

The Irish Famine Eviction: Destitution and Survival of Irish Migrants in Sebastian Barry's *Days Without End*

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The role of food in the history of humanity ultimately provides cultural processes for ethnic identity. Along with religion, language, folklore, food has also been one of the most significant creators of ethnic and regional identity. The invention of cooking allows human beings to make it as a cultural product which is formed by the climate and environmental geography of a nation and also denotes the characteristics of the places. People from different parts of the world eat different varieties of food but certain types of food and culinary tradition are considered as one of the significant cultural symbols and pride of an ethnicity. The production, ingredients, methods, preparation, preservation and consumption of food explain the history of the dynamic ways people opted for living. It creates human bonding and at the same time it preserves the cultural disparity. The enlightenment indigenous food and its ingestion construct identity and claim the individuality of the people from the outsiders. Moreover, the food predilections vary within an ethnic or regional group according to their class. The concepts of food and food system make clear perception about the relationship between the people and food, and their creativity in the preparation. The traditional way of production and ingestion of food is passed down from one generation to other generation. The implementation of richness in food making is the supreme manifestation for the reinterpretation of cultural identity and it also reflects the intellectuality of human civilization from classical to contemporary age.

Food plays a vital role in the development of social structures and the tradition of a society because food is culture; it is medicine; it determines the economy of a nation. In his article Jean-Jacques Boutaud states that “food becomes a central identity marker, defining personality, social class, lifestyles, gender roles and relationships, from family, to community, to ethnic groups or nationality, changing through time and place” (1). The history of gastronomy is conserved and utilized for ethnic pride, national identity and symbolism, familial and regional inheritance.

At the same time the scarcity of food can take away the livelihoods of people. Food is essential to live but the decline of food production will bring terrible and prolonged hunger. During the famine the population of a country will be decreased that people will die due to malnutrition, starvation and acute diseases. Generally, famine does not prevail perpetually, but the effects will be severed, and the scars of the famine live eternally in a country. Famines can come from war and epidemic such as Chinese Famine, Ethiopian Famine, and North Korean Famine. Some famines are provoked by natural disaster like drought, flood, insect infestations and plant diseases. Likewise, in

Ireland, the Great famine was a natural catastrophe which brought drastic change in the economy and livelihood of people. Apart from that there was some political inability that made the people to suffer vulnerably by the famine.

Culture explores the excellence of human knowledge towards moral values, fine arts, belief, customs, behaviour and human attributes which are shared by the people of a particular society. The culture of Ireland is concocted and steeped in myth, literature, religion, music and language that helped to establish the land as a single national identity. Along with these cultural elements, food had also been an epoch-making in the embodiment of national and cultural identity. However, in the period of seventeenth century due to social and political changes in the land, Irish cuisine represented different cultures. Jean-Pierre Poussou wrote in his essay that “Irish food was essentially based on milk products, butter in winter, curds and whey in summer. The diet included meat, and in coastal areas fish, with oat gruel as a supplement” (Web). The dairy products, wheat, peas, beans and oats were the staple food of the ancient people of the land. During the British regime variety of Potatoes were instigated into Ireland and in the beginning, it was cultivated as vegetable garden plant. The benefit of potato was that it grows where the cereals cannot be cultivated. Therefore, the amount of cultivation and ingestion of potato were increased two times and soon after it had taken over the staple foods such as oats, meat and dairy products. Eventually potato became the essential food of the Irish diet in the second half of the eighteenth century. People from lower and middle class society used potato as main foodstuff extensively, the result of which lead to indigenous food items of Ireland became cash crops and were exported to England. The protagonist, Thomas McNulty in *Days without End* recalls his past to explore his life in Sligo County, Ireland and explain the changes in the food system from the arrival of potato. His father had exported their indigenous food and the family was completely depended on potato.

My father was a butter exporter man in a small way sending butter in barrels out of Sligo port into England. All good things were sent there. Cows, beeves, pigs, sheep, goats, wheat, barley, English corn, beets, carrots, cabbages, and all the rest of the paraphernalia of existence. All that was left in Ireland was the potato for eating. (28)

The exportation of indigenous food, complete dependency on potato and larger cultivation of potato was later found erroneous by the propagation of the fungus *Phytophthora infestans*. In the middle of the nineteenth century the fungus spread rapidly and ambushed the potato crops without any caution. This leads to the great catastrophe which is known as a Gorta Mor, i.e. the Irish Potato Famine. Paul F. State explained the situation in his book *A Brief History of Ireland* that “In 1845 the blight spread to encompass about half the country, destroying about 30-40 percent of the crop. In 1846, it was apparent that the blight had returned, this time destroying almost the entire crop nationwide” (185). The one third of potato crops were completely annihilated by the fungus and people ventured a great hunger. In the novel, Thomsan mournfully envisages the death of his mother and sister when there was nothing left to eat in Ireland except the blighted potatoes.

All that was left in Ireland was the potato for eating and when the potato was lost there was nothing left in old Ireland. She starved, in her stocking feet. In '47 the harvest was so bad even my father had nothing then. My sister died and my mother, on the stone floor of our house in Sligo town, in a street called the Lunguey. (28)

The common Irish people had historically confronted the denial of rights, been the victims of famished and chronic diseases, and experienced the devastation of their livelihoods for so many years. Though the Great Famine was a natural disaster its repercussions were aggravated by the activity and inactivity of the Whig government which was led by Lord John Russell. Paul F. State referred in his *A Brief History of Ireland* that,

Russell believed that his government should leave relief to the local workhouses and the buying and distributing of food supplies to private merchants and speculators. The administration closed the food warehouses, except on the ravaged western seaboard, suspended public works, and forbade local relief committees from selling food at less than prevailing market prices, which soon soared out of reach of the desperately poor. (186-187)

The inequality approach was also one of the reasons for the famine. The lower and middle class people were the majority to confront destitution and starvation. Through colonization and dissociation of land poor farmers could not cultivate their food crops but people of upper class survived which is observed in Paul F. State's *A Brief History of Ireland* that "large landlords survived" (189). People from upper class utilized the situation and developed their wealth. They took land from the poor tenants in order to provide food for them.

