



DOI 10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-1-51-60  
EDN: JCKISO  
UDC 821.1.09


Research article / Научная статья

## Food culture in Oonya Kempadoo's *All Decent Animals and Buxton Spice*

Isha Banerjee<sup>1</sup>  , Rashmi Dubey<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>*Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur, Republic of India*

<sup>2</sup>*Govt. D.B. Girls' P.G. College, Raipur, Republic of India*

 [banerjeeisha01@gmail.com](mailto:banerjeeisha01@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** The role of food culture in the construction of collective identity remains indispensable, considering that it results from consistent and prolonged practice by the given population. In the particular case of postcolonial literature, cultural markers such as food, clothing, rituals etc., act as powerful tools of sociocultural representation. In *All Decent Animals* (2013) and *Buxton Spice* (1998), Oonya Kempadoo posits the characters as the embodiments of various levels of association with the traditional culinary practices thereby showing their differential sense of cultural rootedness against the multicultural milieu of the novels' settings. The study aims to extract such instances from the novels that show the impact of food culture in the creation of a common memory, hearkening back to the shared history of the characters. The authors concluded, that something as mundane as food occupies a pivotal role in co-navigating the characters' journey from self-doubt to self-acceptance. The effect of food culture in eliciting an inclination towards one's ethnic roots is considered, while also touching upon the matter of developing a sense of cultural, familial and individual identity by means of foodways.

**Keywords:** Caribbean literature, foodways, multiculturalism

**Conflicts of interest.** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**Article history:** submitted November 1, 2022; revised December 15, 2022; accepted January 2, 2023.

**For citation:** Banerjee, I., & Dubey, R. (2023). Food culture in Oonya Kempadoo's *All Decent Animals and Buxton Spice*. *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 28(1), 51–60. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-1-51-60>

## Культура еды в романах Унии Кемпаду «Все достойные животные» и «Бакстон Спайс»

И. Банерджи<sup>1</sup>  , Р. Дубей<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>*Университет Пандита Равишанкары Шуклы, Республика Индия, Райпур*

<sup>2</sup>*Государственный медицинский колледж для девушек, Республика Индия, Райпур*

 [banerjeeisha01@gmail.com](mailto:banerjeeisha01@gmail.com)

**Аннотация.** Роль культуры питания в формировании коллективной идентичности остается незаменимой, учитывая, что она является результатом последовательной и длительной практики соответствующего населения. В конкретном случае постколониальной лите-

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ратуры культурные маркеры, такие как еда, одежда, ритуалы и т. д., выступают в качестве мощных инструментов социокультурной репрезентации. В книгах «Все достойные животные» (2013) и «Бакстон Спайс» (1998) Уния Кемпаду позиционирует персонажей как воплощение различных уровней ассоциации с традиционными кулинарными практиками, тем самым демонстрируя их различное чувство культурной укорененности на фоне мультикультурной среды, в которой разворачивается действие. Цель исследования – извлечь из романов примеры, показывающие влияние культуры питания на создание общей памяти, возвращая внимание к общей истории персонажей. Выявлено, что, несмотря на кажущуюся обыденность, еда играет ключевую роль в совместном путешествии персонажей от неуверенности в себе к самопринятию. Изучено влияние культуры еды на формирование склонности к своим этническим корням. Рассмотрен вопрос развития чувства культурной, семейной и индивидуальной идентичности в сфере кулинарной практики.

**Ключевые слова:** карибская литература, культура питания, Foodways, мультикультурализм

**Заявление о конфликте интересов.** Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**История статьи:** поступила в редакцию 1 ноября 2022 г.; отрецензирована 15 декабря 2022 г.; принята к публикации 2 января 2023 г.

