



Negotiating Belonging through Food: *Sambal*, Commensality, and Insider-Outsider Relations in Puthut E.A.'s *Sambal Keluarga*

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Abstract:

This article examines how food mediates belonging in Puthut E.A.'s short story, *Sambal Keluarga*. This study asks how sambal and the breakfast ritual are constructed as a commensal code that produces collective family identity and how presence, absence, and mode of consuming sambal operate as a form of domestic hospitality that marks acceptance, deferred acceptance, or distance toward outsiders. This study employs a qualitative interpretive design combining close reading with qualitative content analysis. Primary data consist of meal scenes, naming practices, and dialogic moments in a short story, which are organized into thematic clusters and read through gastrocriticism, commensality theory, domestic hospitality, and symbolic boundary-making. This research finds that sambal functions not as a supplementary condiment but as the family's central ritual object. Its recurrent presence at breakfast stabilizes affective continuity and validates collective identity, while its disappearance in the presence of guests signals the household's strategic withholding of intimate access. Climactic scene involving Dian further shows that belonging is negotiated not only through access to the dish but also through conformity to the family's taste code. This article lies in bringing commensality-centered gastrocriticism into conversation with Indonesian short fiction and demonstrating that ordinary culinary gestures can become precise literary mechanisms for staging insider-outsider relations.

Keywords: gastrocriticism; commensality; domestic hospitality; symbolic boundaries; *Sambal Keluarga*, Puthut EA

Abstrak:



Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana makanan menjadi media penerimaan (serta penolakan) dalam cerpen *Sambal Keluarga* karya Puthut E. A.. Kajian ini merumuskan penelitian dengan mengajukan dua pertanyaan pokok: pertama, bagaimana sambal dan ritual sarapan dikonstruksikan sebagai kode komensal yang menghasilkan identitas kolektif keluarga; kedua, bagaimana kehadiran, ketiadaan, dan cara mengonsumsi sambal beroperasi sebagai bentuk hospitalitas domestik yang menandai penerimaan, penangguhan, atau jarak terhadap pihak luar. Penelitian ini menggunakan rancangan interpretatif kualitatif yang memadukan pembacaan intens dengan analisis isi kualitatif. Data utama penelitian berupa adegan-adegan makan, praktik penamaan, dan momen-momen dialogis dalam cerpen yang diorganisasikan ke dalam gugus-gugus tematik dan dibaca melalui gastrokrisisme, teori komensalitas, hospitalitas domestik, serta pembentukan batas simbolik. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa sambal berfungsi bukan sebagai pelengkap hidangan semata melainkan sebagai objek ritual sentral keluarga. Kehadirannya yang berulang ketika sarapan menstabilkan kesinambungan afektif dan meneguhkan identitas kolektif sedangkan ketidakhadirannya di hadapan tamu menandai strategi rumah tangga dalam menahan akses keintiman. Adegan klimaks yang melibatkan Dian semakin memperlihatkan bahwa keberterimaan dinegosiasikan bukan hanya melalui akses terhadap hidangan melainkan juga melalui kesesuaian dengan kode selera keluarga. Orisinalitas artikel ini terletak pada upayanya mempertemukan gastrokrisisme yang berpusat pada komensalitas dengan cerpen Indonesia serta menunjukkan bahwa gestur kuliner sehari-hari dapat menjadi mekanisme sastra presisi untuk memanggungkan relasi antara orang dalam dan orang luar.

Kata kunci: gastrokrisisme; komensalitas; hospitalitas domestik; batas simbolik; *Sambal Keluarga*, Puthut EA

INTRODUCTION

In domestic life, food is never only a matter of bodily need. Around the dining table, it quietly arranges who is close, who holds authority, who is familiar, and who remains outside. Eating together, then, is not a neutral routine around the table. Studies of commensality show that shared meals give belonging a social form: who is invited to sit, when people gather, how they interact, and how far they recognize one another as part of the same circle (Giacoman, 2016; Scander et al., 2021). Studies of family meals likewise link shared eating to routine, emotional regulation, and the reproduction of family identity (Berge et al., 2013; Brannen et al., 2013). A recurrent dish can therefore condense the question of domestic membership. Fiction matters here because it registers silent meanings carried by ordinary food practices. In Puthut E.A.'s (2006) short story, sambal is not a supplementary condiment but the family's "main menu"; its presence or disappearance at breakfast indexes inclusion, distance, and relational uncertainty.

