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TASTEFUL REMINISCENCES: FASHIONING OF A POSTCOLONIAL GASTRONOMIC BENGALINESS IN CHITRITA BANERJI'S *THE HOUR OF THE GODDESS*

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Abstract

Chitrita Banerji's memoir The Hour of the Goddess *(2001) explores, among other things, the association between food and cultural identity. Growing up in a middle-class household in the Indian state of West Bengal, Banerji recounts the various everyday and occasional food practices that shaped her cultural consciousness. From the sights, sounds, and smells emanating from the kitchen, ritual offerings of food to the domestic deity, to the celebratory feasts held by her family and community played a pivotal role in Banerji's embodiment of Bengaliness. However, it is only when she travels to the United States, befriends and finally marries a Bangladeshi Muslim man that she truly recognizes the limited and limiting scope of the tastes she grew up associating with Bengaliness.*

This paper will analyze the text of Banerji's food memoir to study the gastro-political constitution of modern Bengali identity which is revealed through the author's representation of the charged cultural exchange between West Bengalis and East Bengalis that has permeated all spheres Bengali life from late twentieth century onwards. Using Bourdieu's theory of taste and De Certeau's concept of the Everyday, this paper delves into the distinctions in Bengali local, religious, and economic classes that is actualized through distinctions of alimentary preferences. Banerji is the quintessentially Bhabha-ian unhomed migrant, whose defamiliarized perspective could appreciate the plurality of everyday gastronomic performances of Bengali identity. Within the postcolonial world of gastronomic pluralism, taste creates a play between separation and connection among Bengalis on either side of the international border.

Keywords: taste; Bengaliness; postcolonial; the Everyday; food practices; Bengal-partition

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1. Introduction

Chitrita Banerji's *The Hour of the Goddess* published in 2001 is a food memoir that explores the memories of women, food, and rituals associated with the author's Bengali identity. The exonym 'Bengali' is a contested term, and the identity associated with it is equally complicated. The Cambridge online dictionary defines the noun Bengali as "a person from Bangladesh or West Bengal in India" (Cambridge, n.d., Meaning of Bengali in English section). What the dictionaries fail to substantiate is how people from two different countries, subject to distinct national laws, rights, and duties, have come to be denoted by the same name. To an outsider, people from the eastern state of West Bengal and from Bangladesh are often regarded as indistinguishable and hence interchangeable.

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Yet, for residents of either West Bengal or Bangladesh, the sense of being a Bengali is unique to their local habitus and is characterized by, among other things, specific preferences and taboos of food. The ambiguous use of "Bengali" in dictionaries for people from West Bengal as well as from Bangladesh stem from the history of the two places being part of an undivided land before being split into India and Pakistan in 1947. The division of Bengal into West Bengal, which had a Hindu majority, and East Pakistan, which had a Muslim majority, was fraught with vehement protests and resistance and the event has left behind some long-lasting wounds that sometimes lead to some unwarranted differences between the two Bengali communities. The relationship between the Bengalis from either side of the border is a complex one that sometimes sweetens with their shared love for their mother-tongue, and at other times becomes hostile with their comparisons and competitions of taste in food.

The Hour of the Goddess is one of the many food memoirs that have been published during the ongoing wave of memoirist gastronomic writing that has started from the late 1990s. A postcolonial work of creative non-fiction, it shares some features with other food memoirs that have originated from postcolonial societies. However, Banerji's memoir provides her readers with a unique perspective of a postcolonial Bengali woman whose geographic and historic journey allowed her to experience three distinct transactions of taste. As someone born in 1947, Banerji grew up in a Bengali society that was going through the harrowing refugee crisis following partition. Her family had been first-hand witnesses the violence and bloodshed of partition and this in turn had coloured their belief of Muslim Bengalis of Bangladesh. She writes about how her interactions with her friends would often end in picking on the other kind of Bengali and making fun of their practices. However, being a citizen of the postcolonial, globalized India, Banerji is able to defamiliarize herself with the notion of a homogenized, Hindu Bengaliness that she had grown up with thereby transcending the traumatic biases of her predecessors. Her decision to marry her Muslim Bangladeshi husband and settle in Bangladesh for some time led to her questioning the very notion of an unchanging personhood, and the futility of the shoring up on the identity of the Self as against the Other. Her memoir is a journey that exemplifies the inherent hybridity of any identity.

