



POSTCOLONIAL ASPIRATIONAL MODERNITY, COLONIAL MIMICRY AND URBAN INEQUALITY IN ASGHAR WAJAHAT'S "CAKE"

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Abstract

This paper examines Asghar Wajahat's short story "Cake" to explore the intersection of postcolonial modernity and urban inequality in a metropolis like Delhi. Through the protagonist Mr David, an underpaid proofreader, Wajahat employs the motif of a cake to symbolize the fragile aspirations of the urban postcolonial lower-middle class. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry, the study explores how Mr David's fascination with British culinary traditions reflects a longing for status and dignity. Furthermore, drawing on the insights of Arjun Appadurai, Henri Lefebvre, and Zygmunt Bauman, the analysis highlights the gap between consumer desire and material reality. Ultimately, the unattainable cake signifies the deferred dreams and persistent socioeconomic exclusions characteristic of the postcolonial urban landscape.

Key words: *Postcolonial modernity, Colonial mimicry, Aspirational desire, Urban inequality, Consumer modernity.*

Asghar Wajahat is a renowned fiction writer, playwright, and filmmaker known for his satires and social commentary. A prolific author with five short story collections, six collections of plays and street plays, and four novels, Wajahat's writings are sharp and concise, exploring themes such as postcolonial modernity, communalism, corruption, and the struggles of the common man. His key works include the famous play *Jis Lahore Nai Dekhya*, *O Janyai Nai*, which examines the human impact of the partition of India; *Mahabali*, centred on Mughal emperor Akbar and his relationship with art; and the novel *Saat Asman*.

Wajahat's short story "Cake", originally written in Hindi and translated by Jai Ratan, presents the fragile postcolonial aspirations of the urban lower-middle class through a narrative that is both accessible and nuanced. Set in metropolitan Delhi, the story centres on Mr David, an underpaid proofreader and tenant in Mrs D'Souza's home. The narrative unfolds primarily through dialogues between the narrator and Mr David, whose fixation on cake emerges as the central motif. While initially humorous, this obsession gradually exposes deeper psychological and social tensions characteristic of modern urban environments.



Wajahat explores the contradictions of postcolonial modernity, where cities promise wealth and mobility, yet social injustice excludes many from these benefits. Mr David's desire for the cake reflects a deeper longing for belonging, dignity, and recognition as a member of the middle class. The cake serves as a literary device to examine the emotional and economic realities of urban life in postcolonial India. This paper examines how the cake symbolizes aspirational modernity, highlighting the gap between desire and attainable progress. The discussion draws on the insights of postcolonial thinkers such as Homi Bhabha, Arjun Appadurai, Henri Lefebvre, and Zygmunt Bauman to deepen the analysis of aspiration and its effects in postcolonial urban settings.

Mr. David expresses a strong admiration for English culture and British culinary traditions, particularly regarding food and dining etiquette. His conversations frequently emphasize the perceived refinement and sophistication of English cuisine and manners. At one point, he articulates these views with notable conviction.

"The arts of cooking and eating are known only to the British and the Muslims. The British have departed, and as for the Muslims, they have grown dull by feeding on buffalo meat." ()

This statement indicates that the colonial legacy persists across generations, with British cultural customs continuing to signify elitism, status, and refinement long after independence. Within this framework, Mr. David's fascination with English cuisine exemplifies Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry, wherein the colonized seek to emulate the standards established by the colonizer.

Bhabha defines mimicry as making someone similar to another, but with subtle differences, a concept Mr. David embodies. (Bhabha 1984). While he enjoys demonstrating how to bake cakes and prepare English dishes, he cannot create a home of his own. Instead, he performs his understanding of English cooking symbolically, rather than integrating it into his identity. The narrator often notes Mr. David's enjoyment in the cake-making process:

How much flour is needed for a cake. How many eggs. How to mix the jelly and fruit. How long to whip the milk. He has hundreds of formulae for creaming and glacing which no one in India knows now. Sometimes he says, these dhoti flapping people, how can they know anything of the arts of cooking and eating?...The arts of cooking and eating are known only to the British and the Muslims. (440)

These descriptions reveal Mr David's aspiration to align himself with the cultural sophistication of the Western elite. However, the disparity between his aspirations and his material circumstances underscores the precariousness of such mimicry. While Mr David can reproduce the discourse of elite culture, he remains excluded from the economic realities that sustain it. Through this ironic portrayal, Wajahat



demonstrates the enduring influence of colonial cultural hierarchies on individual aspirations. These descriptions reveal Mr David's aspiration to align with Western cultural sophistication. However, the gap between his ambitions and his circumstances highlights the fragility of such mimicry. Although he can adopt the language of elite culture, he remains excluded from its economic foundations. Wajahat uses this irony to show how colonial cultural hierarchies continue to shape individual aspirations in postcolonial societies. The cake becomes a cultural object MrDavid can admire and discuss, but never truly attain. The cake exists more as an imagined or conversational construct than as a tangible object. The narrative thus positions the cake as a product of aspiration rather than material reality.