Recent studies offer useful but still separate conversations. Gastrocritical studies argue that literary food scenes encode power, desire, memory, and identity, not decorative realism alone (Tompkins, 2005; Ajulu-Okungu, 2015). Sociological and anthropological studies of commensality show that meals create cohesion and tension at once: eating together marks group membership while regulating access, manners, and taste (Douglas, 1972; Yates & Warde, 2017). Work on domestic hospitality further stresses that households welcome outsiders selectively, often



through controlled food sharing rather than unconditional openness (Warde et al., 2020). Yet Indonesian literary gastronomy remains relatively limited, and existing studies rarely examine how one recurrent food item structures insider-outsider relations inside the intimate family sphere (Damayanti & Ambarwati, 2024; Nugraha, 2021). Underexplored, then, is the intersection of gastrocriticism, commensality, and domestic hospitality in a short fictional text centered on a family condiment.

Sambal Keluarga addresses this gap by making *sambal* the center of familial togetherness and domestic selection. The dish does not appear as an ordinary side item; it anchors breakfast, where interaction, emotion, and collective identity are quietly formed. Repetition turns the dining table into a space of affective continuity, and shared attachment to sambal produces a code most fully legible to insiders. Its absence, especially when guests stay in the house, marks a boundary between family members and outsiders. Its presence may signal acceptance, but not complete acceptance. Dian's climactic encounter clarifies this logic. She is allowed to taste the family's sambal, yet her addition of sweet soy sauce unsettles the scene. Dian's gesture is small but decisive: belonging depends not only on access to the dish, but also on the proper mode of consuming it. This article examines sambal as a commensal code through which belonging is produced, tested, and suspended.

This article examines how Puthut's story turns *sambal* and breakfast into a commensal code for negotiating belonging. This study asks how *sambal* and breakfast ritual produce collective family identity, and how *sambal* presence, absence, and mode of consumption enact domestic hospitality by marking acceptance, deferred acceptance, or distance from outsiders. *Sambal Keluarga* text leaves this logic implicit; a qualitative literary method is required. The analysis combines close reading with qualitative content analysis to identify recurring scenes, naming practices, affective responses, and meal situations, then interprets them through gastrocriticism, commensality theory, symbolic boundary-making, and hospitality studies (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This article argues that sambal is not a culinary accessory but a code that turns breakfast into a ritual of affiliation, validation, and selection. Its recurrence anchors rhythm, vocabulary, and affect; its disappearance before guests makes hospitality conditional; its offering to a romantic partner keeps belonging unresolved when her eating reveals difference. Taste becomes social evidence. This reading shows how literary food practices disclose household power, intimacy, and symbolic boundaries more subtly than explicit statements (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Weber-Lawson, 2024).



LITERATURE REVIEW

Gastrocriticism offers this article's broad conceptual frame by treating food in literature as a point where material practice and symbolic meaning meet. Literary food studies show that narrative eating organizes otherness, desire, embodiment, and cultural hierarchy, making food a productive entry into textual politics (Tompkins, 2005). Later work extends this view by reading food scenes as social acts that mediate power, memory, and affiliation, especially when eating recurs as a domestic routine (Ajulu-Okungu, 2015). Within this frame, commensality matters because it shifts analysis from the dish itself to the structured event of eating together: who participates, where, when, under what rules, with what emotional tone, and with what effects of recognition (Giacoman, 2016; Scander et al., 2021). The key dimensions (participants, place, temporality, interaction, and symbolism) explain how meals sustain solidarity while enforcing norms (Sobal & Nelson, 2003; van der Heijden & Wiggins, 2025). For *Sambal Keluarga*, this approach clarifies sambal not only as a taste or recipe but as a repeated breakfast event that codes memory, etiquette, and belonging.

