

LITSCROLL



BEYOND THE PLATE

VOLUME 6
2025-26

ON THE MENU



FROM THE EDITORS' DESK

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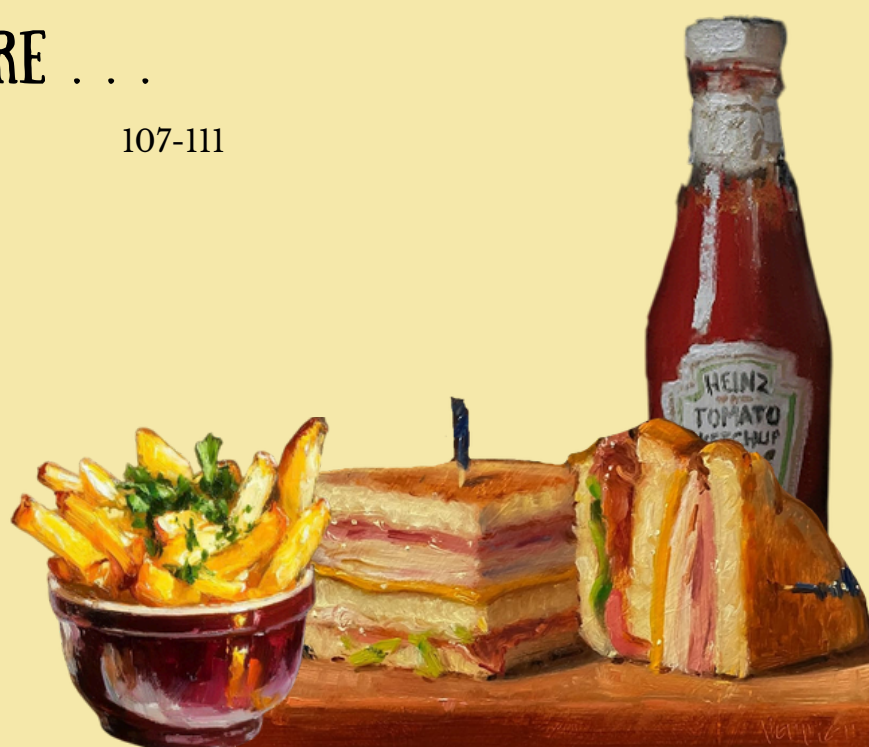
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FROM THE EDITORS' DESK



Dear Readers,

We are thrilled to present to you, “Beyond the Plate”, the sixth volume of LitScroll. Everyday, we sit before a table and feast—oblivious to the weight of history every spice carries, the hands that labored to lay the spread, the culture, and the systems that determine what goes in it. A cuisine evolves through centuries of history, a dish simmers differently in the hands of every generation that inherits it, traversing borders, oceans and cultures. From the time of mortar and pestle to the era of espresso machines and airfryers, we have never simply cooked—we have coded our hierarchies of class, caste, access, and taste into every meal.

For the curious minds who want to go further, this edition also breaks down the basics of food theory through a literary lens: with book recommendations, key terminology, and an interview with a food scholar.

As Editor and Sub-Editor, working on *Beyond the Plate* has been an enriching journey of collaboration, learning, and shared purpose. Every submission challenged us to think more deeply about the many meanings food carries beyond nourishment. This volume is the result of months of thoughtful discussions, careful editing, and the collective effort of an incredibly dedicated team. We are sincerely grateful to our Editorial Board and every member of LitScroll, whose creativity, commitment, and enthusiasm made this edition possible. It has been a privilege to bring these voices together, and we hope this volume inspires meaningful conversations long after its final page.

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to our Principal Prof. (Sr.) Molly K.A, whose commitment to the students has been a constant source of inspiration and encouragement. This volume owes its existence to our Staff Advisor, Dr. Sugandha Sehgal, who allowed us the freedom and space to express ourselves, while consistently driving us towards perfection. From the first meeting of the magazine's inception to its completion, it was the combined efforts of each member that made this endeavour possible.

Lastly, we extend my heartfelt gratitude to the contributors for sending their creative write-ups without which the successful compilation of this magazine would not have been possible.

With gratitude,

Aamna
Editor, LitScroll

Muskan
Sub-Editor, LitScroll



STANZA STEW (POETRY)



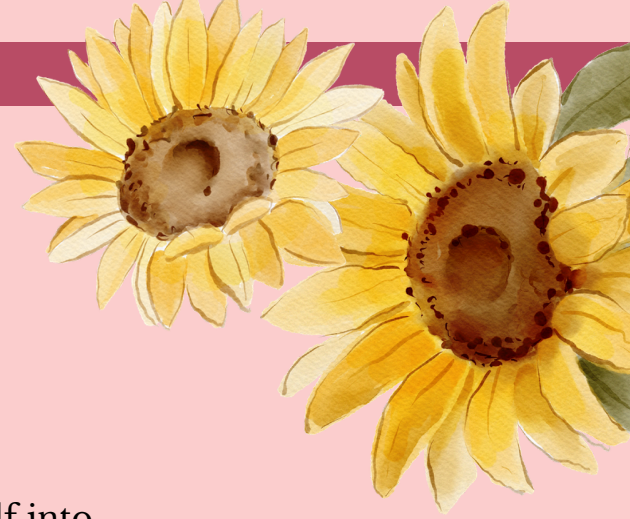
THREE DIFFERENT NATIONS IN ONE

Avishi Chug, B.A. (Hons.) English, 1st Year

I sit crowned with microgreens
on a silver-polished plate,
dressed with feta cheese.
I could be just an avocado toast,
but am first garnished for pictures
before serving my purpose of hunger,
so that the rich can be pleased
with imported olives and sunflower seeds.
So that before they eat, the rich can
subtly tease, subtly tease.

Thin layer of butter covers me whole.
a thick cheesy slice on Sundays,
but usually just cucumber and tomatoes
live with me within the lunchbox walls,
I am a mere sandwich ,
like the mere family that eats me,
limited to dream and achieve their goals,
Caught between the bills and payrolls.





A single roti stretches itself into
a meal
on an empty plate like me,
small and dry yet on fortune
days
feels no less than a full feast.
Am glad that no one
photographs me
because I fill only the stomach,
not anyone's social needs,
not anyone's pride or greed.

Three different nations
live in the same country as me.
Rich, middle and poor
discussing diet and calories,
other discussing salaries,
and the later praying that
tomorrow-
filled their plates will be,

Three different nations
live,
live in the same country
as me.



WHAT I EAT, YOU CANNOT

Aarushi, 3rd Year, BAP (English Major)

Your leftovers are my daily meal.
For what's poison to you
is dinner to me.

Some eat organic because they choose to;
some survive on toxins because they have to.

They choose from a variety of dishes;
I choose whatever I can afford.

Your standards reject it;
my stomach accepts it.

What's toxic to you
is dinner for me.

My pocket decides the flavour I get to taste.
My heart rejects it,
but my mind whispers,
"Behave. Listen to me.
Eat the toxins.
That's your daily need."

You read the ingredients;
I read the price tag.

Where you search for healthy,
I search for affordability.

I compromise for survival,
while your lifestyle decides
what your cart carries.



Those people sent it back,
calling it unsafe.
Yet somehow,
it still found a home on my plate.

No standards feed my family;
those leftovers only care for me.

No principles.
No manners.

When hunger finds me,
just give me your leftovers.

I learned to respect every grain,
not because I should,
but because I have to.

It's a rare day
when my plate looks rich—
a little butter chicken,
a spoon of shahi paneer,
given to me
after others were full.

What is too much for you
is dinner to me.

Remember,
when purity is sold as luxury,
poison becomes a necessity.

And what's poison for you
remains dinner for me.





NUTELLA

Anonymous



Me and my sister are sitting in our room,
eating Nutella straight out of the jar with a spoon
when she says, "It's too sweet by the end of it."

And I think of how true it is, even for the time I reached the end of my
girlhood,
when my mother became closer to me, warmer to me,
told stories about my alcoholic father to me,
showed me a love I'd never known till I was sixteen.

My sister jokes, "You sure you didn't get diabetes?"
The joke is such a joke in the way it's so bittersweet.
So thank you, Sophia, for eating chocolate with me
and showing me love in places where my mother could never reach.





DAL CHAWAL



Manya Sharma, B.A. (Hons.) English, 1st year

Nani never said, “I love you.” She said, “*Kha le*,” and meant the same thing every time.

And if I didn’t, she would tell me I’d return as a cockroach in my next life and eat it then.

I found it silly, but you would never find a single grain of rice left in my thali.

The dal was always left on a slow flame as I oiled her hair and she told me her funny stories.

She kept our bellies full as though it were something almost religious to her, her hands were so motherly; they fed me and the birds with the same warmth.



Hot summer nights, sitting on the floor,
a hundred kinds of pickles she had made herself,
arranged on the plate as though all the colours of the world had been summoned
to decorate the thali.

Dal chawal, made with so much love,
that every ounce of laughter filling the kitchen while it cooked seemed to find its
way onto my tongue with every bite I took.



I spent years asking my mother to make Nani-wale dal chawal, never realizing the prefix I had attached to the food itself.

Even now, somewhere, I find myself looking forward to summer vacations-
not necessarily because of the break,
but because of the dal chawal.

The food that feels like home.

And that makes me wonder whether home was ever really about four walls and a roof.

I find myself asking: Was it the dal chawal, or was it the fact that Nani made it that made it feel so sacred?

Was it the dal chawal, or the coriander leaves resting atop the bowl, grown by the same loving hands that fed me?

She watched me eat the way one watches the rain-glad that it came.

Now, even during summer vacations, I live somewhere that doesn't smell like her kitchen.

The dal doesn't taste the same, and yet I finish it to the very last drop.

Not because I enjoy it, but because somewhere, I still feel her.

I am still her Manu at the table.

And the thali should never return half-eaten.





PARANTHAS IN HER PRESENCE

Naisha Chawla, B.A (Hons.) English, 2nd Year

The first taste of the world, from your first morning,
was neither milk nor embrace,
but understanding.

The miracle of conversation with no dialogue, of never being hungry for so long
that you could notice it. Rather, enjoying the privilege of rejection.

Years later, it would come to me.

The taste of my home was in the hands of my mother,
not only in the way she pounded spices and kneaded dough,
but in the hands with which she fed me,
the tone in which she asked what our next meal should be,
the eyes with which she watched me sleep, like dal on a simmering stove.

I was not the easy child-none of us are.

I frowned and I pouted, even cried and protested,
and many times got away with it all-the poor woman couldn't stand to see me
unhappy.

Sometimes she pleaded; other times, I did.

Sometimes I was the unhappy one, but every time, she was happy.

Years later, it came to me.

I had no victory to claim,
at least none greater than the one I now strive for.
Perhaps no degree, no prize, no accomplishment
would put a bigger smile on her face
than to know I had sated my heart,
and sated her soul.





HEARTY HELPINGS
(PROSE)

THE WOMEN WHO ATE LAST

Suhani Mendiratta, B.A.(P) English-French, 3rd Year

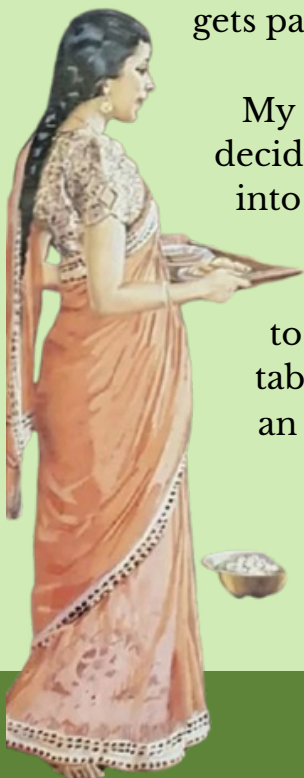
Sunday lunches in our house were a kind of celebration where the whole house would smell like garam masala by noon, relatives would come over, and extra chairs would be pulled up to the table. Meanwhile, somebody would ask for more rotis before the first batch was even finished.

There is a photograph in my digicam from one of those lunches that I had glanced at many times without ever really seeing it. Everyone is seated around the table, plates full, mid-bite or mid-laugh and I see my mother is at the edge of the frame, standing, moving between the kitchen and the table. She is serving someone, checking the dal or refilling a glass that is not quite empty yet. Only after all of that does she finally sit down to eat. For years, this felt completely normal to me. It was just how lunch worked in our house.

Looking at that photograph now, I really wonder how many women in my family exist in memory in very much the same way. Not at the centre of the frame, but somewhere at its edges, making sure everyone else is fed, comfortable, and cared for. When people talk about the women in my family, they talk about the food they made. The aam ka achaar, a Kheer, nobody has quite been able to replicate, a dal that still finds its way into conversation years later. These are meant as compliments—and truly they are—but they often leave out a few things which actually are important, like the books they loved, the education they might have wanted, the opinions they held about the world beyond the kitchen. What gets passed down is the recipe.

My mother is already living inside that same pattern. In our kitchen, she decides everything—what will be cooked today, how much spice should go into it, which day calls for which dish. She holds recipes so effortlessly in her mind, never written down anywhere, just passed down from her mother and her mother's mother. She creates the entire meal, down to the smallest detail, and then steps back once it is ready, sitting at the table only when everyone else is almost done with their meal, almost as an afterthought to herself.

I grew up knowing exactly what my father liked, what my sister liked, what I liked—but I did not know my mother's favourite food.



So I asked her. She said, “I like whatever everyone else is enjoying.” I have thought about that answer many times since then. Did she really mean it, or had years of adjusting to everyone else made her own preferences harder to find? Maybe the voice that wants something for yourself gets quieter the longer you spend making sure everyone else has what they want.

Nobody ever needed to announce a rule that said women must eat last. There was no conversation about it. It simply happened that way. The first roti always went to someone else. The women served, refilled, checked, adjusted and ate only once everyone else was taken care of. As a result, over time, eating last stopped looking like a choice. It just looked like how things were done.

I think of my mother cutting mangoes in the summer. She cuts neat slices for everyone at the table, and once they are gone, she eats the seed herself, scraping off whatever is left clinging to it. She does not call this a sacrifice. To her, it is just what is left, and she does not mind.

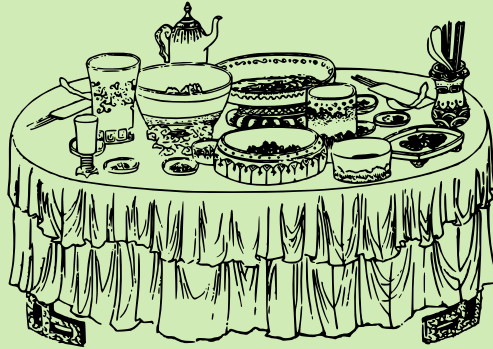
My mother genuinely loves feeding the people she cares about. There is real joy in it for her—she doesn’t see it as her duty, and I do not want to call it martyrdom because it isn’t, not for her. Still, I keep coming back to one question. Why does the person who shows the most care so often end up with the least of it for herself?

I keep returning to that photograph. For years, it looked to me like an ordinary family lunch, nothing more. Now, it means something different. Everyone else was easy to see because they were sitting at the table. My mother was at the edge of the frame, moving between the kitchen and the meal she had made possible, the meal everyone else got to enjoy because of her. For years, I looked at that photograph without noticing my mother at all. Now she is the first thing I see.



HIS FEAST

Sarika Bhatt, B.A. (Hons.) English, 1st Year



The dinner table was set.

The jury entered. It was a man in a dark coat with flags pinned to his collar.

Beside him sat a man with a Rolex on his wrist. He was served bowls of water with some cash on the side.

Next to him sat a girl in pink and her mother. They were served bacon.

Then came a student who was served papers. He found it to be too roasted for his liking.

Next, a person walked in with bangles on their wrists. They were not wearing any pants, though probably because their IDs needed to be scanned. They were served mangoes with... leather belts?

At the last seat sat an old man with a sickle. He was served grass and coins.

Another family came running, looking around for a vacant seat but found none. The jury decided to give them some bread and some bhaji on a leaf. On the floor.

One by one, everyone started having their food.

The man with the Rolex drank all the water and swallowed all the cash.

The girl in pink didn't want to have the bacon, but her mother encouraged her to try the bacon to know the taste of who she was.

The student choked on the papers as they were too dry—and died.

The person with bangles did not know how to consume the mangoes (their father had never got them any before), but they knew the leather belts, so they ended up chewing on them.

The old man's grass was dried up, and the coins were too hard to swallow, so all he could do was longingly stare at the water bowls from afar. The family sat on the floor consuming the bread and bhaji, but when they requested to sit on the table, they were ignored.

Lastly, the jury. His plates were empty. However, he had a feast spread before him.

He looked at the man with the Rolex and smiled. He looked at the girl bought freshly from the farm. He looked at the student, satisfied with their dependence: and he scowled at the Person with bangles, knowing the glass bangles would crunch between his teeth—but he will have to make do. He saw the old man and smiled kindly at him, choosing to consume him first. And then he looked at the family on the floor and wondered if he even needed them. He did—the elections were close. So he picked up one broken chair and gave it to the family to sit on.

And there it was. His meal. His feast. His plate.



AROMATIC REMINISCING

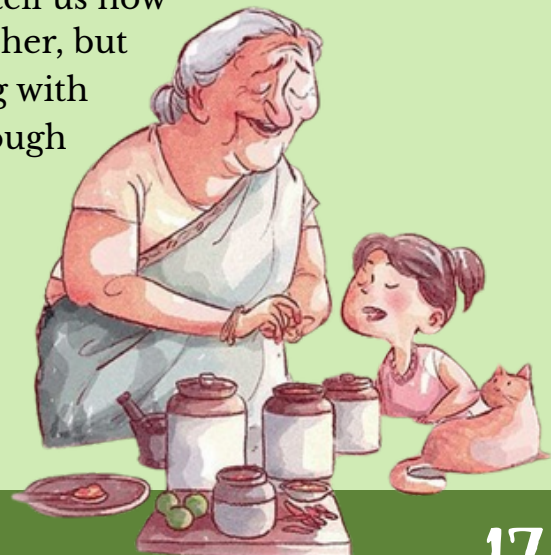
Pranjal Miglani, B.A.(P) English-French, 2nd Year

They say air, water, and food are essential for one's survival, but I believe 'food' has the most galvanic effect on people. "Good food leads to a happy mood"—I've grown up hearing this statement a lot around me. I've been a picky eater, and I still am, despite a few improvements in that matter. Nevertheless, my Nani (maternal grandmother) was the one who made food delightful for me. It seems there's a unique and special connection that our grandparents share with food, which they extend to their children and grandchildren. Grandparents have a way of making food memorable—we always carry those delightful stories of our childhood into the rest of our lives. One of my core memories has to be getting greeted by the aroma of the assortment of soulful dishes prepared by Nani, as my family and I would visit her during our summer vacations.

For my Nani, making food for her loved ones was her most profound and special love language. Thinking about Nani's food got me excited and ecstatic. I would wonder what magic would be brewing in her kitchen, all while sitting in the classroom on the last day of school before the vacations began.

Now, after she's gone, I realise the enormity of the indelible mark she left on me and my family's outlook on food. I read the label of a random *achaar* (pickle) company saying '*gobi gajar shalgam ka achaar*' or see *panjiri laddoos*, all reminiscent of her sweet, tender love and care. Each time I come across something that Nani used to make for us, all the times I spent with her held dear in my heart avalanche upon me. If I don't snap out of that moment fast enough, the memories encapsulate me, and I travel back in time.

