

Soul Curry: Re-reading of Gourmet Rhapsody

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Hemingway said, "I have discovered that there is romance in food when romance has disappeared from everywhere" (<https://www.terriwinding.com/blog/2014//12/literary.html>). Food is the ultimate source to link people with one another. Food and eating habits are the universal experience of the human beings. Food and the behavioural pattern are closely related to each other. Involvement with food would vary from person to person, people who are more involved would be better in understanding the people's emotions. Good food attracts everyone, and it would be admired by all. It is a wonderful feeling for the tongue and for the eyes. It depicts one's culture, tradition and it reflects people's identity and it also defines the class of a person. The psycho-analytical theories portray the eating habits which display self-identity and the routine habits of the society.

The French gave the world the bench marks in cooking standards, etiquette as also a vocabulary to go with it. For the French, food is a religion they practice with ardent devotion and public display of adoration. Restaurants and chefs are rated in terms of Michelin stars and have a cult following. Food is not only nourishment of the body, it is also a nurturing of the soul. From the bare ingredients to the final flourish of plating and serving, food is a sensual delight. Much before food porn became the norm, French chefs were dishing up meals fit for the aristocracy. Innovation and sophistication in the combination of flavours and delectable presentation of food is akin to religious ecstasy. Two antithetical terms that have entered the English language are *gourmet* and *gourmand* which represent the discerning connoisseur and the greedy hog.

This is a telling comment on the philosophy of French cuisine which privileges a discerning palate above a savage satisfaction of hunger. Domain of food includes appetite; pleasure and it defines a society's structure and the world vision. Food has played an integral role in our culture and it has invariably crept into our writings and entertainment. Literatures of the world not only depict the themes of romance, relationships, struggle for survival, jealousy, hatred, wars, murder, moral values, identity crisis, caste and class discriminations, justice, anger, oppression, gender inequality and so on; but also, the importance of food and its implications. In children's Literature it is displayed through tea parties. Lewis Carrol's *Alice in Wonderland* presents the uncivilized tea party which Alice was forced to attend, describes the wine, tea, butter and bread. Charles Dickens' famous novel *Oliver Twist* speaks about Oliver's childhood in the orphanage. In the orphanage, the children demand more porridge as what is served is insufficient to meet their hunger. This is viewed as a call to rebel and he is sent away from the orphanage. It is a turning point in many ways for Oliver.

During the calamitous events like droughts, food as survival is a crucial theme in adult Literature. Food is the major symbol described by John Steinbeck in his epic novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. It depicts the fertile American land turning into a dust bowl as all cultivations fail. The still born baby is a metaphor of the death of possibility in an environment which is reduced to dust. The struggle of the family to stay together and survive the drought is the major leit motif of the novel. The novel *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo narrates the story of Jean Valjean, a convict who serves a prison sentence of 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed the children. He is treated as a criminal throughout the novel. In *Great Gatsby*, Gatsby's dinner parties are famed. He defines his status through his dinners. Toni Morrison uses food metaphors to delineate status symbols. Through food images her novels depict the survival for an African-American identity.

Food thus is a measure of civilizational standards and is a tool for exerting cultural dominance. This food war which represents a cultural war is facilitated by the high priests of taste—the food critic. He is by no means a fly by night operator or an amateur. His palate is his weapon and if he is pleased, he will bestow his favour upon the eatery; if his exacting standards are not met, he will unleash his ire through his pen. The well-known animation film *Ratatouille* portrays Gusteau, a popular chef feels that anyone can cook; but unfortunately, he commits suicide due to Anton Ego, the food critic's acidic comments about his restaurant. Food critics wield an enormous power in French society; they can make or break the restaurant industry that relies heavily on reputation and public patronage.

The author of a well-known novel **The Elegance of the Hedgehog**, Muriel Barbery's debut novel **Gourmet Rhapsody** depicts a food critic as an unlikely hero. The novel showcases a plethora of flavours of life and how the human soul acts in an unexpected situation. The novel illuminates his incandescent power as mere flotsam and leaves him facing a reality check when he is unexpectedly informed about his imminent demise. All his life, he has lived for the pleasure of food and the everyday human relationality of life is denied in favour of his love of food. Nothing mattered to Monsieur Pierre Arthens except the delight in food. His devotion to food finally devours his entire life and he is left with the illuminating moment of discovery that food is nourishing in the relationships built around this most basic act of nurturing. The novel intimates that the importance of small pleasures in life is more important than either power or pelf in society.

