| Research Article |

The National Politics of Meat and Carno-Phallogocentrism in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*

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Abstract: *The invisibility of women in national discourses and the absence of animals as living breathing referents have repeatedly been highlighted by feminists in recent times (Adams & Donovan 2007, Nilsson & Tetreault 2000). In this context, this study focuses on Suleri's "Meatless Days" (1989) as an allegory of the national politics of meat in Pakistan and probes the role of women and animals in national discourses/narratives as absent referents rather than as subjects. For this purpose, this study probes the inter-connectedness between the ontological absence of women and animals in patriarchal and national discourses and, using Derrida's notion of "carno-phallogocentrism" (1995) along with Adams' seminal work "The Sexual Politics of Meat" (1990), it aims to decipher the fragmentation and consumption of meat/animals (literally) and of women (symbolically) to comprehend how the national discourses are structured around this symbolic devouring that renders women either invisible or irrelevant to these epistemologies. This study throws light on the gendered phallogocentric manifestations of nationalism in Suleri's memoir and emphasizes that, through the metaphor of meat-less days, Suleri equates the fragmentation and consumption of animals as meat to the fragmentation and symbolic consumption that women have to go through in national narratives and spaces.*

Key words*: Nationalism, Phallogocentrism, Absent Referent, Subjectivity, Politics of Meat*

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the analysis of the national politics of meat in Suleri's "Meatless Days" (1989) and the way this politics of meat impacts women as well as animals--the former through metaphoric devouring and the latter though literal consumption. Suleri's memoir can also be labeled, to use Jameson's categorization of the third world literatures (1986), as the National Allegory of Absence that, through the metaphor of meat-less days, equates the fragmentation and consumption of animals as meat to the fragmentation and symbolic consumption that women have to go through in national narratives and spaces. In this context, this paper deals with the national politics of meat, the role of meat as a metaphor for the silencing that women have to go through in public and personal domains. For this purpose, Derrida's carno-phallogocentrism (1995) along with Adams' "The Sexual Politics of

Meat" (1990) have been relied upon as the theoretical constructs in this study. Through the analysis of the kapura parable in Suleri's memoir, this paper scrutinizes the underlying phallogocentric construction of male subjectivity and the way this constructed formation is superimposed upon the way women perceive subjectivity.

Numerous studies have been conducted on Suleri's memoir with particular emphasis on the way food serves as a metaphor to juxtapose the public/political and private spheres of women's lives in Pakistan. Warley (1992) probed the way Suleri has described the text of her life in terms of a culinary recipe of the self. Dow Adams (2009) critically scrutinized the triangulation of food, body, and politics in postcolonial Pakistan in Suleri's narrative. Anja Oed (1998) deconstructed the kapura anecdote as a subversive episode that, like the Western discourses, served to further homogenize the native culture in terms of monolith uniformity. In this context, this study, rather than scrutinizing Suleri's narrative from the perspective of East-West dichotomy, takes the kapura anecdote as the point of departure to focus upon the way Suleri makes use of food as a form of dissent to challenge the anthropocentric and androcentirc notions of male subjectivity that define the national politics of meat in Pakistan.

This paper, first, gives a brief overview of Adams' and Derrida's notions as utilized in this study; this overview is followed by an analysis of Suleris' memoir with particular emphasis on the kapura parable and the way food and faith are juxtaposed in the national politics of meat in Pakistan to turn women and animals into absent referents.

Kapura, Absent Referent, and the National Politics of Meat

Carol J. Adams, in her work "The Sexual Politics of Meat" (1990), critically scrutinizes the politics of eating meat as essential to the formation of male subjectivity; meat's association with virility tends to link it closely to the culture of masculinity and patriarchy. Meat-eating practices also tend to render the animal—the living being who is devoured—into an absent referent; these practices tend to dislocate the referent from its ontological meaning and lend to it a fluidity, a free-floating liquid existence, that makes it quite susceptible to re-signification without taking into consideration its context of existence. This carnivorous devouring, Adams (1990) believes, is limited not merely to animals, rather women are also made into absent referents as the sexual politics of meat "animalizes women and sexualizes and feminizes animals" (Adams, 1990, p. xviii). Suleri, in "Meatless Days" (1989), deals with the unanchored existence of women who, like the animals consumed in a carnivorous patriarchal culture, remain vulnerable to (epistemological and metaphorical) consumption as absent referents.