What makes me smile to this day is that she was a picky eater herself as a child. Whenever I would refuse to eat something, she would tell us how she regretted her food choices back then. I never asked her, but I wonder if this was the reason she loved experimenting with the food she made, to make it delicious and 'edible' enough for herself and other fellow picky eaters. Now that she's gone, the different seasons echo like a void, with an emptiness I don't fully comprehend. The dearth of enthusiasm for summer stings me whenever I see popsicles. Absurd? Maybe, but I can never forget the



gleam in Nani's eyes when she would tell us about the different flavours of ice cream she had prepared in her popsicle container: the *aampanna*, and the secret dessert with so much love!

The onset of winter mist reminds me of the aroma of the elaborate process of roasting an assortment of dry fruits, seeds and semolina to make *panjiri*, wafting through Nani's house. The slight winter sunshine brewed with all types of fruits and vegetables into a juice that I, as a picky eater, would make my efforts to stay away from. However, Nani somehow always managed to compel me into drinking it, and miraculously, almost every time, I would fall in love with the taste of the eccentric amalgamation of fruits and vegetables. Every season is now reminiscent of her. The list of her lingering spells imbued in her cooking would be longer than a skyscraper.

Those painful moments caused by intimate familiarity also take me down a rabbit hole of frustration because my memories continue to fade. Her intangible mementoes keep me close to her, yet I can't help the fear of forgetting them over time. What do you mean I won't be reminded of her and the delicious *malai kofta* she once made in random moments when I see *malai kofta* in a wedding food stall? The thought makes my heart ache.

What makes me despair is that the person who made food so special for the people around her had to struggle to even swallow soup in her twilight days. I remember visiting her in the hospital, watching her struggle to eat the semi-liquid foods before she had to completely turn to a liquid-based diet. The quantity of food she ate decreased gradually, eventually reducing to the portion size of an infant.

She was the strongest woman I had seen, and I love her. Her food and unwavering spirit of life were her signatures. I'll always be grateful to her for making food so special for me, and I never want to forget the dishes that have turned into mementoes that feel like her loving embrace.

Thank you, Nani. I miss you.



A KITCHEN IN SEPIA

Soumyashree Thapa, B.A. (Hons.) English, 2nd Year

Darjeeling has a cold which cannot be described by any English term. Blue, scrubbed morning skies, and birds chirping to remind you that they, at least, are not shivering. You would see my town veiled in white during winters until I was four years of age—snow gracefully making its way to the earth, and settling into a soft, chilly bed. After that, there has been only rain and sleet, still ruthless and stinging—the kind of cold that pulls a whole family from their rooms into one kitchen.

Momo. Its roots are tangled between Nepal and Tibet, just as our Himalayan identities are. Its origin is still debated. Yet I know one thing: it arrived generation after generation the way the mountains did, inherited, carried forward by hands before mine.

My father crouched in front of a wooden stump—*our* wooden stump—*khukuri* in hand. I watched him turn the fatty meat to keema with the patience of ritual. My grandmother rolled the dough into thin, almost perfect circles—thinner and rounder than any of ours, no matter how many times we attempted to steal her technique. The rest of us folded the keema and dough into small crescents. We have always liked our *momo* bite-sized, melting in our mouths into a dance of flavour and texture.

The power used to go out often in winter. Of course, it didn't matter to us. Three or four candles burned—the kitchen shrank into a smaller place, glowing orange instead of white. On the walls, our shadows were visible with our fluttering hands. Two hours of folding and rolling—a performance of artistry and endurance. Then a big *mucktoo* sat on the stove, hissing and steaming while we sat around the fire, laughing and rambling, waiting for the steam to say it was ready.

When the *momo* came to the table, we ate it with *dalle khorsani ko achaar*—a pickle made from our local red chilli called *dalle*. This *dalle*, small but vicious, made us tear up and flush; yet, we never reached for water. The burn was part of it too.

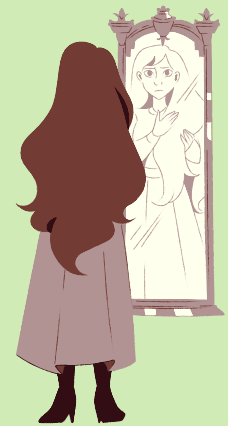


I had no clue then that I was registering what home tasted like. I only understood that winter meant plans for expanding the kitchen, candlelight, the warmth of firewood, and my grandmother's unmatched skills.

Nowadays, Delhi swallows me for months at a time, and somehow it has turned me into someone who can survive both freezing temperatures and the smoldering heat. And I let it be too, because I know the way back.

The car climbs from the terai, past the flat stretch of tea gardens, and then the hills begin. Before the road steepens further into the town I call home, I stop by a small restaurant in Rohini.

She is there—the same girl. She might be only a few years older than I am. As soon as I get out of the cab, I see her at the entrance, wiping her hands with her apron, smiling. “*Aju kay khaney bahini?*”—What will you eat today, little one? She has asked me this same question for years, and she knows the answer too. I tell her anyway—*chicken momo* and *aloo dum*. My chest loosens, and my shoulders drop when I say it, the exact way a held breath is released.



*What will you eat today,
little one?*

The *momo* arrives, too hot to touch. I press one open with a fork, and the steam rises, smelling of that

candlelit kitchen, the crackling wood, my father's *khukuri*, and the power outage nobody minded. I start chewing. I watch the steam from the plate rise and settle on the window. Outside, the hills are lush green. It is quiet and still, as if someone is observing how much I have grown, how long my hair has become, how much I have missed home.

Soon enough, the silence is broken by passing vehicles, and life resumes. I continue savouring the plate of chicken momo before me. I take my time; there is no rush. There are two more hours of winding hills before I reach home.

But you see, *I already am home.*

Notes:

Momo: steamed dumplings usually with a meat filling.

Khukuri: a traditional, inward-curving Nepali knife.

Dalle: called the red cherry pepper, or the fireball cherry pepper in English. *Native* to the Himalayas

Mucktoo: traditional, multi-tiered utensil made of metal or bamboo for steaming dumplings.



THE KITCHEN OF INVISIBLE LABOUR



Apoorva Singh, B.A. (Hons.) English, 2nd Year

“To emancipate a woman is to free her from the brutalizing toil of kitchen and washhouse; it is to organize your household in such a way as to enable her to rear her children... while still retaining sufficient leisure to take her share of social life.”

— Pyotr Kropotkin

God made food for the purpose of survival. But somewhere along the way, in most traditional Indian households, this survival became a prison sentence handed to one gender alone, to be served for a lifetime without parole. A girl is born, and before she can spell her own name, she is taught to stand on a small stool near the stove, watching her mother's two hands working through ten things—chai, chapati, and onions—like a ritual older than memory. She is not even asked if she wants this inheritance. By the time she is a teenager, the lessons have advanced into the stage of preparation: learn to cook well, serve quietly, and smile through exhaustion. Because somewhere, in some strange house, a family is waiting to judge her hands before they judge her heart. This is what we call, without irony, “getting a good hand in a marriage”, as though a woman's worth could be measured in the roundness of her rotis and quietness of her voice.

Then comes the wedding, a ritual in which a woman does not simply marry a man. She marries his mother's expectations, his father's preferences, and an entire lineage that will now eat from her hands. Her old home and memories recede like a tide, never to return. The folk line “*betiyan jo byahi jaye mudti nahi hai*” (the daughter who gets married doesn't return) romanticises a daughter's permanent displacement, masking the invisible emotional labour of women forced to abandon their memories and identities to survive in a stranger's home.



We used to call women devoted entirely to this work ‘housewives’—a word that, said slowly, gives up its secret. Wife of the house, not of the human inside it. Married to walls, to a kitchen counter, to a chore list with no end date, no holidays, no salary and no appreciation. And so begins the loop—soak the nuts, chop the vegetables, light the stove, cook, serve, clean, sleep, wake, repeat—until, decades later, a new bride arrives to inherit the apron, and the loop simply continues, generation folding into generation like dough.

The cruellest truth is this: the woman who feeds everyone eats last, and often, eats cold. She serves the hottest, freshest food onto other plates and finally sits down with what is left of the cold dal, rice gone stiff, and a single piece of bread saved more out of duty than appetite. Her swollen feet carry her from sink to stove to dining table a hundred times a day, but it is her smile, not her exhaustion, that the family remembers. That smile is practically her birth ritual. Nobody asks what it costs her to wear it.

This labour is real labour, even though it carries no salary and appears on no resume. India's 2024 Times Use Survey found that women spend 3 to 4 more times on unpaid domestic work than men and that cooking, cleaning, and childcare alone consume nearly 85 per cent of that time. Barely one in four women in the prime working-age group take part in paid employment, as opposed to three in four men. These are not just data; they are millions of women whose entire day is dictated by other people's hunger.

And still, at the end of the day, she is asked, gently, mockingly, endlessly, “What do you even do all day?” She is “just at home.” Nobody sees the four a.m. wake-up to start the rice before anyone else stirs, the mental toll of preparing seven different appetites and allergies and moods, the tantrums taken without complaint, the festival mornings when the men relax in new clothes while she moves between stove and floor from sunrise to midnight, cooking for guests she won't have time to greet. Patriarchy does not need to shout to survive—it only needs to make a woman's exhaustion invisible, and her silence expected.



Virginia Woolf once wrote that a woman needs money and a room of her own. Most of the women I am describing have neither. Merely a kitchen that is only technically theirs, and nothing else. Ask her what she wants, and notice how often the answer circles back to the kitchen, a new pressure cooker, or a better dining set, because she has never been allowed the voice, or the space, to want anything for herself. What if she had her own dreams? What if she had wanted to be a teacher? A singer? A woman who finishes her own sentences? We will never know, because she spent her wanting, her unfulfilled desires, on us, smiling the whole time, so that we could leave the house and become whoever we wanted to be.

This is not a story about blaming men. It is a story about an institution, normalised and defended by women and men alike, that decided one gender's labour should be invisible while the other's leisure stays protected. This fix is not punishment; it is restructuring.

Ultimately, the revolution will come when society learns to teach the boy to cook the dal and teach the girl to drive the car. Teach both that knowledge and skill have no gender, and that love expressed through food should be a choice, not an assignment. Let both grow up financially independent and emotionally whole. And here is the real revolution: let both be called homemakers, because a home built by only one pair of tired hands was never really a home. It was a job no one applied for.

Do this, and food stops being a leash. It becomes, again, what it was always meant to be, not a duty owed by one person to everyone else, but a thread that weaves a family closer, taken care of by both ends, held by everyone who eats.



THE CASTE ON OUR PLATE

Muskan, B.A. English Hons, 2nd Year

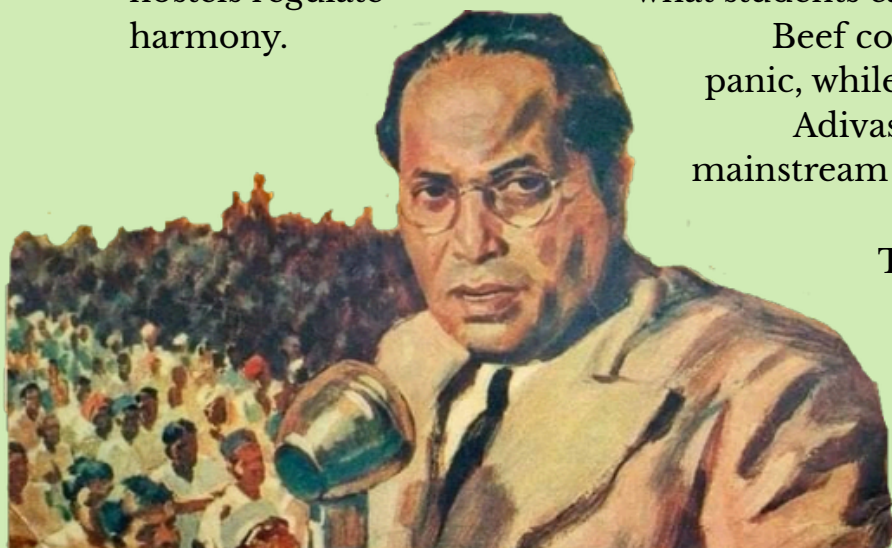
Food has always secured a special place in the social hierarchy of caste and class. The sociology of food demonstrates that dietary practices are neither natural, nor politically neutral. Additionally, we have romanticised food so much that we completely ignore caste as an influential factor. Cuisines are historically produced, culturally regulated, and deeply embedded in relations of power. In the Indian context, caste remains one of the most significant forces shaping the politics of food. The concept of food and its accessibility is vast. The choice of having access to certain foods is definitely a personal one. We are told that vegetarianism is a lifestyle, that food preferences are private, and that one person's plate should not concern another. But this language of "choice" often obscures the social structures that have shaped our desires long before they appear to be individual.

Who decides which foods are respectable? Why are some cuisines elevated as symbols of culture while others remain confined to the margins? These are not questions of appetite—they are questions of caste. In India, caste has been the most enduring and significant force in determining not only who eats, but who cooks, who serves, who dines together, and whose food is considered fit for public recognition. Food became one of caste's most effective instruments because it transformed everyday acts into markers of social hierarchy. The kitchen, the dining table, and the marketplace became spaces where power could be exercised without appearing political.

This history continues to shape contemporary India, even if it is expressed differently. Housing societies advertise themselves as "vegetarian only." University hostels regulate what students can cook in the name of maintaining harmony.

Beef consumption becomes a site of moral panic, while the histories of Dalit, Bahun, and Adivasi food cultures remain absent from mainstream conversations about Indian cuisine.

The *Manusmriti* was one of the social ancient texts that codified social hierarchy and brought the idea of purity and pollution into consideration. The Indian plate



was never neutral. Long before modern politics, the *Manusmriti* had already decided whose food deserved respect and whose deserved disgust. Caste manufactured deprivation and then moralised it as impurity. Fortunately, B. R. Ambedkar refused to take hierarchy at its word. If Brahmanical texts wrote the rules of the kitchen, Ambedkar taught us to question who was denied a seat at the table.



The Mid-Day Meal Scheme has repeatedly exposed the hypocrisy surrounding the politics of food. Schools promise nourishment and health, but some parents first ask for the cook's caste. Dalit women have been removed from kitchens not because the food was unsafe or poorly prepared, but because their presence unsettled the fiction of purity. It seems caste can spoil a meal long before the ingredients ever could.

Narendra Jadhav remembers his mother drying scraps of meat under the sun so the family would have something to eat for weeks. There is nothing romantic about this memory. It is a reminder that many Dalit cuisines emerged not from abundance but from exclusion. Yet caste performs its oldest trick once again. It first produces deprivation, then mocks the food that deprivation makes necessary. India celebrates culinary heritage with remarkable enthusiasm, provided that the heritage does not carry the memory of caste.

Moreover, Indian cuisine prides itself on its diversity. Menus literally celebrate Awadhi, Mughlai, Chettinad, Kashmiri, and Malabari traditions as emblems of the nation's culinary heritage, but this celebration is remarkably selective. The cuisines of Dalit, Bahun, and many Adivasi communities remain conspicuously absent from the gastronomic imagination. Their food rarely acquires the status of "heritage"; it is more often reduced to necessity, poverty, or survival.

This absence is not culinary. It is political. Caste has determined not only what is eaten but also whose food is considered worthy of preservation, documentation, and prestige. The dominant palate has long possessed the authority to decide which cuisines become culture and which remain invisible. Indian gastronomy, it appears, has perfected the art of celebrating recipes while erasing the histories that produced them.

Yet, food has never remained only as a site of oppression. Across Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi communities, reclaiming traditional cuisines has become a brave act of political assertion. What was once dismissed as "impure" or "inferior" is increasingly being documented, celebrated, and preserved as a history of resilience. To cook these foods is not merely to remember the past; it is to reject the shame that caste sought to impose. It is often said that food should remain outside politics. But food has never been outside politics. When a student is denied the right to eat certain foods in a hostel, when housing societies police kitchens in the name of culture or religion, or when lynchings are justified through allegations of beef consumption—politics is already present. The demand to "keep politics out of food" often asks only the oppressed to remain silent while power continues to regulate their plates.

Food has never been merely about taste. It has always carried memory, power, and politics. Every time we call a cuisine "authentic" or dismiss another as "unclean," we inherit a history that predates our own choices. Perhaps the question is not whether food should be political; it always has been. The real question is whether we are willing to confront the politics already sitting on our plates. After all, a society that can debate recipes more passionately than inequality isn't merely seasoning its food, it's masking its history.



WATER IN HER LUNGS

Aamna Rehman, B.A. English Hons, 2nd Year



1.

She takes tiny bites, lingering over every chew and swallow, each movement deliberate—not because she's savouring the food, but because she doesn't want to eat.

“You mustn't eat so fast, Aliza. You'll burn your tongue,” her mother would say whenever she caught her reaching for another bite before finishing the one already in her mouth.

She doesn't eat so quickly now. Her mother would be happy.

But her mother never understood that the food she made was simply that good—that Aliza couldn't wait to reach the next burst of flavour. Logically, it makes sense that every household prepares food a little differently. Everyone has their own preferences and ways of cooking. Yet her tongue sits heavy with the absence of what it knows.

She dips her spoon into the pool of daal on her plate. It is a mild yellow and pale, warm and gentle on her tongue. Not like her mother's, and the way she taught Aliza to make it. The way her father always praised her for making it—darker, more orange than yellow, scalding hot, with little dots of red spice.

She can feel the water filling into her lungs.



2.

The mall food court is loud and bustling with chatter, the smells from every fast-food kiosk blending into a miasma that makes Aliza grimace. It's not loud enough to rival the sweaty racket of her college cafeteria, though—once upon a time, when her friends would gather around a table and share a meal from the same plate.

Her two daughters argue over what to eat while their father watches them with narrowed eyes, waiting to see whether today's battle is won by burgers or pasta. Right behind their table is a South Indian food kiosk, and for just a second, the pleasant aroma of a dosa sizzling on the tava reaches her. She finds herself craving the warmth of hot sambar against the chill of the food court's air conditioning. Her mouth waters, but it would be a waste. She can't finish a dosa on her own, and neither her husband nor her children are particularly fond of it. The fork in her hand absently nudges the leftovers around on her daughters' plate.

Her stomach aches, and her throat tightens, filling with water as though she's drowning.



3.

Her back is damp with sweat. Her neck aches beneath the weight of the bun pinned at its nape. She has already surrendered to the onset of a headache with a weary sigh. She couldn't bear the wet strands of her hair either, lying across her back like lashes. Oil sizzles in the pan. The pressure cooker whistles like an unleashed scream.

"Everybody's sitting ready for dinner, Aliza!" Her husband's voice rings out from the guest room. The booms of laughter that follow sears her eardrums.

The sea inside her seethes and roils, flooding her mouth with bile. It spills through her eyes.

4.

Something about the air in Kolkata always makes her drowsy. It hangs heavy with moisture, carrying a sweetness that settles over everything. She steps into her grandmother's home and lets her bags fall to the floor. Her shoulders loosen as an undefinable weight slips away. She fills her lungs with the familiarity of the space, feeling unexpectedly light. The warmth of her Nani's hug makes her want to languish.

Outside, rain falls steadily beyond the windows.