**Для цитирования:** Banerjee I., Dubey R. Food culture in Oonya Kempadoo's *All Decent Animals* and *Buxton Spice* // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2023. Т. 28. № 1. С. 51–60. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-1-51-60>

## Introduction

Oonya Kempadoo happens to be among those authors emerging out of the Caribbean canon who encapsulates the dynamicity and vibrancy of the multiculturalism pervading the Caribbean Islands. Born to parents of mixed ancestry, Kempadoo collected her own cultural and individual memories and amalgamated them with the sweep of experiences from the times spent in different countries to produce a literary result which is as exquisite as a pearl inside a clam dwelling deep into the ocean – *sui generis*. The novels *All Decent Animals* (2013) and *Buxton Spice* (1998), set in Trinidad and Guyana respectively, demonstrate the importance of food culture in helping the characters attain cultural rootedness and a sense of identity engendered by their distinct food practices. Being located within postcolonial literature, the aspect of food culture can be looked at as being analogous to the emancipated population's endeavour towards finding a balance and sense of autonomy. How the food culture helps in creating a sense of individuality and belongingness can be understood by looking at how different characters in the novels associate a deeper level of meaning to the food than mere comestibles, which either brings them closer to or creates a longing for, their traditional foods.

## Discussion

Food culture seems to be a broad term that not just constitutes the way food is cooked and eaten, but also the entire process of food handling, assembling, and consuming, along with its symbolic meaning to the concerned culture. As defined

by Lucy M. Long, “food culture” includes “the practices, attitudes, and beliefs as well as the networks and institutions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food” (Long et al., 2020, p. 8), which essentially hints at the term’s comprehensiveness. Food culture, like other aspects of culture, tends to be a very dynamic and overarching construct spanning the continuum of everything that lies between the process of food handling and eating. This definition helps shape our understanding of how food culture plays a crucial role appertaining to the creation of memory and cultural identity by reinforcing a commonality in the practices surrounding food within the respective cultural groups. It is also worth noting that a number of factors such as familial history, geography, ethnicity, socio-economic background etc. influence the food culture which in turn makes it an important socio-cultural marker representing the specific groups in the vast map of diversified populations. This understanding helps in identifying such instances from the novels where food seems to either trigger the characters’ realization of cultural rootlessness or elicit a strong emotion of steadfastness with their cultural heritage.

The retention of traditional gastronomic identity helps in establishing a sense of being annexed to the roots by begetting “belongingness” and resisting the “patterns of domination and acculturation” (Mehta, 2004, p. 25). When understood in the context of a work set in a Caribbean country, this statement also hints at the possibility of cultural markers like foodways as being a labile and easy target for dominant groups to manipulate as a part of systemic subordination and appropriation. Thus, the preservation of traditional food culture, particularly of the erstwhile dominated or colonized groups, becomes very crucial to the aim of cultural subsistence of these said groups. “Foodways” can be described as the “eating habits and culinary practices of people, regions or historical periods” (Dwyer, Freitas, 2013, p. 289). Simply put, it can be said to include an understanding of the role of food and food-related behaviour in representation and how the acquired knowledge about food is transferred within the respective sociocultural groups. Keeping in mind that the Caribbean countries are homes to a diverse population belonging to different ethnicities, it becomes all the more interesting to witness the gastronomic multiculturalism blooming in its full glory as observed in the novels, while concurrently the commonality of identity entrenched by traditional foodways becomes a strong tenet of sociocultural representation.

Yet, just as all sociocultural parameters underwent commingling due to the exposure of multicultural practices, the food habits too were faced by this eclectic confrontation. By transcending the traditional realms and landing up on the plate and palate of non-native populations, the foodways resulted in newer relationships between the food and the people, both within and outside their immediate cultural groups. In the novels, food becomes an integral component of the cultural makeup of the characters by seeping into their everyday lives and actions. Thus, it can be deduced that the food practices prove to be instrumental in the creation of the *culinary* image of the characters, which is shaped by the character’s perception of themselves, and others’ perception of them. As a “material good and a means of

symbolic representation” (Beushausen et al., 2014, p. 11), food and eating practices contribute to certain physiological manifestations emerging as a result of the way the characters’ bodies become active participants in the process of eating. The protagonist of *All Decent Animals* is Caribbean-born returnee – Atalanta, who goes by the name Ata among her friends. Having spent a large part of her life living the diasporic identity in Europe, Ata finds herself crippled when it comes to her relationship with her food culture, leaving her overwhelmed with the questions of authenticity.

