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Gastronomic Memory and Intergenerational Taste: Loss, Transmission and Recovery through Food in Laapataa Ladies

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ABSTRACT: *Kiran Rao's Laapataa Ladies* (2024), written by *Biplab Goswami*, unfolds through the story of two young brides who lose themselves during a train journey; yet the film's narrative extends beyond this literal displacement to explore the symbolic terrains of memory, identity, and resistance. This paper examines how *Laapataa Ladies* celebrates the intimate and often overlooked power of food as a site of gastronomic memory, intergenerational taste, and feminine agency in contemporary Indian cinema. While food in film is frequently analysed as a marker of culture, domesticity, or social identity, this study foregrounds the sensorial and affective dimensions of taste , its capacity to evoke empathy, trauma, longing, and self-assertion across generations within patriarchal and gendered frameworks. Anchored in memory studies and feminist phenomenology, the paper treats food not merely as sustenance but as a vessel of emotion, a taste keeper of tales, and a recipe that stitches together the forgotten past and the unfolding present.

By interrogating motifs of culinary amnesia under patriarchal expectations, the analysis reveals how *Laapataa Ladies* transforms the acts of cooking and eating into subtle forms of resistance. The film situates food as both silence and voice, erasure and testimony : rendering it a symbolic site through which women reclaim agency and reconstruct identity. Through the recovery of lost flavours and remembered aromas, the narrative reclaims erased histories and reimagines domestic spaces as arenas of poetic, political, and emotional resonance. The paper argues that *Laapataa Ladies* positions gastronomy as a transformative aesthetic and political practice; one that restores memory, challenges patriarchal authority, and affirms women's subjectivity through the intimate language of taste.

Key terms: Feminist phenomenology, Gastronomic Memory, Intergenerational taste, Culinary Amnesia, Memory Studies

I. INTRODUCTION

Each grain of rice carries a whisper of the past, and each simmering pot pulses with remembrance. In contemporary Indian cinema, food has moved beyond the realm of sustenance to become a language of identity, emotion, and resistance, a sensorial grammar through which filmmakers negotiate the politics of memory and belonging. Within this evolving cinematic discourse, *Laapataa Ladies* (2024), directed by Kiran Rao and written by Biplab Goswami, stands out as a delicately layered cultural text that blends humour, realism, and feminist critique to explore how women navigate identity, displacement, and autonomy.

Beneath its apparently light-hearted premise, two newly married brides mistakenly swapped during a crowded train journey through rural India, simmers a profound meditation on gender, memory, and self-reclamation. The story centers on Phool Kumari, a gentle newlywed bride, and Jaya (who assumes the name

Pushpa Rani), an intelligent young woman forcefully married and searching for autonomy. During the chaotic journey, Phool is mistakenly separated from her husband Deepak, while Jaya finds herself unexpectedly welcomed into Deepak's family. Stranded alone at the railway station, Phool is taken in by the resilient Manju Maai, a tea stall owner, and slowly discovers economic and emotional independence as she finds support and solidarity among other women. Meanwhile, Jaya defies her oppressive circumstances, exposing her husband Pradeep's violence, and finally chooses to pursue her dreams of organic farming, aided by allies like Deepak's sister-in-law and the principled police officer Shyam Manohar. Through these parallel journeys of displacement and discovery, food becomes both metaphor and medium: a space where histories are kneaded into dough, emotions simmer in pots, and acts of feeding and tasting acquire political significance.

In *Laapataa Ladies*, food is not a backdrop but an affective protagonist. The film's visual and sonic textures, steam rising from a kettle, the rhythmic clatter of utensils, the sharing of rotis and tea evoke what Sara Ahmed (2006) terms "the politics of orientation": how bodies inhabit, resist, and re-shape the spaces that define them. The disorientation experienced by the film's lost brides becomes, in Ahmed's terms, a necessary reorientation toward new possibilities of being. As they move between homes, kitchens, and roadside stalls, culinary gestures trace the contours of female subjectivity, turning nourishment into narrative and the ordinary act of cooking into a choreography of resistance.

Guided by the frameworks of feminist phenomenology and memory studies, the article *"Gastronomic Memory and Intergenerational Taste: Loss, Transmission, and Recovery through Food in Laapataa Ladies*" reads *Laapataa Ladies* as a sensorial archive of gastronomic memory, a repository where emotion, taste, and embodied knowledge intersect. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's claim in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) that "the body is our general medium for having a world," feminist phenomenologists such as Iris Marion Young and Ahmed herself emphasise that gendered bodies experience the world through spatial and material constraints. Domestic cooking thus becomes a form of culinary domesticity: a habitual performance that disciplines the feminine body even as it enables subtle acts of agency. Within patriarchal households, the kitchen operates as what Pierre Nora would call a lieu de mémoire, a site of both remembrance and erasure. Through repetitive gestures of care, women sustain others while forgetting themselves, a process that this paper terms culinary amnesia.

