



SAVOURING THE STORY: THE INTERCONNECTION OF FOOD, CULTURE AND EMOTIONS

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ABSTRACT:

Culinary literature is a rich and delightful genre that connects culture, food, and tradition. It encompasses various types of texts, including cook books and novels in which food is a central theme. Additionally, this sort of literature explores the emotions associated with food, illustrating how it can signify love with tradition and heritage. By intertwining the sensory joy of cooking with emotions and cultural practices, this literary realm reveals deeper connections between culture and emotions. Hence, the present paper proposes to examine the relationship between food, culture, and emotions through the novel "*Alphabet Soup for Lovers*" by Anita Nair.

KEYWORDS:

Culture, Emotions, Food and Traditions.

INTRODUCTION:

Culinary literature and Cultural studies are accessible to readers due to their compelling storytelling, with cultural studies often touching on various aspects of humanity, while food is primarily associated with culinary arts and skills. "*Alphabet Soup for Lovers*," one of Nair's distinguished works, vividly explores the intersection of love, food, and identity, set against the rich culinary traditions of Kerala, illustrating how food and culture serve as emotional anchors intertwined with personal identity. This fictional narrative invites readers to connect food with culture, showing how both reflect society and serve as emotional ties between individuals. In *Alphabet Soup for Lovers*, the protagonist Komathi learns English and connects food with the English alphabet, highlighting her commitment to her work. Her love for Shola Pani unfolds, revealing the complexities of their relationship.

FOOD AND CULTURE: AN EXPLORATION THROUGH ANITA NAIR'S *ALPHABET SOUP FOR LOVERS*

Food is an essential part of culture, and when people think of culture, they often envision elements like food, clothing, music, art, or literature. One of the most significant ways to understand culture can be through food, as it serves as a powerful metaphor for deeper meanings within any given society. Food is intertwined with culture, and by exploring it, it is gained a better understanding of various cultural values and it has been a importance to human existence—without it, survival is impossible—and in this context, it serves as an ideal medium for understanding culture. The way food is created, shaped, transmitted, and learned through cultural practices makes it an important element of cultural identity. Over time, food has come to symbolize the identity of specific regions, and in contemporary times, it has evolved beyond mere sustenance to become a cultural marker. The rise of food blogs, cooking shows, and the increasing focus on organic products reflect a shift in how food is perceived, signalling its significance not just as a need but as a reflection of identity.

The recent interest in Culinary literature has opened new avenues in literary studies, revealing how food can serve as a metaphor to explore deeper cultural meanings. Food in literature has been analysed as a way to reflect cultural identity, tackling complex issues such as social inequality, relationships, and even sexual desires. In Anita Nair's novel *Alphabet Soup for Lovers*, food plays a crucial role, acting as a metaphor throughout the story. The novel centres on a Tamil cook, the protagonist, who learns English alphabets by comparing each letter to a dish. In doing so, she uses ingredients to teach herself the English language, while imparting valuable life lessons that resonate deeply with readers. As she learns each letter, she connects it to an Indian dish, highlighting the rich flavours of South Indian cuisine, thus reflecting the cultural nuances of her background.

Anita Nair's narrative style is particularly notable for her unique approach to exploring Indian culture. As a contemporary Indian English writer, she seeks to represent Indian culture in a way that resonates with readers globally. The title of the novel itself is a perfect blend of culinary and romantic elements—*Alphabet Soup for Lovers*—suggesting the importance of food as the foundation for understanding the complexities of life and relationships.

In the novel, Komathi, the servant of the house, learns English alphabets not through the conventional method (A for apple, B for ball) but by associating each letter with an ingredient from her kitchen. Her perspective illustrates the profound relationship between life's experiences and the food one consumes. Every chapter in the novel is titled after a specific food item—such as *Arisi Appalam*, *Badam*, *Cheppankizhangul*, *Danger Chutney*, *Eeral*, and *Filter Kaapi*—which adds flavour to the narrative and offers a distinct reading experience. These food references help to frame the themes of love, loss, social disparity, and human emotions.

Komathi, the protagonist, believes that food can be remedy for many of life's problems, and this idea is explored throughout the novel. In the chapter titled "B for Badam," Komathi reflects on the social distinctions in the availability and value of food. She notes that Badams (almonds) are considered a luxury, only affordable to the wealthy, while others can only afford cashews or *Munthri Paruppu* (pulses). Komathi's inability to afford Badam, in contrast to Leema's (Lena Abraham) privileged status, highlights the social class discrepancies within the same

household. The introduction of a character like Shoola Pani, who is seen as superior, is also likened to Badam, signifying the reflection of social hierarchies in the food consumed by individuals. The following passage reflects Komathi's personal struggles with poverty, as she contrasts her humble beginnings with the wealthy household she works for:

“At first, when I came to work here, I was horrified at what I found in the kitchen. Big bins of atta (wheat flour) and a small bin of rice. Was I expected to stop eating rice? How could I? I ate rice three times a day—freshly cooked rice for lunch, leftovers for dinner, and the rest I would soak in water overnight, adding buttermilk and a green chili for breakfast. This was my starting point to a productive day. The godumai atta (wheat flour) and the small bin of basmati rice were for the family. But this, Leema's mother said, showing me a bin of ration-shop rice, was your rice. It was exactly what I was used to. I sighed in relief” (Nair 59).

