

Food as Personal Gratification and Public Insinuation

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One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well. (Woolf. np)

There is a most serious need to remember who we are so that we may assist other people in remembering who they are. Ethnic cooking in our time is not 'in' just because it tastes good. It is **historical and meaningful on its own**. (Smith np)

Without proper diet, medicines are of no use.

With proper diet, medicines are of no need. (BAPS 196)

All the three quotations cited above very clearly highlight the essentiality and the inextricable inevitability of food invariably for all living beings as the most vital sustenance measure. Nourishment is what makes life livable and possible. When one is fed adequately with nutritious food, he begins to take care of himself, helps himself and also tries to contribute to the extent possible for the welfare of his dependents. Hunger, being the natural instinct of all living beings including plants and other sub-human beings, due attention should be paid to satiate the same. When famished, hunger leads one to be bereft of finer sensibilities and become bestial in temperament, attitude and actions. Literature has manifested the repercussions of this basic instinct in all its glory and atrocities.

Food is identified not only as a basic necessity but more vitally as a symbol that exemplifies one's social status, personal dignity, aesthetic sense, and humaneness. Bharathiar in one of his verses stoutly proclaimed that when there is no food for a single individual, the world should be destroyed. Of all the creations of Nature, the single sensed organism, namely plants alone are able to sustain on their own. All the other sub-human livings depend on others for their food and living. Based on the food habits, living beings are grouped as herbivores, carnivores and omnivores. Governed basically by this helpless instinct, insects, birds, reptiles and animals pounce on each other and without any qualms about the consequences they survive. Human lot is different and from the time they become sensitive and sensible, they begin to differ, and it is this difference that eventually has led to separation and division.

Charles Lamb in his “Dissertation upon Roasted Pig” has very humourously narrated how the succulent flesh of the burnt piglets’ once tasted has resulted in the frequent burning of the huts. The tasty juicy flesh can very easily enslave even the judge. Such is the power of food. After such accidental discoveries, cooked food attained the status of cultured life style. From the advent of such habits, man aspired to be nurtured by man invented activities which also eventually led to his deviation from Nature. Food, eating habits and table manners begin to exemplify the quality of life and people. Food thus has been inextricably interwoven with the living style of people.

Man, during the early days, enjoyed akin to the other living beings, raw food. When hunting became mandatory for sustenance and as fear was an unknown factor then, human beings hunted their preys with glee and enjoyed the flesh heartily. This hunter instinct has got merged within the psyche of all despite the acculturation, adaptability and process of civilization. Hunting wild animals is revered as mark of manhood, bravery and chivalry. Hunter with the hunted object displays his mastery, skill and supremacy claiming both applause and headship. When there is no supervisory power to maintain man made moral etiquettes, unruliness usurp the place and the mind easily adopts that. Jack, the strong willed youngster in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* is the appropriate example. Jack, observes Xiaojang Li, “is always associated with shadows and obscurity ... From the start of the story, he claims to hunt for meat. Actually his argument is a filmy pretext for the fact that he needs blood. He wants to share the pleasure of conquest and killing more than eating meat” (120). Eventually he evolves into an undisputed chief burying all shades of culture, civilization and ethical values with which he had been brought up. Hunting for meat, a crucial source of life sustenance in this context, is just a guise beneath which one can sense insensitivity and inhumanness.

Food in the form of feast and liquor added in the menu mostly prove to be manipulative. P. Sivagami’s *Grip of Change* best exemplifies the crafty exploitation of the headman Kathamuthu. This saviour of the clan makes hay while the sun shines. Thangam, the young widow, seeks justice for all the wrongs underwent by making an appeal to the headman. Kathamuthu’s earnest efforts result in financial redress, and the compensatory money is also used by him for his family’s welfare. As a mark of gratitude and happiness, he arranges for a sumptuous lunch with meat. He invites his two wives and Thangam and generously offers them liquor only to make Thangam submit herself for his carnal desire. The hunger and poverty stricken needy people are very easily deceived with succulent food. This is yet another trait of food.

