

HISTORY LESSONS:

ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS AND KERALA CULTURE

James R. Aubrey

ABSTRACT

As realistic fiction, Arundhati Roy's novel The God of Small Things contains imitations of reality that reflect particular cultural values of people living in Kerala, where most of the story takes place. Real places represented in the novel include the village of Ayemenem, the city of Kochi, and the site of the Taj Garden Retreat at Kumarakom. Real people include E.M.S. Namboothiripad. However, the fictionalised representations of places and people in the novel are not history, for they are not designed to adhere to a standard of accuracy but, instead, to evoke sympathy for characters who resist conventional social practices of modern Kerala culture. A few minor characters resist modernization by adhering to traditional, status-marked social roles such as servant or kathakali dancer, but the major characters resist by rebelling against the social status quo, which includes Communist party politics, psychological Anglophilia, and casteism. Roy's narrative advocates an ideology of individualism partly by shaping the facts of social history, partly by describing characters as individuals with physical bodies, partly by employing an individualistic style of writing that draws on the language resources of both English and Malayalam, and partly by representing aspects of dance as personal expression. The result is a work of art that represents the culture of Kerala in a fictionalised form in order to hold that culture up for critical examination.

To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity.

—Homi J. Bhabha

All history is fiction, perhaps excepting dates and tables of fact, and even facts are really interpretations, as philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once observed.¹ Some histories may

be more accurate than others, but all history is fictional to some degree as it constructs a narrative to represent the past. Conversely, all fiction is history, for any literary narrative reflects to some degree the historical moment in which it was written. Some novels have a closer relation to history than others, and some histories may be more fictionalized than others, but recognizing that literature and history overlap, blurs a distinction that has been

observed since the European Renaissance, when Sir Philip Sydney argued that literature is superior to history because what it teaches is not limited to the facts.² Since that time, however, and especially since the early 1980s, literature and history have ceased to be seen as distinct categories of writing. In cultural studies, literature and history are often considered overlapping, blended categories with a boundary that is indistinct. An accompanying phenomenon has been the emergence of the postmodern novel, one feature of which is the playful mixing of actual historical figures with imagined characters, as in the novels of John Fowles and Salman Rushdie in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Arundhati Roy is another such postmodern novelist.³

Literature, History, and *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's 1997 novel *The God of Small Things* is primarily a work of fiction, but like all fiction it has a historical dimension. The book is a cultural artifact that inevitably reflects the historical moment in Kerala, India, when it was being written in the early 1990s. As soon as it was published, the novel was

criticized for historical inaccuracy, particularly for its unflattering description of an actual person, E.M.S. Namboothiripad, the founder of the Communist movement in Kerala, as the novel provides an historical context for the fictional character of Comrade K.N. M. Pillai.⁴ By the late 1990s, after winning the prestigious Booker Prize had brought *The God of Small Things* widespread, international attention, Roy's depiction of Kerala took on authority as history among readers with little previous knowledge of India, partly because Roy uses the word *history* and discusses historical matters in the novel. Her fictional but realistic-sounding history of a multi-generational family resembling Roy's own, living where she actually grew up, prompted many readers to imagine that everything in the novel must represent the real Kerala. However, a close look at one of her uses of the word *history* should serve to remind readers that Roy's is a very literary kind of historical text: "History's smell. Like old roses on a breeze. It would lurk forever in ordinary things".⁵ This is a description of "history" as an imagined after-effect, not as a science, and Roy's mixing of actual and fictional characters is a characteristically postmodernist move in a hybrid work of history and literature.



Fig. 1: Arundhati Roy was involved in the cover design of her 1997 novel *The God of Small Things*, which uses a photograph by Sanjeev Saith of lotus leaves and flowers. The author insisted that her book's cover not show a conventional, exoticizing image of India—particularly not an elephant. It should be remembered that a book is an artifact of a culture, as well as an achievement by an author

A summary of the content of *The God of Small Things* will indicate how the novel works. The main events take place during a visit to Kerala by Sophie, daughter of Chacko Ipe and his British ex-wife, Margaret. During the visit Chacko's sister Ammu, a single mother of seven-year old twins named Estha and Rahel, falls in love with Velutha, a family employee from the Untouchable class. Their clandestine affair comes to light when Sophie drowns and the police are called in to investigate. Velutha is brutally beaten in front of the twins and subsequently dies. The already dysfunctional Ipe family collapses, and the novel makes that outcome seem to be the result of irresistible social dynamics.

