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Food for Thought: A Critical Inquiry into Food, Gender and Language

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ABSTRACT

Society is as society does. The culture of a region is an extensive manifestation of the mindset of the individuals residing in it. One's ideas and beliefs are reflected in their behaviour and furthermore, their behaviour assumes the eventual collective identity of a cultural ground. These aspects can be noticed even in the most mundane parts of their life such as their understanding of certain bodily gestures, their approach towards using language and their perception of their surroundings. Ironically, one of the key aspects of this inclusive formulation of one's cultural identity is also one of the most often neglected aspects of the daily life – food. Hence, gastrocriticism emphasises upon a critical inquiry and an interdisciplinary approach towards food, culture, language, literature and society.

The paper aims to focus on food as being an inherent part of the culture in the Indian subcontinent. Food in terms of being gendered as either masculine, feminine or neuter in different Indian languages and consequently being associated with different functions in daily life is a concept highlighted in the paper. For example, tea is perceived as a female entity in Bhavnagar, Gujarat in reference to its quality of being the nurturer and beginner of life (a day only truly begins with a cup of tea along with breakfast) to the townsfolk, whereas, it is addressed as a male entity in the language of urban Rajkot, 150 kilometres away from Bhavnagar, for its property of revitalising men at (and after) work. Moreover, the role of different genders while cooking, both at home and professionally, is another important aspect in the paper. Food also plays a prominent role in the lives of individuals and shapes the media narrative of the contemporary age, throwing light on its culture and lifestyle. Thus, food being a harbinger of life, an ingrained feature of culture, a shaper of identity and an indisputable part of language and is focused upon in the paper.

Key words: food, gender, men, women, cook

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INTRODUCTION

American journalist and writer Mark Kurlansky notes in his Glenfiddich Best Food Book Award winning non-fiction text *Choice Cuts* (2002) that “Food is a central activity of mankind and one of the single most significant trademarks of a culture.” This statement holds its metal for India as a country and Indians as a people.

Food has been a central element in shaping the history of the Indian subcontinent and determining the direction of its culture. Even in the 15th and the 16th centuries, the primary reasons for Europeans to sail through the seas and land on the newfound shores of India was to obtain the myriad of exotic spices.

From the intimate exchange of food among the households of a neighbourhood, which is a common practice prevalent across many Indian colonies, to the recent innovations in marketing done by food delivery applications such as Zomato and Swiggy, India is enriched with an entire spectrum of culinary narrative. This research aims to inquire in detail about a selected few culinary occurrences in the Indian paradigm pertaining to language and gender.

With this research, the discipline of gastrocriticism in the Indian context is put under a comparative measure with the patriarchal design of the Indian society at large and the functional properties of various Indian languages in terms of gendering and perceiving food items. The researchers aspire to draw cross-referencing parallels between the commonly found gendered pronouns of various food items in Indian languages and the overall perception of gender roles in the culture from which the said pronouns originate. Although, despite English being a rapidly growing language and an agent of cultural renaissance in urban India, it is not taken in primary consideration for the analysis as gendered pronouns do not exist for inanimate objects in English.

The research also aims to explore the dynamics of gender observed in culinary arts as a professional pursuit. Due to the aforementioned patriarchal nature of an Indian household unit, the women are structurally assigned duties of nurturing and being responsible for the nourishment of the family, while the men are conditioned to be the breadwinners and hence the external cause of the family's health and nutrition. This paper conducts an inquiry into the nuances of this societal compartmentalisation and aims to highlight the implications of patriarchy found in the culinary narratives of India.

A CRITICAL INQUIRY INTO FOOD, GENDER AND LANGUAGE

In a patriarchal society such as India, gender is a differential used majorly in the structuralist terms of a binary. The society materialises its experience of gender through its collective consciousness, behaviour, conventions, language and the perception of life. Gender is also often manifested in tangible entities e.g. toys, clothes, customs, rituals, etc. In a similar manner, gender finds its influence gaining dominance over food as well. In this essay, the researchers will delve into the dynamics of Indian languages through their practice of gendering food, and the perception of various food items as belonging to either spectrums of the gender binary in India, which will be cross-referenced with its representation in media and product-based marketing.

Language is fundamentally a mode of communication that facilitates the exchange of thoughts in emotions between a sender and a receiver. But from a more intersectional perspective, language is also layered with the cultural beliefs and mindsets of the region it originates from and belongs to. Hence, it can be rightfully considered a reflection and a systematic manifestation of the collective societal consciousness at large. As mentioned above, the structuralist viewpoint of the patriarchal Indian society promotes the categorisation of entities in binaries. Therefore, several Indian languages also feature the grammatical function of gendering not just living entities, but also inanimate objects. Such a provision does not exist in the English language as all inanimate objects are universally perceived and addressed with the neutral pronoun 'it'. Although, the same is not the case with Indian languages. Amongst the Indo-European family of languages, the ones that originate from the Sanskrit have the provision of gendering inanimate objects in their grammatical structure. For example, Hindi categorises objects into two genders: masculine and feminine; while Gujarati categorises objects into three

genders: masculine, feminine and neuter. The following notes are an inquiry into their function in gendering food items, and the consequent reflection of the ideology that prevails in the regions that the words belong to.

