

The Semiotics of Sambal: Food, Domestic Intimacy, and Symbolic Boundary-Making in Indonesian Short Fiction

Aniqo Dhamar 'Asyuro¹✉, Rachelina Mariska Oktaviana², Moh Atikurrahman³
Department of Indonesian Literature, UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia¹²³
✉ adhamarasyy@gmail.com

Abstract

This article aims to examine how sambal functions as a culinary sign in two Indonesian short stories, Puthut's *Sambal Keluarga* and Tenni Purwanti's *Sambal di Ranjang*. Rather than treating sambal as a minor condiment, this study reads sambal as a dense cultural code through which domestic intimacy, gendered labor, and symbolic boundaries are narrated. This research uses a qualitative comparative textual design based on close reading, document analysis, and theory-guided coding. Three conceptual lens structure analysis: Roland Barthes's semiology, especially denotation, connotation, myth, and lexia-based reading; gastrocriticism, which approaches food as a social and affective text; and commensality, which explains how shared eating organizes membership, proximity, and exclusion. Findings show that in *Sambal Keluarga*, sambal consolidates familial myth through ritual breakfast, affective repetition, and insider knowledge, while in *Sambal di Ranjang*, it is privatized as a sign of ideal wifhood, erotic service, and conjugal possession before being reclaimed as a medium of resistance and economic autonomy. By combining semiotics with food studies, this study demonstrates that ordinary culinary objects can serve as rigorous evidence for analyzing family myth, domestic power, and the politics of inclusion in literary texts.

Keywords: sambal; gastrocriticism; commensality; semiotics; Roland Barthes

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana sambal dalam *Sambal Keluarga* dan *Sambal di Ranjang* menjadi sistem kode kultural (kulinari) kompleks. Alih-alih diposisikan semata sebagai kondimen, studi ini menempatkan sambal dalam cerpen Puthut EA dan Tenni Purwanti sebagai narasi utama yang merangkum keintiman domestik, kerja rumahan berbasis gender, dan batasan simbolik dalam lokus kultural bernama keluarga. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif komparatif berbasis pembacaan dekat (*close reading*), analisis dokumen, serta pengodean yang dipandu teori. Analisis terhadap dua cerpen sambal ditopang tiga lensa konseptual: semiologi Roland Barthes, terutama konsep denotasi, konotasi, mitos, dan pembacaan berbasis leksia; gastrokritik yang memandang makanan sebagai teks sosial sekaligus afektif; serta komensalitas yang menjelaskan bagaimana praktik makan bersama membentuk keanggotaan, kedekatan, dan eksklusivitas. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dalam *Sambal Keluarga* sambal berperan mengukuhkan mitos keluarga melalui ritual sarapan, pengulangan afektif, dan pengetahuan orang dalam. Sementara dalam *Sambal di Ranjang* sambal mengalami privatisasi sebagai tanda istri ideal, layanan erotik, dan kepemilikan dalam relasi suami-istri sebelum akhirnya direbut kembali sebagai medium resistensi dan otonomi ekonomi. Dengan menggabungkan semiotika dan gastronomi, penelitian ini menegaskan objek kuliner yang tampak sederhana justru dapat menjadi bukti analitis kuat untuk membaca mitos keluarga, relasi kuasa domestik, dan politik inklusi dalam representasi teks sastra.

Kata kunci: sambal; gastrokritik; komensalitas; semiotika; Roland Barthes

INTRODUCTION

Food in literary narrative rarely remains merely nutritional discourse; it becomes a dense medium through which intimacy, hierarchy, memory, and belonging are organized. This is especially visible in domestic settings, where repetitive meals, minor culinary preferences, and everyday kitchen routines often function as social codes rather than neutral habits. (Douglas, 1972) argues that food encodes hierarchy, inclusion, exclusion, and transactions across boundaries, while (Fischler, 1988) shows that eating practices bind biological to cultural and individual to collective. In Indonesian, *sambal* is not simply a condiment accompanying rice and side dishes; it is an everyday culinary object saturated with affect, locality, family memory, classed taste, and domestic routine. Its preparation, circulation, absence, and consumption may reveal who belongs, who remains outside, and who controls the terms of intimacy. For this reason, research on *sambal* in short fiction matters: it discloses how Indonesian domestic life is narratively condensed through an ordinary food object that appears simple but carries symbolic, affective, and ideological force.

Recent studies have established strong foundations for reading food as a social text, identity marker, and relational practice. Studies on food choice and selfhood demonstrate that eating practices articulate personal identity, social category, and life-course experience (Bisogni dkk, 2002). Research on commensality shows that eating with others reflects and organizes social relationships, particularly in family meals and domestic food arrangements (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Studies of domestic cooking and gendered foodwork further reveal that culinary labor is tied to responsibility, care, moral order, and unequal domestic burdens (Meah, 2014). Literary and postcolonial food studies have also shown that food in narrative can carry memory, place, difference, and desire (Lawson Welsh, 2018; Lok, 2020). *Sambal di Ranjang* (2015) has been examined through feminist representation (Wilujeng et al., 2021), while food in Indonesian fiction has often been treated thematically. What remains insufficiently developed is a comparative analysis of sambal as a structured semiotic object that simultaneously operates as sign, ritual, and symbolic boundary-making device.

