

'Males and Females the Girl Consumes!': Food, Desire and Unstable Gender Expression in Zinaid Meeran's *Saracen at the Gates*

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Published: September 1, 2023

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the ways in which food discourse is employed to destabilise essentialised notions of culture and gender in South African author Zinaid Meeran's debut novel, *Saracen at the Gates* (2009). The article explains how Meeran disrupts stratified conceptions of culture through his alimentary cartography, and how food is used to disrupt religious identification. His depiction of the desiring queer body is interpreted as that which ruptures the limits of control and excess associated with appetite through analysing his representation of desire as simultaneously fluid, culturally specific and material. The article concludes that Meeran's alimentary cartography allows for the creation of alternative constructions of identity that coalesce around the gustatory.

Keywords: food, desire, Zinaid Meeran, queer bodies, South African literature

INTRODUCTION

Few novelists attempt to blur the boundaries between edible bodies and erotic bodies in the same off-handedly sexual way as Zinaid Meeran does in *Saracen at the Gates* (2009). Meeran dedicates his novel to 'those who have no race, gender, country or class. Who desire the freedom to be only themselves' (2009: i). Taking this as my starting point, I explore the ways in which the representation of food in Meeran's novel opens up new analytic lenses for the re-evaluation of rigid conceptions of gendered love in the novel's context. This remarkable South African novel has received a lamentable paucity of scholarly attention. After it won the European Union Literary Award in 2008/09, Cheryl Stobie briefly discussed it in her 'Reading bisexualities from a South African perspective – revisited', arguing that 'the originality and success of the novel lie in the light and humorous touch with which concrete notions of identity, in terms of race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality, are dismantled' (2011: 486). The only sustained exploration of the work can be found in Jessica Murray's 'Stereotypes and subversions: Reading queer representations in two contemporary South African novels', in which she analyses how Meeran represents 'homophobic stereotypes in order to expose their inconsistencies and dissonances and to open them up to critique and even to ridicule' (2013: 484). To address this lacuna, in this article I will demonstrate the usefulness of food studies to South African literary criticism in analysing Meeran's employment of an alimentary cartography that allows him to situate love and desire as forces that are in flux rather than fixed.

The protagonist of the novel, Zakira Cachalia, is a self-proclaimed 'curry mafia princess'. With its explicit incorporation of food discourse to denote identification, this term suggests Meeran's commingling of the alimentary with race, class and gender categories. Zakira's parents are money-laundering confectionery establishment proprietors, ostensible pillars of the community who allow their coddled son, Zakir, the indulgence and freedom they deny his female twin. The novel traces Zakira's movement from her self-absorbed entrapment in the structures of privilege associated with her family's wealth to her sexual and romantic relationship with Sofie, the leader of the Saracens, an anarchist girl gang intent on dismantling all systems of power.

The novel's success lies in Meeran's careful problematisation of the rigid social and gender expectations demanded by Zakira's family. As I will elaborate below, these are expressed in the negotiation of the excess and control of appetite that is made material in the queer body through its conflation with food.

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QUEER POSSIBILITIES IN THE CONJOINING OF FOOD STUDIES AND LITERARY CRITICISM

Theorists working on the relationship between food and identity have pointed out that it can be a socially unifying force with the potential to create and re-establish individual and cultural identity. Claude Fischler argues for the fundamental role played by eating in identity formation, claiming that to 'incorporate a food is, in both real and imaginary terms, to incorporate all or some of its properties: we become what we eat' (1988: 275). To realise the multitudinous ways in which food shapes perceptions and performances of gender, one needs only to think of the uneasy position women have historically occupied in relation to food (in relation to their roles as food providers, and their body images, to name but two examples). Similarly, Chapman and Beagan analyse how food practices inform understandings of culture and assert that the 'eating of ostensibly traditional foods, or the foods of "home," can (...) be a way of insisting on the salience of the local, a form of resistance to globalization' (2013: 368). Roland Barthes relates culinary systems to semiotics, arguing that food is the 'functional unit of a system of communication (...) for all food serves as a sign amongst members of a given society' (1961: 24). Despite the numerous ways in which food acts as a point of commonality in giving cohesion to gender, race and class systems, the alimentary also acts as a powerful marker of difference that simultaneously highlights the divisions and blurs the differences between the categories that it ostensibly serves to coalesce. Even on a physiological level, food connotes difference, as it implies a transgression of the boundaries that separate inside and outside, self and other. As Kayla Tompkins (2005: 245) points out: 'Every food discourse or representation has a relationship to a specific body politic'. Who grows the food we eat, how it finds its way to our kitchens, who prepares our meals, what our diets consist of, and whether we have access to food, are all ways in which the alimentary acts as a marker of racial, sexual, and sociocultural difference.

