



Salted Shores and Sustained Lives: Food Habits of the Parathavar Fishing Community in Joe D’Cruz’s *Ocean Rimmed World*

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Abstract. This paper examines the traditional food practices and ecological knowledge of the Parathavar fishing community as depicted in Joe D’Cruz’s novel *Ocean Rimmed World*. Set in the coastal region of Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu, the novel provides a rich portrayal of the lives of fisherfolk whose survival is intricately linked to the sea. Through a close reading of the text, this study examines the community’s dietary habits, food preservation methods, and cultural beliefs about food. The Parathavar community relies heavily on marine resources, consuming a wide range of fish including stingray (thirukai), tiger shark (varipulian), and maangai chalai, which is specifically given to lactating mothers. Preservation techniques such as salting, drying, and burying fish in pits—locally known as *oorai*—are key to their food security during non-fishing seasons. In addition to fish, their diet includes locally grown plantains, tubers, tapioca, and foraged herbs like *keelanelli*, used for both food and medicine.

The paper also highlights how food is interwoven with social customs and spiritual life. Offerings of rice flour and bananas to deities, the communal act of sons dining beside their fathers on Sundays, and the distinct roles men and women play in food preparation all reflect a deeply rooted cultural identity. Trade links, such as the export of dried tiger shark to Colombo and the demand for fish liver oil among colonial settlers, further show how local food practices intersect with larger economic systems.

Positioned at the crossroads of food studies, environmental humanities, and regional cultural analysis, this paper argues that the foodways depicted in *Ocean Rimmed World* offer valuable insights into sustainable living. The novel serves not only as a literary representation of a community’s struggle and resilience but also as a record of ecological balance, traditional knowledge, and the intimate relationship between humans and their environment.

Keywords: Parathavar, Food Studies, Traditional Knowledge, local food, Sustainability, environment.

1 Introduction:

Food is not only a means of sustenance but it is a living record of human adaptation, ecological engagement and cultural survival. It is most likely to be in communities along the coast, the most immediate expression of life and belonging, singing, the songs of the earth and the sea. In the ocean rimmed world of Joe D’Cruz, the world of the Parathavar fishing community in the southern coast of Tamil Nadu is presented in a rich tapestry of food practices, which go beyond just feeding. The food traditions, food preservation and the food ritual practices of the community are a multi-layered network of social structure, environmental awareness, and spirituality. Their daily cooking, and food consumption are also the systems of knowledge which encode centuries of co-existence with the abundance and desire of the sea. The food practices of the Parathavars are discussed in this paper as a point of contact of an identity, ecology and economy. It theorizes that food is a material need as well as cultural metaphor in *Ocean Rimmed*

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World- keeping lives going as well as enacting the perpetuation of shared memory. The salted fish under the sun, women making medicinal curries, and men chewing betel leaves in the sea, not only retrieves the ethnographic details, but also a larger sense of survival and returning with nature. Through such representations, however, D Cruz novel can be read within the twin frameworks of food anthropology and environmental humanities which explore the way food practices are both constitutive of, and constituted by human relationships with their ecological situations. This has put the Parathavars culinary world into broader contexts of the symbolic and social roles of food in exchange with other scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas and Sydney Mintz. The ecological knowledge of Glenn Albrecht and other people also forms the basis of discussion to understand the development of the environmental ethics in consumption and preservation. Crotty salted beaches of the Parathavars are thus a site of convergence between subsistence, spirituality and survival- a terrain that is not sustainably brought into being by labor but also by cultural fantasy. In this regard, Ocean Rimmed World is not just a document of the material experience of a coastal settlement; it transforms food into narrative form, which articulates resistance, adaptation and continuity. ¹This research reveals the engagement of the food practices of the Parathavars in a superior discourse on a sense of belonging and resilience by anticipating the cultural ecology of eating. In this way, food is symbolically described as endurance or a way of trying, remembering and storing life itself in the alternation of the tides of the history and the economy.

2 Managing Hunger and Hardship at Sea

It is not only the catch but a complicated regulation of the metabolic requirements of the body which in the Parathavars make them withstand the difficulties of fishing. The sea is a highly fluctuating workplace to the fishermen of the Gulf of Mannar where lunch or even dinner can be a few hours or days away. A functional relevance of the use of non-food materials like betel leaves comes into play here. D'Cruz said that chewing betel leaves at sea was not a matter of habit, but on the contrary, a contrivance to forget to eat. This is a kind of cultural pharmacology as viewed by the nutritional anthropology. The leaf alkaloids and betel nut are mild stimulants which increase stamina and decrease appetite in order to allow the fisherman to remain awake during the high-stakes fishing on sharks. The ultimate form of Parathavar risk-taking is shark hunting, in particular the hunt of the varipulian (tiger shark). ²The association between food, here, is reversed: the fisherman has to reason like a predator or the predator will become his prey. The interpretation of smaller fish parts as a bait proves that there is a granular understanding of the marine hierarchy. This is in line with the findings of Bronislaw Malinowski on the functional aspect of food in tribal societies- nothing goes to waste as all the scraps of biological material can play a part in the economic sustenance of the group. The hunger on the sea is not simply a deficit of the calories but a psychological condition which should be controlled with the help of traditional stimulants and strategic distribution of resources.

