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**Narratives on a Platter: Gastronomic Symbols in Sarah Joseph's Works**

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**Anna George**

Assistant Professor ,Baselius College, Kottayam

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**Article Received:** 02/04/2025**Article Accepted:** 04/05/2025**Published Online:** 06/05/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.05.76

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**Abstract**

In this chapter, I mainly look at the connection between food, religion, class, and caste in Mattathi. This chapter shows how human tastes are related to an individual's social, religious, and political backgrounds. Malayalam Literature has representations of food, but there are 'silences' too. The food representations of certain cultures find prominence while certain others are silenced in Literature. These kinds of silences are there in every field, be it cultural, religious, social, or political. Kerala is a state where there are Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, and several other religious practitioners. Nevertheless, Hindu food culture often gets represented whereas other food cultures are sidelined. When it comes to Christian food culture, the level of representation goes down further. The novel Mattathi by Sarah Joseph is such a novel where Christian food culture is represented. There are representations of abundance and poverty. The novel addresses food and its relation to religion, class, caste, and gender. Each of these areas has a strong connection to food and determines the rules behind gathering, preparing, serving, and consuming food. Sarah Joseph has thus applied the theme of food into the narrative to read the society itself.

**Keywords:** Caste, Class, Culture, Naming, Religion

Food is much more than ordinary imagination

A culinary creation, end to hunger and other manifestations

The ordinary glance reveals it is made for consumption

But that is manifest, not the latent function.<sup>1</sup>

The centrality of food in our lives has made it an important part of academics. The acceptance of cultural texts like food narratives into academia goes back to the introduction

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<sup>1</sup> An excerpt from a poem by Vikas Gupta titled "A Poem on Food" (2004).

of Cultural Studies by the efforts of pioneers like Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, Tony Bennett, etc., in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Their burgeoning interest in popular culture paved the way for the Birmingham School. The Birmingham School focused on “working class and dissident populations, television personalities” (Nayar 8). Cultural Studies look at the mass culture and the everyday activities of people, all of which were labeled “inferior” and hence not worth academic attention. Though we can see traces of this trend in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), it gained much acclaim after the establishment of the above-mentioned school of thought.

From then on, “ordinary” things of life were also considered worthy of study. A wide range of topics like food, dress, music, theatre, films, photography, etc. were introduced into academics. Once they were studied, they were less devalued. The acceptance of Cultural Studies into the academic realm was also not easy. Harrington points out that while this was relatively easily accepted by Sociology and Anthropology, Literature maintained its elitist attitude of dismissing the “lesser cultural texts” and took a while to accept the changing trend. Studies that focused on food in Literature were very sparse compared to disciplines like Sociology and Anthropology. But now we can see a change in the approach, with much ink spilled on food culture and its representation in expatriate writers, post-colonial Literature and children's Literature among others.

Food writings in magazines and newspapers have dedicated columns to bring out flavors from across the world. Television channels also add flavor to our lives through shows which are totally dedicated to food. Following Western television trends, now we have a 24x7 food channel by Sanjeev Kapoor, who gained fame airing *Khana Khazana*<sup>3</sup> for almost 17 years in the Zee Network.

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<sup>2</sup>The British New Left thinkers understood that the courses offered in Oxford or Cambridge

Universities had little to do with the working class cultures and there was a strict divide between the high and the low brow culture which alienated them. The attempt to understand ordinary people's culture through “lived life” resulted in the discipline of Cultural Studies.

<sup>3</sup> Kapoor, Sanjeev. *Khana Khazana*. Dir. Girish Madhu. Perf. Sanjeev Kapoor. Zee Television.

<<http://www.khanakhazana.com>>

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My identity as a woman and a Keralite, among others, directed my attention to the works of Sarah Joseph, an eminent woman writer in Malayalam who has done considerable work in this area. Her works brilliantly portray the politics of food, gender, and society. Hence, I have chosen her following works: *Mattathi* (Other 2003), "*Veykunnathum Vilambunnathum*" (Cooking and Serving 2000), and "*Nammude Adukkala Thirichupidikkuka*" (Reclaiming Our Kitchen 2000), which have addressed food culture in the three different genres -- novel, short story and critical essay for my study.

Though my research concentrates on Sarah Joseph's works, in the process of research I have made references to Indian English culinary fiction, non-fiction and other texts from Malayalam to expand my realm of research. Preliminary attempts of data collection itself revealed that there are not many works on food in Malayalam Literature. Interaction with researchers and others in Kerala offered only a few suggestions of writers who might have dealt with food. They were also not confident about the extent of references to food and the relevance of food representations in the works of writers from Kerala. Since most of the suggestions, even from publishers, referred only to cookbooks, it was pretty much evident that they were not aware of the existence of something like "Culinary Fiction." This became the main motivation behind my work. The works *Mattathi*, "*Veykunnathum Vilambunnathum*," and "*Nammude Adukkala Thirichu Pidikkuka*" have multiple references to food and to the process of cooking.

The representation of food in early Malayalam Literature (*Thullals*<sup>4</sup> and Poems) outnumbers the works of the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When popular media like television, newspapers, and magazines are flooded with food shows and food columns, Malayalam fiction has kept away from this trend. This was a question that arose in my mind from the very beginning of my research. While pondering this topic, I assumed that it shows the role of food in the lives of contemporary Keralite people. Food in television shows and magazines is more of an entertainer with the modern techniques of photography, making food appear visually appetizing, but rarely to the taste buds. The entertainment quotient of food is stressed these days through Malayalam Channels (other language channels are also not very different) with celebrity cookery shows and cooking competitions. This opens an arena where the audience experiences new vistas of gastrotainment. They offer an opportunity to enjoy all those delicacies with our eyes alone, as they would be unaffordable otherwise. Fictional works in Malayalam Literature have not dealt in detail with the idea of food as 'entertainment'.

