

Of grandmothers and culinary realms in *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings: Celebrating our Grandmothers*

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Abstract: Literary works of all kinds, particularly those categorised as life writings, have explored and narrativized poignant memories of grandmothers and their comfort cuisines. This article examines the relationship between food and grandmothers in *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings: Celebrating our Grandmothers* (2019) by Abhirami Girija Sriram and Babitha Marina Justin, a compilation of bittersweet memories of forty-four young women about their grandmothers. Despite the cultural differences, what is common in all the writings are anecdotes of grandmothers cooking, feeding or eating. These accounts of the daily labour of food preparations are not merely fond recollections of childhood memories. Rather, they serve as narratives that shed light on the presence of social, cultural and gender disparities that dictate the assignment of food responsibilities and food obligations to femininity and its effects in the lives of older women. This essay, therefore, is an attempt to analyse the ‘gender performativity’ of the grandmothers especially through the means of food. It also looks into the culinary habits of the grandmothers which granted them a sense of empowerment when coupled with the privileges of their age and the culinary metaphors employed to convey the same. The paper further explores the elements of ‘culinary nostalgia’ in the book and the features that categorise it as a ‘feminised food memoir’ based on the concepts by Mark Swislocki and Nandini Dhar respectively.

Keywords: grandmothers, food, gender performance, culinary nostalgia, feminised food memoir

Introduction

Grandmothers embody the abstract essentials of “love, comfort and security” across cultures (Tanumihardja 2009, ix). What helped them gain this status is mostly their culinary wisdom, as female caregivers,

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who are conditioned to express care primarily through food (Gunderson 2018). Serving as guardians of family recipes and cooking traditions, their culinary skills are highly regarded. This is evident in the common sentiment of authors like Michael Pollan, who advocate for a return to food choices of previous generations. In his work *In Defense of Food*, Pollan advises that we “[d]on’t eat anything [our] great-grandmother wouldn’t recognise as food” (2008, 148). Grounded in traditional and cultural family values, this relationship between grandmothers and food elicits nostalgia among subsequent generations (Timothy 2015, 66). Literary works of all kinds, particularly those categorised as life writings, have explored and narrativized such poignant memories of grandmothers and their comfort cuisines.

Published in 2019, *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings Celebrating our Grandmothers* (hereafter referred to as *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings*), edited by Abhirami Girija Sriram and Babitha Marina Justin, is one such work which brings together memories of forty-four young women about their grandmothers. With the majority of contributors from India, the book is an attempt to historicise the “bittersweet memories of grandmothers... [who] lived and died as housewives and mothers and of course as grandmothers”, says Babitha (Cris 2019). The writings include stories, poems, and a photographic essay. Despite the cultural differences, what is common in all the writings are anecdotes of grandmothers cooking, feeding or eating. Across the pages, food takes on a central role, connecting the stories and memories of these women. This work, therefore, constitutes a “gendered food nostalgia”, a term first used by literary critic Parama Roy (Alimentary Tracts 2010, 167), as it includes specific culinary events recollected by women about their grandmothers.

However, these accounts of the daily labour of food preparations are not simply fond childhood memories. Instead, they shed light on the presence of social, cultural and gender disparities that dictate the assignment of food responsibilities and food obligations to femininity and its positive and negative effects in the lives of older women. This essay, therefore, is an attempt to analyse how the grandmothers mentioned in the book conform to traditional gender roles by performing their gender through the medium of food. It will also explore the culinary habits of the grandmothers which granted them a sense of empowerment when coupled with the privileges of their age and the culinary metaphors employed to convey the same. Furthermore, this study will identify the elements of ‘culinary

nostalgia' in the book and the textual features that categorise it as a 'feminised food memoir' with a specific focus on the segments set in Indian context.

