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MY FOOD SAYS IT ALL: DIETARY DESIRES AND FEMININE BOUNDARIES

Rosemaria Regy Mathew[1]
Junior Research Fellow,

Dr. S. Balasundari[2]
Associate Professor
School of English and Foreign Languages
Gandhigram Rural Institute, Tamilnadu, India

Abstract:
Githa Hariharan is a distinguished Indian writer who is well known for her novels, short stories and essays which articulate social and feminist causes and shed light on the predicament of the Indian female community. Her debut novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, won immense popular as well as critical acclaim. Her stories, seemingly calm and innocent, brim with tremendous energy of resistance and the desire to break social and cultural barriers. The paper attempts to analyse the role of food in two of her short stories - "The Remains of the Feast" and "Revati" included in the collection of short stories titled *The Art of Dying and Other Stories*. It critically examines the way in which food occupies a prominent place in these stories and becomes a metaphor for communicating deeper and more sensitive issues such as desire, resistance, identity etc. Hence far from being an innocent object of consumption, it becomes a powerful metaphor for articulating key feminist issues.

Keywords: food, desire, resistance, body, identity, self, patriarchal, feminine

We now live in an era where everything from the extremely exquisite to the most quotidian elements of life are subject to literary and critical examination, revealing much on social relations and power in day-to-day life. With rising inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches in academic research, nothing seems to miss the academic's eye. Naturally literature and critical study of texts have also evolved over time. When Margaret Atwood titled her debut novel as '*The Edible Woman* 'or when the female protagonist of Elizabeth Gilbert's bestseller *Eat Pray Love* claimed to have an 'affair' with her

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pizza, what the readers got were not just refreshingly new perspectives but also the realization that food is not *just* food. Nobody could have it made it more clear and crisp than Terry Eagleton who pointed out that "If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food … Like the post- structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable…" (qtd.in Shahani 2). Given the integral role of food in our basic survival and existence, it is no surprise that food has also come to occupy a distinct place in human imagination and creative expressions. It has come to mean much more than just its material aspects and has found its way into the literary world of images and symbols. Food seems to be the new exciting thing and everything related to it such as healthy eating, diet, various types of cuisines from across the world etc seem to be widely discussed. From publications such as magazines and cookbooks to television shows which deal with a wide range of culinary topics, we seem to be surrounded by a "food explosion" (Varghese 2).Literary food studies is a relatively "new and emerging field of enquiry, which re-evaluates, rethinks and rediscovers the importance of food and eating in understanding the ways we live and communicate. It is …essential to address not only the widely-spread place occupied by food in literary narratives, but also its ability to convey cultural messages in a variety of literary-related contexts"(Piatti-Farnell and Lee Brien). To put in simpler terms, food studies analyses "food symbolism to reflect on cultural identity which includes various issues from social position to sexual desire to gender relations" (Varghese 2).Talking about the genesis of 'food studies' in literature and culture studies, Suzanne Daly and Ross G Forman point out:

> "… however much legitimacy "food studies" has acquired in these fields [other fields like anthropology and sociology], in the camp of literary and cultural studies, it has remained - at least until recently- a devalued object of inquiry. There are many potential reasons for this, the most important of which may be food and cookery's association with women and with popular culture- which therefore tied its study to polemical debates about the merits of feminist studies; the importance of maintaining the canon; and the value of the "cultural turn" as a whole- as well as the field's broader lack of interest in the aesthetics of the quotidian. (363)

Although food as a major topic of critical enquiry in literary circles is

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relatively new, a good number of significant works have been produced in this area. A feminist discussion of food reflects on "the gendered patterns of production, preparation and consumption of food" (Lindenmeyer 1).One often comes across scholarly studies on the relationship between food, body and sexuality in literature or feminist critical examinations of food scenes in women's writings .The social as well as metaphorical links between food, sex, gender and language makes food a highly effective way for literary authors to depict and explore gender roles (Mc Quown). Interestingly there are various literary works which examine the relationship between women and food, employing food as a powerful metaphor or signifier. Food imagery is also prominent in the works of several Indian women writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Gita Hariharan, Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Nair.

Githa Hariharan is a distinguished contemporary Indian writer and the author of several novels, short stories and essays. Her debut novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book in 1993. The author of several highly acclaimed works such as the *The Art of Dying* (1993),*The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), *Fugitive Histories* (2009) and *Almost Home: Cities and Other Places*(2014),Hariharan's works shed light on the predicament of Indian women. In *The Art of Dying and Other Stories*, published in 1993, the readers are met with "complex female figures, which emerge from their anonymity as wives, mothers, or daughters and demand their right to have a distinct voice and a visible position from which to speak. Even though some of these characters may be portrayed in ironic or caricaturist modes, their originality and subversive potential is what redeems them" (Dengel-Janic 13).In stories such as "The Remains of the Feast", "Gajar Halwa", "Revati", and "Virgin Curry" (included in *The Art of Dying*),food becomes much more than an edible commodity. It takes on powerful cultural and social signification and conveys more complex issues such as identity, resistance, desire, fulfilment, purity and much more.