This article addresses that gap by comparing Puthut's *Sambal Keluarga* (2006) and Tenni Purwanti's *Sambal di Ranjang* (2015) through qualitative textual analysis combining Barthesian semiology, gastrocriticism, and commensality studies. The first objective is to examine how both stories construct *sambal* as a sign at levels of denotation, connotation, and myth within domestic

space. *Sambal*, denotatively, appears as chili, garlic, salt, *cobek*, meal accompaniment, and bodily taste; as connotative, it becomes home, intimacy, service, desire, acceptance, or possession; mythically, it naturalizes certain ideas about proper family, ideal wifehood, domestic loyalty, and culinary belonging. The second objective is to explain how the presence, absence, preparation, serving, and consumption of sambal organize domestic commensality by marking membership, intimacy, acceptance, deferred acceptance, rejection, or distance. The third objective is to compare two domestic regimes: *Sambal Keluarga* (2006) frames *sambal* as a ritual of familial cohesion and insider-outsider differentiation, whereas *Sambal di Ranjang* (2015) transforms *sambal* into a sign of conjugal possession, patriarchal control, and female resistance.

This article argues that sambal in two stories is not merely a matter of taste, but a meaningful culinary sign through which domestic relationships are imagined, negotiated, and controlled. Its significance emerges from the way it gathers together affect, memory, intimacy, obligation, and power within seemingly ordinary routines of family life. In *Sambal Keluarga* (2006), *sambal* sustains a family myth through breakfast rituals, shared culinary memory, and subtle tests of belonging. Its absence when guests arrive, and its disruption when an outsider alters its taste, reveal that family intimacy depends on restricted access to a specific culinary code. In *Sambal di Ranjang* (2015), by contrast, *sambal* shifts from condiment to conjugal instrument: it organizes the wife's domestic labor, eroticizes service, and becomes subject to the husband's attempt to privatize her culinary skill. Yet the same object later becomes the basis for refusal and entrepreneurial self-assertion. The broader implication is that domestic intimacy in Indonesian short fiction is not a transparent emotional given. It is materially staged, repeatedly performed, and ideologically naturalized through ordinary culinary objects that mediate both care and power (Barthes, 1972; Douglas, 1972; Giacomani, 2016; Le Moal et al., 2021).

RELEVANT READINGS

Barthesian semiology treats food as a sign system, not as passive material. For Barthes, meaning does not stop at the literal level. It moves from first-order signification to connotation, then to myth, where cultural values appear natural, obvious, and unquestioned (Barthes, 1972). His essay on food is crucial here. Food, for Barthes, works like a language: its combinations, forms of presentation, and uses communicate meanings beyond nutrition (Barthes, 2018). In this study, *sambal* is therefore read at three levels. Denotative: it appears as chili paste, condiment, *cobek*,

seasoning, meal accompaniment, and bodily taste. Connotative: it evokes warmth, intimacy, danger, desire, exclusivity, service, possession, or home. Myth: it becomes an ideological form that naturalizes ideas of proper family, ideal wifehood, domestic loyalty, and culinary belonging.

Barthes's model is useful because it connects small textual details to wider cultural logics. Domestic rituals seem natural because they have already been coded as signs. Within this framework, concepts of *lexia* and the five codes in *S/Z* help organize a close reading of both short stories. A *lexia* is not a fixed grammatical unit, but a selected unit of reading that carries strong interpretive force (Barthes, 1974). Hermeneutic code marks narrative enigmas: why does sambal disappear when guests arrive, and why must sambal be served in bed? Proairetic code follows actions that move the plot: arrival of *cobek*, Dian's pouring of kecap, husband's purchase of a car, or wife's discovery of a hotel room. Semic code gathers traits and atmospheres attached to objects and characters. Symbolic code reveals oppositions: spicy/sweet, family/stranger, private/public, exclusivity/circulation. Referential code activates shared cultural knowledge about sambal, domestic femininity, and Indonesian meal practices. Together, these codes make close reading more systematic. They show how sambal accumulates meaning, becomes ideology, and organizes domestic life as if its rules were merely matters of taste.

Gastrocriticism brings food studies into literary analysis by treating food as a social, historical, and rhetorical text, not as a decorative detail. This framework examines how ingredients, cooking methods, serving practices, and references to taste encode class, memory, identity, and power in narrative worlds (Lawson Welsh, 2018; Gasperini, 2022). Gastrocritical concern is not culinary description alone. Nor authenticity. Rather, it asks what food symbolically and relationally means in a text. Literary food may store longing, loss, difference, home, colonial memory, religious normativity, erotic attachment, or politics of care (Chiaro & Rossato, 2015; Weber-Lawson, 2024). *Sambal* is therefore analytically important because it is materially simple but culturally dense. It can signify local knowledge, household skill, emotional continuity, and social classification at the same time. Gastrocriticism enables this article to read sambal as a narrative center through which domestic relations are formed, protected, disturbed, and remembered.

