Representing Home: Reading the Aesthetics of Food in Postcolonial Literature

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Summary

This article seeks to establish aesthetic analysis as an integral approach to postcolonial literature, taking attention to form and depictions of beauty to stand for aesthetic qualities. More specifically, this article reads the treatment of food in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) and Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* (1995) as not only aesthetic achievements that resonate powerfully with many postcolonial concerns, but also as instances where aesthetically sensitive attention to form critically informs postcolonial concerns. Given the rapid development in the inter-sections between food studies and postcolonial criticism, food is no longer merely domestic and therefore apolitical, or in the play of flavours and spices and odours are the threads of colonial enterprises, national histories, independence movements, family legacies and personal narratives entwined around representations of home.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel poog om estetiese ontleding as 'n integrale benadering tot postkoloniale literatuur te vestig, met aandag aan vorm en uitbeeldings van skoonheid as verteenwoordigend van estetiese eienskappe. Meer spesifiek beskou die artikel die hantering van kos in Amitav Ghosh se *The Glass Palace* (2000) en Romesh Gunesekera se *Reef* (1995) as nie net estetiese prestasies wat kragtig met baie postkoloniale bekommernisse weerklink nie, maar ook as gevalle waar esteties sensitiewe aandag aan vorm, postkoloniale kwellinge krities onderlê. In die lig van die snelle ontwikkeling in die kruisings tussen voedselstudie en postkoloniale kritiek, is kos nie meer bloot huishoudelik en dus apolities nie, of in die wisselwerking tussen geure en speserye en reuke is die drade van koloniale ondernemings, nasionale geskiedenisse, onafhanklikheidsbewegings, familienalatenskappe en persoonlike vertellings geweef rondom voorstellings van die bekende; die huis.

This article engages with how the histories of India and Sri Lanka are indelibly shaped by their colonial pasts, and explores how the experience of and longing for home gave rise to innovative cuisines, like Peranakan food in *The Glass Palace* and a fusion of Asian and Western tastes in *Reef*. Drawing from seminal work by Elleke Boehmer (2010), Deepika Bhari (2003), John S. Su (2011) and Sarah Lawson Welsh (2010), in the area of postcolonial aesthetics and from Parama Roy (2010) and, more recently, Gitanjali Shahani

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(2018), in the area of food studies, this article discerns – in the narratives surrounding food – the particular dislocations colonial rule and postcolonial circumstances dealt to notions of home and belonging.

It is not difficult to accept Robert Young's (1998: 4) conception of postcolonialism as an "interdisciplinary political, theoretical and historical work that sets out to serve as a transnational forum for studies grounded in the historical context of colonialism". Since postcolonial literature tends to reposition its narratives through "representative minority experience" in contradistinction to colonial renderings, he feels that such depictions have become valued as much as, if not more than, the "aesthetic qualities" of literary texts (7). Here, Young rehearses the uneasy connections between aesthetics and postcolonialism: whereas aesthetics, in its pursuit of beauty, appears inadvertently frivolous, postcolonial literature seeks to be demonstrably purposeful by destabilising the logic of European thought that animated imperial projects. Elleke Boehmer (2010) more explicitly addresses Young's points in "A Postcolonial Aesthetic: Repeating upon the Present" (2018). She posits these contentions to issue from an "awareness that 'postcolonial aesthetic' represents nothing less than a contradiction in terms, perhaps even an oxymoron", writing:

> Insofar as *the postcolonial*, always a contentious term, is used to refer not merely chronologically but politically, and is taken to designate writing in opposition to empire and its oppressions, there is little sense in which postcolonial writing can be both political *and* implicated in a (purely) aesthetic stance.
>
> (70)

In the same vein, Sarah Lawson Welsh (2010: 165) traces the "disjunction between the aesthetic of the literary and the ethical-political drives of postcolonial studies" to the simple fact that "the current status of the aesthetic in the literary is not high". Directly engaging with Robert Young, Elleke Boehmer acknowledges that since the postcolonial

> can be taken to signify a political commitment to some form of struggle and as allied to the traditions of anti-colonial resistance, a simultaneous commitment to an aesthetic is understandably viewed in some postcolonial circles as a distraction, an unaffordable indulgence.
>
> (2010: 172)

Yet, both Elleke Boehmer and Sarah Lawson Welsh (2010: 166-167) share the view that "it is only by embracing (rather than evading) the problems of the aesthetic that the ethical and political objective of postcolonialism are to be fully realized". In fact, to take the position that aesthetic study is somehow incongruous with postcolonial studies is to renege on a fundamental ideal which, in Robert Young's (1998: 4) own words, is an inclusive, syncretic

plurality in the shape of an "interdisciplinary" and "transnational forum". By charting the ascendancy of "representative minority experience" against "aesthetic qualities", he installs a distinct binary between postcolonial concerns and literary aesthetics, and implies that content and form are competing categories inimical to each other (7). Young replicates, perhaps less obviously than other postcolonial critics, the very logic he sets out to defy, for the totalising notions whence sprung Western imperialism grew out of injudiciously contrived binaries that were then inflicted around the globe.

