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The God of Small Things: Arundhati Roy's Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism

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When interviewed about her best-selling novel *The God of Small Things* shortly after winning the Booker Prize in 1997, Arundhati Roy made the point that her work had been conceived as a single defining image, and subsequently written out of sequence: "I didn't start with the first chapter or end with the last . . . I actually started writing with a single image in my head: the sky blue Plymouth [car] with two twins inside it, a Marxist procession surrounding it. . . . [The story] just developed from there".¹ And, true to Roy's non-linear method, this "single image" is divided across the second chapter of the novel, forming the centre-piece of a larger episode which recounts a family outing to Cochin in the southern Indian state of Kerala, during which Roy's protagonists, middle-class Syrian Christians who run a failing pickle-factory, find their car surrounded by a trade-union demonstration at a rural level-crossing:

As the marchers approached, Ammu put up her window. Estha his. Rahel hers. (Effortfully, because the black knob on the handle had fallen off.)

Suddenly the skyblue Plymouth looked absurdly opulent on the narrow, pitted road. . . .

"Look down!" Baby Kochamma said, as the front ranks of the procession approached the car. "Avoid eye contact. That's what really provokes them".

On the side of her neck, her pulse was pounding.

Within minutes, the road was swamped by thousands of marching people. Automobile islands in a river of people. The air was red with flags, which dipped and lifted as the marchers ducked under the level-crossing gate and swept across the railway tracks in a red wave.²

The central protagonists of *The God of Small Things* are Estha and Rahel, "the two twins" who occupy the car (along with their mother, their aunt Kochamma and their uncle Chacko), and much of Roy's third-person narrative is told from their perspective. In Roy's novel they grow up in

their grandparents' home in Kerala because their mother, Ammu, has been forced to return there after a failed marriage, and subsequently the focal event of the novel is a socially transgressive and ultimately doomed love affair between Ammu and a low-caste carpenter, Velutha.

I start with this image of the family in their imported American car, not because of its significance as an example of authorial inspiration, but because it is compelling in other ways. Indeed, the scene offers itself very readily as a metaphor for some important literary-theoretical issues which inform contemporary South Asian writing—the family group confined in the foreign, socially contained space of the sky-blue Plymouth could be seen as a fitting analogy for the creative situation of the postcolonial author, as s/he relates the transcultural preoccupations of an anglicized, often elite Indian middle-class, and couches these within the appropriated form of the novel. Moreover, like many of the more commercially successful South Asian novels published in recent years, the vehicle in Roy's work is conspicuously hybrid in its construction. On the Plymouth roof-rack, we are told, there is “a four-sided, tin-lined plywood billboard” advertising the family pickle business (*Paradise Pickles & Preserves*), complete with painted pickle-jars and a picture of a kathakali dancer to give the products, as Uncle Chacko states, a “Regional Flavour”.³ The pickle advertisement immediately makes one think of Salman Rushdie's “chutnified” histories in that other Booker Prize-winning text, *Midnight's Children*, but in its combination of linguistic flexibility, telepathic child-protagonists, and Western form welded to mythical-popular content (the kathakali dancer turned chutney-logo), Roy's novel also recalls the related mythic-realism of Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and the dialogic interminglings of Amitav Ghosh's early novel *The Circle of Reason*.

As we make these critical comparisons we should remember, however, that the dominance of the culturally hybrid Indian novel in Europe and North America after the publication of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981 has coincided, as Arnab Chakladar has noted, “both with the interests of the burgeoning field of postcolonial studies . . . and with [a] resurgence of interest in the British Raj in the culture at large”.⁴ This correspondence between commercial and academic spheres (as an indication of the market value of postcolonial texts as “cultural capital”) has already been recognized by a number of influential postcolonial theorists. Indeed, it is linked to a wider theoretical debate by Marxist commentators such as Aijaz Ahmad and Arif Dirlik over what the latter terms the complicity of postcolonial critics and intellectuals in “capitalist hegemony”, which takes the form of “postcolonialism's diversion of attention from contemporary problems of social, political, and cultural

domination, and . . . its obfuscation of its own relationship to what is but a condition of its own emergence, that is, to global capitalism".⁵

It is worth digressing slightly at this point to outline some of the ways in which this questioning of the disciplinary location of postcolonial critics and writers has involved a theorizing of the kind of hybrid, culturally-cosmopolitan fiction which Roy seems to produce in *The God of Small Things*. Timothy Brennan, revising his earlier assessments of the genre's political possibilities, argues in his 1997 work *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* that literary cosmopolitanism is nothing less than the "interlocutor" for "what [now] enters metropolitan literature as a 'third world literature'".⁶ He goes on to provide a formulaic definition of this intermediary genre which comprises, amongst other things, an irreverence towards national politics and literatures of national liberation, forms of transculturation and dialogic abundance, and an often magical-realist combination of epic scope and personal, impressionistic memory.⁷ Brennan explains the present market-dominance of these works by reference to associated processes of cultural priming operating in Western academia and educational publishing, processes which, in his opinion, encourage a falsely inclusive vision of contemporary regimes of global power.

