

Philosophical Consciousness and Ethical Self-transformation through Food in Sudha Murthy's *The Magic of Lost Temple*

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Abstract. As both cultural and philosophical entity, Food vindicates a transformation that reflects broader ideological and societal shifts. This study analyses the literary representation of the transition of food from cultural practice to philosophical construct in the characters of *The Magic of the Lost Temple* (2015) by Sudha Murthy. Leveraging the philosophical construct of the three *Gunas*, as articulated in the *Bhagavad Gita*—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas, signifying goodness, passion, and ignorance, this research investigates the ethical, spiritual, and moral dimensions encoded within food choices and culinary traditions, moving beyond their sustenance role. Additionally, the notion of culinary triangle adumbrated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, manifesting in raw, cooked, and rotten serves as a structural framework to analyse the representation of food as a metaphor for transformation and moral development. The paper will underscore the protagonist, Nooni, who undergoes a transformative culinary journey, shifting from a modern, convenience-oriented consumption to one characterised by traditional, value-laden engagement, reflecting a movement from Rajasic and Tamasic inclinations toward a Sattvic ideal. Employing the structuralist approach of Lévi-Strauss, this paper demonstrates how the preparation and consumption of food in the narrative of Sudha Murthy marks a transition from unrefined cultural practices to an enlightened, philosophical perspective. This transition, as depicted in the novel, reinforces how food shapes individual consciousness and communal identity, a concept further supported by the assertion of *Bhagavad Gita* that “the food that is dear to each is also following their nature” (*Bhagavad Gita* 17.7). Through an intertextual reading, synthesizing these frameworks, this study underscores the role of food in cultivating philosophical consciousness and ethical self-transformation within this narrative of Murthy.

Keywords : Food; identity; philosophy; *Bhagavad Gita*; structuralism.

Food in its essence, in narrative is intertwined with human existence, far predominating its role as mere sustenance. It is a potent cultural artifact, a symbolic language that conveys profound emotions, intricate social structures, and the very essence of identity. In literature, this symbolism is amplified, transforming meals into pivotal moments that illuminate character development, cultural dynamics, and philosophical explorations. From the ritualistic feasts of ancient epics, symbolizing communal unity and divine favour, to the solitary meals in modern novels, reflecting alienation and introspection, food serves as a powerful lens through which we understand the human condition. Sudha Murthy, a writer renowned for her ability to distil complex cultural and ethical dilemmas into accessible narratives, masterfully employs food as a narrative tool in *The Magic of the Lost Temple* (2015). Her storytelling, characterized by its emphasis on simplicity, moral clarity, and the celebration of traditional values, renders her exploration of food particularly poignant. This novel, a coming-of-age story charting Nooni's journey from urban disconnection to a deeply immersive rural experience, positions food as a central catalyst for her transformation. As Nooni's grandmother explains, "Food is not just to fill the stomach; it carries love, care, and tradition" (Murthy, 45). The temple and its surrounding village, with their rich culinary traditions and communal dining practices, become a crucible for Nooni's personal and philosophical evolution. As it is stated in the *Bhagavad Gita* that Foods that increase life, purity, strength, health, joy, and cheerfulness, which are savoury and oleaginous, substantial and agreeable, are dear to those in the mode of goodness.

Moreover, Lévi-Strauss's structuralist culinary triangle 'raw', 'cooked', and 'rotten' offers a compelling framework to analyse Nooni's transformation. In the village, cooking is a communal act, a process that symbolizes not only a way of nutrition but also the transmission of cultural knowledge. As Lévi-Strauss posits, "cooking, in its essence, establishes the difference between nature and culture" (*The Raw and the Cooked*, 164). Her initial unfamiliarity with traditional methods of food preparation highlights her urban alienation, but as she learns the rhythms of rural life, she comes to understand that to cook is to preserve, to transform, and to belong. The contrast between the artificial convenience of urban food and the authenticity of rural meals underscores the broader theme of reconnection with tradition, nature, and self. This paper posits that food in this narrative is not merely a backdrop but an active agent of change, a

bridge connecting cultural immersion with philosophical enlightenment, and that this transformation can be best understood through the dual lenses of the concept of the *Gunas* enunciated in the *Bhagavad Gita* and Lévi-Strauss' structuralist culinary triangle, revealing the complex interplay between diet, culture, and self-discovery. As Nooni reflects that Food is more than taste, it is memory, love, and life itself. Through the act of eating, cooking, and sharing, she finds a path not only to her heritage but also to a deeper understanding of herself and the world around her.

