

An Introductory Study of Gastronomy With Reference to Roland Barthes' "Chopsticks"

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Abstract— Food plays a prominent role for the existence of human beings. Food is neither a subject nor an object, it is an action more universal than language. It is also a relationship between body and mind. Food as a symbol of life and death is amalgamated in the orifice of human beings, like body and soul, like eating and speaking. Both the writer and the chef are supreme creators of metamorphosis. They work as a bricoleur making something new out of something old, through the process of selection, renovation and imagination. They produce original and complex products. These products change the consumer emotionally, intellectually and physically. This paper offers an introductory study of gastronomy by analysing the K'iche people's myth and the Sumerian myth. It shows how food which becomes an origin of life also becomes a cure and leads to death. And primarily by using the article "Chopsticks" by Roland Barthes it draws a parallel between the culture and civilization of the orient and the occident.

Keywords— Gastronomy and literature, orient and occident, chef and writer, food and culture, food and civilization, ancient myths and food.

Man is after all just a food, for worms and microorganisms after his death. It means that human beings are also a food, hence they are born from food. Whoever it may be, Black, White, man or woman who belong to any race, gender, religion or caste, are accompanied by food for their survival from cradle to grave. Food is neither a subject nor an object it is an action more universal than language which makes food the essence of life. Food is also a relationship, a relationship between body and mind. Terry Eagleton points out that, "Food is what makes up our bodies, just as words are what constitute our minds; and if body and mind are hard to distinguish, it is no wonder that eating and speaking should continually cross over in metaphorical exchange" (SL 399).

Even before the existence of human beings the process of consumption started in this world, “Wind and water eat stone, night eats day, back-hole eat light – silently” (Fussell 22). These actions are addressed by different words in different languages but they are mere ‘consumption’. Food chain exists ever since life came into existence and human beings topped the chain due to evaluation. If anything goes wrong with the chain human beings may become extinct creatures, “We don’t like to be reminded that if dung were not caviar to the dung beetle, the earth would be covered in shit” (Fussell 22). The fact is that human beings are just flesh and blood like other animals.

Humans may feel superior to other mammals as their brain is superior to others but they are also a mammal who act as a parasite and cannibalize their mother in the womb, “...we cannibalize our mother in order to live. Each of us, no matter how noble his sentiments at a later stage of development, drinks mother’s blood from the time he is a tiny egg clinging hungrily to a uterine wall” (Fussell 22).

Food as a symbol of life and death is amalgamated in the orifice of humans, like body and soul, like eating and speaking. There is only one orifice through which humans eat and speak. The K’iche’ people’s myth portrayed how human beings originated from corn, a food product. The K’iche’ people were the inhabitants of Guatemalan Highlands. They were a part of the Maya Civilization. Their cultural narrative called *Popol Vuh*, recounts the creation of the world. Their Gods Tepeu and Gucumatz created the earth out of their thought power. They wanted the animals and birds that they had created to praise them but they just chirped and mewed on top of their lungs so they created humans out of wet clay and found it imperfect. Then humans were made of wood but eventually they too failed. At last they made human beings out of corn and found them to be perfect and powerful. The K’iche’ people believe that human beings originated from corn, a food product. The book *Popul Vuh: The Book of the People* reads:

From Paxil, from Cayalá, as they were called, came the yellow ears of corn and the white ears of corn.

These are the names of the animals which brought the food: *yac* (the mountain cat), *utiú* (the coyote), *quel* (a small parrot), and *hoh* (the crow). These four animals gave tidings of the yellow ears of corn and the white ears of corn, they told them that they should go to Paxil and they showed them the road to Paxil.

And thus they found the food, and this was what went into the flesh of created man, the made man; this was his blood; of this the blood of man was made. So the corn entered [into the formation of man] by the work of the Forefathers. (Goetz and Griswold 121)

Food which becomes the origin of life also becomes the curse and leads to death in other myths, such as Sumerian myth. The character of Eve in Hebrew holy text traces its origin in the Sumerian myth. Enki, the Sumerian God of water and wisdom was cursed with death by Ninti, the Sumerian Goddess for eating eight of her water plants. Later she restored Enki with life. The first part of the name 'Nin' means 'rib' and 'ti' means 'to make live', she is also called as the 'Lady of Rib'. Fussell says, "...the language and the food got muddled in the transition from Sumer to Hebrew, so that in the Hebrew story the lady of Eve was given life by the rib of the man, whose death was caused by the woman's eating of magic plant" (SL 24). The mytheme of both the myths is one and the same, the birth of life and the death of life take place through food.

