

“*Postura!*”

by Grazzieli Rios Cordoni

Hold your fork in your left hand, hold your knife with your right hand, drinks go on the top right hand side and the bread plate goes on the top left, the spoon and knife are nicely placed on the right next to the main course plate that holds a triangular shaped folded cotton napkin. Elbows *never* on the table. Hands *never* on the food. Butter knife is not the same as a steak knife, and a steak knife is not the same as a fish knife. Napkin on your lap. Do not bang the silverware on the plates ; don't slurp or gulp. Eating should be soundless. Surgeons use less precision when performing heart transplant than a Brazilian woman when eating dinner. These were all things I knew before the age of seven. That is why when I read “Table Manners”, written by Indian-American award winning writer Aimee Nezzhukumatahil, I felt something inside me paralyze; I was in shock. Did people out in the world have this much freedom? They ate with their hands and no one scolded them? People didn't humiliate them with stares of disapproval.

Pride. Pride is something my and Aimee's story have in common but not in the obvious ways. The pride the “Northerners” felt is different than the pride the adults around me felt (1). The adults around me felt the ugly kind of pride, the hurtful kind of pride, the imprisoning type of pride. I, and anyone else, couldn't eat freely because pride didn't allow us to; I had to show people I knew how to eat properly, I knew how to sit up with good posture, and that I knew how to maneuver around the various types of utensils. Their pride made me see my hands and fingers as dirty, my comfortable posture as imperfect, and my music-like utensil-hitting as obnoxious. The pride Aimee depicts is different: “In India, Northerners *pride* themselves/ on eating only with their

fingertips, / while Southerners enjoy their foods/ with the entire wrist if need be” (1-4, emphasis added). This is the good pride, the healthy pride, the joyful pride. Something in my culture deemed so shameful in other parts of the world it is something to be proud of.

When I was a kid I had only dreamed to have the freedom Aimee’s cousin had, some didn’t even know what to do with the utensils, as seen in this quote:

The three-year old sees my fork

and cries until he gets one

of his own to **bang** and **draw**

lines in his plate of sauce. (17-20, emphasis added)

The toddler did not use the fork, he cried for, to eat; he used the fork to play as if it were a foreign object to him. Had he never learned that forks are for eating? Had he never even seen one? When Aimee asks for a fork the servant girl "disappears" (13) into the storage room to get this basic utensil. Showing that even though it was a big gathering, where it is expected to have utensils ready, they had to go back to the storage room to get the forks, inferring that they weren't used in a long time. Did he think it was a mini rake? Or a hair brush like Ariel (“The Little Mermaid”¹). According to studies eating with your hands helps with development in children, yet *I* was the one who had the mannerisms of a middle-aged woman at the age of five (Four). Why the need to grow up so fast? As a child, why didn’t I get the pleasure of enjoying food and not having to pay attention if I was accidentally banging the silverware on the plate or not. I didn’t know I had the option to eat like this, I think neither did Aimee. She was born in Chicago and she sat “stunned/ at the dinner table” (5-6); this makes me wonder: was this her first encounter with her South Indian father’s

¹ Ariel was inserted into a new culture (of people) while living her whole life as a mermaid. She had never seen a fork before because she lived at the bottom of the ocean. So, like the toddler, she had never seen a fork before.

culture? Did she feel like it was her culture or only his? Why didn't she join them? I can only imagine what she felt like having a first encounter with your own heritage. But I assume she felt like she couldn't join them because for some reason her American side overrode her Indian side. When I was fourteen I moved back to Brazil after having lived in America for five years. To the Brazilians I was a *gringa*² and to the Americans I was an alien. I remember vividly wanting to join my friends in the Brazilian *samba* dance, but I had never learned how; I remember wanting to sing along to Brazilian songs they all new, but I had never learned how; I remember wanting to debate the history of my country like they all did, but I had never learned how; I remember I wanted to cook *feijoada*³, but I had never learned how. I felt that if I asked how to do it, or even if I could join them I would be rejected. I didn't want to impose on *their* culture — I didn't want to overstep — and even though I tried telling myself that it wasn't overstepping since it was my own culture something didn't feel right; I felt like I was interrupting some natural order, because if I didn't do all these things right on the first try was I not a legitimate Brazilian?

I can recognize and empathize the craving and curiosity Aimee felt in eating with her hands:

Each finger-lick makes me grimace

but secretly I want to join them

in slick-smacking this beautiful food. (14-16)

This quote is very contradicting but harmonizes well to describe what international people feel when they encounter another culture, or become estranged to their own. To grimace is to cringe at something disgusting or unpleasant, yet this sentence brings an air of freedom with their actions.

² someone foreign

³ beans with different types of meat, sausages, bones and spices

Aimee's cousins eating their food with their hands was a way to break free, to find true happiness (does that mean Aimee hasn't found true happiness?). She grimaces at the sight of her cousins devouring the food but she had an urge to join them; an urge to embrace her culture and dive head first. I like to think that she wanted to join her cousins in eating the native food that way because it is in her blood and it has been passed down by generations. Aimee, like me, felt like she had to keep her desire a secrecy and, also like me, she felt like an outsider to her own heritage and was too scared to ask and reveal her distance from her culture. The word "slick-smacking" makes it so I can almost hear her cousins eating as they "scoop and slurp their lunch" (7), proving a vivid image and bringing me to the scene. Also, I imagine Aimee telling a friend this poem like a story of when she, I'm assuming, went to India for the first time. I can see her saying "each finger-lick makes us grimace" with emphasis and loudly, but whispering "but secretly I want to join them/ in slick-smacking this beautiful food", as if someone overheard her saying these words they would judge her; after all, she lived in the Western world, whose customs are very different .

Throughout the poem, Aimee expresses her amazement about these surprising South Indian eating customs through the repetition of the oo-sound in the words "foods", "scoop", "poori", "cooled", "spoon", "room" (3, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13). I kept wondering the 'why' of this until I decided to read the poem out loud allowing myself to also express my side commentary. I caught myself saying 'oooooo' in amusement and intrigue to her cousin's eating habits. I assume this was Aimee's reaction as well. Seeing her cousins devour their national food in a way they have liberty to enjoy it in the most expressive way left nothing to the imagination. You can feel the warmth of the food both in your hands and mouth, you can feel the texture of the food, the density and weight of what you are eating, something I have never experienced.

I look back at it now and I can only envy the way Malaysians eat their food. I envy it because eating freely with hands is a way to break free from others' rules and expectations and to make your life happy in the way you choose:

No one here ever wishes
 you happiness and now I know why:
 this is supposed to be your own doing,
 your own relish, of your own open hands. (21-24) .

When I first read this final stanza, I felt so puzzled because in Brazil, everyone you meet wishes you happiness, health, peace, love, and prosperity. But even though this is the case, if you try to seek those things in a way that is seen as ‘not proper’: it is forbidden. Happiness won't come from other people's wishes, but from our own desires in our lives. As a restless child, the only thing I ever wanted was to explore and understand the texture, density, and weight of my cultural food. Yet the only words of incentive adults could manage to utter out were “*postura*”⁴ and “*assim não*”⁵.

Works Cited

- Centers, KinderCare Learning. “4 Reasons to Let Your Baby Play with Their Food.” *KinderCare*, <https://www.kindercare.com/content-hub/articles/2017/may/why-babies-play-with-their-food>.
- Nezhukumathil, Aimee. "Table Manners." *Miracle Fruit*. North Adams, Mass: Tupelo Press, 2003.

⁴ meaning: posture

⁵ meaning: ‘not like this’; in the context of doing something wrong