



# When Kitchens Speak: Storytelling Aesthetics in Shahu Patole's *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*

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## Abstract

*This research examines how food in Shahu Patole's Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada serves as an aesthetic of storytelling based on myth, memory, and shared meals. This analysis contends that Patole makes Dalit kitchens spaces of narration in which cooking practices retain cultural identity, resist caste violence, and exhibit indigenous ways of knowing. Through the use of narratology and Native theory, the paper investigates how Patole's work re-defines food as both a literary trope and cultural repository of resistance. The paper uses a qualitative, text-based analysis of Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada. Drawing from narratology (Genette's narrative voice and temporality, Barthes' cultural codes) and Native/Dalit theory (Linda Tuhiwai Smith's decolonizing methodologies, LeAnne Howe's concept of tribalography, Dalit cultural criticism), the study examines how Patole structures his memoir through episodic anecdotes, oral traditions, and communal food narratives. The methodology emphasizes food as a site of cultural memory, myth-making, and collective storytelling. Patole's work illustrates that Dalit kitchens are not just home spaces—they are cultural storages in which hunger and survival myths are reframed as counter-myths of dignity. Culinary memory keeps erased histories alive through recipes, anecdotes, and oral testimonies, serving as an archive of endurance. Shared meals become acts of solidarity and subversion, breaking caste-enforced hierarchies of purity and pollution. Through narrative and indigenous modes of storytelling, Patole's autobiography insists on Dalit identity and turns the meal into a story of belonging and defiance. Through the placing of Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada within the intersection of myth, memory, and food, this paper illustrates that food narratives are not simply culinary but fundamentally political. Patole's narrative sensibility recovers Dalit foodways as expressions of cultural continuity and resistance, placing gastronomic literature in the center as an important repository of identity, history, and anti-caste agency.*

**Keywords:** narratology, dalit, culinary, storytelling, aesthetics

## Introduction

Food, commonly seen as a human survival need, has come to be more widely understood as an elaborate cultural text on which histories, identities, and shared

memories are inscribed. Food narratives, especially in marginalized cultures, turn the kitchen into a narrative room that not only talks about sustenance but also about struggle, survival, and belonging. In



Indian literary practice, food writing has been dominated by prevailing caste ideologies that emphasize purity, taste, and refinement. Dalit writers such as Shahu Patole have, however, challenged these hegemonic discourses by re-appropriating food as a ground for cultural testimony and resistance. Shahu Patole's *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* (2015) is a remarkable work that brings to the literary imagination the quotidian meals of the Dalit home. By way of memoir and oral history, Patole builds a counter-archive that subverts the exclusion of Dalit food cultures from gastronomic common sense. His account transcends the materiality of food to inhabit the symbolic, mythic, and affective aspects of food practices, showing how food acts as an interface to caste hierarchy, social memory, and communal being. This paper explores Patole's work through the lens of storytelling aesthetics, examining how myth, memory, and meals function as narrative strategies within Dalit kitchens. Drawing on narratology (Genette, 1980; Barthes, 1972) and Native/Dalit theoretical frameworks (Howe, 2002; Smith, 2012), the analysis demonstrates how Patole mobilizes oral storytelling, anecdotal fragments, and culinary memory to articulate Dalit subjectivity. Thus, *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* converts cooking and consumption into acts of testimony and resistance. The aim of this research is thus doubly-oriented: firstly, to analyze how food functions as a narrative tool sustaining myth and memory; and second, to illustrate how Patole's aesthetic of storytelling undoes caste hegemony while reclaiming dignity and cultural belonging. In situating the Dalit kitchen as a speaking subject, the article contends that food narratives are essential archives of everyday life and political struggle.

