

RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE POLITICS OF THE GUT: GASTROCRACY, HUNGER, AND THE TRAFFICKED GIRL IN SHOBHA RAO'S *GIRLS BURN BRIGHTER*

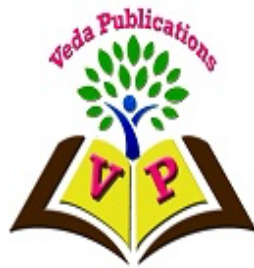
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ABSTRACT



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Food is a largely neglected aspect in the criticism of human-trafficking fiction. Yet, the girl who is bought, moved, and sold is, before anything else, a body that must be fed, starved, and disciplined to serve others before herself. This paper intervenes in readings of Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018) by theorising gastrocracy, governance exercised through food, as a structuring force that begins the trafficking of girls not at the brothel or the border but in the domestic calculus of who eats first and who eats last. Bringing Michel Foucault's accounts of governmentality and biopower together with Arjun Appadurai's analysis of gastro-politics in South Asia, the argument shows how the daughter is steadily constituted as an "extra mouth," her hunger underwriting her expendability. The kitchen emerges as a disciplinary apparatus in which cooking oil, the medium of nourishment itself, becomes the instrument of Poornima's disfigurement, while Savitha's vulnerability to the sex trade is rooted in a lifetime of systemic deprivation. Against this regime of appetite and denial, the paper reads the shared meals between the two girls as an embryonic counter-sovereignty, a commensality that Anita Mannur's notion of culinary citizenship helps to theorise as resistance. Gastrocracy, in the end, lets food studies reconceive hunger not as background misery but as a deliberate technique of rule, with the friendship at the novel's centre gesturing toward an alternative ethics grounded in eating together.

Keywords: biopower, female trafficking, gastrocracy, governmentality, hunger

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INTRODUCTION

Trafficking narratives are often read through the lens of violence, poverty, and gender oppression, but rarely through the seemingly mundane act of eating. Yet food is never neutral: it is a technology of governance, a marker of inclusion and exclusion, and a site where bodies are rendered legible to power. Drawing on critical theorists such as Michel Foucault, Arjun Appadurai, Parama Roy, and Anita Mannur, the paper takes seriously the theoretical claim that food is a structuring force in the making and unmaking of trafficked girls. Foucault's concepts of governmentality and biopower foreground how power works not simply through law or violence, but through the daily practices that shape desire and regulate life itself. Appadurai's gastro-politics and Roy's analysis of the postcolonial alimentary reveal how food in South Asia is powerfully entangled with questions of caste, gender, and belonging; it is a "condensed social fact" through which hierarchies are naturalised and internalised. Mannur's notion of culinary citizenship, meanwhile, opens a space to theorise how acts of eating together can form the basis of alternative solidarities and resistant subjectivities.

By theorising gastrocracy as both a material and symbolic regime, this argument situates *Girls Burn Brighter* within a robust tradition of food studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial critique. In doing so, it reframes hunger not as an incidental misery but as a deliberate, historically specific mode of subjugation and resistance. Rao's novel exposes how the politics of the table precede and shape the violence of trafficking, and how the possibility of shared eating gestures toward an alternative ethics

of care and agency. The paper thus offers a theoretical intervention that makes visible the intimate, routine mechanisms by which power is exercised over girls' bodies and appetites, and how these mechanisms can be both internalised and refused (Afzal et al. 495).

Food often looks apolitical. It seems daily, humble, repetitive, more a matter of habit than of power, and even attentive readers can struggle to say why it should matter. Yet a meal is never only a meal. Who cooks, who is served first, who eats the leftovers, and who goes without are clear determinations of rank and worth, and they are rarely named as governance. This paper foregrounds that hidden governance under the concept of gastrocracy, the exercise of power through food, and follows its operation when the governed body is that of a poor girl in contemporary India. In fiction about the trafficking of girls, where daughters are aborted, abandoned, sold, and moved across borders, hunger is everywhere and almost never analysed. Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018) forces the question into view.

When Poornima's marriage collapses over an unpaid dowry, her husband and his mother do not simply cast her out. They reach for the oil. Hot cooking oil, the same medium that tempers mustard seed and softens onion in every kitchen of the Telugu country, is poured over her face until the skin melts and sets into a mask she carries for the rest of the book (Rao 112). The weapon is not chosen at random. In Rao's novel, the substances and spaces of nourishment double as the substances and spaces of punishment, and a daughter learns early that the



kitchen is the room where her worth is added up and, when the sum falls short, disfigured.

