

## **Symbolism through Culinary Preferences: A Study of Shakespeare Plays**

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*Eating is not merely a material pleasure. Eating well gives a spectacular joy to life and contributes immensely to goodwill and happy companionship. It is of great importance to the morale-*

Elsa Schiaparelli

Literature is Culture Specific in Production. The Literariness of the literary text does not restrict to a particular genre, but begins the Interdisciplinary approach to Knowledge. The impact of Culture Studies in the academia is hugely immense with its culinary importance of Food Literature. Food Literature's rudiments were found from the time of the Bards era. As Ben Johnson stated, "Shakespeare was not of an age, but for all times" These words by Johnson stated, the Bard as a transnationalist who explored the symbols of race, identity, and caste from one culture to another in the form of food preferences that fed his plays. Among the different aspects of culture, food plays a vital role.

Food foregrounds a human's race and status to which s/he belongs. In the plays of Shakespear food was employed as a metaphor which recognized the indices of one's position in relation to complex ideas about rank, nationality, and spiritual well being of life. Food was a literary device that operated meanings, feelings, feastings, revelations, and rituals of his rigid characters. This paper aims to show how food was a trope of murder and a meal Disciplined and destroyed hierachiasation, erupted societal evils around the tables of his bloody and blessed characters.

The table signifies an area of drama where we act, react, sing, cling, bite, fight, love or hate before the tempting aid. This aid forms the greatest factor of pleasure or dispute between people with reason or without purpose. The significance of table connote 'thanksgiving' symbolizing joy or sorrow to human roles. As in the context of Shakespear this tempting aid that selected and segregated cultures was 'Food'. The Bard used this technique to branch conflicts, bake major relationships, build love triangles, balm secrets, and break heirachial truths. Many times this technique or aid was an excuse to distract or attract the audiences on stage as characters, and off stage as spectators. Food was prevalent dominantly excavating the Renaissance-era in England, as ripe tragedies and raw comedies.

This idea of William Shakespear exploited the links between food and the hierarchy of cultural norms. He bridged food as a supplement to entertain his characters in their roles, and space friends and enemies leaving them no choice to speak. The symbol of food created

dramatic tension for the playwright and a reckless silence to the awaiting audiences. The paper jots down how food can be a preference, or a symbol of murder or a meal in all his plays. The craziness starts in the play *Macbeth* highlighting the banquet scene. “The new king Macbeth invites everyone who’s anyone in Scotland to his table to determine who’s with him and who’s against him,” but he loses it. Hallucinating, Macbeth sees the murdered Banquo at the table and begins talking to himself. Lady Macbeth pushes him to be a better host, “complaining that his guests might have stayed at home to simply ‘feed’ if he won’t provide the ‘ceremony’ that is a real feast”. But miserably Macbeth fails at hosting a dinner party. And that in turn, “shows us that he is unfit as a king.”

Under research Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* knits the tragic fate or the absurd time of banquet which cheats Macbeth from becoming a ruler. His very culinary preference is defeated by food as a symbol. Banqueting is a joy but here it becomes a dark ritual. The act of ‘breaking bread’ emancipates the resurrection of a horrid truth and the vague pictures of crime in *The Tempest*, and *Titus Andronicus*. The paper proposes a new approach unravelling Shakespearean food metaphors by learning the meaning of the texts in aesthetic era.

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, food starved the shrew to obedience, as Petruchio the bossy bridegroom aimed to tame Katherine, as he yanked her away from getting a bite from her wedding feast. As here, food was a choice to tame the stubborn and arrogant animal to a gentle lamb. Most of Shakespeare’s references on food were friendlier. Especially drawing the Elizabethan shopping list in *The Winter’s Tale* as the clown busily prepares the sheep shearing feast with the addition of sugar, rice, mace, dates, ginger, raisins, and saffron “to colour the warden pies.” These warden pies were open face tarts made with spears, cultivated in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by the Cistercian Abbey monks of Bedfordshire. Here the food delves in to the cultural background or history of the era defining the birth of monks and their existence. This chain of food connects the Buddhist culture to the Elizabethan culture bringing the rise of nationalism.

Specific identification of characterisation was born out where food like jellies or junkets was termed delicacies. They demanded more time but served to flavour the tasteless mouths. Among them was the Spanish paps resembled the conic raspberry pyramids that Sir John Falstaff fed his cuped belly. Food here was a pleasure to the boisterous characters to cheer their cranky moods. Thus every Shakespearean play psychologically creates the self identity of an individual in a family or a social economical class.

