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**Culinary Marginalization and the Politics of Food:
Memory, Identity, and Resistance**

PARVATHI T S

Assistant Professor
Department of English,
MES College Marampally(Autonomous), Kerala
parvathitsaju@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper examines food as a critical cultural and political signifier in Dalit literature, foregrounding its intersections with caste, memory, and embodied experience. Moving beyond conventional understandings of food as a marker of taste, culture, or tradition, the study argues that in Dalit narratives, food functions as a site where structures of caste-based oppression are materially enacted and symbolically contested.

Drawing on texts such as *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki and *Karukku* by Bama, the paper explores how practices of eating, serving, and sharing food are governed by the ideology of purity and pollution, which underpins caste hierarchy. These everyday practices reveal how the body itself becomes a site of regulation, exclusion, and humiliation within caste society. Drawing on insights from trauma and memory studies, the paper conceptualizes “culinary trauma” as a mode of remembering wherein experiences of hunger, deprivation, and caste-based humiliation are inscribed in both individual and collective memory. These narratives not only archive suffering but also articulate forms of resistance through the reclamation and revaluation of Dalit food practices, challenging dominant caste aesthetics and hierarchies. Ultimately, the paper argues that food in Dalit literature operates not merely as material sustenance but as a powerful discursive and affective site that exposes the everyday workings of caste oppression while enabling alternative articulations of dignity, identity, and agency.

Keywords *Culinary Marginalization, Politics of Food, Food Memory, Food Identity, Culinary Resistance, Food and Power*

Introduction

Food occupies a central position in human life. It is not merely a biological necessity but also a cultural, political, and symbolic practice deeply connected with identity, social hierarchy, and power relations. Across societies, food practices often reveal structures of inclusion and exclusion, privilege and deprivation. In the Indian caste system, food becomes one of the most visible markers through which social hierarchy is maintained and regulated. The ideology of purity and pollution governs who can cook, serve, touch, or consume food, thereby transforming everyday acts of eating into mechanisms of caste discipline and social control. India has historically functioned as a caste-ridden society in which certain communities, particularly Dalits, were denied dignity, equality, and even recognition as fully human. Within the caste hierarchy, Brahmins occupied the highest social position and enjoyed cultural privilege, including access to notions of “pure” food and respectable food practices. In contrast, Dalits were treated as outcastes and were denied not only equal access to food but also basic standards of living and humanity. Food habits became one of the markers through which caste difference was reinforced.

Vegetarianism, especially within Brahmanical ideology, was celebrated as a symbol of ritual purity, moral superiority, and social refinement. The consumption of meat, beef, fish, and other non-vegetarian food items was often associated with impurity, savagery, and lower caste identities. Communities that consumed such food were considered uncivilized and polluted within dominant caste discourse. Dalits and other marginalized groups were therefore stigmatized for their food practices, which were linked to their social exclusion and economic conditions. The caste system transformed dietary practices into moral categories, where vegetarian food symbolized purity while meat consumption was projected as inferior and degrading. However, contemporary discourses surrounding nutrition and health increasingly challenge these caste-based assumptions about food. Modern nutritional science recognizes the importance of proteins, fats, vitamins, and other nutrients often derived from meat, fish, eggs, and animal-based products. Even medicinal and health industries today incorporate animal extracts and protein supplements as essential components of human health and bodily development. This shift exposes the contradictions within traditional caste ideologies that once condemned such foods as impure while simultaneously associating them with marginalized communities. The changing understanding of nutrition reveals how food taboos were not merely cultural preferences but were deeply entangled with structures of caste power and social exclusion.

