

Determining the Symbolic Representation of 'Food' in Life and Literature

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An individual born in the world grows to 'survive' in the Universe. The growth factors of a person are influenced through various components of which the most important are the primary needs: food, clothing and shelter.

Food is the most essential requirement for sustenance of human life. Even if a human being does not have shelter over their head or clothes over their body, they would still survive if they get wholesome nutrition. That is why all over human history, we have been motivated to search and seek food. Throughout history food has acted as a catalyst for societal transformation, societal organization, competition, development, conflict and expansion. (Singh)

Though the basic needs of life get widened or altered, food remains unaltered and cannot be detached from any living specimen. There are various truths hidden in the various symbols outshone by 'food'. 'Food' through its various forms represents various shades of life.

Besides, literature and life which are the byproducts of each other have never refused to replicate the essence of food that it adds to life. The aspects and emotions that food symbolises through life and literature are being identified and enlisted by the paper by drawing references from life stances and literatures.

Food is an important commodity that marks both opulence and nothingness. The abundance of food denotes wealth whereas the scarcity of food addresses the paupers. Food marks the functioning of a person both from inside and outside. The inside functions of a human body such as losing or controlling one's appetite is determined by the availability of food. Availability of food is again influenced by the purchasing power exercised by the person, the act that takes place outside the human body. Therefore, the act to afford for food to whet one's appetite is determined by the availability of money. Depending on the availability of money, people choose the kind of food accordingly for consumption. Thus food, demystifies both the purchasing power

and the economic credibility of a person. It indirectly introduces the intricate class divisions among the home sapiens.

Food is made a business, it is considered as a commodity that mints money in abundance. In the hands of corporate sectors, food is packaged and sold that has led to food crisis. The food crisis has charged a state, in which the economically sound people afford to buy the packed food commodities and the economically subjugated people act as spectators. This draws a margin between the haves and have-nots. It again reiterates marginalisation in a new form leaving people unhappy and subjugated. In the present times, food attempts to create and thicken the margins between people. Margins majorly affect people of all ages and push them to experience the degrees of unworthiness. It makes people to fail to understand the difference between 'want' and 'need'. On handling these crises, people tend to forget the devastations that occur due to food scarcity.

In the present, 'poverty' that is showed up by the scarcity of food is extensively becoming high across the globe. The traces are evident. "An estimated 85,000 children under five may have died from extreme hunger in Yemen since a Saudi-led coalition intervened in the civil war in 2015, a humanitarian body said on Wednesday, as the UN special envoy arrived in Yemen to pursue peace talks" (Reuters). "The West Bengal Legislative Assembly on Tuesday witnessed noisy scenes over reports of deaths of Sabar community members allegedly due to starvation and malnutrition, with members of the Congress and Left parties staging a walkout" (Special Correspondent).

In literature, the descriptions of food occupy a space. These descriptions are either out letting the setting of the scene or the tone of the characters. 'Descriptions' is the genuine exaggeration employed by writers to exemplify their imagination and recreate the same in the minds of the readers. Some of these descriptions are supported by food products or some of the food products itself are described to achieve the writer's purpose. These genuine exaggerations have never failed to fulfill their purpose of recreating the writer's peace of mind. These descriptions have brought to life many aspects of life.

Food being a lifesaving entity have always found place in literature. The word 'food' or the statements relating to food have made a remarkable and an everlasting spot in the minds of the readers. There are various connotations that literature replicates through food. One such connotation that is annotated by Christopher Marlowe in *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (edited by C. Bhaskara Menon) is 'gluttony'. The description of gluttony, one of the seven deadly sins as enlisted by Marlowe stands the test of time.

GLUT. Who, I, sir? I am Gluttony. My parents are all dead, and the devil a penny they have left me; but a bare pension, and that is thirty meals a day and ten bevers, -- a small trifle to suffice nature. O, I come of a royal parentage! my grandfather was a Gammon of Bacon, my grandmother a Hogshead of Claret-wine; my godfathers were these, Peter Pickle-herring and Martin Martlemas-beef; O, but my god-mother, she was a jolly gentlewoman, and well-beloved in every good town and city; her name was Mistress Margery March-beer. Now, Faustus, thou hast heard all my progeny; wilt thou bid me to supper? (2.2.27)

Food attributes to psychological healing too. Food, either liquid or solid or be it a bowl of delicious biryani or a cup of hot coffee revives not just the senses or the appetite but provides a psychological healing too. What a person eats determines his or her actions. “Put simply, what you eat directly affects the structure and function of your brain and, ultimately, your mood” (Selhub). References similar to these facts are evident in literature too.

People talk too much about the writing of old white men, but if you could never taste again, it is Hemingway who could tell you about food. In *A Moveable Feast*, his ode to appetite, he writes, “As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and ... drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans.” (Conroy)

Despite happiness (as described above) ‘grief’, which is one of the difficult situations to experience in life is also reflected through food or over food and finds a place in literature too. The following lines are to be reflected in a state of distress to find solace.

