“I will not grip”
Writing Identity in Sara Suleri’s Meatless Days

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“You learned to talk very early, Sara,” Mamma told me of my forgotten past. “You were so interested in sentences.” It made me the quaintest baby that she had—as an infant, I was absorbed with grammar before I had fully learned the names of things, which caused a single slippage in my nouns: I would call a marmalade a squirrel, and I’d call a squirrel a marmalade. Today I can understand the impulse and would very much like to call sugar an opossum; an antelope, tea. To be engulfed by grammar after all is a tricky prospect, and a voice deserves to declare its own control in any way it can, asserting that in the end it is an inventive thing. Think how much a voice gives way to plot when it learns to uttered the names of people that it loves: picture looking at Peter and saying, “Peter”; picture picking up the telephone to Anita’s voice and crying out, “Nina!” How can syntax hold around a name? Picture my mother on the beautiful old campus of the Punjab University looking straight at her daughter and saying, “Yes?” (Suleri, 155)

Sara Suleri’s fascination with syntax as an infant led to confusion between individual words. Unaware of the definitiveness of nomenclature and eager for contextualization, she tended to substitute one noun for another. In her adulthood, the author of Meatless Days not only sympathizes with this childish disregard for the rules of speech, but ironically aspires to reenact the same “impulse.” As the grammatical conventions of language and society threaten to “engulf” her and subsume her individuality, her younger self’s naïve linguistic lapses emblematize a feasible mode of resisting normative meanings. By demonstrating “inventiveness” in nomenclature, she can forge an individualistic mode of communication and thereby “declare” her authority.

In accordance with her childhood self, then, Suleri would like to call “sugar an opossum; an antelope, tea.” However, the anticipatory rather than affirmative nature of her declaration highlights her difficulty in practically “asserting” this independent linguistic “control.” She realizes a voice’s inevitable subjection to “plot” or to a larger syntactical structure; despite her idealistic notion of the “inventiveness” of language, the act of speaking itself denotes an accession to socially determined signification. Suleri consequently wonders—“How can syntax hold around a name?” How can she reconcile herself textually to the fixed rules of syntax and to socially entrenched constrictions when she subscribes to creativity in nomenclature, multiplicity in identity? She recognizes the speaking subject as a site of negotiation with multiple
discursive and linguistic obligations—her voice must “assert that it is an inventive thing” while simultaneously conceding to the conventions of “plot.” This essay attempts to demonstrate the manner in which Suleri celebrates the inherent flux of diasporic identity, consequently rendering an unstable subject position empowering rather than debilitating. Pakistan’s colonial history and intrinsic patriarchy make Suleri’s Welsh mother a marginalized entity in this country; yet, Mair Jones retains expressive potential in her dignified adaptability and her reproductive capacity. Through the linguistic medium of *Meatless Days*, the author seeks to emulate this fluid equilibrium of the maternal existence. She translates the generative flux of the female body into the male-dominated inscriptive space, thus recuperating women’s latent capabilities despite their obvious repression.

The above passage inevitably turns to Suleri’s mother in seeking an answer to the author’s question. Mair’s profession as a teacher at the Punjab University in Lahore necessitates adopting the position of either teacher or mother depending on the space—academic or domestic—of interaction with her children. In this instance, the impersonal “yes?” with which she meets Suleri’s gaze conveys Mair’s detachment despite the profound maternal connection. Mair, then, successfully alters her demeanor as context changes. Instead of attempting to “cast in fixed terms” her “self-reflexive, discontinuous shifts in modality and perspective, temporal and spatial” (Brodzki, 156), her speech echoes the shifts in the subject position that she occupies. If “self-representation is the effect of a constructed similarity or equivalence between identity and language” (Brodzki, 156), then Mair’s articulation must reflect the multiple roles that constitute her identity. She repudiates the notion of determinate social signification, refusing to search futilely for “a single subjectivity.” Instead content with her own tendency towards a variable existence, she achieves a fluid
equilibrium between “syntax” and “name,” between social interactions and individuality.

Mair Jones’ courageousness in renouncing her Welsh culture to follow her husband to Pakistan figures prominently in Suleri’s narrative. The author points out the “sudden linguistic incompetence” that must have proved disconcerting to a woman who “liked to speak precisely” (Suleri, 163). Her linguistic incongruence asserts itself even in her Welsh name, a name that must eventually give way to the Urdu that “surround[s] her like living space” (Suleri, 163). Mair’s status as an outsider in Pakistan becomes explicit in Suleri’s account of this renaming:

What an act of concentration it must have required, after all, the quick conversion through which Mair Jones became Surayya Suleri! She had to redistribute herself through several new syllables, realigning her sense of locality until—within the span of a year—she was ready to leave London and become a citizen of Pakistan. (Suleri, 162-163)

The fragmentation accompanying the forced “redistribution” of Mair’s identity from a monosyllabic name into the multiple syllables of an Urdu name implies her disorientation and disembodiment in Pakistan. In fact, Suleri insists that the “realignment of sense of locality”—the geographical analogue to linguistic re-identification—is never truly successful. Although Mair Jones indicates her readiness to “become a citizen of Pakistan,” Pakistan does not accept her.

In fact, as Mair adapts herself to a novel linguistic configuration, she also literally comes to inhabit “other people’s homes” (Suleri, 163). Suleri describes her mother as a “guest in her own name, living in a resistant culture that would not tell her its rules” (Suleri, 163). The colonially “resistant” nation distrusts Mair Jones, who “chose to come after the English should have been gone”—“what did she mean by saying, “I wish to be part of you’”? (Suleri, 163) The color of Mair’s skin thus poses a fundamental impediment to effective integration. Therefore, just as she figuratively disembodies herself through reconfiguration of her name, she must “abnegate” her
physical representation of colonial history in order to be assimilated into Pakistan. In other words, in order to achieve this acceptance, Suleri says that Mair must “walk through her new context in the shape of a memory erased” (Suleri, 164). However, Mair’s physicality cannot be obliterated. She continues to serve as a visual reminder of colonialism even though she does not actively exercise her power. Further, along with the animosity that she faces, an “unthinking structure of adulation” (Suleri, 156) surrounds her as a consequence of her whiteness. The socially ingrained deference to the British colonizer becomes redirected towards Suleri’s mother in immediately post-colonial Pakistan, a “devotion” that causes Mair “annoyance.” Therefore, the conflicting nuances of history bring Mair into confrontation with both hostility and reverence, making her body a site of cultural and political tensions. However, Suleri foregrounds Mair’s preservation of her individuality despite these overwhelming historical forces that threaten to figure her as a mere emblem of a politically resonant position. The compromise Mair reaches with potentially delimiting external influences allows her to remain a distinct, definitive presence.

