

Representation of Food: A Study of Anita Nair's *Alphabet Soup for Lovers*

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Anita Nair (1966-), the living writer of this century, is an Indian English writer. She is a creative artist bestowed with enormous ability and scholarly view. At the same time, she is artful in interweaving her stories in the Indian scenario, unique in presenting her formation and pioneering in sharing the experiences of language. Exhibiting an individualistic elegance in her writing style, Anita Nair's novels display an awe-inspiring depth in her narration, and the main thrust of her novels is the confrontation between the self-actualization and family responsibilities of the individuals. Almost all her novels are embedded in Indian culture and the characters and settings are inherently Indian.

After venturing out to sea with the tale of a Somalian trader with a jeweled eye, Anita Nair once again goes back into the feminine zone quite a few years' after *Ladies Coupe*. This book is a somewhat tranquilize love story between Shoola Pani, a popular film star on a self-imposed retreat up in the Anamalai Hills, and his landlady Lena Abraham.

The author's latest work is openhandedly embellished with references from the kitchen. Anita Nair's latest book, *Alphabet Soup for Lovers*, is very different from her sweeping historical saga, The book follows Lena whose easygoing life on a tea plantation in the Anamalai Hills is turned upside down with the arrival of the south Indian superstar Shoola Pani. The love between the movie star and memsahib is told partially through the eyes of Lena's cook and general factotum, Komathi, as she learns the English alphabet through similar-sounding ingredients.

This paper entitled "Representation of Food: A Study of Anita Nair's Alphabet Soup for Lovers" portrays a riveting tale of two ill-fated lovers who get together after a long struggle, sacrifices or a display of strong character. This book *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* felt like interleave in a bowl of warm, ghee laced khichdi, occasionally biting into a whole peppercorn

or a piece of mango pickle accompanied by a rather limp, oil soaked papad which should have brought it some texture and flavors into the khichdi but ended up rather being a nuisance.

Alphabet Soup for Lovers, Anita Nair's most recent novel, was born when her Italian publisher specially made her to inscribe food-based short fiction. Since she refused to 'write to order', the book emerged as a slim novel built on the foundation stone of romance. However, despite its simplicity it is not an ordinary romantic tale. Nair has spiced it up with a character-cum-narrator and a sub-plot that make all the difference.

At the heart of the story Lena Abraham married to the very gentlemanly KK. They live quietly on a tea plantation in the idyll of the Anamalai Hills in south India. Komathi, their cook and Lena's true lighthouse keeper, begins to learn the English alphabet using the sounds of common cooking ingredients to help her remember the letters. As she makes progress with her lessons, she narrates the events at her employers' home unfolding before her, escorted by her own views and analyses. More often than not, she comes across as an astute observer. For instance, this is how she describes the relationship between the husband and wife:

That's how they always are. Like two strangers in a doctor's waiting room [...] These two are like store-bought appalam. Seemingly perfect but with neither flavor nor taste. (*Alphabet Soup for Lovers* 5)

Incidentally, Arisi Appalam is the first of the element with which she begins her alphabet voyage. However, Komathi shares the space with another narrator throughout the novel unidentified and omniscient, hence less interesting but equally significant. This voice has a sensitive comment to make on Lena and KK:

There's an absence of messy emotions between them, the sort that can throw people off kilter. They don't question and judge and this allows them to remain wedded to each other. (7) The tediousness of their lives is interrupted by the appearance of a well-known actor on the scene. Shoola Pani Dev, an aging actor and south Indian cinema's 'heartthrob', rents the home stay the couple runs, seeking refuge from his own stardom, at the peaceful site. In her first encounter with him Lena finds his actions unpleasant and confronts him with the words, 'Are you always this rude?' — to which his response is an apology offered with a boyish grin. This section of the novel comes across as somewhat of a cliché, though not precisely an Elizabeth-Darcy charade, since there is an instant connect between them. (78)

Even though the lovers cannot yet comprehend what is become obvious between them, Komathi can read between the lines with no trouble and fast. When Lena returns from her regular visit to the actor in the cottage, Komathi examines a ‘gleam in her eye’. She says,

When she was a child, she often dipped into the honey jar with a large spoon when no one was looking [...] My Lena is too old to find joy in the sticky sweetness of honey. What has she been stealing? (34)

Komathi’s intellectual perception is evident here. Lena is not particularly fond of Daangar chutney (D is for Daangar chutney), yet she asks her to make it and takes it to Shoola Pani, who apparently tasted it last when his mother was still alive. The making of Daangar chutney also brings back to Komathi memories of her own unfortunate romance — that forms the parallel thread in the book. While on the one hand she is loyal to her charge and even severely defensive of her, on the other bitterness smoulders deep within her because somewhere she holds Lena liable for the despondent end to her own love story.

Komathi can see and understand the romance blossoming between Lena and the stranger, but her reliability clearly lie with Lena’s husband, KK. Again and again her aggravation surfaces at the extent of his blindness to the new developments in his life taking place right under his nose. Nair’s humour is at its best here:

And KK, does he see the transformation in her? [...] But even he can’t be oblivious to the stars in her eyes. Or does he think filter kaapi put it there?’ (F for Filter kaapi, Nair admits, is her personal favourite in the book.) (54)

Even though the actor-ordinary woman romance lies at the centre of the novel, while Komathi and her backstory stand at its periphery, it is actually the old cook, her candid and revealing commentary, besides her personal history that are far more interesting and captivating than the characters in the foreground.

Stories that use food as metaphor for life, love and anguish hold their own appeal, and this one is no exception. There is no conflagration, not much anguish or any real or imagined hand-wringing involved in this affair; the lovers pretty much go with the flow, pretending not to hear the tick of the unseen but very-much-felt clock.

The tale is peppered with dollops of kitchen wisdom but no recipes. Yet, the food-narrative device works rather well. There are some charming homilies on the preparation of dishes, like this one:

There are rules and rules about making oorkai. You mustn't make it on a Sunday, Tuesday or Friday. You must make it before the moon disappears entirely behind the clouds on an Aamavasya night. You can't touch the oorkai when you are menstruating. You can't touch the pickle pot after being with a man. (122)

Into the mix are added bits of Komathi's own romance. The two love stories twined together stress both caution as well as devil-may-care valor and show that both work in their own ways. But yes, at times, Komathi's takes sound a little too sophisticated for an unlettered soul, as does her patois. That is still palatable. The problem is that at the end of the tale, the characters all remain shadowy figures:

the earthy Komathi who nurses her own heartache, KK who may or may not have cottoned on to his cuckolding, Shoola Pani, the film star, who has inner conflicts that are only hinted at, Lena, the *châteline*. (146)

Komathi, for reasons not fully explained, wants to learn the English alphabet. And so she starts to match words and letters in a manner that makes eminent sense to her and yes, to the readers too, such as 'A' for arisi appalam, 'Q' for qollu, 'S' for sora and so on. Even as she is engaged in this task of literacy at the kitchen sink, she is an impassive observer of what is going on right under her nose, the illicit attraction that has sprung up between the lodger in the overseer's cottage and Leema (a combine of Lena and amma). Since a food analogy is the pitfall Alphabet Soup is rather like a light-as-air soufflé that melts in the mouth but does not leave any trace, enduring or otherwise.

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