

Rice: An Intercultural Dialogue on Food and Asian American Identity

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Abstract

Food functions as a vessel for cultural memory, resistance, and assimilation within Asian American identity formation. Through a comparative literary analysis of Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* and Anita Felicelli's *Love Songs for a Lost Continent*, this work argues that food holds a dual role in both protection and erasure of one's heritage. Foods such as onigiri, umeboshi, and eggs show how forced assimilation during Japanese American internment weaponized food to strip individuals of identity, while uttapam and kozhukattai show more subtle, generational assimilation among Indian Americans. Cuisine works as an intercultural language connecting past, present, and future Asian American experiences. This illustrates how engagement with culinary traditions can enable resistance to cultural homogenization, and create a hybrid identity that is simultaneously Asian and American.

The diversity of Asian American ethnicities is interconnected due to the complex identity struggle that arises from cultural assimilation via nutritional artifacts. Food is an amalgamation of shared values and traits of a certain group, so when it is passed down to new generations, its culture is also imparted on them. Even in diverse groups, shared attitudes about certain foods, methods of preparation, and consumption can unite people who have endured similar timelines. What is so unique about the significance of food for Asian American subgroups is the manner in which food can be used as both a defense to prevent and a weapon to inflict assimilation.

Arguably the most important piece of nutrition comes from the rice crop. For many Asian cultures, their schools of thought are governed by “rice, ecology, and the environment”.¹ Most evidently, the products of the rice crop played a large role in local religions and the social order of villages. For instance, those families who were capable of cultivating large fields of immense crops were considered to be of a higher social status than those with meager grains. In conjunction with the economic desire for a plentiful rice crop, rice was often associated with women and fertility, which played a large role in various religious and spiritual ceremonies across a diverse array of Asian cultures. Thus, such a simple crop as rice has the capacity to unite billions of people across a continent, directly showing the importance of elements such as this in spreading culture. What arises from this double-edged sword is not the generosity of sharing, but the usage of food as a method of poisonous assimilation and destruction of culture.

Julie Otsuka’s poignant text *When the Emperor was Divine* illustrates the juxtaposition between the gracious and destructive nature of food. Set in California during the height of World War II, Otsuka writes about a suburban Japanese family whose entire life is uprooted as a result of Japanese internment by the American government. As a result of learning about her community’s upheaval, the mother of the family is shown cleaning out her house and destroying many of her cultural possessions. Like many others, the Woman didn’t know if her family was going to survive the camps, so she performs a form of goodbye “ritual” with various elements, as described in one quote:

She opened the icebox and took out a plate of rice balls stuffed with pickled plums. She ate them slowly as she listened to the tenor sing. The plums were dark and sour. They were just the way she liked them. When the aria was over, she turned off the radio and put two rice balls into a blue bowl. She cracked an egg over the bowl and added some salmon she had cooked the night before. She brought the bowl outside to the back porch and set it down on the steps. Her back was throbbing, but she stood up straight and clapped her hands three times.²

The icebox that the woman uses to hold food can be thought of as a method of preservation, one that tries to keep the freshness of food for as long as possible. This is almost as if the woman is somehow hoping to freeze this cultural dish, wanting to hold onto it for as long as possible. As she knows her family’s fate and understands that they may be unable to return to their home, she wants to

¹ Meneses, “The Art of Rice: Symbol and Meaning in Southeast Asian Village Tradition.”

² Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 9.

preserve as much of her culture and history as possible. However, just as in real life, an icebox cannot preserve anything forever. Leaving items in the box risks the possibility that the food will spoil, that holding onto it for too long can do just as much damage as forgetting it. This may speak to the consequences that Woman, and many other Asian Americans, may suffer from as a result of expected assimilation from the dominant society. In certain hegemonic cultures, such as those seen in the United States, immigrants are often socially pressured into taking up the culture of the majority and forgoing their past identity. By holding onto her culture, the Woman risks her chances of ever being seen as true American. This is especially true during this particular time period, in which Japanese American citizens were often expected to pledge their allegiance to the American government and serve as necessary, thus disassociating themselves with the Japanese Empire.

