

Food in Media: As a Bridging Catalyst between Cultures and a Humanitarian Tool

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Introduction

Films are phenomenal tools for effecting change by transforming behaviours and ideologies. Food has occupied a privileged position in visual arts for its ability to pack in layers of meaning and to connote emotions and feelings in recognizable bite-sized formats. Food is such a globally connecting element these days and so the portrayal of food and its local and national variations is alluring in all media these days, especially in movies. For filmmakers, food is a powerful tool for encapsulating the decadent, nostalgic, and even grotesque on-screen. It is also manipulated symbolically, to sketch the formation of characters on screen, their emotions and moods, mostly delivered in a very subtle and imaginative fashion. Food is such a globally connecting element these days and so the portrayal of food and its local and national variations is much popular in all media these days especially in movies.

Experiments by renowned chefs in food, results in exotic dishes which costs a fortune. Golden Phoenix Cupcake at Bloomsbury Cafe - Dubai, UAE (\$18,713) is one among them, crafted with fine Italian chocolate, 23-karat edible gold sheets, vanilla beans from Uganda and strawberries dipped in edible gold. Kopi luwak is one of the most expensive coffees in the world, selling for between US\$100 and \$500 per pound. Innovation and adding richness to food is always welcome. But in the midst of all this craze about introduction of inventive recipes and highly expensive dishes which becomes more of a symbol of luxury than a fundamental necessity, the real purpose of food is often conveniently forgotten. It is our responsibility of making sure that our fellow beings are not starving and have basic necessities fulfilled. This paper focuses on two movies to explore the inevitable role of food as a bridging catalyst between cultures and as a humanitarian tool.

The Hundred-Foot Journey

The Hundred-Foot Journey (2014) is a movie by 'Dream world entertainment', which features the story of a family of restaurateurs from Mumbai who moves to Europe and tries to open a restaurant, catering authentic Indian food in France. The Kadam family consists of a couple and their 5 children who have a passionate brilliance in cooking authentic Indian specialities and Tandoor cooked delicacies. But definitely, in a country like France which has a proud legacy of world-renowned cuisine, it's not going to be a cake walk for them.

The family with five kids was running an open-air restaurant in Hassan's (the second one of the 3 sons) school compound. Their mother was the chief cook and she used to mentor Hassan, who

always expressed an exceptional sense and interest in cooking and tasting food. He would stay mesmerized with closed eyes, when the fragrances and flavours seeped into him. A riot breaks out in the village after an election and someone throws a burning twig into the school yard, ending up in burning down of the restaurant and the mother loses her life in the fire.

After a short uncomfortable stay in Britain, They decide to move on. They are forced to stay the night in a French town as their van needs repair. Marguerite, a young French lady who is a Sous chef, takes the whole family to her house and serves them some home-cooked cold food. The platter looks so flattering and they all enjoy the food. The father in his sheer appreciation for her hospitality and the great food made with all home grown and processed ingredients states that,

"My family is silent because they are afraid, they died in the accident and is in Heaven"

This shows how food is so cherished, sacred and delighting for the Kadam family and they are very open to good food and kindness from anyone. Here offering food to someone in need is not only a kind and most humanitarian gesture, but it is also something which warms up and melts down the differences between people of two countries with completely different cultures.

In spite of many arguments and apprehensions within the family, they buy a left-alone space and decides to set up their restaurant there. Even though the elder kids other than Hassan are so worried about the presence of a Michelin Star¹ Restaurant in the proximity, father takes an audacious step and opens the restaurant, 'Maison Mumbai'. He is confident that the French people will definitely find Indian cuisine interesting and special, stating that they never had a chance to try it.

Mrs. Mallory, an elderly woman who runs the reputed restaurant, Le Saule Pluereur, is very particular about her menu and makes sure that they always serve the best food in the best way. She corners the staffs, picking on an overcooked asparagus shoot, they served the previous day and warns them:

"In this Restaurant, the cuisine is not an old tired marriage. It's a passionate affair of the heart."

