

Edible Hierarchies: Culinary Taboos and Domestic Power in Global Women's Fiction

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V. Deepika

Research Scholar, Department of English
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women Sivakasi
Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.



<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-9468-446X>

J. Sobhana Devi

Associate Professor, Department of English
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women Sivakasi
Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

This article examines how cuisine functions as a tool of gendered conflict, cultural identity, and social control through a qualitative comparative literary analysis of four contemporary novels by women writers: The Edible Woman by Margaret Atwood, Serving Crazy with Curry by Amulya Malladi, Recipe for a Perfect Wife by Karma Brown, and The Abundance by Amit Majmudar. The research employs close textual analysis, drawing on symbolic anthropology and feminist food studies, to investigate how surrounding food acts, such as cooking, serving, refusing, and sharing recipes, embody power relations in both domestic and diasporic contexts. Methodologically, analysis (1) identifies and classifies recurring culinary motifs; (2) examines characters' behaviours related to food; and (3) traces the symbolic functions of these acts across cultural environments. The findings indicate that food operates both as a means of patriarchal enforcement and as a vehicle for resistance: characters reclaim agency through subversive culinary practices, challenge gendered expectations, and transmit intergenerational knowledge. Thus, the kitchen emerges as a contested site where gender, memory, and identity are actively negotiated.

Keywords: Culinary Literature, Food Politics, Gender and Domesticity, Symbolic Purity, Diaspora and Identity, Social Hierarchies

Food has long been used in the literature for both sustenance and as a powerful symbolic tool that reflects and distorts societal institutions. In women's literature, food is depicted as a real metaphor that is intertwined with female identity, domestic work, and defiance of patriarchal dominance, as well as its material presence. Through academics such as Avakian and Haber, food imagery can be used to challenge the notion of social construction and policing of women's lives, both publicly and within the home. The depth of meanings for metaphors such as cooking, eating, or refusing to eat, termed "layers of meaning" by Sceats, permits a wider exploration of subjectivity, control, and autonomy.

Women's connection with food has historically dictated their roles as caretakers and homemakers. Specifically, cooking has limited gender roles by forcing conformity in performing drudgery and low-paid household chores. However, feminist authors have also envisioned the kitchen as a subversive space where gender roles are both enacted and subverted. Neuhaus argues that food is a site of resistance against coercive identity, both conforming and resisting (Neuhaus, 83).

Similarly, bell hooks also emphasise how such seemingly mundane practices can be representative of larger acts of resistance to systemic injustices (Hooks 37).

This study's qualitative, comparative literary analysis focuses on four contemporary novels: *The Edible Woman* by Margaret Atwood, *Serving Crazy with Curry* by Amulya Malladi, *Recipe for a Perfect Wife* by Karma Brown, and *The Abundance* by Amit Majmudar.

When choosing these novels, the following three criteria were paramount: (1) the employment of food as a plot device, (2) how they address gendered domesticity, and (3) how they depict varied cultural and diasporic settings. The analysis uses close reading methods to examine how food-related actions such as cooking, fasting, serving, and sharing recipes operate in each story in an effort to reveal power dynamics, silence, and identity negotiation.

The discussion draws on influential feminist theories of food, including Adams's work on *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, which examines the intersection between the consumption of meat and the objectification of women and patriarchy; Shapiro's work on the home kitchen as an expression of care and confinement; and Counihan's anthropological approach to food as a means of exerting gender norms. Apart from these studies, Mary Douglas's idea of symbolic purity is useful in interpreting the cultural politics that exist around food taboos and culinary cultures.

Due to this strategy, this research emphasises the importance of culinary culture as a site for gendered complicity and resistance. It also examines how purity codes and cuisine rules, which are generally considered sacrosanct or value-neutral, reinforce inequality along caste, class, and gender lines. Even though feminist literary studies focus intensively on domestic life and embodiment, the significance of symbolic hygiene and food taboos, particularly in the comparative and transnational contexts of literature, remains poorly understood. This study bridges this gap by examining how cuisine has become a vehicle for conveying women's agency across cultural boundaries.

Aside from being a primal necessity, food has been demonstrated by scholars such as Roland

Barthes, Sidney Mintz, and Arjun Appadurai as a semiotic system and site of political contest. Mintz's history of sugar uncovers the colonising economy of colonialism, whereas Appadurai's study of culinary traditions, particularly in South Asian societies, demonstrates how they embody hierarchy, discipline, and gendered domination. Food for Barthes is a symbolic language that communicates the beliefs and standards of society.

