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Beauty, Food and Marital Relationships in Bulbul Sharma's "Sweet Nothings" and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

Abstract

The present paper looks into the plight of corpulent women protagonists in Bulbul Sharma's "Sweet Nothings" and Anita Nair's Ladies Coupé. Reshma and Margaret suffer severed marital relationships, as they are rejected/neglected by their husbands due to their corpulent bodies. Being brought up in Indian culture, these two women are trained to devote themselves to their husbands and families. Balancing their lives post marriage, between household chores and feminine nurturance, these women hardly find time to maintain their ideal beauty and eventually lose it. The loss of beauty, these women feel, is directly related to the loss of their husbands' attention. Reshma and Margaret try hard to make changes in their dietary habits to regain their ideal of beauty to sustain their marriages and retain their husbands' love. The paper aims at examining the connection between the concept of beauty and the notion of food in marital relationships, through the critical frames of food and culture.

Beauty, food and women are inextricably linked with one another. The body of a woman is an overt form of expression of her beauty, as many cultures define beauty of a woman through her physical appearance. In a sense, woman's body becomes her identity and a cause for her social acceptance or rejection. A woman with slender body and fair complexion is considered to be an ideal beauty in patriarchal societies of some cultures. Joan Jacob Brumberg explicates an interesting fact that during Victorian period, "In Britain the dread of fat weighs like an incubus" on romantic youngsters who consumed vinegar "to produce thinness" and swallowed rice "to cause the complexion to become paler" (171), as a woman who possessed slender body with fair complexion was considered the ideal of beauty. Young women were so passionate about the ideal of beauty, that they were ready to follow even the most uncommon practices to possess it. Brumberg further explains that "If plump [the girl] berates herself as a criminal against refinement and aesthetic taste; and prays in good or bad earnest for a spell of illness to pull her down" (171). Such was the obsession of Victorian women to be thin, that they wanted to remain thin and beautiful even at the cost of their health. These notions posited by Brumberg are prevalent in many modern societies, where woman's slender body is treated as synonymous to her beauty. A woman who befits the norms of the ideal of beauty, with a fair slender body, feels more confident to assert herself in social circles.

Food plays a significant role in regulating the beauty of a woman. Brumberg observes that in Victorian era, many women handled their food and appetite according to the notion that "sturdiness in women suggested low status, a lack of gentility and even vulgarity" (173). In many contemporary societies too, a corpulent women feels rejected, dejected and eventually loses her social acceptance. In Indian cultural context, the ideal of beauty is more often associated with a slender bodied woman. Therefore, married women, being no exception to

this notion, are also in race to maintain their ideal beauty as they believe that this would ensure love, care and attention of their husbands. However, in India, it becomes a challenge for married women to retain their ideal beauty, as they are trained to devote their lives to their husbands and family, and care less for themselves. Moreover, balancing their lives post marriage, between household chores and feminine nurturance, these women find it difficult to maintain a slender body and even lose it. Once they put on weight, women are often observed to refrain from food, make dietary changes coupled with exercises to regain their slender body. Ironically, the woman who cooks food for her family cannot relish what she cooks, as she is always worried about her body. Swagata Ray and Rajni Singh rightly point out in their essay, "Food and Femininity in Fay Weldon's *The Fat Woman's Joke*," that the woman cooks food for her family, serves food, starves for food to maintain her measured figure and ultimately is "consumed" (65). A corpulent woman may also lose her husband's attention and become the butt of every joke. When a woman is engulfed in insecurity, her body becomes a site of contest for her own survival. In short, women fall prey to the 'beauty myth' prescribed by the male dominated society.

The present paper examines the lives of two corpulent women protagonists, Reshma and Margaret, who live through disturbed marital relationships owing to their husbands' negligence towards them because they are fat. The role of food, which has an impact on their bodies, and their ideal of beauty, will be examined. In Bulbul Sharma's "Sweet Nothings," Reshma's husband has an affair with another lady of the same name who is more slender than Reshma. Reshma finds it extremely difficult to accept her husband's betrayal and is also concerned about her two sons' future. She strives hard to regain her slim body by following a strict diet and doing regular exercises, through which, she feels, she can retain her husband's attention. In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, Margaret, who puts on weight, post abortion, is insulted by her husband, Ebenezer Paulraj. Margaret experiences loss of selfhood as she also happens to be her husband's colleague. There are many instances, where, Margaret feels let down by her husband before her other colleagues. However, it is interesting to note that both Margaret and Reshma use food to regain their ideal beauty, but unlike Reshma, who foregoes food, Margaret uses her culinary skills to regain and restore marital love.

