What's in a Curry? Interdisciplinary Approaches to Indian Food Discourse

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Abstract
This article offers a preliminary discussion of Indian food discourse, interpreted not as a mere example of material and immaterial culture, but rather as a site of stratified genres, images and ideas that take up cultural, linguistic and literary forms to mirror multifaceted dynamics of belonging, migration and change (Appadurai 1988; Collingham 2006, 2018; Jurafsky 2014; Nandy 2004). The entanglement of vernacular customs and migratory practices, the creative processes leading to terms for food and the strategic representation of dishes in literary works by Indian and diasporic authors are just a handful of the modalities by which Indian food discourse is foregrounded and manifests itself stylistically and symbolically so as to convey ideologies and values. From such a perspective, I propose to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that benefits from various disciplines such as cultural studies, postcolonial theory and linguistics to unearth some of the diverse (his)stories and meanings of this complex domain and its reconfigurations of identity (Achaya 1994; Burnett and Saberi 2008; Daya 2010; Mannur 2010).

Keywords: Indian food discourse, food studies, Indian culture.

1. Introduction

One of most powerful engines of human culture is certainly represented in the idea of food, since it touches upon and embraces a number of historical, social and religious aspects. In fact, food has always been regarded as much more than a simple necessity for human beings to physiologically survive, because it has been central in the establishment of practices, rituals and meanings. From this perspective, it is a theme that can be investigated in terms of discourse, for example following the scholarly tradition of cultural studies as well as linguistic and literary approaches (Appadurai

1988; Jurafsky 2014; Perianova 2010). Hence, the need to adopt an interdisciplinary methodology to study the many possible textual forms of food discourse, from culinary memoirs with recipes to narrative fiction.

The specific case of Indian food discourse constitutes an interesting arena to explore, considering the traditional, postcolonial and diasporic dimensions by which it has been linguistically and symbolically constructed in order to convey ideologies and values (Achaya 1994; Collingham 2006, 2018; Daya 2010). The ritualisation of traditional food taboos and prescriptions, but also the massive popularity of curries in the British Isles, as well as the creative processes involved in English food terms and the strategic representation of dishes in literary works by Asian and diasporic authors are just a handful of the modalities of Indian food. Among its stylistic renditions, we also find the genre of cookbooks, in their Anglo-Indian version too (Burnett and Saberi 2008), and for Appadurai such apparently banal texts, in actuality, underpin sociocultural practices, since they work as "representations not only of structures of production and distribution and of social and cosmological schemes, but of class and hierarchy" (1988: 3). As such, food discourse also contributes to the indexicality of national and migratory identities by connecting rites and behaviours in mediation between local and global contexts, and it also fuels debates about a range of polarities, such as pureness and pollution, authenticity and inauthenticity, as well as localisation and globalisation.

My main argument is that Indian food discourse does not represent a mere combination of material and immaterial culture, *i.e.* ingredients and utensils suited to social and dietary traditions, but rather that it emerges as a site of stratified genres and manifestations that mirror the multifaceted dynamics of belonging, migration and change. From this perspective, I propose to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to unearth some of its diverse (his)stories and meanings, as well as its postcolonial and transnational reconfigurations (Jackson, Crang and Dwyer 2004). In this preliminary inquiry, I use the term curry as a metonymic expression with plural connotations, and I side with Collingham's suggestion to critically read food discourse as a key element in colonial history (2018). Drawing from disciplines such as cultural studies, postcolonial theory and linguistics, I look at Indian food in the coterminous fields of culture, language and

literature, and I examine the imaginative construction of Indian gastronomy in cultural terms, the linguistic texture of Indian food heritage, and the narrative representation of the Indian foodscape.