A more recent, and rather less polemic analysis of cosmopolitan writing is made by Graham Huggan in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, in which he agrees that "links clearly exist between postcoloniality as a global regime of value and a cosmopolitan alterity industry".⁸ For Huggan, the most noticeable aspect of writing by authors such as Rushdie and Roy is the skill with which they manipulate the expectations and the familiar, "commercially viable" literary codes of this alterity industry. This is marked in novels such as *The God of Small Things* by an ironic display of "lushly romantic images . . . metaphor-laden language [and] transferred Conradian primitivist myths", all of which call attention (perhaps too blatantly) to the "continuing presence of an imperial imaginary lurking behind Indian literature in English".⁹ In Huggan's view, postcolonial writers like Roy are forced to negotiate a double-bind, balancing an awareness of their work as a cultural commodity against the counter-hegemonic imperatives of their politics. They know that

their writing, ostensibly oppositional, is vulnerable to recuperation . . . they know that their work might still be used as a means of reconfirming an exoticizing imperial gaze. They are aware of all this, and they draw their readers into that awareness in their writing.¹⁰

Here, according to Huggan, cosmopolitan texts become interestingly janus-faced, glancing back to their local origins whilst also looking

forward to their metropolitan reception: “if postcolonial literary works often dramatize the material circumstances of their production this would be equally true of writers like . . . Roy *at the level of consumption*”.¹¹

Certainly, the success of *The God of Small Things* must, to a large extent, be attributed to Roy’s use of literary tropes which are already recognizable markers of cultural difference for a metropolitan readership; a success facilitated by a marketing strategy in which Roy herself has been staged as an attractive authorial *avatar* of her own, intricately-wrought prose. However, my aim in the following pages is not simply to mark the points at which Roy’s work follows the formal/theoretical strategies of cosmopolitanism or performs an ironic, literary “articulation of anti-European sentiments by European conceptual means”.¹² To call attention to these reiterative tactics certainly reveals “the link between the perceptual mechanism of the exotic and the metropolitan marketing of Indian Literatures in English in the West”,¹³ but also risks an inadvertent ethnocentrism in which the values of the former colonial centre remain, although reversed through irony, the critical coordinates which guide metropolitan readings of postcolonial texts.

In recognizing the limits of critical work which attends closely to the postcolonial mirrorings and refractions of South Asian fiction, we might also consider the possibilities of a more self-aware critical practice which “remains constantly vigilant about . . . the neo-orientalist aspects of its own interpretative terms, and of its neocolonial context”.¹⁴ And, ideally, such a critical practice should alert us to the covert, desultory, para-critical strategies apparent in Roy’s writing—because although it is impossible to make a claim for an “authentic” cultural or political point of leverage in Roy’s text which is not “always already” marked by its own potential commodification, it would be equally short-sighted to assume that the sophisticated debate over agency in *The God of Small Things* is defined, at the expense of its contextual determinants, by singularly textual forms of dissimulation. Thus, in the following pages I want to ask how Roy’s novel could register the limits of critical readings of cosmopolitanism, or at least offer a qualified definition of the term which might re-emphasize “contrapuntal” resistances in the text, closer affiliation to intra-national political contexts, and a more partisan relationship to form.

But first, how does Roy’s writing fit into the structure of the postcolonial production of knowledge? What are the creative and the literary ingredients that have made her text such an acceptable “regional flavour” on the global market? As much as *The God of Small Things* signals difference, it is also a novel which reworks very familiar (non-Indian) cultural signs of the late 1960s: Estha dresses as a diminutive Elvis, the landscape of Kerala evokes Vietnam, and the family see *The*

Sound of Music at the cinema. And interestingly, alongside these obvious Western reference-points, Roy also engages (albeit in a qualified way) with paradigms of subjectivity and language which have a strong theoretical association in the West. As I will argue, this is most evident when the cosmopolitan tropes and stylistic techniques of *The God of Small Things* are read in relation to the theoretical work of postcolonial commentators such as Homi Bhabha.

