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Digesting Women's Unrestrained Appetites: Renegotiating Women's Desires in Select Folktales from Ramanujan's *Folktales from India*

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Abstract:

The predominant socio-cultural representation of women as providers and nurturers of food within their families has historically constrained their identities, which find liberation in 'little' folk traditions. The research investigates the unconventional representation of women's culinary and consumption practices in selected folk narratives from A.K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India*. The study employs a Feminist Food Studies lens to underscore the subversive employment of food motifs in women-centric folktales, which challenge the established patriarchal power structures within domestic households and unravel women's hidden desires for sexual gratification to reclaim agency and power over their bodies. Through an in-depth examination of selected women's folk narratives, the research seeks to elucidate the pioneering role of folk literature in providing an alternative and non-conformist discourse on women's domesticity through food within mainstream socio-cultural traditions. Additionally, it comments on the contemporary pathological issues concerning women's eating habits. This critical examination contributes to the growing discourse on the complex interplay of food, gender, power, and agency in Indian folk literature.

Keywords: Folktales, folk narratives, food, women and food, unrestrained consumption of food, women's unrestrained appetites.

Introduction: Why Food in Literature?

"It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So, it happens

when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it ...and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied...and it is all one.” (14)

- MFK Fisher, *The Gastronomical Me*

The intricate processes of food production, consumption and preservation within set geographical, sociological, and religious frameworks play a significant role in sustaining the cultural ethos of a society. These culinary practices not only guarantee the survival of the mankind, but also perpetuate the ritualistic traditions of families and societies. However, the representation of food in fiction which is controlled by the author's decisions, raises the question: Why do characters devour or feast on food when their existence is solely determined by the authors' choices?

Literature imbibes food with layered meanings that reinforce the socio-cultural milieu within which the text is situated. One of the most prominent Indian folklorists, A.K. Ramanujan, explicated three orders of meaning associated with the presence of food in literature - the utilitarian, the symbolic and the expressive. Food is utilitarian based upon its edibility, acquires symbolic meanings within socio-religious contexts and is expressive upon the amalgamation of the two kinds of meaning that “yield ironies, reversals, poetic metaphors (in language as well as in the medium of food itself)” (84). Food, therefore, acquires a character of its own in literature. However, the representation of the relationship between women and food in literature becomes even more complicated and layered owing to the stereotypical notions associated with women's role in the kitchen.

The pre-dominant socio-cultural representation of women as primary nurturers and feeders of their families has sequestered their roles in the kitchen. Consequently, the kitchen spaces have become highly performative, serving as a playground for executing domestic power relations. This hierarchy is based upon the preconceived knowledge of recipes and eccentric dishes made among the household's women to satiate the appetites of the men in the house.

In the Indian milieu, women are frequently idealized as *Annapurnas* of domestic households, fostering a reductionist interpretation that justifies the societal marginalisation of women and reinforces “a vision of subservient domesticated womanhood” (Browarczyk 282). The consequent domestication leads to women's physical confinement to kitchen spaces and the symbolical confinement of their identities. Additionally, women's consumption is met with stringent patriarchal surveillance which has led to the depiction of eating disorders among women like bulimia, anorexia nervosa and more in literature. Interestingly, metaphors of

consumption in literature also symbolically convey and shape concepts of sexuality, agency and gender identity (Andrievskikh 137).

Women and Food in Folk Literature

From Rapunzel's ravenous hunger to the poisoned apple consumed by Snow White, Western folklore has endowed foods with magic that can bestow the eater with youth, beauty or immortality (Andrievskikh 141). Referencing Michael Jones' 2005 address to the American Folklore Association, Natalia Andrievskikh underscores the commonly mistaken interpretation of demonstrating healthy appetite in women as "acting up" and giving into passions, which results in women downplaying their appetite, especially in public (142). The literary representations of women's food consumption are, therefore, layered due to the socio-cultural expectations that control their eating practices. These expectations frame women within a largely patriarchal belief system that regulates their bodies and desire for pleasure. A similar strain of thought can also be traced in the Indian ethos, which underscores a dichotomous categorization of women's identities, as either virtuous or morally dubious based upon their consumption practices. While examining women's consumption practices within public spaces in Assam, Pooja Kalita posits that women who abstained from publicly consuming food in an unrestrained manner were considered an embodiment of the goddess, thereby sustaining the patriarchal authority over women's appetite (5). Contrarily, a "bad" woman was the one who freely expressed her desire for food and enjoyed an uncharacteristic clarity about her gustatory preferences (7).

