



The Politics of Taste: Caste, Gender, and the Subaltern Kitchen in Dalit Writings

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Abstract:

This paper explores how Dalit Indian English literature transforms food from a mundane necessity into a potent symbol of resistance, identity, and cultural resilience. By examining key texts such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Bama's *Karukku*, and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, the study demonstrates how food narratives disrupt hegemonic caste discourse and articulate suppressed voices. Anchored in Dalit aesthetics, cultural materialism, and sensory theory, this paper argues that the kitchen, the plate, and the palate are not apolitical sites but battlegrounds of dignity and memory. The objective is to foreground culinary discourse as both an archive and an act of subversion in the lived realities of Dalit communities. The analysis draws upon the intersectionality of caste, class, gender, and food politics to show how everyday acts of cooking and eating become potent literary tools of defiance and cultural memory.

Introduction

In the Indian sociocultural landscape, food transcends its biological and utilitarian function to become a site of social, religious, and political meaning. Particularly in the context of caste, food assumes powerful symbolic value. Concepts of purity and pollution, central to Brahminical hegemony, are often articulated through the policing of food—who prepares it, who consumes it, and who is excluded from the dining table. For Dalit communities, this relationship with food is fraught with systemic humiliation, deprivation, and exclusion. Yet, it also becomes a space of radical resistance and assertion.

Dalit Indian English literature increasingly engages with food as a site of memory and protest. It reveals the sensory dimensions of caste: how hunger feels, how rejection tastes, and how community is cooked into everyday meals. The narratives of Bama, Valmiki, and Kamble do not treat food merely as background detail but foreground it as a crucial metaphor for Dalit survival, subjectivity, and struggle.

Food taboos and dietary codes in India have historically been used to reinforce caste divisions. From the Manusmriti to contemporary social practices, food serves as a medium of inclusion or exclusion. Upper-caste purity is maintained through strict vegetarianism and the spatial control of kitchens and utensils. Dalits, considered impure, are excluded from communal eating spaces, denied participation in religious feasts, and shamed for consuming non-vegetarian food.

This paper delves into how food, taste, disgust, and labor are politicized in Dalit literature to reclaim identity and challenge caste hierarchies. While scholarly work on Dalit literature has often focused on themes of oppression, labor, and identity, the role of food remains an under-explored yet vital dimension of the Dalit experience. This study bridges literary criticism, cultural theory, and food studies to illustrate how culinary expression operates as both testimony and resistance, shedding new light on the power dynamics within caste societies.

Dalit food culture, despite being marginalized, is a treasure trove of heritage and survival strategies. It encompasses unique recipes, oral traditions, and knowledge systems that reflect resilience and creativity. This paper argues that these culinary practices are not just cultural artifacts—they are instruments of protest and political assertion. The goal is to explore how food becomes a powerful force in literature, resisting silence, reclaiming agency, and narrating the unspoken.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Caste and Food Politics, Culinary Practices, Oral Food Traditions, Embodied Memory

Objectives

(i) This paper aims to analyze food as more than just sustenance, but as a powerful medium of protest in Dalit literary expression. It serves as a tool for the marginalized to reclaim their identity and challenge the oppressive caste hierarchies, inspiring readers with the resilience

- (ii) To explore how sensory experiences such as taste and disgust articulate caste-based discrimination.
- (iii) To examine the intersections of food, gender, and labor in Dalit women's narratives.
- (iv) To present food as an alternative archive preserving oral traditions and cultural resilience.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis with an interdisciplinary approach, grounded in close readings of select Dalit autobiographies and novels in Indian English, as well as their translations. The primary texts analyzed include *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, *Karukku* by Bama, and *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble. Each of these works, though distinct in voice and context, converges on the significance of food as an experiential and symbolic element of caste-based oppression and resistance.

Frameworks from cultural studies, Dalit criticism, feminist theory, and sensory analysis enrich the research. The concept of "embodied experience" is central to this study, which posits that physical acts such as eating, cooking, and tasting are also inherently political, particularly in a caste-structured society. This methodology emphasizes lived reality over abstract theorization and seeks to foreground marginalized voices through their terms.

In addition to primary texts, the study engages with scholarly works by Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, Kancha Ilaiah, Pierre Bourdieu, Carolyn Korsmeyer, and William Ian Miller. These thinkers help articulate the socio-cultural meanings of food, taste, and disgust as socially constructed phenomena.

Theoretical Framework

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital offers a foundational lens for understanding how taste is socially conditioned. For Bourdieu, taste is not merely individual preference but a function of class-based conditioning. In the Indian context, this takes on caste dimensions: Brahminical vegetarianism is projected as 'pure' while Dalit dietary practices are stigmatized as crude or impure. Taste, then, becomes a marker of social stratification.

Michel de Certeau's theory of everyday practices sheds light on the kitchen as a site of resistance. De Certeau sees everyday actions, such as cooking and eating, as subversive practices that reclaim agency within oppressive structures. When Dalit women cook beef or dried fish despite social stigmatization, they are participating in acts of everyday resistance.

Dalit aesthetics, as theorized by scholars such as Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege, emphasizes the raw and unfiltered articulation of lived experience. It challenges Brahminical literary norms that prioritize beauty and refinement over truth and accuracy. The inclusion of food, hunger, and labor in Dalit literature is thus an aesthetic choice—a deliberate deviation from sanitized narratives.