In both the stories that are being analysed, the protagonists are concerned about their fat bodies. Reshma experiences psychological neurosis, because of her voluptuous body. Goffman (qtd. in *Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism*) observes, "In Western abomination of the body (53). Further Gailey quotes in the same book that, "In addition to surprising that many fat persons internalize fat hatred" (53). In the Indian cultural context She sees herself as a failure, as she feels she no longer befits the role of a wife, as she has lost her slim body. In modern India, it can be said that, slenderness is perceived to be immanent to woman's beauty. The protagonists in both the stories being fat are considered unattractive. Both Reshma and Margaret become obsessed with their physical appearance, when their husbands neglect them. Ignominiously, they start hating themselves, thereby affecting their marital relationships too.

In Bulbul Sharma's "Sweet Nothings", Reshma feels awkward that her husband has an affair with another woman of the same name. She feels humiliated, as though this woman has

stolen a bit of her too along with her husband. In her dream, Reshma sees Ajay growing round and fat like a gas balloon, but this image fades away soon and an image, where chocolate sauce is being poured on her is what remains. Reshma's dream can be understood as a mirror of her angst towards life. Reshma perceives beauty as slimness; being aware of her husband seeing slim Reshma, a sense of insecurity, seeps into her mind. Her helplessness in real life about her husband's infidelity, leads to imagining Ajay become fat like a gas balloon. This can be read as Reshma's vengeance against her husband. Reshma's dream symbolises her insecurity about her marital life and husband's love, both of which, she now feels, she is losing. Having internalized the fact that she is fat, Reshma hates the other, slim Reshma. However, Reshma is ready to do anything, to refrain Ajay from pursuing his affair. Reshma's mission to somehow dissolve the fat in her body becomes an obsession to overrule other aspects of her life. Giving birth to two sons and having had a miscarriage, Reshma has no control over weight gain and has remained fat at forty four. The biological compulsion is undermined by social expectation and Reshma wonders if she should go in for a liposuction. As Reshma looks at accumulation of fat as her failure in marriage, she directs her energy towards regaining her slim body which she possessed before marriage.

Reshma's everyday life is marked by strict dietary calendar and regular exercises to lose weight. Reshma's day begins with the book titled *Complete Calorie Counter*, the cover page of which has the picture of a blonde girl with a white swimsuit, holding a glass of orange juice in one hand and lettuce in the other. It is interesting to note the marketing industry perpetuating the slim body. Like most women getting attracted to the models in the advertisement, Reshma's eyes too fall on the girl on the cover page. However, Reshma starts hating this girl too, as she hates the slim Reshma because she does not possess a slender body like theirs' and hence considers herself ugly. It can be observed how Reshma is stigmatized by obesity and her overweight. Alice Julier in her essay, "The Political Economy of Obesity" observes, "One major function of obesity is that the obese can be identified and punished as alleged or real deviant in order to uphold the legitimacy of the conventional norms" (553). Further, Julier elucidates, "The cornerstone of weight bias is the belief that it is a self-induced state from which a self-disciplined individual can escape by hard work or, that, the purchase of right diet book, foods, exercise equipment or medical intervention" (553). Considering Julier's notion of the obese as deviants and indisciplined individuals, it can be observed how Reshma now feels othered and distanced from her husband. However, Reshma subscribes to what Julier posits by buying the book on weight loss. There is no dearth of efforts that Reshma puts in to lose weight. Her days are filled with instructions to her servants Amah and Raha on how to give her food with measured calories that would help her lose weight- Juice, only fruit, no breakfast, slice of toast with no butter, and the toast being absolutely dry are some of the food on Reshma's menu. In spite of such committed efforts, Reshma is fat.