One of the most commonly found food-related motifs in folklore and popular genres is the implicit expression of sexual desire through the socially accepted depiction of food consumption practices (Andrievskikh 142). In Indian folk literature, consumption narratives intersecting women often surface as "a motif of miraculous conception" (Sudyka 193). Referring to Mary Brockington's article, *Jarāsaṃdha and the Magic Mango*, Sudyka summarizes that the mango fruit offered by the sage Caṇḍakauśika to the barren King Bṛhadhratha is presumably the earliest recorded instance of its utilisation as a fertility charm. A.K. Ramanujan has also confirmed the intrinsic correlation between food consumption and sexual consummation. In his essay, "Hanchi: A Kannada Cinderella", he traced the origin of the word "food" to the Sanskrit term *bhuj*, which means both "to eat" and "to enjoy sex" (89).

Consequently, every discourse surrounding food and the representation of its consumption by women results in a specific body politic. Although the desire for and the act of uncontrollable consumption is often perceived as a pathological condition among women

stemming out of their distorted images of self and body, it is also perceived as an act of rebellion by them against the socially determined gender behaviour that controls their pleasure-seeking needs and wants. Such non-conformist attitudes, as can be concluded from the previous discussions, are often represented in folk literature. They contrast with the predominant societal perceptions of women and food, aligning well with Ramanujan's understanding of folklore as "counter-systems, anti-structures, a protest against social systems" as stated by Becker et al. (qtd. in Ramanujan et al. 55).

Born into a highly educated Tamil Brahman family in Mysore, India, in 1929, Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan's deep fascination with Indian folktales culminated into a comprehensive collection, *Folktales from India*. From his collection of 110 tales collated from all corners of the subcontinent, Ramanujan emphasized the significance of women-centric folktales, since he believed that "genders are genres" (Ramanujan et al. 349). Some of the women-centric folktales in the collection make "a silent woman a speaking person" (437) through a curious employment of culinary/consumption practices that corroborate with the empowering relationship between women and food as delineated by the scholars above. It contrasts with the predominant construct of women as the primary purveyors and nurturers in the broader socio-cultural Indian milieu. This dissimilarity primarily motivated the researcher to underscore the intersection of food, femininity and folklore in selected folk narratives from Ramanujan's collection.

The article hypothesizes that the representation of women's unrestrained consumption of food in select folk narratives from Ramanujan's *Folktales from India* contributes to the non-conformist discourse that challenges the patriarchal surveillance controlling women's eating practices, and unravels their hidden desire for sexual gratification to reclaim power over their bodies. Since the emphasis is on the critical intersection between food, folklore and femininity, emphasizing women's appetites, the research will analyse through the lens of Feminist Food Studies. It will employ Elspeth Probyn's theory on food, gender and sexuality as delineated in her works "Beyond Food/Sex: Eating and an Ethics of Existence" and *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities*. The research endeavour will also scaffold its arguments with Susan Bordo's critical insights of the female body as a cultural construct heavily regulated by patriarchal norms, which control their eating habits, as discussed in her seminal work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. The critical insights of both scholars will aid in associating the significance of women's desire for untrammelled consumption of food with their desire for sexual gratification and reclamation of their bodies. This will be achieved by highlighting various food symbolisms, metaphors and motifs within the socio-cultural and

religious frameworks in the folktales. The research will also explore the contemporary pathological issues surrounding women's eating practices owing to societal pressures.

