

From God to Marx: (Meta)Physicalities in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Lydia Saleh Rofail

INTRODUCTION

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy covers a broad historical spectrum: pre-colonial; British colonial; Postcolonial; Hindu, Christian and Communist, each epoch with its various layers and fragments of history. It engages both Western and Indian culture and celebrates the ancient and the modern in a hybridity which couples the mythological and the material. What interests me in particular is a problematic postcolonial present which is unable to shed the residue that has come down from its mythological past. It will be argued in this paper that Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* can be read as an attempt to transcend layers of Indian history and navigate the physical and cultural landscapes into the metaphysical, a spiritual space that encompasses Hindu mythology. This mythology resides within a Gothic postcolonial (Indian-suburban if you will) landscape. I am concerned in particular, with the 'war of histories', that is, two layers of history: spiritual and secular and the Sanskrit mythological past and post-colonial present and their uneasy co-existence in present-day India.

THE SCOPE OF THE NOVEL

The God of Small Things differs from other postcolonial novels in that it does not edify or celebrate the pre-colonial culture. Nor does it place it in a binary with the postcolonial. Rather, its mode is one where the new power structure grafts itself onto the old. As with the Gothic tradition, the terrifying residues of the past haunt the present.

In Kerala (India's south where the novel is set), the ancient and social religious tradition that produced the Hindu caste system refuses to give way to the new, postcolonial present which sees a Communist Kerala heralding new economic opportunities.

In the *The God of Small Thing*, Kerala is a formidable character; ever-evocative, teeming, brooding and menacing. As a topographical,

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cultural and historical landscape, it resides as an anachronistic omnipresence in the novel. Kerala is at place at once spiritual and secular – where God meets Marx and *kathakali* dancers meet American cable television. It is a place where Communists have been elected to power since 1957 and are subsequently in government until this present day. For Roy, Kerala is a place where communism betrays common people and the god that presides is a 'small god' limited and dissipated by the prevailing society.

The *God of Small Things* is heavily autobiographical, and chronicles the lives of a Syrian-Orthodox Christian family in Kerala. The beautiful Ammu, trapped within socially imposed constraints of caste and gender, tries to escape her stifled home life by marrying a violent, alcoholic Hindu with whom she has two inter-caste children. Ammu's husband is 'willing to barter her to his English boss in order to retain his job at the tea-estate.'¹

Exasperated, Ammu returns home to Ayemenem, Kerala with her fraternal twin children, Estha and Rahel, a disgraced woman; divorced with inter-caste children, she feels her life is not worth living. When Roy describes Ammu's predicament, he evokes a sense of doom at her foreseeable destiny, and the way that her gender and her divorced status traps her into a predictable future with no property rights and no financial independence despite her high-caste:

She was twenty-seven that year, and in the pit of her stomach she carried the cold knowledge that her life, had been lived. She had had one chance. She made a mistake. She married the wrong man.²

Ammu falls in love with Velutha, a low-caste Untouchable who works in the family's pickle and preserve factory. Tragedy ensues when Estha and Rahel's half-English cousin Sophie Mol drowns while with the twins. This coincides with the revelation of Ammu's inter-caste affair with Velutha. Added to this is a motley cast of dysfunctional characters that make up the Ayemenem household: the 'monstrous suspicious bully' of a father, Pappachi; embittered mother Mammachi, Ammu's sexually frustrated spinster aunt Baby Kochamma (the

¹ Indira Bhatt and Indira Nityanandam: editors, *Explorations: Arundhati Roy's the God of Small Things*, New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999, 86.

² Arundhati Roy: *The God of Small Things*, London, 1991, 38.

classic Gothic villain) and the vitriolic cook, Kochu Maria. There is also Ammu's anglophile, egoistic brother Chacko, the Rhodes scholar.³

Arundhati Roy once said in an interview that India 'exists in several centuries simultaneously.'⁴ Indeed the existence of the caste system in India today (particularly in rural areas) is testament to the way in which powers in the present utilise traditions from the past to assert their dominance. Thus power is kept in the same societal strata; high-caste males with British educations such as Chacko, and mythological remnants such as the caste system are able to be kept intact through the various layers of history. As an Untouchable, living in modern-day (Communist) Kerala, Velutha is bound by the past that haunts his present, suffocating the emergence of his economic potential and personal ambitions.

David Punter portrays Gothic literature as a textual negotiation with history which is apocalyptic in its vision. He talks of a new Gothic, a 'psychic grotesquery' or 'landscapes of the mind'⁵ which are infested with (often universal) human anxieties. Alienation, rootlessness, fear of contamination are all present in the novel and culminate in the social concern with inter-caste contamination.

