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Elizabeth Outka

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ELIZABETH OUTKA

Trauma and Temporal Hybridity in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, presents an often bewildering mix of different times. Images, stories, and sensations from the past blend together with present moments and even future experiences. Critics have noted this temporal blending and have cited this feature as reflecting the novel's magical realism, or postcolonialism, or postmodernism, which are all associated with various forms of time play.¹ Indeed, as writers from Joyce to Woolf to Rushdie remind us, time is always to some extent a mixture, as the present must be understood as a complex amalgamation and negotiation of past moments. Roy's novel reflects,

I gratefully acknowledge the insightful comments offered on this article by Trip Pollard, Paul Outka, Kevin Pelletier, Monika Siebert, Amy Howard, Julietta Singh, and my readers at *Contemporary Literature*.

1. Critic Alexandra Podgórnjak, for example, links the time play in the novel with magical realism: "In a manner typical . . . of magical realist fiction, Roy uses the technique of building a tale within a tale, persistently delaying climaxes, intermingling the past and the present" (261). Likewise, Jean-Pierre Durix, writing on the postcoloniality of the novel, observes, "The reader opening the book is plunged into a world of childhood reminiscences and associations thanks to which the history of a family in Kerala is reconstructed in poetic fashion, through a mixture of scenes, happenings, memories, sensations, sounds and phrases which follow one another obeying a logic of association of ideas rather than one of linear progression" (18). Finally, the temporal play of the novel has been seen as postmodern: as Marta Dvorak observes, "[Roy's] sudden time shifts, alternating fast forwards and flashbacks, or rapidly edited loops and turns circling yet moving forward have been dubbed cinematic techniques by certain reviewers. Yet such strategies are interestingly characteristic of postmodern writing in general, with its systemic recourse to fragmentation" (47).

however, another critical aspect of blended time that the stylistic and political readings of the novel have so far missed: the central role of trauma in creating the temporal mix experienced by the characters.² One of the most noted aftereffects of traumatic experience is, in fact, a disordering of time, when past events threaten to take over the present, returning repeatedly to haunt the current moment in the form of flashbacks, hallucinations, or dreams.³ Trauma reorders time itself, and thus in Roy's novel, the temporal mixture must be read not simply as a feature of a postmodern or postcolonial narrative, but also as the sign of traumatic experience.⁴ Roy depicts what I will call "temporal hybridity" both within her characters' lives and within her narrative structure, providing a vivid map of trauma's lingering damage. Roy also evokes, however, the possibility of another temporal zone apart from her characters, one accessible only to the reader, and one where time's hybridity—through this very access—might reflect not disruption but also the possibility of radical political and social change.

In evaluating Roy's novel, I borrow the term "hybridity" from postcolonial theory deliberately, despite its controversial status within the field. Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridization demands that we view cultural meetings not as simple binaries, but as meetings where ambivalence and multiplicity are governing forces, and where the apparent sides might in fact represent

2. L. Chris Fox is one of the few critics to note the connection between trauma theory and Roy's novel. His argument concentrates on "the role of the abject," rather than on narrative time. More generally, trauma and colonization have received sustained critical attention; Frantz Fanon's well-known work *The Wretched of the Earth*, for example, remains a central text detailing the traumatic effects of colonization and the mental illnesses that it may produce.

3. The official definition of "post-traumatic stress disorder" may be found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (309.81). See also Caruth's volume, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, which brings together essays by literary critics, psychologists, and scientists on the aftermath of trauma, as well as Ruth Leys's critique of Caruth and other theorists in *Trauma: A Genealogy*.

4. I follow Elleke Boehmer in my use of the hyphen for the term "postcolonial." When I refer to the historical period after colonization, I include the hyphen. When I refer to literature that concerns issues of colonization and the postindependence period, I omit the hyphen.

hybridizations themselves.⁵ Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and others have further explored how time itself must be understood as multiple, with Bhabha positing “a dialectic of various temporalities” as a way to unsettle the repressive illusion of “fixed and stable forms of the nationalist narrative” (“DissemiNation” 303), and Chakrabarty exploring the idea of “time knots” of multiple moments that may disrupt the narrative of modern capitalist history.⁶ In this article, I bring together postcolonial theories of hybridity with the parallel critical work on time, proposing a temporal hybridity, one that in Roy’s novel might hold a liberating power to disrupt existing narratives, but one that more often reflects the brutal aftereffects of traumatic events. For Roy’s characters, time is not a binary meeting but a hybrid where different times become simultaneous, multiple, ambiguous. The present moment is at once a dangerous blending of many times, but also, paradoxically, a refusal of those moments to blend, signaling the past traumatic event’s refusal to be integrated into an unfolding narrative.

Considering the traumatic temporal hybridity of Roy’s novel in turn offers a way to evaluate criticisms of Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridization, which has been taken to task for, among other things, eliding material realities of the colonizer/colonized binary.⁷ The temporal hybridity in Roy’s novel does not ignore such realities but actually reflects the trauma that certain brutal

5. Bhabha discusses hybridity in many of his works; see for example *The Location of Culture*. Critic Susan Stanford Friedman offers an incisive genealogy of the term “hybridity” in her book *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Friedman locates two central types of orientation for hybridity—spatial and temporal. Hybridity, she argues, is often explored in terms of the geographic meldings it suggests among cultures, and also in terms of its temporal meldings, or “how the mingling of different cultures and the formation of new ones takes place over time,” giving rise to a “temporal palimpsest of sedimentations” (87). See Friedman, especially 82–93. In the post-traumatic, postcolonial narrative, the mingling of cultures not only takes place over time but also may take place within time itself, as the present moment becomes, always, a conglomeration of the past.

6. For more on temporality, narrative, and the postcolonial, see Bhabha’s essay “DissemiNation” and Chakrabarty’s insightful volume, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*.

7. Benita Parry presents her critique of hybridity in *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*.

material realities may produce; in her depiction of collective trauma in particular, Roy pushes against nonmaterialist readings and explores the harmful effects of caste prejudice, sexism, and commercial and political colonizations. Roy's temporal hybrids indeed capture the often contradictory readings of hybridity within postcolonial theory. As Susan Stanford Friedman has recently summarized, hybridity has been read as a sign of oppression, as when one culture forces another to assimilate, or as a sign of progression, where rigid dichotomies are unsettled and new forms emerge.⁸ On a temporal level, Roy depicts these contradictions within her novel, exploring primarily how a hybrid time reflects a damaging blend, but also how such hybridity might finally unsettle a rigid understanding of time and allow for new temporal possibilities to emerge.

