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## **Chicken Tikka Masala, Flock Wallpaper, and “Real” Home Cooking: Assessing Britain’s “Indian” Restaurant Traditions**

### **Abstract**

*This article considers the meanings Indian restaurants achieved in Britain by the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. As highly stereotyped cultural arenas and nodes of ethnic encounter, Indian restaurants were open to as much ridicule, critique, and displays of racism as they were to enthusiasm and an emergent nostalgia. With both their food and interior decoration attracting attention, a growing number of commentators by turns condemned and defended the “curry house norm.” Gender emerges as integral to reassessments of restaurant dynamics, as do the possibilities for consuming South Asian food at home as an alternative to restaurant dining.*

### **Keywords**

*Britain  
India  
Immigration  
British Asians  
Restaurants  
Curry  
Interior decoration  
Racism  
Cookery books  
Nostalgia*

Few cultural artefacts demonstrate British society’s familiarity with dining out at South Asian restaurants as succinctly as a skit that featured in an episode of the comedy show *Goodness Gracious Me*, a prime time hit televised by the BBC in 1998. Rather than depicting an encounter between staff who originated from the Indian subcontinent and white British customers at an establishment located in Britain itself, the show turned the tables by imagining an inverse scenario: a group of three Indian men and two women living in Bombay who, as part of their post-cinema Friday night ritual, settled down to dine at “Mountbatten’s English Cuisine” located at “222 Viceroy Place.” At a table strewn with beer and wine and interspersing heavy cigarette smoking with the occasional noisy belch, one of the Indians asks his friends, “Bombay is the restaurant capital of India, so how come every Friday night we end up here?” Another responds, “because that’s what you do, eh? You go out, you get

tanked up on *lassis*, and you go for an English! I mean, it wouldn't be a Friday night if we didn't go for an English!" When the waiter arrives, he tells them his name is "James", not "Mike", only to hear it repeatedly mispronounced as "Ja-mez" and be told "we come here every week and spend lots of money, eh? You should be grateful!"

Very impressed with themselves, the group proceeds to shout orders of bread rolls, "some of that fancy stuff" (being butter), and a fork and knife, and then to demand "the blandest thing on the menu", which turns out to be scampi. When one friend orders prawn cocktails, another warns, "you'll regret that in the morning!" One woman shyly asks for a chicken curry, only to be told by her friends, "come on, this is an English restaurant, eh, you've got to have something English, no spicey-sheisy", and "have something a little bland, huh? Hey Ja-mez, what have you got that is not totally tasteless?" Upon the waiter's suggestion, she orders "steak and kidney pee." When she protests "I won't go to the toilet for a week!", a friend replies, "that's the point of going for an English!" When the group orders 24 plates of chips and the waiter suggests they may have ordered a bit too much, mayhem ensues as two of the men stand up and threaten to hit him; the scene draws to a close with the waiter beating a hasty retreat.

*Goodness Gracious Me's* take on "Going for an English" involved British Asians parodying what had become an instantly recognizable encounter in 1990s Britain. White Britons making a ritual trip to the neighbourhood Indian restaurant, often late on a weekend night after spending hours drinking at the pub; insulting the Asian waiter; expecting to get dishes they believed were "typical" Indian food; ruminating about the risk of untoward digestive consequences; men trying to prove their masculinity by ordering the hottest dish, normally a *vindaloo* or a *phaal*: so familiar had such scenes become that the comedy show's inversion became an instant success and has remained common knowledge. In Britain, "Going for an Indian" and the cuisine Indian restaurants served to a predominantly white customer base became a common way of depicting intercultural encounters in the media. *Goodness Gracious Me's* skit, moreover, was not the first restaurant-based encounter between whites and Asians to appear on British television. Between 1985 and 1987, the series *Tandoori Nights* revolved around two rival Indian restaurants, establishments named "The Jewel in the Crown" and "The Far Pavilion".<sup>1</sup> As one of

<sup>1</sup> For a brief discussion of *Goodness Gracious Me* and *Tandoori Nights*, see Sarita MALIK, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (London, 2002), pp. 99–103. Mirroring the predominance of white customers at many of Britain's Indian restaurants, although *Goodness Gracious Me* featured British Asian comedians and subject matter its audience was estimated to be 85 per cent white (Sarita MALIK, *Representing Black Britain ...*, p. 103). See also Raminder KAUR, Alda TERRACCIANO, "South Asian/BrAsian Performing Arts", in N. ALI, V.S. KALRA, S. SAYYID (eds.), *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain* (London, 2006), pp. 343–357.

its characters summarized, “apart from the Kama Sutra, the Indian restaurant is the most celebrated export of the Indian subcontinent.”<sup>2</sup>

As the names of all the aforementioned television restaurants suggest, Britain’s history of ruling India until 1947 underpinned cultural representations of India within the nation that had been, within living memory, the heart of the empire. Postcolonial Britain had no shortage of reminders of its imperial history, with Raj nostalgia becoming prominent in the media in the 1980s. As Lizzie Collingham summarizes, “in the unstable boom and bust of Mrs Thatcher’s Britain, curry appealed to a British public which was hungry for stability and tradition. Indian food . . . carried with it echoes of empire and Britain’s period of lost glory.”<sup>3</sup> Many Indian restaurants were laden with colonial referents, with a noticeable number of the new establishments opening in the 1980s naming themselves after books about the Raj that had recently been made into films, E. M. Forster’s *Passage to India*, M. M. Kaye’s *The Far Pavilions*, and Paul Scott’s *The Jewel in the Crown* being prominent examples.<sup>4</sup> *Goodness Gracious Me*’s invoking of Lord Mountbatten, the last British Viceroy of India, achieved a similar effect.

After the Raj came to an end, mass migration to Britain from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh added new layers of meaning to Britain’s relationship with the subcontinent as the “empire struck back.” If restaurants were indeed “the most celebrated export of the Indian subcontinent” into Britain, the arrival and settlement of South Asians (alongside immigration from the West Indies and elsewhere) and the demands posed by an evolving multicultural society proved far more contentious. As Uma Narayan and others have argued, British society’s liking for Indian food did not necessarily extend to tolerance or understanding of the peoples who provided it. Immigration and multiculturalism have never ceased to be hotly debated issues throughout the decades when eating at Indian restaurants spread to become a British tradition and other forms of “ethnic” food became popular; as Narayan suggests, food readily acts as the non-threatening, “acceptable face of multiculturalism.”<sup>5</sup> A speech given

<sup>2</sup> Therese DANIELS, Jane GERSON (eds.), *The Colour Black: Black Images in British Television* (London, 1989), p. 51; see pp. 50–54 for reprinted reviews of the series.

<sup>3</sup> Lizzie COLLINGHAM, *Curry: A Biography* (London, 2005), p. 235.

<sup>4</sup> On Raj nostalgia in postcolonial Britain, see Salman RUSHDIE, “Outside the Whale,” *Granta*, vol. 11 (1984), pp. 125–138; John McBRATNEY, “The Raj Is All The Rage: Paul Scott’s *The Raj Quartet* and Colonial Nostalgia,” *North Dakota Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 3 (1987), pp. 204–209; Richard DYER, *White* (London, 1997), pp. 184–206; Graham HUGGAN, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London, 2001); Antoinette BURTON, “India, Inc.? Nostalgia, Memory, and the Empire of Things,” in Stuart WARD (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester, 2001), pp. 217–232; Elizabeth BUETTNER, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 252–70; Elizabeth BUETTNER, “Cemeteries, Public Memory, and Raj Nostalgia in Postcolonial Britain and India,” *History & Memory*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Uma NARAYAN, “Eating Cultures: Incorporation, Identity, and Indian Food,” in *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism* (New York, 1997), pp. 173, 184. Amongst

by Britain's late Foreign Secretary Robin Cook in early 2001 exemplifies this tendency. Cook proclaimed "Chicken Tikka Massala" – an Indian restaurant mainstay – to have become "a true British national dish", epitomizing "multiculturalism as a positive force for our economy and society."<sup>6</sup>

Both *Goodness Gracious Me's* parody and Robin Cook's oft-quoted speech suggest the extent to which British society's familiarity with South Asian peoples and cultures became refracted through consuming hybrid dishes, largely in restaurant settings. By the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, such public dining establishments – often known as curry houses in Britain – could boast a history of attracting growing numbers of white customers spanning more than three decades. Restaurants' divergent cultural meanings once "going for an Indian" had achieved the status of a British tradition are probed in the pages that follow.

As highly stereotyped cultural arenas and nodes of ethnic encounter, Indian restaurants were open to as much ridicule, critique, and displays of racism as they were to enthusiastic responses like Robin Cook's and an emergent nostalgia. With the food they served as well as their interior decoration attracting attention in almost equal measure, a growing number of commentators stepped forward both to condemn and to defend what had developed as the curry house "norm." The first section of this essay explores how this norm developed, examining critiques by both white and Asian observers of purportedly "typical" Indian restaurants in Britain. The following moves on to place Asian women, long sidelined in depictions of Britain's Indian restaurants, at centre stage, analysing Vicky Bhogal's successful cookery books alongside Pratibha Parmar's film *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, all of which have appeared since 2003. Gender emerges as an integral strand in reassessments of restaurant dynamics, as do the possibilities for consuming South Asian food in the domestic sphere of the home as an alternative to restaurant dining. Bhogal and Parmar are prominent among the new voices now asserting themselves to re-evaluate and contest dominant images of Indian food in public

other suggestive works, see also Virinder S. KALRA, "The Political Economy of the Samosa", *South Asia Research*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2004), pp. 21–36; Stanley FISH, "Boutique Multiculturalism", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 23 (1997), pp. 378–79; Lisa HELDKKE, *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* (New York, 2003); Barnor HESSE, "Introduction: Un/Settled Multiculturalisms", in Barnor HESSE (ed.) *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions* (London, 2000), p. 10; David PARKER, "The Chinese Takeaway and the Diasporic Habitus: Space, Time and Power Geometries", in Barnor HESSE (ed.), *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms ...*, p. 74; Ian COOK, Philip CRANG, Mark THORPE, "Eating into Britishness: Multicultural Imaginaries and the Identity Politics of Food", in Sasha ROSENEIL, Julie SEYMOUR (eds.), *Practising Identities: Power and Resistance* (Houndmills, England, 1999), pp. 225, 230; Alan WARDE, "Eating Globally: Cultural Flows and the Spread of Ethnic Restaurants", in Don KALB et al. (eds.), *The Ends of Globalization: Bringing Society Back In* (Lanham, MD, 2000), pp. 299–316.

