

Who Will Eat the Leftovers? Identity of Subaltern Section as the Eaters of the Leftover Food

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Abstract

Food is a fundamental requirement of human beings. Numerous appreciable contents of critical work have been produced concerning the significance of food in modeling one's personal and cultural identity. Food sources that you eat govern your health, look, and vitality. The same source indubitably constructs your identity as well, willingly or not, is another question.

The paper exclusively pinpoints the food habits of the Dalit community with reference to the novels *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, *Scavenger's Son* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, and *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki. The symbolic imagery of food is, in a way, the prototype of the recurring patterns of imagery in literature while simultaneously exposing the convictions of cuisine. A closer analysis of the three different novels reveals that food has been used as a symbolic image of seclusion despite the linguistic and cultural differences between the novels.

Keywords: *Untouchable*, *Scavenger's Son*, *Joothan*, food, subaltern, culture, identity, symbol

Introduction

Prior to the distinguishing phenomena of social identity lies the manifestation of one's culture. A person's lifestyle and community-based setup depend more or less on their clothing, manner of speech, high-status profession, the songs they hear, the food they consume, and many more. Numerous appreciable contents of critical work have been produced concerning the significance of food in modeling one's personal and cultural identity. Food sources that you eat govern your health, look, and vitality. The same source indubitably constructs your identity as well, willingly or not, is another question.

Food is an inevitable part of our life. It plays an essential role in the emergence of social hierarchies and the negotiation of power and identity. Food habits play a significant role in determining the identity of a person. Society gives importance to the food habits of upper-class people. Economically backward communities are often gone unnoticed. Even the government authorities hesitate to accept this fact. It is believed that the untouchables are supposed to eat only the leftovers of upper-class people. This has become so common that it is even seen as a natural food cycle.

Leftover foods are for the untouchables. This old notion has created a different identity for untouchables – eaters of the leftover. Food scarcity means eating everything they can lay their hands on – which is usually everything the upper class has allowed them to eat. This paper focuses on how the subaltern groups developed an identity through food.

Selected works

How did the conditions of the subaltern groups get disclosed to society? The autobiographies written by members of the particular groups and other novels based on them played an essential role in the disclosure. A closer analysis of each of the three different novels reveals that food has been used as a symbolic image of seclusion despite the linguistic and cultural differences between the novels.

Mulk Raj Anand's masterpiece, *Untouchables*, is one of the first Indian novels to give a crystal-clear idea of the life of the subaltern section. It depicts a day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper who is untouchable due to his work cleaning latrines. The plot revolves around the argument for eradicating the caste system.

Thottiyude Makan, written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, is a Malayalam novel translated to English as *Scavenger's Son* by R. E. Asher. The novel portrays three generations of working-

classfamilies engaged in Alleppey as scavengers. It explicitly captures the nuances of class consciousness and the subsequent revolutions taking place in the small town.

The third novel, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, is an autobiographical account of his experience of growing up as a Dalit in the newly independent India of the 1950s. *Joothan* portrays the Dalit history and a manifesto for the revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness.

Untouchables, Scavenger's Son and Joothan

In the novel *Untouchables*, Bakha, the protagonist, is presented as a person who wants to step out of the shackles of untouchability and lead a decent life. He admires the English people. Bakha unenthusiastically begins his day by cleaning the latrines. Then he goes to collect food from the upper-class families. They are not allowed to step into the compound of the upper-class houses as it will pollute the sanctity of the house. He has to call "Bread for the sweeper, mother" (Anand 29). If the upper class has any leftover food, they will answer his call. At one place, a woman asked him to clean the latrine in exchange for food. While he was doing his job, the woman threw the stale chapati to Bakha, and it fell into the gutter. Bakha took the food and moved toward his house. The same lady gave fresh food to the sadhu who came with Bakha. One can see that the food they receive is of different types based on their status in society.

Another instance is when Rakha, Bakha's brother, brings in all the leftover food he collected from upper-class houses, and the entire family eats it together. "There was a heap of food there, broken pieces of chapatis, some whole ones and lentil curry in a bowl" (Anand 76). Bakha hesitates to eat that food. "The picture of a sepoy washing his hands in his round brass tray, over the leaving of bread and salad and then throwing them in Rakha's basket appeared before him" (77).

