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Food, Fashion and Survival in Padma Lakshmi's *Love, Loss and What We Ate*

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Abstract:

Indian American, Padma Lakshmi's memoir *Love, Loss and What We Ate* (2016) unravels the vulnerable ingredient in the smart, resourceful person she is. Her culinary style of writing intertwined with her fascinating pieces of recipes in between the pages make the readers feel the experiences and literally transport them to her world of food. Her poignant descriptions of her life in India and in US, her relationships, her journey to the world of fashion and then to food is indeed a lesson of survival. Apart from other memoirs which pictures diasporic identity crisis, Ms. Lakshmi's memoir stood apart since most of the book talks about her survival; not just a mere survival, but the absolute victory of a brown girl being globally acknowledged as a model, actress, television host and an author. The trend of a celebrity memoir written in a culinary style can be considered as refreshing and welcoming in Postmillennial Indian writing.

Keywords: memoir, culinary writing, immigrant life, identity crisis, survival literature, multiculturalism.

It is important to note that Indian writing in English has achieved quite a transformation and vitality throughout decades. Today, trends keep changing and writers are more inclined towards making profit out of creativity. Literary genres like autobiography, memoir, and biography brought a new dimension to the style of writing as it accounts the personal life and experiences of people. 'Memoir', as the name suggests, recalls the memories of the writer since her childhood days. Recent days, celebrity memoirs pour into the publishing industry as it invites a whole lot of attention from the audience. Kareena Kapoor Khan's *The Style Diary of a Bollywood Diva* (2012), Anu Aggarwal's *Anusual: Memoir of a Girl Who Came Back from the Dead* (2015), Rishi Kapoor's *Khullam Khulla* (2017) and Karan Johar's *An Unsuitable Boy* (2017) are few among those. Readers always find it amusing and curious to delve into the personal life of celebrities. Hence, Bollywood seems to be the perfect destination for the publishers these days. It is important to note that film personas have interesting anecdotes to share with their fans and followers, but the stint of controversy comes with it sells the book enormously. Postmillennial Indian writing seems to be giving more importance to the market selling strategies and celebrity memoirs are the genre of the time, as we speak. This trend of celebrities writing their memoirs was there for a long time, but it is only in the postmillennial period that it surfaced to a great extent.

Speaking of celebrity memoirs, Padma Lakshmi's book *Love, Loss and What We Ate* (2016) stands apart from all the existing pieces in this genre. The way she penned it down narrating her journey from a South Indian traditional Tamil Brahmin home to the United States and to the world of fashion and food is quite different and unique. Indian American, Padma Lakshmi is the author of two cookbooks, *Tangy, Tart, Hot and Sweet* and the award winning *Easy Exotic*. Ms. Lakshmi is considered as the first Indian successful supermodel and hence a global style icon. Her role as a television host for cookery shows like *Top Chef* made her quite famous and receivable to the public than her role as a fashionista. Her most recent book, *Love, Loss and What We Ate*, which was published in 2016 on International Women's day, was well received by critics and readers. The way she weaves her stories from her childhood in India, her journey to US, her struggle to blend in, her passion for modeling, impulsive affairs and the tumultuous marriage, through a culinary frame is enchanting and rejuvenating. No other memoir had taken this step of blending culinary style in the narration of real life experiences. Thus Padma Lakshmi's book stood apart with its most unique way of narration as she displays her food on the table sumptuously. It looks delicious and exotic; the book with its stories and recipes.

