

Repression and Resilience through Food: A Study of Selected Short Stories by Bulbul Sharma

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Abstract

Food and culinary practices often determine and reveal power relations in different social structures. Women are inextricably linked to food regardless of nation or culture. This paper attempts to study the gendered politics of food in the Indian domestic sphere by analysing two short story collections of Bulbul Sharma, The Anger of Aubergines: Stories of Women (1997) and Food and Eating Women, Telling Tales: Stories about Food (2011). Drawing on theories like gender performativity, necropolitics, beauty myth etc, the paper examines how everyday acts of cooking, fasting, serving and eating depicted in Sharma's stories functions as mechanisms that regulates patriarchal conventions by suppressing and regulating women's bodies, desires, and identities. At the same time, the paper also demonstrates how the female characters in selected stories transform food from a tool of oppression into a means of resistance against the oppressive forces to negotiate power, assert agency, and reclaim their identities.

Keywords: food culture, Indian households, patriarchy, performativity, necropolitics, resistance.

Introduction

Food and culinary culture play a significant role in social interaction. They define and recognise varied power relations in different social structures. In India, food serves as a symbol of caste, class, gender, religiosity, ethnicity, culture, and heritage. When it comes to food choices, people are subjected to adhere to specific culinary traditions of the community they live in. Family is the major institution through which gendered roles are taught and performed; hence, men and women relate to or perceive food differently. Patriarchy has confined women to the kitchen and given them the responsibility of cooking and serving to keep them out of the public eye (Daya 475). While men identify food with its aesthetic quality, flavour, and nourishment, women share an emotional bond with food. Therefore, food becomes a significant medium through which women articulate their stories.

As Shyamasri Maji and other scholars have observed, Indian women writers have frequently used the kitchen and food practices as powerful spaces to examine questions of caste, gender, and social expectations (Maji 306-308). These are visible in the works of Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Mahasweta Devi. Within this larger feminist literary tradition,

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Sharma's engagement with food becomes particularly significant.

Bulbul Sharma, an Indian author and painter, has published several books focusing on the lives and plights of women. Her short story collections *The Anger of Aubergines: Stories of Women and Food* (1997) and *Eating Women, Telling Tales: Stories about Food* (2011) encompass the complex relationship between women and food in typical Indian households. Hence, the paper situates Sharma within a broader tradition of Indian feminist writing that has consistently challenged the separation between the domestic and the political.

Gender Performativity and Domestic Surveillance

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity demonstrates how gender is created through the continuous repetition of behaviours, gestures, and practices that society recognises as masculine and feminine (33). This understanding of gender is relevant in the Indian context, where womanhood constituted the daily performance of domestic responsibilities such as waking up before others, preparing meals, serving family members, eating only after everyone else has been fed, managing the household, and observing culturally prescribed fasts.

In case of widows in India, this performative dimension is even more visible. As per the dictums of the orthodox Hindu tradition, widowhood signifies the end of pleasure and happiness. They are expected to abandon symbols of marital status, withdraw from auspicious events, and follow strict dietary observances (Chakrabarti and Gill 7). The Hindu widows abstain from having rich and tasty food and are forced to fast regularly to control their bodily cravings (Hossain; Kapur). In the introduction to *The Anger of Aubergines*, which is titled "Saying It with Cauliflowers" and in the short story "Constant Craving", Bulbul Sharma speaks about the dietary restrictions imposed on Indian widows.

Being an orthodox Brahmin widow, Dida in "Saying it with Cauliflowers" follows all the practices prescribed by her community which include eating simple vegetarian food without any garnish or colour, eating only once a day, and fasting the rest of the day (vi). Although Dida is not physically forced into these practices, her "internalization" of communal norms demonstrates how patriarchal expectations become embodied through habitual acts of "self-discipline" (Bartky). In contrast, other family members ignore their traditions by consuming beer, meat, onions, and garlic, and sharing their table with their non-Brahmin friends. In Dida's case, widowhood is not just a social status, rather, it is "performed" by repeatedly enacting the practices prescribed by the community. Her regulated appetite becomes a marker of her regulated identity.