Coincidentally, the year 1997, when *The God of Small Things* was published, was also the year that India was celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of independence from Britain. Roy's novel must have seemed at odds with any spirit of celebration, because it holds up for criticism many important institutions of Indian society including the patriarchal family, the political system, and the caste system. Ammu's fatal love affair is made to seem an admirable act of social rebellion against what Roy calls "Love Laws" and other strictures against individual freedoms. Because the novel promotes change of the social status quo, it was not welcomed by many social conservatives, but even the most critical view of a culture can reward study.

Most of the novel's episodes take place in or around Ayemenem, an actual village on the Meenachal River in Kerala.

Roy does not disguise place names, as her predecessors William Faulkner and Thomas Hardy did in their novels of rural life, and Roy's



Fig. 2: The actual Meenachal River as it flows through Ayemenem is smaller than the fictionalized river that Sophie drowns in, in *The God of Small Things*

references to recognizable places are an invitation to readers to imagine *The God of Small Things* as a history of real people. Some aspects of the novel have been acknowledged to be autobiographical, including the Ipe family constellation (Sharma and Talwar 1998), and most details describing the house where they live match the architectural facts of the former Roy house on the hill in Ayemenem. The abandoned colonial mansion where Velutha is beaten by the police, called the History House in the novel, is described by the narrator as a real place that was recently purchased by a five-star hotel chain (125). When Roy was writing in the early 1990s, that description accurately described the status of Baker House at Kumarakom, which had been unoccupied since its sale in 1977 but had been newly purchased in 1992 by the prestigious Taj group of hotels, which was making the house itself into the reception area and dining parlour to serve bungalows surrounding an artificial lake, all of which would become the Taj Garden Retreat.⁶



Fig. 3: The colonial-era Baker House now serves as the reception and office building of the Taj Garden Retreat at Kumarakom, on the backwaters of Kerala

Roy does take some novelistic license with geography, locating the History House across the Meenachal within a short walking distance of Ayemenem, when in fact the distance is about ten miles. The novel describes the previous owner of the house as a latter-day colonial and child-molester, whose ghost literally haunts the History House, much as the spirit of Mr. Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* might be said to haunt Western culture.⁷ Roy even introduces a note of irony by suggesting that the house of E.M.S. Namboothiripad became one of the bungalows of the Taj Garden Retreat. This detail is not based on fact, as Roy's detractors have pointed out (Sharma and Talwar 1998), but Roy would see historical accuracy as

less important than her fictional purpose, which is to develop the Baker/History House as a symbol of the colonial past that continues to haunt Kerala—like the smell of old roses on a breeze—even under Communist government. Indeed, Roy's manipulation of historical facts for an artistic purpose illustrates how fiction can be more functionally true than history.

Literature as Expression of Cultural Values

One aspect of India's culture that varies from state to state, and from individual to individual, is what Roy's character Chacko calls Anglophilia, or "love of Englishness." This common attitude is a legacy of the era of British rule over India, and it can become a problem if that love of things English turns into a loathing of things Indian. Anglophilia in *The God of Small Things* is one of the bases for the Ipe family's problems. Chacko, the male head of the Ipe household, tries to explain to the twins: "They were a *family* of anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. He explained to them that history was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside... Estha and Rahel had no doubt that the house Chacko meant was the house on the other side of the river" (52). He means no such thing, of course, but Roy wants her readers to see a connection. She also wants readers to see how Chacko's explanations, typically intellectual, are not what the love-deprived twins need to hear. As a former Rhodes Scholar, Chacko might be assumed to have acquired his Anglophilia in Oxford—where he also acquired his English wife, who must repeatedly remind him that she is now his ex-wife when she and Sophie visit Ayemenem. His own father once aspired to be Imperial Entomologist and became obsessed with his lack of recognition by the British for his entomological discovery of a new species of moth; he spent the last years of his life in isolation from his family, favoring his Western status symbol, a sky-blue Plymouth. Chacko's aunt's insistence that the twins speak English at home rather than Malayalam is another manifestation of the family's Anglophilia, in Baby Kochamma's case intensified by a gardening degree she has obtained abroad that prompts her to turn the approach to their Ayemenem house into a miniature English country garden. Chacko's father abuses his mother, and Baby Kochamma manipulates Estha into condemning

Velutha. This family of Anglophiles is not happy or healthy.