FOOD FOR THOUGHT
(ACADEMIC WRITING)

FOOD AND DIETARY HABITS AS CATALYSTS OF CULTURAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION DURING THE DELHI SULTANATE

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Abstract

The Delhi Sultanate marked a decisive shift in the subcontinent's governance and culture, succeeding the Ghaznavid legacy and introducing new political and social sensibilities shaped by Persian, Central Asian, and Indian influences. Indian food culture, much like architecture, art, music, and language, would be unthinkable without considering the sultanate influence. This paper explores how food during the Delhi Sultanate became a reflection of power, hierarchy and cultural negotiation. The royal kitchens and elaborate dining rituals symbolized authority, wealth and moral superiority, while acts of sharing food reinforced loyalty, patronage and legitimacy. At the same time, dietary taboos, religious prescriptions and notions of purity and pollution determined who cooked, who ate and who was excluded. Using traveler's accounts and contemporary historical literature, this study examines how the politics of food in the Delhi Sultanate embodied both distinction and coexistence revealing how taste itself became a language of rule, identity and faith.

Keywords: Delhi Sultanate; food culture; power and hierarchy; purity and pollution; cultural synthesis.

INTRODUCTION

In the study of History, historians often focus on the key aspects that are crucial for defining an empire which are its Administration, Economy, Military, Bureaucracy, Religion and Social life. However, the domain of food has traditionally undervalued. It is frequently regarded merely as a means of sustenance rather than as a vital lens through which power, identity, and culture can be understood. Yet, within the context of the Delhi sultanate, by 1225 all of the northern India was under Islamic rule. Collectively called the Delhi sultanate various Turkish, Afghan and Central Asian dynasties held sway for more than 300 years.

Food transcended its basic function and emerged as a deeply political and symbolic practice becoming the one that reflected and reinforced hierarchies of power, religion and gender. Food occupies a central place in the lives and culture of the people. Culinary practices, ingredients, and dining norms varied across regions and communities, shaped by cultural and religious values. In northern India, the arrival of Muslim immigrants marked a significant cultural transformation. As these groups settled in India, joined the administrative machinery, and intermarried with the local populations, a process of cultural assimilation began, giving rise to what came to be known as **Indo-Muslim culture**.

To the existing relatively austere Hindu dining traditions, the Muslims introduced a refined and courtly etiquette of communal dining and shared fellowship. Indian cuisine, which already included a wide range of native ingredients, was enriched with nuts, raisins, spices and ghee. This period witnessed the growing prominence of meats like kebabs, stuffed delicacies such as Samosa, desserts like halwa, and sweetened beverages such as Sharbat. New dishes like halim, harisa, pilaf and kulfi were diversified with the culinary landscape. Thus; Muslim influence transformed both the style and substance of Indian food.

THE ROYAL KITCHEN AND DINING PRACTICES OF THE DELHI SULTANATE

The royal kitchen in the Delhi Sultanate followed a vast and elaborate procedure. Food was prepared using a variety of luxurious and exquisite ingredients, reflecting the ruler's power and cultural superiority. Many accounts left by travelers shed light on the elaborate dining rituals and customs of the Delhi Sultans. Ibn Battuta and his party were asked to sit in a portico where food was served in gold utensils. A piece of cloth was spread on the floor and food was laid out in two rows in front of the visitors; then a bow performed, to mark the In-ginning of the dinner, was followed by choruses of 'Bismillah' which precluded the service of every fresh article on the menu. On a particular occasion after the dishes had been served on the floor, the palace officers stood up along with their chief, who made a discourse in favour of the emperor and bowed in his honour.



Map of Delhi Sultanate

Simultaneously all his staff and the visitors bowed; whosoever heard the discourse stopped instantly if he happened to be walking, and everybody listened in reverence.

In the palace of Hinawr on the western coast dinner was served in what may be called modern or European fashion. The plates were placed on a large copper tray around which installed chairs which were occupied by the guests. Hot rice, butter fat and pickles were brought in big pots the contents of which were served by a beautiful girl by means of a copper ladle. In this way four kinds of food were served in successive courses, the last being that of sweets amongst which the curded milk came in the end. The service of curded milk after the meals was a common feature of the northern and southern dinners. 'When once it stands on the table', tells Ibn Battuta, 'one knows that no further dishes are to follow'. This indicates that dining was not merely about eating food, but also a form of cultural refinement that symbolized the sophistication and moral superiority of the king. There was also a particular seating arrangement during royal dinners. The judge(qazi), orators (khatibs), jurists, saiyids, and dervishes sit at the head of the dinner carpet called simat. And then comes the sultan's relatives and rest of the people who can sit anywhere except on sultan's designated place hence ending any kind of confusion. This arrangement shows that everyone knew their social position, indicating a clear hierarchy.

Entertaining on a grand scale was a mark of prestige and this the sultans sought to emulate the traditions of the shahs of persia. Shihabuddin Al-Umari based on Indian travelers to Arabia informs us that in the royal palaces, the meal was served twice a day, morning and evening. In the royal palace there were 2 kinds of dinner private dinners and public dinners. Private dinners were attended by the Sultan and selected officers. It was his habit to dine with those present or with those whom he wished to honor for a special purpose. The number of attendees was generally around twenty. Occasionally, when the Sultan wished to honor someone, he would take a plate, place bread on it, and hand it to the person. The latter received it, placed the plate on his left hand, bowed, and touched the ground with his right hand as a mark of respect. Sometimes, the Sultan sent a portion of the meal to an absent guest, who would also bow in gratitude and share the food with his companions. These instances indicate that lavish banquets were not merely social occasions but also reinforced power relations and strengthened political alliances. The act of sharing food symbolized loyalty to the ruler and royal patronage. However, public dinners on the other hand were headed by the chief palace officer. When the dishes were served the chief officer stood and praises the sultan after which he bowed to the sultan followed by the people present at that dinner. All remained in their places and did not move till the discourse was over. Everyone occupied his seats and had before him the set of different dishes, and no one shared a plate with another.

Certain references also indicate that many food items carried symbolic meanings. For instance, the offering of betel leaves held special significance. If, upon visiting his friends a person is presented five betel-leaves he feels as if he is given the whole world and its wealth specially if the presenter is an amir or an important personality. Presenting a betel or paan they consider as sublime and as signifying greater nobility than giving gold and silver. The Sufi saints along with their disciples were also invited by the rich people to their meals. Once a rich person in Delhi invited Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya to his dinner and the Shaikh along with his disciple and other people came and enjoyed the meal. They were served with Nan, qur and meat. Al-Shibli tells us that the most respectful way for Indians to entertain the guests was with betel leaf. If a person entertains his guests with various kinds of eatables, sharbats (drinks), sweet meat, perfumes and flowers and does not offer betel leaf to them it means that the gesture was incomplete or the host was not good. Similarly, when an important man has to oblige some acquaintance, he offers him a betel leaf. Ibn battuta mentions that when the governor of multan visited india his table was filled with the delicacies of the sultanate. The royal table was rich in every aspect and what amazed him was no items in the meal fell short of and items like figs raisins etc that are not grown here had to be imported but the meal was never compromised. The emperor is always keen to favor the foreign guests with the fruits of their respective countries as a token of his affection for them.

The rulers also used food and resource control to assert their authority and remind others of their supreme power. One such instance occurred when Qutb-ud-din Mubarak Shah, the son and successor of 'Ala-ud-din Khalji. did not like the Sultan-ul-aulya picked up a quarrel with him. The sultan was angry and prohibited the amirs and mahks from giving any kind of presents to the saint. But the Sultan-ul-aulya took up the challenge and ordered that the outlay for the distribution of food at his kitchen should be doubled thence forth. On hearing of this the sultan became extremely indignant and ordered a complete economic boycott of the saint; no food-stuffs could be sold to him. But the Sultan-ul-aulya invalidated this economic boycott also and the sultan was worsted. The saint made no reply but cursed the sultan who was afflicted, before long, with an attack of colic pain which was cured only when the sultan had repented; but he resumed his haughtiness as soon as he had recovered.

There were also langars or public kitchens for poor people that were maintained by nobles, sufi saints called (matbakhs) etc. The public Kitchens, langars were maintained by the Sufi saints and other religious-minded people for the benefit of the poor, the visitors to the khanqah and the travellers. It was considered an act of piety by the rich people to serve food to the poor every day. The Sufis maintained large kitchens for the public with futuh (unasked for offering both in cash and kind) while the rich people made endowments for their maintenance.

Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya is reported to have said that feeding the poor had been recommended and praised by all the religions of the world. He also exhorted his followers that no discrimination should be made against anybody and to feed them irrespective of creed. Food and resources were also used by different Sultans to display superiority over their predecessors, implying a sense of competition to project a favorable image of themselves. Various sultans of Delhi ensured an abundant supply of water was procured and maintained. For example, Sultan Iltutmish built Hauz in Delhi for the supply of drinking water. Sultan Alauddin Khalji also constructed a reservoir called Hauz-i-Khas which was even larger than that of Sultan Iltutmish. The sultans and nobles used to distribute free water and sharbat among the common people on special occasions such as festivals or to celebrate some victory. Barani mentions that to maintain market regulations under the *Diwan-i-Riyasat*, Sultan Alauddin Khalji ensured that the prices of commodities remained low. He decreed that all goods from caps to stockings, combs to needles, sugar to vegetables, harisa to broth, *sabuni* sweets to *reori*, dry bread to roasted bread, fish, betel leaf, color, areca nut, and flowers should be available in all markets.



Shiekh Nizamuddin Auliya

RELIGION, PURITY AND TABOO IN SHAPING FOOD PRACTICES

While the royal kitchens and dining rituals of the Delhi Sultanate reflected hierarchy and power, the realm of everyday food practices was equally shaped by religion, caste, and notions of purity and pollution. India, both before and during the Sultanate, was deeply influenced by caste-based norms that dictated how people ate, what they ate, and with whom they could share food. The concept of purity and pollution was central to these distinctions. Moreover, the cultural differences between the people who migrated to India and those who were already settled here were substantial from their fasting rituals to dietary restrictions yet they coexisted under the same empire, negotiating complex boundaries of faith and identity.

Ibn Battuta in his travel account talked a lot about the existing differentiation; illustrations of Untouchability are given from the conduct of the Hindu watermen, in charge of the well along the Malabar roads, who made invidious distinctions between their co-religionists and the Muslims while giving water to drink. Besides, Muslims were not allowed to enter a Hindu house and to use 'Hindu utensils'. The infidels of India were not very welcoming towards the travelers however they never abused or assaulted some reluctantly made meat for them in other utensil so that it could be disposed off later. They maintained considerable distance from them and their remaining food were fed to dogs even if any children mistakenly ate that he would be beaten and forced to eat cow dung as a form of ritual purification. In contrast, the Musalman had no objection in accepting the eatables made and offered by the Hindus. According to the author of *Masalik-ul Absar* the general food of the Indians (Muslims) contained beef and goat flesh. There was no scarcity of sheep, but still beef was preferred by the Muslims. Beef and mutton were sold at the same price, while pigeons, sparrows and other birds were sold at fewer prices. This, as Miik observes, reflects the extent to which Hindu customs had influenced the dietary habits of Indian Muslims. He also notes that Shaikh Muhammad Nagauri considered his male and female slaves unclean and did not have his food prepared by them because of his belief in untouchability. However it may be argued that the shaikh was a saint of abstemious habits and performed his devotional exercises during which he scrupulously avoided all possibilities of contamination and impurity which might explain his apprehensions regarding his servants.

Islam, in comparison has relatively fewer food restrictions, but they are observed strictly. These were derived from both the Quran and the sunna. Pork carrion, blood, alcohol and other intoxicants, were considered haram, are forbidden to believers. Animals were slaughtered according to Islamic method handled with mercy and kindness, killing swiftly draining all blood as it is considered unclean. Such meat is called halal. During the sultanate drinking wine in the company of friends and parties became a common practice. If a Muslim were found guilty of drinking wine he was chastised with eighty strokes of the whip and was incarcerated three months in the prison, which was not opened except to hand him the meals. Fasting was one of the five pillars of Islam. The fast is broken at sunset with a small snack called iftar, followed by a large meal. The end of Ramadan is celebrated by communal feasts and the serving especially *sewaiyan*. The second major festival is *Edi-ul-Zuha* or *Bakrid*, on this day Muslims were expected to sacrifice a goat if they can afford it and distribute one third of the meat to friends, one-third to family and one-third to the poor. All these festivals signify piety, hospitality and charity.

Hindu eating practices during the Delhi Sultanate were deeply intertwined with religious doctrine, caste hierarchy, and ritual propriety.

Central to Hindu dietary ideology was **ahimsa** (non-violence), which encouraged vegetarianism, especially among Brahmins and other upper- caste groups; meat particularly beef was considered impure and often taboo (see the discussion of ahimsa shaping ancient Hindu food choices). Meals were frequently sanctified by **ritual invocation**; the offering of *bhog* (sacred food) in temples and household shrines exemplified the spiritual dimension of eating. *Bhog* was prepared



Al-Biruni

according to Ayurvedic principles, emphasizing seasonal ingredients, local produce, and the intention (*bhāva*) behind the offering, thereby linking nourishment to holistic well-being (*Bhog* is described as a living culinary tradition with Ayurvedic foundations). Al-Biruni informs us that among the four classes, Sudras are allowed to only drink the wine but not sell it.

Barani's *Tarikh-i-FirozShahi* records market regulations that enforced halal standards, while Hindu caste prohibitions dictated separate preparation areas for beef and dairy. The overlap created negotiated spaces where Islamic and Indian notions of purity intersected.

GENDER, DOMESTICITY, AND INTIMACY THROUGH FOOD: WOMEN'S ROLES IN COOKING, KITCHEN MANAGEMENT, AND FOOD EXCHANGE

Ziauddin Barani provides valuable insight into the dining practices of the Delhi Sultanate, particularly noting how meals reflected social hierarchy and administrative organization. He records that Imad ul Mulk, the Amir-i-Ariz (paymaster-general) of Sultan Balban, who used to take his afternoon meal with his staff. The Amir is said to have served the meal for years on his behalf. The Amir's dedication to this practice reflects how shared dining among officials symbolized unity and discipline within the administrative elite.

Mushtaqi also offers detailed accounts about the huge kitchens maintained by the nobles. He notes that the larger the kitchen a noble maintained the more generous

and large-hearted he was perceived by the public which is a reflection of power expressed through hospitality. One of the leading nobles of Sultan Sikandar Lodi, Miyan Gadai Farmuli possessed hundreds of camels to carry foodstuffs, cauldrons and cooking utensils beside the kitchen staff whenever he accompanied the sultan or a military expedition. This illustrated the scale of culinary logistics that paralleled the empire's administrative grandeur.

Nobles and royals maintained private kitchens known as *matbakhs*, managed by an officer titled the *chashnigir*, who was responsible for tasting and ensuring the quality and safety of the food. Dining was often a communal affair; nobles and courtiers gathered around a common *dastarkhān* a Persian term signifying both an elaborate tablecloth and a sumptuous meal comprising numerous dishes, sometimes shared from the same plate. Such rituals of commensality not only reinforced social bonds but also reflected cultural refinement and hierarchy.

Amir Khusrau's poetry praises the queen's role in preparing *khichrī* and *kebabs*, underscoring women's influence in courtly hospitality. Female kitchen staff managed procurement and distribution, linking domestic labor to the Sultan's political legitimacy. Turkish noblewomen, who retained many Central -Asian traditions of mobility and property ownership, could own and run kitchen enterprises, especially in elite households, thereby influencing culinary practices and courtly hospitality. In the broader Indian context, women across all social strata were responsible for household chores, including food preparation; the skill, expertise, and labor required for managing a household were culturally framed as "natural" feminine functions, yet they remained invisible to male-dominated narratives. The *Ni'matnāma*, depicts female cooks of the harem dressed in *kamarband* who were appointed heads of royal *kārkhāna-hā* (kitchens) and accompanied the Sultan at his daily meals, demonstrating that women could hold official kitchen leadership positions in the Sultanate's successor states.

The sultan and his nobles oversaw large kitchen staffs that included cooks, bakers and dishwashers. the chamberlain (Hajib) stood at the head of the dinner carpet and took a bow towards the sultan then all the presents followed him. This ritual reflected both reverence and protocol. Beyond the palace, Caterers, bakers and butchers set up shop in urban areas, along roads where caravans passed or in places where a sufi holy man lived or where a sufi's tomb was located. Urban centres had a flourishing catering profession

that served all classes of society marking food not only a means of sustenance but a marker of social organization, gendered labor, and cultural exchange.

FOOD AS A SITE OF NEGOTIATION BETWEEN RULERS AND SUBJECTS, WHERE ADOPTION, ADAPTATION, OR RESISTANCE TO DIETARY CUSTOMS MIRRORED POLITICAL AND CULTURAL INTERACTIONS

According to Ibn Battuta the common people of India primarily consumed simple and meals consisting of porridge of pounded millet mixed with water or buffalo milk. Domestic animals and birds were both plentiful and affordable, as food in India was much less costly than in Egypt or Syria. This dietary simplicity reflected both Agricultural abundance and regional self-sufficiency.

The contemporary sources refer to a number of dishes that were prepared by the people for their meals. The Masalikul Absar provides us a broader picture of the agricultural and dietary practices in India, noting that Wheat was the most favored grain which was sold for a dirham hastkhani and half the man. A second important crop was rice, with numerous varieties cultivated across regions were basmati, Kajari, ratnari, madhukar, dhela, jhenasari, ghiu, kandau, kunwarbilasu, rambas, lanhchaur vachi etc. As many as twenty one kinds of rice were cultivated. Apart from this a wide range of crops and vegetables were grown sesame, pulses, millet, mustered oil, ginger, onion, squash, hemp brinjal and various other vegetables were grown in India. Salt, both sea and rock, sugar, refined and black, onion, spices, ghee, animal fat, mustard oil, and vinegar make principal supplements to the diet of the people. Amir Khusrau also mention different kinds of pulses such as moong, gram, mash, which were commonly produced. However, a number of dishes were prepared with rice in different traditions and across social strata. A dish known as Khichri was prepared by mixing rice with pulses. Some of them took in the breakfast. It was a principal dish of the mashaikh. The author of siyarul-Arifin informs us that sometimes it was cooked with rice with milk and sugar, sometimes with only milk, or salt and sometimes mixed with roasted fowl. Such variations show not only the flexibility of local food traditions but also the blending of ascetic simplicity with courtly indulgence. In the agrarian context, India's agricultural practices involve sowing the land twice annually. During the summer monsoon, the autumn crops are sown and typically harvested within sixty days. Among these, the principal grains are **bajra (a variety of millet)**, which is the most abundant; **kal**, a grain similar to barley; and **tandul**, whose seeds are smaller than those of kal. Additionally, **shamakh**, a wild grain, often grows without cultivation and serves as a staple food for the devout, the poor, and the ascetics, who gather it directly from the fields, carrying large baskets for collection.

At the same time, such culinary practices among the masses reflected a site of negotiation and coexistence between communities. The dietary divide between Hindus and Muslims where one community abstained from meat while the other regarded it as essential did not lead to complete separation but rather a continuous adaptation. Food became a subtle medium through which boundaries of faith were maintained, yet everyday coexistence was made possible. The public kitchens, market stalls, and caravan eateries where both groups interacted illustrate how shared spaces of consumption often transcended religious taboos, demonstrating food as a site of cultural encounter and accommodation.

Islam played a great and important role in creating a distinctive and more elaborate food culture during the sultanate. The kitab nama-i Nasir Shahi reveals that new significant additions were made to the traditional Indian dishes under the impact of new immigrants, especially from central Asia and Iran.



