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Food as an Element of Ideological State Apparatus in Indian Family: A Case of Hunger, Desire and Appetite

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Abstract:

Can a woman eat to satiate her hunger? It has a provisional answer where the affirmative response relies on the quantity of food. While western feminist researchers see female body as the site of exerting disciplinary control and liberating desire through the consumption of food, South Asian families (focusing on this paper on Indian families) act as the ideological state apparatus to contain the appetite of women. The female body is shaped by patriarchal exploitation where women bodies are affected by the cultural practices. This essay shall focus on three short stories: “The Trelis” by Bibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyay, “The Rock” by Ismat Chughtai and “The Curse” by Pratibha Ray. The three stories focus on female body wherein their food is regulated to discipline their physical body thereby maintaining their desirability in the society. This essay aims to interrogate the politics of hunger, desire and appetite mediated through food in Indian families wherein it is primarily the female body which is subjected to control. It also looks into how female body is conditioned by patriarchy to maintain its sexual desirability to perpetuate certain cultural practices.

Key Words:

hunger, desire, ideological state apparatus, appetite, family.

Flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh

-Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*

While discussing the fictions of Margaret Atwood, Emma Parker observes that “[w]hile literature is suffused with the scenes of men eating, there is a conspicuous absence of images of women engaged in the same activity” (349). Atwood considers the act of eating to be highly political, where she defines politics as “who is entitled to do what to whom with impunity; who profits by it; and therefore who eats what” (394). It is in this light Parker concludes that “women are rarely depicted eating in literature because consumption embodies coded expressions of power” (349). But the question also arises, what is the implication behind the non-consumption or restraint exerted on eating?

The fictions of Margaret Atwood have been critically analysed with the consumption and restraint of food. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead is a society in which women are denied any form of power. One of the main ways the system of oppression is enforced is through food. The handmaids have no choice about what they eat and are permitted to consume only that which the authorities consider will enhance their health and fertility.

The body has been theorized as a site for repression and constriction as well as desire and subversion of social norms¹. Food and eating are fundamental in defining one's identity and are crucial to characterize family, class and ethnicity. Besides being the most basic of human somatic activities, it is also a marker of one's sociopolitical identity. The vital role and myriad significances of food and eating encompasses a link with epistemological and ontological concerns. The quote by Angela Carter in the beginning of this paper refers to sexuality, yet it is equally relevant to food. In “Extreme Fidelity”, Helene Cixous claims that the story of Eve involving the scene of the apple is

the guiding myth of Western culture. It acts as a fable about the subjection of “female oral pleasure” to the regulation of patriarchal law (qtd. in Heller and Moran 1). Cixous marks the narrative of Fall as a female rebellion where she states “knowledge and taste go together” (ibid 5).

Michel Foucault talks about the surveillance of human bodies so that certain values can be inscribed on it. I will extend Foucault’s theorization to establish how family as an ideological state apparatus controls the hunger and appetite of female bodies to maintain their desirability in Indian families. The cultural politics of Indian patriarchal families as enunciated by Leela Dube will also be taken into account to further my argument.

Voracious Appetite of Kshenti

In “The Trellis”, Kshenti is a quiet girl with a voracious appetite which is emphasized by her desire to eat prawns with *pui* (or malabar spinach). Her mother Annapurna further reiterates her appetite, “you are found wherever there are a few leaves to be had or a couple of eggplants!” (Bandyopadhyay 67). Kshenti is reprimanded by her mother because “a girl ought not to be so greedy”, thereby laying down certain proscriptions for the girl (ibid 68). This becomes a source of worry for her mother who fears to earn the ire of the society and wishes to get her married at the earliest. Her presence as a “marriageable daughter at home” leads her to an early and unhappy marriage² (ibid 66). This ascribing of female body with honor further facilitates patriarchal exploitation. How we eat and what we eat reproduces gendered identities. While a man is expected to gorge on food to reflect his masculinity, a woman is expected to nibble³. Annapurna surmises the same from Kshenti. Despite exerting restraint on Kshenti, Annapurna is still filled with maternal love for her hungry child where she fulfills her daughter’s desire by preparing the *pui* with prawn. Annapurna the goddess of food in Hindu mythology, acts as the eternal feeder for all. It is ironic here that her namesake acts as the agent of a patriarchal society where she surveys her daughter’s appetite. In doing so she aims to control Kshenti’s weight to keep her desirable for marriage. After her mother, it is her mother-in-law who deprived Kshenti of food, primarily because she did not get any dowry annoying her in-laws.

