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**Food Politics Through Cinema**

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***Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com*****ABSTRACT**

Representation in food is also a matter of politics. We would like to look at this through cinema. Our focus would be how elitism creeps into the kitchen and threw it into our lives. One when looks into the representation of food in Cinema, can try and analyse this trend of only catering to the upper class. The food becomes a stereotype of the people, and this becomes a problem in itself. The moment a certain food is included, the idea is simply that a certain community is included. But what one forgets is the excluded ones, the marginalized, where more representation is needed, where more voice is needed to come from them to talk about their struggles and their culture. One of the texts which we are looking at 'The Hundred-Foot Journey' familiarises one with the issues at multiculturalism but while doing so potentially excludes the larger portion of India, and thus representing Indian cuisine as a single entity. This problem of representation of food and misrepresentation of it will be looked at by us in this paper. And, we would try to find the reasons behind this as well as the consequences when this happens. These areas will be also looked into by conducting surveys, interviews of people around us, thereby giving us a concrete direction for our research.

**KEYWORDS: Representation, Elitism, Culture, Multiculturalism, Stereotype****Introduction**

This paper aims to look at food and how it is represented through Indian and American cinema. The idea is to look at these constructs and try to break them to extract from it a broader perspective on how food plays a pivotal role in our lives. And especially in the lives of people who live outside of their native country. The movies, *The Hundred-foot journey* as well as *Maacher Jhol* tackle these issues. Food becomes a living entity, something as close to a living being, which they come back to time and again to find their lost selves.

In *Maacher Jhol*, the protagonist, Dev D, played by Ritwick Chakrabarty, is a guy who we find in Paris busy working in one of the several Michelin star restaurants owned by him. Dev D, as known is Paris has been there for the past 13 years. One gets to know his origin during the start of the film when he spatters Bangla words in the middle of fluent French sentences, as somehow only his mother tongue could help him explain the things he feels. With all the Michelin

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Quick Response Code:

Received on 20/02/2019  
Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved



star restaurants and even his French girlfriend, one could well assume that the life of Dev is like a plane platform where everything like time is moving linearly without any troubles in hindsight. This is shattered when a single call disturbs the state of mind and the life he is living in Paris. We get to know that Dev's mother is severely ill and this propels him to go back to his native place, herein, Kolkata. Dev meets his mother and she asks him of a peculiar request. To make 'Maacher Jhol' for her. She reminisces about time lost when she was sick and Dev had enthusiastically made for her a simple 'Maacher Jhol'. Even the 'Maacher Jhol' here serves as a reminder that as ordinary as it, can serve as a remnant from one's past and always provide us with fresh nostalgia. What one observes throughout the film is that Dev, while making the dish adds really odd things which aren't actually inherently present in the dish, ie: There is a shot where he puts mango in the curry and my Bengali mother gets a heart attack while watching it. This brings us to the aspect of 'Multiculturalism'. This film could be called a quintessential example for the portrayal of 'multiculturalism'. A Kolkata boy, deciding to leave his job as an engineer, going against all odds and his father, leaving his family behind, from Maacher Jhol he goes on to become a master in French cuisine.

He learns to adapt to the new culture and even thrives in it, one could say everything was fine. We see the unusual usage of food products, which wouldn't normally be used in a typical Bengali dish. We could well say that this could be Dev trying to mix and match certain foods from various culture to try and recreate a dish which was asked of him. This melange of food and culture could be hailed as a signpost for all the good things diversity and multiculturalism in a way brings forth to us, while it does give us a new perspective to a dish in a sense but what happens in the process is the indigenous flavours are lost with time.

In *The hundred foot journey* is the story of a family, the Kadams who leave their life in Bombay because of 'some election or other' and decide to settle in a quaint village in the South of France. Some of the scenes have even been shot in the beautiful scenic locales in Midi Pyrenees. They acquire a dilapidated house which is right in front of a Michelin star restaurant owned by a woman named Madame Mallory who is equally grave as her name suggests. The Kadams are shown as the stereotypical north Indian family, who like playing loud music and the excessive use of spices, which Madame's Mallory's ears and nose take offence too often. The film tries to show how subtly the racism works along these lines but while doing so falls in the trap of stereotyping of certain communities instead. In an interview, some shots were taken in such a way and the spices were used in abundance so as to recreate and bring forth to people the 'Indianess' of it.

“The food had to audition. It was a character. For the Indian food, for example, we wanted dishes that looked hot and spicy, very true to themselves and not pretentious.”