Shades of Immigration: Religion, Colour, Name and Sexual Abuse

Padma Lakshmi, in her memoir, recalls her first journey to the land of opportunities with excitement. Padma's mother was working in the United States and she sent for her child when she was just four. Little Padma was excited to see the foreign land with all its glory and pomp, on her arrival on a Halloween night. Padma was taken care of by her maternal grandparents in India before her life in US. This serves as a constant reminder for Padma as she compares and contrasts everything with what she saw in India like she does when she compares their house in US with their traditional home in South India, their meat eating Brahmin life with their vegetarian lifestyle in India and so on. The native land thus remains a recurrent factor in Padma's life even after she grew up. The comfort and care that she felt in India never occurred to her in US. Her mother's busy tiring life kept Padma anxious about their life. It is to be noted that even as a small child, Padma realized that her mother also deserves a life of her own and that she should be respected for the fact that "she had willed a life for the two of us in a new land" (Lakshmi 53). The process of immigration was not that a difficult one for little Padma. She was quite happy to be with her mother after a long time. She was excited to live in a new land. But the life in US was not as expected for her. The struggle for a sense of belonging was present everywhere.

Padma talks about her school days when she started taking part in religious ceremonies as it was a catholic school. She, being a child, never bothered to understand the differences in religions. But she remembers the times when the nuns made her "sit in the last rows of pews" (Lakshmi 58). Padma really wanted to blend in to the life there but her Hindu identity never allowed becoming one. The fact that she was not allowed to participate in the Communion made her even more vulnerable. She missed belonging there. She recalls,

At school, while other children rehearsed the choreography of confirmation services and taking communion, the nuns made me sit in the last rows of pews. Yet that morning, the lone school kid among the early worshippers, I found an empty pew near the front and looked on as the priest spoke. I got up and sat down when others did, so as not to look disrespectful or like I didn't belong here. (58)

The skin color was yet another factor which deeply disturbed Padma in US. Being a brown girl in a white crowd was something Padma couldn't bear more. She hated the skin tone and the way her body displays itself. She wished she could control her body and the skin color. She wished she can escape the identity crisis if she could somehow change her skin color. For a small girl with brown complexion from a far away land, lighter skin appears to be attractive and demanding. She thought the color itself can raise her to a higher pedestal. Padma recollects her nicknames in school, "Blackie" and "Black Giraffe". The idea that colour plays an important role in children in perspective formation about their identity is at the core of diasporic literature.

Along with colour, the Indian name, Padma Parvati Lakshmi Vaidyanathan, also contributes to the tension in Padma's immigrant life in the US. The book recounts the time when little Padma strives to change her name to "Angelique", which she derived from her mother's friend's name Angie. It is important to note that she believed "while I couldn't change the way I looked, I could change my name" (115). Padma thought she could belong in the new land with this English name. She thought she could easily erase the Indian identity with the new name. But what happened was, "I felt both American and Indian" (115). The Indian name and the reactions it arouse in others were unbearable for child in Padma. She felt alienated and distanced by her name. She says, "Yet, reflected in the mirror of other's reactions, my name came to seem distorted, strange, and a little icky." (114). But changing the name doesn't let Padma live in peace. It can be analyzed as a part of she also liked her Indian identity. At times, she finds it exotic and unique among the others around her. And this uniqueness is what she promoted over her years in US and finally stepped into success. But for a brief time, Padma stayed as Angelique in her school days, at least for a year. She drifted back to being the exotic Indian tall girl in class.

I was Angie for a year. As the shock of yet another new school wore off, I drifted back toward the exotic. I then elongated and embellished the name to Angelique the year after. I suppose I wanted to be noticed, just not for the reasons I was noticed as Padma. But of course, my skin color and the other markers of my ethnicity-my dark eyes and fine, straight black hair- were immutable. (116)

Being the child of a single immigrant woman in US, Padma faced some difficult time adjusting to her mother's life. She recalls the life with her mother's second husband, a cab driver, during her first arrival. She referred him as Mr. V, who used to stay with them. But to the reader's surprise, unlike other children of her age, Padma took her mother's relationship very well. There aren't any references about Mr. V being abusive or disturbing in their lives. But Padma did mention the fact that her mother helped him to get his family members to migrate to

US with her green card status. This can be suggestive of Padma's displeasure of Mr. V staying with them. But the shocking revelation of Padma, being abused sexually as a child by Mr. V's relative, leaves the reader disturbed. She says,

