

## Representation of Identity through Narrativization of Food in *Julie and Julia* (2009) and *The Lunchbox* (2013)

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### Abstract

Food is one of the most important 'cultural markers' for human beings. It creates a sense of belonging and identity. It also helps to understand social, familial, relational and class connections. Another aspect associated with food and its usage is related to gender. It is an undisputed fact that food is a significant activity in the lives of human beings. However, food never has been/ is not merely about physical sustenance. We should not delude ourselves into thinking that eating is a non-essential undertaking due to its 'quotidian' nature. Food can never be looked at singularly. Like literature, it has endless meanings, which have to be 'read in between the lines.' It is replete with both overt and covert meanings which are related to the most cherished and inaccessible parts of human rational/ irrational depths of the brain. We eat for various reasons; out of hunger, anxiety, stress, emotional distress and even after we have been satiated. Food comprises a 'more or less conscious tool' for an amiable and volitional behaviour of a person or her/ his association with a group/ section of the society. It also acts as a means of bias against gender, abuse, and subjugation. Women have been confined to the kitchen since time immemorial. This 'space' has been responsible for their subjection, enslavement, unacknowledged labour and anguish. The present paper examines *Julie and Julia* (2009) and *The Lunchbox* (2013) to look at the stereotypical notion of 'kitchen' being the restricted 'space' from a different perspective. There are many dimensions to the 'kitchen,' the food cooked in it and a sense of liberation and identity involved with it. For the protagonists of these movies, the 'kitchen space' has multifarious implications and each deals with them according to her individual social setting.

**Keywords:** Food, Gendered, Kitchen, Space, Emancipation, Identity.

*The human frame being what it is, heart, body and brain all mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments as they will be no doubt in another million years, a good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well. The lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes.*

([Virginia](#) Woolf *A Room of One's Own*)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

It cannot be denied that food is essential to life. For a starving person, food provides succour for sustenance while for one with means, it is indulgence. For a gastronome, it is to be enjoyed. It is passion for a cook/ chef, wherein every step towards the final product is replete with pure joy. The juices of good food are flowing increasingly into real life, making it difficult to ignore, enriching and invigorating it. The palates have been titillated, always wishing for more, better, and tastier edibles. Readers, audience, and researchers have begun to look at food in a new light. A comprehensive look shows that food exists everywhere. These 'culinary images,' which are all pervasive in cinema and literature, cannot be ignored. They are visible like 'kaleidoscopic lenses' which permit the reader/ audience to delve deep into the various stories behind the 'production' and 'consumption' based on socio-historical contexts. This consciousness of and enchantment associated with the 'symbolic power' of food has resulted in its trans-nationality. In fact, food items have become 'glocal.' The generous nature and 'texture' of the food presented before us, with its 'edible metaphors' and 'visible features of [the] identity/ [that is, of those who prepare it] ... provides [the readers/ audience] with the means for [its] integration and acceptance into the new society ([Jagganath](#), 2017).

Food has crossed boundaries and spilled over from kitchen into anthropology, sociology, arts, humanities, and cinema. It showcases the divergent complexities of personal lives of the home and professional cooks by looking into the suggestive meanings. It is central to human need and experience, giving it universality.

## Literature Review

In the words of Terry Eagleton, food represents an "endlessly interpretable" object of "materialised emotion" (1998: 204). There are not only numerous interpretations of food but it also elicits different emotions from people who consume it. Food also has immense 'symbolic' importance which is evident in 'our cultural coding of possible nutrition into acceptable food and subsequent categorizations that structure that food as edible or inedible' ([Lévi-Strauss](#) 1966; [Mäkelä](#) 2000). [Barthes](#) (2013) has pointed out that food works as a 'sign...not only [as] a useful lens and a remarkable tool to understand the nuances of a particular society, but...also the means for examining the construction of ideas, values, assumptions, practices, and institutions of a social group.' Food is not about buying and monetary

<sup>1</sup> <https://victorianpersistence.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/a-room-of-ones-own-virginia-woolf-1929.pdf>

transactions. The production and its subsequent 'consumption' also play a significant role in the entire scheme of food-making, which, in turn, are an 'integral part of the ... universe of the people...' ([Appadurai](#) 1981). E. N. Enderson, in the discussion on 'constitution of food-ways,' mentions the 'importance of 'bio-cultural approach,' which incorporates human biology, culture, and political economy, all at once - recognizing that all are crucial determinants of particular food systems. His main argument, however, is that our food preferences are notoriously subjected to cultural and social factors, although our basic nutritional needs are set by biology and regulated by the environment' (2005). One must understand that 'food-ways are simultaneously local and global, foregrounding changes in the local dynamics of production, consumption, adaptation, identity construction, and post-modern consumerism' ([Cheung](#) and Chee-Beng, 2007).