Analyzing Roy's depiction of temporal hybridity further allows an exploration of some of the most vexed elements of trauma theory itself, an exploration that clarifies issues of representation and of recovery within the theoretical models and presents a critical role for the reader. As I go on to detail, the very depiction of trauma is controversial; if, as many theorists argue, traumatic events cannot be fully experienced or recorded by the victim at the time they occur, and they are, then, to a certain extent, unrepresentable, how can they be remembered by the victim later, and how in turn might the victim (and the writer—and the reader) give voice to something that is, by its very nature, unrepresentable? If the aftereffects of trauma can be depicted, does the writer risk traumatizing the reader through this depiction? And within this struggle of representation, how might both author and reader avoid the aestheticization of traumatic experience, one that potentially revictimizes a victim? Roy explores these questions both on the level of her individual characters and in her depiction of collective forms of community trauma, and in each of these areas, she suggests a particular place for the reader. As the first part of this article investigates, the experiences of the individual characters offer a way to consider the temporal anomalies of post-traumatic stress that pushes

8. See Friedman 82–93.

beyond the tidier depictions of the theoretical models; here, only the reader can piece together the full (or at least fuller) story, as the reader becomes a unique kind of witness to the event, one who may mark the distinction between a literary portrayal of trauma and its material counterpart. In the second half of the article, I turn to Roy's depiction of collective trauma, a depiction that demands another role from the reader. In exploring the particular ways a community might experience forms of traumatic temporal hybridity, Roy recasts the reader in a political role, inviting an active, activist response and imagining a recovery that might be open to readers, though not to the former community or its members. Examining forms of traumatic temporal hybridity finally allows a new reading of the novel's controversial dual ending, where two transgressive sexual acts reflect trauma's unending damage and—simultaneously—the possibility for political change.

Temporal Hybridity and the Individual

The God of Small Things offers two central and interwoven narrative threads. The first thread traces the traumatic events experienced by an Indian family living in Ayemenem during a two-week period in 1969. The family includes Mammachi; her two grown children, Ammu and Chacko, who are both divorced and have returned home; and Ammu's seven-year-old twins, a daughter, Rahel, and a son, Estha. Terrible things happen during these two weeks: Estha is molested by a stranger; Chacko's half-English daughter Sophie arrives from America only to drown accidentally; and a love affair between Ammu and an untouchable worker named Velutha results in Velutha's brutal beating by a group of policemen, a beating that takes place in front of the twins and that results in his death. The second narrative depicts a day in 1993, when Estha and Rahel meet for the first time since the violent events twenty-three years before, a meeting that culminates in an incestuous sexual encounter. In addition to these two main threads, other stories are told about each of the characters, both before 1969 and after. Roy presents the two central stories in more or less alternating chapters, but each chapter

weaves back and forth over other time periods, creating a complex series of references and allusions. The narratives are punctuated with repeated flashbacks and images, as past events return in the present and, inexplicably, future events appear to disrupt the past. By presenting the novel's temporal framework not as a continuous narrative but as a disordered mix of various times that can be pieced together only by the reader (if at all), Roy's text echoes the way her characters are experiencing the present moment, one always already haunted by past and future events.

The novel's temporal mix remaps one of the most frequently noted characteristics of individual cases of post-traumatic stress: the experience of temporal paradox. Trauma theorists identify two prominent contradictions. First, traumatic events may, strangely, be both erased from memory and yet return repeatedly as flashback. Mark Greenberg and Bessel van der Kolk, for example, observe that the amnesia of post-traumatic stress can "paradoxically coexist with the opposite: intruding memories and unbidden repetitive images of the traumatic events."⁹ A second and related paradox involves the freezing of time at one instant, locking the subject in the past moment of trauma; yet alongside the freezing there is a false sense of movement or unfreezing, as the memory returns again and again to haunt the present.¹⁰ In all these disjunctions, disparate times are not experienced sequentially, instead remaining distinct in experience yet forever appearing together. Roy certainly portrays both kinds of temporal paradoxes, but in a way that suggests that temporal *hybridity* would be a more precise description than paradox, evoking as it does a more complicated blend. Roy implies in her novel that temporal reality for victims of post-traumatic stress is more than a contradiction of two experiences—amnesia clashing with flashback, for example—as each side might already be hybrid: amnesia might hold a hidden set of memories, and flashback

9. Quoted in Caruth 152, from Mark S. Greenberg and Bessel A. van der Kolk's "Retrieval and Integration of Traumatic Memories with the 'Painting Cure'" 191.

10. For more on the freezing of time, see Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart's "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," especially page 172.

might still represent a selective forgetting. The concept of temporal hybridity, rather than temporal paradox, acknowledges the contradictions but also acknowledges that the combinations may be so intertwined that their separate parts are difficult to identify. Likewise, the many parts of the hybrid—in this case, various moments of time—are symbiotic; one moment in the present may trigger the memory of many events in the past, and the past can return to distort the present, the disparate times producing and mingling with each other. Viewing the experience of post-traumatic time as hybrid in turn underscores the difficulty of untangling the temporal mix. Not only is time scrambled for single characters, but memories have also split and are shared among multiple minds. Thus no one character can remember the past as a complete story. At the same time (literally), characters may have access to memories that they themselves did not experience directly. Only Roy and (by the end of the novel) her reader can see the gaps and understand at least in part the way the stories blend—and do not blend—together.

The novel's most traumatized characters—the twins and their mother Ammu—reveal Roy's careful portrait of temporal hybridity and its mixture of amnesia and flashback, frozen time and relentless return. Rahel, for instance, who remains the most functional of the trio, and who seems to remember the most about her story, nevertheless is haunted by recurring memories. The drowning death of her cousin, Sophie Mol, lives on most prominently in her thoughts; the death "was always there. . . . It ushered Rahel through childhood (from school to school to school) into womanhood" (17). As the narrator ironically notes, "It is curious how sometimes the memory of death lives on for so much longer than the memory of the life that it purloined. Over the years, as the memory of Sophie Mol. . . . slowly faded, the Loss of Sophie Mol grew robust and alive" (17). The "Loss" is alive for Rahel at every moment, following her—and even chasing her—through linear time, from school to school, from childhood to womanhood, a frozen moment and yet one that is perpetually on the move. This static omnipresence appears in a simpler though starker form in the recurring symbol of Rahel's toy watch, which always shows the same time, ten to two. The

watch itself ends up buried at the site of Velutha's beating and Sophie Mol's death, as if recording permanently the moment and the place when time stopped altogether—and simultaneously suggesting that the moment will always be present. Roy adds another layer of temporal complication for Rahel, as Rahel also remembers events she did not herself experience; tied telepathically to her twin Estha, she knows, for example, of his molestation by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, though he never tells her directly. Here the blend of amnesia and flashback occurs in part in two people, with Estha forgetting and Rahel experiencing the flashback. For Rahel, it is not simply that she must experience these half-remembered traumas along with her present. Each moment becomes a tangle of other moments, each crowding out the others, each refusing to be integrated. Time is both problematically hybrid, made up of different interwoven pieces and, ironically, problematically separate, as pieces of the past are experienced distinctly but together, refusing to be ordered sequentially and thus failing to transfer into the past.