<sup>6</sup> "Robin Cook's Chicken Tikka Masala Speech", *Guardian Unlimited* (London), 19 April 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/racism/Story/0,2763,477023,00.html>; accessed 31 January 2007.

and private spaces, and this article concludes by considering nostalgia for and pride in Britain’s contentious curry house tradition.

\* \* \*

### Curry House Traditions, Clichés, and Challenges

The ascent of Indian restaurants to the prominent position they now occupy within British culture occurred between the 1960s and the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Underlying their proliferation, status, and the images commonly associated with them is Britain’s history as an imperial power in South Asia and the corresponding immigration of formerly colonized peoples from the Indian subcontinent. After the collapse of British rule and the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, migration to Britain from the region increased dramatically as South Asians arrived in search of work at a time of full employment.<sup>8</sup> At the time of the 1951 Census, approximately 43,000 South Asians resided in Britain, but by 2001 their numbers surpassed two million. Immigration from India and Pakistan peaked between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, with new arrivals declining thereafter on account of economic downturn coupled with a series of government immigration restriction measures enacted in 1962, 1968, 1971, and 1981. Primary immigration largely ceased, but movement into Britain from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan, which became an independent nation in 1971) continued, largely taking the form of family reunification.<sup>9</sup>

Britain’s growing South Asian diaspora was thus multi-national; in 2001, it included 1,051,831 people of Indian origin, 746,612 of Pakistani descent, and 282,808 Bangladeshis.<sup>10</sup> It included Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and other faiths, and encompassed a broad social spectrum.<sup>11</sup> Most “Indian” restaurants,

<sup>7</sup> This section summarizes some of the issues I consider in Elizabeth BUETTNER, “‘Going for an Indian’: South Asian Restaurants and the Limits of Multiculturalism in Britain”, *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 80, no. 4 (2008), pp. 865–901, and develops additional points further.

<sup>8</sup> On the history of South Asian immigration in Britain in the postwar era, see N. ALI, V.S. KALRA, S. SAYYID (eds.), *A Postcolonial People ...*; Rozina VISRAM, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London, 2002); Judith M. BROWN, *Global South Asians: Introducing the Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2006); Roger BALLARD (ed.), *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain* (London, 1994); Avtar BRAH, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London, 1996); Zig LAYTON-HENRY, *The Politics of Immigration: Immigration, “Race”, and “Race” Relations in Post-war Britain* (Oxford, 1992). The body of new work directed at a mainstream readership grows continually; a recent book using food as a means of framing this history is by journalist Ziauddin SARDAR, *Balti Britain: A Journey Through the British Asian Experience* (London, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Ceri PEACH, “Demographics of BrAsian Settlement, 1951–2001”, in N. ALI, V.S. KALRA, S. SAYYID (eds.), *A Postcolonial People ...*, pp. 168–69.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>11</sup> Britain’s South Asian population is largely urban and regionally specific. While South Asians of Indian and Bangladeshi origin and descent are heavily concentrated in London (42 per cent and 54 per cent respectively), Pakistanis are more strongly represented in North West England, West Yorkshire,

however, were owned and staffed by Bangladeshi or Pakistani Muslim working-class men. Some had initially worked in factories or in other sectors such as transport, while others took jobs in the catering sector upon arrival. The vast majority – nearly 90 per cent – of Britain’s curry houses are run by Bangladeshis, a community heavily dependent upon this economic sector for jobs. In the early twenty-first century, 52 per cent of employed Bangladeshi men in Britain worked in restaurants.<sup>12</sup>

Many establishments initially served working-class Asian male customers and were most numerous in cities like London, Birmingham, Bradford, Manchester, Leicester, and Glasgow that had experienced high levels of immigration. Over time, some restaurants that had once catered largely to Asians attracted a white British customer base, while others opened with a non-Asian clientele in mind from the start. While many white Britons had once shied away from eating “curry” – a generic term for many Indian dishes, particularly those restaurant staff modified in ways deemed likely to appeal to British palates – the taste for restaurant food gradually spread.<sup>13</sup> While only about 300 curry restaurants existed in 1960, they grew to roughly 1,200 in 1970 and reached approximately 3,000 by 1980. The 1980s witnessed the most dramatic increase, with numbers approaching 6,600 by the end of the decade – a time when immigration from Bangladesh also peaked.<sup>14</sup> Expanding beyond cities and neighbourhoods with substantial Asian populations, they became a national presence and depended on a white clientele for most of their business. Although levelling off somewhat, the sector continued to grow in the 1990s and 2000s, with estimates suggesting that nearly 9,000 exist today.<sup>15</sup>

and the West Midlands, having been attracted to these areas on account of the jobs they (once) offered in textile mills, manufacturing, and the transport sector. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah SALWAY, “Labour Market Experiences of Young UK Bangladeshi Men: Identity, Inclusion and Exclusion in Inner-city London”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 31, no. 6 (2008), p. 1127; see also COLLINGHAM, *Curry ...*, pp. 3, 215, 223; Katy GARDNER, Abdus SHUKUR, “‘I’m Bengali, I’m Asian, and I’m Living Here’: The Changing Identity of British Bengalis”, in BALLARD (ed.), *Desh Pardesh ...*, pp. 142–164, 150–152; John EADE, *The Politics of Community: Bangladeshi Community in East London* (London, 1989); Yousuf CHOUDHURY, *The Roots and Tales of the Bangladeshi Settlers* (Birmingham, England, 1993), p. 200; Panikos PANAYI, *Spicing Up Britain: The Multicultural History of British Food* (London, 2008), pp. 164, 172.

<sup>13</sup> See especially L. COLLINGHAM, *Curry ...*, particularly chapter 9. Other books charting the popularity of curry in postwar Britain—most written by journalists for a non-academic audience—include Panikos PANAYI, *Spicing Up Britain: The Multicultural History of British Food* (London, 2008); Shrabani BASU, *Curry in the Crown: The Story of Britain’s Favourite Dish* (New Delhi, 1999); Peter GROVE, Colleen GROVE, *Curry Culture: A Very British Love Affair* (Surbiton, 2005); and Jo MONROE, *Star of India: The Spicy Adventures of Curry* (Chichester, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> “Curry Statistics”, in Pat CHAPMAN (ed.), *The Cobra Indian Lager Good Curry Restaurant Guide* (London, 1991), p. 18; P. PANAYI, *Spicing Up Britain ...*, p. 172; S. SALWAY, “Labour Market Experiences ...”, p. 1130.

<sup>15</sup> S. BASU, *Curry in the Crown ...*, p. xi; P. GROVE and C. GROVE, *Curry Culture ...*, p. 208.

Indian restaurants in Britain became typically referred to as “curry houses”, a term which placed them in discursive proximity to the “public house”, or pub. Indeed, “going for an Indian” became widely known in relationship to nights out at the pub, with many diners taking advantage of some restaurants’ late-night hours of operation to prolong an evening out once pubs closed – which was typically at about 11:00 p.m.<sup>16</sup> Like the parody performed in *Goodness Gracious Me*, diners might arrive at the curry house after an evening of heavy drinking, effectively combining a curry with more alcohol over the meal. Acting as default destinations when little else was open, curry houses were attractive because they were cheap and filling; the quality of their food often appeared a secondary consideration.<sup>17</sup> A Bradford restaurant review referring to the “soak-up curry after the pub” was one among countless similar descriptions of curry house experiences.<sup>18</sup> As one observer commented in 2004, the curry house was “embraced as the most venerable of British institutions ... [having] the same status as pubs and Yorkshire pudding, with its Friday night ritual played out by millions.”<sup>19</sup>

Curry, and its consumption in Asian-run restaurants, achieved a loyal mass following among diverse social sectors and became described as a national tradition – or, in neighbourhoods and cities with substantial Asian populations and large numbers of restaurants, as a specifically local tradition. Bradford, for example, counted among Britain’s self-proclaimed “Curry Capitals”, celebrating Asian restaurants as akin to “traditional industries” and indeed “a Yorkshire institution.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Birmingham promoted its own contribution to British South Asian cuisine in the form of “balti”-style food

<sup>16</sup> L. COLLINGHAM, *Curry ...*, pp. 220–21, 231.

<sup>17</sup> Britons seeking food after pubs closed had other late-night dining options, particularly fish and chips shops, kebab takeaways, and Chinese takeaways. But these establishments did not generally offer tables and seating; Indian restaurants, on the other hand, provided the opportunity to continue socializing indoors as well as to partake of inexpensive food and drink. See PARKER, “The Chinese Takeaway and the Diasporic Habitus ...”; P. PANAYI, *Spicing Up Britain ...*, pp. 152, 215, 218; on late-night urban life, see Philip M. HADFIELD, *Bar Wars: Contesting the Night in Contemporary British Cities* (Oxford, 2006). Some South Asian restaurant owners actively targeted the post-pub market as a source of customers; see for example Monder RAM, Tahir ABBAS, Balihar SANGHERA, Guy HILLIN, “Currying Favour with the Locals’: Balti Owners and Business Enclaves”, *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2000), p. 50; Tony MASON, “Start the Year Right”, *Tandoori Magazine*, issue 26 (Feb. 1997), p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> “Good value for a fiver”, *Telegraph and Argus* (Bradford, England), 29 April 1989; “Man! What a great nan!”, *Telegraph and Argus*, 1 Oct. 1988; “Cheap without frills or thrills”, *Telegraph and Argus*, 27 May 1989; “Rajshahi”, *Telegraph and Argus*, 21 June 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Danielle DEMETRIOU, “Indian Restaurants in a Pickle Over Staff”, *Independent* (London), 7 August 2004.

