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# Spice Routes and Story Maps: Transgressive Cartography of Mappila Cuisine in Kerala

**Roshni Shree S**
**Dr Shima Mathew**

This paper explores Mappila cuisine not merely as a static cultural artifact but as a hybrid spatial construct that continuously negotiates identity, power and territory, and one that assumes the role of a transgressive geocultural text. Rooted in Kerala's Malabar coast, Mappila foodways emerge as a palimpsestic record of layered histories—Arab trade, colonial encounters, caste contestations, and gendered labour—all encoded in everyday culinary practices. Through the theoretical lens of Bertrand Westphal's geocriticism, particularly his notion of transgressivity, the paper traces the evolution of Muslim foodways in Kerala. Drawing upon Ummi Abdulla's culinary literature and the Malayalam film *Ustad Hotel*, it argues that Mappila food functions as both a cartographic and narrative device—challenging caste hierarchies, colonial legacies, and gendered silences. In doing so, Mappila cuisine becomes a palimpsest of layered spatial meanings. The paper argues that Mappila cuisine resists homogenization, asserting cultural multiplicity through cooking, sharing and storytelling.

**Keywords**: transgressivity, palimpsest, Mappila cuisine, geocriticism, hybridity

"Chili, spice of red Thursday, which is the day of reckoning. Day which invites us to pick up the sack of our existence and shake it

inside out. Day of suicide, day of murder."- *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni[1]

**Introduction: On Maps and Meals**

French gastronome Brillat-Savarin in *The Physiology of Taste* (1825) famously proclaimed, "Tell me what kind of food you eat, and I will tell you what kind of man you are." (25) In Kerala, what and how one eats also reveals where one stands in the intricate lattice of caste, religion, migration, and memory. Food, here, is never innocent—it is deeply situated, political, and performative.

Mappila cuisine—arising from the coastal Muslim communities of North Kerala—is often framed as a subset of "Malabar food." But to do so flattens a rich palimpsest that has developed over centuries of trade, conquest, intermarriage, and resistance. As Manu S. Pillai reminds us in his article "The Real Kerala Story," "Not mortals alone, but the gods also mingled here with one another, whether it is tribal deities sharing space with Sanskritic ones, or Christian saints with links to Hindu temples. The region's social fabric conceded space to all major communities." The Mappila kitchen is thus a melting pot of connections, where Portuguese vinegar meets Arab dry fruits, Mughal/ Persian originated biryani dances with Jeerakashala rice, and saffron intermingles with regional spices.

This complexity is viscerally felt in contemporary representations of Mappila food. When Indian celebrity chef Sanjeev Kapoor visited the Malabar coast as part of his culinary travel series *The Biryani Journey*, he found himself in the home and commercial kitchens of Kozhikode, learning to prepare various types of Malabar biryani such as Kozhikodan, Tellicherry, and Kannur styles with local cooks. Through interviews and interactions, Kapoor reflects on the surprising absence of black pepper in the biryani, despite its historical significance as a major trade commodity. The explanation is nuanced: pepper tends to overpower the more subtle balance of spices that characterize this regional preparation. Mastery of the dish, therefore, demands not only culinary skill but also an intimate familiarity with the rhythms of local taste and inherited knowledge.

Kapoor also raises the question of whether Basmati rice, widely used in biryanis across other parts of India, could substitute

the region-specific Wayanadan Kaima, also known as Jeerakasala rice. This variety, protected under the Government of India's Geographical Indications (GI) scheme, is uniquely suited to the climatic and soil conditions of Wayanad. Its fragrance and texture are considered essential to the sensory identity of Malabar biryani and ghee rice. For Kapoor, and vicariously, for the audience, the journey becomes more than just a gastronomic adventure. It evolved into an immersive encounter with a cultural landscape mapped through touch, smell, and sound. His moment of quiet awe while sharing a meal with a local family offers a compelling glimpse into how food acts as a sensory cartography of place, intimacy, and identity.