Among the recent Indian literature, the cookbook memoirs like *Shoba Narayan's Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* (2003), Madhur Jaffrey's *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India* (2005) and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's *The Settler's Cookbook: A Memoir of Love, Migration and Food* (2009) have chronicled the relationship between memories, family meals and those who prepare it. Authored by diasporic Indian women, these works employ food as a profound cultural expression of their national identity, allowing the presence of mothers, grandmothers, and their culinary skills to shine through. Similarly, texts like Jenny Mallin's *A Grandmother's Legacy* (2017) delve into the history of food culture in India and includes the recipes inherited from great-grandmothers penned down years ago. All the above-mentioned texts have a conscious inclusion of 'culinary nostalgia'. In contrast, what the readers find in *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings* is not so deliberate inclusion of culinary elements since it primarily serves as a biographical testament of grandmothers recounted by their granddaughters. Therefore, a critical study of the book from a cultural and feminist perspective could comprehend the normalisation of gender performances like cooking in the lives of aged women mostly in the pretence of care and love.

From an academic standpoint, only limited works have examined the recurring themes of food and dining in life writings. Notable studies include Cristina Herrera's article "Food Becomes a Measured Thing: Family, Food, and Violence in Latina Memoir" (2020), which analysed gastronomical moments in two Latin memoirs, *The Truth Book* and *The Distance Between Us*. The article explored how these memoirs showcased unequal family structures and violence through the complex dynamics of consumption, denial, and shame surrounding food. Similarly, employing Marcus Samuelsson's memoir, *Yes, Chef*, as a framework, Badia Ahad examined the tendencies of post-blackness in relation to food culture in the essay titled "Post-Blackness and Culinary Nostalgia in Marcus Samuelsson's *Yes, Chef*" (2016). The study particularly analysed how Samuelsson's culinary nostalgia contributed to the development of new black subjectivities through a post-black culinary praxis. In addition, Nandini Dhar's latest essay "Of Edible Grandmothers, Culinary Cosmopolitanisms, and Casteized

Domesticities: The Contradictory Ideologies of Shoba Narayan’s Food Memoir *Monsoon Diary*” (2023), explored how the Indian diasporic feminised food memoir serves as a significant space for revealing the class aspirations of the new globalised Indian elite. Despite these investigations, there remains a lack of attention in the gendered nature of food references within life writings. This article aims to address this gap and shed light on the gendered aspects of food in lives of aged women.

Theoretical framework

Once we acknowledge, both ‘gender’ and ‘age’ as not solely natural states but also social constructs, the intersection of the performance of age and gender becomes evident (Baldellou 2018, 69). Kathleen Woodward highlights this performative nature of age and gender in her work “Performing Age, Performing Gender” (2006), stating that “older age is performed in the way we would say gender might self-consciously be performed” (2006, 165). Elderly, particularly women, perform this gender conformity through various means, including cooking, clothing, and caregiving. Among them, the association of food and culinary skills with grandmothers is a widely recognised motif (Dhar 2023, 268). Therefore, this essay employs Judith Butler’s theory of ‘gender performativity’ to interpret the memories of food prepared by grandmothers in the text as instances of conscious or unconscious gender performances. According to Butler, masculinity and femininity are not innate rather actively constructed and performed through the repetitive enactment of various behaviours and the embodiment of cultural expectations (*Gender Trouble* 2006, xv). In her work *Gender Trouble*, she states that “. . . gender proves to be performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (2006, 34). In case of this study, the doing is equated to the culinary acts of the grandmothers.

Moreover, Butler emphasises that gender does not stay the same over time and varies as it intersects with race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and region. It cannot be viewed in isolation from the “political and cultural intersections” that are “produced and maintained” (2006, 4-5). For her, “being a man and being a woman are internally unstable affairs” (*Bodies That Matter* 2011, 86). Building on her concept of ‘unstable nature of gender and gender performances’, scholars like Catherine B. Silver (2003, 389) have observed that the gender-based

expectations gradually weaken for women in their third and fourth ages. This leads to the erasure of gender differences among older people offering great flexibility and openness in performing gender roles. These concepts have been explored in relation to understanding the enactment of gender by the means of food in old age which is ambivalent in nature, with reference to the text. That is, food in case of grandmothers in the book becomes not only a means of submission to gender identity but also a means of empowerment when associated with the privileges of their age.

