



Food Politics and Culinary Capital: A Critical Reading of Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's "They Eat Meat"

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Abstract

Food is an expression of social, communal and personal identity. Family, relationships and socio-cultural bonds are mediated through the making and sharing of food. Tribal communities, too, manifest power and hierarchies within the family, community and society at large through food as a central cultural motif/icon. When foodways and food habits are an individual's identity markers, the person/group/community undergoes a series of belongingness and unbelongingness/estrangement within the particular community and outside the community. The present paper tries to understand and critically analyse the gendered and communal politics of food culture and culinary capital as represented in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's "They Eat Meat" from *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. Engaging with food and culinary culture and their related dimensions, the paper deconstructs the numerous socio-cultural-political nuances attached to food culture and capital in the tribal and non-tribal world.

Keywords: Discrimination, food capital, food culture, foodways, gender identity, hierarchy, identity.

Introduction

Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, craving and identity.

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Food is invariably a gateway to understanding a socio-culture dynamics of a community. "Food is a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena" (Counihan 6) in the form of rites, rituals, beliefs, deities, festivities, tradition, history and communication. Food represents not only an individual's identity but also that of a community and society at large. Every household, community and class has its unique food culture, dishes, food preparation, ingredients, food-related rituals, food service/hospitality, food seasons, etc., which makes 'food' an important artefact in any culture. As Counihan states, food as an artefact "... occur in a wide range of peasant and tribal societies and are central to the maintenance of community and political organisations" (14); that is how "foodways influence the shaping of community, personality and family" (6). In the words of Freud, food is a crucial icon in becoming a part of the community by conforming to social norms and henceforth forming societies. Counihan emphasises, "[t]o eat and drink with someone was at the same time a symbol and a confirmation of social community and of the assumption of mutual obligations" (174). Every community-conscious group stresses the significance of the dishes, ingredients, the specific method to prepare food, the importance of food and food habits. Food becomes an entry point in understanding history, culture, and personal desires, at the level of the individual and the society at large. Food as a cultural artefact can be studied along the five basic elements of what Paul du Gay calls "the circuit of culture" (87). These elements include seeing representations, identity, production, consumption and regulation via food. Food is the focal point of any culture, helps in understanding socio-cultural and power dynamics, the identity of an individual and the community, the production, service and consumption of food, and many rites, rituals, and taboos concerning food and its preparation. If food is so significant in making and establishing a culture, then food helps establish and sustain the power structures as well. Food not only reveals the traditional identity of a person, but it also expresses the emotional attachment/value it holds for the one. This is how food mediates to construct and control the power dynamics in society: "Association between food and intra as well as inter-community relationships is often reflected in local and regional political nexus-food practices are used as symbols and used to compete for power"

(Mukhopadhyay 276). At the inter-community level, food is seen in how the minor community conforms to the food beliefs and practices of the dominant community. The domination of one community over another through food is visible in *Axone*, which projects the assumption of a few people from North India living in Delhi that northeastern food is against their religious beliefs. Students living in Delhi but belonging to North-East India want to cook Akhuni, their traditional food, on the occasion of the marriage of Mariam, their friend, but the people living in their neighbourhood do not let them cook their traditional food, mainly Akhuni. The tiff is visible. *Axone* or Akhuni is a traditional Naga food that is made during festivities. The cinematic narrative is about the struggle of these students to cook this dish. Since the cooking of Akhuni exudes a strong smell, the people around call them bad names both mentally and verbally. They are judged and threatened for the 'sin' they commit by cooking Akhuni, besides facing racist remarks about the food they cook and eat. This highlights how traditional or cultural food or food habits are used to map a person's acceptance and non-acceptance in a society.