A grand feast means celebration. To celebrate the much longed for coronation, Macbeth, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, arranges for a grand banquet. All the invited Lords, Nobles and

Members of Royal family have gathered to enjoy the glorious moment. Since none other than Macbeth knows about the murder of Banquo and Fleance, the banquet hall is suffused with a festive mood. The inner craving for absolute power is converted into inexplicable fear and dreadful guilt in Macbeth. While everyone rejoices and is about to enjoy the feast, the appearance of Banquo's ghost perplexes Macbeth and the inner conflict prods him with hallucinations driving him on the verge of insanity. Feast is offered by Macbeth to bury deep his crime whereas the same banquet instead of being a place of revelry turns out to be revelatory.

While Shakespeare has used a banquet scene to delineate Macbeth's well sealed guilt, Sharon M Draper in her *out of my mind*, uses a dining scene to create awareness about the anguish, discomfort and sense of humiliations experienced by an intelligent, sensitive but inexpressive young girl namely Melody affected with cerebral palsy. Quite a genuine human tendency is that none wants any of their weakness to be noticed or let known to the public. Melody has proved her mettle in the quiz programme after a lot of efforts and training. Her struggles eventually result in success, adoration and admiration by others. As part of the celebration, the entire team is taken out for dinner. Melody's anxiety and restlessness are so picturesquely captured. Her thought process is:

Usually, eating out doesn't bother me. Mom and Dad take turns spooning food into my mouth, and I ignore anyone who is rude enough to stare. But this was different. At school I eat in a special area of the cafeteria with the other disabled kids. The aides put bibs on us, feed us, and wipe our mouths when we're done. ... nobody on the team had ever really seen me eat. Rather, be fed.

I didn't know what to do. My food sat there getting cold. I looked at Mom. She looked at me. She picked up the spoon and looked at me with the question on her face. I nodded. Very carefully, she placed a spoonful of pasta in my mouth. I swallowed. I did not spill.

I saw Molly poke Claire, and they exchanged looks.
... Nobody said anything, but I saw them look down at their plates with way too much attention. It got quiet. Even Connor stopped talking. (235)

Such is the intensity of feelings of embarrassment and helplessness experienced by differently abled people. Through such realistic narration, the writer is successful in communicating the unexpressed woes and sufferings of the differently abled. That food, the essential ingredient for life sustenance itself could be a thing of annoyance is brought to lime light.

Shaw in his *The Apple Cart* has used vegetable imagery to identify the qualities of people. In this political extravaganza Shaw has created King Magnus, an extremely poised and sensible ruler. With flawless prudence and accurate judgement the King is able to thwart all the possible attempts made by the Ministers to subdue him. His mistress Orinthia tries to influence him and refers Queen Jemima as an old cabbage. Unmindful of the sarcastic undertone, Magnus instantly retaliates that in day today life a cabbage is of more useful than a rose. Orinthia regards herself a beautiful rose. Beautification process will be of any avail only when one sustains and is healthy. The shapeless cabbage proves its worthiness through its utility value. Shaw, the subtle and wise thinker, has very clearly distinguished the essentiality of wife by associating her with a food item and the inessentiality or the unimportance of a mistress by equating her to a beautiful, graceful and colourful rose.

Sakharam Binder, one of Vijay Tendulkar's most controversial plays, has kitchen to be an important place. It is in this room that the new entrant Laxmi actively interacts with an ant. The playwright is able to peep through the aesthetic sense of the lady and kitchen is where her personality blossoms. Kitchen is her exclusive domain and she feels her hold over the house through exercising her power in the kitchen. The conventional concept is that kitchen is the soul of any home and it is through cooking the desired food and feeding the members with concern and care, the female could win over and assert herself. This notion is well iterated and the docile and seemingly meek Laxmi gains boldness and moral courage to question and convince the non-committal Sakharam. This is the safest place for her and in the end it is there, she persuades Sakharam to bury the next victim Champa. Tendulkar in this play has used food and kitchen as symbols that signify the place and power of women.

