

EXPLORING CULINARY NARRATIVES: THE ROLE OF RECIPES IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYALAM CINEMA

Deleep D L

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government College for Women, Trivandrum

Abstract

The identity of a community is shaped by various factors, with food serving as a significant cultural marker. A complex interplay of social interactions, market dynamics, and geographical influences creates foodscapes imbued with diverse social meanings and values. Culinary narratives seek to encapsulate these foodscapes—along with associated memories and social practices—through films and literature. This paper aims to analyse how the acts of cooking and consuming food serve as narrative devices for constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing social norms and expectations, focusing on three selected films from Malayalam cinema: *Salt n Pepper: Oru Dosa Undakiya Katha* (2011), *Ustad Hotel* (2012), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021). Each of these films prominently features food in their titles. The exploration will address the roles that food and its preparation play within these narratives. Is food merely a means of sustenance, or does it fulfil broader social functions? How do every day dining rituals articulate societal norms and expectations? Furthermore, how are discourses surrounding religion, gender, caste, class, and labour constructed through foodscapes? This paper will also investigate how recipes and cooking processes function as metaphors and narrative tools in these films, enhancing the viewer's understanding of themes such as oppression, romance, and identity realization. Despite the direct connection of these film titles to food and related spaces, each film approaches the concept of food uniquely. The processes of construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction occur through food practices that include recipes and dining rituals. A close reading of these three films using semiotic analysis will reveal the deeper significance of food within their narratives.

Keywords: Culinary narratives, foodscape, *Salt N' Pepper*, *Ustad Hotel*, *The Great Indian Kitchen*

Foodscape refers to the various locations and environments where individuals acquire, prepare, discuss, or derive meaning from food. This concept originated in geography and has found extensive application in urban studies and public health, particularly concerning urban food environments. Sociologists have broadened this definition to encompass the institutional frameworks, cultural contexts, and discourses that shape our relationship with food. Foodscapes can manifest as institutions, organizations, or even small corners of streets that foster a sense of permanence and identity within a community.

Foodscapes can serve as a means to address various challenges, but they also have the potential to create new conflicts. These environments often reflect a range of prejudices, including those based on race, class, caste, and gender. As foodscapes emerge as vibrant centers for cultural nourishment, they are also shaped by cultural politics and prevailing trends

regarding the meanings and significance of food. This paper seeks to explore the cultural importance of Kerala's foodscapes through the lens of three films from Malayalam cinema.

Kerala is home to a diverse array of foodscapes, ranging from traditional households that cherish age-old recipes passed down through generations to small street eateries known as 'Thattukada'. These foodscapes, prominently featured in Malayalam cinema, carry significance beyond mere consumption and preparation of food. This paper aims to explore the semiotic elements present in three selected films from Malayalam cinema: *Salt N' Pepper* (2011), *Ustad Hotel* (2012), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021). In Malayalam cinema, 'New Generation films' refers to those released after 2010 by various directors. While these films resist classification into a specific genre or movement due to their diverse characteristics, they share a commonality in their innovative narrative techniques and bold critiques of societal norms (S. Gopinath and S.J Raj). The emergence of new directors and storylines has been labeled as the New Generation movement, as many of these filmmakers and actors are making their debut in mainstream cinema. Within this context, food has begun to play a crucial role in storytelling, acquiring symbolic and metaphorical significance. The culinary traditions of different communities and regions in Kerala have found new expression in cinema, transcending mere consumption and aesthetic appeal (Swetha). *Salt N' Pepper* and *Ustad Hotel* are two prominent New Generation films that emphasize cooking, recipes, and food consumption. While *Salt N' Pepper* illustrates how food can bring two people together romantically, *Ustad Hotel* explores themes of belonging, familial bonds, and the tension between tradition and modernity.

In these New Generation films, the glorification of food often accompanies an appreciation for traditional cooking methods, imbuing them with a ritualistic significance. *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) takes a unique approach by reflecting on cooking within a domestic setting, which also serves as a foodscape. The film provides a stark commentary on heteronormative patriarchal households, where women spend their lives toiling in the kitchen. It challenges the aesthetic value typically associated with food by exposing the monotony and exhausting nature of cooking, including graphic depictions of waste disposal. *The Great Indian Kitchen* reveals the significant disparity between the societal reforms that Keralites claim to have achieved and the reality that persists. Through detailed summaries of the selected films analyzed in this paper, readers will gain a clearer understanding of these themes.

