



Savouring the Text: The Semiotics of Culinary Imagery in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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ABSTRACT :

In the Indian English novel, food is seldom a mere setting, but serves as an intricate semiotic code that allows the expression of caste, gender, memory, transgression and postcolonial anxiety. This paper proposes a sustained strategy that the culinary imagery of Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) provides for the novel. This article suggests that Roy's Ayemenem is a world of kitchens, pickle factories, banana jam, orange squash, and the ritualized presentation and denial of food, and that these images form a parallel plot which follows the main themes of the novel, the "Love Laws" of "who should be loved and how and how much." Close reading of the text, coupled with the adoption of frameworks from food studies, postcolonial theory and feminist criticism, reveals three overlapping roles for culinary imagery—food as a symbol of caste/class boundary, most obviously in the touchability/untouchability economy surrounding Velutha, food as a repository of gendered labour and repressed desire in Ammu, Mammachi, and the Paradise Pickles and Preserves factory, and food as a vehicle for childhood perception and traumatic memory, as filtered through the twins, Rahel and Estha. The paper also places Roy's culinary poetics into the larger context of Indian English writing, and compares her techniques with other Indian English novelists who use food as a cultural metaphor, sketching out the differences in their approaches briefly. Roy makes the kitchen and the pickle vat into places where the past and the future are preserved, and where history, desire and prohibition ferment together; the analysis shows that culinary imagery is essential to the structure and thematic logic of the novel, not a mere flourish.

The *God of Small Things*' writing is invested with culinary imagery, which is also given a symbolic significance with respect to food. The *God of Small Things*' writing is filled with culinary imagery, which is also assigned a symbolic value in relation to food.

Introduction

There is a paradoxical position of food in literary criticism. At once most banal of human necessities and one of the most coded of cultural symbols, it can convey identity, hierarchy, intimacy and taboo with no words of explicit commentary. Food imagery does important cultural service in Indian English writing, which has always been at odds with the indigenous experience and the inherited colonial language. It enables writers to depict caste status, regional identity, religion, gender roles and inter-generational conflict in scenes that seem on their surface to be about dinner. The most arresting examples of this in modern Indian English novels are Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize book *The God of Small Things* (1997). The novel is filled with food images: the Ipe family's precarious living from the pickle factory, the bottles of orange and lemon juice that run in and out of town, the banana jam that doesn't set, the fish curry that Sophie Mol cooks when she arrives, and the elaborate etiquette governing which members of the family may eat with which, whose hands and whose part of the house.

This article argues that these pictures can be understood as more than just an unconscious formula of realism that could merely be a nod toward regional authenticity for an international audience. Instead, in *The God of Small Things* food is organically woven into the novel's non-linear story and primary focus on the Love Laws—the unwritten social codes which determine acceptable objects and expressions of love, and therefore acceptable transgressions. Paradise Pickles and Preserves isn't just a family business—it's the novel's chief metaphor for the preservation and subsequent decay of memory, desire and social order. The novel's most significant sin is Ammu's affair with Velutha, the untouchable, and the language of taste, hunger and contamination are used again and again to represent the affair. The attitudes towards the English biscuits, tinned pineapple and the display of table manners with Sophie Mol, the half-English cousin, serves as a medium of expression for the Anglophilic pretensions of the family, especially those of Baby Kochamma and Chacko. Even the way the children perceived trauma, with its disjointed and associative imagery, is filtered through food: the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, the memory of old roses and lost sweets, the power of a single Love-in-Tokyo hairband purchased with an orange drink in mind.

