



Contextualizing Cuisine, Love and Bonding in Anita Nair's *Alphabet Soup for Lovers*

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Abstract

Anita Nair's *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* employs food as both a narrative strategy and symbolic framework to examine the intersections of language, love, and cultural identity. By centering on Komathi, an illiterate cook who learns English by associating alphabets with kitchen ingredients, and on the evolving relational dynamics around her, the novel positions cuisine as a medium of emotional expression and cultural articulation. This paper investigates how culinary practices serve as a vehicle for encoding memory, desire, and social power. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates that food preparation and consumption transcend their literal functions to become acts of translation, where meals carry affective and symbolic meanings incomprehensible through conventional language. For Komathi, whose linguistic limitations are counterbalanced by her culinary fluency, cooking becomes a powerful expressive tool. This paper argues that Nair reimagines food as a sensory language: one that not only reflects but actively shapes interpersonal relationships and cultural understanding within the novel.

Keywords: *Food, Language, Culture, Semiotics, Memory, Interpersonal Dynamics*



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Anita Nair's *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* presents a rich ensemble where love, language, and culinary artistry simmer together against the lush backdrop of the Anamalai Hills. The novel's idyllic setting; a homestay where Lena Abraham's orderly life is disrupted by the arrival of actor Shoola Pani, becomes a stage for exploring how food mediates human connections. Central to this exploration is Komathi, Lena's cook, whose struggle to master English through kitchen ingredients mirrors the novel's broader thematic preoccupation with non-verbal communication.

This paper interrogates how Nair employs culinary semiotics to intertwine three narrative strands: Komathi's learning through cooking, Lena and Shoola Pani's romance, and the unspoken connections formed over meals. This paper examines how language functions not merely as backdrop for exploring romantic relationships and culinary motifs, but more significantly as a vehicle for revealing the subtle, unspoken bonds that develop between characters through the narrative.

In *Alphabet Soup for Lovers*, language serves as the pathway through which readers explore the interconnected realms of food, letters, and human relationships. David Lodge's notion of the opening sentence as a narrative "threshold" finds particular resonance in the novel, where language and food intertwine to create an immersive narrative world. Lodge writes in his *The Art of Fiction* that for every reader, the opening sentence of a novel, "is a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world the novelist has imagined" (5). The readers are drawn into the fictional world etched by Nair with the evocative opening line "Arisi Appalam" (Nair 2). This deliberate choice underscores how language functions not merely as a narrative tool, but as the essential medium that reveals characters' inner lives and forges connections between them. As the characters communicate through both words and culinary acts, language becomes the bridge between their lived experiences and the reader's imagination.

Monica Fludernik's observation about language in *An Introduction to Narratology* serves as a key theoretical foundation for this analysis. She notes that through its symbolic power, language enables the representation of landscape, actions, locations or characters, allowing the fictional world to take shape in the reader's mind:

When landscape, actions, locations or characters are being represented, the language of a novel should be seen as the medium which, by virtue of its symbolic potential, makes it possible for the fictional world to be evoked and to take shape in the reader's imagination. (65)

The novel's descriptive language, whether describing kitchen rituals, alphabetic lessons, or intense conversations, constructs a vivid, sensory-rich narrative space. Analysis of these linguistic strategies reveals how food and language collaborate to articulate the unspoken bonds and tensions that define the characters' relationships.

The operative terms in the title, cuisine, love, and bonding, frame the analysis of how Anita Nair's narrative employs food as a linguistic and emotional tool. The acts of preparing, serving, and sharing food reveal the subtle emotional nuances and interpersonal dynamics among the characters. Much like raw ingredients that are transformed through cooking, the characters, particularly Lena and Komathi, undergo internal shifts as they come to terms with their identities, past experiences, and evolving relationships. These transformations are marked by openness to change and a quiet acceptance of the unknown, without excessive rumination (Nair 202).

Komathi, the narrator and Lena's long-time cook, introduces the story by explaining how Lena initially attempted to teach her English. However, it is her granddaughter Selvi who devises an effective method; associating each letter of the alphabet with familiar kitchen ingredients. Komathi believes that food will help her coax alphabets to "stay within" (Nair 4). Despite serving Lena for nearly thirty-three years, Komathi never openly expresses her concerns about Lena's strained relationship with her husband, KK. To her, their marriage resembles "...store-bought Appalam. Seemingly perfect but with neither flavour nor taste" (5). She is deeply perceptive, noticing the "expression of stolen pleasure" (34) on Lena's face when asked to prepare Daangar chutney—a dish that, for Komathi, evokes painful memories. This particular cuisine becomes a trigger, unearthing the grief of lost love and reminding her of her own past with Rayar (36–40).