Suleri perceive the written word as primarily responsible for the perpetuation of historical influences. She depicts her father’s political journalism as centered around the functioning of a “great machine”: “It had a manufacturer’s name emblazoned on one side: when we learned how to read, we bent down and spelled out h-i-s-t-o-r-y” (Suleri, 118). The typewriter that writes history appears instead as produced and branded by history. In thus reversing the metaphor, Suleri indicates the inevitable effect of past events upon the occurrences that the typewriter now records. Suleri’s and her siblings’ apprehension of the machine’s historical nature only after acquiring a familiarity with language further illuminates the centrality of the written word in historical pervasiveness. The father actively endorses, as his children observe,
the infusion of past events into journalistic accounts—historical prejudices are inevitably built into current writing. Pip, further, also possesses the power to make “each front page fit into his control of the aesthetic of his history” (Suleri, 168). He inflects his presentation of cultural and political events with his own interpretations, thus imbuing his personal biases into preexisting historical ones.

On the other hand, Mair rejects history by demonstrating her repudiation of speech and writing. During her husband’s imprisonment, she publishes a blank version of the Times of Karachi. She ostensibly expresses her dissatisfaction with governmental censorship; further, she responds to her own marginalization by figuratively erasing the prejudices that she encounters in a nation rife with patriarchy and colonial history. Suleri emphasizes that her mother turns “censorship into sedition” (Suleri, 118) by inhering opposition into deliberate speechlessness; indeed, this rebellious act culminates in the lengthening of Pip’s jail sentence. As Mair thus declares her hitherto unproclaimed political potential through silence, the author’s narration imparts a physical dimension to this protest. Suleri’s mother’s wordless dissent concurs with her literal pregnancy\(^1\), and is evinced through the “nudeness” of newspaper. Thus, despite Mair’s position both as a racially isolated and as a gendered subject, Suleri’s account invests her with corporeal power.

However, this power encounters cultural limitations. Suleri highlights the infeasibility of a comprehensive female identity in Pakistan by declaring that “there are no women in the third world” (Suleri, 20). In fact, the autobiography commences with the insistence that in Pakistan “the concept of woman was not really part of an available vocabulary: we were too busy for that, just living, and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a

\(^1\) Mair Jones, at the time of this incident, is pregnant with the author.
Dalal servant” (Suleri, 1). Individualistic womanhood remains an unknown concept, since women are defined by social and familial ties. Shazia Rahman asserts that “there is no such thing as a woman removed from her context” (Rahman, 352); therefore, as demanded by the cultural context of Pakistan, Mair must concede to definition by relationships. Nevertheless, Mair does not allow this devaluing mode of existence to confine her. Suleri describes her mother’s political assertions even in ostensible diffidence to patriarchy:

> My mother… let history seep, so that, miraculously, she had no language in which to locate its functioning but held it rather as a distracted manner sheathed about her face, a scarf. “Mamma was more political…” I essayed the idea to Tillat. “She did not have to put it into print—it was the sheet in which she slept.” (Suleri, 168)

According to Suleri, history seeps into Mair’s body and inextricably integrates itself with her very being, rather than remaining an impersonal account of events. However, Mair prevents this history from discombobulating her core identity: she holds it, like a “scarf” or a “sheet,” close, yet external to her body. The resemblance of the face-scarf to the Muslim *burkha* denotes Mair’s external acquiescence to traditional Islam while concealing her Welsh identity beneath this disguise. Suleri states that women in Pakistan thought of their womanhood as “hidden somewhere among [their] clothes” (Suleri, 1); but Mair transfigures this veil of diminution into an empowering rather than an obstructive entity. She accepts her embeddedness in cultural context, ironically appreciating the protection that encasement within a symbolic status affords her intrinsic Welshness. According to Suleri, Mair “never noticed the imprint on her face as it wore, for she was that imprint: she was her own dust before her bones had dreamed that they could crumble” (Suleri, 168). Despite her outwardly Pakistani way of living and the stamp of conventionality that she bears, she essentially remains imbued by her own heritage. History determines her daily routine and marginalizes
her in the social realm; yet, her misleadingly passive external identity safeguards her independent authoritativeness.

Thus, abstaining from a futile effort to undermine the resistance that she faces or to occupy a socially authoritative position, Mair gracefully retracts into her private world. She “cut[s] away the sentence with which she wish[es] to be liked” (Suleri, 156), forsaking any reliance upon appreciation or cognizance of her identity by other people. Suleri recalls the motto of her mother’s existence: “leave it, let it go away, this grammatical construction of what it is to like and be liked!” (Suleri, 156) “Grammatical” here alludes to both the linguistic and social syntax of relationships in which her mother ostensibly sought approval; instead, Mair harbored a “curiously powerful disinterest in owning, in belonging” (Suleri, 164). However, the author realizes that this “posture of disinterest” (Suleri, 167) and “vagueness” does not preclude Mair’s performance of her duties as wife, mother and teacher. Mair reveals the philosophy of her existence to her daughter:

“I must say, Mamma,” I said to her as we went walking in companionable conversation, “It was most incongruous, most perverse of you to take to Pip.” She looked amused. “You must not minimize my affection for him,” she replied with slight reproof. “But you’re the one who says it doesn’t count!” “Oh,” said Mamma vaguely, “as conduct I suppose it counts,” and then turned towards some nearby shrub, but I pulled her back into our talk. “If affection’s conduct, then what’s history?” I asked her, curious. “…Bearing…” she answered, vaguer than ever, “…even posture, perhaps…” (Suleri, 164)

For Mair, then, “bearing” and “posture” i.e. the apparent comportment of her body, remain historically significant as they convey the isolation effected by society’s discrimination against her evident Welshness and femaleness. However, this marginalization does not detract from the “affectionate” nature of her relationships in the present moment (Suleri, 165). In fact, since the very necessity of existing in this historical context arises from the love that she feels for Pip, she insists to her daughter that “love renders a body into history” (Suleri, 164). Interpersonal relationships take precedence over her historically generated alienation as she affirms her affection for
her husband—regardless of history’s inflection of her “posture,” the “conduct of affection” remains fundamentally important to her sense of self. Therefore, Mair fabricates a novel mode of interaction by engaging in simultaneous affective interaction and restraint. She goes against the grain of Pakistani society that allows women to be exclusively either “sweet and simple” or “cold and proud”; Mair’s coexisting “sweetness” and “coldness” (Suleri, 166) allows for distinction.

