

Deepa Mehta's *Cooking with Stella*: A Cinematic Intersection of Delicacies, Dreams, and Diplomacy

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Abstract

Deepa Mehta is a critically acclaimed Indo-Canadian filmmaker. The choices of stories adapted by her are often eccentric, yet phenomenally portrayed. Her magnum opus, *Elemental Trilogy: Fire, Earth, and Water*, are often the centre of discussions, rendering her other works underappreciated. *Cooking with Stella* falls into the latter category. The simple story of a cook named Stella who practices regular thievery in the house brings out the emotional and social interdependence of humans. The food emerges as much more than a mere culinary product in the story, thereby creating a culinary space and textualizing the act of cooking. The article aims to revisit *Cooking with Stella* and comprehend the film by situating food at its core. This article will engage with food, not just in the form of a meal or a delicacy, but to understand its potential to interfere with the social structures and reveal internal human complexities. It also seeks to foreground and discuss several cultural motifs that are carefully placed throughout the movie. By employing culinary-cinema topology methodology, the article will analyse how Mehta's writing and direction illustrate the subtle integration of food into the politics of gender and class and communities.

Keywords: Cooking; Diplomacy; Human relationships; Dreams; Identity

Introduction

...not only does cooking mark the transition from nature to culture, but through it and by means of it, the human state can be defined with all its attributes, even those that, like mortality, might seem to be the most unquestionably natural. (Strauss 164)

Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' categorises food as part of the physiological needs of humans to survive at the most basic level. Food provides us nutrients

and energy, but it is also a marker of hunger, memory, nature, culture, community, history, heritage, and one's identity. Food holds a special place in every culture and functions differently according to the social needs. The historical and cultural relevance of food in Indian subcontinent dates back to the Vedas. Indian food history is diverse due to the constant cross-cultural influx of invaders and traders, thus, adding to the richness of an Indian *thaali*. Along with the culture, the nature of food holds great significance in defining a person's identity, ideologies and nature. Where Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's phrase, "Tell me what a man eats and I'll tell you the kind of man he is" (ix) is prominently alluded to in academia in the West, on the other hand, Indian scriptures such as *Bhagvad Gita* evince the association of different foods as markers of distinct faith and character since ancient times. (Bhagvad Gita Chapter 17) Pushpesh Pant, a renowned food historian, further expounds this diverse nature of food in his book *Cuisines*.

The basic tenets of Indian thought are reflected in India's culinary philosophy — the concept of *satvik*, *rajasik* and *tamasik* foods which is matched with three different personality types in the famous spiritual text, *ShrimadBhagwatGita*. These three terms roughly correspond to spiritual, active and inert materials respectively. (Pant 11)

Hence, this borrowed concept of food from *Bhagvad Gita*, when understood from the perspectives of psychology, attributes food as a carrier of energies and vibrations. Food is an integral part of many traditions and rituals, particularly in major South Asian cultures, where it is offered to elders, priests, gods, and ancestors. It is offered to God as *bhog*, as it is called in Hindu households, as a gesture of gratefulness for the food and life. The kitchen, then, becomes a sacred space, not accessible to all but only to family members and the cook, called *maharaj* in most traditional *Hindu* households.

The conventional role of a cook is not only to provide food but also take the responsibility for feeding the family good, nourishing, soulful food. The intention with which the food is prepared is also considered a major factor while deciding the energy of the food we consume. David Livert in his book *A Psychology of Food, Cooks, and Cooking* also attests to this as he says,

The domestic cook is in charge of the menu and assumes the burden to satisfy the flavor, diet, and other likes and dislikes of household eaters (Rawlins & Livert, 2019). The world of the domestic cook is part of the invisible labor of the household. The labor of planning, coordinating, juggling, and strategizing how to feed a family, in addition to physical labor of pushing a cart down an aisle or fixing a salad or grilling a burger, may often not be acknowledged by others in the household or considered equivalent to work for pay (DeVault, 1991). (Livert 18)

While cooking can be a solo act performed by the cook who is in charge of the food, the act of commensality brings people together. It is not only about sitting together and sharing food, but also about sharing experiences that create memories and foster bonding at both social and personal levels. Susan Fiske, in her work *Social Beings: A Core Motives Approach to Social Psychology*, underscores the need for belonging and affiliation, which are also achieved through the practice of commensality. As social beings, humans necessitate the cooperation and inclusivity that is harboured when people come together. Eating together nurtures compassion and warmth between individuals.