The Indian masala tea is termed as *chai* in Hindi, which is a commonly accepted feminine word. While in Gujarati, the word *chaa* assumes both masculine and feminine pronouns depending on where it is being used. For example, the residents of Bhavnagar, a district in the Saurashtra region, would use the feminine pronouns for *chaa*. In contradiction, the residents of Rajkot, a district adjacent to Bhavnagar, would use the masculine pronouns for *chaa*. This is a direct reflection of the cultural contexts of the said regions. Bhavnagar, being the stronghold of the Gohil dynasty in the colonial era, harbours the spirit of royalty and regal conduct. Hence, tea serves as a nurturing and comforting entity in their cultural context. On the other hand, Rajkot had been the political centre of the Jadeja dynasty, a clan known for its fierce warrior traits. Hence, as a cultural influence, the residents of a region perceive tea as an energising element which boosts their stamina for manual labour.

A similar case can be observed for the Hindi and Gujarati words for alcohol as well. All the commonplace words found in Hindi for alcohol – *sharaab*, *madira*, *haala* – are attributed with feminine pronouns as each word conveys seductive and romantic connotations. While the Gujarati term for alcohol, *daaru* and *madhya* are both masculine words. A firm implication in this case can trace back to the legal restrictions posed against alcohol in the state of Gujarat. The ban imposed on intoxicating products would make the act of consuming them a triumph of valour, which in turn, can be conveyed through a masculine pronoun. It is also important to note an intriguing peculiarity that the same word, *daaru*, when used in Hindi, assumes a feminine pronoun as the word exudes the connotation of luxury and romance as the other synonyms.

In the case of sweet dishes, *jalebi* is perceived to be feminine and cheap while a variant of the same composition, *ghevar*, is considered a regal delicacy in Rajasthani cuisine and hence is given a masculine pronoun. It is also a widely known fact that a cultural belief still persists in India, where *peda* (a sweet made from flavoured milk solids) are distributed in the neighbourhood on the birth of a son, while *jalebi* is distributed on the birth of a daughter. This practice has seemingly prominent sexist undertones in terms of championing the importance and significance of a male child by assigning him to an apparently expensive sweet dish, while deeming the girl child insignificant by symbolically assigning a cheap and common roadside sweet to her. In terms of snacks, another example emerges from the Gujarati language and culture, where the small flattened chips of gram flour are called *paapdi*, a noun that is attributed with a feminine connotation, while the bigger and thicker variant of the same composition called *fafda*, are masculine.

It is also noteworthy that the form and texture of the food item majorly affects its gendered perception. Across a vast variety of dishes, the ones that are thinner in density are perceived to be feminine while the ones that are thicker in density are perceived to be masculine. For example, two different dairy products – curd (*dahi*) and buttermilk (*chaash*) – are assigned different genders in terms of pronouns and perceptions in both Hindi and Gujarati. Again, in terms of sweet dishes as well, *basundi*, a dish made out of flavoured milk, spices and dry fruits, is a feminine noun while *shrikhand*, a dish made out of hung curd, spices and dry fruits, is a masculine noun.

Apart from being analysed as an inherent part of language and expression, gastrocriticism also adapts socio-cultural inquiries into the convention of culinary narratives in a region. The gender dynamics of the institutionalised culinary beliefs of a region can aptly reflect its gender differential at large. The following is an interdisciplinary analysis of the contemporary Indian paradigm in reference to the gender dynamics prevalent in Indian culinary practices.

The above mentioned system of the nomenclature of culinary items is rooted in history. The tradition of men cooking for the community began in old rural India when men would cook at large social gatherings. The vessels, knives, sacks of ingredients and other apparatus required for preparing the food would be large and heavy, the cooking would sometimes be done a night before in the outskirts of the village, the women would be typically involved in the cumbersome

process of dressing up, having henna on their hands while the men, dressed hassle-free would be responsible for the cooking of the meal. Thus, the public and more physical aspect of the task, considered more fitting as a job of the men folk was taken up by the man remains conventionally to be the charge of the males. Women cook in the safe arena of the household, toil just for their family while the men 'perform' in front of a large gathering and have no qualms owning up to their skills which, distressingly, are encouraged to be suppressed in womankind. Even today, it is a group of male cooks which is invited to cook at marriages, birth and death functions and other grand-scale Indian ceremonies. Male cooks are called "*maharaj*", a term meaning "king" or "leader" whereas there is no such provision for addressing female cooks in the culture of the country. Men and women serve normative functions in accordance to their pre-decided identities when it comes to the issue of food. Women become the means to promote healthy food choices at home, being responsible for the nutrition of the family while men help assemble the required food ("hunting").

Food consumption is also centred around the perception and normative identities of the genders. Men are traditionally encouraged to eat meat, eggs and other protein-energy rich foods whereas women are encouraged to have a fibre rich, low-energy diet consisting of fruits and vegetables. This has to do with the general ideal of men being muscular, strong and physically assertive whereas the women being petite and delicate. Culinary narratives are pluralistic and diverse in India and have a symbiotic relationship with the people and their ethnicity. Thus, the idea of food is seeped much deeper than in the taste buds-it has to do with the history, culture, language and perceptions of the locale within the country.