At the inter-level, a dominant culture creates its own culinary capital in the form of food and imposes it on the tribal/marginal communities pushing them to the wall. At the intra-level, it is the tribal woman who becomes doubly marginalised from within and outside the community. A tribal woman is otherised by the dominant structure of the society on the basis of food and her kitchen domain. Virginia Woolf's remark in *A Room of One's Own* on writers who "... seldom spare a word for what was eaten" (12) in their writings and discussions and instead prefer to talk about the "very witty" things said during the luncheon parties (12), indicates the patriarchal politics of indifference, ignorance towards women on general and women writers in particular. Mention of soup and salmon means to go beyond what just appears on the plate. However, trivial and everyday thing like food begs discussion at the parties, where it becomes a marker of discrimination and association at the same time. Even Counihan reflects that "food is both a means of differentiation and a channel of connection" (12), not only in parties but in communities as well. On the one end, it can connect people, societies and cultures; on the other, it can be a marker of differentiation among diverse communities and sexes. Woolf is able to trace such

differentiation in the form of gender discrimination via food. She comments, "Here was my soup. It was a plain gravy soup" (20), which echoes how women have been given an inferior societal position that is mediated via food. "The transparent liquid" becomes a discourse that women are not only ill-fed but also pushed to the second position in society by serving less food or food that is not up to the mark (Woolf 22). Such discriminatory attitude towards women indicates their secondary status vis-à-vis men. Thus, food here is a marker and reminder of how a woman is "othered" in a community.

A metaphor of exploitation, food in the tribal communities, too, becomes a prop to suppress women. Food becomes a trope to express patriarchal power, woman subordination, and submissiveness. *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire talks about the Naga women's marginalisation and their secondary position in their society via food. In most Indian societies/communities, food and the kitchen are essential to and inseparable parts of a woman's life. Kitchen politics and food power are legitimised and valued in the Naga community. "Food and domestic spaces like the kitchen, therefore, are central to ascribing gender roles to women to maintain the patriarchal structure of their community" (Fauzi and Ahmad 112). Similarly, the women of the Naga community are pushed to the kitchen and hold the burden of exploitation and discrimination for eternity. The ideal place, i.e., the kitchen, and the ideal work, i.e. cooking, cleaning, etc., for a woman to fix her identity. She is constructed by the norms prevalent in the community, starting with food. Patriarchal control is reinstated via food politics, and the hierarchical relationship between a man and a woman stays rock solid.

Food and Identity Formation/ Identity Formation via Food

Narrated through Dielieno, a young girl, *A Terrible Matriarchy* threadbare the food politics and the power derived and exercised via food by both genders. The narrative opens with a scene where four-and-a-half-year-old Dielieno is sitting in the kitchen with her brother, and their grandmother¹ is serving them food. The Grandmother sweetly asks Bulie, Dielieno's brother, "What meat do you want?" (Kire 1). On hearing this, Dielieno, in all her excitement, says, "I want the leg, Grandmother, give me the leg" (Kire 1). The

Grandmother, at that very moment, rebukes her for asking for a leg piece: "I wasn't asking you, silly girl." (Kire 1). Saying this, she swiftly puts the chicken leg piece into her grandson's plate and says, "That portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions" (Kire 1). The food eventually becomes a reminder of her secondary status vis-a-vis her brothers. First, a woman is not allowed to express her choice; secondly, her gender becomes detrimental to getting her proper food. If the metaphor of food explicates the unequal relationship between Dielieno and her brothers, the kitchen also is used as a learning ground for the young Dielieno. Her entry into the kitchen to take up culinary lessons and learn related skills is a step forward in the process of her becoming a woman. The space of the kitchen becomes a space of marginalisation and exploitation for her. The way she describes the kitchen as dark and her attempt to make her way in it metaphorically shows how the outer brightness is not meant for her, and she has to negotiate and adjust herself to the patriarchal darkness: "The kitchen was dark, and I stumbled over a low wooden stool. The bright sunshine outside has blinded me, and I carefully felt my way around the kitchen" (Kire 48). The Grandmother represents the exercise of this patriarchal control, a timely genderisation via food.