"The Remains of the Feast" narrates the tale of Rukmini, a ninety-year-old Brahmin widow who, towards the end of her life, feels a sudden and irrepressible urge to taste various food items she has been 'forbidden 'so far. Rukmini begins a series of "midnight feast"(Hariharan 12)of cakes, ice cream, biscuits and samosas and within a month, her granddaughter-in-law and great-granddaughter get used to her "unexpected, inappropriate demands"

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(13). As her condition gets worse, the intensity of her dietary desires increases. When her daughter-in-law tries to feed her rice gruel, Rukmini resists strongly and demands "something from the bazaar. Raw onions, fried bread. Chickens and goats" (14).Rukmini not just craves for 'forbidden' and 'tabooed' delicacies and snacks but also enquires eagerly about other related aspects such as the ingredientsin them and the shops from which they have been brought. This brings in more grave issues such as the notions of purity, pollution, clean/unclean, which in turn connote other significant social dimensions such as caste and religion.

> Notions of purity are encountered in various cultural or conceptual spheres, as for example in kinship (ideologies and rules requiring endogamy), sexuality, political and theological notions of ideological or doctrinal purity, and folk theories of race. However, it is mostly in the areas of religion and ritual that the concept has proven relevant to the analysis of social systems. One notable example is the Hindu caste system, interpreted by Louis Dumont (1980), following Bouglé (1908), as an essentially religious system founded on distinctions of "pure" and "impure." Explicit ideas of purity and pollution, and practices dealing with impurity, are also found in other world religions, most notably in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. (Forth)

Rukmini's sudden desire for cakes with eggs, soft drinks with alcohol content and other delicacies which she has never tasted throughout her life is not just a means of resistance against conventions and her final attempt to break all the codes she has lived by till then, it also brings in the whole question of the purity/impurity of body, caste, religion etc. For instance, she insists to have food items made by "non-Brahmin hands" ("Remains of the Feast" 12), cakes from the "Christian shop" (12) and food items made by "muslim cooks" (13) etc. This becomes particularly significant in a social context where caste and other such factors occupy a prominent position. Shah in his article titled "Purity, Impurity, Untouchability" points out, "ideas of purity/impurity were present all over Hindu society for centuries: in domestic as well as public life, in exchange of food and water, in practicing occupations, in kinship and marriage … and in a myriad different contexts and situations. These ideas played a crucial role in separating one

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caste from another, and in arranging them in a hierarchy…" (99).

In a way when Rukmini, a "Brahmin widow who had never eaten anything but pure home-cooked food for almost a century," eats "cakes and ice-cream, biscuits and samos as, made by non-Brahmin hands" "and small cakes…from the Christian shop" (Hariharan 12), she transgresses the boundaries of caste and religion. While "notions of purity and pollution are connected to systems of classification that define the culturally recognized categories," (Forth), food taboos "can serve to mark outsiders as unclean, unhealthy, unholy" (Mark Steine, qtd. in Pathak 8). Thus when Rukminieats food prepared by 'outsiders', she also goes beyond social categories, societal conventions and accepts "what has been for her unclean and unholy throughout her life" (Pathak 8).Moreover Rukmini is a Brahmin widow. Hence "the manifold form of oppression on the basis of caste, class and gender is depicted in the text. The patriarchal code of conduct that Rukmini is made to follow preaches abstention from forbidden food and drinks as well as wearing of dark coloured clothes on the basis of the fact that she is a Brahmin widow who belongs to the upper middle class" (Mukherjee 3).

Perhaps it is not just the taste of the food that excites Rukmini, but also the very idea of 'transgression' involved in it. She is not just delighted by the taste of cakes or aerated drinks, but is also thrilled to know that there are eggs in the cake and alcohol in the Coca-Cola. This sense of breaking conventions and norms which has she has lived by for a whole lifetime confers on her a sense of 'self' and 'identity.' The fulfillment of her gastronomic desires creates a sense of elation in her, perhaps because it also signifies her courage to transgress and in this transgression, she finds her voice, subjective autonomy and agency over her own wants, at least to a certain extent. This sudden craving for 'forbidden' food may also symbolize her realization of the restrictions which she experienced throughout her life and the urge to live her life the way she wants, at least during the last days of her life. It may also stand as a representative act for many more cravings left unfulfilled and needs unattended to, deeper and more significant, during various stages of her life- desires and needs subsumed in patriarchal restrictions and societal conventions.

