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Cooking Identity : Reading the Semiotics of Food in *Angamaly Diaries*

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ABSTRACT


In recent times, food films have coalesced to become a bonafide genre in the film industry. Food is no longer seen as a primary aspect of survival or is important for its aesthetic gastronomic function. The tools of cultural studies and identity politics have interrogated the multiple dimensions and functions of the representation of food in films and literature. Malayalam film industry has also seen a number of films giving prominence to food and its representation like *Mr. Butler*, *Salt and Pepper* and *Ustad Hotel* to mention a few. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the dialectics of food in the recent Malayalam movie *Angamaly Diaries*. Food, as Barthes rightly pointed out is a sign, it is part of a semiotic system. The paper attempts to explore the semiotics of food as represented in the movie *Angamaly Diaries* and how it reflects the politics of identity construction, gender equations, cultural and ideological interpellations.

Keywords: Food, culture, identity, gender, Other, resistance.

Introduction

The cultural and political landscapes of human interactions and deliberations are formulated, manipulated and maneuvered to a great extent by the play of signs and symbols. The human psychological, intellectual and ideological trajectories are interpellated by the visual, verbal universe that one encounters. Films play a major role in formulating the cultural and ethnic nuances of the communities they represent. Decoding the signs interspersed in the visual medium enables one to interrogate the underlying tenets in their multidimensional manifestations. It is as Terry Eagleton rightly points out in his 'Edible Ecriture' "if there is one thing about food, it is that it is never just food. Like the Post Structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable" (204). Food is a powerful sign, a very poignant pointer that guide the careful observer to distinct emotive, ideological, cultural premises of the visual narrative.

Food films have become a bonafide genre in recent times with a multitude of movies in different languages weaving complex semiotics around the metaphor of food. They have garnered substantial critical attention too for in them food ceases to be a mere object with only a gastronomic function to play. Food becomes a potent sign capable of signifying codes of ideological gravity.

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Angamly Diaries is a movie directed by Lijo Jose Pallisery and written by the acclaimed actor Chemban Vinod. The 2017 movie received commercial and critical success and was lauded especially for the refreshing style of narration involving 88 debutant actors and an uncut 11 minute long take in the climax featuring almost 1000 artists. The movie intricately captures the pulses and rhythms of the squalid underbelly of Kerala's Angamaly town. The movie revolves around the story of Vincent Pepe and his friends, who form a gang called the Palliyangadi team and desires to be the dominant gangster team in Angamaly. The visual narrative features how the protagonist and his friends decide to start pork business, and involves the tale of rivalry and greed, of love won and love lost, the accidental murder committed by Pepe and how he tries to resolve the issue and weave a life of his own. What gives the movie its peculiar charm and poignancy is the way in which the narrative captures the taste, odour and music of the region to create a specific regional identity. It is the culinary narrative that is so dexterously interwoven into the main narrative that moves the movie forward, inviting the viewers to partake in the magic of regional flavor served in toto in a platter.

OBJECTIVE

Films such as *Chocolat*, *Ratatouille*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Chef*, etc where the culinary narrative occupy a central dais abound in foreign languages, but food films are few and far between in the regional language like Malayalam. Though there are films such as *Ustad Hotel*, *Kammath and Kammath*, *Salt and Pepper*, some of which have managed to gain commercial success, the culinary universe embedded in the narrative is seldom paid critical attention and probe. The attempt of this paper is to delve deep into the semiotics of food as portrayed in a recent Malayalam movie *Angamly Diaries* and to see how food becomes a powerful sign signifying issues of identity, ethnicity, regionalism, gender and resistance to mainstream, manipulative forces.

Food in the movie has different functions to fulfill. In addition to arousing the gastronomic greed in the viewer with the tantalising visualization of preparation and presentation of food, it invites the reader to engage in a kind of dialectical discourse with issues of gender and identity, cultural nuances and conflicts so peculiar to a small town region in Kerala. It is as Barthes highlights "For what is food? It is not only a collection of products ... It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (29).