While Reshma is obsessed with losing her fat looks, Amah, her servant wonders, "Why doesn't Sahib like her?" (138). Reshma constantly checks with Amah if she has lost weight. Amah, who belongs to a different class, reads beauty in different terms. For her, beauty is not slenderness. Awestruck, she asks Reshma, "Why do you try to become thin all the time? So healthy you are. Mother of two handsome sons. You should be fat and healthy like a queen"(138). Belonging to an economically weaker class in society, Amah understands beauty as being fat and healthy. Raha, another servant, too fails to understand the importance of Reshma's 'circus' to become thin. He wonders why the rich prefer to look like scarecrows

and he is of the opinion that, it is on the stomach that it should show, when one makes money. The fat around the stomach, according to him accumulates, when one becomes rich. So he wonders why rich people should do a 'circus' to lose that fat. Amah remarks about the pujari's wife in her village, who weighs as much as three sacks of grain and can, drink a full glass of ghee in one gulp. She expresses her desire that people of her village want to be like the pujari's wife. Thus, one can observe how the perception of beauty varies as per class distinctions. The ideal of slim body as beautiful seems to be the upper class marker for a woman.

In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, Margaret suffers a similar distraught like Reshma, losing her husband's attention because of her appearance. Married to Ebenezer Paulraj, the Principal of a prestigious school, Margaret is offered to head the Department of Chemistry and teach the senior class in the same school where her husband works. Eighteen months after marriage, Margaret discovers that she is pregnant. She is so excited after their visit to the maternity clinic that she wants to call her parents and tell them the news. She wants to stand on the roof top and scream to the world that she is going to have a baby. In her excitement, she fails to notice Ebenezer, who is quiet and withdrawn as he has different plans. Ebenezer calls her 'Maragatham'. He feels Margaret Shanti is what everyone calls her, and Maragatham is his special name for her which means Emerald in Tamil. Not wanting to be a parent yet, Ebe tries to propitiate Margaret, by calling her Maragatham in a voice that is softer than usual, and breaks his silence, by announcing that he is not sure, if they should have a baby yet. "What's the point in working for a Doctorate? Do your B.Ed. so you can become a teacher and then we will always be together. Long hair doesn't suit you. Cut it off. You'll look nicer with your hair in a blunt bob. Let's wait till we are both settled in our careers before we have our baby. We have each other. What more do we want?" (105). Ebenezer tries to pacify Margaret, trying to infuse in her mind, the little girl's image, that he expects her to possess, so that he can dominate her. He opines that blunt bob will make her look young like a little girl once again. With his crafty words to Margaret, he successfully convinces her for an abortion. Margaret, who is immensely in love with Ebe, does not want to go against his wishes and so agrees for an abortion with remorse. It is also interesting to note, how he prevents Margaret from doing her doctorate and pursues her to do B.Ed., so that even in education, she does not outshine him.

Ebenezer perceives Margaret's beauty, in terms of a little girl's image. Margaret's evolution into a woman by becoming a mother is seen as a threat by Ebenezer, who wants to control her, by establishing his power over her girlish body. After her abortion, Ebenezer once tells Margaret, "I love it when you call me Ebe, Ebe, just like you did now. I like you like this my lovely girl. With no big woman's breasts and horrible woman's bush. I never want you to change. I want you to remain like this all your life" (111). Ebenezer dislikes Margaret's womanly body that seems to him, both strong and powerful. Margaret knows that Ebe sees anyone who is contemporary and successful as a threat. He does not want her to become a woman through motherhood. He wants her to retain her little girl's image, so that he can rule over her. He tries to recreate the girl in her and kill the woman in her. In other words, he wants to erase her identity as a woman. He wants her to go against the norms of nature and become unbeautiful, as against the desire of Margaret.

