



Food And Fantasy: Decoding The Eccentric Cuisines And Their Hidden Meanings In Bhaskar Hazarika's *Aamis* And *Kothanadi*.

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Abstract

Food has served as an integral part of an individual's life since time immemorial. Without food there is no sustenance and in the absence of sustenance how can there be any life. However, in the modern context food is much more than a simple need- essential for survival. Food indicates culture, lifestyle and even status. Food has in the global era cut through the barriers of region and culture uniting people in the joy of celebrating life through something it sustains.

In this regard, food shares a lot of similarities with movies. If one endows the body with sustenance, other replenishes the mind. If one is essential for the growth of the body, other for developing the mental faculties. Similar to how a well-balanced diet ensures the smooth and effective functioning of the body, a well-made movie engages and stimulates the mind to the fullest.

In this paper, I shall be probing an inquisitive inquiry as to what possible interpretations could be drawn from concocting both in an artistic quest for answers pertaining to culture and human psychology. I shall endeavour to find whether culture compliments human psychology or the latter is rather developed as a resistive response to the former.

In doing so, I shall be primarily focusing upon two movies directed by the Assamese filmmaker Bhaskar Hazarika- "*Aamis*" and "*Kothanodi*".

Keywords: Food, movies, culture, human psychology, resistive, etc.

Movies often shape our understanding of the world and the people that inhabit it. Through movies different cultures and their unfamiliar ways are made familiar to us. Similar to a specific cuisine that can be pinned down to a specific region, a movie based in a certain community also carries a flavour of its own. Richly seasoned with the cultural prevalences of said chosen community, such movies are adequately capable of giving us a fine taste of those uncharted territories which remain separated from us by boundaries of distance, space and exposition.

In the recent years, Assamese cinema has gained a lot of momentum. People have started taking a lot of interest in the movies- especially the quality ones- that are being made by extremely talented directors such as Munin Barua, Rima Das, Bhaskar Hazarika, etc. Various OTT platforms combined with the boon of translation have made it much easier for people to access these regional movies that are usually made in small to medium budget.

Like the food that has gone through several stages of evolution, the Assamese cinema has also demonstrated signs of transition through the years. This transition is both in terms of the nature of the content that is being produced as well as the many milestones this industry has crossed over the years. Directors such as Rima Das have brought laurels to the state with movies like *Village Rockstars* (2017). Not only was it nominated for the Oscar Awards (2019) but declared the Best Film in the Indian National Film Festival as well. For a regional cinema to receive such global recognition via such platforms is a matter of insurmountable pride.

Every once in a while such movies emerge like a breath of fresh air; replenishing our appetites for something novel and something unusual. Such movies can be compared to those exotic dishes that are specifically reserved for special occasions- like the arrival of esteemed guests- a cultural habit practiced in most Indian households.

As a matter of fact, culture and food are deeply entwined. One can hardly be separated from the other. In, this regard it becomes crucial to quote Margaret Visser:

“A staple food is, of course, fundamental to the civilization that cultivates it and what is not eaten is as important, from a cultural point of view, as what is.”

Visser divides food in two exclusive categories- edible and not inedible. And from the vantage point of “civilization” the food needs to be cooked first in order to be consumed (Visser 117). The habit of properly washing and cleaning the food before cooking it properly is the first and foremost condition for the food to be considered eligible to be consumed. At least in the world of humans. who follow a “cultural” code of behavior (Visser 117).

Speaking on culture Raymond Williams says, it "may be seen, as a special kind of a map by means of which the nature of the changes can be explored (xv)". He says this in retrospect to the evolving phases of human behavior that can be observed in the cultural practices followed by a group/tribe/community of people across different time zones. Visser's categorization also inclines towards William's understanding of culture for the food habits as well as acceptable ways of eating has evolved greatly over the years. From eating raw, uncooked food to seasoning their food with an assortment of spices and herbs, humans have indeed come a long way.

In fact, there is a great influx in the number of shows, blogs and podcasts that educate people on how to eat and what to eat in the current times. The basic idea behind all these is to make people aware as to what is going inside their body and, in what many ways, would it be affecting them. For the good or for the worse. Such kind of an environment results in a heightened kind of alertness amongst the people who feel guilty about consuming things that fail to pass the many nutrition tests set by experts.

