

Culinary Culture in Literature: Food and Narrative¹

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ABSTRACT

Inside the realm of literature, culinary culture functions as a potent narrative technique, embedding characteristics such as identity, memory, and social hierarchy inside the narrative. The act of eating is transformed into a major, symbolic, and frequently political literary element, ranging from classic to modern fiction. Food acts as a metaphor for emotion, culture, and power, and it gives rise to the transformation of the act of eating. There has been a long-standing connection between culinary food and literature, which serves as a reflection of cultural identity, societal conventions, and the progression of history. The purpose of this study is to investigate the depiction of food in literary works and to analyze the ways in which authors employ gastronomy as a narrative device to convey feelings, traditions, and social structures. Both *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel and *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust are examples of works that explore the symbolic implications of food and the function that it plays in the growth of characters, the evolution of the story, and the depth of the themes explored. In this study, the multifaceted significance of food in literature is uncovered through the application of critical theories such as structuralism, postcolonialism, and feminism. Based on the data, it appears that food not only provides nourishment to the body, but it also functions as a cultural artifact and a medium for narrative that influences the human experience. Mythology and folklore introduced Indian culture to children's literature. The didactic element of these stories sometimes hampered their 'fun' or 'entertainment'. However, some publishing houses have tried to close this gap by creating stories that are more engaging and relatable to youngsters that reflect Indian culture and values. Food-based children's stories use food as a cultural symbol and representation of India's wide and diverse geography. This study investigates how chosen Indian children's literature employs culinary narratives to illustrate regional culture and gender performativity to fight colonial influence and Western capitalist expansion. This study analyzes Kozhukatta (2017), Thukpa for All (2018), Thatha's Pumpkin (2020), Paati's Rasam (2021), and *My Grandmother Can't Cook* (2023) using Edward Said's idea that resistance is not merely a reaction to colonialism but a new way of seeing human history. The article shows how culinary narratives promote ethnic variety, tolerance, and inclusivity among young readers.

Introduction

Narrative device that plays a significant role. The culinary aspects in fiction do more than only give realism; they also symbolize cultural traditions, social hierarchies, and the dynamics of characters. Within the scope of this paper, we investigate the ways in which gastronomy acts as a literary tool, thereby influencing tales and providing deeper insights into the human form. Food in literature serves a purpose that goes beyond merely providing nutrition; it also serves as a narrative bridge between characters and the cultural, emotional, and historical circumstances in which they find themselves. When it comes to literature, food is much more than just a setting or a symbol of nourishment; it functions as a multifaceted narrative and thematic device that is replete with cultural, psychological, and political meaning. Food appears as a conduit for memory, identity, and emotional expression across a wide range of literary traditions and genres. This provides readers with an opportunity to gain insight into the inner lives of characters as well as the socio-historical situations in which they find themselves.

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The evocative ability of food to alter personal and collective experiences is revealed in literature, from the involuntary recollection that is sparked by a madeleine in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* to the emotionally charged dinners that are depicted in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*. In this study, the numerous roles that food plays in literature are investigated. Specifically, the study investigates how parts of cuisine serve not just as sensory experiences but also as vehicles for storytelling, resistance, and cultural negotiation. By employing a qualitative literary analysis that is informed by structuralism, postcolonialism, feminism, and psychoanalysis, the research analyzes the ways in which authors utilize food to articulate issues of identity, power, social class, and cultural hybridity. Through the examination of a variety of literary works, such as *Great Expectations*, *The Hundred-Foot Journey*, *Babette's Feast*, and *The Joy Luck Club*, the research sheds light on the role that food plays in the narrative process and its ability to enhance the significance of literary works. With the use of this multidisciplinary approach, the project intends to make a contribution to the expanding corpus of research on food studies and literature by illustrating how cuisine can serve as both a metaphor and a method. In the end, this research highlights the fact that food in literature is never just food; rather, it is memory, identity, resistance, and reconciliation, all of which are served on a narrative plate.

Prior studies have pointed out the symbolic significance of food in literature, observing how it influences cultural portrayal and character growth. Bourdieu investigates the relationship between food and social stratification, whereas scholars like Barthes talk about the semiotic features of food. *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel and *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust show how rituals and memories around food form individual and communal identities. In addition, studies of migration tales, gender studies, and postcolonial literature have examined the literary device of food, namely how gastronomy may be used as a tool of power, nostalgia, and transformation in these contexts.

