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To cite this article: Parama Sarkar (2007) Performing Narrative: The Motif of Performance in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, South Asian Review, 28:2, 217-236, DOI: [10.1080/02759527.2007.11932525](https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2007.11932525)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2007.11932525>



Published online: 08 Dec 2017.



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**Performing Narrative: The Motif of
Performance in Arundhati Roy's *The God of
Small Things***

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Indian writing in English has always had to deal with accusations regarding its authenticity. Many Indian academics have fulminated over the imposition of the English language on Indians, first by the British colonial rulers and then by the postcolonial Indian establishment. Others have argued that in most Indian-English texts, there is a move towards an essentializing and fetishizing of India in compliance with the demands of the western market. In a collection of essays entitled *Shifting Boundaries/Colliding Cultures*, Makarand Paranjape alleges that the western media and publishing houses dominate the creation and dissemination of images about the third world: "Only a devalued and abused India is marketable in the West. This is an India of poverty, violence, urban chaos, rural exploitation, caste conflict, political instability and insurmountable corruption" (239).¹ I begin with this twin critical trajectory to illustrate the tenuous position of Indo-English fiction writers like Arundhati Roy who have to constantly "negotiate a double-bind, balancing an awareness of their work as a cultural commodity against the counter-hegemonic imperatives of their politics" (Tickell 75). I argue that this awareness of the recent reception of the history of Indo-English fiction is what makes Roy enact a superb stylistic performance in her acclaimed debut novel *The God of Small Things*. Roy uses the motif of performance to construct a critique of a society caught between the colonial legacy and the constant onslaught of trans-national rhetoric. But her overt critique of globalization, which she believes to be a kind of neo-colonialism,

effectively sidelines the representation of a strife-torn, class-ridden Kerala, something that could have otherwise drawn charges of misrepresentation and cultural fetishism. Further, she disrupts possible allegations of inauthenticity because of writing in English by dovetailing the English language to a specific cultural context and by casting her narrative in the traditional Indian oral epic mode, thus signaling a metaphoric return to indigenous traditions.

In an interview after the fairy-tale reception of her book culminating in her winning the Booker Prize in 1997, Roy bristles against attempts by self-appointed cultural commissars to control representations of India or “Indianness”:

If you write about Brahmins or kathakali dancers, you’re writing for the West. If you mention *The Sound of Music*, you have betrayed Indian culture. India is a country that lives in several centuries, and some of the centuries have not been at all pleased with my book. But I say replace ethnic purity and ‘authenticity’ with honesty. (qtd. in Mullaney 70)

While making a case for literary subjectivity and “honesty,” Roy tellingly encapsulates some important theoretical issues which haunt Indo-English writing, specifically the postcolonial author’s act of cultural translation. In his book about the marketing of postcolonial literature provocatively entitled *The Post-Colonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan elaborates on how writers like Roy are aware that they might be looked upon as cultural translators: “In ironically rehearsing a continuing history of imperialist perceptions of an ‘othered’ India ... they know that their work might still be used as a means of reconfirming an exoticising imperial gaze. They are aware of all this, and they draw their readers into that awareness in their writing”(81). Huggan goes on to assert that the reason that Indian writing in English has become so popular in western literary circles is because it has metonymically replaced India itself as the “object of conspicuous consumption” (81) and that Roy, like Rushdie, is guilty of perpetuating this mode of consumption while critiquing it at the same time. In Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, the critical strain seems more apparent, and the chapter entitled “Kochu Thomban” about the travails of the Kathakali man essentially captures her awareness and apprehensions about her position as a postcolonial writer.² This chapter splendidly encapsulates the myriad contours of the performance motif, which functions both as an invisible narrative thread throughout the text and successfully counteracts charges of her pandering to western stereotypes in her portrayal of India. Using this chapter as a focal point, this essay explores how Roy’s use of the motif of performance reveals fissures in the Indian political and social structure. At the same

time, by delineating the ill effects of globalization through the figure of the Kathakali man, Roy cleverly extricates herself from possible criticism of writing under the western gaze that is routinely hurled on the postcolonial writer. Finally, this chapter incorporates a “metafictional moment”³ where Roy self-consciously comments on her writing, thus tangentially reflecting her awareness of the delicate position that the postcolonial writer is often forced to negotiate.

The Theme of Performance

The performance motif unites the various thematic concerns of the text. *The God of Small Things* makes it apparent that to conform to the demands of a morally rigid, class-conscious society, individuals are constantly coerced into role-playing on various levels. Roy makes it clear that individuals are always either engaged in willing or forced performances and such performances are constantly revealed to be potentially disruptive, if not downright destructive. She concedes that performance is necessary for survival, yet the alternative space that it creates is not self-fulfilling because it is created not out of the individual’s own desires, but by pressure from external forces.⁴ Yet those who resist performances are doomed as well. Any opposition to conform to socially accepted codes of conduct is construed as aberrant behavior and the punishment for erring individuals is particularly severe. The kathakali performance at the temple witnessed silently by Rahel and Estha provides an entry point through which we can trace the other performances in the text.

