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**Men and Cuisines: An Exploration of Domestic and Social Cuisines in
the Construction of Masculinities with respect to
popular movies in Malayalam**

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with a study of an understanding of masculine interest in the culinary culture which was often relegated as a sphere of women. The movies in Malayalam like *Saltpepper* and *Usthad Hotel* creates a homosocial as well as heterosocial spaces in the sociality of cooking that is dependent on the construction of masculinities, (hegemonic and marginalized masculinities.) Along with that there is the deployment of culinary masculinities dependent on traditional domestic settings and professional cooking which can combine hybrid aspects of food play and food work, cooking and serving etc. Thus the culinary performances determine spaces for gendered performativity. The alternate discourses interrogates the hegemonic ideal at the same time is contained within it. The role of culinary masculinities in the home and the world paves a new dimension to understand the sense of domestic and social responsibilities that they embody in their interventions.

Keywords: culinary masculinity, homosocial, heterosocial, performativity, gender, hegemonic

Introduction

Men and Culinary practices form a new discourse in the contemporary literature of the new era where we witness the interrogation of the fixed gender roles and its performativity to include contested notions of masculinities and femininities. This change is noted in the cultural performance of cooking in the recent times. Cooking came in the visual culture through many cookery shows and as reality television programmes in the form of a game. The 'Chef' got a popularity in these shows and cooking was seen as a scientific and professional art form. The Chef especially the male chef with his uniform dress code and his meticulous performance with clinical objectivity made the audience understand his culinary performance as something that is devoid of tradition, lacking the homely warmth which is often related to feminine aspects of cooking. Thus 'the male chef' was influential in compartmentalizing the masculine and feminine cooking. He is a person who separates the world from the home and the professional from the domestic settings. The appearance of male cook in the movies provided different layers of the image of male cook who can enact masculinities which can embody the marginalized and feminine abstractions. He is someone who slides between different roles and the

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ideology that he constructs with these roles creatively engages with gender politics and societal issues.

The movies taken for the study brings this relatively new dimension of male cook who is not a typecast. *Salt n'Pepper* and *Usthad Hotel* are two movies in Malayalam where 'food' is the space that controls the main narrative. *Salt n'Pepper* is subtitled as A Story made by Dosa. and *Usthad Hotel* is centered around a small hotel. These two movies carry the character of male cook who is an unusual phenomenon in Malayalam popular movies of superstars, one dismissed as a comic figure or a castrated male. We have ample evidences of male cooking spaces and culinary practices in the two movies where the 'macho' is disrupted and there is the simultaneous evocation of homosocial and heterosocial values.

Salt n'Pepper centres around the story of Kalidasan who is in his mid age, bachelor who works in the archaeology department who by chance falls in love with a woman named Maya who is a dubbing artist, unmarried like Kalidasan due to her ill fated stars. Both of these characters are alone(their parents are dead) and alienated and they connect due to their common interest in food. Unlike Maya, Kalidasan has a home and he has a cook named Babu as a male companion. The beginning of the movie shows Babu and Kalidasan in a homosocial environment. Babu is upset with Kalidasan when he returns after his expedition in the forest. He quarrels like a wife for his absence, pining for the excellent food that he prepared when he was away, anticipating his return. The intimacy of both characters start with the talk about food. They met for the first time when Kalidasan went to see a girl for a marriage proposal. He liked unniappam and asked to meet the person who made it who turned out to be Babu, the cook. Instead of marrying the girl, he went with the cook accompanying him like a newlywed bride with an air of shyness. It is notable that the cook asks whether Kalidasan is married and when he confirms in the negative, he is happy and takes the picture of God Hanuman, the perpetual celibate God along with his clothes. Thus the character of Babu and Kalidasan shares the bond of homosocial desires in the culinary space of the movie. Both these characters interact in the domestic cooking setting. The vast portion of Kalidasan's home is devoted to the exploration, preservation and serving of food. We see a lot of jars, pans and utensils in the living room and the characters emerge in these settings. The sociality of cooking in this context serves two purpose. It is about the homosocial leisure but also a way for men to maintain heterosocial relationships and assuming domestic responsibility.