Meatless Days thus demonstrates Mair’s unique individualism despite the inescapable “burden” of history that she carries. As Susan Koshy observes, Suleri is “able to reveal the resources and capacities of her mother’s way of knowing and interacting that, judged by the standard of assertion and public activity, would only reveal a lack” (Koshy, 50). The author stages this revelation through the generative flux of Mair’s body, which potential is concentrated in the inherently fluid maternal womb. Suleri’s mother admits that she expresses herself through her children: “I wrote Ifat and Shahid, I wrote Sara and Tillat; and then I wrote Irfan” (Suleri, 184). Shirley Geok-lin Lim, speaking of the experience of the Asian woman writer, insists that a woman’s “energies, which for writers are inscribed in writing, in the graphic creations of self, must necessarily be dispersed or dispensed on material “creations”…” (Lim, 443) Reproduction being posited as one of those creations, Mair channels her latent expressive abilities into the biological function of procreation.

Julia Kristeva’s exposition on the childbearing woman draws attention to the threat posed by this act. The pregnant woman, says Kristeva:

slips away from the discursive hold and immediately conceals a cipher that must be taken into account biologically and socially. This ciphering of the species, however, this pre- and transsymbolic memory… does make of the maternal body the stakes of a natural and “objective” control, independent of any individual consciousness… The maternal body is the module of a biosocial program. (Kristeva, 306-7)
Mair’s pregnant body, revealed to the reader in the account of the blank newspaper\(^2\), indeed emphatically liberates itself from “objective control.” Suleri’s mother violates her conventionally silenced position and asserts her “individual consciousness,” thereby ciphering into her daughter a “biosocial program” that not only diverges from but blatantly contravenes socially imposed marginality. Thus, even as Suleri figures all Mair’s children as representations of her “lost obsessions,” she perceives herself in particular as the tangible manifestation of her mother’s “need to think in sentences” (Suleri, 167). Mair’s defiant act during her pregnancy with the author inevitably imbues Suleri with the propensity towards mutedly subversive linguistic expression.

However, although Suleri deems her mother’s reproduction as redirected verbalization, she indicates that Mair’s children do not comprehensively embody their mother’s personality. Mair refrains from unconditional investment in her children’s lives despite the maternal bond that she shares with them. The author and her siblings remain external to Mair’s core identity, acting as “brash foils to her neutrality of color” (Suleri, 168). On account of their mixed racial heritage, they evince greater solidarity with Pakistani society than their mother. Therefore, they become “complicit in her habit of hidden variety” (Suleri, 168). Mair’s “habit” returns us to the figure of clothing as concealment—like the historical scarf and sheet that sheath her, her children, both external to and intimately affiliated with her body, contribute to the preservation of her whiteness, her “neutrality” of color, by constituting her deceptive historical disguise. Their “brash” tints signify her concession to Pakistani culture, thereby permitting her to remain in her “neutral regions of low color” (Suleri, 154). The external representations of herself ostensibly move towards historical accession and cultural integration, and Mair remains secure in her indigenous identity.

\(^2\) See page 5 above
Suleri’s text reenacts Mair’s mode of balancing the cohesion afforded by social discourses with a declaration of individualism. Even while *Meatless Days* acknowledges the author’s indebtedness to multiple languages and discourses, it nevertheless remains intrinsically comfortable with a unique position at the interstices of divergent racial, cultural and linguistic influences. The author admittedly seeks to learn the lesson of equilibrium from her mother.

…it is not merely devotion that makes my mother into the land on which this tale must tread. I am curious to locate what she knew of the niceties that living in someone else’s history must entail, of how she managed to dismantle that other history she was supposed to represent (Suleri, 164).

The term “dismantle,” implying the shedding of the historical “scarf” and “sheet” wrapped around Mair’s body, figures Mair as divesting herself of the garb of her original history and allowing herself to be cloaked by new context. Living like her mother in a country and culture alien to her upbringing, Suleri “reveal[s] a longing to adopt and valorize [her] mother’s mode of disinterested love, and the negotiation of a life formed by an oblique connection to the society in which she lives” (Grewal, 246).

However, *Meatless Days* makes the author’s navigation rooted in not only the social, but also in the linguistic realm. As she writes, she faces the challenge of preserving the fluidity resulting from the multiple influences that shape her identity while embedding herself within fixed linguistic signifiers. In other words, since the author’s accession to an inscriptive mode of expression may threaten her loyalty to the legacy of maternal flux, Suleri looks for instructions on managing the contextual “mantle” that she wears. The author’s reliance upon her mother’s memory evinces itself in her statement: “…I am interested to see how far any tale can sustain the name “mother,” or whether such a name will have to signify the severance of story” (Suleri, 164). For Julia Kristeva, the maternal body represents the “ordering principle” of semiotic *chora*, a space within which the “linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of
an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic” (Kristeva, 36). As a child enters the thetic phase and recognizes the symbolic distinction between the signifier and the signified, “dependence on the mother is severed and transformed into a symbolic relation to an other” (Kristeva, 43, emphasis added). Narration of Suleri’s story, an act inevitably “constitutive of language” and “indebted to, induced and imposed by the social realm” (Kristeva, 43) threatens to sever her from the mother. Demonstrating her refusal to repudiate the maternal connection in *Meatless Days*, however, Suleri speaks in the transgressive “sentences” (Suleri, 167) imparted by Mair.

In her account of a dream shortly after her mother’s death, the author emphasizes her undiminished loyalty to the maternal mode of expression:

> A blue van drove up: I noticed it was a refrigerated car and my father was inside it. He came to tell me that we must put my mother in her coffin and he opened the blue hatch of the van to make me reach inside, where it was very cold. What I found were hunks of meat wrapped in cellophane, and each of them felt like Mamma, in some odd way. It was my task to carry those flanks across the street and to fit them into the coffin at the other side of the road, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Although my dream will not let me recall how many trips I make, I know my hands felt cold. Then, when my father’s back was turned, I found myself engaged in rapid theft—for the sake of Ifat and Shahid and Tillat and all of us, I stole away a portion of that body. It was a piece of her foot I found, a small bone like a knuckle, which I quickly hid inside my mouth, under my tongue. Then I and the dream dissolved, into an extremity of tenderness. (Suleri, 44)

The dismemberment of Mair’s body here mirrors the redistribution of her identity through “several syllables” in entering her husband’s land. Suleri, then, seeks to literally re-member this body, to put her mother to rest by rejoining the pieces of her fractured identity. Pip’s presence in the refrigerated truck serves as a reminder that Mair permitted her husband to “colonize her body” (Suleri, 163); however, although he governs the pieces of his wife’s physical self, he also points his daughter towards the coffin within which the body must be reassembled. Suleri’s father, then, despite his responsibility for—or at least, concomitance in—Mair’s disintegration in Pakistan, provides their daughter with the receptacle within which she can render her mother
whole again. Susan Koshy insists that Suleri engages in a “covert transgression of paternal jurisdiction over the maternal body” (Koshy, 47) by “stealing” a part of the body behind her father’s back. Instead, however, this dream also enables the reader to perceive the constructive influence of Suleri’s patriarchal father; paradoxically, his gift of public writing enables the author to reinstate Mair’s body, an entity whose power was ironically mitigated by patriarchy. Koshy also insists that “memory enables the retroactive theft of prohibited meanings symbolized by the mother’s body [and] allows the incorporation of the maternal body into the daughter’s narrative” (Koshy, 47-48). However, it is not simply memory, but memory relayed through the act of writing that permits Suleri to foreground these “prohibitive meanings” and the generative possibilities of Mair’s physicality.