But what about deviations from such normal habits? What could probably such deviations signify? Some abnormalities or repressed emotions? Or certain unexplored fantasies that can never be materialized into reality? Probably, in all totality, they form certain "pattern of behavior that are destructive in some form" that reveal "the existence of some psychological difficulty" that lingers throughout the human existence (Tyson 12). Such deviations can be caused by many factors-all gearing towards the multi-faceted and multi-dimensional human psychology. Similarly, in a culture as emotionally charged as India, obtaining such deviations is not difficult at all. Especially when foods can easily be rejected based on their cultural implications and certain foods are also strictly prohibited too. This is mainly because the concept of totem- of assigning a specific set of beliefs to any object (both living as well as dead)- never grows old in India.

Cows are considered sacred in India. There is a lot of censure an individual can be exposed to if one commits a heinous crime of consuming it. Several sections of the society are always within the target range because of their eating practices which involves consumption of this sacred animal.

Religious factors, too, greatly contribute towards this concept of totem building- as observed in the context of cows. In her research paper titled “Food Avoidances of Indian Tribes”, Gabriella Eichiger Ferro-Luizi discusses how various connotations associated with certain animals make them unsuitable for consumption. She writes:

“Animals occupy a particularly favourable position as claimants to divine honours. They may be separate gods or they may be associated with other gods as their representatives, incarnations, vehicles or protégés.”

(393)

Under such circumstances, it becomes extremely problematic to consume these animals or even parts of them for they could incite communal hatred and societal disharmony. Apart from religious factors, there could be other reasons too for rejection of any specific food item. Disgust and the notions surrounding pure and impure also contribute significantly towards this.

Furthermore, Ferro-Luizi writes:

“The boundary between a disgust reaction towards a potential food item and its refusal due to impurity is difficult to draw. Often the two coincide, as practically all foods considered to be impure by a certain community would also fill it with disgust; but not all disgusting things need to be held defiling for ritual purposes in a given group. Disgust maybe a personal reaction, but more often, especially in traditional societies, it is culturally determined.”

(398)

Aamis by Hazarika plunges headfirst into the world of such “disgust” and “impurity” (Ferro-Luizi 398). In fact, all boundaries get blurred; contaminating palatable with anomalies and diluting a pure kind of reality with a twisted and morbid fantasy. The opening of the movie itself sets its tone- leaving no room for doubt regarding its intention.

An anxious looking Suman (Arghadeep Baruah) seeks help from Dr.Nirmali (Lima Das) to restore the health of his vegetarian friend who suffers from over consumption of meat. Dr. Nirmali (Das) is a child specialist who is implored by an agitated Suman (Baruah) to treat his 27 year old friend who couldn't control his greed while trying meat for the first time in his life. Reluctantly, she agrees and this is a first for her in a series of

many that comprises the plot of the movie. This excess of greed in Suman's friend leads to disgusting consequences- the likes of constant puking- but also paves the way for the fulfillment of Nirmali's *repressed desires*. The concept of *repressed desires* is closely related to the idea of *unconscious* as designed by Freud. The "*unconscious* is the storehouse of those painful experiences and emotions, those wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts we do not want to know about because we feel overwhelmed by them" (Tyson 12). And this *unconscious* "comes into being through regression" (Tyson 12).

This regression, in turn, is achieved through an "internal censorship" of all those desires which can never be communicated through gestures and deeds for fulfillment (Westernik 57). Those desires involve the illicit affair one of Nirmali's married friends indulges in and is criticized for all the same. Nirmali condones her friend's deeds for she understands very well how she is a part of such a society that idolizes monogamy and condemns adultery. And, in doing so, she sets the boundaries for herself as well; a boundary that must not be crossed in the absence of her husband who stays away mostly for work related purposes.

Because she cannot directly fulfill her long suppressed desires unlike her adulteress of a friend, she chooses an indirect alternative course to do the same. And together they (both Suman and Nirmali) embark upon a journey of enthralling insanity that is captured brilliantly through their shared love for meat- all kinds of it. Nirmali is lured in by the aroma of novelty that Suman embodies. Everything that he prepares has a freshness to it that she feels missing in her life. It is emphasized upon adequately by Suman insisting how the meat that he and his friends prepare in his meat club is nothing like the frozen, adulterated one sold in markets and cooked in restaurants.

