

# Miracle Meal Ragi: Perspectives on *Ragi Ragini: Chronicles from Aji's Kitchen* from Alimentary Domain

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## Abstract:

*Ragi Ragini: Chronicles from Aji's Kitchen*, Anjali Purohit's debut work, is an intriguing mash-up of recipe writing, pictographic visualizations, and narrative writing. It presents a sensitive story about the miracle meal ragi, which is intertwined with the protagonist Ragini's life in various ways. What unfolds is a one-of-a-kind story about women and food traditions encouraging each other through a mutually supportive relationship. The study explores the diverse responses to food narratives, with female characters often conforming to patriarchal codes while resisting them. Authors like Anjali Purohit challenge patriarchal ideologies by incorporating kitchen locations as women's spaces for knowledge creation, sharing, and caring. Purohit's narrative aligns with the contingencies of Third World women, who lead lives in deeply patriarchal locations. By writing narratives anchored on alimentary traditions, she offers a new prescription for women's enablement, offering a nuanced understanding of empowerment discourses.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Food, Narratives, Recipe, Space

Dr. Anjali Purohit is a multidimensional artist who moves effortlessly between the writing, painting, and oratory realms. She made her literary debut with the critically acclaimed novel *Ragi Ragini: Chronicles from Aji's Kitchen* (2012). Cookbook writing, storytelling, and sketching collide to form a complicated story. The story revolves around the warp and weft of Bahinabai's ovis. Bahinabai Choudhari (1880-1951) was an illiterate widow from Maharashtra's khandesh region. She wrote ovis, which were eventually written down and published by her son, Sopandev Choudhari. Purohit's work grew from a short narrative she wrote many years ago and wished to expand on (Singh 127).

Adding the word "chronicles" to the title elevates a story that may have been dismissed as a simple culinary recital or recollection. Making the tale into an archive, Purohit describes it as a tribute to the three women in her life. It is admiration for unacknowledged work that women have done throughout the centuries. It gains such status by being recorded as a chronicle. Mao's phrase is about women holding up half the sky, but I believe they hold far more (132). Purohit's feminism does not criticize the established quo but instead instills women's conventional roles and spaces with hitherto unseen empowerment. The multi-generic text bears witness to the culinary, musical, and medical knowledge systems that women produce and exchange. The narrative is a montage alternating between

narration, recipes, ovis, and pictorial portrayals of traditional utensils. Purohit comments on this diversity, saying:

When I had my son I couldn't feed him so from the day he was born I have fed him Ragi in different forms. I would soak and grind and take out the extract and mix it in his milk. Now he is twenty five and one foot taller than me. (Laughs) So that is my connection with Ragi. The story developed out of that and I wanted to give recipes. Some are traditional recipes and I cook reasonably well but I am a reluctant cook. (Laughs) I want good food on the table and I value our traditional foods in a way they should be valued. So many of these are now going obsolete. Now these very proletarian dishes are now left to the elite. It's like we treasure as art these copper vessels. Today if you go to the village they all have plastic ware! It's superficial to some extent, a sort of 'hot house' form. In my book there's bits of philosophy which come in here and there. I find that grandmothers were very wise because of the rootedness they had. (127)

The prologue presents Ragi or finger millet, known as Nachani, Nagli, Kelvaragu, Mutthari, and Coracano. It is an indigenous grain cultivated and consumed in rural India for millennia. The text begins by integrating the nutritional trajectory of the grain with song and dance, both of which are incorporated into the taxonomies of "... music (raag) and dance (naach)" (Purohit 1).

Purohit emphasizes the relevance of music and poetry in relieving women's daily home labours. "I also want to emphasize the importance of music and poetry in a woman's world in the kitchen because that lightens your burden, right from the slaves in America. It eases the work and it is one thing we tend to ignore" (Singh 132). Her novel has a variety of ragi recipes, beginning with traditional fundamental recipes and progressing to modifications. Specific improvements are also introduced, addressing new-fangled calorie issues (Purohit 2). The author's trust in Ragi as a remedy for a sickly body pervades her recipes and stories. The grain is marketed as a cure-all for emotional, bodily, and spiritual well-being. The recipes are accompanied by an infrequent spattering of Ovis that are braided along with an entertaining story of Ragini, the narrator, her indomitable grandma Aji, her strong-spirited MasiDurga, and of course the "... transcendental nachani/ ragi grain" (4).

An ovi is a poem in a couplet form-two lines forming a verse-put to an easy tune, which were traditionally sung by women throughout Maharashtra as they went about their chores. . . In its earlier form, the ovi was predominantly about god, mythology, legends and the divine. After the Bhakti movement took root, ovis became more universal and took on broader subjects that included morality, society and day-to-day human experience (Purohit 2).

