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ABSTRACT

Kitchen is an integral part of the Indian culture and society. To quote George Bernard Shaw "No love is more sincere than the love for food". It is imperative that relationships between people to a large extent are defined by the food culture, its preparation, utensils, the ingredients used and the culinary expertise of one or more people involved in the process.

The common thread in the three stories here is the utensils, the choice of food and the process which in turn almost documents the living conditions of a particular society.

The protagonists; the mother in Vasudhendra's essay "Stainless steel paatre" a simple uneducated woman, Mangamma, the empowered mother in law in Maasti Venkatesh lyengaar's "Mosarina Mangamma" another illiterate woman, the septuagenarian widow.... the omniscient Kittajji of Neelavara Surendra Adiga's short story "Kittajji mathu havissu paatre" come across as empowered women inspite of the social structure that exists.


The young woman married off to a clerk nursed a passion for "stainless steel vessels" in the kitchen, which serve as cheaper alternatives for the absence of expensive clothes and jewellery in their humble household. The replacement of age-old copper and brass vessels which were an integral part of domesticity are gradually replaced by the ambitious young daughter in law; an indication of changing values and new perspectives. The innate desire to challenge the existing set up is evident and she successfully demonstrates that in her domain, the kitchen!

Mangamma, the expert at making curds, preserving, storing and delivering it to homes is also a financially independent and shrewd woman who makes calculated moves to maintain her position as the powerful mother and mother in law. A deeper study of the text reveals the complexity of relationships and the struggle for power in domestic sphere.

Kittajji, an old widow shocks us all with her progressive thinking. Its intriguing to know her as a character who challenges the caste divide and yet continues to be an integral part of the small Hamlet. Her lifeline is her "Havissu paatre". Her expertise in cooking for over a hundred people and her empathy for the people around her makes her an indispensable element of the entire society.

The three strong women and their actions makes us wonder if this mysterious power of human mind is undervalued in the social order that frequently defines them as the weak and subservient!

KEY WORDS: Utensils, empowerment, identity, gender, traditional, domestic.

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UTENSILS AS IDENTITY IN SELECT STORIES

“No love is more sincere than the love for food” George Bernard Shaw.

Food and food habits are a reflection of culture and ethnicity of a specific region and society. The process of sourcing ingredients, cooking, serving, consuming, the utensils that are used for cooking and serving reflect a cultural process. The traditional utensils replaced by more convenient, modern, attractive utensils stand testimony to changing thought process of the people who are an integral part of domestic sphere. Sometimes these utensils in the kitchen are passed on from one generation to the other and thus tell a tale. It is therefore not surprising that a woman's search for identity starts in this very familiar domain.

The paper attempts to chronicle the journey of three empowered women, their struggle for power, their insecurities and their progressive thinking in the very ordinary mundane framework of the constructed society.

The essay “Stainless steel paatregalu” by the contemporary Kannada writer Vasudhendra is a documentation of a woman's (his mother) obsession with steel vessels and her sense of empowerment which also is her identity.

The description of the “Patrali” leaf (a poor replacement for a plate) in which food is served, a mango leaf used to serve ghee document the economic condition of that humble household.

The new bride of the house despises the traditional brass, copper and bronze utensils that were an integral part of the kitchen. The economic condition of the house only allowed her to dream of new shining steel vessels which would serve as cheaper alternatives for the absence of expensive clothes and jewellery.

The poor uneducated, young ambitious bride is shrewd enough to make a wish for a steel plate to eat her lunch everyday. The clever woman uses her pregnancy as an excuse to change a system (cultural practice) that had existed for decades. The entry of one steel plate into the kitchen served as a passport to many more steel utensils that would make a thoroughfare entry. This replacement of old, traditional copper, brass, bronze utensils by the modern stainless steel ones is a glaring example of an urban phenomenon. It is significant for the reason that it begins in the woman's familiar domain, the kitchen!!

The need to be recognised empowered seems to be an innate need and it manifests in the form of material possessions. The need to embrace the trends of the urban culture results in the acceptance of changes happening in the familiar surroundings. The entry of one steel utensil and their ever increasing numbers to play their designated roles are labelled as necessities! A different utensil for a specific purpose. Welcome to the consumerist world!!

The lady of the house displays her economic status by increasing the number and variety of utensils in the kitchen! Knowing her fondness for steel utensils the son decides to take her shopping to one of the popular multi-storeyed store in the city selling only steel utensils. It is also his way of making up for the lost box filled with steel utensils that were gifted to his sister during her wedding.