This passage underscores Komathi's relationship with rice, symbolising her roots and comfort in familiar food, despite her difficult circumstances. It reflects how food is not just about sustenance but about emotional connection to one's culture, society, language, and home. Even when physically distant from her homeland, Komathi's connection to her native food remains steadfast, symbolizing her unbroken cultural ties.

It is evident that food serves as a powerful metaphor to explore cultural identity, societal divisions, and human emotions. Through Komathi's journey, the narrative illustrates how food is intricately linked to heritage, acting as a tangible representation of cultural roots and values. The connection between food and identity extends beyond personal nourishment; it becomes a symbol of belonging, a bridge between generations, and a means of preserving traditions. As the story unfolds, food offers a lens through which to examine the underlying cultural dynamics that influence behaviour, social norms, and even class distinctions. The novel demonstrates how the act of eating—what is consumed, how it is prepared, and the rituals surrounding it—reflects broader societal structures and values. By using food as a central theme, the novel delves into the complexities of individual identity while also shedding light on the social and cultural tensions that define human relationships, positioning food as a key element in understanding the interconnectedness of culture, society, and emotion.

FOOD AND EMOTIONS:

Food is often regarded as a powerful reflection of emotions, serving as a tangible representation of the internal states and experiences of individuals. That is consumed can reveal more than just physical hunger; it can provide insight into mental and emotional states, sometimes expressing unspoken feelings and desires. It is widely believed that food does more than merely fuel the body—it also influences mood, shaping emotional experiences. For instance, the act of sharing a meal with others can strengthen bonds, fostering a sense of connection and unity. Similarly, the simple gesture of sharing a cup of coffee often transcends the beverage itself, becoming a ritual that nurtures relationships and serves as a medium for emotional exchange. This type of food is one that people often crave or prepare, and it can serve as a subtle yet powerful signal to others about one's emotional state. In Anita

Nair's *Alphabet Soup for Lovers*, this intricate relationship between food and emotion is explored through the characters of Komathi and KK (Lena Abraham's husband), whose interactions with food reveal deep-seated emotional currents and connections to their respective cultural identities.

As Komathi learns the letter 'L' in her journey toward mastering the English alphabet, she connects it with laddoos, a traditional sweet often associated with celebrations and moments of joy. This connection represents the comfort and happiness that food can bring, evoking memories of communal festivities and family gatherings. In the novel, when KK brings laddoos to Komathi, she misinterprets the gesture, believing that he shares in her happiness. However, KK's offering is devoid of any emotional intent, emphasizing the gap between their emotional worlds. This scene highlights the contrasting ways food can be imbued with different meanings depending on one's emotional state and perspective. Through this, the novel demonstrates how food becomes a silent communicator of feelings, capable of conveying emotions even when words fail.

Food's emotional significance extends beyond individual interactions and is rooted in deeper cultural practices. Komathi reflects on how her grandmother, Aachi, would prepare dishes using quollu (horse gram), a food believed to impart strength and resilience. Komathi internalizes these teachings, recognizing that cooking transcends the simple act of preparing meals; it is also a means of conveying emotions. Each ingredient, each dish, has a purpose and a message, and a skilled cook understands this deeper connection. Cooking becomes a way for Komathi to communicate with those she serves, expressing affection, care, and even sorrow. For Komathi, food is more than nourishment—it is an intimate, emotional exchange between the cook and the eater, a reflection of personal feelings and cultural values.

In a poignant moment in the novel, Komathi shares, "I serve it to her. My Kesari will say, forgive me, better than words can" (Nair 145). Here, the food Komathi prepares—Kesari, a sweet dish—becomes a vessel for her emotions, a tangible manifestation of her feelings. The act of serving this dish goes beyond the physical sustenance it provides; it serves as an emotional offering, a way for Komathi to express what cannot be articulated in words. Similarly, when the letter 'F' is introduced, it is associated with filter *kaapi* (coffee). Lena Abraham prepares coffee for Shoola Pani, and the taste and aroma of the coffee stir emotions within him, sparking a deep attraction toward Lena. The novel captures this emotional awakening, noting,

"He takes a sip of the coffee, is coffee an aphrodisiac, he wonders as something stirs in him" (Nair 58).

In this moment, coffee is no longer just a drink—it becomes a catalyst for emotional connection, intensifying the bond between the characters.

Food also serves as a powerful means of evoking nostalgia, transporting individuals back to childhood memories or significant life events. The emotional impact of food is central to the novel, demonstrating how certain dishes carry sentimental value and create lasting connections to past experiences. Whether it is the comforting taste

of a childhood meal or a dish that recalls a special occasion, food becomes a bridge to the past, a reminder of moments and relationships that have shaped one's life. It is through food that individuals connect with their histories, their families, and their cultural roots. The act of preparing and sharing food is a way of honoring traditions, preserving memories, and expressing emotions tied to those who have come before. As the novel highlights, food is not just a means of survival—it is a cultural artifact, an emotional marker, and a central element in the understanding of personal identity and human relationships.

CONCLUSION:

Food is not merely a source of sustenance; it serves as a powerful marker of culture, reflecting identity and telling the stories of histories and memories. Beyond its basic function of nourishment, food plays an essential role in shaping behavior and interactions within society. In *Alphabet Soup for Lovers*, Indian cuisine is intricately intertwined with the English language, and food serves as a bridge between emotion and culture, highlighting its central role in understanding both identity and relationships. Through this fusion, the novel emphasizes how food goes beyond mere nourishment to shape personal and collective experiences, ultimately enriching the narrative and offering profound insight into the complexities of human connection and cultural identity.

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