In addition to Butler's theory on analysing the discourses of gender and food in *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings*, the study makes use of the concept of 'culinary nostalgia' introduced by Mark Swislocki in his work *Culinary Nostalgia Regional Food Culture and the Urban Experience in Shanghai* (2009). Anita Mannur (2007, 13), in her essay "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora", have perceived the concept in relation to diasporic subjects whose nostalgic longing for home is entangled with their food memories. However, in the context of the study, it is used to look into the memories of granddaughters about their grandmothers embedded in the flavours of food prepared by the latter. In addition, to identify the features of a 'feminised food memoir' in the chosen text, the study draws on Nandini Dhar's definition of the same outlined in her work based on diasporic food memoirs mentioned above.

Discussion

Grandmothers, food and gender

Memories of the women in the book, *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings* (2019), about their grandmothers are filled with aromas of food from cosy kitchens, carefully seasoned and served with love. All the aged women are remembered for their care, gentleness and wisdom, which is often intertwined with food and foodways. For instance, one of the brightest memories of Aarcha Mahendran about her grandmother is her "excellent chicken dishes", despite the fact that *Ammumma*¹ was a vegetarian, which Aarcha considered as one of her enduring sacrifices (12). For Anandam Ravi, the comforting presence of their *Paati*² and the "hot food" she prepared helped her survive

¹ *Ammumma* is the common word for grandmother in *Malayalam*, a regional language in India.

² *Paati* is the common word for grandmother in *Tamil*, a regional language spoken in the state of Tamil Nadu, India.

challenging school days (22). Many of the other grandmothers were traditional matriarchs who prepared elaborate family meals on Sundays with meat and cakes neatly arranged on tables covered with cotton clothes (29, 65). They ensured that everyone was fed enough and had a satisfying meal, exemplifying the gender performance of love, care, and nurturing, aligning with the societal expectations placed on women within the domestic sphere.

On the other hand, some were remembered as keepers of culinary wisdom, passing down cherished family recipes to their granddaughters with the intention of preserving them for future generations (29). In this manner, these women inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles within the family. Likewise, images of grannies sweating, panting and running around in the kitchen to impress the men in their family and to nurture their grandchildren are recurrent in the work. Recollecting childhood memories on her grandmother Mariamma, Babitha Marina writes:

The hearth had been lit with coconut spathes and wood shavings. Mariamma was busy frying diced shallots to golden crisp. She added chopped ginger, green chillies and some crushed green pepper to the pan, then turned her attention to drawing starch from the cooked rice...in another stove the lamb curry simmered to perfection, filling the kitchen with mouthwatering aroma. This was Mariamma's signature dish and she was eager to impress Tomichan, her new son in law (47)

Here, we find Mariamma performing cooking as a feminised gender activity assigned to her being the controller of the kitchen. Mariamma's diligence in preparing the family meal reflect the nature of the exhibition of culinary skills as a mandatory gender performance in a patriarchal setting as Butler (2006, 34) suggests, observed by women of all generations. This makes Babitha remember Mariamma's very act of cooking itself as a performance which is entertaining. Also, by preparing a special dish meant to impress the guest, Mariamma engages in a socially desirable presentation of the self. This is why, "Mariamma, known for her sweetness and temper alike, was furious for a couple of days" when the children ruined her mutton curry (49).

