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Abstract

'Agency in *The God of Small Things*?' Surprise may well be readers' first reaction to this thought as they recall the series of relentless tragic events that befall the chief characters of this novel. To commence this seemingly unjustified mission, I shall consider the kind and scale of agency one finds in Roy's political writings. I adopt this procedure because Roy herself, in an interview with Terrence McNally entitled, 'Finding Justice with Arundhati Roy', explains that for her, writing as a novelist and as an activist are not very different activities:

J.A. KEARNEY

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INTRODUCTION

'Agency in *The God of Small Things*?' Surprise may well be readers' first reaction to this thought as they recall the series of relentless tragic events that befall the chief characters of this novel. To commence this seemingly unjustified mission, I shall consider the kind and scale of agency one finds in Roy's political writings. I adopt this procedure because Roy herself, in an interview with Terrence McNally entitled, 'Finding Justice with Arundhati Roy', explains that for her, writing as a novelist and as an activist are not very different activities:

In fact, right from the time that I was studying architecture or even earlier, this political way of looking at the world began...The essence of what one is looking at is deeply political, but how one chooses to express that can change. (1–2)

Similarly, in *Power Politics* she argues:

Now, I've been wondering why it should be that the person who wrote *The God of Small Things* is called a writer, and the person who wrote the political essays is called an activist? True, *The God of Small Things* is a work of fiction, but it's no less political than any of my essays. (11)

What is evident in all Roy's activist writing is her affirmation of agency for herself and fellow activists. In her essay, 'The End of Imagination', which concerns the issue of nuclear weapons, she insists: 'we have to reach within ourselves and find the strength to think. To fight' (122). Her passionate advice to her readers is therefore to '[s]tand up and say something. Never mind if it's been said before. Speak up on your own behalf. Take it very personally' (131). Such an action is possible in her view because:

Everybody, from the smallest person to the biggest, has some kind of power, and even the most powerless person has a responsibility. I don't feel responsible for everybody. Everybody also is responsible for themselves. (2001a 38)

Commenting in *Power Politics* on 'the huge political and social upheavals that are convulsing the [Indian] nation', and having in mind in particular the devastating effects of the government project to build huge dams, Roy brings her imperative to 'stand up and say something' closer to her own form of intervention: 'One is involved because one is a human being. Writing about it just happens to be the most effective thing I can do' (24). Fortunately for her, as Naomi Klein notes in her Foreword to David Barsamian's *The Chequebook and the Cruise Missile: Conversations with Arundhati Roy*, '[i]n Roy's hands, words are weapons —

weapons of mass movements' (ix-x). What is needed on the part of activists like herself, she explains, is a 'new kind of politics. Not the politics of governance, but the politics of resistance. The politics of opposition. The politics of forcing accountability' (2001b 33).

In the case of her vociferous opposition to the Sradar Sarovar Dam in the Narmada Valley, Gujerat province, sufficient evidence of the odds faced by activists like herself is provided by the fact that criminal proceedings were instigated against her for contempt of court. She and others had dared to cite specific instances of government officials' perjury in relation to the question of whether promised resettlement of villagers had been carried out. In this way she practises her own dictum that 'we have to rescue democracy by being troublesome, by asking questions, by making a noise. That's what you have to do to retain your freedoms. Even if you lose' (2002 96).

The effect of the trouble and noise made by her and fellow activists leads Roy elsewhere to celebrate the success of the Narmada Bacao Andolan [NBA], the Save the Narmada Movement:

The NBA is a fantastic example of a resistance movement in which people link hands across case and class. It is India's biggest, finest, most magnificent resistance movement since the independence struggle succeeded in the 1940s. There are other resistance movements in India. It's a miracle that they exist. But I fear for their future.

(2001a 16-17)

A significant qualification that Roy makes in the interview with Terrence McNally brings me closer to what I find relevant for my study of the novel:

finally you have to understand that more important than anything else is justice. The way we can turn the world around is if we are at least moving on a path towards justice. Maybe it can never be achieved in any pristine form. Right now, the powerful, and I don't just mean the powerful in America, but the coalition of the powerful elites across the world are making it very clear that they are not even interested in justice. (5)

What I shall endeavour to show is that in *The God of Small Things* Roy creates situations in which historical class and caste prejudice seems to have an inexorable and deterministic force. On the other hand, however, she celebrates a variety of forms of individual agency. Within the time scope of the novel these forms of agency do not succeed but the tensions set up between the efforts towards significant acts of agency, and especially through the ending, seem to endorse the position taken up through her political activism: '[w]riting about it just happens to be the most effective thing I can do'. Thus I would argue that readers are, in turn, induced via imaginative sympathy to 'reach within [themselves] and find the strength to think. To fight', to '[s]tand up and say something. Never mind if it's been said before. Speak up on your own behalf. Take it very personally'.

