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A Slice of Belonging: Wedding Cakes, Marriage, and Cultural Identity in Indian, British, and American Literature

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Abstract

A wedding cake is often seen as a simple celebration dessert, but it carries many deeper meanings. It represents love, family expectations, social status, religious belief, memory, and the public announcement of marriage. This paper examines the wedding cake in Indian, British, and American literary and cultural contexts. It argues that the cake is not only food; it is a symbol through which societies express their ideas about marriage, gender, class, tradition, and modern life. In Britain, the wedding cake is closely connected with fruitcake, royal ceremonies, and the idea of family continuity. In the United States, it is often imagined as a white, layered cake that represents romance, purity, and the ideal married life. In India, the wedding cake has a different meaning because it exists alongside traditional sweets, regional foods, religious customs, and changing ideas of modernity. Indian weddings may include cakes, but they also include laddus, barfi, jalebi, kheer, and other ceremonial foods. Therefore, the cake does not replace Indian traditions; it becomes part of a larger cultural mixture. The paper uses a cultural and literary approach. It studies how wedding cakes appear in literature, popular culture, films, advertisements, and social media. It also examines the cake as an object of class, gender, family pressure, and personal choice. The study finds that the wedding cake is a powerful cultural symbol because it makes marriage visible. When a couple cuts the cake, they are not only sharing food; they are performing their new identity as a married couple in front of family and society.

Keywords: wedding cake, marriage, Indian literature, British literature, American literature, food studies, cultural identity, ritual, gender, class

I. Introduction

Background of the Study

Food is an important part of human life. People do not eat only to satisfy hunger; they also eat to celebrate, remember, mourn, worship, and connect with others. Food becomes especially meaningful during weddings because marriage is one of the most important social events in many cultures. A wedding meal brings families together, shows hospitality, and expresses the values of a community.

The wedding cake is one of the most recognizable foods associated with marriage in many parts of the world. It is usually decorated, displayed, photographed, and cut in front of guests. In Western weddings, the cake often becomes the centre of attention during the reception. In Indian weddings, the cake may appear alongside traditional sweets and regional dishes. Its presence can indicate modern taste, urban lifestyle, Christian tradition, luxury, or global

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influence. Although the wedding cake looks sweet and joyful, it also reflects serious social issues. It can show wealth, family status, gender expectations, and cultural pressure. A large and expensive cake may suggest that a family wants to display success. A simple homemade cake may represent intimacy, modesty, or resistance to social expectations. Therefore, the wedding cake can be studied as more than a dessert. It can be read as a cultural object that reveals how people understand marriage.

Statement of the Problem

Many studies discuss the history and symbolism of wedding cakes, especially in British and American contexts. However, there is less research that compares the wedding cake across Indian, British, and American literature and culture. Most existing work focuses on Western traditions, while Indian wedding cakes are often discussed only as examples of modern or Western influence.

This study addresses that gap. It examines how the wedding cake is represented in Indian, British, and American cultural settings. It asks whether the cake has the same meaning in all three contexts or whether its meaning changes according to history, religion, class, and social expectations.

Research Questions

1. What cultural meanings are attached to wedding cakes in Indian, British, and American societies?
2. How do wedding cakes represent love, family, class, gender, and tradition in literature?
3. How does the Indian wedding cake differ from British and American wedding cakes?
4. How do colonial history, globalization, and social media influence the meaning of the wedding cake?
5. Why is the wedding cake an important symbol in literary and cultural studies?

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the historical and cultural background of wedding cakes.
- To compare wedding-cake traditions in India, Britain, and the United States.
- To analyze the wedding cake as a symbol of marriage, family, class, and gender.
- To study the role of wedding cakes in literature and popular culture.
- To explore how Indian wedding cakes reflect cultural hybridity and modernity.

Significance of the Study

This study is important because it connects food, literature, and culture. It shows that a wedding cake is not merely a sweet item on a table. It is a meaningful object that can reveal social values and human relationships. By comparing India, Britain, and the United States, the paper shows that the meaning of a wedding cake is not fixed. It changes according to culture, history, and personal experience.

