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The Interconnections of Food and Femininity in BP Koirala's *Sumnima* and Govinda Bahadur Malla's *The Window of the House Opposite*

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Abstract
The aim of this paper is to map out the interconnections of food and femininity in Nepali fictional texts of the early twenty-first century. The gastrocritical approach helps understand the food-related behaviors in the literary texts. B.P. Koirala's *Sumnima* and Govinda Bahadur Malla Gothale's *The Window of the House Opposite* are considered the sources of evidences for making an associative study between gastrocriticism and feminist studies. Informed by the analytic framework such as cross-case and within-case analysis, this study uses the critical insights of Claude Levi Strauss's "Gusteme" Mary Douglas's "Deciphering a Meal" and Roland Barthes's "Food as System." The cross-case analysis and within-case analysis assert that food is a remarkable determinant of Nepali femininity, which has not been the wholesale victim of patriarchy as the daughter's role is in an advantaged position as compared to the role of daughter-in-law and wife. This discourse between gastrocriticism and feminist studies, thus, establishes a generalization that women in the twenties of the turn of twentieth century had not received an undifferentiated treatment.
Keywords: Food, femininity, social inferiority, gastrocriticism

Introduction
In the climax of two novels *Sumnima* (2005) by Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala and *The Window of the House Opposite* (1998) by Govinda Bahadur Malla Gothale, the main characters Haribhakta and Somdutta wish to be fed by their wives, Misri and Puloma respectively. Somdutta's foodless penance was substituted by Sumnima's offering of food when Sumnima informed him that her Gods would not be happy seeing the creatures practicing foodlessness. Haribhakta is waited on by Misri's family on the day of *Shraddha* as Misri is going to elope with Hiraman, the hoodlum. These two food-

related climax-making scenarios emphasize how food plays a significant role in fictional texts. Eventually, Somdutta regains manhood after being fed by Sumnima, and Haribhakta and Misri drift apart after the banquet for *Shraddha*. With these food-governing backdrops, this study, alternatively, keeping masculinity and food aside, examines food as the determinant of femininity in Nepali fictional texts.

Establishing the rationale for the selection of these two novels entails the need of the presence of masculine and feminine roles of husband-wife, mother-daughter and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Alongside, the inclusion of strict husband and liberal husband for testing the concept of excellent wife, the availability of a mother-in-law who would be offering advice concerning food are the bedrocks of evidence. Thirdly, food acting as an important role in defining the social roles of the femininity was fed into by research questions of this study.

Koirala's *Sumnima* has received a lot of scholarly attention. Bhanubhakta Sharma Kandel maintains that the novel establishes the need of "respect of difference" that makes a society "a salad bowl" (106). Bimal Kishore Shrivastwa observes how the non-Aryans are proved to be "wild" and "uncivilized" (70). Using Thomas Hylland Eriksen's theory of racism, Shrivastwa depicts "how the novelist resents against… racist ideology prevalent in the Nepalese society" (72). In a study by Rajendra Prasad Chapagaee makes an exploration of "cultural assimilation" (78) in which Aryan and non-Aryan members go from conflict to harmony. But Malla's *The Window of the House Opposite* has received scant attention. The literature available around this novel consists of academic theses. Those theses have the emphasis on the translational concerns: An instance of translational study can be taken from Pratigya Acharya who argues that the translated version has used the "domestication strategy" and has shown "disrespect towards the source culture" (40) stressing the need of translational honesty.

The examinations on Koirala's *Sumnima* have either focused on the domination on ethnicity or women and nature. In addition, they hint at the need of respect to the other group. The studies on Malla's *The Window of the House Opposite* have focused on the failure to translate the ethos of the source culture. With the review of extant literature, this study problematizes a concern to examine the connection between food and femininity. More markedly, the study has been informed by the research questions: What does it mean to be a daughter, a daughter-in-law and a wife in the Nepali novels of the early twenty-first century? How does food turn out to be the determinant of these feminine roles? To address these questions, the paper aims to find out the deeper understanding of food-related behavior can enrich the comprehension of Nepali femininity.

