

Culinary Cadences: Studying the Semantics of Cooking in *Thursday Special*

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Abstract:

Though food is routinely materialised for its nutritional and cultural significance, the processes involved in its preparation are often relegated, obscured and undervalued. Cooking invariably gets sidelined in the mainstream narratives and discourses. These always attempt to magnify and elaborate the pleasures of eating. They evidence a conspicuous disregard for the act of Cooking and the hands that cooked. This paper attempts to study the culinary semantics articulated in Varun Tandon's award-winning short film *Thursday Special*. It seeks to read beyond the literal act of cooking, plunge into the textured narrative of the film, and interpret the rhythms, gestures, ingredients, and emotions that magnify its culinary space. The study investigates how cooking becomes more than a mere representation, and how it becomes a constitutional component that drives and defines the film. It attempts to interpret cooking as a text that articulates a narrative rhythm which constitutes the cadence of life itself. It seeks to establish how the cooking in itself becomes the locus of meaning in the film. The paper adopts a qualitative methodology grounded in food studies frameworks, drawing largely on the theories of David Sutton and Lisa M Heldke, for its analysis of the film.

Keywords: semantics, culinary, cooking, food, emotion.

Traditional Western philosophy has always believed in a hierarchical divide between mental and manual labour. It has maintained a biased respect towards the former, and has therefore valued all activities that produce “timeless, unchanging results- known as genuine knowledge” (Heldke 204). There ensued a natural social prejudice patronising activities “aimed at the production of allegedly timeless knowledge as opposed to activities- cooking, farming, cleaning- that result in transitory products” (205). Lisa M Heldke opines how Western philosophical tradition has always sought to treat any act of inquiry as a process involving an evident separation of the subject and the object; the inquirer and the inquired. She reconceptualises this theory/practice dichotomy and provides a promising trajectory that interprets “foodmaking as a thoughtful practice” (216). Through this reconceptualisation, she establishes how cooking turns “to focus on the concrete, embodied, emotional and erotic nature of activity” (217) and how it recognises the “significant interconnections that exist between inquirers and their environments” (217). Within this reconceptualised framework of foodmaking, the dichotomous relationship between the cook and the cooked is replaced by an interconnected coexistence between the two. Heldke conceives a “bodily knowledge” as the core of this practice. She interprets cooking as a mode of interaction that treats the body itself as knowledge, as different from a Cartesian system that bifurcates it from the mind. Heldke in her essay “Foodmaking as a Thoughtful Practice” articulates a sharp dismissal of the disregard shown by Plato and other philosophers towards anything that is bodily and appetitive, and who therefore called it “a rather unfortunate fact of human life” (220). She identifies the interactive practice of cooking as a key to understanding all other forms of human interactions.

An embodied practice like cooking would also naturally connect itself to memory. The “education of the senses” (Sutton 300) is in a way a honing of one’s memory. Getting one’s skills nurtured through repetition and apprenticeship automatically becomes a mnemonic exercise. Sutton interprets cooking as a performance “evidenced in skills which take time to

acquire and cannot be simply reproduced or copied” (300), and which permeates into and flows through the subjective realms of senses. Cooking involves “semiosis”, where the mind and the body interact consistently to achieve an embodied experience. The distinctiveness of a dish therefore is not to be merely ascribed to the flavour gradients of its ingredients but to a variety of embodied information that defines it. They would be a conglomerate whole of “material and cultural realities, including objects, practices and norms” (Parasecoli 661) that breach the discursive/non- discursive barricades.

With an obvious foregrounding of food, Varun Tandon’s *Thursday Special* meticulously explores the culinary semantics embedded in the marital interactions of an elderly Indian couple. A short film that runs up to twenty six minutes, *Thursday Special* has earned global recognition since its release in 2025, and has bagged the title ‘Most Poetic Film’ at the Kustendorf Film Festival, Serbia, in the same year. The film is an intimate family drama which depicts the life of the Misra’s. Renowned actors Anubha Fatehpuria and Ramakanth Dayama play the roles of Shakuntala and Ram, an aging couple who have survived a tragedy, and are sailing through life. Tandon’s poignant short film subtly implies the couple’s struggle for years to come to terms with the grief and trauma of losing both their children in an accident. The film explores the heavy sorrow that weighs them down, through the most ordinary and quotidian language of food. It emerges to be a stupendous effort by the director in showcasing how the mind can be healed by the body. It articulates how the ache of the mind gets pacified by the pleasure of the body, as grief affects the mindscape and food effects the body. However, there arises a conflict, as either of the lead characters chooses to chase this pleasure using their own self-designed methodologies. The paper examines this conflict, which is dramatised through food. Though the film is built around the marriage and relationship of the elderly couple Ram and Shakuntala, the study here chooses to foreground food and the culinary aspects of it.