Her words denote how proud they are about their cuisine and also how hard they have worked to come up to the level of a Michelin star restaurant. Food is not just to suppress hunger or to merely survive, but to feel and embrace life with all its richness and beauty and differences too. It acts as a cementing element between people, sometimes even makes them ignore trivial differences and immediately connect them to grow into deep relationships.

Mrs. Mallory looks down at the Kadam family initially, as she considers them as inferiors and despises their attempts to put up the restaurant and tries her best to make their opening day a failure.

When Hassan suggests adding white wine to cook mutton faster, retaining all its tenderness and flavors, Mansoor the elder son questions using wine, which is not a part of Indian cuisine. Then, he responds,

"We cannot survive unless we adapt"

While being proud of our own heritage, we should also be open to blend and widen the horizon of our exposure and food is one of the best tools, which aid that and many a times leads to treasurable memories and unprecedented bonding.

Hassan later impresses Mrs. Mallory with his culinary brilliance by making a very much Indian flavoured Omelette and she hires him. In spite of the differences and conflicts they had, Mrs. Mallory is a lady of pure passion towards brilliance in cuisine and open to innovations. Hassan's relentless stride towards innovative excellence, always maintaining a hint of the striking Indian flavours in his dishes and talent gets them the second Michelin Star. Hassan moves on to a prestigious Paris restaurant, where he becomes the celebrated chef and talk of the town. But later, he returns to St. Antonin and his family and the Le Saule Pluereur and takes charge of it, in partnership with Marguerite, with whom he falls in love deeply. Their romantic relation and the warmth between the two families is not just the bonding between them, but also the mighty bridging of two great cultures catalysed by food as a magic ingredient.

The whole theme of the movie focuses on adapting and blending and being open to new ideas and experiences. Mankind has always evolved through its numerous interactions and involvements with other ethnicities and when we look deep into any culture or community, we can see a clear connection between their history and geographical conditions and the food culture they flaunt. And many a times, it's not a much appealing reality for traditionalists that, there is nothing original in what we claim as our own traditional food and it is all a very harmonious blend at many levels and layers, of what was shared with us by all the people who approached us as traders, conquerors or explorers.

As stated in *Global Gastros* on Internet,

"From the black pepper trade of the ancient Romans to the introduction of potatoes from the New World into Irish cuisine, new flavours and cooking techniques were often incorporated into cuisines as a way to add a bit of interest".

As we become more globally connected, food culture is no longer tied down to any particular place or original, but it is adopted by anyone who is interested and to any extend, personal or professional level, and spreads far and wide.

The abovementioned merging of cuisines did not always just stay as whisking of food habits alone. History has many instances of fusion of cultures which also resulted in union of people in

deep, long lasting relationships too or vice versa. This has been carried down to coming generations also, which is quite interesting.

Usthad Hotel

Anjali Menon, a promising female director and story teller of Malayalam industry, under the direction of Anwar Rasheed has crafted ‘Usthad Hotel’ as a vibrant commercial movie and nevertheless addresses many social issues out of which it drills down to the painful reality of poverty and starvation in our world, when so much food is wasted. It is based on a real-life story.

The movie is based in and around Calicut, a district towards the Northern side of Kerala which is so popular for its outstanding hospitality and baffling array of exquisite dishes which is supposed to be one of the repercussions of a long history of trade with many, including the Arabs, Portuguese etc.

Faizi, the young hero of the movie is a certified Chef from a reputed Swiss culinary institute, who always had a keen interest and skill in kitchen. But he does this course convincing his family, particularly his father that he is doing a management course in hospitality, so that they can run a five-star restaurant of their own. When the reality is revealed to his father who was waiting for him to come back as a management graduate to take over his business empire, he is enraged and takes away his passport so that he cannot join his job as a Sous chef, which he had already qualified to.