Technology of the Ancestors: The Oorai and the Ethics of Salt. The Parathavars have devised good preservation techniques to make sure food is available at the Vaadai (northwind) seasons when the sea is too rough to go fishing. The main method of this is the oorai- a technique of burying salted fish in pits. D'Cruz gives a graphic account of this process: "Dry fish had been scattered all over to dry in the Middle Street... Pits had been dug in various places to pile up and dip the fish in salt... The smell of the dried fish was hung in the air (83). In this practice, the village becomes a sensory landscape in which the scent of curing protein is associated with security. To the environmental humanities, the oorai is not merely a method of storage but it reflects the idea of the slow technology. In contrast to refrigeration today, that must be supplied with an external power grid and leads to ecological waste, the oorai utilizes the chemical composition of the earth and sea salt so as to come up with a reliable, sustained food supply.³

This is in line with the so-called Culinary Triangle by Claude Lévi-Strauss that has preserved a complex cultural mediation of the raw (nature) and the cooked (culture). The salt does not merely dry the fish, it freezes time and the community is in a position to go beyond the seasonal constraints that their environment has. Moreover, the social character of such work, such as digging the pits, washing the fish, and placing them on the so-called Middle Street, strengthens the social ties, and preservation becomes a group act of resiliency.

3 Feminine Pharmacy: Maangaai Chalai and Gendered Knowledge. Although the sea is a male space of extraction, the home space of the kusini (kitchen) is a female space of transformation and healing. The preparation of foods in the novel is highly gendered and women are the custodians of the ethnomedical knowledge in the community. The best example is the cooking of maangaai chalai curry to the nursing mothers. According to D'Cruz, women in confinement during their postnatal period are normally served with maangaai chalai curry that has been

prepared with medical herbs and spices. Manga chalai in addition to being delicious is said to enhance lactation⁴. The practice emphasizes the use of food as functional medicine. There is also no distinct separation between the pantry and the pharmacy in the Parathavar world. The ingredients, such as herbs such as keelanelli and particular types of fish, are chosen on the basis of their supposed therapeutic and medicinal qualities as generations of experience reveal. This house economy of care guarantees the biological survival of the community. The power to feed, as Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik argue, is the power to maintain the very existence of life and the Parathavar women have a kind of nutritional sovereignty which redresses the physical extremities involved by the men at sea.⁵

4 Food with Purpose: Nutrition and Symbolism

The Parathavars food consumption includes certain types of food that have a nutritional and symbolic purpose. An example of this is the maangaai chalai curry which is given to nursing mothers to help promote lactation and incorporates a culinary practice with particular health advantages. It goes beyond folk belief; it is a kind of functional nutrition in which the ingredients are chosen based on their particular pharmacological attributes within the coastal ecosystem. As pointed out on page 19: "...women who are isolated after giving birth are normally served with maangaai chalai curry with medical herbs and spices. Not only is manga chalai tasting, but it is also said to stimulate lactation among breastfeeding mothers. "...women who are confined after childbirth are usually given maangaai chalai curry seasoned with medical herbs and spices. Beside being mouthwateringly delicious, manga chalai is believed to improve lactation on nursing mothers." It is a simple fish curry that has been enhanced with such medicinal herbs and spices like garlic, pepper, and local foraged greens that make it a postpartum restorative. With no official hospitals, the Parathavar kitchen was a major pharmacy. The maangaai chalai curry is a classic illustration of how the intellectual property of the community the ancestral knowledge of the sea and the land is condensed into a single food so that the next generation may survive⁶

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On common bowls of gruel and the acrid odor of roasted fish, the Parathavar reestablish their status in the social hierarchy and their equal fate with the sea. This diet is the material ground of their identity--a taste of the sea without being on the sea, but on the shore.

Rituals that Bind: Spirituality and Ecology

In the case of Ocean Rimmed World by Joe D'Cruz, the geography of the Parathavar spirituality cannot be isolated of their culinary and ecological culture. This part examines how the connection of the community with the divine is a form of regulation towards maintaining the environment and social order by turning the process of eating into a divine conversation with the ocean.

