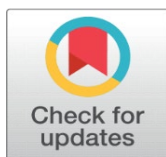
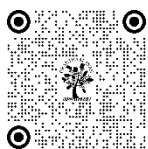


# READING THROUGH THE GENDER AND REGIONAL IMAGES: A STUDY OF SELECT FOOD MEMOIRS FROM INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

Food is an endlessly interpretable artifact and so the flux keeps food studies as an ever-dynamic discipline. Culinary memoirs reflect the life experiences of an individual as well as a community. Food and language bridge the gap between nature and culture. They become social constructs that can create and distort our identity. Language and food have become powerful media that can manipulate and influence the human mind invariably. It is significant to understand the role food plays in reasserting societal norms as an indispensable cultural icon of our everyday lives and the immense potential it has to transmute our perspective seamlessly. This paper is an attempt to explore the gender and regional stereotypes in select illustrated culinary memoirs, *Travels through South Indian Kitchen* by Nao Saito and Aparna Jain's *The Sood Family Cookbook*. These works reflect how food explains the deeply embedded structures of gender and region in our everyday lives. Close analyses of these texts especially that of the verbal and non-verbal language show that food acts as a tool in distorting as well as reaffirming certain stereotypes prevalent in our society.

**Keywords:** Food Memoirs, Indian Food, Language, Gender, Region, Stereotypes

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Food is the elixir of human life since it serves as nourishment. However, nowadays, food is not only deemed as a source of nutrients but a celebrity and cultural icon. In this post-industrial era, food is much more than a personal experience as it influences the way we perceive and represent ourselves as individuals and as a part of social conglomeration. Food was always an endlessly interpretable cultural artifact but submerged in the supposedly organic and self-evident fabric of our quotidian life (Balirano et al., 2019).

Apart from the verbal exchange of recipes, countless cookbooks have been written since Roman times (Waxman, 2008). Presently, Cookbooks are no longer just a collection of recipes. They are also a treasure trove of nostalgia, indelible anecdotes, irreplaceable bonds and togetherness which suffices the reader's emotional hunger too. These writers not only record the recipes for posterity but also generate awareness among the uninitiated about that particular community or region's values, rituals and beliefs.

Culinary memoirists are very well aware that they are writing about mankind's strongest basic instinct and necessity. So, they recollect their life stories in a way that they become palpable and are entrenched in our core memories. Readers are attracted to the lyrical prose, luscious photographs, scrumptious delicacies and vivid descriptions that are mirthful and poignant at times. They reveal the invisible and sometimes hidden aspects of the material and social life of the cultures producing them (Christou, 2017). These memoirs reveal the reality of this glossy culinary world and its interminable cultural intricacies.

Food and language are fundamental cultural icons that bridge the gap between culture and nature and act as a tool that lends form to the world. Food has an integral role in melding and altering people, places, preferences and cultural awareness around the world, so does language (Balirano et al., 2019). The production, preparation and consumption of food establish and maintain linguistic identities. Thus, it becomes a fundamental element in cultural, social, and linguistic practices (Fitrisia, 2018). The familiarity of food makes us oblivious to its actual meanings and the way it impinges on our personal and social interactions. Based on the ever-changing surroundings and norms, food assumes umpteen meanings that remain open, incomplete, and arguable. Food has an indelible role in establishing certain norms attached to gender, region, ethnicity, caste, class and religion.

This paper is an attempt to analyze how food and its practices reinforce as well as distort certain stereotypes prevalent in our society through constant negotiations and interactions. It is significant to understand the role of food in establishing societal norms as an indispensable cultural icon of our everyday lives. Thus, here we explore the connections of language and food to understand the regional and gender portrayals in select culinary memoirs, *Travels through South Indian Kitchen* by Nao Saito and Aparna Jain's *The Sood Family Cookbook*. This is an attempt to do a close analysis of the language and the images to understand whether these narratives act as key sites in normalizing and legitimizing problematic conventional traits prevalent in society.

## 2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

"For a traveler, a household kitchen in a strange land is usually a remote destination, but it tells the truth about food and everyday life," says Nao Saito, the author of *Travels through South Indian Kitchens*. She is a Japanese architect and designer who made the unfamiliar Kitchens in Tamil Nadu, an integral part of her life during her three-month residency at Tara Publishing House. She encapsulated her experiences through the particular lens of the kitchen. She took an aberration in exploring the food and food ways of new land as she obviated the visits to public spheres for the heart of people's homes, i.e., their kitchens. This enabled her to understand the distinctive tastes, fragrances, laughter, livelihood and life of various households and their unique residents. These experiences enriched her appetite as well as soul so much so that the "beloved Chennai" become a pertinent part of her life.