Arundhati Roy's novel tells a story of forbidden, cross-caste love between Ammu, the divorced Touchable, and Velutha, the Untouchable handyman who works for her mother, Mammachi, and brother, Chacko. The events are largely

seen through the eyes of Ammu's twin son and daughter, Rahel and Estha, first while they are still children, then as adults, twenty-three years later with the return of Rahel from the United States to her home in Ayemenem in the state of Kerala. Ammu and Chacko's family is traditionally Syrian Christian, although Chacko proclaims himself a Marxist. However, both Christians and Marxists come under Roy's rigorous critical eye for their collusive support of the caste system.

Events unfold from the day when the twins' cousin, Sophie Mol, daughter of Chacko by his marriage to the English woman, Margaret, arrives with her mother for a Christmas visit. Sophie Mol's drowning, the culmination of an escapade planned by all three children, and the revelation by Velutha's father of his son's illicit love affair, are the pivotal crises for the later tragic developments: Velutha's death after a brutally punitive police assault, Ammu's expulsion from the family home, and in the long term, serious damage to the possibility of adult fulfilment for both twins.

Before engaging directly with the novel, I need to offer a brief contextualisation of the caste issue in India, using information derived from an internet paper by Kurshid Alam entitled, 'Untouchables in *The God of Small Things*'. Castes are ranked and membership comes through birth. According to the Hindu sacred texts of the *Rig Veda* there are four main castes, each of which performs a function in sustaining social life. Untouchables, those who do not belong to any of these four castes, are generally associated with professions such as, butchers, launderers, and latrine cleaners. Since 1935 Untouchables have been called 'scheduled castes'. They are also called by Mahatma Gandhi's name for them, 'Harijan', meaning 'the children of God'. More recently these groups began to refer to themselves as Dalits, a Hindi word which means oppressed or downtrodden. Despite some improvements in certain aspects of Dalit life, 90% of them still live in rural areas, and more than 50% are landless labourers. In many parts of India, land is still held by the upper castes which use the ideology of the caste system to exploit the low-ranking landless labourers. The caste system is alive and well in India today, despite its being illegal.

Between 1888 and 1892 all the main Syrian Christian denominations — those that claim the Apostle Thomas as their founder and use Syriac as a liturgical language — initiated Evangelical Societies that sought out low-caste converts, and built schools and chapels for them. The novel thus refers to the school of 'untouchables' built by the twins' great-grandfather. However, as Roy points out, even though members of low or polluted castes such as paravans (Velutha's caste) converted to Christianity, they were 'made to have separate churches, with separate services and separate priests' (74), and thus continued to be treated as 'untouchables'. After Independence, they were denied government benefits created for 'untouchables' because officially they were Christians and thus casteless.

In 1957, under E.M.S. Namboodiripad (to whom Roy refers explicitly in the novel), the state of Kerala became the first Indian state to elect a communist government. Despite a split in the party in 1964 there have been communist-led

governments in Kerala more often than not. Alam quotes Roy's statement that the reason behind the Communist party's success in Kerala was that it 'never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to' (2). This double standard is emphasised when Comrade Pillai incites the workers of Paradise Pickles and Preserves to strike against their owner, Chacko, but refers to the latter as "the Management". As though Chacko was many people' (121).

My initial summary of the novel will have already indicated the severely deterministic tendency of the novel. I now proceed to argue that there is an opposite tendency suggesting scope for agency even if only temporary, which needs to be taken seriously. My case will be argued in relation to three prominent concerns in the novel: history, story, and play (both in the sense of spontaneous action, and in the sense of drama).

HISTORY AS DETERMINISTIC

When Velutha and Ammu gaze at each other unexpectedly at the time of Sophie Mol's arrival at Ayemenem, and while he is engaged in a playful ritual greeting with Ammu's daughter, Rahel, the narrator comments that 'History was wrong-footed, caught off guard' (176). Furthermore, Velutha is described as seeing 'things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history's blinkers' (176). At this moment then the Untouchable man and the Touchable woman seem magically released from the tyranny of an historical caste bondage. These moments gain their force precisely because Roy otherwise presents history as heavily deterministic. Just as in her political writing, the forces pitted against activists seem insurmountable.

