

Gastro-literary Motifs in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: Voices of Resistance and Ethnicity

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Abstract: Valued not only for its nutritional value or gastronomical pleasure, food, its preparation and its consumption have been an important marker of human culture and its evolution. Food practices are shaped by geo-cultural practices, social rules and hierarchies, influx of other food cultures and its ethnic core. To a great extent, an individual/community's identity is shaped by what they consume. Food becomes a cultural reservoir through which a community or an individual can relate to past while being conscious of its absorption of other systems over time. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* tells the story of the troubled childhood and adulthood of the twins Rahel and Estha in the backdrop of Kerala in 1960s and 1970s. She shows how the ethnic culture of Kerala transforms through the arrival of Western religion and culture, British colonization, cosmopolitanism and globalization, and is affected by dislocation, fragmentation and hybridity. Food becomes a functional metaphor for this cultural journey that blends the East with the West, modernity with ethnicity, and the individual with the community. The present paper focusses upon how culinary art works as a cultural component and a marker of the evolution of culture. It also aims to trace how it becomes a component of individual identity and how it helps an individual to reconnect with his/her past(s) and to redefine his/her ethnicity.

Keywords: Culture, food, ethnicity, resistance, hybridity, identity.

In the elitist and materialistic paradigms, food or cuisine, so to say, has usually been disregarded as just another necessity of survival as it provides limited sensory pleasure, caters to the body and it has a transitory existence, with reference to digestion and the biological processes involved thereafter. Studies on popular culture and socio-philosophical significance of everyday existence have brought the plate and the palate within literary focus. "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are" Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's assertion in his *Physiologie du Gout* encapsulates how the culinary choices of an individual or a group, smallest to largest, become a decisive marker of their socio-cultural existence, identity, heritage, ethnicity, simultaneously containing within itself the cultural evolution of that individual or community, not excluding geo-political history involved therein. From being regarded as a marker of appetite, carnal desires and a sin like gluttony, food has become a trope of culture, ethnicity, resistance and subjectivity.

Along with its obvious necessity for the survival and sustenance of humanity, food is also a cultural repository, a bond that connects communities together, becoming a shared space of cultural history that functions across the fragmentation of society. It even becomes the mode of communication between different communities sharing cultural past(s). Literature, being the

reflection of life, regularly projected food as a significant symbol. Actually, food has functioned as a symbol that has the power that can retain and transmit culture across space and time. The earliest most commonly circulated book *Bible* has a good number of gastro-literary representations. God is metaphorised as the bread of life and the water turns to wine at Cana, the Last Supper. We also have that part where the venison buys the right of the eldest son in the tale of Jacob and Esau. When we accept the intricate involvement of food with individual and cultural memory, question of identity and ethnicity, social archetypes, retention of hierarchical values, and the conflicts of the individual and the community, it is used for illustration of human condition. The formal idea of the table in British culture involves hierarchy, social position and it necessitates accurate observation of manners and etiquette. The Victorian society was quite strict and punctilious about it, as enumerated in the Victorian manner books. Lewis Carroll in his *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, parodies the stringent social norms in the tea party hosted by Mad Hatter. This party is a complete shamble. Alice arrives uninvited, a stranger, yet she takes 'a large arm-chair at one end of the table' (Carroll 96), getting the position of eminence. The Dormouse constantly sleeps on the table while Mad Hatter and March Hare use him as elbow support. The disorder of this table and the possibility of adulteration of food satirises the Victorian obsession with order and propriety through the metaphor of food and associate practices.

In the post-colonial perspective, food becomes symbolically burdened with questions of ethnicity, memory and cultural past. It often becomes a metaphor of existence and an overarching pattern of identity. In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai, the narrator-protagonist, is gifted with acute sensory perceptions. Saleem experiences epiphanic remembrance through food, interlacing issues of postcolonial existence with preservation of ethnic identity. What the tea-soaked madeleine does in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Mary's Chutney does that for Saleem, creating a portal to the lost time, transcending mere nostalgia. Rushdie structures his novel through culinary production. Saleem structures his tale/history preserving them in thirty jars of special pickle, each corresponding to one chapter of his fictional autobiography. A pickle itself is a poignant symbol as the purpose of a pickle is to preserve, preserving the components for a long time, simultaneously alternating the taste and nature of the ingredients to a certain extent creating a flavour that's original yet a composite of all that went into it. As Saleem assures that his chapters 'possess the authentic taste of truth', but, 'a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste, is a small matter, surely?' (Rushdie 644). Precisely that's why Rushdie christens Saleem's narration of history as 'chutnification', another culinary metaphor that underlines this twin aspect of preservation and adaptation. Continuing on this gastro-literary narrative and the trope of history, Saleem initially plans to cast his tale in thirty jars/chapters, but he adds one more empty jar to continue the tale because he realises that history has no closure but is a flowing narrative of human existence. Through the pickle metaphor that carries multiple flavour, Rushdie also effectively denounces the idea of homogeneity in India as a nation.

