

Oh! It's Delicious: The Symbolic Functions of Food, Eating and Hunger

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Abstract

The meaning of the word table can be used traced to Latin *tabula* intended for a reception of inscription or account. The word *tableau* in Old French too has similar narrative connotations: it means “a striking scene, a picturesque representation, produced unexpectedly and dramatically”¹. There is thus an implicit connection between tale and table, food and narration. The aim of this paper is to make explicit precisely this connection between eating and storytelling. I discuss two very different texts- Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Indira*: both from the nineteenth century, both written in the realist mode, both about the fortunes of its eponymous heroine. I use food as a locus to discuss various aspects of culture, class, caste and gender that get displayed in the process. Being a literature student, I wish to offer a nuanced portrayal of how the Victorian conceptualization of female appetites, her health and well-being and anorexic body were infused with contemporary notions of sexuality and gender; also, in what ways women's relationship to food was gendered.

Keywords- Food, Hunger, Eating, Gender, Sexuality, Consumption

Introduction

Food is an important and indispensable part of any culture. Silvia Mergenthal notes how “[i]t is the link between the natural and socio-cultural dimensions of eating... [which] lies at the heart of an anthropology of eating. On the basis of this anthropological constant, every culture develops its own cuisine, that is, its system of language and practices around phenomena such as food, eating and embodiment”. Literature, moreover, is informed by and becomes one of the sites in which discourse about food gets articulated. “Literary texts reflect... the dietary habits and eating practices of the society in which they originate”. Given the above, it becomes interesting to compare literary texts from

two very different cultures – mid-Victorian and late nineteenth century colonial Bengal (now West Bengal, a state of India) – to see ramifications of eating practices, dietary habits and attitudes towards preparation and serving of food reflected with literature. Carolyn Korsmeyer calls this “gustatory semantics”: “because of the temporal dimension of eating – and of testing and satisfaction of appetites – narrative contexts can furnish reflections of the meaning this activity entails.” Literary texts then can be seen as embodiments of a whole range of connotations that the language of food entails

Based on this I read the two texts by asking the following questions: What gets counted as food? (notions of edibility and availability) Where and how is it seen fit to be eaten? (notions of decorum and consumption) And lastly, what does it say about who prepares it? (notions of preparation and serving). In *Jane Eyre*, “a novel obsessed with feeding and starvation”² these questions reveal profound details about Victorian food culture and ideological ramifications bordering on ideas of class and gender. Helena Mitchie notes that “the dinner table is important locus of interaction in Victorian culture. In the novel, it is the place where characters, plots and subplots come together to enjoy and to produce the rich complexities of Victorian fiction.”

Sally Mitchell elaborates on the differences in food consumption based on one’s social position. While the working class had bread, cheese, potatoes, etc, a more nuanced and elaborate choice of food was available to the upper classes. In the novel too, the choice of food available depends on the social setting. At Lowood, for instance, Jane complains about the “burnt porridge” and after her near starvation after the wedding fiasco, asks simply for “bread”. At her Aunt Reed’s or at Thornfield, more refined delicacies are available (“tart”, “coffee”, “custards, cheese-cakes and French pastries”, etc.). Similarly, on striking it rich, Jane articulates her newly found status on the basis of food: “....the two days preceding that on which your sisters are expected will be devoted by Hannah and me to such a beating of eggs, sorting of currants, grating of spices, compounding of Christmas cakes, chopping up of materials for mince pies, and solemnizing of other culinary rites....”

Special spaces were accorded to special rituals concerning food. At Gateshead there is a separate “breakfast room”, a dining and [a] drawing room” and a kitchen for the “servants’ dinner”. Timings similarly become important. Afternoon tea becomes popular round the 1840s, but is, as Mitchell comments, considered by and large a “ladies meal”. Dinner was taken early in the evening but could begin, as Mitchell notes around 7.30 or 8.30 pm. In *Jane Eyre*, “Mrs. Reed when there was no company dined early”. At Thornfield, there is a mention of “dinner at six”. Dinner is undertaken in a separate dining room. At the dinner party where Blanche Ingram and other guests are invited, this is precisely what happens, with the possible aberration of the governess, Jane, being invited to join the guests after dinner in the drawing room.