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<sup>4</sup> Thullal is a poetry genre in Malayalam introduced by Kunjan Nambiar. Through this, he satirized the hypocrisy of the society around him.

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In the process of this study I attempt to analyze select works of Sarah Joseph, which presents the daily life of ordinary people in Kerala, with an eye on their food habits. The chapters of this dissertation address questions about how food acts as a medium wherein religious, class, caste, and gender differences play out. The cooking of food in these works decodes meanings which takes us to the differences in tastes created by human beings.

In an attempt to give a taste of a few Western and Indian theories of food -- both culinary fiction and non-fiction in Indian English, Indian languages, and Malayalam Literature. The pioneers in Western food theories are Claude Levi Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Mary Douglas. With the rise of Structuralism in the 1960's there was an initiation into anthropological studies in food with Levis Strauss' *Raw and the Cooked* (1964) identifying the cultural meaning of food through the language of food. While Roland Barthes's "Ornamental Cooking" (2008) locates the structural meaning of food, Mary Douglas' "Deciphering a Meal" (2008) analyses the dietary patterns of several societies. Most of these theorists have discussed questions of edible and inedible food.

Indian English fiction has umpteen references to food and cooking. The works of R. K. Narayan, Saleem Piradina, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai etc. have represented food through memories, as a social factor which unifies the immigrant Indians, as a factor which shows their sense of lost identity. The Indian non-fiction about food mainly includes cook books by famous chefs. Indian theories of food by Arjun Appadurai, R. S. Khare, T. N. Madan, Dunkin Jalki, etc. concentrate mainly on the religious, class, and caste perspective.

After sampling a flavour of all those food theories, fiction and non-fiction in India and abroad, we come to the Kerala scenario where the selected novel and short story are located. As observed earlier, Malayalam fiction has not paid much attention to food. Writers like V. K. N. have addressed food in a handful of short stories where he deals with the politics of eating, cultural differences in relation to food between North Indians and South Indians and increasing anglicization of our food habits. T. V. Kochubava is another writer who represents food in the domestic realm of the house where it is prepared, saved and served by mothers. The veteran author Vaikom Muhammad Basheer is another author whose works has appetizing references to food in Muslim families. The latest among fictional writers who have represented food is Santhosh Echikanam with his "*Panthi Bhojanam*" (2010) that retells caste hierarchies in food practices in the modern society.

The non-fictional food writing in Malayalam is very rich with cookbooks published as early as 1948. The magazine columns and cook books of the later years with authors like Mrs. K. M. Mathew, Umami Abdulla etc. have set models for the women of Kerala. The theories in Malayalam regarding food are very rare and the very few which have addressed food are magazine articles by Sarada Kutty, K. P. Nirmal Kumar etc. The representation of

food

in the school textbooks in Kerala is one area which is also addressed. The analyses of food representations in the novel *Mattathi* by closely reading the religious, class, and caste perspectives on food. In this chapter taste and food habits are considered as constructed. The socio-religious backgrounds can decide the food habits of people. They are so powerful that a deviation from any such habits can result in social isolations. The food rules imposed by religion play a very important part. These rules decide the edibility and inedibility of certain food. Since food etiquettes are different for different religions, it makes the same food edible or in-edible to different people at the same time. The restrictions imposed by religion plays an important role in constructing tastes.

Food culture of Brigitha and Lucy, the protagonists in the novel *Mattathi* are analysed along with its implications on feasting, fasting, taboos and nomenclature of food. The question of edibility of non-vegetarian food arises when Lucy is in college. There her food culture is being contrasted with that of her batch mates, who are mostly from upper-caste Hindu families. This creates an inhibition in Lucy to eat non-vegetarian food. The restrictions not only end in creating inhibitions but also isolates Lucy from other students.

The differences in the nomenclature of food by different religious groups also come up for discussion here. Though there are no descriptions of fasting in the novel, Christians have strict rules regarding fasting in connection with church festivals. Fasting is followed by feasting when it comes to religion. We find examples of this in the novel when Lucy and Brigitha visit Celina's house on the occasion of a church festival, where people get together to prepare food in large quantities. The cooking of food in such cases becomes an occasion where many conversations happen and news is shared while toiling over food.

Caste differences regarding food is evident when Oppan (a converted Christian from the lower caste) is given a treat in Brigitha's home. Even when food is shared between people of different classes and castes, it is more of an occasion to show off than creating bonds between them. The conversations draw out the differences. Class differences are present even inside the house when we look at the difference in food cooked for Lucy and Brigitha. While these illustrate how taste has been marked, there is also evidence of breaking the class rules of food by Brigitha -- this happens when she buys *Vettikootu*<sup>5</sup>. Thus food in this novel acts as an agent which declares differences between people on the basis of religion, class and caste.

Culinary fiction offers gustatory delight to its readers. We feel an enigmatic pleasure by eating (reading) at an imaginary table which has the capacity to present food in its grand forms. Such representations are common in Indian English writing. Depiction of food in

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<sup>5</sup> Discarded pieces of meat.

fiction unfolds many meanings. Generally, it narrates the stories of starving stomachs, sumptuous tables with surplus food but surprisingly the depictions of people who cook and their hardships are rarely portrayed. Food is a representation of culture in each and every stage of its production, preparation and consumption. Food is arguably a powerful form of culture according to Shonali Muthalaly, a culinary journalist.

