



## **CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF FOOD IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF ANITA NAIR**

**Dr. P. NEELAKANDAN**

Associate Professor of English,  
Rajah Serfoji Government College, (A)  
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University)  
Thanjavur – 61 3005,  
Tamil Nadu,  
[neelakandanperiyasamy1@gmail.com](mailto:neelakandanperiyasamy1@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

The representation of food in literature is not a newly developed concept, but it has its existence since the time of Ramayana and Mahabharata. It exists in literature from the time of the Holy Bible to mystery and detective fiction of present literature. Many writers writing on food have strictly penned their ideas about this concept. The major writers and their works are Jean Anthelm's *On The Pleasure of The Table*; Virginia Woolf's *To The Light House*; Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*; Evelyn Waugh's *The Manager of The Kremlin*; Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*; MFK Fisher's *A Kitchen Allegory*; Gunter Grass' *The Flounder*; Nora Ephron's *Heartburn*; Amy Tan's *Best Quality* and TC Boyal's *Sorry Fugu*. These writers have perfectly shown the food for stomachs and curious minds. Various writers have reflected food in all its forms. They have presented it beyond the bodily requirement and source of presentation of feelings. Besides satisfying the craving for the stomach, food provides happiness and promotes wisdom. The meal is a biological need, but in literature, it is an occasion for transcendence. This paper discusses the changing perceptions of food in the select novels of Anita Nair.

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**Keywords: Anita Nair, food, literature, feelings, biology, perceptions**

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Anita Nair presents varied experiences, thought-provoking expressions and cultural observations through her literary endeavors. Anita Nair regarded as one of the leading novelists in Indian English literature, explores food not only as the substance of eating, which is a fundamental human activity but also shows it as an activity inextricably connected with social functions. She explores behaviors like eating habits, the choice of dining companions and the eating rituals connected with their fundamentals through simple stories. These food behaviors foster an understanding of human society. She has used food as a literary device that marks both the visual and verbal impact. It gives an exclusive medium of transcendence from the limitations. Anita Nair feels that "Writing on food gives her the greatest enjoyment in fiction that without any effort and she quite seamlessly introduces food into the narrative" (*Goodnight* 149).

Nair's writing is based on the perspectives on gender, society and modernity. It led her characters to move beyond mere survival. She focuses on the pursuits of subjectivity and happiness through food. She is exceptionally best in this art of presenting reality in literary works. Despite being a female writer, she is also sympathetic towards her male characters. She delves deep into the human psyche and stimulates every character that needs liberation in a real sense. To expose human psychology, she erases the boundary for her characters. She chooses food, a basic thing of every house for exposure of identity and self-respect. She has proposed a new philosophy regarding food in the context of modern times. Her concept of food transcends that is the limited role of hunger and she relates this concept to the mental and emotional state of every person.

Anita Nair mirrors society in her literary endeavors and her writings delve deep into the contemporary obnoxious condition of human beings. Food is a basic need of every being, children, animals, and plants. Nair's characters follow their biological expressions as every human being does. They are shown feeding to men, children, cats and even birds. In *Idris*, one can observe very clearly when Kondavar feeds his dog Maccanto. When Idris meets Baapa Gurukkal, he comes to know the true value of feeding a hungry man. Another part of the novel shows food as the basic need when the accused of theft is punished in Neelakanthan's area. They throw the accused in the hole for three days, but he is not deprived of food. They hurl down the food of eight days in the hole so that he may not die of hunger. They depute a person of his duty to feed him. It is believed that a dying person must not go hungry. If it happens, God punishes the whole society. He bears death-like punishments, but he is not denied food to die hungry. At another place, Kandavar tells his mother that: "I am so hungry that I could eat an elephant" (*Idris* 75). His mother takes care of him a lot. She makes the food of his likeness. When he goes out with Idris, he feels homesick as he does not get as tasty food as his mother cooks. Anita Nair shows food as a biological need when she says:

"Despite everything, despite the world falling around our ears, our bodies will never let us forget that we were alive and needy. That our hunger has to be appeased, our thirst quenched, our desires awaked, our lives spent. There is no escaping from that" (*Lessons in Forgetting* 58).