An activity as mundane as fruit-eating holds great significance for Atalanta as we see that she often nostalgically recalls her childhood days of savouring the taste of local fruits without any inhibitions. As a grown-up woman, Ata’s longings for reliving those memories are upended as she finds herself unable to indulge in the gustatory pleasure of enjoying her favourite tropical fruits for the fear that such an indulgence would make her look uncouth and “apelike” (Kempadoo, 2013, p. 210) in front of Pierre. Ata’s habit of actively involving her hands in the process of eating and subsequently getting them messy seems to make her feel self-conscious and uneasy, which stems from the fact that her French partner, Pierre Lacroix, displays utmost refinement in his dining habits, like eating sugar apples with “silver knife and fork and linen napkin” (Kempadoo, 2013, p. 209–210). The underlying disparity of their respective food culture causes them to view each other with incredulous surprise, bringing to the forefront the question of acceptable versus unacceptable in the case of eating habits. A similar disparity in eating habits is reiterated in *Buxton Spice* when Mrs. Emelda DeAbro takes note of the dining practices of Lula’s household. In particular, Mrs. DeAbro seems astonished by their use of paper napkins and cutlery which seems to be in contrast to the proper native way of using one’s hands for eating food. She implicitly attributes this practice to the sophisticated upbringing by Lula’s mother, Rose, who is of European descent. Thus, in Mrs. DeAbro’s eyes, Rose’s cultural and ethnic background seems to be the reason behind the distinct eating practices of her household.

Lavanya Ramanathan’s view expressed in an article leaves us with the quivering notion of immigrant cuisine being labelled as the *other* and “ethnic” by the condescending Westernized lens. She rightly reproaches the blatant use of the label “ethnic” to all food unique to immigrants, particularly that which is “cooked by people with the brownest skin”<sup>1</sup> as a way of *alienizing* their cuisine as exotic. However, if the matter is looked at from the other end, the use of the term ‘ethnic cuisine’ may be justified in that it helps refocus on the traditional culinary practices of the concerned groups, the artistry of which may be likened to the craft of an alchemist who works proportionally with various elements to create a magnificent result. Per se, the term in itself does not cause much harm towards appropriation or subjugation of the food culture of the ethnic groups, as does the intentional

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<sup>1</sup> Ramanathan, L. (2015). Why everyone should stop calling immigrant food ‘ethnic’. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved December 12, 2022, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/why-everyone-should-stop-calling-immigrant-food-ethnic/2015/07/20/07927100-266f-11e5-b77f-eb13a215f593\\_story](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/why-everyone-should-stop-calling-immigrant-food-ethnic/2015/07/20/07927100-266f-11e5-b77f-eb13a215f593_story)

obliteration of the ties between the foodways and the culture of those groups. Thus, if the racial references are discounted from Ramanathan's observation, the term 'ethnic food' might as well serve as a pop culture reference to one's traditional foodways as an empowering element of unequivocal representation. This may also be thought of as a way of acknowledging the cultural and historic background of the population whose food culture is being referred to.

In *All Decent Animals*, Pierre Lacroix is a person who is ethnically detached from the traditional food practices of the Caribbean. As a French man living in Trinidad, Pierre tries to "hold on to a piece of his culture" (Kempadoo, 2013, p. 50) by being passionate about the same breakfast menu of jam, toast, butter and coffee. He hopelessly longs to find the perfect French pastry, wine and other foods, similar to Ata's longing for indulging in the experience of fruit-eating. In Ata's company, Pierre tries foods and drinks of the Trinidadian culture, but his taste palate does not take up the distinct flavours and textures, which leads to a gastronomic estrangement between the two. On the flip side, Ata, Fraser and Sammy all happen to be of Caribbean heritage which explains why, to them, the local food equates a sense of warmth and homeliness. Atalanta's architect friend, Fraser Goodman, happens to be the person with whom she shares a food bond, so to say, as a result of their shared love for tropical fruits and the classic local dishes. Despite being terminally ill, Fraser yearns to wallow in the nostalgic memories of eating fruits such as sugar apple, passion fruit, and genip. Once as they are both eating sugar apples, he revisits the "sugar heavens of childhood" (Kempadoo, 2013, p. 208) when Ata exclaims that the only correct way to eat the fruit is by ditching the paper plates and napkins and using one's hands instead while letting the seeds fall off directly on the ground. Such gastronomical memories tie them together, which also highlights their shared history as Caribbean youth.