<sup>20</sup> “Flavours of Asia” [n.d., c. 1987], Bradford Tourist Office, Bradford Central Library Local Studies Collection, B914.2817CIT, p. 2; “Hot Stuff”, *Yorkshire Post*, 12 April 1988; “Giving a trendy edge to tradition”, *Telegraph and Argus*, 15 Jan. 2001; “Aagrah”, *Yorkshire Post*, 21 Dec. 2004.



preparation along with a neighbourhood with a high density of restaurants as the “Balti Triangle”, ranking balti as “part of Birmingham’s tradition.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite public affirmation, however, South Asian restaurants repeatedly were subjected to multiple forms of abuse and contempt. Customers who arrived drunk after pubs closed often behaved disrespectfully, most characteristically by calling waiters and restaurant managers “wogs” or “Pakis.” Countless instances of racially-motivated insult, physical assault, vandalism, and arson have appeared in the press and in publications targeting the Asian catering sector like *Tandoori Magazine*.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the most infamous instance of curry-house racism occurred in Birmingham in 1986, on this occasion with an Asian customer reaping the consequences. Satpal Ram was dining at an Indian restaurant with friends when a group of six white diners started racially insulting the waiters and the Indian music being played, saying “we don’t want any more of this fucking wog music.” A fight broke out involving Ram and Clarke Pearce, who attacked and wounded Ram with a broken glass. Claiming self-defence, Ram stabbed Pearce, who, when taken to hospital, was drunk and refused medical treatment. Pearce later died of his injuries, and Ram was convicted of his murder despite considerable evidence that Pearce had instigated the attack and that Ram acted out of fear for his life and was outnumbered by Pearce and his friends. Following many appeals and a protracted public campaign to free him, Ram was finally released from prison fifteen years later in 2002.<sup>23</sup> Although an extreme example, the episode nonetheless suggests the violent, or potentially violent, behaviour Asians employed in the catering trade witness all too frequently, even if in somewhat milder forms.

Aside from overt displays of racism directed towards Asian staff, British diners have subjected South Asian restaurants to considerable ridicule and often scathing criticism. Condemnation and condescension often has come from social groups claiming cultural superiority and gastronomic expertise. Curry-house cuisine was repeatedly accused of being inauthentic, low quality, and downmarket, and popular dishes like chicken tikka masala were mocked

<sup>21</sup> “The Balti Triangle Birmingham: Essential Guide”, produced by Marketing Birmingham, 2004–2005, pp. 4, 6. On the marketing of the “Balti Triangle” area of Birmingham, see assessments by M. RAM e.a., “Currying Favour”, pp. 41–55, and Noha NASSER, “Metropolitan Borderlands: The Formation of BrAsian Landscapes”, in N. ALI, V.S. KALRA, and S. SAYYID (eds.), *Postcolonial People*, pp. 374–391.

<sup>22</sup> “Assault Fears at Balti Houses”, *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 23 Sept. 1997; R. CHALMERS, “The Vindaloo Squad”, *Independent*, 13 April 2000; “Crime File”, *Tandoori Magazine*, vol. 5, issue 7 (1999), p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> For press coverage of the Ram case and the campaign to have him cleared, see Simon HATTENSTONE, “The Prisoner”, *Guardian*, 20 Sept. 2001, as well as other articles reprinted on <http://www.innocent.org.uk/cases/satpalram/index.html>, accessed 10 Nov. 2008; see also a brief analysis in Virinder S. KALRA, John HUTNYK, “Brimful of Agitation, Authenticity and Appropriation: Madonna’s ‘Asian Kool’”, *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1998), pp. 344, 351–352.

as the antithesis of “real” Indian food as often as they were celebrated as a “British national dish”.<sup>24</sup> Detractors included middle-class white Britons and better-off South Asians familiar with British Indian restaurant offerings alike. Cooks were accused of using a range of shortcuts to prepare dishes quickly and cheaply, with the result being a “terrible parody of Indian food” with “a common sauce ... slopped on”; as a result, “everything tastes the same”, with the only significant variation coming through the amount of hot spices included.<sup>25</sup>

Time and again, critics poked fun at what came to count as standard restaurant décor as much as they joked about the food on offer. In the early 1970s, a journalist writing for the London *Times* was one of what was to become a long line of observers to allude to flock wallpaper as the signature style, describing “that damson coloured velvet variety which you find on the walls of Indian restaurants, and which I have sometimes thought must be the exit visa with which restauranteurs from the subcontinent are furnished on their departure for Europe.”<sup>26</sup> “Red flock wallpaper, the identical standard menu and the hot curries cooked in axle grease” were inseparable features of critical commentary during the 1980s that persist today.<sup>27</sup> Judging by restaurant reviews and other sources, the extent to which flock wallpaper continues to inform derogatory mainstream understandings of the “average” – and, by implication, mediocre – Indian restaurant is striking, despite the fact that most establishments which may have sported such trappings in the 1970s or 1980s updated their décor long ago.<sup>28</sup> Commentators mocked erstwhile decorative choices, the Asian staff, and the food curry houses habitually provided simultaneously: “it used to be that there were three certainties in life: death, taxes, and flock wallpaper in Indian restaurants”; or, the curry house became popular “despite its flock wallpaper, sullen waiters, and unflattering lighting”; “most were pretty awful, all flock wallpaper, dire sitar music, and questionable produce disguised under a congealed glob of violently coloured ‘sauce.’”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> In the United States, by contrast, Indian restaurants lack this reputation; as Laresh JAYASANKER notes, in the 1990s Americans most likely to eat this cuisine were well-educated and earned high incomes. See “Indian Restaurants in San Francisco and America: A Case Study in Translating Diversity, 1965–2005”, *Food & History*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2007), p. 243.

<sup>25</sup> Naseem KHAN, “The Food of India: Punjab and the North”, *Curry Magazine*, spring issue (1982), pp. 10–11; “Fay Maschler Looks for Clues in Search of Good Food”, in Pat CHAPMAN (ed.), *The Good Curry Guide 1984* (Haslemere, 1983), p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Charles LEWSEN, “Who Killed Jack Robin?”, *The Times* (London), 10 Aug. 1972.

<sup>27</sup> “The Restaurant Trade”, *Curry Magazine*, vol. 3 (1982), p. i; “The Indian Restaurant and Its Menu”, *Curry Magazine*, vol. 4 (1983), p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> S. BASU, *Curry in the Crown*, refers to flock wallpaper on pp. xxxiv, 122, 124, 133, 139, 141, 173, 177; L. COLLINGHAM, *Curry*, on pp. 1–2, 233, 237; and J. MONROE, *Star of India*, on pp. 4, 58, 127–128, 130–132.

<sup>29</sup> “London Restaurant Reviews: Eriki”, by Tina LOFTHOUSE, <http://www.restaurantsomh.com/1229.htm>, accessed 22 May 2007; D. DEMETRIOU, “Indian Restaurants,” “Restaurant—La Porte des

Revealingly, even scholarly assessments uncritically reproduced such imagery without any attempt at substantiating their claims, suggesting that the appearance of Indian restaurants and their correspondingly low social status came to count as mere common sense among educated Britons. An article published in the *Journal of Design History* in 1988 included the following off-hand remark: “Flock wallpaper has connotations of Indian restaurants, New Orleans brothels, boudoirs in Hendon, and pubs” – with the author deeming it unnecessary to cite any sources to support his contention.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the chapter on “Flock Wallpapers” in a recent book on interior decoration published by the Victoria and Albert Museum began by noting that over a span of three hundred years, what had once been “a luxury product used by the wealthy ... has declined into cliché, most familiar (at least in Britain) as nothing more than a commonplace decoration in Indian restaurants where it is intended to evoke an atmosphere of Colonial grandeur.”<sup>31</sup>

By the mid-1980s, flock wallpaper was increasingly being replaced by other decorative styles, with interiors intended to be reminiscent of the Raj proving popular choices at a time when, as noted above, colonial India was a recurrent setting for many British films, fiction, and other forms of British public culture.<sup>32</sup> Décor invoking the colonial past was but one of many examples of “retro” styles prominent on the cultural landscape of 1980s Britain, a theme Raphael Samuel has examined.<sup>33</sup> In time, however, Raj-themed establishments also waned although never fully disappeared; restaurants named Viceroy, the Last Days of the Raj, and Memsahib are still to be found throughout Britain in the present day. By the 1990s and 2000s, favoured choices for new, or newly refurbished, establishments centred on modern minimalism. As *Tandoori Magazine* admonished its readers in 1999, “please just don’t do flock wallpaper, plastic flowers, swirly carpets or scalloped arches – go minimal for the millennium!”<sup>34</sup>

Contemporary, minimalist interiors, interspersed with the occasional Indian painting or sculpture, also dominated the interior schemes of newer

Indes”, [http://www.bestloved.com/special\\_info/special\\_info\\_detail.php?id=482&type=bestloved](http://www.bestloved.com/special_info/special_info_detail.php?id=482&type=bestloved), accessed 22 May 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Sean CUBITT, “Anxiety in Public Houses: Speculations on the Semiotics of Design Consciousness”, *Journal of Design History*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1988), p. 131.

<sup>31</sup> Gill SAUNDERS, *Wallpaper in Interior Decoration* (London, 2002), p. 55.

<sup>32</sup> “The Changing Face of the Indian Restaurant”, *Asian Restaurant*, Nov. issue (1984), p. 33. As L. JAYASANKER, “Indian Restaurants”, pp. 225, 229–36, illustrates, the small number of Indian restaurants open in San Francisco in the 1950s and 1960s also deployed British colonial referents in their names, décor, and menus, but shifted to other forms of representation during and after the 1970s as new images of India took precedence in the American imagination.

