

**Food Rhetoric and the Politics of Narration: A Study of Select
Indian English Fiction**

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CONCLUSION

The thesis adopted food as its focal tool of analysis and examined the food references in a few canonical texts from the year 1936, with the publication of Mulk Raj Anand's *The Coolie* till the publication of Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire*, in the year 2015. All the selected texts employ food as an instrumental driving force, and the thesis derives how food references constitute some vital arguments of the text. Food studies in literature have come a long way since E.M Forster's comment in the book, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) that, "Food in fiction is mainly social. It draws characters together, but they seldom require it physiologically, seldom enjoy it, and never digest it unless specially asked to do so" (39). Quite contrary to Forster, now, it can be safely declared that food in fiction is no longer just a perfunctory element, but is a significant figurative element, containing intricate meanings. As Charlotte Boyce and Joan Fitzpatrick suggest, "evocations of food in literature enrich the reading experience, providing

a tangible link to the imaginary world of the text" (292). Thus, the trope of food continuously manifests itself in the form of various semantic and semiotic indicators, that feed, enthrall, or starve fictional characters. Each of the four core chapters of the thesis examines how writers across time foreground different aspects of food, cooking and consumption. While each chapter examines a particular aspect of food, the thesis as a whole foregrounds the instrumentality of food in understanding the historical and sociocultural distinctiveness of the country, as well as the personal experiences of its inhabitants.

In the selected novels, it is observed that food is not just an incidental embellishment, but is positioned in meaningful intersections so that it can further enhance the arguments of the text. By acting as a metaphor, food concretises the affects and emotions of the text, and conveys it more adequately than simple verbal language can. For instance, Chapter 2 provides evidence for the initial claim that food serves as a repository for intricate metaphorical meanings. In colonial India food and cuisine transcended their symbolic and metaphorical functions, and became sites of sociopolitical encounter. This encounter is made highly apparent through the abundance of hungry bodies of the labourers, in the novels like *So Many Hungers!*, *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Coolie* and *Sea of Poppies*. Hunger is found to be a constructed phenomenon, not due to the absence of food but due to the several experiments conducted on the country's agricultural system, such as

the replacement of traditional crops with cash crops (Sen 3; Ray 38, 44). Food's materiality is presented in an "inverted form" through the narratives of hunger, as evident in the corporeal pain due to starvation, experienced by Bhattacharya's Kajoli and her family, or Markandaya's Rukmani and her family (Boyce and Fitzpatrick 293). During this period, even a common food item like rice became a powerful metaphor as it ceased to be a staple food and reached the level of luxury— a commodity that can only be commanded by the people in power. If we go by statistical data, there were hardly any shortfall in the harvest of rice, but India's experience of repetitive famines under the colonial rule, tells quite a contrary tale. The intensity of the famines can only be adequately accounted for, in terms of hunger, suffered by its population, and its representation in fiction. As the 'Grandfather', in Bhattacharya's novel comments, "Facts never tell much unless they are seen in terms of human experience" (Bhattacharya 25). Their experiences reveal that poor people had to eat grass, weeds, and other unusual food out of "sheer rebellion" against hunger (Bhattacharya 110; Markandaya 89).

The discourse of culinary imperialism among the imperialists and the self-fashioning of tastes among the Indian bourgeoisie, stage another important aspect of the dietary negotiation between the ruler and the ruled. The analysis of novels like *Coolie* and *Sea of Poppies* shows how, India facilitated extravagant living and eating habits, for the British expatriates. This was made possible by the armies of Indian servants and the vast numbers of unemployed labourers, who were resourceful and willing to work for little pay thus making the colonisers' lives easier in the country (Leong-Salobir 2). The study perceives food as a site of cultural negotiation, as one witness the formation of Anglo-Indian dishes like curry or mulligatawny in the colonisers' kitchen while tinned fish, tinned butter, bread, and English sweets began to dominate the palette of the colonised. In essence, the country itself became a laboratory for colonial dietary experiments as scientific language, capitalist theories, and cultural stereotypes merged. The study of the unequal access to food among the natives, or the capitalisation upon the poverty of opium cultivators like Deeti, as well as the examination of microcosmic spaces like the kitchens or the bedrooms of the memsahibs, as in *Coolie*, supports the second hypothesis that the study of food may help in revealing contextual truths.

