



Research Paper

Savoring Survival: The Metaphoric Potency of Food in Dalit Literature

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ABSTRACT: *The multifaceted essence of food extends beyond basic nourishment, embedding itself deeply within the cultural, social, and political tapestry of society. Food studies, as an interdisciplinary field, delves into these dimensions, exploring food's myriad implications and representations. Specifically, Literary Food Studies examines how food is represented in literature and the symbolic meanings it carries. Analyzing food in literature can reveal deeper insights into characters, settings, and narratives. Through the lens of food in memoirs and autobiographies, readers gain insight into the author's journey, exploring how food has shaped the author's personal and communal identity. In the realm of Dalit literature, food emerges as a powerful narrative element, encapsulating stories of struggle, resilience, and liberation. Food imagery in Dalit literature is laden with symbolism and metaphor. Dalit writers and thinkers reflect on food to address themes of identity, purity, pollution, and social justice, thereby contesting and subverting the casteist ideologies that have historically marginalized them. Dalit autobiographies and memoirs explore the unique representations of social stratification, which are deeply intertwined with their identities and experiences. An interesting aspect of these texts is the emphasis on food and elaborate culinary details. This paper delves into Urmila Pawar's autobiography, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, employing the method of qualitative content analysis to examine the role of food as a metaphor. Drawing upon concepts from both Dalit literature and Food Studies, this study explores how culinary descriptions serve as powerful vehicles for conveying themes of survival, resilience, and cultural identity within Pawar's narrative.*

KEYWORDS: *Food Studies, Dalit literature, casteism, oppression, resilience, identity*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Etymologically coming from the Sanskrit root 'dal,' meaning split or broken, the term 'Dalit' signifies being downtrodden, oppressed, or suppressed. James Massey explores the history of the term "Dalit" in his work *Dalits in India* (1995). Originating in the 19th century, the term was used by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule to describe oppressed outcastes. While B.R. Ambedkar also popularized it, he mainly used the terms Scheduled Castes or Depressed Class. The term gained momentum in the 1970s due to the Dalit Panther Movement, signifying those excluded from India's traditional caste system. Dalit literature is a significant literary movement that emerged in the Indian subcontinent, providing a voice to the historically marginalized Dalit community. It seeks to challenge the narratives shaped by dominant caste ideologies and to assert the dignity, identity, and humanity of Dalits. The literature is marked by its vivid portrayals of caste oppression, its critique of social hierarchies, and its call for emancipation from the shackles of caste-based discrimination. Moreover, Dalit autobiographies provide valuable insights into Dalit constructions of identity and culture by offering a firsthand account of their lived experiences. Sharmila Rege's anthology *Isn't This Plate Indian?* focusing on Dalit women's autobiographical writings, with a special emphasis on memories of food, underscores the multifaceted nature of these narratives (Rege, 2009). Food serves as a powerful metaphor and lens through which to examine issues of caste discrimination, poverty, and resilience within Dalit communities.

In its fundamental role, food serves as a lens to observe the stratifications of class, caste, gender, race, and other societal divisions (Probyn, 2000). The degree of accessibility and control over food reflects one's position within these social hierarchies, highlighting the profound disparities that exist (Counihan, 1998). Mary Douglas' concept of purity and pollution, as outlined in her anthropological work *Purity and Danger* (1966) provides a framework for understanding how social and cultural norms shape perceptions of cleanliness, order,

and boundaries within a society. In the Indian context, the role of food in shaping the caste hierarchy is profound. Dietary habits, the purity of foods consumed, and the rituals surrounding food preparation and consumption have historically been used to establish and reinforce social boundaries. For those labeled as untouchables, the restrictions and humiliations associated with food are particularly severe. Foods deemed as beyond human consumption frequently carry associations with the most marginalized groups, the wretched of the earth who are subjected to dehumanization (Shahani, 2020). The foods consumed by Dalits, particularly those derived from sources considered ritually impure, such as certain types of meat or animal by-products, are deemed polluting according to the norms of purity upheld by upper-caste communities. Dalits are often forbidden from consuming the same food as higher castes or even using the same vessels. This exclusion extends to denying them access to public eating places and water sources, thereby reinforcing their marginalized status and perpetuating their social isolation. However, these oppressive practices also have the unintended effect of fostering a strong sense of community and solidarity among those within the same caste or sub-caste groups. By sharing specific food customs, dietary laws, and culinary practices, members of a particular caste reinforced their collective identity and cultural cohesion.