While Rukmini in "Remains of the Feast" craves for all kinds of hitherto 'forbidden' food towards the end of her life, Revati in the eponymous tale appears to be obsessed with food throughout her life. Hence while the old

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Brahmin widow transgresses and crosses boundaries of gender and social categories through her cravings for food during old age, Revati does it through her constant yearnings for food. Just like Elizabeth's affair with pizza in *Eat Pray and Love*, Revati seems to have a deep lifelong affair with food. She is presented as a woman who "ate enough for two men, unaffected by details such as how much she was leaving in the dishes for the rest of us" ("Revati" 94). Not just that she ate a lot, she also advised the women in her family to eat. She would say, "Eat, so that you're strong. So the ghosts don't get you" (94). Regarding her eating habits, the narrator says:

I had never seen anyone eat like Revati. Usually we women waited till all the children had eaten, then the men, before we sat down to eat what was left over. But Revati, in spite of being completely grey, never noticed any of these feminine niceties. She would sit with the children, and stuff the food, great big balls of it all mixed up, into her mouth. (94)

According to Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard, "food practices express a gendered hierarchy, with the status of a 'good woman' and the well-being of her family dependant on her cooking, thriftiness and self-sacrifice" (qtd. in Lindenmeyer 1). Going by these criteria, Revati would hardly be perceived as a good woman. On the contrary, going by Pierre Bourdieu's claim that "men and women ate differently: men greedily, in gulping mouthfuls, women daintily, taking smaller bites and chewing carefully" (qtd. in Lindenmeyer 1), her voracious eating probably makes her more 'masculine' than the 'expected feminine.'

Just as in the case of Rukmini, Revati'seating habits signify much more than a mere love for food. It becomes significantly connected with other factors such as her 'feminine' identity, body and sexuality. Revati is portrayed as a woman with peculiar habits of her own and a staunch refusal to fit her into the moulds of the conventional feminine. Her identity seems to be constructed in contradiction to the ideal feminine. In other words, she is what the ideal feminine is not. This occurs in various contexts, such as in terms of her appearance which is rather "bulky" ("Revati" 95) and behaviour which seems to be devoid of all "feminine niceties"(94). She seems to possess a host of habits that make her less feminine. She is never ashamed to express her feelings and needs, whether it is admiration for the narrator's bridal finery or her desire for food.

One among her unique traits was her eating habit. As far as the question of

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'feminine' identity is concerned; the story presents a binary between Revati and other women characters in the story including the narrator. Consequently Revati's appearance and her behaviour fail to put her into the 'privileged' category of the ideal femininity (in a patriarchal society). Hence her 'performance' of her gendered self falls below social expectations and she consequently ends up as the 'Other'. Revati's already marginalized position within the women community becomes further aggravated due to this. Moreover, in contrast to dominant stereotypical representations of women, particularly widowed women, Revati is neither silent and submissive nor very loving and comely. Her behavior hardly confirms to socially approved etiquettes of womanhood or widowhood. While this is actually a liberating aspect for Revati, it is perceived as problematic by others and she is eventually seen as a burden by her family. As Dengel- Janic rightly puts it, "the dichotomy that is established by the narrative between "us," meaning the family, and Revati reinforces her role of the rebel against the socially approved forms of womanhood" (9).

Revati appears to be in direct contradiction to the usually accepted and socio-culturally framed feminine ideals. The narrator makes this very clear when she thinks that things would have been different and more pleasant if Revati had been "different somehow. Beautiful maybe,or even just more attractive, or loving. Or if she had been a good cook or helpful with the children" (Hariharan 93). One cannot miss the fact that all these qualities- physical beauty, good culinary skills and looking after children are all qualities that the society expects from a woman, part of the social construction of femininity. Revati, on the other hand, is "short, squat, with a scaly, swarthy skin, coarse grey hair, and shamelessly aggressive buck teeth" (93). Her body appears to be very different from what the society would pass as an ideal or desirable female body. Her eating habits and fat figure is significant in a society which most often equates women to their external (physical)appearances and perceive women as "simply being their bodies"(Richardson and Locks 8). While masculinity has more often been associated with the intellect and reason, femininity is mostly associated with and appraised in terms of its physical beauty (Richardson and Locks x). However Revati seems to be least bothered by how others perceive her supposedly 'unfeminine' body and behaviour. She refuses to change. The narrator points out that despite all attempts by the family, Revati still remained the same. Even at a rather old age, "she still ate too much, sighed greedily when she saw our new saris, and bathed for hours on end"

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(95).Her excessive eating and "bulky frame" (95) thus become her way of resisting patriarchy and finding fulfillment. Her eating habits become important ways of retaining her control over her body which can be extended to aspects of the self and identity, considering the integral part the body occupies in a person's self and identity.

