

## The Role of Food, Memory, and Experience: Contextualizing Self and Identity in Urmila Pawar and Temsula Ao's Autobiographies

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Food, memory, and experience play a significant role in shaping our sense of Self and Identity. Two powerful autobiographies, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* and Temsula Ao's *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags*, delve deeply into this theme, illustrating the profound impact that food and associated memories can have on our understanding of who we are.

Pawar's experiences growing up in a Dalit community highlight how food can serve as a marker of social status and identity. In her autobiography, she highlights discrimination and exclusion and how food played a role in reinforcing the divisions. She reflects on her childhood experiences and how they shaped her sense of Self. Similarly, for Ao, food serves as a powerful symbol of cultural identity and belonging. As a member of the Ao Naga tribe, she grew up with a deep appreciation for her people's traditional foods and customs. The vivid descriptions of the foods and her experiences help her shape her Self and assert her identity. Through their autobiographies, Pawar and Ao demonstrate the complex ways in which food, memory, and experience intersect to shape our sense of self and identity.

The research paper aims to delve deep into how food, memory, and experience play a significant role in the formation of Self and identity. It will also shed light on how food can symbolize the cultural issues of resistance and how it builds one character with diligent recourse to textual analysis.

Memory and identity are two interconnected concepts that have fascinated researchers for decades. While memory refers to the ability to store and retrieve information, identity is the way we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. As Smith and Watson(2010) write in *Reading Autobiography*, “Memory is not to be conceived of as stored structures but as a function of the whole organism, as a complex, dynamic recategorizing and interactive process.” (32)

The connection between memory and identity is intricate and complex, with memory playing a crucial role in shaping our sense of Self. Leuzinger-Bohleber(2008), in *Biographical Truths*, clearly states that memory does not exist in isolation from the body. The pain, the suffering, the pleasures, and the hunger all become a part of the experience of our body. These experiences transcend into the language of memory, leading to knowing our true Self and helping us contextualize our identity. As Smith and Watson(2010) write, “The ability to recover memories, in fact, depends upon the material body. There must be a body that perceives and internalizes the images, sensations, and experiences of the external world.” (37).

One of the fundamental ways memory and identity are connected is through the process of autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memory refers to our memories of our personal experiences and life events. These memories are crucial in shaping our identity, allowing us to reflect on past experiences and make meaning out of them. Our autobiographical memory is not just a simple recollection of past events but a complex and dynamic process intertwined with our sense of self. Autobiographies reveal experiences and cultural memories leading to cultural and individual identity creation. As argued by Brockmeier in his work *Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative and the Autobiographical Process*, since autobiographical writing is unique in that it intertwines past with present experiences, it is helpful to think of the autobiography as an archive, not only to shed light on the fabric of memory itself but also to explore how this memory is actively created or ‘rememorized’ in the present . Temsula Ao, in a similar vein, describes

memory as “not one-to-one transference; they emerge from multiple prisms of the subconscious of the ‘rememberer’.” (3)

Urmila Pawar’s autobiographical narrative, *The Weave of My Life*, stands distinguished among the notable contributions made by the Dalit women writers. It is an essential milestone in Dalit women’s writings. As Sharmila Rege writes in her afterword, “*Aaydan*, Urmila Pawar’s testimonio, weaves a complex relationship between ‘official forgetting’, memory, and identity- forging a right to speak both for and beyond the gendered individual and contesting explicitly the ‘official forgetting’ of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance.” (333)

On the other hand, Temsula Ao, in her autobiography *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags*, covers the different phases of life, a life that went on to overcome the ordeal of fractured childhood, early marriage, single parenthood, and the demand of a full-time job. It depicts her odyssey searching for the self-worth once lost to time and circumstances. She is able to portray not only her individual experience but also the experiences of her people. The fascinating part is the way she weaves her own story with that of her community.