This paper has been organized in the following sections. The paper begins with the introduction section, followed by research methods section, which explains the research methods and procedures such as gusteme, deciphering a meal, grammars of a meal, cross-case analysis, and within-case analysis. The penultimate section involves the analysis of the textual evidence that demonstrates how the feminine role is represented by food. The conclusion subsumes a claim that understanding femininity precedes understanding food studies.

Research Methods

This study analyzes the information retrieved from the primary texts, using the concepts of gusteme by Claude Levi Strauss, deciphering a meal by Mary Douglas and meal as system by Roland Barthes. Triangulating these three theoretical insights contribute to the understanding of the patterns of food-related contexts, which deal with not only the foods eaten or served, rather they are helpful to comprehend the patterns of

the social hierarchy of the given society. Gusteme, an analogy drawn from language such as phoneme and morpheme assumes the basic constituent of the cuisine that can stretch its meaning to the study of the conjunction between food and the social layers. As Strauss, gusteme is the differential opposition of "minimal culinary elements" (Noth 302). Similar to gusteme, Roland Barthes' notion of food as a system emphasizes the study of patterns and underlying structures of food and situations around food. The "food grammars" as Barthes suggested are comparable to the structures of the languages (Mennell 11). Thus, like language, food can have a layer of meanings as Mary Douglas proposes efforts in deciphering of the meals. She describes how cultural beliefs manifest in ordinary meals, ". . . the meaning of a meal is found in a system. . . . Each meal carries something of meaning of other meals; each meal is a structured social event, which structures others in its own image" (240). The analytic framework consists of two modes: cross-case analysis and within-case analysis. While in cross-case analysis, a comparison of themes from both novels has been taken into consideration, in within-case analysis, a single case from the novel has been analyzed. To conduct cross-case analysis, key phenomena under consideration were identified. For instance, cases relating to daughter and food, wife and food, and daughter-in-law and food were identified from both novels. Afterwards, idiographic generalizations are developed by integrating within-case analysis and cross-case analysis.

Results and Discussion

The spectrum of women's roles pronounces the roles of daughter, daughter-in-law, and wife. Mainly, the daughters are well-fed and well-cared whereas the daughter-in-law and wife remain in the role of feeding others rather than waiting to be fed.

Food for Daughter: The Poignantly Caring Treatment

Two roles of females in Nepali society are respectable, namely, the role of the mother and that of the daughter. Precisely, having the role of a daughter is more like that of a goddess as it is the same with the role of a mother. This section discusses that part of reality from the information drawn from the novels Koirala's *Sumnima* and Malla's *The Window of the House Opposite*. This role suggests that there is no gender discrimination in Nepali society. Rather, the daughter is in the privileged status. There are evidences that are not sketchy; these solid evidences assist the researcher to question the Oedipus-complex by Sigmund Freud. As his theory of Oedipus-complex postulates that there is an affinity between the child and the parent of opposite sex. Here is the affinity between mother and daughter. In this line, it can be understood as the anti-Oedipus complex.

Mothers are unusually conscious of their daughter's health, especially the married daughter's health status because they feel that the married daughters must have faced the severity of the inferiority in the husband's house. Misri, in Malla's novel, in her parents' house is especially cared as compared to her husband's house where she feels that she is under constant surveillance by her mother-in-law. When Misri is going to her husband's house form her natal one, her mother advises her: "Whatever you do, don't eat sour or spicy food" (32). As Misri often complains of the headache, her mother reminds her to refrain herself from those items. Matilda Marian Pullan discusses the maternal counsels to her daughters about the importance of moderate eating for the better health. Echoing Misri's mother's cautions to Misri, Pullan discusses the general counsels of mothers to their daughters (111). The mothers, in general, remind their daughters to eat in balanced ways so that they have their better health.

While Misri was in her parents' house, her sister-in-law would invariably cook in the kitchen. She would be cooking the rice and the smoke would trouble her.

