

Feeding the Frame: Food, Culture and Class Identity in Kollywood Narratives

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Abstract: This paper, titled "Feeding the Frame: Food, Culture and Class identity in Kollywood Narratives" examines how food functions as a dynamic cultural and socio-political signifier in contemporary Tamil cinema. Through a close textual analysis of selected films, the study explores how culinary practices articulate questions of identity, ritual continuity, caste hierarchy, class aspiration, and economic transformation within Tamil society. Food emerges as a marker of rooted cultural identity in rural settings, where cooking rituals and communal feasts preserve intergenerational traditions while simultaneously exposing ethical tensions and generational divides.

The paper further analyzes how globalized food commodities symbolize urban aspiration and class mobility, revealing the cultural anxieties produced by consumer capitalism. Ritual meals associated with marriage and death are examined as performative spaces that reinforce social order, kinship structures, and communal memory. In agrarian narratives, food production and land ownership are shown to reflect caste-based power structures and structural inequality. Additionally, the study highlights the role of small-scale food enterprises and farming economies in representing labor dignity, market vulnerability, and shifting economic aspirations. By foregrounding food as both symbol and material resource, the paper argues that Kollywood uses culinary imagery to critically engage with broader discourses on culture, class, power, and economic change.

Keywords: Food Culture, Class Identity, Caste and Agrarian Politics, Ritual and Tradition.

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Introduction

Film and food share a profound connection that extends beyond mere depiction. In Kollywood movies, food doesn't just feed characters; it also serves as a rich symbol that adds depth to themes, shows how complicated characters are, and reflects the ideals of society. This article 'Feeding the Frame: Food, Culture and Class Identity in Kollywood Narratives' examines the complex relationship between food and film, highlighting how food functions as a multifaceted symbol in films and enhances our understanding of the traditions of the Tamil film industry. Food is more than just a visual or sensory element in Tamil cinema; it is a powerful narrative tool that shows cultural values, social dynamics, and personal feelings. Food is crucial in Tamil cinema since it helps shape storytelling and thematic exploration. For example, in Kollywood musicals, there are big parties, while in independent dramas, there are small meals. This study looks at how food is shown in Tamil films and how it works as a symbol, a plot device, and a theme.

A sign of cultural identification

Food is a strong sign of Tamil cultural identity and social structure in the film *Saivam*, just like food images are in regional literary works. The film's emphasis on the preparation of traditional non-vegetarian dishes, particularly chicken for a family feast, firmly situates the narrative within rural Tamil customs and intergenerational traditions. The kitchen and dining area become places where cultural continuity is both maintained and challenged.

The extensive description of culinary rituals shows not only how unique Tamil food culture is but also the emotional and moral conflicts that are a part of it. Food becomes a symbolic way to talk about issues of tradition, compassion, and power. The generational split, especially the child's compassion for the sacrifice animal, questions established conventions and shows how inflexible inherited customs can be.

In *Kaaka Muttai*, pizza and other foods are strong cultural symbols that show the conflict between local identity and global consumer culture. Pizza is not like traditional Tamil meals that stand for legacy and being rooted. Instead, it stands for hope, modernisation, and becoming part of a globalised urban identity. The two boys who live in a slum want to taste pizza not just because they are hungry, but also because they want to feel like they belong to a world that they are not a part of. The branded pizza place is a cultural line that separates the impoverished in the city from the middle class who buy things. So, food is a sign of class-based cultural differences in modern Chennai.

The boys' daily meals of plain rice and local delicacies also show how they live in their culture. These meals are connected to where you live, your community, and being alive. The difference between how native people eat and how Western fast food is sold shows how globalisation has changed cultural identity. When the boys ultimately eat pizza but don't like it, the movie implicitly criticises the idea that global goods are better than local ones. The movie re-establishes local identity at the forefront and

demonstrates how advertising and media images shape cultural desire.

Rituals and Traditions Represented

Food is vital to Tamil weddings, one of the most important ceremonies in Tamil culture. The name of the movie *Kalyana Samayal Saadhham* itself refers to a magnificent wedding feast, which is not just a celebration but also a sign of family honour, social standing, and cultural continuity. In Tamil tradition, the wedding meal is very structured. The ceremony includes certain dishes, a certain order of serving, and eating together on banana leaves. The movie's story takes place around these food traditions, revealing how cooking becomes a group activity that includes extended family networks. The feast stands for wealth, respectability, and the successful making of ties between two families. Also, the wedding's food abundance is in stark contrast to the groom's private worries, showing how food rituals often hide personal problems. So, food in the movie is a cultural act that publicly shows respect for tradition, hierarchy, and social belonging.