It is interesting to observe that both autobiographies share a common thread - the profound impact that food has had on their lives and memories. These memories are deeply personal and communal, underscoring the significance of culinary customs and traditions passed down from generation to generation. This relationship with food is emblematic of cultural identity, enabling individuals to communicate and establish their uniqueness. People communicate and identify their distinctiveness through the medium of food. The culture of food acts as a powerful force that brings families, communities, and cultures together worldwide. It rings especially true for a country like India, whose intricate and diverse dishes highlight its rich heritage. Pawar and Ao come from different parts of India, but their autobiographies highlight the rich cuisine and cultural heritage. Deborah Lupton elucidates that societal class, location, customs, gender, faith, and even job occupation can all contribute to shaping our eating routines. These variables can enable us to

differentiate between various traditions, rituals, celebrations, and meal times. It highlights the intricate and multifarious nature of our relationship with food. (1) Food can bring people together but can also create divisions. Throughout the autobiographies, the authors delve into how various foods have been utilized to illuminate their experiences and emotions, providing context for their sense of self and constructing their identity. Furthermore, they portray the discrimination perpetuated by a patriarchal society, rendering their narratives all the more poignant.

Food is an essential ingredient in the recipe of our lives, going beyond mere sustenance to become a cultural and emotional symbol that plays a significant role in shaping our identities. Roland Barthes writes,

for what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviors. (29).

People's food choices reveal much about their thoughts, likes, and dislikes and serve as a conduit for the stories of households, migrations, assimilation, resistance, and changes over time. It is fascinating how the food we eat defines us and acts as an agency for defining individual or communal identity. Moreover, food can also reveal much about the processes of gender stereotyping and oppression and the hegemonic potential of patriarchal society. By analysing our food habits and choices, we can shatter many myths regarding food consumption and food-related stereotypes. Every meal served on a plate tells a story, revealing personal connections, nostalgic longings, a sense of belonging, and racial pride. It is no wonder that food is celebrated in various art forms, from literature to film, and is an inevitable theme in studying human psychology and culture. In the "Introduction" to *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Writing*, Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard argue that food is central to writing.

If food is fundamental to life and a substance upon which civilisations and cultures have built themselves, then food is also fundamental to the imagination and the imaginary arts. Food is fundamental to the imagination

because food is fundamental to culture. (5)

Food is an essential component of who we are as individuals. It has a nostalgic effect on us, reminding us of memories and bringing a sense of familiarity and security. They serve as a form of emotional support, helping us cope with difficult situations and providing a temporary escape from the challenges of adult life. Many of us have vivid food memories that have shaped our identities, whether the taste of our mother's homemade pickle or the aroma of a particular spice that takes us back to our childhood.

food is not a mere detail or an embellishment in the backdrop; food is the protagonist, playing varied roles, such as that of a bond between different generations, as an identity marker, and as a symbol of religious rituals and remembrances. Food is indeed a crucial piece of the puzzle that aids us in better understanding of who we are as individuals and as a society. ( 230)

Food customs have always been integral to every community's cultural identity throughout history. Geography and cultural traditions have played a significant role in shaping the way we eat, cook, and share meals. This rich legacy is passed down from generation to generation, creating a sense of continuity and belonging and reflecting the unique history of a particular group. Our culinary traditions are vital to our identity and can reveal much about our ethnicity, religion, and geographical location. The food we consume and how we prepare it can tell a story about who we are as a people, offering a window into our cultural heritage and providing a deeper understanding of our shared history. When people are asked to describe the food, they talk about visual and taste perception. The sense of taste and smell is subjective in nature. It cannot be verified and is a part of bodily experience. Their narration signifies the cultural aspect and the different eating practices in different geographies. In a way, depicting food in social narratives helps create social identities. Temsula Ao, for instance, during her visit to her ancestral village during winter, met her father's paternal aunt. She depicts how the grand-aunt treated her brothers with her delicious home-brewed rice beer, a common tradition in the Naga households. The beer was consumed as a part of

the regular meals, but unfortunately, most of the Nagas abandoned this tradition after converting to Christianity as it was considered heathen. By describing such experiences, she brings to the forefront the cultural traditions of her community.