The use of food as a metaphor for national struggle of India has been most famously popularised by M. K. Gandhi. Food has been the major impetus in the construction of Gandhi's political stature. His ideas of fasting and vegetarianism, are as important as his

ideals of non-violence, brahmacharya and satyagraha. The thesis examines the politics behind Gandhi's dietetics, an area which has been relatively ignored in favour of his political and sexual stance (Roy 75). Gandhi's ideas on food also made a mark on the socio-economic and dietary spheres of the country. His idea of vegetarianism has been a challenge to the idea of meat-eating masculinity, popularised by the British government. Since the meals popularised by Gandhi were economical, sustainable, and nutritious in nature, they appealed to many grassroots communities, thereby enabling him to establish a closer connection with them. It is observed that while his vegetarianism initiated his entry in the political world, his fasts strengthened his position in the political scenario, and gained world-wide attention and support. In Gandhian politics, an item as common as salt has the potentiality to become a powerful political symbol (Roy 78), inspiring the Salt March, which launched the Civil Disobedience movement across the nation. The thesis deliberates that apart from historical facts and sociological studies, the representation of Gandhi in fiction allows one an insight into the public's perception of Gandhi. However fictional writers must deal with certain intricacies while writing about Gandhi. For instance, it is observed that Gandhi is not directly featured in any of the novels like *Kanthapura*, *The Vendor of Sweets*, *The Guide*, and *The Dark Room*, but his charismatic aura is mostly emphasised through emphatic references (Iyengar 372). *Kanthapura* provides an important critique of Gandhian dietetics as it stages Gandhi's questioning of the caste system and its taboo of commensality among different castes. It also stages Gandhi's concept of employing fasting as a weapon against the colonial authority. The public fasts among the villagers, their engagement in satyagraha, the picketing of toddy businesses, demonstrate the vitality of the peasants in the national struggle, and reaffirms his sway over the underprivileged. Alternatively, Gandhi's philosophy is parodied in Narayan's novels to show how the general public interpreted and applied Gandhian principles for achieving their own selfish goals. It is observed that the ideas of self-discipline as a means to attain spiritualism and fasting as a weapon, remain baffling to most of his followers. The protagonists like Jagan, Raju, Savitri— all undergo fasts and limited intake of food at some point during their lives, but their actions are mostly undertaken with the intent of resolving their personal problems. Jagan's control of the palate is staged in strict opposition to his desire to feed Mali excessively, while being indifferent to the needs of the hungry people who stare at his sweet shop. Raju become a victim of the circumstances and is forced to carry out his fast, by the villagers. Savitri's fasts and frugality in the kitchen is observed as a resistance against the domestic oppression

of her husband. This way of reading food, consumption and fasting in both Chapter Two and Chapter Three, proves the second hypothesis that even when literary food studies were not popular or, at best, in its infancy, food played a prominent role in canonical Indian English fiction.

