“Let There Be Food”: Evolving Paradigms in Food Studies

Prof. Thahiya Afzal
Assistant Professor
School of Social Sciences and Languages
VIT University, Vellore, India.

Abstract:

Food Studies is not the literal study of Food. Food studies looks at peoples connect with food. It straddles several tropes all together. It addresses issues of Culture and Identity. Food plays a consistent role in how issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and national identity are imagined or perceived. It helps define and characterize as well as show how notions of belonging are affirmed or resisted. Food, then is a central part of the cultural imagination. It interpolates the dynamics of metaphor, symbolism and is a constant point of reference in literature. Almost every study in culture cannot but draw its inferences from how food is seen in literature. Literally and figuratively food provides “food for thought”. This paper discusses the cultural significance of Food as metaphor and the notion of Food as metonym in the elaboration of culture and identity.

Key Words: Food studies, food habits, food and identity, food and culture, Identity

“Man ist, was man ist” – German proverb
Translated into English -“You are what you Eat”

Food is at the center of life. Food defines life and is one of the foremost essentials to life and sustenance. It is at the core of survival. Food straddles across our physical and emotional tropes and is at the root of our very existence. Food brings people together, helps them bond, interact, relate, connect and establish intimate sustaining and nurturing relationships. In fact, it is at the heart of all social relationships-personal, social and intimate. It is hard to imagine a single positive experience social, cultural and personal (intensely) without Food at its fulcrum.

For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, at the same time, a system
of communication, a body of images, a protocol of images, situations and
behaviour. (Barthes, 167)

Food connects people in very profound ways. Food connects humans and perhaps all
living things driven by a common need they all share. Massimo Montanari throughout his “Food
is Culture” believes that

the underlying preposition is that all food is cultural, even “artifact” however artless
it may seem. What humans grow involves selectivity but even in the wildest natural
or spontaneous growth and “wild” livestock, those elements of biological or
horticultural environment and genetics that constitute “natural selection” are
“cultural”. And from the moment humans choose food products, however “natural”,
then provenance, that too becomes a cultural choice. With the “discovery” and
human appropriation of fire, plants and animals are metamorphosed into cultural
manifestations through the crucible of flames and heat: la cucina leads to the
kitchen, which leads in turn to “cuisine”. The richness and resonance of that word
“la cucina” here stands revealed. Man forges in the smithy of the fire the created
consciousness of his environment, his mythology, his history, his economy and his
gastronomy.

Food as Culture? Food is culture. – Sonnenfield. (Series Editor’s preface to Montanari’s
“Food is culture”).

Massimo himself strongly argues in his Introduction that “Food is culture when it
isproduced, even performed”, because man does not use only what is found in nature (as to all
animal species) but as he explains “seeks also to create his own food, a food specific unto
himself, super imposing the action of production on that of predator or hunter” (Montanari, 3).

In other words he reiterates:

Food becomes culture when it is prepared because, once the basic products have
been acquired, man transform them by means of fine and a carefully wrought
technology that is expressed in the practices of the kitchen. Food is culture when it is eaten because man while able to eat anything, or precisely for this reason, does not in fact eat everything but rather chooses his own food, according to criteria linked either to the economic and nutritional dimensions of the gesture or to the symbolic values of with which food itself is invested. (Montanari, 6)

It helps greatly to further this perception that food has been defined by doctors and philosophers of antiquity, beginning perhaps with Hippocrates who included food among the factors of life that belong not to the “natural” order but to the “artificial” order of things. In short culture is that “man himself construed and manages”.

Which brings us to the primordial, question, “why do we eat what we eat?” E.N. Anderson raises these and many other questions... “How many of our food ways are determined by biology, how may by culture?” He propounds that in fact “human food ways are a complex result of the interaction of human nutritional needs, ecology, human logic and historical accident (Anderson, 2).

Food as culture influences theory and is thereby perceived within the framework. Karl Marx observes that “human make food, but they do not make it just on they please”. “Food history”, Anderson says “unlike the history of war and violence is generally a history without names... They live on, but only in the silence of bread, the calm of a bowl of rice, the joy of wine, the light of a cup of coffee” (Anderson, 2).

