

NEGOTIATING CULTURAL COMPLEXITY AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN ROMESH GUNESKERA'S *REEF*

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses various facets of cultural identity crisis as portrayed in Romesh Gunesequera's *Reef*, chiefly focusing on the characters Triton, Salgado, and Nili. The novel serves as an example of how one's identity is shaped by displacement, gender roles, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. Applying Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity as a dynamic and evolving process, the study attempts to state that the identities of individuals are not fixed but continuously negotiated within cultural contexts. The diasporic experiences of Triton and Salgado after their migration to London reflect HomiBhabha's concept of hybridity, where "in-between" spaces generate new hybrid identities. The novel symbolically presents degradation of coral reefs on Lankan shores as the erosion of national and cultural identity as well as the socio-political instability of Sri Lanka. Through Triton's culinary skills which maintain a connection to homeland traditions, food is depicted to become a powerful indicator of cultural preservation. The study further traces the expectations of gender roles through the lens of Alice Eagly's social role theory, emphasizing how Nili struggles to free from patriarchal norms and strives to establish her rights in a male-dominated society. By incorporating postcolonial hybridity, cultural identity and gender-based theories, this research highlights the role of *Reef* in presenting cultural identity as a negotiation between memory and adaptation, tradition and transformation.

Keywords: *coral reef, cultural identity, displacement, gender role, hybridity*

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural identity is defined as a person's sense of belonging to a particular culture. When a community undergoes unexpected and rapid changes, the individuals, as its components, struggle to maintain their stable senses of self, resulting in crises of cultural identity. The theme of cultural identity crisis has emerged as a significant concern in postcolonial literature, especially in societies that experienced colonial influence, migration, and civil conflict.

Reef, a Booker Prize-shortlisted novel by the renowned Sri Lankan-born British author Romesh Gunsekera depicts Sri Lanka during a period of political unrest and social transition, exploring identity as unstable and continuously reconstructed. The experiences of the significant novel characters such as Triton, Salgado, and Nili reveal how individuals reflect their sense of belonging towards culture amid displacement and changing social expectations.

The novel reflects Stuart Hall's argument that cultural identity is not fixed nor essential but a dynamic process shaped by history and discourse. Migration by both Triton and Salgado from Sri Lanka to London further complicates identity formation, introducing cultural hybridity and diasporic consciousness. Similarly, gender norms and environmental degradation expose deeper crises affecting both personal and national identity.

Among several studies exploring the novel in the perspectives of trauma, environmental crisis, and postcolonial displacement, limited researches are available to examine how the characters react in the face of cultural identity crises. This study positions the novel within postcolonial and gender theoretical frameworks to examine how cultural identity is shaped, challenged, and redefined.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Individuals in a society often encounter multiple types of identity crisis arising culturally under various circumstances. How does Romesh Gunsekera's *Reef* represent such cultural identity crises through displacement, migration, gender roles, and the tension between tradition and modernity, and how do the characters negotiate and reconstruct their identities within these changing contexts?

OBJECTIVES

- To analyze different aspects of cultural identity crisis experienced by the characters in the novel.
- To examine displacement and migration as factors shaping identity.
- To explore the symbolic representation of coral reef degradation in exposing cultural erosion.
- To investigate food as an indicator of cultural heritage.
- To analyze gender roles and expectations of the patriarchal society through Nili's character.
- To apply Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity and Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity in interpreting the novel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies explore the theme of identity crisis in literature in psychological, social and cultural perspectives. For instance, Mallot (2007) focuses on the intersections of history, trauma, and political chaos, situating the novel within broader political conflict in Sri Lanka. Ghosal (2024) explores food, sexuality, and “queering,” explores food, sexuality, and “queering,” and again Ghosal (2024) deals with ecological insecurity and care ethics.

Stuart Hall (1990) conceptualizes cultural identity as a continuous process shaped by history and transformation rather than a fixed essence. His idea of diasporic identity emphasizes hybridity and difference. Homi Bhabha (1994) introduces the notion of “in-between” spaces where hybrid identities emerge, challenging pure national identities.