In this animated culinary landscape, Bertrand Westphal's theory of transgressivity becomes salient. Space, he argues, is not stable—it is essentially transgressive. It is not fixed, rather it fluctuates, and it is caught by this perpetual motion that can be called an inherent transgressivity of all spatiality and of every perception of place (45). Mappila cuisine, accordingly, becomes an edible cornucopia of transgressions—of spatial boundaries, social norms, and historiographic omissions.

**Entangled Histories: Mappila Food as Maritime Palimpsest**

The Mappila cuisine has roots that lie in the voyages that reached the ports of Kerala via Indian Ocean and thus has multiple influences—Arab, Portuguese, Dutch, Syrian, French, British and Jewish. Arab traders settled along the Malabar coast as early as the 7th century CE, establishing not only mercantile but also matrimonial relationships with local families. When Vasco da Gama landed in Calicut in 1498, he opened the door for European influences. These unions birthed a syncretic culture that challenged both Hindu orthodoxy and Arab purism.[2]

Its roots lie in the monsoon-shaped circuits of the Indian Ocean world, where food, faith, and family traversed boundaries long before the idea of the nation-state. The ports of Kerala such as Calicut, Ponnani, Kannur, and Beypore were not endpoints, but nodes in a cosmopolitan network linking the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, Southeast Asia, and Europe. In this geography of flows, Mappila food

emerged as a layered text—spiced with Arab memories, Portuguese aggression, and Kerala earthiness.

Texts such as the *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin* by Zainuddin Makhdoom II (late 16th century) document the early struggles of the Mappilas, portraying them as both religious minorities and stakeholders resisting Portuguese imperialism. Their cuisine mirrored this duality—simultaneously local and international, pious yet unyielding against western influence. As Roland E. Miller observes in *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends*, the Mappilas are a people of synthesis. Though geographically, linguistically and culturally, Mappilas are identified with Kerala, their food, language and lifestyle evolved through a peaceful communication and trade relations between Arabia and Kerala.[3]

This synthesis defied orthodoxies on both sides: challenging Hindu caste purity as well as Arab culinary conventions.

Consider the *ari pathiri*, a thin rice flatbread cooked on a tawa. On the surface, it is a humble staple. But its rice base subverts the wheat-centric North Indian Islamic foodways: "The only way that wheat flour was used at dinner was to make *gothamba pathil.*" (Abdulla. *A Kitchen Full of Stories.* 48) Simple and unadorned, ari pathiri has qualities that resonate with Sufi ideals of humility and surrender (khidmat and faqr). Likewise, *arikadukka* (stuffed mussels) symbolises a community that quite literally filled local bodies with foreign moulds. Mussels, or *kallumakaya* are local seafood: "My ancestral home in Thikkody was right by the Arabian Ocean. The rocks against which the waves would crash was the best place to find mussels and other shellfish. Mussels were found in abundance in the region, and sure enough, they found their way into our cuisine as well" (Abdulla, 73). Arikadukka incorporates meat-stuffing techniques that have middle-eastern origins.[4] Even desserts tell their own tale. *Mutta mala* (egg garlands), made by pouring beaten egg yolks into boiling sugar syrup, traces its lineage back to *fios de ovos* from Portugal:

> In the 14th and 15th centuries, deep inside the convents of Portugal, nuns discovered an unexpected use for egg whites – they stiffened their vestments with them. But it was the leftover yolks that

> sparked culinary magic. The nuns began creating fios de ovos – delicate, golden threads of egg yolk cooked in sugar syrup, a dessert that would eventually travel across the oceans with Portuguese explorers and evolve into the Malabar classic known as Muttamala. (onmanorama)

In the coastal towns of North Malabar, particularly in places like Koyilandi, where Vasco da Gama first set foot on Indian soil, Muttamala became a cherished festival dish. On her self-titled *YouTube* channel, Abida Rasheed recalls how, in the lead-up to Eid, the matriarch of the household would collect eggs for over a month, preparing the intricate dessert with patience and devotion. Each golden strand was a gesture of love and a symbol of celebration.

