



Food Paradoxical Role in Society: A Study on Baum's Utopia through Food Habit

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The Wonderful Wizard of Oz series, being a modernized fairy tale, often surfaces cannibalism throughout the series. The constant importance given to skills of cooking, eating and other food habits along with the actions that undermine civilization constitute food habit in Oz, and subvert it as Utopian wonderland. Commenting on the Oz series, Osmond Beckwith observes that the series “contradict the sentimental idea that Oz was extended as a planned Utopia” (91). Eating is not just the daily process to fill the stomach; it has a main role to play to highlight cultural tensions. In Oz, Baum unknowingly incorporated the threat of cannibalism, which creates a situation that no one will ever know who will be the diner or who will be the dined.

Food and cooking plays a central role in creating and maintaining a social structure. Food habit defines the behavior and civilization of a society. In Oz food habit is the yardstick to evaluate the quality and mentality with the kingdom of the fairies. In fact, the ingredients of the food are part of nature, and cooking techniques belong to the civilization. In cooking, however, both the realm gets intermingled, though it is culture which attributes the style or the process of cooking and consuming, like storing, gathering, hunting and preparing varieties of ingredients and recipes of a meal. Hence, cooking cannot be categorized as central to the complex structure of nature and knowledge, as it is also the nucleus to the growth of any civilized culture.

Food serves a civilization in Oz. It suggests that if any creature is fed with sufficient and sophisticated food then that the creature belongs to a higher level of cultural involvement, for instance we experience them in the conversation between Aunt Em and Tin Woodman. It is said that mosquitoes in Oz never bite people because it is fully fed and so it belonged to higher levels of

society. It is indirectly stating that only when all living beings in a society is well-fed, for the basic necessity is nourishment which should be considered first before the cultural development is attained, individuals could live undisturbed:

“We have some very large mosquitoes here, which sing as beautifully as song birds,” replied the Tin Woodman. “But they never bite or annoy our people, because they are well fed and taken care of. The reason they bite people in your country is because they are hungry--poor things!

“Yes,” agreed Aunt Em; “they’re hungry, all right. An’ they ain’t very particular who they feed on. I’m glad you’ve got the ’skeeters educated in Oz.” (EC 234)

In Oz series, Baum has touched the concept of cannibalism. Through the handling of cannibalism he strikes a balance between different cultures and it establishes equality. Cannibalism explains the various groups of people with almost negative color. The danger of eating friends, strangers, known and aliens are connected to emotional disharmony, which is evident in the conversation between Hip – po – gy – raf and Scarecrow where Hip – po – gy – raf requests Scarecrow to allow him to eat the straws of Scarecrow.

“As for me,” said the Woggle-Bug, “I think that I could live for some time on Jack Pumpkinhead. Not that I prefer pumpkins for food; but I believe they are somewhat nutritious, and Jack’s head is large and plump.”

“How heartless!” exclaimed the Tin Woodman, greatly shocked. “Are we cannibals, let me ask? Or are we faithful friends?” (ML 157)

Baum also portrays that when hunger is high; it destroys any relationship no matter friends or relatives. He also highlights that the people of Oz are under a promise that a friend will not feed on his friend. This is shown in the conversation between woggle – Bug and Tin Woodman. When Woggle–Bug reveals his wish for eating Pumpkinhead as it is nutritious, Woodman gets shocked and says that he is not a cannibal but a faithful friend. This promise of friendship among the beings in Oz balances the fragile relationship between food and friends. The social structure of Oz is defined not only by the issues of food, but also by the distinction made between the prepared and raw food. The unprepared raw food shows that the society lacks the ability to eat processed food, which can be called Primitivism. Whereas cooked food represents civilization, because to prepare food one should be equipped with fire and tools.

