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Circular time: A study of narrative techniques in Arundhati Roy's the god of small things

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Circular Time: A Study of Narrative Techniques in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Undoubtedly Roland Barthes would have qualified Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as "writerly" or, to use his own terminology, *scriptible*. The novel's fragmented temporal structure with its polyphonic narrative voices compels the reader to reconstruct the text much as she/he would piece together a jigsaw puzzle as the story of three generations unfolds. In a fashion very reminiscent of Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), time is superimposed in layers, each layer leaving unobliterable traces that confuse perception of the whole. Thus the past is always in the present, and the present is always shaping the future. This fluid backwards and forwards movement deconstructs chronological temporal sequences. No longer anchored in a static time frame, temporal signifiers float loosely on a Lacanian stream of sliding signifieds as the reader gropes her/his way through the narrative's circular rather than linear progression.

In this paper, I would like to discuss why Roy chose this particular mode, and to attempt to link it with her political commitments. I will begin with an analysis of the links between narrativity and temporality in *The God of Small Things*. After defining the different levels of the novel's multiple-temporal structure, I propose an in-depth study of the opening chapter as a sample of Roy's techniques before analysing the consequences of this "metatemporal narrative mode"[1] through a careful examination of the two closing scenes. Thus I hope to elucidate the intimate connection between 'form' and 'content' in *The God of Small Things*.

The novel's "metatemporal narrative mode" is clear from the very first chapter. This long introductory chapter weaves backwards and forwards between prolepses, analepses and ellipses, laying foundations for the story to come. It finishes with the famous lines:

> In a purely practical sense it would probably be correct to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem. . . . Equally, it could be

argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. . . .
That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made.
The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how.
<div align="center">And how much. (32-33)</div>

Thus a double-time pattern is built into the novel from the very beginning: chronological time, or time pertaining to the diegesis, which operates syntagmatically, and a-chronological time, or time pertaining to history, or the collective memory shared by a society, which operates paradigmatically. In the lines quoted above, Roy symbolises chronological time by the first event in her story, the arrival of Sophie Moll to Ayemenem, and she chooses to symbolise a-chronological, or vertical time, by what she calls the "Love Laws", "laid down thousands of years ago". We will return to these "Love Laws" in greater detail later, but for the moment, it suffices to note that thus an atemporal dimension is added to the temporal – a consciousness of the weight of the past on the present. In addition to this dual-time pattern, the linear chain of chronological time is broken up and the pieces are juxtaposed, thus creating deeper levels of temporality.

Before discussing *The God of Small Things*, a few remarks on narratology are in order. Narratology accepts that diegetic, or 'story' time sequencing is independent of narrative presentation, resulting in a dual and independent time-ordering: the time-line of the story, and the time-line of discourse. Paul Ricoeur defines plot as the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story. Thus plot is the crossing point linking narrativity and temporality. A story is made out of events to the extent that plot makes events into a story. Ricoeur notes : "To tell and to follow a story is already to reflect upon events in order to encompass them in successive wholes." (174). Now the point is, what sort of "whole", if any, does *The God of Small Things* encompass ?

To begin with, there are two "wholes" or story lines to consider. *The God of Small Things* is a 'before and after story'. Before the main drama, when the heroine, Rahel, was seven, and after, as Rahel, thirty-one, returns from the United States to her home town, Ayemenem, in Kerala. Throughout the novel these two time sequences are constantly juxtaposed. To these two story lines, which ultimately combine into a single story, must be added a third "whole", which is governed by a-chronological time. That is to say, the presence of history, in the form of cultural codes which dominate action throughout the two story lines. Roy has chosen the third-person narrative form for her novel which enables her to simultaneously shift perspectives and temporal levels, with the narrator moving from story line to story line.

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The story proper can be resumed in a few words. It centres around a family of wealthy Syrian Christian landowners comprising the grandmother, Mammachi, her divorced son, Chacko and her divorced daughter, Ammu, Ammu's twins, Rahel and Estha, and an unmarried aunt, Baby Kochamma. Margaret, Chacko's British ex-wife and their daughter Sophie come to India to visit Chacko. The day of their arrival coincides with the beginning of a secret liaison between Ammu and an untouchable carpenter, Velutha. The discovery of this liaison and the ensuing confusion result in the children running away in a boat, and the accidental drowning of Sophie. In an attempt to save the family honour, the aunt accuses Velutha of rape and kidnapping, convincing the innocent twins to testify against him. Velutha dies, victim of police brutality and Ammu is thrown out by the family to die an anonymous death, while Estha is shipped off to his father in Calcutta. Rahel remains in the family home, unloved and unwanted. The entire action takes place over a period of two weeks. Twenty-seven years later, Estha, now aphasic, is sent back to Ayemenem by his father, who is immigrating to Australia. Rahel, who had in the meantime moved to America, returns to Kerala to look after her twin.