I.METAPHOR FOR CULTURAL/REGIONAL IDENTITY

The very beginning of the movie is a clear explication of the central role accorded to food in the visual narrative. The movie starts by treating the viewers to a visual feast imbued with images of food, food being prepared and savoured, tantalizing and appetizing the viewer's senses of taste and smell. What the culinary narrative that runs powerfully and poignantly in the movie does primarily is to establish a sense of regional identity and cultural continuity. Not all food is given prominence, not all exotic images are incorporated in the narrative, but the food that predominates the framework of the movie is pork, the ways of preparing it, especially the signature way in which pork is cooked in Angamaly. Whereas pork is cooked alone in other regions, people of Angamaly cook pork with the vegetable 'koorka'. Pepe takes pride in the fact that his mother is a typical Angamli woman who makes her pork with 'koorka'. Images of pork and other staple regional flavours abound in the movie. Food is a part of every celebration and food becomes the primary character in the movie. At every bend and turn of Angamaly town you find a local tea shop or hotel that sell pork dish, or a meat shop that sell raw pork meat, at every bend and turn of the movie you are greeted with the visuals, odour and palatable taste of food prepared and consumed with much gusto. Food is no longer a basic nourishment, it is not merely an object to be consumed but it rather becomes a subjective entity of the ethnic landscape of Angamaly. It becomes an objective correlative of identity for every Angamalian. It evokes a sense of belongingness, a sense of rootedness, a sense of

nostalgia. Just as the movie starts with images of Angamaly, accentuated with rhythmic, regular portrayal of images of food, the movie ends with the protagonist nostalgically reminiscing about his home town, Angamaly where life will be moving on with a little pork and liquor, usual fights and adventures. This is the Angamaly that the movie sketches for the viewers. The identity, regional speciality of the place, the local flavor and aroma are so powerfully captured and delivered within the images of food prepared and consumed. The culinary narrative offers a rich picture of the subjective schema of the people of Angamaly, people for whom nice life is nothing but a life comprising a little pork and a few glasses of liquor, fights and petty brawls.

II. GENDER: STEREOTYPES AND SUBVERSIONS

Movies play a significant role in constructing, affirming and sometimes subverting gender stereotypes. A multitude of images are used by many directors to signify the spectrum ranging from the totally subservient to the empowered. *Angamly Diaries* also showcase different types of women, some still writhing within the four walls of gender inequality and some breaking chains and creating a space and voice of their own. What makes the movie significant is the way in which it skillfully uses images of food to articulate the nuances of gender as an institution in the ambiguous society of Kerala, a state which stands first in the rate of literacy but where cases of abuse, gender stereotyping and patriarchal domination abound. *Angamly Diaries* finely captures these two dimensions of gender functionality in the Kerala society through the semiotics of food. The traditional connection between women, kitchen, cooking and food has been established right from the beginning. The mother in the initial scenes function as the mouthpiece of patriarchal supremacy when she sharply rejects her daughter's plea for more food by an outright 'No' and dictating to her that being a girl child she needs only that much food. Without hesitation, she gives more food to the boy child, who eats alongside his sister. Space also functions as a symbol of circumspection when the boy child is affectionately asked by the mother to get seated at the dining table and eat. The shadow of the girl still standing in the kitchen, learning to comply with mother's insinuation that she is inferior to her brother looms large in the background. She does not question it; does not challenge it. Preferences and privileges are the exclusive prerogative of the male child. Subservience becomes a permanent script in the palimpsest of her psyche. The mother becomes an example of how women can become collaborators in perpetuating subjugation of women. Gender demarcation, disparity and inequality are indoctrinated right from childhood. Women become mere puppets at the hands of patriarchy. Women in the movie, majority of them at least, are shown functioning within the stereotypical role of cooking and serving food. Kitchen is their world and cooking is their destiny. When cooking transcends the four walls of the kitchen and becomes a source of income, it becomes the man's domain.

MASCULINITY / FEMININITY – THE MACHO MAN AND THE EFFEMINATE

Food is used a symbol to represent what the average Keralite considers a macho man and to draw a sharp demarcation between the masculine man and the effeminate man. In one of the initial scenes of the movie, snake meat is found to be offered to the other men who all look muscular and behave in a thuggish manner. Only the heroic macho man can eat something as exotic and rare as snake meat, which incidentally has been stolen from a school exhibition and cooked sumptuously. It is offered only to the heterosexual, masculine male whereas the effeminate, evidently homosexual/ transgender character is not even asked to partake snake meat. It is evidently not his cup of tea in a society where transgenders are still stigmatized and looked down upon. The binary between masculinity and effeminacy is clearly drawn out using the imagery of food.

