

## **A Study of Anita Nair's *Alphabet Soup For Lovers*: A Typical Food Narrative**

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There are innumerable assortments of impressing the reading public but certainly the narrative style of Anita Nair is worth mentioning. Being a female author of contemporary Indian English arena it is her duty to explore new ways of representing Indianness in the mind of the readers around the world. Indeed it is on the whole prolific in the depiction of ethnic Tamil cultural practices throughout the narrative. The authenticity of the representation is quite vivid in its narrative.

The title itself is striking with its just right amalgamation of an ever new combination of kitchen with a typical love story. If the narrative style might not be the new-fangled experimental it might be easily referred as a mere typical love story which crosses the border of marital relationship. It's not just about a soup for lovers but alphabet soup for lovers which in fact the basics of literacy. The servant of the house wants to learn the English alphabet not by mechanical oral practice of A for Apple B for Ball etc; instead she searches for words of her native language taken directly from kitchen to fit in to the English alphabet.

Even though there may be many exceptions, usually it is of no doubt that women are bound to the four walls of domesticity in fact more bound to the four walls of kitchen. While considering the condition of women in India they are considered to do the household chores which certainly include preparing food and the all round cleaning of the premises. If the house is capable of luxuries of life then the women in that house might not be working in the kitchen but certainly there may be cook to do the duties. So being a narrator of the novel a cook can have more to explicate in the novel but the way of narration is quite different from the typical traditional norms. What made the perspectives of a cook regarding the life patterns of existence and how an uneducated but experienced old age woman perceives life is discussed within the narrative.

Here in the novel the narrative is moving along with the thoughts of the made servant of the house Komathi whose perceptions of life is based inclusively on objects in kitchen. It may be vegetables, fruits or a dish. She believed whatever may be the issues in life; something is related with the food we ate. So each emotion could be either nurtured or annihilated using certain eatables in the kitchen. The experimental narration is quite significant because it discloses

everything that happens in the novel under the subtitles like eatables e.i, Arisi Appalam, Badam, Cheppankizhangu, Daangar Chutney, Eeral etc . Each chapter discloses certain fruit, vegetable, any particular ethnic Tamil dish as its title which emphatically talks about the English alphabet which Komathi wants to gain knowledge of .Only a female author like Anita Nair could transport the readers through the kitchen of a strictly Tamil tradition in the hills of Anamalai.

The story begins when the old aged and illiterate servant of the house Komathi wants to learn English alphabet not because of her desire to impress anyone but out of curiosity to learn at least one language in a systematic manner. Being a typical Tamil woman she could not decipher the traditional way of learning English alphabet by strictly following A for Apple and B for Ball. Instead she prefers the letters consequent to each object in her native Tamil language which could be easy to retrieve in her memory due to familiarity. That leads to an interesting pattern of narrative where each chapter begins with a short description of native food items of Tamilnadu and a successive story of a family that lives in the Anamalai hills. That will certainly add flavors to the whole process of reading a novel.

Komathi, one of the leading characters of the novel highlights the importance of food in the relationship among people in a society. Whatever she thought in the novel is thought in terms of the foods she familiar with. She believes food is the best remedy for many problems that human beings are suffering from.

“That’s what the ancients have taught us. If your leg aches, have mutton soup. If you have to build your constitution, eat mutton liver. When you build your constitution, you build your gumption. That is the truth. (P 44)

She estimates all people in terms of food items for example in a chapter she identified people in terms of Cheppankizhangu.

“People are the same. The hairy, knobbly ones and the plump rounded ones. Not their bodies but their souls. Take Leema. She pretends to be a hairy knobbly person when what she is , is plump and rounded. There is a huge reservoir of feelings within her, which she keeps hidden behind that stiff exterior” (P 28).