In one particular scene where both of them are riding inside a car, Suman talks of all bizarre kinds of food- the likes of insect juices. Nirmali is not disgusted by it. As a matter of fact, she looks intrigued. This scene is pivotal in unraveling the mental health of the protagonist who suffers from boredom- a kind of boredom that seeps in unsuspected and very much holds the potential of damaging otherwise seemingly perfect marriages. Here Suman transforms into one of those enticing goblins who try to sell luscious and juicy fruits to a naive Laura in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin's Market". Nirmali, too, is unsuspecting like Laura and unaware of the misery that awaits her given she chooses to enter the eerie and forbidden world of Suman.

Suman's description of the ways many tribal people consume the juices of *gandhi puk* (a kind of stink bug) commonly found in Assam possesses "all the insatiable qualities of hunger and thirst" making Nirmali ache and pine in a fashion similar to Laura (Werner 19). And it is this uncontrollable ache that will eventually lead to her downfall. But unlike Laura there is no redemption for Nirmali for there it is a man who is entrusted with the responsibility of fixing her unusual appetite and not some devoted and pious sister who can bring her back to her senses.

Gandhi puk is the beginning of many derivations and absurdities that form the sole ingredients of the journey that Suman and Nirmali embark on. The juices plant the seed of an insatiable kind of hunger in the mind of Nirmali. Like Laura “she is unsatisfied by her experience” (Werner 19). And the onus of salvaging the situation falls on Suman; something towards which he wholeheartedly dedicates his dishes and recipes. However, Suman’s choices of food- to silent the gnawing hunger inside Nirmali-keeps on getting weirder and weirder. From simple chicken he pushes to bats and eventually moves on to his own flesh in an attempt to be one with his beloved. He does so for any other kind of intimacy between a married woman and any other man who is not her husband doesn't "fit into the scheme of things" and, hence, strictly forbidden in any cultured society (Borgohain 141) . It is worth mentioning here how the categorization of women into two definite and limiting categories has been a practice since immemorial and hasn't changed much since time immemorial. Regarding this Borgohain writes:

"Those who could, found a husband for themselves and things "evened" out for them. The ones left stranded in the outer darkness- various restricted zones and social margins- were the odd women, unattached to any supporting male."

(142)

The idea illustrated by Borgohain was a befitting commentary on the Victorian era and holds relevance even in the contemporary social set-up. Marriage as an institution has still lost its power over an individual's life. A set of characteristic traits need to be fulfilled by a woman before she is deemed eligible for marriage. And a certain code of behavior is to be followed after marriage. Nirmali cannot violate those norms by allowing herself the passionate touch of Suman. Hence to escape trespassing one forbidden territory, they enter another as “cannibalism is regarded with horror in India, an animal’s presumed similarity to human beings is a valid reason for abstaining from it” (Ferro-Luizi 389).

This very act of feeding Nirmali his flesh, Suman communicates that carnal desire which knows no boundary set by society and all its enforcing institutions. In the absence of any physical kind of contact Suman finds this alternative way to enter the body of the woman who has consumed all his thoughts and now overpowers his mind. In one of the scenes where Nirmali tries to feed Suman his own flesh he pukes in disgust reminding her how she is "waiting ovum, which lacks identity till it receives the male's impress" (Selden et al. 113). Suman firmly reminds Nirmali it is always the woman who is to be penetrated and can never be the other way round.

