

Interaction of food
with power and
masculinity within
"pariah" and
"brokeback mou..."



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Scenes involving food and male characters from both Dee Rees' *Pariah* (2011) and Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) help to elaborate on and explain relationships that both Arthur (Charles Parnell) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) hold with other characters as well as their own masculinity within the films. Using cinematic cues, types of food, and who is preparing the meals, the films invite their audiences to understand how masculine ideals are used through food to dictate power. To illustrate this, one can use the scene from *Pariah* where Arthur sits down to a post-work Sunday meal amidst a family argument, and the scene from *Brokeback Mountain* wherein Jack Twist competes with wife Lureen Newsome's (Anne Hathaway) father, L. D. Newsome (Graham Beckel) over the Thanksgiving spread.

Within *Pariah*, Arthur and Audrey's (Kim Wayans) unequal relationship is solidified through food. This relationship is especially defined by assumptions of power and gender norms. This begins to appear early on the film, in the scene where Audrey is arguing with Alike (Adepero Oduye) over what she should and should not wear to church. A short scene, one may assume that not much is offered regarding Arthur and Audrey's relationship within the approximately one minute long exchange. However, the first clue to the amount of work this scene does to establish the unhappy marital connection is in how the scene is composed. Focusing on the part of the scene where Arthur is shown, there is an obvious power differential between him and the other characters featured. When he arrives home, the camera is unfocused on his figure until both Audrey and Alike rush towards him. When he does become clear and within the frame, he is in the center of the shot. This forces the viewer to see him as the subject of the shot, despite the various

other characters. Juxtaposed to this, Alike is aligned to the left of the shot while shown talking and similarly Audrey is pushed to the right side of the frame, which allows the viewer to focus on the entire rest of the frame. Audrey is only shown in the center of the frame before serving Audrey a plate, and immediately after doing so the rest of the shots feature her to the side. To further this point, when Arthur is featured on the screen, he is the only face viewable. While eating, Audrey stands to his left but her entire body from her shoulders up is cut off from view. Her stance is passive, with her arms hanging limply and her body angled towards Arthur. These choices encourage the viewer to see Arthur as the center of the scene and therefore more visible than other characters, which establishes that he holds power over them.

The scene presented of power struggles over food in *Brokeback Mountain* differs slightly in that Jack Twist is not presented as having pre-established power over the other characters in the scene, but instead shows the struggle he goes through to gain such power. The scene is especially interesting to dissect for hints of a masculine dominance struggle, as it is a show down between two men rather than a patriarch figure over the female members of his family. The scene begins by placing both Jack and L. D., Lureen's father, at the same height and viewable in the same shot. As L. D. takes over carving the turkey, Jack is shown sitting down submissively. This change in height is emphasized by having L. D.'s body still visible as Jack sits down, and the close shot on Jack's reaction forces the audience to acknowledge that this has challenged him. This shot serves as a kind of power transfer, wherein the "stud duck," L. D. takes over the masculine role of powerful

patriarch, and Jack is forced to be submissive to his authority. As the scene progresses and Jack goes to turn off the TV to prevent son Bobby from being transfixed, he takes his height back and stands up and is momentarily on the same power level as L. D. yet again. This prompts a response from L. D., who uses his height and power to reverse Jack's decision as well as his attempt to act on masculine authority. Jack's standing up is emphasized by the production team as a direct power grab by the choice to have L. D.'s disapproving stare focused on Jack not as he begins to stand in his chair, but instead on the space to where Jack stands up into. There is also a longer shot as Jack walks back to the table where he crosses over where L. D. is standing and they match up at the same height, symbolizing that he has directly challenged his father-in-law's power. Along with this, Jack continues to sit down despite seeing L. D. heading towards the T. V. both the first and second time he has gotten up. As if the symbolism of height and standing up versus sitting down was not yet fully solidified by the scene, Jack tells L. D. to literally "sit down" in the process of reclaiming his own masculine power. He rocks back and forth on his chair in apparent range, but this also signals that he is fighting with the ability to stand up, which would reclaim his power. L. D. is shown sitting down prior to Jack getting up to carve the turkey, proving that the "stud duck" position had to be relinquished before another could take its place and signifying this shift through the change in heights within frame. In these ways, the cinematic composition of this scene from *Brokeback Mountain* is discussing deeper themes of power and masculinity through food rituals.

Another strong negotiator of power struggles and gender norms within the same scene of *Pariah* is the kind of food Arthur is eating. Audrey serves him spaghetti, and although it is not wrapped in foil the audience safely assumes that it is leftovers which she has taken time to save for him. This establishes power for Arthur, as he is not responsible for cooking his own meals. Audrey is acting out an expectation of wives to cook for their husbands, and Arthur is cooperating with that power negotiation. Although it is not necessarily demeaning to cook for a spouse, there is a certain level of expectation shown by Arthur that leads the audience to believe that Audrey is not merely doing a nice thing for her husband out of love, but because the established power differential they have as husband and wife. Despite Audrey offering to heat up the meal, Arthur refuses and instead opts to eat it cold. For an audience enculturated to understand that women and men see food differently, this choice reinforces Arthur as a rugged image of masculinity. By not heating his meal up, not seeming to want to enjoy his food fully, Arthur is acting out a cultural expectation of men to see food as strictly filling or nutritious, as opposed to women who look to food as comforting and ritualistic. As expressed within “Food for Feminist Thought” by Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr, women struggle with a contradictory relationship with food where they are simultaneously supposed to deny themselves food, while also being “[led] to resort to food as a comfort” (558). This relationship between women and food means that by Arthur neither denying himself food nor looking for comfort in his meal, he is rejecting a feminine relationship with food and reinforcing a masculine identity. In a similar way of buying into gender expectations, Arthur is enjoying a messy dish which women are famously taught to never order on a first date. Furthering this idea, if it is <https://assignbuster.com/interaction-of-food-with-power-and-masculinity-within-pariah-and-brokeback-mountain/>

