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Food, Gender and Films: Representation of the Gender in Culinary Discourses through the Eyes of Movie *Salt and Pepper*

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ABSTRACT

Gender has been one of the most controversial issues in the recent times. The way gender roles have been formed and represented has been a question for quest for various researches. Even how gender is represented through culinary narratives has been a subject of various researches by scholars such as Judith Butler, Simone De Beauvoir etc. But in the following paper, as a different stream of thought, will be presented the connection between food and gender.

The current paper will try to explore various gender narratives in food through the eyes of the film *Salt and Pepper* which is a Malayalam film. This film was released in 2011 and has been revolutionary at that time. In this Research Paper this film will be analysed from a gender perspective and not restricted to one gender. The Research for this paper has been taken not only through analysis of the movie but also in reference with the previous research papers on the same lines. The current paper is a culmination of the conclusion to the researches on these issues of gender and food.

The purpose of this paper is to bring a change in the perspective of the fixed roles of gender in culinary narratives. The other purpose is to give new perspectives on how gender is represented through food and in the eyes of the movie as a case study.

Theme: Food and Gender

Keywords: Gender, Food

What is Gender?

Gender has been defined in various contexts by various researchers and dictionaries. According to the Collins Dictionary Gender is “*the state of being male or female in relation to the social and cultural roles that are considered appropriate for men and women*”. According to this definition, there is a dual notion associated with gender i.e. the notion of male and female which comes in tandem with the principle of Hegelian dialectics of binaries. Another definition by the Merriam Webster dictionary considers gender as the sub-class of the sex as sex is the physical identification of the person and the gender is the cultural and social roles and responsibilities of an individual. Gender is also defined by United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. According to the UNESCO Gender Mainstreaming Framework

the “Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, our societies and our cultures”. The various above definitions come to the point that gender is the roles defined by the society and the culture for a particular individual.

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Gender has been used as a tool by various scholars and Feminists. One of the prominent among them is Judith Butler and Simone De Beauvoir. In the book *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir, she tried to de-construct the idea of gender and to incorporate how the gender stereotypes are created and the various roles of a particular gender are established by the society and the culture. This is represented through the various stages of women's life from married women to mother and so on. There also has been a feminist attribute which can be given to Simone De Beauvoir as she primarily focuses on the representation and de-construction of the structure of women. The other Scholar mentioned above, Judith Butler, in her book *Undoing Gender* defines gender as limitations thus bringing about the concept of sexual autonomy. Even this book also can be attributed to feminism but in a gender perspective. The other aspect of gender representation has been shown by the media.

This Paper primarily looks at this aspect of gender representation but with the context of culinary discourses and media. This Research has been primarily done by various researchers but has not been done on the aspect of Malayalam movies.

Representation of Gender in Culinary Narratives

Food has been used as a prominent aspect to represent gender roles. So many culinary myths ranging from the Bible to the other myths have represented women as the home makers. A woman has been made to be closely associated with the culinary narratives in the household context. Best example of this is the advertisements which are shown in newspapers and television. Let us take the advertisement of the Prestige. In most of their advertisements, women are seen to be the sole cook or chef who makes food for the entire family. The other example is the stories of the religious texts which give the role of the women as the homemaker. Even though in the contemporary set-up there has been a much change to this idea of women being a homemaker, but the crux of the idea has not been destroyed.

But, in contrast in the professional sphere as of a chef in the hotel women are seen less. According to most of the surveys in relation to the female in hotel industry, there is a minimal participation of women. There has been a lot of justification given to this issue. One of the justifications is that women cannot cook in a professional manner. In the series Halabol by bindass channel there was a story of a female being a chef in a hotel. The chief chef considered her as inferior to him in cooking and he also in various times said that the women are not fit to be chef. The other justification is that women cannot be professionals. This justification has been given against women in various other fields such as armed forces and others.

These are some of the representation of the gender in the culinary narratives.

Representation of Gender in culinary narratives through the eyes of Films

There has been a lot of changes in the representation of Gender and food in films. A lot of films have been made in relation to represent gender in the context of culinary narratives. One of the most famous films is the Bollywood film *English Vinglish*. In this film the main character is Shaasi played by Sridevi who is a homemaker. In the movie Shaasi's husband considers her as a laddoo maker which is considered to be the work of a homemaker. This mixes into the stereotype that women are only considered as homemakers even if they make anything for their home. Her daughter also stigmatises her to be of less knowledge than her and feels ashamed of her mother as she cannot speak English. This shows how English become the indicator of an educated person. But, when she goes to USA and learns English, she comes to know that she is an Entrepreneur and making and selling something is the work of a businessman. She first gets confused by this idea but then feels proud of being an entrepreneur. But, at the end when it comes to the climax she chooses to make laddoo instead of giving her final English test. This again shows how the women are filled with the stigma of making food as important work of women. The movie in general tries to build in the stereotype of women as a domestic homemaker and does not challenge the traditional relationship of women with the culinary narratives. The movie also tries to be

traditional in its outlook of women.

