

THE DIFFERING SEMIOTICS OF FOOD IN MAHESHINTE PRATHIKAARAM (MP) (2016)

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-first-century films have an unswerving nexus with the representations of food or food memories. Culinary sketches play an equivalent role as that of the protagonists in the films. It is not only in the depiction of food preparations, but the act of eating, tasting, enjoying the flavor, cooking and even memories shared by the characters bring forth uncertain micro-sociological elements essential for the understanding of films. Malayalam Cinema has evolved to weave food, food thoughts and memories, food representations and food songs as an integral part of the narrative.

KEYWORDS: *Food Memories; Socio-Cultural Elements; Cuisines; Food and Culture*

INTRODUCTION

“Of course, I knew already that the best meal in the world, the perfect meal is very rarely the most sophisticated or expensive one. I knew how important factors other than technique or rare ingredients can be in the real business of making magic happen at a dinner table. Context and memory play powerful roles in all the truly great meals in one’s life.” (Bourdain, 2001, p. 6). Anthony Bourdain establishes Context and Memory as powerful factors in all the great meals in one’s life. If we expand the cultural significance of context and memory into a film text, it could be linked to the ties that one reads between food and culture, food and memories and food and taste.

What is the relevance of food in representing micro-sociological, socio-cultural, economic and political conditions? Being a material and palpable element, food and food representations are more engaging to our visual imagination. It could take us to different cultural locales; it could bring back the forgotten memories and recreate histories. Food depictions were once part of the plot, especially to tell more about the characters involved. In the contemporary Malayalam films, food is not the only element involved, but the manner of depiction, the cuisines depicted and the agents involved in the depiction of food or food thoughts are significant. It is these conditions that give culinary representations in cinema, an evolving status. At times, we could see the intentional veneration of food that happens in Malayalam Cinema to understand the nuances of the relationship between people, to look at the proximity of the characters and their cultural locale, and at certain instances an abnormal deification of cuisines to venerate the characters. In all these instances, food descriptions give a new perspective for the understanding of socio-cultural spaces in Cinema. This paper looks at the mosaic of food representations and their socio-cultural relevance in Malayalam Cinema with a special emphasis on Maheshinte Prathikaaram (MP) (2016).

Nexus between Cinema and Food

Very rarely the plot of the cinema takes a food narrative lead, exceptions are movies like *Salt and Pepper* (2011), *Rasam* (2015), *Ustad Hotel* (2012), etc, but in certain other instances, the plot includes a significant reference to a food theme; *Dakshayani Biscuits* in *Midhunam* (2011), marriage consultants in *Kalyanaraman* (2002), dosa entrepreneurs in *Kammath and Kammath* (2013), biriyani history in *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014), Chef Sanjay Paul in *Ente Mezhuthiri Athazhangal* (2018) are some of the examples. In certain other cases, food memories and descriptions are intentionally manipulated by the cinema, so that the characters are caricatured perfectly. Their emotional anxieties and nostalgic memories are reflected through food memories. For e.g., *Kalippattam* (1993) and *Godha* (2017). Sometimes movies are the agents to discuss the role reversals, which again look at the gender performance of the individual who manages the home, e.g., *Mister Butler* (2000) and *Salaam Kashmir* (2014). In some other cases, food songs or videos sequencing food of a particular region are also incorporated into the movies, which again places food in an elevated status. Thus, food representations in Malayalam Cinema have changed to a large extent in the contemporary scenario.

