

RECIPES OF HYBRID IDENTITY:

ANGLO-INDIAN FOOD CULTURE AND ETHNICITY IN

ALLAN SEALY'S *THE TROTTER-NAMA*



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Abstract

Among the distinctive ways of articulating cultural identity found in fictional works by ethnic minority writers, references to food culture and eating habits and the unique taste preferences of the respective communities are widely acknowledged. The present study makes an attempt to explore the food culture as expressive of the ethnicity of the Anglo-Indians in Allan Sealy's Trotter-Nama, a work that can be considered as an example of ethnic articulation in Indian English fiction. While narrating the fictional chronicle of the Anglo-Indian Trotter family Allan Sealy's Trotter-Nama traces what and how the members of the Anglo-Indian community in India ate over a period of about two hundred years through seven generations. The novel thus tries to examine the cultural precincts of the Anglo-Indian community as gathered from the community's food preferences and eating habits. It is interesting to note that, for the Anglo-Indians, the traditional food culture is the adoption of mixed varieties from its twin influencing sources, viz., the Indian culture and the European culture. However, they showed a leaning mostly to the West in their food selection and dining table etiquettes. Food can also be approached as a location of resistance of a community, as it is expressive of the beliefs, likes and dislikes that the community inherited from its ancestors as a method of differentiating themselves from the others. Pierre Bourdieu in his Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste argues that quotidian realms like cookery and fashion operate as "symbols of difference"



that “allow the most fundamental social differences to be expressed almost as completely as the most complex and refined expressive systems available in the legitimate arts”. Thus viewed the articulations with reference to the preferences in food, cookery, prohibitions and acceptance of food, recipes and cuisines, and eating habits and etiquettes as portrayed in ethno-fictional works cannot be looked at in isolation, as they have something to do with the ethno-cultural experiences of the respective communities.

Key Words: Anglo-Indian, ethnicity, food culture, food preferences, culinary culture, taste, difference, hybrid, recipe, identity.

Among the various ‘side streams’ in postcolonial Indian literature in English, fictional works by writers belonging to ethnic minority communities in India made tremendous impact on the Indian literary scenario by their distinctive articulations of ethnic and cultural identity. Indian English novelists like Allan Sealy, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy, and Khushwant Singh, to name a few, formulated thematic preferences in many of their works from the distinct ethnic/community experiences of their respective groups. These writers, like their counterparts from similar other sections of Indian society, extended the canvas of Indian Writing in English, by thematically percolating deeper into the geo-cultural panorama of the country. As expressions of cultural distinctiveness and ethnic identity their works, most importantly, shield the multiethnic, multicultural rubric of the country, as they endeavor prevent the loss of commitment to the secular/plural character of the country as a result of the revivalist activities initiated by a section of the majority. The ethno-fictional works that prioritized representation of the respective communities in Indo-Anglian fiction include Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey* (1991), Allan Sealy’s *The Trotter-Nama* (1988), Kaveri Nambisan’s *The Scent of Pepper* (1994), Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) Khushwant Singh’s *Delhi: A Novel* (1990) Boman Desai’s *The Memory of Elephants* (1988) and Firdaus Kanga’s *Trying to Grow* (1990). These novelists, arguably, made their works auto ethnographic formations, adapting distinct ways to represent and record their group’s identity. One distinctive mark of cultural identity in ethnic articulations (not only in



India, but almost everywhere) is probably the references to food culture or eating habits and the unique taste preferences of the respective communities. Thus Allan Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama* and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* provide the reader with ample clues to fathom the food culture and ethnicity of the Anglo-Indian ethnicity, and the American Jewish ethnicity respectively. In the present study a probe into the food culture as expressing the ethnicity of the Anglo-Indians is made in Allan Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama*, which is arguably the most poignant ethnic articulation in Indian English fiction.

Allan Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama* is a (fictional) family chronicle that recounts the story of the Anglo-Indian Trotter family, the history of which spans about two hundred years through seven generations. The novel details the growth of the community from its glorious founding father, Justin Aloysius Trotter, to the seventh Trotter, Eugene Aloysius Trotter who is the chronicler in the work. The novel's story, which puts into play a chronologically arranged series of historical incidents that affected the Trotter family in India, is to be looked as a veiled attempt at writing the history of the Anglo-Indian community in India as a whole in the sense that the novelist gives ample importance to the different roles assigned to the members of Trotter family during the colonial and the post-colonial periods, which is applicable to the Anglo-India community in India as a whole. The novel can thus be approached as one that traces the evolution, growth and decay of the Anglo-Indian ethnicity, with focus on the formation of its cultural traits and political motives, and its interactions with the dominant sections in the country.

The term Anglo-Indian refers to those natives of the Indian subcontinent who had a European ancestor in the male line of inheritance. The roots of the Anglo-Indian community could be traced as early as the time of the Portuguese traveler, Alphonso de Albuquerque, who followed Vasco de Gama and Bartholomew Dias, and who established Portuguese power in India. The first forefathers of the community were, however, a race of mixed Portuguese and Indian descent established by the Portuguese "variously known as *mestizos*, *mestees* or later an Indo-Portuguese or Indo-Lusitanians" (Wilson-deRoze 3). The Anglo-Indians are known by multiple names like Eurasians, Firinghees, Britasians and



Indo British (Roychowdhury 30). The constitution of India in its article 366(2) defined an Anglo-Indian as “a person whose father or any of whose progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but is domiciled within the territories of India and is or was born within such territory of parents habitually resident therein and not established there for temporary purposes only.” (Quoted in Wilson-deRoze 92) But this definition limits Anglo-Indians within the territory of India and thus excludes, for instance, Anglo-Indians domiciled in Pakistan.

According to the more prevalent assumptions and beliefs, it was some directives from the East India Company to its officials in Madras that became instrumental in the establishment of this the Anglo-Indian race. The directive came to Madras in 1684, for instance, reads thus: “The soldier’s wives shall come to their husbands if they can find the means to satisfy or pay the owners for their passages, and for such soldiers as are single men, prudently induce them to marry *Gentoos*, in imitation of *ye dutch politicks*, and raise from them a stock of *Protestant Mestizees*” (Quoted in Wilson-deRoze 1). Nirad C. Choudhury, in his *The Continent of Circe* (1965) categorise Anglo-Indians or Eurasians as “half-caste minorities” in India (255). In this category he includes, apart from Anglo-Indians or Eurasians, the Indian converts to Christianity. He also refers specifically about the people living in places like Mangalore and Goa with Portuguese names, who are remaining and are treated separate from the Eurasians (255). In Laura Roy Choudhury’s view, the ethnic elements created by the European expansion in India produced two broad classes of half castes viz., genetic half-castes and cultural half-castes. “The first group includes the communities in which there is an actual intermixture of European and pre-existing blood, mostly Hindu. The second is comprised of the converts to Christianity, in which intermixture is not present” (Choudhury 254). For Choudhury, the half-caste in India “is a psychological and cultural type, and not merely a zoological hybrid, though the genetic admixture has certainly played a part in predetermining and preconditioning his [or her] mental and cultural characteristics” (254). Apart from this, they do not possess a “composite culture” and “they are not natural and healthy hybrids, racially or culturally but



the genetic hybrids or converts are people who have given up their old cultures without being able to adopt a new culture except in a weak and debased form”(254). Since they were a depressed offshoot of the conquering nations, and as they remained protégés of the European nation so long as their rule lasted, it is their social and cultural situation in a country politically dominated by the Hindus that make their position very anomalous and dubious. (Choudhury 254-55).

Considering food as a major location to examine the cultural identity of a community, particularly a minority community, the cultural precincts of the Anglo-Indian community can be gathered from an analysis of what and how the members of the community ate during the course of their historical evolution. It is apparent that food carried indicators of the cultural difference of the communities. It is to be noted here that for the ethnic minorities in India sticking on to the distinct recipes and cuisines of their own is a way to resist the overwhelming influence of the majoritarian culture in general and food culture in particular. As for the Anglo-Indians, what could be called the traditional food culture is the adoption of mixed varieties from its twin influencing sources, viz., the Indian culture and the European culture. However they showed a leaning mostly to the west in their food selection and dining table etiquettes. As a location of resistance food often becomes political and polemical as it is expressive of the beliefs, likes and dislikes that the community inherited from its ancestors as a method of differentiating themselves from the others. While discussing the way in which choices in fashion or food works as part of the cultural location, Pierre Bourdieu, the famous French philosopher, in his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* argues that quotidian realms like cookery and fashion operate as “symbols of difference” that “allow the most fundamental social differences to be expressed almost as completely as the most complex and refined expressive systems available in the legitimate arts” (227). For him cookery is a field of preferences in which there are stylistic possibilities and the meaning of these choices both depends and defines social position (246). Thus the articulations with reference to the preferences in food, cookery, prohibitions and acceptance of food, recipes and cuisines, and eating habits and