Rahel's mother, Ammu, experiences a mirror image of such temporal hybridity; frozen time becomes a sign of trauma but also a possible defense, as Ammu tries to stop time as a way to shield herself against the past. After the central traumatic events of the novel, Ammu must send her son away and leave her daughter for a job. When she returns to visit four years later, she brings the eleven-year-old Rahel presents suitable for her past age of seven. "It was," the narrator tells us, "as though Ammu believed that if she refused to acknowledge the passage of time, if she willed it to stand still in the lives of her twins, it would. . . . [Ammu] seemed terrified of what adult thing her daughter might say and thaw Frozen Time" (152–53). Ammu's attempts to freeze time clash with the evidence of thaw, as she struggles to ignore time's passage at the same time that she is faced with her inability to force time to "stand still"—an effort that, ironically, serves to paralyze her further. Despite Ammu's best efforts, however, time remains hybrid. Her wish to hold on to a past before the traumas took place conflicts with her present experience of Rahel; likewise, the memory of the trauma in the past is triggered by seeing Rahel in the present. Time cannot be ordered

in a linear way but is experienced all at once, the different moments fueling each other in a temporal feedback loop. Roy suggests that Ammu is in the end defeated by this overwhelming effort to keep time frozen, as Ammu finally stops time in the only way left—through her own death.

Estha, the twin most traumatized by the events, would at first seem to have escaped temporal hybridity through another defense: amnesia. Instead of freezing time at one moment, his mind erases memory, becoming numb to the present in an effort to forget the past:

Once the quietness arrived, it stayed and spread in Estha. . . . It sent its stealthy, suckered tentacles inching along the insides of his skull, hovering the knolls and dells of his memory. . . . It stripped his thoughts of the words that described them and left them pared and naked. Unspeakable. Numb. . . . [Estha] grew accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquilizer on his past. Gradually the reason for his silence was hidden away, entombed somewhere deep in the soothing folds of the fact of it.

(13)

Estha falls into a silent world where time does not quite stand still at one moment; it simply ceases to exist. What is “unspeakable” remains unspoken, and yet the unspeakable remains and gains agency, engaging in violent and even desperate attempts to vacuum or strip or pare or hide or numb or entomb or tranquilize the persistent memory. The sheer number of ways that the quietness works to silence the past suggests that even for Estha, the past returns at every moment, and the only way to avoid this hybrid time is to shut out the present as well. Since the present can always trigger the past, just as the past can always infect the present, Estha can partly escape only by being taken over by a monstrous silence. Estha’s experience appears to allow survival but little else.

For Ammu and her twins, the present moment is always a meeting place for the past’s intrusive presence. Ignoring this presence, as Estha attempts to do, still reflects a traumatic forgetting, which in turn robs the present of its meaning. The reverse symptom is equally troubling; the haunted remembrance

experienced primarily by Rahel offers no defense. For most of the novel, the temporal hybridity is both sign and symptom of trauma, something that reveals that remembering and forgetting hold similar dangers but little relief. The quest for all these characters is to get the present back, to have something happen, not just to have something that happened, but the past continues its relentless invasion. And time's hybridity not only haunts the trio individually but also collectively. Together they hold a more complete story of past events, but this fuller narrative is available for the reader and not for the characters themselves. Despite the overwhelming sense of multiple times, the individual memories have gaps and erasures that can be filled only by another's memory, if at all. Roy suggests that the traumatic production of temporal hybridity extends to collective memory, exposing the difficulty of ever untangling the temporal sequence, and hinting what little possibility there is that *recovering* a memory could ever morph to a more therapeutic sense of *recovery*.

Roy depicts these various forms of temporal hybridity not only in her characters but in the very structure of the novel itself. Form follows content here; Roy describes the effects of trauma at the same time that she demonstrates them within the narrative, structuring her novel as if the readers themselves are experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. The narrative returns to images, phrases, and sensory experiences—the sickly sweet smell of blood, the watch, a recurring image of a rose—giving a textual demonstration of the paralysis experienced by the characters and offering the reader the experience of flashback. While the reader knows from the novel's opening the basic outcomes of the traumas, only at the conclusion is the reader offered the context from which the various images and phrases have been drawn. Both the narrative threads circle around, and then finally lead to, a fuller description of the central traumas at the end of the book, when the reader can finally piece the fragments together. For most of the text, however, the reader must experience these fragments much as the characters do, as memories out of context that bewilder and unsettle.

Analyzing the position of the reader in Roy's novel allows a new consideration of two controversial issues that continue to

plague trauma theory and literary studies. First, to what extent does the reader experience trauma as the characters do? If the experience of trauma is related through the structure of a novel, are the readers likewise traumatized? The second and related question involves the controversial status of the traumatic event in memory. If the original traumatic experience is not fully recorded or experienced at the time (and critics have challenged this part of the theory as well), then how can a writer convey something that cannot, by its very nature, be represented? Is literature a special case, an arena where nonrepresentation can at least be suggested? Roy's novel offers a possible response to these two tangled issues.

The attempt to give readers the very experience of post-traumatic stress disorder has been read as the best—and indeed the only—way to convey what is otherwise unrepresentable in traumatic experience. As critic Greg Forter summarizes, theorists have noted the particular “power of texts that seek less to *represent* traumatizing events—since representation risks, on this view, betraying the bewildering, imperfectly representational character of traumatic memory—than to transmit *directly* to the reader the experience of traumatic disruption” (260). Both Forter and other theorists point out the dangers and also question the effectiveness of such approaches. Forter notes the political apathy that may result when a reader is invited to share rather than to question the traumatic experience, and both Dominick LaCapra and Geoffrey Hartman observe the ethical problems of readers becoming overly identified with experiences they do not, in fact, share.¹¹ In her novel, however, Roy invites readers to identify with the trauma while still providing a distinctly different experience for the reader. In her transmission of post-traumatic stress symptoms into the very structure of the novel, Roy does offer the signs of such a disorder—centrally, the temporal hybridity encompassing flashbacks, repetition, and amne-

11. Greg Forter, Dominick LaCapra, and Geoffrey Hartman all discuss the ethical implications of trauma literature. Jean Wyatt's insightful article, “Love's Time and the Reader: Ethical Effects of *Nachträglichkeit* in Toni Morrison's *Love*,” also discusses the role of the reader in trauma fiction.

sia; the readers, like the characters, cannot remember the traumatic events themselves at the start of the novel. Yet here the resemblance between reader and character ends. Simply because Roy (or any author) transmits an experience does not mean the readers themselves are traumatized in a similar way. As readers have not experienced the precipitating trauma, they may experience the symptoms, but the originating traumatic moment is not lurking within their consciousness. In addition, readers may follow the layers of narrative voices in Roy's novel—the voices that record and recount the stories—from a position unavailable to any character. At times, Roy employs a third-person omniscient voice that seems to have access to multiple characters; at other times, the voice slips into free indirect discourse, speaking with the style and observations of, say, the young Rahel or the child version of Estha, inviting the reader to see and experience from a particular point of view.¹² The very multiplicity of voices and narrative tones and perspectives grant readers more of the story than any single participant might have. Certainly the reader's knowledge is incomplete, but traumatic experience is often marked by having no outside frame of reference, no way to imagine a witness observing and recording.¹³ The narrative voices, collected together, thus act as guides for the reader, though, critically, not for the characters. This difference—so obvious yet so important for considering relations between trauma and literature—means that the victim's experience of post-traumatic stress within this novel (and within most novels which offer access to more voices and viewpoints than would be available to a single victim) will not be transmitted to the reader in a direct or similar form.