Mary Douglas's symbolic anthropology, particularly in *Purity and Danger*, provides the foundation for this work through her demonstration of how food laws express deeper concerns over pollution and identity. Feminist scholars broadened these concepts through food paradigms. Adams discusses the intersection of gender and meat politics (*The Sexual Politics of Meat* 67); Shapiro considers past assumptions about women's nutrition and decency (*Perfection Salad* 88); and Counihan investigates the role of food and body politics in reinforcing gender roles (*The Anthropology of Food and Body* 102).

Although plenty of research has been conducted, much of it remains limited to specific national or regional contexts. Cross-cultural literary research has hardly explored how dietary restrictions, cleaning, and domestic work serve as symbolic instruments in feminist novels across different cultures. This research seeks to fill that space by juxtaposing four Western and South Asian diasporic novels.

Utilising a qualitative comparative literary approach that draws on feminist literary theory and symbolic anthropology, this research examines the symbolic and political functions of food in women's literature. The four novels at the centre of this research are Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Karma Brown's *Recipe for a Perfect Wife*, Amit Majmudar's *The Abundance*, and Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*. These novels were selected for their varied cultural representations of gendered domesticity and repeated employment of food as a literary device. These novels make it easier to examine how food traditions and domestic rituals are employed to express identity, authority, and resistance in South Asian and Western diasporic contexts.

This research draws on three broad research questions: (1) In food and food taboo, how do women writers subvert or reinforce domestic hierarchies? (2) How do symbolic practices like cooking, eating, and recipe sharing shape gendered subjectivity and resistance? (3) In feminist literature, is food an agent of agency or control and are there thematic convergences across cultures?

Methodology

The investigation utilizes qualitative comparative literary analysis to analyze the symbolic role of food in four novels of the contemporary world: *The Edible Woman* by Margaret Atwood, *Serving Crazy with Curry* by Amulya Malladi, *Recipe for a Perfect Wife* by Karma Brown, and *The Abundance* by Amit Majmudar. The choice of these books is informed by three principal criteria: (1) the dominant use of food as a narrative or symbolic trope; (2) a female-authored account addressing gender and domesticity; and (3) multiculturalism, most specifically diasporic and intergenerational struggles. The novels exist across North American and South Asian diasporic landscapes, opening up a cross-cultural examination of gender, identity, and power, as realised through culinary discourses.

The study proceeds in three stages.

Identification and Classification: Each novel was closely read to identify recurring food-related motifs and acts (e.g. cooking, eating, refusing, sharing, and innovating). These acts were then categorised according to their narrative function (e.g. resistance, compliance, trauma response, and cultural transmission).

Textual and Character-based Analysis: This research examines how protagonists and supporting characters interact with food-related acts. These interactions have been studied in relation to their emotional, psychological, and political implications, especially regarding gender norms, silence, agency, and rebellion.

Comparative Cross-Cultural Mapping: After individual analysis, the texts are compared along shared thematic lines, such as intergenerational conflict, diasporic dislocation, and domestic performance. This comparative stage applies concepts from symbolic anthropology and feminist food studies to trace how culinary metaphors function differently in cultural and historical contexts.

The cross-cultural paradigm highlights how food functions as both a culture-specific and universally evocative instrument of negotiation. In diasporic fiction (Malladi and Majmudar), food acts as a vehicle between inherited customs and individual subjectivity, whereas in North American contexts (Atwood and Brown), it frequently acts as a vehicle for foreclosing normative domestic scripts. Symbolic anthropology (for example Lévi-Strauss and Douglas) and feminist theorists of domesticity (e.g. hooks and Counihan) shape the interpretive framework.

This approach enables the study to illustrate that food is not only a domestic theme but also a politicised symbol capable of upholding tradition as well as facilitating subversion. By organising the analysis in such a manner, the research ensures that cross-cultural comparison is not anecdotal, but based upon clearly specified categories of practice, resistance, and narrative transformation.