assumed that the spaghetti is made with a meat sauce, Arthur is embracing and encouraging yet another masculine expectation of men and food. As observed by Luanne Roth within "Beyond Communitas: Cinematic Food Events and the Negotiation of Power, Belonging, and Exclusion", "Meat manifests as a symbol of male dominance in this cinematic scene, a celebration of patriarchy itself" (171). By embracing meat in his meal, Arthur is adding yet another layer of masculinity to his lunch. Through these specifics of the meal Arthur's masculinity continues to be built up by his food choices.

In *Brokeback Mountain*, the symbolism of the Thanksgiving spread is multifold for Jack's power and masculinity. The most important part of the scene and the meal is the large turkey, which is brought to the table by Jack. The turkey holds powerful imagery for the audience, who associates the filling dish with a head of household able to provide for their family. The process of turkey carving has long established itself as an important task for the patriarch of the family. As explained by Luanne Roth within "Sexing the Turkey: Gender Politics and the Construction of Turkey Sexuality", "within the matrix of American culture, carving the turkey is the patriarchal prerogative of (heterosexual) males" (136). This is possibly born, in part, from antiquated traditions of large game being served to community members by the hunter to take the animal down. Although the message is not the same for modern viewers who hunt less and stop at grocery stores more, the connotation of power behind being able to feed a large family remains. The importance of the turkey is solidified by how often Jack is featured in frame with just the bird. While sitting down, the bird is often

slightly in front and to the right of Jack's gaze. The most filling part of the Thanksgiving meal, Jack is obviously focused on the bird, which becomes, as explained by Roth, "an object over which masculinity is negotiated" (137). The fact that the focused dish is turkey, as opposed to mashed potatoes or cranberry sauce, reaffirms that the scene is about men and masculinity. Despite supposedly not cooking any of the dishes, Jack's symbolic labor is materialized through presenting the bird at the table and through whoever carves it. Due to all of the subversive connotations of the carving rituals, the argument that ensues between Jack and L. D. begins to clarify as a battle for patriarchal power. The importance of their argument being over televised football, a sport wrought with violence, is a discussion beyond the scope of this paper.

Another important aspect that contributes to the manifestation of Arthur's masculine position within the scene from *Pariah* is the inferences behind Audrey preparing the dish. Throughout the film, the audience is introduced to the fact that Audrey routinely saves meals for Arthur, who is often away from home. Only twice in the film is he shown to eat a meal with the full family, and both scenes are wrought with family strife and tension. The fact Audrey cooks all of Arthur's meals for him is embedded with normative gender implications. As explained earlier, it is expected of women within a westernized understanding of married life to provide meals for their husbands. The fact that Audrey has been doing so signals to the audience that she has prescribed to this, thus acting out an understanding of marriage that also emphasizes the power of the husband. Arthur's refusal to eat these carefully preserved meals, as evidenced by him repeatedly bringing takeout

home, ironically reaffirms his higher power status within the framework of marriage Audrey is operating within. By not partaking in an understanding of marriage where, despite being the patriarch, he is reliant on his wife for meals, Arthur is claiming his own independence from the family structure. This invalidates Audrey's contributions and forces her out of any position of power within their relationship. The fact that Audrey also physically serves Arthur is also symbolic of his power. Within the scene, Audrey places the plate directly in front of him despite it being merely across the table, and also goes to grab him a beer on command. These images conjure up and reinforced typical masculine roles for the audience, who have been enculturated to identify with images of a servicing housewife placing dinner in front of her husband, while affirming his power over his wife.

For *Brokeback Mountain*, the important aspect of the preparation of food rests on the fact that despite the battle for dominance occurs over the action of carving, the entire meal has been prepared by wife Lureen. However, rather than being a part of the battle for dominance, she is immediately relegated from the discussion by the fact that she is a woman. The fact she remains seated throughout the Thanksgiving scene, along with her passive expressions during the angry exchange between men, is indicative of this. Power is not negotiated by who has put in actual labor, but rather on the symbolic labor of carving the turkey. Ignoring the battle for patriarchal power by Jack and L. D., the scene immediately denies Lureen power and transfers it to male identities. The fact she has prepared the spread is ignored by all characters in the scene in lieu of the symbolic work of her husband and father, thus negating any of her possible claims to power. This is in line with

gendered expectations of married life at the Thanksgiving table, and thus reinforces the patriarchal power vested in the carving of the turkey.

Within both *Pariah* and *Brokeback Mountain*, power dynamics and gendered expectations of masculinity in relation to food and meals are strongly defined. Through the way that both Arthur and Jack interact with food such as how they are cinematically composed with meals, the kinds of foods they interact with, and who they are prepared and served by. The symbolism of food is multifaceted within films when defining factors of gender, as it lends itself to reinforcing behavioral expectations of men and women, and this function of cinematic food is clearly present within *Pariah* and *Brokeback Mountain*.

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