



Piece Of Cake And Power Feminism

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I. Introduction

The novel *Piece of Cake* by Swati Kaushal is a story of Minal Sharma, the protagonist, who is a daughter of strictly socially devoted parents, having a history of freedom fighters in her family. Traversing through a disciplined childhood, the protagonist has been described through her journey from being overly dictated by her parents, to completing her MBA without the will of her parents, to making her path as a product manager in International Foods Company, and in this process, finding a love for herself.¹ In this journey, the protagonist is subjected to multiple situations, incidents and anecdotes which prove that being a single woman in her approaching 30s is not entirely acceptable by the society, yielding a pressure to get married rather get settled, as if without the tag of being married, one is unsettled or infuriately incompetent². The novel *Piece of Cake* is regarded to be a pioneer in the genre of Chick Lit and is the first novel to ever address the various facets which an independent woman looking for stability, faces while living in an Indian society.

The novel is a collaborative portrayal of the lifestyle, mindset, actions, personal experiences, popular culture and thought process of every woman in her 30s, trying to strike a balance with her career and personal life.³ The novel addresses the factual happenings in the corporate world, for a woman rising up her position and the reflexes from the male counterparts. A perfect blend of mental self-actualization and the hypocritical standards set by the society related to marriage business have been accurately included in the novel, to provide the readers with a shade of both the worlds. The protagonist of the novel, Minal Sharma is a strong female character determined to rise in life fighting all odds, which started off from her childhood comprising of strict parents and a legacy of stricter grandparents.

¹ Swati Kaushal, *Piece of Cake* (Gurgaon: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 1–266.

² Mirgane, and Kharat. "Indian Chick Lit." *Literary Endeavour* X, no. 1 (2019): 147–50. <https://doi.org/0976-299X>.

³ NowfiyaNazeer, "Literature as a Reformatory Tool: The Role of Indian English Literature in Shifting the Stereotypical Paradigms of Womanhood," *International Journal of Trend in Research and Development* X (2018): 9–11, <https://doi.org/2394-9333>.

Throughout childhood, the younger Minal acted according to the will of her parents, and her choices were guarded and determined solely by the future decided by her parents for her. The start of the novel describes the day after Minal's twenty ninth birthday which was welcomed by a letter from her mother, or one can call it an ultimatum⁴. The letter comprised of probable matches which were suitable for the protagonist as her future partners, which were the result of an advertisement or a matrimonial ad published by protagonist's mother, as a birthday gift for her daughter. The importance of the tag of being married can be analyzed from the tone of the letter, which quoted that finding a match for their own daughter has become a fight similar to the struggle to fight for independence. The proportionate introduction of Minal, the protagonist in her own matrimonial ad started off with an opening line, stating everything about her family background, ancient history and anecdotes, but missed the only part which was – Minal herself. The whole matrimonial ad was a speaking evidence of the way protagonist's mother emphasized on the family background, rather than the actual human being Minal was. As the protagonist finally stressed, "If you had to do it, couldn't you have done it right mom?⁵, reflecting her frustration from the matrimonial ad. The sarcasm of this line potentiates the resonant voice of protagonist, not shocked by the actions of her own mother, putting her family background first and then her daughter.⁶ The letter by protagonist's mother stressed enough on the importance of getting married early, and even if some compromises had to be made, the answer should be a yes.

Throughout the novel, the biggest critique of the protagonist, without a doubt has been her mother, emphasizing on everything else above her daughter's satisfaction and peace of mind. The priorities of Indian mother's has been well-justified and presented in the novel through the journey of Minal Sharma, an obedient yet dissatisfied woman frustrated from her mother, as she quotes, "Go away, Leave me alone, Stop messing around."⁷ As for the career of protagonist, the job posting of Assistant Product Manager at International Foods under the branch of cookies and crunchy little cookies. The name of the post is much lavish than the actual work done by protagonist at this post. The story of her initial failure in career after being questioned and demoted for her involvement in leak of new product template, the only way for her procurement of self-respect was a good man in her life.

II. Expression of Power Feminism and Patriarchal Dominance

⁴ Swati Kaushal, *Piece of Cake* (Gurgaon: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 1–266.

⁵ Swati Kaushal, *Piece of Cake* (Gurgaon: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 1–266.

⁶ Sugandha S. Singh and AbhaShuklaKaushik, "Chick Lit in India: A Step towards Power Feminism," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 28, no. 3 (September 26, 2021): 369–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09715215211030405>.

⁷ Swati Kaushal, *Piece of Cake* (Gurgaon: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 1–266.

