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Representations of Culinary Images in Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayanaswami's *Swami and Friends*

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ABSTRACT

Culinary is a dominant means of portraying thoughts, themes, and narrative techniques by the literary writers all over the world throughout the whole time period. Besides being its literal use, food is also used as a metaphor for multiple things in literature. R.K. Narayan is an Indian English regional and realistic writer who uses culinary as the means of expression in many of his works, including *The Guide, The Vendor of Sweets, Half a Rupee Worth, My Days, Swami and Friends*, etc. The primary objective of this research paper is to study the culinary images represented in R.K. Narayan's children's novel, *Swami and Friends*. The main theoretical approach that is used in this research study is food studies. This study takes Carole Counihan's food theory to interpret the text. This research paper uses the qualitative and the analytical methods of research. It uses the APA 7th edition of referencing for citations. In conclusion, it is deduced that culinary images in the novel is used to represent fondness and comfort for home, motherly love and family, social and class hierarchies, community sense, power hierarchies, etc.

Introduction:

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'Culinary' means anything that is related to the kitchen or cookery. It especially refers to the developed skill or art of cooking. The word "culinary" comes from the Latin word *culinarius*, which means "pertaining to the kitchen". It is derived from *culina*, which means "kitchen, cooking stove, food". Culinary is a dominant means of portraying thoughts, themes, and narrative techniques by the literary writers all over the world throughout the whole time period. Instead of merely keeping passively in the background, foods are sometimes used as vital foregrounding images in many literary texts. Recently, it has been a trend to make delicate metaphorical use of food besides its literal use and sustenance power.

Indian English literature is overflowing with the food metaphors and culinary images portrayed, and R.K. Narayan is one amongst many Indian English writers. Other food writers of Indian English literature include Bhabani Bhattacharya, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Despande, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, Shoba Narayan, Madhur Jeffrey, Amulya Malladi, etc.

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayanswami is an Indian English regional and realistic writer. He was born on 10th October, 1906, in Madras, Tamil Nadu, India, into a Tamil Brahmin family. He is awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1960 and the Padma Bhushan in 1964. He is also awarded the AC Benson Medal in 1980 by the British Royal Society of Literature and the Padma Vibhushan in 2000. He was also nominated to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian Parliament. His name was also nominated for the Nobel Prize once. He is the writer of more than two hundred novels and also writes short stories, plays, and non-fiction. Many of his fictions are set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi, created by him. As far as his writing style is concerned, he focuses on the ordinary and everyday middle-class life of his characters. He usually takes the themes of Indian society. His narration is usually descriptive, authentic, and realistic. He also includes autobiographical elements in most of his works. Shashi Deshpande calls Narayan's writings naïve and pedestrian because he writes in a very simple language which goes hand in hand with the simplicity of the emotions and the behaviours of his characters. His writing style is often compared to that of William Faulkner, as both are regional novelists. Malgudi is a fictional urban South-Indian town created by R.K. Narayan. This fictional town can be compared to that of Faulkner's fictional country, Yoknapatawpha. The fictional town, Malgudi, was first introduced in his novel *Swami and Friends* (1935). He created the town in September 1930, on the day of Vijayadashami. It is an auspicious day chosen by his grandfather for some new beginnings ("R.K. Narayan," 2026).

His first novel *Swami and Friends* (1935) is the first book of his trilogy set in the fictional town of Malgudi. The other two novels are *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*. When this novel was first written,

it was rejected by many publishers. His uncle also ridiculed his effort. Later on, he became a reporter for a Madras-based paper, "The Justice". The paper was dedicated to the rights of non-Brahmins. The job exposed him to many publishers and issues. Moreover, he also sent the manuscript of *Swami and Friends* to a friend at Oxford. His friend showed the manuscript to Graham Greene. Then Graham Greene recommended Narayan's book to his publisher, and finally, it was published in 1935. This is a semiautobiographical children's novel that is concerned with the psychology of every Indian schoolboy, featuring laziness, procrastination, attempts to come out of the life of school bullying, workload, pressures, parents' control, and making their way to a life of freedom which, at last, fails, etc. Though throughout the novel, R.K. Narayan's way is comic, he portrays the real agonies of every school-going child in the novel. His work may also be considered as a moral message to every Indian parent as well as the school authorities about the harassment that the children face. He may try to bring out the fact that simultaneously with the academic work, co-curricular activities like sports are also important in students' lives through his use of cricket and the children forming the 'Malgudi Cricket Club'. Since the game 'Cricket' originated in England, therefore, it may reflect the scenario of British rule and its influence on the Indian people. Besides, *Swami and Friends*, his other writings that make extensive use of culinary metaphors are *The Guide, The Vendor of Sweets, Half a Rupee Worth, My Days,* etc.