This is Charles Bowden writing in his essay, *The Bone Garden of Desire*, about a defiant appetite in the face of grief. “I would believe in the words of solace if they included fresh polenta with a thickened brown sauce with shiitake and porcini mushrooms ...” He pleads with us to always go to the garden and the kitchen. There is affirmation of life in both. (Conroy)

Food has also become a genre in literature. It influences certain writings and writers to captivate their readers. The illustrations of food employed in literature create awe for the readers and they stand out in the minds of the readers forever. One striking line that just has employed the word ‘food’ is still green in the minds of the readers. The line is from one of the Shakespeare’s plays, *Twelfth Night* and the quotation stands out as follows. “If music be the food of love, play on” (“Famous”).

As food has been ventured in genres of literature the same has eventually ventured as a life changing career. It has branched into a stream of education nurturing someone's occupation. Institutions are specifically offering courses to specialise in catering technology. Cooking skills have illumined the lives of people and have turned people into historical figures as in the case of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) founder Colonel Harland Sanders.

Food plays a role in every genre of English literature. Especially food and drama have historical affiliations. Food and the issues underlying them have influenced writers and their writings as in the case of William Shakespeare.

And during Shakespeare's time, the English people were plenty hungry. The country saw at least 40 food riots between 1586 and 1631, as historian Buchanan Sharp records in his classic work *In Contempt of All Authority*. Shakespeare was new on the London scene just as the city was rocked by the food riots of the 1590s. And the bard well knew the hunger - fuelled 1608 "Midland Rising" that affected his home turf in Warwickshire. Scholars suggest Shakespeare drew on both in writing *Coriolanus*. (Bramley)

Hunger and poverty which are left behind as the ill effects of food's unavailability is truly felt in literature.

But in *Coriolanus*, the playwright makes the struggle real. The play, based on the life of the legendary Roman leader Caius Marcius Coriolanus, opens with citizens armed with "staves, clubs, and other weapons" in protest against the city fathers they accuse of hoarding grain while the populace starves. The resistance leader insists he fights "in hunger for bread, not thirst for revenge" – even as he rallies the masses to rebellion "rather to die than to famish." (Bramley)

The elements of food enter the titles of literary writings. They are employed to create paradoxical, metaphorical, satirical or any special effects to a literary work. They leave an everlasting hue in the minds of the readers. These titles provide symbolic representation of life and life related themes. It seems to turn out as a tool to register the writer's piece of mind. These titles connote the essence of the literary work. These titles propagate the literary work. The titles of these kinds are as follows: *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl, *Jack and the Beanstalk* by Steven Kellogg, *Chicken Soup* series to mention a few.

As titles stand as bench mark for literary works, some of the brands too that label some of the food products set bench mark for certain food products and propagate the same. The food brands such as Café Coffee Day, Starbucks Coffee, Cadbury, Britannia and many more fulfill the purpose of distinguishing their products from others. They denote the trust built on their products by the consumers. They denote the long history of the food products and the various historical aspects attached to it.

Food determines ‘history’. Food adheres history of brands in it. Evolution of certain food, food products and food brands cling to historical background. Evolution of the veteran brand KFC did have a story board relating to one of the historical events. The story of KFC dates back to the period of Great Depression which marks the daunting days of world history. Great Depression which brought differences in literary dimensions has chronicled the birth of one of the world’s popular food brand KFC. “KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) was founded by Colonel Harland Sanders, an entrepreneur who began selling fried chicken from his roadside restaurant in Corbin, Kentucky, during the Great Depression” (Singh).

Thus, despite reiterating the symbolic representation of ‘food’ in life and literature the paper is bound to stress on the following aspects which therefore adds to the outcomes of the paper. Food wastage happens at a large scale. On the other hand, need for food is highly increasing. It is due to ineffective food management. “In every Indian wedding, food is the most important part and the most wasted too! In India, statistics related to food wastage at weddings have been quite shocking, given the fact that it is the same country where countless number of people have to survive without the basic necessity of two meals a day” (Venue Monk).

Food wastage and food scarcity are both recurring and increasing leading to critical situation as stated by the following statistics. “Around 100,000 weddings and social events are held in India every day. Food wasted each day at weddings and family functions in Mumbai alone would be enough to feed the city’s vast slum population” (Venue Monk). In order to curtail this warning situation, food management has to be practiced at a sturdy fashion.

Another impact that the paper implies to stress on is that ‘Globalisation’ has altered the food phase of the country. Food wander has been turned into wander lust. All the continental food of which some are considered junk has replaced the traditional food. These junk foods fail to provide goodness to the human body. This results in an unsound body and mind.

The endurance of food is strongly felt in both life and literature. ‘Food’ denotes various shades of life. The diverse spectrum of emotion that food exhibits is limitless as referred in the paper. The chronicles that food delivers about people, place, and things are exquisite and

interesting. Therefore, food as an everlasting commodity relishes both body and mind. With its nutritional values and deliberate facts 'food' symbolises its key representations. These representations are therefore exemplified by the paper through the instances taken from life and literature. Literature and life are not two different entities - therefore 'food' in both represent life.

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