

# PRIVATE PARTS OF PAKISTAN: FOOD AND PRIVACY IN SARA SULERI'S *MEATLESS DAYS*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay considers Sara Suleri's autobiography, *Meatless Days* (1989), in which food is the central metaphor for the complications of a childhood spent in Pakistan before partition. Suleri offers interwoven images of actual and metaphorical eating, cooking, and hunger in a compelling triangulation between food, body, and body politics, providing sharp contrasts between her private and public lives in a politically charged post-colonial Pakistan. Sara Suleri deliberately works with the ingredients available to her, while guessing who might be coming to dinner as her readers. She wants to combine autobiography's most salient characteristic—the need to reveal and conceal—by writing a book which can begin to help her reconcile the complications of her most private self and her relationship to her public life. Now an English professor at Yale, Sara Suleri Goodyear seeks to create a recipe that will allow her to blend her life in the United States, her childhood spent in Pakistan and England, her Welsh-born mother, and the political turmoil and violence.

KEY WORDS: Sara Suleri, autobiography, *Meatless Days*, food, eating, cooking, hunger, body, body politics, public life/private life.

## RESUMEN

Este ensayo examina la autobiografía de Sara Suleri, *Meatless Days* (1989), en la que los alimentos son la metáfora central de las tribulaciones de una infancia en Pakistán antes de la división. Suleri ofrece imágenes entremezcladas de comida real y metafórica, de cocinar y del hambre en una apremiante triangulación entre comida, cuerpo, y políticas del cuerpo que proporciona nítidos contrastes entre su vida pública y privada en un Pakistán post-colonial politizado. Sara Suleri trabaja deliberadamente con los ingredientes que tiene a mano, mientras adivina quiénes serán los lectores que asistan a la cena. Suleri quiere combinar la característica más sobresaliente de la autobiografía —la necesidad de revelar y de ocultar— a través de la escritura de un libro que puede ayudarla a reconciliar las complicaciones de su yo más privado y sus relaciones con su vida pública. Sara Suleri Goodyear es en la actualidad profesora de inglés en Yale, y busca una receta que le permita combinar su vida en los Estados Unidos, su infancia en Pakistán e Inglaterra, su madre nacida en Gales, y la confusión y violencia políticas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sara Suleri, autobiografía, *Meatless Days*, alimento, comida, cocinar, hambre, cuerpo, política del cuerpo, vida pública/vida privada.



“A troubled relation to food is one of the principal ways the problems of female being come to expression in women’s lives.”

Kim CHERNIN, *The Hungry Self*

“Who was it said that food was the only desire that renews itself three times a day?”

Sara SULERI, *Boys Will Be Boys*

For this essay I would like to consider a pervasive and poetic web of food images in Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days*. Published in 1989, *Meatless Days* is an especially complicated text, in which—beginning with the title—Suleri offers interwoven images of actual and metaphorical eating, cooking and hunger in a compelling triangulation between food, body, and body politics—all providing sharp contrasts between her private and public lives in a politically charged post-colonial Pakistan.

In her “Assembling Ingredients: Subjectivity in *Meatless Days*,” Linda Warley asserts that one way to begin to understand Suleri’s text is to “think of the process of reading and remembering the text of a life in terms of reading a recipe of the self,” though she adds, “However, as any cook knows, a certain assembly of ingredients will not always produce the expected result” (107). Precisely what dish has been set before us when we began to sit down to *Meatless Days* is directly connected to the author’s desire to balance her personal and public selves. While classified as “Literature/Autobiography” on its back cover, the book’s cook has been somewhat vague about what she has produced. Within the text she suggests that *Meatless Days* began with a series of family tales which might serve as a “surrogate for the letters that I owed to intimates” (172), further describing the chapters as “quirky little tales” (174), while in an interview she remarked that the book “originated in an essay about my Dadi” (Shamsie). In other conversations she suggests that the book is “a new kind of historical writing” and “an alternate history of Pakistan” (Lee). Responding to the suggestion that *Meatless Days*’s having been marketed as autobiography suggests a certain degree of historical accuracy and personal authenticity, Suleri responded by suggesting that fiction has another kind of authenticity to convey, and that she was not exactly writing confessionally or autobiographically (Lee).