Sandra Lee Bartky's concept of the "Panoptic internalisation of patriarchal imperatives" draws from Michel Foucault's idea of the Panopticon, a model of surveillance in which individuals begin to regulate their own behaviour because they feel they are constantly being watched (26). According to Bartky's feminist point of view, women internalize patriarchal power and blindly follow it. Sumitra in the story "Constant Craving" is an unfortunate widow who has "internalised" the patriarchal expectations of widowhood. Being a traditional Hindu woman, Sumitra's mother-in-law, who herself is a widow, insists on fasting, saying that it protects the virtue of widows and keeps the souls of their dead husbands at peace (Aubergines 87). Sumitra is restricted to eat only fruits on Mondays and Tuesdays. She has to wake up at four in the morning, shower, chant prayers, and only then she breaks her fast. She is also supposed to observe fasting on Ekadashi, when food or water cannot be consumed. Frequently, she forcefully ignores her appetite to follow the norms.

In the patriarchal social order, widows are often expected to suppress their sexual desires and avoid attracting men. Therefore, her access to nourishment is restricted and regulated. Sumitra's mother-in-law often insists her to fast regularly saying, "Fast, Sumitra, fast when the moon

tells you. Your body should not be warm and plump, smelling of rich food, onions, and garlic (Aubergines 87). She was forced to fast so that her body becomes lean and no men will get attracted to her. At some point, Sumitra's suppressed cravings made her break the restrictions imposed upon her. She secretly orders *choley* and *samosas* without the knowledge of her mother-in-law. This act can be interpreted as "counter-performative", as she attempts to break the power enforced over her body and desire; though, her mother-in-law re-establishes the power by kicking the parcel out of the house.

When widowhood transforms Sumitra into a helpless being, Dida emerges as powerful and dominant within her restricted space. Dida never allows anyone to step inside her kitchen, and nobody dared to cross "the invisible line" that divides her kitchen with the rest of the house (Aubergines iv). She also asserts her authority by cooking and eating before all other family members have eaten. In this context, food not only operates as a tool for reinforcing culinary restrictions but also serves as a medium for self-expression and identity for Dida.

Domestic Space and Gendering

Women are often regarded as the torch-bearers of culture and tradition, especially the culinary culture of the family. According to Anita Mannur,

Preserving the domestic familial structure becomes the responsibility of women; but cooking and food preparation must be acknowledged for the central role they play in upholding the dynamics of domestic familiarity. Preserving the sanctity of the domestic home space, creating a space where members of the household feel nurtured and protected, thus become important touchstones of women's labor. (52)

Women oversee the eating habits of their family members, as they are entitled to the responsibility of nourishing the family. They are dominant and influential in the realm associated with food and cooking. Buaji, in the story "Jars of Gold", is an old woman who exerts her power over her family members through food. She is in charge of the storeroom, the only restricted space in the vast house, where kitchen provisions are stored. Bulbul Sharma describes Buaji as "a Nazi general in a war movie", who always keeps an eye on the door of the store room (Aubergines 6). She denies access to everyone except the head cook, "Three times a day Buaji doled the rations out to the head cook with such meticulous care that not an extra grain of rice, sugar or dal ever entered the kitchen" (1). Her authority over the storeroom not only permits her to perform gender, but also to enforce gender.

Buaji embodies patriarchal femininity by giving more preference to the male members of the family, especially when serving food. She ensures that "[a]dult men got full and generous amounts of everything" while all other family members were served less (3). The narrator notes that Buaji serves more pickles to men, especially the narrator's father. The narrator also adds that when her father shares them with his wife, Buaji would cough angrily, expressing her disapproval.