<sup>33</sup> Raphael SAMUEL, “Part I: Retrochic”, in *Theatres of Memory, Vol. I: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 1994), pp. 51–135.

<sup>34</sup> Tania AHSAN, “Interior Design”, *Tandoori Magazine*, vol. 5, issue 7 (1999), p. 42; see also “Interior Motives”, *Tandoori Magazine*, vol. 4, issue 1 (1998), p. 32.

restaurants whose owners sought to attract an upmarket, and more “discerning”, clientele.<sup>35</sup> Lizzie Collingham aptly links changing restaurant styles to changing images of India in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Britain, noting that “the old images of poverty and fading Raj grandeur have been replaced by computer technicians and modern call centres” at a time when professionals make up a growing number of immigrants from the sub-continent – especially from India – and a significant number of British-born Asians – particularly those of Indian descent – have achieved higher levels of education and affluence.<sup>36</sup> Styles, not to mention cuisine, reminiscent of those found in the stereotyped curry house denigrated as downmarket were studiously avoided by a more affluent group of restaurateurs who included better-off second-generation British Asians and newly-arrived South Asian professionals alike. Owners of newer establishments aiming to attract wealthier diners moved away from dishes bearing any resemblance to the standard menus that had become simultaneously loved yet loathed in Britain. Instead of “classics” like vindaloo dishes or chicken tikka masala, diners were told that an establishment’s offerings were “authentically Indian”, and often specific to a particular region of India – not hybrid or generic inventions concocted to cater to uninformed British curry fans. Some owners indeed explicitly contrasted themselves, their head chefs, and their restaurants with curry houses and their staff, dismissing the latter as non-Indian on account of owners and chefs being Bangladeshi or Pakistani – not to mention of modest social origins.<sup>37</sup> Exclusive newcomers to the restaurant scene often advertised that they

<sup>35</sup> In the United States and Canada as well as Britain, “ethnic” food has a history of changing social status, particularly since the 1960s. While foods associated with lower-class immigrant groups were often initially stigmatized and avoided by the ethnic majority population, over time some cuisines diverged to offer both low- and high-class variants – in part because immigrants themselves moved up the social ladder. On the socio-economic and cultural connotations of “ethnic” restaurants and their cuisines in North American contexts, see, among other studies, Donna R. GABACCIA, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), chapter 4 and especially pp. 102, 105, 121, 208, and 215; Harvey LEVENSTEIN, “The American Response to Italian Food, 1880–1930”, *Food and Foodways*, vol. 1 (1985), pp. 1–24; Laurier TURGEON and Madeleine PASTINELLI, “Eat the World: Postcolonial Encounters in Quebec City’s Ethnic Restaurants”, *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 115, no. 456 (2002), pp. 258–269; Wilbur ZELINSKY, “The Roving Palate: North America’s Ethnic Restaurant Cuisines”, *Geoforum*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1985), pp. 60–68; Sylvia FERRERO, “Comida Sin Par: Consumption of Mexican Food in Los Angeles: ‘Foodscapes’ in a Transnational Consumer Society”, in Warren BELASCO, Philip SCRANTON (eds.), *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies* (New York, 2002), pp. 206–207; Lucy M. LONG, “Introduction”, in Lucy M. LONG (ed.), *Culinary Tourism* (Lexington, KY, 2004), p. 14; Jeffrey M. PILCHER, “From ‘Montezuma’s Revenge’ to ‘Mexican Truffles’: Culinary Tourism across the Rio Grande”, in LONG (ed.), *Culinary Tourism*, pp. 76–96; Amy BENTLEY, “From Culinary Other to Mainstream America: Meanings and Uses of Southwestern Cuisine”, in LONG (ed.), *Culinary Tourism*, pp. 209–225.

<sup>36</sup> L. COLLINGHAM, *Curry...*, p. 237. For discussions of the emergence of new higher-class restaurants, see also P. PANAYI, *Spicing Up Britain...*, p. 174; J. MONROE, *Star of India...*, pp. 201–220.

<sup>37</sup> As Ceri Peach summarizes, since the 1950s “sharp economic differences between [British Asians] have become accentuated. The Indians tend to be professional and suburban. The Pakistanis

recruited their chefs directly from five-star hotels and restaurants in leading Indian cities like Bombay and New Delhi – a world away, in other words, from the working-class curry house staff who largely originated from impoverished regions like Sylhet in Bangladesh or Mirpur in Pakistan that sent many immigrants to Britain. One went so far as to want “to take this business away from Pakis and Banglis who are just jungle peasants with rough habits. We want to appeal to ... bon vivant people.”<sup>38</sup>

Like most curry houses, upmarket restaurants overwhelmingly continue to label their cuisines “Indian” as opposed to South Asian, Bangladeshi, or Pakistani, sometimes by highlighting Indian regional specialties on their menus. Despite owners’ social and national differences, “India” remains seen as a successful and familiar “brand image” within Britain and worth retaining, despite the stereotypes many Britons have of the cuisine made familiar through curry houses.<sup>39</sup> As Harvey Molotch notes in his conceptual discussion of “place in product”, however, “favorable geographical stories” revolving around one particular place can “create entry barriers for products from other places.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, although the vast majority of the owners and staff at most of Britain’s “Indian” restaurants have their roots in Bangladesh or Pakistan, most choose not to foreground their own national backgrounds in their promotional material, on their menus, or through their décor.<sup>41</sup> One owner of an exclusive restaurant summarized this attitude thus: “Bangladesh as a brand is associated with floods and cyclones, whereas India is associated with romance, the Raj, the Taj Mahal, mystique.”<sup>42</sup>

By the late 1990s and persisting into the present, “traditional” curry houses thus faced attacks on an increasing number of fronts. Not only did they continue to suffer from racist behaviour by disruptive white customers, but

and Bangladeshis have a much higher blue-collar profile and tend to live mainly in inner cities. Their educational levels tend to be low and their unemployment rates tend to be high.” See PEACH, “Demographics”, p. 181. Britain’s Muslims, in particular those of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin, are widely associated with economic disadvantage. See Roger BALLARD, “The South Asian Presence in Britain and its Transnational Connections”, in Bhikhu PAREKH, Gurharpal SINGH, Steven VERTOVEC (eds.), *Culture and Economy in the Indian Diaspora* (London, 2003), pp. 201–206; Claire ALEXANDER, “Re-imagining the Muslim Community”, *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 11 (1998), pp. 439–450.

<sup>38</sup> Yasmin ALIBHAI-BROWN, “Britain’s beloved chicken tikka masala is under threat from a new wave of upmarket curry houses”, *Guardian*, 13 July 2001.

<sup>39</sup> Anuradha BASU, “Immigrant Entrepreneurs in the Food Sector: Breaking the Mould”, in Anne J. KERSHEN (ed.), *Food in the Migrant Experience* (Aldershot, 2002), pp. 166–167; Monder RAM, Trevor JONES, Tahir ABBAS, Balihar SANGHERA, “Ethnic Minority Enterprise in its Urban Context: South Asian Restaurants in Birmingham”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2002), p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> Harvey MOLOTCH, *Where Stuff Comes From: How Toasters, Toilets, Cars, Computers, and Many Other Things Come to Be As They Are* (New York, 2003), p. 167.

<sup>41</sup> I. COLLINGHAM, *Curry . . .*, p. 223.

<sup>42</sup> Geraldine BEDELL, “It’s curry, but now as we know it”, *Observer* (London), 12 May 2002.

Bangladeshi and Pakistani owners and staff at more modest establishments might also find themselves dismissed as “Pakis”, “Banglis”, and “jungle peasants with rough habits” by affluent Indian competitors as well. Competition within the socially- and nationally-divided South Asian restaurant sector was indeed fierce in more ways than one. With the lower end of the market repeatedly being described as saturated, restaurateurs faced a cut-throat, “dog eat dog” struggle to survive and remain profitable with a surfeit of rivals fighting to attract customers.<sup>43</sup>

Even at the height of what *Tandoori Magazine* called the “curry revolution” its editor warned against complacency, noting the tendency of many restaurants to appear “tired and formulaic” in terms of their menus and overall atmosphere.<sup>44</sup> Failing to update their menus and interiors and continuing to rely on dishes “suffering from over-familiarity”, the magazine argued, threatened to drive valued customers into the arms of establishments either attempting to attract more “discerning” diners through offering purportedly authentic dishes or simply advertising a cheaper meal.<sup>45</sup> Restaurants also faced a growing threat posed by supermarkets.<sup>46</sup> As *Tandoori’s* editor reminded his readers, “more Indian food is now being eaten at home than in the restaurant”; rather than needing to visit a curry house for a chicken tikka masala or a rogan josh, “customers can and do now walk into a supermarket and buy a chilled ready meal for around £2 or they buy a sauce or paste for just over £1 and make a meal for four themselves. The manufacturers of these sauces and pastes are often the same people who provide the sauces and pastes for caterers and they make their consumer brands on the fact that they are ‘Restaurant Style.’”<sup>47</sup> Low prices were no longer an advisable way to secure customers, since supermarkets could always offer cheaper pre-prepared products. Restaurateurs failed to reckon with opportunities available for convenient domestic consumption at their peril.

<sup>43</sup> Claire E. A. SEAMAN et al., “Fissures in the Marketing Strategies of South Asian Restaurants in Edinburgh”, *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2005), pp. 193–199; M. RAM e.a., “Ethnic Minority Enterprise ...”, p. 27; M. RAM et al., “Currying Favour ...”, pp. 41–55.

<sup>44</sup> Iqbal WAHHAB, “Reflections on the Curry Revolution”, *Tandoori Magazine*, issue 26 (Feb. 1997), p. 20.