The rice balls that the woman takes out of the icebox are regarded as one of the most recognizable symbols of Japanese culture. Typically shown as a symbol of family love and appreciation in Japan, rice balls or “onigiri” are a staple in Japanese culture, where the creation of this dish signifies the importance of hard work and dedication to the family.³ The word “onigiri” comes from the Japanese verb “nigiru”, which means to pack together something tightly with your hands. By using this cultural dish to represent the family, Otsuka may have been trying to allude to the hard work, principles, and dedication of the Woman's family, as they have painstakingly created a perfect “American” life. Similarly to how the rice balls are made, the Woman's family has had to handcraft an image of themselves that would fit in with the white majority, so as not to upset or draw attention to themselves. In this sense, the only way that the woman's family can culturally express themselves is through the dishes that they eat at home.

The specific filling that Otsuka includes in the rice balls is also significant, as pickled plums are the most traditional filling in this dish. Pickled plums, or “umeboshi”, are a significant element of many Japanese diets, as they were originally used for medicinal purposes.⁴ In this way, it can be thought that Otsuka's inclusion of this filling is symbolic of the Woman trying to protect herself before she is forced out of her house. By filling herself with this “medicine”, the Woman is hoping to prevent any sort of “illness” that she could contract during her imprisonment, almost as if her culture is the vaccine against neo-colonialism. Among the noted properties, umeboshi is known for preventing aging and fatigue, which is why it is particularly significant that after eating them, she feels her back throb, as the end of the quote describes. In a sense, it seems as though the reality of her future is actualizing itself. Although the Woman and other Japanese people may have been discriminated against in their town, they were able to retreat to the safety of their own homes. Now it seems as though their own homes can't protect them, much like the umeboshi can't protect the Woman anymore.

Once the Woman finishes eating, she prepares a dish made with the rice balls for the family dog, of which she places in a blue bowl. Blue is noteworthy, as this color and its muted counterparts were often designated for use by common people, particularly in garments.⁵ In addition to this, blue

³ Ly and Ha, “Onigiri - A Symbol of Family Love in Japan.”

⁴ Gochiso Magazine and Wayama, “What Is Umeboshi (Pickled Plum)?”

⁵ Lisina, “Symbolic Colors in Japan.”

symbolizes the sky and sea, everything that surrounds the island nation of Japan. It also represents dignity, calmness, and stability among others. By using this bowl, Otsuka is trying to represent a sentiment within the Woman, as she feels that she will not be caught off guard by the future. As it is written later in the text, the Woman's husband was seized by the US government in his pajamas in the middle of the night. By using the stable properties of blue, she calls on her heritage to guide her through difficult times and act as a steady hand to hold herself. This represents a sense of comfort that the Woman takes in her culture, as she uses some of her last final moments in her house to give thanks to her heritage.

One of the two major ingredients that the Woman adds to the dog's meal includes a raw egg. Found in most Asian cultures, this animal product functions as a symbol of health, life, fertility, longevity, and creation.⁶ It is also noted that, in Japan, the eggs grown there are considered to have less contamination, i.e. salmonella, than eggs coming from abroad. However, the Woman isn't in Japan, and she isn't using Japanese eggs, so why does she still feed them to her dog? Is it because she has no other choice but to feed this to the dog? Or is it because, much like the dog, she is at the end of her life, metaphorically speaking. Having her own life taken away from her and her family, forced to destroy their possessions and say goodbye to their community, the Woman too is faced with the destruction of her life, which is ironic considering the egg's connotation of fertility and growth. With this, she may be trying to give the egg to the dog because she knows that this is the last chance she will ever get to care for her dog again.

The other ingredient in the bowl that she gives to the dog is the salmon that she had cooked the night before. Salmon is also referred to as "kamui chep" or "divine fish" by an indigenous population of Japan known as the Ainu.⁷ Once considered a pillar of their diet, the Ainu were banned from catching and consuming this fish on their homeland by the Japanese government. As a form of resistance, the Ainu would catch this fish during the nighttime, cook it, and feed it to their children.⁸ Similarly, the Woman is forced to hide her culture during the day, saving small slivers of time in the night to create this meal for her dog. Almost as an act of rebellion, she allows the dog to eat this food, knowing that the family will never be able to express their culture again, whether it be the physical or spiritual death of their heritage.

