


Communality, Culture, Culinary Fruits and Communication in Noor Unnahaar's South Asian Gastro Poetics

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Abstract

This article explores how food, particularly fruits, functions as a form of emotional and cultural communication in the insta poetry of Noor Unnahaar. Drawing from the interdisciplinary field of literary food studies and gastro poetics, the study examines how culinary imagery becomes a medium for expressing love, memory, grief, and familial bonds within South Asian collectivist cultures, where emotions are often communicated indirectly rather than through explicit verbal expression. Focusing on selected poems shared on Instagram, such as "Fathers", "Persimmons", and "Lemons", the article analyses how everyday fruits become symbols of affection, remembrance, and inherited emotional understanding across generations. Through close reading, the article demonstrates how Unnahaar transforms ordinary food items into powerful affective markers that communicate care, nostalgia, and belonging.

The study also situates Unnahaar's work within the context of contemporary insta poetry, highlighting how the brevity, visual elements, and confessional tone of social media poetry enhance emotional immediacy and communal resonance. In essence, this article argues that Noor Unnahaar's gastro poetic representations of culinary fruits create a space where personal memory, cultural identity, and familial communication intersect, revealing how food becomes a subtle yet meaningful language of love in South Asian communities.

Keywords: gastro poetics, literary food studies, insta poetry, noor unnahaar, south asian culture

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Introduction

“Literature does not merely describe food; it uses food as a narrative device to construct memory, identity, and belonging” (Tigner and Carruth 2). Food literature or literary food studies is an evolving interdisciplinary field of study that inspects the representation, symbolism and cultural significance of food in literary productions. The culinary experience and the local food culture have been historically recorded in literature from earlier forms of literature. “The semiotics of food and culture was observed by cultural theorists in the 20th century as “not only a collection of products . . . It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour” (Barthes 21).

In the recent decades, literary food studies have developed an extensive, distinctive approach to food writing combining literary criticism and gastronomy - “gastro criticism” (Tobin 621-630). It applies a culinary lens to texts in investigating the material, embodied, symbolic and rhetorical aspects of food; it acknowledges the active presence of a non-human entity (food and food ways) in literary texts (Klitzing 355). As a framework of criticism towards literature and food,

(it) integrates the methods of cultural history, close reading, and archival research with concepts drawn from both literary studies - such as narrative, rhetoric, form, audience, authorship, and taste - and food studies - such as foodways, food justice, gastronomy, and agrarianism... to tease out relationships between cultures of food and major literary forms: tragedy, utopianism, satire, modernist fiction, and so on. (Tigner and Carruth 4)

Gastro poetics and Affect: Theoretical Framework

“Gastro poetics shifts attention from food as simply an object of consumption to food as a poetic device that generates meaning, emotion, and cultural identity. Through metaphor, imagery, and symbolism, food becomes a site where individual experience and collective memory intersect” (Roy 478), explores the “realm of affect rooted in the individual body” (Wang 4), encompassing both “aesthetic singularity and social implications” (Cutter 1). In its modernist form, poetry’s representation is polarized. Drawing from Levi Strauss, modernist poetry is considered a dialectic phenomenon - poetry that aligns with nature and productions with affiliation toward culture, as demarcated in the book chapter “‘The Raw and the Cooked’ Food and Modernist Poetry” (2019) with reference to the poetry of D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens (Jenkins 183-192). Similarly, *The Role of Fruit in Modern Poetry (1991)* examines the poetic representation of fruit in modern poetry and its metamorphosis from an object to an artifact of consumption - from sensory to the sensuous to the sensual, in alignment with the transformation from the raw, to cooked, to the rotten (Dietrich 142). In connecting food poetry to its affect, *Gastronomic Poetry: Food and Affect in a Catalan Setting (2022)* confluences Food Studies and Affect theory to discuss food as a site to reflect on and define a sense of belonging through metaphor and other literary strategies that express affect in Hispanic poetry (Bou). Within the subcontinent, *Digesting Women’s Unrestrained*

Appetites: Renegotiating Women's Desires in Select Folktales from Ramanujan's Folktales from India (2024) employs a Feminist Food Studies framework to underscore the subversive employment of food motifs in women-centric folktales, to challenge the established patriarchal power structures within domestic households and the unravels of women's hidden desires for sexual gratification to reclaim agency and power over their bodies. (Gandhi 141-155). It contributes to the discourse on interplay of food, power, gender, agency, and gender in Indian folk literature.