Even though this qualitative comparative approach allows for in-depth interpretive engagement with texts from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is not without limitations. Like all interpretative literary methods, reading is necessarily conditioned by the researcher's own subjectivity and the theoretical lenses selected—feminist food studies and symbolic anthropology—which potentially close down alternative interpretive potentialities (e.g. psychoanalytic or postcolonial economics). As this research is interested in the symbolic and metaphorical aspects of food, the actual practical and socioeconomic processes of food availability or production are also outside its considerations.

Moreover, the four English-language novels by women authors, although representative of a mix of cultures, are nevertheless located in North America's and South Asia's diasporic communities, which restricts the purview of the study. Therefore, the results may not be fully applicable to literature in languages other than English, or literary cultures from around the world. To guarantee that comparative analysis is comprehensive and manageable without losing the focus on gendered food symbolism within contemporary literature, these restrictions were deliberately established.

Textual Analysis

The ensuing paragraphs discuss how food is symbolically used in each novel to represent gendered power, agency, and cultural identity. In accordance with this methodology, each work is scrutinised through major culinary motifs, the attitudes of the characters toward food, and how these practices become tools of resistance or submission in particular cultural contexts.

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

In Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, food serves as a primary metaphor for the psychological breakdown and defiance of gendered domesticity. Marian, the heroine, increasingly develops a distaste for foods such as meat and eggs—symbols conventionally linked with femininity, nurturing, and fertility. This distaste mirrors her increasing repudiation of the domestic work.

A turning point is reached when Marian orders a woman-shaped cake and presents it to her fiancé, performing her internalised fear of being “consumed” by patriarchal norms. When she subsequently devours herself, Marian symbolically retakes possession of her body and decisions. Atwood reconfigures food refusal and consumption as a feminist critique of domestic commodification, gender performance, and symbolic chastity. Food in this narrative is not passive nourishment, but an active metaphor for autonomy and resistance.

Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*

In Malladi's novel, food operates at the intersection of trauma, silence, and cultural hybridity in the South Asian diaspora. Devi, the protagonist, attempts suicide and retreats into muteness, communicating only through food. Her culinary creations, such as the blueberry chutney and curried lasagna, symbolically represent a fusion of American individualism and Indian tradition, mirroring her divided identity. Devi's food acts of culinary creativity undermine Saroj's strict adherence to traditional kitchen roles, exposing generational and cultural conflicts inherent in diasporic homes. The kitchen is the site of confinement and transfusion. Food in this space is not simply therapy or nostalgia; it is the deliberate language of Devi's resistance, an

act of self-definition beyond conventional verbal or filial roles.

Karma Brown's *Recipe for a Perfect Wife*

Brown's novel employs a two-way narrative to consider how home expectations, particularly about food, are transmitted—and subverted—between generations. The contrast between Nellie, a 1950s homemaker, and Alice, a contemporary woman finding out about Nellie through her annotated cookbook, highlights how food inscribes home ideology. Nellie's cookbook, full of marginal notes and quiet subversions, is a feminist archive. Although recipes appear to confirm gender roles, the annotations reveal silent resistance to domestic confinement and spousal domination. Alice's process of deciphering this legacy discloses how culinary practice has the potential to be a vehicle for carrying historical resistance. Brown transformed the kitchen from a site of servitude into a repository of feminist memory, agency, and survival.

Amit Majmudar's *The Abundance*

Majmudar's work centres less on open revolts and more on the cultural and emotional nuances of intergenerational relationships within a family of Indian-American immigrants. The mother-protagonist, who is terminally ill, employs cooking as a vehicle to return to distant children. In this case, food is a less rebellious tool than a vehicle for cultural preservation and emotional healing. Ingredients such as turmeric and tamarind become emblems of endurance, continuity, and identity. Cooking classes, especially with her daughter, are infused with unspoken love and regret, belying the tension between cultural transmission and individual agency. In contrast to the more combative food politics in other works, *The Abundance* offers a rich description of the kitchen as a site for both authority and nurturing. Food becomes a means to grieve, instruct, and heal.

Throughout these four books, food is a highly symbolic landscape, one in which conformity and defiance, convention and invention, care and domination cross over, and entwine. At the same time, Atwood and Brown critique normative gender constructions in North American domesticity, and

Malladi and Majmudar highlight food's power in mediating diasporic identity and intergenerational tension. Residing across diverse cultures, however, is a consistent concern: Food is never mere nourishment. It is a narrative tool that inscribes to power, memory, and subjectivity.