As the food studies movement has begun to develop and explore other ways of thinking about how humans relate to food, scholars have investigated the potential of food as a privileged site which simultaneously draws together (people and ideas), sets them apart and creates new connections. One area in which this becomes especially apparent is the conjoining of food studies and queer theory, given its focus on dismantling established ways of thinking, doing and being. In an article that attempts to queer the food studies discipline by addressing the relationship between disability and food, Kim Hall argues for a 'queer crip feminist conception of food justice' that 'critically engages the conceptions of community, relationship, bodies and identity that are assumed, made possible by, or foreclosed by food discourse' (2014: 178). She posits a metaphysics of 'compost' as a useful point of access into the space where food studies and queer theory merge. Compost, she argues, 'understands bodies and food as interactively emergent, provisional, and contested sites where boundaries are questioned, negotiated, and open to transformation' (2014: 179). Similarly, Elspeth Probyn (1999: 224) makes use of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of 'rhizomatic lines of flight' to configure 'an ethno-poetics of food and sex' through which 'we may begin to formulate an ethics of living that works against the logics of categorization that now dominate much of the politics of identity'.

More recently, scholars have begun exploring the potential inherent in reading literary texts through the lens of food studies. Arguing that this approach presents possibilities for richer analysis than simply identifying food imagery in literature, Donna Lee Brien and Lorna Piatti-Farnell explain: 'Connected as they are to the ritual structures of both celebration and the everyday, and refusing to be taken as simple supplements to add realism to the narrative, food, cooking, and eating are linked to both cultural anxieties and desires in relation to human experience, from economic and political constructs, to symbolic transmigrations of gender, class, ethnicity, family, race, and, of course, the body' (2018: 2). This burgeoning of research that combines food studies and literary criticism constitutes a diverse body of work that covers various analytical approaches. Brien and Piatti-Farnell (2018: 1) have identified four main trends in this field:

1. Studies that analyse food representation in particular literary nationalities and geographical spaces (see Leiwei Li, 1998; Aoyama, 2008; Brien, 2008; Xu, 2008; and Carruth, 2013);
2. Studies that focus on individual authors (see Houston, 1994; Fitzpatrick, 2007, and Lane, 2007);
3. Cultural studies projects that read food in literature in relation to culture, gender, ethnicity and genre (see Daniels, 2006; Keeling and Pollard, 2008, and Carruth and Tigner, 2017); and
4. Studies that situate food and literature in specific historical periods (see Yue and Tang, 2013; Boyce and Fitzpatrick, 2017; and Christou, 2017).

Brien and Piatti-Farnell emphasise the depth of analysis these approaches offer in their statement that '[i]t is (...) essential to address not only the widely spread place occupied by food in literary narratives, but also its ability to convey cultural messages in a variety of literary-related contexts' (2018: 1). This article attempts to expand on the growing body of work by reading food in relation to unfixed gender, sexual and class identities in the context of a South African novel.

TEXTUALITY, DESIRE AND CONSUMPTION: THE GUSTATORY AS UNFIXED EXPRESSIONS OF GENDER

These approaches open an array of lenses through which to read how love and desire manifest textually and have the potential to create connections that stimulate new ways of thinking about gender. Holland, Ochoa and Tompkins have commented on the fact that ‘eating conjoins violent, linguistic, erotic, and gustatory appetites into a lexicon with purpose’ (2014: 392). According to them: ‘the text *is* the body’s alimentary tract, and the work is, not to think of inside and outside, but to think of the impossibility of separation between self and other, body and text, tongue and bowel’ (2014: 393, emphasis in original). This nodal intergrowth of desire, food, and language is especially apparent in *Saracen at the Gates*. The innovative way Meeran’s text incorporates food discourse resists what Probyn (1999: 220) criticises as the too-easy commingling of food and sex, where she argues that often ‘the conflation of food/sex may be simply convenient (the use of easy metaphors), or sloppy (the type of inversion that makes meat equal masculinity)’. Instead, Meeran utilises the gustatory in a complex and nuanced manner that partakes of what Holland, Ochoa and Tompkins (2014: 396) call the ‘cathectic and world-making behaviors [that are] already politicized as points of biopolitical, territorial, economic, and cultural intervention’. In *Saracen at the Gates*, this intervention takes the form of dismantling the rigid ideological constraints often associated with gender, and centres on the way the novel foregrounds the narrative representation of food as having the capacity to forge unfamiliar textual connections. In my analysis, I use the term ‘alimentary cartographies’ to describe Meeran’s incorporation of food discourse into his novel. This term addresses his conflation of food, body, race, culture and gender: ‘alimentary’ relates to sustenance and nourishment, but also implies that the body should be read as a politicised site of difference, as it suggests both incorporation and being subsumed. The word ‘cartographies’ alludes to the tessellated topography of interconnection that Meeran creates through his inter-articulation of hunger, desire, and the queered, erotic body.