The thesis also examines of the relationship between food, power, gender, and class. For instance, Chapter Four, challenges the traditional view of food as apolitical and shows how it can be used to express a wide range of social and political meanings. While eating can entail “veiled expressions of power” and can be seen as a metaphor for the fight for political agency (Nath; Tompkins 9), it can also make its consumers docile. For instance, the application of Foucault’s idea on biopower in studying the acts of cooking and consumption reveals how food can be used as an instrument to control and manipulate people’s emotions and behaviour, to create and reinforce social and familial hierarchies, and to shape gendered identities. Through the intersectional space of the kitchen, which stages several societal and cultural binaries, this study has revealed the intricate interplay between the political and gendered roles of food and consumption. The thesis examines how various characters interact in the kitchen in novels like *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, *Sangati: Events* and *Midnight’s Children*, and the way they use food to express their identities, negotiate power, and resist oppression. It is observed that the relationship between gender and power in domestic cooking spaces is complex, fluid, and nuanced. While it is true that women have traditionally been responsible for cooking and other domestic tasks, this does not mean that they are always powerless in the kitchen. In fact, cooking and serving food can be a source of power and empowerment for women. It can be a way for them to express their creativity, to connect with their families and communities, maintain their empowering culinary heritage, and to assert their authority. By understanding the complex dynamics of the kitchen, we can begin to challenge the traditional gender roles that have been so harmful to women and men alike. While by cooking and eating together, people can create a space where they can resist dominant ideologies and build more egalitarian relationships. Kire’s novel is a powerful critique of the ways in which women are socialised in their relation to food. For instance, the novel illustrates how the perception of meat as a food associated with men, tends to perpetuate the disparity between the sexes with regards to its consumption. The way Dielieno is denied proper pieces of meat emphasises the denial of power and agency to her. On the other hand, Bano’s character represents a contrast to the principles of dietary

denial and body-policing that are promoted by 'Grandmother'. For Bano, food and its unrestricted consumption becomes a subtle way challenge such discriminatory ideals. Women who act upon their desires of consumption may be easily labelled as eccentrics. This is because women's capacity for consumption can also indicate that they are independent and strong, which challenges patriarchal norms. In Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, Kulfi's hunger is a manifestation of her desire for control and autonomy. The transgressive nature of food is emphasised through Kulfi's utopic fantasies of eating and exercising her agency through cooking. Although her hunger is portrayed as a driving force, labelling it as cannibalistic, dehumanises her and raises questions about cultural anxieties towards women's appetite and reveals the power politics involved in such perceptions. The alternative language of food and hunger is also present in *Sangati*. It is observed that Dalit food is not just a matter of sustenance, but also a tool of asserting their communal identity. The existence of Dalit food becomes politically significant as it originates from their continued struggle against hunger. Hunger, in this context, highlights the significance of Dalit food as a political voice and an expression of their continued fight for survival. The political nature of food as a tool of resistance and a means of agency is also highlighted in *Midnight's Children*, wherein the author goes even further by employing food as the major structural element of his historiographic metafiction. Contrary to what is stated in the novel, the chapter identifies food as a device of manipulation by men like Saleem. That is, it deconstructs the notion of Saleem as a victim of domestic politics among other things, and reveals his misogynistic endeavours to conceal the subversive tendencies of women against the national script of domesticity and docility, staged through their transformative cookery. Hence, the findings in the fourth chapter support the third hypothesis, which suggests that investigating food can provide a nuanced understanding of the formation or resistance of gendered identities, while also revealing the gendered nature of food practices.

Food is also used to preserve and transmit cultural practices and dietetic memories across generations. In the fifth chapter, the analysis delved into the intricate and multifaceted nature of the rhetoric of food in the works of the Indian diaspora. This is because in diaspora literature, food is not simply a catalyst for nostalgia, but also serves as a platform for exploring complex themes such as culture shock, challenges of assimilation, fluidity of identity, exoticisation, and gastronomic hybridity. The emergence of creolised dishes and hybrid cuisine bear testament to the complex terrain of culinary choices and