This selection of the author and the novel is not accidental, but rather based on a sound method. Comparative studies of culinary imagery from several Indian English writers, although useful, often yield a list of motifs rather than a sustained interpretive analysis. In contrast, Roy's text is rewarding because it is so rich in its food imagery, and it is so close to the plot of the story, the non-chronological organization, and the senses as a way of knowing as a child. This paper focuses on Roy, and a close reading of this work can make it go beyond the inventory of themes to an argument on the architecture of the novel, the parallel plot, a secondary plot line that follows and sometimes predicts the main events of the novel's transgression, punishment and loss.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. The research questions and objectives are explained in section 2. Section 3 explains the method for conducting this research, placing it in the context of a qualitative literary analysis that draws from food studies and feminist and postcolonial theory. The

substantive analysis is found in Section 4, with three thematic strands: caste and economy of touch and taste; gender, labour and repressed desire in the domestic and factory kitchen; food as a medium of childhood perception and traumatic memory. A comparative note, briefly situating Roy in the broader context of culinary imagery in Indian English fiction is provided in Section 5. The article wraps up with a discussion about the importance of food imagery in the novel's meaning and with some ideas for future research.

Research Questions

- RQ1: In the context of *The God of Small Things*, does Arundhati Roy encode and critique caste hierarchy in terms of 'touchability' and 'untouchability' of Velutha, by using culinary imagery?
- RQ2: How does the domestic and factory kitchen become a space for the representation of gendered labour, repression and transgressive desire of the female characters like Ammu and Mammachi, specifically in the case of *Paradise Pickles and Preserves* business?
- RQ3: What part does food imagery play in how the childhood perception, memory and trauma of twins Rahel and Estha are formed, and in the non-linear structure of the novel?
- RQ4: In what ways are Roy's uses of culinary imagery similar to the wider trend in Indian English fiction and what does this indicate about the use of food as a uniquely postcolonial narrative tool?

In response, the study aims to locate and categorize the key occurrences of culinary imagery in the novel; to interpret these occurrences in the context of the novel's portrayal of caste, gender and childhood; to suggest that such imagery is not merely decorative but also plays a structural role; and to situate the findings in the larger critical discourse on food and literature in the Indian English tradition.

Research Method

This study is qualitative and text-centred literary analysis, which involves close reading and a thematic-interpretative approach based on three converging fields of theory: food studies, postcolonial analysis and feminist literary theory. As one text, one author implies, as stated in the introduction, the reader will examine a single primary source, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Secondary sources consist of published scholarly criticism of Roy's novel; general studies of food symbolism in literature; and foundational postcolonial and feminist theoretical texts which are used to develop an interpretive lens, not to test a falsifiable hypothesis in the social-scientific sense.

The analytical procedure was carried out in four steps. An extensive thematic reading of the novel was first carried out, to capture all the key mentions of food and its consumption, of drink and its consumption, of cooking, of preserving, and of the other senses involved in the experience of eating and drinking. Secondly, these references were categorized in three main thematic clusters related to the study's research questions: caste and touchability, gender and domestic labour, and childhood memory and trauma. Third, each cluster was closely read, with special focus on diction, imagery, and the role of the food in the novel's narrative (who sees the food, who makes the food, who does not have access to the food, where is the reference to the food in the novel's achronological plot? Fourthly, the output of each cluster was combined into one argument about the structural role of culinary imagery throughout the text, which was in turn briefly discussed in terms of other Indian English novelists.

This approach is therefore interpretative and qualitative and not quantitative as literary symbolism is not simply a matter of the frequency of certain images, but the orange and lemon drinks, the pickle factory, the biscuits and sweets made for Sophie Mol, for instance, are called attention to, but when they do recur, they are deployed in narrative space, so that they can be seen as evidence of their structural significance. Although the study is not meant to be comprehensive of all Roy scholarship, it does aim to be a focused, theoretically informed re-reading of the novel's culinary dimension, the richness and centrality of which are grounded in the density and centrality of culinary imagery in the novel itself.

