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Nalapaaka Narratives- Mapping Male Cooking

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Cooking has been a woman's domain since stone ages as hunting has been for men though early man did help to clean the raw items, start fire to cook and did odd household jobs. Myth also has references of men who were experts in cooking, like Mahabharata narrates the story of Nala, the ruler of the Nishadas who was a splendid cook apart from excelling in managing horses and driving chariots. Cursed to be in a disguise in King Rituparna's court, he introduces himself as Bahuka, a culinary expert. Nala's story was narrated to Yudhishtira by sage Brihadashwa during his exile. The story is the fifty third chapter of Mahabharata titled *NalopakhyanaParva* of *VanaParva*.

Bhimasena, the second Pandava was also skilful in culinary art. It is widely known that when each of the Pandavas chose to live in disguise during their one year exile, Bhima lived as a cook in Viraata's kitchen by the name Ballabha. This can be found in Second Chapter of *ViraataParva*. Before entering into the Kingdom of Viraata, all the Pandavas discuss how they should live in the palace. Bhima says about his skills in cooking, "O foremost of kings, I am a cook, Ballabha by name. I am skilled in dressing dishes. Do thou employ me in the kitchen!" Veda Vyasa narrates, "Thus appointed in the kitchen, Bhima soon became the favourite of King Viraata. And, O king, he continued to live there unrecognised by the other servants of Viraata as also by other people!"

Ancient Greeks and Romans along with their European, American and Asian counterparts have proudly proclaimed their culinary skills. Post modern men are not shy to showcase their cooking skills and take pride in calling themselves Master Chefs thanks to cooking shows which are being brewed and viewed all over the world. This paper attempts to map men's journey in the kitchen under the title '*Nalapaaka Narratives-Mapping Male Cooking*' as a tribute to our own Nala whose name in India has become synonymous with mouth-watering dishes.

Key Words- Nala, Bhima, Male Cooking, Women cooking and Master Chefs.

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Once upon a time, there was a man who cooked so well that a princess chose to marry him. And when he ran away, taking up a job as a cook, she tracked him down by the flavours he conjured up in his master's kitchen. He is Nala - a name synonymous in India with splendid cooking (*Nalapaaka*), she is Damayanti and their story *Nalopakhyana* (the tale of Nala) was narrated by sage *Brihadashwa* to the exiled Pandavas in the fifty third chapter *NalopakhyanaParva* of Mahabharata's *VanaParva*. Nala loses his fortune due to gambling, runs away from Damayanti while in exile, wishing her to lead a better life. He disguises as Bahuka, a culinary expert in King Rituparna's court.

Cooks were service-providers, or *dasa*, hence not much respected despite their culinary skills. An avid charioteer and excellent cook, Prince Nala was also known as Nishadha (tribal king), hinting at his non- Aryan lineage. Cooking was hardly the vocation or hobby befitting a king. Yet it is this skill that wins Nala the heart of Damayanti. She distinguishes him from the gods who attend her *Swayamvara*(choosing her groom) from the flavours of the kitchen clinging to him, while the other princes exude the scent of flowers. And again Damayanti eventually traces him at the end of their twelve year separation through his culinary skills and they lived happily ever after.

Nala is even credited with having written a cookbook in Sanskrit, called *PaakaDarpana* or 'the mirror of culinary skills'! These are not just recipes but also observations about food, techniques of cooking and their medicinal properties, revealing an intimate knowledge of Ayurveda too with different types of food for different times of the day and different seasons. *PaakaDarpana* describes sixteen types of preparations: rice, khichdi, curd rice, ghee, butter, buttermilk, puddings, juices, meat dishes, vegetable dishes, watery dishes, side dishes, munchies, lickables, appetizers etc. This Sanskrit cookbook provides recipes of non-vegetarian dishes made of chicken (*kukkuta*), animals, fish and eggs. Presently popular biryani previously known as *mamsodana* or rice cooked with meat finds a special mention. Nala apparently was aware about food becoming poisonous: how ingredients that are non-toxic become toxic when mixed together, or how toxic ingredients become non-toxic when cooked differently. So we find mention of dishes containing leaves of the poisonous *dhatura* and *arka* plants. He is also particular about the qualities of a cook and a waiter.

In the Mahabharata, mighty Bhima is also described as a cook; initially cooking only to feed himself (a negative trait that eventually denies him entry to heaven). In the *ViraataParva*, the section dealing with *Pandavas* exile when he is forced to hide as a servant in the kingdom of *Matsya*, he is required to feed others before he feeds himself. Bhima says,

I intend to present myself before the lord of Viraata as a cook bearing the name of Ballabha. I am skilled in culinary art, and I shall prepare curries for the king, and excelling all those skilful cooks that had hitherto dressed his food I shall gratify the monarch. And I shall carry mighty loads of wood. And witnessing that mighty feat, the monarch will be pleased. And, O Bharata, beholding such superhuman feats of mine, the servants of the royal household will honour me as a king. And I shall have entire control over all kinds of viands and drinks. And commanded to subdue powerful elephants and mighty bulls, I will do as bidden. And if any combatants will fight with me in the lists, then will I vanquish them, and thereby entertain the monarch. But I shall not take the life of any of them. I shall only bring them down in such way that they may not be killed. And on being asked as regards my antecedent I shall say that--Formerly I was the wrestler and cook of Yudhishthira. Thus shall I, O king, maintain myself.

