Between Fire and Flour: Rethinking Women's Invisible Culinary Labor in Modernity Gender, Modernity, and the Politics of Culinary Work

Sakshi Mathur

PhD Scholar, Department of Humanities, School of Liberal Education, Galgotias University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh

sakshimathurofficial@gmail.com

ABSTRACT . While food is a cultural language, we often cannot see the labour of the women who prepare, preserve, and maintain it. This essay examines how globalisation and modernisation have affected women's food roles, often reinforcing gender inequalities while generating diverse forms of resistance. Women have always been food workers, sharing recipes, maintaining seeds, and forming cultural structures. Food work was vital to community survival; yet rather than being recognised as such, it was considered a "domestic duty". Women were not acknowledged for the social or economic value of their work in food production. Modernisation and technology have refocused questions about food and changed the characteristics of social work and financial viability. While new technologies of mechanisation and industrial food production offered women liberation from the drudgery of the domestic kitchen, they also aimed to eliminate embodied knowledge and commodify kitchen and food work. This inequality continues today; we undervalue women's unpaid domestic cooking while praising and economically rewarding men's professional cooking work. The processes of globalisation add to the dynamic complexities and pressures. The feminisation of wage labour adds to the burdens women face: women with wage jobs endure a "double shift" between paid employment and unpaid responsibility for domestic labour. The ongoing takeover of traditional food systems by global food companies, especially as they take indigenous traditions and knowledge from women, is wiping out ecological knowledge and making practices and lifestyles more uniform. Women have traditionally borne the burden of food production, which has increasingly been subsumed within the industrialised supply chains of the food economy, where profit is prioritised over sustainability. Women are also everywhere resisting and recasting these relations. Movements, from the grassroots of cooperatives to digital platforms, have mobilised efforts to reclaim space for women's agency and identity, including reconceptualisation. The critiques of feminist care and political economy encourage the reconstitution of food and care work as cultural production rather than as domestic labour, ecological stewardship, or cultural/intellectual knowledge. This paper advocates a feminist reconceptualization of women's

S. Sharma et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Emerging Food Studies: Intersections of Culture, Science and Sustainability (ICEFS 2026)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 1017,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-583-6_25

culinary labour as integral to gender justice and sustainable food futures. It acknowledges and values this invisibility, which is necessary for equitable and resilient food systems worldwide.

Keywords: feminist critique; culinary labour; globalisation; modernisation; women's roles; and invisible work.

1 INTRODUCTION

Many people consider the kitchen "the heart of the home", because warmth, food, and closeness create a strong bond. However, behind this romantic image of homes with hearths and bread made from flour, there is a hidden truth: women do almost all cooking and food preparation. Historically, this occupation has been understood as non-skilled and non-intellectual labour; cooking and food work have commonly been associated with feminine traits. As a result, women's work in relation to food and cooking has been undervalued and invisible, thus providing a foundation for how men's work and women's work are viewed very differently in society today in terms of 1) invisibility, 2) economics, and 3) societal recognition.

Although cooking is one of the necessities of human life, it has been ideologically and systematically viewed as a woman's duty. Within a patriarchal society, cooking is often regarded not only as work but also as a manifestation of a wife's mother's affection. Society has established that "cooking" at home is "yet another form of work." To complete such tasks, one must possess the requisite knowledge, creativity, and skills. Many people still mentally categorise women's work into two distinct types, as evidenced by the time women spend in the kitchen.

2 LITERARY REVIEW

2.1 Early Perspectives on Domestic and Culinary Labor

When sociologists and feminists began to critique domestic work in the 1970s, both kitchen work and the practices around it were in the context of Ann Oakley's The Sociology of Housework (1974), which claimed that domestic labour, including cooking, was systematically devalued, both as unpaid work and as women's work. Christine Delphy (1984) extended that claim by setting domestic labour as a form of exploitation that was structurally embedded within patriarchy—cooking was not an act of love but a form of invisible labour extraction.