Hazarika's fascination towards an unusual kind of appetite prevalent in women is further explored in yet another masterpiece "Kothanadi". "Kothnadi" means a river of fables and is an anthology of four overlapping stories keeping mothers at the center. It involves a pair of horrifying mothers (one biological and another foster) on the one hand and a pair of helpless mothers (both dealing with problematic children) on the other. What adds to the eeriness of the movie is that during several sequences of the movie, daughters are either forced to consume questionable foods or be consumed by blood-curling creatures by their respective mothers-both biological as well as foster-to highlight this unusual appetite which Hazarika shows an unmistakable inclination towards. (insert *mirror* concept here)

It is usually during pregnancy that women exhibit sudden, unprompted cravings for certain kinds of food item. It could be a sudden urge to have something extremely sour or something pleasantly sweet. At times, the cravings might go beyond edible items as well and involve objects such as plaster, paint chips, etc. This is a medical condition called *Pica*. *Pica* is born out of the psychological changes that accommodates the rapidly changing body of a woman during pregnancy. Needless to say during pregnancy "psychological changes and dramatic changes in physiology, appearance and body and body, and all social status are all occurring simultaneously" (Leifer 754).

During pregnancy, the most tangible and easily identifiable change is the swollen, massive belly of the mother. The belly stands out as a reminder that she (the mother) is a double entity now as there's a life growing inside her every day. The belly communicates an idea of "connected assemblage"- of an irreversible multiplicity (McSharry 52). Alongside such physiological changes, cultural implications associated with pregnancy severely affect the minds of pregnant women. Every step of the way, they're reminded of the life that is taking shape inside them every day. They're reminded of the do's and don'ts frequently. In short, life becomes full of impositions and restrictions. Also, something (the bond between the baby and the mother) that was supposed to be very intimate and strictly personal becomes a social concern with everybody butting in their thoughts and experiences and, that too mostly, without any kind of prompt on the end of the mother.

Pica could very much be interpreted as a retaliative response to such overwhelming vigilance and control. In fact, the very act of consuming such non-edible items might very well be considered an "open, violent, sometimes non-violent, well conceived and organized form of protest which only occur occasionally" reiterating Derrida's interconnected notions on power and resistance (Rao 205).

In *Kothanadi* both the characters of Senehi (Zeriha Wahid) and Dhoneshwari (Seema Biswas) are heavily impregnated with an excess of desire- desire for love, attention, greed and ambition.

Senehi (Wahid) feels stuck in a loveless marriage where her husband Devinath (Adil Hussain) puts all his focus on his motherless daughter Tejimola (Kasvi Sharma). She feels like her step daughter is feeding generously on all the love and attention her husband has to offer; leaving her starving. Her mind is plagued by all sorts of negative thoughts pushing her further and further into the clasp of insanity. This horror experienced by her can be better explained by the concept of *mirror stage* as proposed and outlined by Jacques Lacan. According to Lacan, "the mirror stage occurs prior to the child's actual acquisition of a sense of self, a sense of itself as subject in distinction from objects in the world: the child experiences, as projected in its mirror image, itself and its surrounding as an integrated unity. (Cuddon 438). The various tortures Senehi inflict upon Tejimola is to untangle her "sense of self" from this newfound and unwanted role of motherhood that her marriage has forced upon herself (Cuddon 438). It is to constantly remind herself that she cannot become a mother-figure to the child that is not hers for, in doing so, she would have to repress all her desires and embrace the absolute feminine- the sexually comatosed mother.

She imagines a male figure to make up for the love and attention that her husband fails to extend to her as a *counter-memory* to "displace the dominant collective memory" of marrying both a man as well as his wild (she refers to Tejimola as *bonoriya* which is an Assamese equivalent for wild) child (Cuddon 161). In a visually disturbing scene, she forces Tejimola to feed on worms. Despite being unsettling this scene is richly infused with symbolic meaning. This scene marks the physical manifestation of the kind of *abjection* she goes through. Kristeva defines *abjection* as an attempt of the infant to distinguish the "I" and the other by abjecting" by "violently throwing out and jettisoning" (Cuddon 2). There is a specific kind of worm-called leech- that sucks on the blood of humans. Senehi (the infant bride/mother) throws out such worms that is symbolic of the relationship that she shares with her step-daughter Tejimola so that the latter can consume the bitterness she has stirred in their marriage. Those worms become a substitute milk- the only kind befitting a wicked child.

The trio exhibit a displaced sort of *Electra complex* where the step-mother contests with the tragic daughter (devoid of her biological mother's love and affection) to win her husband's affection. This contest culminates in a horrifying death of Tejimola at the hands of an emotionally and psychologically imbalanced Senehi in the absence of an authoritative male figure reiterating the age-old sexist (proposed by the likes of Freud) notions about how women are too beastly and need to be tamed down by their male counterparts- to be civilized.