The study is also relevant to food studies, cultural studies, gender studies, and literary criticism. It can help readers understand how everyday objects, such as cakes, carry social meanings. It

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can also encourage future researchers to study other wedding foods, such as Indian sweets, British fruitcakes, and American celebration desserts.

Scope and Limitations

The study focuses mainly on literary and cultural representations of wedding cakes. It does not claim to cover every Indian, British, or American wedding tradition. India is diverse, and wedding practices differ across regions, religions, castes, classes, and communities. Similarly, British and American wedding cultures are not uniform.

The paper therefore uses selected examples rather than trying to describe every possible tradition. It focuses on the wedding cake as a cultural symbol and examines its meaning in literature, history, film, and contemporary wedding culture.

II. Literature Review

Wedding Cakes in Cultural Studies

Scholars have long recognized that food carries symbolic meaning. In weddings, food becomes even more important because it is connected with celebration, family unity, and social approval. The wedding cake is a special type of ceremonial food because it is displayed before it is eaten. Its appearance matters as much as its taste.

Simon Charsley's study, "The Wedding Cake: History and Meanings," is one of the most important works on this subject. Charsley explains that the wedding cake has developed through history and carries meanings related to fertility, purity, social status, and marriage rituals (Charsley, 1988). His work shows that the cake is not simply a modern invention; it has deep roots in older customs involving grain, bread, and celebration.

Other researchers have also studied the wedding cake as a ritual object. The act of cutting and sharing the cake creates a connection between the couple, their families, and their guests. The cake becomes a way of making marriage public. When guests eat the cake, they participate in the celebration and acknowledge the couple's new status.

British Wedding Cake Studies

British scholarship often connects the wedding cake with fruitcake, royal weddings, and social hierarchy. Traditional British wedding cakes were often rich fruitcakes covered with royal icing. These cakes could be made in advance and preserved for a long time. This made them suitable for weddings, especially in earlier periods when refrigeration was not available.

The British royal family has played an important role in making the wedding cake a public symbol. Royal wedding cakes are often large, expensive, and highly decorated. They are reported in newspapers and admired by the public. Through royal weddings, the tiered wedding cake became associated with national identity, wealth, and tradition (Royal Collection Trust, n.d.).

Carol Wilson's work, "Wedding Cake: A Slice of History," also explains the historical development of the wedding cake. Wilson shows that wedding cakes evolved from older

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customs involving pies, buns, and ceremonial breads. Over time, cakes became more elaborate and closely connected with marriage celebrations (Wilson, 2005).

American Wedding Cake Studies

In the United States, the wedding cake is often associated with white layers, smooth icing, and romantic ideals. The white cake became popular during the twentieth century, especially through commercial baking, bridal magazines, and wedding photography. The white color is often linked with purity, innocence, and the ideal bride.

However, the white wedding cake is not an ancient or universal tradition. It is a modern cultural image that developed through advertising and the growth of the wedding industry. The American wedding cake reflects the idea that marriage is not only a personal relationship but also a public performance.

American wedding culture also includes many different traditions. Immigrant communities, Black American families, Southern communities, religious groups, and LGBTQ+ couples have shaped wedding food practices in different ways. Therefore, the American wedding cake cannot be understood as one single tradition. It exists alongside many other foods and cultural practices.

Indian Wedding Cake Studies

Research on Indian wedding cakes is limited compared with research on British and American cakes. This is because the cake is not a traditional food in most Indian wedding rituals. Indian weddings have their own rich food traditions, including sweets such as laddu, barfi, peda, jalebi, and kheer. These sweets are often connected with religious rituals, regional identity, and family customs.

The wedding cake entered many Indian wedding celebrations through colonial contact, Christian communities, hotels, bakeries, and global media. In urban India, cakes are now common at engagements, receptions, birthdays, and weddings. They are often decorated with flowers, Indian patterns, or modern designs.

The Indian wedding cake is therefore a hybrid object. It may use Western baking methods, but it can include Indian flavours such as cardamom, saffron, rose, pistachio, coconut, and mango. It may also be decorated with Indian motifs. In this way, the cake becomes neither completely Indian nor completely Western. It becomes a symbol of cultural exchange.