It might be most appropriately to read *Meatless Days* as memoir because the text focuses as much outwardly as inwardly, narrating both the life of its author and the times and place in which she lived, especially her immediate family and friends, an approach which corresponds to the classic definition of memoir. Autobiography is usually described as focusing more inwardly, covering a more complete life, and revealing personal details about authors and their various selves. These definitions are less helpful, however, when we consider that in current practice, many personal

narratives are called memoir regardless of their focus, especially when their authors are not famous people writing toward the end of their lives. Furthermore, because so much of the private aspects of *Meatless Days* are also directly connected to the public aspects of Pakistani politics, the private and the public are constantly interconnected and reversed within the text.

*Meatless Days* individual chapters, which carry such titles as “Excellent Things in Women,” “Papa and Pakistan,” or “What Mamma Knew,” sometimes read like individual examples of the personal essay or separate instances of creative nonfiction, the biographical sketch, or even new journalism. Like a cook who must substitute a packaged ingredient for a more natural one, a store-bought “curry” for an individually selected, roasted, and blended collection of spices, Sara Suleri deliberately works with the ingredients available to her, while guessing who might be coming to dinner as her readers. Now an English professor at Yale, Sara Suleri Goodyear seeks to create a recipe that will allow her to blend her life in the United States, her childhood spent in Pakistan and England, her Welsh-born mother, and the political turmoil and violence which her father, Z.A. Suleri, a prominent pro Pakistani independence journalist, born in India, covered extensively while she was growing up. Further confusing generic distinctions, in 2003 Sara Suleri Goodyear published a biographical book about her father’s life, naming it *Boys Will Be Boys*, which was the title of her father’s proposed but unwritten memoir as described within *Meatless Days*.

That revelation and hiding —like the public and private— are often intertwined is frequently described in terms of food. For example, one scene in *Boys Will Be Boys* describes a Pakistani knock-off of Tampax called Yumpax, advertised as “another Yum-Yum Product!” (13). “After a huge struggle —private of course— with the cardboard vessel,” she adds, “a Yumpax could indeed sail up and moor itself in our groins” (13). Sitting with her sisters in a garden, Suleri recalls her father’s boisterous declaration that another newspaper article is complete, “while the Yum-Yum was quietly growing like a cauliflower or anemone” (13).

I’ve been writing about genre, not because I want to try to argue for some absolute generic distinctions, but because part of the narrative design of the book involves the deliberately interconnection between the most private of body parts and the most public political events of Suleri’s childhood. The text is filled with apparent secrets, hints of hidden events, and opaque surfaces, often linked to tropes of eating, hunger and body. For example, when the author notes of her sister’s complexion “Ifat’s white, and I am brown,” her father describes Sara as “my wheaten daughter” (160). Beneath the surface of her lost sister’s skin, behind what appear to be at first literal statements about not writing about her body, Suleri embeds figurative descriptions of her ambition to reveal what she seems to be concealing. “Darkness, after all, is too literal a hiding-space, pretending as it does to make a secret of the body,” she writes, adding “since secrecy annuls, eats up, what is significant in surface, it cannot be sufficient to our tastes” (175).

While Suleri’s narrative hints about important people in her American life, Tom and Dale, she leaves their personal stories out of the text, in part to protect them. And yet she tells the reader of terrible personal events which she will not



describe in detail, including the hit-and-run death of her mother, and a year later the apparently political murder of her sister, Ifat. And though she has chosen, at several points throughout the book, to reveal these terrible losses, her narrative proper concentrates on the lives rather than the deaths of her mother and sister, deliberately omitting details, and relegating a direct description to parentheses: “(For in this story Ifat will not die before our eyes: it could not be countenanced)” (104). Refusing, then, to write too directly about the death of her sister Ifat, Sara Suleri instead reveals many personal details about their relationship, and displays her sister’s image prominently on the cover of the book, in part because: “To hide would be a gesture of spare courtesy toward the world, which surely knows that revelation must be a hiding” (175-76).

