the factor of adequate distribution. And in India we do not have distribution systems that cater to more specialized kinds of films or those that reach what one might call minority audiences. I mean, for instance,

if you make a film which most people will not claim as entertaining and only a few people believe that these are the kinds of films they would like to see and be engaged and entertained by, then you have a huge and significant divide. Now, film-makers like myself do not have the means and the methods to be able to reach that audience because such an audience is also dispersed and you have to go to where the audience is often. Particularly, if you are talking the urban middle-class audiences, who are usually literate and are exposed to a wider range of entertainment, and the arts they enjoy—like painting, music, theatre and so on. So to reach an audience like that we don't have the adequate infrastructure. This is because the biggest urban entertainment medium, which used to be the cinema, is today also the biggest rural entertainment medium in India. And unless you make films that are likely to become popular with everybody you get caught and tend to be marginalized especially if you make the kind films I make.

**Ameen** As an artist then, as somebody who wants to practice a certain aesthetic, how do you cope with this marginalization?

**Shyam** You carry on regardless. There are certain conditions under which you find it difficult, and the conditions in India are difficult for such film-makers, but they still aren't so difficult that I would have starved. I can still get to make the sort of films I want to make. And to me that's the most important thing. As long as I am able to make the films I want to make and not be forced into making films simply because this is the only thing that I know to do well and therefore be caught in it as though it were some chore. I would hate to have to churn out films if that were the only way I could be successful. I haven't, thankfully, been forced into such a fate yet.

**Ameen** What about reach, though? Every artist likes to have an audience...

**Shyam** Sure. That's true. And I do have an audience, an audience that grows slightly every year. Yes, it's true that it has not grown

to the extent that I would have liked it to have grown, but there's precious little I can do about that. Considering the films I like to make, films that express besides the views I may have and also my own sensibility, I am at least sure that those who respond to this sensibility are definitely going to see my films.

**Ameen** Your films *Antarnaad* and *Suraj* were screened at the Vancouver International film festival (1992). I'd like to know how Indian films are selected for the festival circuit? What are the criteria?

**Shyam** Film festivals by and large deal with the art of cinema. And since that is the emphasis, most of the Indian mainstream fare is not likely to find a place in such an arena...

**Ameen** You wouldn't call mainstream Indian films cinema then?

**Shyam** Well, I would call it cinema, to a certain extent, for it is broadly defined as such. But mainstream Indian films are not concerned, most of the time, with the development of the art of cinema.

**Ameen** What do you mean when you say 'the art of cinema'?

**Shyam** For instance, cinema has a legitimate claim to be an art form. It is creative, it has a body of aesthetic and has a certain kind of manner and vocabulary, which grows all the time. Simultaneously it's grammar is also evolving. But if you are not involved in any of these things and you work out a certain formula film then obviously you are not involved in developing the art of cinema. You are involved in another kind of way: simply on the level that film being a product needs to be consumed, like you have any number of products. Now, I think consumption *per se* is the minimal aspect of cinema. But there is more to it than that. I think it is possible to get some kind of insight into life through cinema, an insight into human experience, into something fine. Cinema offers many such possibilities. The fact that it has the ability to become a metaphor says that it has poetic potential. But when you are thinking of it only in terms of it being a product, which it has to be of

course...but it has to be something beyond that as well. If you are stuck with it as just a product, then you don't have to see it as an artistic venture at all. You can think of it as purely commercial by which you sell a fair number of tickets and make a huge profit.

**Ameen** How then would you counter the charge of a certain elitism in your definition of 'art'? Mainstream Indian cinema claims to provide a necessary escape from harsh, everyday realities. Could the large need that it fulfills be all that misplaced?

**Shyam** There may be a certain harshness to reality, a grimness to everyday life, but as I've said earlier, a film should deal with insights into human experience. And that goes beyond anything like grimness and harshness alone because cinema has a way of saying something about life that takes it out of the grimness, out of the harshness of everyday life—it gives you an insight into that predicament. And that's very important. I think, yes, cinema can also function to transport you into fantasy, into a world outside your own—it has all those wonderful qualities. But that's certainly not the end. For instance what is the end of a painting? The end of a poem? The end of a piece of music? Somewhere, as I've said, it points to the human condition, something universal, something which tells you to look at life in a slightly different way from the you've been accustomed to looking at it.

**Ameen** A new perspective...

**Shyam** Precisely. One that strives to

re-define dimensions of space and time; one that fills your space in different ways. Now all these things are part of art. There can't be any argument about this because the *raison d'être* is in the work itself. Similarly you don't need another reason for cinema. You cannot narrow it down to mere escapism. If it was only that, it would surely be very ephemeral indeed.

**Ameen** I know you have collaborated a lot with Shama Zaidi on the screenplays of your films. How do you determine a subject, one that you feel offers an insight into the 'human condition'?

**Shyam** Well, that depends on the frame of mind you are in at any given time and what you happen to be going through during that phase. One morning something quotidian may look extremely interesting. Now this is not because it has not been there all along. It's just that you happen to notice the potential in it at that specific moment in time and realize that there might be a film somewhere in it. There is no conscious way of determining a subject, at least not for me. I don't decide on a subject and then go to work on it. Perhaps unconsciously, even subconsciously perhaps, there are a whole area of your own concerns, that do play a part in the way you happen upon and choose a subject. And later when you look at your own body of work you notice that there is a pattern, but the paradigm has shifted ever so slightly with time, with every new film. It reveals other aspects of the same area of concerns. You have moved in life, your ideological positions have also imperceptibly been altered and that shows through every new film.

**Ameen** Talking about ideological underpinnings, I have noticed—and this may just be my reading of your films—a strong feminist subtext in your work. I am thinking of *Bhumika*, *Nishant*, *Trikaal* and *Mandi*, to name a few...

**Shyam** Yes, I am concerned with the social conditions in India. This concern includes the attitudes towards women in Indian society. I am also affected by the non-egalitarian nature of Indian life, as it has been for over many centuries. Here I am thinking of the social hierarchies of Indian society based upon the caste system and the complexities that come with it. These issues do exercise

my mind and I do seek clarity, not only in the issues but also in my own responses and attitudes towards all of this. So it's no surprise that these concerns become more and more apparent in my work. However, I must add that I have never made a conscious effort to make these issues stand out. But when I am in the narrative, they seem to emerge, maybe because I am sensitive to these realities.

**Ameen** How did you get to make *Kalyug*, a significant departure from your other films, a film that alluded to itself, in its very title, as a modern-day *Mahabharata*?