Shehnaz, the slackened dough

While Kshenti’s female body is responsible for her unhappy fate in a patriarchal society, “The Rock” suggests how female body itself is shaped by patriarchal relations. Shehnaz puts the needs of her family above her and thereby neglects herself becoming “overweight and ungainly” (Chughtai 100). When her husband leaves her for a more beautiful (read, younger and slimmer) woman named Shabnam, she indulges in fried potatoes dipped in chutney, toast laden with butter and jam, pulao and qorma for solace. The narrative shows her self-feeding firstly as an act of pleasure and later as an act arising out of despair. The husband’s act of forsaking the wife for a slimmer woman perpetuates the belief that thin is normal and fat an anomaly highlighting the axiom fat being a feminist issue⁴. The two women are also juxtaposed by their food choices, Shehnaz consuming apricot jam with cream was ridiculed by Shabnam as she nibbled on cucumber. The irony seems to hit hard on Shabnam as after her marriage to Bhaiya she gained weight and Bhaiya’s flirtation at restaurant was deliberately overlooked by her as she “downed large morsels of roast chicken to *distract* herself” (ibid 111) (emphasis mine). The physical contrast between the couple, the wife as a “slackened dough left overnight” versus the “lean and slim” husband startlingly reveals the control that this man imposes upon his wife’s body. Her body becomes a projection of his wishes as he did not want her to beautify herself. Through his direct influence over his wife’s eating habits, he is able to create a woman by whom he is not threatened and whom the rest of society will not find more attractive than himself.

Women’s right to food is highly provisional. Kshenti, married without any dowry, is not given a full meal in her in-law’s house. Bhabhi on the other hand, despite having access to

unrestricted amount of food acquiesces in powerlessness when her marriage starts to crumble. Ultimately, women unable to control their appetite came to grief. But it would be myopic to consider Shehnaz's consumption as solely a denial of reality, trying to find solace in an alternate world. The act of self indulgence in food can also be read as an alternative model of agency as seen in the beginning of the story where clearly she is the mistress of the house.

As Alison Clarke suggests, "the decision and complexities of household provisioning embody consumption as an arena of power in which social relations and knowledge are constantly rehearsed, rearranged and challenged" (qtd. in Ashley et al 73). When Shehnaz's marriage was on the verge of degeneration, her indulgence in food was also an attempt to recuperate any power that she commanded in the family. But the power structure had shifted towards Shabnam.

Perpetually hungry Pari

A fifteen year old Pari is introduced as "perpetually hungry" and the narrator claims "hunger (there are so many hungers in life) is the root of all sorrow... we can learn to control all other hungers by first learning to control the hunger of the stomach" (Ray 298-99). *Paan* was offered by the grandmother-in-law to satiate Pari's hunger. Chewing betels makes the lips red. The semiotics of paan relegates it as a source of attractions (Dube WS 16). Besides, paan is ascribed with numerous properties from being an aphrodisiac⁵ to being an appetite suppressant. She did not realize the hunger experienced by Pari was not only physical but also psychological. While her desire for food was subdued, it gave rise to her sexual desire as she was neglected since her marriage. Though late, Pari realizes the different connotations of accepting paan from a maternal figure and from a brother-in-law. She is thrashed by her husband on charges of adultery. Though Pari is innocent, under the garb of patriarchy she confesses her guilt blaming the paan for clouding her judgement. Though she subverts the social norms by accepting paan from her brother-in-law⁶, later she accepts the patriarchal mandate instead of adhering to her defiance.

The idea of family as an aspect of Ideological State Apparatus

Louis Althusser describes ideology as a "set of practices and institutions that sustain an individual's imaginary relationship to his or her material conditions of existence" (693). Unlike the other ideological state apparatuses (henceforth ISA) like educational or religious institutions, family is a heterogenous entity which has access to the private realm of existence. Ideology propels ISAs but can also include punishment or repression secondarily. They exert coercion to generate complicity within the Subjects. Family inculcates specific way of thinking to fall in line with the demands of the state. Family as an ISA uses suitable mode of punishment to "discipline" its members. For women, food is one of the media through which authority is exerted to discipline them. But simultaneously, an alternative perspective is also voiced in family as an ISA. Women tend to over indulge or starve themselves as a sign of protest to express displeasure.

