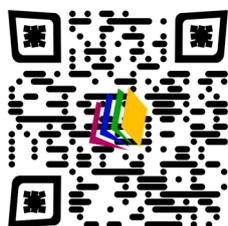




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Gendering of Food Culture

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ABSTRACT:

In the following work “Gendering of Food Culture” gender, food and culture are the main themes, which are interconnected. I have tried to look at the multiple of sources in order to get a better sense of gender, food and cultural history. Generally, gender history is limited to the study of male and female. But it has a broad perspective. Gender is related with culture, custom and even with food also. This paper revolves around the food culture. Food is a new topic, which became a part of historical and anthropological studies. Food history is very interesting, as lot of things connected to it is revealing. Idea of food history came later, which is something new and interesting. Like a gender history, food history is a modern study. Infact there are variety of ancient and medieval sources, which do mentions about food culture and practices. It’s a stereotypical concept to symbolise women as food. As Caroline Walker Bynum said that the religious significance of food changed its meaning under medieval women. I have tried to trace the concept of feasting and fasting. Besides, I have also tried to look at the method of food practice in the west and the east.

KEY WORDS: Food Culture, History, Gender, Fasting, Feasting, Feminism

Food history is a really, very new topic of research. Earlier, historians were least bothered about this arena, but now historians are looking to it also as a part of research, coming with new ideas, like the system of kitchen and food, as a part of cultural, social genealogies etc. Food is also a personal place of interest. In order to know about food history, about its practices, food as anthropological study, one needs to look at the chronology, genealogy and practices, in order to know it in a proper way. One needs to look at multiple sources, in order to get a better sense of food history. One need not to do just cherry picking portion of food that just talk, because that will not give clear idea, as those are just nugget of portion without any context. We need to look at the nature, patron and audience of source before doing any research. Eating is not simple act of consuming something or satisfying one’s

hunger. Food historian and food based anthropologist are dealing with certain question: **“why people eat food? What we eat?”** Food is not separate from politics of the period, not separate from the social history of the period. You can't talk about these categories and question it in isolation. These are inter-connected categories. In some aspect everything is cultural. Cultural history is very important aspect of history. It is like a starting point. All of the stuff related with cultural history is relevant. According to Barani, food is not naturally created. It is actually created by people. It is socially constructed. Food became a major bio-cultural activity. Anthropological point of view holds the question on culinary, domesticity, gender, and dietary practices. Baburnama, Akbarnama and Humayun-nama are the major text of Mughal time to reconstruct whole idea around food discourse in the context of India.

Scholars like Liza Balabanlilar⁷³, Suraiya Faroqi⁷⁴ and Norbert Elias⁷⁵ talked on gastronomy. Liza Balabanlilar deals extensively with dietary food. She said that gastronomy like eating, sharing and displaying of food played crucial role in creation of Mughal Empire. Question of food is strongly related with, kind of food which created different endeavour. Construction of food is fundamental argument. Food should not be considered as a matter of just eating, but as a matter of power. Food is one of the major instruments, creation of different kind of hierarchy like- moral and sexual hierarchy, through dietary practices. Food became major instruments for power according to Ruby Lal and Liza Balabanlilar. Besides, food also became binding factor of love. Exotic food basically became expression of sexuality and love. Historian of classical time, Suraiya Faroqi, is the first to trace the relationship between gastronomy and

politics. She said that food was used as major power of legitimation by Ottomans. They used power of food as an act of charity (sadqa). Alms became important political object. They politicised whole idea of **“Sadqa”** Sharing of food as charity and sadqa became major site for continuous legitimacy. Norbert Elias, talks about creating the feel of historical gastronomy and whole new historiography was based on daily dietary interaction. Street food was a major binder in pre-colonial French city- salon, public sphere, market and coffee house. For Elias, it is the idea about food, new senses about eating created capitalist modernity. People get new sense of body along with new sense of food, new sense of individuality that created different kind of modernity. New sense around body and food not only created new political senses but also new kind of economic itself. He tries to say Colonial French Society is a city which changed dietetic behaviour of food. City urban elite created new behaviour around food. Elias actually say it the city elite who, created new sensibilities around fashion and new body market.