In post-colonial context, cuisine becomes a metaphor of culture, adaptation and authenticity, thereby incorporating critical aspects of identity, resistance and ethnicity. Arjun

Appadurai points in his essay 'How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India', how food and its consumption in India is loaded with versatile symbolic resonances and behavioural practices determining class, caste, religious differences, relating to all aspects of human existence. In fact, food is so integral to Indian life that *Ain-i-Akbari*, a book devoted exclusively to good administration, has a separate chapter on cuisine. On food culture in India, Appadurai comments,

Food in India is closely tied to the moral and social status of individuals and groups. Food taboos and prescriptions divide men from women, gods from humans, upper from lower castes, one sect from another. Eating together, whether as a family, a caste, or a village, is a carefully conducted exercise in the reproduction of intimacy. Exclusion of persons from eating events is a symbolically intense social signal of rank, of distance, or of enmity. (Appadurai, 10)

He highlights how in Indian society food is held as a medium of communication between the gods and the devotees or between men themselves. Food can never be upheld only for its nutritional values—it is neither morally nor morally neutral. People celebrate by having great feasts while people purge themselves of sins by fasting. While one or the other of these patterns is visible in all places, nowhere it is so richly embedded with moral, social, medical or soteriological implications than in traditional Hindu India, Appadurai asserts.

In the post-colonial context, food becomes a metaphor for the individual and the community to preserve the cultural heritage and ethnicity post the influx of colonial culture. Indian English fiction has regularly used food as a complex metaphor of post-colonial culture. Avtar Brah has argued about how food connects the past with present, tradition with modernity. Food has enabled the post-colonial writers to grapple with the issues of cultural identity, hybridity and displacement. Arundhati Roy, in her *The God of Small Things*, makes use of food to signify hierarchical differences, caste binaries, conflicts of power, and suppressed transgressive desires. Food is deeply embedded with cultural resonances, individual memory, community culture, and functionality of social interaction. *The God of Small Things* is set in Kerala, in the second half of twentieth century, with occasional shift to the Eastern part of the country. The story revolves around the troubled childhood of the fraternal twins Rahel and Estha whose lives are disrupted by the strict love laws of the casteist Kerala Society. Kerala has a strong indigenous culture whose culinary culture is marked by tapioca, pickles, spice, curry, appam, fish fries etc.

In the small world of Ayemenem, where Roy sets the complex story of Rahel and Estha, food also shows the nuances of the postcolonial culture, hybridity, love, politics, social rigidity and exclusion. Food intertwines the issues of gender, identity, historical trauma and resistance in the narrative. Roy synchronises food with personal lives of her protagonists and the socio-political changes in India. Food is so integral to the way of life here in Ayemenem that Roy describes the midget cook Kochu Maria as vinegar-hearted to convey the taciturn nature of the person. Her descriptions bring cuisine to life, appealing to what Appadurai calls 'vicarious pleasures of the literature of the senses' (Appadurai 1), as when she reminisces about "The smell of meat frying in coconut oil. The spitting and hissing of mustard seeds. The quick bitter

crunch of curry leaves.” (Roy 115). The sensory language sets the tone of narration as it shows how food becomes a conduit for the characters to connect with their past, and how the remembrance of the ethnic cuisine retains some of their cultural heritage in their fragmented, displaced existence.

Food or the practice of dining is a core sentiment of domesticity and family ties. It's believed that health and happiness of a family are reflected in its dining habits as reflected in the popular adage that a family that eats together, stays together. In the tense and traumatic journey of Ammu, Rahel and Estha, the love and tenderness they share is reflected in the way Ammu feeds them as Roy writes, “Ammu fed them with her hands, her fingers brushing their lips as if she was giving them her love, bite by bite” (Roy 157). But this simple domestic act has the potential to become an act of transgression and resistance. In the stringent hierarchical society of Kerala, caste barriers are very rigid. Scarred from an unhappy and troublesome marriage, Ammu, Rahel and Estha's mother, returns to Ayemenem and settles there. She secretly grows attached to Velutha, an untouchable who belongs to the servant class. Their intimacy is reflected in their sharing of meals. As Roy writes, “Velutha watched Ammu's mouth as she ate, and Ammu watched him as he ate. The intimacy of it was unbearable.” (Roy 229), it not only depicts their growing intimacy and emotional dependence on one another, it equally becomes an act of resistance. Apparently it enables Ammu to enact a small scene of happy domesticity that she could not experience during her short and troubled married life, but it also subverts the social prohibitions on people of higher castes sharing food with people from lower castes. Their act of eating becomes an act of social transgression because the servants and lower castes had to eat separately, as in “Velutha ate in the shadows, away from the others, his food cold and untouched.” (Roy 198).