SUBVERSION OF STEREOTYPE

The only character in the movie who attempts to subvert the orthodox codes and conducts of the Malayali community is Lichi – Lichi is Pepe's friend's sister. When the protagonist breaks his relationship to his first lover, Lichi in a crucial moment bares her heart to him and expresses his wish to marry him. A woman proposing to a man is looked down upon in the orthodox Malayali community. The rule dictates it the other way around. She breaks this rule ; she proposes to Pepe who is younger to her . The codes of marriage in Kerala rigidly favours the man being elder to the woman he marries. Without qualms, Lichi decides to marry Pepe who is younger to her. She had been called Lichi by Pepe because she is his friend's sister , it is Liji 'chechi' (a term meaning sister) which got abbreviated to Lichi. Pepe considers her an elder sister as is evidenced by the term of address he uses. In the Kerala society a woman is never supposed to marry or engage in a romantic relationship with one who occupies her brother's position. Lichi thwarts this rule too when she expresses her wish to marry Pepe who is her younger brother's friend, who calls her sister! This strain of rebellion and revolt in her character is poignantly reflected in her food preferences too. Unlike Malayali women for whom drinking alcohol is a matter of shame and scorn, Lichi delights in drinking alcohol, to the surprise of Pepe and other men around her . In fact it is in one such moments of courage given by liquor that Lichi unfurls her passion for Pepe. In the middle of the night, again a time when Kerala women are not supposed to be on the road, out in public, Lichi walks with Pepe, swaying under the effect of liquor consumed and finally in a moment of absolute censure of the customs and traditions so steadfastly adhered to by the Malayali community, professes her love for Pepe who is younger to her and in her brother's position and blatantly proposes to him. Her streak of contrast, rebellion to tradition can also be seen in the scene where she decides the menu for the house warming function. Even the caterer is astounded to hear her ask for a vegetarian menu and his loud exclamation wondering which Angamali resident would eat vegetable is a telling statement that points to Lichi's status as the rebel, as the outsider, one who questions and thwarts age old customs and traditions. . At the end, in a characteristic subversion of the stereotypical concept of man being the provider, Lichi becomes the breadwinner, she takes Pepe abroad , gets him a job and weaves the foundation for a secure life.

III. VEHICLE OF EMOTIONS

Right from the beginning food becomes a powerful tool of expressing and explicating the emotions that so ardently circulate in the movie – feelings of love, the sense of loss, anger, competition, ego and vengeance.

Pepe's first love is realized when he is in hospital and Seema comes to see him with fruits, watermelon and pineapple. The intensity and fervor of love is explicated in culinary terms when that love is equated with the hit combination of tapioca and egg in the tea shop nearby.

The improbability of that love reaching fruition is foreshadowed in the fruits she brings to the hospital, watermelon and pineapple, which are very difficult for a patient to cut and consume in a hospital, a fact echoed in Pepe's friend's sarcastic statement “Apt fruits to bring to the hospital!” When she jolts him in love , he , like the youth of the day decides to move on and this change in attitude is also expressed in terms of food imagery . The newfound love is expressed as the new found hit combination of egg and peas. The derogatory attitude to woman is exemplified in the pun intended. – peas and piece. For Pepe his new found love, Sakhi, is another piece, an object of pleasure.

The lack of commitment to the pure , eternal love, the readiness to experiment with and accept new combinations , new relationships, the ability to move on without remorse or second thoughts, which were not common in the Malayali community till recently, are beautifully captured in the food imagery, where the food vendor understands the redundancy of old combinations and constantly experiments with novel ones and the way in which these new combinations are accepted, loved and hailed by the food lovers .

Food as a aphrodisiac bonding love is evident in the love relationship of Pepe's friend Varkichan, whose love for Annie progresses through offers of pork and other non vegetarian food items. It is food like mango with salt and chilly powder, ice sticks and masala dosa, that act as the adhesive force in creating the gang of friends headed by Pepe. It is food again, rabbit meat that functions as the source of enmity that lead to final catastrophe in Pepe's life.

IV. FOOD AS REPRESENTING PLEASURE AND PAIN

Food is shown to have a close dialectics with the feelings of pleasure and pain. Refusal to eat is associated with unhappiness and anxiety whereas food in plenty, especially pork and liquor in plenitude is the mark of happiness and pleasure. The only moments when Pepe who is shown as a food lover refuses tea offered by his mother, and refuses food is when there is a crisis in his life i.e, when he inadvertently becomes a murderer and blinks in vain at a hopeless, hapless future. A similar scene is when he meets her lover of the time, Sakhi in a restaurant, orders coffee for her, but nothing for him. This is the moment of breakup with Sakhi, a moment of intense agony for Pepe, where his heart craves for the love of his life but his practical sense tells him, he as a murderer awaiting punishment has neither a future nor a life to share with her.

Food , however is an inevitable ingredient of all meetings of joy and celebration, be it religious festivals, auspicious events at home like house warming or common gatherings of friendship and carefree joy. Infact, the Angamalian definition of a nice life is a life accentuated by pork and liquor, a bit of fight and adventure !