As such, this article seeks to establish aesthetic analysis as an integral approach to postcolonial literature, taking attention to form and depictions of beauty to stand for aesthetic qualities. It adopts Elleke Boehmer's position as it undertakes to

> retrace the polarities of certain well-known debates about the aesthetic *and* the postcolonial (or indeed the aesthetic *versus* the postcolonial), in order finally to assess whether, on balance that *and* represents a legitimate, even legitimating concern.
>
> (2010: 171)

More specifically, this article reads the treatment of food in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) and Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* (1995) as not only aesthetic achievements that resonate powerfully with many postcolonial concerns, but also as instances where aesthetically sensitive attention to form critically informs postcolonial concerns. Given the rapid development in the intersections between food studies and postcolonial criticism, food is no longer merely domestic and therefore apolitical. As Gitanjali Shahani (2018: 13) sees it, the "turn to food has also empowered scholars to write colonial histories anew through food", and perhaps especially in cases where the aesthetic is foregrounded. This is not a retaliatory gesture aimed at reinstating aesthetics above postcolonial concerns. Instead, it is an exposition based in part on Deepika Bahri's (2003: 1) observation of "a remarkable lack of a sufficiently developed critical framework for addressing 'the aesthetic dimension' ... of postcolonial literature" and also John S. Su's (2011: 79) view of aesthetics as being "heterogeneous in the sense that it legitimizes and critiques simultaneously". If one conceives of literature as a fabric of words in the first instance, then a careful scrutiny of literary aesthetics in postcolonial writing should find Michael Wood's (1998: 11) assertion to be true: "it is in play that words find their simplest, most immediate form of liberty and life".

The "motives" behind aesthetics and postcolonial literature are, to borrow Uma Dey's reflection on the disparate reasons behind the unlikely union of Dolly and Rajkumar, two central characters in *The Glass Palace*, "not exclusive of each other" (Ghosh 2000: 186). For they each "play a part in creating a wholeness, as in the fitting together of misshapen pieces of a puzzle" (Ghosh 2000: 186). Food most intimately expresses characters' sense

of liberty and life in *The Glass Palace* and *Reef*, irrespective of prevailing political or colonial structures. That food figures in the predominantly domestic sphere of the home in no way detracts from its political implications. If anything, it underscores how food and home cannot escape the political, for in the play of flavours and spices and odours are the threads of colonial enterprises, national histories, independence movements, family legacies and personal narratives entwined around the conceptualising of home in its manifold variations. By scrutinizing "food as subject, as form, as landscape, as polemic, as political movement, as aesthetic statement, as key ingredient in literature", these "moments of culinary transformation" in the representations of home in *The Glass Palace* and *Reef* reinvigorate the ethical-political drives of postcolonial studies (Shahani 2018: 2).

The Glass Palace spans an expansive sweep of history. From the forced exile of King Thebaw of Burma to India, to the flourishing teak and rubber plantations of Rajkumar and Saya John, and into the intricacies of Indian ethnicities, these interwoven narratives are put through the brutalities of the Japanese Occupation, and culminate eventually in the tumultuous independence and post-independence movements across Burma and India. In view of this epic nature, it is consequential that Amitav Ghosh positions his novel not as a political or historical tome. Ghosh chooses rather to describe it as "a family memoir" (Aldama 2002: 87) through which he captures a particular "history of Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia" (Aldama 2002: 89). To read *The Glass Palace* with an emphasis on the family is to trace the representations of home in the novel. The notion of home is a tricky one, admittedly, made even more so with diaspora as its backdrop, but home is less a physical location than a complex of feelings of belonging, comfort, familiarity and safety. Food figures prominently in any and all attempts to find or build a home.

For Arjun, his life at home – before joining the army, that is – is defined by his being "a cause of increasing concern to everyone in the family," primarily because he is "easy-going to the point of slovenliness" (Ghosh 2000: 256). Although Arjun seems content with this, the excitement of being first accepted into the Indian Military Academy, and later posted to the 1st Jat Light Infantry, points clearly to his having found a joyous, new home in the army. Two things define this new sense of belonging: Manju notes that Arjun's "letters were in English – an unfamiliar, idiomatic English", and they are littered with many references to food, the first of which in his description of a visit to a "restaurant 'in town' with ... Hardy" where "they'd eaten 'lashings' of sandwiches and drunk 'oodles' of beer" (Ghosh 2000: 259). Home, for Arjun, presupposes speaking and eating and living as the English do. This is made even clearer in a conversation he has with Dinu:

> Every meal at an officers' mess, Arjun said, was an adventure, a glorious infringement of taboos. They ate foods that none of them touched at home:

> bacon, ham and sausages at breakfast; roast beef and pork chops for dinner. They drank whisky, beer and wine, smoked cigars, cigarettes and cigarillos. Nor was this just a matter of satisfying appetites: every mouthful had a meaning – each represented an advance towards the evolution of a new, more complete kind of Indian.
>
> (Ghosh 2000: 278-279)

That Arjun and his friends enjoy the luxurious food served in the officers' mess is not in itself unbecoming. It is the privilege of their positions in the army. However, the invocation of "home" in relation to food "taboos" suggests that the religious and cultural characteristics of the various ethnicities in India is out of keeping with their newfound association with the English (Ghosh 2000: 278). The sense of belonging that Arjun finds in his new home – the army – is built out of such infringements.

