

Curry on the Divide in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham*

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In all of its unprepossessingly unliterary forms, curry—whether denoting “authentic” recipes, suspect tinned powders, or complexly “exotic” dishes—can sharpen our sense of imperial and postcolonial identities in two apparently disparate texts, Rudyard Kipling’s 1901 novel *Kim* and Gurinder Chadha’s 2002 film *Bend It Like Beckham*. Situated half a century before and half a century after the 1947 Indian independence, these two *Bildungsromane* present mirror opposites in terms of gender, ethnic difference, and relation between the colonial center and its periphery. Yet the representations of spicy foodstuffs that suffuse both texts play pivotal roles, revealing how the consumptions of diaspora at opposite ends of the imperial divide ultimately complement each other: for the orphaned son of a colonial agent at the turn of the last century, curry represents mastery (by assimilation) over the colony; for the daughter of Indian immigrants to the former colonial center (London) a century later, curry represents the stigma of frustrated, if not impossible, assimilation. In her recent “biography” of curry, Lizzie Collingham observes that “[t]he Indian subcontinent has accommodated a great variety of immigrants, all of whom brought their own cuisines” (9). *Bend It Like Beckham* suggests unease about whether the same can be said of Britain. Read alongside through specifically British imaginings in *Kim* and its imperialist Victorian culinary contexts, curry exposes in Chadha’s bubbly, sweet story a bitter aftertaste that calls into doubt the possibility of a harmonious, syncretic multicultural society.

In Kipling the young hero masters “the Great Game,” of espionage that he plays for England, a place he has never been, and he does so by infiltrating all levels of Indian society. Kim’s ability to acquire and consume indigenous dishes offers an eloquent index to his mastery of both Indian society, and, in a sense, the whole of India. A century later,

a second-generation Briton sees her dream, of “playing for England” in the “Great Game” of football, as a dream attainable only by denying an ethnic identity imposed upon her with comic relentlessness, an identity for which food marks a persistent metaphor.

Yet food—specifically, curry and its component spices—does not simply stand in for the cultures and peoples who have produced it. Despite the temptations to stop at such a reductive metaphor, the dynamics of gastronomic consumption offer a way to explore the nuances of postcolonial identity, particularly the charged concepts of hybridity and mimicry. Indeed, recent Anglophone writing abounds with scenes where eating occupies a vexed position. To begin with breakfast, one might think of Jamaica Kincaid’s bitter memories of fry-ups “Made in England” (210) or Zadie Smith’s concoction, O’Connell’s, “an Irish pool-room run by Arabs with no pool tables” where “Mickey will cook you chips, eggs, and beans, or eggs, chips, and beans, or beans, chips, eggs, and mushrooms but not, under any circumstances, chips, beans, eggs and bacon” (154). Just these two disparate examples evoke a wealth of subtle variations on cultural subjection and resistance. Likewise, culinary fusions do not translate into a harmonious hybrid society: the apparently universal taste for chicken *tikka masala* in the United Kingdom, for instance, neither elects South Asians to Parliament, nor exempts them from racial profiling by the police. After all, right-wing Conservative Member of Parliament Enoch Powell did not let his infamous opposition to immigration stop him from frequenting Indian restaurants that reminded him of his time in India (Tönnies 65). Instead, “ethnic” foods remain a marker of cultural difference, branding immigrants from the former colonies, along with their non-immigrant children and grandchildren, as inexorably foreign, other, and “ethnic.” But then it was just this food, and specifically spices, that justified European exploration and the concomitant British Empire. The spicy-tongued mother of Moraes Zogoiby, hapless narrator of Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, puts it aptly when she remarks of peppercorns, “From the beginning, what the world wanted from bloody mother India was daylight clear. . . . They came for the hot stuff, just like any man calling on a tart” (5). In somewhat more temperate language, numerous

recent food histories confirm her conclusion about Indian spice. Typical of these is Jack Turner's 2004 cultural history of "the taste that launched a thousand ships" (4–12).

The gendered metaphors—Rushdie's personification of India as a prostitute and Turner's analogy to Helen of Troy—echo centuries of characterizations of India and her spices, which therefore make a particularly ironic obstacle for the protagonist of Gurinder Chadha's popular film celebrating multicultural feminism. At the forefront of Cool Britannia's "multicultural" film scene, Chadha's work enjoys reviews that read like encomiums on female and minority empowerment. Fuzzy and delightful, *Beckham* is remarkable for its "feminis[m]" and "girl-power," as well as its treatment of "cultural—and multicultural—attitudes" (Kenny; Cadorette; Sterritt).