12. Even when Roy seems to use a third-person omniscient voice, the perspective may in fact be specific to a character; the seemingly neutral third-person narration could in places suggest dissociation, a psychological state of seeming dispassionate neutrality when victims remove themselves from a traumatic moment by seeming to hover just above it.

13. This lack of a witness may strangely exist alongside the dissociation that may occur during a traumatic event. While important to survival at the time, this witnessing does not later appear to serve as a helpful "outside" perspective on the event, such as an actual witness might.

Roy also addresses through her depiction of time a second contentious issue within trauma studies, one that concerns the nature of representation in traumatic memory. Cathy Caruth, along with many other theorists, has argued that a traumatic event is not fully recorded at the time that it occurs; part of the experience of trauma involves this blankness, as well as the paradox of the precise, repeated return of the memory at the same time that the memory itself is strangely inaccessible to conscious recall. To stay true to traumatic experience, then, writers cannot represent trauma; they can only convey the effects of trauma in their work. Ruth Leys in particular has taken Caruth and others to task for this position, arguing that the theory is inherently contradictory.¹⁴ Leys dismisses Caruth's and van der Kolk's claims that "traumatic memory involves a literal imprint of an external trauma that [is] lodged in the brain in a special traumatic memory system," one that "defies all possibility of representation" (Leys 16). Such theories are, for Leys, "not only theoretically incoherent but also poorly supported by the scientific evidence" (16). *The God of Small Things* shows some of the difficulties of representation that these controversies suggest and offers a model for considering how literature may in part sidestep these issues within a novelistic framework. The experience of the past traumas are inscribed onto the characters, but Roy portrays the damaged and incomplete quality of this inscription, as if the traumas themselves are indeed partly unrepresentable

14. Leys points out that trauma has been "understood as an experience of hypnotic imitation or identification," what she terms "mimesis" (8). In this approach, the original traumatic scene is not remembered or recorded, "and hence was constitutively unavailable for subsequent representation and recall" (9). Mimesis is associated with dissociation, when the victim removes the self from the scene, experiencing the trauma in something like a hypnotic trance in which the victim may overly identify the self with the aggressor. As the mimetic theory suggests an uncomfortable closeness between victim and oppressor, Leys argues that such theory encourages a turn (within the same theorists) to the "antimimetic" tendency "to regard trauma as if it were a purely external event coming to a sovereign if passive victim" (10); these two versions are contradictory, and Leys sharply critiques both Caruth and others for inconsistencies. Despite the force of Leys's argument, I continue to draw on the ideas of both Caruth and van der Kolk, as I find their particular work on temporal experience to be outside Leys's objections. As I go on to argue, Roy's novel should not be read simply as an objective study of trauma, in any case, but as a fictional and artistic expression of the aftereffects of trauma.

to the characters yet still pursuing them through fragments of memory. At the start of the novel, most of the central traumas of the book have already occurred, but the memory of these events is missing for the reader and is represented by gaps and sudden partial flashbacks for the characters. Seemingly gone from the central narrative until the end of the novel, the violent past events leak through to the present, sometimes as bits of sense perceptions, sometimes as more concrete memories. Once the narrative arc arrives at these events, they are told chronologically, either from outside the perspective of the central characters or within the voices of the victims or perpetrators. Roy presents, in other words, both the actual traumas and their fragmented and dissociated aftermath, a representation that at once acknowledges, at the level of the novel, the possibility of representation and, at the level of the characters, the way such representations are often broken or even forgotten.

Despite the controversies surrounding representation in trauma, the exact status of the traumatic memory within consciousness is of greater importance to psychology than to literary studies, an observation that in turn points us to some of the dangers of bringing psychological theories to bear on literature. Novels are not empirical case studies; they may be based on an author's experience, but they are not the same as observations of a particular patient at a particular time. Characters may be given unconscious desires by the author, but they do not produce them themselves. Reading literature to prove or to disprove psychological theories, whether of Freud or Caruth, must therefore be done with the greatest caution. What is more enlightening, and what critics such as Anne Whitehead and Jean Wyatt are starting to explore, is to recognize literature as a special case, as an opportunity to convey, rather than simply reproduce, traumatic experiences, granting the reader a position unavailable not only to the character, but to the actual victims of traumatic events, as Roy does in her novel. As I touch on above, novelistic retellings often provide many perspectives, as well as a place for the reader to be a kind of witness. This position apart from the traumatic events may not grant the reader a way to "fix" trauma, but it gives her at least a position from where it might be under-

stood and resisted.¹⁵ The danger of this reader position, as LaCapra and Forter wisely point out, is that readers may start to aestheticize the traumas of others and in turn fail to recognize the fundamentally social and political forces that have produced the trauma in the first place, problematically seeing the damage as something more natural, produced by an ahistorical response common to all humans, and thus outside of remedy. Roy addresses this issue directly in her depiction of collective trauma, which is where I turn next.

The History House: Community and Temporal Hybridity

Communities, as well as individuals, may experience the damaging effects of trauma and the temporal disruptions such traumas produce. As we have seen, Roy's characters experience a traumatic temporal hybridity produced by specific, overwhelming events. Roy also explores, however, how communities may experience such hybridity, in part from the lingering effects of colonial rule, in part from entrenched patterns of caste and gender discrimination. The experience of collective trauma has been described by sociologist Kai Erikson as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (187). Rather than the immediate terrible event of individual tragedy, communal trauma often unfolds over a longer period and often involves the unraveling of that community, a sense among its (former) members that "'we' no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body" (Erikson 187). While Roy explores various manifestations of such collective trauma, her depictions also complicate Erikson's theory, exposing what may happen when the community in place before the trauma occurs is already weak or damaged—when traumas come on top of other traumas, and "the bonds attaching people

15. Nor is the reader experiencing the *bodily* trauma of the victims, of course, though within trauma fiction, the characters themselves have only literary bodies.

together” have already been loosened by previous events.¹⁶ The communal traumas within Roy’s novel in turn produce communal experiences of temporal hybridity and speak in important ways to the effects of long term patterns of oppression. Critic Greg Forter notes such patterns when he distinguishes between what he terms “punctual” trauma, resulting from an overwhelming single event, and “those forms of trauma that are . . . more mundanely catastrophic. . . . the trauma induced by patriarchal identity formation rather, say, than the trauma of rape, the violence not of lynching but of everyday racism” (260). These more systemic traumas do not fit most theories of traumatic experience, as they do not produce a sudden shock to the system. Instead, such traumas may become (almost) naturalized, blending with “ongoing, systemic practices and patterns of behavior” (260). As I will explore, these wider depictions offer specific ways for Roy to encourage her readers to resist this naturalization and to identify the larger social and political forces at work in the Ayemenem community; readers are invited to align themselves with her critique and to act as witnesses to, rather than over-identifying with, the unfolding traumatic events of the story.

