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## **FOOD NARRATIVES: RUMINATING GENDER**

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### **Abstract**

This paper proposes to examine food narratives as integral features of culture and acculturation. Taking select fictional narratives as case studies, the present study proposes to interrogate food as a discursive, narrative, cultural, ideological and representational trope. It is proposed to explore here, how the superstructures thus created move along lines of solidarity and distance, empowerment and the lack of it. As hypothesis, the study proposes food to be a critical vector of socio-political hierarchization and a significant tool which aids in forming notions of social, political, familial and racial power. The key research question posited here is how food becomes literary ethos and how this ethos helps define the interventionist nature of food. The focus of the paper will be to investigate the trajectories of selected food narratives, as they intervene into the cultural politics of food through the construction of gender. Other related questions, on food as a critical vector of social structure and hierarchy which embeds the politics of culture, are also prospected. Food takes its place as a foremost provision for regaining space, power, and voice, within the discourses of community, gender, identity, class, caste, human rights, nationalism and globalization, to name a few. Consequently, it has a seminal impact on the somatic and psychosomatic lives of people. As a potent marker of identity, kinship and hierarchy, food is probed for its complicity with power and for its impact on the lives of marginalized communities and people. Approached through the lens of food, literary texts tend to unravel significant cultural, ideological and creative insights as to their constitutive poetics and politics. This methodology also helps analyze how food coheres, defines and defies existing power praxis. Food is intricately related to cultural identity, continuity, validation and is a powerful tool of social control. In their monumental work, David Inglis, Gimlin and Thorpe, reinforce the centrality of food in all processes of society, "From class structures to gender relations, from forms of community to questions of identity, from cultural nationalism to globalization of human affairs, from grand cosmological designs of religion to the most mundane micro level details of human existence, all such key social process and structures can be very usefully explored and analysed through the lens of food and cooking" (I: 2). Communities and individuals are shaped by the foods they select, the ways in which they prepare and share them. As Mannur posits, food is a crucial "vector of critical analysis in negotiating the gendered, racialized, and classed bases of collective and individual identity" (*Culinary Fictions* 24). Unravelling the stories of our meals reveals gastronomical revolutions, technological leaps and sometimes gruesome realities. The favourite ingredients and set tastes are buried deep in our collective past. Analogously, food stories are wound up with the customs and rhythms of daily life, especially women's lives. The paper aims to investigate how food manages to turn into stories with cultural and representational specificity of relevance to women, with reference to the selected literatures.

### **Keywords**

Food Narratives, Culture, Gender, Acculturation, Social Hierarchy, Power Dynamics, Identity, Community, Cultural Displacement

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The focus of the paper will be to investigate the trajectories of selected food stories and how they intervene into the cultural politics of food through the construction of gender. The role of food narratives in identifying and codifying food traditions, as well as in helping archive theorizations on its politics, will be center spaced. Food takes its place as a foremost provision for regaining space, power, and voice, within the discourses of community, gender, identity, class, caste, human rights, nationalism and globalization, to name a few. Consequently, it has a seminal impact on the somatic and psychosomatic lives of people. This impact is exacerbated particularly in the case of those who get marginalized through caste, gender and geographical/ cultural displacement.

Communities and individuals are shaped by the foods they select, the ways in which they prepare and share them. Unravelling the stories of our meals, reveals gastronomical revolutions, technological leaps and sometimes gruesome realities. The favourite ingredients and set tastes are buried deep in our collective past. Analogously, food stories are wound up with the customs and rhythms of daily life, especially women's lives. The paper aims to investigate how food manages to turn into stories with cultural and representational specificity of relevance to women. The paper engages with the questions of gender through the short stories of the Indian Tamil author C.S. Lakshmi AKA Ambai.

