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Society and The Paradigm of Taste

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Taste being a sensory receptor in its literal sense, is what makes experiencing food enjoyable. Food is an integral part of a person to identify themselves as belonging to a nation. Post globalization era, we have seen certain food products overtake the food market all over the world causing tension with local cuisines in different countries. Food is an expression of culture. Food is also politics. By abstaining from or indulging in certain food, people make statements of their political belief. Identity is also formed by drawing upon the culture/s they've grown up in. Manipulation of taste of food accentuates social division and individual anxiety. What happens when we appropriate food and manipulate its taste in a new society? Glocalisation is posited as the solution to the consequences of unmitigated globalization. In spite of its saintly guise, it is not what it seems to be in many countries. This large scale appropriation has caused social division of class and increased individual anxiety. This paper discusses how the promotion of cultural identity and a case of mistaken identity can disrupt the delicate balance of society.

Keywords: Taste, Glocalisation, Dominant and Subordinate cultures, Pasta, Fortune

Cookie

Taste being a sensory receptor in its literal sense, is what makes experiencing food enjoyable. Food is an essential part of culture. The daily lives of people are intertwined with the food they eat. Over time and tradition, food has been subjected to changes just like culture that is constantly defined and redefined. Taste is often associated with the nationality and identity of a person. Food is an integral part of what makes a person identify themselves as belonging to a nation. Often friends and family mock or question the authenticity of a person's national identity if they are not able to handle spicy food (in the case of India or Mexico). The implementation of beef ban in some parts of India caused an uproar in Kerala and a counter culture based on food began emerging. Keralites began parading their love for beef all over social media to dissuade the government's plan. It is very much evident through these examples how much food and taste is a part of culture and identity. Post globalization era, we have seen certain food products overtake the food market all over the world causing tension with local cuisines in different countries. What happens when we appropriate food? Food is an expression of culture. Food is also politics. By abstaining from or indulging in certain food, people make statements of their political belief. Identity is also formed by drawing upon the culture/s they've grown up in. Cultural Identity

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Theory states that people internalize beliefs, values, norms, and social practices of their culture and identify themselves with that culture. Therefore, appropriation of a particular culture's food leads to misconceptions and racial

marginalization especially if the food belongs to a marginal community. Whether these dishes authentically uses these ingredients is up for question. This is supported by a theory called as perceived ownership which is a theory in economics but fits into this situation like a glove. Pasta and fortune cookies are two of the food products that has seeped and have been appropriated into various cultures. This large scale appropriation has caused social division of class and increased individual anxiety. This paper discusses how the promotion of cultural identity and a case of mistaken identity can disrupt the delicate balance of society.

With respect to recent times the food industry has been expanding vividly and is inclining towards a consumer centered organization. The rapid change in food consumption habits has become an object of commercialization and the repercussion of it affects the lifestyle of an individual. It is a basic necessity that requires attention before processing into a plate. It is a part of our daily life and connects us to the survival road. The food industry has been institutionalized for profit making and the structure is being ever present in our daily lives but as consumers we are being anesthetized to this ruling structure. This further leads us to subscribing to the popular choice i.e., fast food, processed food which are taking over as dominant culture. However, to be sold under a certain banner to certain culture, a research on the type of taste needs to be conducted for the success of it. When reflecting on such matter, first, it is important to understand the complexities within the food itself and second, its associated identities. Taking the support of these ideas this research will address and attempt to answer following questions; why is it important to theorize something as basic as food? What is appropriation of food? How does food reflect identities? What is the impact of subordinate and dominant culture? How is culture sold under the guise of taste?

Manipulation of taste of food accentuates social division and individual anxiety. The taste referred here is the gastronomic taste of food and not taste of choice. The taste is not preferred but served, and many fall into the misconception of the former. If one wants a certain dish with less salt or more spice, it can be adjusted but cannot changed completely because of existence of a dominant taste. This dominance is in coherence with the traditional norms and the naturalization of food taste from the very beginning of a human's life. Anything away from this dominance is either seen as luxury or lacking in cultural authenticity, simply because the individual has made the choice to be away from mainstream and subscribe to something that is uncommon. The problem arises when one subscribes to be part of this structure that elevates the divisions prominently. Such dominance paves way for manipulation of taste of food which is appropriated according the dominant taste. Following the main idea of such manipulation, adds onto a social division of rich and poor. This appropriation, in turn, disorients the original aura of the dish for reasons of survival in that particular market. Such disorientation increases the gap between already present hierarchies and propagates an anxiety of existence in the market. Social division that add to the luxury factor associated with food goes hand in hand with individual anxiety where survival becomes a key issue and choice of taste still need to be considered.