Domestic hospitality sharpens study by showing how households regulate outsiders' entry. Rather than pure generosity, it is a practical arrangement shaped by asymmetry, reciprocity, labor, and control (Warde et al., 2020). In literary terms, hospitality marks thresholds: who enters the home, sits at the table, receives certain dishes, or remains outside intimate routines. Food is central because it materializes the host's stance. A dish may include, delay, or limit inclusion by controlling access to a family's most private culinary code. This lens is crucial for *Sambal Keluarga*, where visitors are welcomed physically but not always admitted to breakfast intimacy. Indicators such as invitation, seating, menu choice, timing, labor, conversational tone, and participation in household routine reveal conditional hospitality (Warde et al., 2020). Since taste in new domestic relationships involves accommodation and resistance (Bove et al., 2003; Kemmer et al., 1998), acceptance appears gradual, partial, and negotiated.

The notion of food as code provides the article's third framework. Douglas's foundational claim remains useful because it shows that meals communicate hierarchy, boundary, order, and social classification, not hunger alone (Douglas, 1972). Later studies of taste and distinction confirm that food preferences act as symbolic markers through which groups recognize themselves and differentiate others (Wills et al., 2011; Oncini, 2019). A recurrent family dish, then, is also a sign system: name, timing, serving style, and proper mode of consumption convey norms



of belonging. Boundary scholars clarify this process by distinguishing insider-outsider lines from practices that enact, negotiate, or soften them (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). In food practice, such boundaries appear through menu differences, ritual repetition, approved taste combinations, and judgments about proper eating (Atkinson, 2021; Yalvaç & Karademir Hazır, 2021). Thus, in *Sambal Keluarga*, sambal becomes both edible and legible: a shared condiment, a domestic language, and a social test of loyalty, familiarity, and distance.

METHOD

This study takes Puthut's short story, *Sambal Keluarga*, first published in 2006 in *Kompas*. The primary textual narrative repeatedly gathers meaning around one domestic object, sambal, and one recurring event, breakfast, making it suitable for focused qualitative analysis. The story of *sambal* is not treated as transparent evidence of empirical family life, but as a crafted cultural representation in which scenes, repetitions, speech acts, and meal arrangements are patterned. This material evidence includes descriptions of sambal, breakfast routines, guest presence, family responses, and Dian's climactic scene, allowing attention to how literary form organizes social meaning within a compact domestic narrative (Puthut, 2006). This study uses a qualitative interpretive design that combines single-text case study logic, close reading, and qualitative content analysis. This design fits a text whose social logic appears through symbolic repetition, affective cues, and implicit household rules rather than measurable variables (Bengtsson, 2016; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Thus, this story is read neither as sociology nor formalism alone, but as a literary case where textual form and social meaning carefully illuminate each other through theoretically guided textual interpretation.

This article uses a text-centered but theoretically grounded source design. Its primary source is *Sambal Keluarga*, including narrative description, direct speech, naming practices, and meal scenes. Its secondary sources are journal articles and foundational works on gastrocriticism, commensality, domestic hospitality, family meals, taste, and symbolic boundaries, selected for their relevance to food-related sociality, household hospitality, and food as code, taste, and boundary-making. These sources frame interpretation rather than decorate the background, enabling the story's internal patterns to be read against established debates (Douglas, 1972; Giacoman, 2016; Warde et al., 2020). Data were gathered through iterative desk review and repeated close reading. Text was read several times to identify passages linking sambal to routine,



emotion, secrecy, guest management, and belonging. Excerpts were extracted, grouped, and coded through a movement from open noticing to focused coding: early readings marked references to sambal and breakfast, while later readings traced their narrative functions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Three clusters resulted: sambal as a commensal ritual, domestic hospitality, and a symbolic family boundary. Analysis then followed reduction, display, and verification. Relevant passages were narrowed, arranged in thematic tables with page references and analytic functions, and checked against the full narrative context to prevent overreading (Miles et al., 2014; Bengtsson, 2016). Thus, qualitative content analysis identifies patterns, while interpretive reading explains how repetition, contrast, and affect generate literary meaning within shifting domestic scenes and carefully staged meal situations.