"*Gastronomic Memory and Intergenerational Taste: Loss, Transmission, and Recovery through Food in Laapataa Ladies*" serves up and beautifully unveils a distinctly feminist aesthetics of culinary memory, where food becomes both language and legacy. Through the rhythmic choreography of stirring, serving, and sharing, the film transforms the unnoticed labour of cooking into an art of remembering and reimagining womanhood. Each recipe simmers with resistance, each morsel carries memory, turning nourishment into narrative. Rao's film reclaims the kitchen as a crucible of sovereignty, where women's silenced creativity finally finds its voice. The analytical arc unfolds like a five-course meal of feminist awakening, each scene serving new flavours of defiance and renewal. Within the fragrant folds of rotis and chutney, culinary gestures rise as quiet rebellions, transforming service into self-expression. In this sensorial politics of sustenance, taste itself becomes freedom: an edible act of reclaiming the right to feel, to belong, and to be.

II. TRANSMITTING INHERITED TASTES: INTERGENERATIONAL MEMORY AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

Taste in *Laapataa Ladies* operates as a form of inheritance: a sensory and cultural archive through which patriarchal values, silences, and gestures are transmitted across generations. Yet, within this inheritance lies the possibility of rupture: a reawakening to forgotten desires and suppressed autonomy. Rao's women inhabit the tension between learned submission and emergent self-awareness, tasting both the bitterness of conformity and the sweetness of resistance. Through the act of cooking and eating, the film traces how memory is not only preserved but also reinvented in the hands of those who dare to question it.

In one quiet but emotionally charged moment, Jaya (the woman mistakenly brought home by Deepak) compliments Deepak's mother on her cooking. The older woman responds, "I don't even remember what I like … we just make what the men like"). Her words, prompted by Jaya's gentle appreciation, expose the generational conditioning of feminine taste. The food being served here becomes a double symbol: of inheritance - what the family has always cooked, and transmission -what gets passed down. Deepak's mother reveals a habitus of self-effacement, a learned suppression of personal preference that sustains patriarchal domestic order. Jaya's presence, however, becomes a catalyst for reflection, hinting at the possibility of rupture: an awakening to what has been inherited and what might be questioned.

Kiran Rao herself highlights this dynamic in an interview: "The nighttime scene of dinner with all the women together… had so much of women's sisterhood." Around the fire, older women model forms of communal bonding that resist isolation. The hearth, the shared meal, and conversation become vehicles of intergenerational transmission; not only of recipes but of modes of being, listening, and surviving together. Here, taste transcends the culinary; it becomes a metaphor for how one learns to "taste" life, relationships, and self-worth.

Pierre Bourdieu famously writes that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Distinction, p. 6). Taste, for Bourdieu, is a socially conditioned inheritance, part of the habitus: the internalised dispositions that shape perception and practice. In *Laapataa Ladies*, this idea materialises vividly. The rural patriarchal community transmits not only recipes but hierarchies of preference: what women cook, eat, and even how they perceive pleasure are determined by male desire. Jaya's shock at Deepak's mother's confession marks a generational break, an awareness of how taste itself has been colonised. She inherits not the submission, but the consciousness to resist it.

The film's recurrent image of the ghunghat (veil) furthers this logic of inheritance and reinterpretation. The mistaken identity of the brides occurs because their faces are veiled, a metaphor for how inherited customs obscure individuality. As critics note, "the veil… is at once a suppressor and sometimes a liberator" (IJNRD, 2024). Rao transforms this inherited symbol of silence into an instrument of recognition: by losing their prescribed identities, the women discover their authentic selves.

Manju Maai's defiant declaration, "If those who love you have a right to hit you, I exercised my right too", condenses the film's feminist argument. Her words convert inherited endurance into assertion, transforming the taste for silence into a taste for speech. Manju becomes the conduit of a new habitus , one that transmits refusal and dignity rather than compliance.

As Laura Virtanen observes, "Values and practices are formed within a family and shaped in an intergenerational mechanism" (p. 4). *Laapataa Ladies* visualises this process: each woman's gestures, tastes, and silences are products of inheritance yet open to reinterpretation. The younger generation receives these dispositions but renegotiates them through experience. As Vera King suggests, the evolution of femininity involves a "negotiation between inherited identity and emerging selfhood" (King and Flaake, p. 25). In this sense, Rao's film dramatises a dynamic habitus; not static reproduction but creative transformation. Taste becomes the site where memory and modernity meet, where women reclaim the right to flavour their own lives.

Laapataa Ladies transforms culinary inheritance into a site of introspection and insurgency. The women's rediscovery of taste mirrors their rediscovery of voice, as inherited gestures give way to acts of agency and reinterpretation. Across generations, food ceases to be a symbol of servitude and becomes a conduit of feminist continuity. In reclaiming flavour, Rao's characters reclaim authorship over history itself; proving that resistance, like taste, is learned, shared, and savoured across time.