Food practices evolve their own gender dynamics. This issue has been taken up for analysis in detail through the study of an anthology of Ambai's short stories, *A Purple Sea*. *A Purple Sea* was published in 1992, and is one of the earliest volumes of Ambai's stories which got translated into English. Ambai's engagement with women's lives and spaces reflects in various domains of her interests and pursuits. Her deep engagement with feminist issues led her to establish SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women), a facility which archives and documents works of female artists, writers. It aims at endowing value to women's narratives and creations, as worthy of being archived for purposes of creating/ recuperating the history of the underrepresented lives and narratives of women.

Her short stories engage with food as a cogent material and metaphor, which impacts women's daily lives. Ambai mostly writes in the short story genre and consistently foregrounds

feminist concerns in her writings. Commenting on her extensive use of the short story form she says, “I find the short story form very challenging because every time it has to take a different form. I find that very interesting and I have yet not thought of writing a novel” (Appendix i327). There is a palpable presence of food and food practices in her stories. Food as a trope, is efficiently deployed by Ambai to explore the lives of genders and characters in her stories. Reinforcing food as a cogent symbol of cultural value she says, “There is food as symbol of sharing, there is food as a symbol of power. There is also food that is in the public sphere where how it operates as friendship between people from different cultures” (338) and “Food is very much a part of friendship and healing. It’s very difficult to talk to a person unless there is food in between” (333). A lot of cooking, sharing and caring takes place within the prescriptive/ proscriptive kitchen spaces. Elucidating the centrality of food in her stories Ambai says, “I feel that the food is so closely integrated with the stories that in certain stories if you remove the food part of it then maybe a certain nuance will go away” (337). Ambai’s short stories aim to deconstruct such notions through a deconstructive reading of the gender politics embedded in the alimentary provinces.

The opening tale of *A Purple Sea* “Gifts”, tells the story of a woman, as she travels in pursuit of her research interests. Her escort Chidambaram takes her to his brother’s house for a bath and some food. The hospitality gregariously extended by the host is premised on the household toils of his wife who puts the water in the bucket for the woman and cooks crisp dosais for her. The unselfconsciousness, with which Chidambaram’s sister-in-law expects the visitor to bathe in the kitchen, while she cooks there, surprises the traveller. Her openness and innocence in talking about all aspects of her life also amuses the protagonist, who reminisces of her own contrastingly constrained upbringing. However, they both share a gendered conditioning which is contoured along socially sanctioned roles in provisioning for food within the household. Along with a list of injunctions on dressing, talking, and demeanour, the visitor recollects the gastronomic labours which constrained and regulated her life even in the parental home, “Chop these vegetables for me. Churn the curds later” (*A Purple Sea* 4). Interestingly, Chidambaram’s sister-in-law sums up her life after marriage in analogous terms, “My realm has been to feed them all” and “I have to serve him a fresh dosai the second he has finished the last. He can’t stand it otherwise. If he gives a single blow. . .” (4). Gastronomic perfection, which is used as an excuse to practice domestic violence, is recalled fondly by the hostess who has internalized the gender discourse. The hostess’ desire to see the sea is an expression of her freedom to her own impulses, and therefore stifled speedily with a slap by the “. . . great devotee of Muruga. . .” (6). Within the overarching patriarchal mores which inform Chidambaram’s brother’s mindset, even the alimentary labours and expertise of his wife are devalued. He belittles her skills at cooking by peddling them as her only domain of knowledge (6).

As the visitor moves onwards on her journey, she visits Ganpati’s house. Ganpati’s sister Chandra, offers to make tea for her as she associates tea drinking habit to people hailing from Delhi (*A Purple Sea* 8). Regional notions of food preferences help build stereotypes. The life of the women of the house, which revolves around food preparation and other household chores, is in contrast to the comparatively independent existence of the protagonist. Chandra’s life is tied to home and hearth where, “Whenever one peeped in, she was found by the kitchen hearth” (9) ready to wake up at the slightest sound of cough to make a soothing drink. The smell of food on her hands, we are told is, “The smell of food which had been cooked for generations” (10). Food constructs itself as a cultural act, and in this instance, an act of gender. The food smells perforating Chandra’s body, establish the continuity of the age-old act of cooking as a gendered performance. The smell of food, which has been cooked for generations, transforms Chandra into a symbol for every woman, in as much as she represents their collective labour and destiny. The bond that the two women, Chidambaram’s sister-



in-law and Chandra, form with the visitor is again conveyed through the gifts of food they send for her.