Symbolic representations of culinary and consumption practices in folk traditions are in constant dialogue with those of the broader socio-cultural and political landscape, which corresponds to the current cultural ideologies. Paying attention to women's eating practices in these alternate discourses unravels their hidden desires and anxieties, helping to conceptualize their identities independent of the societal expectations. The critical insights produced in the article will contribute to the expanding field of feminist scholarship around food and literature, a field that started to emerge with the rise of women's studies in the 1970s.

Feasting Forbidden Fruits: Is that a Sin?

The Kannada folktale "The Clever Daughter-in-Law" (AT 1535, The Rich and the Poor Peasant + 956B, The Clever Maiden at Home Alone Kills or Outwits the Robber) engages with the stereotypical representation of the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law rivalry. It begins by depicting the daughter-in-law's subjugation, portrayed through her forceful consumption of leftovers and stale rice, imposed by her mother-in-law. In his essay, "Food for Thought: Towards an Anthology of Hindu-Food Images", Ramanujan discusses the cultural connotations of leftovers and faeces as pollutants, describing them as "two ends of the alimentary canal" (77). By subjecting her daughter-in-law to starvation and providing her with only stale food, the mother-in-law establishes her dominance and reinforces traditional domestic power structures. In "Gastro-Politics of South Asia", Arjun Appadurai explored the gastro-political framework of traditional Tamil Brahmin society and delineated the conflict-ridden relationship between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. He examined how the senior female authority exercises power by prolonging the daughter-in-law's apprentice phase – "a meek, subordinate, and labour-intensive role"- by keeping her "underfed, the last to eat, and often must eat alone" (500). The consumption of leftovers thus symbolizes the daughter-in-law's alterity within the domestic household, as consumption embodies coded expressions of power (Raja 278).

In addition to the daughter-in-law's coerced semi-starvation, the mother-in-law exercises physical repression to sustain the structures of power within the domestic household: "If the young woman so much as breathed a complaint, the mother-in-law would pick up a broomstick and rain blows on her head" (Ramanujan 40). The psychological deprivation and torture compel the daughter-in-law to subvert the lopsided power relations: "Once, after several days of semi-starvation, the young woman was seized with a craving to eat a full meal of

delicious snake-gourd *talada*" (40). The daughter-in-law's yearning for *talada* (a South Indian dish) marks the turning point of the folktale.

Her desire to indulge in food without any disciplinary control arises from "the resentment over the relevant role expectations" (Appadurai 500) imposed by the stringent patriarchal surveillance manifested in the form of her mother-in-law who controlled her eating practices. The resentment amplified when she defied the religious norm of offering food to the Goddess upon reaching the temple with a pot containing *talada* to consume it privately. Her desire to consume food for pleasure and to satiate her hunger superimposes the ritualistic reverence paid to any God or Goddess in the temple in the form of food. According to Appadurai, consuming food after offering it to Gods and Goddesses in South India (a practice followed throughout South Asia) is an essential ritual, as the food becomes *prasadam* or as popularly touted, "divine left-overs" (505).

The daughter-in-law's blasphemous attitude towards the deity, portrayed by her refusal to offer food, may surface from the symbolical connotations associated with the term, 'divine leftovers.' Marginalized in her domestic household by being forced to consume the 'leftovers', the daughter-in-law's blasphemy reflects her transgressive desire to consume food that "disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible", as bell hooks argues (qtd. in Lindenfeld 222). The unrestrained consumption of food, until "she belched a big belch of utter satisfaction" (Ramanujan 41) reflects not only her refusal to conform to the conventional forms of consumption but also demonstrates hunger "as an insistent, powerful force with a life of its own" (Bordo 105).

Hunger, as a powerful force, is an incessant theme in another women-centric Kannada folktale, "Hanchi" (AT 510B, The Dress of Gold, of Silver, and of Stars, + 896, The Lecherous Holy Man and the Maiden in the Box). The eponymous character is faced with the lecherous advances of a Guruswami following her marriage to a *saukar*'s son. The Guruswami falsely accuses her of infidelity, convincing her in-laws of her supposed transgression. Consequently, Hanchi's family imposes starvation as a punitive measure to exert their power over her apparent transgression of the law of chastity.