Alice Eagly's social role theory (2000), further elaborated by Wood and Diekmann, explains how gender expectations arise from societal divisions of labour. Studies such as Öhman et al. (1993) and Ashani et al. (2019) document coral reef degradation in Sri Lanka, which symbolically parallels the erosion of cultural identity in the novel. Herath et al. (2018) and Chandradasa & Rathnayake (2019) discuss patriarchal norms and psychosocial distress among women in Sri Lanka, contextualizing Nili's struggles.

Jenifer & Geetha (2019) explore the cultural trauma and identity crisis in connection with religion, culture, identity, tradition and customs that are the basic and important strands in Afghan society and the group conscious of the migrated people as portrayed in Khaled

Hosseini's novels. Oberoi (2017) analyses how Bharati Mukherjee portrays the characters' struggles and trauma suffered due to cultural clash and how they attempt to construct a new identity in an alien land. Another study by Basnet (2021) examines how Gordimer shows diasporic people's sense of displacement, loss, identity crisis and their attempts for identity formation in *The Pickup*.

RESEARCH GAP

Although the above studies mainly focus on postcolonial and environmental perspectives, limited research integrates cultural identity theory, diasporic hybridity, environmental symbolism, and gender role theory within a single analytical framework. The existing studies focus separately on the themes of ecological concerns or migration without examining how these dimensions collectively construct a broader cultural identity crisis. This study fills that gap by synthesizing postcolonial, environmental, and gender-based approaches.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative, text-based analytical approach to examine aspects of cultural identity crisis in Romesh Gunsekera's *Reef*. While the primary materials are presented from the novel itself, the secondary data include theoretical works by Stuart Hall (1990), Homi Bhabha (1994), Alice Eagly (2000), and scholarly articles related to ecological degradation and gender roles in Sri Lankan cultural contexts.

The study applies close reading of the novel to analyze narration, characterization and character-sketches which reflect different features of cultural tradition, displacement, and gender roles.

CULTURAL IDENTITY CRISIS

Every community possesses a unique culture. The culture of a community not only shapes that community but also plays a significant role in forming the identity of individuals of it. Culture and identity are never entirely separable: When individuals of a community undergo conflicting cultural influences, their sense of identity is affected and becomes unstable leading to what is termed as 'cultural identity crisis'.

The cultural identity crisis is a noticeable theme in *Reef*, particularly with Triton, Salgado, and Nili. The characters struggle to trace a sense of belonging during the tension between modernity and tradition and cultural displacement. This type of crisis is resolved by the characters at various levels with each character learning to successfully navigate the cultural changes and adapt to new cultural settings.

Cultural identity is a continuous process as Stuart Hall (1994) admits. He describes, “Cultural identities come from somewhere have histories but like everything which is historical they undergo constant transformation.” As Hall points out, Triton’s entire journey is neither restricted by tradition nor defined by modernity, but constantly subjected to different changes due to cultural displacement. Hall (1994) further asserts that cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification which are made within the discourses of history and culture, not an essence but a positioning.

The novel also reflects Hall’s perspective on diasporic identity which is formed through cultural hybridity. Hall (1994) states, “The diaspora experience is defined not by essence or purity but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity by a conception of identity which lives with and through not despite difference by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference.” After migration to London, Salgado and Triton adapt to the new circumstances representing cultural hybridity, yet rooted in tradition of their motherland.

Murray (2009) suggests that the erosion of the coral reef by the ocean can be understood as symbolically erasing the island and its identity. The sea as an erosion of cultural identity in this novel is metaphoric and can be understood in the context of the civil war in Sri Lanka. However, the ocean is also a link to other islands/ nations. Triton’s exile to England is a continuation of his “voyage of discovery.”

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND DISPLACEMENT

Salgado’s long-standing research on the coral reefs along Sri Lanka’s beaches can be seen as part of the attempts of preserving the country's cultural heritage.