According to Lynn Marie Houston, the aristocratic Trinidadians tend to have a penchant for "European-influenced meals" (Houston, 2005, p. 111), as seen in the case of Fraser's mother, Mrs. Dorothy Goodman, whose "sophisticated charm" (Kempadoo, 2013, p. 219) emanates an air of upper-class grandiosity. She seems to have taken up the refinement of European eating practices and considers trifle, rosé, and sherry as essential parts of her Sunday menu when inviting Ata, Pierre and Fraser for lunch. However, despite having received educated in England and lived there long enough as an expat to have picked up the fluent British accent, Fraser remains a true-blue Trinidadian who rejoices in the flavour and memories associated with the authentic Trinidadian foods like callaloo, macaroni pie, pilau, and local fruits even during the agony of his final days. It can rightly be said that food serves a greater purpose than being just a source of hedonic pleasure as Fraser finds the comfort of belongingness, which in a way compensates for the lack of the warmth of familial affection. Thus, it becomes evident that the traditional food habits retain a long-lasting imprint on Fraser's memory which asserts itself through the best and worst times of his life.

The incident surrounding Ata's insecurity with enjoying her cultural foods also leaves an interesting afterthought when looked at with the interpretation of

foodways given by Lynn Marie Houston. Speaking of the commingling of the foodways between the “immigrant food cultures” that were introduced into the “remnant indigenous elements” (Houston, 2005, p. 13) in the Caribbean, she brings the focus back to the fact that the hitherto marginalized, colonized, and subservient “indigenous” people are the originals, making their food culture the speculative stock onto which the culinary practices of the incoming groups were grafted. An antithetical example of this culinary graft is observed in how, upon visiting Pierre’s birthplace in France, Ata seems to freely enjoy the traditional French comestibles and expresses her amusement with their variety and quality, but on the contrary, she hesitates in embracing the traditional eating practices of her homeland. It can be assumed that the cultural confrontation spurs a culinary alter ego in her that controls the way she thinks of a circadian activity as eating with such cryptic reservations, and it is at this stage during her life that the culinary graft tends to exercise greater power over the cultural stock of the Trinidadian eating practices.

Jon W. O’Neill identifies the link between the act of cooking food and the reinforcing of a sense of identity among the Caribbean people who had been erstwhile disenfranchised by colonial rule (O’Neill, 2010). This is reflected in the case of Sammy’s mother in *All Decent Animals*. Sammy, the humble driver happens to be raised singlehandedly by his mother from the money that she earned from her cooking business. The fact that the novel is set during the turn of the century explains why the financial independence sought and attained by Sammy’s mother, as a Black woman, is so vital to the narrative. Her cooking business symbolizes the independence, both in terms of financial freedom and the individual identity, that she attains by making food and culinary artistry her brandishing weapon in her battle against the contemporary oppressions.

The matrilineal tradition of cooking and eating as a celebratory display of affection is passed on from Sammy’s mother to him, to the point that Sammy never finds it unusual to be in the kitchen as a man. In fact, to him, food becomes a love language as he is often seen making references to food items in expressing his adulation for his beloved Douli by likening her silky hair to the starchy rice water and referring to her as “chutney sweetness, sugar dumpling” and “pepper love” (Kempadoo, 2013, p. 67). Later, cooking plays a therapeutic role in Sammy’s case when he is faced with the greatest loss of his life – Douli’s death. As a way of empathizing with him for his loss and helping him recover from the grief, Sammy’s mother cooks traditional Trinidadian comfort food for him, which he refers to as “thick creole love” (Kempadoo, 2013, p. 143). The ability of food to provide solace amidst tumultuous situations is seen in Sam and Fraser’s examples where they find warmth and consolation in the traditional foods.