The fact that the Ipe family's business is "pickling and preserving" is a symbolic indication that their problems are rooted in the past. Metaphorically, the history of this family is the history of Kerala, and of India, and of the human species. Late in the novel Roy's narrator observes that human history is "human nature's pursuit of ascendancy" (309). In context, this observation is a comment on the beating to death of Velutha by the police, by "history's henchmen", as Roy calls the executives of the powerful. Velutha is the victim of his own family (his father turns him in), of his employer (Baby Kochamma claims that he has abducted the children), of his party (Comrade Pillai refuses to intervene), and of his society (the police brutalise him, fatally). Roy's comment on this need for ascendancy, for power and status maintained by means of violence, makes Velutha a representative victim of forces larger than himself. These forces impose themselves on small people and things in the private, domestic sphere—where Pappachi Ipe routinely beats Mammachi with a vase. As if such personal violence is commonplace, when Ammu makes a sarcastic remark to Chacko, the narrator notes, "Chacko didn't slap her. So she didn't slap him back" (137). Slapping in the face comes up again when Sophie asks the twins if their mother hits them. "Mine does", Sophie Mol said invitingly. "Mine even Slaps" (143). The capitalizing of the letter S is meant to indicate not only that the slaps are hard, but also that this is a generalized, recognizable form of punishment. Evidently it is not a completely acceptable social practice, for Estha answers with a lie, that his mother does not hit them, which he has uttered "loyally" (143) even though readers know otherwise from having previously been told that to punish Rahel, "Ammu took her out of the room and smacked her" (49). Another Kerala mother, whose child is threatening to put a bead up his nose, warns him, "Try it and see what a slap you'll get" (127). Since Sophie's mother is British, one could infer that slapping children is also a practice in the United Kingdom, but Sophie's word *even* implies that it is unusual there. Roy seems interested to show the high level of tolerance, even acceptance of such behavior in Kerala culture. The related phrase *tight slap* is never heard in the US or the UK, but it is frequently heard in India, and the need for such a phrase in the Indian dialect of English suggests that a slap on the face is a commonly

accepted practice there—as watching almost any Bollywood movie will bear out.⁸ Roy is showing that a culture of violence informs practices on all levels of Indian society, from powerful institutions to powerful parents, in the History of large things and in the history of small things.

As Roy reminds readers that humans have a propensity to violence, she reinforces the point in a literary way with a pattern of references that tie her story to the particular culture of Kerala and the traditional “love, affection and reverence that Keralites attach to elephants”.⁹ The first elephant introduced in the novel is dead, electrocuted at the side of the road. Rahel and Estha hope that it is not the Ayemenem temple’s elephant, which they feel that they know as an individual from its visits to the Ipe house, to collect donations for the temple.

It is not, but the vivid description of the other



Fig. 4: The Hindu temple in Ayemenem is not open to the general public. In *The God of Small Things* Estha and Rahel watch a kathakali dance performance here, while the temple elephant sleeps

elephant’s cremation is evidence of its important status in the community (146). The still-living temple elephant is known as *Kochu Komban*, or Little Tusker, a name that links it with the novel’s pattern of references to small things. Late in the novel, at daybreak following an all-night dance performance at the temple, “Kochu Komban woke and delicately cracked open his morning coconut” (224). This indication of his gentleness with the word *delicately* contrasts with the description of on the same page of Comrade Pillai as “Ayemenem’s egg-breaker and professional omeletteer,” one of several references in the novel to the familiar proverb about the inevitability of violence: “You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs”. Two paragraphs after that, Roy’s narrator adds the comment that “certainly no beast has essayed

the boundless, infinitely inventive art of human hatred” (225). Thus, what differentiates Comrade Pillai from Kochu Komban is the human culture of extreme violence, and it is this kind of behaviour that Roy’s novel presents as objectionable.

One of the key episodes in *The God of Small Things* is called by Chacko “an extended exercise in Anglophilia”: the family attends an afternoon screening of *The Sound of Music* when they visit Cochin, the old name of Kerala’s second largest city in 1969, in order to meet Margaret and Sophie the next day at the airport (54). The movie theater they attend is named Abhilash Talkies, which is the name of an actual movie theater near Ayemenem, in Kottayam, whose arbitrary re-location to Cochin is a reminder that Roy’s book is fiction, not history.

The Sound of Music is, as Chacko points out, a



Fig. 5: The Abhilash movie theatre in Kottayam resembles the fictional Abhilash Talkies in Kochi, where the Ipe family go to see *The Sound of Music* on the day before they are to meet Margaret and Sophie at the airport

movie for Anglophiles in that it represents Western values: it is set in Austria; Julie Andrews is British; the stageplay and movie are American. The film was so successful that it won the American Academy Award for Best Picture in 1965. What was important to the Ipe family was that the movie’s language was English and that it was linked in their minds with the prestige cultures of the West. Adding to the movie’s appeal would have been the movie’s extended length of 174 minutes and its musical numbers, both of which make *The Sound of Music* resemble the normative cultural form of popular cinema across India. It is not a product of local culture, however, and Roy encourages readers to notice the differences by also describing a popular Malayalam movie of the same time period, *Chemmeen*. Ammu is said to hear a song from the movie on her

