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Gender and Language in *MasterChef Australia*

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Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

MasterChef Australia is the most popular cooking show in its nation's television history. In recent times, the Australian version of *MasterChef* has garnered positive reviews, feedback and a colossal fan base world over. The show's concept to put amateur home-cooks under the spot light, by giving them a chance to showcase their culinary skills and make a career in the food industry, is a premise that drives thousands of Australians to apply for the competition.

Despite the fact that the show strives vigorously to impress upon the ideas of equality and inclusiveness, it barely makes a statement in shutting stereotypical gender roles. So much so, that the trailer released for season 5 projected a flimsy 'boy versus girl' battle with women priding over being better at 'presentation because we are used to grooming ourselves!' The show received backlash and eye rolls on social media for it.

This paper takes the content and visual representations of the show's seasons eight, nine and ten, to study the gendered patterns, their conventional representations and language used to delineate participants, celebrity guest chefs and their dishes. It has often been debated that women are characterized as 'cook' and men as 'chef' the moment their dishes are discussed at a professional platform.

It is the researcher's attempt to question the show's dearth on challenging the norms of the professional gastronomic field that glorifies male chefs for their refined culinary skills, but does little to value that of the women.

Keywords: Men, Women, Gender, MasterChef Australia, Food, Media

Introduction

The recent popular food culture allows men and women to mark out and rework their relationship around food. However, the food shows dished out of this relationship are anything but progressive in terms of their gendered representation. While women still choose to shoot indoors in a 'kitchen setup' narrating stories about how their grandmothers and mothers made the same dishes, the men are usually seen leading food and travel shows that proffer a feeling of leisure and unwinding.

This raises broader questions of how concepts of gender might or might not be progressively reconfigured in the televised kitchen (Redden 126). Many male chefs choose to appear in forms that do not belong in a domestic home kitchen routine. The rise of charismatic and authoritarian male chefs has given birth to a new trend in food shows and competitions in the past decade. This is most evident in the cooking

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contests that place cooking firmly in the public sphere and promote a version of masculinity tied to hierarchy, success, power, speed and stamina (Swenson 49-50). The ethos of the competition functions to normalize the 'manly' nature of professional cooking and to remove cooking from the cooperative ethos of family life (Swenson 50). It is via this trend of gender power and representation in the kitchen that the researcher chooses to look at the world's most popular version of *MasterChef*; *MasterChef Australia*.

The Show and the Judges

The show starts with the auditions of potential contestants who compete through a cooking challenge, and from there, approximately twenty contestants are chosen to go through the *MasterChef* kitchen (Redden 127). Through team challenges, pressure tests and cook-offs, two contestants are eliminated each week, leaving one winner in the end. While the show is quite balanced in terms of the 'gender' of the contestants on it, the aim of the paper is to check the gender representations in food television. If there are any gender codes, how are they seen and interpreted? What is the possible relationship that gender and ingredients or gender and food preparation share? Is this relationship drilling the age old conventions regarding gender roles or questioning it? These are some of the questions the paper tries to find an answer to

The judges of the show Gary Mehigan, George Calombaris and Matt Preston are definitely the kindest in a face of a Gordon Ramsay, but that doesn't take away the blithering truth of the matter that the show has 'all male' judges. Even the fourth wheel to this mix is chef Shannon Bennett; male. The composition of the team of judges affirms links between male experts, gourmet restaurants and the higher levels of the professional hierarchy (Redden 129). Researcher Nancy Lee argues how *MasterChef* can be seen as an example of how masculinities are defined collectively in culture and are sustained in institutions (Lee 88). Despite the fact that the show has supportive judges, one cannot take away the fact that the *MasterChef* kitchen is infused with the hegemonic masculinity of the hard kitchens that require masculine stoicism in the face of pressure (Lee 88). The format of the show acts as a rendition of the brigade formed by the four judges and the contestants, in which the judges hold hegemonic positions and the contestants learn under them (Lee 97). Apart from this, the show's format opens doors to some of the most awe-inspiring celebrity guest chefs from Australia and the rest of the world.