She mentions several other instances that give us a glimpse into her personal life and simultaneously sketches her society's collective identity. In one of the chapters titled 'Nakham and the Missing Guavas', she highlights the importance of the association of food items to different cultures. She writes

it makes me realize the importance of the association of food items to different cultures of the world. We know that often what seems to be stinky, ugly and inedible to some is a delicacy to others. This particular dry fish called 'nakham' has a very strong smell which is offensive to some but for many others it is a much relished delicacy. No meal is complete without this side-dish. Thus the association of food to nationalities is a world-wide phenomenon. (117)

In another instance, she narrates an anecdote about a member of a Konyak tribe. Nagas usually made a contraption of bamboo, which they used to dry fish or meat for preservation. However, when she entered their kitchen, she was shocked as she saw "big rats split open vertically, the openings held in place by wedging pieces of twig and bamboo across, and spread on the tray to dry!"(123). She later learned that it was considered a delicacy for the Konyaks. In another instance, she narrates the different kinds of wedding feasts that have gone out of fashion in modern times. The visual description of the prepared food, like the rice cooking process and how the meat was prepared, constructs the social identity.

The method of cooking meat for a big crowd was different: the longish meat pieces would be strung, in long bamboo strings with a knot on one end, meaty fat portions would be strung on separate strings and cooked in tins. All the spicy ingredients also would be put in. When the meat was done, it was put on to big winnowing baskets and sliced into medium pieces...Except for meat, one could have second helpings of rice and

gravy...In this custom there was no concept of 'jutha' or 'unclean' associated with the gift. (136-137)

In a similar vein, Urmila Pawar narrates the number of wedding feasts along with various cuisines throughout her autobiography. She also describes the kind of food given to a woman who had given birth to a child. She writes, "For the first two days, she would be given rice with a little coconut milk mixed with a bit of molasses and paper." (163-164)

In another instance, she narrates how she realised the difference between the status of her and her classmates. She would often visit her friend's house for help with her studies. "It was in their house that I enjoyed very tasty dishes such as varanbhat with a lot of ghee, spicy mutton curry, fish and delicacies like shellfish bhajis." (163)

Her friend and Neena often teased her by enquiring about 'sweet dishes' (163). One day, when they got a chance to look at her tiffin, their "face fell when she saw the coarse grain rice, with a little dal and vegetable on it," (163)

Another instance highlights not only the social structure but also brings to fore the discrimination she faced as a child and its impact on her. Her mother often sent her to buy pickles from the 'Pandit' family who lived opposite them across the road. She writes, "The memory of their mango pickle – hot, fiery red, with raw mango pieces, floating in oil – made my mouth water." (77) She had to stand at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for someone to answer her call. After the first, to which there was no clear response, she had to call out again as if she 'was a thief or a beggar!' (163). After handing her the pickles, the water would be sprinkled on the coin to purify it.

Kaku would bring some fiery red pickle on a plantain leaf, the lime pieces covered with yellow rai dal and oil, and keep it on the second or third step. Then I kept my coins on a step, which the kaku collected, but only after she had sprinkled water on them to cleanse them of pollution! (78)

Several such instances fragmented throughout their narratives create a complex and vivid visual and olfactory perception that links the memory with bodily experience, helping one to understand how identity is perceived, and self is fashioned.

Food also connects with the idea of home and identity. It brings to the forefront the memories and nostalgia. Memory is very subjective in nature. For the girl who managed to smuggle nakham in the hostel, "...was a strong reminder of home, and hence her intense urge to taste a bit of that 'home' in the impersonal hostel environment was so overwhelming that she did what she did." (117)

Foods can evoke unique feelings that serve as vivid memories of previous moments and locations. Pawar's account of her childhood recollections of food, cooking abilities, and meal times gives a stark picture of Dalit households in the Konkan area. Rice cooked from coarse grains with a lentil sauce, occasionally a green vegetable, and Bhakri prepared from red jowar or grain dust were the staples of daily meals. As Rajyashri says, "There is no "Dalit cuisine"—these culinary traditions are as diverse as the regions and communities in which they originated." ("Dalit Identity And Food – Memories Of Trauma On A Plate").

While reading Pawar's autobiography, one observes that their cuisine was not even part of the mainstream discourse and was not quite popular. Moreover, most of the Dalits came from poor backgrounds and, in a few places, were denied rights as essential as food and water, indicating how those in power use it as a tool of oppression, making them invisible. She also highlights the differences in food practices between the upper and lower caste. She narrates the food prepared during the festival of Holi:

"On the Holi day, the Marathas and the Brahmins would make sweet chapattis called puran poli, and in our houses we would cook lentils called pavata or varana. This was the crop that would be ready around Holi. We ate dal and rice with cooked pavata lentils and gathered in front of the Shambhu temple in the evening to see the dancing of the palanquin." (48)

Food is often related to the powerful emotional state. After her father's death, she depicts how her mother used different food ingredients in a thrifty and miserly manner. She presents it in complete contrast to the upper-caste community, where much food is wasted. Frugal usage and minimum wastage became the epicentre of cooking at home. She also highlights how flavour and taste affect the senses, and even hunger is completely overhauled even though food would have become stale.

