

Food and its Manifestations in Contemporary Indian Films: A Study with Reference to Malayalam Movie *Guru*

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Food is a constant and continuing presence in literature and art. This is not a new phenomenon. Right from the beginning where our ancestors began carving on rocks, dining and food and culinary activities were never spared from being their topics of expression. It is in myriad ways that food is presented to us in our arts and the representations of food serve different purposes in art and media. Sometimes the work becomes completely about the activity of cooking and dining, like the cookery shows and cook books. Sometimes the work could be on the different cultural aspects of food. This is done in a number of different ways, ranging from books on the topic, to food festivals that show us the different foods and thus tell us how the food of a region is a symbol of its culture. Sometimes food can be a constant presence in a work, forming a part of the major frame of the story, sometimes symbolically representing a totally different idea.

Now is a time when food is used in stressing and underlining our politics of gender. The importance of food in our daily lives, as an influence on our lives perhaps in ways which we have never even imagined, is being stressed strongly through our arts and media, which includes paintings, literatures, movies, advertisements, and even music. If we were to trace the beginnings of the representations of food in arts, we must not be surprised seeing food and drinks as the most common motifs in our early age paintings and sculptures, the Da Vinci painting of the “Last Supper” being the most famous of them all. In many literary works and also in other art forms, we have seen food being used to represent women. We see women being compared to food--the bride being described as a ‘beautiful iced cake’ Katherine Mansfield’s famous story “Frau Bechenmacher Attends a Wedding”--and this has been constantly attacked by our feminist theorists as highly sexist and antifeminist.

Food has been used to convey social messages in the catchiest way by our famous writers across the globe. In the very famous play “Arms and the Man” by George Bernard Shaw, which was intended to be a satire against violence and war and the heroism attached to it, we see a soldier carrying in his pockets chocolates instead of cartridges. *Arms and the Man* has its setting in the 1885 Serbo-Bulgarian war. The humorous play, depicting the futility of wars, is most often referred to as the wittiest of Shaw’s plays. In the play we see the female lead character Raina Petcoff refers to Captain Bluntschli as “her chocolate cream soldier” for he carries chocolates in his pockets. Bluntschli, here, is a diminished version of Aeneas, the hero of *The Aeneid*. In this play, through

Bluntschli, Shaw satirizes the heroic retelling of wars. This is a great example of a literary work where the author has used food as a tool to deliver a social message, though not explicitly.

“Art is not what you see, but what you make others see,” said the great French artist Edgar Degas. Art, be it any form, must evoke, and without doubt, one can say that visual arts is the most powerful of them all. Movies are the most popular and powerful among the variegated forms of visual arts. Films not only present us with characters and events, but also with larger political, cultural and ethical issues. Most often, movies travel far beyond the borders of aestheticism and act as social forces, taking up socially relevant themes. Movies are usually based on universal principles and shared sentiments.

Guru (The Teacher/Spiritual Guide) is a 1997 Indian movie directed by Rajeev Anchal. The movie, which was selected as India’s official entry to the Oscars for the Best Foreign Language Film category, is a metaphorical movie with multiple layers of meaning. The movie begins with the wordings “Guru is someone who with his wisdom removes the screen of ignorance and makes you see again.” The movie has a higher symbolic meaning to it and has been compared to Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*. In Plato’s *Cave*, he compares the “effect of education and the lack of it on our nature”. Here, in the *Allegory*, we see a group of people living chained to the wall of a cave, facing a blank wall. On the wall, they watch shadows of the objects passing in front of a fire behind them, and consider these shadows to be the reality. One day, a prisoner manages to free himself from the bondages, and gets to know that their reality was not the ‘actual reality’. The light hurts his eyes for he was accustomed to darkness since ages. Plato says that the prisoner would turn away to the things that he is accustomed to. But if he was forced to come into the light and know the actual reality, after he gets to know the reality, the prisoner would pity the other prisoners who live in total ignorance. He would want to free them off their chains and bring them to light. But the prisoners, says Plato, will not be willing to take the path the older prisoner took for they think it would hurt them. They would therefore even try to kill anyone who attempted to take them out of their own bubbles of ignorance to which they are accustomed.

