Cultural Representations of Food and Drinks in World Literature

Cultural Representations of Food and Drinks in World Literature

Edited by

Monica Manolachi and
Lorena Clara Mihăeș

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Cultural Representations of Food and Drinks in World Literature

Edited by Monica Manolachi and Lorena Clara Mihăeș

This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-0364-5341-1
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-5342-8

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

MONICA MANOLACHI

The idea for this book is about ten years old. It began while I was reading prose by Romanian women writers, both from the country and abroad, exploring novels and memoirs spanning the decades before and after 1989. Themes such as ritual and sacrifice in cooking, food availability and types, eating at home versus eating out, traditions and modernity, commensality versus solitary eating, attitudes towards animals, gender roles, and the impact of gastronomy on language and creativity—all these revealed both similarities and significant contrasts between Romania and the West. This inspired me to delve into literary food studies and seek opportunities for research and collaboration.

In November 2019, I was delighted to participate in the thematic conference *Craving Planet Earth: Food in Culture, Past, Present and Future* at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, organised by Ana-Karina Schneider and Sebastian Groes. In November 2023, Lorena Mihăeș and I co-organised a panel titled *Critical Approaches to Food and Drinks in Literatures* at the annual conference of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Bucharest, followed by a call for articles hosted by the journal *Cultural Intertexts* at Lower Danube University of Galați. Most recently, in August 2024, I participated in the panel *Food and Eating in Anglophone Literature and Travel Writing from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* at the 17th ESSE Conference in Lausanne, Switzerland, convened by Lyudmila Kostova and Oana Cogeanu-Haraga. In this climate of growing awareness, such events brought together culturally diverse groups of researchers exploring food and drinks in literature, media, and the arts in various contexts, from Shakespeare and literary prize winners to Indian folklore.

We hope this collection of articles, offering a multicultural perspective that encompasses the broader Anglophone world, will appeal to researchers in literary food studies as well as scholars in related disciplines.

Bucharest,
December 2024

INTRODUCTION

LORENA-CLARA MIHĂEŞ

> *The human frame being what it is, heart, body, and brain all mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments as they will be no doubt in another million years, a good dinner is of importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well. The lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes.*
>
> (Virginia Woolf 1977: 23)

Who can forget the description of the madeleine in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*? On a cold winter's day, the narrator returns home to his mother, who serves him tea along with "short, plump little cakes called petites madeleines" (Proust 2013: 50). The taste of tea and cake brings back memories of his childhood:

> No sooner had the warm liquid, mixed with the crumbs of the cake, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent on the extraordinary changes that were taking place in me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. At once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had on me the effect that love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me. I had ceased to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savors, could not be of the same nature. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I grasp it? (Proust 2013: 50-51).

Proust's madeleine is probably one of the most powerful metaphors one can think of how food is used to bring back memories and, thus, set in motion the plot of a novel. Food as represented by the madeleine becomes, thus, a powerful symbol for the passage of time—*fugit irreparabile tempus*—and nostalgia, but also for the possibility of reviving the past, even if only in one's mind. Beyond Proust, this metaphor has inspired countless literary and cultural explorations of food as a medium for

connecting the present with the past, emphasising the emotional and symbolic dimensions of culinary experiences in storytelling. Although food studies have traditionally been seen as pertaining more to fields of study such as anthropology, sociology, history, and geography, recent shifts in cultural and social attitudes have brought the study of food and drinks to the forefront of literary research. With the rise of feminist waves, the postcolonial turn, the technologisation and politicisation of food, and the expansion of food movements, there has been a better understanding of the importance of food in shaping our identity. As a result, literary approaches to food have become increasingly respected, literature now being recognised as an important field of study for exploring the role of food and drinks.

Contemporary literature views food as a symbol of cultural heritage, personal traumas, and the struggles within society, whether in terms of class, gender or ethnicity. Food has become a symbolic material Nobel Prize winners use to craft their storyworlds. To give just an example, the 2024 Nobel Prize winner for literature—Han Kang—rose to international acclaim with her novel, *The Vegetarian*, a story whose main point seems to be the rejection of meat, but which goes far beyond that. Yeong-hye's vegetarianism does not bring about salvation or inner peace. Her abstention from consuming living things does not lead to enlightenment but instead makes her become estranged from life itself. As Yeong-hye withdraws further from the world, Kang confronts the readers with a dilemma: should we hope for Yeong-hye's survival, or should we accept her desire to vanish?

Besides novels and short stories, memoirs, essays, and poetry are also gaining recognition for their ability to convey personal and often politicised connections of individuals with food. As food increasingly becomes a symbol of cultural resistance in the face of globalisation, it is often connected to authenticity and/or cultural appropriation. In this sense, the study of food and drinks in literature offers insights into the complexities of cultural belonging and identity in a world that is changing under our very eyes.

The present edited volume is a journey into the domain of food and drinks as represented in world literature. It explores the ways they serve as cultural symbols in literatures from various genres (novels, short stories, poetry, drama, memoirs, folklore, and children's books), regions, and historical contexts.