Remarkably the representation of food, choice of tasting, reflects the hidden history of any culture or tradition. Eating is both a necessity and a pleasure, as it helps in mutual understanding of human society. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it’s represented in a more complex form, as a drug or a nutrient, depending on the body consumption of one to many. It is described that culinary preference of food literature was introduced by William Shakespeare from the theatre floor. Two theatres Shakespeare’s Globe and The Rose gave birth to the ‘distinction of status’ among the English people. This variation was the rise of rich food which the royal kingsmen ate during the stage of Shakespearean plays in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century theatre goers.

The Class Distinction was a symbol of food which spoke of the counterparts, the leftovers, was the people in the pit who could only afford walnuts, hazelnuts, plums, cherries, raisins, peaches, and figs. Where the upper classes, in the balcony, cherished royal non-vegetarian crabs, sturgeon steaks, juicy fruits like pears, and mussels. In observation the three unities of Time, Place and Action was followed with food as a metaphor. The plays of Shakespear dredged aquatic animals such as Oysters, as the bread giver of the poor masses in the English society.

There is no better way to venerate the Bard than to throw a party in his honour being the 450<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of William Shakespear, a poet, playwright famously called the Bard of Avon, has left a significant mark on language and culture, even nearly half a millennium later. Being dead physically the Bard is still haunting the minds of every reader and critic who is ignorantly resurrecting him to life, reinterpreting his literary plays and texts or destroying them to recreate. As it is said, every age creates its own Shakespear.

“Some books are to be tasted, some devoured, but only a few to be chewed and digested thoroughly.” –Francis Bacon.

The Shakespear's time depicted the culture of gastronomic textures and flavours in food. Special flavours were a part of a general trend to “denature” food by changing its taste and transforming it (Montanari 1993:56; 64). According to Montanari, the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries imbibed the art to unite and blend flavours followed by the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries European cuisine preferences. The rise of French cookery evolved individual cultural flavours (Montanari 1993:56). Certain foods from the Elizabethan era laid great impact mentioning Shakespear's consciousness “that the idea of a sauce as a corrective, contrast, complement or digestive to food comes naturally to him” (Spurgeon 1982:84, 123). Hence,

(...) the *sauce* to *meat* is ceremony;

Meeting were bare without it

(*Macbeth* III, iv, 23),

As Lady Macbeth tells her husband after he poured out the “*saucy* doubts and fears” which he is caged in. These words exhort him to delight the feasty banquet, as he cheers,

Sweet remembrance!

Now *good digestion* wait on appetite,

And health on both!,

The above lines showcase how food as sauce, is a symbol of fear and reluctance that characters played within their authentic selves by Spurgeon. Even the Traditional English Christmas fare of “minced pies without meat” developed from the Georgian period (Wilson 1973: 273). The latter, was the significance of spices and pungent sauces that tempted guest

of royal courtship to salted flesh of tainted meat (Wilson 1973:99, 285). This choice of meat is indirectly referred to by Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* (III, ii, 74):

The world is still deceiv'd with ornament.  
 In law, what plea so *tainted* and *corrupt*  
 But, being *season'd* with gracious voice,  
*Obscures* the show of evil?

It is stated that the tainted meat during the Bard's time was an artificial recipe added in the pies, baked fruits, as a malpractice of employing spicy meats that misguided the people to sickness. The role of food in various symbols preferred by the Shakespearean people was the spice which bore a separate status symbol of "wealthy" gastronomy and people of the lower regime became ineligible to even smell the spices.

No play of Shakespeare could be without the basting fatty meat, which tagged them English people. The meat roasted, fried, butchered, and minced was an operation that every character played up purely. In *Troilus and Cressida* (II, iii, 196), Ulysses refers to Achilles as

(...) the proud lord  
 That *bastes* his arrogance with his own *seam*",  
 Whilst Falstaff complains that  
 (...) they would *melt me out of my fat drop by drop*  
 (Merry Wives of Windsor IV, v, 89)

From spices and meat Shakespearean time celebrated the days of bread which was the food for Britain men and women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century where there were 62 white bakers and 36 brown bakers. The ratio described white bakers more as it was for the royal people, and brown bakers were for the poor illiterate labourers. Shakespeare clearly discusses this racial distinction of colour and its quality using them for all his plays and specifying certain characters. And one such play is *Measure for Measure* (III, ii, 195) describing the lustful nature of Duke Vincentio who, in Lucio's words, would mouth with a beggar, though she smelt *brown* and *garlic*. Shakespeare removed the clutches of the medieval times with the unfavourable use of Garlic, as it was associated by the poor hands, and Elizabethans named it "the poor man's physic" (Wilson 1973: 361).