As such, the film's appeal is centered squarely on questions of identity, much as Kipling's *Kim* has done increasingly for readers today. Indeed, the novel's most recent commentators have focused on the moment when Kim asks, "Who is Kim? He considered his own identity, a thing he had never done before" (166).¹ Like such early European ethnographers as Sir Richard Burton, Kim shuttles between cultures, free to choose.² At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Chadha's young football player, Jess Bhamra, enjoys no such freedom. While Kim's consumption of curry enables him to master India and to protect British interests, curry confines Jess. Not only her mother but also Britons with no interest in preserving her family's traditions impose it upon her from all sides. Read through the quotidian materialist signifier of curry, *Bend It Like Beckham* becomes a pessimistic meditation on multicultural Britain.

Curry is, as I have noted, central to Kim's method of navigating the margins of Indian society. His ability to infiltrate India and to absorb its foodstuffs makes him a potent instrument of British surveillance. The first chapter introduces the thirteen-year-old Kim as much more than a little sahib in native's clothes. The orphaned son of an Irish officer, Kimball O'Hara has been entrusted to a neglectful, opium-smoking "half-caste woman," whom he makes a habit of eluding (49). Not surprisingly, perhaps, his primary motivation is gastronomic: "Sometimes there was food in the house, more often there was not, and Kim went

out again to eat with his native friends” (51). Exposure to—and eating with—all these “native friends” transforms him into the “Little Friend of all the World,” the nickname that distinguishes him as a cultural chameleon who “borrowed right-and left-handedly from all the customs of the country he knew and loved” (121). As even the wisest of natives cannot help observing to him, “no white man knows this land as thou knowest” (139). Kim’s extraordinary success at these cultural transformations is borne out by his virtuosity at working an indigenous economy governed by food. It is an economy explicitly delineated in the novel’s first encounter with the Muslim horse trader Mahbub Ali, from whom Kim finesses “a flap of soft, greasy Mussalman bread” that contains, “as he expected . . . a small wad of folded tissue-paper wrapped in oil-skin, with three silver rupees—enormous largesse” (69). He is no less effective among Hindus. One particularly successful exchange in their gastronomic economy scores Kim an enormous bowl of hot rice, which a grudging old crone garnishes, “nonetheless, with good, steaming vegetable curry. [She] clapped a fried cake atop, and a morsel of clarified butter on the cake, dabbed a lump of sour tamarind conserve at the side; and Kim looked at the load lovingly” (62). Kipling, too, looked lovingly on Indian meals. Such detailed descriptions abound and, despite the arrogantly tacit affirmation of the British right to control India that mars his masterpiece, evince a genuine fascination with and respect for India. This attitude seems to surprise Kipling’s more ardent detractors. Although Abdul JanMohamed faults the novel for ultimately reinforcing what he terms a “Manichean allegory” that demonizes the racial other in colonialist fiction, he nonetheless praises *Kim*’s “positive, detailed, and nonstereotypic portrait of the colonized that is unique in colonialist literature” (78). In this portrait, food in all its variety across India is vividly pictured.

Here it is worth remembering that it was no small feat to navigate the gastronomic world of India, so often depicted by British observers as a “muddle” of religious and caste scruples. It should not have been surprising, therefore, that the “Mutiny” of 1857 erupted out of a rumor that the bullets for the new Enfield rifle were greased with pork and beef fat—meats which are unclean to Muslims and Hindus, respectively.

This insurgency made irreconcilable the divide between colonizers and the colonized, and led to the Government of India Act, which transferred control of the subcontinent from the East India Company to the Crown. What is more, the lore surrounding the Mutiny holds that the insurgency spread via chapattis, unleavened flatbreads, that struck fear into the colonials. Indeed, “a mysterious affair about some chupatties” figures in virtually all British accounts of the insurgency (Coopland 70). As historian Ranajit Guha observes, this mystery was not understood by most of the native servants, yet colonials ranging from the common soldier to the Viceroy’s wife insisted that the flatbreads had spread the contagion of the sepoy rebels’ paranoia. Published in 1901, *Kim* is set in the 1880s, so the Mutiny and its associations with food would have been within memory of many of the characters.

It is therefore fitting that the “test-sentence” players of the “Great Game” of espionage exchange in order to recognize each other hinges upon the proper allusion to *tarkeean*, a vegetable curry (231–232, 247–248). Though increasingly secure in his status as a sahib, Kim habitually begs and devours ghee and rice, sweetmeats and curries, as if he were what Kipling’s narrator calls “Asiatic of birth” (232). With Kim at its focal point, the novel functions on one level as a gastronomic quest through India, which even this very young sahib may master by denying—if only momentarily—his innate “European’s lust for flesh-meat” (242).

