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**Culinary Narratives of Malabar: Hunger, Identity, and
Gastro-Politics in P.A. Muhammad Koya's *Sultan Veedu***

DILARA M

Assistant Professor and Research Scholar
Postgraduate and Research Department of English
Farook College (Autonomous), Calicut
Affiliated to the University of Calicut, Kerala

DR. ZEENATH MOHAMED KUNHI

Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor
Postgraduate and Research Department of English
Farook College (Autonomous), Calicut
Affiliated to the University of Calicut, Kerala

Abstract: Food in literary texts serves as a powerful marker for understanding cultural identity, social hierarchies, and historical memory. P.A. Muhammad Koya's historical novel *Sultan Veedu*, set during the Indian Freedom Struggle in Kerala's Malabar region, has received limited scholarly attention for its treatment of food as a narrative trope and cultural archive. This study examines how *Sultan Veedu* integrates culinary elements to construct Mappila Muslim identity, reflects on class structures, examines gender dynamics, and records acts of resistance during the colonial period.

Through close textual analysis of culinary codes, the paper employs a methodological framework integrating literary analysis with food studies approaches, particularly culinary semiotics and food as cultural memory, to comprehend representations of traditional Mappila dishes, food practices, gendered dynamics of gastronomy, and culinary class divides. The study further situates these literary representations within the historical realities of colonial Malabar, assessing the novel's value as a literary archive for preserving the region's culinary heritage and social history, and showing how food ecologies operate as a political reality, exposing systemic injustices under colonial and feudal rule.

Food in *Sultan Veedu* is a multivalent metaphor that also functions as an ethnographic archive documenting Mappila dishes and cooking practices that might otherwise remain unrecorded. The persistent dialectic between feudal feasts and endemic hunger among ordinary Mappila people reveals the novel's political dimensions. Gender analysis traces the social positioning of men and women within Mappila domestic/public spaces in relation to food. The narrative is a significant literary and cultural document that preserves Mappila Muslim foodways while interrogating romanticised notions of the past by presenting the lived material conditions of Malabar in colonial times.

Keywords: *Mappila Literature, Food Narratives, Culinary Memory, Colonial Food Systems, Hunger Politics*

Food is not just about sustenance and nurture. It is also a cultural entity through which societies articulate identity, hierarchy, memory, and power (Douglas; Bourdieu; Appadurai; Fischler). In the Malabar Mappila milieu, culinary practices bear the imprints of maritime exchange and cultural hybridity, leading to or augmenting distinctions of class, caste, gender, and economic privilege. P.A. Muhammad Koya's *Sultan Veedu* transforms this everyday realm of food into a site where the tensions between feudal inheritance and emerging modernity unfold. This article argues that the novel's culinary narratives, which encompass its kitchens, ritual feasts, domestic labour, food habits, hunger operate as a form of gastro-politics through which Koya exposes structures of social exclusion while tracing a movement from aristocratic privilege towards subaltern agency, earned dignity, and social solidarity. Against this socio-cultural and culinary backdrop, Koya (1922–1992) stands as a prominent literary figure and journalist in Northern Kerala's cultural history, and plays a significant role in chronicling the transformations within Malabar's Mappila society.

Chronicling the transition of the Mappila community from decaying feudalism to subaltern modernity, Koya's prose has always been noted for its restraint on didacticism. He chose to render his socio-political commentary organically through chronicling everyday domestic life. In *Sultan Veedu* ("The House of Sultans"), his seminal work of fiction, Koya renders the Kozhikode Mappila dialect with linguistic precision - infusing Malayalam with Arabic, Persian, and Urdu loanwords. To fully comprehend the socio-cultural architecture of this work, one must first map out the historical terrain of the Malabar coastline.

This region of Kerala has historically functioned as the primary world source for black pepper and cardamom, transforming its northern coastline into a pre-modern global trade hub (Kurup, 1988). It was at Kappad, near the historic city of Kozhikode, that Vasco da Gama first anchored in 1498, firmly tying Malabar to European mercantile expansion and global spice routes. Kozhikode, known and documented in Europe as Calicut and the seat of the Zamorin kings, developed a unique cosmopolitanism defined by trade, open ports, and cross-cultural patronage. Within this historic mercantile city lies Kuttichira, Koya's narrative epicentre, an enclave centred around stone mosques and the Mappila Muslim community.

The history of Malabar Muslims, known in Europe as Jonaka Mappilas, is widely celebrated as a triumph of early global trade and Indo-Arab hybridity. Arriving along the southwestern coast of India as early as the seventh century, West Asian merchants interacted with local communities, forming one of South Asia's oldest native Muslim populations (Miller 45). Historically, mainstream narratives have framed the arrival of Islam in Malabar as an egalitarian refuge that dissolved indigenous rigidities.