Signalled by such exceptional cases of cooking in exile and large scale cooking, day to day cooking in India has always been woman centric, since ancient times to the present. Orthodox Indian culture stringently followed the social set up of man going out to earn while a woman would cook, clean and nurture a home. Yet feasts, funeral and mass cooking were predominantly male centric. Social and religious restrictions prohibited women from cooking during certain periods like monthly menstruation days. They were also prohibited from carrying, cleaning and using heavy kitchen tools, sacrificing animals, butchering and interacting with other men which invariably happened during public cooking. The tagline 'unsuitable for weaker sex' to perform certain activities still exists despite emerging protests.

Pherekrates, a 5th century BC comedy author scorns that, “Nobody had ever seen a woman butcher (*mageirainan*) nor indeed a fish-seller.” Pherekrates opposed thus the non-existent woman butcher to the equally gender defying man who is selling perfume. Professional occupations were gender based and while male flower and perfume sellers could be occasionally seen, woman butchers were unheard of. Food scholar John Wilkins, observes that there was “A gender differential in that no female protagonist prepares food with her own hands in Old Comedy”. The *mageiros* had a sacred role based on sacrifice, and women were too high in the social order to perform menial task. Ancient Greek attitude towards food was that women had limited role in private spaces and hardly any in public domains.

During the Hellenistic and Classical periods, a *mageiros* was a high- skilled cook, a culinary specialist, a butcher and a tradesman (*demiourgos*). He was also an artist in the kitchen of the rich. But before a *man qualified* as a *mageiros*, he was a priest responsible for slaughtering, roasting and dispersal of sacrificial meat. Greek cookery stood in high regard and an archimageiros (chief cook) could rise to great heights of civic importance, “*the conquered thus conquered the conquerors*”.

Cooking was so important to the Greek that not anyone could become a cook. Cooking gave power, and Greek playwright Aristophanes shows in several of his comedies how important were the stakes of cooking activity. For example in this satire of Athens politics, *Knights*, the sausage-seller Agoracritus competes with a demagogic character inspired by the real politician Cleon whom he boils and later rejuvenates in order to gain the confidence of the old Demos, a character that represents the Athenian citizen. By rejuvenating Demos, the sausage-seller proves to be a better protector of Athens than the corrupt Cleon:

Sausage-Seller-“Maintain a holy silence! Keep your mouths from utterance! Call no more witnesses; close these tribunals, which are the delight of this city, and gather at the theatre to chant the Paeon of thanksgiving to the gods for a fresh favour.”

Leader of the Chorus, “Oh! Torch of sacred Athens, saviour of the Islands, what good tidings are we to celebrate by letting the blood of the victims flow in our market-places?”

Sausage-Seller, “I have freshened Demos up somewhat on the stove and have turned his ugliness into beauty.

At the end of the play, Agoracritus and Cleon exchange their functions, with Cleon condemned to sell sausages at the gates of the city. Thus, the mastery of cookery can allow a man of low status to access a better social and political position.

In Aristophanes' comedies *Acharnians* and also *Peace*, sexual intercourse is presented in terms which merge sexual submission of women into sacrificial cooking, from which the protagonist emerges rejuvenated. So, it's no longer about just feeding and filling hungry stomachs, but cooking reveals its full importance with its fantastic results: the rejuvenation of the protagonist. This gives the boastful cook a new aura of magic and proves him to be essential to the story. Extensive power and almost an allure of divinity came upon the cook who succeeds and manages to prove the restorative function of food, like the cook in the Christian New Testament *Philemon's Soldier* who boasts about the dish he made: “*I have discovered immortality: those who are already dead, when they so much as sniff it I make them live again*”.

While it may be likely that women were indeed involved in cooking and were not banned from kitchens, Greek classical literature has passed their activities under silence. Did women really have so many food restrictions as depicted in the medical treatises? The making of food as documented in Greek classical literature suggest that, food was far too important a resource to be left under the control of women alone, especially among the social elites. The absence of women engaged in culinary activities in Greek ancient literature and their occasional portrayal in aspects of cooking with

magic or social disorder can be regarded as a sign of the need of male control over the critical domain of daily life which is food.

In some Greek plays, women appear as both nurturing and disturbing culinary agents. Medea can distort the use of ingredients, utensils and cooking itself to appear as a nurturing figure that rejuvenates and regenerates loved ones. But she can also twist the processes of cooking by integrating ingredients that no longer give food restorative properties, but associate it with cannibalism. This ambivalence between the nourishing and the disturbing sides also appears in the case of Aristophanes' satire *Assembly Women* whose protagonist *Praxagora* strives to ensure an equitable food distribution that ignores functional, gender or status criteria. She appears also as destructive, as she has to abolish individual property first in order to reorganise food and other resources distribution.

