



Commensality and Togetherness in Becky Chambers' *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet*

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ABSTRACT

Food in literature is always part of a symbolic act, as the characters within do not eat to stay alive as humans do, but rather, this depiction of eating is always a symbolic process. Food, especially in science fiction and fantasy fiction, works on an even grander scale by being an integral part of the world-building process. It operates on a two-fold scale by serving as a familiar anchor in futuristic and fantastical settings, while also functioning as a defamiliarizing agent that adds to the strangeness of the story world. Food is an incredibly complex motif to be explored in literature, but what will be concentrated on here is the aspect of commensality that is related to food and food practices. Commensality, often seen as related to conviviality, is the practice of sharing a table and consuming food together. This practice has connotations of the deeper meanings vested within food practices in a communal and social sense. These practices promote harmony and feelings of belongingness and togetherness. This paper looks at *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* (2015) by Becky Chambers through the lens of food to explore how commensality works to create a home and promote the feeling of togetherness amongst an inter-galactic space crew that consists of multiple alien species from radically different cultures and communities.

Keywords: Commensality, community, food, family, science fiction



Introduction

Food studies has taken a cultural turn in recent years, where it has imbibed various flavours from an interdisciplinary as well as a multidisciplinary background. Food has become a crucial field of interest for anthropologists, historians, psychologists, sociologists, and many such academicians. The initial exploration of the field was a structuralist one, with Claude Levi-Strauss examining the meanings behind eating customs and cooking styles in "The Culinary Triangle," thereby relating food with culture (1966/2013). Roland Barthes, in "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Consumption" (1961/2013), approached food and culture through the perspective of semiotics that gave rise to the idea that food is "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behavior" (p. 24).

By regarding food as a communication system—as a language that conveys meaning—further opportunities arise for the world of food and culture to be explored. Mary Douglas remains a prominent name in the field with her numerous works, which are recognised as significant contributions to further thought and ideas. Her explorations of food have resulted in the notion of food restrictions and taboos functioning as social codes that create social groups based on inclusion and exclusion (Douglas 1972; 1966/1984b). This notion of collective identity was also explored in the individual realm when Claude Fischler presented his article "Food, Self and Identity" (1988) as a "speculative survey" of the relation between food and identity (p. 275). He asserted that food, and its associated properties, become a part of the consumer when ingested and hence, argued that food signifies more than mere sustenance. Here, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's much known—and often considered clichéd—aphorism "tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are" (p. 25) from *The Physiology of Taste* (1885/2009) is built upon by Fischler to present a mutual relationship of identification between food and the consumer.

David B. Goldstein (2018) opines that though what we eat is quite important in the nutritional sense of sustenance and appropriate nourishment, he asserts that "*how or with whom* we consume each food is just as important" (emphasis in original, p. 40); a notion that was introduced by Jordan Rosenblum (2010) as well. Food is not something that is merely consumed, but is eaten in a social setting, even when one eats alone. Food is "relational," asserts Goldstein (2018), for it circulates through ecological transformations and is further influenced by processes associated with the relationships

among people. The social aspects and interactions with food are broadly grouped under the term “commensality,” which is, in turn, derived from the Latin word *commensalis*, which refers to the practice of eating together at the same table (p. 40). While commensality finds itself an area of academic inquiry in the social sciences, it has only recently gained academic interest from the literary world. Goldstein (2018) affirms that commensality would be an appropriate lens through which food relations in literary works could be looked at to understand how language and imagination plays an intrinsically important role in the creation and maintenance of the relationships between people and also between people and the world around them (p. 42).

Food in Science Fiction

Science fiction “inhabits the realm of imagination, offering us glimpses of the world as it might be—whether in an alternate present or a possible future, on earth, in space, or on a distant planet” (Retzinger, 2008, pp. 369-370). A work of science fiction is governed by the premise that it “requires material, physical rationalisation, rather than a supernatural or arbitrary one. This grounding of ... [science fiction] in the material rather than the supernatural becomes one of its key features,” writes Adam Roberts in *Science Fiction* (2000, p. 5). Jean P. Retzinger (2008) finds that it is this insistence of the materiality that leads science fiction “to address the humans’ biological as well as social and psychological needs” (p. 370).

