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Food, Identity and the Issue of Representation in African American Literature

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ABSTRACT

Claude Levi Strauss and Claude Fischler demonstrated in their respective essays on food that the domain of food not only encompasses appetite, pleasure and desire but also serves as a reference point for society, structure and world vision. Literary food studies, so, have been adroit enough to analyze the food symbolisms and reflect upon the domains of cultural identity ranging from the social issues to sexuality and genderizations. Akin to the widely celebrated music of African Americans their culinary culture- “soul food”- has received a worldwide recognition. Foodways and culinary practices, thus, have played a significant role in the process of black identity construction. In order to retain their culture, traditions, and ethnicity, since the period blacks were afflicted to the chains of slavery, they practiced eating and cooking trends that kept them connected to their roots, Africa. Moreover, during the black power movement 'soul food' emerged as a binding vine for the African Americans, keeping them aware of their ethnic roots. Gradually 'soul food' and southern eating practices became signifiers of African American identity and pride. This study aims to trace out the ways in which food and related images began to articulate southern black identity and social crisis experienced through the era of enslavement, emancipation and reconstruction. The paper would focus on the three twentieth century milestone works- *Zora Neale Hurston' Mules and Men (1935)*, *Richard Wright' Native Son (1940)* and *Ralph Ellison' Invisible Man (1952)* - to divulge the issue of identity crisis that blacks had to face and thus would attempt to unravel the connotations food and associated metaphors brought to the context. These writers, preoccupied with southern folklore and food tradition, used food and eating to symbolize cultural issues of acceptance, resistance and preservation of customs. After tracing out the historical significance of 'soul food' in the revival of African American identity, I would thereby problematize the issue of black identity as it relates to food with references from aforementioned works. I would conclude this paper by highlighting the concerns that food metaphors carry beneath-from conveying the indefinable human experiences to manifesting the human complexities that simmer underneath, in general.

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Introduction

The area of food studies has received immense recognition in the recent times. The reason behind is the growing interest in cultural studies with food being an omnipresent aspect intimately linked to various facets of social life (Latshaw, 99). The cultural angle views food as a significant social construct impregnated with symbolic meaning. A “food culture” not only encompasses appetite, pleasure and desire but also serves as a form of communication encrypted with cultural implications and meanings. Thus, food has a decisive role to play in reinforcing the singularity of a community and marking it' distinctiveness from the others. Moreover, culinary studies have had its crucial role in bringing to the core the literature of marginal minorities. Within African American literary canon, 'soul food' and the narratives woven around it have transpired as the very articulation of southern black identity. . Foodways and its study, thus, have aided the vindication of black identity and selfhood. This paper aims at comparing the connotations and metaphors that food carries along in the three great works of twentieth century: *Zora Neale Hurston' Mules and Men (1935)*, *Richard Wright' Native Son (1940)* and *Ralph Ellison' Invisible Man (1952)* and how these signifiers contribute to the construction of biased black identities.

History recounts the days when the blacks were subjected to slavery and oppressed to the crux of their 'souls'. Positioned since ever as the “unspoken and invisible 'other' of predominantly white aesthetic and cultural discourses” (Hall 441), the definitions that their biological color gained them was definitely a consequence of political and cultural practices that controlled and 'normalized' the very enunciations that their representation was coded of. The politics of race and representation left the blacks devoid of any sense of cultural identity. With the emancipation act of 1860's though the practice of slavery came to an end but the predicates of racism still held back the blacks from conceiving a distinct identity. The prerogative attitude of white Americans was finally challenged by the rages of Black Power Movement of 1960's. The movement sought for recognition and assertion of black identity by deconstructing the white power structures. The hegemonic power structure of whites held a control on the image and its definitions of the blacks. The movement looked up to every social, political and cultural aid to eradicate such stereotyped notions. Food emerged as one such cultural thread around which the discourse of black identity and ethnicity began to get woven. The very precursors of the movement like Le Roi Jones himself presaged the late 1960's fascination with and commodification of the black food practices. He began the trend of valorizing 'soul food' as a pride of black culinary culture and in the later run the very concept of 'soul' helped in reconstruction of black identity. It was a step in the direction of critiquing the white reductionist narratives that stuffed black image or culture with their stereotyped notions of the 'other'. 'Soul food', thus, gave voice to the demand of black power.