<sup>45</sup> Iqbal WAHHAB, “Get Real!”, *Tandoori Magazine*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1998), p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> As P. PANAYI argues, in recent decades British supermarket chains have been key players in enabling and encouraging the ethnic majority population to eat South Asian and other “foreign” cuisines at home, working to domesticate the consumption of foods that Britons had usually first been exposed to in restaurant settings. South Asian foods sold by supermarkets include ready-meals, pre-prepared sauces, spices, and other ingredients (needless to say, smaller Asian retailers also sold ingredients, largely to other Asians but also to Britons of other ethnic backgrounds). See *Spicing Up Britain ...*, pp. 31, 35, 129, 181, 185–187, 191, 196, 201, 206–209, 214–216. S. BASU, *Curry in the Crown ...*, also assesses this development; see pp. 40–49, 70–76, 108–109. As she notes on pp. 183–184, the retail market for Indian food sales grew by 80 per cent from 1989 to 1993; between 1994 and 1996, its value had doubled to £750 million “as more and more English people cooked Indian food in their own homes.”

<sup>47</sup> I. WAHHAB, “Reflections ...”, p. 20.

Britons who had grown to appreciate Indian food were also said to be increasingly likely to try preparing it themselves from scratch at home, not simply opting for bottled sauces and ready-meals.<sup>48</sup> Thanks to the publication of an increasing number of Indian cookery books, Britons had a wealth of recipes from which to choose if so inclined. Some Indian chefs, the actress Madhur Jaffrey prominent among them as early as the 1970s and 1980s, made a name for themselves through television cooking shows as well as through publication. Like the affluent restaurateurs discussed above, Jaffrey also criticized the standard offerings available at most restaurants. First published in Britain in 1976 and continually re-issued ever since, her book *An Invitation to Indian Cooking* dismissed most Indian restaurants as merely “second-class establishments” whose cooks, largely “former seamen or untrained villagers who have come to England in the hopes of making a living, somehow or other”, lacked proper catering qualifications. In consequence, restaurants tended to serve “a generalized Indian food” as opposed to authentic versions; sauces “inevitably have the same colour, taste, and consistency; the dishes generally come ‘mild, medium, or hot.’”<sup>49</sup>

Jaffrey effectively advocated learning to cook “authentic” dishes at home as a means of circumventing inferior restaurant cuisine. Other food writers and media figures, many of them also Indian or British Asian women, were later to join her in her suggesting that Britons look beyond the restaurant curry and within the home to find “real” Indian cuisine. As the next section illustrates, domestic consumption became a highly gendered activity, not to mention a means of asserting the value of “authentic” home-made Indian food as opposed to non-genuine restaurant fabrications.

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### Cooking Like Mummyji and Nina’s Heavenly Delights: Women and the Domestication of Restaurant Food

Within Britain’s South Asian restaurants women make up part of clientele, despite the stereotyped predominance of aggressively masculine diners. Yet at most establishments, South Asian women rarely have been visible participants within what are largely family-run small businesses. As was seen above with Madhur Jaffrey, Asian women have been decisive actors in the transmission of Indian food to a British audience, albeit not commonly within restaurant

<sup>48</sup> Iqbal WAHHAB, “The Future of Our Industry”, *Tandoori Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 6 (1997), p. 41.

<sup>49</sup> Madhur JAFFREY, *An Invitation to Indian Cooking* (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp. 11–12. On Jaffrey, see L. HELDKE, *Exotic Appetites . . . .*, pp. 34–38, 108–9; P. PANAYI, *Spicing Up Britain . . .*, pp. 36, 204; Parama ROY, “Reading Communities and Culinary Communities: The Gastro-poetics of the South Asian Diaspora”, *positions*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2002), pp. 471–502.

environments – at least not in ways that have been publicly acknowledged. With fathers typically being restaurant owners while sons and male members of the extended family often work as cooks and waiters, women are seldom seen amongst restaurant management and staff. Because most curry houses are run by Bangladeshi or Pakistani Muslim families who often discourage women’s work outside the home, the labour that women do perform commonly takes place behind the scenes. In some cases, mothers, wives, and sisters help considerably by preparing food at home which is then brought to the family restaurant, but their role in restaurant food production has largely been erased.<sup>50</sup>

Asian women restaurant entrepreneurs remain few and far between, with prominent exceptions including wealthy non-Muslim Indian owners of upmarket London establishments.<sup>51</sup> Fathers often proved reluctant to involve daughters in managing their businesses, with sons, or sons-in-law, tending to be singled out as their successors.<sup>52</sup> Impressionistic evidence suggests that the lack of male heirs upon a father’s death accounts for other women’s involvement in catering, leading some outspoken female critics to protest the male-dominated status quo. In a letter to the editor of *Tandoori*, Rama, Jasmine, and Rekha Rouf told readers their story:

“We have recently come into the ownership of an Indian restaurant due to the death of our father. ... Yes, I’m sorry to say we are in fact females! Females and Indian restaurants!?!?! The whole Indian restaurant sector is characterised by a marked absence of females. Why is that? Could it be because Indian restaurants are dominated by patriarchal misogynistic men?”

Surely if anyone is qualified to work in an Indian restaurant, it is the Asian female. Take mums as an example; they always seem to have enough food to feed the five thousand – including uninvited guests – while simultaneously maintaining a smile and keeping up with the gossip. After all, isn’t your mother’s cooking always the best. ... we would like the Indian restaurant

<sup>50</sup> M. RAM e.a., “Currying Favour ...”, pp. 44, 49–50; Mohammed RAFIQ, *Asian Businesses in Bradford, West Yorkshire: A Study of Ethnic Entrepreneurship in Retailing, Manufacturing and the Service Industries* (D.Phil thesis, University of Bradford, 1988), p. 326; Avtar BRAH, Sobia SHAW, *Working Choices: South Asian Young Muslim Women and the Labour Market* (London, 1992); Trevor JONES, David McEVOY, Giles BARRETT, “Success or Just Survival?: Our Image of Asian Businesses is Not Necessarily the Right One”, *New Economy*, vol. 1 (1994), p. 53; KALRA, “Political Economy ...”, p. 31.

<sup>51</sup> For exceptions, see Humayun HUSSAIN, “Where Curry is King”, *Tandoori Magazine*, vol. 3, issue 6 (1997), p. 21; Asif HASHMI, “A Tale of Two Cities”, *Tandoori Magazine*, vol. 4, issue 1 (1998), p. 43.

<sup>52</sup> Zahid HUSSAIN’s novel *The Curry Mile* (London, 2006) centred on the Manchester restaurant trade, and concludes with the Butt family’s restaurant “empire” being passed to a daughter long eager to be in charge of the business. She succeeds following a protracted struggle for her father’s recognition which she only secured in his dying moments.



sector to be more accommodating to women and to bring their attention to the untapped potential of females.”<sup>53</sup>

Alongside sporadic examples of British Asian women acting as restaurant owners and managers, female writers and film directors have also confronted the popularity and imagery of Britain’s Indian restaurant tradition. Over the past decade, successful cookery books written by Vicky Bhogal, coupled with Pratibha Parmar’s 2006 film *Nina’s Heavenly Delights*, illustrate the diverse ways that women now strive to challenge common understandings of, and tell alternative stories about, the cuisines and cultures associated with Britain’s Asian diaspora.<sup>54</sup> Like the Rouf sisters’ letter to *Tandoori*, Bhogal’s and Parmar’s works both reinstate women at the heart of South Asian cooking. While Bhogal contrasts restaurant food with the gendered gastronomy of the home, however, Parmar domesticates, feminizes, and rethinks the possibilities of the otherwise male-centred public sphere of the restaurant.

Published in 2003 and 2006, Bhogal’s books entitled *Cooking Like Mummyji: Real British Asian Cooking* and *A Year of Cooking Like Mummyji: Real British Asian Cooking For All Seasons* share the emphasis on authenticity seen to be apparent within certain sectors of the restaurant industry noted above. As an author of cookery books directed at a British-based readership, Bhogal joined the growing number of culinary spokespersons who have built upon public familiarity with curry house fare to encourage preparing and eating South Asian food at home. *Cooking Like Mummyji* opens by divulging the following “secret”: “Our home food is much simpler than the food you find in Indian restaurants. ... The main element missing from restaurant food is the female energy. The kitchen is always the best place to be in an Indian or British-Asian household. Full of women joking, laughing, gossiping, confiding, moaning about their mother-in-law or daughter-in-law – they do all this whilst cooking and this is the magic ingredient, which cannot be replicated.”<sup>55</sup> Contrasting the masculine world of the restaurant unfavourably with the female world of the family kitchen, Bhogal initially suggests that her readers

<sup>53</sup> Ms. Ruma ROUF, Jasmine ROUF, Miss Rekha ROUF, “The Female Touch”, *Tandoori Magazine*, vol. 5, issue 4 (1999), p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Pratibha Parmar is a well-known feminist author and filmmaker whose written work includes Valerie AMOS, Pratibha PARMAR, “Challenging Imperial Feminism”, *Feminist Review: Special Issue: Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives*, vol. 17 (1984), pp. 3–19. Prior to *Nina’s Heavenly Delights*, Parmar’s previous films included a number of documentaries focusing on racism, gender, and homosexuality as well as the ways immigration has changed British identity. See Tamsin WHITEHEAD, “Rejecting the Margins of Difference: Strategies of Resistance in the Documentary Films of Pratibha Parmar”, *thirdspace*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2008), pp. 1–9; Gwendolyn Audrey FOSTER, “Pratibha Parmar: An Assault on Racism, Sexism and Homophobia”, in *Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL, 1997), pp. 73–94.

<sup>55</sup> Vicky BHOGAL, *Cooking Like Mummyji: Real British Asian Cooking* (London, 2003), p. 5.

are predominantly non-Asians never fortunate enough to have experienced such “magic” known to insiders like herself through a lifetime of experience: “our home food” is contrasted with that which “you find in restaurants.”