Komathi knows Lena intimately and cares deeply for her well-being, affectionately referring to her as Leema. In Komathi's view, Lena's life is "sterile, clean and dull" (61), and she quietly hopes for something or someone to bring colour, flavour, and vitality into her

monotonous routine. Aware that Lena is unlikely to take her advice seriously, as she is “too familiar” a presence in her life, Komathi turns to the only language she knows best: food. By preparing a dish made of liver, she subtly encourages Lena to treat herself “with more kindness” (45). Komathi soon discerns that Lena is developing feelings for Shoola Pani, sensing a reflection of her own youthful passion for Rayar in Lena’s demeanour (54). Her affection for Lena is maternal, filled with devotion and concern, and she worries about the consequences of Lena’s growing attachment to the actor. Attempting to ground her, Komathi serves her “injikozhambu”, hoping the sharp flavours will pull Lena “down from the clouds.” (76). Although anxious that Shoola Pani might ultimately abandon Lena (90), Komathi keeps her fears to herself, choosing food as her silent medium of guidance and care.

For Komathi, cooking is far more than a routine task; it is an act steeped in memory and emotion. Each dish she prepares evokes fragments of her past, blending nostalgia, joy, sorrow, and regret. The laddoos she eats bring her momentary happiness, while also reminding her of the countless laddoos she had once made for Lena’s first wedding anniversary (97). The “murungakai sambhar” (106) she cooks for lunch rekindles memories of an intimate moment with Rayar, just as preparing crab for Shoola Pani (117) reminds her of the incompleteness of her own love story. The bitterness of *paavakai* stirs recollections of Lena’s childhood aversion to the vegetable (128) and, more strikingly, her later preference for eating it “barely cooked,” as if she were eager to “embrace bitterness of her own volition” (130).

Komathi’s emotions reach a breaking point when she prepares *qollu* for lunch, triggering a rush of “repressed rage” from her past (143). Aware that Lena had spent the night with Shoola Pani, Komathi reflects on her own lost love, Rayar; separated from her, as she believes, because of Lena. In an attempt at reconciliation, she prepares *kesari*, Lena’s favorite sweet and a dish Rayar disliked (145), symbolizing her gesture of compromise. This quiet truce is sealed over a fish curry (153). Yet food, once again, becomes a source of heartbreak as she realizes her lingering hope—that Rayar might return—has been in vain (169). She compares hope to “uzhunthu”, noting that, like ingredients, it must be measured wisely or risk ruining the dish and the dream (169).

Later, she confides in Shoola Pani, explaining why she chose not to accompany him to meet Rayar (175). Komathi continues to nurture Lena, preparing *wediyum*, a rice dish to help

Lena regain her lost vigour (183), and gently advises her to be resolute in her choices (186), to “live according to our taste” (190), and above all, to leave no room for regret (197). Ultimately, Komathi senses that life will not be the same once others discover that Lena has left home to be with Shoola Pani (202). Through each meal, Komathi not only feeds the body but also expresses a depth of emotional insight, memory, and resilience that words often fail to capture.

Hilary P. Dannenberg, in her book *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*, observes that “narrative fiction uses a repertoire of sense-making operations to establish...the autonomy of the narrative world and thus create an environment for immersion” (25). Anita Nair achieves this immersive effect in *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* by embedding the narrative in the language of food. Through this culinary framework, Nair offers readers an alternative perspective through which to understand her characters, whether KK, Lena, or Shoola Pani. While much remains unspoken by Komathi, the narrator, the emotional and relational textures of the characters emerge vividly through their associations with food.

For instance, Komathi initially presents Lena as someone leading a content, orderly life. However, a deeper emotional reality is revealed in a small but telling moment, as Lena bites into a piece of *arisi appalam*, she feels “for the first time that day, a small curl of joy unfurl in her” (Nair 15). Such instances show how Nair uses food as a narrative device that uncovers the characters’ interior lives; subtly yet powerfully drawing readers into the emotional undercurrents of the story.

Although Lena does not actively engage in cooking, she possesses a clear understanding of culinary preparation and its emotional resonance. Her relationship with KK, her husband, is marked by emotional detachment, which Nair describes as “an absence of messy emotions” (7). Lena does not marry KK out of love (93), and after meeting Shoola Pani, she begins to re-evaluate her marriage (79). The arrival of Shoola Pani disrupts her predictable existence, prompting her to reflect on her desires and emotional needs. She observes his appreciation for rare dishes and perceives him as a wild animal unwillingly caged in a zoo, an insight that mirrors her own yearning for freedom and passion (107).

