

THE (IN)VISIBILITY OF *THE LUNCH BOX*

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Abstract

The paper unveils the labour-intensive dabbawala system followed in Mumbai and the subsequent socio-cultural conflicts of a middle-class family as projected in the Hindi movie, *The Lunchbox*. The dabbawalas collect lunch boxes from restaurants or homes and deliver them to people at work. The study is based on a 2013 Indian epistolary romantic film written and directed by Ritesh Batra. In the movie, a disgusted wife, Ila (Nimrat Kaur) tries to gain the care and affection from her indifferent husband through the delicious food that she sends him for lunch. The irony is that through a rare mix-up, the lunchbox of Ila is delivered, not to her husband but to Saajan Fernandez (Irfan Khan), a widower about to retire from his job as an accountant. The paper presents the paradox of food preparation. On the one side, it has become a well-established industry as in the case of the Dabbawala System and on the other hand, it is a monotonous activity for a woman who spends most of her time in the kitchen. The director clearly portrays the psyche of an ordinary Indian housewife who considers it her prime responsibility to prepare tasty food for her husband. The paper unveils the invisibility of the marginalised Indian housewife and the visibility of the male centred Dabbawalas. The paper also analyses invisibility at different levels.

Keywords: feminism, invisibility, food, dabbawalla,

Simon de Beauvoir has rightly pointed out in her famous book *The Second Sex*, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”.

The life of Ila, the heroine of the movie *The Lunchbox*, substantiates these words of de Beauvoir. Ila does not have a world of her own. Her sole aim is to make the members of her family happy. She discharges her household chores without any grievance. She has never considered it to be a difficult task. The patriarchal society shapes her thoughts and for that reason, she accepts her duties as a wife and a mother. It is deplorable that she does not get her husband's love, care, or attention. In the long run, Ila faces the meaninglessness of life. She even thinks that one needs the courage to commit suicide. Her husband does not note her presence and she becomes invisible.

Ritesh Batra uses simple but powerful weapons to portray the life of Ila. When Ila first appears on the screen, she is a disturbed and worried woman who busily dresses up her daughter, Yashwi, to school. She instructs her not to play in the rain or go under the tree. After sending her daughter to school, Ila rushes back to the kitchen to complete the unfulfilled household chores. Ms. Deshpande, her neighbour aunty, is the only person to whom she opens her heart. Initially, Ila's only companion is this aunty who stays on the upper floor of her flat. The major topic of discussion between them is food and the recipes of food. The aunty advises her to win the heart of her husband by preparing new dishes. Ms. Deshpande is not at all seen throughout the movie, but her voice is very powerful in moulding Ila. Hence, she is the invisible power in this movie. She suggests new recipes which will enable Ila to conquer the heart of her husband. Surprisingly, Ms. Deshpande understands the perfection of each dish prepared by Ila from the flavour she gets. Diagnosing the missing spice in the food prepared by Ila, she immediately sends the spice to be added in a basket tied with a rope from the top floor of her apartment. This method also indicates the traditional way of exchanging household goods from kitchen to kitchen, which is still prevalent in South India. Ila packs the food in a metallic lunch box and sends it through the dabbawala, who collects it from her door. Ila enjoys the traditional gender roles and expectations. Ms Deshpande's suggestion to try new recipes reinstates Melinda Anne Mills view:

Women who cook and enjoy spending time and energy with food preparation are asserting their agency. They are actively carving

out the space and time to discover and rediscover their talents; to connect or re-connect to their culture, community, family, and more; and to possibly showcase their culinary abilities- something they are presumably inherently equipped to do successfully and easily, but is not necessarily the case. In these instances, women in kitchens want others to recognise these creative efforts as distinct from perceived innate abilities to prepare meals.(29)

