

Food Tropes in the Portrayal of Saleem Sinai in Rushdie’s Novel “Midnight’s Children”

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Abstract. The article analyses the subversion of the meanings attributed to food tropes in Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children*. The research is carried out within the theoretical framework of Postethnic Narrative Criticism, which postulates that literature should not be perceived as an accurate representation of reality outside the world of fiction or interpreted as such; as a result, historical and political contexts should not become key to understanding the narrative. The article analyses the key connotations of the tropes emerging in the description of Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of the novel *Midnight’s Children*. The portrayal of Saleem highlights the fusion of private and public realities of life, subverting established gender – specific connotations related to the tropes of food. A traditional model of the family undergoes major challenges in the novel, which is symbolised by an increase in the importance of liquid-related food imagery associated with the problem of alienation from the family and an emerging possibility to establish long-term relationships outside it. Diverse religious, political and economic contexts attributed to food tropes in the novel broaden the scope of traditional meanings of food tropes.

Keywords: Rushdie; *Midnight’s Children*; postethnic criticism; food tropes; Saleem Sinai.

Introduction

The article analyses the subversion of food tropes in the portrayal of Saleem Sinai in Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children*. It is the second part of the research into food tropes in the novel. The first part dealt with the use of food tropes in the depiction of Aadam Aziz and Reverend Mother, as well as the subversion of the tropes in the portrayal of their children. Saleem Sinai represents the third generation of the Aziz family, in whose story the food tropes introduced in relation to the previous generations are preserved but further subverted. The research is carried out within the theoretical framework of Postethnic Criticism. The first section of the article introduces the relevance of the topic as well as

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the methodological background. The second section presents a close reading of the novel with a focus on the food tropes in the portrayal of Saleem Sinai.

1. The transformation of the approach to the topic of food in literary criticism

The representation of food and related processes such as its preparation and consumption have long been of interest to literary critics because of the impact of major canonical literary works such as Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1564), centred on the hedonistic consumption of food, or Michael Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913), depicting madeleines which evoke childhood memories. Despite the relevance of the topic, the approach to it has been confusing; however, recently, we have seen a change in the perception of food within the scope of literary criticism. Most recent studies of food and literature highlight the connection between food and wider anthropological studies, pointing out that processes surrounding food, its preparation and consumption reveal the intricacies of our societal inner workings. Michele Coghlan (2020) postulates that studies of food offer insights into relationships and value systems of societies rather than substances consumed, while Sandra Gilbert highlights the connection between food and identity, claiming "Tell me what you read and write about what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are" (Gilbert, 2014, 26). Similarly, Tigner and Carruth (2018) observe that literary research benefits from food studies as depictions of food in literature open new ways of creating meanings in a text:

These literary engagements with the edible world demand complex ways of thinking about food because they interlace its cultural and corporeal meanings and move across the scales at which those meanings take shape. As works of literature interact with food in its various stages – agricultural, culinary, and alimentary – they often traverse the boundaries between the intimate and the social as well as the microscopic and the planetary, a capacity that arguably defines the literary. (Tigner, 2018, p. 1)

Another influential work on food in literature is Nicola Humble's monograph *The Literature of Food* (2020), which explores cultural connotations attributed to food and their transformation over time. David B. Goldstein's ideas on this topic within the literary discourse provide an interesting and transformative approach to the topic. Goldstein proposes that traditionally, we approach food as an object, which can be measured according to the Western tradition, and this kind of attitude creates a problematic relationship between a person and the food they eat, resulting in eating disorders and health issues. (Goldstein, 2018, pp. 39–40) Instead, he suggests treating food as a socio-environmental process and claims that:

Food is relational. It doesn't stay in one place, one form, or one body. It circulates, first through ecological transformations that start with soils, plants, and nonhuman animals, and then through

relationships with other people. Food constitutes a material trace of the biological, ecological, social, and symbolic interactions that link eater, eaten, and the macrocosm that surrounds them. (Ibid., p. 40)

