

Pickled Histories, Bottled Stories: Recuperative Narratives in *The God of Small Things**

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Summary

This article explores the various ways in which *The God of Small Things* (Arundhati Roy 1997) interrogates and rewrites versions of histories. By blurring the boundaries between the personal and the political, the novel exposes official, documented History and suggests that *such* History rests on and empowers itself at the expense of subaltern discourses that have been (deliberately) marginalised. This article discusses the various ways in which history, memory and silences resurface in a range of narrative situations in the novel so that they may be remembered and rewritten.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die verskillende maniere waarop *The God of Small Things* (Arundhati Roy 1997) weergawes van geskiedenis interrogeer en herskryf. Deur die grense tussen die persoonlike en die politieke te verdoesel, lê die roman offisiële, gedokumenteerde Geskiedenis bloot en suggereer dat sulke Geskiedenis op sigself berus en sigself bemagtig ten koste van subalterne diskoerse wat (opsetlik) gemarginaliseer is. Die artikel bespreek die verskillende maniere waarop geskiedenis, herinnering en stiltes heropduik in 'n reeks narratiewe situasies in die roman, sodat dit heronthou en herskryf kan word.

But unshed tears can turn you rancid. So can memory. So
can biting your tongue.

Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

1

In a purely practical sense it would probably be correct to say that it all began when Sophie Moll came to Ayemenem. Perhaps, it's true to say that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of a whole lifetime. And when they do, those dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house – the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture – must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for.
(Roy 1997: 32)

This article takes its cue from Roy's (1997: 32) extract (cited above) and explores the various ways in which *The God of Small Things* accounts for and resurrects the submerged stories in the lives of the characters. By accounting for these absences, the novel also comments on the larger political silences in India's histories. By intricately interweaving the "small things" (the histories of the characters and the "unofficial" events of what transpires on the fateful day Sophie Mol drowns) with the "large things" (the submerged histories of the caste system and the officially documented version of what happened), the novel uses the personal (small things) to challenge the political (large things). The second part of the article explores the consequences of physical (dis)location upon the marginalised subject. Through the process of interweaving the personal and the political; the private and the public, the novel sets into motion a process akin to what Linda Hutcheon (1989) terms "historiographic metafiction". Hutcheon uses the term to describe (postmodern) narratives that interweave both History and fiction to reveal that History as a grand narrative has collapsed and has been replaced by islands of plural discourses that emphasise discontinuities, erasures and occlusions. In *The God of Small Things* Roy abuses Historical incidents in her fiction to undermine them and to censure official versions of obvious distortions.

The text questions Christianity and Marxism and the ways in which they impact on Paravan lives and, further questions the caste system, particularly that of Untouchability. The system of Untouchability destroys the Paravan by fixing him/her so that the only escape is death or "bodily crisis"(see arguments below). The political impact of *such* fictions is that they emphasise the constructedness and (even) fabrication of History; they highlight the ways in which constructed History effaces and marginalises "disruptive" and "contaminating" elements so as to maintain the status quo and present sanitised versions of History (in this specific instance a denial of the caste system and the love between a Paravan and a Catholic Christian). *The God of Small Things* challenges the so-called official versions of documented History by allowing an untold, secret version of events to resurface. In so doing, it attempts to "set the record straight" and suggests that "[t]he Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics" (p. 14) does not have to be

distortion, silence or death in the pauper's river for Velutha, the Paravan (see arguments below).

The time-frame of the novel spans twenty-three years: from 1969 to 1992 and deals with the lives of the twins Estha and Rahel, their "die-voiced" mother, Ammu, who in the "hot brooding, month of May" (p. 1) falls in love with the Paravan, Velutha. In 1969 the fateful day that marks the family's downfall is the day they fetch the twins' cousin, Sophie Mol ("yellow-bell-bottomed and much loved from the beginning") from the airport. Twenty-three years later (1992), Rahel returns to Ayemenem after an absence of eight years. During the twenty-three years after Sophie Mol's death, Velutha has died, Estha has been returned and rereported, Ammu has died, Chacko (Sophie Mol's father and the maternal uncle of the twins) has emigrated to Canada where he runs a failed antique store while Rahel has been an unsuccessful architecture student, married, suffered a miscarriage and divorced her husband. During these twenty-three years the twins have not seen each other.

