



Portrayal of Kerala Cuisine and Geo-Cultural Narrative in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract: The paper entitled as 'Portrayal of Kerala Cuisine and Geo-Cultural Narrative in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*' examines how food and geography symbolizes a hidden culture of Kerala society. The paper focus on 1997 Man Booker Prize won novel of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. By the representation of various indigenous cuisines like mango pickles, jam, jelly preserves, *appam*, tapioca, pepper etc. Roy tracked a cuisine culture exclusively for Keralites. Simultaneously, geographical narrative in the novel also proves the incredible culture of backwaters, mountains etc. By using a fictional town namely, *Ayemenem*; Roy extended the setting to the realistic place of *Kottayam*. Like atoms combine to form giant molecules, like shots combine to form movie, small things in the life of *Ayemenem* people combine to form the novel. The portrayal of ordinary people and their realistic life even though settled in a fictional arena, Roy's thought of small things is outstanding.

Keywords: Kerala cuisines, culture and hybridity, geographical narrative, hidden culture

Introduction: Why are human food habits so diverse? Why do Americans recoil at the thought of dog meat? Jews and Moslems, Pork? Hindus, Beef? Why do Asians abhor milk? In good to eat, best-selling author Marvin Harris leads readers on an informative detective adventure to solve the world major food puzzles. The diversity of world gastro-economic customs, demonstrating that what appears at first glances to be irrational food tastes turn out really to have been shaped by practical, economic or political necessity. Food is a cultural resource that has the potential to facilitate a number of community benefits. For South Asians, food regularly plays a role in how issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity and national identity are imagined as well as how national belonging are affirmed or resisted. Culinary Arts are the cuisine art of food preparation and cooking usually in the form of meals. The origins of culinary arts began with primitive human roughly two million years ago. There are various theories as to how early humans used to fire to cook meat.

God's Own Country, Kerala: Let's have a glance at the geography and culinary of God's Own Country, Kerala. What is Kerala most famous for? Kerala is well-known for its mesmerizing backwaters, eco-tourism initiatives, serene beauty, amazing beaches and mouth-watering cuisines. According to Hindu mythology, Kerala was created by Lord Parasurama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu by throwing his axe across the sea to create new land for his devotees to live peacefully. So, Kerala is God's own creation, hence it is called God's own country. Kerala is considered as the land of diversities in languages, tradition, rituals, religions, clothing and moreover foods. Being the best host who take care and treat the guests well; food is a strong bond between the host and the guest. Indigenous cuisines like rice and curry, tapioca, pickles with spices, appam, fish fries portray an age-old culinary culture of Kerala. The purpose of delivering the idea about food culture and culinary art followed by geographical culture represent how food epitomizes the diversity and traditionality of a particular geo-culture. Being a diverse culture-based country; India. The soul of identity of each citizen lies in the hard-core of the culture in which he/she were born. Those hard-core culture include the festive, clothing, religions, socio-political and economic backdrop of society and food. Yes, food plays an inevitable momentum of each society. So, the paper aimed how food habits and geography describes a particular society's unique culture and identity.

Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* is about the childhood experiences of fraternal twins whose lives are destroyed by the love laws that lay down 'who should be loved, and how. And how much.' The novel beautifully explained how small things affect people's behaviour and lives. The novel is settled in a native place called Ayemenem in Kerala. Story focusses on the themes of casteism, Kerala politics of 1960s, 70s, marginalization of women, cultural hybridity etc. Roy's Man Booker Prize winning book *The God of Small Things* keenly depicted the small things that affect the lives of characters like Estha, Rahel, Ammu, Velutha, Chacko, Sophie mol etc. Being a half Malayali and Bengali, Roy herself had a bilingual cultural identity. It can be seen throughout the novel as in the cases of Chacko as an Indian and his wife Margaret as Western woman, Ammu and her divorced husband (from Calcutta), Sophie mol (half Indian and half white). To some extent Roy's personal life can be connected with Ammu in the story. Both the women haven't succeeded in their marital life. If Roy is a woman of vox-populi; Ammu is a suppressive daughter, wife and mother.