Derrida, in "Eating Well" (1995), presented the idea of carno-phallogocentrism which refers to the literal and symbolic devouring of animals and women and marginalized others as constitutive of religion, civilization, nationalism and patriarchal existence. Calarco, while

explaining Derrida's term, emphasizes that the formation of subjectivity is dependent upon three notions including being "a meat-eater, a man, and an authoritative, speaking subject" (Calarco as cited in Adams, 1990, p. xix). These three conditions are pivotal to the normative notions of subjectivity—male subjectivity—and shed light on the process of how phallus and carnivorism define and shape male-centric notions and ideas and existence. Derrida himself describes carno-phallogocentrism in these terms:

> "…it suffices to take seriously the idealizing interiorization of the phallus and the necessity of its passage through the mouth, whether it's a matter of words or of things, of sentences, of daily bread or wine, of the tongue, the lips, or the breast of the other" (Derrida, 1995, p. 280).

The "interiorization of the phallus" (Derrida, 1995, p. 280) refers not merely to the symbolic devouring of animal flesh, rather the male phallic subjectivity will be formulated and asserted through the "ingestion of flesh" (Baumeister, 2017, p. 54) as well as the domination over women. Hence, it juxtaposes both the androcentric as well as anthropocentric notions of domination to subjugate both women as well as animals. Suleri, through her work "Meatless Days" (1989), exposes how the phallus is interiorized literally as well as symbolically in the form of kapuras and how this interiorization leads to a questioning of both androcentric and anthropocentric notions of male subjectivity on the part of Suleri.

As mentioned earlier, Suleri's memoir is an allegory of absence: the absence of women in the political and national domains. To allegorically symbolize this absence, Suleri uses the metaphor of meat to make explicit the subject-formation process in the patriarchal Pakistani culture; she seems to use meat as a trope for the marginalization and silencing that women undergo in patriarchal societies like ours. Adams, in her work "The Sexual Politics of Meat" (1990), describes the role of meat in shaping male subjectivity as an omniscient presence shaping and defining the male-centric notions of subjectivity. "Meat is a symbol for what is not seen but is always there" (Adams, 1990, p. xxxviii). The carnivorous devouring of meat on the part of men—that Derrida describes as carno-phallogocentrism (1995)—renders them into a "genuine subject" (Calarco as cited in Adams, 1990, p. xix) capable of carrying and sustaining the burden of "male-stream" (Braidotti, 1994, p. 6) civilization. Suleri, in her memoir, has presented an alternative space peopled, pre-dominantly, by women in the domestic/personal sphere as well as the public sphere. This all-female space, through the metaphor of meat, describes how meat becomes a metaphor to designate the male-centric notions of virility, how virility and meat-eating practices are inter-linked and how these practices serve to turn women into absent referents by making their experiences either

irrelevant or invisible. The very title "Meatless Days" is quite significant as it allegorically manifests the epistemological absence of women in an otherwise 'meaty' patriarchal world.

> "Unequal images battle in my mind for precedence—there's imperial Ifat, there's Mama in the garden, and Haleema the cleaning woman is there too, there's uncanny Dadi with her goat. Against all my odds I know what I must say. Because, I'll answer slowly, *there are no women in the third world*" (Suleri, 1989, p. 22 Emphasis added).

This epistemological absence of women hinted at by Suleri—"there are no women in the third world" (Suleri, 1989, p. 22)—refers to what Eisenstein describes as "fantasmatic imaginings" (2000, p. 35) which allow women to be imagined as fantasised beings by men, and for men, in certain limited roles, and turn them into absent referents as the roles that are imagined for them bring about ontological dislocation; they lose their referent point very much like those animals who lose their referent point as living breathing beings and are turned into meaty chunks to be devoured and consumed, primarily, by the male populace. Suleri's claim of absence regarding women in the 'third world' is also quite reminiscent of Jameson's generalization regarding National Allegory and the third world literature that "a certain nationalism is fundamental in the third world" (Jameson, 1986, p. 65). Hence, women's absence and nationalism's presence in the literary landscape of the 'third world' serve to emphasize the gendered dimensions of national/ist discourses in the literatures being produced in the third world countries.

