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## Representations in Gastro-Literary Narratives

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“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are” French writer Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's statement from his 1825 book, *Physiologie du Gout* is not a mere aphorism. As one of the central credos for food studies, the statement reflects reality to the core. While Savarin recognized inherently, research encapsulated the power of food significantly to manifest and mould identity.

In narratives, food plays an essential role as it changes and or sets the mood and tone of a scene, often accompanied by a dramatic shift in the plot. Like language and symbolism in literature, food is a powerful means of both representing and transmitting culture. Not only does food act as a dynamic social, gender, political and cultural marker, it also transcends beyond the externalities and internalities of the physical body. It exists uniquely in our collective and personal identities.

Considering poignant culinary scenes from novels that revolve around food or use food as a trope, this paper aims at analyzing narratives that have centered their plots around culinary metaphors, symbols, representations of other things and its links to, identity and culture. The paper will focus on a dynamic range of narratives from texts such as Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Mrs. Sen* from *The Interpreter of Maladies*, and Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. This research is not just an analysis of the potential of food as a marker of ethnicity, race, and identity in literary texts; it also is an avenue for discourses in the field of gastro-literary studies.

**[Key words:** food studies, literature, culinary metaphors, symbols, transmitting culture, representation in narratives, gastro-literary studies]

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Quick Response Code:

Received on 20/02/2019  
Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved



## Representations in Gastro-Literary Narratives

If literature holds up the mirror to life, it is manifest that it also represents food. Not only is food an essential facet of survival, but it also binds communities together and becomes that language that breaks the barriers between two people or groups from varied backgrounds. Considering the vitality of food, it has not only been prominently featured in literature but has also been the focal point of many narratives. Its prominence comes to no surprise evaluating the fact that the first widely read and encountered narrative; The Bible thrives with gastro-literary representations. Extending from the venison that bought the rights of the eldest son in the story of Jacob and Esau to the metaphor of God as the bread of Life, to water turning into wine at Cana, the Last Supper, and so many more prove that food and drink are indissociable from the routines of daily life.

Food and meals have an appeal that draws people together. Meals are like dramas in fictions as in life. Moreover, they follow the narrative logic of a beginning (appetizers), the middle (entree) and the end (dessert) which also reflects Aristotle's rule of a three-act play. In fiction, food engages and excites all the senses of the reader. In narratives, food is not for mere descriptive purposes or to just set the scene. They are like hors-d'oeuvres, they stimulate the reader's appetite for the larger meal ahead; the novel.

The use of food as a trope has changed over time. Initially, it was used as a signifier to represent carnality, appetite, desire, sex and the perishability of the body and all the usual subjects. However, the trend of signifying carnality, desire, gluttony, and sex by means food has changed over time. It has transgressed the boundary of being a sign with a fixed signified and signifier. In literary texts, food as a trope explains the complex relationship between the body, subjectivity, and social structures.

The link between food and literature is in the likeness of the link between the author and cook. While the latter stimulates hunger and satiates appetite, the former creates a hunger for words. A hunger to transcend from ourselves to the bodies of those different from us. A hunger to live the lives of these people and cross the divide of nationality or class or culture or race or gender. Also, to a certain degree, across consciousness itself.

There have been many writers who have coalesced cooking and food with memory, social conventions, stereotypes, habits, the conflict of individual and communal identity and so forth. When writers realize the importance of food in the lives of their characters, they use intricate illustrations of it to show their readers how food shapes and represents a society or individual at a particular point in time. One such writer is Lewis Carroll whose *Alice in Wonderland* is highlighted in the research.

A general notion about the table around which a group of individuals sit, eat and even talk at times represents diversity, culture, hierarchy and even social standing among others. This idea or notion that evolved through food then becomes an identity of the group and individuals. Louis Carroll in his work *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice begins to question her identity by stating, 'Who in the world am I?' (Carroll 19) later to join Mad Hatter's tea party which is complete shambles. The tea party is nothing more than a satire to the strict and stringent Victorian society with rules that an individual had to follow based on the person's position and social standing. There were impressive books like *Hints on Etiquette* that acted as 'a guide on how to behave in a polite and appropriate way in various social situations' (Messrs 12) and had even twenty eight editions of the same. The book includes several chapters on the etiquette of a dinner party, marriage, visiting and even tattling. Carroll has ridiculed this idea not only in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* but also through his article 'Hints for Etiquette; Or, Dining Out Made Easy.' The Mad Hatter's tea party breaks the punctilious and starts at the point where Alice casually walks in and sits 'down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table'. (Carroll 96) There are several activities in the chapter like Dormouse enjoying a siesta at the table while Mad Hatter and March Hare use him as a support for their elbows. Alice arrives invited and even takes the eminent position at the table which would have

been unacceptable and even shocking to the Victorian citizens. The entire chapter deals with a bungled family with Mad Hatter and March Hare acting as brats and Dormouse as a young sibling who is constantly sleepy.