III. NEGOTIATING CULINARY DOMESTICITY, PATRIARCHAL CONTROL, AND CULINARY AMNESIA

In *Laapataa Ladies*, the kitchen functions as both a literal and metaphorical crucible of women's existence. Beneath the rhythmic sounds of daily cooking lies a narrative of culinary domesticity, where women's identities are steeped and served within patriarchal design. The film combines routine and resistance, revealing how recipes evolve into rituals of control and how each act of chopping or serving is seasoned with gendered expectation. Food ceases to be mere nourishment; it becomes a language of power, silence, and memory. As David Sutton notes, food is a "dense cluster of associations and memories" operating through "synesthetic experience," where taste becomes inseparable from identity and social relations (84). This synesthetic quality renders culinary experiences deeply embedded in gendered power structures, functioning as what Sutton calls "whole body memory" that "triggers associations with past meals, people, and times" (5).

Kiran Rao's cinematic palette portrays domestic spaces not as comforting hearths but as sites of culinary patriarchy, where the hearth becomes a symbol of subservience and taste itself is colonised by masculine appetite. Iris Marion Young argues that women in sexist societies are constrained not by bodily deficiency but by social conditioning: "Women are physically handicapped" by the way "feminine existence lives the body as object as well as subject" (155). The kitchen becomes such a space where women's bodies are both productive and objectified, their movements choreographed by patriarchal expectation. Women cook but do not eat first; they serve yet remain unseen; they remember recipes but forget themselves. Beneath this quiet rhythm simmers the ache of culinary amnesia : the gradual loss of one's own taste, desire, and agency in the endless act of feeding others.

Through subtle framing and tactile imagery, Rao transforms food from routine household work into a feminist discourse of hunger:- not hunger for sustenance, but for recognition and selfhood. Young's phenomenological framework highlights how women's bodily intentionality is shaped by constrained modalities of comportment and spatiality (137). Within domestic kitchens, these constraints translate into restricted culinary agency: women move efficiently but their appetites remain unspoken. The kitchen thus becomes a site of oppression and awakening, where each meal becomes a metaphorical negotiation between servitude and subjectivity. In tracing the faint aroma of forgotten preferences and unspoken hunger, *Laapataa Ladies* exposes how domesticity, duty, and silence are served daily on the same plate, garnished with invisible labour.

Yashoda (Deepak's mother) articulates culinary amnesia most poignantly when she confides, "I have forgotten what I like to eat. I only cook what the men want". Her confession encapsulates the lifelong erasure of feminine desire under patriarchal conditioning. Marjorie DeVault describes this as the "invisible work" of feeding families, labour that erases women's subjectivity: "The work of feeding embodies the relatedness of family life… but this relatedness is shaped by a society in which men and women are unequal" (118). Women "adjust their own preferences to the demands of others" until their desires become "so deeply buried that they are difficult to recognise" (55). This is culinary amnesia in its most devastating form not forgetting a recipe, but forgetting oneself. The poignancy of Yashoda's words transforms culinary labour into symbolic sacrifice: a silent nullification of self through everyday service.

Numerous scenes depict women engaged in meal preparation with minimal verbal exchange, underscoring the monotony that defines domestic labour. This silence embodies the invisibility of women's work, where chopping, grinding, and stirring occur in near-ritual quiet. Sara Ahmed's phenomenological insight illuminates this conditioning: "If orientations are about the direction, we take that puts some things and not others in our reach, they are also about the direction we have already taken" (15). The kitchen becomes a space where women's bodies are "oriented" toward service through repetition, until such orientation feels natural , a "straightening device" of patriarchy (21–22).

In collective meal preparation scenes, the rhythmic sounds of chopping and clattering utensils draw attention to the physical demands of this labour, while the women's own stories remain unheard. This sensory contrast, between audible labour and silent labourers , mirrors the broader silencing of rural women, whose contributions remain invisible within familial structures. Sutton connects this to "embodied knowledge" transmitted through cooking, where "the body remembers through its movements what the mind may forget" (21). Yet in patriarchal contexts, such embodied memory reproduces subordination rather than affirming agency.

A revealing instance of culinary patriarchy occurs through the ritual of serving and eating: a quotidian but political act. The gendered hierarchy of nourishment dictates that men are served first while women wait. Within this ritual, kitchen and dining spaces become coded zones of gender performance and power negotiation. Carole Counihan asserts that "food-centred activities" are never neutral but constitute "a fundamental way in which people create community and construct their social lives," yet in patriarchal cultures, these acts reinforce hierarchy (6). "Control over food," she adds, "is a fundamental kind of power," and when women lack it, they "lack control over their lives" (2). This manifests not only in who eats first but, in the ability, to remember and assert one's own taste, the foundation of culinary amnesia. The affective consequences of this hierarchy mirror what Young calls the experience of "discontinuous unity" with one's body, where women exist simultaneously as subjects and objects (155), alienated from their sensory selves.

Women's solemn expressions as they sit quietly, waiting for men to finish eating, reflect their marginal position within patriarchal systems. The silence, punctuated only by the sound of utensils, underscores how hierarchies are sustained through everyday rituals performed without words yet saturated with social authority. Having cooked and served food that caters to male preference, women forget to articulate their own desires. Pierre Bourdieu observes that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (6), showing how food preferences operate as social hierarchies. In patriarchal homes, women's tastes are subordinated to masculine preference: "The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated" (56-57). Yet here, the separation is reversed : women's tastes are deemed illegitimate, male ones dominant. Eating last becomes normalised across generations, transforming self-denial into virtue. Culinary amnesia thus emerges as a systemic erasure of female gustatory identity through ritualised obedience.

The patriarchal script of serving extends beyond nutrition to signify control over women's bodies, time, and emotions. Eating last becomes both literal and symbolic subordination: a daily surrender of agency. Such repetition naturalises servitude, disciplining female subjectivity through domestic performance. By foregrounding these dynamics, the film shows how the act of feeding others transforms into a mechanism of containment. The kitchen, far from a haven, becomes an ideological site where domesticity enforces conformity and suppresses pleasure. The denial of taste equates to the denial of selfhood. Food becomes both a medium of care and an instrument of control, rendering the female body productive yet invisible. Culinary domesticity, governed by patriarchy and sustained through amnesia, shapes women's lived realities, turning nourishment into a silent negotiation of deferred desire.

Phool's character embodies the internalised norms of patriarchal womanhood, where virtue is measured by domestic skill. Her compliance reveals how kitchens function as sites of both discipline and identity formation, what Simone de Beauvoir describes as the process through which "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301). Phool's early behaviour exemplifies learned compliance; she performs her duties with quiet efficiency, equating self-worth with service. In her conversation with Manju Maai, Phool proudly asserts, "I can sew, cook, sing, pray," while dismissing Maai's critique of women's social conditioning. This exchange dramatises the tension between internalised obedience and emerging self-awareness. Through Phool's gradual awakening, *Laapataa Ladies* reveals how culinary patriarchy confines women's identities within domestic performance, while their growing awareness signifies the first stirring of feminist resistance.

Everyday table manners and "proper" food behaviour encode deeper systems of control. The domestic table becomes a stage where authority is ritualised through etiquette, and obedience is naturalised as virtue. Carolyn Korsmeyer notes that taste is both sensory and social, as "judgements about what tastes good are embedded in cultural norms" privileging masculine perspectives (23). Within this framework, lessons about food conduct reveal how culinary domesticity functions as social conditioning that shapes women's silence and subordination.

Elders' admonitions about food reinforce these expectations. Jaya recalls older women instructing brides on "proper" conduct, not only what to cook but how to serve and behave. Yashoda's dry remark, "Since when are women allowed to cook food of their preferences?" exposes the normalised suppression of women's tastes. Such dialogues reveal how culinary obedience becomes a gendered compulsion, masking inequality beneath etiquette. Rao thus critiques how food sustains patriarchy even while symbolising care.

Cooking and recipe-sharing transcend domestic function to form a symbolic system of patriarchal transmission. Within this framework, knowledge is passed through gesture rather than dialogue. Maurice Halbwachs argues that "the group continuously recreates itself" through shared rituals (84). In *Laapataa Ladies*, this recreation occurs within patriarchal frameworks. The intergenerational transmission of recipes becomes what Sutton calls "prospective memory," a process of "remembering to remember" certain tastes that preserve social continuity (83). Yet this continuity often sustains inequality. Sutton's notion of food memory as "social memory", since cooking takes place within relations that "reinforce or recreate" social hierarchies (8) , reveals how intergenerational taste reproduces patriarchy. Mothers teach daughters recipes that please men, not themselves. Jaya observes such silent exchanges between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, illustrating how unspoken culinary knowledge perpetuates domestic subservience. Korsmeyer describes how "tastes are schooled within cultural contexts" (23) but warns that unreflective tradition risks becoming mere "habit" (87). In Rao's film, this unreflective transmission perpetuates culinary patriarchy: recipes become what Bourdieu calls "inherited dispositions" that operate "below the level of consciousness" (471). Thus, what appears as affection or continuity often conceals domination.

Through its portrayal of kitchen rituals and quiet hierarchies, *Laapataa Ladies* reveals how patriarchy persists in the mundane textures of domestic life. The recipe book of womanhood is inscribed not in ink but in inherited silence, where obedience functions as the key ingredient of gendered order. Yet as the film unfolds, this silence begins to crackle, the first sound of defiance, suggesting that each act of stirring or questioning constitutes a step toward rewriting the recipe for liberation.

IV. RECOVERING LOST FLAVOURS: REMEMBERING, RECLAIMING, AND REMAKING THE SELF IN *LAAPATAA LADIES*

The flavours that fill *Laapataa Ladies* are not merely ingredients, they are recipes of remembrance, blending taste with time and identity with emotion. The film crafts an evocative narrative in which cooking and eating emerge as acts of healing, where the kitchen becomes a site of soul-restoration rather than servitude. Forgotten dishes, ancestral methods, and shared meals revive not only taste but also the traces of the women who once owned those recipes. This sensory storytelling transforms food into a medium of recovery, where the past is digested and the self-reimagined. By fusing memory with sustenance, the film celebrates food as both inheritance and invention. *Laapataa Ladies* serves as a tender reminder that every simmering pot holds the possibility of remembrance and that every remembered flavour contains the seed of rebirth.

