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'FOOD LONGING' IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SHORT STORIES: A STUDY OF GITA HARIHARAN'S 'REMAINS OF THE FEAST', MOGALLI GANESH'S 'PADDY HARVEST' AND BULBUL SHARMA'S 'JARS OF GOLD'

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of food as a motif in Indian Literature focusing on three contemporary short stories that have used 'food longing' to articulate the experience of marginalisation and oppression that the characters undergo. In all three texts, the characters desire a particular food item that is not accessible to them – either because of inaccessibility or prohibition. Thus food in the three stories becomes metaphoric of their experiences as well as the source of their resistance of the hegemonic structures of caste and gender that seek to keep them in their place.

Keywords: Food as symbol, resistance, marginalization, identity

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Food is an important aspect of our life, especially in a nation like India where poverty and hunger are an intrinsic part of existence for many. Food has won and lost elections, been the reason for cultural and religious violence and has been a part of government agendas. Therefore it can be safely concluded that food plays an important role in society and exists more than just as a matter of sustenance. It is a symbol and moves beyond the function of physical nourishment.

It is an essential part of death rites as well as marriage. It has been the reason for battles and colonization. And since the primary purpose of literature is to 'represent' the world around, food and the written word have been closely related. Writers often use food as a rhetorical and/or metaphorical device to represent the 'abstract internal and difficult to express concepts' (192, Mary Anne Scholfield). Food as a rhetorical device often helps the writer to represent the essential qualities of life – a device through which the writer can imagine the socio-political structures of power.

There have been many different ways in which food has been used in an interpretative manner – semiological, socio-historical and cultural. The most popular approach to the study of food has been in the field of social anthropology where it is studied for its symbolic or metaphoric values:

Food is identity, memory, and locality. Food is emotion, relationships and sex, and is needless to say, deeply intertwined with kinship, agency and power. Because there are few humans who do not engage with food every day of their lives, there is simply no limit to the contexts in which we can regard food as a substance on which, with which, and through which humans exist, whether its uses are festive or every day, sacred or profane, benign or cruel.(546, Ann Grodzins)

So, for many writers, food becomes the entry point to their explorations on class, gender, caste and identity politics. In some writings food reflects the cultural and social contexts – an illustration of the modes of power in society, and eating itself becomes a political act. AnziaYeziarska in her novels use food to discuss issues of identity and to question assimilation. Anita Brookner uses ‘hunger’ to explore self-development and identity. Therefore, food and eating are often articulations of emotions and manifestation of the psychological conflicts and repressed desires of the characters.

This paper will study how three short stories – ‘Remains of the Feast’ by Delhi based Gita Hariharan, ‘Jars of Gold’ by Bulbul Sharma and ‘Paddy Harvest’ by Dalit Kannada writer Mogalli Ganesh, use food and the desire for it in their narratives to reflect the structures of power and the characters’ desire to subvert them.

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Food is closely related to religious, national and ethnic identity. In a positive way this identity is asserted through what is allowed to the characters. In its negative form, it is manifested in what is denied to them – ‘food taboos.’ Therefore, the procuring, eating and not eating of food has significant meaning and reflects structures of power and domination in society. Questions of identity are constructed and resolved through food practices – its preparations, taboos and consumption. And questions like, who is allowed to harvest or hunt, who is permitted to cook the produce, how it is cooked, in what is it cooked, how it is eaten, who eats it and who serves it, become important in finding answers to the questions raised in the texts.

The three stories are all narrated from the perspective of the marginalized. The third person omniscient narrator of ‘Paddy Harvest’ empathises with the plight of the lower castes. The first person narrator of ‘Jars of Gold’ and of ‘Remains of the Feast’ are women who understand and experience patriarchal oppression themselves.

In ‘Paddy Harvest,’ paddy becomes the centre of caste conflict and the oppression of the Dalits is manifest in their limited access to it. The story begins with the lower caste characters fantasizing about the paddy grown by the upper caste lords, illegally on public land – the Olegere plain, that the tehsildar had announced they would be allowed to harvest and take home. For the Dalits, food is a major preoccupation not because of their access to it but because of the scarcity. The Dalit villagers fantasise about the paddy that they will be allowed to harvest, especially significant since it belongs to the upper castes and talk about the feasts that they have attended. Traditionally, the upper castes have exerted control over lower caste body and identity. In the story, the Dalits are given an opportunity to subvert the power structure – by being given control over upper caste paddy.

For them, in this instance, the paddy becomes a metaphor for a life different from that of their regular day to day existence, which is marked by hunger and suffering. Hunger in the story becomes a metaphor for their powerlessness and paddy becomes one of power:

The entire colony warmed with dreams; with a hundred plans. Then they all went to bed hoping and believing that at last their empty, wasted lives would be filled with riches. Their bodies felt the cool breeze from the plain, a breeze that travelled across the wide fields and wafted in with the aroma of paddy. (115, Paddy Harvest)

Paddy here becomes not just food but a metaphor for ‘power’ that the caste system had denied them.

Likewise in ‘Jars of Gold,’ the bottles of pickle that the title refers to, the access to which is denied to the women of the family, become symbols of privilege and power. Buaji, under whose strict control food is portioned out in the family, becomes a representation of patriarchal authority, policing the women and servants (representing the lower classes) into submission and doling out male privilege. Her control over the family and domestic space is absolute and manifest in the way daily food rations are doled out “with

meticulous care that not an extra grain of rice, sugar or dal ever entered the kitchen.” The pickles, like the paddy in the earlier mentioned story represent the ‘taboo’ and the denial of which defines the identity of the narrator and the other women in the household. The narrator’s ‘longing’ for them becomes a manifestation of her desire to escape her state of powerlessness.

