



Serving the caste, gender and identity on plates

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Abstract

If you are what you eat, then what am I? - Geetha Kothari

Consumption of cooked food is seen as a mark of civilisation. From the natives or the tribals who eat raw food to the sophisticated urban people who consume branded food items, the politics of food attain different dimensions and perspectives. The positioning of food as “superior” and “inferior” rules out the scope for the inclusion of the food habits of the Dalits and the other backward classes in India. Indian mythology and religious practices have played a pivotal role in classifying the vegetarians as a superior class as opposed to the non-vegetarians. From assigning different food items to different Gods, serving few food items as “Prasada” in temples and the myth of “Amrit” for which the devas and the asuras fight in Hindu mythology to the symbolic apple that Eve use to seduce Adam into committing the first sin and the divine “manna” that God gave to the “chosen” people in Christianity, food has been used as a means to subjugate, hierarchise and identify people as inferior or superior.

Even in the present scenario food serves as a means to determine the culture of people. People make use of the available resources and adopt easily cultivable crops as their staple food which in turn determine their occupation, living standards and culture. For instance, the culinary narratives of the coastal regions portray how fishing and consumption of fishes formulated the culture and life style of the fishermen community together with the myths associated with food that gets passed down to generations. This paper attempts to trace the influence of Indian and Western mythologies in creating identity and caste with reference to food. The gender discriminations and role-play associated with the process of cooking and consumption and the comparison of women to food items resulting in commodification of female body are also analysed in the light of religion, tradition and culture. The diasporic nostalgia that gets reflected in literature with reference to festivals and in turn to the traditional food is also analysed to probe deeper into the politics of food production and consumption.

Keywords: mythology and food, culinary narratives, culture, gender, identity

Introduction

Food politics is an emerging genre around the globe that has led to the inclusion of food studies in literature and other disciplines of Humanities. However, about a decade before food studies has evolved as an independent discipline. The role of food in creating caste, identity and gender-based roles is analysed and studied deeply in order to understand the role of food in formulating and dictating the culture and life of people. Several universities (New York University for instance) offer courses on food studies taking into consideration the political, social, culinary and economic impact of food on the society and the life style of the people. Marion Nestle is a noted American academician in the field of food studies, who wrote in her book entitled *What to Eat*, “Food choices are about your future and that of your children. They are nothing less than democracy in action.” Her works mainly focus on the food politics of multinational food companies and corporation that does not take into consideration human and environmental health.

It is important to note that the politics of food consumption has been inculcated to the public minds since ages through myths, legends and religion. In India Hinduism has played a pivotal role in categorising and differentiating people based on the food that they produce and consume. Even in western religions and mythology such hierarchisation is visible thereby resulting in economical and racial ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ classes. Such myths and legends have been used to oppress and subjugate resulting in the marginalisation of the

lower classes and women. The role of literature in both emphasising and deconstructing the food politics resulting in the creation of a stereotypical identity is also important. The popular culture is been naturalised and manipulated so much by the multinational corporation so that the common man becomes an unconscious victim of the food politics that they promote. This paper intends to analyse the influence of notions of food in myths, legends, religion, literature and popular culture in creating identity, caste and gender-roles.

Myths and Legends

Every land has a rich tradition of myths and legends that are transmitted across the ages. Such myths and legends often function as the tools that communicate the cultural and social stereotypical roles down the generations. Their influence often gets so naturalised that it is often unrealised by the practitioners. The myths related to food and their influence on the cultural, political and socio-economic factors are often neglected in a similar manner. The structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss talks about understanding the myths through the food metaphor of the “raw” and the “cooked” in his work entitled *The Raw and the Cooked*. Through an in-depth analysis of the mythologies of the Bororo people of South America, Strauss differentiates the humans from the animals by pointing out the essential difference between the both- consumption of cooked food by the former and raw food by the latter. He points out the existence of the binaries: the raw and the

cooked, the fresh and the decayed, the moistened and the burned and attempts to reconstruct the ideas associated with food and cooking myths. Dr. Ouzi Elyada summarises Strauss' notions in his paper *The Raw and the Cooked: Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Hidden Structures of Myth* as,

In his 1964 book *The Raw and the Cooked* Lévi-Strauss explored nature/culture relations on the culinary level – namely, the way in which myth describes and explains the evolution of cooking techniques and rules, and the transformation of cooking into a cultural process – through the study of myth. The act of cooking is perceived by Lévi-Strauss as a type of anomalous category since food constantly crosses the boundaries of the categories, nature and culture. Thus, the cook is a type of cultural agent who links the raw product with the human consumer. His role is to ensure that the natural becomes cooked and undergoes a process of socialization.