In retrospect, one of the most striking aspects of Bhabha's critical *oeuvre* is the way it has dramatized the ambivalent relationship between poststructuralist thought and the later theoretical incarnations of postcolonialism. As a radical questioning of transcendent meaning in Western philosophical and humanist traditions after the Enlightenment, French thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva have, undeniably, provided postcolonial thought with some important critical tools. But for postcolonial commentators the relationship has also been one of revision and expropriation, especially where poststructuralism has seemed to reproduce the ethnocentric biases of the Western tradition it seeks to question. In his theoretical recourse to figures such as Foucault and Kristeva, and in his concentration on semiotics, the exclusions of a liberal humanist narrative of modernity, and the psychological ambivalence of disciplinary regimes such as colonialism, Bhabha can be described as making a catachrestic, corrective "return" to the scene of a theoretical assault in which the French *avant garde* was already deeply implicated.

Talking of the French student uprising of 1968 (which attempted to put the intellectual iconoclasm of the period into practice), the postmodern theorist Jean François Lyotard defines the movement's central agenda as "the transformation of the relationship between what is desired and what is given, between potential energy and the machinery of society [but]... its work was [also] that of an undoing, an anti-political kind of work, carrying out not the reinforcement but the dissolution of the system".¹⁵ Lyotard's description is relevant here because it draws attention to a prevailing concern over system and structure which runs from the critique of humanism enshrined in Foucault's work through subsequent postcolonial theoretical responses such as Bhabha's to a creative engagement with ideas of epistemological and linguistic structure in cosmopolitan fictions such as Roy's novel.

It is intriguing, in view of the rough theoretical connections I have sketched out, just how closely Roy engages with power in the form of systems, hierarchies and scientific taxonomies in *The God of Small Things*. Indeed, the problem of classification is posited, somewhat unexpectedly, at the start of the novel when we are told of the unwelcome

investigations of the Food Products Organization (a regulatory governmental body) into the family pickle business:

[Mammachi's factory] used to make pickles, squashes, jams, curry powders and canned pineapples. And banana jam (illegally) after the FPO (food products organization) banned it because according to their specifications it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said.¹⁶

The threat of what happens to the unclassifiable underpins the transgressive cross-caste romance at the centre of the narrative, and problems of classification are signposted more directly when Rahel concludes that "it seemed as though this difficulty that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question".¹⁷ As we soon realize, classification is not solely bureaucratic in *The God of Small Things*. It also reappears in the more Foucauldian shape of biological taxonomy, associated with the repressive, patriarchal figure of Pappachi, the children's entomologist grandfather. In Roy's novel Pappachi confronts disappointment when, convinced he has discovered a new species of moth, he is notified that it is really an unusual specimen of a well-known species. We are told that "The real blow came twelve years later [after Pappachi had retired], when, as a consequence of a radical taxonomical reshuffle, lepidopterists decided that Pappachi's moth *was* in fact a separate species".¹⁸ In short, Pappachi's professional authority is sabotaged by nature's tendency to evade or slip across the boundaries of classification.

Roy emphasizes the ironies of this slippage between categories in the figures of Pappachi's grandchildren, Estha and Rahel, who are, like Pappachi's moth, examples of a kind of biological anomaly. They are dizygotic (two-egg) twins, and therefore represent, in the words of the eighteenth-century French naturalist Buffon, "mixed objects which it is impossible to categorize and which necessarily upset the project of a general system".¹⁹ For the twins, classification becomes an imposing force which threatens their hybrid existence: "Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons. Short creatures...patrolling the Blurry End".²⁰ Furthermore, as "two-egg twins", Roy's protagonists upset the symmetry of that central figure of Enlightenment thought, the self-knowing Cartesian subject, around which (as Foucault shows us in *The Order of Things*) the epistemological scaffolding of the human sciences is erected.²¹ In contrast to this sovereign subject, Roy's twinned protagonists become oppositional figure(s) of subjective instability and merging: "Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese

twins, physically separate, but with joint identities".²² The twins' subjective blurring is exacerbated by their uncanny telepathy: Rahel wakes up in the night "giggling at Estha's funny dream" and later recalls the "taste of the tomato sandwiches – Estha's sandwiches that Estha ate – on the Madras mail to Madras".²³

