



# Performing Heteronormative Femininity: The Embodiment of Cooking Mothers and Women Eating Onscreen

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**Abstract:** The love, memories, and nostalgia associated with food find embodiment in the figure of the mother across various narratives. Many Malayalam films depict the mother figure, emphasizing her culinary skills and showcasing some of her signature dishes. Consequently, a loving and nurturing mother is often defined by her culinary expertise. This paper aims to explore how films contribute to the gendering of cooking by perpetuating the notion of an 'ideal' mother who is deeply rooted in her culinary prowess. Interestingly, the act of 'women eating' is rarely depicted in films, which predominantly focus on idealized mothers and idyllic wives. Consequently, this paper also seeks to examine instances of women eating onscreen to better understand how eating practices have become gendered, sexualized, and stigmatized. The simple act of 'women eating' itself becomes an act of resistance since women have historically been associated with cooking, serving, and being in the background both on and off the screen.

**Keywords:** Culinary, Malayalam Cinema, Gender, Eating

"I am a feminist, and my feminism started with a fish fry," said Rima Kallingal in her TEDx Talk on gender discrimination. She recounted a moment from her own life where her family was gathered around the dining table, and her mother served the food. However, she noticed that only the oldest and two men at the table received the three fish fries; while her mother never sat down to eat with them. Rima reacted to this inequality, questioning why her mother was excluded from sharing the meal. The family was taken aback by her response and deemed it an "overreaction."

Numerous studies demonstrate that men tend to receive priority in terms of being served first, receiving the best portions, and consuming the most food. These power dynamics surrounding food reflect the broader power dynamics between the sexes (Counihan 4: 2005). An example of this gender disparity is depicted in the film *Angamaly Diaries* directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery in 2017. In one scene, the protagonist's mother denies her daughter an additional piece of *puttu* (a traditional Kerala dish), telling her that what she has is sufficient, while she provides a whole cylinder of *puttu* to her son. Furthermore, the mother slaps and scolds her daughter for allegedly spoiling the curries by not refrigerating them. These instances highlight the normalization of gender disparities in food preparation, consumption, and distribution.

The quotidian foodways<sup>1</sup> are so deeply ingrained in domestic cultures that they are often considered natural (Scott 106: 2009). The example also reinforces the notion that kitchens and dining halls are reflections and representations of life itself, as identified by Aju K. Narayanan and Cherry Jacob (Narayanan 2016: 93).

Love, memories, and nostalgia surrounding food find their embodiment in the figure of the mother across various literary, visual, and real-life narratives. Mothers are often portrayed in Malayalam films, showcasing their culinary skills and describing their signature dishes. Consequently, a loving and nurturing mother is often defined by her culinary expertise. This paper aims to explore how films contribute to the gendering of cooking by perpetuating the image of an 'ideal' mother deeply rooted in her cooking prowess.

Notably, the sight of 'women eating' is rarely depicted in films, where idealized mothers and idyllic wives take centre stage. Consequently, this paper also delves into the portrayal of women eating onscreen to comprehend how eating practices have become gendered, sexualized, and stigmatized. The simple act of 'women eating' itself becomes an act of resistance, for women have historically been confined to cooking, serving, and standing, both on and off the screen. By analyzing these aspects, the paper aims to shed light on the reinforcement of gender roles and stereotypes through culinary representations in films. It seeks to challenge and question these portrayals, emphasizing the importance of equal representation and breaking free from the confines of traditional gender expectations.

Most women are involved in cooking activities irrespective of their educational level, ethnicity, or class status. Julie M Parsons has observed that the significance of foodways or ways of doing food is reminiscent of West and Zimmerman's notion of 'doing' gender, Butler's conceptualization of gender as performance, and Morgan's theories on 'family practices' as significant in distinguishing between what families 'are' and what families 'do', in contrast to the institution of 'the' family (Qtd in Parsons 2: 2015). The 'image of a loving mother who cooks' and the symbolic maternal ideal of feeding others are predominant images in Malayalam films. Most of the mother figures in Malayalam films, played mainly by Kaviyur Ponnamma, KPAC Lalitha and Sukumari Amma, appeared as the most lovable, kind and calm mothers who spent time in the kitchen making favourite dishes for their 'sons.' Their passionate call for sons, such as Unnee, Kanna, and dear son, and their making *payasam*, *unniyappam* and an inevitable *pappadam* frying scene were in most films.