III. Theoretical Framework

Food as a Cultural Symbol

Food is more than nutrition. It carries memories, emotions, and social meanings. People use food to express love, respect, identity, and belonging. In literature, food often reveals a character's desires, fears, family relationships, or cultural background.

The wedding cake is especially symbolic because it appears during marriage. Marriage changes a person's social identity. It may change family responsibilities, living arrangements, legal

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status, and public expectations. The cake becomes part of this change because it is shared during the celebration.

When a couple cuts the cake together, they show that they are beginning a shared life. This act may represent cooperation and partnership. However, it may also be a performance for guests and cameras. The cake therefore exists between private emotion and public display.

Ritual Theory

Rituals help societies mark important changes in life. Birth, puberty, marriage, and death are often surrounded by rituals because they change a person's role in society. Marriage is one of the strongest examples of this change.

The wedding cake participates in the marriage ritual. It is displayed, admired, cut, and eaten. These actions make the marriage visible to the community. The cake is not only food; it is a symbol of the couple's new relationship.

The preservation of a portion of the cake also connects the wedding to the future. In some British traditions, the top tier is saved for a later celebration, such as the christening of a child. This custom links marriage to family continuity and expected parenthood. However, it also shows how social expectations can be placed on couples.

Material Culture

Material culture studies examine how objects carry social meaning. A wedding cake begins as ingredients such as flour, sugar, eggs, butter, fruit, and icing. It then becomes a decorated object. Finally, it is eaten and disappears.

This process gives the cake a special role. It is temporary, but it leaves behind memories, photographs, and stories. A wedding cake may be remembered for years because it was part of an important family event. Its physical disappearance makes it different from other wedding objects, such as rings or photographs.

Class and Consumption

Wedding cakes can also show class differences. A large, expensive cake requires money, skilled labour, and access to commercial bakeries. In Britain and America, elaborate cakes have often been associated with wealth and social status. In India, luxury hotels and wedding planners also use cakes as part of a larger display of status.

However, the cake is not only about wealth. It can also represent aspiration. A family may choose a beautiful cake because they want their wedding to look modern, respectable, or memorable. The cake becomes part of the family's public image.

IV. The British Wedding Cake

Historical Background

The British wedding cake has a long history. In earlier periods, English weddings included foods such as bride pies and ceremonial breads. These foods were connected with fertility,

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prosperity, and good luck. Over time, sweet fruitcakes became more closely associated with weddings.

The traditional British wedding cake is often a dense fruitcake. It contains dried fruit, spices, nuts, alcohol, and icing. These ingredients made the cake rich and long-lasting. The cake could be prepared before the wedding and stored after the celebration.

The fruitcake reflects Britain's history of trade and empire. Ingredients such as sugar, spices, dried fruit, and citrus peel came through global trade networks. Therefore, the British wedding cake is connected not only with domestic family life but also with colonial history and imperial commerce.

Royal Weddings and National Identity

Royal weddings helped make the wedding cake a major public symbol. British royal wedding cakes are often enormous, multi-tiered, and decorated with white icing, sugar flowers, and symbolic designs. They are displayed as national events, not only as family celebrations.

The Royal Collection Trust explains that wedding cakes have evolved into the multi-tiered structures associated with British royal weddings today (Royal Collection Trust, n.d.). These cakes show wealth, continuity, and the importance of monarchy. They also influence public ideas about what a "proper" wedding cake should look like.

The tiered form is important because it creates a sense of grandeur. A tall cake dominates the room and draws attention. It becomes a visual monument to the marriage. Its height may suggest social success, abundance, and family pride.

Fruitcake and Preservation

The British fruitcake is durable. It can be made months before the wedding and kept for a long time after the celebration. This practical quality became part of the tradition. Many families preserved the top tier of the cake for a future event, often the christening of a child.

This custom connects the wedding cake to the life cycle. The cake does not end at the wedding. It continues into the couple's future family life. In this sense, the cake represents hope, continuity, and expected reproduction.

However, this tradition can also be questioned. The expectation that a couple will have children may create pressure, especially for couples who do not want children or cannot have them. The preserved cake may therefore reflect older social assumptions about marriage and family.

