

HEB

## Culinary *her Story*: A Study on Women's Personal History documentation in Jenny Mallin's *A Grandmother's Legacy*

CASS

Brindha T Sachdanandam

University of Madras

**Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com**

### ABSTRACT


Food memoirs use memory of food as a narrative trope to study, discuss and document various life experiences of women through several narrative components such as recipes, anecdotes and other written records. Often, they are not acknowledged on par with commonly established historical sources in understanding personal history or social discourse. A *herstory* is a feminist historiographic record of events of the past that are documented from a non-patriarchal standpoint. This paper explores the potential of food memoir as a genre in personal history documentation and chart its scope in sequencing personal memories based of life events of the narrator through the narrative. In this context, the study uses interpretive content analysis method to examine the text *A Grandmother's Legacy: A Memoir of Five Generations Who Lived Through the Days of the Raj*(2015.) Women have extensively used the culinary writing as a genre to discuss and represent their lives. These experiences are often coded into the narrative elements such as the metaphors and anecdotes. The study aims to establish the importance of interpreting these narrative components to situate and understand the standpoint from which the women of past spoke from.

**Key Words: Culinary *herstory*, Personal History documentation, Recipe Writing, Food Memoirs**

### Introduction

Memory of food is an important narrative trope that is explored in writings on food, specifically in food memoirs. A distinctive feature of a food memoir is that it brings together episodic moments from the narrator's past centered around food and food related experiences. Food memory is narrative trope that formulates the structure of a food memoir. In mothers' and grandmothers' language, food ingredients are often used as metaphors to profoundly reflect upon life. The kitchen space is greatly used in gendering and imparting the gendered social codes of conduct. The recipes are chosen/selected by the author/narrator of a food memoir. The choice of recipes documented are therefore a selection of her favourite recipes, or the ones that she finds as rare/distinct/unique to the kitchen of her home space.

The recipe sharing results in providing a genealogical link between the women of different generations. A

<i>Access this Article Online</i>	
<a href="http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies">http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies</a>	Quick Response Code:
Received on 20/02/2019 Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved	

grandmother's recipe is often plays the role of a comforter at a foreign land when the individual faces an identity crisis. The genealogical link is established through the memory medium. Memory is often dismissed as an unreliable source while documenting historical facts. However, memory as a medium in food narratives offer a gustatory validation of the recipes. Gendering of food is a common theme in food memoirs.

The ability of food to evoke memories of savouring food through all the five senses is not gender-specific. However, the knowledge acquisition and knowledge transfer on processing food ingredients is often oriented towards socially and domestically grooming young girls in a family which is a stereotype that remains unquestioned. While men's presence and dominance are strongly suggested in the narratives in terms of their food preferences and taste palette, they are almost made invisible within the domestic kitchen space in a food memoir and the experiences are mostly centered around the manner in which women 'recreate' a taste memory from their past experiences.

Merriam Webster's dictionary defines 'herstory' as "...history considered or presented from a feminist point of view or with special attention to the experience of women." The term herstory through its feminist standpoint challenges the conventional forms of historical documentation which are master narratives that are rooted in 'power', 'dominance' and other 'hegemonic social structures.' The letter 'H' is herstory not capitalised to signify the renouncing of everything that the hegemonic master narrative represents and it foregrounds 'her' story and not 'his' story. Women's stories are herstory that are rooted in everyday performances. Their stories do not make any grand claims rather simplify the process of history making/construction by grounding them to everyday common experiences.

*Matheeki Barge*... Justthe name of this recipe had me stumped for ages, I just hadn't come across this recipe in our family before and my mother certainly hadn't heard of it. Then it suddenly occurred to me that one of the main ingredients, *ventheum* greens is the name for fenugreek which is also known as methi (and after that, once I put a different emphasis on the sound of the word Barge, and read it out as *Bhurji* (which in Hindi means scrambled). So here we have a recipe from Wilhelmina for *Methi Bhurji* with eggs. In other words, a version of scrambled eggs using fenugreek leaves as herbs. (Mallin 23)

The text *A Grandmother's Legacy*, presents the kitchen narratives, recipes, stories and anecdotes from the past as documented and presented by Jenny Mallin, the author/narrator. She uses the text to create a culinary lineage that is 'feminine'. The act of documentation does not remove the recipes from the women who cooked and owned them. These recipes and the adjoining narratives are a product of 'herstory' that is representational of both the individual women and the community that they represent through their cooking.

Victoria Browne's doctoral dissertation on "Feminist Historiography and Reconceptualisation of Historical Time" proposes a 'polytemporal model of historical time'. Women's lives and experiences are shaped by several social and cultural intersections and therefore fragmented and complex. She defines historical time as time that "is generated through a mix of different temporalities and fields of time, including the 'time of trace', 'narrative time', 'calendar time', and 'generational time'."