Carole Counihan, in her book, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power,* says, Food "is connected to many kinds of behavior and is endlessly meaningful. Food is a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena" (Counihan, 1999, p. 6).

Objective:

The main objectives of this research study are:

1. To examine the relationship between food imageries and family in the novel.
2. To study how the novel employs food to represent the class, caste, race hierarchies in a society.
3. To examine the relationship between food and power hierarchies in the novel.
4. To study how food is used in the novel to maintain community relationship.

Research Methodology:

This research study uses food studies as the main theoretical approach in order to interpret the text. This study primarily takes the American anthropologist and theorist Carole M. Counihan's views on food, body, and society. It uses the qualitative, descriptive, and analytical methods of research. It combines both the primary and the secondary sources. It uses the APA 7th edition of referencing for citations.

Discussion:

R.K. Narayan, in his children's novel *Swami and Friends*, makes a dominant use of culinary images. Food imageries are used as tools to reflect many vital themes throughout the novel. Food imageries are used to portray fondness and comfort for home, motherly love and family, social and class hierarchies, community sense, power hierarchies, etc. All these are portrayed through child characters in the novel. Childhood innocence, longing for freedom, escaping from school bullying, friendship, familial relationships, and childhood ego - all these are represented through culinary images in the novel.

The novel examines the relationship between food and family that Carole M. Counihan theorises. She writes, "Feeding is one of the most important channels of infant and child socialization and personality formation" (Counihan, 1999, p. 17). She talks about how food is a determinant of the healthy relationship between parents and their children. She quotes Palazzoli's statement regarding this in her book, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power:* "Problematic feeding can lead to personality disturbances in children, and children's eating problems may erupt in dysfunctional families (Palazzoli 1971; Bruch 1973)" (Counihan, 1999, p. 18). Counihan writes:

> In all cultures, food plays a central role in mediating and expressing human beings' place in the world. Feeding is one of the earliest and most important ways in which adults establish relationships with children…Adults communicate to the growing child through the ways they satisfy the childs hunger. Whether they hold the child a lot or a little, feed on demand or on a schedule, respond immediately to the infants hunger or make it wait, feed in a calm or hectic environment, use feeding exclusively as nourishment or as a general comfort, express a pleasureful or utilitarian ideal of eating—all these practices communicate a sense of what the world is like to the infant. (Counihan, 1999, p. 133)

In the novel, at first, food is used to describe the child protagonist Swaminathan's home and motherly relationship with the females of his family. Through food items, his mother and his grandmother show their love, care, and nourishment for him. His grandmother's small wooden box containing cardamoms, cloves, and areca nuts is an instance of the comfort that he derives from her. Because the writer mentions how Swami "felt very snug and safe in the faint atmosphere of cardamom and cloves" (Narayan, 1935, p. 22). Since Indian grandmothers are generally associated with betel nuts and leaves, it is obvious that Swami's mother also keeps a container of post-meal tobacco. The cardamoms, cloves, and areca nuts are symbols of her aristocracy, though Swami's family is a middle-class family. The 'lime pickle' is a food item that Swami and his friends are always appetising for. It is a food item that Swami's mother prepares. But for