In this chapter I mainly look at the connection between food, religion, class and caste in *Mattathi*. This chapter shows how human tastes are related to the social, religious and political backgrounds of an individual. “Taste in food also depends on the idea each class has of the body and of the effects of food on the body, that is, on its strength, health and beauty...” (Bourdieu 190).

Malayalam Literature has representations of food, but there are 'silences' too. The food representations of certain cultures find prominence while certain others are silenced in Literature. These kinds of silences are there in every field be it cultural, religious, social or political. Kerala is a state where there are Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Buddhists and several other religious practitioners. Nevertheless Hindu food culture often gets represented where as other food cultures are side lined.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to Christian food culture the level of representation further goes down. But it is interesting to note that the Christian food tradition becomes a major trope for attracting tourists in Kerala.

The novel *Mattathi* by Sarah Joseph is such a novel where Christian food culture gets represented. The novel has strong representations of food through which I have analyzed the characters. There are representations of abundance and of poverty. The novel addresses food and its relation to religion, class, caste and gender. Each of these areas has a strong connection to food and determines the rules behind gathering, preparing, serving and consuming food. Sarah Joseph has thus applied the theme of food into the narrative to read the society itself.

Sarah Joseph, one of the most famous women writers from Kerala was born in 1945 to a middle class Christian family in Trissur. She had to discontinue her studies for a while because of her marriage at an early age of 14. She later continued her studies through distance education and secured an M. A. in Malayalam. She started her career as a lecturer in Sanskrit College, Pattambi where she also began her literary career as a poet and

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<sup>6</sup>According to the census of 2001, of the total 318 41374 people in Kerala, 56.20 % are Hindus, 24.7% Muslims, and 19% Christians.

gradually moved to short stories and novels. Her first works were published in magazines and they acquired critical acclaim. Most of her works addressed women's issues which were often unheard at the time. She thus became a voice of those who were silenced. Her works provided an impetus to a lot of debates in the arena of women's writing among literary circles. She has tried to create a space for women through her strong female characters in *Othappu* (The Scent of the Other Side 2005), *Alahayude Penmakkal* (Daughters of Alaha 1999), *Mattathi* (Other 2003) and several other short stories. Sarah Joseph tries to achieve a space for women not only through her works but also through her active works with Manushi<sup>7</sup>, a women's group to raise voice against alleged offenders of woman's freedom and security.

*Mattathi*, is part of a trilogy. The other being in the group are *Othappu* and *Alahayude Penmakkal*. While the latter two novels gained much critical acclaim, *Mattathi* was paid less attention. The term *Mattathi* itself means 'other'. The novel, because of reasons unknown, was relegated to the sidelines in the literary circles. But since it is a novel that gives attention to food culture, it caught my attention. Sarah Joseph is an author who has presented her views on food through her fiction *Mattathi*, her short stories "*Veykunnathum Vilambunnathum*", and her critical essay "*Nammude Adukkala Thirichupidikkuka*". In my telephonic interview (29<sup>th</sup> May 2011) with her, she expressed her greatest concern about our tastes now being dictated by capitalist powers. In an interview given to the magazine *Mathrubhumi*<sup>8</sup> she explicates the role of cooking in her life. Most of her works took shape while she was cooking in the kitchen.

The novel *Mattathi* is the story of Lucy and Brigitha, set in a small village called Mariapuram in Kerala in the 1960's. When the story begins Lucy is a young girl of 14 or 15 studying in high school. Brigitha is an ageing aristocratic Syrian Christian woman. Although Lucy is a distant relative of Brigitha she is treated as a servant at Brigitha's house. Both of them live in an old house in Mariapuram. Lucy's day starts and ends with kitchen duties. As the story progresses we see other characters like Oppan, Celina, Cherona, etc., making an entrance. In the novel, Lucy is seen collecting provisions, cooking, serving and also cleaning the house after the whole process. The descriptions of food start from the first page itself. Brigitha, the old lady is very particular about her food habits. The food

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<sup>7</sup>Manushi is a women's group which was formed in Sanskrit College, Pattambi, when Sarah Joseph worked there. They have actively engaged in bringing several sexual harassment cases to the fore front.

<sup>8</sup>Shaji K.N. "Ente Concern Pranayam Mathramanu" *Mathrubhumi*. Nov 29, 2009. 25. Print.

descriptions in the novel mainly revolve around Brigitha, the consumer of food and Lucy, the producer of food (cook). Lucy's life moves under the strict control of Brigitha. She is seen as a school going child, a college student and later as a soul tied to the walls of the kitchen. In each of these stages we see descriptions of food. Once she discontinues her studies, she is back to her role as a maid. At this point Brigitha owing to her old age has unusual cravings for every kind of food under the sky. Lucy toils day and night to satiate Brigitha's inordinate cravings. This is followed by an anorexic stage in Brigitha, where she refuses to take food and sleeps throughout. Brigitha's relatives throng the place after knowing about her deteriorating health and Lucy is literally pushed to the kitchen. The story ends with Brigitha's death and with Lucy leaving the place with the washer woman Cherona who was her sole confidant right from the beginning of the novel.