The disappearance and decline of coral reefs in the coastal area of Sri Lanka has been attracting the attention of the experts for several years. According to Öhman et al (1993), “The

degradation of coral reefs in Sri Lanka has increased substantially over the last decades. Human activities causing this degradation include: mining for lime production, sewage discharges, discharges of oil and other pollutants in connection with shipping and port activities, destructive fishing practices, land and mangrove destruction, tourism and the collecting of fauna such as fish, shells and corals.”

During his study of the coral reef while researching for the reasons for its disappearance, Salgado explains some facts to his friend Dias. He points out, “Coral grows about as fast as your fingernails, but how fast is it disappearing? Nobody knows” (p.48). Dias mentions about dynamiting as a cause for the disappearance of the coral reef, but Salgado adds more including bombing, mining, and netting as the reasons.

Then Salgado stresses the importance of safeguarding the coral reef. He says, “...even a small change in the immediate environment - even if you pee on the reef - could kill it. Then the whole thing will go. And if the structure is destroyed, the sea will rush in, the sand will go, the beach will disappear” (p.48). His worrying words expose his concern over safeguarding beach through protecting reef, a real concern over preserving cultural heritage.

Echoing Salgado’s words, Öhman et al. (1993) also highlight the human activities as the significant cause for the degradation of coral reefs. According to them, “Human disturbance factors on the reefs were found to be net fishing, boat anchoring and ornamental fish collection for the aquarium trade. Bottom-set nylon nets in particular were found to have a very destructive impact on the bottom fauna.”

Another study brings out a similar point. “Increased number of tourist visits and boating act as chronic anthropogenic disturbances causing loss of coral cover, increased algal growth and degradation of ecosystem services in coral reefs” (Ashani et al, 2019).

Salgado, after describing the reasons, reveals frustration at the negligence of the politicians and authorities by saying, “...but who cares?” Again, he fears that politicians could exploit the matter for their own gain. He remarks, “Some political bigwig will want his fat hands on it.” (p 48)

For this, Dias replies, agreeing with his friend, “...all they want are some success stories to show this country is finally joining the 20th century” (p.49). The conversation between the

two friends highlights the crisis surrounding the environmental and cultural heritage and their worries over safeguarding it.

Meanwhile, the displacement brings numerous crises in the lives of Salgado and Triton. Though Salgado led a life with more comforts in the homeland, he is to survive with the feeling of alienation in the foreign land.

As for Triton, he is employed as a servant, and emerges later as a manager at Salgado's household, owing to his inborn talents and skills. Then he accompanies his master in migrating to London, and successfully becomes the manager of the restaurant operated by Salgado. Though successful, he experiences cultural identity crisis after he settles in a foreign land.

Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity focuses on Triton's position: "In-between spaces are where different cultures intersect these 'in-between' spaces are where new hybrid identities are emerging challenging the idea of pure ethnically homogenous national cultures" (Bhabha, 1994). Triton's life in London reveals this hybridity. In spite of his professional advancement, he struggles to adapt to the new environment amid the sense of alienation and longing for cultural belonging.

Food serves in the novel as the representation of preserving the Sri Lankan cultural heritage. Triton is shown as the one who always respects and reflects his cultural roots by his mastery in cooking traditional foods. He showcases his talents in cookery by means of learning from Lucy-*amma* and pleases his master and his friends by preparing varieties of foods.

Different types of foods are mentioned in the novel: *seeni-sambol*, crispy corned beef roasted with potatoes, onions and green chilli, soy sauce (p.8), *pol-sambol* (p.15), *thora malu*, *para malu* (p.17), patties (p.67), boiled rice, liver curry, bitter gourd (p.73), etc. Many of the above are attributed to Triton and Salgado in recognition of their senses of cultural heritage.

