

Food as a Symbol of ‘Excess’ and ‘Lack’ in Anwar Rasheed’s *Ustad Hotel* and M. Manikandan’s *Kakka Muttai*

Shona Smith

&

Reshma Sarah Easo

PhD Scholars

Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi

Abstract

In the article *Grains Gone Wild*, Paul Krugman writes “These days you hear a lot about world financial crisis. But there is another world crisis under way- and it’s hurting a lot more people.” Here Krugman discusses about food crisis. Though the increasing world food prices have dismayed several people across the globe, it still continues to be a source of ‘entertainment’ for many.

The Malayalam movie *Ustad Hotel* and Tamil offbeat movie *Kakkamuttai* shows the two faces of food. In *Ustad Hotel*, the protagonist’s life undergoes a transition under the influence of food. The film efficiently portrays how one side of the world is well stocked up with luxurious food while another side grapples for a morsel. Similarly in the Tamil movie *Kakkamuttai*, we see a struggling boy in quest of having a slice of pizza.

This paper attempts to portray how food can be seen as a transition from hunger to entertainment. Food juxtaposes poverty and luxury, representing both lack and excess.

The beautiful culinary expert Padma Lakshmi once said “The best thing you can do for someone is make them a beautiful plate of food. How else can you invade someone's body without actually touching them?” Perhaps the only thing that keeps on satisfying a person every day is nothing but a piping hot plate of his or her favourite food. Even after decades there are tastes that never tend to leave us; always lingering at our tongue buds. There are flavours that we always tend to preserve in our memories. It can be our grandmother’s tangy mango pickle that we relish with our fingers or our mother’s soft and fluffy idilis that we swear won’t be available elsewhere. Food over time has become an emotion than a necessity. It has gained the thread to unite and connect people. This paper is an attempt by us to look as to how, food over the time has transformed from something that is used to satisfy hunger to a medium for entertainment. We

have taken two popular movies for the purpose of our paper; *Ustad Hotel* by Anwar Rasheed and *Kakka Muttai* by M. Manikandan. Both these movies beautifully capture the excess and lack of food.

The movie *Ustad Hotel* depicts the food patterns of Malabar in a very effective and efficient way. Written by Anjali Menon, the movie can be described as one of the best food movies of Indian cinema. When quizzed about how she weaved the story line, she says, “I am a complete foodie and I believe that every time we consume something we must give it full attention to enjoy every flavor. That is the root of the story. Distinct flavors of tea, sweetness and sourness come together in a *Suleimani* creating a blend of experience that stimulates us – quite like romance, I think.” Many scenes from the movie have surely left the viewer’s mouth watering. All throughout the movie we hear Fazi’s grandfather, Kareem Bhai repeatedly mentioning as to how the complete satisfaction of a good meal lies in watching others eat with relish rather than eating by oneself. On one side the movie depicts how *Ustad Hotel* and the people surrounding it survive from the mere income that they have; their special biryani being sold for 35Rs per plate. On the other side the director shows us the polish and plush five star, *Hotel Bay* and how the same biryani from *Ustad Hotel* is sold there for 350rs. The movie clearly sends out the message of excess and lacking.

In the lavish hotel where Fazi takes up the job of a chef, we see a fusion fest happening, in the fest there is a scene where an entire layered cake is blasted off and people play with the cream on each other’s faces. This scene clearly points out to today’s generation where food is wasted and trampled upon without any mercy. The cake scene also points out a message to many youngsters who celebrate occasions in such a manner. The fusion fest displays an array of food items. But what is really funny is that many food items that are shown are actually the food of the poor that has gained significance over time. Kappa or tapioca is an underground tuber that was once seen as the food of the working class, in the movie we see how foreigners relish on kappa and fish. Similarly there is a shot where the protagonist tries to remake oysters for a haughty customer who was not satisfied with the way they were made. Oysters too have a history similar to our very own kappa. Once upon a time in sea areas surrounding Britain, France and the United States, oysters were available in abundance and hence were the main sea food of the working class population who could not afford fishes. *The Pickwick Papers* by Charles Dickens mentions about oysters and how they go hand in hand with poverty. But the increased demand soon resulted in the decreased supply of oysters and so today many menus show oysters with a heavy price tag. Parotta is another favourite food of Malayalis that is showed with great prominence both in *Ustad Hotel* as well as in the five star hotel. In one shot we see how tirelessly Fazi learns to make the Kerala porrota, which is probably sold for 8 or 10rs. It is only after an entire night of twisting and rolling that Fazi learns the task. We also see that for the fusion festival, Fazi makes porotta with a Spanish omelette (which is nothing but eggs whisked with pepper, onion and poured on top of boiled potatoes.) Here we get to see how the same food gets a transformation and high class appreciation when done in the five star ways. Even biryani that is showed all throughout the movie has an interesting history too. It is widely believed that the dish originated as a balanced food to feed the soldiers. It was easier too, considering the fact that all ingredients just needed to be put together rather than making separate dishes. Biryani is said to

have its origins from Persia. But today however, there is no dish that has merged boundaries in India as the biryani. We have our own varieties too; Dum biryani, Hyderabadi biriyani, Malabar biryani and Dindigul biryani to name a few. Indeed no outside dish has captured and unified Indian as biryani has over time.