Indeed, in the very next moment after the two have gazed with such wonder upon each other, Roy points out how they looked away because 'History's fiends returned to claim them' (177). Its claim is to ensure that they are once more governed by the 'Love Laws' which 'lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much' (177). The immediate agent of History in ensuring submission to the Love Laws is ironically Velutha's own father, Vellya Paapen, who comes some days later to inform Ammu's mother, Mammachi, that he has seen his son and Ammu intimately together. Grotesquely ironic is the way in which Mammachi, in her fury on hearing Paapen's news, loses control and not only touches Paapen, but pushes him backwards. His collapse into the mud below the back door steps of the house is an ultimate degradation, a sinking below even his customary polluted caste level. In this pathetic state he shows how fully he has internalised the caste laws, by actually offering to kill his son in order to protect the touchable Ipe family from further disgrace. And Baby Kochamma, for her own devious reasons (and having incited Chacko to assist her), is only too ready to destroy Velutha and banish Ammu.

When Chacko asks the twins, at an earlier stage, to think of the whole Ipe family as Anglophile, his explanation depends on an analogy between history and:

an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside. 'To understand history,' Chacko said, '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.' (52)

As the twins understandably interpret this explanation literally, they identify the 'old house at night' with a remote deserted, and haunted house they have heard of, and which had once been occupied by an Indian equivalent of Conrad's Mr Kurtz. David Punter notes how the ghost is himself 'the phantom of a feared miscegenation, a perverse hybridity' (74). This particular house then becomes for the twins the site of history because they choose it as their refuge when they run away from the adults in order to induce them to offer more certain proofs of their love. The twins arrive there, however, in a state of exhaustion and extreme trepidation because Sophie Mol, who had entered with relish into their conspiracy, drowned when their boat capsized in the turbulent river. Through a bizarre twist of fate the History House is also Velutha's chosen refuge on the same night after Mammachi, enraged by Vellya Paapen's information, has vilified and dismissed her erstwhile trusted worker. Roy's sense of history as an apparently deterministic, inexorable force, then becomes specially manifest through the brutal police assault on Velutha, instigated by Baby Kochamma, which takes place there. Thus Roy comments in an advance hint of Velutha's appalling fate: 'History visited [Estha and Rahel] in the back verandah' (190). So too, in offering a kind of mock excuse for Comrade Pillai, the local Marxist leader's treacherous abandonment of Velutha, a card-carrying party member who came to seek his help after Mammachi's denunciation, we are told that Pillai 'merely slipped his fingers into History's waiting glove' (281).

STORY AND PLAY AS SPONTANEOUS ACTION

In relation to the consequences of the patriarchal ideology of a caste-bound culture that 'cultivates snobbery and violence to maintain social order', the critic Tapan Ghosh emphasises that Roy has a 'story of her own' to tell (185). I would like to draw out the full implications of this comment in relation to Roy's own comment in her WordsWorth Interview with David Barsamian when asked whether her view is 'that happiness is illusory and any love is doomed':

Actually I wouldn't see the book that way...the way in which the story is told, or the structure of the book, tells you a different story. The structure of the book ambushes the story — by that I mean the novel ends more or less in the middle of the story and it ends with Ammu and Velutha making love and it ends on the word tomorrow. Though you know that what tomorrow brings is terrible it is saying that the fact that this happened at all is wonderful. (qtd in Mullaney 56)

I begin by noting, as several critics have already done, Roy's fascination with wordplay. Sumanyu Satpathy notes in 'The Code of Incest in *The God of Small*

Things' how Roy's use of wordplay extends even to hinting at the eventual incest between the twins. In a more general way Ghosh reveals how Roy uses wordplay as an evocation of childhood: 'a tactile world of smiles and laughter — with its sense of wonder and curiosity' (185). Corrado Micheli, concerned with the theme of Anglophobia in the novel, traces some of the ways in which Roy uses innovative English — she 'frequently coins words or compounds, plays with pronunciations, and capitalization' (212) — as a means of opposing Anglophobia.