Before I carry on, however, I need to warn that the term Indian, which clearly has a geographical denotation, also encapsulates a series of dense implications. Indeed, when we speak about food in India, we indirectly mean one country and many cuisines, all of them characterised by specific local ingredients and habits. As an adjective, it might even suggest the entire South Asian Subcontinent, *i.e.* including Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Additionally, thanks to migratory processes, Indian dishes and food traditions are now present in many parts of the world, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries. The word may also be considered with its pre-1947 meaning, when the entire Indian subcontinent was a colony within the British empire. But today's scenario of Indian food is even more complex because, in the West, Indian restaurants are very often run by other nationals, with the general result being a vaguely defined cliché of Indian identity (Appadurai 1988; Nandy 2004; Sardar 2008). Moreover, such a permeable label has been, at least partially, appropriated and retracted through colonial reminiscences, so that some Indian dishes (real or invented) have been incorporated into English gastronomy: "Indian food in particular is now an integral part of English culture. Our customs revolve around it" (Fox 2004: 301). It is no surprise, then, that the UK now boasts food festivals and competitions such as National Curry Week (originally launched in 1998) and Curry Capital of Britain, both of which aim at reinforcing specific images of food discourse and implicitly national identity.

2. Indian Food Discourse and Culture

The role of the food domain significantly emerges in areas such as religion and society, and in India this aspect is of paramount importance. Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism prescribe a list of rigid norms about what one is allowed to eat or the kinds of food that have to be avoided through the establishment of binary categories (the pure and the polluted foodstuffs), as well as the techniques of gastronomic preparations. The relation between the idea of food and the sense of the sacred is thus marked and determines specific practices and customs. For instance, the traditional system of

Ayurvedic medicine considers food, and its six main tastes (sweet, sour, bitter, pungent, astringent and salty), within a holistic approach to nourishment, whereas Jainism recommends veganism to endorse respect for living beings, such as animals of any type. Naturally, all these instructions have repercussions on the conceptualisation of food, which in the Hindu tradition "stays encompassed within the moral and medical modes of thought, and never becomes the basis of an autonomous epicurean or gustatory logic" (Appadurai 1988: 11)[1].

The chief element in this foodscape pivots around the notion of tradition, by which certain values and habits are crystallised in the upholding of practices and passed on to the following generations. Although tradition might seem to be a static concept, in reality it can incorporate change and revision. The meaning of autochthonous cuisine may thus turn out to be a sort of invention, a fantasy that obliterates the present by excluding or reinterpreting the past. Nandy for instance deconstructs the traditional Indian menu by affirming that many of its principal ingredients actually come from other parts of the world, so that "the story of Indian food is often the story of the blatantly exogenous becoming prototypically authentic" (2004: 11). Therefore, not only vegetables such as cauliflower and onion, or fruits like pineapple and guava, but even some spices such as ginger, fenugreek and cinnamon in reality bespeak the historical, social and trading contacts between India and other territories. These ingredients represent a material cog for processes of transformation, adaptation and localisation of human habits as well as the (re)invention of discourse and rhetoric that privilege particular ideologies: in an anthropological perspective, ingredients, or even recipes, from abroad are appropriated and renovated in order to set up an indigenous custom, within a specific community, which will eventually be perceived as authentic.

The colonial experience too has strongly impinged on Indian culinary habits: many preparations that today are commonly

[1] Due to space restrictions, it is not possible for me to further explore this issue, which significantly informs the recent upheaval over the prohibition on selling or eating beef and which is linked to the state's project to monitor the type of food consumed even at home. Recently intellectuals and novelists such as Partha Chatterjee and Arundhati Roy have provokingly joined this debate.

