

Culinary to Narratives: A Study on Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*

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Abstract

Food occupies a central point of discussion in anthropology, sociology and cultural studies, especially in post modern era. It stands as a powerful sign that carries innumerable meanings for interpretation. Food symbolisms often turns as powerful weapons to signify one's cultural and personal identity. Connotative meanings of diverse foods and eating habits provide associations to the intricacies of private lives and cultural identities. In the "Introduction" chapter of *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature*, Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard argue that "food is fundamental to literature:" "If food is fundamental to life and a substance upon which civilizations and cultures have built themselves, then food is also fundamental to the imagination and the imaginary arts. Food is fundamental to the imagination, because food is fundamental to culture" (5). Indian writers for female cause adopted various narrative or literary strategies from Gothic ones to Chick Lite modes to voice divergent cultural issues such as resistance, preservation of culture, narrative history and memory- both personal and collective. Amulya Malladi, the feminist writer belonging to diasporic canon, uses food to reflect on issues of acceptance, resistance, fragmented selves, repressed sexual desires in her novel *Serving Crazy with Curry*.

KEYWORDS: Culinary, modes of communication, sign, situation, re defining identity.

Roland Barthes is one of the first to explore the semiotics of food and culture, collecting his ideas in "Towards a Psycho Sociology of Contemporary Food Consumption"(1957), in which he wrote of food: "It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior". Malladi uses the art of culinary as a tool to unravel the story. Receptions changes as the central character expresses herself, defines her personalty, battles with herself and as relationships in Veturi family break and thicken.

Devi, the central character of the novel inherits Indian roots through her parents who migrated to America to reap the fruits of technological boom. After a series of unsuccessful love adventures and experimentations, Devi, gets pregnant and goes through a miscarriage and the devastated Devi attempts to end her life in her bathtub. Shattering all her plans she is saved by her mother, with whom Devi never shares intimate feelings. Owing to her status both as an unmarried and unemployed woman, she returns to her mother's home. Thereafter she keeps silence and withdraws into herself from a world which finds as constraining and oppressive.

Lacking self concept, Devi, always estimated herself as a mute shame of her family. In her mother's home, she began to voice herself through the art of culinary. "She, who had never cooked, never been part of the kitchen militia, was a general now. She loved it. And she realized that she owed her culinary epiphany to her mother"(90). Taste is a social or cultural construct and to a great extent, it is not inherited; it is taught, learned and performed. Malladi depicts:

Her chutney was a success. Pride swelled inside her and for the first time in a very long time she felt a small measure of confidence. But then she thought of all the coming days and panic filled her. She couldn't just make chutney every day and get a sense of accomplishment. Oh God, what was she going to do? (Serving 40).

Boosted self concept adds to her confidence and she began to make experimentations in cooking. She blends south Indian dishes with western ones, which can be considered as a culinary sin in traditional sense. As she finds more space in cooking she experimented with everything that she can have. "Take the apricot, ginger; garlic, peppers, and salt (I added the apricot syrup in small quantities as well, depending upon how liquid I wanted the chutney to be, not too liquid) and blend it to a pulp"(65).

Her broken heart and mind, protests and conflicts got expression in various recipes. "Food was an essential; thinking about what to cook for lunch during breakfast, and what to cook for dinner during lunch, kept her mind busy. And during dinner, well, during dinner she thought about what to cook the next day" (75). The sense of identity is the basis of existence and Devi's dishes began to fill the gaps in relationships of Veturi household. "Food, which had been merely meals before, objects of sustenance, had become objects of art" (34). She experimented every means to establish her life as an independent woman and she could never create a space of her own as she wished. When cooking evolves to be a place to define her space, she experiments "I don't think anar goes well with lamb, Devi. Saroj tried once again to dissuade her daughter from cooking the lamb with pomegranate seeds. Who had ever heard of such a concoction? It simply wouldn't work"(123).

Avi asked as he reached for the water. He usually never drank water while he ate but lately with Devi's moods seesawing from bland to spicy, it had sometimes become a necessity" (54). Devi followed her mood swings not through verbal means, but mediated them in her recipes.