transistor radio, which prompts the narrator to summarize the plot of *Chemmeen* for readers as “the story of a poor girl who is forced to marry a fisherman from a neighboring beach, though she loves someone else. When the fisherman finds out about his new wife’s old lover, he sets out to sea in his little boat though he knows that a storm is brewing.... Everybody dies. The fisherman, his wife, her lover, and a shark that has no part in the story, but dies anyway. The sea claims them all” (208-09). The setting is in Kerala, and this is the kind of movie that ordinary Keralites would have watched repeatedly—not *The Sound of Music*. Roy’s implied contrast of *Chemmeen* with the movie choice of the Ipe family guides readers to understand that in cinemagoing as in the rest of life, the seemingly less important “small things” of the novel, whose eponymous god is the low-status, victimized Velutha, are often ignored by higher-status Indians in favor of the Big things of the Big city, in the Big language of English.

Language and Culture

Arundhati Roy’s own English is distinctive for many reasons. British English often sounds slightly exotic to readers accustomed to the American dialect, whose speakers would never refer to a girl’s “frock and knickers” (136), for example, or say “to hospital” rather than *to the hospital* (3), “hoovering” for *vacuuming* (12), or “torch” for *flashlight* (178). But Roy’s English is also distinct from British norms of usage because of her having been immersed since childhood in the Indian dialect of English, sometimes disdained as Hinglish or, in Kerala, as Manglish, that is, Malayalam-inflected English.¹⁰ Roy does not use the more obvious Indianisms that differentiate Indian English from common British usage, words such as *pre-pone*, *thrice*, or *pressurize* (as a transitive verb), but she does not try to avoid them either, using *Uncle* as an honorific, for example (110). In addition, she employs many Malayalam words that help to make the story feel rooted in Kerala. Most characters are known by their position in the family, from Baba (father) and Kochamma (grand-aunt) to Ammu herself, whose name means “mother”. The name of the servant, Kochu Maria, means “Little Mary” and links people of her class with the other small things of the novel. Although some Malayalam words are explained, for example, “Mol is Little Girl and Mon is Little boy”, others are not, such as the word *bhajan*—a religious song—used without

explanation on the next page, or terms for articles of clothing worn in Kerala, from *mundu* to *pallu* (60-61). Malayalam words even find their way into a chapter title: “Big Man the Laltain, Small Man the Mombatti” (88). Roy’s use of Malayalam words serves as a constant reminder to readers that this is Kerala, despite the fact that the novel is not written in Kerala’s local language. Perhaps just as important, Roy’s having absorbed an Indian version of the English language subtly contributes to a prose style that is differently flavored, and thus sounds particularly original to Western readers. This distinctiveness of style might lead a speaker of Malayalam English to feel at home reading *The God of Small Things*, but it might make an American reader feel that her prose is refreshingly original. For example, if Roy had learned English in the UK as her only language, she probably would not have thought to call the small spider at the end of the novel “lord rubbish,” from Malayalam *Chappu Thamburan*.

The freshness of Roy’s language derives primarily from her conscious deployment of words that give her prose the richness of poetry, and these are stylistic choices, not just reflections of a variant dialect. That Roy is a poet can be perfectly illustrated by the novel’s fourth paragraph, with its description of early June in Kerala, as the southwest monsoon begins: “It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem. Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, plowing it up like gunfire. The old house on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat. The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground. The wild, overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives. In the undergrowth a rat snake rubbed itself against a glistening stone. Hopeful yellow bullfrogs cruised the scummy pond for mates. A drenched mongoose flashed across the leaf strewn driveway”(1-2).

Besides its evocative, sensory words such as *moss* and *dampness* and *whisper*, the description of the weather is vivid because it uses verbs of human activity such as *slammed*, *plowing*, or *wore*, and the wildlife is described using extraordinary, active verbs such as *rubbed*, *cruised*, and *flashed*. These would be unusual word choices in any dialect of English, and they immediately bring the story to life.



Fig. 6: For most of her childhood and adolescence Arundhati Roy grew up living in this house with her mother and brother in the village of Ayemenem, near the city of Kottayam, in Kerala

Roy also likes to play with the language. She is like the twins in her novel, who like to reverse the order of letters and words in sentences in order to torment their teacher, or sometimes just to amuse themselves, for example, by noticing that a stop sign spells *pots* in reverse (58-60). Roy's playfulness leads her to invent striking metaphors, such as her description of coconut trees as sea anemones catching clouds (83). Roy even goes so far as to invent words, from the verb coinage *to stoppit* (141) to portmanteau constructions such as *furrywhirring*, *sariflapping*, and *slipperyoily* (94). Roy's English has made a unique contribution to world literature as well as to Kerala culture.