Swami and his friends, it is a treasure that is difficult to get, since his mother is all the time in the kitchen, and Swami can't steal it. The health benefits of lime pickle are very well known throughout India. Therefore, it is used as a digestive appetiser with the main meal in almost every household throughout the country. Moreover, the lime pickle can also provide the children with the life of freedom that they 'crave', since they think of eating that by sitting in the bank of the Sarayu river. But like the freedom, they also can't get the lime pickle. The coffee and the tiffin - these two food items play an important role in the relationship between Swami and his mother. His mother is, in the maximum time, seen either giving instructions to the cook about the coffee or making coffee and the tiffin herself. Swami is fond of the hotter and more sweetened coffee that his mother makes. He always insists on giving more sugar to his coffee. These two food items also work as the comfort foods that revive nostalgia for the home and his motherly love when Swami is lost in the woods. When he is wandering for hours in the woods, he is very exhausted, hungry, and thirsty. He is longing for his home, motherly love, and the foods she prepares. The 'curd rice' is a famous South-Indian recipe which Narayan mentions in the novel. Here, 'curd rice' works as a cultural signifier of the South Indian culture. Swami keeps thinking about the nice tiffin that his mother prepares with ghee and curds:

> What fine things the cook prepared! And how Mother always insisted upon serving ghee and curds herself! Oh! How he would sit before his leaf and watch Mother open the cupboard and bring out the aluminium curd-pot, and how soft and white it was as it noiselessly fell on the heap of rice on the leaf and enveloped it! A fierce hunger now raged within him. (Narayan, 1935, p. 186)

But since he can't get any of these food items in the woods, he tries quenching his hunger by plucking fruits like wood-apple, green figs, purple eugenia, etc. from the nearby trees and eats them. He is always in hunger for a life of freedom: he is consuming passion to come out of the stresses of schoolwork and homework, his father's control, and the duty and responsibilities of school. But when he is lost in the woods and can't find his way to his home, he is nervous. Though there he is free from all the workloads and school bullying, there he can't consume the delicious childhood freedom he gets. He is, instead, craving his home, the same school, the schoolmasters, and his father. The freedom that he craved for so long, the same freedom, can't give him satisfaction. When he is rescued by the forest officer and taken to his home, his mother treats him with his favourite food items of 'hot coffee' and 'steaming tiffin'. The author describes this as follows:

> Mother had meanwhile disappeared into the kitchen and now came out with a tumbler of hot coffee with plenty of sugar in it, and some steaming tiffin in a plate. Swaminathan, quickly and with great

> relish, disposed of both. A mixed fragrance, delicate and evocative, came from the kitchen. (Narayan, 1935, p. 203)

The food item "sugar" gets a significance here as far as the anthropologist, Counihan's view, is concerned. She, in her book, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power*, talks about the relationship between food and power. She quotes Mintz's view regarding this:

> Sugar is another example of how food reproduces and sustains hierarchy. It was at first only a food of the rich, who used it to create fabulous ostentatious sculptures that proclaimed their wealth and power through extravagance with the precious and desirable commodity (Mintz 1985). (Counihan, 1999, p. 8)

Here the excessive and extra amount of sugar may indicate his mother's extra care for him after his return. The sugar may also indicate their middle-class background, as the extra amount of sugar becomes a privilege for them. Moreover, generally Swami is seen drinking cold coffee as a beverage, but after returning from the woods, his mother provides him with hot coffee. This may be an indication of extra care and nourishment from his mother and extra privilege.

Secondly, the novel also portrays distinctively the relationship between food and the class, caste, and race in a society. Carole M. Counihan, in her book, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power*, comments that:

> Class, caste, race, and gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over and access to food. One's place in the social system is revealed by what, how much, and with whom one eats. As Goody says, "the hierarchy between ranks and classes takes a culinary form" (1982, 113). In India, caste is marked quite conspicuously by different food habits and prohibitions against eating with those of lower caste (Goody 1982, 116 ff; Khare and Rao 1986). Different consumption patterns are one of the ways the rich distinguish themselves from the poor. (Counihan, 1999, p. 8)

The very coffee and the tiffin that his mother prepares serve as the indicator of social and class hierarchy between children like Swaminathan and his intimate friend, Rajam. Because of Rajam's snobbish behaviour, Swami feels insecurity in his own home itself. Since Rajam is the police superintendent's son, Swami therefore feels shy and timid about inviting him to his unscheduled and disorganised house. When he and Mani go to Rajan's house, Rajam shows his power and control over the cook and also rebukes him for bringing the foods in dirty cups and keeping the plates on a table. Though the cook brings very nice coffee and a big plateful of eatables as tiffin for the guests, Rajam, instead, curses the cook in front of his friends.