The Gunas in *The Bhagavad Gita*: Culinary Reflections of Inner States and Ethical Considerations

The concept of the three *Gunas* adumbrated in *The Bhagavad Gita* 'Sattva', 'Rajas', and 'Tamas' provides a profound framework for understanding the connection between diet and consciousness. These qualities, inherent in nature, permeate all aspects of existence, including food, shaping our mental and emotional states. *Sattva*, representing purity, harmony, and balance, is associated with foods that promote clarity and tranquillity, such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and grains. *Rajas*, which signifies passion, activity, and desire, is linked to stimulating foods like spices and pungent flavours, which energize but can also agitate the mind. *Tamas*, which symbolizes inertia, darkness, and ignorance, is connected to heavy, stale, or processed foods that dull the senses and promote lethargy. The classification of food under these *Gunas* is not merely a dietary guideline but a reflection of a larger philosophical and ethical worldview. As Prabhuji notes, "Food is not only sustenance but also an instrument of inner transformation, with every meal influencing one's mental and emotional equilibrium" (*Food and Consciousness: A Yogic Perspective*, 42). In this narrative, Nooni's culinary experiences are a microcosm of this philosophical framework. Initially, her encounter with the vibrant, often spicy, regional cuisine reflects a *Rajasic* engagement, mirroring her energetic, if somewhat disoriented, immersion into a new cultural landscape. Her early experiences, filled with curiosity and sensory stimulation, align with the assertion manifested in the *Bhagavad Gita* that *Rajasic* foods 'produce pain, grief, and disease' despite their initial appeal.

As she begins to participate in the preparation of *Sattvic* meals—simple, nourishing dishes crafted from locally sourced ingredients—Nooni experiences a profound shift, finding solace and spiritual

clarity in the purity of her diet. This engagement signifies her transition into an unfamiliar environment, where the excitement of new tastes parallels the psychological turbulence of adaptation. As she begins to participate in the preparation of Sattvic meals, simple, nourishing dishes crafted from locally sourced ingredients, Nooni experiences a profound shift, finding solace and spiritual clarity in the purity of her diet. This transformation is emblematic of what K.T. Achaya describes in *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* as “the intimate relationship between food and dharma, where what is consumed shapes the ethical and spiritual dimensions of life” (132). The simplicity of these meals, and the labour that goes into making them, reflects the simplicity of the life she is learning, fostering a deep connection to the natural world and the community that sustains her. Conversely, her initial unfamiliarity with local food customs, and any instances of food waste, symbolize a *Tamasic* disconnect, representing her initial resistance to cultural adaptation and a lack of understanding of the sacredness of food. As Nooni’s dietary preferences evolve, moving towards a more *Sattvic* approach, her spiritual and ethical understanding deepens, demonstrating how food choices can reflect and shape inner states. This aligns with Kapila Vatsyayan’s argument that Indian culinary traditions are deeply tied to notions of purity and the cosmic balance, where the act of eating is inseparable from the act of being. The philosophical implications of these choices, including the ethical considerations surrounding food production, consumption, and waste, become central to her journey.

The philosophical dimensions of Nooni’s culinary choices, particularly the ethical considerations surrounding food production, consumption, and waste, constitute a pivotal aspect of her transformative journey. Drawing upon the *Bhagavad Gita*, the paper posits that sacred food, offered with devotion, nourishes the spirit and aligns the eater with the divine, thereby underscoring the transformative potential of Sattvic dietary practices undertaken by the narrative. Consequently, Nooni’s trajectory transcends mere cultural acclimation, evolving into a profound exploration of the moral and spiritual significance inherent in sustenance.