The society, however, is not untainted and corruption, somehow, in some form or another, creeps into houses and takes root in such spaces. This loophole leads us to question the trust, moral values, ethics, and purity of the relationships that are fostered in homes between the family and its supposed members. Interesting circumstances surface when the literal and metaphorical connotations of ‘consumptions’ become interchangeably mobile. What becomes even more fascinating are the uncharacteristic changes that people undergo in order to protect their loved ones, where moral compromises are made without even realisation. Food may not be the primary focus in most scenarios, but in the end, it’s always about the food.

Analytical Framework

The intersection of food, literature, and cinema, as a multidisciplinary subject, has garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years, and it continues to evolve and merge into the mainstream canon. The relevant scholarship reshapes narratives and shifts perspectives, focusing on culture, language, and

communities through the lens of food-centric methodologies.

Steve Zimmerman, with his book *Food in Film*, published in two editions (2005 and 2009), stands as one of the pioneers discussing food scholarship in movies. By surveying and analysing over 900 films in the two respective editions of his book, Zimmerman foregrounds the food in films and discusses how it functions as more than a mere prop. The books explore the narrative power of food as they dissect the select films. Zimmerman's acute focus on colours and textures of food visuals, in a way, lays the foundation to centralise food in many food-centric and non-food-centric films, which ultimately affects the cinematic presence of food in films. This presence stimulates the underlying emotions of the people and thus encapsulates human nature. Zimmerman attests to the artistic qualities of food, thus highlighting its constituency in the mise-en-scène.

That food of all kinds eventually found a prominent place for itself in films should not be all that surprising, considering that cooking and filmmaking share many of the same aspirations and techniques. In both ventures the 'artiste' works with color, texture, style, and tastes — with a dash of intrigue thrown in to create an experience that is more than just eating or just watching a movie. (Zimmerman 20)

Bloom's understanding of cinema resonates with what Zimmerman said in his comparison of cinema and food. In his paper, "Maternal Food Memories in Lin Cheng-Sheng's *27°C: Loaf Rock* and Eric Khoo's *Recipe: A Film on Dementia*," he states, "Analogous to culinary arts, cinema, which is made for consumption, combines art and science, embodies culture, and incorporates tradition and innovation, as I show in this comparative study" (Michelle E. Bloom 26) Employing the interdisciplinary approach, Jane F. Ferry combines films, semiotics, anthropology, and history in her research book, *Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication*. Ferry postulates the communicative powers of food that extend the boundaries of the kitchen and hold the potential to communicate and influence people beyond the ambit of the kitchen. The research has studied food and dining in combination, in relevance to the films portraying American landscapes. *Gastro-modernism: Food, Literature, Culture*, edited by Derek Gladwin, examines the literal,

physical, and metaphorical spaces created and observed in the modern literature from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century.

In her collection of essays, *Cuisine and Symbolic Capital: Food in Film and Literature*, Cheleen Ann-Catherine Mahar encompasses the diverse metaphorical facets of food. Ten chapters divided into three categories based on cross-cultural writings locate food at the centre of social relationships. The struggles of identity formation and the intersection of cultural constructs such as class, gender, and nationality mediate the vitality of the role that food plays in defining the broader socio-spatial ideologies. This cognition of cultural and structural powers from a reversible ‘prism of food cultures’ is taken forward by Simi Malhotra, Kanika Sharma, and Sakshi Dogra in their work *Food Culture Studies in India: Consumption, Representation and Mediation*. The book thoroughly augments the scholarship on food studies as it constantly engages with identity, politics, cultural significance, power dynamics, and moral, ethical and geographical boundaries signifying food as a socio-economic stimulator. David Livert in his book *A Psychology of Food, Cooks, and Cooking*, brings the cook to the centre of the discussion, one who makes food and feeds people. Livert’s psychoanalysis of people producing and consuming food not only suggests their food preferences but also sheds light on their identity, their routines, their ideologies and character traits, which primarily guides this research in the analysis of Stella, the protagonist. Claude Fischler’s persuasive paper “Commensality, Society and Culture” engages with the exchange of meals, thoughts, and ideologies, which further foster the intimacy, trust, and inter-dependency among the people who sit together to eat. It constantly reshapes the relationship between the cook and the diners and helps in social bonding.