The tangibility of food is exploited to the maximum in Malayalam Cinema, and we could observe a trajectory in its changing patterns and also in the semiotic structuring of meanings as conveyed by the cinema. An analysis of MP will help us to look at and understand food as a persuasive entity that reflects socio-cultural, economic and political realities. The realistic lifestyle of a common man is manifested through his regular food practices. This is reflected in how they deal with specific food items, raw or cooked. The food representations in MP, which are strong markers of micro-sociological elements are scattered within the frame to give an apt portrayal of the middle class or lower-middle-class people from a high-range geographical space. The food materials, raw or cooked are wisely employed to emblemize the economic, socio-cultural, political and religious features of the people. Land, in its political sense and also as a geographic locale plays a major role in the selection and manifestation of the represented food items. The food materials represented include Malabar tamarind, coconut, tapioca, jackfruit, Indian gooseberry, jackfruit seeds, cocoa fruits, in its raw form, rice, black coffee, black tea, boiled tapioca, milk, omelette, fish curry, kanji (rice porridge), kumbilappam (steamed jackfruit dumpling), tea and bonda, sarbath, porotta, sambar and beef curry, which are some of the food materials locally available and common among the natives, and a host of other food items like fried rice and chicken curry, packet chips, etc., which are adapted food items are also represented in the film. Apart from these, there are food items referred and presented without direct on-screen manifestation. kummattikka juice (water melon), vattukappa (boiled tapioca) and egg puffs could be placed in this category. Thus, within the runtime of one hour twenty minutes, camera eye's minute detailing made this movie a phenomenal success. This paper looks at the minute detailing of food substances to represent the micro-sociological elements.

Maheshinte Prathikaram (Mp): A Food Journey

In the opening scene, we could find Mahesh the protagonist of the movie, on whose baffling decision the movie moves forward, taking a bath, which is followed by the *Idukki* song. Majority of the foodstuff that is discussed in the paper is presented in the *Idukki* song. The characters are deeply rooted in the locale, and with the food representations, it may seem that *Idukki's* geopolitical locale is the leading motif in the movie. Mahesh who is curious

enough to collect the Malabar tamarind is a young, committed gentleman, who is very much attached to his lover, to his father and to his friends. In the mise en scène, we could find a pair of sandals, two Malabar tamarinds and a washed and wet inners that signify the relevance of Malabar tamarind. Mahesh brings them back to his home. The economic value of Malabar tamarind is mentioned without any utterance in this scene. A lot of processes including sectioning and drying are involved to make it a useful product of economic value. This economic value is signified when Mahesh locates two ripe Malabar tamarinds and he throws them gently towards the rock so that he can take them back home. Being a cash crop in a high range locale, its money value is assessed and understood, and at the same time as an essential ingredient of redfish curry, Malabar tamarind is indispensable. Thus, its relevance to the palate could not be ignored. This clearly depicts the frugality that instigates an ordinary high range guy to reserve these cash crops. The food item looks at the economic condition of the hero. Though he is financially not well, his concern for his pet again looks at the philanthropic values that he has. The idea of dedicating a plateful food for his dog again signifies the mindfulness and how easily he connects with other beings.

The tactility of the raw food items is effectively manipulated in the text. At home, he halves the coconut and drinks the coconut water, and then he checks the softness of the rice in the pot to check whether it is cooked. From the open riverside, we are taken towards Mahesh's house and his day is introduced before us through the Idukki song. The indispensable tie between a high range guy and the naturally available food substance makes him an earthly material. The elements of familiarity and habitual actions are superimposed along with the main plot. The kitchen space, a reservoir of his emotions pushes forth the character through the food substances that he handles within and outside the space. Instead of romanticizing the food materials through the valorization of food materials, the commonness of food materials is detailed carefully. Thus, the semiotics of the represented food communicates the "commonplaceness" of the foodstuff, which is a bit different from the stereotyped and mediocre food representations. Thus, it could be linked to what Barthes had said about food as "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behavior" (Barthes, 2013, p. 29).

Through the representation of familiar food substances, instead of defamiliarization or extreme romanticization, the indispensability of certain very common and familiar food substances are portrayed, and it could be read in line with the reluctance of certain people to shed the comfort zones of habits and routines. The idyllic cosiness that they enjoy in their (Mahesh and his father) morning black coffee and in their daily drink along with their kanji at night touch upon this fact. The acclimatization due to their constant interaction with their routine habits, affirms their strong bond with the commonplace. This familiarity is depicted in the lunch that Mahesh and Baby have. Rather than a display of a lavish lunch with all kinds of exquisite dishes, we could find them sharing a working-class lunch in the small, steel tiffin boxes and gravy in a plastic container. Seeing Mahesh's lunch box with just two dishes Baby asks, "only omelette and yellow gravy" (17:06), which again gives a clue regarding the simple and silent lifestyle of Mahesh and his father, whereas in the case of Baby, who has his wife and children to take care of, brings a better meal box with red fish curry.