The journey of food from one place to another and its visibility are worth discussing. The tradition of carrying food in metallic lunch boxes from private homes to schools, colleges and workplaces is a typical Indian custom . Ritesh Batra has portrayed the remarkable service which the dabbawalas render. The lunchbox undergoes various procedures before reaching the final destination. It moves from hands to hands and from one mode of transport to another mode. Earlier the food was carried on hand carts, horse carriages and bicycles. The change in the mode of transportation is reflected in the dabbawalas' delivery system also. They use trains and some of them even carry their bikes on the trains. The film projects the hectic process behind the dabbawala system. There are many people involved in the process. The cyclewala who picks the tiffin from homes to the office boy who supplies it at the office is part of this elaborate office delivery system. After the lunch break, the empty tiffin boxes are returned back home. The system may be surprising to a person who is not used to this system prevalent in Mumbai. Even before the return of their husbands, the housewives will know whether the food was liked and eaten by their husbands. Seeing the empty box, poor Ila thinks that her husband, Rajeev, has eaten the food she prepared. She shares her happiness with her neighbour aunty and expresses her gratitude for sharing the new recipe, which has become a success. Ila dresses up beautifully to receive her husband. Surprisingly, there is no intimacy between Ila and her husband. When Rajeev returns home, Ila notices to her surprise that he is the same old indifferent husband who does not even smile at her. When she asks how the lunch was, he replies that it was good. To the constant interrogations of Ila, he comments that *alugopi* (A dish made of potato and cauliflower) was good. Ila understands that the lunch box was delivered to the wrong address

as it was not *alugopi* that she had packed for him.

When Ila points out that the lunchbox was mixed up, the *dabbawala* disagrees. He says that during his service period, it has never happened. Most of the *dabbawallahs* are Hindus, but they have customers who belong to Muslim, Sikh, Jain or Parsi religions and each religious community observe different and strict dietary rules. So each lunchbox must be delivered to the right person. He even informs her that their system is so perfect that even people from Harvard University have complimented them. He declares that the rulers of England were impressed by the efficiency of their service. This information given by the director is indeed accurate. The Harvard Business Review recognises the systematic work of *dabbawalas*:

Every working day they transport more than 130,000 lunchboxes throughout Mumbai, the world's fourth-most-populous city. That entails conducting upwards of 260,000 transactions in six hours each day, six days a week, 52 weeks a year (minus holidays), but mistakes are extremely rare. Amazingly, the *dabbawalas*—semiliterate workers who largely manage themselves—have achieved that level of performance at very low cost, in an ecofriendly way, without the use of any IT system or even cell phones.

Ms. Deshpande also speaks of the impossibility of delivering the lunchbox to the wrong address. On the other hand, Mr. Saajan Fernandez, who gets tasty food, goes to the restaurant and appreciates them for the delicious food preparation. The restaurant workers decide to prepare the same *alugopi* for him every day. With the advice of aunty, Ila writes a letter to Saajan informing him that the food was meant for her husband and it was delivered to him by mistake. She is shocked to see the reply note, “Dear Ila, the food was very salty today.” Ms. Deshpande asks her to add more chilly to the food the next day as Saajan did not even send a word of gratitude. The following letter from Saajan says, “The salt was fine. But the chilly was a bit on the higher side.” Gradually, a strong relationship grows through these letters. Two souls who have not met each other are able to communicate with each other with the lunch box. The invisibility does not matter in their relation. The lunchbox becomes not only the carrier of food, but also of passion, frustration, anger and sarcasm. In the long

run, Ila informs him of her busy husband, Rajeev, Ms. Deshpande, Mr. Deshpande's coma state and obsession with ceiling fan, her father's illness, her brother's suicide and many other personal matters. Ila is happy that she has a companion to communicate to. Very soon, Ila understands that Saajan is a widower. Saajan eats food with Shaikh, who compliments the food. He says that the person who prepared the food has magical hands as the food is terrific. Ila tries new recipes of her grandma, which she had tried soon after her marriage. The recognition she gets from Saajan is the real motivation for her food preparation. A strong contrast can be drawn between Rajeev and Saajan. Rajeev even does not look at Ila. He never smiles. Throughout the movie, one feels that Rajeev tries to avoid Ila's company in the name of his busy schedule. He uses only limited words and never looks at the face of Ila while replying to her questions.

Saajan consoles her, saying that too many busy people in Mumbai struggle to make both their ends meet. He even advises having a second child as a solution to their present detached situation. This is a common suggestion in the Indian context. In order to attract her own husband, Ila wears the dress which she used during her honeymoon days. To her request of having a second child, Rajeev suggests her not to make *alugopi* daily as he has an acidity problem because of that. The continuous neglect from her husband's side really wounds her psyche. She also points out to Saajan the meaninglessness of her life and her suspicion that Rajeev has another affair.

