

77. ‘The Roaring Sea’: The Analysis of Material Agencies in Terms of Their Ecological Impacts in Romesh Gunsekera’s Reef¹

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Abstract

This article focuses on the agency of the non-human environment and the ability of the non-human, whether animate or inanimate, to affect and change the human world in Romesh Gunsekera’s *Reef*. I discuss the agency of the food and the reef in the novel in their relationship to creating and shaping the identity of Triton by employing new materialist theory introduced by Karen Barad. I discuss that the agencies of the reef and the food are as crucial as human agencies since they have the power to shape humankind and culture, which is observable in the form of wrong post-colonial economic development policies, investments and, most importantly, the demise of the scientific research of Mr. Salgado in the novel. I also claim that Triton, who is not affected by the agency of the reef and the ocean while they were visiting the research post of Mr. Salgado, will be an outstanding cook producing meals that would intoxicate Mr. Salgado and other characters, which will result in the disruption of Mr. Salgado’s research on the coral reef.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, postcolonialism, posthumanism, matter, new materialism, material agency, coral reef, food

‘Kükreyen Deniz’: Romesh Gunsekera’nın Resifinde Maddesel Eyleyciliklerin Ekolojik Etkileri Açısından İncelenmesi

Öz

Bu makale Romesh Gunsekera’nın *Reef* romanında canlı ya da cansız insan dışı varlıkların maddesel eyleyciliklerini ve bunların insanı ve kültürü etkileme boyutlarını analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bunun için Yeni maddecilik yaklaşımının öncülerinden ecofeminist yazar Karen Barad’ın ‘eyleyici gerçeklik’ modeli kullanılarak tüm varlıkların ve maddenin birbirlerini ‘içten etkime’ ile etkileşimde bulunduğu gösterilmeye çalışılacaktır. Romanda Mr. Salgado’nun Triton üzerindeki etkisinin yanı sıra okyanus ve mercan resifinin de eyleyciliklerinin Triton ve Mr. Salgado üzerindeki maddesel eyleyciliklerinin üzerinde durulması planlanmaktadır. Romanda ön plana çıkan Triton’un hazırladığı yiyeceklerin Mr. Salgado üzerindeki olumsuz etkileri ve mercan resifi araştırmasının sekteye uğraması iredelenerek sömürgecilik sonrası dönemdeki sosyal, politik ve ekonomik değişimlerle birlikte çevrenin arka plana atıldığı savı ortaya konmaya çalışılacaktır.

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Anahtar kelimeler: Ekoeleřtiri, sömürgecilik-sonrası teori, insansonrası, madde, yeni maddecilik, maddesel eyleycilik, mercan resifi, yiyecek

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka-born British author Romesh Gunesequera's first novel *Reef* (1994), which was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1994, has received many criticisms both on the representation of social and historical background of Sri Lanka and the way it treated the ecological problems delineated throughout the novel. Sri Lanka, formerly a British colony until 1948 under the name of Ceylon, has a long colonial history that shapes both its geography and the indigenous people. As an expatriate writer, Gunesequera views home as an outsider from a distance, which might seem like a weakness on the part of the representation of the Sri Lankan culture, history, and ecology. Walter Perera in "Images of Sri Lanka through Expatriate Eyes: Romesh Gunesequera's Reef" argues that Triton, the protagonist, who looks back to his life as a child in Sri Lanka after he immigrates to England and establishes himself as restaurant owner, shows chauvinistic attitudes and a language that debases his own people (1995, 65). In a post-colonial work, Perera discusses that this attitude is problematic and he builds on the ideas of Bruce King to argue that Gunesequera, as a self-exiled writer, "has become the intermediary, the interpreter, of the new nations to the metropolitan centers" (qtd in Perera, 1995, 65). The tension between the postcolonial and ecocritical theories generating from the distinct foci of these two cultural theories has been in the center of the critical writings of Gunesequera's novel.