The volume begins by presenting a theoretical framework that emphasises cultural diversity within literary food studies. "A Multicultural Approach to Food in Literature" by Monica Manolachi sets the stage for

understanding how culinary symbols cross cultural and genre boundaries, showing food as both a universal human need and a vehicle for specific cultural values. Although the analysis is restricted to the anglophone space, the current trends the author identifies in food studies may, as a matter of fact, be valid for other literary landscapes. Over recent decades, the interplay between literature, multiculturalism, and food studies in the anglophone world has evolved, expanding the horizons of literary criticism. Scholars increasingly adopt interdisciplinary methods, incorporating sociology, psychology, and political science alongside traditional fields like theology and philosophy. Food studies, once largely overlooked, give us the possibility to examine migration, hybridity, identity, and power dynamics in diverse, multiethnic contexts. Themes like belonging, resistance, and cultural preservation are examined through food narratives, especially amid globalisation. This shift speaks about the universal relevance of food, akin to storytelling, as a bridge across cultures. Consequently, anglophone literary criticism has grown more multicultural, reflecting the role of food as a common cultural denominator.

The next seven articles cover mainly novels and short stories. Sarah Agerbæk's article, "Eat Your Heart Out! On the Intersection of Food, Murder, and Theology in Crime Fiction", brings together Italian, British, and Scandinavian crime fiction, in an unexpected discussion about food and death in detective stories. Focusing on three detectives—Andrea Camilleri's Inspector Montalbano, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, and Henning Mankell's Detective Wallander—the paper brings theology into the picture by exploring how dominant religious traditions (Catholicism in Italy and Protestantism in England) shape the depiction of food and its symbolic significance within crime fiction narratives. In Italian crime fiction, food has a sacramental role, offering spiritual comfort in the face of widespread corruption. In contrast, English crime fiction reflects Protestant restraint, creating a facade of propriety that conceals the decay of society. Scandinavian crime fiction (or Nordic Noir), meanwhile, presents a tense relationship with food, marked by discomfort and a lack of pleasure, highlighting a (post)secular existentialism. Ultimately, the detectives' connections to food become powerful motifs that help define the distinct tone and themes of each genre.

Alice Nicoleta Bleiu's "Culinary Symbolism in *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin" analyses the various dimensions of food in the celebrated book of historical metafiction, examining it as an expression of power, a symbol of revenge, a reflection of ritual and religious practices, an instrument of torture, and a marker of cultural identity. The diverse

culinary landscape—from the exotic spices of Dorne and the elaborate dishes of King's Landing to the hearty stews of the North—reflects the rich cultural variety across the realm. These culinary elements symbolise a deep connection to cultural circumstances and identity, adding authenticity to the series as a whole.

In "Anthropological Perspectives on Food in Margaret Atwood's Fiction", Orsolya Deji-Nagylaki looks at the work of Canadian author Margaret Atwood through an anthropological and multicultural lens, and analyses how food and cooking metaphors offer depth to the characters. As both a political and emotive subject, food—or its absence—is often referenced in dystopian literature depicting oppressive regimes. The study concludes that Atwood's anthropological approach to food has evolved across her works, beginning with *The Edible Woman*, progressing through *Alias Grace*, and culminating in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. In a similar manner, Atwood's approach to multiculturalism seems to have progressed through gender criticism, immigration history, and later, through dystopia. This progression offers insights into Atwood's exploration of consumerism, multiculturalism, and societies under oppression.

Roxana Elena Doncu takes the reader on board for a voyage in late nineteenth-century Romania through Radu Tudoran's adventure novel *All Sails Up!*, first published in Romanian in 1954. This gives her the opportunity to consider how food and cooking symbolise the blending of diverse traditions in the Balkans, reflecting a shared Ottoman influence that combines Christian and Muslim culinary practices. "Cooking Moussaka, Baking Baklava: The Meanings of Food in Radu Tudoran's *All Sails Up*!" looks into the new culinary practices that contributed to the emergence of national identity. Set during a period when Romania aimed to distance itself from its Balkan-Ottoman past in favour of a Western-inspired democratic future, the ship named Hope embodies the aspirations of the young Romanian nation as it journeys westward to France and the Americas. Captain Anton Lupan, a mix of figures like Noah, Columbus, and Ahab, embodies ambition and leadership, while Ismail, the cook, represents a connection to the familiar Balkan heritage. Together, their dynamic illustrates how culinary geography influences the nation's destiny.

Titled "Meat and Masculinity in Contemporary Scottish Fiction" and speaking from a gender studies perspective, Gina Lyle's article argues that meat in Scottish literature is often an expression of male power. While it is the women's responsibility to transform meat into edible food, prepared meat is an ideal foodstuff for male diners in patriarchal societies. Thus,

meat brings to light the gendered imbalances and systems of control. Analysing a wide range of popular prose from the 1990s to today, Gina Lyle's paper discusses works by well-known authors such as Janice Galloway, Kirsty Logan, Jenni Fagan, and Irvine Welsh. Through this exploration, it offers insights into how contemporary Scottish writers incorporate meat symbolism in their fiction to address themes of masculinity.