There are descriptions of feast, scarcity of food and ritual food practices in the novel. The characters of Brigitha and Lucy are unveiled to the readers in their connection with food. Lucy is portrayed as a good cook and Brigitha enjoys the food prepared by Lucy. These food practices in turn are closely linked to the society. Food in *Mattathi* has socio, political and religious importance. There are clashes between classes and castes due to the consumption of certain food. Sarah Joseph admits that she gives importance to food in her life and works and knows its centrality in life. It is for this reason that she represents her characters in their relation to food.

### **Food and Cultural Discourses in *Mattathi***

#### **Food and Religion**

From age old days there has been a strong connection between religion and food. The dietary rules of many cultures were formulated by this connection. These rules made their food cultures different from one another. Kerala much like the other parts of India is a land of diversity and this implies different food cultures. Kerala food is also influenced from outside. These influences came in the form of trading companies or invaders. The people of Kerala welcomed these influences whole heartedly. These influences have combined with the food culture of Kerala in different permutations and combinations to form an altogether new food culture -- creole food.<sup>9</sup>

From the days of Vedas, acharyas gave prime importance to the idea of food (Krishna Pillai 10). Many *Suktas* like "*Annam Brahmethi Vyajanath*" (Taittiriya Upanishad) promotes the idea that nourishment is Brahman, which implies the strong connection between food and Hindu religion. The Bible, the Quran and other religious texts also have

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<sup>9</sup> Creole food indicates the food culture formed as a result of foreign influences on the native food.

The creole food culture is discussed by the food columns of Shonali Muthalaly.

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depictions of food in them. Most of the early theories of food that were based in India were also about the Brahmin food culture. This has already been looked into in the first chapter. One among the most important factors which makes religious celebrations unique is the special delicacies prepared during the festival. Almost every religious practice has strong connections with food. Christianity, Hinduism and Islam have occasions which make them grand due to the special dishes prepared during that particular time. Certain food is associated with certain feasts. One example from Hyderabad is the Haleem, which is available only during the festive of Ramzan season.

In the Kerala context, there are special feasts which are conducted as offerings to God. The famous *Valla Sadya* (Boat Feast) in the Aranmula Temple on *Ashtami Rohini* day is a mass feast given by the devotees to the boat rowers of the *Palliyodams* which is considered to be the divine vessel of Lord Krishna. This is a mass feast, which offers food to more than one lakh devotees. The food consists of an elaborate *Sadya* with 45 side dishes. Another example is of the famous *Vechoottu* at the St. George Orthodox Church, Puthupally, in Kerala, on the day of the Church *perunnal*. Similarly the St. Mary's Forane Church, Champakulam in Alleppey district is reputed for its *Choroonu* (lunch festival) on March 19th, the feast day of St. Joseph. The most interesting aspect of this festival is the serving of *sambar* from a huge boat located in the church premises.

Coming back to Sarah Joseph's novel under study, the food cultures that come in contact and have been contrasted are the Hindu (upper caste) food culture and the Syrian Christian food culture. The former mainly comprised of dishes like *Olan*, *Kalan*, *Moloshyum*, *Kootukari*, *Pachadi*, *Uppilittathu*, etc. Most of these dishes were quite new to Lucy because her culinary expertise was firmly rooted in the Syrian Christian tradition of food. Hence she is taken aback when she gets to know about the variety of vegetarian dishes in a Hindu household. She recollects the names of these dishes while silently eating her food in the corner of the common room of the college. To Lucy, a vegetarian curry was made from the blending of vegetables like raw banana, papaya, yam, tapioca, etc., with crushed garlic, red chillies and curry leaves which is cooked by adding water. These dishes were made according to Brigitha's tastes. Lucy's knowledge of vegetarian dishes was controlled by Brigitha. Even among the people of the same religion there exist power hierarchies. Here Brigitha has more power than Lucy because of the class privileges. This illustrates how the powerful exercise control over the powerless even in the case of food practices. It also shows how sometimes the people who cook have little choice over the selection of dishes.

When religion and food are brought together, another aspect which comes out is the idea of fasting and feasting. Christianity as it is practiced by some denominations in Kerala has a custom that the followers should fast on Wednesdays and Fridays the whole year

except during the lent season before Easter. A control over food meant a control over the whole body itself. Religions linked food and sexual pleasures together. So fasting was one way through which one controlled the body. Fasting is usually followed by feasting. But in certain traditions fasting follows feasting too. Feasts are an unavoidable part of religious practices.

Feasts related to the church are another category of feasts. They are very common in Kerala. Since they are part of a culture, a good understanding of the cultural background is essential to get a flavor of the scene. Most of these are in memory of Saints or of Virgin Mary. A typical church feast in Kerala is called a *perunnal*. A *perunnal* would include a church mass and other rituals like offerings of food, a procession, etc. Rahamat Tarikere in his “Food et cetera” discusses festivals in Karnataka when relatives get together and celebrate together. Likewise, food is another attraction of the *perunnal*. Special food will be prepared during these days in large quantities.

*Mattathi*, also presents one such *perunnal*. Brigitha and Lucy visit Celina’s house during this. The preparations for food start in the morning itself. A large quantity of food is prepared by the women of the house. Celina’s aunts and other women of the family sit together in the kitchen preparing delicacies like *Achappam*, *Kuzhalappam*, *Unniyappam*, *Cheeda*, *Avalosunda* etc. These are just the snack items. There were six baskets of *Achappam* and *Kuzhalappam*, rest of it was heaped on a carpet. The enormity of the food is evident in the following statement.

