

Covert communications: Food in transition in Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox*

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Ritesh Batra's 2013 film *The Lunchbox* explores issues of belonging, tradition and progress in contemporary India. By evoking, re-working and subsequently re-deploying the traditional diasporic symbol of Indian cuisine, *The Lunchbox* self-reflexively addresses and tests the boundaries of diasporic narratives and explores issues around globalisation and transnationality. The film ultimately remains ambivalent about late modernity's progressive project in India, instead advocating for creative and adaptive solutions in response to the alienation and loss of home experienced by characters in the film.

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South Asian diasporic cinema has long been associated with Indian cuisine.¹ Many popular titles illustrate the conflation of a "global" South Asian identity with what is popularly conceived as authentic Indian food. Orientalist apprehensions of South Asian cultural identity often evoke depictions of spicy and exotic gastronomy. Diasporic films often utilize this association to cater to a western audience's expectations of an accessible Indian subjectivity: *Mississippi Masala* (1991), *Masala* (1992), *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), *What's Cooking* (2002), *Mistress of Spices* (2005), *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (2006) and *It's a Wonderful Afterlife* (2010) are just a few titles that demonstrate the genre's preoccupation with the spicy connotations of Indian cuisine. "When it comes to thinking about South Asian diasporic bodies, food is never far" (Mannur 2010, 3). Although its title would not feel out of place in this list, Ritesh Batra's 2013 film *The Lunchbox* distinguishes itself through its engagement with and critique of traditional diaspora cinematic convention. It does so primarily through its

utilization of food and eating as symbolic and formal categories. By manipulating the traditional significations of diasporic cinema *The Lunchbox* presents its audience with a thoughtful and subversive diasporic narrative that explores the tensions between nostalgia and progress through its representation of food and cooking, and it reimagines the boundaries of national belonging and home as constructed within the context of a globalized late modernity. In diasporic film, the “native” body is usually mediated through the established ideological codes that render it synonymous with cuisine, and transmits itself through the medium of food and offers itself up for voyeuristic consumption. But in *The Lunchbox*, the codes are re-written, the text of the body is reinterpreted through the act of writing which exposes the fallacy of the essential “Indianness” associated with Indian cuisine and diasporic film.

Both protagonists in this film, Ila and Fernandes, demonstrate a deep nostalgia for the past, but the past is complicated in this film through its implication with not only an unattainable temporal space – an impossible return to a sense of home and belonging – but also with aesthetic expressions derived from Bollywood, diasporic cinema and even India’s colonial past. By associating the past with these discourses, the film casts a critical eye to the filmic categories with which this movie engages – Bollywood cinema, world cinema and Hollywood (through its absence) – whilst simultaneously problematizing notions of nostalgia and belonging. *The Lunchbox* depicts a patriarchal social order characterized by a reproduction of tradition which is being threatened by the forces of modernity and progress in India. It does so, most adeptly and subversively, through the culinary imagery deployed in the film.

Diasporic Aesthetics at Home

The Lunchbox is not an obvious diasporic text. *The Lunchbox* intervenes into critical diasporic territory by exploring a diasporic aesthetic, one that departs from older modes of diasporic representations that have geographic dislocation at the core of their structural logic. This film negotiates diaspora by exploring the binary structures that characterise diaspora - home and away – as psycho-social categories rather than spatial. The film locates this diasporic imaginary locally and with ‘native’ subjects, and in doing so comments upon the geo-politics of globalisation and the condition of late modernity in India. Thus, it is able to negotiate new definitional spaces that allow us to recognize how diasporas operate in the age of globalisation.

Batra’s film engages with aesthetics of diaspora cinema, the most obvious of which is an Orientalist approach to South Asian culture and identity as expressed through depictions of Indian cuisine. Apart from this, the film also legitimizes its dialogue with diasporic narratives by other means: it’s international audience, familiar diasporic critical reception and release history. It consciously engages with many themes and narrative devices characteristic of diasporic cultural production: a preoccupation with the idea of home and belonging, and avowed (albeit brief) instances of international migration as they are exemplified through the characters of Shaikh and Ila. However, uncharacteristic of diaspora narratives, the film is set entirely in India and features Indian characters. I argue that the characters experience the alienation commonly associated with diasporic subjects, but they are not nationally or culturally displaced in the obvious way. Rather, their dislocation is a result of India’s project of late modernity, cast in the film as a barrier to human intimacy and as a mindless commitment to progress, work and production. Its protagonists are subject to forces of late modernity and globalization that seemingly render their own recognition of familiar signs of home as increasingly rare. In this text, diaspora – or cultural and social dislocation as a function of national identity and belonging – is represented though the film’s exploration of

intimate disconnections rather than geographic dislocation. In this way, *The Lunchbox* plays with the boundaries of diasporic cinema. Or rather, it breaks the mould of conventional diasporic cinema but stays true to what Desai (2004, 41) claims in *Beyond Bollywood*: “Diasporic cinema and its categories of inquiry are fluid and heterogeneous rather than fixed and unitary.” *The Lunchbox* traverses the boundaries between national, Hollywood and diasporic cinema.