Meeran’s deployment of food discourse in the novel specifically engages with ideas relating to gender, sexuality, and love. His portrayal of Zakira’s sexuality is one of the most compelling aspects of the text, as he seems purposefully to resist ascribing to her any labels that might delimit the freedom of her desire, and in doing so liberates it from fixed conceptions of gender identification. Zakira’s sexuality is read in divergent ways by Murray and Stobie. Murray argues that Meeran portrays heterosexuality not as ‘some unassailable monolith’ and that he emphasises sexuality as a ‘context-bound construction that is open to challenge’, reading the novel through the lens of ‘lesbian desire’ (2014: 135). Stobie approaches Zakira’s sexuality from the perspective of bisexuality, arguing elsewhere that bisexuality ‘represents a potential for change, a loosening of boundaries, a possibility of multiplicity, all of which signify a fruitful cultural and national pathway beyond the rigid boundaries of the past’ (2007: 71). Stobie does acknowledge that ‘expanding the binary categorisation [of the hetero-/homosexual dichotomy] to contain a third element risks implying that this tripartite scheme of hetero-/bi-/homosexual neatly wraps up all the possibilities’. However, she insists that her deployment of the term ‘bisexuality’ is a ‘strategy not of completion, but of amplification and clarification’ (2007: 21). I contend, though, that the effectiveness of Meeran’s portrayal of Zakira’s sexuality lies in its resistance to all categories of identity politics and in its insistence on a sexuality that is as fluid as it is culturally specific. Meeran clearly neither implies that Zakira’s sexual relationship with Sofie should be seen as her progressing from heterosexual to homosexual desire, nor does he ever pin her down by explicitly labelling her as bisexual. He depicts her negotiation of these desires not as mutually exclusive categories but rather as open-ended sites of play that allow for a multiplicity of engagements and meanings.

One danger of such a reading lies in the possible perpetuation of discourses that promote biphobia and bi-invisibility. As Stobie points out: ‘in theoretics, as well as in academic writing, journalism, films and film criticism, bisexuality tends to become invisible, to be sensationalised or stigmatised’ (2007: 69). A further danger lies in the erasure of the distinctions that define human beings as sexually desiring subjects in a material world, positing sexuality as an amorphous free-floating signifier, so fluid that it ultimately signifies nothing. I contend, however, that Meeran’s use of food discourse in his representation of the sexual is a deliberate strategy that attempts to insist simultaneously on the materiality of desire and on its existence as part of an alimentary cartography that is divorced from the narrow confines of identity politics. In Meeran’s conflation of food and sex, the fluidity of the sexuality he represents is grounded by the concrete viscosity of food. Food thus serves the function of acting as the anchor around which alternative constructions of sexuality can begin to coalesce. It is not my intention to suggest that food should replace sexual practice as a category of identification, but rather that reading Meeran’s novel through this lens opens up alternative ways of imagining textual representations of sexuality. This reflects what Probyn (1999: 422) refers to as ‘more interesting taxonomies of difference within queer identity than the usual reliance on forms of sexual practice’. Below I analyse the ways in which Meeran conflates sexual appetites with alimentary appetites to render desire simultaneously fluid, material and situated in a particular cultural context.

'SO WHOLESOME IT SOUNDS!': FOOD PRACTICES, SUBTERFUGE AND TRANSGRESSION

The baking circle through which Zakira meets Sofie represents one instance in which the comingling of food and sexuality allows for alternate expressions of desire and identity, as it becomes the smokescreen behind which they hide their relationship. Meeran's depiction of the baking circle as camouflage reflects Gabeba Baderoon's argument elsewhere on the idea of 'discretion' (2013: 88):

These spaces of *discretion* can also be found in Muslim practices around same-sex desire, through a phenomenon that Kecia Ali calls a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy. While this is often in response to the risks and dangers of being openly queer, the term also holds the possibility that silence does not always imply oppression. Rather, it can also be the space of consciously 'not naming' or 'not discussing'— what I am calling discretion — which opens up the possibility of varied forms of sexual expression in contexts where gender and sexual roles are over-determined and where symbolic and social meanings place gender and sexual diversity at risk.