Our apartment in Queens was often packed with my mom's in-laws. Many nights I shared a bed with a twenty –something relative of V's, a state of affairs that, to people like us who were used to live far too many to an apartment in India, seemed relatively normal. I was seven. One night I woke up to his hand in my underpants. He took my hand and placed it inside his briefs. I don't know how many times it happened before, since I suspect I slept through some incidents. ..I had shown signs of distress. (59)

Even when Padma was really excited about her life with her mother in US, the shuttling life between two cultures was difficult. Her skin tone, colour, body and religion posed a threat to her peaceful existence in US. The identity crisis faced by immigrants across the globe was not unfamiliar to Padma too. But her book explicitly covers her experiences and memories through which she discovered her true identity and the poise with which she walked through the thorns.

Survival of a Brown Girl- Legacy of Food and Breakthrough of Fashion

Padma always wished for a place where she can feel the sense of belonging, a place where she is not categorized by her ethnicity, colour or religion. Clark University was the best thing happened to her after school. The spring semester long study program in Madrid marked the transformation awaited her. To pay off the tuition debts, she thought she could use a little pocket money earned from modeling. But she says, "...but I knew, I wasn't model material...Speaking of race, modeling seemed to me the domain of white girls." (127) But beyond her fear of getting selected, that audition was just the beginning for Padma. After spending years in Paris and Italy, she pursued modeling in Los Angeles.

Being in the world of fashion opened a foray of opportunities to Padma, even after so many failures in her way. She remembers her days in Milan and Paris where she was introduced into the glam world of fashion. She was irritated by the scar that she has in her right arm which is the result of a car accident when she was a teenager. The scar constantly reminds the inferior complex she has about her life. But the scar made a star out of her, when a trailblazing photographer named Helmut Newton from Monte Carlo signed her for his work. Padma realized that the scar which she hated all her life has now saved her from those days of debts. She says, "Almost overnight, it (the scar) had transformed from a strain into a sort of talisman, a source of power and confidence....the greatest gift fashion has given me is the courage to expose that most vulnerable part of myself". (167)

The world of fashion instilled in Padma, a confidence to win the life. It has increased her self esteem about herself. She had completely escaped from being the "black giraffe" and transformed into a supermodel of global attention. When she came back to LA, she continued her

career in fashion and then she met Booker prize winning author, Salman Rushdie, her future husband. Padma extensively recounts her high profile relationship with Rushdie in her book. She narrates the sweet and bitter memories of their courtship and married life, but always held Rushdie in a higher pedestal. Health and professional reasons failed their relationship and Padma moved on with her life.

The legacy of food is what makes Padma Lakshmi's memoir special. She held the opinion that what we ate determines what we are. Throughout the book, she intertwines her different experiences with different flavours of food. The book is filled with numerous recipes from different cuisines. At times, reader might wonder if this is a cookbook or a memoir. The insertion of recipes in between shows that Padma's existence is decided by the food she ate. Padma gave credits to her love and passion for food to her Indian origin and her stay at her maternal home in Madras. She beautifully captures the essence of taste from her grandmother's kitchen and mixed it with her American and European aroma. She says,

My love for food was born in India, where I spent the first four years of my life and many summers afterward. The vivid flavours I experienced there will forever be the standard to which I hold any food I eat today. (71) Mornings of my Madras childhood smelled of steeping coffee, steaming tea and sandalwood. (187)

Cooking was a therapy for Padma. It healed her. She finds comfort in food. She finds belonging in food. All through her memoir, she relates everything happened to her with the food she ate and the cuisines she discovered. When Padma narrates her life with Salman Rushdie, she describes how she cooked dinners for Salman and his intellectual friends. She believed that with her cooking, she could also join their group. She imagines she could be a perfect partner for him, that she could make him feel at home. She wanted to be liked by his friends too. Thus she cooks and asks, "Who doesn't like the cook?" (19). Then she moved on narrating her stay in Madras in India. Her descriptions of her grandmother's recipes are a mouthful. She describes the way her grandmother make every meal fresh and how yogurt rice comes in varieties of tastes in each hand. Her love for food explained her relationship with her grandparents, aunts and cousins. Each memory accompanied with a recipe of south Indian cuisine.