Goldstein's views on food are supported by multiple scholars, for example, Noray Önder and Carl Bonn postulate that "nowadays food has cultural, sociological, cultural, historical, economic, and biological implications" and add that the topic of food can be approached from the perspective of class, race, gender, etc. (*Food in American Culture and Literature*, 2020, pp. 1–2). Regarding food tropes, Goldstein elaborates on their function in literature claiming that through them the foundations of human relations are revealed. He introduces the term commensality, defining it as "the range of relationships that emerge and are reified through the act of eating" (Ibid., p. 41). The term is not restricted to human interaction; it also embraces the non-human world as a provider of food as well as the space to which humans return as food posthumously. It is important to point out that the social aspect of commensality is of key importance in Goldstein's works, and this point of view is supported by researchers in other fields such as anthropology. For instance, Holtzman notes that food is a cultural construct in a study on food and memory. However, accepting such an interpretation of the term within the European and American experience framework is challenging (Holtzman, 2006, p. 364). The approach to food featured in literary works as a cultural construct poses challenges, as literature and literary criticism differ from the social sciences. They interpret what is beyond a specific social situation portrayed in a literary work. Subsequently, different terminology and ways of approaching the material are required.

In this article, Postethnic Narrative Criticism is taken as a methodological background for the research of food tropes. One of the key representatives of the postethnic approach to literature, Aldama (2003), claims that it is important to differentiate between anthropological and literary studies as they deal with different subject matter. A literary text should not be approached for the sake of eliciting information, as it is not a mere reflection of the real world. Literature is governed by its inner rationale rather than principles of the world outside of it. Another representative of Postethnic Narrative Criticism, Florian Sedlmeier (2014), seconds Aldama's postulations and states that the emphasis put on the ethnicity of the writer hinders their creative freedom. The writer is expected to represent a specific culture rather than write authentically. Consequently, the focus of this research within the theoretical framework of the postethnic approach to literature is to reveal the complexity of meanings attributed to food tropes within the narrative of the novel, taking into consideration cultural aspects as one of the keys to interpretation but not its focus.

This research delves into the food tropes in Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* in connection with the portrayal of the protagonist Saleem Sinai. It is the second part of a more extensive analysis of the topic within the framework of the novel. In the first article, the subversion of the meanings of food tropes in *Midnight's Children* is discussed in relation to the main characters of the novel, with the focus on the portrayal of Aadam Aziz and Reverend Mother, as well as the further transformation of the food tropes in the

depiction of their daughters Amina and Alia. The close reading of the novel reveals that the story of the patriarchs of the family introduces the topic of socio-cultural change, in which food serves as a means of battling against the transformation of traditional gender roles under the Western influence; in addition, a motif of liquidity to symbolise the disruption of family relations is introduced. The storyline of the daughters shows that the introduced food tropes are preserved, but their meanings are subverted. Food, which used to be an integral part of private life, acquires connections to the public domain through references to economics, politics and popular culture (Radavičiūtė, 2022).

2. The subversion of the connotations of food tropes in the portrayal of Saleem Sinai

The tropes of food become central to the narrative of *Midnight's Children* through the portrayal of its protagonist, Saleem Sinai. As Gitanjali G. Shahani notes, "Salman Rushdie's historiographic metafiction rests on Saleem's cooked up chutneys and his 'chutnification of history,' with each chapter lined up as a label on a pickle jar at the end of *Midnight's Children*. Food is memory, food is irony, food is drama, food is symbol, food is form." (Shahani, 2018, p. 3). The narrative about Saleem Sinai incorporates a plethora of tropes related to food. In contrast to the storyline of other central characters of the novel, in Saleem's case, historical context acquires more importance in the discussion of the meanings of the tropes; hence, several historical figures are introduced as characters of the novel. The connotations attributed to the metaphors of food retain connections to the original meanings introduced in the story of Saleem's family, specifically, Doctor Aziz, Reverend Mother and their daughters, but are further subverted and undermined.

The first mention of food in relation to Saleem is included in the description of his first days in the family house, which is in line with the traditional interpretation of food in Indian literature. Ruth Maxey points out that the connection of the food trope with the familial setting is essential in the South Asian literary tradition as "food is part of a whole milieu: one's childhood home and the parental love and protection with which it is associated here, and the sense that as an adult, one is allowed to retreat from day-to-day worries when with one's parents." (Maxey, 2017, p. 169). However, the traditional meaning is undermined in the novel.