Further, in putting a “piece of [Mair’s] foot” under her tongue, the maternal remains become the source from which the author’s voice in Meatless Days emanates. The dream’s dissolution into an “extremity of tenderness” following ingestion posits this act itself as responsible for the consequent production of Suleri’s text. Therefore, Mair serves as the inspiration for the language of Suleri’s autobiography as well as relies upon the text to reveal her suppressed political potential. Suleri’s account of her dream thereby manifests the collaboration between the maternal body and the paternal treatment of language in constructing Meatless Days. She accepts the way in which “the maternal legacy of language becomes charged with ambiguity and fraught with ambivalence” as she writes, provoking her to “locate and recontextualize” her “mother’s message” (Brodzki, 157) within paternally imparted signifiers.

Suleri’s act of putting Mair’s body in her mouth evinces a progression from the transfer of liquid sustenance from Mair to the author in the latter’s childhood. Suleri reenacts the intimate relationship of nourishment that defined the maternal
connection, even as this relationship is now resignified. Explicitly, she states: “Flavor of my infancy, my mother, still be food: I want my hunger as it always was, neither flesh nor fowl!” (Suleri, 160) She betrays an affinity for the fluidity of maternal sustenance despite the solid “flesh” that she ingests. The fluid “sentences” imparted by Mair in nursing her daughter, then, represent a reprieve from unyielding prevalent idioms. The author’s resistance to fixed signification in the social realm appears predicated upon the disadvantages of straying from the semiotic as posited by Mair:

> “Take disappointment, child, eat disappointment from me…Since I must make you taste, let me put gravel on your tongues, those rasping surfaces that years ago I watered! If you cannot, will not, live—as I insist—outside historical affection, then I must be for you the living lesson of the costs of history.” (Suleri, 169)

Despite her resistance to her children’s acquisition of language, Mair realizes that they must “taste” “flesh and fowl” divergent from the maternal mode of satisfying their hunger. As they insist upon seeking a culturally and socially inscribed identity, she has no choice but to substitute “gravel” for the fluid nourishment of their infancy. In Kristevan terms, then, along with the deviation from the maternal and the subsequent entry into the social, a movement from the semiotic to the symbolic occurs in this act of eating. Nevertheless, the distastefulness of the gravel that Mair feeds her children warns them against investment in language as a means of grounding. She fears that inscribed historical context may incapacitate them as it marginalizes her; therefore through the instruction of inevitable disappointment, she shields her children from the necessity of predicing their identities upon “non-spaces” (Krückels, 179). Indeed, as Suleri ingests part of her mother’s body, she incorporates this gravelly, unpleasant disappointment into her labor of love.

Consequently, for Suleri, her autobiography seems to lack traction: “Somehow it will not grip me, the telling of this tale, not with my mother’s aura hovering nearby to remind me of one of her most clear announcements: “Child, I will not grip””
(Suleri, 159). Suleri’s project becomes volatilized by the characteristic fluidity of her mother’s body and her resistance to fixed signifying systems. Mair’s refusal to “grip,” culminates in her daughter’s inability to “tread” (Suleri, 164) upon a firm surface, since the mother admittedly serves as the foundational element of *Meatless Days*. In order to faithfully represent her mother, Suleri must articulate the rejection of representation in her tangible text. She acknowledges the complexity of her task: “…it saddens me to think I could be laying hands upon the body of her water as though it were reducible to fragrance, as though I intensified her vanished ways into some expensive salt” (Suleri, 159-160). Just as distilling the sea’s water into the salt that gives it flavor deprives it of its distinctive fluidity, the author’s text must guard against reducing Mair’s “dispersed aura” (Suleri, 156) into “salt” via signification. The solidity and coarseness of salt opposes the fluid “flavor of [Suleri’s] infancy” (Suleri, 160), thereby accentuating the potentially delimiting nature of translating maternal fluidity into the symbolic. Furthermore, even the less tangible image of the “fragrance” of bathing salts exemplifies Suleri’s “sadness” in simplifying Mair to a mere element, rather than the very form of the textual fluid of *Meatless Days*. Like the amniotic enclosure of the maternal womb, Mair’s presence is the diffused, ubiquitous aroma or “flavor” within which the authorial identity develops. The text, despite its inherently symbolic nature, mirrors Mair’s natural abstraction and the repudiation of linguistic fixedness.

In fact, Suleri posits her text as the fluid womb space in which the women of her family are imbued and through which they are reconstructed. As the text encompasses Mair’s message, it renders “[the author] and *Meatless Days* as Mair Jones/ Surraya Suleri’s transmogrified book” (Lovesey, 45). Suleri explicitly plays out this dialectic between writing and reproduction:
I was imitating all of them, I knew, my mother’s laborious production of her five, my sisters’ of their seven (at that stage), so it was their sweat that wet my head, their pushing motion that allowed me to extract, in stifled screams, Ifat from her tales. We picked up our idea of her as though it were an infant, slippery in our hands with birthing fluids, a notion most deserving of warm water. Let us wash the word of murder from her limbs, we said, let us transcribe her into some more seemly idiom. And so with painful labor we placed Ifat’s body in a different discourse, words as private and precise as water when water wishes to perform both in and out of light.” (Suleri, 148)

The sweat and physical exertion of her mother and sisters in childbirth becomes Suleri’s in her literary labors; these women serve as her inspiration in reconfiguring their role as women in Pakistan. Referring here specifically to Ifat’s mysterious death, Suleri’s autobiography becomes the medium through which she can remove Ifat from the web of fixed social signifiers, from the “plots” or stories in which her married life and Pakistani society embed her, and re-describe her body in a more “seemly” fluid discourse. Suleri insists that the linguistic formulation of the female body must emblematize the personality that pervades it; therefore, the “words” of her autobiography must “glide” away and renounce “solidity” (Suleri, 177), must remain fluctuating and variable in the manner of the corporeality of women. Further, to faithfully represent the nuanced position of Ifat’s body, the words of her portrayal must be “as private and precise as water when water wishes to perform both in and out of light.” This desired combination of intimacy or privacy and determinative precision in the representations in Meatless Days echoes the idealized dynamic of Mair’s relationship with her children—just as Mair, through her children, both maintains her individuality as well as participates in the social realm, Suleri’s public text encompasses a private discourse, intimate aspects of the authorial identity.

