

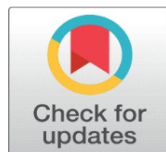
THE POLITICS OF THE PLATE: CASTE AND CONSUMPTION IN JOOTHAN

Priyadarsini Pradhan ¹, Dr. Pranati Das ², Dr. Sudarsan Sahoo ³

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of English, GIET University, Gunupur & Assistant Professor, Department of English, GEC Autonomous College, Bhubaneswar, India

² Professor, Department of English, GIET University, Gunupur, India

Assistant Professor of English Parala Maharaja Engineering College, Berhampur, India



Corresponding Author

Priyadarsini Pradhan,
priyadarsinipradhan5@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.6135](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.6135)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

ABSTRACT

Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, stands as a seminal work in Dalit literature, offering an unflinching testimony to the brutalities of caste oppression in post-independence India. This paper argues that in *Joothan*, the consumption of ritually polluted, leftover food—the eponymous *joothan*—is not merely an indicator of poverty but a central and systemic mechanism of caste-based violence, humiliation, and the dehumanization of Dalits. The narrative meticulously demonstrates how food and commensality operate as a primary site for the performance of upper-caste power and the enforcement of a rigid social hierarchy. Drawing upon an analytical framework that combines the sociology of food, caste studies, and theories of purity and pollution, this paper examines the material and symbolic weight of *joothan*. It first establishes the theoretical underpinnings of food-based caste rules before analyzing how the forced consumption of waste functions as a tool of subjugation, inflicting deep psychological trauma. Conversely, the paper explores how acts of refusal—rejecting the polluted scraps—and the autonomous preparation of food become pivotal moments of resistance and the reclamation of Dalit dignity. By tracing this politics of the plate, the paper highlights *Joothan's* profound contribution to understanding the visceral, everyday experience of structural violence and the complex process of forging a resistant Dalit identity in the face of systemic degradation. The analysis concludes by connecting Valmiki's narrative to the persistence of food-based discrimination in contemporary India, affirming the text's enduring relevance.

Keywords: Joothan, Caste, Dalit Literature, Commensality, Dehumanization, Resistance, Structural Violence



1. INTRODUCTION

In cultures across the globe, food is far more than sustenance. The acts of preparing, sharing, and consuming food are deeply embedded in the social fabric, serving as fundamental markers of identity, community, and social relations. In India, this social life of food is freighted with an exceptional weight, governed by millennia-old codes of conduct that dictate who can cook for whom, who can dine with whom, and what can be eaten.

Commensality—the practice of eating together—is a powerful barometer of social proximity and hierarchy. To share a meal is to affirm a bond of equality and inclusion; to refuse it is to enforce a boundary of separation and status. It is within this deeply stratified context that Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, emerges as a shattering counter-narrative.

Published in Hindi in 1997, *Joothan* dismantles romanticized notions of Indian village life, exposing the raw, visceral reality of growing up as an "untouchable" in the newly independent nation that had constitutionally abolished the

practice. Valmiki's account is not merely a personal memoir of hardship but a political testimony, a crucial contribution to the "archives of Dalit history" that gives voice to the long-silenced sufferings of an entire community. The title itself, which translates to polluted leftovers or scraps from a plate, functions as a potent metaphor for the systemic dehumanization of Dalits, who were historically forced to subsist on the waste of the upper castes.

This paper argues that in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, food and its consumption transcend biological necessity to become the primary lens through which the politics of caste is enacted and experienced. By focusing on the symbolic and material weight of joothan, Valmiki illustrates how the plate is a site of structural violence, ritualized humiliation, and ultimately, a crucible for forging a resistant Dalit identity. The narrative reveals that the offering of leftovers is not an act of charity but a calculated transaction designed to perpetuate economic dependency and reinforce a social hierarchy that relegates Dalits to a sub-human status.

To develop this argument, this paper will first examine the theoretical underpinnings of purity and pollution that govern food practices within the Hindu caste system. It will then proceed with a close textual analysis of joothan as a tool of dehumanization, exploring its economic and psychological impact on the Valmiki family. Following this, the analysis will shift to food as a site of resistance, focusing on pivotal moments of refusal and the assertion of dignity through culinary autonomy. Finally, the conclusion will synthesize these findings and connect Valmiki's historical narrative to the enduring politics of the plate, demonstrating how food-based caste discrimination continues to manifest in contemporary India.

