



"Gustatory Pleasure¹": An Evocation of Food and Festivities of Bengal – A Review of *The Hour of the Goddess* by Chitrita Banerjee

Dr Kalyan Chatterjee WBES

Assistant Professor in English, Government General Degree College, Manbazar-II, Purulia

The author is Assistant Professor of English (W.B.E.S.) and is at present the Head of the Department of English at Government General Degree College, Manbazar-II, Purulia, West Bengal. Previously, he was the head of the Department of English at Jhargram Raj College, Pashchim Medinipur, and Government General Degree College, Singur, Hooghly and served as Assistant Professor of English at Hooghly Mohsin College and as Lecturer in English at Sri Ramkrishna Sarada Vidya Mahapith, Kamarpukur, Hooghly. He received his Ph.D. Degree for his research work on the writings of Jean Rhys from The University of Burdwan. His area of interest includes food writings of the Indian diaspora. He has published a paper titled "Representation of Fish in Jhumpa Lahiri's Mrs. Sen's: A Study in Exile" in *Writer's Feast*, Ed. By Supriya Chaudhury and Rimi B. Chatterjee, Published by Orient Blackswan. His article, titled "Food and Home in Interpreter of Maladies", got published in the *Journal of the Department of English, Vidyasagar University* (Vol. 8, 2010-11). His article "Negotiating Homelessness through Culinary Imagination: The Metaphor of Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*" was published in the *Rupkatha Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2016.

1. The phrase is used by Banerjee. See p. 18. *The Hour of the Goddess*.

The Hour of the Goddess (2001) by Chitrita Banerjee is about, as the subtitle of the book aptly puts, “Memories of Women, Food and Ritual in Bengal”. As an expatriate Bengali woman, who, after growing up in Calcutta lives in faraway Cambridge, Massachusetts, her book is customarily soaked in nostalgia and other memories of girlhood. As it happens in case of immigrants, “[f]ood seems to be the part of a culture that immigrants hold on to longest...” (Roden 69). The remembrance of her past is, however, dominated by female figures from different walks of life, as Banerjee weaves her narrative with anecdotes and stories on them reconstructing the cultural matrix of the Bengali society. The predominance of the female figure all through her narrative is accounted for in the dedication part of the book, where Banerjee writes “For all the generations of Bengali women who created, enhanced, and preserved a culinary tradition of excellence and innovation”. The Book introduces Banerjee’s intention with her deeply nostalgic evocation of the Bengal autumn, a season of festivities that are virtually synonymous with food, feasting and eating. As a matter of fact, her memories of the festivals are associated with the aroma of the quintessentially Bengali foods like *luci-chholar dal* and *luchi aloor dum*. Juxtaposed with the memories of ebullience is her experience of Christmas in America:

Arriving as a student in the autumn, I had kept my homesickness at bay by imagining that Christmas would be a compensatory event. I anticipated the same kind of energy, laughter, and fragrance that festivals had always meant for me. Instead, I found myself inhabiting a ghost town. (4)

The contrast of the two cultures in relation to their biggest festivals – in one being extremely outdoor and social in nature (Durgapuja and other festivals of Bengal) whereas, the other being “a very private family event behind closed doors (Banerjee 5) – creates a shock in the immigrant mind of the writer. The introduction, like all the other chapters of the book, ends with recipes, in this case that of *luchi-chholar dal* and *aloor dum*. *The Hour of the Goddess* has eleven chapters. The first chapter shares the book’s title. The following chapters are “Feeding the Gods”, “Patoler Ma”, “A Dose of Bitters”, “Food and Difference”, “Crossing the Borders”, “The Bonti of Bengal”, “Five Little Seeds”, “What Bengali Widows Cannot Eat”, “How Bengal Discovered Chhana” and the final one – “Food, Ritual and Art in Bengal”. “Patoler Ma” describes the plights of poor female-cooks of Bengal and reveals the author’s sadness at their helplessness. “Food and Difference” deals with a curious cultural contact between two cultures which are so close to each other and yet are at a distance; namely, the cultures of the Hindu West Bengal and the cultures of the predominantly Muslim East Bengal

or Bangladesh. Banerjee's marriage with an atheist from a Muslim family of Bangladesh brings an interesting proposition to the already varied cultural context. Banerjee begins exploring the context by first, describing the shock her family gets when they hear about her marriage outside their own caste and religion, and then goes on to share her amazement at discovering the subtle nuances of difference that exist between the food of the two Bengals separated by an international border. She is surprised to see how in Bangladesh, "where people spoke my language and looked and dressed like me, constantly presented unfamiliar facets to well-known things" (63). Turning her attention to food she observes: "The food I ate during our initial stay in my in-laws' house was apparently the same rice, dal, vegetables, and fish that I had grown up on, and yet everything tasted different, though no less delicious" (63). The discourse in these two chapters ("Food and Difference" and "Crossing the Borders"), however, doesn't limit itself to merely food and eating; rather it goes on to deliberate upon the issues of inclusion and exclusion, love and distrust and the politics of bigger and smaller nations. The politics of exclusion takes a different version when Banerjee describes the eating restrictions and practices of the Bengali widow, an issue mired in the politics of the sexes. Banerjee has a close look at the problem through her mother's widowhood and is naturally saddened by the injustice meted out on the Bengali widow. From the politically charged, complicated issues of food and eating Banerjee shifts on to the historical in the chapter "How Bengal Discovered Chhana", where she discusses the Bengali confectioners' tryst with the Portuguese by the River Hooghly at places in and around Bandel. She describes how the acid-curd-cheese, brought to India by the Portuguese traders and still sold at New Market in the form of 'Bandel Cheese', transformed in the hands of the enterprising and experimental *moyra* (confectioners) of Bengal. The last chapter "Food, Ritual and Art in Bengal" deals with "a third dimension [of food], where food is the medium for depicting the emotional, ceremonial, and ritual universe of a people" (Banerjee 128). Banerjee, a reputed food historian with two titles already to her credit: *Bengali Cooking: Seasons and Festivals* and *Life and Food in Bengal*, makes the reader aware of a host of issues, ranging from gender and food, food and religious identity, class as it affects food and eating, abundance of food and similarly deprivation of food – all woven in a charming personal narrative that should please both readers and researchers alike.

Works Cited

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