Then again, it should not be all that surprising that Kim, a boy rambling along the Grand Trunk Road through northwest India, would be able to acclimate himself to the food of India, to the extent that he can debate the niceties of how the exotic-sounding *tarkeean* and *kichree* should be prepared. Kim’s gastronomic authority reinforces an assumption established in earlier Victorian fiction, which positively drips with curry, particularly representations of Britons at home consuming it. The eponym of Wilkie Collins’s 1856 serial, *A Rogue’s Life*, complains of an overabundance of curry, along with such very Victorian English specialties as “haunch of mutton,” “cabinet pudding,” and “cream and tartlets.” He declares them “all excellent things, except when you have to eat them continually” (8).³ Collins’s roguish country doctor was not the only Victorian character who submitted to eating curry continually. In the

sporadic series that began by immediately preceding *Great Expectations* in *All the Year Round*, Dickens's "Uncommercial Traveller" manages to find a curry, albeit a very bad and expensive one, even in remote "Namelesston" (367). But Victorian fiction's most famous homage to curry occurs in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. There, Jos Sedley, the corpulent and vain Boggley Wollah tax collector, lately returned to London to cure a liver complaint, has convinced his doting mother to recreate at their home in Russell Square the Boggley Wollah kitchen. Effectively turning the cuisine of the other into Mummy's home cooking, Mrs. Sedley proudly presents "a fine curry for her son" (30). It is an acquired taste, as Becky Sharp, the scheming heroine of Thackeray's "novel without a hero," discovers: "flesh and blood could bear it no longer. She laid down her fork. 'Water, for Heaven's sake, water!' she cried" (31).

Cookbooks of her time suggest that most Britons differed with Becky Sharp, for the surprising abundance of curry in Victorian fiction seems to follow a domestic discourse. As early as 1807, Maria Rundell's best-selling *Domestic Cookery* asserted that "Curry, which was formerly a dish almost exclusively for the table of those who had made a long residence in India, is now so completely naturalised, that few dinners are thought complete unless one is on the table" (314). After the Mutiny, curry was, if possible, even more "completely naturalised." Without comment, Isabella Beeton published recipes for those Anglo-Indian hybrids kedgeree and mulligatawny, fully expecting readers of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* in 1859—and later of her *Book of Household Management*—to need and use those recipes. In this monumental work of Victorian cookery, Beeton included several recipes for curry powder, and presented with special pride directions for one mixture "founded on Dr. Kitchener's Recipe," noting that "[w]e have given this recipe for curry-powder, as some persons prefer to make it at home; but that purchased at any respectable shop is, generally speaking, far superior, and, taking all things into consideration, very frequently more economical" (215). With due respect to those respectable shops, the recipe Beeton provides yields a mixture that endures as *garam masala* in cookbooks of our more enlightened, globalized times a century and a half later. For instance, the "Tamil Nadu Curry Powder," described in Yamuna Devi's

award-winning compendium of Indian cuisines, improves upon Dr. Kitchener only in substituting a crushed, dried chili pod for the quarter teaspoon of cayenne that Beeton specifies (710).

If curry powder was the commodified essence of India, then its consumption was the essence of empire in the later nineteenth century. By no coincidence did Beeton's matter-of-fact inclusion of Kitchener's recipe appear so soon after the Government of India Act in 1858. And, as her ubiquitous cookbook suggests, the consumption of curry powder had become so common in British households that it was available—"far superior," more economically, and in mass-produced tins—at "any respectable shop." In this way, Victorians at home could placidly consume India every day. As Susan Zlotnick observes in an essay on empire and domestic discourse, "Indian curry belongs to the Victorian interior as much as tea and crumpets; and that belonging points to ways in which the Victorians understood India to be theirs" (84).

But half a world away, as the mass-produced consumables of the Industrial Revolution made their way to India, could Indians have assimilated Britain in any reciprocal way? Cookbooks hailing from both directions guided memsahibs in directing their Indian servants to prepare English specialties. By then curry was an English specialty, a hybrid that the colonizers defined as "Indian," though the Tamil word "*kari*" denotes nothing more specific than a sauce of any type. Unlike anglicized sauces, anglicized Indians occupied a much more complicated space.

In *Kim*, the Bengali Hurree Chunder Mookerjee—known simply as Hurree Babu, a moniker that effaces his individual identity—represents the folly of anglicization. He might be described as a personification of mulligatawny or kedgerie: neither British nor Indian, but a vain Indian effort to placate British tastes and prejudices. Though Kim is *his* apprentice in the Great Game, Hurree Babu exists primarily to provide comic relief, to the point that his irresponsibility would seem to undermine the greater wisdom of Her Majesty's agents. If Kim's consumption of India's gastronomic bounty translates into assimilation into and mastery over that culture, then the Babu fails to achieve what Edward Said terms affiliation—adoption and absorption into the colonizing center (*The World* 174–175). When Hurree Babu consumes vodka proffered by a French

spy, for example, he loses all inhibition and rails against the British. In fact, he would have compromised the Great Game had Kim not come to the rescue. As Kipling's omniscient narrator solemnly opines of the spectacle, "Never was so unfortunate a product of English rule in India more unhappily thrust upon aliens" (286). For all his vaunted education at the English university at Chandernagore, his adulation of Herbert Spencer, and his aspirations to the Royal Society, Hurree Babu is just a babu—a term that outgrew its initial definition as an Indian civil servant and took on the derogatory connotation of an Indian with just a smattering of English, an Indian unsuccessfully mimicking his English superiors. Hurree Babu's inability to consume anything European is a devastating register of his failure. As one onlooker remarks, "He represents in little India in transition—the monstrous hybridism of East and West" (288). Of this monstrous hybridism, this "flawed colonial mimesis," Homi Bhabha claims, "to be anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English" (87).