As she finishes preparing the meal, the Woman steps outside and claps her hand three times. This number of claps specifically ties into the dish the Woman prepared, as the number three represents creation, time (past, present, future), and the three elements of body, mind, and spirit. The number three in Japanese, san 三, is written with three lines and is considered a symbol of strength and balance.⁹ Additionally, the significance of the number three shows up in the recipe for making umeboshi. In the aforementioned recipe, they explain that the ume fruit is dried during a specific period during July 20-23 for three days and three nights. This is done because the amount of ultraviolet radiation that reaches the Earth's surface is at its peak. It's also interesting to note that these few days are referred to

⁶ Hall, "The Ancient Art of Decorating Eggs | Folklife Today."

⁷ Aguirre, "NOVA Online | Island of the Spirits | Salmon."

⁸ Cobb, "Japan's Forgotten Indigenous People."

⁹ Pylant, "Appendix B: Numeral Influences."

as the “dog days of summer” in Japan, further connecting this meal to the dog and the Woman’s culture. Rather than this number expressing the values commonly held in Japanese culture, the Woman’s three claps are signaling the end of the dog’s life, not his prosperity. In essence, Otsuka uses the irony in the number’s meaning to draw connections between the dog, the meal, and the cultural significance they hold. Shortly after this quote, the dog is fed the meal and the Woman puts him down, almost as a preventative measure to make sure the dog doesn’t suffer from abandonment. Her actions almost function as both a physical and spiritual funeral of the Woman’s culture. In an effort to properly give thanks to her culture, using food as an object of comfort and memories, she bids farewell to the person and family that she used to have, unsure whether or not the future will hold space for people like her.

After spending four months living in a horse stable at the Tanforan racetrack in San Francisco, the Woman and her family are removed and transported to a camp in Delta, Utah. Soon months morph into years, and the family has no idea whether or not they will ever be allowed to leave the camps. Many of their days are filled with the monotony of camp “activities”, consisting of standing in line at the mess hall, attending school (when the building is functioning), and sitting in a desolate, dirty room. All while this occurs, the Woman slowly becomes a shell of the person she once was. One day her son brings back food from the mess hall, to which the Woman responds:

SHE SAID she no longer had any appetite. Food bored her. “Go ahead and eat without me,” she said. The boy brought back food for her from the mess hall—a plate full of beans, a mound of pickled cabbage—and pressed a fork into her hand. But before it had even reached her mouth she stopped and stared out the window. “What is it?” he asked her. “Tell me what you want. Do you want rice?” She said she didn’t want rice. She didn’t want anything anymore. Not a thing.¹⁰

One of the most striking phrases that Otsuka uses in this passage is saying that food had “bored her”. This alludes to a lack of “umami” flavor in the food that she is forced to eat now, the term meaning a Japanese loanword for “pleasant savory taste”. Rather than the comforting, familiar flavors of the food that she once knew, the Woman and her children are forced to eat slop that is essentially made for prisoners. Especially within this comparison, the Woman went from handmaking each rice ball with care, to having this job taken from her and given to somebody who does not even consider her a real American. Cooking food for one’s family imbues a sense of cultural ownership that cannot be passed down in any other way. By taking this practice away from people, a sense of identity is lost, and a cultivation of conformity arises. The Boy had also brought back food from the mess hall, of which this word refers to a building or area where people would sit to eat. This comes from the old meaning of mess as “food for one meal”. With this, families aren’t able to sit peacefully and eat together, much less cook and care for each other. This, in a sense, shows how the American government used this important cultural item as a weapon to detach people from their families, let alone the rest of society. By separating them and restricting them to a certain set of behaviors, this

¹⁰ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 94.

creates a dependency, in which families that don't willfully assimilate are forced into restraints.

