

The food motif in the writings of Hindi women writers

Dagmar Marková
Prague

A serious attitude towards food has always been reflected in Indian literature. In recent decades a number of women have entered onto the Hindi literary scene. The motif of food appears very frequently in their writings too, but from a specific point of view. As women they have down-to-earth experience in the preparation of food and with its role as a means of even very intimate communication. We can often feel a tinge of irony in the female way of dealing with the subject.

The preoccupation with food and with the rules of eating has always been part and parcel of the Hindu tradition. Much space is given to food and eating in the *Manusmṛti* – the Laws of Manu; in Kṛṣṇa poetry, food comes to the fore as a means of communication with their gods, while in the *Bhagavadgītā*, wise Kṛṣṇa, the adviser, also focuses on food. The threads of Manu's and Kṛṣṇa's principles can be followed through the ages to contemporary everyday life. This long tradition of preoccupation with food in Indian culture in the widest sense of the word means that, although it may seem odd to a foreign reader, there is in fact nothing strange about the high frequency of the motif in modern literature.

The motif of food, as it appears in the writings of diverse authors from different trends and groupings, signifies something more than mere food. In particular, many short stories describe family situations through scenes of serving and consuming a meal. People communicate (or refuse to communicate) through the means of food. The women serve the meals, the men consume them and express their satisfaction or, rather, their dissatisfaction. A male writer depicting a family situation describes everything very truthfully and usually in dead earnest; for example, let us consider **Amarkant's** short story *The Dinner* (Amarkant 1966).¹ A family is having dinner. There is great disharmony within the family and this is rendered by the lengthy silent scenes of serving and consuming the meal, which indeed nobody enjoys.

1. The names of Hindi authors are given in their most common anglicised spellings. Diacritics will be used only in the titles of works.

To quote another example: *The Voice of the Soul* by **Kamleshwar** (Kamleshwar 1966) depicts two wives in different places who are not able to prepare *capātīs*, Indian pancakes, properly. One wife is humiliated by her husband, while the other is treated condescendingly, but, whatever the case, both of them are unhappy. And the motif of preparing, serving, and consuming food has been chosen to present all this to the reader. Many such examples could be given. Indeed, a sensitive reader might even start feeling depressed on reading these short stories.

Of course, the same can happen when we read some of the short stories by women writers, but in this case, on the contrary, one might even smile – or grin a little.

For example, let us consider the short story *Repulsion* by **Mridula Garg** (Garg 1986). Throughout their married life, a husband had never found time for his wife, who was a perfect housewife. Now when he is retired and they are both getting old, he is the one who longs for a few warm intimate words, but all she does is run the house perfectly and cook. She does not need him any more. The ‘well-balanced, tasty and nutritious’ dinner (Garg 1986, 24) is always perfectly served on the table, but the wife never shows the minimum interest in her husband. Even when he deliberately ‘finds’ a small stone in the lentils (an imaginary one), she simply throws the prepared dish away and does not feel hurt in any way.

A husband’s criticism or praise of food is an important element in Indian married lives and the kitchen symbolism applied by Hindi writers is clearly seen in India, although not always in the West. Mild criticism of the wife’s cooking is part and parcel of togetherness. As **Pushpa Saxena** puts it, in two short sentences in the short story *A relation of distances*. ‘Did he never complain of your burnt food? Your brother-in-law seeks out faults in my cooking all the time’ (Saxena 2010, 58). These lines are taken from a conversation between two sisters. The older one is happy with her husband who criticizes her cooking, while the younger one is divorced – her husband turned out to be a liar and an unreliable man. But – he never complained about her cuisine. On the contrary, she recognizes different values. In the background, there are more important things than small talk about food and cooking!

Mamta Kaliya often injects irony and scepticism into many of her short stories and poems. Such is the case in her longish poem *A girl from a small town* (Kaliya 2009): ‘The lord of the house ate his fill, belched, stroked his tummy and said / the world has changed / but you are the same / a girl from a small town’ (Kaliya 2009).

His wife felt hurt and started looking for a job, which she found and coped well with, but

at home – the same role
for centuries the same
she understood

that her victory should have been at home
 the rest of the world has no significance
 (...)

 She put all her talents
 in potatoes with vegetables
 mixed all her creativity into curd with vegetables
 created a whole era
 from tastes and smells
 but her husband never said thank you. (Kaliya 2009)

Mamta Kaliya herself did not 'put all her talents' in the kitchen; however, perhaps it is only a woman who can present cooking and serving scenes in so few words and in such a way that they come to life in the reader's mind's eye. This is perhaps because every Indian woman has had to confront this role at some time in her life.

The motif of food is frequent in the short stories dealing with Indians living abroad. Vegetarianism is naturally a frequent stumbling block in their lives and relations.

In the short (possibly autobiographical) story *Five days* by **Sunita Jain** (Jain 2007), the first person narrator visits her son who is living in the United States, married to a fully Americanized Indian girl. The daughter-in-law insists on eating meat daily and is not ready to give it up even for a few days. The mother-in-law feels sick when she sees and smells raw meat. Just three pages later, a whole paragraph follows which depicts the mother-in-law preparing Indian pancakes for the family. All the ingredients are mentioned. The paragraph can whet the reader's appetite for these pancakes, but he might lose his appetite after the mentions of red meat. The two women have a number of other problems, but the writer chooses food for the most detailed discussion.

In the literature written by women we can find really vivid pictures of preparing, serving, and consuming meals. After all, cooking and serving food rests on their shoulders for some time at least, and, indeed, one's own experience is the best inspiration. Women writers are not so deadly serious about cooking and serving; instead of layering gloom upon gloom because of their husbands' or anybody else's disgruntled taste buds, they find it better to make use of a touch of teasing, taunting, irony. They do not treat the gloomy atmosphere that is somehow connected with food as a tragedy. Life is just like that and one cannot expect any thanks. It is far better to refuse the role of an obedient unpaid servant.

How marvellous it would be if more non-writing Indian women followed their examples!

References

- Amarkant 1966 = Amarkant, *Dopahar k̄a bhojan* (1956), in *Kahānī aur kahānī*, ed. by Indranath Madan, Rajkamal Prakasan, Dilli 1966, 35-41.
- Garg 1986 = Mridula Garg, *Vitr̄ṣṇā*, in Id., *Urf saim*, Rajkamal Prakasan, Nai Dilli 1986, 63-74.
- Jain 2007 = Sunita Jain, *Pāṃc din*, in Id., *Yā isliye*, Remadhav, Noida 2007, 21-32.
- Kaliya 2009 = Mamta Kaliya, *Kasbe se āyī khāṃṭī*, «Garbhanāl» 32 (2009), 40.
- Kamleshwar 1966 = Kamleshwar, *Ātmā kī āvāz*, in Id., *Rājā Nirbaṃsiyā* (1957), Kalkatta–Dilli 1966, 46-57.
- Saxena 2010 = Pushpa Saxena, *Dūriyom̄ k̄a sāth*, «Garbhanāl» 44 (2010), 54-60.