Biryani



Qima

This text mentions several new dishes, along with detailed description about the method of daily cooking in the royal kitchen and the different ingredients needed for the cooking of a particular dish. The mention of biryani (rice red coloured with saffron and cooked with meat, dry fruits and spices) for the first time, while shorba, qima (fried minced meat) mentioned as qima-i-Ghiyas Shah after Sultan Ghiyasuddin Shah, and Sambosa being the traditional dishes. Apart from this number of halvas was also listed among the royal delicacies. These innovations marked the gradual synthesis of Persian, Central Asian, and Indian culinary traditions.

As the Sultanate settled more deeply into the Indian landscape, the elite's plate evolved to incorporate elements of both culinary traditions.

Although the success of a meal among the elite was determined by the number and variety of meat dishes, as the Sultanate's residence in India lengthened, they developed more of a taste and appreciation for vegetarian food. At a banquet in the court of Sher shah, for instance the Muslim dined on naan, meat kebabs and yellow mutton shorbas, while their Hindu guests were served puris, various vegetables, lentils, suhali. On other occasions, Hindus were served fragrantly spiced rice dishes, jhal and manda. Such shared feasts between Muslim and Hindu elites became not just occasions of hospitality but also performances of political diplomacy and cultural coexistence. The dining table thus functioned as a symbolic space where religious and social boundaries were negotiated through food turning meals into acts of diplomacy, inclusion, and mutual respect within the pluralistic fabric of the Delhi Sultanate.

When the Ghaznavids first entered India, no one could have imagined that the encounters between the new rulers and the local people would create a legacy that would outlast empires. The Delhi Sultanate did not merely establish political control it reshaped the cultural and social fabric of the subcontinent through the language of food. What began as a meeting of different dietary worlds which were Persian, Central Asian and Indian gradually grew into a refined Indo-Islamic cuisine that reflected both negotiation and assertion. By institutionalizing royal kitchens that combined Central-Asian ingredients such as nuts, ghee, rice pilāf, and kebabs with indigenous produce, the Sultanate crafted a food culture that embodied hierarchy, piety, and governance. Dining rituals displayed power and discipline; public kitchens and langars reflected charity and devotion; and the daily act of eating revealed the deep negotiations between religion, purity, and social order. Women's roles in kitchens, the symbolism of serving, and the etiquette of dining all contributed to a silent yet powerful politics that shaped how society functioned. Through these culinary practices, food became more than sustenance. It became a statement of authority, belonging and identity. It dictated who cooked, who ate and who was excluded, turning kitchens and dining floors into mirrors of empire. As the Sultanate gave way to the Mughals, this legacy did not end evolved. The Mughals inherited the flavours, techniques, and etiquettes refined under the sultanate, carrying forward a tradition where every meal still whispered stories of power, faith and coexistence.

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DIGITAL CARTOGRAPHIES OF DESIRE AND AFFECT: INTERNET, CHILDREN, AND THE ERASURE OF GASTRONOMY IN GAZA

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(This paper was presented as part of the Literati 2025-26 Paper Presentation Competition.)

Abstract

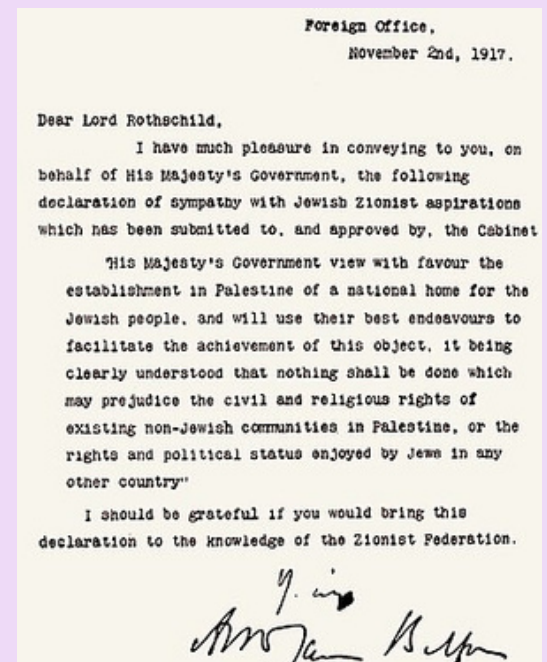
The systematic oppression, paralysing control, and erasure of masses in Palestine and subsequently Palestinian culture, since the Balfour Declaration (1917) has assumed various forms historically. This paper looks at the strategic instrumentalisation of aid blockades (after the genocide escalated in October 2023), to manufacture famine in Gaza, and its recurring nature's implications on Palestinian children's physical health and emotional states. It looks at the consequential shift of their diet from a diverse, balanced one, to sparse mere survival meals comprising of minimal nutrition, and how cases of children starved to death have accelerated in Gaza. Furthermore, it takes into account instances of stale, rotten food being sent into Gaza to discuss the nature of this erasure of gastronomy.

Employing the digital archival method, documentations such as 'What I Eat in a Day' videos posted via verified Palestinian social media handles, it explores the erasure of Palestinian gastronomy, juxtaposing it with the global practice of misrepresentation of Palestinian dishes as Israeli. It takes the case of child chefs who used their online presence to a)share their innovative takes on diverse food related challenges posed by the displacement and food blockages and b)preserved indigenous gastronomy by digitally documenting and sharing it online publicly. It looks at videos of Gazan children's desire to taste traditional dishes after months of starvation, and their reactions upon tasting those dishes months later. It seeks to look at the dynamics of desire and affect vis-a-vis underfed, malnourished, and starved children, and how grief and physically visible excitement become capital feelings with relation to the fluctuating availability of food in an identity under siege.

Keywords: Palestine, Balfour Declaration, children, famine, gastronomy, food blockages, digital media, starvation, desire, affect.

INTRODUCTION

In 1917, the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild, an influential British Jewish figure, endorsing support for the establishment of a “national home for Jewish people” in what was then, the land of Palestine. This was later issued by the British government as a public statement called the Balfour Declaration. Ever since the Balfour Declaration, owing to the British government’s promise to the Jewish people, the map of Palestine has undergone shifting cartographical borders at the behest of foreign entities. This colonial intervention by Britain spurred the emigration of Jewish people into Palestine, which lead to an invasive occupation of Palestinian territory, and has blurred the boundaries of Palestinian territory for nearly a century now. This colonial project of creating the state of Israel on Palestinian land has instrumentalised hard power by using military force, and soft power by trafficking pernicious discourse, to create the false narrative that defies undisputed historical facts about the colonisation of Palestine and the genocide of Palestinian people.



Balfour Declaration

This genocide escalated in October 2023, and ever since, the state of Israel has left no stone unturned in dehumanising, oppressing and annihilating Palestinians and Palestinian identity. According to United Nations, On 9 October 2023, Israel announced its starvation campaign against Gaza (M.I), again proving that documentation of this genocide is rather dense, and yet the violence continues.

This study focuses on the repercussions of the systematic orchestration of famine in Gaza on Palestinian children falling in the age group of 0-18 years. It further investigates into digital documentations of Palestinian children’s ‘What I Eat in a Day’ videos on Instagram to discuss the effect of famine and aid blockade on native gastronomy. Additionally, it looks at the affect of starvation on children and concludes with a discussion on the blurring cartographies of gastronomy due to misrepresentation of native food culture under the shadow of territorial occupation.

METHODOLOGY

1) *Digital Archival research*- For the purpose of this study, a thorough analysis of digital archives on the internet was conducted. A large number of videos of Palestinian children (from October, 2023 to present) struggling to get food and preparing survival meals on makeshift stoves were consulted to understand the struggle of facing famine as a child. Moreover, videos of children opening aid packages were consulted to get an idea of the food that was being made available to them in middle of frequent blockades. Also, videos of children's reactions after tasting different foods after months were consulted to draw a link between Silvan Tomkins's Affect theory and the starved children of Palestine. Finally, news articles and official news channel videos were consulted to collect data.

2) *Secondary Research*- Literature on the history of the Palestinian map, gastronomy and affect theory was consulted to academically scrutinise the topic.

AID BLOCKADES, CHILDREN AND THE DIGITAL AGE

As mentioned above, the Palestinian territory and population has been long subjugated by Israeli occupation. Throughout the course of the past 80 years, aid from other countries has been delivered to Palestine because the international community and forums like the United Nations (UN) recognise the occupation of Palestine as illegal by international law and Israeli treatment of Palestinians, genocidal. This creates a layered host of challenges for the native Palestinian, for the native faces oppression at the hands of the Israeli state as well as Israeli citizens because of the leeway provided to Israeli citizens by the government. This can be observed in how ever since October 2023, Israeli forces have frequently blocked aid from entering occupied Palestinian territory, and how Israeli citizens have also participated in these blockades after aid trucks were sparsely allowed to enter Palestine and attacked by Israeli citizens (Cursino). This actively demonstrates that the genocide is not an asymmetrical war, instead, it is a systematic plan being executed by an entire population at state and individual levels to erase the otherised Palestinians.

With consecutive months of no aid being allowed into Palestine, Palestinians faced starvation due to a very well orchestrated famine. Treated as aliens in their own land, forcibly displaced from their native settlements, Palestinians go through a transgenerational hardship, as the recipients of this genocide, include Palestinian children as well, born and unborn. Needless to mention, the pregnant women of Palestine birth children in the middle of a genocide, meaning, the lack of nutrition during pregnancy already ensures deprivation from the womb for the children

of Palestine. These children are targeted from the womb to the tomb, and it all begins with a forceful snatching of sustenance from conception. It is a famine they are living in, but one must never lose cognisance of the fact that these conditions in this particular instance are man-made.

This famine has led to a direct, capital impact on the physical and mental health of Palestinian children, which can be seen through videos and images of malnourished bodies coming out of Palestine. Visuals of bones and ribs visibly poking through abdomens, disproportionate skulls and loss of movement due to malnutrition have become a routine broadcast coming from the Gaza Strip. However, these cases are not one-dimensional, or uniform. Each body is different, each body suffers but does so differently. Each deprived body endures but endures differently. For example, one case of a young girl losing all of her crown hair due to stress has also been recorded (Al Jazeera English, “Palestinian Girl Describes Losing Her Hair over War Trauma”), which goes on to demonstrate the multifaceted implications of surviving a genocide as a child. That the bereaved child grieves and her body responds to this grief in such a way is an instance that humanises the Palestinian body, which is often called and treated as inhuman by Israeli settlers and military. To feel is to be human, and to be treated humanly is a right Palestinians have been denied. But most of all, this case enlightens us about the misery of these people, that has most unjustly been denied, overlooked, and worse, been sought to sound justifiable.



Malnourished child in Gaza

Being a child, however, in this day and age also comes with remedies to adverse situations— with all its harmful effects, social media has been the only saviour of Palestinian voices. With the worsening political scene, children took to internet as their final resolution to battling the challenges in front of them. This included creation of Instagram handles to record videos of their plight, on ground realities of starvation as well as documentation of what they ate in a day to show the world what living in a genocide entails. Young children with culinary interests such as Renad Atallah, gained popularity for their documentation of preparing survival meals from the few resources made available to them (Chughtai and Maram Humaid).

Her videos are centred around preparing meals that allow some joy amid starvation and famine, such as eating a cake when sweets are unavailable and bakeries are struggling to make basic bread. Born from childlike curiosity, her creative take on food recipes has inspired many to figure out solutions to the problem of being deprived of desire and meals as a child. Her videography also tends to the community in the dual sense of a) preparing communal meals for the children in displacement camps, and b) creating a sense of much needed closeness to one's own culture, for, the genocide is not merely about dead body counts but also about the genocide of a culture through inhibiting life, mobility, stealing of native culture, and portraying it as inherently Israeli.



Falafel



Hummus

Much like the frowned upon colonial practice of anglicisation, which is founded upon giving the impression of non-English words, figures, and names of things and places as historically English, Israel and Israelis have often tried to give the impression of Palestinian gastronomy as inherently Israeli. To present traditional Palestinian dishes like hummus, muhammara, falafel, etc., as Israeli is an act of thievery, and unfortunately, majority of the world permits it. Amid these circumstances, reiteration becomes vital to sustain history and culture, and that is precisely what these child chefs are doing.

These child chefs have not only shown how to make do with minimal kitchen ingredients and equipment, but also how to preserve links to one's native gastronomy when their entire identity is under attack. While some children preserve culture, some are annihilated within ten years of birth—cases of starvation leading to death in children skyrocketed after October, 2023, reflecting the success of the Israeli agenda to erase Palestinian bloodlines (Chughtai). Food shortage therefore, is not a temporary issue in the occupied land; it is a historical act of aggression, tainting bloodlines and erasing lives from records. This shows not only the misery being faced by the community, but also the heartbreaking reality of children being robbed off their childhood or their entire life, in Palestine.

GASTRONOMY, AID AND CYBERCOLONIALISM

The aforementioned mass food shortages have had direct impacts on the native's gastronomy as well. Predominantly on an Arab diet, which is largely non-vegetarian, Palestinians have been forced to live off canned food sent to them, which leaves little to no room for making traditional dishes. To add to this, Israeli soldiers often loot aid being delivered to Palestinians, and have also been documented spoiling the food being sent to Gaza (Middle East Monitor). This host of problems has not only physiological effects but also emotional ramifications, for, it is not only associated with deprivation of satiety but also being forced away from one's roots. Also, one must take into account the anticipation of nourishment that is killed when rotten aid food is unboxed. So, in Palestine, children— born and unborn, elder people, and anticipation, all are marred.

Interestingly, all of this takes place while Israelis claim Palestinian dishes to be inherently Israeli (Ranta), thereby demonstrating the multifaceted attack on and manipulation of the occupied people's culture. This phenomenon is also not geographically isolated, for, even many restaurants abroad advertise Palestinian dishes as Israeli now, thereby partaking in the cyber colonialism project on Palestine (Tawil-Souri and Aouragh). Restaurants in Delhi's Punjabi Bagh serving cuisine from central and west Asia, and Africa, often describe these dishes on Zomato, a food delivery app, as Israeli. This is not an innocent mistake, but a deliberate lie told to epistemologically destruct one's knowledge and idea of Palestine while standing in a remote place. It is also a clear example of cross-border far-right nationalist solidarity between India and Israel. While one corner of the internet is full of Gazan children making do with the most bare minimum aid packages, there's another corner that reaffirms Israeli ideology of subjugating Palestinians in newer ways every single day, and that corner, is occupied by Indians. It is precisely in this way that digital cartographies are mapped or rather, erred, and solidarity erased, and affect misplaced. While for the larger part of India's post-Independence era, its foreign policy aligned towards Palestine, ever since 2014, that has shifted drastically. It is in these times, that discourse upon the same must be critically conducted and solidarity with the oppressed reaffirmed, lest we too, participate in an intellectual genocide of the Palestinians.

It is worth noting that the onset of any colonial activity, births anti-colonial movement as well. It is fairly in response to these cybercolonial tactics of Israel, which make it vital for Palestinians to continue their anti-colonial struggle by taking to the Internet, for it also makes space for the global audience to experience the affect of being disbarred from fulfilling desire, even the most basic of it, like eating food.

CARTOGRAPHIES OF DESIRE AND EFFECT IN CHILDREN

The months long desire to taste one's native food is a potent desire visible in the affect children go through. Along the lines of Tomkins's contribution, one sees how Palestinian children crave meat for months and when they finally see it, they are overwhelmed with joy. One child is also seen immediately falling into prostration to thank God for this provision, which demonstrates the deep affect children experience in months long starvation coming to and end (YouTube, "Children in Gaza Cheer When Realizing They're about to Eat Chicken for the First Time"). In contrast to this, children have been observed crying desperately for basic food but being denied the luxury of a healthy meal, which goes on to exemplify how deep the pangs of hunger can be for children ("Palestinian Child Breaks down after Missing Meal amid Starvation").



Children in Gaza Cheer When Realizing They're about to Eat Chicken for the First Time

The startling emotions and affects of joy and remorse in the child's body are testaments to how deep feeling the human being is, and reflective of how heinous it is to purposefully repress the desire of another human being as has been done by the Israeli government. With no remorse for the children being persecuted and starved, the occupation gets emboldened by the day, and human life, joy, feeling—all succumb to its power.

With the blurring cartographies of the digital representations of the map of Palestine, the cartographies of gastronomy begin to blur too. Residue of the native gastronomy remains, still under attack, yet surviving by the power of the internet and powerful documentation in an age fraught with difficulty. People's apt imagination of Palestinian culture survives in resistance to the colonial narrative flooding discourses today, desire and affect coexist somehow, in little Palestinian children's bodies, and the revolution lives, in one sparse bite of food after another, prepared to preserve, a residual gastronomy in the face of a genocide. With all its hunger and starvation, the Palestinian child lives in the face of adversity, in gruelling conditions that leave it bereft of hope. The child learns to create its own hope, in one makeshift pot after another, one bite of authentic Palestinian Hummus after another, even as sellers globally start calling it Israeli cuisine. Just like the body of a child from Palestine, the occupier also has feelings; but unlike

the Palestinian child, the occupier lives off lust and desire for the former's identity. And yet, the starved child resists this occupation till whenever its little, besieged body allows, between one bite of bread, and another, holding together the lines of cartography that signify its home under attack, in emotional breakdown and massacre, living from one bite of bread, to another.

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DECODING BLIND BORDERS: CARTOGRAPHIC COLONIZATION, DISPLACEMENT AND RESOURCE POLITICS ACROSS WEST ASIA

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(This paper was presented as part of the Literati 2025-26 Paper Presentation Competition.)

Abstract

This paper seeks to examine how colonial cartographic tools redefined political, cultural, economic and geographical realities of West Asia. Without any consideration of local languages, traditions, customs and landscapes, the vast swathe of land was divided along strict lines of control. Through the examination of cartographic colonization, this paper tends to highlight how agreements like the Sykes - Picot agreements and Balfour Declaration reshaped and transformed West Asia forever. These “Blind Borders” led to subsequent displacement, exile and identity crises. Reading and interpreting literary texts like Darwish’s poetry and Abdul Rahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt*, it examines how colonial narratives have been countered through these literary tools of resistance. Furthermore, the paper also examines how apart from political divisions, oil cartographies further converted areas into areas of extraction and exploitation by the West. Drawing on postcolonial studies, history, literature and geography, this paper establishes the role of counter mapping narratives to understand West Asia beyond the blind borders erected centuries ago.

Keywords: West Asia; Cartographic colonization; Displacement; Oil Politics; Counter Mapping; Literary examination

INTRODUCTION

The vast, dry and rolling landscape of West Asia, defended by the Arabian and Mediterranean Sea, was the cradle of civilization where ancient cities like Babylon and Uruk reigned supreme as the capitals of the world, renowned and esteemed for their grandeur and greatness. This land of empires and kingdoms breathes of a story ignored. The colonial hunger for “money, material and matter”, morphed into political domination, economic exploitation and cultural imposition across the Middle East and South Asia and the simultaneous quest for power and

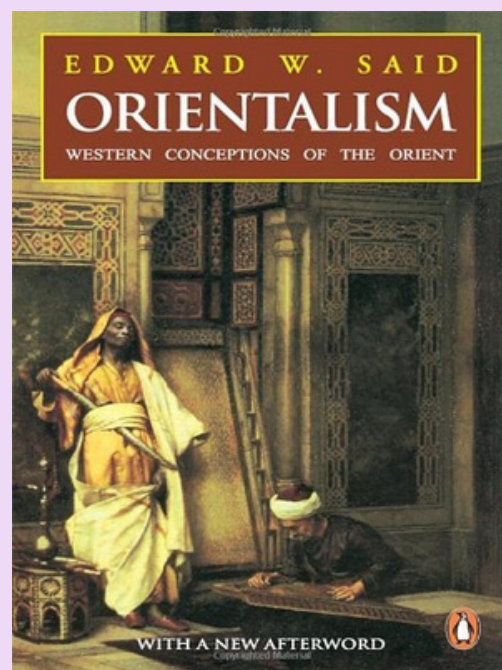
dominance among the colonizers led to the creation of blind lines in the form of borders that cut through customs, traditions, communities and ethnicities. The ink spilled on paper by foreign entities led to the creation of modern day “maps”, that triggered not just displacement and migration but also generation’s worth of trauma and suffering. Beneath the geographical maps of control, there lies another map of memory and belonging, a voice that craves to reclaim the lost histories and narratives.