But Roy's use of a merged or doubled subjectivity does more than simply challenge the figure of Man as subject (or author) of his own, disinterested, systems of knowledge—it also traces out Bhabha's theoretical codicil to Foucault's work. Responding to what he sees as the ethnocentrism of Foucault's project, Bhabha attempts, in essays such as "The other question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism" and "DissemiNation: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation", to rearticulate Foucault's anti-humanism from a postcolonial perspective, and to emphasize how the construction of Man as an ethical category subsumes or overwrites "Other" cultural and political constituencies. In Bhabha's work this subsuming ethnocentrism, which underlies the supposedly transcendent category-basis of the "human", is characterized chronologically in the delayed or "time-lagged" arrival of the non-European racial/cultural subject within the writings of modernity:

in pushing the paradoxes of modernity to its limits [writers such as Foucault] reveal the margins of the West. From the postcolonial perspective we can only assume a disjunctive and displaced relation to these works: we cannot accept them until we subject them to a [temporal] *lagging*.²⁴

In the very fact of Estha and Rahel's birth we encounter a strikingly literal version of this temporal lag, as one twin "follows" or provides an unexpected supplement to the other. "Born from separate but simultaneously fertilized eggs. Estha—Esthappen—was the older by eighteen minutes".²⁵ In short, Roy's doubled protagonists work as a figurative reminder of the historical violence of colonialism, manifested as an ideological force which transforms the colonized self into a belated copy of the European Enlightenment subject.

At the same time as she questions the unified narrative subject (again, a strategy which recalls *Midnight's Children*, with its fragmenting, protean narrator, Saleem Sinai), Roy also engages with theoretically related linguistic instabilities, in the form of rhetorical slippage and textual citation. Like the blurring of taxonomy, this dialogic flexibility has particular implications for South Asian writers and theorists, since it highlights the constitutive power of English, and represents a subversive response to the symbolic (and more directly hegemonic) authority of the colonial tongue. This is why, for critics such as Bhabha, postcolonial

resistance depends largely upon models of strategic agency *within* and as “an effect of” language. Here, “the . . . agent only re-emerges through a form of retroactivity, similar to the way that in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory the subject becomes individuated only *after* being positioned within the terms of the symbolic order”.²⁶

According to this notion of agency, Estha and Rahel’s language-use can be read as a seditious repositioning in the midst of “individuation” into the structured symbolic order of English. 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, and these experiments occur in close proximity to the twins’ other, palindrome-named language, Malayalam. Significantly, this linguistic flexibility (even when it is only conveyed as interior monologue) is most noticeable when Estha and Rahel are the objects of spoken orders or commands, such as when Ammu scolds Rahel for misbehaving at Cochin airport:

Ambassador Rahel wouldn’t come out of the curtain because she couldn’t . . . Because Everything was wrong. And soon there would be a Lay Ter for both her and Estha . . .

The dirty airport curtain was a great comfort and a darkness and a shield . . .

When Ammu was really angry, she said Jolly Well. Jolly Well was a deeply well with larfing dead people in it.²⁷

Here the children’s linguistic sensitivity works as a form of intuitive deconstruction; the historically-loaded words they learn are refused their authority as signifiers, wrenched apart like old toys, and made anew.

The God of Small Things can be read, then, as a complex engagement with certain aspects of contemporary postcolonial theory *via* the formal strategies of the cosmopolitan novel. And where Roy reinforces Bhabha’s psychoanalytic focus and seems to endorse the dissident potential of hybridity, this connection is particularly convincing. However, by relating Roy’s work so closely to accepted notions of postcolonial agency, we may also risk losing a sense of the more unreadable, dissonant representational strategies available to postcolonial writers, a dissonance which Bhabha himself describes as the “enunciatory disorder” in the “writing of cultural difference”.²⁸ As we have seen, postcolonial writers and theorists have traditionally revised the radical self-critiques of the West, but in doing so they have, as Bhabha has also pointed out, interrupted Western epistemologies and modes of comprehension with the “disordering potential of the signifier” staged in “the narrative uncertainty of culture’s in-between”.²⁹

Taking this resistant textuality into account, it is important to ask whether the “problem of classification” in *The God of Small Things*, which seems to disclose an ingrained structural ethnocentrism in Western thought after the Enlightenment, might work to undermine the explicatory ambitions of contemporary criticism as well. This is the claim made by Elleke Boehmer when she states that the “skittish burlesques” and “over-stylized arabesqueries” of Roy’s language demonstrate “a subtle subversion that at once co-operates with and exceeds the definitions criticism imposes”.³⁰ Here it is not so much the liberating potential of textual *différance* or slippage which is significant, but the way in which Roy uses language to bring conflicting political positions or social perspectives into sharp, shocking juxtaposition (a linguistic flexibility which emphasizes the creative potential of childhood language acquisition more clearly than the “resistant” proliferation of voices and registers which echo through Rushdie’s novels).

