

RESEARCH ARTICLE



2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

Examining the Maternal Foodscape in Selected Short Stories from Bulbul Sharma's *The Anger of the Aubergines*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.3.263](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.3.263)



Article info

Article Received: 25/07/2026
Article Accepted: 22/08/2026
Published online: 26/08/2026

Abstract

Bulbul Sharma's *The Anger of Aubergines* (1997) uses food as a recurring motif and cultural language through which kinship and power roles are negotiated. This article seeks to contribute to the field of gastrocriticism and Indian women's writing in English through an examination of selected short stories by Bulbul Sharma, a relatively understudied area within literary scholarship. Through a close textual analysis "Sandwiched," "Feasting with a Vengeance," and "Train Fare", this article examines of how culinary practices function as a performative technology within the kinship role of a mother which at times sustains, at other times regulates, and sometimes even contests familial relationships. It also looks at how food operates both as material practice and cultural discourse in Sharma's work. Further examination of acts of cooking, feeding, refusing food, and preserving recipes, construction of motherhood, regulation of female bodies is undertaken in the article. In "Sandwiched," maternal authority is repeatedly performed through culinary rituals that transform feeding into an assertion of emotional and domestic power. "Feasting with a Vengeance" exposes the disciplining and control of women's appetites and bodies within the marriage economy, revealing how food becomes a mechanism for producing socially acceptable femininity. "Train Fare" examines how consumption in a public space becomes a matter of patriarchal anxiety. The selected short stories each give a different insight into the configurations of motherhood. The short stories within the anthology are accompanied by recipes which function as feminist paratexts, preserving women's embodied knowledge and domestic histories which are often excluded from conventional narratives. Sharma examines kinship and the distribution of care in Indian households by presenting food as an archive of memory, cultural authority and reimagines the kitchen as a contested space where gendered identities are negotiated through everyday acts of cooking and eating.

Keywords: Women's Writing, Indian Writing in English, Gastro criticism, Motherhood, Kinship.

Bulbul Sharma in her short story collection *The Anger of the Aubergines* explores women's subjectivities and quotidian realities through the motif of food. In her writings food has variously been used to articulate domesticity, used as a metaphor for memory, an instrument to express desire or orchestrate resistance. Each short story of the collection provides an insight into a range of experiences characteristic of the everyday domestic milieu. Where in "Saying it with Cauliflowers," food mediates affection and in "Sandwiched" it articulates the competing demands of motherhood and marriage; "Sweet Nothings", "Constant Craving", "Feasting with a Vengeance" examine politics of the body, various mechanisms of culinary control and discipline, wherein, appetite is bought into dialogue with the social regulation of women's desires. "Food to Die For", "Dead Man's Feast" look at the human life, food and mortality. "Jars of Gold" and "A Taste for Humble Pie" lie at the opposite ends of a spectrum where food production become means of control and maintenance of authority in former and subservience and relevance in the latter. In "Mushroom Madness and "Moonfish by Moonlight," culinary exchange becomes instrument romantic expression, a site of intimacy and desire. Whereas in "Train Fare" food intake exposes gendered expectations and patriarchal paranoia. All the short stories of this collection demonstrate how food is not just a means of nourishment but a practice through which kinship is performed and negotiated. In Bulbul Sharma's collection the kitchen, the dining experience often becomes sites for examining care, obligation, gendered labour, authority, and agency. The popular adage - the way to a man's heart is through his stomach- is testament to the role food plays in influencing interpersonal relationships which thereby help in negotiating power in the domestic sphere. In

traditional patriarchal economy men often control the finances, women's knowledge and labour surrounding food can become an important, though often overlooked, source of influence and agency and becomes a means through which women influence the existing structures in their favour.

This article examines trope motherhood via motif of food in the selected short stories of Bulbul Sharma's short story collection, namely, "Sandwiched," "Train Fare" and "Feasting with a Vengeance". She reconceptualizes food as a performative technology of motherhood, through which authority is negotiated, affection, obligation, and resistance are expressed. Mother's culinary labour functions as care, a tool of expression, communication, and a subtle method of influence and exercising power. Sharma articulation is nuanced, she does not celebrate motherhood as selfless caregiving steeped in domestic labour, nor she homogenise 'motherly' characteristic by assuming a single, universal maternal instinct as fixed biological or gendered identity. Rather she sees these as divergent practices in which food plays a significant role. Motherhood thereby emerges not as a static fact of blood relation but as an ongoing performance sustained through everyday culinary rituals.

