

**Smoke Stories –  
Narratives from the Hearth:  
On the Agency of Women**

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**Abstract**

The centrality of food practices - cooking, feeding - in the life of women is irrefutable. This temporal and cultural universal of women playing the prime role in feeding makes it an essential component of their identities- personal, social and gendered. Food and the rituals and memories surrounding it are invested with many meanings and emotions by women, some of whom even make it a vehicle for self-expression. Therefore, food can be used “to investigate the complexity of women’s intersecting social identities” (Avakian and Haber vii).

The paper takes up a case study of rural women of Punjab and looks into if and how these women exercise some kind of agential power through cooking and other food related activities.

**A Labor of Love?**

A few decades earlier, only anthropology and nutrition science were interested at looking at one of the most banal acts of human survival. Lately many academic fields including sociology, economics, history and the interdisciplinary women studies, cultural studies and of course food studies, study food with the notion that being the building block not only of the human body but also of the communities and consequently the entire civilisation, it can yield valuable insights about the world around us. Despite the central place of women at the hearth over time and across cultures, until the end of twentieth century, very few scholars had a women-centric perspective on their work on food and the feminist scholars emphasized on the food related pathologies in women (Avkian 2). The hegemonic discourse on the oppression and liberation of women that accompanied the second wave of feminism helped mask all of the cooking work just another indicator of patriarchal domination. In the feminist literature of the time, cooking was considered as another dimension of domesticity or an indication of women’s subordination (Friedan; Greer; Oakley). In this process, the actual relationships that women shared with food and its practices were distorted.

It was only at the turn of the century that scholars started paying attention to the complex and nuanced relationship that women share with food and how they reproduce, resist, and rebel against the set notions at various sites and compel us to move beyond a uniform

understanding of women and cooking. An increasing number of women have articulated how they enjoy preparing food, either for self or others, and have often found pleasure and/or empowerment in the process (Supski). For some therefore, “Cooking...is not an obligatory performance but rather a celebration of our own affectionate and creative expression” (Abarca 24). The emancipation can come either through building identities as someone who creates through cooking or through challenging traditional expectations or by claiming their own space within the kitchen.

Yet we have to remain cognizant of the nuances, for women are implicated in a quandary here. The whole idea of women as selfless nurturers, who ‘cook with love’, falls within the now normalised framework of gender roles and expectations. Women who may genuinely enjoy doing some of the chores involved in food preparation, find pleasure in feeding others and see it as a gesture of love, do so within the set confines. Therefore, it’s a double-edged dilemma - various food related activities can bring joy if and when done out of one’s own volition, but to be able to distinguish between one’s genuine interest from internalised gender responsibilities is next to impossible and sometimes the former may even be interpreted as false consciousness. Hence, being in the place where women would want and like to be, could also help reinforcing that it’s the place where women ‘belong’. Do the women, who rejoice in cooking and gain some kind of power from it, reproducing the belief of women as natural nurturers (Lorber; West and Zimmerman) or are they disrupting and subverting these very notions? But just the fact that cooking is enjoyed by some does not entail that the act need not be analysed and politicized. The relationship of women with food should be regarded as culturally symbolic and meaningful in its own right and reflective of their relationship with themselves, their bodies and others.

Scholarship needs to and has recently moved away from constructing the image of a monolithic woman by contextualising gender within other social factors. To do justice to the specificities of women’s lives, their interconnecting and embedded social formations need to be taken into account as well, as has been done by intersectional, especially post-colonial feminism. By allowing for the postmodern possibility of various understandings, we can resolve any inconsistencies and through a closer and more nuanced assessment, arrive at a better interpretation of the lives of women.

### **A Little More than Feeding**

It is not only that the work of feeding and nurturing has come to the share of women, but they are additionally burdened with the responsibility of providing meals that are culturally and nutritionally acceptable, liked and sometimes procured through demands by the family members and economically and generally feasible. Women have been understood to be in a better position, and consequently held responsible, for introducing nutritional value in family meals (Nayak et al; Wood). For this, women feel obligated to gain information and increase their knowledge in this regard and also improve their culinary skills (Brown and Miller). In the case of women, many times the notion of a healthy body extends to beauty and other aesthetic

appeals, something that has been referred to as ‘food/health/beauty triplex’ in late modernity (Lupton 131). Food discourses- centring both on the benefits and risks of food- are increasingly becoming proliferate, in frequency and intensity, in the contemporary society (Lupton; Nicolosi). This plethora of information in our contemporary time makes it all the more challenging for women to navigate through it all and instils in them feelings of anxiety and a sense of futility (Rangel et al 124).

