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Food as the Liberating Force, Cultural and Political Weapon: An Analysis on Dae Jang Geum Or The Great Jang Geum

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ABSTRACT

Dae Jang Geum, the Korean television series of fifty four episodes deals not only with the story of Korean dynasty or culture but it's importance lies in the fact that it is the true story of Jang Geum, the first female royal physician. Food was given much importance that the court ladies, those who prepare food for the King was placed much above the nurses or those who treat the King.

The series proclaims the rich culinary culture of Korea where food acts as political tool for cementing relationship between countries and a divine force for those who cook food with devotion. They are saved in life and those who misuse it for political gains are severely punished. The series is connected to Korea's history, its rich culture as well as points out the corruption in royal court. Food is the supreme force and it is only through food that the court ladies enjoy power. The present paper analyses the role of food as a liberating force for women and as a constant companion helping her to find a space for herself also helping common women to emerge out from the restrictions and also to challenge as well as crush the patriarchal set up. The study will also throw light to the food symbols where the food they eat and the way they ate marks one's social position.

Keywords: power, liberation, politics, social position, history, patriarchy, food symbols, culinary culture, divine.

Introduction

The Korean Television series *Dae Jang Geum* or The Great Jang Geum was aired during the year 2003 by Munhwa Broadcasting Cooperation (MBC) in South Korea and in India in the year 2007 by DD National titled *Ghar Ka Chiraag* (The Lamp of the House). It held the largest viewership of the time. The series was directed by Lee Byung-hoon, with the title role being played by Lee Young-ae. She portrayed the character of a brilliant young girl who grew up to become the first female physician of last royal dynasty of Korea, the Josean dynasty, in a time when women were forced to place themselves within the four walls of kitchen and were denied education. The series is based on the reference of a physician lady named Jang Geum in the historical record Josean-wanjo-sillock or The Annals of Josean Dynasty.

Chau B le states that the master cooks of the Chosun dynasty were the palace women. These women had origins in either commoner or low-born families and entered service at the royal palace generally around the age of

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twelve or thirteen, but on occasion some were as young as four. They were actual government employees of Choson, and are a relatively rare example of female government workers in pre-modern Korea. However, they were not employees in the modern sense as they could not opt out of their positions; instead they were employed at the palace for life. At any given time, there were about 600 palace women of different official grades filling various capacities at the royal palaces of Choson (*What food tells us about culture*). The women thus in spite of being born to poor class was able to take up government jobs which helped them to support their family as well.



Fig .1 The Royal Kitchen:Wikipedia

The story revolves around Jang Geum whose tale begins even before her birth, her father was a military officer in the royal army and who had to take part in assassination of the queen with the order of the king ,her curse haunts him. At the time a monk proclaims that his fate is held by three women; he would kill the first (the queen), but would save the second but she would die because of him (Jang Geum's mother) and he would be killed by the third but she would save many lives (Jang Geum). Later she is born to Park Myeong-yi who was a court lady and was thrown to death by Lady Choi but was saved partially by Baek Young (Lady Han) by adding antidote to the poison and by Seo Cheon-soo (Jang Geum's father).

Jang Geum starts her life in the palace as a young bride after thorough training and selection process. In the palace she is trained under Lady Han who excels in culinary art. They develop a deep relationship. Lady Choi is wealthy and powerful and is worried, after finding that Jang Geum is more talented than her nephew and is a threat to her successor Keum Young whom she wanted to be make the *sanggung* or highest kitchen lady. Lady Choi tries to move them from the palace them by spreading the rumour that the duck porridge which they prepared for the king is poisonous with her political influence. It results in Jang Geum's and her teacher's exile to Jeju. Lady Han dies on the way and Jang Geum lives in Jeju as a servant. She determines to go back to the palace and take revenge as a physician lady as the servants could also partake in the entrance exam for selection of physician ladies . She returns to the palace after passing as the topper but she put aside all her revenge and treated people with a pure heart. Lady Choi, her family and other villainous characters are paid for their ill doings at the end.

Food as the liberating force

The series proclaims that whether it is boy or a girl, passion is the governing factor in one's life. Choi Keum Young is talented but lacks the passion of Jang Geum. The former had the only aim to retain the dominance of Choi family in court. Eventhough she manages to hold *soorakang's* or the royal kitchen's highest *sanggung* rank, it is temporary. The driving force that made Jang Geum overcome all her fears and move forward in her life was her mother's last wish. The patriarchal conventions and superstitions of the Korean setup rupture as a women rise up to be one of the highest government official. Royal Kitchen becomes a place where she spends almost her entire life.

