

Samir Zaidi
Food For Thought
Essay 1- Portfolio Draft

The Stars So Near

One starry night, I was lying on the rooftop of my grandparents' house. I had never before felt so contemplative. Maybe it was the brightness and closeness of the stars that made me link with nature. Maybe it was the feeling of being so close to my family, something I have always cherished. Maybe it was the grotesque smell of the streets that were illuminated only by the stars. But something that night compelled me to ponder how food, this giant blob of mass that delightfully satisfies your taste buds, can both excite and suppress so much passion and anger; these thoughts eventually unraveled new perspectives and insights into my own character.

This was on the night of August 15th – the Indian Independence Day – a day that is marked each year by national celebration and festivity. The night before, my family and I were staying at the Guest Suites of the India National Science Academy in Delhi, a prestigious scientific academy of which my grandfather is a member. I was dreadfully jetlagged, so I instantly fell asleep the moment my head made contact with the pillow. I woke up the next day in a ghastly mood and craved for more sleep. We had to wake up for festivities at my maternal grandparents' house. As we entered the house, I noticed that scores had gathered to celebrate. As I gazed upwards, I saw that the rooftop was chock-a-block with men and women dressed in bright garments, gossiping away.

My grandmother and my mother were tucked into the kitchen cooking many Indian delicacies. On the table was an exceedingly expensive brand of goat meat. Astonished, I went up to my grandmother and exclaimed, “Nani (grandmother), you

never buy this goat, you always say it is too expensive!” She answered with overwhelming delight as if I had touched her heart. “Beta (son)”, she said, “on this day, so special to me, I bought this lamb not only to commemorate India’s independence, but also to highlight the principle of unity which led to it. This goat meat will be available to all people. They are brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the same God. They can stop at the door and food will be served to them.” Normally my grandmother bought the cheaper lamb, saying that the expensive goat meat was a waste. In fact, she even claimed that buying expensive goat meat meant more money for those rich and corrupt corporations that in essence promoted poverty. Therefore, I did not really understand her logic for buying it today, especially when it was required in such great quantities. Through her own logic, why would one help the poor and at the same time feed corrupt corporations? I felt as if I should argue with her, but noting that she felt so strongly about this matter, I decided to hold off. Perplexed and confused, I walked over to my mother.

I was rather hungry and so asked for my favorite dish that my grandmother always made for me when I visited India. This dish is made out of burnt eggplant, which is of a somewhat peculiar taste, but one that I have cherished since I can remember. While I was eating, I was zoned out. I was thinking about my childhood in London. I missed my life back then. I did not have too much to bother about at age six. I stayed at home and got completely and utterly pampered by my family. There were no qualms about excelling in school, no responsibilities to hold up to, and no girls to stress out about.

The eggplant dish reminded me of one time when I was five years old. My dad was working late and I called him while my mother, my sister, and I were having dinner.

I was angry that he was not at home. I told him to come back home because I missed him at dinner. My dad said he would be on his way right away. I tried staying up after dinner to wait for him, but he got back just a few minutes after I had fallen asleep. My father rushed so much that he left the car in second gear and it hit the car in front of him. Even at that time, I seemingly had a view similar to that of Francine Du Plessix Gray. She writes, “The home meal requires genuine sacrifices of time and energy, large expenditures of those very traits it nurtures – patience, compassion, self-discipline.” Although I was angry, my father’s effort to come home and dedication to his son by “expending his energy and time,” showed me how much he cared for me and how much he would be there for me if I ever needed him. I woke up the next morning angry that I did not get to see my dad last night, but as the story unraveled, courtesy of my mom, the anger rapidly dissipated. Now, when I ever miss my dad at the dinner table because he is occupied with work, I think of this moment and look at the food and these memories suppress all the anger and tribulations in my life.

These kinds of memories, triggered by the eggplant dish, just started pouring into my head until my mother finally realized that I was blanking out. She really had no idea what was going through my mind. She thought it might be the fatigue, which was true to a certain extent. The fatigue indeed made me vulnerable to these emotions. My mother told me to go up to the rooftop because the real food was coming up soon.