The presence of an old friend Sunil, back into her life with a new outlook and new-found personality became the source of distraction for the protagonist⁸. A cancer surgeon, with a charming personality and a London returned bachelor, sounded like a perfect introduction for the most eligible bachelor in town, completely contradictory to the way protagonist was introduced. In her quest of finding love and a partner, the protagonist went through a round off multiple overly toxic males, some of which even ranked Minal based on her looks and voice. The template of marking sheet which included columns of beauty, family, hostess skills, values and personality are enough to be comprehended as toxic for any human being in general. Even with the grace marks, given by the male counterpart Naveen, Minal scored 4.1 as her ranking, which apparently was too low for the guy to even consider her as a future life partner.

As Minal had been promoted all of a sudden to head the department of cakes at International Foods, the apparent friends of hers including Ali and her boss started questioning her promotion, even giving her tips on how to not get acclimated in the new environment. This is a representation of the way male counterparts in a corporate setup behave and react when the female colleague is promoted on her own merit⁹. These little incidents in *Piece of Cake* reflect the common mentality of general public, exhibiting toxic masculinity accompanied by a strong domination of patriarchy¹⁰. Even at the promoted position, her new colleague, with whom she was supposed to form a team, named Rana turned out to be another overly enthusiastic and highly egoistic fellow exhibiting a personal supreme in every task assigned.

The politics of life for Minal in terms of finding individuals with true sense of humanity has been tough both in terms of personality and fundamental issues of ego and male dominance. The men of Minal's life, including the ones sent by her mother knew her from her family background, not from the appreciative nature she possesses. The various men ranked her, judged her (through the mark sheet) and others took Minal for granted. In the process, she met her old friend Sunil, a well-established Cancer surgeon with a tag of an eligible bachelor. On the very first day, the mothers of two children acted as if they were meant to get married and said, why don't they give some alone time to the two children to talk freely. The awkward silence between the two gave an explanation of how eager the mothers were to get them married. The later appearances of Sunil in *Piece of Cake* were extremely respectful and carved the impression of Sunil to be the best man¹¹.

⁸ Swati Kaushal, *Piece of Cake* (Gurgaon: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 1–266.

⁹ Mirgane, and Kharat. "Indian Chick Lit." *Literary Endeavour* X, no. 1 (2019): 147–50. <https://doi.org/0976-299X>.

¹⁰ Swati Kaushal, *Piece of Cake* (Gurgaon: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 1–266.

¹¹ Lewis, Patricia, Yvonne Benschop, and Ruth Simpson. "Postfeminism, Gender and Organization." *Gender, Work & Organization* 24, no. 3 (April 5, 2017): 213–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12175>.

As the story progresses, the professional sphere of Minal takes a sharp turn due to the leak of her company's recent venture "The Original Anniversary Cake" by the competitors of Gourmet International. As Minal was the product manager, specifically a female product manager, she was doubted without any evidence. As she was designing the tagline for the product, she met Ali, whose friend works in Gourmet International. Ali was a younger love crush of Minal, whose carefree attitude and cool profession enchanted Minal due to his persistent effort. But due to the differences in opinions as Minal puts it, "You can't put attraction above everything else", the two never made a pair. But irrespective of everything, the first hint for Minal for her doubt on Ali to be the secret leaker was because of Lara, Ali's friend. On the same evening, Minal's mother was about to leave and Sunil came to drive her back to Meerut. The chances of Sunil spying on Minal's little cake strategy for a food company never made sense; hence she categorically removed Sunil from her radar of possible people to leak her design. Sunil was about to propose to Minal, the idea of a woman being asked to give up on her job because of some momentary obstacles is again a re-establishment of the patriarchal dominance¹². Had Sunil been the perfect eligible bachelor, he would have wished Minal good luck and should have stuck with her choice from life. With other boys, the marking system existed¹³. The marking sheet's design, which featured categories for beauty, family, hostess skills, values, and personality, is poisonous for any human being in general. Minal received a 4.1 ranking despite the grace marks from her male counterpart Naveen, which was allegedly too low for the guy to contemplate her as a prospective life partner.

III. Societal Reflection and Hypocritical Standards in the Light of Protagonist

Piece of Cake is a collective representation of every woman in her 30s striving to create a balance between her profession and personal life through her lifestyle, thinking, behaviours, personal experiences, popular culture, and cognitive process¹⁴. The story depicts real-life events in the business environment, including the reactions of male colleagues as a woman rises through the ranks. The work perfectly incorporates a perfect combination of mental self-actualization and the hypocritical standards imposed by society connected to the marriage industry, giving readers a taste of both worlds. Minal Sharma, the novel's heroine, is a strong female character motivated to succeed in life against all difficulties who in her life met with male counterparts who even ranked her on the basis of her looks and politeness and another side of the coin is her being the independent project head at International Foods¹⁵.

¹²Singh, Vikash. "Myths of Meritocracy: Caste, Karma and the New Racism, a Comparative Study." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 15 (December 21, 2017): 2693–2710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1413201>.

