

HEB

## Food and Representation

### Culinary Delights and Dumpling Transformations in the Picture Book *Tsomo and the Momo*

CASS

*D. Nazneen Marshall*

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Stella Maris College, Chennai – 600 086

*Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com*

#### ABSTRACT:

It has been observed that young children in India, who sleep at night along with or in the same room as their parents, do not need bed-time stories for comfort as much as children in the West do. Instead, many tales in India are food-centred, narrated at meal times, when the child absorbed in the story-telling finishes the hand-fed meal while listening raptly to the story in which food figures. Not surprisingly then, picturebooks published in India also feature food eaten in various regions of India or by specific communities.

Ann Alston asserts that although the consumption of food is a “biological necessity” it is also a “cultural practice” as the “type of food, the method by which it is prepared, and the people with whom it is shared suggest an adherence to specific ideologies, families, and even nations. . .” (106). The momo is a dumpling that has travelled to India from its neighbouring countries around the Himalayan region – Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and China. In Tibet, the momo is considered the unofficial national dish. This paper studies the momo as cultural signifier in the picturebook *Tsomo and the Momo* written and illustrated by Niveditha Subramaniam. Carolyn Daniel points out in her book *Voracious Children* that “cultural food rules and attitudes toward food and the eating body are transmitted via the subtexts of children's fiction and of their everyday lives” (15). The paper also attempts to analyse the ways in which these rules and attitudes are both endorsed and subverted in this picturebook.

**Keywords:** Indian children - food-centred tales – food narratives in picturebooks – the momo as cultural signifier - cultural food rules and attitudes – endorsement and subversion.

#### Culinary Delights and Dumpling Transformations in the picturebook *Tsomo and the Momo*

Many tales for children in India are food-centred; they are narrated at meal times during which the child absorbed in the story-telling listens raptly to the tale in which food figures while eating the hand-fed meal. Not surprisingly then, picturebooks published for children in India also feature food eaten in various regions or by specific communities. Food becomes the central focus of the verbal and visual narratives in picturebooks like *Tsomo and the Momo* which is written and illustrated by an Indian picturebook maker, Niveditha Subramaniam. The momo is a Tibetan dumpling that has travelled to India along with the Tibetan exile who had to flee Chinese invasion in the 1950s. This

paper is an attempt to study the representation of the Tibetans, a voiceless diasporic community in India, and trace their history through the momo which becomes not just a cultural signifier but an important identity marker for

<i>Access this Article Online</i>	
<a href="http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies">http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies</a>	Quick Response Code:
Received on 20/02/2019 Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved	

the community. Carolyn Daniel points out in her book *Voracious Children* that “cultural food rules and attitudes toward food and the eating body are transmitted via the subtexts of children's fiction and of their everyday lives” (15). The paper also attempts to analyse the ways in which these rules and attitudes are both endorsed and subverted in this picturebook.

Children's literature is “a largely underutilized source of historically relevant information” about all the little details of everyday life. It offers the researcher “a snapshot of prevailing culture” (Daniel 1). Adult ideology in children's books is ironically entrenched in two contradictory notions. On the one hand, a child is “innocent, pure, and possesses innate wisdom. On the other hand, a child is, at the same time, wild, voracious, primitive, and in need of instruction: the tenets of Romanticism and Puritanism persist and coexist” (12). Daniel makes a pertinent comment about the way adults believe themselves to be superior to children in the way they teach them all sorts of rules about food and eating in the books they write for children:

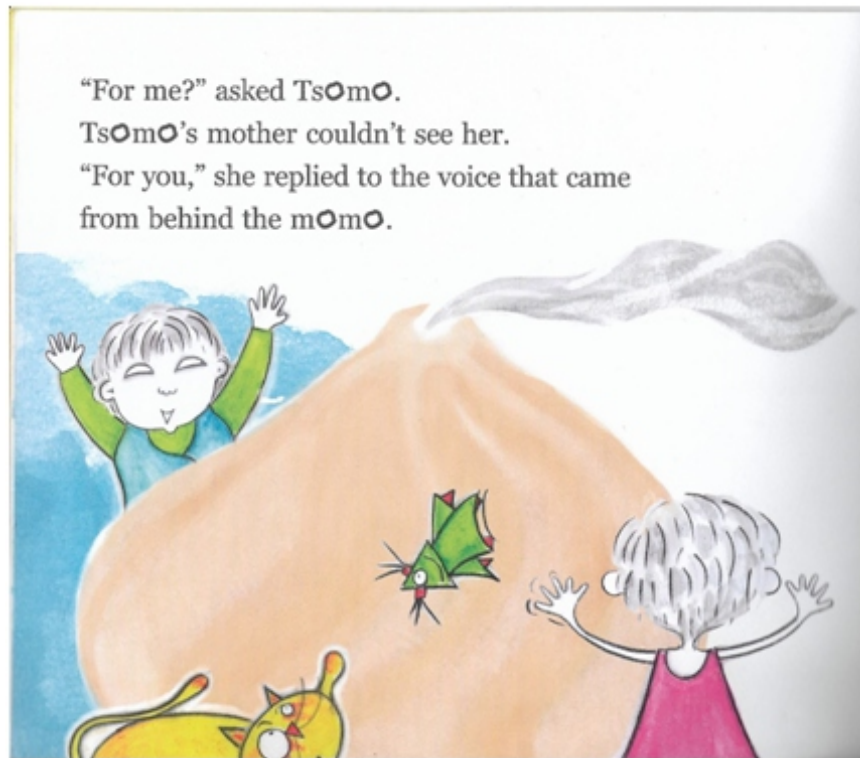
The way adults write about children, for children, tends to uphold the notion that, while adults are regarded as civilized, controlled, sophisticated, and properly human, children lack these qualities. . . Food rules relate, not only to what is and isn't edible, but also concern who eats what, according to age and gender; when to eat; how to eat (good manners); and, significantly, how much to eat, again according to age and gender. Similarly, the imperative to provide, prepare, and cook food is culturally determined and assigned, even in contemporary society, generally according to gender. (12, 15)

Subramaniam weaves her narrative around a delicacy that is eaten by the people of Tibet. A land-locked country nestling in the Himalayas between China and India, Tibet has been ruled intermittently by the Mongols who had spread their empire all across China. On the other hand, the 400 years that saw an independent Tibet from the mid-fifteenth century onwards also witnessed the transfer of power to the Dalai Lamas, the spiritual leaders of the kingdom who followed Buddhism which spread from India. For centuries, Tibet has been fantasised by people in the West as a mystical place and an exalted sanctuary. Colin Thubron writes about the reality that was Tibet in his book *To a Mountain in Tibet*:

The country was born in violence—most of its early kings died young—and for centuries it waged aggressive war against itself and others. In this bitter land and climate the people were prey to disease and earthquake, and within living memory worked as indentured labour for an often callous monkhood. The pious Buddhist folk whom travellers knew as gentle, cheerful and honest were haunted by evil spirits and by starvation. Even pilgrims to Kailas were sometimes so impoverished that they took to banditry, which might be punished by public mutilation.

Only after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959 did the fantasy finally fragment. After the Dalai Lama, with much of the monastic elite, fled into India and beyond, Tibet itself—while never quite emptied of sanctity in the Western mind—became a place of violated innocence, at first brutally persecuted by the Chinese, then half-sanitised for the secular gaze. As its homeless Buddhism opened to the West—whether as a faith, a therapy or a fashionable cult—the country itself was lost. In exile, Tibetans looked back (if they remembered) on a land of pained wish-fulfilment.