Maud seems to indulge herself in a love of baking and has an obvious love for puddings, and she starts a wonderful collection of recipes for old English puddings from the early part of nineteenth century. Inside my grandmother's book, we see recipes for Cabinet Pudding, Chester Pudding, Transparent Pudding and a delightfully named Fair Rosamund Pudding- all hailing from good old Blighty! Most of them are early versions of our popular puddings nowadays such as Lemon Meringue Pie, Bakewell Tart and Bread and Butter Pudding. (Mallin 67)

Known affectionately as "Rumble-tumble" within Anglo-Indian circles, this is my grandma Maud's recipe. My mother tweaked it a bit and included bacon or sometimes ham and used Carnation milk which made it rich and creamy. Any leftovers can be made into sandwiches the next day or heated with a little more milk as it keeps well and the flavour just

improves. (63 Mallin)

Food narratives such the text referred for the study invite the observer to be part of the historical process. Since food, a universal need is part of both the narrative structure and the subject of study, the text often sequential historical continuum between the various pasts, present and the futures.

It's a totally different way of following a recipe because my mother condensed the way she listed her recipes (i.e. she would write "for a 1lb of meat or fish" and then would detail the measurement of spices required). By doing it this way, it gave you greater flexibility of being able to choose your own choice of meat, fish or whatever so that you were much more spontaneous with the dish you were creating and this allowed you to think outside the box. It was especially useful as it meant you just had to open the fridge and see what meat you happened to have, and then just decide on the kind of dish you felt like cooking, so with chicken it was just a simple choice of whether you felt like a Korma, Vindaloo, Country Captain or Jalfrezi. (Mallin 109)

Browne used the term "receptivity' to the past". She states that "the reality of the historical past is indeed constituted through a backwards movement i.e. through the way we frame and narrate the past in the present, and our active pursuit of the past, but also through a forward's movement, i.e. through the overflow of the past in the present and provoke new ways of thinking or acting." (Browne 100)

The act of recipe writing is a result of a performative act of cooking. This performance is repetitive and defines the experiences of women within the domain of domestic household kitchen. A collective experience of these everyday performances of cooking by various women belonging to different generations and their perceptual standpoints are fed into the writing of recipes. The recipe narratives ensure that the several strands of complex time frames as effectively linked to make meaning along the various temporal points that link the past, present and future.

Rather than try and convert each of my mother's typed up recipes I have decided to deliberately leave it exactly the way she wrote them, without offering further guidance (as opposed to the rest of the recipes here in this book). What will be interesting is that hopefully you will also "find" your way through each of them and discover for yourself your own mode of cooking! So, I hope you enjoy these well used, typed up recipes with their curry splodges all over them...!! (Mallin 109)

The study recognises the functionality of the documentation process relies heavily on the intersection of three different time frames, namely, personal time (calendar time), shared time (intersubjective time/generational time) and the 'time of trace' which is the 'narrative time.' Mallin's Grandmother's legacy is culinary memoir. It recalls and revokes events of the past as 'remembered' and 'recalled' by the author/narrator. The text is therefore autobiographical in terms of its narration. Examining the past events from a standpoint that is rooted in the 'here' and the 'now' time frames (Ricoeur as stated in Browne 112)

The text traces the family line of Mallin (author/narrator) and she uses the culinary trope to associate to women of her family while she identifies the men either in terms of their relationship to other women in the family or by means of their profession which allowed for the women they were married to, to settle in different parts of India and explore different local spices and cooking styles.

My mother's uncle Eugene was the last living relative on her side who was still living in India. Born in 1898, he was now aged a spritely ninety-three and lived in the charming Eventide Rest Home (a sunset retirement home for senior Anglo-Indian citizens) As we were in Bangalore, we decided to pay a visit to uncle Eugene. I was looking forward to seeing him again as the last time must have been over twenty years ago when he flew over to his family in England. (Mallin 137)

The text is more than a recipe book as it documents the lives of Mallin's ancestors and present snippets from their lives to describe and represent the lives of many Anglo-Indian families which resided in India during and post-independence.

Browne in her study considers the possibility of historians understanding history as a product of an “asymmetrical interdependence between happening and interpretation” (Browne 100). Another concern that she aims to address is the issue of perceiving time in terms of 'backwards-forwards' movement between past and present which she refers as 'trace time'. The interpretative feature of textual narrative disrupts this perception. This is a prominent feature of a culinary memoir as it relies on recipes which represents both the text as well as the performative aspects of cooking.

The recipes discussed in the text were produced out of actual lived experiences of women who cooked them. This occurrence or 'happening' of such lived experience is interpreted by the one who 'performs' the actual cooking or writing about the act of cooking. In *Grandmother's Legacy*, the textual content comprises of recipes of various dishes prepared by aunts, grandmothers and other women relatives of the author. The recipes are followed by anecdotes and narratives that recalled the lives of the women who cooked them and thereby sets a context for the readers to understand the personal, cultural and historical backgrounds to that of the recipe. A narrative presents “historical reality as 'lived reality' and therefore, historical time as a 'lived time’” (Browne 104)

Memory of food is an intersubjective phenomenon that links the women who performed the act of cooking in the past and documented their knowledge in the form of recipes, to women of the present (living descendants of the family to whom the recipes were handed over) who follow their recipes to cook and write about them as they recall the context to each recipe.