“An alternative foodway introduced a disjuncture, a moral dilemma that opposes local cultural values, with the many moral concerns that abound with international assessments of foods and their uses. Even more problematic is the devaluation of local foods in favour of introduced foods and the associated gastronomies. A secure future has become problematic in the face of globalization, where householders must choose between a ranges of moral concerns every time they provide for their families. Cash does not necessarily increase the range of foods accessible to those households, or simplify moral concerns.” (Pollock, 285)

With the arrival of pre-packaged, processed, foreign food, local communities started living on a glocal diet whenever they could afford them. The dilemma to choose between global and local food products is caused by the intense marketing of a global lifestyle promoted by the capitalistic regimes of the world which isn't discussed in the essay. To reduce the brunt of the pressure, many local families, resort to an appropriation of food where they manipulate the foreign products to fit into the taste buds of the local individual. The large scale appropriation of pasta is an example of this.

Masala pasta sold all over India by Maggi is intended to satisfy the taste buds of the Indian national. Pollock implies a social division taking place because of the high prices of processed global foods. Maggi through its production of masala pasta bridges the social gap as well as the cultural gap. It sells the product at a lower price while incorporating the flavors known to be Indian with that of Italian. However, this attempt to bring classes together furthers the gap between the classes. The taste of Maggi masala pasta as compared to a curry pasta served in a café or any of the starred hotels is different. Therefore, the intend of Maggi masala pasta is to quench the middle and lower classes into silence by giving them a substitute for the high quality pasta they dream of having.

“Unfortunately the world's poor, the asset-less and the deprived are at one end. The state, the market and the civil society groups are at the other end. How and who is to manage this interface between the market, the state, civil society and the world's poor is not clear as yet. There is a need to glocalise the world economy so that both the locals and the global players get the best from the world's shrinking resources.” (Kulkarni, 3328)

Glocalisation is posited as the solution to the consequences of unmitigated globalization. In spite of its saintly guise, it is not what it seems to be in many countries. In India, glocalistaion works in a much more sinister way, as seen through the example of Maggi masala pasta. It allows the domination of large scale private corporations to treat its consumers as passive entities. Through the use of media, it injects the desired thought process into the mind of the consumer.

“Since its adoption as a theoretical term in the early modern period, taste has been regarded both as a common perceptual facility rooted in human nature, and as a domain of varying preferences where elite choices establish normative standards... The tastes of creators and consumers do not always converge, and the global reach of current artistic, fashionable and culinary activity seems only to have increased these tensions, as the articles in Etnofoors special issue demonstrate... At the same time, the possession of good taste, requiring as it does not only fine sensibilities but also the leisure and education to develop them, separates people into groups where preferences are not only different but also ranked.” (Korsmeyer, 111)

Food being appropriated in different countries leads to the manipulation of taste. It is as if a natural consequence of appropriation. Does appropriation really cause the fashioning of taste? How is a particular taste normalized? The essay 'Complexities of Taste' answers these questions. The choice of the bourgeois often establishes the universal taste which is reproduced and accepted by the society. It is not that they do not converge, as it's mentioned in the essay but taste is propagated as being 'good' through media and trends are born.

A society and its culture have a close connection with its food and aesthetics of it. With advance of open market economy, it is easier to be a participant to the roots of a particular culture and its gain knowledge of its taste. However, taste differs from border to border. Indian cuisine tends to be spicy and European cuisine has an extensive use of fermented milk products. When bringing concept of taste under one umbrella, the generalizations add to the popular idea.

Popularized as a staple Italian dish, pasta is the world's favourite dish according to a news story titled 'How Pasta Became the World's Favourite Food' published by BBC in the year 2011. Making pasta requires the most basic of ingredients which are wheat, water and egg. In the current situation, the Italians or Chinese are perceived to be the owners of pasta and sesame seeds respectively. However, while in many parts of the world, pasta is a staple food, in India, having pasta is a sign of luxury though that is changing at a fast pace with the introduction of Maggi pasta. The idea of living life similar to an Italian is an appealing notion in our country. Italy symbolizes food like pizza and pasta, a luxurious

consumption and an exotic lifestyle which many Indians dream of leading. Consumption of their food is a very conscious effort to become as close as possible to that dream. This yearning for a taste of Italian culture is something that is largely created as a result of popularized food culture.

A fortune cookie is a crisp and sugary cookie that comes with a piece of paper inside on which an aphorism or a vague prophecy is inscribed. Popularized by American society this delicacy was brought to light by the chain of Chinese restaurants in American and is formerly known as Chinese tea cakes however, it is not a part of the Chinese culture. The concept and the form of the fortune cookies is derived from Japanese version of cakes “*tsujiura senbei*” that are a little bit larger and darker and has a savory flavor unlike the modern one which is sweet.

