

WHY FOOD MATTERS? REPRESENTATION OF FOOD IN CINEMA**Binil Kumar M. R¹, Indu Balachandran²**¹Binil Kumar M. R., Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Paul's College,
Kalamassery²Indu Balachandran, Assistant Professor, Department of English, SN College, Cherthala &
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binil@stpauls.ac.in, indub284@gmail.com**Synopsis**

Cinema is a sensory art that stimulates and manipulates visual modality and auricular faculty. The inclusion of food and culinary art as a subject in film incites the imaginary potentiality of olfactory and gustatory senses. Besides sensory engagement, 'food' is used as a narrative device, a metaphor or a symbol representing class, tradition, relationship, culture, memory and emotion. The serious engagement with food in movies evolved a sub-genre called 'food films' or 'culinary cinema.' This paper attempts to look at the metaphorical significance and representation of food in films.

Key Words: Cinema, Food, culture, Representation

From the inception of cinema 'food' has been a protagonist, or used as a mis-en-scene with different purposes. It is interesting to note that the first commercial public screening of projected motion picture by Lumière brothers on 28th December 1895 took place in the basement of Grand Café in Paris. Moreover, one of the ten films that were screened, a short black and white clip titled *Le repas du bébé* presented Auguste Lumière and his wife spoon-feeding their baby. Even during the silent era, films presented culinary scenes. In *Sorcellerie culinaire* (1904), Georges Méliès presented a chef preparing tasty dishes that attract a vagabond. Charlie Chaplin in his *The Gold Rush* (1925) portrayed the classic scene of Thanksgiving dinner in which he prepared soup with shoe and waited to eat it with a knife and fork. The last notable film in the silent era was *From Soup to Nuts* (1928), a short comedy in which hired waiters serving at a high-society dinner party leading to a series of humorous mishaps and slapstick comedy.

After the silent era, some prominent films that dealt with food were *Adua e le Compagne* (1960), *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971) and *Who is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe?* (1978). The food films have completely emerged as a distinct genre in the second half of the 1980s. *Tampopo* (1985), *Babette's Feast* (1987), *Crossing Delancey* (1988), *Mystic Pizza* (1988), *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989) initiated a new era in the cinematic depiction of food. From 1990 onwards, there were a flood of films in this genre that brought a term called 'food porn' into wide currency through social media. The term is used ".... to describe aestheticized visual or verbal representations of food that focus intensely on its desire-inducing qualities" (Lupton 37). During this time from the aesthetic representation which makes sensory appeals, food has been presented as a metaphor to represent culture and Identity.

Anne Bower notes that despite this very early start, the movie industry has been slow to recognize the visual and aesthetic attractiveness of food and have only recently begun to produce movies where food has a leading part to play. Particularly, in recent years, the use of gastronomy culture in movies has become more common, and gastronomy culture has begun to be used for different functions, with different attributions (10). The food movies with different intentions are classified and listed below.

Culture, Tradition and Human Relationships

Many of the films use food to illustrate culture, customs, and interpersonal interactions. The process by which culinary values of countries become national and later international are aided by movies. They emphasise the crucial role that culinary customs play in fostering human connections, conserving cultural traditions, and expressing affection and concern. *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), *Soul Food* (1997) and *The Lunchbox* (2013) are examples of it. *Eat Drink Man Woman* centres on Mr. Chu and his three unmarried daughters. The elaborate dinner that Chu prepares each Sunday serves as the backdrop for the revelation of their innermost thoughts and challenges. *Soul Food* with its focus on an African American family emphasises the value of Sunday dinners as a custom that fortifies family ties and conserves cultural history. Both these films stress the value of keeping culinary customs alive and transferring them from one generation to the next, addressing more general issues of cultural legacy and identity.

Kniazeva & Venkatesh opine that People come together with others over a meal when they have something to celebrate, need cheering up, or are introducing new acquaintances to and long-time friends. Indeed, eating serves a central role in developing and maintaining relationships and is often ritualized (421-422). Even strangers may get into contact by the influence of food. *The Lunchbox* directed by Ritesh Batra revolves around a special bond that forms between Ila, a housewife and Saajan, an isolated office worker who is about to retire, as a result of an error in lunch delivery. In all such films food acts as a powerful story telling device that evokes strong emotions and memories. It is the food that connects people, members of the family and even strangers.