Judith Butler, idea of performativity provides an interesting framework to unpack motherhood as an enacted and relational where gendered identities as being constituted through "a stylized repetition of acts," suggesting that legitimacy is acquired in social roles through repeated performances. In the selected short stories, the acts of feeding consumption and cooking illustrate this principle via culinary practices. In the short story "Sandwiched," motherhood is performed not merely through biological maternity but through habitual acts of feeding. Vinod's mother

recalls how she "made tiny round balls of rice and dal and fed him with my own hands" (Sharma,1997, p. 29). Nourishment is transformed into an enduring expression of maternal authority where the act of feeding is a mechanism control. Even post her son's marriage, food continues to mediate the emotional struggle and becomes a tool of assertive communication between mother and wife, where both women attempt to secure affection through increasingly elaborate acts of cooking. The domestic table thus becomes a battleground for control where kinship is negotiated through appetite rather than explicit confrontation. "Feasting with a Vengeance" reveals how culinary practices regulate female bodies within the patriarchal marriage economy. Preeti's identity is reduced to the impersonal language of matrimonial advertisements, where even an extra slice of toast provokes maternal anxiety: "Anyway, you have had enough toast. Look how fat you are getting" (Sharma ,1997, p.39). Here appetite itself is monitored and food is transformed into a mechanism through which acceptable femininity is manufactured. The female body is regulated through everyday domestic surveillance that appears natural, affectionate, and maternal but are.

All of these short stories are followed by a recipe which is not a mere whimsical additions or practical culinary notes; rather, it is what Gérard Genette identifies as paratexts, extending the narrative beyond conventional closure. The recipes are a concrete embodiment of domestic knowledge that the story itself cannot fully contain. The stories are followed by the recipe transform culinary instruction into an archive of memory, affect, and feminine knowledge becoming a textual monument to domestic labour that has historically remained absent from official histories and literary canons. A careful reading of "Sandwiched," "Feasting with a Vengeance," and "Train Fare" examines domestic space as a politically charged cultural arena where food production

and consumption constructs motherhood, kinship, shapes gender identity, archives memory, and negotiates power.

In Bulbul Sharma's "Sandwiched" food emerges as a political currency in kinship roles where the domestic conflict between the mother and the new daughter-in-law is performed via the food production and intake. Rather than overt arguments, the narrative presents a seemingly ordinary middle-class household where meals become symbolic of the conflict and it is through culinary practices such as cooking, feeding, and eating the language of affection, rivalry, and power is articulated. Kitchen becomes a site where motherhood and wifehood are continually performed and contested. Nirmala, Vinod's mother exercises her influence through constantly reminiscing about the memory of feeding him which is not merely sentimental recollection but a claim to maternal authority and service attempting to establish an emotional ownership over Vinod that seek to supersede the wife's claims. The mother's authority not only resides in giving birth but is continuously reinforced in through the foodscape of the household. Sara Ruddick in her book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989) posits motherhood not just a biological condition but as a practice of care, preservation, and nurturance. Ruddick's concept of motherhood helps in reading the trope of motherhood performed via food in Bulbul Sharma's work. Every meal prepared by Vinod's mother carries with it a reminder of years of accumulated emotional investment she has made in him. His wife, Nirmala, attempts to undermine her mother-in-law's hold by introducing Vinod to new cuisines. Kitchen emerges as a site where two women embolden their respective claims and establish their legitimacy through food. This struggle becomes rather evident in the narrative's repeated emphasis each puts on Vinod's consumption of the cuisine cooked by them wherein the food stands in for the place one holds in Vinod's regard. The mother constantly urges her son to

eat, interpreting his appetite as evidence of emotional closeness. Refusal to eat consequently signifies emotional distance rather than simple satiety. In humorous inversion of patriarchal authority, Vinod is reduced to consuming unappetising food just to appease both the factions. Barthes concept of food undertaking the function of communication by becoming "a system of communication," is illustrated here, wherein food becomes a communicator of maternal love, refreshing Vinod's memory of the care his mother has bestowed upon him and thereby the expected obligation meant to strengthens his mother's rights over him.