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The above speaks for notions of decorum and consumption. But decorum also prerequisites certain givens about class and gender. In *Jane Eyre*, various attitudes about class and gender get reflected through notions of food. Mergenthal remarks on the “link between gender and the class-coded attitudes to food becomes evident when one considers who is responsible for cooking and serving it”. While she does not say so, a similar link is observed when one examines the question: who is considered fit company for eating?

In the beginning of the text, John Reed makes this explicit to Jane: “You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen’s children like us, and *eat the same meals we do*, and wear clothes at our mamma’s expense.” [Emphasis added] Class and dietary practices hence are inextricably linked. At Thornfield, similarly, Jane as a governess finds herself in “an ambiguous class position.”³ Neither is she required to take her meals with the servants, who have a separate meal time and place, nor can she dine with Rochester. She usually dines with the housekeeper Mrs. Fairfax, (“I and my pupil dined as usual in Mrs. Fairfax’s parlour”) or as during Ingram party, has her meals with Adele in her nursery. (“Everyone downstairs was too engaged to think of them”).

A similar relation is revealed between food and gender. While Victorian fictions may abound in mentions of food, dinners and other social gatherings, any mention of the heroine *eating* is conspicuous only by its absence. Yet, as Mitchie observes, “despite the emptiness of the heroine’s plate, women’s hunger constitutes a vital mythic force behind both the novel and the culture”. Hunger acts as a Victorian euphemism for sexuality. Small and delicate appetites are not simply with femininity but also with virginity, as imagery of devouring would imply untamed sexuality. Jane is fed by both Miss Temple and Bessie outside of meal time. This “secret nibbling in the bedroom”, as Mitchie calls it, makes explicit connection between food and sex. The association of women with terrifyingly voracious appetites is an old one. In her essay “Hunger as Ideology” Susan Bordo writes “Mythological, artistic, polemical, and scientific discourses from many cultures and eras ... suggest the symbolic potency of female hunger as a cultural metaphor for unleashed female power and desire” (116). Patriarchal societies that necessitate the suppression of female power and desire grow to fear what they suppress. The refusal to acknowledge female appetites causes them to take on monstrous proportions in the patriarchal imagination. Bordo notes that women’s sexual appetites and appetites for food are deeply linked in the patriarchal imagination and both are feared as insatiably devouring. Active female sexuality is terrifying because, as Bordo points out “the sexual act, when initiated and desired by a woman, is imagined as itself an act of eating, of incorporation and destruction of the object of desire” (117). Thus, the securing of a passive female body without desire or appetite becomes a matter of life and death. The well-fed desiring healthy woman is imagined as a dangerous,

deadly threat. In *Mysteries of the Dark Moon*, Demetra George writes about male supremacist societies constructing “a devouring feminine sexuality that causes men to transgress their moral and religious convictions, and then ... consumes their vital essence and entwines them in an embrace of death” (28). Female sexuality, hunger and desire were conquered and tamed through the imposition of a starving ideal of Victorian femininity.

In her reading of the history of the anorexic body, Anna Krugovoy Silver reads the connotations surrounding the corset. The corset was supposed to give the appearance of the slender waist. “The small waist signified a woman’s lack of appetite and her self control”. Pale women signified upper class and spiritual while large fleshy women suggested the lower classes and carnal desire. Silver remarks that anorexia nervosa first appeared in upper and middle class households as a response to the woman of idealized slender waist. A refusal of the intake of food then appeared as a sign of protest. “They could deny patriarchy by simply refusing its food.”⁴ Hence, lacks of mention in conduct books and related literature of the heroine eating.

It is a similar spiritual versus carnal binary that Gilbert and Gubar read as operative in *Jane Eyre*. Helen Burns is the typical “Angel in the house” while Bertha Mason is the “devil in the flesh”. What needs to be added to the same is that this coincides with Helen’s bearing near starvation at Lowood and Bertha Mason’s cannibalistic ‘biting’ episode. Food again appears as a locus and sub-text for other socio-cultural connotations.