It is food again which becomes the apple of discord between Pepe, his friends and Maramkothy Raju and his friends, one of whom Pepe eventually kills inadvertently. It is the small quarrel regarding who ordered a dish made of rabbit meat first at the local dine shop that sparked off the rivalry that ultimately culminated in a murder that throws Pepe's world off balance. Rabbit meat, is an exotic item, a rather rare dish in the regional market dominated by pork meat. Whereas pork symbolizes belongingness, identity, love , romance, pleasure and togetherness, rabbit meat is an alien, and symbolizes the negative emotions of anger, hatred, ego and brutality.

V. ESTABLISHMENT AND DELINEATION OF CHARACTER.

It is interesting to see how food plays a crucial part in establishing character of the people involved in the narrative. Pepe though has streaks of hooliganism in him, is soft at his heart, and hates extreme violence, a fact established by his resistance and hesitation to taking up pork selling as a business because this involves killing of pig by hitting it with a hammer on its head. This is unbearable for a kind hearted person like Pepe, a trait that he maintains in all of his relationships. He is never violent or brutal, he even sacrifices his love for Sakhi knowing she does not have a future with an accused murderer like him. Even the murder he commits is an accident. On the other hand, the villains of the story, the cold blooded murderers Ravi and Rajan, establish themselves as cruel villains by stabbing Babuji in broad daylight. This callous, nonchalant brutality in them is established by depicting scenes of their violent killing of pigs for money.

The rebellious, anti establishment character of Lichi is evident in her unorthodox preference for liquor in a community where it is a taboo for women to drink liquor. The symbol of modern girl, Sakhi shows traits of modernity in the kind of dish she prefers too. She loves to frequent theatres and enjoy popcorns, a dish that has become a metaphor for the modern, pleasure seeking, trendy youth.

VI. A MIRROR TO SOCIETY

The culinary dialectics employed in the movie offers a clear lens to the society of the times with its inherent casteist, gender, class stereotypes and threats of bribery and corruption. As reiterated in the film , it is the common man, the

local Angamalian who show a craving for local tea shops and the pork served there. Those who belong to the higher ladders of society are never once showed as frequenting such shops or engage in sensual pleasure offered by food. It is to be noted that the ones who move away from the region in search of better prospects including Sakhi who is a nurse in Germany and Lichi who is a nurse in Dubai do not share the other characters' craze for the local, regional flavor.

The event of Pepe being involved in a murder opens venues to elaborate on the systems of corruption and dirty politics functioning within the social fabric. All negotiations happen over food, all talks of bribery happen over food. At one instance, in his talk with the advocate, food itself is the bribe that Pepe offers the advocate to mediate a compromise talk.

The clash between tradition and modernity is portrayed through the characters of Sakhi who prefers popcorns and Pepe who prefers pork to pop corn. Predictably, their alliance does not have a future. Food serves as the platform to elaborate on the social evils and social conditions that mark the peculiar ambience of the region portrayed in the film.

CONCLUSION

“Food has been part of film since films began, yet only recently have we given extended attention to the many and sometimes startling ways that food functions in movies” (Bower 2004, 3). *Angamaly Diaries* is first of its kind in the Mollywood industry to create a complete local flavor by the incorporation of culinary elements into the narrative – the earlier films or other contemporary food films in the Malayalam film industry use food but often just to promote / emote a particular emotion like love, for e.g the movie *Salt and Pepper* or to represent qualities like determination and humanitarian ethos as in *Ustad Hotel* but no other film has used food to such an extent that it completely captures the myriad reflections of the local identity and regional, cultural specificity of a particular region like Angamaly. The visual narrative takes us down a culinary detour of Angamaly, intricately interweaving cultural, ideological, sexual, patriarchal textures of the regional fabric. A thorough comprehension of the semiotics of food in the movie is a testimony to what Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik establishes in *Food and Culture: A Reader*:

Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds and contradictions. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family and community relationships... Food is life and life can be studied and understood through food. Food is both a scholarly concern and a real life concern. (1)

Food, in all its gustatory, olfactory allurements tantalizes the viewers of *Angamaly Diaries*, while carefully functioning as a metaphor capturing the warmth, the ego, the presumptions, the hypocrisy, the love, the friendship, the conflicts, the resolutions, so characteristic of the social weave of the region. The movie is important in the way it has shown the significance of food as an intricate part of the cultural texture of a region and its people – there is no Angamaly without pork – just as there is no Angamaly without its local hooliganism, love and larger humanity.

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