Her odd feelings, indifference and protest to others made her dishes spicy "In the end because G'ma wouldn't shut up about going back right away, I added, in anger and therefore in too much quantity: cayenne pepper. I felt the sauce needed a little bite...but I think I bit off more than the others could swallow.(174)

The craftsman in Malladi equipped her to portray strained nature of relationships in Veturi family through the language of culinary. Saroj dissuades Devi from experimentation in cooking and often they fight each other for the mastery of kitchen. ...we have communication by way of food. For the fact that there is communication is proven, not by the more or less vague consciousness that its users may have of it, but by the ease with which all the facts concerning food form a structure analogous to other systems of communication. People may very well continue to believe that food is an immediate reality, but this does not prevent from carrying a system of communication, it would not be the first thing that people continue to experience as a simple function at the very moment when they constitute it into a sign.(Barthes 4)

In communication the message encoded can be verbal or non verbal .Non verbal means often places them in the higher steps of the ladder of effective communication. Once she silences herself ,Devi chooses the medium of culinary to signal her thoughts . In accordance with Barthian concepts on ‘food ways’ ,Devi challenges the semiotics of verbal communication through culinary.Veturi house began to dine together and Devi’ s dishes formed the core of their discussion.It smoothens both interpersonal ad intrapersonal communications in the family.

“She enjoyed waking up at the same time every day, cooking lunch, then dinner. She went grocery shopping after lunch to buy ingredients for dinner and the next lunch. There was comfort in monotony”(Serving 87).

There never occurred an intimate bond between Devi and Saroj. Once she involves herself in cooking, Devi draws thick lines between herself and mother. “My memories of Sunday mornings of eating hot dosas with sambhar and pickle are vivid. I’m glad that I’m living here again so that I can learn to appreciate the one thing that I never did learn to do before: Mama’s impeccable south Indian cooking”(120).Identification with her mother enlivens feeling of belongingness in her.Devi reflects:

Her food tasted different from her mother’s but she had learned to cook from Saroj and that made Devi feel closer to Saroj in a way she never had before.

“Silence and the kitchen had brought them together, and it was a time and place that Devi had started to relish. Since Devi wasn’t.(146)

Food is not a sign in communication that can be trivialized. “Food serves as a sign not only for themes, but also for situations; and this, all told, means for way of life that is emphasized, much more than expressed, by it. To eat is a behavior that develops beyond its ends, replacing, summing up, and signaling other behaviours, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign.”(Barthes 6). Food evolves as a sign in *Serving Crazy with Curry*. As Malladi draws readers to conclusion, food rises up as a situation. An unbreakable bond develops between mother and daughters and Malladi signals it again through food imageries; where Sobha asks her mother to add a handful of sugar to her tea and Devi to spice her tea with ‘elaichi’. “food is not something to be taken, digested and discrete” (4). *The Meaning of Food* is an exploration of culture through food. What we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, who is at the table, and who eats first is a form of communication that is rich with meaning. Beyond merely nourishing the body, what we eat and with whom we eat can inspire and strengthen the bonds between individuals, communities, and even countries. There is no closer relationship than the one with the family, and food plays a large part in defining family roles, rules and traditions.

Conclusion

Kitchen and the art of cooking preoccupied central roles in many of the post colonial Indian English novels ,but they often reflected some coloured perspectives. Many post colonial narratives in Indian English fiction like *Midnight’s Children*, *Fasting, Feasting*, *God of Small Things* depicted the artifacts of cooking in the plot development. But they used the art of cooking to signify oppression, confinement of women and gender roles ascribed by patriarchal set ups. Malladi through her novel *Serving Crazy with Curry*, gives a new space to culinary in Indian English fiction. As Barthes opined the sense of food is not elaborated at the level of its cost, but rather at the level of its preparation and use. In “*One Reader’s Digest: Toward a Gastronomic Theory of Literature*,”Brad Kessler insists, “Food in fiction engages all the reader’s senses (taste,

touch, feel, sight, and smell)” (151). He explains how food draws the reader into the text: “Meals are magnets; they draw people together. They are drama, in fiction as in life” (153). Malladi weighs spaces for self expression, protest and emotional attachment and detachment in her novel through culinary.

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