According to Indian economist Amartya Sen, food availability decline is the root of famines. He talks about the entitlement failure in his work *Poverty and Famine* that has connection to the Great Famine. The lower and middle class people largely had entitlement on potato, but the infestation of fungus crops was destroyed, leading shortfall in food production. They could not sell the potato and became penniless which took them into destitute and starved for a prolonged period in the country. The exportation of indigenous food caused food decline and brought into a Great Famine.

The people had been living in extreme poverty, dying of extreme hunger and deprived of their sense of identity. The common people of Ireland experienced larger amount of health disparities and their longevity was decreased than the upper class society. They found difficulty to obtain enough food to eat. So, the people ate whatever they found and died of the consumption of infested food they had. Here, Paul F. State visualizes the terrible situation of people to the reader in *A Brief History of Ireland*.

People ate raw turnips; seaweed; half cooked Indian meal; nettle tops and wild mustard; the carcasses of dogs, horses, and diseased cattle; and even grass, so they

died of dysentery, the fatal bacillary dysentery called the “bloody flux”. Irish men, women, and children succumbed to hunger edema (“famine dropsy”) from lack of food, to scurvy from vitamin C deficiency. (188)

According to Paul F. State, millions of people perished of destitution, starvation and unexpected diseases. When seeing the weakening and devastation of livelihood millions of people started to evacuate the native land for the sustenance of their family. Paul explain the horrible condition of the people during the famine in *A Brief History of Ireland* that “Many among those who were poorer sailed first to Canada . . . the 100,000 who sailed to Canada, about one sixth died on the voyage” (189). In the novel *Days without End*, the narrator Thomas also had the traumatic experiences of famished, witnessed the death of his own people and millions of migrants during the famine. He lost his family, wealth and identity, and travailed for survival.

I say my sister and mother perished. They perished like stray cats, no one caring much. But the whole town was perishing. The old ships started to bring ruined people to Canada, people that were so hungry they might eat each other in the holds. I am not saying I saw that. But I was thirteen or so and I knew in my heart and soul. . . I was among the destitute, the ruined and the starving for six weeks. Many went overboard, that’s how it was. (29)

Even during the voyage many people died of hunger and fever. They could not resist the situation. The hunger not only took away their land, wealth and family but also took away their identity, pride and ethnicity. In *Days without End*, during his voyage to Canada the narrator Thomas felt that he was afraid of revealing his identity because of the hunger as the Canadians see them as diseases and like shit animals

Into the fever sheds with us and that’s where hundreds died. I’m just writing all this down. The point is we were nothing. No one wanted us. Canada was feared of us. We were a plague. We were only rats of people. Hunger takes away what you are. Everything we were was just nothing then. Talk, music, sligo, stories, future, past, it was all turned to something very like the shit of something. (29)

The Great Famine made the people lose their national pride and other people had seen them as dreadful animals. They lost all their cultural identities such as stories, music, land and left with nothing prevailed but hunger. In Canada people did not find job to feed enough food for their family. The lower income in the country had made them to leave the place and wandered the world for survival. Paul in his book *A Brief History of Ireland* stated that “Many among those who were poorer sailed first to Canada, where fares were lowest and from there made their way south to the American republic” (189).

In the beginning of migration Thomas in the novel *Days without End* reached Canada but he could not find a job even to get enough food. Then he moved to America. There he had started his

life as female dancer when he was a teen-ager. He recalls that “Men shaved for us, washed for us. And put on the finery for us, such as it was. John was Joanna, myself was Thomasina. We danced, and we danced. We whirled, and we whirled. Matter of fact, end of all we were good dancers” (13). He felt that after so many days he wore good clothes and ate good foods. “This was the cleanest I had been in three years, maybe ever” (10). But later, in his twenties, he could not disguise himself as a woman and moved into the American army for survival. He writes that “Yes the army took me, I’m proud to say” (2). Then he lived his life as an army man till the end of his life. Though he struggled a lot he survived in some way. But the effect of famine, the feeling of hunger, still persists in his heart. Thomas tells that “but you were glad to get work because you didn’t work for the few dollars in America you hungered, I had learned that lesson. Well I was sick of hungering” (2). The sick of hungering refers his retrieval about the effects of famine which made people die of hunger and poverty.

As from the reference of the novel *Days without End* the narrator Thomas put forward the struggle of the Irish for the sustenance of their family during the Great Famine. In that period the entire country was shattered by the destitution, starvation, and chronic diseases. This forced the people to leave their native land in order to get good food and essentials for their life. The paper has attempted to explore the loss of food and the complete dependency on potato and the infestation of fungus which took the lives of the people for many years. It also tries to bring to out the other reasons for the great famine apart from natural factors such as inequality, colonization, entitlement failure, shortfall in food production which took the country into a great crisis. Moreover, the paper deals with the traumatic experience of the narrator in famine, his loss of identity and his travails to make both ends meet in the migrant country.

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