Nonetheless, none would go to help her in the kitchen. Sometimes, Misri wished to help her and would see the "rice was sputtering in the pot. Light smoke filled the kitchen" (7). The kitchen with smoke would not be a cool place for Misri who had been troubled by the pre-occupation with the gestures of hoodlum and wanted "to run away and be free of that suffocating place" (7). Kitchen, with the smoke, is not a good place to live in and Misri can go away to avert the smoke while her sister-in-law has no escape. The daughter is liberated while the daughter-in-law has to face the trouble of the smoke of fireplace.

When Misri was in the natal house, she was disturbed by the look of hoodlum in the house opposite. She would sew the blouse and remain self-absorbed: "She didn't notice when five o'clock came and went, or when the sun left her room. Her mother called her to come and eat some *chiura*" (17). Mother reminding her of lunch is an indication of affection. The mother's affection is manifested in the form of reminder.

Misri had to go to her husband's house as she would be fetched. Once she came back to the natal house to settle the issue with the hoodlum. When she had come to settle the issue, she wanted to go back to her husband's house on the same day. As she arrived at her natal house, her mother inquired her promptly, "Did you eat before you came?" (65). A mother, especially to the married daughter, looks very much affectionate and inquires whether her daughter has been fed or is hungry.

Another glaring evidence that stands for the privileged position of a daughter in terms of food is the offering of the mango pickle by Misri's mother. Once Misri was eating her rice and her mother said, "Oh, your uncle brought some mango pickle from the plains. I saved some for you" (72). Mother has saved the mango pickle for a daughter who would visit her. This instance of a mother saving mango pickle for the daughter shows how caring the mother is, which is narrated in the novel in this way: "When her mother had hurriedly brought the pickle and put it on Misri's plate, she felt a wave of emotion, and tears threatened to drown her eyes" (72). Misri was very much moved to find her mother caring for her.

Koirala's *Sumnima* also contains the scenarios of daughter having food. They too contain the liberal attitudes towards the daughter. Before conveying a message of a meeting to Somdutta, "barbecued piece of meat her mother prepared for the night feast was given to her and she ate it with some rice and quickly wiping her face she ran down towards the Koshi bank" (16). While Misri was a married daughter, Sumnima was unmarried; even so, there is no difference in the treatment by the mothers. They are equally caring and affectionate. In terms of food, the treatment by the mothers is a special one.

When Somdutta was to be nursed by Sumnima, Sumnima said in a sad tone, "You haven't had adequate diet. It clearly appears that there is no one to take care you affectionately…" (57). Sumnima believes that one needs to be taken care "affectionately" by having "adequate diet." Her father added, "Daughter! Nothing special has happened to him, his body has been obstinate…. The man within him has been angry with him, quite incensed. The man within him has to be propitiated…" (57-8). Father-daughter's conversation hints at the importance of the adequacy of food and offering it in an affectionate manner. It can be concluded from this conversation that Sumnima's father has advised Sumnima about the importance of abundant food not only to Somdutta but to Sumnima as well. For her father, his daughter too requires this.

When Somdutta's mother was dead, his father was ailing, "Sumnima's daughter came with food and said, 'Mother sent it for you'" (107). The instances of daughter and food have mostly involved the caring intentions and affectionate manners. Sumnima's daughter brings food to Somdutta while he is sick. Sumnima's daughter has been shown

affectionate to Somdutta. Thus, a daughter in Nepali society is loved and cared as she cares for other members of society offering food.

Overall, the cases of a daughter and her association with food indicate that daughters have enjoyed the advantaged social position in Nepali society. Both the married daughters and unmarried daughters are loved by their parents, perhaps more than their sons.