Postcolonialism is a useful tool for analyzing the ways in which food embodies colonial history and power conflicts, particularly in storylines that involve migration and cultural displacement. For example, the novel *"The Hundred-Foot Journey"* illustrates how the relationship between diverse cultures can result in the development of new culinary habits (Morais). The protagonist of the book is Hassan, an Indian chef who moves to France and finds himself in the middle of a cultural confrontation between the culinary traditions of India and France where he is working. Hassan's adaption of his native flavors into French haute cuisine is symbolic of both resistance and assimilation. This culinary journey is representative of the larger postcolonial struggle that has been going on. In the words of Morais (120), "the tandoori spices melded with the delicate French sauces, creating a dish that spoke of two worlds colliding and coalescing." The hybrid identity that he has developed as a result of his interactions with colonial individuals is reflected in the development of his food. There is an application of feminism in order to investigate the ways in which food in literature is connected to gender roles and household labor. "Each dish she prepares is infused with emotions, translating into the experiences of those who consume it" (Esquivel 102) is a quote from the book *"Like Water for Chocolate,"* which describes how cooking becomes a way of emotional expression and resistance against patriarchal norms. Despite the fact that Tita, the main character, is constrained by the rigorous traditions of her family, she discovers both happiness and independence in the kitchen. Her repressed feelings, whether they be love, grief, or rebellion, are channeled through each and every meal that she prepares through the medium of food. "Her tears, mixed into the batter, transformed the wedding cake into a dish of despair," Esquivel writes (Esquivel 115). This is how Esquivel recounts the scenario. in the act of cooking, Tita is able to communicate in ways that cannot be expressed in words. She subverts the patriarchal assumptions of domesticity by imbuing food with power and agency.

Food is commonly used as a potent metaphor for identity, memory, and heritage in works of literature. This metaphor encapsulates the ways in which personal and cultural histories are maintained and relived through the experiences of eating. The well-known scene from Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, in which the taste of a madeleine dipped in tea unexpectedly resurrects a torrent of memories from infancy, is a prime example of how sensory experiences, particularly taste and scent, can release memories that have been buried for a long time. The Madeleine episode is not only about sentimentality; rather, it demonstrates how food can become a container for memory, transcending both time and geography. In this same instant, the narrator finds himself suddenly taken back to the Sundays of his youth in Combray, where his aunt Léonie would offer him madeleines that were soaked in lime-blossom tea. An overpowering flood of emotions is triggered by the taste and aroma of

the pastry, which serves to support the concept that one's identity is formed by the past and that memory is frequently involuntary, as it is connected to sensory experiences rather than conscious remembrance.

Outside of the works of Proust, food frequently has a similar function in literature, serving as a symbol of connections to one's own identity, traditions, and home. In diasporic storylines, for example, gastronomy frequently serves as a link to one's cultural roots, so giving characters with a sense of belonging even when they are in strange places. Several literary works, such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, portray food as a crucial link to heritage. In these works, the process of preparing and consuming traditional dishes is shown as a means of preserving cultural traditions and memories. In the end, food in literature is more than just a means of subsistence; it is also an essential component in comprehending both identity and history. Whether it be a straightforward madeleine or a recipe that has been handed down from generation to generation, food serves as a literary device that bridges the gap between the past and the present. It does this by influencing the identities of the characters and illuminating the profound impact that memory and heritage have on the lives of people.

Through the description of food in literature, class distinctions are frequently brought to light. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens recounts how Pip regards food as a marker of social mobility, highlighting the dramatic differences between his impoverished beginnings and the luxurious dinners of the upper class (Dickens 120). When it comes to literature, food is commonly used as a marker of social class. It serves to illustrate the gap in economic status as well as the goals that are associated with upward mobility. Charles Dickens utilizes food as a potent symbol in *Great Expectations* to contrast Pip's humble beginnings with the splendor of the upper class. This contrast highlights Pip's growing notions of money, status, and identity while also underlining the contrast between the two. The first few encounters that Pip has with food in the beginning of the book are characterized by a lack of plenty and a straightforward approach. It is a working-class household where he is raised, and the meals that he eats are unremarkable and uninteresting. Pip's poor meal is overshadowed by the tension of having stolen a pork pie for the escaped convict Magwitch during the Christmas dinner scene. This is especially noticeable in the moment where Pip is eating during the Christmas dinner. The fact that he associates eating with feelings of guilt and the need to survive highlights his lower-class status and reinforces the notion that for those who are economically disadvantaged, food is frequently a matter of need rather than pleasure. In contrast, Pip learns to view food as a means of determining one's social standing after being introduced to Miss Havisham's deteriorating house, Satis House, and then experiencing the exquisite dining culture of London's upper class. When he arrives at Miss Havisham's, he is presented with a lavish yet unfinished feast, a wedding meal that has deteriorated over time and represents both luxury and stagnation. This spooky environment serves as a precursor to his subsequent revelation that fulfilling one's potential and experiencing happiness are not always synonymous with one's socioeconomic level. In later chapters of the book, as Pip works toward becoming a gentleman and amasses fortune, his relationship with food undergoes a remarkable transformation. He consumes expensive meals as a performative act of social belonging, and he often dines in establishments that are considered to be luxury. However, these luxuries come at a moral cost, as he begins to isolate himself from his humble upbringing and from people who actually care about him, such as Joe Gargery. This is a morally questionable behavior. The contrast between Joe's straightforward and straightforward meals and the opulent dining experiences that Pip meets in London serves as an indictment of social mobility and the illusions that it generates. By utilizing food in this manner, Dickens is able to reveal the rigid class systems that existed in Victorian England. He does this by demonstrating how having access to exquisite dining and expensive meals acts as both a privilege and a sign of desires. But Pip's trip also demonstrates that riches and refinement do not necessarily correlate to genuine contentment or moral superiority. This is something that Pip discovers along the way. The complexity of class disparities is brought to light in *Great Expectations* through the representation of food, which demonstrates how both personal identity and societal perception are influenced by these distinctions.