The title of Suleri's memoir "Meatless Days" is quite significant as it symbolizes what Adams describes as "women's oppression …. expressed through the trope of meat eating" (Adams, 1990, p. 116). By making it about meat-less days rather than about meaty days, Suleri puts forward an alternative to the patriarchal "texts of meat" (Adams, 1990, p. 139) by questioning and exposing the carno-phallogocentrism inherent in the meat eating cultural practices in Pakistan. She questions the national politics of meat by bringing forth the state's manipulation and control over the consumption of meat through the declaration of two meat-less days in every week. This declaration, rather than controlling and tempering down the consumption of meat, ended up making meat all the more coveted by masses as they started to hoard and refrigerate meat to cook on those two meat-less days. The effort by the state to control the culinary practices of masses, of how much meat people put into their bodies and when, hints at the close link between state, patriarchy and meat eating practices and reveals how deeply-ingrained these practices are.

As already mentioned, Suleri's 'meaty' narrative (1989) is an allegory of absence—the

absence of women in gendered national narratives and spaces and the absence of animals as living referents in patriarchal culinary culture. It deals with what Adams (1990) describes as the objectification, fragmentation and consumption of women and animals metaphorically, and in animals' case, literally as well. Suleri, in her American sojourn, misses not the company of women, rather, as she puts it: "I miss, of course, the absence of women" (Suleri, 1989, p. 21). This allegory of absence is rendered palpable through the kapura parable that Suleri describes in her work. Through the kapura parable, Suleri presents the dialectic of absence and presence that makes manifest the literal and metaphorical consumption of meat by turning it into an absent referent. This dialectic of presence and absence hinges on the dislocation of the referent that makes animals as living breathing beings absent in patriarchal culinary culture and replaces them with meaty cooked chunks of food meant only to be devoured. Berger emphasizes:

"The first metaphor was animal" (Berger as cited in Adams, 1990, p. 21).

So kapura that Suleri was made to eat in her childhood by her mother and the cook metaphorically symbolizes the dislocation that all animals go through when they are converted from living breathing beings into butchered, fragmented, cooked delicacies. Hence, Tillat's (Suleri's sister) question, "Sara,… do you know what Kapura are?" (Suleri, 1989, p. 23) is aimed at questioning the cultural patriarchal assumptions about food that render animals' existence irrelevant by creating a man-centered hierarchy. This 'man-centered hierarchy' makes irrelevant not only the lives and existence of animals, but it also renders invisible the experiences of women. Tillat's query in the kapura parable questions the ontological dislocation that Suleri, and all subjects in a meat-consuming culture, have never bothered to probe. Kapura have always been, for her, the sweetbreads, and the re-assuring institutionalized comfort of this assumption leads Suleri to reply promptly to Tillat's question: "Of course I do.…They're sweetbreads, and they're cooked with kidneys, and they're very good" (Suleri, 1989, p. 23). But by questioning this ontological dislocation, Suleri is made to think about its referent, the living being whose body parts are ravenously devoured in a patriarchal carnivorous culture, and thinking about its referent leads her to turn this meaty chunk of food with absent referent into a presence; it is only after consuming it and questioning its physiological location that the absent referent starts to acquire a presence. Prior to this, it was this very ontological dislocation that turned animals/meat into what Adams describes as "a free-floating image" (Adams, 1990, p. 28) open and vulnerable to re-signification and re-interpretation in a patriarchal culture. This "fluidity of absent referent" (Adams, 1990, p. 28) enables Suleri to restore it to its anatomy, "to strip a food of its sauce and put it back into its bodily belonging" (Suleri, 1989, p. 24). Adams further emphasizes: "To make the absent