Ustad Hotel (2012), directed by Anwar Rasheed, tells the story of a young man named Faizi (Dulquer Salman), who dreams of becoming a chef. Raised by his sisters, whom he affectionately calls *ithathas*, Faizi is depicted as a loving younger brother who has been learning to cook from them since childhood. While Faizi aspires to attend culinary school, his father insists he pursue an MBA instead. When Abdul Razaq discovers that Faizi has studied culinary arts rather than hotel management as he wished, he becomes enraged. This revelation leads Razaq to sever ties with Faizi, cutting off financial support and withholding his passport, while also breaking off Faizi's engagement to Shahana (Nitya Menon), who never expected her affluent fiancé to pursue a career as a chef. Devastated but resolute in following his passion, Faizi turns to his grandfather Kareem (Thilakan), who runs a well-known local eatery called

Ustad Hotel. This transitional period becomes a significant learning experience for Faizi, who had previously felt disconnected from his roots. Through cooking, sharing, and experimenting with recipes alongside his grandfather, Faizi discovers a sense of purpose in life and opens up new opportunities for himself. He learns about his grandfather's humanitarian efforts and becomes involved in cooking for the less fortunate while helping to run Ustad Hotel, which employs those in need. This coming-of-age film chronicles Faizi's transformation from a spoiled yet determined young man into someone with a meaningful cause.

Salt n Pepper: Oru Dosa Undakiya Katha (2011) marks the directorial debut of Aashiq Abu, an acclaimed filmmaker in Malayalam cinema known for his innovative storytelling and socially impactful themes. The film tells the story of two middle-aged individuals who discover love, with food serving as a significant narrative device throughout the plot. Maya (Shweta Menon), the female lead, is a dubbing artist struggling to navigate societal pressures as an unmarried middle-aged woman facing constant criticism and unwanted attention from a patriarchal society. She lives as a paying guest with a woman who operates a beauty parlor and shares her space with a younger roommate. For Maya, food and cooking provide solace, evoking memories of her late mother. Kalidasan (Lal), the male protagonist, is a single middle-aged archaeologist who has experienced heartbreak in the past. He is also a food enthusiast who enjoys exploring culinary experiences. One stressful day at work, Maya orders 'Thattil kutty Dosa,' a type of dosa served with garlic chutney, inadvertently dialing Kalidasan's number instead of the restaurants. When Kalidasan fails to clarify the mix-up, Maya grows frustrated with the delayed service and calls again, speaking harshly to him under the impression that he is the restaurant manager. Their heated exchange escalates into mutual insults, but after both apologize, they develop a friendship rooted in shared recipes and culinary interests that eventually blossoms into romance. As they prepare to meet for the first time, both Maya and Kalidasan feel insecure about their appearances and age. Interestingly, they each have alternative families composed of friends and supporters who help them manage their insecurities while sometimes complicating matters further. Ultimately, their journey culminates in a positive resolution as they finally meet at the end of the film.

The Great Indian Kitchen (2021), directed by Jeo Baby, offers a critical examination of traditional family structures, highlighting the patriarchal norms that enforce rigid gender roles. Set within a conventional Hindu household, the film features a father-in-law (T. Suresh Babu), a mother-in-law (Ajita V. M.), their son (Suraj Venjaramoodu), and his wife (Nimisha Sajayan). The narrative unfolds from the perspective of the young bride, who initially attempts to conform to the societal expectations of being the ideal wife. As the story progresses, her challenges begin when her mother-in-law leaves to visit her daughter, leaving her as the sole woman in a household that adheres to socially acceptable norms. A pivotal moment occurs when she jokingly confronts her husband about his table manners at home compared to public settings. This confrontation reveals the darker side of patriarchy when he responds angrily, asserting his right to behave as he pleases in his own home. Throughout the film, she finds her opinions disregarded, including in matters concerning her body and their sexual relationship. When she menstruates, she is confined to a menstrual chamber, isolated from her husband and father-in-law who are observing a religious vow. Realizing that her marriage is suffocating her

spirit, she ultimately leaves her husband's home, only to find that her own family does not welcome her back with open arms. However, the film concludes on a hopeful note, showing her as a successful dance instructor in a school. Through its sensory storytelling, *The Great Indian Kitchen* effectively captures the struggles of a woman trapped within domestic confines.

Recipes and Cooking of Food as Metaphors and Narrative Processes

Recipes play a crucial role in establishing and preserving traditions, as they are passed down through generations, linking the past with the present and fostering a sense of identity and belonging (Hamamoto). In our increasingly globalized world, we continuously exchange and incorporate recipes from various foodscapes, enriching our culinary practices and creating new identities, cultures, and traditions. The sharing of recipes exists along a spectrum of secrecy—ranging from openly accessible blogs and newspaper articles to cherished family recipes that are closely guarded. The manner in which recipes are shared, and with whom, can reveal much about the relationships involved. In *Salt N' Pepper* (2011), the sharing of a 'historical' recipe serves as the backdrop for the romance between the lead characters. Kalidasan decides to reconcile with Maya by offering her the recipe for Joan's Rainbow Cake. According to the film's narrative, following World War II, a soldier writes to his beloved Joan Lobo about his return. In anticipation of his arrival, Joan bakes a strawberry cake. However, when he fails to return that day, she continues baking over the next two days, creating additional cakes—pistachio and orange—and layers them with whipped cream. On the fourth day, when her husband finally returns with chocolates, she melts them to glaze the cake, sealing it as a symbol of their love and marking an end to their wartime separation.

