

Re-imagined communities: Culinary responses to the pandemic in Anjana Menon's *Onam in a nightie*

Indira Mondal, Assistant Professor of English, University of Delhi

Article Received: 14/10/2023

Article Accepted: 29/11/2023

Published Online: 30/11/2023

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.03.52

Abstract

The long year of 2020 has been etched in the memory of each individual across societies, cultures, and ethnicities due to the unprecedented pandemic of Covid-19. Rupturing events such as pandemics, epidemics, and catastrophic phenomena can transform erstwhile social organizations; the COVID-19 pandemic was not an exception. However, in these altering moments of isolation, the essence of community, belonging, and affiliation emerges to emphasize its presence through its absence. Anjana Menon, in her 2021 anthology titled *Onam in a Nightie: Stories from a Kerala, Quarantine*, recounts the quotidian experience of living through a pandemic and how culinary practices enable the individual and the community to re-assemble themselves. This paper examines this social phenomenon of community building through the practice, art, and tradition of cooking, eating, and sharing a meal. Further, in the face of the isolating circumstances of a pandemic, it was impossible to continue the usual culinary practices, including the availability of ingredients, the commercial viability of food joints, and social gatherings for festivities. However, by studying Menon's anthology, this paper illustrates how culinary practices can modify, mold, and yield to challenging circumstances to reorganize social systems.

Keywords: culinary practices, pandemic, community, belonging, identity

Published in 2021, Anjana Menon's *Onam in a Nightie: Stories from a Kerala Quarantine* resembles the R.K. Narayanesque *Malgudi days*. The anthology by Menon contains episodic snippets of acceptance and belonging within Thrissur in Kerala. These are a collection of stories on joy, hope, and resilience amidst the global pandemic of COVID-19 that transformed sociological epistemology as we know it. The idea of a community is the centripetal singularity within this anthology, along with the realization that the organization, structure, and affiliations within a community get disrupted when encountering a pandemic and its quarantine and restrictions on socialization. However, these tough times also testify to the need to belong to a community. Isolation can make one realize the episteme of belonging. In isolating conditions, individuals realize belonging is a longing for a community. Menon's anthology paints a juxtaposition of isolation and community re-building, the latter being the

effect of the former as she says, "[i]solation does that. It makes you look at things more clearly, examine your relationship and surrounding in minutiae" (9). The gastronomic palate of Kerala becomes the catalyst to bring about community re-building during the pandemic. The anthology demonstrates that culinary practices- the traditions, rituals, customs, feasts, fasts, and sartorial choices within cooking and eating- can create several re-imagined communities amidst an isolating pandemic.

It is universally acknowledged that a community's superstructure is based upon the foundation of imagination. Drawing from Benedict Anderson's 1983 *Imagined Community*, "nation...is an imagined political community. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Further, Anderson studies the nature of this imaginative exercise of constructing a community wherein "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). The "style of imagination" implies that there is a particular method, methodology, and mode that is inherent in constructing a community. Anderson bases his study on the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution. During the Enlightenment, the medium of print and the act of the citizens of an entire nation reading newspapers gave rise to a specific type of political community, where members were English gentlemen with a penchant for the colony and foreign revolutionary ideas. German philosopher Jurgen Habermas terms this community as the "public sphere," where the printing press created a space for discussion among citizens. Thus, the style of the community during the Enlightenment was based on print capitalism, the act of reading newspapers that gave rise to nationalism as people began to imagine their relationship with one another in new ways. Transposing this theoretical paradigm onto the community history of Kerala, the act of consumption and production of food is the foundational "style of imagination" in binding and creating a community.