Sensory theory, particularly the works of Carolyn Korsmeyer and William Ian Miller, contributes to the analysis of disgust. Disgust is not just a biological reaction; it is socially trained. In caste societies, disgust serves as a regulatory emotion that enforces social boundaries. A Brahmin's aversion to touching food cooked by a Dalit is not natural but learned through cultural codes. Korsmeyer's idea of "aesthetic disgust" helps us see how food that repulses some may be deeply comforting to others, underscoring the cultural relativism of taste.

These frameworks collectively provide a lens through which Dalit food narratives can be understood as multifaceted texts, encompassing both political, aesthetic, and affective dimensions. They help decode how taste is policed, how disgust is weaponized, and how memory is preserved through everyday acts, such as cooking.

Caste and Culinary Control

The caste system in India has historically used food as a primary mechanism of exclusion and control. According to Manusmriti and other Dharmashastra texts, Dalits were forbidden from cooking for upper castes, participating in communal meals, or using shared utensils. These regulations were not just spiritual decrees but institutionalized forms of discrimination that seeped into daily life.

This culinary control persists today. Reports of Dalit children being segregated in school mid-day meals or Dalit cooks being replaced in temples reflect the ongoing relevance of these exclusions. Food becomes a site where caste is lived and enforced. It is in these small, repetitive actions—refusing food, discarding leftovers, maintaining kitchen purity—that caste hierarchy is reproduced.

Dalit autobiographies often recount stories of being denied food, being forced to eat spoiled leftovers, or being humiliated for bringing non-vegetarian food in public spaces. These are not isolated incidents but part of a larger system of symbolic violence. In many regions, Dalits are denied access to wells, community kitchens, or even tea shops that maintain separate cups for lower castes.

Kancha Ilaiah, in his seminal work *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, celebrates the food practices of Dalits and backward castes. He highlights the irony that while Brahmins project their food habits as superior, it is the Dalit diet—rich in proteins, greens, and seasonal ingredients—that is more nutritionally robust. Ilaiah reframes eating beef or pork not as deviance but as a cultural assertion.

Thus, caste functions not only through temples or texts, but also through taste and taboo. The act of eating becomes political, and the politics of the plate becomes central to understanding social hierarchy in India.

Food as Memory and Testimony

Food is not merely sustenance; it is memory, identity, and testimony. In Dalit literature, food recurs as a motif through which personal and collective histories are narrated.

In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki describes his childhood experiences of gathering discarded food from upper-caste weddings. He writes: “We would spread a piece of sackcloth and collect whatever half-eaten or discarded food we could find.” The term *joothan*—referring to leftovers from someone else's plate—becomes emblematic of the Dalit condition. But Valmiki reclaims this shame, transforming it into a symbol of endurance and agency.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* reveals the systemic hunger faced by Dalit women and children. She writes of children dying from eating poisonous plants and the community's reliance on millet gruel or scraps from landlords. Food in her narrative is a measure of social abandonment and gendered suffering. Kamble's detailing of the kitchen rituals, scarcity, and innovation provides a gendered lens into culinary memory.

Bama's *Karukku* offers a Christian Dalit perspective. Despite conversion, caste remains embedded in food practices. Bama recalls being mocked for the “smelly” fish she brought in her school tiffin. The disgust of others turns her food into a site of shame. But Bama resists this stigma by celebrating her community's food, detailing the ingredients, flavors, and communal nature of eating.

Food thus becomes a mnemonic device. The taste of dried fish, the smell of ragi porridge, or the sight of shared banana leaves evoke a layered memory of joy, trauma, resistance, and identity. These narratives do not erase suffering but use it to assert subjectivity.

Kitchen as a Site of Resistance

For Dalit women, the kitchen is a site of labor and resilience. It is also a site of resistance. In the absence of financial resources or recognition, Dalit women innovate with whatever ingredients are available. They cook with seasonal vegetables, wild greens, fermented foods, and discarded animal parts to create nutritious meals. This is not only survival but resistance.

The preparation of foods like pork curry, beef fry, dried fish chutney, or fermented rice is not merely culinary—it is cultural. It asserts a distinct identity that refuses assimilation into Brahminical norms. These foods carry stories of ancestors, rituals, migration, and rebellion.

Oral traditions surrounding food—such as songs sung while grinding spices, stories told during communal cooking, and rituals performed while serving food—form an alternative archive. These narratives are seldom documented but are rich sources of cultural memory.

Cooking becomes a feminist act. It challenges not only caste but also patriarchy. Dalit women, often at the intersection of both oppressions, utilize the kitchen to assert control over at least one domain of their lives. In doing so, they create a space where community, creativity, and care can flourish despite adversity.

As Sharmila Rege argues in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, the domestic sphere cannot be dismissed as apolitical. The labor of Dalit women in kitchens, fields, and homes must be read as both reproductive and resistant.

Conclusion

Dalit literature reimagines food not as a passive element of survival but as a tool of political expression and cultural assertion. Through the sensory—the feel of hunger, the taste of shame, the smell of community meals—these narratives bring forth the embodied reality of caste discrimination. The kitchen, the plate, and the recipe become weapons against erasure and silencing.

By analyzing texts such as *Joothan*, *Karukku*, and *The Prisons We Broke*, this paper demonstrates how culinary practices serve as acts of resistance. Dalit food culture challenges dominant narratives, asserts identity, and reclaims history through oral, embodied, and textual practices. The politics of the palate thus becomes an entry point into larger questions of social justice, memory, and dignity.

In a country where food is used to segregate, control, and humiliate, Dalit authors reclaim it to narrate, protest, and celebrate. Their stories ensure that even the most mundane acts—such as cooking rice or eating leftovers—are not forgotten but transformed into powerful declarations of humanity and hope.

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