



Nature as Machine in Culinary Fiction

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Abstract:

The advent of machines and technology has caused nature to take a backseat in terms of being viewed as a means of production, especially when it comes to food. Today food is classified into processed, natural and organic; divisions that did not exist years ago. The reason for this is the emergence of man-made machines with the ability to create processed foods in order to meet the growing demands of population and urbanisation. People have a tendency to view machine and nature as binaries, for nature existed before mankind and is organic in substance while machine is non-living and designed to only meet the basic needs and the greedy needs of humans. This juxtaposition does not necessarily be a binary opposition.

Nature has and continues to be a machine of production for our daily sustenance. Landscape, water, air, weather and even animals are all parts of the mechanised nature that work together in order to produce food. This role of nature which is taken for granted is celebrated in many novels of culinary fiction where cooking is revered and the food is served in a farm to fork fashion, giving precedence to the growing of one's own ingredients within the domestic space. The primary texts used to study this characteristic of nature are "BlackBerry Wine" and "Five Quarters of the Orange" by Joanne Harris. The paper will explore the camaraderie between nature and home cooks and how they work with nature and so do they with machines in order to produce food and the destructive potential that is dormant in both nature and machine.

Keywords

Culinary; Nature; Farmers; Gardening;

1. Introduction

Nature has made an appearance in many works of literature and can be classified under Nature writing and Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism can be defined as the critical study of the role of nature in literature and analysing a text from the point of view of the treatment of nature in it. The setting and surrounding backdrop of the text is taken up for analysis and the relationship between the characters and their natural environment is also taken up for study. Nature writing on the other hand deals with literature written on and about nature and nature ends up being the only subject matter of the text. Travel writing often merges with nature writing such as the works of Isabella Bird who authored *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* which is about her trip to Colorado Rocky Mountains on horseback. While she writes of her travel experience, she also gives detailed descriptions of nature she encounters on this journey; thus often nature writing merges with other subgenres of the novel.

The question then arises if Ecocriticism has a place in the culinary novel and if food and nature have a co-existing role as travel and nature does; and the answer is yes. Culinary fiction places emphasis on food being prepared from scratch and to find the ingredients for which one must turn to nature. Before the actual cooking process takes place the ingredients need to be grown in the earth and harvested first. The primary texts selected to carry out this study are *BlackBerry Wine* and *Five Quarters of the Orange* by Joanne Harris. These texts don't exactly qualify as descriptive nature writing (though other culinary writing may), but nature has proven itself indispensable when it comes to the food we eat. Such novels can be viewed from an Eco critical perspective as the actual preparation of a meal starts with the tilling of the ground.



2. The Mechanism of Nature

The mechanism of nature allows humans to cultivate varieties of sustenance such as crops, orchards, rearing animals etc. All of these are done on the common ground of nature which exists as land; except the landscape has had work done to it by human intervention in order to produce the desired sustenance. Hence from an eco-critical perspective nature in culinary fiction follows the philosophy of earth for human's sake rather than earth for earth's sake; and goes against the concept of 'Deep Ecology' which believes in letting nature be as it is while we peacefully cohabitate with it. "The shift from a human centered to a nature-centered system of values is the core of radicalism attributed to deep ecology, bringing it into opposition with almost the entirety of western philosophy and religion." (Garrard 21). Nature in order to produce sustenance is not allowed to exist by itself without being chiseled, in *Five Quarters of the Orange* we see that the life of a farmer depends more than simply existing on nature, for nature has given its landscapes but it is the working of nature for one's own personal use that brings forth sustenance.

As Framboise narrates,

There is always plenty to do on a farm. Water to bring in from the pump, leaving it in metal buckets on the cellar tiles so the sun doesn't warm it; goats to milk, the pail to be covered in a muslin cloth and left in the dairy; the goats then have to be taken to pasture so they don't eat all the vegetables in the garden; hens and ducks to feed; the day's crop of ripe strawberries to pick; (Harris 103)

The protagonist's mother works hard on her farm everyday but also exhibits a love for the trees she grew and even anthropomorphizes them as people at times by the way she gives her trees names in her journal/cookbook and talks about staying up with them all night when they are sick. At the same time she raises livestock and poultry which she doesn't mind butchering for a meal, nor does she mind harvesting her other crops. The trees are given special care because they qualify to be one of those agents of nature that continue to provide sustenance season after season as Framboise states "Our main source of income was fruit," (Harris 66). For the pride of a farmer falls on market day when every farmer gathers his produce which he/she grows in the farm and sells it to people in the market. Thus nature

does not only provide sustenance but also livelihood. The products Framboise and her mother sell in the market also include animal products such as egg and cheese which though aren't directly derived from nature, are from nature as it forms the base on which the animals are reared and is in turn worked in order to make the ground fit for raising certain livestock. For example poultry cannot be raised in green pastures as are goats and sheep, while such animals are restrained and denied from accessing vegetable patches which throw light on the issue of space and wilderness.