The Cake in British Literature

British literature often uses food to reveal class, morality, and social performance. In Victorian and Edwardian novels, wedding celebrations can show a family's desire to appear respectable. A large wedding breakfast or reception may display wealth, while a modest celebration may suggest emotional sincerity.

The wedding cake can reveal whether a marriage is based on love or social convenience. In a novel, a beautiful cake may hide family conflict, financial pressure, or an unhappy marriage. The perfection of the cake can contrast with the imperfection of human relationships.

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Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* is one of the most famous literary examples involving a wedding cake. Miss Havisham's decaying wedding cake becomes a powerful symbol of stopped time, betrayal, and failed marriage. The cake remains on the table long after the wedding has been abandoned. It becomes a physical reminder of a marriage that never happened.

This example shows how literature can use the wedding cake in a negative way. Instead of representing happiness, the cake represents disappointment, decay, and emotional trauma. It shows that wedding symbols do not always mean joy.

V. The American Wedding Cake

The White Layered Cake

In American culture, the wedding cake is often imagined as a white, layered cake with smooth icing. This image is closely connected with twentieth-century wedding culture. It became popular through bakeries, bridal magazines, wedding planners, and Hollywood films.

The white cake is often associated with purity, innocence, and romantic love. The bride wears white, the cake is white, and the wedding is presented as a perfect moment of happiness. However, this image is not natural or universal. It is a cultural construction shaped by advertising and media.

The white layered cake became a modern invention, even though cake rituals have older roots (NPR, 2017). This shows that wedding traditions change over time. What appears traditional today may have been created or popularized in the recent past.

Romance and Consumer Culture

The American wedding cake is strongly connected with consumer culture. Couples often choose cakes based on design, flavour, price, and appearance. Bakeries and wedding planners sell cakes as part of a complete wedding experience.

The cake becomes a product as well as a ritual object. Its design may include sugar flowers, metallic colours, geometric shapes, or personal messages. These features make the cake visually attractive and suitable for photographs.

Social media has increased this focus on appearance. Couples may choose a cake because it looks good on Instagram or Pinterest. The cake becomes part of a visual story about love, success, and lifestyle. In this way, the wedding cake reflects modern consumer culture.

Gender and Domestic Expectations

The wedding cake has often been connected with ideas of femininity and domestic responsibility. In traditional American culture, women were expected to bake, host guests, and manage the home. A wedding cake could represent a bride's skill and readiness for married life.

However, modern weddings challenge these expectations. Many couples now share wedding planning equally. Some choose nontraditional cakes, small desserts, or completely different celebration foods. A bride who rejects the traditional cake may be rejecting the expectation that she must become a perfect wife and hostess.

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Literature and film can use the wedding cake to explore these tensions. A character may feel trapped by family expectations, or she may use the cake to express independence. The cake becomes a small but powerful symbol of personal freedom.

Cultural Diversity in America

The American wedding cake is not the same for every community. Different cultural groups bring their own foods, flavours, and rituals to weddings. A wedding reception may include a traditional white cake as well as soul food, Mexican sweet breads, South Asian sweets, or Caribbean desserts.

This diversity shows that American culture is not one single tradition. It is made from many histories and communities. The wedding cake may represent assimilation when it replaces traditional foods. It may also represent coexistence when it appears beside them.

For example, an Indian American wedding may include both a cake and Indian sweets. A Mexican American wedding may include a cake alongside pan dulce or other traditional desserts. These combinations show how families create new traditions while respecting older ones.

VI. The Indian Wedding Cake

Cake and Indian Wedding Culture

Indian weddings are known for their rich food traditions. Food is central to hospitality, religious ritual, family honour, and celebration. Different regions have different wedding dishes, sweets, and customs. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of one single "Indian wedding food tradition."

Traditional Indian wedding sweets include laddu, barfi, peda, jalebi, halwa, and kheer. These foods are often connected with religious rituals, blessings, and community identity. They may be distributed to guests as prasad, given as gifts, or served during ceremonies.