To comprehend the profound significance of joothan in Valmiki's narrative, one must first understand the ideological architecture of the caste system, which is built upon a fundamental opposition between purity (*shuddha*) and pollution (*ashuddha*). This binary, central to Brahminical Hinduism, is not merely about physical cleanliness but is a deeply entrenched system of ritual, moral, and social hierarchy. As articulated by the French sociologist Louis Dumont in his seminal work *Homo Hierarchicus*, this opposition between the pure and the impure is the foundational principle that structures the entire caste system, dictating social separation, interdependence, and the division of labor. Within this framework, Brahmins, as priests and scholars, occupy the apex of purity, while Dalits, historically relegated to "polluting" occupations such as handling human waste, animal carcasses, and leather, are considered to be in a state of permanent, hereditary impurity.

This ideology of purity and pollution is meticulously mapped onto the domain of food and commensality, creating a complex web of restrictions that govern every aspect of consumption. These rules are not arbitrary; they are the practical, everyday enforcement of caste boundaries. The key variables include the type of food, the caste of the cook, the caste of the person being served, and the context of the meal. A central distinction is made between *kaccha* and *pakka* food. *Kaccha* food, cooked with water (like rice, lentils, and certain breads), is considered highly susceptible to ritual pollution and is generally accepted only from members of one's own or a superior caste. It signifies intimacy and is typically reserved for family fare. *Pakka* food, on the other hand, is cooked in ghee (clarified butter), which is seen as a purifying agent. This makes *pakka* food more resistant to pollution and thus transactionable across a wider, though still restricted, range of castes, often served at feasts and to guests of high status.

These transactions are rarely reciprocal. As anthropologist McKim Marriott demonstrated, the flow of food is a primary determinant of caste rank: givers of food are inherently superior to receivers. A caste's position in the local hierarchy can be mapped by observing who accepts food from whom. This creates a system where every meal can be an affirmation of the social order, a constant, low-level performance of caste status. It functions as a form of social surveillance, a "gastronomic panopticon" where individuals internalize and police the rules of commensality, thereby perpetuating the hierarchy in their most intimate, daily routines.

At the bottom of this elaborate food hierarchy lies joothan. The term is not a simple synonym for "leftovers." It specifically refers to food that has been rendered ritually impure because it has been eaten from, and thus polluted by the saliva of, an upper-caste individual. This food is considered garbage (*jutha*), unfit for consumption by anyone of equal or higher status than the original eater. However, in the perverse logic of the caste system, this maximally polluted substance is deemed acceptable, and indeed designated, for Dalits. The consumption of joothan is therefore the ultimate act of social abjection. It institutionalizes the role of the Dalit as the absorber of the ritual and physical waste of the upper castes. By consuming the impurity of others, Dalits are forced to embody their own polluted status, making the act of eating—the very thing that sustains life—a tool for their symbolic death and dehumanization.

In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki moves these theoretical concepts from the abstract to the brutally concrete. Through a series of searing vignettes, he illustrates how the practice of collecting and consuming joothan is not a peripheral detail

of poverty but the central, organizing experience of humiliation in his childhood. The plate of scraps becomes a microcosm of the structural violence that defines Dalit life.

Valmiki's most vivid and painful memories are tied to the collection of joothan from the wedding feasts of the upper-caste Tyagis in his village. He describes the scene with excruciating detail: his mother and other Dalit women waiting with large baskets outside the feast, hoping for the leftover food from the guests' leaf-plates (pattals). The young Valmiki is often a participant, standing alongside his mother, witnessing her begging for the scraps. He recounts the visceral reality of the act: "scraping the joothan from the leaf plates" and gathering the sullied pieces of bread (puris) and sweets.

The narrative power comes from the dual perspective of the child experiencing the event and the adult author reliving it. The adult Valmiki reflects on these memories with a renewed sense of pain and revulsion, emphasizing the permanence of the psychological wound. He writes, "These memories of the past burn him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present". The act of writing itself is an act of confronting this trauma, of trying to make sense of a system that reduces human beings to scavengers. His anguished question, "What sort of life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan" (Valmiki, *Joothan*, p. 11), encapsulates the profound sense of injustice and exploitation that defines the experience.

Valmiki makes it devastatingly clear that the giving of joothan is not an act of charity but a calculated transaction within an economy of subjugation. The scraps are a form of payment for the myriad unpaid or barely paid menial tasks his community is forced to perform—sweeping the village, cleaning cattle sheds, disposing of dead animals, and providing back-breaking labor during harvests. This system creates an inescapable cycle of economic dependency. By withholding proper wages and controlling the means of production, the upper castes engineer a state of perpetual hunger and then present their own polluted waste as the only "solution".