Gastrocritical reading here is organized through four indicators. First, *materiality*: ingredients, utensils, preparation, heat, texture, and accompaniment. Second, *circulation*: who prepares sambal, for whom, under what conditions, and whether it remains private, familial, commercial, or public. Third, *affective archiving*: how sambal stores memory, comfort, longing,

resentment, embarrassment, or erotic charge. Fourth, *value formation*: how sambal becomes linked to domestic virtue, economic aspiration, or cultural prestige. These indicators distinguish sambal as food from sambal as social text. In *Sambal Keluarga*, *sambal* is organized through repetition, memory, and family cohesion; its simplicity intensifies its symbolic force. In *Sambal di Ranjang*, the same object acquires erotic, proprietary, and entrepreneurial meanings. *Sambal* thus moves across affective and economic registers while retaining its domestic charge (Fischler, 1988; Bisogni et al., 2002; Apriyani & Yuli, 2025).

Commensality is usually understood as eating together. Yet recent scholars treat it as more than a shared meal. This concept may refer to sharing food, a table, a time, a space, a social scene, or a combination of these elements (Jonsson et al., 2021). Giacomani (2016) identifies several dimensions of commensality, including interaction, rules, pleasure, and social order. Sobal and Nelson (2003) show that meal partners reveal patterned social relations. Commensality here matters because both stories are shaped by repeated, suspended, or disrupted eating scenes. This framework helps read domestic meals as relational technologies. Who belongs. Who remains peripheral. Who may enter under certain conditions. Who is kept outside? Through this lens, intimacy appears not as a natural emotional state but as a social arrangement. A small food object, sambal, becomes a medium through which domestic order is recognized, tested, and defended.

This article applies commensality through five dimensions: co-eaters, setting, temporality, affective rule, and boundary effect. *Co-eaters* refer to those who share food and in what relation: parents, siblings, lovers, spouses, or outsiders. Settings distinguish the breakfast table, kitchen, bedroom, hotel room, and imagined restaurant; each carries a different domestic script. *Temporality* concerns repetition, ritual, suspension, and exceptional events. *Affective rule* refers to unspoken expectations in shared eating: enthusiasm, discretion, loyalty, and obedience. *Boundary effect* tracks whether eating produces acceptance, deferred acceptance, exclusion, secrecy, or reversal. These indicators follow recent commensality studies that move beyond idealized family-meal discourse and examine ordinary, variable, and contested practices of eating together (Scander et al., 2021a, 2021b; Le Moal et al., 2021; Biggs & Haapala, 2021). They also clarify the main contrast in this article: the breakfast table in *Sambal Keluarga* produces familial cohesion and insider-outsider distinction, while the bed in *Sambal di Ranjang* produces conjugal possession, patriarchal control, and eventually female resistance.

METHOD

Unit of analysis in this study is *domestic food-sign* in two Indonesian short stories: Puthut's *Sambal Keluarga* published in *Kompas* (2006) and Tenni Purwanti's *Sambal di Ranjang* published in the same newspaper (2015). This analysis focuses on *lexias*, selected units of reading that contain meaningful references to sambal, ingredients, utensils, preparation, serving, consumption, and related reactions. Examined objects include descriptions of *cabai*, *bawang*, *cobek*, *ulekan*, *kecap*, milkshake, breakfast scenes, bedside meals, a hotel room, and an imagined restaurant. These *lexias* are not treated as separate quotations. They are read as nodes within wider domestic sequences. Since both stories are short and tightly patterned, they are suitable for close interpretive analysis. This study does not prioritize frequency. It focuses on relational function: how food scenes organize intimacy, secrecy, acceptance, jealousy, and resistance. Each story is therefore treated as an individual case, while both are read together as a comparative constellation of sambal-centered domesticity.

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative design that combines close reading with theory-guided textual coding. A comparative textual case-study design is appropriate because the study does not aim to generalize about all Indonesian fiction. It aims to explain how two selected narratives mobilize the same culinary object in different ways. Document analysis provides the main research strategy because the corpus consists of written texts (Bowen, 2009). This study is not purely inductive. It is guided from beginning by three conceptual lenses: Barthesian semiology, gastrocriticism, and commensality. These lenses shape the coding process and interpretive categories. This design preserves textual specificity while enabling cross-case comparison. It also supports the article's central claim: meaning emerges from patterned relations among signs, actions, and domestic scenes, not from isolated themes. For this reason, this study privileges depth, textual texture, and analytical triangulation over breadth or numerical representativeness.

Primary sources are two short stories, *Sambal Keluarga* (2006) and *Sambal di Ranjang* (2015). Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles and selected theoretical books on semiotics, food studies, domesticity, and commensality. These sources have two functions. First, they build a conceptual framework. Second, they position findings within previous studies on food as code, family meals, gendered foodwork, and Indonesian literary criticism. Study on both stories is also used to map research gap, especially feminist work on *Sambal di Ranjang* and gastrokritik work on *Sambal Keluarga* (Wilujeng et al., 2021; Apriyani & Yuli, 2025). Corpus is

therefore deliberately differentiated. Two short stories serve as interpretive data. Scholarly literature serves as analytical scaffolding and a dialogic context. This distinction is important in qualitative textual research because it keeps the literary object from being overdetermined by a theoretical framework.