¹³Lewis, Patricia, Yvonne Benschop, and Ruth Simpson. "Postfeminism, Gender and Organization." *Gender, Work & Organization* 24, no. 3 (April 5, 2017): 213–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12175>.

¹⁴Lina-Marcela Ramirez, "The Paradox of Equality Policies and Meritocracy in Female Leadership," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3438321>.

¹⁵ Swati Kaushal, *Piece of Cake* (Gurgaon: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 1–266.

For a woman working and managing her life independently in Delhi and Kolkata, her own fiancé has been quoting words like "You're usually out in the searing heat and travelling to such dreadful areas," Sunil says of the protagonist's employment. "It will be excellent for you to switch to something more fitting."¹⁶ He also compared the protagonist to the wife of a mutual acquaintance who quit her career when they married¹⁷. Gender stereotypes that go ignored in society and are assumed to be something that women must do by default are to blame for this pathology of the female counterpart being the one to care for the family. These dialogs in the novel represent the true personality of a character for his misogynist approach and the presence of male ego to be a superior partner as he is a doctor, and if the wife is working, the simplest answer given was "I earn enough for the both of us". The hypocrisy in the feminist behavior of Sunil can be explained by the stance of Calypso on hypocritical feminism as, "I have noticed that some feminists differ from their online persona, in the way that they treat women around them in real life"¹⁸. People, who come across as feminists, are majorly seen pretending to fit into a circle of apparently open minded individuals who stand for female meritocracy¹⁹. But in reality, the actual state of mind of such male chauvinists gets reduced to actual form when a woman, specifically the female protagonist in life becomes exceedingly oriented to her profession²⁰.

IV. Analysis of Female Meritocracy in Piece of Cake

The various twists in the novel, ranging from different characters like Sunil, Minal's mother, her colleagues and Ali have been central in portraying the actual representation of the modern society. The plot will be looked upon from the standpoint of a 29-year old, independent and working woman trying to carve her path in the industry of food business and settling in life on her own terms²¹. The family of the protagonist and their stance towards their daughter is discussed to reflect upon the behavior of modern society towards their unmarried daughter. In the context of patriarchal dominance and dilemma of female meritocracy, the fiancé of the protagonist Minal and her boss Vik have been discussed in greater depth²². According to the theory of female meritocracy, the environment in the

¹⁶ Swati Kaushal, *Piece of Cake* (Gurgaon: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 1–266.

¹⁷ Nowfiya Nazeer, "Literature as a Reformatory Tool: The Role of Indian English Literature in Shifting the Stereotypical Paradigms of Womanhood," *International Journal of Trend in Research and Development X* (2018): 9–11, <https://doi.org/2394-9333>.

¹⁸ Irrational Calypso, "Hypocritical Feminism," Medium, August 1, 2020, <https://medium.com/@whyami42/hypocritical-feminism-c704dabde793>.

¹⁹ STEUTER, ERIN. "Women against Feminism: An Examination of Feminist Social Movements and Anti-Feminist Countermovements." *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie* 29, no. 3 (August 1992): 288–306. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-618x.1992.tb02440.x>.

²⁰ Supriya Sharma, "Girl Power," India Today, 2012, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/supplement/story/20121119-girl-power-760483-2012-11-09>.

²¹ Swati Kaushal, *Piece of Cake* (Gurgaon: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 1–266.

²² Singh, Vikash. "Myths of Meritocracy: Caste, Karma and the New Racism, a Comparative Study." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 15 (December 21, 2017): 2693–2710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1413201>.

workplace after the feminist movement has become equal towards both genders in terms of pay scale and availability of opportunities²³. The linkage of employee rewards with their performance according to this theory, are not limited to the differentiation on the basis of gender²⁴. These are a result of establishment of the moral credentials in the workspace. This theory and its hypothesis are contradicted by the plot of Piece of Cake. The dilemmatic approach of Vik and Yogi towards Minal as an employee and the demotion of the protagonist without any evidence from the post of a product manager to sales manager is a working evidence for the contradiction of female meritocracy in workplaces²⁵. The presence of this theory illustrates the possibility of workplace equality in various environments, but as for the plot of Swati Kaushal's Piece of Cake is concerned, there is a firm contradiction to the actual applicability of this topic²⁶. The colleague and teammate of Minal, Rana who was again appointed by Vik for managing the cake section always looked down upon the capabilities of the protagonist. Through the various meetings and briefings done in the office and meeting room, the audience gets a clear idea that Rana has the best statistical knowledge possible for International Foods based on his experience in this field. At the same time, a food business is not run only through mathematical numbers which is the domain of Minal Sharma, the protagonist. The team pairing done by Vik had been exemplary, but the behavior of Rana always belittled the talent of the female counterpart. Through his debate and deliberations with Minal, he displays a massive superiority complex and undermines the ground level market knowledge of his female colleague, appointed by his senior²⁷. This displays not only the behavior of male counterparts when women come at the same level, but also shows the lack of respect for them when caught up in substantial conversations for taking big decisions²⁸.

