

Cooking Resistance: Food and Feminine Agency in Select Short Stories

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Abstract

This paper explores how food functions as a powerful tool of resistance in the lives of women within domestic spaces, focusing on two short stories by Assamese women writers: “Pas Sotalor Kathakata” by Arupa Patangia Kalita and “The Revenge of Annapurna” by Mitra Phukan. Both stories depict women navigating oppressive patriarchal structures, where food becomes more than sustenance—it becomes a means of reclaiming agency and identity. In the story of Arupa Patangia Kalita, food taboos tied to widowhood and menstruation expose how traditional rituals are used to control female bodies, while the protagonist subtly questions and challenges these norms. On the other hand, in Phukan’s narrative, the central character, likened to the goddess Annapurna, uses her role as the provider of food to assert emotional and moral dominance within the household, ultimately turning domesticity into quiet rebellion. Adopting a feminist literary approach, this study highlights how everyday acts like cooking, serving food and other culinary activities can carry deep symbolic meaning, allowing women to resist marginalisation and assert their presence in private and cultural spaces.

Key words:

Food, gender, identity, power, resistance.

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Introduction

Food, beyond being a biological necessity, is a deeply symbolic and cultural construct. As both a nurturing practice and a crafted product of material culture, food sustains not only the body but also the soul, offering a stable, sensory means of knowing oneself and the world one inhabits. It serves as a differential marker between the known and the unknown, the self and the other; and is inextricably linked with social identity, power and status. Entitlements to food—who eats what, when and how—are not merely personal or familial decisions but reflect broader social hierarchies and cultural codes. As Anita Mannur notes, food is a critical “vector of analysis in negotiating the gendered, racialized and classed bases of collective and individual identity” (24). In its material as well as symbolic dimensions, food helps articulate the mind-body dialectic and becomes central to how individuals are located within cultural, historical and ideological structures.

Within this framework, food plays a significant role in the way gender is constructed and performed, especially in patriarchal societies. Home and hearth, as feminine spaces, with overtones of nurturing, caring and constraints, evolve their own gender dynamics. Kitchen and food are interrogated as gendered sites which define women within patriarchal ambits. The power of the traditional family ideal is seen to reside in its dualistic conceptions as an ideological construct and as a basic precept of social formation (Collins 157). It is conjointly to be understood as the primary location of hierarchy. Interestingly, the power of traditional hegemony lies in the paradox of the practice of patriarchy at home, a private sphere which is imagined as feminised space. However, contemporary feminist analysis discredits home as a safe place for women (Collins 162) and designates it as a site for the continued subordination and exploitation of women. Food and gendered entitlement to it, is a definitive feature of the hegemonic, hierarchized Indian households where the balance of power is tilted unequally in the favour of males.

The term “gender” is deployed here not as a fixed category, but as a genus which acquires validation through gender performance. Food and food ways have been identified by critics as important sites for ‘doing gender’. Carolyn Corrado points out in

her essay “Gender Identities and Socialization”, that individuals receive social rewards for ‘doing gender’ in normative ways and conversely also inhere the potential to change social definitions of gender through deliberate, discursive disjuncture (358). Though food provisioning puts a daily burden of labour on women, it also presents them with opportunities of asserting their agency by discovering their own talents or by making occasions to connect with their traditions, community and family. Food presents a rich domain for women to engage in subversive strategies. They appear to uphold tradition while inflecting it to suit their own goals of achieving covert and overt agency. As Shanti Menon puts it, women’s apparent acquiescence “hides the fact that within their separate sphere women create a space from which they can resist male authority in subtle and silent ways. Their resistance is never articulated; it is a shared secret among women. To voice it would be to bring out into the open, to make public the contradictions within which they operate — contradictions which they accept as part of their everyday lives” (qtd. In Brettell and Sargent 359).

Close proximity to food preparation, feeding and caring, makes women more informed on food and nutrition. With the advantage of material knowledge of foodstuffs, women understand better their impact on human health and well-being. Culinary aspects allow women to partake in empowering knowledge creations. Women are also able to redefine the kitchen as a space where women ought to be, by appropriating it as a space of emotional intimacy (Avakian and Haber 15). Food becomes an important ingress into ontological understandings of the female self. It is also a pertinent element with which women reclaim ethnic and gendered locations and create a women-specific cultural space. Therefore, women’s relationship with food constantly negotiates between complying with social codes and articulating personal or cultural resistance. Alimentary traditions and narratives are interrogated for their divergent potentials of constraint and agency, as they impact and construct women’s spaces, bodies, entitlements and lives.

