

Haute Cuisine of Memories: A Reading Of Anita Nair's *Alphabet Soup For Lovers*

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Food has a universal appeal that won it a prominent place in literature. Food literature is now a popular genre. It is usually said that literature reflects society. This reflection is more vivid, when it comes to food literature because food reflects culture and mode of living in a better way. "... to write about food is to deal with the most important and most basic of human needs and desires." (Schofield 1)

This paper is entitled *Haute Cuisine of Memories: A Reading of Anita Nair's Alphabet Soup for Lovers*. *Haute Cuisine* is a French culinary term which literally means high cooking. "It is characterised by meticulous preparation and presentation of food." (*Haute Cuisine*). Anita Nair in this novel makes the narrator and cook, Komathi, prepare and present her memories, induced by different food, she comes about in the kitchen. Komathi the main narrator of the novel presents memories about Lena her mistress, Lena's husband KK, the actor and lover of Lena, Shoolapani, Komathi's partner Raghavandra. The role of food here, is that of a trigger that evokes memories. Secondly, the role of food as an aid in learning is analysed. Finally, the position of food as a mode of communication is studied.

Food is reminiscent of persons, events, places or a certain period in life. This relationship is mutual, as sometimes, people or events can evoke memories about food. That is how Kerala reminds one of Sadya, Tamilnadu that of Pongal and North India that of Daal. Some adjectives used with food evokes different meaning. A homely food is expected to be traditional and pure. Bachelor cooking is something easy, that saves time and that uses minimum ingredients. Jane Lawson in her book *Grub: Favourite Food Memories* observes, "...it isn't just the food, it's the emotions attached to it" (Lawson 7) Thus food is a medium for recalling memories. What appeals more about a food is obviously the memories and emotions attached to it.

Each chapter of the novel is given the title of a food or an ingredient, in the South Indian cuisine and each of those title is in the alphabetic order. Thus, it becomes the alphabetic book and the memory book of Komathi, the narrator. The basic thread of the novel tells the story of Lena and her mechanical and loveless married life with KK and Lena's love affair and elopement with the actor Shoolapani Dev. This is a common place theme of many novels. Telling this story by making food as a major theme is a different approach.

Food in this novel is a prominent element in teaching Komathi English letters. It is contradictory, because, a woman destined to be in kitchen has less chance to think about polishing her academic skills. But Komathi, the cook is so enthusiastic about learning English alphabet. A child is introduced to alphabet through an alphabet book with the usual A for Apple, B for ball, etc. in it. Komathi's alphabet book is different. Being a cook, she cannot have a better medium to learn letters. She says, "Food, I know. Food will never elude me, unlike everything else that has. Be it men, wealth, happiness and it seems, the Alphabet.... Perhaps the Alphabet can be coaxed to stay within my grasp. Perhaps food will teach me to make sense of these lines, curves and curlicue" (Nair 4) She grasps each letters with the help of food names an idea put forward by her granddaughter Selvi and Lena is her guide in this matter.

The first chapter is given the title *Arisi Appalam*. This dish made Komathi think about the nature of relationship between Lena and KK. She says they "are like store-brought appalam" (Nair 5). Their life lacks genuine flavours and it is an artificial one. Appalam brought to her memory, Lena, during her childhood, the day Komathi took charge of Lena's care and her decision to call Lena as Leema a portmanteau of Lena and Amma.

When Komathi saw a *Badam*, Shoolapani Dev, the actor came to her mind. He is not a familiar person to her. Except one time, she had seen him only from a distance. Hence she says, "... he is sheathed himself and it is impossible to peel of the covering"(Nair 18)

Komathi remembers Lena again, when she saw *Cheppankizangu*. She compares the nature of Lena with this tuber. "Take Leema. She pretends to be hairy, knobbly person when what she is, is plump and rounded. There is a huge reservoir of feelings within her, which she keeps hidden behind that stiff exterior." (Nair 28)

In the chapter entitled *Dungaarchutney* a Marathi dish - she remembers her partner Raghavandra Rao. That is why she opted for *Dungaarchutney* to the commonplace *Dosa*. It is Raghavandra – Rayar, as Komathi calls him- who taught her to make this chutney and as she expected, their relation ended in heartbreak and she even forgot how to make the chutney.

Eeral or liver reminded Komathi of Lena's grandmother who is of the opinion that people love with the liver and not with the heart. Komathi quotes her words, "Without the liver we are nothing but a mass of flesh. So, it is with the liver we love." (Nair 43)

In the chapter entitled *Filter Kaapi*, Komathi remembers how she made *Filter Kaapi* for Lena and KK, and how KK preferred *filter Kaapito* tea or instant coffee, thereafter.