The relationship of Kalidasan and Babu evokes homosocial leisure. Kalidasan's home has a void of women which is filled up by Babu(the cook), Manu(his nephew) and the tribal Chief that he brings from the forest. These men resort to drinking, celebrating life and shares grotesque jokes, thus perfecting the emotional bond in homosocial environment. However the interaction of Babu and Kalidasan never proves to be a homosexual relationship. Babu(acted by Baburaj who is known for his macho figure) is presented as an emasculated man. The scene where he goes to the market where the audience may anticipate him as a goonda who is on his daily fight turns out to be a surprise as he acts submissive and coyly asks the price of the fish to the shopkeeper. He even plays out the meek wife in a meek wife/dominating husband relationship. Men are often considered to be unemotional and inexpressive but Babu turns out to be the opposite of macho and he interrogates the inflated masculinity. He is someone who is trapped in a masculine body with a feminine mind. He adores Hanuman but can only display his strength in grinding the flour and batter that is in the domain of cooking, which has long been treated as a feminine discipline. Kalidasan is opposite to Babu maintains stricts code of hegemonic masculinity and could appropriate the complicit masculinities that of Babu and could show his art like a heterosexual male in invoking interest in the opposite sex.

This homosocial leisure in the film evolves in the realm of the language of cooking negotiated through indirect means. There is a homosocial desire in men's talk. There is considerable dominance and male solidarity in their talks which is marked by the 'masculine subject' and 'masculine ontology'ie, the ways of becoming masculine by the masculine subject. (Whitehead, qtd in Kiesling,399)

Most often desire is thought as sexual desire, But the term used by Whitehead is broader that it encompasses the spirit of Freud and Lacan in simple terms, as which we lack but we want. One way language organizes desire is by showing subjects what is socially prohibited, absent and thus desired. Desire may be felt by social subjects but it is structured and learned in language and social interaction.(Kiesling,699)

The intimacy of Babu and Kalidasan is achieved partly by transgressing the public taboos in the domain of culinary language. There is much indirectness in their conversation. Kiesling defines indirectness when the conventional meaning of an utterance is not what the speaker means(703). The first meeting of the characters prove it. It's like a wife who teases her husband over silly matters.

Kalidasan: Why are you crying? Has your father died?

Babu: If you peel onion, you'll definitely cry. Where were you? I have been making delicious food for you the previous days.

Kalidasan: What did you do then?

Babu: What can i do. I ate everything.

Kalidasan: Did you put the salt after boiling it or boiled it and later added the salt?

Babu: I won't say it. That is my trade secret.

Kalidasan: Then don't say it and don't come to drink the special arrack that I brought from the jungle



Along with the indirectness of language sociality of cooking, the male characters in the movie shares a fraternity linked to food. Men talk about food and does food work and food play. Babu plays the role of domestic cook. He does the food work like a wife who has to cook for three or four times a day, thus showing his concern like a wife and mother. Food work is a major theme in domestic cooking which is a women's domain. At the same time there is considerable food play involved. Babu takes his cooking as a leisure. It is relaxing and creative. Thus he paves us to read about the modern culinary masculinity that lies in the interstices between food play and food work.

For domestic male-cooks there are generally two types of cooking, co-existing side by side in clear contradiction. The first one is the restrictive, mundane and tedious task of everyday cooking that has to be dealt with in order to feed the family or oneself – the foodwork. It is clearly framed as woman's work. The second type of domestic cooking is the festal, experimental cooking that is reserved for special occasions, such as weekends, holidays, birthdays, dinner-parties and such – food-play.(Mozny, Cultivated Macho,31-33)

Babu uses his own traditional recipes but he is confident of willing to learn and explore when met with new cooking knowledge. He is willing to learn from Kalidasan and he challenges the forest chief that he could learn the

mysterious cooking recipes from him even at the first exposure. But, however he belong to the marginalized masculine representation who does not have his voice in any matter and is used to maintain a version of hegemonic masculinity.

Kalidasan maintains the role of a traditional male cook who does cooking as food play distancing away from the feminine role of food work and domestic responsibilities. It is Babu who does this role and fills up the gap of a woman. Kalidasan is restricted by many masculine templates in his lack of emotional attachment and in leisuring the food work and his disregard for restraint. Babu usually prefers to cook for Kalidasan the non vegetarian recipes especially chicken which is unhealthy, related to risk and carelessness. We only see Kalidasan cooking Juan's cake in the film where it involves romance, nostalgia, leisure and food play.