Continuous discrimination between Dielieno and her brothers based on food constantly reminds her of her inferior position in relation to her brothers. The grandmother ". . . had hobbled to the almirah to give a lump of jaggery to Leto (*Dielieno's brother*). My brother saw me return and gave me a bit to lick at. "Enough, enough, it is for you (*Leto*)," said the Grandmother . . ." (Kire 4). The grandmother felt that eating even a piece of jaggery may spoil the girl. Food culture and ethos unique to each culture clearly demarcates the gender boundaries like man gets pampering with serving first with a good share of food and that too of his choice but a woman is not only served last but also least and that too not of her choice. Dielieno even narrates how every single man and woman is given different spheres of work: "The old man from the village chopped firewood after a cup of tea had been given to him. His wife would dig up the garden to plant sweet potatoes or garlic, beans and maize. Some days, she would sit and weave rough cloths for Grandmother . . ." (Kire 16). This indicates the gendered spheres are demarcated exclusively

for a man and a woman. Even her mother further reinstates this gender discrimination via food. She says to Bulie, Dielieno's brother, "You're eating a man's share now, . . . and you can do a man's work as well" (Kire 57). On the one hand, Bulie is fed more than his sister which becomes a moment of pride for the mother but on the other hand, his sister being kept hungry and being denied the desired food is taken to be a norm in the society. Food draws a line between the two genders where one is ill-fed and the other is given more than one's requirements. This is what Virginia Woolf points out in *A Room of One's Own* where the men's luncheon parties are filled with copious amounts of food while the women's parties hardly have food on their tables. While the men are given proper food, sometimes even more than they require, women, on the other hand, *must* remain content with whatever they get. The discrimination does not stop here. It goes beyond this, where a woman is not even supposed to complain. She accepts it as a norm.

Food is also used to categorise and hierarchise women. The ones who cook food are respectable, and the ones who brew rice beer are the bad ones with no respect. Even on many occasions, a woman is pitted against another woman. Food becomes a basis of comparison between two women. Women are unable to stand in solidarity. Once when the grandmother asks her son, the narrator's father, about the best cook, he smartly tells her that she is the best. But when his own daughter exposes him by counter-questioning how he used to tell his wife that she cooks the best food, avoiding the direct answer, he says, "Ah yes, but not as good as your Grandmother . . ." (Kire 36). Food and the kitchen space conventionally have been extremely close to women since the kitchen is the place where politics is played out, where control and fear are generated, where a woman is being made or unmade, and where a woman realises that this space should remain with her. Cooking and food become an integral part of a woman's life and men are seen exploiting it quite often. To strengthen the web of patriarchal power and control, food and food work become important metaphors in the narrative. Discrimination towards Dielieno, especially via food, shows how control and conditioning start at a young age. This discrimination process is played 'terribly' by the grandmother, whose ultimate task throughout the narrative is to construct and transform Dielieno into a 'good woman'. The

grandmother keeps on commanding and controlling the household by telling or rather assigning everyone their roles and socially appropriate behavior. Once when Dielieno's brother is sent to fetch water because her mother is occupied in cooking, the grandmother reprimands: "Send the girl next time, that is girls' work. No man in my day has ever fetched water" (Kire 3). Food is not only used as a patriarchal trope to express gender discrimination but it is also used as a medium to extract control and power. The grandmother uses food as a pedagogical prompt to establish and strengthen gendered roles: "At Grandmother's house, it was always *her* food. I never thought of it as food. It had to be attached with the pronoun "her" to make it clear that it was food cooked and served by Grandmother, so she had every right to do with it as she wished" (Kire 1).

As a metaphor for gender identity and gender discrimination, food helps to establish a sense of identity in a class, tribe and community, and society. As food helps create cultural capital for a tribe, it becomes an emblem of its identity. Eating together even forms intimacy, and "[C]lass, caste, race and gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over and access to food. One's place in the social system is revealed by what, how much and with whom one eats" (Counihan 8). The loss of food habits and cuisines leads to the loss of culture, values and belief systems. It can even lead to an identity crisis in another community/group/ tribe. "They Eat Meat!" by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar delineates a similar identity crisis. The story is about a Soren family which shifts to Vadodara in Gujarat after Biram Kumang gets his transfer. As Santhals from Orissa, the family, especially Panmuni-Jhi, Biram Kumang's wife, is sceptical and worried about the food and food culture of Gujrat. As soon as Panmuni Jhi gets to know her husband is transferred to another place, her immediate concern is food. She immediately tries to find an acquaintance in Gujarat to negotiate food. She gets one and calls Jhapan, who is there to offer her advice on food:

That we'll have to, Jhapan, I am more worried about where to stay and what to eat. You see, Jhapan?'
 'I understand, jhi. And that might be a problem.'
 'A problem?'