According to Roland Barthes⁷⁶ (social scientist, French essayist), one of the major decisive work, address questions on consuming food, who decides the characteristic and consumption or human touch. Basically, he talks of human touch, which gives different kind of significance. Inflection of human sensibility, gives different meaning and different significance as a food matter. He further describes human as a cultural category and they give meaning to an object. During 16th century, any food item did not have fixed meaning. It changed through time, region and space. Any food item is different at under different human hand and under different cultural spaces. Similarly, in the 16th and 17th century, city elites of France created new table manner, new prohibition at dining table, example-

‘poking of nose, eating with noise, tooth picking at the dining table was prohibited completely.’ New body behaviour was emerging. New idea about pollution, social disturbance, new bodily restrictions, bodily aesthesism, engagement with other cosmos political civilization like Iran, Persian etc were emerging. Another scholar tried to connect question of pollution. Mary Douglas⁷⁷ (social anthropologist), work on question of food. She talks about how certain food act as social anchor. She also says that, food items are considered to be danger. In Europe, how food created social anchor and social conference, violence and danger. She introduced in anthropology, food as a matter of emotion, friendship, intimacy instrument etc. With the emergence of new capitalism or early capitalism, the relation with new regional elite of Europe and non-Europe, was also emerging. One of the major things that happened in European society was body contact. Fooding, eating became deep communitarian courtly affair in India in 16th and 17th and became individualistic in Europe. Emergence of new social shame, embarrassment is not only from a kind of political situation but also economic situation. One of the major differences is about court dietetic behaviour, replaced by family regional behaviour (private behaviour). Public feasting became a part of new culture. Everything was a public affair, which later changed to private affair. Privacy was a feature in capitalist structure. In modern time people have lots of fear- fear about state, power, religion, caste and friends. There are lot of permissiveness.

In the food history, scholars and anthropologist, works on question of gender. Eating in the European Middle Ages was stereotyped as a male activity and food preparation as a female one. It was not only in European context but also in rest

part of world. Till now this stereotypical ideology of categorisation of food as women arena is still revolving, especially in the east. This traditional association of women with food preparation rather than food consumption helps us to understand certain aspects of the religious significance of food. Food is particularly women controlled resource. In the majority of cultures, food preparation is women role. Cooking was so much a woman’s role that it appeared to man not merely arcane but threatening. There are many reasons for the association of women and food preparation that is found in so many cultures. One reason seems to be the biological analogy. Through lactation women is the essential food provider and preparer. Food resources are controlled by female and an economic resource by male, as male is a bread earner. Those times, in which charity and service were deeply valued, women found food the easiest thing to give away. Both, women’s food distribution and their fasting appeared culturally acceptable forms of asceticism.⁷⁸ Women used food as a major channel to create major subculture, create a homo social space in detail. In Europe women used feast as a major expression of their self. “Act of cooking as an act of emancipation”- it was during pre-colonial time under male homosexual world, where space for women, were extremely restricted. Caroline Walker Bynum⁷⁹ traced the religious significance of food to medieval women, which changed the meaning. Bynum, said women considered the food as chance to get expression. They utilised this activity. Female in Christian monastery, expressed through different dietetic logic. They were in a position of hosting food in public, as a social worship. Accounts of certain women like Beatrice of Nazareth, Elizabeth of Hungary, Angela of Foligno, Lidwina of Schiedem, Dorothy of Montau and Catherine of Siena suggested that they are pieces of literature, whose drama and pathos are