Ideology interpellates an individual as an interpellated subject. Family interpellates an individual as subject. Those who are in ideology believe by definition to be outside ideology and hence family does not believe that it exerts any authority over its members in any form. But it does. The members are governed by the rituals of ISAs. The ultimate aim of the state through family is to maintain stability in human relations by exerting control over women, one of the means being through their consumption of food. When the role of women is viewed as child bearer and nurturer, she is considered to produce labour for the economy. So regulating the female body becomes crucial to regulate the labour force of a state.

Domestic ideology segregated home and workplace to an unknown extent, justifying its relegation of men and women to separate spheres of the private and public by emphasizing fundamental differences between male and female nature. Individuals come to identify with and bind themselves to their social roles. Althusser instructs that there is a relational nature between

repression and ideology, and this is made clear in how families operate in India through repression of hunger and appetite with respect to food.

Hunger, Appetite and Desire

Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak claims that “there is no such thing as an uncoded body” (qtd. in Ellman 5). This enunciates how bodies are shaped by social, political and psychological factors. Women bodies in particular have been determined by male dominated food practices in most societies. Female bodies become a site of resistance either through indulgence or denial of food⁷. Food and eating habits are gendered in nature as seen in the fictions discussed above. Both indulgence and starvation take on different connotations with different genders. While Gandhi’s strategic use of fasting testifies to his resistance against the colonial power and was thus a form of empowerment⁸, women in Indian families challenge norms to elude socially prescribed body images.

Hunger is symbolic of desire as well as absence of desire. Hunger in a primal sense is a physical need to all living beings. It presents a need for sustenance to meet the bodily requirements. I will try to interrogate how hunger influences the emotions and intellect of protagonists like Kshenti, Shehnaz and Pari. At the brink of a crumbling marriage, Shehnaz no longer restrains her hunger and over indulges in “rich” food. The perpetually hungry Kshenti stealthily fetches potatoes with her father to satiate her hunger. Pari seeks out for an alternative in paan to negotiate in marital relation where her husband is afar. The physical hunger is manifested in the mind as well. In these characters we find hunger is tied up with their protagonists’ resignation into silence and desolation and how it might result in a deliberate renunciation of the world around them. Hence it also becomes imperative to stress that hunger provides a means of challenging and testing established ideas pertaining to notions of the body. If the control of appetite was a crucial indicator of a girl’s ability to control or suppress her libidinal appetites then, that control simultaneously functioned as a marker of the mother’s ability to instruct her daughter properly or a female figure restraining another. This is enunciated in Annapurna’s admonition, Shabnam’s ridicule of Shehnaz and Pari cautioned by her grandmother-in-law.

As discussed earlier on, hunger can also be read in political terms as a sign of dissent and a metaphor for protest on the part of the starving individual. The physical degeneration and weakening of the body through hunger can, however, also lead to an enhancement or intensification of thought and perception⁹. In Foucault’s seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, where he addresses the relationship between the individual body and society, Foucault argues that it is not only through an act of forceful coercion that the individual is turned into a subject, but rather through a more subtle relationship in which the subject is to some degree complicit:

But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, or force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. The political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated, and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. (25)

Leela Dube points out the innate misogyny in Indian families which objectifies the abrupt growth of young girls. She states the girl’s intake of food is controlled, particularly just before and after the onset of puberty because girls should look younger than their age because a girl with a developed body raises questions about containment of her sexuality and reminds people that marriage is imminent for her and she is more likely to become a victim of sexual aggression (WS 18).

Similarly, Uma Chakravarti explains how caste, class and gender shape the Indian patriarchy. A system functions due to perpetuation of an ideology. *Stridharma*¹⁰ or its corollary *pativrata*¹¹ was the ideological *purdah*¹² of the Hindu women. It functioned as the “mask by which the hierarchical and inegalitarian structure of the social order was reproduced with the complicity of women” (582). Patriarchal family employs patriarchal women to survey women and their appetite. It is Kshenti’s mother who regulates the food she consumes or desires to consume. After an unhappy marriage, her in-laws put restraint on her eating habits. Shehnaz’s sister-in-law, the unnamed narrator though never restrains her but deploys a voyeuristic gaze on what she’s eating. Similarly Pari’s grandmother-in-law is the one who offers her paan to decrease her appetite after observing her constant desire to eat.