After they move to London and open the restaurant, they might undergo a crisis in retaining their cultural heritage and face a question of what types of foods are prepared. They eventually could navigate the crisis blending the traditional Sri Lankan foods with the diverse cultural environment of London.

Triton's identity is in dilemma even after he is well-established in London as the owner of a restaurant. It's noticeable that he is caught by the feelings of nostalgia for his homeland when he happens to meet a Sri Lankan boy at a petrol station.

The following lines reveal how he is longing for his home after meeting the Sri Lankan boy, "My every breath seemed imbued with petrol. I wanted to close my eyes and imagine a warm sea and our salt in the air...Then, as the stars brightened, I remembered a bay-fronted house six thousand miles away" (p.3). His words prove that he somehow manages his survival in London amid the feeling of alienation and displacement in a foreign country while being emotionally connected to his Sri Lankan roots.

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GENDER ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

Gender roles refer to the social roles imposed on each person to identify themselves in relation to their gender. As such, they are 'shared expectations that apply to persons who occupy a certain social position or are members of a particular social category' (Eagly, 2000). The *Reef* portrays the pressures imposed by the society on women and their struggles to establish their identities in a patriarchal setting.

Eagly (2000) adds, "Gender roles exist at the intersection between subjective experience and cultural understandings of what it means to be a man or a woman ... Gender roles are 'injunctive norms' which depict how persons should behave, '[producing] social disapproval and efforts to induce compliance' if they are broken."

According to Eagly et al. (2000), different expectations for each gender stem from the division of labour between men and women in a given society ... Women were underrepresented in politics, business, science, technology, and various other fields. In turn, girls were not expected to develop interests and skills that lead toward professions in those fields."

As one of the significant characters of the novel, Nili's independent nature and life style contradict with the expectations of the society about women. Her decision to live with Salgado outside marriage in contrast to the accepted norms causes controversies in the societal circles.

Despite her confidence and courageous undertakings, Nili suffers from the feeling of confusion which is a sign of cultural identity crisis in the society where patriarchal structures are significantly prevalent. As a woman living in the politically unstable nation, she is forced to encounter bitter experiences from the local thugs.

According to Herath et al. (2018), “Social traditions have placed women as a housekeeper and a child bearer. And it represents the gender norms and perceptions instilled in Sri Lankan society, which perpetrates not only overt violence but also norms that promote men’s extreme control over many aspects of women’s lives.”

In an interview about the traditional roles both on men and women particularly in Sri Lanka, a woman, aged 29, reveals, “Jobs of women are cooking, washing, cleaning and looking after the children. Men should go for a job and they should find the income to the family. This truth need to teach at our homes to our children. We can’t go beyond what society determined” (Herath et al., 2018).

In contrast to the societal expectations and norms, Nili establishes herself as a successful entrepreneur in a male-dominated society. She also maintains cordial friendships with a number of men who later befriend Salgado, following her affair with him. They all frequently gather at Salgado's house and join the parties hosted by Salgado.

As a single woman among a group of men, she moves forward with her own personal freedom. Though she is well aware of the fact that the patriarchal society she represents does not welcome her close bonds with men, she doesn't seem to be bothered by the societal boundaries, yet she eventually struggles to maintain a balance between her personal freedom and the social norms. As Chandradasa & Rathnayake (2019) reveal, “The educated young women are likely to face psychosocial distress in a patriarchal society where they would be expected to fulfil traditional gender roles.”

Triton says, “Nili and six others, including some foreigners, were coming to our once-and-only Christmas party, a real dinner party” (p.78). A woman accompanying men for the parties does not gain social recognition in the society those days.

One day, Nili arrives at Salgado’s home with Professor Dunstable from England and his friend Dr.Perera. They drive up in a cream-colored car and park it in the drive. They all gather there to celebrate a New Year party.

On another occasion, Nili visits Salgado's home for a party with some friends. This time, she accompanies a new friend, Robert, who is from America. Triton describes the events of the party: "I served the vegetables. Then a ruby-red Jaffna wine that Miss Nili had winkled out of a dry-zone vicar, especially for Mister Salgado... Everybody watched her while she spoke, and Robert especially seemed to take in every word" (p.88).

