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Flavours of Affection: Unveiling the Culinary Symbolism in *The Founder* and *The Lunchbox*

**Aiswarya Roy,
Krishna R**

Department of English,
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham,
Amritapuri, India.

&

Dr. Krishnajakamol

Department of English,
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham,
Amritapuri, India.

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Abstract:

Food functions as a potent emblem of cultural identity and character development in both *The Founder* (2016) and *The Lunchbox* (2013). Ray Kroc's ascent in the fast-food industry is framed in *The Founder* by his relationship with food, which represents his own aspirations, the commercialization of the American Dream, and the loss of authenticity in the process of achieving success. Food turns into a vehicle for both exploitation and innovation, mirroring Kroc's ethical shift. In contrast, *The Lunchbox* uses food as a personal means of communication and emotional expression. In the fast-paced urban setting of Mumbai, the protagonist's lunchbox becomes a symbol of love, care, and cultural continuity. The movie emphasizes the importance of food in upholding traditional values while negotiating modernity. Both movies show how food not only fuels the body but also reflects deeper cultural and personal stories, offering insights into social systems, emotional ties, and identity creation. Each of these movies uses food to highlight how people's relationships with what they eat and how they generate

food can significantly influence their cultural identity and character. This study explores neuropsychanalysis, an interdisciplinary field that integrates neuroscience and psychoanalytic theory, examining how brain functions shape emotions, cognition, and behaviour, offering insights into the mind-brain connection.

Keywords: McDonald, The Founder, The Lunchbox, Neuropsychanalysis, Food.

Food, an essential pillar of human existence, has been co-opted by an industrialized system that prioritizes profit over authenticity, nutrition, and sustainability. The illusion of diversity in supermarkets belies the monopolistic grip of conglomerates that dictate consumption patterns through aggressive marketing rather than genuine culinary merit. The commodification of traditional cuisines has led to their gentrification, where ancestral recipes are appropriated, diluted, and repackaged for mass appeal, often at the expense of their cultural significance. Meanwhile, the relentless pursuit of convenience has precipitated a decline in culinary literacy, fostering an overreliance on hyper-processed, chemically-laden sustenance masquerading as nourishment.

Compounding this issue is the inherent contradiction within global food systems—while industrialized agriculture depletes natural resources and accelerates environmental degradation, vast swathes of the population remain food-insecure. The fetishization of "authenticity" in gastronomy, while seemingly a nod to tradition, often results in a superficial replication devoid of contextual integrity. To transcend this dystopian trajectory, a conscientious revaluation of food consumption is imperative—one that champions sustainability, preserves cultural heritage, and reclaims the act of cooking as both a necessity and an art form.

Food is a powerful symbol of culture, tradition, and personal identity. It is more than a way of life. The foods consumed and the ways in which they are prepared have a significant impact on a person's identity and social standing. Individuals express their uniqueness, reflect their purpose, and connect with the past through food in literature and everyday life. The art of preparing, sharing, and eating food is often a tool for character development, discovery, and the preservation of traditions. Food is important to society, culture, personal history, and sustenance, nurturing, and a sense of community. One's sense of self is closely related to the way one prepares and eats food, and this often talks about what they were in the past and how the world has changed. Food is a narrative feature in literature and everyday life that drives meaning, character development, and cultural significance because of self-creation. How one interact with food can reveal their values, challenges, and goals, whether through family eating traditions or the symbolic meaning of food in different traditions. Where the focus of a character's journey is eating, preparing, sharing, or evolving, the connection between food and character development is especially clear. One example of how food can reflect personal development is when a character's evolving relationship with food reflects their mood.

Psychological development and an understanding of a character's changing identity, morality, and social environment, which may be gained through their food preferences, cooking techniques, or through the cultural importance they give to food, or to understand whether a character rebuilds their relationship with their heritage or adapts to a new culture. Food can be both a source of comfort and a challenge in the face of change. In many cases, food is more than just a tool for survival. It becomes a storytelling device that shows character growth. Food also plays an important role in cultural identity. The history, traditions, and values of a community are preserved through culinary traditions, which are often passed down from generation to generation. What people serve reveals a lot about their origins, beliefs, and interpersonal relationships, even in a diasporic and globalized environment. These culinary

traditions also provide a sense of continuity and belonging, connection with ancestors, and how to preserve cultural practices. Community aspects of food, such as gathering together over shared meals, celebrating important events, or even just preparing food together, help to strengthen bonds between families, communities, and cultures. Food is a medium of cultural expression in this respect, which connects various people not only with their legacy but also with each other, promoting a collective identity rooted in shared experiences.