Physical Performance

The “Kochu Thomban” chapter graphically portrays the magnificent physical performance of the kathakali troupe at the local temple in Ayemenem. The men perform episodes from India’s great epic *Mahabharata* and this performance is witnessed silently by the novel’s twin protagonists, Rahel and Estha. Demands by western tourists have resulted in a tragic mutilation of this native tradition, which is evident in the troupe’s truncated performances, a far cry from the elaborate and glorious enactment of ancient myths and legends. The troupe’s ritualistic performance at the temple is to exorcise their guilt for commodifying their bodies and to ask pardon from the gods for corrupting their stories merely to earn money through tourism. The theme of performance here is significant on several levels; the reader is reminded of the twins’ aversion to any kind of forced performance by their behavior at the Cochin airport when they go to receive their half-English cousin Sophie Mol. The language of performance is introduced

at the very beginning of that chapter when we are told: “At Cochin Airport, Rahel’s new knickers were polka-dotted and still crisp. The rehearsals had been rehearsed. It was the Day of the Play. The culmination of the *What Will Sophie Mol Think?* week” (136). Estha refuses to greet their cousin properly and Rahel wraps herself in a curtain, much to the chagrin of their mother Ammu, who “had wanted a smooth performance” (145). This childish resistance to social performance results in their marginalization within the Ipe family. The twins had already been occupying a liminal position because of Ammu’s social transgression, first by her inter-community marriage and then by her subsequent divorce. The arrival of Sophie Mol heightens their marginalized condition and in the “Welcome Home Sophie Mol” chapter, which interestingly is replete with performance rhetoric, Rahel and Estha are metaphorically equated with the socially ostracized untouchable, Velutha. In this chapter, Sophie Mol is being introduced to the matriarch of the family, Mammachi, on the front verandah of the Ipe household, and the artificiality of the entire situation and the performative behavior of the other characters like Chacko is constantly emphasized: “The elevation gave it the dignity of a stage and everything that happened there took on the aura and significance of performance” (165). As the twins silently witness the fawning over Sophie Mol, Rahel quickly realizes that not only is she “in a Play” (172) but also that “she had only a small part” (172) in it, and she willingly slips out of it to go to play with Velutha, who is anyway denied access to the Ipe family’s domestic space. In the surrounding grounds, Rahel asks Velutha “*We’re not here, are we? We’re not even Playing*” (182) and Velutha replies in the affirmative before engaging Rahel in a comical “Rumpelstiltskin-like dance” (182). Roy’s capitalizing of the word “playing” highlights the importance of the performance motif, and the juxtaposition between the Ipe family’s forced performance to impress Sophie Mol and Velutha’s willing performance to entertain Rahel sets up an interesting contrast which is developed throughout the narrative.

Performance as Entrapment

The physical performance of the Kathakali man is predicated on economic reasons; he has to perform to survive. In order to save himself from starvation, he has to sell his only possession, “the stories that his body can tell” (230) to a western audience with “imported attention spans” (231). The “truncated swimming pool performances” (229) are a humiliation of his magnificent skills. Yet he has to perform because he knows he has no other profession and in the absence of a discerning and appreciative audience, he becomes hopelessly entangled

within his performance. Performing for pleasure is eclipsed by a routine forced performance for money. The Kathakali man's predicament eerily parallels the lives of Rahel and Estha, both of whom are unwillingly trapped within their performances. But unlike the Kathakali man, who, however unwillingly, survives his performance, the performance which the twins are trapped into by Baby Kochamma almost annihilates them. A seven-year-old Estha is tricked into falsely indicting Velutha as a kidnapper as a means of saving their beloved mother Ammu, but in the process, Estha ends up losing all his loved ones. A forced performance silences him forever. Even after the twins are reunited after twenty-three years when Estha returns to Ayemenem and Rahel comes back from America, Estha cannot escape the cocoon of silence that he has built around himself. Roy graphically describes their poignantly tragic condition as they are unable to even reach out to each other and unite in their common grief and overwhelming sense of loss:

A pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative. Stumbling through their parts, nursing someone else's sorrow. Grieving someone else's grief.

Unable somehow, to change plays. Or purchase, for a fee, some cheap brand of exorcism from a counselor with a fancy degree, who would sit them down and say, in one of many ways: "You're not the Sinners. You're the Sinned Against. You were only children. You had no control. You are the *victims*, not the perpetrators." (191)

Like the Kathakali man, who is trapped within his performance, both because of his inability to be in any other profession and because of financial reasons, Rahel and Estha become hopelessly entangled in a play not of their own making. But unlike the Kathakali man, who can exorcise his rage through a manic performance in front of the gods, or rather the "god of the big things" at the Ayemenem temple, Rahel and Estha have no scope of expiating their guilt because their actions have eliminated their "god of small things" (330), their beloved Velutha who left behind a "hole in the Universe through which darkness poured like liquid tar. Through which their mother followed without even turning to wave goodbye ... left them behind, spinning in the dark, with no moorings, in a place with no foundation" (191-92). Within the self-enclosed, claustrophobic space of the Ipe family, with malicious and narcissistic Baby Kochamma as the only surviving member, Rahel and Estha have no scope of redemption except the solace they find in one another. Performance is thus forced upon both the Kathakali man and Rahel and Estha and is revealed to be potentially destructive as it stultifies individual desires.