This transaction is a potent performance of power. It constantly reminds the Dalits of their place, reinforcing their sub-human status by communicating that they are worthy only of consuming what others have discarded. The act of giving is an act of othering, a ritual that maintains the social distance and hierarchy between the "pure" giver and the "polluted" receiver. It weaponizes the fundamental biological need for food, trapping Dalits in a "choiceless choice": either starve or participate in their own ritual degradation. The plate, in this context, becomes an instrument of psychological torture. The most insidious effect of this practice is the deep psychological trauma it inflicts, leading to the internalization of shame and a sense of worthlessness. Growing up in a world where your community subsists on garbage teaches a child to see himself and his people as garbage. Valmiki describes this wound with a powerful metaphor: "a scratch appeared on my mind like a line scratched on glass. It remains there still" (Valmiki, *Joothan*, p. 45). This is not a fleeting hurt but a permanent scar on the psyche, a trauma that is both individual and collective.

The shame is compounded by the fact that this degradation is normalized, even relished out of desperation. Valmiki recalls how the dried puris from the joothan, saved for the rainy season, were considered a delicacy. This memory, recalled from the perspective of an educated adult, is filled with revulsion and pain, highlighting the psychological dissonance between the child's survival instinct and the adult's understanding of his own dehumanization. The constant exposure to such humiliation creates what Valmiki calls a "terror-filled environment" where Dalit children are "locked in their own shells", developing personality traits of introversion, anxiety, and low self-esteem. The experience of consuming joothan is thus an experience of consuming shame, an act that inscribes inferiority directly onto the body and into the soul.

While *Joothan* is a harrowing account of oppression, it is equally a powerful narrative of resistance. Valmiki meticulously documents the moments when the cycle of humiliation is broken, when the demeaning scraps are refused, and when the act of eating is reclaimed as a source of dignity. The narrative maps a clear evolution of resistance, from the spontaneous, embodied defiance of his mother to his own conscious, politically-informed refusal as an adult. The most electrifying moment of resistance in the book centers on Valmiki's mother. During a wedding feast, after being condescendingly dismissed by the upper-caste host,

Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, she does the unthinkable. Tyagi tells her, "Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going" (Valmiki, *Joothan*, p. 12). In that instant, something snaps. Valmiki writes that "the mother Goddess Durga entered my mother's eyes" (Valmiki, *Joothan*, p. 12). She empties the entire basket of joothan at his feet and retorts, "Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baratis tomorrow morning".

This act is a profound political and emotional rupture. She confronts Tyagi "like a lioness", refusing to be the passive, grateful recipient of his waste. Her rebellion is visceral and immediate, a powerful assertion of self-respect in the face of

unbearable insult. For the young Valmiki, witnessing this transformation is a formative experience that "sows the seeds of rebellion" in him. This scene is a testament to the agency of Dalit women, who, despite being doubly marginalized by caste and patriarchy, are shown to be capable of fierce and courageous defiance. Beyond overt acts of refusal, a quieter but equally significant form of

resistance lies in the act of preparing and consuming one's own food. While the autobiography is steeped in descriptions of extreme poverty, the moments when the family cooks for itself represent a reclamation of autonomy and dignity. Preparing a meal, no matter how meager, outside the demeaning economy of leftovers, is an assertion of self-sufficiency.

It carves out a domestic space free from the polluting gaze and condescending "charity" of the upper castes. The kitchen, traditionally a site governed by strict rules of purity and pollution, is transformed into a space of Dalit identity, community, and pride. This act of cooking for oneself is a fundamental step toward breaking the cycle of dependency and reclaiming the right to nourish one's own body with dignity.

Valmiki's narrative also presents a more complex form of agency in the scene where his mother carefully dries and preserves the leftover puris collected from the joothan. These are stored to be eaten or even sold during the lean monsoon months. On the surface, this might appear to be a passive acceptance of their degraded status. However, a deeper analysis reveals it as a desperate but shrewd act of survival that subtly subverts the intended humiliation. The upper castes offer joothan as a symbol of the Dalits' worthlessness. By turning this instrument of shame into a tangible economic resource, however meager, Valmiki's mother refuses to let it remain solely a symbol of their degradation. She extracts value from the very substance meant to devalue her, demonstrating a resilient agency even within the most oppressive of structures. It is a quiet but powerful act of re-appropriation, a refusal to let the tool of their oppression be mere waste.