The cultural importance of food is noted in *Buxton Spice* wherein Lula’s father seems enthusiastic about his wife’s culinary skills. To him, cooking is like an art that derives its vibrant colours from the multicultural framework of the society and paints the magnum opus of a close-knit family bonded over food and warmth. During the simple event of eating dinner, the use of the word “*bhagee*”

(Kempadoo, 1999, p. 25) for referring to the leafy greens shows how multiculturalism is celebrated and honoured in Lula's household in contrast to the rising incidents of communal conflicts infiltrating the neighbourhood of Tamarind Grove. Lula's "Dark cool Madrasi" (Kempadoo, 1999, p. 27) father appreciates the colour combination of orange and green from the pumpkin and *bhagee* respectively, making her European mother take note of how cooking and eating hold ceremonial importance to Lula's father.

Sebastian Huber identifies cooking as a "highly subversive form of resistance" (Huber, 2014, p. 69) to the totalitarian powers that threaten the cultural integrity of populations. In this regard, the emphasis laid on the practice of cooking food, as observed in the two novels, shows the way in which cooking manifests itself as a cultural metonym, by not just providing a feeling of comfort during times of distress, but also fortifying the sense of rootedness as a family. In this regard, the thoughts of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss seem highly relevant, that cooking signifies the "transition from nature to culture" and how the "gustatory code" (Lévi-Strauss, 1964, p. 164) can be deployed as a medium for seeking answers to the complex questions about human state. This explanation buttresses the idea that cooking, indeed, is a potential marker of sociocultural representation, as is rightly seen in the examples from the novels.

The act of embracing one's food practices can be looked at as a metaphorical way by which the characters also reconcile with their cultural heritage. This is exemplified when Ata goes for a solo stay at Blanchisseuse to renavigate her career path and her failing relationship with Pierre. It is here that she comes across an imaginary person who validates her individuality and velleity towards embracing her food culture. It is as if the habits, particularly pertaining to food, that she had tried to change while being with Pierre, are all welcomed by this stranger, which makes her feel powerful and confident. Unlike with Pierre, around whom Ata often affects sophistication, she feels comfortable enough in the presence of this stranger to eat a trickling mango without the fear of drawing in derisive comments or looks. He later exclaims how her body smells of a traditional drink made up of spiced hot cocoa concoction, reminding him of the earthiness of the Island home. This affirmation spatializes the erstwhile non-existent sense of cultural pride in Ata and emboldens her toward self-acceptance.

It may be assumed that this other person that she meets at Blanchisseuse is her alter ego or a manifestation of her inner self, thus making their encounter her epiphanic reconciliation with herself. It is also interesting to note how upon returning to the city, Ata feels like she has cheated on Pierre by forming a deep connection with the 'stranger' when on the contrary, she has succeeded in moving a step forward toward self-acceptance. This incident suggests how by the simple act of embracing her food culture, Ata takes a metaphoric leap towards reconciling with herself on cultural and individual levels. The importance of food ethnicity, particularly in Caribbean literature, where the tenets of everyday cultural practices wield great impact on concretizing the common identity, is reflected in a passage in *All Decent Animals*, wherein Ata is told of the significance of food

culture by Terence. The very grave topic of racial alterity and subsequent curtailing of the traditional food culture is elaborated by Terence as part of a jovial conversation which ultimately makes Ata mindful of the fact that all her Afrocentric friends had steered clear of having a White partner, for the simple reason that they wanted to enjoy the local foods without any inhibitions or restrictions, as experienced by Ata during her relationship with Pierre. Thus, Ata and Pierre's different racial backgrounds and their respective food cultures become the barrier in the way of complete acceptance of the traditional eating practices.

A counterfoil of this is seen in how Lula and her friends enjoy eating the local fruits like dungs, genips, mangoes, sapodillas, star apples etc. At one instance, Lula mentions eating sweet genips in an almost mechanical way by tearing the skin and plopping the fruit in her mouth while at the same time savouring its sappy remains from her hands. A strikingly similar way of eating the fruit is exhibited by Ata, however, her confidante, Pierre looks at her with a repulsive expression stemming from his unfamiliarity with the fruit's handling. As readers, we realize how insidious the gentrification of food culture is, for its repercussions are seen in Ata's failing attachment to her culture as a result of her attempts to conform to the pop culture practice of following sophisticated eating habits and preferences. While Ata becomes inured by the self-imposed restrictions on her eating preferences, Lula immerses herself in the traditional food culture without any reservations.

