

The Cultural Significance of Food and Drink in West Indian Literature

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Although food and drink are often considered merely a means of verisimilitude in the literary work, they are usually culturally defined and are characteristic of the ideology of the people associated with that culture.¹ Food and drink therefore may not only be a source of sustenance but may also be imbued with a particular meaning and cultural significance that can contribute to a more comprehensive and informed reading of the text or, indeed, of the culture it depicts and/or from which it emerges. The food mentioned in West Indian Literature is local in flavour and, because of the varied races of the region, gives the literary work a sense of authenticity and indigenosity that is significant to a study of its post-colonial background. Food is associated with historical roots, colonialism, superstition, religion and with the local folk culture. It may be used as a marker for class and social aspirations and is often a gauge for personal relationships. This paper proposes to examine the ways in which culture and ideology are structured around the description of food and drink in some West-Indian literary works, and argues thereby for the importance of food and drink in the construction of cultural narratives.

The reality of post-colonialism is reflected in the literature of the region. For writers, the most obvious means of revealing this post-colonial quality is through the use of literary techniques that usually involve writing back against dominant discourses² but also encourage the creation of an indigenous culture. However, it is interesting to note that food, which can be used as a marker of the unique history of the West Indies, also plays a similar role in discourse. In *Moses Migrating* by Samuel Selvon, for instance, such use is revealed in the episode in which the Trinidadian-born Moses returns with an English couple, Bob and Jeannie, after living in England for a number of years. The characters, who are staying at the Hilton, are having a breakfast of local dishes, one of which Moses describes in the following terms: "It is called 'buljol' by the locals. The main ingredient is salted cod, what they used to feed the slaves with." Bob, a conscientious Englishman who professes against racism is horrified: "'I'm not touching it [...] They should ban such reminders of those horrendous days.' But he looked around and saw all the white tourists digging in. 'Do they know the history of their breakfast?'" (75)

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that "we can [...] discover for each special case how the cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure or else resigns itself to revealing its contradictions" (595).

² See, for example, Ashcroft et al. However, this issue has been the subject of great debate. See, for example, Trivedi and Mukherjee.

In this example, food is used by the hotel chain to advertise the local Trinidadian culture to the white tourists. Interestingly, the particular food that Samuel Selvon chooses to include reflects a particular history of colonialism and slavery for which the English were responsible. This episode, however, offers a form of cultural inversion as the very dish used to feed slaves is now presented as a great delicacy which the white tourists relish. Also, ironically, the salted cod, one of the cheapest types of food for the slaves, is used here to rake in the white tourists' money. Even Bob, after being encouraged by Moses, is soon busy eating and quickly forgets his previous protests.

It is also significant that Moses later chooses "one of those exotic, non-intoxicating drinks you see advertised on the television, with droplets of icy water on the outside of a tall glass, and inside have a concoction of red cherries and green berries and orange juice and a yellow slice of pineapple, all floating around with crystals of crushed ice, and covered with grated nutmeg." Given this description, one can assume that this is a tropical tourist drink, and, although Moses admits that it "taste[s] like shit," he thinks it is "impressive to sit back and stir the mixture now and again with two long straws and look about idly, like the tourists was doing" (100). Here again, the tourist and the local, the foreign and the indigenous are inverted, echoing the very title of the novel.³ In these instances, then, food perpetuates the theme of colonialism and develops the cultural reversals characteristic of postcolonial literature.

This inversion of power relations between the coloniser and the colonised⁴ is developed later in the novel when Doris is said to have spat in her white employers' food after they annoyed her. Moses's ruminations on this event immediately elaborate on the colonial theme:

They say in Mexico that before he get slaughtered Montezuma take his revenge by putting a *zeppy* on the water, and when white people drink it they get the shits. Looking at it from this historical angle, what is a little spit compared to all the years of slavery and gruesome tortures that the white man mete out to the blacks? (91)

Here, through the evocation of folk religion and superstitious belief, food and drink assume a mythical power that is used as revenge against the whites. Spitting in the food is, because of the images of contamination associated with the act, a means of subversion of the assumed white superiority and, therefore, becomes a sort of self-affirmation for Doris.