Indeed certain food items will remind us of people who are close to our heart. Daangar Chutney is an instance which made Komathi to talk about her ex- lover who was a Marathi. Daangar Chutney is a favorite dish of her ex -lover Raghavendra Rao, a Maratha man. One’s place could be easily understood from what he likes to eat. This is very clear when a Maratha man asks Komathi to prepare Daangar Chutney, a Marathi dish. He is the person who taught her how to make it. She believed that Food is actually a tool to the heart of another individual which she usually practiced in her life. Later Lena too comprehends that truth which made her to prepare Filter Kaafi with her own hands to give Shoola Pani, an actor from film industry with whom she later falls in love with. In a way it became instrumental in their relationship which soon turned into a kind of true love.

Indeed certain food items in a kitchen determines the condition of the whole house especially its financial background, cultural roots, traditional heritage etc. Badam is not everyone’s nut as the novel suggests. Only people who are wealthy could afford such a

luxury others would prefer nuts like cashews or muntiri parpu etc. Komathi perceives sometimes we the people had a tendency to value things and people merely because they are inaccessible. She explains the point by taking the example of Badam which is seen as the superior nut. Being a superior nut to cashews or munthiri parpu, it is not so readily available for most of the people. It is really a luxury in the kitchen which may not be purchased by Komathi as easily as Leema. In the same chapter there are instances in which a film actor named Shoola pani is treated just like the Badam which is superior to other people only because he is not too available but a rare figure from the cinema world.

The hierarchy of power could be seen even in the food we eat. For the low class the food items they eat are quite different from the higher class people. Godumai or Atta is the frequently used food item by the family whereas Komathi likes rice. That too is instrumental in highlighting the difference between the upper class owners of the house and the poor servant of the house. The food they purchased for the whole family is a clear substantiation of how they express the politics of food. For the poor uneducated servant they offered a bin of ration shop rice which clearly provides the servant a consolation. Instead they kept big bins of atta and a small bin of rice which emphatically stress their preference.

“ I ate rice three times a day. Freshly cooked rice for lunch, the leftovers for dinner, and what was left of that, I would pour water into and keep it for the morning. I would add some butter milk, a silt green chilli, and have it for breakfast. It was the start I needed to put in a good day’s work”. (P 59)

The above lines of Komathi vividly portray the poverty stricken early childhood experiences which made her more comfortable with what she referred as Arisi means Rice in English.

In general people had a tendency to stick on to their roots even if they are far away from the homeland. The landscape, culture, society, language, religion, food, life style etc will certainly have a close association within their psyche. The distance from our roots will naturally make us to search for similar conditions in the alien world. The one thing naturally people favors the most is their homely food. Food can make them even more contented in a foreign land. The people stick on to their roots through food which is evident from the novel where Raghavendra Rao asks for Daangal Chutney a typical Maratha food from Komathi, a Tamilian.

“It reminds me too much of Raghavendra Rao, the man who taught me how to make it. it isn’t really one of our dishes, it’s a marathi one. And he was a Maratha. ‘In Tanjavur, there’s a large number of us, and we still eat like our forefathers did’” ( P 35)

The narrative discloses how Komathi and Her Rayar had a relationship with each other and what all memories are strong in her mind in her old age about their youthful days. Certain food items are associated with their relationship and the memory of that items are still fresh in her mind from which she can never get an escape. Varak( gold adornment on peda brought from Bombay) , Zigarthanda( a drink made out of milk and the gum of Badam) etc are certain dishes they had experienced together in their younger days. Their relationship came to an end when she made Rava Kesari which later culminated in a strong squabble between them. So food is proved quite fatal in their relationship.

KK, the husband of Lena had a habit of eating toasts and porridge for breakfast food which incurs sharp comments from his wife. Then KK confesses himself as a creature of habit. And the habit is a product of continuous twelve years of boarding school life from which he can't escape even after long sixteen years of married life. So certain food items are part of one's habit which grows as the people grow old.

The narrative provides certain beliefs regarding curry leaves or Karuvepillai, the colloquial term Anita Nair used. The Karuvepillai is treated as a tool to discuss issues of abomination based on menstruation. The typical social structure emphasizes the women in the menstrual cycle were impure. How the primitive society and uneducated people perceive a mere biological process as an anathema to the women is depicted within the narrative.