What strikes me most about this fascination on Roy's part, however, is the kind of significance it gives indirectly to the possibilities involved in play. She herself, in the Salon Interview with Reena Jana, comments on her interest in the graphic design of the language: 'that was why the words and thoughts of Estha and Rahel, the twins were so playful on the page...I was being creative with their design' (4). Often Roy uses short, stunted sentences for special emphasis as in her description of the way Chacko holds roses for his expected ex-wife and daughter — 'Fatly/Fondly' (137), or to convey the way in which a mood of intense disappointment overwhelms Rahel (as if her consciousness is invaded by the crushing disappointment associated with Pappachi and the new species of moth he discovered but was not credited for):

Out
In
And lifted its leg
Up
Down. (293)

This kind of foregrounding or highlighting of individual words and phrases is also used several times for the key motif of the novel:

The God of Loss
The God of Small things. (265)

The twins have a particular relish of words as, for example, Rahel's thought that '*boot* was a lovely word. A much better word, at any rate, than *sturdy*. *Sturdy* was a terrible word' (41). Sometimes the narrator's predilection in the novel for unusual or invented words seems to reflect the children's mode of perception as, for example, when Margaret Kochamma tells Sophie Mol at the airport, swinging one arm like a soldier, 'to Stoppit. So she Stoppited' (141); or in the description of Rahel's intervention in the activities of ants, as if they are participating in a religious ritual: 'After [the Antly Bishop] had waited for a reasonably Antly amount of time, he would get a funny Antly Bishop frown on his forehead, and shake his head sadly' (185). In 'When Language Dances: The Subversive Power of Roy's Text in *The God of Small Things*', Cynthia vanden Driesen refers to the way the twins delight in taking a word like 'Nictitating' apart (180) and suggests that 'this child's-eye view of events interrogates and subverts the adult view of reality', that indeed the children 'enjoy a kind of power through their play with language' (368). She is particularly struck by their reading backwards as

‘tantamount to a powerful subversion of the established order’ (368). This point seems to me to be closely related to what I shall finally argue about Roy’s structure in the novel. Her attention to the evocation of children’s spontaneous engagement with language, and her concern with the graphic possibilities of words in the novel as a whole, seems to become more generally a means of affirming the opportunities for individual agency. These offer in miniature form a sign of the larger possibilities available for authorial agency and thereby provide implicit encouragement for future activism.

Roy’s political essays from which I have already quoted do not reveal any particular use of word play. However, Roy’s two essays ‘The Great Indian Rape-Trick I and II’ in which she decries Shekhar Kapur’s strategies in his film, *Bandit Queen* (based on the life of Phoolan Devi), contain instances of what she refers to in the Salon Interview as ‘the graphic design of the language’ (4). Prominent examples are:

If you say you found the film distasteful, you’re told — Well, that’s what truth is — distasteful. Manipulative: that’s Life — manipulative. Go on. Now *you* try. Try... Exploitative. Or. Gross. Try Gross. (I, 1)

Or:

Phoolan Devi’s first war, like almost every dacoit’s first war, was fought for territory. It was the classic beginning of the journey into dacoitdom. But does it have rape in it? Nope. Caste violence? Nope. So is it worth including in the film? Nope. (I, 4)

And from the second article:

After I saw the film, which was about three weeks ago, I have met Phoolan several times. Initially I did not speak of the film to her, because I believed that it would have been wrong of me to Influence her opinion. The burden of my song so afar, has been *Show her the film*. I only supported her demand that she had a right, a legal right to see the film that claims to be the true story of her life. My opinion of the film has nothing to do with her opinion. Mine doesn’t matter. Hers does. More than anyone else’s. (II, 3).

Each of these examples reveals a choreographing of word arrangements in the service of sardonic humour as a spur to protest. It is through this kind of humour that Roy’s choice of agency on Phoolan Devi’s behalf becomes manifest.

PLAY AS DRAMA

What then of play as in drama? How much agency is involved in that use of the word in the novel? Some important distinctions are called for at this stage. Sophie Mol’s arrival and presentation to the relatives at Ayamenem is referred to as the ‘Welcome Home, Our Sophie Mol’ Play (164). It involves an imposed, highly artificial form of behaviour, every aspect of which is dictated by the wishes of adults. Even the front verandah of the house at Ayemenem lends itself to ‘the dignity of a stage and everything that happened there took on the aura and significance of performance’ (165). Roy brings out the implications of this kind of trap sardonically through Rahel’s awareness: ‘Rahel looked around her and saw

that she was in a Play. But she had only a small part. She was just the landscape. A Flower perhaps. Or a tree' (172). Thus Rahel, as soon as she has the chance, 'slipped out of the Play and went to [Velutha]' (175). Now 'outside the Play' (182), she asserts her independence from the commotion over Sophie Mol by merrily insisting to Velutha '[w]e're not even playing' (182), an assertion which he echoes.