Performance and Madness

Ironically, after a span of twenty-three years, it is the actual kathakali performance at the Ayemenem temple that brings the twins together. The distinction between forced and willing performance is emphasized in this section as the twins witness the Kathakali man's manic performance. The Kathakali dancers willingly perform in front of the gods at the Ayemenem temple to exorcise their guilt of performing forcibly for the western tourist, to apologize "for corrupting their stories. For encashing their identities. Misappropriating their lives" (229). The Kathakali man's frenzied performance is both an attempt to expiate his anger and guilt at his forced stigmatization as a cultural enticement and to reclaim his freedom from oppressive social and economic structures. Rahel and Estha's realization that the episode of *Duryodhana Vadham* in the final stages of the performance was no routine act, but that "there was madness there that morning" (235), immediately recalls another horrific performance that the twins had been forced to witness, "the brutal extravagance of this matched by the savage economy of that" (235). Roy describes the police's torture of Velutha in graphic terms as "History in live performance" (309). The policemen are "history's henchmen" (308) and their carefully orchestrated performance is marked by economy and efficiency and motivated by "feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear—civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness" (308). But even though this performance is not marked by external manifestations of madness like hysteria or frenzy, the implication is that such controlled madness demonstrated by the police is even more destructive. The Kathakali man's madness is a manifestation of his inner rage at society's unjust treatments. A measured performance like Velutha's torture by the vanguards of societal order is particularly horrifying because it is a display of the complete dehumanization of an individual and his reduction to the state of an automaton orchestrated by authority within the confines of the state. As Roy pointedly says, this "was a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions ... of human nature's pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly. It was human history masquerading as God's Purpose, revealing herself to an under-age audience" (309). Madness thus becomes a performance that is both liberating and constricting in the text. But what is important is that it is again the performance metaphor which unites the past and the present and consequently Rahel and Estha. Their witnessing of the madness in the kathakali performance rekindles in their memory another, more gruesome performance and this is what binds them anew with a common sense of guilt and nostalgia.

Role-playing as Forced Performance—Pappachi, Chacko, Comrade Pillai

Roy also presents performance as role-playing, inventing and inhabiting a self to keep up a desired profile in society but which is in complete contrast to one's actual self. For instance, in the text, the Kathakali man's magnificent performance is undercut by his private persona as a wife beater. We are told that all the men, even the one who enacted the role of Kunti, "the soft one with breasts" (236), went home to beat their wives. Being forced to perform or hawk their body for economic reasons seems to be a compromise of their masculinity, and the bizarre gesture of beating their wives, a show of their patriarchal power, would somehow restore that lost manhood. This manifestation of male power is clearly mirrored in the character of Pappachi, the patriarch of the Ipe family. Chacko refers to the Ipe family as a family of Anglophiles; Pappachi is a literal embodiment of Anglophilia in his role as "Imperial Entomologist" (50). Pappachi is a member of the generation of colonial elite to whom Homi Bhabha refers to as "mimic men."⁵ Pappachi, in his job as imperial Entomologist, is always anxious to please his colonial masters, and he is in line with the class of Indian men Macaulay infamously enshrined in his "Minute on Indian Education" (1835): "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (249). As Mullaney suggests: "His job of collecting, preserving, and indexing India's fauna for the colonial archive, puts him at the heart of the colonial enterprise" (33). Ammu reaffirms this view when she reveals that Pappachi was extremely courteous with visitors and "stopped just short of *fawning* on them if they happened to be white" (180; emphasis added). When Ammu comes back after having divorced her husband, who was urging her to comply with his English boss's requests for sexual favors, Pappachi refuses to believe her because it is incomprehensible to him that English men could ask for such things: "Pappachi would not believe her story—not because he thought well of her husband, but simply because he didn't believe that an Englishman, *any* Englishman, would covet another man's wife" (42). As Mullaney points out, Pappachi inhabits his mimic man persona religiously and has internalized the beliefs of the English colonizer so much that it is impossible for him to question their authority or criticize their behavior, even if his own daughter is at the receiving end of their oppression (37). In tune with his Anglophilia, Pappachi wears a three-piece suit every day of his life and is very careful to maintain an outward appearance of respectability: "He worked hard on his public profile as

a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning" (180). His violent moods were believed to be the direct fallout of a lost opportunity of "taxonomic attention and ... fame" (49) from having a moth he discovered named after him. The naming would have conferred some prestige on him in the eyes of the colonial rulers, and his frustration at this loss of power translates into an act of domestic violence. Not unlike the Kathakali men who beat their wives as a recompense for their loss of masculinity during their performance, Pappachi compensates for the loss of power by tormenting his family. Pappachi thus epitomizes the social and sexual hypocrisy that plagues Indian society. This hypocrisy is nowhere more apparent than in the juxtaposition of his benevolent creation of a school for Untouchables and treatment of them as underdogs in personal interactions.