As asserted by Nicolosi, this shift towards an ‘orthorexic society’ in the recent years can be witnessed in the Western societies. This paper is concerned with specific regions in the eastern part of the world, which have been insulated to varying degrees from the food system as the West understands and experiences. Although India, like all other countries, has not been exempt from the influence of the globalized capitalist food system, owing to the opening of its market and economy since 1990, but the countryside, where majority of its population still resides, is vastly different from the urban areas, especially when it comes to foodscapes. The paper takes up the case study of women of rural Punjab - who have been left bereft of any educational opportunities and therefore denied any professional prospects outside the home- for whom then the enactment of their personal, social and gendered identities happens mostly around the hearth. Unlike their western and urban counterparts, these women do not have much access to the print, electronic and digital media and therefore are not exposed to the food discourses that proliferate in these media. This is not to say that they consciously want such an access to information and feel at a loss when they don’t get it. Rather they are of the opinion that they do not need any external sources of information when it comes to food, cooking and feeding. Furthermore, the discourses of health and nutrition- which many of the times become a source of apprehensions and concern to women- are conspicuously missing from the narratives of these women.

Sans the triplex as employed by Lupton exercising any potential effect on the lives of these women, they manoeuvre their duties and place in the kitchen in their own way. Their narratives talk about the dynamics created by them in the intimate space of the home, in the community life and kinship networks, through the language of food. As emphasized by Estelle Jelinck in the context of women autobiographies, the “social bias against the condition or the delineation of their lives seems to predominate over critical subjectivity” (3), the food narratives of women, especially who are doubly or triply displaced, too risk the error of missing out on the public lives of women. Thus, these narratives which materialize at the margins of culture, literature and history, need to be paid due attention and maybe brought back within the folds of history and academia.

### **On the Question of Agency**

Agency has been defined as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 112). Since different cultures allow for different decisions and actions to manifest, the notions of agency also differ from society to society. Pickering suggests that “within different cultures human beings and the material world might exhibit capacities for action quite different from

those we customarily attribute to them” (245). Ahearn stresses the need for academicians to not only enquire about what agency means for them as theorists but also what it means for the people they study and work with and how the interpretations of agency might change over time (113). For many feminist theorists, the agency of women can be seen demonstrated in their resistance to the patriarchal status quo (Goddard 3). Ahearn warns against such simplistic equations of agency with resistance and how agency should not be just reduced to oppositional agency (115). In conceptualizing women’s agency, MacLeod notes that women, “even as subordinate players, always play an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance, a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest sometimes all at the same time” (534).

The paper also refers to Urvashi Butalia’s analysis of agency, who studied it in the context of violence and gender during the partition of 1947. She claims that while retrieving women and their agency from history, we tend to focus on powerful women and always perceive agency as ‘positive’. In the context she was working in, while problematising agency, she states that “women are thus simultaneously agents and victims” (15) and concludes that it is indeed difficult to discuss in generalised terms when it comes to women, their agential capacity and their roles and identities. Therefore, we also need to take into account the mediation of the family, community, class and religion to arrive at a better understanding of agency. As pointed out by Kumkum Sangari, “rather than make simplistic assumptions about the power of women, it is better to capture the complexities of struggle” (qtd. in Butalia 24).

Thus, while discussing agency we need to steer clear of any uniform understandings of agency, which can lead to obscuring of many things, and be careful to take into account all the possible different motivations behind any human action. This paper attempts to do this- in the context of rural women of Punjab. By paying attention to the “complex and ambiguous agency” (MacLeod 539), the paper attempts to better understand the lives of the women it is dealing with.

## **Methodology**

The paper springs out of an ethnographic study, whereby the researcher conducted informal interviews over a span of one year and collected narratives from women in her ancestral village in the district Muktsar, Punjab. The sample whose narratives were actually used for the study was a small one consisting of six women. Therefore, the results need not be generalized for a larger section of the population but be understood contextually. The first few months the researcher talked generally to a larger number of women, to let them be at ease and grow comfortable enough with her to discuss issues of their families and other aspects of their lives. The conversations of the later months, with the selected ones, were recorded and transcribed. The interpretations and English translations are according to the best of my knowledge. I was at an advantage because Punjabi is my first language and since many of these women belonged to my extended family, I was able to understand them contextually as well. I

had explained my intent well, had obtained consent and was careful not to let the fact that I was related to some of them alter their responses. On the other hand, I found that women, who were related to me, were able to talk freely about certain things (for example, their relationships with their mothers-in-law), which the women from other households were sometimes reluctant to be completely explicit about.