In her next story, “Wings: I”, Bhaskaran is introduced as a bloated man with a hanging belly (23). However, his obesity is glossed over under patriarchal notions of a man in good health. He is mean and miserly by nature and averse to any expenditure of money. His whole world view revolves around monetary concerns, and leads him to view his wife and child as a strain on his finances. It is for this reason that he harshly reprimands his son to finish his entire meal, “What do you mean, too much, you rascal. Do you know how much rice costs? You’ll get a blow now. Eat up” (23). The spoiling of the pickle enrages him because of the wastage of precious salt, spices and oil. He carries his coffee and tiffin from home as it would be expensive to buy from outside (24). At first Chaya used to think that, food cooked by her had a special significance for him, but her misconceptions are speedily dispelled by his response, “Your cooking is all right. You waste materials, though. But all the same, it is a better bargain than eating at a restaurant” (25). His transactional relationship with food, deprives the family of any bonds which could be forged through it. Ranjitham, who lives in the opposite house, voices food’s centrality in life, “After all, why do we work so hard, Maami, except to eat well and to dress well?” (30). Bhaskaran’s constant rebuffing of her gastronomic preferences takes away the joy of living from Chaya. He refuses to buy her favourite mangoes, as they are very expensive. She who according to her mother, had a “. . . long tongue” (31) when it came to food, learns to renounce her cravings on the altar of Bhaskaran’s miserliness, “On that very day she cut her tongue and threw it away” (31).

Memories of Chaya’s life before marriage are mainly carved along gastronomic routes. Her food tantrums permitted her the exercise of her choices and are agency endowing. Her mother’s culinary toils to appease her in spite of her own bad health, construct notions of love and care which bind the family together.

In “Wings: II”, the growing disconnect between Chaya and Bhaskaran, gets increasingly reflected along gastronomic channels wherein, “She realized that all feelings special to the relationship between husband and wife had ceased between them. . . . She did not serve him his meal with care just because he was her husband. . . . She did these things as a woman with responsible and humane feelings; she would do them for any other human being” (42). Her desire to spread her wings and to be free of his despotism are fabricated through dreams of gastronomic agency “On Sekhar’s birthday she would invite all his friends to a meal. She would prepare sweets, whatever the price of sugar” (38). However, as pointed out by her sister, Chaya herself has been contaminated by Bhaskaran’s miserliness. She becomes so miserly that she denies her son the simple pleasure of eating ice cream simply because she would also have to spend on his friends (48). She is shocked at this realization. Deprived of appetite for anything, Chaya becomes an agent of repression herself.

Ambai’s story “Once Again” overtly espouses the theme of gender creation and stereotyping. The narrative opens with the line, “The two were created. / Lokidas. / Sabari” (91). The staccato tone, along with strategically placed periods, underline the artificiality and segmentation embedded in the creation of these binaries. The fate of the girl child is sealed within the home and the hearth in this oppressive household. Sabari’s father decides her educational trajectory keeping in mind that “After all you you’ll end up blowing at the kitchen hearth” (96). According to his gendered injunctions, Sabari’s orientation should be towards learning how to cook well through recipes in the popular magazine *Femina* because, “Nobody is going to marry a girl who can’t produce tasty food” (96). Women’s engagements have to obtain the sanction of patriarchal censors, which construe gastronomic domains of knowledge as appropriate for their consumption. The story constitutes food also to be an instance of production, producing women’s gendered lives and limiting the ambit of their reach to learning.