Food and its consumption are basic necessities that have a place in almost all realms of life. George Slusser (1996) even goes so far as to argue that “[h]umanity is defined by what it eats, and how and when it eats it” (p. 2). While it is possible to map out a timeline from the past to the present of how human beings ate, Slusser notes that science fiction “projects this same food-driven history into the future” with the wild possibilities of the comestibles that will form a part of our diets in the future. Mentions of food and eating in science fiction and other alternative modes such as fantasy and horror also provide a space to explore the unmasked and challenge the existing notions of “the civilised tables of mainstream fiction” (p. 2).

Barthes (1961/2013) argues that “an entire ‘world’ (social environment) is present in and signified by food” (p. 26). This signifying aspect is especially relevant because science fiction authors often use food as a medium to exhibit the extra-terrestrial and futuristic nature of the worlds that they create for the stories. Mervyn Nicholson (1987)

asserts that even though eating is a necessity that is part of a daily routine for humans, that is not the case for characters in literature. He finds that “in literature eating is always a symbolic act” as the characters do not eat for sustenance to stay alive, but rather, they eat for a symbolic purpose (p. 38).

Food in science fiction works on a two-fold scale, writes Retzinger (2008), with familiar foods functioning as an “anchor” to these alternate worlds, while unfamiliar ones serve as a defamiliarizing agent that makes these constructed worlds even more removed from the present reality. By presenting familiar food imagery in these novels, the future is seen as a reassuring thought wherein at least some of the usual customs remain the same. Conversely, “strange foods help emphasise the strangeness of the future,” thereby forewarning the readers of what remains in store for the future. He also points to how food suggests the interplay between nature and science, as recent innovations in technology have greatly influenced how food—nature’s bounty—is grown and processed (pp. 370-377).

Food in science fiction also functions as a prop that aids in the believability of the illusion of the imaginary worlds (Forster, 2004, p. 252). David Seed (1999) observes that science fiction novels and films “are not producing arbitrary fantasy but rather reworking key metaphors and narratives already circulating in the culture” (p. 2). Therefore, food functions to lend relatability to the context of the science fiction work and to anchor the reader to the make-believe reality presented.

The Building of Togetherness

The novel *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* (2015) by Becky Chambers—which later went on to become the first novel of the *Wayfarers* series—begins with the premise of a motley crew of multi-species beings aboard a spaceship called *Wayfarer* accepting an inter-galactic mission to travel to a distant planet as part of peace-treaty negotiations. During the plot, the narrative shifts to offer glimpses of each crew member and their backstories while elaborating on their relationships and their perception of being part of a found family. The readers are offered introductions to the members of the crew on their long journey to the planet. The work does not posit any one character as the protagonist and instead offers shifting perspectives wherein each character takes turns to play the central role in moving the plot and the sub-plots along.

Rosemary, a human and a new addition to the crew, is the first character who makes an appearance, and it is through her, that the readers are introduced to the other members of the crew. Ashby Santoso, another human, is the captain of the ship. The ship's pilot is part of an alien race called the Aandrisk and is named Sissix. The two human mechanics aboard the ship are Kizzy and Jenks. Dr. Chef is the Grum alien referred to as such due to the roles that he takes on as the ship's onboard medic and cook. The navigator, Ohan, is part of an alien species known as the Sianat pair where their bodies serve as hosts to a virus that takes over their higher thinking capacities, and hence they prefer the pronoun of "they" so that the virus is also given the consideration of existence. The human Corbin is a fuel scientist. The ship's final member is Lovey, an artificial intelligence-based configuration that controls the ship's workings while also serving as the pan-ship communication system.

This article seeks to explore Chambers' world in the novel through the lens of food to explore how commensality works to create a home and promote the feeling of togetherness amongst a space crew that consists of multiple alien species from radically different cultures and communities. Food is always at the peripheries in the novel. It never takes a centre-stage position, but its mentions are interspersed throughout—either as snacks scattered all over the ship by Kizzy, as the fruits and vegetables painstakingly grown and doted upon by Dr. Chef, meals as time markers which convey the progression of the days, and as corporeal necessities to be performed even at the times of crises. Food events and interactions from this book will be looked at from these vantage points: how each crew member's individual relations are with food, how the crew comes together over food and the dining table to partake in commensality, and eventually, how the crew as a unit interacts with other communities through food relations. This analysis is to understand how their personal relations work to create a found family within the crew and how they present and identify themselves as such in the presence of other social groups.

