

TASTE OF TRADITIONS: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF CULINARY CONNECTIONS IN *UNDERTOW*

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Abstract

The inherent significance of food in an individual's life is widely recognized, as it often remains unwavering in the face of deep-seated emotions. This novel *Undertow* (2020), introduces varying interpretations through its diverse characters. Culinary narratives provide us with a fresh perspective, allowing us to comprehend humans through a lens of curiosity rather than hastily jumping to conclusions about their character. In this article, we aim to explore the psychological foundations of our relationship with food, shedding light on the diverse array of approaches available for emotional release and healing through this culinary connection.

Keywords: Culinary, food, gastronome, nourishment

Introduction

The utilization of food as a time-honored method for shaping both the body and the mind is deeply rooted in our food-related culture. Within the framework of daily rhythms, people have seldom contemplated abstaining from nourishment. The intricate interplay between sustenance and emotions persists unfalteringly. Visually arranging food on a plate from any particular region has the ability to evoke significant memories associated with that cuisine, helping 'discover the link between food and identity' (Parveen 47). The

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realm of food in literature constitutes an interdisciplinary domain encompassing culture, history, psychology, nutrition, culinary practices, and more. This involves an anthropological perspective that establishes a connection between food and humans. In an article featured in *The Guardian*, Paul Levy, a US/British author and journalist born in 1941, emphasized the universal allure of the subject of food studies. He highlighted how it resonates with people from all walks of life and underscored its vital significance for future generations “describing people who, because of age, sex, income and social class, simply did not fit into the category ‘gourmet’, which we insisted had become ‘a rude word’ ” (Levy par.5). Numerous academics, scientists, scholars, researchers, and advocates have already elucidated the influence of food on an individual’s life. Nevertheless, numerous obscured viewpoints will require deciphering and application in the times ahead. The ethical considerations surrounding the comprehension and utilization of culinary knowledge can vary, depending on the context and timeframe, whether the approach is conventional or adapted to different environments and eras. The study of food encompasses multiple disciplines, with food culture being an integral component of this field.

Roland Barthes explored the topic of food consumption in his essay, *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* (1961). In this essay, he illustrated the prevalence of sugar consumption in America, highlighting its comparatively diminished importance in the context of French dietary habits. He further delved into the importance of food in facilitating communication and fostering connections among people. He also brought up another example, which revolved around the significance of regular bread and whole wheat bread in various locations. For some, bread serves as a daily staple, while for others, it transforms into a party centerpiece at home.

Food Studies is a burgeoning interdisciplinary field that delves deeper into the realm of food beyond its mere production and consumption. It transcends traditional categories like nutrition, chemical fertilizers, and dietary practices, expanding its scope into diverse sub-fields and alternative methodologies ripe for exploration. As per Paul Levy, this is a pioneering field that tends to be overlooked and classified in various ways. What is currently submerged has the potential to become significant in the future. Various theorists, including Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieu, and numerous others, have diligently examined diverse approaches and techniques for comprehending the intricacies of food. Don Yoder

(1921-2015), a prominent folklorist is mentioned in Lucy M. Long's "Introduction" section published in the *Journal of American Folklore*. Within this introduction, Yoder's exploration of food within the broader context of folklife studies, encompassing customs, values, and the entirety of practices and beliefs related to food consumption and its cultural context is highlighted 'brought food under the wing of folklife studies' (Long 3). These discussions have persisted throughout the years, leading to a multitude of fresh interpretations. Countless uncharted territories in the realm of food studies await scholarly exploration. As time advances, an increasing number of scholars embark on journeys into various branches of this dynamic field.

In the book *Undertow* by Jahnvi Barua (2020), Loya and her fractured family unknowingly become entangled in a recurring exploration of the world of food and its accompanying rituals. The culinary arts encompass the practice and study of food preparation, cooking, cuisine presentation, and even etiquette at the dining table. Culinary methods involve diverse approaches, including techniques such as utilizing livestock or harnessing fire, which are also explored by scholars like Levi Strauss. In addition to him, anthropologist Richard Wrangham, in his book *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (2009) delves into the early practice of cooking meat over an open flame. His theory not only clarifies the preference for cooked over raw meat but also explores why meat becomes healthier and more flavorful when subjected to the sizzling flames of fire. This transformation is intertwined with the age-old hunting of beasts in the depths of the forest, forming an integral part of this culinary process. These culinary customs are also observable in Barua's work. Loya's culinary habits and physical demeanour effectively convey her connection with sustenance. Food represents an inseparable expression of love for Loya, one that has accompanied her throughout her entire journey. Even in disheartening circumstances, individuals refrain from showing disrespect towards food and the associated cultural values it holds. This insight into her character and her connection with food didn't happen abruptly. She fondly remembered the affection of her elders through the meals they prepared, a memory that resurfaced each time she stumbled upon delectable dishes during her journeys. In the book, she safeguarded the memories of her paternal grandmother, Ammachi, who was not particularly child-friendly, by recalling a unique non-vegetarian dish that Ammachi would consistently prepare whenever Loya come to visit her. The feeling evoked by that dish is beyond words, as it's not

just about the food itself but also the affection and care with which it was prepared 'It must have been a Sunday, for Rukmini and she were both at home and Ammachi had served roast chicken at lunch' (Barua 126).