RESULT

From the beginning, Puthut's story frames *sambal* as more than a side dish, "*Sambal itu bukan menu tambahan atau menu penyempurna. Ia merupakan menu utama*" [This sambal is not an additional or complementary menu. It is the main menu (Puthut, 2006). This status is reinforced when breakfast is described as "*sebuah prosesi*" and *sambal* as "*uba-rampe yang tidak bisa digantikan*" [an indispensable ritual element]. A third excerpt moves meaning beyond taste: the breakfast menu is "*penuh dengan isyarat dan petanda yang lembut*" [full of soft signals and signs] (Puthut, 2006). Together, these passages mark three linked levels of significance: sambal as a central dish, breakfast as a ritual, and meal as coded family language. The narrative therefore, treats food not as a sensory object alone, but as a repeated, timed, and collectively recognized practice, consistent with commensality theory (Douglas, 1972; Giacomani, 2016). Table 1 presents the first evidence cluster.

Table 1. *Sambal* as Commensal Ritual in *Sambal Keluarga*

Textual Excerpt	Analytical Function
" <i>Sambal itu bukan menu tambahan atau menu penyempurna. Ia merupakan menu utama.</i> " [The sambal was not an additional dish or a mere complement. It was the main dish.]	Positions sambal as the meal's ritual center rather than a side dish.
" <i>Sarapan pagi bagi kami adalah sebuah prosesi ... Sambal adalah uba-rampe yang tidak bisa digantikan oleh apa pun.</i> "	Defines breakfast as a repeated ceremonial event anchored by sambal.



[For us, breakfast was a procession ... Sambal was an indispensable ritual element, one that could not be replaced by anything.]	
<p>"Menu makan pagi ... penuh dengan isyarat dan petanda yang lembut bagi kami sekeluarga."</p> <p>[breakfast menu ... was filled with subtle signals and signs for all of us as a family.]</p>	Shows meal as a semiotic network through which family members read each other.

Table 1 shows a pattern of progressive social thickening. *Sambal* first appears as a matter of taste, yet each later description gives it greater relational weight. The repeated breakfast scene is crucial. Although the family eats three times a day, the narrator stresses that only in the morning do they truly "meet" as a family (Puthut, 2006). This temporal focus turns breakfast into a privileged site of recognition. Story extends logic through naming: family members variously call the dish "*sambal korek*", "*sambal galak*", "*sambal bahagia*", "*sambal malas*", and "*sambal asal*", showing how one object holds multiple intimate meanings. These different names do not fragment family identity; they strengthen it by locating *sambal* within a shared routine. The meal is thus polyvocal, not uniform, yet still collectively owned. This pattern supports studies showing that commensality depends not only on co-presence but also on repeated interactional scripts through which group identity is performed and recognized (Sobal & Nelson, 2003; Scander et al., 2021).

Puthut's story builds commensality by joining repetition with difference. Repetition gives family stability: the same *sambal* returns, the same breakfast rhythm recurs, and the same expectations shape morning affect. Difference remains, but it is absorbed into the domestic order. Each family member names *sambal* differently, and each responds differently when it is absent, yet these variations still operate within a shared familial frame. *Sambal* therefore, becomes a centripetal food sign: it draws diverse subject positions back into one family orbit. Later description of breakfast as "ritual validation" after family members live apart strengthens this reading, since the meal renews not only memory but also membership (Puthut, 2006). From a gastrocritical perspective, the story shows that commensality is more than eating together. It is a ritual arrangement of taste, time, and affect through which collective identity is produced, renewed, and recognized in ordinary domestic life (Ajulu-Okungu, 2015; Yates & Warde, 2017).

The second evidence cluster focuses on domestic hospitality. This clearest passage explains that when guests stay in the house, the family's *sambal* "*bersembunyi, lenyap dari meja makan kami*", as if silently signaling, "*Sekarang sedang ada orang lain*" [If guests stay over ... the menu



hides, disappearing from our table, as if sending the message that someone else is present] (Puthut, 2006). This rule, however, has an exception. Yu Sumi, long-serving kitchen helper, knows the secret and is recognized as "*bagian dari kami*" [part of us]. Romantic partners occupy a more evaluative position. Ayunda's future husband is described as having "*lolos dari pedas sambal maut*" [passed the deadly sambal test], while Dian receives sambal from her mother in a climactic breakfast scene (Puthut, 2006). These examples show that hospitality is not automatic. It is graded, managed, and contingent (Warde et al., 2020).