The book is a semi-autobiography and major part captures her childhood experiences in Aymenem. The book was listed as one of *The New York Times* and reached fourth position on *The New York Times* bestsellers list for independent fiction. The book received stellar reviews in major American newspapers such as *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, in Canadian publications such as *Toronto Star* etc. It was one of the five best books of 1997 according to *Time*. Since the success of her novel, Roy has written a television serial, *The Banyan Tree*. After that, Roy was working on second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

The setting of the story is in Kerala, a state on India's tropical Malabar Coast. It's known for its palm-lined beaches and backwaters, a network of canals, mountains whose slopes support tea, coffee, spice plantations as well as wildlife. Because of widespread natural habitat and biodiversity coloured with greenery, thick forests, mountains etc the colour green signifies the essence of so-called Kerala Culture. So,

in a sense we can analyse that Roy deliberately gave the colour green to her book cover in order to signify the soul of so-called Kerala culture and geography.

The Hidden Kerala: Roy portrayed a hidden Kerala culture using food (cuisine) and geographical narration as metaphor. Edible oils, pepper, spices were introduced by foreigners in Kerala. By the arrival of Portuguese, British and others, Christianity; a new religious belief system emerged in the age-old land. Before the introduction of Christianity, Hinduism, feudalism was dominated by the society. Caste system and untouchability were prevalently dominated. Only the upper caste men enjoyed a prestigious life in the society. Literacy was also given to them. Paravan like Velutha, was considered as the servants to the upper caste family. In this novel the dominant Rev. Ipe family occupies a prestigious position in *Ayemenem*. They were educated and the family had followed a mixed culture of both eastern and western. Roy gave her first chapter's name as Paradise Pickles & Preserves because she tried to picturize her female character in a high esteem by allocating them certain jobs in the society. Cultivation of various agricultural food items like banana, jackfruits, pepper, paddy fields, rice, sugar canes, mangoes and tomatoes in a family picturizes their status in that particular society in Kerala context. Roy introduced certain products like instant milk products, teabags, coca-cola, fanta, liquors etc represents its western origin and their impact in Kerala cuisine markets after the British invasion in Kerala culture. The cuisines also made a transition from organic traditional Kerala society to an artificial commercialized overseas market society, in which income matters. Exporting and importing of products paved the way for many multinational company's arrival and constitutes the traditional Kerala society into a globalized marketplace among other developing and developed countries.

This paper focusses on Kerala Cuisine and Geo-Cultural Narrative in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* there by find out the hidden culture in which Roy depicted through the metaphorical portrayal of foods and geography. The concept of hybrid culture and commercialized cultural transition during 1960s and 70s Kerala society. The article aimed to find out how Arundhati Roy portray Kerala culture in her celebrated novel *The God of Small Things*. Metaphorizing through the images of food and geography, Roy drew a canvas of Kerala. Transformation of eastern culture into western form is also depicted here as a hidden culture. By using the tool of textual analysis, the novel keenly visualizes the greenery, describe the geographical beauty, sensationalised the delicacy tastes and the shift into a consumer western culture of the land. Incorporating the ideologies of William Raymond and Cultural Studies theory; the topic under discussion paved a relevancy in the current societal digital Indian world of degrading culture and moral values.

Kerala Cuisine and *The God of Small Things*: "And the air was full of thoughts and things to say. But at times like these, only the small things are ever said. Big things lurk unsaid inside" (Roy, p. 1). Arundhati Roy beautifully depicted in her work about the Kerala culture of 1960s, 70s. As the title proved how small things in our day to day made up a life, just like atoms combine to form giant molecules. Divided into 21 chapters, Roy gave her first chapter's name as Paradise Pickles & Preserves because she tried to picturize her female character in a high esteem by allocating them certain jobs in the society. Cultivation of various agricultural food items like banana, jackfruits, pepper, paddy fields and rice, sugar canes, mangoes, tomatoes

in a family picturizes their status in that society in Kerala context. Roy introduced certain products like instant milk, teabags, coca-cola, fanta, liquors represent its western origin and their impact in Kerala cuisine markets after the British invasion in Kerala culture. The cuisines also made a transition from organic traditional Kerala society to an artificial commercialized overseas market society, in which income matters. Exporting and importing of products paved the way for many multinational company's arrival and constitutes the traditional Kerala society into a globalized marketplace among other developing and developed countries. Roy began the novel by picturizing the month of May in Kerala as a hot and brooding one. Followed by the class vacation of school students, plucking of mangoes from mango tree gave cheerfulness as well as companionship to the blazing summer days. By the beginning of June- July breaking of the south-west monsoon with breeze and water in the environment makes nature as gloomy and passive. The indigenous spices like pepper considered as black money stole the hearts of even Portuguese. Cultivation of various agriculture like tapioca, pepper in a particular house makes them a village head or feudal king in the so-called Kerala culture. "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, dust green trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruit burst." (Roy, 1)

But by early June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take roots and bloom. Brick walls turn moss green. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Roy keenly observed the day-to-day life of Keralites. Each village is called *Gramam* in native Malayalam dialect, have a feudal king or *Janmi* followed by his hectares of land, his labourers of lower castes, owned by either a *kudumbha-kshethram* or temple and church. There must be a village town called *kavala* in which all the people gathered for buying and selling essential things including garments, foods etc. Food supplying shop from the government called ration *kada*. *Kada* means shop. Food kit from ration *kada* include rice harvested directly from these feudal king's paddy fields by his lower caste labourers. Then dals, lentils etc. Vegetables are cooked directly from the yards of each house. Each feudal family have their own home cultivation of supplies like mangoes, tapioca, jackfruit, guava, curry leaves, tomatoes, lady's finger, bitter-gourd, cardamom, nutmeg, oil from coconut, toddy, turmeric, sugarcane, banana plantation etc.

Past Sophie mol's yellow church. Past the Ayemenem Youth Kung Fu Club. Past the tender bud nursery school (for touchable), past the ration shop that sold rice, sugar and bananas that hung in yellow bunches from the roof, cheap soft-porn magazines about fictitious South Indian sex fiends were clipped with clothes pegs to ropes that hung from the ceiling. (Roy,13)

Ipe family in *Ayemenem* occupies a prestigious position in Roy's story. They are considered as hybrid of both eastern and western culture. Still the family followed very traditional cultures of home cultivation as well as pickle factory business. The name of the pickle factory 'Paradise Pickles & Preserves' in *The God of Small Things* represents the religious as well as orthodoxy Christian culture of Ipe family. Roy found that the people of Kerala followed a strict discipline religion either from a Christian thought or from the mythical Hindu epics. In this story Ipe family beliefs, the sins, and curses of Jesus Christ. They tried to make those

gospels into practical life situations; but unable to follow completely. “Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria, the vinegar-hearted, short-tempered, midget cook, were the only people left in the *Ayemenem* house.” (Roy, 15)

Narration style in *Small Things* became more and more impressive as we immersed into the story deeply. Roy metaphorizes her characters with that of the indigenous cuisines like vinegar and toddy. The method of making vinegar at home was a common practice in most home in Kerala about 50 to 70 years ago. In olden days cooking was done with firewood. So, in the kitchen there would be a place in which you can cook by using firewood for the meals. It is called *Adupp* in Malayalam. The heat from the burning wood is needed in the fermentation process. As the whole fermentation process takes around 35 to 45 days, but once the vinegar is ready it can preserve for 2 years or even more. One of the key factors of Kerala cuisine is rich in health benefits. Like organic coconut vinegar is loaded with B vitamin amino acids, fibres, essential enzymes and pro-biotics, anti-microbial and anti-bacterial properties. So, if applied it on the surface of the skin it can safely treat conditions like acne or sunburn. It can also use in pickles, curries and even salads. It also helps to balance the hormones. Organic coconut vinegar is fermented from coconut toddy. Coconut toddy is collected from the scalp of coconut tree and a toddy tapper climbs the tree out open the vein and attaches an earthen wear pot just below the exposed way. This is usually done late in the afternoon next day about 5 am. The toddy tapper climbs the coconut tree and collect the earthen pot already attached to it. After the fermentation of coconut toddy oxidised from air with bacterial action finally got the organic coconut vinegar. Housemaker women in Kerala society considered this process as a way of economical safety way to them. Even today toddy business paved the path for many eco-tourist developments in Kerala's tourist sector. The character like Mammachi from the story is a clear example for independent economic women. Mammachi's pickle factory is a kind of economic safety business for her.

From the dinning-room window where she stood, with the wind in her hair, Rahel could see the rain down on the rusted tin roof of what used to be their grandmother's pickle factory. Paradise Pickles & Preserves. They used to make pickles, squashes, jams, curry powders and canned pineapples. And banana it because according to their specifications it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency they said. As per their books. Looking back now, to Rahel it seemed as though this difficulty that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question. (Roy, 30) Pointing to the next ingredient of Kerala cuisine from the story; Pickles. Pickles from home cultivated mangoes, limes, nutmegs, garlicks, chillies, fish, meat etc. It is evident that why Roy gave importance to food supplies as well as serene beauty of God's own country as the soul in her masterpiece work. Ms. Roy is fascinated by the intensified and meditated natural wilderness of the greenish land. The age old culinary as the part of various religious-festive and wedding occasions among the people of Kerala. It is considered as a major part of Kerala *sadhya*. *Sadhya* is a popular cuisine during the occasions of wedding, Onam festivals etc. banana leaf is also a symbol of *sadhya*; in which it offers many health benefits.