Gastro poetics and South Asian Women Poets

In narrowing the scope of gastro poetics to ethnic women poets, *Food, Love and the Self in Indian Women's Poetry in English (2020)* traces how identity in the works of post-independence poets such as Sujata Bhatt, Imtiaz Dharker, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Sumana Roy, Sharanya Manivannan, Anindita Sengupta, Arundhathi Subramaniam and the food images articulating their identity at the levels of individual, interpersonal and social (Sareen 49-58). As evidenced, previous research on gastro poetics and its affect is relegated to its less contemporary forms and within South Asian poetic production, the discussion is limited to modern female poets. The post-modern poetry of Noor Unnihar, a poet and visual artist from Pakistan, writes from her inherited memory as a daughter. For her, "writing is a navigatory act for her personal & familial history. her poems draw inspiration from South Asian culture where superstitions and food absolutely rule" (Unnihar). Her literary contributions include a collection of poetry *yesterday I was the moon (2018)*, followed by her poetry journal, *Find Your Voice (2018)* and most recently, *New Names for Lost Things (2021)*. Besides her published works, she actively posts/self-publishes her poetry on Instagram; select poems on raw food, familial history and South Asian culture have been preferred in this article as the primary material for the application of the theoretical frameworks of gastro poetics and affect to deconstruct communication in collectivist communities through food.

Insta poetry as a Twenty-First Century Literary Form

As a twenty-first phenomenon, Insta poetry, a postmodern form of poetry, is characterised by:

brevity, emerged with the rise of social media. Its straightforward language, minimal punctuation, and all-lowercase formatting, often accompanied by visually engaging graphics and designs, make it a digestible form of poetry that easily spreads across social media platforms. Frequently delving into themes of love, self-empowerment, mental health, and identity. (Naidu)

"Insta poetry reflects contemporary modes of communication in the digital age, where brevity, accessibility, and emotional immediacy define literary production. The visual and textual hybridity of social media poetry allows writers to communicate affect quickly while fostering communal engagement among readers." (Khilnani 138). Noor Unnihar's instapoetical productions are rooted in personal identity, with themes of culture, language, womanhood, survival and self,

informing its affect. When interviewed on the labelling of her work as insta poetry, she responds:

My work, while centered around poetry, still uses other mediums like photography, journaling, and painting. I see my work as a visual assemblage, where two or more mediums are connected via a common theme. By identifying the methods, I simply become a creative who uses Instagram as an outlet to display my work. How that very work is labeled later is out of my hands. (Murugan)

Collectivist Culture and Non-Verbal Communication Through Food

Her poetry is predominated by familial practices manufactured in synchronization with the implementation of her cultural norms and enacted in the limited communicative space proffered. “In collectivist societies, emotional expression is often indirect and mediated through shared practices such as cooking, eating, and food preparation. These everyday rituals function as non-verbal communication systems that convey affection, care, and belonging without explicit articulation” (Triandis 59).

In South Asia, collectivist culture is practiced with minimal affective expression or direct, verbal communication in familial interactions. “Food practices in families frequently operate as emotional languages, where acts of cooking, serving, and sharing become symbolic gestures of love, memory, and intergenerational continuity” (Counihan 9).

Outside the western social convention of communication through endearing language and expressions, the South Asian cultures resort to non-verbal cues - communication through food. “Foods, deployed referentially or conceptually in texts are atypical sign vehicles, functioning at the connotative (attitudinal, affective, cultural, ideological, etc.) veins of meaning...Connotatively, through food, ideational and interpersonal meanings can be communicated and explored” (Ibrahim Esan 166 -168). Hence, raw food acts as a form of calibrated communication in the South Asian communities by functioning as a non-verbal system of signs and symbols. It signifies what is eaten, when it is consumed, and whom it is shared with; it is simultaneously personal and communal.

Culinary Fruits as Metaphors of Familial Communication

In the poetry of Noor Unnihar, the preparation of a meal, the significance of food items in a familial tradition/ritual, the cultural binding and reduction of women to domestic labour in food preparation, and food’s function as a familial tie of women from varying generations are discussed by presenting food as a metaphor. From her myriad depictions of food enabled by the post-modern poetic form, the representation of raw food as a sign, signifying the non-verbal affective communication in parental relationships within the South Asian culture, has been preferred for the application of the theoretical framework of gastro poetics - to dissect the intersection of food, poetry, memory, affect, social bonds and cultural identity in the poems.

