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Drawing Food values from Nora Dauenhauer's "How to Make Good Baked Salmon from the River"

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Abstract

Anthropocentrism regards human beings as the supreme power and all the animals, birds, plants and objects are considered inferior and exist merely to serve man. They are located much below man in the hierarchical structure. This outlook of supremacy and thoughtless domination of man has caused havoc in every sphere of life. Depletion of ozone layer, climate change, extinction of rare species of animals, birds and plants, over consumption, mindless consumerism, ignorance of ethical practices from daily life and food scarcity in some parts of the globe have pushed human beings to the brink of disaster.

Researchers, environmentalists, philosophers, scientists, historians, sociologists and anthropologists have reiterated the fact that food plays a role which is more fundamental than sustenance. All living beings require food for survival, growth and nutrition. Food satisfies hunger, our basic need. Every community shows its exceptional connection with food through cooking, consumption and ceremonies. Food is symbolic for people belonging to the same identity marker such as religion, language, race, class and caste. There are many practices connecting food that help in building and maintaining a tradition and culture. In today's competitive world, there is a preference for quick, immediate gratification. This includes day to day practices of cooking and serving food. There is a felt need to achieve results no matter the cost involved, and this leads to steering away from healthy sustainable living practices such as eating fresh produce, slow cooking of wholesome food, following traditional recipes and methods of cooking and feeding the birds and animals. This paper titled "Drawing Food values from Nora Dauenhauer's "How to Make Good Baked Salmon from the River" deliberates on mindful food habits that form sustainable living practices. The mapping of this chapter presents food as a culture marker in societies, food as an ecology creator and food as a mechanism for organic growth and livelihood on this earth.

Keywords: Food, climate change, sustainable

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Drawing Food values from Nora Dauenhauer's "How to Make Good Baked Salmon from the River"

Introduction

Anthropocentrism regards human beings as the supreme power and all the animals, birds, plants and objects are considered inferior and exist merely to serve man. They are located much below man in the hierarchical structure. This outlook of supremacy and thoughtless domination of man has caused havoc in every sphere of life. Depletion of ozone layer, climate change, extinction of rare species of animals, birds and plants, over consumption, mindless consumerism, ignorance of ethical practices from daily life and food scarcity in some parts of the globe have pushed human beings to the brink of disaster.

Researchers, environmentalists, philosophers, scientists, historians, sociologists and anthropologists have reiterated the fact that food plays a role which is more fundamental than sustenance. All living beings require food for survival, growth and nutrition. Food satisfies hunger, our basic need. Every community shows its exceptional connection with food through cooking, consumption and ceremonies. Food is symbolic for people belonging to the same identity marker such as religion, language, race, class and caste. There are many practices connecting food that help in building and maintaining a tradition and culture. In today's competitive world, there is a preference for quick, immediate gratification. This includes day to day practices of cooking and serving food. There is a felt need to achieve results no matter the cost involved, and this leads to steering away from healthy sustainable living practices such as eating fresh produce, slow cooking of wholesome food, following traditional recipes and methods of cooking and feeding the birds and animals.

This paper titled "Drawing Food values from Nora Dauenhauer's "How to Make Good Baked Salmon from the River" deliberates on mindful food habits that form sustainable living practices. The mapping of this chapter presents food as a culture marker in societies, food as an ecology creator and food as a mechanism for organic growth and livelihood on this earth. The chapter refers to the poem "How to Make Good Baked Salmon from the River" by Nora Marks Dauenhauer as a framework and refers to case studies from Tamil food culture. An attempt is made to universalise food experiences but retaining the uniqueness of each of the food cultures. Nora Marks Dauenhauer hailed from Juneau, Alaska and largely lived in fishing and breeding communities. She belonged to the Tlingit tribe and became the Raven clan mother. She spoke Tlingit, taught and researched the Tlingit language extensively. Her literary works spring from the wealth of her conscious choice of connecting with her land and sea. Her poem "How to Make Good Baked Salmon from the River", is a testimony of her conscious rising to live in harmony with the environment through food. The format of the poem is unique as it's a recipe poem. The word recipe, has Latin roots and it means "to take", when doctors used it in prescriptions. Later in cooking, it refers to a list ingredient used in preparation of food with the procedure involved. "The recipe or receipt, then is a written formula for mixing ingredients for culinary, medical or magical purposes". Oral narratives of recipes have similar methods too. (Goody, 83-84) The poem presents two situations simultaneously. The former is the traditional Tlingit method of cooking a freshly caught salmon in a fish camp. The poet gives clear, step by step cooking and serving procedure by stating the ingredients, cost of the products, where to procure them, time taken, way to consume the cooked salmon, the right accompaniment and the "story telling" session that follows eating. She gives importance to both feeding the body and the mind. Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar observes in verse 412 of Thirukural, "Some food for the stomach is brought, When the ear gets no food for thought"(Kural 412, trans.*Shuddhananda Bharati*). In this narrative Dauenhauer differs moderately. She urges her community to cook and serve food the traditional way and then indulge in sharing stories or small talk. Story telling or the oral narrative technique is crucial to the survival of indigenous communities.