The various cuisines that Mahesh deals with could be considered as manifestations of his innate desire to keep the old that are habituated to his heart. There are quite a good number of movies that have discussed the concept of lovers' snack. It could be a treasured food item that the lover preserves for the loved one, and in most of the movies, it is the girl who keeps the snack for her lover. Food could be considered as a lover's snack, where the act of

sharing a meal or a food item among the lovers is portrayed to show the intensity of their relationship. In the movie *Kanakambarangal* (1988), we could find the heroine, who fondly shares a boiled egg and a glass of milk to her lover, who is a regular visitor. When we look at the movie *MP*, it is Mahesh who secretly shares kumbilappam with his love interest. In *Rakshadhikari Baiju Oppu* (2017), the girl is smart enough to announce her love openly, shares a plate of kumbilappam with her lover, who is not sure enough to take a decision regarding their marriage, who states that there was a movie that was shown in television recently, where the hero and heroine share kumbilappam before their break up. Thus, kumbilappam is positioned at a different level in the contemporary food discussions. It is not just an ethnic snack, but it is an omen that could connect and disconnect relationships.

When Mahesh chats with Soumya, his lover, he is curious to know whether she ate anything. The perplexity due to her lack of commitment is evident right from the beginning in her disinterested tone. Mahesh repeats the very same question when he meets her the second time with the kumbilappam. Mahesh's interest, care and concern for Soumya are evident in his query. Soumya's lack of consideration is reflected in her passivity. In the first instance, she states, "nothing but bread only" (05:53). In the second instance, she states, "only a cup of black coffee" (26:07). But at the same time, she is excited seeing the kumbilappam, appreciating Mahesh stating that she has not tasted it for such a long time.

Kumbilappam, being an extremely local, easily available snack, which is again seasonal, depending upon the availability of ripe jackfruits are not fast food, but slow food, which could be prepared with authentic materials, like rice flour, jaggery, grated coconut and ripe jackfruit. One has to dedicate time and energy to collect the ingredients, to sort it and then to prepare the dough. One could guess the tremendous patience and energy one has to invest upon for preparing such ethnic cuisines. The next day when Soumya's father discusses an alliance of an NRI nurse with her, he aptly asks a practical question: "You just decide dear, whether you have to spare your life here, munching kumbilappam, or to have a happy life traveling abroad, to other places" (26:07). Here, one could identify a striking similarity in the attitude of Mahesh towards a simple and slow food to that of what Bourdieu has said in his critique of the judgment of taste, "what for some is shameless and slovenly, for others, is straightforward, unpretentious; familiarity for some is the most absolute form of recognition, the abdication of all distance, a trusting openness, a relationship of equal to equal; for others, who shun familiarity, it is an unseemly liberty" (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 39).

Thus, kumbilappam, the lover's snack that connects Mahesh and Soumya gets a political elucidation, where it could satiate the hunger, nostalgic longing and palatal anxieties and traditional linking, but at the same time, something that will never allow you to broaden your horizons and go abroad. Sharing of kumbilappam could be perceived from Mahesh's position as an act of extreme caring. He is more receptive and warm-hearted to share a food item that his lover could have longed to eat for such a long time, as she is staying in a hostel, but it is perceived in a different manner by the elders, who wanted their children to go out of their curtailing geographic locale and to explore the outer world around them. Because if you are controlled by your palatal anxieties, you will remain where you are, your tradition and the bondage associated with your family will lock you with the place. Though in the post-global scenario, where jackfruit is an "aspirable" food substance, a "rebranding" (terms used by Mr. James Joseph, who popularized Kerala's jackfruit in the global market) (4:43-4:48) of jackfruit has occurred, whereas the food has received a different level of appreciation in its local market and abroad, the dish prepared using jackfruit is again appreciated in the culinary spaces. It is a representative of the traditional cuisine, which will take you towards the

past and add nostalgic memories. As a concerned father, Soumya's parent looks at the reality from the perspective of local and international; marrying a local photographer and appreciating kumbilappam could not be compared with the status, position and luxury that she is going to enjoy if she marries a nurse from Canada. Kumbilappam signifies the lacunae between these two positions of the ordinary local and the rich NRI.