While religious or cultural leanings are socially constructed and there is nothing objectively wrong in abandoning the old to adopt the new, the above descriptions of food reveal an innate discomfiture these Indian officers find in their new home. Apart from the inherent contradiction behind "glorious infringement," which is in effect a straightforward ranking of English prestige over culturally or religiously Indian heritage and taboo, there is a fascinating logic behind Arjun's view of his and his comrade's "advance towards the evolution of a new, more complete kind of Indian" (Ghosh 2000: 279). Words like "advance" and "evolution" and "more complete" connote, individually and collectively, positive change (Ghosh 2000: 279). Yet this new breed of Indian is defined exclusively by changes contingent on the negation of their inherited values. Arjun proudly declares that "we're the first modern Indians", for "we eat what we like, we drink what we like, we're the first Indians who're not weighed down by the past" (Ghosh 2000: 279).

This is true insofar as they have escaped being "weighed down by the past" by weighing themselves down, ever more slavishly and without realising it, by the present. Arjun himself unwittingly acknowledges this: "All of them had stories to tell about how their stomachs had turned the first time they had chewed upon a piece of beef or pork; they had struggled to keep their morsels down, fighting their revulsion" (Ghosh 2000: 279). They forced themselves to eat like the British to convince themselves that they have become more evolved. Here, a second negation inflects Arjun's view of their becoming a "more complete" Indian (Ghosh 2000: 279). Not only are their cultural "ties to the soil" and the religious "responses instilled in them by their upbringing" to be overcome, their personal tastes and preferences for food need to be reformed, their "revulsion" overcome (Ghosh 2000: 279). Where food is, home is not. For their perceived sense of belonging to the army is predicated, essentially, on their lack of belonging. Even Arjun's announcement of their becoming the "first modern Indians" comes only "after a whisky or two": his self-satisfaction is doused with inebriation (Ghosh 2000: 279). Through this aesthetic rendering of food and its many inherent contradictions, Ghosh

vividly prefigures Arjun's later debilitating confusion. This manifests itself when Arjun despairs of his adopted identity as an officer in the British Indian Army, which ends with him "not want[ing] to live" (Ghosh 2000: 526).

In many ways, Ghosh's depiction of the British-sanctioned meals in the army elaborates on Thomas Macaulay's "Minutes on Education" published in 1835. The "British Policy of providing an 'English education' to Indians", Inderpal Grewal (2008: 180) explains, was "initiated to produce a middle class that might function in the British Government as an intermediary between the colonial state and the Indian population". Later in his essay, Grewal (2008: 180) explores how the British education apparatus produced among the Indians "an elite through knowledge of and contact with the West". While Grewal provides this general context for his purposes, his is rather a mild statement of the case. The original "Minutes on Education" of 1835 presented by Thomas Macaulay as a Member of the Council of India makes clear that the aim was to set aside a sum of money for the "encouragement of the learned natives of India" schooled in English language and customs (Macaulay 1835: 1). This is founded on the basis that he "[had] never found one among [the orientalists] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Macaulay 1835: 2). Arjun's articulation on food reveals in his case, however, that British education comes not only externally through the teaching and learning of English language or culture, but much more intimately and insidiously through the renovation of their diets. Arjun's excitement at having become a new, more complete kind of Indian provocatively modulates what Grewal (2008: 180) sets forth as an Indian "elite" produced "through knowledge of and contact with the West", for this "knowledge of and contact with the West" is ingested. And these ingestions are decidedly, marks of their displacement.

Food is an important buttress in the power structures of British colonial India. It is worthwhile, therefore, to ponder a different valuation of British "'lashings' of sandwiches" and "'oodles' of beer" in contrast to Arjun's veneration (Ghosh 2000: 259). This figures in a story of food told over food, "an odd little incident" which "ruptured" the "flow of the meal": Hardy's love of chapatis (Ghosh 2000: 280). If Arjun devours English food happily, Hardy eats it only "dutifully" because "he was one of those chaps who, no matter how hard they tried, simply could not get by without his daily dal-roti" (Ghosh 2000: 281). As concerns food, this is not an issue. The "Indian food" Hardy hankered for was readily available "somewhere in town" and also in the "messes" for the "other ranks"; even his being partial to chapati is recognised as "a common occurrence among Indian officers" (Ghosh 2000: 281). Having already "dutifully [eaten] whatever was served in the mess" with other officers, Hardy does his due as an officer of the British Indian Army where food is concerned (Ghosh 2000: 281). He fulfils the requirements for belonging to "an elite" who were "eligible to be rulers" or, as Arjun would

have it, one of "the first modern Indians" (Ghosh 2000: 279). Food – chapati – becomes an entanglement worthy of critical attention because of how Ghosh positions this anecdote: it masterfully unmasks the power dynamics of British colonial India underwritten on food preferences.