This behaviour of Rajam indirectly works in Swami's mind also to be like him. He also wants to be like Rajam and misbehaves with the cook when he appears in front of his friends in a dirty white dhoti and shirt. Moreover, he also insists his mother prepare something fine, hot, and sweet for the afternoon tiffin to serve his special guest, Rajam. He says,

> "You had better prepare something very nice, something fine and sweet. Rajam is coming this afternoon. Don't make the sort of coffee that you usually give me. It must be very good and hot." He remembered how in Rajam's house everything was brought to the room by the cook. "Mother, would you mind if I don't come here for coffee and tiffin? Can you send it to my room?" (Narayan, 1935, p. 42)

Seeing his mother trying to cut plantain leaves for the meal, he is so frustrated. Not only in the case of food items, but in everything, he is searching and 'craving' for perfection. But this 'craving' for perfection is not for himself but to satisfy Rajam. He is very concerned in matters like where to entertain Rajam, in his own room where his father often comes in to dress and undress, or in his father's room, whether his grandmother will appear in front of Rajam and therefore stop her from doing that, cleaning his table, etc. He is also concerned about everyone's dresses when Rajam comes to his home. These things keep haunting and consuming his mind every time. Therefore, instead of enjoying his life, he is 'fasting' in his life. He is so worried for that period of time that Rajam comes to his house, and he doesn't even know that Rajam's visit goes more smoothly than he had anticipated. The narrator describes, "Mother had prepared some marvel with wheat, plum, and sugar. Coffee was really good. Granny had kept her promise and did not show her senile self to Rajam. Swaminathan was only sorry that the cook did not change his dhoti" (Narayan, 1935, p. 43).

The novel explores the relationship between food and community as Carole Counihan reflects in her book. She notes, "Manners and habits of eating are crucial to the very definition of community, the relationships between people, interactions between humans and their gods, and communication between the living and the dead" (Counihan, 1999, p. 13). Though food items make a class hierarchy between Swami and his friends, sometimes, foods play an important role in making their friendship tighter. At first, when Rajam, Mani, and Swami are in a contradictory and combative-like situation, their happiest conclusion is celebrated through food items. Their first friendship is celebrated through Rajam sharing half a dozen biscuits among them. Counihan takes Farb and Armelagos views regarding this: "Sharing food ensures the survival of the group both socially and materially. A companion is literally a person one eats bread with (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 4)" (Counihan, 1999, p. 13).

The novel explicitly shows the relation between food and power as far as the husband and wife's relationship is concerned. Carole M. Counihan makes a comment on this:

> The power relations around food mirror the power of the sexes in general. Control of money and food purchases is a key index of husband-wife balance of power. Men may wield power by controlling food purchases and claiming the authority to judge the meals women cook. They can disparage the food or demand certain dishes. Men can refuse to provide food or to eat. Husbands often legitimate wife abuse by citing meal failures. (Counihan, 1999, p. 11)

The very betel nuts and betel leaves become the indicator of oppression as far as Swami's parents' relationship is concerned. It is always seen in the novel that Swami's mother is always serving her husband and is under his control. Before going to the office, she has to treat him with water and the plate of betel leaves and betel nuts. The writer describes: "She gave him a little areca nut and half a dozen neatly-rolled betel leaves. He put them all into his mouth, chewing them with great contentment" (Narayan, 1935, p. 26).