The geography of Kerala is a testament to the rich resource of ingredients available to satiate its gastronomic palate. Along its beaches and village roads, on the edge of its rice paddies, and extending to the foothills of its rugged mountains, Kerala is circumscribed with coconut trees, whose leaves, branches, and fruits are all transformed into culinary apparatuses. The edge of the Arabian Sea houses predominantly Muslim fishing families. Jackfruit is another fruit that occupies a versatile position in Kerala's platter. In the story "The Taste of Freedom," the narrator mentions that "jackfruit multi-tasks. It is a hardworking fruit. You get everything from jackfruit flour to pickles. Even the seeds are useful" (Menon 82). It can be made into jackfruit jam or deep-fried chips. In another story titled "Dancing with Dragonflies," the narrator remembers his grandmother who would make "a little saucer made from the leaf of a jackfruit tree, pinned in place with a stem" (Menon 129). In the southern midlands of Kerala, where more reddish and drier soil is available, casava is planted. The steep slopes of the Western Ghats are amicable for cultivating pepper, ginger, tea bushes, and coffee trees. In a sociological documentation titled *Kerala: Radical Reform as Development in an Indian State*, Richard W. Franke and Barbara H. Chasin note that Kerala has high food

output per unit land area that grows crops and cash crops. The cultivation of per capita output on the land ensures an enormous yield of crops and grain, which are then distributed to schools, nursery lunches, special feeding centers, and ration or fair-price shops. Franke and Chasin state that public food distribution via ration or fair-price shops is "Kerala's most extensive mechanism for ensuring adequate nutrition to the poor." They further state that ration shops were established in Kerala during the First World War but came to cover large numbers of people in the state only after 1964, when food shortages throughout India caused the Kerala government to purchase rice and wheat to make sure that enough available for everyone (Franke and Chasin 29). The government organization of ration shops creates a tight-knit community based on trust and food security. Through this economic and sociological survey conducted by Franke and Chasin, one can infer that food- its cultivation, distribution, organization, production, and consumption- becomes the style of imagining the Keralite community. Kerala, "a victim of high literacy, low poverty, unbending self-assuredness, and elastic resilience," derives its communion spirit from the more significant connotations of these food practices (Menon 10). The historical implementation of ration shops and food for all schemes ensures food security. It instills trust, reliance, resilience, and affiliation to its community that nourishes its members.

This credibility is at the kernel of the "style of imagination" for Kerala's organizational community design. This sense of trust and nurturing security also made Kerala highly efficient in tackling the debilitating socio-medical circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the story "A Habit is a bad thing," the narrator proudly observes that "Kerala is busy- learning, relearning, preparing, keeping pace and breaking old habits, coping with new" (Menon 49). According to the World Health Organisation, "a pandemic is simply a widespread epidemic, but when referring to influenza, a pandemic now signifies a worldwide epidemic caused by a new subtype of influenza A virus" (Ghendon 451). Management of pandemic influenza relies on the complex coordination of many dimensions of the health and social care systems, emergency services, national and local government levels, civil society, communication and media, and cultural expectations. Community subjects are compelled to inhabit a constant state of surveillance and fear. Barbara Reynolds notes that "chaos theory emphasizes that disasters that take a toll on human life are inherently characterized by change, high levels of uncertainty, and interactive complexity." She further notes in her study on disaster management that during a crisis, open and empathetic communication that engenders the public's trust is the most effective when officials attempt to galvanize the population to take positive action or refrain from a harmful act (Reynolds 13). Trust and credibility are established through empathy, caring, honesty, and openness, as opposed to scientific reasoning and political discord. Looking at the space of Kerala during the pandemic- where normal activities of gathering, celebrating festivals, and visiting restaurants are prohibited- how would one imagine a community? Food, again, comes to the rescue. Modified culinary practices in *Onam in a nightie* illustrate how newer forms of community are created in the face of isolation. Food becomes the vehicle for communicating and community building in Kerala.