Similar to Babitha, Sharmila Roy also talks about her grandmother by describing her culinary prowess. The imagery encompasses the

grandmother's continuous stirring of the rice pudding with her right hand and the gentle sprinkling of cardamom powder with her left hand. The sound of "her gold bangles jingling", the sight of transparent jars filled with "spices and pickles", the "smok[y] haze" and "wheezing" from the stove, the playful "banter" and soft "murmuring", the "salad bowls" and "potato bags" in her grandmother's kitchen together constitute the author's childhood memories (147). She describes the kitchen as a place where every day dishes are lovingly prepared and infused with care (148). Through such constant doing of culinary activities, skilfully multitasking without any hint of complaint or resistance, the older women are in fact doing their gender (Butler 2006, xv).

For a few others, it is not the food or the display of culinary skills that evokes memories of their grandmothers. Rather it is "the dexterity of her hands" which tirelessly cooked for her children and husband over years (79). It also includes minute instances like how she offered coins from her pouch to get the forbidden sweets (92), how she sat along with her granddaughter who is sad and picking on her food (114), her small transacts on selling the milk to her neighbours (161), and how she rarely got a chance to ask "had enough" while feeding the family (176). These memories though not directly associated with cooking or dining, show the complexities of the feminine obligations to accommodate the gender identity of grandmothers.

In short, the grandmothers mentioned above are seen as nurturing, non-dominant women in a way since they meet the emotional and dietary needs of their families. Their gender performance is primarily confined to the realm of family and traditional female pursuits. Such ageist and gendered expectations have become deeply ingrained and normalised in the socio-cultural fabric. To the extent that, culinary experiences occupy the most prominent and vivid memories associated with these grandmothers during the respective childhoods of the contributors.

Grandmothers, food and empowerment

An alternate dimension of the grandmother-food dynamic is the unique form of empowerment and authority granted to them based on their nature of control over the dietary habits in the household. Feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir, have mentioned about the liberation that women experience when they enter into the third age, freed from the patriarchal order to an extent (*The Coming of Age* 1970, 583-584).

With the loss of beauty and reproductive power, society legitimises a such a gender digression for older women (Silver 2003, 387). Huma Ahmed-Gosh (2009, 7) also talks about the paradoxical nature of gender in old age in India, where older women are granted the privilege of dominance over other family members as well as household affairs in compensation for her lack of sexuality. Therefore, in the context of *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings*, alongside recounting emotional and heartwarming food memories, granddaughters have also shared instances of empowerment facilitated by their grandmothers through their privileges in food-related roles.

One of Ann Torday's memories about her grandmother is that of a strict homemaker who ensured the delivery of quality groceries for cooking. Due to her age, Granny was the only "fierce customer treated by them [delivery men] with respect and affection" (26). This made her a legendary cook (27). While an upgraded familial position along with complete authority over the kitchen space, provided elderly women like Mariamma, Babitha's grandmother, the ability to decide the delicacies and how to be cooked and served. In Babitha's memoir, we see Mariamma performing culinary activities as well as assigning others simple duties to the rest of the members (48). Hence, as the female head of the family, who excels in culinary skills, these elderly women possess a power and authority that they may not have had in their younger years.

Some of their exclusive powers mentioned in the text include reserving a cupboard of delicacies - made in the kitchen or brought by the guests. Suneetha Balakrishnan writes "[t]he best from this cupboard was reserved for a particular uncle's sons who were her [grandmother's] favourites" (161). Seema Krishnakumar's *Ammachi*³, Mariamma, had the freedom to take a break from her daily chores and feed chickens and sit back and chew her tobacco, something unlikely in a traditional Indian household (139). Women like Khyrunnisa's nanny were regarded as the "provider of food" for the hungry young folk. Nani was powerful enough to manage to serve endless quantities of food to everyone (90). She even used to track down her grandchildren who have not had their meals. Khyrunnisa remembers how they were marched down home for a tasty meal by servants on her

³ *Ammachi* is the common word for grandmother in *Malayalam*, a regional language specific to the state of Kerala, India.

command (92). Such acts of providing nourishment to their loved ones brings in them a sense of purpose and empowerment.