Tsomo, the name of the protagonist in the picturebook under study, is a popular name among the Tibetans. It is incidentally the name of a prominent Tibetan Buddhist female master who was the consort of the Khakyab Dorje, 15th Karmapa Lama. The cover page of the picturebook *Tsomo and the Momo* gives an inkling to the significance of the momo, considered the unofficial national dish of the Tibetans, in the surreal narrative that follows within the book. A little girl with a blissful smile, her hands raised high, seems to be revolving around a huge momo; the bright yellow, blue and pink brush-strokes of paint swirling with her are set in contrast to the light-brown momo. The endpapers within the book echo the colourful paint strokes outside. The title page introduces us to a strange one-eyed, green, hand-puppet that seems to be dressed in a long coat with sleeves. It stands smiling along with two chopsticks within a wooden bowl. Its physical appearance, the fact that Tsomo seems to be its creator and the resemblance it has to a mouse that the cat in the narrative (resembling a Chinese man) tries to paw, draws attention of the reader to the fact that the mouse-puppet may stand metaphorically for the Tibetan who is now a similar puppet in the hands of the Chinese.



The aromatic pleasures associated with a momo is reflected in the illustration on the first page of the narrative. A short-haired woman wearing a blue vest is lifting the lid off a vessel from which steam seems to be twirling up. A bottle of chilli sauce rests by her side. Although the consumption of food is a “biological necessity” Ann Alston affirms that it is also a “cultural practice” as the “type of food, the method by which it is prepared, and the people with whom it is shared suggest an adherence to specific ideologies, families, and even nations. . . ” (106). In the picturebook, Subramaniam portrays both the ritual of making momos by Tibetans as well as the rules associated with eating it. The momo is a dumpling that has travelled with the migrating Tibetan to India, Nepal and Bhutan. It is similar to the kinds of dumplings made by the Chinese –the 'dim sum', the 'baozi' and the 'jiaozi'. In Tibet, momos are made with various fillings. The dumplings are stuffed with beef, tofu and green bean, cabbage, potato or mushroom and cheese (Kelly 16, 17). They are steamed or fried and savoured with a hot sauce called 'tsal' which is made with tomatoes, garlic, ginger, dried chillies and oil that are tossed and blended together. The momos are usually steamed and served in bamboo baskets and eaten using bamboo chopsticks. Though diasporic Tibetans in India usually make the momo and the sauce using the traditional recipes, they have also improvised on it. For instance, in Sikkim, chicken and cottage cheese are now used for the stuffing.

Subramaniam's illustrations make the reader see more than what the verbal narrative rather flatly narrates: “Tsomo's mother made a momo.” The cat sitting on the mother's shoulder seems to be taking in the aroma arising with the steam. But strangely, the steam seems to move only in the direction of the cat's nostrils. The reader who looks at the picture for the first time is not sure if the steam is moving up or if the cat's long whiskers that resembles that of a Chinese man is streaming down to the momo. The association of the Tibetan momo with the dumplings made in China are brought to mind by the very first spread; the traumatic story of the Tibetans and the unwelcome connection with the Chinese functions as a “second, hidden text” or “shadow text” in the picturebook (Nodelman 8). One of the eyes of the cat seems to resemble a momo, drawn much bigger in size than the other one. Similarly, the font of the written text also veers away from the ordinary when it comes to the bigger, irregularly-shaped momo-like-'O's.

The page turn brings to the reader a huge momo with steam completely enveloping the little girl Tsomo. But the size of the momo does not deter Tsomo from asking her mother for another one, her hands raised as she shouts from behind the momo: “I want more!” Although Oliver Twist may have uttered almost the same words in Charles Dickens's novel (20), the context

here seems to suggest greed more than hunger. The mother points out that she has made a big momo, but Tsomo insists that she wants a momo “as big as the moon!” The next page lists out a series of commands by her mother who stands with one arm akimbo and the other stretched out pointing at Tsomo. She says that she will make another momo only after Tsomo has eaten the one she has already made; she also wants the momo to be eaten fast. Alston asserts that food is very often used as a disciplinary tool by the adult:

Food can work as a weapon because it is invested with power and control; while food empowers the adult when children accept it, when they refuse it, as they so rarely do in children's literature but frequently in reality, the children become empowered as they control what goes into their own bodies. The reader is reminded that the good mother is one who controls the child's intake of food. . . . But in controlling food, the mother figure also polices desire, sexuality and behaviour. Food becomes a disciplinary tool as it can signify a reward for good behaviour, or children can be threatened with its withdrawal for bad behaviour, and the parental figures are judged by the quality and amount of food they give to the children. (118)