The text is preoccupied with memory. Several memories of the characters have been deliberately erased or subconsciously repressed. These memories include the memories of what really happened at "History House" (p. 124) on the day the twins disappear and Velutha is found by the Touchable police, the memories of their mother who dared to love a Paravan and the memories of the Orange-Ade man who molests Estha outside the theatre. Memory serves to retell ("dredge") the past, evoke trauma which ruptures neat surfaces, suture and rupture again, and then return once more to endless cycles. Memory, of the unspoken, is shared, for instance between Rahel and Estha, her brother. Rahel and Estha are telepathic; for example, even though Estha tells no-one that he has been molested, Rahel knows. The twins also share the same dreams and upon her return to Ayemenem, although Estha walks silently past Rahel after not seeing her for twenty-three years, Rahel "could feel the rhythm of Estha's rocking, and the wetness of the rain on his skin. She could hear the raucous, scrambled world inside his head" (p. 21). Such sharing breaks the hermetic boundaries between individuals and individual memory. Rahel, unlike Estha, refuses to fall prey to the "inky tranquillizer" of Estha's silence. In this way the text acts as a repository for the unspoken. The tenuous nature of memory is revealed through the way in which the text "worries" both its time and stories. Time in the novel may be seen as kaleidoscopic with oft-repeated words and refrains. Because of its emphasis on the tenuous nature of memory, the novel is elliptical in structure.

While it questions the "old ways" and challenges the "new ways", (seen in the commodification of cultural artefacts), the novel does not wish to create reactionary revivalism. My article explores how the novel visits the repositories of memory by foregrounding silences, absences, discontinuities and erasures. This ensures that the text does not give credence to the retrograde valency of History. Instead, we are confronted with several intertextual

references¹ which break existing hierarchies. By layering the everyday (“small”) events of lives against the mythic/epic and its constant juggling of events, the novel encourages a sense of what Edward Glissant refers to as *metissage*. However, while Glissant uses the concept to describe the notion of wandering across cultures (including those of Africa), I would like to borrow the term to suggest that the novel “wanders” across various aspects of the heterogeneities of Indian cultures and ideologies (cf Glissant quoted by Parry 1996: 86). The novel flits between official versions of events, created by the Touchable police (with Baby Kochamma and Comrade Pillai) and the unofficial version of events which is deliberately buried to preserve the order of things and the old traditions.

Upon her return to Ayemenem, Rahel confronts a crumbling house whose “walls streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground, [t]he wild overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives” (Roy 1997: 1), an inert Baby aunt whose days are spent ensconced in front of the television enjoying the bitchy repartee of endless soap operas, and a “rereturned”, silenced Estha. The whiff of (silent) scandal that pervades the household is echoed in Rahel’s strangely luminous, “drownable in”, yet empty eyes. The emptiness expresses the gap in her life for things: the “small things” of the title which, ironically, are big things. These “things” remain untold, inscrutable and twenty-three years before they could not be spoken because the official version of events (chronicled as it is by the media) overtook the unofficial version. The victims of the untold version (Velutha, Ammu, Rahel and Estha) become, in Comrade Pillai’s words: “The Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics” (p. 14). Through retelling what happened on the fateful day when Sophie Mol’s body was found in the river, the novel exposes the lie of the official version which was documented in the media. Rahel’s return, therefore, allows what lies buried beneath History House (p. 124)² to be excavated, and allows the unspeakable finally to be spoken. *The God of Small Things* uses the technique of rememory to disrupt the intelligible lie that History has created, and to expose the unintelligible truths that fester beneath. In this instance, it interrogates the ways in which the process of colonialism, the class/caste system together with cultural commodification have led to the erasure, occlusion and distortion of both personal and public histories. It is this that prevents “subjects” from finding a sense of location or from mapping personal histories. Counternarratives (by which I intend those narratives like *The God of Small Things*) challenge master-narratives to produce hitherto submerged (“buried”) histories. “Unburying” histories is, however, an arduous task which can be simultaneously liberating and traumatic. In this context Glissant maintains that for marginalised subjects “history is not only absence [i]t is vertigo” (Glissant quoted by Parry 1996: 86).