woven around the central motif of bodies as food.⁸⁰ Food is important to women religiously because it is important socially. There are many reasons for the association of women and food that is found in so many cultures. Infact in our own house we do experience this kind of culture. Women from early age are told to follow this kind of culture, because their mind has been set up in this way only. In order to be perfect one need to know the value of kitchen especially girls, as male is a bread earner and female is a house maker. If a woman doesn't know how to cook food then it's a shame for a society, even if she is good in studies and successful. Cooking is associated with marriage, especially for a woman. If she from the early age became perfect in household and kitchen stuff, that means she is mature enough to marry, because for girls it's compulsory to be a food maker. In order to be a chaste woman, a girl needs to be perfect in preparing food even if the husband is abusive. Similarly, Virginia Woolfsays⁸¹ that during Victorian time girls from her early child was trained to be a perfect wife, like she used to get training in the kitchen works, cooking, cleaning, maintaining room and only education she used to get was of religious and value education, as education was not meant for a girl at that time. So, before teaching any girl how to be perfect in kitchen world, as kitchen in traditional society considered to be female arena or department, one should know that **"KITCHEN BELONGS TO MASCULINE ORIGINE AND NOT FEMININE"**. The following quotes denote the saying in local language in day to day life in the eastern world, India- like "kitchen ketna bada hai", kitchen bada hi acha hota hai"- so here one can make out that kitchen term is masculine. Even, we find lots of male chef, working in a restaurant, as we can say this to be part of capitalist world. Even, professional kitchens are still male dominated. We, find gender gap in cooking industry, as the industry

still recognises more male chefs. But, in personal space, cooking is mandatory for a woman; even if male is expert in cooking. Even, if a woman is industrious, she has to prove herself to be best in kitchen, no matter if she is better in earning than her male counterpart. In, rural areas I have heard from people, infact my own male friend saying, that male member working in a kitchen is considered to be a shameful act. But, I feel ridiculous that those who hate doing kitchen stuff when they started staying away from a family; they developed the habit of cooking.

Caroline Walker Bynum⁸² changed the meaning; she says Mughal women used kitchen and food as major expression of power. Here, I want to critique her that this concept which she has used for women as 'symbol of food and kitchen and food as major expression of power', which I think it's totally stereotypical concept. Why, women should only be considered powerful in this kitchen and food sector, she can be powerful anywhere. There are many women who had proved them to be powerful both inside and outside the house, like- Joan of Arc, Rani Laxmi Bai, Razia Sultan, etc. Infact, in tribal society concept is totally different, as everyone is equal. Both male and female perform their duty in a group. There is a concept of sharing, both divide their work, whether it earning, cooking etc, they do things together. In the tribal society, women are far more superior as compared to men. If a woman is powerful her character and status remains the same. According to Eleanor Cocks, it is biased within hunting gathering community that men do not hunt alone. Women also hunt and men also forage. She says among Nasta group in Canada if a girl had talent as a hunter, then she would hailed as a warrior, she would not dismiss as queer or strange.

Now, from early modern period things are

changing. Food and eating that was the problem to women has become a cliché. New type of concept has emerged that is the concept or I can say culture of extreme dieting called “**ANOREXIA NERVOSA**”.⁸³ This type of practices is prescribed to a girl only due to media and society habit of body shaming. Media urges women to control body size, as they associate thinness to beauty, which is a sour reality and actually it is associated to weakness. This idea and concept has been also established by male-oriented society, as they don't want women to be powerful. They wanted women to be weak. Here, my point is that generally, dieting is prescribe to the girl only, as she has to prepare herself for a future chaste wife, and for a male, his earning and success matter, so that they can be dominating. Through comparison and dominance men do create a mental pressure on a woman, due to which she feels herself to be unstable and mentally weak. Society is generally working according to male member. In the name of beauty, attractive physicality, girls are manipulated; a grave fear has been set up in their mind. This will make them weak and a puppet at the hand of male oriented capitalist society.