Godumai took her back to the day she was rejected by a man who came to her as a part of a marriage proposal. Her aachi comforted and said that she deserves a *Godumai dosa*. The very memory of the "... godumai dosa, crisp yet chewy, sweet and salty, that burnt sweet smell of jaggery turning to syrup on a hot cast –iron tava..." (Nair 62), made her mouth watering and makes her forget

the pain. Godumai dosa reminded her about how Lena and KK spoiled a tava, that her dosa ended up like a G instead of a being a perfect round.

Inji according to Komathi is the best thing to get rid of the irritation created by too much sweetness. That is why she decided to make inji kozambu for Lena, as she is in the over sweet world of Shoolapani. Inji reminded her of the oft asked question of Lena during her childhood, that why the fox in the story said that the grapes are sour just because he could not reach them.

The narrator learns her J through *Jeera*. It led her think about Lena. She loved to have jeera muttai than a toffee or chocolate.

Komathi learns K through *Karuveppilai*. She remembers the myths connecting *Karuveppilai* and women, that a woman should not touch it when she is bleeding. The progressive woman in Komathi comes to the front when she ask why a rapist or a murderer is allowed to touch this leaf. She also sees a probability for Lena being deserted by the actor, like a *Karuveppilai*.

Ladoo is the next food that made her go back to her memories. She thought about those days in which she prepared up to two hundred *lados* for Lena's first wedding anniversary, and it is impossible for her now. She doubts whether the ability to cook fade out with fertility when a woman gets aged.

Komathi shares the traditional belief that *Muringakai* increases libido. This obviously turned her thoughts to her partner Rayar. She remembers the day she made *Muringakai* Sambar and her Rayar made love to her. But Komathi came to the realization that a woman gets aroused only when she comes to know that her man loves her.

Rayar comes to her mind when she made *Nande curry*. It is not the curry, that made her think about him, but its smell that clings over there for much time. It is like the memories she keeps about her Rayar. They are still a part of her life even though the the relation is over. At present, that smell irritates her because it is now merged with the illicit relationship between Lena and the actor.

Komathi reminds of some rules about the dish *Oorkai*. It is somewhat similar to that of *Karuveppilai*. *Oorkai* is made out of large lemon called *Narthanga Oorkai* should not be made on Sunday, Tuesday or Friday. It should be made before moon disappears completely on *Amavasi*. A bleeding woman and a woman after being with a man should not touch it. Though these are the general beliefs, Komathi has only one rule concerning it. There should be no moisture and it should not be heated after it is seasoned.

It is a common experience of everyone that the most hated food items during childhood become one of the favourites when grown up. It is a lesson that food teaches everyone. During childhood what matters about food is its colour and taste. Slowly it is understood that its benefits are important. *Pavakkai* is such a food. Komathi remembers that Lena hated *pavakkai* not because of its

bitterness but because she thought that it is a baby crocodile caught from the river. Later in life she devoured *pavakkai* juice just as she did with a glass of milk.

Komathi thought about *Qollu* or Horse gram and she remembered the moment she expressed her anger for Lena's illicit relation with Shoolapani. When Lena came to know that Komathi is going to prepare a dish with *Qollu*, Lena expressed her dislike and Lena is startled to hear the unexpected reply from Komathi.

It is *Rava* that made Komathi remember that unforgettable day in which her Rayar part with her, because of Lena. *Rava* evoked in her the memory of *Kesari*, the dish that Rayar hated the most. When Lena heard Rayar complaining about *Kesari* and calling it "baby's vomit" (Nair 148). Lena felt sorry for Komathi and forcefully fed him all the *Kesari* in her plate. When Lena's mother came to see this, she interpreted the situation falsely and fired Rayar from there. Though Komathi pleaded, it did nothing good. Thus, Lena became a reason for the misfortune. Years after Komathi decided to make *Kesari* for Lena to seek her forgiveness for her harsh talk to Lena. "I'll make *rava Kesari* and when Leema comes for breakfast, I'll serve it to her. My *Kesari* will say, forgive me, better than words can." (Nair 145). Food here is a language which is much more expressive than spoken language. In such cases food not only functions as a physical entity but they function as a series of expressions like that of apology, gratitude, request, love, etc.