3. Domestic Space Vs Wilderness

Space in nature has also become mechanised as it comes under the control of humans. Landscape is worked in order to cultivate vegetation where the domestic livestock aren't allowed, but are separated from other feral animals as they are raised exclusively for consumption. A small plot of land for instance can be cleared of greenery and used as a poultry farm or a pig-pen, just as easily as a piece of land is tilled and filled with manure in order to plant crops. As opposed to the treatment of the mother's trees in the novel, there is no anthropomorphism when it comes to livestock for they are also used as a means of production (for milk, eggs, meat etc.), interestingly in the novel the young Framboise relies on the local pond in order to catch fishes for their dinner; it is here that she sets her eye on the old mother Pike and makes plans to capture it for sport. Earlier on in the novel she also hunts water snakes and kills them for sport too, hanging them by their heads near the river bank.

There is a difference in the treatment of the animals in the wilderness and one's own livestock, which can be observed from this. "We are rarely enjoined to prevent the suffering of wild animals because our moral responsibility principally applies to the animals we use for food, transport and companionship" (Garrard 149). The mechanism of nature here is exploited as nature provides the river bed where the fishes and other aquatic animals live and function, but Framboise by her human intervention is not satisfied with merely taking her catch of fish for consumption but proceeds to capture snakes as a sadistic pleasure and hunt the old pike just because it had the audacity to exist for so long. Framboise's unnecessary killings are retaliated by nature in turn by upsetting the farms in the village and destroying their source of sustenance. "The

Hourias farm had been badly hit. A week's supply of eggs requisitioned, half the milk, two whole sides of salted pork, seven pounds of butter, a barrel of oil, twenty-four bottles of wine, ill-concealed behind a partition in the cellar, plus any number of terrines and preserves"(Harris 121).

4. The Farmer's Plight

While the mechanism of nature acts as the provider, it also functions as a destroyer. Nature can be worked by human intervention only to a certain extent but cannot be completely controlled by it. This is the difference between manmade technology and nature. As Jay states in *BlackBerry Wine* "Other farmers suffered, too, but it was Marise, with her marshy pastures, who was the worst affected. Standing pools of rainwater surrounded the house. Two goats were lost in the flood water from the Tannes" (Harris 269). A farmer can work very hard in order to grow produce only for it to be taken away in an instant by a natural disaster as in Marise's case, who though ran an efficient farm had suffered loss because the weather is out of her control. Farming is a risky occupation as one can observe from the tragedy that struck the Hourias' farm and Marise's farm. A lot of investment goes into the purchasing of raw materials such as seeds, pesticides, fertilizers etc. along with intensive labour which goes to a total waste if nature decides to give these farmers a bad break.

The tragedies of the two farms in the novels are not something new for often in the news one hears about farmer suicides due to lack of yield that season such as the farmer's protest in South India in 2017, with skulls of the deceased who had committed suicide due to the drought which killed their crops making them unable to pay their debtors. " 'Temperature was more powerful at explaining crop yields and suicide rates,' explained Carleton in an interview with National Geographic. The data suggested that for regions over 20 degrees Celsius, a one degree increase in a single day's temperature caused an average of 70 suicides" (news.nationalgeographic.com).

Culinary fiction helps bring to light such issues concerned with farming seen in the character of Joe stating "All it takes is for one year to be bad, and then you're taking out loans from the credit Mutuel so you can plant next year"(Harris 260). Farming therefore or any profession dependent on the mechanism of nature is a gamble for there is not

always a reward for the work and investment put into it; but nature is the only doer of machines one can go to for the production of our daily sustenance. Thus one needs to sympathise with farmers for farming is indeed the first stage when it comes to food and since its workings are with nature, tends to be unpredictable. The only other alternative for this is processed food which produces a lot of short term and long term side effects; even genetically modified organisms (GMO) which a lot of farmers are fighting against should be of concern even to the layman for its potential health hazards. To sum it up, farming shouldn't only be left to the farmers but a profession supported by the entire community.

5. Role of Gardening in Traditional Cooking

Another feature of culinary fiction that one can observe is the emphasis given to home cooking and making meals from scratch. All cooking is done with an emotional element attached to it along with a lot of care taken to select only the finest quality of ingredients. Culinary fiction this way, acts as a foil to the fast food society where meals are also commercialised in the growing markets. The reader develops a fascination for the kind of effort taken by the cook in order to produce a decent and decadent meal on the plate. Therefore a good cook works to produce a meal in the farm to fork fashion as opposed to depending on commercialised ingredients or even GMO produce. "You bloody won't, though," exclaimed Joe. 'Buggerin everything up with chemicals. That's not what you came here for, is it?'"(Harris 185). Joe believes in gardening without the use of chemicals or anything unnatural even if it provides a lucrative promise of better yield because ultimately what can be grown is for consumption. Joe didn't just garden but also harvested what he grew and made wines, preserves and other edibles.