Within the framework of caste society, Dalits have historically been denied access to food dignity, equal participation in communal eating practices, and even the right to touch food associated with dominant caste communities. Food practices in caste society therefore extend beyond questions of taste

or nutrition and become instruments of humiliation and oppression. Dalit literature powerfully captures these experiences of hunger, deprivation, exclusion, and social violence. Through autobiographies, memoirs, poems, and narratives, Dalit writers expose the brutal realities of caste discrimination embedded in ordinary practices of eating and sharing food. Food occupies a crucial position in Dalit autobiographies because it reflects the lived realities of caste oppression, poverty, humiliation, and social exclusion. In caste society, food is not merely associated with nourishment or survival but also with dignity, identity, and social status. Dalit writers repeatedly portray hunger and food deprivation as central experiences that shaped their childhood, identity, and consciousness. The denial of food dignity becomes one of the most violent forms of caste oppression, where the marginalized are denied not only equal access to food but also humanity itself.

Dalit autobiographies such as *Akkarmashi* by Sharan Kumar Limbale and *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki vividly portray how hunger becomes an everyday reality in Dalit life. These texts reveal the brutal intersection of caste and poverty where survival itself becomes a struggle. Food scarcity forces Dalits into degrading labour, social dependency, and humiliation. Hunger therefore functions not only as a physical condition but also as a psychological and emotional trauma deeply embedded within memory. This paper examines the concept of “culinary trauma” in Dalit literature by analysing how food becomes a site of memory, oppression, and resistance. Culinary trauma refers to the emotional and psychological wounds associated with caste-based humiliation, hunger, and exclusion connected to food practices. These traumatic experiences are not limited to individual suffering but are deeply collective, inherited through generations, and embedded within community memory.

The study primarily focuses on *Joothan*, *Karukku*, and *Akkarmashi*, three seminal works in Dalit autobiographical writing. These texts portray food as a recurring symbol of caste humiliation and social marginalization. In *Joothan*, the very title refers to leftover food discarded by upper-caste households and consumed by Dalits as a marker of social degradation. Similarly, *Akkarmashi* by Sharan Kumar Limbale reveals how hunger, food scarcity, and social deprivation shaped the author’s childhood and identity formation. By examining food as a cultural and political signifier, this paper argues that Dalit literature transforms culinary experiences into narratives of resistance and identity formation. Dalit writers reclaim food practices traditionally stigmatized by dominant caste ideologies and challenge hegemonic notions of purity, taste, and respectability. Thus, food in Dalit literature emerges not only as a symbol of suffering but also as a means of asserting dignity, survival, and agency.

Culinary Trauma and Caste

In *Akkarmashi*, Limbale presents a disturbing portrayal of extreme poverty and hunger experienced by the Mahar community. The Dalit settlement or Maharwada is represented as a space of abandonment, deprivation, and social exclusion. Limbale compares Maharwada “to a heap of Jowar grains gathered at the resting place of a corpse” (Limbale 12) and further describes it as the “garbage that the village throws out” (12). Such imagery highlights how Dalit communities were treated as disposable and socially polluted within caste society. They were deprived of land, education, employment, and economic stability and were forced to survive through dependence on upper-caste communities.

The economic condition of Dalits becomes so pathetic that many are compelled to engage in socially condemned activities merely to survive. Limbale observes how caste oppression pushes people toward stealing, selling liquor, poisoning animals for meat, and even prostitution. Hunger becomes the driving force behind these desperate actions. The author profoundly states:

God endowed man with a stomach. Since then man has been striving to satisfy his stomach... A woman becomes a whore and a man becomes a thief. The stomach makes you clean shit; it even makes you eat shit” (Limbale 8).

This statement demonstrates how hunger destroys dignity and forces human beings into degrading conditions. The stomach becomes symbolic of survival, compulsion, and oppression. Limbale repeatedly portrays hunger as a force more powerful than morality, social norms, or individual desire.

One of the most heartbreaking incidents in *Akkarmashi* is the description of Santamai collecting grains from cow dung to prepare bhakari. The scene reflects the horrifying extent of deprivation faced by Dalit communities. The protagonist recalls:

“The ‘bhakarīs’ made from the jowar picked out of the dung looked coarse but spicy. I put a piece in my mouth and chewed it slowly. It stank of dung. As I chewed it, I felt I was actually eating dung” (Limbale 11).