The multiple definitions and fluid categories the term diaspora inspires renders the concept a complex and dynamic one. The central logic that underpins the diasporic imaginary is the binary of home and non-home; for the diasporic subject, that home that is bound up with psychic and cultural wholeness is lost through displacement; “the idea that against one’s *desh* (‘home country’) the present locality is *videsh* (‘another country’)” (Mishra 2007, 5). Traditionally linked to the notion of loss of place, diasporic imaginations construct the homeland as both an object of mourning as well as a point of departure for narrative of progress and daring self-reinvention. The recovery the object of mourning – home – is figured as the true and only path to psychic wholeness, cultural, social and political legitimacy, and stable community. However, given that the physical homeland – its actual political and material boundaries – is of less import to the functional construction of the diasporic imagination than the idea or concept of a homeland, it is “the creation of its own political myths rather than the real possibilities of a return to a homeland which is the defining characteristic of diasporas” (Mishra 2007, 6). The imaginary homeland is thus deployed as a necessary foil to fit the needs of the diasporic community – whether this is to be cast in the nostalgic role of the idealized place of origin, or as the backward country whose barbarous fetters must be escaped in order to legitimately engage with modernity’s narratives of progress, perpetuated by the logic of globalization and capitalism. “It makes more sense to think of diasporan or diasporic existence as not necessarily involving a physical return but

rather a *re-turn*, a repeated turning to the concept and/or relation of the homeland and other diasporan kin” (Tololyan 1996, 14). The homeland that Tololyan describes here is imaginary, constructed and continuously reconstructed in reaction to the sense of loss caused by the situation of displacement. Although the desire to return becomes less and less central to understanding the diasporic imagination, home – or rather the idea of the home – remains at the very heart of it.

The diasporic subject’s concept of home is further complicated when considered alongside the home understood to be in possession of the “local” subject; local in this instance referring to those who are not hailed as part of the diasporic community, those who can seemingly claim ownership of the psychic, material and ideological structures of the homeland both at the port of arrival and the land departed. Those who remained “at home” are conceived by diasporic imaginations as untroubled by the displacement and longing for home that characterizes their own community. Locals are framed as rooted, embedded within essentialist discourses that legitimize their place within their nation and community. These comfortable binds, however, are influenced by the same psycho-social pattern of projection that the diasporic community uses to construct its own sense of displacement and homelessness - that is to say, the local’s sense of home is also imaginary. Locals are doubly invaded by forces of deterritorialization when they are confronted by the diasporic subject because local subjects stand to lose (and thus attempt to police and defend) that which they never truly possessed. Žižek terms this the “Nation Thing” – a discursive construct that legitimizes nation identity and provides the ideological boundaries for the nation. Diasporic subjects grapple over the imaginary thing, in order to repress the “traumatic fact that we never really possessed what was allegedly stolen from us” (Žižek 1993, 203). Homi Bhabha also points to the ambivalence of the nation when in *Nation and Narration* he refers to “the impossible unity of the nation as symbolic force [in spite of] the attempt by nationalist

discourses persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress” (Bhabha 1990, 2). The enjoyment of the nation, is always of the ‘imaginary’ and as Mishra reminds us “and we continue to impute to the Other what we ourselves wish to enjoy (Mishra 2007, 15).

Local subjects struggle with a longing for the homeland as much as their diasporic neighbours. Their possession of the structures of enjoyment that qualify an uncomplicated relationship with the nation state is declared as an absence. “Whenever we live in an urbanized society, we encounter strangers: uprooted men and women who remind us of the fragility or the drying up of our own roots” (Hobsbawm 1992, 173). The mythologies of home are as real to locals as they are for those against whom they seek to defend it – the yearning for home in this instance is constructed as a sort of melancholic condition, a condition affecting both native and diasporic communities. “Challenging narratives of purity, rootedness, and timelessness, diasporic critique is positioned to dismantle nationalist constructions of belonging that link racialized and gendered bodies and space in seamless tales of bloodlines and family to the land” (Desai 2004, 18). Exploring diasporic notions of home is vital to our understanding of home itself. This includes, although is not limited to, the home that is constructed as the undisputed possession of those who consider themselves “local.” The stringently constructed binaries of home and away, of local and foreigner – so vital to the diasporic imaginary is revealed as simplistic and inaccurate. This is doubly true when considering the reality of older orders of belonging and migration that prevailed before national borders became the currency of diasporic discourses, particularly in India. “The consolidation of the language of the modern nation-state has transformed and undone older modes of identity and cultural co-existence that occurred in the wake of a continuous migration within the subcontinent” (Perekh, Singh and Vertovec 2003, 83).