In order to show the need for food, she described every character carrying some eatables with them while going out of their homes. All her characters are very conscious of taking some betel nuts, butter, and honey with them. This shows that the basic need for food cannot be ignored, even out of the home. In *Mistress*, when Shyam goes on a business trip by train, he observes the special liking of children for eatables like- chocolates, a packet of chips, bananas and a cup of coke. On the train, this scene reminds him of his days of childhood. Anita Nair develops her characters by subtle and minute analysis of gesture, expression, intonation and a hundred other details.

The value of food comes true through the incident of *Idris* when a worker of a Merchant Golla finds a diamond on the sea beach. He gives this diamond to merchant Golla only for the sake of one plate of rice and a long cloth worth 40 *peche*. No doubt diamond is very expensive, but nothing is expensive before a hungry dying stomach. This description shows that everybody has to focus on only his first need that is food. All the workers collect expensive things from the sea and give these things to the merchants and they get food for this. Even Idris and other merchants collect food first and then they set on their journey. The characters wherever go outside, firstly bothers for food. As in *The Better Man*, Anjana and Ravindran go to Kozhikode to live there for some time. She packs her favorite food items firstly. When they reach there, she firstly unpacks the bag that contained food and she stacks the groceries on the kitchen shelves. Idris and Kondavar pack their food for one full month. They pack rice and dried fish. They do not take the clothes with them to wear and they are seen struggling for food, not for trade in coastal areas. Akhila always keeps peanuts in her bag. She never forgets her Tiffin while going to the office. Nair never shows the working process of the office but she never forgets to describe the lunch time. All the staff members are seen negotiating which others on the matter of the food packed in their Tiffin.

In another novel *Mistress*, in conversation with Radha's father, Shyam exposes food as a basic need through his own experience. Shyam used to write poetry, but Radha's father does not like his profession as he thinks that the profession of poetry cannot feed the hungry belly properly. Radha's father seems to be very careful in choosing a bridegroom for her. He was very conscious of the matter

of money. His first care for her daughter Radha is for her food for a lifetime. Their everyday conversation about food shows food as a basic need for everyone. Shyam tells his own experiences to Radha. Shyam belongs to a poor family where his mother was the sole winner of bread in his family. He faces a lack of food at his home. Whenever he asks his mother for food, she snaps and says: “how could you be hungry?” (12). He reminds him of eating time. She used to tell him to eat food at the appropriate time and in appropriate amounts. His mother rationed their food carefully, but he was a growing child and all day and sometimes at night, hunger with a rat-like tooth gnawed at his intestines. His mother dosed him of worms and said “he must have monsters living within him, who demanded to be fed all the day and night” (13). But out of her love, his poor mother did her best to make both ends meet, to make do with what was offered to him. His hunger threw her planning asunder. This shows her love for her son.

In *Ladies Coupe*, the character of Akhila shows the food is a physical need at the very first of her story. His father never likes to see food as a waste in the kitchen. Her mother was very careful in managing the kitchen so-called her territory. Nair shows the food consciousness while depicting the details of the kitchen in every story. The depiction of Akhila’s mother eating left over of the kitchen pricks the readers’ minds. She eats one *chapatti* with a slice of a pickle at the end. This shows the real devotion of every woman. Akhila has to earn after the death of her father because, except for her, no one was at her home to earn food. She becomes the sole breadwinner of her family. She does her best in saving money for her family. She works for extra time in her office so that she may earn extra for the study of her brother and sister. She manages the whole expense of their marriage. Further, when she wants to start a new life that is the journey, she firstly eats three *idlies*, a small bowl of *sambhar* and a hot cup of tea in her breakfast. She knows that her members of a family would not allow her to go so she fulfilled her physical need firstly after that she tells about her going.

The role of the family in its essence is not unique only to Indian literature but it relates to all human experience at the global level. It has universal relevance and validity in every theme. Nair teaches on the familial relationship especially in the context of the theme of food. The basic need for food is deeply connected with the „family“. A family is a group consisting of two parents and children as a unit. Generally, the mother occupies the central position in this role. This one person is generally a mother in every family. So mother relates to our food also. Akhila’s mother looks after every family member about their food of daily routine. She asks her husband: “Aren’t you hungry? You must be. You have had nothing to eat since you woke up” (*Ladies Coupe* 45).