Moreover Revati's eating habits and her fat body become significant, particularly in a socio-cultural context where the female body is the site of oppression and resistance. Married at the age of ten and widowed within a year, she is home tutored and later sent to Madras for higher studies. Once she is employed as a teacher in a small town, she has her own savings and becomes an independent woman. However as she grows old, everybody in the family "felt a kind of a disbelief when she arrived at their doorstep with monotonous regularity, sweaty and hungry"(93). Revati, with her "bulky frame" (95) and with slow movements like a "soft, swollen balloon, filled with stale air (95) is never seen as a 'desirable' woman in a patriarchal setting and she never becomes an object of heterosexual male desire. She refuses to let her body be controlled or regulated. She eats to her heart's content and becomes fatter, regardless of what others think about her. Even her conversations seem to centre on gastronomic issues such as the "gas problem" or the "three kinds of burps"(95). The narrative thus puts the female body at the centre and the whole narrative "revolves around a woman's body, including its vulgarity and ugliness" (Dengel-Janic 11).In a world which attaches tremendous importance to a woman's external appearance and physical beauty, Revati appears to be a radical figure. This reminds the readers of Wolf's assertion that beauty standards are issues of power, pointing out that "the cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience" (187).Further, in a society which places an exaggerated importance on female beauty and constantly projects unrealistic standards of female beauty, the body and food (the perfect diet for attaining the stereotypical beautiful female body) seem to be a rather uncomfortable or contentious terrain for many women. As Susie Orbach, writes in *Hunger Strike: The Anoretic's Struggle as a Metaphor for our Age* (1986), for many women "food is a combat zone, a source of incredible tension, the object of the most fevered desire, the engenderer of tremendous fear, and the recipient of a medley of projections centering round notions of good and bad" (qtd. in Grey).She also points out:

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> There are those women who are constantly dieting and consistently limiting their food intakes, there are those women who diet during the week then let themselves go at weekends, there are those women who do not eat until suppertime…there are those women who consistently plan to diet but end up over eating every time they start to eat something (compulsive eaters); and there are those women who try to avoid food at all costs (anorectics). The adaptations are endless and women vary in their responses." (qtd. in Grey)

Connected with this is the idea of female sexuality."Metaphors of consumption act as a major symbolic vehicle to both convey and shape concepts of sexuality, agency, and gender identity. In literary and popular contexts, appetite often stands for sexual desire, descriptions of eating mask language of possession, and representations of cooking express both enslavement and empowerment" (Andrievskikh 137). While the narrator and other female members of the house follow certain "feminine niceties" ("Revati" 95),Revati is shown as "devouring food, instead of delicately and modestly eating. Her passion for eating and her relationship to a young retarded relative hint at her hidden sexuality…" (Dengel-Janic 9).This is crucial considering the fact that women in many cultures are encouraged to deny their hunger and desire for both food and sex ("Sex and Food"). Revati thus presents before the readers a "subversive image of womanhood" (Dengel- Janic 11). Moreover "the female code of chastity, modesty and silence is turned upside down by the bulky widow who, instead of merging with the needs of the family, centers her attention and the attention of others on her bodily needs. Consequently her characterization dwells on the very physicality of her existence" (11).

The relationship between food and literature or representation of food in literature has attracted significant scholarly attention in the recent times. The idea of food as a literary trope of considerable importance and its ability to reflect and convey deeper issues such as those of social relations, gender, ethnicity etc has been well explored by writers and critics. Diverse representation of food and eating in specific literary works of different

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historical periods, culinary texts such as cookery books, food novels, food memoirs, culinary biographies, chef autobiographies and other 'dietary' literature or 'food writing' or "food literary genres" (Piatti- Farnell and Lee Brien), food imagery and food symbolism in literature, food and gender representation, representation of food in works of diasporas writers are some of the few widely studied intersectional elements between food and literature. In the selected short stories, Revati's excessive eating and Rukmini's sudden desire to eat certain food items can all be interpreted on different levels and they convey much more than mere dietary desires. As Boyce and Fitzpatrick rightly put it, "the use of food in novels, plays, poems and other works of literature can help explain the complex relationship between the body, subjectivity and social structures regulating consumption" and this is exactly what Hariharan seems to be doing in these stories. For these characters, their dietary desires also provide a way of negotiating and transgressing feminine boundaries defined and set by the society, at least to a certain extent. Ultimately the stories shed light on the situation of women in a patriarchal setting and effectively convey the idea of what it means to be a woman in a male- dominated society in all its myriad hues and multiple dimensions.

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