The struggle for black identity took a new direction when 'soul food', a metaphor which symbolized black pride began to be condemned as the “slave diet” as “an unclean and unhealthy practice of racial genocide” (Witt, 80). The food which was supposed to glorify the culture of blacks was scorned as unhealthy, inelegant, and hopelessly out of sync with the culinary canons that defined 'healthy eating practices'. Cultural critic Doris Witt writes about the 'unconscious ambivalence' toward the cuisine:

“...soul food came to be interpreted as a dynamic of intraracial identification and othering, a dynamic whose instabilities can be probed to expose fissures in the construction of black American subjectivities.”(80)

Such an 'intersection of food with identity, race, class, gender and power' has been a recurring theme in literary works focused at depicting the deplorable living conditions of blacks (Williams-Forson, 108). Long since the practice of slavery the food images have remained central to the African American literary tradition. Many works were written in the vogue to illustrate the African American culture by problematizing the issue of representation along the lines of black history and ethnicity. Ralph Ellison' 'Invisible Man' (1952) was one such milestone that stimulated the existential sensibility of

African Americans. It explored the dramatic transformation of lives of black migrants soon they came in confluence with the white world. The novel envisages for a better tomorrow for the black world, 'anticipating the hierarchical inversions of power'. Breaking from the trend of normal protest novels, this piece of literary expression discusses the issue of labeling and stereotyping that overshadows the very individuality of a black person. The novel has proven to be a valuable site for studying the "triangulated relationship between blackness, food and filth" (Witt 83) and the resulting ideological warfare.

After completing his college and moving to the north, the narrator of the novel contemplates for better opportunities in near future but eventually finds his identity vacillating between acquiring acceptance among the whites and embracing his own color, culture, and food practices. According to Ronald Bailey, the:

"Afro-American move from South to North, from country to city, and from farm to factory is one of the most significant social transformations in the history of the United States. No aspect of the lives of black people was left unchanged. The dynamic interaction of a southern-based rural Afro-American nationality and northern, urban experiences is a key to understanding this process". (181)

The prominent fetishism of the southern blacks with food has led to it fulfilling what Shavitt and Nelson call a "social identity function" (56). Ellison' novel draws upon this notion and delves into the politics of construction of eater' identity. Food, thereby, not only nurtures but also signifies.

In the early part of the novel, the narrator' submissive nature to the white' regime is emphasized by bringing in the context his ennobling of white eating manners using adjectives that establishes its supremacy over the primitive black fashion of food. For instance, in a scene where he waits to meet the headmaster, he catches the smell of the school' food: "The smell of fresh bread being prepared in the bakery drifted to me. The good white bread of breakfast; the rolls dripping with yellow butter that I had slipped in my pocket so often to be munched later in my room with wild blackberry jam from home"(136). The "good white bread" symbolizes the spirit of enculturation and acquiescence possessed by the narrator for the white society. The 'wild blackberry jam from home' suggests the sense of comfort and rootedness to the rural south but the practice of it being eaten in private space connotes to the conflicted psyche which insists on denying its southern black identity. The two distinct metaphors- the "good" white bread placed in contrast with the "wild" blackberry jam- used for the food from two diverge cultures signify the state of struggle the protagonist finds himself in, hesitant to acknowledge his "wild" African American roots while censured by the whites.

John Egerton, a southern writer, calls food "central to the region' image, its personality, and its character," proclaiming it as "an esthetic wonder, a sensory delight, [and even a] mystical experience" (2-3). Ellison' narrator encounters this nostalgia at several instances and tries hard to thwart the temptations to consume it. The politics of incorporation has a vital role to play in this act of narrator'. Eating behavior and choices are seen as an indicator of the cultural roots of human beings. After being expelled from the college and moving to the New York city, the narrator comes across the irresistible odor of another southern cuisine but yet again disclaims his black identity. Visiting the diner he remarks: "I could feel the odor of frying bacon reach deep into my stomach" (177). Denying the offer of the waiter who offers him: "...pork chops, grits, one egg, hot biscuits, and coffee.." (178), the narrator contemplates: "Could everyone see that I was southern?" (178). He orders the typical 'white' breakfast refusing to be identified with the stereotypes of blackness. Foodways, here, function as a medium that expresses one' regional identity. The incident also shows how traditional foodways have enough potential to keep the sense of belonging intact. The yearning to be identified with the class of whites pushes the narrator towards disowning his originality. The southern breakfast is a symbol of rural black folk culture and reminds him of his struggle to incorporate with the white fashion of living in the New York city. The narrator desires of a society where blackness is no more a signifier of the 'other' or the primitive and all such meanings 'structured' by the authorities.