West Asia was birthed through a set of agreements, from the *Sykes–Picot Agreement* of 1916 to the *Balfour Declaration* of 1917, where colonial cartography turned land into a battlefield, each consequent border sustaining wounds and injuries. This paper aims to explore the implications of colonial map-making and its reverberations in contemporary times. By examining how the colonization of cartographies turned borders into instruments of control and dominance, this study, through a reading of Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry and Ghassan Kanafani’s *Men in the Sun*, analyses how literature became a tool for resistance. Through an understanding of how oil and resource politics further shaped geographies, this paper highlights how mapping was not simply political but economic as well, drawing on the phrase by J.B.Harley (1989) that “The colonial map did not describe the world; it produced it.”

THE ORIENTALIST LENS AND COLONIAL GAZE: THE GENDER OF GEOGRAPHY

The cartographic colonization of West Asia can be traced back to the theory of orientalism propounded by Edward Said (1978) which encapsulated the study of Asian languages, religion, cultures, philosophies and law, all in an effort by the colonizers to dominate the sources of knowledge production. By drawing the distinction between the “Occident” and “Orient”, Said argued that the latter was effeminate, savage and barbaric and must be tamed, disciplined and civilized by the imperial masters.

The act of mapping West Asia, therefore, transformed the region in line with the Orientalist imaginings of the “East”, turning geography into spheres of influence and determining the notions of hierarchy.



Theory of Orientalism by Edward Said

The lack of consultations with regional stakeholders while determining the borders and territories is reflective of the sheer denial of autonomy and self-determination to those who were to face the brunt of these consequential decisions. Moreover, the call of “White Man’s Burden” by Kipling (1899) provided ideological justification for the European colonizers for “civilizing” the non-Europeans. In West Asia, these ideologies coalesced into the demarcation of the territories amongst the French and British, each deciding for themselves the extent and size of the lands, masking dispossession with domination. Thus, the colonial cartographies became a literal manifestation of the Oriental ideology through the demarcation of territories, which was not only a political but also a moral project, rooted in the belief to restore order to “disordered” territories.

The spatial imaginations of colonial cartographies were deeply organized along gendered lines. Sara Ahmed argues in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) that emotions and orientations relegating the Orient as the “Other” influenced the feminisation of these lands. Colonial understandings feminized lands as exotic, mysterious and sensual waiting to be “conquered” and “penetrated” by European colonizers. This implies how geography too was viewed from a patriarchal perspective with the masculine colonizers considering it their duty to “discipline” societies and bring order to the “unruly” landscapes in the Middle East. Maps, therefore, became the most effective instruments for the assertion of dominance and control over the “effeminate” Orient.

SYKES-PIKOT AND BALFOUR DECLARATION: TREATIES OF CONTROL

The Middle East has long been considered one of the most volatile and unstable regions of the world. The entirety of the region’s 20th century history has been mired in a state of perpetual conflict between disparate countries and groups from the Israel Palestine conflict to the Arab Spring, the roots of which can be traced back to a series of agreements signed amongst Europeans, permanently sealing the fates for millions of Non-Europeans. The Skyes Picot agreement, a secret negotiation between Britain and France, split up the region into spheres of influence under the mandate system which led to the demarcation of modern borders of Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian territories. With Ottoman Empire, “the sick man of Europe”, on the verge of collapsing, the British and France sought to safeguard their strategic interests in Egypt and Suez Canal. The treaty, however, was an amalgamation of false promises and betrayals.

As Edward Said argued it was “made by a European power ... about a non-European territory ... in a flat disregard of both the presence and wishes of the native majority resident in that territory”. The Sykes-Picot agreement was a treaty of contradictions. Firstly, under the terms the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the Jews has been promised an independent state in Palestine, in a bid to rally their support towards the Allied powers in World War 1. Secondly, Britain went against its own word to grant the Arabs self-determination, promised under the Hussain-McMohan Correspondance (1915–16). Thirdly, the French had been promised that Palestine would be placed under international administration. Under this treaty however, Palestine would be placed under British occupation, denying the Palestinian Arabs the independence promised to them.

These agreements not only created artificial, inorganic borders, they essentially ripped apart communities along ethnic, linguistic and sectarian lines. With a sheer disregard for the local populace and their demands, these borders split majority communities like the Kurds and Druze and essentially, relegated them to the position of minorities in several countries, denying them the right to self-determination. The undeniable impact and influence of the Sykes-Picot have been evident with the rise of organisations like the Islamic State in Iraq and the State (ISIS) and its calls to eradicate regional frontiers and lay Sykes-Picot to rest. The rise of Kurdish militant groups, seeking greater autonomy and rights for the Kurdish people in Turkey, Iraq and Syria as well as the 1948 Palestinian Nakba have been glaring examples of the repercussions of the insatiable colonial quest for profit and control, triggering incomprehensible displacements and dispossessions. As Kerry Goettlich stated in “From Frontiers to Border”, the colonizers had been engaged in drawing maps where no white man's foot ever trod, dividing mountains and lakes despite never knowing where they were, therefore, signifying total indifference on the part of colonizers while splitting communities and establishing political structures that did not reflect the historical, cultural and ethnic context of the indigenous populations.

CARTOGRAPHIC EXTRACTION: RESOURCE POLITICS OF OIL

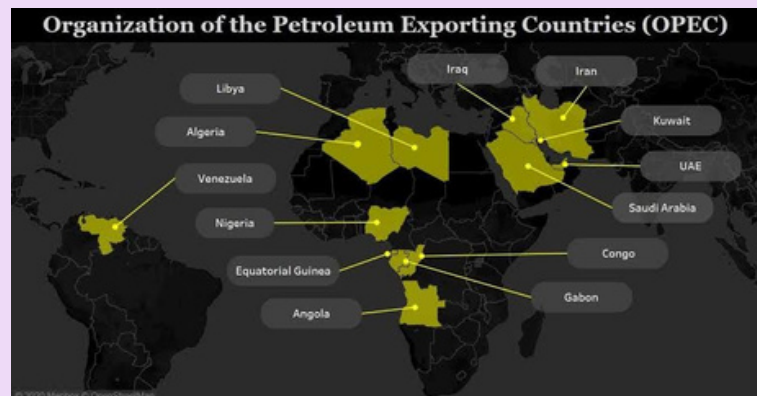
The quest for liquid gold or petroleum began in the first half of 18th century when an Englishman called William Knox D'Arcy secured a permit from the Persian regime to drill for oil in the region, a move that tied West Asia with the story of oil indefinitely. As European empires transitioned from mercantile to industrial capitalism, the demand for refined petroleum increased as Kerosene was discovered in 1854. The Oil Rush of the 1940s boomed to run the war machine during World War II and initially surged in America with the latter supplying 60% of global oil.

However, concerns over depletion of oil reserves made the Americans and Europeans settle over the Arabian Peninsula. Cartography, therefore, became a tool for locating and identifying potential oil-rich landscapes. Deserts, coasts and oasis now became zones of extraction and profit-making.

Modern understandings of Geopolitics refer to the political actions of the state in consonance with its geography, with factors like location, resources, population and climate playing the role of major contributors. Scholars like Saul Bernard Cohen argued that geopolitics is “the analysis of the interaction between geographical settings and political processes.” The Geopolitics of Oil and Gas shaped the 20th century that brought about a complete transformation of West Asia. Oil acquired a political status as the 1940s witnessed Italian bombings of Saudi Wells and well as Hitler’s invasion of Baku all in the search of oil wells. What Fred Halliday called the “petro-geopolitics of empire”, further reinforces the notion that the link between oil and political power has been the defining geostrategies of empires in the 20th century. Battal Doğan notes in “Colonial and Postcolonial Oil Politics in the Persian Gulf”, British and American oil companies used mapping “not merely to locate petroleum, but to delimit political authority and territorial sovereignty.”



OPEC SYMBOL



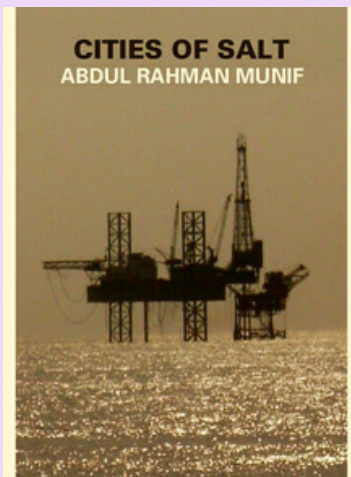
THE COUNTRIES PART OF OPEC

Everett DeGolyer in 1944 announced that West Asia was sitting on 25 billion barrels of oil. For much of the 20th century, the “seven sisters” including BP and ARAMCO, a cartel of British and American companies extracted oil from West Asia, procuring 50% all the benefits. In resistance OPEC (Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries) was established in 1960 and the oil crisis of 1973 led to a power shift with Arab countries gaining control of the supply and revenue systems. These oil cartographies and the establishment of pipelines, transport corridors, and refineries reflected how lands were not mapped according to culture or tradition, but rather on a profitable, economic basis.

DISPLACEMENT AND DISPOSSESSION: LITERATURE AS COUNTER-MAPS

Perhaps the most harrowing consequence of the colonization of cartographies in West Asia has been the displacement of millions of indigenous people. Borders produced by the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Balfour Declaration and other UN demarcations as discussed above cut across regional, ethnic, tribal and cultural lines, indifferent to the demands of the local population, as the consequence of which disparate groups were forced under singular political structures. Such “lines in the sand” became the breeding grounds for resentment, conflict and internal instability. The Shia-Sunni population in Iraq as well as the division of the Kurdish population have morphed into violent struggles for power. These agreements not only bifurcated territories, but also displaced communities, transformed identities and shattered the very essence of homeland. Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands* very poignantly wrote how to be displaced was akin to perpetually living in translation.

The most profound example of displacement was witnessed by the world in 1948, in what has been called the Palestinian Nakba. 2.3 million Palestinians were displaced and registered as refugees in West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza strip, following the creation of the state of Israel, resembling the promise of the British to establish a Jewish state in a region whose native population comprised of 90% Palestinian Arabs.



Abdul Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*



Mahmoud Darwish

Mahmoud Darwish's poetry beautifully captures the essence of the loss of one's homeland. The imposed borders are critiqued by him, and memory serves as a tool of resistance against exile and displacement. Lines such as “Stripped of my name and identity? On a soil I nourished with my own hands?” captures the emotions of the poet longing to return to the home of his ancestors.

Abdul Rahman Munif's work "Cities of Salt" masterfully highlighted how oil cartographies changed natural habitats and ecosystems. The construction of oil fields and pipelines led to the departure from the traditional Bedouin life to that of wage labour and how wells and rigs replaced the oasis, leading to a complete cultural rupture. He also highlighted how oil politics led to asymmetrical power relations as there was a strict racial segregation between the Arab and American communities. Refineries replaced villages and indigenous people were displaced from their ancestral homes.

These writers used the power of literature to reclaim their histories and narratives through the exploration of loss, memory and displacement. While Darwish's poetry captures the violence of displacement and turns it into critique, Munif's work highlights how land is not simply a political entity to be captured and reshaped, rather, it too has a life of its own.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these themes reveal that maps and borders are not simply geographical indicators. Rather, they act as political instruments that have historically been used to control, dominate and exploit. Colonial cartography fractured the regional and local dispensations of West Asia and sowed the seeds of conflict that went on to have disastrous repercussions in the form of displacement and exile. The violent conflicts and turmoil in West Asia today can be traced back to those agreements which simply promised but never delivered. The quest for Oil reshaped local economies and led to economic development. However, it transformed the very essence of traditional desert life and transformed them into spaces of extraction and contestation. The literary works of various writers has led to counter-mapping through critique and resistance, and these voices have challenged these imperial borders in line with Gillian Rose's statement: "To map is to assert control; to remap is to reclaim agency."

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THE PR DEPARTMENT OF FOOD

Author : Ananya Singh, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi

Imagine, that every food has its own PR department. Some do their job brilliantly—transforming a shellfish into a lexicon of luxury or elevating the fast food of the working class into a decadent delicacy. And then there are those that are simply the victims of the worst PR campaigns in history—a campaign waged by a prank letter, a \$10 bet and a wave of xenophobia. How did these transformations happen and in MSG's case, how did a reputation crumble so unjustly? The history of lobsters, oysters and MSG reveals that our tastes are shaped not just by our tongues but by technology, scarcity, health scares and even prejudice. What we consider 'good' food has less to do with taste or nutrition than with the stories we tell ourselves about it and the PR department that sells them.

For a lesson in how food reputations are created, destroyed and rebuilt, lobster provides the perfect example. Before transforming into the delicacy it is today, it was simply food. Its journey from a common food to a symbol of status reveals how food meanings are socially constructed. Lobsters have existed for several million years and evidence suggests that numerous ancient Mediterranean civilisations consumed them. While Greeks and Romans regarded lobsters as an important component of their food, Egyptians portrayed them in temple artwork. In both Greece and Rome, lobsters were commercially valuable and associated with wealth (Majumdar). But when Europeans came to North America, lobster's reputation drastically changed. This demonstrates that lobster was not inherently a food of the poor; its meaning changed depending on the society consuming it.

The Mi'kmaq and Maliseet had long known lobster as food, fertilizer and ornament ("The American Lobster"). But to the settlers, abundance was not a blessing; it was useless. The lobster was judged worthless because it was everywhere. The creature itself had not changed. The gaze upon it had. As William Wood wrote in the 1630s, "Their plenty makes them little esteemed and seldom eaten" (qtd. in Majumdar). They became a cheap source of protein for the poor. John J. Rowan said in 1876, "Lobster shells about a house are looked upon as signs of poverty and degradation" (qtd. in "From the Prison Yard"). The same abundance that once made lobster valuable had now stripped it of prestige.

It is a popular myth that servants and prisoners were forced to eat lobster so often that they protested. However, food historian Sandy Oliver found no primary evidence supporting this claim, suggesting that the story emerged later to exaggerate lobster's former abundance (Majumdar).

Lobster's reputation was not, however, set in stone. The nineteenth-century advancements in transportation and canning, in particular, changed how people viewed and consumed lobster. Transcontinental railroads introduced lobster to those who had never seen it before and canning made it possible for lobster to travel beyond coastal regions. In order to create a fresh narrative around a food that was previously thought of as poor people's food, train owners started serving lobster to customers as something "rare and exotic." The passengers loved it and the lobster evolved from a food source for tourists from inland regions to a symbol of the sophistication and elegance. As demand grew, new methods of transportation, including "smacks"—fishing vessels designed to keep seafood alive during transport—allowed lobster to reach wider markets (Majumdar).

Lobster's luxury status is a perfect example of how scarcity and social perception drive value. Overfishing and regulations eventually made lobster scarce. But by then, the link between rarity and luxury had already been established. Lobster's transformation was never just about taste but about the social meanings attached to it. A food once dismissed as "the cockroach of the sea" became a symbol of exclusivity because it represented something increasingly difficult to obtain. And exclusivity is the most powerful



A Lobster Dish

marketing tool of all. The less people could afford it, the more it became a sign of decadence. The price of lobster does not reflect its value but the social status it reflects. In this sense, lobster functions as a 'Veblen good'—a product whose demand increases as its price rises because its cost itself becomes a marker of social status. This phenomenon is not limited to seafood; it also occurs in a number of premium markets, when companies purposefully restrict supply to increase demand. As consumers chase these status markers, the cycle of exclusivity and want continues to fuel the attraction of high-end products.

Oysters followed a path similar to lobsters. Today, they are the epitome of fine dining, served on ice with lemon and white wine. But two centuries ago, they were the ultimate fast food—cheap, abundant and sold by the dozen from street carts in London, Paris and New York. How did the same shellfish go from worker's lunch to luxury treat?

Unlike their modern reputation as an expensive delicacy, oysters were once one of

the most accessible foods available. By the 19th century, oysters had become truly abundant. Environmental historian Booker describes oysters during this period as “a basic staple,” comparing their role in diets to everyday foods such as eggs (Greenwood). This abundance meant that oysters were not associated with exclusivity but with ordinary consumption. They were sold as street food across industrial cities, where workers relied on them as an inexpensive and filling source of nutrition. Much like fast food today, oysters were convenient, affordable and available to almost everyone.



An Oyster Dish

Then came the fall. Industrialization flooded rivers and coastal waters with human waste. Oysters, being natural filters, absorbed everything in their environment—including the sewage. The consequences were deadly. In 1924, the deadliest food-borne outbreak in American history was traced to oysters. Fifteen hundred people fell ill. One hundred and fifty died (Greenwood). A food that had once been a staple of working-class diets was now associated with typhoid and sewage. One hundred and fifty died (Greenwood). A food that had once been a staple of working-class diets was now associated with typhoid and sewage. The situation only got worse due to overfishing. Wild oyster populations had collapsed by the end of the 19th century. Suddenly, the food of the masses became a rare commodity. Their prices skyrocketed and now only wealthy people could afford them. But the mere fact that oysters became scarce did not make them luxurious. Oyster production became increasingly regulated and costly and laws required cleaner cultivation techniques. With only nine days to reach the table, oysters were expensive to transport. Today, they are farmed in clean waters, checked individually and shipped worldwide. What was once the street food of industrial workers has now become a symbol of gourmet luxury.

Just like lobsters, oysters have also re-emerged as a marker of social capital and status. Unlike many foods, oysters require participation and appreciation from the diner, elevating the act of eating into a display of sophistication and a refined culinary understanding. The act of shucking and slurping represent a form of enlightened wealth. True sophistication, it seems, lies in understanding their origins, flavours and the influence of terroir—the idea that where an oyster is grown affects its taste—and in knowing the difference between a briny East Coast oyster and a creamy West Coast one, as well as pronouncing “Kumamoto” without hesitation. In the age of social media, sharing a picture of oysters has become a way of showing one’s status and cultivated taste. It is a skilfully marketed symbol .

of who you are and where you belong, a prop in the performance of identity.

Lobster and oysters both made their way back to luxury. But MSG's story is different. Its reputation was not transformed but destroyed by a racist prank and a wave of xenophobia. So how did a completely natural flavour enhancer become one of the most misunderstood ingredients in modern history?



MSG

Monosodium glutamate, or MSG, was first isolated in 1908 by Japanese biochemist Kikunae Ikeda. He was trying to identify what gave kombu seaweed its savoury taste. “Ikeda noticed that kombu didn’t taste like any of the four main tastes (sweet, salty, sour, or bitter) but instead seemed to be defined by a fifth taste that had yet to be categorized.” He succeeded, naming the fifth taste “umami”—which translates to “delicious, savoury” in Japanese (Kang).

Ikeda established the Ajinomoto corporation to mass-produce the seasoning. MSG was embraced in Japan, spread across East Asia and quietly adopted by American food manufacturers who added it to canned soups, TV dinners and soldiers' MRE rations (Kean).