In positing her text as a product of her “labor,” in fact, the author transcends the limitations of motherhood in the social space. Offered the option of surrogate motherhood upon Ifat’s death, Suleri ponders re-engagement with the overwhelming historicity of the country that she left:
And so my silence hissed to me: stay, in the face of history, harbor to those three most deserving of a cove, since they have lost delicious wind that gave them their desire—or go, but know that you leave with a body derogate, unfit in such desertion to conceive even the idea of a child! (Suleri, 126)

As Suleri returns to the United States without Ifat’s children, her “desertion” seems to indicate physical “derogation.” In fact, Ifat believes that a woman’s identity can be realized solely through actual reproduction: “…home is where your mother is, one; it is when you are mother, two; and in between its almost as though your spirit must retract...your spirit must become a tiny, concentrated little thing, so that your body feels like a spacious place in which to live” (Suleri, 147). Therefore, only biological connections as an engendered and engendering entity define a woman’s existence.

Furthermore, in insisting that “men live in homes and women live in bodies” (Suleri, 143), this feminine home must necessarily remain distinct from the actual tangible constructs of a house. In Ifat’s opinion, women cannot decisively occupy the “home” territory; instead, their “spirit,” essence or “salt” must be contained within the body itself, to create a space of inhabitation withdrawn from the social sphere. In the same way that Mair propagates a preservation of her essential identity in intrinsic retraction from and external compliance with the social order, Ifat figures motherhood as social accession despite which a woman must internally nurture the “spirit” of her identity.

Thus, while Suleri’s womanhood inevitably impedes her from authority within an actual residential space, she also rejects, in leaving Ifat’s children, the “home” that motherhood would have afforded her. However, despite the physical absence of her dead mother and her refusal to become mother herself, Suleri’s figurative child—her text—and the memory of her mother provide her with non-corporeal notions of “home.” She holds both Mair’s memory and her own imagination within her autobiography, thereby conflating the two positions of comfortable inhabitation as engenderer and engendered to which Ifat refers. Consequently, the encompassment of
the act of motherhood and being mothered in an inscribed and not social space
permits navigation between the two; in the textual sphere, the author becomes able to
privilege her own “spirit”. Her womanhood need not retract or become diminutive in
the manner of a concentrated, essentialized “salt” that imparts flavor. Instead, female
identity remains a continuous, fluid, pervasive presence in *Meatless Days*.

Suleri’s text thereby blurs the distinct opposition between the symbolic and
the semiotic. Like the semiotic, implicitly maternal sphere, expression in the
symbolic, too, allows for variability. Thus implying that single, fixed signifying
systems fail to suffice for her project, Suleri echoes the Lacanian theory of language.
Language being an “endless process of difference and absence,” the entry into a
symbolic order means that one becomes susceptible to the “move from one signifier
to another, along a linguistic chain which is potentially infinite” rather than
possessing the signified “in its fullness,” (Eagleton, 145). Lacan thus formulates
language as a space of inevitable slippage, which belief in the inexorable flux of
signification Suleri herself affirms as she says: “Coming second to me, Urdu opens in
my mind a passageway between the sea of possibility and what I cannot say in
English: when those waters part, they seem to promise some solidity of surface, but
then like speech they glide away to reconfirm the brigandry of utterance” (Suleri,
177). The “sea of possibility” here recalls both her mother’s “body of water” (Suleri,
159) and the womb within which the author herself was borne. In this moment, the
author depicts the language of patriarchal, historical Pakistan as facilitating the
transition between the characteristically fluctuating maternal space and definitive
signification. As it promises stability, then, writing threatens to “sever” her from her
mother. However, the presumption of “solidity” remains ill-founded—the “shore” of
fixed expression to which the author aspires itself “glides away” in the manner of
water. The text becomes marked by a “ceaseless dialectic between connection and separation” (Koshy, 50), a simultaneous linguistic embrace and evasion. Instead of diverging from her mother’s fluidity, *Meatless Days* “reconfirms” Mair’s generative transience even within conventionally unyielding signification. For the author, then, acquiescence to a signifying system need not detract from the fundamentally fluid premise of her articulation—as the “brigandry of utterance” enables simultaneous reliance on English as well as Urdu, it allows her to commingle her mother’s variable expression with determinative language.

Suleri textually finds an identity through Koshy’s dialectic, through language that fluctuates between accessibility and unfamiliarity. Inderpal Grewal asserts that the “postmodern selves” in this text “seem sometimes to be disquietingly marginalized, unsure, silenced, and sometimes seeking for some surer grounding for identity that seems not to be available to them” (Grewal, 244); yet Suleri revels in her position of flux without yearning for stability. Mara Scanlon insists that a stable “homecoming in language” (Scanlon, 412) remains unviable for Suleri. Her residence in Pakistan, her journalistic, Anglicized father and Welsh mother render the concept of “mothertongue” inherently ambivalent, as evinced by her propensity to simultaneously engage with both English and Urdu in the above passage. In addition, while use of the “mothertongue” normally enables “recovery” of “an essential maternal connection” (Scanlon, 412) in implying reverting back to the language of childhood, the divergence between “mother tongue” and “mother’s tongue” for Suleri perpetuates the trope of linguistic fluidity in her life. Nevertheless, she finds equilibrium predicated upon the tangible corporeality of her mother’s memory:

> When I return to Urdu, I feel shocked at my own neglect of a space so intimate to me: like relearning the proportions of a once familiar room, it takes me by surprise to recollect that I need not feel grief, I can eat grief; that I need not bury my mother but instead can offer her into the earth, for I am in Urdu now. But just at the moment I could murmur, “the stillness of a home,” Urdu like a reprimand disturbs my sense of habitation: “Do you think you ever lived..."
Suleri expresses her sense of guilt at “neglecting” Urdu in favor of Anglicized expression, as the idiomatic quirks of Urdu offer her novel modes of expressing her sentiments. The Urdu expression allows one to “eat grief”, to incorporate this sentiment into onself, as Suleri literally does with her mother’s body; furthermore, Urdu offers the author an opportunity to bury her mother ritualistically, thereby communicating Suleri’s devotion more profoundly. Yet, the particularly gendered nature of Urdu undermines its appeal as a vehicle of expression; she would rather inhabit the “arenas of regressed significance” that allow her to refute socialized, gendered disparities.