This paper explores how food functions as a medium of control and resistance in two short stories by contemporary Assamese writers: “Pas Sotalor Kathakata” by Arupa Patangia Kalita and “The Revenge of Annapurna” by Mitra Phukan. Kalita’s story, which appears in the short story collection of the same name, examines how food taboos

surrounding widowhood and menstruation are used to discipline and regulate women's bodies. The mother's quiet refusal to impose these restrictions on her daughter becomes a subtle act of generational resistance. Phukan's story, included in a short story collection titled *A Full Night of Thievery*, portrays a woman who takes on the persona of Annapurna — the goddess of nourishment — and transforms cooking into a strategy to reclaim emotional and moral authority in a strained marriage. Both narratives depict how women, within the confines of tradition, use food-related practices to negotiate autonomy, challenge control and subtly resist patriarchal expectations.

Analysis

In traditional societies, especially within patriarchal systems, the domestic sphere assigns women the role of tireless caregivers—responsible for sustaining the family through both biological reproduction and the maintenance of daily life. This division of labour, though largely unpaid and unacknowledged, is central to the functioning of the public world. Despite its invisibility, women's work, especially in relation to food, becomes indispensable to the maintenance of social and economic structures. Cultural expectations often lead women themselves to internalise these roles, reinforcing ideals such as “good wife,” whose value is measured by a clean home and plentiful meals (Avakian and Haber 9). Within this structure, food entitlement becomes a key marker of gender inequality, with power skewed significantly in favour of men.

Food routines are deeply embedded in cultural, temporal and spatial contexts, making them an effective lens through which women's lived experiences can be understood (Avakian and Haber 2). The act of preparing, serving and consuming food continually shapes women's identities, which are often defined relationally within roles such as daughter, wife or mother. Deborah Lupton, through a poststructuralist approach, notes that food and eating are deeply emotional acts that contribute to one's sense of self and social identity (36). As women strive to meet conflicting social expectations—cooking well, nurturing others and maintaining ideal body standards—their identities are continually redefined.

Cultural associations often link specific foods with gendered notions of purity, discipline and morality. Women, especially during menstruation or widowhood, are

frequently denied rich or protein-heavy foods and expected to consume only plain, ‘pure’ meals. These restrictions reflect long-standing Ayurvedic classifications of foods into *Satvika* (pure), *Rajasika* (passionate) and *Tamasika* (ignorant), with women often confined to *Satvika* foods in the name of bodily control and spiritual elevation. Such dietary rules are used to monitor women’s desires and behaviours, reinforcing ideas of chastity and restraint.

Fasting rituals also reflect this ideology. Often practiced by women to secure family welfare or spiritual merit, these acts of abstinence are tied to religious beliefs and social expectations. As Sila Basak explains, such rituals, known as *bratas*, are performed methodically and are grounded in traditional ideas of discipline and magical thinking (Basak 13). These practices embed virtue in the rejection of physical needs and affirm patriarchal ideals that associate feminine virtue with denial of appetite and bodily control. The disproportionate burden of these disciplines on women reflects broader social ideologies that demand self-restraint and moral purity from them.

As Avakian and Haber point out, this regulation of women’s bodies through food and abstinence plays a key role in maintaining gender-based power structures (22). Acts like eating or refusing to eat are often politicised within these frameworks. Nonetheless, women’s relationship with food is not entirely defined by subjugation. While culinary responsibilities have been used to confine women, they also grant access to practical and cultural knowledge. Women’s hands-on work with food fosters expertise in nutrition, seasonality, and health. Cooking becomes a space not just of duty, but also of creativity, emotional bonding and cultural transmission.

The kitchen, then, becomes a complex space—one that can restrict but also empower. Through shared recipes, caregiving and cultural memory, it serves as a place where women form connections and assert control. Joan Brumberg, in her work on anorexia, argues that women have historically used food behaviours like refusal or overconsumption as symbolic acts of protest, using “appetite as voice” to express emotional and social distress (Pilcher 101). Becky Thompson similarly interprets behaviours like bingeing and starvation as responses to trauma or societal pressures

(Thompson 21). These insights underscore that food is not merely material sustenance but a dynamic field where power, resistance and selfhood intersect.