We come across the famous 'yam scene', where the narrator finds himself being 'lured by the yam vendor'. Jessica Harris has aptly expressed this practice of bewitching customers by vendors selling traditional foods: "African American street vendors in the North and South gave the streets of fledgling cities an African inflection. Vendors hawked their wares with loud cries designed to lure customers" (336). The narrator finally gives way to his temptation for the yams, another southern 'soul food' which is often blanketed under the jargon of 'poor food choices'. The 'savage urge' that the scent of baked yams induces in the narrator is a sort of invocation to the black 'soul' which he attempts to hide underneath. The baked yams being sold by a vendor strikes him "by a swift stab of nostalgia" (262). The yam seller lures him by guaranteeing the best of its kind, he says: "If that ain't the best eating you had in a long time, I give you your money back". The reply of the narrator: "You don't have to convince me. I can look at it and see it's good (264). This ignites a sense of cultural sharing in the vendor: "I can see you are one of those old-fashioned yam eaters" (266). The yam serves as a connection to communal southern tradition and identity. It is beyond materialistic delights, a celebration of black ethnicity and uniqueness. John Egerton calls such cuisines "the most positive element of our collective character, an inspiring symbol of reconciliation, healing and union" (103). The narrator too finds himself in peace with his original identity and thinks "I no longer had to worry about who saw me or what was proper. To hell with all that, and as sweet as the yam actually was, it became like nectar with the thought" (264). The narrator devours the food, reconciling to his inescapable blackness with a sense of pride in his roots and looks forward at redefining the ontology of race. The encounter with the yam vendor reunites him with his quintessential past and showcases "the power of food to excite memory and reinforce identity" (Davis and Powell, 6).

The taste and smell of yams renders a sense of empowerment in the personality of the narrator who then fantasizes to expose the shams of his former school headmaster, Dr. Bledsoe. He imagines to confront the headmaster at a Men' House, who ignores his presence and visions himself "enraged and suddenly whipping out a foot or two of chitterlings, raw, uncleaned and dripping sticky circles on the floor," shaking them in his face, shouting:

"Bledsoe, you are a shameless chitterling eater! I accuse you of relishing hog bowels! Ha! And not only do you eat them, you sneak and eat them in *private* when you think you're unobserved! You are a sneaking chitterling lover! I accuse of indulging in a filthy habit, Bledsoe! Lug them out so we can see! I accuse you before the eyes of the world!" And he lugs them out, yards of them, with mustard greens, and racks of pig' ears, and pork chops and black-eyed peas with dull accusing eyes. (265)

The chitterlings are part of the southern United States culinary tradition commonly called "soul food". 'Invented' by slaves who used to receive the last of the unwanted meat from the killings of their slave masters, it was a dish made out of leftovers. "When a hog was slaughtered, no edible part was wasted" (McDearman 679). Thus, the dish was suggestive of backwardness and destituteness of rural southern blacks. bell hooks writes in her essay "The Chitlin Circuit"(1990): "a very distinctive black culture was created in the agrarian South, by the experience of rural living, poverty, racial segregation, and resistance struggle, a culture we can cherish and learn from" (38). Instead of encouraging it for its enterprising feature and the communal sense of rootedness that it is symbolic of, the narrator fantasizes it with a sense of shame and disgust. By eating chitterlings, "He [Dr. Bledsoe] would lose caste. The weekly newspapers would attack him. The captions over his picture: Prominent Educator Reverts to Field Niggerism!" (265). The very act of 'sneaking' makes him a 'filthy' character who although devours southern cuisines but with disgrace. The narrator rebuts such perceptions and condemns all kinds of false notions associated with African American community' social and economic pseudo development. Corresponding versions of 'white sanctioned black identity' practiced by a class of 'petit bourgeois' has also been criticized by the narrator. All such attempts made towards 'assimilation' took the blacks a step behind from their original roots and sense of history.