Althusser discusses how power is wielded in subtle and disguised form in families that it is not questioned and accepted as an everyday social practice. Such powers indoctrinate people into certain ideologies and people accept it. The ISAs are more influential than the SAs in a capitalist society according to Althusser. Ideology, hence, becomes powerful because the subjects internalize it and they rarely see outside it.

The consumption of food is invested with a gendered state ideology. The female maternal figures, also the carriers of patriarchy, oversee the consumption of food thereby becoming the producers of such ideologies. On the other hand, the daughter figures are the consumers of this ideology. The producer and the consumer are both being judged upon by the state which indirectly manipulates the consumption of food. Men’s non-consumption of food is considered self control and it has to do with class status, while the case is not so for women¹³. The emphasis is laid on the external female body to remain slim to maintain their desirability. A cautionary episode is presented in Shehnaz as by not adhering to limited food consumption she was rejected by the family.

Mothering is a gendered ISA as seen in the character of Annapurna. Karl Marx writes that labor is the most “essential” aspect to our species-being and that the products we produce are the encapsulation of us and therefore our productivity (71-76). The daughter is a product a mother creates. Mothers or women in general are watched by society on what they eat, how much they eat and when they eat. It is again a gendered division of labor as women mostly keep an eye on women’s diet.

Partha Chatterjee articulates the responsibility of women for upholding the institution of home and family thereby interweaving the intricate relationship among domesticity, the home and the nation:

In the entire phase of the nationalist struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture... The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality. (626-27)

Thus as Anita Mannur puts it, preserving the domestic familial structure becomes the responsibility of women (52). 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. As Rosemary George notes, “the word ‘home’ immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection” (1). Home is categorized into the private realm where patriarchal values are reinstated and women are located at the centre as well as the margins of the familial space. Far from being neutral spaces, homes are contested sites “manifest on geographical, psychological and material levels. They are recognized as such by those within and those without” and thus become important sites for disciplining subjects to perform their given identity role (George 9).

The household is viewed as a crucial unit within which production, distribution and consumption are organised, and within which individuals are differentially socialised. While the home is often conferred as a shelter from the public realm and identified with positive life affirming values such as privacy, security, intimacy, comfort and freedom, it is the unremunerated female labour which includes both physical and emotional labour that produces and supports the family through the provision of meals.

So how do we interpret the impeded food consumption by women in the short fictions? What does it say about family as an element of ISA? We have already discussed the subordinate role played by women in a patriarchal family. They are coerced to eat less, in the end after everyone's meal is over. Pari's meagre meal in late afternoon after finishing all the household chores testifies to it. Even Kshenti is taught the same by her mother. These stories reflect the sociopolitical and cultural ethos of the Indian families which evoke the discourse of renunciation.

For women, consumption and non-consumption of food expresses that which is ideologically not meant to be spoken about.

Besides food functioning as a muzzled form of female self-expression, it also becomes a medium of experience. Consumption, read as an index of agency, was seen to be a masculine prerogative. Images of food and consumption appear so often that they tend to get neglected, but deep diving into the imagery reveals various potent significance attached to those images of consumption.

Notes

¹See Sarah Sceats' comments in *Food Consumption and the Body*, pp. 62

²Louis Dumont has observed, getting girls married before puberty was an ancient Indian custom and a father who disobeys this command incurs the wrath of supernatural powers. See Dumont pp. 110

³See Ashley, pp. 71-72

⁴For more discussions on fat being a feminist issue, see Diamond and Boling

⁵In the Introduction to *Kamasutra*, Doniger and Kakar note the explicit sexual connotation associated with paan. See Doniger and Kakar, pp. lxvii

⁶Indian customs dictate daughters-in-law to maintain distance from their elderly brothers-in-law, lest they should dishonor themselves on charges of character assassination.

⁷See Casanova and Jafar for more elaboration

⁸See Alter. pp. 28-32

⁹Daniel Rees has worked extensively on hunger in modern writing. See Rees

¹⁰*Stridharma*- literally means duties of a woman

¹¹*Pativrata*- In Hindu tradition it refers to a married woman who is faithful and loyal to her husband

¹²*Purdah*- a religious and social practice of female seclusion prevalent among some Muslim and Hindu communities

¹³Ira Raja has discussed how hunger in Indian masculine bodies is determined more in terms of class status and also their disavowal reinstates their subjectivity.

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