

Eating One's Way Through History: Food and Politics in Manuka Wijesinghe's Monsoons and Potholes

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Abstract: This paper consists of an analysis of *Monsoons and Potholes* (2006), the first novel by Sri Lankan playwright Manuka Wijesinghe. Attention is paid to the ways in which the text articulates relations between personal stories, food, history and politics. Food plays a central role in some novels published in the last years by Sri Lankan authors, as is the case, for instance, with Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* (1984) and Mary Ann Mohanraj's *Bodies in Motion* (2005). Both these works elaborate metaphors of identity through the dominant trope of food-encompassing cooking and the rituals of consumption. In *Monsoons and Potholes*, food accompanies and illustrates the autobiographical account of a Sri Lankan youngster born in the early 1960s, and revisits the first twenty years in her life together with the socio-political up and downs in her country. While it is a novel which to a great extent draws on metaphors of myth and history, scenes of food and eating appear consistently throughout the narration, which contribute in providing a down-to-earth (and highly satirical) version of the life of the Sinhala upper-middle classes during the period. These images of food (and the sets of rituals, beliefs and constrictions around it) are exploited by the author with the aim to explore, understand and denounce the historical process which precipitated Sri Lanka, at the beginning of the 1980s, "on the road to nowhere".

Keywords: Sri Lankan literature; Manuka Wijesinghe; contemporary fiction

Manuka Wikresinghe's fiction has been compared to that of Arundathi Roy and Salman Rushdie (Abeyratne 2009; Perera 2008), and the quality of her writing is repeatedly noted in the reviews of her two novels published up to now: *Monsoons and Potholes* (2006) and *Theravada Man* (2009). A born Sri Lankan who lives in Germany but travels constantly to her country of origin, before turning on to fiction Wijesinghe had earned a name as a playwright (Goonetilleke 2005:188). Her first novel, *Monsoons and Potholes*, unanimously acclaimed, has been signalled as a "better text" of the times in a landscape of the contemporary Sri Lankan novel depicted as plagued by "the want in originality, the unwillingness/inability to experiment with art and creativity and the underemployment of imagination" (Perera 2008). If there is consensus in considering

this novel both crafty and engaging, there is also a coincidence in accusing it of excessive density and length. It is my contention, though, that verbosity can be considered as an asset in this case, given the mythopeic quality of *Monsoons and Potholes*. On the other hand, the text reads as *bildungsroman*, a genre arguably prone to excess. Suffice it to say that Goethe's canonical *bildungsroman*, founder of the genre, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, comprises no less than eight volumes, while Thomas Mann's tetralogy *Joseph and his Brothers* reaches the 2000 pages.

Monsoons and Potholes, we are warned on the back cover, is “an auto biography,” a fact further evidenced by the coincidence of author and protagonist's name, Manuka, as well as the preliminary words: “When the past finally reached the present, it mutated. No longer what it had been; a structure of confabulation, the conditional having conquered the past participle. ... It is my life. My story” (6).¹ Her personal story will actually be used to accompany and illustrate the course of political events and configurations in Sri Lanka over a 20-year timespan, as while revisiting her own life the narrator revises what the decades of the 1960s and 1970s meant for the country in political terms, her account finishing in the early 1980s, after the breakout of the ethnic riots between the Sinhala and Tamil populations that marked the beginning of the civil war terminated in April 2009. In connecting individual narration with the construction of history, the coincidence between Wijesinghe's experience and the events she narrates would make this text “eligible” in the sense signalled (not without a critical squint) by Graham Huggan, which is explained by Minoli Salgado as “the evaluation of a literary work ... mediated not only or always on the basis of discursive dynamics or textual considerations, but also on the basis of its perceived cultural legitimacy” (Salgado 2007: 3).

