

Analysis of "broccoli and other tales of food and love" by lara vapnyar



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There are between 700, 000 and 1, 000, 000 former Soviet immigrants who largely came in years 1971-2009 to the United States. Approximately half of this population settled in the New York City but as well in Boston, San Francisco or Chicago. Of all immigrants, about half a million are of Jewish origins. Russian- speaking Jews are said to be less committed to the synagogue than to the Jewish community. What is more, they are having a stronger connection with Israel than most American Jews due to having families who immigrated to Israel first and then to the United States. According to the Israeli newspaper, Haaretz, Russian-Jewish Americans do not fell assimilation with the rest of Jew in the United States and created their own community. Their dissimilarity characterizes with, for example mixing English and Russian words, instead of using Yiddish or Hebrew what is familiar for the American Jews. Russian immigrants are still cultivating their language among their families, their children are taught Russian even though they haven't visited their motherland. What is more, they prefer to rub shoulders with Russian immigrants' societies as they find Americans false due to being friendly even when they dislike you. Unfortunately, 75% of Russian Jews do not feel the connection between them and the American Jewish community: " most of the Russian Jews, young or old it doesn't matter, don't feel they belong to the mainstream American Jewish community." Russians show their religiousness through their family heritage and culture not like American Jews through their attachment to the synagogues and Jewish organization. Even though Russian immigrants try to integrate with Americans and often become friends with them, but they feel more comfortable in their own environment. However, they find their

relationship with Americans not that bad and find one reason for it – misunderstanding of those two communities.

Lara Vapnyar, Russian writer, who in her early twenties immigrated to the United States, became successful in her profession, in spite of encountering many struggles in the immigrant life at the beginning. As she recalls, she “hated everything.” She found out a therapy in writing. Vapnyar is known for writing about Jews in her novels short stories. As soon as she found out that her works are published in the motherland- Russia, she felt joy, and “was happy, but in a very different way. It was not the same feeling I had when I was told that my books are being translated into any other languages. It was like coming back to my childhood, a very warm and touching feeling.” She feels a strong connection with Russia even though she left it and is sharing her culture and language with her kids.

Immigration, nostalgia for Russia, love, and food are the subjects that inspire Lara Vapnyar in her fiction literary works. One of her famous piece of work is a collection of six stories Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love published in 2008. She described the events from the perspective of East European immigrants who settled in the United States. She used food as a tool to diversify plot, describe her characters. At the end of this book, Vapnyar included recipes of the food she describes in her stories.

“Borscht” is a story in which Vapnyar analyzes the connection between the desire for sexual experience and the act and pleasure of food preparation. The main protagonist of the story is Sergey, a Russian immigrant who installs carpets in New York. He is married to Lenka who stayed in Russia during his

economic immigration. They haven't seen each other for a year and Sergey misses her. He looks at her picture every day. During their previous phone call, their relationship seems to go downhill: " she sighed and yawned. The real Lenka, his Lenka, wouldn't have yawned into the phone. Lenka would have cried. would have begged him to return home." He recalls the time when Lenka warmly welcomed his at home, rushed to him after his work. Feeling so lonely, Sergey arranges a meeting with a prostitute, Alla. As soon as he reaches Alla's apartments, he feels the smell of food on a staircase. " Sergey was able to make out onions frying in fat, boiling cabbage, garlic, a rich meat dish" but at the same time he " realized he hadn't eaten anything since morning's dry cereal." Seeing Alla for the first time he is disappointed with beauty and hesitantly enters the apartment in which is hot and the smell of cooking spreads. During Alla's and Sergey's sexual encounter he realizes that this is not what he wants and was not aroused. Sergey was ready to leave the apartment but Alla stopped him: " I know what I'll give you. Some borscht! You can't say no to a bowl of borscht, right?" They went to the kitchen and Alla stated preparing the soup. " She moved the lid a little bit so that only the slightest puffs of steam escaped, then broke off a head of garlic sitting on the windowsill and grabbed a bunch of parsley that hung upside down from a cabinet handle." At this time Sergey finds out that Alla works as a babysitter in Manhattan. Alla continued her cooking and added vegetables to the pot and spices. Later on, she added big, ripe, red potatoes. " I cook them whole in my borscht, then take them out and crush them - my mother and my aunts all used to do it like that." She prodded the potatoes with a large fork, breaking the soft flesh and leaving four furrows in the

surface of each. “ Well, not as fluffy as in Russia, but still nice and soft. You have to crush them, not mash them. I don’t know why, but they say it’s important.”

As Alla needs help, she asks Sergey to slice bread for the meal. He agreed and does it eagerly and sneaks one piece: “ the bread had such a fresh heady smell that Sergey couldn’t resist breaking off the crust of the first slice and stuffing it into his mouth.” Waiting for the borscht to be ready, they start a conversation about their spouses and Alla’s children. She shows him the pictures of her family. After their conversation, the time has come for the borscht:

The hot borscht was in their plates. Steaming, bursting with colors. All shades of red in perfect harmony, with the faded purple of beets, the white of sour cream, the orange pools of fat floating on the surface, the dark green of the parsley.”

In the meantime, Alla offers to drink vodka with Sasha who does not refuse. They toast to come back home. Sergey savors a sip of a shot and continues the soup consumption: “ He felt a chill on his tongue followed immediately by a great warmth spreading down his throat and chest. He took a big heavy spoonful of borscht and brought it to his mouth, holding a piece of bread beneath the spoon.”

In this story, Lara Vapnyar portrays how the process of making borscht makes more pleasure to the protagonist and makes him more comfortable than sexual act with Alla, a part-time prostitute. The soup became the primary appeal of character’s interest. He found a cure in his loneliness. This <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-broccoli-and-other-tales-of-food-and-love-by-lara-vapnyar/>

simple meal made Sergey forget about Alla's beauty which did not meet his expectations when he saw her first. Through this dish, Alla and Sergey found a common subject and a way to forget for a while about their life "realities." "Borscht" can be also used as a tool for a reader to experience a real experience of Russian kitchen. In this story food is also the main indicator of symbolic ethnicity. Gans elaborates about this term that it is "a nostalgic allegiance ... a love for and pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior."