

For the Love of Food: A Gastrocritical Reading of Alphonse Puthren's *Premam*

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Abstract: Through the lens of culture studies, everyday practices that were hitherto overlooked have gained heightened interest of late. Food Studies is one such burgeoning field of inquiry, building upon the complex relationship between human, the social being and his/her gustatory practices and foodscapes. It transcends the basic notion of food as sustenance and interprets its representations as cultural codes, gateways to traditions and as markers of identity, fixing class, gender, ethnic and familial classifications. This paper focuses on one particular cultural product, the famous Malayalam film *Premam* and studies the employment of food tropes and notions of consumption in it to identify food as a semiotic device, contributing to the film's meaning-making practices. It interprets gastrocritically (Ronald W. Tobin), how such an employment furthers the genre adhering trope of the film, which is a romantic comedy. It locates food as a metaphorical vehicle that enables the formation and evolution of notions of 'love' as appropriated in the film. Borrowing broadly from various disciplines like psychoanalysis and gender studies, the paper argues that food aids in the construction of underlying ideologies like masculinity, gaze, and desire as embedded within the film's fabric.

Keywords: food studies, film studies, gastrocriticism, masculinity, love, gaze, romantic comedy

INTRODUCTION

Premam, the Malayalam film directed by Alphonse Puthren, struck cords nationwide for its portrayal of love, which is one of the most predominant themes of Indian cinema. Irrespective of the genre or storyline, a love plot of 'boy meets girl' is invariably roped into narratives quite so often. Malayalam cinema especially, known for voicing out radically and fearlessly, treading upon taboo shades of many issues, including 'love', delivered another crowd-pleaser that

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was remade in different languages though it resonated with the audience beyond language barriers. The audience found it easy to associate with a hero who faced more failures than success when it came to love, identifying it to be more realistic than conventional romcom templates that are ideally too fantastical to be true. The hero came across as an everyman figure and spoke to the youth of the country. Though the film received nationwide appreciation and accolades across all generations and genders, on critical enquiry, feminists like Mythily Nair (2020) have pointed out the patriarchal gaze that dominates the film's discourse and claims that it is a narrative of male fantasy. This research when it set out to further probe along the gendered tensions embedded within the film's fabric, it stumbled upon a discovery of the strategic employment of food as a metaphoric device. The film is notorious for having portrayed delectable food scenes which became so famous that, restaurants started recreating the dishes while spectators began queuing after and trending the delicacies depicted. One among them was the red velvet cake which traces its sudden popularity in the southern parts of the country, especially in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, back to the release of the film. This paper assays to focus on how food has been employed as a signifier in intensifying the theme of the movie: 'love', concurring with the title, *Premam* (meaning love) and simultaneously observes the nuances associated with its depiction. On doing so, various gendered constructions arise that seem to be resultant of the film's generic nature, communicated through the language of food.

Though food studies have been a primal preoccupation as a human endeavor, ever since the coinage of the term 'Gastrocriticism' by Ronald W. Tobin in 2002, literary attention has spiked towards rethinking the ideologies behind food. Beyond the idea of food as sustenance, scholars have acknowledged the equally important social functions of it, which shapes and marks the way we live. Its interdisciplinary nature borrows widely from social, cultural and anthropological sources, where food discourses, like a soaked up sponge, is pregnant with the possibilities of extracting the numerous substructures of meaning embedded within it. Roland Barthes advocated a requirement for the recognition of food as a signifier and as part of a system of communication that needed to be observed and studied to reveal the significant transmission of culture manifested within it. He reiterated "one could say that an entire 'world' (social environment) is present and signified by food" (Barthes 2012, 26). He

saw food as a signifying system, called it an “alimentary language made of: rules of exclusion; signifying oppositions of units [sweet and sour, for example]; rules of association ...; rituals of use which function ... as a kind of alimentary rhetoric.” (Barthes 1967, 27-28) He called menus “systems” of language and investigated how dishes had specific “meanings” and functions; he understood the sequence of their occurrence as “syntagms” contextualised amidst larger meaning-making units; personal tastes and practices of preparation and consumption of food were classified as “idiolects.” (Ibid., 63) Semiotically, food can thus be perceived as a sign whose denotation transcends superficial layers of literal meaning, which Gaye Poole (1999, 3) puts it as: “it is possible to ‘say’ things with food—resentment, love, compensation, anger, rebellion, withdrawal. This makes it a perfect conveyor of subtext; messages which are often implicit rather than explicit, but surprisingly varied, strong, and sometimes violent or subversive.” Humanities scholars now interpret food as cultural codes, gateways to traditions and as markers of identity, fixing class, gender, ethnic and familial classifications. Critical investigation devours the symbolic nature of culinary representations in cultural products and attests to the “power of using food as a lens for analyzing contemporary culture.” (Zinn 2007, 4) Likewise, this paper’s aim, therefore, in a nutshell, is to carry out a gastrocritical reading of the film *Premam*.