etiquettes as portrayed in ethno fictional works cannot be looked at in isolation, as they have something to do with the ethno-cultural experiences of the respective communities. A discussion of the culinary dimensions of expressions in *Trotter-Nama* is therefore a point of departure in the discussion of the community that the book represents.

Trotter-Nama gives a clear picture of the food culture that the Anglo-Indian community developed in the process of its evolution. The novel discusses the way, right from the time of the First Trotter, the Anglos evolved a number of food items that mostly are from hybrid recipes, or by mixing of the eating habits and cuisines of two dialectically variant cultures, European and Indian. The novel attributes the inventions of a number of food items like *gulab jamun*, and the inauguration of certain of dining table etiquettes that the elites of modern India adopted later as their own, on the Anglo-Indians. Thus it could become that the practice of taking sweets after the main meals, and even the practice of the entire family taking food at a dining table were inaugurated by the Anglos.

The food culture is therefore an interesting site for the study of the various chattels and traits of the Anglo-Indian ethnicity in India. The Anglo-Indian dining tables echoed the reverent tradition of the toast and applause of their hybrid identity that would not see anything odd in the steaming variety of *pulao*, *subji*, mutton, *pappads* and liquor. Food is a principal signifier of the community, the analysis of which would open up a series of meanings that would enable one to understand the community better. Thus it is clear that not unlike the other ethnic minorities the Anglo-Indians also articulated their cultural difference through their food culture. Homi K. Bhabha's famous statement that, "[t]he social articulation of difference from the minority perspective is a complex ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" is thus applicable to the ways adopted by the Anglo-Indian community to establish their difference from the dominant and other minority groups (7).

The Anglo-Indian community as represented by the Trotters, in *Trotter-Nama*, developed their distinct food culture and cuisines, and offered recipes with a difference right from time



of Justin Aloysius Trotter, who is referred to often in the novel as The Great Trotter. Initially The Great Trotter developed an ardent appetite for the food offered by the Nawab's cooks. "As Sans Souci took shape around him Justin grew into his chateau filling out with gusto, his every surface advancing symbiotically with his house, a dome appearing there, a belly here; there a turret, here a fold; here a palpitating buttock, there a gibbous barbican." (127) Since the community consisted of people from different European countries and the Indian subcontinent, their food culture also acquired a hybrid status, including mixed varieties of two geo-cultural groups, European and Indian. The First Trotter gathered many cooks from different cultures and religions when he settled down in Sans Souci, after a prolonged military service (126-27). In the first few years in Sans Souci, enjoying delicacies of hybrid cuisines was one of the main priorities of the Great Trotter. As the forerunner of a family which has multiplied itself to become the Anglo-Indian community, Justin sowed seeds of a food culture and cuisine which his community inherited for generations. However his love of food was enkindled by a dinner offered by the Nawab in honour of the visiting British governor general. It can be said that the Trotters and as such the Anglo-Indian community was born on the dinner table of Justin Aloysius Trotter, because it was while eating lone dinners that he thought of establishing himself with a family that would annul his loneliness at dinner.

Justin was yet conscious of an unnamed anxiety that roamed the table, hovering like some disconsolate wasp. A knowledge he had been dimly aware of all along began to coat his tongue and for a moment cleft it to the roof of his mouth. Justin was bored. He was tired not of life, not of eating...but of eating alone. Justin was lonely. Not that he was ignorant of the pleasure of secret food-hoards, solitary feasts, private ruminations; nor were the giant banqueting hall meals devoid of charm, and their advantage over communal meal did not escape one who had known the privations of a regimental mess. It was simply that he could not, he knew, always and forever eat alone. On such occasions Justin would have liked to lift his head and see at the far end of the table a face, soft and contemplative,



regarding him with, if not motherly devotion, wifely love. (128)