I trudged up the stairs and met up with my cousins. We talked formalities. All of us were starving and everyone was looking around to see where the food was. Finally, the food did arrive, and this was quite a ceremony. Female after female walked up the stairs each with a steaming dish. First the “biryani” (rice with meat) came up, then the

curried meat dishes, and then finally the vegetables. I had never seen this much of an assortment, but high quality meals during ceremonies such as this one, I am told, are commonplace in India. During weddings, in particular, the rituals of preparing food and the food itself are much more elaborate. The dishes were set down on makeshift tables on the rooftop. However, no one made a move towards the food. The only thing that you could hear was the gentle hiss of the tepid August breeze. Then, after several minutes, my grandfather appeared and made a prayer. It was only after the prayer that everyone stormed at the food. I did not. Instead, I sat on the side of the rooftop and thought how people had so much respect for food. I compared this to the “common” culture in America – when the food is brought out, it is time to instantly eat. In contrast, food in India seems to connect everyone to their religion and reminds them of how grateful they should be for the successes in their lives. It is actually quite amazing that in India even today, contrary to common belief, people from diverse religions, Hindus and Muslims, co-exist in harmony, live as neighbors, eat together, and pray over the same food. Food has this ability to suppress all the conflict between human beings and bring them together. In fact, it was Gandhi who fasted when rival religious factions fought during the division of India and reinforced the principle of religious tolerance, co-existence and harmony.

This philosophical meditation eventually vanished as the incessant and appealing aroma of the food caught up to me. I pigged out, and for that matter, everyone did. People were holding plates and walking around and talking to everyone. Never before had I seen such happiness and unity. After hours of consumption, people waited for the fireworks to start. I was very excited. It was a spectacular sight to behold. Eyes

sparkled with delight. But, these festivities were to end soon to my dismay. It was late and, while most people were slowly dispersing to the comfort of their homes, I just lay there on a blanket and looked up at the divine stars that felt so near me.

Here I was relaxing on the most special night in India and all I could think about was my grandmother's comment about the expensive goat meat. I felt like waking my exhausted grandmother up and telling her that she was wrong and that she should not have bought the expensive goat meat. I was furious at her. I read an article before coming to India about the tribulations of poverty in India. It stated that a little more than a third of the billion people are below the poverty line. My grandmother in a sense contributed to that disparity. I then saw this little boy, coming up the stairs of the house eating the goat meat. His eyes glowed with the sight (and perhaps the taste) of that food. That is when I realized that the expensive goat meat was bought actually to send a message to the corrupt. Although in the broadest spectrum of things, while one might not as easily realize the message my grandmother had sent to the people around her, I sure did. The food acted as a weapon to tell the corrupt (wholesalers of goat meat) that the commonwealth can overpower their plots of dominance and inequality. My grandfather's prayers, in some way, brought this meat and all the food to an unrealized sacred level that was distant from corruption, greed, and religious intolerance, and closer to inviolability and respect.

This night's experience revealed to me that food was the instigator of great passion and yet at the same time it was the suppressor of this same passion. I saw this mix when I became angry with my grandmother about her lack of clarity about goat meat, when I got mad at my dad for not being at dinner, when I was astonished at how Gandhi

had mobilized the whole nation by using ‘the absence of food’ as his most powerful weapon of non-violence, and when I noticed in amazement how scores of people could co-exist and eat on my grandmother’s rooftop regardless of their religion and belief. Every time I got mad, I managed to realize why I should not be angry. These spurts of emotion sparked by the thought of food brought self-revelation. First of all, I realized I was a “hothead.” Second of all, I realized how much respect I should have for others, their ideals, and their religion. Lastly, I realized this unremitting power of food and how it could potentially instigate so much contemplation and sentiment. That night I just gazed at the stars. The stars had indeed “illuminated” my character, and the feeling was so surreal.