Onto these bare bones, Roy grafts stories of all characters involved, at various places in the novel, each story supplying background information necessary to, but not part of the narrative proper, for example, the stories of Ammu, Chacko, Baby Kochamma, the spinster aunt, and so forth, thus shedding light on their behaviour in the narrative proper. This results in several temporal levels, which it would be useful to define, before looking at the novel's structure more closely. I am obliged, for clarity's sake, to arbitrarily name these different temporal levels. We will refer to :

Rahel's return as an adult as	T 0
The story of the main drama as	T 1
Baby Kochamma's story as	T 3
Ammu and Chacko's stories as	T 2
Baby Kochamma's father's story as	T 4.

Finally, there is the a-chronological time level, which runs through the book, co-existing with the five chronological levels, creating the book's dual-time pattern I mentioned earlier. The presence of a-chronological or historical time is constantly reinforced throughout the novel by references to "The History House" (an old abandoned bungalow where the major gruesome events take place). Palimpsest fashion, a-chronological time is inscribed in every temporal level, creating a constant awareness in the reader's mind of the inflexible cultural codes, which govern the lives of the protagonists.

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In addition to blurring temporal boundaries, Roy dissolves barriers between characters and readers through shifting points of view. Changing perspectives through differing narrative voices, thus giving the reader access to the minds of characters through free indirect style is a technique which dates to the turn of the century, but in Roy's case, the shifting points of view are accompanied by changes in temporal level as the narrative shuttles from T 4 to T 0, giving a kaleidoscopic colouring to the novel. The reader shifts from being an 'invisible witness' to the rather pathetic story of Baby Kochamma's 'non-affair' with Father Mulligan in T 3, seen through the eighteen-year-old Baby Kochamma's eyes, to watching Pappachi (Rahel's Grandfather), murderously beating Mammachi, through the terrified eyes of his daughter, the young Ammu in T4, to seeing the charming young Chacko during his student days at Oxford through Margaret's eyes in T 2. Most striking of all, T 1 is largely seen through young Rahel's eyes, or rather, the perception we are given is that of a young innocent seven-year-old. And again, this is not systematic. Frequently the focus is impersonal, or to use Genette's terminology (206), it is 0 focus, especially in T 0, where we are rarely given an intimate glimpse into adult Rahel's mind.

The God of Small Things therefore alternates between several narrative layers, both as regards temporality and perspective. However, the analeptic, proleptic and elliptic movements which characterize it are by no means limited to shifts between these temporal levels. Given time sequences zigzag as well. The main time frame, or T 1, in relation to which the others are constructed, is narrated only in a series of juxtaposed temporal sequences. If, (again using Genette's terminology), the movements within T 0 and T 1 can be classified as internal analepses, as they interfere directly with the narrative, those within T 2 to T 4 could be classified as external, as they do not interfere with the narrative. In fact, very few analepses occur within these three levels, as they are, by their very nature, analeptic themselves. These structural analepses are numerous, the main narrative is built on them, and they have a strong bearing on it. As mentioned earlier, the T 2, T3 and T 4 time structures shed light on the events narrated in T 0 and T 1, which would be otherwise incomprehensible. Roy uses the analepsis technique to fill in information gaps which are either inherent in the book's structure, or deliberate, created through ellipses, as Roy withholds information to give it later, with a different focus. The novel's closing chapter, for example, is a splendid example of this technique.

A detailed analysis of the first chapter illustrates these remarks. The book opens with a lush description of the Keralese monsoon greeting Rahel as she returns to Ayemenem from the United States. The timeless cycle of the

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seasons is juxtaposed with the comings and goings of the traveller, thus immediately giving the book its dual temporal quality. Rahel's barely formulated memories lead to the first analepsis/prolepsis in the book: the reference to the incident of the Orangedrink Lemonadedrink man. Analepsis for T 0 and prolepsis for T 1. Functioning as analepsis, this reference informs the reader that some terrible incident/incidents are responsible for Rahel's return. Functioning as prolepsis, the incident anticipates the future, creating a mystery to be cleared a hundred pages later in chapter IV. Half a page later, the narrative switches to T2 for two paragraphs or so, before zooming on T 1 — not to the beginning of the T 1 narrative, but to the ending — Sophie Moll's funeral, seen through little Rahel's eyes. And again, there is the mysterious proleptic reference to Ammu and her twins, ostracized, made to stand separately: "nobody would look at them".

A second mysterious prolepsis follows the funeral scene, as Ammu takes her twins to the police station. Both the policeman's inexplicable insolence and Ammu's equally inexplicable whispered words: "He's dead, I've killed him" create a thrill of anticipation, an atmosphere of suspense which is carefully sustained until the final explanation given in chapter thirteen, after two-thirds of the book. After a brief return to T 0, the narrative spans a gap between T 0 and T 1, filling in Estha's story in the interval, to return to T 0. We are introduced to the inimitable Comrade Pillai, member of the Ayemenem Marxist Party, and another hint to the mystery with Comrade Pillai telling himself "he was not responsible for anything that had happened". By this time the reader is inevitably asking herself/ himself: what *did* happen anyway?