In *Sethum Aayiram Pon*, food is a big part of death rites and old ways of life in rural Tamil Nadu. The story takes place during funerals, when making certain ritual meals is a cultural duty. Cooking is not about food; it's about doing what is expected when someone dies and is remembered. The organised way of preparing and serving food shows respect for the dead and strengthens relationships between people in the community. Even when there are still problems in the family, characters have to follow certain ritual meal rules, which shows how tradition may be stronger than personal feelings. Food here is a link between the living and the dead. It is a metaphorical bridge that connects individual pain to shared memories. These ritual dinners reaffirm ethnic identity and keep social order in place.

Commentary on political and social issues

In *Asuran*, food production and agricultural resources are intricately linked to caste and land politics. The agricultural setting emphasises farming, crops, and subsistence as fundamental aspects of identity. The ability to access land for food cultivation influences one's social status. The dominant caste's grip over agricultural resources shows that social structures are deeply rooted. Food is not just eaten; it is also governed by politics. Scenes showing modest meals show how poor and marginal people are in the country. Food scarcity and agricultural hardship represent the structural deprivation experienced by marginalised caste communities.

Owning land gives you leverage over the economy and politics. The dispute around land fundamentally constitutes a struggle for food production and survival. The movie makes fun of feudalism based on caste, where the ability to farm determines freedom. *Asuran* connects violence to control of farmland, making the food industry a place of systemic oppression. The story's main point is about the politics of who grows food, who owns land, and who makes money from it.

The story of *Oru Kidayin Karunai Manu* revolves around food, particularly the preparation of a goat for a feast. This is a way to look at caste, communal relationships, and moral ideals. The goat is for a celebration, and it stands for friendliness, hospitality, and country manliness. In Tamil rural culture, sharing meat at events is a way to build social ties and show pride in the

community. But the goat's unfortunate death and the moral issue that follows ruin this joyous ritual. The movie shows how caste-based social codes affect how people eat. The cultural significance of killing and cooking meat relates to identity and tradition. When the ritual is disrupted, it shows how fragile social cohesiveness is and how tensions are present in the community.

The story also makes a subtle point about how rural communities work within strict societal rules, beyond just personal strife. Food becomes a place where the law, morality, and honour of the community all come together. The police probe into the goat's death paradoxically turns a normal meal ritual into a matter of bureaucratic and legal scrutiny, showing how silly government systems can be. The movie also talks about how some dietary habits, like eating meat, are political in modern India. The subject is part of a larger conversation about food regulation, cultural freedom, and identity politics.

Food and economic interaction

Kadai Vivasayi puts agriculture, which is where food comes from, at the center of the fight for economic power. The movie is about a farmer whose only source of income is growing crops. Food here is not something people buy and eat; it's something they make. Agriculture determines economic survival, dignity, and autonomy. The story illustrates how modern economies marginalise small-scale farmers. Industrialisation, government policies, and market changes make traditional rural economies weaker. The farmer's work does not lead to proportional financial stability, indicating an unbalanced food supply chain.

People perceive farming as a cultural aspect and a financial necessity. The main character's connection to land and crops shows how they fight against unfair market systems. Food production becomes a sign of economic independence that is threatened by modernisation.

The movie *Murugan Idli Kadai* is about a little idli shop that is the family's main source of income. The restaurant is not just a place to eat; it's where most of the money comes from. Cooking becomes a regulated job, and being good at it means being able to make money. The idli shop is an example of an informal economy, a family-run micro-enterprise, and a way to make and sell food locally. So, food is turned into a commodity, but only on a limited scale and in a community-based way.

One of the main conflicts in the movie is the fact that different generations have different ideas about the economy. The elders see the idli store as a respectable, steady job, but the younger generation wants to move up and modernise. Here, the food business stands for: Traditional ways of making a living vs. corporate goals, stability vs. growth, and local identity vs. competition in the market. The fight is a sign of bigger changes in Tamil Nadu's economy, from tiny restaurants to big restaurant chains.

The story looks at how tiny businesses have a challenging time in marketplaces where there is a lot of competition. Sustainability depends on price, consumer loyalty, and reputation. The economic connection is evident in the daily cash flow, the relationships between customers and sellers, and the dependencies within the supply chain. Demand and the market determine the price of food, a cultural staple and commodity. The movie also talks about the respect that comes with doing manual and cooking work. The idli store is shown not as a symptom of being poor but

as a way to make a living honestly. This goes against the class bias that generally looks down on jobs that have to do with food.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Tamil films that use food as a metaphor give us a lot to think about when it comes to human experiences, identities, and societal structures. Food can move the plot along, show character attributes, and display cultural and societal values through its portrayal on screen. The portrayal of food in films gives us a deeper understanding of personal growth, social challenges, and cultural identity, which makes the movie-watching experience even better. This study shows that food is more than just a way to get nutrients; it can also be a strong symbol of love, identity, and community. The enduring significance of culinary symbolism prompts additional investigation, indicating that the interplay between food and literature will persist in its evolution as cultural settings transform. Additional studies could investigate particular culinary cultures or examine culinary symbolism in other gastronomic films.

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