

Global Context of Culinary Metaphors and Food Related Experiences in Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of The Tusker* and *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhari Tehsildar*

Mrs. Vrushali V. Bhosale-Kaneri

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, R. A. Podar College of Commerce and Economics, Matunga, Mumbai – 19, (Maharashtra) India

Abstract

Food, as it is a basic need, is a topic of universal interest. In recent years, a sub-genre of novel, culinary fiction has gained attention and popularity. Food and food writing are examined in the discipline called Culinary Studies. Food studies emerged during the 1970s and it refers to the practices, attitudes, beliefs, production, distribution, consumption of food. It also encompasses the concepts of foodways, cuisine and food system. One of the concerns of Culinary Studies is to scrutinize how food is used to express identity, community, values, status, power and creativity in cultural texts. This paper will try to explore how culinary fiction helps the transfer of the local culture to the global platform. It will also analyse the culinary metaphors and culinary contexts in two novels by Assamese writes to show how food shapes identity, hybridity and global interest.

Key Words: Local, Global, Culinary fiction, Culinary Studies, Foodways

“Tell me what you eat, I’ll tell you what you are.”- French gastronome Jean Brillat Savarin.

Food shapes identity. Food reveals caste, creed, religion, nationality, gender. Food is an integral part of any culture. Food culture refers to the attitudes and beliefs as well as the networks and institutions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food. It also encompasses the concepts of foodways, cuisine and food system and includes the fundamental understandings a group has about food, historical and current conditions shaping that group’s relationship to food, and the ways in which the group uses food to express identity, community, values, status, power, artistry and creativity. It also includes a groups’ definitions of what items can be food, what is tasty, healthy, and socially

appropriate for specific subgroups or individuals and when, how, why, and with whom those items can or should be consumed.

Food in fiction depicts ethnic, national and migratory identities. As people move from one place to another, their food also moves, creating foodways. Food cooking, serving, eating, distribution of grains, appear frequently in the fictions which shows the culture of that community.

Indira Goswami is one of gifted women writers of Assam, India known popularly as Mamoni Baideo. She is one of the most celebrated names in contemporary Assamese literature. Along with many other awards, she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi award for her Assamese novel *Mamare Dhara Tarowal* which translated into English as *Rusted Sword*.

“Indira Goswami is one of those rare souls who have been able to get an insight into the great power which working behind the universe – Amrita Pritam”.(Goswami Indira, “The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker”, Rupa & Co., 2004, Delhi, on the jacket of book cover)

Assamese literature in English is relatively a less explored domain in Indian English studies and Goswami is one of the first authors from North east whose regional work has been translated in English. Food gets reflected in the writings of Indira Goswami in many different aspects. One can observe that food metaphors have been used meticulously in her writings. The local food culture, the local cuisine, different varieties of rice available locally, ways of cooking, serving, preserving gets depicted in her writings. In her writing food communicates the character’s caste, social status, relations with other characters, economics status, and inner feelings. For this paper, the researcher has taken two fictional works of Indira Goswami for scrutiny. They are *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of Tusker* and *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*. The settings of both the novels are different. *The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker* is set between 1946 and 1981 in the post independent period and *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* is set in the late 19th century Assam.

In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Goswami has portrayed three widowed but strong women, Giribala, Saru Gossainee and Durga. The novel is about a small sattrain South Kamrup in Assam. The main theme of the novel is ownership of land, the emerging forces of communism strike at the debilitated roots of feudal power, opium addicts, and tax system. The

author holds up a powerful picture of transition, of degeneration and decay. Interwoven with the main story is a poignant tale of the tragedy of widowhood – the plight of Brahmin widows encased in the sattras and their responses to a fate worse than death.