The mother's figure is pictured, highlighting her culinary skills and describing some of their master dishes in most films. The recollections about mothers are usually presented in association with the memory of her cuisines by their children or grandchildren. For instance- "the *mampazhapulissery* [sweet mango curry] that my mother makes is matchless" is one of those recurrent dialogues by young men in many films. These nostalgic men, having uprooted themselves to cities, blame their wives when they fail to recreate their mother's cooking talent. The hero of the movie *Angamaly Diaries* introduces his mother, saying, "this is my mother; a superwoman from Angamaly prepares fish and mango in coconut milk and pork with Chinese potato." Cooking defined the love of women, based on which appraised how well you performed your role as mothers, grandmothers and wives. The manner of presenting, serving and eating food or everyday foodways fulfils the social function of legitimizing social difference. Thus, makes these cultural practices gendered, says Bourdieu. He further recognizes mothers as substantial figures in converting economic capital into symbolic and cultural capital for their children. Skeggs denotes mothers as 'sign bearing' carriers of taste. He also noted that the sign of femininity is always classed (Paterson 5: 2015).

One of the initial scenes of the film *Varane Avashyamund* [Sathyam 2020], in which the central character, Neena, talks to her cousin, Manual, signposts that she excessively loves cooking. The concept of keeping 'the tradition' of one's mother most of the time directly indicates her culinary skills and her efficiency in domestic chores. Therefore there are instances in many of the Malayalam films pointing to it. Thus, Manual comments, "Whoa! Exactly as sheelanti's preparation. Undoubtedly, you are her daughter" while eating the cutlet that Neena made. Subsequently, Kalidasan, a bachelor, finds cooking as the only

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<sup>1</sup> The term foodways usually refer to the production and distribution of food at a macro level. Carole Counihan (1999) used the term in anthropology when exploring food cultures or shared common beliefs, behaviours and practices relating to the production and consumption of food (Qtd in Parson 1: 2015).

way to recall his mother's memories in the film *Salt and Pepper* (Abu 2011). He finds cooking a resort to evade the loneliness of his bachelor life. Maya, a dubbing artist and another film's leading role, also indulges in culinary experiments to stay connected with her deceased mother.

In *Bangalore Days* (Menon 2014), two male cousins meet Divya in her groom's flat in Bangalore after her wedding. They tease her describing how accurately she copied her mother's menu. *Sweet mango curry, cabbage thoran<sup>2</sup> and prawn fry chammanthi, totally as Mema makes*". One of the cousins asks when she learned to cook, and the question makes her feel embarrassed in front of her husband. Furthermore, they make fun of Divya, saying how she made their grandma eat pizza, saying it is an *appam* she has made. This is how they expose her culinary inefficiency in front of her husband. Besides, her husband is curious to know how old she was when the incident happened. They laugh aloud while informing him that it was just two months ago.

In addition, the film specifies that Divya is just twenty years old and forced to get married according to her mother's astrological beliefs. Nonetheless, it proposes that any girl should be an expert in cooking irrespective of age. Accordingly, preserving the authentic taste of one's mother's cooking is significant in many Malayalam films. Divya, who wants a carefree life in Bangalore, pretends to be good at cooking and considers it a part of the 'performance of wifely devotion' (Chaudhari 72: 2011).

As discussed by Sharmila Sreekumar, women's association with the kitchen is by no means customary or natural. She writes how the recipe- books and household hints contributed to the project of modernity in Kerala, which has involved a new model of the domestic construction of the ideal housewife. The films also try to make it a norm that every woman should fundamentally know cooking. Sharmila observes that culinary does more than the performance of child- care and other household chores to shore up the nuclear ideal. She added that cooking offers women occasions for conjugal love and commitment, which buttress the new marital arrangement and space for loving domesticity.

Interestingly, the archetypes of ideal mothers are being replaced with 'self-loving' mothers in recent films. The jovial mother in *Margamkali* (Vijayan 2019) cooks in a modern open kitchen next to the house's main hall. The kitchen is situated next [half-open] to the hall in new interiors, and the space has become more functional. Thus women become more present in the 'male space' [hall] within the house. The smoky and dark kitchen at the utmost corner of the old house had made women absent from other spaces. Sharmila's accounts on the space of the kitchen demark the placing of a kitchen in a house and how it varies from the architecture of kitchens in some contemporary films.

She says:

Even by the late 1920s, the kitchen has not yet emerged as a compulsory space for the performance of modern femininity. The question that remains unresolved is: Is the kitchen private? Or is it in the backyard 'outside'- a marginal realm that a certain non-dominant masculinity (that of the servant) inhabits? Even in the 'new' architecture- clear houses of the dominant castes- the kitchen was fairly mobile in the early twentieth century. It was sometimes outside and resolutely separate from it (Qtd in Chaudhuri 74: 2011).

The mother in the film *Margamkali* sings recent Telugu songs and becomes 'impatient' when it takes time for the milk to boil. She makes fun of her son while he hesitates to drink the milk telling him there is skim milk, telling what else you expect in milk [paalilu pinne paada alland, paavada valichu kettaan pattuo?]. Here, she stands contrary to the 'loving' and unimaginably patient mothers of Malayalam films.