The social unrest that prevailed in the country in 1980s and the negative perspective of the society over Nili's close relationships with men urge the local thugs to burn her restaurant disrupting her professional identity. This puts her in a vulnerable state making her powerless and leaving her abandoned and helpless. Eventually she is mentally broken with no one is found to take care of her.

In contrast to Nili, the old Lucy-*amma*, Salgado's cook-woman and the only woman making appearance in the novel before Nili's entrance, maintains the traditional role of women. According to Triton, "She had been cooking since the turn of the century... she had known Salgado as a child while she was bringing up her own. She had served Salgado's grandfather whisky and coffee during the riots of 1915" (p.15). Since Lucy-*amma* belongs to the old generation, she finds contentment in representing the traditional role.

However, Nili, who represents the new generation, struggles to balance her progressive thinking against the social aspirations, which creates the tension between tradition and modernity. Her modern lifestyle never allows her to take up the traditional role of the women and she is unable to maintain a balance between her sense of freedom and the societal expectations exposing a broader cultural identity crisis.

TRADITION VS.MODERNITY

The novel reveals the rural and traditional values of Sri Lanka through the characters of Triton, Joseph and Lucy-*amma* while illustrating the influences of modernity through the characters of Salgado, Nili, Robert, and Salgado's friends. These opposing scenarios create confusions among characters in terms of culture.

Triton, Joseph, and Lucy-*amma* come from rural areas and they frequently reflect the traditional values including their conversation, language, and behaviour. The way Triton behaves with Salgado as a servant exposing his humble conduct is a sharp example of his

traditional lifestyle. On the very first day, Triton says when he introduces himself to Salgado, “I went to school. Fifth standard. I can read and write” (p.6).

Salgado represents the traditional living in certain parts of his life. For food, he often chooses the combination of traditional Sri Lankan dishes with the western items. As Triton indicates, “At night, when alone, he usually liked to eat bread and western food: Small discs of fried meat and creamy mashed potatoes. Corned beef was a favorite. He ate it with a *seeni sambol*” (p.8). This mixture reflects his cultural blend and hybrid lifestyle.

Triton's cultural identity crisis is noticeable during his conversation with Salgado regarding the party for his friends to be arranged at his home. Though Salgado mostly prefers traditional food items for his own meal, he, as an English-educated scholar adopting many Western customs and values, he wants Triton to prepare a Western-type meal, but Triton initially hesitates and feels uncomfortable.

As Triton indicates, “Mister Salgado had ordered it for Christmas Eve.” He is wanted to do what his employer orders and eventually obeys him. As he says, “That December I roasted a turkey for the first time in my life. I had never done anything like it before...” (p.77).

The novel displays a number of instances in which the characters grapple with certain factors of cultural identity crisis. There are many factors such as displacement, migration, gender roles, and societal expectations, which challenge the perseverance of cultural heritage of Sri Lanka. Under these circumstances, the characters struggle to preserve their cultural values and traditions. Through its nuanced narration and depiction of Sri Lankan cultural elements, the *Reef* illustrates the impacts of the crises on the lives of the characters.

CONCLUSION

Reef by Romesh Gunsekera presents cultural identity as fluid, shaped, and continuously reconstructed. Through its narration, the novel illustrates how the sense of cultural identity can be affected leading to a number of crises. The novel shows identity as shaped by loss and adaptation through displacement, migration, environmental destruction, and gender struggles. As the major characters, Triton's hybridity, Salgado's diasporic negotiation, and Nili's resistance to the expectations of patriarchal society reveal different dimensions of cultural identity crisis. Food functions as a means of preserving heritage, while the coral reef symbolizes both ecological and cultural erosion. On the whole, the novel affirms Stuart Hall's

view that identity is not a fixed essence but often subjected to be formed and reformed through difference, historical change, and transformation.

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