Yet Hurree Babu's comical British affectations evince his dislocation from his native identity. For this reason is he always cleaning his teeth and sucking on aromatics such as cardamom pods and *betel*: it is as if he were continually trying to cleanse his mouth of his native food, the only food for which he is judged fit. The cleansing, too, is a futile effort, for he can do so only with spices characteristic of the local cuisine. As a Russian spy observes, "He has lost his country and has not acquired any other" (288). Hurree Babu thus personifies and elaborates upon the famous refrain to "The Ballad of East and West," in the best-selling *Barrack Room Ballads* almost a decade earlier: "*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.*" Yet it is worth emphasizing that the Babu is a very competent scholar and spy; Creighton sahib would not otherwise have assigned to him Kim, the great hope of the Great Game. Still, Hurree Babu is unintentionally, almost unfailingly, funny. Said discerns why in *Culture and Imperialism*: the Babu is comical "not because he is incompetent or inept in his work—on the contrary, he is quite the opposite—but because he is not white" (153).

Fin-de-siècle popular fiction confirms this discomfort with assimilated "Hindoos"—a discomfort manifested in a compulsion to ridicule

them. At the time of *Kim*'s publication, for example, the *Strand* magazine was selling a staggering half million copies per month. As publisher of Arthur Conan Doyle's stories of Sherlock Holmes, the *Strand* was already widely recognized as "a British institution."⁴ Just two years before *Kim* would eat his way through India, the *Strand*'s pages featured a series of short stories depicting an Oxford-educated "Magnificent Maharajah," a virtuoso of cricket and in every way a perfect English gentleman—except, of course, that he is not English. To entertain his English and Anglo-Indian guests, the magnificent maharajah serves not "rice, ghee, and chupattis," as expected, but "Europe food." His consumption of Europe extends beyond food. One of the story's Anglo-Indian hangers-on cannot suppress her giggles as she remarks that the Maharajah's rooms are "Furnished throughout—he, he, he—by Liberty [the London department store] ... he's had suites of rooms furnished for any white visitors who may chance to come his way. Ridiculous, isn't it? *And* champagne—oh, gallons of it!" As the emphasis on champagne bears out, commodity consumption returns inevitably to the gastronomical, which here metonymically represents the consumption of culture and class. As the giggling guest cannot help pointing out, "he, he, he—he fancies, poor man, he's quite European. That's what comes of sending those creatures to Oxford!" (Allen 515–516). Treated as little more than an impudent tradesman, the maharajah may as well be Hurree Babu's aristocratic cousin. Certainly, the story's haughty memsahib is also a caricature, but this critique is lost as one reaches the story only after sifting through the *Strand*'s legendary thicket of advertizing wrappers, which included notices for such good English goods as Empress Curry Powder and H. W. White's "Raj" Watch.

Decades before the commodification of empire would reach such heights of excess, tacit rules governing Indians' mimicry by consumption were already firmly established. While foodways ran in both directions between the metropole and the periphery, the codes defining an English meal apparently elude the colonized native. Consumption is the province of the colonizer, if George Francklin Atkinson's *Curry and Rice (on Forty Plates) or the Ingredients of Social Life at "Our Station" in India* (1858) is any indication. Written and illustrated by Atkinson,

a captain in the Bengal Engineers, and dedicated to Thackeray, the sumptuously illustrated volume belongs to a Victorian genre that packaged picturesque Indian life for consumption by Britons at home. Figuring the entire subcontinent as a plate of consumables, the title alone invites just this sort of domestic consumption, as the volume goes on, rather tediously, to elaborate a conceit that puns on the lithograph plates and highly seasoned life they supposedly picture. Numerous personages including Major Garlic, Judge Turmeric, and Lord Coriander maintain order over “Our Station” at “Kabob,” an order made urgently relevant by the volume’s publication date, which coincides with the post-Mutiny transfer of control over the subcontinent to the Crown.

As if to promote this illusion of order, *Curry and Rice* constructs the English dinner as particularly mystifying to the natives whose culture and consumables are humorously offered up as “ours” to readers at home. The colonials’ meals are prepared by native cooks, in “Our Cook Room” (n.p.), which is depicted as a dark, primitive space far removed from “the scenes of spotless purity” that characterize “our kitchens” at home.⁵ Fortunately for the transplanted English diner, no trace of either “our” cook room or the “Eastern Soyers” who toil within remains at the site of consumption. In “Our Burra Khana,” “literally a grand feed” (n.p.), only the lithograph’s title and the attendants it pictures indicate that the grand feed is taking place anywhere but in an English dining room. As Atkinson’s narrator boasts, the native cook “can and does, with equal facility, dress a dinner in a tented field,” providing for the colonial “the certainty of as excellent a dinner as ever graced his table in the land of the West” (34). Allowed no identity except for an ancillary association with food, the Indian becomes an invisible instrument for reproducing England in India. This transformation analogously bears out Anne McClintock’s argument that the Victorian cult of domesticity effaced the working-class woman, on whose labour the illusion of the leisurely middle-class housewife depended (163–173). In *Curry and Rice*, Indian men—feminized by their labour and effaced by the conditions under which they perform it—replace working-class Englishwomen in the invisible margin.

