

## POLITICS OF CULTURE, IDENTITY AND CUISINE IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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**Abstract:** Contemporary culture, encompassing culinary studies, has been significantly shaped by postmodern ideas. Postmodernism gained prominence in the late twentieth century as an intellectual and artistic trend that either evolves from or responds to preceding modernism. In Jean François Lyotard's seminal text "The Postmodern Condition," he contends that knowledge and truths are not absolute and may be modified, especially by technology. Postmodern culture critically interrogates the universe, viewing truth and reality as relative rather than absolute. It dismisses limitations, welcoming hybridity and plurality, with juxtaposition and fragmentation. Frederic Jameson broadened postmodern theory to encompass the examination of late capitalist culture, which includes globalization views. Globalization is crucial as a primary embodiment of the inclusivity inherent in postmodern theory and society.

**Key Terms:** Literature, Cultural Politics, Gender, Class, Metaphor

### Introduction:

Food imagery has been a prominent element in great literature from antiquity. In the "Introduction" chapter of Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature, Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard assert that "food is essential to literature." If food is essential to existence and the foundation upon which civilizations and cultures are constructed, it is equally crucial to the imagination and the arts of the imaginative. Food is essential to the imagination, as it is integral to culture. The Odyssey, a seminal work of ancient literature, is replete with culinary imagery and depictions of feasting. There are, in reality, forty-two meals encompassed inside this grand epic. Keeling and Pollard assert that in The Odyssey, "Food is essential to the narrative and character dynamics, driving the adventure throughout the tale; the ceremonial barbecues, the banquets, the slaughtering of bulls, pigs, sheep, and occasionally, humans." Food imagery recurs throughout numerous cherished literary works, from Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales to Dickens's Oliver Twist. Despite the longstanding presence of food imagery in literature, researchers have only recently commenced the examination of works for the underlying importance of foods and consumption. Keeling and Pollard assert that "Food has not consistently been regarded as a topic deserving of literary examination, despite its ubiquity in literature" (6). As food studies and cultural studies expand, literary theorists are increasingly recognizing the significance of examining literature in relation to food, as food fulfils multiple roles within literary contexts. The examination of food in literature serves as an effective lens to analyze many formal and contextual factors within a fictional narrative. Food-related imagery in literature, especially when accompanied by vivid details and

descriptions, engages the reader's senses, so augmenting the work's realism. They offer sensory imagery that resonates with readers, particularly in terms of familiar sights, smells, and tastes. In "One Reader's Digest: Towards a Gastronomic Theory of Literature," Brad Kessler asserts, "Food in fiction engages all the reader's senses (taste, touch, feel, sight, and smell)" (151). He elucidates how food captivates the reader: "Meals are magnets; they attract individuals." "They embody drama, both in fiction and in reality" (153). Kessler posits that food functions as a catalyst for memory, evoking earlier experiences and moving characters to a different temporal context through the recollection of analogous sensory encounters (157). Food-related imagery can be employed to establish a particular ambiance, provide a visual reference for readers, communicate an idea, evoke an emotion, dramatize a scenario, or enhance the realism within a given text. Kessler asserts that the primary function of food in literature is as a cultural marker. He characterizes food as "imbued with significance." Similar to life, food in fiction holds significance. It signifies more than its intrinsic value. It is emblematic. It facilitates access to dual and triple interpretations" (156). Literary critics utilize food as a means to explore deeper meanings and insights into the cultural and personal identities of characters, hence enhancing connections within the text and between literature and life.

### Cultural Resistance

Despite Arundhati Roy's debut and sole novel, *The God of Small Things*, achieving rapid critical acclaim and international recognition as a seminal Indian work in English, its publication incited scandalous and contentious discourse in India, including a highly publicized lawsuit concerning the intimate scene at the novel's conclusion involving two individuals from many castes. The striking and unforgettable novel depicts the nonlinear, complex narrative of a middle-class Syrian Christian family in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The narrative focusses on Estha and Rahel, the twin offspring of Ammu, who, at the age of seven, endured traumatic, transformative experiences and have now, at thirty-one, returned to their familial residence in Ayemenem. The narrative oscillates between the past and present, elucidating the disparate elements that culminate in the profound and indelible conclusion. The novel is renowned for its vivid imagery, poetic diction, and adeptness in producing a kaleidoscope effect in the conclusion. Imagery and metaphor related to food permeate the work, enhancing its complexity and depth, offering vivid representations that illuminate the emotions and personalities of characters, while uncovering profound societal truths. The family's previous food enterprise, Paradise Pickles & Preserves, casts a shadow over the entire narrative. The factory serves as a backdrop for the entire narrative, symbolizing more than the jars of jams and pickled fruits produced by Mammachi.