There are narratives of grannies who knew recipes that other women could not figure out. Their dishes were not only satisfying but also surpassed the taste of any other cook's creations (105). This expertise granted them authority and admiration within the family. They also had the power to overrule the parental restrictions imposed on grandchildren. They permitted their grandchildren to indulge in sweets or treats that are otherwise prohibited by their parents (92). Some, like *Paati* (Bhavana Nissima's grandmother), even actively refrained from engaging in cooking or other domestic chores as they age (56), which is empowering as well.

The authors not only shared instances of empowerment via food, but they also used culinary metaphors as a means to convey the revolutionary acts of their grandmothers. Aarcha Mahendran believes that what made her proud of her ancestry and caste identity is the stories of her grandmother. She writes, her grandmother never told her "stories of the dinner parties she had been excluded from" (12), which suggests her subversive attitude towards caste-based discrimination. Her *Paati* was strong enough to suck and burn down the tears and fears of the family with her seventh cup of coffee a day, writes Anandam Ravi, indicating her unwavering support (22). "Kind to the vegetable sellers and kittens" but not to her own grandchildren, Anuradha's Buddhist grandmother was her role model (40). Describing her *Paati*, as someone who always smiled and never spoke of loss, Bhavana Nissima contemplates the plights she had to overcome, like her grandfather preventing her from serving him food because he thought *Paati* was dark and inferior (56). Correspondingly, it is *Achamma's*⁴ determination which even turned common roots and grass into food, which helped the family to survive the famine twice (174-175) that strikes Vaikhari Aryat the most on remembering her grandmother. These instances, often described through the lens of food or food metaphors, serve as powerful symbols of the strength and resilience that grandmothers have cultivated over the years through a lifetime of navigating challenges.

It is assumed that patriarchal norms and gendered expectations diminish in importance on ageing for both men and women (Silver 2003, 387). This change might have enabled the grandmothers

⁴ *Achamma* is a *Malayalam* word used to refer to father's mother.

mentioned above to express a much-empowered position through culinary activities compared to the experiences of a young female figure in a traditional familial context. This doesn't mean that all the memories in the book were of liberation. There were also narratives which told how some grandmothers refused to share the food and space in a local restaurant along with other people in fear of the persisting gender and caste discrimination they had to face (174).

Grandmothers and 'culinary nostalgia' in *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings*

Mark Swislocki (2009, 1), in his work *Culinary Nostalgia Regional Food Culture and the Urban Experience in Shanghai*, defines culinary nostalgia as "the recollection or purposive evocation of another time and place through food". For him, food is not simply "the object of nostalgia" but also "articulates nostalgia" (Ibid., 2). In *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings*, as the title suggests, food is a major component which formulates the memory of young women about their grandmothers. It is the pile of "chocolates" (11), "soft white steaming *idlis*⁵" (21), images of "salted lemon, mango and gooseberry" (113), "the smell of whole mangoes pickled in brine; from the earthen *bharanis*⁶" (33), taste of the best jam made of handpicked prickly gooseberries stirred for hours (28), and the cardamom-scented tea (73) which makes up the childhood nostalgia of the granddaughters on thinking about their grandmothers. Thus, in this work, food serves as a vehicle for constructing a sense of home and imagining an ideal existence as Swislocki suggests, which can be termed as 'culinary nostalgia'.

This nostalgia also creates a feeling of loss. Many times, the authors link the loss of the grandmothers with the culinary events they shared in the past. Authors like Torday talking about missing the chocolate-covered caramel wafer biscuits that her grandmother prepared though she has the tin with her (28), and keeping the cutlery from her grandmother's possession (31) is symbolic of how much they connect grandmothers to food. For Suneetha Balakrishnan, "a non-crisp tea biscuit" becomes a memoir of her *Ammamma* and the unspoken love (162). Influenced by globalisation, Sharmila Ray, who owns a modern kitchen which she describes as "soulless", laments her grandmother's

⁵ *Idli* in the form of a rice cake is a local breakfast popular in southern parts of India.