From an environmental perspective, *Reef* also offers possible discussion points. Ecocritical and postcolonial theories have been in conflict because of their focus points. Rob Nixon in his "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism" presents four main detailed differences between these two areas of criticism. Focusing on hybridity and cross-culturation on the part of postcolonialists can be considered as the first distinction whereas ecocriticism revolves around the discourse of purity. Second, postcolonialism favors displacement, while literary works accepted, as "environmental" tend to focus on the "literature of place." Another point of difference is that postcolonialists are consistently critical of nationalism; however, ecocritical theory and masterpieces of environmental literary writing are sometimes rooted deeply in a national core. A final distinction may be that postcolonialism tends to dig deep into the past and bring up the images of peripheral experience through the memory of transnational migrants, while in environmental literature, the history is concealed and silenced, transforming it into a quest of "timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature" (Nixon, 2005, 235). The reconciliation of ecocritical and postcolonial theories has been the subject of considerable scholarly work recently. Trying to identify the tensions between these two theories, Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey also points out that

postcolonial criticism often tends to leave out the environmental factors in trying to recover national identity. On the other hand, ecocriticism does not tend to bring forth the historical and social details of the place, which is an intolerable gap in postcolonial theory. Underestimation of the historical and social specificities of place by ecocriticism has not helped to close the gap between ecocritical and postcolonial theories. (DeLoughrey, et.al, 2005, 5)

While drawing the borders of the problem between postcolonialism and ecocriticism, it becomes obvious that displacement and history, which postcolonialists try to emphasize as the main traits and the ethics of place which is favored by ecocritics cannot be brought into equal terms to work together with attributing a notion that foregrounds only the environment.

One of the attempts that both shares the postcolonial and ecocritical concerns is Sharae Deckard’s article on the connection between the toxic culture of Sri Lanka and the environmental problems the country experiences during the period, which the novel depicts. Deckard analyzes the semiotic relationship between Sri Lankan culture and the environment in her “Jungle Tide, Devouring Reef: (Post) Colonial Anxiety and Ecocritique in Sri Lankan Literature” on a symbolic level and relates the demise of the coral reef to the colonial past and post-colonial politics of development, drawing attention to the Mahaweli Irrigation scheme, “which radically alter the ecology of the dry central north by building four dams in the upper catchments of Sri Lanka’s largest river” (2010, 40). She interestingly mentions the ‘agency’ of Mr. Salgado who has an evident effect on Triton’s character development, who can now lead his life without him. By trailing the idea of “agency” proposed by Deckard, I intend to extend my discussion of the novel into another dimension, which has not been covered so far. I will try to grapple not just with the human agency, as Deckard suggests, but I will focus on the agency of the non-human environment and the ability of the non-human, whether animate or inanimate, to affect and change the human world. I will discuss the agency of the food and the reef in the novel in their relationship to creating and shaping the identity of Triton by employing new materialist theory of ‘agential realism’ introduced by Karen Barad. I will discuss that the agencies of the reef and the food in their ‘intra-active agencies’ are as crucial as human agency since they have the power to shape humankind and culture, which is observable in the form of wrong policies of post-colonial economic development, investments in general and, most importantly, the demise of the scientific research of Mr. Salgado in the novel. I will also claim that Triton, who is not affected by the agency of the ocean and the reef, will be an outstanding cook producing food that would intoxicate Mr. Salgado and other characters, which will result in the disruption of Mr. Salgado’s research on the coral reef.

2. Non-human Agencies and Their Effects on Humankind and Environment in *Reef*

Among the many environmental problems that we face today, sea pollution and loss of species living in the sea due to temperature rise are two of the most important problems since life in the seas determines the life on earth. In *The Sea Around Us* (1961), Rachel Carson discusses that life starts in the oceans. Coral reefs are just one of the members of the sea community and their disappearance due to overfishing and rise in the sea temperatures is one of the indicators that we, as the human community, cannot do our part in the preservation of this unique organism. Moreover, if we accept the first rule of ecology defined by Barry Commoner that “everything is connected to everything else,” we can conclude that toxic culture, whether the result of colonial history or the turmoil caused by the indigenous people, and personal is as dangerous as the toxic released to air, land, and water (qtd. in Glotfelty, 1996, xix).