The wide scholarship on food studies across communities and landscapes has proven to be a guiding discourse, paving literary pathways to explore the genre further. However, while a greater body of works focuses on American, English, and French food literature across genres, a significant gap can be identified when it comes to South Asian interdisciplinary studies, in particular with regard to food studies. In the celebration of Western food-centric cinema, the literature surrounding oriental gastronomic gems remains oblivious to the world. While India’s ‘Butter Chicken’ and ‘Biryani’ rank as one of the top

foods across the globe consecutively, the dynamics that Indians share with their cooks and the regard for their food practices still may seem beyond rational comprehension to non-Indians. This article highlights the importance of studying films like *Cooking with Stella* by examining it from a character-centric perspective rather than a plot-centric one. By situating food at the intersection of visual and metaphorical standpoints of cinema and literature, social and personal identity, class, community, politics and human relationships can be understood from fresh perspectives.

Deepa Mehta, the renowned Indo-Canadian director and screenwriter, encapsulates human relationships and portrays them so immaculately in her films that each scene and every dialogue becomes a subject of study. Her characters are often layered epitomes of social characters. The choice of strong female protagonists is evident in each of her films, with a marvellous trajectory from a place of pity to a position of power and agency. From Radha, Sita, Shanta, Kalyani, Chuiya, to Stella, her often controversial characters transcend their existing status quo on different levels. Although her initial works, including the trilogy, have been sincerely and rightfully appreciated by the critics, cinephiles, and Mehta's fans, for foregrounding the social issues that were way ahead of their time and her remarkable narrative skills, it seems the right time to move forward and acknowledge the existence of her other works.

Cooking With Stella (2009), directed by Dilip Mehta and co-written by Deepa Mehta, is a visual treat for cinephiles. An eccentric piece of art—the movie is an impeccable amalgamation of dreams, diplomacy, and delicacies. Diplomacy is ubiquitous throughout the film. The film starts with a list of groceries curated by Stella and thus suggests the magnitude of the role food plays in shaping the lives of the characters. Dialogues delivered by the 'diplomat' cook, Stella, are replete with food innuendos. The simple grammatical error by one of the characters in the film, by addressing Stella as diplomat cook instead of a diplomat's cook, proves to be an ironic prolepsis intentionally deployed by Mehta. At the very beginning of the film, eponymous Stella foreshadows her ingenious schemes while speaking over a phone call: "ek murga jaa raha hai to dusra aa bhi raha hai" (*Cooking with Stella* 00:01:12-00:01:14) which simply translates to "although one fool (diplomat) is leaving, another is coming too."

Diplomacy steps into the house with the arrival of Canadian Embassy Diplomat, Maya Chopra, ‘diplomat’ husband, Michael, and their infant, Zara. Stella takes them through the house, primarily focused on introducing Maya to her assumed place in the house as she says, “This is your kitchen, Madam” (Cooking with Stella 00:05:02-00:05:04). Stella’s hesitant reaction to the revelation of the truth about Michael being the house-husband portrays her as a stereotypical product of patriarchy. Floyd, in his influential paper “Coming out of the Kitchen: Texts, Contexts and Debates,” stresses this centuries-old assignment of traditional roles of women. “The kitchen has been very decisively argued to be marked out as a zone of feminine subjection, where women must manage a ceaseless routine of work to the satisfaction of people further up the domestic, social and political hierarchy.” (Floyd 62)