referent present…disables consumption and disables the power of metaphor" (Adams, 1990, p. 32). Suleri, after setting things anatomically right, is reminded of more metaphorical "carnivorous arrogance" (de Beauvoir as cited in Adams, 1990, p. 41) that had lead her, in the past, to more 'misplaced' consumption of meat: for example, the eating of chicken that was made to look like veal, or the use of linguistically unstable referents as in expressions "mutton dressed up as lamb" and "neither fish nor fowl" (Suleri, 1989, p. 25). All the meat that she has, so far, consumed assumes an unstable metaphorical dislocation. This metaphorical dislocation is quite akin to the "misnomer" (Adams, 1990, p. 50) culture with regard to meat that Nuz—Suleri's half-sister—experiences when she goes through the weekly ordeal of buying meat for the meat-less days. In her desperation to hoard meat to be consumed during the weekly government ordained meat-less days, she asks the chicken-monger for fresh meat. "Are they fresh?...Can you promise me they're fresh?" (Suleri, 1989, p. 35) And the chicken-monger replies in quite perplexity: "But Begum Sahib, they are alive" (Suleri, 1989, p. 35). It makes Nuz and Suleri ponder over the ontological dislocation of animals that reduces them to dead bodies even when they are alive; this patriarchal culture of absence, of misnomer, that makes Nuz and her sister reflect that "a fresh chicken is a dead chicken" (Suleri, 1989, p. 36).

This dialectic of presence and absence necessitates further that animals only in certain manifestations and forms are compatible with the patriarchal carnivorous culture in this nation-state. The patriarchal meaty culture in Pakistan allows or rather prefers meat to be devoured, not the animals to be nurtured. This is made evident by Suleri when her brother Irfan is barred by his father from keeping birds—doves—at his home. Irfan—resisting the "male-stream" (Braidotti, 1994, p. 6) patriarchal notions—"preferred to grow them rather than eat them" (Suleri, 1989, p. 36), so he built dovecotes on the roof in secrecy and fed and nurtured doves there. But when his father Z. A. Suleri, who due to his abhorrence for the local gambling culture associated with pigeons and the English weather that combined pigeon droppings with rain, came to know about their abode, he barred him from keeping and feeding these birds. So the patriarchal carnivorous culture does not give space to birds as living breathing beings, but only as dead absent referents in the form of food are they given space to.

The kapura parable is also significant as it literally manifests Derrida's carno-phallogocentrism (1995) in the national politics of meat through what Derrida describes as the "interiorization of the phallus and the necessity of its passage through the mouth" (Derrida, 1995, p. 280). As the kapura literally are testicles, so the literal and symbolic devouring of phallus is essential for the formation of male subjectivity; the ingestion of animal flesh, particularly the phallus, is the necessary pre-requisite for the phallocentric domination that the male subject desires over animals as well as over women because in the 'man-centered

hierarchy' women are placed only next to animals. Moreover, "in order to be recognized as a full subject one must be a meat eater, a man, and an authoritative, speaking subject" (Calarco as cited in Adams, 1990, p. xix), so the national politics of meat entails the devouring of as many body parts of animals as possible to attain "anthropocentric domination" (Baumeister, 2017, p. 54) essential for becoming a "free subject" (Calarco as cited in Adams, 1990, p. xix). But Suleri's abhorrence at this "gastronomic wrong" (Suleri, 1989, p. 25) engineered by her mother is interesting as it can be termed a form of resistance to "male-stream" (Braidotti, 1994, p. 6) notions of subjectivity. In the national politics of meat where meat is used as a symbol of virile strength and the consumption of androcentric and anthropocentric notions of male subjectivity, Suleri's refusal entails a search for alternative gastronomic practices that are not defined or controlled by the patriarchal notions of carno-phallogocentrism, where women are not made to devour metaphorically and literally the symbols of male virility, where eating vegetables ought not result in being made to eat animal body parts as punishment—Suleri was made to eat "kirrnee" by the cook Qayuum as a form of punishment for relishing the "illicit joy" (Suleri, 1989, p. 28 & 27) of eating cauliflowers fresh from the soil. Hence, in a patriarchal meaty world, where eating vegetables from the soil was likened to being an animal—"there is an animal, Begum Sahib," he [Qayuum] mourned to my mother, "like a savage in my garden" (Suleri, 1989, pp. 27-28)—and where it resulted, for Suleri, in being disciplined by a man, the cook, by being made to devour more body parts, more animal flesh, Suleri's refusal is a form of protest against the "interiorization of the phallus" (Derrida, 1995, p. 280), against the 'man-centered hierarchy' that legitimizes the "ingestion of flesh" (Baumeister, 2017. P. 54). And as food choices can serve as a form of dissent to existing national culture of meat, so Suleri's abstinence from and questioning of meat can also be termed as a search for female-identified food amid the national politics of meat—most probably vegetarian—which can serve to challenge the marginalization and silencing of women as well as animals in a meaty patriarchal world.