In *Laapataa Ladies*, the themes of recovering lost flavours, reconstructing memory, and remaking the self are delicately interwoven into the film's visual and narrative fabric. Through its nuanced portrayal of food, the film constructs a multi-sensory language of identity and renewal, in which cooking and eating transcend domestic routine to become acts of remembrance, resistance, and self-reclamation. David Sutton describes this phenomenon as food's unique capacity to serve as "a particularly powerful mnemonic device," because eating

involves "the whole body" in sensory engagement (84-85). He argues that "food and eating can trigger powerful memories" precisely because they unite "all five senses" in ways that collapse temporal distance, making past experiences feel immediately present (83). This embodied memory-work becomes crucial for women seeking to recover identities lost to patriarchal erasure. Within its reimagined domestic and communal spaces, *Laapataa Ladies* transforms food into a site of emotional healing and social transformation, a cinematic metaphor for rediscovering both taste and selfhood within a patriarchal context that so often silences women's voices and appetites.

The film's emotional and thematic crescendo unfolds in the reunion meal scene, which functions as both a narrative resolution and a symbolic restoration. As forgotten family recipes are revived and shared, the scene embodies a process of collective healing. The women gather around food that evokes ancestral heritage, childhood comfort, and the continuity of tradition. The act of cooking and tasting becomes a reclamation of histories once erased or forgotten, an embodied remembrance of what was lost to social suppression and personal displacement. The sensory detail of the sequence: the aroma of spice, the warmth of the hearth, and the visible joy of rediscovering familiar tastes, illustrates how food serves as an emotional archive. Sutton explains that such gastronomic memory operates through "synaesthesia," where "a taste can evoke a smell, a place, an emotion, a person" in ways that collapse temporal and spatial distance (84). This synaesthetic capacity makes food uniquely powerful as a vehicle for recovering what has been lost to culinary amnesia. In these moments, culinary memory functions not merely as nostalgia but as a mode of reconstituting identity and belonging. As Halbwachs argues, "recollection" is never purely individual but always "occurs within a social context" that provides the "frameworks" necessary for memory to coalesce and signify (38). When women gather to share forgotten recipes, they create new social frameworks that validate their tastes, desires, and histories; frameworks that resist patriarchal erasure.

The women's expressions of joy and astonishment as they taste these long-lost dishes reveal how taste operates as a mnemonic force, carrying traces of the past into the present. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" becomes relevant here, she defines it as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" through "imaginative investment and creation" rather than direct recollection (107). In *Laapataa Ladies*, younger women such as Phool and Jaya connect with memories they did not directly experience but inherit through sensory and cultural transmission, tasting dishes that carry ancestral stories and techniques passed down through generations of women's hands. Hirsch emphasises that postmemory is characterised by its "affective" and "imaginative" dimensions, transmitted through "stories, images, and behaviours" that younger generations absorb (107–08). This gastronomic postmemory allows them to reclaim feminine lineages that patriarchy sought to erase. The table becomes an altar of remembrance, where the act of eating restores dignity and continuity to fragmented lives. Through this, *Laapataa Ladies* articulates a distinctly feminist politics of memory, one grounded in sensory experience, where recovering lost flavours equates to reclaiming silenced identities and histories. The capacity of taste to evoke empathy, trauma, longing, and self-assertion across generations becomes visible in these moments of gastronomic reunion, where the affective power of food transcends individual experience to forge a collective feminist consciousness.

Parallel to this sensory and emotional recovery is Jaya's organic farming initiative, which extends the notion of food memory into ecological and political realms. By promoting sustainable agriculture and natural cultivation, Jaya's project roots the recovery of flavour in the recovery of land and local knowledge. Her commitment to organic farming redefines food not simply as a product of labour but as a living continuum that connects women, soil, and survival. Through her, the film situates culinary memory within an ecological consciousness, aligning the recovery of traditional practices with the ethics of sustainability and self-reliance. As Counihan notes, food practices are always embedded in "political economic relations" and struggles over "land, labour, and resources" (29). Jaya's farming initiative thus represents not merely personal agency but a broader

feminist reclamation of agricultural knowledge and ecological memory, knowledge that patriarchal modernisation often dismisses as obsolete. The cultivation of organic produce thus becomes both a reclamation of environmental integrity and a metaphor for the regeneration of cultural and feminine identity. Here, gastronomic memory extends beyond individual taste to encompass intergenerational ecological wisdom, connecting the sensorial pleasure of authentic flavours to the political act of food sovereignty.

V. REIMAGINING HOME AND HEARTH: FOOD AS A MEDIUM OF SOLIDARITY AND SISTERHOOD

The film's exploration of food extends beyond the recovery of recipes to the reinvention of domestic and communal space. In the communal dinner scene, women insist on dining together, an act that disrupts the entrenched patriarchal hierarchy dictating that women eat only after serving men. This seemingly simple act of collective eating becomes a radical gesture of equality and solidarity. By reclaiming the dining space, the women transform a site of routine servitude into one of shared joy and resistance. The table, once a symbol of subordination, becomes a platform for mutual recognition and empowerment. Ahmed's phenomenological analysis helps illuminate this transformation: "To be oriented toward an object is… to have certain objects within one's horizon" (27). When women reorient themselves towards each other rather than towards male authority, they literally change their social and affective "horizon," creating new possibilities for feminine agency and pleasure. Through the rhythm of shared conversation, laughter, and nourishment, the scene redefines domesticity as a communal and democratic experience rather than an instrument of control.