**Shyam** I am fascinated by archetypes and have always been interested in exploring how they work. Our epics are full of archetypes. *Kalyug* then began with a simple question: Why does something become an epic? One answer to this that they have characters that are so true—that are universally true—and have remained so for centuries. Since the character of *Kalyug* were based on such archetypes. I wanted to see how they would fit into the present-day context and still retain that essential truth about them. Although *Kalyug* was about two warring industrial families that have reached an extreme point of decadence, and are collapsing under the burden of their own power. It was the re-contextualizing that I found really interesting. This, of course, brought with it some complexities. After all, re-visioning and re-telling the *Mahabharata* is no easy task.

**Ameen** Well you have returned to mythology, however obliquely, with *Suraj*. What is it that draws you more and more these days in your cinematic vision?

**Shyam** I am now getting to be concerned with the nature of reality and our perception of it. I am also getting concerned with the ability or the inability of cinema to express certain thoughts and ideas. This state of inquiry started with *Trikaal* and *Mandi* and continues into *Suraj*. I am fascinated with how human perceptions have a way of creating and altering reality constantly. I am intrigued by how human imagination liberates truth from fact.



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# Hand To MOUTH

I tell my wife Greta that she won my heart with food. Mutual friends introduced us over bowls full of steaming noodles, spring rolls and Vietnamese iced coffee. I noticed Greta ate quickly—her eating wasn't dignified but urgent, like a quarter-back being rushed for third down. Surprised by my allergy to cashews, she waved the waiter over and said to him, "Your menu doesn't say there are cashews in this dish. You've made a terrible mistake. This man could have died."

The waiter apologized, returning to our table several times during the course of our meal to ask Greta if everything was all right.

My friends drove me home, since I'd recently stopped driving. My interest in the world was shrinking—I sold Amway and would say anything for testimonial effect: "Oh, I don't need a car anymore! I hold my weekly meeting at home and sell the product right at my door!" This so impressed the new guys at the bottom of my pyramid, that I really did stop driving. I willed myself back into the dark ages.

Mike and Anne asked me what I thought of Greta Poon.

"She seems nice and direct. Actually, she's right. I could've died if she hadn't spotted the cashews."

"What luck," said Mike and Anne.

"It's love, not luck," I said, not knowing what

else to say. Instantly I imagined her face up close to mine. Just the word 'love' conjured Greta's face.

"She seems interested in Amway anyway," added.

"Everyone should sell Amway," Anne said.

Mike agreed. Anne always said Amway with reverence—a longer breath, a deeper intonation. Mike's pupils dilated right away, I could see his posture stiffen as if at attention.

His meandering flow of thought also stiffened, assuming a wild torrent of products and contacts, lifeblood of the 'Amway family.'

I called up Greta that night; the line was busy. I jumped into the shower with this new body-scrub gel, which contained crushed bits of walnut to exfoliate and revitalize the skin.

I scrubbed and scrubbed, thinking of Greta in a generous frilled night-gown, gently parted to engulf me in her delicate, almost palliative caress. I called Greta while dripping wet, and she said, "I'm making jello salad," and I said, "I'd really like to get together with you tonight," and she said, "Well come on over then." I confessed that I hadn't the means to get there, so she hung up and twenty minutes later she arrived at my door with her jello salad sloshing around in Tupperware.

"It won't set properly now," she said, letting me take her coat. Naturally, she wore nothing underneath.

"What'll you do in the morning?" I asked her, putting my arms around her softly rounded back, "Don't you work tomorrow?"

"I'm here to make us supper. I won't need to stay the night."

She took control of my fridge, stove and microwave. Before long she had cheesy scalloped potatoes, broiled T-bone steak and a caesar salad on the table. I fell into an urge for candlelight, but Greta stopped me. She shut off the kitchen and dining room lights, drew open my window drapes, and let the traffic lights on Bowness Road streak across our dinner and conversation.

"If you'd eaten those cashews," Greta said, "Well, actually, I would've enjoyed seeing you go into shock. I work in triage and honestly, it's a real high seeing people lose control. I'm good—very good—at saving lives. Then you would've owed me."

"I'm not good at owing anybody anything," I said. "I take what's mine and I leave."

Greta sighed at that.

"The only men I can't save," she whispered, "are the ones who leave."

Because the food was great—the steak medium, the salad garlicky with just the right punch of anchovy paste—I felt that I had to tell Greta the truth: that sex wasn't the only means of saving me. In fact, the explosive urge to grab her breasts that sent waves of blood up my cock, leaving me light-headed, now drained back to the recesses of my stomach as I ate and ate. It's the smell of cooked blood I love most—the oily brine oozing from juicy marrows. Its knowing that our sole worth is portioned out by the number of steaks we've eaten.







## by Weyman Chan

Eating is the only thing I owe myself, and paying that due leaves me debt-free.

"I would've made you congee," Greta said, "but that takes three hours. Where'd you get that turkey in your fridge?"

"I was at my folks' for thanksgiving. I ate as much of it as I could, but then I had this craving for steak."

"Sometimes I'll do a whole turkey in the oven just for myself," said Greta. "I'll eat turkey for three days. Whatever's left over I'll put in a big pot. Two cups of rice, shiitake mushrooms, a bit of dried grapefruit peel, *fū jook*, black-eyed peas, ginger. That's enough congee to last me a whole week."

"Mmm. I haven't eaten congee in years. Ever since I left home," I said.

"Of course, every orifice has its orgasm. Mine just happens to be hand-to-mouth."

In the dark, Greta's face took on the exact jawline of my mother. But only for a moment. Greta still cooked Chinese, whereas I'd forgotten nearly everything Chinese. The only thing that still lured me back home was food. And Greta was no spring chicken. Like me she was probably being pressured by family into getting married. Food is her Camelot, I suddenly realized. She eats life to save life. Everything she does at work—cutting open a throat to slip in an air-tube, fibrillating a failed heart—enforces that instinct. It's maternal. It's the way a baby hangs off its mother's teat. It's the way Greta Poon crowns herself queen for a day, every day. Triage nurse, street angel, Saint Blood'n'Guts. Given the enormity of her cravings, why did she make room for me?

Supposing we made love tonight. Supposing I dumped her by morning and took leave of her kingdom, her recipes and her remedies, pointing my horse and lance elsewhere. Would I soon yearn for Greta's home cooking after exhausting myself in someone else's arms? Would I ask for three days of turkey, then seven days of congee? Maybe I'd come to the conclusion that food is everything, even in love—that you attend the banquets of other tables in candlelight, widening your social palate—only to return to the tastes you know so well.

Was this an addiction to Greta or to my own twisted appetite? I still don't know.

But in the darkness of our first evening, I saw Greta's hand resting softly on the table beside the T-bone. I picked up her arm and started sucking on her fingers. We never looked back after that. I sell more Amway than ever. My colleagues say that my speeches are inspiring, not laid-back. They say that my looks are distinguished, not muted—that finally, I have arrived. As for me and Greta, I drive us around in my theft-proof Camero. We eat turkey and congee with gusto, our senses on fire, and go to bed early so we can get a fresh start on breakfast.