The next example of this in relation with the above analysis is the movie *Ustaad Hotel*. *Ustaad Hotel* is a Malayalam movie which is made by Anwar Rasheed. The movie starred Dulqur Salman as Feyzee and Thilakan as Karim. The movie is built on the aspect of how culinary tradition can be preserved and how culinary traditions are revived. But, the movie also can be seen from a gender perspective. In the gender perspective the movie throws away the traditionalism as shown in the movie *English Vinglish*. But, the movie instils other stereotypes. The first stereotype is that in the story Feyzee becomes a chef and in one scene when she meets Shahana for the first time at a wedding date he reveals that he is a chef. She has been influenced that men cannot be chefs and can only enroll in business. The other aspect in the movie shown by Anwar Rasheed is the aspect of polygamy which is followed by orthodox Muslims. The scene in the music in which the Feyzee serves the family shows how polygamy exists in India. This also can be connected to the culinary narratives.

The next example is the Malayalam comedy series *Uppum Mullakum*. This comedy series shows some of the stereotypes in women in the culinary narratives. In the episode number 779 the first scene shows the traditional aspect of the wife working. This can be seen as a stereotype of women as homemaker and their relation to the culinary narratives. The other aspect in this episode is the stereotype that women are meant to be in the kitchen and men at work. But the opposite side also is shown which is that in this series the wife is working and the husband is just a lazy person who does not do any work.

From the above examples it can be inferred how the gender stereotypes are created and how that is reflected in the culinary Narratives. The other side of it is also shown in the *Uppum Mullakum* in which the man also gets associated with the culinary practices and even in the movie *Ustaad Hotel* this aspect can be seen. The other aspects of how gender is represented through culinary discourses will be seen through the film *Salt and Pepper*.

Case Study: *Salt and Pepper* (2011)

1. About the Film

The film *Salt and Pepper* is directed by Aashiq Abu and the male lead role is played by Lal and Asif Ali as the Kalidasan and Manu. The female lead role is played by Shweta and Mythili as Maya and Meenakshi respectively. The film has created a revolution in the Kerala movie industry for its unique representation and the unique story. Even the director Aashiq Abu is known for his unique style of storytelling and also the unique ideas that he brings in every movie he makes.

2. Synopsis of the Films

The story of the film revolves around the relationship between Maya who is a dubbing artist and the Kalidasan who is an Archaeologist. The both have a passion for food and can be considered as foodies according to their love of food as shown in the film. They fall in love through the medium of food when Maya calls for thattilkuttu dosa from the restaurant. But unknowingly the call goes to the mobile gifted to Kalidasan by his Nephew Manu who is a new generation representative in the film. Then the wrong number turns into love wherein the Kalidasan tells the story of the Rainbow cake and how it is related to the World War 2. This instils an interest to make it in the mind of Maya who makes the cake in her home and Kalidasan making it in his own house. This becomes the starting of a love between the two. But when comes to meeting each other, they send their loved ones. In the case of Kalidasan as he was old age he was afraid to meet her so he sends Manu on the pretext of Kalidasan and Maya send Meenakshi as a pretext for Maya. They both meet and share their meeting to both Kalidasan and Maya who believes that the other is younger than them. With this context Meenakshi and Manu get a chance to fall in love. In the climax of the movie both Kalidasan and Maya realises their mistake and as all movies conclude they live happily ever after.

3. Analysis of the Film

There are various parts in the film which are a breaking of the traditional stereotypes.