Paired with Mutta Surka (a steamed delicacy made from the leftover egg whites) this duo turns humble ingredients into culinary poetry. Here, eggs and sugar transcend their simplicity, becoming edible metaphors for care, tradition, and the sweetness of welcome. Across continents and centuries, this dessert whispers a shared effect: how sweetness, no matter the language, remains universally understood.[5]

Such dishes embody transgressivity in the Westphalian sense—they collapse binary geographies and open up spaces for cross-pollinated identities. Through its dishes, one can trace not just the history of a community, but the layered cartographies of empire, religion, caste, and longing. Food, here, becomes a way of knowing the world otherwise—through spice, sugar and nice memories.

**Ummi Abdulla's Kitchen: A Feminist Cartography**

Ummi Abdulla can be considered the matriarch of Mappila cuisine as she was the one who brought the little-known culinary traditions of Malabar Muslims to outside attention for the first time through her work, *Malabar Muslim Cookery* first published in 1981. In archiving and preserving unique recipes passed down orally through women's networks, Abdulla inscribes domestic labour into textual history. The Mappila kitchen, long dismissed as peripheral, becomes a site of epistemic agency.

By writing in English and systemising the unmeasured intuitions of her foremothers, Abdulla performs what Westphal calls "border crossings." Borders are sites of movement and transformation,

shaped by cultural, historical, and narrative interactions: "Transgression is coextensive with mobility." (45) Abdulla's recipes embody this palimpsestic quality—it is both map and memoir. This creates a "third space," a hybrid zone where cultural differences intersect, fostering inclusivity and transcending traditional binaries. (70) By translating the domestic into the textual, Abdulla crosses what Homi Bhabha calls the "in-between space:" a third space[6] where there is hybridity and one which dynamically incorporates the contingent nature of difference.

As Anthony Bourdain writes in *Kitchen Confidential*, "Good food is very often, even most often, simple food." (93) Like Madhur Jaffrey, who translated the intricacies of North Indian cooking for diasporic audiences, or Meenakshi Ammal, who codified Tamil Brahmin cuisine, Abdulla brings system to the unsystematised. But unlike these figures, she does not cater to elite culinary nostalgia. Her focus remains firmly on everyday food using simple ingredients. But simplicity, in Abdulla's case, is deceptive; though her recipes are of everyday food "using the same handful of ingredients in various permutations to create dishes that taste completely different from each other," (Oommen) her recipes are not minimal—they are precise acts of cultural preservation, feminist resistance, and culinary diplomacy. Jhumpa Lahiri, in her work *The Namesake*, offers a parallel exploration of food as a medium through which histories and identities are negotiated. when Ashima Ganguly, on a sticky August evening, stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in bowl, food goes beyond sustenance and transgresses into identity, culture and memory. In this, she echoes Abdulla's exploration of the ways in which food practices, seemingly simple and unremarkable, carry the weight of cultural legacy and resistance. Both authors understand food as a powerful marker of identity and a medium through which the past and present are intertwined.

### *Ustad Hotel*: of Memory and Migration

In Anwar Rasheed's *Ustad Hotel* (2012), food becomes a vehicle of moral philosophy and "the poetics of space."[7] Faizi's journey from a chef who studied in Switzerland to working at his uppuppa's

humble restaurant in Kozhikode is a deliberate act of cartographic reclamation of space and identity. The film, much like Ummi Abdulla's culinary writing, portrays food not as mere nourishment but as a dynamic, transformative medium that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, evoking the complexities of postcolonial and migrant identity.