On the same axis of discussion with ecocriticism, Posthumanism has emerged as a reaction to the humanist philosophy that started in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods in the last quarter of the 20th century and in the early 21st century. The prominent posthumanists such as Rosie Braidotti, Cary Wolfe and Donna Haraway try to define the borders of the theory with their works. Rosie Braidotti in *The Posthuman* (2013) questions the relationship between “the binary opposition between the given and the constructed,” and states that “it is currently being replaced by a non-dualistic understanding of nature-culture interaction” (2013, 3). Cary Wolfe, on the other hand, in her *What is Posthumanism?* states that posthumanism “far from surpassing or rejecting the human—actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with greater specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection” (2010, xxv). Posthumanism and ecocriticism have a common denominator, which is the decentering of the humankind and approaching the world with a

more ecocentric perspective. Nature/culture dichotomy that ecocriticism tries to bring down is carried to a higher level with posthumanism. Instead of nature/culture dichotomy that is utilized by ecocriticism, posthumanism uses "naturecultures," which is introduced by another pioneer, Donna Haraway. Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness* (2003) introduces the term "naturecultures" to place humankind and culture in the inclusiveness of the nature.

New materialism which found place under the posthumanist theory, mainly sets up a discussion around the ontological importance of the matter alongside the discursive practices. Karen Barad in "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter" discusses that "the language has been granted too much power" and it seems that at every turn lately every 'thing'—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation" and delineates that "Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter." (2003, 801). Matter, however, plays a crucial role in determining the relationships between naturecultures. Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, introduces the concept of "Agential realism," by following Niels Bohr's quantum theory which gives an "epistemological, ontological, and ethical framework" that "provides a posthumanist performative account of technoscientific and other naturalcultural practices" (2007, 32).

According to Barad, matter "is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity" (2003, 822). Barad's theory unites the discursive practices with the material world and claims that matter has an effect of shaping these practices. She denotes that "material-discursive practices are specific iterative enactments—agential intra-actions—through which matter is differentially engaged and articulated (in the emergence of boundaries and meanings), reconfiguring the material-discursive field of possibilities in the iterative dynamics of intra-activity that is agency" (2003, 822-23). The agency of the non-human world over humankind and culture is inevitable and it also roots for the same purpose as the ecocritical theory does, which is the dismantling of the anthropocentric point of view that dominates human and non-human world.

In Gunesequera's *Reef*, the material discursive agencies can be observed throughout the novel, which determine the faith of both human and non-human world. The agency of the food that is served at the dinners and the parties keep appearing in the background of the novel and has one of the most important material agencies both over Triton and Mr. Salgado. The other material agency that will be analyzed is the reef which shapes the life of Triton in a different way and drags him to a path of life that will transform him to a successful cook and a chef later in his life. I will discuss that the material agencies of the reef and the food are interconnected in terms of their intra-active performativity. While the reef that Mr. Salgado is commissioned to do research drives Triton away with its abundance of life and voices, the food and along with the cooking give Triton a purpose in life which will lead him to become a successful chef at the end of the novel. However, the food he prepares for Mr. Salgado will make him languid to carry out the necessary calculations to complete the project and save the reef.

The novel has a framework narrative, and it opens in London with Triton, the narrator, who lives as a successful chef. His interaction with an attendant at the gas station who escapes from Sri Lanka due to the civil war between Sinhalese and Tamil brings back his childhood memories. The novel is based on the reminiscences of Triton as a child, which might be unreliable as to his relationship with the reef,

however, his interaction with the reef and the intra-active agency of it are indispensable proofs that he is dragged away from being the enlightened individual like Mr. Salgado and he focuses on cooking and becoming a chef eventually.