Visible Indians, by contrast, are baffled by the mysteries of English cuisine. To those consuming *Curry and Rice* at home, “Our Nuwab” (nabob) must have cut a comfortingly ridiculous figure. Despite his “taste for English sports and pastimes,” this Brahmin is nonetheless hopeless at acquiring a proper taste for English food:

Lobsters and “tart fruits” commingle, while truffled sausages and sugared almonds share mutually the same dish. . . . the table slaves of his highness are not adepts at Christian cookery, and trifling irregularities greet the senses. The salad indicates the presence of cod-liver oil, and we have faint suspicions that “Day and Martin” [a popular brand of shoe blacking] has been introduced as a sauce. (n.p.)

Not surprisingly, “our” Nuwab “sits complacently, a looker-on,” not eating while his Anglo-Indian guests partake of his ignorant hospitality. In return, he is the glad receptacle of “destitute articles, for which no purchasers could be found when their owners left Kabob” (n.p.).

Of course, the empire in India began as a mission to acquire and control desirable articles, including tea and spices. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution in England necessitated that consumables flow in the other direction. The disposal of this plentitude through empire seems counterintuitive, for, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British Government shifted constantly to deal with famines among its native subjects, who barely had rice or pulses, let alone “Europe food” for magnificent maharajahs or our nuwabs to lavish on those who would anglicize them. Indeed, such “India crises” made for regular debate on the floor of Parliament.⁶ Even so, as Lord Macaulay baldly insisted,

The mere extent of empire is not necessarily an advantage. To many governments it had been cumbersome; to some it had been fatal. . . . It would be, on the most selfish view of the case, far better for us that the people of India were well-governed and independent of us than ill-governed and subject to us; that they were ruled by their own kings, but wearing broadcloth,

and working with our cutlery, than that they were performing their salaams to English collectors and English magistrates, but were too ignorant to value or too poor to buy English manufactures. To trade with civilized men is infinitely more profitable than to govern savages. (716–718)

In other words, empire would be futile if the Indians could not be trained to consume British commodities. As the terms of Macaulay's comparisons strongly suggest, the anglicized Indian may be threatening, but they are far preferable to a vast native population oblivious of British commodities. Like "Our" supposedly real-life "Nuwab," Hurree Babu and the Magnificent Maharajah show that, in late-Victorian fiction, it is impossible to achieve anglicization, let alone acceptance into the dominant culture, through such consumption. A century later, and at the former colonial center, what has changed?

Justly praised for its bright, multicultural feminism, Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* repeatedly evokes the relation between consumption, specifically of food, and cultural affiliation. However, the film invariably elides these complications through comedy. Such adjectives as "triumphant," "inspiring," "joyous," and "delightful" appear with almost numbing regularity in reviews of *Beckham*, along with some mention of its intelligently wholesome affirmation of adolescent girls and ethnic minorities. Yet the effect of this "you-go-girl, feel-good" surprise summer hit of 2003 (the release date in the United States) is ultimately unsettling. Director Chadha has a light touch in exploring the postcolonial condition of "things that have messy borders," or what Bhabha calls the interstices between cultures (Koshy 161). As the titles of her earlier films—*Bhaji on the Beach* and *What's Cooking?*—might suggest, Chadha tends to explore these things, these interstices, through food. Notably *Beckham's* few detractors tend to deplore its lack of originality in depicting these interstices, played out in "culture-clash clichés" (Whipp) and the conventions of "routine culture-clash comedies" (Niccum). Whether stale or fresh, this culture clash is one in which food plays a pivotal role, as it constitutes a persistent and eloquent, yet overlooked, index to Jess's ambivalent identity.

Even those without teenaged daughters are likely to be aware that *Bend It Like Beckham* tells the story of Jess Bhamra, a teenager from Southall, West London—a young woman gifted with the ability to bend a football around obstacles, in a manner reminiscent of David Beckham, the legendary football phenomenon perhaps better known in the United States as a metrosexual icon, and champion for well-groomed heterosexual men everywhere. Jess's name is really Jessminda, but only her mother calls her that, in Punjabi-accented English. Jess yearns to play a Great Game of a different order from Kim's, and significantly she wishes "to play for England." In fact, the movie opens with her fantasy of converting a pass from Beckham into a goal, and clinching the World Cup for England. Before anything like that can happen, though, she must overcome the objections of her stereotypically (and comically) old-world parents, who misunderstand and thwart her football dreams until she makes them recognize her athletic genius and understand what it is to live in modern, multicultural Britain. Yet the story ends with Jess and her "friend from football," Jules, exiled to the United States—to California, no less—the land of misfits and dreamers.

