

**‘I Am What I Eat’: Foodscape And Cultural Identity In Specific Regions
Of Karnataka And Tamil Nadu**

Jyoti Parameswaran

M.Phil English

Jain University

18th November,2019

Abstract: Food spaces have an active and evolving relationship with culture and embodied identity. In my paper, I would like to explore the relationship between food spaces and cultural identity through the lens of the following novels, SL Byrappa’s Aavarna and Perumal Murugan’s Pyre. These novels present complex issues related to culture and identity. Food spaces play a crucial role in bringing out caste and religious politics in specific regions of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu through these novels. As Roland Barthes says, “Food is not only a collection of products but a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages and behaviour.” Food spaces represent ‘polysemia’ of experiences, and evoke cultural memory, voice out various stereotypes, ideologies related to culture. Food studies in this sense provides an interdisciplinary approach to understand food as a cultural signifier.

Keywords: Embodied identity, culture, food spaces, cultural memory, caste, religion

“Food is not only a collection of products but a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages and behaviour.” (Barthes 24)ⁱ

Food evokes plenty of associations in different writers’ mind, not only through a peculiar sense of smell and taste but food can be perceived through other senses as well. It helps

evoke memories and feelings related to self and the other. Food, therefore, plays a symbolic role in bringing forth complex psychological dilemmas, questions related to self and body.

In India, food acts as a social, political and religious statement of personal beliefs as well as barrier between cultures. Food spaces like the space of a temple, dining hall, kitchen and practices in every region defines the cultural makeup of that region. According to the Hindu belief system beef eating is forbidden and the practice of cleansing the body through 'fasts' and visit to temple space, is believed to purify the Hindu individual. Whereas, in Islamic tradition, if an individual does not believe in animal sacrifice or considers eating beef or meat objectionable, that person is not seen as a true follower of Islamic traditions. Lower caste Hindus are not allowed in the *Agrahara* or the space of kitchen in the upper caste household as they are considered 'impure'. These everyday experiences are translated through the novels *Pyre* and *Aavarna* to show how food spaces and practices related to culture reflect cultural identity and belief system of individuals.

Culture is a complex term as Terry Eagleton puts it. It encompasses a universe of meanings associated with values, customs, beliefs and practices of any culture. It is the defining aspect of human existence and central to human understanding. Food moves beyond just nourishment of the body. It defines social urges, family roles, rules and traditions. Food and culture have a close-knit relationship as they define each other. The place where food is prepared and consumed is crucial in terms of understanding cultures. The self is political, and hence, eating is also a political act. Identifying and analysing foodscapes illuminates connections between food and culture. Food is a part of any civilisation and civilisation becomes culture when societies follow specific practises, food eating habits and rituals that differentiate one society from the other.

India is diversity personified. One culture cannot define the makeup of Indian identity. It has mix of cultural ideologies, blend of various religions, and postcolonial identity. Culture is an integral part of any country and India being such a diverse nation, influence of various cultures and its practises defines Indian identity. Food acts as a political, religious and social statement of personal beliefs. Food spaces evoke cultural memory, voice out various stereotypes and ideologies related to specific cultures. This research intends to study food

spaces of specific regions of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu in order to look at the relationship between culture and embodied identity.

Bangalore is the postmodern hub of Karnataka. It is fast growing with a multicultural population. In this postmodern space of Bangalore, people desire to soak in the capitalist culture and at the same time wish to be culturally rooted. If one must understand the culture of Bangalore, one should look at the multicultural setup of the state. The space of Bangalore reflects the multicultural identity of individuals and a constant search for individual identity. The novel *Aavarna* by SL Byrappa is an iconoclastic novel that raises pertinent questions about religion, identity and the body. It is a novel about the relationship between a Hindu girl and a Muslim boy living in the multicultural society and parallel to that the historical story of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb is explored as well. It is an interesting blend of history and the present to discuss important perspectives related to identity and religion.