Analysis

The economy of Untouchability

The most politic use of food image in *The God of Small Things* is the idea of a caste boundary that determines who can touch, prepare, serve and share food with whom. The economy of touch introduces Velutha, Ammu's love, the Paravan carpenter. Roy reminds the reader that in the days of his father, Vellya Paapen, Paravans had to crawl backwards with a broom to remove their footprints, and that they were not allowed to even cast a shadow on a Touchable. This historical background makes all the scenes of food and drink in the novel into a possible location of transgression or reinforcement of caste hierarchy. His status as a guest in the factory, his role in the manufacture of pickle jars and his mending of machines is accepted for as long as he is a worker, and not a family member who is eating and enjoying himself along with his own family. His ultimate demise is due to an infraction that starts, metaphorically speaking, in the private sphere of touch and desire to which food imagery elsewhere refers to nourishment and delight.

There is another disturbing inflection of this theme, provided by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, whom Estha meets at the cinema. The scene in which Estha is forced to perform a sexual act in exchange for a cold drink, is a combination of images of a desired treat and predation and violation, and an image of the ordinary pleasure of a cold drink, being turned into a weapon of abuse. The drink seems to be a symbol of the innocent desire and contaminates with the use of a child's hunger and trust by the adult world. This episode is a fine illustration of the way in which Roy always employs food and drink imagery to emphasize as well as to foreground violations, and thus makes the desire to eat and drink part of a wider constellation of power.

The pickle factory, *Paradise Pickles and Preserves*, applies this logic of caste and boundary to the register of commerce and labour. The factory is making preserved foods for local and, hopefully, export markets, and as its name implies, it is a place that conjures up an Edenic paradise, which is really a

contradiction in terms of a harmonious and sinless social order in Ayemenem. A minor but telling emblem of the family's struggles and eventually failure to fit into external, quasi-colonial labels and rules of classification and propriety is Mammachi's banana jam, a product which won't set hard enough for the label to classify it correctly as jam and not jelly. The setting of the jam becomes challenging as is the ability of the family to do so; to maintain its social structure in the face of desire, caste transgression and change in history.

Gender, Labour and Repressed Desire in the Kitchen and Factory.

The kitchen and the pickle factory in *The God of Small Things* are places that involve a great deal of feminine work, much of which is not visible, and Roy's images of food always signal the gendered price of this work. Blind and more and more reliant on her, Mammachi is also the brain behind the business of Paradise Pickles, but the profits and public respect go to her son Chacko, who claims to be a businessman yet doesn't contribute nearly as much as the labour or smarts required to sustain the business. This imbalance between labour and recognition is a recurring theme in the novel's addressing of gender and it is the pickle factory, where women are involved in both their domestic and productive work and are boiled, spiced and jangled into preserves, which becomes the most symbolically concentrated: the novel documents how the women's domestic and productive labour is systematically appropriated by the men who claim to own both the business and the moral authority attached to family reputation.

But Ammu's role in this economy is even more restricted. She is a divorced daughter, she is coming back to her original house, and she has an ambiguous, reduced position, her work in the factory, her work in the home is sometimes presented as a kind of penitence, it is not a contribution. Her eventual romance with Velutha here is perhaps a reclaiming of appetite and desire in face of a domestic order that has turned her into a tool of unpaid, unrecognized labour. Significantly, Roy sets several of the novel's most intimate scenes between Ammu and Velutha next to the river and the nature and not in the regulated domestic kitchen, where desire is most tightly controlled, together with food and female labour.

Baby Kochamma, on the other hand, is a figure of a completely distinct and more corrosive dynamic of food, repression and power. She seems to have transferred her physical hunger for Father Mulligan to literal hunger in the form of overeating and an eventual need to watch TV during her old age, indicating that some of her sexual and emotional needs were directed toward physical hunger. Baby Kochamma's bitterness and vindictiveness towards Ammu and Velutha are partly the result of her own frustrated desire, which is slowly revealed through Roy's narration. Throughout the novel, the displacement of desire is manifest in the various female characters as a means of escape from and as a symptom of women's limited freedom in the Ipe family culture, which is the same type of displacement that is revealed in the motif of food consumption. The displacement of desire is repeated in the women of the novel, and like the motif of food consumption, it is a means of escape from and a symptom of women's limited freedom in the Ipe family culture.