Mammachi and Chacko, too, are not free from either social or sexual hypocrisy. Roy presents hypocrisy as a web-like, insidious phenomenon fostered by a caste-ridden patriarchal society that infiltrates every character. Mammachi has different codes of sexual conduct for her son and daughter; while Ammu is ostracized first for being a divorced, single mother and then for the even greater crime of falling in love with the Untouchable Velutha, Chacko is exempted from all kinds of maternal indictment, even after his sexually promiscuous behavior.⁶ In fact, it is Mammachi who has a separate entrance built into his room so that he can have the female factory workers come in to his room without informing others and it is she who offers monetary recompense to all of these women who are the victims of Chacko's insatiable lust.

Chacko himself is constantly enacting different performances. With the twins, he tries to be the surrogate father figure, always correcting their behavior and using what Roy refers to as his "Reading Aloud" (54) voice to impress them with his Oxford literariness. When his English ex-wife Margaret and daughter Sophie Mol come to Ayemenem, he is the pompous factory owner displaying his trophy wife and daughter to all his employees. At the same time, it is Chacko who forces Ammu to banish Estha to Calcutta after the death of Sophie Mol without any regard for her maternal feelings. His interracial marriage is acceptable, but Ammu's intercaste love affair is what brings shame upon the family and destroys all familial bonds. This is indirectly brought about by Chacko's shortsightedness and inability to see through the vindictive machinations of Baby Kochamma.

Comrade Pillai and the Marxists in Kerala are also perpetrators of this social hypocrisy. As Ng Shing Yi suggests, "The novel exposes the corruption and inhumanity of socialist party politics (or more

specifically politicking) and capitalism, both of which are domains of power and subtle colonial imperialism" (1). Roy presents a stringent critique of Marxist politics in *Ayemenem* and her portrayal of Marxism is marked by a complete disjunction between ideology and practice in its exponents. Roy tells us: "The Marxists worked from *within* the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a Cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and Orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy" (67). Like Pappachi, Comrade Pillai is obsessed with keeping up the appearance of a benevolent communist leader, but his every action is tinged with a gaping chasm between his proclaimed and actual beliefs. He extensively discusses measures for safeguarding the factory workers' interests with Chacko, but when Velutha comes to him to escape unjust persecution, Comrade Pillai outright refuses to help him. Like Pappachi and Chacko, he epitomizes social hypocrisy in this text, but his portrayal is particularly disturbing because he explicitly pretends to operate from a Communist ideology at the same time that he perpetrates social evils by betraying those he is committed to serve. Thus, the narrative "sets itself up as a testimony to the fragility of the small, marginalized things (such as the kathakali dancer and his art) which become consumed by the forces of history and power" (Yi 3).

Unable to Perform—Mammachi, Baby Kochamma

Roy clearly delineates the destructive power of social institutions and society's rigid prescription of hetero-normativity that force individuals to either enact a performance in acceptable behavior or indulge in transgression, both of which are self-destructive acts. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma suffer from unnatural desires; Mammachi's relationship with Chacko is clearly laced with oedipal overtones and Baby Kochamma's unrequited love for the Catholic priest Father Mulligan drives her entire life. But it is their in-between position, their inability to either perform or transgress that shapes their personalities. We are told that since the day Chacko saved her from Pappachi's beatings, Mammachi had "packed her wifely luggage and committed it to Chacko's care. From then onwards he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love" (168). The capitalizing of the words "man" and "love" clearly indicate her feelings for Chacko and points to the undercurrent of incestuous relationships which permeates the text. Her words also underscore a disturbing voyeuristic relation with her son. When Chacko returns to *Ayemenem* after a failed marriage, Mammachi can barely control her delight: "She fed him, sewed for him, she saw to it that there were fresh flowers in his room everyday" (248). Her adoration does not stop there. She is the

one who arranges for Chacko's fulfillment of sexual desires by arranging the factory workers' visits. It is hardly surprising that Mammachi nurses a dislike for Margaret Kochamma because she happens to be Chacko's wife and is even wary about whether she will resume her sexual relationship with Chacko when she comes to Ayemenem. The naming of Margaret as Chacko's wife somehow threatens her position and she continues the bizarre gesture of putting money in Margaret's dress as some kind of recompense for Margaret's sexual favors to Chacko, something which she is unable to fulfill. When Sophie Mol dies tragically, Mammachi does grieve for her granddaughter, but it is Chacko's grief which destroys her.