Individual to the Found Family

Rosemary's primary concern on boarding the ship is to satiate her hunger. Her nervousness at the prospect of her new job, the fear of her new crew alien members, and the anxiety of hiding her past are all pushed down her list of priorities to satisfy her human need. Dr. Chef links her name with the herb called rosemary and waxes eloquent about how herbs combine "both the medicinal and the gastronomical," which

he finds to the essence of himself as well, owing to his dual role as the cook and the medic (Chambers, 2015, p. 37). The herb is of significance later, when Dr. Chef orders “a few starters of rosemary plants” to honour Rosemary’s acceptance into the crew (p. 155).

An indicator of Rosemary’s class is seen when she remarks about never having eaten bugs before. This marks her status as higher than most humans in the story world, for the destruction of the earth and the scattering of humankind over the various other planets and asteroids led to humans having to look for alternative food sources. “Insects were cheap, rich in protein, and easy to cultivate in cramped rooms, which made them an ideal food for spacers” (p. 38). Rosemary would have belonged to an immensely affluent family to have eaten conventionally human food by real world standards. This small admission opens to a larger insight by the author into the ideas of food politics and the cultural notions built on class, accessibility, and wealth. Rosemary’s privileged ancestry is a matter of shame for her, and she seeks to hide it from the rest of the crew. Sissix and Dr. Chef seem to understand her hesitation and do not remark on it any further. Jenks states that he had eaten beef before, to which the rest express their disgust at the idea. The notion of food in science fiction being simultaneously familiarised and defamiliarized is seen here with the consumption of beef touted as unnatural instead of the commonplace consumption of insects, which is quite different from the world outside the book.

On behalf of everyone on the ship, the ship’s captain Ashby assures Rosemary that she will fit right in with the crew to fill the gaps in their functioning as a team. While this explicit mention of belonging is taking place, Sissix helps herself to the food from Rosemary’s plate, thereby adding in the implicit element of companionship, which shows that the crew has already started to see Rosemary as one of their own (p. 39).

Rosemary’s observation of the dining table already set for dinner creates the ambience of the kitchen and dining space where her introduction to most of the members of the crew occurs:

The chairs surrounding the table were mismatched, and about a third of them designed to fit non-Human posteriors. Soft lights hung from long wires over the table, capped with shades of different colors. It was far from the fanciest table Rosemary had ever seen — the napkins were faded, a

few plates had dents, the condiments were all cheap brands — but it felt inviting nonetheless. (Chambers, 2015, pp. 33-34)

The warmth of the space and how it emanated the feelings of being lived in made her feel like she could find a place for herself among the rest of the crew. She is cognizant of the dining table as a space to build connections and not to burn bridges, for she thinks to herself that bragging about her knowledge was not something to be “said to new colleagues over dinner” (p. 41).

The way the others sit at the table also shows the intra-relations among the crew. Ashby, as the captain, sits at the head of the table, and Dr. Chef sits right across from him. Sissix, Jenks, and Kizzy choose to sit at the same side of the table while Corbin sits across from them, indicating the strained relationships that he has with the rest of them. Rosemary is invited to sit near Ashby with an empty seat between her and Corbin. Dr. Chef explains that the empty one is meant for Ohan, although they never occupy it as they prefer not to eat with the others for fear of harming the virus they carry. Ohan, although only symbolically, is granted a place at the dining table, and in turn, a place of their own within the crew and the ship. “I want them to know that they’re always welcome,” says Dr. Chef, even “if they can’t eat with us” (p. 44).

Sissix later mentions that she does not need to eat dinner at all, for her kind consumes smaller bites of food throughout the day. She only indulges in the dining experience because she likes “sitting down with everybody in the evening,” as it is one of her “favorite Human customs” (p. 45), a notion Dr. Chef agrees with as he feels the same. Food preferences, notes Retzinger (2008), and the ability to eat are often used to “distinguish human from alien or human from cyborg” (p. 380). Considering this notion, the crew sees dinnertime as one where they can get together at the end of the day, indulge in the familiar movements of passing over plates laden with food, ensure that everyone has enough to eat and drink while talking about what occurred during their jobs. Even though they eat in different ways or, in the case of Lovey, not eat at all, the dining table functions as a central gathering spot wherein these conversations are welcome and help their relationships flourish as they recharge with the necessary sustenance. This finds a reiteration in Susanne Kerner and Cynthia Chou’s (2015) assertion that “commensality is the essence of food” (p. 1). As Goldstein (2018) observes that “while literary commensality takes place...in particular social contexts, literary scenes of meals and metaphors of food and drink are usually constructed in order to point

beyond and beneath the particular to the symbolic and material foundations of human relations" (p. 43), or in this particular case, inter-species relations.