Season 8 hosted an impressive list of 35 celebrity guest chefs along the lines of Heston Blumenthal, Marco Pierre White, Curtis Stone, Peter Gilmore, Maggie Beer, Nigella Lawson and the likes. And yet, out of 35 in the list, 29 were male chefs and only a feeble 6 for the women. A whopping 39 guest chefs were invited in season 9; 29 male and 10 female. The recently concluded season 10 brought along several changes in the format. In order to celebrate a decade to the show, the season invited an intimidating 49 guest chefs, 34 out of which were men and 15 women. The polarization cannot escape the naked eye. Clearly a notable proportion of chefs are specialists (chef de partie) in the feminised domain of desserts, and a number of female experts take on the traditional persona of the home cook (Redden 130). Regarding experts, women have no presence in the permanent judging panel, make up a small proportion of the chefs who are invited to take part and have no involvement in judging in finals week (Redden 135). The exclusion of women from the finals week's judging of whether food meets elite professional standards is indicative of how they are solely looked upon as home cooks and not as experts who can judge the grand finale. In short, on rare occasions women judge the quality of the dishes produced by contestants, they are depicted as experts in home cooking, unlike male chefs, who generally judge whether the food could be served in top restaurants (Redden 130). Another observation made is that most female experts who walk through the doors are introduced as 'cook' instead of 'chef'; making them experts on the home-style of cooking, but being inefficient to sit by and judge the proficiency of the contestants for a professional kitchen.

This draws attention to the description used in order to introduce a celebrity guest chef in the *MasterChef* kitchen. Most male guests are introduced with adjectives such as 'mighty', 'irrevocable', 'the king of meat' etc. while the women

are called on as 'stunning', 'wonderful' 'famous'; giving very clear indications into how they are seen. These adjectives are narratives into the professional kitchen culture and how the genders are seen. The rounds are grilling and predominantly male in the physicality involved. While the show has bold strokes of inclusiveness in terms of gender, culture and ethnicity, it does very little to bring it about in a way that projects that the professional kitchen culture is suited both for the men and the women.

The Show and the Participants

As mentioned earlier, the show is reasonably gender-balanced and is accompanied with ethnic and class diversity. However, the middle-class forms of cultural capital are subtly valued on the show, not by explicitly verbalising classed preferences, but through the framing of contestants' personas and skills as they work towards mastering middle-class culinary forms (Lewis 114).

To ascertain whether the contestants are presented along the gender lines, their introductions in the opening credits of the show can be analysed to begin with. These important visual narratives construct each participant's identity, usually through display of them undertaking a culinary activity (Redden 131). One of the aspects that has been observed is that while the participants are assigned the same tasks and activities, their introductions are quite conventional in context of gender. Women are strongly associated with dressing salads, picking vegetables and fruits from the pantry, decorating desserts or offering a final dish (usually a dessert) to the camera (us). These introductions associate femininity with connotations of delicacy and sweetness, and with the ornamentation side of food preparation (Redden 131).

This pattern in their introductions stares in the face of all those who wish to blur the gender boundaries in the professional industry. Their representation via decorating desserts, smelling their food or serving up final dishes before the camera is indicative of how they enjoy (or are supposed to enjoy) cooking for others and also for the self. Desserts and all kind of baking is seen as feminine in its form. The men on the other hand are often presented within a setting of meat, knives and fire. It's in stark contrast to that of the women as they (the men) are engaged in the serious labour or the 'physical' activity of cooking with fire, sharpening the knives or preparing/butchering the meat. Besides the exception of season 9 winner, Diana, cooking with fire for the introduction, one sees no other female contestant touching upon something that the show considers predominantly male. Men are not seen around desserts, they are seen serving their final meat dishes before the camera or standing upright with their arms crossed; very assertive of the male's physical power and conquering the wild. The absence of women carving meat, sharpening knives or playing with fire in any introductions suggests particular discursive limits are placed upon genders (Redden 134).