Dhaneswari's story also involves such intense competition with another woman. In her story, she is seen to be constantly competing against the first wife of her husband. It is not heard of women to feel threatened in the presence of each other. Popular media has barely left any choice to cash in on the drama that can be

created by pitting two insecure women railing against each other to win the affections of one man. The cult of *souten* never grows out of fashion with a little alteration to suit a modern taste.

In societies, where men are given a free license of sorts to take in a new wife in the presence of their existing wives, the old wives feel “distinctly threatened” about her position in the family (Wilson 370). The taking of a new wife is communicated in terms of a kind of inadequacy on the part of the old wife. Sometimes, people are told tales of how “a married woman whose husband is about to take a new wife may succumb to possession by spirits” (Wilson 370). But, it is rather Dhaneswari (the new wife) who gets “possessed by spirits”- deadly spirits of greed, avarice and delusion (Wilson 370). She is possessed by an overwhelming need to outdo her *souten* (the old wife of her husband) whose daughter gets married to a deadly looking snake who later magically transforms into a charming prince more than capable of making the rest of her life luxurious and extravagant. Dhaneswari exudes tendencies of *intervention*- “a term associated with Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak that refers to the political act or strategy of entering into” (Wolfreys et al. 48). She cannot allow her arch rival to enjoy something- in this case a fairy-tale-come-alive for her daughter- for that would communicate her inadequacies as a mother as well as a wife. to re-establish her status as the ultimate superior she has to intervene and make amends.

In her frenzied state, she captures an equally terrifying looking snake with the help of a group of hired muscles and weds her innocent daughter to the same. She sleeps outside the room where her daughter is supposed to consummate her marriage with a snake to make sure the daughter cannot escape. Her daughter tries to alert her many times about the many disturbing things unfolding inside that room where she is locked with the horrifying creature. But all that goes in vain for Dhaneswari has already made up her mind as to how the snake would magically transform into a wealthy prince showering her daughter in all sorts of riches and jewels. To the onlooker, the scene is grotesque and unpalatable. One is left wondering how can a mother push her own daughter towards the chasm of death from where there is no return but to Dhaneswari this is nothing but pure *jouissance*- a term “associated with sensuousness or sexual gratification” (Wolfreys et al. 48). She has attained the pinnacle of ecstasy as nothing shall get in the way of the consumption of marriage between her daughter and what she believes to be a pseudo snake. She has stationed herself as a watch guard outside their room for the same.

She is blinded by her ambition of outdoing her rival to that extent where she doesn’t shy away from even using her own daughter as a sacrifice to please the gods- as snakes are used as religious totems in India. This concept of offering specific kinds of sacrifices to please gods is very common in a lot of tribes and communities. Outside religion, influence of such practices can be seen in the barter system as well where people exchange something they need in return of something they already have. In this regard, the mission associated with the colonization of almost the entire world by the British is worth mentioning:

"this stigma, and desirous of rescuing the age from a charge of ignorance... strongly impressed with a conviction of the practicability and utility of thus enlarging the fund of human knowledge, have formed the plan of an Association for Promoting the discovery of the interior parts of Africa."

(Pratt 69)

Given the burden of the task, the British might've felt entitled to the varied resources of all those territories under its dominion. Similarly, Dhanewari feels an entitlement towards the life of her own daughter as a barter to all that she has done for the same. Dhaneswari is guided by the aim of lifting the veil of "ignorance" and "enlarging the fund of human knowledge" as to how fairy tales might come true for all those who exhibit courage and defy norms. And also how there is no such thing that is exclusive only to the first wife of her husband (her rival).

From the above discussion one can clearly see how food is used by Bhaskar Hazarika in his movies to communicate ideas that might seem bizarre at first glance yet are deeply entwined with the human psychology that is as complex as the appetite of the women featuring in these movies. In the capable hands of the director, food becomes a medium of communication of a wide variety of emotions ranging from displeasure to animosity, and from unexplored desires to overwhelming ambition.

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