However, the reality of Mappila social history reveals a far more complex synthesis. As Islam integrated into the agrarian and maritime landscapes of Northern Kerala, it absorbed and repurposed the indigenous caste hierarchy. Rather than eradicating caste, the socio-religious transformations in Malabar created a distinct system of social stratification among Muslims, heavily influencing their familial structures, property inheritance, and foodways (Dale 88).

Social hierarchy among Malabar Muslims historically split into three primary tiers: the *Thangals*, the elite merchant families, such as the *Keyis* of Thalassery or the *Koyas* of Kozhikode, and the lower-caste converts (Innes and Evans 188). At the apex of this hierarchy were the *Thangals*, who claimed direct lineage to the Prophet Muhammad's family. Occupying a position of sacred authority comparable to Brahminical purity, they maintained strict endogamy, refusing to give their daughters in marriage to ordinary Mappilas. Below them were the elite mercantile and landed aristocracies, most notably the *Koyas* of Kuttichira and the *Keyis* of Thalassery, whose identity was born from unions between Arab traders and local upper-caste Hindu matrilineal families, such as the Nairs and Namboothiris (Dale 92). At the bottom of this socio-economic pyramid was the vast majority of the Mappila population: descendants of native converts from castes such as Mukkuvars (fisherfolk), Thiyyas (agrarian laborers), and Pulayas (formerly enslaved agricultural slaves) (Innes and Evans 190). Occupations remained rigidly stratified; service groups such as the *Ossans* (barbers and circumcisers) and *Pusala/Mukkuvar* fishers occupied subaltern statuses within the community, often enduring social distance from the mercantile elite.

The intersection of caste legacy and Islamic conversion produced contrasting familial systems across Malabar. The most striking manifestation of upper-caste Hindu influence on Mappila family structure was the adoption of *Marumakkathayam* (matrilineal inheritance). Among the *Koyas* of Kozhikode and the royal Arakkal dynasty of Kannur, property, lineage, and house names passed exclusively through the female line, directly mirroring the kinship patterns of the elite Nair and Samanthan Kshatriya castes from which many early matrilineal Mappilas emerged (Innes and Evans 193). Under this arrangement, women remained in their ancestral homes, while husbands visited them at night, a practice known as visiting husbandship or *pudava koti*. Domestic architecture evolved around these grand matrilineal mansions, which featured expansive central courtyards and dozens of rooms to house multiple generations of mothers, daughters, and their children (Koya 64). Conversely, lower-caste Mappila converts, originating from communities historically deprived of landownership, did not practice *Marumakkathayam*. Instead, they followed patrilineal or simple nuclear family structures, living in small dwellings near coastal belts or agrarian estates (Miller 112). Even within the domestic spaces of elite matrilineal households, internal caste-like class divisions persisted. The physical hearth was often divided into separate stoves for different branches of the extended family, reflecting economic rank.

The labor of domestic service: cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing, was handled by retainers hailing from lower-caste Mappila or subaltern backgrounds, leaving elite women insulated within private quarters (Koya 71).

Foodways in Malabar, interestingly, serve a vivid archive of how caste origins, trade networks, and religious ethics coalesced. While Islam established universal dietary rules, mandating *halal* meat and prohibiting pork and alcohol, the specific culinary items consumed by Mappila sub-groups reflected their historical caste status and economic capital (Appadurai 496). The elite culinary repertoire of Kozhikode, Thalassery, and Cannanore, renowned for dishes like *Thalassery Biryani*, *Chattipathiri* (layered meat pastry), *Mutta Mala* (egg-yolk garlands), and rich coconut-milk curries, was historically the exclusive domain of the upper-caste landed and mercantile families. These dishes represented a fusion of global West Asian ingredients, such as ghee, dry fruits, saffron, and aromatic spices, with high-status local staples like parboiled rice and coconut (Koya 82). Parboiled rice was historically an elitist grain in Malabar; the landed Mappila aristocrats consumed white rice and meat daily, performing their status through lavish dining rituals (Veblen 68).

In contrast, lower-caste Mappila converts historically faced food insecurity and relied on ingredients associated with agrarian subaltern diets. For agricultural laborers and fisherfolk who converted to Islam, daily sustenance did not consist of rich biryanis or meat pastries, but of *kanji* (rice porridge), wild tubers like tapioca and yams, and local sea creatures, while meat remained a rare luxury consumed primarily during festival occasions or ritual communal feasts (Kurup 104). The serving and consumption of food also carried deep socio-spatial meanings. Wealthy families displayed their rank through elaborate communal dining setups using the *Masara* (circular table arrangements) and *Supra* (dining cloths), where the number of tables laid and the thickness of the serving utensils signaled the household's lineage and economic standing (Veblen 75). Countering these elite displays was the traditional practice of *Thakkaram* (hospitality feasts) and *Aandu Nercha* (commemoration festivals). At shrine festivals, Mappilas sat together around a large single plate called a *thalam*, sharing food by hand regardless of sub-caste origin, serving as an Islamic subversion of traditional Hindu pollution laws that historically forbade lower castes from eating near upper-caste dining spaces (Appadurai 502).

