

## Water and Border-Crossing in Suleri: Deconstructing the Idea of Woman

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original site:

<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/hypertext/landow/post/suleri/my3.html>

In **Meatless Days** Suleri deconstructs the idea of a singular identity of woman. Mother and daughter are both border crossers, migrating across water and definition. Water can be read as the ultimate symbol of deconstruction, for it has a truly fluid identity. Suleri depicts her sister through the image of water to honor her as a complex "woman of addition." Of Ifat's death, Suleri says, "A curious end for such a moving body, one that, like water, moved most generously in light." Suleri continues, equating the labor of birthing with the pain of mourning.

Then commenced the labor. I was imitating all of them, I knew, my mother's laborious production of her five, my sisters' of their seven (at that stage), so it was their sweat that wet my head, their pushing motion that allowed me to extract, in stifled screams, Ifat from her tales. We picked up our idea of her as though it were an infant, slippery in our hands with birthing fluids, a notion most deserving of warm water. Let us wash the murder from her limbs, we said, let us transcribe her into some more seemly idiom. And so with painful labor we placed Ifat's body in a different discourse, words as private and precise as water when water wishes to perform both in and out of light. (148)

The precision of water is that which stems from ambiguity. The water-like nature of both Ifat and Suleri's mother obfuscates a singular identity, and instead indicates the complexities of each of these women. They must be provided with the private space to contain their intricate extensions; as with an iceberg, what is presented is only a small portion of these women's mass.

In describing her mother, Suleri notes, "intensity of any kind made her increasingly uneasy, and as a consequence, she worked at all hours to keep her connection with her children at a low tide - still a powerfully magnetic thing, but an ebbing tide, so that there was always a ghostly stretch of neither here nor there between her sea and our shore. . . . And so today it saddens me to think I could be laying hands upon the body of her water as though it were reducible to fragrance, as though I intensified her vanished ways into some expensive salt" (159-160). Salt, the singular remnant of an evaporated sea, represents the problematic crystallization of Mairi's fluidity.

As a child, Suleri idolizes her older sister, Ifat. She attempts to identify herself as Ifat's twin, then realizes, "it cannot be, for she was twinned before my time, her face already raising to the power of some other number, which danced about her shoulder like a spirit minuscule" (131). The description of Ifat as two parallels Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's insistence that there must be a positing of the female element to eradicate the negation of women in Derrida's theory. Spivak draws upon the writing of Luce Irigaray:

But the woman touches herself by and in herself without the necessity of a mediation, and before all possible decisions between activity and passivity. A woman "touches herself" all the time, without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, in fact, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, in herself, *she is already two - but not divisible into ones* -- who affect each other. (emphasis added). Spivak evokes this description of the multiplicity of the female body to create an "awareness that even the strongest personal goodwill on Derrida's part cannot turn him quite free of the massive enclosure of the male appropriation of woman's voice, with a variety of excuses: this one being, it is not **really** woman." Spivak and Suleri both point out the diasporic identity of women as it is represented within a single woman.

The perfect embodiment of all of Suleri's analytic and symbolic tools is her friend Mustakori, whose complex geographical development eschewed even her own attempts at comprehension. Here is a woman who "changed names like clothes, getting up as Fancy and going to sleep as the Fonz" (63), migrating across names, identities, and countries. A name leaves room for the complexities of plot and thus identity through its lack of descriptive utility. As Deleuze and Guattari note, "the proper name does not designate an individual: it is on the contrary when the individual opens up to the multiplicities pervading him or her, at the outcome of the most severe operation of depersonalization, that he or she acquires his or her true proper name. The proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity. The proper name is the subject of a pure infinitive comprehended as such in a field of intensity." Mustakori, in her multiple fabrications, "broke the limits of [Suleri's] imagination" (58).

The peculiarities of cultural reformulations "render both self and other into immigrant configurations. Where empire takes, it also must lose, causing its migration to generate the culturally tautological idiom of English India. Unlike territory, stories cannot be so easily stolen: their guilt is too declarative of itself to be subsumed into easy categories of imperial binarism." The complexity of Suleri's writing in **Meatless**

**Days**, her evocation of cultural migrancy, describing her characters by their "plot," comparing them to water, are all tools she uses to de-essentialize their identities, to formulate a closer approximation of reality, for realism is "too dangerous a term for an idiom that seeks to raise identity to the power of theory."

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