Giribala is a very young widow. Once she becomes widow, she has to follow the strict code of conduct set for the widows by the society. This code of conduct includes a diet of only rice and pulses boiled with some vegetables with a pinch of salt and a little ghee made up of cow’s milk. Her tongue becomes dull and dry. She is fed up with this insipid diet. During the shradha ceremony she smells the irresistible aroma of mutton curry cooked with beans, this aroma brings vivid memories in her mind. She remembers her childhood when she had tasted iguana flesh curry. Indranath could not bring himself to eat this curry but she relished it with great fervour. She remembered how her mother scolded her saying, “Chiko! Chiko! What are you doing? Such greed for flesh is very inauspicious for a girl!”(p143). Food connotes gender bias, the way food is consumed by male or female describes the person, whether the person is level headed, hot blooded, saint like or with animal instinct. With this aroma, she also remembers her late husband Latu Gossain and his way of leading careless life. He was known for the bad company he kept. He toured with a jatra party and it was known fact that he accepted food from one of lady from the party who was from a lower caste and their relationship was scandalous. She used to make pigeon curry with papaya and a sour dish of *ou* fruit with deer flesh for Latu Gossain. Giribala wonders if both these

dishes had the same aroma which she was sensing at that point. She was aware of her husband's relation to this lady and how he ignored herself. She never had any cordial feelings towards him when he was alive neither she had any remorse after his death. She tries to stop herself from consuming meat as it was forbidden for Damodariya Gossain widow, but she cannot not restrain herself; "She forgot everything...religion and rituals, wisdom or restraint....she started gulping it down in grate haste....."(p144)

Food in this novel represents social position, gender, gender relation, sexual desire and suppression of sexual desires, nostalgia, food preparation and who are the companions. The novel also documents the importance of food in religious ceremonies. For instance, in shradhdha food is served to all people in satra. The menu includes fragrant rice and mutton curry with black beans which is cooked using spices and ghee. Even when the marriage proposals are received by Gossain for their son Indranath, the gifts include rice, potatoes, mustard oil and big, fat rohu fish. When food is served, Brahmins sit separately. Mark sahib, who appears in the narrative, is considered as mlechcha as he is a Christian.

The author also creates a visual in the mind of the reader especially when she describes food. The feeling of Saru Gossainee towards Mahidhar, her own economic conditions, her struggle to make both ends meet, her guilty consciousness for having soft feelings for Mahidhar despite being a widow – all reach the reader through the rich culinary description; "Mahidhar should be coming now. He will be tired and hungry. A hot meal will make him cheerful. Whenever

she sees this man, fresh energy seems to run through her body and mind.(p 224, 225)". The rice pot is boiling over. She takes it off from the fire. She keeps the straining vessel over another pot and drains off the hot steaming rice broth. The steam from the cooked rice envelops her soft, beautiful face. She thrusts some more pieces of firewood into the clay oven and hoists a big, black, soot-covered pan over it. Then she takes the mustard oil bottle from its hook on the post nearby and tilts the bottle over the frying pan. To her dismay, she discovers that very little oil is left in the bottle and if the paddy carts do not arrive in time, she will not get the money to buy mustard oil.

Saru Gossainee puts the vegetables in the little oil she could pour out from the bottle. Transferring the pepper, cumin seeds, ginger and red chilies to the grinding stone, she makes a fine paste. The novelist explores the interiority of Saru Gossainee's mind using culinary images "...Fie on her! What she is thinking! Her mind is always haunted by the dream of those solid posts of urium wood and this man. But she can save herself from the pull of the flesh....Her attention was drawn to the frying pan. She turned over the half cooked vegetables and scrapped the sides of the pan where they had got stuck. What else should she cook now? Her eyes fell on the tomatoes in the bamboo basket. Some were quite rip and others half-ripe. She'll make a sour dish of tomatoes, cooked with rice powder. It'll be an ideal dish for someone coming home tired after a long journey!(p226, 227)"

The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar is the heroic tale of a Bodo freedom fighter who was, arguably, the first women revenue collector, a tehsildar.

Set in late 19th century Assam, the fictional work of Indira Goswami generates a great deal of interest. At a time when educated Indians, social reformers and the British government were trying to fight misogynist practices such as sati, child marriage and the purdah system, was a woman working with the British officers, shoulder to shoulder, as a tax collector who rode a horse, wore a hat. Thengphakhri is from Bodo community. Bodos also known as Kacharis are the largest group of plain tribes in Assam.