Although the historicity of the story surrounding Joan's Rainbow Cake is not verifiable—aside from its possible connection to the cakes made by Jewish immigrants in the United States after World War II—the tale is rich in symbolism and meaning. Strawberries, with their red, heart-shaped appearance, are often associated with Venus, representing love, passion, and lust. In Persian traditions, lovers gather beneath pistachio trees to listen to the crackling of nuts, symbolizing happiness. Meanwhile, in Middle Eastern cultures, pistachios are regarded as symbols of royalty and luxury. In Chinese culture, they are seen as representations of happiness and good health. Chocolate, on the other hand, embodies sinful temptation, indulgence, celebration, and desire. All these symbols are intricately woven together in Joan's story and are sealed by a glaze made from the chocolates brought by her lover. This layering of meanings serves to remind us that the recipe for a lasting relationship requires patience, effort, and contributions from all parties involved.

The narrative of Joan's Rainbow Cake is intricately intertwined with the blossoming romance between Kalidasan and Maya, characterized by a series of phone calls that bring their kitchens and culinary experiences to the forefront. As they navigate their respective pseudo-families, the film highlights both the differences and similarities between their characters and households, leading to significant emotional revelations. For instance, Maya reflects on her late mother, sharing her sorrow with Kalidasan, who struggles to find the right words to comfort her. While Joan's cake symbolizes the end of World War II and the return of her lover, the sharing of its recipe signifies the resolution of the conflict between Maya and Kalidasan that

arose from her accidental call to him. This moment marks the beginning of their relationship, built on shared backgrounds and a mutual love for good food. The film also subverts traditional gender roles by depicting a man winning over a woman through culinary efforts, reinforcing the notion that food can indeed be a pathway to a woman's heart (Swetha).

The vibrant colours of the cake starkly contrast with the dull lives of the two main characters, Kalidasan and Maya, who, despite their intriguing careers, lead seemingly monochromatic existences. Kalidasan spends his days in dusty offices and excavation sites, often drowning his evenings in alcohol, while Maya, working as a dubbing artist and living as a paying guest in a beauty parlour, finds herself on the outskirts of love, romance, and beauty—more a silent observer than an active participant. The process of baking the cake over four days through long phone conversations serves as a form of courtship for the couple, creating a private space amidst their shared households filled with pseudo-families. These pseudo-families act as bystanders, enjoying both the cake and the transformation in the couple's demeanour. This suggests that *Salt N' Pepper* employs Joan's Rainbow Cake recipe as a metaphor for courtship and relationship building, while also establishing its place in Kerala's culinary history—despite the cake lacking a direct historical connection to World War II, its popularity on Malayali cuisine blogs attests to its significance. In contrast, recipes, cooking processes, and techniques in *Ustad Hotel* (2012) serve a different narrative function, opening discussions about identity, generational gaps, and the tension between tradition and modernity. The film emphasizes that Kareemikka's biriyani is renowned as the best in Calicut and hints that his recipe may even be used at the upscale Beach Bay hotel next door. However, it is not the biriyani recipe that drives the narrative forward; rather, it is the technique of making flaky, chewy Kerala Parotta that plays a crucial role in storytelling.

After a dramatic fallout with his father, Faizi seeks refuge with his grandfather Kareemikka, who decides to put him to work from the ground up. Faizi begins with physically demanding tasks, such as transporting heavy sacks of rice—when he complains about this to his sisters, they jokingly compare it to weightlifting at the gym. He then progresses to making multiple deliveries of biriyani and attending to tables, as Kareemikka assigns him various non-cooking roles at the restaurant, much to Faizi's frustration. Kareemikka expresses to his trusted assistant that Faizi is not yet mature enough to handle kitchen duties, while Faizi vents to an unseen caller on his mobile, insisting that he can tolerate everything except his grandfather's refusal to let him cook, especially given his training as a professional chef.

After enduring various trials reminiscent of the Twelve Labours of Hercules—such as carrying sacks of rice, delivering takeout, scaling fish, waiting tables, cleaning, and managing bookkeeping—Faizi finally gains Kareemikka's approval to learn how to cook. The scene is set with a table framed by a door, accompanied by a stove and the kitchen in the background, while Kareemikka and his staff appear as silhouettes in the foreground. The master parotta maker demonstrates the technique, skilfully spinning and slapping the dough until it becomes translucent, then slicing it into strips, coiling them into a ball, and rolling out a parotta. Faizi perceives this as child's play and attempts to replicate the process, but his numerous mistakes

are evident. By the time he completes his attempt, he is nearly impatient, leading Kareemikka to express disappointment and leave the scene.