Parallel to Cinderella's association of her identity with her foot size, Hanchi's identity in the Kannada tale is tied to the sweet rice dishes she makes and feeds to her husband's family. The marking difference of "the exceptional excellence of Hanchi's rice dishes" aims to set the tale within a strictly domestic sphere by refining this "very homely detail" (Ramanujan et al. 363). Several motifs of confinement in the folktale - including the clay mask that gave her the name, the room where she was locked and forcefully starved for an extended period, and her

eventual confinement in a box by the Guruswami - serve to echo Hanchi's domesticated womanhood. In addition, the confinement motif also metaphorically demonstrates her inability to move beyond enclosed spaces like the kitchen. For instance, when the Guruswami manipulated the *saukar* to have a picnic, Hanchi "as before...prepared her fine sweet rice dishes, and like a good daughter-in-law, stayed behind to look after the house while everyone else was away" (Ramanujan 346). The domesticated confinement of Hanchi echoes Susan Bordo's concept of an "other-oriented emotional economy" socially imposed on a woman, where she is required to learn how "to feed others, not the self, and to construe any desires for self-nurturance and self-feeding as greedy and excessive" (162).

In the initial instances, Hanchi, much like the "Daughter-in-Law", succumbed to the trope of a docile daughter-in-law who unquestioningly adhered to the culinary norms of the domestic household, prioritizing feeding others over herself. Nevertheless, paralleling the use of consumption as a mode of defiance exercised by the latter, Hanchi's subversion of domesticated womanhood is illustrated through a paradigmatic change in her relationship with food. She undergoes a rite of passage – from her brother's incestuous desires before marriage, Guruswami's lecherous approach after her marriage, her in-laws' domestic violence and imposed starvation to finally locating her identity within her body. Upon being released from the box by the old woman, the first thing Hanchi demanded was food to satiate her "ravenous" hunger (Ramanujan 347).

In "Hunger as an Ideology", Bordo examines the physiological and psychological realities of women who voluntarily starve themselves due to the stereotypical association of femininity with a slender body. Contrarily, the clever daughter-in-law and Hanchi, who were prohibited access to food against their will, similarly found food to be a "perpetually beckoning presence" (Bordo 105). This allure of food rose exponentially, leading them to defy the norms and moral conventions of their domestic households. Unlike voluntary dieters, who willingly abstain, the women in these folktales faced starvation. Nevertheless, their reaction to food's enticement corroborated with the experiences of those who abstain from food by choice.

The women's private and transgressive consumption of food in the folktales mentioned above parallels contemporary patterns of obsessive binge behaviour primarily prevalent among women. The behaviour rarely emerges from "a state of pleasure and independence" and instead serves to transiently assuage the feelings of "despair, emptiness, loneliness, and desperation" (Bordo 121). The representation of the binge behaviour emerging out of despair and loneliness is symbolically underscored in the Tamil folktale "Tell it to the Walls." The brief folk narrative describes the life of a "poor widow" (Ramanujan 3) with two sons and two daughters-in-law.

The cause of her growing body is described interestingly thus: "All four of them (her sons and daughters-in-law) scolded her and ill-treated her all day. She had no one to whom she could turn and tell her woes. As she kept the woes to herself, she grew fatter and fatter" (3). Her implicit binge behaviour, arising from her miserable condition, corroborates Bordo's notion of problematic eating practices among women as a result of their growing alienation from society. Despite the emotional upheavals in a woman's life causing the inevitable binge behaviour, they are condemned for their eating practices, as illustrated in the folktale when her sons "mocked at her for growing fatter by the day and asked her to eat less" (3).