The cook Raha in the story "Sweet Nothings" extends this analysis into the second generation. She recalls her memory, "We only got to eat after my grandfather, father, and uncles had eaten. Sometimes my mother added water to the dal because there was not enough dal left for us" (Aubergines 144). Her memory shows that this pattern is not limited to one family but is passed down as a normalized domestic practice. In both stories, the assumption that male appetites are more important than female appetites is reinforced.

Even though the patriarchal system often grants privileges to men, socially constructed gender roles prohibit men from entering women's spaces like kitchen and other associated spaces. The male members of the family never go near Buaji's storeroom, as it is considered a women's space, "The men would walk past quickly to show that they were not interested in the room.

Unable to overcome a childhood habit, however, they would throw it a quick passing glance” (*Aubergines* 2). All these instances elucidate that the patriarchal structure ensures gendered norms are ingrained in both men and women’s psyche.

The story “A Taste of Humble Pie” is the most concentrated exploration of women’s unpaid labour in the domestic sphere. The story portrays the life of Bala, an impoverished relative of the narrator who has lived in their home as a refugee for years. She is described as a servant, cook, and caretaker who tirelessly worked for the family without any complaint, embodying the ideal of an Indian woman who unquestioningly submits to patriarchy. Bala’s acceptance of the exploitation can be analysed through Bartky’s “internalization” concept, where she considers the servitude as a voluntary act of care. Even the female members normalize Bala’s subordination by making casual remarks like, “Bala does not mind”, Bala likes doing things for us” (12). According to them, Bala’s labour is merely an obligation in exchange for shelter. Thus, it is evident that domestic spaces are often considered the primary site where life is sustained and reproduced, it can also become a space where patriarchal authority controls women.

Culinary Vengeance and Necropolitics

In patriarchal structures, the ultimate authority of the household is in the hands of men. Therefore, men have the power to dictate social and emotional survival of the women in the house. Mrs. Kumar in the story “The Anger of Aubergines”, is also subjected to the surveillance of her husband, Mr. Kumar, a predatory patriarch, who continues to keep an eye on her, even after abandoning her. Without any guilt or shame, he visits the house every Sunday to reinforce his power and supremacy over Mrs. Kumar and the house. Mrs. Kumar prepares his favourite dishes and waits for him like an “ideal wife” (54). Moreover, whenever she tries to initiate a conversation, he always dismisses her. Mbembe’s idea of necropolitics which explains how sovereignty is exercised through the right to decide whose life may flourish is materialised in this context (Mbembe). Mr. Kumar’s domination over his household and his silencing of Mrs. Kumar reveal a form of “necro-political power”, through which he dictates the terms of her existence, and reduces her life to a state of subjugation and ‘symbolic death’.

Later, Mrs. Kumar reverses this power by transforming the domestic space that confines her into a site of revenge. She serves him rich and spicy food, which he eats with great relish despite his doctor’s warning to avoid such foods that cause him indigestion issues, thereby, gaining control over his body, and ultimately contributing to his death (59). In this context, food moves beyond its association with nourishment and becomes a weapon to harm or take one’s life.

Similarly, the story of Nanni also portrays how cooking is transformed into an act of revenge. Nanni’s husband Harish, and mother-in-law used to demean her family whenever they are at the dining table. Even though there were two servants in the house, Harish never allowed them to cook food. He reinforces his control over Nanni by reducing existence to servitude. Punita Chowbey’s work on the micro-politics of food in South Asian households confirms that women “subverted their husband’s authority by employing a range of manipulative tactics” through the food itself (5). After enduring years of suffering, Nanni ultimately decides to grab the power that has been used to suppress her. She begins to feed him in excess,

All her cooking skills would now finally be put to test, she would make one rich dish a week to suck the strength out of his veins, one dish to poison his blood, one to clog his veins which run with so much hate for her and her family, I will cook for him one death dish a week, slowly and slowly he will die, not by my hand but because it is the will of the gods. I will look after him like a good wife. (*Eating Women* 119)

By maintaining her appearance as a dutiful wife, Nanni served “death dishes” as a way to invert the power dynamics that existed in the house.

