

Gender on the Plate: Culinary Discourses in the Malayalam Movie Salt and Pepper

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ABSTRACT

Questions of gender have become central to contemporary cultural debates, and the kitchen is one of the most charged spaces where these debates quietly unfold. This paper turns to culinary discourses to understand how gender identities and roles are cooked, served, and sometimes resisted in everyday life. Focusing on the Malayalam film *Salt N' Pepper* (2011), the study explores how food, cooking practices, and shared meals become sites where gendered expectations are both reinforced and contested. Drawing on insights from feminist theorists such as Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir, the paper examines how culinary narratives shape and reflect ideas of masculinity, femininity, intimacy, and care, without limiting the discussion to a single gendered experience. Rather than treating food merely as a backdrop, the analysis reads recipes, kitchen scenes, and eating rituals as texts that disclose emotional labour, loneliness, desire, and companionship. The research combines a close reading of the film with existing scholarly work on gender and food, bringing together cinematic analysis and gender studies to trace how culinary discourse functions as a language of power, tenderness, and negotiation. By foregrounding the everyday act of cooking as a meaningful cultural practice, the paper argues for a shift in how fixed gender roles in culinary spaces are understood. Ultimately, the study proposes that films like *Salt N' Pepper* can open up more inclusive and nuanced ways of seeing gender through the shared, very human experiences of hunger, taste, and the communal table.

Keywords: Gender, Food, Salt N' Pepper

Gender has been understood and explained in many different ways across disciplines and contexts. In everyday terms, it often refers to how societies imagine and organise what it means to be “male” or “female” in specific cultural settings. For instance, the Collins Dictionary describes gender as the state of being male or female in relation to the social and cultural roles considered appropriate for men and women. This definition already points to a binary structure—male and female—echoing a Hegelian logic of opposites that depend on each other to make sense. Merriam-Webster, on the other hand, treats gender as a category related to, but distinct from, sex: sex is linked to biological characteristics, while gender refers to socially and culturally produced roles and expectations.

International bodies also stress this social dimension. UNESCO's Gender Mainstreaming Framework, for example, defines gender as the roles and responsibilities of women and men that are created within families, societies and cultures, rather than given by nature. Taken together, these definitions converge on a key point: gender is not just about bodies, but about the roles, responsibilities and identities that societies construct for individuals

over time. Feminist thinkers have used the concept of gender as a critical tool to question and unsettle these socially constructed roles. Simone de Beauvoir, in her landmark work *The Second Sex*, deconstructs the idea that womanhood is a natural, fixed essence. She traces how social norms, cultural narratives and institutions shape women's lives at different stages—wife, mother, homemaker—and shows how these roles are imposed and normalised. Her work is often read as a foundational feminist critique because it exposes how the category “woman” is produced through social structures rather than biology alone.

Judith Butler further complicates the category of gender by focusing on its regulatory and limiting functions. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler understands gender as a set of norms that both enable and constrain how people can live, love and appear in public, and uses this to argue for greater sexual autonomy and recognition of diverse identities. Although Butler's work is rooted in feminist thought, it moves beyond a focus on women alone and questions the very stability of gender categories themselves.

Beyond theory, gender is also continuously represented, negotiated and contested in the media. Film, television and advertising play a powerful role in naturalising or challenging gender roles by repeatedly showing who cooks, who serves, who eats, and who is allowed to take pleasure in food. This paper focuses on that representational dimension, but narrows the lens to culinary discourses in cinema. It explores how food, cooking and eating become symbolic spaces where gendered identities are performed, questioned or reshaped. While many scholars have examined gender and food in global media, there is still relatively little work that takes Malayalam cinema as a primary site of analysis, especially in relation to culinary narratives. This study aims to address that gap by reading gender through the everyday language of food in Malayalam film.