Suleri describes Mair Jones as characterized by a “manner of sudden retreating” (Suleri, 164) and as one that occupied “neutral regions of low color” (Suleri, 154), thereby figuring her as an “arena of regressed significance.” The author’s childhood memory of waking up from her afternoon naps locates Mair explicitly in the realm of the “courtyards” and “afternoons” that embody “soothing” spaces for the adult author:

…my mother would go out into the courtyard and call up my name, which would reach me reluctantly, breaking through rest’s liquidity to say, “Mair Jones, your mother, is standing outside and calling up to you, asking you to wake and become this thing, your name.” An overalliterated name, I thought as I got up, this thing I have to be. (Suleri, 152)

Mair’s directive originates in the afternoon from the courtyard, which recollection conflates the space of the maternal body, the temporal space of the afternoon, and the domestic delineations of the courtyard. Just as the linguistic gender neutrality of “courtyards” and “afternoon” offers Suleri respite from the pervasively gendered nature of Urdu, her mother embodies individualistic expression amidst the tumult of categorical Pakistani patriarchy. Suleri goes on to say: “like the secluded hours of afternoon, my mother would retract and disappear, leaving my story suspended until
she reemerged” (Suleri, 157). The afternoon, a period of rest, announced a temporary withdrawal from the “narrative” of Suleri’s days in Pakistan, and her mother too affords a reprieve from the “plot” of social and cultural norms. But, her mother’s “reemergence” that allows narration to continue concurs with verbalization. As the “liquidity” surrounding Suleri’s restful afternoon sleep, evocative of Mair’s “body of water” and the umbilical fluid, holds the author as a child in nurturance and serenity, Mair’s “calling out”—her vocalization of her daughter’s Pakistani name—inserts socially constructed language into this space of reprieve. Suleri becomes able to develop her autobiography only when her mother’s voice fixes her identity through nomenclature. Despite the author’s resistance to a preexisting signifying system, then, she cannot divorce herself from identification through language. Even as it infiltrates and jars the harmonious maternal connection, her “name,” the social signifier of her identity brings Suleri into “being.” This moment plays out the Kristevan notion of a “signifier/ signified break” that is “synonymous with social sanction” (Kristeva, 43).

As Brodzki and Schenck posit in the Introduction to their book Life/ Lines (in reference to Roland Barthes’ autobiography), the author’s textual self comes across in Meatless Days as an “effect of language” (Brodzki & Schenck, 5-6), as identity formation enabled through signification.

Yet, as Suleri undermines established notions of language by demonstrating its reconcilability with fluid identity, she further incorporates Mair’s way of generating meaning through flux in her non-temporal and non-linear narrative form. Davis comments upon Meatless Days’ “pennant for disrupting traditional autobiographic portrayals of space and time” and it’s “almost mythical temporal and spatial representation characteristic of the workings of memory” (Davis, 124). In the subversion of conventional “autobiographic portrayals,” Suleri’s writing further
transgresses the chronological nature of historical narration. The paternal
cociferousness as concerned with issues of Pakistani history makes Pip emblematic of
the historical circumstances as well as the patriarchal order that necessitates Mair’s
retraction. The author recalls her mother’s presence in Pakistan as literally subdued by
her father’s assertiveness: “Papa’s powerful discourse would surround her night and
day—when I see her in his room, she is always looking down, gravely listening!”
(Suleri, 157) Therefore, in speaking against sequential narration, she simultaneously
makes history and patriarchy amenable to Mair’s existence.

However, “history” does not only counter Mair, but it also subjects Pip to its
effects by virtue of its inherent colonialism. Pip occupies a linguistically conflicted
position as a consequence of the coexistence of English and Urdu as viable modes of
expression during his journalistic career. The author points out that his insistent
nationalism exists in disequilibrium with his employment at The Times of Karachi, an
English daily. She perceives a tension between the “generations of Urdu conversation
in [her father’s] genes” (Suleri, 112) and his ostensible repudiation of this inheritance
in working for an English newspaper. However, Pip’s nationalistic loyalties ironically
propel this entry into an Anglicized mode of dealing with history. He evinces his
bitterness through his “flamboyant” yet occasionally faulty pronunciations of English
words, especially his tendency to trip over “most trisyllables that did not sound like
Pakistan.” He resents English’s divergence from the prevalent disyllabic nature of
Urdu and asserts his inability and unwillingness to detach from the language of his
ancestors by pronouncing, as Suleri recalls with amusement, “another” as “anther”
and “beginning” as “bigning” (Suleri, 109).

Further, Pip almost vengefully forces conformity with Urdu in the language of
his colonizers even although his “seduction with history” (Suleri, 112) compels him to
write in the English language: “his heart took hidden pleasure when he got [words] by the gullet and held them there until they empurpled to the color of his own indignant nature” (Suleri, 109). Pip is capable of command over the English language, as evinced by Suleri’s insistence that got words “by the gullet”; paradoxically, however, he violently alters or contorts them to illustrate a greater likeness, in their deepened color, to himself. Like his daughter, for whom linguistic choice presents the problem of division of personal loyalties, language describes the site of incongruence between devotion to the nation and an affinity for inscription. Thus, even this emblem of Pakistani patriarchy exists in a position marked by linguistic, symbolic ambiguity. For Pip, as for his wife and daughter, dependence on signification imparts an incontrovertible flux to existence.

Despite this ambivalence in the power dynamic he shares with language, however, it represents a reliable mode of identification to Pip. Relocating to Pakistan from England, Suleri’s parents encountered the “studiously conscious” judgment of relatives. Pip, therefore, “uttered a great good-bye to the extended family of Pakistan before he cast himself with renewed ferocity into the printing of its news” (Suleri, 117). Linguistic engagement with Pakistan’s history inadvertently replaces actual immersion in Pakistan; his life subsequently revolves around the profession in which he writes history in English. Suleri emphasizes her father’s limited perspective upon political events, since a journalistic version of events remains the “only form of history” (Suleri, 127) in his eyes. She predicates her departure from Pakistan upon her irreconcilable difference of opinion with her father; overwhelmed by Pip’s insensitivity to the brutal and bloody events of partition and of post-independence Pakistan, she says “…we went our separate ways, he mourning for the mutilation of a theory, and I—more literal—for a limb, or a child, or a voice” (Suleri, 122). His
apparent preoccupation with objective, theoretical deliberations causes Pip to lose his sense of groundedness when retirement impedes him from further writing. Suleri recounts her father’s apparent desolation and feeling of emptiness when she visits him in Pakistan. Despite his “two wives, six children, eleven grandchildren, and now also had a brand-new daughter,” Pip insists: “I have done nothing with my life… I have written nothing!” (Suleri, 130) Interactions with people—interpersonal relationships, or the “conduct of affection” privileged by Mair—possess no significance for Pip alongside the authority inherent in inscription.