Told by one of the officers "in a loud, derisory 'ragging' voice", the comment that "Hardy should be here: he's the one who really loves chapatis" causes a startled silence to descend on the group, and everyone "turned suddenly grave" (Ghosh 2000: 280). Chapati appears to be the issue. Even so, as has been established, Hardy's partiality for and accessibility to chapatis is hardly a problem. It becomes ever more consequential that the narrative offers no direct account for why this "apparently innocuous" reference to chapati brings about this "startling effect" at the dinner table (Ghosh 2000: 280). In response to Dinu's curiosity, Arjun explains that Hardy "was in a row last year" (Ghosh 2000: 280), because he had "crossed an unseen line" when he "started visiting the other ranks' messes" for chapati and to spend time with "some of the men" he had called "'uncle' as a child" (Ghosh 2000: 281). The narrative focus shifts subtly but significantly from eating Indian food to a deeper, concealed cause of the trouble: the other ranks – the uncles – were rankled because Hardy's presence stood reminder that they were bound to serve under him and, for them, to "serve under Indians was a dilution" of the "privilege" of having direct "relationship with their British officers" (Ghosh 2000: 281). Lurking beneath what appears to be an inappropriate appetite for chapatis and Hardy's attendant overfamiliarity with the other ranks in the satisfaction of said appetite is a complicated bundle of sentiments which propels to the fore the ambivalent notion of an Indian officer. At once an acknowledged representation of command in the British Indian Army and a visual representation of his being Indian, Hardy as an officer inhabits a strange and estranging position: he is at once Indian and not Indian, at once British and not British. By eating English food only as an obligation to his rank, Hardy is not at home with his position in the British Army; having been spurned by the uncles of his childhood with whom he ate chapatis, Hardy can no longer be at home with his Indian identity.

Ghosh's attention to form and structure in this instance of *The Glass Palace* very lightly but brilliantly evokes the conflicting notions of pride and prestige inscribed on the consciousness of the colonial subjects, officers and other ranks alike. The British Indian Army is, in effect, the executive arm of the colonial enterprise in South Asia; grooming Indian officers for command fosters an elite group within the colonial population which extends the efficacy and reach of British rule. Nevertheless, all that this seeming eliteness achieves for the Indian officers is only an empty promise akin to "a carrot on a stick – something that's dangled in front of their noses to keep them going, but always kept out of reach" (Ghosh 2000: 284). This depiction, folded into an excursus on food that began with Arjun's sentiments on English fare and later Hardy's experiences with the chapatis, finds analogy with Homi

Bhabha's (2001) profound insights expressed in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse". The regulated diets and mannerisms of the British Army figure as a "system of 'interpellation'– a reform of manners" which, through repeated imbibing and mimicked relish, provides Arjun and Hardy with "a sense of personal identity" (Bhabha 2001: 362). They then become "authorized versions of otherness" (p. 362).

That mimicry provides not an identity but merely "a sense of personal identity" is particularly suggestive in the case of Arjun and Hardy (p. 362). An essential indeterminacy surfaces, since senses are notoriously subjective and, devastatingly for Arjun later, subject to shifts and destruction. The recasting of Indian officers as English dislocates their identity as Indian; their becoming English remains an unaccomplished endeavour because they are only ever "almost the same but not quite" (p. 361). It is not for nothing that Hardy's chapati transgression is couched in his having "crossed an unseen line" (Ghosh 2000: 281). Because Hardy's identity subsists on ambivalence, the precise delineation of behaviour demanded by the power dynamics of the British Indian Army must be correspondingly indeterminate: eating chapatis is almost the root cause of the issue and not quite.