Food reflects these complex issues and helps us uncover layers in the novel to understand culture and identity of individuals intertwined with the culture they live in. The novel is about the relationship between Razia and Amir who work for the media industry. Being a part of the progressive elitist culture, Lakshmi, who is now named Raziaⁱⁱ thought that marrying a liberal, educated man would not be a bad decision but little did she know that religion would be a barrier in their relationship. Through this novel, one can understand that food spaces are contingent in nature and the value of food spaces alter according to cultural understanding and identity of any individual. Food spaces reflect racial, cultural and religious prejudices and highlights the politics involved with it. At the beginning of the novel, it is mentioned that ordering food outside the realm of the household was Razia's privilege. But as she was bound in a religious context where ordering vegetarian food was criminal, her husband remarks that he cannot live eating vegetarian food or rather what he calls 'vegetarian nonsense'. Realm of 'outside' or the restaurant is important as it presents the idea of privilege and empowerment. The restaurant is outside the space of the house that is the epitome of one's culture, in this case the Islamic culture. This presents the readers a critique of the gender issues and religious disparities prevalent in the educated, forward thinking society. Razia outwardly was empowered but still the power always rested with the man.

As a result of this unaccepted relationship Lakshmi's father disowned her, and she was forced to convert and adapt Islam as her religion. The way Razia cognitively maps the transition of her identity from Lakshmi to Razia highlights the contrast between cultures and what it does to one's identity. She vividly describes the space of Muslim household and how food practices and culture in general were restricted and very different from her Hindu household. From the preparation of biryani to animal sacrifice, everything in the house marked the territory of Islamic culture. These food spaces make Razia compare her culture and the Islamic culture that she was forced to adapt. Time is crucial in understanding culture. Cultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exteriorised, objectified and is stored in symbolic forms. It is cast in symbols as they are continually illuminating a changing present. In the novel, Razia traces back to her cultural memory of the religion she was born with and tries to compare the food spaces and her embodied identity then and now. She says,

“Lying in the convalescing room, I couldn't help but compare. Instead of killing the poor kids, they could have prepared an offering along the lines of traditional Hindu delicacies- a delicious mixture of banana, coconut and jaggery, and curd rice served separately and offered to God.” (Bhyrappa 19)

She feels claustrophobic and convulsive in the room of the Muslim household with the practises that she was forced to follow. The traditional culture and conditioning of the Hindu girl within her did not allow her to adapt her husband's culture as normal. This shows that meaning of food changes according to the conditioning and value associated with culture.

The meaning of food is an exploration of culture through food. What we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, who's at the table, and who eats first is a form of communication that is rich with meaning. The act of eating is beyond nourishing the body, what we eat and with whom we eat can inspire and strengthen the bonds between individuals, communities and even countries. (Stajcic 1) The way Razia explains the *zenana* and *mardana*ⁱⁱⁱ practice in her husband's house and way women were instructed to cook and serve food highlights how space in the house was divided according to gender roles.

Life and nature are uncertain and according to Hindu tradition, the way to please God is by following rituals and fasting. The space of temple marks as an important cultural marker. South Indian traditions give a lot of importance to temples as a symbol of Hindu religion and

a site of worship. From around 500 BCE new forms of worship and beliefs emerged. Temples were built, especially in South India; some housed single deity others honoured many gods and these temples became the symbol of Hindu tradition and culture. In the novel, the temple space represents an important connection between food space and embodied identity. Body is seen as an object of purification and food is used to purify the body. Body is the most indisputable materialisation of cultural taste. In the novel, Razia desires to perform the last rites for her father but is denied as she had converted into Islam and more so, that she ate beef. She is told to follow certain Hindu practises of purification of her body and in turn the soul to ensure she befalls one religious' identity. She mentions,

“As the first step, she spent three days and three nights in the temple on a strict diet of milk and fruit. On the fourth day, Shastri Ayya initiated her into a purification fire ceremony. Through these days and during the ceremony, she reminded herself that she was doing this to cleanse herself of the sin of eating beef.” (Bhyrappa 65)

Hence, one can observe that the space of temple is a crucial part to assert religious identity, namely Hindu. *Yagna* or the word that can mean prayer, offering or worship is crucial to the Indian understanding. In the novel as well, one can see that the purification of the 'polluted' body is done through this *yagna* and cleansing of the body through a strict diet that does not involve anything that is cooked. Levi Strauss talks about the culinary triangle^{iv} and explains in his essay that in the society just like the language binary, we can see nature and culture binary. Everything that is roasted and boiled. It is created using various aspects of culture like receptacles are a part of culture and everything that is raw is part of nature. In the novel, when Razia is told to stay in the temple and only eat fruits and milk, this shows that she has to connect with nature in order to disassociate herself from one particular culture, in this case the Islamic culture. These food spaces help one understand embodied identity that each one carries with them. Our identity is intertwined with culture. Food and mapping of food spaces help readers understand this aspect closely.