Her longing and obsession for new steel utensils ends with the death of her husband. She even refuses to use the shining steel plate which was so fondly gifted by her husband.

Eventually she gives away all her stainless steel utensils to her daughter. The educated daughter with her sophisticated outlook on life is not very fascinated by the outdated steel utensils. She even chides her mother when a guest is offered water in a steel glass. The daughter who identifies herself with glass and porcelain utensils in the kitchen has categorised the people using steel as lower middle class. The daughter's desire to be identified as an elite class which is a higher social order is evident in her adaptation to modern cookware in the kitchen.

Though the utensils continue to be an integral part of domestic sphere, the mother and daughter choose different

metals to prove their preference of higher social order by introducing changes in their domain.

The saga of utensils ends with the death of the mother. It is fascinating to note that the ritual performed in most Indian households, the performing of last rites to appease the soul of the dead also has a connection to steel utensils in this story. The daughter makes a silent prayer to safeguard the mother's steel utensils and only then the crow touches the (pinda) rice cakes and the ritual is complete.

In spite of the urbanization and adaptability the children perform rituals and also take a vow to safeguard the utensils which were such an inseparable part (identity) of the mother during her life time.

Eventually all the utensils are distributed and her first steel plate is cherished by the children as her personal effect which was her identity too. The urban, elite daughter holds on to the traditional beliefs imbibed by her because of the culture that was prevalent during her growing up years. The desire to accept and belong to the new urban ideas and also hold on to the familiar old beliefs is also an ongoing phenomenon which results in a new identity for oneself.

The curd seller by Masti Venkatesha Iyengar effectively demonstrates the politics of everyday life in most simple homes and a struggle for power.

This short story is all about a middle aged uneducated, naïve women who makes a living by selling curds.

A commodity like curds has a limited shelf life. The culture (to make curds), the storage, preparation and distribution involves expertise. The story happens in the outskirts of Bangalore, where there are homes which buy curds from the pot that the curd seller brings it in. The texture and the quality of the product and its regular delivery ensures regular business and a loyal clientele. The challenges posed by weather in traversing and delivering the product fresh can only be managed by a smart, efficient, seller, which Mangamma has proved to be. Buying and selling in small town villages purely depend on relationships that thrive on trust. Mangamma's interaction is limited to the lady of the house, who also develops a bond because of their everyday interaction. It is common to discuss the little joys and challenges of their respective homes if time, weather and occasion are conducive for an informal chat session. Amidst conversation Mangamma's advice to the lady of the house blurs the invisible social barrier that exists between the two classes. A naive Mangamma gives tips to the lady of the house on safeguarding her marriage by exercising control over the husband. According to her an attractive appearance and a little saving for the rainy day are the secret ingredients to a successful marriage. Her worldly knowledge amuses the lady of the house and she becomes her close confidante.

Mangamma's identity is defined by the commodity she sells and the social relations she maintains with the people whom she interacts on an everyday basis.

Mangamma and her daughter-in-law have a row over disciplining the little grandson in the family. One argument leads to another and Mangamma is forced to live alone.

The independent empowered Mangamma is distraught with the sudden twist of events in her otherwise predictable routine. On second thoughts, a rational Mangamma decides to love herself and spend on her clothes to dress modestly as she does not feel the need to save anymore. She decides to splurge a little and pamper herself. She even confronts a city boy who mocks her fondness for expensive clothes as she wears one of those mukmul blouses. She has a mind of her own and she confidently defies convention to wear nice expensive clothes and be presentable and give herself the comfort of soft linen. An uneducated single women in a village separated from her husband does not think twice to assert herself. She even confronts her son and daughter-in-law on her choice of fabric and does not feel threatened by their comments.

The social construction does not allow the women to handle her finances without the support of a male member in the family. This is evident when an otherwise confident, shrewd, worldly wise Mangamma is intimidated by the advances of Rangappa after she is separated from her son. She realises the need to secure the earnings with her trusted confidante,

the lady of the house. The lady from the higher social order comes across as a timid women who cannot take a stand to help out Mangamma by keeping her earnings with her. She gives an evasive reply and says she needs her husband's permission! She comes across as a less empowered women who is economically comfortable but chooses to be the subservient gender by using her husband, the powerful and decision making individual of the house as an alibi for her convenience! She is content with her identity as the powerless lady of the house who is unwilling to help an rise up to the occasion.

