

Regional Specificities Represented through Food in Malayalam Films: A Study Focused on Films *Angamaly Diaries* and *Maheshinte Prathikaram*

Navami P and Amrutha K J

Introduction

Andrei Tarkovsky, once said, “Relating a person to the whole world: that is the meaning of cinema”. Acceptance and applause amassed by cinema since from the time of its inception shall be owed to this reel-real relation portrayed. And for the thrill of being represented somewhere in the reel length, we part our time for this creative expression which got crowned with the title “The Cinderella of All Art.” Afore said representation need not be always the representation of an individual. It can be the manifestation of certain circumstances, lived in experiences, cultural or ethnic background or even the food we eat.

Closely mentioning food, it is not just always a curry. Outgrown from being treated as basic amenity, today the food decorates a prominent place in our literature and art. And, of course, in cinema too. The stories and emotions it conceals in its colour and flavour are abundant. Anything can be portrayed through food whether be motherly love or home coming feeling. In a broader aspect the on-screen food may have the potential to speak out the specificities of a locale. Thus, there is nothing wrong if we say, food through the unique lens of film craft something that is the reflective of the society around.

Understanding the relations between film and the society is all the more the most important thing and many efforts were undertaken to fulfil this task. John Belton’s edited work, *Movies and Mass Culture* examines this relationship and states that “film, society, and culture mutually determine one another. While films and filmmakers can influence culture and society, they are also produced by it.”

One of the easy methods of societal representation is the representation of a place in film, reflecting its spirit and portraying the cultural section of time. Anthropologist filmmakers go for film technology to convey the image of a city. Region-specific films supposedly emphasize the distinctiveness of the locale. The film makers add visuals, specific musical styles, and textual implications for representing these specificities of that particular region. Intricate detailing of

these elements creates stronger images capable of triggering emotions more easily in the audience. This apparently evokes a kind of mediated relationship between the audience and the particular region within a specific time period. It can be shown through the references in the dialogues and through the visuals which help the films to authenticate the plot.

Major cities of the world look more appealing as such as Rio in *City of God*, Vienna in *Before Sun rise*. Indian film makers too found novelty in saying the story of everyday life of a region whether be Calcutta in *Kahani* or Varanasi in *Masaan* they provide the empathetic experiences of the cinematic place it represents and for this reason the film makers head to a particular place. Reel is going rural not only in Hindi but also in various other regional languages like Malayalam.

By tracing the pattern of Malayalam movie industry in last few years we can find a considerable number of films fall in to the category of region- specific. “A slew of films made by youngsters, influenced by global trends but rooted in the local landscape, has rejuvenated Malayalam cinema”, says C.S. Venkiteswaran. Here the distinctiveness of a particular region becomes the soul of a film. Reality is doled out in new ways. It uses narrative and technical elements for portraying a particular region in an appealing and refreshing manner.

Pranchiyettan and the saint (2010) directed by Renjith can be taken as the pioneering effort in this category. The following years witnessed a fleet of films coming under that genre like *Ordinary*, *Ee aduthkalathu*, *Ustad Hotel*, *Idukki Gold*, *KL10 Pathu*, *Maheshinte Prathikaram*, *Angamaly Diaries* and many more each with a unique style of treatment. Thus, a trend of region-specific films in Malayalam evolved. Staying in tune to the previously stated notions food is often used as a tool in many of these films to touch the heart of a region in its core level.

Methodology

Content analysis is most widely used method in social science and mass communication, various disciplines such as communications, social sciences, political science psychology, history, and language studies use content analysis.

According to Berelson (1952) content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. Holsti (1968) says that it is any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages. Krippendorff (1980) defined content analysis as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context. Content analysis helps to understand the content of different medium. Newspaper content, folk songs, short stories,

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messages of Radio, Television, documents, texts or any symbols can be analyzed on this method. (Prasad).

The content analysis here includes narrative and visual analysis of the two films selected for the study.

Analysis

Food is often connected with the ever time memories of people. They relish those tastes keeping a record of the culinary experiences through which they went through the times of happiness, break downs, achievements, celebrations and much more. Cross checking the realm of its potential we could extend it to something that forecasts the specificities of a region. It is this power of food being evident in two noteworthy Malayalam films, '*Maheshinte Prathikaram*' and '*Angamaly Diaries*' in which Idukki and Angamaly got framed respectively.