The novel has mostly been read as a story about trafficking, dowry, and the fierce friendship between two impoverished girls, Poornima and Savitha, who work side by side at a loom in the Telugu-speaking village of Indravalli. Those themes are real, but the text is also, persistently, about food, a dimension its critics have largely passed over, since its cruelties keep arriving through the plate, the hearth, the ration, and the fast. This paper reads *Girls Burn Brighter* through the frame of gastrocracy, power exercised through food. The trafficking the novel depicts begins not at the brothel or the border but in the domestic arithmetic of who is fed first and who is fed last, who eats and who serves. Read this way, hunger is not the backdrop to the plot; it is the technique that drives it.

Two bodies of thought make that claim legible. Michel Foucault's account of governmentality describes power not as the sovereign's sword but as the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault, "Governmentality" 87), the quiet shaping of a population's desires until people come to want what the order needs them to want. Beside it runs his notion of biopower, the modern authority that operates less by threatening death than by administering life, the power, in his phrase, to "foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault, *History* 138). Set against these, Arjun Appadurai's study of gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia sheds light on the specifically South Asian grammar of the argument: food there is "a highly condensed social fact" (Appadurai 494), a medium through which rank, gender, and belonging are stated and enforced at

every meal. Parama Roy's work on the postcolonial alimentary carries the point into the body that eats and is eaten, the body on which appetite and aversion carry the freight of history (Roy 7). Gastrocracy names the place where these lines cross, where governing a population and feeding it become one gesture, and where the girl-child is governed, most intimately, through her stomach.

The analysis proceeds through four sites of governance: the household arithmetic that renders a daughter an extra mouth, the kitchen where her body and her tastes are disciplined, the market that consumes her, and the shared meal where, briefly, two girls are fed as equals. At each stage, food is the mechanism of control, and the aim is to make that mechanism visible.

THE ARITHMETIC OF THE EXTRA MOUTH

The novel opens with a father doing sums. Before Poornima is anything else to him, she is a cost, a girl who must be fed for years and then handed to another household with a dowry his weaving cannot cover. Rao lets the reader sit inside his early thought of carrying the infant to the water and letting her go, the oldest arithmetic of the missing girl, in which the cheapest answer to a daughter's appetite is to end it (Rao 3). He does not do it. Still, the calculation never quite closes; it only postpones. Every meal Poornima eats is quietly debited against the dowry she will one day need, and the family measures her, as it measures all its girls, by how little she can be made to want.

Appadurai's gastro-politics is exact here. In the domestic order he describes, food is not only sustenance but a way of ranking: the one who cooks



and serves eats last and least, and that one is almost always a woman or a girl, so that the hierarchy of the household is rehearsed at every meal. Poornima and Savitha are raised inside this order and do not think to question it, because it reaches them not as politics but as love, thrift, and tradition. This is governmentality at work. The girls are never forced to want less; they are trained to accept less, to take the burnt edge and the thinner portion and to feel dutiful in the taking. The state is absent from their table because the household has already done the state's work, producing women who can subsist on what is left over (Appadurai 496).

Savitha's hunger is sharper than Poornima's because her family is poorer, and the novel is unsentimental about what that does to a body and a will. Savitha grows attuned to food, keeping the memory of a good meal and reading a household by its cooking. When she eats, she eats with a concentration the well-fed never learn, and the novel shows plainly how deprivation shapes desire: the promise of a full plate can move a hungry person in ways the comfortable cannot imagine. This is why the trafficker's first instrument is not the fist but the meal.

The devotional life of the household deepens the discipline. In the religious calendar the girls inherit, women fast and men are fed, and a daughter watches her mother go without so that a brother or a husband may eat first and eat well. Fasting comes to her as piety and as love, never as deprivation, so that self-denial becomes something she performs on herself, with her own hands. This is governmentality at its most efficient. The order need not police the girl's plate, because it has taught her to police it

herself, to feel her hunger as virtue and her fullness as a small shame. By the time she is grown, the machinery of restraint has been absorbed so completely that it no longer looks like power. It looks like a character.

THE KITCHEN AS DISCIPLINARY SPACE

When Poornima's in-laws disfigure her by pouring hot oil, they do it with a cooking medium, in a punishment that reads less as a departure from the kitchen's ordinary discipline than as its grotesque extension. The dowry was short; the daughter-in-law had failed to convert herself into enough wealth, and the household reached for the nearest instrument of correction, which happened to be the stove. Rao's choice is exact and brutal. The oil that should have nourished Poornima instead unmakes her face, and the room that trains girls to feed others becomes the room that marks them when they fail to please. The kitchen in *Girls Burn Brighter* is never neutral. It is the disciplinary cell of the female body, the place where appetite is regulated, labour is extracted, and disobedience is burned into the skin.

