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**The Cultural Politics of Food and Identity in *Hallyu*: An Analysis of Select K-dramas**

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**Abstract:** *Hallyu* or the Korean wave is a cultural phenomenon that took the world by storm and in India, it became the salve to many a troubled soul during the time of the pandemic. Successive lockdowns greatly contributed to the rising popularity of South Korean entertainment industry and more specifically, the K-dramas. The present paper attempts to critically analyse how food is depicted as a crucial cultural signifier in these programmes. The various images and references associated with food become pertinent in the assertion of a Korean identity that is showcased as desirable and charming in its appeal to a wider audience. *Kimchi*, *ssambap* and *ramyeon* become much, much more than mere culinary delights, they are touted as the “essential experiences” of the Korean identity. The paper will look at select K-dramas like *You are my Destiny* (2014), *What's Wrong with Secretary Kim* (2018) and *Crash Landing on You* (2019-2020) to portray how the visual imagery of food becomes mesmerising illustrations of Korean identity politics and its perception in other Asian countries.

**Keywords:** politics of food – cultural representations – Korean identity – images and implications

**Introduction:**

**Hallyu: An Overview:** *Hallyu* or the Korean wave is an international cultural phenomenon that mesmerised the world with its broad appeal, charm and vivacity. Its success speaks volumes about the diverse ways in which we view cultural transactions and social coding. *Hallyu* demonstrates the formation of several complex layers of signifiers that elevated a national culture to one that transcended its local parameters by the careful foregrounding of a set of potent discourses that gave it its cult status. It is no longer the “Korean” wave, but a global wave that has conquered the collective imagination of a larger community whose members remain united in their passionate fervour for the cultural markers that form its crux.

The cultural codes propagated by *Hallyu* soon replaced the accepted parameters of normative categories and unleashed a new array of aesthetic, artistic and ethical value

judgments. The Korean entertainment industry soon became a force to reckon with and Korean films, dramas and music attained unprecedented levels of popularity in East Asia. One can perhaps argue that it even supplanted the West-centric models of emulation that had earlier exerted a riveting influence on the popular imagination of the region. While Korean movies became known for its innovative plots and brilliant casting, K-pop revolutionised the music scene and the members of the various bands attained quasi-divine status in the eyes of millions of impressionable teenagers. However, it is K-drama that reached out to a wider audience spanning age, gender and social divides. K-dramas are in vogue because “cultural consumption is a negotiation process between consumers and cultural artefacts. In this process, consumers invest their time, money, energy and emotional allowances in cultural commodities in order to acquire pleasure and make meaning.” (Shim, 2008, 26)

K-dramas carefully cultivate the image of Korea that is showcased before an international audience and this is one of the most crucial aspects of the *Hallyu* ideology. Korean culture is vividly captured and its most alluring vignettes are showcased through these programmes that boast of stunning visuals and lavish productions. The present paper tries to analyse how food becomes a pivotal cultural tool in K-dramas that adroitly accentuates the desirability of Korean identity. Culinary items are transformed into cultural signifiers that elucidate the uniqueness of Korean culture and they also act as aesthetic ideals that celebrate the exclusivity of Korean identity.

Food has always been inextricably linked with one’s cultural identity. In visual media, food often becomes a semiotic tool to transmit and decode cultural codes. Many theoreticians have commented on the decisive linkage between food and identity. As Stano (2015) aptly puts it:

Food preferences, taboos and habits, by revealing our taste, express our identity. Moreover, as we live in an increasingly globalised world, characterised by a number of hybridisation processes, the crossing and overlapping among different “food identities” has become evident and consistent, incessantly relating *identity to alterity*. It becomes therefore essential to consider and investigate the links existing between the signs, texts, discourses, and practices concerning the food universe, on the one hand, and the processes of construction and the forms of expression of cultural identity – or better, *identities* -, on the other hand. (Stano, 2015, p.xvii)

Food, therefore, is no longer a simplistic dietary preference, it reveals volumes about one’s identity and perspectives. The present paper proposes to analyse the elements of food in select K-dramas like *You are my Destiny* (2014), *What’s Wrong with Secretary Kim* (2018) and *Crash Landing on You* (2019) to unravel the complex code of signifiers that is inevitably linked to the politics of identity.