Along with an allegory of absence, Suleri's narrative (1989) is also an allegory of desensitization as well. Adams (1990) believes that the absence and butchering of animals in the form of absent referent is made palatable through the process of desensitization. This desensitization is essential not only to desensitize masses with regard to the butchering, fragmentation and consumption of animals, rather this desensitization is imperative for the continuation of normative exploitation of women in nation-states as well. Hence, this desensitization can take multiple forms, depending upon the object of consumption—women or animals. In case of animals, the consumption of butchered animals by masses requires anecdotes, tales, misnomers, and faith. So kapura can be misnamed sweetbreads rather than

testicles and paired with "kirrnee" (Suleri, 1989, p. 28) so that a subject like Suleri can be made desensitized enough to devour it or a desensitized Munni—Suleri's cook's daughter—be made to devour a simulated "fake pan" filled with stones wrapped in a mango leaf day after day and still she would never get "streetwise" (Suleri, 1989, p. 26) or Dadi dragging her goat to be sacrificed on Eid as her desensitization entailed a belief in religious rituals in the form of "chopping up animals for God" and "showing him what she could do—for him—to sons" (Suleri, 1989, p. 4 & 6).

As already mentioned, Suleri's meat-less memoir (1989) is a form of protest against the "texts of meat" (Adams, 1990, p. 139) as it shows her dis-ease with the national politics of meat. The character of Dadi and her fetish for meaty delicacies is quite relevant in this context as it displays how carnivorism is coupled with religion in Pakistan to legitimize the "ingestion of flesh" (Baumeister, 2017, p. 54) and how imperative are the meaty culinary religious practices in the attainment of subjectivity. Calarco describes the significance of meat eating practices in the following words:

> "…being a carnivore is at the heart of becoming a full subject in contemporary society. Participating, whether directly or indirectly, in the process or rituals of killing and eating animal flesh is almost a necessary prerequisite of being a subject" (2008, p. 132).

Hence, in the national politics of meat, participation in the killing, butchering, dismemberment and devouring of animals is a prerequisite for subjectivity. In this context, Dadi's pining for "choppable things" and her fondness for "chopping up animals for God" (Suleri, 1989, p. 4) is quite significant as it asserts how constitutive these meat eating practices are in the formation of culture, politics and religion in Pakistan. Culture and religion seem to be intertwined through this carnivorous appetite for meat as Dadi presumed to "understand him [God] better than anyone" and meat had the propensity to "move her to intensities" (Suleri, 1989, p. 3). So when her appetite for both—food and faith—converged as on the ritualistic festival of sacrificial Eid then it legitimized for her to partake in what Adams (1990) describes as the objectification, butchering, and dismemberment of animals by turning them into alienated absent referents. Her first attempt at the ingestion of sacrificial flesh was thwarted when the goat brought by her months in advance to be fed and nurtured for sacrifice was transformed from an absent referent with ontological dislocation into a presence; by bringing the goat home to be fed in fact turned that goat into a presence, a living breathing being from an alienated chunk of meat. "The little goat was our delight, and even Dadi knew there was no killing him" (Suleri, 1989, p. 4). The second goat brought by her was not so lucky as it was

sacrificed and cooked and devoured by her. This close inter-linked association of meat and religion in the national politics of meat requires a belief in both—deity and carnivorism. So, in the days past her "immolation" (Suleri, 1989, p. 16)—which seemed more like a sacrificial act as the word 'immolation' testifies—Dadi gave up on her craving for faith and went "unpraying" (Suleri, 1989, p. 18) and, consequently, her diet also underwent "curious changes" (Suleri, 1989, p. 16). Though Dadi was able to relocate her fetish for meat, quite ironically, when Suleri's mother died but she could never recover her appetite for God. This un-pairing of faith and food in the national politics of meat in Suleri's tale is quite significant as it symbolizes the desire on the part of Suleri's household women to give up on faith as constitutive of subjectivity, not food. This desire is quite reminiscent of Kamila Shamsie's stance in "A God in Every Stone" (2014) with regard to the role of religion in history that makes Shamsie probe history of the region from the perspective of polycentric lococentric multiplicity rather than faith or religion. It hints at a desire on the part of female writers of the region to re-assess and re-define the national politics of faith, history, and culture in Pakistan.

