

The Gender Mystique: Gender Roles in Cooking Shows of Malayalam Television

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Abstract

“The modest virgin, the prudent wife and the careful matron, are much more serviceable in life than petticoated philosophers, blustering heroines or virago queens. She who makes her husband and her children happy, who reclaims the one from vice and trains up the other to virtue...” These lines from ‘*Vicar of Wakefield*’ elevate the first chapter of one of the earliest and celebrated cookery books titled ‘*Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management*’ written during the Victorian era. The book which is a voluminous collection of recipes of 19th century begins with a general chapter titled ‘Mistress’ which emphasises on the role of a woman in providing ‘men’ with delicious food to keep them at home rather than probing them to stray out to ‘taverns and dining houses’. The first wave feminism evolved as a rejection of Mrs. Beeton’s book which portrayed middle class housewives as domestic managers responsible for maintaining the family’s class identity by creating a ‘tasteful’ lifestyle. In this new world, media play a major role in shaping and reshaping gender roles within the society. This paper looks into the role of those soi-disant ladies programmes telecasted by various Malayalam television channels in recreating and reaffirming gender stereotypes. The politics behind showcasing celebrity cookery shows that laud heroine’s expertise in culinary arts in reality has turned to reconstruct the lady’s roles as a responsible ‘home-maker’.

Keywords: Gender, Feminine Mystique, Doing Gender, Media Studies

From days immemorial cooking was a task that always adorned a woman’s hat of social and domestic responsibility. Kitchen is that corner of a house meant only for women. This concept has undergone tremendous revisions and those innumerable protests and revolutionary movements helped women to find her footing outside the domestic cubicle. Advent of television as a mass medium for entertainment, politics, gossip, news, advertisements, culture, fashion and even food has created tremendous clamour all over the world invariably. The network of regional Malayalam language television channels consists of one government owned channel, almost 14 private general entertainment channels, seven news channels and a number of local channels. Invariably all these channels have in their list at least one programme which is centered on food and the art and the act of cooking. These cookery shows can in general be classified into two sections - those with male chefs and that

with female cooks and the portrayal of both these sections on screen defines distinct grammar of arts.

The ladies' programmes which come to the household with charming titles which are the gendered adjectives of femininity are normally telecast during the 'ladies hours' which is around 2pm to 5pm when the home makers are off from their daily chores and are supposedly waiting for their children to return from schools. Such waiting hours are embellished with insights mouthed by their friends from screen on preparing exciting evening snacks to lunch box decorations. The selection of these ladies hour hosts includes familiar faces from the evening soaps to fellow mothers facing similar challenges of their audience. The host's language, actions and appearance and the production conventions are techniques used to convey the relationship between the hosts and their imagined viewers. Cookery shows of these prime hours are synonymous to the domestic work done to please the family and friends.

Taste Time, a popular cooking show aired during the evening snack time in Malayalam television has numerous segments to glue the homemakers to it. Kids' cookery, healthy diet foods, celebrity cooking where celebrities from popular television soaps appear with ladles and an audiences' recipe section are the major segments in this show. The programme is aired with the motto of making women better cooks and also with enough tips for young female upstarts to engage themselves in this culinary art. *Magic Oven* is another popular conventional cooking show with similar gendered ingredients. With a variation from these conventional shows, there are programmes which are crafted especially for women and those will always have without fail a segment for cooking which marks women's legitimate place in the society.

Apart from the general cooking shows a recent trend has evolved in the Malayalam media by showcasing female celebrities as hosts of such shows. These movie stars who reigned in the audiences' minds as the epitome of glory, talent and beauty often come down to their kitchens as the embodiment of happy home makers, probing them to practise more in their domestic space. *Annie's Kitchen*, a star studded celebrity cooking show is hosted by a popular film star of the bygone era. The heroine who shone as a versatile actor in the movie town puts on an apron and lectures on the art of being serviceable kitchen queens.

In her seminal work *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan had accused the editorial decisions made by the male editors of women's magazines of 1950s which showed women as either happy housewives or unhappy careerists as the culprits of creating a 'feminine mystique' which cements the idea that women are naturally fulfilled by devoting their lives to being housewives and mothers. She also talks about American feminists who fought against the perception that the appropriate role of a women was just to be a wife, mother and homemaker. *The Feminine Mystique*, one of the most influential works of 20th century catalysed the second wave feminism which insisted women to go against the thus established feminine mystique. An over emphasis on a film star's culinary and homemaking expertise could be read along with the production techniques adopted by the male dominated world of media to re-establish the once altered feminine mystique within the general audience.