Sharing of familial recipes through a narrative ensures that understanding and knowledge of culinary practices and use of ingredients are transferred across generations. The documentation of collected recipes in a food memoir play an important role in sharing and transferring the memory based/ 'remembered' knowledge transfer across generations of women belonging to the same family and serve as a representational document of the specific cultural and communal history that their foods represent. This knowledge transfer is presented through everyday performances of cooking and the articulation of its remembering. In a food memoir, the different narrative elements construct and establish a channel for memory transfer through the performance of cooking and writing about cooking. When the acts of cooking, consuming, remembering and forgetting become performances, they aid the process of gendering and intergenerational memory transfer.

Erikson's definition of 'identity' is defined as “the meeting between individual life history and the historical movement”. Erikson has also stated that 'current reconstruction of individual family history goes beyond individual identity’, as it 'encompasses' the linkage of one's family background with the largest historical experience which is recognized and accepted as part of a collective heritage”. “...historical time is an intersubjective time, and narrating is an intersubjective practice.” (Browne 104) While the food memoirs describe the lineage and construction of the familial culinary tradition, they also describe of the 'past' as an 'ideal' which is 'irrecoverable'. This sets up the basic premise for the need for practice of cooking to continue and thrive in the 'here' and the 'now' as they are seen as the important ways by which the past can be reclaimed or recreated. Documenting familial food practices through script source especially in the form of a blog is associated with “an elite approach / marked by the sense of / accused of elitism'. Hareven suggests that even 'the search for a genealogy was considered successful only if it is led to high – status ancestry'. Associating with the ancestral heritage is often done through the medium of food as it serves as the physical link that no other form of memory aid can provide instantaneously. It is through the food and the ingredients used to prepare the food, that one connects to the 'native' homeland.

Exploring the different facets of communal identity in the context of contemporary times is a common to narratives that tend to represent “hyphenated identities” (Spivak 244). The term Anglo-Indian is a term that is hyphenated and is often challenged questioned with the migration and settling down of most of its members in different parts of the commonwealth countries. While the act of 'recollecting' and 'remembering' a past event brings the scenario or the episode

to the narrator's mind's eye, the narrator is able to assess and relate to that 'recollected' memory or the 'relived experience' while situating herself in the 'here' and the 'now'. The sensibilities and the perceptions that she has developed as an adult, who is reliving an episode from the past through the act of 'remembering' inevitably, filters the actual 'lived experience', which as situated in the 'then' and the 'there'. The art of recollection itself can be studied as the act of 'unmediation', as it involves a certain level of construction. However, this construction does not materialise outside the socio-cultural context within which it was conceived originally.

By looking and observing the manner in which their aunts, mothers and grandmothers cooked, one learns about the visual cues that determine the 'doneness' of a specific stage of preparation while cooking. The text also refers to how grandmothers and aunts used their own bodies (hands to portion out ingredients) to describe units of measurement for the young girls in their families. Women's use of their bodies while understanding the different process of cooking and the nature of ingredients used for cooking stems from an essentialisation of their bodies as 'consumable.'

Apart from such bodily knowledge acquisition, spending time in the kitchen with aunts, mothers and grandmothers ensures the passing on of a lot of lived experiences shared in the form of anecdotes that a child may not even understand. Most of these experiences are coded into food metaphors. Through these narratives informal sex education and topics of adulthood and social conduct are often discussed in a subtle yet powerful manner.

The kinesthetic experience of knowing food through interactions and bodily perceptions is a strong trace or trail that allows for women to recollect and recall the recipes and the memory associated with it even as adults. These 'narratives' are important and play a major role in supporting the continuation of memory timeline across generations. The episodic memories of grandmothers and mothers ensures that the grandchild/daughter understands her own past vividly. The curiosity to know about the past that one cannot even recollect or have a 'lived experience of' becomes a part of the generational memory that gets coded into the thinking of the system of the granddaughter/daughter.

Recipe writing brings together both the acts of narration and writing that document the lives and experiences of women of the past. It can be considered as an important historical artefact in understanding personal, familial and communal history. Recipes are certainly socially and culturally coded documents of herstory as they reflect on both the bodies and the performances that inform us of the women of the past. Women's method of historical documentation through recipe writing is representational as it presents not only the point of view of the narrator but also the women of her family who find their voice into the present through their culinary performances and their knowledge sharing.

## References:

- Browne, Victoria. *Feminist Historiography and Reconceptualisation of Historical Time*. Diss. University of Liverpool. United Kingdom, 2013. Print.
- "herstory." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2011. Web. 5 February 2019.
- Mallin, Jenny. *A Grandmother's Legacy: A Memoir of Five Generations who lived through the Days of the Raj*. USA: Author House, 2015. Print.
- Munley, P. H. (1975) "Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development and Vocational Behaviour." *Journal of Counselling Psychology*. 22(4), pp. 314-319. PDF.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World". *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen, 1987. 241-286. Print.
- The Importance of herstory: A Philosophical Perspective. *University of Szczecin: International Symposium on Gender Studies*. Warsaw, 2016. Microsoft Power Point File.