Saints, nuns, Sufis- were actually inverting whole social logic to entertain different kind of emotion. Feast became big mechanism. Mughal period we find another kind of stuff. Babur period was a camp empire. Women were not given separate quarters to eat, cook because situation was different. But in later part of Mughal empire i.e. during Humayun and Akbar, we find different things, like women were segregated. Food became an expression to categorise. Liza Balbanlilar⁸⁴, says Mughal women conducted big feast. Members of the Mughals women introduced feast to express them. They were changing, creating a kind of

silence within the court mughals also created hierarchically sitting arrangement. Hierarchical sitting structure arrangement, the physical emotional intimacy, and distance at dining table these were all structured. Hierarchization of material, behaviour, display, expresses all kinds of power relations. Logistically, physically and emotionally mughal feast was not a simple thing, lot of planning used to happen. There was a continuous engagement, which was highly complicated, not so easy to conduct. They need to have power, money, network, resources, material and proper planning. Marshall Moss⁸⁵ says there was embedded hierarchy, the very act of giving and taking. The invitation, feast and exchanging gift- these whole thing questions of obligation by accepting gift. He also says gift is also about hierarchization and also social differentiation. There are question about hierarchy, inferior thing, dominance, power- related with food. In medieval time philosophy would say emergence of modern public sphere. Dietetic place emerging as a hub of society.

Thus, I would conclude by quoting the words of certain feminist like Gerda Lenersaid⁸⁶ that “sex is biological and gender is societal”. Another feminist Nivedita Menon⁸⁷ said “society is like a nude make-up, in which society pretend to show gender equality but in reality it is not”. Concept of gender has been created by a society. Nivedia Menon says that if a woman is powerful like, Rani Lakshmbai, she was quoted as “khoob ladi mardani woh toh Jhansi wali rani thi”- which is written by a female only. Here “mardani” means, masculine. So, why does a woman, even if she is powerful put under the category of male. Men and women perform equal role and equality is only concise to a book. Image of a woman is a controlled image, due to institution,

society and family, which is consider being a part of cultural product. Women would follow this idea through this as they wanted acceptance in society. Symbol of civilization, accomplishment becomes part of art sensibility, mass culture. The 16th and 17th century, became as a major practice of gendered space. Religion/ piety became major site of expression, a kind of instrument. Food/ charity thing became a major site for this period. Feasting with people, Sufis, noble, women became multi-site for expressing different kind of thing. Feast were organised in order to honour people. Occasion of birth and death became occasion of feast. Food items has become a metaphor- example, salt is increasingly becoming a major moral metaphor for undesirable intimacy, whereas sugar emerging social metaphor for loyalty, honesty and intimacy. Political space created conquest through food, taste and importing of taste. The idea that woman is a symbol of food as their duty is to provide and prepare food and man is a bread earner, has not been changed, till now. Aristotle said that “women should eat less and men should eat more”, as men are bread earner. I am totally against this Aristotelian theory, as we all know that a girl requires more food as every month they menstruate, they keep a child in a womb, which is really a difficult job for a woman, and they reproduce and inspite of this instead of complaining we work hard and provide food for families. But, I think not only men should be blamed, women should also be blamed, as women are the carrier of patriarchy. Similarly, Gerda Lerner said that woman is the victim of other women. Instead of teaching a girl to be perfect in kitchen work, in order to prepare and give training to be a chaste housewife and to compromise by enduring the mental and physical pain at the hand of husband, they (mother), should teach a boy, instead of ignoring and remaining silent, how to be a chaste husband and perfect in

household and kitchen world, which I don't think it's a shame at all. If God has made both male and female equal, so there should be equality everywhere. Symbol of food should not be confined only to a woman, but include man also. Lastly, I would like to add concluding remark that instead of considering food and kitchen to be symbol of women and neglecting is a sin; instead we should consider the household work of women to be a job. We need to abolish the tradition notion of chaste wife. From feminist point of view one need to categorise the role of women to be a job, as we consider men's earning of a bread to be a job. Both men and women need to change this kind of conservative- patriarchal- Victorian ideology, and try to be self-dependent.

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