Again, on some levels, this strategy of juxtaposition—anticipated in the titular theme of “Small (and Big) Things”—“co-operates” with neo-orientalist assumptions about India as a place of extremes, recuperating a technique of colonial writing in which comprehension surrenders to a stunned sense of spectacular *incongruity*. But Roy’s use of childhood language, her virtuosity with metaphor and her attention to literal/figurative disjunctions also provides a way of speaking about human exploitation, familial guilt and political violence which carries an ethical charge rare in cosmopolitan fiction. After a fatal beating by the “touchable” policemen, Velutha is transformed, in Estha’s horrified eyes, into a man with a head which “look[ed] like a pumpkin . . . with a monstrous upside-down smile”.³¹ And in the evocative “Hotel Sea Queen with the oldfood smell” Roy’s child-centred narrative notices that “[t]he bellboy . . . wasn’t a boy and hadn’t a bell. He had dim eyes and two buttons missing on his frayed maroon coat [and] his greyed undershirt showed”.³² Here *The God of Small Things* surpasses both a theoretical sense of the disorientations of power-as-meaning within a semiotic field, and the more obvious literary commonplace of the reflecting innocence of the child-perspective. Instead, Roy draws the reader into a text “woven with little fragments of ordinary language [contrasted and folded unexpectedly against each other] that begin to sing in our ears as they gather, with each repetition, the whole emotional charge of the narrative”,³³ and in these instances Roy depends on a brilliant “over-written” layering of tone and detail, as much as she does on ironic narrative effect.

Thus, if we try to read Roy’s novel by referring to a critical orthodoxy which depends on established models of “cosmopolitan” resistant textuality, we soon become aware of evasions and moments of tricky

formal subterfuge which challenge our initial assumptions. Like the vigilant theorizing of recent black feminist commentators, Roy's writing goes "a piece of the way"³⁴ and colludes with (but also undercuts and second-guesses) its critical interlocutors. Moreover, these evasions are not confined to subjective or linguistic aspects of *The God of Small Things*. Coming back to Roy's inaugural image, the customized blue Plymouth stalled at the level crossing, and looking again at its formal metaphorical possibilities, we encounter other instances in which Roy works against the grain of her critical reception in the West.

In particular, the billboard image of the pickle advertising kathakali actor (the sign under which Roy's protagonists travel) seems to offer us rather more than an exotic, recontextualized updating of indigenous myth. Instead, 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. In subtle contrast to the interweaving of myth, magic, and popular religion which is such an enduring feature of South Asian magical realism, the figure of the billboard kathakali dancer has an internal resonance in *The God of Small Things*, and is mirrored in the "Kochu Thomban" chapter. Here, an entire kathakali is performed in a local temple courtyard, watched only by Estha and Rahel, and the reader soon realizes that this play is an adjunct to more public but less culturally affirming poolside performances, which the kathakali men enact at the local hotel in front the mocking "lolling nakedness"³⁵ of foreign tourists.

In her representation of kathakali Roy is clearly alive to the way in which folk-stories and aspects of indigenous myth are now over-determined as authentic markers of difference. In other words, the narratives which Frantz Fanon defined as the basis of his "second phase" of anticolonial literature: "Past happenings . . . [and] old legends . . . reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed aestheticism",³⁶ which have since been reconstituted in India by the Hindu right, are also today the means by which cultural difference is commodified. Roy's characters recognize (and question) this tendency when they argue over the use of a kathakali image to promote Mammachi's pickles on the "overseas market":

Ammu said that the kathakali dancer was a Red Herring and had nothing to do with anything. Chacko said that it gave the products a Regional Flavour and would stand them in good stead when they entered the Overseas Market.³⁷

As Huggan argues, this is the same predicament which faces the postcolonial author: "the globalisation of commodity culture has confronted postcolonial writers/thinkers with the irresolvable struggle

between competing regimes of value. This struggle . . . plays itself out over the value of *cultural difference*".³⁸

But more than her cosmopolitan literary predecessors, Roy seems to build this internal "irresolvable" struggle into her narrative, so that the kathakali performance itself operates as a commentary on the politics of cultural commodification. Like the commercially successful Indian-English novel, the kathakali in Roy's work is caught between two (culturally distinct) constituencies: a reduced indigenous audience at the temple and a more lucrative foreign tourist audience at the Heart of Darkness hotel. As I have already indicated, the latter performances are really little more than acts of staged authenticity—"4 hour epics shrunk to 20 minutes", which cater for "imported attention spans"—and consequently the night-long drama which Estha and Rahel witness in the deserted grounds of a local temple becomes a spiritual compensation, and a way of "jettison[ing the] humiliation" of cultural commodification:

On their way back from the Heart of Darkness [the kathakali troupe] stopped at the temple to ask pardon of their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories. For encashing their identities. Misappropriating their lives.

