

MEANINGS OF FOOD IN THE FILM “THE HUNDRED-FOOT JOURNEY”

Monica Alina TOMA¹

Abstract

The article seeks to explore the meanings associated with food in the film “The Hundred-Foot Journey” (2014), directed by Lasse Hallström. This paper aims to demonstrate that food represents not only a platform for asserting personal, social, national and cultural differences, but also a means of establishing bonds between people in spite of these differences. The hundred feet in the title represent not only the physical distance between two restaurants, but also the gap between the Indian and the French culture that the protagonist Hassan Kadam needs to cross in order to find his rightful place in the world.

Keywords: *food, culture, identity, differences, intimacy, bonding*

DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2022/18/2.04

1. Introductory considerations on the meanings of food

During recent decades, movies in which culinary arts occupy the central place have mesmerized us with their delightful atmosphere and with their savoury dishes. Food films such as “No reservations” (2007), “Haute cuisine” (2012) or “The Hundred-Foot Journey” (2014) depict a world in which eating and the activities related to it define the social and cultural context in which the characters live, influencing the personalities of the protagonists and stirring their emotions. In these movies, eating and cooking represent key elements in the plot, possessing symbolic functions, while the setting also carries a metaphorical potential. As Bower notices, in food movies

[...] the camera will focus in on food preparation and presentation so that in close-ups or panning shots, food fills the screen. The restaurant kitchen, the dining room and/or kitchen in home, tables within a restaurant, a shop in which food is made and/or sold, will usually be central settings. And the film’s narrative line will consistently depict characters negotiating questions of identity, power, culture, class, spirituality, or relationship through food. (Bower, 2004: 5–6).

The present article analyzes the different meanings associated with cooking in the film “The Hundred-Foot Journey”²(2014), starting from the premise that food is

¹ Monica Alina Toma, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, monica.toma@rei.ase.ro.

² The movie “The Hundred-Foot Journey”, which is based on Richard Morais' 2010 novel of the same name, was directed by Lasse Hallström and produced by Juliet Blake, Steven Spielberg and Oprah Winfrey. Just like “Chocolat”, Hallström’s previous film involving

more than just a substance that we consume in order to survive. The first idea taken into consideration is that cooking is an important means of defining and expressing our sense of self. Food tells stories about our childhood, our life, but also about our hopes and dreams for the coming times, providing a notable impression of who we are and what we want to become. According to Bower, "food tells us [...] where we have come from, and connects our past, present, and future. It sustains us with more than nutritional value alone, or *can* when we are aware of it and allow it to feed our spirit." (Bower, 2004: 42)

Food is also important for sustaining the essential connection between us and our loved ones. Meals and their associated activities, such as the procurement of the ingredients, the cooking or the serving of the dishes, involve all the family members, allowing the expression of their devotion to one another. As Bower affirms, food "takes time to prepare, tastes wonderful, and is reserved for festive occasions when family and friends gather around the table to share their lives. It is a labor of love." (Bower, 2004: 43)

Besides being a means of asserting our personal identity, food is also a signifying system that can define a larger category of people: a social group, a nation or even a whole culture. Thus, food may express our social, national and cultural identity through the values, perceptions, choices, practices and texts that it involves. (Stano, 2016: 20-21) According to Faber and Claramonte,

[...] food is culture both when it is prepared and when it is eaten. [...] Each culture decides what is permissible to eat, as determined by religious beliefs, class identification, ethnicity and gender roles. The cultural component of food is reflected in menus, meal schedules, eating habits, celebrations and rituals. (Faber and Claramonte, 2017: 157)

Still, nourishment represents not only a device for expressing specific differences, it is also an instrument for bounding together individuals from different social classes, countries or cultures. Thus, food can be seen as a mark of welcoming and acceptance between people from various backgrounds and even as a sign of affection.

2. Short presentation of the film "The Hundred-Foot Journey"

The film presents the initiation story of Hassan Kadam, a young immigrant to France, who succeeds in skillfully blending the Indian and the French culinary traditions and thus becomes a famous chef. The hundred feet in the title represent not only the distance between his family's Indian eatery and a famous French

French food, "The Hundred-Foot Journey" has a fairy-tale-like atmosphere that allows for the display of a variety of emotions.

restaurant, but also the gulf between two very different cultures that the young cook needs to overcome in order to succeed in his career.

In the opening scene of the movie, at a customs office, Hassan, the son of Abbu (Papa), explains to the clerks why the Kadam family came to France. They used to own an eatery in Mumbai, but, during a riot, the restaurant was set on fire and the mother was killed. Following these tragic events, Abbu, the father, decided to take the rest of the family out of India. The Kadams lived in London for a year, then departed for mainland Europe in order to find a better place to settle down.