Hegemonic behavior involves certain level of carelessness. Carelessness is an epiphenomenon of the desire for release, as opposed to a need for control and restraint. Robertson [2006] in his study of laymen understanding of health and illness links this male propensity for risk and carelessness to a need to perform the “macho” style of behaviour. The constant need to restrain oneself is viewed as a negative notion, because “real” men don't simply have to restrain themselves.... At times like that to “do food” the traditional way, being the strong, meat-eating, indulgent manly man may be felt as restrictive or downright uncomfortable. And it is at this point that other forms of masculinities, other ways of “doing food” emerge and replace the traditional set of action scripts with other, more suitable forms of behaviour.(Mozny, Cultivated Macho 23,27)

There is an erasure of modern culinary masculinity where Babu disappears with the strong presence of the female cook ,Maya, Kalidasan's lover. The feminine void is filled up with the real presence of female character who brings out the traditional hierarchies and patterns seen in heterosocial environment. Kalidasan and Maya meets up in the name of dosa(thattilkutti dosa). Meat in the homosocial environment is replaced with dosa that has a feminnie connotation related to food work, care, intimacy and nutritious value. Dosa invokes motherly tenderness in Maya and it invokes the long lost home in Kalidasan where every member of family eats together at the dining table which is displayed in the scene where Kalidasan shares that moment with his companions in the thattukada where he eats thattilkutti dosa. Eventhough Kalidasan takes cooking as leisure, he is unwilling to experiment or challenge the knowable limits and never experiments like Babu . He likes to possess the knowledge of recipes which can make a 'culinary habitus'. “Knowing was not usually framed as simply having the theoretical knowledge, the know-how, but rather as having the knowledge and being able to utilize in specific situations or dishes. Thus the knowing colludes to certain culinary habitus, i.e. possessing a set of internalized knowledge that enabled people to act in a certain way when occupying the space of domestic kitchen.”(Mozny,Cultivated Macho,46) When he makes Juan's cake, he is specific of following the rules like one must soak the raisins in rum for one hour etc. He takes the forest chief along with him to learn the traditional recipes like the grandmother in traditional home settings who is a repository of all recipes.



The space of kitchen in Kalidasan's home thus maintains the frame of feminine cooking and in the climax of the movie the modern culinary masculinities in the homosocial environments disappear to form a dichotomy of male/female hierarchy in the patriarchal home settings. Food for Kalidasan becomes an item that displays to impress someone. That involves emulation and reconstruction of recipes which he does when he makes Juan's cake. Thus he gives legitimacy to feminine cooking but carefully distances away from the feminine role by seeing cooking as a leisure as he never serves the food to others and there is an absence of care work and return to traditionalism where the wife cooks for the husband and the husband can be a sporadic cook, cook on occasions and it can be a leisure and food play. The slow transformation from homosocial environment to heterosocial environment signals this aspect where the subordinated masculinities and the feminine roles of cooking cements the structure of traditional culinary masculinity with a hegemonic ideal.

The film *Saltn'Pepper* relies on the individual preferences in the domestic cooking settings especially the gender identities in a homely setting which is related to cooking. The movie never talks about other important aspects related to cuisine ie, serving and consumption. The sociality of cooking becomes when cooking, serving and consumption go together. How does food intervene in the society. For Whom the food is made? Who consumes it? That takes in to the other movie *Usthad Hotel* which addresses the masculinities in connection with the professional kitchen.

The film is set in the premises of a famous but a local hotel in Calicut near a seashore. The Hotel becomes a space where men form a homosocial fraternity that is related to domestic kitchen unlike the fraternity in the five star hotel. The chef in the local hotel is veppukaran literally translated as one who does food. Cooking, serving and consumption of the food becomes social events hoisted by the fraternity. Faizi is the hero of the movie who have passed the chef course from Switzerland and the Hotel is owned by his grand dad, Kareem. The warmth and the bond that the grand dad and Faizi shares over food is the central theme. Faizi's dad abhors being born as a son of a veppukaran and he teaches his son to not follow his grand dad's path but fate unites Faizi with his granddad.

Cooking is relegated as feminine space and Faizi's father whenever he catches the boy making dishes in the kitchen scolds him and asks him to study and be ambitious in making money. Faizi spends his time in food play and food work. Being born motherless, the kitchen is the space for intimacy and affection with his sisters. His father Abdul Razzak is a man who upholds traditional masculine values. He is only happy with his son and not daughters and he hates his wife for upsetting his dreams in each successive pregnancies which leads her to an untimely death. We never see this man entering in to the kitchen even though the children do not have mother. Thus he compartmentalizes kitchen as a feminine space and any association with it demeans his status. He is merely a consumer of feminine food work which often gets, unpaid, unnoticed and unappreciated..Contrary to Razzak's expectations, his son disrupts the macho ideologies by pursuing his career in cooking and when ousted from his home, decides to live with his grand dad.



Usthad Hotel is not a professional kitchen but an extended version of a domestic kitchen where there is a feeling of community and family among its members. Kareem ikka never sees it as business but more or less like a service. He

charges only a minimum rate for food and the special dish in the Hotel is the chicken biriyani and anyone who comes to Calicut would surely eat from the Hotel. The kitchen in Usthad Hotel carries the emotional bond displayed in feminine cooking where there is an intermixing of tradition and also the changing landscape of domestic cooking with new recipes. There is food work and food play that is related to domestic culinary masculinity.