Representing the Physical Body

Not only is *The God of Small Things* an artifact that constitutes part of Kerala's recent cultural history, but also it represents Kerala's history in its fictional narrative. Readers of novels usually feel on one imagined level that the story happened, even though on another conscious level they know that it did not. On the first level, by suspending their disbelief, readers imagine that a character has an existence outside their minds.¹¹ Thus Velutha exists in readers' imaginations as the Paravan Untouchable, as the lover of Ammu, and as the eponymous god of small things. In a similar way Velutha exists as the imagined victim of large things such as the forces of History—which Roy would spell with a capital letter *H* to ironize the inflated social status given to such Things. In terms of the narrative, Velutha is the victim of the policemen, whom the novel describes

crushing small millipedes under their boots as they march through the jungle leading to the History House, where they will similarly crush Velutha (304-05). However, the police are themselves the small agents of police Inspector Thomas Mathew, who acts in complicity with Comrade Pillai, the chief of the local Communist Party of India (Marxist) who has declined to intervene on behalf of Velutha despite his membership in the party. They, in turn, are implicitly agents of even larger men such as the named historical figure E.M.S. Namboothiripad, whose actual election in 1957 to be Chief Minister of Kerala made him "the first ever democratically elected Communist government in the world", as Roy accurately points out even as she gives him the sarcastic label "the flamboyant Brahmin high priest of Marxism in Kerala" (67). Roy's irreverent tone invites readers to believe that Namboothiripad, like his Party chief in Ayemenem, K.N.M. Pillai, compromised Marxist ideology for immediate political gain. So readers are encouraged to see Namboothiripad, too, as a pawn of historical forces larger than he is. For several pages, Roy describes how Kerala became Communist, with this conclusion: "The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that 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. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy" (67). One implication is that political ideology of "revolution" is outweighed by the more deeply-seated, religious ideology of "caste" and "communal divides", and that all Keralites join Velutha and Namboothiripad as victims in history. It is at such a moment that Roy's novel seems to have turned into an essay in cultural studies embedded in a fictional narrative, or perhaps such moments just illustrate how she is sometimes writing in the late twentieth-century form of the non-fiction novel.

Roy's use of the negative phrase "caste-ridden" to describe Kerala's traditional community is a reminder that she disapproves of categorizing people in terms of a fixed social hierarchy, and that *The God of Small Things* is highly critical of Indian ways of distributing power by means of such status arrangements as caste, party, or gender. The competing ideology in the novel might be labeled

individualism; Roy does not use that term, but her phrase “a Mobile Republic” seems to refer to an individual who thrives on independence from social restrictions (202, 335). This interest in promoting the individual also could help justify the novel’s frequent references to the physical body and its functions, a topic that some readers find offensive.¹² However, representations of physical details contribute a sense of realism to a work of fiction, so descriptions of Ammu’s deep dimple or Velutha’s birthmark help Roy to create the illusion of their reality. Other aspects of the physical body help put characters into a social context by invoking cultural markers, for example the way women style their hair, which is referred to when Ammu dreams recurrently that her hair is being cut off—a nightmare for a woman in India, “the land where long, oiled hair was only for the morally upright” (161).¹³ One of the novel’s most disturbing physical descriptions is important both for motivating a character and advancing the plot: the shocking scene when seven-year-old Estha is forced to handle the penis of the Orange drink Lemondrink man at the cinema helps readers account for Estha’s subsequent emotional shutdown. Other descriptions of physicality can seem gratuitous, for example, the detailed description of adults helping little Rahel urinate into a public toilet, or Baby Kochamma’s embarrassment over her stool at the police station (319). Inclusion of these details violates a convention of traditional, polite fiction, which calls for omission of such matters, but conventions such as these are like the social rules that Roy wishes to subvert in the interest of individual freedom. The novel is meant to shock conventional middle-class readers especially, and its descriptions of bodily functions serve that purpose—as does the unexpected, incestuous, sexual congress of Estha and Rahel when they reunite in 1992 (328). As one result, at the end of the novel the explicit description of sexual intercourse between Velutha and Ammu is not unexpected, even seems a warranted extension of the novel’s earlier, physical details. Roy is pushing the cultural norms that militate against representing physical affection in public or in literature, as if she were a Bollywood filmmaker who deliberately shows two characters kissing each other on the lips as a form of rebellion against the conventional staging of kisses on the neck or affectionate hugs. Such overstepping of the conventional boundaries of the novel form were disturbing enough to one Keralite that “criminal

proceedings were filed against Roy under Section 292 of the Indian penal Code, on the charge of corrupting public morality by a lawyer from Kerala, Sabu Thomas” (Mullany 2002). Obscene or not, the represented physicality of her characters was serving the novel’s ideological, artistic purpose: the individualized body is the small object on which large cultural forces attempt to inscribe their power, whereas Roy hopes that the individual subject will resist.