The 'historical' and 'sociological' birth of food makes it essential to analyze its 'figurative' use in all its 'manifestations.' Anita Mannur points out that more than 'physical sustenance,' food "feeds into the literary rendering of [the person's] subjectivity," giving "a language through which to imagine [individual creativity] in the American imagination" (2010: 13). Food analogies and themes work as markers on phenomenological levels both in literature and cinema. Memory, identity, and culture are intertwined with the current locale of the person. Everyone attempts to 'explore' and 'interpret' the "edible écriture" ([Eagleton](#) 203) in their own manner. The narrativization of food not only mentions mouth-watering recipes but also presents a window into the characters of the concerned individuals.

### **Food, memory, and its presentation**

Food is not merely tasted with the tongue. It is also eaten through the eyes, nose, and touch. Language, expression, verbalism, visual arrangements, lighting, gesticulation, and execution play an important role to convey the meaning and/ or taste of food.

All these give new dimensions and values to food, which is consumed by people of every class, gender and region. Memories lodged in the mind result in the interpretation/ re-interpretation of food, which, in turn, are the result of power relations, class, caste, race and gender. Everything related to food is a "lived and living history" ([Carolan](#) 2011: 9) experience translated into the dish on the table.

The first connection between food and memory is the deeply 'sensory' and 'emotional' nature of food based on its social and cultural 'symbolic' elements. Sensory, tactile and emotional responses not only define the people involved but also give food new meaning. They act as 'transmitters' and 'triggers' towards the evocative response to food. Gordon M. Shepherd gave the term "neurogastronomy" to the 'study that examines how brain creates flavour and how this affects the mnemonic process' (2012: 1). His research shows that 'senses and emotions share the same brain nerve pathways that store experiences as memory' (2012: 2). Another neurologist, John S. Allen, gives a more detailed account about this connection. He explains that 'the hippocampus is the brain structure responsible for both "the formation of declarative or explicit memories" as well as the regulation of drives and emotions' (2012: 152). This study is crucial as it yields the corporeal foundation for understanding how food pervades the memories and narratives of people.

David Sutton talks about "synesthetic memory [which is] the process by which the senses work in union

to convert a sensory moment into an embodied social and cultural experience that is then stored in memory” (2005: 314). Famous historian Cruz Miguel Ortíz Cuadra states that “palate memory” (2013: 2) is responsible for creating an “intimate bond” (2) between the ‘sensory’ and ‘emotional’ features of food which mirror the harmonious memories of most important social and cultural experiences and frequently convey “sensations of entanglement” (2).

Without doubt, the sensory and emotional connotations of food rest within the individual. However, a distinctive feature of food memories is invariably driven by cultural and social characteristics. On a ‘personal front memory denotes mental and physical attributes that aid the process of chronicling and remembering past experiences.’ On a ‘collective’ level, ‘memory works in the figurative domain’ ([Holtzman](#) 2009: 335). The experiences embedded in food memories work differently for different people. The analytical memories work through words, names, ingredients, ideas, plan/s of preparation, ideas, and subsequent completion of the dish “through exposure in oral [and/] or written form of memories. This can come by the way of a dish’s name, a recipe, a style of cooking, debates about food systems...” ([Buchanan](#) 2012: 119, 142, 308). Food memories are also referred to as “edible memories” ([Taylor](#) 2003: 2) which create stories for all involved.

Constant repetition and habits are also related to food memories. Cutting; kneading of dough; baking; frying; preparing a dish; serving, offering, and sharing of food is an everyday practice, which is the result of habitual memories ([Connerton](#) 1989: 1561). This memory is the result of past knowledge gained through personal and collective experiences. When these processes are repeated, the performance of these actions is enhanced over a period of time. Food memories are the result of our past, impact our present and mould our future. David Sutton calls this “prospective memory, [a process that takes place] in the present to remember food events in the future [by which a] form [of] historical consciousness [is created]” (2001: 19, 26).