In *Idris*, Idris’ mother asks frequently about food. She remains in the kitchen for the whole day. From the beginning, it is clear that Idris and his mother have a cordial relationship. Whenever Idris looks at her mother, she asks for food as if he is hungry. Her devotion to her son keeps her busy all the time in the kitchen. She never feels tired as she thinks it is her responsibility. In *The Better Man*, Nair shows the children with their basic need is milk. Milk is a complete food for children. She tells:

The milk powder was a gift from the government of some milk-rich nation for the malnourished, milk-hungry children of India. Most of it went into making tea, coffee, Horlicks and Ovaltine in restaurants and tea shops. (59)

Meenakshi gives the alternative of milk that is *Kanji*. Nair’s writing is invigorating and effusively delightful to the readers. It is significant to note that Anita Nair is an admirer of the cooking process. Through giving the minute details of the cooking process, Nair also focuses on the effect of emotions, gender, society and modernity on food. The cooking process completes the sense of food. Moreover, it is highly commendable that Anita Nair is a writer of food. Anita Nair is curious in telling the minute details of the cooking process. She has told many types of dishes indirectly in her works. In *Idris*, *Kanji*, *Poova*, *Halwa*, *Niter Kebbeh* and *Booya*. In *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila’s tells the process of her mother’s favorite dish:

Amma never mixed the filter coffee decoction with milk till she had made the sweet. Semolina toasted a golden brown. Cooked in double the quantity of water, an equal portion of sugar, plenty of ghee and a hint of cardamom stirred till the grains glistened, separated and whole

colored with saffron. Garnished with raisins and roasted cashew nuts. Then they would sip the coffee, bite on the *bhajis*. (47)

Katherine and Akhila are best friends. Katherine eats eggs, but Akhila does not eat eggs as she belongs to a *Brahmin* family. But Katherine tells her the benefits of eating eggs and persuades her for eating eggs. She tells Akhila how to boil eggs when she says:

Do you know how to boil an egg? Just fill a small vessel with enough water to cover the egg and boil it for about eight minutes. Then pour cold water on it and it will be nice and firm. If you boil it for just five minutes, the white would have set and the yellow will be a goosey. That's nice as well. Tries soft-boiled egg sometimes. (89)

In *Ladies Coupe*, when Janki is going to be married to Prabhakaran, her aunts and mother teach her how to do cooking and pickling perfectly. Their way of teaching shows that the taste of good food uplifts the position of women at home. The kitchen is the territory of women. If a woman wins over this territory, she becomes the queen at home. If she cannot do so she becomes an unnecessary object at home. In *Idris*, Kuttimalu makes a dish named *Kunji* and Nair gives a beautiful description of the cooking process of *Kunji*. She tells how Kuttimalu began leading change into a flat-rimmed bronze bowl. She added a dollop of *ghee* and pushed the duck-shaped wooden salt box towards him. She opened the box of salt and took a pinch of salt. *Kunji* brought a leaf of a Jackfruit tree folded into a cone and pinned with a silver of the coconut-leaf spine. Kandavar dipped his leaf spoon into the bowl and spooned the gruel and rice into his mouth. Further, Manickam tells the perfect way of drying sesame seeds in sunlight and preparing for oil and cooking. They keep their cooking pots, grinders and storage jars with them while going on trades.

At another place, Idris prepares chicken and describes the complete process of making chicken. Idris also teaches his son Kandavar how to cook. Even in the imagination of the characters, Anita Nair puts the process of cooking. When Koman goes to England with Angela, he is fed up with food and imagines himself in his kitchen. He tells the process of cooking his favorite recipe. In an awkward condition like the fight, Anita Nair does not sit at back in telling the process of cooking. The beautiful description of cooking can be observed when in *Idris*, Thilothamma makes food along with fighting with her husband in a very loud voice. When in *Idris*, barber, the accused was taken to the cauldron of hot oil everyone felt the smell of cooking flesh. By presenting such situations, Nair makes the reader aware of the reality of day-to-day life. Anita Nair is very expert in combining two different situations for creating a new meaning. She compares the smell coming from the burning body to the food cooking. She presents the lively descriptions in a very clear manner.

Anita Nair's presentation of food contains all the processes of food making, eating as well as serving. Sala Pokkar, Akhila's mother, Radha, Maya, Kuttimalu, Koshalya, Maricolanthu and Janki serve food very efficiently. Except for the cooking process, she also seems to be very conscious in depicting the eating process. In *Idris*, Manickam makes a spoon of leaf for Idris and also advises him not to eat with his fingers. *Pizza* makes the characters feel young and full of spirits. Through the description of *Pizza*, Nair has added the context of modernity very efficiently. She presents both the ancient and modern types of dishes. From an ancient context, she details food as medicine for the body.