The food industry in India is dominated by male chefs, paid several times more than their counterparts, while a majority of women cook at home. Zara Morgan (2018) in a BBC news article explained the reasons for male domination in professional kitchens. As per UK National Statistics, only 17% of chef positions are held by women. Most women are discouraged to work in professional kitchens as it involves physical exertion(long hours standing in front of hot stoves or moving around to check over other subordinate chefs) while men are often seen capable of easily battling those challenges. Even in television cooking shows that involve a home décor set-up, the women host shows that are shot in backgrounds looking like an everyday kitchen while male chefs host shows wherein the backdrop is similar to that of a restaurant kitchen. Moreover, women chefs host shows that deal with cooking for children or healthy cooking as opposed to cooking as a hobby or cooking elaborate meals for oneself. Both the kind of shows are marketed keeping in mind women being their primary audience.

Another instance of gender disparity could be the plethora of misogynistic advertisements on television through the ages. A prominent example of the same is the series of advertisements by the National Egg Coordination Committee, India (EGCC) wherein men and women sing about the benefits of eggs for the audience's benefit-the men sing about the eggs being cheap and providing strength while the women talk about nutrition and the beauty benefits of consuming eggs. In yet another television advertisement to promote egg eating in India, featuring wrestler Dara Singh, men from three generations are shown to be sharing a breakfast of omelettes. The mother appears in the advertisement but is not shown to be eating. This could imply that women serve the men who would eat first in an Indian domestic setting or perhaps that eating eggs(known to provide strength, considered not to be completely vegetarian and hence as symbol of masculinity) is not meant for womenfolk.

Most Indian advertisements like green tea (e.g. Lipton), glucose controlling supplements (e.g. Sugar Free India), cooking oil (e.g. Saffola Gold Oil) deal with a health conscious wife pestering her husband about his health and taking charge of the nutrition of the household while the men let their choices be made for them. As opposed to that, food products which are clinically proven to be hazardous for health are often endorsed by male ambassadors, actors and mascots. For example, most of the fast-food chains which have entered the Indian market via FDI have had predominantly male personas endorsing their products. Ronald McDonald is the mascot of McDonald's, the iconic logo of Kentucky's Fried Chicken, more popularly known as KFC, features a caricature of its founder Colonel Harland David Sanders, and the title *Burger King* suggests a masculine inclination with a glaring lack of subtlety. Ready-to-eat food items made by Fritolay,

such as Lay's chips, are endorsed by Saif Ali Khan, a Bollywood actor, throughout the Indian market, while soft drinks manufactured by the Indian division of Coca-Cola, such as the range of Thumbs Up and Sprite beverages, are endorsed by male actors and models. On the other hand, one of the biggest fast food chains of the United States of America that features a female persona on its logo, Wendy's, has not entered the Indian subcontinent at all. Several advertisements feature popular chefs such as Sanjeev Kapoor and Vikas Khanna who are recognized and loved throughout the country and yet most of the times they tend to appear onscreen in their professional attires, while they are shown to be cooking. This practice asserts not just the fact that the reason for them cooking is professional (and hence, respectable and valid) but also that men do not generally cook at home or for domestic purposes, even though they are trained to cook for their living.

In terms of product based marketing, food chains and corporate units rely largely on the status quo of the strongly defined gender roles in Indian society. Two instances of linking the gender stereotypes in food products are those perpetuated by Kinder and McDonald's. Kinder Joy (marketed elsewhere as Kinder Surprise) is a chocolate based dessert sold in egg shaped plastic shells. The target consumer base for the product is children as it guarantees a small toy inside the package. Kinder has categorised their Kinder Joy products in two variants: blue and pink. The blue variant has the word 'for boys' while the pink variant has the word 'for girls' written on the top. This categorisation, in turn, facilitates the gendering of the toys. For example, the blue variant would have conventionally masculine toys such as racing cars and superheroes, while the pink variant would have conventionally feminine toys such as dolls and miniature cosmetic accessories. The same policy has been adapted by McDonald's for their flagship children's attraction, the Happy Meal. The Happy Meal, along with a soft drink and a burger, also promises to gift the consumer a toy. The same segregation of gendered toys is practised regularly in the Happy Meal schemes at McDonald's. Apart from compromising ethics for the sake of profit, these factors contribute in inculcating a regressive and toxic gender disparity in children from a very young age.

Conclusion

Conclusively, an assertion can be arrived upon that the nuances of the Indian society find their expression through seemingly passive yet peculiar modes such as language, media and daily perceptions. The heritage of apparently natural factors such as language that is passed on from one generation to another, also carries with it the underlying set of beliefs which contribute heavily in strengthening the status quo of the gender disparity in the country. A conscious acknowledgement of the inequality that is prevalent in the Indian society and its effect on our daily life would help the coming generations in dissociating their beliefs from their modes of expression. This can be executed with a thorough inspection of our behaviour, language, media and mind-sets. An academic dissection of these factors would bring about significant effect in shaping a healthier society in the coming days.

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