The source of all culinary knowledge resides with Kareem Ikka who is a traveler cum gypsy who came with different recipes across the places he travelled. Thus the Hotel is ruled by the overarching presence of an ancestral tradition. The granddad is a version of grand mother with her old school recipes which she transfers to her daughter and so on. Kareem transfers his experiences and knowledge of cooking to his grandson whom he sees as one who can come far from treating food as a materialistic entity to a spiritual or having transformative potential that can change our society just like a mother who sees cooking for the betterment of her family. There is a reconstruction of tradition in the character of Kareem Ikka in this domestic culinary masculinity.

The primary route of transmission of culinary knowledge, from a historical perspective, is the exchange of recipes and skills between two or three consecutive generations – especially women have traditionally been initiated into the secrets of domestic cooking by their mothers or grandmothers, carrying on the legacy of domestic cookery [Swenson 2010]. And despite that Kaufmann [2010: 203] states that “(t)he passing on of ancestral traditions has in fact been more of a mythologized model rather than a real practice for several generation now, especially when it comes to cooking” (Cultivated Macho,63)

Kareem Ikka shares the secret recipe of the biriyani to his grandson thus passing on the ancestral tradition. He has performed his role as a mother to the infant Faizi, feeding him bottle milk with his special ingredients, when the suckling child refused to drink milk after his mother died. So he has performed the role of a grand mother and mother to the child. Cooking keeps the familial connection intact in the movie with a feminine care work and intimacy.



Along with cooking, serving and consumption features at the centre stage and Kareem Ikka advises his son that “one can fill a man's stomach but an expert cook should fill his mind” Serving is not the modern way of garnishing the food or placing it on expensive utensils. Serving also brings up the homely setting that is framed as caring, loving and affectionate practice done for others. It must be a selfless act and food is treated as a gift. Kareem Ikka says that food is something to be experienced and he shares the drink(sulaimani) with his grandson. (Each sip of sulaimani must evoke romance) Food for the old man is not a self satisfying one but an offering or a shared experience. In a sense, the whole plot revolves around shared memories connecting food.

There is a certain notion that only through the act of sharing the sensory and gustatory experience of eating is complete. . . . apart from deciding what to cook the notion of commensality is crucial for the successful execution of “food as a gift”. Commensality is conceptualized as an act of getting together to share a meal, “sharing not only a table, but the food served at this table with friends, embracing both higher values and bodily needs, and excluding strangers” (Mozny, Cultivated Macho,57-58)

Kareem ikka treats food as having higher value and the selfless aspect of cooking brings more than pleasure of feeding and pleasing the customer. The film relies on the notion of performative aspect of culinary masculinity where there is a considerable difference between cooking for one self and cooking for someone else. Kareem ikka does the food in a feminine way even in the professional space of kitchen where cooking can be seen as a masculine quest where there is a considerable challenge and broadening of knowledge and competition. But serving is completely understood as a feminine domain where men should act in less masculine ways and must involve “the care work” of the feminine kitchen. It depends on whom we should feed or the intended consumers of the food. It is the people who are hungry and who do not get a chance to taste good food must be the target audience just like a mother who feeds the hungry child her milk. The connection with food and intimacy starts in feeding or serving the food. Thus the movie through the character of KareemIkka and later his son places their culinary masculinities in the interstices of “cook/serve” and “pleasure/gift”. The journey of Faizi starts from this quest.

Faizi is not a veppukaran or a traditional cook like his granddad. He has been scientifically trained in cooking. He is a “new cook” who like his grand dad is driven by cooking myth where one has to constantly push his limits. “The acceptance of the values presented to us by the cooking myth leads to an increased desire for challenge, adventure and experiment....The cooking myth is the driving mechanism behind our desire to learn and experiment –it makes us aware of how much there is to know, how much there is to try out.”(Mozny,58) The character Faizi travels around the realm of food work/food play. The food work comes at the point where he exerts much professionalism in cooking. His dedication to learn new dishes and his acknowledgement of traditional roots of cuisines from his grand dad. It involved food play where he deepened his affection with his kin and his country men when he played with the food. Faizi never treats cooking as a job in Usthad Hotel where it is fun and leisure and relaxing like his granddad , a traditional cook who sees cooking as meditative. Usthad Hotel is a bigger version of domestic kitchen and it interrogates the work ethics of Professional Kitchen like Beach Bay International, a five star hotel.