While he wants Margaret to stick to her little girl's image, Ebenezer himself is a fitness freak. He likes to run; running, he claims, helps him to concentrate and focus. However,

Margaret knows that if Ebe has a weakness, it is food. He loves eating; the richer the food, the better he likes it fatty bacons, roe-filled sardines, chicken liver, the globs of fat that butchers throw in to make up for the bones, when selling mutton, eggs, mangoes and many more fat rich foods. Margaret is aware of his fondness for food but knows Ebe loves his body even more. So he controls his natural fondness for eating, avoids a second helping and fasts for a whole day once in a week, to maintain his fit body. He also forbids Margaret to cook anything that would test his will, and make him to succumb. Ebenezer's endearment towards his physique is more than his liking for food, as a fit body denotes his confidence, self-esteem and his superiority over his wife's fat body.

After her abortion, Margaret is emotionally upset; she allows herself all that she should not, food being the only thing that comforts her. She buys a big bar of chocolate and hides it from Ebe in different places, as he would get angry if he sees her snack. Just knowing that the chocolate is somewhere in the house, gives her a secret pleasure. Through food, Margaret tries to forget her disappointments in life. She binges on chocolates and chips to fulfil her cravings; food becomes a source of solace in her life. However, lack of control over food leads to loss of her slim body. Margaret abhors her looks after the abortion, as she now has double chin, rolls of fat around her waist; thick calves and puffy wrists. She hates to look at herself in the mirror, but, she is happy that she is no longer her husband's little girl. Destroying the body that Ebenezer liked gives Margaret happiness; however, her new-found satisfaction is short-lived when Margaret learns that her husband is infatuated with the 'lithium girl' (as Margaret has named her) Daphne. She resorts to find emotional security in food. Margaret, who does not possess the ideal beautiful body, envies Ebenezer. She detests his looks which had once attracted her. She fears losing her husband's attention as Ebe is attracted to a slim girl. Thus, marital happiness is presented as closely linked to a woman possessing a slim body through proper dietary habits. A woman who fails to do so is in a precarious position to lose her marriage. In Indian cultural context, a woman who cannot hold on to her marriage is seen as a useless, failed woman. Margaret is aware of the societal rejection if anything happens to her marriage. As she reflects, "she, with all her numerous faults, overweight and barren, and given to long morose silences and melancholic disposition, ought go down on her knees everyday and thank the heavens that he, her husband has still stuck by her" (112). As Margaret becomes aware of the uncertainty in her marriage and the social rejection, she tries to look for new strategies of survival.

Food can be observed to be the leitmotif in both the stories. Food, eating habits, and body are closely linked to the female identity. As Swagata Ray and Rajani Singh agree, slenderization affects the social presence of women, as patriarchy makes the physical beauty of women, the parameter for social recognition. So, to get social recognition, women not only use beauty products but also adopt dieting, starve to an optimum level without realizing the adverse effects of such eating-habits on their bodies. Both Reshma and Margaret are aware of their husbands' infidelity towards them. Though Ajay tries to pamper Reshma through his baby talks to her, she is well aware that Ajay is attracted to the other Reshma, who is thin as a boy. In Margaret's case too, she knows that Ebe is infatuated towards Daphne and fears that Daphne may now play her husband's little girl's role. Both Reshma and Margaret, see the other woman with slim body as a threat to their existence and their identities as wives. As Julier rightly points out, "People stigmatized by body size lack the level of political and social power to correct the stereotypes that the other people hold of them and thus continue to be thought of as willing victims engaged in bad personal decisions" (554). Between the two

Ebe remains fat, there are no power struggles and they lead a calm and happy life.

The two stories discussed above point to a significant aspect of Indian social set up. A slender body, which is also an indication of proper eating habits, befitting the norms of patriarchal ideal of beauty, boosts the confidence in women. Thus the woman's body becomes a combat field, where she fights against her own needs and desires to attain an ideal beauty through her body. A body maintained as such is closely linked to marital happiness. Striving to achieve success against their bodies by relinquishing food, it can be observed how Reshma and Margaret fall prey to the beauty myth prescribed by patriarchy in India. However, food plays a predominant role in these women's lives as they grapple with their fat bodies. While Reshma gulps on sweets and is entrapped in her sorrows, Margaret uses the same food to vindicate her anger towards her husband. Marriage, which is a strong social institution in India, is often understood as sustainable through the physical beauty of women's body. Thus slender body of a woman, understood as beauty attained through proper adherence to food habits, becomes a prime nutrient to nurture marital relationships in India.

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