The Search for Home at Home in *The Lunchbox*

The melancholic mechanism that constructs the homeland as a haunting presence in the diasporic unconscious also structures the imaginative matrix of the locals' relationship to home, inaugurating their own dislocation from the nation. *The Lunchbox* presents us with a representation of this everyday, localised displacements. The form of rootlessness I am describing here manipulates the discursive structures that characterize conventional diasporas in that they hinge around a binary of "home" and "non-home," but chooses to emphasise the aspect of diasporic discourses that assume utopian constructions of home. The local subject feels a sense of psychological placelessness that emerges from the familiar, whereby home becomes foreign; and local connections loosen and give way to a sense of alienation. As a result, they nostalgically yearn incarnations of home (specifically domestic homespaces) that are long since past, romanticised and were fleetingly experienced. By presenting viewers with this type of displacement, the film challenges the primacy of the nation state as the only unit to articulate spatial loss and belonging. It takes to task the notion that the borders of the state contain a dominant cultural community that feels uncomplicatedly "at home", and it demonstrates how the effects of late modernity contribute to the erosion of the social and intimate ties between characters as portrayed in the film.

The characters in Batra's film experience a sense of displacement in the film, but the displacement is psycho-social as opposed to literal. They inhabit their de-familiarized environment with an ostensibly diasporic attitude. "The diasporic imaginary is a term I use to refer to any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement" (Mishra 2007, 14). Ila and Fernandes, the protagonists of the film, experience a pervasive sense of dislocation in their every day lives and are consequently stuck in nostalgic loops of longing and un-fulfilment. They are Indian citizens, living in India. A Hindu and Christian,

they are emissaries from the massive Indian middle-class, neither politically oppressed, nor socially unrepresented by the national politics of India. Their sense of displacement is determined by the middle-class worker's disenchantment with the nation's project of modernization and progress, and their resulting sense of disassociation with national discourses of community and sense of place. Although their national identities are not in dispute or threatened, the film explores India's particular brand of nation-building, along with the attendant themes of belonging and community.

The *Lunchbox* deftly negotiates the interstitial space between the dominant cinematic discourses of Bollywood and Hollywood – the imaginative space of diasporic film. Diasporic films are often forced to subscribe to the hegemonic discourse most readily available – narratives of multiculturalism that often elide complex representations in favour of orientalisating and homogenizing narratives. Films that attempt to evade the ideological pull of either Hollywood, Bollywood or “world cinema” are often discounted and “rendered illegible or primitive in dominant national and international discourse” (Desai 2004, 34), and are further at risk of underproduction. Simultaneously if films pander to a particular hegemony of cinematic convention – for example, if a film attempts to explain other cultures to western audiences by embedding diegetic or non-diegetic explanations inside the film itself – it also risks becoming an expression of the native informant, perpetuating orientalist modes of knowledge-production and consumption. *The Lunchbox* eludes these pitfalls by presenting itself as usual diasporic cinematic fare, but subverting the tropes of diasporic cinema as a form of critique.

The Lunchbox carefully negotiates the competing (but often overlapping) accessibilities of Hollywood and Bollywood audiences and manages to avoid the usual ghettoization associated with a diasporic South Asian film. It refuses to explain its alterity to foreign audiences, but also approaches easily-recognizable themes such as heteronormative

romance. It avoids Bollywood's usual preoccupations with extended family and communal politics, but explores family through its absence through the orphaned character of Shaikh. The film is "characterized by polyvocality or in Bahktian terms *hetroglossia* in that it contains 'multiple speech and language types'" (Desai 2004, 43). In the most literal example of this polyvocality, the film is bilingual – characters speak both English and Hindi and there is a comfortable communication between the two national languages that is normalized and remains unexplained throughout the film. Western audiences may be surprised to see two Indian characters in a film populated entirely by Indian people, set in India, speaking to one another in English.² The film's Hindi scenes are translated into English, but alongside this accessibility there are scenes within the film that are intentionally unreadable for western, English-speaking viewers, and serve to address those more familiar with the conventions of Bollywood.