Data were collected through a staged document-review process. First, both stories were read repeatedly to identify their narrative arcs, recurring sambal references, and spatial organization of domestic scenes. Second, all lexias involving sambal, its substitutes, its absence, and related eating arrangements were excerpted into analytic matrices. Third, each lexia was annotated using preliminary categories: signification, materiality, affect, co-eaters, spatial setting, and boundary effect. Fourth, secondary scholarship was reviewed to refine these categories and determine which patterns were theoretically significant. This process resembles thematic coding but remains grounded in close reading. Each quotation was interpreted in relation to narrative sequence, tone, and focalization. Following qualitative best practice, this study maintained an audit trail of coding decisions and table displays, so that movement from excerpt to interpretation remained transparent (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). This process emphasized consistency, reflexivity, and textual nuance.

Data analysis followed three connected stages: reduction, display, and interpretive verification. In the reduction stage, the corpus was narrowed to lexias directly related to sambal and domestic interaction. In the display stage, selected lexias were arranged into three comparative matrices based on the study's conceptual triad: semiology, gastrocriticism, and commensality. In the verification stage, emerging patterns were checked against the full narrative to ensure that interpretations remained contextually grounded, not selectively extractive. Barthesian analysis identified denotative signs, connotative associations, myths, and relevant codes. Gastrocritical analysis examined how sambal's materiality, circulation, and affective charge structured each story. Commensality analysis then mapped who ate with whom, where, when, and under what rules of admission or exclusion. These stages were iterative, not linear. Interpretations were revised whenever later comparison challenged earlier assumptions. This procedure strengthens trustworthiness by combining systematic coding with theoretical triangulation, allowing analysis to move from textual detail to culturally thicker explanation (Bowen, 2009; Tracy, 2010).

RESULT

Sambal as a Barthesian Sign: From Culinary Object to Domestic Myth

In both short stories, *sambal* is not merely a food complement. It works as a sign. Barthesian reading helps explain this movement because *sambal* shifts from denotation to connotation, then to myth. In *Sambal Keluarga*, the denotative level is simple: green chili, garlic, salt, hot oil, and a *cobek* at the breakfast table. Nothing excessive. Nothing luxurious. Yet the narrative immediately changes its value. Breakfast feels incomplete without *sambal*. Narrator even states that "*Ini merupakan menu utama,*" not a side dish (Puthut, 2006). This is where connotation begins. *Sambal* becomes warmth, togetherness, family memory, and collective identity. It does not merely accompany a meal. It completes the family scene.

In *Sambal di Ranjang*, *sambal* also begins as food, but its meaning moves in another direction. It enters the bedroom, not the dining table. It is prepared for the husband, repeatedly and intimately. Wife states, "*Suamiku mengaku, setiap kali melahap sambal buatanku, ia selalu ingin bercinta denganku*" (Purwanti, 2015). *Sambal* here signifies desire. But not desire alone. It also signifies training, obligation, and gendered service. Wife's skill is not presented as pure culinary pleasure. It is shaped by marital demand and by expectation that a woman proves herself through domestic competence. *Sambal*, therefore, becomes a sign of regulated intimacy. Food, body, pleasure, and obedience meet in one domestic object.

At the mythical level, *sambal* turns cultural values into something that appears natural. Barthes calls this second-order signification: culture disguises itself as common sense (Barthes, 1972). In *Sambal Keluarga*, the myth is quiet. A proper family has its own taste code. Its *sambal* is shared internally, but not openly offered to outsiders. This rule is never explained. It is simply practiced. When guests arrive, *sambal* disappears. Silence becomes code. In *Sambal di Ranjang*, the myth is more explicit. "*Istri idaman adalah perempuan yang pandai membuat sambal*" (Purwanti, 2015). Culinary skill becomes a moral value. A good wife is imagined as one who serves, pleases, and restricts her culinary labor to her husband. The myth here is not only about *sambal*. It is about ideal femininity.

Barthes's concept of *lexia* in *S/Z* sharpens this reading. A *lexia* is a selected unit of reading that carries interpretive force (Barthes, 1974). In both stories, small textual fragments produce large meanings. Why is *sambal* absent when guests stay over? Why does the husband forbid others from enjoying his wife's *sambal*? These unanswered questions activate the hermeneutic code. Minor actions also become decisive. The late arrival of *cobek*, Dian's addition of kecap, husband's

rejection of the restaurant plan, and discovery of sambal in the hotel room all activate proairetic code. They move the plot. More importantly, they expose the rules behind domestic intimacy.

Semic and symbolic codes show contrast between the two stories. In *Sambal Keluarga*, *sambal* is simple, familiar, warm, and collective. Its many names (*sambal korek*, *sambal galak*, *sambal bahagia*, *sambal malas*, and others) create an intimate family vocabulary. In *Sambal di Ranjang*, *sambal* is intimate, possessive, erotic, and finally linked to betrayal. First story turns on oppositions between inside and outside, family and stranger, shared taste and foreign taste. Second turns on private and public, loyalty and betrayal, intimacy and circulation, wifhood and autonomy. These oppositions rely on familiar cultural codes: sambal as a daily necessity, breakfast as a family ritual, and cooking as a measure of feminine virtue. Sambal, then, is not a fixed object. It is a moving sign. It connects food with emotion, social order, gender, and power.

The following table organizes these Barthesian lexias and their signifying functions across two stories. It shows how sambal operates through denotation, connotation, myth, and the five codes: hermeneutic, proairetic, semic, symbolic, and referential.