The wedding cake is a newer addition to many Indian celebrations. It is especially common in Christian weddings, Anglo-Indian communities, urban weddings, and luxury hotel receptions. However, cakes are now also found in Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and other wedding celebrations, especially in cities.

Colonial History and Modern Influence

The Indian wedding cake is connected with colonial history. British rule brought European food practices, Christian institutions, hotels, clubs, and bakeries to Indian cities. Over time, cakes became associated with education, urban life, and cosmopolitan taste.

However, the Indian wedding cake should not be seen only as a foreign import. Indian bakers and families have adapted it. They use local flavours, designs, and ingredients. A cake may include cardamom, saffron, rose, pistachio, coconut, mango, or jaggery. It may be decorated with Indian flowers, patterns, or cultural symbols.

This adaptation shows that culture is not fixed. People do not simply accept or reject foreign influences. They mix them with their own traditions. The Indian wedding cake becomes a creative cultural product.

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Cake as a Symbol of Modernity

In contemporary India, the wedding cake often represents modernity. It may suggest that a family is urban, educated, wealthy, or globally connected. In metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Chennai, cakes are common at engagement parties, receptions, and wedding celebrations.

The cake may be placed in a separate area with special lighting. Guests may take photographs before it is cut. The cake becomes part of the wedding's visual display. It is no longer only food; it is also an image.

This reflects a wider change in Indian weddings. Weddings have become major social events where families display status through venues, clothing, jewellery, catering, photography, and entertainment. The cake participates in this culture of display.

Generational Differences

The wedding cake can create disagreement between generations. Older family members may see it as unnecessary or foreign. Younger family members may see it as exciting, fashionable, and modern. These differences show how families negotiate change.

At the same time, many Indian families combine both traditions. They may serve traditional sweets during religious ceremonies and cut a cake during the reception. This allows them to respect older customs while also participating in modern celebration culture.

The cake therefore becomes a symbol of balance. It shows that Indian wedding culture is not opposed to change. Instead, it adapts and includes new elements.

Indian Literature and Wedding Food

Indian literature often uses food to explore family, caste, religion, gender, and memory. Wedding scenes are especially important because marriage affects the entire family. A wedding meal is not only about eating; it is about community, status, and belonging.

In Indian fiction, wedding food can reveal the pressure placed on women. A bride may be expected to look beautiful, serve guests, obey family expectations, and maintain family honour. Food becomes part of these expectations. A lavish cake may celebrate the wedding, but it may also show the commercialization of marriage.

Diasporic Indian writing often explores cultural hybridity. In such texts, a wedding cake may appear alongside Indian sweets. This combination represents the experience of living between cultures. The family may maintain Indian traditions while also participating in global culture.

VII. Comparative Analysis

Differences Among the Three Cultures

Aspect	British tradition	American tradition	Indian context
Common cake type	Fruitcake with royal icing	White layered cake with buttercream or fondant	Hybrid cake alongside regional sweets

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Main symbolism	Continuity, tradition, royal identity	Romance, purity, consumer culture	Modernity, hybridity, luxury, cultural exchange
Ritual focus	Cutting and preserving a tier	Joint cutting and public display	Display, cutting, and coexistence with mithai
Class meaning	Wealth and social hierarchy	Middle-class aspiration and consumption	Urban luxury and status display
Literary use	Social performance and historical memory	Gender, romance, and commercial culture	Cultural negotiation and generational change

The British wedding cake often looks backward. It connects marriage with family history, royal tradition, and continuity. The American wedding cake often looks forward. It presents marriage as a romantic dream and a modern consumer experience. The Indian wedding cake often negotiates between past and present. It enters a culture that already has strong food traditions and adapts to new global influences.

Sweetness and Social Pressure

In all three cultures, sweetness can hide social pressure. The cake appears joyful and generous, but it may also represent family expectations, financial burden, and gender roles. A family may spend a large amount of money on a cake to show respectability. A bride may be judged by her appearance, behaviour, or ability to manage the celebration.

The cake's sweetness can therefore be read critically. It may make people feel happy, but it may also distract from inequality. Bakers, servers, cleaners, farmers, and sugar workers are often invisible behind the beautiful surface of the wedding cake.