Nirmala pregnancy introduces another maternal figure into the domestic sphere and authorizes a new form of maternal discourse centred on nutrition and fetal health. Here it is again through food that competing models of motherhood are mediated. Nirmala's mother-in-law legitimates her attempt to control the nutrition of the unborn child by quoting her memories of nurturing Vinod in the past and attempts to register her authority by controlling the nutrition of the unborn child "I will get cow's milk for him, fresh white butter, curds" (Sharma, 1997, p.32). Nirmala on the other hand counter's this by choosing a more contemporary form of parenting and nutrition by remarking "Everyone gives eggs and cereal now"(p.32). Her mother-in-law legitimises her decisions by emphasising the success of her traditional methods, "That is why their teeth fall out when they are thirty. look at Vinod, how healthy his teeth and bones are"(p.32). This generational transition in culinary knowledge, reflects the changing conceptions of maternal care. The contrast between the inherited domestic wisdom with contemporary health discourse, illustrate how food practices evolve alongside shifting social values. Yet neither system entirely displaces the other. Instead, they coexist uneasily within the household, intensifying domestic tensions. The short story's narrative encapsulates what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's terms the concept of gastro-politics

where food becomes a medium through which status, authority, and social relationships are either contested or maintained. By relocating domestic conflict from verbal disagreement to culinary performance neither woman openly challenges the other; instead via the emotional influence through feeding each attempt to secure their methods as the legitimate authority.

Motherhood is not idealised, while Vinod's mother undoubtedly loves her son, yet her care is not without its own selfish objectives. Feeding is an assertion of emotional ownership and not just selfless nurturance. Similarly, Nirmala's concern for her unborn child is geared towards cementing her authority within the household. Simplistic binaries between nurturing and domination are dismantled. Culinary care simultaneously expresses love and power, revealing the emotional ambiguities embedded within domestic relationships.

Mary Douglas's anthropological understanding of food as a system of social order further clarifies this ambiguity. Douglas argues that meals create and reinforce cultural boundaries where food communicates "different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries" (1972, p. 61). Sharma similarly portrays food as organizing familial hierarchies. The dining table becomes the symbolic centre of domestic authority where relationships are continuously negotiated through serving, accepting, or refusing food. Appetite itself becomes socially meaningful because eating confirms participation within familial structures.

Where "Sandwiched" explores food as the tool of motherhood where she attempts to maintain her apex position in the traditional domestic status quo via continued food production and memory of the nutritional care she provided to her son; "Train Fare" presents a striking reversal of this dynamic where the adult child attempts to control and regulate the maternal subject and the representation of

motherhood is constructed through the son, Gopal. His expectations of what a mother should be and behave allows the story to expose the patriarchal ideal of maternal respectability. Gopal's relationship with his mother, Sita, and his wife, Malati, (mother of his daughter Kajol) is marked by a combination of dependence, surveillance, and regulation. Sita is his elderly mother, he positions himself as her protector, treating her body, movements, food, and interactions as matters requiring his supervision. "Train Fare" humorously exposes the patriarchal anxiety in which the maternal figure is expected to remain domestic, contained, modest, and obedient, even after her children are grown. Gopal recalls his father's injunction that "Women should always eat in the kitchen after the men have eaten" (p.66) which is particularly revealing and so is the repulsion Gopal feels at their appetites "...now Gopal realised why. "How ugly they look chewing like cows, their teeth stained with food" he thought...", (p.66) is rather telling. Patriarchal picture of motherhood is embedded within a domestic order in which women's feeding labour is expected, while their own appetite and public consumption are regulated.