Another aspect of Indian identity is caste. Caste system is deeply ingrained in the Indian sensibility. Caste system has many ramifications, especially for the two most fundamental human activities: sex and eating. People could not marry, share or accept food or use utensils outside their caste parameters. Caste became closely associated with the idea of purity and

identity of an Indian. Caste is not something that is physical. It consists of a set of social relationships and is a crucial marker of identity for the Indian sensibility. Food is one of the most important aspect of living in terms of defining caste and embodied identity. Food spaces hold extreme importance in terms of defining caste-based identity.

The novel, *Pyre* by Perumal Murugan presents a stark critique of caste-based identity. It is a love story of Kumaresan and Saroja who belong to different castes. They elope and get married. They come to Kumaresan's remote village to face the wrath of his mother and the entire community that supposedly represents lower caste community. In the entire discourse of the novel, what is interesting is that Saroja's caste is never revealed. It is left to the villagers and the reader's imagination and preconceived notions. Food spaces in the novel bring out complex issues of caste identity, also makes the readers uncomfortable with the question of unnamed caste identity of Saroja. It plays on the reader's stereotypes and the stereotypes of the characters within the novel.

In the story, the space of this remote village is clearly defined as the space of the 'other'. The author outlines,

“There were no houses anywhere in sight. With each searing gust of wind, the white summer heat spread over everything as if white saris had been flung across the sky. There was not a soul on the road. Even the birds were silent. Just an ashen dryness, singed by the heat, hung in the air. Saroja hesitated to venture into that inhospitable space.” (Bhyrappa 3)

At the beginning of the novel itself, the author establishes that space of the village is unwanted space of the other which is uncomfortable and inhospitable and not a part of normative society. The village is symbolic of unwanted caste space of the lower class. Saroja who belongs to the city space and presumably, part of the upper caste society feels claustrophobic, bound and unwelcome in this space.

As Aristotle says that boiling and roasting are a part of culture. Making food using receptacles shows the aspect of culture and differentiates one culture from the other. In the novel, *Kaanji*^v is the staple food of people living in this remote village.

“...I will give you some leftover soaked in water. Will you drink it? But she was too unsettled to respond.” (Bhyrappa 18)

Kaccha and *Pucca* food^{vi} are markers of caste differentiation. The lower caste in India accept *Kaccha* food or the food that is not rich in nature. Hence, Kumaresan is accustomed to eating rice soaked in water but at the same time, Saroja finds it uncomfortable and unsettling to eat this kind of food as she it is not normative for her. In comparison to the food practises in the village, Saroja's dwelling marks abundance. Tholur symbolises the space of the normative.

The author remarks, “In Tholur, where she was from, it was simply not a custom to mix some pap with rice and then drink it. They did make porridge, but not the kind Kumaresan was used to. They called broken rice ‘noy’. Here, in Kumaresan's village, however, koozh porridge was made by boiling flour in water with some salt.” (Murugan 19)

The comparison that she draws is a manner to juxtapose the high and low culture. In a recent book, Balmurli Natrajan (2012) refers to the ‘culturalization of caste’ as the process by which caste groups seek to represent themselves as cultural groups, thus naturalising their existence and justifying their preferences and practices as ‘diversity’ and ‘difference’ rather than hierarchy (Appadurai 3). By drawing comparisons between spaces, she is also drawing the boundary between cultures and trying to identify with a culture she has grown up in and is comfortable in. Saroja describes the elaborate way rice was cooked according to her customs. Memory is not individual or private experience but a part of the collective domain. When Saroja refers to how food is prepared in her culture, it reflects the collective sensibility of the culture she belongs to. Food brings cultural memory to our contemporary life. Descartes maintains a notion of Euclidean space in which space cannot be separated from the bodies in space. Following the Aristotelian definition, the term body here refers to anything with mass and dimensionality and for Descartes all bodies have a fundamental characteristic, spatial extension, so that what we think of as space is just an extension of bodies. Hence, what these characters in the novel carry out through their attitude towards food and consumption of it is representative of the entire body of the culture they represent.