To understand the category of 'Dalit food' it is important to examine how Dalit authors reflect on food and eating experiences in their autobiographical works, and how these narratives contribute to the construction of 'Dalit food' as a relational category, in contrast to the traditional mainstream Indian food. The detailed descriptions of food preparation and consumption in Dalit literature provide readers with insights into the characters' daily lives, their socioeconomic status, and their cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the portrayal of food in these narratives can also reveal the inequalities and injustices present within society. For example, the disparities in access to nutritious food or the exploitation of Dalit communities in food-related industries can be depicted through the characters' experiences with food.

In *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx writes, "Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail, and tooth." (Marx, 1993, p. 92). The primal hunger that Marx talks about reflects the civilizational crisis that emerges from oppressive regimes. In the hierarchical power structures, the hungry are portrayed as subhuman others in need of the benevolence of the civilized ones. In the lives of Dalits, food is often associated with experiences of lack, hunger, and humiliation. Their everyday diets are meager, procured through minimum wages in cash and kind (Rege et al. 2009). The consumption of joothan, which refers to the leftovers or scraps of food given or thrown by upper caste patrons, reflects the pervasive poverty and marginalization experienced by Dalit communities. The consumption of carcass meat is considered taboo by upper castes. The association of Dalits with the disposal of dead animals and the consumption of their meat led to their ostracization and dehumanization within the caste-based social hierarchy, wherein Dalits are relegated to the lowest rungs of society. The concept of joothan exposes the systemic injustices inherent in the caste system, wherein certain castes enjoy abundance and extravagance while others endure deprivation and scarcity. Caste-based prejudices in Indian society often manifest through the naming of lower castes based on their dietary practices, such as the Mahars consuming dead animals and the Musaharis eating rats. These names carry derogatory connotations and serve to reinforce social hierarchies, with dietary habits being used as a marker of inferiority and marginalization. The Valmikis, referred to as the joothan caste for accepting leftover food, face a similar stigma. These practices reflect deep-seated discrimination, perpetuating social inequalities.

Dalit cuisine, borne out of necessity and resourcefulness amidst marginalization and scarcity, offers a fascinating array of unique delicacies. These dishes are a testament to the ingenuity of Dalit communities in maximizing the use of available ingredients and preserving food for sustenance. Dalit dietary practices differ significantly from those of the upper castes, affected both by social and economic factors. While the upper castes typically consume wheat, rice, jaggery, and other refined ingredients, Dalits often rely on millet, broken corn, molasses, watermelon seeds, pea flour, and sun-dried pig skin. Additionally, they tend to utilize animal parts that upper castes consider inferior, such as intestines rather than prime cuts of meat. In *Isn't This Plate Indian?* Sharmila Rege affirms:

Eating habits and foods starkly mark the boundaries between the pure and the polluted, as well as between the upper and lower class, male and female, humans and god. Conversely, what kinds of food are 'permitted', 'tolerated', and 'enforced' for consumption and the ways in which they are consumed are structured primarily by the caste, class, [and] gender inequalities in society. (Rege, 2009, p. 63)

To cope with scarcity, Dalit communities developed various dishes through innovative techniques in food preservation. One such technique mentioned is the preparation of chanya, which consists of long slices of sun-dried beef, and "chunchuni" which consists of sun-dried pig skin. This method allowed the meat to be stored for months, extending the shelf life of meat and ensuring a steady food supply during difficult times. Another creation is "rakti," a dish crafted from coagulated animal blood, seasoned with onions, oil, salt, and chili powder. Similarly, "wajadi" features the skin of animal intestines, flavored with a similar blend of spices. In both dishes, the sparing use of spices and oil reflects the economic challenges faced by Dalit households. Another standout delicacy is "chaprah," a robust paste made from crushed red ants and their eggs, combined with a medley of

ingredients. This pungent and slightly acidic condiment, known as "red-ant chutney," has transcended Dalit communities and found its way into mainstream media. Beyond its culinary prowess, Dalit cuisine challenges stereotypes and celebrates the rich diversity of culinary traditions within Indian society. It serves as a poignant reminder of the resilience and creativity inherent in marginalized communities, navigating adversity with flair and flavor. Dalit food shares similarities with the culinary traditions of African American communities called soul food, developed during times of slavery and segregation in the United States. These cuisines have endured through generations, serving as symbols of resistance, survival, and cultural heritage in the face of adversity.