Warner Belasco in “Food: the key concepts” further places things in perspective. He professes, “It is the axiom of food studies that “dining” is much more than “feeding” while all creatures “feed”, only humans “dine” (Belasco, 17).

As the French cultural theorist Barthes suggests, “what we consider “food” extends far beyond nutrition, calories and minerals. A meal is much more than the sum of its parts for it encompasses what Barthes calls “a system of communications, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour (Barthes 166-173). People use food to “speak” with each other, to establish rules of behaviour (protocols) and to reveal as Brillat Savarin said “what you are”.
Anderson consolidates and builds on this point. He says that “Food is used in every society on earth to communicate manages, preeminent among these are one messages of group solidarity (Anderson, 6). French sociologist Claude Fischlers’ argument in “Food, Self and Identity” states that “food constitutes the self ... the saying, “You are what you eat’” bespeaks not only the bio chemical relationship between us and our food but also the extent to which food practices determine our system of beliefs and representations”(Anderson, 7).

Food and eating practices are then essential ways at defining a culture’s ethnic identity, reflecting on those person’s identities within the culture. Food can serve to signify the belief systems, religious rules, and complete ideologies of a particular person or character or that of an entire community or culture.

**Food as Cultural and Personal Identity**

The term “foodways” was first used by folklorists in reference to “the connection between food-related behavior and patterns of membership in cultural community, group, and society” (Camp). In “Food in Folklore,” Jonathan David writes:

In order to establish such a framework about food in folklore, . . . we should first examine the subject of folk cuisine itself, and folk eating habits. Together, these constitute the domain that scholars in the field of folklore and folk life have come to call ‘foodways.’

The food traditions of any one community include not just the recipes involved, but the methods by which these foods are gathered, stored, prepared, displayed, served, and disposed of. “Foodways” also examine the rules that define these ‘culture’s’ choices of foods, such as “ideas of health and cleanliness” and “foods that are especially esteemed or shunned,” as well as “specific rules governing the contexts in which particular foods may or may not be eaten” (David). Folklorists study these food habits or traditions and eating behaviors within a community or culture “to identify the primary cultural attributes of an individual or group of individuals” (David). These references to food may be found in folktales and folksongs, but they may also be seen in other expressive genres, such as folk dance, festivals, costume, and even architecture (Camp). “Foodways” also denotes the way in which people of a particular region produce or obtain, prepare, and consume food.
Food imagery helps to understand their characters’ true identities, because in many ways, food defines people and cultures. In Editors Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau’s collection Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, an article titled “Food in Literature—Introduction” states,

“Recent psychoanalytic theory suggests that eating practices are essential to self-identity and are instrumental in defining family, class, and even ethnic identity. Although food and related imagery have long been part of literature, psychological theories have led to the examination of food and eating as a universal experience.”

Food can serve to signify the belief systems, religious rules, and complex ideologies of a particular person or character, or that of an entire community or culture, that may not be explained explicitly in a text. In “Introduction: Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures,” Gardaphé and Xu explain, “Ethnic identity formations have been shaped by experiences of food productions and services, culinary creativities, appetites, desires, hunger, and even vomit” (5). He continues to describe French sociologist Claude Fischler’s convincing argument in “Food, Self and Identity” which states “that food constitutes the self. . . . The saying, ‘You are what you eat,’ bespeaks not only the biochemical relationship between us and our food but also the extent to which food practices determine our systems of beliefs and representations” (7).

Food and eating practices are essentially ways of defining a culture’s ethnic identity, reflecting on those persons’ identities within the culture. Food not only reflects and expresses personal identity in life and in literature; it also mirrors cultural identity and can create boundaries and differences between cultures. Mark Stein states, “Food does more than satisfy one’s biological need for calories, nutrients, water. Food choice divides communities and has the power to delineate the boundaries between them. Food taboos can serve to mark outsiders as unclean, unhealthy, unholy” (Stein, 134).

Kittler, Sucher, and Nelms (2012) coined the term food habits (also known as food culture or foodways) to describe the manner in which humans use food, including everything
from how it is chosen, acquired, and distributed to who prepares, serves, and eats it. They stated that the significance of the food habits process is that it is unique to human beings. They pondered why people spend so much time, energy, money, and creativity on eating.