The mother in the movie, *Om Shanthi Oshanna* (Joseph 2014), is another of the same sort who likes cooking experiments. She cooks for herself and eats alone, all those with great joy. Another woman character in the film, a lonely housewife, happily engaged in winemaking. Here, the kitchen and cooking are not synonyms of submissiveness and patriarchy but a genderless passion, an extension of self-love and art. A culinary columnist like N Velupillai has counted the art of cooking in the same league as poetry and music. Sharmila Sreekumar suggests that there were attempts to elevate cooking from realms of the menial to the arts. However, many opined that women cook to ensure the new modern economy of frugality and self-help and best to make nuclear domesticity self-sufficient. She observes that a woman is seen as ill-equipped if she does not know cooking. This can also be read in the background of gender identities, where mundane foodways are routinized recurrences, performances, and affective practices provide the impression of a stable self. These come to be part of the 'performativity' of heteronormative gender

<sup>2</sup> *Thoran* or *Upperi* is a dry dish made of finely cut vegetables or leaves with grated coconut and chillies, generally prepared to eat along with rice. The same dish, when cooked plainly without coconut, is called *mezukkupuratti*.

practices 'that creates the illusion of an inner essence or psychic gender core', says Butler (Qtd in Parsons 3: 2015).

These 'not so motherly' mothers in some of the films indicate the changes in the status of women after the demise of the traditional joint families. The kitchen became more gendered, unlike the traditional upper caste ancestral houses where male servants cooked. These mothers in the cinema are free from the matrilineal homestead and not under the burden of satisfying the culinary likes of many members of the joint family. The space and freedom gave mother in *Om Shanthi Oshannna* to experiment and enjoy their culinary skills apart from her professional life as a doctor. However, even the change in Kerala's family structure and women's status contributes the least to the gendered idea of cooking. This is what Budgeon opines about the constructions of new femininities in the present. Women need to surmount the two extremes of traditional femininity even while embracing the neoliberal values of the sovereign self. Thus they become responsible neo-liberal citizens, as identified by Deleuze and Guattari (Parsons 5: 2015). Julia Paterson has opined that a 'cultural habitus' (Bourdieu 1984) is generated through the replication, reproduction and reinforcement of values and tastes of these daily foodways.

Do we find any women 'eating 'normally' on screen? Women who eat in the films are generally voracious eaters who are either obese or too slim to be made fun of. Most films depict women as passionate cooks and lovable wives who always embrace the kitchen. Men generally appeared to enjoy eating and drinking. Disparate to the usual appearance of food, eating, cooking and garnishing, it appears in a highly sexualized way juxtaposing with women on screen.

As Zubiarre observes:

Food- the comprehensive, highly sexualized process of its preparation and ingestion figures among the most recurrent leitmotifs in erotic art and literature. However, the films have an accurate deviation where food appears as a social entity. Preparing food in the film is often highly sexualized, like what erotic art usually does with women eating. ...erotic literature is written by, and for heterosexual males, the image of the "edible" woman of the female body as the ultimate desert after a sumptuous dinner; of beautiful women covering their nakedness with the sinuous meanders of sprayed whipped cream; of alluring temptresses who allow champagne to flow between their breasts and into their vaginas is so firmly embedded in sexist iconography, that it seems indeed difficult to convey a new, feminist meaning to the equation woman = food (Zubiarre 29: 2018)

The image of a woman eating heartily by licking the curry off her fingers, biting into a delicacy, and gradually relishing it is a personal feminist assertion. It becomes an act of resistance against the state, and structural oppression, says Soumya Mathew. The sheer act of 'eating of women' turns out to be resistance, for women have been cooking, standing and serving all these while. Mathew quotes the World 2020 report of the State of Food Security and Nutrition to denote that women and girl children of India are affected mainly by anaemia and other malnutrition compared to the men in the family. Gender inequality in Indian households is evident from the differential treatment in serving, dividing and eating food. Marcy J. Epstein observes how eating an act of gender performance becomes; she quotes Judith Butler, who has argued that it eventually determines one's position in the power hierarchy.

Films also carried the picture close to reality in many households where women eat after men; they stand and serve them wholesomely. Thus, the sight of 'women eating' is a rare scene in the topography of films. Films portrayed the idealized feminine figures as the one feeding [family or guests]- either as a symbol of motherhood or an idyllic wife. The inequalities in the food division, where men eat first and a substantial part of food, have been dominant in the dining space. These real-life moments of women eating [normally] as a part of their everyday acts are seldom found in films, advertisements and other visual representations. They either appear in cooking, serving and washing dishes. In advertisements, women are used in the visual representation of food to make it more exotic and arouse desire. In these moments, women and food appear together as objects of desire. Though Marcy J Epstein has discussed the studies by Judith Butler, Jill Dolan, and Kate Davy, which have shown with scrutiny that the physicality of female bodies diminishes in the construction of gender for the "sexing" of these bodies; however, food acts in real foreground physical bodies of women in profound ways which are not captured by performances of eating (Epstein 21: 1996).