Ila never wants to be a radical feminist. She never considers being a wife and being a mother as a barrier to her self-fulfilment. She thinks that culinary knowledge empowers women. Ila never wants to live like a man. She is not ambitious as to shoulder the greater responsibility of men. She wants respect for her unique female identity. Unfortunately, her female identity does not receive any acceptance in her home. Ila is invisible to her husband, but she is a source of inspiration to Ms Deshpande and Saajan, who do not see her at all. She receives words of praise and recognition from the invisible people and these words are the only reason for her to be alive. Though she has not met Saajan, through letters, she communicates her feelings and desires to him. Eventually, their lunch notes become their confes-

sions about their loneliness, regrets, memories and joys. She even informs him of her aspiration to go to Bhutan along with her daughter and settle there. She knows it is an emerging country but she wants to be free from her husband. It is not sure how she will survive there. It is this strong desire to go to Bhutan that forces her to sell her ornaments in the last part of the movie. Saajan, who at first shows his yearning to settle down in Bhutan along with her gives up that idea when he secretly sees her and comprehends how young and beautiful she is. The visibility becomes a barrier in their relationship. Saajan feels that the pretty and young Ila will not love him as is very old in comparison with her. He develops an inferiority complex which results in their relationship being virtual. Even though Ila tries to trace him through the address given by dabbawala, she fails. By the time she reaches the office, Saajan has retired and gone to Nasik and Shaikh has taken the charge as the new accountant.

In the postcolonial world, food has become hybrid- local and global. The dullness of food preparation is reflected in the slow pace and silence of Ila's home. The conversation between Ila and her husband is really a monotonous activity. The fastness of the industry is reflected in the dabbawala system. The food industry is one of the greatest profitable industries. The common belief is that a woman has to cook and serve food to her family. Even the famous Malayalam superstar, Mammooty has opined that a woman who does not have time to cook food and pack it for her kids should not be a mother.

Mammooty made the statement at a Kerala government event for the launch of 'Sukratham', a programme to provide free treatment to people suffering from cancer and some lifestyle diseases. Mammooty was pointing out that most lifestyle diseases that Keralites are suffering from are due to a change in their diet over the years. He emphasised the need for home cooked, healthy food. (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/>)

Mammooty, in fact, refers to the necessity of having home-made food for better healthy living. But he highlights the fact that it is the responsibility of the mother. Some fathers totally ignore the family and then the mothers are forced to earn a living to take care of their children. It becomes a double responsibility for them. But astonish-

ingly, it happens that only the roles to be played by women are ingrained in the minds of the male dominated patriarchal society.

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion. (Tennyson)

Man is given a superior role in society as illustrated by Tennyson. He has the strength and ability to work in the field, whereas the woman is meant for the fireplace. When a man uses the sword and takes part in the war, a woman can only use a needle and stitch clothes. Ulysses and his wife, Penelope, are perfect examples of this. Man is meant for intellectual supremacy. If a woman does not obey the orders given by her man, it will result in conflicts. To avoid this situation, most of the women are ready for adjustment and compromise.

According to de Beauvoir, sexual difference is a result of cultural conditioning. The cultural conditioning makes a woman the central figure of her own kitchen. Hence, the kitchen is the only world for Ila. She is not ambitious of anything other than cooking. Even the great art of cooking, which she has mastered, fails to win the heart of her husband. It is said that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Hence, it becomes the prime responsibility of a woman to win his heart by cooking good meals. This is how society conditions woman. When a woman praises a man involved in cooking, the praise implies that cooking is an inherently female act. In *Dear Ijeawele, A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, Adichie says, "The knowledge of cooking does not come pre-installed in a vagina. Cooking is learned. Cooking – domestic work in general – is a life skill that both men and women should ideally have" (9). In the famous poem "Introduction", Kamala Das portrays a woman's stereotypical roles. She can be a cook, a quarreler or an embroiderer, but she should not behave like a man, act like a man or do specific jobs designed only for man.

....I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored

My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl,
 Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
 Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. (Das)

In her book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan highlights the frustration and distress of American housewives and names it as a problem with no name. The problem which Ila faces is also a problem with no name. It cannot be defined adequately. Meanwhile, the problem of Ila aggravates as she cannot support her parents, who are in need of money. Her father has lung cancer and requires a massive amount of money for medicine. She realises that her mother, who has a great obsession with TV programmes, has sold off the television. Though Ila suggests arranging money from Rajeev, her mother refuses. She considers it will affect the self-esteem of the family if she borrows money from her son in law. She also comments that she might not have faced that financial crisis if her son was alive. The helplessness of Ila is reflected in the situation. Even after the death of her father, Rajeev does not accompany Ila to her home. In order to avoid the embarrassing situation, she informs her mother that Rajeev will join them soon.