First, the motive of liquidity is emphasised through the use of hyperbole. The narrative about Saleem's relation to food in his early childhood is marked by his insatiable appetite as a baby display: "By mid-September, I had drained my mother's not inconsiderable breasts of milk. A wet-nurse was briefly employed but she retreated, dried out as a desert ... I moved on to the bottle and downed vast quantities of compound." (Rushdie, 2006, pp. 169–170). A bowl of soup, which saved the life of Doctor Aziz, and bottles of alcohol, which sustained the life of Ahmed Sinai, are replaced with milk whose consumption is portrayed employing hyperbole to stress the increase in the level of alienation from the family, which has to be compensated with a supplement of a liquid. The reason for such

a need is explained later in the novel, revealing that Saleem was switched with another baby in the hospital, which resulted in him being raised by a family of strangers.

Similarly, Saleem's younger sister, Jamilia's loss of liquids, marks the family going through a difficult period of alienation due to their father's alcoholism. At that moment, he has been deserted by servants, who cannot endure his hostility towards himself and the people around him; what is more, he kills family pets, a bird and a dog, by exercising excessive cruelty towards them. In the episode which depicts their father's sadistic behaviour with a family dog, Jamilia dehydrates by crying unstoppably: "[she] cried for a week; my mother became worried about dehydration and made her drink gallons of water, pouring it into her as if she was a lawn." (Rushdie, 2006, p. 283). Similarly to the previously discussed episode, the narrator uses hyperbole to depict the event, which is later resolved as Jamilia's loss of liquids is replenished, and the family crisis is temporarily subdued.

The characters of the novel who are affected by an extreme loss of liquids, from Ahmed Sinai to Saleem and Jamilia, do not manage to mend their relationship with the family completely. If Ahmed Sinai succumbs to the power of alcohol, Saleem and Jamilia establish permanent relationships outside the family, which are hinted at through other food references. Having relocated from Bombay to Karachi with her family, Jamilia develops a weakness for leavened bread, the best of which is made by "the sisters of the hidden order of Santa Ignacia" (Rushdie, 2006, p. 438). Being a voice of the nation of Pakistan, Jamilia risks her reputation as a symbol of an Islamic nation, getting "the warm fresh loaves of nuns" (Ibid., p. 438) every week. Purchasing the bread baked by Catholic nuns, Jamilia reconnects with her rebellious self from her childhood, the bread being "the last relic of her old flirtation with Christianity" (Ibid., p. 439).

Saleem identifies green chutney as his favourite childhood food: "the same chutney which, back in 1957, my ayah Mary Pereira had made so perfectly; the grasshopper-green chutney which is forever associated with those days." (Rushdie, 2006, p. 292). A traditional connection between women and food to signify the maternal connection between the baby and the mother in the Indian culture (Maxey, 2017, p. 165). is subverted in the novel. Mary Pereira becomes Saleem's family by committing a crime of switching two babies at birth but stays in Saleem's life till the end. The green chutney infused with her guilt and fear accompanies Saleem throughout his life, acquiring new meanings and functions. The chutney functions as a medicine after Saleem is isolated from the family when they discover the truth about the circumstances of his birth (Ibid., p. 332), and when he becomes sick while writing his memoirs in the pickle factory (Ibid., p. 290). The chutney is also attributed to the function of the connection between family members, which was originally established in reference to food in the Reverend Mother's household. After a long period of wandering away from his family, Saleem recognises Mary's green chutney in a meal served in Bombay. It is through it that Mary and Saleem reconnect.

The image of the green chutney is also mentioned in the political context, which leaks into Saleem's private life. Recovering after an illness, Saleem is brought the desired green chutney served on a special plate: "grasshopper-green chutney is being extracted from its vat, to be brought on a wiped-clean plate with saffron and green stripes around

the rim.” (Rushdie, 2006, p. 291). The excerpt references the colours of the Indian flag, which were initially meant to symbolise the religious unity of the country: the saffron colour stood for Hinduism, the green colour represented Islam, while the white colour united the remaining religions practised in the country. The interpretation is reinforced in a discussion following Saleem’s recovery. Explaining his memory problems, Saleem draws a parallel between himself and the Prophet, while serving his audience helpings of his favourite meal: “by now, the green chutney was filling them with thoughts of years ago” (Ibid., p. 293).