Weyman Chan lives and works in Calgary. His poems and short stories have appeared in the following anthologies: *Booking Passage: The Alternate Lives Of Artifacts*; *Many-Mouthed Birds*; *Boundless Alberta*; *Colour: An Issue* (WESTCOASTLINE); and *The Road Home*.

Illustrations: Adam J. Bochynski

# All-Time Annapoorni

by Lakshmi Kannan

Woman. The eternal giver. Woman, a *devi*. Annapoorni, the one who gives you food in abundance and delights in giving. Annapoorni, India's Amalthea, with her horn of plenty. For the Tamil speaking Indians in particular, she is the everyman's annapoorni, tireless source of all the delicious dishes that figures in the oral and written compendium of Tamil cuisine handed down by great-great-grandmothers who presided over large, sooty kitchens.

Our own everyman's annapoorni will do her grandmothers proud by showing us how well she can feed the menfolk in her household, will show how well she can feed the senior women and the children of the family. Yes, she is either a super cook or well...nothing else. If, by chance, due to some fatal flaw in character, she does not know cooking (hard to imagine a condition like that), or if she bravely tries but her dishes turn out to be disastrous, then her man wipes her off from the face of this universe. She instantly ceases to exist as a woman, much less a wife, and if she decides to live on nevertheless, she lives as an embarrassment to her family, indeed a blot on society.

So the meals are the top priority in her life. For each meal should have variety, infinite variety. And each item of each meal should be excellent and faultless. Items served during the day are not to be repeated in the evening meal. The more complicated and painstaking a dish, the more credits for the woman who cooks them. If a woman qualifies, in the final analysis, then she earns the approval of her man and the entire family, no matter how illiterate or dowdy she is, no matter how fat and dull-headed, no matter how silly and gossipy, or no matter how educated and gifted, no matter how smart and elegant—she can now be her own self. Once she has proved to herself and her family that she is Super Cook, she will be forgiven for

## PANIVUDAN PARIMARAL.

*In Tamil it means the  
supreme etiquette of  
serving the food that  
has been cooked as  
if it is fit for  
the gods.*

being illiterate and gossipy, or equally, she will be forgiven for being bright and professional. She first has to fulfil the requirements of the Great Tamil Cuisine and the serving etiquette that follows.

**PANIVUDAN PARIMARAL.** In Tamil it means the supreme etiquette of serving the food that has been cooked as if it is fit for the gods. Usually, it is a three or four course meal on ordinary days when no god is born, or no rain gods invoked, or no special season of harvest. On those special days, festival days, it may be a five or six course meal, complete with a sweet dish. There are rules to be followed regarding what item is served when, what comes before or after what. There is an unstated code of conduct about how to place the banana leaf on which the food items are served. Why a banana leaf? Because it is auspicious and at any rate, more pure than a used dinner plate. The banana leaf is cut and only the pieces with the edge of the leaf are used (the rest are relegated

to other uses, for children, servants, women folk, and so on). The leaf is always carefully placed so that the uncut edge of the leaf is to your left. There are strict rules about which item is placed where on the banana leaf for each has its proper place, the curry, the dal, the vegetables, the rice, the lentil...Shame on the woman who doesn't know even that!

Once the meal starts, items that have been introduced as starters already on the banana leaf are served once more, but one by one, the woman bending down to serve the persons usually sitting on the floor. After each item is served, the *morkuzhambhu*, *sambar*, *rasam*, *pacchadi*, *koottu*, *avial*, delicacies cooked in coconut milk and garnished with freshly ground spices, quick sprinkle of juice of tamarind, and unfailing pot of yoghurt, the woman retreats into an unobtrusive corner, usually the door of the kitchen or against a remote wall, and patiently waits while she keeps a vigilant eye on the persons eating from the banana leaves, slurping, grunting with pleasure, crumbling *papadam*. She is standing all the while, never sitting, because she has to hover over the people with motherly concern (never mind that she has just turned twenty five), enquiring (read pestering) if they want a second helping of something, or if they won't have a little more, oh just a little more of something, and whyevernot, was that particular dish so bad (this said with endearing modesty and coyness) and she jumps joyously at any odd request for an extra serve of curry or *papadam*. Usually the 'request' is issued more like a peremptory, curt command without as much as lifting the head:

"Rice!"

"Some curry!"

"Avial!"

"Yoghurt!"

"Water! I say, will somebody give me water!"

That will galvanize the woman into action again, sending her sprinting about to get the things for the irate eater. She makes several rounds of serving all items that were called for, together with the ones that were not mentioned till they are through with the meal. It may take roughly one hour. As they finally get up with some difficulty, making loud gratified noises of satiation, often belching aloud (a sure sign of masculinity, if not manliness), she murmurs her protest: "But you haven't eaten well at all. What's the matter? Was the food bad? Why, you haven't eaten anything to speak of..."

They wash their hands and amble over to the room in the front where they await the customary betel leaves and scented *supari*. The woman enters the front room, this time with a tray of betel leaves and *supari* and passes it around. Sporadic conversation floats about the room languorously.

"Feel like stretching myself. I really ate a heavy meal."

"You should eat the *avial* made by my mother. You'll eat so much that you'll not be able to get up from the floor."

"Really?"

"Absolutely! She has a trick of cooking vegetables till tender, and then adds the coconut milk and spice at the very end so that the final taste is fresh...ah!"

"In our house, we brown the coconut gratings a little over clarified butter and then add it to roasted potatoes."

"I can just smell those potatoes. In my friend's place, *rasam* is something that goes down your throat like a warm, balmy golden fluid. You feel you're having the very *rasa* of life."

The betel leaves and *supari* makes its rounds, winding in and out of the food talk.

"Come on, have some more," the host (the woman's husband) presses the betel leaves on his family and guests. He is a clerk with the government, a man of meagre means with little or no pretensions to education, but never mind. He can feel seven feet tall once he enters the dining area of his house, because he will be treated and served like a prince. He insists on seven varieties of pickles for the seven days of the week and he gets it. *Amla*, lemon, mango, ginger, stuffed chilies, raw green pepper, tomato...All day long, all through the year, his wife has been pickling them between her household chores, slicing, cutting, adding salt, spices and hot oil, mixing, turning, stuffing them in jars, tying a clean piece of thin muslin over the mouths of the jars to let the sunlight and air through. She wards off straying flies and sparrows, pulls the jars lovingly towards the receding sunlight all day long, following the slanting shafts of warm light as she sits beside

the jars, knitting, reading a romantic serial in *Woman's Own* or just dozing. Sunlight pours on her, pickling her along with the lemon and the mangoes and the ginger, till she turns into a puckered up, wizened pickle of a woman, all seasoned.