Commensality "serves as a medium for shared cognitive taboos in boundary-maintaining mechanisms" (Kerner & Chou, 2015, p. 2). Rosemary finds that commensality also broadens her conception of alimentary restrictions to include things that were once taboos for her, such as the insects that she now takes great relish in eating once she overcame her initial inhibitions regarding the alien food. Sissix helps Rosemary eat the unfamiliar food, thereby leading them to bond with each other while appreciating the differences in their life experiences—ones that mark the differences between them while still adding to the collective experiences of the crew.

Kizzy's fire shrimp snacks are a ubiquitous sight on the ship, as she brings them with her everywhere. It is even a part of her list of emergency items, ranking at a priority level equivalent to her tools (Chambers, 2015, p. 229). These snacks, even when denounced by others as a "cheap snack," are defended by Kizzy when she replies with, "[a] cheap snack you can only get from my colony, which makes them a rare delicacy" (p. 45). Deborah Lupton's (1994) ruminations on the symbiotic relationship between food and memory, wherein she affirms that food memories and preferences are part of "a shared cultural experience" and are a result of "socialisation from earliest childhood" (p. 668), show that more than the taste, it is the nostalgia and the cultural associations that Kizzy has with these snacks that make these so dear to her. The crew members further associate these generic snacks with Kizzy, especially after they see that the care packages from her parents contain these same snacks.

Food memories also serve as triggers that remind people of bad experiences and things they wish to leave behind. When the dining table conversation shifts to the topic of desserts, the mention of "real milk" ice creams at once brings in a bout of homesickness for Rosemary as well as the aftertaste of the life that she had chosen to forget. Dr. Chef's "spring cakes" serves as the perfect dish with which to overwrite her memories of the ice cream, or at least, to serve as a new memory of a much-loved dessert that she creates with her crew (Chambers, 2015, p. 47).

Dr. Chef's relationship with food is quite nuanced. His journey from his tumultuous past as a military doctor to his tranquil present as a medic and cook was facilitated by food. He was offered a place on the ship while managing a soup stall— a venture of

adopting the culinary sphere that he had undertaken to forget his past as a war medic. Perhaps through his life experience, he chooses to be cognizant of personal rituals of mindfulness, self-care and attention and taking the time to indulge in the practices that he finds a place for in the kitchen. He takes pleasure in his ritual of preparing his tea, for a “solitary cup of tea required more care, a blend carefully chosen to match his day. He found the ritual of it quite calming” (p. 205).

Implicitly understood routines and procedures, especially those involving food, forms a crucial part of the smooth functioning of the crew. Dr. Chef reiterates them for Rosemary on her first official workday on the ship: “Breakfast here is a help-yourself affair, as is lunch. Snacks are available throughout the day, so stop by whenever you’re peckish. . . .there’s always tea. You can get yourself a cup anytime you like” (p. 62). Jenks and Kizzy introduce Rosemary to mek, an alcoholic drink. Claude Grignon (2001) finds that socially “approved food and drugs” such as alcohol “enhances communicative exaltation, allowing a lowering of censure and reserve” (p. 29). This practice could also be seen as a ritual of commensality and a rite of passage as an initiation into life on the ship while simultaneously functioning to lower inhibitions and communicative barriers, thereby creating, and strengthening bonds.

The mek drink makes its appearance at multiple places in the novel. Jenks’ friend Pepper offers to buy him the drink when he visits at her shop. It is also offered to the crew by Kizzy’s friends after they all have become comfortable with each other. This shows the universal notion of partaking in food and drink as a social activity to forge connections.

Furthermore, the business transaction between the friends is not seen as an economic venture. Pepper asks Jenks to compensate her labour by getting her a meal instead of fixing a monetary price. Additionally, Kizzy also offers to buy Rosemary a meal to seek forgiveness after a momentary tiff between them, something she had also done in the past to placate Sissix. Hence, food also serves to mend existing social connections while also serving as a means of compensation.