In the patriarchal society, a woman's duty is designed by man. She is forced to act according to the instructions designed by the powerful male dominant society. Rajeev does not accept the good deeds of Ila as he merely thinks that it is the duty of a wife. Silence is really painful in the movie. When the three membered family has food together in the evenings, no conversation occurs. Rajeev's eyes are strongly fixed on the T.V. only. Ila never hears a word of admiration from her husband. Rajeev fails to notice the difference between the restaurant food which he eats for lunch and the tasty food he eats during dinner.

On the day of her husband's death, Ila's mother says that she feels hungry. Such a comment is unacceptable from a widow. A woman cannot make comments on her hunger and frustrations related to her starvation and desire for food. The society will be highly antagonistic as in the case of Rima Kallinghal who said that her feminism started with a fish fry. She says that her mother always serves food to the members of the family. Once there were only three pieces of fish and

her mother served it to the oldest member and two men. The twelve year old Rima was sad and questions why she is denied fish. But the whole episode was restructured as Rima did not get fish. Society forgets that a girl or a woman will have a craving for fish.

The film *The Lunchbox* depicts the dominant place of food in bonding the hearts of the people. It is Ila's food which transforms Saajan. Earlier, he was an arrogant and reserved person. Even Shaikh, the chief accountant to take up charge when Saajan Fernandez retires, is moved by the food prepared by Ila. Saajan tries his level best to avoid Shaikh, but he lacks self-respect and frequently asks Saajan to give him the training to take up the post. The real rapport between them happens when he tastes the food prepared by Ila. Shaikh soon understands the intimacy between Ila and Saajan. He comments with great surprise that people prefer emails in the modern technologically advanced society and not letters. He makes fun of Saajan and sings, "dabbe me roti, roti me chitti". The food prepared by Ila and her lunch notes play a vital role in changing the character of Saajan. During the time of Shaikh's marriage, Saajan is the only guest present from the bridegroom's side. When their boss scolds for the accounting mistakes, Saajan, saves him from the situation by admitting that it is his own mistake. The boss also could not tolerate the foul smell of vegetables which was there on the files of Shaikh. It is because of the habit of Shaikh cutting vegetables from the train using the file as a cutting board. When Saajan is invited to Shaikh's home for dinner, he informs Shaikh's wife that he has a girl friend named Ila. Unpredictably, Saajan who was very tough with children playing near his home, transforms into a gentle lover of children.

The life of dabbawalas are not highlighted in the movie, but it depicts how organised and systematic their system is. The spectator, who watches the film, really gets interested in the dabbawalah system and investigates if such a delivery system exists in Mumbai. Ritesh Batra successfully blends reality with fiction. Raghunath Medge, the President of Mumbai Dabbawala Association, comments that they deliver 180 000 lunches every day and they charge 7 dollars a month for the service. He also comments that only one box goes missing every two months, that is one in six million. Some of the dabbawallas

have been invited to business conferences and to give lectures at business schools. This indicates the efficiency of the system. As people prefer traditional home made food, the dabbawala system could withstand the competition from fast food outlets and giant food corporations. This meal on the wheel is cheaper in comparison to the food provided in stalls and restaurants.

The dabbawalas are just carriers of food. But the society does not recognise the value of a women's talents which is hidden in the box. The lunch box itself is symbolic. The food inside the box remains safe in spite of the adverse routes through which it travels. In the same way, a woman's abilities are hidden treasures which cannot be crushed even by adverse situations. The film makes some reference to the efficient system of dabbawalas. Dabbawallahs are independent, small-scale businessmen. The visit of Prince Charles to see the working of Mumbai dabbawalas adds feathers to their cap. Mumbai Dabbawallas have got various certifications like ISO, 6 Sigma without even giving a formal application. The management practices of Mumbai Dabbawalla are now being taught at various institutions, B-Schools, Seminars etc. But it is astonishing to note that the woman who works at home and prepares food does not receive half the recognition the society gives to dabbawalas.

There are many unheard and unseen women in *The Lunchbox*. They are Ila, Ila's mother and Ms Deshpande. It is because they are the marginalised gender. The domestic duties crippled the freedom of women. Indian women compromise a lot of things in the name of culture and tradition. The European and African women will not be so submissive to surrender their self-esteem. It is the financial dependence which forces women to accept all injustice they face. Ila could have sold her skill of cooking and earned a lot of money. Her helplessness in depending on her husband to help her parents financially is a universal problem which women face. Women suppress their desires in the name of family, culture and tradition. Their hardwork, compromise, sacrifice and loyalty are not counted at all. Just as Adichie states in "We Should all be Feminists", "Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture"(46). Society

has an important role in making the invisible, visible.

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