The food that the Boy specifically brings back from the mess hall for the mother consists of a plate of beans and pickled cabbage. In the United States, beans were often seen as a food for low-income families, providing a cheap source of protein for dinner time. This was the case up until the Great Depression, which then turned beans into a staple for soldiers. However, it's not just soldiers that consume beans, as food similar to this was often fed to prisoners.¹¹ Additionally, the Japanese Americans being served pickled cabbage with their meals almost alludes to the sardonic nature of the camp, as this food is quite literally what composes sauerkraut, a blatantly obvious symbol of German culture. How is it that the US was able to detain Japanese people and physically apprehend all signs of their culture, but allowed sauerkraut to be served, even when Japan and Germany fought on the same side? Putting aside the clear imbalance of treatment among these ethnic groups, bland meals such as beans and sauerkraut function as a numbing agent, making Japanese American citizens immune to all other forms of culture except what is allowed by the American government. This mass-prepared food is essentially fed to them as a form of brainwashing, trying to make them forget about their own heritage. For instance, the seductive, mysterious nature of Japan's own pickled dish flavors are now washed away by the bland horribleness of pickled cabbage. Essentially, by using this form of torture to remove all ties of "foreign" influence from these Asian Americans, the government works to produce a group of homogenous citizens, in which no exchange of culture or display of diversity is shown.

Not just within the food, but in the very materials that the people are supplied with to eat point to the blatant and purposeful ignorance of their historically significant cultural practices. When the son gave the plate of food to mother, he "pressed a fork into her hand". Traditionally, many meals eaten by East Asian countries are done so with a pair of chopsticks. By using this specific utensil, people are forced to eat slower and be more mindful about what exactly they are putting in their bodies.¹² What comes with eating slower is also spending more time at the dinner table, and thus, spending more time with family. Now they are treated like animals, as they have to finish eating quickly in order to leave and make space for the next group of people to come. This also points to the way that Asian Americans are viewed as indispensable and unrecognizable as separate people, they only function as a singular group that needs to be controlled. What is also apparent about the differences between these utensils is the connotation that each of the actions gives. By eating with a pair of chopsticks, the user is inclined to pick, lift, and gently hold their food, savoring each bite. Unlike this, forks are used to stab items and gather large quantities, piling and shoveling rather than enjoying. Now that they are barred from using objects directly from their culture and practicing their philosophies, a significant element of Asian identity is stripped from them. This allows other Americans who are not a part of the white majority that in order to be a part of the country, they must conform to this one specific, correct way of being American.

Towards the end of the quotation, when the Boy asks his mother if she would like rice, she responds by saying that does not want rice, nor does she want anything. By rejecting the staple crop

¹¹ Nguyen, "Food of the Incarcerated."

¹² Nguyen, "Food of the Incarcerated."

of her Asian culture, this demonstrates the effects of the violent assimilation that her and her people are forced to endure. This sense of trauma that has been inflicted onto her identity has forced the Woman into a husk of the person she once was. This points to a total loss of hope that she will ever be able to return back to her normal life. Is there truly any point to hoping when the Woman doesn't even know if she will make it out of the camp alive? What often goes unnoticed by others is the state of limbo that victims of assimilation often suffer from. Almost as a sign of defeat, the Woman forgoes any sense of culture, unsure what to align herself with.

Although Asian Americans have long experienced violent, sudden conformity of culture, as seen during World War II, a loss of culture can also be more subtle, a development over time. Due to the differences of Asian immigration patterns that have occurred in the United States, various timelines overlap with one another, creating a kaleidoscope of the different experiences that Asian Americans share with one another. In Anita Felicelli's novel *Love Songs for a Lost Continent*, one of the stories focuses on a young Indian American graduate student who returns to his heritage home of Tamil Nadu in the hopes of researching ancient lore about the area. Through his work he meets a young Indian woman named Komakal who helps him learn more about his culture. During the first few weeks of their relationship, Komakal takes the narrator to a restaurant in a quaint Indian neighborhood. What becomes apparent in this passage is the thinly veiled effects of modern assimilation within the narrator, and how this is displayed through the mannerisms in which he interacts with his own culture:

“Did you come to Chennai because you hate it there?” Komakal asked on our first official date: a trip to Karpagambal Mess, a cheap restaurant on a noisy thoroughfare where they served the food on bright green banana leaves. She was eating a greasy chili uttapam with her fingers, dipping pieces into a plastic cup of orange molaga podi, and her small snub nose glistened with beads of sweat. . . She'd chosen the restaurant, possibly to test me, and since I seemed to be passing this test, I stayed mum about my headache, trying to steal as much happiness as I could from the moment.¹³