Throughout, food piquantly articulates Jess's dilemma of negotiating between cultures. Where Kipling's Kim comes of age as a sahib by mastering (and eating his way through) the "grey" muddle of India, food traps Jess in her parents' expectations. Through food, the film makes hard-and-fast the demarcation between her aspirations for the future and the cultural traditions she is forced to inherit. It is suggestive that *Bend It Like Beckham* takes its title from a scene in which Jess tearfully confides to a friend, "Anyone can cook *aloo gobi* [cauliflower and potatoes in a spicy tomato sauce], but who can bend a ball like Beckham?"⁷ And so repeatedly the film pictures Jess choosing between her dream of "playing for England" and "cooking Punjabi dinner." As her battle-axe mother (a comic stereotype) avers, "What kind of family would want a daughter-in-law who can kick a football around all day but can't make round chapattis?" Chadha represents this dilemma repeatedly and graphically: Jess bumps a cabbage on her head until her mother smacks her on the shoulder and reminds her to tend the *aloo gobi*; in the garden

Jess dribbles a football, only to be handed a platter of samosas that effectively puts an end to her footwork.

Though she is seldom pictured eating anything, Jess's dilemma of being othered by curry plays out a cinematic variation on a familiar theme in postcolonial migrant fiction. Described by its author, Salman Rushdie, as "a love song to our mongrel selves," *The Satanic Verses* meditates on postcolonial migrancy ("In Good Faith" 394). Saladin Chamcha is "the Man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice" who, heard but not seen, "ruled the airwaves of Britain," where "he could convince an audience that he was Russian, Chinese, Sicilian, the President of the United States" (*Satanic Verses* 60). To the extent that a caricature of the mimic man is possible, Chamcha is precisely it. Magically saved from the plane crash that precipitates the novel's plot and just as magically disfigured into "a horned goat man" (251), the more-English-than-thou Chamcha seeks refuge at a run-down immigrant haven, tellingly a Bangladeshi restaurant, full of people he refuses to acknowledge as his "own people, [his] own kind" (253). "Always fussy about his food" (275), he is horrified to be brought such "filthy foreign food" as "a masala dosa instead of a packet cereal complete with toy silver spacemen" (258). As alien as a spaceman and as helpless as a toy, Chamcha ironically finds his goatish form adopted as the icon of London's activist Asian and black youth.

Likewise, the hungry narrator of London centered novel *The Intended*, Indo-Guyanese writer David Dabydeen's reworking of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, must reject the filthy foreign food that reminds him of the home he has just left. On his way to Oxford, the young scholar visits his Pakistani friend, whose mother

slipped some money into my blazer pocket, and gave me food, two tins of meat curry and boiled channa, to take to Oxford. She ordered Rashida to wrap up half a dozen chapatis in tin foil, and all the samosas she could find in the fridge. . . . I feigned gratitude, took up my presents and left. When I was far from the house I threw away all the food, not wanting my Oxford room to smell with curry and spices . . . I felt bad as the food

popped into the bottom of the bin. For a moment I thought of retrieving it. (215–216)

Carefully anglicized through study of Tennyson and Milton (not to mention Conrad) the narrator cannot risk succumbing to such spicy temptation at the point that his English dream, along with its “refrigerator stocked with miniature bottles and sandwiches” (203), is so close at hand. To varying degrees, both *The Satanic Verses* and *The Intended* have been described as semi-autobiographical. Their gastronomic conflicts, too, derive from real migrant experience. For instance, a sixteen-year-old V. S. Naipaul confided to his sister in 1950 that he had left his mother’s homemade flatbreads in a wastebasket at the New York hotel where he had stayed before boarding a ship to England. The disposal marked the beginning of his long exile from Trinidad. The justification for waste he could ill afford is simple: “ethnic” foods taint the migrant as a migrant.

Unlike such literary and real-life forebears, *Beckham’s* Jess Bhamra does not have the ability to cast off curry and spices. More importantly, she is not a migrant but a native Briton, but curry and spices still effectively prevent her from creating her own identity. This association persists so strongly perhaps because she is, as a woman, charged with maintaining the traditional culture by preparing its food. In one transitional scene, the elder Bhamras forbid her from playing football forever. They have good reason, for she has once again defied them, this time sneaking off to a match in Germany, while her sister Pinky invents a cover for her. Perhaps inevitably, they are discovered when their father finds an article in the paper announcing the match. The subsequent scene, which might be described as a montage of contrasting but complementary, very short scenes, presents the clash between tradition and multicultural Britain:

Scene: Parking lot. Bus pulls up.