The last story in the collection is “A kitchen in the Corner of the House”. It is a story which has food at the heart of its significations. The title itself foregrounds the politics of space in the construction of the concept of household. The architecture of the house is depicted in terms of rooms which mimic mindless rows of railway carriages, with the kitchen carelessly thrown in towards the end as an afterthought. The spatial placement of the kitchen, at an isolated end of the house, symptomizes the relegation of the women and their labour to the margins of the household. The thoughtlessness with which this space is allotted to the kitchen, along with its dinginess and squalor, is indicative of the patriarchy’s apathy towards its occupants. The drainage sink has no ledge ensuring that the soiled utensils and food remnants literally and metaphorically overflow into lives of the women who work in this gendered site. The kitchen as a site is a veritable “No man’s land” and the youngest son Kishan’s entry into it in order to help his wife Minakshi, becomes a severe breach of the normative gender codes governing the household.

The patriarch Papaji’s Rajasthani lineage has a “. . . reputation for its love of food and drink. They were people who enjoyed the pleasures and experiences of life” (204). Concomitantly, perennial cooking and eating takes place in the story, be it to satisfy the common needs for physical sustenance, or to fulfil sociological needs of status accrued through food profusions and offerings. Festivity and hospitality are both earmarked through alimentary opulence and surplus which signals the prosperity and status of the family. However, the experience of the household as a restful and happy place is the privilege of the males of the family, who enjoy the fruits of women’s labour and toil directed towards the construction of the household and the family. The kitchen’s allocation to one corner of the house is an addendum to the location of the women and their gendered labour in normative patriarchal hierarchies.

The rites of passage ceremony of the new brides into the household are designated by the mother-in-law presenting a pair of gold bangles to them along with a soothing ointment for cracked soles and heels. This initiation ritual ushers the new brides into the world of the household, where the women resign themselves to their unhygienic working environment and an overflowing sink which afflicts their feet. The patriarch is apathetic to their plight and completely insensitive to the inconvenient, unhygienic physical environment in which the women of the household work. The kitchen has two windows which overlook the green mountains with a temple on the top. However, even this soothing sight is denied to the inmates by the sundry wet clothes which hang on the clothesline just outside which curtails the sight and mind from wandering too far away from the inward-looking household and its labours. The women have no respite from the incessant cycle of cooking and cleaning. The kitchen, as Ambai says, “was not a place; it was essentially a set of beliefs” (206). This set of beliefs is patriarchal and exploitative which presumes that women’s lives must be relegated to labour silently in the kitchen spaces, from where delicious food appears magically. Accordingly, the women are admonished on the day of the picnic, for creating noise while preparing the food, as it disturbs the males of the house who are still resting. In a household where the division of labour is gendered, the construction of the home as a place of comfort and enjoyment is primarily the prerogative of the males.

It is only fitting that Minakshi, the unconventional South Indian daughter in law who is an outsider to the ‘Rajasthani’ customs, voices suggestions to Papaji for improving the kitchen. Her outspokenness is met with disbelief at her audacity and a swift chastisement in the form of more clothes lines added outside the kitchen windows to block the compelling view. Papaji’s underlining of his home as a “Rajasthani household” is his way of asserting the local culture within which he eats. It is this culture which anchors his view of the world and creates taxonomies of signification.

Minakshi, a South Indian, is an outsider to this culture and the food differential at her wedding become foremost marker of her outsider status. For a people who serve alcohol as prasad

for their clan goddess Amba, the absence of liquor and meat at the wedding feast is reason for objection. The unfamiliar food feast strikes an appropriate note to orchestrate the marginalized status, which continues to define Minakshi's position in the family. South Indian dishes prepared by Minakshi are viewed as bland and pale in comparison to the spicy Rajasthani mutton pulao.

Similar patriarchal codes operate in the second son Gopal and his wife Radha's house in Jodhpur, and the kitchen once again becomes its transmitter. Gopal's memory of having to stand in the hot and uncomfortable kitchen for making tea, while Radha is away for a couple of days, is important enough to be narrated. But when Kishan points out that Radha bhabhi also cooks in the very same uncomfortable kitchen, Gopal dismisses it as womanly fate, "After all, women are used to it" (214). Kitchen invariably becomes a space of neglect and apathy which extends to its naturalized users, women.