The empowered, financially independent, yet a very emotional Mangamma is reluctant to break ties with the loving son, daughter-in-law and grandson. She is flabbergasted with Rangappa's advances towards her when she starts living independently. She realises the physical strength of her male counterpart is certainly overpowering. She is smart enough to make peace but her ego will not let her make the first move. The struggle for power by the two women in the family is evident. They are all out to prove their mettle.

Mangamma's equally sensible, shrewd daughter-in-law Nanjamma hatches a plan to take control of the situation by instructing her young son to be around Mangamma. Mangamma is proud that the grandson has chosen to live with her and decides to soften her stand for her son and daughter-in-law. Mangamma welcomes the grandson, who she thinks is a good substitute for the absence of any male member in her life.

The established pattern in the society invariably thrusts the idea of a male being a sense of security and power for the women irrespective age and physical strength. The reconciliation happens in a subtle way with the control of finances and domestic chores being shared by the two women.

Mangamma exchanges her profitable curd selling business for the control that she can establish in the management at home and live a secure life with love and respect. A happy Nanjamma takes over the established profitable business and makes peace with Mangamma. The struggle for power is evident in every society irrespective of the social order they represent.

A short Kannada story “Kittajji mathu havissu paatre” by Nilavara Surendra Adiga, a Kannada writer talks about an old women Kittajji and a bronze vessel (Havissu paatre) which is an integral, inseparable part of her life.

Havissu is the grain, milk or ghee that is used to give oblation into the fire so that it reaches and the deities, when a ritual is performed. Here, “havissu paatre” is a bronze vessel to cook rice to be given as oblation.

Woman of any traditional household is familiar with the strength, function and purpose of the kitchen. The women who have gained expertise in household chores and cooking are revered by one and all. Since times immemorial the social structure that has constructed restricts this domain mostly to women, with a few exceptions!

Kittajji put her knowledge and skills to good use and became an integral part of every household in the village. The septuagenarian with her bronze vessel was everyone's woman Friday. A woman who challenged tradition and custom and silenced an entire village with her progressive views on inter-caste marriage emerges as an empowered woman despite her adherence to certain rituals.

Havissu paatre was her lifeline, her identity. She cooked for all rituals in that utensil without any assistance. There hardly was a house in the village which did not make use of Kittajji's services and her vessel. A young widow who lost her parents to an epidemic and her lands to Land Reforms Act leaves her village with this bronze utensil as a piece of memorabilia which eventually becomes her identity. She supports her grandson's inter-caste marriage and lives with him but trains the young bride to follow the Brahmin traditions. She challenged the tradition by encouraging the inter-caste marriage and emerges as a woman with progressive views, an individual who lives within the framework of established social norms and demonstrates a questioning spirit whenever the occasion demands. With her decision to live with her grandson who married out of caste, she invites the wrath of her own son. She is assertive enough and tough with her son

and reluctantly accepts the invitation to help him during her deceased husband's "Shraddha". But she agrees to go to the house only the day before the ritual. An angry son decides to perform the ritual without her assistance. It's only after he buys a new expensive utensil for the ritual he realizes the worth of Kittajji and Havissu paatre. The expense incurred for hiring people to cook during the ritual and the strain he experiences makes him realize Kittajji's efficiency.

A woman who is an indispensable part of her entire village because of her strength of her character doesn't think twice to speak her mind even if it meant straining the relationship with her own son. The legendary Kittajji dies due to age related illness in the hospital. The havissu paatre on the day of the shraddha is kept on the fire to make the rice for the ritual and the family realises that a small hole at the bottom of the vessel has made it dysfunctional.

The end of Kittajji's journey coincides with the end of the usage of the strong bronze utensil which efficiently cooked, served hundreds of people on numerous occasions. The end of the utensil made from a particular metal which was the identity of specific households and specific generation also marks the beginning of another generation which quickly replaces the thought process, relationships with more modern ideas. The traditional bronze vessel replaced by the son for the ritual by a new one is a pointer of change.

END NOTES:

Havissu – is the grain, rice, milk, ghee that is used to give oblation to the fire when the rituals are performed.

Havissu Paatre : A bronze vessel (mostly used for cooking)

Patrali leaf : Patrali is an Indian eating plate or trencher made with broad dried leaves. It is made from sal leaves.

Stainless steel paatre : Utensils made from stainless steel metal which are used for cooking and serving food.

Pinda : lumps of rice or rice balls offered to ancestors during a ritual.

Mosarina Mangamma : The lady who sells curds.

Mosaru : Curd

Culture : As in the culture used to make curd.

Mukmul : A soft linen cloth.

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