The twins' maternal grandma commenced this endeavor years ago. The concept of preservation holds significant importance for the characters in the narrative, particularly for the eldest generation in the family—Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, the grandaunt. Kerala society diligently preserves certain principles and traditions, transmitted to future generations by the

elders, notably the Love Laws and the maintenance of caste standards, both essential components of Keralan culture that Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are committed to safeguarding. Roy asserts, “One could contend that it commenced well before Christianity arrived by sea and permeated Kerala akin to tea from a teabag.” It truly commenced at the era when the Love Laws were established. The regulations that dictate whom to love and the manner of such affection. What is the cost? (33). Despite the significant population of Syrian Christians in Kerala, to which the family belongs, caste systems remain entrenched and are still upheld within Christian communities. This is ironic, given that many untouchables converted to Christianity to evade the harshness of the rigid caste system. The Love Laws and caste regulations significantly influence the culture of both the family and society. Despite the Kochamma family's status as touchables, their liberties remain constrained within the family, mirroring the limitations imposed by the broader society. The metaphor of food preservation symbolizes the endeavor to maintain societal expectations through the Love Laws and the caste system, propelling the narrative as various people choose to either conform to these laws and cultural norms or to rebel against them. Ammu, Rahel, and Estha ultimately oppose the maintenance of these conventional cultural norms. The narrator frequently asserts, “Things can change in a day” (156). Nonetheless, if Mammachi and Baby Kochamma had their way, no alterations would occur. Ammu, in contrast, is distinct from her family; she possesses a wild, rebellious personality that is incongruent with the harsh society surrounding her. Following her divorce from her drunken and abusive spouse, a notable stigma in Indian society, she returns to her parents' residence with her two children, where she faces widespread condemnation. Nonetheless, she continues to resist the maintenance of her society's cultural norms. In “Unsettling Race, Coloniality, and Caste,” Saldívar examines the character's persistent defiance against the conventional values imposed by Mammachi and Baby Kochamma. He notes, “Ammu’s resolute reaction to her family’s demand for adherence to caste regulations prevalent in Keralan culture is to compel the twins Rahel and Estha to ‘promise’ her that they will ‘always love each other’—particularly in defiance of what Roy describes as the local ‘love laws.’”<sup>359</sup> Ammu grapples with the “normative rules of kinship in Kerala” that Mammachi and her family endeavor to maintain, akin to the preservation of pickles and jams in their business, finally culminating in her illicit romance with an Untouchable, Velutha, the god of small things (359). The actions of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma in this situation represent one of the most egregious violations in the novel, ultimately leading to the deaths of both Velutha and Amma. Rahel and Estha defy the constraints of the Love Laws upon returning to their childhood residence as adults, re-establishing their connection and expressing their anguish and “hideous grief” through intimacy (311). Saldívar refers to it as “a transgressive ‘acting out,’” asserting, “The adult twins achieve this by rendering the love laws and their regulations incoherent” (361). Saldívar asserts that the characters’ choices are predicated on “an understanding of the brutality of caste, the love laws, and the necessity and urgency to de-institute them” (362). In their childhood, Rahel and Estha witnessed the repercussions of the caste system; their mother’s intimate involvement with an untouchable led to Velutha’s beating and demise, the twins’ separation, Ammu’s compelled departure from the family residence, and

Ammu's eventual death. They are unimpressed by the constraints of the Love Laws and the cultural norms that their family members opted to obey, and they react by disregarding the laws themselves.

### Secrets Sealed and Secrets Split

The preservation metaphor in *The God of Small Things* serves as a symbol of the numerous secrets that are "bottled up" throughout the novel, concealed from view due to shame or the need for protection. The narrator elucidates the concealment of a secret: "It was preserved, sealed, and stored."

A crimson, succulent, mango-shaped enigma in a container" (191). Similar to how preserves, fruits, and pickles are preserved and stored, the family's pickle business represents the aspiration to conceal secrets and scandals from external scrutiny. As a child, Estha refrains from disclosing to anyone the actions of the Orange-drink Lemon-drink man at the movie. Estha and Rahel clandestinely visit Velutha, developing an affinity for him. Ammu clandestinely visits Velutha. Mark Stein elucidates that "[S]ecrets are revealed . . . barrels rupture. . . ." Roy's tale focusses on leaks and spilling. Significance may indeed reside in the overflow. It may reside in that which is not pickled nor preserved, but rather exudes and envelops anything within proximity" (145). Likewise, Mammachi reflects on her initial experiences in the pickling industry, recalling how her inaugural batch of "professional pickles" leaked: "Bottled and sealed, positioned on a table adjacent to the head of the bed, . . . The pickle bottles rested in a reservoir of oil. The pickled mangoes had absorbed the oil and swelled, causing the bottles to leak" (159). She states, "Even now, after all those years, Paradise Pickles' bottles still exhibit minor leakage" (159).

