

Vindra (Vanessa) Moonilal

A “Bitter” Taste

Abstract


This paper expresses the mode of allegory, illustrating the complexity of repression and ostracization through the visual and sensorial representation of the meal curry chicken. More specifically, the narrative conveys the intricacy of being a first-generation Canadian Indo-Caribbean child and the importance of storytelling.

It's a mundanely chilly November. I've neared the end of Dionne Irving's (2022) book *The Islands Stories*. I contemplate the various ways stories can be incorporated as academically credible within Caribbean Studies in Canada.

As a Canadian Indo-Caribbean academic, I am situated within a diasporic range of multiple identities. Within the Trinidadian context, the small island is predominantly inhabited by a high ratio of people of Black and Indian descent. Yet, across the Caribbean, the ratio of Indian inhabitants extensively decreases. With the demographic size fluctuating, there is a need to record personal narratives and conduct scholarly research within the Canadian context. Yet, given the nature of contending identities within the Caribbean, I question, how can the process of recording stories be ethically conducted within academia? As a scholar, am I allowed to record these stories? Does my Canadian upbringing overshadow my Indo-Caribbean identity?

The last question brings forth an unconscious bias to being Canadian Indo-Caribbean, as there is an awareness that I am unable to retain certain traditions of my Indian heritage. For instance, replicating a simple curry chicken dish my mom effortlessly makes. The instructions are straightforward, so I think:

1. Pour some oil into de pot!
2. Half a spoon of curry powder!
3. Quarter spoon of saffron powder!
4. Put some seasoning into de pot (shado beni/cilantro, garlic, and pepper).
5. And let everything burn down (that's how yuh get de taste).
6. After, place yuh seasoned chicken into de pot and mix it. Let the moisture of de chicken burn out.
7. Then add about a cup of boiling water into de pot and let de chicken cook.
8. Taste de sauce to know if salt is needed.



Everything seems to be going well! My curry chicken is aesthetically pleasing (almost like Mum's)! I dish out my meal—curry chicken with the gravy and rice. I eagerly take the first mouthful of chicken and rice; I chew and chew until I'm hit with a bitter taste that lingers at the back of my tongue. I am dissatisfied with myself and the meal. My mind wanders back to Irving's book as I desperately attempt to relight the stove and add more water to stretch the curry sauce within the pot. From one of Irving's short stories, the fictional narration from Kerry replays in my mind when she notes:

"It was difficult for *some people* to understand the experience of being raised in a Jamaican household while not being in Jamaica. The family, the community, the culture was part of her life. But she wasn't Jamaican, not to Jamaicans. Not to the people she grew up with. To them, she was Black. Just Black. Some people who hadn't grown up eating breakfasts of ackee and saltfish, who hadn't had tablespoons of fish oil every morning, who hadn't swallowed fishy burps all day couldn't understand. There was Blackness, yes. But the cultural experience was too different. The thing holding [. . .] together seemed to be skin color and mutual oppression. But everything else felt different. It had been impressed upon her so deeply that she must remember that she was not Black American." (Irving 2022, 193–94)

Irving's fictional dialogue hits close to home, prompting the bitter realization that my diasporic identity is tolerated through the watering down of the curry sauce. Being a first-generation Canadian Indo-Caribbean child, I am aware of the liminal state I delicately navigate. Residing within the Canadian diasporic space, my Caribbean culture is typically mistaken for South Asian-ness due to my phenotypical characteristics. Typically, there is the misconception that to be Caribbean is to be Black and Jerk chicken is the staple dish for the entire Caribbean. Ironically, the Caribbean is a hybridity of flavours that have merged from all corners of the world.

Similarly to Irving's passage, I have decided to draw a reference to curry chicken to symbolize my Indo-Caribbean background. There is an element of diasporic-ness that forms a mosaic identity of belonging and not belonging. Within a cultural context, tradition is key to retaining identity, especially within the Indo-Caribbean household. The act of cooking brings forth generational memories of the senses coming alive through smell, taste, and touch.

Symbolically, the act of stretching the thick binding of the seasoning is an attempt to extend every molecule of my Indo identity—(re)shaping an evolution that is in constant progress for and against time and space—until the curry chicken is "okay" to eat, as it has and continues to be generations before it will just be "okay" to adapt, adjust, and resettle. I am at a loss as to what I did wrong.

Why can I not replicate a simple recipe? Maybe, it's the reality of embodying two cultural identities—the Canadian dream with the honour of retaining an Indo-Caribbean culture. There is nothing wrong, yet all is wrong with one bitter mouthful that screams "skin colour," "mutual oppression," and the "felt difference" of being a first-generation Canadian (Irving 2022, 193–94). The bitter taste of intergenerational memory brings forth questions that have been concealed by the previous generation of immigrants who relocated to Canada for a better, not bitter life. The "felt difference" is an unspoken reality that is mundanely bitter, unmasking the everyday realities of "skin colour" and "mutual oppression." How to address the bitterness that lingers with the taste of life. . . freeze it?

Subconsciously, the act of freezing my curry chicken reflects an attempt to ignore the tainted reality of an ambiguous existence. An existence yet defined by the first-generation children who have and continue to experience the best of both worlds. The experience I speak of seems unworthy, as the question that lingers is whose voices are valid when recounting personal narratives? My generation struggles with the learned behaviour from our parents freezing their narratives, as our parents' stories have been forcefully frozen into a silent abyss. Let's immortalize the smiling sun and cozy island breeze to defrost the rich-tasting stories seasoned and fermented with years of experience and hardship—to bring forth flavourful stories that will forever nourish our minds and souls with past and present experiences. Maybe then will my curry chicken find its place without a bitter taste.