Both narratives under study highlight how food, in its various roles, is used to discipline women's bodies, construct their identities and simultaneously serve as a site of resistance. The primary storyline of Arupa Patangia Kalita's "Pas Sotalor Kathakata" unfolds through a series of narratives that the protagonist, Junu Hazarika, encounters during her research. These discovered stories significantly influence her perspective and later decisions. The narrative adopts a stream-of-consciousness style, allowing the reader to follow Junu's internal reflections as she navigates between past and present. Details about her life and the other characters are revealed gradually through flashbacks, as she recalls significant moments from her past.

Junu, a researcher focused on the lives of child widows in 19th century India, is committed to ensuring a life of freedom and dignity for her daughter—one unburdened by the limitations those historically defined women's lives. Her aspirations are made clear when she tells her daughter, "I will give you a sky to fly. You will fly. You will fly, Majani, flapping your wings" (Kalita 3). As she delves into dusty old books and archival materials in a national library, the voices of the past seem to rise from the pages. These women, once silenced, become vivid presences in Junu's imagination, leading to imagined dialogues that bridge time and space. A layered narrative emerges as we read about Junu reading the lives of these women, whose experiences resonate with her own evolving awareness. The initial section of the story focuses on these widowed girls, many of whom were married off before adolescence and left to suffer lives of silence and deprivation, often without ever knowing their husbands.

In "Pas Sotalor Kathakata," food emerges as a powerful medium through which patriarchal society disciplines and controls widowed women. The fictional characters Junu Hazarika encounters during her research—mothers of child widows from the nineteenth century—reveal traumatic stories of how their daughters were subjected to ritualistic food deprivation. These widows were not allowed to consume non-vegetarian food and were restricted to only one modest meal per day, under the belief that nutritional, protein-rich foods like fish and meat could stimulate sexual desire and thus

disrupt the ideals of chastity and renunciation imposed upon them. The denial of nourishment becomes symbolic of the broader denial of agency and bodily autonomy. Swarna's mother recounts how, when her daughter expressed desire to eat fish, she deceitfully inserted bamboo sticks into fried lentil *badas* and fed them to Swarna, faking the texture of fish without breaking ritual codes. Another character, Kamala's mother, shares an even more disturbing practice—she would make her daughter fall asleep while eating, place her hand in the food plate, and then weigh it down with a stone to make it appear as though the child was still eating, thus preventing her from being accused of eating twice a day. These deeply disturbing strategies illustrate how food, rather than being a source of care and nourishment, was transformed into a mechanism of punishment, discipline and enforced austerity. The systematic restriction of essential nutrition serves to maintain the widow's subjugation and uphold the patriarchal expectation of bodily control and self-denial.

The practice of fasting often idealised as an expression of piety and self-discipline, becomes yet another form of bodily control imposed upon widowed women in "Pas Sotalor Kathakata." Among the many narratives Junu Hazarika engages with, one particularly haunting account is that of Basanti—a young widow who died while observing an *Ekadashi* fast without even a drop of water. Such extreme forms of abstinence, glorified by religious traditions, are internalised by women as virtuous acts, reinforcing their marginalisation through self-effacement. Fasting in this context is not a matter of personal faith but a social expectation imposed to regulate the widow's desires, discipline her body and maintain her image as chaste and self-denying as Susan Bordo, in her essay "Hunger as Ideology" points out, "the social control of female hunger operates as a practical 'discipline' (to use Foucault's term) that trains female bodies in knowledge of their limits and possibilities. Denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse" (130).

In "Pas Sotalor Kathakata," the second part of the narrative marks a pivotal shift from historical inquiry to personal awakening, as Junu Hazarika learns that her daughter, Majani, has attained puberty. Upon returning home, she is shocked to find her daughter confined to a room, subject to customary practices that mirror the very rituals Junu had

encountered in her study of nineteenth-century widows. Majani is kept isolated, forbidden to eat or be touched, invoking in Junu a sense of painful realisation that the oppressive ideologies she thought belonged to the past are still deeply embedded in her own present. The narrative explicitly collapses the distinction between historical time and contemporary experience, as articulated in the line: “It was a world of enchantment where the differences between past and present merged into a synonymity” (Kalita 5).

The story highlights how women’s relationships with food are intimately linked to control, identity, and resistance. The deprivation Majani faces during her first menstruation echoes the same structures of abstinence imposed on the widows Junu had been studying. Junu’s recognition of this continuity triggers a transformation. In a gesture of rebellion, she offers her daughter cake and chocolate, symbolic of nourishment, love, and agency. This act serves not only to comfort Majani but to subvert the rigid norms that seek to control her developing body. Junu’s insistence on eating the same food as her daughter further signifies her refusal to let traditional ideology dictate either of their lives. Food, in this moment, becomes an assertion of solidarity and resistance—a reclaiming of agency for both mother and daughter.