Table 2. *Sambal* and Staging of Domestic Hospitality

Textual Excerpt	Analytical Function
<p>"Kalau ada tamu menginap ... menu itu bersembunyi, lenyap dari meja makan kami."</p> <p>[Whenever guests stayed over ... that dish would withdraw, disappearing from our dining table.]</p>	Signals the household's withholding of its most intimate food code in the presence of guests.
<p>"Hanya ada satu orang ... Yu Sumi ... ia adalah bagian dari kami."</p> <p>[There was only one person ... Yu Sumi ... she was part of us.]</p>	Marks earned inclusion through long-term domestic participation rather than biology alone.
<p>"Mas Rudi ... lolos dari pedas sambal maut"; "Mbak Dian, sambal ... ini sambal keluarga kami."</p> <p>[Mas Rudi ... had passed the deadly sambal test; Mbak Dian, <i>sambal</i> ... this is our family sambal.]</p>	Stages of conditional admission of romantic partners through food.

Note. Data show that hospitality is managed through menu presence, sequence, and selective access.

Table 2 shows a clear progression from withholding to controlled admission. Ordinary guests first cause *sambal* to disappear; the family protects its intimate breakfast code when outsiders enter the house. Yu Sumi then occupies a liminal yet trusted position. She is not a biological family member, but her long involvement in domestic labor grants her access to family secrets. Romantic partners face a sharper threshold. Earlier absences of sambal create anxiety because they suggest failed entry into familial intimacy, while its later serving signals provisional acceptance. These shifts are never expressed as formal judgments. They are staged through menu management. Family does not declare who belongs and who does not. It decides whether an intimate dish appears, for whom, and at what moment.

Hospitality is therefore enacted through controlled access to food. This pattern supports a study that defines domestic hospitality as a selective practice combining welcome, control, and



boundary maintenance (Bove et al., 2003; Warde et al., 2020). This pattern matters because the story presents hospitality as threshold work. Outsiders may sleep in the house, speak warmly with family, and share breakfast, but access to the family's most symbolic food remains controlled and delayed.

Hospitality is therefore neither rejection nor open generosity. It is a calibrated test of fit. Yu Sumi's case shows that kinship is socially produced, not only biologically given: long participation in domestic food rituals can make a helper "one of us." By contrast, scenes with lovers show that romantic closeness does not automatically become familial belonging. This distinction shifts hospitality from abstract ethics to ordinary household practice. Family manages its threshold through food, especially through the timing of *sambal's* presence or absence. Such representation supports the view that domestic hospitality is materially enacted and emotionally regulated, with meals as one of its most precise instruments (Marshall, 2005; Le Moal, 2024). In the story, *sambal* becomes the household's gatekeeping medium.

Table 3, then, organizes the third body of textual evidence, which concerns food as a code and as a marker of symbolic boundaries within the family. The opening excerpt is significant because the narrator characterizes the breakfast menu as "*penuh dengan isyarat dan petanda yang lembut*" [full of gentle signs and signals] (Puthut, 2006). Second appears when mother formally introduces dish to Dian: "*Mbak Dian, sambal ... ini sambal keluarga kami*" [This is our family's sambal] (Puthut, 2006). Third, and most decisive, occurs after Dian accepts sambal and says, "*Tapi saya paling suka kalau ditambah kecap*" [But I like it best with sweet soy sauce added], leaving the room silent (Puthut, 2006). This sequence is clear: family code is identified, offered, and then disturbed by a minor culinary alteration. Table 3, therefore, shows that symbolic boundaries depend not only on access to food but also on expected ways of consuming it after access is granted (Douglas, 1972; Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

Table 3. Food as Code and Symbolic Family Boundary

Textual Excerpt	Analytical Function
"Sarapan pagi adalah ritual validasi atas diri kami berdua." [Breakfast was a ritual of validation for two of us.]	Frames breakfast as a periodic re-registration of family membership.
"Mbak Dian, sambal ... ini sambal keluarga kami." [Mbak Dian, this sambal ... is our family's sambal.]	Makes family code explicit at the moment of provisional inclusion.