Roy observed that the food habits and seasonal climatic changes are mutually associated in Kerala. For example, mangoes during summer season mentioned in the story. Harvesting of pepper after monsoon. Cultivation of paddy during the mid of summer-monsoon season. Cultivation of tapioca during monsoon. Ripening of jackfruits etc. Jackfruits is another source of income for homemaker like Mammachi in the story. She used to cook it as jam, jelly, chips, *chakka-puzhukku* etc. Like that banana plantations also considered as an income of source. Fresh bananas are used for fry in order to make banana chips. Another major ingredient of *sadhya* known as *upperi* is use from ripened banana. It provides a lot of health benefits as well as skin care regimes. Banana leaves used for cooking food to make the food tastier. The dining system of Kerala also picturizes familial as well as social culture. From the story it is clear that Ipe and his family followed a system of joint family which were prevalent among traditional families in Kerala like Ipe's. Women member of a family were allowed to eat only after the meals of aged and young men's meals. There is a system existing that the wife must serve the foods to her husbands. If a women failed to obey these dining rules, she is not an ideal home woman in the typical Kerala society.

There is a paravan called Velutha in the story. Feudal family in Kerala society practiced a system of *kumbilil kanji* Kanji means rice filled with rice water and salt. A Paravan like Velutha, firstly makes a 6 inch by 6inch hole in the soft mud by scooping it out, before pushing the banana leaf into the hole to make it look like container. Into this leaf container the thambran (owner or landowner) pours the rice with water (kanji) usually *thambrans* are very miserly so just give the farm worker one green chilly to bite while drinking the rice water. Another ingredient of cuisine incredible to Keralites is 'appam' which is also depicted in her novel. It is a type of pancake, originating from South India, made with fermented rice batter and coconut milk, common in Kerala. It is eaten most frequently for breakfast or dinner. Variants like *palappam* (made with milk), *kallappam* (made with toddy), *vellayappam*. It has a combination of meat curry is best served.

Towards the end of the novel, Roy's narration also transformed along with the transformation of 1960s, 70s Kerala society's arrival of readymade as well as packed foods in the consumer society. Food and its economic changes of the global market also influenced the land. Roy introduced certain products like instant milk, teabags, coca-cola, fanta, liquors etc represents its western origin and their impact in Kerala cuisine markets after the British invasion in Kerala culture. The cuisines also made a transition from organic traditional Kerala society to an artificial commercialized overseas market society, in which income matters. Exporting and importing of products paved the way for many multinational company's arrival and constitutes the traditional Kerala society into a globalized marketplace among other developing and developed countries. Roy's novel started with the traditional home-cultivated Kerala cuisine culture and ends into a culture representing the transplantation to an artificial western impact of readymade and packed instant cuisines. So, this shift portrayed the influence of so called modern or western or we can call Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* in cuisines. Ipe family shows the hybridity of both eastern and western culture, thus showed the hybridity in cuisine changing habitat also.

Geo-narrative and *The God of Small Things*: Kerala is well-known for its mesmerizing backwaters, eco-tourism initiatives, serene beauty, amazing beaches and mouth-watering cuisines. According to Hindu mythology, Kerala was created by Lord *Parasurama*, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu by throwing his axe across the sea to create new land for his devotees to live peacefully. So, Kerala is God's own creation, hence it is called God's own country. Roy in her work magnificently canvassing the unique beauty of Kerala backwaters and climatic changes. She keenly observed both micro and macro changes in the nature due to weather shifts. There is an initiative called 'Kerala Tourism' launched during the beginning of 1970s and 80s. Eco-tourism paved a new way to cultural studies theory now a days. Eco-tourism is a form of tourism involving responsible travel to natural areas, conserving the environment, and improving the well-being of the local people. Its purpose is to educate the traveller, to provide funds for ecological conservation to directly benefit the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, or to foster respect for different cultures and for human rights.