Unbeknownst to Felicelli's character, the Karpagambal Mess isn't a random “cheap restaurant” that he is taken to, but one of the oldest eating houses in the Mylai residential neighborhood. This restaurant, located in the area of Mylapore, was nicknamed “Mylai” and first opened in 1950, just a few years after India gained its independence from the British Empire.¹⁴ The narrator's lack of knowledge explicitly demonstrates his lack of care for his own culture. Instead, his Americanized expectations of what is considered a “nice” eating establishment cloud his vision from understanding the historical significance of the very place he has the privilege of eating in. It's also interesting that other characters in the story notice his behavior as well, with Komakal asking if he is only in Chennai because he does not like America. In a sense, the narrator's assimilation into Western culture has injected itself into his

¹³ Felicelli, *Love Songs for a Lost Continent: Stories*, 39.

¹⁴ India Online Network, “The Legendary Mylai Karpagambal Mess.”

character, so much so that he considers his own heritage home as second best.

When describing Komakal's dish, the narrator takes special notice of the banana leaves that are used as plates in the restaurant. In many South Indian states, banana leaves are used as the environmental alternative to using plastic, metal, or ceramic plates. Not only is this considered to be better for the environment, but more health conscious, as the antioxidants and vitamins of the leaves are infused when hot food is served on them.¹⁵ Due to their health benefits and role within the environment, these banana leaves are used for prasad, sacred food offerings given to deities during prayers. The meals that are served on these leaves are also typically meant to be eaten with family, paralleling the importance of nutritional family practices within Japanese culture as well. What happens when immigrants and their future generations assimilate and lose their home culture is the inability to distinguish various complexities within their own identities. The narrator isn't able to pick up on the slight nuances that would be obvious to another Indian person that is in touch with their culture. The position of the leaf also represents an important philosophy within Indian culture. It is custom for the leaf to be served with the stem facing the left side, as this environmental element represents, from left to right, the development of the universe to its obliteration.¹⁶ In a sense, this cycle of creation and destruction can be seen within the inner turmoil that the narrator suffers from. Being in India and engaging with his culture works to build his identity, but the homogeneity of American culture only seeks to destroy and mold him into a subservient citizen.

Almost with a sense of aversion, the narrator describes Komakal enjoying her meal by using her fingers to pick up the food. However, in a country as vast and diverse as India, eating food with your hands is one of the most common practices shared across its home population and diaspora. Indians believe that no other utensil besides hands can pick up the diverse catalog of food they possess, much like other Eastern Asian cultures use chopsticks to maintain the integrity of the dish. In addition to being used in every step of the cooking process, hands are especially significant because of the religious symbolism that they hold. According to the Vedas, the ancient Hindu scripture, fingers and toes correspond to the pancha mahabhoota or the "five components".¹⁷ The thumb represents fire as "agni", the forefinger is "vayu" for air, middle finger is "akasha" for ether, ring finger as "prithvi" for Earth, and the pinky finger represents "jala" or water. Due to the spiritual connotations of fingers and toes, and their connection to the environment, hands and feet are some of the most powerful tools that humans possess. Thus, by touching food with your hands directly creates physical and spiritual connection between food and the person who consumes it. What many American born Asians lose when they don't engage in their culture is a sense of spiritual belonging within their heritage. By ignoring the customs of their own people, Asian Americans lose a historical part of their identity, much like the narrator of Felicelli's story.

Another important implication from the Western colonization of India comes from the very dish that Komakal eats. In a recipe from Hebbar's kitchen, they explain that uttapam is a thick form of dosa,

¹⁵ Hegde et al., "Traditional Indian Way of Eating – an Overview."

¹⁶ Hegde et al., "Traditional Indian Way of Eating – an Overview."

¹⁷ Sarah, "Why Indians Eat With Their Hands."

a light dough pancake made from fermented batter.¹⁸ This classic breakfast item in Tamil Nadu gets its batter from lentils and rice, which is why it is considered such a healthy alternative. Its nutritional benefits also bring into question why the narrator refers to the food as “greasy”, if it has been a part of Indian diets for so long. It is also known that dosa was most commonly eaten in South India, but once the British had left the country, there was greater access to cultural exchange within other areas, like North India. Without this overbearing force in place, the nation was able to gain a plethora of cultural wealth by sharing various elements, such as dosa and uttapam. By the narrator belittling the historical significance of this dish points to nothing but his own ignorance of his own people. Why does the narrator immediately dismiss the food of his own people as greasy and strange, rather than trying to understand it? The conditioning that he has suffered from has had the opportunity to slowly develop over time, making his illiteracy of the culture less obvious to him, but striking to other Indians.