Similarly, in “Dead Man’s Feast”, Mani also uses food as a medium to express anger and resistance. Mani has been the caretaker of *pradan*, a wealthy landlord who has been paralysed for sixteen years. Though the *pradan* married five times, all his wives eventually left him. But he continues to call out their name repeatedly “like a hungry man begging for food” (*Aubergines* 128). Instead of acknowledging her efforts and sacrifices, he often abuses her with heartless words and insults. His behaviour reinforces her position as a powerless figure whose identity is reduced to servitude. Finally, Mani retaliates by feeding him in excess,

“I will make Kheer for him. Hot kheer with crushed almonds like Nirmala used to make. I will make black dal, too, richer than Uma ever made; and the *pradan* will never have tasted meat curry like the one I will cook. Tender, soft pieces of goat’s meat in a rich, green, spinach gravy...All day long I will feed him like a new-born sparrow. Kheer...meat...black dal... kheer...until he dies. Then his wives can come and take him away. (129)

Within the necropolitical dynamic, Mani eventually acquires the power that suppressed her and emerges as the authority who dictates who lives and dies.

Within domestic spaces, women’s bodies are often regulated through ideals of being “proper”. Any deviation from these norms is “corrected” through social or familial pressure and intervention. In the story “Eating Women, Telling Tales”, Maya enters her husband’s household as a happy butterfly. According to Gitasri, the mother-in-law, Maya is unlike her four daughters-in-laws, who are “so gentle, docile with forever downcast eyes and hunched shoulders” (*Eating Women* 9, 10). Gitasri wanted Maya to satisfy the patriarchal expectations of a traditional Indian wife—composed, silent, and submissive.

Building on Foucault’s account of disciplinary power, Sandra Lee Bartky identifies three forms of disciplinary practices that shape the female body according to socially desired standards: practices that aim at a particular body size and shape; practices that produce particular gestures, postures, and movements; and practices that treat the body as a decorative surface. Bartky reads all such practices as “self-surveillance” and “obedience to patriarchy” (41). Maya’s refusal or inability to fit into the framework of “ideal women” marks her as someone who must be “corrected” (Bartky 25-26). Gitasri takes Maya to a demigod figure named Omprabhu Dayal, also known as Bhagwan, a cruel sexual predator, in the hope that he will “tame” her. He makes a herbal concoction and instructs Gitasri to give it to Maya in small doses, assuring her that within a week, Maya will be transformed into the desired one, - a perfect woman like the gods had ordained her to be - a jewel of a woman to possess, beautiful and pliant. Quiet, docile, soft-spoken, always good tempered, always ready to obey. She would lie softly under her husband receiving his seed, lower her eyes before her elders, cook, clean, tend to their welfare without pause and every month on full moon nights, wash his feet with her hair. Her eyes would lose their shine yet be pretty, her skin would be fairer, her hair would grow even more black and glossy, her head, so proud now, would bend as delicately as a lotus bud, ready to bow to everyone’s wishes (18). The daily consumption of the mixture made Maya weaker both physically and mentally. Here, food becomes a “necropolitical agent” that suppresses and silences Maya to become an ideal docile wife by gradually destroying her autonomy, personality, and agency.

Patriarchy and the Slenderness Trap

Women are subjected to maintain their body and fitness according to the beauty standards prescribed by the patriarchal world. According to Naomi Wolf,

...female fat is the subject of public passion, and women feel guilty about female fat, because we implicitly recognize that under the myth, women’s bodies are not our own but society’s, and that thinness is not a private aesthetic, but hunger a social concession

exacted by the community. A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience. (*The Beauty Myth*, 187) Bulbul Sharma's "Sweet Nothings" explores this dimension of patriarchal beauty standards. The story unravels the life of Reshma, a fortyfour year old woman, who makes strenuous efforts to maintain her beauty and body in an attempt to win back her husband, who is involved in an extramarital affair. Her two pregnancies and an abortion made her fat, and the patriarchal world made her believe that her fat and shapeless body was responsible for her fate. She lives in a world where women are expected to maintain certain beauty and fitness standards. Therefore, she is also expected to achieve a perfect body through diet and exercise.