Ghosh's characterisation of Arjun and Hardy in relation to food is, in many ways, an evocative elaboration on Bhabha's (2001: 361) concept of mimicry: "Mimicry is ... the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriate' the Other [the colonial subject] as it visualizes power". The above exploration of food illustrates the "complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline", but further nuances are enclosed in how colonial "power" is visualised (Bhabha 2001: 361). With its intricate structures and organisational pomp, the British Indian Army renders visual its power over the colonial subjects of India. As officers in the army, Arjun and Hardy visualise colonial power by participating in the system, thereby lending it credence and substance. Yet, their very participation in the army is also a perpetual, and more pronounced, subjugation by the colonial regime. For colonial power is not only visualised *by* the army, it visualises itself *on* and *through* Arjun and Hardy and every other Indian officer marching about the occupied territories. The root of this can be traced back to Thomas Macaulay's (1835: 7) point: "we must at present do our best to form a ... class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect". This identity of this class of persons, to which Hardy and Arjun both belong, are by definition split. Such a colonial subject's proximity with the colonial regime is, then, proportionate to his/her displacement; Arjun's initially confident sense having found a home and an identity in the army deals him, in the end, the greatest and most affecting sense of despair. Diaspora, in this case, need not be a physical exodus from one's home, since Indians in India suffer this displacement no less severely. The narrative trajectory of Arjun and Hardy is threaded in no small part by food

and their sense of home defined overwhelmingly, if not entirely, by loss. Where, then, is home?

It should be evident thus far, though nonetheless worthwhile to note, that the foregoing examination of Ghosh's sophisticated aesthetic shaping of *The Glass Palace* is not an exercise in indulging the frivolously beautiful. Neither is it, according to Boehmer (2010: 170), simply "a western, middle-class indulgence", a common objection to an aesthetic approach to postcolonial literature. Carefully analysing the literary aesthetics in *The Glass Palace* discerns for a postcolonial reading many nuances of food that underlie the extensive power networks in British colonial India. The realities facing Arjun and Hardy in the colonial setup are frightening but this very expression is only fulfilled by a tactful interpretation of the aesthetically refined language and form. As a counterpoint to the so far dispiriting readings of food, an examination of Peranakan legacies in *The Glass Palace* illuminates a more uplifting notion of home.

"Nyonya food" is, after all, a blend of cultures and flavours that Elsa calls "the world's last great secrets" (Ghosh 2000: 365). To begin understanding the importance of Nyonya food in the representation of Alison's home, a different kind of home from what Arjun and Hardy sought in the army, one must trace her genealogy to her grandfather Saya John's history. In the opening chapter of *The Glass Palace*, Saya John tells Rajkumar: "I am, like you, an orphan, a foundling," "brought up by Catholic priests in a town called Malacca" (Ghosh 2000: 10). Saya John stands at the crossroads of many cultures: he looks "Chinese", carries a "Christian name" and speaks a number of the "Indian" languages, and he has been called "a *dhobi ka kutta* – a washerman's dog" and told that he is "*na ghar ka na ghat ka* – you don't belong anywhere, either by the water or on land" (Ghosh 2000: 10). This fusion of cultural traits inheres in Saya John's not having a home. In Saya John's son Matthew is a similar intermingling of cultures. Having spent years in New York City and becoming "extremely urbane in manner", Matthew marries Elsa Hoffman, "a foreigner and a Protestant" (Ghosh 2000: 193). This family into which Alison is born is made up of such cultural diversity that converged upon Morningside Rubber Estate, Saya John's venture into the rubber plantation business, and a new home for them grew from this.

Morningside is a monument to wood built on Matthew's acknowledgement of how "[e]verything I have, I owe to trees of one kind or another" (Ghosh 2000: 219). However, it is also much more a home that, through Elsa's cooking, wafts with the smells and flavours of food: "gulai tumis, fish cooked with pink ginger buds, bunga kuntan", "Prawns roasted in Pandanus leaves", "Nine-layered rice cakes", "Chicken with blue flower – bunga telang", "Pickled fish with turmeric leaves and lime leaves and leaves of purple mint," a "salad of shredded squid and polygonum and daun kado" (Ghosh 2000: 219-220). It is significant that food at Morningside is unlike the purely factual, functional designations for food in the officers' mess in the British Indian

Army: they merely have “bacon, ham and sausages at breakfast; roast beef and pork chops for dinner” (Ghosh 2000: 279). Even the “‘lashings’ of sandwiches” and “‘oodles’ of beer” suggests a creative use of language for description more than thoughtful preparation of or eating food (Ghosh 2000: 259). Food, at Morningside, is beautiful. It is no simple matter of ingredients like “fish”, “Chicken” and “Prawns”. It is “cooked”, “Prepared”, “Pickled”, “shredded”; it gleams with shades of “pink”, “blue” and “purple”; it contains many types of “leaves”, “flowers” and “buds” (Ghosh 2000: 219-220). The dishes kindle a plethora of fragrances, mixtures, textures and layers, all of which are ornamented by Malay names and English descriptions: they are to be savoured in more ways than one. Food creates an atmosphere of home, a sense of belonging that, despite including a range of cultural and religious differences, binds Saya John’s family together.