Faizi ends up with his paternal Grandfather who runs a beachside eatery called ‘Usthad Hotel’ which is famous for its special biriyani. Faizi who enjoyed a pampered and posh life so far, learns many ground realities of life during his stay there. He also gets an opportunity to work in a star hotel there. Even though he finds life with his grandfather interesting, he is still waiting for the chance to move out to London and take up his glamorous, dream job. But eventually when his grandfather falls ill, he requests him to meet a person in Madurai, Tamil Nadu which turns out to be a life-changing experience for Faizi.

There he is awestruck by the life of a man who has dedicated himself completely to feed the starving people and he realizes that:

"The purpose of serving good food is not only to fill the stomach but to make people happy and contented."

Narayan Krishnan who is a real-life hero from Tamil Nadu was himself a chef of Taj group of hotels. When he was about to relocate to the US for a very well-paid position as a chef, he comes across a man in streets who is in a really deplorable condition. And he tosses his dream job in the realisation that his duty lies here in feeding the poor and homeless brothers of his own.

The simplicity and humility of his noble work moves Faizi. He senses the ultimate satisfaction of feeding the needy ones, and the matchless sparkle of gratitude in their eyes strikes him

deep. He who was enduring everything in the hope of somehow getting into the luxurious and glamorous life of a Chef, now realises that all that is futile when there are still so many who doesn't even have enough to survive.

Conclusion

"According to UNICEF, around 22,000 children die each day due to poverty. Even though the world produces enough food to feed twice the world's present population, food wastage is ironically behind the billions of people who are malnourished. The number of hungry people in India has increased by 65 million more than the population of France "as per the statistics mentioned in The World Today. As stated in the CSR Journal, "According to a survey by Bhook (an organization working towards reducing hunger) in 2013, 20 crore Indians sleep hungry on any given night. About 7 million children died in 2012 because of hunger and malnutrition".

Weddings, hotels, social and family functions, households spew out so much food. According to the United Nations Development Programme, up to 40% of the food produced in India is wasted. About 21 million tonnes of wheat are wasted in India and 50% of all food across the world meets the same fate and never reaches the needy. In fact, according to the agriculture ministry, INR 50,000 crores worth of food produced is wasted every year in the country. While some restaurants in India employ food controllers to check food spoilage, others donate it to their staff and other personnel and smaller standalone restaurants, donate it to orphanages. Few also reuse non-perishable food.

The heart wrenching short story "Biryani" (2016) by Santhosh Echikkanam, a Malayalam short story writer portrays the life of a daily wages worker who has to dig a pit to dump a huge Chembu², full of biriyani, with an empty stomach and a starving kid at home. It is not at all imagination, but a deep dark reality of our society. There are also commendable movies like *Like Water for Chocolate* (book published in 1989) which is based on the book of same title by Esquivel Laura. This work attempts a mesmerising analogy between original Mexican recipes and the life and experiences of Tita the protagonist, manoeuvring magic realism.

Food will always be the very basic need of humankind and above that, it will take countless forms as something which will always influence allure and baffle humankind as much as humans transform it. And it will continue blending cultures and ethnicities all over the world like nothing else can do. However, deep down, food is the basic necessity for any human being and each of us should feel responsible to make sure that everyone gets their rightful share of it.

NOTES

1. The term normally refers to the annually published Michelin *Red Guide*, the oldest European hotel and restaurant reference guide, which awards up to three *Michelin stars* for excellence to a select few establishments. The acquisition or loss of a star can have dramatic effects on the success of a restaurant.
2. It is a huge vessel used, mainly for cooking briyani.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

Editors: Dr. V. Sangeetha, Dr. B. J. Geetha, Dr. K. Sindhu, Dr. S. Boopathi and Ms. S. Sneha Sri

Food in Literature: Papers Presented in National Seminar on Food in Literature, 2019

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