After getting permission to enter France, the family drives through the countryside in an old van, trying out the local vegetables. When the breaks fail in the hills above the charming village of St. Antonin, a beautiful young woman, Marguerite, who happens to pass by, offers to take the Kadams to a local mechanic. Marguerite brings the tired family to her apartment and offers them a snack.

Delighted by the quality of the food in the village, Abbu decides to acquire an old restaurant building available for purchase. His family members object to his choice, because their competition would be “Le Saule Pleureur”, a Michelin-starred restaurant situated only one hundred feet away. But Abbu buys the building, considering that Indian food is unique and that the French would love it if they tasted it.

However, the Kadams’ intention to open an eating house named “Maison Mumbai” right across the street is not taken lightly by “Le Saule Pleureur”’s uptight proprietor, Madame Mallory. Madame, who has been waiting to get a second Michelin-star for thirty years, doesn’t welcome the new neighbors, not only because they represent potential competition, but also because she considers them vulgar, unlike the refined French.

Thus, she takes action to make sure that the Kadams’ eatery doesn’t succeed by buying all the locally available food ingredients that they would need for their opening night menu. An all-out war erupts between Madame Mallory and Abbu, which makes both their lives difficult.

Still, while the two proprietors are busy fighting with each other, a bridge between the two restaurants is being built with Hassan’s becoming interested in the French cuisine and also in Marguerite, who, as he discovers, is a sous-chef at “Le Saule Pleureur”. Marguerite helps Hassan understand the French style of cooking and also tells him about Madame’s method of hiring employees: when people apply for a job, she doesn’t interview them, but asks them to prepare an omelette, knowing from one bite whether or not they have the potential to become great chefs.

The conflict between Madame and Abbu peaks on Bastille Day, when one of “Le Saule Pleureur”’s chefs, Jean-Pierre, instigates his friends to torch “Maison

Mumbai" and to spray-paint on the outer wall of the eatery words which mean "France for the French". Hassan scares the attackers off, but his hands and legs are burned. Horrified, Madame changes her attitude towards the Indian family and dismisses Jean-Pierre, personally cleaning the graffiti from the wall of her neighbours. She also helps Hassan make her an omelet according to his recipe, because his hands are injured. After tasting the omelette, Madame recognizes his skills and hires him as an apprentice. Marguerite becomes envious of Hassan's abilities and treats him coldly, but the two competitors gradually develop feelings for each other.

At the end of one year, "Le Saule Pleureur" receives the much coveted second Michelin star due to Hassan's exquisite dishes. He is offered and accepts a job in Paris, at the restaurant "La Baleine Grise", where he gains national recognition for his French-Indian fusion cooking style. Meanwhile, Madame warms up to the Kadam family and even starts dating Abbu.

Another year later, Hassan is on the verge of receiving a third Michelin Star for the Paris eatery where he works, but he is not happy. He misses his family and Marguerite. He returns to St Antonin, where he becomes Marguerite's lover and also business partner at Madame's restaurant. At the end of the film, Hassan refuses to get the third Michelin Star for the restaurant "La Baleine Grise", proclaiming that he and Marguerite will receive such an honour the following year at "Le Saule Pleureur".

3. The role of food in the construction of personal identity

In "The Hundred-Foot Journey", food is presented as an important element in the construction of the main characters' personal identity, being related to their past memories, to their present preoccupations and to their future life. The ambitious Marguerite, who is a sous-chef at "Le Saule Pleureur", has been studying the French cuisine since she was 12 years old and she wants to become "chef de cuisine" ("The Hundred-Foot Journey", 00:25:49-00:25:50) All her dreams about making a career are connected to cooking.

Madame Mallory's whole being revolves around the restaurant that she inherited from her husband, and her unique purpose in life, at least at the beginning of the film, is that of obtaining a second Michelin star. Abbu's entire life has also been focussed on running eating houses. He used to own an eatery together with his wife in India, and, after her death, he decided to open a new one in France in order to support his much-loved children. For him, food represents a way of carrying on his family's long cooking tradition and a means of reconnecting to his national heritage.

Hassan's life is also centered around food. He learnt how to cook at his parents' restaurant in Mumbai, during his childhood. The old family recipes were passed on

to him by his mother, who also taught him that food carries within itself the beliefs of India. (“The Hundred-Foot Journey”, 00:03:50-00:04:41) Her son remembers her when he sees sea urchins, but also when he prepares certain meals, because for him “food is memories”, it is a means of recalling a past of happiness and joy. At the same time, for Hassan, cooking is a comforting way of recreating a sense of home in France, a foreign place that is so different from his country.