Though deeply drawn to him, Lena expresses her feelings not through declarations but through food. Instead of confronting her emotions directly, she chooses to make *daangar chutney* for him (40), letting the gesture speak in her place. In doing so, she begins to break away

from routine and embraces change, learning to act without hesitation or guilt (111). As she walks toward Mimosa Cottage carrying a tureen of *nandekari kozhambu*, she fully accepts the emotional complexities of her situation—the “deceit and duplicity, the cunning and manipulation, the shards of guilt” (116–17). Lena is not naive about the fragile nature of her connection with Shoola Pani (180), yet she relinquishes the sterile stability of life with KK, believing that her time with Shoola Pani is shaped by a “mysterious force” (198). Through this shift, Nair portrays Lena’s journey toward emotional authenticity, with food serving as both catalyst and conduit.

The narrative further illustrates how culinary language reveals the emotional texture of male characters and the bonds they share with others. In particular, the relationship between KK and Lena is marked by silence, detachment, and routine. KK and Lena engage in minimal conversation; their exchanges are brief, practical, and devoid of intimacy, reflecting the emotional distance between them. This detachment forms the unspoken understanding that underpins their marriage. They “remain wedded to each other” more out of obligation than connection (7). Lena’s grandmother refers to KK as a “cold fish” (11), while Komathi considers him a “strange creature” (54), entirely unaware of the changes unfolding within Lena.

Lena often rehearses conversations with KK in her mind but rarely voices them, highlighting her internal conflict and unmet need for companionship. She repeatedly reminds herself that she is a wife and that she has a life (66), clinging to the illusion of stability. However, toward the end of the novel, she confesses to Komathi that her life is, in fact, “an empty one” (185). KK remains oblivious not only to Lena’s affair with Shoola Pani (172) but also to the deeper loneliness and dissatisfaction she experiences. When Lena expresses her desire to adopt a child, KK dismisses the idea, prioritizing his attachment to his dogs over any emotional or parental commitment (182). His emotional unavailability and disinterest in genuine connection reflects the profound void in their marriage; one that is ultimately articulated not through dialogue, but through the silences and absences around the shared table.

The gastronomic list enumerated throughout the narrative offers deep insight into the characters: their preferences, aversions, cravings, and even their fears. Rather than complicating the story with excessive exposition, Nair uses cuisine as a subtle and evocative language that communicates emotional states and personal histories. Food, in this context, becomes a form of

emotive expression that transcends spoken dialogue. Arthur Asa Berger observes in *The Objects of Affection Semiotics and Consumer Culture*:

The food we eat can also be considered the equivalent of speech and all the food that is available as the equivalent of language. There are certain codes we learn, as we grow up in various nationalities, ethnic groups, religious groups, and subcultures that involve the way we think about food. (21)

In *Alphabet Soup for Lovers*, these culinary codes operate as narrative signifiers, shaping our understanding of the characters and their relationships. Through food, Nair constructs a semiotic system that is both culturally rooted and emotionally resonant.

Each character in the novel reveals aspects of their personality, emotional history, and cultural orientation through their food preferences and the way they engage with meals. Komathi, though illiterate, possesses a rich culinary literacy passed down by Lena's mother, who taught her how to prepare a variety of dishes. Over the years, Komathi not only preserved these traditions but also continued to experiment, often at Lena's request to try out recipes she had "discovered in magazines" (Nair 67). Komathi's food choices reflect her personality and emotional connections: she enjoys filter coffee (53), almonds (17), and *godumai dosai*, which she describes as her "comfort food" (62). Certain dishes carry deeper emotional resonance, *colocasia* reminds her of her mother (27), while *daangar chutney* evokes memories of her lost love (36).

She also recalls a specific moment when KK and Lena, soon after their wedding, discussed the etymology of ginger (74), illustrating how food becomes woven into personal and relational memory. Komathi observes that much has changed over the years, including her own language (81), indicating a subtle evolution shaped by her environment and experiences. In contrast, KK's aversions such as *arisi appalam* (15), *pavakai* (130), and *daangar chutney* (40) highlight his emotional distance and disconnection from Lena, who, by contrast, either tolerates or enjoys these very dishes. These culinary preferences, thus, serve as character markers that both reflect and reinforce the emotional landscape of the narrative.

Both pleasant and unpleasant emotions are intricately embedded in the novel's culinary language, illustrating how food becomes a medium through which characters process their inner lives. When Lena and Shoola Pani visit the market square, he casually remarks that it could serve

as a film location. This comment unsettles Lena, as it reminds her of the world he inhabits beyond their intimate bubble. For her, “the very thought of his other life is like biting on a mouthful of grit” (84). Their emotional and physical intimacy is subtly marked by a moment of shared tasting; they eat multi-coloured cumin, a sensory cue for their growing closeness (86). Sweet confections trigger nostalgia not only for Lena and Shoola Pani but also for Komathi, tying the emotional resonance of food across different characters.

