

Pakistan's Tumultuous Invention and Grotesque Parables in Meatless Days

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original site:

<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/hypertext/landow/post/suleri/cook2.html>

In **Meatless Days** Suleri carefully weaves intimate tales of tragedy and love with the history of Pakistan's tumultuous invention. Guided by the interpretative figure of migrancy Suleri's narrative technique implicitly establishes a nuanced understanding of colonialism as a means to "provide a language for the slippage of trauma from apocalypse into narrative" (**The Rhetoric of English India**, 5). Indeed, the apocalyptic trauma of Pakistan's invention entitles Suleri's memoir. That is, on the heels of the so-called birth of Pakistan in 1947 the government mandated that every Tuesday and Wednesday all butchers' shops must close as a means to preserve the national supply of goats and cattle. This initiative proved limited in its effectiveness, as Suleri explains, "As a principle of hygiene I suppose it was a good idea although it really had very little to do with conservation: the people who could afford to buy meat, after all, were those who could afford refrigeration, so the only thing the government accomplished was to make some people's Mondays very busy indeed" (**MD**, 31). For Suleri, the daughter of a widely published journalist and a university professor, these meatless days summoned curiosity rather than abstinence. Of course, in addition to nationality and culture, class further makes the category of generalized women an empty cipher. And for that matter, implicit in the title of her autobiographical text, Suleri draws attention to the heterogeneous economic classes among Pakistani society.

Besides a governmental imperative, Suleri introduces meatlessness as an idiom to flesh out the indigestible declaration that "there are no women in the third world" (**MD**, 20). This particular language of meatlessness translates "migrancy as an interpretative figure" (**REI**, 5) best through the narrator's relationship with her mother, a white, Welsh woman living in Pakistan. Evoking the apocalyptic trauma Suleri queries of Pakistan, "What could that world do with a woman who called herself Pakistani but who looked suspiciously like the past it sought to forget?" Significantly, much of what Suleri intimates about her mother's diasporic situation in Pakistan as an English teacher inversely describes Suleri's own profession in the United States and her shared disembodiment from a situated place. Repeatedly Suleri teases out of her tales the space between body and self, making organs, muscles, and thoughts autonomous and separable. Yet like meat and excrement, these distinctions remain

intimately related to form and function. And for the female, socially marked by the body she inhabits, a possibility of comfort lies first in acknowledgment of this predicament and then in (dis)embodiment. For example, when Suleri's sister Ifat marries Javed, a Pakistani general, her father demonstratively disapproves of the marriage without forgiveness. In response to Sara's protective concern for the cold formality tempering her sister's occasional visits, Ifat rationalizes, "It doesn't matter Sara." For, "Men live in homes and women live in bodies" (MD, 143). Granted this assertion superficially names a fiercely determined gendered biology, at the same time however, Ifat's observation draws attention to the displacement of women in a society where name, family, and house figure as possessions available only to men.

Suleri describes her mother, this meatlessness, with a painful affection. "It was always hard to keep her in one place, make her stay with you in a way that let you breathe, "Now she has no secrets." According to this description Mair, renamed Surraya Suleri by marriage and conversion, appears to have freed her thoughtful disposition from the anchor of the corporal frame--an act worthy of emulation and wonder for young Suleri. "She seemed to live increasingly outside the limits (delineated by race, gender, and gravity) of her body, until I felt I had no means of holding her, lost instead in the reticence of touch" (MD, 156). Surrounded by an incomprehensible restraint, Surraya does not insist on possession like her husband. On the contrary, she appears to have relinquished ownership of any past belongings except for the ability to articulate her discourse with precision and tact. Ironically, in her studied perfection of being, Surraya's weightless (meatless) aura surfaces as more political than her husband's career--a lifetime invested in curating the history of Pakistan through numerous publications.

Deliberate acts of self-exploration and understanding, enable a new subject formation at the small cost of renouncing the social compass that directs identity formation. Incidentally, in referring to her mother's death, Suleri cries, "Flavor of my infancy, my mother, still be food: I want my hunger as it was, neither flesh nor fowl!" (MD, 160). Indeed, perhaps this cry emerges from Suleri's own retrospective understanding of the body as an unreliable yet necessary harbor for imagination. Grieving the loss of the meatless sustenance of her mother's being, Suleri launches into the surreal details of a dream that captures the multiple metaphors of meatlessness:

A blue van drove up: I noticed it was a refrigerated car and my father was inside it. He came to tell me that we must put my mother in her coffin, and he opened the blue hatch of the van to make me reach inside, where it was very cold. What I found were hunks of meat wrapped in cellophane, and each of them felt like Mamma, in some

odd way. . .when my father's back was turned, I found myself engaged in rapid theft. . . I stole away a portion of that body. It was a piece of her foot I found, a small bone like knuckle, which I quickly hid inside my mouth, under my tongue. (44)

This tenderly grotesque parable celebrates the meatless temperament Suleri has adopted from her mother: the foot that travels and the tongue that enables learning. The red hunks of meat, their texture recognizable, offer the grieving narrator solace in her familiarity with her mother's practiced disembodiment.

Both feminism and postcolonialism form apparent discursive cul-de-sacs. However, deploying the interpretative figure of migrancy pushes the reader to think beyond either curbed border. Indeed, many great texts in postcolonial and postimperial literature integrate gender and postcoloniality to re-think the established knowledge-power relations informing history, culture, nationalism and discourse. For example, Alan Duff's **Once Were Warriors** displaces women from Maori culture and tradition mimicking Suleri's infamous argument. Here one of the novel's protagonists, Beth Heke meditates her nonexistence in the Maori society, half resenting the male elders, their privileged position, their secret language that only they and a few others knew; remembering that this very place, its cultural practices, had always been a mystery to a young girl growing up: a males-only domain (114). Belonging neither to the housing projects of Pine Block nor the patriarchal practices of her youth Beth can be located in her racially and sexually marked body not a home.

Bibliography

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