The memoir comprises of twenty-two recipes and twenty-one kitchen stories. There are only four recipes of men in the compilation, out of which two, i.e., *Kitchen with Many Hands* and *Bachelor's Kitchen* are doing it as a necessity as they stay away from home. *Kitchen with a Stool* and *An International Kitchen* are recipes predominantly prepared by a man that too inherited them from their mothers respectively.

Though 'S' in the *Kitchen with a Stool* cooks a delicious sambar, he recollects how he was never allowed to cook in his formative years while his mother toiled in the kitchen for the entire family. Every recipe by men or women is bequeathed to them by their mothers. This cemented the fact that men are never really attached to kitchen and household chores in India. Even in the memoir, there are only very few instances where men and women can be seen sharing their workload, organically. In *A Family Kitchen* BM, helps his wife BR in the kitchen for his affection for her and not as his duty.

Most of the anecdotes depict women as the linchpin of the kitchen who runs the household efficiently. In *Kitchen Labors* V's husband casually disregards the tiresome process of grinding chutney on a stone grinder as he lauds the taste of a stone-grinded chutney which is a rarity, nowadays, over an electric blended one. We can also find women who sacrifice their own needs and eating preferences for children and husbands as in *Bilingual Kitchen* as well as *Power Cut Kitchen*.

Be it Auntie S, a homemaker in *Expanding Kitchen*, K, R's mother, a fish seller in *Kitchen as landscape*, R's mother, a former English teacher in *Kitchen of Memoires*, M, the matriarch who literally rules the kitchen in *The Scent of Banana Flowers* or G, the head of their publishing house, Each and every one of them has to toil relentlessly in the kitchen as that is the societal norm, that is what expected out of a woman. Her class, caste, financial independence, educational as well

as professional achievements, preferences, her affinities, nothing would transcend this age-old social conditioning. The story of P in *Christmas Morning* testifies to the aforementioned predicament of every woman in India. P and A are working people but she appointed a cook because of her time constraints and A's contribution to the household work is not even addressed. There was a cook but it was still the women's job to buy all the provisions.

Nao also mentions the custom of most Indian "classic" families, where people eat one by one beginning with the head of the family. The women serve all the family members and eat last. Though women run the household and toil arduously in the kitchen for endless hours, they have neither the privilege to decide what to make nor to eat when they please. Nao Saito remarked her shock and surprise mildly when encountering some obsoleted unwritten rules in Indian households such as BD's marriage at the tender age of seventeen. But never made any emphatic declaration, questioning these outmoded, irrational gender stereotypes and inequality percolating verdantly in our society.

All of these women, except a few have no choice but to pliantly follow societal standards. Many of them are not even cognizant of this exploitation happening at their homes daily as they have been trained and educated to do this since their childhood. There are a countable few who withstand these societal compulsions and circumvent a path around it like partners equally sharing their chores or finding inventive ways to cook and so on.

Among them, L of *Kitchen without Cooking* was the only one who unveiled the double standards of Indian society unabashedly. She says "People expect a lot from a woman who is married. Everyone wonders about her cooking skills and what she has learned from her mother. No man would ever be asked that question" (Saito,184). She was quite aware of what she wanted from life and that is never an unending affair with a kitchen like her mother who besides being a working woman manages to cook every day, not only the daily food but even the traditional cuisines with seasonal vegetables and sweets for festivals.

In India, even women are gifted utensils as a wedding present by their mothers and some even inherit them. All these reinforce the idea that cooking and the kitchen are traditionally viewed as a woman's task and her world in India. But being an outsider, the author never questioned this gender inequality in Indian households vehemently. Her own prejudice was on display when she was a bit apprehensive of visiting the Bachelors Kitchen and she had a small lunch as a precaution. Her qualms were about their cleanliness and adequacy in preparing a whole lunch. These doubts are reserved for the bachelor's kitchen alone as she visited the girl's kitchen gladly where a single woman prepared her delicious Lemon rice. Her prejudice was evident in her surprise of three women chatting and enjoying cooking together A taste of home.

