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### Edible Identities: Food, Affect, and Selfhood in Chef

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**Abstract:** *This article examines food through the literary perspective that food is not merely eating material; it is associated with identity, passion and emotional connection. It presents food as a powerful symbol through the film Chef (2017). This film focused on an individual who wanted to become a popular chef, strives to achieve his goal and manage his personal relationships. The paper argues that the film functions as a medium of self-discovery and narrative device. Through cooking, an individual can achieve the sense of identity, show creativity, and restore harmony within his family. The film can be seen as a literary text where food becomes a symbol of multiple layers that expresses deeper meanings of life: that food is not merely for physical sustenance but can also become a medium for emotional expression.*

**Keywords:** *Identity, Passion, Food, Self-Discovery, Transformation*

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### Introduction

In the contemporary era food is not merely the medium of survival; rather, it can also function as a symbol of culture & emotional expression. The role of food is increasingly significant in the film as well as in the literature. The film *Chef* effectively demonstrates that food serves as a central element in the Roshan Kalra's life, as he describes that "most people are driven by compulsion by emotional impulse, whereas he is guided by sensory instinct, specially taste and aroma"(Chef). Roshan K. leaves away his house and disconnected from his family in the course of narrative, and after he experiencing several struggles, he is eventually reunited with his family through the medium of food only. The article explores how food becomes a significant symbol and literary tool.

### Food as Destination and Art

In the film *Chef*, food is a prominent aspect, as it is directly associated with passion and art. For Roshan K., cooking is not merely a profession, but deeply connected with his emotions. Through cooking he attains recognition. When he cooks, he has a distinct sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. As he conflicts with his family in order to pursue his ambition of becoming a chef. His family wanted him to become an engineer or a doctor; they perceived it as an insignificant business. He will only become a mere cook (Chef). But after enduring significant struggles, he did so considerable effort and emerges a reputable chef. He was known for his cooking. He was famous primarily due to this passion, otherwise, no one would know who he



was. Even his family fails to support him; that's why he leaves his house to fulfil his aspirations (Kaushal). When he cooked the dishes, he articulates his identity and imagination. As no one supported him, no one was there; every person left him, but still he wanted to live and establish a small restaurant, and that restaurant shaped his personality (Chef) He hires a staff under his name. He constructs his individuality independently. When he worked at his restaurant, he encounters numerous challenges as he feels confined; he felt that there were multiple difficulties. He lacks autonomy; he could not give time to his family. He becomes frustrated; it suggests that freedom is essential for an artist to show his creativity. He sacrificed everything; he is unable to devote time with his son. But because of this frustration, he fought with a customer because the customer criticises his food. He is unable to accept the criticism so he fought with him, and that conflict damages his reputation. Through the technologies, this video went viral; he is widely criticised. According to him, he took his stand; he refuses to tolerate criticism for his food because it's his hard work, after all. Every chef cooks food with sincerity and dedication. If the food is good or not, each customer should respond constructively and should have to appreciate the chef's hard work. As it is not so easy to stand in the kitchen, especially in the summer, one still has to stand and cook. For instance, if we take an example of daily life, a mother always cooks in the kitchen in every season. She does not express complaint, but she demonstrates care of her child, and on the other side, if that child does not like food, his mother is not satisfied. She feels emotionally affected. As it is not a demanding task to stand in the kitchen for a whole day. Same as with Roshan, when he was criticised by everyone, he experiences a loss of identity, as his business partner wanted to fire him and attempts to undermine his identity, so he leaves the position and returns to his family. If we look from a literary perspective, this concept can be understood as artistic self-expression, where food becomes a canvas and chefs become artists. This is comparable to poetry & painting, although the medium is different.