Then came 1968. The New England Journal of Medicine published a letter from a doctor named Robert Ho Man Kwok. He described numbness and heart palpitations after eating at Chinese restaurants and suggested MSG might be to blame. The media needed no further invitation. Newspapers splashed stories about “Chinese Restaurant Syndrome” across their pages and MSG was suddenly a “culinary villain” (Hamilton).

There was just one problem. Dr. Robert Ho Man Kwok didn't exist. The letter was a racist prank. It had been written by an orthopaedic surgeon named Dr. Howard Steel as part of a \$10 bet with a colleague. Many readers trusted this information from the esteemed publication, even if it appeared that several doctors were aware of the joke (Kang). Other doctors wrote in with their own anecdotes—though none reported the same symptoms. One blamed duck sauce, another wonton soup and one neurologist actually absolved MSG, noting he cooked with it at home. The inconsistencies should have raised questions. But newspapers continued to publish the tale despite the skepticism. MSG's reputation was damaged and the phrase “Chinese Restaurant Syndrome” was coined (Kean).

The fear was never really about the ingredient itself. It was about who was using it. American foods like Doritos, hot dogs and ranch dressing contained far more glutamate than a plate of chow mein, yet no one feared them (Hamilton). The difference was cultural. MSG was declared guilty by association. It belonged to Asian cuisine and Asian cuisine was seen as foreign, exotic and suspicious. The ingredient became a scapegoat for xenophobia dressed up as health anxiety. It took decades for science to undo the damage. In the 1990s, the FDA ruled that MSG in normal amounts is safe. Harvard Health later added that it contains roughly two-thirds the sodium content of table salt, making it a practical option for those reducing sodium intake (Hamilton).

Yet the stigma persists. MSG's story is the ultimate cautionary tale in food PR. A reputation ruined not by any real flaw but by a racist joke, sensationalist journalism and xenophobia. The 1968 MSG letter was published in the same year as the "Hong Kong flu," contributing to a climate where Chinese food was increasingly viewed as a health threat and Asian bodies were perceived as sources of contamination. The "No MSG" label became a marketing tool, a quiet way of saying "cleaner" — and in doing so, it reinforced the idea that "foreign" food was somehow dirty or inferior. This is PR's dark side: a false narrative amplified by media and fueled by prejudice. The letter was a joke and the symptoms were inconsistent. However, none of that mattered. The public was ready to believe that "foreign" food was dangerous and the media was ready to supply the evidence. The tragedy of MSG's story is that even when science finally vindicated it, the stigma still persisted. MSG's reputation was never about the ingredient itself; it was about what people had been taught to believe. And that is the power of PR: to shape perception, regardless of truth.

Lobster, oysters and MSG. Three foods. Three stories. One lesson. Lobster went from fertilizer to fine dining. Oysters rose from street carts to wine pairings. And MSG fell from harmless to hated. What do these stories tell us? That a food's reputation is rarely about the food itself. It is about the forces that shape perception. Lobsters became valuable when they became scarce and when railroads made them premium and exotic to the inlanders. Oysters returned to fame when regulation and production costs made them expensive. And MSG was condemned by a racist joke and a climate of racial discrimination.

The journey of each food reveals a fundamental truth: What we call "good" food is often just food with a better publicist. So the next time you're handed a menu with lobster or oysters on it, ask yourself — is this really worth the price or am I just paying for the story? The answer has less to do with what's on your plate and more to do with the PR department that sold it to you.

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MISE EN PLACE: STOCKING YOUR FOOD STUDIES PANTRY

Food studies emerged as a distinct interdisciplinary field in the 1980s and 1990s, bringing together anthropology, sociology, history, and literary criticism to argue that food is never just biological but is deeply connected to identity, power, and memory.

Foundational scholars include Sidney Mintz, whose *Sweetness and Power* links sugar to slavery and empire; Claude Lévi-Strauss, who viewed the raw/cooked distinction as a cultural code; Arjun Appadurai, who explored Indian cookbooks as sites of nation-building and class formation; and Krishnendu Ray, whose work examines migration, race, and labour through food.

Every field has its own spice rack — the handful of terms you reach for again and again once you know where they're kept. Here are fourteen essentials for food studies, labeled and shelved.



*The study of how food becomes a battleground for power, whether through caste, class, gender, or national politics. It looks at who gets to eat what, and how food access enforces social hierarchy. In *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh shows this through the rigid food segregation aboard the ship, mirroring colonial caste structures.*



*This term covers the entire cultural ecosystem around food: how it's grown, cooked, shared, and ritualized, not just consumed. It treats food as inseparable from identity, memory, and tradition. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* uses cooking scenes to carry the weight of trauma and inherited memory.*



GASTRO-POETICS

This is food used as a literary and aesthetic device, where taste, smell, and texture become tools of poetic expression. It suggests that describing food well is its own kind of art form, not just background detail. Agha Shahid Ali does this in his Kashmir poems, where food imagery becomes inseparable from grief and displacement.



FOODSPEAK

The coded, often gendered vocabulary people use to talk about food and bodies, full of euphemism and guilt ("cheat day," "being good"). It reveals how diet culture disciplines language itself. It's a key term in feminist critiques of dieting rhetoric.



KITCHEN TABLE ETHNOGRAPHIES

*A feminist research method that treats informal, domestic conversations (often among women) as legitimate sources of cultural knowledge. It pushes back against academic gatekeeping about what counts as "real" data. Patricia Hill Collins draws on this idea in *Black Feminist Thought*, valuing everyday wisdom over institutional authority.*



CULINARY MATRILINEAGE

*The passing down of recipes and food knowledge through generations of women, treated as a form of inheritance and storytelling. It frames cooking as an archive of family history. Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* explores this tension between inherited duty and personal identity.*



ALIMENTARY ALTERITY

How food is used to mark someone as “Other,” where one culture’s staple becomes another’s symbol of disgust.

It’s a recurring device in colonial travel writing to construct racial and cultural difference. It shows how eating habits get moralized and othered.



FOODSCAPES

The physical and symbolic geography of food, like markets, kitchens, and street stalls, treated as meaningful cultural spaces.

It’s useful for thinking about how food organizes a city or region.

Delhi’s Chandni Chowk or Mumbai’s dabbawala network are real-world foodscapes worth analyzing.



FOOD INSECURITY NARRATIVE

A framing that treats hunger and scarcity as structural failures (economic, political) rather than individual shortcomings.

It resists narratives that blame poverty on personal choice.



CULINARY NATIONALISM

The use of food to build and defend national identity, often through claims of “authenticity.”

It shows up in debates over who “owns” a dish or cuisine. Arguments over the “real” origin of biryani or hummus are classic examples.



COMMENSALITY

The social and emotional bond created by eating together, treating the shared meal as a ritual act rather than just nutrition.

*It's often used to study community, intimacy, or exclusion. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Laura Esquivel makes communal eating almost magical, tying food to love and connection.*



SLOW FOOD MOVEMENT

A socio-political countermovement against industrial and fast food, advocating for sustainability, locality, and pleasure in eating.

It began as a protest against globalized fast food culture. Carlo Petrini founded it in Italy in 1986, and it's since become a global framework for food ethics.



GASTRO-NOSTALGIA

*A longing for home, childhood, or a lost past expressed through food and taste memory. It's especially central in diaspora writing, where food becomes a stand-in for a place you can't return to. *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Mistress of Spices* builds its entire premise around this idea.*



CULINARY ABJECTION

Drawing on Julia Kristeva's idea of the "abject," this refers to disgust reactions toward certain foods (offal, fermentation, insects) that mark boundaries between self and other, civilized and uncivilized. It reveals how visceral reactions are culturally constructed, not universal.



CRITICS' TABLE (REVIEWS)

AAMIS : WHEN DESIRE CROSSES ALL BOUNDS

Enakshee Samanta, B.A. (Hons.) English, 1st Year

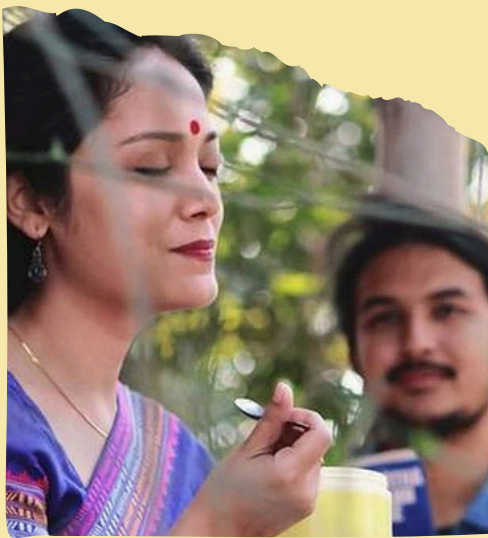


Aamis (Ravening), 2019

Aamis (Ravening) is a 2019 Assamese romantic horror film directed by Bhaskar Hazarika. The film follows a forbidden love affair between Dr. Nirmali — a married pediatrician and Sumon who is a PhD student researching food habits of North – eastern people. Often remembered for its gory, macabre elements and the deeply shocking progression of their love for meat into cannibalism, its real strength lies in how food is used as a metaphor for suppressed desire, longing and obsession. The film explores the dangers of unbridled desires and the slow moral degradation of the central characters.

Meat in *Aamis* is not simply food but the language through which desire is expressed. Nirmali and Sumon's undefined love story is expressed through food. Food begins their initial interaction and later brings them together.

Sumon and Nirmali's first encounter is rather unexpected, where he asks her to treat his friend who is suffering from indigestion. Instantly enchanted by her, he mentions a Meat Club formed by a group of his university friends. He also tries to woo her with different types of meat. Over time, they develop an intense emotional bond over their unusual love for meat. Progressively, Sumon develops a deep carnal desire for Nirmali and Nirmali develops the urge to have new experiences. Food also shows the progression of their relationship, as their feelings intensify, their food choices become more and more extreme. This eventually leads to cannibalism signifying obsession.



A scene from Aamis

However, the film refuses to celebrate their actions. The first part of the film presents them in a humane manner. It shows their loneliness, desire for companionship, curiosity and affection. These relatable emotions make the audience understand the characters. But understanding is not the same as excusing their actions. The casual, quiet moments of their bonding over food is overshadowed by the psychological horror of cannibalism. The protagonists keep crossing moral boundaries and their choices become increasingly inhumane. Sumon cooks a small portion of his flesh from his thigh for Nirmali. This happens multiple times. When Nirmali first finds out she is hesitant and confused, but later, this transforms into ecstasy. Nirmali also prepares a dish for Sumon in the same manner. The true horror

comes when Nirmali becomes obsessed with human meat. She asks Sumon to cut the legs and limbs of a corpse in the hospital morgue. As her hunger reaches a maddening extent, Sumon kills an innocent rickshaw puller for her.

“ Sometimes, I feel like this infinite hunger is making me go crazy ”

The film's ending scene gives it a moral turn. Sumon and Nirmali are arrested by the police. As the two are taken out of the police station with masks, in front of the reporters, Nirmali holds Sumon's hand which marks their first physical touch. At the same time, this moment seals the characters as irredeemable because they show no regret for their actions.

They do not feel guilty for killing an innocent man. Their touch not only showcases their love, but also their lack of remorse and that they would do it all again, if given the chance. The film provides a moralistic ending, warning about the dangers of unchecked desires and obsession. Desire when left unchecked, manifests into obsession which erodes moral, legal and societal boundaries.

Shedding light on the film's acting, Lima Das as Nirmali gives the perspective of a woman descending into obsession while Arghadeep Baruah as Sumon spectacularly portrays the doe – eyed expression of a young PhD student in love with Nirmali. The film's greatest strength is in its restrained style. It creates tension through the unsettling and disturbing atmosphere, rather than relying on constant shock. The gradual pacing and descent of the characters makes it realistic and adds to its psychological element. In the end, *Aamis* is more than a macabre film — it is a film which connects food with desire and explores how obsession can lead to destruction.

NOT EVERYONE GETS A SEAT AT THE TABLE

Kanan Khokher, BA Multidisciplinary Department, 2nd year



Ratatouille, 2007

There are many things society cannot forgive: bad table manners, an unfashionable accent, pineapple on pizza, and, apparently, a rat in the kitchen. *Ratatouille* begins with the last of these transgressions. On the surface, it follows Remy, a rat with an extraordinary sense of taste who dreams of becoming a chef in Paris, a city that prides itself on fine dining yet recoils at the mere sight of his species. Pixar uses this absurdity to ask a surprisingly serious question: who gets to belong in spaces guarded by prestige, tradition, and taste? Beneath its humour and charm, *Ratatouille* becomes a story about exclusion, ambition, and the invisible rules that decide who deserves a place at the table.

The Paris of *Ratatouille* is built on hierarchy. Gusteau's restaurant is not merely a place where meals are prepared; it is an institution where critics wield enormous power, chefs guard their reputations fiercely, and culinary excellence is treated as the inheritance of a privileged few.

Remy possesses everything this world claims to value: creativity, discipline, and an exquisite palate. Yet none of it matters because he is a rat. His identity eclipses his ability. The film understands something uncomfortable about the societies we inhabit: talent is often celebrated only after the person possessing it has been deemed acceptable. We like to believe that merit triumphs over prejudice, but *Ratatouille* quietly exposes how often prejudice determines who gets the opportunity to demonstrate merit in the first place.

This is why the film resonates so strongly with the theme “Fork or Fingers?: The Unspoken Hierarchies of How We Eat.” We attach prestige to certain cuisines while dismissing others as ordinary. We celebrate meals served in expensive restaurants



A scene from *Ratatouille*

and overlook dishes sold on crowded streets, only to rediscover them years later as the next great culinary trend. The irony is that the dish at the heart of the film- the ratatouille itself- is peasant food. Before Pixar immortalised it, ratatouille was a humble stew of vegetables associated with rural kitchens and everyday life. Nobody reserved tables months in advance for it. Nobody treated it as high art. Yet in the hands of Remy, this modest dish becomes extraordinary, forcing everyone around him to confront the absurdity of their assumptions about taste and value.

No one embodies these assumptions more perfectly than Anton Ego, the fearsome food critic whose very name sounds intimidating enough to come with ominous background

music. Ego believes that taste belongs to experts and that excellence can be recognised only by those positioned above others. And yet, the film's most iconic scene dismantles this certainty. Ego tastes Remy's ratatouille and is instantly transported back to childhood. The critic disappears.

“ *Anyone can Cook* ”

For a brief moment, he is no longer a guardian of elite culture but a little boy returning home after a difficult day, comforted by his mother's cooking. The scene is moving because it reminds us that food's greatest power has nothing to do with prestige. It is memory, affection, and belonging that give a meal meaning.

What makes *Ratatouille* remarkable is that it critiques elitism without rejecting excellence. Remy does not demand entry into the culinary world because standards should be lowered; he earns it through relentless effort and undeniable talent. Gusteau's famous line, "Anyone can cook," is often mistaken for sentimental optimism. It is, in fact, a quietly radical statement. It does not mean everyone will become a great chef. It means greatness can emerge from unexpected places and that institutions are often poor at recognising brilliance until it has already forced its way through the door.

Nearly two decades after its release, *Ratatouille* remains astonishingly relevant. In an age of curated lifestyles and endless performances of taste, the film reminds us that our preferences are shaped by class, culture, and power. Remy's triumph is not simply that he becomes a chef; it is that he transforms the rules of the kitchen itself. And perhaps that is why the film endures: because long after the final scene, it leaves us wondering how many other tables remain guarded- and how much better the world might taste if we made room for everyone.

LOVE, LANGUAGE, AND LADDOOS

Diya Malik, B.A. (Hons.) English, 1st Year



English Vinglish, 2012

“ *My wife; she was born to make laddoos.* ”

English Vinglish, starring the iconic Sridevi, is an intricate film that subtly brings to the surface the reality of almost every middle-class woman in an Indian household. Shashi, the protagonist, struggles to keep the house together, trying her best to satisfy everyone's needs except her own. She is constantly treated as the butt of jokes simply because she does not know how to speak a foreign language—English. The film offers us a glimpse into her world, where she feels like an outsider, especially in her husband's and her rude pre-teen daughter's lives. The one and only thing that makes her feel valued and gives her a sense of identity is food—specifically, her laddoos.

However, food in the hands of a woman is not considered a skill or an art, but rather a moral duty and a job, which further contributes to her subjugation and disempowerment.

This review will focus on two important aspects that the creator, Gauri Shinde, clearly had in mind: first, how cooking is perceived differently by gender, and second, how the film can be analysed through a postcolonial lens that inferiorises and infantilises women through language. It is needless to say that the movie portrays a couple with a clear hierarchy, so much so that the daughter does not even seek her mother's permission because it is considered unimportant. We will see how this dynamic unfolds as we go further.



To briefly discuss the events that take place in the movie: the film begins at the crack of dawn, where Shashi's own morning routine of drinking chai and reading the newspaper is constantly interrupted by her family, who seek her help in providing them with tea. For the first half of the movie, she feels like an alien in her own home, becoming the satirical butt of every conversation between her husband and daughter. Things begin to change for Shashi when has to travel alone to New York for her sister's wedding. Her initial experiences there shatter her completely, as she is humiliated and embarrassed because she cannot comprehend the language around her. Everything changes when she finds a place where she feels welcome: she joins an English class with the sweetest teacher and a wonderful group of people whose English is just as terrible as hers. And of course, there is Laurent, the Frenchman who helps her fall in love with herself. Things would not have turned out the way they did if it were not for Radha, her sister's daughter, who is a catalyst in helping her on a transformative journey of self-discovery.

To discuss the first major theme of this review—that cooking is perceived differently depending on gender—we can trace several events throughout the film. Shashi makes excellent laddoos and runs a small home business, similar to a modern cloud kitchen, where she personally delivers her handmade sweets door-to-door. She genuinely enjoys cooking; it is not forced upon her. It comes naturally to her. Yet this is also the only reason anyone, especially her husband, has even a little respect for her as a person. Even this talent is turned into an insult.

In one scene, her husband says to their son, “You'll be expelled from school, and then you'll make laddoos your whole life.” For no valid reason, he also tries to stop her from selling her laddoos, which are her only independent source of income, effectively attempting to keep her confined within the four walls of the house. Cut to New York: in her very first English class, she is introduced by her teacher as a respected entrepreneur. Suddenly, her work has value. Suddenly, she has value. Laurent, who is also a chef, plays an important role in shaping her perspective. He associates food with art and love and tells her that she is, in fact, an artist.