Indian food also represents for the main protagonist a source of innovation, creativity and reconciliation. Hassan cannot exist without his daring spices (coriander, fenugreek, masala, etc.), without the flavourful tastes of his birthplace, and he brings them into the fusion dishes that he cooks at the famous “La Baleine Grise”: oysters with nitro pearls of sturgeon and oyster dust with ground cardamom seeds, marinade of tamarind and smoked chili, petals cooked in hay-infused chamomile, cauliflower ice cream, etc. Only by getting inspiration from the traditions of his homeland is he able to come up with the original combinations that bring him fame, only by mixing his Indian cuisine with the French one can he construct a bridge between the two opposing cultures.

4. Food as a means of expressing social, national and cultural differences

The idea that food is a mark of cultural, national and even social identity is often expressed in the film. Abbu knows that India is “the oldest civilization in the world” (“The Hundred-Foot Journey”, 01:09:14-01:09:15) and he is proud of his heritage. When he opens “Maison Mumbai”, he brings with him the symbols, music and the traditional clothes of his country, but especially its cooking habits. The Indian influence can be seen in all the elements related to the Kadam’s food: in the use of certain tools such as the “tandoori oven” (“The Hundred-Foot Journey”, 00:30:55), in the spices used for cooking (curry powder), in the traditional recipes, menus and dishes (murrgh masala, ka saag aloo, dal), in the strong color and smell of the meals and even in the manner of serving them.

On the other hand, the specific French lifestyle is personified by the sophisticated Madame Mallory, who has maintained the practice of fine dining and order in her elegant restaurant that serves refined dishes from France (escargot, pigeons, etc). The snobbish lady, who has made quite a name for herself with “Le Saule Pleureur”, finds herself disturbed by her Indian neighbours with their loud music.

Bred in the best of the French culinary tradition, the rigid Madame Mallory, with her upper-class restaurant, disregards “ethnic” cuisine. Her disdainful attitude towards Indian food and culture can be seen in the way she talks to her neighbours: “Well, if your food is anything like your music, I suggest you turn it down.” (“The Hundred-Foot Journey”, 00:31:51-00:31:53)

This hostile look on the Indian people can also be perceived in the aggressive behavior of Jean Pierre, the employee of "Le Saule Pleurer" who will tell his friends to set "Maison Mumbai" on fire. For the harsh French chef, the strong smell of curry coming from the Indian eatery represents an infringement of some deep-seated gastronomic and cultural habits: "The smell of curry, it's everywhere! Honestly! No sense of culture or tradition." ("The Hundred-Foot Journey", 00:54:49-00:54:55) Jean Pierre's culinary perception has been influenced by the cuisine of his own country and he strongly rejects other people's tastes concerning nourishment.

At the same time, Abbu also considers that his Indian cooking tradition is superior to the French one. That is why he is against his son's getting a job at Le Saule Pleurer. The argument between Abbu and Madame Mallory concerning Hassan's education shows not only their different views on cuisine, but also the way in which food can express national traits and attitudes:

Papa: You deliberately seduced him! You seduced his mind, with your awful, tasteless, empty sauces! With your pitiful squashed little bits of garlic!

Madame Mallory: That is called subtlety of flavor.

Papa: It's called meanness of spirit! If you have a spice, use it! Don't sprinkle it. Spoon it in!

Madame Mallory: [...] Enough is enough, arrêtez!

Papa: Yes, enough of you. [...] You tell him, it's "classical." What is "classical"?

Madame Mallory: "Classical" comes from the word "class." And that is what he will learn in my kitchen. He will learn how to cook with class." ("The Hundred-Foot Journey", 01:09:35-01:10:21)

Of course, Abbu also considers that Indian food is classical, because India is the oldest civilization in the world. However, since Indian food alone cannot become the basis for success in the Western environment and since Hassan does not have any formal culinary training despite his talent, Madame Mallory decides to help the young cook reach his potential by hiring him. This opportunity for training in French cuisine will represent for Hassan a stepping stone into the world he is going to live in from now on and who will accept him and recognize his gift.

5. Food as an instrument for bonding and intimacy

At the beginning of the film, the Kadams travel through the bucolic French hills in order to find the right place to open their restaurant. And this right place turns out to be the idyllic village of St. Antonin, with its medieval architecture and its vibrant local market. The widescreen lensing and the aerial wide shots wonderfully capture the beauty of the grassy land surrounding the buildings, the breathtaking night sky, the misty air of the dawn and the sparkling small river running through the village.

St. Antonin is the special place where delicate women like Marguerite stop the car to help strangers and even invite the hungry travellers for a meal at home.

The scene in which the Kadams try out the food from the village at Marguerite's place is extremely touching. The beautiful girl offers the Indians a gorgeous plate containing locally sourced food, and the viewer can see close-up shots of the guests gathered around the table gratefully enjoying the dinner, taking bites and chewing the cheese and the vegetables that have the perfect taste, colour and shape. Linus Sandgren's wonderful cinematography, with its delightful, luminous beauty, and composer A.R. Rahman's effervescent and gentle score give the scene a delicate, airy lightness:

“Mansur: We're very grateful for your hospitality

Marguerite: No, it's my pleasure. [...]