Similarly in ‘Remains of the Feast,’ the great-grandmother’s desire for ‘illicit’ foods like, cakes, coke, alcohol, fruitcake, ice-cream, biscuits and samosas made by ‘non-brahmin’ hands become symbolic of her desire to break out of the structures of control and power she had been subject to her entire life. Her actions in old age, assumed to be those of a senile old lady by the other characters, symbolize her desire to break food taboos she had lived by: “Lots and Lots of eggs,” I would say, wanting her to hurry up and put it in her mouth. “And the bakery is owned by a Christian. I think he hires Muslim cooks too.” (171). The food imagery in the story is on one side a manifestation of the old lady’s desire to assert herself and on the other, the young narrator’s perception of it: “She retched and as the vomit flew out of her mouth and her nose, thick like the milkshakes she had drunk, brown like the alcoholic coke.” (173, Remains of the Feast)

In all three stories, the denied food become symbols of socio-religious restrictions imposed on them. The pickles, cakes, coke and masala peanuts become symbols of patriarchal restrictions that women are subject to, while paddy becomes a symbol of caste restrictions imposed on the Dalits. Thus in the three stories, food acts as the medium through which the socio-cultural position of the characters is explored and their identity is imposed and enforced on them. And in this context, the ‘longing’ for these ‘taboo’ foods can be read as the characters’ dissatisfaction with the identity imposed on them and as attempts by them to assert their agency and control.

In ‘Remains of the Feast’ the old woman’s subversion and resistance of patriarchal restrictions is manifest in how she eats the foods that are taboo. Her final words on her deathbed, for a red sari and fried masala peanuts, is an expression of her repressed desires during her life as a Brahmin widow. In ‘Jars of Gold’ the monthly theft of the key, an unsolved mystery, becomes an act of resistance most probably by one of the women in the family against the patriarchal domination and control. Likewise in ‘Paddy Harvest’ the tehsildar’s invitation to the Dalits to clear the encroached field of upper caste paddy and to take possession of the harvest becomes an opportunity for them to defy the caste structures that dominate them otherwise.

However, the assertion and resistance in all three narratives is short lived and ultimately thwarted, especially so in ‘Remains of the Feast’ and ‘Paddy Harvest.’ In ‘Paddy Harvest’ the Dalits are hunted down by the police, beaten up and the paddy seized. The police action, instigated on the power asserted by the upper caste members is described in words of caste humiliation and rape: “The very body of the untouchables’ colony was being stripped naked.” (123, Paddy Harvest) At the end of the story ‘paddy’ which had been a symbol of power and wealth for the Dalits becomes a ‘witch’ that subjects them to even more humiliation, violence, hunger and exploitation. It becomes a reminder of their powerless state and the futility of their hopes and dreams: “They felt the wind blow from the dried pond fields, where their hopes of a harvest lay dead.” (126, Paddy Harvest)

One of the final scenes in the story is Mayamma’s grandson, “unable to bear his hunger, began picking up the cooked paddy grains scattered around the stove. He stuffed his little mouth with them. He chewed hard, spat out the husk; the paddy juice streamed from the two corners of his mouth. It seemed as if he could digest everything.” (126, Paddy Harvest) This is in contrast to the fantasies in the beginning of the story, brought on by the tehsildar’s announcement. Here the paddy represents the continuance of the Dalit predicament – their suffering and humiliation. It becomes a metaphor for the power and privilege that is denied to them as well as their violent suppression by the state and their failed attempt to assert themselves.

Likewise in ‘Remains of the Feast’ the old woman’s last wishes for a red sari and fried masala peanuts remain unfulfilled. Ratna’s attempt to clothe the body in one of her red saris is thwarted by the family and the old lady is cremated in a ‘pale brown sari, her widow’s weeds.’ Like the Dalit colony in ‘Paddy Harvest’, the old woman is also silenced and her resistance ultimately suppressed by the re-assertion of social and religious hegemonic structures. In ‘Remains of the Feast’ the great granddaughter Ratna does continue the resistance

for sometime by eating 'taboo'foods: "I search for her, my sweet great-grandmother, in plate after plate of stale confections, in needle-sharp green chillies, deep fried in rancid oil. I plot her revenge for her, I give myself diarrhea for a week." (174, Remains of the Feast)In 'Jars of Gold' the resistance is manifested in the monthly theft of the key to the store room. However, in the end the key is returned and everything goes back to normal.

In all three stories, food longing reflects the marginalized position and relative powerlessness of the characters. The food denied to them – paddy, pickles and cokes, samosas etc from dirty bakeries and tea stalls, become symbols of power. The identity of the characters in the stories are constructed and reinforced through food practices. And though the characters, through their food fantasies and longing for what is denied to them, express their desire to break through and challenge the systems of power and hierarchy, their actions seem ultimately futile, because the stories end with the re-assertion and continuation of the hegemonic systems.

In 'Paddy Harvest' Mayamma's grandson eating the cooked paddy scattered around the stove becomes a sign of the helplessness of the Dalits, while in 'Remains of the Feast' and 'Jars of Gold' the resistance lives on in Ratna and the monthly theft of the store room key. For all three writers, food becomes the point of entry to their explorations of gender and caste and the mode of assertion of patriarchal and caste power. However food, in the stories, also become the source of assertion of self and agency, even if it is short lived and temporary.

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A Brief bio on Corresponding author

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