“The breach”, the title of the first chapter foreshadows the environmental destruction at the end of the novel as Triton recalls the village of the attendant in the gas station: “I could see a sea of pearls. Once a diver’s paradise. Now a landmark for gunrunners in a battle zone of army camps and Tigers” (Gunsekera, 1994, 12). The beginning of Triton’s new life in the household of Mr. Salgado coincides with a failed coup attempt in 1962, which is approximately 20 years before the country goes under a 30 year of turmoil due to civil war that devastates the social and economic balance of people from different ethnicities such as Sinhala and Tamil. As Deckard emphasizes, with the adoption of a liberal economic model, the country is inclined to follow an export-oriented industry and the government tries to realize a dam project that would displace at least one million people, which is called the Mahaweli irrigation scheme. This project and the authoritarian government lead the nation into civil war as the Tamil Tigers fights with the government forces starting from the late 1980s (2010, 40-41). The tension between these ethnic groups is expressed through the conversations between Mr. Salgado and his companions over their dinners and parties. The effects of this conflict on the environment which will be called cultural toxicity of the postcolonial country is represented through marine biologist Ranjan Salgado’s scientific work on the coral reefs of Sri Lanka. Mr. Salgado’s reef endangerment among this turmoil can be explained by Lawrence Buell’s idea of toxic discourse which can be defined as “rhetoric and ethics of imagined endangerment,” that arises “both from individual or social panic and from an evidential base in environmental phenomena” (2001, 27, 31) While loss of the reef and the invasion of the sea in the coastal areas depend on the scientific research, it also counts as the social and political turmoil caused by the instability of the postcolonial country. *Reef*, in this respect, suggests the improbability of a healthy relationship between a toxic culture effected by colonialism and even postcolonialism and the environment with the help of subtle metaphors.

Triton’s story begins when he is delivered by his uncle to the household of one Ranjan Salgado as the help because he sets fire “the thatched roof of a hut in the schoolyard by accident” (Gunsekera, 1994, 17). He escapes to his uncle’s house and seeks refuge from his father who has gone mad about the situation and his uncle promises him a new life in which he would not have to go back. That’s how Triton is introduced by his uncle to Ranjan Salgado, who

had been to the best of Colombo’s schools, [he] regarded himself as largely self-educated. He came from a line of people who believed in making their own future. To him there were no boundaries to knowledge. He studied mosquitoes, swamps, sea corals and the whole bloated universe, and right from the early days wrote long articles about all of them. He wrote about the legions under the sea, the transformation of water into rock – the cycle of light, plankton, coral and limestone – the yield of beach to ocean. (Gunsekera, 1994, 34)

Mr. Salgado is the epitome of the enlightened man who is rooted in scientific tradition and is well-educated. Working for such a man, Triton takes Mr. Salgado as a role model but evolves towards a different career as a cook through the teachings of Lucy –amma who cooked for Mr. Salgado. As a child, Triton takes her as a role model early in his life. She will be the one who teaches Triton how to become a cook in his later life. In this respect, Lucy – amma is presented as a timeless character, which suggests her wisdom on the symbolic level.

She had been cooking since the turn of the century. The place where she had been born had turned from village to jungle and back to village, time and again, over her seventy-odd years. The whole country had been turned from jungle to paradise to jungle again, ... She had known Mister Salgado as

a child while she was bringing up her own, and his father as a child when she was one. She had served Mister Salgado's grandfather whisky and coffee during the riots of 1915. She had seen politicians with handlebar moustaches and tortoiseshell topknots, morning coats and gold-thread sarongs, barefoot and church-shod. She had seen monkey-suits give way to Nehru shirts; Sheffield silver replaced by coconut spoons. But her cooking and her woodstove – two black stones outside the kitchen – remained timeless. (Gunesequera, 1994, 25)

From the above description of Lucy – amma we can trace the changes in the land community as well as in the human community, especially in the colonial and the postcolonial periods. Apart from being a timeless character, Lucy – amma acts a bridge in relaying her culinary talents to Triton, who will eventually become Mr. Salgado's cook and even create “a special hash: crispy corned beef roasted with potatoes, onions and green chilli, dappled with soy sauce and brown sugar” (1994, 18). Although Mr. Salgado seems like a man who is not into eating too much, his relationship with Miss Nili will expose him to the exotic foods that Triton prepares for him and his special guest. Most of the time, he passes the mealtimes with a sandwich, and he does not eat much in the presence of his guests which is noticed by Miss Nili and Triton. Miss Nili even questions this situation by asking Triton: ‘Your Mister Salgado also never seems to eat,’ she added. ‘What is it about this house that makes it so hard for you men to eat?’ (Gunesequera, 1994, 108). Although Triton does not answer Miss Nili at the time, he is aware how Mr. Salgado feels and acts the way he does in the presence of others. Triton thinks,