Banerji's story about her life on both sides of the India-Bangladesh border reveals the everyday negotiations that characterize our lives in postcolonial hybridized societies in general. Her narrative leads to a nuanced understating of Bengaliness and exposes the finer aspects of taste that sustain class-divisions within an apparently uniform cultural group. In this paper, I will try to discuss the politics of taste that goes into the fashioning of a complex and chequered cultural identity like Bengaliness for a postcolonial narrative subject like Chitrita Banerji. Taste, in the Bourdieusian sense, is a sociological parameter of classification, which treats food as being much more than a mere material, nutritional requirement of a biological body. Eating is never simply a process of putting food in the mouth, chewing, and swallowing, but one in which we consume the norms of our culture. The total significance of food in our lives can only be understood by considering the body as a bio-cultural formation: one that is guided by dietary norms like purity, impurity, prescriptions, and taboos that are dictated by religion, social class, and economic capacity. Only then can feeding the self be understood as a culturally mediated everyday activity that has the capacity to build, alter, break, and also re-build identity.

2. *Defamiliarization of Taste*

Banerji was born and brought up in a middle-class Bengali family before travelling to USA for pursue higher studies. While studying at Harvard University, she met her future husband, a Bangladeshi Muslim man, whom she married and went to live with his family in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Given that Banerji was born in 1947 and following textual clues, the timeline for her travels is as follows. She grew up in Bengal in the 1950s when Pakistan, which included erstwhile East-Pakistan that is now Bangladesh, and India were just settling down as independent nations. She migrated to USA in her 20s, and married before returning to the East. Her return coincided with the years following the formation of Bangladesh when it was still a "newly created, war-ravaged country" (Banerji, 2014, 63). Banerji's perspective of Bengaliness, therefore, is shaped by these three key moments when the shift from one culture to the other resulted in a defamiliarization of practices of everyday gastronomy.

De Certeau has observed that the everyday procedures of consumption "lack the repetitive fixity of rites, customs or reflexes, kinds of knowledge which are no longer (or not yet) articulated in discourse" and are hence more prone to being overlooked (1988, 45). However, these quotidian practices of food that usually go unnoticed due to their mundaneness, gained new meaning in the eyes of Banerji who came to associate them with her Bengali identity in her writing.

For Banerji, the first defamiliarization happens when she moves to America. Migratory displacement entails a break from the context within which one's food makes meaning. The spatio-temporal distancing causes a defamiliarization of all things previously taken for granted, and makes the known unknown. Banerji experiences the anxiety of realising that in place of the older binary construction of the domestic versus the public, a new order is in place where the private and public, the home and the world are intertwined and inseparable, or in other words what Bhabha calls "unhomeliness" (Bhabha, 1992, 141). The feeling of disorientation makes the familiar unfamiliar, and novelty out of cultural practices that were previously insignificant or unnoticed. Banerji's memoir begins at the moment when she experiences this defamiliarization for the first time. The account of her first Christmas in America is marked by her bewilderment at the Christian celebration of divinity, which she had imagined would be a "compensatory event" to the festivals of Bengali culture but was not (Banerji, 2014, 5). In the Indian state of West Bengal, Durga puja is the biggest celebration of divinity that takes place every autumn and spans over a period of five days. It is a very public affair, characterized by a lot of pomp and show, where people dress up and gather to worship the idol of goddess Durga. Food plays a major role in Durga puja, as each of the five days has prescribed items of food that are offered to the goddess and the devotees then consume the same combination of foods. Each day people meet, sing, dance, and sit together to have communal feasts. With her experience of such Bengali festivals back home, she had expected Christmas to be a compensatory event. However, the quiet, private celebration of Christmas seemed alien to her. The contrasting feasting rituals of American Christian society and her native Bengali Hindu community left her feeling excluded from the private eating "behind closed doors" (Banerji, 2014, 5).