Table 1. Barthesian lexias and signifying functions in the two stories

Analytical Category	<i>Sambal Keluarga</i> (Puthut EA)	<i>Sambal di Ranjang</i> (Tenni Purwanti)
Denotation	Simple <i>sambal</i> in <i>cobek</i> ; "menu utama"; breakfast condiment.	<i>Sambal cobek</i> on bed; jars, recipes, nightly preparation.
Connotation	Home, warmth, validation, insider taste, family memory.	Wifely service, erotic charge, jealousy, exclusivity.
Myth	A true family shares a secret taste code.	An ideal wife serves sambal only for her husband.
HER (enigma)	Why does sambal disappear when guests stay over?	Why must <i>sambal</i> always be served on a bed?
ACT (action)	<i>Cobek</i> arrives late; Dian adds kecap.	Husband refuses restaurant plan; wife discovers hotel room.
SEM (trait)	Spicy sameness, affection, family-specific naming.	Possessive masculinity, dutiful skill, hidden betrayal.
SYM (opposition)	Inside/outside; spicy/sweet; family/stranger.	Private/public; loyalty/betrayal; intimacy/circulation.
REF (cultural code)	Indonesian breakfast habit: <i>sambal</i> as an everyday necessity.	Moralized wifhood; culinary skill as feminine virtue.

The table shows a shared movement from a concrete culinary object to a broader social meaning. Yet the semiotic direction differs. In Puthut's story, *sambal* moves outward. A single object receives many names, each tied to the family's affective relation to it. Hermeneutic tension begins when this cherished object disappears whenever guests stay over. Absence becomes a sign. Proairetic tension grows when *Cobek* arrives late during Dian's visit, then peaks in her small but disruptive act of adding *kecap*. In Purwanti's story, the sign moves inward, toward conjugal possession. The bed replaces the dining table as the main site of meaning. Sambal becomes linked to wifely skill, erotic service, jealousy, and control. Milkshake vanilla appears as its counter-sign, exposing the husband's contradictory taste and unstable authority. In both narratives, Barthes's codes gather around recurring oppositions: spicy/sweet, inside/outside, family/stranger, intimacy/publicity, and exclusivity/circulation (Barthes, 1974).

These patterns show sambal as a second-order semiological system. Not merely food. A form through which ideology becomes ordinary and effectively persuasive. In *Sambal Keluarga*, myth naturalizes the idea that a proper family possesses a private taste code known only to insiders. Repeated naming of *sambal* does not disperse meaning. It strengthens a shared myth of intimate plurality within one stable domestic core. Even *sambal's* disappearance when guests stay over suggests that family identity must temporarily close itself to protect its code. Dian's sentence, "*Tapi saya paling suka kalau ditambah kecap*", breaks this myth not because *kecap* is inherently wrong, but because it brings an unfamiliar grammar of taste into the family's culinary order (Puthut, 2006). In *Sambal di Ranjang*, myth works through gender. Sambal becomes a sign of ideal wifeness and of a husband's privileged access to a wife's labor, body, and desire. Final hotel scene destroys this myth, revealing that language of exclusivity conceals not love, but patriarchal ownership and hypocrisy (Barthes, 1972; Wilujeng et al., 2021).

***Sambal* as Social Text: Ritual, Circulation, and Domestic Value**

In Puthut's story, *sambal* becomes a social text through ritual repetition, insider knowledge, and symbolic membership. Breakfast is described as a "*prosesi khusyuk tapi tetap cair dan ringan*", while *sambal* is called an "*uba-rampe yang tidak bisa digantikan oleh apapun*" (Puthut 2006). This phrasing matters. *Sambal* is not a supplement to a meal. It is a condition that makes family breakfast feel whole. Its material form remains modest: chili, garlic, salt, hot oil, and a *cobek*. Yet its effective function is large. Family members gather around it, compete for it, name it, and measure one

another's emotional condition through it. Lack of enthusiasm toward sambal signals disturbance. Appetite becomes diagnostic. Repetition turns taste into memory. The ordinary breakfast table becomes an archive of family intimacy.

This ritual also creates a boundary. The family has an unwritten rule: *sambal* disappears when outsiders stay over. The narrator states, "*Kalau ada tamu menginap di rumah, tidak peduli apakah itu saudara dekat seperti nenek atau bude, atau teman-teman Ibu dan Bapak, bisa dipastikan menu itu bersembunyi, lenyap dari meja makan*" (Puthut, 2006). The rule is never explained, but all family members understand it. *Sambal*, therefore, marks access. Only those fully absorbed into the family may receive it. When Mas Rudi is finally served *sambal*, Ayunda's ecstatic response confirms his symbolic admission into the family circle. Dian's case is more ambiguous. *Cobek* arrives, but she adds *kecap*. A small act. A major disturbance. The problem is not *kecap* itself, but failure to recognize the family's internal culinary code.

In Purwanti's story, *sambal* enters a different domestic regime. It is privatized within marriage and relocated from the dining table to the bed. Narrator recalls, "*Seminggu setelah malam pertama, ia memintaku segera menyiapkan makan malam dengan sambal, di atas ranjang*" (Purwanti, 2015). This spatial shift is crucial. Bed fuses eating, service, and sexual intimacy. *Sambal* becomes a bridge between taste and body. Husband's confession that he wants sex after eating his wife's *sambal* intensifies this connection. Yet intimacy is unequal. Wife's skill is produced through demand, correction, and discipline. Her mother's statement, "*Istri idaman adalah perempuan yang pandai membuat sambal*", turns culinary skill into a moral standard of wifeness. The further advice, "*Jika kamu ikhlas, rasa sambalmu pasti lezat karena semuanya tergerus sempurna*", regulates not only action but feeling. A wife must cook, serve, and feel correctly.