He needed his privacy to feel comfortable. When there were other things to attend to—people to talk to, guests to look after, ideas to pursue—eating would be too much of a distraction. There was no security in eating in the company of a lot of people; attention always got divided. Only the intimate could eat together and be happy. It was like making love. It revealed too much. Food was the ultimate seducer. (Gunesequera, 1994, 108)

The romantic relationship of Mr. Salgado to Miss Nili is another culprit in the hindrance of the scientific research on the coral reefs. For example, Mr. Salgado, who is an intellectual in the society and an enthusiastic scientist in the beginning, gives up his hard work on the research of the loss rate of the coral reef after his relationship with Miss Nili. As Shalini Jain questions “the ethics of human engagements with the natural world” in “Romancing the Environment: Romesh Gunesequera's *Reef* and *Heaven's Edge*,” she draws attention to the price paid by the environment as Miss Nili and Mr. Salgado do “the cha cha cha on the sea-front” (2012, 30). Jain builds her argument on Val Plumwood's idea of “hyperseparation between the sphere of human and that of nature in which humankind sees himself/herself superior over nature (2012, 31). In the metaphorical level, this suggests that reason is overcome by romanticism, in other words emotions. It is a kind of runaway for Mr. Salgado to escape from the responsibilities of the enlightened mind. Triton comments on this situation saying: “She brought out the urban socialite in him and shrouded the scholar. It was not something deliberate on her part; simply a desire in him” (Gunesequera, 1994, 129). However, it is not only the love relationship between Mr. Salgado and Miss Nili that derails the scientist from his research on cultural and emotional basis, but it is the gradual development of Triton as a cook and serving food to Mr. Salgado and Miss Nili that will make them become addicted to his food. The most important material agencies that will form the foundation of this article's discussion will be the food and the sea coral and their intra-active agencies in determining both the fate of each other and the characters in the novel. The food plays a crucial role in the relationship of Mr. Salgado and Miss Nili as the reader can sense that Miss Nili is driven into this relationship not only with the agency of Mr. Salgado but with the food Triton prepares for them.

Harold Fromm, in “The Environment is Us,” points out to the fact that the environment as it is perceived at the moment, “runs right through us in endless waves, and if we were to watch ourselves via some ideal

microscopic time-lapse video, we would see water, air, food, microbes, toxins entering our bodies as we shed, excrete, and exhale our processed materials back out” (“Environment”, 2012, 1). His comment on the role of the environment is definitive in terms of new materialisms since it indicates the fact that humankind is in interaction with the environment on a material basis. From this point on, I will try to show the material inter-activity between Triton, the food he cooks, the coral reef, and Mr. Salgado and his scientific undertaking of the conservation of the sea coral.

The research on the coral reef is introduced by Dias, a friend of Mr. Salgado from his school days who is a government officer. He comes over one evening “with a big buff folder under his arm” with a big ribbon on it (Gunsekera, 1994, 56) which is the report of the reef research. Dias mentions he has visited this place called Hikkaduwa and says: “it is incredible, ... all that stuff underwater. Gave me vertigo, just looking. I didn’t realize there were so many fantastic shapes. Some of these fish are something else” (Gunsekera, 1994, 57). After Mr. Salgado surveys the reports he becomes convinced that the government does not know what is happening to the coral reef because as he says,

polyp is really very delicate. It has survived aeons, but even a small change in the immediate environment—even *su* 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. ... It is only the skin if the reef that is alive. It is real flesh: immortal. Self renewing. (Gunsekera, 1994, 58)

The loss of the coral reef means that the ocean will gain more space from the land, which would mean destruction for most of the indigenous people regardless of their ethnicity. The invasion of the land by the ocean due to the destruction of the reef also metaphorically signifies the upcoming civil war that will haunt the country for over 30 years. The relationship between culture and nature in this example does not necessarily benefit the environment because the toxic culture of the postcolonial country poisons the environment along with its society. As Pablo Mukherjee also denotes “the ‘post’ in the postcolonial marks not an end of colonialism, but an end of a particular mode of colonialism which then shifts its gears and evolves to another stage (obviously triggering a concomitant shift in the global struggles against it” (2010, 5-6). Although Gunsekera suggests a way out for Triton through immigration to London, the reconciliation with the environment is left unattended at the end of the novel.

