

**FOOD, AGENCY AND POWER: A READING OF BULBUL SHARMA'S
*EATING WOMEN, TELLING TALES***

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Abstract

According to an increasing number of food scholars, (Counihan, Anderson et. al) food is more than mere nutrition. Carole Counihan has further argued that “men’s and women’s ability to produce, provide and consume food is a key measure of their power” (11), while Jack Goody opined that “gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over and access to food” (23). Taking my cue from these food scholars, I shall be examining the roles played by women in the stories and the power relations that are involved in it. These food theorists have opined that food conveys a whole lot of meanings and identities, since food has a language of its own. The relationship one shares with food is like a power network, depending on the role one shares with food in terms of production, consumption and distribution. In my paper, I shall be examining the tales of everyday lives of women as propounded by Bulbul Sharma in her book titled *Eating Women, Telling Tales*. Though, the stories have their own sense of wit, humour and satire, it also showcases Bulbul Sharma’s mastery of conveying the stories of everyday lives of women and their relationship to their surroundings which is intrinsically related to food. I shall be examining the roles played by women in their domestic spheres in relation to food and the power equations that are involved in it which enables the women to exercise their agency in different ways.

Keywords: gender, power, agency, identity, consumption

Roland Barthes in his essay “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption” stated that, “for what is food? It is not only a collection of products ... It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (3). Many food scholars have held the view that food is more than mere nutrition, for it conveys a whole of meanings and identities, since it is like language. According to Eugene Anderson, “food is rather like language” as it communicates an array of meanings and identities. (110). Carole Counihan went on to argue that men’s and women’s ability to produce, provide and consume food is a key measure of their power. (11). In the stories penned down by Bulbul Sharma, culinary practices become the focal point of establishing relationship and camaraderie among people. Jack Goody opined that “gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over and access to food” (23). As Meigs had observed “the sharing of

food, is a means by which to establish physical commingling, interdependence, and oneness” (119).

In the first story of the book, few women have gathered to prepare the funeral food of a man named Bhanurai Jog. In the group of women who have been assigned the responsibility of cooking the deceased’s favourite dishes- Badibua, the leader of the groups assigns certain tasks of cooking, chopping and grating certain ingredients to the women in the group, based on their age and experience. Initially, in the story we are told that prior to Badibua who has been newly assigned the task of cooking Jog’s favourite food, a woman by the name- Shantirani, who claimed to be a hundred, had done the main dish. But, now due to her old age, she had become decrepit and derelict unable to perform the much reputed task of preparing food in memory of the deceased. The women in the lot were related to the deceased in some way or the other. In this story we are made aware that, Bhanurai Jog had broken all ties with some of his family members, because of their greed. These people had come for the funeral to see whether the late Bhanurai Jog had left a share of his property for them. These people looked at Badibua with envy because their father had left a share of his wealth in her name. The children of the deceased could not discern the reason behind this move. It could be on account of the fact that, Badibua had been a childhood friend of Jog’s wife.

In this paper, I will also attempt to look into how food is used in the novel to define and attempting to transgress the social and cultural boundaries of acceptable female behavior. Badibua’s relationship to the cooking would fit into Lupton’s argument when he said caring for the nourishment and the well-being of the family, “involves cooking for others, offering food as love, being highly aware of one’s own body’s needs and those of others for whom one is charged with caring” (109). Badibua assigns different tasks associated with cooking based on age and experience. For instance, it was decided that the pumpkin would be cut by the senior most women, she and Malarani would lead the vegetable cutters. If the women of the younger lot like Shashi or Choni were given the responsibility, there would be grumblings and the cooking would taste bitter. It is also noted that Malarani works with great fineness and speed but she made sure not to be faster than Badibua for that would be challenging the authority of the head cook. (4). Bulbul Sharma, in this tale, has been successful in describing the bondings and camaraderie among women in this culinary space. It is in this space that the women assert their subjectivity and agency. We are also made aware of the opinions Badibua has of her group while cooking, for instance, she did not approve of Shashi’s short hair. While interacting in this culinary space, chopping the coriander reminded Badibua of how wonderfully her dead sister prepared the chutney. It brought back a flood of memories to her mind. As the narrative progresses, each woman take turns to tell their own story, which more or less has to do with one’s relationship to food, beginning with Badibua.