The film opens with Shakuntala overriding the precision of even an alarm bell and waking up in the wee hours of a Thursday morning. This speaks of a long practice that she is habituated into. She heads straight to the rack of recipes in excitement. Being Thursday, her energy and enthusiasm are about the *Yachni Paneer* (Green Yoghurt Curry) that she has planned as her 'Thursday Special'. The camera zooms into her mediocre kitchen, inviting the audience to a sensorial landscape of smells and sounds, of pots and pans, of stirring and grinding that emanate from her kitchen. The kitchen becomes an intensely personal space wherein relations with food and other objects play a vital role "in mobilising the sensory, haptic and kinetic dimensions of memory through a combination of taste-, sound- and smell-scapes and mundane activities which are embedded in the rhythms of everyday life", and constitute "the sensory dimensions of memory" (Meah and Jackson 4). It becomes a site "in which memory, mood and agency are materialised" (4), a space in which "objects of personal, artistic or cultural interest are stored and displayed to narrate the untold stories of lives being lived, those having been lived and those which are imagined within them" (4).

Ram and Shakuntala have been married for a few decades and both have now habituated themselves into this regular Thursday ritual. Shakuntala, the homemaker wife wakes up at the crack of dawn, to meticulously prepare a delightful and delectable tiffin of delicacies every Thursday, for her husband's potluck lunch at his government office. The sheer delight of the preparation of Thursday specials, and the long wait in anticipation, for the compliments that Ram brings back from his office in the evening, drives her on for further Thursdays. These Thursdays shape her present. In the same opening scenes, Ram is heard to eulogise the taste magic of his wife's hands, "It was smelling so good...The whole office is still raving about the Tangy Potatoes you made last week. Mr. Shukla was saying, he wants the recipe for his wife" (3:16). The hands that prepare it and the face that beams at the masterpiece crafted with love, feels rewarded when that love gets reciprocated through her husband's compliments.

Shakuntala's love speaks volumes when the camera shows her hands carefully packing the tiffin and wiping the edges clean of the spills. What is invisibly conveyed is a stealthy licking of the finger that has wiped it clean. This act implies the selfless love that allows her to pack the entire dish into her husband's lunchbox, not leaving any bit behind for herself. It is evident that her pleasure is in cooking and serving, and not in eating the same. Shakuntala's cooking is her way of articulating her emotions and her life. It is an act of devotion. Embedded within her language of cooking is a semantics of transformation- a purposed choice that prods herself to shake off her gloom and bring on a glee. It is her means to wade through the sea of grief to reach the shore of sanity. The cadences from her kitchen help to steady herself and not lose that delicate balance. Cooking assists her to navigate through her grief. When Ram asks her, "But honestly Shakuntala, I do not know how you do it...Every Thursday...no one in the entire office can compete with your cooking" (4:12), she is heard to say, "I do not know. I just enjoy it. All week I look forward to this day..." (4:23). Embodied, habit memories are accomplished by individuals, through repetition. They are often stored unconsciously, get embedded in ordinary, personal spaces, and help them narrate their lives and experiences. Cooking narrates Shakuntala's life. She transmits her emotions into the dishes she prepares.

The opening parts of the film give the semblance of a couple united in grief and joy. They perform this weekly Thursday ritual together, based on their shared love for food. This ritual is a committed enactment of fidelity and faith in each other, and it shows an emotional cartography of their relationship. Their ritualistic Thursday special is a strategy to survive the pangs of their intangible grief through the tangible pleasures of food. When Ram prepares to leave for work, Shakuntala requests him to return early in the evening. She says, "Listen, come home early today. I am making a cake. Just think, the kids would have turned twenty-two today" (4:58). She plans to bake a cake to commemorate their children's birthday. They would have turned twenty-two if they were alive, as we understand from Ram's reply.