Gastrocracy works through portion size, but it also shapes the palate. A girl raised on leftovers acquires a taste that makes scarcity feel normal and richer food feel like excess she has not earned, and Rao closely follows this conditioning of appetite. The girls do not rebel against their hunger; they accommodate it, making deprivation ordinary and finding enough where others would find nothing. The cruelty lies exactly there, in the internalising of preference. When a family can decide what a girl finds tasty, filling, and sufficient, it has reached a level of control no law can touch, because it has



made her a partner in her own regulation. To alter such a taste, even for an evening, is no small thing, which is why the food the two friends later share carries the weight it does.

Food in the novel's world also draws lines between people, not only within them. Appadurai's insight is that food both binds and divides: the same meal that gathers a family into one body can mark another family as lower, other, untouchable (Appadurai 501). Who may cook, who may be fed, whose hand a portion may pass through: these questions carry caste and status as surely as they carry calories, and a girl learns the map of her society by learning whose food she may take and whose she may not. For Poornima and Savitha, the dividing power of food is inseparable from their poverty. They are on the wrong side of the line, the ones whose labour cooks for others and whose own plates come last, and the intimacy they build across that line is, in its quiet way, a breach of it. Two girls with almost nothing, sharing what they have, refuse the sorting that food is meant to perform.

If gastrocracy regulates the girl's body, it reaches for her imagination of pleasure as well, and here it meets a limit. In one of the novel's tender passages, Poornima and Savitha dream of Majuli, a river island of flute-song and, by implication, plenty. The dream is not of wealth or rescue but of sufficiency, a place where a girl can eat, rest, and go uncouneted. Against a world that ties every plate to debt and danger, they imagine abundance without a price. A regime that governs through hunger, Rao suggests, cannot fully govern what the hungry are able to imagine, and the remembered sweetness of food becomes the first

ground on which its rule is refused (Shalini and Mathew 335).

APPETITE, TRAFFICKING, AND THE CONSUMABLE GIRL

The middle of the novel moves the girls out of the family kitchen and into a market that treats them, with terrible literalness, as things to be consumed. Savitha, fleeing after Poornima's father rapes her, falls into the hands of Guru, a pimp whose operation the book renders as a grim commissary, girls stored, priced, and served to clients in an economy of appetite. The metaphor is not the critic's imposition; it is the culture's own. The language of the sex trade, in Rao's hands as in life, is alimentary through and through: girls are "fresh," are "used up," are finished and thrown out like the remains of a meal. Foucault's biopower names what is happening (Foucault, *History* 139). The trafficked girl is administered as a living resource, kept alive and fed just enough to stay sellable, her body fostered so precisely that it can be denied any fuller life.

Inside these operations, food is the leash. A girl who has been hungry all her life is held less by the beating than by the plate, by the daily reminder that the roof and the meal depend on her compliance, and the horror of it is how rational submission looks from the inside. Rao does not sensationalise the brothel; she shows its economy, the way appetite is first manufactured by poverty and then rented back to the girl as obedience. The family that sells a daughter and the trafficker who buys her are not opposites in the novel's moral scheme. They are two stations on a single continuum, along which the girl's



body is priced, fed, used, and finally erased. Gastrocracy is the thread that runs its whole length.

The novel also refuses the comfort of choice. When a starving girl walks toward a trafficker in exchange for food, the language of consent does not fit what is happening, whatever the surrounding society prefers to believe. Rao rejects the story of agency and insists on the prior fact of scarcity: the trafficker collects only on a debt that the household and the wider economy have already run up. Gastrocracy cuts closer here than the vocabulary of coercion, which assumes a free will that force then overrides. Instead, the novel shows a will shaped by long deprivation, so the girl seems to consent to her own undoing. Food has taken the place of the fist.

The novel's most brutal image of governance through the body comes when Savitha is moved to the United States. To secure a medical visa and admit her as "domestic help," her traffickers have her arm amputated, remaking a whole girl into a maimed one because a maimed one clears the paperwork (Rao 201). It is a chilling literalisation of what the trafficking does to the migrant woman: she enters not as a person but as a function, a pair of hands, here a single hand, to cook and clean in other people's houses. At this point, the novel meets the question of food and identity head-on. The South Asian woman's passage into the West is routed, as Anita Mannur argues in her account of culinary citizenship, through the kitchen, through her usefulness as the maker of other people's meals (*Culinary Fictions* 23). For Savitha, there is no warm arrival, no cuisine that makes her feel a sense of belonging. There is only labour, drawn from a body

surgically adjusted to fit the machinery of demand (Fukushima 372).