In Roy’s novel, communal traumas have disrupted time even before the individual traumas create their own disruptions. For example, colonialism’s extensive damage to community relations—in addition to its generation of multiple individual traumas—creates on several levels a sense of temporal disorder in the community, one that echoes the traumatic temporal hybridity we find in Roy’s characters.¹⁷ The colonial encounter could allegedly imply a meeting of different times: a “modern” colonizer

16. Roy does hint at a community that echoes Erikson’s notion of a preexisting “we” of “connected pair[s]” or “linked cells” (Erikson 187). Throughout the novel, the twins are referred to—and see themselves as—a linked entity, yet the novel’s traumas produce fractured identities for both children. In the last scene, Roy implies that the twins would have to return to the womb to find a nontraumatized time.

17. Critic Anne Whitehead, in her important work on literature and trauma, notes a particular connection between what she calls “trauma fiction” and the postcolonial narrative: “Trauma fiction overlaps with postcolonial fiction in its concern with the recovery of memory and the acknowledgement of the denied, the repressed and the forgotten” (82). Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* has long been a central text in discussions of trauma and the postcolonial.

confronting the supposedly “primitive” past. The post-colonial period may reflect damaging traces of this attitude, as well as a haunted sense of a past time, and a past community, that have been buried by the colonial encounter. There may also be a destructive belief, in the post-colonial moment, that the colonial culture was the “real” or “authentic” one. For several of Roy’s characters, for example, British and American culture represent the modern moment, the present time, to be preferred to—but also resisted by—the older or past cultures of India. A cultural hybridity could also become a temporal hybridity. Roy further suggests how the entrenched caste system within the community produces its own temporal mix; rather than a multiplicity of times, the caste system seems both to freeze and to erase time, decreeing that social status must travel unchanged through history. Untouchables like Velutha are both frozen in one role and required to leave no literal or figurative footprints in time. Such systems of oppression can further alter the experience of time in the entire country; as Roy remarked in an interview, the different reactions to the caste system in India create a “time warp” in the country, forcing India to “exist[] in several centuries simultaneously” (qtd. in Elliott).¹⁸ With all these types of communal trauma, Roy explores how group members might experience a disparate rather than a shared sense of time, and how the community as a whole might struggle with competing parts of the past in the present.

Roy describes this sense of communal temporal hybridity in Chacko’s image of the History House, which on first reading seems to speak only to the aftereffects of colonial rule. He tells the twins that “though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglo-philés. . . . Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away” (51). Chacko reflects here the sense of being shut out of a past Indian history, one that still haunts the community but cannot be reached. For Chacko, what has

18. Dipesh Chakrabarty would object to seeing India as a unique kind of time machine. As he points out, “time knots” are not exclusive to postcolonial countries, as all nations live with a plurality of times.

replaced it is the British history in India, disrupting both culture and the sense of time itself. As he goes on to explain, "history was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside" (51). To understand that history, Chacko declares, "we have to go inside and listen to what they're saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smell the smells" (51). Unfortunately, as Chacko laments, the History House remains locked:

[W]e can't go in . . . because we've been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves. . . .

We're Prisoners of War. . . . Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas.

(52)

Chacko here gives voice to a shared temporal hybridity in a post-colonial present. Chacko declares that they are blocked from history, a history that may, his language suggests, be elusive anyway, consisting of shadows and unheard whispering. Even after independence, Chacko implies, India remains caught in the colonizers' narrative, forced to dream foreign dreams and to play unchosen parts. History has been disordered and leaves not a clear sense of connection to the past but an uncharted, unanchored sense of living in many times simultaneously.

Chacko's History House both demonstrates and describes systemic trauma on several levels, as gradually the victims are robbed of sight, hearing, and knowledge, locked out in a way that has come to seem inevitable, a way that at least partially erases the signs of the original colonial occupation. What's frightening about Chacko's conception, in fact, is how ahistorical it seems. Chacko speaks of "History" and "Conquerors" and war, generalized terms that seem universal rather than specifically part of the British colonization of India. By speaking in such generic terms, Chacko reveals his tacit acceptance of entrenched patterns that are in danger of appearing natural rather than his-

torical. In part, Chacko's reaction suggests his status as a victim of colonial occupations. Roy hints, however, that Chacko is also swept up in his own rhetoric, delivering his speech in his "Reading Aloud" voice and seeming to prefer, to borrow Forter's term, an "aestheticized despair" to actual protest. Chacko in fact seems (unintentionally) blind on several levels. He appears caught in what Dipesh Chakrabarty might describe as a historical discourse that assumes Europe to be the referent for the world. Chacko protests this assumption at the same time that he reinforces his belief that the British still determine the story. Chacko also seems blind to the way his History House description speaks equally profoundly to a caste system that produces its own set of traumatic disruptions. When he notes how colonial rule has swept away their footsteps and locked them out of the house, he echoes exactly Roy's repeated references to Velutha's lost footsteps and his exclusion (on all levels) from the main house. These very links suggest how traumas produce traumas, how discrimination in one area augments discrimination in others. Ironically, it is finally Chacko's own Anglophilia, his favoring of his half-English daughter Sophie Mol, that in turn helps lead to the final traumas at the end of the novel.¹⁹

By including a character who, in effect, represents the kind of blind, ahistorical reading that Roy would want her readers to avoid, she offers by extension a warning against some of the dangers of trauma literature outlined by Forter and others. Chacko's broad terms, and his seeming partial enjoyment of the drama he evokes in his picture of the History House, remind readers that such reactions may obscure possibilities for change and blur historical particularity. The generalized time that

19. Sexism is another "systemic" trauma that Roy explores, both through the limited options open to the novel's women and the treatment they receive from many of the male characters; it is, for example, Chacko's pervasive sexism that contributes to his sister's rapid decline, though much of the blame falls on Baby Kochamma. Roy is careful not to blame Chacko exclusively for the traumas, apportioning responsibility to every adult in the novel, living and dead, as well as to endemic societal sexism, classism, and racism. Traumas from past generations, both "punctual" and systemic, blend into the present, as adults repeat behavior learned and experienced as children.

Chacko suggests, where “history” has become “History,” reflects a different kind of temporal hybridity, one composed of flashback, but also of an undifferentiated sense of historical time where India’s past becomes a generalized record of timeless oppression, stretching off into a vague horizon of struggle. Roy makes clear that such temporal hybridity is extraordinarily damaging, both to her characters and, potentially, to her readers. As her painstaking depiction of the precise though multiple causes of trauma in the rest of the novel suggests, Roy seeks to differentiate history and to show in particular her characters’ context as one that sustains economic and racial inequalities that may in turn lead to a damaging temporal disorder. For Roy, to ignore the specific material realities that produce the trauma in the first place risks reinscribing (though in a new form) the traumatic temporal hybridity already present in the community. The reader is thus repeatedly invited to stand apart from any reading of History or history that ignores the multiple and often mutually constitutive causes of trauma.