The upper class always served the untouchables in separate utensils; most were usually broken and old. When Bakha went to meet Charan Singh, he served Bakha tea in the pan from which sparrows drank water. "'Get the pan from which sparrows drink water,' he said to Bakha, pointing to the foot of a wooden pillar. 'Pour out the water from it'" (Anand 99). Bakha, without objecting, followed his instructions. All these people accept their condition as it is because they believe that it is their fate. They believe that the leftovers mark their identity.

Though the female characters are not dealt with in detail, they have an essential role to play. Sohini becomes an object of sex in the eyes of the upper-caste Hindus. Being an untouchable is a sin, but touching an untouchable for quenching one's carnal thirst is not deemed as a sin by the caste Hindus. There is an instance in the novel where the temple priest molests Sohini, and when she reacts to his suggestions by screaming, the priest covers his disgusting act by putting the blame on Sohini. He smartly converts the molesting into an action of defiling. He accuses Sohini of touching him and polluting him by contact. "You people have only been polluted by distance. I have been defiled by contact" (53).

In *Scavenger's Son*, one gets to see another untouchable who fights hard against his circumstances to give his son a decent future. At the novel's beginning, after his father's death, Ishikkumuthu, Chudalamuttu replaces his father. As he completed his morning shift, the hotel owner asked him to bring the broken plate to the top of the toilet for food. When he did as he was asked to do, he got the leftover food from the customers. In the novel, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai emphasizes the forces of heredity and environment operating in the lives of outcasts. Muthu becomes aware of the strong influence of such forces when his son insists on eating with him from the same bowl. In a mood of frustration, he looks at the situation.

Whatever stale leftover food is collected in a pot from houses and brought by keeping it on the scavenger's cart is to be given to the child. Thus, he must grow up. The son of a scavenger cannot grow up without eating such filth. If it is not given, he will ask for it. It is more delicious to him than the biscuits. Because the taste for it is hereditary. (Pillai 17)

The third novel *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki, portrays the central character amidst similar circumstances and identifying himself with Bakha and Muthu. Om Prakash Valmiki equates 'Joothan' to scraps of food left on a plate destined for the garbage or animals. The untouchables in India have been forced to accept and eat joothan for centuries. The word encapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of a community forced to live at the bottom of the social pyramid. Valmiki describes how his community depends on the leftover food thrown out by the upper castes in return for their hard but unpaid work. The community had to rely on the mercy of the upper castes, who exploited them, instead of paying for the labor.

The title of the autobiography *Joothan* literally means food left on an eater's plate, usually destined for the garbage pail in a middle-class, urban home. Valmiki gives a detailed

description of collecting, preserving, and eating joothan. He was assigned the work of guarding the drying joothan against crows and chickens. They used to relish the dried and reprocessed joothan. These memories of the past burn him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present. One of the most powerful moments in the novel is when Valmiki's mother overturns a basket full of joothan before Mr. Tyagi, against humiliation. Sukhdev Singh pointed at the basket full of dirty pattals and said,

“You are taking a basket full of joothan. And on top of that, you want food for your children. Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going.” That instant, she emptied the basket right there and said to Sukhdev Singh, “Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baratis tomorrow morning.” (11)

She confronted him like a lioness when he pounced on her to hit her. This act of defiance by Valmiki's mother sows the seeds of rebellion in the child.

In all three novels, food is shown as an object of suppression. Albeit the geographical differences, the condition of the outcasts is similar. They are scavengers who suffer from untouchability and humiliation. Even after an entire day's work, what they get is leftovers. The upper-class people believe that the subaltern groups are meant to eat their leftovers. Wherever they go, they get this food. This ultimately creates their identity.

Conclusion

The three central characters, Bakha, Chudalamuthu, and Valmiki, are brought up in a society that sustained themselves with whatever they received from the economically high-placed people. Later it became a part of their identity. They became the scavengers of society. Apart from the leftovers, the Dalits eat the blood of animals butchered and the parts of the animal the upper class throws away as waste. These ultimately serve as the main ingredient in Dalit cuisine.

Through various food images and food habits, the novels provide an insight into the deeper social forces that transmute the social fabric and try to capture the spirit of their times and reveal the historical development. The paper focuses on how the subaltern groups are still forced to satisfy themselves with unhygienic food and how this became a part of their identity. Even in the post-independent era, our society has not transformed enough to accept the subalterns as fellow humans; then, we should rethink our notion of freedom and equality.

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