Constructing Gender through Culinary Narratives

Food has long been a powerful way of representing and enforcing gender roles in culture. Across religious stories, myths and everyday practices, women are often imagined as the “natural” homemakers and primary cooks in the family. Advertisements make this link even more visible. In many popular kitchen appliance ads—such as those for Prestige—women are repeatedly shown as the main cooks who prepare meals for the entire household, while men and children simply receive and enjoy the food. Religious stories and traditional narratives similarly cast women as responsible for feeding and nurturing the family, reinforcing the idea that the kitchen is primarily their space.

Although contemporary society has seen some change in these assumptions, the basic association between women and domestic cooking remains strong. At the same time, a striking contrast emerges in professional spaces. In hotel kitchens and the wider hospitality industry, women are far less visible as chefs, despite their central role in home cooking. Surveys of the hotel industry often show low female participation in professional culinary work, and this is frequently justified through gendered stereotypes—for example, that women lack the skills, stamina or temperament to be “professional” chefs. Popular media sometimes reproduce this prejudice. In the television series *Halla Bol on Bindass*, one storyline follows a woman working as a chef in a hotel; the head chef repeatedly treats her as inferior and tells her that women are

not suited for such roles. Similar arguments are used to exclude women from other professions, such as the armed forces. These examples reveal how gendered ideas about who should cook—and where—are woven into culinary narratives.

Seeing Gender through Food in Cinema

Cinema has begun to rethink the relationship between gender and food, but it often does so in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. A well-known example is the Hindi film *English Vinglish*. The protagonist, Shashi (played by Sridevi), is a homemaker who runs a small business making laddus. Her husband casually reduces her identity to that of a “ladoo maker,” reinforcing the stereotype that women’s work in the kitchen is merely domestic and unimportant. Her daughter, embarrassed by her mother’s lack of English, also sees her as less knowledgeable and less modern. Here, English becomes a marker of education and status, while Shashi’s culinary labour is devalued.

When Shashi travels to the United States and joins an English class, she begins to see herself differently. She realises that what she does—producing and selling laddus—is in fact entrepreneurial work, a form of business. Initially, this recognition surprises her, but it gradually becomes a source of pride. Yet, in the film’s climax, she chooses to prioritise making laddus over taking her final English test. This narrative choice reinforces the idea that a woman’s “true” place is still tied to feeding others. Rather than fully challenging the traditional link between women and domestic cooking, the film ultimately returns to a familiar image of the woman as devoted homemaker, preserving a conventional view of gender and food.

A different, though still complicated, picture emerges in the Malayalam film *Ustad Hotel*, directed by Anwar Rasheed and starring Dulquer Salmaan as Faizi and Thilakan as Karim. The film primarily focuses on preserving and celebrating a culinary tradition, but it can also be read through a gendered lens. Unlike *English Vinglish*, *Ustad Hotel* allows a male character to claim cooking as his profession and passion. In one scene, when Faizi meets Shahana at a wedding, he tells her that he is a chef. Shahana is surprised because she has internalised the idea that men are expected to go into “respectable” professions like business, not into kitchen work. Here, the film disrupts the stereotype that cooking is only women’s work, yet it simultaneously reinforces other norms, such as those related to class, religion and family expectations. The film also touches briefly on polygamy within an orthodox Muslim context; a scene where Faizi serves a large family hints at how food becomes a medium through which patriarchal structures, including multiple marriages, are normalised and sustained.

Television too participates in shaping these narratives. The Malayalam comedy series *Uppum Mulakum* offers a mix of reinforcement and subversion of gender norms. In episode 779, the opening scene shows the wife engaged in household work, echoing the traditional image of women as homemakers closely tied to the kitchen. The series reflects the common stereotype that women belong in domestic spaces, while men are expected to engage in paid work outside. However, the show also complicates this picture: the wife in *Uppum Mulakum* is employed, while the husband is portrayed as lazy and often inactive. In some episodes, men are shown participating in cooking and other household tasks, subtly expanding the idea of who can belong in the kitchen.