In *The Lonely Londoners*, Selvon provides another good example of how the West Indians are able to achieve self-affirmation through the various recognisably West Indian foodstuffs they are able to buy in the otherwise alien and hostile city:

Before Jamaicans start to invade Brit'n, it was a hell of a thing to pick up a piece of saltfish anywhere, or to get thing like pepper sauce or dasheen or

³ Moses is "migrating" to his homeland, Trinidad.

⁴ I have also written on this topic in the following article: "Black Crusoe, White Friday: Carnavalesque Reversals in *Moses Ascending* and *Pantomime*" in *Culture, Language and Representation* 1.1 (May 2004): 69-80.

even garlic. [...] But now, papa! Shop all about start to take in stocks of foodstuffs what West Indians like, and today is no trouble at all to get saltfish and rice [...] blackeye peas and red beans and pepper sauce, and tinned breadfruit and ochro and smoke herring. (76–77)

This list is a function of the process of “colonisation in reverse”⁵ that occurred with the West Indian immigrants’ “invasion” of England.⁶ This, of course, is also related to the cultural reversals consistent with the postcolonial theme, as the blacks become the colonisers, somehow symbolically appropriating and dominating the land of the whites through the introduction of their own culture and food. Selvon’s character Tantie, further exemplifies this “colonisation” when she encourages the London shops to “give credit” as they do in the West Indies and insisting on having a bag to carry her bread. According to Brinda Mehta, food can be used “to transcend feelings of immigrant powerlessness” and to “transform [...] the alienness of immigration into the hope for new beginnings” (111–12). The novel focuses on the *blacks* in London and their survival strategies in an alien and hostile environment—they, not the whites, are the Lonely Londoners.

Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack Monkey*, through the mention of food in certain aspects of colonial education, subtly attacks the dominant English culture imposed on the West Indies. The education system she describes perpetuates the colonial ideology that gives English culture and language a superior status, and the right to decide what is proper and acceptable, thereby sacrificing the indigenous folk culture and language. In his foreword, Roy Narinesingh states that the education system in Hodge’s novel is characterised by “[r]igid conformity, emphasis on external order, unquestioning obedience, submissiveness and passivity, the irrelevance of the curriculum, (both cultural and linguistic), the absence of stimulation to learn, and lack of warmth.” (x) Tee, the child narrator of the novel, speaks of learning “A for apple” when all she knows of the fruit is its “brief and stingy appearance at Christmastime” (25) and, although there is levity in the scene, poor Dunccey-Joseph cannot help thinking that g-r-a-p-e-s spells “chennette,” a local fruit, when instructed to look at the picture, because of his limited experience with the foreign fruit. In both instances, food is related to language and, therefore, reveals the irrelevant cultural and linguistic content of the colonial education system. In these instances, food functions as an important tool that constructs the narrative as postcolonial discourse by contrasting the local and the foreign, the indigenous and the imposed cultures.

The way in which the preparation of different types of food is described may also convey social class and reveal social aspirations. As Mehta argues, “food discourse offers microcosmic insights into [...] particular [...]

⁵ This phrase is borrowed from the title of a poem by Jamaican poet Louise Bennett.

⁶ In the post-war period, as reflected in Selvon’s novels, Britain’s Nationality Act (1948) allowed immigration from its colonies and former colonies. The West Indians arrived on the SS *Empire Windrush* causing a period of population growth in London and creating an atmosphere of rich variety (Procter 321). Kenneth Ramchand also observes, “West Indian writers emigrated to the United Kingdom in such numbers in the 1950s and 1960s that London became the West Indian literary capital” (Ramchand 96).

worldview[s]." (118) In *Crick Crack Monkey*, food, among other things, is used to create a contrast between the two aunts, Tantie and Auntie Beatrice, who are fighting with each other for the guardianship of Tee and her brother. The children, and Tee in particular, are torn in "a painful psychological and emotional tug-of-war" (Rahim 96–97) between two worlds that represent two very different social classes—Tantie stands for the lower class while Auntie Beatrice belongs to the socially aspiring middle class. This clash forms the basis of Tee's alienation from both aunts at the end of the novel.