Jess: Jules—

Mel: You all right, Jess? [*Camera cuts to Bhamras standing by their car.*] Is that your mum and dad?

Scene: Kitchen, where Bhamra sisters struggle to make chapattis.

Scene: Jess's room, where parents are sitting on the bed.

Mrs. Bhamra: What haven't we done for these girls? We bought a car for Pinky. Jessie wanted computer, music center, TV, video.

Scene: Pinky's room.

Jess: Pinks, how do you know Teet's the one?

Pinky: I just know. When you're in love with someone, you'll do anything for that person.

Jess: Pinks, do you think Mum and Dad will still speak to me if I ever brought home a *goreh*?

Pinky [*turns around*]: Who?

Jess: No one. I'm just saying.

Pinky [*rising*]: It's that coach bloke, innit? I knew something was up when he turned up here.

Jess: Nothing's happened.

Pinky: You make sure it doesn't all right? Look, Jess, you can marry anyone you want. It's fine when you're in love and all that. But do you really wanna be the one that everyone stares at, every family do, cos you're the one who married the English bloke?

Jess: He's Irish.

Pinky: They're all the bloody same to them, innit? And anyway, why go to so much grief when there's so many good-looking Indian boys to marry. It's not like before, you know? Now they wear good clothes, got flashy jobs. Even know how to cook and wash up.

The scene economically paints Jess's choices in the inhospitable interstice between cultures.

Not surprisingly, food occupies a central space in this interstice. Spatially the scene cuts from the outside world containing the team bus to the claustrophobic kitchen, where the chastened sisters are condemned to the penance of traditional clothes and the mournful preparation of chapattis. The theme of consumption broadens to include modern, "western" commodities, which the parents upstairs enumerate

as having driven their daughters away from “proper” Indian womanhood. Quite inevitably, the scene winds up to the conflict that perhaps underlies all intercultural contact: interracial sex. However, the dialogue all too deftly elides this conflict through comedy, with Pinky’s assertion that Indian men have not only shed their stereotypical nerdiness, but in fact “even know how to cook and wash up.” Perhaps predictably, the narrative circles back to the kitchen in this short scene, suggestively titled “Unhappy Homecoming.” For where indeed is home? It is a particularly suggestive coincidence that Bhabha locates at the interstices between cultures the Freudian *unheimlich*, or “unhomely,” moment in which what should be secret comes to light. Though, as Bhabha fails to acknowledge, postcolonial conditions vary geographically, culturally, and historically, they are inevitably conflicts between the *heimlich* hearth and the alien *unheimlich*. The migrant is torn between homes. So, however, are his children, who have never known any home but the former colonial center. Struggling to feel at home where she can play for England, Jess finds her parents’ hearth anything but home.

She is doubly displaced, for outside the Bhamras’ oppressive haven in suburbia, Jess finds no more welcoming space. Reaching for her dream on the football pitch, she is awakened to her marginalized status when an opposing player tells her to “Piss off, Paki!” Jess’s righteous retaliation gets her ejected from the game, literally marginalized on the idealized space of the football pitch as well as in the larger society. Racial slurs might be considered an extreme form of what Gayatri Spivak has memorably termed “othering,” homogenizing individuals into a collective, different, inferior category. In *Beckham*, food functions as an othering mechanism as well. Among the film’s many comical touches drawn from Chadha’s life, Paula Paxton, Jules’s benignly bigoted mother, greets Jess by confiding that, “I made a lovely curry the other night.” The fleeting comment, doubtless intended to provoke laughter, nonetheless depicts the dominant culture putting Jess in her place. It is an essentializing moment in which Paula Paxton identifies Jess not as her daughter’s schoolmate, but with a domesticated, exotic dish. Chadha’s “horri-fied” revelation in her commentary to the DVD that such remarks “just poured out of my head onto the computer. It was all the stuff I’d kept

inside, I think, from my English friends' mums when I was at school" is thus particularly significant. Belying her insensitivity, Mrs. Paxton, like housewives all over a harmonious multicultural Britain, manages to whip up a dish of curry that she judges "lovely"—possibly a synonym for "authentic" but in any case one that needs conform only to her taste—a feat that suffices to sum up the other. Mrs. Rundell, Mrs. Beeton, and any number of other Victorian *über*-Angels in the House would have been proud.

For Chadha's properly, phenotypically "English" characters, food is never so fraught, because they can assimilate all of it. The Paxtons can even use imported food items to enact football's tricky offside rule:

Scene: Picnic table in Paxtons' back garden.

Frank: The teriyaki sauce is the goalkeeper.

Paula: Goalkeeper.

Frank: The posh French mustard is the defender.

Paula: Defender.

Frank: The salt is the attacker.

Paula: Sea salt.

Frank: The sea salt is the attacker. Now, when the ball is played forward, the sea salt has to be level with the mustard.

[*Jules enters.*]

Hello, darling. Right. Now watch and concentrate. [*Moves sea salt back and forth.*] Offside, onside. Offside, onside.