Taken together, these examples from English Vinglish, Ustad Hotel and Uppum Mulakum show how gender stereotypes are constructed, questioned and sometimes partially overturned through culinary narratives. They reveal both the persistence of old patterns—women as default caregivers and cooks—and the emergence of new images in which men also enter the kitchen and food becomes a shared responsibility. Against this backdrop, the film *Salt N’ Pepper* offers another rich text through which to explore how gender is represented, negotiated and perhaps reimaged through food, cooking and eating.

Salt N’ Pepper (2011) is a Malayalam film directed by Aashiq Abu, featuring Lal and Asif Ali as Kalidasan and Manu, and Shweta Menon and Mythili as Maya and Meenakshi. The film is widely regarded as a turning point in contemporary Malayalam cinema for its fresh narrative style, its focus on everyday lives, and its unusual centring of food as a key element of storytelling. Aashiq Abu is known for experimenting with form and theme, and in this film, he uses humour, romance and culinary culture to explore relationships and social change.

The narrative follows the evolving relationship between Maya, a dubbing artist, and Kalidasan, an archaeologist, who are brought together by a shared love of food. Both characters can be described as “foodies”; their passion for eating and cooking is a central part of how the film constructs their identities. Their story begins with a wrong number: Maya tries to order *thattilkutti dosa* from a restaurant, but her call accidentally reaches Kalidasan on a phone gifted to him by his nephew Manu, who represents a younger, “new generation” male figure.

This accidental phone call leads to a series of conversations about food, memory and emotion. Kalidasan narrates the story of a “rainbow cake” linked to the Second World War, and Maya’s curiosity prompts her to attempt the recipe in her own kitchen, while Kalidasan prepares it in his home. Cooking the same dish in different spaces becomes a turning point in their relationship, transforming an impersonal phone call into a deeply affective connection mediated by culinary practice. When the time comes to meet in person, both feel anxious about their age and appearance. Kalidasan persuades Manu to meet Maya on his behalf, while Maya sends Meenakshi in her place. Manu and Meenakshi, believing each other to be the original caller, begin to form their own bond. Eventually, the misunderstandings are resolved, and the film concludes by bringing both couples together in a conventionally happy ending.

The film offers several significant departures from traditional gender roles in culinary narratives, while also retaining some conventional elements. A central intervention is the representation of a middle-aged man, Kalidasan, as a passionate cook and discerning eater. From the opening sequence, his identity as a foodie is foregrounded. When the head of the Archaeology Department brings him *appam*, Kalidasan immediately identifies that it has been fermented with alcohol, signalling both his refined palate and his intimate familiarity with cooking techniques. Later, at his engagement, he pays more attention to the taste of *unniyappam* than to the prospective bride. On realising that the sweet has been prepared in the *Kottarakkara* style, he tracks down the actual cook in the kitchen, confirms his origin, and ultimately brings the cook home rather than proceeding with the engagement. This humorous reversal subverts the expected outcome of an arranged marriage scene and underscores Kalidasan’s prioritisation of culinary pleasure over normative marital arrangements.

The film further deepens this characterisation through a childhood flashback. When a teacher explains the food chain and concludes that humans “eat to live,” young Kalidasan contradicts him, insisting that “we live to eat.” This line encapsulates his lifelong orientation toward food as a central source of meaning, rather than a purely functional necessity. From a gender perspective, these moments disrupt the conventional association of cooking and food-related emotional labour with women, and instead position a male character as both cook and connoisseur.

Another major thematic strand is the role of food in structuring intimate relationships. The romance between Kalidasan and Maya develops almost entirely through culinary communication: recipes, stories about dishes, and shared acts of cooking in separate spaces. The narrative of the rainbow cake, and Maya’s attempt to reproduce it, demonstrates how food functions as a medium for affect, memory and connection across distance. The repeated references to thattilkutti dosa—beginning with the wrong-number call and reappearing later when Kalidasan asks Maya where he can find it—mark food as a key link in their emotional journey. These scenes show how culinary discourse can create a shared language between genders, challenging stereotypes that restrict men to the public sphere and women to the private, domestic space.

