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Problematising the Identity of Food: The Debate Between Form and Function Due Cultural Appropriation and Disappropriation

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ABSTRACT

Cultural appropriation or cultural disappropriation as it is now more popularly known is the adoption of elements of one culture by another more dominant one. In contrast, Cultural disappropriation is the rejection of elements of a minority culture by a dominant majority. Both these concepts reason that where two cultures are unequal in power, there can be no equivalent cultural exchange. This assertion has resulted in a heated debate on the definition and identification of what can be classified as culturally appropriated or culturally disappropriated. Food, a universal necessity for human existence, is not exempt from the debate on cultural appropriation or disappropriation. The identity of food has been problematised as a result of claims of cultural appropriation (Or disappropriation) and the resultant attribution of a positive or negative connotation to such appropriation (Or disappropriation). This debate has called into question our conception of a stable identity for food. This paper tries to address the various nuances and intricacies in the complexity of the debate by attempting to reconceptualise the discourse by foregrounding the opposition of form and function in the debate. In short the paper addresses the question of whether the debate on the culturally appropriation or disappropriation of food is valid.

Problematising the Identity of Food: the debate between Form and Function due Cultural Appropriation and Disappropriation

In the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Food is “any substance consumed to provide nutritional support for an organism”. It is usually of plant or animal origin, and contains essential nutrients, such as carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins, or minerals. The substance is ingested by an organism and assimilated by the organism's cells to provide energy, maintain life, or stimulate growth. This definition of food on close analysis found to possess two conflated notions of the identity of food. The identity of food is both formal and functional. When food is defined as a consumable, digestible substance that helps organisms sustain and grow, we ascribe food with a functional identity where a substance S, if it performs the above functions can be labelled as food. The chemical composition of food is what makes these functions possible. Therefore, food performs its function due to the intrinsic property of possessing carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins, or minerals, whatever form the food might be in. It is this functional identity that has been problematised due to

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cultural appropriation and disappropriation.

Should English chefs make Dosa? The question seems obviously straightforward and the uninformed reader or listener would not infer any politics behind the question. The colonial history of India where Britain misappropriated India's natural resources would not be alluded to in the question or in the answer unless at least the speaker or the listener were informed on the politics of cultural appropriation. "Cultural appropriation, at times also phrased cultural misappropriation, is the adoption of elements of a minority culture by members of the dominant culture." (Young 2) The question now is reinterpreted as whether the culturally dominant Englishman who trained as a chef should make the Dosa of the culturally minor Indian. This question when rephrased, along the rhetoric of cultural appropriation can be seen as having a pejorative connotation for Indian culture and the existence of an inequality between the two, due to India's colonial history. This rhetoric also asks if the Dosa is the cultural property of Indians? and whether reparations are owed for the appropriation of Dosa? This interpretation of food, attributes food with a cultural value as opposed to nutritional value.

Value is attributed by the function something performs. That which is necessary for the change in the state of something from a state S1 to a state S2 possesses value. In short, if something is necessary for a function, it has value. This thing is necessary for a change in the state due to its form. The form of food, differs from culture to culture but it performs the basic function of providing nutrition for the sustenance and growth of life. The rhetoric around food on cultural appropriation, ascribes food with a cultural value where food by its form in a culture is the cultural property of the members of that culture. This rhetoric tries to persuade us, as implicit, of a hierarchy where function is relegated to form. This relegation in effect elevates cultural value in relation to nutritional value. But before the rhetoric around the cultural appropriation can persuade us of the cultural value of food, it must persuade us of the essential nature of culture identity.

Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a group. It is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is both characteristic of the individual but also of the culturally identical group of members sharing the same cultural identity or upbringing. (Moha 19-23)

The definition of cultural identity does not in any way indicate that culture is inherited and not communicated. Culture is communicated or transmitted. A person's food and his food habits are transmitted to him by his culture and his environment just like every other thing of cultural value. This also implies that culture is subjective and that it can be interpreted differently by different individuals. Therefore, each individual's cultural identity is unique to that individual. Therefore, the knowledge of how to make a certain food is transmitted to a person by cultural identity and is not part of a person's essence. It is learned.

All Indians do not eat Dosa and all who eat Dosa cannot be identified as Indians. What can be said is that making and eating Dosa is a habit that is predominantly found in Indians. Since making Dosa is a skill and not an inherited right, it is absurd to say that only Indian chefs can make Dosa. Dosa making is non-propositional knowledge that can be transmitted from one person to the other. Therefore, to say that cultural appropriation of food is unjust is incorrect because individuals appropriate food. Entire cultures do not. The tendency to see food relations in terms of group identities cannot be supported as it has no basis in reality. On the other hand, if members of a group appropriated a finite natural resource without reparations to the group that had a right to it, it would be indeed unjust and violation of their rights. Here food relations are taken to mean the proliferation of a certain kind of food across cultural boundaries. In the same sense that cultural appropriation had taken a pejorative connotation, cultural disappropriation had taken a positive connotation in recent rhetoric around food especially beef.