Thus, the relation between myths and food becomes evident through Strauss' works. Dr. Ouzi summarises further,

The analysis of myths pertaining to food and cooking is based on three premises: 1. Cooking is a language, and like any language, it has an unconscious structure constituted by binary oppositions; 2. Cooking is structured by the culinary triangle: raw/cooked/rotten – a triad which involves a double opposition between nature/culture and elaborated/unelaborated; 3. In practice, this abstract triangle becomes filled with several oppositional pairs, such as roasted/boiled, which corresponds to the pair raw/rotten.

The detailed analysis of myths and legends of both the oriental and the occidental world would throw light on the influence of culinary myths in mundane life of the people. For instance, food offerings are considered as a means to avoid the wrath of deities. This practice is a prominent one in Hinduism where each deity has a favourite food that has to be offered as part of prayers. "Food rituals" are also part of worship, especially in India, where the consumption of 'Prasada' obtained from temples is considered to be a sacred act. Christianity in India seems to adopting similar food rituals as there is food distribution in Churches in India during the feast of certain saints. Food rituals define national and cultural identities as well. The Japanese tea ceremony, Easter eggs, Christmas cookies etc., are all of international acclaim. Eucharist, which is central to the beliefs in Christianity also adds to the food metaphor in religions. The believers consume the eucharist with the notion that it is the body of Christ and drink wine distributed at the churches believing it to be the blood of Christ obtained through the process of transubstantiation. Again gluttony is seen as one of the seven deadly sins and there is a reference to "manna" as the divine food that God gave to His chosen people.

Such myths and legends related to food has also been used to subjugate and to construct stereotypical identities. Irrespective of cultures women are often identified with the life cycle of plants- birth, fertility and death. The land metaphor is often attributed to women to define her as fertile or infertile. However, such references are not found in the case of the "fertility" of men who seems to enjoy a

superior status across cultures when it comes to sex and sexual problems. Such myths and legends often play a significant role in attributing gender specific roles to women such as cooking and feeding the entire family etc. Similarly, the consumption of the forbidden fruit in Christianity (often assumed to be apple), is often used as a means to subjugate women for it is Eve who "tempted" Adam into committing the first sin thereby leading to the "fall" of man. Even Islam prescribes a set of rules as to what one should and should not eat.

The notion of "superior" and "inferior" food exists all over the world and is evidently visible in the caste politics that exists in India. The vegetarians are considered to belong to the upper class (brahmins), as opposed to the "savage" meat-eaters or the non-vegetarians. The Dalits are a set of people who had to face ostracization only because of their "different" food habits. The food hierarchy, as Dalit icon B.R. Ambedkar said, segregates people into three different identities: Those who do not eat flesh (at the top), those who eat non-vegetarian food other than beef (in the middle) and those who eat beef (at the bottom). He had written *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* as,

Even a superficial view of the food taboos of the Hindus will show that there are two taboos regarding food which serve as dividing lines. There is one taboo against meat-eating. It divides Hindus into vegetarians and flesh-eaters. There is another taboo which is against beef-eating. It divides Hindus into those who eat cow's flesh and those who do not. From the point of view of untouchability, the first dividing line is of no importance. But the second is. For it completely marks off the Touchables from the Untouchables.

Thus, the Dalits were often side-lined and persecuted for their culinary myths and practices. Their myths are still unknown to the outside world as a result of their suppression by the mainstream media. The interesting fact is that the food practices of the Dalits were mostly imposed on them. Being deprived of the right to land and food produce, they had to survive on what was available to them. Beef, blood (recipe *rakthi*) and intestine of animals etc., were easily available and hence formed the staple diet of the Dalits though for some Dalits meat were a luxury. The food practices of Dalits vary across the different states in India because the Dalits themselves are diverse in their culture and practices. It is to be noted that the upper-class Hindus attempt to portray India as a vegetarian nation thereby ignoring and marginalising the meat eaters. However, the recent trends show the attempt by the Dalit writers to throw light on the fact that India too consisted of non-vegetarians right from ancient times. *The Myth of the Holy Cow* by D. N. Jha gives historical evidence that India was a meat-eating country.