**The Familial Bonding over Food:** Food is often perceived as a bonding factor and this is perhaps ubiquitous in most cultures. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that K-dramas also make use of this time-tested formula. However, certain items of food are specifically slotted

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so as to associate such items with familial traits of caring and unconditional love. Some items are valued for its simplicity and contrasted with expensive food items that signify the pejorative aspect of a fast-paced life which has no place for familial concerns. Such an indirect association is indicative of a choice that a character in the drama will eventually have to make; towards a simplistic familial life or a sophisticated life that is perhaps lacking in such warmth.

In the drama *You are my Destiny*, Lee Gun (played by Jang Hyuk) is impressed by the *Ssambap*<sup>1</sup> that his mother-in-law (played by Song Ok Sook) prepares. As the millionaire who is unwittingly forced to abandon his glamorous girlfriend and marry the dull secretary, he is portrayed as a man who is perplexed and suspicious of his wife and her relatives. In episode 3, he is literally dragged for a *ssambap* meal and he finds himself in a very tough predicament. From this recalcitrant stand, he slowly transforms into a more humane and caring individual who visits his mother-in-law and eats the *ssambap* prepared by her. He alternates between calling her mother and *ssambap* lady and the switching of these appellations suggest that *ssambap* is more than a comfort food; it is her token of affection and his silent plea for acceptance. Even after Lee Gun's relationship with his wife, Kim Mi Young (played by Jang Na Ra) becomes strained, he continues to visit his mother-in-law and their familial bonding is subtly and poignantly textured with his adamant demands for *ssambap*. Here, *ssambap* is not merely a culinary delight, it is a dish that is associated with simple living; a dish that brings back nostalgic memories of home-cooked meals and cherished reminiscences.

Throughout the series, food is strategically placed in order to highlight its resonance in emotionally charged moments. A mother's affection, a wife's devotion, a friend's support and a plethora of similar situations can be layered with more sub-texts by bringing in specific culinary items that accentuate the cultural context in which the scene is situated. Such cultural tags function as positive connotations within the medium and supply the audience with feel-good boosters that further foreground the uniqueness of Korean culture. While watching Lee Gun's affinity for *ssambap*, the audience is at the same time reflecting on how Korean culture treasures the positive ideal of family.

*You are my Destiny* also has several instances where mealtimes are depicted as an important ritual for the *chaebol*<sup>2</sup> family of Lee Gun. It is pertinently alluded to as a time when family members cast aside their differences and come together. Food takes centre stage in this familial ritual that is emphasised as an essential component of Korean culture. Family is posited as one of the defining factors of Korean societal structure and the drama highlights how familial bonding is of paramount importance, both to the *chaebols* and the working class. Both Lee Gun's uber rich family and Mi Young's working-class family have their own mealtime rituals that they cherish and uphold. Mealtimes assume a crucial role in the drama as they become junctures where decisions are taken and resolutions are passed. Though the characters are often portrayed in restaurants, such meals are not endowed with the gravitas that is usually reserved for family mealtimes.

Food that is shared within the bounds of the family signify the rapport shared among the individual members and the effort taken in preparing the dishes is often lauded as a commendable trait. In episode 9, the growing affection between Lee Gun and Mi Young is cleverly suggested by how she prepares special lunches for him and how he reacts warmly to her overtures. Though the lunch box is deceptively simple with neatly arranged vegetables and rice, the emotional value invested in the gesture makes the food extremely appealing to the senses. Mi Young is the quintessential loving wife, who invests her time and effort in making her husband sumptuous and nutritious food. And Lee Gun is expected to cherish this gesture and food thus enhances the fragile concord in their interpersonal dynamics.

Food thus becomes an active ingredient in strengthening the bonds of kinship. In the immensely popular 2018 drama, *What's Wrong with Secretary Kim*, Kim Mi So (played by Park Min-Young) and her sisters often get together for meals and the items of food on display (pork skin in episode 4, fried chicken and beer in episode 3) serve as a tangible reminder of their shared memories. These instances bring out the camaraderie shared among the sisters and the profound sense of commitment that they share as a family. This sibling bond is in stark contrast to that shared between Lee Young Joon (played by Seo-joon Park) and Lee Sung Yeon (played by Lee Tae-Hwan). The brothers share a deeply embittered relationship that is made even more complex by their haunted past. Family meals are taut with tension (episode 4), but as their mutual animosity thaws, a simultaneous relaxation is perceived in the mealtimes as well. Therefore, one may even argue that the mutable dynamics between characters is cleverly manipulated using food as a familial signifier.