On these occasions, a human audience was welcome but entirely incidental.³⁹

Hence, in the ethical dilemma of its divergent audiences, Roy uses the kathakali to throw into relief the fact of her own intrinsically marketable position within "competing regimes of value". And although not a direct repudiation of the exoticizing tendencies of cosmopolitanism, at the very least this sub-narrative indicates Roy's awareness of the involuntary, assimilative demand which global capital makes in its encounter with local postcolonial cultures.

Although the cosmopolitan novel often aspires to, or builds on, the epic digressive range of *sthala purana*, 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. The "Great Stories" of kathakali, drawn from the *Mahabharata*, can be "enter[ed] anywhere and inhabit[ed] comfortably":

They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover's skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't.⁴⁰

In addition, the kathakali actors, who have been trained in the symbolic moves and expressions of the drama from childhood, are the exact

opposite of the cosmopolitan, deracinated (often transcultural) South Asian novelist. Like Walter Benjamin's image of the pre-modern storyteller in his essay on Nikolai Leskov,⁴¹ the kathakali men are integral to the local community and are irrevocably bound to their own stories, becoming, in *The God of Small Things*, narrative craftsmen. "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".⁴²

But for all its critical resonance, this almost nostalgic vision of narrative commonality cannot be sustained in *The God of Small Things*. Indeed, Roy undermines a sense of celebratory nativism in the "Kochu Thomban" chapter by associating the mythical source of the kathakali with the "love laws" (delineated in texts such as the *Manusmriti* or The Laws of Manu) which proscribe Ammu's affair with Velutha. As the night-long drama in the temple unfolds, Roy points up the routine oppressions of the play-world, indicating that, when Dushasana tries publicly to undress Draupadi, the Pandava's wife, after she has been staked in a game of dice, Draupadi is "strangely angry only with the men that won her, not the ones that staked her".⁴³ The patriarchal violence which informs idealized figures such as Draupadi is registered again in the sudden jolting bathos at the close of the drama, when dawn arrives, and the kathakali men take off "their make-up" and go "home to beat their wives".⁴⁴

It is telling that as Roy underlines the conservatism of local mythical narratives and their violent rehearsal of *dharma* and *adharma*, she extends the cultural range of her critique of power as systematized knowledge, already traced out here in Bhabha's postcolonial anti-humanism. In the "Kochu Thomban" chapter, Roy's engagement with discursive structure can also be seen to encompass the older, mythically-encoded taxonomies and hierarchies of Hindu philosophy and aesthetics. These are exemplified, according to the great poet and translator A.K. Ramanujan, in the Hindu concern with *jati*—the logic of classes, of genera and species, of which human *jatis* are only an instance. Various taxonomies of season, landscape, times, *gunas* or qualities (and their material bases), tastes, characters, emotions, essences (*rasa*), etc., are basic to the thought-work of Hindu medicine and poetry, cooking and religion, erotics and magic.⁴⁵

If the "thought-work" of orthodox Hinduism—and we must remember that this is available as the legacy of orientalist scholarship⁴⁶—offers us a schematic logic of *varna* or caste, then themes of structure in the novel point as clearly to politically sustained pre-colonial social inequalities as they do to a more direct legacy of European colonial epistemology. Roy reinforces this point in the sense of uneasy identification which the adult twins feel when they watch the kathakali:

It was no performance. Esthappen and Rahel recognized it. They had seen its work before. Another morning. Another stage. Another kind of frenzy. . . . The brutal extravagance of this matched by the savage economy of that.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Roy does not employ the same invasive tactics against the structure of mythical narrative as she does in her engagement with the orders of biological taxonomy or English grammar. In *The God of Small Things* the potential of kathakali drama to evoke a cultural “popular sovereignty”—something which Timothy Brennan sees, in his criticism of literary cosmopolitanism, as the “only way [to] express internationalism”⁴⁸—is recognized but then disavowed because of Roy’s clear awareness of what Bart Moore-Gilbert terms a “tendency [inherent in forms of cultural nationalism] to relocate . . . minorities—women in particular—in a subordinate role in the name of either solidarity or tradition”.⁴⁹ There is also a sense that in spite of this tendency, myth, as an ingredient of the “toxic” authenticity of cultural or religious nationalism, is important in a temporal repositioning of postcolonial identity, a repositioning which must be read alongside the strategic atemporalities which Bhabha works into his reading of Western anti-humanism.