There are references in *The God of Small Things* to a function of the physical body that takes a more positive form: dance performativity. Kerala’s unique Kathakali form of dance is featured in the novel both as a signifier of traditional values that Roy believes should be preserved, and as a structuring device.

Dance traditions have been important in Hindu cultures for millennia. Indra’s court had its *apsaras*, and the most familiar Hindu image is that of Shiva Nataraja, or Shiva the Lord of the Dance, whose raised leg and flying hair signify bodily movement in space and time (as well as other meanings). Perhaps some of the social-psychological functions once served by temple dancers are now fulfilled by “item girls” in the temples of popular cinema, but the dance tradition of Kerala culture is different. Kathakali dancers are exclusively males, who act out Hindu mythological narratives in extravagant costumes and colorful makeup. In *The God of Small Things*, an unnamed character referred to as Kathakali Man helps to perform the story of *Karna Shabadam*, the Oath of Karna, followed by *Duryodhana Vadham*, the Death of Duryodhana, including a detailed description of the enraged, extremely bloody murder of Duryodhana’s brother Dushasana at the hands of Bhima, who wants to avenge an insult to the Pandava brothers’ wife, Draupadi (228-34). The fictional performance takes place in 1992 at the Krishna temple of Ayemenem and serves various purposes in the novel. For one, Roy is providing a vivid representation of a visual art form for the pleasure of the reader. For another, in terms of plot, Roy is using the occasion to reunite Estha and Rahel, who have not seen each other for twenty-four years, as they sit and watch—and sense each other’s presence—from opposite sides of the temple (234). For a third purpose, Roy is developing the character of the local dancer who specializes in women’s parts. His trained body is said to be his only instrument, and he is able to inhabit his characters and bring them to life, but his

children are said to want better paying jobs and have no interest in carrying on his work, even deride him for it (230). Thus Roy establishes that there is a personal cost to social progress. Fourth, Roy is indicating wider social costs, which include widespread, superficial values among the modern spectators of Kathakali. More and more Keralites, she implies, are living as tourists, unconnected to the traditional culture of all-night performances at the temple. In the novel some fictional tourists are "treated to truncated Kathakali performances ('Small attention spans,' the Hotel People explained to the dancers). So ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos" (127). The fictional performances are staged by the swimming pool of the new hotel, which has been built on the site of the former History House. There, the onlookers watch Kathakali Man: "In the Heart of Darkness they mock him with their lolling nakedness and their imported attention spans. He checks his rage and dances for them. He collects his fee. He gets drunk. Or smokes a joint. It makes him laugh. Then he stops by the Ayemenem Temple, he and the others with him, and they dance to ask pardon of the gods" (231). With this imagined scene, the all-night, traditional performance is held up as a moral norm and the short, modern performance as an ill-advised departure from that norm, even as a symbol of social decay. Estha and Rahel are said to be trapped "in the bog of a story that was and wasn't theirs" (236).¹⁴

A fifth purpose of the dance scene is to resonate with the theme of violence in the novel. Roy describes Bhima's killing of Dushasana in gory detail: "He continued to kill him long after he was dead. Then with his bare hands, he tore the body open. He ripped its innards out and stooped to lap blood straight from the bowl of the torn carcass, his crazed eyes peeping over the rim, glittering with rage and hate and mad fulfillment. Gurgling blood bubbles pale pink between his teeth. Dribbling down his painted face, his neck and chin. When he had drunk enough, he stood up, bloody intestines draped around his neck like a scarf, and went to find Draupadi and bathe her hair in fresh blood" (235). In case any reader fails to recognize the parallel, Roy's narrator points out that Estha and Rahel realize that they have seen this kind of violent frenzy before, as children in 1969, when Velutha was beaten and kicked almost to death on the veranda of the History House as they watched from hiding.

There is a sixth way that the form of Kathakali

dance contributes to *The God of Small Things*: as structure. When Rahel arrives after the performance has begun, Roy's narrator comments on the fact that she would already be familiar with the story, which comes from the *Mahabharata*: "It didn't matter that the story had begun, because Kathakali discovered long ago that the secret of the Great Stories is that they *have* no secrets. . . . You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won't. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, and who doesn't. And yet you want to know again" (229). What is true for the dance narrative is also true for the novel's narrative. Readers are told in the opening pages that Ammu dies at age thirty-one, that Sophie Mol's funeral took place when she was almost nine, and that Velutha is dead as of that day (3-4, 8). There is no conventional suspense, for readers have been told the outcome of the story, but readers are teased into wanting to know what happened, exactly, and that will not be revealed for many pages because a novel, like a lengthy kathakali performance, is a lengthy form of literature. One of the reasons that a kathakali performance lasts so long is that the story-telling pace is slow, certainly in comparison to Western narrative forms. When