Early in the novel, Tee's lives with Tantie and we are afforded a view of the local folk culture. When Tee visits her grandmother in Canapo, the list of local food she prepares also conveys the folk culture of the West Indies: "[Ma] spent a great part of the week stewing cashews, pommescythères, cerises, making guava-cheese and guava jelly, sugar-cake, nut-cake, bennay-balls, toolum, shaddock-peel candy, chilibibi" (15). Hodge thus establishes a world in which life is free, playful, simple and delicious.

Later, when Tee goes to live with Auntie Beatrice, the difference between this folk culture and the socially aspiring middle class is expressed through food. When Auntie Beatrice goes shopping for the da Silvas' dinner, for example, her list consists of largely foreign ingredients: stuffed olives, a bag of potato crisps, Worcester sauce and French dressing. Auntie Beatrice's menu is aimed at impressing the da Silvas who, she believes, are of prominent social standing, if only because of their name and their fair skin. The type of food she selects for entertaining therefore suggests her ideological position regarding social class.

Auntie Beatrice's parties, which consist of "a gathering of a priest and ladies," are similarly accompanied by food that she deems suitable to her social class. She has her maid pour tea and serve little sponge cakes. There is much tittering and tinkling of teacups and saucers, and the children are dressed up for the occasion. This event is strikingly different from Tantie's loud rambunctious "fowl-run parties" in which liquor is served and there is much dancing and revelry. The contrast between the types of beverages at the parties reveals the social aspirations of one aunt and the folk culture associated with the other. Auntie Beatrice, in an attempt to establish her social identity, is careful to perpetuate the English tradition of having tea parties. Her efforts are, however, based on false assumptions and manners she associates with a foreign culture. In her insistence upon the ideal of the English tea party, "Aunt Beatrice cultivates bourgeois values that despise blackness in every form—skin colour, speech patterns, food" (6), as noted by Ketu Katrak. This, in a sense, is related to what Uma Narayan refers to as "food parochialism" (76) and to Mehta's observation that "food chauvinism parallels [...] cultural chauvinism [...] where the preservation of culture becomes an excuse for cultural insularity and racism" and that "patterns of inclusion/exclusion [...] are institutionalised through food discourse" (113, 118). Not surprisingly, then, when Tee distractedly takes her food in a bowl and begins eating with a dessert-spoon as she used to do at Tantie's, she is ridiculed by her cousins and reprimanded by Auntie Beatrice: "'Don't bring your ordnryness here! We don't eat with bowl and spoon here, you're not living at your precious Tantie now!'" (95)

This seeming fear of contamination of the artificial world of manners and politeness Auntie Beatrice has constructed is also reflected in her hatred of any

type of food that is associated with the lower classes and the indigenous folk culture. When Tee reflects on the possibility of attending Moonie's Hindu wedding, she thinks of "dalpouri and good hot pepper [and] eating off a piece of banana-leaf." This is followed by a significant line: "Auntie Beatrice had an aversion to hot pepper; she said it was nastiness" (79). It also seems clear that eating off a banana-leaf would be far from Auntie Beatrice's idea of good table manners. Furthermore, when Tantie and company later pay Tee an unexpected visit, the consumption of local and folk food is described as defilement and contamination, and the fact that it should have taken place within Auntie Beatrice's walls described as taboo:

The worst moment of all was when they drew forth a series of greasy paper bags, announcing that they contained polorie, anchar, roti [...] and accra and fry-bake and zaboca [...] in short, all manner of ordinary nastiness. [...] the very thought of sitting in Auntie Beatrice's drawingroom eating coolie-food! And *accra! Saltfish!* Fancy even bringing saltfish into Auntie Beatrice's house! (106–107)

Tee, by this time, has been so deeply influenced by Auntie Beatrice's affectations that her voice sounds more like her pretentious aunt's, and the very delicacies in which she once delighted become shameful. She is further mortified when Uncle Sylvester proceeds to "help" her with a piece of spotted roti by "opening his jaws wide enough to accommodate Government House (this was a dictum of Auntie Beatrice's in the context of table-manners)" (107). The parenthetical explanation further establishes the distance between Tee and her folk culture, a distance that has been precipitated by her interaction with Auntie Beatrice. It reflects her changing ideology that is the cause of her estrangement and of her ardent wish to migrate at the end of the novel.