### **Food As Individuality and Self-Realisation**

The central theme of the film is individuality and self-realisation. When the protagonist, i.e., Roshan, lost his identity following a conflict arising from frustration, he experiences a sense of emptiness. Food emerges as the only significant element that can give peace to his mind. When he lost his identity, he undergoes significant difficulties as he struggled with the emotional and psychological breakdown. This phase of his life resembles a state of despair. But when he came back to Kochi, he met his family, his wife, and his son, and then he spends time with them; he begins to overcome his mental stress. Initially, he separates from his wife, and they undergo divorce, however during his difficult time, she remains his primary support, assisting him to rebuilding both his career and identity. She first allows him time to heal. Healing plays a crucial role in an individual's life. He spent time with his son; he begins to explore several aspects of his past and travels across familiar places where he used to go in his childhood. He revisits Ramlal Chacha and tastes the Chole Bhature again (Chef). He revisits a restaurant known for specially dal fry served with tomato chutney, but finds the chutney



unavailable (Chef), as the man who made it had passed way; consequently, he tries to recreate it using his personal understanding of the recipe. Through cooking he gradually heals himself, and finally he met with his wife's friend. He was a businessman; he offers him an idea to rebuild himself. Then he provides him a truck so he could establish his cafe. It illustrates that a true person support often emerges during hard times. Roshan attempts to understand himself once again. He was ready to rebuild his career, and he develops a sense of hope that he could do anything with his art, passion, and hard work. He tried to find himself, his true identity as a chef. When he started the cafe, his creativity fully bloomed. He tried with many new ideas, new experiences, and different cuisines; through this, he explores his passion completely. Through the journey of rebuilding, he realises his real identity as a creative chef, not a restricted employee or unemployed. For instance, Vikas Khanna was from a small background; he established his identity through food only. He represents cultural roots on a global platform; similarly, Roshan Kalra also rediscovers his identity and recognises his actual worth.

### **Reunion of Father and Son Through Food**

This represents the emotional phase of Roshan's life when he met his son Armaan. When he was away for a long period there were relationship issues between them, a significant communication gap and a sense of disconnection. Usually parents are generally able to support their child, but if one parent lives away, a child experiences a sense of emptiness. A single parent can manage responsibilities, but sometimes a child often need the presence of both parents. The same feeling Armaan faced in his life although he had his mother but still he longs for his father's presence. When Roshan came back, Armaan emerges as a source of emotional healing. Both gradually heal together. Food becomes a bridge between them. As Roshan visit Chandi Chowk with his son to taste Chole Bhature, prepared by Ramlal Chacha. They revisit to his ancestral house to meet his father, who criticises Roshan's identity; although the food served by the servant is not appreciated, his father continues to question his profession, referring to him as a 'rasoiya', which Roshan corrects by asserting the term 'chef' (Chef). Then they also try Kappa (Tapioca), along with Idiyappam, Kahna ki Pindi (Chef). When they started travel together they come to understand each other, they develop a strong bonding (Bhatnagar). They build a trust between each other. Cooking become a strong element between their relationship. In most of the times eating serves as a way where people can connect with each other but here cooking becomes a shared experience. Through the cafe journey, when Armaan feels sad, his father used to cook and serve him a new dishes. Even, Armaan gives a name to a dish, namely 'Rotza', which means Rotiwala Pizza, whenever Roshan cooks the food he first serves it to his child, and then eat himself and serves others (Chef). It clearly shows that how food can become a means of expressing priority, how a father demonstrates to his son that he is his priority through food. From a literary perspective, food becomes a medium of communication, where actions carry greater meaning than words.

### **Food As Journey and Modification**



The film follows the structure of a journey narrative. The journey of the café is not merely geographical travel ; rather, it represents an inner transformation. The film illustrates how Roshan reconstructs himself by sustained effort , moderately regaining recognition as he personally cleans and rebuilds the truck with the assistance of Armaan ( Ramnath). He conveys important values to Armaan if an individual wants to achieve something one must be willing to perform every work, regardless of its nature. Subsequently, he renovates a truck by furnishing it through the items that is needed for cooking. During this journey he encounters Alex, a truck driver who facilitates his mobility across different regions. Initially, they visit a region where he got to know the organic cooking practices such as varutharacha. It highlights cultural authenticity , as cooking is carried out using wood rather than gas (Chef).