The banning of beef is an act of cultural disappropriation. Cultural disappropriation is the rejection of elements of

a minority culture by the dominant culture. Here, the minority culture is the relatively smaller population of beef consumers in India as opposed to the dominant non-beef eating, Hindu, mostly upper caste population. Cultural disappropriation by selectively banning beef would in effect redefine Indian culture as a purely non-beef eating one. This would in turn construct an Indian identity that takes as an implicit premise that non-beef eating food habit is a normative part of the Indian Cultural Identity. This act of redefinition would create an intensional definition of Indian Culture. "An intensional definition, also called a connotative definition, specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing being a member of a specific set." (Lyons 158) This in effect excludes anyone who eats beef as a person outside Indian Culture. In short, it would implicitly be taken as a given that beef eaters are non-Indian. When taken to negative extremes and given moral or religious connotations this could relegate the beef eaters to the morally bankrupt other. The moral bankruptcy of the other has often been used for the legitimisation of violence towards the other and food politics can be symptomatic of such an outcome. Furthermore, the advantages of Food proliferation outweigh food monopolisation even outside the realm of cultural identity.

The monopolisation of food based on its origin or the locality in which it is found is undesirable because the formation of non-proliferating local food systems come in conflict with food diversity and food security. At the 1974 World Food Conference, the term "food security" was defined with an emphasis on supply. Food security, according to them, was the "availability at all times of adequate, nourishing, diverse, balanced and moderate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices." (FAO, UN 2.2) *When food is monopolised to a specific locality, region or ethnicity, the accessibility to the most affordable and accessible foods is compromised and therefore food security is threatened. The proliferation of foods across boundaries guarantees the optimisation of food security. In addition, the logistical and cybernetic costs of maintaining, archiving and locating the ownership of the monopoly of foods would further exacerbate the problem. The nutritional value of food must be given primacy over the cultural value for no reason other than an ethical responsibility to ensure food security for all. Similarly, food monopolisation is also a threat to food diversity. Foods can be subject to natural variables, such as a scarcity in the ingredients for preparation due to social or environmental factors. Climate change and famines are much more potent threats to local food systems.* But the disadvantages of some could be covered by the advantages of others, and in the multitudes come strength. "The future of healthy food is not a series of discrete innovations arrayed along a distance-to-proximity axis, that is, but a collective of overlapping cultural and organizational ones." (Cohen 7) Preserving food security and food diversity take ethical precedence over questions of cultural appropriation of food in any society.

Both food security and food diversity can conceptually take precedence only if the nutritional value of food takes precedence over its cultural value. Cultural appropriation and cultural disappropriation, both give cultural value precedence over the nutritional value of food. This in turn is a precedence of form over function. Cultural value is dependent on the form in which a particular food is and nutritional value is dependent on the function of food. This is not to say that food does not have a cultural function. It is a feature of a normative cultural identity. Cultural identities often use normative food habits as a means of defining members of the culture. But cultural disappropriation gives a specific food a negative denotation or connotation, often with moral distinctions. This causes the polarisation and division of a culture into a dominant culture that enforces the cultural disappropriation and a minority culture that consumes the disappropriated food. This disappropriation is often accompanied by claims of normative traditions or pragmatic justifications based on health concerns. Whatever the basis for the disappropriation, a schism in the culture is the consequence. In the 1990s, American studies scholar George Lipsitz argued that "cultural appropriation" was a form of "strategic anti-essentialism." (Lutenki 9) "Cultural disappropriation" is "strategic essentialism" by group identities to

intentionally redefine their so-called essence. For example, Jews do not eat pork and this is a strategic essentialism on their part to define their identity. But if the Jews were to declare that all pork eaters were morally bankrupt then there would be a cultural disappropriation of pork meat and a legitimisation of violence against them. Or in a less intense consequence, the excommunication of all pork eaters from the Jewish community. In the instance of a beef ban, a similar excommunication of beef eaters and the legitimisation of violence against them can be consequences even if the government were to selectively ban it on pragmatic grounds. Furthermore, claims of reparation for cultural appropriation also rely on the implicit premise that the food habit is an essential property of a cultural identity which has been unjustly misappropriated. Thus, both cultural appropriation and cultural misappropriation operate along the same premise.