For example, as Fernandes jostles to work on his usual overcrowded commuter train, he hears street children on the carriage singing the Hindi title song from the popular 1997 Bollywood film *Pardes* (Batra 2013). The song lyrics remain untranslated in the subtitles in the film, and the brief amateur musical interlude is treated like diegetic music, adding to the authentic ambience of the train setting, and serves perhaps to illustrate examples of local class differences and poverty. The Hindi word "pardes", however, is more than just a film or song title. Firstly, and significantly, it has no exact analogue in English. The etymology of the word comes from the words "par" meaning "other" and "des" (or "desh") meaning nation. Although the term "desh" does not refer only to India, it is colloquially synonymous with the nation. Thus "pardes" means "outside of India". By referencing *Pardes*, *The Lunchbox* is self-consciously situating itself in the imaginative space of diaspora - between "desh" and "videsh" - as well as addressing the cultural politics that separate and define the dominant cinematic discourses of Hollywood and Bollywood. Additionally, the plot of the film *Pardes*

renders it a vital intertext for the diasporic terrain *The Lunchbox* attempts to navigate. The film follows the trials of a beautiful young heroine who must choose between two suitors: a rich, handsome yet selfish man who is corrupted by the values of the west, and a genuine “nayak” of India – played by the iconic Shahrukh Khan – who conversely embodies authentic and essential Indianness. The heroine makes the correct choice and chooses a local partner, eschewing the soulless individualism that the film associates with the west. The choice between western and Indian values is a familiar agon in Bollywood cinema, and *Pardes* is a highly typical example of the breed of film that dramatized the cultural conflict that characterised post-independence, post-colonial, India, what Mishra (2002, 15) describes as the frequent “deployment of the primitive binary of Western Evil and Oriental Goodness”. *Pardes* also depicts a more traditional diasporic narrative in its depiction of NRI (non-resident Indian) life and thereby connects the less conventional diaspora of *The Lunchbox* to larger issues of migration and displacement.

The reference to *Pardes* also refers to the film’s extra-textual production circumstances. Bollywood cinema is certainly known – particularly so during the release date of *Pardes* – for shooting in dazzling natural locations abroad, especially in Europe and Australia. *The Lunchbox*’s allusion to *Pardes* is a self-conscious reminder to the audience (or at least, the audience with enough of a cultural foothold to recognise the signs and codes of Bollywood, to translate the Hindi and to be familiar with the plot of *Pardes*) that it is making a reflexive decision to focus on Indian stories – set in India and concerned with a section of Indian society that big budget Bollywood traditionally ignores. *The Lunchbox* focuses on mundane localities of urban life, even the food lacks the exotic appeal audiences of diasporic films have come to expect. It simultaneously speaks to, and attempts to upend, diasporic audience expectations. As Suketu Mehta (2004, 351) notes, the Indian diaspora wants “an urban, affluent, glossy India, the India they imagine they grew up in and wish they could live

in now, an India projected by Bollywood.” It ignores the idealized version of India that is depicted in most Bollywood movies – opting for gritty, documentary-style realism. As such, it escapes the often confining categories of Bollywood. Furthermore, Nimrat Kaur and Irfan Khan are not representative of the Bollywood mainstream. Irfan Khan has increasingly focused on Hollywood projects, and Kaur is a theatre actress. This movie is an obvious departure from the familiar modalities of Bollywood. But still – as any movie referencing India on any level would be – this film is haunted by the spectre of Bollywood. Although it is clearly conscious of its position as an outsider to mainstream box offices in India (and of course, the world) and as such acknowledges the primacy of Bollywood cinema, it continuously endeavours to rewrite and reimagine itself as un-Bollywood, un-Hollywood and even un-world cinema – and does this by manipulating and recycling the codes employed by these dominant cinematic discourses.

Perhaps the most notable example of this conscious reinvention is referenced through the Dabba system, itself a uniquely indigenous system of food delivery; and a cultural phenomena belonging to the office-going middle class. The movie’s plot dynamics revolve around an unlikely error in the Dabba system’s perfect efficiency and delivery record. When the lunchbox intended for Ila’s husband ends up at government clerk Fernandes’s desk by mistake, an unlikely friendship blooms into a romantic entanglement. This is the classic epistolary love story between kindred strangers. Again, the film offers up a number of familiar cinematic themes but subverts these classics into something innovative in its form. The most daring re-inscription attempted by the film is its intervention into a thematic arena that is the overwhelming preoccupation of South Asian diasporic film – that is, the synonymy of Indian identity with its native cuisine. The Lunchbox re-mixes and re-serves the traditional vehicle of Indian culture to western audiences (in its most orientalist incarnations) – a spicy, “authentically” Indian meal – and offers it to audiences in an unfamiliar medium. It

reinterprets Indian stereotypes that many diasporic films rely upon in order to fit neatly into the paradigms of its own established cinematic hegemonies. In this way it consciously considers its own positionality and the politics of its representations within the discourses available to it in terms of categorization – and transcends them.