This reimagining culminates in the montage of kitchen scenes, where the film's visual language reaches lyrical intensity. The women are depicted cooking together, laughing, exchanging stories, and performing choreographies of labour infused with creativity. The vibrant energy and rhythmic editing of these scenes dissolve the boundaries between work and art, routine and expression. The kitchen, long a symbol of confinement, emerges as a stage of emotional release and communal empowerment. Through this imagery, *Laapataa Ladies* elevates the ordinary acts of chopping, stirring, and serving into symbols of self-affirmation and interdependence. The visual poetics of these sequences reaffirm the possibility of joy, solidarity, and agency within spaces historically marked by silence and subjugation.

Taken together, these moments construct a deeply layered meditation on food as both material and symbolic practice. The recovery of lost flavours becomes synonymous with the recovery of selfhood; sustainable food practices echo ecological ethics and continuity; and communal eating redefines domestic space as a site of fellowship and resistance. Through its interplay of taste, texture, and emotion, *Laapataa Ladies* positions food as a dynamic cultural text, an expressive form through which women negotiate identity, remember heritage, and enact freedom.

Food becomes the grammar through which forgotten selves learn to speak again, each flavour a syllable of survival, each recipe a recovered memory. The film stirs both senses and soul, transforming kitchens into crucibles of resistance and railway stalls into arenas of becoming, where everyday labour translates into acts of liberation. Around steaming vessels and circles of shared eating, women reclaim the right to taste, to remember, and to belong in a world that once muted their appetites. Jaya's organic farm, Manju Maai's stall, and the collective meal together form a trinity of sustenance: ecological, emotional, and existential. Every dish becomes a manifesto, declaring that nourishment is never merely physical but profoundly political. *Laapataa Ladies* serves more than food: it plates emancipation itself, carefully crafted, ethically seasoned, and richly served from the hearth of memory.

VI. RECLAIMING THE PUBLIC CULINARY SPHERE: STREET FOOD AND FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The aroma of street food in bustling public spaces carries more than flavour: it carries stories of survival, defiance, and quiet transformation. Amid the clang of ladles and the hiss of frying oil, cooking becomes a language of freedom, reclaiming the culinary public sphere from patriarchal invisibility. Within this sensory landscape, *Laapataa Ladies* unfolds a narrative in which women move from the shadows of domestic kitchens to the open stalls of possibility. Williams-Forson observes that women's culinary entrepreneurship has historically functioned as "a form of self-determination" and as resistance to economic marginalisation (45). Through female entrepreneurship, the film stirs a new recipe for identity, one in which food ceases to be a symbol of servitude and becomes a medium of agency, resilience, and reimagined womanhood.

At the heart of this transformation stands the railway food stall run by Manju Maai, a vibrant site where taste, trade, and transformation intertwine. The stall's inauguration marks the moment when women step out from private kitchens into the bustling marketplace, reclaiming both culinary and social space. The sizzling of pans and rhythmic chopping of vegetables become symbolic sounds of emancipation. The food stall, at once humble and revolutionary, functions as a hybrid arena in which women's domestic expertise is recontextualised as public authority and economic agency.

Phool's journey from a quiet domestic helper to a confident food vendor exemplifies this culinary metamorphosis. Guided by Manju Maai, she learns to cook, sell, and negotiate with a new sense of ownership. Her first earning, a modest payment for her dish, becomes more than income, it is the tangible taste of self-worth. This transformation illustrates what Young describes as the movement from "inhibited intentionality" to embodied agency, wherein women overcome the "discontinuous unity with [their] surroundings" that patriarchy imposes (145-46). Through entrepreneurship, Phool's body and intentions become unified in purposeful action. The railway stall becomes a theatre of empowerment where food is not merely consumed but re-signified as a language of freedom. As Counihan argues, "When women gain power over food, they also gain economic autonomy and social recognition" (118), transforming culinary labour from invisible domestic work into visible public enterprise.

Yet the path to visibility is not without friction. In the vendor conflict scene, Manju Maai confronts a male competitor attempting to reassert dominance over the food trade. The heated argument mirrors a larger contest simmering beneath the surface: the battle for women's right to occupy space, to cook, to sell, and to be seen. The encounter reveals how even ordinary acts of sustenance are charged with gendered politics. Ahmed's concept of spatial orientation becomes crucial here: "Spaces are oriented 'around' some bodies more than others," and when women claim public space, they challenge the assumption that certain spaces naturally "extend" masculine bodies while constraining feminine ones (52-53). Here, the ladle becomes a weapon of defiance, and every serving a declaration of equality. Williams-Forson notes that African American women's culinary entrepreneurship has historically functioned as "a means by which to assert their independence" and to "reject normative gender roles" that confine them to unpaid domestic service (89). Similarly, Manju Maai's public food enterprise challenges the patriarchal assumption that women's culinary labour belongs exclusively within private households.