Another aspect that is important from the perspective of culture and caste is taste. Pierre Bourdieu in his essay says that “Eating habits, especially when represented solely by the produce consumed, cannot of course be considered independently of whole lifestyle. The

most obvious reason for this is that taste for a particular dish is associated, through preparations and cooking, with a whole conception of domestic economy.” (Murugan 33) Taste is something that is acquired through contact with culture. Be it Saroja or Kumaresan both have taste for the kind of food they ate. There is a point in the novel, where Kumaresan’s mother, Marayi does not want to go to restaurants as then they fear losing taste for home-cooked food and contrary to that Saroja does not like pap and water as she has never developed a taste for such food.

Including caste space, Marayi also marks her space and her dominance by not sharing the kitchen with her daughter in law who she disapproves. In space of the kitchen, she creates another kitchen where she does not allow Saroja to cook. This kind of creation of space shows the idea of dominance as Marayi does not want to let another woman take over her power in the kitchen and she wants to create a boundary for her caste and does not want to allow Saroja who belongs to another caste transgress those boundaries. Kitchen is an important space that marks the gendered understanding. Kitchen symbolise power play and space of women where they can assert their voice that otherwise patriarchal society suppresses.

All food spaces have their own significance. It voices out cultural stereotypes and practices of various kinds. Eating is not always merely an act of filling one’s stomach or satisfying hunger. It satisfies hunger for identity, voice and even validation from the culture one would like to associate.

Francis Bacon famously observed in his essay *Of Studies* that "some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested". Literary language can be mouth-filling, hard to digest or even spicy. Words can nourish meanings and flourish figurative meanings and relationship between food and culture. Just as cooking transforms raw materials into cultural forms, the space of writing helps readers identify with these relationships and help the readers make a cognitive map of their reality and the reality within the story. Food in that sense acts as a cultural signifier and represents *polysemia*^{vii} of emotions of the past and the present of an individual’s embodied identity. Food communicates individual beliefs, cultural ideology and acquired value and taste that each society has imbibed. The meaning of food changes with context and cultures. Food is not just

a mere necessity or an innocent act of pleasure seeking. It is not a metaphor but a metonym for culture and identity.

End Notes

ⁱ This quote is from an essay by Roland Barthes named, ***Towards the Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption***.

ⁱⁱ Lakshmi is named Razia as she was told to convert to Islam if she desired to marry Amir.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Zenana** is the part of a house for the seclusion of women and **Mardana** is the outer space of the house for guests and male members.

^{iv} Culinary triangle term is taken from Levis Strauss's essay, *The Culinary Triangle*. Strauss states that culinary triangle is like the language triangle. It constitutes of raw, cooked and roasted food that reflects nature/culture binary.

^v Kaanji is a kind of food preparation that has boiled rice which is also known as pap with rock salt. It was generally used by the lower caste people for their everyday living.

^{vi} Kaccha food is raw, uncooked food and pucca food is cooked food.

^{vii} Polysemia is a word created by Roland Barthes and mentioned in his essay, ***Towards the Psychosociology of Contemporary food consumption*** where he refers to the entirety of experiences.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." counihan, carole and penny van esterik. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2013. 23-30. English.

Bhyrappa, SL. *Aavarna*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2014. English.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste." counihan, carole and penny van esterik. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2013`. 31-39. English.

Eagleton, Terry. "Terry Eagleton." 24 October 1997. *The times higher education*. English. 18 February 2019.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "The Culinary Triangle." counihan, carole and penny van esterik. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2013. 40-47. English.

Murugan, Perumal. *Pyre*. New Delhi: Hamish Hamilton, 2016. English.

Sen, Colleen Taylor. "The Age of Ritual." Sen, Colleen Taylor. *Feasts and Fasts: A History of Food in India*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2015. 34-46. English.

Shahani, Gitanjali G. "Introduction: Writing on Food and Literature." *Food and Literature* (n.d.): 1-10. English.

Eliot, T. S. Notes towards the Definition of Culture. Faber & Faber, 2010.

Eagleton, Terry. Culture. Yale University, 2018.

Sen, Coolen Taylor. "The Age of Ritual." Sen, Colleen Taylor. *Feasts and fasts: A History of Food in India*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2015.34-46. English.