Suleri's dream in which she devoured her mother's flesh is also quite significant in the context of carno-phallogocentrism and the national politics of meat. In the aftermath of her mother's death, Suleri, during her American sojourn, "dreamed a dream" that left her "reeling" (Suleri, 1989, p. 48). In that dream, she saw herself on a London street, along with her father, trying to put her mother's pieces back together in a coffin to be buried. During the numerous trips to coffin across the street, she stole a piece of her mother's flesh "for the sake of Ifat and Shahid and Tilat and all of us" (Suleri, 1989, p. 48) and put it in her mouth and devoured it. This very act of devouring her mother's flesh is highly symbolic and draws parallels with Freud's notion of Primal Parricide and the ingestion of father's flesh by the sons. Freud's primal parricide and the subsequent ingestion of filial flesh is a highly patriarchally constitutive notion as it asserts the formation of male subjectivity and 'man-made' civilization on "the act of carno-sacrificial-ingestion" (Baumeister, 2017, p. 59) that leaves women completely out of the equation as mere objects to be traded and fought over by the devouring sons. Suleri's dream, in contrast, also describes "the act of carno-sacrificial-ingestion" (Baumeister, 2017, p. 59) as Suleri devours voluntarily a part of her mother's flesh but this act was necessitated not by the desire for the erosion of the sacrificial parent's existence as in the patriarchal Freudian tale, rather this act was the outcome of the desire for preservation, for identification, for internalization of (m)other's existence. This act of devouring was not an act of exclusion as, in the primal tale of filial ingestion, the father was excluded and devoured for his power, for his strength, for his virility, for his hoarding of women and animals; Suleri's devouring, on the other hand, was an act of inclusion—to include her (m)other's tale into her own existence, to

preserve a part of her existence, literally and symbolically, for herself and for her siblings; it was an act of tenderness and affection. This act of inclusion as an identificatory act is quite likened in spirit to Sethe's act of infanticide in Morrison's "Beloved" (1987) that made Sethe negate the self and other boundaries between herself and her daughter and resulted in the death of Beloved at the hands of her (m)other Sethe; in a similar vein, Suleri failed to isolate her self from that of her (m)other's and wanted to retain a part of her mother's existence symbolically as well as literally through the act of ingestion. Although this act took place in a dream, not in real life, yet the symbolically constitutive nature of this act cannot be denied. Quite like Freud's symbolic primal parricide that Derrida believes "resembles a fiction" (Derrida, 1992, p. 199), this dream-act is also constitutive of a formative link between meat, motherhood and memory. To re-member her mother in a dream like trance is the opposite of dis-memberment that animals face for the sake of human consumption, yet the transformation of her mother into "hunks of meat wrapped in cellophane" (Suleri, 1989, p. 48) makes literal the act of patriarchal butchering and consumption as absent referents that women face metaphorically in the national politics of meat. Moreover, to be buried in fragments—"hunks of meat wrapped in cellophane" (Suleri, 1989, p. 48)—also manifests literally the metaphorical erosion of women's subjectivity in the national spaces and narratives.

After the symbolic ingestion of flesh, Suleri finds herself in meat-less days: "I had eaten, that was all, and woken to a world of meatless days" (Suleri, 1989, p. 49). This awakening after the devouring of meat—kapuras, kidneys and (m)other's flesh—is quite akin to the eating of the forbidden fruit that led to Eve and Adam's awakening to a life on earth. So Suleri had eaten meat, literally as well as metaphorically, and had ended up in meat-less days where women only serve as absent referents, a visible invisibility, just like the animals devoured and reduced to their body parts and juices.

Hence, Suleri's memoir serves to bring forth a feminist reading of the national politics of meat in Pakistan. Through the kapura parable, she highlights the masculine notions of subjectivity superimposed upon women and how this parable can serve as a form of dissent in the existing culture of meat in Pakistan.

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