Challenging societal control over women's eating practices and their sense of self, the folktales depict the acts of subversion in interesting manners. In "Tell it to the Walls", the poor widow feels lighter in body and mood when she recounts her woes to the four walls of a deserted old house. This deserted old house foregrounds the widow's own condition as she is old and abandoned by her family. Her cathartic narration of grievances to the walls, which reduce to dust one by one after she recounts her woes, corresponds to the formal oral narration of folktales in public realms. Contrarily, the subversive narrative in "Hanchi" is underscored through her demand to consume food to reclaim her agency. From her brother's incestuous obsession to the mad passion of the *saukar*'s son to possess her, the male gaze upon Hanchi culminated when the Guruswami confined her in a box and returned to the old woman's house, "eager to taste his new power over Hanchi" (Ramanujan 348). Hanchi's desire to satiate her "ravenous hunger" marks her transformation from being an object of consumption to becoming a consumer herself. In "The Clever Daughter-in-Law", the character's unrestrained consumption of food subverts the domestic power structures at a household level and the broader socio-cultural prescriptions of a woman's hunger, causing the idol of Goddess Kali in the temple to cover her mouth in shock.

Following the initial uproar in the village resulting from their idol's concocted shape, the daughter-in-law chooses to take matters into her own hands (quite literally). She chastises Goddess Kali's idol with the broomstick in private. The daughter-in-law's blasphemous chastisement of the idol with the broomstick is subversive on two levels. Traditional notions of femininity are perpetuated by representing a slender body, which requires strict control over appetite and a restrained public display of food consumption. According to Bordo, illustrating unrestrained appetite among women as inappropriate "makes restriction and denial of hunger central features of the construction of femininity and set up the compensatory binge as a virtual inevitability" (122). Controlling female hunger is, therefore, an act of disciplining female bodies. Consequently, the "bloodcraving Kali's" (Bordo 112) gesticulation of shock in

response to the daughter-in-law's gorging corresponds to the cultural conservatism that controls women's appetite and hunger to sustain a slender, 'docile body.' Therefore, when the daughter-in-law chastised the idol of Kali with the broomstick, she attempted to shatter the societal expectations from women to maintain an infallible, slender and docile body, symbolically demonstrating her refusal to be disciplined by the traditional society.

The second layer of subversion emerges from the inherent nature of folklore, characterised by its act of humanizing Gods. Unlike the divine beings in the *Puranas* and the pan-Indian mythologies who seem to carry no bodily functions like sweating, urinating or defecating, the Gods and the Goddesses in folk traditions are "embodied, localized, domesticated" (Ramanujan et al. 547). As Ramanujan states, "gods like Ganesa, heroes like Bhima, demons like Ravana, or even poets like Vyasa cannot help going to the bathroom and goddesses like Ganga and Gauri menstruate" (547). Therefore, the act of chastising the idol results from this humanizing characteristic of gods in folklore.

The ferocious identity of the daughter-in-law, materialized through her unrestrained consumption, contrasts with her docile persona observed in the initial part of the narrative. This duality reflects an amalgamation of her subservient nature, which conforms to the marginalizing domestication, and the ferocious potentially cannibalistic aspects of her womanhood. The dichotomy mirrors the ambivalence of Goddess Kali herself, as illustrated through a Kannada proverb, *nari muni-dare mari*, which translates to: "Woman, when furious, is a Goddess (mari)" (Ramanujan et. al 497).

A dichotomous identity can also be perceived in "Hanchi", as P. Mary Porselvi has remarked. In "Food, Household and Sisterhood", Porselvi underscored Hanchi's complex identity, delineating two facets of a woman's self – "the true self and the false self" within the patriarchal structures of power (99). In the folktale, Hanchi's true identity is physically veiled by the clay mask and symbolically veiled by her confining association with the sweet rice dishes, as evidenced towards the end of the folk narrative. Her "true self" is identified when she is literally and metaphorically 'unlocked' from the box, which symbolizes the confining domestic spaces, and chooses to satiate her ravenous hunger.

The dual nature of the women in these folktales loosely corresponds to the contemporary pathological issues associated with women's eating practices that exceed the 'normal' consumption behaviour and result in eating disorders. In "Hunger as an Ideology", Susan Bordo delineates the real-life experiences of anorectics, referring to an "other self" of an anorectic, "the self of the uncontrollable appetites" (145). These two selves – the one that restrains herself from consuming food, succumbing to the societal norms of a slender body and

shrunken appetite, and the other that gives in to her voracious appetites and rejects traditional femininity - are in constant contestation with each other within an anorectic (145). Although Hanchi's 'ravenous hunger' may seem reasonable after days of starvation, the daughter-in-law's flogging of Kali can resemble potential "anorexic revulsion towards hips, stomach and breasts" as delineated by Bordo while referring to her article in "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture" (190). This act reflects a rebellion "against maternal, domestic femininity" (190) as previously discussed.