The dichotomy hereby drawn between these is that both have faced identity association problems. Pasta's identity as an Italian dish is overemphasized so much so that it has become a part of every culture as a sign of luxury and fortune cookies is sold on a mistaken identity. The taste adds to the hierarchy of class structures. When foreign food is introduced to a society, the taste of the food need to be related to the taste buds of the local people living there. This marks the success of the item in the market, this is what we call appropriated food.

The accessibility of the ingredients of pasta must make it cheap globally. However, we see a recurring production of Italian varieties of pasta in kitchens with few countries mixing their indigenous flavours to make it appealing to their locale. Similar appropriation can be seen in the case of the fortune cookie which was originally Japanese but now sold under the banner of Chinese food taking on a new shape and new taste. The appropriation rises as a result of the gap among the consumers. Pasta which should have been accessible to all is sold as an expensive commodity. A fortune cookie is sold to the indecisive and confused individual resting their hopes on a piece of paper. Selling of culture has taken place in both these instances. The Italian lifestyle and the idea of knowing your future as a Japanese myth buys more bucks than the cost of production of the product.

The above examples represent two types of cultures: the dominant and the subordinate culture. In the case of pasta, the Italian culture emerges as dominant. The promotion of the nation of Italy, especially after the reign of Mussolini accelerated with the help of export and marketing of pasta. Mussolini was known as the oppressor of pasta because he was against the import of pasta from foreign countries. This cause added to the vigorous promotion of pasta as a luxury diet. In no time, appetites everywhere were craving for Italian pasta. Pasta dominates the world food charts even today but not without causing problems which will be discussed further. The fortune cookie presents a case of mistaken identity and a subordinate culture. Originally Japanese, the fortune cookie was adapted and appropriated by Chinese restaurants in America to cater to their diverse crowd. With the passage of time and the tendency of the west to homogenize Asian cultures, the real identity of the fortune cookie was lost. The fortune cookie in its attempt to deliver fortunes to the depressed of the world, ignored the origin of the fortune cookie itself.

The universally agreed best way to sell ideology in this millennium is through movies. The power of the Italian dish of spaghetti and meatballs is shown in Coppola's *The Godfather* where Clemenza shows Michael Corleone how to cook the dish. This delicate conversation between two killers and mobsters shows the reverence for the dish. *Freaky Friday*, directed by Mark Waters show how a mother-daughter relationship is changed as an effect of reading a fortune from a fortune cookie. The movie promotes the idea of fortune cookies being an integral cause for resolving problems. The depictions of food in the famous movies sets a trend. Viewers who begin to admire the characters attempt to get as close as possible to imitating them, even if it means eating what they ate. This unconscious consumption of food boosted by the film's popularity manipulates the taste of communities worldwide by selling a uniform taste. This leads to the diminishing of local cuisines.

Associated with luxury, the globalization of a pasta in this situation creates a dichotomy between the upper and the middle class. Even if the dish is easily available and easy to cook, it's perception as foreign mark it as a sign of luxury.

Therefore, providing access to this taste, the Indian market has especially created Indianized version as a recipe. This may have been a step to bridge the unavailability of it but the original flavor is lost due to its market availability. Pasta needs a sauce and the concept of sauce is introduced in this product as a powder that can make this sauce. This portrays that the food industry is giving the required product under a compromised taste and lost authenticity. The part of society who would not subscribe for this dish is served a façade of true taste. The gap widens because one part of the consumers have access to one version and the other is given the product at face value, injecting that there is no difference. Fortune cookies originally has a savory taste and lost its original taste and concept as it was introduced to the American food market. This loss in originality was done to cater to the American society. These gained popularity after the world war era and the concept of fortune notes added to the growing anxiousness of an uncertain future.

People cared more about survival than authenticity and hence promoted the reformed the item under a new banner. This is an example of food for survival where profit is not the initial aim but rather a stability in the market. On one hand, the universalization has enabled to overemphasizing of the dish so much so that the manipulated taste is synonymous to the identity of the authentic culture and on the other hand this universalization has narrowed the dish to slot where it is sold on a mistaken identity. Available everywhere, appropriated for the place and adopted for profit making. Both aimed at glocalization at the cost of authenticity of culture. The Italians and the Chinese yearned for a way to make their presence felt globally. In both the cases, the aim of appropriation is universalization. As the saying goes, the best way to get to a man is through his stomach, came true for both the cultures. The unprecedented appropriation of the taste both at the hands of the propagator and the consumer created unexpected chaos.

The manipulation of taste to force feed consumers causes imbalance in society and within the individual. Capitalism continues to wreak havoc under the façade of globalization. The monopoly of a single culture and homogenizing the taste of society are the consequences of unprecedented globalization. Glocalisation can be a solution but it is yet another medium through which binaries are enforced and individuality is threatened. Is there a solution to this problem? It is wrong to dictate the gastronomical palates of society but one solution is to be a conscious consumer.

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