While his chateau took shape, his belly was also developing alongside the domes in his home. He developed insatiable love for curries and in the initial years he widened his taste by including “mint chutneys, cauliflower pickles, cucumber salads, green mango achar, tomato kasaundis, lotus root, tamarind-pepper water, pastes, purees, preserves, curds, raitas, and thousand accompaniments of rich and satisfying food” in his menu (127). He wanted to make it a practice to take desert with meals, but the Indian cooks, although allowed a peppered sweet, did not normally serve sweets with meals. He changed this instilled habit of not taking sweets with meals, by introducing the true Indian dessert by mixing the kernels of pomegranate with crystal sugar, which he took following the courses of food (127). He built a dining room in Sans Souci which was named by himself later as ‘Glacerie’. “High backed chairs upholstered with maroon leather stood alone the walls, ready to be drawn up should the occasion arise. Chandeliers cut and worked by Bohemian craftsmen hung in festoons waiting for the brilliant dinner parties that would last far into the night” (127). There were also “tapestries depicting the revels of bygone ages in far countries; the pictures in between showed wedding scenes with wine and food in plenty and riotous guests convivially entwined”(127-28). The First Trotter’s menu was by and large non-vegetarian, with the flesh of birds and lamb. Even when he flew on the air balloon he carried with him food items favourite to him like Tandoori Partridge, and curried doves.

The First Trotter is to be regarded as the one who inaugurated the community’s love for sweets. After his insistence on sweets after every meal a series of sweet items encroached on the dining table and menus of the Trotters which included Jelebis, Vermicelli Pudding, Kulfi, Almond Burfi, Gulab Jamun and so on. However most of these items were introduced to India by the Anglos. When he was on the aerial survey of the estate, the Great Trotter was regretful for not having carried anything sweet with him. When he remembered that it was his birthday, the absence of sweets became more poignant for him. “He felt a quivering of taste buds at the utmost tip of the tongue, an



ungovernable tickling at the root, neither salt, nor sour, nor bitter. It promise of a sensation intensely pleasurable ...inviting surrender to pleasures unspeakable, to a long sweet slavery, to sweetness without end.” (36) The First Trotter thus developed a relentless craving for sugar. He consumed a large quantity of carrot halva and jelebis during his hay days in Sans Souci. The arrival of Sultana added another sweet item in the Sans Souci menu, Vermicelli Pudding which she took regularly. The continued use of sweets and sugar made Justin a diabetic and then eventually sugar was forbidden to him. But the other members of the chateau proceeded with their rendezvous with sweets in the Glacerie.

Rose, the fourth woman picked up by Justin, who is always referred as Gul Bedan, did a lot to the development of the Anglo-Indian food culture narrated in the novel. It is said that “the milk and honey of two continents flowed in her veins” (314), while referring to the kind of items like Kulfi, Almond Burfi, and Malai Pan she introduced to the trotter household and to the community as a whole. While others referred the Recipe books kept in the Sans Souci library, for making new food items, the intercontinental food culture of miscegenation and Diaspora was interred with her being. Sealy presents Rose as the inventor of gulab jamun, which is rated as the “king of sweets” (314). She invented gulab jamun as casually as she prepares other food items one day in 1844. “So it happened that one afternoon in 1844, Rose, called Gul Bedan...approaching the kitchen in humility and openness, and taking cream and sugar in her scented hands, invented the gulab jamun.” (314) Rose continued to influence the later generations that adorned their dining tables with sweets like *gulab jamun*.

The dining hall of Sans Souci was in fact an epitome of the importance the Trotters attached to food and eating. Eating was a cultural activity the style and attributes of which can be taken as signifiers for the specific characteristics of the Anglo-Indian community. The preferences at the dining table, and the ways of eating, and so on are were of ritual value to the Anglo-Indian culture, as long as they tried to maintain it as a cultural practice. As members of a mixed group or hybrid class, the Anglos made their food and dining