The stall gradually evolves into a culinary common: a place where women gather to work, share recipes, and exchange laughter. Against the backdrop of roaring trains, their conversations rise like steam, carrying stories of struggle and survival. The act of cooking together transforms into a ritual of solidarity, turning food from a sign of servitude into a feast of fellowship. This collective culinary practice embodies Halbwachs's insight that "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories" and that "it is also in society that they recall, recognise, and localise their memories" (38). Through shared labour at the stall, these women create new social frameworks for memory, frameworks that validate their desires, talents, and histories rather than erasing them. Sutton observes that "commensality," or eating together, creates "bonds of solidarity and common identity" that can either

reinforce or challenge existing power structures (22). At the railway stall, commensality becomes revolutionary, forging bonds that resist patriarchal hierarchies. Through shared labour, these women rewrite the unwritten recipe of patriarchy, substituting silence with sisterhood and compliance with creativity.

Street food, in this context, becomes a palatable form of protest. The women's dishes: simple, fragrant, and deeply local, embody their defiance against economic exclusion and social invisibility. Phool's culinary experiments with sweets such as *kalakand* represent the fusion of tradition and innovation, reflecting a redefinition of identity through taste. The sensorial dimensions of these dishes, their textures, aromas, and flavours, carry intergenerational knowledge while simultaneously expressing individual creativity and agency. Sutton notes that food practices can serve as "sites of resistance" where "creativity and innovation" challenge dominant norms while "maintaining connections to the past" (118). The public stall thus becomes a site of both survival and storytelling, where every plate served tells a tale of endurance and evolution. Korsmeyer argues that taste, though often dismissed as a "lower" sense, possesses profound cognitive and emotional dimensions: "Tastes remembered can bring the past vividly to the present" and serve as "repositories of meaning" that ground identity and community (112). Phool's *kalakand* becomes more than confection, it is a sensory archive of her journey from erasure to self-assertion, from culinary amnesia to gastronomic memory reclaimed.

Laapataa Ladies transforms the everyday act of cooking into a public performance of autonomy, where street food becomes a metaphor for women reclaiming voice and craft. The culinary public sphere of the railway stall emerges as a transformative space; part marketplace, part manifesto, where invisible labour acquires visibility and value. Through female entrepreneurship, the film articulates how sustenance itself becomes a strategy of survival and self-definition. DeVault notes that when women's feeding work moves from the private to the public sphere, it "becomes visible as work rather than invisible as care," allowing for both economic compensation and social recognition (223). Manju Maai and Phool's enterprise thus rewrites the patriarchal grammar of kitchens, seasoning tradition with agency. The steam rising from their stall carries not just flavour but the aroma of emancipation simmering in the public sphere.

VII. EXPERIENCING INTERRELATIONAL SENSATIONS THROUGH EMBODIED MEMORY

In *Laapataa Ladies*, sensory experience becomes a narrative medium through which identity, belonging, and agency are reimagined. The film's tactile and gustatory moments: eating, touching, cooking, translate emotion into embodied knowledge, allowing women to reconnect with their silenced selves. Through gestures of feeding, sharing, and tasting, Kiran Rao situates female subjectivity within a phenomenology of care and resilience. Gastronomy here becomes not just a motif of nourishment, but a language of recognition, where bodies remember what history forgets.

When Phool (Nitanshi Goel) is first stranded at the wrong railway station, she is offered food by Manju Maai (Chhaya Kadam). This simple act of sharing rotis, chutney, and tea becomes an intimate gesture of safety and grounding: a sensory initiation into a new social and emotional landscape. Taste evokes home, maternal care, and emotional sustenance in an unfamiliar setting, functioning as the first ingredient in Phool's rediscovery of belonging. It connects two women across age and class through shared hunger and nurture, transforming food into a relational language of empathy. Anthropologists David Howes and Constance Classen remind us that sensory experience: taste, smell, touch, is culturally shaped and socially meaningful rather than merely biological. As Classen observes, "Touch grounds us in the world of material and social relations; it is through touch that we feel reality and connection" (The Deepest Sense, 2012, p. 4).

Taste and touch in *Laapataa Ladies* reveal both social hierarchies (rural versus urban, rich versus poor) and emotional intimacy. When Phool and Manju Maai share food, Phool experiences a surge of embodied memory, recalling the warmth of her home and the sensory imprint of belonging. Her tears signify not despair but rediscovered comfort, a moment of maternal affection in exile. Through the energising of her taste buds, Phool

immerses herself in the process of self-recognition; taste becomes a portal through which she reclaims her lost sense of identity and rootedness, as if recovering a forgotten recipe for selfhood.

Manju Maai's hands, constantly engaged in kneading dough, washing clothes, or cutting vegetables, embody resilience and agency. These tactile gestures, etched by labour, stand in contrast to the ornamental delicacy expected of women like Phool, whose touch is meant for domestic grace rather than survival. Each culinary movement: kneading, stirring, serving etc becomes an act of inscription through which gendered experience is cooked into memory. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests, the body is not an object but a medium of perception and memory: "The body is our general medium for having a world" (Phenomenology of Perception, 2012, p. 146). Phool's first meal at the railway station thus becomes an act of embodied remembering, her body "remembers" safety and affection through taste, aligning with Merleau-Ponty's idea that sensation anchors meaning. The taste of home-cooked food restores a lost emotional geography, allowing her to momentarily inhabit the feeling of "home."