This idea of something being essential 'Indian' is problematic since the filmmakers have beforehand decided that there is something that exists that is authentically 'Indian'. One could also term this as 'exoticising' certain cuisine because of its cultural background. It further helps in the dissemination of more stereotypes like if there is the usage of spice somewhere, it would automatically mean it has something that has got to do with India. This idea of Indians as people who create hullabaloo, instead of helping them would often lead to more ostracising from other cultures, whereas this idea that is perpetrated is just another perspective of how Indians were portrayed by the filmmakers. Instead of people from the fringes getting representation and that leading to the betterment of the community as a whole, they face negative ramifications.

In both of these films there is an emphasis on culture and differences and enmeshing of clashing cultures when they come in contact, but when one puts in a lot of emphasis on the 'cultural aspect'. When this happens, in most cases as seen in both *The hundred-foot journey* and *Maacher Jhol*, these people come off as Indian. The idea that they could be something else apart from being Indian is taken away from the scene itself because time and again one is made to realise that they belong to this certain community. In *Maacher Jhol* one is reminded from the start that the guy is a Bengali living Paris, and

that becomes a huge part of the narrative and in *The Hundred-foot Journey*, we get stereotypes after stereotypes in front of us to always keep the identity in place, that of Kadam family belonging from the north part of India. Identities here are fixed, there is no playing around with it. One is a Bengali and one is noisy Indian. In actuality, this is hardly the case. Identities are fluid. They change with time and situation. Let us imagine that a student of Christ (Deemed to be University) while travelling in an Airline comes up against certain odds, the flight gets delayed. Even though he has a certain identity, that of a Christite, at that moment, when everyone along with him everyone else protests for a refund, he joins the same and in a certain sense it in itself becomes a micro-community of sorts and they continue to be together till the time their purpose is served and then they disperse. One could comment the same of communities at large in itself, they come together for a certain cause, which sometimes is not just inherent, it could be political, social even geographical and they stick together till the time their purpose is served. Multiculturalism can also be looked through a different angle wherein one can possibly look for the forces overlapping each other and aiming for the ultimate power and then its resistance. Different aspects of different cultures collide and few parts of the dominant cultures finally come out of it. In this process, the marginalised aspects get left behind paving the way for the hegemony of a single identity which then contradicts the very meaning of multiculturalism.

The presence of single identity is itself problematic for the concept of multiculturalism because be it a certain country or a certain community, they have multiple identities and aspects, simply because of the fact that an absolute identity is not possible and is purely circumstantial. And this point is reflected several times, forcing a single identity on a people, in itself defeats the very core value of multiculturalism again.

One of the major sources of deriving one's culture is geography, but it's not the sole source. To enumerate an example, a very cliché stereotype of Bengalis only eating fish, Punjabis only eating butter chicken and south Indians only relying on idli dosa, prevails within our nation till date. This stereotype is widely discussed and believed, and cinema too, on the other hand, portrays such stereotypes. It doesn't look into the availability of certain commodities at certain geographical locations but creates such notions without any research or data, but purely based on mere speculation.

If multiculturalism means the existence of various cultures with equal representation and status, then where does the concept of the special status of minorities come from? It doesn't validate the idea of multiculturalism, wherein cultures exist harmoniously without overlapping their very existence.

Multiculturalism importantly teaches us to be culturally, ethnically and regionally categorised and to look at the world through the same lens by keeping ethnicity, race and faith in mind. It arouses the feeling of cultural identity in an individual and an urge to formulate policies for his interest and his community in particular. Similar to this happens in the case of food politics where certain groups engage in constant cultural and culinary clashes. The concept of multiculturalism has created problems that it in itself was meant to resolve.

Also, one major problem with multiculturalism is a threat to a region's indigenous aspects. The authenticity of the very term culture is diminishing in itself, where an individual travelling to another region earlier, used to eat the local food and experience the vivid culture in its best possible manner and to the utmost possible extent. Whereas talking about the present day scenario, these practices have ceased to exist. What happens now is that people travel and eat as per their comfort, totally abandoning the local cuisine, tastes and traditions, which in turn threatens the very culture of that place.

Another stereotype we come across every day is the nature of Indian food, the notion that Indian food has to be oily and spicy, making it unhealthy. On the contrary Italian or French food to be extremely minimalistic and classic giving it an elite status. This idea of elitism comes into the picture that how a certain culture is given preference because of its intrinsic quality, intellect, skills and there's no scope for practicality to exist but the neverending race for reaching the highest point in the social strata. This stigma attached does more harm than good.

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