The story culminates in a powerful moment of defiance when Majani refuses to consume *shantipani*, a ritual drink associated with purification. Her rejection of this symbolic act marks a decisive break from the restrictive traditions imposed on her. In a direct confrontation with her grandmother, Majani asserts her voice: “Just because I’m a girl, I will not cry and fast (*brata*) like you” (Kalita 51). This refusal not only challenges the notion of ritual purity but also signifies her refusal to internalise the gendered expectations tied to her body. Unlike the widows of the past who were silenced and disciplined through food rituals, Majani chooses agency. Her stance signifies a generational shift, a refusal to inherit the silence and submission that defined the lives of so many women before her. Through this small but potent act, Majani embodies the spirit of resistance, reclaiming control over her body and voice.

Mitra Phukan’s short story “The Revenge of Annapurna” takes inspiration from the myth of Hindu goddess Annapurna, who is worshipped as the provider of food and nourishment. In the story, the narrator, the daughter-in-law in a traditional Assamese

household, carefully adopts the role of Annapurna. She serves food with care and devotion, feeds the whole family according to their preferences and appears as the perfect homemaker. But under this image of service lies a powerful and silent form of resistance. The narrator does not raise her voice, does not question her husband's betrayal directly, and does not leave the home. Instead, she uses the everyday act of cooking and feeding to claim moral power, emotional control and psychological strength over those around her, especially her husband. In doing so, food becomes her tool of survival, resistance and eventual triumph.

Trapped in a marriage devoid of emotional intimacy, the protagonist finds herself not as a lover or a partner, but as a silent worker—daughter-in-law, wife, mother. Her husband, Abhishekh Barua, is an acclaimed writer, deeply involved in an extramarital affair with a mysterious hill woman. While he escapes to the mountains in search of passion and poetry, the protagonist remains grounded, managing the domestic sphere with precision and devotion. However, this apparent submission masks an act of profound resistance. Rather than confront her husband or express pain, she uses food—ritualistically and tactically—as her means to assert presence and authority. The kitchen becomes her battlefield; every dish, a declaration of endurance and power.

In the traditional Indian context, food is a gendered practice, often linked with women's self-sacrifice, discipline and duty. But in this story, food takes on an oppositional role—it becomes both a marker of identity and a subversive force. The narrator serves each member of the family with precise attention to taste and tradition: "I carry the thought in my mind even as I ladle out the daal without onions to Ma... To Deuta, I carefully slide out the large roundel of rohu fish, along with the tenga... Bablu wants the chicken thigh, so I turn and give him that" (Phukan 178). These gestures, while rooted in care, are also calculated enactments of devotion that position her as irreplaceable. She is not just feeding them; she is cultivating loyalty, orchestrating emotional dependencies through taste, comfort, and consistency. She becomes the centre around which the household revolves—not because she demands it, but because she designs it. In every plate she serves, she affirms her centrality.

The protagonist consciously aligns herself with Annapurna, the goddess of food and abundance, stating: “I never begin on my food until the others have been fed. Like Annapurna, I will not touch a morsel until my devotees have full bellies” (Phukan 179). This deliberate evocation of divinity is deeply strategic. While Annapurna is revered for her generosity, the narrator invokes this image to elevate her own domestic labour into sacred ritual. It becomes a source of unchallenged authority. Her family’s reliance on her cooking transforms her from a replaceable wife into an indispensable presence. She notes with satisfaction that “they are certainly fans of my cooking, Ma and Deuta and Bablu” (Phukan 179) Her labour becomes love and eventually becomes her leverage.

This leverage is most apparent in the quiet power dynamics between her and her husband, whom she refers to only as “Bablu’s father.” Her refusal to use his name even in thought signals an emotional disinvestment and an internal resistance. While he is Abhishekh Barua to the world, the celebrated poet and writer, to her, he is reduced to a role. He is no longer the subject of affection or even resentment; he is simply “Bablu’s father,” and thus stripped of individuality and intimacy. This act of renaming is a radical internal rebellion against patriarchal power.