"Tapi saya paling suka kalau ditambah kecap."

[But I like it best when sweet soy sauce is added.]

Shows that the boundary persists through norms governing proper consumption.

Note. Boundary-making in story is enacted through both access to *sambal* and judgments about how it should be eaten.

Table 3 shows boundary negotiation, not simple inclusion or exclusion. At first, the story presents *sambal* as a private code learned through repeated participation in family life. Code is then offered to Dian in a scene that resembles initiation, supported by the sister's enthusiasm and the narrator's visible relief (Puthut, 2006). For a moment, sharing seems successful. Yet Dian's addition of *kecap* shifts the scene from acceptance to uncertainty. No one rebukes her directly; parents smile and return to light conversation. Even so, collective silence matters. It signals that a meaningful norm has been disturbed, or at least reinterpreted. This is not a scene of blunt rejection. It shows instead that access to family dishes does not automatically produce shared taste practice. This boundary remains flexible, but still active, in line with studies showing that food distinctions often persist through everyday judgments about combinations, manners, and appropriateness (Oncini, 2019; Atkinson, 2021).

Why does a small act of adding *kecap* matter so much? Because the story has already made *sambal* an intimate semiotic object, authorized by repetition and tacit agreement. Once a dish functions as family code, changing it is no longer mere seasoning; it is an act of interpretation. Dian's claim that she often makes a similar *sambal* for her grandfather first connects her to family through intergenerational familiarity. Yet her addition of *kecap* both confirms similarity and exposes difference. This moment sharpens the article's central argument: belonging is negotiated through food, not only through invitation, but also through embodied practice. The family's silence shows that symbolic boundaries can persist even within apparent inclusion. From a gastrocritical perspective, this scene reveals how literary texts give ordinary eating gestures exceptional social force. Story, therefore, ends not with closure, but with suspended belonging: acceptance remains possible, yet still depends on further negotiation of taste, intimacy, and domestic code (Weber-Lawson, 2024; Reddy & van Dam, 2020).

DISCUSSION

Commensality first shows that the story defines family beyond shared residence. In *Sambal Keluarga*, breakfast is more than a repeated household event; it is a practice through which family identity becomes recognizable again and again. Shared *sambal* serves as a ritual anchor, organizing



memory, expectation, and emotional adjustment. Its integrative force, however, is not sentimental. Family cohesion is performed through repetition, not simply assumed as given. These findings support research that views commensality as social glue produced by coordinated time, participation, and interaction, not by food intake alone (Giacoman, 2016; Yates & Warde, 2017). Literary analysis, therefore, gains a more precise language for explaining how ordinary meals reproduce collective identity and sustain family continuity.

Commensal structure gains force because repetition converts taste into social memory. Same *sambal*, morning rhythm, and patterned responses to absence settle into a practical grammar of belonging. Since this grammar is habitual, insiders rarely need to explain it. Story's multiple names for *sambal* make this clear: variation does not weaken unity because it remains inside a shared familial frame. This also explains why breakfast still works as validation after children live apart. What returns through the meal is not only flavor, but a recognizable relation to others. This pattern supports theories that meals matter because they join embodied practice with symbolic recognition (Douglas, 1972; van der Heijden & Wiggins, 2025). Repetition gives taste its social durability.

Hospitality in the story shows that domestic welcome is layered rather than absolute. Guests may enter the house, but the family's signature *sambal* can still vanish from the table. This withholding does not signal direct hostility. It protects the household's intimate code until the outsider's position becomes clear. By staging this process through everyday meal arrangements, the story challenges the assumption that hospitality always means unconditional generosity. Its key insight is that households negotiate openness alongside self-protection. Acceptance, therefore, emerges gradually and conditionally. This matters analytically because the story identifies food as a central medium for dramatizing threshold management in literary form (Warde et al., 2020; Marshall, 2005). Domestic welcome becomes relationally selective.