Different dimensions of food are explored in this novel. Thengphakhri is tax collector of Bijni kingdom in lower Assam. Bijni sent dry fish, oil and silver ornaments. Food as an export item gets a close look in the novel. Bodos are known for their scientific ways of agriculture. People from different regions come to Assam to learn from them. Assam is known for its hospitality. Any guest, who comes to their house, is treated like god and offered food. Among Bodos, guests are offered jumai-beer on arrival. This same beer is also offered to their god, lord Shiva. The novel also reveals a folk story behind making this jumai beer. Tribhubon Bahadur, grandfather of Thegphakhari shares a story about how jumai-beer was created with the soldiers from Uttar Pradesh.

“The wine created itself. Once upon a time, a woodcutter became very tired trying to cut a tree in the deep forest. He fell asleep under a tree. After a while, he heard the chirping of birds and woke up. He saw that his whole body was covered with wild flowers and dry leaves that had fallen from the tree. He looked up and saw a host of beautiful birds on the tree. It seemed like a meeting of fairies. So many birds! Birds-of-paradise, parrots, bulbuls!

Every now and again the birds would enter a hollow in the tree-trunk and drink the sparkling water that had collected there. After drinking that water they would start dancing. The old wood cutter was curious. He too drank the water and immediately, he found a new energy in his body. He filled up some of the water in bamboo hollow and took it for his old wife. As soon as they drank it they started to dance.

The old man and the woman finished off the wine from the bamboo container in just two days. When that ecstatic state ended, they felt as were as if drowning in the sea of sorrow. Seeing their sorrow, lord Shiva came down from the skies and taught them how to distill wine. Soon, the old man and the woman became experts at this and it became very popular among the Bodos.”(p 29)

The food culture of a particular area is the work of generations. The local environment, climate, and availability of sources shape the food habits of the people. Bodos consider rice as goddess Lakshmi, it is seen through their folk songs:

“Aahu-paddy is Goddess Lokhimi

Sali-paddy is Goddess Lokhimi too

Lokhimi, you are our flesh

You are our life.”(p 69,70)

The Bodos use diverse varieties of rice. They use a particular type of fragmented rice called joha rice. When the characters in the fictional work, share their drink or food, it reveals the relationship between them. Sharing food with somebody shows that one trusts the person and shares intimate relation. It also shows equality between both parties. Thengphakhri's grandfather shared his drink and meals

with sutradhar. Macklinson sahib shared food with his Bodo soldiers. He relishes Bodo's steamed rice and turtle curry. On the other side, Clark does not share his food and drinks with the soldiers. He does not share food with Thengphakhri also. He eats his food alone. This shows his alienation from the Bodo people. He considers himself superior. It also points towards the fact that he does not trust them. He keeps watch on Thengphakhri and when she goes out in night to meet the Prince, he arrests the Prince. But he does not show any kind of signs in his behaviour or talk about his deeds. The Britishers had a way of appreciating soldiers by distributing rum bottles among them. Food shows emotions; when Hardy sahib dies, Thengphakhari cannot eat for many days, she leaves her meals untouched. This was a known fact among British officers. This shows Thengphakhri's relation with Hardy sahib and her devotion towards him.

This fictional work has reference to food ways. The Britishers imported wine in oak drums and ice from England. Also they

imported packets of porridge from their own country. Sometimes they do set an English breakfast on the table consisting of boiled fish, boiled meat and porridge. Thengphakhri does not like it. Britishers travelled all the way from England to India, their colony; and they did carry their food habits.

“Another important aspect of food is it works as a means of communication. Because of food's multi-sensorial properties of taste, touch, sight, sound and smell, it has the ability to communicate in a variety of registers and constitutes a form of language” (Barthes; Ed. Counihan and Esterik, 10). This culinary semiotics operates in Goswami's novels as she encodes human emotions such as love, devotion and anger in culinary metaphors.

To conclude, culinary metaphors and experiences in Goswami's novels connect immediately with the readers. They also depict social hierarchy, economic status, caste, gender politics, inter-personal relations, religion, psychological states, local culture, culinary politics and emotions.

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