The comfort offered by food is depicted as a panacea for emotional malaise. In episode 5, an emotionally vulnerable Lee Young Joon is comforted by Kim Mi-So's *ramyeon*<sup>3</sup> and is almost taken aback by its delectable taste. As a health-conscious *chaebol*, he admits that he never likes to try processed food laced with chemicals. But the first taste of *ramyeon* proves to be addictive and he is shown slurping the noodles down with gusto. On Mi-So's suggestion, he adds *kimchi*<sup>4</sup> to his noodles and the effect is almost magical. Here, Young Joon's fascination for *ramyeon* is compounded by the fact that Mi-So serves it. He is thrilled that she is taking the effort to care for him and his elation with the meal is also a faithful mirroring of his emotional dependency on her. "In this scene, ramyun doesn't only show the rich and removed lifestyle of the rich male lead but also indicates his eagerness to experience the same things as the female lead. It speaks to his character and where the plot is going – that Lee Young-joon is also willing to step into the world of Kim Mi-so." (Li, 2020)

Later, in episode 14, Mi-so makes Young Joon breakfast after the consummation of their relationship and this is again construed as an act of intimacy. Their physical intimacy is complemented by their emotional intimacy and food again becomes the medium. While Mi-So cooks the breakfast, Young Joon serves it to her, thereby reflecting their mutual

compatibility. Here, again food becomes the channel of communication; one that communicates without words.

As their relationship deepens, Young Joon is further introduced to Mi-So's favourite culinary dishes, which are all alien items for him. As a member of the elite *chaebols*, he never consumed grilled pork skin or rind meat and all these items become a novelty for him. This foray into a new culinary experience is akin to a cultural baptism for him as he learns to accept and respect Mi-So's family. In episode 10, Young Joon tries desperately to curry favour with his prospective sisters-in-law by eating as many cheap crabs as he can, just to prove that in spite of being a *chaebol*, he is determined to learn and accept their way of life. The class divide that separates the couple is deftly depicted through the culinary divide that separates them. Even the hunt for clams in episode 10 hints at the economic divide between them. As a member of the rich elite, Young Joon had the luxury of being served fresh food all the time, without really being aware of it. But Mi-so's family is not so privileged and they catch their clams so as to enjoy its fresh taste. Young Joon redeems himself in front of the sisters by his eager acceptance of their social circle and it is rather interesting to note that food is again employed as the bonding factor.

Food thus becomes the metaphorical bridge that paves way for people from diverse social circles to accept each other. Though the demarcating lines between classes are often reinforced by food habits, at least in K-drama, one gets to hail food as a unifying agent. The rich *chaebol* who is fascinated by unpretentious culinary delights offered by a character from the working class is almost a cliché in K-drama and yet it oddly fascinates the audience. It can be argued that this fascination is guided by food's liberating prowess. Or it can be a testimony to how *ramyeon* and *ssambap* have the enchanting ability to transcend ideological barriers built by mere mortals.

**The South, the North and the Love of Food:** Ever since the Korean peninsula has been politically demarcated into the North and the South, it has been the subject of many controversies. There have been countless movies, dramas and documentaries that dealt with the contentious topic and the 2019 K-drama, *Crash Landing on You* attained cult status with its theme of forbidden romance between a North Korean captain and a South Korean *chaebol* heiress. The poignant love story between Captain Ri Jeong Hyuk (played by Hyun Bin) and Yoon Se-Ri (played by Son Ye-Jin) is made even more alluring by how food forges unbreakable ties between a rich, spoilt heiress and earnest, impoverished soldiers who come together to form the most unlikely friendship. The drama was also lauded for its focus on authenticity and the food scenes had been incorporated with much fidelity to its original source.