Culinary Culmination of Desire

As "The Clever Daughter-in-Law" progresses, the folktale unravels the latent erotic desires that intersect with the daughter-in-law's transgressive consumption. Due to her increasing popularity in the village as a *pativrata* (having restored the original posture of Goddess Kali's idol), the mother-in-law and her husband conspired to kill her. Escaping their treacherous plan to burn her, the daughter-in-law finds herself in a dense forest. In literature, forests are often depicted as a foray into one's unconscious and deepest desires.

While hiding on a branch, the daughter-in-law encountered a robber and, to protect herself, convinced him that she was a celestial being searching for a husband. In order to gain the robber's trust, she pulled a betel leaf from her bag. In addition to receiving "sastric sanction for use in rituals and ceremonies" (Ahuja and Ahuja 17) and being considered as a royal gift to be exchanged between kings and emperors (22), betel was also regarded as a "necessary adjunct to sex in the Kamasutra" (31). It aligns with Cielas who references *Kamasutra's* suggestion of chewing betel together with a partner after intercourse as it helps to "stimulate pleasure, love, and passion" (166). Hence, betel is considered as an aphrodisiac that can also galvanize the partner's trust by transferring it directly to her mouth (166). This act of gaining a woman's trust through the transference of the betel from a man's mouth to a woman's is demonstrated in the folk narrative when the daughter-in-law states, "Look, we are not married yet. But you can put your betel leaf into my mouth with your tongue. When I've eaten from your mouth, I'll be as good as your wedded wife" (Ramanujan 44).

The sexual connotations associated with betel nut and betel leaf provide an alternative discourse to their references in classical literary traditions, where betel leaf typically serves as a digestive consumed after meals. This alternative discourse reinforces folklore as a counter-system. Additionally, the sexual implications of betel leaf, coupled with the representation of the daughter-in-law's consumption of it through the robber's mouth, raise questions about her desire for sexual gratification.

In “Beyond Food/Sex: Eating and an Ethics of Existence”, Elspeth Probyn has argued that “thinking sex through food” is a compelling way to draw one’s attention to “the interrelation of various corporeal dimensions...” (215-16). This corporeality refers to one’s relationship with their body, which, according to Probyn, changes after “a large, delicious or disgusting meal” as discussed in *Carnal Appetites*. She elaborates:

To pry open this idea further, in eating we experience different parts of our bodies: from the physical reaction as we bite into something, past experiences also flock to accompany the savouring of the moment. The same could, of course, be said of sex. Obviously, at times, the corporeal experience of sex also joins us with other bodies as it reworks aspects of our relations to ourselves, past and present. (62)

In “The Clever Daughter-in-Law”, the daughter-in-law’s awareness of her body’s desires increased when she indulged herself with *talada*, as evidenced through her big belch of satisfaction. Shruti Sareen aptly argues in “Food, Love and the Self in Indian Women’s Poetry” that food’s association with the body’s physical reactions such as “hunger, eating, belching” aids to locate “our identity within the body itself” (56). Sareen further adds that the “body is its own testimony”, and it galvanizes “our sense of self” (56). The daughter-in-law’s building awareness of her inner self and identity through her corporeal self makes her privy to her desires for sexual gratification, underscoring the erotic connotations of the betel nut and betel leaf in her conversation with the thief.

However, before their ‘marriage’ could be sealed, the daughter-in-law bites the tongue of the robber and steals his stolen wealth. This act of biting a man’s tongue symbolizes an elemental act of consumption and becomes a potential act of cannibalism. Sarah Cleary, in *Dinner for Two*, remarked that when sex conflates with food, parallels form between erotic desire, consumption, and cannibalism (55). The daughter-in-law’s potentially cannibalistic action transcends, as Cleary suggests, the subject-object dichotomy (55), thereby establishing her supremacy over the robber.