In attempting to retrace the “lost footprints” of History, the novel uses elision as a means of exploring the tension between official and unofficial

versions of the past. It revisits the personal histories of Ammu, Velutha, Estha, Rahel and Baby Kochamma while pitting these against the political history of Ayemenem in 1969, at the time of Sophie Mol's death and Ammu's "tryst" with the Untouchable Velutha, when "[h]istory was wrong-footed, caught off-guard. (When) its marks, its scars; its wounds from old wars and the walking backward days all fell away" (Roy 1997: 176).

Kerala in 1969 brews political turbulence. The Naxalites (the revolutionary wing of the Communist Party) have become increasingly dissatisfied, as have the Paravans (Untouchables) who no longer bother to walk backwards in the face of approaching Touchables.³ The novel is unusual as a postcolonial text in that it does not overtly inscribe the polarity between the coloniser and the colonised. It focuses instead on the "horizontal violence" among the (South) Indians at the time and the way in which the caste system created pariahs of generations of people. The Untouchables have been duped by Christianity and neglected by the Indian government. The Paravans who had converted to Christianity to escape the scourge of the untouchable status soon realised that they have to worship in separate churches, with separate services and separate priests. They were given a "Pariah Bishop". After the Independence of India these converts (among them Velutha's grandfather) realised that they were entitled to no government benefits. Officially they were Christian and therefore casteless; unofficially they continued to be Untouchables: "It was like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all" (p. 74).

The absences and silences surrounding the death of Velutha while in custody are literalised in the silence of Esthappen, who does not talk. He is the silenced "keeper of the account" of Velutha's death. It is Estha who is coerced and threatened by Baby Kochamma to lie that Velutha is guilty of heinous crimes against the Ipe family. Initially accused of raping Ammu, this charge is hastily changed to abduction of the children. Estha, misled by the lies of Baby Kochamma and terrified of what may befall his mother should he not implicate his beloved Velutha, looks into the battered face of Velutha after his arrest by the Touchable police and utters a too-hasty "yes!" when he is asked by the Inspector if Velutha is indeed guilty of the unspeakable crimes he has been accused of. Consequently, the record of official history is kept in order and the Ipe family name is kept intact – unscathed by the touch of the Paravan "scandal". However, in an inexplicable way Estha's false admission destroys, for the future, any sense of sanity or security. Estha silences himself because of the trauma associated with falsely accusing Velutha and because he blames himself for leaving the house with his sister and cousin on the night of Sophie Mol's death. Unknown to him, he is merely a pawn in the "large things". For his part in Sophie Mol's death he is "returned" to his father. It would take the "re-returning" of Estha and Rahel's return to Ayemenem twenty-three years later before the "unofficial" version of the story is heard.

Still other forms of silence and their breaking are evident in the novel's set of nested tales. In seeking to retell the story of its protagonists, it may be argued that the tale it tells is ancient – a tale told in various guises:

It could be argued that it actually began a thousand years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar Long before Christianity arrived in the boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a bag.

(Roy 1997: 33)

The breaking of these silences may also be seen in the carnivalesque-like routines of the Kathakali dancers who, through mime, retell the ancient epic tales of the Indian classics (especially those of the Mahabharata). An important aspect of the Kathakali sequences in the novel is the way they have been abbreviated and truncated to please the tourists, who have short memory spans but generous purse-strings. The dances have become commodified, distanced from their own “cultural location”, and so silenced in a new way because the historical significance of the dance has been expunged for tourist consumption. Consequently, ancient histories have been collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics have been slashed to twenty-minute cameos with the tourists being none the wiser. Rahel's retelling of the family's stories and the absences in the novel seek to “flesh out the twenty-minute cameos” that their lives have become, so that the unofficial version of their stories may be told and heard.

A further nested narrative is the self-reflexivity of Baby Kochamma's personal history. In order to cope with her thwarted existence she lies and recreates her personal history (see arguments below). Despite all proof to the contrary, she believes that Father Mulligan loves her and she details daily diaries, stating her undying love for him. The diaries, however, are merely empty evocations of “I love you”. When she hears that he has given up being a Catholic priest and has joined the Vaishnavas (followers of Lord Vishnu) instead, she cannot believe that he has given up his priestly vows for a sect and not for her. After his death she continues her daily entries, secure in the knowledge that in death he can truly belong to her. She literally “rewrites” his feelings for her, reclothing him so that he be more acceptable to her, in so doing she recreates a personal history more acceptable to *her*.