The film's opening session, two veiled brides clad in identical red sarees, underscores how embodied markers such as clothing, jewellery, and gesture shape both memory and identity. When Phool later removes her bridal attire and dons more practical clothes, it signals transformation: her freed body expresses self-realisation more powerfully than words. Liberation in Laapataa Ladies thus emerges as a sensory awakening, freedom that flows from within, not conferred from without. The women's hands, silently conveying emotion and longing through the act of cooking, become emblems of embodied memory and lived resistance.

Pushpa Rani's (Pratibha Ranta) act of riding a bicycle encapsulates this bodily emancipation. The rush of wind against her face, the balance of her body, and the taste of dust on the open road transform sensation into freedom. Her movement through space mirrors the stirring of ingredients in a vessel, each motion releasing agency and self-trust. Feminist phenomenologist Iris Marion Young observes that women's bodily comportment is socially shaped, often restricted by patriarchal norms: "Feminine existence stands in discontinuous unity with her body, which she experiences as a thing inhibited by impositions from without" (Throwing Like a Girl, 1990, p. 42). Pushpa's cycling literalises Young's insight, her body, once constrained, now claims spatial and sensory autonomy. Through the felt rhythm of motion and air, she experiences the feminist embodiment of lived freedom, tasting the texture of liberation itself.

By foregrounding taste, touch, and movement as carriers of meaning, Laapataa Ladies renders sensation an act of remembrance and renewal. The women's embodied experiences,Phool's rediscovered appetite, Manju Maai's resilient hands, Pushpa's cycling freedom , compose a sensory cartography of emancipation. Through the body, memory resists erasure and asserts continuity across class, generation, and geography. The film transforms everyday gestures into a feminist poetics of perception, where feeling itself becomes a mode of freedom.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In *Laapataa Ladies* (2024), Kiran Rao transforms the seemingly simple motif of food into a vibrant terrain where memory, identity, and resistance converge. Through its intimate depictions of cooking, tasting, and sharing, the film crafts a sensorial narrative that transmits inherited taste and preserves intergenerational memory as forms of cultural continuity. Each recipe, spice blend, or remembered aroma becomes a vessel through which the women in the film carry forward ancestral knowledge, a form of culinary inheritance that resists erasure within patriarchal and class-bound structures. The film reclaims food as a living archive of feminine wisdom, a taste-text where the histories of mothers and grandmothers are kept alive through touch, smell, and embodied repetition.

The film's treatment of culinary domesticity oscillates between negotiation and subversion. Cooking, often construed as a symbol of women's confinement within patriarchal domesticity, becomes here a tactile language of agency and reinvention. Rao's mise-en-scène reframes the kitchen as a space of negotiation rather

than submission, where women reclaim authorship over the rituals that have historically been used to discipline them. In this reimagined domestic space, food ceases to be a duty imposed by patriarchal control and becomes instead an act of self-expression, creativity, and quiet rebellion. The hearth, once a marker of containment is reimagined as home, a site of belonging and transformation where the act of feeding others becomes intertwined with the act of self-becoming.

Central to this reclamation is the recovery of lost flavours, those erased by displacement, neglect, or social hierarchy. The women's journey through physical and emotional landscapes mirrors a sensory journey through memory: the rediscovery of a familiar spice, the smell of roasting grains, or the taste of shared street food evokes a return to selfhood. These embodied sensations as feminist phenomenology reminds us that are not mere sensory stimuli but repositories of lived experience. Sensation through embodied memory allows the film's characters to reconnect with their own pasts and those of their foremothers, rendering taste a language of affect and testimony. Through food, the women reclaim histories that patriarchy would rather forget, inscribing themselves into a lineage of resilience that flows through the body and the palate.

Beyond domestic kitchens, *Laapataa Ladies* also engages with the world of street food and female entrepreneurship, expanding the boundaries of women's culinary agency into public space. The act of selling or sharing food outside the home becomes a political gesture that challenges gendered divisions between private and public, domestic and commercial. Street food, often dismissed as marginal, is reframed as a site of creativity, autonomy, and collective survival. These women's ventures into entrepreneurial cooking foreground the radical potential of everyday acts as how a recipe or a meal can become a manifesto of independence, how feeding others can nourish the self.

Laapataa Ladies positions food as both memory and movement: a medium that transmits cultural continuity while opening pathways toward transformation. Through the recovery of lost tastes and the reimagining of domestic and public culinary spaces, Rao's women assert their right to feel, remember, and create. Food, in their hands, is both inheritance and invention, a means of sustaining the past and envisioning a liberated future. The film's celebration of taste thus becomes a celebration of feminine resilience: an edible narrative through which women reconstitute identity, reimagine home and hearth, and flavour their freedom with the salt of memory and the spice of resistance.

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