At the same time, the film does not entirely escape traditional gender coding. Maya’s attachment to cooking is explicitly connected to her memories of her mother, who is portrayed as a homemaker. When Kalidasan asks how she became interested in cooking, Maya recalls watching her mother in the kitchen and associates food with maternal care and affection. This reaffirms the familiar image of women as primary nurturers and anchors of domestic culinary culture. The film also visually situates Maya more often in domestic spaces like the kitchen than in her professional space as a dubbing artist. Thus, even as the narrative expands the idea of men as legitimate subjects within culinary discourse, it simultaneously reinforces the longstanding linkage between women, home and food.

A further layer is added through the characters of Manu and Meenakshi, who represent a younger generation encountering both traditional food practices and inherited gender norms. Manu’s enthusiasm for thattilkutti dosa and other traditional dishes suggests a revalorisation of older culinary forms among younger urban subjects. His willingness to learn, cook and experiment with food positions him as another male figure who transgresses the stereotypical distance between men and the kitchen. Meenakshi, meanwhile, participates in this reorientation by engaging with both Manu and Maya’s culinary world. Together, they illustrate an intergenerational transmission of recipes, tastes and possibly reconfigured gender roles around cooking.

Overall, *Salt N’ Pepper* presents a complex picture: it introduces male foodies and male cooks as central characters, complicating the binary that equates women with domestic cooking and men with professional or public identities. Yet it also retains traces of conventional femininity, particularly in its portrayal of maternal influence and women’s continued association with homemaking. The film thus operates as a site of both disruption and continuity in the representation of gender within culinary narratives.

Several key insights emerge from this case study. First, the film foregrounds gendered roles within culinary narratives, revealing how both men and women are positioned in relation to cooking, eating and food-related labour. Second, it introduces a relatively new and “revolutionary” figure in Malayalam cinema: the middle-aged male foodie who not only appreciates food but also actively cooks and curates it. Through Kalidasan, his cook, and his nephew Manu, the film presents men as legitimate participants in culinary discourse, thereby challenging the idea that kitchens and cooking belong exclusively to women.

Third, the film continues to depict traditional gender roles for women. Maya’s relationship to food is strongly rooted in her mother’s domestic labour, and the visual framing of her character often situates her within the home. This underscores how deeply entrenched these roles remain, even within narratives that attempt to challenge them. Finally, the film invites viewers to recognise that perspectives on culinary narratives are shifting: men enter kitchens, younger generations engage with traditional dishes, and food becomes a shared space where gender norms can be negotiated rather than simply inherited.

Conclusion

This study set out to interrogate how gender roles are constructed, maintained and contested within culinary narratives, using *Salt N’ Pepper* as a primary case text and placing it in dialogue with other films such as *English Vinglish* and *Ustad Hotel*. The analysis suggests that culinary narratives are a crucial site where gender stereotypes are both reproduced and challenged. In *Salt N’ Pepper*, gender representation around food is ambivalent: while men are shown as food enthusiasts and competent cooks, women remain closely tied to domestic culinary labour, reflecting both continuity and change.

Comparative readings highlight how different films handle these dynamics in distinct ways. *English Vinglish* largely reinforces a traditional association between women, home cooking and family care, even when it briefly recognises the protagonist’s entrepreneurial potential. Other texts, including *Ustad Hotel* and serials like *Uppum Mulakum*, offer more varied configurations, sometimes allowing men to enter kitchen spaces, sometimes reaffirming conventional divisions. Together, these narratives indicate that gendered meanings around food are not fixed, but constantly negotiated across cultural contexts and media forms.

The study also points toward several areas for further research. One is the need for more sustained analysis of gender and culinary representations across a wider range of films and television series, especially in regional cinemas like Malayalam. Another is the importance of tracing how evolving gender roles—shaped by women’s empowerment, changing labour patterns and increased awareness of gender stereotypes—reconfigure who cooks, who eats, and whose labour is valued. Finally, the findings underscore the potential of culinary discourse as a lens through which to rethink gender itself: as a set of practices, performances and relations that can be challenged, reimaged and shared rather than simply inherited.

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