Marriage as Public Performance

The wedding cake shows that marriage is both private and public. A couple may love each other privately, but their marriage is recognized publicly through rituals, guests, photographs, and celebrations. The cake becomes part of this public recognition.

When the couple cuts the cake, they perform their partnership. Guests watch, applaud, and take photographs. The cake becomes a shared object that confirms the marriage. However, this performance does not mean the marriage is false. Rituals often need public performance to create social meaning.

VIII. Wedding Cakes in Literary Interpretation

Cake as Desire

The wedding cake often represents desire. Its sweetness, softness, and richness make it a natural symbol of romantic longing. In literature, a character's reaction to cake can reveal emotional hunger, sexual desire, or the wish for domestic security. A bride who secretly eats cake before the ceremony may appear rebellious or humorous. Such a scene challenges the idea that a bride must always be controlled, graceful, and self-denying. The cake becomes a small act of pleasure in a setting full of duty and expectation.

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Cake as Memory

Cakes also carry memory. A character may remember a parent baking a cake, a childhood wedding, or a family recipe. In diasporic writing, cake can remind a character of home, family, or a lost past. The wedding cake is temporary. Once it is eaten, it exists only in memory and photographs. Literature can use this temporary nature to reflect on the fragility of love, family, and celebration. A beautiful cake may disappear quickly, just as happiness can change over time.

Cake as Conflict

The cake can also become a source of conflict. Families may argue about its flavour, design, cost, or religious suitability. A vegetarian, eggless, vegan, or allergen-free cake may reveal deeper differences within a family. In India, vegetarian food is important for many Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist families. Eggless cakes are therefore common in Indian bakeries. The wedding cake must respect religious and ethical beliefs. Its ingredients become a matter of identity and inclusion. In Britain and America, dietary choices can also create conflict. A vegan or gluten-free cake may challenge traditional expectations. A traditional fruitcake may represent continuity with older customs. In each case, the cake becomes a way of negotiating change.

XI. Contemporary Changes

Sustainable Wedding Cakes

Modern couples are becoming more aware of sustainability and food waste. Some choose smaller cakes, local ingredients, seasonal fruit, or edible flowers. Others replace the large cake with cupcakes, dessert tables, or regional sweets. These choices challenge the idea that a wedding must be large and expensive. A smaller cake does not mean a less meaningful wedding. It may show environmental awareness, financial responsibility, or a desire to avoid waste.

Queer and Nontraditional Weddings

Queer couples have also changed wedding culture. The traditional white cake, bride-centred imagery, and heterosexual family expectations may not represent every couple. Some queer couples choose unusual flavours, colours, toppers, or rituals. The wedding cake can become a symbol of resistance. A cake decorated with rainbow colours, chosen-family symbols, or nontraditional designs may show that marriage is not limited to one cultural script. However, queer couples may still face discrimination from families, religious groups, or wedding businesses.

Social Media and Visual Culture

Social media has changed the wedding cake. Couples now choose designs based on photographs, videos, and online trends. Bakers advertise their work through Instagram, Pinterest, and wedding websites.

The cake becomes part of a visual archive. It is photographed before it is eaten and shared with people who were not present at the wedding. This changes the cake's role. It becomes a form of self-presentation, allowing couples to show romance, wealth, and cultural taste.

X. Conclusion

The wedding cake is a small object with large cultural meaning. In Britain, it is linked with fruitcake, royal ceremony, and family continuity. In America, it is associated with white romantic ideals, domestic expectations, and consumer culture. In India, it is a hybrid symbol shaped by colonial history, urban luxury, religious diversity, and global media.

Across all three cultures, the wedding cake represents more than sweetness. It represents marriage as a social event. It shows how families display status, how gender roles are maintained or challenged, and how traditions change over time. The cake may bring people together, but it can also reveal inequality, pressure, and conflict.

Literature is important because it allows writers to question the meanings that society takes for granted. A wedding cake can represent love, but it can also represent obligation. It can create celebration, but it can also expose family tension. By studying wedding cakes, we can better understand how food shapes human relationships and cultural identity.

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