The power feminism theory, through its journey from establishing the feminist belief to conceptualizing power as a necessity to exhibit equality has been aptly applied in the

²³ Emilio J. Castilla and Stephen Benard, "The Paradox of Meritocracy in Organizations," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (December 2010): 543–676, <https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2010.55.4.543>.

²⁴ Lazar, Michelle M. "Entitled to Consume: Postfeminist Femininity and a Culture of Post-Critique." *Discourse & Communication* 3, no. 4 (November 2009): 371–400. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481309343872>.

²⁵ KiranManral, "Why I'm Not Ashamed to Be Called a Chick Lit Author (and You Shouldn't Be Either)," Scroll.in, 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/858680/why-im-not-ashamed-to-be-called-a-chick-lit-author-and-you-shouldnt-be-either>.

²⁶ KiranManral, "Why I'm Not Ashamed to Be Called a Chick Lit Author (and You Shouldn't Be Either)," Scroll.in, 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/858680/why-im-not-ashamed-to-be-called-a-chick-lit-author-and-you-shouldnt-be-either>.

²⁷ Vikash Singh, "Myths of Meritocracy: Caste, Karma and the New Racism, a Comparative Study," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 15 (December 21, 2017): 2693–2710, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1413201>.

²⁸ Rothstein, Bo. "Gender Equality, Corruption and Meritocracy." *SSRN Electronic Journal* 23, no. 2 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3023929>.

context of Piece of Cake²⁹. The idea of power being equally distributed in every domain of society from household to workplace is essential in contributing to the gender equality and availability of rationalized opportunities³⁰. The power feminist theory, established in 2015, aims to address the task of critiquing the gender based subordination, the delegation of work and availability of opportunities in the work front³¹.

V. Conclusion

The idea of hypocritical love and its exploitation to create marriage business is another issue addressed by Piece of Cake. The marriage business thrives in India as targeted in the web series of Indian Matchmaking, due to the presence of an eagerness from the bride's family to get their daughter settled and from the groom's end to get a suitable match which can be an all-time available human companion for their son, without any demands and opinions. The social stature of oneself is also being connected to the lavishness in marriage functions. A small function with limited guest list is taken to be an offense, as Minal also encourages Sunil to hold a small reception function; he responds that marriages are a social status symbol and basically a way of networking with connections, not to actually celebrate the love between two people. Sunil proposes to Minal, and the two begin their romance with a happy long distance relationship, with one of them in Delhi and the other in Kolkata. Minal returned to work as a Sales Promotion Manager, with the primary responsibility of working with distributors and redistributors in order to increase International Foods sales. She'd been assigned to a position that would allow her to immerse herself in the roots of industry while also being surrounded by the luxury of the Pandey family, whose daughter in law she was soon to become. Kaushal's depiction of the protagonist's engagement was reminiscent of a Disney film with a Bollywood twist. It was a performance to show off wealth, not to celebrate love. Based on this mindset, marriage is genuinely converted to a business, rather than a function to celebrate love.³² The hypocritical idea of love and Cinderella syndrome, all have been reflected in the plot to come to an end, as the engagement is done. After the actual engagement, Minal gets to understand the real personality of her to-be-husband, who is a complete misogynist, dominant, superiorly inferior and most importantly anti-feminist³³. The patriarchal complexes of dominance in men based on the inherent roles of particular gender in society are also being highlighted in the context of Swati Kaushal's Piece of Cake. This portrayal of toxic masculinity and the disrespect for a partner describes the crumpled

²⁹Stina Powell, *Gender Equality and Meritocracy Contradictory Discourses in the Academy* (Department of Urban and Rural Development, Sweden, 2016), 1–215.

³⁰ Emilio J. Castilla and Stephen Benard, "The Paradox of Meritocracy in Organizations," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (December 2010): 543–676, <https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2010.55.4.543>.

³¹ Celia Kitzinger, "Feminism, Psychology and the Paradox of Power," *Feminism & Psychology* 1, no. 1 (February 1991): 111–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353591011016>.

³² Thomas Wartenberg, "The Concept of Power in Feminist Theory," *Praxis International* 8, no. 3 (1998): 301–16, <https://doi.org/154224>.

³³ Swati Kaushal, *Piece of Cake* (Gurgaon: Penguin Publishers, 2004), 1–266.

behavior of the men in society treating their female counterparts as someone who will always stay inferior to them. Piece of Cake will always remain about the original cake and about the life of protagonist whose life was not adequately a Piece of Cake.

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