Food re-interpreted

The dabba system is a hugely complex and labour-intensive system, and a western audience may be surprised at the effort being exerted to preserve the continuation of a warm, traditional sit down lunch at work, when on-the-go meal solutions would be more efficient. The office depicted in the film is a government workspace, with few frills and modern conveniences. Still lunchtime is a sacred time when office workers – including our stoic and hardworking Saajan Fernandes – stop and partake in a hot meal consisting of hand-cooked items. Fernandes does not have a wife to cook him his meals and so gets his dabba delivered to him from an eatery. Despite his own reputation for efficiency, even he thinks that people who only eat a banana or two for lunch are depriving themselves and notes it as indicative of the increasingly rushed pace of modern life in India. Thus the dabba delivery system is constructed as a romantic symbol of the tradition, one that has not yet been overtaken by an impersonal commitment to efficiency and progress. The dabba system is also an attempt to preserve the immediacy of a meal, bringing the domestic into the public (the food delivered is still warm) whilst simultaneously maintaining the binary logic of private and public. Although imbued with an idealized comfort that is rooted in national tradition and the past, the dabba system serves to separate the feminized world of the domestic from the public traditionally inhabited by men. Indeed, although the system facilitates Ila and Fernandes's inappropriate communication, their intimacy is actually enabled by an external factor – the mistake made by the dabba system. It is therefore the failure of convention and order that

gives Ila and Fernandes access to a potentially liberating albeit socially discouraged site of communication. Facilitated by the dabba system, the film explores the tensions between progress and the past, ambivalently constructing the national project of modernity in India through its engagement with the signs and meanings of eating, cooking and food. This concern places the film in dialogue with mainstream Bollywood cinema, as “a key binary that has been detected by almost all commentators of this form is the modernity/tradition binary” (Mishra 2002, 4), but the reformulation of the familiar diasporic preoccupation with food simultaneously indicates the film’s engagement with “mainstream” diasporic cinema. From the instant we join the characters in this movie, we are being ushered into a world where cultural signs are unfamiliar. Yet at the same time, our familiarity with the interchangeability of Indian cuisine and Indian culture is being tested and strained because this is a movie, like so many other movies about India released to an international audience, where cuisine plays a starring role.

The protagonists in this film, Ila and Fernandes, feed a hunger that exists within each of them. This hunger is for connection and intimacy, and it manifests in the film as nostalgia for the past: specifically, a temporal space characterised by an idealism, innocence and uncomplicated domesticity. Ila is dissatisfied with her marriage and absentee husband and feels suffocated by her largely house-bound domestic existence. Her home has become loveless, and so she seeks to return to an apparent past domestic harmony and attempts to win her husband’s affections back using her cooking skills. As her relationship with Fernandes develops, she faces the decision to continue her efforts to return to a domestic scene long past, create an analogous domestic life with another man, or radically break away from the domestic scene entirely. Fernandes, similarly, yearns for the restoration of home. A lonely, anti-social widower on the cusp of retirement, he stands at a crossroads: his choices are a new, yet solitary, life of leisure outside of the city, the attempted recreation of a normative

domesticity with Ila, or the continuation of his current uneventful existence which revolves largely around his office and work. The two lonely characters begin a clandestine epistolary romance by passing notes to each other, secreted away inside an errant lunchbox. The two protagonists, who never actually meet in the movie, nourish the appetites of the other – offering each other a much sought-after intimacy that takes the form of a return to the comforts and pleasures of the domestic scene, a heteronormative nuclear family, rooted in the familiar logic of culturally-mandated food production and consumption.