Assumed knowledge of restaurant versions, and indeed in many instances of restaurant food alone, recurs throughout both *Cooking Like Mummyji* and its 2006 sequel. “I have often thought it such a shame that the Western world is not let in on the secret of real Indian home-cooking ... I have cooked for many people and my friends have always been amazed by how different the food is from restaurant food, that it has all been cooked fresh from scratch without any artificial ingredients and that it is so healthy. There is much less oil involved than restaurant food and it is quite mild”, Bhogal recounts.<sup>56</sup> Born in Britain in c. 1978 to a Sikh family of Punjabi origin, she recalled that “when I was young I could not understand why the food served up in such establishments was labelled as Indian – it bore no resemblance to anything I ate at home.”<sup>57</sup>

Standardized restaurant dishes recur throughout both books as the diametrical opposites of “real” domestically-prepared alternatives, with the comment that “real chicken *biryani* is worlds away from the restaurant version of fairly bland chicken mixed with multicoloured rice served up with a pale brown curry sauce” being one of many examples.<sup>58</sup> Recipes accompanied by personal and familial anecdotes in her books contain repeated references to the dishes’ place within the authentic private sphere she knew first hand as opposed to the artificial realm of the restaurant. “Pooiji’s [father’s older sister] original fritters”, “my Mum’s thariwala chicken”, and the fried potato cakes “my chachiji [aunt – father’s younger brother’s wife] made ... for me a while ago as an afternoon snack” draw the reader into her mother’s and her extended family’s kitchens, as do “Leicester naniji’s [grandmother’s] methi roti.”<sup>59</sup> By their very titles, Bhogal’s books and recipes share much in common with Mahdur Jaffrey’s cookery books in what Parama Roy has identified as an “autobiographical thrust” along with the “familial kitchen and the maternal figure as sources of inspiration.”<sup>60</sup>

While Jaffrey’s cookery books count among the many written by expatriates born in India whose gastronomic journeys reflect a state of nostalgic exile in the wake of migration, Bhogal emphasizes that her books centre on the

<sup>56</sup> V. BHOGAL, *Cooking Like Mummyji* ..., p. 16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124; see also Vicky BHOGAL, *A Year of Cooking Like Mummyji: Real British Asian Cooking For All Seasons* (London, 2006), p. 10. For a discussion of Bhogal’s work amongst other themes, see David Bell, Joanne Hollows, “Mobile Homes”, *Society and Culture*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2007), pp. 22–39; P. PANAYI, *Spicing Up Britain* ..., pp. 36, 148–149, 163, 204.

<sup>58</sup> V. BHOGAL, *A Year of Cooking* ..., p. 127.

<sup>59</sup> V. BHOGAL, *Cooking Like Mummyji* ..., pp. 63, 106, 55.

<sup>60</sup> P. ROY, “Reading Communities ...”, pp. 479, 485.

foods “we British Asians have grown up eating” after families migrated to Britain – food specifically of the British Asian diaspora, not food consumed in the subcontinent itself and not restaurant fabrications.<sup>61</sup> Other Indian cookbooks, she suggests, are “either geared towards the British curry-house fan, full of dishes no self-respecting Indian would ever cook or eat at home (and tend to be written by non-Asians), or they are the type that target real food-lovers and contain recipes which, although delicious, are highly stylised and often complicated. They often contain dishes from restaurant kitchens in India, rather than the traditional food cooked at home in this country.”<sup>62</sup> Dishes in *Cooking Like Mummyji* are intended to be both authentically British Asian and to be practical and simple rather than overly time-consuming – in short, less daunting for the uninitiated.

Yet non-Asians whose acquaintance with “curry” comes largely via the “inauthentic” restaurant constitute only half of Bhogal’s imagined readership. *Cooking Like Mummyji* and its sequel targeted not just readers only able to experience “Mummyji’s” food through Bhogal as the indispensable intermediary, but also second-generation British Asians, particularly young women, who, like herself, grew up eating little else at home but the foods prepared by their mothers, aunts, and other female relatives. Unlike women born in the subcontinent who moved to Britain between the 1950s and 1970s, girls born in Britain often lacked the knowledge or the desire to learn traditional cookery skills, she noted. Bhogal joined many British Asians of previous generations in regretting this as change for the worse. Describing a visit by her “*Pooiji* and *Phupherji* (Dad’s older sister and her husband)” on “a particularly blustery and sodden Saturday in April” – the reference to the weather serving to reinforce the scenario’s Britishness – Bhogal recounted preparing the evening meal with her mother while the others looked on. Her *Pooiji* said, “It is such a shame that so many Indian girls of your age don’t know how to cook or share your enthusiasm. Nowadays, girls are either so busy studying or they just have no interest. Gone are the days when they used to stay in the kitchen by their mother’s side and were able to cook for the whole family by the age of ten. Now it’s ‘I’m going here,’ or ‘I’m going there,’ or ‘I’ve got exams!’ Soon, no-one will be able to cook proper roti anymore and we elders will be fed chilled supermarket chicken *biryanis*, a twinpack of frozen *naan* and a jar of mango chutney!”<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> V. BHOGAL, *Cooking Like Mummyji . . .*, p. 19. On the prominent contribution of expatriates to the corpus of Indian cookery books, see especially Arjun APPADURAI, “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1988), p. 18; P. ROY, “Reading Communities . . .”

<sup>62</sup> V. BHOGAL, *Cooking Like Mummyji . . .*, p. 17.

<sup>63</sup> V. BHOGAL, *Cooking Like Mummyji . . .*, p. 12. The image of second-generation British Asian women being uninterested in learning to cook and prioritising non-traditional pursuits distasteful

Young British Asian women, Bhogal explained, led lives unimaginable for their mothers’ generation, particularly within the middle-class families who are implicitly at the centre of her narrative. Academic achievement, success in exams, and a good university degree followed by entry into professional life had become the norm for growing numbers, as did the wish to spend their leisure time with friends; “learning how to cook featured low on the list of priorities.” Nonetheless, within British Asian families, “the expectation that girls ought to be able to cook remains”, with traditional femininity in relentless competition with the desires and demands for new lifestyles. “Today’s ideal bride is still a girl who is fair and beautiful and from a respectable family, but now she needs to be just as good kicking butt in the courtroom or performing a triple by-pass as she is at making perfect crispy *samoses*. Talk about being superwoman”, she summarizes.<sup>64</sup> Bhogal’s books hold out the promise of young women being able to have it both ways – to pursue academic and professional paths alongside social lives outside the family, while still learning how to cook without years of lessons. Those who missed their mothers’ food after leaving home were thus provided with an accessible guide for preparing their own “just the way *Mummyji* makes it” that would simultaneously reassure their families that “you are [not] an absolute disgrace of an Indian girl and a shame to your mother.”<sup>65</sup>

*Cooking Like Mummyji* and its sequel envision how second-generation British Asian women might fulfil a diversifying range of family aspirations

to their parents is a prominent theme in other media productions. Gurinder Chadha’s film *Bend It Like Beckham* appeared in 2002, just a year before *Cooking Like Mummyji* was published, and features eighteen-year-old Jesminder—called Jes by everyone but her mother—from Hounslow on the outskirts of London who is passionate about playing football. Her mother argues, “I was married at your age. You don’t even want to learn how to cook *dhal!* ... What family will want a daughter-in-law who can run around kicking football all day but can’t make round *chapattis?*”, while Jes complains to a friend, “Anyone can cook *aloo gobi* but who can bend a ball like Beckham?!” Generational conflicts about “traditional” versus “modern” gender roles utilize food to illustrate wider issues; this film (like the solutions Bhogal’s books offer) suggests that such differences can be reconciled to mutual benefit. Jes, albeit grudgingly, does submit to cooking lessons, while her parents ultimately allow her to continue sports. For an analysis of this film, see Winnie CHAN, “Curry on the Divide in Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* and Gurinder Chadha’s *Bend It Like Beckham*”, *ariel: a review of international english literature*, vol. 36, nos. 3–5 (2005), pp. 1–23.

<sup>64</sup> V. BHOGAL, *Cooking Like Mummyji* . . . , p. 15; see also p. 16, and V. BHOGAL, *A Year of Cooking* . . . , p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> V. BHOGAL, *Cooking Like Mummyji* . . . , pp. 19, 202. As Bhogal later admitted, however, even those with adequate cooking skills still could be excused from taking refuge in supermarket alternatives. Starting in 2005, she launched her own line of “Just Like Mummyji’s” ready-meals for Tesco, Britain’s largest supermarket chain. “Although preferable, occasionally people really do not have the time to cook a meal from scratch but ... there is no reason, or excuse, why a chilled meal cannot be of high quality and similar to heating up in the microwave a dish your mum made the day before”, her website explained. With their “real home-cooked taste”, customers rated “Just Like Mummyji’s” options as “better than an Indian restaurant meal or takeaway.” See <http://www.vickybhogal.com/biography.htm>, accessed on 3 November 2008.

while still leading lives of their own choosing. Pratibha Parmar's film *Nina's Heavenly Delights* highlights similar tensions and, like Bhogal, uses food as a means of addressing the competing demands of South Asian family traditions and the new possibilities enabled within early twenty-first century Britain. While *Cooking Like Mummyji* depicts "our home food" in stark contrast to restaurant fare, *Nina's Heavenly Delights* is set in an imagined realm in which the British Asian home and the restaurant merge. Parmar's film explores the choices made by its protagonist, Nina Shah, a woman in her late twenties who was born in Glasgow and had grown up in the New Taj restaurant run by her father but moved to London three years before. The Shah family's home and restaurant are literally inseparable: their living quarters are located immediately above the restaurant, and family meals are prepared and consumed in the restaurant's kitchen.<sup>66</sup> In placing the nuclear family at its centre, *Nina's Heavenly Delights* destabilizes the image of the restaurant as an exclusively male arena. Men are moved to the margins of the Shah family restaurant from its outset, with the film beginning with the father's premature death – an event that brings the "prodigal" Nina back home for his funeral. Upon return, she learns that the New Taj's days appear numbered on account of her father's having sold half the business to Lisa, a young white woman Nina's age, to pay his gambling debts.