### Theoretical Framework

To examine Shahu Patole's *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* as a place of myth, memory, and meals, this research employs two interrelated frameworks: narratology and Native/Dalit theory. These frameworks enable both the exploration of the form (how Patole narrates his story) and the cultural function (why these stories are significant in the

Dalit world). Narratology offers devices for analyzing the structure of narrative. Gérard Genette's theory of narrative voice, temporality, and focalization explains how Patole switches between personal anecdote, collective memory, and generational myth (Genette, 1980). An example is that the application of episodic narration and fragments orally is aesthetically nearer to orality than to linear classical prose. Equally, Roland Barthes' (1972) theory of "mythologies" serves to place food as a semiotic system in which dishes and recipes are cultural codes that mean deprivation and resilience. Such narratological insights serve to interpret the ways in which Patole works to turn kitchens into spaces of literary testimony. Native/Dalit theory, meanwhile, brings forward the epistemological value of food as cultural survival. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) emphasizes that storytelling is a decolonizing methodology, one that validates indigenous knowledge systems and resists erasure. LeAnne Howe's (2002) concept of tribalography—the weaving together of history, memory, and story—resonates with Patole's narrative style, where culinary memory interlaces with caste history and myth. Dalit cultural critique, spoken by intellectuals like Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd (2009), points out how food has been at the center of caste hierarchies, where Dalit food is denigrated as polluted or contaminating. Patole's memoir explicitly challenges this one, revaluing Dalit dishes as dignified and cultured. By combining narratology and Native/Dalit theory, this research examines *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* not just as a recipe memoir, but as a narrative archive—a book that reimagines the kitchen space as a site of telling, cultural continuity, and political resistance.

### Myth in Dalit Kitchens

Food in Indian society is deeply implicated in the mythologies of caste. Some foods—beef, pork, or leftovers—are stigmatized as polluting, others—ghee, milk, and grains—are valorized as pure (Appadurai, 1981). These myths are not innocent but encode power hierarchies, representing Dalit food practices as debased. Patole's *Dalit Kitchens of*



*Marathwada* confronts these mythologies directly, retelling them from the lives of those who existed within their parameters. Patole describes how the ancestral histories of poverty and marginalization became institutionalized in local legend. The repeat character of hunger works almost mythically, handed down as tales of survival on whatever was available—coarse grains, wild greens, or animal scraps. In telling these histories as cultural memory, Patole displaces hunger from being only a state of suffering to being a shared myth of survival. This conversion of lack into resilience is a testament to Barthes' (1972) idea that myths are not only old-time fables but cultural explanations that inscribe meaning. Meanwhile, Patole deconstructs prevailing myths of pollution. Beef and offal, rendered impure by Brahmanical rhetoric, are redecribed in his account as sources of sustenance and respect. In the process, Patole builds counter-myths—narratives contesting caste-dependent definitions of pollution. As Rege (2013) points out, Dalit stories habitually break myths, revealing how symbolic food hierarchies are implicated in power. Narratologically, Patole uses an anecdotal form imitating oral retelling. Myths are located in disjointed, circular memories instead of linear timelines. Childhood meals are told about effortlessly evolving into discussions of ancestral pain, demonstrating how myth and history are interwoven in Dalit kitchens. In this sense, myth functions not as distant legend but as lived, embodied narrative. By reclaiming myth, Patole transforms the Dalit kitchen into a narrative space where stigma is overturned, and survival is mythologized as dignity. His work exemplifies Howe's (2002) concept of tribalography, in which stories draw together myth, history, and cultural identity into a unified narrative whole.

### Memory as Culinary Archive

Memory is the foundation of Patole's *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*. Food, for Patole, cannot be separated from remembrance—of mothers cooking simple fare, of community feasts, of the flavor of shortages. They are not individual but serve as a collective archive, allowing Dalit histories that have

been erased for so long from official discourses to be stored and made sense of. Collective memory, according to Halbwachs (1992), is constructed on the basis of social structures. For Dalits, memory of food is both caste exclusion and survival all at once. Patole remembers, for instance, that his family commonly had jowar bhakri with watery curry as their meal, a food that was symbolic of poverty but also communal survival. These memories are what Connerton (1989) refers to as "incorporating practices"—embodied practices that share cultural memory through repetition. Narratologically, Patole's text is organized in a fractured, episodic way, echoing oral storytelling traditions. Memory does not map linearly onto time but circles back to hunger, scarcity, and determination. Genette's (1980) theory of analepsis (flashback) provides an explanation for this narrative flow since Patole constantly moves between present-day comment and past anecdote, in this way producing layered temporality. This aesthetic emphasizes how memory exists not as fixed remembrance but as mobile narration. From a Dalit/Native point of view, remembering is an act of resistance. As Smith (2012) points out, indigenous narrative reclaims histories suppressed by dominant structures. Patole's memoir illustrates this in that it legitimates Dalit food memory as cultural heritage. The practice of documenting recipes, remembering taste, and telling struggles is a means of writing Dalit presence into the literary and cultural realm.