What the camera captures next, are Ram's slow and heavy steps as he walks to work. At the lunch hour, Ram opens his tiffin, smells the 'special' packed for him by his wife, and heads straight to the security guard with it, who asks upon seeing him, "Sir, what is there this week?" (7:20). His question subtly implies that it is a regular Thursday pattern. Ram gives him a curt reply, "Do your business! And clean the tiffin box properly afterwards!" (7:21). Camera then traces Ram's hasty and excited steps all the way to Shankar's Restaurant. The warm reception by the restaurant staff and the familiarity they show him, are visible signs of the regularity of his visits to the place. As he waits after ordering his dish, Ram's excitement is visible and overt. The camera captures his cheer and the excited tapping of his feet as he waits impatiently for it. When food is brought, we see it to be a crisp fried masala fish, garnished with lemon slices and onions. As Ram squeezes the lemon atop the fish and takes the first bite of it, he displays a paradisiacal pleasure coming over him. The sensuality of the moment's pleasure and the blissful, heavenly taste make him forget his grief and shed his grumpiness. The smile that spreads over his face is a sign that he enjoys every bit of the experience.

The film takes a turn after this, when the camera captures a long-angle view of Ram stepping out of 'Shankar's', and wiping his hands clean, as seen through the eyes of Shakuntala, who is at the opposite end of the street, buying ingredients for the cake. When she sees him at a most unexpected and unfamiliar place at his 'office potluck lunch hour', it sends a feeling of fear and suspicion through her. He is captured, suspiciously satisfied. After he leaves the spot, she goes nearer to take a closer look at the display board outside, which showed "Thursday Special- Madhki Masala Fish Fry". Later in the evening, when Ram returns home, Shakuntala asks him as he is waiting for the cake,

Shakuntala: How was office today?

Ram: Like how it always is

Shakuntala: And lunch?

Ram: When is that not great!

Shakuntala: Tell me more

Ram: The curry was delicious. And you added some fennel in it. The flavours just hit the spot....That is such a lovely cake in front of us, and you are talking about lunch!... And also, the smokiness of the gravy...just outstanding.

Shakuntala: You sing such praises every week.

Ram: What else can I do? You make something so amazing every week?... Is everything okay? For the first time in so many years, you do not look happy hearing compliments.
(12:05)

Next Thursday arrives, and it is Curried Green Peppers that Shakuntala has planned. She is back in her kitchen early in the morning. When she keeps the packed lunch bag on the table, Ram asks, “What have you made today?”, and she replies, “Taste and see for yourself” (14:20). She places this test before Ram, by not revealing the dish in advance. A little after he leaves, Shakuntala prepares something hastily and decides to deliver it directly at her husband’s office. As she enters the office premises asking for Mr. Ram, in order to hand over the box directly to him, the security guard offers to give it himself. Upon her stubborn insistence that she gives it herself, he has to finally disclose to her that Mr. Ram has gone out for his lunch. However, what distresses Shakuntala even further, is the sight of her carefully packed lunch bag in the security cabin. She asks, “What is this bag doing here?” (15:12)

Shakuntala retraces her steps and hurries back to ‘Shankar’s’, the place she thinks her husband would be at that hour. She enters the restaurant, heads straight to her husband’s table and confronts him directly. She stares at the fish on her husband’s plate. Her expression is a

perfect mix of dismay, disgust and disillusionment. As she looks up at Ram's face, she sees him sitting with his head bent down with guilt and shame. Adding to the awkwardness of the situation is the waiter's remark, "Mrs Misra? Sir has been coming here for so many years now! What can I get for you?" (16:21). He gets his reply from Ram's stern, sour stare, and wisely retreats. Shakuntala asks Ram, "Will you say something?" (17:05). Ram remains silent, with his head hung low with guilt and shame. She adds, "I asked at your office....Nobody had even heard about the potluck lunch!" (18:03).

Later at home, the conversation continues:

Ram: I can explain.

Shakuntala: How have you been lying all these years?

Ram: It is not like that...Years ago I had lied once. And then, I just continued doing it.

I used to think, what is the harm in this? After all, we were both so happy with it.... When I used to go to eat my favourite fish secretly, I used to enjoy it so much that for a few moments, I would forget everything else. And when I would come home and praise your cooking, you would feel so happy too.

