

Feast for All: Folklore and Foodlore in Lawrence Norfolk's *John Saturnall's Feast*

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Abstract

The act of eating is a basic human need. Food is a mirror of life, like literature. The increasing significance of food in sociology, history, and culture is reflected in literature as "Food Literature." This article deals with Lawrence Norfolk's *John Saturnall's Feast* as a culinary fiction of feast and foodlore, with reference to folklore under the approach of cultural materialism. The novel is based on seventeenth-century British cuisine, with the historical context of food, the theoretical method of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism as the focus of Psychoanalysis, and close textual analysis of culture and societal political commitment, all based on the four key principles of cultural materialism. It is a type of gastronomy that dates back to the Roman God Saturn, the myth of origin and the seventeenth century in Britain, specifically the period of civil war. It exemplifies food in terms of History, Culture, Sociology, Economics, Politics, and Psychology.

Key words: Culinary; Cuisine; Gastronomy; Myth; Foodlore; Feast

The evolution of writing and literary techniques in British literature over time is referred to as the history of British literature. Food literature is one of the emerging fields of literature. The presence of food in novels, poems, dramas, and literary essays is indeed much more of a realistic portrayal of everyday human existence.

Food acts as a medium of communication between cooks and eaters, as well as between authors and readers which serves as a layer of meaning and significance in literary texts, reflecting and sometimes complicating the words in the text. It is an ideal tool for literary authors because of its ability to reflect social organisation and allow for infinite interpretation, such as a language of symbols within a language.

Lawrence Norfolk is a British novelist best known for writing historical fiction with complex plots and detailed descriptions. He skilfully entangles folklore and foodlore in his fourth novel, *John Saturnall's Feast* (2012). The story is rather unimportant, and its ultimate aim is to lead the readers to a luxurious feast where the author fully displays his vast knowledge of English Baroque cuisine.

John Saturnall, the son of a local herbalist, is driven into a world of privileged origins and background, where he needs to face suspicion and bullying, which is counterbalanced by some of his special abilities. He is endowed with an almost supernatural sense of smell that allows him to identify the individual ingredients even in the most delicate dishes, which pave the way for him to pursue a career as a cook. As a cook, he is to carry on his mother's legacy by organising the feast.

Norfolk's narrator drew the reader into John's story from his early childhood, when he was bullied by other children in the village, through a difficult phase in his life when he lost his mother, and finally, with a stroke of luck, he was able to get a position as a cook in a Somerset Mansion. He grows both personally and professionally, falls in love with the wrong person, experiences the Civil War as a Master Cook, and ends his story with a fairy-tale ending.

Food is used as a means of differentiation among people in all cultures, and it is even considered a preserving factor of culture. Cultural Materialism, a term coined by Raymond Williams, is used in the novel to entangle folklore and foodlore. It is concerned with specific historical documents, and attempts to analyse and recreate the dominant set of ideals or beliefs of a specific historical period.

Some critics, such as Tony Bennett, have disputed the claim that cultural materialism is necessarily a Marxist theory, but the practitioners of cultural materialism have operated broadly within the parameters of Marxist conceptions of struggle and history. In the foreword to *Political Shakespeare*, Jonathan Dollimore and Allen Sinfield set out the four key principles of cultural materialism, based on which Norfolk's *John Saturnall's Feast* is analysed in the present article along with historical context, theoretical method, close textual analysis, and political commitment.

Historical context in cultural materialism deals with the events of the past in the novel with reference to culture. During the seventeenth century, English cuisine underwent several transformations, in the view of Norfolk, which are a reflection of changes in society and historical events. As an apprentice, John Saturnall enters a nearly self-contained world with the highest purpose of creating decadently refined dishes that satisfy the ruling class's aestheticism rather than hunger.

The elevation of John from the kitchen boy to the master cook permitted him to prepare a feast, especially the dishes for the higher table. It is a feast with a purpose, the reunion of the two houses, Fremantle and Callock, under the hands of Charles I, King of England, Scotland, and Ireland. His special dish of deep sugar coated with sour salt allowed him to sit beside the king, and it also allowed the king to understand the value of the servant, especially the Sayer of his father's time, whose task was to taste the king's food and pass it fit for the royal plateful.

During the civil war, the Commander-in-Chief of the parliament army, Oliver Cromwell, defeated the ruling party. As soon as he took power, he delivered an unexpected lesson to the nation, armed with a Flintlock and a Bible. He mentioned that there were no Christmas, May-feast, Hocktide, feast, or fast. He did, in fact, completely avoid all such luxuries. He also added that the Dukes wanted to seek their dinners in the hedgerows or flee to Paris's garrets after oysters were mixed with crumbs.

Cromwell remembers that in these simple dishes, a pickled fish and a bowl of gruel was a Benison for a Lord, and a drop-apple was supper enough for the fattest Bishop. He claims that Food is for hunger and not for the ruling class's aestheticism. Such a kind of food-related attitude was unavoidably popular among the Puritans. All of this, combined with the historical circumstances, transforms John Saturnall from a cook in an aristocratic household to one who prepares food for Puritan soldiers.