Claude Fischler describes the term 'incorporation' as: "the basis of collective identity and, by the same token, of otherness". The irony with the blacks was that their endeavours to get incorporated to the society of whites proved futile as well as it distanced them away from the ethnicities of their own. He furthers the definition by inscribing the role of food in the process: "Food and cuisine are a quite central component of the sense of collective belonging" (4-5).

In addition to reinforcing senses of tradition and community, the soul foods also serve rural values of familial love and care. The character of Mary in 'Invisible Man', who takes care of the narrator, nourishes him back to health with hot soup when he comes across a boiler explosion at the paint factory. The maternal figure of Mary evokes a sense of comfort and homeliness as well as the warmth of her conduct stirs a "feeling of old, almost forgotten relief" (253) in the narrator.

The concept of soul food has provided an impetus for bestirring the black sensibilities to revere in their history and cultural uniqueness, which to a great extent is fading because of urbanization being practiced on a massive scale. The 'chitlin-circuits', a congregation of black folks who were accustomed to the lives of one another, was significant for the sense of communal pride and belonging it upheld. Food, similar to music provided the tempo and gust for the cult of confraternity. Hence, whether be it encouraging the sense of rootedness or reminding one of their communal ties, foodways have a significant contribution in weaving the fabric of southern culture and identity. Amused by the African American folklore and traditions, Zora Neale Hurston explores her intimate ties with the regional ethnography. Love for regional cuisine is shared in abundance by the people of African American community of Eatonville, Florida which is a subject of study to Zora Neale Hurston in her *Mules and Men*.

Hurston, a folklore student in New York is chosen to perform some field research aiming at collecting stories of the blacks of Deep South. She arrives in Eatonville and soon is carried to a party at which: "There was plenty of chicken perleau and baked chicken and fried chicken and rabbit. Pig feet and chitterlings and hot peanuts and drinkables. Everybody was treating wildly" (15). A man named Charlie insists her on trying some other cuisines: "Come on, Zora, and have a treat on me!" Charlie Jones insisted. "You done et chicken-ham and chicken-bosom wid every shag-leg in Orange County *but* me. Come on and spend some of *my* money." Zora replies: "Thanks, Charlie, but Ah got five helpin's of chicken inside already. Ah either got to get another stomach or quit eatin'" (15). This depicts the generous sharing attitude of the black folks who don't have any luxuries and reside most commonly in poverty. They are untouched by the idea of capitalism which eventually gives rise to an insecure social being stricken forever with the attitude of competition. Further, the politics of market economy gives rise to the concept of high and low culture and respective cliches. Such definitions and labeling of cultural practices thus induces sense of inferiority in one tagged as low cultured, bereaving one of access to community food and other integral customs. The commodification of food leads to an angst of deprivation in among the impoverished, imperiling their respective identities in jeopardy.

Critiquing the capitalization of food industry is also a concern of Richard Wright' *Native Son*. How modern economic tactics pull food into the arena of competition in the modern urban society is the issue brought to light. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist, strives hard to satisfy the chronic hunger of his family who are in a state of constant penury to obtain regular meals. To feed the stomachs of his family, Thomas agrees to work for a white family, the Daltons. The idea of working for the whites is although hated by him but he is compelled to perform the job as his mother warns him: "if you don't take that job, the relief'll cut us off. We won't have any food" (16). The Dalton' are typical whites who practice racist attitudes toward him. The blacks are all generalized as following the communist ideology of fighting for social equality. Mary is the daughter of the family who wishes to experience black ways of living along with her boyfriend, Jan. She is indifferent to all kinds of blemishes that generally debilitated a black soul. They convince Bigger to take them into a restaurant that specializes in serving the tastes of black customers. Mary and Jan eat fried chicken and drink beer after which Mary remarks: "This is simply grand!" (73), and Jan trying to sound somewhat like a black speaks: "You got

something there” (73). Throughout this scene Bigger is jittery to share his 'black social space' with the whites. The fondness of the whites for the black food is not acceptable to Bigger. The insecurity of being invaded even of his cultural domain flusters the emotional state of Bigger.

