

IMAGINING FOOD AND IDENTITY: A STUDY OF ARVIND ADIGA'S THE WHITE TIGER

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Abstract

Food is crucial to our lives as a nutrient substance but apart from a nutritional substance, it plays an important role in formation of one's identity as it moves from biological function to cultural and symbolic one. So, food creates, and shapes one's cultural and ethnic identity. Also differ persons and communities to each other as though everyone eats food, but not everyone eat the same food or prepare or consume it in the same ways. This paper proposes to examine the ways in which identity is structured around the descriptions of food in Adiga's *The White Tiger*, and thereby argues for the importance of food in the construction of individual identity, showing how food and eating habits express character's emotions, and relationships and becomes a vehicle in determining identity. And how various facets of identity that is not homogenous in postmodern era, corresponds to the characters' and plays its role in determining their personality traits and give them individualistic attitude.

Arvind Adiga is one of the promising writers of Indian contemporary fiction. He got fame by his debut novel *The White Tiger*. First published in 2008, it won the 40th Man Booker Prize in the same year. He was the second youngest writer and the fourth debut writer to win the Man Booker prize in 2008.

The White Tiger is in the epistolary form which provides ambivalent perspective of India's class struggle. The animalization of human species becomes a metaphor for the inhumanity of India's urban economic growth, and a way to conceptualize the cruelty of India's new social organization and the ruthlessness. Balram, the narrator and the White Tiger of the title, casts himself as a man-eater. Through his journey in the novel, he examines the issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption, poverty and globalization in India. Ultimately by establishing himself as an entrepreneur, Balram transcends his sweet-maker caste. The novel presents a bleak picture of what really happens to colonized people after colonialism has met its end. Dealing with the different and various identities, the novel becomes a site where clash of different castes, religion and values can be seen.

Notion of Identity and Food

The linkage between food and identity is of great importance both to food studies and literary fiction. Identity is a notion we live by and through which we negotiate in our society. It is a notion that is not “fixed,” but being in constant flux and the product of hybridizations. The representation of food is commonly used in literature because it is a familiar, universal substance that is understandable. As identities are not fixed so as to foodways because in this era of postmodernity adaptation and re-creation take place on a day-to-day basis. As Scholliers says:

“Diet and identity are not ‘given’ or just ‘out there’ ready to grab, but both are interpreted, adapted or rejected according to one’s needs, means and intentions” (4). Identity is a synthesis of a variety of aspects and food habits as its constituent part might be overruled by other self-representations in view of the context.... Food habits are dynamic and subject to change, and so it is undesirable to make direct connections between food and concept of national identity” (Hinnerova n.p.).

We can define ourselves in opposition to the culinary items of another cast or community and nation. In a far richer sense, we can also equate the other with the inedible. Food affects a person's self-identity as well as his social function. Eating practices and habits determines a person's economic standing as well as his role within the family dynamic. Similarly, food is fundamental to one's culture. Though everyone eats food, not everyone eats the same foods nor do they prepare or consume it in the same ways. Food creates, and shapes one's cultural and ethnic identity This paper seeks to examine the ways in which identity is structured around the description of food in Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, and thereby argues for the importance of food in the construction of individual identity, showing how food and eating habits express character’s emotions, and relationships and expresses his or her identity.

Caste identity and Food

Adiga presented a critique of nation itself in *The White Tiger* by showing the caste system of India. He captures the process whereby the upper-caste exploit the poor lower caste people. The caste system is a social system that divides the Indian population into higher and lower castes and classes, on a broader level. Each caste has its own cultural traditions with its own food habits, rituals, dress codes and traditionally assigned to a specific occupation. In defining caste, Uma Chakravarti states, “the relationship to the occupation and specific cultural traditions of each caste functions within a broader framework in which the localized hierarchy is based on ritual status, control or lack of control of productive resources and power. This is the difference within the caste system, making a division between upper caste or higher castes and lower caste... and lower castes who are at the bottom of hierarchy and whose touch was often regarded as polluting” (9). As usual the marginal are kept at the ridge or periphery of the power centre.

“If the natives was the subaltern during the colonial rule, postcolonialism created its own subalterns. Women, lower cases, and classes, ethnic minorities rapidly become the ‘Others’ within the postcolonial nation-state. The new elite were as exclusive, as the colonial master. Democratic approaches failed, and economic and social emancipation slopped across the horizon as millions of ‘postcolonial saw themselves colonized by the new powers.... Further caste discriminations and working class continues unabated” (Nayar 100).