Ready.

She is indeed the woman "whose hand is fragrant" (in Tamil, *kai manakkiradu*), the ultimate compliment for a Tamil woman, for whatever she cooks turns out to be excellent, with the magic of her culinary skills. Actually, it is not just her hand that is fragrant, she now has a permanent odour of *besan*, hot oil, roasted mustard seeds, fermented rice together with yoghurt and chopped coriander clinging to her hair, her skin and the folds of her sari so that when she walks past, a man is overcome by a whiff of such godly kitchen smells that he is almost sexually aroused in seeing the woman. Why she smells good enough to eat!

And what does the woman do after everyone has eaten? She sits down to eat the odds and bits of left-overs, serves herself the now cold food. She eats up the confusing bits of residue with a beatific smile although nobody really inquires if she has enough of what she likes, or if the food is fresh. For she has indeed lived her role. Blessed is the home and hearth that has an Annapoorni like her.

After meal-time, she returns to the kitchen and plans breakfast for the following day. That again is a mini-meal, calling for variety. What variety could there be about cereals or corn flakes and bread? Wait a minute, did you actually say bread? B-R-E-A-D? Horrors! Didn't you know that bread is canine food in this part of the world, that it is strictly for the dogs? Oh no, breakfast is a round of *idli*, *dosa*, *puri*, *upma*, *pongal*, *puttu* and *sevai*. All of them require careful cooking and garnishing and serving with the right kind of warmth. The woman's reputation rises with the *idlis* and *puris*, never mind that she gets flattened out as a *dosa*, making reputable breakfasts. But the end result is aromatic and gratifying for one and all, for our Annapoorni, remember, has a fragrant hand.

## *Fasting for the family*

On Tuesdays and Saturdays, the woman fasts for the long life of her husband and children, fasting all through the day, and breaking her fast with a light meal in the evening. But this does not exempt her from cooking a good breakfast and two fabulous meals, ignoring the pangs of hunger from her stomach. For a married woman, it is auspicious to go on a fast. It is even more auspicious to complete the fast and then break it with a celebratory meal that has a festive touch about it. The family ravenously

wolfs down the special evening meal she serves, and the hungry *Devi* is again the last one to eat. Well, let's hope she has at least something left of the feast she prepared to mark her fasting.

## *Festivals*

For the Hindu godheads, such as Ganesh, Krishna, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, Shiva, Narayan and Hanuman, festivals are invariably skirted around certain special food items, particularly special snack items both sweet and salty. Often it involves sacrosanct numbers, like five varieties of sweet and salt, or three to complete the ritual and this is seldom violated. A large quantity of the snacks are prepared and generously given that day to the children of the household and to any visiting child. No child, or adult for that matter, least of all the easily offended servant, shall go empty-handed on the day of a festival. Everybody gets more than his share of the snacks to eat. More because he may wait uncertainly to be given more, for it is indeed very delicious. Particularly because the lady has prepared the snacks on an empty stomach, maintaining a devout fast. It is believed that the items get a divine aroma and superior taste only when the woman fasts and cooks them with *bhakti*, a spirit of utter devotion.

She ends the day of the festival, like she ends any other day, a truly fulfilled woman, cleans up the kitchen and the dining area and retires to bed with food thoughts buzzing in her head. There are meals to be planned for the tomorrows and the days after in the vast kitchens of her mind where spectres of great-great-grand mothers blowing over a recalcitrant log fire, smoke stinging their eyes, are bent over in the sacred art of cooking. Blessed is the home and the hearth that has a living, dedicated everyday Annapoorni.



Lakshmi Kannan is a bilingual writer who writes in English and Tamil, using the pen-name *Kaaveri* for her writings in Tamil. She has published twelve books that include fiction, poetry and translations. Many of her works have been translated into English and other Indian languages and into French, German, Spanish, Arabic and Bulgarian. Her work has also been included in anthologies such as *The Inner Courtyard* (Virago 1988).

Image: Madhur Jaffrey's A Taste of India (1985)

## Where are the puddings of yesteryear?

by Ann Birch

Go to a typical dinner party and you'll probably find a menu that is Mediterranean or Greek or Spanish. I love this food, but I get miffed when people imply that there was no *cuisine* before Canadians discovered fettucini, *arroz verde*, and Dijon mustard. Those of us who grew up in rural Canada at mid-century know that the cooking then—simple or exotic, sublime or stodgy—was just as satisfying.

"*Où sont les neiges d'antan?*" long-ago poets sang as they lamented the passage of time and the world as they knew it. I've noticed the same elegiac note creeping into conversations with friends of my age. But instead of nostalgia for the snows of yesteryear—we still have plenty of those—we lament the passing of the homely joys of our mothers' cooking. Our plaint runs something like this: "Where are the puddings of yesteryear?"

In those days before lean cuisine became *la mode* and 'wellness' became a cult, there was always a pudding: tapioca puddings or fruit puddings with brown sugar toppings, or creamy custards. Many had homely names like apple betty, floating island or roly-poly, apt for a rib-hugging steamed suet pudding made with black currant jam.

But the acme of puddingdom was an unlikely mixture of carrots, potatoes, suet, raisins, currants, cherries and spices. It appeared for Christmas dinner, sometimes drenched in brandy, and always served with a rum and butter sauce and whipped cream. Afterwards it was absolutely necessary to find a sofa and put our bellies up for an hour.



## When Food Was A Way Of Life

by Anees Jung

When the royal chef demanded an *ashrafi*, the golden coin, as the essential ingredient for the *tarka*, the dressing for the *dal* that helps give the lentils a glow, he was questioned, even misbelieved. The astute chef pleaded for just one opportunity to prove his point. When the *ashrafi* was granted, he put it in the oil, heated it, and poured it over the yellow lentils. Before serving the dish, he poured some of it in a pot that had just been planted with a sapling. The morning after, as the tale goes, the sapling burst into a golden flower. It was the strength of the *ashrafi* that let the sapling flower. If a plant can thus bloom, why not the person who partakes of the *dal*, sprinkled with *ashrafi tarka*? My mother recounts this tale to prove the point that food spiked with gold, blended with crushed pearls, was a way of life in Hyderabad, the city of her birth, as also mine. The tone to this way of living and eating was set by the Nizams, the seven Asaf Jahi kings who ruled the erstwhile state of Hyderabad for nearly two hundred years. The Nizams are no more but echoes of a lifestyle they helped create persist. For what the royalty did today, the nobility did the next day, and the man on the street the day after.