As a result of the contrived, exhibitionistic behaviour associated with the 'Welcome Home' play, and Sophie Mol's death by drowning, the twins' potential friendship with their cousin 'never circled around into a story' (267). Story here has the force of a joint, creative bond of spontaneous enterprise. The potential for friendship, however, is shown clearly on the day after Sophie's arrival when all three children dress up in saris as Mrs Pillai, Mrs Eapen and Mrs Rajagopalan and visit Velutha. Their untouchable friend enters fully into their play-acting — a small-scale drama which they have chosen and which they enjoy. He treats them as adults and makes no attempt to mock or even tease them. It is only when Rahel returns home, so many years later, that she 'recognized the sweetness of that gesture' (190): 'A grown man entertaining three raccoons, treating them like real ladies. Instinctively colluding in the conspiracy of their fiction, taking care not to decimate it with adult carelessness. Or affection' (190).

The contrast between this episode and the 'Welcome Home Our Sophie Mol' play seems to me crucial for the novel in the way it emphasises one of the qualities that, for Roy, characterise genuine adulthood: having the capacity to appreciate children's desire for play and play-acting. In stark contrast Roy comments as follows on Comrade Pillai and Police Inspector Mathew: '[t]hey were not friends...They were both men whom childhood had abandoned without a trace' (262). Collusion here, as distinct from so many other forms of social collusion revealed in the novel, perhaps most of all in the Marxist leader's collusion with the caste system, is an ironic way of acknowledging Velutha's ability to enter into the innocent consciousness of a child. The narrator's further comment, '[i]t is so easy to shatter a story' (190), highlights the intricate interweaving of the notions of story, history and play in this novel. This bit of spontaneous theatre on the part of the children is, in more sustained form than their wordplay, their story, a revelation of their agency which deserves celebration despite the doomed existence that awaits them. What is also movingly ironic about this episode is the readiness of Velutha, the untouchable, to grant the children a higher status than that of child in his response to their acting. In a consideration of Velutha's relationship with the children more generally, Julie Mullaney notes how his reaching 'out across the boundaries of caste to [them]', also involves 'extending the exuberant play on names and the mobility of identities in his renaming of Estha, "Esthappappychachen Kuttappen Peter Mon"' (32).

Almost immediately after the adult Rahel's recalling of the Indian ladies episode, as she watches Estha sitting in his room in the silence that has become habitual to him, the narrator describes the twins as 'a pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative. Stumbling through their parts,

nursing someone else's sorrow. Grieving someone else's grief' (191). There could not be a more grim contrast with their childhood experience in visiting Velutha: those moments of enchanting spontaneity make all the more disturbing and unbearable the consequences for the twins of Velutha's murder, and their mother's untimely end:

He left behind a hole in the Universe through which darkness poured like liquid tar. Through which their mother followed without even turning to wave goodbye. She left them behind, spinning in the dark, with no moorings, in a place with no foundation.

(191–92)

My argument, however, is that the moments of enchanting spontaneity are not to be seen in retrospect as merely poignant but as the levers by which Roy induces the reader into the kind of responsiveness that prompts agency: 'to reach within ourselves and find the strength to think. To fight'.

Play as drama appears in several further episodes in the novel. First I turn to Ammu's dream, later on the afternoon of Sophie Mol's arrival, of the 'cheerful man' with one arm who seems closely associated with Velutha, and who seems moreover to be a means of rescuing her from a whole miscellany of ugly, violent and threatening images despite his one arm. The image I wish to note here is the impression created in Ammu's dream of a kind of audience in a circle of folding chairs:

Beyond the circle of folding chairs was a beach littered with broken blue glass bottles. The silent waves brought new blue bottles to be broken, and dragged the old ones away in the undertow. There were jagged sounds of glass on glass. On a rock, out at sea, in a shaft of purple light, there was a mahogany and wicker rocking chair. Smashed. (216)

These people simply sit and witness the incessant breakages and smashing around them without making the least effort to change the situation. The rocking chair relates to the chair which Pappachi smashed to pieces after Chacko found his father violently abusing his mother, Mammachi, and warned him never to do so again. The overall suggestion is of a moribund society which has allowed a state of emotional, psychological and spiritual destructiveness to persist, conniving at its existence. This doom-laden imagery is a forerunner of the even more harrowing description of the police assault on Velutha. Out of the tension between such passages, and those evoking an impression of spontaneous action, Roy's aim, I would argue, is to enkindle in her readers the urge to engage in the politics of resistance.