From stage to characters, actions to reactions, regrets to applause the journey of Shakespeare's play was successful or decorative only with the presence of 'Food' coloured

and creamed to mesmerize the characters into their characters, spread the aroma of sweetness and symbolify the sign of celebration and rejoiced banquets. The sight of puddings, pasteries and biscuits feature pre dominantly in Shakespear's *Twelfth Night* through the character Sir Toby and Clown (II, iii, 124),

Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be  
 No more *cakes and ale*?  
 Yes, by saint Anne, and ginger shall be hot i'th'mouth too,

The above lines envelope the words of a staunch puritain Sir Toby who disagreed the consumption and eating habits of creamy cakes, as it was a sign of flattery by the wealthy merchants, hidden under the curtains of festive banquets. From cakes, candies were born out coated with sugar and silvery tapping of honey daired chocolates. These slithering candies were a symbol that eroded the erotic moves of characters of a play within a play. And a victim to it was *Othello* "I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip" (Act IV, Scene iii). Similarly in the play, *Henry V* says "You have witchcraft in your lips, Kate (Act V, Scene ii, 1599). Shakespear evocates another sign were the "prostitues were inferred as food," in the English community. They were called with pen names as mutton, chick, fresh meat, salt fish, and fleshy goose disgracing the women folk

This prejudice is noticed in the play *Romeo and Juliet* as Mercutio says:

Thy wit is a very bitter sweeting: it is a most sharp sauce.  
 And is it not then well served into a sweet *goose*?  
 O here's a wit of cheverel that stretches from an inch narrow to an ell broad!  
 (Act II, Scene iv,)

Thus precisely Shakespear jots that "Food and Drink provoke raw and ripe chances leading to sexual swings and mood metaphors," says Senechal. Anything over tasted, or cherished with signs of swallowing, devouring, and sipping are classified to concubines in Bard's plays.

Critics such as Diane Purkiss, states the very base of how Shakespear learnt the art of culinary through symbols. And under analysis it is from his childhood Warwickshire days. Every play written by him deals with the rustic pleasures of life, laboured hands of the poor, and his keen interest on foods of all regimes. He classified food through signs in characters and symbols of meaning, linking ones' status, nationality and identity. In *Richard III* strawberry was used as a note of sweetness and purity, as the Bishop gives away strawberries that were sent for the Earl of Gloucester: "When I was last in Holborn, I saw good strawberries in your garden. I do bessech you send for some of them" (Act III, Scene iv,)

Thus final outcome is the detailed description, researched on the Culinary Preferences through the Shakespear's symbolisims and metaphorical images in most of his plays. Every

symbol of food was a technique to draw the readers, and audiences into the psyche of characters alive and invisible in reality. For eg: the image of *cookies* and *biscuit* in the play *Troilus and Cressida* was made as rusks in the ships, that helped the sailors through long voyages, a food that soothed the rustic time of the hectic journey undertaken in Medieval era.

Cobloaf!

He would pun thee into shivers with his fist,  
 As a sailor breaks a *biscuit* (Act II, Scene i, 41).

The above findings dealt so far has concluded that eating and drinking are vital to all human beings, and this was indirectly disclosed by Shakespear reforming his contemporaries. He reframes the minds of the early modern drama, by including the cultural traits of different countries, their cuisines, colonized nations, and political dynamics. The prior purpose of this research is how food denotes multiple logos in the plays of Shakespear. Each play is culture specific igniting the English impulses of food to the contemporary period where, food garnishes the aspects of community, recognizes a characters role in a play or in real, distinguishes the gender, ecology, and transcends a human with aesthetic integrity.

These are the hidden protocols of Shakespear's play where food is not just an appetiser but a semiotic feature held responsible in exemplifying life with the preference of your own self.

Thus interdisciplinary rays of food literature are grounded with culture studies. Every time one sees it, reads it, one discovers something new, something one had never fully appreciated before. It was indeed a good venture into the manuscripts of the greatest dramatist of all ages.

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