Once Nina has returned to the family fold upon her father's death, the film explains why she had left in haste three years before – to escape her impending wedding to Sanjay, the son of her parents' friends who owned another local restaurant, whom she did not love. It soon becomes clear why when romance blossoms between Nina and Lisa. Rather than selling the restaurant to Sanjay's father as expected, the two women decide to try to revive the failing establishment by competing in the annual "Best of the West Curry Competition" – an event which, in better times, Nina's father had prided himself on having won twice. In aiming for another victory in her father's memory, Nina struggles with conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable desires: to honour her father's culinary traditions and enable the survival of the restaurant he loved; to re-establish her relationship with her mother and siblings that had been ruptured when she left home upon refusing marriage; and to find romantic and sexual fulfilment with Lisa. Yet she fears that an openly lesbian relationship would mean "losing everything" again because her mother was unlikely to support her sexual choices. As she explained to a friend, while in London "all I ever wanted to do was come home" – home to her family and to the New Taj alike.

<sup>66</sup> Although the image of a British Asian family and their business presented in Parmar's film bears little resemblance to "real" counterparts, the family living in a flat above the father's restaurant was indeed a fairly common arrangement in earlier decades.

As Nina grapples with her attachment to her family and the restaurant and her emerging relationship with Lisa, the New Taj moves further and further away from realistic restaurant norms. The food prepared in the New Taj’s/Shah family kitchen bears little resemblance to that commonly served in most curry houses. In place of standardized dishes produced quickly and cheaply, those Nina remembers being taught to make by her father as a child that she now recreates alongside Lisa involve slow and careful preparation. As her father always said, “there’s no need to rush, Nina *beti* [daughter]; always take your time”; “no matter what the recipe says, *beti*, always follow your heart.” Indian cooking becomes a labour of love and an art form, not a source of income in a service industry – indeed, for much of the film, the New Taj is visibly devoid of paying customers and the only people to be found in it are the Shah family and their friends. While Sanjay’s Jewel in the Crown restaurant – a highly clichéd restaurant name, as noted above – is shown as popular and filled with customers, it is most decidedly a source of profit and a business. Sampling Sanjay’s dishes, Nina rejects them just as she had once rejected marriage to him; “technically it’s very good”, was her verdict, “but there’s something missing ... it’s the chemistry ... it’s not quite right.”

The “chemistry” of *Nina’s Heavenly Delights* emanates from the domestic kitchen, albeit one which is nominally part of the restaurant, and through the love affair between two women whose first kiss, and developing relationship, occur amidst a kitchen filled with colourful jars of spices, pots, and pans. Just as Vicky Bhogal claimed that “the main element missing from restaurant food is the female energy” in *Cooking Like Mummyji*, Parmar’s film places female “chemistry” at its heart. The dishes made by Nina and Lisa occupy a higher realm from that associated with the “typical” restaurant food of the male-dominated commercial arena which Sanjay’s Jewel in the Crown represents. Instead, the restaurant Nina and Lisa run together becomes worthy of its “New Taj” appellation. As the film explains, the Taj Mahal is “a beautiful monument to eternal love” and a popular Indian honeymoon destination; in the Glasgow restaurant Nina and Lisa are able to embark upon a new kind of love affair which ultimately wins the approval of Nina’s mother and all of their acquaintances. *Nina’s Heavenly Delights* ends with Nina and Lisa defeating Sanjay to win the “Best of the West Curry Competition”, thereby showing how women’s commitment to the family, and simultaneously to the family restaurant, can be reconciled with “following your heart.” In the process the once-floundering restaurant revives, with the film’s closing scene showing the New Taj filled with customers for the first time. Like Vicky Bhogal’s imagined second-generation female readership, young women are shown successfully balancing family traditions with new opportunities.

## Nostalgia, Pride, and “Retro”: Revaluing Restaurant Traditions

*Nina's Heavenly Delights* and *Cooking Like Mummyji* are both texts which, albeit centred around the new lives some British Asian women now seek to lead, are simultaneously driven by nostalgia. Parmar's film depicts Nina's recurring memories of learning her father's recipes by his side as a young child at the restaurant while trying to recreate the dishes afresh after his death, while Bhogal's two cookery books are laden with references to the years of her own childhood in 1980s Britain. *Cooking Like Mummyji* and its sequel combine black and white photographs of Bhogal's extended family and anecdotes of family life with a hot pink cover, brightly-coloured pages, and allusions to second-generation *desi* youth culture which had become trendy and “cool” amongst non-Asians in Britain during the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>67</sup> References to popular forms of bhangra music and listening to Nitin Sawhney alternate with the wish that certain traditions, not least the culinary, “should not be lost.”<sup>68</sup> Alongside juxtaposing British Asian family traditions with contemporary youth culture, her books incorporate commentary about the postwar history of South Asian settlement more generally, thereby allowing her to discuss the restaurant traditions presumed familiar to her readers in more detail.

Given her views about restaurant food noted above, Bhogal's nostalgic tone is unsurprisingly less pronounced when describing the cuisine that curry houses made so widely available to the British public. Unlike the vociferous criticisms of Indian restaurant fare discussed above, however, her assessment of such restaurants, their proprietors, and even their menus is highly complimentary. Despite their food being “worlds away from home cooking”, she stresses how dishes like chicken tikka masala and other standards were invented in order to survive in the catering trade. “I have admiration for the Indians who came over to this country in the 50s and 60s and with an entrepreneurial

<sup>67</sup> As Bhogal explains, *desi* means “anything traditionally Indian or when a British-Asian person feels like behaving in a traditional, Indian way instead of in a modern, Western way (acting *desi* means going back to your roots and old values).” V. BHOGAL, *Cooking Like Mummyji* . . . , p. 42. *Desi* translates as “of the country”, and has also become a way of referring to second-generation British Asians and cultural practices associated with them. For a critical reading of the popularity of “Asian Kool” in the late 1990s (and indeed continuing thereafter), see V.S. KALRA, J. HUTNYK, “Brimful of Agitation . . .”, pp. 339–55.

<sup>68</sup> V. BHOGAL, *Cooking Like Mummyji* . . . , pp. 190, 196. Recent work on bhangra includes Tony BALLANTYNE, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World* (Durham, NC, 2006), chapter 4, and Rupa HUQ, “From the Margins to the Mainstream?: Representations of British Asian Youth Musical Cultural Expression from Bhangra to Asian Underground Music”, *Young*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2003), pp. 29–48; more generally, see Sanjay SHARMA, John HUTNYK, Ashwani SHARMA (eds.), *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music* (London, 1996); Sanjay SHARMA, “Asian Sounds”, in N. ALI, V.S. KALRA, and S. SAYYID (eds.), *A Postcolonial People* . . . , pp. 317–26.

spirit set up restaurants serving Indian food to the West. ... These early chefs were right to do whatever they could to maintain their business and so the dishes were adapted to make them more palatable to Western tastes”, she summarized.<sup>69</sup> Shortcuts which spelled inauthenticity or compromised quality were also necessary to cut down on labour costs and thereby ensure profits. In her *A Year of Cooking Like Mummyji* sequel, Bhogal revisited restaurant food, this time stressing the Bangladeshi prominence within the curry house sector and describing her conversations with a number of restaurant owners. One grudgingly admitted that he did not actually serve “authentic, traditional, real” Bangladeshi food as his advertising claimed, but explained why: “Okay, so none of the dishes on the menu are from Bangladesh but it is what customers want – they won’t accept our real food”, he argued. Far from condemning this rationale, Bhogal claimed that “I felt admiration for these restaurants for adapting to ensure survival.”<sup>70</sup>

Pride in the restaurant sector’s achievements in ensuring that curry became a British favourite is embedded in statements emphasizing the obstacles Britain’s Asian communities have had to overcome within a society pervaded by racism. “My parents, like most other British-Asian parents, instilled in me the value of working hard to achieve in life. As part of a generation who were often skilled or educated back in their motherland of India, they found themselves victims of insults, abuse, prejudice and discrimination as immigrants”, forced to take factory jobs “to earn a measly wage”, she wrote – a somewhat improbable introduction, perhaps, to her recipe for cardamom and gold chocolate truffles.<sup>71</sup> Yet the contrast between humble beginnings and the affluence implied by the truffle makes the upward journey stand out in even greater relief.

Vicky Bhogal counts among the many British Asians who have contributed to a narrative celebrating the presence and accomplishments of the nation’s communities originating in the Indian subcontinent. South Asian restaurant owners and staff, like other Asian immigrants, may not have achieved wealth and success in equal numbers. Indeed, many businesses remain precarious ventures; as discussed above, restaurant work involves long hours, late nights, and often meagre rewards, as do other forms of self-employment in which Asians are strongly represented.<sup>72</sup> Given its many downsides, resilience, survival, and possibly relative prosperity in unpropitious circumstances becomes all

<sup>69</sup> V. BHOGAL, *Cooking Like Mummyji* ..., pp. 125–126.

<sup>70</sup> V. BHOGAL, *A Year of Cooking* ..., pp. 86–87.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>72</sup> The drawbacks of restaurant work are even more pronounced for staff than for owners. Despite their ongoing dependence upon employment in catering, Bangladeshis (particularly the second generation) also commonly denigrate restaurant jobs as low status. See S. SALWAY, “Labour Market Experiences”, pp. 1139–1141, 1145–1147; Geoff DENCH, Kate GAVRON, Michael YOUNG, *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict* (London, 2006), p. 130.



the more commendable – even if emphasizing success risks minimizing the extent to which many Asians remain economically disadvantaged and rely on insecure forms of employment with a high risk of failure or which, at best, promise minimal rewards.