"Anyone can fill the tummy. But the key is in filling their hearts with joy. That is the true purpose of cooking," (trans.) Faizi is told by his grandfather. The line echoes Sufi ideas of *niyyah* (intention) and reframes food not as product but as a practice. Ustad Hotel becomes a cinematic dargah[8], where the kitchen becomes a space of devotion, the food a dhikr[9], and Faizi's transformation a pilgrimage of the heart. Like discovering mohabbath in the cup of sulaimani, Faizi transforms by rejecting the world of sanitized, Michelin-starred fine dining in favour of something rooted, relational, and reparative. He learns that healing a stranger with biryani or offering a cup of sulaimani to someone in grief can be as redemptive as any sacred act. As Westphal might observe:

> Transgression corresponds to the crossing of a boundary beyond which stretches a marginal space of freedom. When it becomes a permanent principle, it turns into transgressivity. The transgressive gaze is constantly directed toward an emancipatoryhorizon in order to see beyond a code and territory that serves as its "domain. (47)

This theme resonates across several contemporary Malayalam films that centre or allude to Mappila food cultures. For instance, Thallumaala (2022)[10], though stylistically different from Ustad Hotel, grounds itself in the youthful swagger of Malabar. Street food, biryani joints, and wedding feasts are integral to the film's cultural palette. Here, food becomes performative, part of a larger aesthetic of Malabari identity that is unapologetically loud, and defiant. Across these narratives, Mappila cuisine emerges not merely as an ethnic marker but as a geocritical and transgressive cultural text: a way of mapping memory, reclaiming identity, and resisting erasure. Whether in the quiet care of a mother's kitchen or the bustling chaos of a beachside restaurant, these films remind us that food is always more than what is on the plate; it is a story, a space, and, most importantly, homeliness.

## Conclusion: Recipes as Resistance

In conclusion, to cook is to perform an act of "transgressivity." In case of Mappila food, be it in real life as with Ummi Abdulla or in literature as with Faizi, to cook is to stage a rebellion—against colonial homogenisation, casteist purity codes, gendered erasure, and historical amnesia. Each meal is an act of archiving; each spice is the representation of a memory. Mappila cuisine does not belong neatly in categories, rather it spills over refusing containment.

Mappila cuisine does not conform: it bears traces of Arab, Persian, Portuguese, and local influences, yet refuses to be reduced to any one of them. In its hybridity lies its radical power. It flows across boundaries—geographic, cultural, and linguistic—asserting the right to be plural, to be fluid. It is in this excess, this refusal to be contained, that Mappila food becomes a form of subaltern cartography: a map drawn not with borders but with aromas, textures, and inherited gestures. In the act of cooking and sharing food, a different kind of geography emerges—one rooted in mohabbath, memory, and embodied knowledge. To cook, then, is to reclaim space. To serve, is to tell a story. And to eat, is to remember.

## Endnotes

1 Divakaruni, C. B. (1997). *The mistress of spices* (p. 39). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

2 Mamgain, A. (2018, December 21). Malabar's Mappila magic cuisine. *The Citizen*.

3 "The book represents a worthy attempt to fulfil an imminent need towards understanding those Indian Muslims who are away from the centres of what is commonly understood as "Indian" Islam. As the author has observed, the direct relation of Mappilas […] with Arabian Islam is as significant as their isolation from "Indo-Persian" Islam."
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4 The technique is described in medieval Arabic cookbooks like *Kitab al-Tabikh* ("The Book of Dishes," 10th century)

5 There are global variations to Muttamala. In Spain, it's called huevo hilado, in Japan, it is keiran soman, in Cambodia, it is vawee, in Malaysia, it is jala mas and in Indonesia, it is foi thong

6 Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of Culture*. Routledge.

7 *The Poetics of Space* (French: La Poétique de l'Espace) is a 1958 book by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. Here, it means an emotional response to space.

8 Shrine

9 Remembrance, prayer
10 Ashraf, K. H. (Director). (2022). *Thallumaala* [Film]. OPM Cinemas.

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**Roshni Shree S**
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Sree Narayana College, Cherthala
Alappuzha, Kerala, India-688523
Email: rosh92.shreyas@gmail.com
Ph: +91 8075533211
ORCiD: 0009-0008-3304-679X
&
**Dr Shima Mathew**
Professor
Department of English
T.M Jacob Memorial Government College
Manimalakunnu
Piravom, Kerala
Pin: 686662
India
Email: shimasushan@gmail.com
Ph: +91 9496343906
ORCiD: 0000-0002-7813-2025