Banerji contrasts this feeling of otherness to the emotional inclusiveness she had experienced in the feasts of Durga puja back home. She seeks consolation by recalling the vivid olfactory memories of "puffy *luchis* (deep fried puffed bread), of *alur dam* (slow-cooked spicy potatoes) nestling in a glistening, dark, tamarind sauce, of golden *chholar dal* (yellow split peas) spiced with cumin, coriander, cinnamon, and cardamom, its thick texture flecked with tiny coconut chips fried in sizzling mustard oil" (Banerji, 2014, 4). Against the seemingly unwelcoming and unfamiliar American foodscape, these known tastes seemed so intimately embodied in her existence that she could "wrap [her tongue] around the cool memory of a rice pudding" (Banerji, 2014, 4). Standing within the construct of American society, Banerji has a fresh perspective of her own cultural customs. This estrangement transforms mundane acts of the past into unique traditions and quotidian food rituals now become symbolic of a cultural heritage. She takes long distance lessons of cooking from her mother over letters, and starts cooking Bengali food in her American kitchen (Banerji, 2014, 5). In a Butlerian sense[2], Banerji's preparation of Bengali food in her American kitchen becomes a performative expression of her Bengaliness, because her cooking becomes "a discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (Butler, 2011, xxi). By preparing Bengali food in her

[2] In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler problematizes the binary model of gender by proposing the concept of performative identity that allows for a spectrum of gender and sexual expressions. Butler makes a feminist interpretation of Austin's linguistic theory. Butler argues that gender cannot be a 'natural' attribute of a body since this very designation of natural is a cultural construct. Bodies can neither be understood as existing outside culture nor as passive receivers of cultural inscription. Instead, bodies are constituted in the performance of culture. "Gender reality is performative" and the identity is real "only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 527). Butler's arguments imply that identity is not an innate quality, a given; rather it is a continuous process of performing normative actions. This also applies to cultural identity like Bengaliness. Quotidian domestic gastronomy constitutes a range of performative cultural identities, including embodied identities of class, caste, religion, and region, that subliminally mark the way we perceive ourselves. By being performative instead of expressive, social subjects "effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal" (Butler, 2002, 528).

American kitchen, Banerji not only connects with her cultural roots but also asserts her identity as a Bengali woman living in a foreign land. The act of cooking becomes a way for her to resist assimilation and maintain a sense of belonging to her heritage. Through the flavours and aromas of her dishes, Banerji is able to recreate a piece of home, share it with others, thereby bridging the gap between her past and present. This culinary practice not only sustains her connection to her culture but also serves as a form of resistance against cultural erasure and homogenization.

3. Gastronomic Bengaliness

The "Bengaliness" that I have discussed in this paper is not an essentialist notion. It is not an innate, given, fixed identity that one can define as a strict watertight category. As with any social identity, Bengaliness is a construct that is shaped by subjective 'positioning' and not an essence (Hall, 1990, 226). Banerji's Bengaliness that is explored in her memoir may not be consistent with that explored by other Bengali writers in their writings. Her Bengali identity is constituted in instances of her personal cultural journey, and is not inherently a pure category but a hybrid construct. Like many other food memoirists, Banerji constitutes her cultural identity around the micro-narratives of everyday gastronomic taste, instead of grand discourses of national identity. The transient nature of everyday practices constitutes identities through tactful negotiations and not through momentous occasions and grand monuments expressing Nationalism. Taste as a manifestation of habitus is a durable yet changeable system (Bourdieu, 2020, 72), which is capable of acquiring multiple social, cultural, and economic influences as one moves through life. It is a more fluid and nuanced mode of expressing cultural identity. The concentration on everyday food practices effectively highlights the differences that are often obscured in the macro-discourse of nationalism. Even as Banerji is grounded in her claim to a Bengali heritage and sustains some continuity with the past, she also shares a profound discontinuity with her fellow Bengalis. One must understand postcolonial, diasporic identity not as something presupposed by a 'pure' self that one must excavate and reveal but rather constituted of "critical points of deep and significant difference" (Hall, 1990, 225). The diasporic self, in this sense, does not come from what already exists as its "roots" but is constituted in one's traversal through "routes". It qualifies identity as not just 'being' but also 'becoming' (Hall, 1990, 225). Hence, Bengalis as a cultural group may share the same the 'roots', but the 'routes' that each individual Bengali has taken to arrive at their present selves are different. The differences that are generated by the unique journeys undertaken by individuals, despite their common geographical origin, are as much a part of their cultural identity as are their similarities. This realization becomes a key factor in shaping Banerji's perspective of her Bengali identity.