The gender discrimination had to surrender before a talented women but at the same time she had to undergo the thrashes of the patriarchy as well . The society was strictly divided into different classes and only those who belong to

upper middle class enjoyed power. Even though the king ruled the nation all of his decisions were dependent on the council of ministers. The council of ministers of the royal court or the *Yukjo* who were the representatives of the patriarchy were mostly corrupted. They protested against Jang Geum unable to bear the change and considers her to be a threat against their position. They plead to the King not to place a woman in a high position as the traditions and roots of Chosun will be shaken.

Dae Jang Geum portrays the repealing of outdated laws after a woman rises above men, with her talents in Chosun, from the time she started practicing medicine. She disregarded the gender threats and helped the poor mainly those who suffered from smallpox, who were abandoned by the physicians as well as the king. The convention of placing men in higher rank and women below them is challenged when Jang Geum receives the status of a third rank official. Even though she is a commoner (*baekjong*), she was able to rise to a higher position in a society where the girls in traditional households were instructed to stay indoors and learn cooking. The will to be a court lady makes the heroine face all the hurdles that life throws upon her.



Fig 2. The Royal meal .Wikipedia

Women of poor families had a chance to be a part of the palace and hold high positions in the kitchen, in a male-dominated setup. They had a chance to enjoy an elevated position much above the physicians and could also help to uplift their families from poverty. People took pride in sending their daughters to palace to cook for the king. The ladies who were assigned to cook different dishes put up their best hand up to please the king.

In the competition for the highest kitchen lady, it is the wild boar dish that Lady Choi prepares and she thought that cuisine expressed her talents at its best while for Jang Geum it was the simple wild berry snack and Keum Young considers her best dish to be the mixed fruit punch like herself who doesn't have particular taste or talent. Lady Choi who is cunning and rude is associated with the wild boar. Jang Geum's wild berry snack mirrors her love towards her parents, her honesty and strong character. The dishes were considered to be the silent replica of the cook's nature.



Fig 3 the Korean Lunch: Ivan Herman

The ladies of the kitchen were engaged in preparing the table for the royal family and they being displaced from their families, the girls developed deep friendship with other women. At the same time there were women like Lady Choi, Keum Young, Yoon Young-roh, Yoon Mak-gae who are selfish and class conscious, who strives only for personal gain. They considered food only as a power gaining force which resulted in their ultimate doom. Lady Choi exploits her power and along with other officials of the court but she faces a pathetic end. Keum Young is exiled for her crimes against Jang Geum, Young-Roh is murdered by Choi's men. Thus all those who used food wrongly for clinging to their social position and greed had to face the justice of the nature.

Jang Geum prepared delicacies to show her gratitude to Sir Min for providing her with books. Eventually they fall in love and later the delicacies that she prepared become symbol of their love. Elizabeth David and M.F.K Fisher considered food as a medium to express feminine views. In *Dae Jang Geum*, Jang Geum seems to attach her personal emotions to food; she feels happy when she cooks for her lover. For the king she provides the wild berry snack as her best food because it was the food that she gave to her mother before she died and she asked the king to protect people like her mother would have taken care of her. While on the other hand, Lady Choi's focus is on to her aim, that is to protect their family monopoly in kitchen. Her aunt asked her to be stone hearted and also commanded to sustain their family leadership in kitchen.

For Jang Geum, preparation of food is a dedicated process and is truthful to the person who eats it. She expects that the person who eats her food would smile. The king is like her father and queen her mother, she prepares food as if for her own father and mother. Eventhough she had to undergo worse situations in life ultimately the coin is turned to her favour.

Food takes up varied roles and powers in the story. Each delicacy like kimchi, wild berry snack, leafy vegetables had their own particular role to play. These dishes were presented to the nobility which was unconventional helped in changing the assumption that they are lowly food and should only be consumed by those who belonged to low class. Food seems to be classified and was demarcated based on its colour, preparation process and availability. It resulted in a change that, be it vegetables or plain meals they must be consumed only by considering their nutritious value not by their conventional classification.

Food helped to liberate women like Jang Geum who must have passed away without even getting a chance to step into palace. She always cooked food with a smiling face, her passion helped her in making the dish taste deep and to win the favour the king. Her dishes was also instrumental in making her the first female third rank official. Food is shown to be reflecting one's character and those who enjoy it could clearly make out the hidden intensions. Thus here it plays the role of a mirror where it reflects the nature of those who prepare it.