Baby Kochamma is a malicious, vindictive loner whose unfulfilled desire makes her disrupt all loving relations in the family. She harbors an unnatural hatred for Ammu and Velutha precisely because she recognizes that they can successfully resist societal pressure and indulge in sexual gratification even under the imminent threat of annihilation. Baby Kochamma can neither perform nor transgress in her objective of uniting with Father Mulligan. She converts to Catholicism in the hope that her performance in religiosity would ingratiate her with Father Mulligan, but when she realizes that the "Senior Sisters monopolized the priests and bishops with biblical doubts more sophisticated than hers would ever be, and that it might be years before she got anywhere near Father Mulligan" (25), she cannot sustain her performance. Her inability to keep up her performance like Pappachi or transgress like Ammu entraps her into a cocoon of vindictiveness and makes her lash out violently at people who refuse to partake in any kind of performance as it reminds her of her own failings. Like Mammachi, her unrequited lust makes her voyeuristic as she anxiously follows all of Ammu's movements and even Rahel's when she comes back after twenty three years. Ironically, contrary to her comment about Velutha turning out to be the Nemesis of the Ipe family, she is the one who actually brings about the annihilation of the entire clan. Ambreen Hai's comment on Baby Kochamma in her essay is very revealing. She suggests that the affluent or racially superior white woman is suspicious of men of lower classes or racial other "precisely because as a woman, less powerful than men of her class or race, she is more threatened by their politics of resistance ... Baby Kochamma is threatened by the Communist class politics—coded as sexual virility—of the Untouchable Velutha" (155).⁷

Resisting Conformity or Forced Performance—Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, Estha

Ironically, any individual who resists a forced social performance does not remain unscathed in this society. Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha are all crippled by their unwillingness to conform to society's demands upon their individual selves. By refusing to perform, all of them indulge in some form of transgression:

Perhaps, Ammu, Estha and she [Rahel] were the worst transgressors ... They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how ... It was a time when uncles became fathers, mothers lovers and cousins died and had funerals. (31)

In all these characters, transgression stems from a direct refusal to perform a different role and paradoxically the space of transgression becomes a liberating space for them. The History House, the colonial residence of the English nobleman, Kari Saipu, whose homoerotic desires led to his suicide, is literally marked as the transgressive space. It is here that Rahel and Estha disrupt class boundaries by playing with the Untouchable Velutha and where Ammu and Velutha consummate their forbidden love.

Performance Commodified—Roy's Text as a Cultural Commodity

Like the History House, which becomes literally marked as the site of transgression, the Ayemenem temple becomes marked as a liberating space for the kathakali troupe after their forced Cochin performance that had been necessitated by economic reasons. The commodification of the Kathakali man introduces a whole new dimension to this multilayered narrative. We are told that the "Kathakali Man is the most beautiful of men. Because his body *is* his soul. His only instrument. From the age of three it has been planed and polished, pared down, harnessed wholly to the task of story-telling" (230). The Kathakali man had been trained from his childhood to uphold the glorious mythic storytelling tradition of India. Even though he uses his body to earn a living, the implications are that as a performer of myths and epics narrating the story of gods, he has been traditionally imbued with a divine aura, "he has magic in him" (230). But now economic unviability threaten the Kathakali man's very existence and he has literally become commodified and fetishized as a tourist attraction completely vulnerable to the western gaze: "In the *Heart of Darkness* they mock him with their lolling nakedness and their imported attention

spans. He checks his rage and dances for them. He collects his fee.” (231; emphasis added). The reference to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is unmistakable here—the implication is that postcolonial India is still reeling under the aftereffects of three hundred years of colonial rule, with cultural commodification an ongoing process through the years.⁸ Roy’s characters are aware of this cultural encashment as they argue over the use of the image of the Kathakali man alongside the “Paradise Pickles and Preserves” (46) sign on top of the Plymouth owned by the Ipe family. Though the very material task of making pickles is completely at odds with the aesthetic appeal of the kathakali tradition, Chacko insists on it because “it gave the products a Regional Flavour and would stand them in good stead when they entered the Overseas Market” (47). By showing the Kathakali man as symbolizing the regional flavor of Kerala and revealing his survival to be contingent upon his acting as a local cultural enticement to western tourists, Roy both laments the downfall of tradition and comments on the ill effects of incipient globalization. At the same time, as Tickell suggests,

Roy uses the Kathakali to throw into relief the fact of her own intrinsically marketable position within “competing regimes of value” ... this sub-narrative indicates Roy’s awareness of the involuntary, assimilative demand which global capital makes in its encounter with local postcolonial cultures. (83)

Roy is well aware that her text might be viewed as a marketable cultural commodity in the western media as a picture of the real India and consequently draw charges of fetishism from Indian critics.⁹ It is this awareness which makes her use the commodification of the Kathakali tradition to construct her critique against globalization and hence repudiate potential accusations of deliberately inviting the western gaze.