In these four selected novels, food is not solely a housework or femininity symbol; instead, it is a rich literary tool that drives character development, performs social critique, and enables emotional disclosure. In domestic spheres that have long been linked to servitude, food becomes a platform through which women heal from trauma, resist patriarchal structures, and rebuild their subjectivities. Actions such as culinary creativity, recipe annotation, ritual fasting, and intergenerational pedagogy redefine food as a symbolic and narrative resource through which gendered experiences are inscribed and challenged.

These factors jointly complicate the assumption that food is a benign or purely nurturing force in women's lives. Rather, caregiving and consumption are only described as emotionally heightened and morally complex activities, where nourishing can coexist with domination and feeding is not dissociated from surveillance. The food in these stories works as a symbolic spectrum—between oppression and freedom—upon which characters negotiate agency, belonging, and identity. The cross-temporal and cross-cultural diversity of the chosen works reinforces the thesis that food practice in feminist fiction is an enriching form of symbolic and political discourse.

Throughout these works, food is a multifaceted sign that includes care and coercion, tradition and resistance, and sustenance and shortages. Using food-related practices, such as cooking, refusing, preserving, and sharing, women negotiate and sometimes resist gendered constraints and cultural orthodoxy in diverse cultures and historical settings. Kitchens and tablespaces, once set apart by feminine duty, become sites of critique and transformation. Marian's refusal to be consumed in *The Edible Woman*, Devi's silent resistance through fusion cuisine in *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Nellie's annotated cookbook in *Recipe for a Perfect Wife*, and the pedagogical kitchen of the dying mother in *The Abundance* all demonstrate how food encodes stories of power, resistance, and memory.

This work contributes to the growing body of feminist literature that positions food as a cultural and political site of intervention. James argues that everyday nutrition rituals enable women to reclaim domesticity as an arena of agency (James 375). Nair interprets recipes as resistant forms of documentation, particularly in diasporic narratives (Nair 455), whereas Chung places culinary performance as a space of survival and unspoken resistance within postcolonial women's literature (Chung 120). Collectively, these theorists demonstrate how food writing has increasingly moved from the realm of metaphor to a mode that is both a narrative device and a theoretical model—one that intersects with the themes of trauma, migration, and intergenerational conflict.

This research has established that food in postmodern feminist fiction is not simply an emblem of housework or femininity, but a politically and emotionally intense literary trope. Through qualitative comparative literary analysis of four women-authored novels—*The Edible Woman*, *Serving Crazy with Curry*, *Recipe for a Perfect Wife*, and *The Abundance*—this study indicates that culinary performances express both compliance and resistance with patriarchal norms. Based on symbolic anthropology and feminist food studies, this analysis reveals how cooking, eating, refusing, and recipe-exchange operate as gendered rituals that negotiate power, memory, and identity. Once the site of servitude, the kitchen becomes a site of contest where women claim power, work through trauma, and subvert cultural orthodoxy, particularly in diasporic and intergenerational spaces.

By positioning food as both an oppressive framework and a place of freedom, this research recontextualises domestic practice as political discourse. Culinary tropes have become avenues by which women reclaim their histories, resist erasure, and forge new selfhoods. In so doing, this research not only highlights the symbolic richness of food in women's contemporary fiction, but also broadens the comparative feminist paradigm for reading domestic rituals as both oppressive and resistant acts within cultures.

Although this research focuses on a specific theory-guided analysis of four recent books, it deliberately confines its scope to English-language

writing by women in diasporic situations in North America and South Asia. In doing so, the framework enables depth, but limits the scope of the research to other literary traditions that are either cultural or linguistic. The work also highlights the symbolic and narrative applications of food without paying attention to important material or socioeconomic variables that might assist in placing food politics and production in the context.

This research can be extended in the future through the analysis of texts in other linguistic areas or through narratives centred on culinary themes written by men or authors who are not members of the diaspora. Further interdisciplinary work that considers environmental, economic, or postcolonial ecocritics may also provide us with a better sense of how food functions as a lived practice affected by world power and access patterns, as well as a metaphor for identity.

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Author Details:

V.Deepika, Research Scholar, Department of English, The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women, Sivakasi Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.
Email ID: deepikavairam7@gmail.com

Dr.J.Sobhana Devi, Associate Professor, Department of English, The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women, Sivakasi Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.
Email ID: sobhanadevi-eng@sfrcollege.edu.in