Overall, Saleem’s narrative transforms the communicative function of food, shifting it from the role of a mediator within a family to a means of telling one’s story to the world. Talking to Padma, his reliable assistant and love interest, Saleem explains a connection between writing and cooking: “my chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings – by day amongst the pickle-vats, by night within these sheets, I spend time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks.” (Rushdie, 2006, p. 44). If preparation of food is compared to writing at the beginning of the novel, by the end, the narrative and food fuse into one: “I reach the end of my long-winded autobiography; in words and pickles, I have immortalized my memories” (Ibid., p. 642).

Saleem becoming a cook not only expands the area impacted by the communicative function of food from private to public life, but it also undermines the traditional gender-assigned roles, which presume that cooking is performed by women. However, a path for this change is cleared not by Saleem but by his ayah Mary Pereira and her sister Alice who bring the tradition of making food from “domestic, and thus feminised, sphere” to quote Maxey (2017, p. 170) to the public domain; hence, undermining the traditional connotation attributed to food making. Sisters seize an opportunity to establish a pickling factory when offered an investment from “the fearsome and enterprising Narlikar women” (Rushdie, 2006, p. 640) and succeed in becoming an established name: “It’s Barganza Pickle; best in Bombay, everyone knows” (Ibid., p. 637). Hence, the gender roles are reversed: women invest and establish a business entering public life through an activity which used to be restricted to the private domain; while by learning to cook (“Mary ... taught me the secrets of the pickling process.” (Ibid, p. 641)), Saleem reestablishes his connection with his family and transforms Mary’s ability to express her emotions through food into an ability to tell stories.

In the period between Saleem’s childhood and his reunion with Mary Pereira, Saleem briefly lives disengaged from his family. This part of his life is marked with references to food, which contain religious, social and political connotations. Saleem’s adolescence in Karachi is marked by his explorations of the world. Through his sensitive nose, Saleem collects and classifies smells, thus learning about the world surrounding him. The smell of food is mentioned at the initial stage of his explorations: “to begin with, I perfected my skill at distinguishing, until I could tell apart the infinite varieties of betel-nut and ... the twelve available brands of fizzy drink. ... Feldman saw these drinks as a manifestation of capitalist imperialism. ... Double Kola, Kola Kola, Perri Cola and Bubble Up were

blindly identified and named.” (Rushdie, 2006, p. 441). A short passage which includes a list of available beverages reveals a complicated political and social narrative surrounding fizzy drinks in Pakistan. The list includes falsified beverages sold with minor changes to their brand names; hence, Double Cola becomes Double Kola, and Perry Cola is named Perri Cola. A political aspect leaks into the business narrative as fizzy drinks are said to symbolise capitalist imperialism, and Herbert Feldman, an author of books about the politics of Pakistan, is mentioned in relation to this observation. Overall, food in Pakistan has become a means of manipulation. Businesspeople deceive their clients by selling them falsified products of famous brands, while politicians attribute ideological connotations to food items, implying that the consumption of food equals accepting certain political ideas. Thus, the connotation of food as a means of transmitting ideas is subverted further.

The beginning of Saleem's adulthood, which coincides with his service in the Pakistani army, contains both new and established tropes related to food. Saleem's fellow soldiers identify him as an alien amongst them; and they differentiate between themselves and him through a food metaphor: “Ayooba, the apostle of meat, may have found his tracker insufficiently virile. ‘Like a brinjal, man,’ I permit Ayooba to complain, ‘I swear – a vegetable’” (Rushdie, 2006, p. 488). The comparison to a vegetable has a double connotation: it refers to the indifference Saleem displays regarding his life in the army; in addition, contrasted to “the apostle of meat”, “a vegetable” stands for an Indian person, an enemy against whom the Pakistani army is fighting. The role of traditional food as a means of asserting one's identity, as Maxey observes, is typical in South Asian literature. Writers often

demonstrate the power of food to contain traditions and guard against Otherness, particularly in the context of Hindu dietary rules: that is, religious laws – subject to wider interpretation, of course – dictating which foods can and cannot be eaten, with a particular emphasis on the avoidance of animal-based products. (Maxey, 2017, p. 171)

Rushdie subverts the traditional meaning by reversing the roles of oneself and the other. Consequently, the dominant element of the traditional diet marks Saleem as the Other and places him in a vulnerable position.