Sora, is a river fish which gave Komathi an opportunity to go back to one of her memories in her childhood. *Sora* is believed to be good for lactating mothers and she remembers her father bringing it to her Aachi. As she does not like the fish, Komathi had it in plenty. She also remembers a movie they watched thereafter, that also about a *Sora* fish, which eats human beings. That led her to stop eating *Sora*. These are all presented as vague memories of Komathi related to the fish. *Thayir* reminded Komathi of her days after Rayar left her. She had a difficult sleep those days. She knew it is good to eat hot rice with *Thayir*, to induce good sleep. Another person comes to her mind is KK's mother who was an expert in making *morukaachiyathu*. Komathithinks, "She died a couple of years ago but her *kashyamam* and *morukaachiyathu* lives on." (Nair 160)

Varak or the gold foil on a peda is closely connected with one of Komathi's memories about Rayar. When she tasted the peda that Rayar gave her, after his bite on it, it tasted like nothing to her, but like his mouth.

Another sad memory is connected with *Wendiyum* or Fenugreek. For Komathi *Wendiyum* is reminiscent of her days after which she aborted Rayar's child. Lena's mother prepared *Uluvachoru* for her to regain her strength after the abortion.

Komathi uses the letter X to explain the dangers of being lazy and complacent in kitchen, rather than for a food. She remembers some moments when KK, Lena or some other guest avoiding some dishes, saying that it is not cooked enough, or it does not taste as usual. It is then she became conscious about that fatal mistake she had made. She forgot to taste the dish. That is what the letter X reminds her.

Yera or prawns made her think about a question asked by Lena, when she was cleaning it. Lena asked her what she is thinking about. Komathi replied that her mind goes a trip without telling her, while cleaning prawns.

The final chapter is entitled *Zigarthanda*. It was a new experience for Komathi to have it. Before having it, after the compulsion from the part of Rayar, she had no idea about what it would taste like or what would it do to her. That is why Komathi used the metaphor of *Zigarthanda* to explain her uncertainty about the future life of Lena with Shoolapani after they eloped. Komathi was equally uncertain about what to expect from KK after hearing the news of elopement of his wife.

All these memories prove that food is not a mere appetizer, mouth filler or pass time, but it proves to be a strong medium to recall memories. Food also gives some lessons for life, they carry myths, superstitions and emotions. This particular novel presents food as an educator too, giving its narrator basic lessons in English language.

Appalam is her word to remember the letter A. She says, “I prefer the pleasing fullness of *Arisi Appalam* to the dull crunch of the A for Apple” (Nair 2). The B in Komathi’s alphabet book is that of *Badam*. C stands for the hairy dark *Cheppankizangu*. She cannot remember a D through *Dosa* because it reminds her of a folded *Dosa*, which is not good. That is why she opted for *Daangar Chutney*. E is for *Eeral*. F is for *Filter Kaapi*. G is for *Godumai Dosa*, because despite her hard work in taking out the *Godumai Dosa* from the tavaa little left there, and it looked like a G. H stands for *Hayagriva*, because for Komathi, Honey or *Halwa* does not sounds like an H. I is for *Inji*. J for *Jeera*. K can stand only for *Karuvepilai* in her alphabet book. L for *Ladoo*. Lena had made an M out of the *Muringakai* pieces Komathi had chopped and she decided that her M stands for *Muringakai*. N for *Nande*. O for *Oorkai*. P for *Paavakai*. Komathi clarifies her doubt that whether *Qollu* starts with Q or K and learns that Q is for *Qollu*. R for *Rava*. The *Sora* fish resembled the letter S, so her S is for *Sora*. T for *Thayir*. U for *Uzunthu*. V for *Varak*. W for *Wendiyum*. X stands for the dangers related to laziness in kitchen. Y stands for *Yera* and Z for *Zigarthanda*.

Komathi, thus gives completion to her alphabet book that contains A to Z. She makes it unique by giving a shade of memories to each the pictures in her book. She takes her own freedom in deciding which food should represent each letter. “I know the *Zigarthanda* should start with J, but this is my alphabet book. What is right for the world may not be right for me” (Nair 202).

Food is a language sometimes far more effective than words. Intonation and stress in the language of food, is the way in which the food is presented. Words and food, that comes out of love, taste good. So, what is Food for Komathi? Obviously, it is not only a tool in her profession as a cook neither is it a sustenance. It is indeed her world. It is her window to memories, her outlet to the world of progress and her language for expressing emotions. Thus, the novel views the concept of food from a different perspective.

Works Cited

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