In light of the above, the eating practices at Lowood deserve a special mention. Considered a “charity school” for children who have lost one or both parents, the school is set up as a training ground for social positions such as that of the governess. What needs to be highlighted in the sort of ideological indoctrination that operates within the institution – indoctrination that goes hand in hand with feeding practices. Jane mentions her near starvation in the school repeatedly: “I was now nearly sick from inanition having taken so little the day before.” And later:

Ravenous, and now very faint, I devoured a spoonful or two of my portion without thinking of its taste; but of the first edge of the hunger blunted, I perceived I had got a nauseous mess; burnt porridge is almost as bad as rotten potatoes; famine itself soon sickens over it. The spoons were moved slowly: I saw each girl taste her food and try to swallow it; but in most cases the effort was soon relinquished. Breakfast was over, and none had breakfasted.

Most significantly, it is Miss Temple’s feeding of the students which provokes Mr. Brocklehurst’s ire:

‘Madam, allow me an instant. You are aware that my plan in bringing up these girls is, not to accustom them to luxury and indulgence, but to render the hardy, patient, self-denying. Should any little accidental disappointment of the appetite occur such as the spoiling of a meal, the under or the over dressing of a dish, the incident ought not to be neutralized by

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replacing with something more delicate the comfort lost, thus pampering the body and obviating the aim of this institution; it ought to be improved to the spiritual edification of the pupils, by encouraging them to evince fortitude under temporary privation. A brief address on those occasions would not be mistimed, wherein a judicious instructor would take the opportunity of referring to the sufferings of the primitive Christians; to the torments of martyrs; to the exhortations of our blessed Lord Himself, calling upon His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him; to his warnings that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God; to His divine consolations, 'If ye suffer hunger or thirst for My sake, happy are ye.' Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!'

The so-called "aim of the institution" then becomes to manufacture an assembly of girls who are "hardy, patient, self-denying". The rationing of food and its (near) withdrawal is equated here with power and a means of control.

In a similar manner, Rochester in the first half of the text "uses food and food imagery to control Jane"⁵ From their first encounter, Rochester uses other worldly imagery to talk about Jane. Jane is compared to a fairy, a goblin, an elf, etc. On Jane's exclamation that she was starved at Lowood, he proclaims her to belong to another world. Matters such as physical sustenance and such worldly concerns are not part of Jane's agenda for Rochester. "In his eyes, Jane does not need physical sustenance; her 'otherworldliness' is his expression of her lack of physical presence."⁶ When Rochester tells Jane and Adele that he is her (Jane) away to the moon, it is Adele who recognizes the potential control behind the statement and exclaims that he will starve her – there being no food on the moon.

After the wedding fiasco, hungry and lost, Jane goes begging for food door to door. "If she had held it [the door] open a little longer, I believe, I should have begged for a piece of bread for I was now brought low". And later:

Once more I took off my handkerchief – once more I thought of the cakes of bread in the little shop. Oh, for but a crust! For but one mouthful to allay the pang of famine! Instinctively I turned my face again to the village; I found the shop again, and I went in; and though others were there besides the woman I ventured the request – 'Would she give me a roll for this handkerchief?' She looked at me with evident suspicion: 'Nay, she never sold stuff i' that way.'

Almost desperate, I asked for half a cake: she again refused. 'How could she tell where I had got the handkerchief?' she said.

‘Would she take my gloves?’ ‘No! what could she do with them?’

Reader, it is not pleasant to dwell on these details. Some say there is enjoyment in looking back to painful experience past; but at this day I can scarcely bear to review the times to which I allude: the moral degradation, blend with the physical suffering, form too distressing a recollection ever to be willingly dwelt on.

Another dimension of dietary practices which illuminates other socio-cultural aspects, as mentioned earlier, is the question of preparation and serving. A link between gender-coded attitudes to food becomes visible when one considers the role of the household mistress in the preparation and serving of food. Mergenthal observes how it is considered honorable for the mistress to be involved in household chores, of which food serving is an indispensable part. In the text, while most of the preparation is done by servants at Thornfield, the house in the earlier part of the text lacks a mistress that can never serve the food. In the denouement, Jane has been read as coming to occupy a position of “worthiness” with respect to Rochester. A stature that comes along with the liberty to *feed* the maimed Rochester:

‘Can you see me?’