‘Yes, jhi. You see, the food habits here are very different. You may have to stop eating quite a few things we take for granted.’

‘Like what, Jhapan?’

‘Er... for one, people don’t eat meat here. No fish, no chicken, no mutton. Not even eggs.’ ‘Oh!’. (Shekhar 2)

It is the power structure of the majority/mainstream that instils fear in subaltern.

Food and Control

Domination and control by cultural and ideological means hegemonise and polarise the communities and people. In the story, one dominant/insider culture very subtly imposes its food culture upon the other/the outsider thus creating its own cultural hegemony. This thereby leads to social control whose primary objective is to make the other community conform to the dominant ideologies and cultural notions willingly, fearfully, or forcefully. Jill Haku, fish meat is very significant for Santhals; it is not just a food item but it is like a conduit for them to connect, form and strengthen their collective consciousness. Panmuni Jhi gets to know that people in Gujarat do not eat Jill-Haku. The very idea of giving it up gives a chill to them. Elwin also talks about this cultural change in the form of food during his interaction with the tribals. He remarks how the Gond people were forbidden to practice their food habits, “. . . wide forbidding the Gonds to eat beef or even yoke the cow to the plough, to abstain from pork and poultry, to avoid alcohol, and to prevent their women from dancing” (Shekhar 27). Elwin talks about how the mainstream culture forces the other cultures to give up all the practices, beliefs, customs and habits which they feel are not up to the mark: “Everything, therefore, that the Hindus despised must be abandoned” (Elwin 27-28). This is not an identity crisis for an individual but an identity crisis for the whole community. But Panmuni Jhi makes all efforts to keep her food and food habits intact.

“They Eat Meat” shows how one community is forced either to leave their own customs and rituals and accept the other culture and assimilate in order to survive in a different cultural location. These diasporic pressures have mentally displaced and disoriented tribals

and their communities from their beliefs, traditions and practices. Even within the country, the freedom of being just goes away as soon as geographical boundaries change. Though Sorens are from Odisha, they are forced to hide their real identity in Gujarat. "In Odisha, Panmuni-Jhi could be a Santhal, an Odia, a Bengali. In Gujarat, she had to be only a Gujarati" (Shekhar 8). The real identity is often caged or eclipsed in a new location and is under shadowed by a new and fake identity. Even their landlord, Mr. Rao, warns them that tribals must hide their true identity and refrain from eating chicken, mutton or eggs: "Tribals, even lower-caste Hindus, are seen as impure. I hope you understand" (Shekhar 9). Mr. Rao even asks Biram-Kumang, "'Er... Isn't Soren a tribal surname? . . ." (Shekhar 9). Although this statement completely shocked Biram Kumang, yet he answered the question lightly. To hide the real identity, one has to let go of different food habits, as Jhaphan remarks, "Jyamon des, tyamon bhes" (Shekhar 6). People like Mr. Rao and Jhaphan serve to validate the views, values, ideologies and experiences in society by suppressing subjectivity and highlighting objective viewpoints regarding food. But as Sorens get to know people in Gujarat, they try to appear to adapt themselves to the new cultural change to be majorly accepted by the cultural dominant majority. Within a year, they feel comfortable in the new environment. They start to conform to the new norms of the place as going to the temples, celebrating all the Hindu festivals, etc. Panmuni-Jhi too starts eating and enjoying outside. Though they are of ". . . Adivasi origin, they conformed to the norms- they went to mandirs, celebrated Hindu festivals, fasted on certain days, lit dhoop-batti in their house . . ." (Shekhar 13). These things made them acceptable in society, but the one thing they continued to miss was their food, although they had given up on meat and chicken. As food encapsulates semiotic value, it becomes a symbol of status, domesticity, discipline, and social values of a class and community. "It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour" (Barthes 49-50). Mr. Rao confesses:

. . . You see, even we used to eat meat and chicken. And eggs. We used to have eggs for breakfast almost daily. My sons, they eat non-veg. But not when they're here. When we decided to settle here because this place is so neat and tidy-

we had to pay a small price. I hope you understand. (Shekhar 10)

This indicates how the mainstream culture completely rips off another culture, especially in terms of food. If food binds to the traditional value system, then it also holds a language of suppression and oppression. But old habits are hard to die. So on certain days, they cook eggs, but not only the disposing of egg shells but also the smell of eggs cause problem for them. So after cooking eggs once, they need to wait almost a week to cook egg again so that the smell goes out of the house and the neighbourhood stealthily. *Axone* also problematises the food odour. This continuous negotiation with the identity and habits within and the identity and habit outside is palpable throughout the narratives in *Axone* and "They Eat Meat". It becomes evident how food and foodways are not only controlled by a specific community but also by mainstream culture. Subhanpura is a small colony in Vadodara, Gujarat, comprising mostly outsiders such as the tribals, Mr. Rao from Andhra Pradesh and a Muslim family. But still, they are unable to have their own food in their way; rather are controlled by the outside insiders, i.e., Gujaratis. This fear of non-acceptance and violence makes several communities fearful of practising their customs. Though they are forbidden from cooking meat or eggs, Panmuni Jhi still dares to cook eggs at least, showing her courage and how she is able to connect with Mrs. Rao, her landlord. Mrs. Rao requests Panmuni Jhi's to fry an egg in her kitchen and Panmuni Jhi lets her which they then enjoy together. In order to douse its smell, they take an *elaichi* as a mouth freshener. Food thus, builds bonding comradeship. Mrs. Rao shares how even the kitchen, a conventionally women-centric space, is encroached upon by men when they instruct women what to cook and what not to. Not only is kitchen space controlled by men, but it is also used as a site of violence. Diellieno's brother, Vini, beats his wife daily under the influence of intoxication. Tired of being abused physically, mentally and emotionally, she runs out for help to Diellieno. Not finding an easy target to unleash his anger, he threatens the family members by violating the kitchen space. He breaks five plates and says, "Bring her back now or I will break all the plates in the house" (Kire 228). This shows the patriarchy's disrespect and exploitation of the kitchen space to satisfy his ego and self-assertion.

Though Biram Kumang and Panmuni-Jhi in “They Eat Meat” try to become part of the mainstream, they soon start to feel like caged birds. They begin to look down upon the norms they must conform to for survival. Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” aptly captures Soren’s mental state:

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing. (lines 8-14)

The condition of the tribals is similar to that of a caged bird. Since they have to move out of their spaces to work or educate themselves, they often find themselves alienated from the rest of the world. They have to hide their identities, conform to the masked identities and give up even their traditional food that they have kept sacred for ages. Even Biram Kumang says, “We’re prisoners” (Shekhar 17). Finally, when they are transferred to Ranchi, Panmuni-Jhi is excited to move to “our area” where “no one minds what we eat here” (Shekhar 21). Though the Sorens are able to break free from the alien communal cultural hegemony but women, in general, are its biggest victims. At the micro level, within the family, a woman is a victim of patriarchal hegemony. And a tribal woman is victimised twice – at the level of race/tribe and at the level of gender. This patriarchal hegemony channelises its gendered social control to make women conform to traditional/conventional roles. Dielieno, in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, talks about the grandmother’s control over her and her brothers, even over her father and mother. This control is felt, read and reflected upon throughout the narrative through the medium of food. No one dares to question the control exercised by the grandmother and every character, in a way, agrees to be controlled.