Urmila Pawar is a prominent Dalit feminist writer and activist from Maharashtra, India, and a leading voice in the struggle for social justice, particularly focusing on issues related to caste and gender discrimination. Her autobiography in Marathi, *Aaydan* (2003), translated into English by Maya Pandit as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, is considered a seminal work in Dalit literature. Her narrative provides a vivid portrayal of the lived experiences of Dalit women of Mahar communities in Maharashtra, India. Central to this exploration is the role of food, which emerges not merely as sustenance but, as Barthes puts it, "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (Barthes, 2012, p. 21).

Arjun Appadurai's concept of gastropolitics refers to the intricate social dynamics and power relations that revolve around food within Hindu South Asian societies. In his work *Gastropolitics in Hindu South Asia* (1981), Appadurai explores how gender politics and hierarchies are expressed through food practices. He examines how food production and consumption are often gendered activities, with women typically responsible for cooking and serving meals while men hold authority over food-related decisions. Urmila Pawar records the gendered division of Dalit households in terms of financial responsibilities and food consumption. Many men in Dalit families fail to assume financial responsibility for their households, with a significant portion of their earnings being spent on alcohol consumption. Also, separate food items, often more nutritious, are cooked for male members of the family, indicating gendered divisions in food consumption within the household. After her father's early death, Pawar's family faced economic challenges, relying on basic and affordable food items for sustenance. They relied on a simple diet consisting of coarse rice, gram flour curry (pithale), leafy vegetables, bread (bhakri) made from millet or husk, and small dried fish seasoned with onions, red chili powder, and salt. During the fish season, Pawar's mother would buy small fish from fishermen, dry them, and preserve them for consumption during periods of scarcity. Pawar's portrayal of Mahar women relying on leftovers or going hungry underscores the systemic injustices perpetuated against Dalit communities, especially Dalit women who are victims of both casteism and sexism. The intersectionality of caste and gender oppression is starkly evident in her narrative, highlighting how these women faced multiple layers of discrimination and deprivation. The detailed account of their food serves as a metaphor for survival, cultural identity, and the everyday resistance against the socio-economic challenges imposed by their lower caste status.

Mahar women faced challenges in accessing nutritious food, as evidenced by their consumption of dry bread and cheap, roasted fish before embarking on strenuous tasks like climbing uphill from the morning market. This indicates a lack of time and resources to adequately nourish themselves, prioritizing the needs of their children over their own. Pawar elaborates on how Mahar women, in the absence of their menfolk, resorted to consuming the leftover stock used by the affluent to boil their fish. She explains the preparation, "The rich stored the flesh of sode, tisrya, or mule; poor people stored the water in which these fish were boiled. The stock was boiled till it became a thick-like sauce and was then stored in bottles. This was called kaat." (Pawar, 2009, p. 100). The women cooked this with chili powder and salt to make a dish called saar, which formed the daily diet of Mahar women, which Pawar describes as having very low nutritional value. This diet led to health issues such as diarrhea, further worsening their already difficult circumstances.

In the public sphere, Pawar recounts various instances where food becomes a source of acute embarrassment and humiliation. The act of eating, especially for Dalits, is laden with the weight of caste prejudices and restrictions. Pawar describes the derogatory way Dalits were perceived while eating in public, equating their eating postures with defecating, "as if they were about to shit" (Pawar, 2009, p. 20). This comparison not only dehumanizes but also serves to reinforce caste hierarchies, equating Dalit bodies with impurity and unworthiness. The specific episode is where a Dalit woman from the Mahar community is subjected to violence "for trying to buy fish from them" (Pawar, 2009, p. 80). The public humiliation and physical attack faced by the Dalits at the hands of the Daldin fisherwomen is a manifestation of the systemic and institutionalized discrimination that governs all aspects of life, including what one can eat, who can eat it, and where it can be eaten. Thus, the act of buying fish transcends a simple economic transaction, embodying the fraught interactions across caste lines.