South India is a broad term that constitutes five states Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. But here the titular South Indian kitchens only deal with Chennai and its suburbs. Not even the whole of Tamil Nadu and its diverse kitchens are explored. Chennai is the bustling capital city of Tamil Nadu which is the main topic of discussion in Nao's travelogue. Besides that, only countable kitchens in Nagapattinam, Velankanny and Srirangam are visited. Thus, the title is inappropriate and problematic as it reaffirms the tradition of generalizing the eclectic cultures of five states into a bracket of south India.

The state of Andhra Pradesh was once mentioned offhand in *A Taste of Home* where V, the daughter-in-law was born there and had to learn Tamil dishes as she is married to Tamil Nadu. In the *Bilingual Kitchen*, she draws a picture to demonstrate "how to eat the 'Malayalam Way' (Saito,47), which in itself is an incorrect usage as Malayalam is the native language of Kerala. From her limited encounter with a Keralite and one dish of 'Puttu', 'Payaru' and 'kadala' curry, she concluded that three basic ingredients for a typical Kerala meal are coconut, coconut oil and black pepper, which is way too superficial statement.

She injudiciously uses the all-encompassing term South India to refer to the coffee filter used in a particular place in Chennai and describes a typical Tamil breakfast of Pongal with vadai as traditional South Indian food. "Many Indian women have long hair and wear it in a braid often with flowers", (Saito,128) she describes the Tamil women ornated for the special occasion of 'Pongal'. India is a country that has states with disparate cultures that are distinctive and unique in their way. In *The Scent of Banana Flowers*, she claims that the meals end in most South Indian homes with curd rice is so not the case as curd rice is a delicacy commonly eaten in Tamil Nadu. As we have mentioned earlier, with cultural differences, taste preferences and identities also change. Here the author labeled five different states with unidentical taste priorities and assorted food items as South Indian. Just because these states share boundaries does not mean that they have the same kind of food varieties. Here the author, instead of breaking away from the platitude of South India, reaffirms the stereotypical notion and dismisses the vibrant culture of five entirely different states in a perfunctory manner.

Aparna Jain's *The Sood Family Cookbook* is a family affair with a *mélange* of recipes, originally written for family members across the globe to mitigate their cooking predicaments. She is an Integral Master Coach who runs her own firm called Zebraa Works. In this work, she attempts to unveil the diverse food items as well as the quirks and whims of the Soods to the reader. It is an insightful account of their world, their culture, their lifestyle and particularly their unique foodways. Aparna ardently exhorts that good food enables meaningful connections and soulful conversations which helps us to navigate through most of the hardships.

The book bluntly begins its preface with a trite that every Indian woman would have heard at least once in her life i.e., "one day you will have no choice but get into a kitchen and cook" (Jain,1) reiterated by Aparna's mother, as she pertinaciously tries to emphasize the need for women to master the art of cooking. Aparna reminisces that at least when it came to chores she was told "Women should do" (Jain, 1). She refuted it in the loudest phase of anti-gender stereotyping at the age of twelve with "I will never enter a kitchen. And I will get married to someone who can cook. So there!" (Jain, 1). But her brother Arjun was never compelled to learn any of the household chores, especially cooking.

Aparna's recollection of her mother's childhood also proposes the age-old gender stereotypes prevalent in our society. In her maternal house, every sister was assigned the task of making and serving milk to all the siblings at night, especially the brothers who kept on changing their minds and concoctions to irk their sisters. Though her grandfather cooks the delectable "Pahaadi Mutton" for his family, once in a while, he is the patriarch who makes all the decisions and everything happens according to his wish.

Most of the women in the family had a choice, owing to their privileged backdrop, to enter the kitchen or not. Sonal, her cousin, who created Sheikhland Kitchen, never entered the kitchen while growing up but now she cooks because she wants to do it wholeheartedly. In contrary to this, Anu, the master of Butter Chicken in a hurry, lives without help and her weekends are spent in the kitchen with copious cups of tea as a stimulant. Here, the involvement of her husband and two sons in this hard labor is not mentioned. Women and cooking are inseparable in our society and we are predisposed to believe it inarguably.