The differences between individuals in a society implies a social order, a classification. It is in the construction of this social order that taste, as an expression of the habitus, becomes an embodied cultural performance. Bourdieu defines habitus as "a system of shared social dispositions and cognitive structures which generates perceptions, appreciations and actions" (1988, 279). Bourdieu studies the processes by which a social body is constituted by internalising social structures and producing a generative structure of habitus. He introduces the concept of 'taste' as a manifestation of the embodied habitus. He foregrounds his study of taste by abolishing the "sacred frontier" that separates aesthetic taste of music, painting, and literature from the more mundane tastes of food, sport, and hairstyle (Bourdieu, 1984, 6). This separation of two spheres of consumption – aesthetic and ordinary – had been the "basis of high aesthetics since Kant, between the 'taste of sense' and the 'taste of reflection'" (Bourdieu, 1984, 6). By collapsing this division, Bourdieu paves the way for discovering relations that link something as bodily as food to taste in art. Bourdieu classifies his work as 'constructive structuralism' or 'structuralist constructivism', and both concepts of habitus and taste may be used to facilitate an embodied reading of food practices. Post-Bourdieu, taste and distinctions of taste may be understood as constituted in the embodied habitus instead of being innate qualities of a person.

When read in light of Bourdieu's theory of habitus, Banerji's memoir reveals a number of instances that exemplify the role of gastronomic embodiment in shaping cultural identity. Take for instance, her account of *harir loot* that accompanied a Bengali cultural devotional ceremony known as *kirtan*. A

traditional form of Vaishnavite worship in Bengal, *kirtans* are characterised by trance-like dance to devotional songs (Banerji, 2014, 13). *Kirtans* conclude with a playful ritual called *harir loot*, which is a ceremonial scattering of sweets called *batashas* among the devotees. As Bengali Hindus of the Vaishnava sect, Banerji's grandparents often organised *kirtans* at their place in Calcutta. The second chapter of Banerji's book opens with the description of a *kirtan* session at their house, where handfuls of the airy, puffy *batashas* were flung into the air and devotees bent down to collect them as they landed on the floor. (Banerji, 2014, 15). Banerji describes a core childhood memory wherein she, as a six- or seven-year-old girl, hunted *batashas* among the rustling feet of other devotees. With time, the practice of *kirtans* had gradually disappeared from their household. Banerji too had forgotten about it in the process of growing up, graduating from college, and going to America. However, the embodied memory of the taste and its association with innocent joy and alacrity would remain with her only to be re-discovered at a future time and place.

Removed from the context of her childhood, the taste of *batashas* came back to Banerji years later, after her marriage, when she was in a remote Bangladeshi village "conducting a drinking water survey for an international agency" (Banerji, 2014, 66). There, thirsty and exhausted, she was offered refreshments by a local tea-seller. Along with tea in "chipped earthen cups", the boy unexpectedly brought along a bowl of *batashas* (Banerji, 2014, 67). As Banerji put the sweet in her mouth and savoured the familiar taste, she experienced an instant connection between the Bengal of her childhood and the Bangladesh of her current venture. On the unfamiliar soil of Bangladesh, where Banerji was at times vexed by her work, the *batashas* brought back the propitiousness that she had felt in her childhood when she participated in *harir loot* at her grandparents' place:

> A charge of energy pulsed through my body. For one moment, I felt the pall of inertia, doubt, and despair lift away from me. In this alien land so perversely close to my home, I found myself once again ready and eager, sharply poised to give chase, filled with the confidence of capturing Krishna's largesse (Banerji, 2014, 67-68).

At this moment, when a Bangladeshi 'profane' food triggers the recall of a 'sacred' taste from her past, Banerji's embodied cultural identity is reconstituted to accommodate the new associations formed with the remembered taste. Here, I use 'profane' in the sense of Eliade's characterization of practices which are distinct from sacred ones in terms of the latter's spatial and temporal associations. As opposed to sacred practices are bound by restrictions of time and space, profane practices occur in "homogenous and neutral" time and space. The profane, in other words, is characterised by its unspecified spatio-temporal nature (Eliade, 1968, 22). Banerji re-embodies her Vaishnavite identity through the act of remembering the taste of the inexpensive sweetmeat from her childhood, while simultaneously embodying the newer association of the poverty and destitution in this remote Bangladeshi village where *batashas* are all that people can afford to have with tea. Being removed from the source of her memory associated with *batashas* and tasting the food in a completely different, non-sacred, context in Bangladesh, makes it a complex and composite experience of Bengaliness for Banerji.