Roy’s critique of the commodification of native Indian traditions in her book points to the larger critique of neocolonialism, a phenomenon that threatens a native and peaceful way of life. In the last decade of the twentieth century and almost fifty years after independence from colonial rule, India is seen as still engrossed in negotiating its identity, oscillating between nostalgia for a lost indigenous history and the onslaught of globalization. As Mullaney suggests, “The transatlantic networks and movements of goods, money, and labor that once were at the heart of the British colonial enterprise continue despite the ostensible dismantling of Empire with Independence” (49). Actively involved in the protest against the establishment of a dam across the Narmada river by the multinational corporation Enron at the cost of the displacement of millions of people, Roy is deeply suspect of this neo-colonialism which has taken the face of corporate globalization. In an

essay entitled “The Ladies have Feelings, So...” in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Roy gives a graphic picture of this new threat:

‘Trade not Aid’ is the rallying cry of the headmen of the new Global Village, headquartered in the shining offices of the WTO ... This time around the colonizer doesn’t even need a token white presence in the colonies. The CEOs and their men don’t need to go to the trouble of tramping through the tropics risking malaria, diarrhoea, sunstroke and an early death ... They can have their colonies *and* an easy conscience. ‘Creating a good investment climate’ is the new euphemism for third world repression. (203)

Her mistrust of global organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and fear of techno-dominance is reflected through the disastrous effects they have, even on the quiet little town of Ayemenem. The Meenachal river, formerly the lifeblood of the people of the region now “smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank Loans” (13). Baby Kochamma’s passion for gardening has been usurped by the appearance of satellite television and “in Ayemenem, where once the loudest sound had been a musical bus horn, now whole wars, famines, picturesque massacres and Bill Clinton could be summoned up like servants” (27). Baby Kochamma now exists in the make-believe world created by the western media. Roy’s anxiety about individuals being engulfed by external forces like technology and losing touch with their inner selves permeates her book. She is deeply suspicious of the encroaching globalization on the Indian mindset and by emphasizing its disastrous effects on indigenous traditions, she successfully diverts attention from her trenchant social critique of postcolonial India.

Roy’s Stylistic Performance

In her article in *India Today*, Bino K. John makes a move towards contextualizing Roy’s narrative by illustrating how her Syrian Christian background and insular “English language” upbringing shaped her story-telling method. The Syrian Christians, in order to distinguish themselves from the rest of the country, decided to adopt the language of the colonizer:

Geographically insulated from the larger context of the national movement, the community tried to master the [English] language and send its children to proper English colleges. ... It needed a writer of Roy’s impish humor and feel of the language to see the irony—and pathos—here. It is out of this tragic grandeur that Roy wove her novel. *Twisting the language to suit her own story telling. She*

managed to make the whole world a stage for Ayemenem and its people. (26; emphasis added)¹⁰

Roy's self-conscious use of the English language with generous interspersions of Malayalam does seem to suggest that she was working towards what Bishnupriya Ghosh terms as "a complex linguistic localism" (66), an integral feature of a cosmopolitical novel. Ghosh persuasively demonstrates how standard literary English "affords only subjective alienation" (49) for the protagonists of cosmopolitical novels and only "a localized English ... properly offers the postcolonial subject recompense" (49). She goes on to show that the deliberately created locales like Roy's Ayemenem are, in fact, "linguistically layered worlds in which an idiomatic Malayalam English becomes an everyday *performance* rather than a stable language" (49; emphasis added). Drawing on Ghosh's comment that "the story's specificity of location stipulates the use of a certain kind of English" (109), this essay argues that Roy's play with language and her structuring of the book in the Indian oral epic narrative tradition with a complete disregard for temporality is a very deliberately constructed performance. Roy's retelling of the story in the traditional oral epic mode and her refashioning of the English language into a localized dialect is an extended performance which subverts the traditional British novel and upsets the linguistic hegemony popularly believed to be thrust upon the colonial subject by the British rulers. Ghosh recognizes this dual tension in Roy's work and effectively sums it up: "These worlds seem to offer a microcosmic India to global audiences ... yet entry into those representational worlds and their linguistically confused subjects demands constant linguistic motility, and resists replication for purposes of commodity fetishism" (82). Roy's text thus "both render[s] India communicable (the local fetishized as national) and undercut[s] full communicative access" (82).

Roy starts her narrative with an epigraph from John Berger: "*Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one,*" and italicizes it to immediately apprise us of the multifaceted nature of the narrative. She indirectly comments extensively on her style in "Kochu Thomban," tellingly situated midway in the book comprising of twenty-one chapters. Elaborating on the local Kathakali storytelling tradition, which involves the enactment of popular myths and epics, she demonstrates how familiarity with a story does not lessen its aesthetic appeal. Rahel and Estha enter the Ayemenem temple in the middle of the performance. Roy tells us:

It didn't matter that the story had begun, because kathakali discovered long ago that the secret of the Great Stories is that they

have no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. ... In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again.

That is their mystery and their magic. (229)

Roy's capitalizing of the words "great stories" and her subsequent portrayal of the Kathakali men's performance of episodes from the *Mahabharata* compels us to see these lines as emblematic of the power of myths in Indian culture, and their function as a unifying force because of their national familiarity. So even though the highly stylized Kathakali dance form is native to Kerala, the performance would not be incomprehensible to people from other parts of India.¹¹ Also, as the above lines demonstrate, the power of the performance is not inherent in the story but in the way it is enacted with passion and madness. It is the form which is important and which subsumes the content. Roy fashions her story in this same mythologizing narrative mold with a complete disregard for temporality. Like myths, her story depends for its survival on the twin strands of history and memory and in true oral epic mode, it begins *in medias res*, with the first chapter progressing in a non-linear manner, switching back and forth between the story of Ammu and that of her great-aunt Baby Kochamma. As Mullaney affirms on page 56 of her book, the chapter outlines the entire storyline as we learn that the book is about transgression and desire, about broken "love laws" (33) at the crux of which are the inextricably intertwined lives of the two "dizygotic" twins, Rahel and Estha, and about "who dies, who finds love, who doesn't" (229). Also, like the passionate performance which keeps Rahel engrossed in the re-telling of *Mahabharata*, Roy's stylistic performance with her adaptation of the oral epic tradition keeps the readers glued to the pages.