The singularity of Wijesinghe's fiction lies in her extraordinary ability for satire, a quality that has been noted: “Manuka Wisejinghe abounds in and revels in irreverence, ribald wit, humour, caprice, blasphemy, fabrication, eccentricity, lively fancy, [and] in a huge binge of creative imagination” (Wanigasundara 2006). Another critic remarks: “When it comes to satire, Manuka is as deadly as a rattlesnake. Her bite could even fell an elephant” (Abyeratne 2009). Indeed, in Wijesinghe's work satire becomes a weapon to criticize virtually *everything* in the world depicted, from the prejudices related to class, caste or skin colour, to the official versions of history elaborated by strongly chauvinistic Sinhalese governments, or the mythological accounts of the creation and early times of the isle of Lanka—fashioned by Buddhist religious elites to marshal a version of the country fitting with their own interests.

In Wijesinghe's “most exhilarating of biographies” (Wanigasundara 2009) food plays a relevant if not crucial role. For obvious reasons, it is a more conspicuous presence in some parts of the text, for instance when narrating the period of Mrs. Bandanarayake's “minimization”, as food then became a scarce commodity in the country even for upper middle class families like Manuka's. But I intend to show here how food remains an important motif throughout the story, contributing to keeping down to earth a narrative line which often veers towards the mythological, the philosophical, the religious, or the metaphysical. Moreover, food works as a narrative thread which accompanies the everyday experiences of a community held together by the sense of belonging to a common political unit, Sri Lanka. Importantly, this community is also held together through the common cultural values they attribute to food, as well as through the very rituals which involve its preparation, consumption and sharing.

We cannot overestimate the importance of food and eating in culture. As Juan Cruz Cruz remarks in his study *Food and Culture (Alimentación y Cultura)*,

Food is a symbolic form of communication, either between mother and child, or between the individual and society. Humans arrange conduct patterns, norms and religious prohibitions, hierarchical modes and functions distribution through food. (Cruz Cruz 1991: 13)

And also:

A culture is run by norms which provide acceptable ways to confront certain situations. These norms propose appropriate modes of behaviour, hierarchically arranged from the more to the less beneficial. In any case, modes of behaviour are put together in such a way that when an individual starts eating, this act is already impregnated of the global meaning of culture, of his or her normative system. (Cruz Cruz 1991: 15; my translation in both quotes)

Indeed, food plays an essential role in Sri Lankan culture, as works like Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* (1984) and Mary Ann Mohanraj's *Bodies in Motion* (2005), among others, underscore. In these two diasporic novels food and cooking are treated in a fetishist manner, as the material means of sticking to a culture (Sri Lankan) which has been left behind and replaced by another (Australian or American in either case). In a different way Wijesinghe's novel partakes of this *weighty* concern with food. Oftentimes in *Monsoons and Potholes*, food not only accompanies and helps illustrate major themes in the novel such as politics, history or mythology, but it is also used as a motif to assist and enhance Wijesinghe's poignant social critique.

Textual evidence of how food accompanies every single aspect and moment of Sri Lankan life abounds in the text. Key moments in the life of the protagonist and the rest of characters, as much as obscure or irrelevant ones, are narrated in ways that underscore the proximity between the world of social rituals and institutions and that of food. It is interesting to provide a few examples of how wittily the narrator uses an apparently harmless universe in order to criticise and denounce. An early example of this strategy can be found when the narrator recalls the predictions cast around her birth:

Let me talk about Pathiraja first. His predictions were brilliant under the influence of alcohol and dull when sober. My grandmother, being a woman of great perception, had invited Pathiraja for a dinner of fried rice, wild boar, mutton and chicken liver, given him half a bottle of Arrack and somewhere along the post-dinner, nocturnal route to intoxication, made him predict the otherwise unpredictable. My birth. (11)

The paragraph reads as a critique, recurrent in the story, of the corruption of the Buddhist Church. Nonetheless, this model of Buddhist priest is contrasted with a more restrained one, in the figure of the priest come home some years later to cast predictions at the birth of Manuka's younger brother, later affectionately called by her "TM Mozart":