The food that the Nizams feasted on was referred to as *khaasa*, a reverential term for food meant for royalty and nobility. It was not just plain food. Nor was it cooked the simple way. *Khaasa* involved ceremony and ritual. Like Emperor Tiberius who is remembered for having invented a system of fattening the young liver of pigs by feeding them with figs and honey, the legacy of food Nizams of Hyderabad have left behind remains to this day the stuff of tales, almost mythical. One that recently aroused my curiosity was that of eight women hired in the royal kitchen to clean one kilo of rice. When I asked the royal cook, now an old man living in the back lanes of Char Minars, he sighed, leaning back against the discoloured bolster and said, "Ah! that was no ordinary kilo of rice." The rice, he explained, was first pounded in flour, then strained through a fine muslin cloth to remove the invisible impurities, and later picked grain by grain, taking care that each grain was the same size. When cooked, the grains opened like jasmine petals. It took as long to cook rice as it did a meat dish. Food in those days took longer to cook and longer to eat, says my mother. Each dish was savoured, recognized for its flavour, its quality. Each spice too was respected for its strength and colour and used in a proportion so that its property was not betrayed: the blackness of *shahzeera*, a refined kind of cumin, had to be diluted; garlic was never used whole, but squeezed and



strained, and ghee heated and passed through fine muslin to preserve its *itriyat*, its true nature.

Eating food, like cooking, had its own norms of ritual and decorum. Food was deemed a gift of God. To bring out its true nature was the task of man. "One who accepts what God gives is the one who understands the true nature of gratitude," is a common inscription in Urdu printed or woven into the design of the *dastar khaan*, a tablecloth spread out on the floor over which food is traditionally served. Sitting around it, guests would revel in the meaning of the inscription before beginning the ritual of eating. Those who lived in Hyderabad gave food its due, made it a way of life. What began with kings filtered down to the man on the street. A *dawat* in a poor man's house was not devoid of echoes distinctive of royal *khaasa*, which would arrive in a *khaan*, an ornate covered tray, carried by two *chobedars*. These liveried men would ride in a horse carriage announcing what was on the way. The small round silver tray would be arranged with tiny bowls, each gently filled with a delicacy, meant only to taste and tickle the tongue. A treat that I remember with equal clarity was a *dawat* at our old driver's home. It was to celebrate the *bismillah* ceremony of his grandson, a sacred occasion when the child learns to write the first letter of the alphabet on a silver slate with a quill dipped in saffron. The feast on the *dastar khaan*, was an array of aromatic delicacies that imitated the *khaasa*. *Khatti dal*, a lentil preparation was cooked with as much a ritual as *shad daeg*, meat cooked with turnip for three long days. The attention both dishes commanded was the same. So much of the fabric of living was woven and coloured by what one ate and how it was eaten.

The secrets of Hyderabadi cooking have begun to recede from the noble mansions. A man who brought back the sense of that lost art is unlikely to be a cook in a five star hotel. He told me stories of food the way my father would, sitting at the head of a long table. Like



No wonder my friends and I get nostalgic. Today's desserts, if in fact we are bold enough to defy public censure and eat one, are leaden layer cakes with puritanical labels like Chocolate Sin. Or there may be seditious sorbets that look pretty but assault the sinuses with blinding pain.

We also remember the fancy sandwiches for I.O.D.E. and church teas. Served on the requisite starched doily on a silver tray, they imparted a pleasant sense of *haut monde*.

We sat in the kitchen watching our mothers make these dainties, and we can still describe the fillings and the method, even at 40 years' remove. The bakeshop would provide bread, delicately tinted pink or green, and from this base would emerge ribbons filled with pineapple or pimento cream cheese and pinwheels stuffed with asparagus or gherkins. To achieve the highest degree of refinement, at least half of the bread, butter, and filling was cut away, and we kids got to eat these remnants.

Looking back, I'm appalled at what we took for granted. In the winter, my mother filled dozens of jars with grapefruit and orange marmalade. In the fall, she coped with jelly bags dripping in the kitchen and pickles simmering on the back burners.

It's the pickles I remember most. In September, every Canadian village smelled of vinegar and spices. There were bread and butter pickles that we ate for lunch, layered on homemade rolls. There was tomato mustard, a spicy curry sauce that we slathered over hot dogs, and that bore as much resemblance to *salsa* as a hybrid tea rose does to a dandelion. There were spiced pears and chutney, pickled watermelon rind and pepper relish, plum ketchup and nine-day pickles, so-called because they took that long to make.

Now, the crocks for those aromatic mixtures of vegetables, fruit and spices marinating have metamorphosed into petunia planters for the back porch.

Grocers nowadays stock their shelves with jams, jellies, marmalades, and relishes with labels that say "gourmet," "original," or "olde tyme." Don't be fooled. None of it tastes the way it used to.

My mother's generation made no fuss about cooking. There were always chores to be done, and the cooking of three meals a day was one of them. Husbands and children in small towns came home for lunch and expected something substantial to see them through the afternoon. On farms, during the summer and fall, a small army of itinerant workers had to be fed. My Aunt Lillie, with whom I spent many of my childhood summers, made hot biscuits for these troops three times every day.

Last week, at a dinner party, I listened to a heated debate on the merits of tarragon or rosemary as a spice for *poulet Provençal*. I thought how foreign such a topic would have been at Aunt Lillie's table. She served up platters of delicious roast chicken with sage, onion and breadcrumb dressing, and we gulped it down, and that was that. To my shame, I don't remember ever complimenting her or offering to help with preparation.

Those were the days before cooking became a

fashionable hobby. Even I, a reluctant cook who could not prepare three meals a day if my life depended on it, can count eight cookbooks on my shelf. My mother had only one, Nellie Lyle Pattinson's **Canadian Cook Book**. Looking through the detailed information on its bespattered pages, I realize its value to the bride of half-a-century ago who found herself cooking endless meals in an ill-equipped kitchen long before the days of gourmet mixes, corner delicatessens, and trendy restaurants.

Swapping of recipes was a necessary supplement to the basic cookbook. Experienced cooks passed on their expertise to novices. My mother's cookbook is filled with scraps of paper and file cards on which are written "Hannah's Cookies," "Ruth Morgan's Fruitcake," "Aunt Lillie's Tea Biscuits"—usually in the giver's own hand-writing.

A few years ago, my mother discovered an alternative lifestyle. She now orders in regularly from pizza parlours and chicken chalets. She's also learned to eat with gusto the pasta dishes that my son concocts, and has been known to order up a stir fry when we dine out. She has laid Nellie Lyle Pattinson to rest in the kitchen drawer, along with all her starched and neatly ironed aprons.

But my family misses her cooking. When we came up from the city to her house on Friday nights, there was always a wonderful dinner waiting for us: perhaps stuffed spareribs, butternut squash, scalloped potatoes, a favourite jellied cream cheese and strawberry salad, and a rich maple cream pudding.