Even though there was a cultural and gender reversal from the Sumerian Myth to the Hebrew myth the plight of human animal remains the same, therefore the food which gives him life also kills him. It is after the consumption of the forbidden fruit man was cursed with mortality. Isac Kikawada notes that:

Contrary to the New Testament portrait of Eve as the first sinner and the bringer of death into the world (1 Tim 2:14), the author of the Primeval History is emphasizing that Eve, the lady of Adam's rib, has the special status as a life giver with attributes similar to the goddess Ninti. It would be an error to think that a simple borrowing has occurred here. The borrowing is polemical which deliberately modifies the old tradition in order to establish a new paradigm. (Smith 200)

Taking the myth of Prometheus into account, a chef is compared to the 'New Prometheus' who performs a prominent role in changing the society and its individuals. The person who cooks the food and the person who produces a literary piece of work trace the same structure of mind. Both the writer and the chef are supreme creators of metamorphosis. The kitchen is the locus of the transformation for the chef. Presentation and preparation are the two important process for the outcome of food. For the process of preparation the key element is fire which the chef as a new Prometheus has stolen from the Gods for the

benefit of humans. Both the chef and the writer both work as a bricoleur making something new out of something old, through the process of selection, renovation and imagination. They produce original and complex products. These products change the consumer emotionally, intellectually and physically. The chef and the writer play a vital role in bringing changes.

Apart from the origin of life and decline of human beings, food also reflects one's own culture. McCallum remarks concisely, "A society's culture, we are told, is reflected in its food pattern" (235). There is a vast difference between culture and civilization. The uncivilized homo erectus and homo sapiens hunted animals for food. Once evaluation took place, human beings came into existence but things changed, 'man hunted man'. Most of the history books don't offer a deep insight into the American history. They stop when Columbus landed in America. But the dark history begins right there. Thousands of 'cultured' Red Indians were massacred by the so called 'civilized' human animals, ruthlessly, brutally and mercilessly in the name of 'civilization'. Fixico writes:

From the time Europeans arrived on American shores, the frontier—the edge territory between white man's civilization and the untamed natural world—became a shared space of vast, clashing differences that led the U.S. government to authorize over 1,500 wars, attacks and raids on Indians, the most of any country in the world against its indigenous people. By the close of the Indian Wars in the late 19th century, fewer than 238,000 indigenous people remained, a sharp decline from the estimated 5 million to 15 million living in North America when Columbus arrived in 1492. (Web)

But ironically the whole of Western civilization treat the rest of the world as 'other', an orient. They assume themselves to be far superior to the orient. Barthes in his essay *Chopsticks*, slashed the western civilization with their culinary practices, knife and fork, which they use for food consumption. At the same time he contrasted the orient from the occident, their elite nature using chopsticks as a symbol. Not only food reflects one's culture even the culinary utensils used for the preparation and consumption of food mirror one's culture and civilization.

He presented the sniffy nature of the occident through the way the occidental food is displayed at a market in Bangkok, "Occidental food, heaped up, dignified, swollen to the majestic, linked to a certain

operation of prestige, always tends toward the heavy, the grand, the abundant, the copious” (SL 41). Through the function of chopsticks he unfolded the cultured nature of the orient. The chopsticks never pierce, cut or slit the food unlike the knife and fork. Barthes says:

In all these functions, in all the gestures they imply, chopsticks are the converse of our knife (and of its predatory substitute, the fork): they are the alimentary instrument which refuses to cut, to pierce, to mutilate, to trip (very limited gestures, relegated to the preparation of the food for cooking: the fish seller who skins the still living eel for us exorcises once and for all, in a preliminary sacrifice, the murder of food); by chopsticks, food becomes no longer a prey to which one does violence (meat, flesh over which one does battle), but a substance harmoniously transferred; they transform the previously divided substance into bird food and rice into a flow of milk; maternal, they tirelessly perform the gesture which creates the mouthful, leaving to our alimentary manners, armed with pikes and knives, that of predation. (SL 42)

It holds the fragment of a food particle according to its nature with gentle pressure and helps the chef, the creator for a beneficial production. It also takes a maternal role. It moves the food with much care like a mother cares for his child.

Food, not only in the mythical world but also in reality forms the cornerstone of life. Food practices across the world reflect the culture and civilization of human beings. It is the bond between the body and the mind of human beings. Food is nothing else but life.

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