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Reclaiming the Self through the Language of Food: A Study of Anita Nair's *Alphabet Soup for Lovers*

Abstract

Food constitutes one of the most interesting languages of communication, and also reflects the shifts in life styles of people of a particular culture. In the book Food and Culture, the French theorist, Roland Barthes states, "Substances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification; and as soon as this happens, we have communication by way of food" (25). The items of food, the texture of food, the colour, taste, smell of foods, ways of preparation and norms around cooking, eating, and serving tend to become important 'signs' of this language to render the significance of food in a socio-cultural set up. Memories associated with food also become an important signifier in the language of food. Further, food can be viewed as the language of women to 'write their self,' as they are commonly associated with food preparation and serving their families. In the process of expression through food, consciously or unconsciously, women are also involved in articulating their 'self,' and therefore, in constructing an identity for themselves. Does food, as a system of communication, provide a powerful medium for women to bring to fore their problems and struggles they face in their attempt to establish themselves as individuals? Since food is a cultural product, do culinary fictions reveal the contours of a specific culture and its formulations of women? The present paper intends to look into these questions by considering Anita Nair's Alphabet Soup for Lovers as a significant culinary fiction that narrates the journey of two women who reclaim their self-identity through the language of food.

Key Words: Food, Women, Identity and Self-reclamation.

Lena Abraham and KK lives an uneventful married life on the tea estate of Anamalai hills. Komathi is Lena's cook, with a buried past, who shares a fraught relationship with Lena. Going by the advice of her granddaughter, Komathi begins to learn English alphabet through food. ShoolaPani, South Indian cinema's heartthrob, an actor in flight from his own stardom, comes to spend some solitary time at a homestay run by Lena and KK. When Lena meets ShoolaPani something blazes between them that neither could have predicted. Soon Lena becomes ShoolaPani's Lee and he her Ship and Arcadia the place they meet. Komathi narrates Lena's and ShoolaPani's intense tale of passion and love, as she learns each letter of the English alphabet. Each letter starting from A to Z is either related to Lena's present or Komathi's past. Nair serves a delicious soup of

Technology, Time and Human Desire

Scientific advancements have totally changed the living conditions of human beings. The pace of life has got a tremendous increase and the world runs faster than ever before in the digital era. Knowledge at fingertips makes human being feel stronger but he is still afraid of time. Whatever be the technological advancements and the speed human beings has acquired with the help of technology, time still remains something which man loses his race to. It is not an opponent which increases its speed in the race to win, but something which moves forward with a constant speed and man fails to run along with it always. As the time changes, changes occur to everything in the world. The energy and enthusiasm of everything reduces as the time moves forward. From a common man's perspective it can be said that the nature of the time remains constant for ever and what changes with time is not actually the time itself but everything else in the world. Human being as one of the components of the world also changes according to the changes in time, he grows older, becomes less energetic as the time moves forward and after a certain period of time his life functioning stops, what he calls death, which is the complete shutdown of the human system for ever. Since this shutting down is a necessity as per the rule of nature and the technology he has built is unable to do anything to change that, time matters. Every change that occurs in the human body is an effect of time. The wear and tear of anything is the result of the action of time on it. Therefore, the existence of something can be explained as the state of that thing in a particular point of time. The alterations occurring to it are the changes with respect to time. In this sense, the life span of a human being or anything is determined by the time, which is very obvious. But what human beings constantly try through the scientific and technological development is to improve his living conditions and that the medical science basically aims is to increase the time period of a man's life in this world. It aims at the increase in the period of time just because it cannot alter the effect of time on any thing in the complete sense. Even though there are surgical methods and other treatments to hide the old age, the human system itself will not take a pause in the process of aging. Every such treatment helps just to look young, not to make young. This consciousness actually disturbs every human being. The consciousness of being alive and the awareness of death after which nothing is actually known other than some believes and guesses prompts human being to sustain as long as he can in the state of being alive. To be precise there is a fear of death in the mind of almost all human beings and the fear of extinction in the mind of the human race as a collective. The end of one's life can happen in anyways, which is unpredictable. But this, as every other moment in human life, is depended upon the flow of time. The forward motion of time turns every second into history and therefore, undoing something that is already done in the past in order to make another result is impossible. The technological growth has made many "impossibles" possible, but rewriting the past is still something beyond the reach of man. But human being, as an emotional, ambitious creature with a lot of desires, though he knows it is beyond his abilities, dreams of overcoming the limitations