Neuropsychanalysis originated in the late 20th century, emerging as an interdisciplinary field that integrates psychoanalysis and neuroscience to understand the relationship between brain function and the unconscious mind. The pioneer of neuropsychanalysis is Mark Solms, a South African neuroscientist and psychoanalyst. His work bridges Freudian psychoanalysis with modern neuroscience, particularly in understanding consciousness, dreams, and emotional processing in the brain. Neuropsychanalysis, when used with food, becomes an interesting lens to explore the complex relationships between the brain, unconscious motives, emotions, and food, and it also delves into how the unconscious mind interacts to shape one's relationship with food. From a neuroscience perspective, eating is a complex brain process. The brain's reward system, controlled primarily by dopamine and other neurotransmitters, plays a key role in how one perceives and derives pleasure from food. Neural circuits in areas such as the hypothalamus control hunger and satiety. While the limbic system, responsible for emotions affects cravings and food preferences, the release of serotonin and dopamine when eating such comforting foods provides a feeling of happiness and calm which reinforces certain eating behaviours. Neuroscience also studies how the brain responds to environmental factors and stress related to diet. Factors such as sleep deprivation, chronic stress, and exposure to highly processed foods can change the brain's reward system, leading to excessive consumption, and may contribute to obesity and other diet-related disorders. Psychoanalysis, based on Freud's theories

explores the unconscious motivational and emotional factors of human behaviour. This field analyses the early experiences, symbolic meaning, and how unresolved conflicts in the context of food influence eating behaviour. For example, certain foods may be linked to feelings of safety or comfort based on childhood memories. In his book *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud introduces his theory of psychomotor development which states that the oral stage (birth to 18 months) is a critical period in which an infant develops a relationship with food, and if conflicts that have not been resolved occur during this period, individuals may develop lifelong attachments or aversions to particular foods or eating patterns. Psychoanalysis also considers the symbolic meaning of food, especially in people with eating disorders such as those related to love, power, or control. It offers a complex view of the complex interactions of the brain and unconscious mind in shaping eating behaviour. Integrating insights from neuroscience and psychoanalysis has the potential to revolutionize the way we understand and address issues related to food, emotion, and health. This interdisciplinary approach not only advances our understanding of human behaviour, but it also becomes a practical tool to promote a healthy and balanced relationship with food. In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of eating behaviour, neuropsychological analysis of eating aims to combine these two methodologies. For instance, people who are under a lot of stress could change their diet and engage in binge eating. Neurological systems [the brain's reward system is impacted by elevated cortisol levels] and unconscious emotional demands (using food as a coping strategy to validate unrequited emotions) explore the deeper psychological origins and molecular mechanisms of the brain. A thorough framework for comprehending such behavior is offered by neuropsychanalysis.

The Founder [2016], a biographical drama, directed by John Lee Hancock tells the story of the rise of McDonald's, one of the world's most iconic fast food restaurant chains. The film focuses on Ray Kroc [played by Michael Keaton], a struggling milkshake machine salesman

who meets Richard and Maurice, the McDonald brothers who run a small restaurant in San Bernardino, California, in the 1950s. The plot follows the journey of Ray Kroc as he becomes involved in the McDonald brothers' business. Initially impressed by the restaurant's performance, Ray offered to expand the business into franchises across the country. Even though the brothers were hesitant at first, they eventually agreed to take charge of Ray's franchise process. When the company grows, Ray's ambition and desire for control cause tension between him and the McDonald brothers. Ray took over more and more of the business. By making decisions that conflict with the McDonald brothers' core values, Ray is ultimately confronted with a situation where he legally owns the McDonald's brand. *The Founder* chronicles the rise of McDonald's, telling the story of Ray Kroc and his journey of transforming a small fast-food restaurant to become a world-class empire.

The Lunchbox (2013) is a romantic drama film directed by Ritesh Batra, set in Mumbai, India. The story centres on two main characters: Ila (played by Nimrat Kaur), a young woman trying to find a spark in her troubled marriage, and Saajan (played by Irrfan Khan), an employee, a widowed office worker who is close to retirement. The plot begins with Ila preparing a homemade lunch for her husband to impress him and improve their troubled relationship. However, it accidentally reaches Saajan instead of her husband. Saajan is a lonely man in the office, and upon receiving a packed lunch, he mistakes it to be delivered by the canteen. Upon tasting Ila's food for the first time, Saajan was immediately impressed by its quality and taste. During a conversation between Ila and her husband, she realizes that the lunchbox she had packed was not finished by her husband. To clarify this, she writes a note and puts it in the lunchbox the next day. This led to a unique exchange between Ila and Saajan, who began communicating anonymously over lunchboxes. As they tell stories of their struggles, grievances, and personal desires, they form a quiet bond even though they have never met. Ila tells Saajan about her broken marriage. Meanwhile, Saajan opens up about his

loneliness and life. As their relationship deepens, both characters face important decisions about their lives. Meanwhile, Ila contemplates her future, whether to move in a new direction.