Husband's possessiveness confirms this privatization. When Dimas proposes a business opportunity, husband rejects it: "*Aku tidak ingin sambal buatanmu jadi pasaran. Cukup aku saja yang menikmati sambalmu, Dik*" (Purwanti, 2015). The word "*pasaran*" carries two meanings at once: common and public. For husband, *sambal* loses value when others gain access to it. He does not merely want to enjoy *sambal*. He wants to monopolize its circulation. Thus, *sambal* becomes property. Skill, body, labor, and desire are folded into conjugal possession. The irony is that this imposed skill later opens another possibility. Once others value *sambal*, it becomes economic potential. What first served patriarchal intimacy begins to support female self-authorization. *Sambal* moves from private service to public value.

Table 2. Gastrocritical Matrix of Sambal as Social Text

Gastrocritical indicator	<i>Sambal Keluarga</i> (Puthut E.A.)	<i>Sambal di Ranjang</i> (Tenni Purwanti)
Materiality	Green chili, garlic, salt, hot oil, cobek.	Many sambal variants, jars, small cobeks, bed tray.
Preparation/skill	Simple, repeated, almost ordinary.	Learned, disciplined, perfected as domestic duty.
Affective archive	Stores family memory and morning togetherness.	Stores desire, fatigue, resentment, and hope.
Erotic charge	Minimal; intimacy is familial, not conjugal.	Strongly eroticized by the husband's desire.
Circulation	Restricted to family ritual; withheld from outsiders.	Initially privatized, later contested and commercialized.
Economic value	Low market emphasis; high affective value.	High entrepreneurial potential through the restaurant dream.

Gastrocritical pattern is not simply that food carries meaning. *Sambal* organizes the emotional and economic infrastructure of each domestic world. In Puthut's story, taste depends on memory and co-presence. *Sambal* becomes complete only when the family gathers around the breakfast table. Narrator's attempt to reproduce it elsewhere never feels the same. Food here works as an archive of family time. Its simplicity strengthens its symbolic force. Nothing distracts from its role as a recurring affective center. Purwanti's story revises this structure. *Sambal* is tied to gendered labor and embodied service. Wife must learn, practice, and perfect it as a conjugal duty. Mother's advice converts culinary skill into a moral measure of femininity. Yet the same object that sustains patriarchal intimacy becomes an exchangeable value once others desire it. *Sambal* is effective labor and market potential. Husband's anxiety begins when domestic food threatens to circulate beyond marriage and gain public recognition (Fischler, 1988; Meah, 2014).

Through gastrocriticism, the difference between stories lies in how *sambal* mediates private feeling and wider structures of value. *Sambal Keluarga* privileges an effective economy. Culinary repetition secures belonging, but also depends on selective exclusion. *Sambal* gives pleasure. It also guards the gate. *Sambal di Ranjang* makes this tension sharper through eroticization and monetization. Husband's claim that only he should enjoy wife's *sambal* turns food into privatized property. His refusal of the restaurant proposal shows that control over circulation is central to his idea of marriage. Once *sambal* becomes desirable to consumers, its symbolic monopoly weakens. The wife's final decision to build a restaurant “*dengan atau tanpa persetujuan suamiku*” confirms

a shift from obedient domestic craft to resistant self-authorization (Purwanti, 2015, p. 9). Gastrocritically, sambal is not a fixed symbol. It is a mobile substance that stores intimacy while exposing its economic and ideological limits (Lawson Welsh, 2018; Weber-Lawson, 2024).

Commensality, Exclusion, and the Regulation of Domestic Closeness

Both stories can be read as two different models of sharing food. In *Sambal Keluarga*, commensality is collective. It gathers parents, children, siblings, and eventually an accepted in-law around the breakfast table. In *Sambal di Ranjang*, commensality is narrowed into a conjugal pair. The table disappears. The bed takes its place. This shift matters because each eating scene produces a different social order. One creates family cohesion through a repeated breakfast ritual. Others create possessive intimacy through privatized marital service. By tracing who eats sambal, where, when, and under what rule, the stories show that food-sharing is never neutral. It defines closeness. It also marks exclusion.

In *Sambal Keluarga*, breakfast is the only meal in which the family truly "*bertemu*". Lunch is fragmented by individual appetite. Dinner is often replaced by food from outside. Morning is different. *Sambal* in one cobek becomes the point of convergence. It is eaten together, competed over, and treated as indispensable to the family's emotional rhythm (Puthut, 2006). Affective rule is implicit but firm. Enthusiasm for sambal signals belonging and emotional health. Lack of appetite signals disturbance. When Adinda refuses breakfast, her father immediately senses that something is wrong. Sambal, therefore, becomes more than shared food. It becomes a domestic instrument for reading mood, attachment, and relational stability.