All senses are involved in the creation of food memories. Actions are performed through the bodies which elicit emotionally thoughtful responses. Starvation and/ or satiation result in physically, emotionally, and mentally draining or satisfying experiences as the case may be. “These narratives, therefore, are the sites where affirmations, ambiguities, and contradictions inform an individual’s and group’s cultural subjectivities. The analyses of these forms of food narratives become the process of decoding the memories – sensory, cognitive, habitual, performative – that food creates. Every time a food memory is narrated – in an oral, written, or performative form – the food recalled is reproduced as an embodied experience. In telling what ‘we eat,’ we are showing who ‘we are.’ Therefore, it is not food that defines our social and cultural subjectivities but the stories we tell about our food practices. In short, food memory, as an embodied sense, has the capacity to season the narratives of our lives” ([Abarca](#) and Colby 2016: 7)

## Movies and Food – *Julie and Julia* (2009)<sup>2</sup>; *The Lunchbox* (2013)<sup>3</sup>

Ever since cinema came into being, there has been a strong connection between food and movies both in Hollywood and Bollywood. Film critics have written about the depiction of food in movies of the West<sup>4</sup> but research on Indian movies dealing with food is scarce.

“A film can be treated as a text: visual, verbal and musical constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language” (Hall, 1975). Both *Julie and Julia* and *The Lunchbox* are ‘visual,’ have their specific ‘language’ of food, which has enough symbolism to satisfy the ‘palate’ of the cine-goers.

*Julie and Julia* is based on the real life story of two women. Julia Child is the inspiration behind Julie Powell, an exasperated working woman trying to find the ropes of writing, turning over a new leaf to change her life. The film was based on two books: Julia Child’s autobiography *My Life in France*<sup>5</sup> and Julie Powell’s blog-writing later published as *Julie and Julia: 365 Days, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen*.<sup>6</sup> The movie *Julie and Julia* proved to be a huge success. It was the first movie based on a book and a ‘blog.’ The story oscillates between the lives of Julie Powell (Amy Adams) and Julia Child (Meryl Streep). Julie lives in Queens at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century while Julia, though an American, lived most of her life in Paris in the 1950s due to her husband’s government job. Both lead very different lives never cross paths yet their lives echo the captivating ‘pattern’ of each other.

Julie, in late-twenties, married, works at the ‘Lower Manhattan Development Corporation’s call centre.’ During the day she attends to calls from 9/11 victims. At night she tries to find solace in cooking. Frustrated with her life, she resolves to change her life, challenge herself and “live bravely and actively” (*Julie and Julia* Special Features trailer 2009). She chooses to cook ‘524 recipes’ from Julia Child’s book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*<sup>7</sup> in ‘365 days.’ This transforms her life. She blogs about her painstaking journey and her blog becomes a success.

Julia, in late thirties, married, lives in Paris, moves from hat-making to bridge cooking. She attends ‘*Le Cordon Blue*’, the French culinary school to learn French cooking. From this love of cooking arises the desire to write a cookbook on French cooking, with two other French women, for the “servantless”

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<sup>2</sup> *Julie and Julia*. Nora Ephron. 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *The Lunchbox*. Ritesh Batra. 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Anne L. Bower, ed. “Reel Food.” *Essays of Food and Film*. New York, 2004; Tom Hertweck, ed. “Food on Film.” *Bringing Something New to the Table*. Lanham, 2014; James R. Keller. “Food, Film and Culture.” *A Genre Study*. Jefferson, 2006; Steve Zimmerman. *Food in the Movies*. Jefferson, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Child and Alex Prud’Homme. *My Life in France*. New York, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Julie Powell. *Julie and Julia: 365 Days, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen*. New York, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Julia Child, et al. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Vol. I. New York, 1961 and Julia Child, et al. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Vol. II. New York, 1970.

(*Julie and Julia*) American women.

Lives of both the women are similar yet different. Both are at a juncture which could have tipped either way. The unconditional support and steadfast love allow them to follow their hearts, pursue their dreams and achieve a sense of happiness through the fulfilment of their objectives. The joy brought about through cooking is the consequence of 'sharing' and 'connecting over food.' The director of the movie, Nora Ephron, says that the picture is about two women, separated through time, space and distance, who find love in cooking. They get immense happiness from it which also results in recognition from the world. (*Julie and Julia* Special Features trailer, 2009).