The concept of pumpkin eating a pumpkin cannot be considered as cannibalism in reality, but in fantasy tales, there is a precarious balance between the concepts of the real world and the imaginary world. Hence the terrific concept of cannibalism is ridiculed for the sake of children in fairy tales. Cannibalism is a taboo in civilized society; this is clearly seen in the conversation between hen Billina and Dorothy. In an instance, Dorothy asks hen Billina to eat its egg, which hen Billina takes as an insult. This occurred because the food habit of the hen is completely different from that of Dorothy. The act of savagery is highlighted through such scenes of the book.

“I’m a trifle hungry, myself,” declared the yellow hen.

“Why don’t you eat the egg?” asked the child. “You don’t need to have your food cooked, as I do.”

“Do you take me for a cannibal?” cried the hen, indignantly. “I do not know what I have said or done that leads you to insult me!” (OO 21)

In yet another conversation between Billina and Dorothy, Billina defends her food habit, she says that eating raw and living things is always better than eating dead creatures. Here Billina pushes Dorothy to save her hypocrisy of civilization by explaining through cooking food. As Carolyn Daniel points out in her analysis of food in children’s literature, “certain foods impart certain qualities to the eater, that is, you are or you become what you eat” (25). She was offended by the ideology of the hen Billina. Dorothy defends herself stating that cooking and eating dead food is always better than eating terrifying live Bug. Even though Billina and Dorothy are good friends, Dorothy’s appetite shows that her way of eating and thinking is barbarous.

“Goodness me!” returned the hen, in a puzzled tone; “how queer you are Dorothy! Live things are much fresher and more wholesome than dead ones, and you humans eat all sorts of dead creatures.”

“We don’t!” said Dorothy.

“You do, indeed,” answered Billina. “You eat lambs and sheep and cows and pigs and even chickens.”

“But we cook ‘em,” said Dorothy, triumphantly.

“What difference does that make?”

“A good deal,” said the girl, in a graver tone. “I can’t just ‘splain the difference, but it’s there. And, anyhow, we never eat such dreadful things as BUGS.”

“But you eat the chickens that eat the bugs,” retorted the yellow hen, with an odd cackle. “So you are just as bad as we chickens are.”

This made Dorothy thoughtful. What Billina said was true enough, and it almost took away her appetite for breakfast. As for the yellow hen, she continued to peck away at the sand busily, and seemed quite contented with her bill-of-fare. (OO 24)

The Utopian story confuses the dichotomy between meats and vegetables, as vegetables also speak in the Land of Oz. On one occasion when a vegetable speaks it calls man as “Meat”. Here the differences between meats and vegetables evaporate in wind their standard as cognizant beings. Vegetarianism thus does not resolve the meat- based diet problems.

As the two halves of the Sorcerer fell apart on the floor [Dorothy] saw that he had no bones or blood inside of him at all, and that the place where he was cut looked much like a sliced turnip or potato.

“Why, he’s vegetable!” cried the Wizard, astonished.

“Of course,” said the Prince. “We are all vegetable in this country. Are you not vegetable, also?”

“No,” answered the Wizard. “People on top of the earth are all meat. Will your Sorcerer die?”

“Certainly, sir. He is really dead now, and will wither very quickly. So we must plant him at once, that other Sorcerers may grow upon his bush, continued the Prince. (DW 44 – 46)

Talking and expressing one's feeling is also considered as civilized, hence Billina considers Toto uncivilized. But later Toto finds that he can talk like other animals of Oz. It is the author's mere idea that makes Toto to play mute. Toto decides to stay mute because with communicating ability he may consider himself civilized and he cannot eat what he desires.

Baum demonstrates that the habit of eating food with the community and the obligation to consume enough food shows the civilization of a community. Nature entrusted certain rules to be followed by all creatures, but the complication is that nature and civilization are challenging and hard to maintain the balance. This concept is well expressed through the characterization of the Cowardly Lion. He compels himself to keep quiet about his food habit as he thinks that love for particular food may disturb his friendship with other creatures. Baum advocates that friendship is shaken when one goes in favour of food. Civilization depends upon the community in which people communicate with each other for their mutual benefits, but when hunger arises or the food supply is broken, chaos is unavoidable.

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