Food as a Culture Marker

In all societies food is a marker of culture. Food culture traces its roots in food customs and practices in the past. This varies depending on race, region, religion, caste, class, age and health factors. Through food, pertinent communication about any given society occurs. Traditions and rituals about a community is connected to food habits. By following food patterns and paradigms, societies transfer culture from one generation to the next. Food structures are carefully processed and practiced and drastic changes or alterations are discouraged. Young children are introduced to traditional foods in the family. Margaret Mead informs that in a research on “food habits, it is important to define the patterns into which the available foods are arranged...” (Margaret Mead 23, *The Problems of Changing Food Habits*). The total number of meals, cultural and nutritional needs, the permitted and prevented food items. Affordability and availability of ingredients impact the food that is cooked. For instance, nutritious breakfast and midday meals are provided in government schools in Tamil Nadu. There is food chart with clear time table for the Chief minister’s breakfast scheme for primary school children which was initiated on 7th May 2022. The students are provided with pongal, upma, kitchadi and kesari. Locally available millets is to be used at least twice a week and territorial vegetables are served. This practice matches the local food culture and cooked according to the flavour of the region. Apart from providing nutritional food, the local food culture and items are introduced at a tender age.

In the context of diaspora, transfer of a community’s traditional practices and rituals are performed through food to younger generations. All across the globe, home space is marked by cooking of traditional food from one’s own country or region. For instance, in America., the Tamils celebrate Pongal, the harvest festival of Tamil Nadu grandly. They cook the pongal rice, offer it to sun God and share the feast with family and friends. They mimic rituals and customs from their native culture and post pictures of the celebration in social media. The performative act of procuring, cooking, serving, sharing, preserving are essential to reiterate the home culture in the host land. In elaborating on race and culture, R. Radhakrishnan posits the notion of “textual structure” (80 *Diasporic Mediations*). He deliberates on the following pertinent ideas. They include history incorporated into the knowledge of ethnicity and culture, the subject/ object positions, the reader and interpretation of the text, orientation and advancement in ethnic history, identity and culture. In all these liminal spaces food plays a definitive role in the construction and conservation of race and culture. History and culture of a race is transferred through food practices and food habits. In the private space of the home the knowledge is presented to the younger generation and in public, this is seen in celebration of festivals and commemoration of events connected to one’s home culture. The subject/object positions are fluid because there is a marked difference in the approach towards one’s home tradition in the first, second, third generation immigrants. For instance, in a diasporic situation, in the privacy of home, the subject could be the first generation immigrant and the object the second generation immigrant. In public sphere the object remains the immigrant. Therefore, food and experiences connected with food get objectified. When food is the text in consideration, the one who cooks and the one who consumes, become the reader and interpreter. Preparation of food is imitative of the larger racial, cultural identity dynamics. Interestingly, immigrants cleverly replace ingredients, cooking procedures to match the availability of ingredients and to suit their needs. Just as Nora Dauenhauer’s baked salmon can be prepared in the conventional way and the modern way. Judicious mixture of the traditional and the modern is a useful method to carry forward familial food culture in a foreign land. Traditional recipes and native styles of cooking and presentation of food is essential to the establishment of culture. But to ensure, the firm presence of one’s regional culture, small modifications and changes as per the requirement is permitted. This fluidity enhances the native food and draws a wider consumer audience.