His gratification in his presumed inscriptive power becomes evinced by his newly acquired habit, late in his life, of “using his index finger as a pen, making it in constant scribbles write on each surface it could find” (Suleri, 130). Furthermore, Ifat insists that the movement of the finger is from right to left—therefore, countering the necessity of writing the history of his country in English, the father unconsciously performs his imaginary writing in Urdu. However, Suleri acknowledges Pip’s actual inability to determine the course and consequences of events; his belief in his authority is misplaced. His Anglicized construction of historical events through journalism only continues to perpetuate a subjection to colonial history despite the subversive inflections of his speech, or the illusionary employment of Urdu:

But as [Suleri and Ifat] whispered in the half-light, we both felt cognizant of a more pressing issue: in a room we could not see, a hand was still awake. It sought the secrecy of surface in the dark, and its finger was writing, writing. (Suleri, 130)

In this case, Pip’s version of history becomes inconsequential, or at least subsumed by, the course of events created by the hand of national history, shaped first by colonization and subsequently by Pakistan’s military dictatorship and religious zealotry. Suleri’s description of this unknown “hand” and writing finger echoes the function of the ”Moving Finger” in Omar Khayyam’s verse from his collection *Rubaiyat*.
The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it. (Khayyam, Verse 51)

Khayyam asserts the unalterable nature of the predetermined course of events, and Suleri and Ifat experience a congruent awareness of the continually determinative nature of Pakistan’s history. The “Moving Finger” belonging to the past continues to write, continues to influence the manner in which events transpire in the present day. Pip’s own writings only remain embedded in this larger context, and Suleri indicates his relative powerlessness.

Suleri juxtaposes her father’s derivation of sense of purpose solely from his journalistic job unfavorably with Mair’s unique mode of living in empowering equilibrium with historical influences. Mair derives pleasure from the “conduct of affection” (Suleri, 165) even as she accedes to potentially disabling constructs; on the other hand, Pip excludes himself both from productive professional and affective engagement by subordinating all relationships to historical events. After retirement, however, Pip adopts the “brand-new daughter” to whom Suleri refers in the above quote, admitting that he has “needs” (Suleri, 129) which must be satisfied. Her father always harbored a “tyrannical dependence upon history and women” (Suleri, 101); yet, he explicitly acknowledges the necessity of these women only after retirement has deprived him of his (albeit illusionary) inscriptive authority. As he ultimately acquiesces to the essentiality of female support in his life, he takes recourse to affirmation of his identity via previously repudiated means. He thus echoes the politics of Mair’s concession to the power of language and the author’s acknowledgement of the necessity of writing *Meatless Days* to empower her mother. Like his wife and daughter, Pip cannot refute constitution by both actual relationships and linguistic signification.
Regardless of the conflicts that they each face, then, Suleri’s parents ultimately concede their indebtedness to diverse facets of familial, social, cultural and linguistic structures. Similarly, in writing her own text, Suleri acknowledges these various constructs. “Baffled” by her mother’s apparent disinclination to engage in social interactions, Suleri poses her rhetorical question: “… if I am to break out of the structure of affection… then what is the idiom in which I should live?” (Suleri, 156) If she rejects social relationships and the cohesion afforded by language as her mother instructs, how can she possibly secure her identity? Suleri recognizes that denial of the structure within which she exists will only culminate in an aggravated sense of instability; therefore, even her novel idiom must contextualize the problems that she faces as a woman and as a diasporic subject. In other words, as she writes, she must constantly grapple with the theoretical question she asks in her essay “Woman Skin Deep”— “If the languages of feminism and ethnicity are to escape an abrasive mutual contestation, what novel idiom can freshly articulate their radical inseparability?” (Suleri, Woman Skin Deep, 119) Irrefutably inhabiting a “structure of affection,” Suleri must find a way to reconcile and make empowering the counter-idioms that she proposes to this structure within its very delineations— within the idiomatic constrictions of patriarchy and race.

Suleri attempts to foreground women’s power without seeking to undermine, discount or overwrite any of the influences acting upon them. She echoes, in this endeavor, Mair’s embodiment of “agency articulated through the idiom of accommodation not mastery” (Koshy, 50) and her consequent peaceful existence within the delineations of the hostile society around her. Suleri therefore emphasizes the value that paternal authority imparts to her text instead of positing a feminism that denies this authority. Her account of Pip’s actions after Ifat’s death includes him in
the process of “placing Ifat’s body in a different discourse” (Suleri, 148). Instead of allowing his daughter’s victimization by the “language of investigation” that wishes to perform an autopsy upon her body, Pip insists upon her burial. “I could not let them violate the dignity of her body” (Suleri, 174), he claims, manifesting a similar resistance to dismemberment as in his instructions to Sara in her dream to re-member her mother’s body. Since the father’s patriarchal attitudes figure him as partially responsible for the disembodiment of these women in the first place, Suleri’s accession to his signifying system in writing *Meatless Days* may constitute a fundamental transgression of a feminist agenda; yet, he admittedly aids the author in safeguarding and integrating the female body within her text. Suleri thus acknowledges the part played by her father’s opinions and perspectives in shaping *Meatless Days* just as she honors her mother’s strength in silence.

Pip imparts to his daughter the gift of writing; further, his particularly fraught relationship with language becomes instructive to his daughter as she grapples with the politicized nature of inscription. The nationalistic goals that Pip hopes to satisfy through his journalism justify his recourse to English; the daughter similarly comes to terms with her paradoxical deployment of symbolic structures in order to ascribe privilege to her mother. Consequently, the “counter-history” that Suleri proposes to the patriarchal national narrative of Pakistan becomes formulated through “a web of metaphorical relations between [existing] discursive practices and the woman’s body” (Ponzanesi, 67). Suleri does not see the female body as radically separate or sustainable in absence of the “structures” of patriarchal and historical discourse; she can privilege it through the support of “discursive practices.”

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3 Inderpal Grewal criticizes *Meatless Days* for its apparent indifference to feminism by insisting that “there is very little belief in feminism of any kind in Suleri’s work apart from a strong concern about how women live with each other within families and outside them” (Grewal, 236). However, the ability
writing becomes especially generative for the women in *Meatless Days* as it explores the possibility of their empowerment despite and within, and not idealistically separated from the limitations of race and gender. Mair partakes of the “luxury” of powerful independence despite the hostility warranted by her “sex and color,” and through this individualistic existence, Suleri refutes an equation between individualism and cultural privilege.\(^4\)

Along with negating the theory that assenting to overarching discourses culminates in disempowerment, Suleri also redefines Friedman’s notion of female “collective identity” or “group consciousness.” The inscriptive formula of *Meatless Days* relies upon “an awareness of the meaning of the cultural category WOMAN for the patterns of women’s individual destiny” (Friedman, 76). Speaking for and of the women in her family, Suleri presents through her text a model for empowerment through fluctuating identity. However, Suleri’s interpretation of “collective” female identity refrains from pretending to encompass women separated from the Suleri women by “historically changing contexts of community, caste, class, religious and regional difference” (Grewal, 240). She makes explicit that her voice does not represent a homogenous group of Pakistani women; this move, instead of manifesting her tendency to be, as Dayal believes, “disturbingly elitist” (Dayal, 265), only exhibits the complexity and variability within a cultural notion of womanhood.\(^5\) Thus, even as

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\(^4\) Susan Friedman asserts in her essay that “Isolate individualism is an illusion. It is also the privilege of power. A white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex. Woman and minorities, reminded at every turn in the great cultural hall of mirrors of their sex or color, have no such luxury” (Friedman, 75).