Fig. 7: Kathakali dancers act out a scene from the *Mahabharata* as the curtain in front of them is lowered, at the Kerala Cultural Centre in Kochi, November 2006

Roy describes the killing of Dushasana, she notes, "For an hour they fenced with each other. Traded insults. Listed all the wrongs that each had done the other" (234). If the outcome were the primary concern of the audience, patience would wear thin, but it is the rehearsal of the story that villagers want—not just a mystery solved, and certainly not a demonstration of

the exotic art form for visitors to the village. Even the hour-long demonstrations of kathakali dance performed nightly at the Kerala Cultural Center in twenty-first century Kochi deliberately delay revealing the antagonist figure for more than five minutes of stage time, as crew members hold up a fabric curtain that prevents the audience from seeing him while he rants and growls, out of sight except for the top of his headgear visible above the curtain.

This device creates a kind of suspense, not over the outcome but over when the mythological figure will be seen. It is a kind of teasing of the audience, perhaps related to the religious concept of *darshan*. Because a religious experience takes time to develop, a crowd at a temple festival may wait for hours in anticipation of the removal of a curtain from in front of a hallowed icon, an image of the divine whose long-awaited sight brings closure to a lengthy religious ritual (Eck 1998). Delay in revealing the sight of a character in a kathakali performance generates a similar, satisfying experience in the spectator, and Roy's narrative delay in revealing how Velutha dies—and how he and Ammu love—allows a deeper sense of engagement to develop in the reader of the novel.

There is one other, seventh way that kathakali dance functions in *The God of Small Things*. In the last chapter, whose punning title is "The Cost of Living", the word *dance* is used as a metaphor for life when Roy finally reveals how Velutha and Ammu make love for the first time—and their sexual intercourse is meant to be understood as love, for it is described as a violation of "Love Laws" (328). The last pages of the novel finally relate the first of their clandestine meetings near the History House, and Roy characteristically includes some description of their physical bodies as they touch one another, lying on the ground in the very place where the twins earlier found the fatal boat. "She danced for him. On that boat-shaped piece of earth. She lived" (337). To equate dancing and living is indirectly to invoke the image of Shiva Nataraja, and to do so at the end of this narrative is to provide *darshan* of the god—and goddess—of small things. To conclude the novel with "tomorrow" is to suggest that today is a small triumph of life.

Coda

If living can be metaphorical dancing, so can writing or reading be dancing with words, in one's imagination. Arundhati Roy once used a similar dance metaphor to describe her own

writing process: "For reasons I do not fully understand, fiction dances out of me. Non-fiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning".¹⁵ If any art form comes naturally to humans, it is dance. Writing, on the other hand, a recent invention of the human species, is perhaps the most unnatural. Roy's comparison of fiction writing to dancing testifies to the relative easiness, as well as pleasure, for her, of writing a novel as opposed to writing history. Her choice of metaphor, however, would not have occurred to a writer who had not grown up in a culture where dance is so highly valued and widely enjoyed that it seems natural. So it may have come easily to Roy, to have structured *The God of Small Things* like a dance and to have made the fictional characters dancer-like. Roy's characters may be partly imagined and partly remembered, and not fully understood even by her, but they also partly reflect and critique the culture of Kerala in recent history. For readers engaged in cultural studies, working to understand this dimension of Arundhati Roy's novel can be deeply rewarding.

Notes

- ¹ Nietzsche is often quoted to have said, "There are no facts, only interpretations." In a letter to his sister he once wrote the following: "Against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying 'there are only facts', I should say: no it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations..." (*The Portable Nietzsche*, page 458).
- ² The discussion is in Sir Philip Sidney's 1595 essay "An Apology for Poetry."
- ³ On blending see, for example, Hayden White's discussion of textuality and contextuality in "New Historicism: A Comment," and consider the title of the essay "Blurred Genres: The Reconfiguration of Social Thought," by Clifford Geertz in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. Regarding the postmodernists, John Fowles in the 1969 novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* establishes the time frame of his 1867-69 fictional narrative by describing the historical Karl Marx at work in the British Library (page 18). Near the end of that novel Fowles locates a crucial episode in the historical Tudor House in Chelsea, London, where one of his fictional characters is revealed to be living with historical figures from the Pre-Raphaelite circle of artists, specifically identifiable as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, and Charles Algernon Swinburne (page 426). American novelist E.L. Doctorow in his 1976 novel *Ragtime* brings into his novel such historical figures as Sigmund Freud and Henry Ford. Novelist and cultural historian Norman Mailer once proposed labeling such hybrids of fact and fiction as *faction*, an

idea reflected in the subtitle of his book *Armies of the Night: History as a Novel/The Novel as History*. Salman Rushdie's 1980 novel *Midnight's Children* is a fictionalised, even playful treatment of India's history since Partition. Arundhati Roy is working in this tradition.