Her identity as a potentially cannibalistic consumer is clearly illustrated as an act of self-protection against the robber’s sexual gaze. However, it also subtly implies her unfulfilled sexual desires through the symbolism of betel nut and betel leaf. The daughter-in-law’s action - from subtly enticing the robber to biting his tongue - are an act of transgression against the socio-moral code of conduct expected of women. These actions challenge the sexual

superiority exercised by men and reflect her desire to gain sexual pleasure in a potentially sadistic manner.

When she came back to her in-laws' home, she lied to her mother-in-law, claiming that the God of Death, Lord Yama, had proclaimed her to return and warned that unless her mother-in-law behaved appropriately, she would be dipped "in cauldrons of boiling oil" (Ramanujan 45). The threat of the mother-in-law being cooked in the cauldron symbolizes the complete subversion of the power dynamics in the house, where the consumer (the mother-in-law), who controlled the appetitive needs of the daughter, now faced the threat of being consumed. Thus, the desire to consume food and indulge in self-pleasure marks a reversal of power dynamics in the preceding folk narrative, shifting power from traditional authorities to the individual.

In addition to "The Clever Daughter-in-Law", the sexual connotations of the betel nut are also underscored in "Hanchi." When the Guruswami sought to placate the infidelity of the eponymous character falsely, he planted bits of betel nut and betel leaf in the room, which was later considered as evidence by Hanchi's in-laws of her disloyalty. The counter-cultural discourse of betel nut and betel leaf is further reinforced in the Tulu folktale "Heron Boy" (T5543). The folktale describes the barren relationship of a husband and a wife where "the wife wouldn't sleep with her husband, and he wouldn't sleep with her" (Ramanujan 133). Despite their barren and cold relationship, the wife continues to follow the norm of cooking food for her husband. When she prepared rice gourd for him, he "went out to sit out by himself" (133) since he did not like it. The wife's subservience echoes Appadurai's critical observations regarding women's role expectations in a domestic household. According to Appadurai, "Cooking is the domain of women and therefore indicates their general subordination to men. This is a generalized extension of the basic idea that cooking and sexual intercourse are appropriate and symbolically interconnected services performed by a wife for a husband" (497). A paradigmatic shift is brought in the couple's barren life when the husband wishes to have some betel. In addition to providing the betel, the wife also desires to consume it with some lime. She wipes off what appears to be lime, "oozing down the wall" (133). It was the droppings of a paddy heron. Consequently, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby heron, who grows up to provide its parents with a vast fertile field and a palace, and later eventually transforming into a human boy. The couple's desire to consume betel symbolically attracted fertility into their lives and thus elevated their socio-economic status. The wife's desire to consume betel stemmed from her dissatisfaction with her barren relationship, reflecting her unsatiated sexual desires.

Conclusion

The critical observations of selected folktales from Ramanujan's *Folktales from India*, examined through the lens of Feminist Food Studies, provide an alternative discourse on women's consumption of food that challenges the patriarchal control over women's eating practices. Additionally, it underscores women's hidden desire for sexual gratification, which drives their reclamation of agency and power over their bodies. These folk narratives, which align with the overarching counter-cultural theme of folklore, subvert the domesticating relationship between women and food. They depict consumption as a means for women to reclaim their corporeal identities, independent of the patriarchal surveillance that dictates their eating practices. In conclusion, it seems befitting to synthesize the essential ideas inferred in the selected women's folk and food narratives of the present study by referencing Anurima Chanda's inference from her article, "Who Eats Whom?" in *Children's Literature Through Nonsense Literature*:

From food being the domain of the female (since the kitchen has always been seen as the woman's space), to she herself becoming the food (say, in erotica), to women themselves becoming voracious eaters (the classic example would be Eve, who brought about the downfall of entire mankind just because she gave in to her temptation to eat off the Tree of Knowledge), food moves from giving definitions to women as the nurturer, the object or the transgressor. (35)

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