In *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*, food memory cannot be separated from dignity. What appears to be small meals in dominant discourse are revalued as markers of survival and cultural identity. In memory, the Dalit kitchen is not a place of shame but history, continuity, and resistance, Patole states.

### Meals as Storytelling and Community

If myth and memory shape Dalit food narratives, meals themselves are embodied sites of narration. Patole underscores the point that sharing a meal in Dalit families and communities was never just for sustenance; it was about creating bonds, claiming identity, and negotiating exclusion. Meals in Patole's memoir are frequently communal experiences—



family gatherings, celebrations, or community meals. These are moments that serve narratively as what Bakhtin (1981) calls the "chronotope," when time and space intersect to form significant events. A meal is not merely an event but a node in the story that expresses relations, power, and cultural values. Meanwhile, meals are political. Patole illustrates the ways in which caste discrimination is lived out through food-sharing practices: Dalits excluded from upper-caste cooking, partitioned at festivals, or shamed for their diets. But among Dalits themselves, communal eating becomes an act of solidarity. Conforming to mainstream Hindu conventions, Dalits eat beef or coarse grains together and convert stigmatized foods into symbols of collective pride and solidarity. According to Ilaiah Shepherd (2009), such practices subvert caste hierarchies by validating Dalit food culture. Narratologically, meals in Patole's text are narrated with shifting focalization—sometimes through his personal memories, sometimes through the collective voice of the community. This polyphonic quality aligns with Howe's (2002) tribalogy, where storytelling merges individual and communal perspectives. Meals thus become narrative spaces where multiple voices converge. In reframing meals as storytelling events, Patole challenges the dominant construction of Dalit cuisine as degraded. Rather, he offers food as pivotal to identity creation, cultural recall, and resistance. The Dalit kitchen is not mute; it speaks through food, claiming both survival and dignity.

### **Native Storytelling Aesthetics in Patole's Work**

What distinguishes Patole's *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* is not only its content but also its form. His narrative style reflects a native storytelling aesthetic, rooted in orality, repetition, and anecdotal fragments. Unlike linear memoirs, Patole's text moves cyclically, weaving together myth, memory, and meals. This aligns with Howe's (2002) tribalographic principle, where storytelling unites history, culture, and identity into a single narrative fabric. The kitchen is a location where past and present, personal and public, myth and memory meet. Patole's writing is everyday language,

frequently close to the rhythm of oral stories. Recipes are told not as strict directions but as memory, with emotion and context infused. This spoken tone is a statement of what Smith (2012) refers to as decolonizing storytelling—narratives that refuse the conventions of dominant literary forms and instead prioritize indigenous ways of knowing. Aesthetically, Patole turns food into a storytelling medium. Ingredients, cooking, and taste are metaphors for survival, exclusion, and cultural identity. This aesthetic of storytelling does not simply tell food stories but brings food to life so that kitchens themselves can "speak." Patole's work therefore represents a Dalit storytelling aesthetic that combines narratology with Native theory. It illustrates how marginal foodways may be told in oppositional narratives to contest prevailing myths, safeguard memory, and claim identity.

### **Conclusion**

Shahu Patole's *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* uncovers the fact that food is never merely sustenance; it is a mythic, memorial, and communal archive. In storytelling aesthetics derived from oral traditions, Patole appropriates Dalit kitchens as sites of dignity, endurance, and resistance. Through narratology and Native/Dalit theory, this paper has demonstrated how Patole's stories deconstruct myths of caste, restore forgotten memories, and politicize meals as acts of solidarity. The episodic, anecdotal format of his memoir is an indigenous aesthetic that makes Dalit experience legitimate in cultural terms. Doing so, Patole makes kitchens into speaking subjects—spaces where Dalit struggles and strength are voiced and saved. Culinary stories like Patole's highlight the larger work of food literature in specifying identity and challenging oppression. They remind us that kitchens are not mute domestic spheres but repositories of cultural memory and political action. Consequently, Dalit food stories deserve attention not as marginal oddities but as essential offerings to India's literary and cultural landscape.



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