This moment reveals not only material poverty but also the humiliation attached to survival. Food, which normally symbolizes nourishment and comfort, becomes associated with shame, disgust, and trauma.

Limbale’s autobiographical narrative effectively captures the bodily experience of hunger. He describes his stomach “as a way to the graveyard that continuously swallows the dead” (3). Such imagery intensifies the emotional impact of starvation. Hunger is not represented as temporary discomfort but as a constant condition shaping the body and mind. The protagonist further remarks that

he always felt “half-fed” and imagined swallowing the entire land while still chewing stones (3). These metaphors communicate the endless nature of deprivation in Dalit life.

The narrative also demonstrates how hunger alters human relationships with food. The protagonist eats discarded banana peels and reuses thrown-away tea powder to make black tea. Such acts reveal how poverty forces individuals to consume what society rejects as waste. The body learns to survive on leftovers, discarded materials, and polluted substances. Hunger therefore transforms the meaning of food itself.

Extreme hunger in *Akkarmashi* is further portrayed through the Dalit community’s dependence on dead cattle for meat. Limbale writes:

“Whenever a carcass fell in the village, Maharwada would rejoice” (Limbale 40).

This statement exposes the horrifying extent of starvation experienced by Dalit communities. The death of an animal becomes a source of celebration because it temporarily relieves hunger. The carcass, rejected by upper castes, becomes valuable food for starving Dalits. Limbale thereby reveals how caste oppression reduces human existence to a struggle for survival where even dead animal flesh becomes precious. The passage also exposes the hypocrisy of caste society in which upper castes worship the cow as sacred while Dalits, deprived of resources and dignity, survive on its carcass.

Limbale eventually philosophizes hunger as the ultimate force controlling human existence:

“Bhakari is bigger than man. It is as vast as the sky, and bright like the sun. Hunger is bigger than man... Hunger is more powerful than man” (Limbale 50).

This philosophical reflection elevates hunger from an individual experience to a universal condition. Yet in the context of caste society, hunger is not natural or accidental; it is socially produced through systems of exploitation and exclusion. Dalits remain hungry not because of fate but because caste structures deny them access to resources, land, and dignity.

The lack of shelter further intensifies their suffering. The family lives under “four tin sheets,” and the absence of space and comfort reflects their economic vulnerability. Often they are forced to sleep in bus stands “like discarded bus tickets.” Such descriptions reinforce the connection between bodily deprivation and social invisibility. Dalits are treated as disposable objects within the social order.

A similar portrayal of hunger and humiliation appears in *Joothan*. The term “joothan” itself refers to leftover scraps of food contaminated by another person’s saliva and usually thrown away as waste. In upper-caste households, such food is considered polluted and unfit for consumption. Ironically, the

same food becomes acceptable when consumed by Dalits because Dalit bodies themselves are viewed as polluted within caste ideology.

For centuries, Dalit communities survived on *joothan* collected from upper-caste weddings and feasts. The leftovers were dried, preserved, and consumed during difficult times. Omprakash Valmiki reveals how his community worked tirelessly for upper-caste households but received only leftover scraps instead of wages. He bitterly asks:

“What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just *joothan*” (Valmiki 10).

The statement captures the dehumanizing relationship between labour and caste exploitation. Dalits provide physical labour but are denied economic compensation and social respect. Instead, they are expected to survive on discarded leftovers. Food becomes a reminder of their degraded social position.

Valmiki’s autobiography portrays *joothan* as a symbol of pain, humiliation, and inherited suffering. The memories associated with collecting and preserving leftover food continue to haunt him even in adulthood. He recalls guarding the drying *joothan* from crows and animals so that it could later be consumed by his family. Such memories reveal how deeply humiliation becomes embedded within consciousness.

The autobiography also exposes how caste discrimination operates within educational spaces. Valmiki repeatedly narrates experiences of exclusion at school. He is denied participation in extracurricular activities and forced to remain outside classrooms and social spaces. He writes:

“I stood on the margins like a spectator... I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door” (Valmiki 16).