Pierre's doctor declares that he has just 48 hours to live and he finds himself in a state of horror. He spends his final few hours in his yearning for a long-forgotten taste which he has forgotten for years, yet he does not find it. He yens for the long-lost taste spirals into a quest for the real meaning of life as he goes into self-introspection mode. The disposition of his character is disclosed through the self-analysis of his life from his childhood onwards. Through 29 chapters, Barbery wrenches the hero's inner thoughts in the form of confessions. Pierre describes his journey to Greece, Tangiers and Brittany. Barbery not only uses Pierre as the narrator but he is also seen through his wife, his mistress, his son, his maid and his cat. He understands that power and position in society has only fetched him more ego rather than companionship.

Pierre as a narrator exposes his real nature: how he spent his time with his relatives shows that from his childhood he loved food and his quest had led him to reach a position as a food critic. He says, “I find that I have always loved eating” (Barbery, 4). He remembers how he used to love to be in his grandmother’s kitchen. The aroma of various flavours cemented him there. “We could already catch a whiff of the heavenly aroma from the corner of the street” (Barbery, 50). A beautiful picturesque description about the grilled chicken prepared by his grandmother makes Pierre get nostalgic enough to re-live the past. He says, “I did not hear another thing. My eyes open wide, I stared at the object of my desire; the grey, blistered skin. It elevates the grilled sacrifice to the rank of culinary apotheosis, is at the best like evoking the soporific virtues of opium” (Barbery, 51). Grandmother had the power to conquer the men of the house through her cooking. She conquered the men through their taste buds. The men experienced paradise “Via the taste buds” (Barbery, 43). He realises, “No chef can cook, nor has ever cooked, the way our grandmothers did” (Barbery, 43). Pierre feels that the women in the house lured, seduced and charmed the men through their cuisine. He remembers, “yet under the influence of her expert hands, the most banned substances were transformed into the miracles of faith” (Barbery, 49).

Pierre’s reminiscence of the past showcases his attachment for food rather than for his relatives. He remembers his visit to aunt Marthe’s house where he had the experience of fishing with his uncle Jaques and how he avoided the bread and the salted butter but “devoured relentlessly the strips of fish, the grilled sardines suffused my palate with its track and exotic bouquet with each mouthful I grew more mature, and every time my tongue caressed the marine ash of blistered skin I felt exalted” (Barbery, 52). His uncle used to take great pains to cook himself a little mouthful of paradise and he used to refine himself and lived everyday as an authentic aesthete.

The one who loves food only can become a good cook. Pierre devours what he eats. He defines the cook as, “Those who claim to be cooks must resort to all five senses to be truly cooks – a dish must delight to the eye, the most, and the taste of course – but also to the touch, which directs the chef’s choice on so many occasions and has its part to play in the celebration of fine food” (Barbery, 52). Pierre is proud to boast that even his Dalmatian dog could have dreary tasty buds and could smell the food correctly.

Pierre recollects his visit to Burgundy, the land of wine, with his grandfather. He remembers the company of his grandfather and his first taste of whiskey recollects the first time he experienced the power it has to wake the dead. He meets Gaston, the wine maker who is considered as the prince among princes because he feels, “In any activity, whether noble or reviled, there is always room for an all-powerful flash of realization” (Barbery, 126).

Only a good cook can become a good food critic. Pierre felt, “Tasting is an act of pleasure and writing about that pleasure is an artistic gesture, but the only true work of art in the end” (Barbery, 82). He recollects how he had visited Ms Marquet’s restaurant for 20 years as she was known for her creative perfection. His positive critical comments made her restaurant famous in the town. Though she disliked him, yet she shares her bed with him to safeguard the customers in her restaurant. He likes her because in spite of being well established in her field; she does not rest on her laurels but

continues to establish herself better amidst her competitors. When Pierre orders the food in her restaurant in a form of Anthology he realises, “Naturally, it was a feast of an anthology and it was perhaps the only time during our lay co-habitation as food lovers that we were truly united in the fervour of a meal, neither a critic nor cook, only high-flying Connoisseurs sharing their allegiance to a same emotion. But while this memory of noble lineage may flatter above all my self-importance as a creator that is not the reason why I have caused it to re-emerge from the mists of my unconsciousness” (Barbery, 135).

Anna, Pierre’s wife had no emotional attachment, but had taken care of him and his family. She loves him for the sake of her children; Pierre had only used her to fulfil his needs. She regrets to see his pitiable condition and says, “He would no longer see me, would pierce my haunted soul with his falcon’s eyes in order to embrace a view that was beyond the sight” (Barbery, 111). She has seen him grow professionally and at his deathbed she feels, “Everyman, in a way, is master of his castle. The coarsest peasant, the most uncultured winemaker, the most miserable employee, the shabbiest shop keeper, the greatest pariah” (Barbery, 125).