Although cooking has been regarded as a basic feminine domestic labour, with male labour displayed in the public space, there is little literary mention of the activities of ancient Greek women in the kitchen. As a consequence, the question of the presence of women at symposia or at private meals has been widely debated within the gender studies field, with scholars such as John Wilkins or Andrew Dalby arguing that women did not eat along with men, although they cooked meals. There is very little proof of women's participation or mere presence in the kitchen in Greek literature. It is as if to Ancient Greeks, what women did or did not do in this domain was not as important as to take the time to write about it. We are left with a series of questions regarding this absence: were women really not as involved in the preparation of food as they have been for the past centuries? Or were their actions in the kitchen as concealed as their actions in the gynaeceum?

So why is there such a silence in Greek literature regarding what and how they cooked? And what does this say about women's social status? That in the upper class, women didn't have autonomous access and did not interfere in the process of distribution of food, as in bigger households certain slaves were designed as primarily involved in the cooking and the presence of a male cook, as suggested by comic figures, would have restrained women's access to food resources. Scholars such as Robin Osborne and Joan Burton have shown, women did have access to sacrifices regardless of their married/widowed status and they even enjoyed public and private symposiums, were they took part in mixed or female commensality. Yet, as they were not involved in the actual sacrifice ritual and in the cooking – even the sacrifice for the Thesmophories was realised by a man - we have to bear in mind that their access to food was in fact, controlled, by men. The men of ancient Greece roasted meats on spits or over coals; the women were responsible for boiling foods and baking them in the oven.

So if the kitchen was a restricted area for women, who cooked? During the 5th century BC, the *mageiros*, was glorified in Athens. His duties consisted of three roles: a butcher dismembering slain animals, a merchant who sold meat in the market, and finally a cook who could perform a private sacrifice ritual and eventually cook. Cookery came to be recognised as *techne* (art or skill), commerce brought culture and culinary skills closer and European tables were filled with white bread, abundant fish and vegetables. Persian and Middle Eastern spices were used mildly. The Old and New testament has enough evidence to prove that meals could be prepared either by men or women (Genesis 18:7, 8) and both sexes ate together (Deuteronomy 16:14; 1 Samuel 1:4; Job 1:4; Ruth 2:14).

Food was acclaimed as an emotional, spiritual journey by the Ancient Greeks and understandably their synonyms for a powerful emotion like love is eros which could be the feeling towards concepts (eg- peace), food (eg- strong desire for sausages in Aristophanes' *Acharnes*), negative and evil things. In ancient Greek literature eros is depicted as a feeling akin to drinking- a warmth, softening, melting force. Poetess Sappho often addresses Eros as: *Bittersweet, irresistible creature. Now Eros shakes my soul, a wind on the mountain falling on the oaks.* (Sappho 41).

It is not just Indians but some western women too confess that 'putting the apron on' robs men of their masculinity.

Penny Lancaster, wife of singer Rod Stewart, conceded her views may be a bit old-fashioned' but said she believed men should be 'the hunter-gatherer, the macho man, looking after the family. This claim that cooking makes a man less manly overlooks the plain fact that, ever since the institution of the restaurant was founded by Monsieur Boulanger in Paris in 1765 professional kitchens have been dominated by male chefs. It was always seen as masculine work, and that the kitchen has now become the hottest room in the house can be viewed as an extension of that. In Sudan it is taboo for a man to cook. The women of Sudan do not allow their men into the kitchen because (amongst other reasons) they believe men's potency might diminish over the cooking fires. Since war ravaged Sudanese immigrants are forced to leave homeland, they are compelled to cook for themselves and get over this mental, cultural block.

The recent male cookbook trending in the market is Michael W. Twitty's *In The Cooking Gene* which narrates his travels across the American slave plantations, searching to understand himself through the prism of food and his family history, which he traces via DNA testing and facial characteristics to Ghana. He explains how enslaved Africans set about to 'cocreate a language based in the English of their captors that would make the absurdity of their exile bearable.' Okra, sprung from Nigeria's Igbo community, yam came from 'nyambi' in Wolof, a language with Senegal roots. "By showing the living what the dead went through, I live a scary and unsettling past," he writes. "I feel like a doorway for all the spirits of the plantations I visit. I feel their souls passing through me as I cook."

Tracing cooking from the period of Early Man convinces that cooking skills are gender-blind but gradually became gender biased. And most of ancient Indian history had mentioned that women excelled in kitchen as its the only arena where they were given freedom to show their skills. Whereas the professional chefs gives a long list of JiggsKalara, VikaasKhanna, SanjeevKapoor and so on. In the house men enter the kitchen to please their wives by 'occasionally' cooking for the family, which may not be true for all households. But there was an age old stigma of men in the kitchen that is now disappearing thanks to modern TV shows attracting people to the kitchen to try out recipes from around the world. Novices are taking up the pan thanks to the virtual cooking guides and the old adage, 'Who rules the roast might rule the seas' has to be reinterpreted.

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