Women are expected to eat less and also in a gentle way. Leda Cooks observes how norms such as 'women do not chew food with their mouth open' accords gender identities at a performance of eating. Voracious eaters are generally ridiculed and considered more inappropriate for women, especially since they have to keep their desirable bodies. Rituparna Patgiri also states that men and women eat differently, and eating practices are gendered. She reads how ideas of *femininity* and *womanhood* are always linked to the absence of desire and greed for food. Women are supposed not to glut on food while consuming and are expected to be decent and be controlled. Patnagiri states that food and eating habits are integral to socialization and constructing gendered bodies.

The reclamation of eating spaces in public places and women's eating scenes are started coming in some of the Malayalam films. A woman bites into mouthfuls of *golgappas* and enjoys grilled popcorn in the film, *Alamara* (Manuel 2017) and Divya exploring and eating with her male cousins in *Bangalore Days* are a few among them. Hitherto, these moments of eating in both films occur in Bangalore, a city not in Kerala. Divya tries to eat a burger with a wide mouth like her cousins and later cuts it to pieces, showing how girls become more conscious while eating in public. Patnagiri has referred to a Japanese Burger chain that made masks for women so they could eat burgers discreetly the big mouthful of burgers. They called it the 'liberation wrapper.' It was intended to make women eat a burger 'elegantly' with a modest mouth. This 'proper etiquette' expected in women eating in public rarely reflects in the scenes of women eating in cinema. As observed by Patnagiri, the lack of desire for food is considered a suitable quality for a women's body. Further, women are expected to perform their gender roles even while eating. She writes, "the biological process of eating becomes socially constructed and gendered, creating a desirable female body that is controlled."

This is similar to what Jessica Valenti said, especially about thick women, that one is supposed to perform public penance while eating (Qtd in Narula 2019). This is a performance of eating according to one's body. Narula quotes Erving Goffman, who called this performance of self in everyday life. Here, this performance encompasses social practices and ways to behave appropriately. Furthermore, Narula reads the performance of eating correctly in public, equating with stigmatizing female bodies and appeasing male gazes. She advocates women to stop shrinking their bodies and start eating aloud, disregarding the etiquette of eating [for women].

*Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses* by Isabel Allende portrays women sitting at tables as a symbol of reclaiming their right to the public domain. It carries a powerful proclamation that women are not food satisfying the sexual hunger of men. In addition, it states that women do not cook and hide in kitchen spaces just as nurturing machines of family and mysterious sorceresses for men. Instead, women eat food sitting at a table. Similarly, an artist from North America, Judy Chicago, makes a feminist parody of the *Last Supper* through her famous piece of art, *The Dinner Party*. She tries to reclaim the historic occasion for women by making them part of the public space in the bible. The triangular table in her artwork suggests the structure of the vagina. Nevertheless, in most films, the table is a symbol of male power where women stand and serve. They were seldom found sitting around it. The dining table is generally interpreted as the ideal locus of patriarchy and the male ego.

*The Great Indian Kitchen* (Baby 2021) is the finest example that shows how traditional hegemonic gender norms make men masters of the family and women more subordinate by making them responsible for all domestic food work, housekeeping and nourishment. The cultural expectation and sexist view of considering cooking as a feminine work put women in static gender roles. However, the film portrays how the gendered power questions the female identity and agency, later leading to the end of the marital relationship. As De Vault observes, food-provisioning work at home is considered unpaid domestic labour of women in almost all societies, thus placing a significant workload on women and offering a valued identity or gendered power for women (Qtd in Liu 99: 2017). Chen Liu observes how the development of an egalitarian relationship changed pre-existing gender cultures. Men started participating in the preparation of food as part of becoming 'proper' fathers and partners. Hitherto, the writer also admits that the kitchen remains a feminized space irrespective of all the changes where women's principal responsibilities in food work at home continue to perform.

People like Julia Paterson and Pollan have observed that women have extra pressure on family health. Therefore, the mothers feeding the family home-cooked meals are always valorized. This heteronormative femininity continues to act as a norm and value where women are made to act as responsible feeders and cook according to the tastes and preferences of others. Paterson asks how women can have time to be epicureans. Further, the beauty hazards based on physique restrict women from enjoying the pleasures of sensual eating and being foodies. The gendered division of women as feeders put them under a stigma that they could never eat before others in the family. They always cook for others according to their tastes and preferences.

### Filmography

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