My next example concerns Rahel's return to Kerala when she goes to watch the Kathakali dancers that she and her brother had once watched with Comrade Pillai. The name 'Kathakali' derives from the Malayalam words, 'katha', meaning story, and 'kali', meaning play. Using characters with vividly painted faces and elaborate costumes, the dance re-enacts stories from the Hindu epics. While Roy pays tribute to the singular dedication and craft of the actors, the events portrayed in their intense performance seem to mirror the state of the society itself, engulfed in an apparently endless cycle of violence. Alex Tickell notes how the 'epic

narratives [of the Hindu *Mahabharata*, on which the Kathakali dances are based] have often been employed to justify gender and caste inequalities' (2007b 163). Thus, he maintains, Roy

adopts a covertly critical approach to the cultural history of the 'Great Stories' in her novel, short-circuiting a potentially nationalist/communist celebration of Hindu identity by associating the *kathakali* temple performance with the 'love laws' — delineated in the *Manusmriti* or The Laws of Manu — that proscribe Ammu's affair with Velutha and justify Velutha's murder by the police. (163)

In the first story, Kunti, who had borne a son to the god of Day, reveals herself to this son. However, as he angrily realizes, her motive is only to 'secure the safety of her five other, more beloved sons' (233). Kunti's invoking of the Love Laws for her purpose reflects a state of mind as twisted as that of Mammachi or Comrade Pillai in the main plot. A further link to Roy's narrative is created through Karna's resolve that he will go to war against one of Kunti's other sons, Arjuna, the one who 'publicly reviled Karna for being a lowly charioteer's son' (233). In this way the yoked ideas of class and vengeance disturbingly anticipate Velutha's fate.

The next story, *Duradham Vadham*, involves Bhima's hunting down of Dushasana who had tried publicly to undress the Pandavas' wife. The fierce battle between the two men culminates in the brutal, prolonged killing of Dushasana. Roy explicitly links this barbarous scene of slaughter with Velutha's death:

There was madness there that morning. Under the rose bowl. It was no performance. Esthappen and Rahel recognized it. They had seen its work before. Another morning. Another stage. Another kind of frenzy (with millipedes on the soles of its shoes). The brutal extravagance of this matched by the savage economy of that. (235)

Roy then shifts her attention to the actors' activities outside the play. As if simply adapting their large-scale theatrical orgy of wrath and vengefulness to a domestic setting, they go home to beat their wives. Tickell notes how through the 'miniaturized epic' constituted by the Kathakali performance in the novel, 'the politics of *TGST* are mirrored in Roy's non-fiction, which also attempts to disclose and demystify the connections "between power and powerlessness", and draws attention, continually, to "the absolute, relentless, endless, habitual unfairness of the world"' (165).

Roy mocks false, artificial notions of play/drama in the recitations given to Chacko by Comrade Pillai's niece and son. His niece recites 'Lochinvar' 'at remarkable speed' (271), and simply as an exhibition of her skill in memory and public speaking; there is no sign that she has any understanding of the poem. Of course Roy has chosen this ballad because of its underlying ironic connection with what Velutha and Ammu might have done in another kind of society. The son, Lenin, is equally concerned with mere fluency and does not understand a word of Mark Antony's funeral oration in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*; a speech that his father persuades him to bestow as a recitation on Chako:

[Lenin] began to race up and down the strip of front yard between the house and road, braying with an excitement that he couldn't understand. When he had worked some of it off his run turned into a breathless, high-kneed gallop. '*Lend me yawYERS;*' Lenin shouted from the yard, over the sound of a passing bus. *I cometoberry Caesar; not to praise him. Theeeevil that mendoo lives after them, The goodisoft interred with their bones;*' He shouted it fluently, without faltering once. Remarkable, considering he was only six and didn't understand a word of what he was saying. (274–75)

Both children's performances, although so amusingly described, represent play that has become divorced from any kind of spontaneity or deep emotion, and reveal indirect ways in which Roy intensifies her indignation at the hypocrisy of Pillai. As I have already noted, neither he, nor Inspector Mathew, have any trace left of childhood spontaneity. The Pillai children's exhibition thus leads one to appreciate all the more that other close encounter of children with an adult: the sweet gesture in which Velutha gives full scope to genuine children's play.

The Pillai children's stultified playing also highlights the pathos of the twins' explanation to Baby Kochamma about why they took ('stole' is her word) things from the house across the river: 'we were only playing' (316) says Rahel. Here one should note the ironic echo of her earlier assertion to Velutha, 'we're not even playing' (182). Thus, in self-defence she is led to devalue that most carefully planned and serious drama of the children's own deliberately planned flight from Ayemenem, a drama that turns to tragedy. This flight was initiated by Estha in his wish to escape the possible further molestations of a sexual abuser, and agreed to by both Rahel and Sophie Mol as a way to spur the adults to greater affection and caring. Baby Kochamma, in her narcissistic and vengeful scheming, so thoroughly manipulates the twins that they ultimately agree to her false version of what led up to Velutha's death: that he had kidnapped all three children, and kept them hidden at the History House.