The integration of this philosophical framework within *The Magic of the Lost Temple* not only celebrates India’s rich culinary heritage but also elucidates food’s role as an ethical and spiritual compass. Nooni’s progression from a detached observer to an active participant in Sattvic traditions exemplifies the narrative’s assertion that food functions as a

medium for self-discovery, discipline, and spiritual atonement, extending beyond mere physical nourishment. As Krishnadas observes, “Culinary habits in Indian philosophy are not about taste alone but about aligning the body and mind with the principles of the cosmic order” (*Spiritual Nourishment: The Role of Food in Hindu Traditions*, 203). This perspective reinforces Murthy’s utilization of food as a vehicle for cultural immersion, self-realization, and philosophical awakening. Conversely, Nooni’s initial unfamiliarity with local culinary customs and any instances of food waste serve as symbolic representations of a Tamasic disconnect, signifying her initial resistance to cultural adaptation and a deficient understanding of the sacred nature of food.

Lévi-Strauss’ Culinary Triangle: Structuring Cultural Understanding and Social Dynamics

Lévi-Strauss’ culinary triangle, comprises, the raw, the cooked, and the rotten, which offers a structuralist framework for analysing cultural food practices and their underlying social dynamics. The ‘raw’ represents nature in its unprocessed state, symbolizing a lack of cultural mediation and order. The ‘cooked’ signifies the transformation of raw materials through cultural processes, reflecting the imposition of societal order and refinement. The ‘rotten’ represents decay and disorder, often symbolizing cultural breakdown or a lack of respect for tradition. As Claude Lévi-Strauss explains in *The Origin of Table Manners*, “Cooking marks the transition from nature to culture” (405), a process deeply embedded in communal identity and tradition. In *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, Nooni’s initial urban perspective, marked by a lack of familiarity with rural culinary practices, represents a ‘raw’ understanding. Her detachment from the origins of her food and her reliance on processed meals reflect a disconnection from the natural world and the cultural traditions that sustain it. As she engages with the communal cooking practices of the temple, she transitions to a ‘cooked’ understanding, learning the intricate techniques and cultural significance of local dishes. The temple’s kitchen becomes a space of cultural transmission, where Nooni not only learns to prepare food but also absorbs the stories, rituals, and values associated with it. This aligns with Roland Barthes’ assertion that “food serves as a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviours” (*Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, 24).

The act of cooking, therefore, becomes a metaphor for cultural integration and spiritual growth. The 'rotten' aspect, metaphorically, can be seen in the urban lifestyle she leaves behind, a place where food is often treated as a commodity rather than a sacred resource. It also appears when any food is wasted, or when traditions are misunderstood or disregarded, signifying a cultural decay. As Mary Douglas states, 'Dirt is matter out of place' (*Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* 44), suggesting that cultural disorder is marked, suggesting that cultural disorder is marked by the erosion of culinary traditions. The waste of food, or its detachment from its ritualistic and social significance, represents a loss of cultural integrity. This process of culinary transformation is further enriched by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, which suggests that food practices are a form of social distinction and identity. Nooni's journey reflects an accumulation of cultural capital as she moves from ignorance to expertise, integrating herself into the traditions of the temple. As Bourdieu argues in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (6), highlighting how Nooni's adoption of rural culinary practices marks a shift in her identity and social belonging.

Moreover, the communal nature of the temple's kitchen aligns with anthropologist Marcel Mauss' theory of the gift. The preparation and sharing of food become a reciprocal exchange that strengthens social bonds and reinforces cultural continuity. Mauss states in *The Gift*, "The gift is never free; it binds individuals in a continuous cycle of reciprocity" (17). Through her participation in temple cooking, Nooni is not just acquiring culinary skills but is actively engaging in a cultural and spiritual exchange that redefines her relationship with food and community.

Additionally, the sacred dimension of food in the temple underscores Mircea Eliade's concept of the sacred and the profane. The kitchen serves as a liminal space where the mundane act of cooking becomes a sacred ritual. Eliade notes in *The Sacred and the Profane* that "man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane" (11). In this sense, Nooni's experience in the temple kitchen is not just a culinary education but a spiritual awakening that reconfigures her understanding of food as a sacred entity.

Thus, *The Magic of the Lost Temple* exemplifies how food preparation and consumption are not merely practical acts but are deeply embedded in cultural narratives and social structures, reflecting the values and beliefs of a community. Sudha Murthy's novel, through its portrayal of Nooni's journey, underscores how culinary traditions serve as an avenue for cultural education and transformation. The novel ultimately affirms Lévi-Strauss' structuralist insight that food is more than sustenance; it is a symbol of civilization, community, and dynamic continuity.