2.2 Feminist Food Studies

The publication of Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik's Food and Culture: A Reader (1997) caused a major shift in the narrative of food as a site of gender and cultural negotiation, redefining cooking as a site of resistance to oppression and agency. Arlie Hochschild (1989) highlighted the "second shift", a metaphor for working women who face the double burden of being employed while also being responsible for unpaid domestic

cooking. Feminist food studies made a theoretical advance when Avakian and Haber (2005) conceptualised food as a medium of resistance, cultural identity, and memory. There were cases in which women's culinary practices could deploy patriarchal roles while simultaneously subverting them through preservation, ritual, and the spontaneous, creative activities of cooking.

2.3 Globalization, Media, and Culinary Contradictions

New research has examined how culinary practices are globalised and commodified. To this end, "authentic" cuisines gain worldwide popularity, while the women who are instrumental in maintaining these culinary traditions become invisible. Media representations of food further complicate existing contradictions, elevating the work of male celebrity chefs in cooking. This study shows how women are relegated to domestic cooking within their cultural narratives (Hollows, 2003).

2.4 Postcolonial & Intersectional Adjectives

Postcolonial feminist researchers have examined how global capitalism and colonial histories shape the conditions under which women work in the food industry. Talpade (2003) discusses domestic workers and the impact that double marginalisation has on women from the Global South, who are subject to normative values associated with the patriarchal nature of society as well as the hierarchical structures of the global capitalist system. Class, caste, and race all play an important role in shaping women's experiences as they relate to food preparation; therefore, an intersectionality approach should be used. For example, whereas women's culinary labour is culturally recognised as "preserving tradition" among women of the upper caste in India, culinary labour by lower-caste women and Dalits frequently go unrecognised, are stigmatised, and rendered invisibly removed from cultural narratives.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Research has analysed women's culinary labour as a culturally reflective space; however, much less attention has been paid to the relationship between women's culinary labour and modernity, particularly by examining forms of labour associated with industrial events, the professionalisation of culinary work, and the ways in which women remain invisible. To connect the dots concerning the relationship between women's cooking experiences worldwide through hands-on, site-based, domestic, and

international cooking. We plan to incorporate women's culinary work into discussions of feminist and cultural studies to better understand the distinct perspectives each discipline brings.

3 Description of Research Methods

This research primarily employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on feminist theory, cultural studies, and culinary studies.

3.1 Textual Analysis –

The creation of discursive frameworks will allow us to organize culinary labour using major texts that exist in feminist, sociological, and food studies.

3.2 Case Studies –

We will compare and contrast the experiences of women who cook in their kitchens throughout various cultures, with special emphasis on India, Europe, and the US.

Critical Theoretical Frameworks: While in the home, women are typically required to cook in a system that discriminates against them, i.e., through caste and class and through race. Additionally, Intersectionality examines the intersection of caste, class, and race in relation to women working in culinary settings. Feminism, particularly from a Postcolonial perspective, interrogates the domestication and commodification of gastronomy.

3.3 Interpretive Reflection

Culinary work is not just considered a form of domestic labour but also a method of conserving culture and feminism's resistance to oppression. This view provides an alternative perspective on the role of women in kitchen culinary work by highlighting their hidden contributions through an evolving understanding of modernity.

4 Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Historical Underpinnings of Culinary Invisibility:

Women's culinary labour has a long history of being invisible. In pre-modern societies, cooking was associated with survival and reproduction, activities considered "natural" women's work. The histories of colonialism further shaped culinary hierar-

chies. In India, colonial discourses dismissed women's kitchen labour as primitive while simultaneously embracing foods reinforced by particular spices and recipes intended for Western markets. Cultural and economic marginalisation is associated with femininity and domesticity.

4.2 The Modernity Paradox:

Modernity has offered a wide range of technological advances, such as stoves, refrigerators, and packaged foods, which appeared to reduce women's workloads. However, women have never been freed from the gendered expectation of being the primary food preparers or from

their invisibility. Although modernity has made cooking more efficient, it has not changed the way society devalues this work. Moreover, the professional space of food production has been constructed as masculine, where cooking has not only been institutionalised as art, science, or crafting, but women have also been systematically excluded from recognition of their work and contribution. The irony is evident: women appear invisible in domestic spaces, such as the kitchen, while men are featured as celebrity chefs in the profession.