One of the main aspects which can be seen in the movie is the aspect of a male being a foodie and a person who likes to cook and eat food. This can be seen through the character of Kalidasan. The Kalidasan is a foodie and he knows how to make food properly and he also identifies various types of food just by having the taste of it. The first scene in the movie is the starting of this aspect. In the first scene when he is with the Archaeology head the head brings *appam* and he identifies that it's made of alcohol instantly just by eating. The other instance of his foodie attitude is seen in the scene in which he goes for his engagement. In the engagement instead of focusing on meeting the girl instead as he is a foodie he tastes the *unniyappam* and finds that it is made in a Kottarakara style. He suddenly asks if she made the food, she tells yes at the first instance but when he stresses the question she tells that the cook made the *unniyappam*. Then he asks the route for the kitchen and meets the cook who tells that he made the food and he is from Kottarakara. Then he goes on to tell the cook to whether he could come with him and he comes. This is a revolution to the aspect of traditional engagement wherein he gets the cook instead of the girl. This is another mark of the foodie Kalidasan. Another example is his childhood wherein his teacher teaches about the food chain and in the end he says that we should eat food to live. In this case the young Kalidasan contradicts by saying that “*Alla sare Namal bakhshanam kazhikkan vendi alle jivikunathu*” which translates to “No sir, we are living to eat food sir”. This shows other aspect of a foodie who believes that food is one of the important things in his life. This is contradictory to the gender role associated with men who are considered to be just professionals and not as people who are making food.

The next aspect seen in the movie is the aspect of a relationship created through food. The relationship between Kalidasan and Maya is a perfect example of this is type of relationship through food. This can be seen the various scenes of the movie. One of the examples is the scene wherein the Kalidasan tells about the story of the Juan's Rainbow cake and she also hears the story and start making the cake according to his instruction. This itself shows how food can be the medium for gender relations. The other scene which can be connected to this aspect is the scene wherein the Kalidasan asks Maya about where he will get *thattilkuttu* dosa as their relationship started through the wrong number of *thattilkuttu* dosa. This aspect can also be connected to the previous aspect of the love of food by men and also the gender deconstruction of men who likes and makes food. The other scene which can also be connected is the scene wherein Kalidasan asks Maya on how she got interested in cooking. She tells about the memories of her mother cooking and also her love for her mother. This scene again reinstates the fact of their relationship.

The other aspect which this movie repeats as any other movie is the aspect of women being the homemaker which is considered to be the traditional gender role of women. The scene told above also tells the fact of her mother being a homemaker that inspired her to be a foodie. This shows how the traditional role of women remains the same even though there is a change in the society. This can also be seen in many scenes of the movie wherein Maya is mostly seen in the kitchen and in the home maker space more than in her professional space as a Dubbing Artist.

The last aspect in connection this in the movie is the new generation getting to know about the old food styles and also the gender stereotypes. Manu and Meenakshi are best example of this. In many scenes in the movie the Manu shows an interest in learning of the traditional food. One of the scenes is where he and others go to a restaurant wherein they eat the *thattilkuttu* dosa and he is enjoying the dish and saying that the dish is very tasty. This shows his interest towards tradition. There are also other scenes which tell about this aspect in the movie.

In conclusion, the movie is filled with a lot of scenes and aspects of breaking the stereotype in the culinary narratives. But also there are a lot of scenes in which the movie sticks to the traditional stereotypes of the gender roles in culinary narratives.

4. Concluding Remarks from the film

There are a lot of points which can be inferred from this movie. Some of the points is being mentioned below. The first point is how the movie represents the gender roles in the culinary narratives. The second point the new concept that the movie introduces which is revolutionary to the traditional thinking of gender and food. The third point is the aspect of the traditional gender roles of the women which is explicitly shown in the movie throughout. But, in contradiction to this

aspect the movie also shows how men have become the representative of the culinary discourses through the character of the film Kalidasan and also his cook and his nephew who are men but in contradiction to their constructed gender roles goes on to be a foodie and also people who makes food. The last point is the new thought on the changing perspective of the culinary narratives which is explicitly shown in the movie.

Conclusion

The following research has been conducted in the view to bring about a change in the perception of the people in relation to the gender roles related to culinary narratives. The research as is seen has been very successful in addressing the issue of the gender stereotypes in culinary narratives. The various conclusions from the research are mentioned below. The first conclusion is the analysis on how gender is represented culinary narratives through the movie *Salt and Pepper*. The 2nd conclusion is from the fact of how gender representation in culinary narratives is different in different movies. In the movie *English Vinglish* the gender role of women in the culinary narratives is represented in a traditional way. But in other movies the gender representation in culinary movies is seen in different perspective. There are some of the things which are the recommendations in connection with this research. The first aspect is the need of further analysis on the aspect of representation of gender in culinary narratives through eyes of more movies. The second recommendation is that of the changing perspective of the gender in culinary narratives. The third recommendation is for a change in the gender roles by women empowerment and awareness about the gender stereotypes and how this can be broken.

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