Food as a Bridge to Cultural Immersion and Community: The Social Fabric of Shared Meals

Nooni's participation in food preparation and sharing becomes a powerful catalyst for cultural immersion and community integration. Her involvement in cooking and serving meals fosters a sense of belonging, breaking down social barriers and creating a sense of camaraderie. As Arjun Appadurai suggests, "cuisine is a highly condensed social fact" (*Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia*, 495) and Nooni's integration into the community through food underscores its role as a medium of cultural negotiation and identity formation. Communal meals serve as a platform for storytelling, cultural exchange, and the transmission of traditional values. The social dynamics present during these meals, the sharing of recipes, the passing down of culinary techniques, and the communal enjoyment of food draw attention to the importance of food in building social bonds. The evolving relationship of Nooni with food, a dynamic reflective of both cultural preservation and transformation, underscores a scholarly consensus that food functions as a significant cultural site.

As Sidney Mintz argues in *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, "food choices serve as conscious and unconscious affirmations of identity" (7), a principle evident in Nooni's internalisation of the cultural ethos embedded within local culinary traditions. Key scenes that illustrate Nooni's culinary journey, such as her learning to prepare local delicacies and participating in temple feasts, highlight the transformative impact of these experiences on her cultural understanding. The impact of learning the traditional cooking methods, and the importance of the oral tradition, becomes central to Nooni's acculturation. Oral transmission of culinary knowledge is a form of storytelling, that reinforces cultural memory and heritage. Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked* highlights that "culinary transformations parallel social transformations" (28), a concept

present in Nooni's journey as she transitions from an outsider to an accepted member of the community through her mastery of local dishes.

Thus, Food becomes a method of cultural exchange, and the sharing of food, is the sharing of cultural identity, solidifying Nooni's place within the community. The act of sharing food, and the food itself, becomes a language that Nooni learns. Her culinary immersion ultimately evinces food's instrumentality in facilitating not only cultural negotiation and social inclusion but also profound personal transformation. By engaging with traditional culinary practices, she achieves enhanced cultural acumen, cultivates significant interpersonal relationships, and integrates herself seamlessly into communal life.

Food and Philosophical Enlightenment: Nourishing the Mind, Body, and Spirit

Nooni's culinary experiences lead to a deeper philosophical understanding of herself and her place in the world. Food becomes a tool for self-discovery, allowing her to connect with her surroundings and appreciate the interconnectedness of life. Her engagement with food reinforces the importance of preserving cultural traditions and encourages ethical considerations regarding food production and consumption. These practices are embedded within a larger cultural and philosophical framework, where Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that food is good to think with and in Nooni's case, it becomes a medium for contemplating ethical, cultural, and existential questions. Learning the origins of food, and the labour involved in its production deepens her respect for sustenance and fosters a sense of gratitude. The simple act of eating, when done with mindfulness and gratitude, becomes a spiritual experience, a communion with the natural world and the community that sustains her. Food becomes a vehicle for transmitting philosophical and ethical lessons within the narrative, highlighting the importance of respect for the food that is provided, and the philosophical implications of food waste. The act of cooking and eating becomes a meditative practice, a way to cultivate awareness and appreciate the simple joys of life.

Conclusion

In *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, food transcends its basic function as sustenance, becoming a powerful symbol of cultural immersion and philosophical enlightenment. Nooni's journey, marked by her evolving

relationship with food, reflects the transformative power of culinary experiences in bridging cultural gaps and fostering a deeper understanding of self and the world. Through the dual lenses of the *Gunas* and Lévi-Strauss' culinary triangle, it can be inferred how food shapes her perceptions, guides her spiritual growth, and solidifies her connection to the community. Sudha Murthy's narrative underscores the complex cultural and philosophical significance of the simple act of eating, reminding us that food is not just sustenance but a vital thread in the fabric of human experience, a language that speaks to our deepest values and beliefs. The simple act of eating is a very complex cultural and philosophical experience, and through food, Nooni can become a new person. The food, and the act of eating it, becomes a metaphor for Nooni's own transformation, a narrative of growth and cultural awakening.

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