Loya delighted in savouring each mouthful of home-cooked food, her senses rekindling memories of the fragrant *tandoori* spices. Her transition to a vegetarian diet came about when she embraced her deep affection for elephants. It was a sensation akin to the warmth of love and the blessings imbued in every meal. The moments she spent waiting for the food to be prepared and served seemed to stretch on indefinitely. John Rawls (1921-2002) was a prominent American philosopher known for his extensive work within the liberal societal tradition. He placed a significant emphasis on the idea that it is both rational and morally justifiable for those with more wealth and resources to assist those who are less fortunate 'to do what is right solely in virtue of its being right' (Rawls 418). Furthermore, Rawls extended his philosophical insights to the realm of dietary choices, exploring the ways in which individuals make preferred selections based on their food customs and preferences. In line with Rawlsian theory, individuals can be evaluated based on the culinary customs prevalent in their region. Furthermore, he also portrayed the cuisine of the lower echelons of society, where individuals would partake regardless of the hour or their circumstances. This wasn't the fare of upscale restaurants, but rather the offerings of local street vendors and the snacks they peddled.

'Thus while we know that over any extended period of time we shall always have desires for food and drink, it is not until the moment comes that we decide to have a meal consisting of this or that course' (Rawls 360). Food is deemed to hold fundamental and primary significance, and it is imperative to recognize that it must be equitably disseminated across all segments of society, devoid of any form of discrimination. John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice*, emphasizes the obligation of the more privileged strata in society to assist those less fortunate, and he takes a philosophical stance on this matter. Within this philosophical context, he underscores the essentiality of food as a basic human necessity that cannot be disregarded.

Claudia Roden CBE, born in 1936, is a prominent British cookbook author of Egyptian origin. She has played a pivotal role in introducing Egyptian and Middle Eastern cuisine to both British and American audiences. During a talk show appearance, she eloquently discussed the profound connection that women forge within their kitchens, emphasizing that this bond often surpasses their connections to

the outside world. As per her account, women discussed the minor impact they have on the same cuisine. It pertains to the resilience and consistent dedication that women invest in preparing each meal. However, in the novel, Loya discovers Romen, a male cook, during her time at her mother's residence in Assam. Loya reminisces about her lifelong connection with food, tracing it back to her childhood when Romen introduced her to the distinctive cuisine of Assam. The study of human behaviour towards food has contributed to the understanding of human nature. In the book *Food, the Body and the Self* (1996) Professor and researcher Deborah Lupton explores the intricate connections between food, interpersonal relationships, and one's childhood experiences. Lupton delves into how food becomes intertwined with our connections to friends and family, highlighting the profound impact of our early life context on our relationship with food. She emphasizes in her book that "certain foodstuffs to eat because they are programmed to 'know' that the foods are physiologically good for them" (Lupton 7).

'the first, an alkaline one called khar to settle the stomach, then a daal with rice and vegetables on the side, after which a fish or meat curry would be served, then a sour curry, called tenga, and finally the sweets and yogurt' (Barua 80-81).

During her visit to Assam, Loya explored a diverse range of cuisines, but certain dishes stood out as true cultural signatures. In the book, the dishes "khar" and "tenga" symbolize the profound cultural roots of Assamese cuisine. While these dishes risk fading into obscurity, some dedicated cooks, homemakers, and native Assamese chefs continue to understand and preserve their significance. These dishes also serve as remedies for individuals experiencing stomach-related issues. Assamese people, deeply connected to their heritage, are well aware of the remarkable physiological benefits of including "khar" and "tenga" in their culinary traditions.

The research also draws a distinction between the act of consuming food and the process of its preparation. These culinary experiences were introduced to Loya by Romen, the skilled chef at The Yellow House. He dedicated considerable effort to prepare authentic Assamese cuisine specifically for Loya. Despite Loya's mixed heritage, with one side being Malayali and the other Assamese, she had never had the opportunity to explore her Assamese roots due to a familial rift between her mother and her grandparents. Nevertheless, Romen extended his support, enabling her to savour the traditional Assamese dishes, which she genuinely enjoyed during her stay in Assam.