considered Indian, such as vindaloo, mulligatawny soup, and kedgeree, are the products of the years of the Raj, when British settlers tried to adjust their recipes using local products. In doing so, they invented new foods, which were subsequently exported all over the world, thus radically changing the image and authenticity of Indian food. Perhaps the most representative of these novel preparations is curry, a term first attested in 1598, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2018). As frequently occurs with gastronomic lexemes, the etymological origin is difficult to track down, but for Achaya (1994: 176) the word "was originally used for any spiced relish employed by south Indians to accompany rice and is noted as early as 1502 by Correa as *caril*. Later the word curry was very much enlarged in Anglo-Indian usage to mean a liquid broth, a thicker stew, or even a dry dish, all of which of course appear in a south Indian meal as successive courses, each with various names". The word curry thus operates a strategy of lexical condensation, a form of hyperonymy that covers a range of different subcategories of preparations. As Collingham (2006: 115) notes, "Indians referred to their different dishes by specific names and their servants would have served the British with dishes which they called for example *rogan josh*, *dopiaza* or *quarama*. But the British lumped all these together under the heading of curry". Such a semantic redesigning was of course part of a larger political project sustained by imperial ideology to control and manipulate local cultures, but what is striking is the rootedness of the changes that were brought about, *i.e.* affecting not only the colonisers but also the colonised. Indeed, this type of naming procedure endorsed the multiple meanings of curry and led to the creation of a new, unexpectedly pan-Indian, cuisine.

Indian food discourse encodes processes of permutation and adaption as it synthetises the fabric of autochthonous (hi)stories, the colonial enterprise, and the relationships between the East and the West, as well as narratives of power and identity. The presence of such centripetal and centrifugal forces is evident even today because national Indian cuisine arises from the combined traditions of Mughlai gastronomy and the colonial period, but is influenced by regional and ethnic recipes, as internal migrations of people disseminate local food habits throughout the country. For Appadurai, this is a procedure that reflects the cultural diversity

of the country and may touch on society at large because the "movement of recipes across caste, language, and ethnic boundaries is accompanied by an increase in formal (and informal) entertaining and dining across these boundaries" (1989: 7). In this context, food discourse proves to be an important indicator of cultural flows and transformations.

In its original context, Indian cuisine actually combines more gastronomic traditions, balancing between those of the north, pivoting around the Mughal heritage, and those from the south, for instance, specialities from Tamil Nadu. To illustrate this point, let us look at the typical list of fast food items, which now features *tikka* (a snack made with boiled potatoes, onions and spices, from the north) as well as *dosa* and *idli* (respectively a type of pancake and rice cake, both from the south). The sometimes conflicting cultural relations between the north and the south of India and the superficially mundane question of food, in reality, run in parallel, as they both reflect a more general context and its loaded ideologies dividing the Hindi-speaking belt from the mainly Dravidian south. However, the alchemy of cultures at work in the country affects and somehow mitigates opposite relations, while enveloping ever more diverse relations: as Nandy (2004) highlights in her analysis of food and languages, the mixed assortment of fast food menus from both the north and the south seems to mirror the multifaceted sociocultural and sociolinguistic arena of India, in which languages and customs are intertwined and generate (in)authentic traditions.

Yet, a prototypical representation of the Indian food world mainly coincides with recipes and preparations from the Mughal and Punjabi traditions. Naturally, in the former case we observe how political power, *i.e.* that of the Mughal dynasty, which governed northern India for centuries, dictated palatal tastes, for instance by turning to aromatic rice dishes mixed with herbs, spices and other ingredients, such as *biryani* or *keema parathas* (street food with minced meat). However, the Punjabi culinary enrichment should be read more attentively, since it constitutes another interface between food discourse and local culture. Punjab, whose historical borders do not follow the present-day political geography, is split between Pakistan and India, and thus is rhetorically constructed in order to strengthen nationalism in both countries. The popularity of Indian food around the world generates further complications because

