
PHOTOETRY AND FOOD POETRY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE ANTHOLOGY *KITCHEN POEMS*

SUSAN JACOB

IIIrd year BA English Literature
P G Department of English, and Research Centre
Bishop Chulaparambil Memorial College, Kottayam, Kerala

Abstract: Photographs are frozen bits of time which capture the joy, madness or melancholy of a moment that has been irretrievably lost. Poetry is a medium of literature which invokes emotions through stimulating ideations in the reader's mind. Both of these media have the capacity to form and/process complex emotions within the discerner. With this research paper, the researcher seeks to find out how photography has aided in the conceptualization and understanding of poetry. The researcher uses Barthes' *Theory of Photography*, along with comparative textual and visual analysis of selected photo-poems from the anthology *Kitchen Poems* by Dr Nithya Mariam John. "Photo-poetry", known popularly as "photoetry", is a hybrid space in modern literature, where two media of expression converge to create the magic of literary expression. How this space has expanded over the years, especially with the arrival of Instagram as a creative space where both imagery and imaging thrive, has been a fascinating study, to say the least. The "intermedial" analysis of how these two media enhance each other has helped the researcher understand the effectiveness this art form has in communicating with its reader/viewer. This analysis tries to grasp the relationship between literary expression and visual culture in the rapidly developing literary landscape. By exploring this less-travelled road of poetic expression, the study challenges the purist's understanding of poetry as solely dependent on verse and delves into how digital photography and the digital media in general have slowly but surely become an inexorable part of modern poetry.

Keywords: *photoetry, intermediality, visual culture, digital poetry, Roland Barthes, photography and literature, Instagram aesthetics*

Photography and poetry are two separate media of art which have illustrious histories in their separate rights. In the dynamic age of social media, where visually stimulating content is considered as the most engaging format of communication and transmission of ideas, photoetry, a blended medium, which integrates photography and poetry into one contemporary art form, has significant potential and scope. This research is an inquiry into the potentiality of photoetry at aiding its prospective readers/ viewers at better understanding the meaning of each other, and the society at large. In "Taking a stanza: the relationship between photography and poetry", published in the *British Journal of Photography* by Rachel

Segal Hamilton interprets photoetry as an art form in which "the poetry is not a caption and the photography is not an illustration, but rather both raise questions about each other. The less literal the relationship, the more successful" (Hamilton).

David Delmer in 'Food as Literary Theme' says,

Food serves as a profound literary theme that reflects human experience and cultural identity. It is intricately woven into narratives, often symbolizing not just sustenance but also personal and societal values. Literature frequently explores the pleasures and rituals associated with eating and cooking, using food to define characters and illuminate cultural backgrounds.

The meaning of food poetry can be condensed as the sub genre of poetry which uses food as a subject or symbol to portray human experience.

Poets and photographers continue to capture the magic of this combination of food and literature. "The relationship between poem and photograph has always been one of disruption and serendipity, appropriation and exchange, evocation and metaphor", as said by noted photographer Michael Nott (qtd. in Nicholls and Ling). The crossover of food and literature is another common theme in the realm of narrative art. According to David Delmer, The centrality of food to human experience and to personal and cultural identity is mirrored in the food preoccupations of literature. Without food, there is no life.

Literature, the imaginative re-creation of life, often centers on food, eating, and cooking. Food practices and images help to define characters and values, enrich language, and illuminate cultures, regions, and particularly women's identity and development. The pleasure of eating is a perennial theme in literature.

This paper has chosen four photo- poems in the sub genre of food poetry as the key resources to explore the dynamic relationship among food, poetry and photography. *Kitchen Poems* by Dr Nithya Mariam John is the anthology from which the four poems are selected.

Dr John's anthology *Kitchen Poems* is a graceful demonstration of how womanhood and culture is inseparably woven into the culinary fabric of a region. She, along with her photographer and collaborator Mr Aby Itty Kurien, portrays the experience the poet tries to convey, sometimes successfully and sometimes not so much. All four of the poems, taken from this varied anthology, are centered in and around the kitchen and the female domestic experience as a whole.

'Daily Bread' was first published in *EKL Review*, August, 2022" (John 93). The poem is illustrated with a mouth-watering photograph of "puttu", curried mung beans and a couple of pappadums (John 18, 20–21). 'Chapati' was first published in *Memories on a Plate*, 2023. It was an art installation at Jaipur in 2024 as part of 'What is for Dinner?' , a poetry reading- art exhibition" (John 93). The poem has a black and white photo of a flat disc of chapati with a rolling pin on top of it (John 54). 'Retreat' was first published in *gulmohar quarterly*, Issue 03, 2022" (John 93). The poem is accompanied by the photograph of a

woman driving a scooter with her back turned to the camera, with the rear of the vehicle stacked with cartons of eggs (John 46–47). ‘Embrimia’ is the last poem under study from this anthology. It is accompanied with the image of dead sardines piled on top of each other (John 48–49).