As Malabar transitioned into the twentieth century, the decline of the feudal landholding system and the rise of secular education began to dismantle traditional caste-based foodways and family structures (Kurup 115). Lower-caste Mappila families, long excluded from the white-collar occupations of the elite Koyas, embraced wage labor, maritime trade, and migration to the Gulf region. This socio-economic shift led to a culinary and familial democratization. Subaltern women, who had historically been restricted to domestic labor or marginalized snack-selling, used commercial food production as a

path toward financial independence (Bourdieu 172). The income generated from labor allowed lower-tier Mappila households to adopt nuclear family setups, buy land, and access the high-status food items such as ghee rice and poultry, once reserved exclusively for aristocratic kitchens.

Koya masterfully documents the transition of this Mappila elite from feudal aristocracy to subaltern modernity in his novel. *Sultan Veedu* follows the coming-of-age of its orphaned protagonist, Ummer Koya, and his sister Thithibi. Orphaned at the age of eight following the death of both parents, Ummer is raised by his mother's maternal aunt, Paathummeyi, a widow who acts as the moral center of the family. The household's feudal decay is accompanied by personal trauma when Ummer is falsely accused of stealing an infant's traditional gold-and-bead ornament, the *Kucheem Manim*. This false accusation stamps him with the derogatory label *Kucheem Manim Kattavan*, systematically othering Ummer, Thithibi, and Paathummeyi within their own ancestral home. Forced to abandon formal schooling due to poverty, Ummer breaks the aristocratic taboo of the elite Koyas, who historically permitted only white-collar roles, by taking up manual labor. Guided by political dissenters labeled as *Kafirs* by the feudal elite, specifically Master and Velu, Ummer engages with newspapers and secular thought, developing a critical consciousness. As the feudal prestige of *Sultan Veedu* collapses, Ummer's self-earned prosperity and intellectual modernism rise, forcing the conservative elders who once shunned him to recognize his agency.

Interrogating *Sultan Veedu* through the lens of gastro-politics, a concept coined by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1981) to explain how culinary practices establish, contest, and reinforce social hierarchies, reveals how domestic space functions as an arena for power struggles. In *Sultan Veedu*, the kitchen acts as a spatial map of internal household politics. The hearth is physically partitioned into six separate stoves, each allocated to a distinct branch of the extended family. The quality of firewood burned and the ingredients cooked at each stove serve as public declarations of status and economic dominance within the feudal race. This culinary conflict is exemplified in an episode surrounding the preparation of *Curry*, a complex traditional dessert of coconut milk, rice powder, and banana. When the dish fails to meet the exacting standards of a visiting groom's family, the ensuing domestic feud exposes the fragile pride and structural decline of the elite lineage.

The spatial dynamics of dining in *Sultan Veedu* further illuminate Thorstein Veblen's (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption. The household's public dining hall was designed to perform wealth and class distinction. Instead of ordinary tables, the family utilized the *Masara*, a series of arc-shaped tables fitted together to form a grand circular structure. In the hollow center of this circle stood the *Dholank*, a raised platform upon which servers laid the *Supra*, the ceremonial dining cloth. Feasts were evaluated quantitatively by the number of *Masaras* assembled and *Supras* laid out. The service was

managed by traditional retainers known as *Kallikkaar*, who navigated the space to serve male guests and children. The massiveness of the serving vessels, such as serving the dessert *Curry* in large *Kaasa* tumblers rather than small bowls, reinforced this performance of feudal abundance. It is to be noted that this dining area was gendered and segregated; while men and male guests consumed food in public view to signal Sultan status, the women of the household and female guests were served in privacy, hidden from public eyes.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital can be used to further explain the class struggle embedded in the novel's culinary economy. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu argues that class differences are expressed through seemingly ordinary choices such as food, clothing, furniture, and leisure. These choices function as markers of social distinction, allowing dominant groups to define their own cultural preferences as legitimate while marginalising the tastes and practices of subordinate groups (Bourdieu 77). For the elite Koyas, food was meant to be consumed conspicuously as a marker of inherited class privilege, never produced for commercial gain. When Paathummeyi initiates a home-based snack business to feed the orphaned children, the aristocrats view her labor as a stain on the family honor. Ironically, as the feudal economy crumbles, the very family members who shamed her become dependent on purchasing her snacks. Paathummeyi subverts the private domestic sphere, turning culinary labor into a tool for economic survival and autonomy. Through this act of resistance, the narrative constructs a dual symbolism of *Zamzam*, the inexhaustible holy well. For Ummer Koya, true sustenance comes not from feudal inheritance, but from two non-feudal *Zamzams*: the sacrificial nourishment provided by Paathummeyi, who survives on tea while reserving the best food for the orphans, and the intellectual nourishment acquired through reading and secular education. Ummer maintains absolute spiritual and moral integrity, strictly avoiding alcohol, pork, and religiously discouraged items such as crab meat, reclaiming moral purity through subaltern ethics rather than aristocratic entitlement.