Mr David's comparisons between Indian and British cuisine highlight the cake as a symbol of middle-class culture, leisure, and social prestige. Yet, the cake remains unattainable, representing imagined possibilities and the hope for recognition and dignity. Appadurai suggests that some commodities allow individuals to envision alternative futures (Appadurai 1996); Mr David's fixation on cake reflects how consumer goods can serve as tools for social mobility in postcolonial cities. At the same time, Wajahat's narrative emphasises the economic inequalities that prevent these aspirations from being realised.

An author's depiction of urban space greatly influences the thematic development of his text. References to wealthy neighbourhoods like Vasant Vihar and Defence Colony in the story emphasise the stark contrast between wealth and poverty within the city. Henri Lefebvre (1974) contends that urban space is both physical and social, shaped by social processes. Delhi's geography exemplifies this, dividing the city into privileged and marginalized areas. Mr. David often compares his situation to those living in exclusive neighbourhoods or investing in real estate. When the narrator suggests starting a poultry farm to escape city life, Mr. David responds with bitterness.

No, no. I won't build a house in Vasant Vihar... Nobody can live like a human being here unless he is a crook. To live like a human being, you have to do black-marketing and exploit others.(444)

David's statement expresses deep disillusionment with the city's social fabric. He sees economic success as inherently linked to corruption, viewing the urban environment as a site of conflict between ambitions for upward mobility and economic disparities. The narrator's depiction of Delhi emphasizes this sense of alienation, portraying the city as both captivating and threatening. Watching the city lights from Mrs D'Souza's rooftop, he feels a mix of excitement and despair. Although the city holds great potential, it remains largely out of reach for those without steady jobs. These contrasting spatial conditions highlight the contradictions



of postcolonial development, as Wajahat shows. The growth of urban wealth has created exclusive enclaves, widening the divide between the rich and the majority who are excluded from the benefits of postcolonial progress.

Wajahat's story also connects economic uncertainty to constructions of masculinity. Mr David is often compared to more successful men and recounts stories of acquaintances who have prospered through land or business. These comparisons intensify his sense of inadequacy and failure. In many cultures, masculinity is connected to economic success and providing for one's family. Mr David's unstable employment as a proofreader likely decreases his self-esteem. His inability to host a birthday celebration with cake symbolizes his desire for middle-class respectability and his struggle to fulfil the role of a provider. Ultimately, his inability to afford a cake highlights the fragility of his masculine identity in a competitive urban economy.

Zygmunt Bauman's theory of consumer modernity provides a framework for understanding the story's emotional dynamics. Bauman argues that consumer societies continuously generate new desires while hindering their fulfilment (2000, 2007). Mr David's obsession with cake illustrates this, as his discussions briefly satisfy his longing but also intensify his sense of lack. The narrator emphasises this tension when describing hunger as an unfulfilled desire in the city, symbolising a continual cycle of longing. It also shows how urban life sparks new aspirations that largely remain out of reach for people like David. David's own disillusionment with city living leads him to advise the narrator to leave the city entirely.

"Run away from this city. Run away as fast as you can. Like you, I too came here straight from college, to win the great capital city. But you can see what has become of me, there is nothing in this city, nothing." (447)

This episode demonstrates the psychological effects of modern ambition. Urban environments offer the illusion of opportunity but often lead to relentless work with little reward, fostering resignation. Despite this disillusionment, Mr David continues to hope for future success, as shown by his intention to bake another cake: "After you come over, a cake will be baked. With a lot of eggs." (452)

The cake symbolizes both hope and irony. Its promise demonstrates that, even in adversity, people are motivated by dreams and aspirations. Anticipation of the cake encourages imaginative enjoyment, but its ongoing absence underscores that these aspirations may never be realised. The cake thus signifies the deferred dreams of those confronting urban poverty and inequality.

Through the story of an ordinary man whose longing for a cake seems insignificant, Asghar Wajahat critiques postcolonial urban modernity by using the cake as a powerful symbol. This symbol reveals how economic and historical forces shape



daily desires and consumption. Mr. David's fascination with British culinary traditions highlights the lasting influence of colonialism, while the recurring motif of cake illustrates consumer desire. Delhi's geography further exposes the stark spatial inequalities caused by rapid urbanization. Wajahat suggests that postcolonial modernity is defined more by ongoing yearning than by real progress. The elusive cake embodies the fragile hopes of those seeking dignity and belonging amidst persistent inequality.

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