Jang Geum's life is an inspirational story of the upliftment of a women in a male dominated society which resulted in the breaking of the patriarchal domination in the royal court. After considering her past efforts and talent the king makes her his personal physician in a time where women was supposed to treat women and men treated men.

Jang Geum's teacher Lady Han or Han Baek-Young albeit being low birth, her talent in culinary art helped her to enter the palace at a young age and she used her talents in preparing the table for the king. She was able to support her family and also took up the role in effectively training Jang Geum. Jang Geum's love for her teacher gave her the power to take up the challenge of treating a young boy, who created hindrances while erupting a memorial for lady Han in So-Tang-Hyeul, which was a restricted land. Her medicines were able to wipe off the disease from the boy and he promised to take care of the land where Lady Han rests.

Jang Geum preferred to go to the public health centre to treat common people leaving the comforts of the palace thus placing everyone equal before medicine. Even in the time of an epidemic she lived with an infected child, to find the right prescription. Thus she played a noble role in the society.

Even though girls were denied of education, they had the opportunity to enter the palace at a young to be the girls or brides for cooking king's food. They were also restricted from marrying or having affair with men .Jang Geum offers porridge to queen which can be considered as a women's effort to equate the commoner with the highest authority or nobility. Jang Geum takes a special care in including 'commoner's food' in king's menu rather than going for a foreign one.

Lady Choi adopted false means to maintain her supremacy in the court, who adds poisonous ingredients in king's mother's food in order to kill her and also to Lady Jung's medicines, who was the highest Kitchen Lady. She equates food only with power. The Choi family monopolises the trade for kitchen ingredients with help of high rank officials whose favour is sought by providing pieces of land as a token. Jang Geum is not a perfect women but she is one of a kind who is an epitome of kindness and empathy.

Food as the diplomatic and political weapon

Food is an aspect which is closely knitted to the tapestry of Korea's culture .This series takes the spectator to well rooted history and food culture. Food is not only life sustainers but it also acts as a weapon to maintain social position thus safeguarding power.

The Chinese envoys who visited Chosun for diplomatic reasons were traditionally welcomed by the food of Chinese Imperial House. The delicacies made the envoy happy and helped in maintaining good relation with the country. Thus cooking food for them makes it one of the toughest task as the envoy would always find fault in those. Lady Han and her assistant Jang Geum was sent there by Lady Choi when she had temporarily taken the office. Lady Han cooked food considering the health of the person and her only intension was good health of the one who takes the food. So she presents leafy food which was considered lowly to the envoy chief as he was suffering from diabetics , the chief was angry but later he finds that though he considered it lowly it improved his health. This makes the envoy to part happily.

The branding of nutritious leafy vegetables as lowly and inferior was proved to be wrong, here the distinction of food as high and low is erased as a nobility is presented with humble food. The envoy chief who had a bad temper and who would have returned without dealing with international affairs, becomes cheerful and agrees for diplomatic measures as he ate the food. Here the food acts as an effective medium through which diplomacy and long term relationship between states is created .

Food Symbols

The ingredients in a dish can act as a medicine and poison similarly the characters are bifurcated in to those who can heal the society like medicine and those who can harm it. Jang Geum becomes the medicine for the society and Lady Choi ,the poison .She not only pollutes herself with greedy thoughts but also instigates her nephew Keum-Young to take revenge against her rivalry Jang Geum.

Baek young is neutral and being born to Choi family she had no other way but to stand with her aunt in her crimes.. She is like water who fails to have any taste or colour herself and perfect character .She obeys Lady Choi as she was her aunt .

In an instance when Lady Min was chosen as the next highest kitchen lady after Choi and visits Jang Geum ,she encourages her by saying that she was the one who cooks food without any other intension. So the person's character and intension stands as a factor for one's rise and fall. Food thus also attains a divine force in the series as those with pure intension and true cause are rewarded and those who are corrupted are doomed.

Conclusion

Dae Jang Geum calls for a change in a society which restricted women where they are always constructed as weak and dependent. The series is a proclamation that women can also bring a change to the society even through cooking. Jang Geum brings the change society with the available resources and by using chances in her life. It is through

food that she gains the favour of the king. Thus food becomes a liberating force for her as well as many other women in the kitchen.

Food also acts as a mediator which helps in the diplomatic relation of a country. The corrupted ministry misuses their authority. Those who consider food as a weapon against others are doomed in such a way it seems to possess a mysterious power in human life.

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