Once he was dead, Baby Kochamma stripped Father Mulligan of his ridiculous saffron robes and reclothed him She snatched away his begging bowl, pedicured his horny Hindu soles and gave him back his comfortable sandals. She reconverted him.

(Roy 1997: 289)

Baby Kochamma's action of “reclothing” Father Mulligan may be read allegorically. The official version of events of that fateful day in 1969 are “re-clothed” to sanitise and keep the status quo, as I argue elsewhere in the article.

Her actions to reclaim Father Mulligan for herself, which require that she effaces who he really was, function as a *mise en abyme* of the way in which she alters the events surrounding Velutha's and Ammu's "tryst", her lies to the police, and the act of terrifying Estha and Rahel so that Estha feels a compulsion to say that Velutha is indeed guilty. Her lies keep the Ipe family name intact, but lead to Velutha's death, and the ostracism of Ammu, Rahel and Estha. Significantly, she has a degree in ornamental gardening which she puts to good use both literally and metaphorically, by taking charge of the "front garden" of the Ayemenem house:

Like a lion tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather.
(Roy 1997: 26)

Similarly, she "tames" the actual events of what happened on the day when Velutha's father betrays him to Mammachi. Not only does she exult in the fact that Ammu, who she has always disliked because of her marriage to a "half-breed Hindu", has been exposed but, true to her profession, she "ornamentalises" the truth so that it castigates Velutha but keeps the Ipe name intact. Together with the inspector and Comrade Pillai she ensures that the "order of things" is maintained. In doing so, however, she takes the family into the deep bowels of despair, silence and emptiness.

After the incident during which Estha is coerced into admitting to Velutha's guilt when "[c]hildhood tiptoed out [and] [s]ilence slid like a bolt" Baby Kochamma literally induces forgetfulness and silence about the incident by administering to them two Calmpose (tranquilliser) each, so that by the time they are handed to their mother they are fast asleep. It is only the following day that their mother manages to extricate the truth from them.

The silence and ostracism become entrenched when Ammu, after hearing what her children have said, meets the inspector and tries, in vain, to set the record straight. By declaring to her that he does not take statements from Veshyas (prostitutes) or their illegitimate children, and tapping her breasts with his baton "as though he were choosing mangoes from a basket" (p. 7), the inspector marginalises Ammu and makes her realise the futility of attempting to clear Velutha's name. Predetermined rules decide what is truth and what is not. Velutha has no name for he is merely an Untouchable, while Ammu who breaks the Love Laws (that set down who may be loved and how much) is a Veshya. Her word can therefore not be believed.

In its attempt to retell the unofficial version of what happened, the novel combines sequences of analepses and prolepses. The "flitting" between retrospective and foreshadowing sequences is a way of resurrecting the lost histories of the characters. History's narrative cannot be neatly bottled by any one group or ideology. This is ironically illustrated by the business of the Ipe family which is that of making pickles. Nevertheless, no matter how hard they try, the sealing mechanisms of the jars never quite function. The result is that

while Paradise Pickles enjoys a popular reputation and its pickles are widely eaten and enjoyed, the oil stains of the pickles remain long after the pickles have been eaten. The central metaphor of the text is the surreptitious seeping and staining of oil from the pickle jars. Just as oil seeps from the jars, histories (long since pickled) seep from the seals used to bottle them, staining the lives of the characters. Not only are the marginalised stained, but those who stick to only official stories, to keep “the order of things”, also become stained: the Communist Party for disregarding Velutha’s pleas for help, because he is a Paravan, and the Indian government specifically for keeping the caste system (silently) in place.

