Food: Culture, Consumption, and Representation

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Early in our childhood, we are introduced to fairy tales and legends that are popular in different cultures. Grimms' Tales was an absolute favourite of mine, mostly for its unforgettable storylines and characters. Yet, as I write this editorial for this special issue which focuses on the theme of *Food, Culture, Consumption and Representation*, I am reminded of the important role of food in this book of children's literature. Driven by extreme hunger in the family, a mother convinces her husband to abandon their children, Hansel and Gretel, and they fall into the hands of an evil witch who craves children's flesh; Snow White is poisoned by an apple prepared by her stepmother; dressed in red, a young girl walks through the woods carrying cake and wine to her grandmother – all alone, only to find a sly wolf waiting to devour her as it had devoured her grandmother; Goldilocks helps herself to the dinner of a family of bears (Grimm and Grimm, 2014). In all these stories, food does not just play its common conventional soothing and comforting role, but also there is an allusion to the dangers of temptation, gluttony, and starvation that surround food.

Needless to say, the prominence of food is not only abundant in children's literature but also in teenage and adult literature – which is, of course, reflective of our lives in the real world. In the real world, what we eat and will not eat, food we crave, desire, or abhor, where we will eat or will not eat, and in fact how much we eat are all deeply reflective of our heritage, our background, and our exposure. We are intimately connected to food, and to the memories and meanings that surround it. Food symbols found across genres highlights the "deepest human desires and anxieties, as well as ways of conceptualization of self and others" (Andrievskikh, 2014, p. 150). Food choices establish and perpetuate boundaries and borders. Food is closely tied to our identity. As Winona LaDuke (2012) states succinctly in her TEDx

talk, "Food for us comes from our relatives, whether they have wings or fins or roots. That is how we consider food. Food has a culture. It has a history. It has a story. It has relationships."

In line with its theme on *Food: Culture, Consumption, and Representation*, this special issue examines representations of food in movies, literature, diaries and online reviews with a specific focus on Asia. This special issue responds to two important questions:

- *What can Asian-centred narratives and texts tell us about the relationship between language and food?*
- *How can Asia as a site of study contribute to discussions in or around food scholarship?*

This special issue is enriched by a collection that spans across many different genres: the academic papers by Justin and Alex, Pillai, Sarmah, Anthony Thane and Chakravarty, the insightful interview on how Perumal Murugan uses food in his writing, the two short stories based in Singapore and Japan, by Mok and Lim respectively, as well as the food poems by Vethamani, Kuttan, Fajarito and Tneh. In addition, the two book reviews highlight both the creator and the critique: Whitehead's book review of *A Food Republic: A Singapore literary Banquet* points out the broad base of the anthology which includes prose, creative non-fiction and poetry, while Ghosh's review of Lesa Scholl's *Food Restraint and Fasting in Victorian Religion and Literature* examines the scholarly discussions on food that are both current and rooted in history. Undeniably, they provide a rich and varied tapestry of food discourse.

The opening article by Justin and Alex examines gender politics and power play in the act of cooking and culinary practices in different parts of India through four Indian food movies: *Stanley Ka Dabba* and *The Lunchbox* in Hindi, *Kaaka Muttai* in Tamil, *Aamis* in Assamese, and *The Great Indian Kitchen* in Malayalam. The kitchen and the performative act of cooking is presented as both an empowering and oppressive space. *The Great Indian Kitchen differs from the other movies in its choice to portray the oppressive nature of the chores of cooking*

for one's loved ones daily using 'kitchen-sink realist' style through the eyes of a newly married young woman in Kerala. The inclusion of *Aamis* by the researchers foregrounds another important but taboo element of food habits – cannibalism. Cannibalism is often attributed to raw sexuality in the movie *Aamis*. The second article, by Sarmah, continues the discussion of the movie *Aamis* in greater depth and explores the connection across different dimensions: such as what is considered taboo, and when meat becomes a metaphor for sexuality and desire.