The way Tita incorporates her feelings into her cooking in *Like Water for Chocolate* shows how acts of cooking can be a way for people to express themselves emotionally and take control of their own lives. "She sensed her enthusiasm permeate the meal, impacting each and every one who encountered it" (Esquivel 132). In her novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, Laura Esquivel delves into topics of control, emotion expression, and power through the medium of food. Cooking becomes a form of defiance and self-affirmation for our heroine Tita because of her

extraordinary talent for infusing her feelings into the food she makes. Because of her mother, Mama Elena's, stringent rules, she is unable to express herself verbally, but via her food, she is able to do so. For Tita, food is more than just fuel; it's a vehicle for her pent-up emotions, which she hopes to share with those who eat her dishes. The preparation of a meal that embodies her intense feelings for Pedro—her forbidden love—is a particularly powerful illustration of this. This piece beautifully captures the power of food as a medium for personal agency; as her emotions permeate the dish, those who consume it are overcome with waves of intense need and longing. Thus, Tita is able to establish her authority in a society that would otherwise repress her by turning her chore of cooking into an act of rebellion. Mama Elena's strict, repressive authority is contrasted with Tita's emotive, almost magical relationship with food in the narrative. Tita finds refuge and defiance in the kitchen while Mama Elena tries to dictate her destiny by prohibiting her from getting married and enslaving her. Every meal she makes is a reflection of her inner life, a weapon against the constraints society has put upon her. As a type of literal and symbolic emancipation, cooking plays a vital role in the magical realist narrative, which centers on the relationship between food and power dynamics. At its core, *Like Water for Chocolate* is about how food may be a kind of social and emotional resistance. The fact that Tita can move people with her food demonstrates how actions of cooking may become more than just a means of subsistence; they can also be potent manifestations of emotion like love, grief, or rebellion. Esquivel shows via Tita's story that food is more than just fuel; it can be a weapon in the fight against repressive systems and for the reclamation of individual agency. The use of food as a plot device that facilitates the progression of the storyline is common in literary works. In the story *Babette's Feast*, the process of preparing an opulent feast serves as a transforming act that helps to overcome differences and builds human connection. Within the context of this narrative, the act of cooking goes beyond the simple function of providing nutrition; it transforms into a ritual of artistic expression and emotional healing. Once a refugee and a servant, Babette is able to gain agency through her culinary mastery, which in turn reshapes the perceptions of others who are in her immediate vicinity. "Each bite seemed to dissolve years of bitterness and discord," said Dinesen (92), who wrote the passage. As a result, the communal dinner serves as a bridge between the grievances of the past and the newly discovered harmony, demonstrating the transformative potential of food in literary works.

Conclusion

According to the findings of the study, cuisine in literature is more than just a means of subsistence; it is also a kind of narrative device that transmits historical, emotional, and cultural dimension. When readers develop a knowledge of the function that food plays in literature, they are able to gain a deeper comprehension of the complexity of human relationships and identity. Among its many functions, food is a tool for retrieving memories, a symbol of strength and resistance, and a medium through which cultures express themselves. There is potential for more investigation into the interaction of food, literature, and digital media in contemporary narrative via the course of future research. Furthermore, the examination of food narratives in developing literary genres and interactive storytelling platforms may provide new insights into the changing role that gastronomy plays in literary works. When it comes to literature, culinary culture functions as a potent and multi-layered narrative instrument that goes beyond the concept of merely providing food to investigate topics such as identity, memory, social class, and the dynamics of social power. Food is used by authors to place characters in certain surroundings, elicit nostalgia, or question societal conventions. This is accomplished by transforming meals into emotional, cultural, and political markers to communicate with the reader. The following are some of the conclusions that can be drawn regarding the connection of food and narrative: Food acts as a channel for memory, connecting characters to their heritage, culture, or experience from the past. Both individual and societal identities are shaped, reinforced, or challenged as a result of this. Culinary traditions are symbolic of a variety of feelings, including happiness, love, comfort, and melancholy. Dishes have the potential to become highly symbolic representations of longing, belonging, or resistance. Food choices frequently serve as indicators of social stratification, reflecting class inequalities, economic disparities, and, as in the case of colonial Bengal, how "hierarchical cosmopolitanism" manifests itself in the world. Food gives sensory nuances that develop characterisation and place, turning scenes of eating into significant cultural commentary. This goes beyond the plot's ability to provide information. Food literature frequently recounts the development of culinary traditions, which reflects the influence of migration, globalization, and the mixing of many cultures into one another.

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