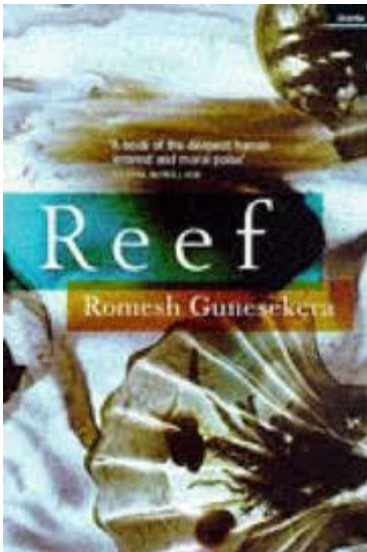


## POSTCOLONIAL EXPERIENCE THROUGH CULINARY TRADITION: AN EXPERIENCE IN ROMESH GUNESEKERA'S *REEF*

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### Abstract

Living in a post colonial society is a different experience altogether. This is the reason why writers from these places try to tell those stories which are particularly their own. Gunesequera is one of those Sri Lankan writers who has created a real picture of the postcolonial reality of Sri Lanka in his works. In *Reef* Gunesequera's effort is to reflect on the vital issues of post colonial Sri Lankan society which are explored with references to the culinary tradition of the country. Gunesequera's novel *Reef* is read with the concern to uncover the postcolonial baggage of the writer in his writing which are pushed forward to the readers with culinary metaphors.

**Key words:** Post colonial, Culinary tradition, Metaphors .

Romesh Gunesequera's *Reef* is a powerful novel that reveals a new way of understanding the postcolonial realities in the modern era - where we are cursed to live in an environmentally challenged world. When in simple words post colonialism can be explained as "the discursive experience of imperialism"- writers at present time explore new dimensions to reveal its impact and influence. Romesh Gunesequera is one of those writers who has an acute observation to uncover the seductive quality of colonialism. Retelling the true culinary tradition of Sri Lanka he has paved the way to understand the colonial baggage that the people of his nation carry in its contemporary postcolonial society . With a fierce voice against injustice and degeneration Gunesequera has proved his talent in justifying the contemporary postcolonial reality of Sri Lanka through imageries and symbols which are related to the tradition of Sri Lankan cooking and food.

The novel *Reef*, is about the lives of a Sri Lankan cook, Triton, and his master, Mister Salgado. Describing the childhood and adolescence of Triton, a restaurateur from Sri Lanka ,Gunesequera has tried to reflect on the political turmoil surrounding the country. In *Reef*, Gunesequera refers to two specific instances of political unrest: the events of 1971, which act as a catalyst for Mister Salgado and Triton to flee to England, as well as the turmoil in 1983. Therefore the political history of Sri Lanka becomes vital in understanding the text. This political history of Sri Lanka is essential enough in understanding the postcolonial reality of the country

which is entangled in Civil War, political unrest, death and destruction. This is the reason why the novel starts at a petrol station at England where the narrator notices that the cashier looks like him as he is also from Sri Lanka, a new refugee settled in the country which once ruled his own nation. Triton the narrator of the story came to England as a refugee but finds a life there as a restaurateur away from the conflict and the turmoil of Sri Lanka. As the author describes Triton's life both in Sri Lanka and England it appears that he is interested in the disjuncture, compressions and confluences of the past with the present, particularly as it relates to Sri Lanka and its conflicts in the post colonial period.

For the speaker of this novel, Mister Salgado's house is the "centre of the universe" where Joseph is the intruder, just like a colonizer colonizing the heart and mind of Triton. The suffocating presence of Joseph is explained as the narrator recalls his past "what I disliked most about Joseph was the power he had over me, the power to make me feel powerless" (p-25). Throughout his stay in Mister Salgado's house he learns to defeat this intruder through "Hot, Dry, red chilies and chillipowder" p-20. Apart from this the presence of Joseph in Salgado's house, a house of a protector of reefs and the sea of Sri Lanka is symbolic enough to understand the impact of the civil war in Sri Lanka. The beauty of reef in Sri Lanka is destroyed in such a manner that its existence can not be realized just like Triton whose existence is negated in the presence of Joseph. In such a situation the author expects that tradition is the only possible strength to fight against all odds in the Island nation.

Triton's journey from Lucy Amma's cooking lessons to the restaurant in England is a journey through physical and mental turmoil. This journey is often explained with culinary metaphors. Here onion is a strong metaphor which is used as a protective shield from oppressors as Triton comments "underneath I found a small basket of red onions. I quickly bit one open and rubbed it all over my hands. Then I put it inside my shirt for my protection." The use of Onion in Sri Lankan food is so vital that the writer has effortlessly used it as a strong medium of transcending traditional values to fight against the post colonial complexities of the island nation. So in the chaos of civil war the only sound that can be heard is "the sound of onion skin rustling from story to story" (p-52). Onion is an escape, a refuge from uncertainty and portable existence of human being in the postcolonial world. For Ginesekera, within the ever changing unstable horror of modern postcolonial existence the static tradition of cooking is essential enough to realize the presence of hope. Therefore in a country where Lucy Amma can remember her place of birth which "had turned from village to jungle and back to village" (p-15) her cooking experience has been stable for years as "the rice still take twenty minutes to cook and if the lid was lifted before the dimples appeared all would be lost" (p-15).

Within the shaky scenario of Sri Lanka the culinary taste is static and unchangeable. Lucy Amma has realized it with all its layers and this is the reason why she can say that the way we swallow food is like the way we make babies and this has not changed throughout the history. Lucy Amma is that static stone which has survived through the ravaging history of Sri Lanka. Her expressions are the result of those withdrawn wishes which are hidden somewhere under the layers of her wrinkles. The trauma resulted from colonial experience and even from its postcolonial hangover is well understood in Lucy Amma's narrative. The aroma of her cooking has the essence of past and of present. Her cooking and its aroma have enabled herself to make a balance between her experiences of past and her realization of the present. The expected change is negotiated with the culinary tradition of Sri Lanka which has imbibed elements of change being static in its approach.

Sri Lanka , its political and social changes after independence is the background of Gunesequera’s novel *Reef*. Holding this background the author has brilliantly established Sri Lankan culinary tradition as a milestone which has the quality to negate change. From coconut rice to fish curry , omnipresence of onion from breakfast to dinner to “Rice Krispies” every bit of it tells a lot about that Sri Lanka which hankers after peace in the contemporary post colonial time. The long withdrawn peace and serenity of Sri Lanka is placed in the food and its aroma in Mr. Salgado’s house. Triton’s capacity to survive through the vigor of Joseph is one side of the scene as the other part is coloured with love , emotion, desire and taste-which are in one way or the other associated with the culinary tradition of Sri Lanka. The social and political crisis of Sri Lanka is dealt with delicate hands in this novel using food metaphors . Gunesequera has proved his talent in understanding the psyche of Sri Lankan people, who are victims of colonization and postcolonial challenges. Here in this novel *Reef* ,Gunesequera has managed to explain the postcolonial experience of Sri Lanka and the people living in that country through the taste and aroma of Sri Lankan food.

Post colonial experience through culinary tradition is well understood in Gunesequera’s novel *Reef* . The writer has tackled the issue with strong and metaphorical language which can easily connect to the reading public.

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