THE ALTERNATIVE AT THE SHARED PLATE

The novel does not surrender food entirely to the structures that weaponise it. Its central friendship is made, again and again, at shared meals. Before they are separated, Poornima and Savitha eat together in a way the household economy cannot account for: not as rationed portions tied to a dowry, but as food freely given, taken in company, and turned into intimacy rather than debt. These meals are a quiet form of resistance. When Savitha eats beside Poornima, the calculation that governs every other meal in their lives falls still, because neither is serving and neither is being appraised. For as long as the meal lasts, the two girls meet as equals, which is the one thing the world otherwise denies them (Qamar et al. 1311).

Mannur's idea of culinary citizenship, the way food can confer belonging where legal and political recognition is withheld, is most useful here (*Culinary Fictions* 41). In *Girls Burn Brighter*, that belonging is turned not toward the nation but toward each other. The commensality of the two protagonists makes a polity of two, a small shared citizenship, even as family, market, and state continue to treat them as goods. Where gastrocracy is food-power exercised in the household and the market, this shared meal is its opposite, an arrangement built on the refusal to rank, in which a meal grants equality rather than deference. It is fragile and almost wordless, and it is the only freedom the novel finally trusts. Mannur's later account of intimate eating, of the table as a site where alternative kinships are risked, describes



exactly what Rao lets these two girls have and then takes away (*Intimate Eating* 14). Whatever the novel imagines against hierarchy rests on this: mutual nourishment, offered without obligation.

The ending honours that fragility by refusing to complete it. Poornima, disfigured and unbroken, has crossed the world as a trafficker's "shepherd," delivering other girls in order to reach the one she loves, and Rao leaves the two of them on either side of a bathroom door in Seattle, each unaware the other is a breath away (Rao 302). The reunion is withheld. Some readers have found the deferral frustrating (Beckerman), and the novel's unbroken catalogue of suffering does risk hardening into a stereotype of India as a country of endless female misery, a risk worth setting against the specificity with which Rao actually writes. Read through "gastrocracy," though; the closed door means something else. The two girls have spent the book consumed by others; the novel, at the last, declines to serve their reunion up as consolation. What it offers instead is the persistence of the search, the refusal of the hungry to stop reaching for the one table where they were ever fed as equals.

CONCLUSION

Shobha Rao's *Girls Burn Brighter*, through the theory of gastrocracy, brings into view the subtle techniques of power that operate through the regulation of hunger, appetite, and communal eating. Drawing on Foucault's governmentality and biopower, Appadurai's gastro-politics, Roy's postcolonial alimentary, and Mannur's culinary citizenship, this paper has argued that the violence of trafficking is first enacted not at the border or brothel, but at the

domestic table where food is rationed, appetites are disciplined, and the girl is rendered expendable. The novel demonstrates how the intimate politics of eating are inseparable from broader regimes of gendered and economic exploitation, and how the kitchen becomes both a site of discipline and a potential ground for resistance.

By theorising the home and the brothel, the kitchen and the marketplace, as sites on a continuum of power, gastrocracy makes visible the everyday mechanisms that produce and justify the commodification of girls. The novel's refusal to grant easy resolution or restorative justice is not an absence of hope, but a theoretical challenge to the reader: how might solidarity, resistance, and care be reimagined when the most basic act of nourishment is politicised? Rao's vision is unsparing, yet within the fragile commensality between Poornima and Savitha lies a radical ethic, one that insists on the political significance of eating together, and that imagines alternative forms of belonging and agency amid conditions of profound precarity. Any meaningful intervention, the novel reminds us, must begin not simply by rescuing the trafficked girl, but by transforming the systems of appetite, care, and exclusion that render her vulnerable in the first place.

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violence, and emerging spaces of subaltern resistance.

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Chinmoyee Saikia is a doctoral research scholar in the Department of English at Assam University, Silchar, India, where she pursues her research under the supervision of Professor Dipendu Das. Her primary research interests lie at the critical intersections of gender studies, trauma studies, and postcolonial literary frameworks. Her current scholarship examines the nuanced representations of systemic trauma, marginalised gendered experiences, and the institutional structures that govern vulnerable bodies in contemporary South Asian fiction. By integrating contemporary critical theory with close textual analysis, her work seeks to uncover hidden mechanisms of power, everyday forms of structural