*Julie and Julia* "alternates between Julia Child's story as a restless American in Paris in the 1950s, longing to write a cookbook, and the adventures of Julie Powell in Queens, in 2002, as a confused young American wife who sets out to replicate Child's recipes" (Denby, 2009).<sup>8</sup> Another film critic, O. A. Scott<sup>9</sup> was of the opinion that both Julie and Julia were "in pursuit of a latent but powerful ambition, the joy of cooking" (2009). Kenneth Turan<sup>10</sup> describes "Julie Powell and Julia Child as two women searching for something worth their involvement and both finding that cooking completed them and made them feel alive in ways wonderful and unforeseen" (2009). Dana Stevens<sup>11</sup> postulates that "the characters' common passion for cooking was more about a drive to reinvent themselves...*Julie & Julia* makes deboning a duck a feminist act and cooking a great meal a creative triumph" (2009).

Carrie Ricky, for her part, compares the passion, for cooking, of the two protagonists and the inspiration behind it. She states that "Julia cooks because she is a sensualist and food gives her pleasure, second only to that of sex. Julie cooks because cooking gives her a measure of control over her disordered and disappointing life" (2009).<sup>12</sup> The connecting component is food and Julie's and Julia's love for it. "The relationship at the heart of the movie – between a female mentor and pupil who never meet, but who share a joy of cooking – is one of common need to reinvent themselves. Through its dual fable of passion and driving ambition, Ephron's *Julie & Julia* suggests that in achieving true happiness one must balance personal discipline, authentic love and professional accomplishment" (Tanks 2006: 15).

*The Lunchbox* (2013) proves the old adage that 'the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.' Like *Julie and Julia*, the central theme of the movie is food. Ila (Nimrat Kaur) belongs to the Mumbai middle-class. Saajan Fernandes (Irfan Khan) works as a clerk in a company. The widowed man is near retirement. Ila, ignored by her husband, is as lonely as is Saajan. There is nothing common in their lives. A fluke of fate and their paths cross. Ila, who wants to get close to her husband again, decides to cook delicious dishes; on the advice of Auntie, Mrs. Deshpande (Bharti Achrekar).

<sup>8</sup> David Denby. *The New Yorker*. 2009.

<sup>9</sup> O. A. Scott. *The New York Times*. 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Turan. *The Los Angeles Times*. 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Dana Stevens. *Slate Magazine*. 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Carrie Ricky. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. 2009.

Auntie shouts to Ila “One bite of that, and he’ll build you a Taj Mahal” (*The Lunchbox*) as she sends down a basket full of spices. Ila laughs it off reminding her that “Taj Mahal is a tomb, auntie” (*The Lunchbox*). Despite her best efforts, the husband is not wooed back. To her dismay Ila learns that her husband is having an affair.

‘The Lunchbox’ is sent to her husband through the *dabbawallas*,<sup>13</sup> a well-known lunchbox delivery system in Mumbai. An inexplicable and “statistically impossible error” (*The Lunchbox*) as the ‘old man proudly’ says occurs. ‘The lunchbox’ is delivered to Saajan, who, appreciative of the food, sends a note of praise for the cook. What follows is a swapping of notes, fated to change their respective lives forever. The preparation had started lovingly to win the husband back. Now, pride, renewed vigour and a sense of liberation is involved as Saajan showers profuse appreciation for Ila’s cooking. He motivates her to leave, having come to know about her family condition through the messages. As with *Julie and Julia*, the third protagonist in *The Lunchbox* is also food. The symbolism attached with it gives new meaning/s to the preparation and consumption.

Batra, the director, wanted to make a documentary on the *dabbawallas* of Mumbai. “They are very accurate and take a lot of pride in their job,” the director says, “the statistic is that one in six million lunchboxes goes to the wrong address. If something is happening one in six million times, it’s a miracle, not a mistake, so the story to me is about the miracle of the big city that connects these lonely souls” (*Metz* 2014).<sup>14</sup> Instead, he decided to make a movie about the woman who cooks food which changes her life for the better.

The relationship between Ila and ‘Auntie,’ is exceptional and captivating. ‘Auntie’ is a ‘voice’ coming from a window on the upper floor. The two women converse in the language of ‘aroma/s’ with its multifarious meanings. Mouth-watering dishes result from this conversation, which leave Saajan wanting more. Ila and Saajan decide to meet. Ila tells him about her dream to leave for ‘Bhutan’ where the cost of living is less. Saajan tells her to leave with him. She waits for him. He watches her from afar but does not take the final step towards her, realizing that he is no match to the beautiful and younger Ila. He tells her the truth that he could not meet her due to his own limitations. She tells him that she will go to ‘Bhutan’ to live a better life.

