

## FILM REVIEW

### An Analysis of Food Narrative in the Indian Film *Lunchbox*

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#### Abstract

In the review of the Indian film *The Lunchbox*, Peina Zhuang shows that although food is central in human relations and social development in modern India, the transformation of food production and distribution systems at the micro level reveals, resists, and reinforces the conflicts between tradition and modernity. The food in the traditional Bombay lunch remain because of the lunchbox delivery system, but this comes at a cost. While in the very moment that it threatens traditions by, for instance, effacing the caste sources of the food, the lunchbox delivery system reifies the patriarchal relegation of women to the kitchen. Complicated in its implications, *The Lunchbox* is an entertaining take on India's rapidly transforming food scene.

#### Keywords

food; gender; *Lunchbox*; modernity; tradition

#### About the Author

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A love story of sorts where food intended for a husband is wrongly delivered to a stranger, *The Lunchbox* highlights the rush and swirl of traditions as they fly against each other—traditions within a history of colonization, where modernity vies for ascendancy. At stake are both entire sets of social relationships and human health, physical and mental. By juxtaposing food, human relations, and social development in the sophisticated dual-context of tradition and modernity, food in *The Lunchbox* is a site of modernity in which we see forceful resistances as well as progressive social change. Food transformations from intimate comestible to the fare of strangers in this famous Indian film reveal the centrality of food in human relations and social development.

The juxtaposition of tradition and modernity is apparent from the outset of the film. It takes place where Saajan, a company clerk who is about to retire from his job as an accountant, daily receives a lunchbox not intended for him. A housewife named Ila prepares the lunchbox every day, and the two characters become connected. They begin exchanging notes in the lunchbox and gradually find themselves falling into some kind of “Platonic love.” Saajan’s wife has died, and he is very much alone, with no one to cook lunch for him and no one to eat with him after work. The lunch delivery system solves his lunch problem but, delivered wrongly to him, the lunchbox also reveals the social rifts in India that transformations in food production and delivery can create, rifts in part already nascent in the replacement of long established traditions with the new requirements of modernity.

The lunch delivery system is a radical transformation of Indian food practices, a transformation geared towards meeting the needs of the new, fast-paced India. We see tradition and modernity at odds with each other here, and what is at stake are not merely food traditions but also social and family relations. In a system where one could lose his/her purity if he/she marries into a different caste, receiving food from someone from another caste can make one’s food dirty. The underlying cultural significance of the lunchbox lies in its capacity to reflect both the perseverance of culinary traditions in the wash of the tides of development in modern Indian society and its paradoxical challenging of such traditions.

The food that people eat during working days as well as their attitude toward it are radically transforming in India. Commuters swarm into the heavily crowded trains for work, and having lunch at home, for most of them, is simply out of the question. Some of them choose to dine at low priced, crowded restaurants that have to be booked ahead of time, but for many, the lunch delivery service is a profound convenience. The fast pace and fast food of modern life, however, do not always transform people’s lives for the better; often, this transformation is for the worse.

Lunch for most people in the film is far from the traditional variety and balance of a full meal and often consists of only two bananas. At least the lunch delivery service preserves the tradition of a proper, healthy lunch; even so, the film graphically depicts how meals, once a site of complicated social relations, have become a solitary affair: “Though seemingly a film on food, it is actually about the solitary lives and sadness of modern people” (Li 1). Also, the effect of people eating bananas for lunch creates the need for supplements that substitute for “real food,” a practice that has its own problems. As food theorist Michael Pollan has noted, “[t]he problem with nutrient-by-nutrient nutrition science is that it takes the nutrient out of the context of the food, the food out of the context of the diet, and the diet out of the context of the lifestyle” (*In Defense of Food*, 62).

Indeed, the lunchbox system shows that the fast food model threatens the social relations, the menu, and the basic nutrition of the traditional Bombay lunch. It is equally clear, however, that food traditions still occupy an important part in people’s lives, as demonstrated by the enormous number of lunchboxes delivered every day. As hinted above, one of the problems this creates has to do with caste: “under the caste tradition of India, people would not have lunch cooked by strangers, but only by his mother or wife. Food for lunch means love, family and tradition” (Li 2). Saajan and Ila, despite their differences in educational background, social status, and family, are connected to each other through the lunchbox. As food production and distribution practices transform, so does the ability of the characters in the film to exert their power over each other in keeping hierarchies in place.

Although much is lost through the transformation of food production and distribution technologies in India, gender inequities remain and are even strengthened, perhaps confirming the notion that “especially family and gender identity—stay in our tradition largely uninfluenced by Radicalizing Enlightenment” (Giddens 73). Moreover, Ila, like the lunchbox itself, is the private property of her husband. There is an inextricable relation between food and women in patriarchies that this film simply does not challenge. Clearly, technological development has not totally emancipated women from the kitchen.

There is certainly much about food in India that *The Lunchbox* does not deal with, macro problems that have to do with Monsanto, food justice, and environmental justice. Indeed, the main conversation about food transformations in India these days involves genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and GM foods. Simon C. Estok has shown, for instance, how in India “the violence and barbarity of transnational corporations such as Monsanto . . . [puts] lives and livelihoods are at stake, how the new corporate imperialism swallows up traditions and histories, and how dangerous food has become” (231). In *Stolen Harvest*, Vandana Shiva explains that “corporate control of food and globalization of agriculture are robbing millions

of their livelihoods and their right to food” (7). Margaret Mead has noted that “[i]f food is grown in strict relationship to the needs of those who will eat it, if every effort is made to reduce the costs of transportation, to improve storage, to conserve the land, and there, where it is needed, by recycling wastes and water, we will go a long way toward solving many of our environmental problems also” (175). This is certainly not what is currently happening in the world, and it is the Global South that is suffering. Tropical fruits are all over the non-tropical supermarkets, and we witness massive deforestation projects to plant bananas, palm (for palm oil), pineapple, and so on. Communities are being destroyed. Dietician Frances Moore Lappe asks important questions about relations between food and community: “How do we build communities in tune with nature’s wisdom, in which no one, anywhere, has to worry about putting food—safe, healthy food—on the table?” (“Biotechnology” 250). Certainly it does not seem that corporate food is the answer: “Corporate control of food and globalization of agriculture,” Shiva explains, “are robbing millions of their livelihoods and their right to food” (7). At both the macro and micro levels, modernity is rubbing against tradition and transforming food in India.

The great Chinese philosopher, Mencius (372 B.C.-289 B.C.) once said that food is the first necessity of the people and that the desire for food is as natural as the desire for sex. However, “from the perspective of anthropology and sociology, food also formulates the basic pattern of culture besides being a living material. It is part of the whole society and culture” (Xi 68). Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that we live in and by the food as demonstrated by the symbolic meanings of the lunchbox and the food it contains in the Indian film *The Lunchbox*. The delivery of the lunchbox to the wrong person and its consequences are reveal the antagonistic relations between tradition and modernity. Certainly, modernity and the workday have transformed food entirely, producing new food production and distribution systems which themselves reveal the value of traditional ways of cooking and eating food. The film also shows that these transformations challenge the caste system but not the women’s roles in food production, allowing sexist structures to remain intact. Complicated in its implications, *The Lunchbox* is an entertaining take on India’s rapidly transforming food scene.

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