The final stage in this evolution of resistance is Valmiki's own journey, which is inextricably linked to his education. Although his school years are filled with humiliation, education provides him with the critical consciousness to understand his personal pain as part of a systemic injustice. His discovery of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's writings is a pivotal moment, giving him a political language and framework for his experiences. This intellectual awakening culminates in a powerful scene in his adulthood. When an upper-caste acquaintance from his village visits him and casually asks his wife for some joothan to pass on to Valmiki, assuming he would still accept it, Valmiki erupts in anger. His refusal is not just an emotional reaction like his mother's; it is a conscious, politically-informed act. He is rejecting not just the food, but the entire identity that the caste system has tried to impose on him. This journey from his mother's visceral defiance to his own intellectual and political refusal mirrors the broader trajectory of the Dalit movement itself—from localized acts of rebellion to a structured, Ambedkarite-inspired political struggle for liberation.

Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan masterfully dissects the anatomy of caste oppression by placing the politics of food at its center. The narrative moves beyond a simple account of poverty to reveal how the most basic human act of consumption is weaponized to enforce a brutal social hierarchy. The offering and acceptance of joothan is exposed not as charity but as a ritual of dehumanization, a transaction that cements economic subjugation while inflicting deep and lasting psychological wounds. Yet, Joothan is also a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Through powerful acts of refusal, from his mother's spontaneous rebellion to his own educated defiance, Valmiki demonstrates that the plate can also be a site of resistance, where dignity is reclaimed and a new, assertive Dalit identity is forged. The chilling power of Joothan lies in its enduring relevance. The mechanisms of oppression Valmiki describes are not relics of a bygone era; they persist and mutate in contemporary India, proving his autobiography to be both a historical record and a diagnostic tool for the present. The logic of purity and pollution that deemed Valmiki's family worthy only of scraps is the same logic at play in modern-day mid-day meal schemes in government schools. Numerous reports document incidents where upper-caste students refuse to eat meals cooked by a Dalit bhojanmata (cook), or where Dalit children are forced to sit separately, their plates and bodies still considered polluting. The school meal, intended to foster equality, becomes yet another arena for enforcing caste boundaries.

Joothan leaves the reader with the lingering, bitter aftertaste of caste. It forces a confrontation with the uncomfortable truth that the struggle for Dalit liberation is not merely for abstract political rights or economic parity. It is a struggle for the most fundamental markers of human dignity: the right to share a meal without shame, to enter a kitchen without fear, and to eat from a clean plate, free from the historical and psychological contamination of joothan. Valmiki's powerful testimony reminds us that until every person in India can eat with dignity, the promise of equality remains an empty one, and the feast of the nation will continue to be haunted by the specter of its polluted scraps.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Quest for Revolt in Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki - Redalyc, <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/7038/703873550004/html/>
- Hindu Dietary Laws, https://pressfolios-production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/story/story_pdf/191541/1915411458281666.pdf
- Caste: The Main Character of Indian Food Ragini Kashyap, <https://www.oxfordsymposium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Kashyap.pdf>
- Agonies of Being a Dalit in Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan: A Study., <https://ijesrr.org/publication/98/600.%20jan%202024%20ijesrr.pdf>
- Echoes of Injustice: Analyzing Caste-based Oppression in Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan - The Criterion: An International Journal in English, <https://www.the-criterion.com/V16/n1/IN22.pdf>
- Contextualize Louis Dumont's concept of binary opposition' with reference to caste system in India. - Sociology OWL, <https://upscsociology.in/contextualize-louis-dumonts-concept-of-binary-opposition-with-reference-to-caste-system-in-india/>
- Symbolism of Food in Hinduism - Longdom Publishing SL, <https://www.longdom.org/open-access/symbolism-of-food-in-hinduism-83596.html>
- Features of caste system, https://www.iilsindia.com/study-material/906572_1624807910.pptx
- Caste Ranking and Food Transactions: A Matrix Analysis - ResearchGate, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345510099_Caste_Ranking_and_Food_Transactions_A_Matrix_Analysis
- Dalit Literature : Issues and Trends - SciSpace, <https://scispace.com/pdf/dalit-literature-issues-and-trends-3f8wsds5l2.pdf>