This relates to the way Zakira makes use of that which should confine her to enact her rebellion. Ironically, Zakira's mother is the one who suggests that she join the baking circle, and in doing so becomes Sofie and Zakira's unwitting 'matchmaker' (Meeran 2009: 102):

They call themselves *Al Sacareen*, The Sweets, you know in Arabic. So pious using Allah's language! They meet every Sunday at eleven and bake, sit nicely, eat and enjoy each other's company. So wholesome it sounds.

Meeran provocatively undermines Zakira's mother's perception of the purpose of such a baking circle as an acceptable and safe pastime for young women. Clearly, to her, the 'wholesome' act of collective baking serves to entrench and reinforce female gender roles as defined by devotion to domesticity. Her use of the word 'pious' suggests that her perception of this role is further informed by religious discourse. The immobility implied by her statement that the young women '*sit nicely and enjoy each other's company*' (emphasis added) suggests that, according to her, female self-identification is defined by fixity rather than mobility. However, by participating in conventionally feminine activities and by ostensibly referring to themselves as '*Al Sacareen*' or 'The Sweets', Zakira and Sofie can camouflage their desire for each other with the innocuously saccharine trappings of stereotypical femininity as they enact rebellion as the Saracens.

The camouflaging power of ostensibly feminine activities, such as baking, allows women to engage in more subversive forms of identity creation, such as politically motivated acts of graffiti. Zakira's involvement allows her to forge a sense of self that is not defined by the structures of family, culture and gender. Furthermore, Meeran's diction in his description of the baking circle points to food imagery's potential to unmoor the relation of gendered signifiers surrounding food from the usual domesticity and propriety they connote. Zakira's mother's description of how the young women '*sit nicely, eat and enjoy each other's company*' (emphasis added) becomes especially ironic and provocative when seen in relation to Meeran's use of terms relating to food and appetite in his description of Zakira and Sofie's sexual relationship, as I will discuss later. The irreverent innuendo deriving from the word 'eat' alludes to oral sex and demonstrates food's potential to reveal alternative ways of representing sexuality, drawing together eating, desire and textuality. While my reading suggests that the baking circle should be interpreted as a textual strategy that allows for the subversion of stratified notions of gender identity, this is not its only function in the novel. The Saracens do not only pretend to bake at each gathering, but actually do so, producing a variety of items such as cookies (Meeran, 2009: 106), bran muffins (Meeran, 2009: 108), pizza dough (Meeran, 2009: 109), Yorkshire puddings (Meeran 2009: 128), scones (Meeran, 2009: 128), Florentines and crumpets (Meeran, 2009: 137), and croissants (Meeran, 2009: 191). This suggests that, while Zakira and Sofie may use the baking circle to conceal their queer and thus socially unacceptable relationship, food remains an important component in how they relate to each other and should not be relegated to being merely an abstract textual signifier. Baking is represented as something that simultaneously is and is not subterfuge in the context of the novel: these feminised acts have conventional meaning for those who participate in them, but they simultaneously allow for the creation of alternate subversive forms of identity construction. This points to Meeran's exploration of how food imagery functions in a more nuanced manner, suggesting that the analysis of gustatory elements in literary criticism requires careful attention to the grey areas in which meaning is deliberately unfixed, despite the materiality of food and its concomitant stereotypical associations.

HER 'BRACKISH' TASTE: CONSUMPTION, SUBSUMPTION AND THE DESTABILISATION OF FIXED GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS

This fluid interplay of desire as a textual conflation of sexual and alimentary appetites can be seen throughout the novel. As Holland, Ochoa and Tompkins explain, the processes governing food and sexuality 'produce us as subjects *and* objects simultaneously, and the sites on (and in) our bodies where we negotiate the boundaries between subjecthood and objectification are what constitute the visceral' (2014: 394, original emphasis). The negotiation to which they refer reflects the way Meeran represents Zakira's negotiation of her queer desire. Notably, however, Meeran's insistence on the multifaceted role played by food in this negotiation points to the complexity of food imagery as inherently ambiguous and complex, and manifesting in deliberately contradictory ways. The interplay between consumption and sexual desire has the potential to invert established constructions of gendered desire. In describing her attraction to Os Labuschagne, Zakira explains that he 'had dry straw hair [she] wanted to *chew* on' (Meeran, 2009: 25, my emphasis) and she says that she '*salivated* at the recent memory of the quality of [his] back muscles' (Meeran, 2009: 70, my emphasis). In this instance, desire is depicted as a wish for incorporation. Probyn (1999: 220) argues that 'flesh confuses the limits of what we are and what we eat, what or who we want; flesh encapsulates the quandary of whether the body in question is edible, fuckable, or both'. In 'salivating' at the 'quality' of Os's body, Zakira's gustatory appetite becomes sexual, and her discernment in evaluating his male body as fit for consumption increases the power of her position as the female gourmand. As Sarah Cleary argues: 'In trying to differentiate the self from other and exert control over that other, the act of consumption is, for the most part, based upon power relations' (2018: 58). This description thus undermines the conventional notion of female desire as the subservient recipient of male attention.