After Cromwell gave up power, Charles II was restored as King of England. This restoration brings back feasts and all other luxurious celebrations for the purpose of the ruling class's aestheticism. Naturally, once the restoration habits are restored, gourmet cuisine is also restored or even elevated to a greater position:

A Feast for the Union of Two Houses once sundered and at last rejoined, being the Fremantles and Callocks, served in the Year of Our Kingdom's Restoration. Only those with long Memories will now recall the Union of Piers Callock, Lord of Forham and Artois, to Lady Lucretia Fremantle, in the first Year of the Reign of our second King Charles. (Norfolk 385)

From this vantage point, *John Saturnall's Feast* could be viewed as an immensely interesting cultural history presented in the appealing form of a novel. The Civil War-related passages in Norfolk's story are fairly common in the country of England. The seventeenth century in England was gloomy, stormy, and violent, but it was also extremely fruitful in terms of scientific and cultural developments.

Analysing the novel in the thematical method of cultural materialism paves the way to focus on psychoanalysis in the novel. In the words of Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis has deeply influenced both structuralism and post-structuralism. It deals with the life of the kitchen boy, John, who learned from his mother that the real feast is not on the plate but on the mind. Such a feast made his mother, Susan, stay alive in the forest without eating.

Similarly, the feast on the mind can be imagined from the recipe description of John to Lucretia in order to make her give up her fasting by eating his dish. It is also demonstrated when she cooks for him out of love. Although the food is not delicious, the images she creates for him give the feel of the real feast to him.

This method of analysis also deals with the details of food as a temptation. The word passed by Sir William to John was that he was to tempt his daughter, Lucretia, with his

minute details in the preparation of the dishes that he had made for her. Despite the fact that she ignored the dish while under the supervision of the officials, she became really tempted and wished to have it without alarming the officials.

The psychoanalysis also brings out the work load and the sufferings of John as a kitchen boy, a cook, and also as a master cook. In comparison, he suffered the most as a kitchen boy and cook. He struggled as a kitchen boy to work in all the rooms like the spice room, the bakehouse, the jointing room, and the cellars without having proper treatment and sleep.

When John was elevated as a cook, he realised that there were many things to incorporate into him, which led him to volunteer himself in the works of all the rooms at different times. He woke up as the first person and learned many things after several attempts and considered himself as he only knew a little, which encouraged him to learn many things in a short time rather than others in the kitchen.

During the time of feast, John agonised sleeplessly, which provoked him to say: "A Hall of Feasters will eat until the good Earth's Fruits are exhausted and drink until the Oceans run dry" (164). This clearly depicts his frustrated mind. He was also struck between the words of his mother, who says that the feast is for all, and Master Scovell, who claims the feast is for the cook.

According to John's mother, a true feast is based on unity rather than its richness. Master Scovell claims that a true feast is a mixture of clear and deep running parts in which a scholarly and humble cook must decipher the dishes that should speak in tongues because a cook does not leave any monument, like other professionals. The cook's only monument is the feast that he prepares for others, so the feast belongs to the cook.

Though John gets confused by the words of Master Scovell in the central part of the novel, he sticks himself with the words of his mother, to whom he had promised to keep the feast for everyone. His obstinate attitude changed the minds of Scovell, who stated that the feast was not only for the cook but for all because, as a master cook, he served the king, but the king himself had someone to serve the feast. As a result, before leaving the manor house, he, too, adopts Susan's point of view.

Close Textual analysis in cultural materialism is an investigation of canonical texts that are identified as "prominent cultural icons". The novel deals with the folklore of the Roman god Saturnus, who created the first garden where the first men and women kept the Saturnall feast, which is the representation of foodlore. Saturnians lived in the feast, where they were free of hunger and pain.

"The Feast," a carnival-like ritual with roots dating back to the Pre-Christian era, when it was a Pre-Christian version of the Roman Saturnalia. The celebrations are the source of many of the traditions which are associated with Christmas. Saturnall is the surname of John in the later part of the novel, which is the representation of the Roman feast honouring the agricultural god Saturn.

The feast begins in the garden with the spiced wine made up of dates, honey, and saffron that are available in the first garden. The second garden is planned in the air where birds like larks, hens, plovers, snipes, and fowls can enjoy their lives. The third garden was the river, where fish jumped in and out of the water, and the fourth garden was the sea, with its scuttling crabs. Then came the orchards. All these represent the healthy and harmonious

life of the old man, who considered nature's giving as a feast and led a happy life with nature without pain and hunger.

Every green thing grown in Bellicca's garden, which was later called the Garden of Eden, is for everyone, and they keep a feast for all. When the Romans went home, Coldcloak came to the garden and kept the feast with Bellicca. Out of jealousy, Jehovah condemned Saturnus as a false idol who had led his people into sin. In order to scatter them, he spreads the word that their amity was lust, their ease was sloth, and the feast was greed.

For Eve's sin, Jehovah took away everything in the name of God, who considered Eve the first witch, and he expelled them all. He made Bellicca and her people be driven out of the Vale, all the way into Buckland's woods. Saint Clod swore an oath to Jehovah's priests, but out of love, he took the orchard and the feast to Buckland and Manor's house. From the first garden to the manor house, it is their cultural aim to have a feast for all.