Pawar's narrative poignantly captures the stigmatization faced by Dalits not only in terms of the food they eat but also regarding their natural human responses to food, such as hunger and appetite. An incident Pawar recounts from her school days exemplifies this form of discrimination. During an incident of cooking and eating food with friends, Pawar was shamed for her eagerness and enjoyment of food. The fact that her very human instinct became the subject of gossip among her peers underscores the deep-seated prejudices and stereotypes associated with caste. "They did not allow me to touch anything. However, we all ate together. I

really enjoyed the meal. The next day, I was horrified to hear that my eating had become the hottest topic for juicy gossip. Girls were whispering in groups about ‘how much I ate’ (Pawar, 2009, p. 110). This humiliation she experienced is emblematic of the broader dehumanization Dalits endure, where their basic needs and desires are subjected to mockery and disdain, further entrenching their ostracization and reinforcing the cruel hierarchies that govern societal interactions. The hunger of Dalits is deemed ‘monstrous’ because it symbolizes not just a lack of food but a lack of dignity, respect, and humanity. Portraying them as inherently greedy and lacking in self-control and comparing them to animals like “goats” or “monsters” (Pawar, 2009, p. 102) dehumanizes them and reinforces the perception of their inferior status in society.

Pawar's refusal to take a lunch box to school poignantly illustrates the intersection of caste, class, and food, turning an everyday school activity into a revealing moment of social stratification. For Pawar, the embarrassment over her tiffin is not just about the food itself but about what it signifies – poverty, lower caste status, and the associated stigma. As a child, Pawar would be terribly embarrassed about her tiffin at school and “would not even talk about it with her classmates” (Pawar, 2009, p. 101). The public space of the school becomes a space of exposure, vulnerability, and potential humiliation, where caste and economic disparities are highlighted.

By examining the dynamics of food taboos, Mary Douglas highlights how food practices become powerful symbols of social identity and hierarchy in caste-based societies (Douglas, 1966). These taboos not only regulate dietary habits but also dictate social interactions and relationships, perpetuating caste-based discrimination and inequality. In the chapter *Bizarre Foods: Food, Filth, and the Foreign in the Culinary Contact Zone*, Gitanjali Shahani writes, “In the contact zone, particularly, food is frequently the object of disgust precisely because it is the marker of sameness and difference (Shahani, 2020, p. 118). The distaste and disgust associated with the dietary practices and foodways of outsiders like Dalits are apparent in the culinary contact zone shared by the Dalits and higher castes. In the narrative, Urmila's experience exemplifies the deep-seated prejudices and social ostracism faced by Dalits, where even the simplest acts of hospitality and sharing become tainted by caste-based biases. On one occasion, during the celebration of her younger daughter Manini's birthday, Pawar extends an invitation to her friend Kishore to join them in partaking of the birthday cake:

Kishore and her brother came, ate the cake, and went home after celebrating the birthday. Kishore's brother told his mother that he had seen photographs of Ambedkar and Buddha in our house. The next day, Kishore's mother came and stood at our door. Without even stepping inside, she started abusing us. “We did not know that you belonged to this particular caste! That is why I sent my children to you. From now on, don't give my daughter anything to eat if she comes to your house. We are Marathas. We cannot eat with you. (Pawar, 2009, p. 202).

Kishore's mother's outright refusal to allow her daughter to eat anything given by Urmila emphasizes the deep-seated beliefs in purity and pollution that underpin caste-based discrimination. The rejection and disdain faced by Urmila illustrate how food practices become potent symbols of Dalit identity and the pervasive discrimination faced by Dalit communities.

Joothan refers to leftover food or food touched by upper-caste individuals, which Dalits often consume due to societal discrimination and caste-based oppression. The practice of begging for leftover joothan from upper-caste households, despite having sufficient food, underscores the internalized inferiority and enforced subservience imposed on Dalits. Urmila Pawar's autobiography sheds light on the normalization of the consumption of joothan among Dalit communities in India, as she writes, “Food was never scarce in the house. On the contrary, on the next day, Dhulwad, we cooked plenty of mutton and chicken and a big potful of rice in our house. Thorolibay would make plenty of vadas with chickpea flour. Yet her daughters-in-law would go begging for the festive food” (Pawar, 2009, p. 51). It reflects the painful concessions made to survive in a casteist society, where even well-off Dalit families could be compelled into demeaning acts to assert a semblance of social belonging. This scenario is indicative of how deeply entrenched caste norms can operate independently of economic status. The insistence on collecting joothan, despite economic sufficiency, illustrates how caste-based practices and humiliations are perpetuated, revealing the enduring power of social norms that dictate behaviors and societal expectations, even in the face of changing economic circumstances.