Moreover, the Indian bribery system during the British era is also represented through food imagery. Though generally children are exempted from bribery, they do whatever the elders generally do. A significant instance of this is when Mani, one of Swami's friends, goes to the school clerk's house with a neat bundle of fresh brinjals as a bribe to get the questions for the upcoming examination. But at last, he can't get the questions from the clerk, which is indicative of the fact that the bribery system is always a fraud. The childhood thing of asking for a reward for every good deed done is also represented through food imagery. There are many instances of this. Swami's grandmother asks him to buy a lemon for three paise, and she gives him another three paise as a reward. Swami also once asks a small child to call Rajam, and as a reward he promises him to offer two almond peppermints as a reward. But later on, instead of almond peppermints, he gives him a three-paisa coin. The small boy's risking the teacher's bullying in his craving for the almond peppermints. Offerings in front of God as a reward for God's kindness are also portrayed through food items in the novel. When Swami was lost in the woods, he prayed and promised God offerings of two coconuts every Saturday to the elephant-faced Ganapathi if the god saved him. Swaminathan's contradiction to his fanatical scripture teacher, Mr Ebenezar, about how a god can eat flesh and fish and drink wine is an instance of his belief in vegetarianism as a Brahmin boy. Since Swaminathan's family is a South Indian Hindu Brahmin family, therefore, they are not shown eating non-veg food items anywhere in the novel. The Hindu god, Shree Krishna, is shown always stealing butter but not any non-veg food items. Swami's contradiction to his teacher about Hindu vegetarianism may be an indication that, just like he joins

Gandhi's hartal and other programmes against the British, in that way he also makes his own hartal against Christianity and the Britishers' attempt to convert the Hindus to Christianity. Through supporting vegetarianism, he establishes his cultural and religious identity. But Paul Brian says in his book *Modern South Asian Literature in English*, that R.K. Narayan completely ignored the British role in India in his writings. Instead, he focused on the private lives of his characters. He himself stated that, thus, he showed his independence from the influence of colonialism.

Throughout the whole novel, food works as a reliever of burden from school, class, workload, parents and teacher bullying for children. The protagonist, Swaminathan, is so anxious and burdened with everyone's expectation, academic stress, and workload that he is 'craving' a life of freedom and autonomy. Like for every Indian school-going child, mathematics is a nightmare subject; Swami is also very afraid of it. On a holiday, when his father asks him to do a sum from his arithmetic book, he is so nervous out of fear from both the mathematics book and his father. After hearing the sum from his father, instead of solving it, he is in a 'craving' for the watery mangoes that are mentioned in the sum. He keeps asking his father whether the mangoes are ripe or not. The mangoes may be a signifier for the life of freedom that he 'craves'. It may take him out from the constraints that he is now in. A simple sum becomes a thing of emotional instability and helplessness for Swami. Because he feels that for ten unripe mangoes, giving fifteen annas is scandalous. Therefore, he feels sorry for Krishna and, at the same time, angry at Rama. Secondly, when Swaminathan gets bullied from his second school, he shows his 'craving' for a life of freedom and anonymity through culinary images. The writer writes:

> So he would have to work and earn… He might get some rupees-and he could go to hotels and buy coffee and tiffin as often as he pleased. What divine sweets the Bombay Anand Bhavan made! There was some green slab on the top left of the stall, with almonds stuck on it. He had always wanted to eat it, but lacked the courage to ask the hotel man, as he believed it to be very costly…(Narayan, 1935, p. 172)

Besides this, plucking mangoes from mango groves near Nallappa and eating those provides the much-needed freedom and anonymous life that Swami and his friends want. The nature and the weather of Malgudi always provide Swami and his friends the freedom and the satisfaction they want. Though during summer in Malgudi, the heat is unbearable for everyone, including the British officers, for Swami and his friends it is bearable. They loiter through the open fields in their 'craving' for freedom. Though they are scorched under the sun, they can be relieved by the clustering groves of mango or coconut. Through this, they may indicate that the stress and the scoldings that they get from their guardians and parents, as well as

the control of the British over India, are more powerful and unbearable than that of the natural sun. The natural sun, instead, provides them with the unsupervised life they 'crave'. Thus, Narayan may use food imagery as resistance against the control of the British over India in a comical and childlike way.

Conclusion:

R.K. Narayan has succeeded in beautifully portraying the culinary images in his children's novel, *Swami and Friends*. Besides being its sustenance and nutritious power, food is used as a metaphor in the novel. Food is used as a metaphor for fondness and comfort for home, motherly love and family, social and class hierarchies, community sense, power hierarchies, etc.

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