Even though Mr. Salgado has written to the Minister about the subject, and they have some funds to do the research, he is having second thoughts about the project because it could turn into some political show that will prove the country “is finally joining the twentieth century” (Gunsekera, 1994, 59). This research, which is aimed to polish the outlook of the country against the West, resembles the Tiger Project that is initiated by Indira Gandhi in 1973. As it is represented in Amitav Ghosh’s *Hungry Tide*, the problem with the project was that many people who lived in the Sundurbans had to be removed by force to make space for the tigers. Yet, it did not help to prevent both human and tiger casualties.

Nevertheless, Mr. Salgado agrees to research the coral reef and sets up a routine of his own and he even takes Triton and his friend Dias to the beach where he conducts his studies. Triton is both enchanted and intimidated with the sight and sounds of the ocean:

I would glimpse the sea between the trees bathed in a mulled gold light. The color of it, the roar of it, was overwhelming. It was like living inside a conch: the endless pounding. Numinous. You couldn’t get away from it. No wonder Mister Salgado said the sea would be the end of us all. During those two nights we spent on tour I felt the sea getting closer to washing the life out of us. (Gunsekera, 1994, 70)

In this example, the reader can observe the material discursive agency of the ocean and the reef as they penetrate the subconscious of Triton in its material inter-activity. It is the first time he observes the sea from afar and his first impression is fear and intimidation: "After a while it terrified me. And it was no comfort when we eventually got to see Mister Salgado's instrument that was going to save us all from a watery grave" (Gunsekera, 1994, 70). However, the intra-active performativity of the sea affects Triton negatively as he perceives it as an intimidating force, which also makes him concentrate on his culinary talents. He has been taught by Lucy-amma, who said, "[c]ulinary taste was not fickle, [...], and the way you swallow food, like the way you make babies, has not changed throughout the history of mankind (Gunsekera, 1994, 25). Although the food can be associated with the culture of the postcolonial country on the metaphorical level, the material discursive agency of the food is explained by Triton as such:

Taste is not a product of the mouth; it lies entirely in the mind. I prepare each dish to reach the mind through every possible channel. The mouth I only need to tickle, get to salivate, and that I can do even by the picture I present, the smell—perfume rubbed on to the skin, or even the plate, uncooked—the sizzle of a hot dish or some aromatic tenderizing herb. For the mouth itself salt, sugar, lime and chilli alone provide a stunningly varied palette. (Gunsekera, 1994, 97)

The ingredients and the smell of the dish are material agencies that stimulate first mouth and then the brain is what Triton discovers as he is transforming into a successful cook. Yet, Mr Salgado's work is interrupted by a romantic relationship with one Miss Nili, who is a receptionist in the Sea Hopper. They meet at a reception and Mr. Saldago becomes "preoccupied with her" and "only her presence seemed to ease him" (Gunsekera, 1994, 78). However, Triton, even though he is happy for his master as their relationship evolves, comments on the political circumstances, and says that "his new world was one that had no place in the future, as ordinary people saw it then. It was a bubbly world of gaiety that seemed to belong to a previous, more frivolous, generation" (Gunsekera, 1994, 93).

He "glowed as if a magic lantern were shining beneath his skin. His face would constantly break into a boyish smile, the corners of his mouth pulling up irresistibly, his teeth forcing themselves into the open air. The sharp angles of his face became more rounded; he seemed to thicken out and with every meal he shared with her in our house, he grew stronger" (Gunsekera, 1994, 118). While he is getting bigger and happier in his life, the balance of the outside world is getting out of control as:

The rest of the country, sliding into unparalleled debt, girded itself for change of a completely different order: a savage brutalizing whereby our chandiyas—our braggarts—would become thugs, our dissolutes turn into mercenaries and our leaders excel as small-time megalomaniacs. But in those days I had no real interest in the politics of the countryside: we each have to live by our own dreams. (Gunsekera, 1994, 118)