Food, or rather its absence, is reflective of the issues of power distribution and politics. It performs a crucial role in the construction and the deconstruction of castes and communities. Balram belongs to the caste of Halwais, meaning "sweet-maker", but is the son of a rickshaw puller - not a sweet-maker. Here, his identity as a 'Halwai' is used to highlight his position in the society as a subaltern so food is used as a tool to exclude him on the basis of race and cast. Mary Douglas who is an influential researchers in this area, also shares this idea:

“Food objectifies social relations and thus it can encode messages of inclusion and exclusion, degrees of hierarchy or willingness to communicate across boundaries (Leeds-Hurowitz 88; Hinnerova n.p.)”.

Describing India in its days of greatness, Balram said that it was a "...clean, well-kept orderly zoo". But no longer because that the powerful with the big bellies took over anything they could and now in India there are only two castes in India – “Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies’ only. And only two destinies: eat- or get eaten up.” So, he was cheated of his destiny ‘to be fat and creamy skinned, and smiling’ (Adiga 64).

Food inspires communal bond while simultaneously constructing barriers. Food choice distinguishes the differences between nations and classes. He is again and again reminded by people of his caste to which he belongs. When he commits a mistake in learning the driving; the old driver said why don't you stick to sweets and tea? Caste sometimes helps Balram and Kishan to get them jobs on tea shops because people thought that they are Halwais, making sweets and tea in their blood.’ But it proves a hurdle when he decides to try an occupation by going out of the traditionally assigned occupation. His future as a chauffeur depends on his caste. It is thought that Halwai cannot become a chauffeur because driving is considered to be an act of masculinity in India. Only masculine upper people can ventures into the act of driving. As the old driver asked:

‘What cast are you?’

‘Halwai’

‘Sweet-makers,’ the old driver said... ‘That’s what you people do. You make sweets. How can you learn to drive?’ ...Mastering a car’- he moved the stick of an invisible gearbox-‘it’s like taming a wild stallion- only a boy from a warrior cast can manage that. You need to have aggression in your blood. Muslim, Rajputs, Sikhs - they’re fighters, they can become drivers. You think’ sweet-makers can last long in fourth gear?

Food also have the ability of connecting the haves and have-nots - not but though for some time. “Curry at Work: Nibbling at the Jewel in the Crown,” Mark Stein states, “Food cuts across the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ – in its ordinariness it connects all human beings, irrespective of differences. Food, the external that is ingested, internalized, only to be expelled again, points towards the paradoxical relationship that humans can have to their surroundings...” (qtd. in Whitt n.p.). Ashok says:

‘I’m sick of the food I eat, Balram. I’m sick of the life I lead. We rich people we have lost our way, Balram I want to be a simple man like you, Balram.’

‘Order for us, Balram. Order the commoners’ food.’

‘I ordered okra, cauliflower, radish, spinach, and *dhal*. Enough to feed the whole family, or one rich man.... “This food is fantastic. And just 25-rupees! You people eat so well!” When he was done I ordered him a lassi

and when he took the first sip he smiled....'I like eating your food. 'I smiled and thought, *I like eating your kind of food too* (Adiga 238-239).

Again, landlord is also very much concerned with Balram's caste and family background, "are you from a top caste or bottom caste, boy... all our employers are from top caste" (Adiga 64-65).

If eat is to distinguish and discriminate, include and exclude, "food choices establish boundaries and borders Apart from driving, Balram has to do other household jobs. For dalits, the labour is central to their existence -but is devalued by the caste system" (Chakravarti 87). Pinky Madam said "I hear you're a Halwai, your family are cooks. Do you know some special traditional type of ginger tea?" (Adiga145). By scratching his groin with left hand and washing ginger with right hand, makes Pinky madam angry and she remarks on him:

"You are so filthy! Look at you, look at your teeth, and look at your clothes! There is a red paan all over your teeth, and there are red spots on your shirt. It is disgusting! Get out- clean up the mess you have made in the kitchen and get out" (Adiga146).

The fact is that the lower caste people are considered dirty. Balram is haunted by the scene of hens and rooster situated behind Jama Mahjid and concludes that they have no option to escape so is the case with the lower class people.

People associate everything to his background as a 'sweet-maker'. Mocking at his cast again and again and his desire to become a big bellied man results in frustration in which he slits the throat of his master. In Laxamangarh, where the villagers, family and friends are subjected to exploitation, torture and torment by the village landlord, Balram is very conscious of his lower caste. He shows his anger, frustration, protest and revenge and is ready to adopt a new moral code of conduct to get success in life. Murder of Ashok by Balram is the result of deep-rooted frustration of lower class experiencing the polarities between the upper class and the lower class. Balram shows a vision of India in which a person high on the caste system greases the hands of the police officers with money to cover up murders, and sabotage, and have various privileges. Balram is a rare exception, as he experiences both sides of the caste system and breaks out the 'rooster-coop' in order to move up the social ladder.