The following Sunday, the new astrologer who cast my new brother's horoscope came for lunch. He was young, vegetarian and a teetotaller. Achi, assuming all astrologers were like Pathiraja, prepared chicken curry, sausage

curry, wild boar, and beef curry. Lalith the astrologer ate only vegetables.
(314)

The scene here does not completely redeem the image of Buddhist monks as presented throughout, as too much sarcasm has been poured on institutional Buddhism at this point in the narration for redemption to happen so easily, but it manages to convey another humorous example of Manuka's family's tendency to preposterousness in their social demeanours, well exploited in the text. As regards the above mentioned irreverence, noted by some critics as we saw, remarks like the following may illustrate it: "On the other hand I had absolutely no intention of going to Nirvana. Nirvana was vegetarian. I wanted pastries" (82); "Nirvana had the appeal of a plate of unsalted rice with neither pol sambol nor curry" (88). "During Sil, one wore white and ate a vegetarian meal before noon. Sat on the ground and meditated in order to prevent the mind from wandering into the territories of bad thoughts. No dinner was permitted. This was classical Sil. I never observed Sil" (83).

Economic privilege will be another target of the narrator's irony. A good example is to be found in the character of Marshmallow, a classmate of Manuka's whose parents own a familiar business which turns their child into a very tempting friendship for anyone else in the class—especially when the times become harsh and the food scarce for the majority: "Marshmallow. An only female child, an only fair skinned female child in a family of dark skinned pastry shop owners. She had been fed with butter and pastries; we had been fed rice and vegetables" (47). Marshmallow enjoys singular privileges made possible by her family's business, and whenever she causes problems the teachers do not intervene to condemn her, "bribed for the day with a sumptuous breakfast of Chinese rolls, prawn pies and cutlets" (47). In the end, the ever resourceful Manuka consents to Marshmallow's friendship intimations, consent being prompted by and fuelled through nutritional matters:

'What are you eating?'
'None of your business'
'It looks HORRID' ... '...if you are my friend, I will give you a bite of my Chinese roll.' ...
...Perhaps I would end up dead like Snow White, biting into a poisoned Chinese roll instead of an apple? But I didn't care. The months of Bandanarayake minimization was [*sic.*] giving birth to its own kind of slit eyed wisdom. I bit into that Chinese roll and became Marshmallow's friend.
(81)

Gender roles in Sri Lankan society are also explored in relation to food. In the following passage, the critique is addressed to the subservient role the wife is expected to play in Sri Lankan society, which demands from her to do the cooking for her husband yet refuses to grant her the social recognition and financial independence which would come with being hired as a cook:

Without a wife, uncle Buddhi did not get proper food, so, he was losing weight. That was a logical conclusion to a man's misery even though hired cooks cook in our country and not wives. But when a husband loses weight when his wife is away, it is not the cook's fault, it is the wife's. (260)

It is to be noted that in spite of the narrator's remark that it is hired cooks who cook in Sri Lanka, indeed not all the families can afford what for them would be luxury. We

thus get attestation that the story we are being told narrates the experiences of a particular social stratum in Sri Lanka, that of the well-situated bourgeoisie, who nevertheless went through difficult times during the Bandanaraike era.

Gender issues are also tackled in connection with food. In the passage I shall be quoting to illustrate this idea, two things are to be observed. For once, we see that the crucial moment in the life of the Sri Lankan female population which is the first menstruation is accompanied by rituals involving food. Together with that, we are also made aware that individual freedom and autonomy are disregarded in favour of an obsessive focus on the need to fulfil the primordial end the physiology of a woman is made to serve in Sri Lanka: childbearing. The conversation is held between Manuka, after she has had her first menstruation, and Achi, grandmother and keeper of this kind of traditions:

‘Ugh! What is that? Are you trying to poison me?’