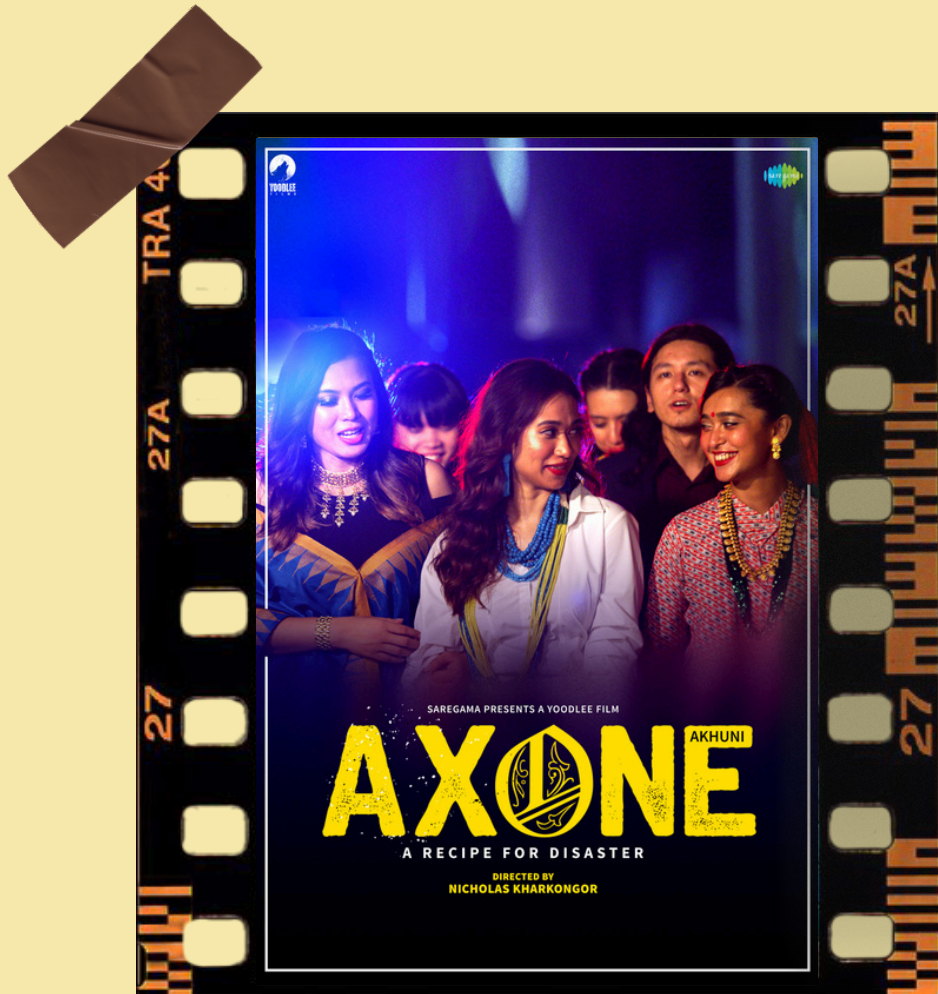
In New York, she is seen as an entrepreneur; in a conservative, traditional, patriarchal household, she is reduced to little more than a caregiver or nanny. It is precisely this lack of respect and inclusion that motivates Shashi to attend English classes in order to earn the respect she should never have needed to earn from her own family. In the first half of the film, she progresses as a character from being someone who is timid and naïve, a woman who supposedly does not know the ways of the world, and is constantly made to feel inferior within her own home and marriage—a marriage that should ideally be a union between two equals.

Coming to the second argument, this film can be partially analysed through a postcolonial lens. English is presented as a language that is superior to all others. Language becomes a tool through which people are differentiated, judged, and subordinated. Language becomes a prison. The subtle language chauvinism present throughout the film becomes evident because, in the end, Shashi's family respects her only after she becomes proficient in English. All of these aspects are immediately noticeable to anyone watching the film.

Ultimately, *English Vinglish* is about discovering Shashi. It is not about Laurent and Shashi's relationship as much as some viewers may wish it to be. Rather, it is about learning to love oneself and proving one's worth—not just to others, but to oneself as well. Food remains an integral part of Shashi's identity throughout the film; the only difference is that in the beginning, it is not valued. Although the movie ends without any clear indication that her family will permanently change their behaviour, it nevertheless leaves the audience with hope.

THE POLITICS OF SMELL

Guntas Kaur Channi, B.A. (Hons.) English, 2nd Year



Axone, 2019

There's a scene in *Axone* (2019) where two women tiptoe out of their Delhi apartment at the crack of dawn to buy pork and fermented soybeans, quietly, carefully, hoping nobody notices. And right there, before a single flame has been lit, before any food has been cooked or eaten, the film has already told you everything you need to know. Some kitchens, it turns out, are not equally welcome. Nicholas Kharkongor's film follows a group of friends from Northeast India living in Delhi who are trying to prepare axone, a dish made with fermented soybeans, pungent and beloved, for a friend's wedding celebration. The stakes, as the film reveals, are considerable. What makes *Axone* so quietly devastating is where it locates its conflict. Most food films, and honestly most food writing too, are obsessed with the moment of eating: the bite, the reaction, the memory it unlocks. *Axone* is almost entirely uninterested in this. The dish itself doesn't even appear until the last five minutes of the film.

Everything before that is about the attempt to cook it: the scrambling for ingredients, the borrowing of spaces, the negotiating with landlords, the timing of the stove around the landlady's sleep schedule. The kitchen becomes a battleground long before anyone sits down to eat, and the villain, if you can call it that, is smell. Axone's fermented soybeans have a strong odour, one that seeps under doors, drifts into corridors, and apparently causes the neighbours to lose their minds. The landlady doesn't see the food, doesn't taste it, doesn't come into any actual contact with it. She smells it in the hallway and that's enough. The food is declared intolerable, the women's right to cook in their own rented flat is challenged, and a confrontation follows that is ugly in all the ways that casual, everyday discrimination tends to be: framed as a matter of collective comfort, dressed up in the language of reasonableness, carrying the full weight of belonging and not-belonging underneath.

This is where the film becomes genuinely sharp. There's a moment where the landlady's grandson, trying to help, suggests they tell everyone the smell is coming from a septic tank being cleaned. The cover story works; people accept it and move on. The implication is left to settle on its own: the smell of fermented soybean, a flavour central to Naga cuisine, is more tolerable to the neighbours when it's equated with sewage than when it's acknowledged as someone's dinner. This sits alongside something else the film does quietly well, which is show which food gets to be invisible. The dominant cuisines of a city, the dals and rotis, the smells of tempering mustard seeds in ghee, circulate freely. Nobody complains about those. They've been absorbed into the sensory background of urban life, naturalised to the point where they don't register as "smell" at all. Northeastern food doesn't get this luxury. It becomes hyper-visible precisely through the complaints it generates, turned into an event, a problem, a disturbance rather than just, you know, someone cooking dinner.



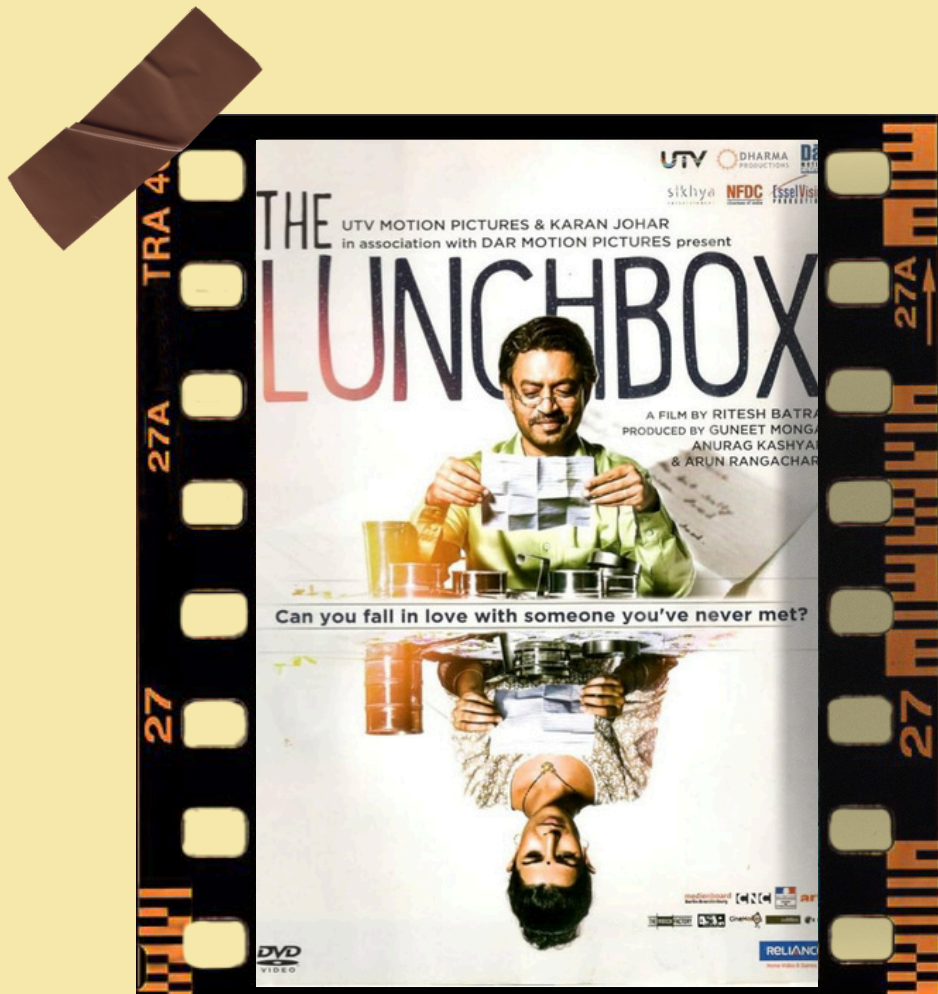
A scene from Axone

The film is funny in places, genuinely so, and the ensemble cast carries a warmth that makes the friendship at its centre feel real. The comedy runs alongside a steadily accumulating weight, and the two moods coexist without either undercutting the other.

When Chanbi has a panic attack mid-confrontation with the landlady, the film makes the cost of all this visible: the exhaustion of constantly managing your presence, moderating your cooking, apologising for your appetite. *Axone* works methodically, following a group of people trying to cook a meal for a friend's wedding and showing you, step by step, how many walls they have to run into before they can do it. The politics are in the logistics. The violence is in the smell. And by the time the dish finally appears on screen, the film has made clear that what was really being cooked, all along, was a case for the right to simply exist in a city that would rather not notice you.

KHALI DABBAS AND LONELINESS

Varsha Maria Joseph, B.A. (Hons.) English, 1st Year



The Lunchbox, 2013

“Aaj dabba khali wapis aaya tha” - this one line from the movie, Lunchbox sent me into a spiral.

For our main character Ela, what did it mean for a ‘dabba’ or a container that she had prepared so carefully to come back empty? Did she think that perhaps her cooked food was so lovely that her husband couldn't help but finish it? Perhaps the sparks between them had reignited? Perhaps her husband was finally, just finally in love with her? The movie revolves around a homemaker who is in her late twenties and leads a monotonous, repetitive life and is perhaps looking for a reason to truly live. The movie follows the story of Ela, who, each morning lovingly prepares a lunch box meant for her husband reaches another person named Saajan. The two start sending messages to each other using the lunch dabbas... and the rest, as they say, is history.

The food references in this movie might be subtle but they sure are powerful. They are literally the backbones of the movie. For instance, the paneer curry which was her husband's favourite, which when she makes for Saajan - hints at the feelings she might be developing for him. Or the way her chai remains cold and untouched after reading a letter from Saajan, which suggests how deeply engrossed she was in reading his letter. Another key scene where Saajan calls Ela his girlfriend over dinner at Sheikh's house also indicates something deep — a contemplative acceptance of the fact that Ela meant something important to him. And most significantly, the empty lunch box signified her anger at Sajan's refusal to meet her at the cafe.



A scene from The Lunchbox

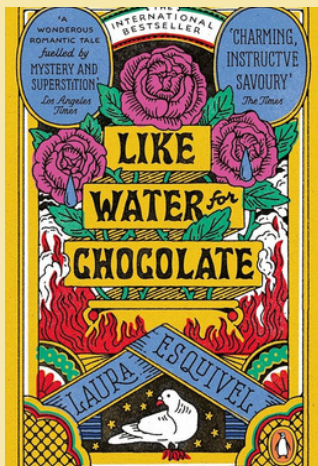
While food is a common source for people coming together, joy, happiness and all the myriad of feelings across fiction and real-life, this movie explores feelings like loneliness, financial issues, despair, and even heartbreak. The various flavours along with the way the food is prepared and served are all excellent references to human emotions and feelings. Out of all the emotions depicted, loneliness is the primary focus of the movie. The various kinds of loneliness: the kind that doesn't leave you even when you are surrounded by people, the one that Ela faced, or the kind that slowly wraps around your life like a mold. Such was the case of Sajan Fernandes, whose solitary life is explored in the movie. Even the wedding photo of Sheikh and his wife is an eye-opener because it shows how lonely he was as he had grown up as an orphan. But food connects them—the lunchboxes prepared by Ela not only connect her with Sajan, but what connects Sheikh and Sajan as well. Those lunchboxes slowly chip away at the loneliness that all of them felt in their own way, by offering the three lonely strangers companionship and confidants in each other.

The different items that Ela cooked or the deep intimate things she wrote about her husband's affair or about her family over the letters with a cup of chai let the friendship blossom through the movie. While Ela and Sheikh were younger and hopeful, and they managed to crack the shell of their isolation and loneliness, Saajan had grown accustomed to it and had let it cover him like a blanket of cigarette smoke.

Initially, Saajan had been determined to not reach out to Ela and leave for Nashik, as he had believed himself to be too old for her. However, his conversation with the old man made him realise how going to Nashik would just lead to him spending his remaining years in isolation. So he makes a bold choice, and so does Ela, when she goes looking for him. After that, it is all left to the viewer. The movie opens up several questions for a plot in which not a lot happens. And the best part? It doesn't really give any concrete answers.

THE BUFFET OF BOOKS

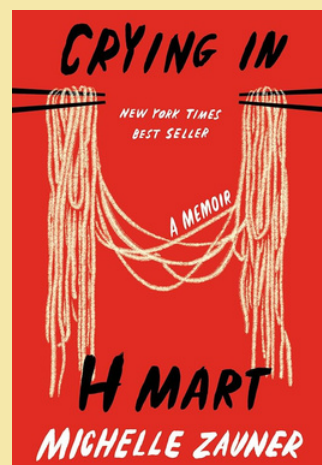
Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel (1989)



A magical realist classic where Tita, forbidden from marrying the man she loves, pours all her emotions into her cooking. Food becomes her only language of love and rebellion, making the novel a beautiful exploration of desire, family, and gender roles.

Crying in H Mart by Michelle Zauner (2021)

Part memoir and part love letter to Korean food, this book traces Zauner's grief after losing her mother. Through recipes and grocery aisles, it shows how food preserves memory, identity, and the feeling of home.



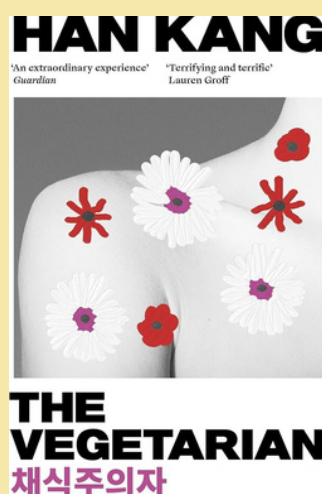
The Mistress Of Spices by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1997)



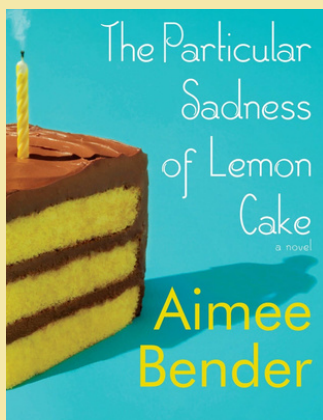
Set in a magical spice shop in California, the novel follows Tilo, who uses spices to heal her customers' sorrows. It beautifully explores migration, nostalgia, and the ways food carries stories across borders.

The Vegetarian by Han Kang (2007)

When Yeong-hye decides to stop eating meat, her choice shocks her family and slowly becomes an act of resistance against social expectations. The novel uses food to question power, patriarchy, and bodily autonomy.



The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake by Aimee Bender (2010)



Rose discovers that she can taste people's emotions through the food they prepare. Blending magical realism with coming-of-age fiction, the novel explores family secrets and asks whether food can reveal truths words cannot.

HOPE YOU ENJOY THEM!

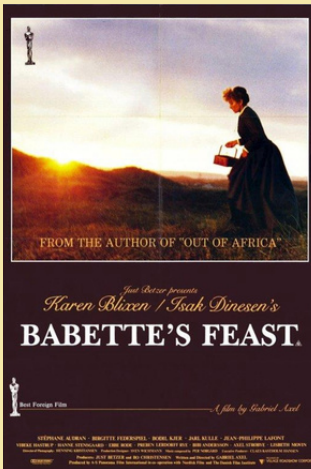
CINEMA À LA CARTE

The Lunchbox by Ritesh Batra (2013)

A mistaken lunchbox delivery in Mumbai sparks an unexpected friendship between a lonely housewife and a widower. Through food and handwritten notes, the film explores love, longing, and the comfort of human connection.



Babette's Feast by Gabriel Axel (1987)



A French refugee prepares an extravagant feast for a strict Danish village, transforming the community in the process. The film beautifully portrays food as art, generosity, and human connection.

Midnight Diner by Joji Matsuoka (2009-2019)

Set in a tiny Tokyo diner that opens only at midnight, each episode revolves around a dish and the memories attached to it. A heartwarming celebration of food, nostalgia, and everyday lives.



The Menu by Mark Mylod (2022)



A dark satire in which wealthy diners visit an exclusive island restaurant, only to discover the chef has far more sinister plans. The film examines food as status, spectacle, and cultural capital.

Tampopo by Juzo Itami (1985)

Often called the world's first 'ramen western,' this quirky comedy follows a widow's quest to make the perfect bowl of ramen. Funny and philosophical, it explores food through community, desire, and the simple joy of eating.



HOPE YOU ENJOY THEM!



ONE-ON-ONE TASTING
(INTERVIEW)

READING THE WORLD THROUGH FOOD

An Interview with Dr. Sakshi Dogra



Dr Sakshi Dogra is Assistant Professor of English at Gargi College, University of Delhi. Her research brings together food studies and affect theory to explore questions of taste, identity, and belonging. She has published with Routledge, Springer, *Gastronomica*, and most recently in *Qurbatein* (Ashoka University), and is co-editor of *Food Culture Studies in India: Consumption, Representation and Mediation* (Springer Nature). She regularly writes and speaks on food cultures, literary studies, and digital media.

1) Could you share with us your journey in academia—what first drew you to food studies, and how has that curiosity evolved for you over the years?

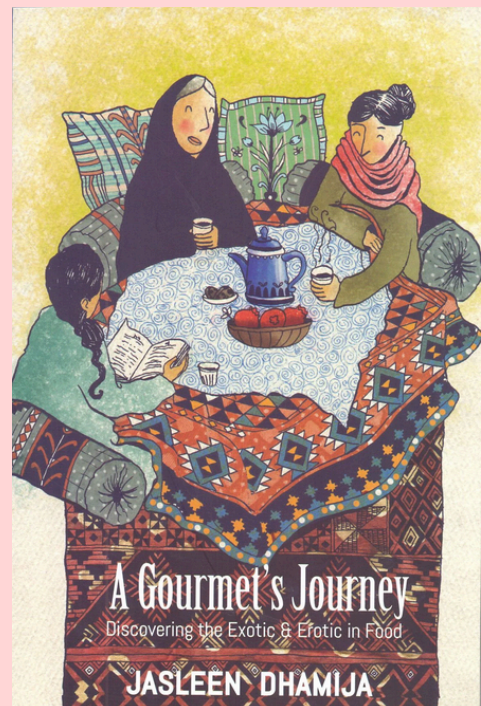
SD: I have always been interested in consumption practices. What it means to consume, whether it be digital content, or popular culture has been a lifelong fascination for me. I have often wondered why people are attracted to certain kinds of texts, genres, or trends. How do we develop a taste for something? At some point while pondering these questions my curiosity led me to the most fundamental and everyday kind of consumption practice, which is eating food.

2) When you hear the phrase “Beyond the Plate,” what comes to mind for you?