The control of the kitchen, designates the hierarchies of power amongst the women. Food practices become a crucial marker of the position held by women in society and household, a position which is solely defined vis-à-vis the presence of a husband. While the grand matriarch Bari-Jiji held sway in the kitchen, Jiji laboured incessantly, but with the grandfather's death, in one stroke of fate, the reins of power shift from Bari-Jiji to Jiji. Consequently, the kitchen becomes Jiji's domain of influence and control. In order to further consolidate her jurisdiction, all the expensive foodstuffs are kept by her under lock and key. Kitchen becomes the arena of food combat, the chief proponents of which were "Jiji, Bari-Jiji" (209). However, the power politics of the kitchen is revealed to be patriarchal, venal and rotten at the core. After grandfather's death, Bari-Jiji's lowered status is signified through an analogous lowering in her food entitlements. Along with loss of right to *kumkumam*, Bari-Jiji also loses her right to betel leaves, meats and spirits. The prescribed pious living of widowhood necessitates a renunciation of all aphrodisiac amorous 'tamasic' foods.

The kitchen power play provides ample opportunity to Jiji to get even with Bari Jiji, for all the times that she had been mercilessly exploited. She ensures that no meat preparations are given to Bari-Jiji, and demarcates plain potato or left-over meals for her. Not one to be outwitted, Bari-Jiji deploys religious superstition as strategy to reclaim her rightful share in the foods prohibited to her.

Though the account of Bari-Jiji feigning possession by goddess Amba is rendered with an amused undertone, it is a sinister reminder of the covert strategies and deceptions deployed by women to circumvent social strictures in their lives. Ironically, Amba is symbol of power or 'Shakti', but it is only through a surreptitious invocation that this power can be wrested from patriarchal clutches.

Minakshi is the only female character who publicly voices her opinion and fails miserably in her attempts to intervene in patriarchal mores. On the other hand, Bari-Jiji's surreptitious but creative strategy reaps rich dividends in access to sumptuous feasts of food. The patriarchal codes which disallow the plain speak of Minakshi, make the covert underhand kitchen politics as the only stratagem accessible to women.

The kitchen arena engenders a food politics which is played along debilitating lines of inclusion and exclusion, control and authority. Ironically, the kitchen spaces which captivate and subjugate the freedom of the women, are viewed by them as a source of power. Janus faced in its promise of power and control to women, the kitchen enslaves them within the very domains they deludingly think, they rule. The internalization of the patriarchal relegation of the women to the universe of the kitchen is so complete that even their intellectual accomplishments are restricted to making earth shattering decisions about the dishes to be prepared. Patriarchal ideology finds its best proponent in the women themselves who refuse to breathe in the fresh air from the mountains lest they lose control of the stuffy dark kitchen. Their idea of authority and control is inextricably intertwined with the unending cycle of being the kitchen's slave and master.

The story draws towards a close on the mistress of the house's ever-increasing obsession with the kitchen, in spite of her ill health. During her illness, her foremost concern is not for her own wellbeing but for the eventuality that Bari-Jiji may usurp her position as the mistress of the kitchen, therefore by extension, of the household. In a rare moment of sharing, she reminisces to Minakshi about her wedding. Food is an important determinant of subjectivity and Jiji's memory is also inextricably enmeshed with it. She recalls cooking three hundred chapati's at her initiation into the kitchen (220). The reward for this back breaking labour is bruised hands and appreciation from her father-in-law for being a 'good worker'. Her kitchen labours claim its first victim, Jiji's first born, who dies of a fall from the parapet. All the women, including Jiji, are busy in the kitchen preparing the feast for a puja, and do not see him climb the stairs. Jiji recalls how, as soon as the men returned after completing the last rites of the child, she had resumed frying puris in the kitchen. This episode is a telling comment on the insensitivity towards women, whose duties towards food procurement must take precedence over all else. Food and food practices map the terrain from birth to death, celebration to mourning, prescribing and proscribing women's lives within gendered discourses.