Returning to Pakistan upon learning of her sister’s death, Suleri notes “her name was everywhere, a public domain, blotting out her face and its finesse into the terrible texture of newsprint” (125). While Ifat’s name is public, the author notes of her family “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). And while her sister’s face is “blotted out,” for a moment, Suleri wishes she was wearing a veil since her own “face felt nude” (148) and later she expresses a fear of an inability of “keeping my face exactly where it was, away from slippage into some third person” (176). The sense of facial exposure as indicator of public and private history culminates in Suleri’s description of her mother, “who let history seep, so that , miraculously, she had no language to locate its functioning but held it rather as a distracted manner sheathed about her face, a scarf” (168).

When Inderpal Grewal suggests that “the prevalence of the metaphor of food all through the narrative emphasizes the notion of incorporation and multiplicity, rather than the complete whole” (241), she is describing the food/body relationship as well as the public/private duality because body image is multiple for everyone in the Suleri family. Like the author —daughter of a Welsh mother and father born in what was then India writing from the position of expatriation to the United States— the mother is suspended between cultures. Suleri asks of her, or for her, “What could the world do with a woman who called herself a Pakistani but who looked suspiciously like the past it sought to forget?” (164).

In an essay subtitled “The Gastropoetics of the South Asian Diaspora,” Parama Roy declares “There is an extraordinary literalness to the way in which food function in the novel” (473), her term for the genre of *Meatless Days*, citing as an example the “parable” of the kapura. While Roy describes as an “unwelcome revelation of a secret” (472) the moment when Suleri’s sister Tillat declares that kapura (which Sara had long thought was a Pakistani version of sweetbreads cooked with kidneys) is actually goat testicles, the author tells us that “I will not write as though I believe in the structure of a secret” (175). Claiming that “our conversations were meals” (21), Suleri wonders whether the “kapura” genre of food is so precise: “couldn’t *kapura* on a lazy occasion also accommodate something like sweetbreads, which is just a nice way of saying that pancreas is not a pleasant word to eat?” (22).

Because her mother had told her that kapuras were sweetbreads, Suleri begins to wonder, long after her mother had died, “Maybe my mother knew that

sweetbreads are testicles but had cunningly devised a ruse to make me consume as many parts of the world as she could before she set me loose in it” (23). Suleri casts the confusion into the idea of her mother’s equating sweetbreads with testicles, rather than the more logical consideration that her mother simply substituted one euphemism for another. Part of the confusion lies in the fact that sweetbreads in Wales are not the same as in Pakistan, a situation compounded by her mother’s lack of translation skills. Writing of her mother, in *Boys Will Be Boys*, subtitled *A Daughter’s Elegy*, Suleri notes that she “lived most of her life in translation. She never spoke Welsh, which her parents did; her French was merely academic; Urdu was one of those illusions that cast its shadow over her, but never long enough for her to possess it. As for Punjabi, it always struck us as a singularly male language” (69).

Genre enters into another aspect of the parable of the kapura when Suleri recalls the “story of the kidney” (24), a memory connected to her being forced to “teach myself to take a kidney taste without dwelling too long on the peculiarities of kidney texture” (26). When Ifat explained on that occasion that “kidneys make pee” (26), the link between word, narrative, animal body parts and genre is complete, for Sara is as much concerned about nomenclature as flavor, her inability to separate fable from story, and her lack of “native” knowledge. “Expatriates are adamant,” she writes “entirely passionate about such matters as the eating matters of the motherland” (22).

The whole episode of separating kapuras, kidneys, and sweetbreads into distinct categories is itself an elaborate trope. Suleri might actually be more accurate than she reveals, for not only is the term sweetbread used interchangeably for such actual animal parts as thymus glands, as well as glands from the heart, stomach or throat, but a popular Pakistani street food is gurda kapura, described on various menus as “an old Muslim favorite of kidney done Moghul style,” and according to an internet poster named Iftar Vikram, on a web site called The EGullet Society For Culinary Arts and Letters, as “a stir fry of organ meats which invariably leads to arguments about whether this includes testicles. I don’t think it does, not usually, simply because the organs are on display around the tavaa —compact curly brains, kidneys like swollen red cashews, glossy lobes of liver, the muscly mass of heart, but no testicles” (<<http://forums.egullet.org/index.php?showtopic=30213>>). Just as Western cooks often omit actual meat or suet from mince-meat pie, so it may be that Suleri’s mother may have not realized that some people still prepare kapura with more authentic ingredients. Adding further to the connection between body parts and geographical ones, Kapura and Kot Kapura are cities in the Punjab region of India.