Be it a woman who never really entered the Kitchen like Baby didi in *Fragrant Sindhi Curry* or Joanna in *Baked Tomato Spaghetti*, women had to play second fiddle to the family's priorities and inclinations. For instance, Joanna loves to have a large chunk of tomato but she had to paste it for Anubhav's preference. Every woman, including the author, had to learn to cook out of love, necessity, or societal pressure. But men exercise the power to choose. They are never impelled to learn cooking because society has attributed this role to a particular gender, i.e., female. Be it her brother Arjun, Cousin Aditya, or Anubhav, they all have a choice to decide, whether to cook or not, unlike the women.

We can realize the extent to which these outdated draconian norms have adhered in our minds when we find that progressive, independent women like the author have unwittingly fallen prey to its vicious snare. This can be proven by the way she teasingly describes her cousin Geetanjalee who told her husband, Deepak that "she would never step into the kitchen because she didn't enjoy cooking" (Jain, 55). The author was very impressed with her until she unfolded the truth that her signature recipe was made by her cook. Here Aparna's good opinion of Geetanjalee has declined on the basis of she enters the kitchen or not.

Here arises the question i.e., Is culinary expertise, a mandate to decide a woman's personal worth? Because such conundrums never occurred in the cases of their male counterparts. Even in the end note, expressing her gratitude, this bias is visible when she describes her "maamus" as "the real women of the family or at least in the kitchens because most of the time- they love shopping, cooking and managing their homes" (Jain, 147), which are essentially deemed as a women's act by the society. In all these instances the author reinforces that the kitchen is the place of women and all those homely duties are essentially a woman's job. Out of 101 recipes recorded, only a few are contributed by the male folk of the family proves this point, undoubtedly.

Aparna's big Sood family is a global one, quite literally, in every way possible. She uses words and images to precisely paint the peculiarity of the dish and the place of its origin. Be it Pahaadi or Kashmiri, their specialties are described unflinchingly. She addresses each dish and its corresponding region with their exact names, in most cases, giving significance to their cultural differences like Bengali Mustard Fish, Sindhi Fenugreek Bhalki, Mangalorean Fish curry, Pahaadi Palde, Winter Swiss Fondue, Thai Khow Sucey, Nepali Tomato Chutney, etc. The origin of the dishes and if any alterations were made according to their predilection, every minute detail are described by the author.

Her demarcation of states and their signature dishes are lucid, especially the five southern states of India which are often labeled unpopularity as 'South Indian'. Baring one or two incidents, for instance, generalizing a Kerala dish of Bean

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Thorán in the 10-minute Thorán as south Indian Thorán and her misconception of the entire South India eat curd rice to cool their 'insides' when it is a common dish of Tamil Nadu, she described the rest of the peculiarities properly.

Both the above-discussed culinary memoirs have a potpourri of recipes but the contributions are mostly from women. Men and their recipes are few and far between. This widening gap in the number itself stood as a testament to the gender disparity indoctrinated in our minds. Everyone views cooking as a woman's part to perform and they are obliged to do so innately. Their male counterparts are spectators who are meant to step outside the homes and earn for the family's welfare. Women who can't cook are denigrated and a man who cooks a meal is vaunted as if he does something commendable just by preparing a meal to sustain.

Nao Saito's book incorporates women from all walks of life. Therefore, their living conditions are also varied, from affluent to indigent, educated to unlettered, independent to home-bound, conservative to progressive, and so on. While Aparna Jain's work includes her family's recipes so they belong to the same cultural background and privilege. But what one can decipher from these distinct and disparate women is that whatever their identity be they all are expected to be ideal with culinary expertise. It seems that their whole identity revolves around this single notion and even estimate their value as human beings.

In *Travel through the South Indian Kitchens*, Regional stereotypes are obtrusive as she does not mark the cultural diversities of the states and defines them vaguely as 'South Indian'. Thus, she cemented the stigma pervading society regarding these states and their identity. In *The Sood Family Cookbook*, she pinpoints each of the regions and its significant dishes perfectly, avoiding misrepresentation.

The language used in these texts acts as proof of the fact that food plays an integral role in establishing and reaffirming existing societal stigmas based on region and gender. Food is fundamental for us to survive, so food and its related content can easily percolate these stereotypes as it reaches to all kinds of people invariably Parasecoli. Also, these misrepresentations can malign the associated communities and hurt the sentiments of the people. Thus, the authors must address these issues judiciously with sagacity and diligence as they can adversely affect the lives of people in unprecedented ways.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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