Such a legacy steeped in beauty and affection survives even the devastating tragedies of Matthew and Elsa’s death in a car accident and Saya John’s increasing “tendency towards confusion” (Ghosh 2000: 332). Alison gives an everyday dinner the thought and attention that Elsa gives to a feast in the instance explored above. Alison tells Arjun about the dishes they were having when he inadvertently intrudes upon her meal with Saya John and Dinu:

> We call this *ayam limau purut* – chicken with lime leaves and tamarind; and here’s some prawn sambal with screwpine leaves; and these are belacan brinjals; and over there is some chinchalok with chillies – shrimps, pickled in lime juice; and this here is fish steamed with ginger buds.
>
> (Ghosh 2000: 364)

Here, too, “fish”, “chicken” and “prawn” make their appearance, but they are spiced up by an entirely different range of “leaves”, “buds” and “chillies” (Ghosh 2000: 364). Amid this blend of food and flavours, Saya John’s memory was “fleetingly clear” for a brief, emotional moment: “It’s the flowers that make the difference,” “Yes – the flowers in the food. Bunga kentan and bunga telang – ginger flowers and blue flowers. They’re what give the food its taste. That’s what Elsa always says” (Ghosh 2000: 365). Home, and the memories of loved ones lost, consists in the artful making of food. If Amitav Ghosh “provocatively portrays” his characters “seeking out spaces associated with beauty and art” in *The Glass Palace*, as John S. Su (2011: 68) posits, then it is in Peranakan food that they find the most beautiful iterations.

Whether charged by potent political implications, in the case of Arjun and Hardy, or charted by private spheres of familial relations, in the case of Saya John’s family at Morningside, the aesthetics of food in *The Glass Palace* allows for a productive and intimate examination of how various homes are represented. Michael Wood (1998: 11) feels that “it is in play that words find their simplest, most immediate form of liberty and life”; this article finds that it is in the play of the tastes of food that Ghosh draws his characters across the broad strokes of history in search of or representing home. Ultimately,

scholarship "in literary food studies is attuned to these culinary moments in a text. They are often to be found in digressions and asides, seemingly incidental to the text" (Shahani 2018: 4).

Food as an integral, aesthetic element in the representation of home is common across both *The Glass Palace* and Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef*, but *Reef* takes the exploration of politics, history and postcolonial interests deeper into the domestic sphere.

Set in the 1960s, as Sri Lanka grapples with the instabilities ensuing from its independence from Britain as a crown colony, *Reef* takes the perspective of Triton's narration, plotted against his growing importance in Mr. Salgado's household, later becoming "his cook as well as everything else" (Gunesekera 1995: 8). As such, the significance of national and international affairs are in many instances tinged by Triton's domestic concerns: "All over the globe revolutions erupted, dominoes tottered and guerrilla war came of age; the world's first woman prime minister – Mrs Bandaranaike – lost her spectacular premiership on our small island, and I learned the art of good housekeeping" (Gunesekera 1995: 45). To articulate global "revolu-tions" and "the world's first woman prime minister" in the same breath as "the art of good housekeeping" suggests not that the significance of politics and history are comparable to Triton's chores (Gunesekera 1995: 45). Instead, this is a point of departure for exploring how the upheavals of post-independence Sri Lanka encroach even on the sheltered domestic domain that Triton and Mr. Salgado inhabit, which eventually impels them to leave Sri Lanka for England. The politics and revolutions of the outside world are brought into Mr. Salgado's house in the form of stories told by his houseguests when they converge on the food and home that Triton manages.

Triton always "hankered after the real world", hoping "to see Mister Salgado's famous ocean and the life beyond our garden gate" (Gunesekera 1995: 52). Mr. Salgado's house narrowly circumscribes the domestic space that Triton navigates; the "garden gate", a barrier between him and the outside world. As Triton admits, "I didn't know what happened much beyond our lane," and "I had no idea how much I did not know about the city", and "I could not visualize the lie of the land, the real geography of the city or the sea between countries" (Gunesekera 1995: 29). Not being able to "visualize the lie of the land" and the "real geography of the city or the sea between countries" suggest that the political dynamics both within and without Sri Lanka are, at least at this point in the narrative, beyond Triton (Gunesekera 1995: 29). Triton's creating a home marked by his flourishing culinary feats is not impeded by this lack of knowledge, though the outside world does find its surreptitious way into Mr. Salgado's house. Dias's story instantiates this well:

> His words conjured up adventurers from Indian north and south, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British, each with their flotillas of disturbed hope and manic wanderlust. They had come full of the promise of cinnamon,

> pepper, clove, and found a refuge in this jungle of demons and vast quiet waters.
>
> (Gunesekera 1995: 85)

In Gunesekera's subtle aesthetic rendering of these apparently simple lines, Triton's threefold fascination can be distinguished here. Firstly, the "adventurers" of mixed origins with "their flotillas" convey a glimpse of a grander world inflamed by grand purposes outside Mr. Salgado's house: this is part of the history of the world. Secondly, the "cinnamon, pepper, clove" are spices that Triton, as a cook, is sensitive to: this is part of what makes food. Thirdly, "this jungle of demons and vast quiet waters" refers to Sri Lanka: this is where the Portuguese and the Dutch and the British found "refuge", and where Triton builds a home. Through these, Gunesekera paints a picture of Sri Lanka's having been impacted by the spice trade, colonial powers and their views of Asian civilisations. As Parama Roy (2010: 7) puts forward,

> Colonial politics often spoke in an indisputably visceral tongue: its experiments, engagements, and traumas were experienced in the mouth, belly, olfactory organs, and nerve endings, so that the stomach served as a kind of somatic political unconscious in which the phantasmagoria of colonialism came to be embodied.