The dishes and preparation methods give more context to the characters and their status and access, the availability of technology, as well as their family and community traditions. The act of breaking bread with comrades shows camaraderie, the painstaking communal process of preparing kimchi sheds light to relationships

surrounding food, and even the mere act of serving someone with handmade noodles in a warm broth gives a sense of care and nurturing. (Metro Style Team, 2020)

After Se-Ri is rescued by Jeong Hyuk, she hides in his house and frequently meets his subordinates. Though both parties are initially wary of each other, their friendly banter over food eventually lays the foundation of a beautiful friendship. In episode 2, Se-Ri casually says that she consumes meat twice a day and this is met with absolute incredulity as Pyo Chi-Soo (played by Yang Kyung-won), Kim Joo-meok (played by Yoo Su-bin), Park Kwang-beom (played by Lee Sin-young) and Geum Eun-dong (played by Tang Joon-sang) are not used to such luxuries. Food, here becomes a major source of polarity as the South Korean opulence stands in stark contrast to North Korean sparseness. For both the parties, it is a cultural shock and they learn to accommodate each other. Even something as quotidian as *kimchi* appears to be a source of wonder as *kimchi* is stored in a kimchi cellar in the North and Se-Ri is astonished to know that such objects exist as she is accustomed to *kimchi* refrigerators.

In episodes 10-15, the soldiers go on an undercover mission to South Korea and they are taken aback by the grandeur and affluence. Food again becomes the medium to convey their elation and awe as all of them are ecstatic to find that *chikin*<sup>5</sup> is easily available in the South and they gorge on the delicacy. The euphoria that they demonstrate is a stark symbol of the poverty experienced by the majority of North Korean civilians. *Chikin* here assumes a symbolic value as many South Korean characters in the drama are seen to be enjoying the dish on several occasions and it stands for the affluent image that *Hallyu* is trying to project. South Korea is projected as the land of plenty but the drama doesn't resort to stereotypical depictions of Northerners as both sides have their share of heroes and villains.

Jeong Hyuk's credibility as a caring man is reinforced by food imagery. In episode 2, he offers simple yet delectable meals to Se-Ri and his care in preparing the noodles and meat cements his credentials as a considerate and attentive man. He constantly caters to her whimsical nature and their growing affection is effectively portrayed. When he painstakingly makes coffee for her from hand-ground beans (episode 4), the solemn gesture doesn't just quench her craving for premium espresso, but also intensifies her affection for him. In episode 5, Se-Ri is treated to roast corn and potatoes by Jeong Hyuk and this incident is all the more special as they cherish a moment of bliss in their dangerous journey. The tender moments between the unlikely pair are best captured using the detailed and poignant food imagery.

Se-Ri's sense of entitlement takes quite a beating when she is in the North as she has to cope with the loss of the luxuries that she had hitherto taken for granted. She learns to cherish simple dishes like roast corn and potatoes and they symbolise the simple pleasures of life that had earlier gone unnoticed in her busy schedule. Se-Ri's change in fortunes is subtly showcased through her shifting attitudes to food. In episode 4, after a foiled attempt to escape, she broods over her present predicament by enjoying a simple snack of rice crust

and sugar. She narrates to the confounded soldiers that she used to be known as the “picky princess” because of her fussy eating habits. Her drastic change in fortune is foregrounded by her earlier diet of organic oatmeal and maple syrup and dishes exclusively prepared in Michelin rated restaurants. As a member of the elite class, she could afford to pick and choose her dishes and even if she deigned to eat at a restaurant, she would only take three bites. With unconcealed pride, she declares that the chefs in her city vied for her attention and fervently hoped that she would give their culinary marvels her stamp of approval. As she reminisces, she is munching on rice crust and this single item of food is tantamount to all that she had lost. Her sparse meal becomes a very pertinent symbol of her character arc; the elite snob who is coming to terms with the harrowing certainties of life.

In Se-Ri’s transformation, food is hailed as the medium that transcends man-made boundaries. As an elite South Korean chaebol, Se-Ri preferred clam *bouillabaisse*<sup>6</sup> and *Sauvignon Blanc*<sup>7</sup>, but in North Korea, she consumes clam *bulgogi*<sup>8</sup> and *soju*<sup>9</sup> with relish (episode 4). In a rather unusual gesture for K-drama, *Crash Landing on you* makes several references to North Korean delicacies and these may have been deliberately included to preserve the authenticity of the narrative. Nevertheless, these references again fortify the argument that the love for culinary delights will surpass human adherence to social, linguistic or political ideologies.