My sons sometimes ask, "Mom, what family specialty will you serve our kids when we bring them to see you?" I honestly don't know. Maybe I'll resurrect Nellie Lyle Pattinson. At the moment, my hot biscuits are good little cannonballs, but I've learned to make tapioca pudding. There's a big call for it at our house when my sons are stressed out with university tests and essays. Let today's cooks jaw on about the low-fat joys of vegetable stir fry and fruit sorbet. For spiritual comfort and solid sustenance, there was nothing like a savoury roast and an old-fashioned pud.



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a craftsman, the cook wove tales of food, unfolding the social history of a time in which he had participated.

Less than a decade ago, to see a one-time *jagirdar* wearing a chef cap, working in a kitchen would have been sacrilege. Mir Hussain Ali Khan Moosavi, a name which wraps itself the mysteries of a lineage and lifestyle, is not embarrassed of being a chef today. Cooking food and sharing it is a tradition that he treasures. Seeing guests gather in a hotel is not very different from having guests in his home. "Not a day goes by when we do not have two or more guests to share food with us," says Moosavi in a manner that is affable and warm. Food as a lifestyle has lent his nature a generosity and warmth...a spaciousness characteristic of true Hyderabad hospitality. Like his sisters, Moosavi learnt to cook watching his mother. Many aristocrats and princes cooked, he says, as a hobby. Stag parties were popular, when men competed and excelled in preparing special dishes. "We met in each other's houses, cooked and shared our creations with friends," says Moosavi. What was a hobby in boyhood has today become his vocation.

Learning to cook in the style of that grand old Hyderabad was an art requiring long years of apprenticeship. To make *sheermal*, a special kind of bread, a cook had to put in fifteen years of apprenticeship. He had to understand the nature of flour before baking the bread. In the same way, he had to understand the kinds and cuts of meats before preparing the different meat dishes. The kind of meat or vegetables determined the kind of container to be used and the two together depended on the kind of wood used for the cooking fire.

Food is best enjoyed when eaten with hands, says Moosavi. And hands should first be washed. In the time of Nawabs, they were washed with rose water. There were no forks and knives. Those who served would begin with deep salaams and await orders. At the end of the meal, no tooth picks were used. It was not in good taste to use them. Also the need to use them never arose. For the meat was so soft and tender that it never got stuck or caused any embarrassment...when food was a way of life.



Anees Jung is a columnist for several journals in India and abroad. Among her books are *When a Place Becomes a Person, Unveiling India—A Woman's Journey, Night of the New Moon—Encounters with Muslim Women in India* (1993) and her most recent book, *Seven Sisters: Among the Women of South Asia* (1994), all brought out by Penguin. She lives in Delhi.

Images:  
p.30, Go Card, Madhur Jaffrey's *A Taste of India* (1985);  
p. 31, Namasté (Vol13 No2, 1994);  
p. 32, Mollie Katzen, *The Enchanted Broccoli Forest* (1982),  
Namasté (Vol 13 No 2 1994).

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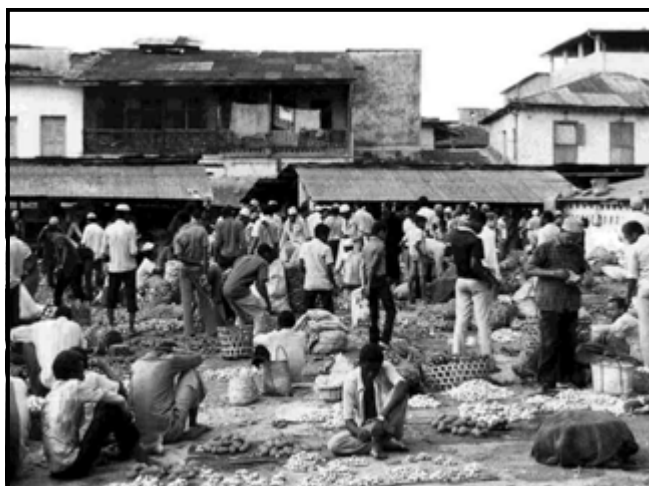
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# Edits

by Sadru Jetha

*Abjiledmarjipachdamadamadeshqalandar  
Bibilailalandar  
Dambadambadeshqalandar...*

He sings it clear. Nobody knows what it means. Not even Grandma, and she speaks Arabic. He can be heard from as far away as Bi Mongi's, tick ticking his coin against the metal bowl in the curve of his left arm. The left arm has no hand, only two fingers.

"You must not stare at his hand, beta," Grandma says.

I must not stare at his feet either. They are rolled up like jam rolls, tied with a string to flat pieces of wood, his square shoes.

And nobody knows whether his hair is curly because a large white turban hides it.

"Beware his eyes, beta. There is more power in them than any *mwali* can counter with prayers," says Grandma.

I do not want to look into his eyes but I always do and I cannot move until his lips part and show whitest teeth. Then I run away and wait in the distance to watch him sing.

"Who is he, Grandma?"

She stops threading beads. "Who is who, beta?"

"Maskin Qalandar, Grandma."

"Why don't you ask your Grandfather?" and returns to her beads. Her words feel hard.

I must not call him beggar. He is *maskin*, poor, and so are the others. They all come on Friday and on Idd. Each *maskin* gets a *pice* coin

from Grandfather but Blind Buzzer gets two and nobody knows how much Qalandar gets because Grandfather puts his in an envelope. Sometimes they form a line, silent. Sometimes they come swarming together, hands raised like leafless coconut branches. Then Grandfather has to see he does not put money in the same hand twice.

Blind Buzzer is the first to come. His "Y'Allah Maskeeeen," can be heard from far away as he thook thooks the lane with his thick stick.

"How does he know where to stop, Mama Aya?"

"That Buzzer has an inner eye, something like your Grandma's, which see your thoughts before you even think them."

He moves his head round and round, like a *mustt* dervish, and his fez tassel whirls faster and faster as he prays, "Ya Allah...*bzzzzzzzzzz*...prosperity...*bzzzzzzzzzz*...this world...*bzzzzzzzzzz*...your children and grandchildren...*bzzzzzzzzzz*...next world...*bzzzzzzzzzz*...blessings..."

Mama Aya says the length of Blind Buzzer's prayers depends on how much he gets. That is why his prayers for Grandfather are five times as long as his regular ones.

Qalandar is the last to come. He lives far away, out of town in a shamba, with his mother and wife and child. Grandfather stands when he sings though Grandma says he does not understand a word of Qalandar's song.

"For all we know, he might be cursing us," she says.

Idd today. The *maskins* come early but Qalandar does not come. He never comes on Idd. Father stays in the shop to greet people coming to wish Idd Mubarak. Then Grandfather goes out visiting.

"Why does Qalandar not come on Idd?" I ask Grandfather as he closes his *maskin* box, only a few coins left now.