Tsomo's mother decides to pour out some salty butter tea from a decorated clay kettle into a bowl. The cat in the background, now dressed in Chinese attire - a red cross-collar garment and a purple skirt - is seen to be holding a bowl too. Butter tea is the national beverage of Tibet. It is the ideal drink to be consumed in the extreme climatic and geographical conditions of the Tibetan plateau due to its high butter content. Teapots are typically made from wood or clay, while the better ones are made from lavishly ornamented metals such as copper or brass. Tsomo's mother is seen holding a traditional bowl in one hand and an ornamented teapot in the other. Tea travelled to Tibet from China centuries ago and the decoction is blended in a tea-mixing cylinder called the 'dongmo' with salt, butter and yak milk to make butter tea.

The antics of the cat who balances the bowl on his head instead of drinking from it as well as the way in which he covers the eyes of Tsomo's mother with his paws when his skirt falls off is suggestive of the ways in which China has attempted to sideline the cultural practices of the Tibetans. But more significantly, the act of obstructing the mother's vision brings to mind the Chinese government's attempts to justify their actions in Tibet through historiography that cites the control of Tibet by China from the time of the Yuan dynasty. Elliot Sperling avers to this constant need to justify:

The primary debate over Tibet's status is thus a debate about history. Even when interlocutors are willing to sidestep the question of status, and by extension history, China generally asserts its case as a given. Hence, the locution commonly encountered in Chinese introductions to discussions about Tibet: “As everyone knows, Tibet has been an integral part of China for centuries” (or sometimes more precisely, “for over 700 years”—although, as will be seen below, even this limit is going by the wayside). In the international arena, Tibet's status as a part of China has been argued over for at least a century, but only over the last quarter century has China mobilised an intense array of studies and documents to support its case. (25)

As her mother and the cat enjoy the hot tea, Tsomo goes on a flight of fantasy triggered by the taste of the momo in her mouth:



“The momo was magnificent. It was gingery. It was garlicy. It was fingerlicky.” All the senses of the reader are evoked in this picturebook on the momo, beginning with the smell and sight of the momo and moving on to a description of its taste and texture on this page. Food descriptions in fiction, like menus in restaurants and television cookery programs, produce visceral pleasure, a pleasure which notably involves both intellect and material body working in synaesthetic communion. (Daniel 2). On this double-page spread, sound words associated with the appreciation of tasty food bring visceral pleasure to the reader who imagines the taste of the momo and the hot chilli sauce through them: “The mushrooms were MMM! The cabbage was AHHH! The chilli sauce was OOOH!” Tsomo's ecstatic moans “Mmm! Ahhh! Ooh!” bring to mind the postulation that food in children's literature functions as an alternative to sex prevalent in literature written for adults (Daniel 81).

Tsomo's fantasy of flying on an open tube of chilli sauce with a mushroom crown on her head and wings made of cabbage leaves also brings to mind fairy tales with magic carpets, fairies and crowned princesses which are said to originate from the human being's desire for wish-fulfillment (Byatt 2). The taste of the momo in Tsomo's mouth leads to a similar wish-fulfillment; the exiled Tibetan biting into a momo may go on a similar flight of fantasy wherein Tibet, the homeland that is hers/his no more, can be revisited in fantasies triggered by the taste of a Tibetan dish. The momo then becomes the magic potion that leads to that fairytale world that cannot be reached otherwise, bringing momentary happiness. To the diasporic Tibetan who cooks and eats the momo, the dish is not just a reminder of her/his people and cultural roots, but a magical remedy for her/his fractured identity. Incidentally, Tibetans believe that food gives as much spiritual solace as physical solace. Elizabeth Kelly, who has cooked for lamas and other Tibetans for more than thirty years writes about the importance of food in Tibetan rituals:

While it is no mystery that people have to eat to live, it has always impressed me that water, food, and fasting are prominent in many Tibetan Buddhist ritual ceremonies. At times, those present eat the consecrated food, and at other times the consecrated food is burnt as an offering. Realizing that food is not just a metaphor for spiritual nourishment but is itself spiritual, we can prepare and eat food with the appropriate intention. In so doing, the body, speech, and mind are nourished. (ix)

On the recto of the same spread, a little to the right, is another image of Tsomo, diving head-first into the momo. When Tsomo's mother calls out to her after drinking her tea, there is no answer. When she comes out of the kitchen, she is surprised to see a smiling, big, round momo with protruding hands and feet standing in her place. Nestling the momo on her lap, the mother sings: “Moon-moon Momo! / Is your name Tsomo?” The reader notices that the alphabet 'm' in momo is now capitalised as in a proper noun. The narrative ends ambiguously with the line: “Yes! said Tsomo the momo.” The visual reveals the smiling momo waving its right arm as the cat and mouse-puppet gaze at the reader.

What Daniel states about food in children's books incorporating information about who eats whom (12) is subverted in this picturebook with a fantastic ending in which the eater, Tsomo, becomes the eaten. But then again it is postulated that food narratives in children's stories are at times transgressive of adult food rules, in terms of timing, sequence, quantity, and quality (Daniel 12). In this picturebook, the size of the momo eaten by Tsomo is far bigger than any eaten by a normal child. The narrative concludes with the roles of the eater and the eaten being interchanged, again throwing cultural food rules out of the window.

Looked at from a different perspective, the visual in which Tsomo dives into the momo may suggest a voluntary leap back into Tibetan roots, cultural and otherwise, which permits the exile in diaspora to cling to an identity otherwise fragmented. In that sense, the tale is metaphorically a celebration of food as a link to culture and identity. Thubron mentions how he saw a Tibetan settled in Nepal decorating the wall behind the reception desk in the hotel he owned with a picture of the Dalai Lama along with photographs of Lhasa in 1937. To his surprise, the man had never been to Tibet – his parents had fled Tibet in 1959 - but he experienced the same yearning and sense of nostalgia for the homeland that an exile typically

experienced. The diasporic Tibetan has idealistic visions of the country that has never been visited; “the country softens and purifies in their absence. The meadows grow apple green, the women beautiful. This is the land of yearning” (Thubron).

The surreal narrative in the picturebook *Tsomo and the Momo* seems to suggest that the momo that is cooked and eaten by the Tibetan community in India brings back to them memories of a lost land. It also evokes a sense of pride in their origins, their customs and their practices. Most importantly, it reminds them of who they are and gives them back their sense of identity which they have otherwise lost. The momo then becomes not just a source of sustenance for the body but also for the mind and soul.

### References:

Alston, Ann. *The Family in English Children's Literature*. Routledge, 2008.

Byatt, A. S. Introduction. *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*. Edited by Maria Tatar. Norton, 2004.

Daniel, Carolyn. *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature*. Routledge, 2006.

Dickens, Charles. *Oliver Twist*. Planet e-book.

[www.planetebook.com/free-ebooks/oliver-twist.pdf](http://www.planetebook.com/free-ebooks/oliver-twist.pdf).

Kelly, Elizabeth Esther. *Tibetan Cooking: Recipes for Daily Living, Celebration, and Ceremony*. Snow Lion, 2007. [www.snowlionpub.com](http://www.snowlionpub.com). Accessed 13 Jan. 2019.

Nodelman, Perry. *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. John Hopkins UP, 2008. BookFI. [en.bookfi.net](http://en.bookfi.net).

Sperling, Elliot. “Tibet and China: The Interpretation of History Since 1950.” *China Perspectives*, vol. 3. 2009. [revues.org](http://revues.org). [chinaperspectives.revues.org/4839](http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/4839). Accessed 12 Jan. 2019.

Thubron, Colin. *To a Mountain in Tibet*. Chatto & Windus. Kobo Books. [www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/to-a-mountain-in-tibet](http://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/to-a-mountain-in-tibet). Accessed 13 Jan. 2019.