Bulbul Sharma uses the scenes of cooking and chopping vegetables as scenes which would foster further communication and story-telling. Food items and the smell of it evokes certain bitter sweet memories of the past. In the first tale narrated the one of the women of the group, a woman is busy crushing the basil leaves tenderly, so that it would not feel the pain. Maya was given the task of preparing basil, ginger, mango and coriander chutney by her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law fed her this concoction which would enable her to conceive soon and prolong their family tree with children. To pick the herbs, Maya had to go all the way round, because the patriarchs- her father-in-law and his friends and two friends sat in the verandah playing chess. Crisscrossing their way would be disrespectful and the daughter-in-law immersed in her wifely duties would not transgress the norms that a woman is supposed to

adhere to. Here, food imagery is used once again to comment on fulfilling the roles of a dutiful wife and mother. As Lupin had suggested, these women who are “delicious in the role” of mothers are desirable to patriarchs as they promise to prolong the family trees with their progeny. (33). While returning, she walked right across the old men, much to their dismay. We are also made aware of the strict roles ascribed to women within the family. The mother-in-law, Gitasri, observes, “...so much arrogance is not good in a woman, who knows what she may do one day” (9). Maya was not as meek and docile as the other daughter-in-laws who would not mind the violence meted out to them. Maya, in contrast to them seemed to be “a lioness with cubs. She was proud because of her beautiful face and her long hair which swung below her hips” (10). Maya would write letters to her husband describing the intimate details of her experience with food such as the insect found in the cabbage, which resembled a corn cob. Even the god-man- Omprabhu Dayal or Bhagwan believed that the touch of a woman made a fruit, fertile. Whereas widows or barren women should not go near them. Maya, at one point is compared to a forbidden fruit which the god-man can never touch. The god-man would tame a woman by asserting his manhood over them. This is what Gitasree attempted to do to her daughter-in-law, for being too outspoken and aggressive. The god-man thought of using all sorts of ingredients ranging from jaggery, black basil to blood coral and the urine of a civet cat to calm the blunt woman and show her, her place.

In the next tale narrated by Badibua, titled Jamini’s story, Jamini’s son Babu returns home from abroad after five years. The sense of excitement that preoccupied the family, especially the mother, is evident in the meticulous way she peeled the oranges. She made sure there were no errant seeds in the bowl. Her son- Babu realized only his mother had the patience to do this and not his wife, Maria back in New Jersey who would just throw the oranges at him. And, soon after the mother prepares coconut sweets with jiggery for her son, which as Jamini remembers, was his favourite dish from childhood. Even Babu’s red tiffin box becomes a storytelling device when he narrates the tales associated with his red tiffin box from his childhood to his wife. He told her that Jamini had a different kind of snack for him in that red box every time she packed it with food ranging from walnuts and raisins to parathas drenched in ghee. So, the relationship among the family members is depicted/mediated by the care, empathy and affection one has towards these items of consumption. As the narrator of the story- Badibua tells us, “...She (Jamini) would cook all the old dishes which Babu would eat, tasting the flavor of love in each one and their small family would be bound together in a close circle again” (33). Distance and Time between continents is considerably narrowed down through one’s relationship with food as Jamini wondered before Babu’s departure after five weeks of stay in India- “She needed more time, more memories, more food. Babu had loved her cooking so much but a flood of panic hit her and her heart went cold when she could not remember her son as her child anymore” (33). When Jamini pines for her, only food brings the two together and its associated memories. Food, or its lack thereof becomes a metaphor for her conflicted feelings.

The next tale concerns Hema’s (one of the cooks for the funeral and Badibua’s maid) mother’s dream about the dead ants. It begins with a goat sacrifice which was offered to the Devta to please the deceased. The dead were the two wives- Choti and Munni of Parvati’s (Hema’s mother) maternal-uncle in-law. These dead women appeared regularly in Parvati’s dreams to ask for something or the other ranging from “a pooja and bhog in Haridwar to a goat...” (37). The dead were to be kept happy or the family had to bear its wrath. The author seems to play upon the idea of wanting to have a male heir by comparing the male to a fruit that grows on trees- “A nice, plump seed from the topmost branch where the best, healthiest sons

