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Reading Communities and Culinary Communities: The Gastropoetics of the South Asian Diaspora

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Parables of Beginning

I begin this essay not with Madhur Jaffrey (who will assume a leading role in this piece), but with a meditation on that other great figure of subcontinental gastropoetics, Sara Suleri.¹ Suleri's autobiographical text *Meatless Days* articulates the precise and haunting ways in which (gendered) national identities are, as it were, tested—sometimes disturbingly—upon the tongue. In her brilliant, ironic rewriting of history's overbearing relationship to women Suleri proffers the following counterpoint to her nationalist father's rapturous litany of masculine heads of state:

Food certainly gave us a way not simply of ordering a week or a day but of living inside history, measuring everything we remembered against a chronology of cooks. Just as Papa had his own yardstick . . . with which to measure history and would talk about the Ayub era, or the second martial **[End Page 471]** law, or the Bhutto regime, so my sisters and I would place ourselves in time by remembering and naming cooks. "In the Qayyum days," we'd say, to give a distinctive flavor to a particular anecdote, or "in the Allah Ditta era."²

If Suleri constructs an alternative (albeit equally class-marked) genealogy through cooking and food, she also makes it clear that such gastrophilic histories, which are in many ways peculiarly tied to conditions of diaspora and migration, are nonetheless saturated with the idioms of national belonging and national purity much like the heroic and relentless histories her father prefers. Migrants preserve their ties to a homeland through their preservation of and participation in traditional customs and rituals of consumption: "Expatriates are adamant, entirely passionate about such matters as the eating habits of the motherland."³ Food, in the migrant/diasporic subject's cosmos, becomes—whatever it might have been at its place of putative origin—tenaciously tethered to economies simultaneously and irreducibly national and moral.⁴ It is precisely through food, through the "poignancies of nourishment," as she so evocatively puts it, that dramas of national and familial duplicity and devotion are enacted. The *kapura* incident (which is generated by her sister's unwelcome revelation of the "secret" of the *kapura*'s anatomical origin, an origin quite other than the sweetbreads of her Welsh mother's account) unsettles her confidence in her own gustatory nativeness and in her capacity to know and inhabit it:

Something that had once sat quite simply inside its own definition was declaring independence from its name and nature, claiming a perplexity that I did not like So, the next time I was in the taut companionship of Pakistanis in New York, I made a point of inquiring into the exact status of *kapura* and the physiological location of its secret, first in the animal and then in the meal. Expatriates are adamant, entirely passionate about such matters as the eating habits of the motherland. Accordingly, even though I was made to feel that it was wrong to strip a food of its sauce and put it back into its bodily belonging, I certainly received an unequivocal response: *kapura*, as naked meat, equals a testicle "But," and here I rummaged for the sweet realm of nomenclature, "couldn't *kapura* on a lazy occasion also accommodate something like sweetbreads, which is just **[End Page 472]** a nice way of saying that pancreas is not a pleasant word to eat?" No one, however, was interested in this finesse. "Balls, darling, balls," someone drawled, and I knew I had to let go of the subject.⁵

Suleri is careful to emphasize, through several reiterations, the parabolic character of this anecdote: "Am I

wrong, then, to say that my parable has to do with nothing less than the imaginative extravagance of food and all the transmutations of which it is capable?"⁶ Reversing and doubling the explanatory logic of the parabolic form, the *kapura* story comments not simply on the semantic and affective...

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