Bhogal's reminders about the obstacles many restaurants encountered, however, remains important as a corrective to narratives which either unproblematically celebrate restaurateurs' success in pleasing British diners or else ridicule them for offering downmarket surroundings and inauthentic cuisine. Such people persevered in a sector dependent upon the patronage of a white British clientele whose curry house visits not uncommonly combined an appreciation for the dishes with racist responses to ethnic minorities that repeatedly extended to restaurant staff. In her preface to a chicken recipe that differed from curry house versions, Bhogal looked back to earlier times that, unlike other moments from her childhood, could not be remembered with nostalgia. "Every couple of years, the nation is gripped with footie mania over the summer, with many an England fan visiting Indian restaurants after matches for lager, a *vindaloo* and patriotic banter", yet unlike many of her non-Asian friends she grew up with no love for football. "Football was simply seen as racist, violent and dangerous" for ethnic minorities; "the word equated yob culture and hooliganism and we were strongly advised to keep well away from it", she recalled. Thankfully, she notes, society had ceased to tolerate such behaviour at matches; times had changed for the better. "As football and Indian food often go hand in hand, why not try something different from the *vindaloo*s and *phaals* and instead enjoy this home-made traditional chicken dish?", she advised her readers.<sup>73</sup> Britain's Indian restaurant traditions are thus critiqued not by mocking their owners and cooks for poor quality cuisine, but rather via reminders of the bad behaviour of some of their customers. While continuing to exalt the value of the "home-made" and "traditional" over restaurant fare, in this instance it is primarily the racism she condemns, not the restaurant staff all too often victimized by it.

Asians working in the curry house sector encountered slurs not simply from white Britons but from wealthier Asians, as explored in the previous section. Bhogal writes supportively of the Bangladeshi curry house owners who resent "snobbery towards them by other British Asians", who "think they're so much better than us, that we are just common waiters." As one protested, "we are very proud of who we are and what we have achieved. We ... came here independently and started from scratch."<sup>74</sup> Defending their reputation and accomplishments against insults by South Asian middle- and upper-class connoisseurs, including the owners of newer and more upmarket restaurants

<sup>73</sup> V. BHOGAL, *A Year of Cooking* ..., p. 72.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87–88.

that promote themselves as superior to the curry house tradition, sets Bhogal apart from many socially privileged commentators who criticized restaurant food and its purveyors without reflecting upon the wider context in which the dishes were produced and consumed.

Revealingly, however, a number of newer establishments are not immune from making explicit reference to the curry house traditions they critique, but upon which they have unarguably relied for introducing British customers of diverse social backgrounds to what they perceived to constitute Indian cuisine. This has led a restaurant called Mother India in Glasgow to marry an otherwise contemporary and minimalist interior with an ironic reference to the outdated, yet still discursively ever-present, ridiculed décor of the curry house’s recent past. One wall is covered with flock wallpaper – now able to be re-valued as “retro” styling via a knowing parody of the establishment’s embarrassing ancestors.<sup>75</sup> In 2008, this trend made another appearance in Birmingham with the opening of a restaurant called Ruby Murray – a name, despite first appearances, with an integral place in Britain’s curry house history. Ruby Murray was a singer from Belfast who rose to fame throughout Britain with hit singles and a TV show in the 1950s; she died in 1996 from liver failure stemming from long-term alcoholism. A familiar figure in British pop culture at the time when curry restaurants gradually entered mainstream consumption patterns in the 1970s and 1980s, Ruby Murray was treated to a dose of Cockney rhyming slang to become an alternative term for curry. A “Ruby Murray” or “Going for a Ruby” was, for some Britons, synonymous with “Going for an Indian.”<sup>76</sup>

In keeping with its explicit nod to former times, Birmingham’s Ruby Murray restaurant distinguished itself from its countless local competitors through staging itself as what one reviewer called “a deliberate retro throwback to the

<sup>75</sup> “Desi DNA”, “The Great British Curry Trail, Part II”, broadcast on British television on BBC 2, 23 April 2008. Since 2007, “retro” styles have become increasingly trendy in British design, with some commentators speculating that the partial turn away from modern minimalism coincides with economic downturn and a quest for tradition and “fun” combined with affordability. As the *Guardian* reported, “designers are applying flock to anything with a surface”, with one arguing that “modernism is very chilly ... there’s no distraction or romance, which is important in times of economic difficulty.” Moreover, “where stripped-down minimalism called for pricey perfection, the new baroque can be done on the relatively cheap: it is all about one-off statement pieces, rather than entire rooms; gilding a seen-better-days sofa with a gold throw or pasting up a few rolls of flock wallpaper.” In short, “an injection of cheap and frivolous decoration sounds like the perfect antidote to the grey-toned realities of the recession.” See Charlotte ABRAHAMS, “Baroque and Roll”, *Guardian* (Weekend), 7 March 2009, pp. 62–63; see also “The Retro Issue”, *Guardian* (Weekend), 26 May 2007. As Raphael Samuel observed, the revolt against 1950s and 1960s modernism was a central factor in the reappropriation and reinvention of Georgian and Victorian styles in Britain during the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. See R. SAMUEL, “Retrofitting” and “Retrochic”, in *Theatres of Memory*, pp. 51–118 (on wallpaper’s place in “retrofitting” see pp. 72–73).

<sup>76</sup> John EZARD, “Ruby Murray, singing star of 1950s, dies at 61”, *Guardian*, 18 Dec. 1996.

1970s” replete with “kitsch and nostalgia”. While “the food on offer in most of Birmingham’s higher-class Indian restaurants has improved dramatically from the days when going for a balti meant leaning your elbows on the table and mopping up some bright orange goo from a metal dish”, Ruby Murray’s calling cards included “flock wallpaper, fish tanks, 1970s music [Abba songs, amongst others] and the reappearance of vindaloo on the menu.” He continued, “it sounds a bit like a gastronomic version of one of those ‘Recreate what life was like during the Industrial Revolution’ shows you get in museums” – not a surprising development given the extent to which curry had come to count as heritage and tradition at the local as well as national level.<sup>77</sup>

Just as Raj nostalgia became visibly apparent in a number of Britain’s South Asian restaurants starting in the 1980s, harkening back to former times now encompasses the extended moment, not so long ago, when “going for an Indian” took off as a consumer practice. Elizabeth Guffey’s important analysis stresses retro design’s focus on the recent past, “even if it might seem to have slipped out of sight only yesterday.” Moreover, with its attitude of ironic, tongue-in-cheek detachment and humour, retro is distinct from nostalgia’s sentimentality, seriousness, and longing for the past. “Retro does not seek out proud examples of the past”, Guffey stresses; “it shuffles instead through history’s unopened closets and unlit corners”, “highlighting popular culture.”<sup>78</sup>

Following the widespread celebration of chicken tikka masala and other curry-house favourites as epitomizing Britishness for the twenty-first century, the stereotyped restaurant of earlier decades became available not simply for mockery and insult but equally to be reclaimed and defended. Extolling the material culture of restaurants past has increasingly become a means of recovering the meanings of such establishments from the condescension of their diverse critics. To quote Raphael Samuel, recourse to retro involves “inversion, discovering hitherto unnoticed beauties in the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life.” As a phenomenon different from many other revivals – among which Raj nostalgia now must count – that revolved around “imitating the grand, retrochic has been more apt to make a fetish of the vernacular and the demotic.” This enables “alternative histories” to begin to be told, for instance Pratibha Parmar’s.<sup>79</sup> Alongside foregrounding the strength of British Asian family ties and positioning a romance between women at the centre of *Nina’s Heavenly Delights*, Parmar enlisted set design as an integral part of the narrative combining tradition with signs of a new vitality and new possibilities. “I wanted vibrant colours and [to] create a little bit of India in Glasgow. The

<sup>77</sup> Paul CLARKE, “Ruby Murray Needs a Flavour Update”, *Metro* (West Midlands edition), 16 Sept. 2008.

<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth E. GUFFEY, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London, 2006), pp. 17, 19–20, 14.

<sup>79</sup> R. SAMUEL, *Theatres of Memory*, pp. 85, 112, 114.

look of the family restaurant had to have a sense of faded glory and I wanted flock wallpaper. It had to look like a family restaurant like so many hundreds [of] such establishments across Britain but without being tacky”, she reflected. *Nina’s Heavenly Delights*, in short, “pays homage to the much derided flock wallpaper in high street restaurants that have made Indian food the staple of the British diet!”<sup>80</sup>

Flock wallpaper, like the cuisine Britain’s South Asian restaurants came to serve, has thus, by turns, been widely insulted but also acclaimed; indeed, it can be argued that recurrent abuse did much to generate the subsequent reaffirmations of its value by its defenders. Counting amongst the latter is prominent author Hanif Kureishi, whose novels such as *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and screenplays including *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986) marked the emergence of second-generation British Asians onto the nation’s cultural landscape like few others.<sup>81</sup> Describing the room at his home where he did his writing in 2007, Kureishi singled out its flock wallpaper for special attention. Although it “was in the house when I got here, I’ve kept it, and indeed fought to keep it, because it is like being in an Indian restaurant, and I always wanted to spend all of my life in an Indian restaurant.”<sup>82</sup> As emblematic places of encounter – both imaginative and real – between Britain’s diverse Asian diaspora, second-generation British Asians, and wider British society, the cultural meanings of Indian restaurants indeed illuminate important dynamics of ethnic interaction in postwar Britain like few other spaces. Were Kureishi indeed serious about wanting to live out his days in one, he would find himself ideally situated to continue pondering the themes around which much of his writing has so productively revolved.

<sup>80</sup> Pratibha PARMAR, in “Verve Pictures Present a Pratibha Parmar Film: *Nina’s Heavenly Delights*”, (Nina’s Heavenly Delights Productions, 2006), <http://www.vervepics.com/docs/nhdnotes.doc>, accessed on 3 November 2008.

<sup>81</sup> On Kureishi and his work, see, amongst others, Bart MOORE-GILBERT, *Hanif Kureishi* (Manchester, 2001); Ruvani RANASINHA, *Hanif Kureishi* (Estover, 2002) and *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain: Culture in Transition* (Oxford, 2007), 221–265; John HILL, *British Cinema in the 1980* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 205–218.

<sup>82</sup> Hanif KUREISHI, “Writers’ Rooms: Hanif Kureishi”, *Guardian*, 20 April 2007.