Celina’s aunts were all engrossed in the magical art of rolling up the *Kuzhalappam* into the shape of a small pipe. In front of them were enormous amounts of white dough which looked like white globes. Coconut oil was boiling in one big vessel. Siii...Siii... sound of the rolled up dough when put into this oil was heard throughout the house (15)

The hustle and bustle of kitchen during such a day is described above. On such occasions women discuss all things under the sun to overcome the tiredness of the job. They have fun and discuss many things over the food preparations.

In feasts connected to religion there are more rules and so one has to be very particular about the gathering of food materials for the preparation of food. The Jews in Cochin prepare their food related to religious practices all by themselves. They prepare it from grains selected very carefully without using even a single damaged grain.

All these are done for ensuring the purity of food. Food is given as an offering to God. Food as an offering is called *prasadam* in the Hindu tradition which elevates food from being material to something divine. There are strict instructions saying that a person who takes the *prasadam* should be pure. During church *perunnals* food like *nercha appam* are offered to church from all homes. These are later distributed among the devotees.

Rituals and beliefs surrounding food reinforces the religious beliefs of the devotees. The food offerings (*prasadam*s) of religious institutions are believed to be divine and are considered to have magical powers. These offerings are given to each and every member of the house and sometimes certain food is preserved for future. These offerings are attributed with medicinal powers and so are stored and given to sick people at the time of need.

### **Class, Caste Interactions and Food**

Class like that of religion is known to create dietary rules that further increases the dissimilarities between one group and another within the same religion. In the *Thullals* of Kunjan Nambiar we see the class division in connection to food. The description of *Sadya* in *Syamanthaka* portrays people who cook the food and people who are invited for the *Sadya*. The concept of *Sadya* itself is part of an upper caste tradition which was later on imitated by the lower caste according to their own financial abilities. There were strict rules laid by the upper caste authorities to keep a curb over the lower caste *Sadyas*. Special permission had to be taken for serving “Big *Papadams*”, “Sugar”, “*Sharkara Upperi*” in the *Sadyas*. All these made the upper class *Sadya* remain in the high pedestal for a considerable period of time. In those days Brahmin *Sadyas* served vegetarian food while Nair *Sadyas* served both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food.<sup>10</sup> Caste restrictions prevented the lower castes from using the best food produced by their own hard work. The best part of the harvest always went to the granaries of the rich upper caste people.<sup>11</sup>

In the well-known novel *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy brings forth many instances of class and caste differences that crop up in the domain of food can be seen. Baby Kochamma, Chacko, Margaret Kochamma, Estha, Rahel and others fed on expensive dishes like roasted chicken, jams, jellies and chips; while Velutha had to depend on the basic food since he belonged to the lower caste and was also poor. The differences in food do not end in the capacity to buy costly food, but also points to the way it is eaten as Rahel and Estha are taught in the novel.

According to Ammu, only clerks behaved like that, not aristocrats. Aristocrats were people who didn't blow spit-bubbles or shiver their legs. Or gobble (Roy 84).

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<sup>10</sup>Ganesh.K. N. *KunjanNambiar-Vakkum,Samoohavum.Calicut: Vallathol Vidyapeedom, 1996.208.*

Print.

<sup>11</sup> A poem “Vazhakkula” by Changampuzha portrays a Pulayan (lower caste) man's vazhakkula (banana) being taken away by the Lord. The grief of the Pulayan and his children come out through the lines.

Thus food acts as a medium where these differences come out. According to Sydney Mintz, “food becomes interesting to anthropologists if they offended the observer, baffled him, or were ceremonialised” ( qtd. in Adapon 6). So instances like the above mentioned in LiteratureLiterature and in history where food has caused frictions among people are studied.

The food served during the feast given to Oppan in Brigitha’s house in *Mattathi* included Fish Curry, *Vattayappam*, Chicken Curry, Fish Fry and pots of toddy . Since Brigitha wanted an upper hand over Oppan she made it a point to buy the best and the biggest fish available. The above mentioned foods are stereotypical Christian dishes. *Vattayappam*, *Kallappam*, *Avalose*, *Achappam* etc. which are represented in this novel at several places have rice and coconut as their main ingredients. These two items are easily available in Kerala. The Syrian Christian food itself was highly influenced by British and Portuguese dishes. The use of pepper in the dishes is one such influence.

Liquor is an unavoidable part of Christian feasts in Kerala. Here also we find that Oppan is served toddy. Brigitha’s comment after offering the Toddy brings out the conflict between traditional liquors and foreign liquor. “Drink! Drink till your stomach is full. And then tell me if your Brandy is better than my Toddy” (47).

The conflicts in food cultures are expressed explicitly when they come in contact with each other. It may happen in public spaces or even under the roof of the same house. One such instance occurs in *Mattathi*. Caste differences between Oppan (a nouveau rich guy) and Brigitha prevent them from socializing even over food. Oppan is a converted Christian which makes him culturally inferior. When Oppan enquired whether Brigitha remembered him as a boy, Brigitha insulted him by saying that she never allowed converted Christians to enter her house let alone her compound. The strict boundaries that are still there in Christianity make Oppan the lower caste and Brigitha, the upper caste. Thus the sharing of food creates and also reminds them of the differences that prevail in the society.