This functions as a metaphor and anticipates the revelation of secrets within the family. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, upon discovering Ammu's sensitive relationship with Velutha, the Untouchable, resort to extreme steps to conceal the clandestine liaison and preserve their family's reputation. Baby Kochamma persuades Estha to fabricate a story about Velutha to the police to protect the children's mother, however the true motive is to safeguard herself. Baby Kochamma attempts to uphold the family's reputation; nevertheless, ultimately, her primary concern is self-preservation.

### Kinship and Gender Issue

In *The God of Small Things*, *Paradise Pickles & Preserves* similarly illustrates familial and gender dynamics that propel the narrative and define various characters. Although Mammachi established the enterprise many years prior as a humble pickle and jam kitchen, the Chacko, the twins' uncle, has resumed control of the factory, relegating Mammachi to the status of "Sleeping Partner" (55). He allocates funds towards costly machinery, assumes control of the little factory's operations, and endeavors to oversee the workforce, including Velutha. The company's leadership hierarchy mirrors the family's structure, with Chacko positioned at the apex. Chacko readily assumes charge of the pickle factory, perceiving the enterprise as his own

without hesitation. This illustrates the conventional gender expectations in this South Indian culture, which Ammu describes as a “wonderful male chauvinist society,” to which Chacko retorts, “What’s yours is mine, and what’s mine is also mine” (56). Salvádar elucidates “kinship” in the novel as not merely a circumstance involving Rahel, Estha, Ammu, and Velutha, but as a constellation of behaviors in postcolonial Kerala that, as Roy posits, are regulated, enacted, ritualized, and dominated by the powerful (361). In this civilization, the individuals in authority are evidently the touchables and males.

### **Mocha Latte Desire**

Chocolate is cherished by women around for its decadent flavor, velvety texture, and purported aphrodisiac properties. While there is no evidence that it genuinely enhances desire or arousal, chocolate is undeniably linked to romance. Roy employs this renowned culinary imagery to provide the reader with a significant indication of the forthcoming sexual taboo in the narrative. The narrator used several metaphors involving chocolate and other delicacies to predict the incestuous relationship between the siblings, Rahel and Estha, symbolizing sexuality and desire.

Throughout the story, Rahel studies Estha, noting his toned physique and form. Upon returning home from a walk in the rain, Rahel observes Estha undressing, characterizing his skin as darker in certain areas and “honey-colored” where his clothing had been: “Chocolate with a twist of coffee” (88). The narrative features frequent descriptions of Estha, while a comparable depiction of chocolate is employed to illustrate Velutha as perceived by Ammu, highlighting a more pronounced attraction. The incorporation of chocolate, honey, and coffee stimulates the senses, and the narrator's depiction of Rahel's thoughts towards Estha in such a delectable manner signifies Rahel's longing, suggesting that she may perceive Estha himself as delightful and appealing. Despite the unanticipated nature of their affair, the allusions to chocolate and honey in relation to Estha's body suggest Rahel's sexuality and physical desire towards Estha.

### **Lemon-drink Fear**

Another culinary metaphor that propels the narrative in *The God of Small Things* is the Orange-drink Lemon-drink guy and the lemon drink, which symbolize disappointment, fear, and embarrassment for Estha. During a visit to the cinema to view *The Sound of Music*, Estha is received a complimentary lemon beverage from the individual at the refreshments counter, whom he designates as the Orange-drink Lemon-drink Man. Estha is summoned behind the counter to collect his beverage, when he is molested by the man. The narrator characterizes the experience as Estha's “initial confrontation with Fear” (113). This encounter is both terrifying and humiliating for Estha, causing him instant physical nausea. He refrains from disclosing anything to anybody, despite Rahel's intuition that the man has wronged him. Nevertheless, he bears the burden of anxiety and guilt upon returning to Ayemenem, where he is incessantly preoccupied with the Orange-drink Lemon-drink Man and his remarks, which Estha interpreted as a menacing invitation to visit Ayemenem. The apprehension of the man entering his home at



any moment is palpable for little Estha, prompting his contemplation that “(a) Anything can happen to Anyone.” Additionally, it is advisable to be prepared” (186). This line of reasoning leads to the notion of acquiring a boat and transporting supplies to the History House—to “prepare to prepare to be prepared” (191). The episode involving the Orange-drink Lemon-drink Man significantly propels the narrative to the moment when the twins' cousin, Sophie Mol, who is unreasonably adored by everyone and visiting from England, drowns in the river after the boat transporting supplies capsizes.

### Conclusion:

In the novel, Roy used vivid culinary imagery to implicitly characterize individuals, propel the plot, and contemplate personal and cultural identity inside the narrative. Diverse cuisines and their preparation signify the inclination to maintain secrets. Maintain tradition. They also reflect unveiled secrets and opposition to cultural norms. The incorporation of food in metaphorical language enriches the novel, imparting profound significance and presenting vivid imagery to the reader. Anita Desai's culinary-themed novel *Fasting, Feasting* use food to convey profound significance; yet, in this narrative, the emphasis is placed less on the dishes cooked or preserved and more on the identities of those who partake in the feast and those who do not.

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