Continuing in the realm of contemporary British literature, Lorena-Clara Mihăeș's article, "'The Proof Is, as It Were, in the Eating': Food Symbolism in Kazuo Ishiguro's Fiction", features Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro and his distinctive use of food symbolism. While food is not a central theme in his work, it appears notably in his early short stories, where he offers a unique and often unsettling perspective that challenges familiar portrayals of food. In "A Family Supper" and "Getting Poisoned", food serves as a symbol of tension, control, and manipulation within family and society at large. "A Family Supper" uses the family meal—a traditional symbol of unity—to hint at mistrust and unresolved conflicts, with the potential danger of the poisonous fugu fish heightening suspense. This looming threat reflects themes of tradition, betrayal, and psychological strain after the mother's death. In contrast, "Getting Poisoned" eliminates ambiguity as the narrator deliberately poisons both a cat and a girl, using food as a direct means of exerting control and inflicting harm. Whereas these two short stories see food as poison, "The Gourmet" speaks of the fetishisation of food in the then-burgeoning world of gourmet culture. Food, thus, becomes an instrument of satire of the rich who are always in search of ever more extreme experiences. Mihăeș concludes with Ishiguro's latest novel, *Klara and the Sun*, where food becomes a symbol of nourishment and healing, reimagined as solar energy. Much like early humans who attributed divine qualities to natural phenomena, the protagonist regards the Sun as a benevolent, almost God-like presence, capable of healing and renewal.

In "Food, Power and Resistance: Depictions of Hindu Widows in Indian Short Stories", Prachi Priyanka employs gender studies to probe into the lives of Hindu widows who follow strict dietary restrictions, refraining from certain foods. Through an analysis of three stories—Bhisham Sahni's "Dinner with the Boss" (2012), Githa Hariharan's "Remains of the Feast" (1993), and Ambai's "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" (2019)—the chapter examines and challenges widowhood as a burdensome curse in the protagonists' lives. These women, who endure silent suffering, wrestling with or surrendering to their repressed desires

for both food and personal fulfilment, are eventually viewed from new perspectives via gastronomic considerations.

The discussion is then moved to poetry and drama. In "Metaphysical Implications of Fruit Imagery in Josep Carner's Poetry", Elena Ciutescu examines the significance of fruit imagery in *Els fruits saborosos* [*The Tasty Fruits*] (1957) by Josep Carner, the greatest Catalan writer. This celebrated poetry collection from the Noucentisme movement embodies Carner's vision of reality, rooted in ideals like serenity, foresight, reason, wisdom, civility, beauty, nature, Mediterraneanism, and classicism. The analysis, based extensively on translation, suggests that fruits, laden with symbolic meanings and subtle associations, function as more than mere structural elements; they offer a wealth of interpretations. Through allegorical and metaphorical depictions of fruits, Carner explores the variety of human experience.

Timothy Ryan Day's "Everything that Grows: Photosynthesis, AI, and Shakespeare" is a meditation on Shakespeare's works, which frequently use food and agricultural imagery to explore human consciousness in relation to the natural world. Shakespeare uses food imagery to portray life's cycles, where all beings are born, nourished, decay, and return to the earth. This understanding reflects Shakespeare's rural background and his appreciation of nature's cyclicality and interdependence. Although scientific advancements have transformed our relationship with food and energy, raising questions about the relevance of the pastoral ideal, Shakespeare's insights continue to highlight the beauty of life's interconnected cycles and the role of conscious beings within them.

Shakespeare is featured in another article: Dana Percec and Andreea Șerban's "'Drunkenness Is His Best Virtue': Moral and Cultural Implications of Alcohol Consumption in Shakespeare's Plays". Taking a different stance, the authors show that alcohol in Shakespeare's plays serves as both a means of social cohesion and a potential source of identity loss and social disorder, reflecting his era's mixed views on drinking. Alcohol facilitates male bonding, loyalty, and alliances, but also leads to negative outcomes like loss of self-control, reputational harm, and antisocial behaviour. For women, drinking symbolises rebellion but is often punished by societal standards. Shakespeare's portrayal of drunkards combines humor with social critique, highlighting the complex, culturally ambivalent role of alcohol in early modern society.

The volume closes with three chapters dedicated to reflections of food in memoirs and folklore. Jianwen Liu's article, "Culinary Cravings and Constraints in Hong Ying's Novel *Daughter of the River*", examines a memoir of China as seen by an author who has witnessed the Great

Famine of the early 1960s. In *Ji'e de nü'er* (the Chinese title), Hong Ying explores hunger not only as physical deprivation, but also as a symbol of deeper, unmet desires within the Chinese social and political landscape during the Cultural Revolution. The portrayal of tempting yet unreachable foods reflects the protagonist's ongoing struggle with poverty, repression, and spiritual emptiness. Hunger here symbolises both literal scarcity and Liu Liu's yearning for freedom and fulfilment. Translated into multiple languages, the novel resonates globally, underscoring the universality of hunger and fostering intercultural empathy around themes of scarcity and desire.

Cristina Ungureanu's article focuses on Queen Marie of Romania's memoir, *The Story of My Life* (1934-35), a genuine diary of patriotism, faith, and royal life. "Food as Art: Representation and Meaning in Queen Marie's Writings" explores important aspects related to food and cooking in royal life. Queen Marie's literature is a mix of personal and public reflections, drawing on her multicultural experiences and a deep search within her memory. Her works explore themes of cultural identity, assimilation, and belonging, involving various characters. She used her global travels and intercultural networking to capture the essence of family life and celebrations, impacting Romanian culture and illustrating how cultural blending can foster understanding. Her evocative descriptions of food and feasts contrast with the fast-paced, solitary dining habits of today, pointing to a loss of social harmony. Marie's writing ultimately serves as a nostalgic reminder of the values and traditions that once united people, subtly warning against alienation and loss of communal joy.