The discussion about kapuras occurs within the chapter of *Meatless Days* called “Meatless Days,” an ironic title in each case because in the context of the Suleri family, “Meatless Days” (established by the government shortly after the re-naming of Pakistan in 1947, and intended to save “the national supply of goats and cattle” (31), increased the likelihood of eating meat. “A favorite meatless day breakfast... consisted of goat’s head and feet, cooked with spices into a rich and ungula sauce...” (32). Just as Sara Suleri wants to maintain an ambiguity about the exact borders in her book’s geography of genre, so she expresses concern that “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” (22). Declaring independence suggests, of course, the partition of predominantly Muslim Pakistan from mainly Hindu India, with the Western and Eastern wings of Pakistan eventually further dividing into Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Referring to the complete kapura narrative, Suleri asks: “Am I wrong, then, to say that my parable has to do with nothing less than the imaginative extravagance of food and all the transmogrifications of which it is capable? Food certainly gave us a way, not simply of ordering a week or a day but of living inside history...” (34). “Living inside history” is a complicated phrase which could suggest living privately without allowing history to interfere with daily life, or just the opposite—living so closely with the difficult political and historical movements of Pakistani history that the public partition of India was directly related to the private partition of women in a newly created Muslim state. Just as “meatless days” are the meatiest, so many other phrases that resonate throughout *Meatless Days* sometimes suggest the very opposite of what they might seem to be asserting, as when Suleri remembers Ramzan, the Pakistan Muslim month of fasting as “the season of perfect meals” (29).

Starting with the first sentence of the book, “Leaving Pakistan was, of course, tantamount to giving up the company of women” (1), and continuing throughout, Suleri makes strong assertions about private vs. public life, assertions which are often completely contradicted by other similarly strong statements. For instance, “Now I live in New Haven and feel quite happy with my life. I miss, of course, the absence of women...” (19) and “there are no women in the third world” (20).<sup>1</sup>

Referring to her seemingly perverse rejection of any solid lines of distinction, Shazia Rahman argues that “Suleri’s critique of various categories does not simply abolish difference. Instead, she looks at the limits of these categories and redraws the boundaries around them” (348). Suleri makes use of this same partitioning technique when she writes about the confluence of food and public life. She claims to be able to understand “the fear that food will not stay discrete but instead defy our categories of expectation in what can only be described as a manner of extreme belligerence” (29). I like order to a plate,” she continues, “and know the great sense of failure that attends a moment when what is potato to the fork is turnip to the mouth” (29). The words “what is potato to the fork” echo the eating habits of Dadi, her paternal grandmother, described in her old age as scuttling “in the posture of a shrimp” (2). With her eyesight diminishing, Dadi is said to “point hazily at a perfectly ordinary potato and murmur with Adamic reverence, ‘What *is* it? What *is* it called?’” (3)?

<sup>1</sup> For a complete discussion of this apparent contradiction, see Sara Suleri, “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition,” *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998) 116-125; and Inderpal Grewal, “Autobiographic Subjects and Diasporic Locations: *Meatless Days* and *Borderlands*,” *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994) 231-54.



For a time during their childhood Sara and her sister Tillat tried to separate the violence outside of their home from the violence within, hoping that “somehow the more history fractured, the more whole we would be” (13). Writing of that period, Suleri notes of her grandmother, “it was hard to distinguish between Dadi with people and Dadi alone: she was merely impossibly unable to remain unnoticed” (6). However, a series of terrible body burnings began to destroy “that sense of the differentiated identities of history and ourselves,” and the sisters “became guiltily aware that we had known it all along, our part in the construction of unreality” (14). The first such episode occurred when Dadi crept into the kitchen in the middle of the night in search of tea. Her cotton garments caught on fire, burning her torso until “little recognizable remained from collarbone to groin” (14). Resisting being “lugged like a chunk of meat to the doctor’s for her daily change of dressing,” Dadi insisted that her wounds be dressed daily by Sara, who peeling the bandages “like an onion,” “learned about the specialization of beauty through that body” (14). Revealing intimate details of her grandmother’s burnt body, Suleri tells the reader that “she developed great intimacy with the fluid properties of human flesh,” describing such private parts as her grandmother’s coagulated breast and her “vanished nipples” which “started to congeal and convex their cavities into triumphant little love knots” (14).