Beyond this, Gunesekera evokes Triton's fledgling sense of being part of a larger world with a distinct history. Triton's glimpse into the outside world begins even before he sees "Mister Salgado's ocean" or "traverses the sea between countries" (Gunesekera 1995: 29). It begins with the stories of houseguests.

Nili brings new rhythms and a different narrative ambit to Mr. Salgado's house. Her arrival is both an entry into the house and an opening up of Mr. Salgado and Triton's lives. As she becomes a central presence, initially as a houseguest, then as Mr. Salgado's love interest who "moved in" and heralded "the beginning of a new era", Triton learns substantially more about the world and about the love between people (Gunesekera 1995: 103). All of this is harmonised by food. This is manifested first in the "*One Hundred Recipes from Around the World*, illustrated, bound in hard cloth covers with a jacket showing dishes shooting out of a globe" that Nili gives to Triton for Christmas (Gunesekera 1995: 96). The "dishes shooting out of a globe" potently sketches how the world can be perceived through food or, rather, that the world can be understood through recipes and fusions of tastes that are undisturbed by political variances (Gunesekera 1995: 96). In this way, "Food is the ultimate seducer" (Gunesekera 1995: 98), not only because Mr. Salgado's relationship with Nili is built on her "coming to tea" on the "*poya*-holiday of April 1969" and enjoying the "little coconut cakes – kavum – patties, egg sandwiches, ham sandwiches, cucumber sandwiches, even *love-*

cake" Triton prepares, but also because food becomes the conduit for Triton's development of an astute sense of proportion and beauty (Gunesekera 1995: 64).

In the opening pages of *Reef*, the narrative tracks Mr. Salgado's preferences for "western food" when he was at home alone: "Small discs of fried meat and creamy mashed potatoes that disappeared without a trace into his body. Corned beef was a favorite" (Gunesekera 1995: 8). This distinctly "western" meal becomes refined by Triton's creation of a "special hash": "crispy corned beef roasted with potatoes, onions and green chilli, dappled with soy sauce and brown sugar" (Gunesekera 1995: 8). In a perhaps unexpected manner, this mixing of western nosh with Asian flavours elicits a different aspect of the complexities behind the study of literary aesthetics in postcolonial writing. As John S. Su (2011: 66) points out, "Focusing on the aesthetics of post-colonial literary texts (...) risks denying cultural differences under a universalizing Enlightenment discourse", since "aesthetics involved an elitist notion of 'high culture' that devalued artistic works produced from Britain's colonies". Yet, Triton's creation of this "special hash" is not a blind valorising of western models of taste. Gunesekera vividly portrays how an Asian palate enhances western cuisine because the "onions and green chilli" and "soy sauce and brown sugar" add colour and spice to the "crispy corned beef roasted with potatoes" (Gunesekera 1995: 8). The western food that Mr. Salgado likes is augmented and perfected by Asian touches.

Unlike Arjun's attempts to blindly assimilate into a western dietary regimen in *The Glass Palace*, Triton's sensitivity to Mr. Salgado's sometimes pernickety preferences shows how "aesthetic categories central to Enlighten-ment reason are reclaimed and redeployed within postcolonial texts" to great effect (Su 2011: 67). Triton's knack for synthesising new and diverse elements through dishes accomplishes in the kitchen what some postcolonial thinkers in their criticisms could not: the blending of western aesthetic discourse with what Robert Young (1998: 7) calls "representative minority experience" need not entail a ranking of one over the other. For an aesthetic approach to postcolonial writing means not "a western, middle-class indulgence", but "asking what makes up the singularity of the postcolonial artefact" (Boehmer 2010: 170). Far from recourse to universalising cate-gories, a tactful interpretation of literary aesthetics in postcolonial texts elucidates hitherto unnoticed details, in turn shading postcolonial concerns more strikingly.