In Kerala, he serves food free of cost , which attracts a large crowd. When questioned about this decision a man assumes that he believes the local people cannot afford the food(Chef). However, Roshan clarifies that it is the first day of his venture and he intends to introduce his culinary skills; he further asserts that if the Kerala people's appreciate it , it will be accepted in the whole world (Chef) . This moment shows not only self confidence in his craft but also the artistic nature of cooking, where both emotion and communication play a significant role. The journey extends to Goa, where they ate street food such as poi with chai. Here Roshan experiments with new dishes like 'Rotza' and offers them free of cost; however, due to huge demand, the food remains undercooked(Chef). When Armaan dismisses the issue by stating that the food is free, Roshan immediately corrects him by invoking the principle of 'Guru Langar' , emphasising that feeding people is a holy act that needs honesty and responsibility, regardless of cost(Chef). Subsequently, he gains fame through social media platforms such as Twitter. They visit to Delhi, he demonstrates a strong understanding of the choices of the people of Delhi . They used to sell the food there and he eventually meets his father his father visits the truck cafe named Rasta café , tastes Rotza, and expresses satisfaction ;when Roshan refers to himself as a 'Rasoiya Hai aapka putter' , his father this time corrects him by acknowledging him as a 'chef', a popular chef (Chef). The journey of a chef is not easy, an individual must confront numerous challenges. In this process Roshan acquires new experiences, he met new people, visit new places, gains new perspective. Roshan ultimately realises his transformed self. He attains maturity, emotionally stability and self-awareness. In the literary content, it follows a bildungsroman structure which reveals the growth and development of the protagonist.

## **Food As Independence and Freedom**

When Roshan worked in the UK, he became frustrated. He felt constrained. His creativity and his identity both are suppressed there. But when he started his food cafe again on a truck, he experiences a sense of freedom ( Ramnath) . Here food functions as a symbol of independence, where he can do operate independently without restrictions. He follows his own principles. He attains individuality. When an artist accomplish freedom, artistic expression emerges more



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genuinely and with greater satisfaction. They prepare food with creativity and gain identification through their craft. This freedom is not only professional but personal also. Roshan learns to make decisions about his life. He learns how to maintain his family harmony, and he realises that in times of need there was no one except his wife and his son. He refines his culinary skills and achieves an independent life.

### **Symbolism and Literary Depth**

The film *Chef*, if we analyse it very deeply, symbolism plays a crucial role, especially the role of food. In the film, food is not only a visible item, but it is also a multi-layered symbol that carries diverse meanings and narrative at a deeper literary level. Food symbolises passion and desire. For Roshan Kalra, cooking is not only a profession but a form of an inner healing. Food becomes a symbol of identity. Roshan not only loses his job but also his identity. He starts cooking again; he rebuilds his individuality, and food becomes a tool of self-definition. Food becomes a symbol of an invisible bond. Food becomes a language where a person expresses himself without a words. In perspective of literary content, it is an aesthetic expression, self-discovery of a character, and a symbol of communication where meaning is constructed through the gestures and actions. On a deeper level, food emerges as a narrative metaphor. Cooking is the process where the ingredients mix, heat is applied, and finally the dish is ready. All these elements mirror Roshan's life. If a person cooks food, it requires patience, time, and balance. The same thing applies in life; life also demands effort and struggle to achieve something. This parallel provides strong literary depth to the film. Finally, food can be understood as a universal connector.

### **Conclusion**

If we analyse the film *Chef* deeply, symbolism plays a crucial role, especially the role of food. In the film, food is not only a visible item, but it is also a multi-layered symbol that carries diverse meanings and narratives at a deeper literary level. Food symbolises passion and desire. For Roshan Kalra, cooking is not only a profession but a form of inner healing. Food functions as a symbol of identity. Roshan not only loses his job but also his identity. He starts cooking again; he rebuilds his individuality, and food becomes a tool of self-definition. Food serves a symbol of an invisible bond. Food becomes a language where a person expresses himself without words. From perspective of literary content, it is an aesthetic expression, self-discovery of a character, and a symbol of communication where meaning is constructed through the gestures and actions. On a deeper level, food emerges as a narrative metaphor. Cooking is a process in which the ingredients combine, heat is applied, and finally the dish is ready. All these elements mirror Roshan's life. If a person cooks food, it requires patience, time, and balance. The same thing applies in life; life also demands effort and struggle to achieve something. This parallel provides strong literary depth to the film. Finally, food can be understood as a universal connector.



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