The novel also portrays food as an intricate vocabulary of Mappila life, marking every stage of the lifecycle, religious belief, and communal solidarity. Lifecycle rituals include *Ponnum thenum*, the feeding of gold dust and honey to newborns; *Mudikallachil*, the first haircut ceremony accompanied by serving meat wrapped in taro leaves; *Kaathukuth Kalyanam*, the ear-piercing feast; and *Pallakaannal*, a continuous delivery of culinary spreads to pregnant women. Matrimonial alliances involve formal exchanges such as *Vethilett*, the betel leaf exchange, and the transfer of *Mooda* or *Maadayum Panavum*, consisting of sacks of rice, ghee, and cash. The post-wedding custom of *Thinnamkudi* requires sending complex delicacies like *Chattipathiri*, a multi-layered meat pastry, to appease the groom's household. Mortuary practices are similarly coded through food: *Marichavetila* involves distributing betel leaves during bereavement, while the custom of *Bajaar* during mourning demands

that even a grieving family provide lavish feasts to visiting in-laws to maintain socio-economic standing. The deceased are further honored through *Kannook* and *Yaaseente Koll*, forty days of continuous prayer and communal feeding to ensure spiritual peace. These rituals coexist with folk superstitions and spiritual therapeutics, such as pregnant women chewing betel leaves blessed by a Mullah influenced by a Jinn; fears of *Nazar* where an envious gaze turns food to poison; the practice of *Othinaatal* where children lick slate ink to digest sacred knowledge; and the offering of organ-shaped snacks like *Kannappam* at local shrines to heal physical ailments.

Moreover, the identity of the Koyas represents a Third Space, neither purely West Asian nor purely Malayali. Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of postcolonial hybridity and the concept of culinary creolization provide a useful framework for interpreting this aspect of Mappila gastronomy. This hybridity is directly expressed in dishes like *Chattipathiri* and the coconut-banana *Curry*. These recipes combine global trade influences, such as rich baking techniques, refined ghee, and West Asian spice profiles, with indigenous ingredients of the Malabar soil, specifically coconut milk, local rice varieties, and native plantains. This culinary synthesis mirrors the socio-historical reality of the Koyas, where the matrilineal heritage of the Malayali mother meets the mercantile legacy of the Arab father.

The narrative reaches its emotional peak following the death of Paathummeyi, culminating in the Final Mourning Meal served by Ummer Koya. This closing act serves as a literary device that completely dismantles the Veblenian structures of the ancestral house. Throughout the novel, the Sultan Veedu deploys food as an instrument of conspicuous consumption and social exclusion. Ummer's final meal for his grand-aunt shifts the meaning of food from public ostentation to private gratitude. Rather than using food to signal superiority over social rivals, Ummer uses the meal to honor the woman who starved so that he and his sister might survive. Furthermore, the meal subverts Veblen's concept of conspicuous leisure, which dictated that high status required complete abstention from manual work. By funding this final feast through the proceeds of his own manual labor, the kind of labor that the feudal family had previously mocked, Ummer validates Paathummeyi's life and transforms the historic shame of the snack-seller into an assertion of earned dignity. Finally, the feast collapses the physical and social divisions represented by the six stoves of the feudal kitchen. While the ancestral hearth segregated family members by economic rank and excluded outsiders, Ummer's final mourning meal is radically egalitarian. He brings together the feudal elders, the working class, and the political dissenters known as *Kafirs*, inviting them all to share the same food in a unified space. In doing so, P.A. Muhammad Koya's *Sultan Veedu* demonstrates how culinary narratives register the decline of feudal structures, mapping the transition from aristocratic exclusion to a modern, egalitarian humanism.

To sum up, the culinary landscape of Malabar in Koya's work chronicles a broader socio-political transformation. Through the microcosm of the Mappila kitchen, the novel demonstrates how food can serve as a tool of feudal oppression, a weapon of subaltern survival, and an instrument of social reform. By tracing Ummer Koya's journey from an impoverished orphan to an independent citizen, and Paathummeiyi's transition from a shamed domestic worker to an honored provider, the narrative captures the decline of aristocratic feudalism. The final mourning meal dismantles the exclusionary gastro-politics of the past, replacing aristocratic pride with a vision of dignity, labor, and human solidarity.

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