Daughter-in-Law and Cuisine: Severity of Social Inferiority

The spectrum of the female's roles in Nepali society yields a bleak view of the role of a daughter-in-law. This is a role that exclusively justifies the accusations by feminists that patriarchy has been utterly unbearable. In Malla's *The Window of the House Opposite*, Misri and Misri's sister-in-law embody the role of daughter-in-law, which causes a shudder in repugnance as their responsibilities require a colossal amount of efforts. The illustrations that ensue substantiate the severity of inferiority that includes chore burdens, special eating etiquettes**,** and being in attendance at the food needs of family members.

Sister-in-law of Misri in Malla's novel had the burden of the domestic chores, saying that "the three-year-old was tugging at his mother's shawl and whining for *chiura*-pounded rice. '*Chiura, chiura*! Misri fled the room and stood on the stair" (3). She was so busy in the service of the family that she had no time for feeding her baby who would be whining for the pounded-rice. The normativity that the daughter-in-law needs to take care of all the household chores single-handedly cannot permit her to offer adequate time and care to her own children. Julie Harper Pace studied conduct manuals and medical advice books studied how the upper-class women learnt to "ignore the drudgery and burdens of food preparation as inappropriate for their class" in the eighteenth-century England. Since Misri's sister-in-law is a middle-class woman from Nepal, even in the twentieth century, she is forced to accept "the drudgery and burdens of food preparation" (1).

The value that the daughter-in-law should not display her hunger explicitly is so true in Malla's novel. Misri at her parents' house was much loved. Her mother would inquire invariably about her food needs. In contrast, when she is at her husband's house and especially with her mother-in-law, she has to pretend that she is not hungry even if she is:

> And then, even if Misri were ravenously hungry, she couldn't eat quickly when her mother-in-law gave her food. She had to pretend she didn't feel like eating. It was as if her mother-in-law were judging every movement of her hands and face, and Misri had to prove she was not a glutton. But here at home, her own mother always said, "Eat! Shall I give you some more?" (11)

Misri as daughter can eat the food without thinking much, and her mother wants her to eat more. In contrast, Misri as daughter-in-law has to remain restraint or she could be labeled a glutton. Being a daughter-in-law is quite different from being a daughter.

Misri's sister-in-law would not take support of Misri in the usual days. However, when Misri was going to her husband's house, her sister-in-law would ask her to come to the day of *Shraddha*. Her invitation in the day would be for helping her, her sister-in-law said, "When will you be coming again? At *Shraddha*? Please come! You see I'm alone here to do everything" (33). A daughter-in-law's plight can be deciphered through this instance. At *Shraddha,* a daughter-in-law is expected to do all household work alone.

Misri's mother-in-law would often ask Misri to feed Haribhakta well. One day while Misri was doing the errands in mother-in-law's room, her mother-in-law said, "Did

Haribhakta eat well before he left?" (42). Later on, Misri's mother-in-law informed her that Haribhakta was not fed well in his childhood as his father was dead, and mother lacked the resources to feed him well. As a daughter-in-law, since mother-in-law advises, she was asked to take care of his food concerns in special way. Nowhere in the novel can anyone inquire about Misri's food concerns when she is in the role of daughter-in-law. This textual situation shows the representation of a daughter-in-law's lowest social ladder, which is demonstrated by the food-related behaviors.

While the preparation for the *Shraddha* was underway, Misri was in the kitchen thinking about her husband's arrival as she could see her sister-in-law "cleaning the rice" (95). On the day of *Shraddha*, as Misri's sister-in-law had thought beforehand, she was all alone to handle the chores; there would be a lot of guests to attend the banquet of *Shraddha*; the cooking to cleaning the utensils were the sole responsibilities of Misri's sister-in-law. A daughter-in-law is overburdened with the culinary tasks and cleaning tasks.

Hence, being a daughter is having privilege whilst being daughter-in-law is accepting servility. A daughter is inquired about her hunger whereas a daughter-in-law should hide her hunger or she could be labeled a glutton that would defame her parents' name.