The bizarre incident of Mad Hatter and March Hare making an attempt to shove Dormouse into the teapot does not only breaks the punctilio of Victorian dining but also adds to the fear of adulteration. In one of the books by Wohl he writes that medical officer was 'horrified to discover: cocci, bacilli, torulae, cotton fiber, lice, bed bugs, bug's legs, fleas, straw, human hair, and cat and dog hair' in ice cream (Wohl 53). Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, written in 1860s, surrounded by all the anxiety adds to the possibility of Carroll using food and drinks that have been adulterated like 'tulip-roots instead of onions' and 'too much pepper in that soup' which was also contaminated by sneezing.

The other element of satire expressed through food is the plentiful supply of it in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Alice and her over indulgent consumption contrasts the reality of Victorian England, where the food was inadequate to several people. Dickens in his work depicts a realistic picture of hunger saying that, 'Hunger was the inscription on the baker's shelves, written in every small loaf of his scanty stock of bad bread; at the sausage-shop, in every dead-dog preparation that was offered for sale' (Dickens 27).

Alice' journey starts with food and even ends with it. While falling she passes through bookshelves and takes 'down a jar' that is labelled 'orange marmalade' (Carroll 4).

Marmalade plays an important role in both Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and in Machel Prout's, *In Search of Lost Time*.

Machel Prout's, *In Search of Lost Time or Remembrance of Things*, originally written in French, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is a novel consisting of seven volumes. The famous incident of the madeleine opens the narrator's reminiscence of his experiences of the metamorphosis from a child to an adult as he reflects at the loss of time as well as absence of meaning from the world. Proust introduces us to the momentous role that the food plays in quotidian acts of revitalization. He states, 'as soon as I had recognised the taste of the piece of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom which my aunt used to give me, immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set' (Proust 64). Proust in his work, manifests the power that a piece of cake and sense of smell associated to an individual can hold and memories it might trigger making the novel emotionally involving. The narrator while walking down the memory lane sights reality in varied objects like the hawthorn flowers of the spring, the music at the chamber and all gothic churches, all of which is aided by food that allows him to discern the quintessence of things other than their external covering.

Moving on to the next author, the paper concentrates on Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, her other works such as *Waves*, have also been studied for their gastro-literary representations. Woolf herself had poor eating habits however, the table was a fertile place for her. It was a place where people absorbed each other. And while eating represented a sense of identity and belonging in her works, it also embodies non-identity and or disintegration. Meals or meal time, in her works are immutably haunted by allusions of impermanence and death; efficaciously the central meal in *To The Lighthouse*. It is also compared to the Last Supper by many critics.

The central meal in *To The Lighthouse* forms a kind of omen or proleptic mourning for the following deaths in the Ramsay household including the dinner hostess Mrs. Ramsay who sacrifices herself to the role of a mother and nurturer thus, confirming to the idea of self-abnegating femininity. Culinary ministrations are evidently a source of pleasure to Mrs Ramsay, as they were to earlier Victorian heroines such as Dickens's Ruth Pinch and Grand's Beth Caldwell (Chapter 5); we are told that 'every nerve of [Mrs Ramsay's] body' fills with a pure sense of 'joy' as she watches her 'husband and children and friends' eating together (Woolf 85). Nevertheless her interior monologue suggests that she is frustrated by her domestic role and its impositions. While her guests take their seats at the table, she questions her existence.

The feast consists of a matrilineal legacy passed down from Mrs. Ramsay's grandmother (the Bee en Daube) is a melting pot of colours, textures and aromas – 'savory brown and yellow meats' mingled with 'olives', 'bay leaves' and 'wine' (Woolf 81-82). The Boeuf en Daube engages diners' senses and engenders communal satisfaction. The melange of the ingredients in the meal replicates the unification of the characters who come around the table. While it seems like a kind of permanence is building, the illusion is soon shattered as Mrs. Ramsay is 'suddenly overwhelmed' by an 'intuition of mortality'. She realizes that the scene she is about to leave is 'vanishing' before her very eyes: 'it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past' (Woolf 90). The sense of loss that Mrs Ramsay perceives here resonates throughout the remainder of the text. Following her death, the Ramsay household lacks its 'emotional, structural, or domestic centre', and mealtimes become disjointed and peripatetic as a result.