Both the movies, *The Lunchbox* and *The Founder* can be analysed through the lens of neuropsychanalysis. A fascinating look at the issues of food and human behavior is offered in *The Founder*. The founders of McDonald's emphasized not just the food service but also a community experience. This fast-food chain is reminiscent of the archetypal "family meal," satisfying an unconscious desire for deep connection and familiarity. Founders, Richard and Maurice McDonald emphasized the simplicity of quality food shared in a community atmosphere, fulfilling the psychological need for comfort and stability. The brain's reward system, especially the release of dopamine, involves the consumption of calorie-dense and appetizing foods, such as those served at McDonald's. This is tied to the emotional appeal that the brand creates. They associate food with nostalgia and satisfaction. McDonald's innovative "quick service system" entices the brain to want immediate rewards. Neuropsychanalytic approaches emphasize how rapid food delivery satisfies physiological hunger and psychological needs in response to the characteristics of modern consumer culture. Kroc's obsession with performance and replication reflects a deeper need for control. A standardized and predictable McDonald's experience gives consumers psychological confidence, fulfilling the unconscious desire for confidence in an uncertain world. Kroc's relentless drive to expand McDonald's can be interpreted as an expression of narcissistic ambition. Narcissistic ambition refers to a type of drive or desire for success that is fuelled by narcissistic traits, such as a strong need for admiration, validation, and superiority over others. People with narcissistic ambition often pursue goals not for personal fulfilment or genuine achievement but to boost their ego, maintain a sense of grandiosity, or gain power and control. It uses the cultural symbolism of fast food to assert its superiority. Psychoanalytically, food becomes the medium through which Kroc satisfies his need for power and self-validation:

“I remember the first time I saw that name stretched across your stand out there. It was love at first sight. knew right then and there... I had to have it. And now I do.”(John, 2016, 01:42:11).

Kroc's business strategy leverages a broader social reward system where food is a commodity and is associated with success, status, and innovation. The film criticizes how food, a primary need, is exploited for capitalist profit. It has neuropsychiatric effects on how the system hijacks the human reward circuit.

The McDonald brothers' original vision of food as a craft [the joy of making and sharing food] differed sharply from Kroc's industrial approach and extrinsic motivation (mass production driven by profit). McDonald's rise as mass hunger has changed the way food is perceived and consumed. Change is not only in personal behavior but also in nutrition and happiness. It influences the surrounding subconscious cultural script. Fast food is designed to be too delicious. It engages the brain's reward centres in ways that can promote addictive behavior. (“Is Fast Food Addictive?” by Andrea K.) McDonald's model, as portrayed in the film, harnesses the sensitivity of the nervous system to create consumers who not only crave food but also want the entire brand experience:

“It's not just the system, Dick. It's the name, That glorious name, McDonald's. It could be, anything you want it to be... it's limitless, it's wide open... it sounds, uh... it sounds like... it sounds like America. That's compared to Kroc. What a crock. What a load of crock. Would you eat at a place named Kroc's? Kroc's has that blunt, Slavic sound. Kroc's. But McDonald's, oh boy. That's a beauty. A guy named McDonald? He's never going to get pushed around in life.” (John, 2016, 01:41:08).

On a psychological level, Kroc's behavior reflects addiction, driven by an insatiable need for more. His attachment to extension reflects the same dopaminergic loops found in

compulsive behavior, which reinforces the similarity between personal and social desires. Food in *The Founder* transcends its biological function and becomes a symbol of human connection, control, ambition, and cultural change. The film reveals how food operates at the intersection of key forces and modern social pressures through the psychoanalytic lens, which creates both personal and collective identity.

The Lunchbox features food as a medium of emotional expression and transformation and at the same time portrays a deep story of human connection, loss and longing. According to neuropsychanalysis, the limbic system and orbitofrontal cortex, in particular, are involved in the reward and emotional regulation systems of the brain, which contribute to the meaning that is attached to activities such as eating. (“The Human Orbitofrontal Cortex : Linking reward to hedonic experience”) As she tries to reconnect with her estranged husband, Ila's painstakingly prepared lunches in *The Lunchbox* represent her need for approval and closeness. She thought if she cooked good food, maybe everything would get better.

