

Food in Children's Literature:
An Analysis of Food and Culture in Roald Dahl's Fiction
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Ideologically, Food is one essential element for all living beings that provides nourishment to the body and allows specific function to work at the best. Psychologically, good food is good mood; many psychoanalytic theories suggest that eating habits play a fundamental role in creating self-identity and in defining a certain social role as in a family or a social class. Food comes in variety, depending on the nature of the one consuming it. Food plays a vital role in maintaining proper health, relationships, culture and tradition. It helps us to understand the essential meaning of home. For most humans food is a direct influence of one's culture, religious practices and personal preference. In literature the theme of food is connected with the state of one's soul as a part of their individuality. It is said that human kind begin with the mythological story of Adam and Eve, since then the concept of food has its own specifications in Literature. In The Garden of Eden after Eve and Adam consume the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge, it gave them the ability to conjure negative and destructive concepts like shame and evil. Here the food (fruit) plays the role of human temptations and ever the fall of man.

Food acts as a lens to view the ritualized ceremonies in society. When sharing a meal together, people observe the certain rites and these religious customs are witnessed from the beginning of human history because these food customs bring warmth to the domestic hearth. Habits of eating and its practices help the better understanding of human society. Though eating is inevitable and delightful, food also refers to society's structure and world vision. The act of food preparing and sharing help to determine the social organization. Therefore, it helps a better identification within culture and it is the ingredient that unites people together.

The theme of food takes a key place in many literary works. In fiction the theme of food is no longer bound by any kinds of social limits, so most of the writers focus their work on food. It also offers a means of powerful imagery. In any literature food imagery serves as a source of deep- rooted connections that lead into the depths of individual and cultural memory. Food is also fundamental to the imagination. The very word 'imagination' leads us to our childhood days. It is because, the deepest emotional outlet we have of imagination is what we experienced

in our childhood. Like the food studies are becoming significant in the field of general literature, it is becoming as significant in the field of children's literature too. Every child has their own experiences of food from birth onwards, thus it is hardly surprising that food is a constantly recurring dominant element in literature written for children. Apart from reflecting social order and civilization, food is always representative of the limitations enforced upon a child's world, uniting well with the idea of excess as a key concept of childhood fantasy.

Food is not just a food, it is a cultural identity. In children's literature food is portrayed as the cultural characteristics related to the characters and their peculiar traditional rules. The family at table is a strong cultural signifier representing stability and prosperity and the fact that those in power have used this image to reassure the nation only emphasizes its influence. From the ancient folktales and fairy tales to the modern children's stories food plays a specific role. The first exposure children experience to the food and cultural codes of society is contained in the tradition of fairy stories. This can be seen in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Enid Blyton's stories or in Roald Dahl's works. Children's literature is flavored with food and social occasions related to it. In Roald Dahl's work *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, where chocolate and sweets play the main part. And in *James and the Giant Peach* where the magnanimous juicy peach stands as an escapism for James from his wicked aunts.

Food is a major part of Roald Dahl's work, not only in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1961) and in *James and the Giant Peach* (1964), but also in *Matilda* (1988), *The BFG* (1982), *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (1970), and many more. Dahl's daughter Lucy Dahl in one of her interviews said that Food was a huge part of their upbringing. And as it turns out, Dahl's creative and sometimes twisted approach to food wasn't confined to his books. Dahl had wake the kids up in the middle of the night and pile them into the car – which was full of hot chocolate and cookies – and drive them up the road in the English countryside where they lived. He kept his kids entertained during normal eating hours, too. He often used mealtime to test out new characters from stories he was working on. Just as Roald Dahl used stories to bring food to life at home, he used food to bring characters to life in his books.

Food culture evoke a plenty of associations in different writers' minds, but for Roald Dahl its only magic and surprises. His food creations include everlasting gobstopper, chocolate fountain, eatable marshmallow pillows, fizzy lifting drinks, hot ice cream, invisible chocolate for class room, three course meal gum, rainbow drops, sugar coated pencils etc. in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. In his *James and the Giant Peach* Dahl created a huge juicy peach with James a 10 year old along with some weird insects in it. These characters will have the giant peach as their food for survival.