The case study was conducted at my ancestral village, Seerwali in the district of Muktsar. The women were aged between approximately 35 to 65. Women younger than 30, new daughters-in-law of the village or the daughters who were of marriageable age and were substantial helping hands in the kitchen, were not included in the study. This demographic differs from the women in the study as one could not claim about the former that they did not have sufficient access to forms of media (majorly TV, recently smart phones and the internet). To establish if and how it affects these women when it comes to the kitchen space is beyond the scope of this paper.

The paper is in line with many other feminist anthropological projects - Hauck-Lawson's work with immigrants in New York City, "culinary chats" by Abarca with Mexican-American working-class women and Carole-Counihan's 'food-centred life histories' of women in South America. All of these works have used the food stories of women in one way or the other to deliberate upon the identity, agency and power of women.

### **Power Structures at Play**

#### ***Feeding the Family, Serving the Self***

Power, as projected through food, can be manifested in two ways- the power of coercion and the power of influence. The former deals with the control of food resources, ideally comes from denying it to others and is typically wielded by political parties and governments. The latter ensues through the act of giving and the consequent obligations generated through this act (Counihan 53). Whereas the coercive power can be exercised by the ones who have control over the resources and those generally happen to be men in most of the societies, the power of influence is the power of women who feed and thereby satisfy one of the most compelling needs of humans. It is this power, one that comes from being needed, that can be manipulated by women and used to exert a certain influence. Although this power is mainly wielded over family members, but the social mores of the table act as microcosm of behaviours and values of the society at large (Counihan 54). Therefore, regulating the same and controlling the symbolic language of the food prepared by them, women administer a substantial amount of power at their homes and also become indispensable actors of the society as well.

Some of the women in this study also echoed similar sentiments. Since they belong to a traditional patriarchal society, the idea of them wielding power over the household members came out most strongly in the case of their sons. One of the women, talking about when her son would grow up and start running the household, quipped "*he (my son) is obviously going to listen to me over his father. Was he nursed by his father? Is he now fed by his father or me?*"

*The father can't even feed himself!*". Since the husband in this case was an overbearing man, who gave little value to his wife's opinions, she believed it was just a matter of time when the son takes charge and she would be actually making decisions through him. The woman in this case was not flustered by the current situation, in fact her conversations seemed to suggest that she felt that she could withhold and deny food to the husband in case of a situation if ever he "created real trouble" and that would go a long way in teaching him a lesson.

Another woman narrated the story of how her both kids were fond of *gulgule*, a fried rainy-day snack in north India. She felt that preparing *gulgule* required a lot of time and energy and the children had to request her to engage their wishes. "I used to lay down certain conditions for them, asked them for doing something or the other for me, in order for me to make *gulgule* for them. At one time they had to help me decorate the walls with mud and cow dung plaster, which helped me finish a two-day job in one. And at another time, my little one exchanged her candy treat from the city in exchange for *gulgule* (giggling)". This narrative presents a counterpoint to the discourses of selfless nurturing by mothers. Although upon further prompting, the woman acknowledged that she might have eventually indulged her kids by preparing the sweet dish for them but she had no qualms about making the children do some chores in exchange for their favourite foods. She believed that though she wouldn't have done so with the provision of the basic daily meals but meeting the demands of the children for something special could be and 'sometimes even should be' exchanged for favours.

### ***Serving the Family, Feeding the Self***

Another way in which women exercise power through their relationships with food is by developing "differential consciousness" (Sandoval 6), a strategy used by dominated people to function within oppressive structures and ideologies by creating alternate beliefs and strategies to resist domination. Women end up creating "hidden transcripts" (Scott x), whereby they deploy contradictory approaches- they appear to maintain the traditional gender role structures and pretend that men are the ones in charge- all the while challenging men's authority privately and covertly. These ideas are also akin to the trope of "la perruque" employed by historian De Certeau to explain how individuals use strategies to create a semi-independent domain within the limits placed on them by the powerful. Taking up such microprocesses of resistance, he urged scholars to attend to the actions of ordinary people (24).

One of the respondents recounted - "*Many times, I collect eggs from the chicken coop, scramble them and offer to the children- all this before my husband arrives. If asked, I feign ignorance. It's only because I know he would otherwise offer them to all those drinking friends he assembles at night.*" In this case, she is apparently performing her submissive role convincingly, but her private behavioral practices do not fall in line with her speech and actions in the public sphere. Menon asserts that "women's agency and their subversion of the dominant discourse are obscured" (359) by an outwardly image of compliance and private efforts to resist that dominance.