Like much else in life, the comforts of home earnestly cultivated by Triton's management of Mr. Salgado's house are irrevocably altered by circumstances beyond them. The mounting turbulence post-independence threatens and ultimately ends their time in Sri Lanka, leading Mr. Salgado to remark on how "[o]ur civilizations are so frail" (Gunesekera 1995: 172). A backdrop of violence grips Sri Lanka: "a savage brutalizing whereby our *chandiyas* – our braggarts – would become thugs, our dissolutes turn into mercenaries and our

leaders excel as small-time megalomaniacs" (Gunesekera 1995: 108). Curiously, the "poker game" Mr. Salgado hosts is this fragmenting civilisation writ small (Gunesekera 1995: 139). The indulgence Mr. Salgado affords Triton in the civility of their home evaporates with Tippy's outstaying his welcome. In his increasingly rowdy drunkenness, Tippy orders Triton, "'Pour the tea, *kolla*'", brusquely foregrounding the fact that Triton is a servant: "He didn't even look at me when I served him his cup" (Gunesekera 1995: 152). What Triton felt more acutely was that callous treatment of his "lasagne" in the aftermath of this poker game:

> Inside the house, in the dining-room, I found my *sambol* on the floor. The dish rolled under the dining-table. The lasagne I had made and kept in the fridge was on the table with a great, gaping hole in the middle where someone had scooped out a spoonful. My heart slipped in my chest. If they were hungry, I should have been there. I found a spoon by the lamp and meat sauce on the wall. My lasagne.
>
> (Gunesekera 1995: 157)

A language of displacement and violence springs from these lines: the "sambol" was "on the floor", the "dish under the dining-table", the "spoon by the lamp," the "meat sauce on the wall" (Gunesekera 1995: 157). This is analogous to the political turmoil that Sri Lanka reels from, illustrated by how the civilities of home and food are quickly disappearing. At the heart of home is the sense of belonging but, like Triton's lasagne, there is now a "great, gaping hole in the middle where someone had scooped out a spoonful" (Gunesekera 1995: 157).

Reef is not as overtly preoccupied with postcolonial concerns as *The Glass Palace*, but the above scenes and resonances depict similar losses of homes, ones built from diverse and meticulous attention to food. What makes this study of food in its representing home a rewarding one is that it traces the place of literary aesthetics in its stimulating postcolonial concerns. The impermanence of home seems to be a disheartening truth of life but what Triton realises at the end of *Reef* colours an important understanding of one's situation in history:

> I was learning that human history is always a story of somebody's diaspora: a struggle between those who expel, repel or curtail – possess, divide and rule – and those who keep the flame alive from night to night, mouth to mouth, enlarging the world with each flick of a tongue.
>
> (Gunesekera 1995: 174)

If one repositions the disheartening impermanence of home through the undervalued beauties of food, the joys and vigours in life could be savoured regardless of political troubles. The "flame" could be kept "alive from night to night, mouth to mouth" and through the relish of food, one could constantly

be finding and building home, "enlarging the world with each flick of a tongue" (Gunesekera 1995: 174). Crucially, such readings will, as Gitanjali Shahani (2018: 16) finds,

> render hollow accusations that the scholarly turn to food is the result of a cynical, we-have-nothing-left-to-turn-to boredom. As a field, food studies reveals itself to be less concerned with food fetishes and food fads than it is with recovering important stories and histories that cannot be told without food.

Broadly, all postcolonial writing bear out with Gayatri Spivak's (1999: 32) notion of the "subaltern group, whose identity is its difference", as it attempts to represent subjects who are variously "unrepresentable", and who cannot "know and speak itself". In spite of this "unrepresentable" nature of the "subaltern subject", Spivak (1999: 32) says that the "intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation". Representation is fundamentally artistic, which means that postcolonial writing, however revolutionary, its underlying political intention is inextricable from literary aesthetics. The "representative minority experience", which Robert Young (1998: 7) insists is the point of postcolonialism, is not innately poised against "aesthetic qualities" of literary texts. For the study of literary aesthetics productively extends the scope and discourse of postcolonial criticism. And, as Spivak (1999: 32) suggests, postcolonial writing is, in the first instance, a matter of "representation". Michael Wood (1998: 13) concurs: he finds in his study of contemporary fiction that "Literature is too close to (the writing of) history to resist it, and quite often it just *is* history, taking a figurative form". Although history pervades literature, literature should not be read as feeding off a sense of injustice or guilt or anger that postcolonial writing sometimes over-emphasises. Incidentally, on this note, there is some value in exploring the concomitant issues of using English as a language through which colonial legacies are explored in what is called "postcolonial literature", but to denounce writing in English as blankly complicit in extending colonial hegemonies is overkill. Appreciation and attention should be paid to what is written, not what it is written with.

Much as this foregoing discussion is concerned primarily with the many joys of food. From colourful cuisines to creative recipes, it is the sophisticated narratives woven by Amitav Ghosh in *The Glass Palace* and by Romesh Gunesekera in *Reef* that artfully inform the many and varied concepts of home in postcolonial writing. Far from competing with its theoretical and political aims, the study of literary aesthetics in postcolonial literature does not undermine its theoretical and political aims. In fact, it sharpens readers' perceptions and appreciations for the socio-political agendas that condition postcolonial writing, fulfilling and meaningfully extending the purview of postcolonial literatures.

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