Promotion of one's own culture through food has taken monstrous shapes in the contemporary world. There are many You tubers, Food bloggers and Instagram content creators who use and abuse this concept. Food porn and voyeurism has reached alarming levels. There are channels such as *Village cooking channel*(Tamil-23.6M subscribers), *The Traditional Life*(Tamil- 1.33M subscribers), *Life in Wet land*(Malayalam- 757K subscribers), *My Country Foods*(Tamil-1.96M subscribers), *Country Foods* (Telugu-1.56M subscribers) which focus on regional, rural South Indian style of cooking. *Country Foods* was hosted by 105 years old late Mastanamma from Andhra Pradesh. She became a Social Media sensation by presenting her culinary skills in cooking regional cuisine. She cooked using open fire, rustic utensils, *My Country Foods* is hosted by Anandhi from Kezhuvathur village near Mannargudi, Tamil Nadu. She posts videos on local, regional cuisine. There are You Tube channels, Pinterest, Facebook and Instagram posts that feature media influencers who consume huge quantity of food with in a time period. There is voyeuristic appeal to such presentations. Such channels enjoy large number of subscribers and viewership and this clearly indicates that there is a market for presenting food for voyeuristic purposes. Regional culture presented through colourful images of food on social media satiates taste buds virtually. Food porn, thus is seen as an assault on fine dining chefs and anti food porn activists. In today's consumerist world which seeks instant gratification, food porn grabs the attentions of viewers instantly. Like sex, the sensual aspects of food are tapped to draw the audience's close attention. For a city dweller viewing food prepared using traditional methods transports him/her to the roots, thus evoking memories associated with food. Thus food voyeurism provides instantaneous satisfaction, easily available and affordable and caters to the desire for nostalgia.

Food as an Ecology Creator

Environmental degradation and abuse has led to poor crops, infertile soil and genetically modified crops. Raising appropriate crops in the right manner, preparing food the organic and healthy way, serving and sharing food is the magic mantra for sustainable living. Nora Dauenhauer's "How to Make Good Baked Salmon from the River" depicts organic, earth friendly methods of cooking the salmon as the first option. The salmon is caught from the river, sliced right through, the gut and gills are thrown to the sea gulls and the ravens. The poet insists on talking to the birds as the offer of food is made because they are family too. "Shoo mosquitoes off the salmon, and shoo the ravens, away, but don't insult them because the mosquitoes are known to be the ashes of the cannibal giant, and Raven is known to take off with just about anything". In Native American tradition sea gulls and raven are symbolic. In some cultures the sea gulls are wise grand mothers who protect the suffering. Ravens are birds larger than crows, they excel in mimicking human voice and are known for their intelligence. They are messengers from God and represent ancestors. In native American tradition, they are clan animals and there are crow clans such as Hopi and Tlingit. It is believed that the raven is a grandmother figure. In Hindu tradition ravens and crows are sacred messengers from ancestors and they protect the living. There fore, the ritual of offering food to crows is practiced in India. Crows are associated with Lord Shani and during ceremonies for the dead, food is offered to crows.

The poet encourages the reader to immerse completely in the emotions involved in eating. All the sensory organs are engaged and thus emerges a wholesome experience. The visual delight is expressed in the line "Enjoy how nice it looks when it's split...Push stake through flesh and skin like pushing a needle through cloth, so that it hangs on stakes while cooking over fire made from alder wood Then sit around and watch the slime on the salmon begin to dry out. Notice how red the flesh is, and how silvery the skin looks". The auditory content is captured in the line "listen to the grease crackle". The olfactory senses are highlighted in "smell its delicious aroma drifting around on a breeze...Smell how good it smells while it's cooking,

because it's soooooo important". With mindful slow eating of food begins the process of creating an ecology through food.

Slow food movement was founded by Carlo Petrini in the 1980's in Italy (382, Letch Alison). Slow food movement assists local cuisine, supports traditional food practices, creates awareness about slow foods, supports organic farming, educates about the dangers of genetically modified crops, resists fast food culture, protects native varieties of seeds and crops, defends vulnerable foods and fights against the corporatisation of food industry. Vulnerable foods are those items of food that might become extinct due to modernisation and fast food culture. For instance, in Tamil nadu, the regular preparation of Kali, a thick gluey porridge made with urad dal or finger millet in earthen pot for breakfast is on the decline. Kali requires slow cooking on steady wood fire with constant monitoring of the cooking process. The ingredients are freshly ground. Thus making it a tedious process. Instead finger millets are available in ready to consume breakfast cereal form and this requires minimum cooking time. Fruits are ripened artificially using chemicals which is hazardous to health. This is also an unhealthy way of speeding up the life stage of the fruit. Strong fertilizers and chemicals are applied in huge quantities to hasten growth and maturity of the crop. Researchers are working on constantly shrinking the normal life cycle of the paddy crop from one forty days to ninety days calling it a short term crop. Cattle, poultry and aqua culture are fed chemicals and medicines to quickly reach maturity and fatten them up. This leads to hormonal imbalance in children and causes early puberty, PCOS and PCOD issues in young women in reproductive age. Heat and eat foods, ready to eat foods, premixed powders are convenient to use but these items of food have erased traditional preparation by reducing cooking time and modifying ingredients. Today's changes in lifestyle and living spaces do not allow slow cooking as a full time procedure, but it is possible to select and use at least a few methods. Adopting environmental friendly food practices will reshape our ecosystem. Nora Dauenhauer's "How to Make Good Baked Salmon from the River", shows the preparation of traditional recipes and healthy options for cooking food slowly in the modern day context where catching fish from the river and cooking on open fire is not feasible.