This confession reveals how her effort in cooking symbolizes her attempt to bridge the emotional gap with her husband. An unanticipated emotional bond is formed when these meals unintentionally find their way to Saajan, a lonely widower. This transfer emphasizes the symbolic role that food has as a conduit for unconscious desires and unsaid emotions. Here, cooking in turn becomes a projection of Ila's feelings, expressing her disappointment, hope, and ultimate metamorphosis. Eating her cuisine brings back memories and restores a buried sense of energy and connection for Saajan, which resonates with neuropsychanalytic discoveries into how emotional reactions can be triggered by sensory cues. Neuropsychanalysis focuses on how the brain, through areas like the hippocampus and amygdala, combines sensory inputs (such as taste and smell) with autobiographical memories. (“From Structure to Behaviour in Basolateral Amygdala - Hippocampus Interaction”) Saajan's

responses to Ila's meals in the movie show how food may bring back feelings and memories associated with his late wife and earlier joys. Saajan's embodied memories are triggered by the intimate act of tasting the meal, supporting the notion that food can work as a potent memory device, bridging emotional states from the past and present. *The Lunchbox*'s central topic of loneliness affects brain chemistry, particularly dopamine circuits that control motivation and reward. Saajan finds that the food from Ila makes his lonely existence more enjoyable and meaningful. Such encounters reduce the psychological toll of isolation by promoting positive affect, according to neuropsychanalysis. Here, both characters undergo subtle changes in attitude and mood as their correspondence becomes more intense, demonstrating how social and sensory enrichment can control emotional states through minor gestures. The way that food in *The Lunchbox* symbolizes cultural rituals and collective unconscious symbols is clarified by the integration of Jungian notions into neuropsychanalysis. Jungian notions are psychological concepts developed by Carl Jung, focusing on the unconscious mind, archetypes (universal symbols), and the process of personal growth. They explore how hidden aspects of our mind shape thoughts, behaviours, and identity. Food has a strong connection to identity, family, and caring in Indian culture. Ila's meticulously prepared tiffin's enhance the power of her gestures for Saajan and the audience by reflecting not just personal feeling but also a cultural archetype of nurturing through food.

According to neuropsychanalysis, food in *The Lunchbox* serves as a profound medium for emotional expression, connection, and transformation in addition to being a source of nourishment. Echoing the complex interactions between the brain, emotions, and relationships, the film masterfully illustrates how sharing food can break down walls of loneliness and promote human connection.

In many European cultures, food is an important part of social life. They often focus on slower, more communal eating. Mediterranean and French traditions, for example, emphasize fresh ingredients, cooking techniques, and family gatherings. *The Founder* introduced fast food as a rapidly expanding business. This is different from the tradition of comfort food and quality eating. European eyes may criticize McDonald's as a symbol of the "Americanness" of food culture, where convenience and speed often trump the importance of taste, provenance, and sustainability. The slow food movement that started in Italy stands in opposition to the fast-food industry and emphasizes regional dishes made with fresh ingredients. McDonald's, on the other hand, is built on the principles of standards, consistency in taste, preparation, and distribution around the world. The film focuses on the McDonald's franchise model. It focuses on the stability of time and space. This can be seen as reducing the diversity of European gastronomy to regional and cultural aspects. Family often plays a key role in food and food-related experiences. Although *The Founder* references Ray Kroc's personal life and family dynamics, McDonald's itself does not emphasize the community and family aspect of food. The McDonald brothers initially built their restaurants as family-oriented businesses, but as Kroc pushed for growth, the family and the small business principles were lost in the expansion. European food culture is proud of its heritage and close connection to the land. But McDonald's rise in Europe has also been praised for its convenience. It has been criticized for its impact on dietary habits and the homogenization of food culture. As McDonald's spreads in Europe, it is also a symbol of American cultural domination around the world, which influences traditional food practices. In summary, viewing *The Founder* through a European food lens contrasts America's fast-food revolution with Europe's values of quality, tradition, and shared dining. It criticizes the loss of cultural food identity in favour of mass production.

