

## **Food Aesthetics in Literature: A Select Reading**

**Dr. K. Thamizharasi, Associate Professor of English**

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At every point of time, the needs of human race have kept on changing –but food remains the life sustenance forever. It is very appropriate to think on these lines in the present scenario where farming procedures, food procuring activities, food making industrial functions have undergone a radical change due to scientific and technological inventions. In consequence, it is the need of the hour that the traditional and proven methods of the past are redeemed and re-oriented for the welfare of progeny.

This paper aims at presenting the multifarious functionality of both overt and inadvertent food symbolism in literary texts. Accordingly, the focus is on the aesthetics of delineating select literary texts such as, *The Mistress of Spices*, *Bhoma*, *Evam Indrajit*, *Macbeth*, “Hunger”, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Road*, from multiple literary and critical perspectives. The chosen excerpts and extracts in relation to food bring out a panoramic view of the world and its social structure in miniature from ethnic, social, political, economic and moralistic dimensions in particular.

A deeper understanding of the concept of food in relation with individual and society reveals the fact that behind the domain of food there remain many great virtues and issues. Food not only nourishes the body but is inextricably yoked to one's culture. Just like language, food is culture specific. Each culture has its own unique cuisine. Diaspora literature brings out the longing of the immigrants for their home and food which increases the homing desire and creates fractured identity in them. For instance, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* the aromatic ingredients of Indian cuisine, such as cinnamon, cardamom, fenugreek, etc. are offered as a cure to heal the fractured selves of the immigrants. Each herb has a unique place in setting things right. The names of spices become titles of chapters in the novel, as they hold truly magical and healing powers. They are from the birth place of Tilo, the mistress of spices who owns an Indian store and helps the immigrants to overcome their psychological traumas.

The chapters narrate, “Tilo's interaction with her customers, and how she gifts a particular spice to them to solve their specific problems in life. Tilo and her spices are at the centre of the interaction between races, cultures, even various Indian cultures, with people of all ages, prejudices and expectations” (Yadav n. page. web). The very name Salad Bowl theory is an indicator that food is an inseparable part of any culture. It is a concept in United States to signify the integration of many different cultures for unique and peaceful co-existence of races. The application of Salad Bowl

theory to this novel is appropriate and denotes the characters, the residents of the US who combine like a salad in a bowl.

The denial of food and hostile environment are directly proportional to each other when it involves politics between man and Nature or man and man. Both *The Oldman and The Sea* and *The Riders to the Sea* depict man's star crossed struggle against Nature. In the same way, Bhoma, the village peasant, is a victim of man's hegemonic mania for economic and social glory. The exploitation of the agricultural labourers and the contemporary social ills are dealt with in *Bhoma* by Badal Sircar, a legend and doyen of Third Theatre. It presents the poverty-stricken life of the peasants who grow food grains for all. They are paid meagre wages which are not regular and do not suffice to support their large families. They starve and remain foodless for many days. This condition of the rural peasant is sharply contrasted with the well-fed, easy-going bourgeoisie of Calcutta. Bhoma is not only an individual but represents the oppressed peasant. The hungry villagers' blood transforms into food for others as, "Bhoma's blood, red blood, blossoms into white jasmines of rice in our plates. Twice everyday" (76). The blood imagery exposes the oppression and exploitation of the economically weaker sections of the rural masses and also stand testimony to the exploitation of the underprivileged by the elite. Here, the significance of food communicates relevant social messages pertaining to immediate contemporary situation.

Food is precious, the dearth of it results in hunger, famine and lawlessness. There is a saying in Tamil, 'Pasivandhal patrum parandhu pogum', which means, one who is afflicted with hunger will ignore devotion towards dignity, morality, and even divinity. Jayanta Mahapatra's poem "Hunger" is an apt example to prove the aforesaid maxim. Here a fisherman sells his 15 year old daughter to a stranger to keep himself and his daughter away from starvation as if she is a commodity.

The fisherman said: Will you have her, carelessly,  
draining his nets and his nerves, as though his words  
sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.  
I saw his white bone thrash his eyes. (2-4)

These lines decisively tell upon the flesh trade for want of food, which is a shame on the nation and humanity. The poem exposes three types of hunger – starvation of the father and daughter, the emotional starvation of the stranger, and unethical masculine hunger for female body. Objectification of woman is barbarism anywhere.