‘That is milk coffee with egg.’

‘I don’t drink coffee.’

‘When you grow up you have to. For the next few days, until the astrologer gives an auspicious time for your bath, you will be drinking a coffee every morning with two raw eggs.’

‘And I don’t eat raw eggs either.’

‘You are a woman and soon you’ll be marrying and having children. In order to nourish a child in your womb you have to be healthy, and now itself start nurturing your organs towards childbirth.’ (231)

Cultural difference is also magnified through the lens of food, as found in the epistolary and telephonic exchanges between the different members of the family who remain in Sri Lanka and those migrated to the Western World, particularly the United Kingdom. And the same applies to religious difference. The following remarks are made on occasion of the celebration of Manuka’s birthday, where she has exceptionally been allowed to invite boys. Her friend Sohani is in love with one of them, a Muslim boy, whose virtues do not go unnoticed by the host, herself infatuated with a cricket bowler:

Sohani’s eyes kept leaping to the window. She had invited the Muslim love letter writer to the party. I hoped Magi had not cooked pork for dinner. (292)

‘Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot to mention to you that there was pork served.’...

‘Don’t worry girl, if I don’t know, and Allah doesn’t know, there is nothing to worry about.’ I like[d] the Muslim love letter writer. I wished my bowler had his sense of humour. (296)

As it happens with food and social matters, also the nutritional and the political are deeply intertwined with each other. In *Monsoons and Potholes*, governmental policies clearly affect the everyday politics of food and eating, and, interestingly, food has a heavy influence on the country’s politics as well.

The novel’s three parts coincide neatly with different periods of Sri Lankan political life. Part One, “The anatomy of a pathological birth”, actually presents a double “pathological birth:” that of the protagonist’s, for one, but also the beginning of Mrs. Srimavo Bandanarayake’s severe grip on the country. Mrs. B (as she was popularly known) became Sri Lanka’s Prime Minister after her husband’s death in 1960: “She came like a seven-year itch. Mrs. Bandanarayake, the widow. A phoenix from her

husband's funeral pyre. She held the nation and its people hostage for the termination of her husband's life" (77).ⁱⁱ In political terms, this chapter conflates with the second one, "The road to the left", which is set in the second period of Mrs. B's office as Prime Minister, 1970-1977.ⁱⁱⁱ Chapter three, "The Road to the Right", covers the first half of J.R.Jayawardene's office (1977-1989), as Prime Minister first and then Executive President after the constitutional change he effected in 1978. The following chart may be illustrative of these coincidences:

<i>Monsoons and Potholes</i>	Sri Lanka Government
Chapter I The Anatomy of a pathological birth	Srimavo Bandaranayake, 1960-1965 (Dudley Senanayake, 1965-1970)
Chapter II The Road to the Left	Srimavo Bandaranayake, 1970-1977
Chapter III The Road to the Right	J.R. Jayawardene, 1977-1989 (1983)

As regards the Banadaranaikes period, historian K.M. de Silva remarks that its primary features were "the acceptance of Sinhala as the national language, Buddhist predominance within the Sri Lankan polity and a sharp decline in the status of the ethnic and religious minorities" (de Silva 2005: 644). In an atmosphere rarefied following the passing of the "Sinhala Only" act in 1956 by her husband in his PM capacity, throughout her first stint as Primer Minister Mrs. B. earned the enmity of different groups in the country for acts of commission: Native Tamils for her immediate application of the "Sinhala Only" policies without any concessions to Tamils (regardless of the fact that the Tamil Federal Party had supported her in the election), Plantation Tamils for her agreement with India for their repatriation in 1964, Muslims for her interference in the system of *quasis* or Muslim domestic relations courts, and Catholics for her nationalization of the education system, which had traditionally been in their hand (de Silva 2005: 649 *et passim*). All the while she won recognition among non-aligned countries for her anti-American policies, such as the nationalization of the import and distribution of petroleum products in 1963—an initiative which resulted in the withdrawal of substantial financial aid previously sent by the USA. This cut in foreign aid in turn aggravated a severe economic crisis caused by the decrease in the price of exports. Also, from 1960 staple foodstuffs like rice and sugar, and others like chocolate, were nationalised and started being distributed through state cooperatives—if at all. All these events are reproduced in the novel, of course tinted with irony, as in the following complaint by a Manuka who, having a sweet tooth like any child, resents the scarcity of candy and is unable to find a surrogate pleasure like some members of her family:

Since the nationalization of the sugar and chocolate industries I had forgotten the sweet taste of sweet. Aunty Lydia [who was an Anglican] had

found a compromise between minimized sweetness and the sweetness of the Lord. I could not do so. I had not met her sweet Lord. (114)

Indeed, and as De Silva recalls, “all luxury goods, and then increasingly, more essential goods were eliminated from the country’s import bill in the early 60s” (De Silva 2005: 654). While the prices of imports went up (especially rice, but also wheat) and those of exports (especially tea, but also coconut and rubber) went down (De Silva 2005: 655), Mrs. B. implemented a policy of “minimization” which the novel satirizes endlessly. The irony was that, while she preached and imposed socialism, Mrs B. and her family enjoyed privileges no Sri Lankan could dream of: “In the meantime, her three children got fatter and fairer on baguettes, Roquefort and Brie” (78). For ordinary Sri Lankans, cooking started requiring miraculous skills, as denounced by the narrative voice: “[Magi] is making the best Christmas cake in the world, even when Madam Bandaranayake is eating all the necessary condiments alone” (109). The family cook, Magi, is indeed no less important a character in the story than Thati or Ammi, the girl’s parents. Not only does she have to bake cakes without any ingredients, but she has to cook rice which contains more stones than grains (“‘Kkks...’ A typical sound at the dining table during meal times,” 79), or pol sambol seasoned with chilli powder that more often than not turns out to be red brick powder.

Minimization affects food but also other spheres of life. Together with the Bank of Ceylon, the paper industry was also nationalized and minimized: “Books were minimized since the book markets did not publish Sinhala only. The books in English became too expensive...” (115), and thus new books were no more, while second-hand bookshops sprouted and thrived, and school materials as well as newspapers were reduced to a minimum size and amount (96). Mrs. B.’s Anti-American politics, combined with a policy of non-alignment and an intimate relationship with China which are referred to as her “red silk bed sheets” policy (89), had an effect on the country. Manuka recounts how their weekend entertainments saw themselves reduced to regular visits to the airport, built with Chinese aid, where they took up the habit of lunching together. Once again, the passage combines narration and irony, politics and food:

Growing up in the middle of minimization on an island, our concept of the world was limited to our glorious airport. We were proud. Of it, of us, of the Chinese, of Mrs. Bandaranayake. ...Every Saturday and Sunday, ...Ammi, the servants, the boarders and I, visited the Bandaranayake International Airport and watched the Air Ceylon planes take off and land *with the Bandaranayake family onboard*.

Soon uncle Buddhi and his family joined us. Then uncle Roland and his family joined us. Thereafter, uncle Harry and his family. ...Each family brought their own tiffin carrier with one portion of rice and different curries, to share with each other. Additionally there was cake for teatime; iced coffee... (90; my emphasis)

Emergency is the climactic closure of this calamitous first period of Mrs. B.’s government and of the chapter. Since her election, a state of emergency had been declared between April 1961 and April 1963 and was declared again between March and April 1964. Emergency meant a halt to everyday activities and a frantic chase for food of any kind:

We were at home. No school, no classes, no nothing. Only two hours a day to run to the cooperative store with the ration cards and buy the rationed food for a week. Ammi took care of the rice and dhal. Siya hunted for maldive fish. Achi palled up with the retailers and searched the cooperative stores for fresh coconuts and sugar in the lightest shade of brown. (124)