Suchitra Awasthi's chapter, "The Ubiquity of Food in the Literature of Kumaon", speaks about food in Kumaoni folk literature as a shaper of cultural identity, carrying deep social, moral, and spiritual meaning. Food is celebrated as a source of human pleasure and is reflected in local folk songs and tales. The paper calls for examining the effects of globalisation on this relatively isolated region and how traditional foods endure amid commercialised, Western-style food chains. Unlike countries like France, India has generally embraced global food trends while maintaining pride in its traditional cuisine. In Kumaon, the coexistence of tradition and global influences is seen as inevitable, making it essential to document traditional practices and monitor changes. Environmental challenges and pesticide use pose threats to public health and cultural heritage, which Kumaoni literature addresses in order to raise awareness of these issues. Writers like Gumani, Gaurda, Mohan Upreti, and Deepa Agarwal highlight culinary traditions, advocating for cultural preservation through

their works. Efforts to translate and republish such works help celebrate Kumaoni food and promote it globally.

We would like to end the introduction to this volume with the motto with which we started:

> The human frame being what it is, heart, body, and brain all mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments as they will be no doubt in another million years, a good dinner is of importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well. The lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes. (Woolf 1977: 23)

Virginia Woolf's assertion is a beautiful reflection on the relationship between nourishment and creativity, written at a time when the author was lamenting the inferior dining experience at a women's college—a metaphor for systemic gender inequity. Unlike mere eating, dining is a deliberate engagement with food which is on a par with the deliberation required for artistic or intellectual endeavours, as dining well—and writing well—are acts of profound connection and creativity. For great food writing has a transformative quality: it brings together flavour, culture, and memory.

In its rich cultural diversity, this edited volume guides readers through a multitude of literary portrayals of food and drinks across geographies and genres. Speaking from a variety of vantage points, it reveals how food and drinks in world literature shed light on the complexities of belonging and identity in an ever-globalising world. At the same time, the articles in this collection argue that food and drinks are a unifying force that transcends boundaries of all kinds, pointing to the universality of human experience.

References

Proust, Marcel. 2013. *In Search of Lost Time. Volume 1, Swann's Way*. Yale University.

Woolf, Virginia. 1977. *A Room of One's Own*. Grafton.

CHAPTER 1

A MULTICULTURAL APPROACH TO FOOD IN LITERATURE

MONICA MANOLACHI

Introduction

I grew up in 1980s Romania, a decade marked by severe food shortages, when about a third of the Romanian workforce was employed in agriculture. In urban centers like Bucharest, people would wake up in the middle of the night to queue for basic necessities, while in rural areas, peasants rose very early to toil on the land. In city grocery stores, known as *Alimentara* or *Aprozar*, food sold out so quickly that there was no need to stock shelves. Instead, trucks unloaded goods at the back of these nearly empty shops, where long queues would form behind the rows of apartment blocks. The aging centralised distribution system was increasingly inefficient, and there were few political efforts for systematic improvement, as decision-makers lacked the tools to assess actual needs. Computers and the internet, still confined to futuristic visions found in university library books, were no solutions yet.

With the limited broadcasting schedule of the sole television channel, which was on air for only a few hours each day, reading became a popular pastime for children and adolescents during their free time. We feasted on books, especially during the holidays. In the early years, we enjoyed abridged versions of *Thumbelina*, *The Little Mermaid* or *The Little Match Girl* by Hans Christian Andersen, *Heart* by Edmondo De Amicis or *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain; later we read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper, *One Thousand and One Nights* etc.—all available in translation.

Many of my childhood memories revolve around food. I can picture myself as a little schoolgirl, struggling to carry a plastic bag with three one-litre glass bottles of milk from the dairy shop. They were heavy and

the bag was thin, so I moved cautiously, terrified they might break. At the same shop, one of my neighbours and I, still in primary school, once queued for butter. The adults in line kindly let us take the last packets. The last of anything became a recurring theme in the public space: the last loaf of bread, the last kilo of bananas, the last bag of frozen chicken. Every month, the story repeated itself. By the late 1980s, the shelves in food shops were often bare—there was nothing to see, nothing to buy, and little to hope for. Imagination had to fill the void. One night, before I turned ten, I dreamed of a large orange. In the dream, I reached out my hand, but when I awoke, the orange was gone—just a figment of my longing for something foreign and unattainable. My maternal grandmother would tell us stories of her father, a railway worker in the 1930s, bringing home oranges. It seemed like a world apart, where such luxuries were once real.

Food diversity was often just a dream. On school mornings, breakfast was simple: homemade plum jam spread on bread, rarely with a layer of butter, accompanied by tea brewed from plants bought from peasants at the market or sent by relatives living over 300 kilometers away in the countryside. It was a time when urban schoolchildren carried the apartment key on a thin rope around their necks—the so-called latchkey generation. Parents returned home only in the afternoon, and we ate the lunch that our mother had prepared and left in the fridge.

One afternoon, my sister and I decided to delay eating lunch, turning the second course into a creative project. Using the food on our plates, we arranged faces: mashed potatoes became pale yellow skin, slices of roasted chicken formed dark hair, small pickled cucumber slices made the eyes, and tomato slices shaped the nose and mouth. We prepared a plate for each of us in the family, transforming mealtime into a nameless art display. When our mother arrived home, her first question was whether we had had lunch. My sister and I exchanged a quick glance before leading her to the kitchen to proudly show her our creations. We had not eaten a bite—we were too excited to reveal our culinary masterpieces to her.