When Mahesh knows about how nicely Sowmya got rid of him, his realization of her thanklessness is suggested through a simple comment that he makes, "how tactfully you avoided me" (55:45). In that instance, he is not crying, but he quickly enters into the kitchen and comes out with a plateful of food for his dog, and it shows its gratitude with a look of calmness and contentment and wagging its tail. This act is suggestive of the fact that his dog is more thankful to him than his lover.

Jackfruit's presence is oft-repeated in the movie. It is a person's act of climbing a jackfruit tree to pluck a jackfruit that led to his death, which in a way leads to the sharing of kumbilappam. This image is again communicated when Mahesh reaches Jimsy's house. To treat him, Jimsy's mother gives him tea and a plateful of jackfruit, which is originally meant for Jimsy. While Mahesh is eating the jackfruit, Jimsy arrives and she becomes hysterical realizing that her mother has given it to a stranger. Without even noticing the guest she complains aloud, and Mahesh leaves the scene keeping the jackfruit plate as it is. Jimsy is happy and least concerned about her behavior. One could find the bedridden grandmother, who asks for a piece of jackfruit and happily they munch the jackfruit. An extremely local jackfruit is weaved into the text through different scenes and one could peel different layers of meaning. It communicates a series of signifiers including an agency of accident and death, the breakup of the lovers, a very smart and witty girl, who is able to help the hero to understand and channelize his innate potential by stating, "you are awesome" (1:32:05).

Jackfruit is symbolically represented in the film when Baby's sister is beaten upon by her husband when she is immersed in the television serial and not responding to his calls. She is watching a serial and cleaning jackfruit seeds at that time along with her neighbor. The maximum use of raw food material (multiple uses of single material) is depicted in the movie. The local and ethnic cuisines are making use of the different available sources of a single raw item, which thereby makes it a slow food because of the tremendous energy and time invested upon it. Jackfruit is an apt instance. The ripe jackfruit and raw jackfruit have different purposes, and the same raw jackfruit serves distinct culinary products.

Observations on food made by Crispin, Baby's assistant is interesting. When his boss's daughter signals that some crumbs of the egg puffs is on his face, Crispin suddenly wipes his face and replies, "This snack will humiliate you" (1:09: 54). Puff pastry, which has a Middle Eastern and Spanish origin are introduced into the bakeries of Kerala long back. It is an easily available snack, made with all-purpose flour, but one should be very careful while eating. It will make you look awkward, especially if you have the flakes and crumbs spread around your mouth. Being cheap and easily available food filler, which is again not very healthy, is preferred by the youth and freaks.

Crispin who is again an ardent lover of Mammooty, the Megastar of Malayalam, sings a very popular song on Watermelon and Mammooty. He sings, "Juice, juice, juice, watermelon juice, the favourite juice of Mammooty" (1:40:46-1:40:51). This song, which has popularized both the movie and the character, politicized the stardom of a superstar, at the expense of an easily available fruit. It is in a moment of thrill and extreme joy, Crispin sings this

song and he expects an excitement soon, and he relates that excitement with his favourite actor. It suggests the commonplaceness and ordinariness of such earthly beings, and thus informs us that food substances suggest not only themes, but also emotions and contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, food imageries and kitchen spaces in Malayalam Cinema have evolved into such an extent that the viewers have to look at them as polysemic constructs. They could suggest the habitus, socio-cultural markers, signs of economic and political positions. Through the cinematic apparatus, while critiquing the food representations of characters consuming the food, these multiple meanings are opened before us. The kitchen space and the food materials make the characters more political through such continuous contestations.

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