Holding an orange plastic cup, Komakal dips her uttapam into molaga podi, a spice mixture prevalent in South India that is used as a form of “dipping sauce”. Common recipes typically include a combination of red chilies, Bengal gram, various crushed lentils, asafetida, jaggery, and mustard seeds.¹⁹ The importance of spices is almost as old as the nation itself, impacting the economic, social, and spiritual structures of the country. Many spices indigenous to India have been around since before the 8th century BC, with each one containing specific flavors or health properties. For instance, mustard seeds, which are often used to molaga podi, are used to ward off malignant spirits.²⁰ Maybe through the consumption of these spices, Komakal is hoping to ward off the ignorance that seems to plague the narrator. Being unable to hold a spiritual connection between the culture inherited and the food eaten removes an important emotional aspect of being an Asian American. One of the most unique benefits of being born as a different ethnicity than the dominant one in your country is the mixture of cultures that one can experience. By being an Indian person born in America, the narrator has one of the most beautiful opportunities to interact with American culture, as well as share the wealth of Indian culture with others in the US. However, this is easier said than done, as conforming and bending to the wishes of a larger group is easier than fighting back against a smaller group. The sharing of one’s culture takes effort and dedication, of which the narrator doesn’t seem to possess the motive to achieve.

After spending several months in Chennai with Komakal trying to complete his research, the narrator is taken by Komakal to meet her parents. As it is customary when visiting someone’s home to bring a present for the host, the narrator brings a box of European chocolates, of which Komakal scolds him for. During the dinner shared with Komakal’s parents, the narrator and Komakal’s father get into a dispute over the narrator’s lack of knowledge about Indian culture. In an attempt to quell the fighting, Komakal’s mother brings out a plate of sweets:

Agira brought out a dish of kozhukattai, white steamed dumplings. She sensed my hesitation about eating sweets at all, and misinterpreting, asked if I wanted one of the European sweets

¹⁸ Kitchen, “Uttapam Recipe.”

¹⁹ Kapoor, “Molaga Podi.”

²⁰ McCormick Science Institute, “History of Spices.”

I'd brought instead. Embarrassed, I immediately grabbed two soft kozhukattai. I bit into the brown coconut and jaggery filling. "They're delicious! Is that cardamom?" "You haven't had these before?" she asked. I admitted that I hadn't and asked for another. At this she beamed with a radiance that lit up her large, fawn-like eyes.²¹

Initially, the narrator comes off as naïve about this dish, of which another Indian would immediately recognize as religiously significant. Sensing this inability to distinguish this dessert from any other dish, Komakal's mother believes that the narrator would want the comfort of something that he is used to, i.e. the European chocolates. But one could ask, why did the narrator bring European chocolates in the first place? If he wanted to make a good impression on Komakal's parents, why didn't he bring native sweets? Does the narrator think this Western culture he brought is more valuable than native sweets of their home country? However, after eating one of the kozhukattai, the narrator seems to have an epiphany. Almost as a catalyst, the kozhukattai functions as a spark of interest in the narrator's mind.

Kozhukattai dumplings are made from a smooth rice flour, which is often given as a temple offering.²² When giving food to deities at temples, it is important that the offerings are made from ingredients that are indigenous and seasonal to that area, as an homage to the importance of nature in Hinduism. This sweet in particular is given as an offering on Ganesh Chaturti, a festival that commemorates the birth of Ganesha. This deity is the God of wisdom, new beginnings and luck, as well as the remover of obstacles. The tradition arose from a story of Ganesha, who as a baby, loved to eat sweets called ladoos that his grandmother Meenavati would make for him. The only problem was that Ganesha ate the sweets too fast for his grandmother to keep up. Thus, as a resolution to this issue, Ganesha's mother Parvati made a recipe for modak or "koghukattai", which pleased him and became a favorite of Ganesha.²³ Thus, Parvati proclaimed that anyone who fed koghukattais to Ganesha would be blessed by him. By giving this sweet to the narrator, which quite literally appeases the God of removing obstacles, the narrator is coming to terms with the significance of his identity. No longer does he feel a restraint that keeps him from embracing his culture and religion, now that he is surrounded by people who understand the importance of their history.

