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Euphemisms of Existence : A Reading of the Relationship Between Food and Gender

Abstract

The relationship between food and gender has always been one of identity and power. It displays its own politics. In this paper I propose to explore how men and women address or organize their relationships or social roles through food production, distribution and consumption and how certain codes and attitudes surrounding food define masculinity and femininity.

Key words: Food, Gender, Identity, Existence, Power

The discussion of the political impact of food on gender has focussed on a number of issues including men's and women's ability to produce, provide, distribute and consume food. These abilities vary in accordance with certain factors including one's culture, class, family organization and above all, the economic structure of their society. To an extent, we can analyze how gender is constituted through men's and women's roles in the production, distribution and consumption of food. Nowadays, it is rather clear from the food commercials that what we consume is heavily gendered. Marketers exploit several masculine and feminine traits to make certain foods appeal to us. For example, those foods which are shown as healthy, light and weight-losing are marketed with such intentions as to attract women. Whereas unhealthy and junk food are mainly associated with men: "real men don't eat Quiche" and "salad is for girls".

The relationship between food and gender also exhibits a relationship of identity and power. From time immemorial cooking is always associated with females. Women are expected to stay at home and cook for their men. Hence, cooking was employed as a weapon

of subjugation to keep women forever chained within the walls of a kitchen. Even now this trend is followed and it is explicitly emphasized in the advertisements of food and cooking utensils.

In this paper I propose to explore how men and women address or organize their relationships or social roles through food production, distribution and consumption and how certain codes and attitudes surrounding food define masculinity and femininity.

If we are to find ourselves in the middle of a globalized, rapidly developing, multicultural world, we would become aware of the fact that everything in this world, every aspects of life and existence are highly gendered. This genderism can be seen even in the very basic necessity of existence, ie, in food. Nowadays, wherever we turn we come across gendered food. There is even an assumption that “real men don’t eat Quiche” and “salad is for girls”. This and lots of other gendered attitudes influence men’s and women’s health practices including the types of food they choose to eat. For example, we are continually attacked by advertisements and social medias telling us that eating in smaller quantities and having salad is feminine while eating larger quantities and consuming large amount of meat is manly. These oversimplified rendition of male and female eating habits may seem old fashioned but they are still persistent for many of us.

In recent times, this kind of demonstration is increasing at a rapid speed. Unhealthy eating habits and foods (like junk foods, beer etc. . .) are psychologically associated with masculinity and healthy eating habits are psychologically associated with femininity. From time immemorial, eating meat has been recognized as a marker of masculinity, which exhibits the age old patriarchal notions of power and identity and hence people, especially men, try to manage their gender identity through food choices.

Previously, meat has also been recognized as a symbol and celebration of male power and dominance. People with power have always preferred meat over other food. It is seen that men who choose not to eat meat repudiate one of their masculine privileges. The European aristocrats ingested large quantities of food filled with every kind of meat while the people belong to the working classes consumed the complex carbohydrates. This dietary habits demonstrated class and patriarchal distinctions. Women, who are normally considered as second class citizens are more likely to eat those foods that are considered to be second class in the patriarchal culture : vegetables, grains and fruits rather than meat. Hence class, race, caste and gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over and access to food. Differences in the consumption patterns are one way in which the rich distinguish themselves from the poor and men from women. This gendered attitude in eating

habits reiterate the class distinction with an additional twist : a mythology pervades all classes that meat is a masculine food and eating meat is a male activity.

Another important factor to be noted is that gender is a social construction created deliberately by the patriarchal society to subjugate women. By categorizing certain types of food as feminine, they are trying to attribute certain qualities to women. Men, with more power, suggests the types of food that women should eat thereby expecting them to embrace and exhibit the qualities associated with that food. While associating specific foods like chocolates, wine, fruits etc. . . with women, men are also expecting the women to be sweet and soft like the food that embodies their feminine qualities. Thus the relationship between food and gender also exhibits a relationship of identity and power. It should also be noted that cooking had always been associated with women. Cooking being an important part in preparing food was always seen as the responsibility of women. They were expected to stay at home and cook and were not advised to involve in any social activities or to take part in any social gatherings. It is also assumed that cooking is a way of keeping women within their houses , which can also be seen as an alternative way of subjugation. This genderism is visible even in the advertisement of cooking utensils. The tagline of a famous utensil brand goes like this : “ jo biwi se kare pyaar wo Prestige se kaise kare inkaar”, which means that a loving and caring husband should never say ‘no’ to the cooking utensils of this specific brand because this utensils will ease his wife’s works and thus it will make her happy. The marketers are very careful in not saying that a loving husband should help his wife in cooking. It is because since time immemorial cooking is always assumed as the duty of women and it is not manly to cook. Hence cooking has become an important feminine quality. Thus, along with food, cooking has also become highly gendered.

Science is one of the factors that decrees what foods men and women are drawn to, but education and societal attitudes unquestionably play a more vital role. Masculinity and femininity in all cultures are associated with specific foods and rules controlling their consumption. Between men and women food is a means of differentiation as well as a channel of connection. By claiming different roles with regard to food, men and women define their maleness and femaleness, their similarity and difference. They use food and food metaphors to achieve the power and identity that they exert upon each other. Men can exert power over women by refusing to provide food or by refusing to eat the food that they have cooked. Women can also exert power over men by refusing to cook, controlling their food or manipulating the status and meaning systems embodied in foods. Thus the exchange of food can be a way to mediate contested meanings and power relations between sexes. Class,

gender and ethnic distinctions are also manifested through foods and the rules about their eating. Attitudes towards food and body vary across cultures and provide a window into understanding gender identity and power. They also address how men and women establish their relationships and social roles through food production, consumption and distribution. They also exhibit how meanings and values surrounding food and eating define masculinity and femininity.

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