of time in his life. Every man might have wished at least once in his life for some extra hours in a day. The constantly running time frightens man not only with deadlines, but also with the results of an action done in a particular moment of time. There might be a wrong decision made in that moment which results in something that is unfavourable or harmful. It is not a new thing that man regrets on some of his decisions and helplessly faces the consequences. Something that has gone wrong or that was missed in a particular moment of time is sometimes able to destroy all the happiness and peace of mind of a person in his entire life. The incident can be anything and the person himself or any other person or any other forces can be responsible for that. Whatever it may be, the result of an action instigate man to recall that particular moment of time and curse it if it was unfavourable. These are the instances that evoke human thought process to conquer time, which sometimes act as an invincible villain.

Digital technology and the related gadgets, which are basically computers in different forms, have provided many facilities that help in preserving precious moments in the past and scheduling something to be done in the future. Programmes can be scheduled to be executed at certain point of time in the future using computer, just as an alarm is set. The photographs and videos are in a sense preserved fossils of the past time. Even the dead keep cracking jokes, laughing, dancing or even crying in those video clips as long as computer networks exist. The digital technology helps in storing, retrieving and sharing them but altering the past events to make a desirable future still remains a dream. Since the human craving for this is too intense, he gives life to his dreams where his imagination works without any limits, that is in creating fiction. When the possibilities of technology was incorporated with the imagination and desire of the human mind, science fictions came out which are mirrors of human dreams. What that is practically impossible in the worldly life are made real in fiction. Transcending the limits of time is done in the silver screen and the printed pages with a convincing support of the use of technology. The time travel thus recurs in the sci-fi movies of the digital era and they are accepted by the public as it is something they wish to be possible.

The Time Machine is the name that comes into the mind of every single man whenever he thinks of time travelling. The device that takes one to the past or future according to his/her desire is a dream project that is materialised in the science fiction. H G Wells' novel by the same title and the film adaptations of the same features the wonder machine that takes human being beyond the limits set by time. The scientist protagonist who develops this kind of a machine is the epitome of human desire which tries to rewrite the past and manipulate the future. It is human to ensure that every incident related to him is favourable and makes him feel better. None of the human beings want to suffer from any kind of pain or be disturbed by any kind of undesirable situations arising in his/her life. Therefore, if there is a chance to rewrite the history, man will definitely do that in order to erase the pain and loss he is suffering from by correcting the wrongly gone action in the past. It is not just staying alive, but ensuring that his/her dear ones are also alive makes a

man joyful, for he is a social animal.

Most of the Sci-fi movies that portrays a time travel reflects the human ambition of securing his existence by eliminating the negative forces from the timeline and his attempt to regain the lost. In this attempt, the characters travels back and forth according to need. The 2002 sci-fi movie *The Time Machine* portrays Dr. Alexander Hartdegen, the scientist who builds a time travelling device, trying to alter the past so that he can save his fiancée Emma, who was killed by a mugger. He saves her from being killed but only to witness her dying in some other way. He realises that her death occurs through other circumstances even if he tries to save her from one. For the favourable rewriting of the past he travels to the future to find scientific solutions in a more technologically advanced world. But he realises that the undoing of her death is quite impossible because her death is the cause for the invention of the time machine.

The 2016 Tamil science fiction thriller *24* portrays the making of a time travelling watch made by a scientist cum watchmaker Dr. Sethuraman and his evil twin brother Arthreya trying to steal it. Here the time travelling device is made as part of business and what creates a mess in the characters life is the human greed. Here Dr. Sethuraman actually addresses the human ambition of controlling time, to freeze it, travel back and forth for a period of 24 hours thus making life much better. At the same time Arthreya stands for the evil minds that aim the manipulation of the incidents in the world for making profits and he finds that the control over time is the best way through which he can do that. Dr. Sethuraman is killed by Arthreya and after a series of events Mani, Sethuraman's son, upgrades the watch enabling its user to travel back and forth in time without limits once he realises the cause of death of his parents and undoes the tragic events destroying the evil men.