In "Train Fare", the train becomes a temporary alternative to the domestic sphere, where the rules governing maternal femininity are destabilised where the food practices of the private kitchen transposed to the public space of the train. Even though Gopal repeatedly attempts to reproduce the boundaries of the home in this public space through constant monitoring and surveillance, his anxiety reveals that what he seeks to protect is not simply his mother and wife's physical safety but a particular ideology of respectable motherhood and wifehood one where the maternal body must remain controlled and appropriately situated. The significance of food's potential as an instrument subversion lies precisely in its movement across this private-public divide. At home, food is associated with gendered domestic labour and regulated consumption; on

the train, eating becomes collective, visible, mobile, and socially interactive. Sita eats openly, shares food with her friend Joya and other passengers, and calls vendors to the window. Her declaration, "On a train you don't have to follow the same rules as you do at home," (p.73) explicitly marks the distinction between domestic regulation and public possibility. The train becomes a liminal space in which the conventions attached to motherhood can be suspended and food becomes mechanism through which a certain relief from norms controlling women can be orchestrated. This is especially exemplified when Gopal's mother refuses to heed Gopal's anxiety "But Sita Sen refused to move and opened her paan box. She began to spread lime slowly on a betel leaf to show how firm she was about staying on her bench. Gopal then began a nervous pacing up and down the platform..." (pp.62). Gopal's mother constantly subverts constricting patriarchal expectations through the ordinary visibility of appetite and sociability. Eating in public challenges the assumption that maternal respectability requires female restraint and domestic containment. This disruption is particularly significant in relation to Susan Bordo's formulation of the female body as a "docile body" whose energies are habituated to external regulation (Bordo, 2003, p. 166). Gopal endeavours regulate the maternal body however he is thwarted as the maternal foodscape is transformed from a private site of service into a public site of negotiation. Gopal's anxiety exposes the patriarchal desire to preserve motherhood within the controlled boundaries of the home, while the train's liminal space allows those boundaries to become porous. Motherhood then is not a fixed identity secured by domestic confinement; it is a contested social role whose meanings shift when women, their bodies, and their food move beyond the private sphere. The public consumption of food therefore becomes significant not simply because maternal appetite is visible, but because her eating unsettles the spatial, bodily, and behavioural boundaries

within which Gopal attempts to define respectable motherhood.

Bulbul Sharma explores yet another iteration of motherhood in "Feasting with a Vengeance", in which maternal power and control maintained not through procurement but a denial of food. Srilata is looking for a suitable groom for her daughter, Preeti, to achieve this purpose she attempts to shape and control her daughter's body through limiting her intake of food, before the transition to marriage. We see how the female body is fashioned into a familial project through the everyday politics of food. Appetite, body size, culinary skill, and eating habits become markers of a woman's suitability for marriage, revealing that food is deeply implicated in the production of social identity. We see a side of the domestic sphere where it is not a just innocuous a site of care but as a training ground where gendered norms are inculcated through the disciplining of desires in order to secure familial honour, starting with a control of food intake.

Bulbul Sharma evocatively opens the story with the impersonal language of matrimonial advertisements: "24/160 cm/59 kg/B.A./wheatish/Khatri" (pp. 38). The fragmentation of the protagonist into measurable attributes is deliberate where her personality is effaced and is, replaced with statistics. The basis of this dehumanising categorisation is her age caste, physical characteristics and not her personality. In this story we see how femininity is engendered through strict domestic discipline exercised through food and women shaped into ideal wives. In the union of marriage emotional absent is absent and is largely transactional in which women's currency is her physical attributes. The short story foregrounds the eminence of food as a means through which human body is shaped-sized and therefore controlled. Food then becomes effective tool through which a mother can exercise influence and power in the society at large. Preeti's diet is constantly monitored by her mother for

example when she reaches for another slice of toast, her mother, Srilata, immediately stops her stating "...you have had enough toast. Look how fat you are getting ever since you left college" (Sharma 39). This scene functions to showcase the working of patriarchal ideologies in the ordinary day to day setting through the mother. The focus is diverted from nutrition, which biological role of food to aesthetic shaping of the female body. Every slice of toast threatens the cultivation of the "ideal" bride. Consumption of food takes on a social and a moral tone where hunger is not a biological event but a moral weakness and restraint a feminine virtue. Ironically opposed to this is the gluttonous feast of Preeti's wedding functions. The strict control of her diet by her mother, is followed by an intemperate consumption by the guests in the wedding festivities. Thereby exposing the gendered asymmetry of consumption, where the spectacle of familial abundance is only possible at the back of women's-controlled appetite.