The act of writing analeptically and proleptically enables a process akin to excavation of stories that “lay buried in the ground [u]nder grass, [u]nder twenty-three years of June rain ... a small forgotten thing” (p. 122). Just as the pickle stains are left behind long after the pickles have been eaten, the falsely created official order of things is challenged as the memories of what lay under History House are (re)collected and begin to run into each other like pickle stains. In this regard, Neil Bissoondath refers to the process of “flitting” between analepses and prolepses as a process where “time kaleidoscopes (and) the past is refracted back and forth” (Bissoondath quoted by Richards 1992: 4). Rahel’s return to the Ayemenem house after an eight-year absence initiates a process akin to the Foucauldian “countermemory”. Foucault’s notion is that knowledge and power are inextricably linked. Discourses that circulate are discourses of the strong which invariably silence and marginalise the discourses of peripheral groups (Marshall 1992: 178). Countermemory sets into motion a process that works against these discourses of power, situating instead discourses that run counter to established power relations. This allows for the recuperation, rewriting and retelling of lost histories. Rahel’s return begins to unhinge the official version of events, created to protect the guilty. It also releases the repression many of the characters are forced into as a result of having to cover up what really happened, a repression which has led them to experience what Fanon has termed “a constellation of delirium” (Fanon quoted by Richards 1992: 81).

This “constellation of delirium” (ibid) may be seen in the silenced Estha for whom the deaths of Sophie Mol and Velutha are “unspeakable”; he has grown “accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquillizer on his past” (Roy 1997: 12). It is also seen in Chacko who emigrates to Canada to run a failed business, and in Baby Kochamma whose life is overtaken by DSTV and the locking away of all those things she considers precious. Rahel returns to a closed Ayemenem house – its windows shut against the outside world – inside of which Baby Kochamma even locks her fridge where she keeps her cream buns from Bestbakery. Locking becomes an important metaphor of repression in the novel.

Rahel’s return symbolises rupture. When she arrives Baby Kochamma is uneasy that Rahel will disturb the semblance of peace and has to remind

herself that she has written to Rahel (of Estha's rreturn) only because Rahel should assume some responsibility for Estha. But Rahel disturbs the silence and the lies that Baby Kochamma carries buried within the layers of her "enormous hips" and her "conical person". Her return also jolts the "quiet" in Estha's head. When she arrives the inky, tranquillised past of Estha's world recedes and "the world locked out for years, suddenly flooded in ... a dam had burst and savage waters swept everything up in a swirling" (p. 15).

Her return challenges the repression of past memories, causing instead, rupture. It challenges Baby Kochamma's administration of the tranquilliser Calmpose (pose of calm) initiated twenty-three years before, and brings a necessary rupture because it engenders the process of rememory so that a different version of what happened to Velutha may be presented. In this version the questionable assumptions of the Touchable police are revealed when they had assumed Velutha guilty even long before Estha "identified" him as such. To counteract repression, the unofficial story must also be told to "free" Estha, Ammu and Rahel, so that they no longer have to wander in the desert of repression and forgetfulness. Rahel's return signals the undoing of silences. She tells the story that Ammu could not tell because of the way in which she is ostracised by her family and the police. No one believes her because of her transgression. She is marginalised and treated like a Veshya. The rest of Ammu's life is spent on the margins, moving from one menial job to another, unable to fulfil her promise to reclaim Estha. According to her family, Ammu had "defiled generations of good breeding ... and brought the family to its knees ... *for ever* now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals ... [i]t was all finished now" (p. 258).

Ammu dies alone, aged by the ravages of time and "the black hole of history" (p. 162) in a grimy hotel in Bharat Lodge. The church refuses to bury her on "several counts" (ibid). Consequently, her body is taken to a run-down crematorium where "nobody except beggars, derelicts and police custody dead were cremated, these were the people who died with nobody to lie at their back and talk to them" (ibid). Ammu, who transgressed the order of things, is cremated with only the nine-year-old Rahel and Chacko to witness her cremation:

The heat (of the incinerator) lunged out at them. Then Rahel's Ammu was fed to it. Her hair, her skin, her smile. Her voice.

(Roy 1997: 163)

Twenty minutes later they collect Ammu's remains which are crammed into a clay pot. She becomes "Receipt number Q498673" (p. 163). But Estha, the keeper of records, is not there to record this significant event. He has been returned to his father for his part in the tragic events.

Rahel as an adult realises that Ammu (whose emotions suggest the polarity of gentle, loving mother and "suicide bomber") transgresses the boundaries of the Love Laws, but fails to be accountable or to correct her "mistakes".