Faizi is a “new cook” who creatively interrogates “the domestic/ the professional” cuisines. After working in the domestic kitchen Faizi's job at Beach bay International emotionally distances him away from the “doing food” of Usthad Hotel. There is food work but it cannot be said as leisure but one must maintain steady quality of food, plan the recipe and there is no accidental discoveries or surprises. There is no emotional connection with the cooking fraternity but work that obliges to the hierarchal division(Main Chef and assistant chefs) and mechanical regularity.

The professional cook rarely gets to experience cooking as leisure. Cooking is work and a hard one at that. He rarely gets to experience any explicit, verbal appreciation and praise. Seeing the empty plates in the dishwasher is usually the highpoint of his day. He doesn't get to impress anyone – he spends his days locked behind kitchen doors surrounded by steam and smoke and when he does come out, he looks as if he climbed straight out of a grave. He does not get to experiment much either – everything in the kitchen is done according to a certain norm and thus ensuring a steady quality of the food he creates.(Mozny, cultivated Macho,50)



Faizi similarly experiences the struggles of professional cooking but creatively intervenes with what he learned from Usthad Hotel at the fusion food festival at the Hotel. He merges the traditional food with that of a foreign food, thus acting out in unmanly fashion, discarding the masculine script and engages in feminine food play. Faizi is comfortable at the food work and food play of the five star hotel until he is challenged by the demands of the consumers of food. Serving is not so easy in this five star hotel because the customers put the cooks in sufficient anxiety and distress asking for more. The cook has to satiate the greed of the hotel owners as well as the customers. The cooks have to feed the rich foreigners from the developed parts of the world who come to explore the exotic in the third world nations without understanding the rhythms of the native land. The exotic is often made by appropriating the local knowledge and the local spaces without giving the poor people anything in return. The special Malabari biriyani in Beachbay hotel is the same chicken biriyani in Usthad Hotel but Kareem only gets five rupees per biriyani for sharing the recipe. Similarly the owner of Beachbay International wants to appropriate Usthad Hotel for his hotel extension project.

The food work for the rich Western people is not centered on care work in the domestic kitchen as there is no emotional connection with the boarders and the cook. The cook does not have prior knowledge of their taste so experimenting in recipes may come with success or disasters. This puts him in anxiety and distress and he may prefer following the recipes which has same formula. Faizi is constrained by the way in which the consumption of food happens in five star restaurants. The cook is terribly insulted by the boarders for not meeting their taste scripts and he cannot satiate the mind of those whom he feeds, because cooking is taken as something granted, catering the interests of consumers and it is not a service as taught by his granddad. Faizi returns to the domestic cook frames and understands that to serve means to feed the hungry, those who have to eat human waste due to hunger, the people who do not get taste to good food because they have been marginalized from the society for their disabilities etc. He cooks his best for them even though carrying with him anxiety and distress whether he can satiate them. The anxiety that Faizi experiences in cooking for the disabled children comes that is different from the masculine forms of leisure that he experienced in the cooking rituals with his sisters or in Usthad Hotel or in the fusion food fest in Beachbay International. It is ascribed to feminine emotional involvement and the stronger bonds for whom the food is made.

While the traditional cook sees food as “doing masculinity” and the new cook perceives food as a form of personal pleasure/leisure, the domestic cook frames food as a gift, as something that is done for others. And of course this selfless aspect of cooking brings about more than just pleasure of successfully feeding and pleasing ones boarders. Hand in hand with the desire to please come the anxiety and the distress. (Mozny,58)



Faizi is new cook and traditional cook at the sametime. Thus Faizi like his granddad embraces domestic culinary masculinity which can integrate food work and foodplay, cooking and serving, food as pleasure and food as gift in the

context of hegemonic ideals of professional cooking spaces , meanwhile re negotiating gender identities. Thus the culinary masculinities that emerge from the movie is of a hybrid one often incorporating the masculine food leisure and feminine food work, incorporating the modern culinary masculinities and traditional domestic culinary masculinity but with a difference. The labour in the domestic kitchen should be paid as Faizi does when he takes up Usthad Hotel, he professionalizes the space and he makes sure that food service gets a just payment. The feminine care wok in the kitchen should not be exploited as it happened in the case of his grand dad. At the same time, he must isolate with the masculine exploitative regime of professional and domestic cooking settings. Thus the cultural script of masculinities in relation with cooking practices of Faizi adapt with the situations and changing social practices and is in a constant process of reconfiguration. Thus the two movies negotiated culinary masculinities in different settings in the home and the world that provides new performances in the changing social scenario.

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