Like other dramatic social changes, the 1989 Revolution in Romania was also a food revolution, transforming the availability of products in the market. One of the first foreign items, symbolising democracy, was Kinder chocolate, sent as aid to a population in need, at a time when the production and distribution systems changed dramatically. Strangely, neither my sister nor I ate it. Instead, we kept it for years, long past its expiration date, as a tangible artefact of the regime change. It became more than candy—it was a symbol of a different economic system, food for thought, rather than something to be consumed. Foreign food often held a role akin to a toy or a piece of art rather than a practical necessity.

Bananas, for instance, carried similar significance. Purchased directly from the back of a truck after waiting in line—often a chaotic crowd rather than an orderly queue—for over an hour, they were laden with expectation. It was December, snow was falling, and umbrellas were impractical under the circumstances. The bananas themselves were green and required patience. At home, we carefully placed them in a dark cupboard or on top of a wardrobe, covered with Communist newspaper. Bananas were not just food; they were trophies or souvenirs of the arduous adventure of acquiring provisions in a city where the food distribution system was deeply flawed. We were used to waiting one or two weeks for them to ripen and looked at them as if they were Christmas decorations. Meanwhile, doing homework, reading novels or playing Scrabble, we learned how to be patient.

As a student in foreign languages, many of my most vivid recollections are food-related. In the year 2002, as a summer school student in Jyväskylä, Finland, I experienced campus dining at a level I could barely have imagined. In the 1990s, when I also studied marketing, lunch in the city sometimes meant only one bagel eaten in corridors or classrooms. Therefore, the Finnish campus was a revelation. Students shared well-equipped kitchens in their studios, and the university featured a large restaurant with counters full of diverse options, enjoyed at communal tables with peers.

One year later, during my time on the ELTE campus in Budapest, my friends and I rarely ate in the student canteen, opting instead for street food and pre-packaged supermarket meals. I fondly remember visiting a teahouse near Oktogon Square with friends one evening, to try exquisite teas. When I looked for it twenty years later, I discovered it had been replaced by a different restaurant. However, I was struck by how multicultural the culinary landscape of the Hungarian capital had become in the interim.

In the spring of 2004, I spent time as an Erasmus student in Créteil, a suburb southeast of Paris. Life there was more expensive, and I could scarcely afford to travel through the city. Instead, I walked half an hour to what is now UPEC (Université Paris-Est Créteil) and lived on less than two euros a day, buying the cheapest food from a nearby Lidl. Yet, the simple luxury of cooking in my room, with an electric cooker and utensils provided, felt like an unimaginable privilege. When I returned home that summer, I realised I had lost weight. My father, always quick with a joke, remarked that I had sharpened up like class struggle itself.

As a cultural researcher in literature for nearly two decades, I have been part of countless and very diverse food-related settings associated

with international conferences, both in my home country and abroad, primarily in Europe, ranging from the most modest to the most exquisite. One of the most striking and relevant moments for this paper occurred at a conference on diasporas at the University of Oxford in the summer of 2010, when I was a doctoral researcher, studying postcolonial theory and Caribbean poetry in the United Kingdom. We were seated at tables in the Mansfield College Chapel Dining Hall, sharing ideas over a meal. While the others joked and laughed, I felt slightly awkward—for me, churches were places for prayer and Eucharist, not for eating and having fun. However, it was not my first time dining in a church abroad, so I kept my thoughts to myself. It was there that an Albanian participant told me, "So you are an ethnic Romanian." I laughed, realising I had never truly thought of myself as ethnic before. Yet, she was right, especially when considering the diasporic, European, international, and cosmopolitan contexts I found myself navigating.

I have begun this paper with personal culinary reminiscences because the idea for this article emerged when I understood how integral food is to my identity—and to people's identities in general. For a decade now, I have been reading novels and memoirs by contemporary Romanian women writers, both from the country and abroad, and observed strikingly different representations of cooking and dining experiences. While I am aware that academic research is, and should be, grounded in textual analysis and theory, I am using cultural and affective criticism and reader-response theory since they offer ways to explain how personal narratives can challenge inherited hierarchies and social norms, shedding light on overlooked cultural dimensions. These experiences have shaped not only my physical body but also my relationships with the world and, therefore, my interest in how food determines modern culture, especially literature.

Literary Food Studies in Multicultural Contexts

Over the past decades, the links between literature, multiculturalism and food studies in the anglophone world have undergone a series of changes that have produced a continuum of possibilities in literary criticism. Literary critics and historians have increasingly adopted research methodologies from other fields, closely or tangentially related, in order to explore the intricacies and the tensions of these relationships. Given that domains like theology and philosophy are traditionally connected with literary studies, whereas political science, sociology, psychology, technology etc. constitute newer perspectives that may illuminate literary outcomes, it is interesting to see what roles food studies have played in

this process of hermeneutic expansion and of bridging previously rather incompatible fields. Taking the universality of food into account, researchers have shifted from viewing it merely as a cultural detail to recognising it as a key lens for exploring migration, cultural hybridity, identity, and power dynamics in multiethnic and multiracial contexts, among other subjects. This includes analysing how food narratives address themes like cultural belonging, resistance, preservation and amalgamation, in the context of globalisation, in anglophone literature. When considering the amount of research in English, conceived at the intersection of literary studies, cultural studies and food studies, it is evident that anglophone literary criticism has become increasingly more multicultural. One reason is that food—much like storytelling—serves as a common denominator in all cultures. Everyone requires nourishment, be it physical or spiritual, and the means to create something consumable, be it tangible or intangible. This article explores to what extent recent anglophone literary food studies are multicultural and presents three emerging trends, taking into consideration the intensity of cultural diversity and the organisation of the published material.