After a brief return to T 1, describing Ammu's death, the narrative fills in a second gap between T 0 and T 1: Rahel's story. Rahel's story culminates, logically enough, with her return, that is, T 0, which immediately switches to T3, or Baby Kochamma's story, with a brief excursion into T 4. The narrative returns to T 0, and to Baby Kochamma, as she is now, towards the end of her life, before returning to T 1. This time, Roy gives us a glimpse of Velutha in handcuffs, before switching scenes to Ammu packing little Estha's trunk. Finally, this constant zigzagging finishes with the chapter's famous closing lines quoted earlier, "it all began...".

Mystification and suspense are not the only functions fulfilled by the prolepses which regularly mark the novel. We noted earlier how analepses were used to fill in information gaps in the narrative. Inversely, prolepses anticipate the narrative. Through constant proleptic repetition, the reader's mind gets used to the horror of the coming events. Velutha's grisly death is less shocking when it actually takes place, as we've been expecting it since chapter one. As if it

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were predestined. Roy herself says : "Repetition I love, and used because it makes me feel safe. Repeated words and phrases have a rocking feeling, like a lullaby. They help take away the shock of the plot." (Jana) This constant interplay of analepses/prolepses not only helps to take away the shock of the plot, it works paradigmatically, cutting vertically through the syntagmatic linear act of reading. The boots which kicked Velutha to death echo again and again throughout the book. They become inevitably linked with other scenes of violence, notably the vicious wife-beatings which are mostly in the form of analepses. Genette, commenting on the paradigmatic value of the proleptic form notes, *"après elle, inévitablement commence le règne de la répétition et de l'habitude"*: "after it, inevitably, the sway of repetition and habit begins" (110; Lewin 72). This brings us to the next point I would like to examine: the consequences of this "metatemporal narrative mode" through an analysis of the two closing scenes.

Roy's free-wheeling cinematographic techniques tend to telescope the entire narrative into a single aphorism, brilliantly symbolized by the double transgression of the "Love Laws" in the two closing scenes of *The God of Small Things*. Before analysing the conclusion, let us turn once again to Paul Ricoeur, who notes that a narrative's conclusion is the pole of attraction of the entire development, neither to be deducted nor predicted. Rather than predictable, a conclusion must be acceptable says Ricoeur: "Looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sort of events, and this chain of actions" (170).

In *The God of Small Things* the end, predictably enough, is a double ending: T 0, or adult Rahel's narrative, ends following a chronological linear sequence, as is always the case with T 0. Situated in the penultimate chapter, sandwiched between two episodes of T 1, this is the narrative's true ending, that is to say, the ending to chronological time (or, in other words, to the story being narrated). *But* the point is that there is no ending, inasmuch as there is no classic narrative closure. The story simply stops being narrated, *in medias res*, leaving in suspense multiple narrative possibilities, requiring reader participation to give it final shape. We have no way of knowing what finally becomes of the twins. In fact, Roy is not *telling a story*, she is *using a* story. Ricoeur's definition of a predictable conclusion is reversed, as the conclusion is simply left to the reader to define or predict. Roy does not even, in the manner of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), propose various conclusions, each satisfying differing reader expectancies.

However, if chronological time, as represented by the story narrated has no closure, the same cannot be said of a-chronological time. Roy's book

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ends, not on the open ending mentioned above, but (unsurprisingly enough) with an analepsis from T 1: the famous, controversial love-making scene between Ammu and Velutha. In this case, of course, we know exactly what shape the sequel was to take, that is, Velutha's betrayal by Comrade Pillai, his subsequent death, Ammu's exile, and the separation of the twins. Despite these tragic occurrences, of which the reader is perfectly aware, given the analeptic nature of this passage, the chapter closes *The God of Small Things* on a note of perfect harmony, absent from the rest of the book. As Roy herself puts it:

> ...the novel ends in the middle of the story, and it ends with Ammu and Velutha making love and it ends on the word "tomorrow". And though you know that what tomorrow brings is terrible, the fact that the book ends there is to say that even though it's terrible, it's wonderful that it happened at all. (Simmons)

By placing it at the close of the book, Roy confers an atemporal dimension to the liaison between Ammu and Velutha. And perhaps this is the point of the book. For one brief instant, chronological time fuses with a-chronological time, as Ammu and Velutha break the "Love Laws", which, along with the references to "The History House", symbolize a-chronological time throughout the novel. In the opening chapter Roy accuses the famous "Love Laws" of being the start of it all, in the closing chapters she reminds us "they (the twins) broke the 'Love Laws'". What are these terrifying "Love Laws"? The *Manav Dharam Sastra*, sacred law of the Hindus, dating back to the seventh century? At any rate, the *Manav Dharam Sastra* is very clear about who may sleep with who. Perhaps Roy was thinking of Book III :19 : "For him who drinks the moisture of a Sûdhra's (untouchable) lips, who is tainted by her breath, and who begets a son on her, no expiation is prescribed." (79) No comment is required, and I will not attempt to make any.