Conversely, in the private domain, food becomes a source of comfort, resistance, and a tool for instilling resilience. The memories of consuming ambeel, a sour porridge, affectionately cooked by her aunt highlight how love and care can transform even the most unpalatable meals into something emotionally fulfilling. The act of sharing such meals within the family becomes a moment of solidarity, resilience, and an affirmation of identity amidst external adversities. Pawar's mother's role is pivotal in this narrative. She encourages the kids to eat food that is “almost impossible to swallow” such as husk bhakri by saying “Only people who can eat such food can do good in life” (Pawar, 2009, p. 94-95). Her stories and assurances serve as a beacon of hope and resilience for her children.

For the Mahar community, the act of fantasizing about food is a strategic mechanism for survival, offering a temporary escape from the harsh realities of their circumstances. By telling the story of the Dalit boy who imagines curry in his empty bowl, the mother teaches her children about resilience and dignity. The act of

imagining curry in the bowl while eating dry bhakri is a psychological coping mechanism that reflects the human capacity to find solace, hope, and sustenance beyond the material. Her stories imbue them with the strength to endure hardships, emphasizing that the ability to withstand unpalatable circumstances is integral to their survival and success. Moreover, the camaraderie and shared laughter over meals within the safety of home serve as a powerful antidote to the bitterness of discrimination. These moments are a testament to the power of familial bonds in providing a sense of normalcy and joy amidst external turmoil.

The local marginalized communities, like Pawar's, are relegated to consuming only the fallen, often spoiled fruits like mangoes. Pawar's recounting of how her family consumed jackfruit is another layer in the narrative of survival and resilience. The strategic consumption of jackfruit before meals, to reduce overall food intake, is a poignant example of the coping mechanisms employed by economically disadvantaged families. The cooking methods described by Pawar, using jackfruit seeds to make curry or simply boiling them with salt, illustrate the adaptability and creativity in culinary practices under constraints. These methods not only ensured that no part of the food was wasted but also that meals were nutritious to some extent, despite the limited options.

Urmila Pawar reflects on her childhood experiences when she was fed by an upper-caste friend of her father for a week, experiencing the richness and variety of their cuisine. The sumptuous spread of delicacies such as pickles, papads, rice, ghee, curd, vegetables, and shrikhand captivated her, offering a stark contrast to her usual diet as a poor Mahar. This fascination extended to her curiosity about upper-caste dishes such as poli, dadape pohe, and dashmi, which were considered inaccessible to her due to her lower-caste status. Pawar instinctively understood the social divide reflected in food choices and terminology. While the upper castes enjoyed sweetmeats like ladu and modak, along with dishes like karanjya and puranpolya, these were unfamiliar and unattainable to her as a result of her lower caste background (Pawar, 2009, p. 93). The book vividly portrays the stark contrast in culinary experiences between the upper caste and Dalit communities, as seen through the eyes of Urmila Pawar during her childhood.

Pawar also discusses the phenomenon of Sanskritization, a concept introduced by M.N. Srinivas, wherein Dalits aspire for upward social mobility by imitating and adopting the cultural practices and customs of the Brahmin caste. This emulation extends beyond mere imitation of behaviors; it encompasses aspects of language, dietary habits, and culinary practices as well. In the narrative, it raises internal conflicts within the family. Pawar's sister, for instance, teaches her to prepare dishes like waran bhat, a rice dish associated with Brahmin cuisine. Pawar's mother's criticism of her daughter's adoption of these culinary practices that require expensive ingredients like oil and sugar highlights the clash between aspirations for social mobility and the practical realities of economic hardship.

II. CONCLUSION

Food plays a crucial role in shaping Dalit identity, serving as a site of both oppression and resistance. The food choices, consumption practices, and culinary traditions of Dalits reflect their historical experiences of caste-based discrimination. Pawar's narrative intricately weaves food as a symbol that captures the essence of Dalit struggle, identity, and defiance against caste-based marginalization. It highlights how food practices and social interactions are deeply intertwined with caste-based notions of purity and pollution. Her evocative recounting of culinary traditions not only reflects the socio-political realities of Dalit lives but also asserts the power of gastronomy as a form of cultural expression and empowerment. This memoir exemplifies the thematic core of the paper, illustrating how the metaphorical potency of food in Dalit literature provides a nuanced lens to understand and appreciate the complex interplay of sustenance, identity, and survival within marginalized communities.

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