"He is not like the others," looking out the empty lane. He has his out of bounds look on so I must wait.

"Yes, child," he murmurs at last, "the Qalandars are different...so different." Turning to me, his voice now strong, "It is Idd, child. It is I who go to see them."

"Why Grandfather?"

"Nkhuuuuu," he clears his throat. "I have known them a long time."

"Long, long time?"

"O...many...many years. Since I first came to Zanzibar as a poor immigrant. They looked after me."

"You mean Qalandar?"

"No, child, this was before Qalandar was born. I stayed with his Grandfather, a widower...and...his daughter who later became Qalandar's mother."

"Will you take them presents for Idd, Grandfather?"

"Yes. And food too. Food...yes...Go remind your Grandmother to be sparing with the chilies in biriani. The child finds it too hot."

I stand in the kitchen entrance. Grandma lifts the lid on the lapsi pot. Smells of elchi and strong saffron, special for Idd, all mixed with nutmeg and ghoor and ghee. Mama Aya has spices and yoghurt soaking chicken in the huge pot on the floor. Grandma lifts the bowlful of ground red chilies.

"Not so much chili, Grandma, Qalandar's child he finds it hot."

She stares at me queer, then thuds the chili into the chicken pot and stirs it in hard with her right hand.

"Your hands! Aren't they on fire?"

"What difference? They have been for a long time."

She looks at me again, grins toothless. "Flies will get into your open mouth, beta. He, he, he, he, hee..."

"But..."



"Yesss. And that is final."

"That buzzing Grandfather of yours."

“In that case,” I say, lifting the steaming kettle high, “pay attention if you want to become a

“Yup. About to do what I should have had the courage to do ages ago, write her about us...”

[illegible]

**Sadru Jetha** lives and writes in Calgary. His fiction has appeared in *Vox* and *blue buffalo*. He is currently working on a collection of short stories.

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There are six 'Indian' restaurants within a fifteen block radius of where I live. They are all, like most Indian restaurants in Manhattan, run by Bangladeshis. They all have mediocre food. This is not a particularly interesting fact, most restaurants in my neighborhood have mediocre food.

There are also two Ethiopian restaurants in my neighborhood. They may have the same menus, I haven't checked. They, however, have good food. Perhaps I can't tell the difference between good and bad Ethiopian food, but I imagine the throngs of Ethiopians in these restaurants can, and they keep on coming, and keep on eating. In *Calcutta Café* or *Indian Café*, however, there are rarely patrons of South Asian descent. When we do come in, we eye each other warily, testing to see if the other is an Indian-from-Rhode-Island or on the *qui vive*. We apologize. It's only homesickness, *yaar*. Desperation. *Shaheen* is a hundred blocks away and on the other side of town. With apologies for our presence, we sit down to eat. And then we complain of the food's presence.

After that little business of a war of independence, it is beyond me why no-longer-East-Pakistanis come to America to make West Pakistani food, but *Mughlai* cuisine is the first commandment of these restaurants (except for the addition of *nasi goreng* onto the menu of one quixotic establishment). This would not be so bad, necessarily. The problem is that there are more laws than just Thou Shall Tandoor. The half-page of vegetable dishes is the most poignant example of the powerful and mysterious rules on what can be served in an Indian restaurant. If you want a vegetable other than cauliflower, potatoes, peas, spinach or okra, you're out of luck. Pumpkin and capsicum? Out of luck. Did Aurangzeb in his mad denial of pleasure forbid the cooking of the voluptuous eggplant? What of drumsticks and sweet potatoes, beans and gourds? Out of luck. They are beyond the pale, banned by the decree of the god of Indian restaurants, a god whose presence is known by the sitar muzak he favors, heard nowhere else but in his hallowed alters.

If I was a certain kind of third world girl, I'd blame it on the White Man. If the menus in these restaurants are meat-heavy, the argument goes, it is because the menus are shaped to cater to Western tastes. I don't buy it: everyone knows Westerners don't like spinach, so how did spinach make the cut? Who said Westerners don't like green peppers? The rules are not so easily explained. But even these limitations aside, there are worse problems: call it a failure of the *samosa* test.

Mind you now, I am not blindly wed to tradition, incapable of appreciating the

# What's for Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant?

innovations of evolving diaspora cuisine. One of the most memorable meals of my life was at *La Vallee du Cashmere*, a charming little place in Montmartre, with the lightest, airiest, most delicately spiced North Indian food I have ever eaten. The oily heaviness which is the worst feature of Indian cooking was erased by a French subtlety that made everything yum-yum in the highest. My palate is no prisoner of my politics. If Bangla-American food were a delight to the taste buds, I would be the first one to praise it. Unfortunately, when you order *samosas*, what you are apt to get is a pair of thin, two-dimensional triangles of cooked flour with minced potato in between. These restaurants do not even know that *samosas* come in three dimensions! The chunky, spicy potatoes, contrasted with the smoothly globed peas, the flaky pyramid of crust bursting with warmth and flavors (insert your favorite vulval simile here)—out of luck. Don't think that the shape of food has anything to do with tastes? Don't know why Italians make pasta in thirty different shapes? Order a *samosa* from *Indian Café* and it will all be made plain.

Theoretically, I believe that we can all be all that we want to be. Who am I to question the yearning of Bangladeshis to make *motor paneer* and *shahi biryani*? If there has been a craze for the appreciation of Mughlai culinary arts in downtown Dhaka, who am I to ask, why? But when *raita* is a thick goop of sugared shredded cucumber fampened with yogurt, you have to say, Bangla darling, make some *gulab jamun* and call it a day. Actually, the *gulab jamun* isn't that good either.

Despite the preponderance of Banglas in the business, Bengali friends assure me that even Bengali food is difficult to find. If I were to tell you about the dearth of South Indian cuisine, you'd weep. Get ready.

A columnist for the *Village Voice*, reviewing a new Indian restaurant he liked, was puzzled that there never seemed to be any customers there when he went to dinner. Well, mystery solved: Indians don't eat *dosas* for dinner any more than he eats pancakes for dinner.

Actually I, in the first flush of independent living, ate Raisin Bran three times a day, so I understand his taste for evening *idlis*, but we Tamil girls know it's just not done. But what is a Tamil girl to do? In this city where you can get everything for a price, I can't find *porichche kute*, garlic *rasam*, tomato *goche*, *podalanga sambar*, beans and peas *kute*. To tell the truth, the latter list is a line from a poem of mine: who cares to write sonnets about desire when that is so much more easily fulfilled than the yen for good *paysam*? The draconian laws of Indian restaurants have decreed that South Indian food should consist of *dosas* and *uthappams* made from every available kind of grain, plus the odd *avial* (no doubt the result of fervid politicking by the Malayali lobby).