This fear of contamination is the fear of blurring the ancient Hindu economic, and social lines. When these lines are blurred (Ammu's sexual relationship with Velutha), horror, tragedy and savagery emanate, depicted in the brutal murder of Velutha and the victimisation of Ammu and her twins. Hence, the vision of blurring the lines, of transcending the caste system, is ultimately doomed because the old, decaying power structures are not giving way to the new. The new political systems and social strata (Communism, liberal ideas of class equality) do not sweep away the past caste-based history. For example, the Ipe family allows Velutha to seemingly transcend his caste but only when they can make money out of him. Velutha, an Untouchable, is educated at Reverend Ipe's school for

³ Jaina C Sanga: editor, *South Asian Literature in English: An Encyclopedia*, London, 2004, 116.

⁴ Alison Elliott: 'Caste and the God of Small Things' www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/caste.html Fall 1997, accessed January 2004.

⁵ David Punter: *Literature of Terror*, London, 1980, 3.

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Untouchables at the behest of Mammachi. He works for the Ipe family. He is allowed in the house and allowed to play with Rahel and Estha. When the relationship between him and Ammu is discovered, however, the Ipe family, including Chacko, are quick to relinquish their modern beliefs about economic and social equality and invoke the ancient regime of caste. Hence, Velutha, an Untouchable is falsely accused of raping Ammu and murdered by the Police in order to retain the good Ipe family name. Why? So that an ancient attitude is upheld and the prospect of inter-caste love is never faced. Velutha is never able to escape history. After a fatal beating by Keralite policemen, his shattered body lay on the floor while Roy remarks pointedly to the reader that Velutha is '... abandoned by God and History, by Marx, by Man, by Woman and (in the hours to come) by Children ... [he] ... lay folded on the floor.'⁶

The justification for this brutality, the 'Love Laws,' are integral to understanding how the mythological past haunts the present:

It could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar... Before three purple-robed Syrian Bishops murdered by the Portuguese were found floating in the sea... It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag. That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The Laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much.⁷

Love laws made in mythological time stratified people into castes and are passed down throughout the various layers of Indian history and exist in the postcolonial present. Roy repeats this mantra of the 'Love Laws' and it echoes throughout the novel as a reminder of a past haunts the present, suffocating the emergence of the new.

VELUTHA: GOD OF SMALL THINGS

The term 'postcolonial' is problematic and may hint at misleading implications of the cessation of imperialist influence *after* the colonised country gained independence.⁸ Postcolonial literature is

⁶ Roy, op cit, 310.

⁷ Roy, op cit, 33.

⁸ Nicholas Harrison: *Postcolonial Criticism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003, 8.

often haunted by its history but need not be entirely retrogressive. Jonathan White locates in the postcolonial text 'the potential to both cope with the 'terrors' of the colonial aftermath and engender an improved ethico-political future.'⁹ Hence postcoloniality is a continuum which encapsulates many histories.

Velutha as a *paravan*, a wine tapper, is Untouchable. Hindu belief that being an Untouchable is working off *karma* from a former life. The caste system has its origins in the Vedic tradition which includes the most ancient of the Hindu Scriptures: the *Rig Veda*, the *Gita Govinda* and the *Bhagavad Gita* among others. Orthodox Hindus regard them as the direct revelation of spiritual truth from God to the sages. These texts relay the religious origins of the power structures in the Indian caste system. This system outlines the laws of purity (regarding the body and food), as well acting as an apparatus for the economic division of labour.

Within *The God of Small Things* and India as a whole, caste, dictates occupation, dietary habits, wealth opportunities, as well as regulating social and sexual interaction. On the lowest strata of the caste system reside the Untouchables who undertake work such as 'toilet cleaning and garbage removal ... [which] ... require them to be in contact with bodily fluids. They are therefore considered polluted and not to be touched.'¹⁰ Upward mobility within the caste system is rare and feared. An Untouchable who accepts his/her plight as Untouchable is able to achieve a higher place in the caste system upon their next re-birth. Many characters (including his own father) are unsettled by Velutha believing that he can act above his station. Hence a proud member of the 'sweeper class,' Velutha must pay the price for his aspirations. He is a talented carpenter, a card-carrying Marxist, and falls in love with an upper-caste woman; whereas his father, Vellya Pappen, remembers the days when he would walk out of a high-caste house backwards, sweeping so as not to leave footprints. He fears for Velutha and thinks him too proud.