SD: I think ‘beyond the plate’ accurately communicates the central premise of food studies: that food is about more than what is served on the plate. It is not just functional, not just about sustenance, but in fact what we eat, where, when, how, how much, with whom, reveals the texture of our place in the world, about who we are, where we come from, what we value. In that sense, food is not just food but a window into the emotional worlds we create and inhabit.

3) Your research has also focused on the intersection of taste and cultural encounter. Do you think we can ever come to an understanding about where taste actually comes from?

SD: I must turn to food writing to answer your question. In Jasleen Dhamija’s book *A Gourmet’s Journey: Discovering the Exotic and Erotic in Food*, she writes about how coming in contact with global food cultures opened her to new meanings about Indian food preparations. As Dhamija travels across Iran, Africa, Paris, she meets diverse people and partakes in new flavor basis. Throughout, via romantic anecdotes and unique recipes, Dhamija reminds the readers that the exceptionalism of our national cuisine lies not in insular values of cultural purity but in its ability to participate in continual and transnational exchange. So, in a way, taste emerges through movement and cultural encounter.



*Jasleen Dhamija's book A
Gourmet's Journey:
Discovering the Exotic and
Erotic in Food*

4) How much of what we eat do you think is really our own choice, versus something shaped quietly by the world around us and what does that end up revealing about things like class, caste, race, or colonial history?

SD: This is a good complicated question. Movement tends to change one's predisposition to certain tastes but one must ask who can move and under what circumstances. Migration is not always voluntary or by choice. To study food closely then is also to realize that food can be an instrument of oppression marked by an absence of choice. Once again, I must turn to food writing, and to the lens of gender. A short story by Githa Hariharan called "The Remains of the Feast" is about a widowed grandmother who in conformity with brahmin patriarchal mores has lived her entire life on a diet of vegetarian home cooked home. As death approaches, she begins to demand spicy, oily and titillating food from the nearby shop. Because she had been conditioned into a pedagogy of distaste, restricted from flavors of her choice, a reclamation of her choice of food becomes an instance of resistance. So, like you rightly intuit, what we eat is never simply an individual choice and taste is shaped by structures larger than ourselves. Yet, our acts of eating have the potential to become powerful ways of negotiating or challenging these very structures.

5) There's been a lot of conversation lately around vegetarianism and veganism — do you see older ideas like caste or class quietly running underneath those debates?

SD: Well in many parts of the world, vegetarianism or veganism is seen as an ethical response to concerns about animal welfare or climate change. Those are important conversations, especially given the significant environmental impact our global food systems have. In India however, vegetarianism has been entangled with questions of caste, and notions of purity and pollution. So, the same dietary practice can connote very different values depending on cultural context. This is why food is never just about nutrition but it is always embedded in meanings that are both local and global.



6) What do you think determines which cuisines get celebrated on a global stage, and which ones stay invisible?

SD: There is a very interesting piece by Krishnendu Ray titled “Indian Restaurant Food in New York City” in the recent special issue of IIC Quarterly on *Food Cultures of India*, where he addresses exactly this question and he argues that citizenship premium determines which cuisines gets traction and which don’t. He writes about how the global resonance of Indian cuisine is modest because of the limited demographic weight of the south Asian population, which explains why Indian cuisine is more popular in London than NYC.

7) Butter chicken has practically become a national dish in the UK now. Does a journey like that feel closer to migration and memory, or closer to colonialism and trade, to you?

SD: It’s both, isn’t it. Food changes as people move. Butter chicken travelled with migrants but it also travelled along routes opened up by colonial trade.



8) Cooking has always been women’s labor at home, but recognition in the culinary world still tends to go to men. What does that contrast say to you?

SD: That women’s labor is unpaid and unrecognized. Although women’s writing on the digital platform, specifically the genre of food blogs, seems to be changing that. On food blogs, cooking is not imagined only as domestic drudgery but is instead monetized. Also, stories of eating food in order to satiate one’s own appetite are as common as those of cooking for others. Not only do women participate in caring for an immediate family, they are simultaneously caring for themselves by eating. Thus, for women, where on the one hand, food becomes a site of gendered labour, on the other hand it can be seen as an articulation of self-expression and agency.

9) You’ve written about kitchens as spaces of both confinement and care. How do you hold both of those truths at once?

SD: Yes, confinement, care but also creativity. I must turn to Shashi Deshpande, a stalwart of Indian Writing in English who in her critical memoir-essay titled “Women, Food and Cooking”, writes about her evolving relationship with food and cooking; a relationship which is shaped by genders roles, societal expectations, and feminist awakenings. Deshpande writes about how she has always felt inadequate in a patriarchal context which equates womanhood with

culinary skills. She also critiques the gendered undervaluing of domestic labor and highlights the challenges of writing about Indian food in English as the resonance of foods such as ‘idli’ and ‘dosa’ is not quite captured when translated into English as dumplings and pancakes. However, as she comes to the close of her personal reflective essay, she embraces cooking as a creative and meaningful practice, establishing a more postfeminist relationship to food.



10) Do you think of recipes and food traditions as a kind of archive, a way of holding onto history that official records might miss?

SD: Yes, and Shahu Patole’s work is such an important book in this regard. That Dalit men and women were able to create taste even as they struggled against hunger and humiliation is articulated most empoweringly in Shahu Patole’s important cookbook *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*. In his detailed cookbook, Patole represents dishes that utilize every part of an animal, including blood, bones, organs reflecting a resilient approach to cooking. This is

also an instance of documenting a vanishing heritage. Articulating such stories of food becomes an act of resistance because the very idea of Indian national cuisine is built on the principle of exclusion of marginalized communities and their practices of producing, presenting, procuring, preserving and consuming food.

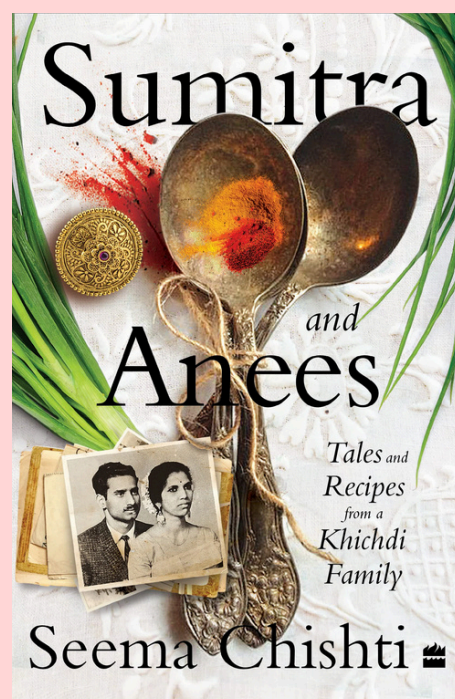
11) With so much “what I eat in a day” content now, food feels like something we perform as much as something we eat. Does that change what memory does with food, in your view?

SD: You are right. Food has acquired new forms of visibility and affect in the digital age. It is no longer simply consumed; it is made to perform. We curate how food looks, photograph it, circulate it, and increasingly experience it through images. Café culture is a good example of this, where the visual life of food often becomes as significant as its taste. It’s interesting to me that this represents a shift in the relationship between food and memory. Traditionally, food evoked memories of the past through smell or taste. Today, we actively document food so that it can become a memory in the future. Instead of food being a trigger for memory, in the digital age, there is a kind of deliberate memory making at play.



12) If food is never just food — what's a story or struggle hiding behind an everyday meal that you wish more people paid attention to?

SD: I will take a leaf from Seema Chishti's book *Sumitra and Anees: Tales and Recipes from a Khichdi Family*. Chishti's book is a record of everyday meals she consumed while growing up in a home that upheld values of tolerance and plurality. Her mother Sumitra, was a Hindu woman from a small town in Karnataka and her father Anees, was a Muslim man who hailed from a district in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Thus, she ate meals that can't really be neatly categorized, that drew together flavors and techniques from different worlds. At a time when food is being used to draw rigid cultural and political boundaries, a book like *Sumitra and Anees* remind us that everyday meals tell a very different story, one of coexistence.



Seema Chishti's book Sumitra and Anees: Tales and Recipes from a Khichdi Family

Interviewed by:

Aamna Rehman (Editor-in-Chief)

Muskan (Sub-Editor)



WHAT'S COOKING (DEPARTMENT ACTIVITIES)



17 SEPTEMBER, 2025

- **Lecture on Adivasi Art & Agency:** *Dr. Samarth Singhal (Assistant Professor, University of Delhi) explored Adivasi art, literature, and the graphic novel Bhimayana.*
- **Know Thy Shelf:** *An exciting new book club initiated by the English Department, to bring together the love of reading to inspire connection and conversations among students.*



24 SEPTEMBER, 2025

- **To Bot or Not to Bot:** *Dr. Kashish Dua (Assistant Professor, JMC & Fulbright-Nehru Fellow, UC Berkeley) unpacked AI and technology.*



25 SEPTEMBER, 2025

- Freshers 2025 – Reverie: *A dreamy welcome for the new batch of English Literature students, packed with dance, music and merriment.*



10 OCTOBER, 2025

- Making Sense of Brain Rot: *Anurag Minus Verma (filmmaker, author & podcaster) decoded internet culture.*



5 OCTOBER, 2025

- Heritage Walk – Old Delhi's Parallel Book Bazaar: *A stroll through the vibrant Mahila Haat, brimming with lore and literature, guided by Dr. Kanupriya Dhingra (Assistant Professor, BML Munjal University).*



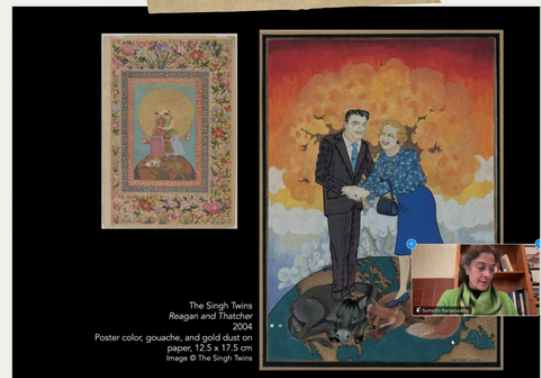
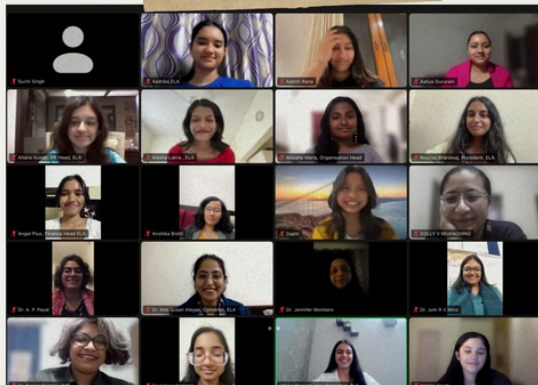


15 OCTOBER, 2025

- Reading Self, Resisting Caste, Reimagining Marriage: Powerful speaker session by Dr. Charu Gupta in collaboration with IQAC.

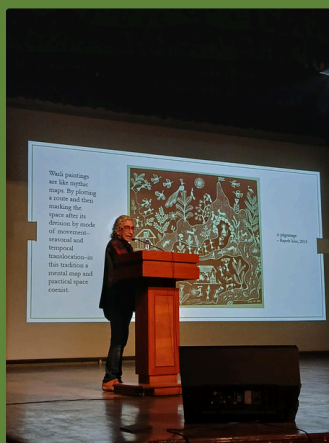


LITERATI



11 NOVEMBER, 2025

- Literati Inaugural Lecture (Online): Official kick-off of the annual Literati festival, with seminal scholars such as Prof. Sumathi Ramaswamy and Prof. Surajit Sarkar speaking on cartography, art, heritage and cultural memory.



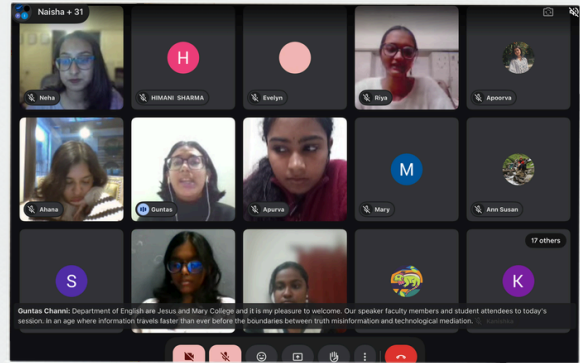
12 AND 13 NOVEMBER, 2025

- **Literati Day 1 and 2:** The first day of the English departmental fest commenced with a cerebral lecture and thought-provoking discussion by Dr. Gautam Chaubey, Dr. Benil Biswas and Dr. Sakshi Dogra, moderated by Dr. Juhi Rose. It was followed by an insightful Paper Presentation Competition. Literati Day 2 brought with it a Creative Writing competition, a thrilling Flash Mob and The Plot Game, concluding with a sequence of dynamic performances.



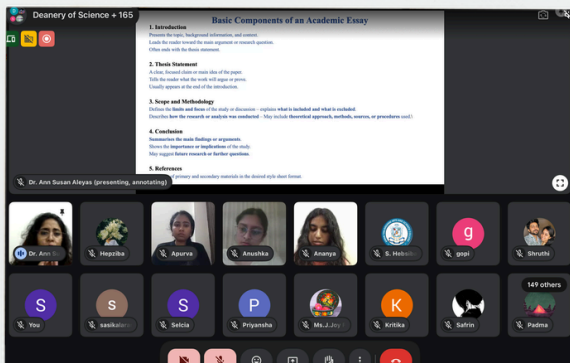
7 FEBRUARY, 2026

- **Alumni Talk – Networking, Misinformation & AI:** *Neha Mustafi (Fact Check Producer, Reuters) shared insights with students.*



12 FEBRUARY, 2026

- **National Seminar on Academic Writing:** *In collaboration with the Department of English, Bon Secours College, Thanjavur, a 2-day online seminar was held to guide students through the practice of academic writing, with clarity, rigour, and purpose. It was led by Dr. Ann Susan Aleyas and Dr. V. K. Karthika.*



14 FEBRUARY, 2026

- **Anupama Nair Award Ceremony:** *The department proudly celebrated the achievements of students at the Anupama Nair Award Ceremony, as a recognition of excellence in writing, expression, and creativity.*





5 APRIL, 2026

- **March Past:** *The perfection that was the result of a hundred imperfect practices. The English Department squad put in the hours. Early mornings, sore feet, countless do-over... and beautiful execution on the final day.*



15 APRIL 2026

- **The Real World Playbook:** *Ms. Preeti Gautam (Founder, 'Theatre & U') equipped young adults with essential life skills.*



27 APRIL, 2026

- **ELA Farewell for Batch of 2025-26:** *A heartfelt goodbye to the graduating batch.*



SOMEONE COOKED HERE . . .
(MEET THE TEAM)



AAMNA REHMAN

Instant Ramen

It's the first thing people reach for on a bad day, and somehow it always delivers. I like to think I'm the same — warm, easy to be around, the kind of person you can sit with when things are going wrong. But there's a spice packet in there too, which means a healthy dose of feminine rage you must brace yourself for.

If I was a food item/ingredient, I would be. . .

Sweet corn.

People usually think it's just a simple snack until they realise how many ways it can exist. Roasted on a street corner, mixed into a salad, tucked inside a momo or served at a fancy dinner, it never loses what makes it itself. I think I'm a little like that. I adapt to different spaces without changing who I am. I like finding depth in ordinary things because I've never believed that being loud is the only way to be memorable. Sometimes the simplest things leave the longest impression you know :)



MUSKAN



Rice.

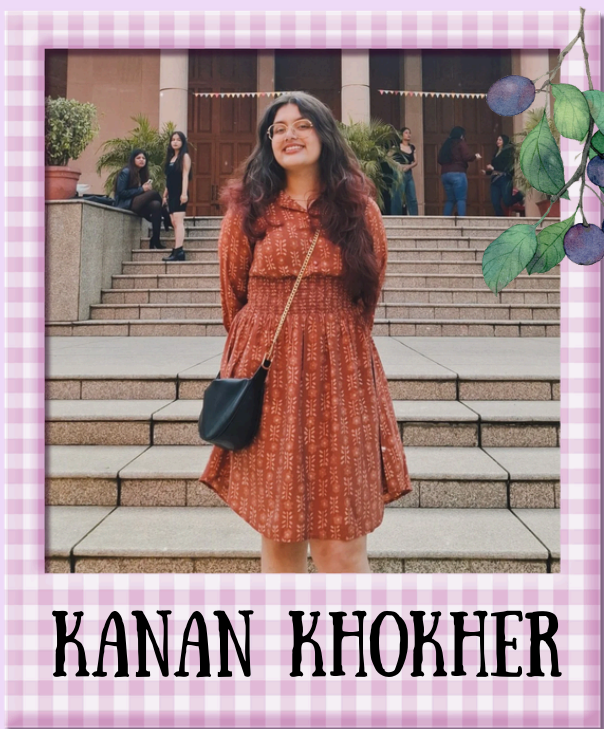
It is plain and simple, nothing extraordinary, yet it can adapt almost anywhere. It is found in different flavours, cultures, and traditions, and in many ways, it belongs to everyone. I like to think I share that same capacity to belong. Rice is common yet essential. After a long, tiring day, I come home wanting something simple yet satisfying, and rice is always there. I want to be that kind of person, someone people can return to, rely on, and find comfort in. Like rice, I may not stand out immediately, but I hope to bring warmth, comfort, and a sense of belonging wherever I go.

If I was a food item/ingredient, I would be. . .

Gol Gappe.

At first glance, they seem simple and fun, but every bite has different layers of flavour that come together in a way you don't expect. I'm quite a serious and thoughtful person, and I tend to feel things deeply, but I also have a sense of humour that comes out once I'm comfortable with people. I don't reveal every part of myself immediately, but the more someone gets to know me, the more different sides they discover. Like gol gappe, I'm a mix of sweetness, spice, and a little bit of surprise, and I think it's that balance that defines me most.





Cheesecake.

It isn't overly sweet, and that's what I love about it. It balances richness with lightness, familiarity with a little sophistication. I try to approach life the same way- finding balance between work and fun, ambition and contentment. I enjoy learning new things, but I also value slowing down and appreciating simple moments. Like cheesecake, I don't believe something has to be loud to leave an impression.

If I was a food item/ingredient, I would be. . .

Mixed Namkeen.

Beause there is no knowing what you will get next with me. As someone who has always felt like my personality has been a mixture of the sweet, spicy, salty and tangy.

The best part - there are no bad parts, some moods and traits are best for some people and situations and some are best for the rest. So why don't you try it out too, maybe there is a special one for you!





DIYA MALIK

Sweet Lime.

As someone who is kind, in general, but not afraid of the extremes; to be bold and assertive when my mind tells me to, I think sweet lime is precisely the description; it's mostly sweet, but every now and then, there's a hint of tang that reminds you I'm not afraid to stand my ground.

There's a sense of balance in this fruit. It's neither as sweet as an orange nor as sour as a lemon—it finds its strength in equilibrium. To say that I've found this balance would be a lie, but I'm certainly inclined towards it.

If I was a food item/ingredient, I would be. . .

Noodles.

They are inherently flexible and adaptable as they can take many forms and adapt to different dishes and cultures. I find myself relating to that flexibility and adaptability because I enjoy learning new things and adjusting to different situations. At times, noodles may appear tangled and complicated.

This reflects how I occasionally feel about life. Moreover, noodles have always had a special place in my heart as a comfort food because when I was a child, my mother used to make noodles on special occasions.



ENAKSHEE SAMANTA