Even though the setting of the novel *Ayemenem* is a fictional place; but it can be regarded as the extension of the present town of Kottayam. The place is surrounded with *Vembanad* Lake, paddy fields, mountains, waterfalls, mist and snow. It is situated in the basin of the *Meenachil* river. The place is also known as 'City of Letters' as many of the first Malayalam daily newspapers like *Deepika*, *MalayalaManorama* were started and headquartered in Kottayam.

The novel has a disjointed narrative; the temporal setting shifts back and forth between 1969, when fraternal twins Rahel, and Estha are seven years old and 1993, when the twins are reunited. These jumps in time are just as important in creating the setting of the novel as the geographic space is. From the narrative of the novel, Ipe family and Velutha represents 60s socio-political agenda of master-slavery relationship. Roy's description of Ipe family as a feudal king occupies hectares of lands, paddy fields, spices like pepper cultivation, plantations, tapioca cultivation, pickle & preserve factory, vegetable cultivation. Whereas Velutha's family is situated in the basin of Ipe's paddy field. Living in a small hut followed by famine and suppression showed them as the untouchables of Ipe. In a context of the story, Sophie mol lost her life in boat wreck near *Ayemenem* Lake. The representation of boat owned by a family in a typical Kerala society is the symbol of richness and their family's prestige. Ipe's physique of garments he wore showed his family lineage of richness. The so called *mund* for men and *saree* and *neriyathu* for women portray another ingredient to Kerala culture. There is subcategory of clothing depends on which religion or caste a person belongs to. A Christian feudal family like Ipe's woman member wore *chattem mundum* if she belongs to a Hindu feudal family the clothing is changed into *saree* and *neriyath*. So from the clothing of Keralites it is clear to find out which religion or caste they belong to as well as their richness and family's prestige among others. Each major family in a particular place is known with either their family name called *veettu peru* or the name of the oldest man of that family. In our story its Ipe's name.

Arundhati Roy gave a complete picture of Kerala society from 1960s to 90s. She had touched the changes in socio-political, economic, and cultural point of view. From the 60s social agenda of caste system, master-slavery followed by the appearance of communist and Marxist ideologies into the society by KNN Pillai like political leaders in the novel. The novel also epitomized patriarchy and women subordination of

Kerala culture of 60s. Mammachi's transformation into an independent woman owned by a pickle & preserve factory showed a social shift. Housemaker women's economical safety was a new thought during the period. Roy caught the idea and boldly present in her novel. The character Ammu shows an example of subordinate as well as a victim of women molestation. Her affair with Velutha made Ammu a woman of no values for the Ipe family.

Another important objective of the paper is to find out the shift of indigenous Kerala cuisine into ready-made packed foods. This change showed the transformation of a new culture into Kerala society, the consumer culture. During the beginning of 1980s, arrival of various communal ideologies and political parties paved the way for the thought of equality among high caste and low caste people. The transformation of Bombay into Mumbai also influenced the age-old traditional land. A globalized consumer society evolved in which goods and money matters. Exporting and importing paved the way for many industrial developments. Many people were employed. Standard of living increased. At the outburst of these new consumer culture, both radio and television got attention of minds. Advertisements not only made a hidden culture but also exposed the existing one worldwide. Knowledge got a prime position. At this scenario, coca-cola, fanta and other packed milk products entered into the stage. Roy also portrayed this change in cultural shift in her novel. The cuisines also made a transition from organic traditional Kerala society to an artificial commercialized overseas market society.

Conclusion: As the title suggests, Roy keenly observed small things in life in order to make a novel, just like shots and scenes combine to form a movie. The paper proves how culinary art and geographical narrative lead a novel into a regions culture. Culture is everywhere, those who keenly observe it can be able to find out the interesting part of various diversities in culture. It can reflect in the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the language we speak, the religion we work-ship, the geography we live. Raymond Williams define culture as," a system by which meanings and ideas are expressed, not only in art and learning, but also in ordinary behaviour." That is what Roy tried to express in her celebrated novel *The God of Small Things*. Just like how small things are significant in life, how she portrays even the daily ordinary lifestyle of Ipe and Velutha's family support William's definition of culture. From the portrayal of indigenous Kerala cuisine of mango pickle, jam & jelly made with banana, tapioca, spices like pepper, appam etc. Roy showed a hidden culture unique to Keralites. By the way through descriptive narrative of natural habitat of backwaters, monsoon and summer climatic changes, storm-forecasting symbolizes the so-called culture represents God's own country. Hence the paper proved there is a hidden culture in this novel which depict Kerala culture. Roy uses the ingredient for observe cuisine culture are food and geographical narratives.

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