frequently Indian restaurants in the West are run by Bangladeshis but serve Punjabi specialities. Consequently, these three terms of nationality become mixed and overlap in an entanglement of altered cultural references, which originate in the subcontinent but then overflow across global scenarios. For Nandy (2004: 14) "this centrality of Punjabi cuisine (actually it is mainly the centrality of that part of Punjabi cuisine that can blend with the popular idea of Mughal food) is particularly surprising because territorially Punjab may be three-fourth of Pakistan, but it is only one-thirtieth of India and it has little to do with Bangladesh". Once again, food discourse reflects the inner asymmetries of power via the representation of an idealised model of Indian food based on specific varieties, as well as the imposition of tradition and authenticity through other gastronomies. It is a tactic that tries to standardise gastronomic characterisation, and implicitly cultural difference, whose outcome constitutes "an anthology of naturally generated images of the ethnic Other, a kind of 'ethnoethnicity', rooted in the details of regional recipes, but creating a set of generalized gastroethnic images of Bengalis, Tamils, and so forth" (Appadurai 1988: 16). The effect of such a phenomenon lies in the process of redrawing labels, whose margins now become porous and permit accommodation and inclusion within Indian national cuisine.

3. The Language of Indian Food Discourse

Since discourse is mainly realised by linguistic means, it is vital to examine the codes of Indian food, enhanced by overlapping loanwords, neologisms and semantic shifts. Standard English has long borrowed from an array of Indian words for food, as recorded, *e.g.* by the *Hobson Jobson Anglo-Indian Dictionary* (originally published in 1888), and many of these are now fully lexicalised. Instead, Indian English is marked by diatopic, and to some extent diachronic, variation thanks to a wealth of language contacts (*i.e.* Hindu, Urdu, Sanskrit or vernacular languages), but also to energetic creativity at play. Nowadays, most non-specialised English language dictionaries feature a number of entries for Indian food, but, due to the intricacy of food codification, transmission and reception, there may be no agreement about the precise semantic definition, and thus normally a concise and simplified description is given.

An emblematic case is the term chutney, from the Hindi word *chaṭnī* (चटनी, meaning 'to lick'), because, although it generally denotes a type of sweet and sour sauce or relish in both the Indian and the British contexts, it can be made with different ingredients. Traditionally churned with mango or peach in India, in the UK the preparation is often characterised by a wide-ranging assortment of local products, *e.g.* beetroot, figs, rhubarb, or even Mediterranean herbs. The historical reason for this is the adaptation of original Indian recipes to the British environment, with substitutions for ingredients that were not easy to find (Burnett and Saberi 2008: 34). For an Indian person, these chutneys signal images of fanciful defamiliarisation, hybridity, perhaps even perplexity, in a reversal of perspectives that attributes the sense of the exotic and the unnatural to the West. But the fact that the British consider these preparations as genuinely Indian condiments is proof that the fantasy of Victorian cooks is still present in the collective imagination and impacts the construction of national food discourse, and, to a certain extent, identity, with its inheritance of Anglo-Indian memories.

The question of authenticity brings to the fore a dish such as chicken tikka masala, defined in 2001 by the then Foreign Minister Robin Cook as part of the British culinary tradition, which actually is a new, "mongrel" (Collingham 2006: 3) preparation. Structurally, this compound stresses its exotic flavour via the insertion of Hindi words: *tikka* (small bits or chunks) and *masala* (a blend of spices such as black pepper, cinnamon and cloves). But it also imaginatively builds a discourse of authenticity by claiming a specific origin for an invented dish, thus endorsing a national identity, shifting from India to Britain via a colonial, perhaps even nostalgic, past, so that, in Barnett and Saberi's view, it is "a recipe which more than any epitomizes the fusion of British tastes and the spiced dishes of India" (2008: 185).

From this angle, food discourse displays an orientalist tendency and, in demonstrating the British appropriation of Indian food during the Victorian and Edwardian times, Collingham holds that "while the food in Indian restaurants took on a life of its own, independent from the food of the Indian subcontinent, the décor projected a romanticised idea of India, teeming with elephants and maharajas" (2006: 232). Reduced to a somewhat exotic, and yet complimentary, part of the overarching rubric of contemporary

Englishness, today the vocabulary of Indian food in Britain may even carry subtle messages of patriotism and national pride. Chicken tikka masala appeared in the recent Brexit debate, when pro-Brexit campaigners and supporters paradoxically bemoaned the threat of having their 'authentic' tradition of curries hit by EU regulations on the production and consumption of food (Ruggeri 2016; Whitehead 2016), thus highlighting the circularity and paradox of food cultures.