In the story "The Memory of Dying Embers," a conversation between a resident under quarantine and her counselor named Stella about chukuvellam creates a sense of bonding. Chukuvellam is a "concoction of mostly dry ginger powder, a pinch of which is added to boiling water and drunk somewhat hot" (Menon 28). The beverage of vellum loosely translates to herb-spiced water that is ubiquitously consumed in Keralite culture from household to marriage ceremonies. With the heightened discourse on immunity building in the wake of the pandemic, chukuvellam has transformed into a drink "in the pursuit of wellbeing and holistic living," leading to medicalizing this drink due to its healing powers during quarantine. The telephonic conversation between the narrator and her counselor, Stella, surrounding chukuvellam informs us about the multidimensional benefits of preparing the drink. Stella tells the narrator that boiling chukuvellam on the traditional wood-fired stove in her house helps to ward off mosquitoes along with preventing the symptoms of COVID-19. This multi-faceted aspect of preparing chukuvellam develops a bond between the narrator and Stella, who have never physically interacted. However, they each get a peek at each other's domestic life. The narrator learns that Stella has a wood-fired stove instead of a gas-powered stove in her kitchen. Through Stella's kitchen apparatus of a wood-fired stove, the narrator reminisces about her childhood in her grandparent's home. Her grandmother's wood-fired stove was used for roasting whole bananas, cashews, pappadam, and brown seeds of tamarind. Preparing chukuvellam on a wood-fired stove can create a community between Stella and the narrator that telescopes the narrator back to her childhood, along with this security of belonging to a commune where she knows Stella and is known by Stella. The narrator's longing to be known and to know satiates her desire for company despite the isolation pre-conditions of quarantine.

"For the love of payasam" is a story about the narrator and her brother's indulgent craving for payasam, a sweet pudding that can be made out of vermicelli, moong beans, ripe bananas, jackfruit pulp, rice, steamed rice pancakes combined with milk and sugar or jaggery, explores the camaraderie that is implicit through this delicacy. The pair of siblings order palada payasam from Jaya Bakers only to be informed of the dearth of their supply. However, the server at Jaya Bakers offered to pick up half a liter of paladar payasam from Ambiswami caterers and drop it off at their residence. The unknowability between the customer and the bakery joint owner is bridged through the sweet dish of palate payasam. This dish allows an individual to serve the other despite unamicable conditions. "In Kerala, the love of payasam is a universally understood language" that communicates this sense of participating and contributing to the community. This act of sharing, giving, and receiving is intrinsic in the structures of production and consumption of food, making culinary practices a fertile ground for community exchange. This sense of community participation was elevated during the pandemic, where "people kept tabs on each other, informed each other where the hotspots were, and Kerala marched on, keeping the spread under check for the first few months" (Menon 49). The titular story "Onam in a Nightie" connects women all over Kerala over the sartorial choice of a nightie, a staple outfit for women while preparing the elaborate Onam Sadya. A nightie, which is Kerala's other national dress, is "the dress of convenience and

chore," providing ease of movement while cooking the numerous dishes at the feast, forming a culinary collective of women (Menon 95). The underlying continuity between these instances is the intrinsic social need for belongingness among discrete individuals that gives birth to a community of giving and receiving comfort, compassion, and company mediated through food.

Clay Shirky, an expert in internet culture, terms the internet as "a networked public sphere" that dramatically augmented the possibilities of political communities (Koh 20). This networked public sphere gains greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an accelerated ability to undertake collective action. This leads to forming a different sense of community as each person in this networked architecture is now a potential producer of information rather than solely a consumer. Social media brings new meaning to sharing, which is insisted by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's notion of "mediascape" or interconnected global ideological and cultural landscapes. The pandemic witnessed the rise of one such social media-based community through the rampant digitalization of food. In the story "A Habit is a Bad Thing," the narrator is intrigued by the chikoo tree in his garden, which he calls "the tree of possibilities" for Instagram influencers. The chikoo tree can transmute into the mediascape through hashtag videos of the tree, where influencers can lean over, pluck the ripe fruit, and pop it into their mouth with lips lined with a juicy shade of lipstick. This aestheticization of food is a standard strategy of visual appeal for food-based influencers. Chikoo, a fruit rich in antioxidants but high in sugar content, also finds mention in WhatsApp anxiety-ridden messages about fruit trees being injected with COVID-19 viruses (Menon 47). The mallu Twitterati also form a virtual community through their hashtag onam sadya that trends throughout the day during the festival that would otherwise have to be celebrated remotely during the lockdown (Menon 91). In the story "The Wheat in My Belly," social media becomes a space for resistance for the culinary community of Kerala through the hashtag hands-off parotta. Twitter users were up in arms against the higher taxation of Malabar parotta due to its maida or refined flour content. The virtual community created through culinary choices across various social media platforms, give a sense of shared purpose and community participation.