Antje Lindenmeyer argues that writing about food in relation to women and desire has the potential to 'disrupt (...) gendered stereotypes by portraying [women] as both "eaters" and "feeders" and laying open the power relationships expressed in who feeds whom, and who decides what is eaten' (2006: 470). This can be seen in Zakira's interactions with Sofie and their growing desire for each other. At Zakira's first meeting with Sofie, Sofie's posture is 'predatory' (Meeran 2009: 78) and she stares at Zakira 'like a carnivore' (Meeran 2009: 91). While this description might seem to imply Sofie's power over Zakira as the one who consumes, Zakira too is portrayed as partaking in the consumption, as Meeran later describes that they 'kissed until [Zakira's] fangs poked [her] lower lip and just a little blood pooled in [her] mouth' (Meeran 2009: 237). Meeran's use of the word 'fangs' implies animal carnality and reinforces the image of the sexualised body as consumable. The blood that pools in Zakira's mouth alludes to the insatiable hunger and desire associated with both vampirism and bisexuality and conflates sexual and alimentary appetites. As Cleary argues:

Significantly: when sex is conflated with food interesting parallels develop between erotic desire [and] consumption. A craving for the assimilation of another through sexual union invites close comparison to the need for incorporation of individual through the act of literal and symbolic consumption. (2018: 55)

This description thus points to the ways in which food imagery is unstable, as it has the potential to connote fluid constructions of subject constitution and self-other relations that destabilise fixed hierarchal perceptions of desire.

Significantly, Meeran extrapolates the connection between food imagery, sexual desire and identity even further. Zakira elsewhere explains that Sofie 'smelled of vanilla beans, nutmeg and a hint of cappuccino' (Meeran 2009: 179). While the conflation of Sofie's body with items relating to baked goods might initially appear to entrench the stereotypical association of women with domesticity, it also hints at Sofie's being the leader of the Saracens. This seems to imply that Zakira's attraction to Sofie derives from both her conventionally feminine qualities and from the ways in which she manipulates and undermines these attributes. Similarly, she feels that the skin of Sofie's hands 'was like cupcake batter, with that same eat-me-now quality' (Meeran 2009: 181). This description clearly differs from the way in which Os's body becomes edible, as desire is here expressed in more indirect terms: Zakira wants to consume Os's hair and back muscles, while her appetite for Sofie's body is reflected through its conflation with a food item. Furthermore, the silky smoothness of hands that are like cupcake batter demands the sensual interplay of licking, tasting and touching. This description thus simultaneously insists on the actual presence of Zakira's lover, alluding to the materiality of desire and the physicality of the erotic, but simultaneously renders it fluid and unfixed through the sensuality of the diction, illustrating Meeran's preoccupation with presenting alternate constructions of sexual desire and identity through food imagery.

This otherness of Zakira's desire for Sofie can be seen when, after a fight, she turns to the sensory in an attempt to recall her lover's presence (Meeran 2009: 332):

Her taste, yes it was brackish, yes it reminded me of limes and tomatoes, yes it was nowhere near as slimy as I would have thought, and I knew that I had been surprised by how moreish it was, but again just a shopping list.

The ambivalence of Zakira's description of Sofie's 'brackish' taste as reminding her of 'limes and tomatoes' is disrupted by her finding it 'moreish' and implies that it is something which she wishes to continue sampling. The reference to the sensory catalogue of Sofie's taste being a mere 'shopping list' in her absence points to the salience of the material in the interconnection of the gustatory, the sexual and the textual. Without Sofie's tangible presence to touch, lick and taste, Zakira's desire for her becomes a textual abstraction, a mere 'shopping list' of attributes without coherent meaning. This hints at Holland, Ochoa and Tompkins's insistence that 'the text *is* the body's alimentary tract' (2014: 392, emphasis in original) and reinforces Meeran's emphasis on the materiality of desire while simultaneously rendering it unstable in Zakira's reconceptualisation of what constitutes desire, as seen in the words 'brackish' and 'slimy'.