‘No, my fairy: but I am only too thankful to hear and feel you’.

‘When do you take supper?’

‘I never take supper.’

‘But you shall have some to-night. I am hungry; so are you, I daresay, only you forget’.

Summoning Mary, I soon had the room in more cheerful order: I prepared him, likewise, a comfortable repast. My spirits were excited, and with pleasure and ease I talked to him during supper, and for a long time after.

Similarly: “... by the bye, I must mind not to rise on your hearth with only a glass of water then: I must bring an egg at the least, to say nothing of fried them.” And late: “I dashed off the salt drops and busied myself with preparing breakfast.”

What the above shows in a variety of mechanisms at work which can be seen to be entered around food and eating practices. In *Jane Eyre*, there is a clear link between food, class and gender. A similar vein can be observed when one travels to late nineteenth century Bengal. One observes in *Indira* an equal obsession with food and eating practices. In fact, the drive of the narrative comes, as will be clear later, from the dietary habits and obsessions with food.

In her reading of four great Indian realist novels, which includes *Indira*, Meenakshi Mukherjee recognizes a “dilemma” involved in order to ‘make one’s own’ a borrowed form. She states:

Creating real people in a recognizable historical setting – people who are not mere archetypes or representatives of a caste or class or a social role (priest, landlord, mother-in-law, etc.) – necessitates an acceptance of subjective individualism and a specific awareness of history. The latter had never been a component of traditional narrative in India, and the former was not easy in a tradition-bound society even though the writers themselves had begun to be restive. Changes in the writer's own value system were perceptible but these had not made any dent on the larger social structure, and to this extent the major Indian novels of the nineteenth century reflect a central dilemma of the period.

And yet, *Indira* is set in a recognizable historical setting, dealing “with contemporary society or a period within living memory” and are “realistic in intention”. Food in this regard becomes an important troupe to render the setting real.

Actions such as eating and feeding are used to create realistic effects in the text. For instance, on her way to her husband's home, before the incident with the highwaymen, the palanquin bearers are depicted as craving for food:

The bearers said, ‘If we don't have some refreshments, we can't go on.’ The guards forbade this – they said, ‘This is not a good place’ the bearers answered, ‘There are so many of us – why should we be afraid?’ The people had not anything all this time. Finally, they all agreed with the bearers.

And later we are told that “they were travelling with empty bellies, in pursuit of handful of rice...”

Similarly, Indira after the incident is shown with needs such as thirst and hunger, establishing a psychologically complex character: “On top of that was my wakeful night, with its unbearable mental and physical suffering... and hunger and thirst”; “I went to her [an old woman's] house. Seeing that I was suffering from hunger, she milked the cow and gave me some milk to drink.”

Speaking of realism rendering visible contemporary social institutions, the novel can be said to not just be constitutive of but rather be made possible by a particular social institution – that of caste. Caste informs the novel through and through, but what interests us here is how an articulation of its manifestation is made possible by eating practices.

That the logic of caste is highlighted by the novel can be shown by the following exchange between Indira and Subhashini:

Subhashini said, ‘Without hearing your name now, is your caste really Kayashtha?’

I laughed and said, ‘We are Kayashthas.’

Subhashini said, ‘I will not ask whose daughter you are, whose wife or where your home is. Now, listen to what I say. You are the daughter of an important man, I can see that – there are

still the marks of ornaments around your arms and neck. I will not tell you to do the work of a maidservant – you know something of how to cook, don't you?

I smiled, 'I do. I was particularly renowned for cooking in my father's house.'

Subhashini said, 'In our house we are all cooks'.... 'But the following the custom of Calcutta, there is also a cook employed...'

Cooking becomes a privileged exercise, one that a "daughter of an important man" can respectably undertake. Its respectability is further highlighted by Subhashini stressing soon after this exchange that there is not anything of disrepute about cooking: "*We will cook, and you will cook for one or two days a week...*" [Emphasis added]

Much the same way, the link between customary practices involving caste and practices of food preparation and serving are rendered visible in the following exchange between Subhashini and her mother-in-law:

... 'You were looking for a cook, so I have brought you her.'

Mistress: Where did you find her?