Purohit asserts, in response to the selection of the grain Ragi as a significant thematic strain, that "There are certain smells and tastes that are so embedded in our consciousness with a history that they don't remain merely something to eat" (Singh 132). The links are considerably broader than food, despite their origins in food. That was one of the reasons she wrote a (partly) food book because it reminded her of something. Like it formerly did, food should significantly form families and communities(132).

The physiology of food transposes itself onto individual physicality and communal sociology. The beat of the ovis, which corresponds to the sounds of the household, helps Ragini remember the

warmth she feels at Aji's place. Aji's memories of Shanta, Durga, and Prashant's bonding are also relayed through gastronomic channels (Purohit 61).

The sounds of culinary labourers usher in the morning hours in the village, continuing the sensory voyage of food. The sound of water being drawn from the well and the symphony of the *chakki* grinding the wheat awakens the household to the noises of food preparation. Even the anatomy of the lowly ragiladdoo conceals significant philosophical postulations of Hegelian thought, in which food ontologies harbour a synthesis of the incompatible thesis and antithesis. As a result, it could be a viable path to comprehending the world and reclaiming the self, which is trapped in its contradictory nature.

Bahinabai's ovis, or poetry, are introduced in the prologue. Bahinabai speaks an Ahirani dialect, which is widely spoken in Khandesh Vidarbha, particularly in Dhulia, Nasik, and Jalgaon. Bahinabai's ovis are a critical element of Konkani heritage and are typically sung by Konkani women while going about their daily activities. They are themed around the life, labour, and anxieties of Khandesh region householder women. Purohit claims that Bahinabai was the first woman poet in Maharashtra, commenting on the relevance of her compositions to the 'no man's land' of daily domestic and kitchen activities, which comprise a big part of women's lives. Ovis have been sung for centuries, but most were about God, mythology, and festivals. Purohit believes that Bahinabai was the first poet to write about a woman's life her daily routines, and see poetry in it! It's not that she didn't write about God; she recognized God in everything (Singh 129). Anjali Purohit expounds on Bahinabai's ovis:

One of her Ovis is a film song, it goes "Arre Sansara Sansara/ Jassatavachulhyavara/ Adhigatechatake/ Tavah mile bhakara". Sansara is the world as well as what you set up as your house. It has two meanings. It is the entire world plus her own little world. So, the sansara is like a tawa on a chulha, first it will scald your hand and only then will you get your bhakar. Ovi is a series of couplets and this particular couplet goes on to become very metaphysical and philosophical in a sense. (Singh 129).

Bahinabai's poetry is vital to feminist ideas since it defines, accentuates, and emphasizes a woman's job while connecting it to all of nature, the planet, and existence itself. The labours of daily routines are welded to philosophical interrogations on human life and the cosmos in Bahinabai's poetry. Her viscosity has denied women essential literary room for expressing their creativity.

The ovi becomes a collaborative, viable endeavour for women's knowledge creation and sharing due to its recital by women throughout the generations and the inevitable inflexions that individual singers/composers bring to it. Though this is liberating in some ways, the gap between covert power wielded in the private sphere and overt power wielded in the patriarchal public domain remains. Even for Bahinabai, it was her son who, as a male with access to education, was able to codify her compositions in the public domain.

*Ragi Ragini* is a one-of-a-kind food narrative in which ragi is not just food or a motif informing the story but the very material and essence of this three-generation saga. The small Ragini thrives because of this miraculous food and a particular type of food culture. Ragi has the same elevating impact as love (Purohit 11), and the protagonist expresses her love for the grain right at the story's start. The novel tells the story of Shanta, Ragini's mother, who is trapped in a loveless marriage. The distinction

between her sensitivities and her husband's family is built on alimentary differences. Shanta's ethical eating offends her in-laws, who regard food plenty and surplus as status symbols. Her frugal consumerism is too rural for their luxurious and wasteful urbane sensibilities. As a misfit in the family, she is mistreated and overworked, and childlessness exacerbates her already poor eating habits (11). She eventually dies, and Aji and Masi raise Ragini in Parvi, a small coastal Konkan village. Ragi, a superfood, is used to nurse the premature child back to health and life (12). As a result, Ragini is a foot taller than her Masi and is finishing her postgraduate courses in medicine at the age of twenty-five. She credits her stamina, the sheen in her hair, and the glow in her cheeks to ragi and age-old nurturing customs.

Food becomes the major conduit of care and love and the primary source of life. The grain's healthiness is built around its simple indigenous origins and alternate nutritive anatomy that measures up to modern alimentation scientific discoveries.