Graded hospitality arises because households already have established rhythms of labor, taste, and secrecy. Outsiders do not enter a neutral space; they enter a patterned domestic order. Yu Sumi's exception shows that long-term reproductive labor can grant access more effectively than formal status. By contrast, lovers may be emotionally close yet remain uninitiated, because intimate access depends on alignment with household practice, not affection alone. The logic is practical and temporal: repeated participation builds trust, while unfamiliarity postpones it. This pattern aligns with research showing that household food practices mediate negotiation and adaptation when new actors enter established domestic systems (Bove et al., 2003; Kemmer et al.,



1998). Admission is produced by time, not sentiment alone.

The symbolic boundary carries particular weight for literary interpretation. Dian scene shows that inclusion is not completed by invitation, nor even by access to a valued dish. Belonging also requires an accepted mode of embodied practice. When Dian adds *kecap* to sambal, the family's silence indicates that a boundary can persist within an apparently successful welcome. This scene reveals how fragile symbolic inclusion can be: entry to the table does not cancel normative expectations. This shifts gastrocritical analysis from fixed food symbolism to the politics of use. This issue is not only what food signifies, but how it must be handled to remain intelligible within a social code (Oncini, 2019; Weber-Lawson, 2024). Inclusion, therefore, remains provisional.

This tension emerges because food boundaries are sustained by tacit judgments that seem minor to outsiders but carry weight within the group. Family does not explain its code to Dian beforehand, nor does anyone openly correct her after the *kecap* incident. Silence is precisely what makes the scene powerful. It shows that symbolic boundaries often work through hesitation, discomfort, and gentle repair rather than explicit prohibition. This pattern aligns with a study on taste and distinction, which argues that belonging is often negotiated through everyday preferences and judgments of appropriateness, not formal rules alone (Atkinson, 2021; Wills et al., 2011). Because food condenses memory, familiarity, and normativity, even a slight modification can signal a meaningful difference in affiliation. Small gestures acquire large social force.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *Sambal Keluarga* (2006) makes food the primary medium through which belonging is sensed, tested, and renegotiated. Its central finding is that *sambal* operates not as an ordinary condiment but as a commensal code. Through recurring breakfast scenes, the story transforms a simple dish into a ritual anchor that sustains family identity, emotional recognition, and intergenerational continuity. Yet the narrative also shows that belonging cannot be secured by physical presence alone. When sambal disappears during overnight visits and reappears only for selected outsiders, domestic hospitality emerges as a graduated threshold, not an unrestricted welcome. Climactic Dian scene sharpens this logic. Access to family dish does not ensure full symbolic inclusion, because acceptance also depends on embodied practice: how the dish is eaten, modified, and recognized within the family's code.



This article, therefore, shows how literary representations of ordinary meals can reveal quiet social mechanisms through which intimacy, distance, and exclusion are organized across modest routines of everyday household interaction and affective care.

This research contributes to literary studies in three ways. First, it extends gastrocriticism by combining commensality, domestic hospitality, and symbolic boundary-making within one framework for reading Indonesian short fiction. This integration shifts food-centered analysis from static symbolism to meals as structured social events, where participation, timing, access, and taste become readable forms of social ordering. Second, it shows that close reading can work with qualitative content analysis and tabulated excerpt displays, allowing literary evidence to be organized systematically without losing interpretive subtlety. Third, it foregrounds an Indonesian short story rarely examined through this conceptual constellation and demonstrates that a modest domestic narrative can generate significant insight into kinship, taste, and insider-outsider relations. This study, however, examines one short story and cannot represent all Indonesian literary treatments of food, family, or hospitality. The text-centered design also leaves aside reception history, authorial poetics, and wider culinary traditions across regions, genres, and periods. Further research could deepen the gender dimension of cooking, serving, and affective maintenance, or compare *Sambal Keluarga* with other Indonesian short stories, novels, and films in which food mediates domestic thresholds. Comparative and ethnographic expansion would clarify whether the symbolic logic identified here is singular, recurrent, or historically changing across contemporary Indonesian cultural texts and among different social formations in Indonesia today.

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