As Roy suggests early in the text, whilst extrapolating possible beginnings for the events in her narrative, the origins of kathakali “love-laws” demand a longer sense of history than most *post*-colonial readings allow. Velutha’s death may be the result of an unexpected power-alliance between a local Marxist demagogue and Ayemenem’s Christian police-chief, but it is also presaged in the social and religious structures which existed before early Christianity incorporated the Malabar coast into its own history: “[I]t all began . . . [l]ong before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendency, before Vasco da Gama arrived, before the Zamorin’s conquest of Calicut”.⁵⁰ It is remarkable that in this history of successive encounter, Roy recognizes the deeply cosmopolitan, syncretized nature of South India’s past, yet also maintains the rhetorical importance of (always-already compromised) authentic cultural times and spaces, as locations from which “equally viable” modes of postcolonial self-fashioning can occur.⁵¹

This brings me back, once again, to my opening image of the sky-blue Plymouth stopped by the rail-tracks, waiting for the slow train, with the air “full of the impatient sound of idling engines”.⁵² This is, I have argued, a scene which is open to a metaphorical rendering within the traffic of cultural citation and re-citation (back to the centre) now critically associated with South Asian cosmopolitanism. Paradoxically, however, the delineation of these ironic “intentionally” hybrid moments

in Roy's writing often occludes aspects of her work which might give us a valuable sense of cosmopolitanism's local, everyday inflections in Kerala. Commenting on precisely this problem, Ania Loomba makes the cogent point that postcolonial writings "cannot be adequately discussed outside of the difficult interplay between their local and global contexts, an awareness that is all too often erased as we celebrate [their] hybridity or polyphony or magic realism".⁵³

Before *The God of Small Things*, Roy wrote several screenplays, and it is perhaps the trace of this work which gives set-pieces such as the level-crossing scene such a cinematographic quality. However, the visual feel of these passages also alerts us to the preferences and focal points of the metropolitan gaze, as a process of critical surveying and scrutiny. I want to conclude by elaborating on this point, very briefly, with reference to the work of a well-known Indian photographer, the late Raghubir Singh. Apart from his pioneering use of colour photography, Singh's work is most interesting because of its compositional idiosyncrasies; in his pictures of crowded pavements and chaotic Indian roads Singh employs skewed perspectives or bisects the frame of the picture, disorientating the viewer, momentarily, into a focus on marginal detail.⁵⁴ Whilst it could be argued that this is a reiterative citation of similar techniques employed by photographers such as Lee Freedlander, Singh's compositional style also crucially *disrupts* a Western photographic interpellation of India in established genres such as social documentary (India's poverty) and neo-colonial romance (India's "timeless" beauty).

In a similar way, Roy's writing sensitizes us to the selective nature of (critical-) narrative perspectives and "ways of seeing".⁵⁵ The level-crossing episode centres on Roy's family, trapped in their car in the trade-union demonstration, but it is also crowded with other very specific regional-cultural signs: a Syrian Christian wedding party, Hindu pilgrimage-buses, traumatized INA war veterans, beggars and wandering fruit vendors:

More buses and cars had stopped on either side of the level crossing. An ambulance that said *Sacred Heart Hospital* was full of a party of people on their way to a wedding. . . .

The buses all had girls' names. Lucykutty, Mollykutty, Beena Mol. In Malyalam, Mol is Little Girl and Mon is Little Boy. Beena Mol was full of pilgrims who'd had their heads shaved at Tirupati. . . .

[The] drivers switched off their engines and milled about, stretching their legs.

With a desultory nod of his bored and sleepy head, the Level Crossing Divinity conjured up beggars with bandages, men with trays selling pieces of fresh coconut, parippu vadas on banana leaves. And cold drinks. Coca-Cola, Fanta, Rosemilk.⁵⁶

Like Singh's photography, Roy's narrative suddenly moves to the borders of its compositional framing here, and develops a sense of contextual detail which is dense with its own lines of regional and transcultural connection. The pilgrimage buses are bound for other destinations, tracing sacred routes between temple-towns like Tirupati and Madurai, and the hawkers moving between the parked cars work an intricate micro-economy which accommodates "parippu vadas" alongside bottles of Coca-Cola. As in her descriptions of the houses built with Gulf-money in Ayemenem, or the impact of satellite television on Baby Kochamma's domestic life, Roy explores cosmopolitanism's limits and local re-translations in this crowded setting, bringing about an uneasy disclosure rather than a complicitous mystification of the realities of globalization.