Food and Being Wife: Always in Attendance

What does it mean to be a wife? Is it the role of subservience? This role is not as privileged as the daughter, nor is it a role oppressed as the daughter-in-law. Predominantly, the wife is considered to have the knack in cooking and needs to know to feed the husband well. She is considered to eat the leftover of her husband and do the chores. Her menstrual period is a time when she is not supposed to cook or feed; however, she is allowed to do the tasks such as slicing the vegetables. From these evidences, what one can conclude is the food-behaviors of a wife are prescribed and being an excellent wife is living by those prescriptions.

The role of wife in Nepali society requires the reminder of the subservient role. When a wife cooks for her husband, the food must be prepared in such a way that the husband's taste is fulfilled. In Malla's novel, Misri cooks the food and wishes to know the views of her husband about her culinary abilities: "I don't think there's enough salt on the vegetables. You look as if it tastes bad. I've forgotten how to cook. I've lost the knack" (39). Misri's implicit efforts of being tested about her culinary capabilities can be read as a wife's need to have the approval of her husband. Cooking the food is one task, but meeting the requirements of her husband is additional task. This what a wife is expected to undertake to be termed an excellent wife. Being an excellent wife is being able to cook well and satisfy the food needs of her husband.

Woman's life stage from being a daughter to a daughter-in-law to a wife to a mother and all other stages especially the time of menstruation contains some prescriptions in regards to the food. When Misri was very much disturbed by the hoodlum's interventions, she was stressful. Once she was in her menstrual time and she was afraid that the hoodlum, Hiraman would send another letter to her for marrying him as she was preoccupied with hoodlum's images of interventions. At her husband's home, "Even though she was having her period, it was permissible to slice the vegetables and do some sweeping" (59). Being an excellent wife would mean to carry out the prescribed roles. Misri, in her menstrual period, would not be cooking, nor feeding. She would merely be chopping the vegetables and cleaning the house where it was permissible. The food-behavior in the menstrual period is different from other times.

Puloma in Koirala's novel has committed to accompany her husband in almost every aspect of the fire ritual. However, her role of subservience is a remarkable point of examination in this paper. Often times, Puloma and Somdutta eat a small amount of foods as prescribed in the religious texts. Puloma was asked to prepare food in the prescribed manner as they were performing the fire ritual for being able to give birth to a son who would offer ghostly food to them after their death. Puloma "prepared a small amount of food for both of them, and after partaking one or two morsels of the leftover of her husband went into her husband's room…" (43). Here, Puloma, Somdutta's wife, has to partake of the leftover of her husband's wife. This instance can be interpreted in numerous ways. Nonetheless, it is considered an attitude of a wife that she had to eat the leftover of her husband to show her respect and love to her husband. In fact, it would be her devotion to her husband. Doing so meant being an excellent wife. Feminists would have taken it as the patriarchal atrocity; Puloma did not take it that way. She did it well and thought that it would do good to materialize her intentions of being able to give birth to a baby-son.

Somdutta and Puloma conducted the fire rituals as they were in the need of the son. Even when they had performed the ritual for a long time, their need was not met. After a while, they started pondering the failure of the ritual and began to blame each other. Whilst Puloma began to suspect on Somdutta that he must have been cursed in the former life, Somdutta asked, "Is it because you eat from bronze plate during the menstrual period that we have been facing this failure?" (48). A husband expects his wife to follow the purity rules in the menstrual period. Although Puloma respond to Somdutta that she would never eat in the bronze plate, nor is there any bronze plate in their hut, what is worth considering is the question of menstrual purity a wife is asked to be aware of. An excellent wife has numerous responsibilities, particularly food-related responsibilities. Being very conscious of not eating in the bronze plate in the menstrual plate is one of them.

Conclusion

To conclude, the study is an attempt to make a sense of the role of meal in determining the spectrum of femininity of Nepali society of the early twenty-first century. In doing so, three important social roles of femininity: daughter, wife and daughter-in-law are analyzed through the theme of food. This pursuit has reconfirmed an idea that femininity requires a differentiated comprehension in that not all the roles assigned to females equally suffer the patriarchal domination. Hence, enlarged understanding of femininity requires an added understanding of food studies.

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