Roy uses the History House to explore two other versions of communal temporal hybridity, one literary and one commercial, that both subtly serve as further warnings to her readers. The twins imagine that the metaphorical History House is an actual house “on the other side of the river, in the middle of the abandoned rubber estate” (51). This house is itself an image with colonial resonance. The house had been owned by an Englishman who had “gone native,” a man described as the region’s “own Kurtz,” living in his own “private Heart of Darkness.” In part, the house signals this previous narrative tradition and demonstrates how different colonial areas may collapse together; Joseph Conrad’s Congo blends into India, both functioning as undifferentiated areas, places where “natives” corrupt the European with a foreign darkness. Roy hints that the very fact that *Heart of Darkness* stands as the reference for all colonization suggests how deeply the effects of colonization are internalized. At the textual level, however, the literary reference also suggests a complex example of what Anne Whitehead calls “intertextuality” in postcolonial trauma fiction and reveals how Roy can turn a nontraumatic temporal hybridity to her own ends. In part, this

intertextuality—where an author or a character is influenced or affected by a literary precedent—can allow, as Whitehead notes, “formerly silenced voices to tell their own story” in the new work (85). The History House, with its links to an iconic Western narrative of colonization, stands as both artifact and new hybridization. For Roy, the house signals a previous literary tradition, but one her novel itself is helping to rewrite, in part to give new “voices” the chance to speak. As with the Chacko example, Roy here encourages her reader to question the use of Conrad’s novel and to identify with Roy’s critique rather than with the community’s interpretation.

The link to Conrad in the History House is also part of a larger set of references to British and American authors and movies, all of which serve simultaneously to highlight Roy’s own articulation of the Indian voices left outside of these cultural texts and to emphasize how damaging this exclusion remains, especially for the twins. Chacko, Rahel, and Estha frequently use British and American texts to narrate or to form their lives: Chacko quotes *The Great Gatsby*, Estha cites *A Tale of Two Cities*, the twins know both *The Jungle Book* and parts of *The Tempest* by heart, and the whole family is captivated by *The Sound of Music*. All of these texts reflect a cultural and a temporal past that haunts and indeed disrupts the present moment for the characters, at the same time that they reflect Roy’s own rewriting of these past texts. *The Sound of Music* in particular disturbs Estha, as it is during the movie when he is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man; his feelings of shame from the sexual trauma blend with his larger sense that as an Indian child, he lies outside of what he views as the “clean white children” from the movie (100). Thus the intertextuality of Roy’s novel signals a temporal hybridity that stands as a sign of trauma and as a possible instigator of more disruption, and yet also as a way of revealing the damaging blends that such intertextuality can produce.

Roy not only links Conrad and the History House to the systemic traumas arising from colonialism but also broadens the connections to include caste discrimination, reemphasizing by this link the way different types of discrimination fuel each other. As Velutha crosses the river at the end of the novel, for example,

having been spat upon by Mammachi and knowing that his life is crumbling around him, Roy again evokes Conrad:

He stepped onto the path that led through the swamp to the History House.

He left no ripples in the water.

No footprints on the shore.

He held his mundu spread above his head to dry. The wind lifted it like a sail. He was suddenly happy. *Things will get worse*, he thought to himself. *Then better*. He was walking swiftly now, towards the Heart of Darkness.

(274)

By this point in the novel, the readers know that something terrible will happen to Velutha on the other side of the river, though the particular traumatic event has yet to be narrated. Readers likewise know that Velutha's hope that things will get better is unfounded and unrealized. He is instead walking into the Heart of Darkness, a reference that has now been fully redefined and rewritten by Roy: rather than the white man moving into a savage (black) darkness, Roy imagines a low-caste Indian traveling into a newly defined darkness, one created by multiply layered traumas and the "swamp" of history that surrounds and builds the house. The lack of footprints or ripples again recalls Chacko's description of colonial rule, suggesting the underlying connections and indeed the symbiotic relations between caste and racial discrimination within a community.

By using patterns of images and references, Roy invites readers to make connections, to occupy a space in which to act as both witness and observer.²⁰ This role for the reader may be clarified by exploring a final image of the History House from the "current day" section of the novel, when Roy explores the unusual temporal hybridity that may be imposed by a seemingly benign commercial culture. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem in 1993, she finds that the building she and Estha considered the History House has been turned into a tourist resort where cultural traditions have been packaged and put on display. The

20. Roy may, of course, envision a different activist response from readers of different ethnic, racial, and gender backgrounds.

resort has collapsed many different times onto a single place. The History House itself becomes

the centerpiece of an elaborate complex, crisscrossed with artificial canals and connecting bridges. . . . The old colonial bungalow with its deep verandah and Doric columns, was surrounded by smaller, older, wooden houses—ancestral homes—that the hotel chain had bought from old families and transplanted in the Heart of Darkness. Toy Histories for rich tourists to play in. . . . “Heritage,” the hotel was called.

. . . The furniture and knick-knacks that came with the house were on display. A reed umbrella, a wicker couch. A wooden dowry box. They were labeled with edifying placards that said *Traditional Kerala Umbrella* and *Traditional Bridal Dowry-box*.

So there it was then, History and Literature enlisted by commerce.

(120)

This new commercial “Heritage” cuts culture and history into truncated forms to be packaged and sold as bits of “authentic” culture. The History House even offers its guests, for “Regional Flavor,” drastically shortened performances by kathakali dancers, “so ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos” (121). The new resort unsettles and indeed traumatizes history (stories are “amputated”), forming a perverse temporal hybridity, where various times, and indeed various traditions, are pushed together and abbreviated. It is a commercial colonization, built alongside—and intertwined with—a political one. Any sense of caste and class discrimination is glossed over by a romanticized look at a “colonial bungalow” surrounded happily by authentic-looking wood houses, “ancestral homes” of old families. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* has been revitalized, renovated, updated for modern times, and the ironic use of Conrad’s title here implies both the hotel’s commercial colonization and Roy’s biting critique of the hotel’s work. The new History House also literally covers over and erases the twin’s personal history, as it is outside its doors where they witnessed the beating of Velutha. Buried in the ground remains, however, Rahel’s plastic wrist-watch, where time is frozen at ten to two, reflecting the still present trauma that lies beneath. Time here is pictured almost as disrupted archaeological layers, the “Toy Histories” in the hotel

piled on top of the individual and collective traumas represented by Rahel's watch and the hotel's very location. These artifacts become material flashbacks to another time, appearing inappropriately and out of context. Roy suggests that the specific cultural knowledge that might rehistoricize these artifacts is in danger of being lost altogether, for the characters, for the reader, and for India itself. Yet despite this loss—and Roy insists that part of this loss is permanent and unrecoverable—the reader is still pushed not to become a guest at this hotel, not to buy into this false version of history or culture. The novel itself stands as a newly told history, a way to identify different threads of time and different ways those times become disrupted and mingled and erased and frozen. The reader can at least recognize this temporal hybridity; whether or not a sense of recovery or change is possible is a question Roy explores in her conclusion.