The metaphor of “standing outside the door” reflects the broader exclusion of Dalits from social equality and dignity. Food and education become interconnected sites of caste discrimination. Dalit children are made to internalize inferiority from an early age.

The traumatic memory of food humiliation is central to both *Akkarmashi* and *Joothan*. Hunger in these narratives is not merely biological starvation but a form of social violence. Culinary trauma emerges through repeated experiences of exclusion, shame, and degradation associated with food practices. The body remembers these experiences through sensory memories of taste, smell, and hunger.

These autobiographies also reveal how caste transforms food into a mechanism of social control. Upper castes maintain dominance not only through economic power but also by regulating who can

eat, what can be eaten, and how food is distributed. The denial of food dignity becomes a means of preserving caste hierarchy. At the same time, these narratives resist silence by documenting hidden histories of suffering. Writing becomes an act of reclaiming humanity and exposing caste violence. By narrating experiences of hunger and humiliation, Dalit writers challenge dominant representations that erase marginalized voices. The autobiographies therefore function as testimonies of survival and resistance.

Food in Dalit autobiographies ultimately becomes both a symbol of oppression and a source of political consciousness. The memory of hunger shapes identity, community experience, and resistance against caste injustice. Through their narratives, writers like Limbale and Valmiki transform culinary trauma into literary resistance, forcing society to confront the brutal realities of caste discrimination embedded within everyday life.

Conclusion

Food in Dalit literature functions as a powerful cultural, political, and emotional symbol that reveals the lived realities of caste oppression, humiliation, deprivation, trauma, and resistance. Through autobiographical narratives such as *Akkarmashi* by Sharan Kumar Limbale and *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, food emerges not merely as a source of nourishment but as an important site through which caste hierarchy is enforced, experienced, and resisted. The study of food in Dalit autobiographies therefore provides a deeper understanding of how caste operates within everyday life, bodily experience, and social relationships. These narratives expose how ordinary acts such as eating, cooking, sharing food, and accessing nourishment become deeply political within a caste-ridden society.

The ideology of purity and pollution, which forms the foundation of the caste system, transforms food into an instrument of social regulation and exclusion. Upper-caste notions of purity determine who can prepare food, who can serve it, and who can consume it. Dalits were historically denied equal participation in communal eating practices and were treated as polluted bodies whose touch could contaminate food and utensils. Such practices reveal how caste discrimination extends beyond social and economic structures and enters the intimate sphere of the body and survival itself. Food therefore becomes one of the most visible markers of social hierarchy in Indian society.

Food also lies at the centre of rituals, religion, and cultural identity, shaping social relationships and reinforcing structures of privilege and inequality. Different communities attach sacred meanings to food habits, methods of preparation, fasting, feasting, and ritual offerings. Within caste society, however, these food practices often reinforce exclusion through ideas of purity and contamination.

Food thus becomes a cultural text that encodes histories, values, power structures, emotions, and identity. It reflects social hierarchy and functions as a site of class and caste division where upper castes enjoy nutritious and luxurious meals while Dalits are often left with leftovers, stale food, or discarded remains. Food is therefore closely connected with privilege, inequality, social exclusion, dignity, and human worth.

The autobiographies examined in this study vividly portray the extreme hunger and deprivation faced by Dalit communities. In Akkarmashi, Limbale presents hunger as an all-consuming force that shapes every aspect of life. Poverty forces Dalits to survive on discarded food, grains collected from cow dung, banana peels, and even the flesh of dead cattle. The statement, “Whenever a carcass fell in the village, Maharwada would rejoice” (Limbale 40), reflects the horrifying extent of starvation experienced by the community. The death of an animal becomes a source of happiness because it temporarily relieves hunger. Such incidents demonstrate how caste oppression denies Dalits even the basic dignity of food. Similarly, in Joothan, Valmiki portrays the humiliation associated with consuming leftover food discarded by upper-caste households. The very term “joothan” symbolizes degradation and social exclusion. Dalits worked tirelessly for upper-caste families yet received only leftover scraps instead of proper wages. Valmiki’s painful memories of collecting, drying, and preserving joothan reveal how deeply humiliation becomes embedded within memory. Food here functions not merely as sustenance but as a constant reminder of caste inferiority imposed by society.