When she left America for Milan for her long study program at Clark, she was introduced to European flavours. Padma gave the credit to her boyfriend Danielle, his mother Gabriella, her professor from Clarks, Michael Spingler and the literary critic friend, Jean Claude. Her stay with them made life more eventful and relishing. All the experiences in Milan and Paris contributed to her future role as a cookery show host in US. Padma also shares her experiences with the cookery show *Top Chef*, for which she was nominated for the prestigious Emmy Awards.

From Danielle, I learned so much about Italian food, in the quotidian way you do when your days and nights together are full of pumpkin ravioli swimming with

sage butter...Danielle's mom Gabriella, opened my eyes to a sort of Italian cooking much different from the spaghetti and meatballs version from the pizzerias...Between Gabriella and Michael, I got a vast education in European cooking. I learned how to make more than just curry and stir fry, to cook without relying on mountains of chopped onions, garlic and ginger. (154-155)

Padma never failed to impress the readers with the new tastes when she narrates her immigrant life in US. Quite contrary to the food she had in India, she describes the breads, tacos, sandwiches, falafel, mashed potatoes and ham. But still she cherished her Indian food especially the *chaat*, *thayir sadam*, *paayasam* and so on. Her later relationships with Teddy Forstmann, chairman and CEO of the global sports and media company IMG and with Adam Dell were also extensions of food experiences for Padma. When she finally owned an apartment of her own, what really excited her was "I was finally in my own kitchen once more". She enthusiastically word painted her kitchen with all the red shelves like the ones she used to see in her grandmother's kitchen.

It is true that Padma's whole life was interspersed with the legacy of food that she brought from home in India. Her memoir stands out because it makes the reader travel through the experiences of Padma Lakshmi by feeling the aroma. The way in which she achieved success should be highly appreciated. All her life, Padma was entangled in the magic that food offers. Her description of her grandfather K.C Krishnamurthy, "Thatha and his *sweet tooth*,..Food was, of course, central to his existence" (189), itself gives the reader a peep into the legacy of food that Padma carries.

Certainly, *Love, Loss and What We Ate* can be called as a memoir written in a culinary style, which is quite new in Indian literature so far. A celebrity memoir which uses culinary style demands attention from the audience as it invites readers from all walks of life. Even though Padma Lakshmi is a global fashion icon representing India or a successful television host with Emmy nomination or a writer of cookbooks, the spell of controversy lies in the fact that she is the former wife of author Salman Rushdie. What new literature industry wants is controversy as it can sell a book which no other elements can. This is exactly why the celebrity memoirs are in high demand today. Publishing industry looks for the element which can surprise the reader or can keep them waiting. But above all these arguments, it can be said that Padma Lakshmi's memoir happens to achieve the status of a creative piece of art because despite being a celebrity memoir, *Love, Loss and What We Ate* narrates the life of an immigrant, the struggles in various facets of life and finally, the difficult journey to victory. Themes of Identity Crisis, Multiculturalism and Diaspora are treated with attention and offered with a true example of worth. Even though she wrote two cookbooks earlier, it is with this book that Padma Lakshmi has made her entry into the class of Diasporic authors. This can be seen as a 'coming of age' work as well as the survival story of a brown girl in white world. The culinary style of narration is what makes this work different from other celebrity memoirs. The recipes in between the

pages fill the common public with curiosity. The huge success of celebrity memoirs in recent times is a refreshing trend as it draws the common readers to the literary world and satisfies their taste as opposite to the so called intellectual authors' books. The critical acclaim she received after publishing a celebrity memoir written in a culinary style makes her survival complete in one sense. Thus Padma Lakshmi's memoir is a recipe for life, indeed.

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