Banerji recounts a number of such specific and some general associations with food that are constitutive of her Bengali selfhood. Perhaps the most significant of these gastronomic associations is with rice. Bengal is part of the rainfed upland rice ecosystem and with other eastern states like Assam, Bihar, and Orissa, accounts for about half of the nation's demand for rice (Mahajan, 2017, 58-60). Like the rice loving South Indians, Bengalis also put rice to a variety of uses. It is the primary starch for everyday consumption, and the numerous variants of the grain are processed into different forms like "puffed rice, rice flakes, [and] popped rice (plain or coated with sugar)" (Banerji, 2014, 132). *Chira* (rice flakes), beloved for its portability, is depicted in Bengali literature accompanying heroes on their travels or being sent with the bride on her journey to her in-laws' house (Banerji, 2014, 132-3). Rice is an integral part of culinary as well as extra-culinary culture of Bengal. A fine powder of rice is used to draw *alpana* (ornamental plastering) on the walls and alcoves of homes during pujas and festivals (Banerji, 2014, 129). Another staple of the area is fish. The delta regions of Bengal, having access to both freshwater and sea water, account for the prominence of fish in Bengali culture. Bengali Brahmins are notorious for eating fish which they have 'vegetarianized' by dubbing it the

"fruit of the ocean" (Das Gupta et al 5). Like rice, fish too holds great symbolic value and is incorporated in a range of Bengali cultural rituals. In weddings, a large carp is sent as a ceremonial gift from the bride's family to the groom's, as it is considered as a sign of plentitude (Banerji, 2014, 137). Fish and ears of rice are also recurrent motifs in *alpanas* displayed during the domestic worship of goddess Lakshmi (Banerji, 2014, 137).

Banerji describes the cooling foods that are usually consumed during the sweltering Bengal summers. Cooling foods include dishes like lightly seasoned vegetable stews of pumpkins and gourds or rice flakes "soaked in cool water and accompanied by milk or yogurt, ground coconut, summer fruits like banana or mango" (Banerji, 2014, 132-133). The light, copious broths of vegetable curries help to restore the water that gets drained out of the body due to excessive sweating in the humid climate of Bengal. This is also the time of the year that Banerji associates with eating sour foods. She describes the delight of eating slices of green mangoes with salt and mustard oil (2014, 32), spice-coated mango pickles, or the sour and spicy fish *ambol* (2014, 90). After the difficult summer, the arrival of monsoon was celebrated with crispy fried hilsa served with khichuri (dish of rice, lentils, and vegetables) (Banerji, 2014, 101). Autumn is a season of festivities in Bengal when three female Hindu deities—Durga, Lakshmi, and Kali—are worshipped, and elaborate feasts are arranged. Autumn and winter are the times when Bengalis indulge in richer foods "that are so hard to digest in the heat of the summer or the persistent dampness of the monsoon" (Banerji, 2014, 3). After moving to America, the cultural difference dawns on Banerji when she understands the way autumn is experienced in the West. In sharp contrast to the festive mood back home, autumn "in the northern latitude, is the time to start wrapping up, to draw inward from the far-flung activities of the summer, start the school year, and buckle down to the serious business of living" (Banerji, 2014, 3).

Banerji's childhood in Calcutta coincided with the years immediately following the partition of India. The partition resulted in a huge influx of Hindu refugees from the erstwhile East Bengal that became a part of Pakistan in 1947. This created a mixed demography within the state with people from East Bengal, referred to by the semi-derisive term *bangal*, and those from West Bengal, referred to as *ghoti*. The partition also led to a major portion of Bengal's fisheries and paddy fields going to East Pakistan, resulting in the rise in the price of both fishes and rice. The political turmoil of the refugee situation in West Bengal came to be expressed as a growing comparison and competition between *ghoti* and *bangal* tastes. In her interaction with fellow *bangal* classmates Banerji was often on the receiving end of jibes for the *ghoti* habit of "eating wheatflour *chapattis* at dinner" which was considered an unacceptable import from the Hindi-speaking Bihari neighbours (2014, 51). Conversely, *bangal*s were mocked for being "an unsophisticated lot that came from the hinterland, had the uncontrollable appetite of peasants, and needed potfuls of *machher jhol* to mop up mountains of rice" (Banerji, 2014, 51). *Bangal*s expressed contempt towards the *ghoti*'s propensity to sweeten dishes that were meant to be hot, spicy, and salty while *ghoti*s sneered at the *bangal*'s love for spicy, oily food that "deadened the palate and left no room for subtle tastes" (Banerji, 2014, 51). There were clear demarcations of class in such insinuations of taste. The *bangal* was fashioned as the poor refugee who overused spices to turn humble ingredients into palatable food, and the *ghoti* as the city bred *bhadrolok* whose sophisticated tastes could not handle spice. This underlying war of tastes shaped everything from literature to sports in post-partition West Bengal (Banerji, 2014, 49).