Though cultural appropriation and cultural misappropriation rely on the same premise, it is no way indicative of its logical soundness or validity. Culture identity is in no way essential. It is learned and acquired. The inheritance of a cultural identity is a form of legitimising the right to belong that culture. Pragmatically there would be no verifiable difference between a naturalised member of a culture and a member born into it other than the period of their respective socialisations into the cultural identity. That being said members of a culture do possess the right to defend their customs and traditions against disintegration as long as these customs and traditions do not violate the equality of individuals. The equality of individuals is an inviolable right in a democracy. Therefore, to disappropriate food is to disappropriate people who eat it and thus creates inequality between group identities in a democracy. Rather than cultural appropriation or disappropriation, democracy should foster horizontal collectivistic multiculturalism.

Horizontal Collectivistic multiculturalism is a much more egalitarian model than an individualistic or vertical one for Indian society. India still suffers from extreme inequality. As per the Oxfam inequality report, India's top 10 per cent of the population holds 77.4 per cent of the total national wealth. The contrast is even sharper for the top 1 per cent that holds 51.53 per cent of the national wealth. The bottom 60 per cent, the majority of the population, own merely 4.8 per cent of the national wealth. "India is currently a vertical collectivistic society." (Shevitt, et al) People in India focus on elevating the status of their group identities rather than the individual's status. This is positive in many respects but an increasingly vertically hierarchised society can elevate inter-group tensions and further inequality and violence.

Inequality on the basis of social groups and religion is an important feature in India. It is a well-known fact that large disparities exist among different caste and religious groups. These disparities exist not only in the income and asset dimension but also on human development outcomes. (Oxfam India Inequality Report 018 Widening Gaps 46)

If food politics resulted in a schism in the Cultural Identity of being Indian, it would adversely affect the minority.

In vertical individualist societies (VI; e.g., U.S., Great Britain, France), people tend to be concerned with improving their individual status and with distinguishing themselves from others via competition. In contrast, in horizontal individualist societies (HI; e.g., Sweden, Denmark, Australia), people tend to view themselves as equal to others in status, and the focus is on expressing one's uniqueness and self-reliance. In vertical collectivist societies (VC; e.g., East Asia, India, Eastern Europe), people focus on complying with authorities and on enhancing the cohesion and status of their in-groups, even when that entails sacrificing their own personal goals. In horizontal collectivist societies (HC; exemplified historically by the Israeli kibbutz), the focus is on sociability and interdependence with others in an egalitarian context. (Shavitt et al)

A more valid approach would be a transition into a horizontal collectivism that fosters equality. It is in the interest of the welfare state to have a horizontal rather than vertical society as it facilitates a depreciation in income inequality and multiculturalism. In a society like India where plurality is the norm, multiculturalism is a necessity for peace and progress. Another positive attribute of horizontal collectivism is the higher valuation of cooperation and mutual coexistence.

Although collectivists share an interdependent worldview, Koreans and other East Asians (VC) emphasize

deference to authority, filial piety, and preservation of harmony in the context of hierarchical relations with others. Indeed, the status of one's family or other in groups establishes one's individual social standing in VC cultures. In contrast, in the Israeli kibbutz (HC), the emphasis is neither on harmony nor status. Instead, honesty, directness, and cooperation are valued, within a framework of assumed equality. (Shavitt et al)

Although the idea of cultural misappropriation is based on affirmative action and restitution for the historically disenfranchised, it stands to question whether in the case of food, members of a dominant group identity are accountable for any historical wrongs their ancestors might have committed. Most of these offending group identities belong to capitalist societies that value individualism and independence over collectivism and group identity in their national discourses. Though the detractors of cultural appropriation may perceive the need for restitution and restrictions in favour of minority communities, the perceived dominant group see themselves as independent individuals and not as a group identity. This opposition in perception would make the dominant group resistant to accepting any accountability for past wrongs. That being said a Marxist perception of group identities struggling against each other cannot substantiate an argument for giving cultural appropriation a negative connotation, as identities and cultural identities in particular are non-essential. Any effort to curb cultural appropriation especially in the case of food, would be seen as an offence on Individual freedom. In the case of an entity's property rights and patented commercial foods, the entity reserves the right to make and sell the particular food by virtue of either being the originators of the food or having acquired the rights from the originators. In contrast traditional foods cannot be traced any further than the group that might make it and even then, there might be a history of appropriation from a minority culture. In truth, it is unknowable. On the other hand, if a traditional food item is patented by a company, it is also a violation. The right to make, the food item belongs in the public domain. Taxes exist as restitution to be paid to the welfare state, from any gains made by selling such food items. This public money can then direct a policy of affirmative action to reduce inequality between social groups.

If a food item is being monopolised on the basis of it having been culturally appropriated or if a food item is culturally disappropriated and its consumption restricted, then there is hierarchisation of the cultural value of food over its nutritional value. This is in effect an ideational preference of form over function, that is a preference of the form (culturally occurring) in which a food item occurs over the function (nutrition for the growth and sustenance of the body) of food. Food security takes ethical precedence over cultural norms.

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