As a traditional homemaker and woman Ila is charged with upholding and reproducing the traditional gendered culture of the nuclear family, and on a micro level re-enacts the gendering of the nation itself. “The home, never a neutral space divested of ideological constructions of gendered nationhood, is a site that produces gendered citizens of the nation” (Mannur 2010, 51). As the self-sacrificing, care-giving centre of the domestic scene, Ila performs her ideological function by being a good wife and mother; her daily activities centre around caregiving. The audience interrupt her in the middle of a crisis. Her anxieties manifest primarily around a threatened domestic existence. She feels her husband’s interest in her – emotional and sexual – waning. He is more concerned with his professional life outside the home and is constantly on his mobile phone, or his attention is affixed on the television screen. With the aid of her home-bound neighbour Mrs. Deshpande (a disembodied voice from the apartment above) Ila hatches a scheme to win back her husband’s affections using her cookery skills. She cooks up a storm, preparing novel dishes to fill her husband’s daily dabba. Ila attempts to use the culturally-mandated tools at her disposal to re-affirm her and her husband’s heteronormative roles within the respectable Indian family.

Her efforts are scuppered by the dabbawallah’s delivery error, and she is further disheartened by the realization that her husband does not even recognize that the lunch he

received and ate was not prepared by her but by the nameless, cheap restaurant that usually supplies Fernandes' meals. As Mrs. Deshpande notes: "Rajeev ate someone else's cooking yesterday and he didn't even notice!" Her outrage affirms the gendered alimentary logic that often forms the basis of many South Asian diasporic narratives that utilize food as a discursive tool. This logic is determined by the construction of food as an affective tool; mediating emotions in the body. Mrs Deshpande's outrage at Rajeev's lack of recognition demonstrates how authenticity is deeply embedded within discourses of food and eating. In the first instance, Ila's cooking is understood to carry and transmit some essential element of her self and her emotional experience - the love and longing she feels for her husband. The recipient of the dish is meant to receive and 'read' this essence, encoded as it was in the preparation of the dish. This popular trope of magic realism is often deployed in culinary narratives, particularly in instances where the food-preparer is a woman: the trope relies on the reductive alliance of women with the body, desire and emotionality, whereas men are counter-constructed as purveyors of rationality and logical thought. When Ila's husband fails to recognize Ila's encoded love missive, viewers are alerted of the absence of this magical culinary essence undermining viewer expectations about this common diasporic trope whilst forcing a critique of its reductive and essentialising qualities. The film consciously defends against Orientalist apprehensions of the easily digestible food narrative. We are being served a narrative turn we do not quite recognize: this film consciously engages and rewrites narratives that allow "for a guilt-free consumption of otherness" (Mannur 2010, 83). The film decouples food (and associated significations) prepared by the "native"³ body from the body itself, as well as subverting the common association of emotion with food, allowing women to escape erasure as the emotionally-determined creature-of-the-body. It undermines the gendered binaries of food and cooking and sets up recognizable codes of South Asian diasporic film, only to intentionally break with them.

Ila and Fernandes' transgressive romance is made possible within the context of the stricter cultural codes governing their circumstances due to the deployment of a language of intimacy that is rooted in the cultural codes of food and eating, facilitated by the dabba system. Their communication is furthered by the slipperiness of the dialect that they use to speak to one another – the food itself. When they initially start their course of writing notes, Fernandes responds to Ila's first written message – a guarded but sincere bid for intimacy – with a perfunctory: "Ila, the meal was very salty today." Angered by Fernandes's taciturnity, Ila communicates her anger with an analogous comestible message: she adds an abundance of chilies to the next meal. Fernandes feels the heat of the meal, but fails to register the true meaning of the food. He responds stoically – "Dear Ila, the salt was fine today. The chili was bit on the higher side. But I had two bananas after lunch. They helped to extinguish the fire in my mouth. And I think it'll also be good for the motions." A still camera focuses on Ila in her usual place, the kitchen, as she reads the note and furrows her brow in confusion due to the lack of acknowledgement of her fiery message: Fernandes's note conjures an abject image of digestion instead of affection. Ila further searches the note back and front, and the camera cuts to her lying in her bed in the darkness, a perplexed expression on her face. Her attempts to speak through food prove too nebulous. After this point she begins to write longer, clearer messages to Fernandes and their intimacy begins in earnest. The focus moves from the food itself to the medium of writing as a means of dialogue and representation.

Here, the cuisine is being overwritten, specifically addressing the context of our nostalgia for a familiar diasporic narrative – one that carries colonial undertones that articulate an understanding of India characterized by exotic spices and curries. The initial misrecognition between the characters when they speak simply through food is straightened out by their access to the written word. The letters between these characters serve as more accurate and empowering emissaries for their desires and a clearer portrait of their subjectivities. The food

takes a backseat soon to the letters – although the emotive power contained within the food certainly does not completely disappear. Indeed, although Ila fails to cook her way out of the kitchen, she certainly has given herself a better chance of escape through the radical act of writing, facilitated by her implication within the gendered matrix of cooking and the home. The film advocates self-representation and agency expressed through unconventional means, but significantly, means other than the ones being touted by modern living in India – for example the mobile telephone that constantly distracts Rajeev when he is at home. This film is critical of these signs of progress in India, depicting them as contributing the sense of alienation that pervades the film's narrative.