Norfolk is heavily influenced by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and he incorporates Eden Garden into *John Saturnall's Feast*. The poet who wanted to "justify the ways of God to man" is widely regarded as the greatest English poet of the seventeenth century. Milton's story of the Fall in *Paradise Lost* only gives the reader a glimpse of Eden as he understands it within Christian theology.

Norfolk is against the view of Milton's interpretation of the Garden and proposes a very different version. It is a pagan, mythical vision, but its contemporary realisation is more accessible according to the belief that the garden's memory is still alive and can be reawakened by a feast, carnival, or Saturnalia. This is the central theme of the novel, and it can be read as a provocative alternative to the traditional historical picture of English literature and culture in the seventeenth century.

Cultural icons in the novel include the Roman god Saturnus, biblical characters and references such as Adam, Eve, Abel, and the Garden of Eden, as well as their folklore and foodlore. Norfolk's story is a fascinating counterpoint to the dominant Puritan discourse, which is exemplified by authors such as Milton.

Political Commitment in Cultural Materialism includes political theories like Feminist and Marxist theory. According to feminist theory, Jehovah's jealousy over Bellicca made him take away everything from her for Eve's sin, which shows the dominant nature of him. Fremantle thane had sworn an oath to God:

As God's Ministers directed me, and for the sake of his Son Jesus Christ, so I swear: that we and all our Descendants do keep these Lands and Hearths and hold them for our Sovereign King. Let no Woman take Fire to the Hearth, nor tend the Vale's Fires, nor give Nourishment save she be bid, nor rule in the Vale, nor hold Rights to a Virgate of Land, nor keep Retainers or Servants lest these Lands be surrendered again to the Enemies of Our Lord . . . (109-10)

This clearly demonstrates the suppression of women in the hearth, land, and rule under man in the name of God's oath. Even if Lady Lucretia Fremantle were to attain her majority, she continued to implacably without a male heir, so she was forced to marry Piers Callock, Lord of Forham and Artois.

Lady Lucretia has the qualities to rule better than the drunker Piers, but she has been ignored because of her gender. In the absence of the male superiors who had gone to the civil war, Lucretia saved Buckland. She holds her promise even under the harassment of Ephraim

Clough to safeguard their land. Piers could not save himself from the enemies and was incapable of riding his horse on the battlefield. He is deceptive and cannot rule or be king. The oath of her ancestor forced her to marry Piers in the latter part of the novel, which depicts male oppression and female suppression in this novel.

An analysis of Marxism in this novel highlights the differences between the ruling and working classes, as well as the equality that existed in the past and is depicted in folklore. There were various categories of cooks, such as kitchen boy, under cook, and master cook, who would prepare dishes for various tables:

The King and Queen, their closest courtiers and Sir William, Lady Lucretia and the Callocks would occupy the High Table. Below them, at the uppermost trestles on the floor of the Great Hall, would sit the other gentlemen of the King's Household with Father Yapp, Miss Pole and the other higher servants. Placed below them, crammed in at boards hammered together by the Estate's carpenters, was everyone else. (221)

The master cook will make rich dishes for the king, queen, and the other superiors on the "High Table" and different dishes for the ministers and other officials who serve on the floor below the high table in the great hall. The undercook will prepare food for all the servants and everyone else who has crowded below the higher household and servants.

Even during the war, despite the fact that the pantry was about to be drained, the king and the high table members were served the best and richest foods, while the soldiers were supposed to eat whatever was left over in the pantry. Though there are many inequalities between the rulers and their servants, the inequality in preparing and serving food is depicted as a part of foodlore in this novel.

There are numerous depictions of equal tables in the folklore of the first feast and the serving of the first men and women, but the equality of Manor house people in the woods out of hunger is much more notable:

There was no garden. There was no Feast. They were lost long ago. Then a woman's voice sounded. "Eden had no High Table." ... "The first men and women ate together as equals," declared Lucretia. "So will we. They were alike in their riches. So are we in our poverty." ... "All of us. We shall make it. And we shall eat it." (357-58)

They all come together to make "Food of Paradise," which was a dish of peanuts dug from the land's snowy surface. Lucretia's love for John and poverty caused her to regard her servants as equals to overcome their hunger and survive in the woods, which led her to draw inspiration from the folklore of Eden Garden. The concept of "Feast for All" appears in several chapters of the novel and exemplifies Marxism's equality of rights.

The novel's core idea is the feast, from which the story progresses through the entanglement of folklore and foodlore. Food and mind, the myth of origins, feasting and battlefield, and food and politics were all highlighted in this culinary fiction by the entanglement of four principles of cultural materialism in this article.

The story is much less prominent, but it offers the reader both a spectacular view and a hyper-realistic perspective on seventeenth-century English cuisine. Norfolk takes pride in the minute details of pre-revolutionary cuisine, which was rich and diverse. It is emphasised by the fact that Norfolk's culinary descriptions are not merely ornamental but actually significant.

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