tables meeting grounds of the cultural/racial polarities that composed them. Thus, their food culture showed mixed qualities. For instance in Sans Souci, they related their lunch with India and dinner with England; that is “curries might be eaten at lunch, but at dinner never. Dinner being, for all Trotters of the blood, a formal affair. That lunch was of India (or India Britonized), while dinner was of Britain (or Britain Indianized)” (482). Lunch at Sans Souci was a heavy meal and dinner mostly light or not so heavy. For lunch they prepared unleavened bread, or chapattis, and such heavy items like parathas and rice. Lunches were adorned with curries, mostly of animal flesh. Dinner was “a strictly European affair” for most of the Anglos. Trotters have developed their own indigenous curry which is named Trotter curry. The chronicler explains how Trotter Curry is made with its detailed recipe (363). The Trotter Curry is said to be a “standard fare” (364) in the Glacerie of Sans Souci. “A whole generation of railway men grew up on it, virile and dependable, so that there was truth in the claim that the trains of India ran to time on goat’s feet” (364). Serious pursuit of curries started probably with Justin. It was curries, apart from sweets that induced his taste buds here in India. Fish and egg were also continued to be used right from the time of Justin. There was a person in charge of the eggs in Sans Souci. Justin found great appetite for fish items like “Goanese masala fish” (169), and “Fish Fricasse” was a favourite of Montagu and Victoria.

The community also had some basic beliefs regarding food and nutrition and so on which are constructed by the community in the long run, although some of them appear to be food fads. Eugene Trotter is said to have learned the following basic presumptions of food from his great grandmother, Victoria:

That Crumple Custard was a corruption, howsoever apt, of the cook’s for caramel custard. That bed tea was an excellent invention for those who did not go to work, for afterwards one doze again or chase one’s waking dreams until chhota haziri or the small breakfast, which preceded the greater breakfast as the morning star the sun. The spices in the morning were offensive, except for the nutmeg in the sugar-pot. That toast was



eaten and toasts were drunk...that butter went with toast, not toast with butter, the same law applying to marmalade...that Smarmite was holy and must be applied sparingly, being English and expensive, that no Trotter household should be without a bottle. That toast must not be dipped in tea. That eggs were eggs on week days but on Sundays became omelettes. That fruit in the morning was gold, in the afternoon silver, but at night lead. That stomach disorders were put right by a dose of effervescent salts in warm water taken in the morning (482).

The beverages that frequented the dining table included specialised items like 'the mango fool', and excepting for dinners tea became a favourite of the Trotters in the later years. Mango fool was a "cooling hot-weather drink made from green mangoes, boiled, mashed, and mixed with milk and sugar... Ice is frequently mixed in, but should not crowd the surface" (48). Instead of milk water could also be used as a substitute, but proportionally. Mango fool was one of the main beverages used during the time of Justin. Since dinner was a European affair, alcoholic beverages found their regular seat on the dinner table. For occasions like marriages, wine was served along with food, mainly rice and curries. Wine was later replaced by other alcoholic drinks like sherry. Trotters like Peter Augustine were addicted to other drinks like toddy. In the evening of his life Thomas Henry depended completely on his nightly consumption of alcohol. The over importance given to the food was understandably one of those factors that led to the economic disintegration of the Trotters. They consumed beyond their means, without ever compromising with the prescribed items for each time. When the number of members increased and the sources shrunk life became a challenge for the Trotters, and they started buying things for credit. The bulging credits in the later years made the Trotters think of selling everything movable. Family dinners any way served as family meetings. Trotters solved their familial problems on the dining table. Victoria expressed her protest against Montagu's wearing Indian clothes was shown on the dinner table, as she declined to join the table till he stopped. Montagu had no way other than relenting to her wishes.



Although the food culture developed in Sans Souci was purely non-vegetarian, the workers mainly, the nilchis or the tribals working in the indigo fields were given only vegetarian food. Their menu had nothing but chickpeas all the days. When there is a marriage or other celebrations they were given “rice and pink dal.” (293) neither the curries and sweets, nor the beverages reached them. However the Trotters tried to maintain the difference in their food and eating practices.

It was probably the Trotters’ traditional love of sweets, and food in general that made Ferdinand Fonseca Trotter to food business. Ferdinand established a chain of food outlets named “Ferdinand Fonseca’s Fine Foods” (315). “As soon as he became old enough”, Farida’s youngest son “went back to Calcutta, the city of his fathers dreams, with a vision of his own: an establishment on Park Street where one might buy every conceivable kind of delicacy, from an oyster to a cream cake.” (315) He was successful too, that within a few years he opened fine food shops in Madras, Bombay and later in Nakhlau. The generations followed him continued the business. Thus, these instances in the novel provide the reader with ample evidence of the distinctive food culture developed by the Anglo-Indians, which in turn indicate the hybrid character of their cultural identity.

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