Roland Barthes’ concepts of “Studium” and “Punctum”, from the seminal text *Camera Lucida*, aids one in understanding the relationship that a photo has with the photographer and the viewer, or according to Barthes, the ‘Operator’ and ‘Viewer’ respectively. The enthusiastic engagement with the subject, by the photographer and especially by the viewer, in order to study its historical, social and cultural implications is studium, while the punctum is a “higher value” added to the photograph by the observer. It is the direct and powerful relationship between the observer and a particular signifier in the image (Studium and Punctum). Barthes elucidates on the impact of photography on society, on whether or not it pricks the conscience of the spectator, or produces a punctum.

Poetry and photography are both similar processes, specifically with regard to the fact that they both induce an emotion in the reader/ viewer, for it to be affective and hence, have an impact on society. So, if these are both creative pieces which induce the same response in the receiver, would they not have more impact together than they would have separately? The rising popularity of photoetry as an art form is a shining testament to that. The reason behind exploring a niche subject like photoetry is to throw light on the effectiveness that the art form of Photoetry has, in communicating to the reader/ viewer. Especially in the digital world, the age of Rupi Kaur and Insta- poems, where fleeting reality is coupled with fleeting imagination (Yu). Food poetry is the sub genre of poetry that the researcher has chosen to conduct this study on.

It is clear that photography and poetry individually appeals to the emotions. But for photoetry to be fruitful, poetry and photographs should collaborate in a manner where “both raise questions” about each other. For that mutual elevation to happen, the poetry should not act as a caption and the photograph should not be an illustration (Hamilton). Both the elements of a photoetry should have an identity and existence individually, and yet come together to “complement” and complete each other.

What happens sometimes when photos are attached as afterthoughts to poems, the photoetry ends up being a poem with a photo acting as an illustration or “supplement” to it. In the researcher’s chosen sub genre of study, photographs being added as an afterthought or supplement could easily translate into the photoetry looking like a cooking recipe straight out of a lifestyle magazine. To quote Barthes again, an affective photograph should have a studium and a punctum, and it should “inform, represent, surprise, cause, signify, provoke desire” (27). For a photoetry to have a similar impact on its reader, the photographic component should have a studium and punctum, while the poem and photo should share a complementary relationship.

A complementary relationship between a poem and a photo in a photoetry is that they should raise questions about each other, and both elements of the photoetry should have an identity and existence individually, yet come together to “complement” and complete each other. A supplementary relationship between a poem and a photo in a photoetry happens when photos are attached as afterthoughts to poems or vice versa, with the end product being a poem with a photo acting its illustration or “supplement”, or the poem acting like a caption to the photo. It is a less ideal, more simplistic approach towards photoetry. Only when a literary piece appeals to the readers’ emotions does it become a poem. Only when a captured moment in time has a studium and a punctum does it become a photograph. And only when a good poem and good photograph collaborate in a manner where both raise questions about each other, and yet have individual identities, that is to say “complement” each other, can it be called an ideal specimen of photoetry.

“Retreat” from *Kitchen Poems*, is superbly complementary as a unit of photoetry (*Kitchen Poems* 46–47). The poem begins with a verse from the Holy Bible. It is from the book of Jeremiah, chapter 12 , verse 5, where God asks Jeremiah to prepare for tougher trials, the difficulties that he is managing at the moment is nothing, when compared to the difficulties that he is about to face. The poem then portrays a cavewoman who hunts roosters for her offspring. The poem has the image of “woman as the feeder” at its theme. The biblical verse and the theme of the poem blends together beautifully only when the companion photograph of the piece is also considered.

The photograph is of a woman driving a scooter with her back turned to the camera, and the back-seat of the vehicle stacked with cartons of eggs. This woman is the modern-day representative of the cave woman, caught in transit during a busy work day, making ends meet to feed the gaping mouths at home. Unlike her troglodyte counterpart, she is not hunting roosters anymore- she is selling eggs. The bible verse assumes a prophetic tone, where the warning of preparing for worser trials is applicable to womankind as a whole, just as much as it was applicable for Jeremiah. The photo in itself furnishes both the studium and punctum, and combined with the poem, supplies the reader/ viewer with a lens to observe society (Barthes).