Rather than a medium of entertainment, food films focus on its power to bring people together around the table. *Luv Shuv Tey Chicken* Khurana (2012) is an Indian comedy film that shows rekindling relationships through culinary legacy. The film tells us about Omi's endeavours to bring back the glory of his grandfather's dhaba which was famous for the chicken recipe. Another Indian film *Stanley ka Dabba* (2011) is about exemplifying the power of friendship and compassion through sharing food by school friends. This film emphasises empathy and the impact of small acts of kindness. *Cheeni Kum* (2007), *English Vinglish* (2012), *Ustad Hotel* (2012), and *Salt and Pepper* (2011) are some of the movies which bring together passion for food and human relationships. They explore how food unites people or help them overcome all obstacles, find their true selves and reach their goals.

Exploring and Exchanging Heritage

Film is like a journey in which a tourist tries to see a new place. In the past, a tourist focussed on things to be seen in a given destination. But nowadays, this perspective changes

and people choose places that provide multi-sensory experiences. Food films provide such experience.

Food has the remarkable ability to bring people together and create a sense of connection. It offers a unique opportunity to learn about different cultures and broaden our understanding of the world. By exploring diverse cuisines, we can gain insights into various societies' history, traditions, and social structures. For instance, analyzing the ways in which food is prepared and consumed can reveal significant information about gender roles and power dynamics in a given community. (Norenzayan)

Films such as *Ramen Girl* (2008), *Julie & Julia* (2009) and *The Hundred-Foot Journey* (2014) are examples of this. *Ramen Girl*, is a romantic comedy-drama film. An American lady in Japan, masters the craft of making ramen and explores Japanese culinary customs and the precision and dedication in Japanese cooking. *Julie & Julia*, American biographical comedy-drama film, considers how Julia Child's introduction of French cookery to America shaped American culinary culture and increased awareness of fine dining. *The Hundred-Foot Journey* is an American comedy-drama film directed by Lasse Hallström. In a charming French village, an Indian family establishes a restaurant across the street from a Michelin-starred French eatery. The film explores the conflict and eventual integration of Indian and French culinary traditions.

Films about food that highlight the sharing of cultural history explore the rich history and cultural relevance of traditional recipes, emphasising the connection between food and cultural heritage, family, and community. These films bridge gaps between groups and promote togetherness and tolerance by highlighting diverse culinary customs and encouraging a deeper knowledge and appreciation of cultural variety. They convey to audiences the essence of tradition, identity, and common human experience through the universal language of cuisine.

An Alternative War

There was a noted trend from 2000 to depict films that portray competition of chefs of different cultures and from different countries. Some of the films include *The Final Recipe* (2013), *Le Grand Chef* (2007) and *Cook Up a Storm* (2017). These films are deliberately targeted towards a global audience. *The Final Recipe* is about a young chef who takes part in a prestigious cooking competition to save his grandfather's restaurant. *Le Grand Chef* is about a cooking competition participated by two old friends to inherit the title of the Grand Chef. *Cook Up a Storm* is about two chefs representing two distinct culinary traditions square off with their different cooking techniques.

"The process by which culinary values of countries become national and later international are aided by movies. ... Movies can also serve to spread cultural codes, be it nearly forgotten, unknown or variations of widely known features" (Yilmaza 136). All these films present competition and the intense pressure faced by the chefs. The setting would be a large studio with competitors from around the world and showcases their best dishes. The purpose of the film is not to make a verdict on which is the best food but is to present the tension of a competition and also to present culinary experimentation. These films end up with the protagonist as the winner but they respect the cross border culinary cultures.

The Politics of Food

Culinary cinema frequently centres on issues of social justice, power relations, and cultural identity. They emphasise the challenges of maintaining traditional cooking customs in the face of globalisation and modernisation. They also discuss class and inequality, demonstrating how having access to wholesome food can indicate one's social standing and level of authority.

Films like *Axone* (2019), *Aamis* (2019), *Seththumaan* (2022) explore the politics of food. The film *Axone* is about a group of friends from Northeast India who face social prejudice and discrimination while attempting to prepare a traditional dish called 'axone' for a wedding celebration. *Aamis* explores the moral limits and societal conventions that determine what constitutes appropriate behaviour, especially in relation to food and carnal desire. The film *Seththumaan* emphasis on how societal hierarchies impact customary cooking methods and how the social systems control and restrict food practices. These films depict food intertwined with other social aspects like race, religion and caste. They delve into the politics of belonging and the struggle to maintain one's cultural identity in a society that often marginalizes minority communities.

Conclusion

Food films or Culinary cinema have a special purpose. It tells the significance of preserving culture, exploring or studying it and respecting it. In an artistic way these films tell us how human relationship is bound by food as a metaphor of love. These films instruct audiences on a variety of cuisines, culinary methods, and the complexities of the food industry, frequently exploring the cultural and historical significance of food. A sense of community and connection is also promoted by food films, which highlight the unifying power of food to bridge social and cultural divides. Food films provide a rich and captivating experience that appeal to a broad spectrum of viewers by fusing these components.

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