grow. Sons who will live beyond their father and light their mother's funeral pyre" (41). In the story we are told that Choti had sent the male bud to Parvati in her dreams and that is how she gave birth to a male heir for Somu (Hema's father). It is only after Somu's orchard receives the blessings of the deceased- Choti and Munni, that it begins to bloom with almonds, plum, peach and flowers. In Savitri's story, Gita is assigned the task of preparing the bhog prasad, along with two other women, for Shivratri by Purohit Baba. Gita's expertise in cooking is made evident when we are told, "...you could chop the vegetables as fine as petals, grind all kinds of spices till they could pass through muslin but if you added too much or too little salt, everything was ruined forever" (49-50). In the story, Savitri's husband left her for an Englishwoman. Soon after, the husband dies after falling from the tenth floor of a hotel in London. The society, blamed Savitri for the demise of her husband and said all cruel things to her. But, she believed she would cook such wonderful bhog for the Shivratri that people would forget the incident. In the same story the reader is introduced to a third woman- Malti who had the capability of cooking for a hundred people. She knew what the gods and goddesses liked. It is interesting to note that the characters in the story, in their devotion to the Gods, wish to offer 'bhog' to the Gods for the child's safe return from abroad (as in Jamini's story), or Dhani, the butcher, promising to fast if the gods gave his wife a girl, instead of a boy. Soni, in a fit of jealousy and malice, sends halwa to Dhani's wife so that she would have false labour pains and she would be sent away to her mother. In Sona's story, all attempts to teach English to her, by her husband, Gautam, fail. Sona's husband has an affair with an Englishwoman (referred to as the she-cat in the story), and it continues even after his marriage with Sona, because of her poor command over English. The only thing that held the marriage together, was Sona's expertise in cooking. In the course of the narrative, Bhanurai Jog, who is now long dead and gone, wishes to be a woman, peering from the clouds (76) by looking at the camaraderie and merry making shared by the women in the kitchen. Jog's son Raman gets into the business of selling groceries in England, though he was trained as an engineer. Bhanurai Jog's wife- Mala had a deep fondness for her garden where she grew mangoes, aubergines, tomatoes and cucumbers. It is only after his wife's death, when Jog strolls through the garden, the prospering orchard reminds him of his dead wife.

In Sharada's story, her in-laws had flown down to India to take part in the annual shraadh ceremony of her mother-in-law, which would be followed by a grand feast. This occasion brought the entire family together. There were five different kind of curries for people of different dispositions, tastes, and belonging to different climes. The red, medium hot curry for the ones who visited India more than once a year and had chilli-proof stomachs, the mild, faded red, watery curry for the ones who came to India once a year, the pale pink, bland sick man's curry for those who had just got off the plane and needed to be reminded about the magic of Indian curry, the stew curry for the NRI children who were frightened of spices (92-93). In utter confusion, the family members end up tasting the curries which were not meant for them, leading to humorous gastronomical problems, the dinner table being occupied with antacids and tablets. Then, there is a quarrel among the relatives about who made the best 'chana-paishe'. Most of their conversations center around food- about the horrible sweets Jaya's daughter made. Then there are conversations around the kind of food their late mother (Sharada's mother-in-law) preferred. Towards the end of this story, "...as their lazy fingers salvaged bits of curry their dead mother's face floated past them, her white hair streaming behind her like a silver shadow. She looked down at them, her sharp gaze broken into fragments by the afternoon light..." (103).

In Nanni's story, who was married off at a very young age, unable to bear the reprimands of Harish, her husband about her family and his neglect of her, decides to kill him by

overfeeding him. She was always reminded that “a wife’s duty is to feed her husband well (106). Nanni’s mother had also reminded her that “Feed him, child, feed him all the richness, all the sweetness that he has not given you till the gods see it fit to take him away” (109). First, she churned the yoghurt and lassi, and put extra dry fruits and sugar into it, so that the excess sweetness would clog her husband’s arteries. But even when the doctors had put a ban on food containing high cholesterol, Nanni would continue performing her wifely duties of feeding him. Her mother’s words continued to ring in her head. Finally the spices and the sweets had worked wonders and Harish passed away “with his eyes open, his mouth slack as if waiting for more food to be poured into it” (112).

In these stories, Bulbul Sharma has successfully depicted the many roles food can play in women’s lives- though in bizzare and often unexpected ways. It becomes concomitant with the sense of duty and wifely obligations that there are expected to perform. For instance, in Nanni’s story, unable to deal with her abusive in-laws and husband, decides to kill him, by way of overfeeding him, since Harish would not prefer having being fed by somebody, other than his wife. The changing relationship of the women in relation to their food or culinary habits stem from the kind of spatial environment there were intrinsically a part of. As Bell and Valentine assert in *Consuming Geographies* that “change in identity are articulated on individuals’ plates— affecting not only what is bought to eat and the places from where it is purchased, but also who has prepared it and the spatial dynamics of when and where [and how] it is consumed within the home” (77). In *Eating Women, Telling Tales*, Bulbul Sharma seems to be hinting at the kind of relations women share with food and the kitchen space, or through food-related scenes which covertly question gender roles. From a tool of patriarchal control, food becomes an avenue for the characters’ questioning of certain restrictions and prescribed roles in the society. These, in turn, become a potent signifier of their self-exploration, an exercise of autonomy in different capacities.

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