Paul, Pierre’s son neither received the father’s affection nor his love but obeyed his father’s orders from his childhood. He does not feel sad at his deathbed as he does not have any emotional attachment towards his father. When Pierre asks him to get chouquettes, without uttering a single word, he runs to the shop. He regrets obeying the orders all the time. Pierre regrets that he has forgotten his past and realises that he has led a life without any meaning as money and fame had preoccupied his mind. He repents missing something in life. A man who ruled the food industry remembers very minute details of his past and the emotional bondage what he had with people in the past prods his awakening, “The emotions attached to it that remains precious, and that might reveal to be a gift for living that I had not previously understood” (Barbery, 52).

In the last chapter of the novel Pierre realises that his wish was to have chouquettes from the shop and confesses that he has written a bad review which had brought the business down. He regurgitates the taste of the chouquettes on his tongue and in that moment feels that he had attained God. He says, “I have lost him, sacrificed him to the glorious desires which were not mine and which in the twilight of my life, have very nearly succeeded in concealing him from me again” (Barbery, 155). He realises that if one loses everything it can be found but the precious moments in life cannot be retrieved. So, one should lead a life full of meaning. His soul craves to re-live a new life but the knowledge that death is round the bend powers his yearning for the last taste which he had condemned in his life time.

Pierre’s identity is well known in the town and his arrogant nature is exposed by Rick, his cat, where it proudly says that the only positive side in Pierre is his love for his cat. He took everyone for granted. Even after his trips abroad, when he comes back home, he does not enquire about his children or his wife but spends a few minutes with his cat. The cat keenly feels that Pierre’s end is his end.

Search for perfection and search for taste enslaves Pierre. He has sold his soul for the taste. On one side it is the food Industry and on the other, the people who make him the arbiter of power. His powerful status is not fixed by others. He is the one who decides who should be raised to the lofty perch or thrown to a frivolous situation. He is the one who defines the power equation in the culinary world. Powerful status depends on the hierarchical position of an individual. The very word 'power' is viewed as a means to 'oppress' or even 'constrain'. Power is concentrated in the hands of Pierre and the others become powerless and, most significantly, he suppresses the powerless. Foucault's contribution lies in the analysis, "...of the way that power operates within everyday relations between people" (Mills Sara, Michel Foucault, 33). Since time immemorial the power structures in society are viewed as a common theme. Various theories are proposed to propagate one's authority either in private or public. Power is a soft insinuating presence used in order to show one's authority. Those who are in power seek attention of the public and gain personal happiness and benefits.

Powerful personalities do not mind common destruction. As long as they gain or maintain the highest position in society, they use the power by any and all means to perpetuate for posterity and their privileged status. They are not worried about the negative consequences which would affect the society in which they live. Pierre uses his power as a food critic and exerts it even on his family. He strives hard to maintain his ego at any cost in order to exploit their Achilles' heel to his own advantage. Power is indeed a concept of one-upmanship and this is best portrayed through Pierre. Foucault feels, "Power is conceptualised as a chain or a net, that is a system of relations between the oppressed and the oppressor. And the individuals should not be seen simply as the recipients of power, but as the 'place' where power is enacted and the place where it is resisted" (Mills Sara, 35). He realises on his deathbed that power is not conducive to healthy relationships. Exertion of power causes isolation, conflicts, personal problems, professional dissatisfaction and psychological stress to Pierre.

Foucault says that if there is resistance in power conflict, the person who shows his power misuses his authority and displays his real nature. Ms Marquet is the victim at the hands of Pierre. His family members too suffer due to the arrogant nature of Pierre. Power slowly destroys Pierre. He tries to exert his authority over the food industry and gets entangled in the complexity of life. Unfortunately, Pierre awakens to his myopia at his deathbed. Foucault opines, "a power relationship can be articulated on the basis of two elements which are indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship; that the 'other' (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognised and maintained to the very end as a person who acts: and that faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible inventions may open up" (Subject and Power 220). It happens in Pierre's case as he realises that his reign over the food industry and the family does not yield anything in life except short-term satisfaction; but in the long run only amicable relationships matter the most.

Apart from depicting the themes of social class, philosophy of life and innumerable flavours and various types of food as major themes, the novel also displays the theme of thirst for power, its

abuse and the moment of reckoning, the role of ego, self-identity and self-realization through confession. Pierre acts as a real connoisseur of good food and an authority to comment and to express his real feelings about food. The title of the novel *Gourmet Rhapsody* suits the plot of the novel as Pierre, an expert food critic describes the food in an authentic manner which entranced the novel's characters as also the readers.