Recipe writing allows you to delve into your past to become a more resilient person. Furthermore, the book becomes a potent motif of validation of information previously assigned to domestic domains due to the premise of education and empowerment incorporated into writing and publishing culinary prescriptions. Within domestic domains, the substance of their existence is imbued with the notion of 'Woman': women, trapped inside familial circles, work for free. The patriarchal order is not just ideological but also contributes to the emergence of distinct material oppressions. To show its presence and expose its methods, it is essential to deconstruct the concept of 'woman,' that is, to condemn the fact that the category of sex has invaded vast territory for repressive purposes (Plaza 26). As such, it becomes a tool of women's enslavement. ArjunAppadurai pertinently says in "How to Make a National Cuisine" (1988) that "The existence of cookbooks presupposes not only some degree of literacy, but often an effort on the part of some variety of specialist to standardize the regime of the kitchen, to transmit culinary lore, and to publicize particular traditions guiding the journey of food from the marketplace to kitchen to table" (3).

The collaborative nature of recipe production and sharing makes it a project that fits the women's collective empowerment trend. The techniques provide a standardized base formula, followed by variants and even suggestions for developments, with room for experimentation. Grain taxonomies and qualitative interventions are neatly classified. In its interventionist capacities, the grain is positioned as a potent and powerful ingredient for women to engage with. The text emphasizes the collaborative character of this empowerment by encouraging a personalized equation with the recipes through practice and inventiveness. The advice that one should "never forget to add that intangible pinch of love and care and serve it with a generous smile" (Purohit15) translates intangible emotional quotients to the materiality of food provided as affection. Ragini rejects standardized weights and measures, preferring to rely on judgements of feel and taste. An intuitive interaction with the food being cooked creates distinctiveness, producing the cook's singular value accruing identity. Common phrases that initiate a dialectical relationship with the recipe readers are interspersed with the recipe directions: "We don't like anyone splitting when we have just started" (18).

Furthermore, food fusions, in conjunction with taxonomies of analogous human emotions, extrapolate to socialization trajectories, "Add raisins, crushed cashewnuts, and cardamom powder and stir on low heat till everyone gets intimate (this should take two to three minutes- coconut and jaggery

are more sociable than us humans)"(19). "Add half a cup of roughly (but lovingly) crushed cashewnuts or almonds to the batter" (18) also contributes to the emotional body of the food. As examples of manufacturing, the recipes incorporate shortcuts and cheat tactics to accommodate modern-day time constraints, increasing the viability of their use. This is consistent with Appadurai's theory:

Many of the new cookbooks emphasize that they are specifically designed to resolve shortage of time and money in urban settings. They therefore frequently offer menus, shortcuts and hints on how to get more out of less. Some of them explicitly recognize the dual pressure on working women to earn part of the family's livelihood and simultaneously to cater to the culinary sophistication of their families and friends. While authenticity, attractiveness, and nutritional value remain the dominant values of the new cookbooks, efficiency, economy, and utility are becoming increasingly respectable themes. (8)

Though Purohit continuously proposes alternate approaches and enables the use of contemporary equipment for convenience and time, at heart, she subscribes to traditional, and thus more authentic, foodways. When making ragi pancakes, she is accommodating to others' constraints, "If you want them to be lighter, you could substitute part of the ragi with maida." Still, she remains wholly aligned with Aji's food legacy, "But Aji would consider this a sacrilege, and so do I" (Purohit 19). Her affinity and affection for age-old culinary traditions are also reflected in her collection of unusual drawings of traditional kitchen tools. Purohit's affection and care for a fading cuisine art are shown in the fascinating images of traditional Konkani household tools accompanying the text. Though the recipes entice the hesitant modern cook with the promise of comparable results when using a food processor, the accompanying aside in the bracket, "(Aji surely disagrees!)" (4) demonstrate a natural attachment to real traditional processes and materials. Purohit, on the other hand, sees clear links between health and hearth.

Purohit is perceptive about the shrinkage in all areas of kitchen spaces, time spent in them, utensil sizes, diversity of foodstuffs, and how this all contributes to the shrinking nutrition on the plate when commenting on the changes caused along the spatiotemporal contours of modern living.

Pictorial portrayals of stone and copper kitchen utensils and equipment add a distinct Konkani flavour to the chronicles, interlaced with Ragi's culinary and medicinal features. This wonder grain nourishes and empowers the protagonist in a variety of ways. Purohit's adherence to established cuisine, cooking methods, and materials gives her an anchor, allowing for empowerment that does not overtly question the status quo. She has no problem with the kitchen being a gendered domain. Instead, she imbues such a distribution with transformative potential.

*RagiRagini: Chronicles from Aji's Kitchen* communicates as a one-of-a-kind women-centric narrative with shared recipes and culinary spaces that foster feminist viewpoints on empowerment via sharing and caring within 'no man's land' settings. Purohit's feminism, on the other hand, is nuanced with an appreciation for the overarching, gender-neutral look of socioeconomic oppressive systems. She reclaims autonomy for women within the settings that confine them through her food narrative. Her viewpoint is more in keeping with the circumstances of women living in patriarchal Third World nations. Purohit does not outline a reactionary or revolutionary route but rather one that coincides with conventional norms and subsequently usurps agency from inside them.

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