As Charlotte Boyce states; The creative gastronomy over which she presides also provides artistic stimulus for subsequent generations; although Lily, the modern woman, rejects Mrs Ramsay's traditional brand of femininity, deeming it 'dusty and out of date' (Woolf 144), she nevertheless takes inspiration from the older woman's culinary success, seeking to replicate the same 'spirit of unity' (Knapp 35) in her painting that Mrs Ramsay achieved with the Boeuf en Daube. If Woolf famously felt the need to 'kill' the 'Angel in the House' in her writing (Woolf 151), owing to the latter's complicity with patriarchal norms, then in her nuanced representation of Mrs Ramsay she, like her New Woman predecessor Sarah Grand nevertheless acknowledges the positive force exerted by such nutritive, self-denying women. (Boyce 263).

Considering Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that the novel's sensorily gifted narrator-protagonist, Saleem Sinai, experiences an epiphanic moment of remembrance via food. The explicit theme of postcoloniality speaks directly and ties food culture to the performance and delineation of ethnic identity. Like the famous tea-soaked madeleine of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Mary's chutney has the power of facilitating a recollection of and reconnection with lost time. It transcends beyond mere human nostalgia. Saleem preserves his narration not only in words but in thirty special blends of pickle. Each flavour, corresponds with a chapter in his autobiography.

His textual-culinary production goes beyond the conventional way of historical accounting. History, in his way of reminiscence becomes a confection. No doubt, in such a gastro-narrative representation, selectivity means less palatable items will be removed or ignored. While Saleem, denies any such omissions, there are features of history that are never disclosed. For instance, the torture he faced during the Emergency period in India is not directly incorporated into his narration.

While being considered as an unreliable narrator, he seems to be aware of the importance of a fine balance between truth and a little bit of ornamentation; to appeal to the people. Saleem suggests, and although he assures readers that his condiments/chapters 'possess the authentic taste of truth', his defensive interrogative, 'a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste, is a small matter, surely?' (Rushdie 644), indicates that, in places, his story may well have been enlivened with some extra savoury 'zing'.

By repeatedly emphasizing the gastronomic pluralism of India in this way, Rushdie exposes as fantasy the idea of a homogeneous, cohesive nation, united by its gustatory preferences and practices of consumption. *Midnight's Children* also represents clearly the huge gulf of alimentary experience between the rich and poor. Whereas Saleem's upbringing gives him culinary privileges, four hundred and twenty of his fellows 'midnight's children' fail to survive to adulthood because of 'malnutrition' and 'disease' (Rushdie 271).

The novel also offers women to challenge or bypass masculine authority by masking it outwardly by accepting

conventional forms of femininity. Cookery in this novel represents the assertion of individual agency. A number of women, for instance, Reverend Mother and Mary have the power to imbue their dishes with feeling and or emotions that is indicative of the creator's personality. Reverend Mother doles out to her family 'the curries and meatballs of intransigence' and 'the fish salans of stubbornness', foods which fill Saleem's mother, Amina, with the determination necessary to restore her family's temporarily embarrassed finances; the Catholic Mary Pereira stirs into her pickles 'the guilt of her heart . . . so that, good as they tasted, they had the power of making those who ate them subject to nameless uncertainties and dreams of accusing fingers' (Rushdie 190–191); Saleem's embittered spinster aunt, Alia, serves up 'the biryanis of dissension and the nargisi koftas of discord', dishes that introduce a sour note into the Sinais' previously happy marriage (Rushdie 459); and Parvati-the-witch seduces Shiva with 'a dinner of biryani so exquisite' that he devotes 'his undivided attention to her for four whole months' (Rushdie 574).

Midnight's Children thus moves beyond the conventional solaces of nostalgia to embrace what Laurent Milesi calls 'a more political' and historical 'remembering forward' or 'promnesia' that would help to forge [India's] 'remembrance of future things' (Boyce 277).

It is often difficult to interpret the implicit meanings of food when it is used as a literary device in narratives since they pertain to the most personal and impenetrable perimeters of human rationality as well as irrationality. therefore, food in narratives needs to be read in between the lines because we as well as the characters in literary narratives not only eat to survive, or because we/they are hungry. But also due to anxiety, and sometimes to satiate an emotional hunger. additionally, while food often represents self-definition and affiliation to a community, it can also function as a feature of the process of oppression and stereotyping.