'Maheshinte Prathikaram' is a 2015 film by Dileesh Pothan. Such a realistic manifestation Idukki it is for which the director was crowned with a title 'Pothettan's brilliance' among the movieholics of Kerala. Blessed with the sprawling tea plantations, Idukki arch dam, National park and elephant reserve Idukki often decorates a prominent position on India's tourism map. Majority of natives are middle class farmers earning their living through struggle against soil and climate, and thus sharing a beautiful bond with nature. Others enter in a job which is closely related to agriculture or find an income in the local business. The region has the best climatic conditions that make it suitable for plantations like tea, coffee, cardamom, pepper etc. Rubber, coconut, nut mug, tapioca also gets cultivated by small and marginal farmers. Food crops from this list directly or indirectly works well to sketch the specific features of the locale.

Maheshinte Prathikaram will be a quick answer to a quick question, 'Which Malayalam film make us feels the heart throb of Idukki, a spotted hill station destination of the country through its frames. Being a perfect blend of engaging screenplay and simple treatment this directorial debut of Dileesh Pothan touched all *Maheshinte Prathikaram* the nooks and corners of the spectators' sense that makes them feel the chill of the Idukki. As the name itself suggests, , is a story of revenge of titular Mahesh where he gets transformed to a confident photographer who has the real sense of art in him. Without being restricted as a sweetest tale of revenge this film showcases the mundane life of Idukki, their only cinema theatre, their only studio and their own occasions of family gatherings whether be marriage or death which actually becomes the talk of the town. And in many more aspects the people of Idukki will fit themselves into the reel of this film.

Maheshinte Prathikaram is not a foody film but the food comes in more than 60 major shots. The title song of the film is scribed as a hymn to Idukki where it gets personified as a young lady with full of vigour and charm. The song is a visual galore of the major cultivations of the region. Malabar Tamarind a unique ingredient in traditional recipes catches hold of our eye when Mahesh stretch his hand to reach for it while bathing in a stream. Later a close up shot foretells the importance of it as a flavouring agent in ethnic fish recipes which is a major dish of high altitudes. Then and there the film starts to display of edible cultivations owned by Idukki and stresses the cinematic space.

The highland area of Kerala is blessed enough with a climate that suits well to the cash crops like coffee, pepper, cardamom and tea. The title song once again pays justice to the region by including the scenes of spice markets and the dealings in the market. There are sequences that drag our attention towards pepper cords and plantations which are the hallmarks of the hilly areas.

As said before, the major source of income of the people of the region is agriculture and activities such as cattle rearing and apiculture related to agriculture. The Cattles roaming over the yards, grass cutting women, honey preserving centres and shots of milk societies point out the occurrence of their livelihood activities. Tapioca is one of the staple foods of the high range habitants. The film shows the cultivation, harvesting, peeling and slicing of tapioca. The shots also hint towards the festive mood where friends and family join for 'kappavattu', process of dehydrating tapioca. Further in many of the scenes we can see the boards written 'kappayum kariyum' (tapioca and curry) in front of the shops in order to attract tourists. Wine and alcohol always hold a place in the dining tables of high range houses. For them, little amount of these beverages helps out to beat the chilling weather. And thus, in the film too, the characters go for it for the same reason. Fruits cultivated in the region like robusta banana, jackfruit, and gooseberries have got a fair mentioning in the film. It does not sound funny if we say the whole thread of the plot starts from a bunch of robusta bananas.

The film is keen in showcasing some tastes that is unique to the region. For instance, Mahesh gives "Kumbalappam", (steamed cake wrapped up in plantain leaf) which is specific to that region, to his love, Soumya.

Breaking the coconut shell, boiling rice, black coffee, vegetables, soda, cracking eggs and many such ordinary foods appears on the screen every now and then, making us wonder how cautious the filmmaker was in detailing the taste of the region.

Unlike *'Maheshinte Prathikaram'* the film *'Angamaly Diaries'* is a *'katta local flick'* as suggested by its tagline. Released in the year 2017 the film is an ode to Angamaly in all its sense. It is the story of youth whose only philosophy in life is 'Hogging pork meat and having a couple of drinks in the evening'. As a growing town, Angamaly gets exposed to all sorts of vibrancy and loudness in order to make it competent among the major townships. The directorial attempt of Lijo Jose Pellissery has succeeded in capturing all those hustle and bustle that brings the nature of town on screen.