### Class, Kitchen, Gender

Julia has unlimited recourses at her disposal. Julie’s kitchen is not only limited in space but also in resources as is Ila’s. Julie cannot join cookery classes like Julia due to the expense involved. In both the movies, the directors persisted that the dimensions of their kitchens should be small, signifying the insubstantiality of their lives. Nimrat Kaur mentioned in an interview: “The kitchen where I was shooting in the film was so cramped up that I would find it difficult to move... despite the suffocation I had to face, it actually translated beautifully onscreen, and displayed Ila’s claustrophobia in her marriage” (*Kaur* 2015).<sup>15</sup> All ‘physical spaces’ in *Julie and Julia* and *The Lunchbox* are ‘filled with food

<sup>13</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dabbawala>

<sup>14</sup> Nina Metz. *Chicago Tribune*. 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Nimrat Kaur. *The Times of India*. 2015.

memories,' which are women's ticket to happiness and freedom.

Julia's perseverance enables her to beat the all-pervasive obstacles and biases of the 1950s. She is the only woman in her class. When she completes the course with the highest honour, she earns the respect of the men in her class. Julie continues to cook even after she comes home exhausted. At dinner, on her terrace, she shouts triumphantly: "524 recipes in 365 days" (*Julie and Julia*). She is able to achieve what she had set out to do, especially 'de-boning a duck, stuffing it and cooking it to perfection like Julia Child.'

The stories of both the movies have similitudes as well as differences. Food is the intrinsic trope in both and the "underlying theme is less food as something to cook than food as the binding and unifying element" ([Denby](#) 2009). These movies follow an unconventional approach to inspect what gives these women joy who are not after men, financial gains and/ or enhancement of beauty. Instead, the aspirations, wishes, objectives and passions weave their way into these films. The ups and downs of these women, who come out on the top after each challenge, are tackled with aplomb by both directors. These women come from different periods of time, different classes but their lives follow the same untrodden roads to pursue their goals. They are modern women of their times who are not deterred by obstacles. They adapt according to their circumstances and re-invent themselves in the 'kitchen space' to make a 'niche' for themselves in a largely male-dominated arena. "The transnational kitchen space is significant to both the movies and the shifting dynamics of the space can be traced in both wherein a discourse of self-discovery has been mapped. The 'transnational' kitchen space is a common bridge between the women in the movies hailing from different countries, talking about their love for cooking. It is symbolic of the transformation of the women from where they have been to where they want to be" ([Ghosh](#) and Reddy 2022: 11) Despite the fact that these women are attached to "domesticity" ([Beauvoir](#) 1989), the 'kitchen space' gives them the opportunity to make their distinctive individualities.

## Conclusion

To understand food and its multi-dimensional symbolism, it has to be examined through "a holistic culinary approach" ([Abarca](#) 2012: 252). This analysis "necessitates an interdisciplinary paradigm that looks at food practices within the private and public, the personal and collective, and the local and global. It involves a dialogue across and between the humanities and social sciences" (Salas Carr and [Abarca](#) 2016: 207). This is the approach employed by the three women. Preparation of food begins as a 'private' exercise on a 'personal' level and soon becomes 'public' on a 'local' and 'global' level. Julia writes a book, which Julie follows to create the recipes from the book. She gets her show *The French Chef* when she moves to New York. Julie, for her part, writes a blog about her experiences of cooking and a best-seller comes out of it. Julie also wrote another book<sup>16</sup> after her encounter with Julia's cooking. Ila learns that food can satisfy a person other than her husband, which frees her from the shackles of a loveless marriage. Food draws diverging emotions from these protagonists in their varied contexts. They own the 'kitchen space' and re-emerge as better selves. The cramped space of the kitchen does not confine them but allows them to find their identities from the new recipes they create.

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<sup>16</sup> Julie Powell. *Julie and Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously*. New York. 2009.

Despite the new-found interest in food, with all its complexities, it is still not inspected in detail from the point of view of literary criticism and media studies. Very little attention has been given to study the 'lived' experiences of women in the kitchen. Mannur states that there is "a relative dearth of critical analysis of film and literature about food" (2010: 10). Two books<sup>17</sup> examine the 'possibilities and limitations of books/ movies based on food. The authors take a feminist viewpoint to inspect the manners in which food is used to present the 'female body' in the extensive selection of works. From the point of view social science, anthropology, gender, and class, the 'kitchen space' has to be examined more thoroughly to give the woman her duly earned space.

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<sup>17</sup> Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran. *Scenes of the Apple*. New York, 2003; Mclean, Alice. *Aesthetic Pleasure in Twentieth-Century Women's Food Writing*. New York, 2013.

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