Culinary images in literature from anywhere, never goes unnoticed. They stand out as kaleidoscopic lenses that gives the reader a platform for inquiry of stories behind acts of consumption and starvation under soci-historic contexts. In Asian American literature, Food represents the ontological and material experience of diasporic communities in the United States of America. Individual and communal identities are reconfigured as soon as the immigrant makes contact with the host country. Food, in these cases, helps diasporic individuals to stay connected with their 'homeland' and cultural identity, at the same time it marks them as different from 'mainstream' American society.

Nostalgia in the Asian American narratives of displacement such as that in Lahiri's 'Mrs. Sen's'—from her award-winning collection *Interpreter of Maladies*—, portrays how culinary traditions, and the most mundane and intimate sensory experiences that they trigger are central depictions for the recreation of diasporic subjectivity, constituting (quasi-)utopian spaces of identification for the displaced and often homesick individual.

Food becomes significant and meaningful once it starts acting as a cultural signifier of the foreign born person's ethnic identity and negotiates between the 'then and now' or between 'here and there'.

Lahiri's short story allows the omniscient narrator to invade the character's thoughts and intimate feelings of anguish and sadness. The character takes refuge in food in an attempt to dissipate nostalgia and/or pain and embrace an 'authentic' identity. Secondly, Lahiri presents the immigrant as the victim of an episode of veiled discrimination. This discrimination elevates the characters' obsessive habits around food.

Mrs. Sen's alienation in America is sharpened by the difficulties she encounters when trying to recreate and feel the warmth and sense of community intrinsic to the concept of 'home' that she was used to in Bengal, as opposed to the cold, aseptic, and strictly material idea of the 'house' where she lives.

Mrs. Sen religiously observes a series of culinary-related Bengali rituals in an attempt to fight her feelings of 'homelessness' in America. Mrs. Sen's case can be interpreted from this perspective, as her nostalgia and longing for a feeling of community are mirrored in her daily culinary rituals, and particularly in her special relationship with fish.

Recollection not only stimulates Mrs. Sen's memories of her life in India, but it also represents a constant reminder of her displacement and estrangement in the U.S. The critical role that fish played in Mrs. Sen's everyday life in India turns it into a nostalgic tool that has the power to disrupt Mrs. Sen's emotional stability. In Lahiri's story, many other different kinds of fish, such as mackerel, butterfish, sea bass, or halibut are repeatedly mentioned, and, despite the fact that none of them 'tastes like the fish in India' (Lahiri 133). Mrs. Sen seems to content herself with them as long as they are fresh.

In this scene, fish not only stimulates the sight, taste, smell, and sense of touch bringing about memories from her family and previous life in India, this task also constitutes a 'means to escape'. The self-affirming and recalling power of kitchen tasks in Lahiri's story allows for a reading of the domestic sphere as a site of agency for the female character, who, unable to gain access to other spaces, turns her patriarchal and solitary confinement to the kitchen into her personal shrine of Indianness.

One of the elements that symbolizes Mrs. Sen's self-affirmation in the United States is the bonti, the blade the protagonist brought from India, and which she uses on a daily basis to chop ingredients as she used to do back home. This ancestral and traditional kitchen tool, represents Mrs. Sen's cultural attachment to her community back in Bengal. The use of the bonti in her new and still unfamiliar setting in America helps Mrs. Sen remember the sense of belonging she felt in her hometown in India, in contrast to the loneliness she endures in America.

By literally and metaphorically holding onto something that has a deep emotional significance for her, Mrs. Sen is able to recall and maintain strong ties with her homeland and cultural background, preventing these bonds from being diluted or severed by distance. The bonti, a fundamental and ritualized Bengali-coded artifact, represents in the story and in Mrs. Sen's life a personal 'auto topographical object' that functions as a 'spatial annex' or a 'material site for memory' (Lahiri 136-140), where Mrs. Sen's Bengali cultural heritage is engraved against the backdrop of time and distance. Using this blade to chop vegetables in America does not simply constitute the reification of an ancestral tradition; Mrs. Sen's attachment to this culturally-coded artefact anchors her emotions to a material and tangible reality to which she can turn on a daily basis in an attempt to feed her memory, and overcome her nostalgia for the familiar. (Kessler 148-165)

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