A GASTROCRITICAL READING

At the very opening, we spot the film’s title design to be shaped like a butterfly, which flaps its wings and rests on a hibiscus flower for a few seconds in a manner of drinking honey from it. The image of bees and butterflies sucking nectar out of flowers has become an archetypal image to be associated with love. Right from the days of the Sangam period, to the cinema produced in the past century in the subcontinent, this image has been reused time and again to symbolize union, consummation or just the idea of love. The butterflies or bees are quite obviously assumed to be the active consumer, invariably symbolizing the man while the silent recipient flower symbolizes the woman. It reinforces the stereotypical misogynistic idea of a woman being the passive ‘giver’, existing and waiting, for the male to choose her. The butterfly on the other hand is the pursuer who chooses the flower it pleases and consumes to its satisfaction; it is also free to move from one flower to another. Just like how the camera moves along with the

butterfly, the story similarly follows the narrative point of view of the hero himself and offers his version of the events, revealing his emotions, feelings and desires. The women counterparts of the story become reduced to objects of beauty to be desired after. The film will most likely fail the Bechdel test, for the lack of their character development and autonomy. Thus the very title design and the opening credits sequence foreshadow the essence of the movie, concerning notions of consumption - consuming and being consumed, attributed towards its gendered construction.

In the first scene, where the audience is introduced to the hero, we witness him in his futile attempts to pen a love letter. Having written not more than a couple of sentences, he falters at mentioning the word 'orange'. Though he means to refer to the colour orange, even the remote memory of an edible fruit disturbs his dedicated efforts to confess his love. When his mother calls out to him, asking his preference while purchasing fish, George clearly gets distracted from the task at his hand. Though at first, he seems annoyed to have been interrupted, instantly he gets diverted into the world of food, smacking his watering lips in anticipation and orders four pieces already, unwilling to share it with anyone. This scene of induction symbolizes the maturity of a 16-year-old teenager, to whom the word 'love' means different things from how it is to evolve and change over the years. While popular historical imagery of food in association with love has revolved around starvation and loss of appetite in yearning, George's fluctuation of affection between food and the woman of his interest reflects his priorities in life at that stage. His adolescent years can be seen as an extension of his childhood where his desires are rather primal and seem to manifest from the Ego. In Freudian terms, devoid of any rational ramifications of the Ego or Superego, the pleasure principle-driven desires of young George represent the blossoming of one's first love or infatuation. Id is also regarded as "the great reservoir of libido" (Freud 1991, 369). While libido translates into sex drive, Freud's definition, which identifies it as "the energy, regarded as a quantitative magnitude... of those instincts which have to do with all that may be comprised under the word 'love'" (Freud 1949, 37) appears more appropriate in this case. Later when his friend Koya points out, it is revealed that his fried fish fantasies have entered the love letter as well and that George had ended up comparing Mary his love interest to fried sardines. This indicates towards the daze of a state one finds himself/herself in the hormone-frenzied adolescence, which can be

agreed upon as a phase of hunger, dominated by impulsive wants, be it food cravings or romantic pursuits. So food here is used to convey what love means to the 16-year-old George, by establishing the trope of ‘hunger’.

Silvia Baučeková (2015, 30) recalls traditional beliefs like that of Kant’s wherein “indulgence in pleasures, especially in the pleasure of eating, prevented the individual from clear thinking”, and quotes Soler (2009) who put it as: “gluttony stupefied the hunger of the mind.” A person who is eating while carrying out duties is socially perceived as someone who does not take his/her work seriously. Activity multitasked with eating is often discerned as a leisurely one. Indigenous and ancient wisdom holds that seekers of truth tend to forego their bodily satisfaction to sharpen their awareness. Recent scientific studies also show how in a slightly hungry state or on an empty stomach, the brain works much better. While rationality is thus associated with the absence of food, thereby linking the Kantian mind to it, the body is equated with emotion, intuition, feelings, desires etc. Whenever we see George and his friends plotting to woo Mary, we see them eating or drinking something. Their thinking is always accompanied by snacking, which is an indication of the non-seriousness of their plans. The famous scene involving the sharbat shows how even before they come up with a strategy to impress Mary, they break in between multiple times, distracted by their drink. They do not compromise on the customization of their drink and demand *kas kas*. Neither is their attention on the task at hand nor is it on their consumption. Each one asks for the addition of *kas kas* separately on seeing the others. In another scene, they contemplate impossible ideas like cultivating some fodder and visiting Mary in the guise of delivering the product. They also wonder if Coca-Cola is made from *coca*. These instances progress the initial image of George’s love framed at the beginning with the help of the fish fry analogy, that it is immature and frivolous. These minute details work to subconsciously connote the meaning of ‘love’ that young George calls himself to have fallen into, which is more of being in love with the feeling of love, than love itself.