The five star hotel reminds us how food becomes something of a class and status. While for people related to the hotel, food was a symbol of status and their style of living. For Ustad Hotel, food was something for their day to day existence. The movie has many shots of suleimani throughout; suleimani or black tea seems to be the driving force behind Karim Bhai and his workers. When asked about the secret ingredient of Sulaimani, Karim Bhai reveals with a shy smile to his grandson that it was Mohobat or love. On one side was a person who sold food for love and satisfaction and on other side was a hotel that served for the privileged rather than for pleasure. The customers that came to both sides also varied, in Ustad Hotel, we see a wide range of people; mostly the common man for whom a biryani was a once in a while luxury and on the other side we see well refined and polished customers for whom wastage never mattered.

Food has become the new symbol of status and, it is no exaggeration. Earlier there was a time when designer clothes, branded bags and watches were a symbol of prestige and show off. Today, the youth take more relish in sharing images of food in ambient restaurants with tables full of delicious plates, chocolates dipped cookies with dusted sugar and perfect baked cupcakes held up against beautiful backdrops have all found their way to social networking sites. The tag #foodporn has made personal food plate a public one. What one eats has now become his or her status symbol. A bucket of popcorn and chilled coke at movies, a triple layered cake for extravagant birthday celebrations and meetings over a cup of coffee has today become a norm. All throughout the movie, *Ustad Hotel*, we get the impression of how food describes and makes a person. In the end of the movie we see a matured Fazi who understands that it is always the desire to feed that wins hearts and not the desire to impress.

A cult classic entertainer, the film *Kakka Muttai*, attains its title from the story it depicts. It narrates the life story of two slum dwelling boys whose favourite past-time is to locate the nests of crows near their slum and gorge off the crow's eggs to satiate their appetite. Released in 2015, the film brilliantly captures and depicts the life struggles of slum dwellers of a city. The two brothers, who are called *Chinna Kakka Muttai* (small crow egg) and *Periya Kakka Muttai* (big kakka muttai) by themselves and the people around them lives off by petty theft and stealing coal from the goods train. The movie title *Kakka Muttai* which translates as Crow Egg juxtaposes the life of the wealthy and the poor living in the same city. On one hand when the two boys satisfy their hunger pangs by relishing on the fresh crow's eggs stolen from the nest, on the other hand director portrays a world devoured by the concepts of consumerism. *Kakka Muttai* story revolves around the two *kakka muttai* brothers whose desire is to taste a pizza and the dire consequences that follow.

The movie is an indirect cry against the invisible foreign invasion in the form of multinational food chains selling junk foods. The twist in the movie commences with the introduction of a television to the poor *kakka muttai* household- a gift from the government for the ration card holders who live below the poverty line. On one occasion the two brothers see a

pizza commercial on television. The appealing visuals and the slow motion images of the piping hot pizza garnished with olives and piled with cheese makes the unfamiliar food look like ambrosia from heaven to the brothers. The grand opening of a pizzeria in their neighbourhood by the actor Simbu and the divine look of enjoyment on his face as he tastes the pizza from the new outlet adds to their dilemma. The boys now think of nothing else but getting the first taste of pizza. Though their grandmother tries to make them a home-cooked pizza using dosa batter as base, it turns out an utter failure. The boys deride their grandmother's attempts and insult her. Here, the director draws a clear distinction between the life of the rich and the poor. When one section of the society struggles to sustain themselves by devouring on the unappealing and the uncommon raw eggs of crows, the other section relishes on the heavy prized Western delicacies like pizza. Access to such plush, opulent food outlets and tempting cuisines continue to be a far-fetched dream to the majority of Indian's even today.

The movie hinges on two specific food symbols – crow's egg and pizza. While the crow's egg translates as the universal symbol for the poor, slum dwellers of India, the pizza represents the affluent class which is slowly drifting into the Western culture and food habits. The movie clearly communicates this difference to the audience through the attire, the language and the life of the two classes. While the customers at the pizzeria are dressed in expensive and fashionable Western labels, the slum dwelling, crow egg eaters' are never concerned about what they wear. They would prefer a decent meal three times a day over an attire that burns a hole in their pockets. As far as a poor man is concerned fuelling the pangs of hunger falls above their concern for appearances and looks. However, the realization that they cannot enter a pizza outlet without decent looking clothes forces these boys to acquire a newly bought pair of clothes from a couple of rich children by buying them *panipuri* from a street vendor, much against the wishes of the rich boys' father, who had denied them the treat as he considered it unhygienic. Again the *panipuri*, a celebrated street delicacy of India represents the people of the street. The rich regard it as unhygienic and unfit for consumption. The street food symbolizes the squalid living and working conditions of the poor people which the well-to-do refrain from.

The pizzeria represents a rendezvous joint where pizza may not necessarily serve the purpose of a meal but a source of an appetizer or even an 'entertainment'. However, by consuming the gross crow's eggs, the *kakka muttai* brothers find no entertainment but a relief from empty, under-nourished tummies. The section of the society that consumes pizza does not bellyache about the cost of the pizza, for they find it meager. Unfortunately, the other section of people (which includes the two brothers) toils day and night for several days to pay off for one pizza. This indicates the economical gulf between the two classes of people. While the pizza symbolizes the 'excess' of food, *kakka muttai* represents the 'lack' of it.

For centuries food has had an invisible politics running through it. While certain foods represent the well-off, the other foods represent the poor people from the street. The luxurious hotels, appetizing food laid out on sweeping dining tables, and Western delicacies are all associated with opulent living whereas the unappealing food joints and unkempt eateries symbolizes the toiling classes. While the first movie *Ustad Hotel*, as the title suggests narrates the life of two different classes of people through two different hotels, the second movie *Kakka*

Muttai represents the two classes through two different foods (crow egg and pizza). Both the movies brilliantly paint food as a symbol of both ‘excess’ and ‘lack’.

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