4. The Empire Cooks Back: From Food to Fiction

The alliance between Indian food discourse and the realm of fiction has been very productive since the early colonial phase: not only does William Thackeray, for instance, cite a preparation called curry in *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), but he even dedicates a short poem to this dish, and this exemplifies the diffusion of oriental gastronomy in Britain. Postcolonial and migrant novels, *e.g.* Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), have foregrounded food images as a stratagem to question the (trans)national sense of identity, and its maps of gender, ethnicity, and class. In other words, for Mannur (2010: 17) it is possible to observe "food as epistemological device to navigate the imagined worlds of Asian America while simultaneously countering the notion that the only productive way to engage with food is to do so while opening a window onto the ethnic and racial lives of minoritized subjects". Fantasies of being and belonging, amplified by reminiscences of an invented homeland, also reverberate in the British diasporic field, *e.g.* with the remediated identities of the Bangladeshi community in the Manzul Ismal's writing (Adami 2005). Often food-related novels are written by women, who employ female characters to address dense questions of modernity, identity and society, in a debate that juxtaposes the autochthonous and the migrant, thus erasing definitional taxonomies.

I will now bring in two examples of such literature, and briefly consider *Ladies Coupé* (2003) by Anita Nair, a polyphonic text in which food is not a main narrative thread and yet is instrumental for the exploration of female identities and relations, decrypting the representation of gender in contemporary India by going beyond stereotypical categorisations. If, on the one hand, tradition regulates food preparation and consumption within the inventory

of behaviour and practices imposed upon society, on the other, female characters turn to food discourse to resist and respond to subjugation. When Akila, one of the female protagonists of the Nair novel, decides to question her social role and her sense of self, she attempts to yield meaning to a new life and escape her suffocating routine. In this respect, the simple episode of eating an egg offered by another woman in a train compartment constitutes, for Akila, a transgressive act, because, as a member of the Brahmin caste, she is not supposed to eat eggs. Moreover, in the Hindu food tradition, eggs are associated with the erotic sphere, an element that the author explicitly mentions in the text, and therefore they represent a sort of device to suggest freedom and emancipation. The female protagonists of this text struggle to redefine rigid identitarian categories, and in thus doing they too engage with food culture seen as a modality to express forms of modernity. For Margaret, in another story, the only way to deal with her violent husband is to reverse dietary habits: initially the woman eats voraciously to forget her sad quotidian existence, while her husband eats modestly and fasts regularly, but then, in a seductive manner, Margaret manages to overturn this sick equilibrium so that he becomes fat as she loses weight. Although the woman's plan does not radically modify the institutional space of marriage for women, it certainly renegotiates power through the domain of food. These literary examples are important because "fiction also enables us to experience things we could not otherwise know, making available additional modes of understanding and explaining our own materialities and modernities" (Daya 2010: 487), and in this respect the synergy between food discourse and narrative lends support to a new critical gaze on contemporary female identity and its evolutions.

Non-fictional works too can draw from food culture. *Monsoon Diary* (2003) is a memoir in which author Shoba Narayan not only deals with her life, first in the south of India and then in the United States, but also includes real recipes to engage the readers in a metatextual way. In the book, the underlying theme of food goes hand in hand with the description of a number of situations, but, in reality, it facilitates the discussion of social and cultural issues in the double scenario of home and diaspora. Moreover, since this writer comes from Chennai (previously known as Madras), the account frames new perspectives for food discourse, *i.e.* by taking