Shakuntala: It is all a lie!

Ram: But that lie helped us get through the whole week.

Shakuntala: Can you hear yourself?

Ram: Shakuntala, didn't you look forward to this day too?

Shakuntala: So all your lies are forgiven? If I had lied to you so much, would you have understood me?

Ram: I used to do this for both of us. After all, what else did we have? After the kids were gone, this day was the only day when we both felt some sort of happiness. (19:16-20:28)

The next Thursday morning is different from the usual. Shakuntala sleeps late into the morning. Her calendar shows a struck-off Thursday special dish- *Bhara Bhaingan*. The hustle from the kitchen wakes her up. Her husband is up early and is in the kitchen. There is a role reversal. Ram says, "I thought I will make something for you today". However, Shakuntala replies, "There is no need to do all this". Ram is distraught at the turn of events and asks helplessly, "How can I make things better?" Shakuntala says, "I do not know" (21:55).

Over the years, Sakuntala had built a "semantic circuit" that linked her senses with agency, memory and identity. Her senses acted as semantic apparatuses that functioned beyond consciousness and intention. They not only represented her inner states but every time she performed the act of cooking in her kitchen, it facilitated a synaesthetic experience as well. It became her "communicative and creative channel" (Korsmeyer and Sutton 471). There was an intense degree of sensoriality attached to each of Shakuntala's culinary act- the act of seeing, touching, smelling, hearing, and of course tasting it. Shakuntala experienced a symbiotic connection between food and emotions, commonly regarded as "the preserve of the embodied self" (Lupton 31). Ram's deception breaks that connection; disrupts the circuit.

Ram perceives the intensity of the culinary infidelity he has committed. He realises that it causes him to lose the trust and break the bond that they shared over the years. With all claims of being a practising vegetarian, Ram indulges in his favourite masala fish fry at Shankar's. This, for Shakuntala, is the worst kind of infidelity- the unforgivable kind. The stunning fact about the film is that director Tandon has attempted to circumvent two different worlds, at the same time- both personal and shared. The climactic scene of the movie is where their individual

spheres collide, causing a rupture. It is a difficult emotion that Tandon has chosen for the film-grief. The couple has it so evidently etched on their faces- their voices and their dark circles speak of it. Their loss has been quiet cataclysmic, as they have lost both their kids when young. For Ram, the loop of functionality that has engulfed his life leaves him with no choice but to live on. His Thursday sneak-out to the non-vegetarian restaurant is his ritual to survive grief through the secret satiation of his craving. The risk and pleasure that this tabooed food renders, helps him keep the memories of his loss at bay. He gets into the garb of a normal, ordinary man and not the role of a husband, father burdened by grief and loss, every Thursday when he digs into the special fish.

Shakuntala has no external routines to shape her days/life. For her, Thursdays bring a rhythm to her lifeless life. The routine of cooking her Thursday special sets the beat. She commits herself completely to this ritual- both mentally and physically. It is her kitchen that offers her an escapade every Thursday from her cell of grief where she is otherwise imprisoned. Hers is probably a version of grief cooking which she religiously does even after so many years since her loss, as it helps her read meaning in life. Just as cooking is about conjuring comfort-memories and nostalgia-laden cherished past, it is also about effacing the conflicted ones which are overlaid with trauma and contestations. Shakuntala's efforts have been to create new memories of a secure life of trust and love with her husband, to efface the trauma and pain of the loss of her children. Her efforts however go unrecognised, as Ram derides her Thursday specials and opts for the food of his own choice and delight.

For the middle-class couple, there is no better scope for a complete closure and catharsis than these most ordinary and mundane gestures around food. It is their own personal refuge or shelter that they seek in food- sometimes more than even verbal communication or physical bonds. Food speaks a silent familiarity- a tangible articulation of intangible emotions. The film

exposes their distinct patterns of unburdening themselves without actually burdening each other. Food speaks a story of togetherness in loneliness.

Cooking is Shakuntala's voice. She cooks to speak her love. She cooks to pour out her grief. She cooks to transmute her sorrow. The 'Specials' she prepares reflect who she is. When Ram fails to eat it, she feels unheard and invisible. Her Thursdays are her escapades, carrying her away from her harrowing memories of loss, and the gnawing pain and paralysis. Ram's pleasure is in the breach of a pattern; in the stealth of a sin; in the secrecy of his tasteful indulgence in Masala Fish Fry. Both seek refuge thus in a naïve and silent familiarity- food, but in their own ways.