Food takes on a fresh perspective on life. It mentions certain subtle elements that readers might intuit as they delve into the novel. Loya's mother, Rukmini, never acquired culinary skills. This could be due to a lack of time or because her mother, Usha, never passed down the culinary knowledge to her. On the contrary, Usha consistently enjoys commemorating even the most minor of occasions, as illustrated 'she would bake cakes to celebrate something as trivial' (Barua 50) as the onset of a bird's nesting.

Food, in relation to women, has often been associated with the idea of passing down recipes and culinary knowledge to the next generation, as described 'learned by women during childhood and how these are passed onto daughters, nieces and other female relatives' (Parveen 50). However, in this book, we see a different perspective where Usha breaks from this tradition and doesn't focus on passing these skills down to Rukmini.

Food often plays a pivotal role in enhancing the festive atmosphere. Maintaining mindfulness during food consumption can promote a harmonious relationship. The novel's narrator portrays the joy experienced at The Yellow House upon Loya's visit. After nearly four years, the finest cuisine was presented by the talented chef Romen. The meal commenced with exquisite appetizers and concluded with delectable desserts.

In this story, a male chef named Romen introduces Assamese cuisine to Loya. It's often said that 'recipes are sustained in diaspora and transmitted through female genealogy by word or mouth' (Parveen 48). However, this statement is somewhat challenged because Loya, even though she lives in India, is unable to connect with her culinary roots. She lives with her mother, who never had the opportunity to learn the art of cooking from her mother, Usha. Rukmini, Loya's mother, doesn't grasp the significance of cooking and was never able to prepare good meals for her daughter. This disconnect creates a gap in their relationship, as Loya is a food enthusiast who forms a strong connection with her grandfather's Assamese chef, Romen, through cooking. She becomes more accustomed to Romen than to her own grandfather. Throughout the novel, Romen disproves the notion that only women have the ability to cook with love and care for food. He was fervent about providing good food to Loya and finds joy in cooking after many years.

'Food that had not been served these past four years- rice pulaos peppered with raisins and fragrant with saffron; mutton curries rich with apricots and exotic fruit; pineapple puddings-now made their way to the once ordinary table' (Barua 67).

Loya's fascination with food can also be explored by observing

her choice of attire. As per Torun, she tends to opt for clothing that resembles that of a boy rather than a girl. When Torun mentioned to his friend Robin that she possesses quite a hearty appetite and could easily consume ten *lusis* in succession, her fondness for food was downplayed. The novel hints at the consumption habits and leisurely indulgence she delves into when it comes to food. Furthermore, her involvement in the Yellow House has been minimal. Aside from sharing meals, she has rarely engaged in conversation with her grandfather, Torun. This can be understood by examining her active engagement within her Bangalore residence alongside her mother, Rukmini. Rukmini has never tried her hand at cooking for her daughter. They rely on Muniamma, their cook, who consistently seeks Loya's opinion regarding the lunch and dinner menu. She has been passionate about this since her childhood, dedicating herself wholeheartedly to food and recipes. Evidently, human contentment is intricately woven into every aspect of life, including culinary experiences. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), a renowned French anthropologist and ethnologist who played a pivotal role in the advancement of structuralism, authored an essay titled *The Culinary Triangle* in 1997, expounded upon the cultural significance of the methods of boiling, roasting, and grilling meat, each embodying a distinct cultural structure. Individuals from diverse geographical areas express varying perspectives on the art of cooking. In his perspective, every type of food carries a cultural imprint. To certain individuals, spoiled food symbolizes various cultural aspects such as decomposition and decline, while for others; it represents the natural evolution of food without any unpleasant connotations. Understanding the significance and power of deciphering food consumption is crucial. 'It was sambars and rasam and the usual vegetables with the same masalas. Whenever, she hankered for something different, Loya would open up one of the cookbooks she had bought and laboriously put together a dish.' (Barua 85)

Exploring diverse ingredients in culinary experiments and grasping the nuances of taste laid the foundation for Strauss's theory. He delved into elucidating how food could symbolize various concepts using distinct techniques. In parallel, Loya, when seeking a departure from her usual culinary experiences, leaned towards comprehending the technical aspects that could be gleaned from a cookbook. She combined ingredients strategically to craft her desired dishes. Strauss's culinary journey, marked by experimenting with various cooking methods, played a pivotal role in the development of the Culinary Triangle Method.