Food as a mechanism for organic growth and livelihood

Environmental historians study the connection of food chains to the creation of a sustainable environment. Holistic interactions with food will enhance planet earth and lead to a healthier life. Organic sustainable farming crusader Nammalvar, from Tamil Nadu dedicated his life for promoting environmental activism. Speeding up life cycle and life stages of any one organism such as a plant or an animal has an impact on the complete food chain and the environment. For instance, consider the hypothetical situation of an annually fruiting tree is genetically modified to bear fruit twice a year. Those birds, animals and insects that feed on these fruits are likely to multiply at a faster rate than usual. This will cause an imbalance in the food chain and destroy other tree species that exist. When those organisms that multiply faster cannibalise other organisms that do not depend on this fruit and the predators or species of predators that prey on these organisms that feed on this fruit will have an excessive supply of food. If this chain continues it will cause an imbalance in the entire environment. The slight modifications made due to the presence of genetically modified foods will have a butterfly effect on the eco system. The term "butterfly effect" was coined by Edward Lorenz, to study changes in weather and climatic conditions. This study draws the attention to the concept that continuous insignificant changes at regular intervals could cause catastrophic effect and catapult into an environmental disaster. Food systems when crushed, suppressed or endorsed extensively can cause multiple issues such as the extinction or uncontrolled growth of certain species and this leads to a instability or even breakage in the food chain. According to Felipe Fernandez-Armesto food commercialisation started in the mid eighteenth century and grew during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There was sudden expansion and growth

in the developing countries. This caused huge demand on food supply. Attention was on mass production of food through processing and preservation. Fast food industry boomed. There was a visible shift towards industrialisation of farming. Plantations employed slaves, bonded labourers and migrants. Thus began exploitation of labourers and land. (186-189 Armesto)

The first step to stop abuse of soil and resources is by acknowledging the problems, the next step is to identify the causes and the third is to work on sustainable life styles to support and sustain the earth. Food ways become vital to building organic development. Adapting sustainable food habits can erase the harm caused by excessive use of chemicals, pesticides and resources. The poem reminds the reader about responsible disposal of left over food, bones and skin. They should “toss the bones to the ravens and seagulls and mosquitoes, but don't throw them in the salmon stream because the salmon have spirits and don't like to see the remains of their kin among them in the stream”. In this context, there has been continuous complaints by farmers from Erode, a district in Tamil Nadu on industries which pollute water bodies with industrial waste. In another incident there were reports about Noyyal river water being polluted by dyeing units. According to a report around twenty thousand hectares of land are irrigated by Noyyal river and the pollution of the water makes it unfit for drinking and irrigation (Aravind Raj Effluents from dyeing units polluting Noyyal river Again New Indian Express). This calls for stringent laws and action that follows any error.

Conclusion

Nora Dauenhauer's poem “How to Make Good Baked Salmon from the River” presents alternate food ways for sustainable living. It predicts future possibilities of human life in tandem with the environment. A native American approach to living in harmony with nature is depicted through cooking, serving and sharing of food. The poem is a recipe which exhibits two methods of cooking. The traditional style is conducted outdoors and uses open fire and the modern method is performed indoors and uses gadgets. It is pertinent that the recipe accommodates slight variations in ingredients and procedure. Using the poem as a framework, this chapter studied issues pertaining to food as a culture marker, food as an ecology creator and food as a mechanism for organic growth and livelihood. The food paradigms are applied to situation in south India, Tamil Nadu in particular. This has led to enhanced understanding of local Tamil food culture using global Native American food culture.

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