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During her recent appearance on The Ellen DeGeneres Show, Padma Lakshmi thrilled desis by teaching the chat show hostess to whip up some Thayir Sadam (curd rice for the uninitiated).

COURTESY: TWITTER.COM/PADMALAKSHMI

'I like the color I am'

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Also it was writing about my mother's story. A lot of those parts weren't easy for her either. She's a 70-year-old conservative Indian woman. She did all these ground-breaking things at the time and — she would hate me for calling her old — but she's an older Indian lady. She's a grandma.

In the book, you touch profoundly on the weight of your brown skin as a young girl and the type of treatment you experienced growing up in America. How and why has that experience changed?

[For] that I have to credit a lot of young women who come up to me on the street or in the women's bathroom or at Curry in a Hurry who are brown and who say "you're the only one on TV who looks like us, so thank you." That's been so meaningful.

It's true though. Think about the famous Indian women in the world. There's Sonia Gandhi who is not Indian. There's Aishwarya Rai. Now there's Priyanka Chopra because she has the [Quantico] series. In the old times there was Persis Khambatta from *Star Trek*. I can count them on one hand. Now of course there's Indra Nooyi, which is really cool. But it was really being told by average young Indian women who were in college or working the cash register at the local deli or being my physician saying that to me. That support from those women meant more than they ever realized.

There's controversy around the constant need for creative directors to lighten women of color's skin on magazine covers. Has that happened to you?

Yea. I was pissed. After all this time, I like the color I am. And I finally found good makeup to match it too. I don't want to be lighter. Now they have screens and it's all digital so you can see. There have been a couple of occasions in the last 90 days for example when I've had to ask [my assistant] or my publicist to gently say, "She actually likes the color of her skin and it looks too light. It's not an accurate portrayal of how she looks in real life." But we were doing that before with my scar; we had to say, "Please don't cover her scar." You can retouch the stretch marks but don't retouch my scar.

What do you want your daughter, Krishna, to get from this book?

That she comes from a long line of independent, strong, self-sufficient and self-reliant women who were kind to each other and supported each other.

Support is important. Gossiping is a terrible stereotypical trait of our culture.

Also there are no boundaries in Indian culture. When I go back to India I get routinely asked how much I get paid for *Top Chef*. It'll be some aunty that we'd gone to visit. Now I just laugh because I expect it. I make a joke of it. I'll say, "I don't know. I made so much money, aunty, that I lost count." What else am I going to say?

That's quite diplomatic. How do those kinds of questions not frustrate you?

I can give you a little piece of advice that someone I loved very deeply — still love but is not here anymore — gave me. Teddy once said to me, "Junior, the one thing you have to remember is that even if it doesn't seem like it, people are actually doing the best they can." So, that aunty that asked me that question probably wants to know that her grandniece in America is making a lot of money because that gives her pride. But it doesn't make it less irritating.

Young Indian-American women — unless they work in finance — have not been encouraged to be as financially literate as they could be. As an entrepreneur, what money advice do you have for them?

Think ahead. Think about your financial health very early on in many ways, to save and invest. To pick and choose what to spend on and how much to use your credit card. Like next year, your purse won't be new and cool anymore. But that money will have earned interest — not in the current climate but... also think about money not as material asset. Think about money as power. Because the more money you have the less you have to answer to anybody else. ■

'Padma Lakshmi leaves women with hope for self-acceptance'

Padma Lakshmi originally sought to write a book on healthy living and eating, but the project swiftly became embedded with the stories that shaped her life as a culinary guru, television personality and most importantly — a mother. While marked by poignant moments and challenging life lessons, Lakshmi's tone is lighthearted and conversational as she ushers readers between her life in New York to flashbacks and flavors of India, Italy and California.

Recipes dot the chapters throughout, but the juiciest parts — as in most memoirs — are the anecdotes about her relationships. While *Love, Loss and What We Ate* is selling widely, it is a talisman for women grappling with a breakup.

Lakshmi, with clarity and poise, walks her readers through her marriage and divorce with author Salman Rushdie, her tryst with (her daughter's father) Adam Dell and the unexpected transformation her last relationship — with legendary private equity investor Teddy Forstmann — brought.

Her candor and unabashed feminism is an unlikely pairing with the reverence she has for old-school cultural tradition. But like some unlikely pairing she approves on *Top Chef*, it just works.

The memoir weaves in and out stories about her mother,

her strong and doting relatives in Chennai, and her many projects over the years. But above all is the omnipresence of food. From the breakdown (to those unfamiliar) of what flavor profiles classify as *chatpati*, to saliva-inducing descriptions of her favorite comfort foods, eating is a natural motif in *Love, Loss, and What We Ate*.

Like all of us, Lakshmi eats when she is happy, when she is sad and when life whisks her through every gradient of the two. Readers can savor the sticky-sweet Kumquat chutney spiked with salty tears of her divorce, the *khichdi* that comforts Krishna, and the warm homemade apple sauce Lakshmi sprinkled cinnamon into for Teddy, whom she lost just a few days after the stove cooled.

Lakshmi leaves women with hope for self-acceptance. Detailing her battle with endometriosis, she discusses the stigma that shrouds the disease and encourages women to worship their bodies and the magic it grants them daily.

And while her memoir's last page, in no way, is a fairytale ending, there's a new age resolution evident where the prince is not responsible for rescuing us. He can be a best friend instead. After all, sometimes the fire-breathing dragon is nothing more than just emotional baggage.

— Rajul Punjabi



Recipes dot the chapters of Padma Lakshmi's book throughout. Like all of us, she eats when she is happy, when she is sad and when life whisks her through every gradient of the two. STEPHEN LOVEKIN/GETTY IMAGES