What is so striking about the concept of food is the way it is looked upon by Marsha Norman, a noteworthy American playwright. In her play *Getting Out*, food is used as a means to fatten up the prospective young girls. The wronged female protagonist Arlie serves her sentence of imprisonment owing to the murder she committed unwittingly. Even before attaining puberty, she was molested by her father. She intends to harm him by applying toothpaste to his sandwich. When a cab driver tries to rape her, she happens to kill him and is convicted. In the prison too she is harassed. She begins to detest food as it is found to be a source to fatten her. The following dialogue between the Guard and Arlie brings out the wilful intention and the hapless state:

GUARD (CALDWELL): Gotta see you get fattened up.

ARLIE: What do you care?

GUARD (CALDWELL): Oh, we care all right. (*Setting the food on the table*) ... Eat. (*Pointing to the food*) We sure do care if you go gittin' too skinny. (*Walks away but continues to watch her*) Yes ma'am. We care a lot hog-lickin' lot. (I, 14)

The audacity of patriarchal power structure and the utter helpless state of the ‘other’ gender is well exemplified through the above mentioned sample. Despite hunger, she detests food as that would ultimately victimize her. She does not want to nourish herself as that would only make men ogle at her.

Aringer C. N. Annadurai’s concern for fellow human beings is a known fact. His short stories and plays are eye openers that change the outlook and attitude of people towards life and people. A story entitled “Sevvaazhai” narrates the combined commitment of the members of Sengodan’s family. Sengodan is a coolie worker and he has nurtured a red banana tree in his home garden. As he is poor and certainly cannot afford to spend any money to buy costly fruits and snacks for his dearest children, he has taken all possible care to nurture the tree and serve his children with this great fruit. The writer has very realistically portrayed Sengodan’s attachment with the plant, the interest he has evinced, the pride he has brimmed with, the ways he has employed to sing its glory, the promises he has made to his children and the plans of the children to enjoy the fruit more than the other siblings. While all of them have been waiting with utmost longing and curiosity, down descends a bolt from the landlord that quality fruits are required to celebrate the daughter-in-law’s birthday. The bitter and sharp disappointment and the utter helplessness in gratifying the genuine needs of the children really make Sengodan shrink within himself. The exploitive nature of the upper social class over the lower class and mute cries of the lower class society are poignantly portrayed in this story. Fruit that stands for food despite having been grown up in one’s own garden, becomes an unattainable luxury to the lower class. Such is the miserable state of affairs with the working class. What is unendurable is the sale of the same fruit in the shop and the cost is too high to buy and eat. The ignorant and hard working class is unaware of the power politics and they mutely accept their misery.

A short film entitled “Our Parukkai” insists on the importance and significance of every morsel of food served on the plate. The entire process of cultivation is touched upon and also the involvement and commitment of many in the process is mentioned. The hard work of all those involved right from sowing the seed to the cooking process is cited to stress upon the fact that the food one enjoys at any point of time is owing to the relentless efforts of many unknown persons and that of the mercy of Mother Nature. This short film very strongly imposes that no one has any right to waste food.

Mother Nature is so merciful and based on the climatic conditions various crops are grown so as to fulfil the needs of people. Food on the whole represents and designs the culture of the people. Though food is primarily to gratify one’s sense of hunger and help the consumer to continue his tenure on the earth, it attains different meaning and represents different significations in the public. Now more than ever the relevance and appropriateness of the ethnic

food items and eating habits are insisted as deviance from that result in health hazards. We eat, so that we live. Food though is primarily meant for eating, adds taste to life. Food greatly influences the quality of people. Food symbolises many things and the paper has tried to bring out its pastel shades. Adherence to conventional agricultural methods and eating habits will make life really liveable. It is high time every sensible person should realize that relevant ethnic food style by cultivating the same on the agricultural field and on the psyche of the inhabitants of the earth will only make us live a hearty, healthy and happy life.

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