“Retreat” has both its elements complementing and completing each other, instead of merely supplementing. The photo and the poem have individual existences, but when put together, they make not just perfect sense, but also expand each others’ meaning. As a result, “Retreat” is a noteworthy example of how photoetry elevates poetry where the picture and the piece work in harmony with each other.

“Embrimia” is a photoetry, with the poem also being a partially concrete verse (John 48–49). The poem has disgust and nostalgia at its core. After an unpleasant sexual encounter, the poetic persona is disgusted as she states,

“We lay
 s s
 I by I
 d d
 e e” (John 49).

Nowhere in the poem does the persona use the analogy of dead fishes to compare how she felt laying near her companion. But the imagery created with the concrete style of poetry immediately brings the familiar sight of piled up fish to the reader’s mind. The companion photograph is a close shot of sardines stacked on top of each other, effectively completing the poem. The photo in itself has a meaning, and so does the poem. But together, they provide meaning to each other, comparing the magnitude of claustrophobia felt by the persona to the close- up shot of dead fish in a heap.

“Embrimia” as a piece of photoetry enhances the overall emotional and thematic depth of what either of its elements could have provided alone.

The poem “Chapati” from *Kitchen Poems* has the theme of domestic violence and the plight of a woman inside the kitchen as its core theme. “Chapati” has the cooking wife kneading the chapati dough with so much force, practically recreating the brutality that has been done to her body (John 55). She lives with a bunch of “poker-faced” chapatis, who never show concern over her scarred face or bruised body. Here, the poet emphasises on the “process” of cooking- the messy, gross and sometimes even ugly process- which happens in the kitchen before mouth-watering dishes are served on the table.

When the “she” in the poem “kneaded the dough of cruel words”, it is unfortunate how the kitchen seems to be the only place where she is allowed to be expressive, even aggressive and retaliate. The emotional dysfunction within an average Indian household and the emotional burden that is often solely carried by the female caregiver of the family is realistically captured in the poem. It should be noted that the poet succeeded in transforming her emotion into a well rounded idea, which was then put into effective language, hence making the poem accomplish its task of striking an emotional chord with the reader.

Now, the second element of this photo- poem, the photo, tells a different story, and much prosaic one at that. The companion image of “Chapati” is a chakla- belan, or the round board and rolling pin used to roll out chapatis. Now, that is a banal representation of such a poignant poem on domestic abuse. While the photographer’s frame provides studium, it does not “wound” the spectator (Barthes 27). The photo, to the average viewer, is

demonstrative of what the utensils used for making chapati are, but beyond that, is unsuccessful at forging an emotional connection to the poem or the viewer. So, if one considers “Chapati” as a specimen of photoetry, it merely supplements, not complements; a poem named chapati with the image of an uncooked chapati, a flatboard and a rolling pin requires no exercise of any creative muscles in the brain of a reader/viewer. The poem and the photo raise no questions against each other, nor provide any insight regarding their significance as a single unit. In essence, in the case of “Chapati”, the creative decision to bring it to the reader/viewer as a photo-poem undermines the emotional and thematic depth of the verse itself.

If “Chapati” focuses on the act of cooking itself, “Daily Bread”, is about the act of eating, especially the act of eating with a loved one (John 19). It is about nostalgia, the hurt of losing someone after sharing the fuel of life with them. The poem starts with a phone call (from a man to a woman, from what can be presumed), and a very unromantic question, “What did you have for breakfast?”. With that uninspiring question, Dr. John propels the poem into a different magnitude altogether. The brokenness and loneliness that the woman feels is expressed as she answers this prosaic question.

Her inner monologue begins with “I’ve broken pieces of sky through the window, and dipped those in the red of memories, for breakfast;” which alludes to the isolation and entrapment that she felt during the past decade as she cooked “biryani of desertation” and baked “cakes of unanswered questions”. Her sorrows were battered and were transformed into “lacy *appams*” at the next sunrise. The poet tries to preserve every little detail of every one of their meetings, which she later presses into “wine” and drinks at leisure. She tries to hide her age as she “ebony-sauced” her hair which has “noodles of white” in it as a “futile attempt” to freeze time. But she does have occasional memories of the pleasant kisses that they once shared, “stuffed” in the “puffed bellies” of tasty “masaladosas”. The woman lives in her past with all these memories as her daily bread. What she eats everyday is her sorrow- her memories, her sense of loss and her pain- yet she nonchalantly answers his question with a casual “Puttu and kadalacurry”.