Plato was talking about an issue that still holds relevance, even today. This is where the foci of Plato’s *Cave* and the Malayalam movie *Guru* fall together. The movie is a surrealistic work which uses metaphors to convey greater messages. The movie begins introducing us to a near-Utopian land where people of all castes live in harmony. This harmony is broken when people with vested interests create trouble in the name of religion. The hero, Reghuraman loses his family in the religious riot, and he joins a hindu extremist group to avenge the death of his family. Reghuraman happens to be at an ashram, where he meets Vaidehi, a disciple of the Guru. Vaidehi asks him to meditate at the Guru’s feet, and there he gets a vision. He is taken to another world in his vision to a valley of the blind where the sense of sight is a lie; where darkness and ignorance is the only reality.

It is a story within a story technique that the makers have employed in the movie. In the new land, Reghuraman meets a group of people who think it as sinful to even talk about light and the

sense of sight. The people there believe that their world is the only world, that their reality of darkness is the only reality. In the movie we come across a blind teacher teaching his blind students:

“At first, the world was the emptiness between these rocks! Dear children, the world is as small as the fruit of Ilama. In short, the world we live is the only world. The world is bordered by the rocks which guard this valley. The top of the world is just a soft outer cover....

The basis of this world is sound. The variations in sound create the time. Smells and sounds are the eternal truths. Sight is just a falsehood.”

This is a very thought-provoking instance in the movie for we see ourselves here. It is our ignorance and limited knowledge that is portrayed in these words. The country of the blind acts as a mirror held towards the hypocrisies and ignorance of the world.

‘Ilama fruit’ is the most important symbol that is used in the movie. In the movie we see a major character Ramanagan explaining to Reghuraman the myth behind the Ilama fruit. He calls it the gift of their goddess, and the root of their lives. The children of the valley at their birth are fed the juice of the fruit but the seed is said to be deadly poisonous. Reghuraman eats the fruit and is taken away by its sweetness, and the sweetness tempts him to have more of it. Suddenly Reghuraman experiences blurred vision, and becomes blind, and realizes that the fruit is the reason for the blindness of the valley. He walks around shouting out to the people that the real cause of their blindness is the Ilama fruit which is considered to be divine and life-saving. The king of the land calls this blasphemy and orders him to be killed in the most barbaric way – by feeding him the seed of Ilama.

“As he preaches against Ilama, let his death be with its seed.”

Reghuraman is fed with the seed of the Ilama fruit as a punishment. The next morning he wakes up back to the world of colours. He regains his sight. He realizes that what was thought to be a poison was actually the antidote to cure their blindness. Reghuraman, with his newly gained knowledge, brings the people of the valley to the world of light.

Reghuraman now wakes up from his meditation to the real world, and realizes the real meaning of his vision. Reghuraman, who was blinded by the extremisms of religion and violence wakes to the world of knowledge and spiritual enlightenment, and the movie ends where he decides on embarking a journey towards peace and brotherhood.

The movie, says the director, took its inspiration from H. G. Wells’ *The Country of the Blind*. The movie is a highly metaphorical one with many levels of meaning. Ilama fruit, in the movie is a great symbol that the director has employed to convey his intended message. The parable of the Ilama fruit explains to the readers how religions which were supposed to spread the message of love and peace among the people, end up spreading hatred. The fruit, here, stands for religion – where the flesh of the fruit is the religion as is preached to us today, and the seed is God, the eternal truth. In

the valley of the blind, the new born babies are fed the juice of the ilama fruit which makes them blind. People of our world, like how the babies of the blind valley are blinded with the juice of the fruit, are blinded with the misinterpreted and wrong notions of religion and God.

“Like in my world where, the real God is hidden by the walls of religion, here a wall hides the truth from me”, says Reghuraman in the movie to the King of the blind world. This statement stands really important even today. In today’s world where people are fed the wrong truth, we tend to ignore the real essence of these religions, which is represented by the seed in the movie.

In the movie, by using Ilama fruit as a symbol, the director makes a statement on the evils of the world blinded with arrogance. The movie gives a universal message about the greater spiritual truths that we tend to ignore in life. The movie is a reaction against the social evils, blind faith and religious terrorism. The movie, through Reghuraman who stands for the entire humanity, tells us that the darkness of ignorance can be overcome only through attaining a higher spiritual knowledge, and that explains the relevance of the movie in today’s world.

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