Chocolate is another trope that encapsulates desire, social prohibition and transgression. It brings forth the sweetness of their secret affair and the social prohibitions against it, when Roy narrates, “The chocolate melted in her mouth as Velutha watched, and it tasted of things she could not have.” (Roy 233). A similar act of transgression is also found in the way Rahel and Estha steal pickles from the family factory. Their small act shows their desire for liberation from the tough times they were going through. With a troubled childhood that resulted from the separation of their parents, the censures imposed upon them in the Ayemenem house, and their marginalisation, the pickles give them the pleasure of denying the social sanctions, “The pickles bit back, stinging their tongues, a reminder of things left unsaid” (Roy 168).

Not only caste discriminations, food also signifies class differences. Caught eating with the servants, Rahel and Estha are chastised by Baby Kochamma, “You must never eat with them. You're not like them. You're above them” (Roy 72), underlining how food can become a social marker between the rich and the poor and every small subversive action can be regarded as an act of transgression. The advantageous location of the Ipe family in the social hierarchy and their prosperity are apparent from their culinary habits as well. They often travel to the city and eat in restaurants. Their fancy meals, containing cuisines like prawn curry or ice cream,

show off their social status and contrast with the simpler foods that the lower caste people are to eat for survival. The Ipe family's preference for such European foods like cakes or cold drinks also shows how the British rule has shaped the cultural identity of the natives, particularly among the learned elite class. The rough edges of cultural assimilation are succinctly pointed out through another food analogy when Rahel and Estha are having Coca-Cola and they feel that "The fizz of the Coke was like a foreign language on their tongues" (Roy 202). This shows how in a post-colonial culture the effects of colonialism penetrate simple acts of everyday life.

Food often works as a conduit between the past and present, bringing back personal memories interspersed with sensory images. When Ammu reflects upon her mother, it comes laced with memories of her cooking, symbolic of the close family ties Ammu had as a child and which she can't find anymore. She recalls, "Ammu remembered the smell of her mother's chicken curry. The thick, red gravy that clung to the meat like a lover." (Roy 146). Memories of an individual become co-existent with culinary exercises and with the emotions that holds a family together. The act of remembering enables the individual to connect to the cohesive past that has the ability to sustain her/him in the face of fragmentation of family, dislocation and alienation. Food, through memory, has the ability to retain the tales, both personal and inter-personal. Rahel's recollection of pickle-making with Mammachi brings back her childhood memories and emotional wounds when she notes how "The jars of pickles lined the kitchen shelves, their lids screwed on tight, trapping memories and things unsaid" (Roy 188). Referring to the pickle factory, naming the first chapter as Paradise Pickles & Preserves is also socio-economically significant. Like a pickle/preserve, the factory preserves a lot of memories for the kids. At the same time, it signifies women joining the system of capitalist production, earning for themselves, and thereby acquiring agency that in turn points to emancipation of these women like Mammachi from normative gender roles.

In Roy's narrative, food also carries the tale of Kerala's cultural evolution through colonization and then globalization. The arrival of European food culture changed the scenario and created a cosmopolitan, hybrid, globalized marketplace. Traditionally, agriculture holds a prestigious place in Kerala. Cultivation of mangoes, tomatoes, rice, sugar canes, pepper, jackfruit, banana, tapioca etc. were most common. The novel opens with these lines, "May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst." (Roy, 1). The arrival Christians and European traders introduced them to spices like pepper and different ways of culinary procedures. 'Paradise Pickles & Preserves', the enterprise, shows how the Ipe family, themselves heavily influenced by western culture, prepare European condiments like jams, jellies, squashes etc. from essentially Indian fruits. In fact, their banana jam can be read as a symbolic expression of the hybridity of the Ipe family. This banana jam was banned by Food Products Organization as it was of an ambiguous and unclassifiable consistency, being something between jam and jelly. It did not conform to the specifications laid out in their books. During the 1960s and 1970s, packed foods entered the market in Kerala

in the form of cold-drinks, liquors, teabags, milk powder etc. The organic traditional cuisine of Kerala was invaded by artificial, processed food products from overseas markets. Multinational companies and global export-import altered the culture scenario comprehensively, achieving a hybridity of western and eastern cultures, reflected in cuisine as well.

Food and its consumption is an important practice and cultural marker of every society. As Raymond Williams noted that culture is a set ideas which are expressed not only in art or learning but equally in everyday life and ordinary behaviour. As the title suggests, Roy shows how small things contribute to the cohesion/disintegration of human life, society and culture. One of those smaller components of culture, food is like a living organism that evolves with every shift in cultural, political, economic paradigms, yet preserves its core to become a reservoir of memory and history. Roy presents the evolution of Kerala society from pre-colonial roots to post-colonial and post-globalization consumerist, hybrid culture, and the struggles of individuals to locate themselves in this fragmented world in her *The God of Small Things*. This is equally captured through her use of food as symbols and motifs in the novel which convey to us the conflicts of class and caste hierarchy, ethnic crisis, and crisis of identity as identified and analysed in this present paper.

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