The poet succeeds in transforming her emotion into a well rounded idea, which was then put into effective language, hence making the poem accomplish its task of striking an emotional chord with the reader. When one considers the companion photo of the poem, it does not capture the theme of love, or eating together, at all. The photo is a quintessential cooking feature, with a *puttu kutti*, or steamed rice cake layered with grated coconut and shaped like a cylinder, along with a bowl of curried mung beans and a couple of fried pappadums. It supplements the poem by illustrating what “puttu” is to a non-native reader/viewer, but then the purpose of photoetry is to provide perspective, not familiarise its readers/viewers with dishes and ingredients. “Daily Bread’ too, is unsuccessful as an ideal specimen of photoetry, as the image and poem fails to complement each other thus undermining the emotional and thematic depth of the poetic piece itself.

The paper is trying to find an answer to the question: to what extent does photoetry enhance or undermine the emotive and thematic depth of food poetry ? Two of the four poems taken for analysis from the sub genre of food poetry have been successful in proving that photoetry can enhance food poetry provided that both of its elements complement each other. If the elements falter at complementing , and end up supplementing for each other, then the quality of the sub genre gets undermined. The crux of the matter is that the effectiveness of the art form lies in its execution. Only if the poet and the photographer engage in a deliberate, well thought-out exercise to enrich each others' creation will the art form of photoetry in itself become effective at enhancing whatever sub genre of poetry it is aiding. Especially a sub genre like food poetry is an area which could hugely benefit from the art of photoetry, but like most emerging fields, there has to be better understanding of the collaborative nature of this medium.

The major limitation during the research for this article was the limited number of photo-poems in the sub genre of food poetry, especially in the Indian literary context. Even though food poetry is a genre of literature that could benefit hugely from this medium, it is not as explored as it should be in the Indian context. This limitation was, in turn, one of the motivating factors which prompted the researcher to investigate the effectiveness of the art form, specifically in the food genre.

Photoetry is a tool to enhance the emotional and thematic depth of a narrative. Each poem becomes a layered site of meaning, where the image and the imagery complements and completes each other. The art form of photoetry thereby bridges literary creativity and visual art, reinforcing the core of what the poet and photographer were trying to communicate. In the emerging and rapidly evolving world of social media poets and photographers, and readers/ viewers with shortening attention spans, it is only natural for a hybrid medium like photoetry to survive and thrive. Its capability to engage multiple intellectual and emotional chords simultaneously, while also locking in the consumer visually, in itself guarantees the long term sustainability of the medium.

Photoetry represents a compelling innovation within literature. By fusing imagery, layout, and sensitive writing, it expands the boundaries of narrative and challenges conventional modes of literary engagement. Future studies may explore how digital media and multimedia formats further amplify the impact of photoetry in contemporary literature. In conclusion, it is evident from this study that the intersection of visuality and language, that is photoetry, in the sub-genre of food poetry, is a powerful and effective mode of storytelling. By combining textual and visual elements, photoetry transforms the act of reading into more cerebral activity, nudging the reader/viewer to find answers to the questions that the photo and the poem raise about each other. Unlike traditional poetry, where imagery often relies on metaphor or suggestion, photoetry situates the reader within a concrete, almost tangible space, making food and its related aspects feel more personal .

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "Chapter 11." *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Hill and Wang, 1982, pp. 27–28.

Delmer, David. "Food as Literary Theme." *EBSCO Knowledge Advantage™*, 2023, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/food-literary-theme>.

Goswami, Ujjwal. "Principles of Literary Criticism Notes." *Scribd*, n.d., <https://www.scribd.com/document/702667484/Principles-of-Literary-Criticism-NOTES>.

Hamilton, Rachel Segal. "Taking a Stanza: The Relationship between Photography and Poetry." *British Journal of Photography*, 13 Sept. 2024, <https://www.1854.photography/2024/09/the-relationship-between-photography-and-poetry/>.

John, Nithya Mariam. "Acknowledgements." *Kitchen Poems*, Red River, 2025, p. 93.

—. "Chapati." *Kitchen Poems*, Red River, 2025, p. 54.

—. "Daily Bread." *Kitchen Poems*, Red River, 2025, pp. 18, 20–21.

—. "Embrimia." *Kitchen Poems*, Red River, 2025, pp. 48–49.

—. "Retreat." *Kitchen Poems*, Red River, 2025, pp. 46–47.

Nicholls, Jon, and Kate Ling. "What Is Photopoetry? An Exploration of the Symbiotic Relationship between Poetry and Photography." *Photopedagogy*, n.d., <https://www.photopedagogy.com/photopoetry.html>.

"Studium and Punctum." *Media Studies*, <https://media-studies.com/studium-and-punctum/>.

Yu, Timothy. "Instagram Poetry and Our Poetry Worlds." *Poetry Foundation*, 24 Apr. 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/featured-blogger/81555/instagram-poetry-and-our-poetry-worlds>.