Before proceeding, it is useful to clarify why multiculturalism is relevant in the context of literary food studies. In recent decades, works of literary criticism and literary history have increasingly used terms such as transnationalism, diaspora, and cosmopolitanism. These terms often emphasise particular cases or describe diversity as an exceptional situation. Many of the surveys and collections of articles examined below contain one or more chapters dedicated to representing cultural difference, reflecting a growing awareness of cultural diversity and the wish to acknowledge it within the public sphere of literary criticism.

It is important to note that there is more than one perspective on multiculturalism (Habermas 1981; Walzer 1983; Spivak 1987, 1999; Hall 1992; Taylor 1992; Bhabha 1994; Bernheimer 1995; Kymlicka 1995; Held 1995; Appadurai 1996; Brah 1996; Nussbaum 1997; Parekh 2000; Appiah 2006; Beck 2006; Sen 2006; Bhargava, Bagchi, and Sudarshan 2007; Modood 2007; Yuval-Davis 2011). These perspectives depend on what values are prioritised through discursive and theoretical practices. To start with, liberal multiculturalism emphasises individual rights and freedoms, advocating cultural diversity in a legal and political framework. As in the UK and Canada, minorities are treated equally in the public sphere and the level of assimilation is moderate. Secondly, pluralism insists on preserving diversity without forcing assimilation and on cultivating dialogue and mutual respect between groups, valuing their contributions to the cultural fabric. Like in Switzerland, this approach involves multiple official

languages and regional identities, based on pluralist ideals. Thirdly, interculturalism, as practiced in some European countries, for example, encourages cross-cultural engagement and integration, because cultural diversity is seen as a resource. Fourthly, assimilationist multiculturalism presupposes the integration of minorities into the dominant cultural framework. Historically speaking, countries like France and the United States have had policies that encouraged immigrants to adopt the values, the language and the customs of the majority. Fifthly, global multiculturalism recognises the increasing interconnectedness of the world due to globalisation and technology, with people, ideas and cultures moving across boundaries. It is noticeable in the biggest urban centres of the world, where individuals develop transnational identities and come together in hybrid cultural spaces. Sixthly, while cosmopolitanism shares many principles with multiculturalism, embracing diversity and global citizenship, it is predominantly associated with intellectual and cultural hubs that encourage global exchange. Last, but not least, ethnic or cultural nationalism is a form of multiculturalism that is less inclusive. Ethnic groups exist, but they are expected to assimilate and to accommodate themselves to the dominant culture, with the effect that indigenous peoples' rights and minority languages are less important from a literary viewpoint.

From a methodological perspective, contemporary researchers offer several conceptualisations of multiculturalism. When existing diversity is recognised and the focus on how different groups coexist, interact and negotiate their place in society, theorists speak about *descriptive multiculturalism*. When questions of justice, equality and the ethical treatment of different groups matter more than others, researchers refer to *normative multiculturalism*. When cultural analysts challenge the traditional assumptions behind multiculturalism and highlight that maintaining differences may reinforce inequalities and hierarchies, they encourage *critical multiculturalism*. When researchers investigate the multiple factors that determine identities in the context of power relations within diverse cultural settings, they practise *intersectional multiculturalism*. Eventually, when scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall emphasise cultural hybridity as a core concept in understanding multiculturalism, they argue that cultural identities are fluid and hybrid, constantly shaped through migration, globalisation, and interactions between cultures. This view challenges static and essentialist notions of culture, power and identity, and sustains a form of *dynamic multiculturalism*.

This paper seeks to take these concepts and methodologies into account and identify how the perspectives of food studies have

transformed anglophone literary studies over the past decades. The corpus consists of works published individually or collectively, usually with publishers based in anglophone countries, with authors, editors and contributors residing in many parts of the world, including in countries where English is spoken as a second language in academia. Such a research scope is relevant in the context of current digital technologies when individuals may be exposed to highly multicultural content—including food and literature—on a daily basis. We must admit that cultural diversity may occur at every level of society, not only in cosmopolitan circumstances. Taking into consideration every level of society involves acknowledging a range of inequalities which writers often represent through agricultural, culinary and ecological narratives and figures of speech. The study of food in literature challenges A. H. Maslow's famous positioning of food as merely part of the physiological needs, because gastronomic references in literary texts are not just about food, and the capacity for higher-level needs and well-being is a subjective matter. In fact, contemporary theorists of taste—in literature and in philosophy—have demonstrated that the concept of taste as an aesthetic category was constructed starting from comparisons with taste as a physiological category (Morton 2004; Gigante 2005; Perullo and Montanari 2016), which suggests that all categories of needs may intersect when food is at stake. Food may simultaneously have multiple meanings, it may express basic, psychological and self-fulfilment needs at the same time.

What follows is a survey of about fifty studies on the relationship between literature and food, published over the past decades in the anglophone world. Most of them were originally written in English, while a few—overtly or not—are translations from other languages. What follows is the result of an analysis of the extent to which each study takes cultural diversity into account as well as of the method used by the author(s) or editor(s). My article ends with a series of questions and suggestions.