Food rituals also anchor memory and emotion for the other characters. For KK, breakfast merely continues his routine (91), yet it becomes a moment of tension when he brings up Shoola Pani during a shared meal with Lena, prompting her to reflect on her shifting loyalties (93). She recalls, with detached amusement, how KK once charmed women at parties by making them eat out of his hands; yet the mere thought of Shoola Pani desiring another woman makes her “want to retch” (94). The emotional volatility of jealousy and possessiveness is similarly expressed through bodily reactions to food: for Komathi, the fear of her husband leaving her for another woman evokes a bitter taste (105), while for Lena, the idea of sharing Shoola Pani triggers a “sourness” in her mouth (94). These visceral reactions suggest that taste, in Nair’s narrative, is not just sensory but also psychological: an index of deeply held emotions and vulnerabilities.

The stench of crab curry unsettles Komathi to the point that she describes it as “distasteful” (122). However, she clarifies that her discomfort arises not from the dish itself, but from the context it signifies: Lena’s husband, KK, is away, and Lena is alone with the film actor, Shoola Pani. In this moment, the sensory experience of food becomes a proxy for Komathi’s moral unease and emotional anxiety. Importantly, it is not only food but also drinks that serve as carriers of memory and emotional undercurrents throughout the narrative. Filter coffee, Komathi’s favorite, is not only a personal comfort (53) but also becomes a medium of connection between Lena and Shoola Pani, marking a moment of growing intimacy between them (58). Lena is often seen sipping green tea (83), while KK, detached and absorbed in his work, drinks tea at his desk (7). Meanwhile, Muthu, the household helper, spends his earnings on alcohol, reflecting his own escape into oblivion.

In the novel’s closing moments, Komathi mentions *jigarthanda*, a milk-based drink, subtly drawing the narrative to a sensory close. True to her understated style, Nair leaves Lena’s fate unresolved, concluding not with clarity but with openness. The mention of *jigarthanda*

marks a symbolic gesture toward continuity, tradition, and uncertainty. In withholding resolution, Nair guides the reader gently into “the unknown” (202), allowing the sensory richness of food and drink to linger as the novel’s final note.

This paper has explored how culinary language in *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* functions as a vital narrative device, offering insights into character development, emotional nuance, and cultural context. As Michael Ryan affirms in *Cultural Studies: A Practical Introduction*, “When we eat food, we literally take in things from the world and make them part of ourselves. What those things are constitutes a culinary lifestyle that is laden with cultural meaning” (166–67). Anita Nair’s novel exemplifies this idea, embedding food deeply within the narrative structure and emotional fabric of the novel.

Komathi’s alphabetic journey, linking English letters with vegetables and dishes, serves as both a linguistic and cultural bridge. Though illiterate, she creates a personal method of learning by associating unfamiliar letters with familiar foods, often naming them in Tamil, her mother tongue (Nair 1), or in Malayalam, the language of Lena’s household (81). Her narration offers practical and symbolic reflections on food: from remedies for an upset stomach (160), to the nutritional value of mutton liver (44), to warnings about the effects of imbalanced ingredients (166), or the overpowering nature of a single “extra pinch” of fenugreek (181). Her comparisons even extend to people, describing Lena as similar to a “hairy, knobby cheppankizhangu” (28). For Komathi, food is not only sustenance but also metaphor, memory, and wisdom. Her life philosophy encapsulates this connection: “Be it a dish or life itself, one needs to taste it as one goes along” (190). Through such reflections, Nair not only affirms the intimate relationship between food and identity but also crafts a narrative where cuisine becomes a profound language of its own.

The arguments presented throughout this paper affirm that Anita Nair’s *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* offers a rich and layered journey through the realms of cuisine, love, and emotional connection. Food in the novel functions as far more than sustenance or background detail; it becomes a subtle yet powerful medium through which the characters’ inner lives: dreams, fears, longings are articulated. Whether consumed, prepared, or simply discussed, food becomes a mirror reflecting identity, memory, and interpersonal dynamics. It acts as a whetstone upon

which each character is emotionally and psychologically honed, gradually inviting readers to cultivate a deeper sensitivity to the symbolic weight of everyday acts like eating and cooking.

This paper concludes by echoing the insight of Benjamin E. Zeller in his essay “Food and Cooking,” where he observes:

Food is not mere foodstuff, but a set of meanings embedded in physical objects, including conflicting notions of culture and ethnicity, absolute values about life, and sentiments about personal identity. Consumption of food is therefore far more than the mere addition of nutrients to the body... Rather, food is a central nexus of how communities and individuals identify themselves. (243)

Nair’s novel exemplifies this view, treating cuisine not just as a backdrop but as a narrative language in itself—one that bridges cultural boundaries, evokes emotional depth, and ultimately allows characters and readers alike to find meaning in the act of nourishment.

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