- ⁴ The initial reception of the novel is reviewed in the introduction to R. S. Sharma and Shashi Bala Talwar, 1998, *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*, New Delhi, Creative Books (pages 9-17).
- ⁵ Quote from page 55 of the 2002 Penguin Books India reprint of *The God of Small Things*. Subsequent page references will be to this edition of Roy's novel.
- ⁶ Peter De Jong has written a twelve-page, glossy brochure titled "The Country House that Became a Garden Retreat," which traces the history of Baker's House by the village of Kumarakom, on the Kerala backwater about ten miles from Kottayam. The house was built in 1877 by Alfred George Baker, the son of two British missionaries. Baker's descendants sold the house to an unspecified purchaser in 1977, who sold it to the Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces in 1992. A copy of the brochure, which does not show a publication date, was given to me by an Ayemenem tour guide referred by the hotel staff when I visited in November, 2006.
- ⁷ Joseph Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* based on his experiences as master of a trading vessel on the Congo River in colonial Africa in 1890. He published the story of Marlow's encounter with Kurtz in 1899 as a magazine serial and in 1901 as a novella. *Heart of Darkness* has become a classic of British literature and was adapted as a parallel story about the American war in Southeast Asia, in 1972 as a novel, *The Laotian Fragments*, by John Clark Pratt, and in 1979 as a film, *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Both adaptations refer to the American CIA as the modern equivalent of the Belgian trading company in *Heart of Darkness*. The idea that Conrad's story of colonial self-destruction still haunts the Western imagination is evidenced by the publication in 2011 of another novel based on Conrad's story, titled *State of Wonder*, by Ann Patchett, whose narrator travels up the Amazon River to find a missing pharmaceutical research scientist.
- ⁸ For example, in *My Wife's Murder* (2005) a character is told, "Come on, or I'll give you a tight slap." In *Housefull* (2010) various characters slap each other on the face, so when Akshay Kumar's character and a monkey slap each other more than a dozen times, the scene is funny because it exaggerates recognizable behaviour. An actual, non-fiction example of such behavior is recorded in the documentary film *Love in India* (2009) when, in public, a policewoman repeatedly slaps a girl who has been seen kissing her boyfriend. That such things happen in Kerala is evident from the lawsuit brought by a voter against C. Divakaran, state Food Minister and leader of the Communist Party of India, for having allegedly slapped him, reported by *India-West*, 8 April 2011 (page A44).
- ⁹ The description is from an article on Kerala in *India Today International*, 23 April 2007 (page 11).

- ¹⁰ The article "Remote Resurrection" points out that Kerala television viewers like to hear the "Manglish (Malayalam plus English)" accent of Ranjini Haridas, in *India Today International*, 18 May 2009 (page 48).
- ¹¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge uses the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" in a discussion of readers' acceptance of the supernatural in literature, in Chapter 14 of his *Biographia Literaria*.
- ¹² In "Coprophilia, Carnography, Marxism, and Feminism" in their 1998 book *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: Critique and Commentary*, R. S. Sharma and Shashi Bala Talwar examine the aspects of Roy's novel that give most offense and generally find them justifiable (pages 96-103).
- ¹³ Commenting on Roy's short haircut in 2001, interviewer Madeleine Bunting of the London *Guardian Weekend* took the idea further, calling Roy "a symbol of rare defiance in a culture that fetishes long hair" (28 July 2001, page 26). That long hair was still the cultural norm in 2009 is evident from the press attention given to the fact that Ekta Chowdhury was "the first contestant from India to sport a short haircut in the Miss Universe contest" (*India-West* 24 July 2009, page C14).
- ¹⁴ To be fair to the Taj Garden Retreat, I should point out that its two-page brochure given to guests offers excursions that include an all-night Kathakali dance performance in a village temple. That said, the nightly dance performances at the hotel, after dinner, are less than one hour in duration and are not Kathakali at all but are, instead, Bharatnatyam, a more lively, non-narrative dance style that employs a female dancer. The performances take place on the hotel veranda, at the very location where, in the novel, Velutha is beaten to death. In reality, I am pleased to note, there is no adjacent swimming pool.
- ¹⁵ Roy is quoted by S. Prasannarajan in a review of *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* appearing in *India Today International* on 27 June 2005, page 46.

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