Baby Kochamma built up her case. She drew (from her imagination) vivid pictures of prison life. The cockroach-crisp food. The *chhi-chhi* piled in the toilets like soft brown mountains. The bedbugs. The beatings. She dwelled on the long years Ammu would be put away because of them. How she would be an old, sick woman with lice in her hair when she came out — if she didn't die in jail, that was. Systematically, in her kind, concerned voice she conjured up the macabre future in store for them. When she had stamped out every ray of hope, destroyed their lives completely, like a fairy godmother she presented them with a solution [i.e. to allow the police to continue believing that Velutha had kidnapped all three children]. (317)

In response, Roy is at her most sardonic and at the same time, most compassionate in terms of her awareness of their future despair: 'in the years to come they would replay this scene in their heads' (318).

HISTORY AND PLAY (IN THE SENSE OF DRAMA)

When Roy deals with the fatal assault on Velutha by a contingent of local policemen, she combines the concept of history and of play. As the 'posse of Touchable Policemen' (304) exact their remorseless brutality on Velutha, Roy

invites the reader to witness the scene through Estha and Rahel's eyes, and points out: 'The twins were too young to know that these were only history's henchmen sent to square the books and collect the dues from those who broke the laws' (306). That strategic 'only' makes the policemen seem the blameless instruments of a force more powerful than themselves. History is consequently seen with Roy's acute sardonic eye to be: 'masquerading as God's purpose' (309). More sardonically still, in light of Estha and Rahel's presence, the phrase continues, 'revealing herself to an under-age audience' (309). A few lines further on, the connection between this aspect of History, and the novel's frequent use of drama as a trope, is made even more explicit: the grim, cruel scene that the twins have witnessed on the History House verandah, is said to constitute 'History in live performance' (309). In this caustically paradoxical way Roy creates the almost overriding impression that history determines the present, and her sardonic treatment of the police becomes even more scathing:

the posse of Touchable Policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. They didn't tear out his hair or burn him alive. They didn't hack off his genitals and stuff them in his mouth. They didn't rape him. Or behead him. After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (309)

The apparent consequence that spontaneous play, as represented earlier in the novel, has no further place in a world where a destructive alliance has been forged between inherited prejudice and present action, works in a way, I would argue, similar to Roy's strategies in her political essays. Her purpose is surely to stir the reader to inner revolt, to 'take it very personally', to 'find the strength within oneself to think'. To fight'.

Not only do the twins find themselves trapped in a recondite play but the emotional abuse caused thereby, damages their personalities irreparably. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem twenty-three years later, recently divorced from her husband, she feels desolate and empty. Estha, however, is in a far more precarious state, still suffering acutely from guilt at his lie to the police which led to Velutha's murder. At the moment his mouth utters the betraying 'yes', the narrator prepares us for the long-term consequence for the child: 'Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt'. (320)

Estha has indeed retreated into total silence, a silence all the more striking and distressing because of his and the narrator's earlier preoccupation with the effect of words. Furthermore he has become a compulsive-obsessive, frequently washing himself or his clothes. The only way in which the twins seem able to renew their childhood bond is through an act of incest which Roy describes with the utmost delicacy and compassion:

What was there to say? Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. Only that there was a snuffling in the hollows at the base of a lovely throat. Only that a hard honey-coloured shoulder had a semi-circle

of teethmarks on it. Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief. Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. (328)

From this point of view the novel appears to be totally and grimly deterministic. However, I have already stressed the related tendencies in Roy's political writings and in the novel which hint strongly at her underlying concern to rouse and indeed empower the reader into a sense of agency. I turn finally to what is of major significance for my argument: the surprise ending of the novel.

THE ENDING AS POTENTIAL COUNTER TO DETERMINISM

To come now fully to grips with the 'story of [Roy's] own', I consider the structure of the novel, the kind of large-scale exploration I have so far avoided. In a novel where history has such determining force, Roy makes a bold authorial bid for agency through a remarkable violation of narrative chronology. And it is here, I would suggest, that all the glimpses of agency through wordplay and spontaneous activities in the novel, find their fulfilment.