Jiji shares with Minakshi the two secret cardinal rules that women must master in order to acquire strength and authority. The first is to take control of the kitchen and the second to adorn oneself attractively. Jiji mistakes the circumscriptions of patriarchy, for prescriptions of empowerment. She finds consolation, for all the suffering under her father in law's regime, in the acquisition of the silver waist hook holding the house keys, "...see how much I gained. I am like a queen..." (221). The silver key hook is a symbol of all the power Jiji imagines she wields by virtue of her ornaments and her control of the kitchen. Even as the Kitchen becomes a gendered site of conflict, it is open to conflicting interpretations.

Minakshi points out the perfidiousness of the power offered by the kitchen, when she advises Jiji to distance herself from it as the source of her power. The kitchen, as well as the gold, both are misleading in their appearance as repositories of power. As Minakshi points out, the authority that they bring, belongs to Papaji. According to her, true authority comes from connecting with one's core, a core which is not defined by family, society, or gender. In the final analysis, kitchen is not only a metaphorical space filling up women's minds with thoughts of meals and ingredients, it is very much a physical space occupying their bodies, labour, and time.

She wishes for women to be free of it so they could be part of discoveries, inventions, and art which would immortalize their labour. She posits, that if women could be free from the bondage of household chores, they could be part of the historical processes which shape the world. For Minakshi/ Ambai, the epitome of an emancipated empowered existence is one where the smell of cooking and the sight of jewels vanish, where the womb and breasts fall away to create an entity which is not gendered. It is in Minakshi's articulations that her resistance, agency and transformative power lie.

Ambai's stories unravel food as a gendered discourse and act which presents itself as a powerful tool for forging fettered and disempowered lives for women. It is deeply complicit with the gendered politics of culture. In all her stories, Ambai questions the normative formations of identity and gender stereotypes. Food presents itself as a potent agent of social, familial order and hierarchy, as well as a cogent force of questioning and unravelling the entrenched mores. Who cooks, who decides what to cook, what is eaten and what is prohibited, how much is eaten and in what order; all these parameters become a gauge of hierarchy, access and power.

Ambai's food narratives, yet again, reveal the wide magnitude of goals that women may have, other than resistance. Though the alimentary domain remains a cardinal ingredient in female biological, psychological and sociological destiny, Ambai constantly challenges the normative patriarchal food codes. Many of her protagonists are women who are in pursuit of educational goals,



beyond the prescriptive household domains. Depictions of women caught in traditional households resonate with images of domestic emotional and physical abuse and violence, mainly justified as punishment for neglect of food obligations. Ambai also presents food as an empowering marker of building bonds of family and community through cooking and eating. Ambai's stories examine the kitchen as a circumscribed/ prescribed space, deeply integrated with women's lives.

It is in these contexts that food becomes an important ingress into ontological understandings of the female self, as well as an integral mediator of the constantly changing and reordered female body. The identity endowing capacity of food also proliferates through the variations in flavour from one household to another, and is reflected in "the cooks concern with variation and the uniqueness of her skills, the irreducible maternal singularity of her work" (Inglis et al. IV: 13). Secret grandmother's recipes which are passed down through generations, serve to identify and highlight the cook, as much as the dish. Family recipes, culinary knacks jealously preserved, secret recipes, are not only markers of a valued knowledge base, but are to be viewed as artifacts with exclusive familial markings which uphold the overt/ covert ideations of the family unit. Women's relationship with food inheres the potentials to calibrate either a conceding and perpetration of social codes, or an articulation of their divergent assertions. The analysed narratives cogently unravel the cultural and gendered manipulations that food and food narratives, embed and engender. The paper presents a diversity of responses offered by Ambai's food stories wherein female characters are seen as conforming to patriarchal codes, while simultaneously resisting them.

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