As people are identified by their castes, food has also two classes – vegetarian and non-vegetarian. Ashok, albeit inherits the cunningness of his family, is opposite in nature. He is vegetarian but all his family members are non-vegetarians. He said:

"Don't you have anything vegetarian? I don't eat meat.'

I've never heard of a landlord who was vegetarian,' the wild boar said.

'It's natural.

You should eat meat to toughen up you up ...

'I don't believe in killing animals needlessly. I knew vegetarians in America, and I think they are right.'

...'you are a landlord. It's the Brahmins who are vegetarians, not us.'"
(Adiga 83).

By showing the upper caste landlords and cruel, Balram vents his spite out on the local landlords who are animals in human form. But Ashok a kind-hearted person becomes a subject of vengeance for the wrongs done to the subaltern community by other powerful landlords of his village.

Adiga has presented a paradoxical situation where “the dreams of the rich, and the dreams of the poor—they never overlap, do they? See, the poor dream all their lives of getting enough to eat and looking like the rich. And what do the rich dream of? Losing weight and looking like the poor” (Adiga 225).

There was enough food in the house for the servants. On Sundays you even got a special dish, mixed with small red chunks of boneless chicken. I had never a regular chicken dish in my life until then; it made you feel like a king, eating chicken Sunday after Sunday and then licking your fingers.(Adiga 67).

Balram, on the other hand, refuses to accept the job assigned by his caste. He ironically points out, he has nothing to do with the profession his cast indicates but it just means becoming a “spiderman,” a hungry man from the Darkness, working in a tea-shop:

“But if we are Halwais, then, why was my father not making sweets but pulling a rickshaw? Why did I grow up breaking coals and wiping tables, instead of eating gulab jamuns and sweet pastries when and where I chose to? Why was I lean and dark and cunning, and not fat and creamy-skinned and smiling, like a boy raised on sweets would be? (Adiga 53).”

Balram is afraid of feeding such an extended family which has corroded Kishan. His rebellion is not only against the members of the upper caste, but against his own caste also. By criticizing the caste system and showing how the people from the upper caste victimize those of the lower caste, Adiga also shows how the individual’s own caste can become stifling. This second view of the caste system also put forward by the writer in this novel. He ironically shows how the extended family sucks the blood of its men, and ties them to the poorly paid jobs permitted by their caste, as they take huge debts to pay expensive wedding for the daughters of the family.

Individual Identity and Food

One can find out the temperament of a person from the nature of the food he prefers A.K. Ramanujan in *Food for thought: Towards an Anthology of Hindu Food-images* states... you are what you eat, and your taste expresses your character” (79). Food indicates who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be. Balram had never a regular chicken dish at his house in darkness but in Dhanbad, he started getting non-vegetarian food which is supposed to create sensuality, sexuality, greed, jealousy, and anger etc. and the person who eats such food are interested in gaining power, and prosperity. Balram also want to attain food and power. Now this type of food enhances his desire of becoming a ‘big- bellied man’and ‘creamy- skinned man’ which he fulfilled by crime.

Balram just belongs to caste of Halwais but he lacked enough food to eat. Since food is power, so he lacked that power. Hence, in order of to be powerful, he charts out a heinous itinerary. Powerless Balram becomes a subject of amusement for Ashok and Pinky. They poke fun at him when he mispronounced ‘Maal’ for ‘mall’ and ‘piJJA’ for PiZZa’. In this way, his struggle is for food. As he has no power, he is bullied by his ex-boss and his wife. Now, Balram can provide everything to his Dharam which he lacked in his childhood.

In the article “Food for Thought,” Andy Martin states that “... “The truth is, we are what we do not eat” and that we “define ourselves in opposition to the menu of another country or community; conversely, we equate the Inedible with the Other.” (qtd. in whitt). Food documents the gap between individuals like Ashok and Balram. Ashok and Pinky is ‘other’ for

Balram. They eat different kind of food and have different personalities “his eyes seemed full of wonder! How could two such contrasting individual specimens of humanity be produced by the same soil, sunlight and water?” (Adiga, 80). Food choices demarcates the difference between the people. . Sudha Rai in the article titled “The Discourse of food and the Matrilineages Contemporary Women’s writings holds:

“The belief system that holds the topic of food, stabilizes cultural and national identities. While contributing to a system within a community, food is also a marker of the other and can divide races and nations as also religions, cast and class groups within traditional societies (qtd. in Nidhi Singh155)”.