The intermingling of contrastive cultural groups results in the appropriation of the cultural markers of the dominated group and perpetuates the pervading notions of superiority and subordination, long after the colonial forces cease to exist. The feeling of being torn between the opposing pulls of her traditional practices and the hindsight of European practices causes Ata to be abandoned along the edge of both cultures, thereby feeling unwelcomed by either of them. The questions of authenticity and rootedness are best answered by looking at a population's adherence to their culture including the food practices, rituals, clothing habits etc. Similar thoughts are iterated in the introductory chapter of *Caribbean Food Cultures*, wherein the "social constructedness of authenticity and its importance for culinary practices" (Beushausen et al., 2014, 17) are seen as a function of the domain of food and its consumption by people, thereby necessitating its consideration as a strong sociocultural marker. Insofar as the present study is concerned, this statement rightly shows the impact of foodways in the characters' negotiation with the ideas of sociocultural image and oneness with their respective cultures.

It is rightly expressed by Astrid Erll that "no memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts" (Erll, 2008, p. 5) and food culture happens to be one such vital component that is embedded into the everyday lives of the populations, thereby playing important role in the creation of cultural identity. Upon analysing the instances surrounding cooking and eating practices occurring in the novels through the lens of sociocultural relations, it becomes clear how they rise from being just mundane activities in the lives of the characters and garner the power to instil a sense of attachment with oneself and one's culture. In the narratives of Caribbean literature that touch upon cultural



multiplicity, ethnic diversity, and implied subjacent-suprajacent relations between different sociocultural groups, food culture becomes a vital part of the linchpin which holds the dynamic components together. In addition to being imbued with the ability to strengthen one's connection to their cultural origin, food culture can be looked at as both, a cause and a result of the intra/inter-cultural activities within the social setup. How the quotidian traditional fare comes to dictate one's association with their culture is understood by the instances discussed in this study.

### Conclusion

To a great extent, cultural memories make up the bulk of a person's recollections, especially in the case of such narratives as Caribbean literature where the cultural memories seem to be cemented together by a shared history of rebuilding a collective identity from the scratch on the clean board of newfound individuality. Though the novels do not project abject annihilation of any cultural group, the vulnerability emerging as a result of ingrained notions of sub-supra relations is seen evidently through the character of Ata, who in the end, emerges triumphant in reclaiming a sense of connectedness in her food culture. How food continues to be a source of attachment can be viewed in Lula, Fraser, and Sammy's characters who remain strongly rooted in their food culture from the beginning. The European sophistication of both Pierre and Rose attracts the surprised gaze of the respective onlookers, making their eating practices as much of an enigma as is true for vice versa. It is interesting to note how the miscibility of food cultures across ethnic boundaries is just as instrumental towards creating a culturally diverse society, as their heterogeneity is essential in ensuring the attainment of a harmonious and non-insular society.

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**Bio notes:**

*Isha Banerjee*, research scholar, Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur, Republic of India. ORCID: 0000-0002-7010-5225. E-mail: banerjeeisha01@gmail.com

*Rashmi Dubey*, Dr, Assistant Professor, Govt. D.B. Girls' P.G. College, Raipur, Republic of India. ORCID: 0000-0002-0640-1492. E-mail: <mailto:rashmi@dbgirls.org>

**Сведения об авторах:**

*Банерджи Иша*, научный сотрудник, Университет Пандита Равишанкары Шуклы, Республика Индия, Райпур. ORCID: 0000-0002-7010-5225. E-mail: banerjeeisha01@gmail.com

*Дубей Раши*, доктор, доцент, Государственный медицинский колледж для девушек, Райпур, Республика Индия. ORCID: 0000-0002-0640-1492. E-mail: <mailto:rashmi@dbgirls.org>