The Kathakali storytelling tradition is therefore constricted and commodified in actuality, but is perpetuated in a different manner through Roy's text.¹² While the actual performance is sadly truncated to cater to the limited time of the western tourist and the Kathakali tradition is literally reduced to a single image in the "Paradise Pickles and Preserves" (46) sign or in the sign at the Cochin airport that says "Kerala Tourism Development Corporation Welcomes You with a Kathakali dancer doing a namaste" (139), the native storytelling mode is adapted in the English language and concretized in print and is dispersed among a "multilingual polity, thereby surpassing the concrete limits of oral transmission" (Ghosh 81)

Roy herself is strikingly silent about this obvious fashioning of the book, though she does admit in one of her interviews that her narrative form is as revealing as the content:

I think that one of the most important things about the structure is that in some way the structure of the book ambushes the story. You know, it tells a different story from the story the book is telling. In the first chapter I more or less tell you the story, but 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.¹³

The reader is therefore actively involved in reconstituting the meaning of the text. Though the reader is aware that the outcome of the transgressive act of lovemaking is brutal for both Ammu and Velutha, the emphasis on “naaley” or “tomorrow” insinuates a suggestion that the act itself was liberating and redemptive. The conscious adoption of this stylized mode of narration and writing of a modern novel in an epic mode is clearly a way of vernacularizing the English language.

The God of Small Things is a superb example of linguistic performance as well. Since English is the main language spoken by the Syrian Christians, Roy is not forging new grounds by writing in English. But by showing the twins actively playing with the language and intuitively absorbing and internalizing it like a native tongue, she is in fact, upsetting linguistic hegemonies created by colonial rule and blurring oppositional boundaries between English and the vernaculars. Roy’s filtering of her language through the children’s consciousness gives her a larger playfield as children’s use of language is more intimately related with their childish experiences. Roy recognizes that children are more attuned to the feel of words and that they use language to concretize their experience rather than making explicit connections between the signifier and the signified, or words and their meanings. So words are constantly fused together (“sharksmile,” “longago,” “CocoaColaFantaicecreamrose milk”) or split up depending on pronunciation (“later” becomes “lay-ter”), significant words are capitalized (“Orangedrink, Lemondrink man”), words are constantly repeated (“viable, die-able age,” “Infinite Joy,” “thimble-drinker,” “coffin-cartwheeler”) or neologisms are formed (“vomity,” “eggzackly”).¹⁴ The English language here functions as a mirror of children’s consciousness and “central to their project is the materiality of words, and the sounds that words make” (Ghosh 115). The impetus is also on the pronunciation of words and Comrade Pillai’s daughter, Latha’s rendering of Scott’s “Lochinvar” in a Malayalam intonation or Lenin’s recitation of “I cometoberry Caesar, not to praise him” (275) clearly indicates that Roy is dovetailing the English language to a specific local usage and hence disrupting the supposed literariness of the language. As Ghosh suggests: “The memorization of poems not understood for their meaning is another symptom of the deadness of

colonial literary English in this cultural landscape" (116). Moreover, Rahel and Estha's propensity to constantly read texts backwards signify their consummate control over the language and "the willingness to explore all its contours" (Ghosh 115). By thus showing the twins to be actively engaged in constructing the English language in a culture specific context, Roy undermines the much hyped argument that because English, the colonizer's language, was imposed upon Indians, that writing in English necessarily implies a pandering to western stereotypes of a fetishized India. As noted Indian writer Vikram Chandra emphatically asserts: "If Hindi is my mother-tongue, then English has been my father-tongue" (9). Ghosh sums it up effectively when she suggests that the opposition between "Indian" English and its "colonial other" has been dissolved: "Now readers are asked to perform different acts of translation ... to migrate between cultural and linguistic worlds whose boundaries are not rigorously defined as East-West or postcolonial-colonial, and which habitually collide and create subjective discordance" (119). English is completely internalized in independent India and Roy's linguistic performance in this text primarily re-emphasizes the hybridity of the language.