In Popular Culture – Literature and Media

Tell me what kind of food you eat and I will tell you what kind of man you are – Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

The popular culture plays a major role in defining the superiority notions associated with food. The mainstream media and literature seem to promote the upper-class lifestyle and food habits alone. There is almost no representation of the food habits of the Dalit and the

marginalised leading to their social exclusion. Their culinary habits are explored only if a book or a film is done exclusively about them and even then, they are misrepresented and are never taken to be at par with the mainstream habits. Food cultivation, productivity and availability often determines the lifestyle and culture of people. For instance, the coastal regions, deserts, hilly areas and the forest dwellers. The role of food in determining the culture of the society is visible in literatures that focus on a particular community. *Chemmeen*, a classic Malayalam novel is an example as it portrays the life and culture of the fishermen community in Kerala. The myths and legends of the shore are associated with the fishing practices. The whole community is identified based on the food that they consume thereby weaving their socio-economic status with their food habits.

The significance of food in reminding the cultural roots of people is also evident in the diasporic works of literature. The nostalgic writings by the diasporic writers reveals their longing for their homeland and its traditional food practices. The longing to attend festivals and to take part in the elaborate food rituals are often describes in such writings. The mainstream media also plays a significant role in assigning gender to different food items as well. For instance, the general notion that men eat more meat and women are fonder of chocolates. Also cooking is a gender role that is often attributed to women in general irrespective of cultural differences across the globe. The traditional Indian films portray the ideal wife as the one who cooks delicious food that her husband likes. Thus, food is used as a means to create and assign stereotypical gender roles for men and women.

Women are often equated with food metaphor in mainstream media. The commodification of women has led to the evolution of a different genre of films – food pornography. Food pornography finds a place in mainstream film making and in pornography as well. Scenes depicting women being “enjoyed” by men together with food items were a trend in Hollywood for a long time. Women and their body parts are often compared to food items – mainly fruits such as papaya, watermelon etc.

The multinational giants in food industry also play a crucial role in creating and propagating a particular food politics through the mainstream media. The consumption of some food products at a particular multinational food chain is promoted as a status symbol through films, series etc., thereby escalating the margins of such corporate companies. This again leads to a loss of the traditional food practices of indigenous groups as such food items are now branded as out-dated. The cosmopolitan refined taste buds move away from nature and natural food products as part of the food politics inculcated by the international food chains. Food production and consumption could also be viewed in terms of nationalist policies of governments. Rumi Sakamoto and Matthew Allen comments on how the Japanese state uses sushi to mobilise their image of authenticity in order to increase the sales of Japanese products overseas in their article. Similarly, a number of food items like spaghetti, croissants, dim sum, sashimi, and pho are now popular across the world. These foods have unique histories related to their production, consumption, and ultimately how they are used as vehicles to express identity.

As stated, earlier food habits were often used to discriminate people in a country like India with strong caste prejudices.

Caste based discrimination is foregrounded in the discussions on food. An analysis of mainstream media connected to food – TV, magazines, books, food shows etc., indicate replication of such cultural hierarchies. The role of language is also crucial in recognising the food of the “other” as knowledge and as part of the culture of the society. This is evident in the absence of culinary terms from Dalit cuisine in the mainstream. The terms used in Dalit food recipes like *wajadi* (intestine), *rakti* (blood) and *chanya* (dried meat) also find recognition as part of larger parlance. The recent political conflict in India banning the consumption of beef is another example for the attempts to discriminate and divide people on the basis of what they eat. Thus, it could be seen that what we eat defines our caste, gender and identity to a great extent in the modern world. There is a difference between recognising that what we eat is what we are and that what we eat constructs what we are. We are symbolically consuming our identity through our food and drink choices – more specifically, by what we do not eat or drink.

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