The strongest commensal pattern in *Sambal Keluarga* concerns access. Core family members may eat sambal freely. Guests, even close relatives, do not automatically receive it. Romantic partners are also tested. Story states, "*Kalau ada tamu menginap di rumah, tidak peduli apakah itu saudara dekat seperti nenek atau bude, atau teman-teman Ibu dan Bapak, bisa dipastikan menu itu bersembunyi, lenyap dari meja makan*" (Puthut, 2006). Sambal marks the threshold between insider and outsider. When Mas Rudi is finally served sambal, his acceptance becomes legible. Ayunda's ecstatic reaction confirms that he has entered the family circle. Dian's case remains unresolved. Sambal appears, but she adds kecap. The act is small. Its effect is not. It reveals a failure to read the family's culinary code.

Sambal di Ranjang presents a narrower and more coercive model of commensality. The setting is no longer the breakfast table but the bed. Narrator recalls that, shortly after marriage, her

husband asked her to prepare dinner with sambal "*di atas ranjang*" (Purwanti, 2015). Eating and sexual intimacy are fused in one private scene. Affective rule is not enthusiasm but obedience. Wife must prepare sambal repeatedly, vary it, perfect it, and keep it available for the husband. Even when he travels, sambal becomes a substitute for her presence. When sambal begins to attract others through business, the husband feels threatened. His objection shows that he does not merely enjoy sambal. He wants to control its circulation.

The final hotel-room scene breaks this possessive arrangement. Wife finds "*aneka sambal di atas ranjang*" complete with small *cobek*, while two women in lingerie sit nearby with glasses of vanilla milkshake (Purwanti, 2015, p. 9). This scene reverses the husband's own rule. He forbids his wife from sharing sambal with others, yet he reproduces the sambal-in-bed ritual with other women. Private commensality becomes parody. What seemed like intimacy is exposed as unequal control. The rule applies to the wife, not to the husband. *Sambal*, once claimed as a *sign* of exclusive marital closeness, reveals asymmetry hidden inside that closeness.

Table 3. Commensality dimensions and boundary effects

Commensality dimension	<i>Sambal Keluarga</i> (Puthut E.A.)	<i>Sambal di Ranjang</i> (Tenni Purwanti)
Co-eaters	Parents, siblings, later in-laws, lovers tested.	Mostly husband and wife; others enter via betrayal scene.
Setting	Breakfast table and family home.	Bedroom, bed, hotel room, imagined restaurant.
Temporality	Daily ritual; recurring validation.	Nightly repetition; broken by infidelity and refusal.
Affective rule	Enthusiasm signals belonging.	Obedience and exclusivity are expected.
Inclusion/exclusion	Guests suspend code; lovers face delayed admission.	Food is monopolized by the husband, then redistributed in betrayal.
Boundary effect	Creates an insider-outsider distinction.	Reveals possessive conjugal privatization and its collapse.

Commensality pattern shows that meal-sharing in both stories is rule-bound. Yet rules differ in scale, permeability, and moral effect. In *Sambal Keluarga*, commensality is ordinary, repetitive, and familial, but not fully open. Yu Sumi belongs because she has long participated in the ritual. Lovers face tacit examination. Delayed appearance of *cobek* during Dian's visit shows

that admission is staged, not immediate. In *Sambal di Ranjang*, commensality is narrower and more possessive. Sharing sambal in bed does not create a wider family circle. It produces privatized couplehood organized by service, desire, and exclusivity. Husband's jealousy confirms that he treats food-sharing as emotional ownership. When he repeats the sambal-in-bed scene with other women, the structure collapses. Intimacy was not mutual. It was governed by unequal control (Giacoman, 2016; Jonsson et al., 2021).

Read together, the two stories reveal sambal as a commensal code whose main force lies in boundary-making. In Puthut's story, eating sambal together validates kinship and renews domestic membership. This is why Mas Rudi "passes," while Dian's kecap gesture suspends acceptance. The breakfast table becomes a site where the family is repeatedly made. In Purwanti's story, the bedside meal first appears to intensify intimacy, but it actually narrows commensality into conjugal possession. Husband wants wife's sambal, labor, body, and desire to remain his. He rejects public sharing and entrepreneurial circulation. Ending reverses this logic. After seeing sambal redistributed in betrayal, the wife withdraws moral recognition from marriage and reclaims circulation as her own choice. Across both stories, sambal does not merely accompany domestic life. It decides who counts as "us," who remains "other," and whether intimacy sustains belonging or exposes the violence within it (Le Moal et al., 2021; Oren et al., 2024).

DISCUSSION

Semiotic reading developed here shows that food in fiction can be a quiet yet consequential medium through which ideology is formed and sustained. In both stories, *sambal* does not function simply as an atmospheric detail or as a marker of local flavor. It becomes a sign around which domestic boundaries, emotional attachments, and social duties are organized. Household order is not presented as a rigid structure imposed from outside the family. Rather, it gains authority through repeated practices, recognizable tastes, and familiar objects that appear too ordinary, too intimate, to be questioned. In this respect, Barthesian criticism offers a productive way to read Indonesian domestic fiction, because it reveals how culinary objects may normalize ideas of family, wifeness, and legitimate intimacy without stating them as doctrine. For literary analysis, this matters because modest domestic scenes often carry larger systems of value. Appetite, habit, and affection do ideological work. Sambal, therefore, becomes an edible sign in which attachment, moral judgment, and social belonging are compressed (Barthes, 1972; Barthes,

2012).