4.3 Gendered Contradictions in the Restaurant Space

The restaurant industry exemplifies the gendered contradictions described above. While celebrity chefs such as Gordon Ramsay and Massimo Bottura are treated as innovators, the labour of countless women working in domestic or small-scale institutional kitchens has been erased. Culinary schools unsurprisingly prepare men for professional cooking, while restricting women to pastry, baking, and "at-home" style programmes. The Michelin rating system, as a system, also reflects the structural inequities that valorise masculine forms of creativity while intentionally ignoring feminine forms of endurance.

4.4 Culinary Labour as Cultural Maintenance:

Often overlooked, women's culinary work plays a crucial role in maintaining cultural traditions. Dishes, passed down from one generation to the next, hold memories, identity, and belonging. In South Asian contexts, women's cooking perpetuates religious rituals, cultural celebrations, and bonds. It provides a sense of belonging that often remains constant with only slight changes. For migrant communities, cooking together helps them keep their culture alive and brings them together as a group. Women's culinary work is legitimate, culturally valuable, and a tangible way to preserve culture, even though it is often disregarded or ignored. Culinary practice remains a tool of heritage conservation that resists cultural colonialism and cultural erasure, even when neglected.

4.5 Culinary Labour and Interdepartmentalism:

Women's culinary labour is often invisible and can be understood only through an intersectional lens. The caste system in India privileges confident cooks and those for whom they cook. For example, it describes the cooking of upper-caste women as "pure", while it condemns the cooking of Dalit women. In the United States, from the kitchens of slavery-era From plantations to the kitchens of today, the cooking labour of Black women continues to be overlooked, even though they are responsible for creating many aspects of American food culture. Class shapes visibility as well; affluent women may work in food-related jobs but do not cook for their families because they purchase food prepared by others. In contrast, working women face one type of work situation during the day and then return home to perform domestic culinary tasks.

4.6 Globalisation and Culinary Traditions:

Globalisation has led to significant changes in the food procurement system. Once forged in the domestic kitchen, food traditions now form part of a supply chain. This process includes everything from packaged items and restaurant chain offerings to global franchises. Indian curry, Mexican tortillas, and laborious sushi circulate and transform across various markets worldwide, detracting from the women who work in the production of these culinary traditions. Corporations and male chefs profit financially from this commodification, obscuring the cultural and gendered work of women.

4.7 Culinary Work and Media Representations

Media futures perpetuate gendered contradictions. TV cooking shows portray male celebrity chefs as leaders and authority figures and women as domestic recognising figures. Consumer advertisements for packaged food name women as consumers, recognising them as providers while minimising the burden of providing. While social media has created new spaces for women to be innovatively engaged in various forms of cooking, visibility still takes the form of traditional stereotypes related to femininity and domesticity.

4.8 Use of Cooking to Protest and Create a Voice

Cooking is a means of protesting against social oppression, and women engage in this form of resistance because of societal barriers to accessing other forms of resistance. Community kitchens in Latin America, including the ollas comunes in Chile, are examples of how women are being politically active through cooking. Likewise, in India, women's cooking groups (Kutumbashree) are being established to allow women to be economically independent through their culinary skills.