Balram is a product of complex identity. His name changes during his struggle but after achieving his aim of climbing society’s ladder, he once again changes his name, as Ashok Sharma. The first name Ashok is reminiscent of India’s great emperor. In this respect, it reflects power and respect but unlike Ashoka, Balram earns this power and status through crime and deceit. The name Ashok also signifies absence of pain, without sorrow’. As Balram says that the trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy. Balram breaks that trust by murdering his master cold-bloodedly. He finds a way to be out of cage to become The White Tiger.

Eating practices and etiquettes reflects a person’s personality and upbringing. Dharam has all these etiquettes. He speaks English fluently and enough to eat. He blackmails Balram for milk and icecream. Milk, which signifies nurturing and innocence, becomes the symbol of his anger, “I watched the milk. It seethed, and spilled down the sides of the stainless steel vessel; the small, shrunken man smiled — he provoked the boiling milk with a spoon —it became frothier and frothier, hissing with outrage” (251). Milk becomes a signifier of his underlying self that shows his inclination towards whiteness and “we see his deeper knowledge leak into the text... Balram also fights his existence, showing that he is aware of his unconscious self and realizing a possibility to make his social status dynamic. He first must realize that he can vanish, for he has no real name or birth date, no official records with the government, no consequence to anyone if his master is no longer alive... Balram kills his master” (Waller n.p.).

Yet Balram has no regret or guilt of doing so. Assuming the new identity of Ashok, as the name signifies, he enjoys the power and freedom and forgets the pain of humiliating servitude. “His newly-assumed family name, Sharma, replaces Halwai with ideas of happiness and joy. As Sharma in Sanskrit has various connotations, such as bliss, happiness’, ‘shelter’ and ‘protection’.

According to Makela, “Food and eating can bring people together, but they can also keep them apart (qtd. in Kahlon n.pag.). Ashok has enough food to eat, so he has power. He is vegetarian and vegetarian food is conducive of good health. It reflects in his temperament but he becomes a prey of Balram. In order to be a predator, Balram first becomes a driver, and then an entrepreneur. Adiga’s character is then a dissenter who struggles to break away from his own imposed social identity. And here is another shade of irony in Adiga’s narrative. He invokes the life of freedom in order to assume a role that will allow him to enter into new globalized India. Hence it is a totally individual liberation process that leads to the death of all the people of his family. The novel seems to challenge the definitions of Indian identity with a narrator who comes from a nameless past with a written fate as a member of the lower caste. Balram is first defined through nonidentity by the fact that he has neither given a name. Subsequently, his teacher names him "Balram ... the sidekick of the god Krishna" (Adiga10-11). Balram’s first encounter with a white tiger at the National Zoo in New Delhi, he observing the sign that reads:

"Imagine yourself in the cage" (Adiga150). The white tiger at the zoo connects with Balram 's unconscious self. He thinks of himself caged like the tiger in a 'rooster – coop". "After Balram's first encounter with the white tiger, we begin to see some of the rage that lies in his unconscious self. The final push follows a chain of events beginning with Ashok's wife accidentally killing a nameless poor person on the road. Ashok's legal adviser suggests that Balram take the fall for the crime, so after his wife leaves him. Instead of making noise and visible emotion, Balram retreats into quiet nothingness. There is no guilt for his crime, because he sees murder as the only way to realize his Being. He also has a dream to start a school, an English language school for the poor children in Bangalore.

Religious Identity and food

The disparities between the religions are also shown in the novel. A man is forced to change his religious identity in order to get a job as a driver. And when his religious identity is revealed he has to lose his job. Such incidents show the tensions between Hindus and Muslims. For instance Balram is able to get the first no. driver of Ashok's family Ram Persad, fired because Persad is a Muslim disguised himself as a Hindu. Balram recognize him through his food habits during the days of Ramajan as he says ' what a fool I'd been!' It's Ramadan! They can't eat and drink during the day (Adiga108). However, Balram feels some remorse for his actions but he doesn't say sorry to him. It is also true that he himself bears no grudges against Muslims. Infact, he respects them and says that they are good people. He makes many references to the "four greatest poets who have ever lived"- Rumi, Mirza, Galib, and the fourth fellow whose name he has forgotten. All are all Muslims, and agrees with their intelligence he finds in their poets. The religious bias and impediment and animosity between Hindu and Muslim community is so much that even Stork wants that his grandson should not call himself Azharuddin , the captain of Indian cricket team, Stork's grandson says " I am Azharuddin, the captain of India!" Adiga in his novel seems to question the very basis of these performing religious activities and considers them baseless:

"Now, I no longer watch Hindi films – on principle but back in the days, just before the movie got started, either the number 786 would flash against the black screen –the Muslims think this is magic number that represents their god – or else you would see the picture of woman in white sari with gold sovereigns dripping down to her feet, which is goddess *Lakshmi* of the Hindus" venerated custom of the people in my country to start a story by praying to a higher power (Adiga 8)."