Within the kozhukattai, the sweet is filled with cardamom, coconut and jaggery, of which this combination works to provide the narrator with a new lens to view his culture. Cardamom, a signature Indian spice that is often said to promote a sense of clarity and joy within people.²⁴ This vision that the sweets give the narrator promotes a sense of connection to the rediscovery of his culture. Additionally, the inclusion of jaggery in the kozhukattai, a cane sugar indigenous to India often works as a natural cleansing agent, meant to flush out harmful toxins from the body.²⁵ It also works to produce body heat and instant energy for those that consume it. Furthermore, coconuts are important

²¹ Felicelli, *Love Songs for a Lost Continent: Stories*, 47.

²² Meenattoor, "Koghukatta / Sweet Rice Dumpling / Koghukattai."

²³ Asian News International, "Ganesh Chaturthi 2019."

²⁴ McConnell, "Cardamom Magic."

²⁵ Arif et al., "Physiochemical Characteristics Nutritional Properties and Health Benefits of Sugarcane Juice."

in Indian cuisine, as this was a fruit given to Ganesha by his father Shiva as a toy to play with.²⁶ Along with explaining how coconuts came into fruition, they are also used in many rituals for social and family purposes, for this very reason. Promoting a sense of fertility, prosperity, and wealth, coconuts are integral for various religious ceremonies in not just Indian culture, but Asian cultures around the world. In a combination with each other, these three ingredients work to provide medicinal uses in whatever food they are placed in. Just as it is said, the narrator seems to take this sweet as a medicine for his ailment, opening his senses to the wonders of his Asian heritage.

Was it purposeful, or was it by chance that the narrator's demeanor towards his own country's traditions changed as he interacted with these gastronomic elements? Now that the narrator is in his home country, he is able to experience a sense of freedom that allows him to become an active participant in his culture. This almost promotes a sense of ownership about who he truly is, as he no longer has to hide behind the facade of what is accepted by European Americans. Rather, he is able to coexist as both an American and an Asian, with these cultural elements acting as the connection between these two spirits. Although his name may suggest otherwise, he is no longer just a narrator, or a bystander to his own culture, watching from outside of a window. He is now one in both groups, a traveler between both the West and the East. By being surrounded with people who care just as deeply about his culture as he should allow the narrator to understand that his own identity is just as important as what is being promoted by the majority. Being able to transition from a sense of disgust and contempt, to wonder and excitement through the consumption of these foods demonstrates the positive impact that his heritage journey back home has had on him. Thus, the narrator learns that he in fact does have the capacity to make change and he does have the capability to bring forth his heritage to others.

Ultimately, Otsuka and Felicelli's stories about Asian American struggles are amplified through their usage of food as a literary device. Across human history, Asian food has connected individuals with their identity in such a way that can only be achieved through nutritional tools of culture. The Woman in Otsuka's novel exists as a reminder of the past, or a time in which Asian Americans were not given the choice to engage in their own culture, but had this violently taken from them, stripping away their identity. Now, Felicelli's narrator works as the present, with the clear mind of being able to learn from the past and understand just exactly why it is so important to understand the culture of which you came from. With these combined notions, Asian American characters such as these work to promote a more diverse future in which a new generation would be able to freely explore the depth of their identities.

However, this only exists when the present is in conjunction with the past. These connections that are drawn between various countries and their cultures within the continent of Asia is inherently what defines the importance of food to Asian American identity. Being segregated to just one country could not fully describe and comprehend the shared struggles that Asian Americans have endured at the hands of cultural hegemony. Though, it is with these struggles endured by the Asian Americans of the past that Asian Americans of the present can be where they are today. Consequently, without the effort

²⁶ Devi and Ghatani, "The Use of Coconut in Rituals and Food Preparations in India."

of the present, Asian Americans will not be able to forge a more harmonious future for coming generations. In this future, Asian Americans will learn to appreciate where they came from, to love themselves, and to love their food.

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