In the last few years it has been almost impossible to switch on the television in the United Kingdom without coming across a cookery program. Domestic goddesses, two fat ladies, naked chefs—the identities assumed by those preparing the food varies according to channel or to fashion. One thing that does remain constant, whatever the format, is the function of food itself. Cookery shows, most of them shot in TV studios or in home kitchens the size of football stadiums, depict the preparation of food as a kind of upscale hobby or lifestyle activity. It is fun, not work. For guests rather than customers.

Two British films have appeared recently which offer a different perspective. Jane Wong’s *Dim Sum* and Nilesh Patel’s *A Love Supreme* are both debut works by second-generation immigrants that highlight the role played by food in the lives of their mothers. They are quiet, meditative works, very different in tone and register from the cheerleading of Robin Cook, a recent Foreign Secretary, who claimed in 2001 that the popularity of chicken tikka masala was a symbol of how Britain had become a multicultural country.

Patel, a full-time architect, was born in Leicester to Gujarati parents who had immigrated to England from Kenya a year earlier. *A Love Supreme*, named after a song by John Coltrane, is about his mother, Indumati, who left school at the age of sixteen and later worked for twenty years as a lock-stitch machinist in knitwear factories, during which period she gradually developed rheumatoid arthritis in her knees and shoulders. The film captures her hands in action making samosas—not yet too afflicted, creating rather than slowly wasting away.

The film, a work of poetic non-fiction that lasts a mere nine minutes and eleven seconds, is divided into ten sections in a manner that seems to parody the step-by-step techniques of cooking programs. Photographer Nick Matthews’s visual style, a moody black and white, is based on those scenes in Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* (1980) where Jake La Motta (Robert De Niro) bandages his hands, and we see the elaborate preparation, intimate and almost sacred, that is needed before carrying out an activity that is so tough and corrosive.

Samosas, triangle-shaped pastries filled with potato, peas, and spices, tend to be eaten in Indian households on special occasions such as parties, weddings, or when relatives are visiting. Easy to make, but hard to make well, they are now often found on sale at non-ethnic shops and train-station stalls. Second-generation kids are as likely these days to buy them off the shelf as to cook them themselves.

The samosas in *A Love Supreme* aren’t prepared in either a kitchen or a restaurant. Patel has set up a special work surface and lit it against a dark backdrop. Never once does he show his mother’s face. The result is that we are forced to attend more closely to a process that we would normally regard as humdrum and prosaic, an aspect of female domestic work that tends to be ignored even by historians of ethnic communities. Patel makes it seem akin to a scientific experiment, a stage-by-stage assemblage quite as marvelous in its own way as an art installation or a piece of craftwork. The sections are sometimes accompanied by Indian classical music, Bollywood soundtracks or desi drum ‘n’ bass, the notes meshing with the crackle of oil or the noise of garlic being peeled.

Seen on a big screen, the results are astonishing. The peas are the size of mountain boulders. Each slice of potato peel is like a ski slope. Corn juice dripping from a cob has the Adamic beauty of a fresh spring. Spices lie like desert sands. The pastry is kneaded and rolled and peeled by Indumati, whose fingers now appear huge. Her hands become historical texts that tell hard, complicated stories about female labor, migration, domestic economy. We peer at the thick veins and the coarse skin, but also at signs of personality and prettiness—bangled wrists, hennaed curlicues. Samosa-making has been transformed into an epic activity.

The film ends with the words, “Dedicated to my Mother, her Mother, and your Mother.” It’s a revelation that always makes audiences laugh, and touches them, too. Patel has created a beautiful and rapturous work of art that transcends mere ethnography. In the past there was a tendency for Asian women’s efforts to feed their families to be overlooked or scorned by their children and husbands. Their craft went emotionally unrewarded. Patel’s achievement is to awaken in us and help articulate a due gratitude. And for that, he in turn deserves our gratitude.

*A Love Supreme* and *Dim Sum* at the movies | SUKHDEV SANDHU

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Another film that explores work is Jane Wong’s *Dim Sum (A Little Bit of Heart)*. Named after a Wayne Wang film from 1985, it’s a documentary set in the director’s home city of Liverpool in northwest England. This area, described as a veritable Plymouth Rock by fugitive American slaves in the nineteenth century, was once a teeming, cosmopolitan port area. Now, as the opening shots show, it is for the most part a rundown post-industrial wasteland. Rows of terraced streets are shabby or boarded-up. And right in the middle of this dereliction, as if marooned, is a small grocery and take-away run by Wong’s mother, Marietta.

She works with two friends: Linda, who is younger and has a husband in jail; and Wah So, of near-pensionable age, who bemoans her bad fate and has been married unhappily for four decades. These women spend most days together, making dumplings around a big kitchen table at the back of the shop, passing acerbic comments in Cantonese about customers who reek of nicotine. Men seem marginal and interfering. Wah So prepares a huge supper for her husband, only for him to mutter, “There’s nothing to eat. Roast pork wouldn’t be bad.”

Patel’s film had a crepuscular undertone to it, but the privations and hardships faced by the three women in *Dim Sum* are rendered more starkly. Wah So bemoans the fact that “You can’t eat fishburger if you can’t order them in English.” She goes on to describe herself, without a shred of self-pity, as “Deaf. Blind. Mute. I have no language to speak to people. I can’t understand people so I am deaf. I go to places I don’t know so I am blind.” Later, Wong sits on a stool in the family kitchen next to, but seemingly miles away from, her mother. She asks: “Would you be happy if I made dumplings?” There is a long pause. “Sometimes.” “Are you glad you had children?” “No. I like to be free—for myself.”

But freedom is a distant dream, a foreign term. At the very start of the film we see the three women preparing dumplings and talking among themselves about what Wong is up to. “She wants to tell our stories,” says one, to the puzzlement of the others. The consensus is that they are nothing special. The women cling to their ordinariness to give them bearings in life. When the word “satisfied” is mentioned they seem confused, and then try to pronounce it: “sat-iss-fy.” One of the most touching scenes is when Linda is shown alone in her living room, singing sad and exquisite songs on a karaoke machine while images of verdant China flit by on her television screen.

Wong’s reflections on women and food are presented in a less aesthetic fashion than those of Patel, but they are no less resonant. She shines a light on the neglected lives of working-class Chinese women, and though what she finds is but a softly articulated litany of disappointments, she shows very powerfully how the friendships they have developed while stuffing prawns into pastry have become rich and sustaining lifelines.