Recoveries

At the end of the novel, Roy's depiction of the individual and collective experience of post-traumatic stress offers a final role for her reader that speaks to one of the most neglected aspects of trauma theory: the possibilities of recovery. For the most part, theorists have focused on how traumatic events are recorded (or not recorded), and the signs and symptoms of the lingering effects of such events. While approaches to healing trauma abound in a range of clinical settings, only a few critics—and indeed, only a few novelists—have considered at length the possibilities for recovering from trauma.²¹ Perhaps the best known approach is proposed by Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, who distinguish between two types of memory: the traumatic and the narrative. For a victim to recover from the debilitating effects of trauma, he or she must translate the traumatic memory, which is fragmented, disrupted, or absent, into narrative memory, which places the event within a linear time frame

21. Henry Krystal, a theorist who is also a psychiatrist, reflects grimly that perhaps only those victims who either undergo long-term therapy or can translate their experiences into art can recover.

and a personal history (163, 168–69).²² Most therapeutic approaches assume an implicit causal link between the dual meanings of the term “recovery”—to retrieve what is lost, and to heal. In order to recover from the trauma, a victim must first recover the memory of the event; one kind of recovery might beget the other. Those trying to heal from post-traumatic stress, however, face an inherent double bind: they must remember to recover, but then, if this initial remembrance allows in turn a fading of the trauma, they may fear that their forgetting will be a kind of betrayal or denial. Alternatively, this remembrance also risks reinscribing the trauma itself, as the victim may experience the past event as if it were happening again. Can traumatized subjects heal and still bear witness? Can they remember and still recover? Roy addresses these questions at the end of her novel by crafting two narrative conclusions that together remain attentive to the tensions inherent in traumatic healing and memory. The dual endings both present acts of transgressive desire, both of which create new instances of temporal hybridity. The first speaks grimly of the ongoing harm caused by trauma and the impossibility of healing for its victims; this ending offers an amalgamation of the damaging types of temporal hybridity recorded in the rest of the novel, reinforcing and distilling—and thus in a sense *naturalizing*—the events, a recovery of memory implying that any form of therapeutic recovery is forever out of reach. The second ending, however, depicts a fragile utopian moment, one that envisions a radical new form of temporal hybridity, a freezing and a blending of time with a difference. Roy again portrays an act of transgressive eros, yet this transgression breaks the boundaries of proscribed love in the community in a way that suggests that a different, more therapeutic

22. This approach, which posits linear narration as a cure, might in itself be problematic; the political status of linear narration is a highly contested issue in criticism and lies outside the scope of this article. Leys takes trauma theorists like van der Kolk and Caruth to task for the inherent contradiction in claiming that a memory cannot be recorded and then claiming that the cure involves renarrating and incorporating the memory into narrative time (9). Leys herself offers little comment on the possibility for recovery, observing, “the soundest basis for a therapeutic practice would be an intelligent, humane, and resourceful pragmatism” (307).

form of recovery might be possible. Even this ending, however, finally implies that healing might come only through radical political change, change that is out of reach for the characters and left in the hands of the reader. Taken together, the two endings insist both on the enduring damage caused by violence and domination and on the possibility that time might unfold differently in the future.

The first ending that Roy offers is chronologically the last to occur, bringing the 1993 narrative thread to a close. This conclusion depicts a transgressive sexual encounter between the twins and embodies, literally, the violent temporal hybridity arising from the earlier traumas. The scene blends together a chaotic mix of different times, previous imagery and phrases, and multiple identities. The sexual meeting is in part a return to the womb, where, as the narrator notes, the twins “had known each other before Life began” (310); this earlier moment unites with the present one and then blends and shifts into infant recollections. Other times rush in as well. Estha’s memory of being sent away on a train after the death of Sophie Mol, for example, reappears; he holds his body in the present as he did on the train long before, and he sees his mother’s mouth and good-bye kiss in the lines of Rahel’s mouth. After years of mental blankness for Estha, the past traumas suddenly refuse to stay in the past, erupting in the form of flashback. Alongside this temporal blending, identity is also hybrid. The twins turn into lovers; Rahel echoes Ammu, Estha recalls Velutha. The incest itself—with its troubled blend of siblings and lovers—becomes a further sign of disrupted identity.

The scene offers a twisted, traumatic recovery, recovery in the sense of return, a relentless replay of previous moments and times without any expectation that these might be left behind or escaped. The twins do, in part, reconnect with each other after twenty-three years, but as the narrator notes, “what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief” (311). The narrator pointedly eschews any possibility of therapeutic recovery; the twins’ experience cannot be erased by “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 Sin-

ners. You're the Sinned Against. You were only children. You had no control.'" Instead, the narrator continues, the traumas "would have to be held. Carefully and forever" (182). Unable to move forward, the twins can only reach, repeatedly, their own past. In this ending, Roy offers little sense that recovery is possible, that time might be untangled in any way that would be beneficial to the characters. Indeed, the twins' crossing into forbidden eros, fed by their traumatic past, creates no radical change and instead reinforces temporal hybridity as the sign and symptom of trauma, a permanent brand that blots out any hope of a different future. This ending thus records the permanent damage caused by trauma and asks the reader to face—and to bear witness to—this destruction; the insistence on the recovery of memory but not the recovery of healing, however, risks naturalizing the trauma, presenting it as an inevitable and unstoppable result of what cannot now be changed.

The twins' sexual encounter is not, however, the last scene in the novel itself. The second conclusion moves earlier in time to depict the first sexual encounter between Velutha and Ammu, a moment set before the central tragedies of the novel unfold. The scene offers a second transgressive erotic encounter, but one that presents a new, potentially liberating form of temporal hybridity, acting as a kind of mirrored reversal of the twins' incest. For both reader and character, the encounter is still marked by the knowledge of what is to come, by references to the later violence that will arise, at least in part, from this very exchange. Imagery from the twins' scene is repeated here, almost as if time has started to move backwards. Velutha and Ammu are symbolically depicted as the twins' true parents, so the reader is, in a sense, seeing the moment of the twins' conception, the moment before Estha and Rahel met for the first time. The scene is both an escape from the traumatic events to come and the precipitating event. Yet the encounter itself is a beautiful one for the characters, fragile yet intimate, dangerous but satisfying in ways not seen in the rest of the work. It represents, in fact, the only moment in the novel of gentleness or understanding between two adults.

The scene has been criticized by theorists who see the encounter as a cheap device to cater to Western audiences and as a

conventional substitution of erotics for politics. Marta Dvorak, for example, finds the ending “as overdone as it is redundant” and “particularly representative of the way in which Roy domesticates the foreign for a metropolitan readership” (54). Aijaz Ahmad, while praising the book in many respects, asserts that the ending is not so much transgressive as conventional, arguing that Roy follows European literary models, creating a cross-class erotic utopia that ends with not one but both traditional conclusions to such stories—a tragic one and a happy one. Ahmad rejects, in a sense, a kind of post-Freudian Marcusean model that might see the encounter as a liberating act, a brief glimpse of individual freedom within an imagined nonrepressive society.²³ The final sexual encounter, according to Ahmad, is depicted as mysterious, nonverbal, and impulsive, not as a decisive political act that might bring about change. Other critics, however, have read the final erotic encounter as decisively political; Brinda Bose, for example, offers an alternative reading to Ahmad’s position, pointing out that the two sexual transgressions at the end of the novel are both conscious decisions, that Ammu’s attraction to Velutha embraces his politics, and that there is a persuasive critical history of the “inherent politics” of desire.²⁴

These two contradictory readings of the novel’s ending are compelling, but a third approach emerges if we read this scene alongside trauma theory. The encounter might be read as a utopian vision of temporal hybridity, though not one that finally either ignores politics or provides an effective political strategy for the novel’s characters. The scene freezes time in a new way, by capturing the moment before the trauma and presenting it as a kind of alternative ending. Those who have lived through a tragic event, perhaps especially a sudden or accidental one, are often haunted by the time before, by a wish to go back to the moment before the terrible events began and to try to stop them.

