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The Politics of Food: An Exploration of Food Stereotypification

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*Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com***ABSTRACT:**

Narratives exploring foodways and culinary representations are gaining currency nowadays. Here in this paper, I attempt to underscore the connection between food and gender as well as food and the established social stereotypes. The link between food and gender has always been one of power and identity. It has its own politics. A discussion on the connection between food and gender is invariably focussed on a number of issues including men's and women's potential to produce, consume and distribute food. This potentialities differ in terms of one's class, culture, family organization and most importantly, on the economic structure of their society. To a great extent, we can inspect how the concept of gender is constituted through men and women's roles in the production, distribution and consumption of food. Nowadays, the food commercials have become heavily gendered. They exploit our feminine and masculine features to make certain food appeal to us. For instance, the foods which are advertised as healthy, light and weight-losing are often marketed with such intentions so as to attract women whereas unhealthy and junk food are always associated with men: “salad is for girls” and “real men don't eat Quiche”. In this paper, I propose to investigate how men and women organize or address their social roles through the process of food production, distribution and consumption and how certain traits and attitudes linked with food define masculinity and femininity.

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address their social roles through the process of food production, distribution and consumption and how certain traits and attitudes linked with food define masculinity and femininity.

The connection between gender and food also depicts a relationship of identity and power. Since time immemorial, cooking has always been associated with females. Women are expected to stay at home and cook for their men. Hence, cooking was used as a weapon of oppression to keep women hitched within the walls of a kitchen. Even now, this pattern is followed and is clearly foregrounded in the commercials of food and cooking utensils.

If one is to find oneself in the middle of a rapidly developing, globalized, multicultural world, then one would become aware of the fact that everything in this world, every aspects of existence and life is highly gendered. This gender stereotypification can be seen even in the very basic necessity of existence, ie, in food. Today, wherever we turn, we come across gendered food. There is even a saying that “real men don't eat Quiche” and “salad is for the girls”. This and lot many other gender centric attitudes influence our health practices including the kind of food we choose to eat. For instance, we are constantly made aware by the commercials and social medias that having salad and eating in minimum quantities is feminine while consuming large amount of meat and eating in large quantities is manly. These oversimplified rendition of female and male eating habits may seem old-fashioned but they are still persistent among many of us.

Recently, this type demonstration is increasing at a rapid pace. Unhealthy foods (like beer, junk foods etc...) and eating habits are psychologically associated with masculinity while healthy eating habits are psychologically connected with femininity. Since time immemorial, consumption of meat has been considered as a marker of masculinity, which portrays the age-old patriarchal norms of identity and power and so people, especially men, try to manage their gender identity through food habits.

Earlier, meat has also been considered as a symbol and celebration of male dominance and power. People with power always favoured meat over other food. It is understood that men who choose not to eat meat renounce one of their masculine privileges. The European noblemen and aristocrats consumed large amount of food filled with every kind of meat while the middle class people ingested the complex carbohydrates. This dietary habits depicted class and patriarchal distinctions. Women, who are normally recognized as second class citizens are more likely to eat those foods which are considered to be second class in the patriarchal culture: fruits, vegetables, and grains rather than meat. Hence race, class, gender and caste hierarchies are maintained, in part, through the access to and control over food. Such differences maintained in the consumption patterns are one way through which the wealthy people differentiate themselves from the poor and men from women. This gendered attitude in consumption habits reiterate the class and gender distinction.

It should also be noted that gender is a social phenomena constructed by the patriarchal society to suppress and subjugate women. By classifying certain kinds of food as feminine, they are attributing certain qualities to women. By associating certain food items like chocolate, wine, fruits etc...with women, men are expecting the women to be soft and sweet, just like the food which embodies their feminine qualities. Thus the relationship between food and gender also demonstrates a relationship of identity and power. It also address how men and women establish their social roles through the production, consumption and distribution of food.

Another important factor to be noticed is that cooking had always been associated with women. It had always come under their responsibility. Women are expected to stay at home and cook and were not allowed to take part in any social activities or to get involved in any social gatherings. Cooking was assumed as a way of keeping women within their homes. It can also be seen as an alternative way of subjugation. Such gender stereotypification is discernible in the commercials of cooking utensils as well. The tagline of a famous brand goes like this: “jo biwi se kare pyaar wo Prestige se kaise kare inkaar”, which points to the fact that a loving husband should never say 'no' to the equipments of this specific brand which will make his wife's work easy and thus will make her happy. But the marketers didn't say that a loving husband should help his wife in cooking. It is because cooking has always been assumed as the duty of women and it is not

manly to cook. Thus, with food, cooking has also become highly gendered, at least in an Indian context.

Science is one among the factors that determines what foods men and women are drawn to but societal attitudes and education also play an unquestionably vital role. Femininity and masculinity, in all cultures and traditions, are connected with specific foods and rules controlling their consumption. Food is a means of differentiation as well as connection between men and women. By exhibiting different roles with regard to food, women and men define their femaleness and maleness, their differences and similarity. They use food and food metaphors to emphasize the power and identity that they exert upon each other. Men can exert their dominance over the women by rejecting to provide food or by refusing to eat the food they cooked. Women can also display their power by refusing to cook, controlling their food or by manipulating the meaning systems and status embodied in foods. Thus the exchange of food is a way to mediate meanings and power relations between sexes. Gender, ethnic and class distinctions are also depicted through foods and foodways. Attitudes towards body and food vary across cultures and it act as a window for the better understanding of gender identity and power.

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