While the tasks that the contestants undertake are the same and the show comes across as being quite neutral in terms of the number of male and female contestants every season; it does little to wipe the boundaries drawn between both the genders. Men are projected as being leisure cooks. They either cook out of choice on a lazy Sunday or in the wild. Even for the contestant's family story, to explore their relationship with food, the male contestants are often shown fishing, dining with their families outdoors or talking about how they are looking out to modernize simple recipes they have seen their mothers cook. The women, on the other hand, are seen carrying full board sized meals and feeding their family or are shown cooking desserts with their children. The set up is a beautiful indoor kitchen; very domestic. Several male contestants are also video-shot preparing elaborate barbecued meals for their families; something that the female contestants aren't asked to indulge in.

The way the contestants' reactions are brought to light when they see the celebrity chef for the first time are important. It is usually a female contestant who is seen gushing about a male celebrity chef, talking about how she has a crush on him or how she hasn't 'fan-girlled' that way before. In fact, even for the women chefs, it is a female contestant who will talk about Nigella Lawson's beauty or her aura. This isn't the way the male contestants react. They are constantly

focusing on the technique the said guest chef applies in his/her cooks and what is their style. The female contestants come by after the initial reaction.

In their recent book length study based on interviews with women in the industry and analysis of food media, Harris and Giuffre argue that gender disparities in the gastronomic field continue to be sustained by the gendered rules of the game that valorise men's ways of doing things (H&G). They find that gendered concepts regarding the ideal person for the job and the male nature of culinary greatness and leadership circulate not only in the profession but also its allied media such as food criticism and awards (Redden 137).

In these terms, *MasterChef Australia* could be viewed as male gatekeepers of the homosocial world of the elite culinary industry making *gestures* of inclusion through the generic conventions of reality talent television, while character types of contestants reinforce fundamental ideas that women cook for care (Redden 138). Moreover, when women are brought over from the professional kitchen to compete against a contestant, they give the impression of being hard core strict professionals who have been trained with big names like Marco Pierre White, Heston Blumenthal, Gordon Ramsay and the likes. Pierre White's insistence on the contestants saying 'yes Marco' to his instructions, Mr Blumenthal flaunting his love for science in food and Gordon Ramsay with his disturbing arrogance and unforgiving insulting attitude deliver the impression that a professional kitchen is all about the testosterone. The female chefs who come by to compete for the contestants' immunity challenge give out a similar aura through their body language. Years of training in the industry seem to toughen them in a way that shouts aloud that one needs to adapt to the demands of the men running the industry if one is to survive. Nothing here really unsettled the idea that professional cooking is a male preserve such that women workers commonly feel the only way to gain legitimacy as a food force is by hiding all traces of femininity (Druckman 29).

On the other hand, a Nigella Lawson or a Maggie Beer function without a professional kitchen and rather own estates or have their own shows. Most female guest chefs on the show have their own cooking show where they are seen breezing around the house and cooking against a backdrop of several recipe books placed neatly in the kitchen. The episode conventionally end with either them sitting on the beautiful porch enjoying a good meal with a glass of wine or serving up the feast for their friends and family who cannot get enough of their food. Therefore by definition one does not see these women as being dominating or demanding in terms of kitchen discipline or resilience.

Conclusion

When applied to the quasi-symbolic, quasi-real kitchens of food media, these issues beg continuous questioning of the terms in which people and food are mediated, not only to expose gendered power blocks, but to note some of the ironies and complexities of change (Redden 138). As distinctive ways of imagining men and women in the kitchen develop in contemporary food media- such as those depicting women deriving pleasure from food, or those inscribing men's culinary practices as adventure- it becomes harder than ever to simply identify good and bad images or correct ways of representing (Redden 138). As the show does enough and more to celebrate cultural variety and ethnicity, it could venture into involving more women chefs (instead of the rare screen time) and alter the impression one gets about the gender in the culinary industry. The purpose isn't to trade or swap the roles between the genders in order to present something different, but to bring to light the various nuances both have. Why must a woman only find joy in the comfort of her domestic kitchen and why must a man only be left in the wild with minimal equipment to prepare a meal? Given the popularity the show has and the calibre it exhibits, it could really bring around the desired change by small, but lasting changes in the gender paradigm.

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