Velutha's plight in this 'war of histories' is problematical due to the paradoxical depictions of him as a god in the novel, in particular as the Hindu god Krishna. Keralite society in the novel utilised the Vedic

⁹ Leela Gandhi: *Postcolonial Theory*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1998, 161.

¹⁰ Elliott, op cit

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past to keep power structures in place to keep Velutha powerless. Roy on the other hand offers a new vision of men like Velutha by comparing them to gods; in this case, striking allusions with the Hindu god, Krishna. While Ammu, Rahel and Estha see Velutha as the god of small things, the god of loss, Roy casts him as Krishna, a god of salvation.

Western readers would notice a Christ-like correlation with Velutha. Velutha, like Christ, was a carpenter who suffered the little children to come unto him. Both were betrayed and brutally murdered. Both were sacrificed for a greater cause, one for the salvation of humanity, the other in order to salvage the stratified social order and to keep an upper-caste family name intact.

Biblical Christian allusions and mythology are all-pervading in *The God of Small Things* and help to draw a constant and ironic parallel between what should be and what actually is, between the search for values and the realities of the human situation.¹¹

The Vedic traditions relay the religious origins of power structures in India and form a mythical justification for the 'Love Laws' and for Velutha's Untouchability. These epics help to make sense of the modern effects of Indian caste-system.

Roy's representations of Velutha transcend his social reality and allude to one of the most celebrated deities in Sanskrit mythology, the god Krishna. Like Jesus Christ, Krishna was cast as a personal saviour, a deity who took mortal form to redeem humankind from evil forces. The tragic and doomed love of Velutha and Ammu mirrors the sexual union of Krishna and Radha in the *Gita Govinda*, a blissful union, symbolic of the salvation of the human soul, the uniting of the human soul with the Divine. 'The lotus-eyed dark-skinned Krishna is the complete and perfect man ... [and later god] ... of Indian mythological tradition.'¹² Roy's depiction of Velutha evokes the dark, erotic physicality of Krishna. Velutha in turn, is deified by Ammu, Rahel and Estha.

¹¹ Bhatt, op cit, 77.

¹² Madhuri Guin: 'Radha Krishna – A Diving Love' in www.dollsofinia.com/radhakrishna.htm, 2001.

Krishna has various manifestations; first as a young man in the *Gita Govinda* and later in the *Bhagavad Gita* as a full deity leading the way to salvation. He contrasts sharply with Velutha, the 'God of Loss,'¹³ the brutalised victim who 'left behind a hole in the Universe through which darkness poured like liquid tar.'¹⁴ Although Velutha is an inverted Krishna, the two bear overt textual similarities. Velutha is ultimately destroyed by powerful hierarchies yet Ammu and the twins deify him repeatedly throughout the text as 'The God of Small Things ... The God of Goose Bumps and Sudden Smiles ...'¹⁵

Repeated reference to the beauty of Velutha's dark body evokes the eroticisation of the body of Krishna. Krishna meaning 'Dark One'¹⁶ or 'Black'¹⁷ is a 'god who is beauty ... [who] ... inhabits a body for us'¹⁸ to worship, a god eroticised by the gaze of his worshiper. Sanskrit mythology and later ensuing poetry note Krishna's 'lovely body ... dark as lamp-black' and 'dark ... as the blue neytal lily ...'¹⁹ Similarly, Velutha is eroticised under the gaze of Ammu as he plays with Rahel:

She saw the ridges of muscle on Velutha's stomach grow taught and rise under his skin like the divisions on a slab of chocolate ... how his body had changed – so quietly, from a flatmuscl'd boy's body into a man's body. Contoured and hard.²⁰

The gaze binds mortal to deity as in Radha and Krishna, or 'Touchable' to 'Untouchable' as Ammu and Velutha. The gaze in *The God of Small Things* gives hope, albeit a brief interlude, to Ammu who felt that her 'life had been lived'²¹ and that 'her cup was full of dust.'²² In view of the calamitous outcome, this emotional respite is ephemeral and foregrounds a Gothic sense of nihilism, desolation and futility. The hope of what could have been stands in stark

¹³ Roy, op cit, 217.

¹⁴ Ibid, 191.

¹⁵ Ibid, 217.

¹⁶ D A Morrison: *A Glossary of Sanskrit*, Blue Mountains, 1977, 20.

¹⁷ John Dowson: *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology, Religion, Geography, History and Literature*, London, 1968, 160.

¹⁸ S P Hopkins: *Singing the Body of God*, Oxford, 2002, 131.