Rahel's return initiates the process of "correcting" the past, reclaiming the rupture of pain, confronting it, and then beginning the slow process of suturing which, while therapeutic, is also traumatic. The process of retelling may be likened to opening a superficially healed wound (rupture) so that it may be sutured anew through positing different versions of truths which lead to healing. Healing has its own power, because it forces into vision different ways of "knowing", and the ability to see the past through different, more enabling prisms.

But the novel is also very instructive in the way in which it deals with the relationship between repression – rupture – suture and therapeutic healing. Healing cannot be complete. Long after the wounds have been sutured, the memories remain. The text therefore sets into motion cycles reminiscent of the various levels of self-reflexivity and *mise en abyme* that it uses. When the unofficial version has been set against the mediated, reported version, when we see as readers the vivid details of the sexual passion that Velutha and Ammu share, and when our "participation" knows that for them there can be no tomorrow, a new set of transgressions that challenge the Love Laws, once again occurs. Twenty-three years after the unofficial version has been unearthed, the Love Laws crumble again. For no-one can explain what happens when the stories are retold and endless cyclical patterns of deferral are put into play. In Rahel, the long-silenced Estha sees traces of the lost Ammu, and soon the Love Laws are broken again. What the twins share that night after their piecing together of their collective culpability in Velutha's death is not happiness but a hideous grief:

snuffling in the hollows of the lovely throat, tears, a honey-coloured shoulder with toothmarks ... once again they broke the love laws – that lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much.

(Roy 1997: 328)

The transgressive nature of their "hideous" venting of grief is startling and is realised through narrative refrain. The refrain, "[i]t was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The Air" (p. 299) anticipates the transgression. After the Love Laws between brother and sister have been broken, there is nothing much to show for it but a "hard honey-coloured shoulder and a semi-circle of toothmarks on it" (p. 328), and the repetition of the refrain "it was a little cold. A little wet. But *very* quiet. The Air" (p. 328). It is a refrain that will be repeated once more in the linear progression of the text – after the first night that Ammu and Velutha break the Love Laws we are told that while Velutha gathers Ammu into "the cave of his body" a breeze from the river cools their bodies and "it was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The Air. But what was there to say?" (p. 338).

In chronological time, however, the incident between Ammu and Velutha (recorded significantly as the final chapter) would have preceded the breaking

of the Love Laws between Rahel and Estha. The novel therefore records its own sense of deferral – an inherent sense that the full story cannot be told. Who will tell the story of the twins who have broken the Love Laws?

2

Minnie Bruce Pratt (1998: 121), in her study of the geographical mapping of inner cities and how this impacts on the suffering of the body, explores the geographical (and by implication the psychological) boundaries that exist between blacks and whites. Her study introduces a mapping of streets, buildings, cities and towns (physical spaces) which exposes the dividing lines between various communities. In an attempt to “transgress conventional visual/ spatial fixing of Other and self” (Pratt 1998: 121), she attempts to find new ways of seeing. Her study reveals that there is no free space. Instead there is what she terms “divisions, concealment, hidden narratives of identity and heritage – overlapping, coinciding, contradicting” (p. 121). I would like to use these ideas to explore the geographical boundaries that the text exposes between the Touchables and the Untouchables, and upon those Touchables who are perceptive enough to “experience” the boundaries.

The physical distinction between the elegance of the Ayemenem household and the Paravan abode is easily discernible. Not only are the Ipes land and factory owners, they also own the labour of the Untouchables. Velutha (whose name means “white” and is so named because he is very dark complexioned) is a skilled craftsman of furniture. This is shown in the “bauhaus dining table with twelve dining chairs in rosewood and a traditional Bavarian chaise longue in lighter jack” (Roy 1997: 75) that he crafts. Not only is he a designer of furniture, but he has the capacity to fix all manner of electrical appliances around the Ipe household. Mammachi, with her impenetrable, Touchable logic, observes that had Velutha not been a Paravan, he would have been an engineer. Yet Velutha is educated in the Untouchable school, and spends his life beholden to the Ipes.