Another one of the respondents cheekily narrated- “*I have a sweet tooth and often crave sewaiyan and halwa. On days when I feel like indulging myself, I float around the house this made-up dream where my late mother-in-law visited me and instructed me to cook something sweet...you know for our ancestors or whatever*”. These narratives suggest that amidst all the expectations and responsibilities of feeding their families, women nevertheless find ways of empowerment in the process. Even when they might present others as the real priority, they are frequently at the center of their actions and stories. They believe first in satisfying their own appetites, literal and metaphorical. In this particular case, while the woman might not have been very comfortable in gratifying her own desires publicly, but she used a subversive approach that let her uphold and undo the traditional structures simultaneously. She is able to sustain the façade of selfless work (in this case for family members who are dead already) while prioritizing her own cravings. As opposed to the negation of self in women in the families (Friedan) which is many a times taken as normal, we witness here a centering of the self. Hence, as stated by Lockford, women can practice a kind of “selfless selfishness” (the former as a mere pretension), that can act as an assertion of subversive feminism (qtd. in Mills 9). The latter produces a space for women to undermine the dominant structures and perform their roles in a way befitting to them.

Both these narratives go on to support Menon’s explanation that women’s discourse “hides the fact that within their separate sphere women create a space from which they can resist male authority in subtle and silent ways. Their resistance is never articulated; it is a shared secret among women. To voice it would be to bring out into the open, to make public the contradictions within which they operate contradictions which they accept as part of their everyday lives” (359). These women contest the power structures of their households and strive for agency, which we can attempt to understand through the lens of differential consciousness, hidden transcripts and *la perruque*.

### **Food Wars: Gastro-politics at Play**

One of the most important domains in which the food chores of women give them a certain authority is in the complex kinship networks, where gastro-politics play a crucial part, as asserted by Appadurai. Most of the land-owning families in rural Punjab have different households for all the brothers. Subsequently, all the women have separate hearths under their control and supervision. There exists a fine balance between the power exerted by the different sisters-in-law and this often plays out in the culinary contexts. Food plays an important symbolic part in most of the social events and this includes the rituals surrounding death as well.

To explicate scenarios where conflict can be engendered in case of food, I would like to draw attention to the death and the funeral rites of the mother of one of the joint families in the study. For the women of the family it was of utmost importance how the gathered relatives formed impressions of their positions within the family and their relationship with the deceased.

One of the daughters-in-law of the family stated - *“It was obvious that the guests arriving a day before the communal feast had to be entertained at my hearth. You see I was the one who took care of her and fed her in the last days. I was the one who called up everyone with the news. I am not being subtle about it. I realize that I’m not the eldest one but I was the one who did all the work, everyone else thought of her as a burden. And they thought that they could compensate and equal my efforts by offering a meagre share of money for the communal feast? I wouldn’t have let that happen.”*

In this case, notwithstanding the amount of labor that has to be put into, the respondent is eager to take on the job of entertaining guests single handedly, as she understands that it affirms and consolidates her superior status amongst the visiting relatives. Her being an agreeable host and apparently serving the multitude of incoming guests pleasingly also lets the visiting kin realize that the selfless performance of her responsibilities as a dutiful daughter-in-law at the death must mean that she served her mother-in-law as selflessly when the latter was alive. Although this wasn’t mentioned outrightly, the respondent led me to think likewise, as she had done with her kinsmen.

Although the woman in this case knowingly undertook what must have been an arduous task (because of the sheer number of people turning up because of the death) in the kitchen, but she used it as a strategy to hide the motivations behind her behavioral practices, which were very unambiguous for her. She exercised her agency to make the decision and used the idiom of food both to articulate her powerful position in the house to the visiting kin and in a way to claim the rewards of settling the conflict amongst the different daughters-in-law regarding caring for the old mother-in-law.

For women, negotiating power relations through food, becomes a delicate balancing act, where all the women of the household work in simultaneously collaborative and conflicting roles to secure their positions for dominance of domesticity. The hearth, thereby, becomes a space for exerting their agential power and expressing their identities through it.