The indifference which Saleem displays in the army is due to a family-related trauma: having lost his parents to a bomb explosion, Saleem loses his final connection to the family when Jamilia registers him to serve in the army – a complete isolation from the members of his family results in a total depletion of emotions. An extreme intervention, a bite of a poisonous snake, is required to revive Saleem. Another liquid-related image – venom of a snake – reconnects Saleem to his past and helps to recover from the trauma:

I was rejoined to the past, jolted into unity by snake-poison, and it began to pour out through the Buddha's lips. As his eyes returned to normal, his words flowed so freely that they seemed to be an aspect of the monsoon. ... Open-mouthed, unable to tear themselves away, the child-soldiers drank his life like leaf-tainted water. (Rushdie, 2006, pp. 508–509)

The ability to share one's message after a loss of liquids/ emotions is first mentioned in the novel in this particular episode. Saleem discovers that words have a liquid nature and can leak into another person, changing them. The transformative power of a narrative is emphasized through a reference to "leaf-tainted water", which soldiers drank in the jungle, and which induced them with insanity ("rainwater poured off the leaves all around them [soldiers] ... it acquired on its journey something of the insanity of the jungle" (Ibid, p. 505)). Saleem retains this ability to use the liquidity of words as a means of transformation when he engages in the process of pickling. He leaks his narrative into his food and pickles it to be preserved for future generations to read/ consume.

Saleem's life after the army is marked by the absence of food as well as a lack of stable relationships. References to food appear only in the description of Saleem's encounter with Indira Gandhi/the Widow. First, a page of a newspaper "smelling of turnips" (Rushdie, 2006, p. 596). attracts his attention as it is the smell of food that alerts Saleem to danger. The newspaper contains information about the announcement of the State of Emergency in India. It is a historical reference to the period of Indira Gandhi's rule of the country from 1975 to 1977, the Emergency, when elections were cancelled, civil liberties were suspended, political opponents were imprisoned, and a mass forced sterilisation campaign was organised. When Saleem is imprisoned as a political opponent, the only food he is given is "a bowl of rice" (Ibid., p. 606), which sustains his optimism and enables him to write a manifesto to the Conference of Midnight Children, declaring their victory over the regime. However, Saleem's optimism is drained when sterilisation is performed on him as well as other members of CMC (the Conference of Midnight's Children). In this final act of isolation, the state drains Saleem of hope irreversibly: no amount of liquid can compensate for this loss and reverse the process of alienation.

Conclusion

The portrayal of Saleem's generation highlights the fusion of private and public with regard to the connotations related to the tropes of food. It is revealed through the subversion of gender-assigned symbolism: both male and female characters function in public and private domains of life; what is more, female characters are assigned leading positions in politics and economics, the fields traditionally dominated by men. There is a wide use of religious, political and economic contexts in connection to food tropes, which in the description of previous generations were hardly mentioned. Non-verbal communication through food as a transmitter of messages, a trope borrowed from the film industry by Saleem's parents' generation, is replaced with verbal expression as Saleem engages in storytelling through food preparation, not replacing non-verbal communication through food but supplementing it.

Saleem Sinai, the protagonist and the narrator of the novel, is the main representative of the third generation of the Aziz family. The narrative about him further subverts the meanings attributed to the metaphor of food. A traditional model of the family undergoes major challenges, which is symbolised by an increase in the importance of liquid-related

food imagery associated with the problem of alienation from the family. Consequently, Saleem's generation builds connections outside of the traditional family, following the same model of meaning-making: making and sharing food with other people.

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