A familiar saying that epitomizes the idea of food and identity is, “You are what you eat.” This expression addresses two of the questions considered in research: What does the food on my plate signify? and How do food practices contribute to personal identity? These questions address the concept of food as a cultural signifier and encompass fields as diverse as literature, anthropology, sociology, and history. San Francisco Digger sage Emmett Grogan proposed in the late 1960s, food is a handy “medium” to develop “collective social consciousness and social action” (Belasco, 17). Or, as an insurgent organic gardener at Berkeley’s People’s Park suggested in 1969, food can serve as an “edible dynamic,” or “digestible ideology” (Belasco, 22).

Food choices are indicative of a group or a person’s beliefs. The food choices made by people, either as individuals or as a group, can reveal their views, intrinsic values either as an individual or as a community, their passions, assumptions and personalities. Food choices tell stories of families, migrations, assimilation, resistance, changes over times, and personal as well as group identity. Food studies challenges researchers to delve into the common daily occurrence of eating and find deeper meaning in this every day practice. By examining the what, where, how, and why of our food choices and food habits, we develop a better understanding of ourselves and others.

Hauck-Lawson introduced the concept of food voice. She suggested that what one eats or chooses not to eat communicates aspects of a person’s identity or emotion in a manner that words alone cannot. Food choices tell stories of families, migrations, assimilation, resistance, changes over times, and personal as well as group identity. So why do we need to study food in a non-epicurean manner? Food studies can challenge us to look deeply into the common daily occurrence of eating and find deeper meaning in this ordinary practice. It can help us understand ourselves and others better. It can help debunk stereotypes and to promote acceptance across individuals and groups. In essence, it develops “the need to study food” (Belasco, 1).
If food is used to communicate messages, the most pre-revenant among these are messages of “group solidity” (Anderson, 6) food sharing is literally sacred in almost all religious and takes on a near sacred quality in most cultures around the world. Anderson lays a strong case when he says that it “also carries messages about status, gender, role, ethnicity, religion, identity... It is subject to snobbism, manipulation and debate” (Anderson, 6). He explains that “Each culture encodes a vast amount of knowledge of local foods: how to identify them, prepare them, grow them…” (Anderson, 8). Sceats too describes food as the “verbal” in which many of us store countless memories. It compresses the area of our earliest education and enculturation… and is inextricably connected with social function”(Sceats, 1).

**Food and Literature**

Food plays a consistent role in how issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and national identity are imagined or perceived. It helps define and characterize as well as show how notions of belonging are affirmed or resisted. Food, then is a central part of the cultural imagination. It interpolates the dynamics of metaphor, symbolism and is a constant point of reference in literature. Almost every study in culture cannot but draw its inferences from how food is seen in literature. Literally and figuratively food provides “food for thought”.

“Tell me what you eat, and I’ll tell you who you are,” wrote renowned gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in 1825. Food has defined culture and has been part of how we see people and their literatures a lot earlier than that. The *Bible*, the Indian epics– the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat* have placed emphasis and have discussed this aspect at length. In recent times though there’s been a lot of food-inspired writing. The manner in which this is done is canvas enough to paint a gastronomic experience by itself.

Although food and related imagery have long been part of literature, psychological theories have led to the examination of food and eating as a universal experience. Themes related to food are common among all types of writing, and they are often used as a literary device for both visual and verbal impact. For example, food-related images in theatre are commonly used to create a mood or convey an idea. Food is also a significant theme in literature by and about women and in children’s literature.
Sharing food has been a way for people of all cultures to sustain and create a mindful or emotional bond with others. From Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* to such writers like Katherine Ann Porter, Ernest Hemingway, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker food has been a central theme of their writing process. Laura Esquivel’s novel *Like Water for Chocolate* or *Chocolat* and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava* have used food as a literary device.

Using texts from novels and other culinary experiences (read cook books, journals, memoirs) one can study food and hope to give “food” its appropriate place in culture studies. These readings can also map how food figures in various expressive forms. Perhaps one can also look at food as part of the Eco centric approach in literature and to explore the power and sensuality that food engenders within literature.

**References**