Culinary fiction is a genre which focuses on the relationship between food and man and since in today's world food is classified into organic/natural/processed, it deals with this distinction as well. The culinary novel without a doubt supports traditional cooking methods that rely on traditional farming.

Environmental groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth played a major role in successfully demonizing biotechnology in Europe in the 1990s and have imported their anti-GMO



campaigns to Asia and Africa. These campaigns have rested, in part, on claims about adverse human health effects that are groundless. The other main pillar of anti-GMO campaigns is built on anti-corporate and anti-big business philosophy (Kloor 70).

It can be observed that Framboise, cooking and serving in her café with produce from her own land. Joe's interest in gardening also stems from a primal need as he uses the harvest from his garden to sustain himself and also make wines and preserves which he sometimes shares with the others in his community. Technically speaking Framboise, Joe and Jay aren't farmers by profession, but it is their personal dedication to their craft which yields high quality ingredients which are natural and tasty. Neither do they cater to mass market but are supported by their small communities where the people eat local food.

Working with nature also requires a lot of patience as cooking a meal from scratch does. In our fast paced techno savvy world everything is expected to happen quickly and be value for money; it is proving to be extremely hard to be able to put together a meal which one can say is natural/organic as most of the ingredients come off shelves from the supermarkets which are processed and have preservatives added. Cooking devices have also changed as microwaves and air fryers replace traditional stove tops and ovens for convenience. Simultaneously there is a boom in food and nutrition blogs such as *thehealthyhomeeconomist.com* and *wellnessmama.com* that endorse healthy eating and cooking done from scratch as an appeal to go back to healthier living by traditional cooking methods. As part of the endorsement, the authors here advocate the practice of growing one's own produce as part of traditional eating. Katie from *Wellnessmama.com* has a section on her website on organic gardening for one's home culinary purposes.

She states,

Gardening was once a normal part of life for most people. Not so many generations ago, neighbours exchanged fresh produce over fences (too many zucchini again!) and most people knew their local farmer. Most of us too probably have fond memories of grandmothers opening a can of homemade pickles or jam.

Even though times have changed (Wal-Mart, anyone?), we still have the ability to grow some of

our own food at least part of the year in almost all parts of the world. Yet statistically many of us don't (especially in the US).

Conserving a local food source is important and working in a garden is good for the body and the soul (*Wellnessmama.com*).

6. Nature – A Mindful Machine

Through the texts taken for study we find that nature is romanticised in some ways such as Jay on moving to Lansquenet and purchasing a farm, finds solace and mental clarity in order to complete his book and finds his happiness in working with nature and farming. Framboise as well returns to Les Laveuses as she couldn't stay away despite the reputation she and her family had earned while they were last there; had to return and start farming once again and even opened a café where she cooked from her produce. But that is just one part of the perspective for nature isn't always 'Mother Nature'. "The ancient mythification of nature as a "benevolent female," Carolyn Merchant argues, "contained the implication that nature when ploughed and cultivated could be used as a commodity and manipulated as a resource" (Buell 215). Nature though can be worked by humans as machines, still manages to retain an identity of its own for the mechanism of nature is such that it can submit to human adaptation while performing on its own as well.

The difference between manmade machines and nature is that the latter are synthetically produced and built out of sterile non-living equipment such as steel, iron etc. While nature is organic and a living entity; hence man cannot control nature as he is able to control his own man-made machinery. All machines in general have a certain percentage of unpredictability which may cause it to act in undesirable and unproductive ways, but while in synthetic machines man adjusts the technology to suit himself; he cannot accomplish this with nature. Nature as a living being cannot be altered past an extent to suit just one species. "All creatures process their environment subjectively and seek to modify it in the process of adapting to it. It is not a question of whether we can evade this ground condition but how to make it sub serve mutuality rather than propriety self-centeredness" (Buell 267).



7. Conclusion

While reading such texts of culinary fiction, the readers are encouraged not only to take on cooking from scratch, but also to grow their own produce to use in their cooking. Hence such novels play an important role socially in acting as a co-text to traditional food diets which are making a comeback with such blogs and books such as Sally Fallon's *Nourishing Traditions*. Such texts also simultaneously function as a co-text to the green revolution as they endorse gardening and traditional farming methods in order to procure the ingredients for cooking. The books contain a setting where the protagonists have moved out of their capitalist environment and into a more natural setting in order to rediscover food, hence bringing to light the inextricable connection between sustenance and nature, also getting the reader's attention towards nature through his palette.

Nature ends up playing an interesting character in culinary fiction because of its role to serve as machines for humans to work them for their sustenance, while at the same time retaining its own individuality to function on its own. This often ends up upsetting people whose lives are grounded in the agriculture sector. Nevertheless, human beings are created as part of nature and need to learn to negotiate and co-exist with it as opposed to trying to control it. The practice of farming cannot be thrust onto farmers exclusively. Nature is impermanent which makes farming a difficult profession. It is in everyone's vested interest to eat healthy that the community as a whole should support farmers and traditional-farming practices while undertaking gardening themselves in their domestic space for their consumption.

8. References

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