¹⁹ Ibid, 134.

²⁰ Roy, op cit, 175.

²¹ Ibid, 222.

²² Ibid, 222.

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contrast to the bleak confined reality of Velutha's 'Untouchability' as a Paravan in the caste system.

When read in this context, the love story between Ammu and Velutha is not a typical Western love story about forbidden and doomed love, but a story about modern Indian concerns. Its tragedy offers a political critique of the inhumanity of the caste system, patriarchy as well as the corrupt police force and the Ipe family's fear of social disgrace.

Ironically, the Sanskrit poet, Chandi Das, was another transcender of the inter-caste rule. A Bengali Brahman of the fifteenth century, he renounced his caste for the love of Rumi a washerwoman.²³ In the words of Das, Krishna reflects upon Radha:

She wore a sari of blue, and through the front could
be guessed her belly's perfection, like lightning her
beauty flashed upon me ... As she walked I saw her
movements were slow as the gliding of a wild swan ...²⁴

In a comparative role-reversal, Roy shows the reader Velutha being watched by Ammu on the first night of their affair:

He wore a thin white cloth around his loins, looped
between his dark legs. He shook the water from his
hair. She could see his smile in the dark. His white,
sudden smile that he carried with him... He stood
before her with the river dripping from him.²⁵

The love scenes between Velutha and Ammu reflect the style of Sanskrit poetry both in their erotic use of the gaze and in the way they link the beloved to nature. Roy diverges from the traditional Western **male** gaze to adopt the style of Sanskrit poetry.

The scenes are replete with allusion to the love between Krishna and Radha in the *Gita Govinda*²⁶ which possess some of the most erotic evocations in all the Sanskrit literature. Radha, an adoring *gopi*²⁷ or

²³ Chandi Das: *The Erotic Sculpture of India*, translated by B Rhys, London, 1960, 92.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Roy, op cit, 334.

²⁶ L Renou: editor, *Hinduism*, London, 1961, 192.

²⁷ Morrison, op cit, 21.

milkmaid, is a companion to the young Krishna and is a symbol of ultimate passion. Radha is the 'youthful, sensual, ecstatic maiden who seduces Krishna the Supreme Being.'²⁸ The Krishna depicted in the *Gita Govinda* is youthful and lives a simple life. He begins as a heroic figure and later becomes a deity and the incarnation of Vishnu in the *Bhagavad Gita*.²⁹ The sexual union of Krishna and Radha is depicted in the *Gita Govinda* as a rightful one, one of spiritual transcendence; it represents the human soul's desire to be one with the Divine. It is through this spiritual 'inter-caste' union, that the soul can achieve beatitude and salvation.

Conversely, the inter-caste relationship between Ammu and Velutha is taboo, doomed and instigates the destruction and tragedy in the narrative (Roy calls it 'The Terror') with the price paid for Ammu and Velutha's relationship being immense, 'Two lives. Two children's childhoods.'³⁰

CONCLUSION

Ironically it is the Anglophile Chacko who makes this insightful statement about Indian history:

...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.³¹

The 'war of dreams' as Chacko calls it, is in fact a war of histories, a struggle of competing visions of Indian society. Chacko's notion of history presupposes it as a meta-narrative, where colonised persons would be denied a place in the grand historical narrative. But this simplistic scenario offered by Chacko is not the case and is negated by Roy in the novel. Roy's vision of history in the novel is one that cannot be separated into clearly defined categories, problematic though that may be. In India and in the novel, the caste system and sexual discrimination survive all political regimes and various layers of history.

²⁸ Ibid, 20.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Roy, op cit, 336.

³¹ Ibid, 53.

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Colonisation did not eradicate the caste system, nor did the postcolonial era. Although he calls himself a Marxist, a man of the masses, Chacko still enjoys his privileges as a high caste male, educated at Oxford. He owns land, he owns his means of production, and he has sexual relations with the lower-caste women who depend on him for their livelihoods.

Velutha on the other hand, a Christian convert, a Marxist, a talented carpenter, a lover, is still an Untouchable in an India which regards him as polluted. India is still a place where edges of caste can never be allowed to bleed into each other.

Kerala itself a Gothic landscape not only because of the psychological horror of Velutha's death and Ammu and the twins' suffering, but also because it is conflicted, a paradox that encompasses two opposing histories. Whilst postcolonial Kerala offers communist egalitarianism, it maintains a strict belief in the stratified caste system. When the characters establish relationships outside the social normative structure, the limits of the traditional Hindu culture are challenged, unleashing cultural fear, wrath and violence.