The putrid smell of the ambeel gone sour assaulted our senses but we would be completely impervious to that. We just poured it down on our throats as hungry tummies would be hauling for food by this time. In the moment of joy at meeting the people we loved, the ambeel actually tasted sweet. (40-41)

Barthes has famously said, “an entire “world”(social environment) is present in and signified by food”.(31) The world of upper and lower communities is directly signified by their food, how they prepare the meals and how they are consumed in their households. During any ceremony or festivities, the women from her community would go begging to collect the leftover food, carrying baskets on their heads to far-flung houses. The pathetic description of the way the leftover food was given highlights the humiliating experience. It also depicts caste becoming a tool for oppression and discrimination.

“But the kulwadi women who gave them food would pour everything in their baskets. Whatever they wanted to give- dal, vegetables, kheer—would all be poured on rice, in a mixed mound. . . They poured the insipid, cooked rice in an earthen pot and put it on the stove on low heat. Their entire house would survive for two days on those leftovers. In some houses the flesh of dead animal would be eaten” (51-52).

Throughout her autobiography, she presents several such instances highlighting how food can be a source of humiliation as well as pride for the Dalits. While they may feel ashamed of their cuisine, they also take pride in appreciating and preparing upper-caste dishes. It is particularly intriguing to note their attitudes towards food and how it is intricately intertwined with their self-realization.

These autobiographical accounts represent food in different ways- lack of food, suffering, and, most importantly, hunger. They reflect on their experiences by describing memories from early childhood. Describing early childhood memories is arduous as it's quite challenging to differentiate between the impressions and actual memories about food and poverty, which the readers can feel and many of them can associate with. During the early years, hunger played a significant role in their daily life. It served as a reminder that sustenance was not only a physical necessity but also a philosophical one, taking on various forms, such as the desire for material wealth, knowledge, and wisdom. However, the most pressing and intense form of hunger was undoubtedly the need for food, as its absence would trigger a painful sense of emptiness. Hilary Justice, in "The Consolation of Critique: Food, Culture, and Civilization in Ernest Hemingway", writes that pang of hunger is "both literal and metaphorical... [it is as] symbolic as it is culinary" (20). Food was a constant truth that provided essential fuel for the body and mind. Ao narrates various incidents that portray her naivety, poverty, and the loss of her parents at a young age. The experience as an orphan and the uncertainty of food on the plate highlights her fractured childhood. Many days, she had to go to school on an empty stomach as there was no food to cook. By highlighting typical food such as chana, aata, etc., she connects with the readers; one can feel her pain and suffering and associate with it. "If a school mate gave me a few grains of chana I would devour them greedily and was it down with water from the school tap" (43).

The hunger for food made her beg in front of her parental aunt. She went to her aunt's door with her younger brother and got a packet of flour, which also got washed down the rain, and the dreams of eating chapatti were washed along.

But with the atta we were not so lucky; it began to rain and no matter how much I tried to shield the packet of atta, the rain eventually won... All dreams of eating at least a hot chapatti that evening were thus washed away by the rain. That night too, we went to bed hungry. (44)

She narrates another incident where she entered the feast in the senior doctor's house with her brother despite having no invitation.

Of course the rice was from the bottom of the pot and slightly burnt. But it was more than compensated by the gravy of the meat curry. We even got to eat a few pieces of actual meat! Even while we were eating, there was a nagging feeling in my mind about our presence in the company of the workers. Young though I was, I was aware of the sense of 'shame' in eating the food we were not invited for. (44)

She describes the burnt rice, and her reaction to a few pieces of actual meat depicts the depth of her hunger. Food is often associated with happy memories, but Ao is associating it with the idea of shame, giving it a negative connotation.