The abode of the Untouchables is presented in strong contrast to the colonial-like manor of the Ipes. It is a hut which houses the sickly brother who spends entire days in the hut unable to move, thinking of his dead mother and recalling that she spent her last days in the corner of death in the hut. The hut has four corners, one for the sickly brother, one for cooking in, one for clothes and blankets, and one for dying in (death corner). Their geographical dislocation, politicised by the caste system of India, is further evident in the way that the Untouchables lend both their labour and lives to the Touchables. When Velutha’s father loses his eye, Mammachi pays for an artificial eye. For this, and because he is a Paravan who has experienced the days of having to crawl backwards in the path of a Touchable, he speaks the unspeakable, out of a sense of duty, because he is “Paravan and a man with mortgaged body

parts” (p. 256). He therefore betrays the lovers who “were sprung from his loins and hers. His son and her daughter. They had made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really happen” (p. 75).

In exchange for their defilement Velutha’s father offers his artificial eye back to Mammachi because he does not deserve it and because his eye(s) had seen too much. Mammachi (blind both physically and metaphorically) recoils from the unexpected touch of the eye and “grope[s] her way to the sink and soap[s] away the sodden Paravan eye juices” (p. 255), her way of attempting to soap away the incident and sanitise her life.

What the novel does (almost surreptitiously at times) is to expose the hidden narratives, concealments, divisions and contradictions that exist between the Paravans and the Touchables. By focusing on the geographical differences between their locations, the plight of the Paravans and their mortgaged bodies is exposed. They are victims of the Touchables. The novel “humanises” the Paravans by illustrating their lives of pain, anguish and sometimes, joy. By allowing Velutha to focalise on what happens immediately after he realises that the secrets he shares with Ammu have been revealed, the reader is able to “read” his feelings and, more importantly, to see the full extent of his betrayal by the Communist Party, and the devious way in which Comrade Pillai, professional omeleteer, (breaking, finally the “omelet” of the Party) disregards Velutha’s pleas for help. By using Velutha as focaliser, the novel makes the reader aware of the gravity of the (long suppressed) Communist betrayal of the Paravans.

When Velutha turns to Comrade Pillai for assistance, Pillai’s response is a terse “you should know that Party was not constituted to support workers’ *indiscipline* in their private lives” (p. 287; my italics). Velutha has therefore violated Party discipline. The Party may be seen to exacerbate the caste system by insinuating that while Velutha may be a card-carrying member, he is a Paravan and therefore should be disciplined. This discipline means marginalising him, taming his actions, his emotions and mostly his sexuality.

The geographies of pain which allude in the first instance to the physical dislocation of characters also cause emotional and psychological trauma. This is seen in the suffering of Velutha’s mother who dies a slow, miserable death, the father’s lost eye, Kuttappen’s silent suffering in their hut, where he endures stifling heat, hunger, and bits of thatch and grit falling onto him. The silent, claustrophobic space of the hut, and his inability to move hem him in, and “terrorize him with the spectre of his own insignificance ... [i]nsanity hovered close at hand like an eager waiter at an expensive restaurant” (p. 207). Further, Velutha’s action of starting a relationship with Ammu reveals the psychological trauma of having to “live in the big house”, while seeing his life pass him by in a small claustrophobic hut. *Both* Ammu and Velutha break the “order of things” that the Touchable society carves out, yet Velutha is the immediate target of the Touchable policemen’s anger, hatred and fear. Ammu “walks out of her world like a witch” and goes to Velutha: it would

take years for Rahel to realise Ammu's culpability in Velutha's suffering. Her Touchable status protects her in one sense (she is not physically harmed) but ostracises her in another (she is a social outcast, her children are taken away, and she dies alone in a grimy lodge, with "no Estha to lie at the back of her and talk to her" (p. 161)). She is constantly haunted by the dream of the policeman who wanted to cut off her hair – they did that to Veshyas in Ayemenem. Twenty-three years later, the whiff of scandal caused by Ammu and Velutha is still in the air and it continues to haunt the twins. After meeting Rahel for the first time since her eight-year absence from Ayemenem, Comrade Pillai remarks of the twins that the one (Estha) is mad, the other (Rahel) is "die-vorced" and almost definitely barren (an interesting note of death is sounded in "die-vorce" which is the way in which Mallyalis pronounce "divorce").