Another burning of private parts occurs one afternoon when Irfan, Sara’s youngest brother, is required to control his asthma by inhaling from a bowl of boiling water, infused with cumin and camphor. Starting to bolt after only a brief time, and then reacting to Sara’s violent screaming of his name, Irfan leapt up, spilling the boiling water directly onto his lap. “He clutched at his groin, and everywhere he touched, the skin slid off, so that between his fingers his penis easily unsheathed, a blanched and fiery grape” (11). Referring metaphorically to her younger brother’s penis as a grape does not seem very anatomically accurate, though it does suggest parallels to her declaration about her ignorance, feigned or authentic, about *kapuras*: “Anyone with discrimination could immediately discern the connection between *kapura* and their namesake: the shape is right, given that we are now talking about goats, the texture involves a bit of a bounce, which works; and the taste is altogether too exactly what it is. So I should have kept in mind that, alas, we know the flavor of each part of the anatomy; that much imagination belongs to everyone’s palate” (27-28).

My final example of food and private parts involves not an actual fire, but the sensation of heat, this time directly related to the author herself. As a young girl, Sara and some friends were especially fond of *gol guppas*, a street food which she describes as follows: “a small hollow oval of the lightest pastry that is dipped into a fiery liquid sauce made of tamarind and cayenne and lemon and cold water. It is evidently a food invented as a joke...” (39). While the adult Suleri has found a way to write about the contradictions of living in the United States while rejecting the position of “otherness machine” (105), noting in an interview that she “is very allergic to being called ‘exotic,’” (Shamsie), she describes the exotic *gol guppas* of her youth as lacking a culinary equivalent. “When I left Pakistan,” she writes, “I had to learn... how to conceive of a kitchen as a place where I actually could be



private” (36). Unlike the privacy of her American kitchen, she has a very private moment in public Pakistan when a friend knocks a bowl of gol guppa sauce into her lap: “never has desire brought me to quite such an instantaneous effect” (39). Having already written about heat and private accidents in terms of her brother and her grandmother, in this case the heat is sexual and public: “My groin’s surprise called attention to passageways that as a rule I am only theoretically aware of owning, all of which folded up like a concertina in protest against such an explosive aeration” (39). Writing of a childhood in which she was urged by her mother to “eat disappointment” (169), describing herself later as “eating grief” (177) over her mother’s death, Sara Suleri uses food metaphors to reconcile her hunger for the past with her appetite for the present. “But we were coming to a parting, Pakistan and I. I felt supped full of history, hunger for flavors less stringent on my palate, less demanding of my loyalty” (123).

That food and body are so often coupled with the private and the public reflects the author’s need to combine autobiography’s most salient characteristic—the equal desire to reveal and conceal—by writing a book which can begin to help her reconcile the complications of her most private self and her relationship to her public life. As a family memoir, primarily a tribute to her mother, *Meatless Days* omits many details about Pakistan’s troubled and sometimes violent history; her father’s place at the center of the Pakistan Movement, including his imprisonments and his support of General Zia-ul-Haq’s militancy and martial law; and the invisibility of the many servants who surround her daily life. And yet many of those public narratives are hidden within the text’s body tropes. As Sara Suleri notes, writing about her own sense of confusion when a broken bone seemed a sign of her own body’s diminishment: “Was I now to watch my own dismantling body choose to unravel with the cascading motion of a dye in water, which unfurls to declare, ‘Only in my obliteration will you see the shape of what I really can be?’” (186). That Sara Suleri, like her mother—born Mair Jones but living in Pakistan as Surraya Suleri—moves fluidly through a variety of ethnic and nationalistic subject positions is a major reason why the author so often uses food metaphors to confuse as well as describe her childhood memories, to reveal as well as conceal. As Anita Mannur notes, “Culinary emerges as an important counter discourse which destabilizes the mechanisms by which gendered national subjectivity is granted visibility and legitimacy in postcolonial spaces” (18).

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