Shakuntala's cooking is her strategy to create pleasant memories to replace the bitter ones. It is her way to get on with life. To go by what Jennifer Brady says, cooking, for Shakuntala becomes a "means of garnering understanding about food, identity, and the body" (323) for Shakuntala. Brady argues that food making is a sensuous way of unravelling the meaning of one's embodied knowledge and identity. Jon D Hotzman too argues that "the sensuousness of food is central to understanding at least much of its power as a vehicle for memory" (365). Memories are created amidst the encounters within an embodied, visceral and in-between space of cooking. Cooking, for Shakuntala, becomes an embodied act which evokes "particular emotions on both the conscious and unconscious levels" (Lupton 31), where there is a symbiotic relationship between food and emotions. It is an embodied act which accomplishes its desired results only through complete bodily indulgence of the cook in the act, and her total identification with the ingredients involved. This very often means that the cook becomes the cooked, as he/she allows oneself to blend into the process. Unlike other forms of enquiry, cooking is where the "subject and the object meet and touch" (Curtin and Heldke 206) and interact. Boundaries blur, allowing one to become the other. Tandon's film clearly articulates this breach between the subject and the object. The protagonist engages in

“performing embodied acts of knowing” (Smith 168), which is her “bodily mode” (168). Shakuntala’s cooking is a “thoughtful activity” (Curtin and Heldke 206)- a mentally manual activity, which is “intelligent”, “inherently and immediately enjoyable” (Dewey 358), “wary, observant, sensitive to slight hints and intimations” (314-315). In cooking, the things that often get acknowledged, are the concrete, the material, the corporeal, the emotional, the erotic and the embodied. In Ram’s betrayal, in his avoidance of her Thursday Special, Shakuntala reads a rejection of her very self.

Shakuntala performs her entire self in the kitchen. The textual instructions she gathers from recipe books are translated into a “bodily behaviour” (Sutton 304)- a language that she expects Ram to decode. It becomes a memory-jogger for her; an inspiration that impels her own. The kitchen becomes an intensely intimate space where Shakuntala’s interactions with the ingredients vitally mobilise “the sensory, haptic and kinetic dimensions of memory through a combination of taste-, sound-, smell-scapes and mundane activities which are embedded in the rhythms of everyday life” (Blunt and Valery 4). As David Sutton opines, “it is the sensuality of food, how it crosses over- via processes of synaesthesia with different sensory registers that makes it a particularly compelling medium for memory” (301); Shakuntala cooks to transmute the bitter, memories of grief from which she starts, to pleasant memories of gratification in the present. When she discovers the emptiness of Ram’s false praises of her Thursday specials, she feels betrayed. She interprets the rejection of her food as a rejection of her body and self. His stealthy eating of the tabooed non-vegetarian food is viewed like a clandestine relationship outside marriage.

Cooking thus functions as the central emotional language and narrative strategy, transforming a mundane, daily chore into a deeply significant ritual of love, grief and betrayal. Food speaks in place of words, helping us view the complexities of a long-term marriage. It becomes both representation and recuperation. Cooking thus acts as the emotional grammar of

the film's narrative. The routine 'Thursday infidelity' for sure inflects their long-standing marriage briefly. However, what follows after we hear Ram ask Shakuntala at the end, "I have heard that a new breakfast place has opened in chowk. Should we go?" (23:40), offers us hope when we see them enter Suraj Sweets, and share a table for their breakfast. They choose to unburden each other, liberate themselves and evolve together with a firm grasp on reality and their selves, and a bolder version of autonomy. There is no longer any make-believe routine of contentment, eagerness to please and praise, secret delights or deception. Food rewires and reconfigures their relationship.

Thursday Special employs food not merely as a symbolic object or visual motif but a whole semantic system. Through the recurring Thursday ritual, culinary practices become a language of emotions and mnemonics. The film's conflict emerges when this language is revealed to be unstable, exposing how meanings attached to food are socially produced, interpreted, and sometimes misread. However, what seems to be a semantic rupture drives the narrative into a secure repair and restoration.

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