There are also feasts which are not related to any festivals. As briefly mentioned above, in the novel we see that Oppan is treated with a feast by Brigitha at her house (42-45). The offering of food is considered as an act of showing respect to an existing relationship or for building a future relationship. The host expects reciprocity in the relationship. According to Lowenberg, eating together with a person is to say “I am your equal” (85). In the story, all these assumptions go wrong. Brigitha organizes this feast to stage her grandeur and authority. The preparations that Brigitha make clarify her motives. She buys very expensive fish varieties, four pots of toddy and also kills a chicken for this function. Lucy had to cook all these under the strict invigilation of Brigitha. The special materials for cooking, the special attention while cooking and the whole ambience made the

feast special. Brigitha tries to bring out the differences between Oppan and her through the extra efforts in preparing food.

The social divide between the classes becomes explicit in the distance that is maintained between the kitchen and the consumer of the food. Only the close relatives are given entry into the inner spaces of the kitchen. The architecture of the kitchen itself is in such a way as to avoid intruders. In the early texts, kitchen is said to be located in the *agni konam*<sup>12</sup> of the house. Even in this novel when Oppan, an outsider tries to peep into the kitchen, he is beaten by Brigitha.

A look into Brigitha's daily menu shows how her tastes are decided by her position in the society and house. She is the one with power in the house. Brigitha's day starts with *Kanji* (gruel) along with coconut chutney. She hits the gruel<sup>13</sup> vessel with her stick if there is no coconut chutney. The raw materials like different varieties of chillies and coconut are produced in the land owned by Brigitha but grown and cultivated by Lucy. Brigitha shows her authority in the way she demands for food at the right time and in the right way. The *Kanji* should neither be too hot nor too cold, it should have the right amount of salt and it should be served at the right time. These episodes from the novel illustrate how Brigitha exercised her authority through taste.

Taste is very often a construct. An individual attains and rejects 'taste' according to what is being taught and suggested to him / her. This is represented in a poem "Experiment Degustatory" written by Ogden Nash.

A gourmet challenged me to eat  
A tiny bit of rattlesnake meat,  
Remarking, "Don't look horror-stricken.  
You'll find it tastes a lot like chicken."  
It did.  
Now chicken I cannot eat,  
Because it tastes like rattlesnake meat.

It explains how people eat certain food happily till the moment they become conscious of its differences. In this particular poem he captures the disgust that the narrator

<sup>12</sup> According to traditional Kerala architecture, kitchen should be at the south-east corner of the house.

<sup>13</sup> Though gruel is eaten by poor people, here Brigitha's gruel is different as she insists on the particularities while preparing the gruel.

of the poem feels when he understands that rattle snake meat tastes just like chicken (Fieldhouse 42).

Lucy in *Mattathi* had a similar experience in her college. Lucy took *Unakka Chemmen Chammanthi* (Dry Prawn Chutney) for lunch and the moment she opened her lunch box she was asked whether she had brought garlic (79-80).<sup>14</sup> This made her very conscious and hesitant in taking fish and meat dishes to college.

Lucy was differentiated and excluded from certain groups of her classmates due to her food preferences. She was also isolated during lunch time after her friend and lunch-mate Sundari took hostel admission. She was excluded for the fact that she ate *malsyam*, *mamsam* and garlic and also for the fact that she made the place unclean with the leftover food. She gorged down her food to avoid gazes and comments from other college girls. Lucy was thus 'othered' due to her peculiar food priorities which were unacceptable in the eyes of her peers. Rahmat Tarikere and Dunkin Jalki discuss in their essays the above mentioned issues of how non-vegetarian food is a negation while vegetarian food is normative. The people who consume non-vegetarian food are excluded from the society on this basis.

### **Food and Naming**

The status of Brigitha's beef curry attains a high status when compared to the simple beef dish of Lucy cooked by Lucy using the *Vettikootu* along with yam or tapioca. Yam and tapioca are added because then the amount of meat in the dish can be reduced but still easily available when served. It is inexpensive and so is regarded as the staple food of the working class. While Brigitha's dish gets raised to the position of a mouthwatering beef fry, Lucy's dish is still named as *Vettikootu* which is rather unappealing. The process of cooking and naming the dishes thus changes the status of certain inedible / rejected items. The *Vettikootu* which was considered inedible by the upper classes in the society is made edible when it is transformed through the process of cooking. Brigitha's beef curry is fried and Lucy's is a boiled dish.

At college, the changed atmosphere and associated culture shock brought about other changes in Lucy. Her classmates were mainly from economically well off upper caste Hindu families. It is common knowledge that non-vegetarian food is consumed mostly by the backward and lower caste Hindus and non-Hindus. The college girls addressed and approached Lucy's non-vegetarian food in a way totally different from the way it was perceived by Lucy or Brigitha. They called it *malsyam* and *mamsam* which were new terms

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<sup>14</sup>Garlic was / is not consumed by upper caste Hindus in India.. It is prohibited because it is considered impure.

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for Lucy. These new terms of food aroused Lucy's desire to use those words. This was one way in which she was hoping to mould herself into the 'perfect college girl' image. She wanted to change her village language into this new vocabulary. Thus *meen* (fish) was renamed as *malsyam* in her new world and *irachy* (meat) as *mamsam*. The nomenclature of dishes becomes a problem at times as seen in the novel. There have been controversies over the name 'Basmati'<sup>15</sup> and also the origin of the word 'curry'. 'Curry' is an anglicised form of the Tamil word '*kary*' which was introduced by the British Raj to describe a meat / vegetable dish cooked in spices with or without gravy. This word has had its reign over Indian kitchens from then on. We use this word to denote any dish irrespective of the presence or absence of gravy in it.