Maya Chopra, a confident young diplomat, is mostly occupied with her office work guilt-free. Her engrossment in her work is reflected in one of the scenes where Michael and Maya are sitting at a table, but both seem on a different page altogether. While Michael cannot help but stop discussing his culinary experiments with Stella, Maya speaks the language of bureaucracy, sharing her office experiences. Maya, with her little presence on the screen, leaves a strong impact on the audience as a career-driven, goal-oriented woman with dreams and passion. Dreams emerge as one of the prominent themes of the movie. Michael and Stella, too, have dreams which they dedicatedly chase after. Michael dreams to learn authentic South Indian food, and to achieve this dream, he requests Stella to be his *guru*. Stella, on the other hand, dreams of her own house in Kerala which is revealed at the end of the film.

Mehta has portrayed the character of Stella through a kaleidoscopic lens. From being a caretaker to a cook, from a teacher to a treachery plotter, from a devotee to a diplomat; she can evidently be declared a juggler. The intentional use of the term juggler to multitasker is used in consideration of her risk-taking abilities, which aid her in making extra income beyond her salary. Stella performs the role of a domestic cook, literally and representationally, immaculately. Elaborating on the construction of social and personal identity, Wolfson and Garcia share how personal identities are shaped through our experiences as cooks in one of their papers. A similar idea promulgated by Livert in his work articulates how “A cook’s innovative experiences in the

kitchen might strengthen her identification as a creative person or a risk taker.” (Livert 67) Stella’s dynamic character as a convincingly passionate cook and responsible caretaker, as well as a sly swiper and diligent planner of the kidnapping and systematic thievery in the house, along with other workers in the house, justifies her risk-taking abilities as per Livert’s statements. Thus, she can be labelled as a smooth liar and a deft thief.

David Livert points out, “From the late nineteenth century, an important strand within feminist theory and activism favoured a kitchenless house; the kitchen was perceived to be the seat of women’s oppression” (Livert 61-62). Mehta, in her movie, however, reverses the patriarchy where Stella thrives in her kitchen. She plans and strategizes not only menus for lunch and dinner, but also excels at pilfering imported wines and groceries. Most of Stella’s business operates from the kitchen and the pantry. It is Stella’s territory, and she has her own golden rules which everyone who enters her domain must abide by. It is evident in the scene where she prohibits Michael from entering the kitchen with shoes on, “Sorry, Sir, no shoes in my kitchen.” (*Cooking with Stella* 00:10:54-00:10:57)

Stella’s kitchen then performs as a contact zone¹, a space where Stella and Michael meet, not as employer and the employed but rather as a guru and chela. It becomes pious as a classroom that is unconventional on many levels. Stella’s kitchen functions not only as a designated space provided for cooking, but the kitchen becomes the microcosm of the house that reflects the authorial shifts taking place. Dilip Mehta’s observant direction helps the viewers to experience the kitchen as a space that is well encapsulated by Tasha Choma-Sampson and Tosha Sampson-Choma in their paper titled “Come, Dine at my Table: The Enactment of Safe Spaces in the Cookbooks of Maya Angelou,” “The kitchen bears a multiplicity of functions. In addition to a space for creating art, it serves as a location for feeding, as well as a site for the impartation of survival skills and instruction in the ways of life.” (Sampson and Choma 109) Stella emerges as a confident teacher in a domain where she could have been an invisible helper in the house. This promotion from a cook to a teacher is a result of strategised cognitive behaviour. Mehta employs the concept of commensality in her movie, where Michael and Stella are seen sharing a table for the first time. The performance of eating together showcases the building

trust, mutual understanding and respect, and a budding companionship that Michael and Stella form in the absence of Maya. She gains his trust as a cook and as a kind-hearted guru who is teaching him cookery without any fees. When offered 2.5 dollars per session by Michael, Stella denies it, saying, “money corrupting everything.” (00:16:54-00:16:56) This incident foreshadows Stella’s greed, which corrupts her conscience so much that she readily conspires to kidnap herself and go to jail as well.