Another kind of community formed due to the unprecedented condition of the pandemic is the cooperative organizations that had to undergo several logistical reformulations during the pandemic prohibitions. The story, "It is not business as usual" describes one such cooperative community of Bharat Hotel (Pure Veg), a restaurant providing limitless plates at a limited price. The restaurant serves hot piping breakfast of steaming idiyappam, doshas, filter coffee, and their vada; lunch was infamous for its customers shamelessly grabbing tables. Prior to the pandemic, the restaurant had a strict no-delivery rule. The pandemic period they have made Bharat Hotel break this rule that was around for fifty-six years to cope with the demand of customers who craved the restaurant's food while in quarantine (Menon 53). In another story, "The Wheat in My Belly," readers are informed of another intriguing link between COVID and rotis prepared by Thrissur's Viyyur Jail inmates. The prison authorities set up a kitchen run by the inmates for making chapattis,

which were rolled by machine, and the inmates cook and pack them. During the lockdown days, when household help was unavailable due to quarantine, these rotis from the prison cooperative that were delivered through food delivery platforms like swiggy acted to satiate consumer demand (Menon 142). Kudumbashree is another cooperative, an all-women enterprise as part of Kerala's poverty eradication and women empowerment program. The narrator visits a supermarket stocked with goods made by the members of Kudumbashree and a Women's Food Court, where women cook, serve, clean, and sanitize the kitchen and eating area, abiding by the pandemic mitigation measures (Menon 185). These instances showcase the various cooperative communities formed upon culinary practices to meet the changing demands of the market stricken by a pandemic.

Further, the Keralite culinary palate resonates with Southeast Asian counterparts in Chinese and Singaporean cuisine. Achappam, a fried stuff made by dipping a metal mold into a batter of rice flour, coconut milk, sugar, eggs, and sesame seeds that is predominantly made in Syrian Christian homes, has a fraternal twin in a Chinese delicacy of Kuih Kapit or the delicate "Chinese love letters" (Menon 33). Kiasu, a Singaporean saying or practice of each family member occupying four different lanes to order food as early as possible, is similar to the shameless seat-grabbing tactic followed in food courts or restaurants such as Bharat Hotel during lunch hours. The Keralite adoration for carbohydrates of rice and wheat is also shared by Singaporeans, who refer to their flatbread with the double nomenclature of roti prata- a portmanteau of roti and porotta.

Menon's anthology of culinary responses, *Onam in a Nightie*, presents a panorama of communities that reconfigure themselves to cope with the isolating conditions of the pandemic. Culinary practice, process, and passion become the anchor that binds people across space and restrictions.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso Books, 1983, pp. 6.
- Frank, Richard W., and Barbara H. Chasin. *Kerala: Radical Reform as Development in an Indian State*. A Food First Book, The Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1989, pp. 29.
- Ghendon, Youri. "Introduction to Pandemic Influenza through History". *European Journal of Epidemiology*, Aug. 1994, Vol. 10, no. 4, Springer, pp. 451–453.
- Koh, Adeline. "Imagines Communities, Social Media and the Faculty". *Academe*, May-June 2016, Vol. 102, no. 3, American Association of University Professors, pp. 19–22.
- Menon, Anjana. *Onam in a nightie: Stories from a Kerala quarantine*. Harper Collins, 2021.
- Reynolds, Barbara, and Sandra Crouse Quinn. "Effective Communication During an Influenza Pandemic: The Value of Using a Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Framework". *Health Promotion Practice*, October 2008, Vol. 9, no. 4, Sage Publications, pp. 13–17.