Recently, there have been signs that cosmopolitanism is becoming less influential as a literary model for South Asian novelists writing in English, and suggestions have been made that alternative forms, such as the Bengali novella, could offer new, "less falsely uniform" templates for prose fictions in English.⁵⁷ But perhaps the uniformity of the recognized template, in works such as Roy's, also needs to be brought into question. As Aijaz Ahmad has claimed in his review of *The God of Small Things*, "for anything truly comparable [to Roy's novel] one would have to go to a different Indian language, a different set of formal conventions, different sets of social and political convictions".⁵⁸ And thus, although novels such as *The God of Small Things* may experience a vexed relationship with "cosmopolitan" metropolitan literary taste, in focusing on these "Big" and inherently troubled generic affiliations, we risk ignoring the "different formal conventions", and the Small, (vernacular) Things which make Roy's voice such an original recent addition to South Asian literature.

NOTES

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- 1 Reena Jana, "Wind, Rivers and Rain. Salon Interview with Arundhati Roy", 30 September 1997, <http://salonmag.com/sept9700roy.html>
- 2 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, London: Flamingo/Harper Collins, 1997, p.65.
- 3 *ibid.*, pp.46–7.
- 4 Arnab Chakladar, "The Postcolonial Bazaar: Marketing/Teaching Indian Literature", *ARIEL*, 31, 1–2 (2000), 189.

- 5 Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism", *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (1994), p.331.
- 6 Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1997, p.37.
- 7 *ibid.*, pp.36–44.
- 8 Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London: Routledge, 2001, p.12.
- 9 *ibid.*, p.77.
- 10 *ibid.*, p.81.
- 11 *ibid.*; italics in original.
- 12 *ibid.*, p.3.
- 13 *ibid.*, p.11.
- 14 Elleke Boehmer, "East is East and South is South: The Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy", *Woman*, 11, 1/ 2 (2000), 69.
- 15 J.F. Lyotard, see Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. p.333.
- 16 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, p.30.
- 17 *ibid.*, pp.30–31.
- 18 *ibid.*, p.49; italics in original.
- 19 George Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, see Simon Eliot and Beverly Stern, eds., *The Age of Enlightenment*, Vol. 2, London: Ward Lock/Open University Press, 1979. pp.165–6.
- 20 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, p.3.
- 21 See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, London: Routledge/Tavistock, 1970.
- 22 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, p.2.
- 23 *ibid.*, pp.2–3; italics in original.
- 24 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p.247. Bhabha plays on the etymology of the term *lagging* in this passage, stressing that the postcolonial subject is displaced temporally from these works, but might also have to subject them to a cultural *lagging*—"in the obscurer sense in which, in the early days of settler colonization, to be lagged was to be transported to the colonies" (*ibid.*).
- 25 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, p.2.
- 26 Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*, London: Verso, 1997, p.136.
- 27 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, pp.146–8.
- 28 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp.126–7.
- 29 *ibid.*, p.127.
- 30 Elleke Boehmer, "East is East and South is South: The Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy", p.70.
- 31 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, p.320.
- 32 *ibid.*, p.114.
- 33 Aijaz Ahmad, "Reading Arundhati Roy *politically*", *Frontline*, 8 August 1997, p.103.

- 34 See Carol Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, London: Routledge, 1994.
- 35 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, p.231.
- 36 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, p.179.
- 37 *ibid.*, p.47.
- 38 Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.13; italics in original.
- 39 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, p.229.
- 40 *ibid.*
- 41 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, London: Fontana/Harper Collins, 1992.
- 42 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, p.230; italics in original.
- 43 *ibid.*, p.234.
- 44 *ibid.*, p.236.
- 45 A.K. Ramanujan, see Amit Chaudhuri, ed., *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, London: Picador/Macmillan, 2001, p.433.
- 46 See Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, London: Hurst, 2000.
- 47 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, p.235.
- 48 Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World*, p.316.
- 49 Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory*, p.56.
- 50 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, p.33.
- 51 Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge, 1998, p.183.
- 52 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, p.61.
- 53 Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, p.257.
- 54 See Raghbir Singh, *River of Colour: The India of Raghbir Singh*, London: Phaidon, 1998.
- 55 See Roy's epigraph from John Berger in *The God of Small Things*: "Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one".
- 56 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, pp.60–61.
- 57 See Amit Chaudhuri's Introduction to *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*.
- 58 Aijaz Ahmad, "Reading Arundhati Roy *politically*", p.103.