To maintain beauty standards, women tend to observe fasts and other dietary restrictions along with vigorous physical exhaustion. In *Feminist Food Studies: A Brief History*, Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber discuss the thoughts of Susan Bordo, a philosopher, who speaks about the relationship between women and eating, "Unable to control other aspects of their lives, women go to extreme measures to control their bodies through dieting and exercise, gaining a sense of accomplishment by their ability to achieve a perfect body, bending their bodies to their wills, gaining mastery over their bodies" (qtd. in Avakian and Haber 21).

In her book *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*, Kim Chernin critically examines the increasing social pressure placed on women to achieve and maintain thinness. She argues that women's bodies are subjected to the "tyranny of slenderness", where practices such as dieting and exercise function as disciplinary mechanism that regulate and control the female body (Chernin). Reshma starves herself after each pregnancy to get back to her former size, "She starved, living only on juices for weeks till black spots danced before her eyes. She exercised for an hour each morning, sitting like a pig, heart pounding till she felt it would burst out of her lycra leotard. She tried jogging but her breasts bounced up and down so much that they began to ache" (*Aubergines* 138).

Reshma regrets about whatever she eats and is very obsessive about sticking to her diet. This style of living gradually made her anxious and psychotic. Though she already knows all the chapters by heart, she always carries the *Complete Calorie Counter* book with her wherever she goes. The book's cover page has a picture of "a blonde girl in a white swimsuit, holding a glass of orange juice in one hand and lettuce leaves in the other. A huge bowl of salad stood in the background..." (134). Reshma is envious of the girl on the cover page because of her sultry, slender, and toned body, like her husband's mistress.

Reshma's suppressed desire to savour tasty and yummy food is visible through her dream in which she sees warm and dark chocolate sauce dripped all over her face, but she can't taste it. She also dreamt of Ajay growing fat and round like a gas balloon. The constant fear of getting more obese, along with a desire to taste her favourite foods, has creates friction in Reshma's mind. Finally, all her stress reaches a boiling point, and she throws her calorie-counting book on the floor and cries her heart out until she falls asleep. The torn book and shattered pages are symbolic of the shattered patriarchal expectations. She awakens as a transformed individual and greedily consumes whatever food is available in the house, including sugar from the sugar bowl. A tinge of insanity consumes her, and she shouts madly, "Come on Amah, come on. Take some. Don't be afraid. We can never become fat. It is Diwali. Let us eat... eat... eat..." (149-150). Suddenly, she begins to cry soundlessly. This emotional outburst is a repercussion of the stress and tension she has been facing for a long time. Reshma is a perfect example of a woman who was forced to abide by societal expectations and ultimately chooses to live her life by shattering the beauty norms.

Conclusion

Bulbul Sharma's stories present a vivid array of women, each representing different aspects of womanhood. From powerful women who assert their authority and break societal barriers to those who remain submissive, quietly adhering to the roles imposed upon them. Her characters are diverse in strength and vulnerability. While analysing the lives of Dida, Buaji and Reshma, the study tries to expose how patriarchal society enforces inhuman dietary restrictions to torture and subjugate women. Whereas, Mrs. Kumar, Chinta, and Mani use food to assert their agency and demonstrate the resilience and empowerment of women. By delving into the concepts of Butler, Bartky, and Mbembe, this paper highlights the issues and challenges faced by Indian women in a domestic sphere. It shows how cooking gives the characters in the selected texts a powerful instrument to express their identity, preserve their tradition, fight against subjugation, and gain empowerment, irrespective of the cultural and personal hardships they endure.

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