One of the few not nationalised products was maldive fish. A routine delicacy in Sri Lankan cuisine, maldive fish is dried and smoked tuna fish, and a basic ingredient of traditional Lankan dishes like the mentioned pol sambol. Maldive fish becomes a motif that runs through the novel. Siya, Manuka's grandfather, starts losing his composure due to the scarcity of this product, which "had the same importance of salt and chilli" (125), and will eventually disappear, literally, in "the maldive fish queue" (127). Maldive fish thus becomes a national symbol for stability, something only attained by Mrs. B. by force, at the expense of hampering the rights of minorities and, worse, at the price of general undernourishment. As the first chapter closes, the disappearance of Manuka's grandfather epitomizes and deprecates the literal banishment and probable assassinations of hundreds of people during Mrs. B's periods of emergency. The chapter ends with the question: "Were we all about to disappear?" (127), which reads both nutritionally, as starvation means death, and politically, in the aforementioned emergency context. Siya the grandfather reappears with no explanation somewhere in chapter two, but only to point out categorically that Srimavo Bandaranayake is "the worst ruler [the] country has ever seen. Even worse than SWRD" (221), and that under her government Sri Lanka is "sinking into hell" (221).

Maldive fish helps illustrating another feature of Mrs. B.'s home politics. According to de Silva, corruption and "a flagrant misuse of state resources" (de Silva 2005: 672) was rife during the second period of Mrs. B. Prime Ministry, begun in 1970:

Preferential treatment of supporters of the government in recruitment and promotion within the state service had always been a feature of the process of governance of Sri Lanka since independence, but now, for the first time, preferential treatment of government supporters was 'institutionalized.' (De Silva 2005: 672)

It is more than likely that Wijesinghe has documented herself through reading de Silva's notorious historical treaty, as in *Monsoons and Potholes* we read a repetition of these terms: "A new era in the left to the centre was ushered in. It was the era of nationalization and the institutionalization of preferential treatment of governmental supporters" (192). In her text, this policy materializes in the invitation to go on "a government sponsored congressional excursion to the Republic of Maldives" (189) received from Mrs. B by Thathi Manuka's father. In her inexhaustible irony, the narrator baptizes this new campaign of the Prime Minister as "the institutionalization of the partial implementation of minimization," or "the non-minimization of a few, versus the minimization of the many" (189). With the only exception of Thathi, an engineer employed as a civil servant, the whole family deplores Mrs. B.'s ill government, and they are outraged by this invitation. His wife, referred to as Ammi by Manuka, will even end up leaving for England in a fit of resentment after a heavy argument on the matter with her husband. To add up to the discomfort, no one in the family understands why Maldives is the chosen place, as it appears as rather drab in comparison to architecturally more glamorous places like Egypt, Greece, France, or closer India. But the Republic of Maldives testifies to the cleverness of the Prime Minister when Thathi

returns from the trip “with two suitcases. One full of dirty clothes and the other full of Maldive fish” (194). Ammi, Siya and all the family are mollified when given a chance to eat again pol sambol that does not taste “like tissue paper” (190). The formerly strict minimization of maldive fish becomes thus partial (as announced by the narrator) in that maldive fish becomes a more abundant commodity in some circles. In this way, even the impartial families of those partial “government supporters” like Thatthi may be led to feel some sympathy for Bandaranayake, as “when the partial members had Maldive fish, so did their impartial families” (194). With maldive fish back in pol sambol, the hitherto murky atmosphere of the family meals is lightened. So are the country’s spirits, as the maldive fish black market thrives and breathes new oxygen into many corroded domestic economies.