When he takes Mary back to home, he gets intimate with her and is caught by the sight of Mrs. Dalton as soon as they begin to kiss each other. In order to protect himself from getting exposed he accidentally kills Mary. Later he writes a ransom note to convince the Daltons that Mary has been kidnapped. Soon he realizes “...a too long lack of sleep and food...He should go to the kitchen and ask for his dinner. Surely, he should not starve like this” (175). The corrosive living conditions distraught with stinging hunger obfuscates the mind of Bigger accounting for his irrational acts indulging violence. The racist inequality and deplorable social laws enrages the rebel in him, desperate to proclaim his competence.

Bigger opts to eat steak in Dalton' kitchen which again signifies the prevalent commercialized notions associated with food. Steak falls under the category of expensive urban foods, consumption of which denotes the empowered 'self' of Bigger'. Also in prison he gets to eat steak which relates the food with the kind of disciplinary space it is served in. Food is, therefore, glutted with various contexts and meanings deciphering much more than just appetite of the devourer. Here, it is also suggestive of the idea of 'being empowered' which Bigger experiences after scoffing off the steak- food of the whites. It turns out that unknowingly food evolves as a medium of revelation, exposing the efforts of black people “so intent on 'making it' economically in the white world that they lose the sense of who they are, their history” (hooks,34).

The connection of soul food with the southern past and present makes it an omnipresent witness of the constant struggle of blacks to break out of the hegemonised spectacle of the ones in power. Patricia Hill Collins suggests the need to investigate the process of external definitions led out by underlying power politics in social interactions (S16-S17). The metaphors and imageries associated with food is basically part of such a process of validation where one group identifies the 'other' with discernible contempt. As Stuart Hall writes in his essay on *New Ethnicities*: “the black subject..are not stabilized by Nature...they are constructed historically, culturally, politically..” (443). The notion of 'ethnicity' for blacks is nurtured deliberately as a thing of shame and dishonor. The process of “self-definition” followed by “self-reliance” can only posit a challenge to the ageless 'regimes of representation' (Williams-Forson,108). Food needs to be recognized more often as a testimonial to southern cultural legacy and past. Through 'enslavement' and beyond 'emancipation', black culinary trend has been a 'delegate' of the unadulterated essence of blackness. The freedom of expression or the freedom to practice any cultural rites that voiced their distinctness and diversity was looked with a daunting scorn by the whites. Kitchen remained the only space where their creativity could find meaning through the medium of various cuisines cooked out of whatsoever they could afford. This fact of food being the only escape where blacks could subvert the order and perform their individualities, perhaps, substantiates with a reason enough the stand to honor and celebrate it as a heritage.

As signifiers and symbols of black community, family, rurality, “southernness” and tradition, the food metaphors have been frequently used by the twentieth century African American men of letters. It has had an eternal role in potently verbalizing the utter social combat blacks have been fighting perpetually. The three works, the paper sheds light on, have their own unique place in the African American literary canon. Implementing 'food' as the 'soul' carrier of black identity and as an exemplar of stereotyping and branding, these works expose the reductionist narratives fabricated along the loci of 'blackness'. Reading “food as a cultural text” unravels many cloistered facts about black ethnography. The interaction of food with the societal norms gives rise to a number of myths and stereotypes associated with the food and the one who eats. The complex relation of food with identity is simplified by Fischler as: “The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organisation, but also, at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently” (1). The whites infuse this sociology into the politics of power and use it as a coign of vantage to establish their supremacy over the black Americans.

The substantial place food holds in the life of African Americans is required to be realized before their souls lose the sense of culture and ethnicity to the modern white dominated world. Food can, in the easiest possible way, steer them towards their roots. The crisis of identity can thus be healed sooner the blacks embrace their forgotten origins. In the words of Beth A. Latshaw: “In essence, if a taste for and pride in these foods- regardless of differences in their meaning and symbolism to groups- is shared, the possibility of food being a healer, unifier, and road to progress should not be overlooked” (123).

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