Many novelists since the beginning of the twentieth century have employed various ingenious ways of reconstructing chronology for their own purposes. The most common is to start at the end of the story and then proceed to work through from the beginning till the end point is reached again. Many novels employ flashbacks to build up the story gradually — Roy uses this device extensively in her novel. The stream-of-consciousness technique, as employed by novelists such as Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner, permits all kinds of intricate inter-weavings of past and present but the story in general moves progressively forward. What is startling in Roy's case is that, although the basic structure of the novel involves a steady continuum of alternations between past and present episodes, she does not end with an episode involving the adult twins' return to Ayemenem which would be chronologically appropriate. Instead, in a resolutely a-chronological final chapter, she returns to the lovemaking of Ammu and Velutha twenty-three years earlier! This strategy acts like a defiance of history, exemplifying Nair's claim that 'the truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of external reality' (253), and, as previously quoted: 'the story of the book ambushes the story the book is telling' (249).

At this stage I need to give some attention to the contrasting views of two critics, Aijaz Ahmad and Brenda Bose, about this final chapter. Although Ahmad has favourable comments to make about the novel, he finds it 'a very great pity that a tale so masterfully told should end with the author succumbing to the conventional idea of the erotic as that private transgression through which one transcends public injuries' (115).

His impression of Ammu and Velutha at the end is that:

They become pure embodiments of desire, and significantly, not a word of intelligent conversation passes between them. They seem consumed by helplessness, twice over:

before their own bodily desires, and in relation to the world that surrounds them and about which they appear to wish to do nothing. (116)

To begin with, one cannot help wondering whether Ahmad engages in intelligent conversation when he makes love. More seriously, his criticism of the lovers seems to me extremely unfair when one remembers Velutha's involvement with the Naxalite movement, and Ammu's sustained and desperate attempts to improve the quality of her life while suffering the persistent criticism of her brother, mother and aunt. Ahmad's sense that, for Roy, 'that resistance can only be individual and fragile... that the personal is the only arena of the political' (119) seems to indicate a wish to turn the novel into a political document, a kind of blueprint for active resistance. It is surely clear from Roy's political essays, though, that, on an overt political front, she believes strongly in group resistance. Through the novel, on the other hand, I would argue that she seeks to arouse individual readers to an awareness of the scale of the problems confronting her society, and to be deeply moved by an intensified focus on the possible transcending of class and caste boundaries, despite a tragic outcome.

In countering Ahmad's view, Bose draws attention to a significant quotation from Chapter 8 (175–76) of the novel, where Roy offers Ammu's reflections on whether it had indeed been Velutha that Rahel saw in the Naxalite march: '[s]he hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against' (125). Thus Bose's case is that '[a]pparently Ammu is not dismissive of Velutha's red politics, but sees in its inherent anger a possibility of relating to Velutha's mind, not just his body' (125). Trenchantly, Bose goes on to remind one (in light of the passage from page 32 to 33 about the Love Laws that 'lay down who should be loved, and how') that:

The politics of [Ammu's] desires, therefore has to do with cultural histories, with the ways in which sexuality has been perceived through generations in a society that coded Love Laws with a total disregard for possible anomalies. (128)

Supported by Bose's case, I would then pursue my belief that, through Roy's final violation of the original structure of the novel, she offers a means of counteracting what Ghosh refers to in the final paragraph of his essay, as 'the frustrated quest for love and light in a man-made heart of darkness' (193). Moreover Ammu's and Velutha's lovemaking, when they have calmed their fears, is full of play:

They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things. They laughed at ant-bites on each other's bottoms. At clumsy caterpillars sliding off the ends of leaves, at overturned beetles that couldn't right themselves. At the pair of small fish that always sought Velutha out in the river and bit him. At a particularly devout praying mantis. At the minute spider who lived in a crack in the wall of the back verandah of the History House and camouflaged himself by covering his body with bits of rubbish. (338)

And, almost as a talisman to undo the power of history, the novel ends with Ammu and Velutha's consoling farewell word, 'Tomorrow'. Thus by using modernist or poststructuralist narrative dislocation, Roy seeks to affirm most compellingly what has been achieved, and what must be hoped for in a tomorrow which she makes alive and real through fiction. I do not wish to suggest, however, that this ending lacks any ambivalence. My case in fact insists that there is ambivalence, rather than just a doom-laden ultimate resonance. Of course the final 'tomorrow' inevitably reminds one of the actual tomorrows in the lives of Ammu, Velutha and the twins, and the sense of defeat and loss that has been built up from the very beginning of the novel. Yet I would claim that the strategy of chronological disruption, precisely because it is employed with such impact in the ultimate sequence, persistently challenges the negative or pessimistic tendency of the ambivalence. This kind of challenge closely matches Roy's resolute strategies in her vigorous campaigns against the kind of world that powerful governments (including her own) seem to have determined.

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