Daughter-in-law: My aunt produced her.

Mistress: Brahmin⁸ or Kayashtha

Daughter-in-law: Kayashtha

Mistress: Ah! Your aunt is unlucky! What can I do with a Kayashtha girl? If we have to feed a Brahmin one day, what will we do?

Daughter-in-law: We don't have to feed Brahmins everyday – never mind about those few days – and then if we get a Brahmin girl we will have to keep her – Brahmin girls are very fastidious – if we go into their Kitchen they throw all the utensils away – and come again to give offerings of food!

A similar link is observed with gender and eating practices. There is clear link between food and gender, gender and spaces. ParthaChaterjee remarks on the division of such spaces as inner and outer as corresponding to feminine and masculine respectively. The inner *zenana*⁹ becomes a communal space for women while the outer world is masculine territory. The text shows some signs of division, of the temporal and spatial segregation in food consumption: "After that, Raman Babu sat down to eat. *We watched from concealment.*" [Emphasis added.] And later: "After that, the master sat down to eat. I could not go there – following the mistress' orders, the old Brahmin cook took the master his rice"; "After that, the mistress sat down to her food."

Though of course one needs to be careful to not undermine an otherwise grim reality of the *zenana*, the kitchen, in *Indira*, nonetheless becomes a carnivalesque female site of banter and mischief. Pertinently though, a moment of transgression, the sidelong glance which marks her first

encounter with her husband in the narrative, happens when she crosses the inner realm to the eating area where Raman Babu and his guests are seated. Marking this transgression is also the fact that she serves food not meant to be served by her. Food and transgression are shown to be inextricably linked.

Similar to its Victorian counterpart, the ability to cook well, to manage the household successfully is considered as ideal femininity. ("Since you are daughters of good people, you know cooking. Aha! Can I rebuke such girls – girls of such a great house.") Indira transforms her woe at the loss of her social identity into pleasure through the activity of cooking. ("Meanwhile I also found some happiness in cooking and serving.") The deep ideological implications of the link between gender and cooking, cooking and domestic servility is brought forward by the following:

Subhashini said 'Are we not servants, then?'

I said, 'When his love awakens, that is the time for serving. Then I will fan him, massage his feet, and offer him tobacco,...'

Significantly, this awakening of love happens by way of showing domestic servility. Much like her counterpart Jane, she wins UpendraBabu over by cooking his food: "For eight days, I inflamed my husband with all the means which providence had given women to inflame men with." And Later:

"On the first day I spoke caressingly; on the second day I showed signs of affection ; on the third day I started *to act as his housewife*; I started to do that by which *his meals*, his sleeping, his bathing would be orderly, and in every respect good; *cooked with my own hands, and prepared everything, down to the toothpicks.*" [Emphasis added]

Indira, then, as much a novel about food and eating practices becomes significant in this regard. The text displays an irrefutable awareness of the logic binding food with notions of caste and gender. Further, since written in the realist mode, the text becomes a sound medium for the reflection of actual contemporary concerns – concerns which enter on food and eating and feeding practices.

Clearly, as the discussion of the above two novels demonstrates, food acts as locus for things other than itself. In an act of displacement, other socio-cultural markers and phenomena – caste, class and gender – use food as a way of enacting their own logic. Significantly, literature becomes a site where such phenomena can get reflected. What the two novels clearly show then is the socio-cultural specificity of notions concerning food. Yet as our examination provides is a clue to the mechanisms of the logic of caste, class and gender that get enacted through food and reflected in literary texts.

Notes & References

1. See Brad Kessler

2. See Helena Mitchie.
3. See Sylvia Mergenthal.
4. See Brad Kessler.
5. See Helena Mitchie.
6. Ibid.
7. Kayashtha: Indian caste system is divided into four kinds and that were considered upper castes. These caste systems were extremely prevalent in nineteenth century India. 'Kayashtha' being one of them.
8. Brahmin: This was the uppermost caste in Indian society. Types of works that were chiefly allotted to the people of this caste included basically: cooking, worshiping god in temples, religious works etc.
9. Zenana: A Kitchen or sort of a small area used mostly for cooking and related works. In old days the kitchen were called as 'zenanas' among Indian people.

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