“But karuvepillai is not a woman's friend. If we touch it on the days we bleed, it will dry up. It will not dry up if a man who beats his wife, starves his mother or rapes a two year old girl goes near it. That is how karuvepillai is.( P 90)

The above lines are scathing attack on the society where the bleeding women were treated as impure and the cruel criminals were depicted as more pure than them.

Laddoo is symbolizing something of a celebration. If happiness is there, laddoo must be brought and shared among people. This is where Komathi learns her letter 'L'. When KK brought a box of laddoos komathi could not decipher what the occasion. But KK explains there must not be any reasons for buying things like that. The two different perspectives of viewing a mere food item are narrated here. Komathi being a traditional Tamil woman believed that people will lose their ability to cook as they age. That's why she considers her laddoo making days were over. During her younger days he is a master cook in laddoos but nowadays she is afraid of it.

Murungakai a frequently used vegetable is having given numerous attributes by the traditional Tamilians. This vegetable is facilitating sexual energy of the male which attracted many young married women to the nearest Murungakai tree. It's been ages that people believed in this miraculous use of Murungakai. Komathi too believed the same that led her to prepare muringakai sambar when she felt a kind of detachment between Lena and her KK.

Oorkai or the pickle is an unavoidable part of south Indian kitchen which adds completeness to the meal we ate. The narrative discloses the beliefs that are attached with Oorkai among the natives of Tamilnadu. There are many rules that they must obey about making Oorkai. Sunday, Tuesday or Friday is not meant for making Oorkai because it is considered as inauspicious to make it on these days. It must be made before the moon disappears entirely behind the clouds on an Amavasya night. When women are menstruating, the Oorkai must not be touched. Similarly the pickle pot cannot be touched by women after being with a man. These are the points which discloses before the readers by the writer to highlight how the beliefs perceives women and their subordinate position in terms of even food items. Komathi knows all these beliefs but instead of blindly following all these, she understood the meaninglessness of such things and follows none.

Qollu (madrass gram) or the so called Horsegram is treated as horse fodder by the higher class of people represented by Lena but on contrary people like Komathi believed that it would give strength to the body. Traditionally her family especially her Aachi cook Quollu once in very week to make her husband strengthier.

Komathi always thinks in terms food items and at the same time to express something she uses food items as a tool. A cook like her really understood the importance of food items, be it grain or vegetable or meat or fish it has certain functions to perform. For that one must know what one can serve to whom. it is often true that every ingredient has a purpose and a message. A real cook will certainly understand it and became a master craftsman in the field. She could make dishes that will convey her emotions to others. That's why she says:

“I will make rava kesari and when Leema comes for breakfast, I'll serve it to her. My kesari will say, forgive me, better than words can.” ( p 145)

Anita Nair expresses her own reflections regarding many food items that are frequently used among the people of south India throughout the narrative to express what are the possibilities of food items that will trigger the narrative and how far it will be effective in bringing the folkloric beliefs regarding food items in their native country to the wider reading public. Only a female writer could have such a sensibility to hold the narrative like this to enhance the readers to a newer experience.

As a conclusion it must be noted that the narrative is moving along with a list of food items either it may be fruit, vegetable, or dish that make the novel more meaningful. The narrative easily moves through the description of a variety of dishes made by Komathi in accordance with the likes and dislikes of the members of the house. How effectively it describes each dish and the way it prepares is par excellence. The literary creativity and innovative attempts of the author found constructive in the outreach of the novel. Throughout the narrative the author presents the mythical and folkloric concepts regarding the food we ate in a remarkable perspective. Most of the images employed in the novel is taken from kitchen which adds a new perception. Being a woman writer she could easily link a female psyche that is always looking for different food items that expresses her emotions and feelings to the reading public. Indeed the food we ate has more significance to play on our life which explicitly discussed within the narrative.

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