### **From the Private, Into the Public**

Since the women in this case study had been denied educational and formal employment opportunities and were therefore stay at home mothers and wives (‘preparers’), who managed the ‘responsibility’ of feeding the family without any help from any of the male members (‘providers’), it might be conveniently assumed that they essentially become restricted to the domestic sphere and are removed from the activities of the public sphere. But the dichotomy between the public and the private sphere is mitigated by the seamless shuttling back and forth of women, often through their command on food and its related activities. The transcending of the separation between the public and the private realm here is not achieved by breaking free of the chores of the kitchen but rather through them. Emphasizing how the model of the separate spheres of ‘production’ and ‘reproduction’ is detrimental to understanding



reality, Rosalind Petchesky points out that, “Not only do reproduction and kinship, or the family have their own...modes of organization, and power relationships, but reproduction and kinship are themselves integrally related to social relations of production and the state; they reshape those relations all the time” (377).

The electoral times, either the Panchayat or the Assembly elections, are charged days in the rural Punjab and involve informal gatherings of male folks- at the village greens and the houses of people with some political alliances. One of the overlooked consequences of these at-home congregations is the additional effort by the women of the household in the kitchen. *“These voting days are the worst. We have to put the tea to boil as many as eight to nine times in a day. And before we are done cleaning the utensils, the next batch of tea has to be brewed.”* An account by another respondent in the context of this situation can help us in moving away from any essentializing narratives of completely helpless forced labor in the kitchen, which is never rewarded. *“It of course irritates me to make tea all day long for these ‘want-to-be leaders’ who hijack my home. And my husband, who has these illusions of political enthusiasm. But you know I avenge all this extra tea making. (slyly) I never vote for (the party staunchly supported by the husband). I secretly go for the opposition.”*

As discussed earlier, this statement too corroborates that being subversive in ways like this allow women to appear appropriately compliant and fulfil their obligations. By masking their subversions under the guise of complicity, they strive for agency “within yet beyond the demands of the dominant ideology” (Sandoval 3).

On the other hand, some women transform their kitchen work into paid labor, but this is only true in the case of women from the lower socio-economic class as for a well to do and/or landlord family, it is considered demeaning if women try to earn an extra income. Some of the women from the lower economic strata in the village offer their culinary skills to other households when needed. They successfully are able to underplay the exploitive dimensions of food preparation and augment the empowering ones. One of the older women of the village, referred to sometimes as ‘*raita bibi*’, used to professionally make raita and earn money for herself and her family. She recounted - *“When I had just married into this village, I used to sometimes cook for the family whose land my husband used to till. They used to love my raita, spoke about it to the neighbors and soon I was making raita for every ceremony held in the village. (smiling) Once I also received an order from the next village. The money that I made wasn’t a lot but it helped me in other ways. All my life I could never be intimidated by my husband or his family about things like visiting my ill parents often.”*

Conforming to but still offering resistance to the divisions of labor, she was able to assert her agency while assuming her food related responsibilities. She realized the economic value of transforming her reproductive labor to productive work and used it for her own benefit. Along with the financial profit, she also converted her cooking skills into social and cultural capital. She improved her position at her home and also in the community.

## Conclusion

When it comes to women and food, there can be no essentializing narratives. Women from varying socio-politico-economic groups experience food preparation and consumption differentially. Consequently, they also experience and negotiate conventional gender roles differentially, depending on the composition of their relational lives. Therefore, the idea of monolithic hegemonic femininity needs to be deconstructed and scholars have to be careful not to colonize women through misinterpretations and misrepresentations of their activities in the kitchen space.

Agency is not ontologically prior to a context but rather emerges from the social, political and cultural dynamics of a particular place and time (Desjarlas 204). It is important to enquire into how people within a specific sociocultural context perceive events, causalities, their own actions and the power they exert. The paper is an attempt to make a nuanced understanding of if and how the women in the case study exercise their agency through food and its related activities. These women ‘cooked up’ discourses which demonstrate how identities around food enable them to perform their social and gender roles, how they can be playful and subversive with these performances, how they can sometimes enjoy self-empowerment through various food chores and thereby challenge the hegemonic power structures. While some find empowerment in rejecting their requisite domestic femininity, others embrace it on their very own terms. They take on the oppressiveness embedded in the structures of gender and labor by experiencing and exercising agency in the kitchen space and the home, by extension.

The narratives of these women help in creating a cultural mosaic of who they are and documenting these narratives is essential to bring the perspectives of regionally and linguistically marginalized women to the academic and mainstream cultural folds. Although the stories of these women create a rich portrayal of familial and social contexts, but they sounded very unsure about the value of these stories and least of all any scholastic worth that could be attributed to them. This indicates the low assessment that women make of their own work and words. But such underrepresentation needs to be combatted, the grand narratives of a woman and her kitchen need to be deconstructed and the Other given the power to speak and assume rightful position in mainstream history and literary establishments.

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