

What's cooking? Preparing and sharing food in Ambai's Tamil short stories

There is an abundance of tropes to do with food, cooking and eating in modern Tamil fiction. They appear consistently in the short stories of Ambai, a contemporary author in Tamil, who writes from a feminist perspective. She uses examples of food and cooking to highlight certain themes in her work: frames and boundaries; order, control and power relations within boundaries, and pleasures outside them.

As a writer who grew up in Tamil Nadu but now lives in Bombay, a recurrent theme is the quest for identity, or sense of the self. Food can be a means of defining a group identity: other people stereotype the 'Madrassi' by what and how she eats ('A rat, a sparrow'), while someone from Tirunelveli defines himself as much by regional landscape as by local foods ('Journey 2'). On the other hand, where a protagonist perceives her 'self' as fluid and changing, tastes and smells of food still feature prominently among the ragbag of memories, sense impressions including music, and emotions that make up her particular history ('A rose-coloured sari').

Ambai also sees food and cooking as ways of imposing control within the family, and maintaining boundaries between communities. She questions the value of hospitality, which merely reflects the status and importance of the paterfamilias. 'A kitchen in the corner of the house' examines the mother-in-law's illusory authority in the kitchen, the establishment of a hierarchy within it, and how that authority can be subverted through 'food wars'. In other stories (e.g. 'Parasakti and others in a plastic box'), a mother's food brings order to the day and the seasons of the year, but this order limits flexibility and choice. Outside the boundaries are forbidden foods: for example, impure foods sacrificed to the non-Sanskritic goddess Mariamman and then cooked into delicious chicken pulao; mouth-watering but unhealthy street foods ('Journey 3') or palm toddy ('Forest'). These cross caste and class lines; they are dangerously close to 'pain, blood and death', and they afford the delights of indulgence and excess.

Sharing food is a continuing theme in Ambai's stories. Sharing food also means crossing boundaries between generations, communities and cultures ('Gifts', 'Age', 'Camel ride'). The ideal feast is one where the cooking is shared equally and spontaneously ('Forest'). Everyone eats together, no one 'serves' another: the opposite of the hierarchy described in 'A kitchen'. The feast also asserts the right to pleasure, which sometimes has to be earned through pain. The women in 'Forest' cook their feast together, to the rhythm of Bahini Bai's lyric which one of them sings:

Arré, sansara, sansara, life is like a griddle on which you cook your baakris:
It is only when you have burnt your hand that you get your baakris.

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