At the same time, Pawar also reflects on her experiences by describing her memories of food and poverty. The reader once again becomes part of her narrative. During the fifth standard, she narrates an incident where she received twelve rupees as a scholarship. When she saw the money, her first thought was to eat many different things. It depicts how poverty sometimes kills the innocence of a child, and a small amount of money can make a child's unsatisfied desires come to the forefront. The readers can feel the child-like innocence when she starts listing foods like guava, tamarind, and bondas.

I so much wanted to hold two lollypops in either hand like red flags, and lick them; to buy the big juicy guavas in Khanolkar's shop near the school and eat them in class even while the teacher was teaching; to buy berries and keep them in my cheeks to look like a monkey and chew on them. I wanted to eat ripe tamarinds, amlas and make other girls jealous. Then I also wanted to buy the hot, spicy bondas, like the big cricket walls, sold in Pilankar's shop, and eat them without sharing without my brother. I so much wanted to tease him while eating them. (90)

At the same time, a naive child's innocence grew aware that they were born into a specific caste and adversity and had to live and survive. By talking about the politics of food, she presents the cultural differences

which, more often than not, act as a barrier. The upper caste girls would talk about various kinds of sweets like laddu, modak, etc., which were novel items. Pawar also recalls an instance from her school days in which her friends intended to make some food at school and discussed what everyone should contribute, but when she inquired about what she should bring, she was told to “bring some money.”

They did not allow me to touch anything. However, we all ate together. I really enjoyed the meal. The next day I was horrified to hear that my eating had become the hottest topic for juicy gossip. Girls were whispering in groups about ‘how much I had eaten.’ (102)

Urmila found it extremely humiliating that even children display caste inequalities and Untouchability and that impoverished people are ridiculed for their hunger. This anecdote demonstrates how caste is engrained in the psyche of our upper-class children.

Going further, Pawar reveals that food, not just within the society but also within the home, portrays the difference between the two genders. Women have to work hard and for long periods, yet they are only allowed to have leftover food. The food was mainly cooked for the men of the house, and the leftover food was for the women. Similarly, Ao also narrates that despite being young, she had to cook most of the time as a girl, which resulted in the rice not being cooked thoroughly or getting burnt, leading to an empty stomach for all of them. John Stuart Mill, rightly remarks: “Women are brought up from earliest years...to live for others, to make a complete negation of themselves and to have no life but in their affections.”(27)

Food plays a vital role in the construction of their self and identity. All the memories, whether a bad or a good one, constitute their experience of pain and pleasure. Throughout the narrative, different varieties of food items are weaved together to present a close-knit image of their true self. As Ben Highmore writes in *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*

“the self stretches out into the world so as to become a self. The emphasis on food for a writer... it is an emphasis on process... the eater is not a

fully constituted subject, but a subject constantly becoming constituted through their orientations towards things like food. Food, then, always has the potential to join in the act of reconstituting the subject.” (151)

Jon Holtzman, in “Remembering Bad Cooks: Sensuality, Memory, and Personhood”, highlights the construction of self. Self is constructed through not only good experiences associated with the food but also bad experiences. He links food experiences to the construction of identity and the formation of self. (240) He highlights how ‘food is a vital arena for memory’ (p.236) and how it has multifaceted images in one’s memory. In the case of both these writers, one can easily observe how bad experiences became a moment that marked their identity and helped them explore their Self through self-revelation.

Food is truly an experience in and of itself. It has always been like a fleeting commodity. As Lynz Z. Bloom writes “*Food is an intrinsically significant subject*, whose ramifications extend far beyond its nutritional value” (350).

It not only brings comfort and solace but also solidifies the memories, irrespective of good or bad, and that is one of the primary reasons why both Pawar and Ao use food as an anchor for depicting their personal experiences. By placing the traditional food plate in front of the readers and making them witness their sufferings of life in which food acts as bad memories, Pawar and Ao allow the readers to associate with their experiences and become a part of their narrative. It has the power to transport and connect us with people and places. By bringing food memories into their narratives, they are able to depict the dynamics between individuals and society. Hilary Justice rightly points out that “food is [a] dialogue” (17). It is not merely a dialogue with the readers but is associated with memory and acts as a specialized form of self-dialogue. By writing about their food experiences, they are able to convey their thoughts and emotions. Having an open conversation with the readers legitimizes their individual and communal experiences and acts as a way of personal revelation and exploring their self and true identity.

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