\(^5\) Dayal himself subsequently acknowledges Suleri’s potentially meaningful eschewal of homogenization by quoting Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s description of third world feminism. According to Mohanty, this feminism must simultaneously engage in an “internal critique of hegemonic ‘Western’ feminisms” and the actual formation of “autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies” (Dayal, 266).
she states that “there are no women in the third world” (Suleri, 20), Suleri warns the reader against indiscriminately perceiving all the women of the author’s acquaintance in Pakistan as similarly marginalized; Meatless Days proves the divergent experiences of different groups of women.

As she speaks of her grandmother’s existence as a widow and a mother of immigrant children at the beginning of her autobiography, Suleri concedes her inability to effectively broach Dadi’s status as a Pakistani woman. Her failure causes her guilt: “I try to lay the subject down and change its clothes, but before I know it, it has sprinted off evilly in the direction of ocular evidence. It goads me into saying, with the defiance of a plea, “You did not deal with Dadi” (Suleri, 2). As Suleri attempts to “redress”—to change the clothes—of the subject of female identity, it evades her grasp. In writing in English, Suleri speaks of the culturally ingrained struggles of women in Pakistan, thereby shrouding the relevant “subject” of patriarchal suppression in a new “habit.” Dadi consequently becomes inassimilable in this discourse. Further, simultaneously defensive and apologetic, Suleri recognizes that her privilege impedes her comprehension of the problems faced by her woman servant:

Sometimes there wasn’t a proper balance between the way things came and the way they went, as Halima the cleaning woman knew full well when she looked at me intently, asking a question that had no question in it: “Do I grieve, or do I celebrate?” Halima had given birth to her latest son the night her older child died in screams of meningitis; once heard, never to be forgotten. She came back to work a week later, and we were talking as we put the family’s winter clothes into vast metal trunks. For in England, they would call it spring. (Suleri, 10)

Despite Halima’s grief at a child’s death and her added responsibilities at another child’s birth, she returns to work at the Suleri household within a week. Furthermore, as the Suleris prepare for respite from the strained political atmosphere in Pakistan by departing to England, Halima inevitably must stay behind and grapple with the frustrating instability of Pakistani life. Suleri’s socioeconomic status gives her the
option of exiting the space of unrest—as apparent both in this incident and in her ultimate permanent relocation to the United States—but the women trapped in traditional patriarchal constructs such as Dadi or women rendered helpless by poverty and servitude such as Halima continue to occupy exceptionally marginalized positions.

Thus, Suleri’s particular brand of feminism depicts the potential for power in marginalization for privileged women such as herself and her family members in Pakistan. Indeed, as she ends her autobiography, Suleri identifies her purpose in writing as reconstruction of Mair’s and Ifat’s memories. She says: “bodies break, but sometimes damage feels like a necessary repair, like bones teaching fingers how to work, to knit.” (Suleri, 186) Broken bodies, the products of her mother and sister’s violent deaths, become the motivation for Suleri’s writing in requiring her to render their disembodied memories in her text. Suleri expounds upon her own position within this loving memoir:

When my bone broke, I was perplexed: was I now to watch my own dismantling body choose to unravel with the cascading motion of a dye in water, which unfurls to declare, “Only in my obliteration will you see the shapes of what I really can be?” I felt put out of joint by such a bodily statement, then chastened to imagine the arduousness of what it must mean to scaffold me: poor winter tree, put upon by such a chattering plumage, castigated out of season for its lack of green! Put upon by sentences galore—like starlings, vulgar congregations! In pale and liquid morning I hold the Adam in me, the one who had attempted to break loose. It is a rib that floats in longing for some other cage, in the wishbone-cracking urge of its own desire. I join its buoyancy and hide my head as though it were an infant’s cranium still unknit, complicit in an Adam’s way of claiming, in me, disembodiment. (Suleri, 186)

Dye, the colored substance, is simultaneously thrown into relief and diffused by the characteristic fluidity of water. Her mother’s “dispersed aura,” (Suleri, 156) the concurrent variability and prominence of her “body of water” represents a shifting textual space within which the author may exist. Suleri initially expresses discomfort with this paradoxical manner of taking form through fluctuation; she feels “put out of joint” or destabilized. Yet, she comes to recognize the practical impossibility of constructing a “structure” to support and sustain a constantly mutant identity. A fixed
textual profusion of sentences will only serve as an ineffective disguise; it will only appear as “chattering” or as a “vulgar congregation” in its redundant wordiness.

The revelation that her broken bone is a rib lends meaning to Suleri’s “perplexed” status at its breakage. According to Birgit Krückels, Suleri’s broken rib makes reference to a “very male myth of creativity: the creation of Eve out of Adam’s rib” (Krückels, 183). The fact of Adam’s association with “linguistic creation, because it was he who named all the animals on earth” (Krückels, 183) further sheds light upon Suleri’s allusion: her father’s linguistic and textual skills imbue her with the ability to signify in language the women in her life. Even as Suleri protectively “holds the Adam in [her],” she invests this broken rib with agency in its “longing” or “desire” to break away from her and become part of another structure. The legacy of inscription that she holds, child-like, within herself, aspires to escape the confines of the author’s body and become Meatless Days, an entity independently replete with language. Just as Mair Jones reluctantly acquiesced to her daughter’s entry into the symbolic, historic order, Suleri relocates her personalized musings in a public realm.

Thus, Meatless Days becomes, in its very engendering, a separate entity from the author, echoing the severance of the infantile maternal connection as the yearning and capability for language emerges. However, as Suleri metaphorically “joins” the rib in its longing for another “structure” of articulation, she emphasizes her desire to occupy the dual spaces of “home” (Suleri, 147) in combining daughterhood and motherhood within her text—she “hides her head” in the manner of a fetus in the text that she creates. Further, just as acquiescence to language inescapably disembodies Mair by revealing the split between signification and her actual identity, Suleri indicates her own disembodiment effected by linguistic aspiration and simultaneous adherence to the primal, pre-linguistic maternal connection. As she consents, of her
own volition, to the “Adam in her[self],” to the manner in which she is both named and possesses the potential for naming on account of the paternal legacy, Suleri becomes actively “complicit” in this divide. She accepts, gracefully and conclusively, the inevitability of “disembodiment” in resisting essentialism.
Bibliography