### **Food and Social Restrictions**

There are different reasons for food taboos against certain foods. The origin of a food taboo might have initially been in the form of a temporary restraint from a particular food which later lead to the permanent rejection of it. Food taboos do not show any inclinations to vegetarian or non-vegetarian food as these taboos affect both the categories. Food taboos are created by religion, class and caste so as to strengthen its own identity over others. Breaking a food taboo might invite punishment, fine or expulsion depending upon the importance given to the taboos in that society.

Socio-cultural differences among human beings can create distinctions as to what is edible and what is not edible. As the famous saying goes "one man's meat is another man's poison."<sup>16</sup> This saying is quite applicable when applied to religious, class and caste perspectives of food. It is often religious and class distinctions that decide the rules of cooking and eating food. Certain food items like pork are adored by people of certain groups but rejected by certain others. Pork is a taboo for Muslims, upper caste Hindus and Jews and cow's meat is a taboo for upper caste Hindus. The reason behind considering pig as an abominable animal is discussed in "The Abominable Pig" (1985) by Marvin Harris. In this essay he points out that geographical reasons along with superstitions of health and hygiene of the pig are clubbed together to portray it as an abominable animal. When it comes to

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<sup>15</sup> In the 1990's an American firm as well as Indian government filed a case for obtaining patent for the word "Basmati". Basmati is the name given to a fine variety of rice with fragrance and is usually grown in North India.

<sup>16</sup> An oft-quoted adage.

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Christians, there are taboos about consuming meat of any animal which does not ruminates. But usually people do consume pork (pig is not a cud chewing animal). A quick look into the history of India shows how religious feelings about food taboos led to the sudden outbreak of the Revolt of 1857.<sup>17</sup>

In the novel *Mattathi* we find instances of food restrictions on the basis of religion and class. One such incident is related to the consumption of *Vettikootu* (discarded meat). Brigitha, the old lady buys meat once a week. She buys only the discarded parts of meat every week. This was considered miserly by both Lucy and the butchers of the place. The left over parts of meat were usually brought by the lower classes of the society. Since there were written and unwritten rules as to what was to be eaten by the upper class and lower class of the same religion, those who were deviant from such laws were usually a source of joke for others. The comments made by the butchers in the shop itself reveal this. As soon as butcher Kochappu saw Brigitha and Lucy coming to the shop he cried out loudly. "Here comes the leftovers" (30). Moreover, when Brigitha asks for one kilogram of the discarded meat he asks her "Is it for the dog?"(30).

Though Brigitha replied back to most such comments, Lucy felt insulted by those comments and mockery. This can be considered as an incident where a food rule set for the upper classes was broken by one among them. Although the result of this does not go to the extent of punishing the ladies, they were insulted in a public place. This illustrates how people have to restrain from certain food items in order to maintain their positions in the social ladder. In this novel, certain parts of food were prohibited for certain classes. This echoes Eugene Newton Anderson's argument in *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Cultures* (2005) "one culture's choicest delicacy becomes another culture's abomination" (113). The differences in food consumption do not end here. It starts from the stage when materials are collected and continues to the stages of its preparation. While preparing food, certain differences occur due to class differences between Lucy and Brigitha. Brigitha, the affluent though stingy character decides her own tastes and always demands the best in everything while Lucy is left with limited choices.

Brigitha's beef curry is made from the best part of the discarded meat brought. Lucy prepares it by adding ginger, onion, curry leaves, salt, chilli powder and coriander powder

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<sup>17</sup> The revolt of 1857 or the First War of Indian Independence had socio, economic and political reasons behind it. But the main incident which triggered the revolt was the Greased Cartridges controversy. The introduction of cartridges greased with cow's and pig's fat hurt the religious feelings of both Hindu and Muslim soldiers.

in the right quantity to make the best concoction. After this initial stage Lucy blends the meat pieces with the above ingredients along with a little coconut oil till she gets the right smell. Here we can see the importance of the olfactory senses in cooking. The meat is thus first cooked in a pot and then later transferred to an iron pan where it gets mixed with tender coconut pieces, cumin powder, pepper powder, garlic and curry leaves with an addition of oil to fry it to the right consistency. The painstaking efforts, expensive ingredients and the time spent for cooking shows the speciality of the dish.

### **Food and Social Roles**

During a feast, food plays the role of a social mobiliser which simultaneously tries to evade differences while also displaying the differences. A relationship builds between the guest and the host through food. In the novel Brigitha acts as the mediator between the perfect cook (Lucy) and the consumer of the food, Oppan.

During a feast, cooking is usually elevated to the level of an art form. Food is the outcome of a cook's / host's desire to provide nourishment, flavour, hospitality and warmth to the guests. The role which dominates among the above mentioned ones will depend on the cook's connection with the consumer. Lucy in the novel is an excellent cook, yet she is tensed by the fact that she has to impress Oppan through her food. Here food as an art product works in a way as to attract the consumer to the cook. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

As mentioned earlier, in these occasions as food is prepared in large quantities for a large number of people. The best is always served to the guests which follows the age old principle of *Athiti Devobhava*. The guests in this case are served good food. Since preparation of food is more often than not by women, it leaves them little time to do anything else of their choice. This again will be taken up in the following chapter where I address the relationship between food and gender.

Similar to any other cooking process a feast involves not only collecting, preparing and serving food, but also cleaning the leftover food. The food left after eating does not often get the same status as of food. Leftover food is always considered inferior. Cleaning the house after a feast becomes a more strenuous task than the task of cooking itself.