Sign gains its power through repeated use, limited circulation, and characters' capacity to read their meaning. In *Sambal Keluarga*, *sambal* returns every morning as part of the family's breakfast ritual. It receives various names, but its position at the center of domestic life does not change. Those names gather different emotional responses around one shared object, while preserving the myth of a common family taste code. In *Sambal di Ranjang*, repetition produces a different effect. *Sambal* is served on the bed within a nightly marital routine, so culinary service becomes tied to erotic access and conjugal duty. Barthes helps explain this movement: denotation grounds *sambal* in its material form; connotation attaches affect and desire to it; myth makes the resulting domestic arrangement appear natural. A lexia-based reading further shows that small narrative details (a delayed cobek, a jar of *sambal*, a splash of ketchup, and a hotel-room tableau) are not incidental. Each becomes a moment in which the stability of domestic code is exposed, tested, or broken (Barthes, 1974; Wilujeng et al., 2021).

Gastrocritical shift food from background realism to the center of narrative world-making. In both stories, *sambal* does not simply accompany emotion; it organizes memory, labor, desire, and aspiration. When food is read as a social text, domesticity appears not as a natural emotional sphere but as a material arrangement shaped by ingredients, utensils, recipes, and acts of serving. This is significant for Indonesian literary criticism, where nation, religion, class, and gender often receive more attention than everyday culinary forms through which these forces enter intimate life. A modest condiment, therefore, can preserve family temporality in *Sambal Keluarga* and expose the instability of conjugal intimacy in *Sambal di Ranjang* (Fischler, 1988; Lawson Welsh, 2018; Apriyani & Yuli, 2025). The difference lies in circulation. In Puthut's story, *sambal* gains value through repetition within a restricted family circuit; familiarity intensifies affect because the same taste belongs to the same people and the same morning rhythm. In Purwanti's story, *sambal* is produced through disciplined foodwork and becomes contested once it acquires exchange value beyond marriage. Husband's possessiveness is erotic and economic: he seeks to monopolize wife's labor and the prestige of her culinary skill. Restaurant proposal becomes explosive because it moves feminized domestic food into public value, revealing patriarchal control as restriction rather than care (Hollows, 2003; Meah, 2014; Rodney et al., 2017).

Eating together is never neutral. In both stories, commensality operates as a relational technology that sorts bodies, feelings, and status. Family breakfast in *Sambal Keluarga* constructs belonging through routine co-presence, yet that belonging depends on tacit thresholds of entry.

The bedside meal in *Sambal di Ranjang* intensifies intimacy by narrowing participation to an exclusive, gendered couple form. Domestic meal-sharing can therefore sustain attachment while concealing domination. Eating scenes are analytically useful because they dramatize inclusion and exclusion without naming them directly. Table, kitchen, bed, and hotel room each have different rules of access; shared food becomes a mechanism for drawing social lines within intimacy itself (Giacoman, 2016; Jonsson et al., 2021).

Commensal structures arise from patterned control over co-eaters, setting, and circulation. Breakfast table in Puthut's story permits expansion only after proof of compatibility; lovers are tested, and in-laws are evaluated. Bed in Purwanti's story collapses meal-sharing into conjugal exclusivity and makes service part of desire. Husband's later repetition of that scene with other women shows that the regime was never reciprocal. It rested on asymmetrical control over access and meaning. Recent commensality research is useful here because it treats meal-sharing as variable, rule-bound, and historically situated, not uniformly harmonious. Two stories confirm that shared eating is structured by boundaries before it signifies closeness (Scander et al., 2021a, 2021b; Le Moal et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study reads *sambal* in *Sambal Keluarga* and *Sambal di Ranjang* as more than a culinary garnish. It is an edible sign through which domestic intimacy is made, disciplined, and disputed in its smallest domestic forms. In Puthut's story, sambal anchors breakfast, preserves family memory, and separates insiders from outsiders. In Tenni Purwanti's story, it enters a conjugal economy of service, erotic desire, and possession, before becoming a ground for female refusal and economic self-assertion. The point is clear: ordinary food can perform dense ideological work, quietly but firmly. Fictional domesticity becomes sharper when read through repeated objects, not only explicit statements. *Sambal* shows that belonging is prepared, repeated, and policed as well (Barthes, 1972; Giacoman, 2016).

Barthesian semiology, gastrocriticism, and commensality together explain how food signifies, circulates, and structures relations. This study connects second-order signification with food studies and theories of eating together. It pairs Lexia-based close reading with comparative matrices, making interpretation explicit without reducing textual complexity. In terms of context, this study positions a familiar Indonesian condiment as an analytical entry point for examining

domestic myth, gendered labor, and symbolic boundary-making. Even so, its scope remains limited. It examines only two short stories, so it cannot map culinary symbolism across Indonesian literature. Future work could extend the corpus to novels, digital fiction, films, or regional food narratives, and combine textual analysis with reader studies or domestic ethnography to test sambal's symbolic stability across media and everyday food cultures while keeping attention on historical change and local practice (Lawson Welsh, 2018; Jonsson et al., 2021; Pereira-Castro et al., 2022; Oren et al., 2024).

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