Faizi spends the entire night repeating the process, feeling frustrated and exhausted. The camera captures the closing of the kitchen and the staff retiring for the night, emphasizing that Faizi's efforts have continued throughout the evening. A pan shot reveals his multiple failed attempts neatly arranged on the table, framed by the sleeping workers around him. The only companion during his struggle is a little abandoned kitten he has taken in, serving as one of many metaphors woven throughout the film. When Faizi finally manages to create a perfect parotta, he finds himself alone to celebrate his success. In a moment of impulsiveness, he snatches a spatula from the sleeping parotta master, who clutches it like a scepter in his sleep, and proceeds to fry the parotta on the stovetop.

Faizi presents his success to his grandfather, who is seated on the dilapidated pier—a significant liminal space frequently featured in the film—just as the sun rises. In a typical "Desi parent" manner, Kareemikka casually remarks that Faizi's effort is "not bad," but then imparts a crucial piece of wisdom: anyone can fill a stomach, but the true purpose of cooking lies in filling the heart with joy. If this profound philosophical and existential engagement isn't evident from the visuals of the cooking process, it is reinforced by the lyrics and melody of Gopi Sundar's song "Sanchari Ni," which begins playing as Faizi starts carrying sacks of rice and fades out when he presents his perfect parotta to his grandfather. The lyrics emphasize that everyone on earth is a traveler or a gypsy, suggesting that the journey itself is the destination. The choice of parotta as a central dish is intriguing; while it is a staple of Kerala's cuisine, few home cooks dare to attempt making it. Most eateries employ specialized cooks dedicated solely to the intricate process of stretching and layering the parotta. Much like the layered Rainbow Cake in *Salt N' Pepper*, the parotta in *Ustad Hotel* symbolizes life itself—the journey, the struggles, and the rich rewards that can be achieved when one respects that journey.

Faizi's quest for identity extends beyond a search for his rich Malabari Mappila culinary heritage; it also encompasses the pursuit of success and personal fulfilment. His credentials as a chef stem not from formal training or education, but from the passion he infuses into his work and his willingness to share both his financial achievements and the meaning he derives from them. He learns valuable lessons through the recipe, focusing on the techniques and processes involved, often through trial and error. In both *Ustad Hotel* and *The Great Indian Kitchen*, tea plays a significant role in representing cultural identity. While the recipe for tea, specifically Malabari suleimani, serves as a metaphor for romance in *Ustad Hotel*, it takes on darker connotations in *The Great Indian Kitchen*. Viewers familiar with the latter film will recognize how the demand for tea becomes a pivotal moment that challenges the hetero-patriarchal dynamics within the household during the climax. This paper will examine another scene where the preparation of tea, or 'kattan chai,' serves as a site of patriarchal oppression, both in domestic settings and at a societal level.

Late in the evening, uninvited guests arrive at the tharavad (ancestral house), prompting Nimisha, the wife, to extend her hospitality by offering to make tea. The guests, relatives of

her husband, request both regular tea and kattan chai (black tea), adding to Nimisha's workload. Eager to please as a newly married woman and fulfill her role as a good daughter-in-law, she agrees, only to be criticized by one guest when her kattan chai lacks the expected spices. He further infantilizes her by explaining how to prepare it. Interestingly, his wife, who initially contributed to Nimisha's burden by requesting a different type of tea, empathizes with her but is dismissed by her husband with a remark about her love for food causing her foot ailment. Later that evening, after offering to cook dinner for the guests and making a mess of their kitchen, the same guest again asks for a cup of tea. When Nimisha prepares it according to his specifications, his appreciation feels almost mocking and patronizing.

While *Ustad Hotel* uses the tea recipe to explore themes of love and purpose as motivation for individuals and to facilitate the sharing of family stories across generations, *The Great Indian Kitchen* employs the kattan chai recipe to critique patriarchy and its various players. Typically, guests strive not to inconvenience their hosts; however, in *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the guest not only burdens Nimisha but also takes it upon himself to instruct her on how to make kattan chai. This act questions not only Nimisha's ability as a host but also her cooking skills, as making tea is often regarded as a fundamental ability for any competent cook. The recipe thus becomes a means for those benefiting from patriarchy to assert their power—he simplifies the process of making kattan chai while refusing to make it himself, effectively questioning the host's capabilities and infantilizing her by dictating how things should be done. The analysis of foodscapes and recipes in these three films reveals their significant role in fostering relationships, providing nourishment, and highlighting how they can also disrupt harmony when intertwined with social markers such as gender, class, and caste. These culinary narratives often serve as cultural indicators that reflect societal dynamics, making the films both enlightening regarding positive changes occurring around us and urgent calls for necessary transformations that have long been overdue.

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