I shall provide a last example of the intersection between food and politics in *Monsoons and Potholes*. We shall now move to the third chapter, “The road to the right.” Although it goes on to denounce the continuation of strongly Sinhala policies, the text is not so ruthlessly critical of J.R. Jawardene’s government as it was of Mrs. B.’s, and besides narrating Manuka’s personal teenage struggles, it concentrates on accounting for the emergence of the Tamil insurrection and the outbreak of the civil conflict—the suggestion always being that the Tamil minority has been improperly cared for by successive Sri Lankan governments. We shall spare details of this progression and focus instead on the key figure of Podian.

Podian is a Plantation Tamil who for a long time worked as a driver for the branch of the family living in Mount Lavinia, with whom Manuka and her closest relatives had to live for some time while looking for a new house.^{iv} Later on, as the family in Mount Lavinia leave for England like so many others, Podian will start working for the family branch in Colombo. The Tamil driver is characterized by his integrity and candour, and above all by his fidelity to his employers. As indicated above in this paper, in 1964 Mrs. B. signed an agreement with Lal Bahadur Sastri, Prime Minister of India, to repatriate around half a million Tamils whose ancestors the English had taken from India to Sri Lanka to work in the tea plantations in the 19th century (see de Silva 2005: 647-48). The concept of repatriation is of course inappropriate since the likes of Podian, that is, Sri Lankan Indian Tamils, are born and bred in Sri Lanka, and feel this country as their one and only place in the world. The driver’s story is extremely moving, and provides a dramatic balance to the previous *excess* of parody—the term *excess* employed here as a positive attribution. Podian is “repatriated” against his will, and once in India, where he has neither family nor friends, he just spends his time saving as much as possible—while forced to live in nearly inhuman conditions—so as to be able to go back *home*. In his nine years there he will neither marry nor do anything that might distract him from fulfilling his utmost desire, that is, going back to Sri Lanka, which he over and over again keeps referring to as “my country.”

Unfortunately, Podian goes back to his country when this is being ravaged by the grave inter-ethnic riots which arose in 1983, after the killing of 13 members of the Sinhala army in the province of Jaffna, and which marked the beginning of the civil conflict. Podian does not feel concerned by this trouble.^v When he appears back in the Colombo household the whole of Manuka’s family rejoices, especially Magi, whose cooking had resented Podian’s absence: “Magi was ... sad at Podian’s departure and her food, needless to say, was the opposite of culinary delight!” (188).

But at this point the whole country is on fire, and havoc reigns. While the text spares no criticism of institutional Buddhism as the driving force behind the terrible attacks on Tamils, Muslims and the “odd Christian” (341), somewhere in the midst of mayhem the family runs out of bread. Podian volunteers to go outside and get some. When concerned for his security they refuse his offer, he decides to go out behind their backs. Noticing his absence soon after, Manuka and other members of the family start searching for Podian, first at home and then out in the streets. The text will now slowly gain a tragic texture. A sense of doom which, come to think of it, is the only possible way to close a story that ends with the outbreak of a war:

He did not return.

Magi did not cook.

No one wanted to eat. Neither rice nor bread. (353)

When they finally find Podian, it is at the police station:

The face that stared at me with its dead vacant eyes and body covered with bruises and cigarette burns, was that of the little black man who returned to us after repatriation. He looked different. I suppose that was the difference death made. He stared at me. Lifeless, rigid, empty, different. The stiffness of death had eliminated his vibrancy. ... I hated that wretched man for returning after repatriation. Why had he come? The police officer had been observing my face. ‘*Meya naeda* (this is him, isn't it?)’ ... Yes, that third dead body which revealed its dead face to me was Podian. His dead right hand still clutching half the loaf of bread he had bought for me. The other half was missing. (354)

While searching for some bread to feed the Sinhala family he considers to be his own family, Podian the Tamil has been brutally tortured to death by Sinhala extremists. A half loaf of bread clutched in the dead hand of an innocent victim can surely suggest a myriad of meanings. In the context of Sri Lankan history, this image amounts to a weeping for the immense loss of lives and illusions effected by inefficient policies, lack of understanding and concern for “the other self” (341), and an irrational civil war which, as we said, precisely began with these riots (Nissan 1996; Schwartz 1988).