5 CONCLUSION

Cooking may seem easy—fire and flour, right? It would be understandable to view family dinners, socialising around a fireplace, and passing along recipes as relatively easy things to do. But as the research has shown us, there are many more layers to cooking than just cooking. The process of making food also has complexities related to gender roles, culture, and politics. In the food system, cooking is an important part of it. However, most times the anxiety that is placed on women's cooking is treated like a natural act of labour rather than an act of difficult labour. The contributions that women make through cooking are invisible, but they have provided the basis upon which we can continue to eat and maintain our cultural customs. Our values sometimes undervalue this work, or, as we call it, 'disregard'. Our study of these types of invisibility shows us that repetition is structural or relates to a larger social structure. Relationships built upon structures of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonisation, among others, negatively influence women's cooking. Most of the time, people tend to discuss domestic cooking as part of the social reproduction process (to nurture family members) rather than understand this labour as a skill that forms an income-generating activity beyond agriculture. As a result, the framing of women's cooking for social reproduction often minimises its significance. For instance, we generally find that women will not elevate their cooking in restaurants (with a real professional kitchen) to the level of art like male chefs do. Cookbooks given to girls by mothers, food made for religious events, and family dinners provide records of how cultures have been handed down over time. In places where people have moved from one place to another, food has been used as a way of holding onto memories of their country of ownership or identity. In many cases, women manage these archives of memories, which can include taste, history, and identity, through kitchen work; however, this work often goes unrecognised. Advancements in modern technology have not eliminated the invisibility of this work, but they have changed it. New tech was meant to ease cooking, but it hasn't changed the expectation that women do most of the work. Media representations of women cooking have also contributed to perpetuating stereotypes about women as "carers" and men as "professional experts" in the kitchen. To truly analyse the way women are viewed in the kitchen, you must look beyond the surface, using an intersectional framework, to examine the effects of race, class, and other divisions on their categorisation and work as an "object", "expert", or "cook" (for example, as an upper-caste or wealthy "expert"). Although women may be acknowledged as the "preservators" of food and the traditions surrounding it, those who identify as Black, Dalit, or as part of the economically disadvantaged will not receive the same acknowledgement for their "foodwork". The value of this research is to encourage a re-evaluation of what constitutes an authentic food culture and an understanding of how women's contributions to this culture have been historically dismissed or overlooked. This study provides pathways to future research. Cross-cultural comparative research could yield valuable insights into realities of invisibility in many different contexts (as well as contribute to our knowledge of what constitutes invisibility). Intersectional studies could build on existing literature on how caste, class, and race shape the various manifestations of visibility in the

culinary field. Studies in the media rely on various media types, from cookbooks to social networking platforms such as Instagram, that represent gender in either traditional or altered ways. This will help determine whether traditional or transformed media portrayals of gender maintain or challenge entrenched gender-based labour stereotypes. Finally, initiatives modelled on community-based or grassroots efforts that examine how women are re-appropriating culinary labour as a means of personal empowerment will optimally inform future research.

Cross-cultural analyses can show how various contexts create invisibility. Research comparing caste, class, and race from an intersectional perspective will demonstrate how visibility varies for women's culinary labour. Media studies will help you understand how gendered representations of women in the media, from cookbooks to Instagram, are maintained or transformed. A study of any community or grassroots can foster agency. Returning to our metaphor of fire and flour, we see that fire represents life and community, and that, together, these two elements represent the creation of survival or imagination.

Fire and flour are both life and community – fire gives life, and flour gives community; together, they give us life and creativity. So far in our discussion, we have referred to the ways in which women's work is often invisible, particularly in the context of tending fires and making sustenance from flour. However, as we've seen, there is the possibility of cultural preservation, feminist resistance, and social change within the "space" between fire and flour rather than as an obligation associated with the home. Although modernity has been successful at hiding women's labour, it may also reveal, validate, and transcend it. Making culinary work visible, recognised, and valued—showing its value, skill, creativity, and political engagement—is not only a feminist effort but also a cultural and ethical one; women are feeding the planet through their cooking skills while simultaneously supporting stories, building identities, and dismantling inequity.

References

1. Avakian, A. V., & Haber, B. (2005). From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food. University of Massachusetts Press.
2. Counihan, C., & Van Esterik, P. (1997). Food and Culture: A Reader. Routledge.

3. Delphy, C. (1984). Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression. Hutchinson.
4. Hochschild, A., & Machung, A. (1989). The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home. Viking.
5. Hollows, J. (2003). Domestic Cultures. Open University Press.
6. Mohanty, C. T. (2003). Feminism Without Borders: Decolonising Theory, Practicing Solidarity. Duke University Press.
7. Oakley, A. (1974). The Sociology of Housework. BlaDecolonising Decolonising