The heroes often visit ‘Gopu’s Tea Stall’ a typical humble roadside tea stall, a common sight in almost all Indian streets. A tea stall is a contested place of communion, “where customers gain both dietary and social nourishment.” (Jorgensen 2016, 1) Raymond Williams noted how this ordinary cultural site can transform into an

“ideologically loaded space” (see McGuigan 2014, 18). Historically, in Kerala, they have been instrumental in transcending the caste system and in creating secular spaces of democratic discourse. It is a place where both the body and the mind are fed, for, often accompanied by the refreshments, brews discussions and debates about various current affairs, making newspaper study and consumption of food a complementary pair. Barthes (1989, 258), on commenting upon the dual function of the mouth for talking and consumption, puts it as “cut off the tongue, and there will be neither taste nor speech.” Likewise, in Gopu’s tea stall, we see the manifestation of the talk of the town Mary and the courtship battles that skirt her. The tea stall here transforms into a space where masculine forces compete against and try to outdo each other to woo the object of interest, feeding the tension between Mary’s admirers. When one of Mary’s admirers tries to open a soda bottle using his teeth, he gets mocked for ‘showing off his teeth’. While the intended message asked him to refrain from flaunting his healthy teeth, it also seems to have an embedded alternate meaning. This is also a common phrase used colloquially when men and women grin supposedly quite obviously and uncontrollably, with teeth visible, mostly as a symbol of coyness or flirtatious behaviour. Food studies scholars have observed how culturally oral functions such as ‘eating’, have been interchangeably constructed as ‘consumption’, with sexual overtones. This employment gets exploited to the maximum in later parts of the movie. Here men as consumers of food paralleled with the construction of men as consumers of visual pleasure is demonstrated when they use the tea stall as a safe space that allows them to ogle at women. These thus can chiefly be identified as masculine spaces, where it is mostly men who visit them and spend time there as a means of relaxation and release of tension. It is a place where their primal desires or needs are met, like feeding and verbal expressiveness, a space that is hardly available to women.

One of the famous aphorisms of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (2002, 3) is undoubtedly, “tell me what you eat, I’ll tell you who you are.” Food marks one’s identity based on their gustatory practices. Mary visits the same tea stall to buy milk and ‘Parle-G’ biscuits. Unlike the men, she does not linger there any longer than required and leaves once her purchase is over. Her tone is functionalist in its meaning and her purchase becomes that of an essentialist shopping for sustenance value. It counters the consumption activities of the men that drive for satisfaction, for instance, indicated by the cigarette smoking

at the stall. Assuming the milk and biscuits to be her evening snack of the day, which she must purchase most probably after school, she does not have the liberty to use the tea stall in the same manner as the men do. She bags them to be consumed later within the confines of her home, in the absence of any male gaze. As Baučeková (2015, 97) remarks, “food and food choice play an important part in constructing, altering or disrupting gender identities.” She quotes Lupton’s findings which concluded that “Feminine foods were characterised as ‘light, sweet, milky, soft textured, refined and delicate.” (Lupton 1996, 106) The milk can easily be read as a symbol of her purity and innocence and the biscuit brand that features a baby on its cover positions her as childlike. This re-emphasises ‘doing gender’ and intensifies the difference between gender roles or characteristics only to glorify the patriarchal, heteronormative image of a romantic comedy, where the leads are hypersexualised in their essentialist notions. What follows is the iconic close-ups of the delicacies sold in the shop. She “gazes longingly at the tall thick glass jars filled with *kappalandi muttai*, *naranga muttai*, and plates of steaming *pazham pori* and *parippu vada*.” (Menon 2019) Though her desire is obvious, she refrains from indulging in those guilty pleasures out of social conditioning. When it comes to women’s relationship with food, hegemonic structures require them to not indulge in it the same way as it is permitted for men. Fasting rituals and eating disorders that manifest when society corrupts their minds with ridiculous standards of body image are just some examples of it. Misogynistic cultural codes in many traditional societies, designate only the ‘simple’ and mundane food for women, while anything rare, superior or exotic is reserved for men, as they are believed to need more nourishment than women. Apart from gender, the scene also obscures classist ideologies underlying the participatory practices of a tea stall. The other acceptable space of consumption appropriated to Mary’s class and gender is revealed to be an elite ice cream parlour, in the later parts of the movie, as a counter to the roadside tea stall. Thus the place of consumption, choice of food, manner of eating, are all unsaid details of hierarchical power structures of gender and class operating simultaneously within the narrative.