into consideration the dietary customs and cultures of south India, from the popular idea of tiffin (an assortment of various snacks and desserts) to the use of local tamarind or coconut chutneys. In her narrative, Narayan seems to use food discourse as a sort of red thread to disclose episodes of her life. In her native Tamil Nadu, for example, she observes how the offering of a rich tiffin can be embedded in the social practice of arranging marriages since "eating *sojji-bajji* has become a euphemism among Tamilians for meeting prospective mates in an arranged setting" (Narayan 2003: 173). Yet, the author decides to revise and lighten food tradition and taboos, so that, when in the States she goes to an Italian restaurant with her husband and her grandmother, she justifies her grandmother's refusal of any food outside the prescribed Hindu inventory in a humorous way, by affirming that the woman cannot eat Italian food as it is deemed "against her religion" (Narayan 2003: 210). Such a playful act of rewriting dietary rules testifies to processes of cultural transformation that unlock instantiations of a new identity. Conventionally, food is part of a wide apparatus of strategies of cultural memory that cement the bonds between the subjects and their homeland, and in fact the author remembers how an expatriate taxi driver in New York offered her food that turned out to be "sublime, returning to me the memory of several bus trips that my parents and I had undertaken in Kerala" (Narayan 2003: 130). Yet it is not just the power of nostalgia that makes food an emblem of being and belonging: it is also its ability to negotiate, discover and translate the dynamicity of identity within the social world. For Roy, the feeling of nostalgia is "capable of being decoupled from personal memory or personal experience" (2002: 489), and thus it mediates between the impositions of tradition, taboos and habits and the stimuli of globalisation and innovation.

5. Concluding Remarks

Given the scope of Indian food discourse, it is clear that this article represents an introductory investigation and that more research is needed to shed light on the multiplicity of its meanings. Here I have sketched out a preliminary scrutiny by regarding Indian food discourse as a crucial domain that orchestrates aspects of identity beyond tradition and modernity. The cultural practices, lexical

expressions and creative stories about food that I have briefly tackled demonstrate not only the vitality of such a field, but also its power to propagate across disciplines and areas by communicating a sense of (in)authenticity and circulation. Although Sardar (2008: 21) defines the invented Anglo-Indian dishes "a fine piece of nonsense", they nonetheless resonate with particular echoes as they conjure a complex scenario, in which food functions as a system of references and indexes. The food field illuminates the beliefs of a community and thus plays into its manifestations, but at the same time it is also an expressive means for a "desired identity" (Perianova 2010: 26), which refers to the imaginative work of being and becoming. The identitarian element of food discourse is particularly prominent in the migratory experience, as in the narratives of Nair, Narayan and many other authors who have to come to terms with the cultural dimensions of home and displacement. Many of the lexical expressions related to Indian food, moreover, are the result of language contacts and testify to the historical overlaying of different epochs by suggesting degrees of cultural porosity and penetrability because they concern processes of borrowing and adaptation. But they also metonymically represent the tensions between subjects and communities in a dialogic relation between ethnic conscience and national rhetoric, as in the idea of a nationwide Indian cuisine.

Food discourse therefore constitutes a metaphor for the map of contacts, hybridisations and even conflicts between civilisations because it conveys specific stances and thus configures the paradigm of identity. To some extent, it recapitulates the history of the language via innovative lexical forms, such as Bombay duck, a dish that can baffle as it actually indicates a type of fish, or vindaloo, one of the hottest curries from the Goa region, whose name hides its Portuguese etymology (*vinho* + *alho*). In following the routes of migrants, the paradigm of food also evokes their roots as they experience dislocation and experiment with a new subjectivity. In Jurafsky's words, food "tells us about human psychology, who we are, from the nature of our perception and emotions to the social psychology of our attitudes towards others" and therefore its wor(l)ds vastly influence human culture (2014: 4). What finally emerges is a palimpsest upon which the mechanics of being, belonging and changing rewrite discourses and texts that recognise the cultural and symbolic value of cuisine.

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