Food is a chief concern for natives of Angamaly and they love the experience of dining and having drinks together. Every meeting, big or small are fared well with an informal invitation, "Come let us part by having food". The cuisine of Angamaly bubbles over the film from the title song to the end. 200 shots in the film exhibit food. Most of them are close up shots which fill out the frame. It is often sets the background, either being cooked or eaten or even it appears in dialogues. The development of the narrative is depends on the food stuffs and related practices. Even the first clash between the protagonist and the opposite occurs at a toddy shop to get the last plate of rabbit meat.

The characters make sure to describe the food with all its sensory details whether be crumbly, gooey or spicy. The very opening sequence of the film gets on reel with food. The gruff boss, "wild" Benny is busy serving toddy and a curry he made from a python.

The protagonist Pepe goes on narrating his own life recollecting the taste and ingredients of his favorite food items. He loves food and memories are tied with taste. In his own language, "Just want to chill happily, hogging some pork meat and having a couple of drinks" (1:07:18). Pepe even introduces his mother as an awesome Angamaly lady who mixes mango with coconut milk for curry and adds Chinese potato to pork meat. Pepe recalls his school days and Pork Varkey's food tips at the beginning, "you should crush it on a grinding stone and throw the seeds away and if you have it with salt and chili powder it will be superb" (16:40). The tale of his long-term friendship kick starts with a small fight for mangoes which got culminated in the 'tutorial' to eat raw mango.

The film details on the pork business that drives the town. The frames include pigs wailing to death and meat getting chopped ceaselessly. Pigs' squealing at the time of slaughter is very much significant in portraying this particular cultural sphere. The Portuguese dominated in the state for a century, they had headquarters in Angamaly for a period. They brought pigs to the Angamaly for cleaning the town. (nellikkot). Afterwards it becomes the part of their life. They even have local breed, Angamaly pigs. But the introduction of the exotic white pigs led them to an endangered level. The real thread of the film lies in the frequent gang wars that happen. Food

has something to render into this real essence of the plot too. It was the pork business started by the Pepe and team made the other retailers furious, in turn triggers the grave gang wars.

Best food destinations of Angamaly are listed by Pepe in his narration. We may find it funny when Pepe starts comparing his romance to that of the hit combination of tapioca and egg, at the local thattukada of Kunju. The film embellishes with many cooking shots and conversations about culinary experiments distinctive to the people of Angamaly.

The *Angamaly Diaries* primarily focuses on the life of Christian community in Angamaly. Garish festivals revolving around the quaint church, Holy Mass, betrothal, wedding, Easter, Carols, and Processions depicts the customs of Christians in Angamaly. And for all these occasions they have dishes unique for the region. Curry made of raw mango and pork fry tops the list which got a fair mentioning throughout the film. The film also touches the culinary sense of female folk of Angamaly. Home maids are cautious even about the shop from where they should buy the meat.

Vegans should think twice to go for a lunch at Angamaly. The catering boy mocks at Lichi when she asks, “Won’t there be any vegetarian dish?” He replies, “If you want vegetarian items, we will add potato in the chicken curry and raw banana to beef and in pork we can obviously add Chinese potato.” (1:28:54)

Film as one of the most popular visual media has its visuals constructed in many ways. For some writers, visual is the most fundamental of all senses. Sociologists, Gordon Fyfe and John Law, for example, claim that ‘depiction, picturing, seeing are ubiquitous features of the process by which most human beings come to know the world as it really *is* for them’. (Rose)

Conclusion

Malayalam Cinema has taken the region-specific format for the last few years. Certainly, the acceptance of region-specific films among the Malayalee audience may have influenced film makers to try out films in the same format. The filmmakers have incorporated certain images and text to ensconce the milieu where foodstuffs and practices of that locale play a significant role. The distinctive characteristic of those inhabitants, their lifestyle, food, beliefs and the landscape of the place have been described elaborately in these films making it more realistic. This is in tune with the Media representation theories.

In a nutshell, these region-specific films do give eternity to the culture and characters of place existing at a point in time. It can be said that these films pay tribute to the legacy of both places Idukki and Angamaly.

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