In conclusion, personal stories, food, history and politics are deeply intertwined in Manuka Wijesinghe's *Monsoons and Potholes*. To begin with, food is used as a device to provide evidence of the existence of a Sri Lankan *national* culture, one which encompasses all Sri Lankans regardless of their ethnicity. In the text Sri Lankans are presented as solidly conscious of their unique mythical and historical baggage, and as being imbued with a heavy sense of political responsibility. In a complementary manner, Sri Lankan culture appears as suitably sensorial and physical, an effect achieved mostly through images of food and eating. Food fulfils a second, all-important function in the novel: to enhance the criticism of governmental policies which have been inefficient and damaging for the population in several senses. The novel is a reminder that Sinhala and Tamil peoples have peacefully coexisted in the island of Lanka for centuries, and that the trouble of recent decades is only the result of systematic divisive policies. Thus, we cannot ignore the dire consequences of the terrible war between Sinhalese and Tamil groups which begins as the novel comes to an end; But the war was happily over last year, in 2009, and a note of hope for a better

future in Sri Lanka seems reasonable at this point. Being Sri Lankan culture as rich and *tasty* as presented in *Monsoons and Potholes*, from now on the socio-political situation in the country can only change for the better.

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ⁱ Page numbers between brackets without author's name will hereon refer to Manuka Wijesinghe, *Monsoons and Potholes*.

ⁱⁱ For an account of the genealogy of the Bandanaraike family and a personal approximation to these two great figures of Sri Lankan politics, see Gooneratne 1986.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the text there is no allusion to the years of Dudley Senanayake's Prime Ministry (1965-1970), as chapter one ends in a period of emergency declared by Mrs. Bandanarayake in her first stint as Prime Minister (the last emergency state she declared in this period was between March and April 1964), and Chapter two begins with the country having its name changed from Ceylon to "The Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka", a change effected by Mrs. Bandanarayake after her reelection in 1970. See De Silva 2005: 2005, Yogasundram 2008.

^{iv} These are Anglican Aunt Lydia and her Catholic husband Aunt Rupert. Their presence in the story illustrates the eclecticism of Sri Lankan religious life, in spite of the strong Buddhist predicament of successive conservative Sinhalese Governments. The very figure of Podian, a Hindu Tamil, as well as the Muslim boy Manuka is mesmerized by as a teenager, are other examples of this plurality. For this reason, although focusing on Sinhala characters, Wijesinghe's narrative could be catalogued as a "narrative of coexistence." These are narratives which contest the official "narratives of partition" or "of separation," and which deploy "complex, intertwined histories and enmeshed, interlocking identities -a dense, untidy tapestry of interactions, peaceful and otherwise, of people in Sri Lanka" (Perera 2000: 15). For a very condensed account of the ethnic distribution in contemporary Sri Lanka, see Goonetilleke 2001: xvii-xviii.

^v "...that is problem with Tamil man from Jaffna, I'm poor Tamil man from plantation, I have no problem" (346). Plantation Tamils had not the same political concerns and goals as Sri Lankan Tamils from the North and East. Let us also note that Sri Lankan Tamils were not a homogenous group in terms of ideology, and that an extremist faction took the initiative over the more moderate Tamils that had traditionally occupied power positions and institutional posts. The novel explores the origin of these extremists, mostly an educated unemployed youth which was not only Tamil but also Sinhala, and which was the product of the nationalization and universalization of education: "When all the rice farmers' and coconut farmers' sons and daughters study art history and philosophy and don't want to work the fields, it was obvious ... that they would have nothing to eat. ...

She understood the gravity of the problem and tucked them into prison cells and fed them. She neither offended karma nor did she give them undue hardship. She minimised their worries. They had a roof over their heads and food to eat." (187-188)