Marguerite: Voila. I thought you might be hungry, so...

Hassan: Beautiful.

Papa: Thank you. [...]

Hassan: So, uh, what is all this?

Marguerite: That's just some cold things we had in the larder. So...

Mahira: Amazing. [...]

Hassan: Where did you buy this?

Mukhtar: Mmm.

Marguerite: Oh, the bread? I bake it.

Papa: Nice.

Marguerite: Yes.

Hassan: Oh, God, Papa, try this. This oil, where is it from?

Marguerite: Uh, from the olive trees in the garden. And my uncle press it every year. So... And the cheese is from the cows in the field at the back. It's totally natural.

All: Mmm. [...]

Papa: Forgive the silence, Marguerite. I think my family is afraid that they died in the accident and now we enter heaven.”

(All laughing) (“The Hundred-Foot Journey”, 00:12:25-00:14:42)

This special moment in the film is illustrative of the important relationship between food and a warm welcome. Thus, the meal appears as a sign of acceptance and familiarity among the people of two vastly different cultures, as a sign of multicultural interaction. The movie shows us how a dinner can transform strangers into friends, by joining the nationals of two extremely distant countries. Thus, the movie demonstrates that nourishment may be seen as an act of trust and as a bond between people coming from very different backgrounds.

There is a sense of intimacy and belonging brought about by food, and this feeling can also be felt in the film in the meetings between Hassan and Marguerite, who slowly develop feelings for each other while talking about ingredients and recipes.

It is Marguerite who tells the young man about the Michelin stars and who gives him the best cookbooks. She is the first one to taste his cooking of the five mother sauces of the French cuisine, while he describes to her his favourite Indian dishes.

When, later on in the movie, Hassan writes to Marguerite from Paris to enquire about their "perfect recipe for the raw cepe ravioli" ("The Hundred-Foot Journey", 01:39:20-01:39:22), she answers: "Hassan, it's not how you sweat the onions, it's where you pick your cepes. And the good ones, they grow here." ("The Hundred-Foot Journey", 01:39:38-01:39:46) It is Marguerite's way of telling Hassan to come back to St. Antonin where he belongs, to come back to her. Thus, the language of food becomes the language of love.

The relationship between food and intimacy may also be discerned in the romantic attachment that is born between the Indian father and Madame Mallory while having coffee at a restaurant in the village, while picking mushrooms or while going to the market together. The scene where the soft Madame Mallory offers the kind Abbu a truffle shows how the two owners have evolved from formidable rivals to potential lovers who are ready to indulge in a "passionate affair of the heart". ("The Hundred-Foot Journey", 00:23:35-00:23:36)

The movie ends with a feast that joins together the Kadams, Madame Mallory, the mayor and other villagers. The dinner is cooked by Hassan and Marguerite and it contains both Indian and French dishes. It is prepared at "Le Saule Pleureur" and it is served at "Maison Mumbai". This is an occasion for celebrating Hassan's return and also the communion that has now been established between the two restaurants, between the members of the small community of St Antonin. This large meal, to which participate loving family members and friends, evokes in the viewer a feeling of nostalgia for the type of group solidarity that characterizes a stabilized and happy society.

6. Conclusions

In the film, the main characters' life is centered around food, which is connected to their past, present and future. Cooking reminds the protagonists of their previous life and of their lost loved ones. At the same time, food is a great reason for their happiness in the present, providing them not only with a source of income, but also with the sense of professional and personal satisfaction that comes with a happily accomplished job. Furthermore, food brings about great hope for the future in the case of the main characters, especially in the case of Hassan and Marguerite, who are going to run together "Le Saule Pleureur", with the prospect of getting a third Michelin star in the coming year.

However, in the film, food is not only related to the protagonists' construction of a personal sense of being and of a personal life, but also to their establishing of a national and cultural identity. This identity is defined by the characters' particular

Indian and French values, beliefs, attitudes and manners, by their choices of certain ingredients, tools, recipes and menus.

Thus, in “The Hundred-Foot Journey”, food reveals the differences between the characters that come from two distinct countries and cultures. At the beginning of the film, these contrasts make the communication between the two restaurants difficult. However, by the end of the movie, the differences become a reason for bonding and a source of enrichment for the main protagonists, who come to understand that cooking together and sharing food represent expressions of belonging and affection.

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The author

Monica Toma obtained her bachelor's degree in Romanian, French and English Language and Literature at the "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia. She received a master's degree in the History of Images, History of Ideas and a doctoral degree in Comparative Literature at the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. She also got a master's degree in the Culture and Language of European Organisations at the University of Bucharest. She has published various articles on literature and film in a number of nationally and internationally recognized journals. At present, she is a PhD Assistant at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.