⁶ *Bharani* is a jar traditionally used to store pickle or for fermentation in India.

loss by the thought of her lovely old kitchen, living in a world of pasta, oregano and olive oil (148). Thus, the memory of grandmothers becomes synonymous to the memory of food. In fact, one of the authors even terms the list of memories with her grandma as a “milk memory” (163), corresponding to the term ‘culinary nostalgia’.

In addition, some of the common memories of communications between these grandmothers and granddaughters are situated in the kitchen or dining spaces. It might be because, unlike their grandfathers, the women mostly occupied these spaces. Apparently, such memories make the writers want to go back in time and relive the moments which structured their present (65, 148). It is appealing that even the greatest of the advice that Babitha’s grandmother gave her granddaughter, which is close to her heart, was connected to food. Mariamma said, “Koche [daughter], God had an oven where he used to bake human beings from a mould. When he put his human-shaped dough in his oven, Indians were baked into a perfect brown, some were lighter and some darker. But beautifully brown either way” (50). These food memories, as Melinda Anne Mills (2010, 45) states in the thesis “Cooking with Love: Food, Gender and Power”, direct the women towards a more authentic sense of self.

***Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings* as a ‘feminised food memoir’ by granddaughters on grandmothers**

There are several features of the text that makes it conforms to the characteristics of a ‘feminised food memoir’, a genre introduced by Nandini Dhar in her essay, “Of Edible Grandmothers, Culinary Cosmopolitanisms, and Casteized Domesticities: The Contradictory Ideologies of Shoba Narayan’s Food Memoir *Monsoon Diary*” (2023). Written by women, prioritising women’s domestic experience as Dhar defines most of the sections in *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings* have themes of food, like eating, feeding or cooking at the centre (257). The work doesn’t entirely concentrate on narrativizing experiences of food and recipes, rather incorporates intermittent culinary events to the nostalgic ethnographic narratives, written from a thoroughly gendered perspective, as in a food memoir (259). What Dhar regards to be the feature of a ‘feminised food memoir’, a focus on “the family matriarchs, such as grandmothers and the mothers, and the relationships they share with other women, children and servants in the family and the community, predominantly mediated through the culinary exchanges” (258) is the crux of the work *Salt and Pepper and*

Silver Linings. Though not a conscious effort, the writings of the grandmothers by their granddaughters, as illustrated above, are primarily contextualised within a culinary experience which makes this book fit into the genre of ‘feminised food memoir’.

Conclusion

The experiences and challenges faced by elderly women in relation to food, gender roles, and cultural expectations are distinct and deserving of attention. Therefore, this study, based on the book *Salt and Pepper and Silver Linings*, written from a feminist perspective, provides valuable grounds for analysing the dynamics between food and grandmothers. In this work, the process of recalling and writing down a memory of their grandmothers served to bring into focus the important social and emotive character of food events associated with them in everyday practices. By examining the memories and experiences of granddaughters and grandmothers within these memoirs, this study sheds light on the ways in which gender performances, such as cooking, are normalised in the lives of ageing women.

These grandmothers navigate the gender expectations placed upon them, focusing primarily on their culinary skills. Also, with the declining patriarchal regulations on ageing and aged individuals, by taking charge of the kitchen and showcasing their culinary knowledge, most of the grandmothers mentioned in the study gained a privileged position where their opinions and preferences were valued and respected. Switching between life stories and nostalgic recipes of everyday home-cooked fare, the work belongs to a new hybrid genre within the cultural field of anglophone life-writing, which is termed a ‘feminised food memoir’.

The grandmothers mentioned in the work published in 2019 belong to the previous generation, as their granddaughters are adults. The grandmother food trope and the nostalgia of an ideal childhood at the ancestral home, which is common for children born in the 1980s or 90s, is degenerating in contemporary times. This work can be considered as yet another attempt to materialise the images of grandmothers and their food which is common across the globe.

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