Despite her husband’s inability to meet her gaze— “This inability of his to meet my gaze, it’s my triumph, too” (Phukan 180)—she continues to perform domestic perfection, knowing full well the effect it has on him. Her resistance grows through everyday practices by which the powerless operate within dominant structures. The expression of this power can be seen in the seen in the dining table scene. The narrator always eats after everyone else, a practice that could be read as self-effacing. But she subverts this very act, using it to prolong her presence, to make her husband sit, wait and watch. “We sit in silence as I finish my meal. I am a leisurely eater at the best of times. Today, I delight in prolonging the meal, taking a sip of water between almost every mouthful to spin it out” (Phukan 180). Her slowness is deliberate—a moment stretched to assert dominance. He is trapped in her space, forced to witness her calm composure, her strategic silence. She feeds first; then she eats—and in doing so, she asserts that this house, this table, this power, all orbit around her.

As she perfects the art of care, she turns the domestic into a fortress. Her in-laws, unaware of the emotional battlefield in which they live, celebrate her sainthood: “It’s all Bowari’s doing... All this comfort in our old age must be the result of some good deed of ours in our previous life” (Phukan 188-89). These praises are earned not only through her cooking but through her all-encompassing management of the household—medications, hospital visits, ceremonial gestures, emotional labour. She notes, “It’s all simple enough, really. Not rocket science. People are so easy to please, actually... I can have them eating out of my hands” (Phukan 189). Her knowledge of people’s appetites—literal and emotional—becomes the basis of her power. Food here is not just sustenance but strategy.

In this story, kitchen has gradually evolved into a social and creative arena where culinary activities transcend mere necessity, becoming expressions of artistry and individuality. Everyday cooking is a language of creative expression for those who do not even comprehend or relate to feminist discourse in their daily lives. The kitchen, then, is no longer a private sphere of domination but of resilience and liberation (Ghosh and Reddy 10). Food, in the story, becomes a medium for the narrator to manipulate and to reign. Her culinary delight and the exactness of her serving—all create an atmosphere where she is inescapable. What distinguishes her power from that of her husband’s mistress, the hill woman with “moonlight skin and monsoon hair” is precisely its durability. The mistress offers excitement, eroticism and escape while the narrator offers familiarity, nourishment and control. She understands the ephemerality of passion and stakes her power on its inevitable decay: “Your body will be ravaged, oh yes it will, by that beast, Time. Your wiles, your enticements, will stale... And then, as I had always known I would, I, Annapurna, will win” (Phukan 189). The narrator knows that her husband may escape to the hills, may fall into the arms of another, but he will always return to her food. He can write his poems about passion, but it is her cooking that frames his reality, feeds his aging parents, raises his child, and sustains his name. That’s why she watches her husband rush up the hills as she knows that while beauty fades and desire weakens, hunger always returns: “Yes, go on, go up. But in the end, it is I who holds the reins of your life. You pelt up the mountain, desperation in every cell of your body. But in the end, you will have to come back. Because I am Annapurna, a goddess and a saint. Who can belittle a goddess, who can battle against a saint? Nobody. Certainly not you”

(Phukan 189). In these lines, her revenge becomes complete. She does not destroy her husband or his affair. She simply outlives it and does so not with violence or anger, but with food, patiently prepared and carefully used as a quiet but powerful form of resistance.

Food is a powerful medium of self-expression, control and resistance, especially for women denied other forms of agency. In “The Revenge of Annapurna,” Mitra Phukan shows how food, often seen as a symbol of women’s domestic confinement, can become a powerful tool of agency. The kitchen, usually a space of confinement for women, becomes the site of emancipation. The protagonist’s identity as Annapurna is not imposed upon her—she chooses it and redefines it. Through food, she exercises control, outlasts betrayal and ensures her own vindication.

Conclusion

The stories, “Pas Sotalor Kathakata” and “The Revenge of Annapurna” powerfully illustrate how food, often viewed as a tool of patriarchal control, can also be reimagined as a medium of feminine resistance. In Kalita’s narrative, food restrictions imposed on widows and during menarche serve to discipline the female body and suppress desire, but Junu’s conscious decision to reject these norms for her daughter and Majani’s own refusal to conform, mark a significant assertion of autonomy and a break from inherited oppression. Meanwhile, in Phukan’s story, the protagonist does not defy tradition by rejecting it, but by mastering it to such an extent that it becomes her means of moral and emotional dominance. By embodying the figure of Annapurna, she uses food to assert her centrality within the household, transforming caregiving into a strategy of control.

These texts demonstrate that acts as seemingly ordinary as cooking, feeding or eating can carry subversive potential. Whether through rebellion against oppressive rituals or the perfection of domestic roles, the women in these narratives claim agency from within the structures designed to contain them. Food, in their hands, becomes not just sustenance but a form of resistance, an everyday practice that redefines their identities and challenges patriarchal authority in deeply personal yet politically significant ways.

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