From a modern context, she details food as the revival in relationships. Through the descriptions of *Pizza* and *Pizza* huts, Nair seems to push her characters out from the limited territory of home. She wants to leave her character free to present their freedom themselves. Her young characters are seen eating *Pizza* very often at *Pizza* huts. While eating in restaurants, they share their life stories. Inspector Gowada and Urmila, Radha and Chris, Bhuvana and Sanjay seem to enter into one another's life while eating *Pizza* in *Pizza* huts. In *Mistress*, eating by Shyam differentiates eating alone and perfectly eating in social gatherings. Shyam says:

I shove the plate aside, lick my fingers one by one, pick up the glass with my soiled hand and drink the water in one gulp, then belts loudly... the licking and belching are a rare treat, but I am alone and can indulge in it without worrying Radha's conscious gaze. ( 63)

Anita Nair shows her characters at the particular time of lunch and dinner. Their daily routine works carry the description of the time of their food. In *Mistress*, Radha, Shyam, uncle Koman, and Chris are shown taking food at the *perfect* time. In *LIF*, Lily meets Kitu at the time of breakfast. She offers him breakfast and says: “it is so nice to see you, professor. Have you eaten? There is porridge, toast, and fruits. Or you can have *Pongal* and *chutney*. Or would you prefer an egg?” (300). Her techniques of writing perfectly enabled the consciousness of disrobing in perfect sequence. She also mentions desserts after dinner. Idris defines their time and menu of food:

It was food alone that seemed to suggest that the day and hours and weekdays. In the morning, there were bread and porridge made of grouts, sometimes wheat sometimes barley and, once a week. For lunch, there would be fish with peas or beans on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. Thursday and Saturday there would be a pound of beef for Idris and Sala Poker while the other had pork. On Sunday their ration was lamb’s meat and beans while the rest of the ship had ham. (*ID* 204)

She also prescribes the proper timing of eating animals also. In *Idris*, Golla keeps a horse and tells that it’s to feed at the first light of the day. Further, she tells eating together has a different role to play among human beings and animals. Kandavar has a pet cat named Musa. But Idris does not allow Kandavar to eat with Musa. Idris advises Kandavar to be aware of feeding Musa in separate utensils. Idris likes Musa and takes care of it. In *Mistress*, there is a description of an elephant and feeding a banana to it. People feel pleasure in feeding an elephant. Besides describing eatables, Anita Nair focuses on beverages like the drink, milk, tea, wine, beer and chewing of tobacco and betel nuts. Idris chews betel nuts and Chris chews tobacco all over the novel. She especially mentions the way of drinking with some spicy snacks- *Murukku*, fried chicken, peanut *masala*, tapioca chips. Meera in *LIF* drinks white wine which is the symbol of Western culture. Marikolanthu is shown feeding her little brother who is too small to eat food. He only lives on milk. She tells the complete process of this. She tells how her mother heats cows milk, dilutes it with water and feeds this to her son. She also discusses many taste ingredients like- mint, garlic, olive oil, onion, clove and cardamom, Anita Nair puts a special focus on cooking as the profession also. Through this, she classifies the profession of cooking in the context of existing gender biases. Generally, the kitchen and dishes are considered related to the women, but Nair goes beyond this perception. She adds the modern and post-colonial context in her descriptions of food. Her male characters are shown cooking in their kitchen as well as in restaurants as a chef. Inspector Gowda cooks in his kitchen. He prepares breakfast for his son and cooks’ chicken for his friend Urmila, Shyam cooks for Radha. UncleKoman calls the kitchen „my Kitchen“ every time. In *The Better Man*, the whole story revolves around the Shankar’s tea club. Shankar’s tea is so famous that people come out of their house only to have tea from his tea club.

Except for tea, all the characters share their lives while sitting there. There are many such examples in her novels. Like in *Idris*, Bania mentions many food shops, and in *Mistress*, there is the restaurant of Koman in which the maximum part of the story revolves around. Except for food shops, restaurants and tea stalls, she mentions the food vendors selling bread omelets, bread, tea, coconuts, and ground nuts in populated areas. In *Mistress*, she also mentions a book on cooking named *The Readers’ Digest*. Koman adopts the profession of cooking in London.

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