'MALES AND FEMALES THE GIRL CONSUMES!': ALIMENTARY DECONSTRUCTIONS OF ISLAMIC CULTURAL PRACTICES

While Meeran hints at, teases out and plays with this conflation of sexual desire, food and appetite throughout the novel, he refers to it explicitly after Zakira's mother accidentally stumbles upon her daughter kissing Sofie. In attempting to understand Zakira's deviant sexual desires, her parents discuss the problem with a doctor who is a friend of the family, alluding, of course, to the fact that any alternative form of sexuality is often pathologised into a condition that needs to be corrected. He informs them that Sofie, the Western liberal, is to blame, and that he must 'deduce (...) a conjuncture (...) a joining' in her of 'sexual preferences'. Tellingly, he concludes in dismay, 'Males and females the girl consumes!' (Meeran, 2009: 319). Meeran's use of the word 'consumes' is significant for a number of reasons. As Peg O'Connor explains (1997: 187), a stereotype associated with bisexuality is that bisexuals possess a greedy and insatiable sexual appetite, 'promiscuously having sex with both men and women'. Jo Eadie (1997: 145) reinforces this point, suggesting that bisexuality represents cultural anxieties surrounding 'excess, monogamy, regulation of appetite and instability'. Sofie, the deviant bisexual and 'serial seducer' (Meeran, 2009: 320), is painted as compulsive and esurient in her unregulated consumption of both males and females. According to the doctor, Zakira's involvement with Sofie should be reduced to (Meeran, 2009: 321):

the confusion that envelops our young ones in the face of all these MTVs, these what-you-call music videos, these revealing clothes, the face-paints, all these so-called professions that offer nothing but anguish for the female mind. She is not a (...) man-woman (...) but a good girl trying to hold up the banner dropped by our beloved, slim young martyrs. She is no different to any girl in our beloved *ummah* struggling to keep head above water in the boiling cauldron of sin that is the West.

In this context, queer desire is depicted as a Western construct that elides Zakira's autonomy as a desiring subject and reduces it to a culturally specific pathology. When Zakira discusses her first encounter with Sofie with her twin brother, he too reduces it to a culture-bound construct, reassuring her that the experience does not make her 'lesbian', because white girls 'hang out naked with each other in PE change rooms from when they [are] in primary school (...) They towel each other down after group showers; they go skinny dipping on camping trips where, of course, they sleep naked with each other' (Meeran, 2009: 145). This patently voyeuristic male fantasy of lesbian desire serves the purpose of parodying the idea of homosexuality as a Western construct. The doctor's approach to Zakira's queerness clearly reflects Eadie's suggestion that attitudes towards bisexuality reveal socio-cultural anxieties, in this case taboos surrounding homosexuality in the South African Muslim community. Through his use of the word 'consumes', however, Meeran draws a line between these perceptions of the bisexual as an indiscriminate and rapacious devourer and the ways in which he has conflated the alimentary and the sexual in his depiction of Zakira's desire throughout the novel. Because the word 'consumes' is used in this context in negative contrast to the appropriate gender practices demanded by religious dictates, Meeran alludes to the historical sociocultural connection between food and sexuality in religious discourse. Probyn (1999: 426) argues that '[a]ll religions have operated to include and exclude on the basis of culinary restriction' and that 'alimentary interdictions are based on, and reproduce, the principles of purity, order and hermetic sexuality'. Similarly, Noëlle Châtelet (1997: 12-13) explains that in this discourse 'one will not eat impure animals, any more than one allows for forms of human alteration (such as menstruation or sperm) to contaminate (...) food' and that '[i]n this way, the logic of food taboos uphold in the most elemental way a certain morality about sexuality'. Through alluding to this connection, Meeran not only shows how the sexual and the alimentary overlap in a specific sociocultural setting, but also problematises how each of these categories is ostensibly defined. Untangling the stereotype of the

gluttonous bisexual, he thus inscribes Zakira's desire as mutable and nomadic, and liberates it from being defined by restrictive conceptions of gender identity.