Descriptions of food and drink can be added to the mixtures of people, races and religions of the region as factors that contribute to a reading of the West Indian culture as one of abundance and variety. The outing to Coriaca to see Carnival in Hodge's novel reveals this culture through the various foods mentioned: "We sang all the way and drummed on our chocolate and pitch-oil tins that contained the pelau and roti and dalpouri and chicken" (85). This reference to various types of food suggests the intermingling of the two major races in Trinidad—pelau is associated with the Africans but also has French Creole roots, and roti and dalpouri are associated with the East Indians. As Mehta observes, the food reflects "creative 'masalafication' or creolization of cultures as a prerequisite for achieving dynamic cultural plurality" (119). The apparent lack of race barriers in Tantie's community, conveyed through food, also stands in stark contrast to Auntie Beatrice's racial discrimination. Interestingly, though, the chocolate tins might be a reference to foreign imports and thereby symbolize that, once again, the post-colonial culture is often a negotiation between the local and foreign. In *Moses Migrating*, this culture of abundance and indiscrimination, especially regarding cultural food, is also made obvious in the description of the picnic victuals taken to the beach: "roti and curry beef and potatoes, [...] fried chicken and chips, [...] hot pies with various fillings, and then ripe mango-julie and sapodillas for dessert" (126–27).

The superstitious nature of West Indian culture is also expressed through food in interesting ways. At the beginning of *Crick Crack Monkey*, the children are told to run into a neighbour's house should Auntie Beatrice appear in Tantie and Mikey's absence. Because the children's only experience of Auntie Beatrice at this point is a distant memory and because Tantie's nickname for her, "The Bitch", she grows "horns and a djablesse-face"⁷ (10) in the children's minds. Auntie Beatrice therefore becomes associated with one of the most dreaded West Indian folklore characters in their imagination. However, when she appears and coaxes them with roast-corn, ice-cream and sweets, all the "attributes of female terrifyingness" (10) disappear. Nevertheless, this early characterisation again becomes very interesting when, later in the novel, we are introduced to another character, Mr Brathwaite, whom the children believe is a lagahou⁸ married to a djablesse. He is rumoured to eat children to whom he would offer sweets and whom he would then pop into a bag. Mr Brathwaite is thus associated with Auntie Beatrice through the relationship between sweets and superstition. Here, food is not only associated with superstition but, through the narrative, which draws a parallel between the two characters, it also contributes to shaping Auntie Beatrice as a threatening figure in the eyes of the child narrator.

Samuel Selvon's short story "Johnson and the Cascadura," which later became the novel *Those Who Eat the Cascadura*, is another example of how food can be associated with superstition. The story is based on a native Trinidadian legend according to which anyone eating the cascadura fish "will end their days in the island no matter where they wander." (11) The early introduction of such a legend into the narrative exposes straightaway the theme of superstition and anticipates the role food will play later in the story. This function is particularly enhanced by the fact that Johnson, the main character of the short story, is collecting material for a book on superstition and witchcraft in the West Indies. The love story that follows between the Englishman, Johnson, and a young Indian girl, Urmilla, is framed by this context of superstition that has been set up by the early mention of the supernatural power of food. Johnson does indeed return to Trinidad after he falls ill with a rare blood disease and Urmilla, who strongly believes in the mysterious power of the legend and of the dish to make wanderers return to the island, carefully prepares the cascadura for him. In this example, food is used to validate the indigenous culture and the particularly superstitious nature of the village in which the story is set, and to frame the narrative in a supernatural context.

The preparation of food also sometimes symbolises love. In *Crick Crack Monkey*, when the children run home excitedly to Tantie with the news that Mikey got into a fight on the bridge which was forbidden to them, they realise, but too late, that they have said too much, and dread the violent quarrel they are certain would ensue on his arrival home. The reason for the fight, however, was Mikey's defending Tantie after she had been insulted. The child narrator, who is unable to make sense of the situation, relates the events which occur when Mikey returns home as follows:

⁷ The djablesse was a female folklore character who was said to have cloven hooves and who, with her beauty, lured men to their death into the forest.