Food and its related concerns with feminine identity and domesticity from the perspective of two great writers, John Milton and Badal Sircar proffer a glimpse of the world view of women in general. Satan in *Paradise Lost Book IX* uses his diabolic tongue as a ruse to make the first pair on earth to err, by tempting Eve, to eat the forbidden fruit. Eve's feminine identity is taken advantage of by both Satan and Patriarchy. Man's fall from innocence to guilt is thus achieved by means of food in the name of knowledge.

The protagonist of the play *Evam Indrajit*, represents the intellectual aspirations and dilemmas of the urban middle class youth of the 1960's. He is both a rebel and a victim of his society. Though the seminal theme of the play is existential predicament, the writer, a humanist presents a glimpse of the position of women, through the rules that bind women and the duties expected of them. Indrajit, despite being a rebel who opposes the laws of the society which keep women subservient, also is a chip of the old patriarchal order. His wife looks after the house and he works in the office. Whenever she goes to her parents' house, he eats in the restaurant. This exhibits the patriarchal mindset that kitchen is a platform only for women, and subtly brings out the politics of food preparation at home.

There is no literary aesthetics without touching upon Shakespeare's contributions. Food symbolism abounds in the play *Macbeth* with many dimensions. For instance, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth receive their royal guest king Duncan with his retinue and offer them a ceremonial dinner with all humility and hospitality hiding their dark intentions. The richness and grandeur due to the royal personages is beautifully exhibited. Though it is a sumptuous royal banquet, there is no humanity in it. The evil intentions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth find a corresponding wavelength with the witches. In Act IV Scene i, the witches prepare a broth in a big cauldron using the wile, ugly and poisonous creatures and dance around the cauldron. Macbeth, who comes there to know the verdict of his present and future, shares the broth unhesitatingly with them. This devilish banquet brings out the evil innate in (man) Macbeth. Killing a king is regicide and it unleashes the depletion of self-culture in Macbeth due to his vaulting ambition.

Wherever natural justice is at stake, where the atrocities of man go unchecked, nature is exploited, and it brings about unnatural happenings, massive destruction and desolation not only to humanity but also to other creatures. In Act II Scene iv, Ross talks with an old man, who reports the unnatural happenings that took place on the previous night when Duncan, a noble and god-like king was mercilessly killed. To cite an example, the king's horses in the stable began to eat one another in tune with the horrible event as a result of the disturbance and calamity.

In an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic world, food is prioritized over everything – as Jean Paul Sartre says, “existence precedes essence” when survival or existence itself becomes a question mark – all other things including ethics become secondary. Throughout the novel *The Road* the remnants of the lost old world due to a catastrophe is depicted. McCarthy classifies humanity as a material object and places it along with electricity and running water, but the consolation is that humaneness might be existing at a lesser level. The boy and his father, the protagonists of the novel are “good guys” as they carry the fire – they follow the ethical standards of life. On the other hand, the “bad guys” plunder and kill the others to fill their stomachs. When the meagre store of food is also depleted, they become cannibals; they capture, torture, and eat the people whom they meet. The “bad guys” roast the newborn infants over campfires. Their act destroys the only hope of new life for humanity. On the contrary, the Father and the Son feel sorry for the lost life. This encounter provides answer to the question of the boy “Are we still the good guys? The father replied, we're still the good

guys. And we always will be” (64). The burnt infants demonstrate desperation and the total decline of man as a civilized being.

The man is able to find some food as he is the “life keeper and death dealer” to protect the boy. In a house, he discovers a bunker full of supplies, crates of canned food, two iron cots, hundred gallons of water and a chemical toilet. They stay there for some days. Even during times of adversity noble souls do not deviate from the moral codes. The boy and the man thank the people who left these things and express their gratitude: “Dear people, thank you for all these food and stuff. we know that you have saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldn’t eat it no matter how hungry we were and we’re sorry that you didn’t get to eat it and we hope that you’re safe in heaven with God.” (p. 154-155).

During calamities, the “good guys” who are noble and ethical, are protected by the Supreme Being. Both the protagonists have adequate food until they meet their ends. At the end of the novel, the father dies but the boy finds a good family with children as his caretakers. Nature never hurts the heart that loves it, at the same time there is no escape from the wrath of nature, when troubled by unethical, selfish human intervention. The apocalyptic/ post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* is a testimony to this.

Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* also deals with the relationship between man and nature. The common thread that connects both the novels is the issues relating to natural or manmade disaster, famine, move towards greener pastures, problems of survival, conflicting ethical standards of humanity during and after the catastrophe, degeneration and revival of hope for humanity at individual and collective level. Steinbeck emphasizes the importance of maintaining self-respect in order to survive spiritually. The Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* prove their humaneness: Tom and Casey sacrifice their lives to restore justice for a common cause, Ma Joad, a strong matriarch takes a lead role in her family and Rosh of Sharon exhibits universal motherhood by her act of feeding/suckling a starving man from death – a gesture of nobility and kindness.

The common purpose of uniting America around a morality-based economy that values people, places and work is another core element of *Grapes of Wrath*. While talking about the importance of man’s connection with nature, American agrarian philosopher Wendell Berry in his *Another Turn of the Crank* defines a healthy community as follows:

People who take a generous and neighbourly view of self-preservation, they do not believe that they can survive and flourish by the rule of dog eat dog; they do not believe that they can succeed by defeating or destroying or selling or using up everything but themselves. They want to preserve the precious things of nature and of human culture and pass them on to their children. They want the world’s fields and forest to be productive; they do not want them to be destroyed for the sake of production. . . They know that things connect – that farming, for example is connected to nature, and food to farming, and health to food – and they want to preserve the connections. . . (17-18).

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* which is a modern classic of fantasy genre is a moralistic novel of Roald Dahl written in 1964. It teaches children values of human life and morality from adults' perspective. The plot exploits the love of children for chocolate to teach them human values. For instance, the boy Augustus Gloop, is intrigued to falling into the chocolate river, which is flowing, for his vice of gluttony. Another child Violet, the world's champion gum chewer, eats away the sample, to be tested gum ball, and bloats like a giant balloon herself and becomes blue in colour. These two instances show that the disobedient children are punished by their own actions. Charlie Bucket, the little hero of the story becomes a role model to the youngsters. He is the only child who wins the competition and proves himself worthy among the rich whimsical children. His family is literally starving with seven members to be taken care of by one bread winner, his father. Charlie's father could provide only enough for, "bread and margarine for breakfast, boiled potatoes and cabbage for lunch, and cabbage soup for supper" (5).

Though Charlie, the only child of the family, is not well-fed, he is well-brought up with all virtuous qualities. His parents, despite being poor, take care of both their parents and behave decently and in a dignified manner. The grandparents entertain the child with stories. His upbringing is an example of good grooming that too in a society where values are declining. By observing the adults, children learn and also teach the adult world. "Child is the father of man" is not only philosophy but reality. "To Cook and Eat" is a poem written by Emma Richards, a twelve year old child reads thus:

To cook and eat  
is an art,  
yet a part  
of everyday life,  
we take it for granted  
not knowing  
not caring,  
that others  
may not have this thing  
which we so foolishly waste. (100)

Though simple, the poem throws light on the need to conserve, preserve, and share food, responsibly and lovingly for today and tomorrow.

To conclude, it is a universally acclaimed altruistic statement that food nourishes the body and literature nourishes and cultivates human minds. Food as life sustenance and its significance take humanity to different levels, with different layers of meaning in human history. All literatures disclose the essentiality of food and denote multiple meanings and functions. Vallalar, a saint poet of Tamil Literature and humanist, of the modern age, founded 'Suddha Sanmarkka Sangam' and looks upon food as substance which satisfies hunger and sustains energy to perform good deeds in life. He

considers offering food to the needy as ‘Jeeva Karunyam’ – unconditional love and compassion for all living beings, kindness and grace – the action of which elevates the soul. He seconds the idea that ‘the one who offers food, offers life too’, which is equal to ‘Where there is love there is life’ by being human. The same action is viewed by Bharathiyar, a great revolutionary Tamil poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as social justice as follows: ‘If a single person doesn’t get food, let the world be destroyed’. He talks about everyone’s right to food on earth. He tries to establish humanity and social justice through equality.

In accordance with the dictum of Bharathiyar, sharing food with others shows hospitality and humanity. A virtuous habit of sharing food is quite common even among children in South Africa and is popularized by the term “Ubuntu” which is a Nguni Bantu term meaning humanity. It is often translated as “I am because we are”, and also “humanity towards others”, but is often used in a more philosophical sense to mean “the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity” (Wikipedia n.pag.).

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Dr. K. Thamizharasi  
Associate Professor of English  
PG & Research Department of English  
Government Arts College (A), Salem – 636 007  
[mythurosh@gmail.com](mailto:mythurosh@gmail.com)