In South Asian diasporic cinema, Indian cuisine is often deployed as a shorthand for South Asian identity, eliding body with object. Yet the cuisine presented in this film cannot be read according to the familiar conventions of diasporic cinema, because they do not readily fit a western audience's expectations. The most obvious example of this is the lack of visuals on the food itself – a common trope in any film about food. Mannur notes that “the concept of food pornography has most frequently spoken to processes of cultural consumption and the commodification of ethnicity” (2010, 82). But in the film, the “pornographic” shots of delicious food are forgone in favour of a focus on the characters' faces: The use of still camerawork and close-ups imply an intentional refocusing on the bodies of the individuals consuming the food. The most obvious example of this is the first time Fernandes eats the accidental meal Ila dispatches to him. He sits alone at a table in the canteen with his lunchbox, unpacks it and immediately his face indicates to viewers that he has just noticed something out-of-the-ordinary in his lunchbox, something that strikes him – this is not his usual canteen fare. Irfan Khan's subtle, mostly-impassive portrayal of Fernandes works two-fold in this scene: it communicates his characteristic repression whilst also represents a refusal to embody and display Orientalist representations of Indian cooking

and diasporic food narratives. He remains obscure, his experience indecipherable – he cannot, and will not, be digested via typical diasporic food narratives. We watch as he spoons the food out onto a single metal plate. The camera remains unflinchingly on his body, although Khan’s facial expression ratchets up the audience’s desire that the camera pan down or cut away to what is being observed. Yet a still camera focuses on Fernandes and only a quiet ambient conversational buzz serves as accompanying soundtrack. The camera is a silent witness to Fernandes’s first bite of Ila’s cooking, and forces the viewer to consider Fernandes’s inner world and experience instead of the food itself – we can speculate as to the meaning of this experience, but we are never explicitly told, and the film consciously severs the easy associations of Indian food and emotion. We are told by a later scene that he enjoys the food, but he refrains from giving audiences what they might expect – a typical diasporic food story of emotional transformation and transcendence. This scene is no exception. The film intentionally avoids showcasing the tantalizing aesthetics of the food that causes Fernandes so much pleasure; even when Ila is cooking in her kitchen the experience is coloured by the cramped conditions of her cooking space, the worn out utensils she uses to cook and the gritty realism of the documentary-style shaky cam the film uses to present her.

By upending the usual role of Indian cuisine in the film in this way, *The Lunchbox* goes about re-codifying the meaning of food as it is traditionally deployed in diasporic cinema. Indian cuisine and identity are often deployed as synonymous by diasporic texts, which capitalise on this sensible formation by foregrounding it within its familiar narratives. By exploring and de-coupling the explicit connection between food and identity, this film also re-evaluates the position of the “native” body. When conflated with comestible objects, the body becomes objectified as something to be consumed along with the exotic, Orientalist narratives associated with the palatable cultural difference that is contained in foreign cuisine. This film rewrites this food’s burden of representation: and instead of focusing on sexualized

aesthetics and sensory semiotics of food, it chases the actors' faces, bodies – and later writing – to relay meaning. Instead of consuming the exotic other, we are directed to look into their faces and acknowledge their complexity. Food's mundane role in the film, its lack of “magical” quality, is all part of a self-conscious project of rewriting the Orientalist mythology of postcolonial and colonial India.

Despite these characters' desires to return to familiar domestic codes, to culturally sanctioned roles, their nostalgia-driven movements only push them further toward unfamiliar territory. Private and public spheres collide to produce disorder, but in the end this disorder sows the seeds of an unconventional progress rather than a return to the past. This movie remains ambivalent about progress, demonstrating how modernity brings with it a multitude of alienating experiences, but also critiques an obsessive return to the past claiming that not only does it not exist, but it may not be a space to which we want to return. Progress is associated with the imagery of modern living that the film clearly denigrates as propounding disconnection and anonymity – Rajeev favouring his mobile phone over Ila, scores of nameless bodies packed onto a commuter bus all avoiding eye contact, the din of a blinking television preventing a family from connecting during mealtimes. But it is also construed as liberating, as the final scenes in the film suggest. Both characters leave their socially circumscribed roles and walk bravely into the unknown – particularly brave for Ila, a mother of a young child and with no apparent means of financial support. But the alternative is dire, as communicated through the older characters like Ila's mother and Aunty Deshpande. Both women remain dedicated to their particular socially-acceptable roles as caretakers and sacrifice their desires in order to provide round-the-clock care for ailing husbands. Both are absolutely subsumed within their social roles as mothers and wives, and it leaves them – in Ila's mother's words “very hungry. I'm craving parathas. I didn't eat breakfast this morning. I was making breakfast for him [Ila's father]. I was always worried about what would happen