Anglo-Centrist Literary Food Studies

One of the most prominent trends consists of nationalist approaches to the nexus of literary multiculturalism and food studies, which are often inflected by inward-looking and assimilationist views. Given that the United Kingdom is historically the origin of the anglophone world, English literature deserves a special place in this categorisation. A similar situation occurs in the case of the United States, Canada and Australia,

which are multicultural political projects from the start. English, American and Canadian literary landscapes have incorporated writers from elsewhere on the planet over the past, which is visible in the national literatures of the three countries.

When it comes to the English literary canon, some historians focus on the works of iconic authors like William Shakespeare or Jane Austen. In the first comprehensive gastronomic study of Shakespeare's plays, Joan Fitzpatrick (2007) addresses social and moral implications of familiar and strange food and feeding, taking into account medical thinking and some of the dietaries of the epoch. While exploring cultural differences expressed through food, she is particularly interested in the "sliding scale of strangeness" (10). According to the critic, apart from character and rank, references to food in Shakespeare's plays engage with debates about health, migration, cosmopolitanism, international trade, religion and philosophy. David B. Goldstein (2013) investigates the communal aspects of eating in Renaissance England, shifting the focus away from individual choice and looking at how sharing food shapes relationships among individuals and groups. By analysing eating relations in both literary and non-literary texts from 1547 to 1680, Goldstein argues that eating was crucial to ethical discussions and the formation of community, by adopting the concept of "relational ethics" (3) grounded in commensality. He concludes that, while reexamining food as a topic of ethical discourse may not resolve all societal issues, it heightens our awareness of how eating can both positively and negatively affect social dynamics. In their edited collection, Goldstein and Tigner (2016) emphasise the central role of the "culinary phantasmagoria" (4) in Shakespeare's plays and explore interdisciplinary perspectives on sixteenth-century issues related to food and drink that resonate today, such as ecology, consumerism, health, trade, and ethics. This collaborative volume includes ten interwoven essays in three sections: the first discusses how local or foreign origins of food and drink influence meaning; the second addresses the ideological implications of gastronomy for the body and for the state formation; and, by comparing the table to a stage, the third shows how culinary practices and theories shape and transform communities.

When it comes to British women writers, critics have tried to highlight specific issues because of gender differences and to show from the title that the content refers only to British writers. In her examination of food in Jane Austen's novels, Maggie Lane (1995) notes that, while Austen's writing is generally sparse in physical detail, she employs food to define characters, illustrate moral values, and depict domestic life such as mealtimes, menus, etiquette, gender roles, and housekeeping practice,

town and country hospitality. Sarah Moss (2009) explores eating, cooking, reading, and writing in British women's fiction between 1770 and 1830, with a focus on authors like Frances Burney, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, and Susan Ferrier. These authors approach themes of corporeality, domesticity, and economics in a markedly different way than the Romantic poet contemporaries, who emphasised idealism and history, emotions and imagination, the beauty of nature and individualism. Andrea Adolph (2009) studies the relationship between food and femininity in novels published by British women writers in the twentieth century, from *Between the Acts* by Virginia Woolf to *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding. In an earlier study, predominantly Western in scope, Sarah Sceats (2000) focuses on the works of five contemporary anglophone novelists, exploring postcolonial and cross-cultural tensions as well: Doris Lessing, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood, Michele Roberts and Alice Thomas Ellis.

Several studies chosen for this section have misleading titles because they suggest a wider scope when, in reality, cover mainly British authors. For example, the selection of texts for *A History of Food in Literature: From the Fourteenth Century to the Present* (2017) by Charlotte Boyce and Joan Fitzpatrick is clearly centred on English literature, with very few exceptions. In the same vein, in *The Literature of Food: An Introduction from 1830 to Present* (2020), Nicola Humble writes a similar literary history. Given that these books are in English and are available for an international audience, readers are invited to assume that literature means mainly English literature despite the global implication of the titles. Similar studies transmit that literature in which food matters is published only in anglophone countries, a distorted approach that needs to be addressed in an era when internet resources can be potentially accessed from everywhere on the planet.

However, certain studies on British literature delve more deeply into cultural diversity. As a result, there is a notable tendency to emphasise cultural diversity in the works of anglophone writers, though this is often approached from an assimilationist perspective. In their edited collection, Melissa Ridley Elmes and Kristin Bovaird-Abbo (2021) explore the functions of food in British outlaw narratives by adopting an interdisciplinary scope and a geography that includes France, the British Isles and the North Atlantic. Apart from well-known outlaw figures like Grendel in the Old English epic *Beowulf* and the legends that surround Robin Hood, the volume includes less-known works of different literary genres, relevant for how they reflect medieval and premodern legal concerns regarding the access to food. In the collection edited by

Alexander L. Kaufman and Penny Vlagopoulos (2019), the essayists engage with the role of food and feasting in modern outlaw narratives from England—including Irish tales—and the USA—featuring Mexican, Native American and African American characters. They examine how food preparation and consumption reveal, reinforce, or challenge established conventions. Both volumes highlight that food in outlaw narratives often represents a critique of the status quo and signals a desire for change, adding layers of meaning and driving action. However, ethnic diversity in these works remains confined to traditional representations.