The God of Small Things is told mostly in the perceptual register of its two child characters, Rahel and Estha, and Roy always records his disjointed and associative perception of trauma in sensory and in gustatory and olfactory detail. Sophie Mol's preparations for her arrival, rehearsed songs in English, special sweets, and the family's attentive watchfulness about what will be served and the way in which it will be presented, dramatize the family's anxious performance of Anglophilia, respectability, for a half-English child whose mere presence threatens to upset the family's delicate hierarchies. The food here is not just a part of the colonial past that is the basis of the family's sense of self—they want to look civilised and modern, and this is achieved again and again by what one consumes and how it is displayed.

Food and drink serve as mnemonic anchor for the twins, and the non-linear narrative is structured by food and drink. Orange and lemon drinks, candy, and the aroma of the pickle factory serve as an involuntary catalyst that takes the reader and the characters from one time in the novel to another, from the innocent days before Sophie Mol's demise, to the traumatic moments around Sophie Mol's death, and to the empty and sad lives of Rahel and Estha many years later. These sensory details, therefore, are more like a narrative punctuation mark; they signal the reader that a scene of nourishment or its withdrawal will intersect with a moment of deep loss, as the novel is not strictly chronological, but rather loops back at times and doubles back.

But in adulthood Estha is shown to become silent, to be silent almost to the point of being catatonic — and remaining so, just as he becomes unable to use ordinary domestic and culinary skills to express himself in an emotional way. Thus, Roy envisions a food that is brought from childhood to become a medium of wonder and violation, to become a medium in adulthood of numbed, compulsive ritual, considering food to be the medium of the child and the adult alike.

Roy in the Wider Indian English Culinary Imagery

This study focuses on the close reading of one novel, but it is important to briefly contextualize Roy's technique in the context of Indian English novels, which have long used food imagery as a tool to negotiate identity, migration and cultural hybridity. Whenever writers in the diasporic tradition evoke food in a nostalgic fashion, they are doing so from the perspective of “home” that is defined by displacement, food nostalgic to recuperate a lost homeland from a position of displacement, Roy's culinary imagery is from within “home” itself, food exposes instead of comforts, indicts social hierarchy instead of mourns its passing. This makes her project more authentic to a critical and even subversive, approach to using food to reveal the cracks in Indian society's caste, gender and postcolonial aspirations. Now, in this comparative perspective, Roy's accomplishment is to show that culinary imagery in Indian English writing does not only represent authenticity and/or cultural pride, but could be the means of social critique in the most familiar and routine aspects of everyday life.

Conclusion

In this study it has been argued that culinary imagery in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is not incidental local colour nor cultural authentication but is rather one of the central elements of the novel, which follows its core issues related to caste, gender and childhood trauma. The economy of touch and taste that surrounds Velutha reveals the violence in the underlying structure of Ayemenem society, which appears progressive and communist. The

domestic kitchen, represented by Paradise Pickles and Preserves, exposes the systematic appropriation of women's labor and the repression of desire in the processes of cooking, preserving and eating food. And the sensory memory of the twins Rahel and Estha is a reminder of how the physical act of eating and drinking serves as the body's way of storing and fragmenting and finally, if not fully, telling childhood trauma. These various results make it seem that Roy's culinary poetics are a parallel narrative that exists in parallel with, and indeed a part of, the novel's overt story of illicit love and its disastrous fallout.

The overall significance of this work for literary criticism of Indian English is that food consists of a body of image material that is worthy of extended theoretical scrutiny, not a fleeting reminder of regional or cultural variation. The method used in this study could be extended comparatively to the works of other great novelists of Indian English literature, such as other authors whose work is also filled with culinary detail, to see if the function of the parallel plot, discovered in the present study in Roy's novel, extends more widely to the tradition, or if it is a feature peculiar to her own work and style. This comparative study would also be enhanced by greater interaction with regional-language food writing in translation, to determine whether Indian English fiction culinary images are an adaptation, a deviation or an assimilation of indigenous literature in other languages (Malayalam, Hindi, Bengali etc.) on food.

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