Stella cooks, prays, and steals without any remorse. It is ironic how she abides by rules and principles, yet she profits from whatever and every opportunity she gets. She is traditional in her approach and believes in the social hierarchy. Throughout the film, Stella diplomatically throws phrases which she calls golden rules of servants: “serve first, eat last” (00:11:22-00:11:25), “never hire new servants. They are very dangerous. Middle of the night they enter and . . .,” (00:33:24-00:33:30) “never call master by name.” (00:48:13-00:48:15) Mehta creates juxtaposing imageries in particular frames of the film alluding to the persistent paradoxical character of Stella. In one of the scenes, Stella can be seen in the middle of the confession at Church when she receives a call regarding the next pilfering order comprising “Aunty Jemima Syrup (1), Spaghetti sauce (3), Canadian Beer (12).”

Food and hunger have been dealt with figuratively in the film in various contexts. Michael, at one instance, while speaking to Maya, compares Stella’s inadequate diet to theirs, intending to warn of the impending dangers of hunger, as he says, “With hunger comes anger and resentment.” (00:17:06-00:17:08) It is conspicuous that Michael is projecting his own unfulfilled hunger to be a chef again. On the contrary, Stella seems quite content as her hunger is temporarily satiated through minor thievery. Every space related to food becomes ground for Stella’s profit-making. Be it the kitchen, pantry, grocery markets, or supermarkets. She steals not spontaneously but strategically. As a member of the lower social strata, Stella believes it is her right to steal; her way to resist class barriers. Referring to the pantry, she declares to Tannu, the nanny, “ye sab hamara hai, vaise to inka hai, lekin mai kehti hu hamara bhi hai” (00:41:33-00:41:40) which translates to “This is all ours, although it is theirs, but I say it is ours too.” She further compares herself to Robinhood and assumes the responsibility to take from the rich and distribute it among the poor. Even

at the end of the movie, she is compared to Martin Luther King. When we see Stella's networking—from the laundryman to the florist to Tannu, all involved in thievery, from Marxist lens, a sense of empathy is evoked for such “class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work,” (Marx and Engels 227) From her perspective, she diplomatically conspires and schemes to achieve her dreams and secure her future. She is eventually jailed. The judge's statement towards the end of the movie sums up the intention of the story: “It is true that in the judiciary there is no penalty for dreaming, but for kidnapping there certainly is.” (01:31:06-01:31:14) However, Stella had to pay a penalty for her dream, her three years of life, to finally get her own home in Kerala.

Conclusion

Cooking with Stella by Dilip Mehta and Deepa Mehta is a common tale told in an uncommon way. Stella, despite being a mere servant at Canadian Embassy House, comes across as a strong character with her own ideologies, confidence and risk-taking faculties. Stella's performative presence in the diplomat's house as a cook, caretaker, and teacher facilitates her thievery effortlessly while maintaining her image of a good Christian in front of Maya and Michael. The efficient persuasion through good food becomes Stella's chief tactic. Food serves as the central motif in the movie. While the rich recipes add colours to the frames in the film, cultural representation through food is also conveyed to the audience by adding the affective elements of steaming lentils, the process of frying garlic and spices for flavour (*Chhauk* in North India), and Stella's individual style of marinating the fish. The centralisation of food becomes the intersecting point, upholding the lives of most of the characters in the film, directly and indirectly. Since Stella is the cook, she dominantly controls the kitchen and the house, thus marking the authorial shift. This research article has successfully analysed the movie *Cooking with Stella* from a feminist as well as a capitalist approach, where Stella emerges as a real diplomat, bargaining, and negotiating at every opportunity. From small commissions profited through flower bouquets, laundry, and groceries, to stealing silver knives, cufflinks, earrings, to kidnapping her own self, Stella proves to be a diplomatic servant who serves delicacies by day and steals at night to fulfil her dreams.

Notes

1. Contact Zone Theory is given by Mary Louise Pratt in her article “Art of Contact Zone Theory” in which she establishes a cultural space in discourses where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.” (Pratt 34)

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