Se-Ri’s ordeal in the North makes her a thoroughly different individual. She admires the people in the North for their resilience. After the initial hostilities and suspicion, she is embraced by the women of the village and their sisterhood is established in episode 5, where they all share “DP and beer”<sup>10</sup> in order to denounce Jeong Hyuk’s inconsiderate behaviour. Se-Ri is informed that dried pollock and beer will make all her worries disappear and the women rally around her to offer her their sympathies. Though the scene is hilarious for its comedy of errors, the food again becomes symbolic as it heightens the sense of solidarity shared by the women.

Food assumes the supporting role in many of the scenes where it accentuates the few differences and many similarities among the characters. The pleasure of indulging in comfort food is subverted in the drama where the most quotidian items in Korean cuisine provide more contentment as it comes wrapped in the intangible flavours of camaraderie and solidarity. As food establishes invaluable emotional ties between the South and the North, it perhaps succeeds in creating bonds that had earlier been deemed impossible to forge.

**Food and its palpable multi-culturality:** One may argue with absolute conviction that food is one of the most important ingredients of a successful K-drama. Like spices in an elaborate dish, it has added layers and textures that unravel the diverse nuances of Korean culture. Food occupies a very important role in Korean culture and its centrality can be ascertained by its frequent appearances in all aspects of media. There have been several K-dramas like *My Name is Kim Sam Soon* (2005), *Let’s Eat* (2013-18), *Wok of Love* (2018) that had food as its major concern. However, the present paper analyses three dramas that focus primarily

on the themes of destiny, love and dedication. Though the dramas do not focus on food as its central theme, it showcases how important food is to the Korean cultural milieu.

Food in K-dramas becomes much more than a prop. It foregrounds the intangible nuances of Korean identity and thereby endows the audience with a better perception. K-dramas invest meticulous care on the presentation of the culinary items on screen and this is indicative of the profound importance that food claims within the Korean wave. This aspect is clearly denoted by how crucial scenes are interspersed with meals or items of food that delineate the significance of the situation.

K-dramas have millions of fans all over the world and the audience is taken in not just by the colourful locales and exceptionally good-looking cast, but also by the rich and diverse strands of cultural codes that are deftly placed within the narratives. The viewers are mesmerised by the Korean culture that is astutely couched in addictive storylines and opulent presentations. It is at this juncture that food emerges as a critical catalyst that heightens the audience's appreciation of the cultural codes embedded in K-dramas. And these cultural codes are at the heart of Hallyu's colossal charisma and extensive allure.

#### **Endnotes:**

1. Ssambap is a traditional Korean lettuce wrap. Leafy vegetables and even sea weed can be used as wraps. Fillings can vary from multi-grain rice topped with fish sauce to other types of rice topped with spicy sauces. It is usually associated with Korean countryside cooking.
2. Chaebols are the huge industrial conglomerates of South Korea which are usually operated by rich families.
3. Ramyeon is instant noodles. In most Asian countries, it is a popular snack, though it is packed with MSG.
4. Kimchi is a very popular side-dish in Korean cuisine. It is salted and fermented vegetables and the main ingredients are napa cabbages and Korean radishes along with associated seasonings.
5. Chikin is Korean fried chicken. It's a very popular food in Korea.
6. Bouillabaisse is a traditional European fish stew. It was originally made with bony rockfish. The pricier versions include exotic items of seafood.
7. Sauvignon Blanc is a very expensive variety of white wine made from the Sauvignon grape.
8. Clam bulgogi can be roughly translated as Clam barbecue. In North Korea, Petrol Clam barbecues are very popular. Clams are set on fire using petrol and the after the clams are thoroughly cooked, the shells are removed and the meat is consumed. This dish is usually accompanied by the alcoholic beverage, Soju.
9. Soju is an alcoholic beverage common in the Korean peninsula. It is usually made from rice, wheat, barley, potato or sweet potato.
10. DP is dried pollock. The fish is extremely popular in Korea and there are different kinds of dried pollock available in the market, based on the kind of fish that is dried.

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