

An Interview with Arundhati Roy

TAISHA ABRAHAM

“AMAZING MIX, THE English we speak. . . . I’m sure nowhere else could languages be mixed and spoken with such ease” (1), says a character in Upamanyu Chatterjee’s novel *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988). Almost a decade later, Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things*, winner of the 1997 Booker Prize, has contributed importantly to an on-going debate—which has widened more recently within the celebratory context of the golden jubilee year of India’s Independence—on the “authenticity/inauthenticity” of Indian writers writing in English. Through collaged words, regional aphorisms, and culturally eclipsed meanings, Roy wrenches the English language from its colonial roots, creating her own “Locusts Stand I.” Aijaz Ahmad in his incisive article, “Reading Arundhati Roy Politically,” published in *Frontline*, August 1997, claims that “she is the first Indian writer in English where a marvellous stylistic resource becomes available for provincial, vernacular culture without any effect of exoticism or estrangement, and without the book reading as translation” (108).

The God of Small Things was released first in India, on 5 April 1997. However, it had already received media attention in the West. In India, one of the earliest discussions of the book with the author was conducted by Alok Rai in *The Sunday Review of The Times of India*, April 1997. Rai said that the money Roy received for her book—a million dollars—is “the least interesting part of the story” (5). After Roy won the Booker Prize—she is the first Indian woman to win it—*India Today* published a special feature labelling her, “The New Deity of Prose.” Binoo K. John, mapping the literary scene in India since independence noted that “R. K.

Narayan and V. S. Naipaul became India's first noted chroniclers. . . . The gos saw a deluge. Amit Chaudhuri, Mukul Kesavan, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, and Abraham Verghese were publishing events in the West. This was the terrain into which the 37-year-old princess strode with enviable elegance, to walk away with the crown" (24).

Several reviews of her book have now appeared both here in India and elsewhere. These reviews have ranged from sheer enchantment with Roy's innovative style to critical comments on her politics. In the following interview by telefax, undertaken in September 1997 for this special issue of *ARIEL* on "Postindependence Voices in South Asian Writings," Roy responds to questions on her approach to language, on the impact of her architectural training on the novel, and on her politics.

"The God of Small Things" is your first novel. You have written screen scripts before this ("In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones" and "Electric Moon"). How do you view your evolution as a novelist?

I don't really think a lot about my "evolution" as a novelist. Writing a novel is something that I always knew I would do. . . . Writing screenplays was a tremendous discipline that helped me to hone my writing muscles before I began *The God of Small Things*, which was artistically by far the most ambitious thing that I have ever done. When I wrote the book, I was aware that I was trying to do things, to explore ways of thinking that I couldn't as a screenplay writer. To put it simply, if *The God of Small Things* were a film, perhaps it would have been the story of what happened to a family that lived in an old house in Ayemenem. Whereas the book is not really about what happened, but about how what happened affected the people that it happened to. That brooding, introspective, circular quality of the narrative would have been hard to achieve in cinema.

You were trained as an architect. Did this have any impact on the way you have arranged your narrative? There is an architectural beauty to it.

Yes, it did. To me the architecture of the book is something that I worked very hard at. It really was like designing a building . . . the use of time, the repetition of words and ideas and feelings. It was

really a search for coherence—design coherence—in the way that every last detail of a building—its doors and windows, its structural components—have, or at least ought to have, an aesthetic, stylistic integrity, a clear indication that they belong to each other, as must a book. I didn't just write my book. I designed it. And here I don't mean the cover and the typeface, etc.

One of the things that strikes the reader about "The God of Small Things" is the way in which you use the English language. You deviate from traditional grammar rules in the sense that you use fragments and capitals, you join and coin words, and you even use Malayalam words without any qualms about being misunderstood by your readers. What is the impulse behind all these linguistic liberties?

All I can say about that is that language is the skin on my thought. My language is something that I find hard to analyse and dissect. It's the way I think. I have no answers to questions about it.

Your novel touches upon a plethora of social evils in our culture—patriarchal property rights, ill-treatment of divorced women, caste issues, wife battering, and so on—yet the anger in the book does not seem to be directed against any social system. Is the anger personal, helpless?

Eventually for me, *The God of Small Things* is not a book specifically about "our culture"—it's a book about human nature. Of course, in different societies the details vary. But since the dawn of time, human society has found ways in which to divide itself, to make war across these divisions, to make love across these divisions. There will always be those of us who make these divisions and those of us who argue against them. So I don't see my book as an angry critique of "our society." It's really a way of seeing, a way of presenting the irreconcilable sides of our nature, our ability to love so deeply yet be so brutal.

Regarding your treatment of women in the novel, there is a wide range that you portray: unmarried, battered, divorced. Yet the novel doesn't have any particular impact on the "women's questions." What do you think?

I find this last question a very hard one to answer particularly because to answer it I would have to defend my book and I don't want to defend it. I believe that once a book has been written and

sent out into the world, a writer must lay her weapons down and allow readers to make what they will of the book. I do not believe I ought to legislate how, and in what manner, it should be read. So if you feel that the book has no particular impact regarding the "women's question," what can I say? I disagree with you, but you must feel what you feel. How can I, and why should I, persuade you to feel otherwise? I don't want to make out a case for my book. My book is my case. I have no further pleas to make.

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