After the spectacular reception of *The God of Small Things* by the western media, Roy was repeatedly plagued by questions about how the book was received in India, especially because the picture it presents of India is not particularly flattering. Roy admits to the social critique in the book in several interviews but always resists attempts to view India as a monolithic entity or be drawn into debates on the question of authenticity. In her essay, "The End of Imagination," Roy dismisses any authorized definition of "Indianness":

There's no such thing as an Authentic India or a Real Indian. There is no Divine Committee that has the right to sanction one single, authorized version of what India is or should be. There is no religion or language or caste or region or person or story or book that can claim to be its sole representative. There are, and can only be, visions of India, various ways of seeing it—honest, dishonest, wonderful, absurd, modern, traditional, male, female. They can be argued over, criticized, praised, scorned, but not banned or broken. Not hunted down. (37)

Here Roy is clearly making a case for the freedom of artistic expression and refuting critics who accuse Indo-English writers of partaking in a global mutilation in their representation of India. But it is her stylistic performance of using the oral epic tradition of storytelling and of dovetailing the English language to her own purposes, combined with the critique of globalization that eclipse the negative portrayal of a strife-torn, hetero-normative and class-conscious society. And just as

Roy concludes *The God of Small Things* with a single word, “Tomorrow” (340) thereby suggesting a possibility of hope and renewal, she reveals her optimism about the future of India in an essay:

“Corporatizing India is like trying to impose an iron grid on a heaving ocean, forcing it to behave. My guess is that India will not behave. It cannot. It’s too old and too clever to be made to jump through the hoops all over again ... and ... I hope—too democratic to be lobotomized into believing in one single idea, which is eventually, what corporate globalization really is: Life is Profit” (*Algebra* 214).

By reiterating that she is not critical of postcolonial India per se but of the negative effects of globalization and consumerism on the country, Roy effectively counters possible accusations of being a “sell out” to the demands of the western market.

Notes

1. Makarand Paranjape elaborates on this idea in the afterword to *Shifting Continents/Colliding Cultures*. For a fuller discussion of this idea, see his essay “What About Those Who Stayed Back Home? Interrogating the Privileging of Diasporic Writing.”

2. This argument finds validation in Alex Tickell’s observation: “Roy’s reference to Kathakali can be read as an engagement with the wider implications of cultural commodification, both as a reflection of western desires, but also, metafictionally, as a set of choices about postcolonial identity” (82).

3. Mullaney comments on this aspect of Roy’s writing in her book where she suggests that the chapter on the Kathakali man “offers a commentary on her own fiction making, on the architecture of her own story” (57). Taking Mullaney as a starting point, my paper explores the motif of performance both within the kathakali narrative and the larger context of the book.

4. Roy’s construction of identity as performance has striking parallels to Judith Butler’s pioneering work on gender and performance. Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, underscores the constructed nature of gender and suggests that an individual’s gendered identity is not something intrinsic, but something that has been constituted through a complex interplay of external forces: “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (179). For more on this theorizing of gender as performance, see Butler’s text.

5. Priya Joshi explains in her book: “In Homi Bhabha’s influential description of it, mimicry is a form of Western desire imposed upon its Others as a way of both inventing them and articulating mastery over them” (24).

6. When Mammachi discovers Ammu’s relationship with Velutha, she is furious. Roy clearly states that Mammachi’s tolerance of “‘Men’s Needs’ as

far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter. She had defiled generations of breeding" (258).

7. Hai suggests that Baby Kochamma's complex reaction to Velutha "is an example of what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have called 'displaced abjection,' when the relatively powerless pick on those even more powerless than themselves" (155).

8. In fact, the "Heart of Darkness" image is reiterated numerous times throughout the text, most often as an epithet for Ayemenem. When the police torture Velutha and Rahel and Estha are forced to witness "History in live performance" (309) in the "Heart of Darkness," Roy clearly indicates that even though a hotel chain had recently bought the "Heart of Darkness," over three hundred years of colonial rule has left a disturbing legacy, for instance, "Man's subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue or deify" (308). Ayemenem seems to be hopelessly caught between this legacy that the colonial rulers left and the onslaught of corporate globalization and consumerism.

9. Roy is keenly aware that writing as a profession has become more economically viable and writers have almost become commodities themselves: "Never before have we been more commercially viable. We live and prosper in the heart of the marketplace" (*Algebra* 193)

10. See John, Binoo K. "The New Deity of Prose". *India Today* 27th Oct. 1997. 23-26.

11. Tickell gestures towards this in his article: "Roy is quick to emphasize the comparative coherence of these local Kathakali narratives which, unlike the postcolonial novel, envelop their indigenous audiences in a sense of sheltered cultural familiarity" (83).

12. Ghosh supplements this argument when she suggests that print culture offers new possibilities for the age old oral epic tradition: "The text printed in English, which signifies cosmopolitan address in this postcolonial milieu, quite effectively translates the classical vernacular" (81).

13. Roy says this on Jon Simmons' website. Mullaney also quotes this passage on page 56 of her book. For further discussion of Roy's comments on her writing, see Jon Simmons website on Roy at <<http://website.lineone.net/~jon.simmons/roy/tgost4.htm>>.

14. Tickell is aware of Roy's play with language: "Throughout *The God of Small Things*, Roy splits and reverses phrases, creates portmanteau words, splices adjectival compounds and indulges in various forms of lexical and orthographic play" (80). Mullaney also points this out in her discussion on Roy's use of language (63-67).

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