Other theorists have been interested in food during Romanticism. For instance, the articles included in the collection edited by Timothy Morton (2004) explore the tensions between literature, philosophy and the history of the epoch. Trying to map early conceptions associated with food like consumption or spices, vegetarianism or addiction, the contributors touch on binaries like excess and discipline, production and consumption, luxurious versus necessary flavours, domesticity and foreignness. They discuss Romantic poetry, but they cover only British Romantic poetry, including references to new produce and eating phenomenology from the former British colonies. In his literary history of taste, Denise Gigante (2005) focuses on British Romantic poetry and the Victorian novel and dwells on Ancient Greek and Western European philosophical conceptions of taste. The effect of these books is that the whole approach is European-centred and shows how the Europeans were influenced by the discovery of new lands.

Annette Cozzi (2010) examines the role of food in Victorian novels, set during a period when imperial nationalism was formally established and enforced by the British government. The primary corpus includes novels by both male and female writers, some of which address the theme of otherness through Irish, Indian, and African characters. She highlights how both food and the novel contribute to the constructed national identity labelled as British, while subtly reinforcing the notion of English cultural superiority. The critic demonstrates that both Britishness and Englishness are composite notions of identity, each comprising discrete elements. Exploring the same epoch, Michael Parrish Lee (2016) traces how the rapport between the marriage plot and the food plot develops in nineteenth-century British novels, with the former waning as eating gains narrative prominence. This interplay serves as a pivotal intersection of biopolitics and novelistic form, emphasising the impact of Malthusian population theory and Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection on the development of the British novel. The critic scans the portrayal of eating and appetite, their roles, and their significance within the novel's

structure. The food plot becomes more prominent in those literary contexts where the characters are overseas, for example, in the West Indies or in Transylvania.

The collection of articles edited by J. Michelle Coghlan (2020) is built so as to reflect the relationship between food and literature from the Middle Ages to the multicultural present, when writers and academia are concerned with the impact of gender, racial, class, ethnic and technological difference. However, the research scope is rather limited to the anglophone world although the title of the volume suggests a wider amplitude: an article on African literature is about writers who publish their work in countries like the UK, Canada and the USA; an article on modernism and gastronomy is only about anglophone modernist literature; all contributors are based in the UK or the USA etc.

There are also studies on early readers' literature that fall within this research trend. For example, Australian scholar Carolyn Daniel (2006) examines the mind-body divide in children's narratives—primarily anglophone—highlighting how food descriptions elicit embodied responses and exposing the patriarchal foundations of Western discomfort with physicality.

In summary, such explorations of food in literature reveal diverse yet predominantly Eurocentric trends, with a significant focus on British and sometimes American and Canadian works. While some studies address multiculturalism and cultural diversity, they usually adopt assimilationist perspectives or remain confined to anglophone traditions, despite suggesting broader scopes. Scholars have examined the role of food in shaping identity, ethics, community, and critiques of social norms, emphasising its importance in narratives from Shakespeare to contemporary writers. However, the limited inclusion of non-anglophone and global perspectives highlights the need for more inclusive and comparative research approaches, especially in an era of increased accessibility to diverse literary voices from many parts of the world.

Multicultural Literary Food Studies

In contrast to the previous trend, literary criticism deeply influenced by postcolonial studies, vegan studies, ecofeminism, and ethnic studies offers alternative perspectives. This approach promotes the decolonisation of literary food studies, fosters awareness of the consequences of excessive and unsustainable production and consumption, and underscores the importance of diverse cultural representation within the scope of world literature.

One of the earliest areas of research in this field focuses on food in children's literature. This focus is not coincidental: children are a universal presence, and all of us have experienced being young, hungry, and dependent. In their edited collection of articles, Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard (2009) examine Anglo-American and multicultural children's literature, covering works from the nineteenth century to the present across various genres, employing feminist, postcolonial, and cultural perspectives to provide rich, multidimensional analyses.

From another angle, Allison Carruth (2013) comments on American literature, culinary writing and agricultural narratives as well as on essential works by authors from outside the United States, published from the World War I to the present. Considering various transnational contexts, the study highlights the double role of the United States both as the land of freedom and justice and as the land where problematic globalisation of food originates. The author proposes "a new account of globalisation that emerges out of an environmental sensibility at once local and global in its coordinates" by adopting a methodology "which expands the parameters of food writing beyond taste, the table, and cuisine" (8) and which "departs from prior scholarship, however, in showing that the history of modernity centers in no small measure on the *interactions* between places of food production and experiences of food consumption" (9).

The majority of contributors to the Routledge companion edited by Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien (2018) are based in anglophone countries, but the themes and literary works approached in the articles vary from several points of view relevant to this article: language of the original text (English or other languages), political context (national, international, transnational), historical epoch (from antiquity to the present), literary genres (from sacred texts to graphic narratives) etc. The volume explores the link between food and literature with a focus on aesthetic, cultural, political and intellectual diversity.

The collection of articles edited by Gitanjali G. Shahani (2018) expands the scope of literary food studies, referring not only to British and American literature, but also to works by writers based in countries like India, Japan or Zimbabwe or from the Caribbean. Shahani (2020) continued her research on multicultural literary food studies by reimagining Mary Louise Pratt's term of the 'contact zone' in culinary terms. She rewrote literary history by charting new vocabulary and changes in taste, with a focus on spices, sugar, coffee, bizarre and cannibalistic foods. The book draws on early fictional and non-fictional discourses of racial, cultural and religious alterity, which emerged when