influences among the Indian diaspora that has been analysed through the concepts of culinary recreation, culinary “interorientation” (Bakhtin 317) and “culinary citizenship” (Mannur 20). The thesis also sheds light on the dietary experiences of the underprivileged members of the Indian diaspora, who are often overlooked. It derived that the old diaspora was more inclined to incorporate elements from the locality into their cuisine due to a lack of resources, whereas the current diaspora, thanks to globalisation, has the privilege to find most of the Indian food items and indulge in the recreation of familiar dishes from their pasts. It is observed that while the old Indian diaspora helped in the formation of creolised dishes, by adapting their traditional recipes to the ingredients and flavours of their new home countries, the new Indian diaspora attempts to recreate authentic dishes from home but often ends up with dishes that are hybrid in nature. Diaspora narratives challenge master narratives and eschew information to question, redefine, and narrate or de-narrate personal, political, and cultural histories (J. Jain 171). In this process, food serves as a catalyst, unveiling alternate and personal realities within diasporic narratives, such as by challenging prevalent stereotypes or by exploring the complexities of a diasporic identity which is often shaped by multiple cultures and experiences. For instance, the portrayal of food in Ghosh's novels offers insights into migrant subjectivities and agencies within the larger narrative of the opium trade.

The novels *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* stages the early settlement of Indian migrants and their culinary inter-orientation in Mauritius and Canton, as they learnt to adopt new food items into their evolving cuisine, giving birth to creolised dishes in time. The process of culinary interorientation represents their triumph over adversities and their growth at the expense of their host land (Bakhtin 281). On the other hand, merchants like Mr Burnham capitalise on the dietary prejudices of the Indian military volunteers by inflating the prices of their food, thereby launching a direct attack on their palate of their underprivileged subjects. The thesis highlights how foodways become an engaging site for identity and cultural negotiations. In *Fasting, Feasting*, food plays a significant role in exploring the notions of “culinary citizenship” and culinary “authenticity” through Arun's migration to America. The chapter traces how food can be a source of comfort and connection, but it can also be a source of isolation and alienation, as experienced by Arun. In *The God of Small Things* and *The Inheritance of Loss*, food plays a significant role in satirising multicultural obsessions. The novels highlight the reconstruction and nativization of foreign dishes in India, depicting them as examples of “colonial mimicry”

(Bhabha 89). This emphasises the significance of food as a tool for cultural critique and exploration of post-colonial identities. Thus, the findings in this chapter support the fourth hypothesis, which suggests that while literature can possess universal qualities, food offers a unique space for studying the intricate nuances of multiple cultures and localities, allowing for the exploration of contextual realities.

References to food in literature enable us “to map intricate patterns of socio-economic and geopolitical change” (Boyce and Fitzpatrick 295). The thesis demonstrates how food acts as an instrumental object in the novels selected for the study. Each chapter takes up an important theme and attempts to examine the preconceived notions of ‘universality’ and stress the need for studying ‘small theories’ and the specifics of localism, as a part of its responsible and comprehensive literary criticism. The physical characteristics of food becomes apparent through the presentation of cooking, consumption, hunger, and the impossibility of its satiation, in certain contexts. The thesis explores how the colonial presence and the imposition of dietary stereotypes by the colonisers, challenged the nation's dining habits. The transformation of opium, from an exotic “spice” grown as a peripheral crop, to becoming one of the heavily cultivated cash crops, serves as a traceable indicator of the growth of global trade and capitalism. In such contexts, the deliberate denial of food gains greater significance, as exemplified by Gandhi's dietary politics that occupied a significant part in his national politics. Gandhi's concept of fasting was partly influenced by the widespread food scarcity experienced by many Indians. While spiritual or nationally motivated fasting is a common theme in Indian English fiction, the representation of eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia is noticeably absent due to limited public knowledge and ignorance surrounding these issues within Indian contexts. Additionally, the thesis demonstrates how food is also used to revisit memories by the diaspora and the return migrants, and also to construct or deconstruct social boundaries, known as categorisation and assimilation, respectively. In a broader sense, food is used to construct, question, and even destabilise the identity and the subjectivity of the consuming self. The study of food rhetoric actively aids in examining several political identities that can be national, gendered, diasporic, hybrid and transnational. Ultimately, the entire thesis supports the fifth hypothesis that food functions as a repository of cultural, social, economic, and political significance and behaviours. By analysing food motifs, one can uncover an alternative and more contextual understanding of fiction as well as facts.