Meanwhile, Triton perfects his skills and "become[s] an expert in the kitchen. Although [he] used [his] hand as a spatula frying fish-balls in hot oil, the middle joint of [his] right little finger was as sensitive as a tube of mercury in judging the right temperature for a perfect string-hopper dough. [He] was also pretty good at a curry in a hurry. A nice red salmon dish could be on the table in twelve minutes flat, and they would both love it" (Gunsekera, 1994, 59). As Miss Nili moves in with Mr. Salgado, their friends who are in their close circle also enliven Mr. Salgado's house and they give parties with food prepared by Triton. As time passes, Triton's food becomes an object of admiration and craving. While he cooked for just the two of them, he would be cooking for a dozen people in no time. Aware of this attention from the people, Triton says, "[t]hey craved my cooking. If I were cooking for two, I would soon be cooking for half-a-dozen. They kept coming, hankering after our food and eager to see how long the romance would last (Gunsekera, 1994, 143). In such an environment, the scientific work gets sidetracked and even if

Mister Salgado’s coastal project passed its zenith; he should have been drawing his conclusions together in some big report but, rather than analyzing and writing, he procrastinated. From time to time, he would ask Wijetunga to produce more data, but he never studied the results. He would occasionally bring a batch of papers home and go into his study. But then he would wander out to ‘take air’. He would see her on the veranda and forget to go back in. She brought out the urban socialite in him and shrouded the scholar. It was not something deliberate on her part; simply a desire in him. (Gunsekera, 1994, 129)

To the end of the year, they have a Christmas party with their friends and after that party, which is also an important challenge for Triton because it is the first time, he is preparing a Christmas dinner for a crowd. Triton prepares a traditional dinner for the party who gathered at Mr. Salgado’s home and Triton notices that Mr. Salgado “blossoms” and becomes “tangible” for the first time and shows everyone how he can be the most entertaining person in the world (Gunsekera, 1994, 93). Meanwhile, the political circumstances in the country also change along with Mr. Salgado’s personal affairs and opposition parties, an uneasy coalition of old-fashioned leftists and new style nationalists who promised free rice and a new society wins the general elections. Dias warns him about the coral business saying “[n]o more highfalutin ideas. It is all People’s committees now. That’s decreed.” Salgado nods and says, “I know people think they can rule even the waves by decree” (Gunsekera, 1994, 173).

They also decide to leave the country as the violence slowly creeps into the streets. They do a lot of reckoning about their circumstances while they are in England as refugees and one day Mr. Salgado would say “The urge to build, to transform nature, to make something out of nothing is universal. But to conserve, to protect, to care for the past is something we have to learn” (Gunsekera, 1994, 188). Mr. Salgado’s words can be analyzed as a confession on the part of his failed scientific research of the reef. Triton also realizes 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” (Gunsekera, 1994, 184). Mr. Salgado goes back to Nili in 1983 after having heard about she is having a troubled time back in Sri Lanka and leaves Triton on his own.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, *Reef* as a postcolonial novel which has environmental concerns cannot offer a solution to these problems. Losing the coral reefs, which means the loss of land that the indigenous people live, become inevitable as the fishermen became “undertakers” and, “burned heaps of the dead in bigger mounds than the fish they caught” (Gunsekera, 1994, 177). However, when it is analyzed from a new materialist perspective, all the turmoil of the postcolonial country, which manifests itself as the unrest between the ruling class and the opposition which drags the country into civil war, is just one side of the problem. The research is not sidetracked by the turmoil of the politics and ethnic rivalry but with the material discursive agencies of the food and the reef in their intra-active agencies. The food cooked by Triton mesmerizes Mr. Salgado along with his love affair with Miss Nili and the reef and the ocean intimidates Triton and drives him away from becoming the enlightened man Mr. Salgado is. The novel uses the sea and the coral reef in their material discursive agencies to affect both Triton in his subconscious mind and enable him to become an enthusiastic cook and then a successful chef at the end of the novel while leaving out the environmental problems of Sri Lanka out of the scope of a solution.

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