Food in India is more than just survival. It is a message of connection, love, and care. The tiffin system (delivering packed lunches) is a unique part of Indian culture where home-

cooked meals are delivered to office workers through an extensive network of dabbawallas in cities like Mumbai. Here, food becomes the medium through which Ila and Saajan communicate and bond. The lunchbox in *The Lunchbox* symbolizes the cultural importance of home-cooked food. Deeply connected to family, tradition, and nutrition, food in India is often associated with the concept of "ghar ka khana" (home-cooked food), which has sentimental value for most people, especially those who live far from family or hometown. In Indian culture, food is often shared among families and is also considered an expression of care and love. Ila's careful preparation of lunch for her husband shows her love and the bond she would love to create with him. The lunchboxes later prepared by Ila for Saajan, reflects the nurturing and intimacy acquired through food, as Saajan begins to look forward to these meals and even develops feelings for Ila, emphasizing a deep emotional connection. In many Asian countries, food is often used to communicate love, especially when families are separated. Ila's attempt to rekindle her relationship with her husband through food is in line with how many Indians use food to express love or make someone feel at home.

The film also touches on the food culture that developed in India. Ila's lunchboxes include traditional Indian food such as dal, chapati, sabzi, and rice, which are staples in many Indian households. These expressions reflect a sense of nostalgia and acknowledgment of the Indian culture. Saajan, on the other hand, is a man with a daily routine. Living a solitary and relatively "modern" life where his food is cut off from the social and emotional rituals that food often brings. The contrast between the warmth of Ila's food and the sterile corporate atmosphere of Saajan represents the division between traditional home-cooked food culture and the impersonal, industrial side of modern life. *The Lunchbox* captures the emotional, cultural, and social aspects of food in India through the lens of Indian food style. A tiffin or lunchbox is not just a simple meal, it is also a tool for connection, communication and emotional nourishment. In the film *The Lunchbox*, Ila attempts to win back her husband's affection by cooking for him

rather than discussing the upsetting event. Indians exhibit this trait via cooking as a way to express their love and affection. Food possesses a tremendous ability to win people over. In a country where food is linked to family, tradition, and identity, this film beautifully shows how food can be a bridge of intimacy and understanding even in unexpected situations. Food is a potent tool for bringing back memories when we migrate from our homeland to another country. To instil a sense of belonging, parents send their children out with home-cooked meals.

Though Eastern food and Western food are different, there are several common roots that highlight the universal nature of food. Both culinary traditions emphasize rice, bread, and noodles as important staple food sources. Both lenses value fresh ingredients. They focus on seasonal and local products for added flavour and nutritional value. Fermentation also plays an important role- in the East, kimchi, soy sauce, and miso; in the West, cheese, yogurt, and sourdough bread. Both traditions also use food as a medium of cultural expression, celebration, and socialization.

Conclusion

The Lunchbox and *The Founder* examine human behavior via the perspective of subconscious motivations and emotional requirements, yet they approach it in significantly different manners. In *The Lunchbox*, the main struggle focuses on emotional isolation and the quest for connection. Ila and Saajan, each dealing with loneliness, utilize their letters to manage their feelings and offer each other support. This emotional bond is based on neuropsychanalytic ideas such as attachment and co-regulation, emphasizing the brain's necessity for interpersonal relationships to attain wellness. In contrast, *The Founder* emphasizes ethical uncertainty and the unyielding quest for achievement. Ray Kroc's determination to turn McDonald's into an international empire is motivated by his ambitious

and self-centred desire for affirmation. His actions reveal a disregard for empathy and ethical concerns, as he becomes solely focused on attaining control. Although Ila and Saajan in *The Lunchbox* demonstrate significant empathy towards each other, Ray in *The Founder* displays a remarkably low level of empathy, putting his own desires ahead of ethical limits. Both movies similarly demonstrate how the brain's reward systems affect behavior. In *The Lunchbox*, the excitement fuelled by the prospect of a new letter or lunchbox represents the happiness of connection and emotional satisfaction. In *The Founder*, Ray's incentive structure is tied to the excitement of power and success, frequently sacrificing personal connections and moral choices. Unconscious drives that lie beneath, influence the main characters in both films, yet they appear in distinct ways. In *The Lunchbox*, the unspoken longing for affection and approval propels Ila and Saajan towards one another, providing them an opportunity for emotional rejuvenation. In *The Founder*, Ray's hidden motivation stems from a profound desire for acknowledgment and control, resulting in his ethical decay as he places his aspirations above everything. In the end, *The Lunchbox* illustrates a narrative of recovery and connection, where emotional ties contribute to mending the mind, whereas *The Founder* emphasizes the harmful effects of unfettered ambition and the price of overlooking compassion and ethics. Both films vividly demonstrate the neuropsychanalytic interaction of hidden desires, emotional management, and the brain's reward mechanisms, yet through remarkably different human experiences.

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