23. Dvorak presents her critique of Roy’s ending in “Translating the Foreign into the Familiar: Arundhati Roy’s Postmodern Sleight of Hand”; Ahmad argues that Roy and her characters are insufficiently political. For more on Herbert Marcuse’s theories on Eros and the utopian possibilities of nonrepressive societies, see *Eros and Civilization*.

24. See Bose’s “In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*” for her more positive reading of Roy’s ending.

In a narrative sleight of hand, Roy recovers just such a moment. While, as I have noted, this scene is not chronologically the last, it is the last within the novel, giving the reader, at least, a closure of another sort. Roy manipulates time, bringing the past back not as a sign of traumatic return but as a protected moment of intimacy, offering a different kind of temporal hybridity. As a novelist, Roy has what Rahel wants earlier in the novel, a watch where time is not fixed, one on which “she could change the time whenever she wanted to (which according to her was what Time was meant for in the first place)” (37). Roy makes clear that this scene will be repeated; when Ammu and Velutha part at the end, they say only “*naaley*,” or tomorrow, a fragile promise to return for another day, a promise, Roy tells us, that they make after every encounter. “*Naaley*” suggests a tentative connection, but it also suggests a circular return, leaving a final impression of an endlessly repeated scene, played out in a temporal feedback loop at the close of the novel, keeping the traumas to come perpetually at bay. The temporal structure of this scene resembles flashback, yet the content of this memory includes the future, folding a moment yet to arrive into the temporal mix. The narrative rearrangement is not wholly utopian, of course; this second version of recovery could itself suggest a problematic temporal disorder, for perpetually reliving, even in memory, a past pleasant moment would in fact be a kind of pathology of its own, a nostalgic hunger for return that would potentially block the victim from living within the present and the reader from facing trauma’s destructive path. It is in fact precisely this other reading—this reminder, alongside the destructive temporal hybridity of the twins’ encounter—that prevents the scene from being fully utopian or removed from the brutal realities of their situation. In part, the scene offers a kind of hopelessness, as it implies that recovery lies only in authorial tricks. At the same time (again, literally), the way the scene carefully rewrites and reverses the chronological ending of the twin’s incest also suggests a possible way that readers, if not the characters, might freeze time differently, might find the past returning as a potentially liberating vision, rather than as trauma.

What should we make, though, of a recovery that is open only to readers—to witnesses, as it were—but not to the original victims? In Roy's novel, the recovery is achieved only on the level of narrative, allowing one past moment to conclude the work and to suggest a continuous circling to that moment. The characters themselves do not recover in any sort of therapeutic way. The final transgressive sexual encounters may or may not have been political—and Ahmad and Bose argue each case convincingly—but psychological recovery for the characters is decisively removed as a possibility. The reader may "recover" a happier moment and feel better about the ending, but this easy satisfaction has rightly been called into question by critics like Ahmad.

Yet in addition to the chances (or lack of chances) for recovery, Roy's vision of temporal hybridity at the end of the novel does in fact suggest the possibility of radical political change, though change that happens at the level of the reader and in fact serves to underscore the effects of systemic racism and classism in producing the novel's trauma.²⁵ In her final ending, Roy offers what Fredric Jameson, following Darko Suvin, calls "cognitive estrangement," when a utopian impulse within literature serves to unsettle the existing, and in a sense *naturalized*, political or societal structures.²⁶ Roy creates just such a moment in her final ending, giving her readers a novelistic warning not to see this sexual encounter as innately destructive: It is mutual; it is pleasurable; it depicts kindness and communication between two characters. Frozen at this moment, blending only with repetitions of itself and other moments of pleasure and happiness, it would never become damaging. The event, indeed, becomes traumatic only when it enters time in the rest of the story, when

25. Forter urges theorists to see certain events as traumatic only in retrospect, when a victim realizes or fully absorbs the meaning of the original event; he notes the critical difference between defining that meaning as traumatic because of something innate—or "structural," to use his term—to human nature (assuming, for example, that seeing a sexual encounter would damage any human child), or defining that meaning as traumatic because of historical sexual or racial or class-based prejudices. Roy's second ending invites readers to consider this second meaning.

26. For more on Jameson's theories about cognitive estrangement, utopia, and science fiction, see *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, especially xiv and 412.

it becomes subject to the definitions enforced by the family, by the police, and by the society, all forces that bring a range of historical prejudices to bear on the meeting to condemn it. But Roy partitions off the meeting itself, showing readers, if not the characters, another possibility, a way that time might blend differently and then unfold, suggesting that the proscriptive Love Laws were not natural, that the traumas to come were not inevitable but only one possible iteration—and thus might have been prevented. This new temporal freezing and blending takes place, as I've said, only at the narrative level, but this very location suggests an important role for imaginative literature in its relationship with trauma theory. As a novelist, freezing and blending time in ways not open to her characters *or* to actual victims of trauma, Roy can create a reminder to readers of the deadly and damaging effects of systemic prejudice, and she can critically show that such effects are not preordained.²⁷

Roy's dexterous translation of a traumatic version of temporal hybridity into a potentially liberating one finally offers a possible response to trauma that bears witness to trauma's relentless potential for ongoing damage and also imagines through narrative a new kind of temporal recovery. Temporal hybridity becomes at once a sign of problematic and traumatic blending, and also a way for readers to imagine political change.²⁸ Such a combination acknowledges the multiple and often simultaneous meanings of hybridity and provides a potent model for understanding not only temporal hybridity's possibilities and its potentially devastating effects, but also the inextricable link between these two contradictory poles. Holding and acknowl-

27. At the same time, Roy also suggests that the reader is finally not given the entire story. Gaps remain; Roy offers little hint of what will happen next in the twins' story, and indeed throughout the novel the reader remains subject to selective forgetting and amnesic memories that are never fully explained. By keeping parts of the story hidden from the reader, at times, as it were, protecting her characters from observation, Roy warns readers that other people, and other experiences, are not simply object lessons for a (Western) audience.

28. Since the publication of her novel, Roy has dedicated her energies to political activism, writing books and essays and giving speeches and interviews on globalization, nuclear weapons, the Narmada Dam project, and Kashmiri rights, among other topics.

edging this contradiction rather than trying to resolve it offers the richest and most supple understanding of hybridity's power.

University of Richmond

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