The geographic dislocation of the Paravans is perhaps most evident through the opening sequence of the novel which records the funeral of Sophie Mol. While Sophie Mol lies in her special child-sized coffin which is "satinlined and brasshandle shined" (p. 4), one death goes unrecorded: Velutha's. He is killed in custody and merely dumped in the "themmady kuzhy – pauper's pit – where police routinely dump their dead" (p. 321).

The novel is an attempt to chronicle Velutha's death. It also allows us to see the dense network of culpability and betrayal by the Touchables. The reason for Velutha's death is he dared to love a Touchable woman. As if to foreground this, the novel "ends" where it "begins". The last chapter, entitled "The Cost of Living" affords a reason for the futility of Velutha's death. The chapter is almost provocative. It details the sexual relationship between the lovers, simultaneously "naturalising" it and showing how transgressive it would have been within the constraints of the myopic Touchable society. Theirs is a relationship of love, hope, madness and "infinite joy" (p. 339). But the Touchable police do their duty. Comrade Pillai does his. And Baby Kochamma finds an outlet for her bile. The narrator snidely remarks that they are to be commended for acting with economy, efficiency and responsibility:

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 ...*

(Roy 1997: 309; my italics)

From what? By ending with the relationship between Ammu and Velutha this question is foregrounded, and as readers we have to ask further questions:

Had [Velutha] known that he was about to enter a tunnel whose only egress was his own annihilation, would he have turned away? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Who can tell?

(Roy 1997: 310)

The God of Small Things is a significant text in that, while it lyrically (sometimes even whimsically) blends the small things (personal histories) with the big things (public and political silencing and “containment”) to tell the stories of the marginalised and enfeebled which have hitherto been distorted or occluded, it constitutes a political act. The novel also manages to poignantly capture “the struggle of memory against forgetting” (Kundera 1980). Through blurring the boundaries between the public and the private and excavating lost memories, *The God of Small Things* allows for a “presencing” of that which has been absent. By emphasising discontinuity, erasure, rememory and forgetting, the novel attempts to “set the record straight” by accounting for submerged stories. Such novels become powerful ways through which representation is challenged. While Lyotard maintains that “narrative is still the quintessential way to represent knowledge” (Hutcheon 1989: 67), the nature and shape of both knowledge and narratives have altered: metanarrative discourses have been rendered elastic since the postmodern questioning of hermetic boundaries. The intervention of historiographic metafiction has created narrative space for hitherto unheard narratives and “hidden histories” (Hall 1996: 112) to challenge fixed hierarchical relationships so that plural discourses can be written. Narratives may now be read as political interventions that unmask acts of horizontal and vertical violence. By drawing links between History and fiction, *such* novels demand that History confront its own absences and contrived continuity. Significantly, the epigraph to Roy’s novel is a John Berger quotation:

Never again will a single story be told as
though it’s the only one.

Madeleine Bunting writing in the *Mail and Guardian* (2001: 24) maintains that “almost every page of *The God of Small Things* reverberates with the fragile vulnerability of the small ... [which] reflects a fierce protectiveness towards the small and powerless”. Significantly, Roy’s work is now in the public arena. Using the Booker Prize money, awarded her for the novel, she is involved in making public the plight of the inhabitants of the Narmada Valley who have been *dislocated* because of the damming projects in India. The majority of the people who have been dislocated are women, children and Untouchables. Thus far the damming projects have been responsible for the dislocation of approximately 300 000 people.

* For Vishnu ...

Notes

1. The novel contains several intertextual references. These include references to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the epic tales of the *Mahabharata*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*. As in Rushdie's text, the danger of pickling histories is extensively referred to and "played" with.
2. "History House" is a reference to the place where Velutha is almost beaten to death by the Touchable police while the children are "rescued". By 1992 it has been turned into a cultural resort for foreign tourists who want their "boost" of Indian culture. Despite their short attention spans and near disregard for the finer nuances of Indian culture, they have the money to "buy" truncated versions of a dose of the exotic. Twenty-three years after the traumatic incident, no trace remains of the heinous action of the police. History House has literally had its memories painted over and beautified for foreign consumption.
3. Mammachi and Vellya Paapen (Velutha's father) still remember the "old days" when, in the face of Touchables, the Untouchables had to prostrate themselves and crawl backwards, while simultaneously wiping away their footprints so that the Touchables would not have to besmirch themselves by walking in the footprints of the Untouchables.

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