“Bring back what we've lost. I hope, yes. Keep what I found, I have to, at all costs.” The words uttered by Tony Stark in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) comes out of the at most pain of losing the dear ones due to a single snap of Thanos, the mighty villain who vanishes off half of the entire population of earth using the power of six infinity stones. Thor is portrayed as a character who regrets about the moment he didn't go for Thanos' head in his dual with him and he wishes somehow to correct his mistake. “Five years ago we lost. All of us. We lost friends. We lost family. We lost a part of ourselves. This is the fight of our lives.” The words of Steve Rogers marks the human love for life, the need of coexistence with those who man love and care and above all ensuring the further existence of the very human race. The movie, rather than a superhero film with mind blowing action sequences, can be observed as the portrayal of human struggle for existence by defeating the dark forces that aims the complete annihilation of the human race. Since everything happens according to the progression of time, what they actually fight with is the time. The rewriting of the undesirable past and sequencing the upcoming events in a way that favours man in creating a peaceful future is the aim of their time

travelling. It's all the matter of time because without the movement of time nothing happens around and it is practically impossible by man to freeze or rewind time. Every sci-fi movie that portrays time travel shows how time plays the vital role in determining man's fate. Therefore time itself is the greatest villain and the greatest hero that every living being confronts with. This makes a human being continuously dream of transcending the limits of time.

Even when most of the people believes that time is a constant, Albert Einstein defined time as a fourth dimension which is relative that vary for different observers depending on their speed through space. Also time has direction and it moves only forward. Through theory of general relativity Einstein put forth the possibility of time travel if one could achieve the speed of light. This became the base idea of the time travelling in several science fiction works were the application of quantum physics justify the logic. The severe gravity of black holes that can engulf even light, which Stephen Hawking explained, shows how the aging process of man stops as he is in a very fast motion with respect to time. In *George's Secret Key to the Universe* Hawking portrays a scientist named Erick, whose aging stops when he is stuck in a blackhole. For an observer from the earth several years have passed but for Erick it was just a matter of minutes when he came out of the blackhole. The same logic is applied in *Avengers: Endgame* based on the experience of Scott Lang who got stuck in the quantum realm for five years and felt like just five hours. Similarly every other seemingly fantastic elements is backed with the support of the science and technology. Along with this, the super computers and artificial intelligence which has proved themselves to be efficient in resolving many degeneration of things and human body are convincingly incorporated with transcendence of time. Technological awareness and theoretical knowledge give wings to the logical portrayal of human defeating time in these science fiction works.

Conclusion

Time travel is theoretically possible but even with the help of all the technology available till the date, it is not practical. But the human desire for it never ends because he has realised that time is the greatest challenge that he has to face in his life, the determining factor of his fate. He cannot ignore any possibility of changing his unwanted past and knowing the future to adjust the track of life because he is a conscious being with a fear of extinction. To be alive is the primary necessity of a living thing and then to make the living environment favourable for it, exterminating all the dangers, is a basic nature of a living organism. This effort made by man to sustain himself is reflected in the sci-fi movies and novels that features time travel. The creative minds are making this dream of transcending the limits of time a reality in the silver screen. People accept it and applaud for it because the time travelling portrayed is one among the dreams of man which he craves for. His dream of beating time is fulfilled at least in fiction and it also paves way for new thinking and research on the same. The reliability digital technology and gadgets that

has improved human life is incorporated in the portrayal of this dream as a reality in the fictional space. Human beings who are afraid of the supremacy of the time and at the same time believes in the power of technology continues with his expeditions to conquer time like anything even if he knows that if “You mess with time, it tends to mess back” as Tony Stark said. (*Avengers: Endgame*)

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