“It is disingenuous,” writes Douglas (1984a), “to pretend that food is not one of the media of social exclusion” (p. 36). By keeping people out, the boundaries between the in-group and the out-group are clearly demarcated, leading to the exclusivity and the sense of privilege granted when one is invited to dine with a group. Commensality

functions as both an inclusive and exclusive process (Fischler, 2011, p. 533). The implicit acceptance of an outsider makes them part of the in-group, as in the case of Rosemary when she is welcomed as part of the Wayfarer crew. Commensality also produces bonding (p. 533), to an extent where consuming the same food is thought to make people more like each other. Moreover, sharing food is also thought to create intimacy and relations. These relationships could be sensual and lust-driven or even platonic with associations of kinship. "Consubstantiation, or the sharing of touched food, i.e., food 'contaminated' by contact with another person, indicates greater closeness in personal relationships" (p. 533). The mention of food also comes up when Ashby offers to get a meal for himself and for his partner Pei, who he just had sexual intercourse with. The meal here is seen as a way to extend the created intimacy from the lustful to the social setting, while tapping into the universal idea of replenishment after intercourse, even among alien species.

Ohan, who prefers their space and stays away from the crew, eventually starts seeking their company after the realisation that they do not have much time left to live. The notion of food functioning as medicine is seen here when Dr. Chef prepares "a variety of homemade tinctures and teas, made from herbs recommended for easing the pain" for Ohan, as they refuse to take medicinal drugs (Chambers, 2015, p. 139). Dr. Chef's consideration seems to have touched Ohan, as they now begin to spend the time that they have left in the presence of the crew.

Food and its associations within a domestic setting are articulated when Sissix grumbles about Dr. Chef being too "parental." He responds by saying, "I feed you and heal you, how else am I supposed to be," thereby associating the role of the parent with the one who cares to satisfy the needs—physical and social—of everyone (p. 145). On being robbed and attacked by inter-space thieving aliens, the crew is visibly disturbed, and Ashby is injured. After the initial damage control steps, Dr. Chef invites everyone to the kitchen to "throw together some comfort food" (p. 170). This functions to distract everyone from the memories of the attack while assuring them of safety through the notion of comfort food.

The Family as an Inclusive Unit

The crew stops later on an asteroid to replenish their supplies after the robbery and repair the ship. Kizzy's friends from the asteroid extend the offer of drinks to the crew.

Douglas (1971), analysing the categories of food events in her own home, asserts that “drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family. Meals are for family, close friends, honoured guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance” (p. 66). This line from intimate to distant can easily be aligned with one from the private to the public (Fischler, 2011, p. 535). The invitation for drinks soon extends to meals and mek when the crew interacts with Kizzy’s friends. The friendship develops from being seen as an extension of Kizzy’s social circle to interconnected links wherein the groups interact and grow close, thereby enclosing them in a warm circle of friendship.

When Pei and her crew find themselves aboard the Wayfarer due to an attack on their cargo ship, the opportunity to extend hospitality is in the hands of the Wayfarer crew. Dr. Chef graciously welcomes them to help themselves to the kitchen supplies, and soon, “[e]verybody was swapping stories and chowing down,” thereby extending the warmth of their communal circle to their captain’s partner and her crew (Chambers, 2015, p. 246).

An instance of exclusion is observed at the reception for the peace-treaty negotiations. Most of the crew keep to themselves and their side of the table, occupied in eating and conversing among themselves. They are wary of the Toremi, the alien species forming the opposing sector of the negotiations. The Toremi do not consume any edibles from the event spread as well, and the mutual exclusion is starkly visible.

Conclusion

The point of a family, he’d always thought, was to enjoy the experience of bringing something new into the universe, passing on your knowledge, and seeing part of yourself live on. He had come to realise that his life in the sky filled that need. He had a crew that relied on him, and a ship that continued to grow, and tunnels that would last for generations. To him, that was enough. (Chambers, 2015, p. 50)

The above lines from Ashby’s perspective articulate his feelings towards his crew. He sees them as his family, and this is a notion that is shared and propagated by the other members of the crew as well. The motley crew finds themselves identifying as a found family through various practices, especially ones where food qualifies as an integral aspect.

The crew aboard the Wayfarer finds themselves experiencing various situations through the novel that engages them in working as a team, where the new members step into their new responsibilities, the old ones cement their spaces, and some even discover new roles that they wish to occupy. They come across new beings and strengthen existing connections, thereby creating a network where an individual is part of a unit and the unit, in turn, has links with other teams. This formation results in a society, albeit in this case, a multi-species one set in a futuristic world.

Food and food settings as discussed in this scenario work at an implicit level to provide a sphere for the exercise of commensality wherein “commensal bonds, like the foods one eats, emerge, transform, and vanish, to recombine later, both as substance and memory” (Goldstein, 2018, p. 50), thereby forging new social connections, strengthening favourable existing ones, and severing rotten ones. Hence, society’s integration is sustained through commensal acts (Kerner & Chou, 2015).

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