Discussion of Hinduism in the novel plays a number of roles throughout the story. Balram shows the signs of respect for various objects or buildings like a sacred temple, statue, or tree. Balram doesn't take his religion too seriously and often pokes fun at it, especially at the 36,000,004 gods. Religion plays an important role in an Indian's life as it symbolizes tradition and honour. This is revealed through the marriage of Ashok and Pinky madam as Ashok's father was against of their union because she was not a Hindu.

The lord Hanuman is the most famous god for the common man. He was the faithful servant of lord Rama and common men praise him because he is a good example of how to serve masters with absolute fidelity, and devotion. This thought is in Balram's consciousness at first but in the end, he renounces his own belief by murdering his master.

National Identity and Food:

Postcolonial writings seem to invoke the notion of social justice, freedom and equality in their attempt to counter structures of racial discrimination, prejudice and ill-treatment. The *White Tiger* presents a contrast between India's rise as a global economy and the plight of the marginalized class of society living in devastating poverty through resented two sides of Indian democracy – an India of light and an India of darkness. Pollution, hectic routine of life, impact of city culture, creates new territories of Darkness in India. India is presented as an emerging entrepreneurial power in the world. Advancement in the field of transportation, tourism, real estate, expansion of mall culture, industries and outsourcing, etc., are the characteristics of the other side of India. But all these developmental activities depend on the labor of the lower class with distinct identity. As a chauffeur in Gurgaon, Balram is exposed to the socio-economic inequality and injustice all around him in the twenty-first century India. Ashok illustrates the complexity of the relationship between the Darkness and the Light. Balram says that “India may not have drinking water, sewage system, and Olympic gold medal but it may have democracy, it is another matter that our democracy run by beastly muscleman, upstarts like the conductor-turned politician and the Great Socialist with ninety-three criminal cases pending against him” (Bende 117).

“As urbanization and industrialization speed up in India and the country's political economy moves towards an arrangement more compatible with globalized capitalism, the fast-food market, too, has expanded dramatically. A sizeable section of urban India now senses the need for something like fast food. However, the formulaic concept of fast food has not made deep inroads in urban awareness” (Nandi n.pag.). Adiga also presented the impacts of globalization. It can be linked to colonialism because many foods and eating practices have been exchanged during colonial period. It can be defined as a process of rapid integration of different countries through foreign trade and foreign investment. Food is one area of culture that has been greatly impacted by globalization. “It (food) is associated with historical roots, colonialism, superstition, religion and with the local folk culture. It may be used as a marker for class and social aspirations and is often a gauge for personal relationships used as a marker for class and social aspirations and is often a gauge for personal relationships” (Rampaul n.pag.).

Adiga's discussion of the western foods in the novel expresses the consumerism of society and the influence of westernizations. Food is used as a bribe, as a means of exercising influence and it becomes crucial to the story as it establishes communication between Balram and Dharam so to facilitate familiarization between the two. He mentions Pizza which delights the master's wife and ice-cream which is used by Dharam to blackmail Balram as so he thinks. He praises Dharam's capacity to ask for milk, pizza and ice creams while he himself as a child often went hungry and only the weddings were the time when can ate to his heart's content. Dharam's demand for more and more food can be perceived as her embracement of things and at the same time, it helps to evoke a greater deal of memories and feelings in Balram. In Delhi, Balram experiences the two kinds of India with those who are eaten, and those who eat, prey and predators. He decides that he will be an eater, someone with a big belly, and the novel tracks the way in which this ambition plays out.

Conclusion:

The notion that the idea of homogenous identity is untenable is seemingly true. Identities are multiple and they are a combination of various facets. Balram is an example of it. We examine food consumption as a postmodern experience which carries multiple cultural, social, psychological, and symbolic meanings. By demonstrating the close relationship between food,

caste, politics and its impact on human psyche, Adiga evokes the social desires, imperfections and ambitions through Balram's narrative. The search for food is connected with the state of his status in as a part of his individuality and it is used to show the inequality and difference between the rich and poor.

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