In her poem titled “Fathers”, she endearingly recalls her father’s inability to identify the demarcation of ripe fruit from rotten at the market. Prior to the cultural practice of the bride’s relocation from the parental house, she recalls:

the fruits would always be divided.
the fresh pile left in my name,
he would take those
unfit to endure another day.
isn’t it some kind of mercy?
hunger quietened by love’s small hands. (Unnahar)

Paternal Affection and Memory in “Fathers”

“Food memories are particularly powerful because they are tied to sensory experience. The taste or sight of a particular food can evoke vivid recollections of childhood, familial intimacy and emotional security” (Kessler 153). The non-capitalization in the poet’s writing assists in the progression of affect within the poem (Andrea); this deliberate choice of informality in the mechanics of punctuation allows for the expression of personal affect. This depiction of the act of fruit sorting in the poem serves as the site of autobiographical and affective expression in gastro poetics. The poet recognizes her father’s act of mercy via the raw food, rotten or ripe, it suffices as a nostalgic reminder of her father’s non-verbal affect toward her, communicated in fond recollection. The imagery of the “fresh pile” of fruits is personified as an asset by the poet asserts this recognition. The unspecified fruit ascends its primary function of nourishment within the context of South Asian culture and emerges as a sign of paternal mercy conveyed with the non-verbal cue. The poem ends with the nostalgic affect attached to the fruit and its signification in her personal relationship – “I turn nine at the sight of fresh pears falling” (Unnahar). In this poem, the fruits “serve as memory triggers, reminding characters of the past, and transporting them to another time through the memory of a similar previous sensory experience” (Kessler 153).

Sisterhood and Inherited Memory in “Persimmons”

In “Persimmons”, she writes of the recently ascertained information of her father’s favourite fruit, persimmons, revealed by his sister. The poem extends to four lines, contains the visual image of a hand-painted persimmon, and intermittent enjambments, word positioning and line breaks. This lineation with brevity in the poetic form foregrounds the subordinated meanings within the lines – the love of a sister through remembrance of a culinary choice. She writes:

I did not know my father’s favourite fruit
was persimmon
until my aunt told me.
she says it’s from their childhood. (Unnahar)

In South Asian culture, direct communication about affect occurs around domesticity between women with an intergenerational connection, foregrounding their affective labour with food as the medium. The sign of the persimmon as a sister's understanding of a brother's culinary desire and the affect the fruit implies is inherited by another female member of the family. Native to the land (In paper Magazine), beyond its culture, the fruit carries its familial connections and lineage in taste through its gastro poetic depiction, for "although fruit is a part of nature, humans -these poets- impose their own cultural categories upon it" (Dietrich 129). The fruit is simultaneously personal, cultural and communal as the poem evidences.

The enjambment conveying the poet's longing to understand her father finds resolution at the end-stopped line, she writes, "I wonder/ what do you love/ when no one remembers?" (Unnahar). Although poised as a question, the "end-stopped line offers completion and, potentially, reassurance." (Hazelton), that remembrance of the favourite fruit is a metaphorical form of affect understood and transferred within the poem.

Grief and Intergenerational Care in "Lemons"

In "Lemons", as a fruit, the reenactment of embodied memory of the lemon as mother's favourite culinary fruit signifies lingering grief and care in its verbal absence with the South Asian household. The presence of lemons thus transcends a mere gustatory experience, becoming a potent symbol of enduring familial connection and the intergenerational transmission of care, a phenomenon wherein culinary nostalgia mitigates feelings of the mother's absence unprocessed, and a son's longing memorized. She writes,

My father's mother loved lemons. Years after her passing,
we run out of everything, but never
lemons.
Nothing shelters grief better than memory.
It's my father way of saying,
even in your absence, you will be
cared
by me. (Unnahar)

Insta poetry's characteristic brevity and emotional appeal amplifies the poem's elegiac tone by presenting grief in an immediately consumable and shareable format, thereby fostering a communal affective resonance. The evocative power of food, particularly in its capacity to trigger involuntary memory, can transform a simple ingredient like a lemon into a complex signifier of loss and familial devotion, demonstrating how gustatory experiences can elicit profound emotional and autobiographical recollection. Such practices, often documented and shared through digital platforms, further amplify their affective impact, creating a communal space for grieving and remembrance that transcends geographical

boundaries. The lack of the father's affective communication of his grief is compensated through the daughter's muted understanding and its gastro poetic expression.

Conclusion

Food, especially in its rawer form, is experienced and depicted with different connotations in gastro poetics. Gastronomic writing on the consumption of a cultural dish is varied from naturally occurring culinary items – the latter is more immediate and conveys the bodily affect of nourishment, desire and longing. The gastro poetic representation of this affect could be considered as a food sphere, where the “discursive (verbal act), representational (visual)” (Ebrahmin Esan 167) activities of cooking, food serving and eating intertwine, enabled by insta poetry's characteristics as a medium for malleable representation.

The gastro poetics of affect in South Asian culture is thus depicted in the insta poetry of Noor Unnihar; its verbal and visual gastronomic writing of culinary fruits allows for non-verbal communication at the personal and communal levels.

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