The feasting in the novel is a kind of competition where the host (Brigitha) tries to overpower the guest (Oppan) by offering the best delicacies. The notions of respect that should be there between the guest and the host are broken through this one incident because of Brigitha's sheer jealousy and strict adherence to the caste and class rules. Food becomes a social meal in the novel and although the aesthetic appeal is superficially pre-dominant, it is the caste hierarchy that looms in a conspicuous manner. The joy and camaraderie of sharing food hardly surfaces in in the novel.

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“*Panthibhojanam*”, a story by Santhosh Echikanam depicts the issue of eating together among people of various castes, classes and religions in the present age. When people who claim themselves to be highly modern find it difficult to share their food with others because of the divisions between them, it takes us back to the age old days when *Panthibhojanam* (intercaste dining) was a serious issue and almost a crime.

Food acts as a socializing agent. Another important place where food plays such a role is the teashops in Kerala. In the age old days they acted as news hubs. Ray Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place* (1999) describes the places like coffee shops as “Third Places” which are essential for a community life. The other two places according to him are the working place and home. In places like tea shops people get together forgetting their social differences. But in many Dalit experiences and texts, we find that lower caste people were / are ill-treated in these places too.

A tea shop or *chayakada* in Kerala may look simple and insignificant but it has played a very important role in the society. Social reformers tried to change the caste ridden state of Kerala in early 20<sup>th</sup> century through the introduction of *Panthibhojanam* where people of all castes came together and ate food. This type of mixed eating was encouraged in tea shops in Kerala which was a symbol of increased freedom and an economy based on money. The tea and snacks served there appeared tastier because of the ambience they provided.

As opposed to Dalit literature, the tea shop which is a frequently used space in Malayalam films portray it as a space of freedom unbound by the caste system. Dr. C. S. Venkiteswaran’s article “Tea Shops in Malayalam Cinema” analyses many films like *Neelakkuyil* (1954), *Rarichan Enna Pouran* (1956), *Ee Bhargavi Nilayam* (1964) that have used this space to reach to a wider cross-section of people. Even a very recent film *Kerala Café* (2010) has a thread that connects the whole story to a coffee house (82-95). The evolution of dining out places in India is traced by Frank F. Conlon in his essay “Dining Out in Bombay”. It explains how people got over the psychological and moral aversions about dining out or having a tea from outside.

Oppan, the gulf-returned young man in the novel *Mattathi* returns to his village after years of exile and builds his image through his actions there. These incidents are reported to Lucy by Cheron, the washer woman. She was on her way back after returning the washed clothes when she saw a crowd in front of Kochuvelayudan’s tea shop. The crowd had gathered to get a glimpse of Oppan who was boiling tea by burning hundred rupee notes. There were mixed comments about this from the crowd gathered there. Some of them thought it was unnecessary for Oppan to waste money like that when he could give it to the poor. Oppan thus showed that he was a newly rich man in the village by boiling tea using

his hard earned money for fire. Oppan is compared to Christ's Last Supper, when the tea is distributed around (33).

Lucy desired to have a glance at Oppan. This made her go early in the morning to the tea shop to give milk bottles. The tea shop is described further through Lucy's eyes and through its smells. The mixture of smell was overpowering -- the used tea dust, faeces of cockroaches, roasted mustard, chutney, waste water, several other smells of snacks prepared there, Brut perfume, etc. She also enjoys watching the act of making *dosa* (37- 38).

Although there are spaces which promoted the mixing of caste as suggested in the above examples, the food culture of the lower caste rarely gets represented. Taking the case of this novel itself there are a few instances where it gets represented. When the Church decides to build a housing colony for the poor people, the workers (poor villagers) were offered food at the end of the work. Their wages were nothing else but food. They worked for getting *kanji*, tapioca and black coffee which was given there. Here food is a means of sustenance and survival.

Kerala food culture has different dietary patterns for different sections of people in the state. Only the lower castes usually consume tapioca, yam, etc., in the earlier days. The food materials poor people ate in those days were the things that were available in and around their houses. *Kollikizhangu* (Tapioca) was one tuber which was mainly used by poor people. Oppan's mother used to sell *Kollikizhangu* to make a living.

Narayan, a famous Malayalam writer has written a story "*Panankurukkum Thaal Kariyum*" which shows the role of food for sustenance. The food that is used by the lower class is usually the roots and the leaves of the plants around them (44). The other meanings of food will be of interest to a person only when his/her hunger is satisfied. For poor people, food is part of their struggle for existence. A person ventures upon new foods in two situations mainly. The first one would be when he/she is bored of the old food items and the second one would be when he/she has to survive on whatever is available. The second reason applies well to the story mentioned above.

The concept of hunger is discussed in a collection of stories titled *Vishappinte Kathakal* (2002) compiled by Dr. Usha Balakrishnan. Neither the festivals nor the feasts can bring about a violent change of food for the poor as the resources they have are very few. An age old Malayalam proverb explains the situation of poor people. It says "*Onam Vannalum Unni Pirannalum Koranu Kanji Kumbilil Thanne*" (whether it is Onam or the birth of a baby the poor man always feeds on gruel).

In this chapter the meanings that are associated with food as part of the religion, class and caste are analysed. I have also studied the politics behind naming, taste, social roles and restrictions of food in the light of *Mattathi*.

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**Citation:**

**Anna George** Narratives on a Platter: Gastronomic Symbols in Sarah Joseph's Works." *International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, vol. 7, no. 5, 2025, pp. 73–93. DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.05.93.