The study also demonstrates how hunger in Dalit literature is not simply biological starvation but a form of structural and cultural violence. Dalits remain hungry not because of natural scarcity but because caste-based social structures deny them access to land, education, employment, and economic stability. Hunger is therefore socially produced and maintained through systems of exploitation. The body becomes a site where caste violence is physically experienced through starvation, exhaustion, and deprivation. Culinary trauma emerges from these repeated experiences of exclusion and humiliation associated with food practices.

Trauma and memory studies provide an important framework for understanding these narratives. The memories of hunger described in Dalit autobiographies are deeply sensory and bodily in nature. Smell, taste, touch, and bodily pain become central to the recollection of traumatic experiences. The protagonists remember the smell of dung in bhakari, the taste of stale leftovers, and the physical pain of starvation. Such memories continue to haunt them even after achieving social mobility. Culinary trauma therefore becomes an embodied form of memory carried across generations. The autobiographies further reveal how caste oppression shapes childhood experiences and identity formation. Dalit children grow up witnessing the humiliation faced by their families and internalize

feelings of exclusion from an early age. Educational institutions, which are expected to provide equality and empowerment, often become spaces where caste discrimination is reproduced. Valmiki's recollection of "standing outside the door" symbolizes not only educational exclusion but also the broader denial of social participation and dignity. The intersection of food, education, labour, and caste reveals the multidimensional nature of Dalit suffering.

Another important aspect explored in this study is the politics of vegetarianism within caste society. Brahmanical ideology historically celebrated vegetarianism as a symbol of ritual purity, morality, and social superiority. In contrast, meat consumption was associated with impurity and lower-caste identities. Dalit food practices were therefore stigmatized and treated as uncivilized or polluted. However, contemporary discourses surrounding nutrition challenge these caste-based assumptions about food. Modern science recognizes the importance of proteins, fats, and nutrients often derived from meat, fish, eggs, and animal-based products. This contradiction exposes how caste-based food taboos were not merely about health or morality but were deeply linked with structures of social domination and exclusion. At the same time, Dalit literature transforms food from a symbol of oppression into a site of resistance and political consciousness. By narrating painful experiences of hunger and humiliation, Dalit writers challenge dominant caste narratives that erase marginalized voices. Writing becomes an act of reclaiming dignity, humanity, and agency. These autobiographies refuse silence and expose hidden histories of suffering embedded within everyday food practices. The representation of culinary trauma therefore functions as a form of resistance against caste oppression. Dalit writers also reclaim food practices traditionally stigmatized by dominant caste ideology. Instead of accepting upper-caste definitions of purity and respectability, they assert the value of Dalit experiences, labour, and cultural identity. Food becomes connected with survival, resilience, and community solidarity. Through literature, the memory of suffering is transformed into collective political consciousness.

In conclusion, food in Dalit literature operates as a complex and multidimensional symbol that reflects the realities of caste oppression, hunger, humiliation, memory, and resistance. Through autobiographical narratives such as *Akkarmashi* and *Joothan*, food emerges not merely as a source of nourishment but as a powerful cultural and political text that encodes histories of exclusion and suffering. The ideology of purity and pollution transforms food into an instrument of social control where caste hierarchy is maintained through practices of segregation, denial, and humiliation. Dalit communities are denied dignity not only through economic exploitation but also through everyday acts associated with eating, sharing, cooking, and accessing food. Food in Dalit literature symbolizes both oppression and survival, deprivation and resilience, trauma and resistance. By bringing marginalized experiences of hunger and exclusion into literary discourse, Dalit autobiographies challenge dominant

social narratives and demand recognition of Dalit humanity. Food thus becomes not merely a matter of sustenance but a profound expression of memory, identity, culture, and social justice.

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