Paula: Offside, onside.

Jules: What are you doing?

Paula: Well, if the mountain won't come to Mohammed—

Jules: What?

Frank: Don't laugh, I'm trying to teach your mother the offside rule.

Paula: Well, I've decided that I've got to take an interest or I'm going to lose you. And this way we can all enjoy football as a family. Right. So don't tell me. [*Hesitates.*] The offside rule is when the French mustard has to be between the teriyaki sauce and the sea salt.

Frank: She's got it.

Jules: Got it.

Frank: Wonderful.

It is certainly to be wondered that Japanese teriyaki sauce, Italian *sale di mare*, and the “posh French mustard” are not just the bounty of the globalized table. For an ordinary English family, in their cozy English garden, these products with far-flung origins *are* “football” in a way that *aloo gobi* never can be for Jess.

Nor, however, can the food of the England for which she yearns to play. In fact, one of the earliest obstacles to her playing competitively is the uniform, whose shorts reveal a scar caused by an early attempt to prepare that peculiarly British culinary monstrosity, beans on toast. Perhaps ironically echoing the gastronomic misadventures of Hurree Babu and his English-authored contemporaries, the perils of unfamiliar English fare constitute a familiar rite of passage for the postcolonial subject. As Rushdie's hyper-anglicized Saladin Chamcha discovers, for instance, the first skirmish in the conquest of England consists of conquering that lowly English breakfast staple, the kipper. The “spikes and bones” of “that peculiar-tasting smoked fish” (44), England, are nothing compared to Jess's disfiguring beans on toast. But for the Paxtons (who for Jess's family stand in for “those English”), consumption is not conflict. Food does not trigger anxious, unhomey ambivalence. At the Paxtons' English table, “we” are the world, and if the mountain does not come to Mohammed, then its edible commodities do. It is perhaps overstatement to suggest that the contrast created by such scenes continues the colonial world order articulated in *Kim* and *Vanity Fair*. Neither Kim nor Jos Sedley is compromised by his exotic consumptions, because both are always sure of their identity as sahibs. As this contrast reveals, though, to consider food as a catalogue of identity is to recognize the compromised nature of the colonial condition, continued and amplified in its postcolonial heirs. It is very much the condition of lived experience, of insuperable difference, displacement, and exclusion.

Whether depicted in Victorian colonialist texts, contemporary Anglophone novels, or family-friendly mainstream film, curry endures as

the shared cuisine that paradoxically divides. In the DVD's "The Making of" feature, Gurinder Chadha calls *Bend It Like Beckham* her "most autobiographical film." It is certainly her most successful. And just as *Kim* was so popular in India as to warrant a monument in Bombay, so *Beckham* is the highest-grossing British-made film ever in Britain. In an interview for *FLM* magazine that became the notes to the DVD, Chadha declares of the film's success, "The Empire Strikes Back!" Her words would seem to resonate as a celebration of multiculturalism, or what the late British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook called "the strength and future of British identity," a distinctly multicultural one. This 2001 speech's conflation of multiculturalism and curry is so legendary that it is best known as "The Chicken Tikka Masala Speech," whose eponym Cook called "a true British national dish," triumphant proof that Britain has "com[e] to terms with multiculturalism" As he noted, the dish is not original to India, but, like mulligatawny and kedgeree, an adaptation to placate British tastes. Yet, as the necessity of a speech assuring Britons of their strong identity suggests, culinary fusion, however tasty or popular, does not translate into a happy hybrid society. An observation by the American writer bell hooks is relevant here: "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21). Seen in this way, the taste for curry may be loosely analogous to the popularity of *Beckham*, the substitution of one consumption for another. The nineteenth-century French gastronome Anthelme Brillat-Savarin famously wrote, "Tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you what you are" ("Dis-moi ce que tu manges, et je te dirai ce que tu es"). The menacing aptness of his pronouncement endures disturbingly in *Bend It Like Beckham*, which after all is supposed to depict Jess Bhamra's process of becoming whom—not what—she is meant to be.

Notes

- 1 See Randall, Jussawalla, and McCutchan.
- 2 See Brantlinger and Said, *Orientalism*.
- 3 *A Rogue's Life* was first published in *Household Words* 1–29 March 1856.
- 4 Quoted from the title of Chapter 1 in Reginald Pound, *Mirror of the Century: the Strand Magazine 1891–1950*. The *London Evening Standard* called the mag-

azine's demise "the extinction of more than a magazine—of a British institution" (March 12, 1950).

- 5 New Delhi's Asian Educational Services issued an unpaginated facsimile in 1999.
- 6 See both sections on "The Great Game" in *Imperialism and Empire: a Documentary Sourcebook* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), where the starvation of Indians is represented as a decennial crisis.
- 7 Quotations are taken from the English subtitles and director-commentary features of the DVD. This disk's bonus features include a segment in which Chadha prepares aloo gobi and submits it for the approval of two "aunties."

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