The *Manav Dharam Sastra* is equally clear about the position of women. Seen by the first Hindu law-maker(s) as a potential sexual snare, women's place in society is clearly defined in the *Manav Dharam Sastra*. Book II:213 states: "It is the nature of woman to seduce men in this (world); for that reason the wise are never unguarded in (the company of) females." (69) Later on in Book V:148, we find: "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent." (195) The enormity of Ammu's liaison with Velutha becomes evident from these brief references to the sacred law of the Hindus, which continues to dominate cultural codes in India even in the present day. One might legitimately ask, "Why should Christians be concerned by untouchable

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laws?" The fact is, Ammu and Chacko, like Roy herself, are Syrian Christians, who trace their faith to a disciple of St Thomas in Kerala, a faith which goes back to nearly 2,000 years ago. Originally high caste Brahmins, Syrian Christians take great pride in their lineage and usually marry among themselves. Any sort of transgression is painful, even unthinkable.

Did Ammu's breaking of the "Love Laws" lead to the incestuous union of the twins? And what led to Ammu's transgression? The "Love Laws" themselves ? That is to say, the burden of history? Be that as it may, it is certain that one of the consequences of the book's "metatemporal dimension" is that a deeper experience of time is elicited, one which escapes the temporal limits as defined by the arbitrary terms we have been using: T 0, T 1, T 2. The fragments ultimately form one coherent shape, but that shape is a question-mark burning through the reader's mind as the final curtain falls on two unions, one sad, albeit endowed with a certain quality of healing, the other a rupture, albeit a rapture. 'Rupture', because it is the second ending which completes the deconstruction operation begun in the first, as a-chronological time fuses briefly with chronological time and presuppositions associated with temporal reality are automatically deconstructed.

Fragmentation of chronological time highlights the importance of a-chronological time, allowing Roy to deconstruct, as it were, the cultural codes she is attacking, the terrible weight of which may be assessed from the above quotations. As I mentioned earlier, she is not telling a story, but she is using a story, raising reader expectancies, but not satisfying them. The absence of narrative closure to the story narrated in chronological time forces the reader to provide meanings, while the harmonious closure to a-chronological time attempts to predetermine, or at any rate, influence, reader-response. Thus the reader's critical sense is awakened, leading to a questioning, and perhaps to a shedding, of presuppositions – presuppositions which Roy feels cruelly rule and shatter lives.

Which brings us to the basic reason for the book's multiple-time structure. Roy chose this particular temporal mode because she is writing an angry book, a book which is a political statement. The political power of deconstruction is neither a new nor a revolutionary notion. Michael Ryan, in his Marxism and Deconstruction (1982) has shown how deconstruction favours "plurality" over "authoritarian unity" of the sort exemplified by the Manav Dharam Sastra quoted above, encouraging readers to actively criticise rather than passively accept the doxa. Margaret Atwood has used a similar fragmented temporal form to attack Reagan Conservatism in The Handmaid's Tale (1985). Roy, as behoves a writer-cum-political activist, wrote The God of Small Things

as a head-on attack on the Keralese caste-ridden society, and the cruel destiny it reserves for both women and untouchables. It has, in fact, been violently counter-attacked by the Keralese society it depicts, and even has a lawsuit pending. Daughter of the well-known feminist/activist, Mary Roy, who has won many a battle in her own right, Roy wrote her book charged with a heavily loaded political message, one which has been supported by her subsequent political activities. For example, she offered her book to the Dalit Sahitya Akademy (the Academy of Untouchable Literature) saying: "I would be honoured if you will publish it in Malayalam. I hope you will publish it and sell it and use the royalties . . . to help Dalit writers to tell their stories to the world" (Popham, 1999).

In conclusion, we may note that paradoxically, the novel's fragmentary form both softens and highlights the violent contours of Roy's *roman à thèse*. The questions Roy puts are too contemporary, too immediately painful to ask without it. Her deconstructionist tactics force the reader to fit the kaleidoscopic pieces together into some sort of coherent "whole", and this act of imagination blurs the dividing line between author and reader. The powerful act of creation is thus shared, and the act of reading becomes an act of composition as the reader "writes" the text through the prism of her/his imaginative perception of the deconstructed *doxa*.

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Note
[1]   I use this term to signify Roy's breaking of temporal boundaries.

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