Freudian symbolism holds that a manifest content of visuals, mostly dreams, have a latent meaning to be unearthed, which is often a wish fulfilment masked up in a symbolic form. For instance, according to Freud’s psychoanalytic interpretative language, symbols that are long and

jutting out are commonly taken to represent the penis. Along those lines, the close-up shots of the sharbat making, that fine-tune to even the textures, involving squeezing of the lemon, swimming of the gel-like basil seeds in the white murky liquid can easily be associated with male bodily fluids, attaching a sexual connotation to food at the unconscious level. Similarly, Lindenfeld and Parasecoli (2016, 16) in their *Feasting our Eyes: Food Films and Cultural Identity in the United States* observe that “Through these techniques food is sexualized and intertwined with desire, frequently functioning as a vehicle for experiencing a utopian state of bliss, pleasure, and contentment.” They identify food depiction as a tool of arousing the audience’s sensory experience and quote Keller (2006) who says, “Food cinema thus invokes the gustatory appetite in a fashion similar to the arousal of the libido through romantic and sexual imagery, accessing the full sensory experience of the actor and, subsequently and vicariously, of the audience.” Lahikainene (2007, 26) on rephrasing Lupton says that “people do often charge food with erotic and sexual tensions. Language of love is often the language of eating. Mouth is essential in early relationship with the world and the mother, in eating and in sexual relationships.” Yet this sexualisation of food cannot be excused of problematization when it disfavours the female gender principally. As the consumption of the cinema is paralleled with feasting one’s eyes over the delicacies depicted, a third component adds on to this ‘gazing’ structure. In the third triad, the close up slow motions of Celine devouring the red velvet cake sexualises the act of a woman eating and the camera lens yields to its patriarchal steering. Food has been employed to play an ally in objectifying women into becoming spectacles, fixing and limiting their identities as objects of fantasy and visual pleasure. The consuming body thus becomes consumable for the consumers of the cinema. As Laura Mulvey states, the active gaze is achieved by the culmination of the male perspective of the camera, character and audience, the feminine ‘to be looked at ness’ becomes the passive counter. She elaborates,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey 1975, 10)

This is further intensified throughout the film by the controlled employment of food and its synonymity with the position women are limited to in the film.

Another act of consumption that cannot be missed in *Premam* is its depiction of smoking and drinking. George and his friends are not spared from smoking even in the first quarter where they are mere schoolgoers and minors. Krishna and Shreehari's study observes that almost fifteen per cent of the film's running time features characters entertaining alcohol and cigarettes. Their research like many others worldwide tries to probe the link between the representation of substance usage on screen and its influence on the audience, especially young males. Drinking, for males, has often been identified as an assertion of their masculinity; the first drink metaphorically enables his transition into 'manhood'. The second triad of the film highlights this specifically to symbolise George's entrance into adulthood and the social licence that comes with it. Male drinking invariably comes attached with much social stigma- the choice of one's drink, the undiluted strength of it, whom he drinks with, how long he is able to hold his drink etc all become set parameters that masculinise man's drinking act. Men are more likely to be shown drinking on screen and "drinking more broadly symbolizes masculinity because it is closely linked to three other key aspects of the male role: unconventionality, risk-taking, and aggressiveness. This association to other traditional male behaviours serves to heighten alcohol's masculine image." (Lemle and Mishkind 1989, 216) Young George and co's secret smoking habit unknown to others can be seen as a desire for manhood, which they unabashedly perform publicly upon becoming older. Their drinking and smoking follow either violence or pain. When violence validates their masculinity, any threat to their masculinity like rejection is 'coped up' using alcohol. It is thus a mechanism that keeps in check their hegemonic masculine identities. The induction to the second phase of the movie stars George and co as gangsters of the college where they constantly break rules as a mark of their machoism which they imagine to be beyond any institution. That which adds glamour to this machoism is substance usage. Many instances validate and approve of this behaviour indirectly even if they are shown to have been punished for it. When the trio comes drunk to a class, though they get dismissed by the lecturer, it is depicted to be opportunistic for George to look at his lady love while not having to listen to the lecture

simultaneously. Even when his father is summoned as a disciplinary action, his reluctance to acknowledge drinking as a serious issue, blatantly validates it as a necessary trait required of a man. This shows how “drinking is not merely permitted: it is prescribed as a means of affirming masculinity.” (Lemle and Mishkind 1989, 217) It represents how drinking is conditioned to be anonymous with unconventionality, deviance and rejection of propriety. (Ibid., 216) The drinking heroes are positioned in contrast to their non-drinking classmates who become their foil by inaction and thus portrayed to be less interesting. Masculine and feminine notions attributed to the hero and heroines are coded via the drinks they consume - alcohol and milk by George and Mary respectively. On the contrast between the two drinks, Barthes (1995, 60) observes that “Wine is mutilating, surgical, it transmutes and delivers; milk is cosmetic, it joins, covers, restores. Moreover, its purity, associated with the innocence of the child, is a token of strength, of a strength which is not revulsive, not congestive, but calm, white, lucid, the equal of reality” thereby reinforcing the stereotypes.

The canteen scenes featured in the film parallel the trope of ‘rivalry in love’ with food, which here is portrayed in ‘excess’ to symbolise the futile attempts of the suitors, facilitated by the conventions of the genre comedy. College canteens become few of the spaces within an institutionalised set-up where non-academic rituals flourish unpanopticed. The canteen seems to additionally feed courtship ideas and is often framed as a site of plotting and contestation. George and his friends are bribed with food to help woo Malar Teacher. As often seen in comedy, right from Shakespearean times, comic interludes tend to emphasise excess in one way or the other. Exploiting Vimal sir’s need, the trio feeds their appetites and indulges in their favourite delicacies on his account, where dramatic irony tells us how the fool is played on him instead. Furthering this comic account is the reversal of tables, when the same canteen witnesses George’s threat, Arivazhagan. This can be seen as an extension of the treatment of foodscapes like that of the tea stall as mobilised in the first triad, where men compete for their female object of interest.

The third and final part of the film features a grown-up George in his thirties possibly, as the owner of a café with assistants working under him, reaching the maturation of foodscape semantics hitherto demonstrated. George’s appetite is seen to have come to satiation with contention as he rarely eats in the last triad, but instead only prepares food and is thus shown to be more responsible and serious. Here the

foodscape as a potential courtship site is painted merely as a ridiculous foil, to that of George's successful proposal. As psychologically conditioned audience, the setting of a confectionery store effortlessly appears to us as a suitable backdrop for a romantic comedy. When George meets Celine for the first time, he falters in his cake decoration. An otherwise serious George getting distracted because of his affections for a girl becomes a foil to the young George's attempts of courtship, distracted by food. This represents his matured, serious intentions of love, which finally lands him in success, arriving at the happily ever after ending, typical of any rom-com. Food again is thus used to symbolise what love means to a now grown-up George.

CONCLUSION

Romantic comedies though much sought after in the twenty-first century, have been accused of being propagators of rigid heterosexuality that is "a political institution which disempowers women." (Kirkland 2009, 5) In referring to Dyer, Kirkland observes how the romantic comedy genre requires 'extreme differences' when it comes to gender and formulates complementary opposites in a manner of essentialising gender roles, characteristics and notions of masculinity and femininity. As demonstrated above, the masculinisation of the hero requires a counter submissive feminisation of the heroines. This can be understood better by associating it with what Connell (2005, 832) terms as 'hegemonic masculinity', which is embodying the "... the currently most honoured way of being a man, it/that required(s) all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men." Such propagation is circulated insidiously via institutions of soft power rather than the obvious and blatant hard power. Joseph Nye coined the term 'soft power' in *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (2013), which is the ability to persuade through cultural ideals and artefacts instead of using militaristic or economical prowess to control. Using food as a tool and the romantic comedy genre as the avenue, the film nurtures essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity that in turn objectifies and suppresses the women as inferior to men by validating their hyper masculinist imagery. As pointed out by Mythily Nair (2020), the heroines' worth in the narrative is always decided by the men vying for them. She comments on how they seem to be buoyed from one man to another, making them objects to be possessed, which is further validated by the

ensuing competition. The women are viewed through nothing but the male perspective, which is often accompanied by the cliched generic 'pursuit' trope, which in reality is a form of stalking culture. The above unpacked ideologies are paralleled congruent to the ideologically packed foodscapes of the visual narrative. There is the employment of culinary tropes in the narrative, to unveil the embedded gender politics underlying the film's generic codes. Food has therefore been used as a semiotic device that intensifies the theme of the film by influencing its tone and mood. It aids in the construction of the concept of love, as appropriated by the film, and enables its development that lends to the formation of the film's narrative.

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