Freud opines that the personality of an individual is determined by the unconscious mind. Our wishes, needs, fears and our emotional feelings in our unconscious mind make us behave in a certain manner. Our ego is based on reality principle and the super ego in us decides to follow the morality of life. Id, the instinct in us, perforce makes us react to a given stimulus. The healthy balance between id, ego, and super ego determines healthy behaviour of a person. When one is overpowered by one or the other, then the conflict arises. The aggressive nature also erupts. Any display of our behaviour is due to inner impulses. People show power on the powerless due to imbalance of the ego. Pierre's superiority complex makes him not to show his emotional attachment to his colleagues or his family. His ego interrupts his getting close to his wife or children; at his deathbed he admits his fault when he recollects his intimacy with his grandparents, aunty, uncle and his close associates. He was on the top of the arena where he used to visit the elegant restaurants and the food courts; yet the thought of death pushes him into self-analysis to regain his normal instinct of attachment with his family members. His soul also craves for the simple taste for a sweet mint whose taste he denied himself during his career as the most famous food critic. Lacan says, "The ego being the result of a conflict between one's perceived visual appearance and one's emotional experience. This identification is known as alienation" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho Analysis*, 220). Pierre alienates himself from his family due to his preoccupation with fame and glory; only to realise that life is simple with simple things.

The paper describes the moment of existential angst faced by Pierre to validate the necessity and significance of human relationships. In a world of seeking success in a competitive arena, it is companionship, affection and love that take the enjoyment of food to a meaningful level. A single flavour which he wants to devour forces him to re-evaluate the value of life. The loneliness and isolation of modern living is cloaked in an aura of power. The reminiscence of memory recalled is a confessional journey from childhood to adulthood and Pierre's disenchantment with his life. It is in a moment of self-realisation that Pierre acknowledges that it is the people, relationships and the small everyday things in life that truly matter. The paper analyses the power hierarchy inherent in the French food industry and the psychological need to associate food with identity.

Rather than exclusively dominating over a larger sphere in search of a space to contain his ego, Pierre would have extended his sphere of influence better had he the humility to respect and adore the people in his life in equivalent terms of his slavering discernment for food. This ability and capacity to judge good taste is sorely lacking in his relationships which are structured on his need to seek tasteful food. His obsession for just the right taste in food borders on an obsessive-compulsive disorder; this assures him qualitative culinary experiences while simultaneously denying him the bliss of intimacy. Excessive power in one sphere of life throws the other aspects of life out of kilter.

The critic knows that refinement in food is an elixir; the same refinement in relationships would have gifted him the harmony of la dolce vita. However, his ego and his lust for power stop him short of the power of the aesthete in every aspect of his life. Gourmet Rhapsody waxes eloquent on his pet obsession, while hemming him out of satisfying human relationships to leave him wanting and saddened by guilt.

Power radiates from Pierre; everything is erased as he sits in judgement of whether the latest originator of taste should be given a free hand or if it did not hold out the possibility of future delights, shouldn't their race be stopped at the starting line itself? Having exercised this dilemma with utmost precision for most of his life not only in matters of culinary ecstasy, but also in his relationships, Pierre faces his own selfish and snobbish choices. His early memories are no doubt about food, but these very same memories evoke the warmth of family too. Somewhere along his climb to the pedestal of power, he lost his bearings and judged his relationships on the same parameters as his professional frames of reference. His pursuit of the epicurean maxim of "eat, drink and be merry" sidelines family and friends who are slotted in the brackets for their utilitarian necessity than in satisfying his emotional needs. Food had replaced the need for both family and friends: through food, he met his deepest need of self-actualization in his capacity to wield immense power to make or break careers.

Yet on his deathbed, he craves for chouquettes—a simple, even plebian treat—to satisfy his intense longing for taste before his final curtain call.

The language descriptive of food is as close to religious ecstasy that the title is justified. The sensual plane is at once orgasmic and blissful: the material satiation of the body is also the path to an intimate knowledge of true unadulterated bliss.

This seeking and knowing confers on Pierre the status of arbiter of taste. Pierre embodies power, yet the power that leaves him weak-kneed in supplicatory enslavement is for chouquettes.

In this admission lies his acknowledgement that the simple pleasures of life are truly everyday reassurance of routine acts done repeatedly. In his last confession and of demanding the gourmand eating of chouquettes, his mantle of power dissipates as he indulges in the last act of satisfying his craving for the simple everyday chouquettes. The gourmet has displayed the chink in his armor; a lesson that rhapsodies the simple.

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