⁸ The West Indian version of a werewolf.

Tantie spread some slices of bread alarmingly thickly with butter, heaped some of the smoke'-herring onto a plate with the bread, went to the cabinet and took out a large mug that was Grampa's which she filled up with cocoa and bore the lot *reverently* into the hostile darkness of Mikey's room. (9-10 [my emphasis])

Tee does not understand why the uproar never comes. Tantie is touched by Mikey's defence of her honour. As Anne Goldman argues, "The culinary metaphor is distinctly feminine [...] The reproductive model of cultural development and identity is specifically maternal" (191). Through the use of hyperbole in this passage (the emphasised text), Tantie's quasi-maternal love for Mikey becomes obvious. The sharing of vast amounts of food is a typically maternal way of expressing one's love and the intensity of her emotions is conveyed through her generosity in the preparation of his meal. A similar observation can be made when Mikey is about to assume an employment position abroad and Tantie loads him with various local foods for his journey: "from tamarind-jam and pone to coconut oil" (66).

Interestingly, sexuality is also often described in terms of food and taste. In novels such as *The Lonely Londoners*, sex is described as "eating": at the end of Galahad's night out with his date, he tries to seduce her because he indeed feels that "the boys would never finish giving him tone for spending all that money and not *eating*." (92 [my emphasis]) Furthermore, Frank's advice to Galahad that "it have bags of white pussy in London and you will eat till you tired," (90) while it may suggest oral sex in the literal meaning of the phrase, can be understood as a general comment on the sexual excesses and lack of love in the relationships formed between the black immigrants and the white women in the novel.

This is, in fact, reminiscent of the calypso, "Congo Man" by The Mighty Sparrow, which recounts the story of a pair of white women travelling through Africa who are confronted by the Congo man. The song plays with the notion of cannibalism but the eating of white meat also carries heavy sexual connotations. The calypsonian is full of praise for the Congo man who has managed to enjoy white women sexually, and he bemoans the fact that he has not had the lucky experience of "eating" white meat. The chorus goes:

Oh I envy the Congo man
I wish I was he
I want to shake he han'
He eat until he stomach upset
And I? Never eat a white meat yet.

Ribald punning is used here to effectively subvert white power and authority. The song, set in Africa, makes a direct reference to colonialism, but the sexual assertion of the black man suggests resistance to white domination. The colonised Congo man, like the characters in *The Lonely Londoners*, reverses the power relations between black and white by somehow consuming the "Other." As Robert Stam argues, "Within the Western tradition, cannibalism has often been the 'name of the other,' the ultimate marker of difference in a coded opposition of light/dark, rational/irrational, civilized/savage." (125) Stam also observes that "The 'cannibalist' [...] metaphors [...] evoke a kind of dissolving of the boundaries of self through the physical or spiritual commingling of self and

other" (126). In a much more recent calypso,⁹ "Catholic Woman," the calypsonian sings about wanting a Catholic woman as a lover. Because of the pronunciation of the word "Catholic" in Trinidadian English, which would sound more like "cat-to-lick" ("cat" being a derogatory name for the female genitalia), the song becomes quite risqué. It is also a particularly subversive calypso because it challenges the Church,¹⁰ a force that is intimately linked with Carnival through their calendar relationship,¹¹ but is also a colonial remnant.

As I have tried to show, food and drink are more important to the literary work than they first appear. Their social and cultural definitions highlight their important role in the rendering of an authentic and indigenous culture in the literary work. They help to reflect and indeed construct the particular history of the West Indies while also effectively conveying social tensions within West Indian society and providing a powerful means of portraying personal relationships. In this way, the use of food and drink images can reveal underlying social, cultural and economic ideologies that contribute to the interpretation of the text and of the culture.

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⁹ Released for Carnival 2003 in Trinidad and Tobago.

¹⁰ In fact, when the song was released, the Archbishop of the Church in Trinidad and Tobago strongly objected to it.

¹¹ Carnival Monday and Tuesday occur just before Ash Wednesday. These two days are therefore associated with a sense of release and indulgence in the worldly pleasures before the fasting of the Lenten season. In fact, the word, Carnival comes from "carne" and "vale" or goodbye to the flesh.

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