The other side of these cookery shows where men don the role of hosts has a different language in itself.

“If men choose to cook, they must make sure their masculinity isn’t diminished; men’s taste in food is antithetical to women’s taste in food; men should cook manly food, like wild game and other types of meat; if men cook meals besides meat it should be a rare event and cause for applause; if a woman wants to keep a man, she should adapt to his tastes in food, not the reverse.” (Innes, 2001, 18-19)

The variation in such a situation can be read along with the status of cooking as a ‘feminine’ task, always associated with women and as a domestic task. Men’s cooking is conditional whereas women cook without any reason and a woman who doesn’t cook is considered an abnormal phenomenon, more or less an outlaw. Portrayal of men cooking in any popular medium is as ‘outdoor cooks’ where they handle tasks like grilling a steak in blazing fire or setting alcohols. Cookery shows’ projection of male cooks also describes a ‘male cooking mystique’. When the female hosts are presented as ‘cooks’ or the friend of the imagined viewer, their male counterparts are none less than professional chefs. They are hardly screened on casual wears but mostly on the professional white chef coat. The domestic cooking space or kitchen in a women’s cookery show gets transformed to the work space of the chef and due credit to the hotel or the restaurant which the male host represents is mentioned without fail.

In case of male hosting the show, anything they cook is not meant for the audience to imitate at home but is a show of their creativity. Even the title of such shows won’t have any association to the household kitchen but would be the sophisticated adjectives of culinary creativity. For the male hosts cooking is a way to flex their professional muscles or else is a leisurely entertainment.

With the hubbubs over food and culture getting wider acceptance, media houses compete to showcase the multi dimensions of cooking and as part of that food travelogues are also popular nowadays. Though it has its own distinct grammar of presentation in itself, at the end it shows the host traversing to different multi starred restaurants where male chefs open before the audiences to a variety of globalised tastes in a split of a second. In some other context, a kitchen in some remote land will be shown where the lady of the home demonstrates her domestic skills of accommodating the guests with delicacies. Either way it bars women’s capacity of donning the professional cap, even in the culinary world. A popular food travelogue show in Malayalam portrays the host, a cine artist who takes the audiences to different toddy shops and introduces the variety of dishes prepared there. The raw attire and settings are the factors which attracts audiences’ gaze to it. The cooks are mostly men who prepare in bulk (for men) very spicy meat dishes which could be savoured with toddy. The masculinity is never compromised anywhere: in settings which is a toddy shop; in selection which is exclusively meat and its products; in preparation which is extremely spicy; serving which is for the male consumers of toddy and consumption.

The popularity of food in media has created a huge cultural boom around us. They play an important role in designing our household food habits. They introduced newer tastes from different parts of the world through a variety of novel ingredients. The huge wave of globalisation has attacked our taste buds through the alterations in the shelves of grocers and the menu cards of eateries too. The cooking shows’ role is unavoidable in creating such a cultural explosion. The way in which a male chef influences the viewer is different from that of the female host. When the male chef projects an arena of global food culture, the female cook focuses on the localisation of global tastes with the effective experimentation to

substitute the global tastes with alternatives from the local households through these mediated kitchens.

West and Zimmerman in the eighties coined 'doing gender' to state that 'gender is a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction' (125) and refers to the assumption that 'gender is a practice constantly re-enacted in everyday social interactions and is not a monolithic, stable and unchangeable ontological individual property.'(185) In case of the division of labour keeping aside all other factors one's gender role takes the first seat, notes West and Zimmerman.

It is not simply that household labour is designated as "women's work," but that for a woman to engage in it and a man not to engage in it is to draw on and exhibit the "essential nature" of each. What is produced and reproduced is not merely the activity and artifacts of domestic life, but the material embodiment of wifely and husbandly roles, and derivatively, of womanly and manly conduct. What are also frequently produced and reproduced are the dominant and subordinate statuses of the sex categories.(143)

Thus kitchen is a gendered space in which deeply held ideologies about natural feminine/ masculine behaviours are evident and the cooking shows play a supportive role in concreting the doing gender concepts. Various attributes associated with cooking includes creativity, experimentation, appreciation and also it is hailed as a heartfelt expression of love and care for the family and friends. Distinct variations in associating these attributes with male and female can thus be analysed and on how a labour becomes 'gendered labour' with the new visual media persuading men and women on what to follow.

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