4. The Bangladeshi Taste of Bengaliness

The domestic and public gastronomic transactions of Banerji's childhood helped shape her West Bengali, *ghoti* identity. Her move to America in her twenties shaped her distinction as an Indian Bengali. The third and the final transaction of taste that Banerji writes about in her memoir is the defamiliarization she faced following her move to Bangladesh. Banerji's marriage to a fellow Bangladeshi Muslim student, whom she had met during her graduate studies in the United States, was a source of great despair for her parents (Banerji, 2014, 62). The bloody history of Bengal partition, the riots and massacres in Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) and West Bengal had affected relations between the people of the two nations. At the time of partition, Bangladesh had a majority of

Muslim population and most West Bengalis of that generation, including Banerji's parents, failed to establish the distinction between the nation and its majority religion. To them, Bangladesh was a "Muslim country" (Banerji, 2014, 62). In choosing to marry a Bangladeshi Muslim man, Banerji had thus not only disregarded a religious restriction, but also made light of the hatred between the two communities of the two neighbouring nations. This made it difficult for her family to accept her marriage and her Muslim husband.

Conversely, Banerji became the outsider in Bangladesh. Even though what she ate at her in-law's place was "the same rice, dal, vegetables, and fish" that she had grown up on", they tasted distinct from the Hindu fare that was cooked in her Indian home (2014, 63). One of the reasons for the taste difference was the abundant use of onions in Bangladeshi Muslim cuisine. While in the Hindu kitchen of Banerji's Calcutta home, onions were used sparingly, usually only with meat, and in some cases with lentils and potatoes, Bangladeshi cuisine used it liberally with every vegetable, fish, and meat. Another major difference was the Bangladeshi Muslim propensity for chicken and meat dishes. Banerji remembers that her family had had goat meat only occasionally, "usually for Sunday afternoon lunch", and her grandparents never ate chicken, which was considered a 'heathen' bird associated with Muslims (2014, 33). On the contrary, Bangladeshi Muslim cuisine is replete with chicken, duck, goat, lamb, and even beef. Such dietary differences made Banerji conscious of her embodied Hindu Bengaliness.

Despite the differences, the new Bangladeshi foods were no less delicious. After spending a few days in her in-law's place, Banerji realized that the distinction of East Bengali cuisine stemmed from what was an unexpected and unprecedented combination of spices for her. For instance, poppy seed paste that was usually added to delicate vegetables like *jhinge* in West Bengali cuisine "was boldly added to chicken and lamb" in Bangladesh (2014, 68). Yogurt was combined with lemon, kewra (extracted from screw pine flower), and zesty ripe green chillies in the sauce of *khashir rezala* and koi fish was prepared with oranges (Banerji, 2014, 68). While *haluas* in India mostly referred to a cinnamon or cardamom flavoured sweet dish made of finely ground grains or legumes sautéed in ghee, Banerji was surprised to find *haluas* served during *Shab-e-barat* in Bangladesh that were made from gluten, eggs, nuts, white gourd, carrots, and even meat (Banerji, 2014, 69). However, the biggest surprise for Banerji was the Bangladeshi preparation of the beloved fish hilsa. In West Bengal *ilish*, as the fish is called, is mostly cooked in mustard oil, with mustard paste, sometimes with tamarind, or with cumin, coriander, and ground red chilies. It was not until she tasted a special hilsa dish made by a Bangladeshi cook that she realized that the fish when prepared with ghee, onions, coconut milk, and lemon, could be equally delectable. What her preconceived notions of taste had taken to be blasphemous became a dish that helped bridge the two sides of her family. She cooked this dish for her family and friends in Calcutta only to be gratified by their "incredulous appreciation" (Banerji, 2014, 71). Even though she never became a part of her Bangladeshi community through "faith, fast, or prayer" (Banerji, 2014, 65), she became part of it by participating in their culinary and gastronomic practices.