The grandmother's house becomes a space for controlling and conditioning women where women are disciplined not to express their desires and disciplined not to eat or have more. This could, in a way, help control young girls and women's sexuality, desires and

aspirations. "But Grandmother would always ladle out more gravy and meat to Bulie or Vini and Leto" (Kire 14). That's why Dielieno calls her house a "little factory" (Kire 16) where a woman is made and constructed. With food comes control and domination. The process of becoming a woman is strengthened via food politics: "In my plate, I found a piece of chicken meat and lots of broth" (Kire 33). For Dielieno, food means just a piece of chicken meat with no leg pieces and lots of broth. The hegemon grandmother through her diktats for the portions to be distributed among girls and boys not only manifest her control over food and food politics but her overall control over her family. On certain occasions, grandmother tries to gain favours and keep the men under her control by offering them food. Through food, she constantly reminds the boys to visit her often, "Come to me, my dear boy, why haven't you come here for so long? Don't you know I have kept sweet potato aside for you? Didn't you say that my potatoes were the sweetest" (Kire 16). As food holds a language of its own, it becomes an exploitative tool in the hand of the grandmother to further gender conditioning and discrimination. Women ironically rule the kitchen space as every woman character in the narrative takes on the charge and responsibility of the kitchen but they fail to liberate themselves from the clutches of the gendered shackles. Rather they shake hands with the patriarchal norms. The politics of discrimination and identity conformism starts with the space of the kitchen. Even Dielieno clearly states how her mother killed her desires and aspirations: "She (*Mother*) thought it was sinful to eat too much of the food one really liked . . ." (Kire 2-3). Though the grandmother never cooks food, she likes serving. Dielieno says, "We would get a piece or two on our plates, and we would want so much to eat more but would have to be satisfied with what we got" (Kire 14); that is how women in the grandmother's house are kept ill-fed. Controlling food, especially for women, also means controlling desires, and patriarchy has always sought to control women's desires. The kitchen space thus, turns out to be a space of exploitation, endless labour and service, discrimination, violence, repression, control, power and taboos.

The grandmother tries to secure the confidence of her grandsons via food: "She tries to secure their loyalty by giving them food and money or the fields as she did with Vini" (Kire 251). This gender

politics is just to secure her future. She wants to remain powerful and exercise control over both men and women. She is the female patriarch. There is lopsidedness to this patriarchal control. The meat is never for the women but for the young ones. Even the father will not get a more significant portion of the meat since patriarchy believes in controlling or securing the future. Grandmother's whole concern shifts from the father to her grandsons. The narrator, on many occasions, envies her brothers for the attention they used to get since they were boys. Grandmother says that "[i]n my Father's Day, boys never did any work because they had to look after the village and engage enemy warriors in warfare. The household that did not have a male heir was considered barren. They were always in constant danger if there was a war. The women would only have one man to protect them. That is why we love our male children so much and give them the best food. And we should" (35-36). Grandmother holds power and influences through the culinary capital, which gives her the kind of autonomy that helps incarcerated women like the mother, Dielieno, Nisano and Bano. So to control, extend the control and gain security the grandmother exercises control via food politics.

Skoll, in *Social Theory of Fear*, says, "Nothing motivates like fear" (58). So, to establish control, fear is infused into society. With fear and terror, the roots of control become stronger since Control propagates and fear helps establish control better. Such control tactics make a woman fearful of her relations, her own acts and the people around her. It impacts her psyche, relations and her own confidence. Food even helps in generating fear in the minds of women. Another shade of the fear generated can be seen in the mother's character. Dielieno's mother is scared of not being ready with food before her husband returns home: "I have to get back home and cook before your father comes" (Kire 6). Even Dielieno confirms that her father has the same expectations from his wife as her mother has from herself: "[H]e would expect Mother to clean the house and wash all the clothes and have cooked food ready when he got home. It was a lot of work and took all morning" (Kire 47). Fear of aligning or conforming with the food practices of the mainstream, Panmuni-Jhi starts to persuade her family to eat home-cooked food by her and thus dissuade them from eating outside. The same control can be seen in the actions of the grandmother in *A Terrible Matriarchy*. Women are

conditioned to believe that only food can bind men to the home and ultimately can bring a sense of security to women. The way the grandmother tries to secure her position in society via food, Panmuni-Jhi does the same. This is evident in the way she tries to master every 'fancy' food item available outside:

Panmuni-Jhi had also mastered several 'fancy' items in restaurants and roadside stalls, phuchka, masala dosa, chowmein, chilli chicken, and the like. If she came to know that her sons had eaten chilli chicken somewhere, she would make the dish at home and ask them which one was better. (Shekhar 1-2)

Panmuni-Jhi maintains high standards in the kitchen and keeps on resisting the outside food. She experiments liberally in the kitchen and asserts, "If I don't get food cooked to my satisfaction, I will not eat" (Shekhar 5). She creates her own standard in regard to food and does not flinch from showcasing her creative skills in the kitchen. Even her own son, Rabi, says, "If my mother is given cowdung, she can make pitha out of it" (Shekhar 6).

Bodily Exploitation via Hunger

Food also helps to create a binary, where men generally overeat and women are just left hungry. Mother in *A Terrible Matriarchy* is seen going ill-fed throughout the narrative. The burdens of motherhood, or how a woman is prepared for motherhood, are tested through her sacrificing food for the sake of her family and children. Patience and hunger establish a woman's essential characteristic traits. She is supposed to feed her kids properly before feeding herself. Even Dielieno agrees that her mother can sacrifice her every share of food just to satiate her boys' hunger: "I had often seen her scraping the pot and giving it to Leto, my eldest brother, or taking meat pieces from her own plate to slip into Vini's plate, saying she is full. The boys never refused" (Kire 2). Interestingly, the sons never notice this. It is the daughter only who is sensitive to this as she is kept hungry by her grandmother. She craves an adequate amount of food but never gets it. The process of othering never stops as Bano says, "... girl children are never considered real members of the family. Their mission in life

is to marry and have children and be able to cook and weave cloths and look after household” (Kire 249). Women are just expected to become “good workers” who not only sacrifice their being but also give up their hunger and stay satiated with whatever little food they get. Lack of food creates hunger, and hunger is used as a patriarchal tool to exploit the woman’s body. This exploitation becomes more severe on a poor tribal woman’s body. In Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s “November Is The Month of Migrations” Talamai Kisku, a twenty-year-old Santhal and her body is exploited merely for “two pieces of cold bread pakora and a fifty-rupee note. . .” (Shekhar 23). How the patriarchy exploits a woman’s constraints like hunger, working situations, helplessness, and physical weakness in the name of food and financial support. Since Talamai Kisku is hungry, she lets the *jawan* of the Railway Protection Force exploit her body. Tribal narratives like this one openly show the multi-level marginalisation – as a woman, as a tribal woman and as a poor tribal woman. The *jawan* seeing an opportunity to exploit the body of Talamai, asks her, “Are you hungry?” (Shekhar 30) and finally lures her with the money by asking, “You need money?” (Shekhar 31). As soon as she agrees to have money and two pieces of cold bread *pakora*, he asks, “Will you do some work for me?” (Shekhar 31). She lets him ‘rape’ her as the only thing she is concerned about at that moment is the food and money.

Conclusion

Food is an essential metaphor for belongingness and holds its discourse on exploitation, acceptance, and genderisation in the family and society. The kitchen is an essential space in the tribal world too. Even when the grandmother dies in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, her spirit comes into the kitchen to haunt the tenets. Dielieno says, “Something fell from the shelf to the floor of the kitchen” (Kire 268), and it becomes evident that the spirit of the grandmother has come. Food and the kitchen play a crucial role in the spiritual system of the tribals. Dielieno repositions herself, tries to re-orient the gendered roles, and challenges the patriarchal paradigms via food. Though food is the medium via which her genderisation is carried out, she does not let it become a norm. She continuously observes, talks and writes about it.

End Note

¹ Easterine Kire, in her novel, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, intentionally associates Grandmother with capital 'G' while I have stuck to normal usage. Mother and father are referred to as Mother and Father with the capital 'M' and 'F.' Kire gives no name to all these characters in her novel. She associates these characters with the others who are given roles to control and subjugate. She capitalises the first letter to show their hegemony, power and control over the rest of the characters in their society.

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