to me when he passed away. But now, I just feel hungry.” The denouement of the film inspires Ila to make her radical move out of the country – *pardes*. Fernandes is seen searching for Ila’s home, having abandoned his own plan to retire alone. The film does not make clear whether he meets her before she leaves, the only certainty is that both have chosen paths less taken, eschewing the nostalgic pull of the past.

The film advocates a type of rootlessness by putting forward the idea that it is a more favourable option than nostalgic yearning, national embeddedness and essentialist narratives, and not only through its ending. The character of the orphan Shaikh, for example, disrupts the binary logic of gender, class as well as cultural notions of belonging. He is the anti-nayak – dark skinned, without familial ties, education and a legitimate origin story. He invents himself, and is comfortable with his fluid subjectivity which allows him to adapt and achieve his goals. He straddles the divide between genders, helping his wife in the kitchen. Somewhat significantly, he does the feminine labour of chopping vegetables in the liminal space of the train, on top of his work briefcase. Fernandes reprimands Shaikh for submitting work that smells of vegetables, his anger perhaps demonstrating his discomfort with the blurring of traditional gender boundaries. Ultimately, however, Fernandes accepts Shaikh and his self-constructed identity, adopting him as a *de facto* son and acknowledging the value of unconventional social ties of one’s own making. The essentialising rhetoric of national discourses is revealed as antiquated in the face of the type of adaptive self-construction demonstrated by Shaikh – the only character in the film with a confirmed happy conclusion. The film showcases Shaikh as progressive, with his lack of connection to the bloodlines of the nation and his own diasporic past in the Middle East. His chameleon-like approach to life is advocated as productive, as opposed to the usual symbols of progress, of which the film remains critical. Shaikh also subverts gender normative food intimacies by cooking for and feeding Fernandes, whose acceptance of this caregiving signals the film’s disruption of

traditional social relations as constructed by food – indeed, the film showcases several instances of conventional intimacy being interrupted and re-routed, yet achieving satisfactory ends. The film’s rendition of these types of intimacies demonstrates how notions of progress and human intimacies – as they are bound up with the project of late modernity in India – are fluid and ambivalently constructed.

The Lunchbox exposes viewers to a subversion of content through familiar forms. It is interested in the “re-turn” of diaspora narratives, but makes a break with more traditional definitions that imagine diasporic communities outside of their “natural” setting: their homeland. This film reflects those aspects of globalization that expose the imbrication of the global with the local, and operationalizes the concerns of the national project as it becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the concerns of the larger global forces within which it is embedded. For Ila and Fernandes, home becomes de-territorialized, invaded as it is by the forces of modernity. When they respond to the anxiety caused by the loss of their sense of home, their reactionary attempts to re-turn to the past demonstrate the impossibility of such a move, indeed if Aunty Desphande and Ila’s mother are to be believed, this return to a romanticized domestic past is nothing to yearn for. The dislocation that Ila and Fernandes face is so similar to the dislocations of traditional diaspora, the choices to be made are as well – to continuously engage with a phantom past, or to move forward into an uncertain but hopeful future. Given the film’s open-ended conclusion – we are not sure whether Ila and Fernandes go on to meet each other or their own individual destinies – it is clear the film does not wish to be definitive on the best course of action. It leaves the decision to the audience, once again upending the cosy, neat narrative arcs associated with Bollywood and diaspora cinema, and staying true to its own unique blend of cinematic innovation.

Notes

¹ I use the term South Asian to designate diasporic cinema emerging from and/or depicting the sub-continent, and am aware that “Indian cuisine” is not representative of the culinary diversity of this area. However, Indian cuisine is often deployed by popular diasporic narratives as a shorthand metonymic representation of the entire region.

² Although Indian characters speaking to each other in English in South Asian diasporic film is not unusual, it is overwhelmingly affluent Indians of a particular class who are granted the privilege of speaking English.

³ I deploy this term with an awareness of its double-connotation: as the root sense of the term as those who were ‘born to the land,’ and in the pejorative sense commonly utilized in colonial, neo-colonial and Orientalist discourses.

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