The next article, by Pillai, examines food and religion through an analysis of the translated diary of a French Catholic missionary in Malaya during the Japanese occupation. The diary provides a rare insight into how Catholic church kitchens are run, the roles that each household aid or servant plays, and the significance of food choices in the Catholic order. It also documents how adaptations were made to French food in Malaya given a shortage of resources during the war.

The fourth article, by Chakravarty, examines how the well-loved detective series writer, Agatha Christie, used food in her novels. Like Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie's description of the meals served and prepared is often presented in the background to the plots: it reflects the traditional English fare, customs and rituals associated with a particular era in Greater Britain. In addition to this role of providing a rich background to the plots, food also plays a central role in her plots such as when it is turned into poison, and inevitably contributes to the progression of the narratives.

The next dimension of food discourse that has become especially prominent in recent years is the ones written online. The article by Anthony Thane analyses the discourse of online food reviews and visuals associated with these reviews of *Nasi Lemak*, a well-loved dish from the Malay Archipelago. She examines in depth using genre theory the text and visuals that describe the feel, taste, smell of the dish as well as the consumers and the places where the dish can be found. Through a careful analysis of the discourse, she unearths how integral the

discussion of people and places are to a review of the dish. She concludes that the most effective means of reviewing a dish is to tell a story about things associated with the dish rather than limiting it to the dish itself.

The interview with the award-winning author and academic Perumal Murugan, translated from Tamil by Vinai and Shabin, provides an important glimpse into the mind of the writer who often pushes boundaries in his writing. Yeats asks, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" Interviews like these that provide much-needed insight into writers' motivations and intentions, allowing us that much more space to appreciate their work.

Zimmerman (2010) notes that "food scenes have been artfully depicted by many of the world's greatest writers, from Boccaccio to Shakespeare to Austen and ever more. Over time, then from canvas to the printed page, and now on celluloid (with sound and colour), food scenes – whether mundane, tragic, romantic, or exotic – have greatly enriched the story of human existence and have made some of our best-loved characters appear all the more real to us." (p. 20). This special issue continues this rich tradition by describing and analysing the food discourse in four different Asian countries: Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, and Singapore. While this is certainly not all-inclusive, it is our hope that this special issue will contribute to a richer understanding and discussion of its theme: *Food: Culture, Consumption, and Representation*.

Equal attention is given to creative works, i.e., food fiction and food poetry, in this issue as it is creative writing and discourse that provide the basis for critical evaluation and appreciation. Mok's story on the failing Kachang Puteh business that is revived by a video that goes viral online reflects the power of the social media to revive food trades. Lim's 'Just a new way to roll' highlights how food and food practices have assimilated in their host countries. Vethamani's 'Rambutan Kisses', 'Mandarins' and 'Coconut Pearls' draw poignant parallels between food and familial love; vividly describes the act of eating a Mandarin orange from a

Chinese New Year collection, and how food has the power to elicit memories of forgotten childhood days. Tneh's poems too highlight the power of poetry to evoke memories of food, and paints a rather realistic picture of the performative act of cooking – of his grandmother cooking. Kuttan's haikus reflect the multicultural cuisine found in Singapore and Malaysia rather succinctly whilst Fajarito's poem reflects a modern-day food dilemma – the prevalence of fast food in the homes and lives of young families.

On a final note, I would like to thank our contributors and the book reviewers for your patience and hard work. A special bouquet of thanks is due to the reviewers, Prof. Edwin Malachi Vethamani, Dr Dennis Yeo, Dr Guo Libo, Dr Debanjan Chakrabarti, Dr Debarati Dutta-Cherukuri, and Prof. J Devika, for their insightful comments and feedback on the pieces. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the photographer of the cover photograph of this journal, Lijesh Karunakaran; the model, Sumi Baby Thomas; as well as Kanchana Amir, Amir, and Nikitha Vaadi for making the cover photograph a reality. Most importantly, my heartfelt gratitude goes to the previous Editor of SARE, Prof. Sharmani Gabriel for inviting me to edit this special issue on food discourse and for her guidance during the initial editorial stages, the current Editor, Dr. Susan Philip for her continued support and patience, and Dr Regina Yoong and the rest of the SARE team for working closely with me. All of you have made this special issue a labour of love and a celebration of food. Thank you.

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