'TINNED VEG AND RELIGION': THE DECADENT WEST, FUNDAMENTALISM AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY

Meeran's use of a gustatory discourse finds resonance with Probyn's argument that 'food has a propensity for hazarding the frontiers of categories' (1999a: 216). This continues in the change that Zakir, Zakira's twin, undergoes in the novel. Initially, Zakir is represented as the mollicodded and doted-upon son and heir, but undergoes a transformation into a paranoid, unkempt recluse who thinks that Osama bin Laden is hiding out in Fordsburg, Johannesburg. Meeran utilises an alimentary discourse to illustrate this change through having Zakir eat increasingly unnatural and bizarre foods, pointing to the crisis of identification that the character undergoes. Significantly, it is his mother who feeds him to the point of excess and who chooses to ignore the very clear evidence of his unhealthy lifestyle and, in doing so, facilitates it (Meeran, 2009: 8):

As for Zakir, he breezes in whenever his lordship pleases, complete with a new dent on his car, freshly fucked and hungry. He pulls in at 7:30 am and requests blueberry-kumquat pancakes with Canadian maple syrup and my mommy complies, no questions asked. She even tucks a serviette under his chin, combs the forelock from his eyes, and places a knife and fork in his hands, shaking as they are with the DTs.

His portrayal in the novel is also inherently informed by the expectations demanded of him as the first-born son of a Muslim family, and concurrently his inability to live up to these demands and cultural expectations. This indicates the ways in which the dictates of gender roles shape the lives of both twins. Zakira is expected to deny and camouflage the ambiguity of her sexual desire while performing the role of dutiful daughter; Zakir is expected to embody certain aspects of conservative religion and Islamic nationalism, while being infantilised and indulged in his excesses by his mother. Zakir's father, however, becomes frustrated with his son's directionless and lavish lifestyle, and sends him to Palestine to drive ambulances in support of the war effort. Significantly, this is something Zakira desperately desires to do but is denied because of her gender. However, instead of heroically and triumphantly proving his masculinity, Zakir, in a drunken haze, crashes an ambulance and is sent home in disgrace. It is important to note that alcohol is prohibited by Islamic lifestyle principles and that drinking it relates to consumption. While Zakir's mother's over-indulgence of his excessive appetite might serve to entrench his privilege as the first-born son at home, this same excess is what leads to his disgrace in Palestine. This seems to suggest that the power and gender advantages of his position simultaneously function as limitations that deny him agency. This is similar to his twin's experiences of gender discrimination, despite her material wealth. I will explore below how this simultaneous similarity and dissimilarity finds expression through Meeran's use of food imagery.

Zakir's reaction to his failure to live up to his father's expectations is to resume his old lifestyle of excess upon his return to South Africa. However, the over-indulgence of his lifestyle no longer manifests in lavish parties, women and rich foods. Instead, he closets himself in his room and scrutinises obscure and seemingly ridiculous documents which suggest that Osama bin Laden is a fugitive in South Africa. He is described as eating 'Oreo-soup – an intriguing gruel of crushed cookies and buttermilk' (Meeran, 2009: 124), reflecting his breakdown which is already underway. Soon, he grows a 'scraggly' (Meeran, 2009: 205) beard, wears only a 'threadbare lime-green *kurtha*' (Meeran, 2009: 206) and 'develop[s] an insatiable hunger for (...) All Gold tinned beans' (Meeran, 2009: 205). His rejection of his mother's diet of sweet treats to eat the food of a fugitive could be read as an attempt on his part to distance himself from his failure in Palestine and to embrace a new lifestyle of religion and austerity, thereby striving to prove both his masculinity and his patriotism. Zakira's disgusted description of her brother's diet highlights its unnaturalness (Meeran, 2009: 205):

Nothing was more satisfying to him than a can of All Gold tinned beans, the sort that comes soaked in a tomato sauce and resembles strawberry jam. He would assemble the empty tins into pyramids and skyscrapers, taking up all the floor space of his bedroom. When the buttery tang of tinned beans became cloying he would turn to other tinned veggies: limp asparagus, sugary sweetcorn, even the nightmare that is Brussel sprouts preserved in sodium benzoate.

Eventually the towers of cans collapse in a bizarre parody of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre. This allusion is reinforced by the fact that the title of this chapter is 'We Built This City with Tinned Bean Cans' (Meeran, 2009: 205), a reference to the 1985 hit song 'We Built This City' by Starship, which is partly about New York. The song is deliberately ambiguous, though, referring to New York, San Francisco and Cleveland, so that it becomes, in its bland, synthetic pop rock way, about the spirit of 1960s counterculture and how it has shaped America. This