Banerji's first experience of the festival of Bakr-id at her in-laws' place was an eye opener for her, where she became accustomed to the notion of *halal* food. In Islam, rules of *halal* must be maintained while offering goats and cows for *korbani* or sacrifice, and even while processing meat for everyday consumption. For a true Muslim, "no meat is *halal* or sanctioned, unless the slaughtering is done right and the blood drained out completely" (Banerji, 2014, 64). During *eid*, the affluent residents of Dhaka bought animals and hired expert butchers to perform the required procedure in their homes. The animals needed to be "slaughtered with the recommended two-and-a-half strokes of the knife across the throat" (Banerji, 2014, 64). After the meat has been made *halal*, it is divided and shared among family, friends, and the poor. Being brought up in a Hindu family, meat had been an occasional affair in Banerji's family, and even then, she had never witnessed "the blood and gore since slaughterhouses were far from the markets" (Banerji, 2014, 65). Her description speaks volumes of the way ritual food practices contribute to the planning of public spaces like the market. Overcoming her initial shock and repulsion for the meat, Banerji finally decided to cook some of it "in the slow-cooking method that is traditionally used for *korbani* meat" (Banerji, 2014, 65). Being aware of the differences in faith

between her own family in Calcutta and that of her in-laws, she attempted to bridge the gap by cooking and eating ritual food.

Banerji's Hindu upbringing trained her to avoid beef and, before her marriage and eventual integration into her husband's Muslim family, she abided by it. During her college years in Calcutta she distanced herself from some of her college friends who "took great pride in showing off their 'liberation' from traditional custom by ordering beef (absolutely forbidden to Hindus) in the cramped Muslim restaurants we frequented in search of their famous kebabs" (Banerji, 2014, 21). The beef that Banerji is taught to avoid is a symbolic impurity which constituted her Hindu identity through exclusion. When she decided to marry a Bengali Muslim from Bangladesh, her family was crestfallen at the thought that she would eat beef and "violate all the taboos" (Banerji, 2014, 62). As a category of food, taboo shares the same status as dirt, which as Douglas states, "is essentially disorder" (Douglas, 2003, 2). A change in the order can change what is seen as a taboo. After Banerji's marriage, the system of belief within which avoidance of beef symbolically constituted her Hindu cleanliness is replaced by a system where beef becomes an edible category. As a child who grew up in a Hindu family, beef was taboo for Banerji, but in the system of her post-marriage Muslim family pork becomes tabooed.

5. Conclusion

'Taste' in food is an embodiment of the habitus. Growing up in a shared West Bengali habitus in India, Banerji was exposed to a gamut of gastronomic practices that shaped not just her preferences of food but her other cultural choices as well. Tastes of one's own culture are incorporated within the domestic space, but they are also qualified by interaction with other tastes outside of home. The complex interplay between private and public practices creates a sense of cultural distinction. Public establishments like schools, colleges, places of work, worship, and even the amorphous space of marriage produce gastronomic transactions that affect the development of a subject's tastes. Banerji's first sense of cultural distinction as a Bengali *ghoti* dawns during her interaction with the *bangal* community and their food practices happened through her school friends. Her consciousness as a South Asian Bengali dawned during her first transaction with Christmas festivities and feasting in USA. Then, her awareness of her Indian, Hindu Bengaliness came during her interactions with her husband's Muslim Bengali family in Bangladesh. Interaction with diverse cultures of consumption always produces a realization of one's own taste as distinct, and cultural subjectivity is a combined constitution of one's inherited habitus and the tastes that one consciously chooses to adopt or refuse.

Gastronomic habitus is always a heterogeneous construct considering how one's familial history and local factors influence dietary patterns. The social subject constitutes their cultural selves through a range of gastronomic relations, remembering and repeating tastes from their original habitus, rejecting some new ones, and adjusting and adopting some others. Thus, as Banerji realizes, cultural identity like her Bengaliness is facilitative and never restrictive. That "environment and historical circumstance load us with the baggage of suspicion and prejudice" but we really are quite adaptive (Banerji, 2014, 71). Banerji uses the example of an onion whose top layers are decaying to describe the adaptive quality of the average human (2014, 71). If we make an effort to peel and remove the rotten, age-old prejudices, most of us will find a fresh and untouched core that is waiting to be inscribed with new ideas, tastes, and cultures.

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