Barua's endeavour to illuminate the emotional connection with food takes centre stage. The novel intricately explores the gaps in relationships among its characters. Yet, the characters' enduring fondness for food remains a prominent thread throughout the narrative. The author skilfully juxtaposed the intricacies of Assam and Bangalore's distinct cultures, highlighting their shared indifference towards food. In the novel, Barua posited that regardless of cultural diversity, a common thread of unity and cohesion could be discovered through the medium of food. Barua used the character Loya to illustrate that her resentment and ill will towards her grandfather gradually diminished as she experienced warm and welcoming hospitality from the residents of the Yellow House. Undoubtedly, food takes centre stage as a symbol of kindness, love, and care in the novel. Through the sharing of meals, the characters, including Loya and their beautiful relationships, are nourished and brought together. In her connection with Ammachi, despite sensing a gap between Ammachi and her mother, she manages to bridge the affectionate bond with Ammachi through the medium of food. Similarly, her connections with her grandfather and his chef, Romen, as well as her rescuer in Bangalore, Muniamma, were depicted by Barua through the diverse medium of food. Robin, a close acquaintance of Loya's grandfather and a somewhat modest figure in the novel, consistently extended offers of sustenance whenever she paid a visit. The sustenance she grew accustomed to be solely of the culinary variety; it also nurtured her feelings of isolation, solitude, and the anxiety she perpetually sought to evade. Barua skilfully crafts her prose with an elegant touch, infusing her novel with subtle elements that effortlessly ensnare the readers' attention from start to finish.

In the novel *Undertow*, we are given glimpses of the gastronomic culture through the character Loya. Her profound appreciation for culinary delights and her seamless assimilation into the local culture through food is truly commendable. Despite never having visited Assam previously, when her destiny led her to this place, she effortlessly embraced both the locale and its cuisine. Romen effortlessly embraced Loya's sense of home in Bangalore, never hesitating to immerse himself in the customs and unique culinary traditions of Assam when preparing meals for her. Romen demonstrated his culinary prowess, displaying an intricate knowledge of the cuisine's techniques and regional cooking styles. As a true "gastronome", he deeply understood the importance of food and its connection to a person's cultural customs. A gastronome not only appreciates the significance of consumption but can also be considered a gourmet.

Furthermore, they possess extensive knowledge of the history and rituals associated with cuisine. From an epistemological standpoint, “gastronomy” encompasses a broader perspective, intertwining with food and culture, encompassing the culinary arts, service etiquette, and the nuances of taste appreciation, all while delving into the scientific realm of optimal consumption. Barua meticulously delineated the importance of each character, elucidating that even the seemingly minor characters exert a profound influence on the central protagonist. They serve as conduits for exploring the characters’ relationships with food and their culinary journeys.

To conclude, Barua skilfully portrayed the intricate connections between characters and their ability to evoke emotions through the medium of food. This conveyed the idea that food could serve as a meaningful means of expressing or cathartically releasing emotions to readers. Loya discovered her refuge within the realm of cuisine, forming connections with those who crafted these delectable dishes. She engaged in daily conversations with these culinary artists, while she remained reticent about revealing her emotions to her closest confidants. The novel narrates her exploration of self-gratification and her bold explorations beyond her familiar territory, all while using her culinary escapades as a unique perspective. Barua skillfully illustrates the conflicts within relationships, with Loya’s strong connection to food prominently showcased amidst the turmoil. Every parent could empathize with the idea that when a child is provided with nutritious meals, they naturally cultivate strong connections with their elders. They hold the belief that their loved ones are the ones responsible for preparing the food. Furthermore, the author also elucidated the solitary eating habits that children have become accustomed to nowadays. Loya, as the sole child, had a strong inclination towards keeping her food to herself, refraining from sharing it with anyone, including her father or any guest ‘no one, not even Alex, was ever invited for a meal’ (Barua 85). Rukmini and Loya both fail to grasp the significance of hospitality ‘mother and daughter would not know what to do in the event of a guest’ (Barua 85). The act of hosting and catering to guests is not a tradition observed in their Bangalore residence, largely due to Rukmini’s solitary lifestyle being a primary contributing factor.

In this novel, it becomes evident that food has evolved beyond its traditional significance and now primarily serves as a societal necessity. Loya deliberately decides to make a journey to The Yellow House in hopes of uncovering answers from her grandfather. The narrative adeptly illustrates the profound psychological impact on

her the moment she steps foot into The Yellow House. Her emotions find expression through the ritual of preparing and relishing food ‘the other thing the girl did was eat’ (Barua 67), highlighting the deep connection between her emotional state and the nourishment she found in her culinary pursuits ‘one would think she had been starved by her mother the way she tucked into her food’ (Barua 67). Food contributes to the overall sense of happiness in the story, and it even serves as a key factor in reuniting the estranged family towards the end of the novel. Implicitly, food plays a pivotal role in the narrative. People may fail to grasp the significance of consumption unless they are fortunate enough to enjoy good food. Consuming food is a fundamental aspect of human existence, whether it’s to satiate hunger, provide comfort during difficult times, or celebrate moments of joy. A comprehensive study of food plays a vital role in understanding an individual’s holistic well-being.

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