The Sacred Reef: Surapaarai and Kumari Atha. The food habits in Parathavar are closely interconnected with the spiritual concepts especially with regard to the sea and its top predators. This can best be demonstrated by the sanctity that is accorded to particular marine areas such as Surapaarai. Big fish that live in such reefs are not just considered as a source of protein but are worshipped as directly in the patronage of Kumari Atha, the mother goddess who protects the sea and the community.⁸This is no abstraction myth, but an ecological ethic that is experienced. The community comes up with a self-proclaimed conservation area by consecrating some species or breeding areas, or by the protection of the Mother. The vow of not exploiting these particular creatures, represents a mutual relationship with nature, in which the idea is of harmony and saving, not of barbaric excavations. To the Parathavar, the sea is not a commodity to strip-mine but a living creature, which only can give when its extremes are not exceeded. This spiritual world perception corresponds to the principles of environmental humanities, in which a metabolic balance with the environment is the key to sustainability in the long term (Albrecht et al., 2012).⁹ By avoiding a catch in respect of Kumari Atha, a fisherman is engaging in an ancient kind of resource management that will leave the bounty of the sea to those that will come after him. Big fish that live in such reefs are not just considered as a source of protein

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Purification Rituals Salt, Water, and Food. In addition to food extraction, food and water are also important social and spiritual realignment tools of the Parathavar. Rituals linked to sustenance and the elements—such as washing after funerals and the offering of blessed saltwater prayers—reinforce cultural notions of purification and protection from harm. These rituals are highly entrenched in the social space, which according to Mary Douglas (1966) are symbolic boundaries. According to Douglas, the rites of purity and pollution play a number of key roles: Defining the Community: Making a distinction between the clean domestic space of the village and the wild or dangerous space of the deep sea. Getting Back on Track: With the same substance that gives them life—the salt of the sea—to cleanse the spiritual burden of death or ill luck. Sanctifying the Catch: Making the eating process not a solely biological activity but a spiritual communion with the deity who gave the meal.

Ecology of the Divine. To the Parathavar, blessed saltwater is the instrument of their work, and their sanctity. The ritual cleansing following a funeral, such as that employed in washing the dead, involves the salinity of the sea in order to bring the person back to the living world. The result of this circularity; the food is given by the sea, the sea is defended by the deity, the ritual maintains the community, forms a closed-loop system of spiritual ecology. D’Cruz shows how the Parathavar do not consider themselves rulers of the ocean, but as subordinate members of a huge, divine space. Such rituals control their food practices such that their physical existence does not become at the expense of their spiritual or ecological integrity. It is not only nets and salt that hold the salted shores together, but the unseen strands of a common belief in the maternal guardianship of the sea.

5 Preserving the Catch and Entering the Market

The Parathavars have devised good preservation techniques in order to have food security and economic security. The fish are salted, packed into natural baskets and stored in pits to dry, a process which fills the community with the smell of their source of livelihood. Such conservation efforts are not only critical to survival, but also a community activity, which forms connections and a sense of purpose. There is also a high demand in the village and in other markets, which are flourishing, like Colombo and certain regions of Asia, of some of the preserved products, especially the precious fins of varipuliyam. It is a market need that converts basic food to commodities, and local activities are connected to international trade systems. The preservation is not only promoted by the use of special seasoning and drying methods, but also preservation of cultural authenticity and competitiveness in the market (Appadurai, 1986; Harris, 1985).¹⁰ “Dry fish had been spread out to dry all over the Middle Street with hardly an inch of those walking by to even put their feet down. Pits had been dug in several places to soak and stack the fish in salt. In the front yard of some of the houses, people were bringing up the mean Hooray. The fish that had been left salted for a couple of days inside the pits and were washing them. The air was spiked heavily with the smell of dried fish.” P 83

Food and Family: Social and Gender Roles

Parathavar culture is gendered and socialized in preparation and sharing of food. Usually, the cooking and planning of the meals are done primarily by women, and men eat together in a special, ritual place such as Sunday family dinner. In this case, food serves as a channel of continuity and reestablishment of order in society, which is in line with the food anthropology focus on kinship and social positions associated with food consumption (Counihan and Van Esterik, 2013). The meticulous focus on food preparation methods and eating together emphasize the importance of sustenance and hospitality to the culture, which is essential to preserving social relationships and identities. Laid mats of small reeds had been placed in the room next to the kusini..the ladies were busy-laid out large portions of the mutton kuzhambu in the curry pot into the deep bowls at the side of every mat. The Parathavars have a cultural memory that comes in the form of food. Dried fish taste reminds people of place and identity, as it links people to their community history and heritage These sensory memories can be related to an Sutton argument that food is a significant part of the way that cultures remember and transmit. knowledge about a new generation (Sutton, 2001).¹¹ The experiences that are related

to signature.¹ flavors such as the smell of the palm jaggery coffee or the special way of cooking fish intestines strengthen belonging and continuity of culture especially in the face of external change. and challenges.

6

Conclusion

The Parathavar fishers community in Ocean Rimmed World has food practices that are deep. knowing about the relationships between culture, ecology and resilience. They have a profound wisdom of living within the rhythms of nature in their approaches of catching, saving, drying and eating food. Food is not fuel here, it brings social life into being, supports spiritual values and guarantees economic survival. An anthropological and food. The multi-faceted approach toward these practices in environmental humanities is highlighted. nourishment of food to not only the body, but identity and community as well. The existence stored on these salt shores is a record of the eternal human power of adapting, of interrelating, and survive by means of food. Food with Purpose: Nutrition and Symbolism.

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