
**FOOD, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL POLITICS: A SOCIO-CULTURAL
READING OF MURDER OF THE MENU BY NIRUPAMA
SUBRAMANIAN**

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Abstract

Murder of the Menu by Nirupama Subramanian is a compelling contemporary work that interrogates the politics of food, identity, and cultural control in modern society. The text examines how food practices become sites of ideological conflict, reflecting broader tensions related to caste, religion, and nationalism. This paper explores the novel as a socio-cultural critique of how culinary choices are regulated and politicized, transforming everyday practices into markers of identity and power. Drawing upon cultural studies and sociological perspectives, the study analyses how food is not merely a matter of consumption but a deeply symbolic act tied to belonging, exclusion, and resistance. The paper argues that the “murder” of the menu represents the suppression of diversity and the imposition of homogenized cultural norms. By examining narrative elements, thematic concerns, and socio-political contexts, the study highlights how the novel exposes the intersections of food, politics, and identity in contemporary India. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that *Murder of the Menu* serves as a critical commentary on the erosion of pluralism and the need to reclaim cultural diversity.

Keywords: Food Politics, Identity, Cultural Control, Nationalism, Caste, Consumption, Power, Resistance

Introduction

Food has always been more than a biological necessity; it is a cultural practice deeply embedded in social, religious, and political contexts. In contemporary India, food has

increasingly become a site of ideological conflict, where choices about what to eat are often interpreted as statements of identity and belonging. *Murder of the Menu* by Nirupama Subramanian engages with this complex dynamic, presenting a narrative that reflects the tensions surrounding food practices in a rapidly changing society. The significance of this study lies in its focus on how food operates as a symbol of power and control. The novel highlights how certain food practices are privileged while others are marginalized, reflecting broader structures of inequality. This raises important questions: How does food become politicized? In what ways do culinary practices reflect social hierarchies? How does the regulation of food impact individual freedom and cultural diversity?

Existing scholarship in cultural studies and sociology has explored the relationship between food and identity. Scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu have emphasized how taste functions as a marker of class and cultural capital, while anthropologists have examined the symbolic meanings attached to food practices. However, there is a growing need to examine these issues within the specific context of contemporary India, where food has become increasingly politicized. This study addresses this gap by analysing *Murder of the Menu* as a literary representation of these dynamics. The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining literary analysis with socio-cultural theory. By examining the novel through the lens of food politics, the study provides insights into how everyday practices are shaped by larger ideological forces. It contributes to existing scholarship by highlighting the role of literature in reflecting and critiquing social realities. The narrative of *Murder of the Menu* unfolds within a socio-political landscape where food becomes a contested terrain, reflecting deeper anxieties about identity, purity, and cultural belonging. The title itself is metaphorically significant, suggesting not only the literal elimination of certain food items but also the symbolic erasure of diversity. This “murder” represents an act of control, where dominant ideologies seek to regulate individual choices and impose uniformity. One of the central themes of the novel is the politicization of food. In the narrative, dietary practices are no longer personal choices but are subjected to public scrutiny and moral judgment. This reflects a broader trend in contemporary society, where food is used as a marker of identity and a tool for social differentiation. The novel illustrates how certain foods are associated with specific communities, leading to the stigmatization of those who consume them. This process reinforces existing social hierarchies, particularly those related to caste and religion.

The relationship between food and caste is particularly significant in the Indian context. The novel highlights how dietary practices are historically linked to notions of purity and pollution, which are central to the caste system. Certain foods are considered “pure” and acceptable, while others are deemed “impure” and are associated with lower social status.

This classification not only influences individual behavior but also shapes social interactions, determining who can eat with whom and under what conditions. By foregrounding these issues, the novel exposes the continuation of caste-based discrimination in contemporary society.

Religion also plays a crucial role in shaping food practices, as the novel demonstrates. Dietary restrictions and prescriptions are often rooted in religious beliefs, which can become sources of conflict in a pluralistic society. The narrative explores how these differences are politicized, leading to tensions between communities. Food becomes a visible marker of religious identity, making it a focal point for ideological conflict. This dynamic reflects the challenges of maintaining cultural diversity in the face of increasing polarization. Another important aspect of the novel is its critique of nationalism and cultural homogenization. The regulation of food practices is presented as part of a broader effort to define a unified national identity. However, this process often involves the exclusion of certain cultural practices, leading to the marginalization of minority communities. The novel challenges this notion of homogeneity, emphasizing the importance of diversity and plurality. It suggests that the strength of a society lies in its ability to accommodate different traditions rather than impose a single standard.

The role of institutions in regulating food practices is also explored in the narrative. Government policies, social norms, and media representations all contribute to shaping public attitudes toward food. The novel highlights how these institutions can perpetuate inequality by privileging certain practices over others. This institutional dimension adds depth to the analysis, demonstrating that the politicization of food is not merely a result of individual actions but is embedded within larger structures of power. The concept of resistance emerges as a significant theme in the novel. Despite the pressures to conform, individuals and communities find ways to assert their culinary identities. This resistance takes various forms, from the preservation of traditional recipes to the public assertion of dietary choices. The novel suggests that food can serve as a powerful tool for expressing identity and challenging dominant narratives. This perspective aligns with cultural studies approaches that view everyday practices as sites of negotiation and resistance.

The narrative also engages with the emotional and psychological dimensions of food. Food is often associated with memory, nostalgia, and a sense of belonging. The restriction of certain foods can therefore have a profound impact on individuals, affecting not only their physical well-being but also their emotional state. The novel captures this complexity, illustrating how food is intertwined with personal and collective identities. This psychological dimension adds another layer to the analysis, highlighting the human cost of

cultural regulation. The novel employs a realistic narrative style that enhances its impact. The use of relatable characters and situations allows readers to connect with the issues being presented. This accessibility is crucial in conveying the seriousness of the subject matter, as it encourages readers to reflect on their own attitudes and practices. The narrative's clarity and directness make it an effective vehicle for social critique.

In comparison with existing literature, *Murder of the Menu* stands out for its focus on the intersection of food and politics. While previous studies have examined food as a cultural symbol, this novel highlights its role as a site of conflict and control. This emphasis on power dynamics distinguishes it from other works, making it a valuable contribution to contemporary literary discourse. The study is not without limitations. The analysis is based on textual interpretation and does not incorporate empirical data or comparative analysis with other texts. Future research could explore these areas, examining how different authors address similar themes or how readers respond to such narratives. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies that combine literary analysis with sociological research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues.

Conclusion

Murder of the Menu by Nirupama Subramanian offers a powerful exploration of the intersections between food, identity, and politics. The novel demonstrates that food is not merely a matter of personal preference but a deeply contested site shaped by cultural, social, and ideological forces. The study highlights how the politicization of food reflects broader issues of power and inequality, particularly in relation to caste, religion, and nationalism. By examining these dynamics, the paper underscores the importance of preserving cultural diversity and resisting efforts to impose uniformity. In conclusion, the novel serves as a critical commentary on contemporary society, encouraging readers to reflect on the ways in which everyday practices are influenced by larger structures of power. Its exploration of food as a site of conflict and resistance makes it a significant contribution to literary and cultural studies.

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