Late one afternoon, having spent my day in a museum staring at Chola Shiva Natarajas and missing my great-grandmother, I wandered into *Madras Woodlands*, the one South Indian restaurant in Manhattan, now deceased. I took a seat, the waiter came. "What *rasam* do you have?" I asked. He looked at me as if I had just descended from another planet. Foolish girl that I was, I had forgotten that garlic, lemon, yogurt, all the flavors of *rasam* that I relished in my childhood on sick days, rainy days, are irrelevant in the face of the implacable tomato that *rasam* must be in Indian restaurants. I mentally revoked the waiters', cooks' and owners' of the establishment right to Indianness.

For ultimately, this is what the narrowness of Indian restaurant cuisine does. The few good places in the city, like the Punjabi *Shaheen*, are true to their ethnic identity, and even if that identity is not identical to mine, it specificity allows an authentic space for us to meet. Generic Indian food, on the other hand, where south equals *dosa* and north equals *vindaloo*, is so dextextualized that it robs food of its ability to act as culture. The food of *Calcutta Café* is not anyone's home cooking and it, unlike chop suey or pizza, isn't even a real reflection of culinary hybridity. Separated by this arbitrarily created cuisine, people of South Asian descent cannot bond over the taste of a shared past. And therefore, in my neighbourhood's Indian restaurants, we are rarely customers, and are shy of each other when we are. The camaraderie of the patrons in the Ethiopian restaurants, in the West African restaurant, in the Dominican restaurant is lost to us. We each stare into our own bowl of *mulligatawny* soup, remembering *molagu* (pepper) *thanni* (water) and rice, and feel sorry for ourselves.



**Mina Kumar** is a homely and well-cultured Tamil girl, wheatish-complexioned, M.Sc. student.

Image: Adam J. Bochynski



# Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora

**Edited by the  
Women of South Asian Descent Collective  
Aunt Lute Books, 1993 \$12.95**

The Women of South Asian Descent Collective was formed in the spring of 1991 by a group of students in Jane Singh's South Asian American history class at UC Berkeley. Noticing a lack of materials on South Asian women in the diaspora, they decided to produce *Our Feet Walk the Sky*.

Despite some excellent essays and three wonderful stories, the anthology is much less than the sum of its parts, and the culprit is a lack of clear editorial direction. Jane Singh's foreword describes *Our Feet Walk the Sky* as a "comprehensive work on South Asian American and South Asian immigrant women in the United States," but the contents of the anthology meander to the origins of India's Parsi community, the South Indian community of Réunion and causes of linguistic tensions in Sri Lanka, while at the same time excluding people and places pertinent to the history of South Asian American women.

The essays that do examine the situation (sunintended) of South Asian American women are the most valuable portions of the book. Lata Mani rends the common-place dichotomy of East vs. West with brilliance and verve. The mother-daughter pair Sayantani Dasgupta and Shamita Dasgupta describe their formulation of an Indian American feminism and Naheed Islam discusses the marginalization of the smaller nations within the rubric 'South Asia.' Kamala Visweswaran's essay *Predicaments of the Hyphen* contains many fascinating bits of information on the history of South Asian immigration to America, such as the development of the 'Mexican Hindu' community. Ms. Visweswaran notes that before 1951, many Punjabi men in California married Hispanic women because as two brown-skinned people, they would not be violating any miscegenation laws.

Ms. Visweswaran's essay and a tangled oral history are all the anthology offers in the way of historically-focused material about South Asian American women, which is the most important way it fails as a resource. No women from the older South Asian American communities are represented. There are no contributions from prominent South Asian American women such as Urvashi Vaid, Bharati Mukherjee, Gita Mehta, etc., and except for a mention of *Manavi*, no examination of the important organizations and cultural networks created by South Asian American women. While child abuse, spousal battery, lesbianism, etc. are mentioned, there is little sense of the community's relationship to these matters. There is no information about the growth of lesbian and bisexual women's groups such as *Anamika* or *Shamakami*, or women's groups such as *Shakti*. With the exception of a few poems about exoticization or ignorance, America is a surprisingly small presence in the anthology.

A good example of the last is Zainub Ali's story, *Daddy*, which concerns a pubescent girl's dislike for her father's second wife. The girl's blinkered perspective leaves out all the interesting questions about this triangle: how does it belong in America, and how does their class status in America, affect this bigamous relationship? How does the second marriage relate to the father's need to retain his identity in America? How do the mother's frequent trips to India relate to her need to retain her identity? In this story, America is the site of reproduced patriarchy and India is the site of the mother's forays into freedom, an interesting dichotomy that is never explored. The skimpiness of this story and several others, including Chitra Divadaruni's *Yuba City*, is that it leads the reader to fill in the blanks with facile, stereotypical generalities about the relationships depicted, instead of using enough specificity to deepen the reader's understanding.

Lata Mani's essay on Indu Krishnan's film *Knowing Her Place* is a devastating critique of the opposition of the traditional, patriarchal East vs. the modern, liberal West, but there seems to be an enormous ignorance in many of

the pieces in the book about Indian modes of feminism or self-actualization. The goddess Sita is often mentioned, but no one examines her final rebuke of Rama after her 'purity' is proven. No one counters familial injunctions against women's education with the example of the Vedic women sages. The wailing about education is such that an uninformed reader would have no sense that many South Asian American women are professionals prominent in their fields.

Most of the anthology addresses personalized issues of sexual freedom and identity, i.e. arranged marriages. Punam Luthra's graceful and simple essay *Pati Dev*, about her abusive husband and supportive family, is the best of the (numerous) lot. Much of the poetry is blatantly manufactured without concern for poetry, as if somehow the essay form is too humble to be used. The only most prominent poet in the anthology, Chitra Divakaruni, weighs in with some of her weaker work.

*Our Feet Walk the Sky* does introduce three new, talented South Asian writers. Natasha Pratap's beautiful *Parvati* is the story of a servant woman's effort to raise her son properly. Though it elides questions of Parvati's resentment of her employers, its subtle and shaded depiction of Parvati's relationship with her husband is extraordinary. In *Maria* by Gaurangi Kamani, the lusty girl narrator manipulates a servant woman into sexual relations. Qirone Adhikary's *Marriage of Minnoo Mahsi* is the rollicking tale of how the narrator's headstrong lesbian aunt avoids marriage as a teenager.

That its best fiction is not set in America is typical of *Our Feet Walk the Sky*. Despite several strong pieces, it is a rather random anthology of writing held together more by the fact that all the writers are South Asian American women than anything else, and its value to the reader depends entirely on whether that is enough.



**Mina Kumar** was born in Madras and lives in Manhattan, New York. Her writing has appeared in over twenty publications.

*Image from book cover: Arpana Caur*



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