could be seen as a manifestation, an appropriately corporate, deceptively thornless anthem, of the 'decadent West' so hated by Islamist fundamentalists. The combination of Zakir's beard, his diet and his reclusive habits serve to identify him on an aesthetic level with the fugitive he seeks, and reflects the social anxiety surrounding an extreme Islamist upsurge in the post-9/11 culture. While in 2004 the 'CIA named South Africa as one of the countries where a new tier of al-Qaeda leaders were hiding' (Firsing, 2012: 10), Meeran's portrayal of Zakir is so patently ridiculous that the association of him with the al-Qaeda movement becomes farcical. Zakira explains, 'Now that [Zakir] was in self-imposed house arrest, cut off from his fast cars, fast drugs and fast women, he had turned to a gluttonous diet of tinned veg and religion' (Meeran, 2009: 209). Her conflation of 'tinned veg' and 'religion' undermines the sincerity of Zakir's attempts at reinvention and highlights the performative nature of his new-found fervour. This is reinforced by her description of how '[h]is farts hung over the house in a rich pall, much like the smog that shrouds Joburg in winter' (Meeran, 2009: 205). While she initially refers to him as a 'wild-eyed Islamist child soldier' (Meeran, 2009: 205), his extreme behaviour ironically soon transforms him into 'an Amazonian tree sloth', whose 'body turned into nothing but a binbag of tinned veggies' (Meeran, 2009: 205). The references to his 'farts' and the description of his body as a 'binbag' imply disgust and regression, and serve to undermine the validity of his superficial attempts at transformation. The depiction of Zakir's relationship to food can thus be read as undermining the categories of identification that the character attempts to assume. Much as Zakira is caught between the ambiguity of her sexual desires and the expectations imposed on her by her parents, Zakir too is caught between the different kinds of masculinity expected from Western modernity and the watered-down version of Islamic fundamentalism in South Africa. The depiction of Zakir's changed relationship to food (significantly prompted by the alcohol he drinks before crashing the ambulance) signifies how food imagery can highlight the instability of constructions of culture and gender.

CONCLUSION: THE MOUTH AS MARKER OF UNSETTLED EXPRESSIONS OF GENDER AND CULTURAL FORMULATIONS

The interplay between expressions of food and desire finds further expression in the richly suggestive allusions evoked by the title of the novel, a paratextual element that warrants examination in relation to Meeran's employment of the gustatory. The word 'Saracen', a European medieval designation that referred to a person of Muslim descent, was usually used pejoratively in connection to a male warrior. Meeran's use of the word rewrites it in multiple ways. The fact that Sofie and her friends self-reflexively refer to themselves as the 'Saracens' wrests the term from colonial discourse and repositions it within their own sociocultural context, allowing them to re-inscribe it with subversive meaning. Their incendiary appropriation of the word becomes even more provocative when seen in relation to their guerrilla activities: instead of being a pejorative reference to male warriors, it positions the Saracens as young women who enact their rebellion through camouflage and subterfuge. Meeran's use of the word thus acts against both colonial discourse and traditional perceptions of Muslim gender roles. The word 'Gates' in the title of the novel is appropriate in more than one way. The gate, like the mouth, functions as a liminal space, a barrier between inside and outside. Like the mouth, a gate constitutes the border at which the self is confronted with that which is other, and subsequently through which both the self and the other are defined. Ambiguously, the gate serves to enclose and protect, but also to exclude and defend. It functions to represent the ambivalent ways in which Meeran's characters negotiate the construction of their identities, and alludes to the alimentary cartography that shapes the topographic relief of his novel.

Clare Hemmings (1993: 137) calls for 'a metaphor for bisexual bodies that signifies both the specific cultural interpretation of bisexuality and its potential for political and theoretical subversion'. Employing Judith Butler's notion of identity formation as being 'the mode by which Others become shit', she proposes that this metaphor is found in the idea of the bisexual as 'the double agent metaphorically covered in filth'. I suggest that this metaphor could centre on the queer body as constituted by an alimentary cartography that emphasises the blurring of appetite, consumption and subsumption. Like the gate and the mouth, this identity hinges on the liminal and playfully invites an incursion of the self. It is simultaneously informed by the concrete viscosity of food and the possibility for that fixity to become unmoored by presenting food as an alternate textual marker that liberates the sexual from being defined by conventional understandings of gender and subject-creation. Meeran's novel demonstrates food's potential to fracture queer formations of identity into swirling nuclei defined both by the materiality of the limits of gender and culture, and the ways in which these limits are always demanding transgression.

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Citation: Pretorius, A. (2023). ‘Males and Females the Girl Consumes!’: Food, Desire and Unstable Gender Expression in Zinaid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates*. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 7(2), 25. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/13553>

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