Dahl wrote his chocolate factory during the emergence of industries in Britain, so the influence of the industrial culture can be seen in his *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. This book give the enduring complexities of many food issues in Britain from the 1960s onwards, Dahl attempts to restore a number of competing ideas about junk food, and more specifically sweets, inadvertently revealing his somewhat inconsistent views about the confectionery industry in the process. Dahl romanticizes sweets and associates sweets-eating with an idealized depiction of childhood. His nostalgic childhood days made him to give the pleasure of eating chocolate in his *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, where the young readers can always associate their life with characters. The mouth-watering description of candies, ice-creams, gums and chocolates make the readers to lose themselves in the candy world. Through this fiction Roald Dahl has instruct the children not to be greedy, adamant, head- strong and selfish. The story is about a little boy Charlie Bucket, hardly of 10 years old, who stay in a small wooden house with his parents and four grandparents. Charlie won the Golden ticket to Willy Wonka’s Chocolate factory (inspired by Cadbury) along with the other four winners from rich family background. The child protagonist Charlie Bucket stands as an epitome of moral values. His behavior and manners have been attracted by Willy Wonka and Wonka gave his chocolate factory to Charlie in the concluding chapter.

Throughout the novel the reader feels like they are actually into the factory. Each chapter has it own surprises and shocks that makes the readers delight. The other child characters are Augustus Gloop – the greedy boy, Veruca Salt – the spoiled child, Violet Beauregarde – who chews gum all day and Mike Teavee – who always watch television. These characters of Dahl tells the readers how the culture of the sophisticated Britain during that time. The history of literature however shows that the topic of food appearing in contemporary literature cannot be view as a new trend. Themes related to food were common even before Dahl’s period. Dining with family often render the family with reflection and expression of human behavior, together with its desires and appetites. Not only food has always been an essential ritual in family life and focus on the socialization of the family members, but also it provides a significant psychological support. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Charlie with his parents, his two grandfathers and his two grandmothers have their supper together.

“There wasn’t even enough money to buy proper food for them all. The only meal they could afford were bread and margarine for breakfast, boiled potatoes and cabbage for lunch and cabbage soup for supper”

- *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. P– 5

Though everyday they have cabbage soup for their supper, they never complaint but enjoyed to their fullest by talking about their days work. Eating together at the table has always

played a vital role in the socialization of children. Children should learn discipline, respect and observing the rules that can be experimented in the society. This part of Charlie's life tells how the families of below poverty line survive with what they have. In spite of being poor Charlie has been brought up with good manners unlike the other child characters in fiction.

Roald Dahl's another fiction *James and the Giant Peach* centers on a young orphan boy of 10 years old, who enters a gigantic magical peach.

"The tunnel was damp and murky, and all around him there was curious bittersweet of fresh peach. The floor was soggy under his knees, the walls were wet and sticky and peach juice was dripping from the ceiling. James opened his mouth and caught some of it on his tongue. It tasted delicious."

- *James and the Giant Peach*. P- 31

This giant peach serves as an escape world for James Henry Trotter from his two selfish and lazy and cruel aunts. As James enters the magical peach, he encountered with various smaller creatures but extremely gigantic in size and shape. The creatures whom James meets in the peach are, an enormous spider, an old green grasshopper, a giant ladybird, centipede and an earthworm. The adventurous journey of James and his inmates begins from here and their final destination is the New York City. The journey filled with many adventures such as escaping from shark, from cloud-men, minor accidents etc. Dining together is an essential part of the basic tradition of eating together, the fundamental bonding of custom. These habits of sharing food bring people together in appreciation and companionship. In this fiction James with his companions share what they have and enjoy the ride in the giant peach.

It is commonly considered that the dining rituals as the suitable use of food to display belongingness to a certain social group. Concerning a social group some different manners are involved and the food could be one of the means of defining social status and social interaction. During family get together, festivals, celebrations it is essential to eat together because people associate and consolidate their common identity that too when they gather to eat a meal together. This concept is witnessed in Bible when Jesus Christ offered his Last Supper to his disciples. The theme of food is traced back to Bible when the food is embodied by spiritual appetite where the bread and wine stands for Christ's body and blood.

This research paper has been written with the intention to analyze the significance of theme of food and culture in children's literature with reference to the select works of the centenarian children's writer Roald Dahl. Food can serve as a replacement to equate our psychical, psychological, imperfections and social desires. From infant to the adulthood mankind tend to taste the food along with their culture. The very first taste we get attracted as an infant is

sweetness, when we talk about sweet we cannot avoid talking about chocolates and candies. Sweets are indeed the innocent pleasures of childhood carrying to the adulthood. Chocolate, eating together bind the social relationships. Chocolate is a temptation to which every human kind is enslaved. This enchanted enslave is clearly depicted in Dahl's juvenile book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. And sharing the food is the best thing human beings can do to fellow being and this sharing one's food is very much clear in *James and the Giant Peach*. Hence both the chosen novels of Roald Dahl have its own similarities and differences in theme of food and culture, where food is a part of cultural identities.

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