Examining this control of the female body, American philosopher, Susan Bordo in her book *Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body* states "Female bodies become docile bodies – bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, 'improvement'" (p. 166). In her work she investigates how women's bodies are regulated not only through external expectations but how women themselves internalise those notions and then monitor and discipline their bodies. The social gender norms are then not seen as an outside form of control but as individual choices (Bordo, 2003). Bordo's work is heavily influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault who illustrated how in modern working of power the process of self-surveillance operates through internalized observation, where the individuals themselves regulate their behaviour without coercion. Bordo uses this framework to examine the control of women's bodies, arguing that dieting, exercise, and appearance management

reproduce cultural ideals of femininity by encouraging women to continually evaluate and correct their bodies (Bordo, 2003). Bodily discipline becomes normalized and is experienced as a form of personal responsibility, even though it is shaped by broader social and cultural expectations. Sharma subtly records this process, Srilata, Preeti's mother never uses physical force on her yet she nonetheless learns that if she is to remain desirable within the marriage economy even her appetite must conform to social expectations.

Maternal care is transformed into social regulation. Feeding usually signifies affection, protection, and care for the child's wellbeing. The regulation of consumption is steeped in the belief that self-restraint will secure a successful marriage. The conventional representation of motherhood is complicated where the maternal affection is very well embedded in patriarchal values and a participant in a cultural system that defines maternal success through the daughter's marriageability. In this framework food is not only an expression of care but an instrument of control and conformity.

'Feasting with a Vengeance' further exposes the ritualised processes of matchmaking - Preeti's evaluation consists of examining her body's proportions, manners, education, and domestic accomplishments with detached scrutiny. The families negotiate alliances through the language of respectability and class and the female identity is reduced to exchangeable characteristics. Food participates directly in this economy as not only does culinary competence remain one of the implicit qualifications of the ideal bride, her relationship with food intake also lays the ground for her suitability. So, she must produce delicacies while she herself must eat sparingly. The filial authority is organised without requiring overt conflict. Mothers, daughters, relatives, and prospective in-laws all participate in a shared system and here food occupies a significant position as a means of regulating belonging, desirability, and respectability. The dining table

is not just a domestic space but becomes a political arena and a place of reproduction of cultural values are through seemingly insignificant domestic rituals. On a closer examination what emerges is not an ordinary act of eating but a critique of patriarchal kinship. Food is not just a means of nourishment or a medium of maternal affection but a cultural technology that constructs socially accepted values of femininity itself. The disciplined female body becomes a repository of familial honour, while appetite is rendered subordinate to social expectation. Ultimately the politics of marriage takes shape at the breakfast table, where every day culinary practices are used to quietly shape women's identities long before they enter their marital homes.

Bulbul Sharma relies upon repetition, humour, and domestic detail to articulate kinship roles via the vocabulary of food. References to meals, snacks, drinks, and cooking recur throughout the story gradually accumulate symbolic significance. Ordinary culinary acts become emotionally charged precisely because they are repeated. Motherhood itself is constructed through countless seemingly insignificant gestures that acquire meaning through habitual performance. Food is not merely a recurring motif but a performative cultural practice through which motherhood is enacted and authority negotiated, and kinship continually reproduced. "Sandwiched" "Feasting with a Vengeance" and "Train Fare" particularly centre around the role of food in the performance of motherhood. Rather than a simplistic celebration maternal instincts and acts are revealed to be deeply political sites of care. The selected stories reveal the domestic spaces not as dormant marginal spaces but sites of cultural production where gendered identities are continually constructed, sustained and at times contested. Relationships are effectively influenced through acts of cooking and eating. The interesting paratexts of the recipes added at the conclusion of the are a culinary

representation of women's repository of knowledge. These recipes preserve histories that conventional archives often ignore. Everyday caregiving in motherhood is studied in a nuanced manner where it is simply not an act of nurture but as something that shapes the structures of society. The acts based around the production, consumption and control of food, becomes a powerful language through which women express love, identity, memory, anger, desire, and resistance. Acts mothering steeped in culinary actions become forms of negotiation and resistance—ways of asserting identity, memory, desire, and power and as a structure of control. The questions of who feeds whom and who cares for whom are not merely domestic questions; they reveal how families organise relationships, obligations, authority, and dependence. Mothers often become the central figures responsible for feeding children, partners, and extended family, and this responsibility can position them as the emotional and material centre of the household while simultaneously restricting their freedom thus revealing ambivalent site where all these acts become mutually constitutive.

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